

## **The Affordance of Visibility in the Social Media Videos of LGBT Nonprofits in Lebanon: (In)Visibilities, Representativity and Socio-Political Engagement**

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LGBT nonprofit organizations in Lebanon use social media videos to foreground the rights of sexual minorities in a society that institutionalizes homophobia. Employing content and thematic analysis to study twelve of these videos within the Lebanese sociopolitical context, I examine how the organizations enact the online affordance of visibility to transgress local hegemonic discourses and claim representativity and political rights. Engaging in politics online comes with the fear of offline homophobia. Lebanese LGBT nonprofits have therefore adopted strategies to mitigate offline persecution, including the invisibility of individuals within the visibility of the collective. They have also engaged in Pan-Arab activism and relied on local Arabic terms for sexual minorities to create a more nuanced activism for the Arab region than found in transnational LGBT activism.

*Keywords:* LGBT, Lebanon, nonprofits, social media, visibility

### **Introduction**

In this article, I provide an in-depth analysis of the social media affordance of visibility of Lebanese LGBT nonprofits. Social media affordances refer to the different ways in which social media users employ and socially engage with specific features of these technologies (Treem and Leonardi, 2013). The affordance of visibility links to the presence of individuals and organizations on media platforms (Yang and Kent, 2014) and the ease of locating information online (Treem and Leonardi, 2013). In a queer context, visibility is essential for fighting the symbolic annihilation of LGBT people (De Ridder and Van Bauwel, 2015) and for claiming political representation (Sender, 2012). For LGBT populations, the politics of visibility may appear through narratives of self-disclosure, a process that social media can facilitate (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2015; also see Hanckel et al., 2019). This places LGBT individuals under scrutiny by intended and unintended audiences alike (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2015) and heightens the risk of an involuntary coming out online with potentially negative consequences (Duguay, 2016; Hanckel et al., 2019) in the offline world (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2015). Consequently, LGBT people engage in online strategies to avoid inadvertent disclosure and to mitigate the risks involved in being identified as non-heterosexual (Albury & Byron, 2016).

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In Lebanon, where social norms and structures are often hostile to LGBT people, Moussawi (2020) finds that the notion of LGBT visibility in the country challenges what he describes as “the dominant Euro-American binary of LGBT visibility and invisibility,” where visibility is a measure of freedom and progress (p.134). He shows how queer people negotiate and decide their visibility by evaluating their environment and assessing the risks of visibility to avoid vulnerabilities (Moussawi, 2020). Further, Moussawi (2020) contends that what is visible must possess a shared meaning for people. As a political statement, therefore, LGBT visibility needs to convey a message to society.

In their online work with LGBT people in Lebanon, Lebanese LGBT nonprofits must adapt their strategies and align them to the needs of their target population, notably regarding visibility. Until now there is no literature covering the social media affordances of these organizations. In this research, I employ content and thematic analysis to study twelve of these nonprofits’ videos to answer the question: how Lebanese LGBT organizations enact and engage with the affordance of visibility in their social media videos? As my data show, LGBT nonprofits have employed online visibility to engage in national politics and in the transnational discourse on LGBT rights as human rights. They address Lebanese social norms and assert that homosexualities are authentic to the Arab region. Nevertheless, engaging in a politics of online visibility comes with the fear of offline homophobia. The Lebanese LGBT nonprofits have thus adopted strategies to mitigate offline persecution such as the invisibility of individuals within the visibility of the collective. They have also engaged in Pan-Arab activism and relied heavily on local Arabic sexual minorities terms, which I explain below, to create an activism that is more nuanced for the Arab region than transnational LGBT activism.

## **Literature Review**

### **Online Visibility**

Treem and Leonardi (2013) connected social media visibility to the level of effort that people with internet access require to track down information about someone else. For this to be possible, such information needs to be public. This is an action social media allow as they permit their users to create content for broadcast to a potential audience (Boyd, 2011), prompting Yang and Kent’s (2014) definition of visibility as “the public presence of an individual or organization in the media” (p.563). Putting oneself and one’s actions on social media to be seen by others is essential for LGBT people to claim political representation and find communities to belong (Sender, 2012).

Such visibility can also be beneficial to nonprofits. Yang and Kent (2014) linked social media visibility to the frequency with which social media users discuss individual or organizational matters and argued that organizational trust improves with increased daily interactions between organization and audience. Social media allow nonprofits to boost their daily interactions (Uldam, 2017), not

only enhancing the potential for visibility but also freeing it from spatial and temporal constraints (see Thompson, 2005). This freedom allows nonprofits to disseminate issues of concern to their stakeholders in real time and reach their audience regardless of geographical boundaries (Housley et al., 2018).

