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Queer Counterpublics and LGBTQ Pop-Activism in Jordan

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Abstract

This article analyses the interaction between MyKali, the first LGBTQ webzine/platform in Jordan, and mainstream Jordanian media and society. It explores the moral panics occurring over the 11 years of Mykali’s trajectory, and analyses the webzine’s attempts to resist these panics and articulate its agenda through pop-activism. From inception to censorship, the trajectory of MyKali illustrates the limits of freedom of expression and the articulation of non-heterosexual identities, as well as the role of media panics in enforcing social control in Jordan. This paper is comprised of four main parts: the first introduces MyKali as a queer counterpublic. The second presents the theoretical framework I draw on and the key concepts used in the analysis. The third part presents what I term the discourse of “homophobic authenticity” and its role in the moral panics surrounding MyKali. Finally, in the fourth part I analyse MyKali’s use of pop-activism to stake its claim to Jordanian identity and counter the discourse of homophobic authenticity through a comparative study of two of its most iconic cover images.

Keywords: sexuality, LGBTQ, Jordan, activism, popular culture

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Queer Counterpublics and LGBTQ Pop-Activism in Jordan

They think “someone listens to me, and someone is going to read this”. It’s also an awareness-raising platform. Media have a huge role to play in normalisation, so I think maybe one day MyKali would fulfil the role of normalising the lives of LGBTQ people in Jordan – A. Rahman, MyKali activist and writer.1

Introduction

This article aims to engage with debates on LGBTQ pop-activism in the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA), by focusing on the case of MyKali, the first LGBTQ webzine2 in Jordan. From inception to censorship, the trajectory of MyKali illustrates the challenges faced by LGBTQ activists in the MENA to create and sustain queer counterpublics, and the tensions between sexual and national identities. MyKali is studied here as a counterpublic, actively engaged in mediated pop-activism through the playful but deliberate use of images, symbols, and discourses that counter moral panics,3 subvert hegemonic national identities to claim queer

1 A. Rahman, Personal Interview, 30/07/2018.

2 MyKali refers to itself interchangeably as a “webzine” and a “magazine”. I used the term webzine in this paper to mean a magazine published online, and that does not exist in print.

identities as part of the nation, and resist homophobic discourses through asserting their 'Jordanianness' and authenticity of LGBTQ identities.

Existing scholarship has studied the construction of queer identities/non-normative sexualities within hegemonic discourses of national identity⁴ and in relation to representations of the MENA. These studies have highlighted the ways in which queer identities are viewed as alien to the region, highlighting the negative implications for queer individuals within the MENA as well as for MENA communities in the diaspora. The tension between what is seen as ‘authentic’ and what is seen as ‘alien’ (or indigenous vs. imported)⁵ is shaped by the legacies of Orientalism, colonialism and liberation struggles in the region.⁶ Here, I take forward these investigations


through a focus on how LGBTQ activists articulate their own self-identities in online spaces, against hegemonic discourses on national identity and what I call ‘homophobic authenticity’. Specifically, I focus on MyKali as a case study of local LGBTQ engagement with these questions through creative activism and locating sexual identities within the Jordanian national context.

The study of LGBTQ and sexual politics in the MENA has been somewhat taken up by the debate over the indigeneity or the lack thereof of non-heterosexual identities, as typified by exchanges and discussions between Abu Khalil, Massad, Habib, and Amer. These questions are


theoretically interesting and can have serious political ramifications for LGBTQ activists and communities in the MENA region. Nonetheless, beyond acknowledging them, this paper does not engage directly with these debates as it is beyond its scope to analyse whether or not identifying as an Arab lesbian or transwoman aligns one with a Western, imperialist agenda, or affirms one’s rootedness in Middle Eastern culture. The alignment, either way, is immaterial to the lived reality of LGBTQ individuals on the ground under Arab heteropatriarchies: a reality of legal discrimination and criminalisation in the majority of Arab states, of social exclusion, of violence, and of self-suppression. It is precisely this lived reality that is the focus of this paper; and in the analysis of the discourse of ‘homophobic authenticity’ and MyKali’s contestation of it, I depart from a point of accepting the self-identification of LGBTQ individuals for what it is, and focus on their efforts to deploy pop-activism as a form of resistance and advocacy for LGBTQ rights.

This empirical study engages with these conversations to highlight the creative use of popular culture, online media, and the importance of images in the struggle over meanings. It examines how the discourse of homophobic authenticity circulated during moral panics represents heterosexuality as a marker of Jordanian national and social identity and constructs homosexuality (or LGBTQ identities) as alien and un-Jordanian. But more importantly this article emphasises LGBTQ activists’ attempts to circulate counterdiscourses that make use of popular cultural forms to map their identities onto national signifiers and to articulate alternative understandings of identity, belonging, and Jordanianness. In doing so, the article gives priority to LGBTQ activists’ agency in defining their identities, carving out counterpublics, and in creatively resisting dominant heteronormative discourses.
The significant ways in which popular culture intersects with media activism and how it is utilized by women and members of sexual minorities in the MENA remains an understudied topic. Despite the presence of a growing body of work on gender-sensitive media activism in the MENA, broadly defined, there is comparatively little work on LGBTQ online media activism in the region. Studies that do acknowledge the presence of LGBTQ online activism in the MENA region tend to gloss over the issue. This occurs in Habib’s useful and concise overview, where she maintains that ‘the Internet [sic] has played a large role in facilitating the creation of [LGBTQ] online communities’, and notes that LGBTQ activists in Lebanon, Sudan, and Egypt have used myriad online media as tools for raising awareness of LGBTQ issues and to connect and inform members of the community. These, according to Habib, include online magazines,


podcasts, and various social media channels. Likewise, Sreberny’s brief intervention on women’s
digital activism in the MENA mentions LGBTQ online activism in passing.10

