Selective Exposure and Perceived Identification With Characters in Transnational Arabic Television

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Given the transnational nature of the Arabic satellite television industry and the cultural differences among Arab regions, this experiment examined the role of social identity in Arab viewers' media choices and perceived identification with characters. Overall, Arab viewers identified more with in-group characters (gender and cultural region) and were more interested in watching programs that feature in-group lead characters. The perceived intended audience of the television program mediated the relationship between cultural identity on one hand and perceived identification with characters and selective exposure on the other. The findings show that social identity plays an important role in Arab viewers' media consumption, and are discussed in light of social identity theory.

Keywords: *social identity, transnational media, identification with characters, selective exposure, Arab television*

The Arabic version of the TV reality show *Big Brother* (*Al-Raʾis*) received heavy criticisms and was cancelled in 2004 only days after it started airing on Middle East Broadcasting Corporation's satellite television channel (Kraidy, 2010). Meanwhile, the Arabic adaptation of the Dutch music contest reality show *Star Academy* persisted to air on Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation's satellite television channel for several years with the most recent (11th) season airing its final episode in 2016. Both shows and other reality programs on pan-Arab television were heavily criticized by ultraconservative Saudi clerics for their gender dynamics, particularly for showing unmarried male and female contestants sharing living spaces. Even though both *Star Academy* and *Al-Raʾis* generated controversies in Saudi Arabia, *Star Academy* was based in Lebanon and hosted more participants from the Levant Arab states, and *Al-Raʾis* was filmed in the Saudi neighbor Bahrain and hosted more participants including women from the Arabian Gulf. This difference in the cultural settings of the two programs may explain the shutdown of *Al-Raʾis* compared with that of *Star Academy*.

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Whereas entertainment programming in the Arab world is usually produced in the more liberal Lebanon or Egypt, sponsors of *Al-Ra'is* wanted to attract the wealthy Saudi viewers by setting up the reality show in a cultural setting close to that of Saudi Arabia (Kraidy, 2010). Because filming such programs in the Saudi kingdom itself is not permitted, Bahrain was chosen. This decision was based on the belief that Saudi viewers would be more likely to watch and identify with a show filmed in a country geographically close and culturally similar to Saudi Arabia and that featured participants from the Arabian Gulf similar to Saudi viewers. For the same reason, Saudi clerics believed that the cultural similarity between the Saudi viewers and the show would lead to more favorable responses toward the media personalities and thus greater influence by their behaviors and actions. Although a complex combination of political, economic, and religious issues contributed to the *Al-Ra'is* controversy, the role of social and cultural identity in this pan-Arab context cannot be ignored. The cultural identity of *Al-Ra'is* was too close to home for the Saudi clerics, and most likely led to its shutdown. In this particular case, Bahrain's status as a vassal state made it easier for Saudi Arabia to exert influence and pressure to close production.

As the above example demonstrates, the cultural proximity between the participants in *Al-Ra'is* and the Saudi viewers triggered a more pronounced reaction to this particular show than other television programs that feature non-Gulf Arab participants. Although this example dates back to 2004, it is the most prominent instance revealing the role of regional Arab cultural identity in the consumption of transnational Arab media content. More recent examples point to similar patterns of identity-based phenomena. For example, the popularity of Turkish television drama serials (dubbed into Arabic in Syrian dialect) over the last decade has also raised controversy. Whereas American television imports are subtitled into Arabic and the imported Mexican telenovelas are dubbed into literary Arabic, thus maintaining a social distance between the characters and the viewers, Turkish series are dubbed into colloquial Arabic and the characters' names are Arabized (Buccianti, 2010). This cultural proximity has generated public concern regarding the potential effects of Turkish dramas on the Arab viewers. It is believed that such Arabized context and the sharing of a religious identity (Turkish characters being Muslim) might increase the degree to which viewers connect and engage with the characters.

In the context of the Arabic-language transnational satellite television industry, social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) suggests that a shared social identity between the viewers and the media personalities (characters or participants) would lead to an increased desire to view the programs and greater identification with media personalities. The present study examined the role of social identity (cultural and gender) in Arab viewers' selective exposure to in-group and out-group media content and their perceived identification with in-group and out-group characters in the transnational Arab media context.

The Transnational Arab Television Industry

Television development in the Arab world went through several phases before evolving into the current transnational industry. Ayish (2011) identifies three primary phases of development in the Arab television industry; the formative phase between the 1950s and 1970s that ultimately led to government control of the industry, the national expansion phase up to the 1990s of growth in production and coverage, and the global phase following globalization trends during the 1990s including technological

advancements, literacy, and privatization, which led to relaxed government control and the launching of commercial operations.

With the global trends and the advent of satellite technology in the early 1990s, the Arabic television market achieved a transnational reach beyond the limited national terrestrial radiuses, broke away from political control, and evolved to include more diverse content. Globalization allowed marginalized and oppositional groups to join the market, thus providing ideological variety as well as choice and opportunity in Arabic television programming (Tawil-Souri, 2008). However, while political elites loosened their grip on the media market, the economic elites took control of the industry. With the commercialization aspect of globalization came the phenomenon of what some call the "Saudi media empire" (Sakr, 2006). The structure of the new transnational market gave advantage to the business elites in the region and the rich Gulf states to launch media conglomerates. The dominant financial position of Gulf countries in this industry gave them a majority of the market share and a greater sphere of influence in the region.

