

Muscles, Moustaches and Machismo: Narratives of Masculinity by Egyptian English-Language Media Professionals and Media Audiences

Joel W. Abdelmoez*
Stockholm University

Abstract:

This study utilizes ethnographic methods to inquire how ideas of masculinities are perceived by English-language media professionals and media audiences in Egypt. Using semi-structured interviews and a survey, the aim is to find common narratives on how masculinity is perceived on personal levels and what terms are used to describe men and masculinities, which in turn can be used as the basis for further analysis of Egyptian media content. The word “narrative” in itself is used to convey personal experience, and the telling of those experiences, rather than generalizable data applicable to the larger population. Found are several common themes, such as emphasized heterosexuality, and the expectation of men as providers and protectors, which is related, by the respondents, to the nation and the military. Protection and militarism relates to ideas of strength, honor, and courage. Men are almost exclusively seen as possessors of power. The ‘head of the household,’ and the head of state, both portrayed as iconized leaders, emerge as the quintessence of Egyptian masculine identity, whether that identity is contested or not.

Keywords: masculinities; media; audiences; Egypt; identity; gender expression.

* Department of Asian, Middle Eastern and Turkish Studies, Stockholm University
e-mail: jw.abdelmoez@su.se

Kaslar, Bıyıklar ve Maçızım: Mısırlı İngilizce Konuşan Medya Profesyonellerinin ve Medya İzleyicilerinin Erkeklik Anlatıları

Joel W. Abdelmoez*
Stockholm University

Özet:

Bu çalışma erkekliklerle ilgili görüşlerin, Mısır'da İngilizce konuşan medya profesyonelleri ve medya izleyicileri tarafından nasıl algılandığını incelemek için etnografik metotlardan faydalanır. Amaç, yarı-yapılandırılmış mülakatlar ve anketler aracılığıyla, erkekliğin kişisel düzeylerde nasıl algılandığı ve erkekler ile erkeklikleri betimlemek için hangi terimlerin kullanıldığı ile ilgili ortak anlatıları ortaya çıkarmaktır; ki bu ortak anlatılar Mısır medyası içerikleri ile ilgili daha sonra yapılacak analizlere temel teşkil edebilir. "Anlatı" kelimesi, geniş toplum için geçerliliği olan, genellenebilecek verilerden ziyade, bizzat kişisel deneyimleri ve bu deneyimlerin anlatılmasını ifade etmek için kullanılır. Bulgular, vurgulanmış heteroseksüellik ve görüşmeciler tarafından ulus ve askeriye ile ilişkilendirilen erkeklerden geçim sağlayıcılık ve korumacılık beklentileri gibi birçok ortak temayı içerir. Korumacılık ve militarizm, güç, namus ve cesaret fikirleriyle bağlantılıdır. Erkekler münhasıran erk sahibi olarak görülmektedir. Her ikisi de ikonlaşmış liderlerce sergilenen 'evin reisi' ve devletin başı rolleri Mısırlı erkek kimliğinin - bu kimlik tartışmaya açık olsa da olmasa da - özünü oluşturan özellikler olarak ortaya çıkmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: erkeklikler, medya, izleyiciler, Mısır, kimilik, toplumsal cinsiyet ifadesi

* Department of Asian, Middle Eastern and Turkish Studies, Stockholm University.
e-mail: jw.abdelmoez@su.se

Masculinity as a concept and an idea is getting increasingly debated and studied. There are many different ways of approaching it, and, while often described as a new or an emerging field of study, it can be traced back at least half a century, perhaps even as far as Freud and Jung (see Connell, 2005; Kimmel, Hearn and Connell, 2003; Gardiner, 2002; Whitehead, 2002). However, despite many established fields dedicated to the study of men and masculinities, there is a recurring problem, namely how to define masculinity:

The concepts “masculine” and “feminine”, Freud observed in a melancholy footnote, “are among the most confused that occur in science”. In many practical situations the language of “masculine” and “feminine” raises few doubts. We base a great deal of talk and action on this contrast. But the same terms, on logical examination, waver like the Danube mist. They prove remarkably elusive and difficult to define. (Connell, 2005, p. 3)

The problem with some of the approaches taken in previous studies is that it ignores the self-understood masculinity, or the perception of the masculine in terms other than academic. That, however, is the core of this study, to explore everyday narratives of masculinity, what is “maleness” or “manhood,” in the descriptions made both by media professionals, represented herein by journalists, producers, editors and translators working with news production in any way, and by media audiences in an Egyptian context. This is to provide a grounded basis for analyses exploring the construction and representation of masculinities in Egyptian media. Rather than applying an arbitrarily chosen academic definition of masculinity, in-depth interviews can let theories emerge from the material. The focus of this research project is as such not only a preliminary exploration of how masculinity is represented and constructed in Egyptian media, but also to find common themes in the descriptions of men as a category and hierarchies of different descriptions. While the study is still a work-in-progress and the findings are preliminary, what clearly stands out is the high status of the military in terms of male ideals, showing deep entanglement of masculinity and

