



# MASTERARBEIT | MASTER'S THESIS

Titel | Title

Gender roles and relationship stereotypes in Arabic memes  
A window into taboo topics

verfasst von | submitted by  
Philipp Meßmer BA BA

angestrebter akademischer Grad | in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts (MA)

Wien | Vienna, 2024

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt | Degree  
programme code as it appears on the  
student record sheet:

UA 066 676

Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt | Degree  
programme as it appears on the student  
record sheet:

Masterstudium Arabische Welt: Sprache und  
Gesellschaft

Betreut von | Supervisor:

Univ.-Prof. Dr. Stephan Prochazka

## **Abstract**

Since the previous decades, internet memes have been a ubiquitous phenomenon, with a, mostly younger, generation worldwide. Something that's only starting to be studied, however, is the impact that memes can have as a means of discourse by circumventing taboos and censorship. This thesis looks at a collection of Arabic memes dealing with the topics of relationships, gender roles and intimacy through the lens of critical discourse analysis. As a preliminary work on a sparsely studied topic, the main focus of this thesis lies in describing and analyzing the memes at hand, in order to point out possible avenues for future research. Noteworthy aspects found within the study include the prevalence of Egyptian films as sources for meme templates, as well as a comparatively strong lack of uniformity within the studied memes. Generally, the findings seem to confirm previous studies that point out the discursive significance of memes, which goes beyond their purpose as simple jokes. While not providing definitive answers, this study also helps to highlight the importance of addressing aspects of memes in future studies, such as purposeful vagueness, the importance of gender and the purposes behind the creation of memes.

## **Abstract (Deutsch)**

Innerhalb der letzten Jahrzehnte sind Internetmemes zu einem allgegenwärtigen Phänomen für eine vorwiegend junge Generation an Menschen weltweit geworden. Etwas, das in seiner Untersuchung jedoch noch in den Kinderschuhen steckt, ist die Frage nach dem Einfluss, den Memes als ein Kommunikationsmittel haben, wenn es um die Umgehung von Tabus und Zensur geht. Diese Arbeit untersucht mithilfe einer kritischen Diskursanalyse eine Sammlung von arabischen Memes, welche sich inhaltlich mit den Themenkomplexen Beziehungen, sozialem Geschlecht und Intimität befassen. Da es sich hierbei um eine Pilotstudie zu einem bisher wenig untersuchten Themenfeld handelt, liegt der Hauptfokus auf dem Deskriptiven ebenso wie in der Analyse der vorliegenden Memes, um mögliche zukünftige Forschungsthemen zu identifizieren. Zu nennenswerten Aspekten, die im Laufe der Analyse deutlich werden, gehört die hohe Bedeutung von ägyptischen Filmen als Quellen für Meme-Vorlagen sowie ein vergleichsweise großer Mangel an Einheitlichkeit unter den untersuchten Memes. Grundlegend scheinen die Ergebnisse vorherige Studien zu bestätigen, welche auf die diskursive Bedeutung von Memes hinweisen, die über ihren Zweck als einfache Witze hinausgehen. Während diese Studie keine endgültigen Antworten liefert, erweist sie doch ihren Dienst darin, die Wichtigkeit bestimmter Aspekte für zukünftige Studien herauszuarbeiten. Zu solchen gehört die absichtliche Ungenauigkeit, welche in vielen Memes inhärent ist, ebenso wie die Bedeutung von Geschlecht und die möglichen Beweggründe für das Erstellen von Memes.

## **Acknowledgement**

I would like to express my deep thanks to all those, who helped me during the genesis of this thesis.

Starting with my friends Hassan and Riem, who helped me by providing information and translations and without whom this thesis would not have been possible.

I want to thank my girlfriend, Verena, for supporting me throughout this whole process with understanding and encouragement. And for helping me check for grammar and spelling errors, just as my friend Blagovest and my aunt Margit did.

Furthermore, I owe much thanks to my family, who helped me greatly and reliably through many years of studying up to this point.

Lastly, I want to thank my professor, Dr. Stephan Prochazka, who has been instrumental in the production of this thesis and whose lectures I already miss a lot, as listening to them meant regularly unlocking the wonders of the Arabian language and culture.

## **Table of Content**

1. Introduction .....	5
2. Context .....	7
2.1. Memes .....	8
2.1.1. Origin of ‘memes’ .....	8
2.1.2. The adoption of the meme .....	9
2.1.3. The Internet.....	10
2.1.4. Possible Definition of Internet Memes .....	13
2.1.5. Terminology in memes .....	14
2.1.6. Text-Picture relationship.....	19
2.2. Arabic .....	20
2.2.1. Diglossia .....	20
2.2.2. Dialects .....	22
2.2.3. Egyptian Arabic .....	25
2.2.4. Relevant grammatical aspects.....	27
2.2.5. Arab culture .....	29
2.2.6. Memes in the Arab context.....	31
3. Methodology .....	33
3.1. Theoretical Framework .....	33
3.2. Data Collection.....	38
3.3. Transcription .....	40
4. Memes .....	42
4.1. The troubles of dating.....	42
4.2. Difficult partners .....	53
4.3. Criticism of marriage.....	67
4.4. Pressure to commit to a relationship .....	86
4.5. Discussing Homosexuality .....	103
4.6. Negotiating Gender Roles .....	112
4.7. Talking Sexual.....	121
4.8. Snake Memes .....	127
5. Conclusion.....	138
5.1. Recapitulation.....	138
5.2. Findings and Outlook .....	140
6. Bibliography.....	144
7. Internet Sources.....	154

## **1. Introduction**

Since the previous decades internet memes have been a ubiquitous phenomenon with a, mostly, younger generation worldwide. Showing and sending memes to old and new friends has become almost as widespread as showing pictures of one's family or one's latest holiday.

