

**Making a Difference:
Youth, Business, and Re-Envisioning Media Practice in Egypt**

By

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Preface

Arabic words have been transliterated to convey my interlocutors' use of informal, everyday speech, including the Egyptian hard G sound, which is pronounced as a soft J in Modern Standard Arabic. Long vowels and emphatic letters are marked with diacritics, as per guidelines provided by the International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES). Diacritics are also used to denote 'ayn and hamza ('). Arabic terms and sentences are set in italics. Titles for media products are written in *Arabizi*, an alphabet using Latin script and Western Arabic numerals to communicate in Arabic over the Internet—I have kept these titles true to form.

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Abstract

Many young Egyptians critique official media outlets and private satellite television for being government mouthpieces. Unlike previous generations, Egyptian youth do not trust the information provided by such channels and actively shun their programming. While several young people seek out new forms of media for information and entertainment, others have opted to produce alternative content themselves, while using the Internet to disseminate their work. Situated at Axeer, an alternative media production company in Cairo, this project aims to understand who young media makers are, what they are making, and how they are generating a virtual public. Central to this work is a deliberate shift in expressive content after Egypt's 2013 military coup.

This ethnographic study follows young media makers as they reimagine their media practice, shifting their vision from creating revolutionary inspired works to establishing a sustainable business model that highlights social causes—an effort to maintain their commitment to alterity and social change. In tracing this shift, I ask: What kind of alterity is possible, and responsible, in the face of an oppressive regime? What strategies have young media makers employed to stay true to their mission of social change? Linking the practice of media production to larger anthropological questions about social process and social relations, this study highlights the complex relationship between expressive culture and the exercise of power.

Introduction

I. Axeer in Transition

I met with Khalid¹, Axeer's CEO, on January 25th 2016, the fifth anniversary of the Egyptian Uprising. The commute, from where I was living in Maadi to Axeer (in Nasr City), was an unusually speedy fifteen minutes. Cairo's notorious traffic was nonexistent on this national holiday, the streets were empty except for a few security personal policing public areas. When I arrived at Axeer's office fifteen minutes early, Khalid welcomed me in laughing, "I never started a meeting early, come in."

I felt overdressed in my black pants, off-white sweater, printed headscarf neatly tucked into my turtle neck, and heeled boots, seeing Khalid comfortable in his torn jeans, floral shirt that peaked through his black leather jacket, and red sneakers. He walked me to the conference room and pulled a chair across from me, "why haven't we met before?" He assumed I was from Egypt and left to the United States for college, like many of his friends. In my reply, I had addressed him in the formal Arabic honorific of *hadretak*, which gave him a good laugh. "Now it makes sense, no one our age uses that word unless they grew up elsewhere. Maybe we use it to address our grandfathers," he chuckled. I explained my project and asked for permission to make Axeer the focus of my dissertation research. In our conversation, he spoke confidently about his passion for media and how it was influenced by the many films and television shows he watched

¹ All names in the dissertation are pseudonyms.

growing up: “my father used movies to teach us certain life lessons and values. Having grown up in the States, he introduced me to Seinfeld and French Prince of Bel-Air, always asking questions about what we watched.” With this critical perspective on media, Khalid learned to pay close attention to the impact media has in society. He proceeded with the following example: “take the new same-sex marriage laws, even though it was legal in many places, in America, I believe shows like *Modern Family*, and movies like *Milk*, slowly made it acceptable, until it became so!”

With added excitement, Khalid shared with me his recent travels to entrepreneurship workshops in Italy, and a volunteer trip at a Refugee Camp in Lebanon:

Axeer is currently in transition. Every time I travel, I learn something new and try to bring it back to the company. I have been asking myself the same question over and over again—who are we, what do we do, why do we do it, and how are we different? I keep coming back to the same thing: use media to make an impact, but how do I measure that? Yes, we talked about Sexual Harassment, Drugs, Child Labor, Women Empowerment and all our productions have gone viral. We are good at mixing art, music, and a cause that attracts many viewers. But still, what is the impact behind this? I am still working on finding an answer to that question. But I do believe that we [at Axeer] want to make a difference and we use media to do so.

Khalid’s questions overlap nicely onto mine: What are they trying to change? How do they measure their success? In what ways does media and creative labor aid their quest of social change? And, in what ways has their work shifted as a result of Egypt’s political instability? As Khalid noted, during the first half of my fieldwork in 2016, Axeer was undergoing a transition, a “liminal” stage that included a rebranding project, a new business model, and the establishment of a clientele base. They were “betwixt and between” (Turner 1969: 95) trying to make sense of their past work and where Axeer would go next. Khalid decided that the company should partner with organizations (local and regional) that work on societal issues; this way they would fulfill their goal in making media that could impact society, “we are still working on this,” he said.



Figure 1: Only those who make a change, STAND OUT

II. Media War: Street Art and Alternative Media

I was introduced to Axeer by a street artist I befriended when I started visiting Egypt in the summers of my doctoral program (2013 and 2014). Ahmed was working in the marketing department of Juhayna, a corporate company that sells beverages. When the Egyptian Uprising began on January 25, 2011, Ahmed was on the front lines. He participated in every protest, camped out in Tahrir Square, and taught himself how to stencil. In the three years of the uprising, he would work at Juhayna by day and wander the streets of Cairo, with a backpack and painting

gear by night, stenciling images on walls. Ahmed graduated with a business and marketing degree from The University of Cairo; with his marketing skills he practiced “guerrilla marketing” techniques to deliver a clear and concise message of social justice. With a rising street art scene in Cairo, Ahmed became part of an active network of street artists who taught each other different ways to deliver their messages. When they were not painting, they were talking about projects in a downtown coffee shop.

My research began by interviewing, and hanging out, with Egyptian street artists like Ahmed. One of their common refrain was “these walls are our newspapers.” In response to this claim, I proposed a research project that would examine street art as a form of media, alternative in its makeup and political in its content. I was interested in the “Arab street” (Bayat 2009) as a field site that was shaped by collective sensibilities, shared feelings, and the public judgment of ordinary people in their day-to-day practices. In my early observations, the street offered moments of collision and cohesion as landscapes and bodies interwove; the street was believed to be public domain, accessible, affordable, and unifying, but was monitored by the state, and often altered by its citizens. I started thinking about alternative forms of media that were coming to fruition in post-revolutionary Cairo. In an interview with Ahmed, he talked me through some of his work, each piece corresponding to an incident in Egypt's ever-changing political arena. Two pieces stood out. The first was an outline of Egypt's state television building engulfed in an explosion, with the word “Liars” above the building and silhouettes of people surrounding it.



Figure 2: *Liars*, photograph courtesy of Ahmed

The other subverted the logo of a television channel called OnTv. Ahmed appropriated their logo and instead of the word ON he wrote OFF in the bottom right corner, claiming that everyone should turn off their televisions and go see what was happening for themselves.²



Figure 3: *Turn off your TV*, photograph courtesy of Ahmed

² This was created in response to the protests on June 30, 2013, which led to the July 3 military coup and Rabaa massacre shortly thereafter. Ahmed was commenting on how Egyptian media was lying to its citizens.

As Ahmed explained,

Our revolution is now a media war. It no longer matters who is in power, or who the president is, because now we know that the military is behind everything. The system is backed and sustained by the military. Our life is one that continuously fights against oppression. Street art was one way of fighting this oppression on the walls. Using art, something people think is nonthreatening, brings awareness to social justice issues. And this is a fight against those who trust, watch, and believe in state media.

Ahmed's claim that "the military is behind everything" was a key turning point in his (and Axer's) story. Young people, like Ahmed, really believed that a political change had happened after Hosni Mubarak was ousted. But, what mattered most was how he also realized that the rules of the game had not changed, and they needed to figure out how to regain their positioning in a very old game with the army. This was also a key moment when many young people realized how critical the role of media is in maintaining the army matrix.³

Furthermore, Ahmed's conceptualization of art as a weapon of war, which is located in the media thereby effecting public perception, spoke volumes to the relationship between art and the state. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o in Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams makes this very topic his focus. In this short book, he details why a writer, or an artist, is seen as a threat to the autocrat despite disparity in their powers: "one has only a feather in his hand; the other, the entire killing machine behind him" (9). Thiong'o isolates four reasons why "the creative state of art is always at war, actually or potentially, with the crafty art of the state" (10). The first is the Godlike aspect of art, attributed to the person who creates or "moulds," which conflicts with the state since it too "sees itself as a god;" the second is art's Socratic aspect, which means it generates "more questions than answers" and always in the form of criticism, a stance that is "irritating to the

³ It is worth noting DMC, a television channel owned by the Ministry of Interior, was established one year later.

state that thinks it knows everything;” third is the Andersenian aspect of art, which is expressed in the form of “voice.”⁴ Both the state and arts are in a constant battle over who voices the community and what could be said. In this way, the battle takes place over the image of society and what it is permissible to say or to show (Ranciere 2004). In the context of Egypt, tension has always existed between the state and the arts. President Gamal Abdel Nasser founded the Egyptian Ministry of Culture in 1958, based on the French model but also shaped by the experiments of various Eastern Bloc countries with centralized production and dissemination of culture — literature, music, and other fine arts, “often with an explicit message” (Pahwa & Winegar 2012). Egyptian artists have often felt stifled catering to the art market as well as to the ministry’s cultural policy (Winegar 2006). However, the 2011 uprising dismantled the idea of needing to work within parameters set by the state. Ammar Abo Bark, a popular street artist, would regularly tell art students “not to register with the Ministry upon graduation, so nobody tells you what you should and should not do.”

The publicity associated with street artists, particularly after the Rabaa massacre, all but insured that the street art scene in Cairo would unwind in 2014, when Abdel Fattah al-Sisi came to power. A law to ban street art, alongside an anti-protest law, were enacted early in his presidency. The network of artists who once gathered together to paint murals in honor of martyrs, voice concern for the country's future, empower women, and critique the military, quickly dissipated.

⁴ Defined as, the broadest possible "human gesture expressing a meaning, a wish, a judgement, a mood, a situation of being."



Figure 4: Mural of Martyrs by Ammar Abo Bakr



Figure 5: *A Thousand Times NO!* Mural by Bahia Shehab



Figure 6: Mural about Sexual Harassment by Mirah Shihadeh and Zeftawy



Figure 7: Mural by Ganzeer

On May 9, 2014, one internationally known street artist, Ganzeer, was denounced by a television broadcaster, Osama Kamal, on the program *al-Ra'īs ū al-Nas* (The President and the People). He singled out Ganzeer by his real name — Mohamed Fahmy — and included his photograph, making him easily identifiable. Kamal called Ganzeer a “recruit of the Muslim Brotherhood,”⁵ and demanded that the government take action against him. This type of accusation, which Ganzeer and several curators denied, was widely deployed against journalists and activists in Egypt since the military coup, leading to sweeping arrests resulting in long prison terms. Two days after the allegations were made against him, Ganzeer left Egypt for an extended stay in the United States.

Ahmed, however, has not yet given up. According to Ahmed, street art was a medium that worked for a certain time period. He came to street art “with the intention of activism, to report what is happening, to practice our freedom of expression, to educate and make demands.” This “activist imaginary,” George Marcus argues, entails turning to media to pursue social change through representation as well as “raising fresh issues about citizenship and the shape of public spheres within the frame and terms of traditional discourse on polity and civil society” (1996: 6). Other media scholars, such as Faye Ginsburg, also see activism in the work of their media interlocutors. Ginsburg places indigenous media production on a continuum that includes aboriginal activists who struggle for land and religious rights. When Ahmed claimed that street art was part of a larger war against the state and was rooted in an “activist imaginary,” he was placing street art firmly in the realm of alternative-oppositional media.

⁵ Mohamad Morsi was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood and also Egypt’s civilian president from 2012-2013. After the military coup, the Muslim Brotherhood was labeled a terrorist organization and anyone who tried to defy the military’s social order was accused of being *ikhwan* (a member of the MB).

Media war, as articulated by Ahmed and others, became the impetus for my project. However, with the street art scene gone, both Ahmed and I had to change our plans—Ahmed searched for other ways to continue this media war, and I continued to follow other potential research topics. In the summer of 2014, Ahmed told me about a media production company that he wanted to work with—Axeer. He had known about this company since they asked Ahmed to stencil *meen al ma2soud* (who is intended; the song's title) in one of their music videos. During this summer, he quit his corporate job to work with Axeer, even though Axeer was unsure if the company would survive the political and economic instability, “we were not providing a necessary service like food; we hardly worked that year,” I was later told.

Ahmed's first project with Axeer, as business developer, was a music video called *I7na Geel wa Into Geel* (We are a Generation and You are a Generation), a song that addresses Egypt's generational strife—the song blames the older generation for supporting a military dictatorship, further oppressing the younger generation. I first saw this video while I was visiting my husband's family in Mansoura, a city northeast of Cairo. I heard the song played multiple times among his friends and family. It always instigated arguments, especially between cousins and their parents. With Ahmed's belief in Axeer as a new approach to a media war, I changed my project to focus on the alternative media landscape in Cairo. I proposed an ethnographic exploration of Axeer to examine how a media production company is, as they claim to be, “impacting Egyptian society.” I wanted to investigate what alternative media and expressive cultural practices were emerging in Cairo, and how young media makers were reconfiguring social space and political practice.

III. A Shifting Mediascape

Axeer was officially founded two days before the Egyptian uprising with the release of their first song *Katib L Bokra Gawab* on January 23, 2011; their goal was to voice Egyptian youths' desire for a better life. Due to a turbulent political landscape caused by the 2013 military coup,⁶ they have shifted their work goals. In examining Axeer's transition, I focus on their media practice, and how they combine aesthetics with ambitious business objectives to grow their company. Furthermore, I trace their shifting media work to present a narrative that highlights the relationship between expressive culture and the exercise of power. Several anthropologists work on the intersection between art and society and have highlighted how expressive forms like music, visual arts, and performance can mediate social relations (White 2008), intervene in canonical historical narratives (Fabian 1996), create national cultures (Askew 2002), and promote expressions of cultural authenticity (Shannon 2006). Anthropologists have also approached expressive culture as a site that creates and represents social identities (Marc Schade-Poulsen 1999). As I will demonstrate, Axeer's earlier productions show how expressive content was created as way for people, with limited access to mainstream institutions or prefer to avoid them entirely, to voice their political and social opinions.

Axeer was not the only media start-up that launched during this time. Other companies' digital media projects had similar goals, and contributed to the revolutionary wave with timely, poignant, and politically charged digital content. Qabila launched a few months into the uprising

⁶ For a detailed timeline of events starting from the 2011 Egyptian Uprising to the 2013 military coup, please consult the appendix. In this dissertation, I have zoomed past the uprising and only discuss these events as they pertain to Axeer's media productions.

with an infographic series that acted as an educational manual about governance.⁷ DiSalata came into the digital media scene with an ambitious undertaking, releasing several different shows at once: cooking, film critique, fashion, social commentary, and a street show—they wanted to monopolize the inter-web to gauge which show would be more successful.⁸ El Gomhorya T.V (ELGTV)⁹ also released varying media content: a sports show, a social commentary show, and seven minute movies. Their seven minute movies included a news recap of events, often ridiculing political figures or highlighting problematic speeches. Lastly, The Planet made a few casual videos which featured their employees addressing ongoing political events over *shisha*.¹⁰ But, what made The Planet popular was their two online shows that reviewed films,¹¹ and critiqued Egyptian talk shows and melodramas.¹²

From the start of the Egyptian Uprising (2011) to the military coup (2013), each company created video content that expressed the point of view of their generation, often politically charged but also humorous, witty, critical and alternative to what mainstream music, shows, and films were showcasing—many of which were claimed to be “un-relatable entertainment.” After the military coup in 2013, all of these companies rebranded and a few commercialized. My

⁷ See DUMFUS here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jdlYoQFbR3Q>

⁸ DiSalata's YouTube page can be accessed here: <https://www.youtube.com/user/DiSalata>

⁹ Check out ELGTV's content here: <https://www.youtube.com/user/elgtvStudio>; ELGTV is an offshoot of two alternative magazines that are no longer in production (G-Mag and E7na). When its founder no longer could market the magazine he turned to online content.

¹⁰ *Dardasha Ma3 Shisha* (Conversing Over Hookah):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=93CHy26h01A&list=PL2F32204FD8E16651>

¹¹ Vignette reviews films shown in Egyptian Cinemas:
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCIO7rw5nE9nSEL89HmMUzLg>

¹² Salizaon critiques Egyptian television serials:
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCOvC6ALGW_20YfyB3YXC17A

interlocutors at these companies gave various answers when I asked about their rebranding and shift in their work, particularly as it related to politics (*siyasa*): “people are fed-up with politics” (*al nas zih't min al siyasa*), implying that they and their audience no longer have the energy to work on, or listen to, Egyptian politics; “it was a business strategy, we are a company after-all” (*iḥna fi al awal wa al akher shirka*), “we want to expand regionally and politics can isolate you” (*'ayzeen nekbar fi al region wa el siyasa mesh hatsa'd*), and finally, “we want to reach a large audience base, which means staying neutral” (*'ayzeen newasal le nas keteera, mayenfa'sh netkalim fi al siyasa*).

In moving beyond politics, my interlocutors situated themselves in entrepreneurial markets, conferences, networks, and sought investors to grow their businesses. However, there is a contextual storyline that is necessary to understand this shift in media making, one that briefly delves into the relationship between media and censorship in Egypt. The easiest way to gauge censorship in Egypt is to look at what political cartoonists are getting away with, and if they are able to publish cartoons of the president. In a article in *Guernica* magazine, Jonathan Guyer notes, a scholar of Egyptian cartoons, “there were very few cartoons of Mubarak in the press, even during the last years as opposition against him swelled, but under Morsi newspaper front pages had cartoons of him – really derogatory, really emphasizing his misguided approach” (2014). That brief freedom ended, ironically, when Morsi was ousted – following days of protests in July 2013 – by al-Sisi, who turned out to be far more oppressive than Morsi and Mubarak. al-Sisi’s appearance in newspaper cartoons is as rare as it was for Mubarak.

Under the Mubarak regime policies towards media organizations were an extension of his policies towards his opposition: they were tolerated but kept under strict scrutiny, which is an

example of what political scientist, Daniel Brumberg calls “liberalized autocracy.” According to Brumberg, Mubarak allowed for a “level of pluralism” to accommodate the various fractions of Egyptian society. This attitude was specifically geared towards different political forces, the Muslim Brotherhood being one. In order to allow for such flexibility and pluralism, Mubarak instilled “a state-tolerated fragmentation of the state apparatus:” all institutions operated as fragmented entities, and were often put up against one another. In this way, “the resulting jostle of interests lead to an equilibrium that can endure so long as no one group gains enough power to threaten the vital interests of state actors or rival regime-protected groups” (Brumberg 2013).

Censorship in Egypt is most thorny when it comes to journalism. Even within Mubarak’s “liberalized autocracy,” journalism was restrictive and oftentimes a dangerous profession. Journalists often served long prison terms and were heavily fined for vague publication crimes (Hussein 2008; Kassem 2002). A common offense that journalists were imprisoned for was “insulting the president” (El Issawi 2013, 21). But in spite of this, critical media outlets popped up and persisted, the most popular being *Masry el Youm* (2004), a privately owned newspaper that was critical of the government, and funded by business tycoons. In the land of television, private satellite channels were given license to operate in Egypt in 2000, after pressure from businessmen who were key accomplices in the neoliberal reforms of this era. Their licensing allowed access in the so-called Media “free zone,” but it specifically did not allow for news reporting (Sakr 2007; 2012). A few channels introduced talk shows as a way to discuss politics and current affairs as a maneuver around the ban on news (Sakr 2012). To evade some of Mubarak’s hawkish media oversight, activists and journalists turned to the Internet. A notorious example was Wael Abbas, an Egyptian blogger who uploaded video footage of police brutality

and torture on his website *MisrDigital*. One notorious video showed a bus driver being sodomized by two officers in a Cairo police station in 2006. Because of this footage, those officers were sentenced to three years in prison, which was unheard of in Mubarak's time (Faris 2010b). A lot of political organization and protests were detailed online in the years leading up to the Egyptian uprising (Radsch 2008; 2010). Citizen journalism became extremely popular during the early stages of the 2011 revolution, everyone was documenting what was happening to recalibrate the power dynamics between an authoritarian regime and its citizens (Radsch 2016).

Censorship was a concern during Morsi's presidency, but it only ever stayed a concern; after covering controversies during the Morsi era, Skovgaard-Petersen (2017) concluded that "in spite of dire warnings, the Brotherhood was far from being in control of the cultural scene—whether the productions or the censorship. When finally a new minister initiated a strategy of brotherhoodization, he only galvanized the opposition of the cultural sector" (34). Many people I met believed that in addition to Morsi's "stupidity," he was set up to fail. As one interlocutor pointed out, "by simply looking at what the media was saying, it was obvious that they were working against Morsi all along." The weeks leading up to the coup, and several months after, all television channels were saying the same disparaging things about Morsi and the MB. Several institutions, including the police, refused to work on behalf of Morsi's government. The Brotherhood had always had a fraught relationship with the military, but during the post-Tahrir period, as the group rose to power through a series of popular elections, there were signs that an arrangement with the army was being worked out. As long as the MB did not interfere too much in military matters, then the military would allow them to get on with their civilian government. However, not long after taking office, Morsi forced the retirement of the Minister of Defense,

along with the commanders of the Navy, the Air Defense, and the Air Force. This move was praised by young Egyptian revolutionaries, who saw it as a sign that Morsi was determined to reduce the army's influence. A few months later, however, he issued a Presidential decree that granted him temporary powers beyond the reach of any court, causing Morsi's opposition to increase and tensions with the army to rise.

Censorship took a turn for the worse when Abdel Fattah al-Sisi took power. In an article in the *New Yorker*, journalist Peter Hessler discusses a series of Sisileaks, a string of secretly recorded videos and audiotapes released in 2013, that indicated how al-Sisi manipulated the media:

In a leaked video from this period, Sisi listens while a uniformed officer advises him on relations with the press. "In my opinion, I think that the entire media in Egypt is controlled by twenty or twenty-five people," the officer says. "These people, sir, can be contacted or engaged with in a manner that is not announced."

Meanwhile, regime critics tempered their work for safety reasons or went off air entirely: Yosri Fouda, who presented a popular talk show on OnTV, went off the air from July 9 to November 25, 2013. He had issued a statement at the end of July on his Facebook page stating, "I'd like to note my reservations and extreme sadness over the local and international detrimental media coverage in Egypt, including my own channel, with very few exceptions."¹³ Reem Maged, who presented another popular talk show on the same channel, has been off the air since June 30, 2013. In late August, she tweeted that she was not suspended or forced off the air, but that "sometimes to be silent is the most honest news, so I chose silence until further notice."¹⁴ An even more popular figure, Bassem Youssef— a political satirist described in America as "Egypt's

¹³ Yosri Fouda, Facebook post, July 28, 2013, www.facebook.com/yosri.fouda1/posts/10151759465765733.

¹⁴ Cited in https://carnegieendowment.org/files/egypt_media_revolution.pdf

Jon Stewart” — fled Egypt pending charges against him. In his book *Revolution for Dummies* (2017), Youssef goes into detail about his experience “poking fun at dictators” from Mubarak to al-Sisi. But his show came to a halt when al-Sisi came to power, even after Youssef altered his sarcastic strategy toward al-Sisi and the military: “we were careful not to even get him onscreen and make fun of what he was saying while he was in his military uniform” (250). He was given a chance to work *with* the government but refused to be co-opted by “media directors,” liaisons assigned to every television anchor to inform of the anchors of what should, and should not, be said on the show. In a matter of days, Youssef went from being the most liked, and watched, television anchor in Egypt to the most hated for not cooperating with the government (267).

According to Brumberg, under al-Sisi’s presidency, Egypt has entered full autocratic mode by centralizing authority in order to consolidate full control. Today the regime has also become very exclusionary, particularly towards the Muslim Brotherhood. Brumberg also notes that centralizing state apparatus narrows the regime’s coalition and will create tensions in its ability to rule over Egyptian society. However, even with the potential rise of said tension, it is highly unlikely that the army will ever lose its power. Since the military coup, news articles have painted a gloom and doom picture of Egypt, describing its society as “crushed.”¹⁵ Once labelled by Amnesty International as “Generation Protest,” the youths who took to the streets in Egypt to bring down a dictator in 2011 have acquired a grim new nickname: “Generation Jail.”¹⁶ Human rights groups claim that as many as 60,000 political prisoners now languish in Egypt’s jails (at the end of Mubarak’s rule, the figure was between 5,000 and 10,000). It is sometimes difficult to

¹⁵ <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/07/egypt-worse-indicator-2013-coup-170702072016494.html>

¹⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/14/magazine/how-egypts-activists-became-generation-jail.html>

see past how “everything is *khara*” (shit), a common statement said by some of my interlocutors. I tried to be conscious of this negativity, battling with my father’s words in the back of my head: “it is getting bad, you think it does not get worse but then it does. I don’t know how much longer it [Egypt] can take before it collapses.” Yet, in real life, and in ethnographic life, nothing is ever only good or only bad; you have moments of ups and downs. As Aya, an Egyptian anthropologist and friend told me, “the news, and academics, like to focus on the *khara*, but you know, the human body does not only shit, it does other stuff too.”

To revisit our companies, it makes sense why my interlocutors would give up on “politics,” saying “it is no longer worth it.” Simply put, it is no longer safe to be critical of the government, or of al-Sisi directly. Yet, there are a few who still carry the “revolutionary spirit” and willingness to be blunt. Young cartoonist, Andeel, left his job at *al-Masry al-Youm*, Egypt’s most prestigious private newspaper, because he would not comply with their censorship rules. Andeel now makes cartoons for an online newspaper *Mada Masr*. Andeel is also keeping up with *Tok-Tok*,¹⁷ a subversive comic that he founded, and is “one of the few print products left in Egypt that will deal with political and social taboos,” claims scholar of political cartoons Johnathan Guyer. In doing so, however, Andeel is catering to a small readership. By contrast, Anwar – Andeel’s friend and former colleague – understands that his cartoons are not as direct as they could be. But to Anwar, the the compromise is worth it so he can reach more people.¹⁸

As I demonstrate in this dissertation, my interlocutors want to be responsible, do good, and support values, beliefs, and behaviors that will create something better. When they *opt out of*

¹⁷ To read more about Tok-Tok see: <http://oumcartoon.tumblr.com/post/97969326886/portfolio-an-encounter-with-andeel-san>

¹⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/12/sisi-regime-makes-satire-harder-egypt-cartoonists>

a certain project, especially one that is politically leaning, then they are *opting for* something else, whatever that may be. Qabila is now one of the leading infographic and animation companies in Egypt with accounts in several Gulf countries.¹⁹ DiSalata rebranded to Tayarah, and market themselves as making branded, commercial, content.²⁰ ELGTV became The Glocal, an online media platform that writes, makes, and produces humorous digital content.²¹ The Planet has not renamed itself and continues to push for clients as a digital media agency. They have been branching out to Dubai and launched a video analytics platform called “mintrics.” Meanwhile, their online show that critiqued mainstream media has been renamed *Shakeb Rakeb*²² and is now featured, by the same host, on *Al Hayat* television station every Friday night.

Out of the five media companies I surveyed while in Cairo, I chose to carry out an ethnographic study of Axeer because of the company’s goal to drive social change. Anthropological work on cultural production and consumption in Arab-majority countries follow the formations of mass media produced through governmental and commercial institutions intent on constituting modern citizens and consumers (see Abu-Lughod 2004). In many postcolonial contexts (see Mankekar 1999 for India), professional cultural producers come to define idealized definitions of nationhood, as well as gendered subjects, for mass audiences. In many cases, these cultural producers occupy a different social position than consumers, and work within elite state

¹⁹ See a list of Qabila Productions here <http://www.bare-ent.com/Production/>; Suhail is a television show made for Kuwait TV

²⁰ Tayarah’s website: <http://tayah.com/>

²¹ The Glocal’s website: <http://www.theglocal.com/>

²² https://www.facebook.com/ShakebRakebTV/?eid=ARDjOWC-EQe3eO56KyEelBPPpErZX5f6sHUX5W6yEI93byJPA5eQzaghcOnHS3gnJLIwDErTrxQAVgPK&timeline_context_item_type=intro_card_work&timeline_context_item_source=762700466&fref=tag

and corporate institutions. Research on cultural production and consumption in Arab-majority countries has been mainly concerned with how the nation is constructed, experienced, and represented in everyday life. Specifically, anthropologists of the Arab world have looked at the role state institutions play in cultural policy and art-making (Winegar 2006), while examining how the state manufactures and regulates national imaginaries and modern subjects (Armbrust 1996, Salamandra 2005).

We find the opposite at Axeer; at the core of their media practice is a self-conscious effort to use media to critique the social terrain they inhabit and the social verities they've inherited. In doing so, this study builds upon a growing body of scholarship that highlights the connections between the mobilization of young people and their use of media to create and represent social identities and to introduce social and political perspectives, while constituting a space for these representations (e.g, Sreberny-Mohammadi & Mohammadi 1994). My interlocutors at Axeer are concerned with producing meaningful content that highlights social causes, and place considerable effort on creative and artistic choices, as well as the social processes in which they are engaged to create interventions into public debates. Yes, they may have suppressed their politics, but they've also tried to maintain their commitment to alterity, to change, and to opting for something else. I wanted to see how they did this, and why they keep trying, even when the possibility of outright opposition was no longer open to them. What kind of alterity is possible, and responsible, in the face of an oppressive regime?

IV. Towards a Mediated Utopia

It did not take long for me to realize that a media war was no longer an apt description of what my interlocutors were doing. As they continued to shift their work and goals, my understanding of what they were trying to do shifted alongside them. At one point in their trajectory, yes, they were part of a bigger, more intentional, and specific war in the online media sphere. Defining the type of media Axeer does was difficult because they intentionally avoided categorization to give themselves flexibility to move in and out of media projects when necessary (Villarreal 2017). I had defined Axeer as an alternative media production company, but as Zacky, Axeer's go-to editor, told me:

A long time ago there was a dream called alternative media (*zaman kan fi helm ismo al e'lambadil*), but that doesn't exist anymore. It also would have never reached a large enough audience, which is what we all want now. There is only one media now and I think what is important is to add value into that media space. Take Hamza Namira for example, he has an extremely large, and global, fanbase. His songs are meaningful, not the Amr Diab type. Axeer tries to do this: balance client work to get money (*akl 'ish*), which can then fund internal project ideas. It is not always a successful model; like the song *Deek*, it adds nothing, I don't know why they did it. But we are really trying to offer something different from mainstream media—there is no value there at all.

Building upon Zacky's understanding of *badil* (alternative), my interlocutors defined this term mainly through an oppositional framework. Theorizing alternative media within the realm of oppositional, counter-hegemonic, and by default more democratic, was common among media scholars as well (Downing 2000).²³ This definition gave way to literature that was broader in

²³ John D.H. Downing's seminal work *Radical Media: Rebellious Communication and Movements*, sets the stage for media that pushes against status quo that is primarily produced by marginalized communities, which has garnered various names: alternative, grass roots, social movement media, radical media, and citizen's media. Downing's account defines radical media as media that is "generally small-scale and... that expresses an alternative vision to hegemonic policies, priorities and perspectives" (v). However, he qualifies this definition by acknowledging that it is almost oxymoronic to simply speak of "alternative media" because "everything, at some point, is alternative to something else" (ix). The extra designation radical, he contends, helps "firm up the definition of alternative media" (ix), and grounds it in activist work that extends media..

scope, such as citizen media (Baker & Blaagaard 2016), activist media (Mollerup 2015), or indigenous media (Ginsburg 1991), all of which highlights groups interested in the political possibilities of alternative media practices as a means of intervention into the status quo. Axeer was once oppositional, but they are no longer so. After spending time at Axeer, I tweaked how I defined their alternative media. If there was a scale of alternative-oppositional media on one end, and mainstream media on the other, I would place Axeer in the middle. They are carving out their own media practice and work space, using Khalid's words "we are doing something different." They are small scale, personal, artistic, and creative. Meanwhile, mainstream implies a large-scale commercial media industry that values money more than art. As Ted Swedenburg notes in his study of Palestinian hip hop, for this music to be "politically effective" it cannot only be about the message (2013:18), there is also a goal of producing good art. Khalid was upfront about this in our conversations, "I am trying to combine art, social cause, and a business together;" Axeer is as much concerned with aesthetics as well as the message.

In reexamining the term "alternative," several media scholars have redefined the term and the methodological research it entails, I found these definitions most suitable to view Axeer's work. Clemencia Rodriguez pushes against the notion of the "democratic" conceptualization of alternative media and examines the complexities involved in producing media content that "spin transformative processes that alter people's senses of self, their subjective positioning, and therefore their access to power" (Rodriguez 2001; 18), as well as the lived experience of those working in alternative media. In her work in Latin America, Rodriguez points out the pivotal role that alternative media practices have in empowering citizens to develop a new understanding and image of themselves. Chris Atton, similarly, is concerned with privileging "the processes by

which people are empowered through their direct involvement in alternative media production,” claiming that alternative media has “transformatory potential” (2002; 29). Atton takes his examination a step further to argue that such potential could be harnessed for social change at a number of levels: “change that is looked for need not be structural on a national or supra-national level; it may be local, even individual” (2002; 18); this sentiment is shared by one of my interlocutors in the concluding chapter.

As Zacky mentioned, *adding value* is what differentiates Axeer from other companies and is discussed in depth in Chapter 4. Their media practice anchors patterns of change through values, which I describe as action-oriented and agentive with the aim of bettering society; values appeared in the work they were doing and the ideas they were promoting, but the perimeters of the term was often contested because it lacked a clear definition. Underlying Axeer’s value-based work is also drive for creativity, as Raymond Williams puts it, “no word carries a more consistently positive reference than creative and obviously we should be glad of this, when we think of the values it seeks to express and the activities it offers to describe” (1965/1961: 19). Such activities are rooted in ideas of change— making media with the hope that it would impact those watching it, while developing a work ethic that is demonstrated in the production process itself. I propose pushing Atton’s and Rodriguez’s notion of alternative even further to incorporate a utopic lens to analyze media productions potential. Ruth Levitas defined utopia as “the desire for being otherwise, individually and collectively, subjectively and objectively” (2013; 5). What I think is significant in Levitas’s approach is her understanding that utopia “is a method” rather than a “goal,” as it encompasses room for Axeer’s making. Used as an analytic term, rather than a descriptive definition, “allows it to be fragmentary, fleeting, and elusive” (5). Combining this

utopic method with our expanded definition of alternative media, we can account for Axeer's conceptualization of their media work, as well as locate contradictions, moments of disappointment, and glimpses of hope.

In Axeer's past and present work there exists a deep seated desire for a better way of living, doing, and being. A utopian vision of alternative media is one that inspires action—not necessarily just the revolutionary kind but also on a smaller more intimate scale. In having such a vision, one must account for when things do not go as planned. Aiming for a better society brings forth constant setbacks that often causes disappointment: disappointment that a video did not turn out the way it should have, disappointment that an idea might be too risky to produce, disappointment that not everyone is getting along. But with every moment of disappointment there is a reshuffling of thoughts and feelings that aid in locating hope and determination: “next time we will do things differently,” “it may be risky now but maybe not later,” “we need to host more social events so people get comfortable with one another.” In several chapters, I set up a media utopia example and detail when the desired goal is met, and when it is not. With Axeer's aim to highlight social causes and leave an impact on society, oftentimes their vision is not met with much enthusiasm by clients or audiences. Most importantly, Axeer's utopic alterity is most evident in their media practice (Coudry 2012), as they help create bonds of solidarity, contribute to processes of network formation, enable individuals to develop new capabilities, and develop a sense of their own agency and voice through their media productions.

V. Office Space, Youthful Place

Axeer is geographically located in Cairo, Egypt, in the old, relatively quiet neighborhood of *Madinet Nasr* (Nasr City). Axeer's media process and production is just one part of their equation; the other part is the people who work there and the space they have created. There are two parts to this dissertation that I have interwoven together, first, is the *doing*, as outlined in the previous section. As such, Axeer is an idea, a brand, and an aesthetic. Second, is the built environment where the doing happens—a place. I spent most of my time at Axeer, which is commonly referred to by my interlocutors as *al-maktab* (the office). It is a place that they have created for themselves for the purpose of enriching and empowering those who work there. Part of their agenda is to create, and maintain, a work environment that teaches, is comfortable, and financially reliable. Movement is at the epicenter of both parts of their equation; when they are not at Axeer, they are still with Axeer as they scout locations, meet with clients, and shoot projects—always returning back to home base. Ingold (2011) tells us to think of place as, A world of incessant movement and becoming, one that is never complete but continually under construction, woven from the countless lifelines of its manifold human and non-human constituents as they thread their ways through the tangle of relationships in which they are comprehensively enmeshed (141).

Al-maktab is the physical space where people go to everyday to work. In this place we see “intensities of activity and presence, as experienced by embodied human subjects” (Pink 2011). Upon reaching Axeer, my interlocutors' behaviors, attitudes, and actions provide meaning to this space; some nap on beanbags, enjoy breakfast and dinner together, celebrate birthdays, organize barbecues and Ramadan iftars, and work and play happens simultaneously.



Figure 8: *Working with a Motorcycle Helmet*

Youth comprise this space, their age ranging between 19-30. Axeer was founded by young people and has continued to be a place for young people. Scholars have marked “young” as an age category, and “youth” as a social category. I use the term “young” to index a relational concept situated in a dynamic context of power, knowledge, agency, and personhood (Durham 2004). By addressing young cultural producers as creative social actors in their own right, this project contributes to the literature on Arab youth to which anthropologists of Arab-majority countries are now turning their attention (Deeb & Harb 2012). Throughout this dissertation, I allude to notions of “youthfulness, which are a series of dispositions, ways of being, feeling, and carrying oneself” (Bayat, 2010: 118). However, as my interlocutors mature, get married, have children, and change their dispositions, the social category of “youth” will one day no longer be

applicable, therefore, in the story I tell here there is a bigger emphasis on generation. A generation is a “consciousness of belonging” (Mannheim [1927] 1952) that locates individuals in a cohort defined in relation to particular events (Edmunds & Turner 2002)—in this case, my interlocutors are part of a generational cohort defined in relation to the 2011 Egyptian Uprising.

The uprisings of 2011 challenged many hegemonic assumptions about ‘youth’ in North Africa. In the years before, international policy makers discussed young people mainly as a ‘youth bulge’ – a demographic and quantitative problem. It was common to read about young people in the region as the *Generation in Waiting* (Dhillon and Yousef 2009). The logic was that while young people were waiting for jobs and opportunities, they were in need of interventions to offset the potential lure of extremism and radicalization. They were also often portrayed as passive victims of an “eroding social pact between former generations and authoritarian regimes” (Schwarz & Oettler 2017). With Egypt’s return to authoritarian rule once again in 2014, the UN’s 2016 Arab Human Development Report (AHDR)²⁴ was the first devoted to youth (15-29 year-olds) since it began in 2002; this report placed a familiar focus on youth unemployment, radicalization, and lack of participation. The report insisted on programs for democracy promotion, volunteerism and entrepreneurship. Interestingly, Egypt’s entrepreneurship ecosystem has been thriving. The Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation at the American University in Cairo (AUC) School of Business was launched in 2010 with the objective of promoting entrepreneurship in Egypt and the Arab region. The Dean of AUC business school claimed that “entrepreneurship is a key driver for economic growth, social inclusion, youth engagement, job

²⁴ <http://www.arab-hdr.org/reports/2016/english/AHDR2016En.pdf>

creation and competitiveness,”²⁵ having the AUC School of Business adopt entrepreneurship as one of its main strategic priorities. AUC Downtown campus annually hosts the Rise Up Summit, one of the biggest entrepreneurship summits in the region. In the 2016-2017 report by the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) concerning Egypt’s entrepreneurial ecosystem, there was a noticeable increase in the percentage of youth who decided to start their own business, especially in the 18–24 year range.



Figure 9: Just Another Work Day

This report attributed the increase in youth entrepreneurship to “higher awareness and interest in having an independent career, and to the higher rate of necessity driven by high youth

²⁵ Global Entrepreneurship Monitor: Egypt National Report 2016-2017

unemployment” (9). Although youth studies scholars have cautioned against promoting entrepreneurship as the solution for unemployment, noting how “it is unfair and disingenuous to propagate the myth that anyone with an idea, grit and determination can be an entrepreneur” (Herrera 2017; 52), I suggest looking at entrepreneurship not as a policy strategy that creates jobs, but how at the local level a start-up, like Axeer, distinguishes possibilities to act out their agency (Cohen 2017).

Christopher M. Schroeder, a seasoned U.S. internet executive and venture investor, further argues that there exists an “entrepreneurial revolution,” based in the tech industry, one that promises to reinvent the Middle East as a center of innovation and economic opportunity.

Amir Hegazy, a successful entrepreneur and investor, echoes Schroeder’s claim in *Start Up Arabia*:

There are many untold positive stories that get brushed by the wayside. This book is meant to shed light on a few of those insightful and inspiring stories being created by remarkable tech entrepreneurs in the Middle East who refused to accept the status quo, managed to transcend cultural beliefs and limitations and are now rewriting the regions destiny.

Entrepreneurs in the region are spawning startups in education, crime prevention, traffic management, recycling, renewable energy, health, entertainment, education, and beyond, solving real challenges and finding new opportunities that can change society.²⁶ However, both Schroeder and Hegazy’s survey of start-ups in the region only highlight the ones that “made it,” those who have landed investors and are churning annual profits in the hundred of thousands, and millions. Alongside those who “made it” are companies like Axeer, a medium-tier creative

²⁶ Some that I have personally used while in Egypt include: education (Tahir Academy, Educate Me) traffic management (Bey2ollak mobile app launched in October 2010 in partnership with Vodaphone Egypt to share updates on real time traffic patterns) Easy Taxi, a cab service that registers with local white cabs; the average time it takes a taxi to arrive after ordering is five minutes, instead of waiting for longer hailing a cab only to be rejected due to your destination.

industry, that is working on ways to sustain themselves, often dealing with inconsistency and unpredictability. Khalid identifies Axeer as a “social entrepreneurship” project that weighs the “societal impact of media products;” he believes in a “socially responsible way to run our company.” As an entrepreneur himself, Khalid has called out “the assholes” in this ecosystem:

Since apparently entrepreneurs here [Egypt] don’t understand stuff except if you do an event about it, can we have an entrepreneurship event to tell founders that morals and ethics actually matter, and not just KPIs, investment rounds or exits? You can make it and grow your company without deceiving your employees, and not paying them, without losing your friends/ partners, without talking shit behind people's back, without taking your words back because they were just words and not legally binding, without insulting people who criticize you or have other people insult those who criticize you, and you can definitely make it while knowing for a fact that being legally right doesn't necessarily mean ethical. Long story short, you can make it without being a fucking goddamn asshole. There are enough assholes in this world, we don't need more young nouveau ones.