LGBT activism benefits from this flexible visibility as it can respond swiftly to homophobia and shed light on the issues faced by the LGBT community, moving it from invisibility to visibility (Venzo and Hess, 2013). LGBT organizations thus counter the effect of symbolic annihilation. The latter is inflicted by the traditional media's promotion of dominant culturally-rooted discourses on social norms and power relations (Gerbner, 1972) favoring heteronormativity. This is significant in Lebanon because, despite increased coverage of gender and sexuality topics on traditional media (El Rahi, 2016), the national mainstream media, particularly TV, do not allow the kind of space that social media can provide for sexual minorities. On the contrary, LGBT issues are mainly addressed in comedy shows ridiculing homosexuality, and in talk shows adopting a moralistic and admonitory tone (El Rahi, 2016), which keeps homosexuality confined within a dominant heteronormative discourse.

Social media visibility allows sexual minorities to circumvent social, economic, and political censorship in the offline world, as Friedman (2007) found in a Latin American context. In the process, social media users make their online behavior visible to others (Treem and Leonardi, 2013), incarnating what Thompson (2005) called "the society of self-disclosure," where they reveal aspects of their personal lives and make them available for the many regardless of their geolocation. For LGBT people, this opportunity for self-disclosure and engagement in a politics of visibility is a political statement (Hanckel et al., 2019). Moreover, the potential for wide visibility affords them the possibility of community building and knowledge sharing, although it also creates challenges. These challenges are aggravated by the fact that the intended public of a social media content is not always the actual audience, which may also be invisible and unknown (Boyd, 2011). This means that tailored content does not always meet its objectives and can cause problems with family, friends, and peers (Boyd, 2011).

Here, Duguay (2016) refers to "context collision," an involuntary coming out to an online audience with whom a certain sexual identity had already been determined online or offline. Context collisions often unsettle social interactions and can jeopardize the safety of LGBT individuals (Duguay, 2016; Hanckel et al., 2019). LGBT people "must consciously navigate the emergence and disclosure of their identity" (Fox and Ralston, 2016, p. 635), therefore, and reflect on how they wish to be perceived online (Cooper and Dzara, 2010). Identity management has emerged as a concept to address these issues and minimize the risks of visibility (Hanckel et al., 2019) while taking into consideration social stigma and discrimination, including ways to avoid the latter by exploiting social media features (Duguay, 2016). Through privacy settings, social media permit users to control their degree of online visibility (Treem and Leonardi, 2013). Privacy features, however, are not always simple to navigate (Duguay, 2016). Moreover, social media repeatedly change their privacy policies, adding to the complexity of these features and leaving sexual minorities in a vulnerable position (MacAulay and Moldes, 2017).

This complexity sometimes causes sexual identity traits to be shared involuntarily, even when LGBT individuals take extra precautions to control the flow of information on social media (Duguay, 2016). Maintaining complete anonymity online is extremely difficult since this is contingent on third party connections and non-changing privacy policies (Hanckel et al., 2019). The inability to fully control the flow of online personal information thus raises the question of surveillance on social media. Facebook's real name policy, for instance, allows different parties, such as marketers and government agencies, to recognize LGBT people and collect their personal data without their consent (MacAulay and Moldes, 2017). Similarly, while social media can empower activists by giving them the visibility needed to enact social change, they also expose them to new forms of governmental surveillance (Uldam, 2017). This is worrying for sexual minorities in Lebanon where same-sex relations are punishable by law (Makarem, 2011).

### **The Local Context**

In his work with Lebanese gay men on a dating website, Gagné (2012) found that the gaze of others lies at the center of the self-representation of these men, whose online visible subjectivity is contingent on how their peers perceive them and on sociocultural notions of masculinity and manhood. These contingencies often reflect intersections between global culture and local practices of self-representation (McCormick, 2006; Merabet, 2014). Moreover, in building their online identity, Lebanese gay men “reiterate their Lebanese and Arab identity... [a process that recalls] the impact of colonization within Lebanon and ties users to sociopolitical relations and colonial imaginaries of ethnicity and nation” (Gagné, 2012, p.128). This further illustrates the complexity of sexual identity constructs for sexual minorities in Lebanon. The online and offline worlds become decisive factors in the formation of queer identity in the country and in the way that Lebanese gay men determine their online visibility (Gagné, 2012). Likewise, the existing social and political homophobia in Lebanon constrains their online visibility (Gagné, 2012).

In Lebanon, there is strong social pressure on sexual minorities to conform to heteronormative societal frameworks and established concepts of gender (Merabet, 2006). People usually grow up in a family environment where family members perceive themselves and are perceived by others as extensions of each other; indeed, family connections are necessary for successful social existence and the formation of selfhood (Joseph, 1993). People – LGBT persons are no exception – are rarely considered independent individuals and need to belong to a religion (Joseph, 1997), a fact consolidated by what Mikdashi (2018) calls “sectarianism,” the intersection of sex and sect defining which Lebanese citizens have which rights in matters of personal status. For example, a Lebanese man who is Maronite cannot file for divorce, unlike a Lebanese Muslim man. A Lebanese woman cannot pass her nationality on to her children or her husband, regardless of her religion.