militarism in the Egyptian context. For example, several respondents refer to the military as a 'factory of men,' and one young man, critical of the military as an institution, laments the fact that many mothers in Egypt want their sons to join the army, 'to make a man out of him.' Former president and military officer Gamal Abdel Nasser is the man most often named as an 'exemplary man' by respondents, his predecessor Anwar Sadat is spoken of as a national father, and the current president and former field marshal Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, too, is described as a representative of 'ideal masculinity,' although in a more suave form than the previous presidents. It is, however, important to note that there are many other examples of masculinities in Egypt, as shown by recent studies that highlight the caring and nurturing man (see Naguib, 2015; Ghannam, 2013; Inhorn, 2012), and that focusing on military masculinities was not an aim of this study, but rather reflects the thoughts and concerns of the respondents. Furthermore, and here I am following the recommendations of Amar (2011), it is crucial that highlighting and challenging militarized masculinity and gendered security politics does not misrecognize and depoliticize social forces. Moving forward with the findings of this study – particularly how media professionals and audiences alike emphasize the military and/or militarism in discussion on men's media representation – it is necessary to ask what role this plays in Egyptian cultural politics under the current regime, while still paying attention to the classed and racialized aspects of military participation and representation, as well as resistance against military institutions. Questions for future studies include whether the same entanglements of masculinity and militarism can be found in Egyptian online press, too. If so, in what ways do the gendered representations of militants, whether military soldiers, terrorists, or jihadists, relate to the state's security narrative? Indeed, exploration of how gendered notions and ideals are used in reporting on military activity, particularly reports on terrorism and the anti-terrorist efforts of the Egyptian army, seems to be the most interesting direction of future research this study may take.

As previously mentioned, this study takes its starting point in narratives of media professionals as well as media audiences. This approach acknowledges that the dynamics between audience and media does not necessarily mean a passive role of the audience, as simply the receivers of information. Indeed, it could be argued that the expectations of their audiences are something that media institutions are well aware of, meaning that, rather than somehow molding their audiences, their news production deliberately follows the audiences' views (Abdelmoez, 2017). Therefore, this is not a study on the impact of media in the construction of hegemonic expressions of masculinity, but rather a look into the perception of the same expressions in media audiences. That being said, observing the importance of the perceived naturalness to binary gender expressions (Butler, 1990), and the meaning of stereotypical representations to construct gender boundaries (Dyer, 2002), it could be hypothesized that media have a large impact on how masculinity is perceived throughout society. This view is supported by many of the respondents in this study, both with the perspective that men are stereotypically portrayed and that women are underrepresented and marginalized in the media. As the overarching theme of this study is gender representation in the Egyptian media landscape, the two study groups, media audiences (consumers) and media professionals (producers, journalists, editors, etc.) have been selected in acknowledgment of the truism that news production does not solely involve producers. Media audiences interact with texts and messages, utilize and decode them according to their own needs and interests, and therefore also participate in creating meaning. Thus, while talking to media professionals provides insight into journalistic practice and how gender is thought about and discussed in the media institutions, media audiences can show how this is received, perceived, and utilized.

The idea of this pilot study is as mentioned to find place- and culture-specific constructions of masculinities and its hierarchies, and let the definitions appear from the data, rather than applying an already constructed framework that might feel foreign to the people implicated by the study. Inspiration here comes from Connell and Messerschmidt's

elaboration on the interplay of local, regional and global levels in constructed masculinities:

Let us consider specifically the relation between regional and local masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity at the regional level is symbolically represented through the interplay of specific local masculine practices that have regional significance, such as those constructed by feature film actors, professional athletes, and politicians. The exact content of these practices varies over time and across societies. (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 849)

A theoretical notion to which this study relates is performativity, which informs how the findings can be understood and applied for future research. This concept was derived from linguistics and the philosophy of language, and it has been adapted to gender studies by Judith Butler (1990). Simply put, Butler asserts that gender and its expressions are not natural, but constructed to appear as such, through means of repetition. Accordingly, gender is not the expression of identity, but identity can rather be understood as constructed through “gender acts”. The idea of gender performativity is largely based on post-structural and social constructivist thinking that language does not necessarily *describe* an objectively true reality, but discursively *creates* it. It is, however, important to note that this does not make gender insignificant. Performativity does not mean artificiality; rather, gender is figured as a product of its own repetition in language and other forms of signification. Butler states that there need not be an “actor behind the act” because the actor is constructed *within* the act:

As a consequence, gender cannot be understood as a role which either expresses or disguises an interior ‘self,’ whether that ‘self’ is conceived as sexed or not. As performance which is performative, gender is an “act,” broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority. (Butler, 1988, p. 528)

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. (Butler, 1990, p. 25)