Taking a closer look at what entrepreneurship provides, or does not provide, to those pursuing it could further our understanding on how young people are acting, deciding, and making in this new venture.

VI. My ties to Cairo, Egypt

When I first met with Axeer’s team members, I was greeted warmly but with the same puzzled question, “why are you here? (*eh il gabek hena*). I had initially thought they were asking about my project and why I chose Axeer, so I would confidently give them my elevator pitch that I had practiced in Arabic. They usually chuckled and clarified that they meant *Egypt—why did you come to Egypt?* I had not prepared myself to answer that question because on most days I too wondered the same thing. This small group of creative individuals are socioeconomically diverse, cosmopolitan—with some more internationally-traveled than others—and all have conflicted opinions about their place, purpose, and affinities to Egypt. They are invested in

bettering their surroundings but struggle, on some days more than others, to push past the blatant injustices that they claim to see on the regular. They do not feel like they belong in Egypt and often questioned why I bothered to come. With several different people posing that question, one day I seized a moment to ask them why they disliked Egypt so much. Khalid got angry, and flipped the question to “what is there to like about it? You should be asking why those here are still here.” If it were up to Khalid, he would have left a long time ago. He considered, and continues to consider, applying for a study-abroad scholarship in business—like so many of his friends have done. Khalid’s list of why he dislikes Egypt is long: a decrease in value of the Egyptian currency,²⁷ destruction of agricultural lands for home construction causing pollution, dirt, and illness, lack of adequate medical care, poor educational system...but his biggest issue was:

There is no future in this country, there is no health or healthcare, there is no honesty or security, no respect, and that is not the worse of it. The worse thing this country does to you is that it kills any shred of humanity you may have (*insaniyata*). For example, of course you heard about what happened to Giulio Regeni²⁸...I have some Italian friends here in Egypt that I met with afterwards and was actually surprised that they were in a state of utter shock. They were afraid and could not process how “he was killed and tortured!” Well, yeah, *sabah el foll*. It isn’t that I wasn’t upset but... *’adie*. We are so used to it now. We are used to hearing about people dying everyday that we feel nothing about it.

In spite of Khalid’s apathetic attitude, he chooses to stay in Egypt because of his commitment and belief in Axeer. He believes that Axeer can make a difference, however small. Making video content that presents an alternative, presumingly more positive, outlook than the one my

²⁷ This was stated before the government had officially floated the Egyptian pound at the end of 2016. In doing so, value of the Egyptian pound was further reduced to the American dollar, causing higher cost inflation, and increasing import expenses. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/04/world/middleeast/egypt-currency-pound-float-imf.html>

²⁸ Giulio Regeni was an Italian PhD student researching labor unions in Egypt. His was found dead, with clear torture marks on his body, on the side of the road, in February 2016.

interlocutors are living is a way to own their life and make a difference in their world. In thinking about my extended trip to Cairo, I realized that part of me wanted to see for myself how people are living, and creating, in Egypt. I too had developed a critical opinion due to my father's constant complaints about the same things Khalid pointed out. I was also vexed to how there is deep resentment and suppression, and the desire to create an alternative to them. This complex blend of motives, tactics, and aspirations produces a simultaneous desire for insulation and engagement, a desire to change society but to also protect and separate oneself from its dangers, which are real. In a way, it is an intimate bond that I share with Axeer due to my family.

My identity has many parts to it, and each part flourished differently among my interlocutors. I am an Arab-American of Egyptian origin, Muslim (and visibly so), a woman, mother, photographer, and researcher. I blended into Axeer's community quickly but always distanced myself, intentionally, by introducing myself as a doctoral student visiting for research. I constantly needed to clarify that I was not *from* Egypt, particularly when I interrupted conversations for clarification about events and references to things I did not follow. One day, Ramy, a producer, brought snacks to the office and specifically gave me the Corona chocolate bar. I thanked him, and that was it. But, he was unsatisfied with my response, "just a thanks? Don't you know what this is? It was very popular when we were kids, I thought you'd appreciate it." And again, I had to explain that I did not grow up in Egypt. This explanation always invited the statement, "but you are Egyptian," to which I politely responded, "*no*." Some understood my response, or tried to, while others informed me: "if your parents are Egyptian, then you are Egyptian, end of story." Months later I shared this story with a new friend I made in Cairo, Angie, a Canadian-Egyptian who moved back to Egypt in the early 2000s and was working as an

arts manager. She laughed at me, “A Corona bar is like us growing up with ice-cream trucks, and its not just about the ice-cream but about hearing that tune as the truck nears your house. A true childhood staple.” With Angie’s analogy, I understood that Ramy’s small but thoughtful gesture was a form of acceptance and invitation into their world, a world that I have yet to fully understand.

One person went the extra mile to tell me “you are part of *ikhwan Amreeka* [the Muslim Brotherhood in America] leaving me utterly confused. He simply said “if you are Egyptian, in America, and wear the headscarf, then you are most likely *ikhwan*.” I replied honestly, that I did in fact have an “ikhwani” upbringing, which was centered on Islam as a worldview and a way of life, but assured him that my family was not part of the Muslim Brotherhood. Such an assumption, however, opened a small window on local categorizations of people based on dress, attitude, and overall habitus. Later, I found out that Axeer, as a company, had a reputation for “being ikhwan.” Their productions, in the beginning, were political (before political become a trend), about change, bettering oneself and society; they were dominated by men who prayed, and wanted to visit al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, Palestine. In a way, by just being there, without divulging too much about myself, I opened avenues for data-collection that would have been closed to others. It did not occur to me that Axeer had this reputation; no one spoke of it, but they all knew it and projected it on to me.

Egypt is my country of birth, but I never felt part of Egyptian society until I lived there for a year to do this research. Even now, I do not claim to fully understand my place in Egypt. My parents emigrated to the United States in the early 1990s. Egypt did not have a significant presence in the first ten years of my life; we spent my first five years in Chicago during Baba's

medical residency and then another five years in Cleveland, Ohio. Grandparents, aunts, and cousins would occasionally visit, but at six, eight, and ten years old my understanding of Egypt was simple: I could point to it on a map and say I have family who live there. We started traveling frequently to Egypt from ten years old onwards, often spending our summer vacations there. Egypt started to grow more prominent in our lives. Baba made it clear that he wanted us, his three daughters, to develop a connection with the country. We would stay at my parent's apartment in Maadi, a suburb of Cairo. This apartment is in a four-story building in which my aunt and her daughters lived with her family. It was the only place in Egypt that I knew, which gave me a very specific, family-oriented impression of the country. In the summer, we would gather to celebrate Baba's birthday; he is truly the glue that binds his six sisters and their children, who assured us that they did not gather in this way until Baba came to visit. Contrary to my father's aims, I never developed a strong affinity for his native country. My opinion of Egypt depended on how much fun we had during summer visits; as children, we loved the time spent at my maternal grandparents beach house; we loved the firecrackers we would throw out of our balcony; and we loved the slumber parties we were never allowed to have back home. But as I grew older, I no longer wanted to spend all summer there.

My teen life in Cleveland never felt entirely settled—we would eventually move back to Egypt, my parents had us believe. It was clear that Baba wanted to return, but I did not understand the predicament. We were told that they moved to America for “educational opportunities,” so why would we move back? Baba never gave up on this dream and started investing in property in Cairo. When I was in college, Baba was consumed with building a house that would be ready when he returned. He designed the house in its entirety and thought of every

detail—from the layout, to the type of brick, tiles, and window panes. This project became his whole world that he would get offended when my sisters and I did not ask about its progress—*I am doing this for you*, he would tell us. Baba designed the house to be a three-story family villa in the 6th of October district—a suburb at the outskirts of Cairo and far away from everything we knew. Instead of having the floors connected through a staircase, Baba turned each floor into separate apartments. There were three apartments total, one for each of his daughters, and a guest studio on the roof. He was disappointed that none of us were as invested as he was. We tried to explain that we were content with our Maadi apartment for our short summer stays, it was the only place in Cairo that was familiar, and moving to 6th of October would isolate us. He would not listen and we could not understand.

It was not until 2011 that I started to appreciate my father's sacrifice, unhappiness, and longing to return home. It was during the Egyptian uprising that Egypt, *Masr*, started to become a forceful entity in our lives. Only then did Baba share with us his reason for leaving Egypt—a reason so painful that it was locked away for decades, only to resurface when former president Hosni Mubarak was ousted. As Baba tells it,

In 1981 Anwar Sadat was assassinated by a member of an Islamist group, what ensued changed things for me...they arrested anyone with Islamist inclinations, members of Islamist groups, anyone participating in religious activity, and anyone who looked religious—this was determined by whether or not you had a beard. I was not specifically part of an organized group or participated in group activities, but in college I was one of many who had a beard, and I prayed in the mosque on campus. I also knew some members of the Jamat al-Islamia, a popular student-led organization that had branches at various colleges throughout the country.

One year after Sadat's assassination I was arrested for no reason.²⁹ I was 26 years old and was already a resident in a hospital. Luckily, I was in jail for only forty days but it seemed like years. I did not know when they were going to release me. I was kept in an extremely small, dark cell by myself. The imprisonment was difficult, but what was worse was the fact that there was no logical explanation to my arrest or any justification to how I was treated. I was physically and psychologically tortured. This

²⁹ When Baba was first imprisoned, he was sent to Citadel Prison before being moved elsewhere. Citadel Prison is now a museum.

changed my entire understanding of humanity and justice, which led me to lose all confidence and trust in the country....anything can happen to anyone; you can be arrested at anytime, thrown in jail anywhere while a case is fabricated against you... and you can't do anything about it.



Figure 10: Citadel Prison Museum

Baba left Egypt upon his release and moved to Saudi Arabia, where he worked as a physician for several years. Both my paternal grandparents visited him often, and after the passing of my grandfather my grandmother moved to Saudi Arabia. He later met my mother and got married in 1987, at the age of 31; I was born a year later and Mariam was born a year after me. In 1990 my grandmother passed away and Baba no longer felt the need to remain in the region so he uprooted us to Chicago; there, he started his medical career over. In 1995 Hajar was born, the only U.S national in the family at the time. After Baba finished his residency in Chicago, we moved to Cleveland for his job and made it our home, but it never became Baba's home:

I always planned on going back to Egypt, which is why I invested in property and built a house. Having a *bayt* had true psychological meaning. It was not just about owning a physical structure because you can have that anywhere. It was about security, having a place that will always remain your place of comfort and refuge, a place you go to feel safe. This country [U.S] will never fully accept us, and growing up that sense of security was taken away from me so I kept hold of this idea.

During the Egyptian monarchy in 1940's, my father had a fabric business and my mother was a seamstress. We were considered middle class, the top were those who owned land and foreign capital, and the lower class were poor peasants, farm laborers, and workers. After the 1952 military coup lead by Gamal Abdel Nasser, we went down in social structure as the class system changed from how productive

you were to how much the government liked you. Those in the middle class that became upper class were people who were backed by the military. We were not part of that society or social group and we were not members of the socialist party, and so we lost our business. We dropped from a decent middle class position to the poor working class; the kind who relies on their daily income. We had no profit, no reserve. I was born around this time period, in 1955, and grew up seeing the social change affecting my family. My father was old and unable to restart his business so my mother was the main breadwinner. We were all students; no one had an income, we all demanded resources. With the change in economy, living conditions became more expensive and we could not maintain our nice home. When I was 14, we moved to a smaller two-room apartment. All 9 of us.

I wanted to change this. I wanted to help my mother and support her. I wanted to have a house, a place that is comfortable. And I wanted to make sure I could provide my children with anything they wanted. The vision of having a beautifully simple and spacious home became my goal. A lot of motivation came from my own living experience. I became consumed by education, knowing that I needed to gain knowledge to change my position. I also knew that I had to leave Egypt for this to happen but I was unwilling to leave my parents. It was not until I was imprisoned and lost all respect and trust of Egypt that I decided to leave. I have been trying to find a home ever since.

Baba does not consider our house in Cleveland to be his *home*. *Bayt makan fi tareekh, ahl, wa amal*. he told me. A home is not just a house but also the place in which the house is located, *where there is history, family and hope, where I want to settle and live out the rest of my days*.

For Baba, what is lacking in our Cleveland house is the history and the sense of settlement, which he left behind in Egypt. But also, his *family* is missing. He has us, but sometimes we are not enough. Baba's *family* includes his six sisters and their children, and it also includes his childhood friends. Baba never really made friends in Cleveland and has grown even more anti-social over the years. In Egypt, however, he is somebody else—full of laughter, and joy.

Our Cleveland house is *my home* and not his. His *bayt* is waiting for him in Egypt. The dream of building a house was accomplished and the desire to return to Egypt survived for decades and began to bear fruit on January 25th, 2011. *After the revolution I made every preparation to move back*.



Figure 11: Bayt-ul-Amin



Figure 12: Living Room



Figure 13: Dining Room and Salon



Figure 14: Baba in the kitchen



Figure 15: Mama and Baba cooking



Figure 16: Baba grilling in the backyard



Figure 17: A family gathering

But Baba's enthusiasm was short-lived. The 2013 military coup proved how deeply rooted power and corruption are in Egypt, and how the country is run by the army. For the first time in over twenty years, Baba did not go to Egypt in the summer of 2013. What was worse, according to Baba was the polarization that occurred in Egyptian society:

In one house you have people constantly arguing to the point of disrespect. People aren't hearing one another, especially if you are anti-coup; it is like your perspective does not matter, like what happened to you does not matter. I was afraid of the inevitable confrontation with my family. My sisters are pro-military, along with many of my nieces and nephews. This deeply hurts me. Seeing our rights disappear, thuggery getting the upper hand, young people thrown in jail for no reason, people unable to defend themselves, thousands killed at hands of the military... this is oppression; there is no oppression after this oppression. Can you imagine living in a place that oppresses you, where you can see injustices happening and are unable to do anything about it, a place that insults and humiliates you on the regular. If this is what I think and I find my own sisters in support of all this, my heart towards them will change. I don't want that.

Baba now spends most of his time on his phone scrolling through numerous faces of young people's arrest. Every time I go home to visit my family in Cleveland, I have learned to expect long conversations about *Masr*; spearheaded by Baba. After the military coup and all the atrocities that has been taking place since, Baba changed his mind about returning to Egypt:

I thought I was going to return soon. But now, after this, knowing that the impossible happened, knowing that the reason I left still lives on, I don't think I can return. My turn has not come yet. I wanted to produce, fix, enrich. I could have benefited the healthcare system with my medical experience. We are not at this stage yet. We went back to resisting, demanding basic human rights. *Al manzooma*, [the system] itself is broken and beyond repair.

*

My trip to Egypt was different than any other previous trips; I was not traveling with my family, or husband, for a short vacation to a place that my parents call home. I was traveling as a researcher, and a new mother, to a place that I wanted to better understand for myself, despite the presumptions I have built due to my father's story. He is what I have come to associate Egypt with: someone who was arrested and tortured, someone who lost all hope for his country and left it even though he never wanted to, someone who still dreams of returning, but who over the

years became more comfortable with living in the U.S. despite believing that he, as a Muslim immigrant, would never be accepted in American society. In his mind, Egypt failed him, like it failed the thousands of innocent individuals currently in jail, the hundreds who have disappeared, and the many who were killed. Baba's Egypt is the Egypt I wrestle with. Throughout my fieldwork, Baba tried to 'help' me by involving himself in my day-to-day activities, often giving me advice:

Nama, you need to be careful. You should do things on your own terms and schedule everything in advance and make sure you are never alone.

Nama, don't go out with your purse or any jewelry, you will get robbed.

Nama, you should take Uber at night and not a regular cab.

Nama, you should accept the American University of Cairo job offer because it will give you more credibility, and you can use that as a way to talk to people instead of saying you are from America.

Other times, he would scold me:

Nama, you can not come home in the middle of the night like that. 2am! What were you doing out until 2 am! I called several times to make sure you got back safely, I was worried sick. What if you got kidnapped, or a policeman raped you. What am I supposed to do all the way from here. Please don't make me worry like that again, Cairo is not safe.

I would comfort him the best I could, saying Baba "Egypt is just an idea, people are great and governments are not," but that would start a one-sided conversation about how "the people are now the problem; they are selfish, have no principles, are corrupt, and need to change."

Thankfully, Mama had generously offered to accompany me, for a few months at a time, to help with Safa's care, who was three months old when I went to the field. But, I think Mama also came to keep an eye on me and help diffuse the tension that she anticipated would arise between

Baba and I. As always, Mama was right. My relationship with Baba was indeed strained the entire time I was in Egypt, leaving Mama on damage control duty when I would not listen.

Our biggest point of debate was where I would be living during my stay. Baba assumed I would live in the house he built in the suburb of 6th of October. He's worked hard to buy land and build a house in an area that is far removed from anything in Cairo—people who live there also work there, shop there, and rarely leave the district. The house is luxurious, with decor and furniture designed by him and utensils brought back with him from the U.S. Baba made this house extremely comfortable. Like Axeer aims to insulate its team from the chaos surrounding them, Baba has tried his entire life to insulate us from his traumatic experience, as evidenced by this house. He, too, created a space that was safe, and comfortable; a place that is far from downtown Cairo, far from Ministry of the Interior, far from protests, and arrests. But also far from where I needed to work. I told Baba that I would be staying in Maadi, because it is familiar, my grandparents live there, and it is a short commute to Axeer. I told Baba that I needed to be close to my nursing daughter and a 3.5 hour daily commute from 6th of October to Nasr City was not possible. He protested. But he still helped; he was visiting Cairo a few weeks before I started my research. When I arrived, he picked us up from the airport and drove us to our apartment in Maadi. He, and my grandmother, had brought us essential items and toys for my daughter.

When I needed a break from research and the bustling noise from the city that never sleeps, I would find calm in Baba's house. It was only then that I truly appreciated Baba's vision. The house was beautiful and spacious. The fresh air in 6th of October was incomparable to the heavy smog that is characteristic of Cairo. Safa and I would spend hours playing in the garden; it

was often difficult for me to spend quality time with Safa. I was still adjusting to being a new mother, to living in a different country, to being alone, and to carrying out fieldwork (which was an unclear and daunting task in its own right). I felt grateful that I had the opportunity to reconnect with her, away from my to-do lists and obligations. In the evenings we would enjoy tea in the garden as well; the smell of the jasmine flowers was intensely aromatic at night, the cool breeze would carry the fragrance, sending chills down our spine. I suppose that is one advantage of living in a remote area where houses were slowly sprouting; I imagine that in a few years time, numerous houses will crowd the neighborhood and soak up all the fragrant fresh air. Baba created a comfortable living environment in an area that had all the resources one might need. I never really appreciated this, but I also was not ready for it. I was only beginning to experience Cairo. Although this place was perfect for peace and quiet, it was so far away from everything I needed to be near and everything I wanted to understand.

This dissertation centers around young Egyptians who are part of a generational cohort that is marked by the 2011 Egyptian Uprisings. In a way, I am part of that cohort. Had my father never left Egypt, I wonder if my life journey would have been shaped similarly to my interlocutors; many graduated with professional degrees, as expected by their parents, but instead, chose to work in artistic fields and follow their passion. Similarly, I started off studying pre-medicine, as was expected of me by my parents, but ventured off to art-school to become a photographer and landed in a PhD program in anthropology. Nonetheless, my father did leave Egypt and my life journey circled back to a country I have only ever perceived through his lens, and have learned about through the lens of my interlocutors. A country that many claim they want to leave but do not, or cannot, instead channeling their energies into smaller places they

have created for themselves, places that are safe and stable, reassuring and comforting. Inside Axeer, things make sense. Outside, they often do not. What sets my interlocutors apart from older individuals, like Baba, is their unequivocal determination to create a more livable and intimate sociality despite the manifold obstacles of corruption, injustice, and chaos that surround them (Berlant 2006).

VII. Dissertation Overview

The chapters that follow tell the story of how young people at Axeer are trying to make a difference through media through the products they produce and the practice they have built. Unfortunately, this story begins with defeat. Chapter 1 examines Axeer's "revolutionary" archive; this archive provides a "structure of feeling" that dominated young people's affectivity during the years 2011-2013. Axeer had a reputation for being "the voice of the street," creating expressive content that represented young people and their struggles. In this chapter, I interweave Axeer's older productions with my interlocutors' thoughts and feelings on revolution, politics, and religion, while concluding how and why they abandoned these concepts.

To overcome their defeat, Axeer worked hard to rebrand, remake, and reestablish their company. When I started fieldwork in 2016, Axeer was undergoing a transition. During this transition, Khalid, was working towards the implementation of a business model that combines art, creativity, social causes, and profit. In Axeer's liminal stage, a lot of deliberations, decision makings, and shifts in their media perspective were brought to the surface as they tried to reconcile their past, while thinking about how to best move forward. In Chapter 2, I provide examples of my interlocutors deliberating over several "risky" projects; they chose to *opt out* of

these projects in order to gain something else. Contrary to the grim picture of quiescence, I argue that my interlocutors maintain a “non-political space” (Candea 2011) as a strategic buffer zone that would allow for other opportunities in the future. Disappointment is an obvious affective dimension in this chapter but it does not exist alone. In locating disappointment, I also located hope, agency, and re-articulation of action.

Just like it is important to discuss the reality of despair, it is important to address when there is hope. As I transition next to Axeer’s media practice, I present a photographic essay that shows Axeer’s space of work and play. In this space, Axeer is in a constant state of becoming. It is a contradictory space: they are a family but not a family, they are precarious but stable, they are hopeful but disappointed. Most importantly, however, is that at Axeer my interlocutors belong. Various disciplines give images and text different levels of priority: photo-journalism privileges text (there may only be one image for every inch of text), whereas art photography prioritizes the image (with text reduced to the role of captions). In anthropology, photographs usually supplement text, merely illustrating what the text already says. I incorporate images in this dissertation in various ways. Throughout the chapters there are illustrative images that accompany the chapters’ text, but Chapter 3 is a stand alone photographic essay where the images and text work together to tell a story of a work space. The majority of illustrative text are screen shots taken from video productions that I intersperse with analysis of the videos. Photographs of my interlocutors are all taken by me, unless stated otherwise. I intentionally do not caption the images, but have provided titles when necessary to assure my reader can follow along. Lastly, the camera holds a unique capacity to document the ethnographic encounter. As you will see, I am close to, in-front of, behind, next to, and participating with my interlocutors.

Distance was a strategy used only to improve composition, often by stepping back to provide a wider, contextual frame.

The images in Chapter 3 are a bridge to Chapter 4, where I focus on Axeer's newly defined mission: a social business that provides media production services to highlight "stories that matter." Values take center stage in this chapter as we see how values are defined, enacted, and part and parcel of Axeer's media practice. I provide a nonlinear narrative that toggles between an older, "successful project" that stands in contrast to a newer and "failed" project. These categories are used by my interlocutors to indicate what they perceive as "good" and "bad" work—both projects succeeded from a client perspective.

Chapter 5 provides a detailed case study of one of Axeer's highly-viewed productions, a music video called *Nour*. The case study follows the production process, moving from the idea, to writing the proposal, to meeting with the sponsor, to the details and preparation involved in making the video, to the actual shooting. We follow key players as they present, at a preproduction meeting, the details about the shoot (location, wardrobe, art direction)—all of which are thoroughly discussed with the client. These details, grounded in aesthetics, class, and gender, shape how the video tells the story of a young person's struggle to become a mechanical engineer. The second half of the chapter tracks the circulation of this video after it was released. I explain how, and why, it went "viral" and the discourses that ensued when *Nour* entered more mainstream viewing avenues (television, talk shows, and radio). *Nour's* popularity speaks not only to the larger goal of making societal issues public in Egypt, but also to the complexity of public-making itself.

In the concluding chapter, I zoom out of Axeer's everyday work to consider how affect has motivated all of Axeer's past, present, and future productions. Told primarily through conversations with Khalid, CEO, and Ibrahim, one of Axeer's co-founders, I share their newest vision for Axeer. Ultimately, I conclude that Axeer's story has no ending because they are in a constant state of motion—growing, maturing, and changing. This is most evident in their willingness to partner with other governmental entities as long as it happens on “our terms,” as well as their overall outlook on how much change they can truly instill in their society.

Chapter 1.
Self Expression: Before, During, and After the 2011 the Egyptian Uprising

I. Speaking the Truth: Structures of Feeling in Axeer’s Revolutionary Music

I was sitting on a dusty old grass-green couch waiting for others to arrive for our weekly creative meeting. Ahmed walked in through a 12’x12’ passageway on the side of the building. His eyes squinted behind his round spectacles when he grinned at me. “Anyone else here yet?” he asked as sat next to me. I shook my head. A few months after I joined Axeer, they moved to a bigger office space that was under construction for several weeks. Minutes later, Zap, a six foot tall athletically built man, was coming down the stairs and fumbled with the temporary wooden door haphazardly secured in place. Ahmed got up to help push the door wide enough for Zap to get through.

“Eh ya man,” he annoyingly retorted.

“*Ma’lish*. It is supposed to secure the computers and equipment stored upstairs.” Ahmed pointed to the hole in the wall through which he came in from. Zap nodded, walked towards the kitchen and placed his motorcycle helmet on the counter. Ahmed made his way back to the couch, sat crossed legged to balance his laptop and went back to checking his emails. Zap pulled a white plastic chair towards us and sat down with his freshly brewed green tea. He took out his gum and carefully placed it at the crook of the handle and faced us: “You know, I started writing music to tell the truth (*al haqiqa*) and now I feel like I am doing what everyone else is doing:

talking about the same things. Or I just travel because I can, or browse the newest car.” He sipped his tea and dazed off. After a long pause, Ahmed replied, assuringly: “It is not time for it.” To which Zap responded: “When will it ever be time?” and left to sit outside. Confused, I asked Ahmed to explain Zap’s angst. He told me it was in response to Mahmoud Tarek’s (aka MT3) new song that went viral. MT3’s earlier song, *Al Kaboos* (The Nightmare), was extremely critical of the Egyptian government, and in his newest song MT3 specifically called out Zap as a fake rapper because he no longer “speaks the truth.” This short, but poignant conversation, posed several questions that I found relevant in understanding Axeer’s history, and potential future. Why did Zap feel like he stopped rapping about the truth? Why can MT3 get away with saying what he was saying while Zap felt like he could no longer address the same issues? Could it be that MT3 was a young person who was fed up and Zap had been around long enough to calculate things differently? I have often wondered if we could view MT3, and his cohort, as an embodiment of old-Axeer—an Axeer that was spontaneous, said whatever they wanted whenever they wanted, and were not concerned with profit, views, reputation, and stability.

In this chapter, I examine Axeer’s past work, from 2011-2013, to understand what “the truth” meant to them and how the definition of “the truth” changed. I interpret Axeer’s archive through Raymond William’s “structure of feeling.” In doing so, I tell the story of a group that was alternative-oppositional and how their work continued to shift as they maneuvered Egypt’s political landscape. Axeer did not officially launch until January 23rd, 2011, two days before the Egyptian Uprising. Before it launched as a company, the four friends who founded Axeer experimented with several songs that set the stage for what was to come. Key works produced by Axeer leading up to the Egyptian uprising, and during the uprising, covered topics that can no

longer be explicitly addressed due to the 2013 military coup, particularly topics of politics and religion. Egypt's revolutionary moment provided a platform for various forms of expression that are now censored by the military regime, like the street art scene.

Raymond Williams tells us that structures of feeling have “specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension” and have “characteristic elements of impulses, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought” (1977; 132-133). This concept expresses an important contradiction: namely, that individual feelings are informed by collective expectations, fears, desires, and agency. The feelings that motivate individuals extend far beyond them and are, in fact, congruent with entire generations. This is certainly the case with the cohort of youth defined by the 2011 Egyptian Uprising.³⁰ Axeer's expressive content, during 2011-2013, was anchored in aesthetics—language, meanings, and visuals—produced by young Egyptian media makers for young Egyptians. Together, language and visuals animated Axeer's videos, and was not simply a transparent medium for the communication of inner thoughts. Rather, it was “essentially bound up with local power relations that is capable of socially constructing and contesting realities” (Lutz & Abulughod 1990; 13). I will be discussing several music videos, a short film, and a web-series that employed emotional linguistic forms and thought out visuals, which intentionally broke away from mainstream aesthetics (Frishkopf 2010, Gilman 2014). The music videos were politically engaged, while other content problematized religious education and religious knowledge. As an archive, these work offer rich commentary on thoughts and

³⁰ Scholarship on the Egyptian Uprisings is vast but has mostly focused on questions youth and mobilization efforts (Khalif 2012), digital media and dissent (Howard & Hussein 2013) visual culture of protests and slogans (Khatib 2013, Downey 2014).

feelings shared by young people, and how those thoughts changed as political events unfolded in Egypt.

II. *Meen Ana*: Who Am I? Before and During Jan. 25

Two college friends, Khalid and Tarek, wanted to do something (*ne'mil haga*) but did not know what. In their last year of engineering school (2010) they planned a conference for a student organization. For the entertainment portion of the program they aired a music video they produced together. Tarek wrote the lyrics but needed someone to edit and perform it. A mutual friend introduced them to Zap, a writer and poet who started to rap in 2008. Tarek asked his cousin Ibrahim, who graduated with a business degree but had a knack for photography and filming, to direct the video. *Meen Ana?* was the first video collaboration of Khalid, Tarek, Ibrahim, and Zap. The song was instrumental in reflecting inner turmoils of a young person (presumably in Egypt but conceivably anywhere). Zap rapped about the uncertainty that surrounded him: "I see my life, my thoughts, my past, but the overall picture is unclear..." After setting up this vague self-portrait, another young man (Anas Tawakol) sang the chorus:

For years I am living but am lost;
I spend a lot of time alone,
I have no dreams and feel like a stranger,
I am fed up and don't know who I am.

Between Zap and Tawakol's singing scenes were visuals that encapsulated these sentiments: a young artist was painting a large canvas, but he too was fed up, lost, and unsure of what to paint. He angrily splattered black paint on the white surface.

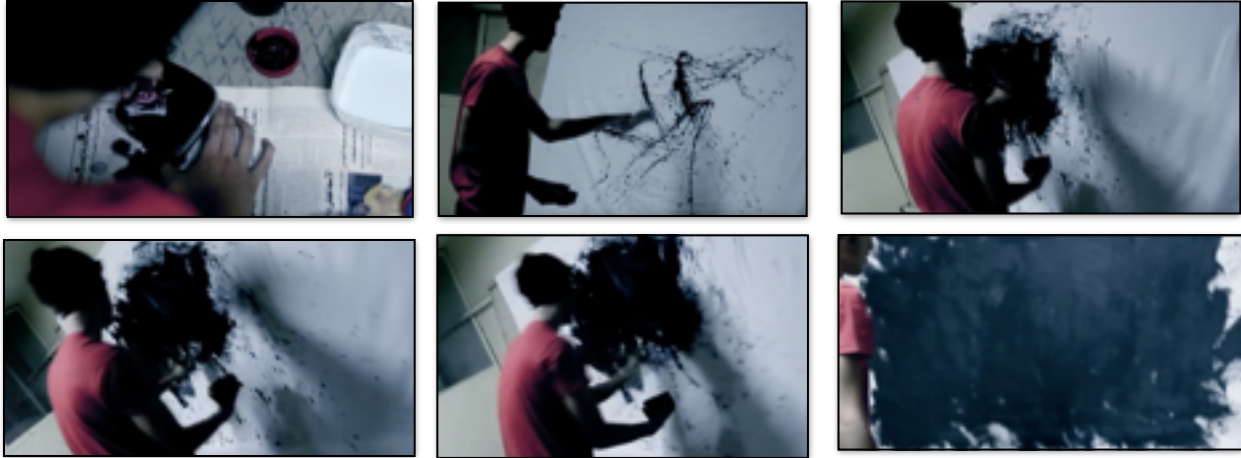


Figure 18: Screen shot from *Meen Ana*

Zap appeared again. He shifts tone, presenting a solution:

First choice I took in changing myself—
 Justice, mercy, and love with no envy.
 Doesn't matter who I was, what matters is who I will become.
 Doesn't matter what I lost, what matters is what I will gain.
 I gained a sense of self, am choosing my own path, this is the first step to rebuild my life.
 I chose one role model and will stick with a plan;
 I will start with myself and leave those who doubt me.

Tawakol sang the chorus twice but changed the last three lines in self-affirmation:

For years I am living but am lost;
 I spend a lot of time alone,
 I have no dreams and feel like a stranger,
 I am fed up and don't know who I am.

For years I am living but lost;
 Now I will start again.
 I found dreams to light my path
 I decided I will change first

Meanwhile, the young artist, whom we follow throughout the video, painted over his black splatter with brighter colors. He wrote in bold white paint, overlaying a cool colored background, *Bokra Ahla* (tomorrow will be better).



Figure 19: Tomorrow is better. Screen shot from *Meen Ana*

Being honest with oneself, striving to be better, taking ownership of one's life, and searching for a purpose were messages evident in this song and in conversations I had with my interlocutors about the beginnings of Axeer. Khalid and Tarek knew that their job prospects as engineers were limited. They faced a life of uncertainties that made them feel lost, unmotivated, and unsure of their purpose. Egyptian millennials faced hardships that differ greatly from those of previous generations; they are part of what sociologists call the Arab "youth bulge." In a region where people under the age of thirty comprise the largest segment of the population, long term prosperity and stability hinges on the opportunities afforded to this generation (Dhillon & Yousef 2009). National governments are unable to create jobs for this young workforce, which is "plagued with forced idleness;" in 2011, the average unemployment rate for youth in the region was 23% for men and 31% for women. Left in a frustrating state of dependence on family and the state, Arab millennials were often characterized by their parents as lazy.

In seeing their colleagues enthralled responses to *Meen Ana*, Khalid and Tarek felt like they were contributing something different. They decided to explore this media terrain more. Along with Ibrahim and Zap, the four of them created a media start-up that focused on "the voices of the street." They took the initiative to improve their own lives by doing something meaningful for themselves and others, and they went straight to work. Entangled in their unpaved journeys

of self discovery, young Egyptians also face the economic and political stagnation that Zap confronted in *Ta2to2a*:

If a bed and pillow have sharp nails,
You can't sleep, making dreaming impossible.
I am restless
Tiredness is your illness,
Crippling you from taking action

Millions and thousands of,
Words, letters, and ideas are spinning
Yet, I am silent.

I am aware and can see—
but talking is forbidden
I chose to be heard between the lines.

They—made those
Sane, insane;
Speaking, mute;
Open eyes, shut;
Fearing my own dream.

Dream and die—
Or be silent and pass-by?
Or forget and smile?
I try to smile,
but my teeth are broken

I looked up, and dreamt with blood-shot eyes
Listening
Shut my mouth in silence—
So they accuse me of retreating.

I wrote a letter to tomorrow, but am afraid it won't arrive
You see, speaking in our country cuts you off.

I am afraid you won't understand,
And far, far, away you'll go.
My shirt is stained black from sorrow.
Its cotton is grown in my country (*baladi*) but it doesn't protect me
I am afraid you won't listen, or worse, listen and ignore.

To dream is ingrained in every generation—
Toughen up and don't be afraid.

*Ta2to2a*³¹ was a form of lyrical music known for its spoken colloquial language and rhythm, often leaving the audience with advice; its colloquial parlance excludes it from being called an official *qasida* (poem). Zap and Anas conveniently used a living room space and natural lighting to produce this small-scale production with a quick turnaround—it was shot and edited in two hours.



Figure 20: Zap in *Ta2to2a*

Zap calmly performed the song in a tone that was self-reflective and pensive, with music added on during editing; he was sitting on a couch speaking into a hand-held microphone.

³¹ As Weis argues in her book *Egyptian Hip-Hop: Expressions from the Underground*, that Zap and other popular rappers in Egypt were creating a new form of cultural expression that had “continuities with momentous historical moments and earlier cultural work” (2012: 570). Furthermore, as noted by Ziad Fahmey in his examination of the relationship between cultural products and politics, cultural workers during the 1919 Revolution used colloquial songs and poetry in an attempt to “motivate mass action through appeals to the listeners’ and readers’ patriotic sentiments (2011: 156). Fahmy discusses how people distributed pamphlets and leaflets of songs and chants; “the words they contained were meant to be read aloud or performed” (2011:156). A similar effort was made by Axeer, whose cultural products were distributed on YouTube and Facebook.

Meanwhile, the camera artfully captured him and details of the room. Different angles of Zap come in and out of focus: we see fuzzy hand gestures from a side angle with a focus on a red carpet; we see the top of his head through hanging Arabesque lanterns, but he was never looking towards the camera or towards us. Gracefully, the cinematographer followed subtle movements of microphone wires, and balanced the tight frames with wide ones.



Figure 21: Detail from *Ta2to2a* video

Near the end of his performance Zap got up to leave the frame and the camera moved to show the audience a mirror. Zap was looking into a mirror the entire time, reflecting on himself, living in Egypt, and his generation's stolen right to dream.

Ta2to2a was signaled in Axeer’s official launching video, *Katib LBokra Gawab* (Writing Tomorrow a Letter), which included seven lines from the earlier song. Ahmed had told me that these songs were why he wanted to join Axeer —“no one else in the music or media scene was producing content that reflected and expressed young peoples’ struggles.” *Katib LBokra Gawab* was released on Axeer’s Youtube channel on January 23, 2011, a few months after Axeer Studio became a licensed media company. In one night, this song organically reached views in the thousands organically (which meant that no ads were bought to increase its viewership). A collaboration between Zap and Asphalt,³² *Katib LBokra Gawab* was a deeply metaphorical song that resonated with young people in Egypt, and perhaps the rest of the Arab world. The literal translation I provide below is not enough to grasp its powerful and careful word choices and rhythm, which is why I elaborate its meaning under each stanza. Belonging, betrayal, and lack of self-expression are main messages in this song.

The song began with Zap lying on the floor of an abandoned building with his hands tied with rope and a white cloth wrapped around his mouth. He slowly got up, but remained seated on the floor. He removed the mouth gag and left his hands secured. Lyrics to the first stanza began:

Thousands are sleeping on a carpet.
Heavy marching cut its threaded wool.
It is okay,
I am a liar.
I am afraid of pain;
Threat of beatings has left a scar in my mind.

I exist but don’t exist,
Living without my voice.
They laugh: “I hear you.”

³² A hip-hop duo consists of rappers Ibrahim Farouk and Mohamed Gad, you can check out their Facebook Page here: <https://www.facebook.com/asfaltmusic/>

Buying my death.
This country does not listen.
So this letter is my casket;

I am writing Tomorrow a letter,
And I'm afraid it won't arrive.
Talking in this country is risky and doesn't reach.
Afraid you won't understand and say,
I'm going far away
I am wearing a shirt, forever stained black with sorrow
It's cotton farmed in *balady*
Yet, it does not protect me



Figure 22: Screen shot of Zap in *Katb LBokra Gawab*

The first part of the song was violent in its undertones. It alluded to the threat of imprisonment—both self-imposed and institutional—as well as torture. With Zap’s captive pose, I presumed the small confined space that held thousands of people sleeping is a prison cell. The space could also symbolize the constraints of poverty. The carpet was torn by the constant footsteps of police in their heavy-duty boots (biyada/بيادة). His mention of beatings referred directly to a uniform belt (القائش) worn and used by police (and military); such threats had left a mental scar that elicited fear even among those who had never experienced a beating firsthand. In the fourth line he said, “I exist and I don’t exist, living without a voice,” and a few lines later he continued, “because words in our country never reach.” The video showed the plot as it reinforced these words symbolically; he was located in a place where no one could hear him—if no one could hear him, does he exit? What was the point of existing if you could not speak and your words do not carry any weight?

Writing this letter was a risk, he said in the next section, yet he had a need to express how he was not valued, even though he would be ridiculed for saying so. What would tomorrow bring? The question has no answer; he may not be alive by then—the price he might pay for speaking his mind. And he would be abandoned by those who did not understand the risk he was taking. Zap concluded that these doubts, fears, and deep loneliness stained his shirt black with never ending sorrow—a color of death, sadness, and despair. His shirt was made out of cotton grown in his country but stained by the state of his country. Egypt has an extensive record of human rights violations that are state sanctioned. Wael Abbas, a prominent blogger and activist, leaked videos of torture in Egyptian prisons in 2008, convincing more and more Egyptians that constant rumors of torture were based on verifiable fact (Said 2009). With the advent of social

media and the rise of bloggers, even before the 2011 uprisings, young Egyptians were more aware of injustices than previous generations. Torture and police brutality were open secrets that many in the older generation ignored, but among Egyptian millennials, such violence was a frightening, prevalent, and visible reality.

We transitioned to Ibrahim Farouk, who was on a roof top and as in the process of writing his letter— moving back and forth, sometimes sitting, writing in his notepad, and then reading what he wrote aloud:

Writing Tomorrow a letter
Afraid I won't finish it—
Life is in the hand of God so you can never be certain.
When does life end? No-one lives forever, when will you regret?

Dirty money cannot be digested.
But hunger can make rocks speak,
When you are walking on two feet and those next to you are crawling and begging.
Ok, listen and laugh:
When I confront someone for their ill manners, I am considered rude.
But if I discretely cheat, they say the smart one succeeded!

Countries face scandals
Doors remain shut—see how many civilizations are being erased.



Figure 23: Screen shot of Farouk in *Katb LBokra Gawab*

Farouk addressed deep-seated contradictions that plague Egyptian society. Starting with the acknowledgment of death being imminent, he asked when will people change, live honestly, and

help one another; when would people start regretting their actions and mistakes? He may never finish writing his letter because he attested that death can come at any moment, but also because his letter would be long, full of critiques and moral ills he wished would change. With that, he continued to reflect on the hypocrisy that surrounded him: for example, those who stole or gained their income illegally while leaving the poor on the street crawling and begging. Then he commented on the poor, claiming that hunger could make anyone do anything—so who was at fault for this never ending cycle? Sarcastically, he noted how values had flipped; when you are honest with someone about their behavior, instead of speaking behind their back, you are judged impolite. But you are rewarded for cheating. Society as a whole has morphed into a corrupt mass that eventually will reach oblivion—a gloomy perspective but a bold commentary to make regarding a society and country that, in ordinary public discourse, must be praised.



