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Middle Eastern-American Women, Media, and Empowerment

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Middle Eastern-American Women, Media, and Empowerment

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Master of Arts in Global Communications

Abstract

The American mainstream media have traditionally represented Middle Eastern women as powerless victims with no voice and no agency. While this is a relatively well-known problem, what sometimes gets less attention are the ways Middle Eastern-American women actually think and feel about these stereotypical and problematic representations, and how they struggle to counter these representations with their own media engagement, and possibly gaining empowerment on a variety of media platforms, including digital, alternative, and social media. This thesis presents a qualitative research on Middle Eastern-American women involved in the media through a series of interviews with the women themselves, in which the research outlines the structural challenges and cultural barriers they face in attaining empowerment and equal representation. This research concludes with the argument that although the digital media are seen to be useful in effecting social transformation, structural and cultural transformations within the mass media are critically crucial in regard to Middle Eastern-American women's representation and empowerment.

Key Words: agency, digital media, empowerment, gender, identity, media representation, Middle Eastern women

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PART I Introduction

Research Objective

There is relatively little research available concerning minority women and the media in general, and Middle Eastern women's representation in and relationship to the media in particular. My research aims to fill in some of the gaps in media studies concerning Middle Eastern women. In the Western media in general, and the American media in particular, Middle Eastern women have traditionally been subject to negative stereotypes and portrayed as passive and powerless victims. My research intends to challenge these representations by differently recognizing these women as active, reflexive actors who use their own agency through the alternative, digital media to gain a sense of empowerment. There also tends to be a visible lack of Middle Eastern female empowerment and agency in the American media sphere, and I intend to argue for the recognition and the presence of more of these women in such mediated spaces. I will take into consideration any complexities and contradictions at multiple levels, recognizing that media representations can be extremely important for identity formation and can also have potential weaknesses and limitations.

The media are an important factor in the empowerment of women, as most feminist researchers around the world have concluded. In this research, I focus on Middle Eastern-American women's representation as it relates to the U.S cultural politics; American popular culture and media power are very strong, exerting soft power that induces and attracts global audiences. American film and television enjoy global popularity and are consumed in the world. However, "soft power" (e.g. Nye, 2004) studies usually from the West and America in particular mostly focus on the producers/senders (e.g. the West) of media texts, and do not really take into account the receivers (e.g. the Middle East) in any equal depth. In the process of exploring how the media

become a doorway for Middle Eastern-American women to express themselves and gain a sense of empowerment, I take into account seriously how the women themselves receive the media and make sense of media representation. Given the media's centrality in initiating cultural conversations, my research aims to further a critical understanding of women's conditions in Middle Eastern communities in the U.S and create a cultural dialogue that will potentially improve relations between these minority communities and the dominant publics in which they are situated. In this research process, I attempt to consider the complexities and contradictions of this phenomenon under study.

Many academic sources in the existing literature tend to deal with Middle Eastern issues inside the Middle East and within the Middle Eastern media (please refer to the Bibliography at the end of this thesis). What I specifically aim to explore in this research is the representation of Middle Eastern women in the mainstream American media, how these women can possibly make a difference in bridging the gap between the Middle East and the West, and how more empowered representations of these women in the media would possibly contribute to the empowerment of Middle Eastern women in general, albeit with difficulties and limitations. Today's social media are partly enabling meaningful forms of social movements for Middle Eastern women, and my research further considers the important yet complex role of the social media for female empowerment in this evolving phenomenon.

Key Research Question

The primary purpose of this research is to identify how Middle Eastern-American women actually think and feel about the representation of Middle Eastern women in the U.S mass media. If they find these representations disempowering, are they possibly utilizing any alternative

media to gain a sense of empowerment and attempting to challenge hegemonic representations? How, and with what consequences? These questions have remained relatively under-explored in the existing literature. In addressing these research questions critically, I also intend to identify any potential challenges or limitations the Middle Eastern women may face in the process.

Critical Literature Review

Focusing on scholarly articles and other literature that relate to the purpose of this study, in my critical literature review, I highlight who has done research on the representation of Middle Eastern women on the mainstream media, and how Middle Eastern women use the alternative, social, or digital media to overcome perpetual problems of representation. As there tends to be a relative dearth of existing literature covering these particular issues, I have also included articles examining the issues of women and the media as related to my study.

In “Female Individualization? Transnational Migration, Media and Identity of Asian Women”, Youna Kim (2013) examines the phenomenon of Asian female individualization in transnational flows. Asian women routinely face gender inequality and discrimination in the job market, even if they happen to be highly educated. In the search for individualization, they strive for a more self-determined life politics undefined by traditional and social constraints, leading to a growing transnational mobility among Asian women. Realizing gender is commonly neglected in scholarly research on migration, Kim highlights the crucial role of global media flows in Asian women’s self-individualization and the feminization of migration in Asian societies. In my own study, I apply some of these concepts to Middle Eastern-American women, whose daily experience of transnational media flows impacts their construction of new, multi-layered identities and self-determination beyond the constraints of their local communities. While the Asian women cited in Kim’s article are emotionally invested in popular Western media, I

wonder how they would respond to representations of women of their own kind in the Western media, and how would it affect their self-reflexive imaginations? The purpose of my research is to find out how representations of Middle Eastern women – as a subcategory of minority women – in the media affect Middle Eastern women themselves, and in what forms these women aim to overcome any existing problems of representation in an increasingly mediated society where greater calls for minority rights and inclusion are taking place.

“When the Camera Won’t Focus: Tensions in Media Ethnography” by Vicki Mayer (2001) focuses on how Mexican-American teenage girls negotiate their cultural identities through media consumption. While observing the girls in the context of their everyday lives, getting to know their media consumption habits, she establishes personal rapport with her subjects in a manner quite different from typical quantitative research. She goes beyond usual scholarly methods in order to provide intimate, detailed data, and by doing so manages to uncover the “hidden transcripts” that shape her subjects’ identities. Understanding that ethnicity, gender, and class influence one’s interpretation of media texts and formation of identity in relationship to the media, I explore how Middle Eastern women feel about their representation in American media. I discover certain power relations at play which hinder them from realizing their media potential and obtaining equal representation in mass media. Through my interviews, I aim to capture the experiences of my participants using their own voices, so to uncover the “hidden transcripts” of their everyday lives that shape their media-making and meaning-making processes. The pervasiveness of social, digital, and alternative media platforms nowadays can enhance the process of self-representation, self-reflexivity, and the negotiation of cultural identities, albeit with contradictions as I outline in my research.

In “Pink Technology: Mediamaking Gear for Girls”, Mary Celeste Kearney (2010) analyzes the

feminization of boy-oriented products for girls, particularly how the “gendered scripts” inherent in media gear lead girls to conform to traditional lines of heteronormativity. She stresses that girls becoming media savvy and gaining media production skills provide unique opportunities for their self-expression and participation in the public sphere, especially since the popular assumption is that “girls do not make media; they consume it.” Kearney explores in depth the relationship between gender, technology and power, a topic seldom discussed in media studies research. However, her study has a predominantly white population as its primary focus. There is no mention of minority girls’ relationship with the media, and how it may resemble or differ from the media patterns she highlights. While Kearney hints at the importance of talking with the girls themselves to truly comprehend their relationships with media technology, she does not incorporate this element in her study. A vital element of my research is hearing from Middle Eastern women firsthand how they utilize media to counter hegemonic societal norms and stereotypical assumptions, creating more multi-faceted discourses and dynamics concerning women of this demographic and their media representations.

Following 9/11, many Western nations witnessed a spike in hate crimes against Muslims. Interestingly enough, little attention has been paid to public violence committed against Muslim women and girls, which is the focus of Barbara Perry’s (2013) paper, “Gendered Islamophobia: hate crime against Muslim women.” By calling attention to gendered motivated violence, Perry analyzes how Muslim women in particular are subject to a discrimination stemming from characterizations of these women as assailable, in need of salvation, or as terrorists. She emphasizes the importance of Muslim women’s voices being heard in the public sphere, so to foster dialogue between those who live under the threat of Islamophobic, gender-based violence and those complicit in supporting such threats. Since the publication of this article,

discrimination against veiled women continues to persist in Western societies, which makes Perry's calls for ensuring the equality of these citizens still relevant. Perry does not, however, emphasize the media's centrality in amplifying women's voices, or in perpetuating stereotypes of women on the other hand. Internet-based platforms in particular have been crucial in providing Muslim women space to be active and articulate. With more positive representations of veiled women in the media, discrimination against them may decrease. As my participants show, no Middle Eastern woman chooses to be associated with stereotypical depictions of the veil, and many Middle Eastern women, Muslim and non-Muslim, are utilizing the media to bring about social transformation.

In "Women, Sexuality, and Social Change in the Middle East and the Maghreb", Pinar Ilkkaracan (2002) clarifies misconceptions about the role of Islam in relation to women's sexuality, arguing that the violation of women's sexual rights in the region is the result of a combination of historical, sociopolitical, and economic factors, in addition to a patriarchal misinterpretation of religion. Although she briefly points activity of women's groups in the region as powerful agents of change, she does not further elaborate on the shifting narratives surrounding women's sexual rights or give more concrete examples of women themselves advocating for changes in the region. In my own approach, I take the discussion a step further and emphasize women's ability in enacting the change they desire. While external and internal elements may prevent them at times from fully exercising their sexual agency, they are still challenging the status quo on sexual attitudes and behaviors in the culture. While Ilkkaracan implies that the issue of women's sexuality is inseparable from today's age of globalization, I say it is also inseparable from the media, illustrating in my research that Middle Eastern women are taking to the globalized media for self-determination purposes, and nowadays, changing social

values and women's advocacy for sexual rights are almost always reflected through mediated discourses.

In "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others", Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) considers the obsession with the plight of Muslim women a continuation of "colonial feminism", as female Muslim symbols such as the veil were appropriated in the "War on Terror" and used to justify American military intervention in Afghanistan in ways they were not in other conflicts. Abu-Lughod asserts the need to adopt a greater understanding of differences among women in the world, particularly when it comes to feminism in Muslim societies, and of being wary about the rhetoric of salvation which often implies a sense of Western superiority. As Abu-Lughod writes from an anthropological perspective, there is little mention of the media and its role in propagating hegemonic discourses and images that operate in line with politics. In her study, we do not hear the voices of any of the Afghani women she advocates for. In my own interviews, I get to hear from Middle Eastern women themselves how they feel about images of veiled women in the media. I also find out how they use the media to counter stereotypes and represent themselves, instead of relying on others for empowerment. Admittedly, this article was published a number of years before the Arab Spring, when veiled Muslim women expressed themselves on social media platforms in ways that defied expectations. If Abu-Lughod were to write this article today, it would be unlikely for her to gloss over the media's significance in these women's everyday lives.