The rapidly growing Arab satellite television industry had reached 975 fully functional free-to-air channels by the end of 2017 (Arab Advisors Group, 2017). Available in all 22 Arab countries and serving a population of more than 406 million with at least 80% television penetration rates (Kraidy & Khalil, 2009), satellite television remains the most popular mass communication medium across the Arab world.

Although more than 406 million inhabitants of the Arab world share a common language, they vary greatly in their cultural tastes and sensibilities and their social, cultural, political, and legal systems (Kalliny, Dagher, Minor, & De Los Santos, 2008). Some homogeneity among the Arab countries does exist as a result of historical circumstances, but numerous differences among the Arab nations exist especially with regard to wealth and economic standards, dialects of Arabic language, cultural traditions, religion and religiosity, social conservativeness, and gender norms (Kalliny et al., 2008; Kraidy & Khalil, 2009). For example, Saudi Arabia operates under strict Islamic law, does not hold elections, and places severe restrictions on women's rights and freedoms. On the other hand, Arab countries in the Levant (e.g., Lebanon) are considered more liberal and have relatively more gender equality.

Kalliny and colleagues (2008) capture this diversity by placing Arab countries on a liberal–conservative continuum based on cultural differences. In general, they categorize Arab countries into three cultural groups based on geographical locations: Asian non-Gulf countries (Levant), Arabian Gulf countries, and African countries (Kalliny et al., 2008). They propose that countries in the Levant region are on the liberal end, whereas Arab Gulf states are the most conservative, and African Arab countries lie in the middle of the continuum. This categorization demonstrates the existence of three distinct cultural regions within the Arab world. Along similar lines, the three categories used by other media scholars to divide the region are the Arab Maghreb, which includes the western Arab countries in North Africa; the Arab Gulf; and the Arab Mashreq, which consists of the Arab Middle East nations excluding the Gulf (e.g., Mellor, 2011). Most classifications place Egypt with the African Arab countries in the middle of the liberal–conservative spectrum.

In the transnational Arab television market with such high levels of diversity, questions emerge regarding viewers' preferences and media consumption choices. In terms of content diversity, media globalization has resulted in a paradox in Arab media. On one hand, commercial and consumerist trends produced "Westernized" Arabic programing with images of seminude pop stars. On the other hand, there arose an ethnoreligious populist reaction to globalization as a way to counter what is perceived as imperialist influence, resulting in Islamic TV channels and religious and conservative content (Tawil-Souri, 2008). To take women's representation as an example, a content analysis of Arabic drama serials (Kharroub & Weaver, 2014) revealed that Arab Gulf programs had more female characters in female stereotypical roles and activities than programs from the more liberal Levant countries. In this regard, the financial power of conservative Arab Gulf states may translate into cultural influence through transnational television networks, and is therefore worthy of investigation.

Audience's media choices and perceived identification with characters in television programs are especially important as they have been shown to play a role in the effects of media content on the viewers' attitudes and beliefs (e.g., Kaufman & Libby, 2012). In the pan-Arab television industry, media programs are produced in several Arab countries and are consumed by viewers throughout the Arab world. The transnational nature of this media market raises questions about the effects of media content produced in one region and reflecting its cultural and social norms on the viewers' attitudes and beliefs in other regions. Given the important role of identity in the processes of identification and effects and the differences among the Arab countries, the present study used the social identity framework to examine whether Arab viewers are interested in watching television programs produced in different Arab cultural regions and whether they identify with characters from Arab cultural regions different from their own.

With much attention given to media ownership and content, little is known about the viewers' media choices in the Arab transnational television market. Surveys show a tendency by Arab viewers to favor programs that feature their own country. Tunisian, Lebanese, Moroccan, and Egyptian viewers prefer local programs produced in their own countries (Arab Advisors Group, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2010b). In contrast, the majority of Jordanian TV viewers prefer watching Syrian and Egyptian drama series than Jordanian dramas (Arab Advisors Group, 2010a). These findings show some differences in media preferences among viewers in different Arab countries, but they also suggest that local programming is still preferred. However, not much is known about the processes that facilitate these phenomena. Little work is available on audience-centered approaches to the study of Arab media, and no empirical studies have examined the role of identity in media choices and identification with characters among Arab TV audiences. The present study examined the role of Arab viewers' cultural and gender identities in their media choices and their perceived identification with media characters in the transnational Arab television environment.

Selective Exposure and Social Identity

People are known to favor programs that feature members of their social groups. For example, studies have shown that viewers prefer programs produced in their home country (Waisbord, 2004) and programs that feature characters that share their gender (Trepte, 2004) and race (Weaver, 2011b). Social

identity theory and self-categorization theory have been used to explain how media choices can be determined by social group membership (Trepte, 2006).

Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) posits that people categorize themselves as belonging to different social groups such that one part of the self is defined by belonging to one social group. Henri Tajfel (1978) defines social identity as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a group together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (p. 63). Interest in entertainment content that features in-group members can be explained by the desire to learn about one's social group and define group norms (Hogg, 2010). As such, based on social identity theory, we expected Arab viewers to show more interest in programs that feature characters that share their social groups, particularly their gender and cultural background.