While often shown and sent for general amusement it would be a mistake to underestimate these memes as mere jokes. Short visual and textual cues can often transport fairly complex messages in an easily understandable and memorable way, while entertaining the audience. In a globalized age of information, where most people find themselves more and more overwhelmed by the sheer amount of information bearing down on them, memes appear to meet a demand for easily digestible information. Their entertaining nature helps to focus the attention of an audience that has less and less attention to give. The virality, that often comes with internet memes, also means that the author of a meme can project a message faster and further, than ever before

Until today, the full potential of internet memes has not been recognized by everyone, with even many members of younger generation regarding them as mostly a way to fight boredom or simply an instrument to waste time. Meanwhile there are numerous examples of political actors and movements worldwide (e.g. Milner; 2013), who, on the contrary, have used the power of internet memes to shape political discourse or even try to influence culture itself. And they have often done so quite effectively one should add.

Of course, the use of jokes or critical remarks paired with visual cues and embedded references, drawing on a shared cultural knowledge is nothing new and has been documented for centuries. In a sense one could probably argue that memes are often basically a form of caricature. This depends of course on the exact definition. New is however certainly the virality internet memes can take, where they get copied with ease and are shared online completely independent from where they originated.

Something that's only starting to be studied however at the moment is the impact that memes can have as a means of discourse by circumventing taboos and censorship. And this not only the case in a political sense but also culturally. While the use of humor to talk about subjects that can't be discussed openly otherwise is not a new concept, the internet must be seen as a new factor in this, with its width and anonymity allowing people to voice opinions in front of a broad audience without the fear of social or governmental repercussions.

Examples of such topics which, if not generally a taboo, are at least very difficult to openly talk about, are gender roles and the concept of relationships as well as the question of intimacy. And while this is generally true for most cultures in the world, there is often a sense among those living within many Arab societies that the intricacies of Arab culture make it especially hard to talk about such topics openly (see e.g. Shousha; 2023: 8). Additionally, the expectations of most families towards their sons and daughters to follow a traditional family pattern, where they are to marry as soon as possible and have children, often create the feeling within the younger generation that they do not really have a choice in how they want to live their lives. On the other hand, it is often said that contrary to western perception many Arabs do not feel the need to fight against the strict gender roles present within Arab society but rather prefer to embrace them (Nydell; 2018: 36). In depth studies on this, however, point towards a more heterogeneous picture of attitudes towards gender among the general population, depending on factors such as governmental approach and gender of participants (Al Atom; 2015: 2019). Traditionally, however, there exists only limited space to openly discuss such topics and it is fair to say that traditionally freedom of expression can be limited in many Arab countries.

It seems however that, being connected to the wider world through the internet and often even being educated abroad, the younger generation of many Arab countries is starting to look beyond the traditional patriarchal framework and nowhere is this more apparent, than on the internet. Memes questioning or ridiculing these stereotypes are widely circulated and appear to be especially common in Arab societies, when compared to the memes that circulate among a younger audience (below 30) in the ‘west’. This could help us better understand how relationship stereotypes and gender roles are really perceived in a younger generation, as “humor can serve as a unique key for the understanding of social and cultural processes” (Shifman; 2007: 187).

This thesis looks at a collection of Arabic memes dealing with the aforementioned topics of relationships, gender roles and intimacy. The memes analyzed can at times differ widely, not only in style and amount of text, but even in the type of language used and the way they deliver their punchlines.

These internet memes were acquired through personal contacts of the author with Arab native speakers and are meant to provide a window into the topic. Of course, this selection can hardly be seen as representative. On this account this thesis will work mostly descriptive, in the hope that further research may draw from the descriptions and samples. Metaphorically

speaking, this thesis is meant to provide a core sample of Arabic internet memes on the topic of relationships, gender roles and intimacy, and as such it will hopefully serve as a foundation for future researchers on which to base further research into the topic.

## **2. Context**

Although the term ‘meme’ is not new per se, it is only since the advent of the internet that most people have been made familiar with this concept. So, while the word ‘meme’ has become an established part of the vocabulary of multiple languages, what this term exactly means appears to be far less understood. It is not uncommon to hear someone ask: “But what exactly is a meme now?”. Not seldom after the topic of memes has already been discussed for several minutes. The same seems often to be true about the Arabic language and Arab culture, where only after the conversation has already been going on for a while the interlocutor will admit that he or she is not quite sure about the nature of Arabic and the peculiarity of the Arab world beyond simple stereotypes.