In "Muslim Women and the Veil", Myra Macdonald (2006) addresses problems of image and voice in media representations. She too outlines colonial fascinations with the unveiling of Oriental women, who were never given a voice in Western narratives and always presented as objects of voyeurism. Placing them in a contrasting position with Western women, who were

supposedly more liberated, served to affirm the superiority of Western societies. This trope has continued to the present day, where veiling is still seen as unnatural and oppressive. In mainstream and online media, images of veiled women are placed strategically alongside accounts of oppression and abuse. Instances of women's agency are dimmed in favor of more familiar and marketable victim narratives. The symbolic use of image and voice perpetuating hegemonic modes of representation is inherent in the movies Macdonald lists in her study. She briefly acknowledges the obstacles in achieving a "reconstruction of difference" in the commercial-driven mainstream media. I too acknowledge the shortcomings of the mainstream media in presenting the diversity and agency of Middle Eastern women, but unlike Macdonald, I present a solution to this dilemma. Alternative media platforms can serve as a useful means for representation, especially when mainstream media provide little room for reconstructions of difference, as can be conferred in my interviews. I also highlight the importance of women acquiring media skills to resist disempowering representations. When women themselves get behind the camera or the microphone, operating video and sound and being in charge of production, they can more easily take control of the narrative.

The Turkish soap opera *Noor* created an overnight sensation in the Arab world in the late 2000s known as "Noormania." Female viewers in particular were obsessed with the male protagonist, Muhannad. In "The Muhannad Effect: Media Panic, Melodrama, and the Arab female gaze", Christa Salamandra (2012) links the "Noormania" panic to social discomfort provoked by the erotic female gaze in Arab culture, all within the convergence of pan-Arab satellite television and online media spaces. For Salamandra, however, discussions on Arab women and the media mostly surround their obsessions over male actors. I believe Arab women's media interactions is an important topic in and of itself, as numerous female viewers tuned in to satellite television to

watch *Noor* and elaborated on the series via online spaces. *Noor* defied Arab cultural norms in its depiction of women's sexuality and independence – elements often associated with modernization and globalization. I also believe this conversation can extend to Middle Eastern women in the U.S. Underexplored in the existing literature are the ways Middle Eastern-American women utilize interactive media in response to American films or television series depicting Middle Eastern women. If a groundbreaking series similar to *Noor* were to be broadcast in the American media, it would likely create a sensation among the Middle Eastern-American community and the women in particular. Given the resources available in today's digital media age, women's responses to modern, stereotype-defying representations onscreen may bear even more intensity.

In “Media and the Construction of Arab-American Women's Identity”, Rahima Abdullah Williams (2012) believes an awareness of hegemonic ideology and its impact on individual identity can equip Arab and Arab-American women with a better knowledge of the media affecting their own formation of identity. Realizing little is known about the media's impact on the identity construction of Arab-American women, Williams engages in interviews and discussions with a group of Arab-American Muslim women, having them go through a critical media literacy process of viewing a number of Hollywood blockbusters containing images of Arabs in them. As a result of few Arab women in the media or films portraying Arab women at a disadvantage in comparison to American women, participants experienced degrees of cognitive dissonance between their Arab and American identities. Williams' research is valuable considering the scarcity of research on Arab-American women's relationship with the media, particularly in relation to their identity construction. She gives her participants the chance to voice their opinions, and is a pioneer in the sense that she chooses Arab-American women as her

focus group. What her study does not address as much are the potential ways her participants can engage in resisting the media portrayals they find so troubling, even though she briefly mentions the power of alternative media in challenging hegemonic messages. While Williams' research on the representation of Arabs in the media – and the opinions of Arab women about this representation – is significant, the prevalence of reductionist media images of Arab women is well known. My approach demonstrates how Middle Eastern women are using their own agency via their media professions and online media spaces to gain a sense of empowerment and counter stigmatizing depictions.

In “Double Marginalization: The Invisibility of Syrian Refugee Women’s Perspectives in Mainstream Online Activism and Global Media”, Katty Alhayek (2014) analyzes the discourses of the Facebook campaign “Refugees Not Captives”, which was launched with the intention of protecting Syrian refugee women but in fact reinforce Orientalist representations of these women, reflecting Western hegemonic language essentializing the Arab world. In what she considers a case study of social media privilege, representation and exclusion, Alhayek marks the disconnection between dominant online representations and the offline experiences of largely invisible refugee women. As revealed in her personal communication with Syrian refugee women and activists, the complexity and diversity of refugee women’s experiences are largely ignored by dominant online media discourses. Alhayek’s study highlights the contradictory nature of social media spaces, which can both help and hinder women. What can be used as a tool for democratization can also reinforce values and interests of regimes of power, revealing the complexities of media use. Even so, there is power in women’s self-representation and capturing women’s experiences through their own voices. Alhayek advocates for further research to more broadly examine the ways Western hegemonic discourse permeates social networking

websites. I believe the argument need not stop there, as self-representations and self-expressions of women can challenge disempowering images and discourses. It is possible for women to use the media to turn the media on its head and counter existing power structures.

In “They Call me Muslim: Muslim women in the media through and beyond the veil”, Jennifer Sotsky (2013) draws upon theories of medical anthropology to explore how the film challenges certain constraints affecting Muslim women while simultaneously perpetuating others. *They Call Me Muslim* tells the stories of two women who are both marginalized in their respective societies for their decisions on whether to wear or not to wear the veil. While the film gives the women a voice, it also displays their private lives to the viewing public. The cinematic gaze in the film is compared to a “surveillant and analytical” medical gaze: as patients are laid bare before their doctors, so the two women are like objects that are “unveiled” by a Western audience. The film reinforces cultural inquisitiveness surrounding Muslim women by limiting discussions about female Muslim identity to the veil, even while asserting that no woman can be defined by a stereotype. Sotsky urges readers to examine who is portraying Muslim women and how the goals and values of those in power influence these portrayals. She who makes the media holds the power and calls the shots – in this case, it is the film director and not so much the women themselves, even though they appear in the film and tell their stories. I argue that women’s media presence alone is not equal to empowerment, but how they are represented. Media empowerment is often synonymous with media literacy and media skills, which is why I assert that one of the ways women can overcome flawed representations is by becoming media savvy and taking control of the narrative themselves.

Kenza Oumlil (2016) begins “Alternative media, self-representation, and Arab-American women” with a summary of reductionist representations of Arab and Muslim women, including

the oppressed woman in need of rescue, and the eroticized belly dancer presented as an object of desire. Echoing sentiments of scholars who call for the “self-representation of marginalized communities,” Oumlil believes in the imperative to study the ways Arab-American women’s voices get heard in the public sphere. She has as case studies two Palestinian-American female artists who are creating their own media to produce counter-narratives to discourses of domination. Oumlil’s study is valuable in the sense that she not only acknowledges problems with Arab women’s representation in the mass media, but also explores how Arab-American women are exercising agency through alternative media forms. Few studies are dedicated to analyzing these women’s presence in the media and the steps they take to overcome misrepresentations, so her contribution is valuable. I agree with her in that Arab-American women creating media on alternative platforms can challenge the status quo, as my own interviewees demonstrate. But I also believe in challenging the status quo concerning Middle Eastern women in the U.S mainstream media, given the U.S media’s pervasiveness, global influence, and history of misrepresenting and/or underrepresenting Middle Eastern women. “In Their Own Voice: Technologically mediated empowerment and transformation among young Arab women” by Courtney Radsch and Sahar Khamis (2013) sheds light on how new media platforms play a role in the empowerment of young Arab women activists in the wave of political and social transformations. These platforms enabled them to find their voices, express their views openly, and be active in ways they could not in the physical world. Through cyberactivism, women became each other’s role models as they became media resources. Adopting a feminist standpoint that affirms the importance of women’s autobiographies and sharing of personal experience, the authors base their study on in-depth interviews with dozens of young Arab women citizen journalists, bloggers, and activists who gained prominence in the

Arab Spring uprisings and whose language and media skills proved to be valuable resources of information for international media outlets. Khamis and Radsch avow that present times coincide with a new chapter in Arab women's visibility, activism, and leadership in their region and on the global scale. Female activists employed social media networks, blogs, and vlogs to articulate their identities and participate in the public sphere – demonstrating the inseparability of women's empowerment and media involvement. While optimistic, the authors admit the challenges of translating personal agency into institutional change. As I point out in my research, there are still major barriers preventing Middle Eastern women from becoming real influencers in the public sphere and media sphere. I also explore the ways Middle Eastern-American women are fighting back against stereotypes and empowering themselves on new media platforms.

“From Veiling to Blogging: Women and media in the Middle East” by Nahed Eltantawy (2013) illustrates how Middle Eastern women are utilizing old and new media platforms to resist forms of domination and provide alternative voices and images to those of the mainstream Western media. She hints at the significance of exposing the diversity and complexity of Middle Eastern women, especially through female-to-female media interactions and relationships. I likewise conclude that not only is there power in the telling of women's stories, there is power in women telling each other's stories and becoming a collective force for change.

In “Arab Women, Social Media, and the Arab Spring: Applying the framework of digital reflexivity to analyze gender and online activism”, Victoria Newsom and Lara Lengel (2012) interrogate mediated discourses of women's roles in the Arab Spring. Through a process they call “digital reflexivity”, information flows from local to global audiences alter the initial activist message based on global needs and interests, therefore restricting the empowering potential of female activist voices. While the discourses may serve a purpose in their initial social media

spaces, they lose substance in the process of reaching the global stage, becoming reflections of the media forms they operate within. “Contained empowerment” is the term used to describe how online media spaces simultaneously empower and restrain cyberactivists. While some scholarly articles point to the limitations of online media platforms in regard to female activism, this is one of the few which calls attention on how Arab women’s discourse on online platforms is constructed and reconstructed by the corporate media system. It appears, however, that the authors prefer theorizing over providing concrete examples or narratives of women that can support their theories. They encourage further research of the role of women and their use of online media since the Arab Spring, something I have done in this study, in addition to demonstrating that online agency does not always translate into offline reality. I also point to the need for major advancements within mass media structures concerning Middle Eastern women’s representation, even as Middle Eastern women are making their own advancements in the media. In “Middle Eastern Women in the Media: A Battle Against Stereotypes”, Amel al-Ariqi (2008) uses content analysis and critical discourse analysis to analyze two feature programs – “For Women Only” on Al Jazeera Arabic, and “Everywoman” on Al Jazeera English. She chooses the two programs as case studies for their special attention to Middle Eastern women’s issues and employing Middle Eastern women as presenters, guests, and news subjects. Al-Ariqi believes more efforts need to be made to justly reflect women’s issues. An assessment of the two language versions of Al Jazeera programs focusing on women reveal differences in coverage of topics, which can lead to the formation of different social realities. My question is, if a network such as Al Jazeera – which has Middle East issues at front and center – needs to improve its coverage on women, how much more, then, do American networks need to reexamine their own representations of such women? Granted, al-Ariqi’s study was conducted several years

before the Arab Spring, when Middle Eastern women broke stereotypes and defied the limitations of mainstream media coverage with their online presence. As many studies have analyzed so far, Middle Eastern women provide counter-narratives to hegemonic media discourses through their utilization of alternative media channels. There is power in women's narration of their own experiences and making their own media – whether on mainstream or alternative platforms – to counter the limitations of dominant narratives, as the interviewees in my study show.