Figure 24: Screen shot of Mohammed in *Katb LBokra Gawab*

Mohamed Gad concluded the song as he sits on a road somewhere in Cairo with desolate buildings surrounding him:

Writing Tomorrow a letter;
it does not matter if it reaches its destination or not,
I am leaving either way.
Even Ayyub would not be patient living here.
If they told me to stay one more day, I wouldn't.
Let us stay asleep,
Let us stay asleep, sitting and doing nothing
Meanwhile our love for our country grows.

Even while here,
Even while here, I miss her (Egypt)
I light myself on fire, yet the fire does not burn
After all of this, you say she smiles at me?
Should I stay and be lost
Or leave *balady*?

Nationalistic undertones run deep in this last stanza, an affinity that was now one of deep ambivalence for my interlocutors. Leaving Egypt, whether through illegal migrant ships that do not always make it through the waters of the Mediterranean, or entering a U.S lottery, or applying for scholarships to study abroad, was a common idea (and an appealing one) among many Arab youth (Cole 2014). Although this song was released in 2011, the desire to leave Egypt is an ongoing reality for many: My father helped three of my male cousins and two of my female cousins to study abroad and sponsored medical observer-ships for several other Egyptians unrelated to me, while many others sought his assistance but did not follow through because they could not leave their family. While in the field, I helped three of my interlocutors apply for study abroad scholarships.

Referencing Prophet Ayyub's (Job) inability to show patience living in Egypt was a clever way to make the point. In Islamic tradition, Prophet Ayyub was the exemplar of patience, and his story was used to teach children this characteristic. Under distress, uncertainty, and loss Prophet Ayyub always had faith in God and never complained about his calamities. In the Qur'an, Prophet Ayyub's story was mentioned in this verse: "And surely we try you with something of fear and hunger, and loss of wealth and crops, but give glad-tidings to the steadfast, who when a misfortune befalls them, say lo! we are Allah's and to Him shall we surely return. Such are they on whom are blessings from their Lord, and mercy. Such are the rightly-guided" (2: 155-157). Ayyub's farm was attacked by thieves who stole his cattle and killed many of his servants; the roof of his house fell down and many members of his family died. Prophet Ayyub remained unwavering in his faith and patience—but how was one expected to stay patient living in Egypt? The lyrics to this song portray living in Egypt as unbearable, providing specific reasons, such as lacking voice, immoral values, and detachment, to connect listener to the plot, but the effectiveness of the words depends also on an audience that can relate the premise of the song to their own lived experiences. The song speaks to the aspects of mundane existence that make living in Egypt unbearable, and only those who live there can fully share this feeling. The lyrics are not just emotional talk; they are heard by Egyptians as “in and about social life rather than as veridically referential to some internal state” (Lutz & Abulughod 1990).

In the years leading up to the 2011 Egyptian Uprisings, music from the ‘underground scene’ articulated disapproval of hegemonic structures in a variety of ways. It was oppositional to the political, social, and cultural status quo, offering audiences alternatives and encouraging new realities (Weis 2016). Surveying the work of these musicians was beyond scope of this chapter

and dissertation. I focused here on Zap's music simply because he was one of Axeer's co-founders and his videos were produced by Axeer, making his work part of a collective effort that went beyond a single musician's vision. Many underground musicians performed in small venues with limited crowds. They were not featured in videos until media makers like Axeer started seeking them out. Musicians featured in Axeer's productions were part of an underground scene long before the 2011 uprising, many of whom identify as rappers, poets, and hip-hop artists. With Zap's connections to the underground music scene, Axeer produced alternative music videos in opposition to mainstream popular aesthetics, contributing to Egypt's musical subculture.

Ellen Weis examined music from the Egyptian underground hip-hop scene and highlighted how most songs oppose "habibi music," a term that designated mainstream Arabic pop, which focused on romantic love, like the songs Egyptian-pop icon Amr Diab sings.



Figure 25: Screen shot of Amr Diab in *El Leila*

A similar comment was made by my interlocutors, who want to make videos that are “real,” “add value,” and “affect change,” which they argue was lacking in Arabic pop. In Weis’s study, she noted how these musicians “rap about social and political problems” and created songs that specifically address “unemployment, slums, sexual harassment, and drugs...drawing attention to education, religious discrimination, gender roles, and the broader economic issues that permit Egyptian society” (2016; 110). I point to Weis’s study to further place Axeer along a continuum of young people who have been creating expressive content that addressed prevalent issues concerning their society long before the Egyptian uprising. Contrary to what many scholars and journalists have argued, the explosion of self-expression that took place during the 2011 uprisings was not new; rather, it was a moment when already existing art forms percolated to the surface and flourished.³³

The January 25th 2011 Egyptian Uprising began two days before the release of *Katb L-Bokra Gawab*. Khalid, Tarek, Ibrahim, and Zap had no idea that their song foreshadowed the largest uprising in their country’s modern history. Youth movements in Egypt played a key role in orchestrating the uprisings that overthrew Hosni Mubarak on February 11, 2011. It is crucial to note that a number of these youth movements—including Kefaya, the April 6 Movement, and others—began organizing long before 2011 and that some of these movements attempted to use their popularity to influence the formation of the new government and its policies. The demography of these movements varied, sometimes dramatically, and in the years since the overthrow of Mubarak these differences have translated into diverging opinions about the ultimate goals of the revolution. Axeer, for instance, has produced several videos that address on-

³³ For documentation on street art in Cairo and other Arab countries see blog: <https://suzeeinthecity.wordpress.com/>

going political events. In 2011 alone they produced ten videos, eight of which were music videos. Their content was original, spontaneous, unsponsored, and reflective of what was happening around them.



Figure 26: Screen shot from *Saba7na Nady*

Saba7na Nady (Our Morning Dew) was a poem that documented the unity found in Tahir Square to rebuke mainstream media that depicted the protesters as spies and traitors; “why don’t you go see for yourself, ask them who they are, and why they are there, hungry, cold, unafraid... you will find a collective answer: we are Egyptians.”

Ba7lam (Dreaming) was a collaboration between Cairokee, a band who continues to epitomize the revolution, and two musicians, Zap and Hany Adel. The music video was located in the streets of Cairo, in front of revolution-themed murals, where the musicians congratulated their generation for accomplishing something of this magnitude. This time, Zap was writing a letter to tomorrow with a known address that contained hope for the future.



Figure 27: Screen shot from *Ba7lam*

Meanwhile, *3enwany* (My Address) spoke to their collective address in Palestine. Tarek, *3enwany*'s producer, told me: "if I tried to write that song now, I wouldn't be able to. I wrote what I felt at the time. We really believed anything was possible. We removed Hosni Mubarak, so we could also free Palestine and pray in Al Aqsa." This anything-is-possible sentiment comparatively existed among swaths of Arab youth as a result of the Arab Uprisings (Bayat 2017). Lastly, *Meen el Ma2soud* (Who's Intended) was a music video dedicated to Arab countries. In it, Zap, Farouk, and Gad rap about American imperialist forces dividing and conquering Arab countries. Music videos produced in 2011 were the inverse of those produced in 2010—they were positive, active, and hopeful. Axeer also started branching out to raise awareness about issues beyond Egypt; they produced music videos about famine in Somalia and the war in Syria (and later a video in support of Gaza during the 2014 raid).



Figure 28: Screen shot from *3enwany*



Figure 29: Screen shot from *Meen el Ma2soud*

Axeer produced music videos first because they thought it the most effective venue for young people who felt the overbearing inequalities of host societies to attain social capital. According to Tarek, they developed a reputation among young people for “speaking truth to power” for being “hip” and “revolutionary.” Youth music has historically constituted an important site of dissent in which youth politics takes place (Blackman 2005; Hesmondhalgh 2005). The spread and growth of musical youth subcultures are indicative of movements in the political realm and can be seen as a “thermometer for a society’s political climate” (Garrat 2004; 146) Expression-expressing (*ben’abar*) was part of every plot; linguistically and visually, these music videos signaled and showed thought, affect, and experience by laying “bare what is within in order to show what is going on without, as well as what to do about it” (Green 2007; 25). Axeer’s work addressed humanistic aspects of political events, as in *7a22y* (My Right), a song about the infrastructural negligence that lead to an accident in Asyut, where many children died, an incident that took place under the new elected-president, Mohamed Morsi, in 2012. But they never campaigned for politicians, or ridiculed political campaigns, unlike other activist groups, such as Moiseren, who monitored the legislature, elections, promises, and “lies” by government officials, and unlike Bassem Youssef, the so-called John Stewart of Egypt, whose show, *El Barnameg*, was dedicated to political satire. Axeer’s media work has been sustained by a certain level of “revolutionary” appeal from the start, but its energies were never merely critical, or destructive. When addressing political issues, Axeer tried to present a perspective that held their people, society, and governments accountable. It was rooted in social justice rhetoric, and its expressive aim was to shed light on alternative perspectives and to provoke their audiences to *think* for themselves.

In Axeer's early years of media production, their music videos were a reflection of their thoughts, which they shared on a viewing platform (YouTube and Facebook) to reach other young people like themselves. Media content produced during this time was concerned with politics and religion, which speaks to how complex and interconnected politics and religion are in Egypt. However, the political for Axeer was not about elections, legislature, or policies. As we saw in the music videos, they were concerned with expressing one self, to change for the better, and to live a decent and dignified life. Ultimately my interlocutors were concerned with being able to act, think, and speak a certain way—a way that exhibited a “youthful habitus” (Bayat 2010; 21). In the sense of being young, youth, represents a kind of Bourdieuan habitus—a series of dispositions, ways of being, feeling, and carrying oneself that follow a structure associated with the biological fact of being young. When Axeer launched, the founders were in their early twenties and recent college graduates. As young people they were involved in everyday practices of cultural politics, exemplified in carving out their own social and cultural spaces, rebelling against the establishment, and innovating. Their youthfulness was expressed through the collective activity of content creation and media production. I discussed key media work that was experimental, political, and timely, and packaged in the form of music videos. Next, I turn to the topic of religion as believed, practiced, and expressed by my interlocutors in two media projects they produced from 2012-2013.

III. Islamophobia and *El Film da Haram*

Religion (*al dīn*) and God (*Rabīna*) were sensitive topics when I was in the field. Religion was not part of my proposal nor was it included in my structured interview questions. Rather, I

became curious about how my interlocutors conceived of religion after a few observations: Eman had taken off her headscarf, Zap wore wooden prayer beads as a bracelet, Khalid was teased for praying extremely fast, and afterwards I learned that Axeer had a reputation for being *ikhwan* (members of the Muslim Brothers). On the daily, customary registers of *Alḥamdulilallah* (Thank God), *rabina yesahel* (an Egyptian colloquial phrase for May God make it easy), and *inshallah* (God willing) were commonly used, but did not signify religiosity in anyway. During interviews, addressing their relationship with God caused many people to pause, as well as any mention of the uprisings and the 2013 Rabaa'a Massacre—both politics and religion were fraught topics. I quickly learned that my presence as a visible Muslim woman who prayed regularly in the corner of the office caused some discomfort among a few of my interlocutors, particularly those who no longer practiced. So I waited until I approached the topic again. After several months of time spent together, these individuals slowly realized that I did not care how they chose to live their lives and that my own religious practice did not mean that I would judge their lack of devotion. On the contrary, I told them that I was interested to learn about their ambivalence. They started opening up and expressed how “ashamed” they felt with their newly-found-waves of lack of faith in God, and their “frustration” with religious scholars. Disappointment in religious figures was not an isolated sentiment at Axeer, rather, it is a growing sentiment among global Muslim youth, and played out uniquely in the Egyptian context. Sesso, Axeer's social media chair, shared with me his story of his religious ambivalence, political disengagement, and how it played out at Axeer.

Sesso met Khalid, Axeer's CEO, at a Muslim organization called *Bridges* in 2011. Sesso had just graduated from dental school³⁴ and was applying for his Master's in dentistry. He spent a lot of his time online and joined *Bridges* because of his friend's "nagging." He joined Axeer in 2012 as their social media chair: "since I am online everyday anyways, I decided to be online at Axeer and do something useful with my time." He continued to work towards his Masters in dentistry for the sole purpose of having the option to emigrate. *Bridges*, a peacemaking educational foundation that dates back to 2008, was founded by Fadel Soliman, an older man who is an electronic engineer turned international Imam. In light of the tragic events of 9/11, Soliman took the initiative to educate the public about Islam. He focused his work mainly in the US and UK; in 2004 Soliman moved to Egypt to establish Bridges headquarters. According to their website, after Jyllands-Posten, a Danish newspaper, published cartoons ridiculing Prophet Mohammed in 2005, Soliman was invited by the Queen of Denmark to give a speech about Islam, and that was the launching point of Bridges in Egypt.³⁵ Four of my interlocutors at Axeer, Khalid, Sesso, Karim, and Eman, had participated in *Bridges* workshops. These workshops comprised of trainings in first learning about common misconceptions of Islam and then in how to refute said misconceptions using the Qur'an and Sunnah.

In light of their work with Soliman, they proposed a Ramadan web-series that would refute misconceptions about Islam that are believed by non-Muslims and Muslims. Karim, Axeer's business developer at the time and an active member at *Bridges*, pitched and sold the program to

³⁴ In Egypt, high school exam scores determine which colleges you can attend. Scoring in the 97th percentile allows you to choose between medical, dental, or engineering schools. Scores lower than that offers you entrance to law or business schools, etc. This is not equivalent to four years of undergraduate studies then an additional several years of professional schooling.

³⁵ From <https://bridges-foundation.org/about-us/>; retrieved 12/06/2018

the television channel 4Shbab (translates to for youth). As Sesso put it, “we believed in educating ourselves about Islam on our own terms, and then presenting what we learned to others. Soliman was accessible and covered topics that *al shabab* (young people) wanted to know more about.” 4shbab is an Arabic-language satellite television station headquartered in Cairo that was founded by Ahmed Abu Haiba, in 2009, to make Islam relevant to youth.³⁶ In an article Haiba wrote in 2011, he surveyed the Islamic media scene to argue that Islamic media will construct a new Arab identity. However, in his overview, he critiqued channels that embodied Salafist ideology (such as Al-Nas and Al-Rahma) for being “narrow in their scope,” lacking artistic vision, music, and “reflecting a puritanical approach” to Islam. Haiba placed 4shbab on the moderate spectrum and called it an “Islamic art channel” that provides “broader, more diverse artistic offerings, such as songs, video clips and drama” (2011).



Figure 30: *Islamophobia* Introduction

³⁶ For an in-depth interview with Abu Haiba and 4shbab channel see: <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/15/magazine/15Pop-t.html>

Islamophobia, Axeer's thirty episode Ramadan web-series³⁷ hosted by Fadel Soliman, was the first official production that was marketed and sold. They had received minimal sponsorships for music videos in 2011, mainly relying on producing low-budget work with a production team of friends who did not get paid. Although Axeer was an official licensed company, they were still working on a sustainable business plan. Their goal was to model all future work the same way this project was conceived: organically come up with an idea that should be addressed—a concept that the team members are passionate about—and sell it. Sesso proceeded to tell me how *Islamophobia's* production team worked closely with Soliman to curate topics they felt young people wanted addressed. Each episode was thoroughly researched and scripted. Zap recorded the programs musical introduction, presented in the form of spoken word poetry. The set was serene, white with muted pastel colors shaped into incomplete geometric patterns, yet bold with black Arabic calligraphy that overlaid the floating fabric in the background.

The first season covered an array of topics— Darwinism and evolution, history of Muslim expansion, slavery, apostasy, and veiling. In thirty episodes they covered common misconceptions about Islam found in the “West” that some of my interlocutors claimed were also common beliefs held in the Arab Muslim world.

³⁷ There is rich scholarly literature that focuses on Islam and Media in Egypt. Charles Hirsckind's seminal book, *The Ethical Soundscape*, examines how sermon cassette-tapes serve as an instrument of ethical self-improvement and as a vehicle for honing the sensibilities and affects of pious living. More recent studies have examined new-media and Islam; Yasmin Moll's work examines new forms of Islamic media as presented by popular “New Preachers” against the backdrop of Egypt's 2011 revolution. In this section, I do not engage with the history of the Islamic Revival or its efforts. Rather, I am interested in why my interlocutors at Axeer created this web-series, what issues they personally have with religion, and how their opinions and beliefs shifted.



Figure 31: Detail from *Islamophobia* set

Coincidentally, my interlocutors were participating in a global effort that aimed to promote a moderate Islam, especially in light of conservative political Islam's rise in popularity after deposed dictators in Egypt and also in Tunisia and Libya. The first episode to the series provided an overview of the show's goals and topics addressed:

Firstly, we will not try to embellish Islam for its own true message is its own best proponent. Trying to do this would be like saying to God, "I am trying to beautify your ugly truth." Islam is a beautiful religion. It is a comprehensive, universal and eternal religion. Islam is a perfect, complete and beautiful way of life as it is from Allah, the Source of Perfection. Anything human is imperfect; it can be beautiful but it will always have imperfections, because humans beings are imperfect...Islam needs to be presented in a way that is more suited to the minds and understanding of each individual....As the Prophet, peace be upon him, said: "Religion is easy, and no one overburdens himself in his religion but he will be unable to continue in that way." In other words, our discussion will show how "moderation" is "the way of Islam." Allah says: "Thus, have We made you a justly balanced nation." This verse is in *Surat Al-Baqara* [The Cow - 2nd Chapter]. *Surat Al-Baqara* has 286 verses. Divide that by 2, you get 143 verses. This verse falls exactly in the middle. "Thus, have We made you a justly balanced nation." Moderation is one of the most important cornerstones of Islam.

Each episode was framed in a style of reasoning that drew on many different bodies of knowledge, not just pure Islamic doctrine, to make Islam relevant to young people. 2012, the year season one of *Islamophobia* was released, was a religiously apprehensive time in Egypt. By this time, Egypt's thirty-year dictator Hosni Mubarak had stepped down (on February 11, 2011). Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) promised to hand power to a civilian government through an election that was later held in May 2012. Meanwhile, scores of violence, detention, and torture persisted during SCAF's interim government, leaving many Egyptians to lose their trust in the military, rupturing a popular revolution chant: "people and army are one hand." On the election front, by January 2012 the Muslim Brotherhood won a majority of seats in Parliamentary elections, with Salafis winning another quarter, putting Islamist parties in charge of the parliament. Presidential elections proceeded in two phases. On May 23, 2012 the first round of voting narrowed down a field of thirteen candidates to two finalists: Mohammad Morsi, from the Freedom and Justice Party (the political branch of the Muslim Brotherhood), and Ahmed Shafik former prime minister under Mubarak. Predicting Morsi's win for presidency, whom the military opposed, the day before the elections the military shut down parliament, awarded itself power to control the national budget and to issue new laws that would dilute the power of the president. On June 30th Mohammad Morsi was sworn in as President and a bitter power struggle between the Muslim Brotherhood and the military ensued. Before moving on to what happened next on Egypt's political arena in 2013, I wanted to map Axeer's *Islamophobia* programming, which was being made in the months of the elections to be released in Ramadan (July 2012), onto the 2012 time period. As a result of the downfall of deep-rooted dictators and the subsequent political opening prompted Egyptian citizens to imagine their nation as they

wanted. Ideologies that were commonly found in the margins, such as highly conservative and liberal ideas, burst out into the public sphere. Mohammed Morsi hadn't become president yet but already age-old Orientalist conceptions of "Islamist vs Secular" debates were percolating.

Ultraconservative (namely Salafists) men wearing traditional garb and women with face veils gave a new character to the public. Extreme examples like a Salafi sheikh, Mahmoud Shaaban, appeared on a religious television channel calling for the death of the liberal opposition leader, Mohamed El Baradei in 2012, caused many to feel apprehensive, even though the statement was denounced by Islamists and leftists across Egypt's political spectrum, including the Muslim Brotherhood.³⁸ Revolutionaries, from diverse backgrounds that included members of Muslim Brotherhood, were concerned that conservative Islamists were hijacking the revolution and ultimately excluding them from achieving their social justice goals (Bayat 2017).

My interlocutors, at this time, were devout practicing Muslims who believed in Islam's principles and way of life. Producing a show that promoted a moderate Islam, one that *they* believed in to counter the rising conservative rhetoric was a motivating factor.³⁹ Funding also played a big role; having sold the program to a satellite-television channel proved that they were able to turn their media passion into a sustainable business. Most importantly, in both seasons of *Islamophobia* my interlocutors were motivated by creating religious content that appealed to them and other young people. Young people tackling questions of faith on their own terms was a nudge against the establishment. In Egypt, the relationship between state and religion is complex.

³⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-islamists/egypt-secures-liberals-homes-after-calls-for-their-death-idUSBRE9160R020130207>

³⁹ Content in season one reminds me of U.S mosque initiatives created post 9/11 when Islam 101 classes were designed to refute common misconceptions. Muslims in America felt as though their religion was being hijacked and needed to address it. This could be a similar sentiment here.

Religion is a part of the educational curriculum and broadcasting; most mosques in the country are state-owned and managed through the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Dar al-Ifta, responsible for issuing fatwas for state bodies, is independent though its head is currently appointed by Al-Azhar University. However, al-Azhar University, Egypt's oldest degree-granting university renowned as Sunni Islam's most prestigious educational institute, has some autonomy from the state but is in a constant tug-of-war because of it.⁴⁰



Figure 32: *Islamophobia 2* Introduction

For *Islamophobia 2*, released Ramadan 2013, also sold to 4shbab, my interlocutors wanted to address real questions by young Egyptians, particularly those who were wavering in their faith. In parallel with conservative religious views emerged a series of liberal sensibilities that shook

⁴⁰ For more on the relationship between Al Azhar and the State, see:
<http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/70103>
<https://www.aljazeera.com/focus/2010/03/201031763554123901.html>
<https://www.thecaireview.com/tahrir-forum/egypts-al-azhar-steps-forward/>

conventional beliefs. The revolution made many believe that rules could be broken and norms could be altered, and sacred beliefs questioned—even the very idea of God. This, coupled with a deep desire for selfhood and autonomy was the premise of *Islamophobia 2*. Season two was much more philosophical in nature—covering topics like the origin of God and proof of His existence. The introduction popped with color—orange, peach, yellow, hot pink, teal—smoke like puffs and lines that compositionally took the shape of an abstracted landscape overlooking a reflective surface, like a lake, as the same colorful puffs were mirrored horizontally on the screen. Movement of these clouds followed the beat and tempo of the season’s theme song, which was about questioning and “seeking truth.”

Each episode began with a young man or woman speaking candidly about a spiritual issue they were grappling with, or a question they had not been able to ask; this set the stage to the topic that would be covered in the episode. Next, a young man painted a symbol equivalent to the topic, or, question asked. As this young man is painted, a voice over of another young man shared a similar story. The layering of stories and voices in this series spoke to the magnitude of how many young people in Cairo were struggling with the same type of questions regarding their Muslim faith—all stemmed from how they were taught to believe one thing and never given the opportunity to question it. This second installment was not structured as rigidly as the first season, rather, it put a face and voice to those struggling with their faith.



Figure 33: Screen shot from *Islamophobia 2*

When the personal thoughts and questions were aired, the black and white painted graphic titled the segment and it transitioned to Dr. Soliman who addressed the question, connecting it back to an overall problem. By the end of the series the mural was complete with several black and white graphic icons of all the topics that were addressed on the show. What I learned from spending time at Axeer was there were always variables and numerous factors that went into deciding what project to work on and why. Money was a factor but producing content that was relevant was equally as important, especially during the beginning years when they were establishing who they were as a company. To make money, they did commercial advertisements on the side, which were kept separate from their expressive works and uploaded on an online portfolio-platform

called Vimeo and not YouTube. Their prime objective was to have a media content platform that made a difference. During this time, their content reflected young peoples' concerns, which gained a revolutionary appeal due to the Egyptian Uprisings. Even though this project was sold, the content was created for a particular purpose—religious struggles needed to be addressed.

In recent years, Egypt saw a rise in popularity of new preachers, the trio Amr Khaled, Mostafa Hosni, and Moaz Masod, who built a reputation for tailoring to youth who otherwise would not tune into Islamic programming—they dressed, spoke, and had similar experiences to young audiences. Prior to the January 25th revolution, they were characterized as offering Muslim youth a “post-Islamist” religious discourse that was apolitical, with one academic observer calling it an “air-conditioned Islam” (Haenni 2005) far from the everyday realities of the vast majority of Egyptians struggling with poverty, social injustice, and political disenfranchisement. In an article surveying new preachers' work in light of the Egyptian uprisings, Yasmin Moll claimed that “since the fall of Mubarak, the revolutionary ethics signified by Tahrir have been subsumed by televangelists in Egypt within a broader religious narrative of personal redemption” (Moll 2013). She proceeded with two examples. The first, was Moez Masoud's television show after the revolution (in Ramadan 2011), called “Thawra ala al-Nafs” (Revolution of the Self); “The premise of the show was that while Egyptians were successful in overthrowing a corrupt system (*nizam fasid khareegi*) what was needed now was a revolution to change internally (*min gowa*)” (Moll 2013). This exceedingly sounded like Zap's song *Meen Ana*, discussed in the previous section, that was released at the end of 2010. Her second example was Amr Khaled's post-revolutionary show “Bokra Ahla” (A Better Tomorrow), where he “continually admonishes viewers” for having “ritual-focused piety.” Khaled's solution

“lies in correcting the ethics of the individual and harnessing such ethics for national reform.” (Moll 2013). Ultimately, being a good Muslim subject for televangelists went beyond fulfilling the ritual obligations of the faith to encompass being a good citizen. Ethical dimensions of religion did not appeal to my interlocutors. They found these programs unappealing and out of tune with young peoples’ faith-based-struggles. In *Islamophobia 2*, released in Ramadan 2013, the featured young guests questioned God’s existence,⁴¹ admitted to atheism’s appeal,⁴² and criticized the use of fear to instill God consciousness.⁴³ Producing *Islamphobia 1&2* was a practice in, what Eickelman and Anderson call, “reintellectualization,” presenting Islamic doctrine and discourse in accessible, vernacular terms, even if this contributes to the basic reconfigurations of doctrine and practice” (12).

Moving into 2013, my interlocutors at Axeer were disillusioned by the election process. Many were excited during the first phase, opting for candidates like Mohamed El Bardei, a Noble Peace Prize awardee known for his left-leaning views, or Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh, who was popular for his liberal-Islamist views. When my interlocutors saw the finalists, several boycotted the election entirely while others voted for Morsi using the “lesser of two evils” argument; “I did not want anyone from the old regime and we saw what comes when the military is in charge, so Shafik was no go. Who knows, maybe Morsi will be better,” one said. However, as Morsi proved to be an incompetent political leader, and exhibited similar authoritarian

⁴¹ For an example, see this episode: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OgMqzzG6EYE&list=PLQ15Iu5Vbki9KIM9bZ9v-1cRwHW9R1XRp&index=2>

⁴² For an example, see this episode: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YDUcet39Ntc&list=PLQ15Iu5Vbki9KIM9bZ9v-1cRwHW9R1XRp&index=4>

⁴³For an example, see this episode: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rCPNZWNaHl8&index=14&list=PLQ15Iu5Vbki9KIM9bZ9v-1cRwHW9R1XRp>

attitudes and policies as the old regime, everyone at Axeer turned against him, and by default the Muslim Brotherhood, especially in light of what happened during his one year presidency (June 30th 2012-July 1st 2013). To help put the year 2012-2013 in context, I will first examine *El Film Da Haram*, which was released on Feb 6, 2013.

As a result of *Islamophobia*, Sara, a student at German University in Cairo, approached Axeer with an idea for a short film called *El Film Da Haram* (This Movie is Forbidden), which was released before *Islamophobia 2* was. As Sara told me in an interview, “the point of the film was to critique religious education and upbringing. There was a heavy emphasis on fearing God, and we wanted to promote loving and knowing God.”



Figure 34: Screen shot from *El Film Da Haram*

The first minute into the film we heard one command after another, then a young boy looked up, back and forth, as he was told: *memorize this sura like your cousin, if you don't finish your food*

it'll run after you on judgement day, don't speak while in the bathroom, get dressed to pray at the mosque with your father, how many times have I told you not to eat with your left hand eat only with your right so shaytan doesn't eat with you, if you cheat you will go to hell, if you don't pray you won't get allowance this week... the tone of these voices varied from harsh to nourishing. The film was edited between the commands told to the young boy, to an older high-school aged boy, wearing a hoodie, who sarcastically regurgitated commands he was told growing up: *if you don't speak to your brother for three days that means you are upset with God, I am not afraid of anyone except God, if you drink alcohol you will be impure for forty days, when you see a black cat say 'I seek refuge from my Lord.'* As time passed, the protagonist, the young boy from the beginning of the film, was seated in the same place, and looked directly towards the camera, while men and women walked past him as if he was not there.



Figure 35: Details from *El Film Da Haram*

The film was edited between the commands told to the young boy, to an older high-school aged boy, wearing a hoodie, who sarcastically regurgitated commands he was told growing up: *if you don't speak to your brother for three days that means you are upset with God, I am not afraid of anyone except God, if you drink alcohol you will be impure for forty days, when you see a black cat say 'I seek refuge from my Lord.'* As time passed, the protagonist, the young boy from the beginning of the film, was seated in the same place, and looked directly towards the camera, while men and women walked past him as if he was not there. In a deep, inquisitive, voice he told the audience how deeply flawed this way of teaching, and thinking, was: *Something is missing, something is wrong. Is this what religion is? A few things we have memorized and don't understand and some social etiquette. I don't think I love God the way I used to say when I was younger, I am afraid of Him because no one taught me to Love Him. Why should I do things out of Fear? This is torture, did he create us to torture us? There has to be another understanding.* In conclusion, he stood up and joined those walking past him, and the video transitioned to a black screen with a quote that Ja'far al-Sadiq, sixth Shi'i imam, was reported to have said: "Worship is of three kinds: some people worship God out of fear, and that is the worship of slaves; other people worship God seeking reward, and that is the worship of hirelings; and some people worship God out of love, and that is the workshop of those who are free, and the most excellent of worship."

El Film Haram was produced and directed by Sara, and her friend Riad, and released and disseminated by Axeer. Since having no internal budget for social media marketing, all of its views were gained organically in Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Sesso, who was responsible for its dissemination and social media analysis, was surprised that it was viewed outside of Egypt. He

initially estimated a reach of one-hundred thousand but it gained six-hundred thousand views within the first few days of its release (as it stands now, this short film has been viewed 721,846 times). The response to this film were positively overwhelming, however, it also received a lot of unexpected criticism because it aimed to rupture a commonly held view on religious education. It was aired on television shows twice. The first time was on CBC 2 with talk show host Khairy Ramadan, featuring Sufi Sheikh Habib Ali Jifri. Habib Ali Jifri had also tweeted,⁴⁴ on his official account, in support of the film. The second television reference was on Al-Rahma, a Salafi channel, where the film was critiqued. In speaking with Sesso about the film and his role in monitoring its dissemination, he had this to say:

This film was pointing out the approach and over use of fear to instill God consciousness. This premise alone makes it very anti-Salafi, so it was expected that they won't like it. It also makes sense that someone like Habib Ali Jifri, who is Sufi, would love the film even if he does not agree with everything included (I'm sure there are some incorrect religious facts, but that is beside the point). We liked the idea of highlighting what we think are mistakes in religious upbringing. We didn't expect the outcome and attention: some didn't like that we just highlighted a problem and did not present a solution—but really, that is not our role in media. Our role is to raise and challenge different perspectives and not dictate what should be done. Our goal is to present different perspectives to encourage open discussion—not tell people what to do or what to think. People change, everyone here at Axeer has changed since we produced this film. If I tell you what to think in 2010 and then the opposite in 2015, what do we gain? But if we encourage you to think about things then we have succeeded.

Sara reiterated Sesso's sentiments, and elaborated on how the film struck a chord with a lot of people, sparking debates about religion: "We were interviewed by 19TwentyThree,⁴⁵ and the interviewer was surprised that Riad and I wore headscarves⁴⁶! They assumed we were anti-

⁴⁴ <https://twitter.com/alhabibali/status/299303159527006208>;

⁴⁵ An online women empowerment magazine

⁴⁶ Author in fact admits to this, see full article here: <http://www.19twentythree.com/features/the-faces-behind-el-film-da-haram/>

religion, not that I am a practicing Muslim who was critiquing a certain way of teaching about Islam.” With this strong pushback, Sara and Sesso decided to include a disclaimer at the bottom of the video:

By the grace of God, the main idea was interpreted correctly by the majority who watched this film, but it occurred to us that there was some confusion that needs clarification: The movie highlights an approach in education, specifically religious education, that we believe is wrong. Those who worked on the movie see that using threats and intimidation will lead result in the opposite effect: the child will free himself from anything associated with such discipline once he is old enough to do so. There were many positive deeds mentioned in the movie: memorizing the Quran, praying on time or at the mosque, were things encouraged by parents and teachers. There is no doubt that that these are good deeds, which are required for parents to encourage their children to fulfill. However, our point is that telling someone to pray out of fear of losing his allowance, or to memorize the Quran only to be better than his cousin, or because he is afraid of his teacher, is entirely different than memorizing the Quran for the sake of being close to God out of love. Hope our view is clear now. We are grateful to those who have watched the movie and those who reached out with their opinion. We are also grateful to God for this success and inshallah the next one will be even better.

Part of why *El Film Da Haram* received such polarizing responses was because of the increased anxiety about religion and politics that percolated to the surface during Mohammed Morsi’s presidency. Mohammed Morsi won by a narrow margin over Ahmed Shafik, the former prime minister under deposed President Hosni Mubarak. During this election, age old binary rhetoric of “Islamist” vs “Secularist” was used to deter voters from voting for Mohammed Morsi, who belonged to Muslim Brotherhood political branch *Freedom and Justice Party*. The earliest calls for Morsi’s ouster began within the first two months of his presidency and came primarily from Taufiq ‘Ukasha, a “trickster who is particularly prone to generating perverted forms of social knowledge” (Armbrust 2013), and later Bassem Yusuf, Egypt’s so-called John Stewart. The media became polarized during Morsi’s rule, with mainstream media painting Morsi’s presidency, purely within an Islamist, theocratic rule, instead of “gridlocked politics” (Lynch

2012). Secular media channels were filled with expressions such as “the Brotherhoodization of the state,” which portrayed the country’s growing concern with members of the Muslim Brotherhood taking over most of the vital positions in the government. As violence erupted in anti-Brotherhood demonstrations, these media started using terms such as “Muslim Brotherhood militias” to refer to Brotherhood-affiliated thugs who would attack protesters. There was no question that Morsi went too far: “Morsi’s decree raises some truly troubling issues for Egypt’s transition. It sparked large protests, violent clashes, judicial backlash, resignations from his administration, rare unity among opposition politicians, and severe new doubts about Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood’s political intentions” (Lynch 2012). However, media analysts were more concerned with deciphering Morsi’s Islamic inclination than the daily political churn. *El Film Da Haram*, found itself in a viewing arena that was used for its own gain: those who were anti-Morsi, anti-Muslim Brotherhood—who varied on the spectrum of anti-religion or apolitical Sufis—loved the film, while those pro-Morsi, pro-Muslim Brotherhood curriculum, and conservatives opposed what they thought the film was doing. Neither could be further from Sara’s intention.

Sesso was one of many that stopped caring about what was happening on a national level and focused more on how that translated to day-to-day relationships, and specifically mentioned the Presidential Palace incident—demonstrators had gathered there to protest against Morsi. By evening, a small number of protesters at the gates began to attack with firebombs, throwing Molotov cocktails over the wall into the compound. Before the police made it to the scene, Morsi-supporters went to protect the palace. As Sesso recalled the incident:

We no longer believed the regime would change. Morsi was just a talking figure, sure he was backed by the Muslim Brothers, but at the end of the day they achieved nothing without the help of the army. The army were the puppeteers. The issue became about the people themselves, our friends, families, and neighbors. I saw family members standing on opposite sides, friends standing on opposite sides, even partners in companies. They were fighting, beating each other up, insulting one another—and for what?!

The incident at the Presidential Palace alone caused a great deal of strife; the clashes at the Presidential Palace were traumatic not only because of the level of violence but also because it tore Egyptian society apart (Matthies-Boon 2017). People who used to be friends, colleagues and family members had openly fought each other as relations were polarized along anti-and pro-Brotherhood lines. My interlocutors watched closely during this time, a few having voted for Morsi hoping things would be better. They found themselves critiquing Morsi on his authoritarian decrees, just like SCAF and Mubarak before him. “It does not matter who holds power, the regime is deeply corrupt and ultimately controlled by the military,” one argued. Conceiving politics as corrupt and pointless initiated during Morsi’s short-tenure, and further solidified after the military coup that happened next. Axeer thought to give the Muslim Brotherhood a chance but started to give up on political reform. What further aggravated my interlocutors during this time was their personal experience in interacting with friends, family, and strangers alike. There was a general sense of anxiety, concern, and judgments about ‘Muslimness;’ their biggest critique was an attitude imbued by Brotherhood members that *their* version of Islam was the only *right* one. Islam, to my interlocutors, was essentially a world view that empowered, fought against injustices, was spiritually soothing, and ultimately a process in becoming. All of which were undertones to the *Islamphobia* programming and *El Film da Haram*.

Exploiting religion in Egypt's political landscape made a lot of people lose interest in religion all together; my interlocutors found themselves disillusioned by "religious" figures whom they respected and would preach against values they believed in. This even played out by their mentor and friend, Fadel Soliman, who was a staunch Morsi supporter. Some of my interlocutors would get into debates with Soliman about how Morsi was no better than his predecessors, in fact some argued that Morsi was worse because his presidency deeply polarized Egyptian society. But according to my interlocutors, Soliman could not see beyond how the military was undermining Morsi's rule and how the media inaccurately painted the Muslim Brotherhood in an extremist light—even though many of my interlocutors agreed with this argument, it did not justify the police brutality that continued and the polarization that was established. After the military coup happened, my interlocutors were more surprised to see respected figures, like Amr Khaled, support the violence that ensued at Rabaa. Those who were fans of Mostafa Hosni and Moaz Masood, critiqued them for "staying quiet" when the massacre took place.

On April 28 2013, a group of revolutionary activists proposed a way forward for the anti-Morsi opposition. Calling their campaign *Tamarod* (rebel), the activists announced a petition drive to withdraw confidence from Morsi and demanded early presidential elections. It further called for a "million-man march" on June 30, 2013, the one-year anniversary of Morsi's inauguration, with the hope of ending his presidency by July 1. Meanwhile, Morsi supporters held a march at Rabaa al-Adawiya Square and al-Nahda Square. My Axeer interlocutors participated in neither, but had family and friends on both side of the spectrum. On the night of 3 July 2013, General Abdul Fatah al-Sisi declared the ousting of President Morsi, suspending

the constitution and appointed Chief Justice of the Supreme Constitutional Court, Adly Mansour, as the interim Head of State until new presidential elections. On July 8, security forces killed fifty-one Morsi supporters and wounded at least four hundred more outside the Republican Guard headquarters in Cairo. From that point forward, the Brotherhood viewed any negotiation with the new military backed regime as a betrayal of its martyrs. So rather than negotiating, the Brotherhood prepared for a prolonged confrontation with the regime. Those who gathered in Rabaa al-Adawiya Square and al- Nahda Square vowed to occupy these areas indefinitely. On August 14th, 2013 both squares were violently dispersed, killing hundreds of civilians and initiating the most violent crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood.

My interlocutors did not participate in the June 30th *Tamarod* campaign, believing that it was an orchestrated march supported by media, the police, and the army. This opinion was not unique to Axeer. Several of my street art contacts, many of whom are left leaning and self-proclaimed atheists, also did not participate. Although the push for early elections and Morsi's removal was strong, many observed that the June 30th protests went smoothly, which was unlike the violence that ensued during the Jan 25th uprising. Media personnel were augmenting the protests on June 30th 2013, while denying anything was happening on January 25, 2011. While many activists claimed that although they were betrayed by both the Muslim Brotherhood and the military, al-Sisi's record in youth, activist, and Muslim Brotherhood imprisonment made some regret the *tamarod* campaign.⁴⁷ At Axeer, they stayed put, observing what was happening. A few took it upon themselves to visit the Rabaa camp because they were being portrayed as "terrorists" on national television. Ahmed who was a street artist before joining Axeer had made

⁴⁷ <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/politics/2015/4/28/tamarod-leaves-legacy-of-regret-in-egypt>

a logo to comment on said media discrepancy. Fadel Soliman disappointed my interlocutors most. As an adamant supporter of Morsi, Soliman took center stage at Rabaa al-Adawiya. Such a public affirmation with a political problem by an Islamic scholar who promoted a pure and moderate view of Islam confused my interlocutors. On numerous occasions, Khalid, Axeer’s CEO, mentioned wanting to remove Islamophobia entirely from their YouTube Channel so they were not associated with a political figure since “Dr. Soliman is now tainted.”⁴⁸

IV. Moving Forward

In asking *Islamophobia*’s team members their thoughts on the production, I only received one positive comment. Ibrahim, Axeer’s co-founder and director of *Islamophobia*, said “It [*Islamophobia*] combined everything we imagined Axeer would be: make content that aligns with our values, leave a positive impact, and make a financial gain in the process.” Ibrahim appreciated that this show was conceived by them, executed a vision important to them, and also provided monetary gain. On the other hand, Khalid preferred removing this show from Axeer’s Youtube Channel. Sesso was ambivalent, “we worked on something we cared about at the time, but now I don’t have much to say about it.” His ambivalence to the program was connected to his ambivalence to religion in general. In 2016, three years after the military coup and four years after the release of *Islamophobia*, my interlocutors had come to terms with their shaken values. Every-time something would happen that went against Axeer’s humanistic worldview—a

⁴⁸ In writing this chapter, I relied heavily on Axeer’s YouTube page for access to their video productions. I listened to songs repeatedly, screen captured images from the videos, and watched the film and show I mention here several times. However, in revising this chapter, I noticed that *Islamophobia* was in fact removed from their page. I can not pinpoint when exactly, but it must have been sometime in later 2018 because I was engaging with those materials throughout 2018. I tried to ask Khalid why he finally decided to remove it and he did not give me a straight answer, rather, he joked about how “research has made me lose my sense of humor.”

worldview that overlapped with their productions on fairness, dignity, and love—it would crack a little part of them, leaving them depleted. A religion that they deemed positively was further exploited by people who flipped principles held by my interlocutors on its head.⁴⁹

On a typical work day at Axeer in 2016, Khalid was sitting in front of his computer and started a conversation about a new campaign spearheaded by Amr Khaled and Ali Gom’ a, Egypt’s former grand Mufti; the campaign aimed to restore the country’s ethics to lift up Egyptian society’s moral virtues. It focused on nine core principles: “love, mercy, cooperation, initiative, empathy, simplicity, justice, tolerance, equality, and perfection.” Khalid was reading about the campaign and immediately called its bluff—“this is bogus, basically it is saying that if we have better morals all of Egypt’s problems will be fixed. It is a distraction from the real issues, like the problem with traffic is a moral one, haha, not holding the state accountable for any of our problems. It is ironic how Sisi is now using religion and morals and no one seems to mind.” He went on to explain how Rabaa massacre was justified by these men using religious rhetoric, claiming that Sheikh Habib Ali Jifri, Amr Khaled, Ali Gomaa, and a fourth sheikh that Khalid called Omar Zeft⁵⁰ el Azhari, met with police officers before the dispersement and told them that killing the protesters would save the country and religion, while calling them “khawarej”—those who have deviated from the rightly guided path. He proceeded:

⁴⁹ Why their faith in God was tied inextricably with religious figures is something I still do not fully comprehend. But it is also not new and is becoming more and more of an issue among Muslims in America as well. I have only scratched the surface of this issue here; there is a deep seated religious ambivalence that my interlocutors are aware of and place blame Egypt’s political landscape. In a casual conversation with an interlocutor about this observation, he told me that “think of it this way, if you have a glass cup, everything that happened from 2011 onward slowly grazed our understanding, values, and beliefs, causing cracks in the cup until the glass shattered into pieces. We are all starting over, trying to find our way and re-assessing what we believe.” This dilemma needs further research and analysis.