If, as argued by Butler, gender is something we do rather than something we are, or have, then what constitutes “masculinity” or “femininity” is indeed not internal, but given to us, through social conventions and contexts. Here, the media play an important part in, in some ways, “teaching” gender. The representation of men and masculinity is not (only) a description of an already existing reality but is a lesson for men on how to enact hegemonic masculinity. When such ideals are enacted by individuals, they are not only individual actions, but collaborative ones. They rely on the social conventions of gender, and are expressed in a particular context in which they become part of a gender “complicity.” The acts, as such, are then “stylized performances [of gender] that are coded into cultural life” (Wood, 2013, p. 63). I want to reiterate that Butler (1990) does not hold gender to be “a performance” but “performative,” an important distinction. Since gender does not exist before it is done, Butler argues that it is the act itself “doing” gender, not the subject. Similarly, Carlshamre (2014) speaks of human bodies as artifacts, modified to suit certain ideals about sex/gender – despite the fact that this is portrayed as “natural” and biological. Pointing towards practices to “design” our bodies, from plastic surgery to haircuts, Carlshamre argues: “It is as if we do not really trust nature to distinguish the sexes well enough, but must help ourselves to become what we supposedly already are” (p. 144).

The reiterability of gender is really a key point as it is never constructed from scratch, but rather, because “always-already” ubiquitously at work, reiterated and cemented in interpersonal meetings, thus reconfirming and entrenching current norms. Swedish queer theorist, Fanny Ambjörnsson, elaborates and clarifies Butler’s theories, especially regarding the consequences of gender non-conformity. It is not enough to *be* (or *identify as*) a man, one must also continuously *enact* one’s tenuous maleness in order to be seen as a “real”

man (Ambjörnsson, 2006). This is where I situate the theoretical crux of this study: how is performative, or “enacted,” masculinity understood by media audiences and professionals? Performativity theory, as such, provides an understanding of the findings as an ongoing process which will, I believe, reveal a form of gender affordance; certain ideals and identities are realized and take material form, making it possible to become the thing to which it itself refers.

Previous research

The present study relates to and primarily draws on contributions to masculinity studies: both general theories on the different mechanisms concerning masculinity, as well as some specific ones to Egypt and the Middle East, as well as media studies. A primary, and very important point, emphasized by Gardiner (2002), is that there is no consistent meaning to the term “masculinity” and that the relationship between feminisms, queer theory and the study of men and masculinities have been a complicated one. Berggren (2014), however, argues that the connection have been there, only not made sufficiently visible, and that bringing feminist phenomenology, particularly that of Sara Ahmed, into studies of men and masculinities acts to revitalize the theoretical framework: “conceptualizing masculinity as *sticky* allows us to see both that subjects are positioned by competing discourses, and that through repeated enactment, the cultural signs of masculinity tends to stick to bodies” (Berggren, p. 247).

The intersection of gender and media has been an important one to gender studies scholars, although very little has been written about the representation and the construction of masculinities in Arab media. The study of gender in Middle Eastern societies and cultures, furthermore, is marked by a strong focus on women. Farha Ghannam’s book *Live and Die Like a Man* (2013) stands as the clearest exception to this, and is an elaborate account of men’s lives in Egypt, based on 20 years of research in the neighborhood of al-Zawiya al-Hamra’. While keeping a critical distance, Ghannam offers a much-needed

problematization of masculinity in Egypt, in relation to class and social norms, as well as political systems and religion. At the same time, Ghannam challenges what she sees as discourses of dehumanization of Muslim men in the global media, by providing detailed accounts of men's lives, and the forces that forms what she calls "masculine trajectories." There is much inspiration to get from this work, but it also highlights the urgent need for more research, based on ethnographic methods, on the role of men and masculinities in contemporary Egypt.

Noha Mellor's article "Countering cultural hegemony: Audience research in the Arab world" (2013) is also highly relevant for the first part of this study, as it highlights different approaches of audience research and understanding the impact of media in the Arab world. In this review of Arab audience research, Mellor (2013) argues for an understanding of 'audience' as both diverse and fragmented, particularly as doing otherwise risks viewing 'audience' as passive, rather than active, in their engagement with the media. Mellor (2013) concludes that there is a "vast room for interpretive research based on the ethnographic and cultural turn in audience research, centering on the processes of the interpretation rather than on the authority of the (imported) texts" (p. 212).

The present pilot study, as such, functions as a step towards filling both these voids with ethnographic audience research focusing on interpretation of masculinity and the portrayal of men in Egyptian media, and thus aims to bring together masculinity studies with media ethnography and audience research in the context of contemporary Egypt.

Method

This study is based on nine semi-structured interviews conducted in Cairo, Egypt, between September and November 2014, each taking between 60 and 90 minutes. Language was mainly English with Egyptian Arabic used only to discuss terms considered language-specific. Respondents included five media professionals, and four readers/viewers of Egyptian English-language media. These two groups of participants were chosen in order to gain insights both from people working in the media, as they can reveal how gendered ideals inform the work from within media institution, and from outsiders, as the audiences also play a part in decoding and interpreting the very same media messages.