In her book “Women and Media in the Middle East”, Naomi Sakr (2006) declares that an essential part of women's empowerment lies in their agency through the media, and that media studies have the potential for illuminating ways in which women are empowered or disempowered. She examines women-media interactions in a region of the world where power dynamics are under increasing internal and external pressures, and how different media have been used in different times and places to either expand or restrain horizons for Middle Eastern women. Her book is a vital resource for those researching the intersectionality of gender, media, and the Middle East. While 9/11 may have perpetuated the image of Middle Eastern women as oppressed victims, and the Arab Spring may have brought global attention to Middle Eastern women's online resistance, Sakr shows that Middle Eastern women were active in the media long before the world ever took notice, a trend which continues to this day. By focusing on a number of countries in the region within different time periods, Sakr exposes the diversity of Middle Eastern culture, and particularly how Middle Eastern women were known to demonstrate persistence in their media engagement and extraordinary resilience in the face of setbacks and difficulties. Since this book's publication, much has happened in the region, changes have occurred within the media, and new concerns surround Middle Eastern women's position within

media power structures. I explore how current media patterns of Middle Eastern-American women can have implications on their empowerment or disempowerment. I also believe that Middle Eastern women in the United States and their interactions with the media can provide insight just as unique, only in a different context and in a different time period, which is why I select Middle Eastern-American women in the present day as case studies in my research.

In conclusion, among the weaknesses and limitations of the existing literature is that often they do not include the voices of Middle Eastern women themselves to support their points, or when they do, they tend to undermine the role of the media in the women's lives, specifically, how the women can become agents of change through the media. Very few studies explore in depth Middle Eastern-American women's active and complex relationships with the media, or focus on Middle Eastern women who are not Arab or Muslim. In my own research, I try to fill the gap in the existing literature by hearing from diverse Middle Eastern-American women firsthand how they are actually using the media, how they feel about media representation, and how they are struggling to enact social change, in addition to discovering any challenges they may experience in the process.

Research Methodology

As I aim to explore Middle Eastern-American women's relationships with the media, specifically whether and how they utilize any alternative media to gain a sense of empowerment and possibly counter hegemonic discourses, I employ a qualitative approach to my study. The purpose of qualitative research is to gain an understanding of a phenomenon and the ways people give meaning to that phenomenon in their lived experiences. Qualitative research generally includes interviewing (e.g. personal in-depth interviewing, focus group discussion) and ethnography (e.g.

participant observation), which intends to investigate in detail the category of “experience”, “identity”, “everyday life”, “power relations”, and so on. It is generally expected that the data and the data analysis from the qualitative research deliver depth of understanding concerning the particular phenomenon under study, among a particular group of people in society. Applying this qualitative approach to my own research, the methodology I employ involves interviews with Middle Eastern-American women in order to explore fully the topic at hand. Given that my study brings to the forefront their negotiation of media representations of women, a qualitative research approach is appropriate, since it sheds light on how these representations tie into their identities and lived experiences, leading them to exert their own agency.

In my study, I was able to interview 13 women in total. The selection of participants was based on the following criteria. All participants: (1) were Middle Eastern-American women in the sense that they were American citizens of Middle Eastern origin, or Middle Eastern women otherwise living, working, or studying in the U.S, and (2) were interested and active in the media, either in their professions or pastimes. Participants were recruited initially via personal contacts. An acquaintance of mine, a pastor and scholar at Yale University, put me in touch with one of his friends who happened to be an Iranian-American author running her own media agency in Southern California. She became the first participant in my study, and through her, I was able to use a snowball sampling by recruiting a number of other Middle Eastern women who were both involved in the media and based in the U.S. They include an Afghani actress in Hollywood, an Egyptian TV host in Southern California, an Iranian film producer in Southern California, and a Saudi women’s ministry founder and online content creator. Through a Syrian colleague of mine at the American University of Paris, I was able to recruit two other participants – a Syrian actress and a Syrian instructor and doctoral student in media studies, both

living in the U.S. Through a Palestinian colleague at the American University of Paris, I included a Palestinian law student in Pennsylvania as another participant. I also was able to recruit the former editor-in-chief of the student newspaper at the University at Buffalo (my alma mater), a Lebanese-American journalist now based in Lebanon, as a participant. She put me in touch with her colleague, a Lebanese-American photojournalist also based in Lebanon, who agreed to participate in my study. Other participants include a Turkish journalist at the Huffington Post, a Pakistani filmmaker based in Los Angeles, and the Palestinian-American director of the Hollywood Bureau's Muslim Public Affairs Council, all of whom I found online. All women range in age from their 20s to their 50s.

I was aiming for at least 15 participants, and indeed found a number of potential interviewees who had initially agreed to participate in the study but did not respond to the interview questions, even after repeated attempts on my part. In regard to several of these cases, I was informed that limited English skills may have been a factor in their backing out. Even with a couple of my participants who did manage to complete the interviews and remain in the study, I detected that a language barrier may have prevented them from answering the questions in more detail. The interview questions were as follows:

1. How do you feel Middle Eastern women are represented in the U.S media (e.g. American news and Hollywood)?
2. Have you ever taken any steps to empower yourself or represent women of your kind through the media? If so, please explain.
3. In this process, have you ever encountered any challenges or struggles? If so, please explain.

The procedure for data collection took place from October 2017 until January 2018, during which I sent questions and exchanged email communications with the 13 women. After initially sending the questions and receiving responses from each interviewee, I would often follow up

with them, asking them to go into more detail or elaborate on certain issues they had brought up, in order to get a thicker description. In this way, I communicated twice on average with each woman, at least three times with many of them, and with several, four times or more. Their time frame of responding would take anywhere from less than a day to several weeks. In total, replies ranged in length from three paragraphs to a couple of pages, as some were more inclined to communicate and share their thoughts than others.

As most of the women were based in the U.S, and I was living in Europe and the Middle East, I opted for email communication in the beginning stages of my study. I would have preferred to have more in-depth conversations with them, but given that they did not know me, and the subject matter required them to disclose personal information at times, I tried to respect their privacy. While face-to-face communication or oral conversation may have been beneficial in establishing a more personal relationship or rapport with my interviewees, giving them the time to respond via email may also have resulted in their being more self-reflexive and intentional about answers and taking the time to respond in a detailed, in-depth manner. In a number of cases, the women even requested for some time to think about the questions and send back their responses at a later date, so they could reflect more closely upon their media patterns. However, in later stages of my study, I contacted a number of the women again, this time by phone, and was able to have oral, in-depth conversations with them that typically lasted up to a half hour. Instead of choosing one or two countries or cultural frames, I opted for a diverse sample of Middle Eastern countries as I could. The women in my study are from a number of countries in the region – Iran, Turkey, Lebanon, Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. While I am aware that this heterogeneous sample is relatively broad, the Middle East category is not always and necessarily problematic for this study as Middle Eastern women tend

to share many similarities, as well as differences, in regard to their positioning within the Western or American media that often fail to recognize the subtle or significant differences among Middle Eastern women. I also realize that Afghanistan and Pakistan are technically located in South Asia and not the Middle East. I was unable to find more participants from a Middle Eastern background, however, knowing that the aforementioned South Asian cultural frames were similar enough to Middle Eastern ones, I consented to include two South Asian participants in my study. Understanding that there tends to be a lack of diversity in the media's representation of Middle Eastern women, I aimed to fill this gap in my own study, being fully aware that any possible differences among the women would not negate certain commonalities in media representation or empowerment. At the same time, I have attempted to call attention to their unique diversities and complexities as related to the concept of empowerment in particular. I am aware that media competence, media professionalism, traveling to and living in the West, and speaking English or other languages alongside one's native language are indicators of social class and privilege. The women in my pool of participants seem to possess certain qualities that may not always be shared by Middle Eastern women in general, particularly concerning their relationships with the media. In this study, empowerment is tantamount to agency and resisting unequal power relations. But I also understand that the notion of empowerment depends largely on what the women themselves understand by that concept, how it operates in their lives, and the complexities or dilemmas they encounter.

As the issue of veiling is more or less connected with Middle Eastern women, and a number of my own participants brought up this issue during interviews, I acknowledge its significance and implications on the notion of empowerment in this study. As there were no women in my pool of participants who appeared to wear the veil or mentioned that they wear the veil, I will not claim

to know how a veiled woman may feel about media representation or empowerment, although at least two of my participants identified as Muslim and all are originally from Muslim-majority countries. In the next section, I analyze the women's own relationships with the media, in accordance to what they have revealed in the interviews.

PART II Data Analysis

Stereotypical and Orientalist Portrayals

Edward Said (1978) introduced the term “orientalism” to define certain representations of the Orient in Western imaginary, which were constructed as a rationalization to colonize and dominate the Orient politically and ideologically. Drawing on Said’s notion of orientalism, Meyda Yegenoglu (1998) relates the intensity of fascination with uncovering the veiled woman to the Western conceptualization of the Orient as a feminine mystery. In paintings of Delacroix and colonial postcards in the nineteenth century, veiled harem women were presented as objects of fascination for the Western male viewer. Unveiling the mysterious woman of the Orient became synonymous with dominating the land. As my interview data below demonstrate, this orientalist mindset has led to the creation of stereotypes of Middle Eastern women in Western media and popular culture, if they happen to be represented at all. A recurring image of the Middle Eastern woman in the media involves the veil, which is often equated with oppression, submission, or victimization: “One of the key figures in this discourse is the image of the veiled woman, and particularly the core stereotype of the figure of the veiled woman as oppressed” (Oumlil, 2016: 41). Unveiling is simplistically equated with emancipation, with little attention paid to the complexities of the woman behind the veil. “The Western popular imagination, nurtured by a media which commonly lacks sensitivity to complex realities, is quick to associate Arab women with oppression and subordination” (al-Ariqi, 2008: 6). These Orientalist problems were commonly identified and expressed by the women who participated in my research.

“I think it is often biased because Middle Eastern women are shown as submissive, subordinates, terrorist wives, or accomplices to acts of terror. What’s worse is that we barely see them because of the depiction of the Middle East in movies and television shows. Women are often kept in the background. And even when we do see them, they

are wearing hijabs, burqas or niqabs which fully covers their faces and takes away any sense of identity. I understand the intention of such movies and TV shows is to mirror reality. However, that is only a part of the reality, not the complete truth. There are many modern, well educated, strong and professionally successful Middle Eastern women and heroes who are kept in the dark, away from the limelight.”
(Afghani actress, in her 20s, working in Hollywood)

Therefore, the Middle Eastern woman is typically portrayed as a mysterious and inferior Other. She is also assumed to be Muslim or Arab, with the veil typically symbolizing Islam or Arab culture. But the practice of wearing the veil can be traced to ancient Christianity and Judaism, predating Islam. And not all Muslim women are veiled. In a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2011, 48 percent of Muslim women in the United States – or half a million women – did not wear a veil. Based on the interview data in my research, I would argue that the diversity of Middle Eastern communities goes well beyond the homogenized and problematic notion of Islam and its stereotypical representations. This relatively less-known diversity should be importantly recognized to better understand the particularity of individuals and of these communities beyond one-sided hegemonic media coverage. Fixation on highly-charged symbols such as the veil takes away attention from achievements, agencies, complexities, and power of the individual.

