

“When I was asked by the BBC to make a video talking about my coming out performing as a Drag Queen in public, I saw it as a great platform to share my experiences with other people in Lebanon who might be experiencing the same fears I used to have. Nevertheless, I still haven’t told my family about the video because they would be too worried about the consequences.”

Anissa Krana, Lebanese Drag Queen and LGBTIQ* activist

To use platforms and coming out- or not to? How to balance between the desire for a presence to share experiences on the one hand and being firmly attached to their family’s values? This is a question that many LGBTIQ* people in Lebanon face.

The diversification of media opens up opportunities for the coverage and display of otherwise underrepresented topics. Both “traditional” media as well as social media have a great impact on people’s opinion. Therefore, it is relevant to look at the way in which LGBTIQ* issues are covered: How are LGBTIQ* people portrayed? Do TV and social networks make LGBTIQ* issues visible and actually improve the situation of LGBTIQ* people, or do they reproduce and enhance social bias by forming stereotypes? This paper examines the representation of LGBTIQ* people and the coverage of LGBTIQ* issues on Lebanese TV and social networks in order to evaluate its influence on the general image of LGBTIQ* people in Lebanese society.

The term LGBTIQ* is used to underline the wide range of non-heterosexual and non-binary genders existing.

“Being who you are is illegal”¹

Regarding the prejudices against LGBTIQ* people that determine their position within Lebanese society, it is of great significance to analyze sexual stereotypes in Lebanon and the issues that arise with them. Seven interviewees were asked to name issues concerning LGBTIQ* people in Lebanon, and all of them mentioned the Lebanese legal system.

Discrimination against and criminalizing of non-heteronormative sexualities does exist in the legal framework of Lebanon, however it is not limited to it: the legal system and legal practice in Lebanon as well as the way Lebanese society responds to it is telling when it comes to heteronormative structures and the importance of religious beliefs. Penalizing everything that is against “the order of nature” poses the question of how judges deal with queer sexualities and how Lebanese society reacts to them.

Due to article 534 of the Lebanese Penal Code “any sexual intercourse contrary to the order of nature is punishable by up to one year in prison”, which makes it a matter of interpretation: Since “contrary of nature” isn’t clearly defined, it is up to individual judges to decide per case. Therefore, specifically LGBTIQ* people are affected by this article as it subjects them to the arbitrariness of judges. They are arrested or punished for their sexual orientation and gender identity due to it, especially since there is no law that protects individuality and diversity. Beyond article 534, LGBTIQ* people can also be criminalized under “public decency” or morality laws, a fact that shows legal judgements are simply based on imprecise definitions and a personal understanding of “morality”².

According to a Human Rights Watch’s report, LGBTIQ* people are treated the same way as drug users and sex workers in Lebanon, and police officers don’t hide their bias against LGBTIQ* people but rather employ verbal abuse and physical violence in order to humiliate LGBTIQ* people or force confessions.³

¹ Interview with Anissa Krana

² Interview with Ghiwa Sayegh

³ https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/lebanon0613_forUpload_1.pdf

During interrogations police men often ask the respondents intimate questions about their sex lives and sometimes even torture them for answers. Even though article 534 refers to specific sexual interaction, police officers nevertheless arrest people not only for their sexual acts but also for their appearance and behaviors. The fact that people are randomly arrested due to their appearances shows how biased the image of LGBTIQ* people in Lebanese society still is. Fearing to disclose their gender identity or sexual orientation, people often refuse to report mistreatment from police officers and verbal or physical violence in general which makes it more difficult to call out abuses of power.

“The giver or the receiver?” - Challenging social pressure & daily discrimination

One interviewee mentioned the difficulties for Trans people that come along with changing their papers and paying for sex reassignment surgery. People who were born in a body which they don't identify with must not only go to multiple therapists to be diagnosed with “gender dysphoria”, but also have to take hormones and become sterile before being allowed to change their IDs.

Trans people challenge Lebanese stereotypes and set binaries between men and women by outwardly expressing their *chosen* identities⁴. Since topics regarding sexuality and gender are considered taboo, being Trans and being homosexual are often confused simply because of ignorance.⁵ Homosexual men are considered to be “strangling manhood” and therefore are often asked whether “they are the giver or the receiver in sexual relationships” when they come out to their parents.⁶ This question mirrors the overall attitude based on patriarchal ideals of relationships, especially sexual relationships because only if the person questioned is the one penetrating the other, their “masculinity” will be proven.