A firm grasp on the environment of the analyzed memes is however quite helpful to the understanding of the deeper messages and implications explored within this thesis. This chapter is hence meant to provide context for those not completely familiar with memes or the Arabic language and culture. Those who are already well versed in these topics might skip the following context chapter and even those not exceedingly familiar might find that they understand most of the following analysis without the context provided in the following chapter. More than anything, this chapter is meant to answer common questions surrounding the topics at hand for those whose interest extends beyond the narrow analysis of the memes in this corpus.

That being said, the following pages will provide a discussion of the origin of ‘memes’ as well as the specific concept of internet memes. Following this will be a description of the most salient features of the Arabic language relevant to this study, as well as a few words on the cultural specifics that overarch all these memes.

## **2.1. Memes**

As with many other terms that most people know how to use instinctively but don't think much about, the word 'meme' seems to be harder to pin down, the more one tries to actually define it. While a common definition might be to classify memes as "funny pictures on the internet" (Schett; 2021: 8) there are arguments to be made for both a broader and a narrower definition. The following chapter will explore the origins of the word 'meme' and the meanings it has come to acquire, as well as the academic view on the topic.

### **2.1.1. Origin of 'memes'**

The term 'meme' was first introduced by British ethologist Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book 'The Selfish Gene' which was centered around explaining current theories of evolution. In this book he proposes that, when studying the evolution of humans as a species, not only biological evolution, but also cultural evolution must be considered (Dawkins; 2016: 245). The argument goes that culture is transmitted by cultural replicators, similar to genes (Dawkins; 2016: 248). He calls these replicators 'memes', as abbreviations of the word 'mimeme' deriving from the Greek root for 'imitation' (Dawkins; 2016: 249). The similarity to the word 'gene' is very much intended here, as he sees the spread of cultural elements widely analogous to the spread of biological genes (Dawkins; 2016: 255). Dawkins himself was not the first one to suggest that the spread and change of culture happens in ways akin to biological evolution, but his theory was the most successful (Johnson; 2007: 39).

Dawkins takes the analogy of memes, as replicators of the cultural plain, to genes, as replicators of the biological plain, even further by going so far as to argue that a meme should be regarded as something that is alive "not just metaphorically, but technically" (Dawkins; 2016: 249). This is not meant to personify memes, but rather should be seen as an argument about perspective (Johnson; 2007: 39). The focus shifts away from the individuals participating in culture to the units of culture, that make up culture as a whole. Just like some genes in the gene pool are more successful than others, so are some memes more successful in the meme pool and spread further (Dawkins; 2016: 252). Additionally, just like in genes, this success depends much less on the longevity of one copy, than rather on its ability to spread, or what Dawkins calls "fecundity" (Dawkins; 2016: 252).

*"The copy of the tune 'Auld Lang Syne' that exists in my brain will last only for the rest of my life. The copy of the same tune that is printed in my volume of The Scottish*

*Student's Song Book is unlikely to last much longer. But I expect there will be copies of the same tune on paper and in peoples' brains for centuries to come.*" – (Dawkins; 2016: 252)

While memes themselves are not conscious actors, Dawkins argues that again, just like with genes, there is a merit in viewing them akin to actors competing against each other (Dawkins; 2016:254-255). In the case of memes however this competition is for space, such as digital storage space, and time of the people who are meant to internalize those memes (Dawkins; 2016: 255). And interestingly, while Dawkins brought forth his arguments at a time, when there didn't yet exist smartphones, with hundreds of Gigabytes of storage space and mobile internet was still a thing of the future, he already noted that probably time is the more important resource for memes. This is remarkable, since we indeed do see a fierce competition for the attention and time of internet users nowadays, as mentioned in the Introduction of this thesis.

However, while introducing the concept to the world, it is interesting to note that even Dawkins left the exact definition of 'the meme' intentionally vague. Closely to his analogy he argued that since genes don't work individually, but rather by blending and mixing with other genes, so do memes work in bundles (Dawkins; 2016: 253). Or in his words:

*"I have said a tune is one meme, but what about a symphony: how many memes is that? Is each movement one meme, each recognizable phrase of melody, each bar, each chord, or what? I appeal to the same verbal trick as I used in Chapter 3. There I divided the 'gene complex' into large and small genetic units, and units within units. The 'gene' was defined, not in a rigid all-or-none way, but as a unit of convenience, a length of chromosome with just sufficient copying-fidelity to serve as a viable unit of natural selection."* – (Dawkins; 2016: 253)

### **2.1.2. The adoption of the meme**

The theory of memes introduced by Dawkins has brought forth its own discipline as early as the 1980s known by the name of Memetics (Shifman; 2023: 364). Memetics is being defined as "the theoretical and empirical science that studies the replication, spread and evolution of memes" (Heylighen & Chielens; 2009: 1).