“‘The veil’ becomes an all-encompassing symbol of repression, and in its dominant association with Islam (with equivalent Jewish, Christian, or Hindu practices written out of the script) reinforces the monocular representation of that religion” (Macdonald, 2006: 8). According to the Arab American Institute, the majority of Arab Americans are descendants of the first wave of Christian Arab immigrants to the U.S, although Muslims comprise many of the recent arrivals (Arab American Institute, 2014). The U.S is also home to a sizable Middle Eastern Jewish diaspora. Middle Easterners in the U.S are highly diverse in terms of ethnicity, culture, and religion, but the ways in which this diverse minority contributes to American politics, business,

entertainment, education, lifestyle, etc., rarely makes headlines. A tendency to stick to traditional scripts and narratives impedes the process of normalizing these communities into the American mainstream and creating demand for more diverse stories.

What the American media lack is a representation of Middle Eastern women in general, and the diversity of Middle Eastern women in particular. This can affect Middle Eastern-American women's construction of identity, having been accustomed to no one resembling them on the television or movie screen. A lack of images of individuals of their kind in the American media may make these women feel nonexistent and insignificant to the rest of society. The media affect identity, and the coexistence of culturally diverse media is a cultural resource for the construction of new identities.

“Everything to do with the ME is tied to Islam at these times. In that sense, I believe there is a lack of knowledge in media and the general public not just about Middle Eastern women, but also about Islam. Both are diverse and have nothing to do with this monolithic image. It's inaccurate at the least and insulting at the most to have the gender stereotypes like a hijabi on TV, movies, etc. Christian women in Lebanon or Jewish women in Israel do not get dressed the same way as others in ME... I always try to make room for stories that show non-traditional aspects of ME: a Saudi woman fighter jet pilot, for example. But I find myself having to pitch harder for these kinds of stories compared to traditional ones talking about the ills of Islam and women. When I choose narratives with a female character, I look at it not as a victim story. I focus on how the women are trying to build their lives instead of going into certain specifics or gruesome details, so to prevent disrespect and discomfort and without compromising integrity. For example, when I did a story on child marriage in Turkey and interviewed two women who had been child brides, I took an angle of empowerment, describing how one had walked out of an abusive marriage and become an activist, and how the other had started a hairdressing business. I try to empower women without sugarcoating circumstances, but also showing how women have found solutions.”
(Turkish journalist, in her 40s, working in the U.S)

Recurring essentialist images and discourses eclipse the nuances of Middle Eastern women themselves, and especially how these women are trying to empower themselves, overcome adverse circumstances, and find solutions to problems. Images of veiled women which do more to generate media buzz and less to bring the women's diversity of experience and self-expression

to light should be a cause of concern for feminists. By continually reverting to reductionist scripts and images, attention is diverted from more pressing issues surrounding these women and longer-term implications of their rights and lived realities. It is time to give up colonial obsessions with the veil and do away with familiar victim narratives, and instead focus on Middle Eastern women's pursuits of equality and empowerment. It is imperative to hear the women's own voices, observe their own narratives, and portray them in ways they want to be seen. As these women gradually gain footing in the media, bridging the divide between their communities and the mainstream culture, it is crucial that those in power not impede their progress.

“As for Hollywood, I think the movie storylines still focus on the veils and limitations of Muslim women and have yet to move into the stories of victories and accomplishments of ME women. Much of what I see concentrates on the extreme sides of things...The platform for women in Christian media in the US has been a blessing. Many Arabic Christian media outlets opened the door for women. Yet a few Christian media women have made appearances on secular media outlets but mainly when the topic is on political Islam. The problem with this type of representation in my opinion is that it creates fear and hostility towards Muslims instead of telling the truth in love. I think it also creates division in our communities.”

(Egyptian TV host in her 50s, living in California)

Stereotypical images of Middle Easterners or Muslims in media and popular culture can incite Islamophobia and discrimination, as reflected in the interview data above. In many Western nations, those perceived as Muslim become targets of hate crimes, especially after highly publicized terror attacks. Veiled women are particularly vulnerable to violence and more likely to be attacked than men, with the majority of their perpetrators being white males (Tell MAMA Annual Report, 2016). These negative stereotypes can also affect public policy. “Ironically, this popular stereotype of the ‘weak’ victim has become part of the controlling image of Muslim women, and thus a trigger and key rationale not only for public violence against Muslims, but also for the ‘war on terror’” (Perry, 2013: 9). Recent events such as Trump's executive orders

barring individuals from a number of Muslim-majority countries may have also served to reinforce stereotypes of Muslims or Middle Easterners. The travel ban requires the Department of Homeland Security to gather data on and publicize “acts of gender-based violence against women, including so-called ‘honor killings’ in the United States by foreign nationals” (*Washington Post*, 2017). Honor killings are not limited to Muslim cultures. The travel ban harshly affects female and child refugees, as they are the ones most vulnerable to mistreatment and violence in their conflict-ridden countries. As the *Washington Post* (2017) recently criticized, such policies could both stigmatize Muslims and undermine the goal of promoting broader gender equality.

With calls for racial reconciliation, cultural sensitivity, and greater inclusion of minorities entering into mainstream rhetoric, these values are also being reflected in the mainstream media.

Need for Equal Representation

In recent years, the number of Middle Eastern women in U.S. media, including news, dramas and films, has increased. But an improved representation does not merely mean increasing the number of these women in terms of frequency and quantity, but how they are represented in terms of quality, diversity, or recognition of their distinctive experiences. A representation reflects an identity, which is not static but a work in progress. Multi-dimensional portrayals of Middle Eastern women reveal their diverse identities emerging through mediated experiences. Self-reflexivity upon their diverse identities can facilitate their empowerment.

“Unfortunately, Middle Eastern women are still represented in stereotypical orientalist ways in American media and Hollywood. However, there are margins of positive change with new generations of Americans from Arab descents who are producing new shows like *Mr. Robot*, which is created by Sam Esmail (who is from a Muslim Egyptian family). This show is one of the rare examples in the American media where we see a Middle Eastern female character represented in non-stereotypical way. In *Mr. Robot*, we have Shama Biswas, known by her hacker name Trenton, who was born to Iranian immigrant

parents, and wears a hijab. She is not a leading character but still her representation shows some margins of how complex non-stereotypical representation can be achieved when media producers are familiar with the complexity of Middle Eastern societies. That said, I haven't yet seen a show about ME women or a ME family targeted for a US audience, and when they are, oppression is the general theme.”
(Syrian Instructor and PhD student in her 30s, living in Massachusetts)

As the data above indicate, representation of Middle Eastern women in U.S media is gradually improving. Traditional and clichéd plotlines are giving way to diverse, empowered, and upgraded depictions. In 2013, Marvel Comics introduced its first Muslim superheroine, Kamala Khan/Ms. Marvel. A Pakistani American teenager with shapeshifting abilities, Khan will appear in the 2018 animated film, *Marvel Rising: Secret Warriors*. In 2017, Iranian American actress Tala Ashe joined the main cast of *DC's Legend of Tomorrow* in the role of Zari Adrianna Tomaz, a Muslim hacker and superheroine. Adena El-Amin, a hijab-wearing artist and feminist, is a recurring character on *The Bold Type*, an American comedy-drama TV series created in 2017. She is played by Iranian Canadian actress Nikohl Booshehri. Dust/Suraya Qadir is *X Men's* female Muslim character who wears a niqab and abaya, and possesses the ability to transform herself into dust. Her looks, religion and dress mark a significant shift from the usual representation of superheroes in American popular culture. Female reporters of Middle East origin who have made significant impact on U.S news outlets include Christiane Amanpour (CNN), Arwa Damon (CNN), Rudi Bakhtiar (Reuters), Octavia Nasr (formerly at CNN), and Hoda Kotb (NBC). Actresses Golshifteh Farahani, Shohreh Aghdashloo, Yasmine Al Massry, Basma Hassan, and Alia Shawkat have appeared in hit American television series and/or Hollywood movies, in non-stereotypical roles.

Yet even more improvement may need to take place in order to generate significant change, both in terms of numbers and form of representation. The presence of Middle Eastern women in mainstream American media is still low. In the 100 top grossing Hollywood films of 2015, the

number of Middle Eastern characters were under one percent (USC Annenberg, 2016). Middle Eastern-American women are only recently starting to enter the mainstream as media content creators, contributors to American popular culture, and participants in the American public sphere.

Progress surrounding Middle Eastern women's empowerment is achieved when they themselves gain voice and influence. These women may identify best with and be inspired most by women who resemble them, hence the necessity for Middle Eastern women to gain visibility through positive, inspiring representations. Roles of feminists, activists, professionals, artists, and the like, veiled or unveiled, should replace the stereotype of the "oppressed veiled woman." It is imperative to gain "a joint and like diverse perspective on what it means to be an Arab American woman using real Arab American women" (Williams, 2012: 169). Providing these women with decent media opportunities and creating plots and storylines best suited to their identity will help shift the paradigm, albeit with limitations and challenges which will be discussed later.

"While there are some who are trying to change the perception of Middle Eastern women, I believe we can do more. I think there should be more women in leading roles with significant impact on the overall story of a film or a television show. And then the next step would be to allow Middle Eastern women the opportunity to play those roles. We barely see Middle Eastern women in Hollywood or in the media who are demonstrating heroic acts. And even if we do, it is limited to the bare minimum. I would love to see more scripts where a Middle Eastern woman is shown to make significant impact in helping bring more love and peace to our world. Such storylines will create opportunities to change the current misperception of Middle Eastern women."
(Afghani actress in her 20s, working in Hollywood)

Referring to Arab women journalists in the post-9/11 world, Naomi Sakr poses the question "So what is it that stops them from becoming household names?" (Sakr, 2004: 199). In the upcoming *Aladdin* remake, Naomi Scott, who is of British and Indian heritage, will play the role of Princess Jasmine. The fact that a non-Arab, non-Middle Eastern actress was cast as an Arab princess may reveal Hollywood's reluctance to cast women from this demographic in major

roles, thus preventing them from becoming household names. Conversely, the industry seems to have no problem with Israeli or Jewish actresses in leading roles. *Wonder Woman's* Gal Gadot is a former Israeli soldier who participated in slaughtering innocent Palestinians, yet she has gained iconic status as the ultimate superheroine.

Arguably, there has not been a star from the Arab world to successfully cross over into Hollywood and gain massive international prominence since Omar Sharif, the late Egyptian actor who had leading roles in epic films in the 1960s including *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Dr. Zhivago*. Arab actors today commonly face being typecast into roles laced with negative stereotypes such as those of villains and terrorists, which has led some to leave acting altogether. The fear factor against Arabs has proved profitable in the American entertainment industry. In the words of Palestinian American actor Waleed Zuaiter, “We need a positive, courageous, attractive, sexy and charming image that hails from the Arab world, male and female. The Arab world is in shambles, so maybe a positive image can help unite and champion rather than separate” (*Hollywood Reporter*, 2015).