Both within and beyond Middle Eastern studies, scholarship on queer identities and activism
online has pointed to the utility of online communities, such as blogs and bulletin boards, for
queer identity articulation, formation, and negotiation.11 These studies have found that online
spaces can act as avenues for self-discovery, self-expression, and community-making, and that
cyberspace can offer ‘the opportunity to explore and play with identities that are often prohibited
IRL “in real life’’.12 However, they have also found that ‘the virtual […] appears to be
ineluctably real’13 in the sense that it is also a constrained environment in its access,
membership, and the types of identities and politics that can be articulated in any given space.

10 Annabelle Sreberny, 'Women's Digital Activism in a Changing Middle East', *International

166-182, Joyce Nip, ‘The Relationship between Online and Offline Communities: The Case of
Queer Sisters’, *Media, Culture, and Society*, 26, no. 3 (2004): 409 – 428, Sally Munt et al.,
‘Virtually Belonging: Risk, Connectivity, and Coming Out Online’, *International Journal of

12 Jonathan Alexander, ‘Queer Webs: Representations of LGBT People and Communities on the
-84.

13 Munt et al., ‘Virtually Belonging”, 137.
These discussions underscore the importance of situating online media and online activism within their respective contexts, as well as the importance of addressing the gap that exists in our knowledge of just how LGBTQ activists based in the MENA use the media to articulate counter-discourses, to organise and mobilise, and to build networks and alliances.

The analysis here draws on textual and visual data collected from MyKali’s Arabic and English website, Instagram, and Facebook accounts as well as Jordanian media coverage of the events under analysis. A total of 20 texts published by various Arabic-language Jordanian news websites and newspapers, ranging from statements, news coverage, reports, and op-eds were selected for analysis. The texts were found through a simple (Arabic language) Google search for terms such as ‘MyKali’, ‘LGBT Jordan’, ‘Khaled Abdel Hadi’, ‘LGBT magazine Jordan’. This material is supplemented by data generated in interviews conducted in Arabic with three members of the MyKali team in the summer of 2018 in Amman, as well as with Mohammad Qtaishat, the director of the Jordan Media Commission. Some of my respondents preferred to mix Arabic and English during these interviews. The names of respondents have been changed to protect their identities, with the exception of the name of the founder of MyKali and the name of the director of the Jordanian Media Commission, both of whom gave informed consent for their names to be used.

Since this article addresses pop-activism by an LGBTQ-focused medium, it is necessary to clarify my positionality in conducting this research. As a feminist scholar, I strive here, as when I conducted the interviews and the analysis, to use the terms MyKali activists use themselves and not to allow my voice to override theirs. I am very conscious of the sensitivity of the work done by MyKali and the real risks these activists took in speaking to me. I am also aware that my
access to the activists is itself a benefit of my social networks in Jordan. To address this, all my respondents gave informed consent prior to the interviews, and were informed that they can choose not to engage with any topics at hand or stop the interviews at any point or withdraw their contribution at any later point. All interviews were recorded, encrypted, and transcribed by myself in Arabic (or English where it was used). My analysis draws on feminist and queer scholarship to illuminate the resistance and agency of MyKali activists, but it does not gloss over the homophobia and the real difficulties and risks they face.

The article is comprised of four main parts: the first introduces MyKali through a brief exploration of its trajectory. The second presents the theoretical framework and the key concepts used in the analysis. The third analyses three episodes of moral panic surrounding MyKali and the role of the discourse of homophobic authenticity in these episodes. Finally, in the fourth part I analyse MyKali’s use of pop-activism to stake its claim to Jordanian identity and counter the discourse of homophobic authenticity through a comparative study of two of its most iconic cover images.

I. Introducing MyKali

MyKali was launched in 2007 as an online safe space\textsuperscript{14} in the form of a blog created by Khaled Abdel Hadi and a number of other students. Abdel Hadi describes this early iteration of MyKali

\textsuperscript{14} I am using the term “safe space” here as it was used by the founder of MyKali, Khaled Abdel Hadi, to describe MyKali: a place to express viewpoints and opinions, and identities, that may not be welcome elsewhere. Safe spaces are not always entirely safe, and the meaning of “safety” is also fluid.
as an attempt to express himself and to document moments and events that had significance for him personally as a young gay man in Jordan. In time, however, MyKali morphed into a ‘conceptual webzine for/from the Middle East and North Africa’ as it currently labels itself. It also assumed a much bigger role in the Jordanian and Middle Eastern LGBTQ community, as I illustrate below. This is not to say that MyKali and the team behind it are representative of the LGBTQ community in Jordan, and nor is it to say that MyKali is the sole queer counterpublic in the country. Yet the fact remains that MyKali is the most well-developed public and visible queer platform in Jordan, boasting over 50,000 followers on Facebook. It is also indisputable that MyKali has faced and continues to face moral panics that demonstrate wider society’s rejection of the LGBTQ community and attempts to suppress LGBTQ identities and rights.