Furthermore, in order to broaden the data, a small survey consisting of key questions from the interviews was distributed through the online link-sharing website Reddit, on a specific “subreddit” (essentially a discussion forum) dedicated to Egypt. 27 people responded to the survey. This quickly and efficiently produced several interesting and useful answers, but the in-depth interviews remain the core of the study. The respondents for these are both media professionals, and from the audiences of Egyptian English-language media. These were selected through a combination of help from previous contacts, and the so called “snowballing-method,” which means that each respondent was asked to name a few other possible respondents. Usually when using this method, data collection ends when it reaches a *saturation point*, meaning that the respondents no longer provide new information or when patterns have appeared and most answers are repetitions of what previous respondents have said. However, considering the fact that this study was only supposed to provide a basis for a larger media analysis, it was not deemed necessary to reach this saturation point. Any and all insights were considered valuable, and can act as a starting point of a content analysis of Egyptian English-language media. The interviews, as mentioned, aimed at eliciting narratives of masculinity that would produce key terms that could be used in

investigating the representation of masculinities in Egyptian media. Therefore, no attention was paid to make sure that the sample was representative in regard to gender, religion, class, etc. In other words, sampling did not aim at generalizability or being representative of the population. Therefore, there is a risk of sampling bias, as it is very likely that the respondents who decided to participate had; 1) a greater interest in the topic at hand, 2) a greater personal interest in sharing their thoughts, and 3) a greater opportunity to speak candidly and critically about fairly controversial issues.

The first group of interview respondents, media professionals, consisted of one online editor, aged between 30-49, identifying as “straight male” (note that sexual orientation/identity was not asked, only gender identity), one freelance translator, aged between 15-29, identifying as man, one journalist, aged between 15-29, identifying as male, one researcher, aged between 30-49, identifying as female, and one journalist, aged between 15-29, identifying as female. The second group, media audiences, consisted of one artist, aged between 50-64, identifying as woman, one musician, aged between 30-49, identifying as female, one architect, aged between 30-49, identifying as male, and one activist, aged between 15-29, identifying as female. The only qualifier for the second group was that the respondent considered themselves part of the target group of any Egyptian news outlet, and somewhat regularly interacted with the news media.

Interview Questions

The interview and questions themselves have been structured after a model suggested by Bryman (2012), mixing introductory and clarifying questions with solicitations of examples. After having been informed about the research purpose and after having given their consent, each respondent was first asked for basic demographics including age, gender identity and educational background. Respondents from the “media professionals” group were asked about their media affiliation (institution) and their professional role (journalist, editor, producer, or

translator). Those from “media audiences” were asked about their profession. Both groups were asked about their primary sources of news media, of which the most common were Al-Ahram, Ahram Online, Al-Masry Al-Youm, Youm7 and Mada Masr. The main questions of the interviews are all centered on the topics of masculinity, media and gender representation, and are all followed by additional questions, as well as clarifying questions and solicitations of examples. In all stages of the interviews the interviewer, as far all possible, refrained from imposing, suggesting or even mentioning possible answers. This is necessary because doing so would defeat the purpose of circumventing traditional or academic narratives (or tropes) of masculinity in order to explore the situated and uninterrupted understandings. Therefore, only the meaning of the questions was elaborated upon when needed, without suggestion of possible answers other than what had already been provided by the respondent.

The survey followed a similar pattern as the interviews, and the questions were a selection of key questions from the interviews. Open comment-style fields were used for answers rather than multiple choices, with the only exception being in regards to age group. This was done in order to encourage the respondents to answer in their own words, and when necessary use Arabic terms, allowing for an as unobtrusive collection of data as possible. The respondents of the survey overwhelmingly identified as male, with fifteen answering “male”, not including one instance of “straight”, two “straight male”, and “*Dakar*”, literally meaning man, but in Egypt considered carrying connotations of machismo.

Findings and analysis

Provide, Protect and Control

Overall, professional life dominated as a theme when discussing “men’s roles” in society and in life. Even in cases when the topic was family life, most respondents correlated this to professional life through a strong emphasis put on the expectation of men to “provide” for their family. Several respondents talked about how men are judged by how well they can fulfill the role as breadwinner for their family. One media professional stated:

Men are normally not involved in home issues; they are only involved in bringing money and bringing bread. What do you expect to find more? I think that’s it, it has always been like that. And I think women are expecting, even when they are getting married to a man, what they ask about is ‘is he able to provide a good life, or not?’ They don’t think much about how collaboration would be in building this family, they think ‘is [this] man, can [this] man be more responsible to provide the life for the family?’ That’s the main question here, when someone is trying to get married.

Many times providing was mentioned next to protecting, as one survey respondent answered on the question of what “masculinity” means: “It means to sacrifice safety or comfort to protect women and children. It means to sacrifice comfort to provide for a family... It means that the prosperity and safety of my family rests on my shoulders.” This correlation also emphasizes the fact that both providing and protecting also relates to a third aspect mentioned by respondents: controlling. In fact, one survey response mentions providing and controlling in the same sentence, answering on whether masculinity is “natural to men,” saying that “I like to think yes, since instinctively we like to be in control and more people than not think of themselves as the providers.” A media audience interviewee adds to the same point, although speaking about what comes to mind when hearing the word “masculinity,” saying:

It's a source of pride, to have. You're the one who control women, you're the breadwinner. You have to appear as a masculine man in the streets, wear modest clothes. Stuff like that, which I think is a very backwards way of expressing oneself.