⁵⁰ Zeft is not name but a benign insult that means rubbish; for more on how these religious figures gathered to justify the Rabaa Massacre see Bilal Fadl’s article here: <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2015/11/16/amr-khaled-heralding-sisis-newest-messenger>

See what religion can do! Yes, okay, religion is important, at least it is to me. But see how extreme you can push it? For the ikhwan [Muslim Brotherhood] it was the same, religion was a motive, they were always saying “we are doing this for our religion.” Salafis also use religion as a extreme pragmatic tool. Now they are on Sisi’s side and before they were with the ikhwan—hypocrites. They never oppose a leader. And you have Ali Goma’ who says it is okay to kill to protect our religion. Seriously? If your religion says that then I want no part of it. I don’t even call his religion Islam, I call it the Ali Goma’ religion. I very much doubt that him and I follow the same thing. My foundations are built on humanity—number one priority is a person’s life. So if a learned Sheikh comes and tells me to kill in order to protect our religion then hell no. Either this Sheikh is a hoax or this religion is wrong—what does that even mean, to protect a religion? But I believe in God and Islam as brought down by the Prophet so my response is disregard that sheikh and don’t bother with him. But a lot of my friends don’t see it that way. I have noticed a shift in the past several years. I know a lot of my friends now don’t pray; some are atheist; others are not practicing but searching. One started drinking. I’m not sure why this is happening now...but this is what Egypt does to you.

Axeer underwent a lot of changes and continued to do so; their ongoing shift in content and personal sensibilities were a reflection of a society in flux. The early years of Axeer’s inception coincided with years of political strife that amounted to media content that captured the feelings of a generation and their antagonistic relationship with politics and religion. Most people have retained their religious beliefs while many struggled to reconcile the messiness of politics and religion during Morsi’s short-lived tenure. They disdained authoritarian rule and governing in the name of religion and wished to enjoy personal liberties, social rights, and local self-rule. But with the military coup and its aftermath, many gave up on the idea of real systematic change. State media remained in the service of the regime rather than the people. Private satellite channels primarily serve the interests of the businesspeople that own them, most of whom were closely allied with the old Mubarak regime and seem to be adamantly behind the current regime of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. The media in Egypt are currently characterized by their seemingly unanimous support for the regime. This is coupled with a continuing tendency to

vilify the Muslim Brotherhood and a campaign to smear the activists of the January 25 revolution, while ignoring any human rights violations committed by the current regime and any efforts to counter them. Under these circumstances, it has become increasingly difficult for the slim minority that is trying to sing a tune different from that of the mainstream media to find a place for itself in these outlets.

Dissident voices moved online but online surveillance has increased in recent years. With a lot of the same issues that young people faced in 2011 percolating back to the surface, a newer generation of young Egyptians are struggling to find their place and voice. People like MT3 and his cohort are attempting to carve out online spaces to share their thoughts on the chaos surrounding them, similar to Axeer's efforts in their early years—only time will tell what MT3's trajectory will look like. In Axeer's rebranding and shift away from political, and revolutionary work, my interlocutors developed a more complex and subtle understanding of change—one that emulates what Raymond Williams calls "the long revolution," a process that is composite and multifaceted, and could give room for social and cultural transformation. As I demonstrate in the chapters to come, Axeer's potential for social and cultural transformation entails strategy, compromise, growth, and vision.

Chapter 2.

No Longer Political: Pragmatism in Self-Censorship

I. Pragmatic Attitudes in a Non-Political Space

When I first met Khalid in 2016, I asked him if Axeer still created political work. He answered my question laughing, almost surprised that I asked the question at all: “haha...no no, that ended a long time ago. Our last political project was in 2014 during the fake presidential elections. We have shifted our gears and are only focusing on causes.” When I followed-up with a why, he replied with the same tone of amusement: “It is not worth the risk. We won’t do much good if we end up in jail. Besides, we have enough problems to try and solve away from politics.” In Khalid’s goal to shift Axeer away from their political past into a more risk-free future, he has intentionally built a “non-political space” that is a result of “an outcome of action” (Candea 2011). Actions taken to secure this space are directly related to the types of projects they considered “risky” to produce. In thinking through my interlocutors’ move away from the political, I ask what is there to gain from doing so? And what does it mean to give up on the state knowing that the state has not let you go?

Their non-political label has provided moments of pause, and strategies around “risky” projects, often asking “should we or shouldn’t we?” Easily dismissed as self-censorship, a common practice among media practitioners in Egypt, has taken on additional layers of meaning when understood through a lens of pragmatism. For our purposes, pragmatism is mainly understood as an open, anti-dogmatic, pluralistic, and practice-oriented philosophy that stresses

live, dynamic experience over fixed principles (see James 1907, Dewey 1999, Addams 2002). Brian Massumi builds upon William James' classical work on pragmatism to argue that the function of the mind (thought, inquiry, experience) is not theoretical but practical—it consists in providing knowledge, thought, and feeling as a presupposition to better action. His theory on “speculative pragmatism” marks a creative philosophy that emphasizes pragmatism as a process, where present practice bears on future potential (Massumi 2011). Anthropologist Jessica Greenberg's (2014) work with Siberian activists defines pragmatism as “not merely an effect of seeing the world as it really is. Neither is it a cynical response motivated by the absence of hope...pragmatism itself is often an intensely felt set of commitments... a different register for configuring the possible in the face of uncertainty” (35). Building on these works and grounded in the ethnographic examples below, I define pragmatism as an attitude, and often employed as a decision-making tool used by Axeer's team to opt out of something for the gain of something else. As we will see below, to employ a pragmatic attitude is to consider the consequences, to imagine the definite differences that follow from each alternative, and to decide what will better meet their goals.

II. A Political Past

Axeer was founded alongside the Egyptian uprising in 2011, and their earlier productions earned them the reputation of being “champions of the revolution.” As discussed in the last chapter, their work from 2011 to 2013 was self-expressive, emotive, and politically engaged. During these first two years the political situation was still new, unpredictable, and transitory. Axeer was spontaneously responding, reflecting, and adjusting. Mohammed Morsi won the 2012 elections

but held a short one-year-tenure before more Egyptians took to the streets, on June 30th, 2013, demanding his removal and an early presidential election. This new wave of protests deeply polarized the country. Those wanting to remove Morsi gathered in Tahrir Square, while those in support of Morsi gathered at Rabaa al-Adawiya Square and al-Nahda Square. Some at Axeer initially thought it was worth giving Morsi a chance but quickly gave up on him, citing his incompetence as president; while many others never supported Morsi. However, no one at Axeer participated in the anti-Morsi protests claiming that they were orchestrated, “both the media and the police were supporting it,” and “no one got beat or shot like on Jan25th, this was a hoax,” I was told time and again. A few went to Rabaa because they had friends there and wanted to see what was happening for themselves since “the media was tarnishing their reputation,” one interlocutor told me. But no one was in obvious support of either protest. It was around this time that my interlocutors began to get disillusioned by Egypt’s political situation.

On July 3rd, 2013, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, a military general under Morsi, deposed Morsi. Pro-Morsi protesters continued their encampment at Rabaa for weeks after Morsi’s removal; they broke their fast and prayed together during Ramadan, and celebrated Eid with sweets and water slides for the children. They were adamant not to leave the grounds until Morsi returned. However, on August 14th, 2013, Egyptian security forces, under the command of general Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, raided the two camps of protesters. According to Human Rights Watch, a minimum of 817 people, more likely at least 1,000, died during the dispersal,⁵¹ while the Egyptian Health Ministry reported a lesser death count.⁵² Several of my interlocutors at Axeer

⁵¹ Human Rights Watch Report "All According to Plan." 2013-08-17. Retrieved 02/06/2019.

⁵² <https://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2013/08/16/health-ministry-raises-death-toll-of-wednesdays-clashes-to-638/>

had friends, and relatives, who were killed that day. As such, they do not deem July 30th as a “second revolution” like many Egyptians do, but mark the day as an orchestrated, bloody, military coup.

During the fallback to Egypt’s authoritarian regime, politics (*siyasa*) developed a restricting definition. In the words of one of my interlocutors, “politics” is anything government related, specifically *al-sulta* (those in power), which in Egypt’s case is the military. Anything that is said, done, or acted in opposition to or in support of the faction in power, is “political.” When engaging in social criticism, one can blame people (*al-sha’b*), society (*al-moktama’*), living conditions (*ahwal al-balad*), or the economy (*al-iqtisad*) with no repercussions, but one cannot place blame on the ruling power. The same interlocutor provided the following hypothetical example:

If you are asking ‘why did the dollar price increase?’ A political statement would be ‘because the army are thieves and are ruining our economy.’ A nonpolitical statement would be ‘because people are lazy and are not working hard enough; or, oftentimes, a conspiracy theory is used as an explanation: ‘America hates us.’

He explained that none of the three statements are factual but even in lay conversations, *kalam fi al-siyasa* (political talk) always involves *al-hukuma* (the government). In moving forward, Abeer removed *al-hukuma* from the equation—only to have *al-hukuma* seep into their lives in very subtle and pervasive ways. Overall, my interlocutors have accepted their current social order, not resisting what Jacques Rancière defines as the “distribution of the sensible... a system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it,” (2004, 12) that was imposed after the 2013 military coup. There are obvious things that they can not say, do,

or show in their media work. They metaphorically signed the anti-politics contract and shifted gears to figure out other ways to make media that could be impactful. As an ethnographer, discussing the current political situation, or what happened in the past, was challenging. When I asked about Jan25th or the Rabaa massacre during interviews, I received mixed signals, long pauses, shifting movements in seats, deep sighs and eye aversions, and a lot of pushback—it was a topic of much discomfort. Puzzled, a few interlocutors answered with the question, “why do you want to know?” And a couple cryptically replied with “don’t you see what’s happening?”⁵³ without elaboration, assuming I understood what they meant. A few were willing to discuss the revolution honestly, although with some trepidation, and several others avoided the topic altogether, claiming “what is the point?” I changed my question and instead asked about Axeer during the time of the uprising. One person shared the following:

The three years from 2011-2013 were magical (*sehria*), and I know it will never happen again. We started making videos to effect change (*ne’asar ‘al nas*). There was no plan in place, it was all very random. We did it because we loved it; it wasn’t a job. There was momentum in Egypt, everyone was talking, sharing, dreaming, but most importantly everyone was listening. All the artists, new talents, musicians that came out during this time had a platform, and we all rode the revolutionary wave; it was the good kind, the kind that really wanted to see things change for the better...but then our generation got fucked (*itfashakh*).

⁵³ Could mean any number of things. In 2016 when I started by research, both Egypt and Axeer were undergoing a transition. al-Sisi won the 2014 presidential elections and in the two years following he began oppressing dissident voices—primarily Muslim Brotherhood affiliates, and those who critiqued him and the military. There was also a few cases of citizen-complaint arrests, such as Ahmed Nagy’s case. Nagy was a writer who was sentenced to two years in jail for “violating public modesty.” What was shocking about this case was how it went against the constitution. Article 67 of the Egyptian constitution states that you can not jail artists. Meanwhile, Italian doctoral student, Giulio Regeni, working on labor rights, was found tortured and killed. There were several cases of government raids of phones and apartments in downtown Cairo, with many more protestors arrested for breaking the “anti-protest law” (protests were organized against the handing over of two Egyptian islands to Saudi Arabia). 2016 was not a stable year.

They paused and started sketching, and then gestured towards my recorder. I turned it off.

When they were ready, I turned the recorder back on, and asked if they could explain why they wanted it off:

This is not a safe time. I don't know if it'll ever be safe. Maybe I am overly cautious... everybody here [at Axeer] knows. We have seen each other at these places, but we don't talk about it, not anymore anyway... You know, I started forgetting the details, I think this is intentional—to have us forget. But I can't really talk about it either. They are things I lived; it became part of me and affected me. If you were there, then you would understand, but if you didn't live it, then it doesn't matter. I don't know what to say about it now. You know, sometimes, I wish none of this happened. But, I remind myself that it is not so bad...at least I am okay...

As political events in Egypt unfolded my interlocutors slowly started distancing themselves from any type of politics to not jeopardize the company. In the years following the military coup, they saw friends, cartoonists,⁵⁴ satirists,⁵⁵ and other media makers arrested. They learned that a new strategy had to be adopted if they were to stay safe and continue doing the work they were passionate about. Adjusting to the sudden halt in self-expression took time, especially after three years of saying and doing whatever they wanted. The above interviewee compared this moment to someone who garnered so much adrenaline after a long hike: “you reach the top of a cliff, or mountain...it is euphoric and everything you imagine is within reach.” But in the midst of catching your breaths from all the excitement, “you are dragged down and all of that euphoria is taken away, and you are back to square one and must stay there. Personally, now I think screw

⁵⁴ Islam Gawish, a young cartoonist, was arrested for a cartoon of al-Sisi: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/01/world/middleeast/egypt-islam-gawish-cartoonist.html#story-continues-2>

Amr Nohan, a law student, was arrested for posting image of al-Sisi wearing Micky Mouse ears: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3367182/Egyptian-law-student-22-jailed-three-years-posting-image-President-Sisi-wearing-Mickey-Mouse-ears-Facebook.html>

⁵⁵ Bassem Youssef, a political satirist, who ultimately escaped charges pending against him: <https://www.npr.org/2017/03/19/520708188/egyptian-political-satirist-bassem-youssef-on-media-and-the-arab-spring>

the revolution (*yekhribeet al-thawra*) and now am thinking long term—work, save money, and if possible leave the country.”

As an ode to their revolutionary aspirations, Axeer produced one last “political song” called *I7na Geel Wa Into Geel* that bid farewell to any sort of political engagement.



Figure 36: *I7na Geel Wa Into Geel* Introduction

Piano beats introduce a record turntable that is spinning on one half of the screen, the other half is a static circular haze, setting the tone for an ambiguous future. In a medium shot frame Zap appears in the center, eyes closed, skin dark with white specs floating on his face. A post production technique in this music-video is the multiple layers that overlay people’s faces and

bodies as they morph objects, images, and other videos. Colors and patterns fade in and out tinting the frame, meanwhile Zap's background color, and graphic, changes per second. Each second the layered images, moving objects, videos, colors, and graphics also move to the beat. The video is full of political references that appear in split seconds and could easily be missed: Handhalah, a cartoon of a ten-year old boy who was forced to leave Palestine, an image of American civil rights icon Malcolm X, the battle of the camel that took place during the Egyptian uprising, and a flash of Sheikh Emad Effat smiling. Sheikh Emad Effat, an Islamic Jurisprudence scholar who opposed the Mubarak regime and fully supported the revolution, was shot and killed during protests.⁵⁶ Lightening, explosion, fire, and crowds of unidentified protestors fighting with security guards all travel through Zap and other peoples bodies.



Figure 37: Screen shot from *I7na Geel Wa into Geel*

⁵⁶ More on Sheikh Effat's death: <http://www.egyptindependent.com/remembering-sheikh-emad-effat/>

Only I control my thoughts and my limitations.
Yet, ownership is not enough to tame my thinking—
Or support me when I am helpless, or prevent me from dreaming.

In silence, I tried to build the walls of my city,
But your world caused me despair, like a dagger in my chest.
Hours of despair will guarantee Tomorrow's wound,
Reversing my hope into negative energy.

Supporting all thefts, taking away all rights.
Stopping myself from rebelling and shouting NO!
Choosing your path is a promise and an agreement—
To sign the guarantee and swear allegiance.

I'm sorry, I won't.
I won't help in walking away from my dream.
Kill everyone who witnessed the revolution.
Thinking out of the box is uncommon—
What is common is a prescribed idea:
Taming the wild, and chaining the living,
Deleting Tomorrow from your dictionary.
[Tomorrow] coming regardless if you're with me.

A clear lie from the beginning to the end.
You are the opposite of my actions.
You are the past.
You accept the loss of rights, as if it were normal to have none.
The difference in age and thinking in the 'free' generation,
Is like your love of life and choosing the worse
We're a generation trying, a generation changing.
And you're a generation that snuffed-out freedom—
You stole our hope while killing those who complained.
We are dead either way so let's loudly say—

We own the streets,
the revolution belongs to the revolutionaries.
And if the free remain silent, they are a disgrace.
The distance between us is too great, with a gash in between.
A generation that refuses silence and yells:
No!
No to silence!
No to fear!
Our no damns your choices that deny our realities.

Our no instills patience in those afraid.
Our no destroys forts, even if they were mountains.
You'll be gone, despite your power.
We are the light of truth in the darkness of doubts.
We are the light of truth in the darkness of doubts.

We own the streets,
the revolution belongs to the revolutionaries.
And if the free remain silent, they are a disgrace.
The distance between us is too great, with a gash in between.
A generation that refuses silence and yells:
No!
No to silence!
No to fear!
Our no damns your choices that deny our realities.
Our no instills patience in those afraid.
Our no destroys forts, even if they were mountains.
You'll be gone, despite your power.
We are the light of truth in the darkness of doubts.
We are the light of truth in the darkness of doubts.



Figure 37: Details from *I7na Geel Wa Into Geel*



Figure 38: Details from *I7na Geel Wa Into Geel* (2)

The political turmoil that my interlocutors witnessed and experienced motivated this production, which was created in response to Egypt's 2014 Presidential elections and released on the first day of elections. Even though it was produced to comment on local frustrations, the video also produced a "mediascape" (Appadurai 1990) that could speak to the plight of young people in the Arab Middle East and elsewhere. *I7na Geel wa Into Geel* situates young Egyptians in an ongoing struggle for freedom and justice that plays out within and beyond Egypt's political borders, as clearly demonstrated by the inclusion of Malcolm X in several frames. Malcolm X is a figure admired by two of my interlocutors, both of whom wear a ring the same as his—a star and a crescent—one is married, and the ring is his wedding band. An affinity with the historical Black struggle in the United States is part of my interlocutors' consciousness; this simple editing ploy is a nod in solidarity to the Black Lives Matter movement, which everyone at Axeer supports.

Meanwhile, deliberately including Handhala represents the injustices faced by young people in the Arab World. The character is depicted as a young boy, with his back turned to the viewer and his hands clasped behind him. He was created in 1969, to memorialize the moment when Naji al-Ali left Palestine in 1948, at the age of ten. Handhala's ragged and dirty appearance, along with his spiky, unkempt hair, situates him as a child living in a Palestinian refugee camp—but his posture, position, and clenched hands present him as a proud, steadfast, resisting boy. Handhala has become anchored in secular Arab cultural and political identity, and Naji al-Ali is now an icon of the Arab secular left (Haugbølle 2013).

Police shielding themselves and charging in front of unknown assailants is repeated several times—we do not know in what country this is taking place. Futuristic at times with its graphics, colors, and animation, the music video pauses on moments in time that aren't dated and

could be either past events or a warning for the future. Unharnessed potential reaches an explosive blast with ethereal cloud formations from a rocket launch, meanwhile a mushroom cloud threatens this generation's very existence, dreams, and aspirations. All of the moving images and video montages pass through Zap, and the other people. The images are never in the background; rather, they are experiential and embodied; they offer proof that minds and bodies are affected by the injustices happening around them.

At the time of my research, *I7na Geel Wa Into Geel* was everyone's favorite production, including Zap, who upon my asking why, replied: "because I had something I wanted to say at the time, and I said it." Others claimed that this song "represented us." In producing this video, Axeer was lamenting the loss of what they thought would be real political change. They believed the 2014 presidential election was a hoax,⁵⁷ and ultimately an insult to those who died, and are imprisoned, as a result of the January 25th revolution. With this song, Axeer ended its relationship with politics, while citing a general feeling of "fed-upness" with what was happening. My interlocutors at other media production companies shared similar sentiments—no one was doing political work anymore for three main reasons: *mesh mestahla* (it is not worth the risk), *kulina zih'na men al-siyasa* (we are all fed up with politics), and *mafeesh haga hatitghayar* (it is a mute topic for change). As Axeer's executive producer, Tarek, told me: "every Jan 25, Mohamed Mahmoud, Port Said, and even Rabaa anniversary would come and go and we

⁵⁷ Election results indicated that Abdel Fattah al-Sisi won against leftist opponent Hamden Sabahi by 96.1%, claiming that just under 47.5% of Egypt's 53 million eligible voters participated. However, many of al-Sisi's critics argued that this figure was inflated. Many polling stations appeared empty throughout election week, despite the introduction of a last-minute public holiday that extended voting days by a third day. I had spent the summer of 2014 with my grandparents. Their television was practically an extended family member, omnipresent and always interjecting itself into our conversations. New channels showed happy, and dancing, Egyptians in the streets. On the second day of the elections, I decided to go to *Khan el Khaleeli*, such a commute would have taken me two and half hours due to traffic but resulted in a commute of less than thirty minutes. The streets were empty. Meanwhile, national television channels were showing crowded streets, traffic jams, and women dancing in anticipating of election results. This is one of many reasons why my interlocutors do not trust televised news.

would not release anything in remembrance of the events, to not influence our position. We shut the door on anything political. At least now I can work. Maybe it is selfish, but it's something I can guarantee." Tarek was speaking about Axeer as an entity—in their newly established non-political space discussions on current events or anything *hukuma* related was scarce. However, when the need arose several of my interlocutors took to Facebook as a platform to share some of their political musings, but it rarely ever made its way back to the office.

Axeer slowly started to restructure the company as a media service business that highlights “social causes.” But it was not a clear or easy shift, and it disappointed many. Guaranteeing clients was challenging due to their revolutionary reputation, and they understood that they were not providing a primary service, like food or retail. Axeer started pitching themselves as a company that produces quality work with low budgets. They slowly built a clientele. During my time in the field they worked with several companies, like Pepsi, General (a cleaning detergent), and Juhayna (a beverage company). My interlocutors were disappointed that this was the type of work they were producing. Despite the tension and stress commercial work caused at Axeer, they understood that in the long-term it would provide the stability, predictability, and routine that would enable the company to create content that might actually make a difference. Every year since, they have been able to add on a new client that shared their vision. Whereas before they primarily worked with UN Women, Axeer now have branched out to UNICEF, Misr el Kheir, and HELM, all organizations that promote social causes.

Since the 2013 military coup, Axeer has been working towards a method of doing and making that guarantees them visibility and presence. My interlocutors are motivated to keep a stable, safe community, and they reject risky work not because they are afraid of the government,

but because they are afraid of fracturing the community they have built. As Zap once told me “we can say whatever we want but also be willing to face potential consequences.” Needless to say, there are moments when my interlocutors are afraid, but fear is not always the motivating factor against certain kinds of work. The examples of not pursuing a project that I will discuss next are directed, instead, toward maintaining a cohesive collective and work environment that will not be threatened.

II. Pragmatic Actions During Moments of Uncertainty

In moving away from political work that could risk their company, my interlocutors developed a sense of pragmatism that allowed for critical reflection of themselves, their work, and ways to continue growing under difficult conditions. Through this newly found pragmatic attitude was a way to enact their agency, and establish themselves beyond categories like quiescence and resistance. I noted examples of critical reflection and deliberation that took place several times while in the field. I will discuss one example of state censorship and three examples of self-censorship below, all of which are fragmented. One was based on responses to the question, “is there something you want to work on but can’t?” Others relate to a creative meeting I strolled into, and snippets of conversations I overheard. Final decisions were often made haphazardly, in isolation or in a small group and announced later if people were specifically asked. I observed a few “should we/shouldn’t we” deliberations but mostly found out about decisions after following up. Reasons were pieced together after the fact, with the same answer given by Khalid, the CEO

—“I want to focus on building Axeer.” In each of these examples, one can see pragmatic attitudes that prioritized working on growing, and bettering, Axeer.

i. Censorship by the State: The Eid Movie (*Film al Eid*)

U.N Women Egypt approached Axeer to produce a short film about sexual harassment⁵⁸ that is prevalent in large crowds, particularly during joyous holidays like Eid. The film was narrated from the point of view of the female victim and told in fragments. Its approach was not subtle; it was obvious that a young woman was harassed, but we do not know to what extent. The film relied on a suspenseful buildup, with the same events told from different angles using extreme close ups. The premise of the film was simple: a young woman was walking in downtown Cairo, on Eid, and finds herself surrounded by a group of young men who proceed to grope her. She then escaped the circle of men into a building where she stayed a while. Finally, she picked up her headphones, got up and fixed her headscarf, and looked towards the doorway, where several men were waiting. “No,” she calmly stated, and the screen goes black. The film ended with a message to viewers: *Don't play a role in this film, and don't let this be every Eid's scenario. Harassment is a crime punishable by law, but the law is not enough. We need to take action. Our silence makes matters worse.* The film's conclusion provoked debate amongst the production team and UN Women. The director thought it unrealistic that after such an attack a woman would stand up and walk into the abyss of men, publicizing what had happened, which was how the film ended. UN Women said that publicizing these crimes was the point and wanted to encourage

⁵⁸ Second project on harassment. In 2014 Axeer produced a music video that mainly highlighted how no one interferes to stop it when it happens: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MPjt0HFoe5I>

victims to speak up and feel empowered in doing so. Axeer settled for the ending the client wanted.



Figure 39: Screen shot from *Film El Eid*

This film was released on Eid al-Fitr day 2016, by which time I had left Cairo. While in the field, I worked on translating the script into English subtitles. Once it was uploaded to Axeer's Facebook page, I saved the film and followed its release online. It had garnered nearly sixteen thousand views in the first few hours it was uploaded, and had the potential to go viral. However, twelve hours later the film was removed from all of Axeer's social media sites as well as U.N Women without a word. A few days after the film was removed, my interlocutors started asking questions in the WhatsApp group. Khalid simply responded by saying a government official asked UN Women to remove the film and then UN Women asked Axeer to do the same. Upon another visit to Cairo I tried to press for answers. By then they had had several conference calls with UN Women where they were told that a high government official stated the film should be removed on the grounds that it would tarnish Egypt's image abroad. My interlocutors were unclear to how this film would do that since they believed that Egypt's reputation was already tarnished.

One year later, when I went to visit while writing this dissertation, a business developer who works at UN Women was visiting Axeer. Khalid asked him if he knew anything about why *Film el Eid* was removed. He said that when his boss saw it, she was not surprised about the removal because it depicted all the men as "zombies" and "animals." Although this film was approved by UN delegates, who understand the parameters of their work because they are directly overseen by the Egyptian government, it was not until the release of the film, and its

gaining thousands of views on Eid, that an external Egyptian government official intervened.⁵⁹

This speaks volumes to how the Egyptian state is trying to control the image of their society.

“Tarnishing Egypt’s reputation” was an accusation used in several other cases: a popular singer had joked about the cleanliness of the Nile,⁶⁰ Aljazeera journalists were charged for highlighting human rights abuses against Morsi supporters,⁶¹ and in 2008, during Hosni Mubarak’s reign, an Egyptian-American sociologist and political activist was accused of the same thing.⁶²

“Tarnishing Egypt’s reputation” is a common accusation against those who are advocates of human rights (Néfissa et al 2005).

Although censorship is a serious problem in Egypt, it is also not a new problem. However, it was new to Axeer. In the art-world, Egyptian authorities justify censorship of works of art that address any of these three topics: politics, religion, and sex, citing the need to protect the public order and public morals (Ezzat, al-Haqq, Fazulla 2014). Meanwhile, Egyptian journalists are the ones most experienced with the censorship apparatus, and have learned how not to cross the red lines of authority (see El-Bendary 2010; Elmasry 2012). Journalist, Yasmine El Rashidi wrote

⁵⁹ UN organizations in Egypt operate under direct supervision from governmental entities. Axer is one removed from this direct link, still claiming that they do not work for the government directly. One of the first projects Axeer worked on with UNICEF was a documentary about social workers. Axeer only produced this project, the creative team did not come up with its idea. The director they hired to film the documentary submitted videos drastically different from the videos he added to his showreel. In the directors cut testimonies made by social workers and families alike against the government were kept, meanwhile the version that was made public and provided to the agency edited out these statements and kept the focus on the hard work and dedication evident by social workers, while highlighting a successful case in which they were able to help a family. In speaking with producer responsible for this project, he simply said “anything that has to do with ‘rights’ and human rights in particular is heavily scrutinized.”

⁶⁰ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43217483>

⁶¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/29/egypt-to-charge-20-al-jazeera-journalists-damaging-countrys-reputation>

⁶² <https://latimesblogs.latimes.com/babylonbeyond/2008/08/human-rights-ad.html>

this of her experience with censorship: “In all my years of writing, it had always been clear what could and what couldn’t be addressed, even when the difference between those things shifted as the political story changed. There was still a margin for challenging the status quo, to subtly suggest what could not be said — that was mostly a matter of timing and venue.”⁶³ It is this understanding of timing, venue, and knowing where the margin is to challenge the status quo that Axeer is lacking.

To say that those in power have instilled fear through censorship and threats of imprisonment dismisses the grey, the pauses, and the variables that are weighed in decision making. Though this was an isolated incident, it was a profound one and one that my interlocutors hoped to learn from in regards to their visual storytelling techniques. In a follow-up interview with Hamdy, Axeer’s Chief Operations Officer, he reflected on the removal of this film and noted, “we spent a lot of time discussing what we could have done differently. Now we are working on covering potential controversial issues in a subtle and nuanced way.” The issue in this example is confronting the unpredictability of the regime, especially since Axeer thought they were in the clear having gotten approval from UN Women. However, their pragmatism is seen through their process of trying to figure out why they were asked to remove the film and how to avoid the same pitfall in the future. One strategy they have employed is opting to not get credit for work done, which is the example we turn to next.

⁶³ See New York Times article for full article: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/08/opinion/sunday/egypt-censorship-crowdsourcing.html>

ii. Doing the Work Without Taking the Credit

One question I asked all my interlocutors during our formal interviews was “is there something you want to produce and can’t?” Answers varied, with several saying no and a couple honestly sharing a project they thought was risky. Omar, one of Axeer’s producers, provided an unexpected answer: “no, but I did work on a project where we decided not to credit ourselves.”

Near the beginning of 2015, Axeer was commissioned by Al-Arabi network (ATN) to produce twenty music videos from several Arab countries. Amr, as project producer, chose the musicians and hired a production team in each country. While working on these videos, the same network asked for an additional three videos, separate of the initial bundle, that focused solely on Yasser Elmanawahly, a popular Egyptian singer known for “speaking truth to power,” for his revolutionary spirit, and for politically charged songs in which he ridicules and chastises the Egyptian government (and those who support it). ATN and Axeer’s initial contract allowed Axeer to publish the music videos on their YouTube channel six months after ATN released the video. However, for Elmanawahly’s songs they agreed to produce them only if Axeer’s name was not linked to the videos. According to Omar, they agreed to work on the project because they believed in the message, but they did not want to be associated with Elmanawahly’s work.

Cautionary measures were taken while working on these videos: they shot and edited the music videos in Jordan, utilizing their connection to production teams that resulted from the initial ATN videos. Omar returned with the edited footage to Egypt, where they were colored and rendered at Post Office, a post production studio that was part of Axeer until they started their own company, and then sent

the videos to ATN and Elmanawahly. As these three music videos stand,⁶⁴ Axeer's production team are not named in the credits,⁶⁵ neither is Axeer's logo displayed. I was initially unsure if I could disclose this example since they went to great lengths not to publicize their work with Elmanawahly. Omar assured me, however, that it should not be a problem, chuckling as he said "Besides, Elmanawahly is still around." Meaning, that even after these three songs were aired on satellite television as well as Elmanawahly's YouTube channel, he has not been harassed by government officials or arrested. Omar presumes that since Elmanawahly's is in the clear then they are too, thereby allowing me to share this example.

iii. Not Pursuing a Project Due to a Present Threat

Axeer's creative team pays attention to the relationship between text and image, but they do not have a formula they apply consistently to all projects. By text, I mean the narration in a short film, lyrics to a song, or the dialogue in a video. By image, I mean the visuals accompanying the story, which are always in motion. In most of Axeer's work, text and image are harnessed together in a symbiotic relationship, one always dependent on the other to materialize the storyline. In *I7na Geel wa Into Geel*, the lyrics are powerful and accusatory, and the visuals specify a localized struggle that pits the police and armed forces against Egyptian youth, all within a larger, transnational context of resistance. I make this point to introduce an example of self-censorship in which a creative team member, Bassem (who later moved to London to pursue his film-making career), thought of subtle and indirect ways to comment on "current absurdities" that nonetheless broached the topic of politics. Text and image play a vital role in this regard. Bassem, a young man in his twenties, is a pharmacy school dropout turned filmmaker. He has a lively sense of humor, which is on display in *Mawazy*, a series of videos that

⁶⁴You can watch Elmanawahly's music videos here:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KmZnhCfvEAW>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M4plfarhIys>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OdWX3tOnYOI>

⁶⁵ Unlike this video that is part of ATN's commission: <https://vimeo.com/239325246>

would broadcast “parallel news” that comments, in a comedic and sarcastic tone, on the “absurdities happening in Egypt.” One skit would indirectly address the plight of political prisoners, who are numbered in the thousands by 2016.⁶⁶ Bassem planned to film this skit at the Zoo and talk about how animals are caged and ill-treated, simultaneously commenting on Egypt’s prison system, prisoners, and how they are treated like caged animals. After designing the logo and writing some sketches, he decided not to move forward. He reported this decision at a creative meeting, noting that a sarcastic performance troupe (of teenagers), *Atfal Shawaree*’ was recently arrested, and released on bail.⁶⁷ “The government is more serious now,” he said. “They aren’t joking; we may have lost the window to make this online show.”

During this same meeting, Bassem also told us of a police-harassment incident he had recently experienced. He went to the airport to pick up a non-Egyptian friend who was visiting for the first time. Not knowing that waiting for visitors inside the arrival hall was no longer allowed, he made his way inside. A security guard stopped him and asked for his national identification card. Bassem refused to give it, innocently explaining that he just wanted to greet his friend. He made his way outside and tried to find a clear window view to wave to his friend when she arrived. Then, a secret police officer ordered him to follow him inside to speak with the commanding officer. Confused, Bassem accompanied the officer inside, where he was asked, “why are you raising your voice and causing a problem? When an officer asks for your ID, you give it to him.” Smiling nervously, Bassem gave him his ID and explained again that he just

⁶⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/14/magazine/how-egypts-activists-became-generation-jail.html>
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/egypt/report-egypt/>
<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/egypt>

⁶⁷ <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/210413/Egypt/Politics-/Prosecution-appeals-Atfal-Shawaree-band-members-re.aspx>

wanted see his friend upon arrival. Inspecting his ID, the officer asked him about his education; his card indicated that he was a student at pharmacy school in Zagazig (a city in lower Egypt, situated east of the Nile Delta, forty miles from Cairo). “Do you know they are all *ikhwan*?” the officer asked him. Bassem said he left pharmacy school years ago and is now a director, adding that maybe a lot of people at this school were *Ikhwan*, but he wasn’t. He paused to tell us how happy he was that he had shaved his beard and was not wearing his bandana that day and continued. Bassem eventually got his ID back and was allowed to go wait for his friend. A few days later, however, the police called him a few times and then raided his home in Zagazig. His mother, the only one there, was terrified. Bassem actually lived in an apartment in Cairo and has not updated his ID to include its address, saying “no one knows my address in Cairo, so I am good.”

Bassem’s project was an in-house original idea and not for a client. A common question asked of such projects is: *what will Axeer gain from doing them and what are its potential costs?* The answer, in this case, was not hard to calculate. But, Bassem’s comment that “we may have lost the window to produce this show” deserves pause. Bassem presumed that since the performance troupe was arrested then the government was making its rounds arresting those who are, in this case, “inciting protest and insulting state institutions.” What Bassem’s presumption tells us is how my interlocutors keep in mind the timing of *when* a project like *Mawazy* would be worth doing (for Axeer or independently). Especially in light of the fact that Cairookee, an independent music band known for their anti-establishment revolutionary songs, was not accosted two months prior when they released their song *Akher Oghnia* (Last Song). Ironic, really, the title of their song and song lyrics forecasts that *if this will be our last song, then I will still sing about freedom*. They blame both the regime and society for uniting against change and

upholding fear to imprison peoples' mind. Cairokee ends their song with a bold ultimatum: *I will never sell my dream or the martyrs before us, take me to your prisons to see our youth. Those [imprisoned] are the real men.* Needless to say *Akher Oghnia* reached views in the millions shortly after it was released.

Meanwhile, near the end of 2016, Ahmed, Axeer's business developer and occasional cinematographer, shot a music video (outside of Axeer) for Young Pharoz, an independent music band. *Khedt el Visa*⁶⁸ (I Received the Visa) features one band member from Young Pharoz rapping a social and political commentary, while standing in front of a large wall of projected moving images gathered from mainstream Egyptian media, with each lyric subverting what is being shown on television as this young man presents reality to be.

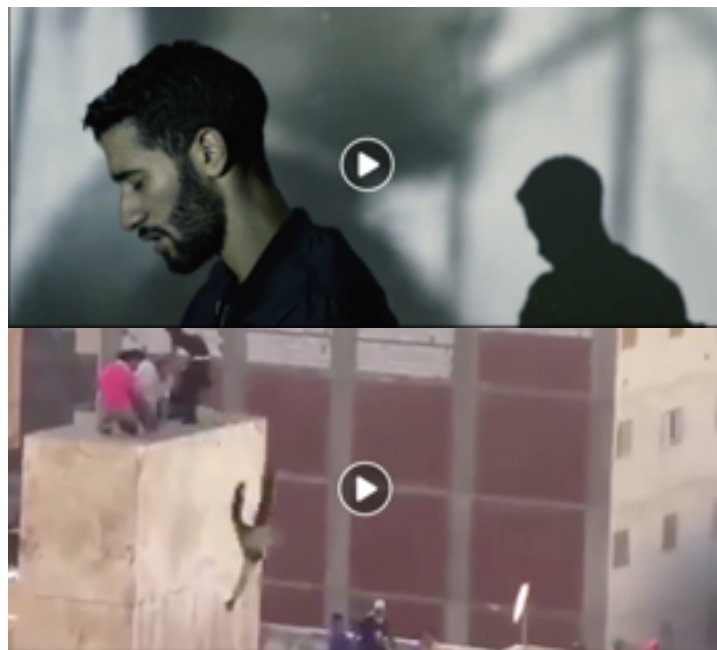


Figure 40: Screen shot from *Khedt el Visa*

⁶⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/YoungPharoz/videos/1531524140209124/>

Ahmed showed a few of us, at differing times, this video before it was released. Those who've seen it were thoroughly impressed by it. Ahmed had told me that they were not going to release it until "it was the right time." The right time turned out to be January 17, 2017, where you can find the song on Young Pharoz' Facebook page with the caption *send my regards to the country and its enforced laws*.⁶⁹ Bassem acknowledged this, "I don't mind sitting on the project until the right time comes. It doesn't help that they think I am *ikhwan*⁷⁰ either," he commented in a later conversation. If Bassem was not accused of being *ikhwan*, would he have changed his mind? Perhaps it would have altered his calculations a bit. But overall, tracking "the right time" is a very elusive task, a task that some of my interlocutors have yet to figure out. Humor and sarcasm, timing, double speak, and nuanced aesthetic, are all tricks that many in the Egyptian cultural industry have been doing for years under former president Hosni Mubarak (Scott 1990). Theatre performers and filmmakers were notorious about talking about key issues and couching the controversial parts in double speak (Ruocco 2005). What we are seeing here is how a group of young people who have had no previous experience in this arena, thought for a brief moment in time that anything was possible, learn to pause and shift gears.

⁶⁹ سلملي علي البلد و علي القوانين المحطوبة

⁷⁰ Officially, *Ikhwan* is a member of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). The term, I argue, has shifted in meaning in the years after the Egyptian revolution. Before 2011, it was not a pervasive term used even to describe someone who is a Muslim Brother. It only ever referenced a political party that often won parliamentary seats. It is common that in every Egyptian household someone was *Ikhwan* or that they have interacted with the Brotherhood, in schools, hospitals, or charity work, in their life time. The organization started as a grassroots effort to provide services to Egyptians that the government failed to provide. However, after the uprising the term was used more to label individuals and their political affiliations—especially as MB members ran for office. After Morsi won 2012 presidential elections, anyone who supported Morsi was called *Ikhwan*, even if they were not an official member. After the coup, MB was deemed a terrorist organization. Therefore, accusing someone as *Ikhwan* ultimately ties them to terrorism. Using the term *Ikhwan* became the Egyptian government's scape-goat. In lay conversations, I have often heard *Ikhwan* be used as an insult—*don't be like the ikhwans*—referencing a blind following, inflexible mindset.

iv. Deliberating Over a Potential Risky Project

After spending several months at Axeer and visiting similar production companies, I thought of a collaborative video project that would document Axeer's production process. Midway through my research I presented myself as a client to Axeer, wrote a brief that dictated parameters of the project and sent it to the project manager to decide with the business developer and CEO if it would move forward. Once they approved the project, it moved on to the creative director and was added to their work list. In this brief, I laid out a presentation that depicted Axeer as a unique production house that employs media to raise awareness about societal issues, and produce content that is alternative to that shown on mainstream Egyptian television. This work does not happen without a series of challenges, disappointments, and external influences—all of which is confronted by a fun sense of humor, trust in one another, and passion. I explained that the goal of this project was to create a collaborative experience that might ground key aspects of my thesis in reciprocal work.