In its early years, MyKali was an obscure, little-known blog-type publication that emulated glossy fashion magazines and spoke in English exclusively to a small group of middle- and upper-class Jordanians who knew about its existence. MyKali’s growing awareness of its own positionality, privilege, and the culturally-specific concerns of members of the Jordanian LGBTQ community led to a change in the tone, presentation, and agenda of the webzine. The changes in MyKali were organic and came as a result of changes in the team working on the webzine, as well as their growing awareness and experience in running such a platform. Friction with mainstream media and society was instrumental to this change as well.

MyKali’s current structure is composed of a small core team led by Abdel Hadi, flanked by a network of volunteer writers, designers, photographers, models, and allies. The team includes a

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diverse group of individuals who belong to different social classes and religions, and who have
different sexual identities and orientations. Effectively, this has meant that the webzine was
transformed from a publication revolving around the personality of its founder and the concerns
of gay men, to a far more representative outlet. Abdel Hadi himself acknowledges the limitations
of MyKali prior to this shift, as he says: ‘We were not diverse, we did not include women
properly and when we did it was in an objectified and sexualised way, we did not include the full
gender spectra, we were not inclusive of the trans community and we were not discussing the
basics of all these things.’

Likewise, both A. Rahman and Warda, members of the Mykali team, have noted that there is a deliberate and conscious effort to be more inclusive in the decision-
making structures within the webzine itself. Aware of its positionality and the ongoing debates
about sexual identities in the region, MyKali published a post-colonial critique of itself (in Arabic
and English) in its 10th anniversary edition. The piece publicly dissected its agenda, history, and past
mistakes, including issues as wide-ranging as language, elitism, and identity politics. The critique
showed MyKali’s reflexivity and evolution and visited two of the moral panics I analyse below,
arguing that MyKali had made mistakes in how it framed its agenda on LGBTQ rights and how it

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16 Abdel Hadi, Personal Interview, 26/07/2018.

17 Musa Shadeedi, ‘Queer Media Critique, a Post-Colonial Perspective: The My.Kali Case Study’, MyKali, https://www.mykalimag.com/ar/2018/10/16/%D9%86%D9%82%D8%AF-
%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85-
%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AB%D9%84%D9%8A-%D9%85%D9%86-
%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%A7-
%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA/ (accessed 12/12, 2019).
addressed its detractors. It concluded that MyKali’s change of course towards a more localised discourse that is sensitive to the needs and considerations of Middle Eastern contexts, and its adoption of Arabic language publishing, were pivotal to demonstrate its commitment to LGBTQ rights in Jordan and the region.

II. Theoretical Framework

Informing this empirical study is a theoretical framework that draws on my conceptualisation of Mykali as a counterpublic that undertakes pop-activism in order to challenge dominant homophobic discourses and moral panics in Jordan. In undertaking this type of activism, MyKali deploys certain national Jordanian symbols through iconophilic ‘acts of gaiety’, in order to construct counterdiscourses that highlight LGBTQ rights and identities as authentically Jordanian. In this section, I aim to unpack these concepts and show their broader implications.

I use the concept of subaltern counterpublics to analyse MyKali’s brand of activism. Fraser critiques Habermas’s conceptualization of the bourgeois public sphere as a singular public arena, and his focus on the clear separation between ‘public’ and ‘private’ matters. She writes that ‘members of subordinated social groups—women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians—have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics.’18 In this, she identifies two main roles that these ‘parallel discursive arenas’ perform: ‘On the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases

18 Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 56-80, 68
and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics.19 Similarly, MyKali provides a rare outlet for the LGBTQ community in Jordan. According to Warda, MyKali is not just a webzine: it is ‘a home where people of similar struggles can come together and kind of meet and speak and talk and trade ideas and talk about change for the future.’20 This is echoed by A. Rahman who describes it as ‘a small platform that gives space for those who have no access to other spaces.21 Not only does MyKali offer a platform that advocates for LGBTQ rights, it is also very much a sanctuary and refuge, a literal and metaphorical safe space where some LGBTQ individuals do not only hear the voices of other members of the community, but also where they feel they can reach out for help. In my interviews with MyKali activists, I was struck by the role that they have found themselves performing as a result of being involved with the webzine. Given the lack of similar visible queer-friendly spaces, the MyKali team often find themselves having to assist, support, or intervene to rescue distressed members of the LGBTQ community. As A. Rahman says:

It is a platform, but at the same time, we do a lot of work on the side that doesn’t have to do with the magazine. Because we are the only platform, LGBT people who are in trouble think they can contact us and we have all the answers. So, they email us and they say things that are scary as fuck, they say that they want to kill themselves, they say that they want to die, they say …. They say these things and we have to deal with it, we have to refer it to other NGOs, we have to figure out ways, we have to identify psychiatrists

19 Ibid., 68.

20 Warda, Personal Interview, 28/07/2018.

21 A. Rahman, Personal Interview.
whom we can send people to, we do all this stuff on the side. So, it is a platform, but it is also a place where people go when they need help. And that is something I did not expect to happen at all.22

MyKali activists feel a huge sense of responsibility towards other members of the community who ask for help, and routinely pool their resources together, including through non-LGBTQ allies, to assist individuals at risk of violence.