While homosexual men are judged for opposing “manhood”, homosexual women are more likely to face the consequences that come along with deviating away from the traditional family values, leading to inappropriate questions and public humiliation in general.

One may conclude that it is not the specific sexual acts that bother people, but the possibility of affecting traditional gender and sex roles. Anything that could affect these traditional roles as well as the clear-cut gender binaries is not approved by most people in Lebanese society and seen as a threat. Those widely held beliefs entail serious consequences for LGBTIQ* people such as contemplating or even committing suicide, taking drugs, being forced to leave the country, along with other extreme attempts to escape society's harsh judgements.

Even though relationships between parents and children are of great significance in Lebanese society, parents are affected by heteronormativity and homophobia as well, and therefore, people often get into serious trouble with their families after coming out. Fearing public humiliation, parents often can't deal with their children's coming out and eventually kick them out of their house and break off contact with them, forcing their children into illegal jobs like prostitution. It is the social pressure and daily discrimination that hinders people who do not follow traditional gender roles from getting jobs and forces them to accept illegal work.

Since neither executive powers, legislative powers, nor family structures provide protection for LGBTIQ* people, another authority is needed to decriminalize their existence and protect them, as well as make LGBTIQ* issues visible. Considering media to be the “fourth estate” of society, it could offer an alternative platform for raising awareness and denouncing abuse of power. Given the powerful

⁴ Bareed Mista3jil p. 22

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nowecHvuXkc>

⁶ Interview with Georges Azzi

influence of mass media, it is necessary to analyse on the one hand how TV channels form stereotypes and, on the other hand, whether social media empowers people or offers visibility.

The Role of Lebanese Mass Media

Lebanese TV channels - Mouthpiece of Religious and Political Institutions

Even though Lebanon is one of the smallest countries in the Middle East, it offers a broad variety of TV channels and since most adults watch TV programs like the daily news every day, it also has a big influence on people's opinions. Being a mainstream media in a country that doesn't ensure the protection of minorities, underlines the great responsibility TV channels carry, since media provides the only opportunity to denounce abuse of power and make minority issues visible. By strongly condemning violence against women, the channel LBCI showed that media is definitely able to contribute to the changing of perceptions, decriminalization and the pushing for law amendments. Dalal Mawad, former reporter at LBCI, explains that condemning violence against women on popular TV shows like the daily news, helped to raise awareness and to put politicians under pressure.⁷ But in terms of public dialogues, being a mainstream media and therefore adhering to mainstream discourses can also be very problematic. Looking at TV's content, it becomes clear that Lebanese TV channels are strongly affected by power struggles and hegemonic aspirations, since there are no independent TV channels in Lebanon as all TV channels are financed and supported by different political and economic actors. Being affected by individual interests, social values and various actors, the process of news selection can't be seen as independent and objective but as biased from the very beginning. It is questionable to which extent journalists, advertising customers and political actors have an influence on the news selection because due to its opaque, it is difficult to analyse which actors have the greatest influence on news selection and who's opinions eventually are reflected on TV.

Myra Abdallah, journalist and director of "The Gender and Body Rights Media Center" explains how most TV channels in Lebanon abide by the regulations put on them by their funders. "Therefore, some TV stations have a bigger margin of freedom when it comes to topics they highlight and angles they take than others".⁸

The opaque funding of TV channels might thereby even reinforce blackmail and corruption. Due to the fact that government and political parties discriminate against LGBTIQ* people, it is hard to tell whether Lebanese TV channels distance themselves from conservative and discriminating politics or just reproduce social bias. Looking at the very small amount of reports on TV⁹ that deal with LGBTIQ* issues, it quickly becomes clear that most TV channels either ignore LGBTIQ* issues or report on LGBTIQ* people in a discriminating way. A wide spread narrative in the local media is to either victimize LGBTIQ* people or to underline cases of prosecution. Instead of telling positive stories and humanizing LGBTIQ* TV channels even enhance misperceptions.