Some were even harsher in their words on this question, with one respondent saying "I think about to be unfair. I think about violence." On the follow-up question whether this is similar to "macho," this respondent said:

Yes, it's similar. But, I refer, when I hear the word 'macho,' I refer to jealousy more, and competition among males. It's not about... controlling the female; it's like competing with each other. But masculinity, that's when the female gets hurt, or treated in a bad way.

Interestingly, the same respondent viewed "masculinity" and "maleness" as the same thing, but "manhood" as something different. When asked about the difference, the answer was that manhood is something positive:

I don't really use the word 'maleness,' I just heard it from you now, but manhood is about character. It's about personality of someone, and it refers to positive points in his personality, it's not like masculinity. It's about to be fair, actually, and to be strong and to be protective and, I don't know, to be responsible.

Being protective, for a man, thus signifies a positive trait to this respondent. Considering the perceived difference between "masculinity," which included controlling, and "manhood," being something positive, there is no correlation made between "protective" and "controlling." At the same time, much of this respondent's answers revolved around men being controlling of women in close relationships to them, particularly brothers' behavior towards their sisters. However, the same behavior was by others described as "protective," meaning that it could be used in

either a positive or negative meaning, although in the former case the same behavior would be labeled as “controlling” instead. Therefore, it is still possible to argue for their connection, which several respondents did:

They [young men] think that the whole protection thing maybe involves the need to control women. So maybe that’s an expression of that desire to control women, or to feel more powerful vis-à-vis women, and therefore prove their virility, their manhood, and then to act as protector. I mean the logic is odd, of course.

The same connection was by others made between “providing” and “controlling:”

A ‘real man’ will be judged, if he is successful, if he can build a family and finance it. That’s very important. [He will be judged on] if he can control the family well.

Two other respondents had this to say about control and masculinity:

I believe it’s a culture in Egypt [...] and this culture helps, maybe not just men, men and women, to control someone weaker than them, and feel that they are strong enough and that they have power. I believe they know they do something wrong, and it is okay because power is very seducing, you know? It’s about being unfair. It’s about refusing a girl to choose, they don’t want her to choose, because they want to feed their power.

I believe the societal understanding of masculinity in Egypt is quite a fucked up one. Thinking about it... It’s sort of a birthright of control. You have the birthright to control things, and to be able to change, and to be able to lead. And, quite paradoxically, this entails very little responsibility. I remember when I was a kid, my friends used to brag about that they don’t do things around the house, because this is

what females do. Like 'I do not clean, I do not do my bed, I do not do whatever, because this is what girls do.' So basically it feels like being a male comes with almost limitless privileges, with little responsibility regarding your immediate context, be it the family or the society.

As we can see, providing, protecting, and controlling are all aspects that nearly every respondent relates to the role that men are expected to take in Egyptian society. While these aspects may or may not intersect, they also exist on multiple levels; not only relating to the family and to the society, but also to the nation. Protection and guardianship on the national level is a task placed with the military, and there are parallels to be drawn between the familial or paternal protectionism spoken of by the respondents, and the trope of a national family, wherein the nation is symbolized as a woman (see Baron, 2005) in need of protection from a male guardian, the military. Viewing this parallel with performativity theory in mind, one could argue that an emphasis on familial protectionism as an integral part of masculinity also acts to construct militarized forms of masculine identity; it encourages men's participation in the state's military apparatus, the "security industry," and by extension the militarized masculinity – which includes the expectation of men to sacrifice their bodies to the state.

Providing for and protecting one's family could be seen as a project of procreation and preservation, to carry on one's legacy. This legacy, however, is mostly inherited from father to son. One respondent claimed to be thankful for not being a man, as it meant that when she told her father that she would not be going to the medical school like he had wanted, he was accepting of it because it was more important for her brother, as the only son, to do so:

He said 'Ok. Anyway, I have my son. For me, you are a woman; you will always be a woman. Even if you are successful, one day you will marry and you will not carry the name.' That's what my father told me, an educated person.

It is clear that when fathering is considered central to Egyptian masculinity; it is usually the fathering of sons. It might be possible to speak of “lineal masculinity,” although that would require studies looking into the past and how notions of ancestry relate to masculine ideals through generations. However, the hinting towards patrilineal legacy given by some respondents, together with the outright account of (male) inherited family feuds and men trying to save their family name, which we will return to, does show that, at least in Upper Egypt, family legacy is closely tied with masculinity. Men are the ones who defend the family name, they are the ones who carry on the family name, and it is their death that is the end of the family.