Interestingly, there seems to be a widespread agreement over how memes work, even if there are some criticisms concerning the comparison to genetic transmission and whether this comparison provides any actual benefit (Shifman; 2013: 364). Critics point, for example, to the fact that, while a gene is contained within the universal molecule of a cell, memes, if one assumes their parallel existence, have no one single form of transmission (Benitez-Bribiesca; 2001: 3). This has further consequences for the analogy, since DNA provides a fixed code script that gets copied quite accurately most of the time, albeit with the occasional mutation. The same cannot be said for memes, where it isn't even clear if a code script similar to DNA exists (Benitez-Bribiesca; 2001: 3). By giving memes a life of their own, many critics also argue that it diminishes the role of human agency in cultural practices (Shifman; 2013: 364) and creates a blind spot, so to speak. But eventually questions like this can be overcome by adapting the theoretical framework and tend to pose only minor obstacles.

More difficult on the other hand is the question of what exactly constitutes a meme and how one is to identify one. This begins with the aforementioned fact that even Dawkins himself left the definition of memes purposefully vague. This might make sense, when trying to compare cultural transmission to biological transmission, but it provides no definitive answer to what is, and what isn't a meme. This is a common and important criticism of the concept within the scientific community, as the "disagreement about what precisely a meme is, [...] leads to difficulties in quantifying and measuring it." (Shifman; 2013: 364). Unfortunately, this has remained an issue even after the popularization of the concept of memes with the advent of the internet.

### **2.1.3. The Internet**

While already an established discipline before the turn of the millennium it was only with the internet becoming easily available to big parts of the world's population that the concept of memes became truly popularized. Undoubtedly, "the meme concept has enthusiastically been picked up by Internet users" (Shifman; 2013: 364) and is now a fixed word in the vocabulary of many languages. Coming from the academic perspective it should however be pointed out that most people using the term 'meme' in the context of the internet are most likely unfamiliar with Dawkins or his theories.

Internet memes are, as the name implies, bound to the internet and get distributed via the internet. Before the emergence of messenger services, like WhatsApp or Facebook, memes

could only be seen on websites dedicated to them (Al Zidjaly; 2017: 575). While these sites still exist today it has become quite common to share memes with friends and family via messenger services. Some people are even earning money through advertisement by sharing memes with faithful online followers.

The lack of agreement in clearly defining a meme, as mentioned before, is no different when looking at the public debate. Depending on who is asked, the concept can be defined very narrowly or very broadly. A 2019 article on the topic of viral internet quotes by the media company wisecrack put it bluntly:

*“We might, of course, be inclined to simply use the word “meme”– but the term “meme” gets applied so generally nowadays, it lacks almost any definition whatsoever. (Whyman; 2019)*

And as just pointed out, it is completely within the realm of the possible to refer to trends, quotes or even ideas that have gone viral on the internet as ‘memes’. Even people, mostly politicians or celebrities, might be referred to as ‘memes’, when their public depiction takes up a life on their own and overtakes the actual person in terms of importance. While seldom meant as a compliment it goes beyond being a synonym for someone becoming ‘a joke’, as some might think. It means that the reputation a person has built, has become more important than their actual personality or actions. And while this stretches the definition of a meme very far, we have already seen that this would be well within the scope of what Dawkins would consider to be a meme.

However, most of the time when talking about internet memes, the subject at hand is limited to photography-based memes that can be shared through websites or messenger services. Basically, as previously mentioned and as Schett (2021) pointed out, a very common way to think of memes in the popular mind is as “funny pictures on the internet” (2019: 8). And from an anecdotal perspective most people will agree that it certainly does get applied this way in popular usage. But this definition remains quite broad and leaves many more questions unanswered.

First of all, it is quite common in most languages to differentiate between different sorts of funny pictures, from cartoons to caricatures and so on. It seems strange that the aspect of a funny picture being shared on the internet would be so important, as to relinquish all further differentiation. After all, the concept of funny pictures themselves is not new at all. Caricatures and mocking pictures produced by ordinary people are well documented from the

times of ancient Egypt, Greece or Rome (Parton; 1877). Even trends or fads are well known to have already existed in ancient times. For example, depictions of pygmies or animals acting like humans, are found plentiful within ancient Roman frescoes (Parton; 1877: 2) for no apparent reason other than people seemingly having thought of them as being amusing. Thus, the question remains if all funny pictures on the internet are to be considered as memes, or if this concept only refers to a certain kind of digital picture.

In addition to this, there are many examples of memes online, some of them included in the corpus of this thesis that do not seem to even try to be funny, but rather seem to be meant for provoking other reactions from the audience. And while there is some discussion about whether these can be considered memes, there are certainly people referring to them as memes. And even if one would take “being funny” as a condition for something being called a meme this would not really bring a solution, as humor remains subjective and highly individual.

An undoubtedly important part in the concept of memes however, both in a broad and a narrow understanding, is the distribution of memes, often spoken of as their virality. Interestingly even in 1976, Dawkins already compared the spread of memes from brain to brain, to the spread of a virus and stressed that this too was no mere metaphor (Dawkins; 2016:250). He rather meant to describe the very real effect of cultural units to multiply seemingly by themselves across the human population which we today often acknowledge by saying something ‘goes viral’. And while it is not clear how much influence Dawkins works had in coining this expression, it seems clear that he had already something like this in mind.

Asked about how he thinks about the reappropriation of the term ‘meme’ by the internet in the magazine WIRED in 2013 Dawkins explicitly mentioned this point again.