Ignoring a topic and paying attention to a certain topic while leaving others out, can be very problematic as it discourages people from dealing with LGBTIQ* issues. Ignoring LGBTIQ* issues on TV implies they simply do not exist and further, covers daily discrimination and cases of arresting. This makes denouncing abuse of power impossible.

⁷ Interview with Dalal Mawad

⁸ Interview with Myra Abdallah

⁹ <http://afemena.org/2017/12/20/monitoring-of-media-content-between-2015-and-2017/>

Since there are no institutional strategies that ensure the inclusion of minority issues in TV, the portrayal of LGBTIQ* people and the coverage of LGBTIQ* issues depends on individual journalists and chief editors. Only if they have interest in covering LGBTIQ* issues and push for it, LGBTIQ* people are portrayed in an appropriate way.¹⁰ Due to different social classes, it also needs to be underlined that not every LGBTIQ* individual is targeted the same way as there are differences between portraying a LGBTIQ* person from the middle class and a refugee.

Among nine national TV channels, Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation International (LBCI) has the highest TV ratings, followed by MTV and Al Jadeed¹¹. Nowadays, ratings claim that 60% of the Lebanese audience watch LBCI every day and the evening news bulletin of LBCI have the highest audience ratings in Lebanon. Therefore, LBCI offers a great platform as it has a big influence on Lebanese society. In contrast to other TV channels, LBCI is not attached to any political party.

As the former editor in chief considered human rights to be important, he ensured to cover related issues in the TV reports which also had a positive effect on the portrayal of LGBTIQ* people. This shows how firmly attached personal interests and TV's content are.

Being owned by Gabriel Murr and his family, MTV (Murr TV) is known to be a quite conservative and right wing TV channel. Al Jadeed which is also known as New TV is owned by Tahseen Khayyat, the former opponent of Prime Minister Saad Hariri and used to be a left wing channel but "now whoever pays the money will decide [about the content]"¹² which again underlines how opaque the funding of TV channels is.

Besides the popular channels, smaller Lebanese TV channels such as Future TV and Al Manar underline the impact of political and religious institutions on TV's content. Since Future TV was opened and run by the former prime minister Rafik Hariri and the TV channel Al Manar is known to be a platform for Hezbollah supporters, both of the channels are associated with political parties and therefore, are not able to report freely or to distance themselves from political actors without disappointing viewers and eventually losing them.¹³ This shows that not only policies but also religious beliefs have a great impact on Lebanese TV programs.

Religious institutions even influence TV channels that officially do not belong to any religious community and many journalists struggle every day to live up to their expectations. Being forced to include the opinions of religious authorities also has a negative influence on the coverage of LGBTIQ* issues. Because religious institutions like the Catholic Church deny LGBTIQ* rights, popular programs like the daily news do neither report on LGBTIQ* issues in an appropriate way nor strengthen the situation of LGBTIQ* people in Lebanon.

¹⁰ Interview with Dalal Mawad

¹¹ <https://www.lbcgroup.tv/news/d/news-bulletin-reports/253930/report-lbci-rated-as-lebanons-top-viewed-channel/en>

¹² Interview with Georges Azzi

¹³ Katharina Nötzold: Defining the Nation, p. 192

TV- Discouraging people from coming out

While Future TV and Al Manar do not pay attention to LGBTIQ* issues at all, other TV channels report on it depending on the occasion. For example, New TV tries to take a positive stance most of the time, due to its general policy of supporting human rights. However, the position of News TV reports sometimes depends on the individual reporter.

MTV being more “popular among the rich right-wing committees and conservative Christians”¹⁴ explains why the channel adheres to a biased reporting on LGBTIQ* issues. Those TV channels frame LGBTIQ* people by the usage of language, stereotyped images and by highlighting only certain aspects which leads to a discriminating report on LGBTIQ* people.¹⁵

For example, the TV show “Majdi & Wajdi” on MTV portrays two homosexual men in an exaggeratedly feminine, flamboyant and obtrusive way which enhances stereotypes and might even disgust the audience. Reinforcing prejudices and creating a distance between the audience and the portrayed people, intimidates people and discourages them from coming out. Since these discriminating images in programs like “Majdi & Wajdi” are often the only moments when especially older generations are confronted with topics like gender and sexuality, parts of the audience transfer the biased image from TV to reality. Therefore, these kinds of programs intensify prejudices by conveying a homogenous and biased image of LGBTIQ* people.