The emphasis on men’s role as protectors of women also perpetuates the ubiquitous “damsel in distress” trope, which in itself could be seen as devaluing women’s agency, or at least symptomatic of the perceived role of women in public society, something which in turn feeds violence directed at women both at home and on the streets. This relates to the Egyptian term *balṭagy* (بلطجي), or “thug”, which is a term often used to separate culturally and socially sanctioned violence from other forms. It is the embodiment of villain masculinity, and the concept, as used on Egyptian streets rather than in laws, “focuses mainly on the improper uses of violence in daily life” (Ghannam, 2013, p. 123). By constructing the threat of the “thug”, or villain, men can position themselves as protectors of women, thus remaining in a place of control and authority. Men constructed themselves as heroic by imagining other men as “villainous.” The Hero, after all, is defined by his courageous struggle with his enemy, the Villain, usually referred to in Egypt as *balṭagy*. Thus men assert their belonging to a group of men engaged in courageous conflict with another group of men. Men also construct the non-masculine non-man in order to exemplify the man who did not conform to masculinity, the equivalent of which in British would be “nonce” or “sissy,” what is in Egypt called *shāz* (شاذ), “deviant,” a term often used to describe non-heterosexual men.

Sexuality, Family and Nation

My early reflections on it were purely sexual. Masculinity was basically a sexual attitude, rather than a social construct. – Young male respondent.

A commonly mentioned aspect of masculinity, related to control, is sexuality. Several respondents talked about what they termed “the hypocrisy” regarding some men’s view of female sexuality: “Macho people also do not allow sexual liberties for women. They don’t respect a woman that is sexually liberated, at the same time they treat women as sexual objects, so they’re very hypocritical.” This respondent also related the term “macho” to “masculinity,” in the sense that it is a way to act, expected of men by society at large. Furthermore, the respondent who differentiated between manhood and masculinity gave similar remarks:

If in the street a girl and her boyfriend or lover is walking, holding hands, or... his hand on her shoulder, or even kissing or anything, it’s not allowed. People won’t let them go by in an intimate way, walk in an intimate way. But if someone harass her, or touch her, touch her without her consent, that’s okay. But if she agrees, then it’s not okay. If she says no for someone controlling her, that’s wrong, and if she says yes for someone she loves, that’s also wrong. But if she’s under control, although the same action is happening - it’s about touching her body - without her choice it is okay, you know?

What this tells us is that female sexuality is explained as subject to double-punishment, or as the saying goes: “damned if you do, damned if you don’t.” Conversely, one respondent talked about how being a man, in Egypt, comes with freedoms. As a teenager, this respondent reminisced, he was able to stay out late without issues of “virginity.” Generally, male sexuality seems to be closely tied to a sense of masculinity, and often comes up in interviews, no matter who the respondent is. As an example

of this, on the question of gender identity one interview respondent and three survey respondents not only said “male,” but actually answered “straight male,” as if to emphasize that they are “proper men.” Not surprisingly, these same men were also the ones who emphasized the “naturalness” of male stereotypes, such as muscularity and intelligence. One of these respondents said, on what the term “masculinity” means to him: “Masculinity and manhood: Courage, strength, honor.” Strength, of course, being another idea connected to the trope of the protective man. Upon being asked to name examples of men that to them symbolize this as a male ideal mainly two people were named: President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, and the former President Gamal Abdel Nasser. I say “mainly” because there was one man who was mentioned once, in a survey response, as a symbol of the “masculine traits” of being “quiet and strong,” and that man was late American actor Charles Bronson. Although Bronson was only mentioned once as an idealized man in Egypt, presidents el-Sisi and Nasser came up in nearly every interview and in several survey responses. While these men are quite obviously tied to symbolisms of the Egyptian nation, there were others mentioned as “idealized men” that have played important, albeit very different, roles in the construction of a national, masculine identity: Actors Rushdy Abaza (“the Clark Gable of Egypt”) and Omar Sharif.

One respondent related both Nasser and el-Sisi back to the family as an idea, as providers and as protectors. According to this respondent, the political elite in Egypt since the revolution of 1952 have constructed an idea of the nation modeled as a family, and the leader, be it Nasser, Sadat or el-Sisi, as a father.¹ This, the respondent says, is clearly shown in the fact that Sadat, during the October War of 1973, spoke about the fighter pilots as “my sons.” The mother in this scenario is Egypt, such as in the statue “Nahdet Misr” outside Cairo University, once again casting the men (soldiers) as the protectors and women as the protected. The respondent emphasizes that women had been cast in this role before Nasser’s revolution as well, and points to the fact that during the inauguration of the statue of “Mother Egypt,” women were not allowed to attend.

On the question of what exemplifies an idealized man, some respondents chose to list traits or attributes, while others listed “exemplary men.” The two most commonly listed attributes were muscles and moustaches. Interestingly, only a few respondents mentioned beards, while nearly everyone (including many survey respondents) pointed to moustaches as a “masculine attribute.”