In terms of cultural background, although culture is a difficult term to delineate, it is commonly defined as a set of interrelated qualities of observable artifacts, values, and underlying assumptions (such as customs, morals, knowledge, etc.) that are shared by and specific to one social group (e.g., Spencer-Oatey, 2012). Several cultural groups exist in the Arab world. For the purpose of the present study and given the structure and financing of the transnational Arab television industry, the regional cultural groups within the Arab world are most relevant here. Based on the three regional cultural categories in the Arab world (Levant, North Africa, and Gulf), we aimed to understand Arab viewers' media choices and perceived identification with characters.

In this context, Straubhaar's (2003) cultural proximity concept can best explain media consumption choices. According to Straubhaar, consumers and media audiences prefer products from "one's own culture or the most similar possible culture" (p. 85). Selection and enjoyment of media content increase when it exists in the same "cultural linguistic" sphere as the viewers (Straubhaar, 2003). In addition to language, other related factors such as dress, lifestyle, gestures, and traditions have been discussed as determinants of cultural proximity (La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005). In the transnational Arab context, regional cultural categories (North Africa, Levant, and Gulf) have been shown to exhibit distinct cultural cues that are visible in the media, such as dialect, dress, traditions, and gestures. The media choices of Arab viewers in relation to the three cultural groups are herein examined.

Looking at quantitative studies of media preference for programs that feature characters sharing the same cultural social group as the viewers (in-group members), the findings are inconclusive. As shown earlier, studies of Arab audiences show some preference for local programming along national lines, but differences among Arab countries exist (Arab Advisors Group, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2010a, 2010b). Looking at other populations and national social groups, Trepte (2004) found no difference in U.S. viewers' preference for German or American programs. Through two international quasi-experimental studies conducted in the United States and Germany and in Great Britain and Germany, Trepte and Krämer (2007) found no evidence for preference of national media products, even when the participants' national identity was made salient. Trepte and Krämer suggest that, unlike sports, the salience of national categories in entertainment programs is not high.

However, regional cultural identity in the Arab world is salient in entertainment programs, especially through the observable cultural cues that distinguish among the three Arab regional regions. Therefore, the present study examined Arab viewers' media choices in relation to television programs produced in different Arab cultural regions. The following research question guided this inquiry:

RQ1:   Do Arab viewers prefer TV programs produced in their own cultural region over programs produced in other Arab cultural regions?

The second component of social identity examined in the present study was gender. Studies have consistently found that females prefer female characters, whereas males prefer male characters. For example, Trepte (2004) manipulated the gender of the protagonist in a description of entertainment programs, and found that participants in both Germany and the United States preferred television series that featured same-sex protagonists. Similarly, the present study hypothesized that Arab viewers would prefer to watch television programs of same-sex lead characters:

H1a: Arab female viewers will express more interest in watching programs that feature female lead characters than male lead characters.

H1b: Arab male viewers will express more interest in watching programs that feature male lead characters than female lead characters.

Perceived Identification With Characters and Social Identity

The second process influenced by social identity and examined in the present study was identification with characters. The process of identification is understood differently depending on the genre of the medium, such that several concepts of viewers' reactions to media have been discussed as identification including liking, similarity, empathy, wishful identification, fandom, and parasocial interactions (Cohen, 2001; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Liebes & Katz, 1990). Identification with characters in fictional narrative genres has been shown to be an important element of narrative persuasion (De Graaf, Hoeken, Sanders, & Beentjes, 2011) and is therefore considered herein. As such, the present study examined Arab viewers' identification with characters in Arabic fictional drama serials (*Musalsalat*).

Identification with characters is defined as a connection between an individual and another person, "such that the individual adopts traits, attitudes, or behaviors of the other person, or incorporates the other's characteristics into his or her sense of self" (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005, p. 326). In his seminal paper, Cohen (2001) distinguishes between identification and other responses to media content based on the internalization of media messages. He defines identification with fictional media characters in narrative texts as an "imaginative process" (p. 253) that occurs in response to exposure to media characters; it is a process of imagining oneself inside a textual reality where viewers feel with the character rather than about the character.

In addition to the temporary process of identification described by Cohen (2001) and others, Hoffner and Buchanan (2005) discuss the different yet equally important notion of "wishful identification": the desire to be like the characters in media texts. According to Hoffner and Buchanan, wishful identification is similar to the durable process of "long-term identification" proposed by Rosengren, Windahl, Hakansson, and Johnsson-Smaragdi (1976), which extends beyond the viewing situation. In the present study, Cohen's conceptualization of identification and the long-term process of wishful identification are both relevant and were therefore investigated.