In contrast to the humiliating representation of LGBTIQ* people in many so called “comedy shows”, the former chief in editor of LBCI argued against the cruel procedure of “anal tests”, which were used to humiliate homosexual men, and he even called Lebanon a “republic of shame”¹⁶ on the daily news. This statement led to discussions on the internet under the hashtag “#republicofshame” and raised awareness of the intrusive pseudo- medical examinations.

Moreover, LBCI shows movies and series that distance themselves from the biased mainstream presentation of LGBTIQ* people. For instance, the series “Mesh Ana” deals with a lawyer who is homosexual and who is not being parodied in the show but taken seriously, which doesn’t reinforce prejudices. Under the direction of the former chief in editor, a liberal shift towards a more tolerant perspective could be noticed but due to the negative reactions of the Christian audience the current editor-in-chief ensured to push minority issues in the background again.

In the process of news selection journalists can neither be seen as external factors nor passive actors. Myra Abdallah from the Arab Foundation for Freedoms and Equality (AFE) particularly points out the significance of the “new generation of reporters” that seems to be more open minded about cooperating with LGBTIQ* activists and NGOs than former ones.

Aside from cooperating with individual reporters, the NGO AFE also tries to establish partnerships with different media organizations. Myra Abdallah says that some TV channels reacted very positively and that LBCI even agreed on a partnership with AFE in order to improve the general portrayal of LGBTIQ* people by cutting out discriminating jokes. Normalizing LGBTIQ* issues and leaving out stereotypes could have a positive impact on the audience and could thereby improve the general image of LGBTIQ* people in Lebanon.

¹⁴Interview with Myra Abdallah

¹⁵ Robert M. Entman: Framing, Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm

¹⁶ <https://www.lbcgroup.tv/news/d/lebanon-news/44921/lebanon-stop-tests-of-shame/en>

Nevertheless, even if more reporters wanted to report on LGBTIQ* people in a supportive way, they would still only have limited possibilities to publish their reports due to religious beliefs, social pressure and censorship. As the internet is not attached to any political or religious institution and hardly affected by censorship, it could offer an alternative platform to make LGBTIQ* issues visible.

3.3. Internet- Making social taboos a subject of discussion

“The importance of the worldwide web lies in simply existing in it; once an online account has been made then the entire cyberspace becomes the user’s playground.”¹⁷

This quote from *Kohl’s Journal for Body and Gender Research* brings up the question to which extend the internet embodies the user’s playground or else, the user only plays a subordinated role in the depth of the cyberspace. Do all users have the same chances to make the cyberspace their playground or does this only apply to a small number of privileged people?

After the internet had massively reduced the costs of access to information, social networks began to grow in popularity and the diversity of perspectives increased. Seven interviewees were asked about positive aspects of the internet and all interviewees agreed on the fact that the internet offered an alternative platform to the Lebanese mainstream TV channels. Rebecca Saade, social media expert and a founder of Meem, calls the internet a “platform not only to speak up but to speak as people which helps humanizing LGBTIQ* people” and further “allows visibility at lower costs”¹⁸.

Giving people the opportunity to normalize queer stories instead of reinforcing prejudices, the advantages and disadvantages of social media must be analysed in order to outline its potential and its dangers. Regarding LGBTIQ* issues in Lebanon, especially Facebook, Instagram and dating apps are of great significance. Unlike their parents, younger people are more likely to use the internet. Due to its easy access, the internet “seemingly brings together individuals from different sociocultural backgrounds and sexual identities”¹⁹ and in terms of psychological problems, it even allows its users to make social taboos a subject of discussion.