I did not attend the meetings that discussed this project, so as not to influence the outcome. However, at one point I was asked to attend as a “research source” and was asked questions about my research and about other companies that might be represented in my project. All of this was to help the creative team decide if they wanted to include other companies and broaden the video or keep it focused on Axeer. As these conversations were taking place, Zap wrote a new song that he wanted to produce. This song, like *I7na Geel Wa into Geel*, was thought of as “representative” of Axeer—it highlighted censorship, injustices, spoke truth to power, commented on how religious figures have become marionettes, how Friday *khutbas* (sermons) are unified and approved by the state, about good and evil and needing to stand up for what is

right. Motivated by this new song, the creative team decided to tailor the video around it. The final treatment was presented to Khalid, CEO, Tarek, executive producer, and myself, client.

The longline was as follows: “A real life thriller that follows the journey behind the scenes of a critical project that speaks out for Egyptian youth in an era of censorship. Will they succeed or not? The question is left unanswered.” The video was conceived as a short documentary showcasing important phases in the life cycle of a critical project for Axeer. It would move from the birth of the project idea all the way to its completion. Throughout the process, team members would share their struggles, thoughts, and insights. This would be shown in three segments: Destiny (end result), Dream (working towards destiny), and Personal Insights (reflections on past, current, and future projects). The documentary would begin in the middle of a production; either it would begin with documenting the production of Zap’s new song, or it would begin with an entirely other project because Zap decided *not* to produce said song. Either way, the documentary would follow Axeer, their creative process, and discuss work they have done and plan on doing. We started shooting immediately.

Depending on who was at the office, Sara, Amal, and I took turns shooting whenever Zap’s song was mentioned. We got coverage of Zap, Ibrahim (the director), Tarek (the producer), and Khalid (CEO) discussing the logistics of the song, as well as some footage of Zap, in a deep pensive tone, discussing his hesitation with moving forward with the project. Below is a transcript from this video. This conversation was said in Arabic and minimally edited for grammatical clarity. The words in bold are terms they said in English.

Zap: If you are going to confront someone, or rather, in a soccer game, they teach you how to anticipate your opponents moves—how they’ll play, act, and react. Here, no one can predict what might happen and this is the biggest concern. The issue can be totally ignored, or not ignored at all, or face some problems. Before there used to be the same dark fog but at least you could guess what the outcome would be, things were more straightforward. I am going to walk through

two points of view...but really, no one can predict what might happen... Talking is easy, but putting it into action is hard; you can spend the rest of your life regretting making this song. I am not saying we shouldn't do it, but I've never been this hesitant. I was excited at first, wrote the song, thought of the beat, but then I was speaking with someone I respect. He's much older (around 72), very down to earth, and I shared with him the lyrics. Immediately, he said, "we are in the worst time in Egypt's history," so is it **risky**...?

Sara: **Is it worth it?**

[Pause]

Zap: That is a very difficult question to answer...the big picture, yes, yes, of course! But sometimes I feel...you know, when I was thinking, why don't we see the good win (*al kheir beyaksab*)? But then at the same time you are the only one who is negatively affected. Do you understand? You will be the one who gets harmed. No one else will even know. Some people will hear the song, enjoy it, get energized, but then they'll move on. Then what? As artists, we try to get people to remember, to think about things, and make them passionate, which often contradicts with [the fact that] you knowing that nothing will change... It is similar to when people say, in the context of war, "oh, you don't have the courage to die for your country." Death is okay, but no one considers a scenario where they come back with both legs amputated. Or that they'll be locked up in a prison somewhere in Israel. Or that they'll come back with just one eye or one arm. That is our scenario; to come back with a problem. You go, don't die, come back hurt — what then? This project is big, and includes a lot of people, so you aren't alone. If it was just one person, maybe, but people in your life—everyone, those you work with, family and friends—will be affected, albeit differently, and that responsibility is on you. I don't know... I really don't know... I want to, but *bas mesh ayez atbahdel*. That's why I asked you, *do you know what could happen?* No one will tolerate even one day of *bahdalha*... But I still think it is worth doing.

Eman: Why don't we just produce it and see if we should release it?

ZAP: No, no, that is a cop out. If you are going to work on something, it should be with the intention of releasing it. Either way, we should be honest with ourselves, and fair. We should be able to say this is what I am doing and why—whether we produce it or decide we are not up for it. Same thing applies for finding ways around it, like, what is the big deal if I change a few words in the song. It is a big deal because I believe in how I wrote it. Changing words will change the meaning. It really does require us to be fair and say, "I am not up for it now." The more I think about it, the more I wonder and ask myself, "What is the right thing to do"? What is the right thing? This encompasses such a broad scale. If you sit with people who are

wholeheartedly righteous, they'll have a different answer. I don't remember exactly what the fiqh laws are, but I know they exist and question things like, is it right to risk your life? Is it right to stay silent in face of these atrocities?

Sara: How are we calling ourselves alternative media if we aren't able to express ourselves? Then what are we even doing? We are just doing things that can pass, saying it adds social value to make ourselves feel better.

Zap: No no, wait. Okay, so what is alternative media to you?

Sara: Media that showcases what is not shown in the mainstream and that represents us.

Zap: Okay. So the songs I sing are considered alternative music?

Sara: Yes.

Zap: The genre and style isn't mainstream?

Sara: Yes.

Zap: And when you add on the content and other styles, you are adding on layers upon layers to an overall product, so there are different versions of alternative. So think about what we do here [Axeer]. Do we talk about the same things the mainstream talks about?

Sara: No.

Zap: Khalas ... [Enough said.]

Eman: No, but there is an overall sense/condition that the entire population is thinking and feeling and no one...

Zap: I mean, I can make the same points in a comedic way [less threatening]. But for me, the point is to strive to make something where you deeply say what is inside you. So the way of doing something matters, but also what matters is getting the message across ...

Eman: But it's not personal; it is not delivered in a way that'll make a difference.

Zap: It is personal to some people. But, yes, I see your point.

Eman: It might not change anything. In fact, I know it won't, and I can't say if it's worth it or not, but I can say that there is this force of negative energy that everyone is feeling, and when someone publicly puts it out there, you feel... I don't know how to describe this feeling, but you feel like you are heard, seen, thought of... like you are anthropomorphizing what was inside into something you can hold (*betgasidy il gowaky fi haga*) and point your fingers towards. So you are relieved that someone said the words you are struggling to say yourself, and you realize you are not alone. That itself is strong enough. This is different from a general issue or a social issue. Those aren't always personal; we make people aware of them. This song is different.

[Pause]

Zap: I don't know. It could be that my perspective, as a twenty-nine year old who's been paying attention to what's been happening in the past few years, is making me take more into consideration ... I don't necessarily have the answer.

End of transcript

In the way this transcript is presented, literally, hearing what Zap, Eman, and Sara were discussing could lead one to assume that fear is a strong opponent to Axeer's project. However, I want to point out that it is not that simple. What I find significant here is how the word fear, in English, and the word *khayef*, in colloquial Arabic, was never used. This does not mean that Zap was not afraid; it is what's expected with al-Sisi's oppressive forces taking place during 2016 when this conversation took place. As one friend, Angie (arts and culture manager) told me about the independent music scene in Cairo: "fear like other emotions isn't black and white nor is it there or not there. Fear comes in ebbs and flows and sometimes the worst fear produces the most unexpected heroes and sometimes it produces the worst cowards." In conceptualizing fear, I find Walter Benjamin Theses on the Philosophy of History (1968) instructive. Benjamin has argued that "only a redeemed mankind" would be able to study a situation, a context, or a concept in its

totality. Instead, Benjamin grasps knowledge as it appears, in his terms, in the form of “flashes,” as they dart by. Moving beyond research that presents totalizing conscious accounts as exemplary of political narratives, Benjamin incites us to maintain ourselves with stream of consciousness: that which is not stable but which blinks, momentarily shows itself, and escapes. Perhaps in this transcript we can find flashes of fear, but we also find philosophical thought, questioning the worth of engaging with politics in this moment of time, a desire to do something, and an annoyance with the unpredictability of their current situation. It is the inability to predict what *could* happen that is at the root of Zap’s hesitation. Having created a non-political space allowed for such moments of pause and reflection. Growing from within this space is an attitude of pragmatism where thinking about their present influences decisions that could effect their future. Pragmatism here is also a way to process both feeling and thought.

In an entirely different conversation, Zap’s tone changed. To further complicate Zap’s thought process, a few days later I was sitting with Ramy, a friend of Axeer’s, when Zap walked in. Ramy casually asked Zap for updates about the song, to which Zap responded in a more upbeat tone:

You know, if we produce this song one of two things will happen: one, we all get screwed and it’ll be the last thing we produce, or it passes and is ignored but then no one in Egypt will pay attention to us. See all the attention we are getting because of *Nour* [a music video that has garnered a lot of online and offline attention] It’ll be like we don’t exist.

Even if I were to argue that Zap was indeed afraid of those in power, it is a fleeting emotion that does not further debilitate other ideas, other projects, or other causes worth highlighting. The point I want to emphasize from this transcript is the honest back and forth and the strategic thinking of whether or not this one song is worth making because they now have more to lose

than before. There is no denying that Zap wants to avoid imprisonment and all that it entails, but even if that is not the immediate consequence that results from releasing said song, placing themselves back on the “political work” map would mean erasing the last three years of working towards visibility, and losing partnerships built with UN, UNICEF, and other local NGOs. *Nour* is the topic of chapter four, but for now it is sufficient to say that this music video went viral, reaching 16 million views, got a lot of positive feedback in both online and offline worlds, and further validated Axeer’s vision to make an impact by reaching wider audiences.

Opting out of producing said song, and by default a documentary that would bring this song to light, was a strategy used to give room for something else, later. Axeer worked on two big projects in the year after this transcript was recorded: Zap’s first album, *El-Medina* (The City), and their first feature film, *Between Two Seas*. *El-Medina* is an album of nine songs that tells the story of different people in the city. Each song averaged 2M-4M views,⁷¹ and are steadily increasing, and is a collaboration with other famous musicians and singers. Songs address various topics: hypocrisy, depression, friendship, happiness, migration, and life, and all reflect inner conflicts that Zap tried to capture after reading several sociological works on Egypt. This album received similar recognition to the 2016 music video, *Nour*; it was trending on YouTube for weeks, received views in the millions, and gave Zap a platform through which to speak when he was featured on satellite television channels ON Ent., and CBC. Both talk show hosts praise *El-Medina* for “covering real issues,” while also commenting on how heavy the topics of his songs are. Additionally, Axeer partnered with UN Women and produced a full

⁷¹ As of 02/04/2019 the album in its entirety has roughly reached 35M views. Each song varies in views with *Al-Donia* at 28M views, *Al-Sohab* at 12M and others between 2-4M views.

length film, *Between Two Seas*, that will be released in Egyptian cinemas, and international film festivals, in 2019.⁷²

Deliberating over projects and taking action against something for the opportunity of something else is not perceived negatively nor is it entirely motivated by fear, or as stifling creativity. Essentially, my interlocutors are finding other ways to get across socially poignant issues that effect people's daily lives without being politically explicit. Their decision making is tied to a hierarchy of values that prioritizes people and community. Within this hierarchy, these kinds of decisions reflect loyalty and commitment to a resonant community—a kind of loyalty for one another to always have a place to come back to, a place that insulates them from a society they don't want to be part of but ultimately hope to change. By maintaining this community, they are able to reach a wider audience and be visibly present. The pragmatism we see in the process of deliberation is a result of the complex political and social world in which they find themselves, and is grounded in both disappointment and hope. It is an attitude that prioritizes strategy that emerges in their making, thinking, and feeling.

In a literal sense, they gain presence when they are seen and acknowledged by the very system they are trying to evade—when their work is broadcast on television and on mainstream networks, which has been happening more and more frequently. A recent public service announcement for an NGO that helps educate impoverished children was aired on television with Axeer's logo on it. They have done TVC's before, but none exhibited their logo. To have their logo on television means they are expanding their audience base. They deem success in the

⁷² *Between Two Seas* was featured at Aswan's International Women Film Festival and won two awards: best directing and best screenplay for the Egyptian film category.
<http://mad.film/press/Between-Two-Seas-Wins-Two-Awards-at-the-Aswan-International-Women-Film-Festival.php>

ripple effect that slowly changes people's minds, perspectives, and essentially their values. But it is also a double edge sword: their continued commitment to doing work that aims to change society can easily be viewed as political, meanwhile any increase in their public visibility brings more government scrutiny and more caution. Metaphorically, of course, they are present in Egypt, in an office space where they work, deliberate, change minds, and produce. But they are also gaining visibility outside the confines of their space, and they hope that the topics they choose to address give them strength in numbers.

Chapter 3.

Everyday at Axeer: Photographic Essay on People, Place, and Work

There are quiet days and loud days. There are slow days and too-much-going-on days. There are tense, stressful days, and moody tantrum days. There are joyous, celebratory days, and chill, fun days—no two days are ever the same at Axeer. Everyday activities are mundane and regular: eating breakfast in the kitchen, sitting on the communal work table with your computer, lounging on a beanbag with your phone, going outside for a smoke, conversing with a friend, and using the conference room for a meeting. In between these everyday work activities are spontaneous breaks that, when I am lucky enough, I am able to capture: those skateboarding between desks or in the garden, or, playing a make-shift game of ping pong using a stool and a tennis ball. But on most days, Sara sings as she walks to the conference room, Ahmed checks his emails, Khalid wanders around the office laughing, Dana naps on a beanbag, and someone prays in the corner. All the while, Mido yells “Voices!” to maintain a level of quiet for those who are working.

Axeer’s built environment is a work in progress with Khalid, the CEO, as its head architect. In conversations about Axeer, his tone shifts from immense exuberance to deep frustration depending on what is happening with a certain project, or conflicts among co-workers. But he is always hopeful. Khalid hopes that Axeer continues to “do what we are doing but in a better way,” and that Axeer becomes a platform that supports young artists and filmmakers “without asking them to sell their souls.” He views himself as someone who is doing the best he can to create an environment where people around him are “treated equally and

fairly.” He no longer has the same “naive” goals of “wanting to change the world” that he had when he first co-founded Axeer in his early twenties. Rather, his job is becoming “more and more about the small parts, the bits and pieces, the people surrounding me and those I work with.” For Khalid, Axeer is home, “a place I seek refuge from my skepticism towards the worlds solution for everything, my skepticism towards how companies work, how money works, how governments work, Axeer is a place I belong to. A place that can prosper with love, justice, equality, friendship, and impact. A place where people can believe again, where they can achieve their dreams, a place with our own set of values and principles.” Khalid understands that in the grand scheme of things, Axeer is a small place with few people, but this small place with its few people are enough because they are all working towards making Axeer’s vision come true—a vision of a media social business that aims to make a difference (to their audience, and to those working on the media products). Khalid’s conceptualization of Axeer is rooted in liberal discourses of rights and justice that is a byproduct of global youth culture as well as the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings (see Herrera 2010).

Inside Axeer is a safe, economically stable, fun environment, that operates on respect and fairness while insulating them from that which is outside of Axeer—a society that is corrupt and unjust. In this way, Axeer blurs the private and public: work is home and home is work, which is also signaled in the material and spatial layout of the company. The company’s layout follows the open office concept, conceived by Italian designer Gaetano Pesce⁷³ in the mid 1990s and is now characteristic of start-up culture; a collage of various environments is tailored to the needs of the departments and individuals that use them. This layout is part of a Euro-American

⁷³ <https://www.npr.org/sections/money/2016/06/03/480625378/episode-704-open-office?t=1534838653799>

movement in office space that aims for a home-like environment to increase productivity, engagement, and collaboration. Axeer's main level has an open work space with tables shared by everyone. The kitchen is fully equipped with a refrigerator, oven, microwave, espresso machine, and counter where people can cook, heat their food, and gather to eat together. Bean bags are dispersed throughout the lower level and are often used for napping. The conference room is available for larger meetings, inviting transparency through its glass doors. There are other sitting areas and work spaces on the second level. A commonly used room on the second level is the editing room that mainly houses the production team. I have often found Amal sitting in the editing room when the production team is not in the office. She appreciates the idea behind the open office concept but sometimes finds it "too distracting," a common complaint by employees elsewhere (see Jungsoo Kim & Richardde Dear 2013).

To understand Axeer's media practice and work environment it is best not to think of work in the traditional sense of labor, but as an ongoing set of activities that motivate my interlocutors to act for the same ends and purposes (Schatzki 2012). Axeer's dominant mode of organization is "network based rather than market or hierarchy," a common trait among creative industries. There is an inherent informality in how Axeer's team members interact with each other and their 'bosses,' further blurring the line between employee and friend. From an entrepreneurial perspective, "the term network is almost always couched in wholly positive terms: the dynamic, flexible, and social alternative to the impersonality of market forces or the dead hand of corporate bureaucracy" (Smith and McKinlay, 2010:17). People at Axeer often play around with these words, oscillating their WhatsApp group name between Axeer Network and Axeer Community. Their constant articulation of who they are and what they do points to their

aversion to becoming corporate. Two ways in which they claim they are not corporate is, first, by cultivating an office space that is designed for both work and play, and second, as Sara puts it “we put people first.” Work assignments are personalized, to the best of their ability. Sara, as Creative Director, and Hamdy, Chief Operations Officer, assign projects to those most interested in the topic. Such an activity aids in higher work satisfaction than continuously working on projects one is uninterested in. Partnering with agencies, NGOs, and other entities that aim to promote social causes also helps; hardly anyone at Axeer enjoys commercial or advertising work. In doing so, when someone receives a less exciting assignment, they will complete it understanding that the job needs to get done so other opportunities can arise.

Within this comfortable, home-like environment, friendship, trust, and loyalty are Axeer’s ideal driving forces; the co-founders believe in surrounding themselves with good people who will uplift, support, and motivate them in achieving the same goal. That is their origin story after all; the founders are childhood friends, their friends joined later, and those introduced to Axeer early on, like Sara, became engulfed in that friendship—for years, they were a closed community. Terms like family and home are used by some of my interlocutors to describe Axeer, but these terms are also extremely vexed. In providing me with a one-word description of Axeer, everyone has something positive to say: camaraderie, a school, home, family, passion, vision, dream, comfort, respect. However, as new team members enter the fold, more conflicts begin to arise and competing visions of Axeer percolates to the surface—this is what Khalid struggles with the most. Khalid, in his capacity as CEO and with approval from the founders, is deliberately building a type of familial-community that situates Axeer as more than a work place. But not everyone agrees with this and some find “this family thing a bit forced.”

Axeer provides different things for different people. Sara strongly believes Axeer is her family, and has a lot to say about the matter:

Family is always priority number one: they are more important than your job, and if someone is facing a problem that is what you focus on. Work is not like that. In any work environment the work and getting things done is the most important thing. But not at Axeer, the people are more important than the job. If we have a deadline that will cause extreme dismay, or if the client is unnecessarily disrespectful and treating us poorly, which is very common in the media field, then we ask to postpone the deadline or cancel the project. Our priority are our family members [the team] and not the work itself. Same goes with support. Your family supports you no matter what, they support you because they believe in you. I've seen it on a personal level on lots of projects. You can get a small grant from Axeer to work on personal project, or everyone looks for a way to sponsor an original idea to make it happen. These are our "passion projects." Another example, if I am not feeling well and am the project owner, in other work places I still have to show up. Not at Axeer. As a family if someone isn't doing well the rest holds them up. No one screws the other person over so they can look better. There was a point where I wasn't able to come to work at all and everyone was really supportive, no one was asking about me for the sake of 'ok there is work to be done when are you coming back'...they would actually try to organize outings thinking it'll make me feel better, or suggest a doctor I should see. Everyone saw my problem as their problem. Its more obvious when you haven't shown up in a while and then return, you get a sense that your presence really makes a difference and as a family member you were missed... Axeer's work environment is not a typical work environment. The idea of waking up everyday and going to work at a place where its people are more than your friends because we've been through a lot together is really special. I know this is probably different for me because I've known these people for a really long time but the idea of family is obvious in these examples. One last thing, and this is the most important, is acceptance. Yeah we tease and joke, which is normal in friendship, but acceptance is a huge part of Axeer. We all changed in different and extreme ways. But at end of the day we are there for each other, no matter what.

Sara comes from a comfortable middle-class supportive family but she is unlike her parents in her religious practice and political affiliations. She has one brother whom she is close with, but he is married, leaving Sara alone with her parents. She spends more time at Axeer than at her home, with her best friend also working at Axeer. With Sara's religious convictions she believes that other media agencies will not accommodate or respect her the same way Axeer does. She's been working at Axeer for six years and as long "as I am learning, challenging

myself, and growing, I'll stay." In Sara's labeling of Axeer as her family, she has created "kinship ties out of relationships which are originally ties of friendship" (Schneider and Smith 1978:42). There is an obvious "time-depth" that has facilitated the development of this familial feeling (Weston 1991; 63), one that others at Axeer do not share.

Like Sara, Tarek, Axeer's executive producer and co-founder, notes that working with Axeer is much more "rewarding, enjoyable, respectful, and is like being at home (*beity*)." A few years after co-founding Axeer, Tarek decided to freelance and not work at Axeer full-time. He started as a line producer and worked his way up in the media production industry. After gaining a lot of experience he returned to Axeer in 2017 as their executive producer. Tarek struggles the most with imagining a home. For Tarek, "home is comfort, trust, and safety." In 2014 his brother was arrested from their family-apartment in Nasr City for reasons that remain unclear. Upon his brother's release, he fled to Saudi Arabia where his parents and sister also reside, leaving Tarek in Cairo. Tarek chose to live with his grandmother until she passed away in 2016. He does not go back to his family apartment unless they are visiting Cairo, otherwise he stays with his cousin in a rented flat close to Axeer. Sara and Tarek both use Axeer as a support system and identify it as their chosen family, as nonbiological kin, that provides mutual support, respect, and love.

Seddawy, on the other hand, is on the fence; he considers Axeer home but its people "not my family." He appreciates and respects them, but the "closeness is not there." Seddawy joined Axeer in 2016, as the youngest of the pact at the age of 18. He is completing his undergraduate degree in business in a public university in the outskirts of Cairo. He spends all his time at Axeer and only goes to classes on exam days.. Seddawy is a sweet, timid, young man. When I first met him he was extremely shy and difficult to speak with, but on my last visit to Cairo, he was

beaming with confidence and very talkative. Yet, he struggles to articulate why Axeer isn't his family; he goes on to explain that you can't "force an affinity like that, it either happens or it doesn't." But, "I learned everything that I am doing now at Axeer, so I am indebted to them."

Meanwhile, Ahmed's relationship with Axeer has shifted over time. Ahmed joined Axeer in 2014 as business developer and "was all in." He quit his comfortable nine-to-five corporate job as marketing research director to join Axeer, knowing how little they pay, because he "believes in their mission." He has worked closely with Khalid to grow the company, and his awkward sense of humor is beloved by all. But, Ahmed has been feeling burnt out. On top of his business development work at Axeer, he has started freelancing as a cinematographer, at Axeer and at other places. Khalid notices Ahmed's split focus and questions his commitment to the company. For several months while in the field, Ahmed and Khalid's relationship is fraught with tension. Khalid tells me that he supports Ahmed's desire to explore cinematography more but the company is undergoing a transition and needs Ahmed's full attention. Ahmed calls me late at night to vent about everything "Khalid wants me to do," meanwhile Khalid spends the mornings complaining that "Ahmed no longer cares about Axeer." Their main issue revolves around differing expectations of Ahmed, while Ahmed wants to only work within the parameters of his job description. Ahmed is working as business developer, project manager, and account manager—these positions have since been filled by other people. Such tension between close coworkers, and friends, is common in the media start-up world, one that relies on unspecified job descriptions to fill in work gaps as they appear (Bennett 2014). Khalid is taken aback because Ahmed has not complained about this before and truly values Ahmed's partnership in building Axeer. With an obvious lack of communication, aversion to confrontation, and the added stress

of a high-budget project I find myself in the middle simply nodding when both speak with me. Ahmed finally asks to only work as a business developer and they talk through some of their issues, however, Khalid feels like he “lost someone who was in my corner.” But Ahmed is unaware of how much Khalid is hurt by this. Several months after Ahmed establishes what he calls “a better balance” between his job as business developer and cinematography practice, he proposes to Amal. With an added engagement, Ahmed’s time is more precious, further distancing him from Axeer’s extraneous workload.

Ahmed and Amal have worked together at Axeer for a few years before getting engaged. After their engagement, they developed a routine: they ate lunch together, leave work together, and often go to the gym (before or after work) together. They rarely socialize with their co-workers outside of work because “we already spend too much time together, I don’t need to also socialize with them,” Amal says. Amal continues, “When I did hang out with them I noticed how the same people talk to the same people and discuss the same projects, it is just like work only at a restaurant. I like taking breaks from that, going to the gym, spending time with my younger siblings, and now Ahmed.” Part of Amal’s difficulty in socializing with her co-workers is that “they are all friends from before, it is not easy to break into that, and I haven’t tried because I have a life outside of Axeer.” Khalid also has something to say about Amal and Ahmed’s new dynamic: “I don’t feel like they are a part of us anymore, they are always together, eating lunch alone outside, coming and going...don’t get me wrong, this is their right...but they aren’t part of the whole like before.” But, Ahmed and Amal are not Khalid’s only concern, he admits that with the growth and official establishment of the company, it has become more and more challenging to implement his community-vision with newly hired individuals.

There have always been two strands to Axeer's media practice—its people, and the media products. Those working at Axeer are often carefully molded to support Axeer's vision and goals. To be fully welcomed into Axeer, you need to be a certain kind of person: someone who does not view Axeer just as a place of work and to be driven to grow and make an impact. Two months before the end of my fieldwork, Khalid offers me the position of Project Manager because "I am dedicated, committed, and got along with everyone." He is willing to "try me" in spite of my lack of experience in such a position. Interestingly, those previously hired based on their experience, like Engy, an account manager with experience at corporate creative agencies, quit. Engy's main motivation to work at Axeer is its proximity to her apartment; she no longer wanted to commute one-and-half hours to work. After a few weeks at Axeer, Khalid realizes that she does not hold the same ideas and values the company holds. Engy is a young woman in her twenties who was not politically involved in the uprisings, who built her narrative of the Raba'a Massacre from national television, and who had worked in an environment where you do your job at work and socialize with your co-workers at clubs or bars. But most importantly, she does not believe that you can make money selling values. "*El-values mabit'akilsh 'eesh*" (Values don't generate money, literally: you can't eat values), she repeatedly notes.

This is not to say that people working at Axeer do not drink or go clubbing; on the contrary, some do and some smoke weed. However, they separate these personal indulgences from 'Axeer' so as to not make those who don't engage in them feel unwelcome or uncomfortable. Axeer outings are infrequent because they spend all their time eating, laughing, celebrating birthdays, and working together, but occasionally will get together for breakfast, dinner, or a movie outing outside of the work environment. Outside of the Axeer community,

individuals do whatever they want. Engy is very friendly and gets along with everyone, but working at Axeer is just that—a job and a job she is not “passionate” about, with co-workers who do not socialize much outside of work. A few months later she quit and now works at a corporate advertising agency. Like Engy, Amal and Ahmed also view Axeer as a work place, but unlike Engy they are passionate about the work that they do and are invested in Axeer’s vision of positive social change—even if they do not hold the same work-familial value that Khalid does.

With these experiences in mind, Khalid and Hamdy (newly hired chief operations officer) establish a ‘probation period’ where hired individuals are put on a trial period for three months. This gives them a chance to develop their position within Axeer as well as build a portfolio by working on projects. At the conclusion of the three months, they present the work they have done and the work they want to do as well as offer general feedback on Axeer with suggestions for improvement. More often than not even those brought on for the probation period are not entirely new to Axeer; they are either recommended by a personal friend or are part of the recently launched internship program. In this way, Khalid can guarantee that Axeer’s team will learn, gain something from the new additions, and also give something to them, while maintaining Axeer’s culture and values. His hiring criteria are simple: the individual has to be reliable and passionate and must have a drive to effect change. If said person has two of these, the third will come with time.

Khalid views Axeer as his refuge, Sara claims it is her home, Seddawy thinks of it as a school, while Ahmed and Amal view Axeer as a place a work. Tension among these views exist because everyone wants the other to view Axeer the same way they do. Axeer will continue to be in flux as new people join and old people leave. But Axeer is not one thing or the other, it is

many things and fulfills desires and goals for everyone who works there. In spite of very different personalities, stress, arguments, constant miscommunication, and egos, there is an underlying drive for change, be it personal or societal, that is the glue that binds this company together.



Figure 41: Khalid signing papers



Figure 42: On a smoking break



Figure 43: Lots going on



Figure 44: Project discussions



Figure 45: Working outside

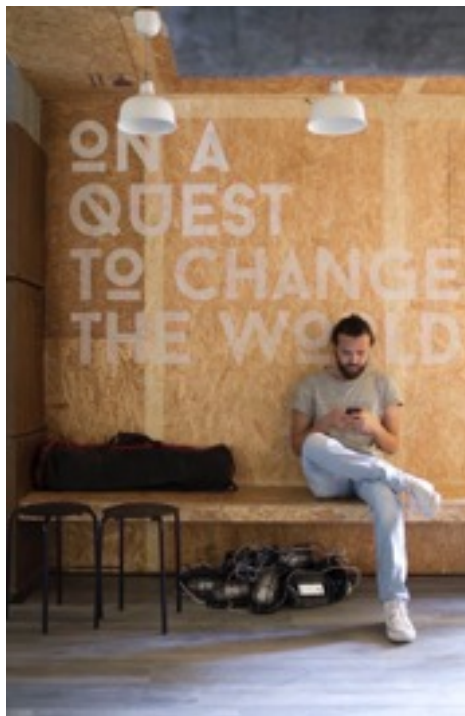


Figure 46: Chilling



Figure 47: Keys



Figure 48: Research

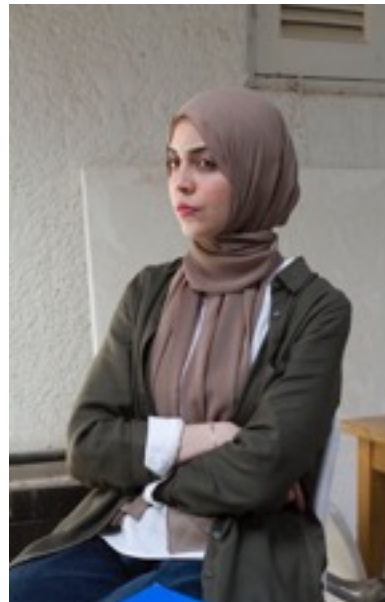
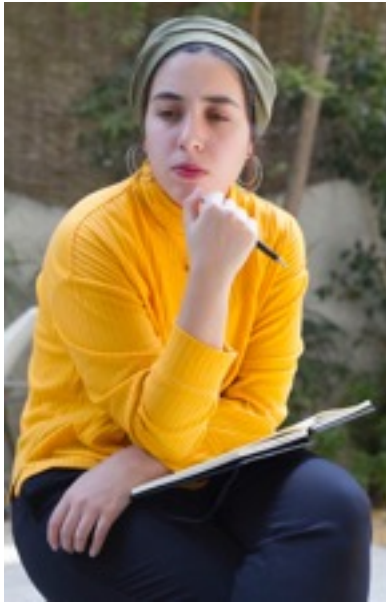


Figure 49: Creative meeting



Figure 50: Skateboarding



Figure 51: Caught in action



Figure 52: A long day

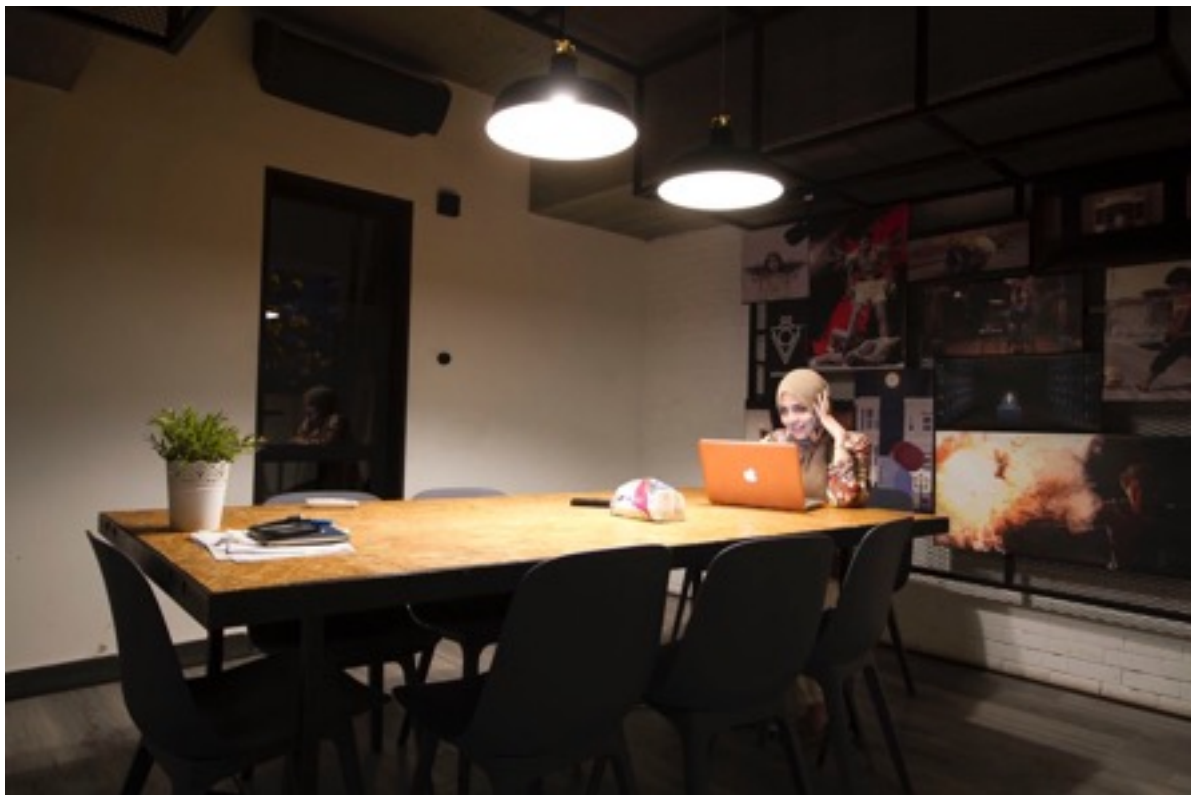


Figure 53: A long night



Figure 54: Praying



Figure 55: Playing

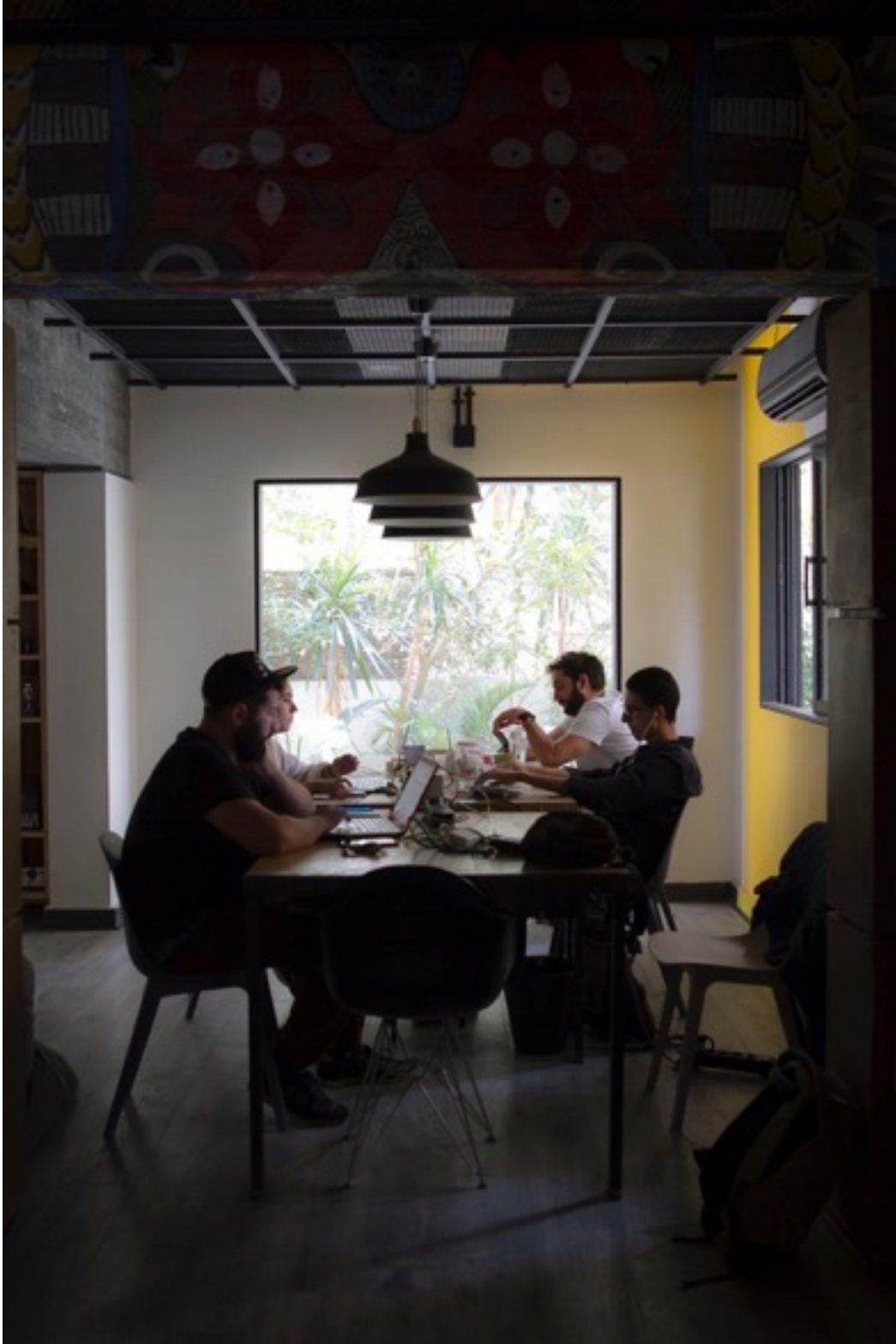


Figure 56: Typical work day

Chapter 4. Media Practice: Axeer's Values in Action

I. Media Practice and Values

Sara, Axeer's Creative Director, has been busy: she directed a music video for Al Araby,⁷⁴ was featured singing in another music video for Mother's Day,⁷⁵ and finished her graduation project—a short film about the struggles of a wedding photographer. We meet at the office for an interview. Luckily it is a quiet day, which makes for a clear recording, but an uncomfortable one with the air conditioning in the communal sitting area broken. Halfway into our conversation she asks if we could move into the conference room where the air conditioner was on. Ahmed is in the conference room working, Sara kindly asks him to leave, fanning her headscarf to suggest how hot she feels. Annoyed at the request, Ahmed retorts “No! You chose to wear it [headscarf]; it's not my fault.” Sternly, Sara replies, “It is a requirement for me, not you. Now please leave.” I look at Ahmed awkwardly and hope he is not upset; after all he is the one who introduced me to Axeer. As Ahmed walks out, I joke, “Is this why they call you the *evil* one?” and point to the captioned studio portraits hanging in the other room. Sara's portrait is captioned *shirira*, ‘the evil one.’ Sara smiles, “Yes!...I have changed a lot since working in this field. I've become impatient, often losing my temper. I gossip...I try not to and am working towards stopping this, but the work I do can be tough, especially as a woman.”

⁷⁴ Al Araby contracted with Axeer twice, and each time included a series of roughly 20 music videos from around the Arab world.

⁷⁵ This can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y7kx5TWW9Ro>

Sara has a strong personality and takes her work seriously but most days at the office she is smiling, joking, and fun. She is one of two self-appointed social coordinators who plan others' birthday surprises and occasional dinner outings. When she is working, she is focused, does not joke with crew members, and is stern in how she talks but always remains respectful. She views Axeer as "home"—a place where "we put people first" in respecting who they are, and shares her self-imposed gender boundary as an example. She tells me that "it is precautionary." She had many male friends growing up, and in college she gained an understanding that male–female friendships are complicated, encouraging her to develop boundaries, especially since she works primarily with men. Not shaking hands with men is one aspect of these boundaries. Sara refuses to shake hands mainly with the men she works with everyday, to maintain a certain level of decorum, especially since she considers them 'family.' In professional settings, however, she will not embarrass anyone who tries to shake her hand by rejecting the gesture. "They tease me about it at Axeer, but I know that I am not being judged," she explains.

A young woman in her early twenties, she is still trying to "figure it all out" and welcomes the process of trial and error. Her self-awareness—an attribute I found in many of my interlocutors—aids in her professional and personal growth. Sara is one of several young people who is learning, reflecting, imagining a different world, and worrying about how people are (mis) treated, all of which she sees as part of "our values." I ask about how 'values' enter into Axeer's work; since starting my research, the word 'value' (in English) was used time and again. Sara shares with me a turning point in Axeer's vision that became definitive in how they define themselves individually and as a company. During Axeer's transition, they accepted several commercial works to financially sustain the company, including a Coke Advertisement:

We were hired to produce a music video for Coke Sham el Nasiim (spring).⁷⁶ I think we agreed because it would have paid well, a big name to add to our site, and would have been a good experience. But it was very stressful: we had a very tight deadline, they did not like any of our proposals even after we changed our idea several times. I don't remember the details of our concept but it did not include a singer frolicking around and singing because there is no idea behind it, but that is what they ended up doing. There was no message or point to what they did—inserting a girl just because she is pretty is a form of objectification we are against. That is what Amr Diab and Tamer Hosny do, not us.⁷⁷ We stepped down from the video part and said we could produce the music. But, even this was a problem. The Coke representative told us to work with Amr Mustafa and we did not want to—he is a pro-military (anti-revolution) guy who has produced several propaganda songs like *Boshret Kheir* that was released during [Sisi's 2014 presidential] elections.⁷⁸ We tried suggesting other people and even recorded with one [another music producer], but they also rejected this attempt and said to work with Amr Mustafa—and unfortunately we did. No one was happy working on this project. The entire company was shaking and we really were confused to why we were doing it. It made us realize that there are plenty of opportunities and if we are serious about our values then we need to be able to say no to some projects, especially if we know that our vision does not coincide with theirs. Otherwise we are hypocritical about our values.