Identification with media characters is a central process in media consumption experiences, as it is believed to influence audience responses to media texts (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005) and the role of media in the socialization process (Bandura, 1986). One of the factors that motivates viewers to identify with certain media characters and emulate their behavior is perceived similarity (Bandura, 1986). Social cognitive theory predicts that people are more likely to pay attention to and model behaviors performed by similar others (Bandura, 2001). Hoffner and Cantor (1991) argue "some degree of similarity to media characters seems to promote a desire to be like them, possibly because certain similarities signal that it is both possible and appropriate for the viewer to become like the character in additional ways" (p. 87). Studies have found that viewers feel similar to characters who are like themselves in terms of demographic characteristics such as gender (e.g., Reeves & Miller, 1978) and race (e.g., Appiah, 2001). This similarity based on social group membership leads to higher identification with the media characters. For example, Kaufman and Libby (2012) found that identification with a character (what they call "experience-taking") is higher when the participant and the character share a relevant group membership. Identification, in turn, increases the effects of media on the viewers (e.g., Liebes & Katz, 1990). For example, Kaufman and Libby (2012) found that 65% of participants in the character in-group condition reported intentions to behave similarly to the character (e.g., going to vote), compared with only 29% of participants in the character out-group condition.

When considering gender as a social identity, research on gender-based identification with media characters shows that viewers identify more with same-sex characters than opposite-sex characters (Hoffner, 1996; Reeves & Miller, 1978). In the present study, we hypothesized that Arab viewers would identify more with programs that feature same-sex lead characters (i.e., when the viewer and the character share the same sex group membership, or gender in-group):

H2a: *Arab female viewers will identify more with female lead characters than with male lead characters.*

H2b: *Arab male viewers will identify more with male lead characters than with female lead characters.*

Similarly, in terms of regional cultural groups, we predicted that identification with media characters would be higher in programs from the same Arab cultural region as the viewers (i.e., cultural in-group):

H3:   *Arab viewers will identity more with cultural in-group characters (from their cultural region) than with cultural out-group characters (from other cultural regions).*

Perceived Relevance and Intended Audience

Several researchers have been trying to understand the processes by which social identity affects media choices and the level of connection with media personalities. Two distinct processes have been examined: the perceived relevance of the plot to the viewers' lives and the perception of being part of the intended audience of the program.

The perception of the relevance of the storyline (i.e., events and issues) by the viewers has been found to influence interest in the program. For example, viewers prefer films that have ethnic orientations (i.e., cultural traditions) that are congruent with the viewers' ethnic background (Grier, Brumbaugh, & Thornton, 2006). Similarly, Cohen and Ribak (2003) showed that women liked *Ally McBeal* and found it to be more relevant than men did, because relevance (through realism) allows viewers to engage with the text and lose themselves in the plot. Weaver (2011a) also found that perceived relevance of a movie theme was related to the viewers' intent to see the movie.

In addition to influencing interest in the program, text relevance is also believed to impact identification with the characters. For example, the relevance of the themes in the film *Thelma & Louise* to women increased female audience's identification with the female protagonists (Cooper, 1999). The present study explored the role of plot relevance in mediating the effect of social identity on interest in the show and on perceived identification with the lead characters. With limited research literature on the topic, the current study expands evidence of the role of plot relevance in media choices and consumption:

RQ2a: Will the perceived relevance of the plot account for the effect of social identity on media choices?

RQ2b: Will the perceived relevance of the plot account for the effect of social identity on perceived identification with characters?

Another factor that has been found to influence interest in a media product and identification with characters is the perception of the intended audience of a program. For example, consumer behavior research has shown that people who perceive themselves to be part of the intended target audience of an advertisement are more likely to show interest in watching and more likely to express positive attitudes toward the ad (Grier & Brumbaugh, 1999). In films, Weaver (2011a) found that shared social identity between the viewer and the character (race in this case) influences perceptions of the intended audience of the film, which in turn is strongly related to interest in the media product and intentions to see the film ($r = .68$). In fact, the perception of the intended audience fully mediated the effect of actor's race on behavioral intentions to see the film. Thus, in the present study, we investigated the applicability of this phenomenon in the transnational Arab context, and examined Arab viewers' perceptions of being part of the intended audience as a mediator of the effect of social identity on interest in the show and on perceived identification with the lead characters:

RQ3a: Will the perception of the intended audience of the program account for the effect of social identity on interest in the program?

RQ3b: *Will the perception of the intended audience of the program account for the effect of social identity on perceived identification with the characters?*

Method

Participants

Participants were college students recruited through universities in Palestine, Egypt, and Syria and through student-centered Facebook pages. The participants (*N* = 123) were between the ages of 18 and 31 years (*M* = 25.3 years). There were 80 women and 43 men, of which 84 were Palestinian, 13 were Syrian, 12 from Egypt, four from Lebanon, and the remaining from other countries. However, only 83 participants completed the questions about same-sex selective exposure and perceived identification with characters and were included in this analysis, of whom 57 were women and 26 were men. Moreover, using the three categories of Arab cultural regions, Palestinian, Syrian, and Lebanese participants only were included in the within-subjects analyses for media choices and perceived identification based on cultural identity (*N* = 70), as participants from these three countries represent the same Arab Levant cultural region.

Design and Procedure

This experiment used a 3 (producing country: Syria, Egypt, or Kuwait) × 2 (sex of lead character) within-subjects design, resulting in six experimental conditions. The participants were sent the link to a Web page where they were told that they would be participating in a study part of a research project examining "media use in different cultures." Participants were then randomly directed to a page containing all six conditions but employing different combinations of story synopses. The participants were first asked to provide demographic information including age, sex, and country of origin, followed by viewing six synopses of Arab television fictional drama programs (one for each condition) and completing measures for selective exposure, perceived identification with characters, plot relevance, and perception of the intended audience for each condition. The introductory Web page and all materials and measures were translated and presented to participants in Arabic.