The men exemplifying masculinity, such as the already mentioned Nasser, el-Sisi, Rushdy Abaza and Omar Sharif, and others, such as writer Taha Hussein and television presenter Tamer Amin, not only symbolize a national identity, but also far-reaching stereotypical portrayals of “masculine men.” The non-Egyptian men that respondents mentioned as examples of masculinity highlight some common themes: Clark Gable, Charles Bronson, Hugh Jackman and Javier Bardem. It seems clear that these names correspond with the listed traits; muscles, moustaches, sometimes beards, and always somewhat “rugged.” These stereotypical qualities could be related to Richard Dyer’s (2002) argument that the most important function of stereotypes is to construct and maintain clear boundaries, in this case gender boundaries. These gender boundaries, however, do not only separate men from women, but also men from other men. When there is a clearly promoted “successful way of being a man,” there is, of course, subordinated and marginalized ways as well. What is important to understand about this is that while a majority of Egyptian men are not necessarily muscly, mustachioed or generally Nasser or Abaza-like, these qualities and these men represent an ideal, which is upheld in society at large and promotes a structure from which most men benefit (cf. Connell, 2005). What these interviews have found is that, while this type of masculinity is idealized, respondents commonly explain the meaning of masculinity as the lack of what is *not* considered masculine. Not having long hair, not wearing make-up, not wearing pink, not dressing in shorts, etc. can hardly be seen as ideals, but quite possibly everyday practices and performances that constitute “common” masculinity.

Much of the answers on what masculinity entails implies heterosexuality: Providing for a family, protecting women, procreation –

it all points to a heteronormative understanding of masculinity. Non-heterosexual practices and identification is only referred to as victims of normative masculine ideals or its hegemony. For example, some respondents spoke of gay-identified men in the discourse of the famously homophobic television presenter Tamer Amin as a way for Amin to reassure his viewers of his own masculinity and/or sexuality. This is somewhat similar what Pascoe (2007) found studying high school boys in America: “Boys lay claim to masculine identities by lobbing homophobic epithets at one another. They also assert masculine selves by engaging in heterosexist discussions of girls’ bodies and their own sexual experiences” (p. 5). Engaging in heterosexist discussion may also appear as a favorite pastime of Tamer Amin who, apart from the accusations of homophobia, has also been criticized for blaming sexual harassment on the victims. The expectation of heterosexuality, its connection to masculinity, and the reiteration of straightness by male respondents may very well be correlated to the fact that non-heterosexual practices and identities are incredibly stigmatized in Egyptian society. In a study by Pew Research Center (2014), as many as 95% of Egyptians stated that they do not think homosexuality should be accepted. What may be even more telling is that this number has made some LGBTs glad, saying “5% is more than expected!”

Men’s harassment of women is a hot topic in Egypt, and was brought up to discussion by most respondents. Rizzo (2014) writes that harassment can be seen as a backlash towards increased female participation in the public sphere, and an attempt to uphold male ownership of public spaces through marginalization of women in those spaces. Harassment is still, by men and women alike, often blamed on the victims themselves, and especially women’s appearance is blamed. In a study sponsored by UN Women, more than a third of victims of harassment claimed that women have themselves to blame. 72.6% of perpetrators claimed the reason for them harassing is that the woman was not decent in her appearance, while 75.7% of victims reported wearing conservative clothing and no make-up (El Deeb, 2013). This suggests that the idea of female decency is more important than how

they really dress, and that men are often perceived as responsible for enforcing the dress code. The protective brother is, of course, constructed in relation to the street thugs who would take first chance to punish a woman for her appearance, even if it is more about power than actual appearance. Thus, the brother's power and ability to control is confirmed while the sister's agency is taken away, and the "proper" masculinity is constructed in relation to the *baltagy*, or the "problematic" masculinity.

Aggression, Violence and Military

Some of the so far mentioned responses have related to aggression. When spoken of, this was often related to sex, with sexual harassment, of course, being a topic many relates to violence as well as aggression and masculinity.² Furthermore, the fact that military men are very commonly named as "exemplarily masculine" shows that certain idealized masculinities are indeed connected to aggression. The military, one respondent said, is viewed as "the factory of men:"

If I'm gonna trace how manhood, or how masculinity, is produced, I would refer automatically to the practices of training soldiers in the army. One funny exercise is [that] they have to sing a song. And this song is very degrading... you know, degrading from an army point of view, like when you pretend to be a female; this is degrading from the military point of view. So you have to sing a song, like one of the rights of passage to be graduated from the military is to sing a song, saying how feminine you are. So it's very funny because the ritual involves, like in order to be able to be a man, you have to prove how female you are, which is very paradoxical. It feels like it's [...] crushing the man in you, in order to construct the bigger man, which is the army.

Another respondent lamented the fact that many mothers in Egypt want their sons to go to the military, “to make a man out of him,” and that there is a pride in the army and an idealization of military masculinity that is not just upheld by men. The problem, according to this respondent, is that militarism relates not only to state violence, but also to violence against women, especially in the light of femininity being considered something degrading:

If they are taught that the feminine is the lesser human body, or lesser person, then, you know, that certainly contributes to the fact that they are not respecting women on the street. Because they’re told, you know; that women are trash.

Connell (2005) writes that “[v]iolence on the largest possible scale is the purpose of the military; and no arena has been more important for the definition of hegemonic masculinity in European/American culture” (p. 213). Given the many respondents who focus on the military as a masculine project, as a source of harassment and violence against women, it is possible to argue for the same being true in Egypt. In fact, this could be said to be the single most notable finding; that military men (particularly military leaders) are constantly named as the most exemplary men, and that the military at large is seen as a prime institution for the construction of masculinity. In order to better understand the actual workings of the Egyptian military as a “factory of men”, it would be necessary to do detailed ethnographic study of the military itself, something that could prove challenging. However, what can be drawn from the study at hand is the perception of the military as a masculine institution, and of military performances and pageantry – such as parades and televised military exercises, for example shown in the music video to the pop song “Teslam El Ayadi” – as key areas for performing hegemonic masculinity.