Lebanese LGBT people may also become victims of systemic and legal discrimination. Article 534 of the Lebanese penal code states that “any sexual

intercourse contrary to the order of nature” is punishable by imprisonment of up to one year, a provision that has been used by Lebanese authorities to persecute those who engage in same-sex relations (Lebanon: Same-sex relations not illegal 2018). Social pressure and institutionalized discrimination thus force many LGBT individuals to seek safety in invisibility and in conformity to social norms (Merabet, 2006). Additionally, many LGBT individuals in the Arab world, raised to believe that homosexuality is Western, struggle to construct a subjectivity that reconciles their sexuality with their cultural and religious belonging (Beirne and Habib, 2012).

This identity struggle foregrounds a debate over local versus Western gay subjectivities. Massad (2007) critiques what he calls the Gay International, a term used to describe Western gay rights organizations and their self-assigned mission to save LGBT people across the world. He condemns their agenda of imposing a Western binary, gay versus straight, on Arab and Muslim societies (Massad, 2007). In Massad’s (2007) view, using a Western-produced knowledge in the Arab context leads to state and religious oppression of those who engage in same-sex intercourse.

On the other side, Abukhalil (1993) demonstrated that homosexuality is not a Western import. He underscored that a “pure homosexual identity” existed in Arab/Islamic culture and that self-declared lesbian and gay people enjoyed a tolerance that was denied for centuries to homosexuals in the West (Abukhalil, 1993, p. 33). Furthermore, in the pre-colonial Arab world, there was no legislation punishing homosexuality (Beirne and Habib, 2012). The colonial administration introduced laws criminalizing same-sex intercourse (Pullen, 2012), such as in Lebanon where Article 534 stemmed from Vichy legislation during the French mandate (Makarem, 2011). Also, while anti-homosexual elements existed in the East earlier in history, as Abukhalil (1993) showed, these did not constitute an ideology until after colonization, when colonial heteronormativity, according to Binnie (2004), reinforced homophobia.

Today, however, many LGBT people in the Arab world turn to the West for a solution to the homophobia prevalent in their societies (Pullen, 2012). They regard international LGBT organizations as a support network ensuring their safety while advocating for gay rights in their countries. This encouragement of Western entities to play a safeguarding role can fuel anti-gay/anti-Western sentiment in the modern Arab world, given the colonial history. Often under the pretext of protecting authentic cultural traditions and religious values (Long, 2005), Arab states resist any form of normalization of homosexuality and dismiss gayness as alien and as an extension of colonialism. In this context, Abukhalil (1993) demonstrated that the term *shudhūdh jinsī*, meaning sexual perversion, was never used in Arab/Islamic history and that it was the modern Arab state that introduced the term to refer to homosexuality. In parallel, HIV/AIDS became associated with homosexuality and was attributed to a Western/Zionist conspiracy (Abukhalil, 1993). Consequently, Arab LGBT people are the targets of a double condemnation: being immoral and betraying their nation (Abukhalil, 1993).

That said, speaking of contemporary pure homosexual identities is impractical. Sexual minorities’ identities around the world influence each other in multidirectional flows of ideas, leading to the proliferation of hybrid gay subjectivities (Oswin, 2006). Locally, Mourad (2013) argues that when Lebanese LGBT people refer to

themselves using English transnational identities, such as gay and lesbian, these identities bear local meanings of sexualities and are influenced by local cultures. Thus, queer Arab sexualities encompass local sociopolitical realities and need to be explored beyond the rigid dichotomy of West versus East (Al-Samman and El-Ariss, 2013).

## **Method**

For this research, I analyzed videos (Table 1) published on Facebook by the four Lebanese LGBT organizations working directly with LGBT people: the Arab Foundation for Freedoms and Equality in the Middle East and North Africa (AFE-MENA), Helem, Mosaic, and Proud Lebanon. To select the video sample, I adopted the guidelines of content analysis (see Neuendorf, 2017) and divided the sampling process into two stages. First, I determined the population, defined by Neuendorf (2017) as “the set of units to which the researcher wishes to generalize their findings” (p. 112). In this study, the set of units is the organizations’ videos. Second, I chose a smaller representative sample from within the population. A smaller sample enabled me to spend more time analyzing the videos and to achieve an in-depth understanding of my research question.

### **Sampling Strategy**

I looked at two sampling units: the platform on which the videos are posted and the date of the posting. The platform I chose is Facebook since it had the highest rate of interactivity with the organizations’ stakeholders. In 2016, for example, Mosaic posted a video on its Facebook page and YouTube channel simultaneously. As of October 2021, the video had gathered over 38,000 views on Facebook and only 581 views on YouTube. This pattern was repeated across all the organizations. As for the date of posting the videos, I adopted a cross-sectional approach examining an event at one point in time (Neuendorf, 2017), spanning from 2016 to 2019. This period covers a time of high visibility for sexual minorities in Lebanon with two Prides events organized in 2017 and 2018, politicians campaigning for LGBT rights during the 2018 elections, and courts ruling in favor of LGBT individuals. In addition to these two sampling units, I decided on an exposure-based population for my video analysis. An exposure-based population contains the messages that are the most consumed by receivers (Neuendorf, 2017). I therefore chose three of the most viewed videos posted by each of the four organizations on their Facebook between 2016 and 2019. This set the population of my study to twelve videos (Table 1). The language used in these videos is Arabic. English subtitles were frequently available.