Communication and the media through which it happens are crucial to the formation and survival of counterpublics. In Michael Warner’s expansion of Fraser’s work, he emphasises that both publics and counterpublics are created through communicative acts and strategies. A counterpublic is pitted against not just a general public but rather a dominant one and ‘maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status.’23 Crucially, Warner identifies this state of conflict as instrumental to understanding counterpublics and maintains that ‘the conflict extends not just to ideas or policy questions but to the speech genres and modes of address that constitute the public and to the hierarchy among media.’24 This particular aspect of Warner’s contribution is important as it focuses on the linguistic and discursive mechanisms through which counterpublics channel their resistance. He argues that for a counterpublic, ‘the discourse that constitutes it is not merely a different or alternative idiom, but one that in other contexts would be regarded with hostility or with

22 A. Rahman, Personal Interview.


a sense of indecorousness’ and that this discourse ‘might therefore circulate in special, protected venues, in limited publications.’\(^{25}\) This understanding is useful here to shed light on how MyKali constructs counterdiscourses and how these are perceived by the wider public.

The concept of ‘pop-activism’ is key to my analysis of MyKali’s resistance as a counterpublic. I define it as a concerted effort to deploy forms, traditions, and practices that are traditionally inscribed as ‘popular culture’ for the advancement of a specific social, cultural, or political cause. In the case of MyKali, pop-activism is practiced to advance counter-discourses that challenge and disrupt the Jordanian heteropatriarchy. Given its alignment with the vernacular, the everyday, and the non-elite, popular culture is a useful conduit for activism that aims to challenge hegemonic discourses and practices. According to Armbrust, ‘there is no all-purpose definition of popular culture,’\(^{26}\) and our attention should be directed to its role in creating new scales of communication and modern identity. Pop-activism, as popular culture itself, is often mediated and remediated and capitalises on the ever-changing meanings of cultural symbols.

Furthermore, MyKali’s pop-activism relies on deploying and contesting symbols in ‘acts of gaiety’, defined by Warner as ‘playful methods of social activism and mirthful modes of political performance that inspire and sustain deadly serious struggles for revolutionary change.’\(^{27}\) Acts of

\(^{25}\) Ibid., 86.


\(^{27}\) Armbrust, *Mass Mediations*, ix.
gaiety include parody, satire, as well as comedy, theatre, and farce-making. These acts are empowering, pleasurable, and liberating, but are deliberate in satirising or ridiculing painful or hateful experiences or situations. These acts of gaiety, in MyKali’s case, are highly visual as will be demonstrated later. These tongue-in-cheek acts are enabled by MyKali’s iconophilic approach to images, and the centrality of visuality and images to their pop-activism. To analyse the latter, I draw on Robert Asen’s assertion that ‘representing is not a disinterested process, but one that implicates social judgments and relations of power.’\(^{28}\) I find his detailed analysis of the contestation over images that occurs between dominant publics and subaltern counterpublics to be useful in understanding how MyKali repurposed and reclaimed dominant images and also how these images became the objects of a moral panic.

In this respect, I utilise the concepts of iconophilia, iconoclasm, and iconophobia. Bruno Latour’s original analysis of the role of images in science, art, and religion identifies a tension between iconophilia (respect for the ever-changing meanings of the image) and iconoclasm (the destruction of iconophilia). Cara Finnegan and Jiyeon Kang adapt the Latourian concept of iconophilia to mean ‘a friendship with images that respects their movements and transformations, challenges conceptions of image culture as a scene in which passive viewers are captive to an endless stream of images passing before their eyes.’\(^{29}\) They expand on Latour’s


application of iconophilia by urging us to ‘sight’ the public sphere, by analyzing it from the lens of images and vision, and recognising and exploring the dynamics at play in images and the politics surrounding them. This is relevant to how we understand the production of images by MyKali in terms of pop-activism. Moreover, they differentiate between iconophobia as a ‘relatively passive anxiety about images’, and iconoclasm as ‘anxiety about vision coupled with an active will to control vision.’ Iconophobia is, according to W. J. T. Mitchell, a fear of and anxiety surrounding images due to their duplicity, which leads the iconophobe to believe that the image is ‘a site of special power that must either be contained or exploited.’ This helps us to understand the ways in which the MyKali images were received by certain sections of Jordanian society and why they became the object of a moral panic.

### III. Homophobic Authenticity and Moral Panics

While Jordanian law does not explicitly criminalise homosexuality, homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia are widespread and normalised. The discussion in this section of three different moral panics surrounding MyKali illustrates this very clearly. The first was in 2007, immediately following its creation; the second was in 2015, in relation to an event organised by MyKali for the International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia (IDAHOT); and the third was in 2016/2017, when MyKali launched its first Arabic-language edition.

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30 Finnegan and Kang, “Sighting”, 381.