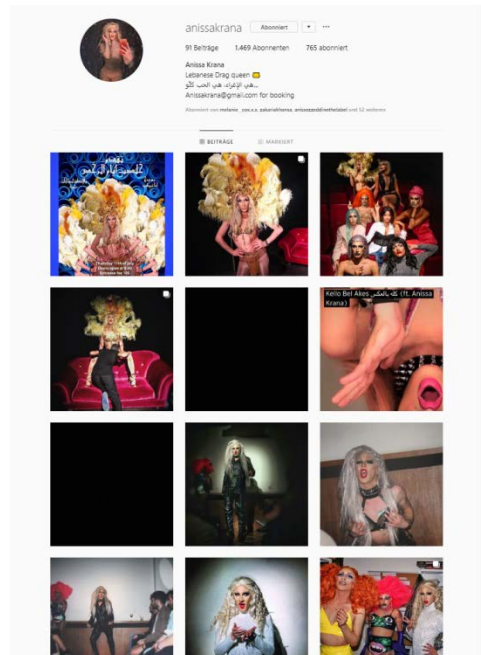
Since people from outside bigger cities usually do not have access to the very few safe spaces where people can express their identities without being afraid, social media diversify the opportunities to reach people and they make it easier to find people with the same experiences.

Nevertheless, one has to keep in mind that social media do not escape social dynamics because a specific social status is needed to be able to enter social networks.

¹⁷ Saly El Wazze *Identities Reconfigured, Online Dating Apps, and Incrimination: A Case of the Egyptian Crackdown and the Lebanese Tinder*, p.4

¹⁸ Interview with Rebecca Saade

¹⁹ Saly El Wazze *Identities Reconfigured, Online Dating Apps, and Incrimination: A Case of the Egyptian Crackdown and the Lebanese Tinder*, p.4



Instagram account by the Drag Queen Anissa Krana

Social media- More than just one identity

Facebook can be seen as a platform for communication and the exchange of perspectives as it enables people to start discussions, post statements and comment other posts. It also offers the possibility for NGOs to advocate LGBTIQ* rights by creating their own page, which makes it easier to reach their communities and share information with them.

For example, Marsa Sexual Health Center provides medical services “free of stigma and discrimination against age, sex, gender and sexual orientation”²⁰ and uploads videos that would be censored on Lebanese TV. One of the videos deals with Trans people²¹ and explains the process of transition in an objective and appropriate way which breaks misconceptions and offers an alternative to the discriminating representation on TV.

²⁰ <https://marsa.me/>

²¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=iETepapE0og



Trans Meets World - ترانس، التغيير النوع (ي) الإجتماعي

Therefore, Facebook is not only a platform for communicating with others but for educating people and informing them about LGBTIQ* issues and terms.

But while social media can make taboos a subject of discussion, they can also cause cyber bullying and hate speech. To violate or discriminate other people appears easier while sitting behind a screen. Additionally, the internet's anonymity makes it difficult to track bullies.

The danger of being exposed and bullied especially apply to popular social networks like Instagram, which are used to upload pictures and comment on pictures of other users.

Many LGBTIQ* people have two Instagram accounts to control what pictures their families and which pictures their friends see. Especially Drag Queens in Lebanon often have a separate account for pictures of their performances and pictures of their daily life, since their Drag performances aren't tolerated by Lebanese society.

Social media like Instagram can therefore be seen as platforms that provide anonymity to a certain extend and that enable Drag Queens to post pictures and stay in contact with their communities without being associated with their daily life appearance. But constructing a digital identity also poses risks: Gender and sexuality are codified in individual performances and especially in a country like Lebanon, many people embody more than one performance in their daily lives and appear genderfluid depending on the environment. This double-performance, which comes naturally in real life, becomes more difficult on social media. As some people have two different accounts, one could argue that different accounts make it possible for the user to keep balance between different social groups. But what might appear as an opportunity for self-expression embodies serious consequences. Since many LGBTIQ* people are convinced to have control over their self-representation on social media, they often underestimate dangers like hacking profiles and attacking someone under the pretext of anonymity.

This applies to dating apps as well: Having a closer look on other Arab countries it is questionable whether dating apps like Tinder and Grinder actually provide anonymity or even increase the risk of disclosing someone's identity: For example, in Egypt police officers create fake accounts to encourage people to send them nude pictures and after, they use those pictures as evidence to arrest LGBTIQ* people.²² Even though this procedure isn't common in Lebanon, people can still take screenshots of intimate pictures and publish them on other platforms.