My interlocutors use the word value, debate it, and converse about it a lot, especially in their transitional period. During several conversations, my interlocutors would say things like: “We have values we live upon”; “Axeer's core values come from us”; “We make work that adds value”; “There are things that we all know, feel, and believe that are unsaid.” Everyone at Axeer has a general sense of how things should be: no one smokes inside, only a few publicly curse, they eat together (breakfast and dinner), and some pray while others don't but neither are judged for it—none of these tendencies are written on a board or discussed; “it just happened to be this way, because it reflects who we are,” Sara tells me. For Axeer, videos are produced and

⁷⁶ The video can be watched here: <https://adigitalboom.com/top-engaging-sham-el-nessim-activations-social-media/>

⁷⁷ Amr Diab and Tamer Hosny are famous Egyptian pop singers who are generally considered “mainstream,” singing a genre that could be called “*habibi* music.” *Habibi*, is a term of endearment that translates to *my love*. Arabic pop songs are mostly love songs. Dubbing this genre *habibi* is a form of critique to what my interlocutors consider shallow song lyrics.

⁷⁸ The song could be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QUBvVTNRp4Q>

consumed, but social relations also have to be created and maintained; all of this requires an investment of human time and energy. As Sara made clear in our conversation about the Coke advertisement, “even after all the effort we put in trying to make the music video reflective of what we believe in, we failed, but we learned that we have to be true to ourselves,” which is to invest their energy into things they consider most meaningful. And yet, they are reluctant to define “value” and it oftentimes seemed convoluted: Do they mean personal beliefs and principles? Or values they hold as a company? Or values they aim to instill via their productions? Or all of the above combined? What are Axeer’s values and why are they important in their media practice? This chapter highlights Axeer’s media practice (the ‘how’) as it provides an entry point for understanding those involved in the process, how they imagine their social worlds, and their commitment to the social good.

II. “Youth-Generated-Media”

Axeer is part of a larger phenomena where young people are utilizing various media and digital technologies to create wide ranging expressive artifacts. However, studies on youth and media coming out of the MENA region attempt to find ways to equip youth with the knowledge and tools needed for meaningful participation in civil society and democracy (Saleh 2010). In one case study on Egypt, the main objective was to find out about young peoples’ use of new media, i.e., the internet and mobile phones, their media literacy, and their media participation (Tayie 2010). These studies were part of global initiatives that aim to increase awareness and knowledge about youth and media, thereby providing a basis for policymaking, contributing to

debates about young people’s media literacy and media competence.⁷⁹ Media education and media literacy programs designed for youth have been challenged for promoting a protectionist agenda or narrowly focusing on the development of consumers rather than “agentive selves” (Hull and Katz 2006) who act as critical producers of their own media. Such criticism arises from a lack of clear and consistent approach to defining ‘youth.’ Oftentimes, young people are seen as vulnerable, lazy, and incomplete adults—after-all, this was the common opinion of millennial youth in Arab societies before the 2011 uprisings (Cole 2015).

In examining Axeer and their media practice, I take seriously that my interlocutors are young people who are “agentive selves” with self-developed cultural politics. I recognize that they are participants and observers of the cultures they claim to reject and aim to remake on their own terms. Their use of digital media technologies combines utilization and aesthetics; they view online platforms as tools to get their messages across, while also carefully assembling equipment that would help provide a certain image (for example, a ronin camera provides high image stabilization, meanwhile an ultra wide-angle lens produces strong visual distortion). Indeed, new media technologies provided young people with an immediate way to connect with audiences that evaded the more traditional, centralized, and regulated avenues of production and dissemination. Although, my interlocutors primarily use digital media and disseminate their work online, their goal is to reach as many people as possible by crossing into and through all sorts of media platforms (television, magazines, radio, online sites). Aesthetic quality is a significant

⁷⁹ See The International Clearinghouse on Children, Youth and Media Yearbook: *Contributions to the Research Forum at the World Summit on Media for Children and Youth 2010*
Berkman Center Research Publication No. 2015-6: *Digitally Connected: Global Perspectives on Youth and Digital Media*
John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Reports on Digital Media and Learning November 2008: *Living and Learning with New Media: Summary of Findings from the Digital Youth Project*

component to Axeer's practice, one that my interlocutors believe could aid in their goal of reaching a wider audience base. In creating and producing media work, my interlocutors strive for creativity, newness, and high levels of care and skill, which ultimately would move their audience.

My interlocutors at Axeer are consumers and producers of media who have young contemporaries in various part of the world. To name a couple, some of their cohort members were established through political upheaval: the six-month-long occupation of the historic city center of Oaxaca, Mexico, in 2006 became one of the first social uprisings to be thoroughly intermeshed with the creation of old and new media. Graffiti, performance protest, and independent radio proliferated and "found its way into the many digitally recorded activist videos shown in community centers, on occupied television, distributed on DVD, and streamed on the Internet" (Schiwy 2018). Meanwhile, when we move away from political dissent and into the world of digital mediation, we meet young Africans in Accra, where a growing middle class increasingly use digital technologies to participate in global networks and "start businesses focused on black popular culture, art, video, fashion, e-commerce, and marketing" (Shipley 2017).

Looking at Axeer, young media makers in Oaxaca, and in Accra, a growing trend of what Joe Khalil calls "youth-generated-media" is noticeable. I find Khalil's categorization useful in providing a framework to fully appreciate Axeer's media work and what they are trying to accomplish. Khalil contributes four characteristics to the term *generated* to help explain what these media are about. The first characteristic is creativity, "whereby the end result is a unique byproduct of young people's experiences" (2014: 440). The second characteristic concerns

young people's ability to render their idea in a product. The third characteristic "suggests the origination of forms of energy, as young people are self invested in their artifacts" (2014; 440). And the fourth characteristic accounts for the "ripple effect" of the media that are part of a sequence of activities; this "ripple effect" is what Khalil, Axeer's CEO, calls "impact" and has yet to find a way to measure it. Finally, in approaching media as a form of practice (Couldry 2010), I argue that their media work orders other social practices they are enmeshed in, particularly as it relates to values that are primarily rooted in respect and truthfulness. I do not use "practice" in the Bourdieu-ian sense of the relationship between human action and a surrounding social structure. Rather, I use practice to mean doings and sayings that are organized by understandings, rules, and actions that are motivated by goals and affect (Schatzki 1996). In the sections that follow, I provide an analysis of content development and production process of an awareness video on persons with disabilities as an example to how values are enacted during Axeer's media production. In analyzing this example of Axeer's media work, I focus on goal orientated actions that originate from what matters most to my interlocutors to parse out *what* they are doing and *why* they are doing it. Axeer invites us to understand media and creative output as a practice of doing that is rooted in values, which revolves around humans rather than economic objects, and aesthetics that are exhibited in the work that they do and in the work place they've created.

III. Enacting Values in Media Production

At its core, Axeer's values are centered on making a difference through the media products they produce and in the process of producing said media product. There are many stages, and

people, involved in producing a media product; respect and trust are expected amongst the team members as well as presenting realistic and truthful (*ḥa'a'ia/waqa'ia*) accounts of society in their work. Respect (*iḥtiram*), as it encompasses politeness and equality, is obvious in how people treat each other in the work space, as Sara explains above. But it is more important during productions, and it is a standard they struggle to meet when they freelance outside of Axeer. For example, on a regular work day, we are sitting in the balcony waiting to start a creative meeting when Sara and Amal walk in fuming. They return to Axeer after leaving for a freelance assistant director position with another production house. They do not enjoy the experience, as Sara tells us:

I cannot wrap my head around the blatant disrespect I experienced. At our shoots we all eat the same type of food and sit with the lighting crew as well as the clients. Here, we were treated like second-hand citizens. They offered us leftovers from the buffet, after the director and producer ate. I don't even think the rest of the crew ate. The producer insulted the lighting crew for powering the light too strong; there was so much yelling, foul language and disrespect. Luckily none was directed at me or else I don't know how I would have reacted, but I have never been on a production set with this type of behavior. It made me really appreciate what we do at Axeer.

Amal nodded in agreement and added, "The job is already hard, with long hours, sleepless nights; it does not need to be harder by being treated with disrespect." At Axeer, in the few instances where there was an issue or a mistake, it was dealt with privately. Even in the office, tensions and conflicts arise all the time due to the nature of the work; I noticed these moments of tension and fissures in friendships, but then after a few days and several private meetings issues would resolve. However, Sara was unaware of external production practices. She worked at Axeer for over five years, and this was the first time she did an external project and saw the difference that Axeer was making in the most basic way—treating people with respect, or as

Axeer's executive producer put it "treating people more humanely." With that mindset, I approached productions more carefully, paying attention to the general atmosphere. In the example that follows, I examine a project with an organization called *Helm* that Sara was directing and how respect, truthfulness, and drive for good work converged together in this project.

i. Content: 'People with Disability' Awareness Video

Axeer's two-bedroom-apartment-turned-office is suddenly bustling with people. Most people come to the office in the late afternoon. Everyone is greeting one another and talking. Their voices get louder and louder. All the usual prayer spots are taken by those sitting on beanbags in different corners of the office, brows furrowed in front of their computers with headphones snug in their ears oblivious to the crowd surrounding them. I step onto the balcony and find Sara and Omar in a meeting. Omar, a trained-dentist-turned-producer, is standing against the metal railing, smoking. Meanwhile Sara, a senior at the German University in Cairo studying applied arts (media design), is seated cross-legged on a stool facing Omar writing notes. Omar smiles when he sees me, disposes of his cigarette and extends his right hand, then hesitates, but when I extend mine he proceeds to shake my hand. This is the first time I meet Omar. "Haha! I thought you would be like Sara." Sara smirks and replies "They are always teasing me about how I don't like to shake hands [with the opposite sex]." I head to the storage room to pray and Sara gets up to join me. After, I sit in on the meeting. Sara explains that they are preparing for a shoot for Helm. Helm, a nonprofit organization that aims to promote the full participation and inclusion of persons with disabilities (PWD), who constitute 15% of the Egyptian society, wants an

awareness video that educates viewers on how to interact with PWDs. During this meeting, Sara, the director, and Omar, the producer, are going through every detail of the shoot: each scene with its assigned camera angle, lighting equipment needed, types of microphones, location of scene, and who is going to be in it. This same meeting took place again with the cinematographer, Ahmed. Meanwhile, Omar met separately with the art director to inform her of the rooms she is responsible for staging, and contacted a sound engineering team and lighting technicians.

Helm approached Axeer with a general idea for an educational video.⁸⁰ Sara was assigned as director of the project and came up with the proposal and treatment. Her idea was to base the video on an exaggerated set of inaccurate and awkward interactions that a PWD would experience and then have that same person respond to the interactions. Sara met with Helm employees, including PWDs, several times to better understand accessibility obstacles as well as mere ignorant reactions. Reflecting on her meetings, she imagined how most people come from a good place and have good intentions; when they see a PWD they try to help, but their approach could actually do unintended harm. Others may stare or overcompensate in their reaction because of a lack of exposure to PWDs. Each situation in the video revolves around these issues. In one situation, a man in a wheel chair is about to go down a ramp when he suddenly finds someone behind him holding his chair's handles. Before he is able to stop this good Samaritan, he is pushed down the ramp and crashes (we hear the crash but do not see it). The crash itself is exaggerated, along with the good Samaritan's shocked facial reaction. The man on the wheel chair addresses the viewer, "Before helping me, ask me how to help." Other situations highlight ignorant misconceptions: a deaf man is checking out books and two girls are standing across

⁸⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/Helmegypt/videos/961744527237316/>

from him. One girl looks at her friend and gestures, with her hands and lips, “he can’t hear.” Afterwards the man signs, “Just because I am deaf doesn’t mean I am also blind.” The opposite scenario is highlighted in another scene. A blind woman is at a restaurant with her friend and the waiter only speaks to her friend asking, “What would she like to have?” The blind woman addresses the viewer: “Just because I am blind does not mean you cannot speak to me directly.”

Underlying all the situations and accompanying messages is the concept that we should not focus on the disabilities but should acknowledge their abilities. In packaging the message in the video, Sara used her learned shortcomings, as someone with minimal interactions with PWDs, to reach the audience. The video is not preachy or confrontational. Rather, each interaction is exaggerated to give a comical effect but also highlights how uncomfortable it could make a PWD. In one example, a blind woman (wearing sunglasses and holding a cane) and a young man are in the elevator together. In communicating with this woman, the man is shown shouting at her, presumably asking what floor she is headed to. This is conveyed by a close shot to his face and hand cupped against his mouth while showing the woman’s hair flying as if a gush of wind just hit her.



Figure 57: Screen shot from *Helm*

ii. Production: ‘People with Disability’ Awareness Video

A few days later, on a Friday (the first day of the weekend for most people in Egypt), I get up at 6 am to meet Sara and the crew for Helm’s shoot. I take my camera, notebook, snacks, water, and breast pump. When I reach the location, which was sent via WhatsApp, I make sure to stand away from the cameras so as not to interfere with the shot. This first scene is taking much longer than scheduled and Sara is getting upset. The woman from the casting agency is not able to deliver the facial expression Sara is asking for, maybe because Sara is still a young director working on how to communicate what she wants or maybe because the woman really is unable to deliver. A few minutes later, Helm’s project manager and vice-president, Ramez Maher, arrives. Once Sara finishes the shoot he goes up to greet her by extending his right hand, which she confidently shakes. When the scene is finally complete, we get into a rented microbus to the next location. Axeer’s crew is small: director (Sara), assistant director (who arrives later in the day), cinematographer (Ahmed), producer (Omar), and myself. In the bus, Omar passes out sandwiches for breakfast but Sara is too anxious to eat. She continues speaking about the woman from the casting agency and what to do in the two other scenes that are designated to her. Ahmed jokingly suggests, “Have Nama replace her. She’s pretty expressive.” I look up from my camera, as I was reviewing shots I just took, and find both Ahmed and Sara looking at me—“See! Look at her face!” Ahmed says laughing. Sara agrees and preps me for the next scene:

Your role is to help a blind person cross the street. In the first sequence, you will hold her arm tightly and drag her across the street. She will fall, slowing you down. I want you to look annoyed and rushed. In the second sequence, you will approach the girl and ask her if she needs help, give her your arm and she will wrap her arm around yours, and cross the street together slowly.

When we arrive at the location, a street in the suburbs of Maadi, Omar walks me to the make-up artist, who applies subtle eyeliner and some lipstick for a natural look. We shot this scene a total of three times. During one of the takes when I asked the girl if she wanted help, I had pointed to the ledge as I was saying my line: “Careful of your step.” Ramez, “the client,” noticed this mistake and asked Sara to reshoot. The other two shots were precautionary, particularly because cars were driving by and Sara wanted to guarantee good composition.

We wrap up and move onto the next location: Helm’s headquarters, two apartments in the same building with a small outdoor garden. We spend the rest of the day here for five scenes: one scene takes place in a microbus right outside the building; one in the garden; one in a hallway; one in a library setting; and another in an office. The library and office scenes are shot first. Both these rooms are being set up simultaneously—desks and chairs are shuffled around, LED lights are plugged into outlets, and the sound engineer asks me to help place microphones on the young women (when he gave me the microphones, I noticed a cross tattooed on his hand). Sara is in the corner going over the shot-list and Ahmed was setting up the camera. Omar was everywhere at once, checking to make sure everything was going according to schedule and fielding questions as they came. Upon a quick inspection before shooting, Sara looks unsatisfied and asks for the art director, who is staging the office in another room.

Both the library set up and the office look too sterile: not enough objects are on the shelves, or desks, and nothing on the walls. Smiling, Sara speaks with the art director calmly and the art director tells Sara that she planned to use whatever is already available on location but couldn’t find more to use. Still composed, Sara expresses her disappointment and the art director starts getting the props from the office to fill up space on the library shelves. Now, however, the same

props are used in two scenes, which is not what Sara wanted. Neither room looks the way Sara envisioned and she takes it upon herself to adjust the framing to avoid making obvious the unrealistic staging of both the library and the office space. On our way downstairs to the garden for the final scene, Sara tells Ahmed and me how frustrated she is with the art director and unsatisfied with the last two shots. Concerned about the aesthetics of the room and prop set-up, she explains that in theory she does not have an issue with the art director using available objects to stage the library and office scenes, but the lack of foresight and preparation is unacceptable. At the completion of the video, Sara tells Axeer's production team, which at the time consisted of two producers, Omar and Ramy, that she will not work with this art director again.



Figure 58: Sara contemplating



Figure 59: Sara directing



Figure 60: On location, *Helm* shoot



Figure 61: On location, *Helm* shoot (2)

I spend my time lending a helping hand when asked and photographing. After the garden scene, Omar walks in with dinner: shawarma sandwiches for everyone. Hours have gone by without a break and now everyone (lighting technicians, sound team, production team, Helm team) spread out in the garden, sitting on whatever ledge, chair, or floor space they can find to eat. Tensions of the day subside and they recharge for the remainder of the evening. Sitting down eating my sandwich, I feel my legs aching from standing all day. I did not anticipate how much physical and mental labor this job would require. I am exhausted; it's around 7 pm and they still have two more scenes to shoot. I excuse myself after I eat, and Omar comments, "Why so early? We aren't done yet!" "This is the longest I've been away from my daughter, who is four-months old," I answer. "I should go home."

On my way home, I think about their drive, determination, and discipline. I think about the stress on their bodies and minds to achieve their common goal. Helm's production was in fact an anomaly in Cairo's media production scene, at least according to my interlocutors: Sara's annoyed but calm demeanor with the art director for her lack of preparation; there was no hierarchy in food, seating, or treatment. In all the production shoots that I have attended, everyone was calm; there was no yelling or public shaming, or obvious disrespect towards the crew. Producing good work is of utmost importance to everyone at Axeer, including Sara, which is why she was getting frustrated with the actress and the art director. Excellence is not only rewarding to them personally, being a testament to their skill, but also increases the chance for impacting viewers, which is their ultimate goal. Assessment of a good product varies from project to project, and their own experience is taken into account since many of my interlocutors are learning on the job; expectations of their work, and of themselves, are constantly changing. But it comes down to whether or not a product came out the way it was envisioned and met their communicative and aesthetic objectives. The budget allocated to a project, no matter how small, is no excuse for bad work. Although they understand that with more money they could present work of a different standard, they are cautious not to fall into this trap. Rather, they focus mostly on their technical skills—in shooting, sound, and editing—the idea, message, and ultimate storyline—if these components are strong, it will show in the product's outcome. Helm's shoot was considered low budget, one of several low budget projects that Axeer worked on.

In every case, Axeer relies on creativity and preparation (which gives them a unique edge), a story (that is engaging to the audience and communicates something impactful), and a resourceful and flexible crew (using me as a replacement to the hired female actor is one

example of this; including crew members as “extras” in the video is another). Budgets often limit what can and cannot be done—adjustments are constantly negotiated—but having the idea dictate the project is essential and spearheads every meeting. The final factor that aids in making good work is “the client.” Sara and Omar enjoyed working with Helm. Both entities, Helm and Axeer, treated one another as partners and respected each other’s skill set. Ramez did not interfere except to point out inaccuracies in representation—like in my scene. Such partnerships help in network-building for future projects; as a result of this video, Helm approached Axeer again to promote a new accessibility project they were launching—*Entalaq*, a mobile app that enables persons with disabilities to navigate accessible venues and services that best fit their needs.



Figure 62: *Entalaq* Campaign

Sara, again, was responsible for the idea: a series of social experiments were designed to push forward the need for accessible venues. In one video, people in a coffee shop all receive menus written in braille. No one can read the menu and customers start getting frustrated. A visually impaired woman walks into the coffee shop and explains the experiment to them. These same people are asked questions like “how did this make you feel,” and “what do you suggest should be done to be inclusive.” Following a similar format, a man on a wheelchair and deaf individuals working in a pharmacy do not comprehend what customers are asking, similarly inviting reflection on inclusivity.

IV. The Push and Pull with Clients

Just as high-quality work can be satisfying, and provide a flare of optimism in reaching a desired goal, involvement in mediocre work is disappointing. Unfortunately, not all client-based work is based on a satisfying, horizontal partnership and symbiotic relationship that developed between Axeer and Helm. In fact, Axeer has dealt with several “difficult” and “inflexible” clients who dictated what they wanted and how they wanted it, micromanaging the entire production process (from altering story endings to even changing the type of rug placed in a living room scene). Some of these same clients take for granted the amount of effort required to produce a short (3–5 minutes video), assuming that it is cheaper, easier, and quicker to make because it will be released online and not on T.V., and thus requesting unreasonable turn around deadlines for a video. This assumption is pervasive in the current media scene in Cairo, but Axeer’s team continuously negotiates to manage expectations so as to not pressure those who will be working on the project. When Axeer began as a company, they would accept “commercial” work for its

monetary benefits and were not overly concerned about it; what mattered was to deliver a product the client would like, without compromising their own core values. In trying to build a clientele with individuals who share their vision of “social impact,” Axeer does not settle as easily nowadays; they want their work to be of social significance and they want their cultural products to display high levels of care and skill. Once an idea is finalized by the creative team and the proposal is sent to the client, they wait for the client’s feedback. Oftentimes, Axeer would accept their suggestions if these were minor and would not change the basic “point” of the story; at other times, they reject the suggestions and involve themselves in several meetings and negotiations to keep their idea intact. The result of these negotiations varies project by project, but more often than not Axeer is able to convince the client of their vision. One exception was with a project on bullying, where after weeks of heated negotiations, Axeer’s creative team decided to settle, causing my interlocutors to lose all attachment to the project and feel immense disappointment.

Amal joined Axeer several months into my field research. One of Sara’s friends, Amal is studying in the same major at the German University in Cairo. However, unlike Sara, Amal is an introvert. She is also a young aspiring filmmaker and was hired at Axeer to be part of their creative team. She has a consciously tough exterior that hides her sensitive and insecure nature. She approached me wanting help with an idea for a project; she told me how she was bullied in middle school and that she wanted to raise awareness about the harmful effects of bullying, especially since it is a common practice in Egypt with no system in place to prevent it. Amal tried bringing this topic up at several brainstorming sessions but was unable to confidently pitch her idea. I encouraged her to develop the idea, mentored her through the research phase, and

practiced her presentation with her. She successfully pitched it to Khalid, the CEO, who gave her the resources to make a launching video. Amal poured her heart and soul into this project; it was personal, self expressive, creative and innovative. The care she dedicated to this work was obvious in the amount of time she invested in it. She visited me in my apartment in Maadi several times while we researched and brainstormed various approaches to the project, an hour commute from where she lives in Mohandiseen. We shot the launching video in a one week, starting in the evenings, when my daughter slept, and finished hours passed midnight. The project grew into an entire campaign that was later sponsored by UNICEF.

The launching video setup was straightforward. We built a questionnaire that went out on all social media sites, asking basic questions about bullying. We then invited people who filled out the survey to participate in a video that discussed this problem in greater depth. Amal, as the director, wanted each person to sit on a stool and face the camera; the cinematographer focused on the interviewees faces and body language as they spoke. The background was black with dramatic lighting to set a serious tone to the video. I was put in charge of asking questions that we thoroughly vetted together. We heard several stories from young men, women, and children who were bullied or who bullied someone else. In this video, we focused on how there was not one Arabic word that identified the problem, making it more and more difficult to solve it, and on how pervasive the problem actually is. Amal singlehandedly designed a four-step campaign that accompanied the video, with each step having a target audience and a specific communication strategy. The first stage was to raise awareness of the problem; the second was a music video narrating different bullying types in an effort to start a conversation; the third was a social experiment that puts the bully in confrontation with their victim; and finally, a series of short-

story videos where effects of bullying was traced. Alongside each media product was an engagement platform. The first phase included hashtags to start an online conversation; the second included a website of resources; the third included public talks; and the fourth included merchandise that would promote an anti-bullying movement like that of “;” the semi-colon.⁸¹ Amal also took the initiative and included “activation projects” such as teacher workshops, parent workshops, and school workshops to further educate the public and instill preventive practices to bullying.

With this detailed and thoroughly thought out proposal and launching video, Axeer pitched it to UNICEF. UNICEF liked the idea and saw its potential; however, they asked for an entirely different project. They sent Axeer’s creative team a brief detailing a request for three separate videos (for parents, teachers, and children) in the format of a public service announcement (PSA). The project now was no longer Amal’s alone and the creative team all participated in creating the three PSAs. At this point in the project’s trajectory I had left Egypt, but Amal told me her issues with how the project unfolded, and it came down to how much the client interfered with every aspect of the project. According to Amal, they spent hours in meetings trying to convince UNICEF of their vision. Everyone, it seemed, had different opinions and no one could agree on how to proceed. With every meeting, Amal and the rest of the team felt more and more disassociated from the project until they decided that it was taking too much time and effort, so they settled—in this case, they had lost their creative autonomy. Amal fought hard for her vision

⁸¹ The semi-colon was a project created by Amy Bleuel in 2013 after she lost her father to suicide. It is a metaphor for suicide prevention. Instead of ending a sentence, a writer can use a semicolon to continue on—so can an individual who is struggling with suicidal thoughts. [Taken from Amal’s proposal]

but the final project ended up, as she described it “being too fluffy.”⁸² They changed scripts, wardrobe, bullying experiences, and even type of schools. For example, Amal wanted to situate the bullying cases in public government schools (that teach foreign language, not only public schools that only teach Arabic). But the way that the videos turned out looks as if they are situated in a private school (very pristine). The client did not want any scenes that included “violence,” even if it was subtly shown or implied, and thus they removed those parts from Amal’s storyline, which infuriated her even more because “bullying can be, and is often, violent,” she said.



Figure 63: Screen shot from *Bullying*

Amal admits that she no longer feels ownership in the project or that it belongs to her or even to Axeer, and she claims, “ I doubt that it will make a difference, maybe it will raise some awareness to the topic but it is no longer relatable nor is it realistic in its representation,” of the issue she set out to tackle. She was the assigned director to the videos, but by shooting time she

⁸² All three videos can be seen here: <https://www.unicef.org/egypt/bullying> or here: Child’s copy (<https://vimeo.com/288955847>) Teacher copy (<https://vimeo.com/289321719>), Parent’s copy (<https://vimeo.com/289321377>),

was no longer fully invested. As we have seen with Helm, in assessing a project's final outcome, good work constitutes: autonomy; investment; self-realization; good quality products that contribute to the common good. Bad work is, on the whole, constitutes the opposite (see Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2010). In the case of UNICEF, Amal's alienation from the project and her dissatisfaction claiming that "it will not make a difference" and "I don't feel ownership anymore" speaks primarily to how she thinks the bullying videos will not contribute to the social good. Most importantly, she did not experience any personal growth or self realization as a result. Amal was optimistic when she started the project, put in the effort to research and convince others of its worth. She was attached to the topic at hand and to the difference she believed it could make in someone's life having gone through the detrimental effects of bullying herself. But when the project morphed into something unrecognizable she was disappointed; and in her disappointment, she had lost a sense of purpose. "I want to be doing something, not waste my time pleasing clients," she recalled.

Some clients view Axeer as providing a media service, short and simple. However, Axeer views itself as much more than that. They have an "optimistic attachment" (Berlant 2011) to the idea that they can make an impact, are doing something different, and are instilling change on various levels by being true to their values of fairness, equality, and honesty. But, in working with some clients they have realized that their optimism towards a certain project, where they "expect that this time, nearness to this thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way" (Berlant 2011; 2) can often be impossible to attain. Such tension with client work reveals the core of a company that wants to see its vision through without compromising it. This tension escalates because many at Axeer want to work on jobs that they themselves find

challenging, rewarding, and meaningful to those who will engage with it; otherwise they would have chosen to work anywhere else. Part of this tension is also a result of Axeer's value of respect and trust; Axeer expects partnership with their clients, meaning that the client trusts that Axeer will deliver an engaging story that has the potential to make a difference. We have seen that play out with the Helm shoot but not with UNICEF.

Chapter 5.

Nour: A Music Video Case Study on Gender, Audience, and Visibility

The previous chapter was about Axeer's media practice where by examining the media itself (content) and the people (addressing the personal and social context of ideas) we saw Axeer's construction, representation, and contestation of their social world. Their practice is socially oriented and concerned with values and action. Part of their values are to further make things they deem meaningful visible. This chapter focuses on a 2016 music video, *Nour*, which was produced by Axeer in collaboration with UN Women Egypt. I follow this project from its inception to its online release and examine how it went viral. I break down Axeer's imaginative audience, their goal to reach "as many people as possible," and how my interlocutors used new media technologies to achieve this goal. *Nour* was a narrative-based music video designed to highlight a social cause (women's empowerment). I will examine its reception from the perspective of media makers who packaged an increasingly global phenomena (e.g., Panday 2017) in local aesthetics that was aimed for a local audience; in doing so, they've created a space for a conversation to discuss a message that is attached to the particular customs and social milieu of the viewer. Underlying this case study is what I call the duality of publics. Axeer

strives not only to make societal issues public but also to make a public⁸³ through the media they produce—one that extends to online and offline spaces.

I. Nour

A request for proposals by The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women was sent to several media agencies, including Axeer, asking for a music video, to be produced and disseminated through social media. This video would be part of a bigger UN campaign called “Taa Marbouta: The Secret of Your Power.”⁸⁴ The song would be used on social media to convey informational messages to audiences, particularly youth, portraying the issue of discrimination against women in Egyptian society. According to the brief sent to Axeer: “the main message of the song is to highlight how people discriminate, whether intentionally or not, between women and men during different situations in life. It should show that women are equal to men and should be treated the same and provided with similar opportunities.” All the while, Zap had been working on a song on this very topic and worked with a member of Axeer’s creative team (Eman) to visualize it. They thought of a narrative-based music video to illustrate Zap’s rap-lyrics. As a narrative, the music video “follows a rigorous internal logic, makes sequence supremely significant, and strives toward closure” (Ryan 2004;

⁸³ Mona Baker and Bolette Blaagaard make a similar argument in defining “citizen media.” Baker and Blaagaard (2016) surveyed the term citizen media and broadened its definition to mean “They *become* citizens when they engage in practices—perform political and aesthetic acts of citizenship—that transform their sense of self and their environment, without expecting personal reward in the form of financial or cultural capital, and without the mediation of a third party of benefactor” (13). This definition does not apply to Axeer directly, however, there is an ever lasting goal of transforming the audiences that see the media they are producing.

⁸⁴ For more about this campaign see: <http://www.eg.undp.org/content/egypt/en/home/presscenter/pressreleases/2016/10/04/ncw-and-the-united-nations-launch-taa-marbouta-campaign-to-promote-women-s-social-economic-and-political-empowerment-.html> ; <http://egypt.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2017/09/taa-marbouta> *taa marbuta* is a letter in Arabic alphabet that is used in feminine gender (ت ا ا).

332); the lyrics of the song and the visuals rely on standard elements to create a narrative effect: plot, characters, events, temporality, causality, climax, beginning, middle, and end.

Project briefs always specify channels of dissemination—a television commercial (TVC), social media, or radio—setting certain parameters to follow. My interlocutors view media technologies as tools to reach target audiences and work within limitations, or possibilities, to present good content no matter its channel of transmission. A social media channel, for example, limits the duration of video to five minutes or less to not lose audience attention. Axeer understands media to include both a channel of transmission and a mode of expression, whether the product is a commercial, a public service announcement, or a short film. Their main goal is to harness media's narrative power by creating products that can jump between different channels of transmission. A music video like *Nour* was heard on the radio, seen on television, watched on social media platforms, discussed in magazines, and performed on stage (all of which expanded its viewership). What generates such movement is attention to “media of expression” (Ryan 2004; 22). My interlocutors did not fixate on media as channels of communication; instead, they claim media is the material support for the form and content of their message, a direct critique to McLuhan's argument that “the medium is the message.” Axeer's team (Zap, Eman, and myself) worked on the proposal, which included a rough storyboard, lyrics, and suggestions for chorus singers and directors. After reviewing several company proposals, the UN selected Axeer for the project.

Axeer's producer and the director assigned to the video met several times to scout locations, cast actors, and finalize each scene in the storyboard. A stylist was hired to dress the actors and singers. Once preparations were complete, a preproduction meeting with UN Women was held in

their regional office in Maadi. It lasted three hours and was full of discussions, questions, and suggestions from UN Women and National Committee of Women⁸⁵ delegates. Each person from Axeer's production team presented their part of the project: the director (Ibrahim) introduced his vision for the story, each shot scene, and shooting locations; the stylist (Rana) showcased wardrobe for the cast; Zap debuted lyrics to the song; and the producer went over the production schedule. Also in attendance was Khalid (CEO), Ahmed (business developer), Adham El-Hilaly (art director) and myself. A strong theme in the meeting was the desire to make the music video relatable to Egyptians by appealing to local aesthetics.

II. *Nour's* Storyline and Lyrics

Ibrahim, the director, presented *Nour's* story scene by scene, including comments on the general tone he hoped to convey in each scene. The video begins with a manager, a man in his 40s, entering his office at a car shop. He sits on his chair and goes through a pile of job applications for a mechanical engineer; interviews for this position will take place later that afternoon. While reading Nour Abdel Karim's application, he finds a wrinkled diary entry that was mistakenly included in the application folder. Moments of Nour's struggles are written on this paper, which the man starts to imagine. From the man's point of view, we see Nour, a young man, taking care of his younger sisters, and living with his mother and elderly father. Nour spends a lot of time working and studying: he works as a mechanic, stays late to finish assignments, engages with his professors at university, and cheers with his friends at final exam results. The last section in the entry is about the death of Nour's father. The man imagines Nour

⁸⁵ The government entity that oversees UN Women work. Every international NGO has direct oversight from an Egyptian government office.

sitting at his father's bedside in the hospital. In the present, we see Nour getting ready for his interview: he puts on his suit jacket, looks at himself in the mirror, sighs deeply, as if overwhelmed, and heads out. He takes the bus to the interview, staring out the window, and walks from the bus stop to the car shop.

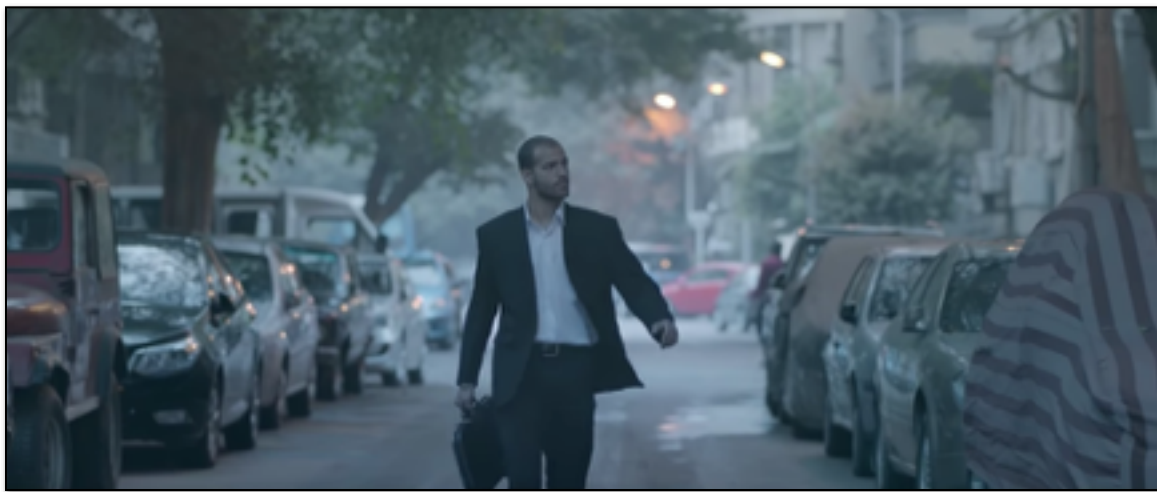


Figure 64: Nour walking to the interview

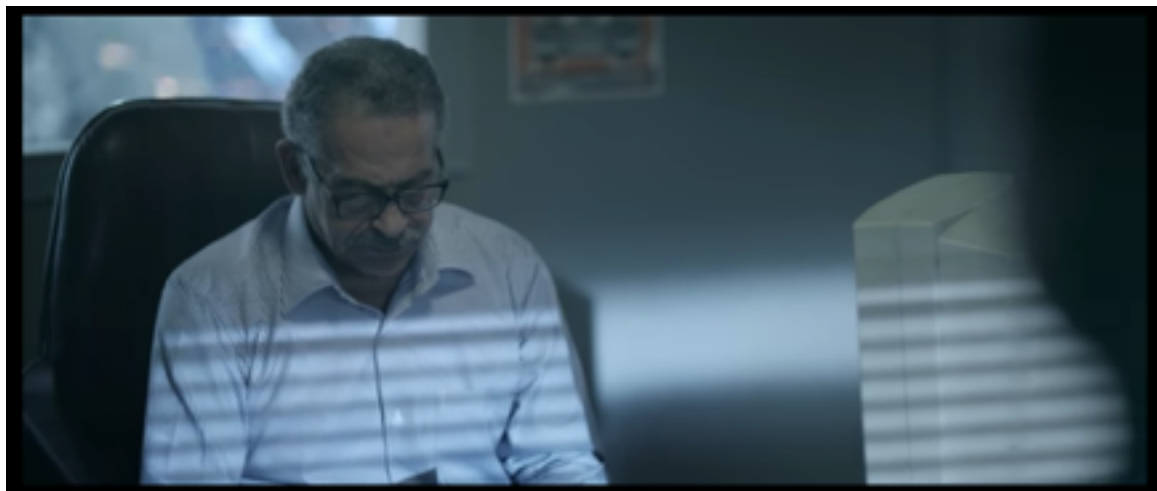


Figure 65: Car shop manager waiting for Nour



Figure 66: Nour (female) walks into the interview

We see the car shop owner waiting for Nour’s arrival but the person who walks in is a woman, not a man: “this is a moment of confusion for the viewer,” Ibrahim says. The entire video rewinds back to everything we saw male-Nour doing but this time female-Nour is our main character. We see her with her two sisters on the bus, we see her studying at night in a car shop and at the university, we see her in the living room with her father and sisters, we see her working as a mechanic, we see her running down a hospital corridor, we see her crying at the death of her father, we see her on the bus headed to the interview, and we see her meeting with the company manager, shaking his hand in the end. Ibrahim’s proposed ending caused disagreements among the UN and NCW delegates. He initially wanted to end with the company manager looking at both Nours side by side, as if the manager was looking at the man and then the woman and hires the woman. A member of NCW was concerned that this ending will make the video seem like it showed *two separate* stories and not one where the manager **assumed** Nour was a man; the message of equality and empowerment would be lost if the video is understood as two stories: “we are not saying choose the woman, we are promoting equality,” she commented. Ibrahim noted her concern and suggested they wait to finalize that decision in

the post production stage, claiming that the singing scenes could also be used to break up the visuals and help lessen the confusion (if one existed). After some thought during post-production, Ibrahim agreed that having both Nours in the end would promote the idea of *two stories* because what was most important was the twist in the story. *Nour* turns out to be a woman, thereby highlighting the manager's preconceived notions of gender and engineering.

The lyrics of the song were largely approved, and the only point of negotiation was the song's title. UN Women wanted a title with a *taa marbouta* (ؤ ة ة) at the end of a noun to emphasize femininity, and fit the theme of their Taa Marbouta Campaign. Arabic, like French, and other languages is gendered, it has both masculine and feminine nouns.⁸⁶ However, Zap was adamant that the song be titled *Nour*. As much as the UN and NCW tried to convince him that having the video's title end with a *taa marbuta* would relate back to the campaign UN was spearheading, Zap made a stronger case for the gender neutrality of the name *Nour* (both boys and girls in Egypt hold this name) and how it would not give away the surprise ending of the story. Zap further claimed that promoting a feminine title would in fact deter from the gender stereotypes that the song addresses in the chorus and second half of the lyrics. Zap wrote the lyrics from the point of view of the manager, the narrator, and when he meets the real Nour an internal monologue takes place where he confronts himself and his biases:

⁸⁶ For example, the word for engineer is *mohandis* (مهندس) which implies a male engineer, however, *mohandisa* (مهندسة) is a female engineer. A noun is masculine by default. It must have one of four signs in order for it to be considered feminine. Which nouns receive one of these four signs (and are therefore feminine) and which do not receive any of these signs (and are therefore left masculine) is entirely coincidental. There is no rule that dictates whether a noun will be masculine or feminine; it is entirely based on coinage. Yes, there are clues such as things that are conceptually masculine will most likely be grammatically masculine as well – the word 'man' (رجل) is masculine and the word 'woman' (امرأة) is feminine.

It is time for the interview, I am excited to meet him
To hear more about his life, his dreams, his circumstances
To my surprise, Nour was not a man
There is a **girl** standing in front of me saying hello, I do not understand
I astonishingly asked “is your name Nour Abdel Karim”?
She replied with a smile “Hello, and you are?”
I asked again, “Do you have siblings?”
“Yes, young sisters, and I’ve been responsible for them since my father passed”
I was shocked that her answer was the same as what I’ve read
A thousand voices in my mind echo: it’s unbelievable, how can this be?
How did she work at a car shop?
How was she the backbone for her family?
How did she exhibit masculine qualities?
How did she overcome those hardships? She’s a girl, not a boy
How will male workers address her as “boss”? (*Rayesa*)
How will I say that I chose a “female” mechanical engineer?
Voices in my head condemning the question and the answer
The voice condemns the hesitation and orders me to agree
My conscience reminded me that I already made my decision
Will I change my mind because Nour is a woman?
What a shame! And for this I apologize.
How can I let myself be influenced by these sick and outdated thoughts
I came back to my senses and gave Nour her diary page
I told her: “I know a lot about your life;
“Congratulations on the new job, I am sure you will succeed
And I wish this will be a new and happy experience in your life”

The chorus was sung by a young actress, Amina Khalil. In the final video, Zap and Amina’s singing scenes flowed from beginning, middle, and end and helped narrate the visuals as well as provide interludes from one part of the story to the next. As it stands, the video starts with the manager at the car shop walking towards his desk and picking up a folder. Zap is introduced alongside the manager and begins rapping the first part of the story. We see Nour as the manager imagines him and are guided by Zap’s lyrics. Amina sings the chorus after male-Nour’s father dies:

The Chorus (written by poet Mohammed Ibrahim)

I will not be marginalized, nor will I accept being idly shelved
This world progresses because we are both equally walking the same line
I lead and challenge circumstances you don't go through
“His” role will never be complete without “Her” role

Amina Khalil’s introduction incites the viewer to keep watching in anticipation—Amina is a very popular celebrity and has a large fan base— adding a layer to the song that has yet to come to fruition: what is she addressing and to whom?