Table 1. The Video Sample

Organization	Video title	Video label in this article
AFE-MENA	Elections 2018	Vid.A1
	No longer alone 2	Vid.A2
	<i>Kull al-'alwān</i>	Vid.A3
Helem	<i>Min sijin lasijjān</i>	Vid.H1
	<i>Munāhaḍa</i>	Vid.H2
	Social experiment	Vid.H3
Mosaic	Diaries of a trans refugee	Vid.M1
	<i>Niḍāl lil'afḍal</i>	Vid.M2
	In just one day	Vid.M3
Proud Lebanon	<i>Chū bta'mil</i>	Vid.P1
	<i>Khalas</i>	Vid.P2
	What Will You Do	Vid.P3

## Analysis

I examined the communication content in the twelve videos (Table 1) by investigating the diverse ways in which the messages were transmitted, such as scripts, speech, and written text (Neuendorf, 2017). I integrated thematic analysis to interpret the meaning of my findings (Green et al., 2015) by defining recurrent themes related to my research (Braun and Clarke, 2006) such as politics, social structures and safety. I employed a constructionist thematic analysis seeking to understand the sociocultural contexts giving meaning to the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and investigated the underlying Lebanese sociopolitical structures and discourses influencing the work of LGBT organizations. To do this, I contextualized my data in the literature on Lebanon. For guidance in defining the key recurrent themes, I also used the literature on the affordance of visibility. I adopted a theoretical thematic analysis rooted in the existing literature (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Nonetheless, I also remained open to new insights that might provide more depth to the analysis.

## Arabic LGBT Terms

Henceforth, in my endeavors to contextualize my findings in their local culture, I use the Arabic *mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn* terms. These terms, which I list below (Table 2), refer to sexual minorities in the Arab world. *Mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn* organizations in Lebanon adopted these terms in their videos after Arab activists had created them in order not to resort to the transnational LGBT categories or pejorative Arabic words. Initially all these terms started with the letter M of the Arabic alphabet called *mīm*. Hence, the umbrella term *mujtama' al-mīm*, meaning community M. At a later stage, the term *'ābir al-jandar* and *'ābirat al-jandar*, starting with the letter *'ayn*, replaced the original term used to refer to transgender people. This was a grassroots change where *'ābirī al-jandar* and *'ābirāt al-jandar*, which can be translated as “transgender people,” dropped the old term and adopted the new term, which they deemed more representative of themselves. The umbrella term then shifted to *mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn* to incorporate

the first letter of the new term. This change suggests that *mujtama' al-mīm/ayn* terms are dynamic and changing and that there is space for further terminological evolutions to occur. In this vein, the executive director of Helem, Tarek Zeidan, emphasized in an interview I conducted with him that Arabic terms of *mujtama' al-mīm/ayn* should not be used without recalling the fact that there are non-Arab peoples in the Arab region, such as the Kurds and the Amazigh, who have their own languages. Additionally, sexual minorities in the various Arab countries can use local terms that are not equally known in all Arab societies.

Table 2. Arabic Sexual Minorities Terms

Arabic term (The masculine plural also serves for mixed-gender groups.)	English translation
Mujtama' al-mīm/ayn	LGBT community
<i>Mithlī</i> (plural: <i>mithliyyīn</i> )	Gay
<i>Mithliyya</i> (plural: <i>mithliyyāt</i> )	Lesbian
<i>Muzdawij al-muyūl al-jinsiyya/muzdawijat al-muyūl al-jinsiyya</i> (plural: <i>muzdawijāt al-muyūl al-jinsiyya/muzdawijāt al-muyūl al-jinsiyya</i> )	Bisexual (masculine/feminine)
'ābir al-jandar/'ābirat al-jandar (plural: 'ābirī al-jandar/'ābirāt al-jandar)	Transgender (masculine/feminine)

## The Findings

### F1: Engagement in National Politics

In their videos, AFE-MENA, Helem, and Mosaic tackled institutionalized homophobia and Article 534 of the Lebanese penal code that criminalizes same-sex intercourse. In the run-up to the Lebanese parliamentary elections in May 2018, AFE-MENA posted a series of short videos, around 20 seconds each. In Vid.A1, a *mithlī* says:

Article 534 of the penal code is used to criminalize same-sex relationships. This means I can be put in prison simply for loving another man. This year, some electoral candidates are calling to abolish this law and to ensure bodily rights for the LGBT community. To find out who these candidates are, visit our website: [www.afemena.org/elections](http://www.afemena.org/elections)

The video participant mentions the institutionalized homophobia that could lead to his imprisonment. AFE-MENA made visible an issue of concern to *mujtama' al-mīm/ayn* and attempted to transform it into a common cause by using inclusive wording such as “rights for the LGBT community.” Furthermore, “rights for the LGBT community” challenges the hegemonic Lebanese political and judicial system’s privileging of heteronormativity and depriving of *mujtama' al-mīm/ayn* of their rights. AFE-MENA also invited Lebanese *mujtama' al-mīm/ayn* to visit its elections webpage and urged them to vote for the candidates who defend their cause. Through Vid.A1, the organization brought the discourse



on the rights of sexual minorities into mainstream politics in the run-up to the parliamentary elections. At the same time, by launching its call to action, AFE-MENA endeavored to gather support around mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn causes and suggest solutions to achieve social change.