Even with recent attempts to portray Middle Eastern women in a more positive light, a greater diversity in representation may have to take place to establish desired transformations, as lasting social change will not come about with the diffusion of only a few diverse or divergent stories. In this media-driven age, identities are increasingly becoming diversified. Media have the power to shape identity. An improved quality of representation of Middle Eastern women – in addition to a greater quantity of these representations – in the media can lead to a stronger sense of identity within them, alongside a stronger recognition of them by the larger public.

While women are increasingly contributing to the cultural narrative through various media positions, the industry itself remains strongly male-dominated. Minority women in general – and Middle Eastern women in particular – are heavily affected by existing gender inequalities.

Challenges facing Middle Eastern women (as a sub-category of minority women)

Discrimination against women in media is nothing new. As demonstrated by the allegations against Harvey Weinstein and other powerful media personalities, sexual harassment has been rampant in the American entertainment industry. Female journalists have long been subject to sexual harassment and discrimination on the job. Gender inequality persists in all areas of media, whether in the percentage of women in key decision-making positions, in the portrayal of women on screen, and coverage of women's issues in stories. "Women's position within media power structures and media representation of women are persistent concerns in every society, because negative stereotyping and lack of female input both reflect and reinforce wider gender inequalities" (Sakr, 2004: 1). The #MeToo movement as a rallying cry against sexual assault and repeated calls for gender equality and inclusion in the 2018 Academy Awards are current examples revealing how female empowerment is yet to be solidified within modern collective consciousness. This critical point was also raised by participants in my research.

"Most local U.S media agencies are not professional enough to show the correct image of ME women, therefore, they either do not present it at all, or they do it with the least efficient ways. In Hollywood, there is currently advanced understanding of Arab and Muslim women in general, but it is still very limited, and the reason that women in America themselves are still suffering from discrimination, sexism, wage gap and many other things. Recently, many Hollywood incidents have been revealed and I believe that the media should use these discriminatory events to empower any woman, not only American women."

(Palestinian law student in her 20s, living in Pennsylvania)

A shortage of women in pivotal roles in film and television influences women's representation on the screen. Having more women in such roles will translate into more diversity and gender

equality on the screen, yet the majority of media showrunners continue to be white and male. Women occupy only 3% of green lighting positions in the media industry and are vastly underrepresented as lead characters in film and television. Women of color, older women, and disabled women are particularly neglected in entertainment media (Women's Media Summit, 2017). Minorities have historically been subject to stereotypical portrayals in film and television, while female minorities are sexualized to a larger extent than women as a whole. Sensational stereotyping of minorities is common in the profit-driven media industry: "In the search for marketability, the voice of the "other" is frequently appropriated for a dramatic effect" (Macdonald 2006: 16). Minority women in media typically lack support for their projects, especially when the content falls outside mainstream media interest or is non-propagandist in nature.

"I feel that my current film, *Forbidden Steps*, is hard to film because the characters are South Asian and because the film isn't propagandist in that the culture and the society is being celebrated in a complex manner. I feel the attention isn't there...I also feel that Hollywood is systemically racist and sexist. The DGA's numbers for women minorities directing are still hovering at 5% or less. It is very hard for people to get behind me to help my projects because even they understand what an uphill climb it is to make the kind of stories that I want to make and then to be behind a person of my demographic. These things are never explicitly stated but when you see your peers, who were celebrated at the same festivals as you initially, rise higher than yourself and you constantly are being told you are doing all the right things, then it gets frustrating." (Pakistani filmmaker, in her 30s, living in Los Angeles)

How minority women are represented in the mass media not only affects the way society views them but how these women view themselves. Additionally, the amount of backing and publicity they receive for their media endeavors impact their success in the media. Support is generally lacking for Middle Eastern women who embark on media projects. While the media do not give enough attention to women's issues in general, Middle Eastern women's issues are particularly neglected. While misrepresentation or under-representation of Middle Eastern women can be

problematic, affecting these women's ethnic and gender-related identities in real life, those who break stereotypes also face certain challenges. Repeated stereotypical images in mass media become ingrained in audiences' minds, perceptions of identities are influenced by the media, and eliminating erroneous perceptions is not an immediate process.

“I don't feel the media is representing Syrian refugees in terms of success stories or happy stories, because all they focus is on the wars, the dark side of things... One of my friends told me the moment I arrived here that as an actress, I should put on black eye lenses and dye my hair black to find more Middle Eastern women's roles in cinema (because I have green eyes and brown hair). I know that Middle Eastern women have been represented like this always in Hollywood, but still this is surprising because America has been built as a country on diversity. It depends of course on how much the American men or women you meet are open minded and educated. But still I can feel their surprise, how for example I eat pork or how I dress in short dresses or pants even though I was born Muslim... My husband and I, we always make an effort to know about other nationalities and cultures in the U.S. This fall I will be starting an MFA program in theater at George Washington University. Through my acting, I hope to reflect my diverse, multicultural self as part of the whole American community.”
(Syrian actress, in her 30s, living in Washington D.C)

As can be inferred from the preceding key data, it is vital for Middle Eastern women to embrace the media and their media professions in ways that represent them in a manner far from the usual stereotypes, as a reflection of their stories and identities being an essential part of the diverse fabric of American culture. Yet Middle Eastern Americans are not fully recognized as a minority group by the U.S government. Only in 2016 did the White House propose to add a new Middle East/North Africa designation on census forms, and it is unlikely for the proposal to be seriously considered under the current administration. The status of Middle Easterners as an invisible minority has implications on policy, anti-discrimination initiatives, and ethnic identity. The invisibility of Middle Eastern women in particular necessitates broader feminist activism in the media industry.

Nowadays, Middle Eastern women are using their agency and individual capacity not only to negotiate or resist dominant media representation, but also confront limitations. The Middle East

Women's Leadership Network, based in California, was launched in 2013 with the goal of helping Middle Eastern women in the U.S and elsewhere become media savvy leaders and world-changers, "creating media for their mission." Women in the network create TV talk shows, short films, books, news articles, radio, social media, and internet projects. In 2017, Nike launched a marketing campaign aiming to encourage Middle Eastern women in sports. The campaign's promotional video, "What Will They Say About You?", was narrated by a Saudi female artist and showed actual female athletes from the Middle East training and working out. Responses to the video were generally positive, with many Arab women expressing their support on social media. The fact that empowerment came from women they identify with may have impacted a Middle Eastern female audience the most. Obstacles preventing women and minorities from gaining full inclusion and equality in the media affect Middle Eastern women as a sub-category of ethnic minority female groups, and their status as an invisible minority in the U.S can double the impact. At the same time, elements within these women's own communities can prevent them from achieving their full media potential.

Religious and Cultural Barriers

Middle Eastern women are subject to certain gender norms and constraints, shaped by what Egyptian – American feminist Mona Eltahawy calls "a toxic mix of culture and religion." Even in the more liberal countries of the region, religion plays a central role, with many remaining socially conservative. The identities of many Middle Eastern females growing up or living in the U.S are largely shaped by their heritage, as immigrant families tend to live out the values of their homelands. Departing from cultural norms can pose a challenge for those attempting to blend in the mainstream: "the Arab American women's identity first developed in a larger world context of what it means first to be Arab and female, and then American and female" (Williams, 2012:

61). The Middle Eastern American female of today will find herself negotiating multiple identities as it relates to the dominant culture, the minority culture, and gender, all in a globalized mediated context. For she who aspires to a career or position of leadership in media, certain elements of her native background may prove problematic.

“One important factor can be that ME families put more emphasis on practical and professional job careers. Media professions are not a common choice for ME families...I think most Middle Eastern women from Christian background or Muslim background have been conditioned to accept the control of male figures in the leadership. When ME women are in leadership roles ME men are usually not comfortable. Criticism, power struggle and manipulation are some of the problems Middle Eastern women in leadership roles will face with men under their leadership. But interestingly enough you find Middle Eastern men accepting the leadership of American women much easier.”
(Egyptian TV host, in her 50s, living in California)

Sexist attitudes prevail in Middle Eastern societies. In a 2017 study focusing on 10,000 men across Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, and Palestine, only one-quarter of men in these regions support gender equality (*UN Women, 2017*). The study revealed that while a sizeable portion of men supported equal salaries for women and women working outside the home, few of them were willing to work under a female boss. The extent to which sexism prevails in Middle Eastern-American localities is yet to be fully discovered, and any possible gender discrimination and oppression inflicted upon Middle Eastern-American women by their own communities is an important matter that may necessitate further research. Many families place high expectations on academic achievement, but there is still a preference for fields such as medicine, engineering, or the sciences which guarantee social prestige and financial prosperity. Middle Eastern women pursuing careers in the arts, the media, or entertainment will deviate from cultural norms and expectations, as these professions are traditionally surrounded by social taboos. Social restrictions on the mixing of men and women can limit women’s media opportunities. Additionally, the media’s tendency to sexualize women can prevent Middle Eastern families

from encouraging female members to pursue such careers. In U.S film and television, women are sexualized more often than men, and one-in-three female characters is shown in sexy attire compared to only 7.6% of males (Women's Media Summit, 2017).

By and large, female sexuality in Middle Eastern culture remains a contentious matter. For many women, sex is associated with stigma and shame, as female chastity traditionally represents the honor of the nation. Societies maintain legitimacy by controlling the sexual order, more often than not through women's bodies and appearances. "The collective mechanisms aimed at controlling women's bodies and sexuality continue to be one of the most powerful tools of patriarchal management of women's sexuality and a root cause of gender inequality in the region" (Ilkharacan, 2002: 760). Some prefer female sexuality kept hidden, as culturally what is hidden and indirect can be more honorable than the direct. While Middle Eastern women in the public eye can sport looks as sexualized as their Western counterparts, this blend of sexuality and modernity draws critique from the local population, as did occur with the following women. Iranian actress Golshifteh Farahani was banned from returning to her homeland after posing nude on the cover of French magazine *Le Figaro*. Her act generated widespread debate in Iran, with some condemning and others admiring her for the courage to remove a taboo among Middle Eastern women. Lebanese Olympic skier Jackie Chamoun posing topless for a calendar shoot caused an uproar on the Internet, as well as government claims that the photos may have "damaged Lebanon's reputation" (*Time*, 2014). Lebanese-born Mia Khalifa becoming the highest ranked porn star on the adult website Porn Hub brought a barrage of criticism and threats on social media from Lebanon. A Lebanese-American woman no longer residing in her country of birth being confronted with such backlash indicates "bigger issues surrounding freedom and women's rights in Lebanon" (*Independent*, 2015). Egyptian pop singer Shyma was sentenced to

two years in prison for “inciting debauchery” (*The Telegraph*, 2017) after appearing in a music video in lingerie and eating a banana in a suggestive manner. In Saudi Arabia, a 2017 Snapchat video of a woman identified as ‘Khulood’ walking around in a miniskirt and cropped top went viral, sparking controversy in a nation which requires women to cover their hair and bodies in public.