*“The meaning is not that far away from the original. It's anything that goes viral. In the original introduction to the word meme in the last chapter of *The Selfish Gene*, I did actually use the metaphor of a virus. So when anybody talks about something going viral on the internet, that is exactly what a meme is and it looks as though the word has been appropriated for a subset of that.”* (Dawkins in Solon; 2013).

But this still does not allow for a clear definition. While many definitions have been proposed, so far none has managed to gain dominance. For now, when researching memes, it remains necessary for a researcher to discuss his or her understanding of what does and does

not constitute a meme beforehand. For comparability, it does make sense however to remain close to previous researchers' concepts.

#### **2.1.4. Possible Definition of Internet Memes**

But what is a meme then? Limor Shifman, a professor from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, who has written extensively on memes, suggests, looking at Internet memes not as single ideas or formulas that propagated well but as “units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated and transformed by internet users, creating a shared cultural experience” (Shifman; 2013: 367). Rather than narrowing them down to one attribute, she defines them as groups of content items that were created with awareness of each other (1), share common characteristics of content/form (2), while also being circulated, imitated, and transformed via the internet by multiple users (3) (Shifman; 2013: 367).

What makes this definition especially appealing is that it considers more than one aspect and thus allows for greater complexity in analysis. The first point of memes being created with awareness of each other is a very important point. As mentioned before, even if there is not much agreement on the nature of memes, almost everyone would agree that a meme needs to be in reference to another meme or at least a cultural note, such as a joke or quote. Here internet memes often draw their references from pop culture, such as movies or current events.

The second point is also very useful. Not all memes look alike, but they share characteristics that make them recognizable as memes. These common characteristics set them apart from other pictures on the internet. Al Zidjaly summarizes the properties of memes as follows:

*“Memes are often, but not always, multimodal (i.e. they draw upon an interplay of image and text), polyvocal (i.e. they include divergent points of views), intertextual (i.e. they draw upon prior discourses and anticipate future ones), and humorous (i.e. they evoke laughter).”* (Al Zidjaly; 2017: 575)

Since not all these characteristics apply to all memes they should not be viewed as exclusive. A fairly good rule appears to be that a meme should have at least some of these characteristics to be considered a meme.

The last and third point seems in contrast almost self-explanatory. As the name internet memes already implies, it is important that these memes have been circulating among multiple people on the internet. This means internet memes must be digital in nature.

Furthermore, for analysis it makes sense to regard memes as artifacts. Wiggins and Bowers (2015) define memes as artifacts, as they are (1) both present in the mind of people and on the internet, (2) they inform us both about the culture of their creators, as well as about their social circumstances and (3) they are consciously produced as products by a participatory digital culture (Wiggins & Bowers; 2015: 6). Such an understanding is also central to the attempt of using memes in order to study society and culture, as is the case in this thesis.

This has proven very useful in previous studies on the social dimension of memes, such as in Milner's (2013) studies about memes in the context of public debates which draws on Shifman's (2013) meme definition and defines them as "multimodal symbolic artifacts created, circulated, and transformed by countless mediated cultural participants." (Milner; 2013: 2359)

So, following this, the sensible definition of internet memes might include memes being digital artifacts that are circulated on the internet, are created in reference to each other, and have common characteristics, such as being humorous, multimodal, polyvocal, and intertextual.

### **2.1.5. Terminology in memes**

Additionally, to the nature of internet memes, it can be helpful to understand the terminology that has manifested around them as well. The most well-known category of internet memes are photo-based memes (Shifman; 2014), also known as image memes (Milner; 2013). The most recognizable of these are certainly image macros (Drakett et al.; 2018) which also make up the biggest part of the corpus analyzed in this thesis.

*"An image macro is quite simply, an image featuring a textual overlay. This particular format is easily created, with a host of applications and websites that can automate the process of adding text to an image."* (Drakett et al.; 2018: 9)

There is no standard format for image macros, but two layouts are however particularly noteworthy, as they constitute somewhat of an archetype of image macros. The Meme

Generator app programmed by ZomboDroid for Android cell phones calls these meme formats the ‘classic layout’ and the ‘modern layout’ respectively. This terminology will be also used in this thesis going forward.

The following memes used to exemplify the terminology of internet memes were sourced from public internet meme sites. The arrows and explanations added into some of them were edited in by the author himself.

The classical layout is the older one, as the name implies, and is characterized by having its text written on the picture itself on the upper and lower margin of the picture. The oldest examples of this are also some of the first known internet memes like, ‘overly attached girlfriend’, ‘good guy Greg’, etc.