Mosaic also addressed Article 534. In Vid.M3, a woman, via a voiceover, told her story of being attacked in the street for being a 'ābirat al-jandar. She said: "why should I feel scared to report to the police? Because the law does not protect me." Simultaneously, the number "534" appeared on the screen. Hence, Mosaic also brought attention to the fear that mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn feel when they need to report violence against them to the police.

Similarly, Helem highlighted the dynamic of mistrust and fear among mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn towards the Lebanese police. The organization conducted a video-taped social experiment for the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia (IDAHOT). In this experiment, a participant highlighted the fact that calling the police to protect mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn would have a counter-effect. The participant said: "the police will see they [mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn] are guilty."

In another attempt to include mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn issues within the broader political discussion in the country, Helem compared the problems sexual minorities face with the political mismanagement of Lebanon. In Vid.H1, the organization showed two individuals from mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn being subjected to a discriminatory gaze on the street. A voiceover makes prejudiced declarations such as "take her, she'll straighten up," referring to a mithliyya, and "he takes it... how gross," referring to a mithlī. Vid.H1 then showed photos of an electricity plant, the 2017 garbage collection crisis in Beirut, and polluted rivers in the city, accompanied by the following text in Arabic and English: "2017: Electricity cuts crisis with no solution. Garbage in Lebanon, and environmental crisis. 80% of Beirut's water contains faeces bacteria." A voiceover then adds: "None of these shook you, my looks did?! From one prison to another, don't be the jailor." "Don't be the jailor" can be read as a call to action for citizens not to discriminate against mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn.

Article 534 and explicit references to national politics were not present in the Proud Lebanon videos I analyzed. The organization did, however, publish videos relating to IDAHOT. Below, I argue that IDAHOT reflects the engagement of Lebanese organizations in transnational LGBT politics.

## **F2: IDAHOT and Rights Discourse**

IDAHOT is internationally celebrated on 17 May to commemorate the World Health Organization (WHO) removing homosexuality from its International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems on the same day in 1990 (APA, 2011). By publishing IDAHOT-related videos on their social media, Lebanese mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn organizations made this internationally celebrated event visible locally. They engaged online in transnational LGBT politics and participated in transnational LGBT activism in the attempt to achieve rights for mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn.

The rights discourse was explicitly present in four of the videos I analyzed. In Vid.M2, highlighting the work of Mosaic with ‘ābirī al-jandar, especially ‘ābirāt al-jandar as the most marginalized population, the organization’s social assistant explained that Mosaic builds the skills and capacities of its target population to enable them to face the society, become familiar with their rights, and learn to defend them. In addition, Charbel Maydaa, the founder and director of Mosaic, argued that LGBT rights form part of the broader spectrum of human rights, advocating for other humanitarian nonprofits to consider LGBT rights while conducting their work. He said: “other human rights organizations should take into consideration the LGBTQIA community.” This call parallels Kollman and Waites’s (2009) argument that, inspired by Euro-American LGBT activism, human rights have become an important vehicle internationally for the rights of sexual minorities. In Vid.M1, a ‘ābirāt al-jandar declared that she will not lose hope despite the dire situation experienced by ‘ābirī al-jandar in the country. “Why would I lose hope in other people, people who exist and who are fighting for their rights?” she said.

As for Helem, the organization created Vid.H2 for IDAHOT 2018. The whole video revolves around the rhetoric of rights. It features a group of young people desperately looking for something in their room. An older lady enters and the following conversation takes place:

Mum: what are you searching for?

Girl: mum, our rights are lost.

Mum: your rights aren’t lost. Your rights are with them.

Voiceover: our rights aren’t lost. It’s time to bring them back.

“Our rights are lost” refers to the Lebanese connotation of the expression signaling an unfair treatment and the absence of a protector. In the reply “your rights are with them,” “them” refers to policymakers in the country. Using “our” and “your” is yet another example of the organizations’ attempts to create and foster a sense of shared causes for mujtama‘ al-mīm/‘ayn. The declaration “it’s time to bring them back” may be read as a call to action and an invitation to challenge the prevalent heteronormative system.