Figure 67: Amina singing the chorus

III. Styling and Art Direction

Rana, a young woman in her twenties, was hired by Axeer to be the project’s stylist; she designed the entire wardrobe for the cast and celebrities (Zap and Amina). Every outfit was presented at the meeting: the younger sisters’ school uniforms, the parents’ attire at home and at the hospital, and both Nours’ clothes at home, at university, at the car shop. In her presentation she mentioned how the clothing is reflective of Egypt’s C-class and based her decisions on “real people.” Rana presented several, similar, options to leave room for flexibility in shopping for the outfits. All the clothes were simple, non-branded, loose, modest, clean but worn (had lost their

luster), and religiously ambiguous; clothing of this type were intentionally chosen to situate Nour, and her family, as a member of Egypt's lower middle class. How Rana assembled the outfits added detail to the social class aesthetic they were creating: at university, Nour would wear loose jeans, a casual button down shirt with a tank top underneath, with her hair tied back, and the two sisters wore a plain school uniform symbolic of government public schools.

Rana casually mentioned that the mother will be wearing an *isharb* (a scarf loosely tied on one's head) when at home, and a different one at the hospital. Nour's mother is an older woman, in her early 50s, and an NCW delegate emphasized the point of not having the mother wear a *hijab*. Rana clarified that the mother will not be dressed in a *hijab* but an *isharb*, with her hair tied back in a bandana or loose scarf, a characteristic of older Egyptian women, but will not signify a Muslim or Christian adherence.

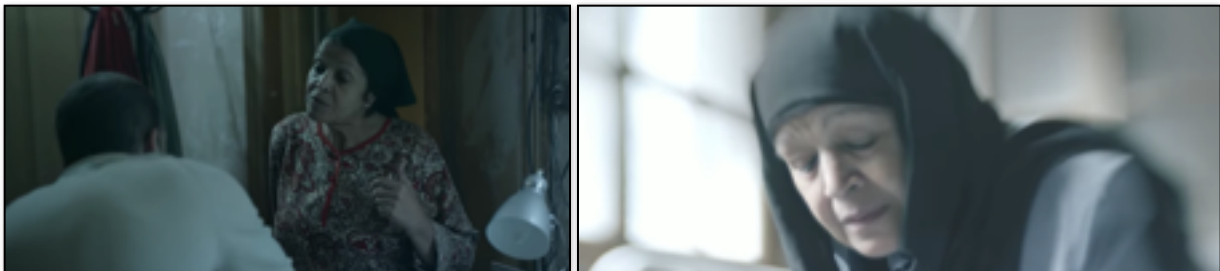


Figure 68: Screen shot of Nour's mother wearing a scarf

In the video, Nour's mother at home wore a bandana and at the hospital wore a more formal head covering that was wrapped in a religiously ambiguous manner—the black scarf is wrapped behind the ears, like a bandana, then brought forward to cross over her neck and drape over her shoulders.

As for the celebrities, their clothes were also simple but indicated a different social class. Celebrities were expected to look fresh, chic, and glamorous, but the styling in this video was intentionally subtle and accessible to insure continuity without “provoking (*istifzaz*)” those watching from the lower-class. Both celebrities wore clothes that were fashionable, youthful, and hip.



Figure 69: Zap and Amina

The outfits were gendered but promoted a sort of gender neutrality: both wore pants, a top with an overtop, and white tennis shoes. In Zap’s second singing scene at the car shop, he wore a jean jacket over a shirt. Both singers displayed fashionable attire, but nothing branded and out of reach for lower middle-class audiences, which was Rana’s intention.

My interlocutors speak of social class in two ways: in relation to their target audience, and as an aspect of the narrative they are creating. Most media agencies in Cairo divide class into A, B, and C—A is for upper class, B for middle, and C is for lower class. In asking about this classification, my interlocutors would reply with general activities, residential areas, hangout

locations, restaurant preferences, clothing styles, shopping places, level of education, and languages spoken (if their Facebook is in English or Arabic, for example). Empirical information, like household income, was less important. Instead, social class was treated as a package best defined through a presumed “habitus.” Bourdieu’s concept of habitus focuses on the embodiment of dispositions, such as mannerisms, clothing, and general behaviors that one acquires. My interlocutors categorize people from different classes using similar principles. I asked Rana about the “Egyptian C-class look” she was aiming for, and she commented on how she has a mental storage bank that contains how people around her dress and act: “you see different styles in the streets and in different places so you have a feedback you reference in your head.” There are tricks Rana employed to get clothes to look certain ways; either she bought used clothing or would buy new clothes and wash them several times. Worn clothes is one factor she described as a way to show how C-class individuals do not own a lot of clothes and re-wear what they have over and over again. Hair and makeup also add details; Nour relied on public transportation, which is crowded and poorly ventilated, so her hair was tied back and glossy from sweat. Minimum makeup was used since Nour was young, worked with men, and was a university student. Similar techniques were used in styling male-Nour.

To fully create a convincing social class aesthetic in this video, art direction was as important as clothing style. Adham El-Hilaly briefly presented the locations and art direction for each location. An everyday aesthetic was established— one that included mundane activities, practical lifestyle, and diverse living environments that characterized everyday life in Egypt’s lower middle class. As we know from the storyline and lyrics, struggle, economic pressure, and responsibility were all part of Nour’s day to day existence. Locations for the video were all

designed to reflect places someone from this social class would visit. Nour did not own a car and relied on public transportation: she went to university, work, a job interview, and took her sisters to school on a bus. Nour also attended public university and her younger sisters attended public school (evident from the school uniform). Her living quarters was small: living room is cramped, included a dining table and chairs, they had a fan and not an air conditioner, and used lamps as a light source (not ceiling lights). The paint on Nour's bedroom walls was poorly patched. In the hospital, several beds were cramped in one room with long hallways of patients and family members waiting, nurses coming in and out of rooms and a general sense of overcrowding and lack of organization. But there is a promise of social mobility now that Nour has graduated university and will be hired as an engineer at a car company. The details and effort put into creating a story that is real and relatable was crucial to its success.

IV. Locations:

Scouting for locations was an activity the director and producer did together. Convenience, budget, timeline, and visuals were all factors considered in this process. Zap and Amina's singing scenes were shot at the same location as the university scenes, but in different areas. The hospital scene was shot in the same location as the living room and bedroom scenes. Zap's second singing scene was shot at a car mechanic shop, along with the manager going over applications, and the interview. Most importantly, in choosing the locations the production team looked for places that would propel the story line, be visually artistic, and fit their budget. Whether intentional or not, what is most interesting about these locations was the history behind them and the repurposing of place for the music video.

The first day of shooting took place in an apartment flat in a historically bourgeois/wealthy part of Cairo, Garden City,⁸⁷ which spans the east side of the Nile just south of downtown's Tahir Square. Downtown Cairo and neighboring areas, like Garden City, were designed by prestigious French architects who stressed the importance of European style urban planning in Cairo. From the 1880s to the early 1900s, when Egypt was ruled by monarchy, Egyptians and non-Egyptian minorities from older neighborhoods flocked to the trendier, up-and-coming parts of the city like Garden City. After 1952, there was considerable mobility in direct response to the period of nationalist construction that took place with the military coup. An exodus of the foreign community, including Jews, Greeks, and Armenians, hit downtown Cairo hard. Its social activities diminished, its boutiques no longer attracted the élite, and its apartments were taken over by the social mobility that accompanied Nasserist nationalization. Negligence in laws and regulations helped establish commercial businesses in the neighborhood, with no consideration for the historic value of the buildings. Parking problems, together with car exhaust fumes, added to the ill effects of misuse and a lack of maintenance of buildings and pavement. Decades of neglect by downtown landlords and tenants, precipitated by the migration of the expatriate community and the subsequent departure of the upper classes, have "left the ornate splendor of its lavish edifices mired in decay" (Eldeen 2013; 920). Yet Garden City is now an attractive site for tourists⁸⁸ due to its quiet, upscale, tree-lined streets, ornamental palaces, and its proximity to

⁸⁷ <https://stepfeed.com/garden-city-a-hidden-historical-treasure-in-the-heart-of-cairo-1455>

TV Serial *Hawanem Garden City* tells the story of several aristocratic women living in Garden City and how life changes after the 1952 Revolution. *Layali Helmia* is a TV serial that follows the lives of various social classes living in an affluent neighborhood and how it changed. *Yacubian Building*, is movie based on Alaa Asway's book, also traces the developments and presents a contemporary view of who lives at this once affluent building in a Downtown Cairo neighborhood.

⁸⁸ With several Airbnb options: [https://www.airbnb.com/s/Garden-City--Qasr-an-Nile--Cairo-Governorate--Egypt?listing_types\[\]=11](https://www.airbnb.com/s/Garden-City--Qasr-an-Nile--Cairo-Governorate--Egypt?listing_types[]=11)

the United States, British, and Italian Embassies. Garden City was modeled after an English garden suburb meant to radiate tranquility. Its winding, leafy streets often intersect with each other multiple times and graceful palaces and lofty mansions line the streets next to modern banks and other professional buildings (Andre and Wood 2001).

The apartments in Garden City are spacious, with high ceilings in some, long hallways in others, and several rooms. I tried to find out who owned the apartment we were shooting in, but no one knew for sure. One of the producers told me he thinks it belongs to a Greek-Egyptian family. Sadly, the apartment was not in good shape, and reminded me of my grandparents' home, with piles of hoarded objects in every corner, white furniture covers turned grey from the dust, and a sink full of dishes waiting for someone younger to wash them. With the production equipment scattered in every corner and people crowding different rooms, it was hard to tell what the apartment looked like. With an extremely long hallway, a characteristic of these older apartments, it made sense to shoot the hospital scene there; the production team brought in plastic waiting chairs and lined up the entire hallway. For the bedroom and living room scenes, they heavily relied on what was already available but moved a few objects around. I snuck into a room to pump and found Rana and her assistants smoking. I joined them as they commented on how messy the room was—a kitchen and laundry room that barely had any space to stand due to the piles of clothes and kitchenware laying in every corner, they were shocked that people lived like this. It is in this apartment that the production team thought it most suitable for a lower class social aesthetic to be presented since the place already looked pretty run-down. And yet it is located in one of Cairo's historically affluent neighborhoods.



Figure 70: Garden City apartment details



Figure 71: Shooting *Nour*, Take 1



Figure 72: Setting up



Figure 73: Shooting *Nour*, Take 2

The second day of shooting took place at the Agricultural Museum; here they shot all the university scenes and two out of the three singing scenes. The museum is located in the well-known area of Dokki in Cairo, also close to Garden City and downtown Cairo. Agriculture has played a major role in Egyptian history, from the days of the pharaohs to modern times.⁸⁹ There is much truth in the famous saying: Egypt is the gift of the Nile. This is because the Nile is the major source of water used in agriculture in Egypt. Therefore, because of agriculture's ancient and continuing importance to Egyptian life, during the 1930s the Egyptian government decided to build this museum.⁹⁰

We spent most of our time shooting Amina's singing scene,⁹¹ near the hall of bread, which displayed various kinds of bread from ancient to modern times. Photographs of different aspects of agriculture -- workers, waterfalls, tools --- lined the walls leading into the bread exhibition. A taxidermic lion lied on its side, his legs having been destroyed by being dragged from place to place, and much of the museum is closed or in disrepair. When I told my father about this project, he thought back to when the museum was in better shape. The grounds of the agricultural museum were among his favorite places to study, and a short walk from where he used to live. He boasted of the lush gardens and trees that provided shade, beautifully furnished

⁸⁹ <http://www.touregypt.net/featurestories/agriculturalmuseum.htm>

⁹⁰ The museum was commissioned by King Fouad I but opened during the reign of his son, King Farouk, in 1938 and was installed in the palace of Princess Fatima (1853-1920), daughter of Khedive Ismail Pasha. The facade of the old palace was adorned with engravings and other decorative designs of plants and animals, and buildings were later added to serve other functions. The grounds of the museum are massive, covering about 125 thousand square meters. The actual buildings occupy 20 thousand square meters. More than 15% of this space is occupied by gardens. The collection contains a vast array of objects in ten halls, including a cinema, a lecture hall, a library, laboratories for the preparation, maintenance, embalming, preservation, and storage of plants—all of which is no longer in use. For more info see *Irrigated Agriculture in Egypt: Past, Present and Future*, edited by Masayoshi Satoh, Samir Abouloros and Peter Wien's *Arab Nationalism: The Politics of History and Culture in the Modern Middle East*.

⁹¹ Sculptors by Abdel Qader Rizq framed Amina Khalil

rooms lit by high rise windows, “the museum now is decaying just like the country,” he said. The decay that my father grieves about is being appropriated by a younger generation trying to establish themselves.



Figure 74: Bread section in agricultural museum

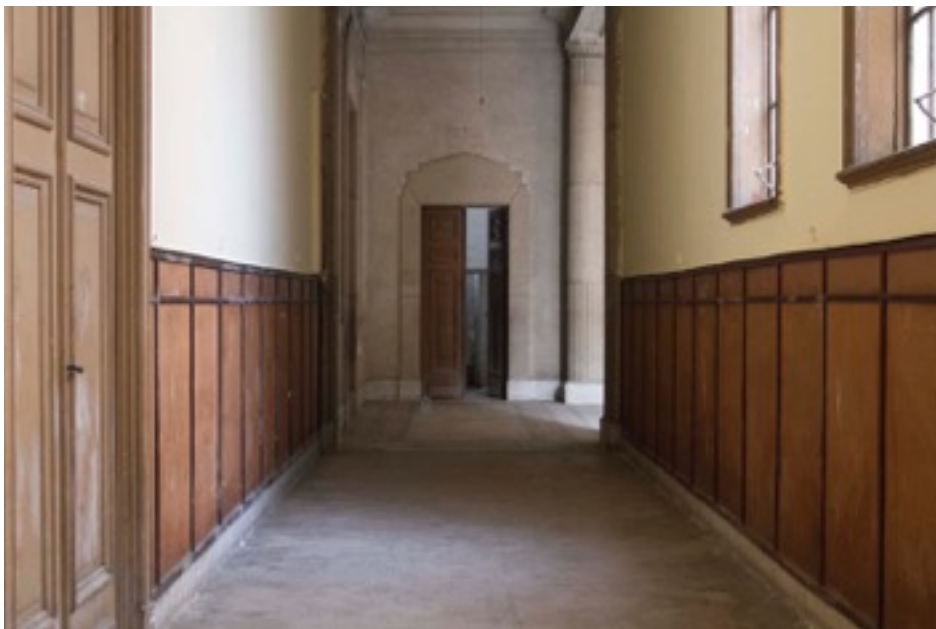


Figure 75: Agricultural museum hallway



Figure 76: Shooting *Nour*, Take 3



Figure 77: Taking a break

V. Internet as a Tool: Going Viral

i. Social Media Marketing Strategy

Included in Axeer's proposal to UN Women was a detailed social media plan that would be put in place before, during, and after the release of the music video. Social media platforms were the main marketing site for the video. In their proposal were statistics that charted percentage of active social media users in the Egyptian population. A summary of what they planned to do and hoped to achieve on social media was divided into three phases:

First Phase: Photographs from the shoot would be released in advance with a comment revealing that a new project was underway: "wait for our new video, coming soon." The day of the release another photograph would be posted with the caption: "Watch our latest video, Nour, tonight at 8pm." The video would then be released on YouTube, Facebook, and shared on Twitter. A song poster would be shared on Instagram with a direct video link added in Axeer's bio. Different song posters would be added as banners on all social medial channels so each site was promoting the same project all at once. Social media influencers who had a working relationship with Axeer would share the video as well—this did not include Zap and Amina, who both have their own following and sites where they would upload the video. The goal of this first phase was to reach as many people as possible in a short time so the video goes "viral."

Second Phase: Publishing a series of engaging posts to deliver key messages. Some ideas included the following: stories of successful women, open forum questions to encourage people to share their experience, or share their opinions of certain situations. The goal for this phase was to start a conversation about women's empowerment and gender inequality in the work force.

Third Phase: Promote two offline events that included a live performance by Zap, one in Cairo and one in Menya. Their goal was to attract 500+ attendees for each event and invite top influencers in Egypt's media scene, who would be invited to spotlight media coverage for the events, the song, and to promote the empowerment message to online and offline communities.

ii. Publishing Content

During Nour's release, I spent some time with Axeer's social media manager, Sesso, to learn more about the dissemination process and how they apply their social media marketing plan. Sesso joined Axeer in 2012, but had been following their work for a while and coincidentally met them at a charity organization called *Bridges*. They were working on their first Web series and did not have anyone official to be responsible for its release, "so since I spend all day online anyway I decided I may as well spend it all day online at Axeer." It was through his time spent online that he learned about social media marketing. He had recently graduated from dental school when he joined Axeer and was applying to get his Masters in Dentistry, which he completed many years later, although he did not want to work as a dentist and wanted to find a way to do social media work full time, which he does now at another company. Axeer was never a secure source of income for him, nor did he want it to be; he felt like he was part of something, "doing something" (*Ba`mel haga*).

Sesso comes to Axeer only when there is a video that needs to be released. At Axeer, he spends most of his time outside, rolling natural cigarettes, and glued to his computer screen with endless tabs open. The day of Nour's release, Sesso was sitting outside typing when I joined him. The sun was slowly setting but Sesso was too focused to move, his big round face illuminated by

his computer screen. He told me he was conducting a “video optimization,” which maximizes the video’s performance and engagement. Focused intently on his computer screen, he typed, clicked on tabs, selected options and continued typing. With over twenty Chrome tabs open on his computer, I lost track of what he was doing. He explained that videos uploaded directly to Facebook play automatically in the News Feed,⁹² and have higher interaction rates than videos that are linked in a post. He started by choosing a thumbnail, since “this is what people would see before the video started to play.” After, he added video tags to help the video surface in Facebook search results. Then came a caption, “I read somewhere that over 80% of Facebook users watch videos without the sound on so I write something that will attract users to turn on the sound and actually listen to the song—I usually just include the artists name and a short description of the video.”

After Facebook, he clicked on the YouTube tab to optimize the video on this platform. One thing that Youtube has is an “end card” feature that Sesso likes—it is meant to guarantee viewability and increase audience engagement with their Youtube Channel by pointing viewers to other videos by Axeer. He published *Nour* at 8pm and let out a deep sigh of relief. We made our way to the kitchen so he could eat his grilled chicken that arrived over an hour ago. “Please have some,” he kindly offered. I politely declined. I asked Sesso to explain the concept of “virality”—what does it mean? How is it measured? How does something go viral? He laughs and says “by luck of course,” and dug into his chicken thigh before answering: “It is random like everything else in our life, but there are some factors we consider: Do people want to share it?

⁹² The official term for this type of video is “native video.” This is different from sharing a video that was uploaded on another platform and not through Facebook directly.

Will it encourage conversation? Is it controversial or timely? Sometimes you have all the factors and a video won't go viral and other times you can have only one factor and it will go viral. It really depends on the audience.” There is no secret formula that is followed to create viral content; a video gone viral is like a surfer riding a wave who effortlessly dodges other waves that could engulf him (other videos that could take his place). Surfers ride this wave as long as there is momentum, wind speed, and duration: the more views, conversations, and offline promotion, the more momentum the video has to keep going. Once this momentum is lost, and the waves break, the surfer reaches shore, waiting to ride another wave another time.

iii. Following the Music Video and Song

Almost everyone at Axeer monitors the release of media work within the first twenty four hours to track how many people have seen it. This involves checking who shared the video, who tagged Axeer on Facebook, and watching the ‘Likes’ metrics exponentially increase. In the first twenty four hours of *Nour*'s release it reached one million people. A thank you to Axeer's audience with a screen shot of the number highlighted in a red box was posted on their Facebook page (see below). Following their social media plan, several posts were shared by Axeer, encouraging those who have not seen the video to go watch it, to keep the momentum going. *Nour*'s wave was impressive: the music video was featured on several television stations⁹³ (some talk shows, other's music channels), Zap was interviewed on two channels—ON and CBC—with talk show hosts Mona Shzaly⁹⁴ and Set el Hosn; online articles, magazines, and newspapers all

⁹³ Mazika, Free TV, MBC, CBC, ON TV and Dream TV

⁹⁴Can be seen [here](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Brj4XwrReIk&feature=youtu.be) ; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Brj4XwrReIk&feature=youtu.be>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zGvsNZfu-js&feature=youtu.be>

wrote about the song and its message, and it was played on many radio stations.⁹⁵ The song was trending number one on SoundCloud Egypt for two weeks, Anghami for two weeks and Youtube for one week (Soundcloud and Anghami are music channels, not a video based platform like Facebook or Youtube). According to a social media report compiled by Axeer, in the timespan of November 25 to December 8 the song had reached 20M impressions and 7M video views across different social networks and media platforms.⁹⁶



Figure 78: *Nour* on social media

⁹⁵ Radio Misr 88.2, Radio 9090, Mega FM 92.7

⁹⁶ More specifically on FB: 3M views, 124 Likes, 14K comments, 101K shares, 8.25M reach. On Twitter 48K impressions and on YouTube 5M views, 84K likes and 3K comments. Instagram 9.5K interactions. All this is on Axeer's pages. NCW and UN women had their own engagement but could not match Axeer's numbers (theirs was in the high thousands: 973K views on FB and UN Women 353K). The video now has 16M views on YouTube. At the time, in 2016, *Nour* was Axeer's highest budget project, and highest viewed music video.



Figure 79: *Nour* screened on television channels CBC and DW



Figure 80: Following *Nour* on Facebook

Online engagement, however, was no longer enough to fully gauge how a video was received, and my interlocutors learned this from experience. YouTube and Facebook are Axeer's most loyal compatriots; they have relied on social media platforms to share their productions, engage with their audience, and gain a following. Seeing how fast *Katb Lbokra Gawab* soared in numbers when it was released on Jan 23, 2011, motivated them to continue working in media and grow their company—they believed they had something different to offer in a landscape that did not speak to them. The Internet⁹⁷ was seen with newfound excitement. It possessed unique qualities as a platform accessible and alternative to the more centralized media organizations (Anderson 1999). It has been characterized by its potential for participation, offering possibilities for individuals and groups to create their own media, breaking away from what Couldry (2002) has termed “the myth of the mediated centre.”

Algorithms on YouTube and Facebook were much friendlier in the beginning and metrics less complicated to follow.⁹⁸ Youtube videos were easily shared on Facebook, which consolidated views in one area. In rebranding Axeer, such romantic views of the Internet shifted, alongside internal algorithm shifts by YouTube and Facebook. Algorithm changes, made by Youtube in 2012 that replaced the view-based system for one base on watch time, made engagement an incredibly important metric—it was no longer about clicking on a thumbnail, but the amount of time you spend watching a video. If you watch a video to its full length, then in

⁹⁷ Relevant scholarship on new media focuses on its inherent political language (Annabelle & Khiabany 2010, Coleman 2012, Doostdar 2004, Hirschkind 2011, Hefner 2003). The most recent study on digital technology in the Middle East focused on the Egyptian uprising, arguing that the revolution was triggered by a Facebook page and played out both in virtual spaces and the streets. Social media serves as a space of liberation (Herrera 2014).

⁹⁸ <https://www.vidyard.com/blog/what-youtubes-algorithm-change-means-for-marketers/>
<https://www.cnbc.com/2018/03/14/with-over-1-billion-users-heres-how-youtube-is-keeping-pace-with-change.html>

Youtube's algorithms it will rise to the top. And if a user presses play and then clicks away from a video because it is not what they expected to see, or it is not to their taste, then it will drop down to the bottom of the algorithm.

Number of views is still an important factor in monitoring how many people are reached, with the added "likes," "dislikes," and "shares" that YouTube and Facebook offer. Both platforms provide analytics that break down growth of subscribers, fan distribution, number of views, number of interactions, and more detailed demographics like gender, age, and location. Yes, Axeer's use of the Internet carved out a space that is unique to them, gained a fan base, and a reputation in the field. But now, their usage is strategic for economic gains, as well as pushing their message into the mainstream to reach as many people as possible, while fully understanding that solely relying on the Internet may not be enough for the impact they wish to make.

VI. Audience: Making an Impact

Audiences are always present in media work. It is impossible to separate "audience" from the process of production (Dornfeld 1998). Scholarship on mass media shows how audiences are not only empirically out there but also are prefigured in the production process as certain assumptions about the particular class fraction that will consume a media product (Ang's 1991, 1996). In this scholarship, there seems to exist a strict divide between producer and consumer, a divide that dissolves in my fieldsite. Media is embedded in people's quotidian lives and consumers and producers are themselves entangled in discursive relationships. For my interlocutors at Axeer, their relationship with their audience is an ever growing one: they acknowledge that they are consumers and initially saw themselves in their older productions,

creating works that expressed their own aspirations, which they assumed were widely shared by Egyptians of their own generation.. They continue to be consumers on a daily basis as they follow what is trending in Egypt, what conversations are happening around various commercials, and various other content as they share their opinions of it. Scrolling on Facebook, Instagram, and other online sites is part of their daily work routine. Before my interlocutors were producers, they were consumers, and they bring this experience to their productions.

In this online world, Axeer intentionally carved out a space that voices timely and relevant social issues. Unlike research done on television audiences that are viewed as an “invisible mass” (Ang 1991), the Internet invites a more direct engagement with media content which materializes an audience. Based on social media analytics they became aware early on that their main audience base were young people primarily living in Egypt (ranging 15-25 years old); members of their audience would leave comments on their Facebook page: “In a world where media makes you lose faith in humanity, Axeer's masterpieces always shine through and restores it. Thank you;” “They are changing the face of our media system! With their creativity and honest work. Axeer is a pioneer in the field.” For the first couple of years Axeer’s reputation was built on what they felt like doing and saying, breeding a fan base that truly appreciated what they offered. Sesso expressed these sentiments in our interview, reflecting on how Axeer used to be and what it is now. He is one of the few critical voices at Axeer and the most honest about how they have changed. “Sometimes I lose sight of what we are doing,” he told me. “Things are not as clear as before, especially now that we are covering social causes. Are we really making a difference or telling ourselves that we are?” Sesso did not judge the changes, “it is neither good

or bad, it is what it is, but we should be honest with ourselves when we don't always practice what we preach.”

A shift in perspective has occurred, causing unresolved tensions between some of my interlocutors. As I discussed in chapter 1, Axeer's productions voiced the concerns of their generation, was political in scope, and uninhibited—they said what they wanted to say when they wanted to say it. One of my interlocutors referenced *Newsroom*, an American television political drama series created by Aaron Sorkin; *Newsroom* shows the behind the scenes of a fictional Atlantis Cable News (ACN) and revolves around anchor Will McAvoy and his new executive producer, MacKenzie McHale. Together, McAvoy and McHale push for ethical, real news reporting even if it means lower ratings, causing an ongoing conflict with the owner of the channel: “we want to be content-driven.” But according to Sesso “we are more timid, more cautious, and take into consideration what people want.” Wanting to reach as many people as possible causes ongoing strife between my interlocutors: how do you make content that people want to see but also stay true to yourself and mission?

When I asked my interlocutors who their audience was, how they imagine them, who their work speaks too, many paused. Sara separated the issue for me, saying that with client work a target audience is already declared, which is necessary for the creative process because from it they can “determine tone of voice, research, and general approach to the video.” For example, for a project on bullying the client wanted three copies: one for parents, one for teachers, and one for children. Each video was specifically tailored for that demographic. Others, like Seddawy, a college student who works at Axeer full-time and is the youngest of the creative team members, claims that their audience is “everyone.” I pressed him, pushing the notion that you can never

truly reach everyone. After some debate he replied “maybe not, but that is what we want, we want to reach as many people as possible.”

Reaching as many people as possible means caring for number of views (ratings), it means aligning oneself with dominant senses of what can and cannot be said, and sometimes compromising content for views. Axeer aspires to be content-based, but also wants to reach “everyone,” which leaves them in a paradox that is yet unresolved. Their rebranded slogan is “telling stories that matter,” but this is only one part of the equation for Axeer; the other, less established part is “making an impact,” which is something Khalid is very passionate about.

Khalid claims enthusiastically that impact is as important as content:

We collaborated with bands and set a new direction for music videos; no one was doing music videos like us when we started. Damfus at Qabila was revolutionary—infographics that changed how we talk about politics....Aly Aly changed the direction of commercials...Bassem Youssef caused an explosion with his political satire... I mean, there is a lot of good content out there, too much maybe, but I like to look at what it is changing.

Monitoring and evaluation tools are not financially viable for Axeer, so they have come to rely on their clients’ methods of tracking effect as well as number of views—e.g., a non-profit development institution (Misr El Kheir) noted an increase in donations for a fundraising campaign after airing Axeer’s video on television. Measuring impact is a goal for the future. For now, seeing how many people “liked,” “disliked,” and “shared” their work is enough to know that people are interested in what they are *making*.

What they are making, interestingly, are two things: they are bringing issues of public concern as well as making a public through their media production. Benedict Anderson and Jurgen Habermas are central to media studies as they theorized effects of media flow. Anderson’s “imagined communities” and Habermas’s “public sphere” offered means of theorizing the

formation of collectivities. Habermas's classic account defines the public sphere as "made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state" (1989; 176). Through acts of assembly and dialogue, the public sphere generates opinions and attitudes which serve to affirm or challenge—therefore, to guide—the affairs of state. Nancy Fraser (1990) critiques this notion, arguing there will always be those who are marginalized from such gatherings; she pushed instead for an understanding of the “counter-public” as “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs” (1990: 67).

Nour's counter-discourse is subtle in approach, and requires us to suss out the relationship between the Egyptian state to women's rights movement, since after all this particular project was a UN Women approved project with oversight from National Council of Women—a governmental organization. Women's movement in Egypt date back to the 1919 revolution, identifying themselves as nationalists fighting against the British occupation of Egypt and Sudan. their activism was placed within a maternalist frame in historical texts and national symbols (Baron 1997), while women themselves constructed their activism in the revolution through a “maternal discourse” (Rizk 2000, Golley 2003). Under the tutelage of Huda Sharawi, women lead organizations began confronting male nationalist leadership. When their demands were ignored, they connected with transnational feminist networks, carving out new political and public roles for women. Sharawi then left the nationalist organization and established Egyptian Feminist Union.

After the 1952 Free Officer's Revolution the new regime co-opted women's rights into its nationalist program and suppressed independent feminist movements (Bier 2005, 201). Recent literature examines the ways in which state feminism constructed the "working women" figure as an expression of the regime's modernization project (Russell 2004). Timothy Mitchell (2000; 136) would go as far to argue that state sponsored feminism was a way to effectively govern women and reproduce gender hierarchies. Despite state rhetoric and legal commitment to facilitate women economic participation the overall number of women in the labor force remains relatively low. Understanding this co-optation explains the contradictory nature of the status of women in modern Egypt, since the politics of state-sponsored feminism envisioned by the former Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser in the 1950s remain the dominant discourse for women's rights under his predecessors (Allam 2017).

Fast forward to 2011 onward, we see a similar cooptation of women's movement and the surpassing of independent feminist organizations. Disappointing gender outcomes persisted throughout the aftermath of the revolution. Under SCAF's interim rule virginity tests were carried out by military doctors against female protesters (Amnesty International 2011). Under Mohamed Morsi, the constitution of 2012 and elected parliament institutionalized deep seated inequalities and gender discriminations (McLarney 2013). Meanwhile, the current military regime of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi seemingly advocates for an agenda on women's rights while curtailing the freedom of independent women's organizations.

After ridding the country of Muslim Brotherhood rule, al-Sisi was seen as the savior and protector of Egypt. A widespread rhetoric of "chivalry, generosity and benevolence"⁹⁹ made

⁹⁹ <https://madamasr.com/en/2014/05/25/feature/politics/sisi-and-his-women/>

women an important part of his campaign, not necessarily as beneficiaries, but as sympathizers; al-Sisi's speeches and interviews address women as housewives, mothers and sisters. Rarely does he allude to them as more than catalysts, and he generally refuses to acknowledge that they are political players in society. When he's mentioned women as part of the work force, he framed her as someone who has a "big role in uplifting society by taking care of her house and children."¹⁰⁰ President Abdel Fatah al Sisi declared 2017 as the "Year of the Woman" in response to a proposal submitted by the National Council of Women. According to Mervat Tallawy, a diplomat and former president of NCW, "The fact that the president even made this proclamation is an important step towards advancing women's rights in Egypt."¹⁰¹ The regime is focused on polishing its image, though changes remain surface level. The Cabinet includes a number of high-profile female ministers,¹⁰² and 89 women sit in parliament.¹⁰³ Despite these much celebrated and publicized developments,¹⁰⁴ women's rights organizations have languished under the current political climate. Director of the Center for Egyptian Women Legal Assistance, Azza Suleiman, had her assets frozen on alleged charges of receiving foreign funds. In another move against feminist initiatives in Egypt, Nazra for Feminist Studies and its director Mozn Hassan had their assets frozen in connection to the 2011 Foreign Funding Case (case 173). Suleiman, Mozn and 43 other NGOs are currently under investigation. According to Nazra's website:

¹⁰⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FNkKhY78dhY>

¹⁰¹ Egypt's Year of the Woman is a First Step to Advancing Gender Equality, March 2017, <https://www.aucaravan.com/?p=4720> [accessed December 19th, 2017]

¹⁰² <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/141883/Egypt/Politics-/Whos-Who-in-Egypt's-New-Cabinet.aspx>

¹⁰³ <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/women-s-representation-new-parliament-highest-egypt-s-history>

¹⁰⁴ <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/12/egypt-women-achievements-rights-laws-2017.html>

The investigative judge in case 173 ordered the release of feminist activist and Woman Human Rights Defender (WHRD) Mozn Hassan, Founder and Executive Director of Nazra for Feminist Studies, on bail amounting to 30,000 EGP, on charges of: Establishing an entity in violation of the law and conducting activities that do not abide by the purposes of the organization with the intention of harming national security, receiving foreign funding with the intention of harming national security, and tax evasion.¹⁰⁵

As these events are happening on the national level. Axeer completed its project for the UN in 2016, a few months before al-Sisi declared 2017 to be “The Year of the Woman.” But in this project, the female protagonist’s lived experience is shared and paints a more complex story that is unlike other representations of women in the media while presenting a nuanced critique of gender roles. Our female protagonist was in fact the breadwinner of the family and the caretaker. *Nour’s* story line pushes, and celebrates, women outside of the domestic world that al-Sisi is boxing them into. At the end of the music video is an accolade of self-established Egyptian women who are pioneers in the fields of aviation, mechanics, wrestling, and more. Furthermore, what is unique about this production is the perspective of the male-manager. In reading *Nour’s* story of handwork, reliability, and struggle, he immediately assumed it was a young man’s story further complicating gender stereotypes. Women empowerment, here, is one that includes both men and women. In confronting his biases, the manager realized his own prejudices and hired the woman. This was also part of Zap’s vision for the song; in creative meetings he would often state that “women’s issues are a societal issue that everyone should work on, not just women.”

Axeer slowly established a counter-public that is online and engaged, but now they want to enter the existing public sphere and change it. Their work is no longer confrontational but subtly oppositional and reflective of issues surrounding them. In wanting to reach as many people as possible, their goal is to push for a public consciousness that responds to the social

¹⁰⁵ (<http://nazra.org/en/2018/06/feminist-activist-mozn-hassan-released-bail-amounting-egp-30000>)

issues their work highlights. Through their work, the social impact they wish to see is one that transforms an audience from an individual to a collective that engages with media texts beyond the moment of reception (Livingstone 2005), where viewers take what they have seen and heard, interpret it, and find ways to apply it to their own life. We have yet to see if this actually happens, especially with an issue that is more ingrained in society like gender roles. But, as Khalid tells me: “years ago you would never have high school kids sitting at Starbucks studying while listening to a song about women empowerment, but that is happening now, so its a start.”

Chapter 6. Conclusion

Living for and Negotiating Change

I. Revisiting Axeer, One Year Later

I returned to Axeer a year after completing my fieldwork. In writing this dissertation, I was unsure how to conclude Axeer's story. Having spent most of my time following Axeer's transitional phase, I wanted to visit the company to see what they have been doing and find an appropriate ending to my journey with them. I have kept in touch with many of my interlocutors via Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook and could sense the changes even from afar. Particularly Amal, for one, was unhappy with the direction Axeer was headed, "We are becoming more corporate, there is a management room now!" she exclaimed during a text conversation. I was curious to see to what extent Axeer's alterity has been institutionalized, and what that meant to my interlocutors. I was asked by Ramy, one of Axeer's producers, to translate video transcripts into English a few times since returning to the US from the field; these newer projects did not, however, sit well with me, especially the *GIZ-Youth Against Sexual Harassment* video,¹⁰⁶ which was sponsored by the Ministry of Youth and Sports. Aside from presenting statistics that problematize the pervasiveness of sexual harassment in Egypt, the video promoted initiatives carried out by the ministry itself. A ministry spokesperson proudly noted that, "in 2017, the Ministry of Youth and Sports is the first ministry in the Egyptian government to develop its own

¹⁰⁶You can watch this video here: <https://vimeo.com/241473492>

internal policy to combat sexual harassment.” It was obvious that Axeer’s “we don’t work with the government” policy was in negotiation; clearly, they started making exceptions.

I have argued throughout this dissertation that in looking at Axeer’s media practice, it is important to trace their creative process as well as other productive processes that are involved in making various media forms; to fully understand media makers, we must understand what they are making and why. What we learn from Axeer’s example is the significance of balancing creativity, content creation, and profitable business strategies, which exist under an intentionally curated work environment. In this sense, aesthetics—both aesthetic perception and aesthetic expression—provide an indispensable tool to help us to further understand the social and political contexts of production specifically and media practice as a whole. An aesthetics of perception is one that is ultimately “valued by the people themselves” (Coote 2006: 282), in this case the media makers, whereas an aesthetic expression is one that “recreates experience” (Sharman 1997: 178). Thus far, this media ethnography has been concerned with craft—learning how to do something, improving skills, and caring about the work even when client expectations conflict with the production company’s vision. Axeer’s work cannot be separated from the world they live in, how they are affected by it, and how they perceive it. As such, aesthetics suggests a “system of evaluation that refuses a separation of textual production and circulation from broader arenas of social relations” (Ginsburg 1994a: 368).

In this concluding chapter, I end my journey with Axeer by further examining how Axeer’s new process of negotiating with governmental entities could provide an analytical connection between the content made, the process in which media makers are engaged, and the larger context in which they operate. Will Axeer’s aesthetic perception further shift as they

reconcile working alongside governmental entities while being staunchly against the regime?

With these questions in mind, I packed my bags and went to Cairo in April 2018.

II. Axeer's Shifting Structure

I arrived in Cairo in the evening and went to Axeer early the next day. I simply wanted to say hello and have my interlocutors know that I was back in town. I was still jet-lagged and unprepared to talk shop, but I immediately found myself pulled into several directions by different people. After greeting everyone downstairs, I made my way to the editing room where the producers were. Ramy was excited to see me, and without any prompting he immediately confessed, “See *ya doctora*, we are directly working with the government! Before we used to fool ourselves.” He sat me down and showed me their latest music video that had not yet launched, *Ba7r* (meaning, Sea). Ramy wanted to test me. He gave me headphones and told me to “watch this and pay close attention...tell me what is going on.” I watched the video twice; in the first time I was focused on the visuals, while in the second time I listened to the song itself. I answered, “The song is from the point of view of the sea, and Fares dies trying to cross the Mediterranean.” Ramy showed a big grin on his face; he was obviously pleased with my answer. I had passed the test!

Before I walked in, Ramy, Tarek, and Omar, Axeer's production team, were discussing whether or not it was obvious that the song was written from the point of view of the sea. As I handed Ramy his computer back, he informed me that this music video was funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “That was a fun experience!” he jokingly said before sitting down to work. I was stunned but too tired to process. Then Tarek asked me to join him in the balcony. He

lit a cigarette and started talking about Axeer's developments. "I feel unsettled that I've become work-focused and not people-focused. Our [creative and production] teams don't always get along. I am executive producer now and have to manage four producers. It has gotten really stressful. There are more people working with us too, which is good, but it also does not feel like we are one big unit like before." He went on to talk about tensions between coworkers, his own struggles adjusting to his new leadership position, and their first full-length feature film. It was obvious that Tarek had a lot on his mind that he wanted to share. He would often introduce me to people as his therapist, a title I refuted time and again. But I have learned to listen and nod, while subtly asking what I can and cannot use for my research.

After spending a few days at the company, I noticed an obvious shift in their organizational structure. Before, I used to find myself filling in roles, preparing proposals, and meeting with clients because they were understaffed; now, everyone's job was clear, and many new faces fulfilled required tasks. A lot has also happened since I left Axeer in 2017; some issues, like co-worker tensions, were familiar, while the shift in focus from "people" to "work" and their potentially new clientele was new.

I was looking forward to my conversation with Khalid, the CEO, whom I met a week after I arrived. Khalid was different; he had gained weight, stopped swimming and eating healthy, and was not laughing as much. He looked older and very tired. Khalid had an extremely intense personality with a dry sense of humor, which can go by unnoticed unless his rambunctious laugh is included. He carried his feelings on his sleeves—when he is excited, he is very excited, and when he is angry, he is very angry— and knew no middle ground. He was also moody, and his moodiness often shifted on a pendulum throughout the day. On my short visit

back, he was overwhelmed with implementing his newest vision for Axeer. They were also working on their first feature film, which has been progressing slowly with a looming production deadline. Any new, challenging project always caused a great deal of stress that rippled through the company. My interlocutors expressed high hopes for this film, which would be released in Egyptian theaters in 2019. Although unique in it being a client job (with UN Women), they were nevertheless striving for recognition through local and international film festivals.