32 Ibid., 151.
Underlying the misrepresentation of MyKali and the moral panics surrounding its increasing visibility in Jordanian media is a discourse that I term ‘homophobic authenticity’, which promotes homophobia as a moral position that denotes not just a belief in the superiority and normalisation of heterosexuality, and the othering of members of the LGBTQ community, but also establishes an almost inherent link between homophobia and authentic Jordanian identity. This is reminiscent of the discourses and actions that surrounded the Queen Boat incident, where those that transgressed sex and gender norms were seen to threaten national identity. Homophobic authenticity plays into nationalist Jordanian discourses where Jordan is viewed as a bastion of heterosexuality, and enshrines broader heteronormative social control as a means to protect Jordanian identity and values. This is often accompanied by anti-westernisation discourses that pit this supposedly authentic identity against the (non-heterosexual) ‘others’ who are seen as agents of western interests, forgetting or ignoring that Jordan itself is reliant on western aid, and that the Jordanian regime is eager to polish its international image in order to maintain its status as a beneficiary of western support.

These highly mediated moral panics were triggered by journalists and politicians alarmed by the threat they perceived in LGBTQ identities and activism against the nation and its values. I use the term ‘moral panic’ as per Stanley Cohen’s comprehensive definition:

A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops,

33 Pratt, ‘The Queen Boat Case’.
politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible.\(^\text{34}\)

Cohen’s definition is useful because it also acknowledges the possibility that the object of the moral panic may be novel or may be familiar, and that a moral panic may be fleeting or that it may produce significant changes in legal or social policy. David Garland highlights that the objects of moral panics ‘are not randomly selected: they are cultural scapegoats whose deviant conduct appals onlookers so powerfully precisely because it relates to personal fears and unconscious wishes.’\(^\text{35}\)

However, I do not view the LGBTQ community merely as victims of these moral panics. My analysis emphasises MyKali’s resistance and agency. Garland notes an important shift away from traditional, consensual moral panics to something he terms ‘confictual culture wars’\(^\text{36}\) where groups that would normally be the objects of a moral panic have more agency and are more vocal in their resistance, and where meanings and symbols are much more contested. Garland argues that in this context, ‘the outrage expressed by one set of onlookers prompts not a public panic but instead a defiant (and equally outraged) response from the “folk devils” whose

\(^{34}\) Cohen, *Folk Devils*, 1.


\(^{36}\) Ibid., 17.
conduct was brought into question." The three incidents analysed here demonstrate how MyKali, as a queer subaltern counterpublic, exercised agency in responding to these episodes, and how the mediated exchanges between MyKali and its detractors were centred on contestations over the meaning of Jordanian identity. However, the power balance in the Jordanian heteropatriarchy remains very much against sexual minorities. As such, conceptualising MyKali’s responses to the anti-LGBTQ moral panics as symptoms of a ‘culture war’ would risk minimising the very real power imbalance that characterises these exchanges. It is too soon, and too naïve, to declare these tensions as the starting shots of a politically contested culture war on the path of the struggle for equality in Jordan.

**III.1 Alienness and Deviance: MyKali Launch, 2007**

Immediately after its creation in 2007, MyKali was the target of a moral panic in local Jordanian media. In particular, a cover visual featuring its founder, Khaled Abdel Hadi, was picked up by Jordanian news websites and framed as a conspiracy to launch a conference for ‘sexual deviants’ to coincide with parliamentary elections. LGBTQs were referred to as ‘members of a group alien to Jordanian society’, and as a ‘morally and behaviourally deviant group.’ FactJo, the website that triggered the panic with its report, framed its endeavour in classic moral panic codes:

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As part of our patriotic, moral, and religious duty to prevent such religiously prohibited behaviours and to protect our traditions and customs, […] we have sought input from human rights organisations, and anti-LGBT associations, as well as psychologists and specialists in sexually-transmitted diseases and religious scholars.\textsuperscript{39}

The report was circulated by Ammon News, one of the most widely-read and influential news websites in the country, among many others. Beyond demonising LGBT individuals as others conspiring to damage Jordanian society, it outed 18-year-old Abdel Hadi at a time when he was experiencing many difficulties in finding acceptance for his sexuality at home and gave him cause to be very concerned for his safety:

At the time, the only news published about LGBT people in the region involved coverage of the persecution, torture and abuse […]. When I saw my half naked picture in Jordanian newspapers, visible to hundreds of thousands of readers throughout the country, my mind quickly shifted to these stories, the stories of oppression of LGBT people throughout the region. I thought that there was a real possibility that I would be arrested or killed in my own country.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{39} FactJo, ‘A Congregation of "Sexual Deviants" in Jordan’, Factjo, 

\textsuperscript{40} Khaled Abdel Hadi, ‘My.Kali: 10 Years of a Public Fight’, MyKali, 
While Abdel Hadi’s physical safety was not threatened, and he was not questioned or arrested, he was the target of online harassment. He decided to go quiet for a few months, and then relaunched MyKali in February 2008. I present a more detailed analysis of the cover visual that triggered this moral panic in the next section of this article.