This style of female sexual liberation may be equated with Westernized feminism and in violation of traditional norms dictating that women’s bodies should represent the nation.

Regulating and repressing female sexual identity thus becomes an imperative of patriarchal order. Women may find themselves having to choose between their sexuality and cultural identity: “conflicting notions of Middle Eastern identity, sexual agency and gender relations vie for dominance” (Salamandra, 2012: 45). Her sexual and cultural identity is in a constant state of negotiation within a globalized context. Globalization as an extension of modernity confronts the everyday experience of the Middle Eastern woman who is simultaneously bound by tradition. “In this age of globalization, women’s bodies and sexuality are increasingly becoming arenas of intense conflict” (Ilkharacan, 2002: 753). The formation of a new identity for the globalized Middle Eastern woman, one that contains “multiple dimensions of cultural referents” (Hall, 1990), becomes inevitable. As such modern, mediated identities flourish, some women may decide to migrate internationally (especially to the West), depending on the extent to which existing problems in their home countries affect them.

“Through my website unveilingbeauty.org, I created a short video of my testimony. It helped me connect with ministries and churches to speak and raise awareness of what the Lord is doing in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries. Currently, I am working on a web series to share the gospel with women in the ME... I am sure I will get lots of negative feedback because the show is about sharing the gospel. I am working on a name change so the government won’t harm my family in Saudi Arabia. Also, my family is not supporting my decision to follow Christ. They consider it shameful that I left Islam, I don’t cover my hair anymore, and I don’t dress the Islamic way.”

(Saudi online content creator, in her 30s, living in the U.S)

In a number of Middle Eastern societies, Muslims are converting to Christianity in sizeable numbers. Many of these converts face persecution and social rejection, especially in predominantly Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Egypt, prompting an exodus of these Christians to the West. A trend resulting from this exodus is the emergence of Christian media ministries in the U.S and elsewhere, reaching out to Arab and Middle Eastern communities around the world. Media outlets aimed at ministering to women of Muslim background have also proliferated, covering issues including religious freedom, trauma counseling, and gender equality, thereby contributing to the emergence of women's identities through diasporic media spaces. While the influence of faith-based diasporic media on Middle Eastern female converts to Christianity is yet to be addressed by scholarly research, it is clear that unconventional Middle Eastern women – Christian or Muslim, religious or secular – face obstacles from their own communities as they imagine new possibilities of freedom from societal constraints, negotiating an identity through globalized media spheres.

Funding, Training, and Networking

The issue of funding and economic resources surrounding women's media projects is important, but relatively under-recognized and under-explored in the existing literature. My research here intends to draw attention to this important issue and analyze in depth.

“Women from the ME face certain challenges because they don't have a lot of support from their male counterparts. Men mostly hold the purse strings and strategic connections, so they must be convinced that women's programming is vital for a healthy and free society... We must be realistic as most of the funding for media comes from Anglo or Jewish people, who naturally will support their own projects. There is plenty of funding in the ME so let's reach out to our support networks and create funding for our projects... As more women get training in media and learn how to secure funding, they

will have more opportunities to create media. We cannot wait for men to open doors for us. Ultimately, if women want to see change in the media world, they must be the catalyst for it. They must create great content that will attract funding and distribution partners. So, we must build a community of like-minded media partners that will help each other succeed...I believe media is a very important tool to empower women, and the fastest way to empower women, even in just a 3-minute video. You have to start getting the word out through media, increase the platform and visibility. In regard to diversity, I try to be inclusive of all women, have an open and generous mindset, listening to the women and letting the women lead. I try to incorporate topics that are underrepresented, such as trauma and religious-based violence. However, we need more people within the community itself with a similar vision.”

(Iranian-American author and media network founder, in her 50s, based in California)

One of the biggest obstacles facing women in media is a lack of access to financing. Insufficient funding for women’s media involvement causes gender inequality in media to persist. A contributing factor to the scarcity of female media-makers is gender discrimination in funding from studios and investors. While some film funding companies try to cater to women filmmakers and female themed content, few of these funds actually contain any real money. Unless funding companies have deals with the studios, they are unlikely to be competitive in any meaningful way. Discussions on funding women’s media projects take place in these quarters, but how effective that talk is remains to be seen. In feature film directing, there is no change in the actual numbers, as American women are still directing only around 7% of studio features (Women’s Media Summit, 2017).

With the issue of female empowerment and representation moving into the echelons of the Hollywood elite, Hollywood agencies and celebrities all vie to profit from and influence the movement. The conversation has moved almost entirely into sexual harassment since the Weinstein revelations in October 2017. In a sense, the explosive news about sexual harassment distracts attention from its root causes, which include employment discrimination against women. A lot of talk and even action to solve sexual harassment will not cost the male establishment in the media industry many jobs. “Time’s Up” is literally eating up the hope that

federal intervention and enforcement of U.S civil rights laws will determine Hollywood's standard of behavior. Hollywood is trying to do that all by itself because it does not want federal intervention, with its studios paying hundreds of millions of dollars each year into the coffers of the MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America) that lobbies for them in Washington DC. Hollywood and the news media are intertwined, so even though an EEOC (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission) investigation is currently underway, the mainstream media no longer mentions the 2014-7 work and contribution of the EEOC and ACLU in instigating the seismic shifts going on today.

White, male showrunners tend to mentor people who look like them, leading to more shows run by white men. A lot of them are still adjusting to women's movements and are more comfortable working with each other and handing cash to other men to produce media projects. Having female showrunners in the male-dominated media landscape is vital as they hire and mentor more women in key creative roles. Although female role models influence a woman's professional success, Middle Eastern women typically lack such mentors. Societal pressure to prioritize marriage and motherhood over careers can affect their presence and participation in the workforce. Training a woman in media to be ambitious, assertive, and bold is imperative, however, Middle Eastern women tend to shy away from being attributed as such because of negative cultural implications. Not only do they lack women to look up to as role models in their own community, it can be difficult for such women to become role models in the first place. It can also be that the concept of mentoring and networking takes on a somewhat different connotation in Middle East societies. Studies done with women in Saudi Arabia and Qatar reveal that they mostly look up to personal acquaintances such as friends and family members as mentors and role models (Abalkhail & Allen, 2015, and Dun, 2016). Mentoring and networking

through the workplace or through wider professional circles has not caught on as much in Middle East societies, although for Middle Eastern women living and working in places such as the U.S, the influence of mentoring and networking opportunities remains to be explored within scholarly research.

In Susan Dun's 2016 study on the impact of sports role models in the media on Qatari women, the majority of respondents believed more should be done in the Arab media to promote female role models. As my respondent indicates, women in media need proper training and networking, alongside sufficient financial backing, to attain success and become an influencer. Taboos surrounding certain media professions leads fewer Middle Eastern women to pursue such careers and receive financial support within their communities. While the Iranian diaspora TV network in Southern California exemplifies a successful minority media venture in the U.S, its influence scarcely goes beyond native communities. Successful female personalities within diasporic media, while not uncommon, remain mostly unknown outside the diaspora. The Middle Eastern minority in the U.S has yet to make a successful crossover into mainstream media in a manner similar to African-Americans or Latino-Americans. Taking adequate time to master the dominant language and culture is key, as lacking strong linguistic and communication skills can be a deal-breaker for minorities who may otherwise be good in what they do. Another deal-breaker is the absence of professional agencies, managers, and sponsors to represent and support Arab or Middle Eastern talent in the mainstream community. While Middle Eastern women are better represented in the media than in the past, those women known to succeed tend to work alone. Improved funding, mentoring, and networking plans are still necessary for them to achieve success on a grand scale. Their nexus must be cross-cultural and multi-organizational, transcending familial and cultural boundaries.

Historically the world has followed the Western model of modernity. Oftentimes the Western woman is regarded as the embodiment of female empowerment, liberation and modernity. Various women's publications across the Middle East have traditionally been influenced by European ideals. In Dun's study, the few public figures cited as role models were often Western, implying the hegemony of Western media around the globe and lack of influential native media personalities: "The preponderance of Western role models cited by the women in the study is indicative of the strong penetration and/or effects of Western media in the region" (Dun, 2016: 55). Middle Eastern women growing up in the U.S are accustomed to a media largely reflecting and reinforcing hegemonic America, learning that their identities do not entirely fit into the dominant culture, and being somewhat forced to choose between their Middle Eastern and American identities. Actresses Reese Witherspoon and Geena Davis are among those in Hollywood championing women's causes in recent times, funding women's media projects and advocating change for women in media. There is a need for more women like them in Middle Eastern communities acting as role models and being in positions of influence and experience to empower other women. Middle Eastern women must learn to fulfill such roles themselves, as they know firsthand the culturally specific constraints facing women of their kind. Barriers are real but can be overcome by performing very well, being very professional, and acquiring all the skills for success.

Limited resources and opportunities can lead to women's appropriation of alternative media sources (e.g. social/digital media) for empowerment and improved representation, as I will discuss in the next section.

Empowerment through the Alternative Media

Middle Eastern women today play active roles in society. Stereotypical roles of women are becoming irrelevant, as women have become more instrumental in the political and societal transformations sweeping the region. Queen Rania of Jordan, in her address to the Second Arab Women's Summit in 2002, stressed the importance of Arab women making use of the latest technologies – and the Internet in particular – to reshape their lives. Recent events in the Middle East reflect the ways women seek equality at all levels and democratization of everyday life, specifically through digital media platforms. Social media in particular have played a pivotal role in women's orchestrating and participating in political and civic movements. A number of these women managed to shine more brightly on the social media scene than their male counterparts. The diversity and complexity of Middle Eastern women as reflected through their media engagement affects the way they see themselves in relation to the world, and how the world comes to see them. In light of the protests in Iran towards the end of 2017, Iranian-American actress Nazanin Boniadi wrote: "The bravery of the women recently protesting in Iran stiffened my resolve to participate in the 2018 Women's March in Los Angeles. As a decade-long advocate for women, I felt compelled to use my freedom of expression to demand theirs" (CNN, 2018).

In light of the way in which local and Western media have traditionally portrayed Middle Eastern women, a cautious and critical question arises as of whether current media trends in a digital age contribute to these women's empowerment. "Will they be able to break the stereotypes of women and deliver more relevant coverage that is able to communicate the real situation of women in the Middle East?" (al-Ariqi, 2008: 8). Nowadays, Middle Eastern women across the globe are trailblazing alternative media platforms, gaining recognition as citizen

journalists, social media influencers, YouTube stars, Instagram sensations, Internet filmmakers, online radio hosts, fashion and beauty bloggers, and the like. On one hand, there appear to be great potentials to this phenomenon, as expressed in the interview data in my research.