In addition to the videos of the organizations, in 2017 Proud Lebanon invited mujtama‘ al-mīm/‘ayn to create short videos and submit them for screening during IDAHOT celebrations that year. As well as engaging mujtama‘ al-mīm/‘ayn in the organization’s activities and its political endeavors, this strategy gave visibility to the daily life challenges of Lebanese sexual minorities from their own perspective. Many of these challenges are ingrained in Lebanese social norms and structures.

### **F3: Social Norms and Structures**

As indicated above, Proud Lebanon invited its target population to submit videos for screening during IDAHOT 2017. In Vid.P2, a participant said:

Enough. I will tell her everything. I look at her and think of her reaction [...] We lost my father last year. I am the only man in the family [...] As they say, I am now the man of the house. Maybe I am not the man my mother wants me to be [...] I do not

want to be selfish, but I do not want to lie to her. How do I tell her I will never get married? That I will never give her grandsons?

This excerpt illustrates the struggles of a *mithlī* when thinking of disclosing his sexuality to his mother. These struggles are embedded in social and family traditions. Being “the man of the house” comes with social expectations in Lebanon. It invokes manhood and the gender-based role of getting married to a woman and having children. This excerpt also recalls the need to be accepted in one’s own family, which is something that may or may not happen, as I discuss below.

Another participant in Proud Lebanon’s initiative highlighted the prejudices *mujtama’ al-mīm/’ayn* face in Lebanese society. Vid.P3 played a voiceover of people answering the question “what will you do if your kid is homosexual?” The answers reflected various prejudices and heteronormative attitudes. Some people believed homosexuality to be a disease requiring treatment: “I try everything to see how I can treat her,” “this is a disease and there is nothing that can be done.” Some feared that the child would acquire a bad reputation and facing social discrimination: “what about people gossiping?” “he will have a dirty reputation.” Other parental statements included tendencies to disown their homosexual son or daughter and even expressed violent reactions: “I would hate him,” “I would disown her immediately,” “my reaction would be tough.” Other people saw homosexuality as unnatural and unacceptable in the Arab region. They also questioned the authenticity of love between two people of the same sex: “I do not expect a man to love another man, especially in our region, our environment,” “this is completely unnatural. What love is this? This is a lie. It is impossible for a man to love another man.”

The idea that homosexuality is alien to Arab society resurfaced in the social experiment conducted by Helem for IDAHOT 2018. In this experiment, a *mithliyya* couple, both Helem activists, held hands on purpose in a street café. A man passing by told them: “for public decency, release her hand. This behavior is unacceptable in our Lebanese society. We are not in Europe here.” This intervention stresses the theory that homosexuality and a queer lifestyle are Western imports, as I develop in F4 below.

However, it is important to stress that not all reactions towards homosexuality were negative. In Vid.P3, some people drew on the strong family connections existing in Lebanese society (see Joseph, 1993; 1994) and declared that they would love their homosexual son, daughter or sibling no matter what their sexual orientation was: “his mother has the obligation to love him as he is,” “I would accept my son and would be open to him more,” “I would stand by her, after all she is my sister.” Some underlined the freewill of *mujtama’ al-mīm/’ayn* family members: “the relationship would remain the same. This is their life, and they are free [to do what they want] with it,” “if I could accept it or not, I do not know; but I cannot bother her, after all this is her life.” And some people expressed a feeling of solidarity: “after all he is human,” “I would stand by him, because people would distance themselves from him and hate him.”

*Mujtama’ al-mīm/’ayn* activists from various parts of the Arab world tackled these family dynamics in Vid.A2, addressing the deep-rooted myths and

misconceptions they face in their societies. They answered questions such as “when will you get married?” and “who is the man in the [same sex] relationship?” They challenged the assertion that “it is impossible for parents in the Arab world to accept their mujtama’ al-mīm/‘ayn children.” While activists agreed some parents do not accept homosexuality for religious reasons or due to social concerns, they refuted the idea that parental non-acceptance of mujtama’ al-mīm/‘ayn children is universal. A ‘ābirat al-jandar declared: “my mother and I are very friendly with each other. She accepts me and I accept her.” A mithlī highlighted the positive change in his mother’s attitude towards homosexuality: “when I first told my mother, she fainted. She was depressed for a long time. But then she started meeting my friends and understanding who we are... she saw that we’re just normal people.” In their analysis of documentaries on mujtama’ al-mīm/‘ayn in the Middle East, Beirne and Habib (2012) confirmed these findings and emphasized that some Middle Eastern families accept their children among mujtama’ al-mīm/‘ayn while others do not. Acceptance can stem from the strong family relationships or what Joseph (1993; 1994; 1997) called connectivity, where family members see themselves as extensions of each other. Rejection, on the other hand, may be motivated by Lebanese sociopolitical structures and the pervasive idea that homosexualities are not Arab (Beirne and Habib, 2012).