**III.2 Agents of a Western Agenda: IDAHOT 2015**

The second moral panic took place in 2015 when MyKali helped to coordinate a closed event bringing together about 40 individuals to mark the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia (IDAHOT). Both the subject and the brief presence of the American ambassador triggered a moral panic in Jordanian media (even though she was not invited, and other ambassadors were also present). In my interview with A. Rahman, she says that the ambassador,

> [j]ust walked in, grabbed the microphone from whoever was speaking and started speaking, and she said you know we know that you people in Jordan are facing a lot of discrimination and one day you are going to be as free and amazing as LGBT people are in the US. […] One day you are going to have what we have, and you just have to be persistent, and we’ll try and support you as much as we can.⁴¹

⁴¹ A. Rahman, Personal Interview. It is important to note here that the text of the ambassador’s speech is not available and was never published. My understanding from interviews with MyKali activists is that she spoke spontaneously and without notes.
In a move that the MyKali activists describe as ‘poorly thought out’, MyKali published an English-language report about the otherwise-closed event, including pictures showing some of the speakers and attendees. The coverage was quickly picked up by mainstream Jordanian media and a total of 136 articles and reports were written about it. On the one hand, the media viewed the US ambassador’s attendance and expression of support for the LGBTQ cause as evidence of Western sabotage of local cultural and religious mores. And on the other, the Islamic Action Front, the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, called the event a form of ‘corruption and deviance’. The Muslim Brotherhood’s media arm, Al-Sabeel, published the largest number of reports and responses to the event. Following this explosion in coverage, MyKali published a response, this time in Arabic, to clarify and correct some information that was circulated in the media. It clarified that the ambassador was not formally invited but attended in a personal capacity, and insisted that the event was not sponsored by any foreign embassies.


44 Zuhdi, ‘Coverage of LGBT Issues’.

Yet the damage had already been done. Jordanian politicians like the socially-conservative MP Yahia Al-Saud attacked the American ambassador and maintained that she would ‘force’ the Jordanian Prime Minister to license a ‘party for sexual deviants’.\textsuperscript{46} Anti-Westernisation discourses constructed the event as evidence of Western (primarily American) intervention in Jordanian affairs and cast MyKali and all involved in the IDAHOT event as the local agents of this intervention. At the same time, Jordanian exceptionalism vis-à-vis homosexuality was invoked in patriotic and religious terms. Osama Shehadeh, writing in the daily \textit{Al-Ghad} newspaper, maintained that ‘we in Jordan must be the most guarded in the entire world against the spread of sexual deviance in our country’ because ‘our country is the only one in the history of all humanity to witness a divine punishment for this crime when Allah terminated the People

Like others, Shehadeh also linked the event to a ‘hidden agenda’ designed to undermine Jordanian sovereignty.

III.3 Contesting Jordanian Values: Arabic Publishing and Censorship 2016/17

A further media panic occurred in 2016 when MyKali published its first Arabic-language edition. In an immediate response, local mainstream media claimed that MyKali had been officially licensed as a publication in Jordan. The panic centred on the rumour that MyKali was licensed, meaning that it had been officially recognised and approved by the Jordanian government. The response from the latter was swift: the Jordanian Media Commission issued a statement denying

47 Osama Shehadeh, ‘Deviance Destroys Homelands’, *Al Ghad*,
https://alghad.com/%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B0%D9%88%D8%B0-%D8%AA%D8%AF%D9%85%D8%B1-
%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%88%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%A7%D9%86/ (accessed 12/12, 2019).

%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%86-
%D9%8A%D8%B5%D8%AF%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A3%D9%88%D9%84-%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%A9-
%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%BA%D8%A9-
%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9 (accessed 12/12, 2019).
this, adding that ‘Jordan is distinguished by its cultural and social heritage which rejects alien and immoral customs’, and MyKali was subsequently censored in Jordan due to absence of licensing.

MyKali activists resisted the dominant media narrative and asserted their right to be recognised as part of the fabric of Jordanian society. They issued a statement countering and correcting mainstream media coverage and the discourse of homophobic authenticity that was circulating at the time. In this statement, they asserted that ‘the Jordanian LGBTQ community has always been an inherent part of the country’s social fabric. It is not a foreign import or construct, nor does it have an agenda to debase Jordanian traditions’, and they corrected the record on its licensing status and funding.50

49 Petra, ‘Jordanian Media Commission Denies Licensing a Magazine for Homosexuals’, Addustour, https://www.addustour.com/articles/26022-%D9%87%D9%8A%D8%A6%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%AA%D8%A4%D9%83%D8%AF-%D8%B9%D8%AF%D9%85-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%AE%D9%8A%D8%B5-%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AB%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86 (accessed 12/12, 2019).

A subsequent and relevant moral panic was instigated in 2017 by Dima Tahboub, an Islamic Action Front MP, who claimed that she had filed a complaint against MyKali with the Jordanian Media Commission, demanding that the webzine be censored. The widely-circulated news about Tahboub’s request resulted in a statement by the Jordanian Media Commission that MyKali was to be blocked, even though it had been blocked for a year by that point (a fact confirmed in my interviews with MyKali activists and the director of the Jordanian Media Commission Mohammad Qtaishat). Qtaishat even denied receiving that alleged complaint from the MP or issuing a statement that MyKali was to be censored. This episode illustrates, foremost, Jordanian mainstream media’s uncritical circulation of unverified information, an emblem of moral panics. But it also demonstrates the utility of scapegoating MyKali, as an LGBTQ platform, by politicians, officials, and the media wishing to brand themselves as champions of alleged traditional Jordanian values. In other words, the discourse of homophobic authenticity serves certain political ends, much like the discourses surrounding the Queen Boat incident in Egypt served to construct heteronormativity as inherent to Egyptian culture and the basis for establishing national sovereignty against Western intervention. In Jordan, opposing MyKali by misrepresenting it, issuing statements and complaints against it, and censoring or purporting to censor it must be understood within the context of deteriorating freedom of

51 The Islamic Action Front is the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan.


53 Mohammad Qtaishat, Personal Interview, 01/08/2018.

54 Pratt, ‘The Queen Boat Case’.
expression, public resentment of government inefficiency and corruption, and a domestic political landscape that favours social and religious conservatism but is not critical of the regime’s reliance on foreign aid. Targeting MyKali during these moral panics is an easy way to demonstrate alignment with an alleged set of values, and it is also a way to appease a citizenry that is unsatisfied with the lack of democratic representation, pervasive corruption, and declining freedoms and living standards.