Materials

Twelve unique synopses of television drama serials (*Musalsalat*) were created based on existing American and Arab television drama plots. Each synopsis consisted of the title and a one-paragraph description of the plot. The producing country of the program (to delineate regional cultural identity) and the sex of the lead character were manipulated to create six conditions: Syria and female, Egypt and female, Kuwait and female, Syria and male, Egypt and male, and Kuwait and male. These three countries were chosen because the majority of drama shows on Arab television come from those countries (Chahine, El Sharkawy, & Mahmoud, 2007) and because they represent different points on the Arab cultural spectrum (Kalliny et al., 2008), where Syria (as part of the Levant regional cultural category) lies on the moderate end, Kuwait (as part of the Gulf regional cultural category) on the conservative end, and Egypt in the middle. The data were collected before the start of the Syrian civil war. Twelve synopses were

used for the six conditions to increase generalizability. The synopses and conditions were counterbalanced such that each synopsis was paired with each condition an equal number of times, and every synopsis–condition combination was seen by an equal number of participants.

Measures

Selective Exposure

Three items adapted from Weaver (2011b) were used to measure participants' interest in watching the show: "Based on the synopsis, how interested are you in watching this show on television?"; "Based on the synopsis, how interested are you in watching this show on DVD?"; and "Based on the synopsis, how interested are you in watching this show on the Internet?" The questions were scored on a 5-point scale: 1 = *not at all*, 2 = *a little*, 3 = *somewhat*, 4 = *very*, and 5 = *a lot*. The average of the responses to the three questions was used as a selective exposure measure. Cronbach's alphas for this scale for each of the six conditions ranged from .90 to .94.

Perceived Identification With Characters

Because both identification and wishful identification are relevant and important to assess the level of connection with characters in this study, we used four items to assess the level of identification with the lead character in each show, two of which were used by Cohen and Ribak (2003) to measure identification: "I feel like I could identify with the characters in this program" and "I think there are many points of similarity between the lead characters and myself," and two measured the wishful identification dimension (Hoffner, 1996; Rosengren et al., 1976): "I would like to do the kinds of things the lead characters do in this program" and "I want to be like the characters in this program." As identification with characters was measured by asking participants to report their identification and reactions to the characters, it was considered a measure of perceived identification. Participants indicated their agreement with the four statements using a 5-point scale: 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree a little*, 3 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 4 = *agree a little*, and 5 = *strongly agree*. Scores were averaged to create a measure of identification with the lead character. Cronbach's alphas for this scale for each of the six conditions ranged from .89 to .93.

Relevance of the Plot

Three items were used by Cohen and Ribak (2003) to measure the perceived thematic relevance of the plot by the participants, and were therefore used in the present study: "The issues dealt with in the plot are realistic," "The plot of this TV show is relevant to me," and "The plot of this TV show reminds me of my life and the lives of those around me." Participants indicated their agreement with the statements using a 5-point scale: 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree a little*, 3 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 4 = *agree a little*, and 5 = *strongly agree*. Scores were averaged to create a measure of perceived relevance of the plot. Cronbach's alphas for this scale for each of the six conditions ranged from .76 to .84.

Perceived Intended Audience

Three items, adapted from Weaver (2011a), were used to measure the perceived intended audience of the program: "I believe I am part of the intended audience for this TV show," "I believe most of my friends would enjoy this TV show," and "I believe this TV show was made for me." Participants indicated their agreement with the statements using a 5-point scale: 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree a little*, 3 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 4 = *agree a little*, and 5 = *strongly agree*. Scores were averaged to create a measure of perceived intended audience. Cronbach's alphas for this scale for each of the six conditions ranged from .71 to .83.

Statistical Power

The G*Power 3.1 statistical program (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007) was used to calculate the power for the analyses. For the within-subjects factors (*F* tests for repeated-measures analysis of variance [ANOVA] within factors) with six within-subjects conditions (Syrian male, Syrian female, Egyptian male, Egyptian female, Kuwaiti male, and Kuwaiti female) and two between-subjects groups (male and female participants) and a sample size of *N* = 83, the post hoc power to find a medium effect size (*f* = 0.25) and *p* = .05 was 0.99. For the between-subjects factor (*F* tests for repeated-measures ANOVA between factors) with two groups (male and female participants) and a sample size of *N* = 70, the post hoc power to find a medium effect size (*f* = 0.25) and *p* = .05 was 0.84. For the within–between interactions (*F* tests for repeated-measures ANOVA within–between interactions) and a sample size of *N* = 70, the post hoc power to find a medium effect size (*f* = 0.25) and *p* = .05 was 0.99.

Results

The hypotheses and research questions were tested using repeated-measures ANOVA. A 3 (country of the plot) × 2 (sex of lead character) × 2 (sex of participant) factorial design was used, where sex of the participants was a between-subjects factor and the plot's country and lead character's sex were within-subjects factors.