Social media also increase ideological separation by creating filter bubbles and echo chambers. Being able to personalize content, social networks, news feeds and search engines ensure that people only consume content that matches with their beliefs. Facebook's algorithm forces users to stay in filter bubbles, which reproduce the same discourses and filter out other perspectives. Giving homophobic or transphobic people the impression that their perspective is the major opinion, filter bubbles and echo chambers enhance discrimination and inhibit a change of perspective.

The hype about social media also complicates the work of NGOs as they have to stand out of the mass of information with a limited budget for advertisement.

However, despite the negative aspects of social media, how can the internet be used as an alternative platform and contribute to the empowerment of LGBTIQ* people?

In a country, where user identities aren't properly protected, NGOs such as AFE can offer workshops that raise awareness of data security and that teach people how to handle the dangers which come along with social media.

In addition, discriminating comments on the internet should always be documented and be used as proof for the still existing transphobia and homophobia in Lebanon and other countries. Due to the fact, that many NGOs sustain themselves financially with international cooperation, the documentation of these comments can be used to justify further financial aid and new projects.

Finally, as censorship especially influences the portrayal of LGBTIQ* people on TV, independent Lebanese media are necessary to make an appropriate portrayal of LGBTIQ* people possible. As movies, that are supposed to be screened in the cinemas, undergo an opaque process it is impossible to track the person that is responsible for censored scenes. Loyal, program manager of Maharat foundation, which deals with censorship in Lebanon, explains that besides the General Security, religious institutions like the catholic media center influence TV channels. By calling the channel MTV and accusing them for "harming religious feelings"²³, the Catholic Media Center even managed to stop the screening of a movie on TV. And even though social media are officially not included in the Lebanese "Publication Law", online journalists started to be put under pressure as well.²⁴ The so-called "cybercrime bureau", which was founded by a catholic priest, started to investigate online journalists for committing "cybercrimes".

²²Saly El Wazze Identites Reconfigured, Online Dating Apps, and Incrimination: A Case of the Egyptian Crackdown and the Lebanese Tinder, p.7

²³ Loyal Bahnan explains that a movie on MTV was banned due to religious values and beliefs.

²⁴ <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2017/Jul-11/412330-cybercrime-bureau-interrogates-journalist.ashx>

4. “By telling stories equally [...] we can achieve visibility”

The widespread use of different social media has opened up many more possibilities to any individual or group to be visible. However, the above described “filter bubbles” are much stronger than in the realm of TV, which still has the largest outreach when it comes to shaping information and impressions of the larger audience in a country.

Unfortunately, Lebanese TV channels don’t do justice to the great responsibility they carry. As every media outlet is affiliated to a certain institution, they must live up to a specific value system and cannot report freely. By having a market-driven private media only, the power over outreach lies in the hands of only a few, and private media do not have to live up to standards that can be asked from public media in a functioning checks- and- balances system. As long as TV channels are only a product of Lebanese parties and religious institutions, LGBTIQ* issues won’t be covered and LGBTIQ* people will be portrayed in a discriminating way. Therefore, independent media, which aren’t affiliated with any religious or political institution are necessary to create an alternative platform.

Independent TV channels would allow reporters to break away from religious values, report entirely freely and shed a light on underrepresented issues. They would further help to humanize the Mainstream narratives and to tell positive stories about LGBTIQ* people.

Nevertheless, it is not only a question of normalizing LGBTIQ* people but also a question of moving away from the approach to “represent” people. Instead of trying to represent LGBTIQ* people, TV channels should give LGBTIQ* people their own platform to speak for themselves because social media show that LGBTIQ* people and NGOs struggle to raise their voices, break misconceptions and open debates.

However, the remaining question is: How would these struggles be enabled to cause a general shift in the discourse? Is the mass media going to remain stuck in an obsolete system of sectarianism and patriarchy which is incompatible with the arising LGBTIQ* movements?

The independent movie director Mohamed Sabbah, whose movie was censored by the General Security, says: “I am still working on Queer films and it is important to not stop even if they are banned and continue to do what you believe in. I believe that more and more pictures and portrayals, that are not discriminating, will eventually lead to a change. Just by telling these stories equally as we tell any other story we can achieve visibility.”²⁵

²⁵Interview with Mohamed Sabbah

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