#### **F4: LGBT Identities: A Western Import?**

Activists in Vid.A2 described the widespread argument that LGBT identities are Western as “provocative” and “an accusation that we face every day.” They denied homosexuality is a Western import and highlighted the fact that a homosexual lifestyle existed hundreds of years ago in the Arab world. As one activist from Lebanon said: “I remember in school; the teacher gave us the poetry book of Abu Nuwas<sup>1</sup> as an assignment. If Abu Nuwas was courting young men 600 or 700 years ago...” Likewise, a ‘ābirat al-jandar from Algeria stressed that her country was “open-minded” before French colonialism, and that manifestations of homosexuality and men living as women were normal. She declared “homophobia and transphobia came about during French colonialism.” In exploring this point, AFE-MENA brought together activists from different Arab countries to challenge the idea – or the myth, as they called it in the video – that LGBT identities are a Western import. They pointed out how “anyone who is different from the norm has to be accused of something.” Furthermore, the protagonists in Vid.A2, coming from different parts of the Arab world, highlighted the similar daily struggles of Arab mujtama’ al-mīm/‘ayn. This common adversity encouraged the creation of common Arab strategies in the fight against homophobia. A clear example of these shared strategies is the coming together of Arab activists to create non-pejorative Arabic terms (Table 2) to refer to mujtama’ al-mīm/‘ayn without the need to resort to the transnational LGBT acronym and categories (Naharnet, 2018; Mourad, 2013). As explained earlier in this article, this lexicon is a step towards rooting the activism of mujtama’ al-mīm/‘ayn in their

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<sup>1</sup>Abu Nuwas was an Arab poet born in the eighth century.

specific geopolitical and sociocultural contexts (Moussawi, 2015). It constitutes a cornerstone strategy in the pan-Arab action for the rights of mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn, as shown by its consistent use by the participants in these videos. Hence, mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn activists from the Middle East and North Africa challenged dominant discourses on homosexuality as alien to the Arab world and paved the way for Arab sexual minorities to claim their belonging to local communities and to affirm mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn identities away from the accusation of Westernization. Nonetheless, engaging in a politics of visibility to (re)normalize the existence of mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn in the Middle East and North Africa does not always align with the needs of mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn themselves, as I explain in F6.

On another level, pan-Arab networking raises the question of the representativity of the diverse mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn appearing in the videos. Besides representing various Arab nationalities, the differences among the cast in the films also includes other forms of diversity, as I discuss in the following section.

### **F5: Representativity**

Various Arab nationalities were represented in Vid.A2, which stressed the organization's investment in pan-Arab networking. In the video, there was also a diversification of sexualities, visible too in other organizations' videos. Helem's films included mithliyyīn, mithliyyāt and 'ābirī al-jandar, Proud Lebanon's videos featured a mithlī and a mithliyya, while Mosaic's videos focused on 'ābirī al-jandar from various Arab nationalities.

Furthermore, Mosaic, Proud Lebanon, and AFE-MENA all featured mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn in their videos, who did not show their face on the camera. This evokes invisibility as a strategy to maintain one's privacy and safety, as I discuss next.

### **F6: Invisibilities**

In the absence of full control over one's online audience (Boyd, 2011; Duguay, 2016), the risk of context collision and of jeopardizing already established relationships with friends and families, who may not necessarily know about the social media user's non-normative sexuality, becomes real (Duguay, 2016; Hanckel et al., 2019). Many Lebanese mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn are thus mindful of remaining invisible to escape offline discrimination and institutionalized homophobia (Gagné, 2012; McCormick, 2006; Merabet, 2006). Remaining invisible may entail the user not including a photo on their internet profile (Gagné, 2012) and not showing their face in the videos by turning their back to the camera or showing only the lower part of the face.

Safety concerns were not exclusive to Lebanese mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn. They also extended to other Arab nationalities. In Vid.A2, activists from the Middle East and North Africa regions addressed the question of whether one has "to be 'out' in order to be a member of the LGBT community." They stressed that coming out is not a requirement for belonging to the community, as this would involve safety concerns. As one Tunisian activist stated: "it [coming out] is not

necessary. Personal safety is the most important thing for us.” A ‘ābirat al-jandar from Egypt declared that she can be arrested in her country simply for being who she is. She replied to a question from her colleague about why she was not showing her face on camera by saying:

[...] It would not be a good idea to show my face. Egypt is not a place where I can announce my identity [...] I can be arrested. My own neighbors can discriminate against me... I can be physically assaulted.

Similarly, an individual from mujtama‘ al-mīm/‘ayn in the Gulf decided not to show their face and chose to be identified as “anonymous.” They said: “You can’t imagine the number of people I know who were pressured to come out of the closet at a young age [...] they faced huge problems [...] became homeless.”