“As an actress, I try to avoid auditioning for stereotypical parts only. It is tough sometimes because Hollywood is very competitive. However, I want to work in projects that do not limit me to any specific ethnic background. Thankfully, there are more ethnically ambiguous roles for actors nowadays. Social media is a great tool I like to use to help demonstrate how versatile and empowered Middle Eastern women can be. My Instagram page for example is a great tool for that.”
(Afghani actress in her 20s working in Hollywood)

While Middle Eastern women have yet to fully prosper on the Hollywood scene, those involved in their regional film and media are flourishing on a larger scale. In spite of various forms of control over artistic production – including backlash from religious and conservative factions – these women manage to defy odds and make feminist statements through their art. “Unlike Hollywood, Arab cinema is flush with female directors making films that deal with feminist issues” (*New York Times*, 2018). More Arab women directors are finding a voice through film, tackling hot-button issues and portraying the lives of modern women and the challenges they face under restrictive traditions. In her debut film “In Between” (2017), Palestinian director Maysaloun Hamoud depicts the lives of three female Palestinian roommates in Tel Aviv, exploring seldom-touched upon topics in Arab culture and media such as lesbianism, casual sex, and alcohol consumption. “Caramel” (2007) by Lebanese director Nadine Labaki follows a group of women in a Beirut beauty salon dealing with issues such as forbidden love and repressed sexuality. “Wadjda” (2012), the first feature-length film made by a Saudi female director (Haifaa al-Mansour), tells the story of Wadjda, an young Saudi girl who fulfills her dream of riding a bicycle in a society where such activities are frowned upon for girls.

In contrast, American films or television shows that realistically depict current issues affecting Middle Eastern women remain few and far between, if they exist at all. This can result in limited opportunities for female filmmakers and actresses of this ethnicity, leading them to appropriate alternative media outlets for relevance and visibility. Gaining prominence on such platforms does prove beneficial in these changing times in which social media sensations are starting to cross over into the mainstream. Top YouTube stars now rival mainstream celebrities in popularity, particularly among millennials. The number of social media followers and scope of social media influence are increasingly being taken into consideration in the entertainment industry's decisions in hiring, casting, and promoting. Social networks allow celebrities to personally engage and regularly interact with their fans, making them more relatable alongside building a sense of community within their fan base. Additionally, social networks provide a unique opportunity to create a fan base from scratch, making fame and popularity more accessible to those with fewer chances to shine in the spotlight via traditional means. Nonetheless, the Middle Eastern social media stars of today are largely based outside the U.S. It remains to be seen whether Middle Eastern Americans – and women in particular – will gain the kind of clout in the social media sphere resulting in a successful crossover into or massive influence over the mainstream.

In the meantime, scholars are making their own unique contributions to the present-day media culture, in ways which may be effective in rectifying prevalent biases and misrepresentations:

“I have been in the media field for over 12 years. I have my own podcast on Status audio journal and I'm co-editor of Syria's and Vox Populi's pages on Jadaliyya. These two projects were possible because a group of Middle Eastern scholars wanted to change the discourse about the Middle East in Western mainstream media so they created these alternative independent websites to provide spaces for intellectual, critical conversation about what is happening in the Middle East and comment on media representation. For me and ME women like myself who work in Western media, we strive for qualities that are critical, new, fun, engaging, and complex. I also

published several research, articles and commentaries in various media platforms both in English and Arabic. Media scholars agree that most alternative media platforms have a narrow niche audience, however, journalists at big news agencies will know about you and contact you when important issues come up, like the time NPR contacted me.”
(Syrian Instructor and PhD student, in her 30s, living in Massachusetts)

It is noteworthy that, for women such as the interviewee above with academic positionality in media studies or in other fields, the type of challenges experienced may be dissimilar to those of women outside academia. If one wants to analyze what is happening in broadcast or entertainment media and how it affects societies and populations, or wants to make a difference in how people think about the media or social issues, academia is the way to go. However, a crucial question still arises as to who would be the primary audiences/readers, and whether or not such outcomes reach and form a meaningful dialogue with the non-Middle Eastern people of the mainstream society as well. If one is more comfortable being commercially successful and creative rather than intellectually critical and transformative, then commercial media is the way to go. Although this relatively non-critical and commercial approach may attract the attention of the mainstream society in a short run, its potential for the empowerment of Middle Eastern subjects still remains questionable in a long run. If one wants to affect the mainstream population and how they think or feel, then journalism is the way to go, but on the extremely difficult condition that one is able to publish in the mainstream or allowed to present one’s intended content without the influence of non-Middle Eastern corporate power and control. Given these complex disempowering circumstances, some Middle Eastern women tend to assume that creating their own blogs, vlogs, or social media pages as their main outlet for self-expression and symbolic community may be empowering. However, the tactical appropriation of these alternative media cannot necessarily guarantee that their voices will be heard or taken seriously in the mainstream society.

Regardless of one's media profession or empowering media outlet(s), what remains clear is the significance of critically thinking, media-literate, cross-cultural communicators and bridge builders between the Middle East and international community. The troubled relationship between the U.S and Middle East post 9/11, often reflected through media biases and stereotypes, colors the experiences of many Middle Eastern-Americans, causing varying degrees of identity conflict among them. Given their ability to straddle Eastern and Western cultures and languages with ease, globalized, cosmopolitan Middle Easterners are in a unique position to bridge the gap between contrasting civilizations. "Overcoming corporate and gender obstacles, and eventually bridging the cultural divide, requires media literacy and a concerted effort to educate oneself and others" (Sakr, 2006: 201).

While cosmopolitan, media-literate Middle Eastern women are instrumental in improving relations between their local and global societies, such individuals comprise a smaller percentage of their population. Those afforded cosmopolitanism are typically afforded luxury. Having the means to travel and live abroad, having Internet access, being media savvy, and communicating in different languages indicate privilege. Veritably, barriers to media literacy include limited language skills, lower socioeconomic status and lack of higher education. As discussed earlier, cultural and societal constraints on these women also affect their presence on media platforms. Albeit their increasing representation and influence in digital spaces, women's social media usage in the Middle East remains limited compared to that of their male counterparts – with only 1 in 3 social media users being female – and the global female average (*Arab Social Media Report*, 2017). Whether similar statistics apply to Middle Eastern women in the U.S requires further study. What is evident thus far is that social media activism in Middle East societies can incur risks and challenges, as the following key data indicate.

“I believe the trending media empowerment is currently Twitter. I personally use it, and so do many other public figures and journalists...I believe that social media lately is a powerful element for empowerment, however, sometimes it can play against you, with many limitations of freedom of expression and speech all over the world. Living in the MENA region imposes many of these restrictions when it comes to moving between countries. Lately, many MENA countries look into your social media and you may get interrogated for it. I faced that once during my last year in Gaza before leaving for the U.S. I have witnessed it during my work with human rights organizations in Gaza, and how homeland security or borders check-outs would take out many youths over that issue.”

(Palestinian law student, in her 20s, living in Pennsylvania)

The Middle East routinely falls within the lowest rankings concerning freedom of the press and information. In 2016, every Middle Eastern country was ranked in the bottom half of the Press Freedom Index, with six countries ranked in the bottom 10 per cent (*Reporters Without Borders*, 2016). The more conservative countries such as Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States, and the more politically unstable ones such as Egypt, Syria, Iran, and Turkey are often the countries with the most censorship and the tightest restrictions (*The Media Line*, 2016). As a result of state control over traditional media platforms, citizens are known to resort to social media networks such as Twitter and Facebook for political expression and news reception. As these online platforms increase in popularity, authoritarian governments react by monitoring and censoring the Internet and blocking social media sites, notably during times of political insurgency.

Although social media played a prominent role in recent uprisings in the region amidst citizens' calls for democracy, economic stability, and political reform, hopes for decisive change were ultimately quashed. Restrictions over media and information remain tightened. Bloggers and online activists continue to face arrest and retaliation.

Surveillance of social media is happening with the U.S Trump immigration policy as well. In September 2017, the U.S government announced its plans to monitor the social media accounts of all immigrants in the country, including green card holders, naturalized citizens, and new

arrivals already having undergone extensive screening. The policy also affects U.S citizens who communicate with immigrants over social media. This can result in self-censoring, even for individuals expressing views which do not threaten national security. I am inclined to argue that the possible implications of this new policy can be particularly crucial for Middle Eastern immigrants, as this can widen the already existing gap and tension in the politics of representation between the U.S and their countries of origin. Chances of Middle Eastern-Americans and the general American public reaching common ground on issues seldom covered by the mainstream media and gaining mutual understanding and respect for each other will be hindered. For Middle Eastern women based in the U.S who happen to be social media literate and competent in cross-cultural dialogue, the policy can dampen aspirations for positive change and empowerment, reducing the women's agency and influence, especially when social media platforms happen to be their main outlet for self-expression.

Middle Eastern women's identity, nonetheless, can be created and recreated more actively in the particular moments of perceived crisis, challenge and interrogation by the powerful, by the U.S nation and media policy in this case. Being questioned by the dominant culture compels minority women to critically reflect on who they are and what they really want, resulting in their discovery of identity at individual and social levels. Reflexivity – a key component in identity formation (Giddens 1991) – increases under the encountering of doubts, questions and oppressive circumstances (Kim 2005 and 2008). I would argue that Middle Eastern women affected negatively by current media representations and restrictions in the U.S can more actively imagine new possibilities of freedom and empowerment even within the multiple societal constraints as discussed in this thesis so far.

Current restrictions need not be entirely negative but rather potentially good and unpredictable. Socially disadvantaged minorities can activate their agency and reflexivity under the unfavorable conditions, presenting a stronger counter-hegemonic narrative, which is evident in the following key data.

“I suppose working in Lebanon as a photojournalist, I'm representing part of the ME which I do find empowering. Even though empowering myself isn't necessarily the incentive while I'm working - I'm more so focused on the story and the moment. I have used social media as well. When the travel ban happened, and anti-immigration rhetoric was coming out of the White House in 2017, I posted a passport photo with short story with the Instagram account *Everyday Migration*. Medium later ran the photo when they did a story on the *EveryDay* accounts. The reaction I had was very positive. A friend of mine who was teaching a class told me later that one of his students used it for their project. It may be minor, but it felt as if I was part of a positive shift.”
(Lebanese-American photojournalist, in her 40s, currently based in Lebanon)

The Instagram page *Everyday Migration* features personal images and reflections by immigrant and refugee American photojournalists. The interviewee's story referred to above is of her family's escape from Lebanon into the States – how they considered themselves lucky to have survived war and been able to migrate to a safe place that they love and call home. The story puts a face and voice to the nameless “immigrant”, the vague “Other,” exemplifying not only a lived experience but a mediated experience, embodying a diversified identity reflected through media. While the pressure and interrogation stemming from xenophobic policies may present challenges, they can also result in new journeys of hope – *Everyday Migration*, which was created during the 2016 election heyday, exemplifies this point. The preceding key data indicate that American cosmopolitans or multinationals do not contradict American loyalty or nationalism. Cosmopolitanism and nationalism need not negate one another, as the relationship is often dialectical – the more likely the cosmopolitanism, the more likely the nationalism. For Middle Eastern-Americans, reconciling their dual identities will develop into a greater sense of self and better self-expression. Middle Eastern-American women such as the interviewee above

who successfully combine their cultural identities as a mediated lived experience will feel more empowered.