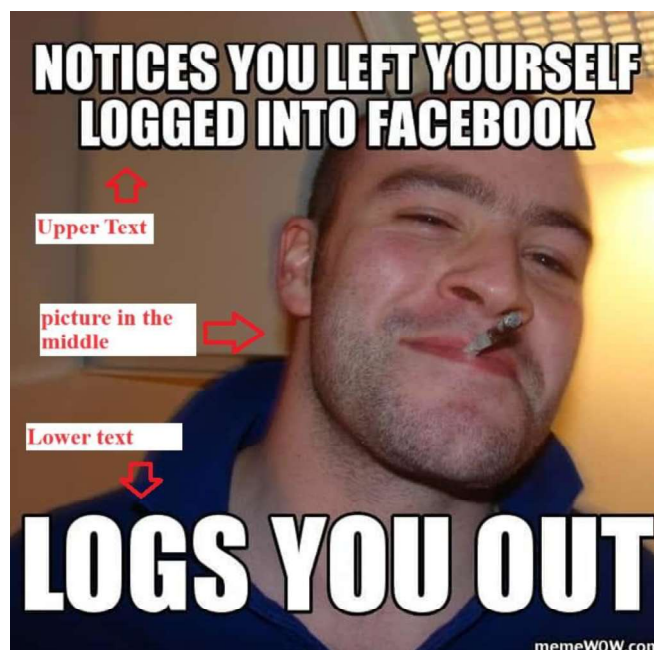


Fig. 1: The Classical layout

The modern layout on the other side is characterized by the picture, being posted on a white background with sufficient blank space above it to accommodate the text. The text is here above the picture and, at least partially, separate from it.

When someone calls you by ur nickname  
when you don't even know them like that

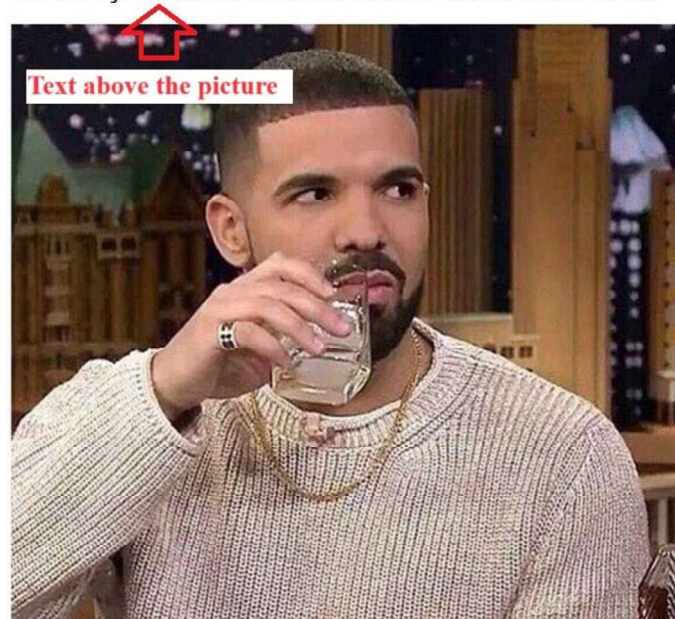


Fig. 2: Modern layout

It is thinkable that this shift towards the modern layout could have its origin in mobile social media apps, such as Instagram or Facebook. Here it can often happen that when a picture is posted online the caption (the message accompanying the meme) is portrayed on top of it. So, in its simplest form an author does not even have to edit the picture but can simply post it and write the text in the caption above.



Fig 3. Modern layout on social media without edition of the picture

There exists no clear separation between both layouts, and both can be mixed to varying degrees. A meme can, for example, include text above the picture and have the picture at the same time be an image macro in the classical layout.



Fig. 4: Mixed classical and modern layout

In both layouts it is possible that there is further writing in the picture. Often to label objects in the picture that are important to form its message.

**Teacher:**  
**tells me to choose the next one to read**  
**Me:**



Fig. 5: Labeling

It is also possible that image macros are mixed with other types of memes or pictures, such as a ‘photoshop’ where part of another picture or meme is transplanted into the picture (Shifman; 2013: 373). The name here is derived from the famous photo editing software Adobe Photoshop, but other software is commonly used in editing such pictures as well.



Fig 6. A ‘photoshop’

These have only been a few examples of layouts and types of memes, but, of course, as memes are unregulated there are plentiful ways to remix and reinvent memes. In fact, the only real boundaries to the creativity of the meme author are the technical possibilities of photo editing and the electronic devices used. As long as the intelligibility for the target audience remains intact, everything goes. An extensive study however on the workings of various types of memes would go far beyond the scope of this thesis.

In the future, we might see encyclopedias for memes, such as we know from other topics within academia. As of the year 2023, the free to access website *Know your meme*, appears to be the closest to such an encyclopedia ([www.knowyourmeme.com](http://www.knowyourmeme.com)). And while titles such as ‘resident Internet scientists’ and pictures of the operators of this website in lab coats suggest somewhat of a humoristic attitude, they do provide thorough analysis of memes and their origins which has even had them being cited in academic articles such as Shifman (2013).

While other formats of memes are plentiful to be found online, this thesis will for the most part focus on image macros or their modern evolution, as those are the most clear-cut form of what many people recognize as a meme.

### **2.1.6. Text-Picture relationship**

Memes, in the context of this thesis, are generally comprised of text and picture(s) as their main elements. The sum of the way these main elements interact is what creates the final meme by evoking impressions in the minds of the users and resonating with their previous knowledge and experiences. This is why Yus (2019) regards the analysis of this picture-text interaction an important aspect of the study of memes. He proposes a taxonomy based on older taxonomies of comics by McCloud (1994) which look at the way picture and text interact.