Emma Sinclair-Webb (2006) writes about how the Turkish Armed Forces plays a great part in daily life, often more so than other countries. Interestingly, the Egyptian military seems to, on the one hand, be seen as

rather elusive, or maybe even Kafkaesque, in the sense that its presence is always known but rarely seen in media, “unless it’s 6th of October, the annual thing where they show movies about war,” as one respondent said. At the same time, as another respondent talked about, the Egyptian Armed Forces are involved in many public projects; they own factories and run constructions (cf. Abul-Magd, 2013; Morsy, 2014); and as previously mentioned, they often figure in popular cultural productions (cf. LeVine, 2015; Mostafa, 2017). As such, they could hardly be portrayed as having a small role in society. Sinclair-Webb further writes that in Turkey, as a result of the important every-day role of the army compared to other countries, “the versions of ideal masculinity generated by the army as a primary institutional site of hegemonic masculinity have a more inescapable social and cultural impact on men” (Sinclair-Webb, 2006, p. 69). Again, the same could also be said about Egypt, especially in the light of respondents’ answers about the Egyptian Armed Forces as a “factory of men.” This further strengthens the argument made earlier that the role of the military, as defender of the nation, correlates to the role of the man, as protector of women. Even in times of peace, the soldier as a guardian of the nation “presumably occupies a significant place in the national ‘imaginary’ and established a military version of manhood as inescapable and a marker against which other masculinities get measured” (Sinclair-Webb, 2006, p. 70).

Violence is, of course, seen as a male/masculine practice outside of the military as well. A respondent from Upper Egypt talked about the concept of *al-tār* (التار or الثأر – *al-tha’r* in Modern Standard Arabic), which means “vendetta,” and is sometimes called “blood feuds.” This relates to family and clan fighting, in which when someone from a family is killed, the men of that family meet to decide who will retaliate by killing a man of the other family. This is a vicious circle, usually going on for generations without anyone really knowing how it started, but can according to the respondent be ended when one of the families only have one man left to carry on their name. In order to save the family name, this man will take his burial shroud, called a *kafan* (كفن), and go to the other family, who will then have the opportunity to decide then and

there to kill this man, thus ending the patrilineal legacy of this family. Because of the humiliation involved in offering your own life, the respondent says, “they usually leave him.”

Key findings

Several common themes emerge in media audiences and media professionals’ personal reflections on what masculinity signifies and how they perceive different performances of masculinity. Most themes are interrelated but often mentioned separately. For example, *heterosexuality* could be explicitly referred to or merely implied, but was invariably an integral part of what is considered “true” or “proper” masculinity. The possibility of affirming one’s masculinity by publicly performing heterosexuality and denouncing alternative sexualities recurs in the answers of the respondents. Related to this “compulsory heterosexuality” is, of course, the *family*, which comes with the expectation of men as *providers* and *protectors*. These expectations also extend, and were related by respondents, to the *nation* and the *military*. In fact, both media professionals and audiences alike heavily associate masculinity and manhood with the military. Participating in military activity was seen as a way of “becoming” a man. Protection and militarism, in turn, were related to ideas of *strength*, *honor*, and *courage*, as well as weakness, shame, and cowardice in relation to men failing to protect women, such as the men called *balṭagy* or *shāz*. Providing on the other spectrum was by a few respondents related to *responsibility* and *honesty*, while both providing and protection were by others related to *control*. Men are almost exclusively seen as *possessors of power*. Indeed, the *father figure*, ultimately represented by the iconized leader (of the nation as well as the military), is viewed as the quintessence of Egyptian masculine identity, thus bringing us back to the (heteronormative) family. Any one of these aspects could be starting points of their own, leading to meanings embedded within them, to be used in research aimed at exploring different aspects of masculinity in Egypt. Most pressing, however, not least because of the return of a military officer to

the presidency, may be the connections between the military, national security narratives and ideal masculinity.

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Notes

1. The respondent commented that Mubarak followed this model early in his presidency, although to a lesser extent than Sadat. Morsi was not mentioned at all, although he too talked about Egypt as his “family and clan.” Mubarak, furthermore, also spoke to the protestors during the 2011 revolution as his “children.” Hafez (2012, p. 39) writes that “In his role as president, Mubarak adopted the father idiom, which was legitimated through the construction of mythical power that reined in chaos to ensure the safety and stability of the masses.”

2. One correlation between aggression and male sexuality may be found in the language. One of the media professionals talked about how the word *yinīk* (بنيك), a vulgar but common word for having sex, relates to penetration. As such, a woman (in most cases) cannot have sex with a man, because it is the man having sex with the woman. This, the respondent means, perpetuates the perceived naturalness of male sexual dominance or even aggression.

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