Selective Exposure

Hypothesis 1a predicted that female Arab viewers would express more interest in shows that feature female lead characters than shows with male lead characters and Hypothesis 1b predicted that male Arab viewers would express more interest in shows that feature male lead characters than female lead characters. Sex of participants had a significant main effect, $F(1, 81) = 8.36$, $p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .09$, where women expressed more interest in the shows ($M = 2.18$) than men ($M = 1.58$). Hypothesis 1 was supported because the gender of the lead characters interacted with the sex of participants and significantly affected the desire to watch the show, $F(1, 81) = 13.25$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .14$. Table 1 shows the means and confidence intervals.

Table 1. Viewers' Selective Exposure to Television Programs.

Participant	Male lead characters		Female lead characters	
	M	95% CI	*M*	95% CI
Male (*n* = 26)	1.67	[1.33, 2.01]	1.48	[1.10, 1.89]
Female (*n* = 57)	2.03	[1.80, 2.26]	2.33	[2.07, 2.60]

Note. p < .01.

Research Question 1 asked whether Arab viewers express more desire to watch programs produced in the same cultural region as them (i.e., that feature cultural in-group lead characters) than those with cultural out-group characters. The results show a significant difference in the Levant viewers' preferences for Syrian, Egyptian, and Kuwaiti programs, $F(2, 67) = 14.62$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .30$. Bonferroni post hoc tests revealed that participants who were from the Levant region in the Arab world (Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon) were significantly more interested in watching Syrian shows (*M* = 2.20, 95% CI = [1.93, 2.47]) than Kuwaiti shows (*M* = 1.69, 95% CI = [1.45, 1.94]), $p < .001$, and more interested in watching Egyptian shows (*M* = 2.03, 95% CI = [1.78, 2.28]) than Kuwaiti shows (*M* = 1.69, 95% CI = [1.45, 1.94]), $p < .001$. Arab Levant viewers expressed more interest in watching Syrian programs over Egyptian programs; however, this finding was not statistically significant ($p = .18$).

Perceived Identification With Characters

Hypothesis 2a predicted that Arab female viewers would identify more with characters in shows that feature female lead characters and Hypothesis 2b predicted that Arab male viewers would identify more with characters in shows that feature male lead characters than female lead characters. Hypothesis 2 was supported, as the gender of the lead characters interacted with the sex of participants and significantly affected perceived identification with characters in the show, $F(1, 81) = 5.64$, $p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .07$. Table 2 shows the means and confidence intervals. There was no statistically significant difference in female (*M* = 1.76) and male (*M* = 1.75) participants' perceived identification with characters in programs featuring male lead characters. Moreover, there was no main effect of sex on identification with characters overall ($p = .28$).

Table 2. Viewers' Perceived Identification With Characters.

Participant	Male lead characters		Female lead characters	
	M	95% CI	*M*	95% CI
Male (*n* = 26)	1.75	[1.56, 2.04]	1.59	[1.29, 1.90]
Female (*n* = 57)	1.67	[1.56, 1.96]	1.93	[1.73, 2.14]

Note. p < .05

Hypothesis 3 predicted that Arab viewers would identify more with cultural in-group lead characters than cultural out-group lead characters. There was a significant difference in participants' perceived identification with characters in Syrian, Egyptian, and Kuwaiti programs, $F(2, 67) = 9.22$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .22$. Bonferroni post hoc tests revealed that participants from the Levant region in the Arab world identified significantly more with the lead characters when they were told that the characters were Syrian (*M* = 1.96, 95% CI = [1.74, 2.18]) than with the characters presented as Kuwaiti (*M* = 1.59,

95% CI = [1.39, 1.79]), *p* < .001, even though the synopses were exactly the same. Participants also identified significantly more with characters when they were told that the characters were Egyptian (*M* = 1.83, 95% CI = [1.63, 2.03]) than when they were told that the characters were Kuwaiti (*M* = 1.59, 95% CI = [1.39, 1.79]), *p* < .05. Arab Levant viewers identified more with characters when they were presented as Syrian than when they were presented as Egyptian, but this difference was not statistically significant (*p* = .38).

Perceived Relevance and Intended Audience

To test the role of perceived relevance and perceived intended audience in mediating the effect of in-group/out-group dynamics on selective exposure and identification, we used a path model analysis. For this purpose, the data were rearranged such that every combination of participant and condition became a unique row of data. Moreover, the cultural identity of the characters was transformed into a cultural distance variable, where the higher value indicated greater cultural distance between the Levant viewers and the characters (1 = Syrian characters, 2 = Egyptian characters, 3 = Kuwaiti characters). Similarly, the combination of the sex of the character and the sex of the participant was transformed into one variable with two levels, where the same-sex condition was in-group and the opposite-sex condition was out-group (0 = in-group, 1 = out-group). The path analyses were performed for the participants from the Levant countries only (Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon). The model was tested using AMOS 7.0, with 200 bootstrap samples, 95% confidence interval. Model fit was evaluated using the chi-square test, the comparative fit index (CFI), the normed fit index (NFI), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), as recommended by Thompson (2004). For the overall model, the chi square was not significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 419) = 0.016$, *p* = .899. The NFI was 1.000, the CFI was 1.000, and the RMSEA was 0.0000, all of which indicate an acceptable goodness of fit.