He distinguishes:

- (1) “Word specific, where pictures illustrate but do not significantly add to a largely complete text” (Yus; 2019: 109);
- (2) “Picture specific, where the picture dominates, and words do not add significantly to the meaning of the picture” (Yus; 2019: 110);
- (3) “Duo specific, where words and pictures send essentially the same message” (Yus; 2019: 111);
- (4) “Additive, where words amplify or elaborate on a picture or vice versa” (Yus; 2019: 112);
- (5) “Parallel, where words and picture follow different courses without intersecting” (Yus; 2019: 114);
- (6) “Montage, where words are treated as integral parts of the picture” (Yus; 2019: 114);
- (7) And “Interdependent, where picture or words together convey an idea that neither could convey alone” (Yus; 2019: 115).

He finds in his research that (3), (4) and (7) are by far the most common combination for memes (Yus; 2019: 120) which unquestionably makes sense, as pictures not only serve to emphasize the text in memes, such as in (3), but also add strongly to the humor behind it by helping to “trigger an incongruity during the construction of an appropriate scenario for the interpretation of the meme” (Yus; 2019: 113). As we will see in further chapters, this thesis is

heavily inspired by the theoretical work done by Yus (2019), as its taxonomy is well suited for typical image macros. And though there are some issues, when dealing with more atypical types of memes, this must be somewhat expected when trying to categorize something as diverse as internet memes.

## **2.2. Arabic**

Just like the concept of memes, the Arabic language is something that is not quite as easy to define as one would think at first glance. About 20 countries in the world have Arabic as their official language and with over 360 million native speakers, it is one of the most spoken languages in the world (Nydell; 2012: 87). These native speakers are generally referred to as Arabs, but this political and cultural term neither means that they are all of the same ethnic origin, nor does it mean they all speak one homogenous language.

In his article Retsö (2013) uses the term ‘Arabic’ to describe “the whole complex of spoken languages from Oman to Morocco from southern Turkey to Chad, including almost the entire Arabian peninsula” (Retsö; 2013: 424). While many people will certainly agree with the geographic markers given in this quote the word ‘language’ is more controversial, as most people would argue that these varieties are all dialects of Arabic, rather than separate languages. The question of what is and is not a language however is often more political and ideological, than linguistic in nature and Arabic is a prime example of this.

While *fusha* or Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is the official language in most Arab countries, the actual spoken language within the different regions can differ to the point of being almost unintelligible to other supposed native speakers. The following chapters are meant to provide an overview of some important aspects of the Arabic language, relevant to this thesis. This includes the concept of diglossia, the different dialects, some important grammatical aspects, as well as cultural aspects and internet usage within the Arab world.

### **2.2.1. Diglossia**

To understand the Arabic language, it is important to be familiar with the concept of diglossia. This concept, introduced by Ferguson (1959), not only exists in Arabic but also in other languages such as Swiss German and Haitian Creole (Ferguson; 1959: 326). Simply put, it means that two varieties of the Arabic language are in use side by side throughout the Arab

world (Woidich & Heinen-Nasr; 2004: Preface). There is a ‘high’ variety which is used in formal situations and most written texts and a ‘low’ variety which is used in everyday situations and also referred to as regional dialects or Colloquial Arabic (CA) (Woidich & Heinen-Nasr; 2004: Preface). The ‘high’ variety in Arabic, also known *fusha*, has only seen little change, both over time and throughout the Arab world (Woidich & Heinen-Nasr; 2004: xi) allowing for intelligibility from Morocco all the way to the Persian Gulf and through the centuries. New words have of course been added over the centuries and small grammatical changes have been introduced over time and as such linguistics differentiates between Classical Arabic and the current Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). It should be noted that native speakers tend to not really make this distinction but usually tend to refer to both varieties as ‘*fusha*’.

MSA is used in almost all kinds of writing and formal discussions or news broadcasts. CA or the dialects on the other hand are almost exclusively used in everyday spoken communication and sometimes cartoons or informal correspondence, such as on messenger services (Nydell; 2012: 88). More than just being the language of literature and education, *fusha*, as Classical Arabic, is in fact sacred to most Arabs, as it is the language of the Quran, the holy book of Islam (Nydell; 2012: 88). With 95% of Arabs being of Muslim faith (Nydell; 2012: xi) this aspect should not be underestimated. MSA is very complex and generally considered to be aesthetically pleasing (Nydell; 2012: 88).

It is however nobody’s mother tongue and has to be learned in school, even by Arabic native speakers (Woidich & Heinen-Nasr; 2004: xi). The dialects, on the other hand, usually named geographically after the places they are spoken at, are the native tongue of their regions and are generally much easier to learn, than MSA, as they are grammatically less complex (Woidich & Heinen-Nasr; 2004: xii). In comparison to MSA however, the dialects have little to no prestige and will often not even be regarded as ‘real Arabic’ by native speakers (Nydell; 2012: 90)<sup>1</sup>. There often exists almost a disdain for dialects among the speakers who use them for everyday communication. Unlike in other countries, little pride appears to be put in one’s own native dialect and those wanting to sound sophisticated and professional will use as much MSA words as possible within their speech.