By narrating the diverse experiences of everyday Americans who happen to be marginalized or “Othered,” what was once considered foreign will eventually become familiar. In the absence of compelling stories in the American entertainment industry and news media about the Middle East, alternative media platforms such as *Everyday Migration* can serve as a means for enhanced representation. Yet these media spaces, as empowering as they may be, do not substitute the imperative for traditional media networks to replace timeworn plotlines concerning this minority with new, improved narratives. There is yet an urgency for content creators in the mainstream media who can accurately portray Middle East issues without bias, in addition to TV shows, films, and news reports with impressive Middle Eastern personalities as subjects. As *Will & Grace* paved the way for greater inclusion of the LGBT community within the mainstream, and *The Cosby Show* broke racial stereotypes with its representation of a successful African-American family, so a sitcom with relatable, inspiring Middle Eastern-American characters will increase the chances of this minority’s acceptance and normalization within popular culture. While TV shows with Middle Easterners at the forefront are gaining momentum, results thus far have been less than stellar: TLC’s *All-American Muslim* was cancelled after only one season due to poor ratings and conservative backlash, and the reality TV series *Shahs of Sunset*, which follows a group of Iranian-Americans in Beverly Hills, has faced criticism from the Iranian-American community for presenting an unsophisticated and materialistic image of their culture. Hence the imperative for more efforts within the industry to ensure humanizing, authentic portrayals of Middle Easterners that not only make good entertainment but conclusively change biased perceptions and discriminatory policies.

Revealing a more humanizing and authentic image of Middle Easterners – and particularly women – occasionally entails going beyond one’s comfort zone and even traveling to the region itself, as is the case with the following interviewee.

“Moving to Lebanon has been one of the hardest challenges of my life. I came here knowing nothing about the Syrian refugee crisis, or Lebanon’s complicated political system, or the corrupt and inconsistent ways this country operates. It took me three or four months to wrap my head around what the issues in Lebanon are, what news outlets care about, whether I should go about pitching written articles or videos, and what I should choose to put out as free blogs or vlogs. On top of that, I struggled with speaking Arabic and getting around the treacherous roads in the country — which means I often have to rely on a translator and driver. I’ve gotten better at the language, and better at the driving, but I still have a long way to go to be able to live here totally independently. I’ve now been here for seven months, and can finally say I’m getting the hang of it. Just because you’re born Middle Eastern doesn’t mean you can seamlessly fit into Middle Eastern life overnight...I have encountered numerous challenges in a story I’m working on regarding early marriage among Syrian refugee girls. It’s given me anxiety, stress and some of the biggest obstacles of my life. But it’s been entirely worth it, because I am writing what I believe is the best story I’ve ever done. Not because it has the potential to be published, but because it has the potential to show the underreported, severe physical and psychological consequences early marriage is taking on young girls.”
(Lebanese-American reporter in her 20s currently based in Lebanon)

As the key data above indicate, Middle Eastern women who have grown up in the West feel compelled at times to move back to the region, for a variety of reasons. They may maintain patriotic and nostalgic ties to their country of origin, even if they have never lived there. They may want to observe people’s everyday lives up close and present a more detailed and nuanced image of the society. It may be a process of maintenance and negotiation of an identity in between cultures. *Lipstick Jihad* by Iranian-American journalist Azadeh Moaveni details her moving to Iran for the first time after growing up in the Iranian diaspora in California, in an attempt to reconcile a complex cultural identity and knowing more about her native country. In the process, she documents the lives of everyday citizens in the height of Iran’s political reform movements, gaining a perspective that went deeper than most news stories at the time. In a similar fashion, the interviewee above decided to move to Lebanon after growing up in the

Lebanese diaspora in Buffalo, New York. Her deep passion for Lebanese heritage and desire to document underreported elements of the Syrian refugee crisis – namely, the adverse effects of early marriage among Syrian refugee girls – prompted her migration. She attempts to empower herself through the alternative media by combining her newfound identity as a Lebanese-American with her newfound desire to represent and empower women in her native country. The phenomenon of transnational migration flows is unavoidable in this day and age. The migration trend affecting many Middle Eastern women is one in which they flee oppressive circumstances in search of freedom and empowerment unavailable to them in their native countries. In some cases, the reverse trend can also apply in which those who have grown up with such privileges sense a duty to return to their conflicted home regions and make a difference. This illustrates an alternative form of female empowerment in international flows, and the diversified identities that emerge in the process via globalized, mediated spaces. Such a trend can nonetheless incur serious risks. Iranian journalists of dual citizenships have ended up in prison in Iran over allegations of espionage and planning to topple the country's regime, the most recent being Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, a female British-Iranian worker for the Thomson Reuters foundation jailed since 2016. Female journalists working in Middle East societies face distinct challenges, including sexual harassment on the job and patronizing, chauvinistic behavior, primarily when venturing into traditionally male spaces and exceeding traditional female norms. A prime example is journalist Lara Logan, who was beaten and sexually assaulted by mobs of men while covering the Arab Spring demonstrations in Cairo's Tahrir Square. Although not Middle Eastern herself, Logan was later compelled to raise awareness on the prevalence of mass sexual assault in Egypt, breaking a silence many female reporters within the region were enduring.

Given the gender restrictions that operate in Middle Eastern societies, the role of alternative media in providing women the opportunity to participate as equals in the public sphere becomes all the more critical. This phenomenon also gives an explanation for the heightened influence of women during the Arab Spring and similar uprisings: cyberactivism enabled these women to transgress societal norms and constraints, making their presence felt and voices heard in ways that were ordinarily not available to them. While utilizing alternative media platforms contributes to women's empowerment, the question arises as to whether these empowering effects result in actual change in society such as reversing patriarchal traditions or the enforcement of gender equality in legislation and government. In the face of persisting conservative forces and lack of political support for women's rights, the region is yet to experience significant progress in terms of gender equality.

In the present time, alternative media platforms are increasingly known to echo hegemonic discourses while incorporating a pro-establishment media bias. This may have adverse effects on underrepresented minorities, as the following key data imply.

“I was surprised when I worked for big-name digital or mainstream platforms that they were targeting a specific bandwidth or audience when it comes to controversial issues. I'm a Western-trained journalist, and even I had a hard time convincing my editors about the diversity of perspectives. They have a specific narrative or headline in mind, there's an urgency to get views and clicks, so they end up airing stories from their own perspective. ME issues are very delicate, you have to know the context behind stories, and that's why we need more journalists, and female journalists in particular, from the ME familiar with the whole context. In coverage of the ME, there's always more than what meets the eye.”

(Turkish journalist, in her 40s, based in the U.S)

As we can see, not only do problems of representation persist in storylines, but the cause of misrepresentation often appertains to interests and values of those in key positions. Professionals such as the interviewee above who try to incorporate diverse perspectives in their journalistic work can face needless but inevitable setbacks, whether on mainstream or digital media spaces.

By 2018, social media bias has emerged into a real phenomenon with an enormous impact on the way stories are consumed and interpreted, something Middle Eastern women would do well to keep in mind if they seek to get their messages across to predominantly Western audiences on such platforms.

In this data analysis, I have discussed the limitations, as well as unintended consequences and contradictions, of the usage of alternative media platforms by Middle Eastern-American women to recognize the complexity of media use. I argue that alternative media use – while not without benefits and potentials – does not always lead to these women’s empowerment, unlike the general assumption about digital power in the existing literature. This issue is relatively under-explored in the current literature and knowledge concerning Middle Eastern or Middle Eastern-American women.

PART III Conclusion

Middle Eastern women have traditionally been misrepresented and subject to Orientalist stereotypes in the U.S mainstream media, but in reality, they are more diverse and empowered than hegemonic media coverage typically conveys. Given the media's power in identity formation, existing misrepresentations can have an adverse effect on these women's sense of empowerment and identity. While the number of Middle Eastern women in the U.S media has increased in recent times, their presence is still limited. An improved representation should not take place with mere visibility, but through multidimensional portrayals revealing their diverse identities in mediated contexts. Progress is best achieved when the women can gain a voice and control the dominant narratives about themselves through the media itself; however, existing gender inequalities affecting minority women in the U.S media apply to Middle Eastern women as well, especially when breaking stereotypes and hegemonic media representations. As these women try to shift the paradigm and gain a stronger foothold in the media industry, they are also subject to cultural norms that impede their progress and present challenges for the modern, globalized Middle Eastern woman aspiring to create her own identity within an increasingly commercialized media-driven world. In order to overcome these structural and cultural challenges and succeed in a competitive media industry, it is equally imperative to find economic resources, such as sufficient funding in addition to having strong mentors and support networks. Middle Eastern women aspiring to pursue careers in the media typically lack such integral elements. In light of the internal and external factors preventing Middle Eastern women from gaining equal representation in the mainstream media, the appropriation of alternative media platforms as a means for empowerment seems like a desirable option. While not without its benefits, appropriation of the alternative media can also present its own set of challenges,

especially when considering the complexity of Middle Eastern societal norms. Core changes concerning Middle Eastern women's representation still need to occur within the traditional media landscape and governmental policies, which in the U.S are connected to one another. Even though the women happen to be activists, educated, and media literate, stubborn structural barriers and workings of the inside media may overwhelm individual power. Utopian illusions of the digital media world and seemingly empowering technologies, in which there is much online activity but nothing substantially changing in the real world, may be another reason why Middle Eastern women face setbacks in the digital media sphere, reflecting the paradox of female empowerment in the digital media age. More efforts need to be made in democratizing media structures that can better lead to greater gender and power balance for Middle Eastern women. In this study, I bring attention to how a diverse group of Middle Eastern-American women involved in a variety of media professions and activities strive for greater gender and power balance. They unanimously agree that traditional representations of Middle Eastern women in the American mass media have been stereotypical and one-sided, and they believe in the need for improvements in these representations, both in quality and quantity. Despite the structural challenges and cultural barriers that may impede their progress, these women show signs of resisting hegemonic media representations, all while influencing individuals, communities, and audiences through their own media immersion. This media activity is often reflective of their diverse identities and perspectives as Middle Eastern-American women aiming to take their rightful place in and contribute to a multicultural American public sphere. Realizing that the diversity of Middle Eastern women tends to be underexplored both in the existing literature and in popular culture, and how Middle Eastern-American women are particularly overlooked in these realms, in my own research, I have attempted to highlight the women's unique differences

as reflected in their media engagement. I include examples of women who are active on Christian media platforms, relocate to the Middle East to report on underrepresented individuals and societal aspects, narrate inspiring immigration stories in times of increasing populist rhetoric, and advocate for more funding, networking, and overall support for Middle Eastern women choosing media careers. The current literature on Middle Eastern women's media activity in large part encompasses their utilization of online and digital media platforms. I have attempted to expand the conversation by bringing attention to the diversity of the women's media immersion, which includes acting, journalism, photography, hosting TV programs, blogging, and filmmaking. As they gain more footing in the media sphere through their diverse media activities, their presence and influence may gradually lead to the structural and cultural transformations necessary to attain empowerment and equal representation in the media sphere, conceivably surmounting particular shortcomings of digital and online media.

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