MyKali activists have come to learn from these moral panics that they are faced with a double challenge, as they have to fight against local homophobia and Western Islamophobia simultaneously. As Warda put it, ‘anytime you want to criticise a dominant discourse you are always attacked on both sides; you’re attacked by the west for being from a community that is barbaric and the Islamic community [sic] that doesn’t allow for that safe space.’

MyKali activists are conscious of this double-bind and are vocal about contesting it: in response to Tahboub’s crusade against them, they published an open letter in 2017 addressed to her grounding their activism in the Jordanian context and urging the MP to respect their freedom of expression and their right to exist as Jordanian citizens. In their attempt to counter the discourse of homophobic authenticity, they asserted that alongside their activism as LGBTQ individuals,

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55 Warda, Personal Interview.

they fulfil the same civic duties, live the same lives, and have a claim to the same rights as other members of Jordanian society:

Along with voicing our opinions through the magazine, we vote, pay taxes and electricity bills, work normal boring jobs, spend time with our families, and complain about the weather and traffic, just like all Jordanians.57

But MyKali activists are also aware of their marginalised position as LGBTQ individuals. In this same letter, they urged the MP to recognise this too: ‘Public demonization of the LGBTQ+ community will undermine public health and safety, encouraging physical violence against a vulnerable group of Jordanians.’ 58 By asserting LGBTQ individuals’ rights as citizens, and by publicly reflecting on their own previous approach and past experiences, MyKali activists resist the discourse of homophobic authenticity and position themselves as an integral and indigenous part of Jordanian society.

IV. Pop-Activism in a Queer Counterpublic: Iconophilic Acts of Gaiety

As the discussion so far has illustrated, MyKali’s evolution and the moral panics it has faced underscore the subordination of LGBTQ communities in Jordan and the risks associated with LGBTQ activism. I have highlighted MyKali’s agency and resistance to the discourse of homophobic authenticity and its growing reflexivity and awareness of its context. It is against this backdrop that I now return to MyKali as a queer counterpublic and to discuss the webzine’s

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.
creative use of popular culture and traditional Jordanian symbols to construct a counterdiscourse to homophobic authenticity.

In my discussion of the moral panics surrounding MyKali, I noted how the image on the cover of the first issue triggered an almost immediate homophobic response in mainstream Jordanian media. I analyse this cover image in more depth here, comparing it with the cover of the 10th anniversary edition. I argue that MyKali’s playful but deliberate use of traditional Jordanian symbols and reclaiming of its own image is an iconophilic response and an act of gaiety, showing the potential of pop-activism for advancing LGBTQ rights advocacy and resistance in Jordan against the discourse of homophobic authenticity.

The cover image of MyKali’s July 2009 issue features founder Khalid Abdel Hadi topless, his arms crossed against his chest, wearing a red and white *shmagh*, the traditional headdress worn by Jordanian men. Khalid is also wearing a black hat and looking directly at the camera. This image is highly charged politically: not just for its subversive homosexual-ness but also for its explicit linking of such subversiveness with Jordanian identity through the *shmagh*. On the same cover, Khalid is referred to as a ‘Jordanian boy’ and the word ‘gay’ appears in relation to a different feature. Both the gayness and the ‘gaiety’ of the image are clear: it is playful, but it is sending a serious political message at the same time. In Khalid’s own words, he ‘wanted to be
part of a cover that gives a sense of belonging and pride, to reflect the relation between being LGBT and Arab/Jordanian.\footnote{MyKali Magazine Instagram, \url{https://www.instagram.com/p/BH2dFCGBUkt/} (accessed 12/12, 2019).}

The power of this image is such that it was routinely used by mainstream Jordanian media, in negative ways, whenever coverage of MyKali trickled through to these channels. Since such coverage is almost always within the context of moral panics, this selection is not random. It is testament to the disruptive power of this image, challenging as it does the discourse of homophobic authenticity by offering an alternative that equally gestures to ‘authentic’ Jordanian identity and introduces an alternative type of Jordanian masculinity. It is precisely this subversive power that invites its use by mainstream media to incite outrage and fuel moral panics. Asen maintains that in such moments of interaction between publics and counterpublics, the latter suffer from ‘the doubly disabling tendencies of representation’ where ‘voices and bodies largely absent from public discourses may be made present through disabling images’ and where counterpublic agents struggle to access the forums in which they are negatively represented.\footnote{Asen, ‘Imagining’, 360.} The difference here is, of course, that this image was created by MyKali itself rather than by mainstream media. In other words, it was not imposed on MyKali but rather claimed by mainstream media as evidence of the former’s agenda to corrupt an imagined and supposedly ‘authentic’ version of Jordanianness. But while mainstream media’s circulation of this cover within the context of moral panics was both homophobic and iconophobic (in the
sense that it was rooted in a fear that generated a desire to contain this image by showing it repeatedly, and to exploit it by using it to illustrate MyKali’s use of Jordanian symbols to incite outrage), it was not iconoclastic in a censorial sense.