Using methods for model trimming recommended by Kline (2004), we sequentially removed the nonsignificant paths from the model. A procedure of removing the path with the smallest critical value and refitting the model was repeated until no nonsignificant paths remained. The resulting model demonstrated good fit, $\chi^2(8, N = 419) = 9.115$, *p* = .333. The NFI was 0.992, the CFI was 0.999, and the RMSEA was 0.018. This model is shown in Figure 1.
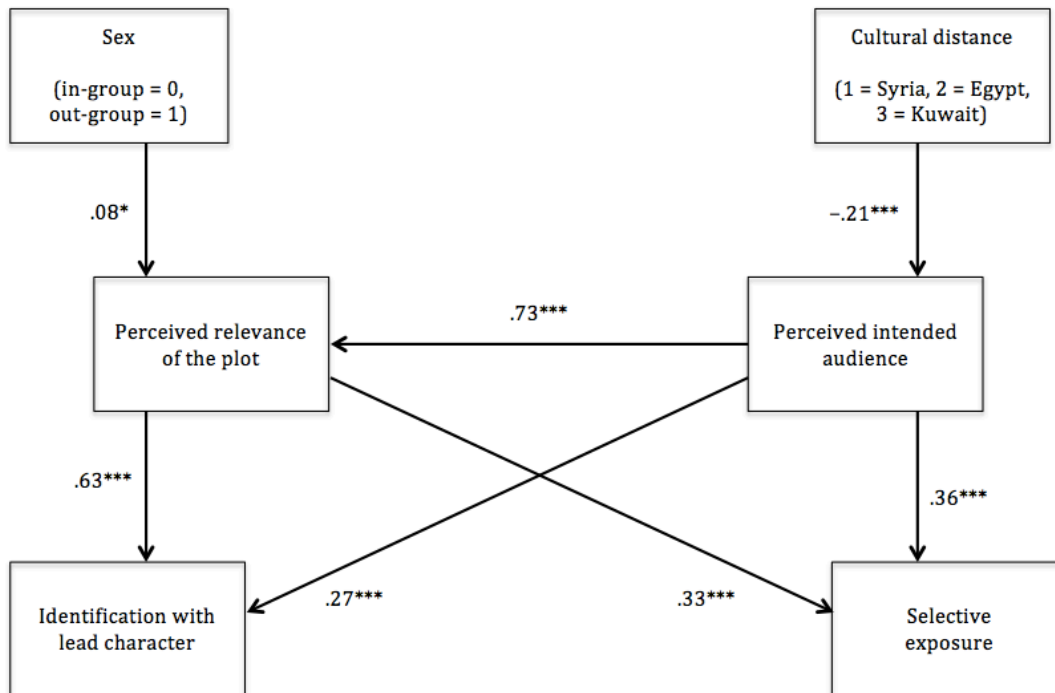
Figure 1. Path model showing the significant relationships (standardized regression weights) between social identity and selective exposure and identification with characters, through plot relevance and perception of the intended audience. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

There were no significant direct effects of sex and regional cultural identity on either selective exposure or perceived identification with characters. Interestingly, regional cultural identity also did not directly affect the perceived relevance of the plot, and sex identity did not directly affect the perception of the intended audience. However, there were direct effects of cultural distance on the perception of being part of the intended audience ($r = −.21$, $p < .001$) and of sex identity on perceived relevance of the plot ($r = .08$, $p < .05$). See Figure 1 for all direct effects.

Although sex and cultural identity did not directly affect selective exposure and perceived identification, they had significant indirect effects on both. In terms of regional cultural identity, increased cultural distance between the viewers and the characters decreased interest in watching the programs, that is, selective exposure ($r = −.13$, $p < .01$) and decreased the level of perceived identification with characters ($r = −.15$, $p < .05$), via perceived relevance of the plot and the perception of the intended audience. Moreover, there was a significant indirect effect of cultural distance on perceived relevance of the plot ($r = −.15$, $p < .01$) via perception of the intended audience. With regard to viewers' sharing the

same-sex identity with the characters, there were significant indirect effects of sex on identification with characters ($r = .05$, $p < .05$) and on selective exposure ($r = .03$, $p < .05$) via perceived relevance of the plot. These results, showing no significant direct effect when the mediators were included but only indirect effects, indicate that relevance of the plot and perception of the intended audience together mediated the effects of sex and cultural identity on selective exposure to the programs and identification with characters.

Regarding Research Question 2, perceived relevance of the plot mediated the influence of sex identity (but not the influence of cultural identity) on selective exposure to the programs and perceived identification with characters. Regarding Research Question 3, the perception of the intended audience mediated the influence of cultural identity (but not the influence of sex identity) on selective exposure and perceived identification with characters. However, the relationships between sex identity and the two dependent variables did not follow the expected pattern when relevance of the plot was added to the model. The characters' out-group membership with regard to the viewers' sex identity increased interest in the program and perceived identification with the character.

In conclusion, accounting for plot relevance and perception of the intended audience eliminated the direct effects of identity on selective exposure and perceived identification with characters. In particular, perceived relevance of the plot explained the effect of in-group sex identity on selective exposure and perceived identification with characters, and perception of being part of the intended audience explained the effect of cultural distance on selective exposure and perceived identification with characters. Overall, the effects were stronger for cultural identity than sex identity, and the strongest mediator for these effects was the perception of being part of the intended audience.