The two activists from Egypt and the Gulf raised the issue of social discrimination and physical violence that may result from visibility. These topics also surfaced in Mosaic’s videos. In Vid.M2, the organization took live shots of the participants in a training workshop but took care not to reveal their faces. The organization wanted to maintain the anonymity of the participants, especially given that, according to a statement in the video, 99 percent of ‘ābirī al-jandar in Lebanon have been victims of violence. In Vid.M3, a ‘ābirat al-jandar talked about her experience of being assaulted without appearing on camera, saying: “they followed me and started telling me mean and bad words [...] I wake up after 15 minutes with my head bleeding.” Hence, invisibility is at times a must for mujtama‘ al-mīm/‘ayn to escape discrimination and violence. In this vein, one activist in Vid.A2 invited mujtama‘ al-mīm/‘ayn to evaluate their situation and environment before self-disclosing. He highlighted the differences existing among Arab societies, saying: “personally, I don’t think it’s necessary to reveal yourself and ‘come out’ to everyone because the societies we live in are not all the same. Lebanon is not like Morocco, or Saudi Arabia or other countries.” Another participant in the video highlighted the importance of financial independence before coming out. Financial security can help empower mujtama‘ al-mīm/‘ayn if they want to become more visible. This independence can mitigate the familial and social consequences of queer visibility and reduce the risk of homelessness. Legal consequences, however, may not be so easily mitigated. Moussawi (2020) links visibility to state power and its capacity to mark and prosecute those whose visibility is perceived to disrupt social norms.

These dynamics thus invoke conditioned visibility and careful self-disclosure. For Moussawi (2020), queer visibility unsettles normativity and social boundaries in Lebanon and can raise safety concerns. Mujtama‘ al-mīm/‘ayn thus adjust their level of visibility in accordance with whom and where they are visible (Moussawi, 2020). Likewise, they need to assess their online visibility and its consequences, something of which Lebanese mujtama‘ al-mīm/‘ayn nonprofits are mindful. Filipović (2019) argued in a Serbian context that invisibility provides other ways for the LGBT population to exist outside the transnational LGBT human rights discourse and identities. The latter, Puar (2013) found, favor visibility. Similarly, I found that the online invisibility afforded by the organizations in Lebanon to Lebanese and Arab mujtama‘ al-mīm/‘ayn offered a potential for local and

differentiated ways of being. While, through their videos, the nonprofits ensured a collective visibility for mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn to transgress hegemonic discourses and claim representativity and political rights, they also allowed for an individual invisibility. They enabled invisible and anonymous mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn to take part in the endeavors to ameliorate their situation without necessarily adhering to transnational activism.

### **Conclusion**

The Lebanese mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn nonprofits enact the affordance of visibility in their social media videos while observing the peculiarities of the Lebanese and Arab sociopolitical context. At times, they also interact with transnational LGBT activism. My study provides new insights on how the organizations engage in this process as until now there was no literature covering the social media affordances of Lebanese mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn nonprofits.

Online, the organizations engaged in national politics and endeavored to make visible mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn issues and bring them into mainstream politics. They reflected in their videos (Table 1) the social and political trends in the country, such as the politically instigated garbage crises in 2017. Previous literature showed that Lebanese mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn organizations engage in local politics such as the endeavors to abolish article 534 of the Lebanese penal code. This research argues that, through social media visibility, the organizations continue to disrupt the political system. The research also reveals that the nonprofits brought their social media activism to a new political level, that of trying to influence the outcome of parliamentary elections by encouraging mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn, publicly through social media videos, to vote for candidates who support their cause. They also criticized the police handling of mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn matters and highlighted the mistrust between sexual minorities and the security forces who are supposed to protect their rights. In this vein, they brought forward in their videos the rhetoric of sexual minorities' rights which aligns with transnational LGBT activism. That said, the organizations endeavored to create a local and a pan-Arab activism that is more tuned to the peculiarities of the Arab society.

Featuring activists from various Arab countries in the videos contributed to the localized pan-Arab activism. In these videos, many mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn individuals showed their faces on the camera. Others, however, decided to remain unidentifiable for fear of offline homophobia. The latter is provoked by the existing socio-political structures in Lebanon favouring patriarchy and heteronormativity and suggesting that sexual minorities are not native to the Arab world but a Western import. The activists in the videos refuted vehemently this claim.

The findings of this research parallel previous literature on mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn's activism in Lebanon suggesting the Lebanese organisations implemented their offline activism in alignment with the transnational LGBT movement but with consideration to local peculiarities (see Moussawi, 2015). That

said, this research brings a new layer by showing how the organisations navigate, on social media, the frontiers of transnational LGBT and local mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn activism. Considering the fear of homophobia that social media visibility can cause, the Lebanese organizations developed a culturally sensitive online strategy. They afforded a collective mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn visibility to transgress homophobic structures while maintaining the space for individual invisibility to ensure the safety of mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn persons. Furthermore, this research reveals a robust trend in investing in finding and using Arabic sexual minorities terms (Table 2) on social media. This trend forms part of the endeavours to ingrain mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn activism in the Arab culture. Previous literature explained how the term mujtama' al-mīm came to be (See Moussawi, 2015; Mourad, 2013). This article contributes to the understanding of how the term evolved to become mujtama' al-mīm/'ayn and underlines the importance of recognizing that this term may be ever changing to include words that are more representative of the people who use them.

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