Likewise, even though MyKali was aware of this image being used in this way, its response to this misuse was neither censorial nor apologetic. MyKali never took the cover down from its page and even promoted it on Instagram in 2016. In a statement it published on its Facebook page at the same time, it addressed the use of this image directly as a form of resistance against attempts to frame it (and by extension members of the LGBTQ community) as un-Jordanian:

> The Jordanian LGBTQ community has always been an inherent part of the country’s social fabric. It is not a foreign import or construct, nor does it have an agenda to debase Jordanian traditions. The cover picture featuring My.Kali’s Founder in a Jordanian ‘Hatta’\(^{61}\) in 2009 [sic] is being used in sensationalist and homophobic media reports provocatively, however the original intent behind the cover was to convey a sense of belonging and pride in the Jordanian identity.\(^{62}\)

MyKali’s response was iconophilic, showing a friendship with this image. This iconophilic response is even more evident in the second cover image I focus on here, produced by MyKali in 2018 for its 10\(^{th}\) anniversary, featuring a remaking of the original cover. I argue that this remixing and reclaiming of the original image and the Jordanian symbols it featured further re-

\(^{61}\) An alternative name for the *shmagh*, traditional male headdress.

\(^{62}\) Mykali Magazine, ‘Statement in English’. 
inscribes Jordanianness on LGBTQ identity and counters the discourse of homophobic authenticity through a playful act of gaiety.

On the cover of the January 2018 edition we see Abdel Hadi wearing a red and white shmagh again, not topless but wearing a nude-coloured jumper, and again looking directly at the camera. Like the 2009 version, the cover explicitly references homosexuality, and directly asks: ‘Why [sic] the Jordanian society is living in a state of denial when it comes to homosexuality?’ Not only do we see almost identical visual elements in the newer image (the same model, the shmagh, the colours) but we also see similar textual elements in the direct references to homosexuality and homophobia. These similarities are important so as to underline MyKali’s sense of continuity and its ownership of its past, as well as its resistance to the moral panics that have aimed to divorce it from its Jordanian context. But there are also subtle and important differences between the two covers: in the 2018 image we see Abdel Hadi wearing the shmagh in the conventional way on his head rather than his chest/torso, in deference to tradition. We also see Abdel Hadi clothed, not showing skin (albeit alluding to it through the nude-coloured jumper), and the black hat is eliminated (perhaps read as a symbol of westernisation in the original image). The cover is carefully composed to articulate a pro-LGBTQ agenda while simultaneously reinforcing MyKali’s Jordanianness. This is deliberate, aiming also to present a

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more culturally sensitive and less-jarring image to mainstream society, ‘in the hope that they [the media] would use this image instead of that one’, as Abdel Hadi said.64

Thus, not only has MyKali taken ownership of this image despite its misuse by mainstream Jordanian media, they have remixed it, playfully but in a deliberate way, in a display of ‘cunning interventions that make a mockery of discrimination and the experience of social exclusion.’65 While the original image is often used to cause offence by/in mainstream media, MyKali’s taking ownership of it and redoing it is an example of what Penney argues is ‘an important and provocative shift from an iconoclastic to an iconophilic approach.’66 It is a playful, but deadly serious, act of resistance through pop-activism.

**Conclusion**

This study has demonstrated how through its 11 year journey, MyKali has evolved into a queer counterpublic unique in its ability to articulate the concerns of LGBTQ individuals and proud of its role as a space for representation and support for the community in Jordan and across the region. I have analysed here how the moral panics targeting MyKali as un-Jordanian drew on the discourse of homophobic authenticity to ‘other’ LGBTQ individuals and activists and to

64 Abdel Hadi, Personal Interview.


articulate a Jordanian national identity that is supposedly exclusively heterosexual. These moral panics served certain political ends, whereby MyKali was an easy target for the media, politicians and officials in the context of Jordan’s declining freedoms and growing political and economic challenges.

Crucially, however, I have also argued that MyKali itself resists this discourse through mediated pop-activism deployed in various creative ways, including iconophilic remixing of images and increasingly anchoring its identity in the Jordanian context through the use of symbols seen as distinctly Jordanian. This carving out of an LGBTQ activist space, and the creativity and playfulness (or gaiety) that is seen in MyKali’s pop-activism, point to the potential of LGBTQ media activism in the MENA and how the tension between national and sexual identities can be contested, innovatively, and in radical and meaningful ways.

MyKali’s survival over the past decade and its increasing visibility suggest that its strategies are productive and important in supporting the capacity of LGBTQ activists in Jordan, and perhaps the wider Middle East and North Africa region, to resist heteronormative social control and better advocate for their rights. Moreover, their very public self-reflexive and critical reviews of their own evolution are unique and have been vital to their survival, growth, and continued relevance. Studies of Middle Eastern LGBTQ activism (mediated or otherwise) would do well to centre the creative ways media and popular culture are harnessed by activists to address their lived realities and to counter dominant homophobic discourses. And while MyKali activists continue to work under considerable and serious risks and continue to tread a fine line between
being subversive and keeping safe, their efforts give cause to be optimistic about the future of
pop-activism for LGBTQ rights in the region.