In our interview, Khalid fidgeted a lot in his chair until he finally found his calm. He answered my questions honestly and professionally, yet contradicted himself often. We discussed the general changes that his friend, Hamdy, made when he was hired early 2017 as Chief Operations Officer, just before I left the field. In the course of one year, several aspects of the company's structure changed and in the process many were concerned that Axeer was turning 'corporate': new working hours were now instilled, insurance coverage provided, pension plans acquired, allocated vacation times scheduled, bank accounts established, tax deductions occurred,¹⁰⁷ and a new management office was designated (that previously housed three employees from Alexandria). In responding to this list, Khalid first made sure I knew that he does not use the management room: "I still wander around the office and sit with everyone." He admitted that Axeer was slowly becoming a more institutionalized creative industry, but he did not find issue with that because they were now more competitive in the market and were taken more seriously. A similar observation was made by anthropologist Tejaswini Ganti in her analysis of Hindi filmmakers. According to these filmmakers, their poor rate of commercial

¹⁰⁷ In disclosing paycheck amounts, Khalid reported that all Axeer employees were paid the legal minimum wage established by the government, which is an absurdly low amount, so the amount deducted for taxes would be miniscule.

success had to do with their “lack of professionalism, discipline, and organization” (2012: 246). Although, Ganti’s ethnography is situated within India’s “mass media” industry, which is not the same space in which Axeer operates, the notion that professionalism and organization is necessary for success is shared among these media makers. However, unlike the Hindi filmmakers who aspire for their work to reach the same level of fame as Hollywood, Khalid’s structural changes has to do with legitimizing Axeer to provide financial security and growth for the company and its team members. Due to economic hardships brought by inflation and the floating of the Egyptian pound,¹⁰⁸ as well as the annual spurts of unpredictable arrests,¹⁰⁹ Khalid worked hard to maintain a semblance of normal life. When Khalid realized that many were concerned about Axeer’s institutionalization, he met with everyone individually to dispel their concerns and explain his thought process. “Hardly anyone took vacation days before, but that does not mean they can't ask for extra days off, or work from home, as long as the job gets done; we are still very flexible.” With patience and dialogue most learned to appreciate the new system.

In the middle of our conversation, Tarek walked into the conference room and asked Khalid for a lighter, which Khalid threw from where he was seated. The lighter hit the lamp dangling from the ceiling and fell serendipitously into Tarek’s hand. They both laughed. “This is a perfect example of how everything we do happens by sheer luck (*mashia bil satr*).” Tarek chuckled on his way out. A welcomed interlude, Khalid started loosening up and continued:

¹⁰⁸ For more information on the Egyptian pound, see <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-37857468>

¹⁰⁹ Most recent case was Osama al-Hady’s arrest, a singer and guitar player. Axeer produced several of his music videos. al-Hady was arrested early March 2018 for allegedly being an administrator for singer Ramy Essam’s Facebook page. Ramy Essam lives in exile in Europe. He is a popular singer from the Egyptian Uprising and had recently released a song insulting al-Sisi from his European home-base, which caused al-Hady’s arrest. al-Hady has since been released.

“You know what Axeer is, Nama? Axeer is for misfits; those who do not fit in elsewhere fit in here.” He turned to face those sitting in the communal work space and gestured toward Mohammed, a newly hired team member. “Have you met Mohammed yet? He is a young man, in Egypt, who does not smoke or drink. He will never fit in at another media agency for that reason. Even Sara, you and I both know her religiosity will be a point of ridicule elsewhere.”

Khalid’s priority was to maintain Axeer’s collegial and nourishing environment. His most recent issue was in fact the people at the company. At this point in our conversation, he looked at my recorder and I turned it off. With names and details, he told me why he was unhappy—several individuals have not been getting along. “I get really upset when people are upset. There is tension between friends, which is normal, and there is tension between those who no longer want to work together. I am trying to maintain and fix all this.” Part of his job as CEO has always been Human Resources. Khalid intentionally does not want Axeer to grow in number of team members: he may hire one or two more people to help with the workload but if Axeer becomes a company of “one hundred, then it’ll lose whatever culture we have left,” and most importantly, “I won’t be close with anyone, won’t be able to talk to everyone. We didn’t start this company to keep getting clients and make money. We have something good here...people can be themselves, feel comfortable in a place of work and do work they enjoy. They don’t feel pressured to socialize in bars, or feel the need to be cool or follow the latest trends; they can just be.”

Through trial and error, however, Khalid learned that not everyone will believe in Axeer’s vision; those who do stay, and those who don’t leave. In this part of our conversation, Khalid illuminated the significance of social relations he hoped to create and maintain at Axeer as it relates to their media practice and ultimately their aesthetic system. Time and again, my

interlocutors have noted that a supportive, non-judgemental, and comfortable space in Egypt's mediascape is close to nonexistent; cultivating this space matters at Axeer as a company but it also matters in how they work and what they produce. Anthropologist Alan P. Merriam succinctly summarized this process when he described the “four-fold organizational pattern involved in the arts: concept, leading to behavior, resulting in product, which in turn feeds back upon the concept” (Merriam 1971: 98). Khalid may have initiated a more bureaucratic way of doing things at the company, but at Axeer's core is a type of aesthetic system that is constantly reconstituted through everyday activities by those who work there. The social relations established and maintained at Axeer enables a creative production process that materializes values and meaningful experiences, which is what they want to deploy in the stories they tell.

III. *Fares*, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Ibrahim, one of Axeer's co-founders and director, elaborated on the notion of openness in a follow-up interview during this visit. Ibrahim was by far the most reserved and religiously grounded team member. He was one out of two in the company who was married with children. His lifestyle was unlike others in the office; he actually goes home at a decent time and has built a consistent routine for himself: at 5:00am he will go to the gym, then he will drop off his son at school, and go to work—either at Axeer (if he has a meeting), but most of his time is spent at a communal work space. As a co-founder, he was sometimes involved in big decisions; otherwise, he freelanced as a director and trusted Khalid to run the company. The more you get to know Ibrahim, the wittier he became. He has been open and honest in all our conversations, and answered questions many avoided, particularly on the topics of politics and religion. In this

interview, I felt more comfortable pressing on certain issues that near the end he started getting a little agitated with my line of questioning.

We started off discussing *Ba7r*, a song Zap wrote as part of his new album. *Ba7r* was a story about friendship, desperation, and migration. Through the point of view of the sea, we learn that Fares, a young man who is bitter, frustrated, and unhappy with his life, chose to “irregularly” migrate and drowned in the process. Out of the nine songs that make up Zap’s new album, Zap and Axeer decided to make a music video for *Ba7r*; and approached UNICEF for sponsorship, which is very typical of Axeer’s new business model. Because the song dealt with migration, UNICEF informed Axeer that the funding will come from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and oversight will come directly from *el-Khargia*, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA). Ibrahim was not involved in the discussion that occurred when they realized MOFA would be involved; he was simply asked to direct the video since he directs all of Zap’s work. But he told me that had he been included in the discussion, he would have told the management team, “I do not mind working with *el-Khargia* as long as I get what I want.” He continued to explain why in 2018 he had changed his way of thinking (he would have never agreed to work with *el-Khargia* in the past):

Because everything has changed, we have to as well. Or else, we will end up staying at home, everyone here will go their separate ways and Axeer won’t exist. The whole *I won’t work with this person because of their opinion* has become obsolete. If I continue to think in this way then I am truly isolating myself from the society in which I live in and claim to want to change. I do this now, and on my terms, so when the time comes I am afforded creditably—power and authority to do whatever I want later.

In other words, they need to start entering into the fold of Egyptian society, which they have avoided thus far. He went on:

I have a friend who is living in 2013. He is stuck in 2013.¹¹⁰ He is very smart, was proactive, during and after the revolution. He is a real tech wiz. But now he does nothing. He curses at everyone and is against everything. I understand... I feel for him. But we also need to accept our reality to be able to move on with our lives. There are certain things we cannot avoid and no one is going to wait for us. What I am doing, and what Axeer is doing, is living. Eventually our situation will change, either the country's or our personal situation. There will come a time when we will be able to do what we aren't doing now, so we need to work towards that. Should I remain a director that no one knows, or work on being a director who has built a name for himself? I choose to change my own situation to be able do what I want later, and I think Axeer is doing the same. My fight now is to confidently answer the question: *Who are you in the media world?* I demonstrate this with a strong, diverse portfolio that includes music videos, short films, and feature films, and prove that I can work with people different than me... Change is not wrong as long as you are aware of it. I am aware of how I changed and take on the responsibility that comes with it.

Ibrahim was speaking about his purpose and role that directly mapped onto Axeer. Previously, he limited himself to a small network that he was willing to work with. Axeer's co-founders were always very stubborn and deliberate in who they were willing to work with. Terms like “selling out” and “hypocritical” were often used to label people whom they were wary and critical of. Although my interlocutors do not think they are “selling out,” many have come to realize that “everyone needs connections for things to keep going” and that they should be more “open” to working with those they do not see eye to eye with, “as long as it happens on our terms.” It is unclear what these terms are, but it is enough to acknowledge that terms must be set. Part of their newly found openness comes back to their goal to attain more visibility, which would result in validation and appreciation, for their work. It did not occur to me before this conversation that in spite of Axeer's drive for social good and desire to affect their audiences by making work that is meaningful, they have been, through the previous years, playing it quite safe by hiding from the very society they want to improve. Now, they were more confident to put themselves out in

¹¹⁰ Without elaborating, Ibrahim knows I understand that by saying 2013 he means the Rabaa Massacre

mainstream society, expand their clientele base, dictate terms, and be open to various opportunities that may come their way. In other words, there was a change of orientation and attitude towards activism and change itself. Not only was there an institutionalization of a corporate structure within Axeer, but changing media practices that incorporate visibility, ownership, compromise, and interaction with the very systems one might be critical of.

Ibrahim was willing to go out into the world, be active, do good work, and wait for the reward. In doing so, he wanted to grow as a director: do work that is liked, of high quality, and improve his own skill set (which will also come back to Axeer). Satisfaction with the artistic products he releases into the world is Ibrahim's new standard; this is obvious in the rest of our conversation. Going back to the topic of *Ba7r*, which has since been renamed and released as *Fares*, Ibrahim explained his emotional connection to the storyline:

When I heard the lyrics, I did not tie it to migration but to separation. Our generation has one thing in common, we have all experienced some kind of separation. What we've seen, what we've been through, was a lot. I saw myself and many of my peers in this song, and in the feelings that were hard to face at the end of the video. This is what I wanted to show. The focal point of the song was being separated without warning.

The music video begins with Ahmed Sheba—a car mechanic and wedding singer who is known for his popular (*sha'bi*) and classical (*tarab*) singing style—calling for Fares: “Where are you? Nabil is looking for you.” Zap then enters the scene and raps the story of three childhood friends—Nabil, Fares, and the Sea. Nabil is the most calm and mature; Fares is the opposite, impulsive and energetic; and the Sea has both impulsive and calm characteristics. They grew up together, played together, and were always in each other's lives. Things got harder as they got older; Fares was unsatisfied with his life and had one too many fights with his boss. But Nabil

was always there for him, reminding him that “tomorrow will be better if we keep trying; we can't blame the circumstances and our generations' luck.”



Figure 81: Ahmed Sheba singing the chorus



Figure 82: Nabil and Fares as children



Figure 83: Nabil, Fares, and the Sea



Figure 84: Nabil (left) and Fares (right) at work

Days pass and Fares was nowhere to be found Nabil went to the Sea to ask about Fares. The Sea responded: “Fares came to me and told me, 'I will travel and hope Nabil forgives me. I lost all hope and things are getting worse, what else can I do?’” The Sea tried to warn him, “No, this is suicide, how can you justify it? You have to keep trying. How will you make it on a small fishing boat? I will not be able to protect you, my friend. My waves are high and you are precious to me.”

Sheba’s chorus pauses the story to deliver the main message of the song:

Life is a turbulent sea,
And friends are our lifeline *(literal translation would be life ring buoy)*
Pray for those who follow their whims
Take care of yourself and those who love you
The sea has snatched many souls and separated many people before you

Nabil found out the truth when he went to Fares's family and then runs back to the Sea. Zap

continues:

Nabil realized what happened,
The shock devastated him.
He looked like he doubled in age.
I was waiting for him to come because I knew before he did,
Fares died between my arms, and I am still holding him.
If only he listened to what I said,

If only he knew that my every drop are tears and pain,
Shed on and felt by loved ones and lost souls like Fares.
Those who came before him, and those who will come after
And their dreams that drowned in that vast sea that embraces them
If only he could sense the agony that we are now filled with.
Or if he only read Nabil's letter to him:

“I am not blaming you, nor am I blaming the Sea. But you left us with such pain,
sorrow, and anguish. I wish you could have met my children, and I wish I could have
met yours. I wish God chose me before He chose you. I long to see you, my friend, and
know I will soon.”

And I wish Fares would have never abandoned his friend.



Figure 85: Fares heading towards the Sea



Figure 86: Nabil finds out about Fares



Figure 87: Nabil sitting with the Sea

The end of the video flashes back to Fares and Nabil as young children playing together on the shore. Sheba sings his chorus, and the following text appears on the screen: “National campaign for raising awareness of the dangers of irregular migration,” followed by: “Under the supervision of Egyptian Arab Republic: The National Coordinating Committee for preventing and forbidding the irregular migration and trafficking in human beings. The final screen lists all the sponsors: IOM (the UN Migration Agency), Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, UNICEF, USAID, and Department of State United States of America.

Ibrahim did not know much about “irregular migration”; he was aware that it happens but admitted to not knowing statistics or issues surrounding it. Like any other cause, Ibrahim believed it was important enough to highlight, but it was not *his* priority (he shared this same sentiment while directing *Nour*). I asked about the sponsors and if *Fares* could be viewed as government propaganda since it was presented as a national campaign with direct oversight from the “Egyptian Arab Republic.” I also further pressed on the fact that the root causes of “irregular migration” were not covered while Fares was blamed for what he did. Ibrahim got defensive:

No one here [Egypt] thinks like that, ‘root causes,’ ‘government sanctioned causes’...and okay, fine, but even though we are not discussing root causes does not mean I don’t highlight another part of the cause. If someone wants to go to the gym five days a week but realizes he can only go three days a week, should he not go at all?! Should I neglect all causes if we can’t talk about the root of it? To me, the separation was the focal point—that his friend died without saying goodbye to his friends and family. And the process for me was enough: I did good work and directed a product I am pleased with. I reflected on it, and I showed a certain emotion that was central to the story. If someone else takes it and claims it is government propaganda that is not my concern. I know it is not propaganda. On top of that *ana baḥot 'aleehom*, I used *el-Khargia's* money to do it!

Although he had mentioned how the song’s focal point was about separation, the more I pressed Ibrahim, the more I understood that, to him, this song had nothing to do with “irregular migration.” Separation was not simply part of the song; the song was about separation. Even though the lyrics and the production—funding, oversight, and ultimate use by MOFA—sets up the issue of migration, Ibrahim was only motivated by the separation that took place. He knew he was far removed from this issue and believed most of their audiences were as well; in directing the video he wanted to package the issue of *separation*, which would be more relatable to viewers. The aesthetic expression that is portrayed in *Fares* was executed through a re-creation of experience in which those in Ibrahim’s generation could relate to in a way that I could not

when I watched the video. I was concerned with the song promoting a nationalist cause, which it does, but the success of the song had nothing to do with its social cause—it had everything to do with what Nabil was feeling when Fares left, and presumably died. *Fares* still fits within the parameters of Axeer’s work guidelines: a media product that affects the audience, presents a meaningful story, it is well executed, and included a financial gain for the company. The cause matters to the extent that Axeer would rather make their living highlighting social issues than marketing shampoos and carbonated beverages.

Meanwhile, in a follow-up email exchange with Hamdy, he updated me on the progress of the song after it was released. Both the IOM and MOFA were pleased with the final product because none of their past campaigns garnered the same amount of views this video had; when it first launched the video received 4 million views.¹¹¹ UNICEF and the IOM held a celebratory event in downtown Cairo. Hamdy and Zap were invited to attend. Hamdy informed me that “IOM said that this campaign had great impact from a viewership perspective and was reposted on their global page, then in Malaysia and Morocco. Several celebrities attended the closed event and the head of IOM offered Zap to be their ambassador and partner up on bigger projects.¹¹² Yet, they haven’t shared any data on how this music video had an impact on any type of key actions they do, do you get me?”

It seems as though Axeer has reached a sort of settlement, not so much in working *with* the government since they still claim they do not do so directly, but a settlement in understanding that working on social causes can only happen in a place like Egypt if backed by a governmental

¹¹¹ *Fares* now has 7.5M views on YouTube alone.

¹¹² I am not aware if Zap accepted or rejected this offer.

entity as it provides a sort of cushioning and validation. In reality, their work with MOFA, via UNICEF is the same as their work with the National Council for Women, via UN Women. Their openness is new yet a bit unsettling. To move forward you must make allegiances; to be seen you must expand your network. And yet they want to remain true to themselves and claim their openness exists only on “their terms”—whatever those terms may be. In working with more governmental entities, my interlocutors’ aesthetic perception has not entirely shifted from its core belief that their world is worthy of improvement. To them, it shows maturity and thought-out strategy in understanding that this new line of work could aid them in attaining the life they are striving for, while asking themselves *how can I reach this goal? What do I need to do to get there? Fares* may not change anything about “irregular migration” but it could change Axeer’s standing.

However, it is important to ask how far Axeer is willing to go to reach their goal, and what that tells us about Egypt’s culture industry. Yes, their craft performs a number of vital functions; it provides them with a livelihood and a means for the attainment of self-respect. But in their quest for visibility and validation, will they continuously express views that conform broadly to dominant paradigms or nationalist discourses? In *Dramas of Nationhood*, Lila Abu-Lughod examines the ways television dramas construct images of “the good nation and citizen.” In selecting serials produced by particular members of the culture industry, Abu-Lughod shows how some producers do “the bidding of the regime,” (2005: 12) instead of solely accusing state-controlled media of doing so. She also comments on how television writers and directors position themselves as critics of the regime and its policies; “some seek to be the voice of the people” (2005: 12)—a refrain similar to the ones we heard from Axeer back in 2011. Yet Abu-

Lughod does not document anything that is blatantly “counter-hegemonic to certain state and national interests” (2005: 13). What will be gained, and lost, as Axeer pursues its new goal of exposure and visibility? Will my interlocutors eventually find themselves in the same position as the writers and directors Abu-Lughod interviewed? Axeer want their work to reach a wider audience and to be shown on television; to do so, they must produce films that garner the approval of the Ministry of Information.

IV. Revisiting the Past: Mediating Memory

For Ibrahim, visibility would help him reach his personal goal, which is to “write and direct a film about his generation”—he defined his generation as anyone who was twenty years old by 2011. He does not want to talk about the 2011 uprising but the effect the year 2011, and onwards, had on the people in his generation: “No one in our generation tried to capture what happened to us, everyone tried to forget and move on.” To do so, he claimed the need to keep working on building his portfolio so funders and other media makers can take him seriously. Every production—*Nour, Fares*, and most recently, *Between Two Seas* (Ibrahim’s first feature film, produced by Axeer)¹¹³—was one step closer to his goal.

In wanting to make a film about his generation, Ibrahim mentioned a point that warrants pause—this is the first time someone at Axeer expressed interest in recollecting their past; it is also the first time their past was mentioned as part of their future. “The past” that I refer to here is rooted in recent history and is tied to the 2011 uprising, which took place in parallel to Axeer’s

¹¹³ *Between Two Seas* was featured at the Aswan International Women Film Festival in February 2019, and later shown in Egyptian theaters. It won two awards: Best Directing and Best Screenplay.

launch. Coincidentally, it was during the revolution that I had learned about my father's story, which sparked my interest in pursuing a research project in Cairo; in a way, my father's history, which took place decades before the specific moment in time that is most significant to Ibrahim, lead me to Egypt. Already, the events of 2011 had impacted both Ibrahim and I in very different ways. During this follow-up interview, Ibrahim admitted that the idea for this film was motivated by my presence at Axeer; the questions I asked, the objectives of my project, and effort I put forth to understand who they are and what they do confronted his memories and challenged him to think about who they used to be. "Through our conversations, I realized that there is a lot that we experienced that I forgot about, and I realized how much we've changed, as a company, and individually," he said.

Since I started working with Axeer, they have been mainly concerned, and oftentimes anxious, about their future. My interlocutors focused on the present to the extent that it would provide a bridge to the future—better projects, more clients, growth in craftsmanship, etc. Even when a project was executed well, there was always an underlying feeling that "it could be better." In my conversation with Ibrahim, the future (his future and Axeer's future) was the focal point, even when he spoke about his film, which is about the past. Axeer was never concerned with documenting the past or archiving their experiences in Egypt's evolving political landscape. In Axeer's early years, they lived in the moment and their spontaneity characterized their productions; as the company matured and changed so did their aesthetic perception and expression, which is essential to this dissertation's narrative trajectory.

In the revolution's early years, Egypt's public space was representative of young activists' creativity and rebellion. Pierre Nora highlights three forms of modern memory:

archive-memory (“preservation of the past”), duty-memory (“gives everyone the necessity to remember”), and distance-memory (“no longer a retrospective continuity but the illumination of discontinuity”) (1989: 13-16). Young Egyptian activists were concerned with establishing and maintaining an archive-memory. Through graffiti on walls, images, texts and structures, the activists created memorials to keep alive the memory of the martyrs as well as the revolution’s ideals. *Walls of Freedom*, a 2014 book by Basma Hamdy and Don Stone, offered thorough insights into the revolution and its artistic work, further materializing an archive-memory. Independent cultural activities, including concerts and street exhibitions, played a role in preserving the historical narrative of the pro-revolution community. Such organizing proved difficult after the 2013 military coup and in the rivalry over the January 25 revolution’s story and memory, the regime had the upper hand. Yet, the regime’s attempt to enforce forgetfulness of the revolution’s ideals did not go unchallenged; media companies like Sada Almidan,¹¹⁴ and Dokkan Media,¹¹⁵ now both defunct, made it their mission to create an “affect-laden recollection of the past,” (Shelemay 2006: 20) where individual and collective memories were fashioned into texts and tunes. Meanwhile, initiatives like Moiserreen, a non-profit media activism collective created for the purpose of documenting the events during and after the 2011 Egyptian revolution, launched the *858 An Archive of Resistance*, which made public all the footage shot and collected since 2011.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ You can find their YouTube page here: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC6xuc_OKDozFNQFfPxc7YyA

¹¹⁵ See *Revolution for the Brave*, a music video that was made to document the Rabaa massacre and its aftermath

¹¹⁶ You can access this archive here: <https://858.ma/>

Ibrahim, however, is concerned with duty-memory, taking it upon himself to work on a project that will narrate how people in his generation changed as a result of the 2011 uprisings. In doing so, Ibrahim's idea is more than just a film about his generation because in the process of examining memories Ibrahim will be creating history. Pierre Nora notes that "what we call memory today is therefore not memory but already history. What we take to be flare-ups of memory are in fact its final consumption in the flames of history. The quest for memory is the search for one's history" (1989: 12). Changes in society, politics, and mode of life, all cause people to attempt to grasp the past and recreate reality in certain ways to satisfy a particular purpose. It is difficult to fully conceive the purpose of the project, how it will manifest itself, and how well it will be received since it has yet to bear fruit. But, based on what Ibrahim said, "narrating the effects of 2011, and onward, on our lives" will require him to rely on "collective memory." Ibrahim acknowledged that people have chosen to forget in order to move on; he will need to garner "the support of a group delimited in space and time" (Halbwachs 1992: 48) to draw strength from his cohort who as individuals will act as "group members who remember" (Halbwachs 1992: 48). Although this project has yet to bear fruit, wanting to revisit their past in this way has led me to ask: In what ways will Ibrahim mediate these memories? How have these memories informed the aspirations, disappointments, and creative work of my interlocutors? Finally, what should we expect from these newly tactical, prudent media makers should a new opening present itself in the political and cultural spheres?

V. Axeer's Newest Vision: The Future

Khalid did not consider their newest work to be *with* the government: "We are still one entity removed," meaning they are working with other NGOs whose source of funding and

oversight are various government entities. But working directly on Abdel Fattah al-Sissi's presidential campaign, for example, was still a red line. To prove to me that they were still true to themselves, Khalid told me how they rejected a project from DMC, a television channel known for its military funding. At the end of the day, working with NGOs—and governmental entities by proxy—was a strategy that has provided Axeer with financial security and legitimacy in highlighting social causes. However, this was not something Khalid wanted Axeer to keep doing for more than necessary. In sharing with me Axeer's newest vision, he said, "We are upping our game. We are still doing what we've always done, but doing it better." Khalid was pushing Axeer away from being a "media service industry" to a "product company." To do so, he was encouraging the team to create and produce their own ideas that can be sold, or sponsored, for viewer-based platforms like Iflix and Netflix, as well as film festivals. Axeer was currently in a "validation phase," where Khalid has been testing out this idea—it all comes down to the team's interest in pursuing this new direction, telling them that "if they have the will, we will have the means; Axeer will provide mentorship, connections, equipment, and financial backing." Several people have started seriously pursuing this idea, working on developing their "passion projects." For example, Sara and Seddaway were working on a music-based documentary that visualized Zap's newly released first album;¹¹⁷ Amal and Ahmed were working on a documentary about the alternative music scene in the Arab world, featuring underground bands from several countries; Axeer was also producing a documentary about Sudanese refugees in Cairo. Khalid continued, "There is something unique about seeing our own projects come to life, get viewed by many

¹¹⁷ *Al Madina* (The City) which includes eight songs, seven of which are duos with different artists. He collaborated in his album with the music producer Sary Hany. Each song narrates a story of someone you meet in the city and covers topics like immigration, friendship, depression, irregular migration, happiness, and personal strife (inner conflict). Axeer produced the music videos.

people, and also provide a financial gain. It is totally different than working with clients. You know, I fantasize that in ten years I will write a book about all of our client experiences...” (remembering that my recorder was on, he shied away from completing this thought).

Even in the face of Axeer’s new settlement, they have demonstrated the many ways through which they self-consciously used new media to address societal issues and communicate meaning and values that are important to them. With the advent of new media technologies, a flurry of scholarly publications predicted a more democratic future as non-state actors began articulating an alternative to the state's discourse through these seemingly unregulated spaces (Anderson 1999). Several studies on new media in the Middle East have prioritized the technologies’ inherent political language, arguing that new media was indispensable to political change (Annabelle & Khiabany 2010, Doostdar 2004, Hirschkind 2011). But this shifts the credit away from those involved in mobilizing groups, creating content, and dismisses the processes, decisions, and conflicts involved in producing media.

Instead, this dissertation has focused on who media makers are while tracing the shifting attitudes and practices that moved from emergent to dominant. As Axeer demonstrated, their journey started as an alternative media production company that produced expressive content different from mainstream media. They learned to maneuver a complex political landscape that is violent, oppressive, and heavily surveilled. In doing so, they have maintained their dignity and agency—even in censorship—as they chose with projects to accept or reject. Their media practice, work environment, and continuous reflection on how to be better, how to grow, and how to stay safe is rooted in their creativity. Creativity does not simply apply to their media

products but is also part of their aesthetic system and nourishes “human activities that transform existing cultural practices in a manner that a community or certain of its members find value” (Narayan, Rosaldo, Lavie 1993: 5).

Khalid got up, straightened his shirt, and walked towards the balcony behind me to light a cigarette. I moved my chair to face him. “Look Nama, let’s imagine I still believe in the positive change media can make, and that media can leave an impact. Did you notice how everyone now covers their laptop camera? *Black Mirror*¹¹⁸...Have you seen *Wonder* or *Thirteen Reasons Why*? Both are about bullying and are raising pertinent issues.” Shows like *Black Mirror* reinforced Khalid’s belief in the power of “media effects,” that what you watch can truly make a difference in your behavior. Movies like *Wonder* further motivated Axeer members to attain a level of artistic skill and execution to create a film with a touching story line, good actors, well-written script, and have it be meaningful. Khalid continued:

Sara and Seddaway’s documentary plan to include a chapter on microbus drivers, under Zap’s song called ‘War.’ We all have bad impressions of these drivers: they are rude, rowdy, drive poorly. If I see one arguing with a police officer, I’ll assume he is in the wrong, when we all shouldn’t trust police officers in the first place. But in the documentary, they will show a microbus driver’s inner struggle and raise awareness about conflict and personal strife. You know, the best episode of *Black Mirror* is “Men Against Fire,” the one about the military technology that is implanted in soldiers to literally dehumanize people so they can easily be killed...all this falls within what Axeer can do.

Khalid has not lost his drive, optimism, or utopic vision that Axeer can still make a difference using media, although specifically what change and how it’ll happen remains unclear. I asked what kind of change, or difference, he hoped Axeer would bring. I quoted their slogan that is

¹¹⁸ Here, he is referencing an episode called “Shut Up and Dance” that was released on October 21, 2016, in a series called *Black Mirror*. *Black Mirror* is a British television series that examines unanticipated consequences of new technologies in modern society. In this episode, certain individuals’ computer cameras were hacked and their indiscreet actions recorded. These individuals were then blackmailed to do unspeakable things.

plastered on a large wall in the main entrance: “on a quest to change the world,” a clause from their mission statement that I was asked to write back in 2016. Then, everyone’s business card had a quote that represented them. For a long time, Khalid’s quote was “changing the world for a living.” He instantly contradicted himself and shrugged, “We change and adapt. The point now is to survive without becoming scum (*minghīr manitwasakh*, literally: without getting dirty) ... sorry, [the] goal is to survive without becoming absolute scum (*minghīr manitwasakh awy*, literally: without getting very dirty).” Khalid no longer believed he, or Axeer, were changing the world and that such grand proclamations were naive. For now, Khalid was “trying to be an empathetic person who wants to do less damage in an already fucked up world.” Maybe he was becoming more of a realist but looking at the big picture no longer appealed him. Through his work in start-ups, media, and life in Egypt, he has interacted with more and more people who have proven “hypocritical” and he did not want to become like that.

VI. Axeer: A Process of Aesthetic Becomings and Flux

Axeer’s story does not have an ending. The majority of my fieldwork has been around tracing Axeer’s constant movement: their plans for rebranding, establishing a business model, deliberating over projects, building a clientele, creating a comfortable work space, and constantly making and doing. Some projects never saw the light of day; some caused great excitement; and others caused deep disappointment, but they kept going. My interlocutors focused their efforts into turning their “passion” into a viable, economically stable lifestyle so they can continue doing what they are doing, while learning how to do it better. On my return visit, I assumed I would find a more settled work environment after being constantly in flux while I was in the

field. Instead, I found Axeer still experiencing some degree of flux, a common characteristic of creative industries (cf. Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011). They were still adjusting—responding to economic pressures, renewed goals, and aspirational desires. Axeer has been inching more and more into the realm of entrepreneurship, and will always be shifting and adapting, growing and compromising, evaluating and reevaluating, as they move in perpetual motion. In other words, Axeer will continue to affect those around them and be affected by those around them.¹¹⁹ Having a clearer goal and learning how to balance the terrain of client demands with their personal vision whilst living in a country that they deem oppressive and unjust, my interlocutors constantly find ways to exercise their agency. They have made the best out of an extremely vexed situation—having deep resentment and moral issues with their country, and finding ways to exist, create, inspire, and ultimately make a difference, however small.

As I have highlighted in this dissertation, Axeer, and my interlocutors, have matured and experienced a slow and steady pace of change. Axeer will continue to shift and reimagine their work for years to come. At their core, however, Axeer has not changed their unequivocal desire to “make things better,” even after abandoning their confrontational aesthetics and “giving up on politics”; their spirit continues to hold on to revolutionary aspirations of being seen, appreciated, and treated with respect, and of implementing a business model that highlights societal issues (even if its impact is debatable). The most important aspect of Axeer is the creative and production process: “For a person to hold a camera for the first time and learn how to take pictures is good enough for me. Once the process offers you nothing new then it is out of Axeer’s

¹¹⁹ Here, I am inspired by Spinoza’s definition of affect. Affect is the medium through which I understand what my interlocutors have done and will continue to do. Although Spinoza particularly pinpointed affect in the body, I extend his definition to all aspects of life as it pertains to Axeer.

core,” Ibrahim concluded our interview. At its core, Axeer’s values centers around process, learning, doing, and making. Axeer created a space for people to be themselves while sustaining a dignified work life that helps their team members *gain* something new in their *making*. By privileging expressive content, analyzing media productions and its varied processes, and situating said content in local contexts speaks to theoretical issues within media anthropology that is concerned with both the effects of media technology on social practice, and with the agents, aesthetics, and politics, behind media production (Kelly and Wilk 2002; Ginsburg et al 2002). As a media production company that was founded by youth, Axeer demonstrated how youth-generated content provided a window into what media makers value most, what decisions and strategies they made and developed, and the ways they are constantly adjusting to the world they live in.

Their biggest sense of accomplishment is providing young people with employment in a sector that is exclusive and judgmental, while mentoring these young people in developing their skills and providing them with opportunities to work on projects that are meaningful. They believe media can affect change but question to what extent they can affect this change. Yet they know that change is inevitable, maybe not in their lifetime, but it will happen and therefore they want to carry on with their life and work in the most honest way they can. Ultimately, the only thing they truly can change is themselves and the quality and value of their work. They are conscious about not wanting to become a company who made things worse, in what Khalid deemed an already “fucked up world.” So they will not give up trying, learning, growing, and figuring out their purpose. As I scroll through their Instagram stories and see them laughing,

working, and promoting their newest products, I am reminded by Khalid's greeting when I returned to Axeer in 2018: "Things are tough, but we are still smiling."

Appendix A: Timeline of Events During the 2011 Egyptian Uprising

2011

January

- 14 Tunisian president, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, flees Tunisia after weeks of popular protests.
- Calls are made for an Egyptian revolution to begin on January 25, including through the Facebook group, *Kulina Khalid Said* (We are all Khalid Said): Wael Ghoneim was admin of this group.
- 25 Thousands of Egyptians take to the streets across Egypt. Tahrir Square is occupied momentarily as the “18 days” begin.
- 28 Friday Day of Rage; occupation of Tahrir Square reenacted, police removed from streets, and army deployed. Major means of communication is shut down. After arriving in Cairo to take part in demonstrations, Wael Ghonim was arrested by Egyptian police and held in secret detention for 11 days.

February

- 2 Battle of the Camel; pro-Mubarak thugs on horses and camels attacked protesters arrayed in Tahrir Square
- 7 Wael Ghonim, co-admin of *Kulina Khalid Said*, is released from jail and gives emotional interview to Mona El Shazly, leading to increased support for protests.
- 11 Omar Suleiman announces that Mubarak has stepped down and left the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) in power.
- 12-14 Most protesters leave the square, but some continue the sit-in; SCAF dismisses parliament and suspends constitution, and tries to clear the square and dismantles tents.

March

- 4-5 State security buildings are stormed by protesters
- 9 The military clears Tahrir Square violently, protesters are tortured in the Egyptian Museum

- 16 No to Military Trials for Civilians hosts press conference where victims and families of victims testify to torture and 'virginity tests'
- April
- 10 Maikel Nabil Sanad arrested after writing the blogpost, *The army and the People Were Never One Hand*
- 30 The Muslim Brotherhood established the Freedom and Justice Party
- May
- 27 Mass protests demand an end to military trials for civilians, removal of *felool* (regime remnants) and call for draft constitution before parliamentary elections
- June
- 11 The two police officers, who killed Khalid Said, are given seven-year sentences
- 28 Massive demonstrations and clashes in Tahrir Square and in other places as police attacks a sit-in of martyrs' families
- July
- 8 Three week long sit-in in Tahir Square begins
- 24 Dream TV host, Dina Abdelrahman is fired after a volatile air exchange with a SCAF member.
- August
- 1 SCAF violently clear Tahir Square
- September
- 9 Offices of *Aljazeera Mubasher Misr* and other television stations are raided by the military
- October
- Maspero Massacre; demonstrations by a group of Egyptian Copts in reaction to the demolition of a church in Upper Egypt. The peaceful protesters who intended to stage a sit-in in front of the Maspero television building were attacked by security forces and the army, resulting in many deaths, and hundreds injured.
- November
- 18 Major anti-SCAF demonstrations across the country
- 19-23 Heavy clashes between protesters and security forces in Mohammed Mahmoud Street (by Tahir Square), more than forty people killed. Graffiti commemorated this event with a stenciled chant "remember remember the 19th of November."

- 20 Video of the army dragging the lifeless body of protester, Toussy, to a pile of garbage causes uproar
- 28 Parliamentary elections begin
- December
16-20 Heavy clashes after security forces brutally beat protesters during a three-week long sit-in outside parliament building
- 17 Journalists attacked and offices raided as military attack protesters in Tahrir Square
- 18 Protester, who becomes known as *Sit al Banat* (the woman of all women), is beat unconscious, stripped and dragged down the concrete by military soldiers, sparking outcries across the country.
- 19 Tahrir Newspaper runs the picture of *Sit al Banat* being stripped and beaten by the military next to the word, '*kazeboon*' ('liars')

2012

- January
11 Last round of parliamentary elections. Majority seats won by the Muslim Brotherhood and the other Islamist candidates
- 25 Demonstrations to mark the one year anniversary of the uprising
- February
1 Port Said massacre; a massive riot occurred at Port Said Stadium in Port Said, Egypt, following an Egyptian Premier League football match between Al-Masry and Al-Ahly. Many of the deaths were due to the police's refusal to open the stadium gates
- May
10 First televised presidential debates in the history of the country
- 23 Presidential elections begin
- June
2 Mubarak sentenced to life in prison. This sentence was later overturned
- 17 SCAF decrees constitutional amendments limiting the power of the president and strengthening the power of the military

- 24 Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood announced president
- 26 Supreme Administrative Court nullifies SCAF's constitutional amendments
- August
- 12 Morsi retires top military leaders and instates Abdel Fattah al-Sisi as top commander
- November
- 22 Morsi grants himself extra-constitutional powers, leading to weeks of protests and clashes
- December
- 3 A number of private newspapers jointly run the headline 'No to Dictatorship' protesting Morsi's power grab
- 5 Presidential Palace Clashes

2013

- April Tamarod starts collecting signatures
 - June
 - 23 Defense Minister and Army Chief Abdel Fattah al-Sisi delivers speech
 - 30 Mass demonstrations against Morsi organized by *Tamarod*
 - July
 - 3 Military coup: Morsi is deposed and the army takes over power, a number of Muslim Brotherhood supportive media outlets are immediately shut down,
 - 4 Adly Mansour is sworn in as interim president.
 - 8 Many killed as police and army attack sit-in of pro-Morsi protesters
- Many Egyptian television stations run a banner saying, '*Masr tohareb el irhab*' - 'Egypt fighting terrorism' in Arabic and English as a witch-hunt on the Muslim Brotherhood begins
- August
 - 14 Raba'a massacre. The military viciously kills over 1150 pro-Morsi protesters in different sit-ins

- 18 36 prisoners suffocate in a police van
- 22 Mubarak released from prison
- September
- 23 An Egyptian court orders the dissolution of the Muslim Brotherhood and the confiscation of its assets; Muslim Brotherhood declared terror organization
- October
- 6 Familiar scenes of violence returned to Egypt on Sunday, with at least 51 people killed and hundreds injured in street clashes across several Egyptian cities
- November
- 4 Morsi goes to trial
- 24 Adly Mansour passes the anti-protest law;
Between 2013 and 2016, hundreds of Egyptians were arrested and taken to police custody following their participation, or attempted participation, in peaceful demonstrations.
- December
- 24 Police headquarters north of Cairo is bombed

Appendix B: Links to Videos

Meen Ana—ZAP Tharwat feat. Anas Tawakol
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=07Mj75RsjdA>

Ta2to2a—Ahmed Tharwat Zap
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_7bqSvwV2ak

Katb l Bokra Gawab— Asphalt & ZAP Tharwat
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6uzPQgbyfR8>

Example of *Habibi Music*. Amr Diab Music Video: El Leila
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eCoVcDogvVg>

Saba7na Nady— ZAP Tharwat
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NAgxK-e0zzY>

Ba7lam—ZAP Tharwat, Cairokee, Hany Adel
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VcC-ehWT6qY>

3enwany—ZAP Tharwat, Sodfa, Mohamed Sweid, Kazaz
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B0oEF7B8IvY>

Meen El Ma2soud—Asfalt & ZAP Tharwat
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKiWuW4Off4>

7a22y—Zap Tharwat ft. Amir Eid
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6An_Pu510eI

Islamophobia 1 Introduction
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JEqu8p9P4pc&list=PLQ15Iu5Vbki-45Qd0Qy7_0b5UJ8cfXUNv

Islamophobia 2 Introduction
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bP9nT8IZXTE&list=PLQ15Iu5Vbki9KIM9bZ9v-1cRwHW9R1XRp>

El Film Da Haram
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ju4o15g941Q>

I7na Geel Wa Into Geel—Zap Tharwat

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

Akher Oghnia—Cairokee (not produced by Axeer)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZu2euuj2GE>

El Medina—Zap Tharwat Album

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZrTHTr3NkCo&list=PLVK7hqTynZffbhMSu3O32FVvqfCkUCnm6)

[v=ZrTHTr3NkCo&list=PLVK7hqTynZffbhMSu3O32FVvqfCkUCnm6](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZrTHTr3NkCo&list=PLVK7hqTynZffbhMSu3O32FVvqfCkUCnm6)

Helm

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=961744527237316>

Entalaq

<https://vimeo.com/225375194>

Anti-Bullying For Children

<https://vimeo.com/288955847>

Anti-Bullying For Parents

<https://vimeo.com/289321377>

Anti-Bullying For Teachers

<https://vimeo.com/289321719>

Nour—Zap Tharwat ft. Amina Khalil & Sary Hany

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7N5oVNo-oUI>

GIZ-Youth Against Sexual Harassment

<https://vimeo.com/241473492>

Fares—Zap Tharwat & Sary Hany ft. Ahmed Sheba

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DJWyRs-8xlE>

Axeer's Team

Co-founders:

Khalid	Chief Executive Officer (CEO)
Tarek	Executive Producer
Ibrahim	Freelance Director
Zap Tharwat	Rapper

Management Team

Khalid	Chief Executive Officer (CEO)
Hamdy	Chief Operations Officer (COO)
Ahmed	Business Developer

Creative Team

Sara	Creative Director
Amal	Creative Team Member
Seddawy	Creative Team Member
Mohammed	Creative Team Member
Ziad	Account Manager

Production Team

Tarek	Executive Producer
Omar	Producer
Ramy	Producer
Mido	Assistant Producer

Accounting

Gaber
Salama

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