Discussion

The present experiment provides an empirical examination of Arab viewers' social identity as a driver of selective exposure to media content and perceived identification with television characters in the transnational Arabic media industry. The findings suggest that viewers in the Levant cultural region of the Arab world are less interested and might identify less with characters in programs produced in the more conservative Arabian Gulf, which are dominant in the television industry. The findings may confirm the Saudi clerics' fear about Saudi viewers' interest in and identification with the contestants in *Al-Ra'is*. Saudi viewers are expected to identify more with characters from the Arabian Gulf cultural region and be more influenced by this in-group content.

In this study, consistent with existing findings (e.g., Hoffner, 1996; Reeves & Miller, 1978; Trepte, 2004), female viewers expressed higher identification with female characters and more interest in programs that feature female lead characters, whereas male viewers identified more with male lead characters and were more interested in watching programs with male lead characters. The findings regarding cultural identity were also in line with these results. Participants from the Levant region in the Arab world expressed most interest in watching television programs produced in Syria and least interest in Kuwaiti programs. Similarly, the participants identified more with Syrian and Egyptian characters than with Kuwaiti characters. These findings are particularly compelling because the very subtle manipulations

(changing the gender of the lead character and the country name, while keeping the exact same synopses) produced significant effects.

The cultural identity findings give credence to two of the three commonly referenced cultural regions (the Levant and the Arabian Gulf), suggesting a salience of regional cultural differences in transnational Arab media products (e.g., through visual cultural cues such as dialect and dress). However, the results for Egypt were not significant. Participants did not express more interest in and did not identify more with characters in Syrian programs than Egyptian programs. This is likely because of Egypt's geography between the Levant and North Africa and the Arab viewers' familiarity with Egyptian media products.

The findings in general support social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978), in that our Arab viewers favored programs that feature their gender and cultural in-groups and identified more with characters that share their social identities. These findings have important implications for media effects. Social cognitive theory suggests that increased exposure and identification with media characters influence the impact of media content on Arab viewers, where learning is directly related to the observation of media models and behaviors (Bandura, 1988). Moreover, social cognitive theory predicts that people are more likely to pay attention to and model behaviors performed by similar others (Bandura, 2001). Therefore, the results suggest that Arab viewers are more likely to be influenced by messages and model behaviors presented by in-group characters (same-sex and proximate cultural identity).

In addition, the study found significant mediators of the relationships between identity and media choices, especially with regard to cultural identity. Consistent with Weaver's (2011a) findings, perception of being part of the intended audience explained the effect of cultural distance on interest in watching the programs and perceived identification with characters. In the Arab context, the results show that a shared cultural identity between the viewer and the character influences perceptions of the intended audience, which in turn influences the viewers' interest in television programs and their identification with media characters, that is, the effect of cultural identity on selective exposure and identification is fully mediated by the perception that the program was made for them.

The unexpected findings for the mediation analyses regarding sex identity might be due to differences between male and female viewers' responses to the sex of the characters. The setup of the mediation path model, in which sex identity was treated as in-group versus out-group, did not account for gender differences. In fact, in the first part of the data analysis, we found that male and female participants did not differ in their level of identification with male lead characters. This pattern is consistent with existing research (Hoffner, 1996; Reeves & Miller, 1978), which found that boys identify more with same-sex characters than girls.

Overall, the present study reveals important findings about the role of social identity in the processes of media consumption among Arab viewers. Consistent with other findings (Kaufman & Libby, 2012; Trepte, 2004), the study shows that Arab viewers are more interested in in-group content and are more likely to identify more with characters similar to themselves, suggesting that such in-group media content might reinforce their existing attitudes and beliefs, especially about gender roles. Moreover, even

when Arab viewers do consume out-group media programs, the impact of out-group content on their attitudes and beliefs may be lessened.

Although it provides a replication and expansion of the research on social identity and identification to the Arab media industry and delivers important empirical data of Arab viewers' media choices and exposure in transnational contexts, the present study is not without limitations. The relatively small sample, the majority of which was female, and the focus of the study on Levant participants present the primary limitations to the study. This limitation is due to the extreme difficulty in collecting data from Arab viewers in different countries. A second limitation is presented by the measure of perceived identification with characters through reading a synopsis, which is also due to logistical challenges in data collection from this understudied population. However, this method of examining identification with characters using textual narratives has been used in several studies (e.g., De Graaf et al., 2011; Weaver, 2011b). Despite these limitations, the study provides important contributions to this area of research and evidence of media choices in the Arab context.

Future research should provide comparison with participants from the Arabian Gulf (e.g., Kuwait and Saudi Arabia) and North Africa. For example, viewers from conservative countries in the Gulf might be interested in programs from more liberal Arab countries as a way of escapism, which would be an additional interesting interaction with characters to explore. Moreover, as previous research has found that identification with media characters can increase the effects of media content on the viewers' attitudes and beliefs (e.g., Kaufman & Libby, 2012), this impact should also be directly investigated in the Arab context. Examination of regional conflicts and political polarization in Arab responses to media messages and message source, including on social media, would be important to assess in the current political climate. Finally, further investigation of the nature and salience of cultural identity in transnational Arab media content could continue to develop our understanding of consumption behavior and effects in this context.

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