---

<sup>1</sup> When learning Arabic most non-native speakers tend to learn MSA. When then talking to a native speaker it can happen that even though the learner is barely able to hold a conversation the native speaker might argue the learners Arabic to be better than his. As paradoxical as this might seem at first glance it does not actually refer to the learner being more proficient in Arabic but really means that the learners Arabic is closer to MSA than the Arabic of the native speaker.

To non-native speakers diglossia can be frustrating, as in most cases MSA is the variety being taught, but when using it to communicate its usability can be limited, as most Arabs will not respond in MSA. But also for native speakers, diglossia can bring challenges, as studies such as Myhill (2014) show a link between the high rate of illiteracy in Arab countries and diglossia. This is because people learning how to read and write must additionally learn a new variety of their own language not native to them. This difficulty is further exacerbated by some dialects being roughly as different from MSA as e.g. Spanish from Latin. Because of this, not every Arabic native speaker is able to use the written language in any but the most rudimentary situations, even though they might technically be able to read and write (Nydell; 2012: 91). This is not just a phenomenon among the uneducated. Even those having received a higher education might find it difficult to consistently write or speak in a pure MSA.

This becomes relevant, when trying to assess, why a person chooses to use dialect or MSA in a certain situation, such as in this thesis within memes. The choice to use a dialect or even mix dialect and MSA in a text or statement might be on purpose, as to a native speaker it would feel very strange to have a dialog entirely in MSA. MSA is simply not commonly used in spoken language and as such appears very old-fashioned and outright theatrical to many Arabs, when spoken out loud. In many cases, however, it is very well possible that an individual writing their statement in dialect simply does so, because they were not able to properly and consistently write it in MSA. On the other hand, there is a case to be made that the choice of language variety within Arabic should not be disregarded, as rhetoric has a high status in Arab societies (Nydell; 2012:91). Possibly even more so, than in most western societies or as Nydell (2012) puts it: “In the Arab world, how you say something is as important as what you have to say.” (Nydell; 2012: 92).

### **2.2.2. Dialects**

With a good part of the memes being composed at least partially in dialects it makes sense to also take a deeper look at the colloquial form. Especially at those dialects present in the corpus.

As in most languages in the world there are regional differences in language known as dialects. The geography of the Middle East, with often widely dispersed and isolated, almost insular, geography of fertile and inhabitable areas surrounded by deserts (Nydell; 2018: 2), means that at times these differences can be quite pronounced even on a very small scale.

Depending on geography and history of a region, the spoken dialect can differ from one village to another. Dialects also seldom correspond completely with national borders, as the nation state and therefore its borders are usually much younger than the linguistic differences.

This might seem trivial at first glance, as it is not unique to Arabic, but it is important to keep in mind. For in order to allow for the study of these dialectal differences, linguists tend to lump the dialects together into bigger groups based on similarities and national borders. They tend to divide the dialects of the Arab world into large groups that can further be divided into subgroups that often roughly correspond to modern day nation states. According to Jastrow (2008) these are usually divided into the following groups:

1. Arabian Peninsula
2. Mesopotamian (Besides Iraq these also include the Iranian province of Khuzestan as well as northeastern Syria).
3. Levantine (This includes Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, as well as the Palestinian territories.)
4. Egyptian (Besides Egypt this includes the dialects of northern Sudan.)
5. North African (This includes the so called Maghrebi-countries: Tunisia, Libya, Algeria, Morocco and Mauretania.) (Jastrow; 2008: 6).

To these main groups one could add further, geographically disparate peripheral dialects which exist in smaller or larger 'language islands' outside of the contingent modern Arabic language area in Asia, Africa and Europe (Jastrow; 2008: 6).

While researchers do not seem to agree on the exact borders of these subgroups, they tend to be quite in agreement, about those bigger groups. For example, the following map by Procházka (2021) shows the same dialectal groups as mentioned by Jastrow (2008) albeit with a slightly differing terminology. The dialects of the Arabian Peninsula are here simply called 'Arabian', Egyptian is called 'Egypt-Sudan' and the North African dialects are referred to by the aforementioned word 'Maghreb'.



Fig. 8 A map of the Arabic dialects. From Arabic Dialectology, by Procházka S., 2021, *The Cambridge handbook of Arabic linguistics*, 214-243. Permission obtained.

When native speakers are asked to classify the dialects of the Arab world the groups tend to be roughly similar, although there might be some discussion about some countries such as Sudan. At least we can see this in the study conducted by Hachimi (2015), where native speakers, excluded the countries of Yemen and Sudan from regular dialectal groups, due to their perceived harshness or differences (Hachimi; 2015).

In general however it is safe to say, that the division shown in the map is widely agreed upon and will also be used in this study. These categories have proven as useful concepts to study differences in dialects, but one has to keep in mind that they fall short in depicting the actual diversity. Simply put, they are models rather than definitive descriptions of reality. This becomes apparent in the corpus of this thesis, where for some memes the exact correct assignment of dialect is not completely clear and might be a topic for debate. While this is in no way meant to discourage criticism of the classifications assigned in this thesis, it should be kept in mind that these classifications are but approximations to allow for better comparability.

Studies, such as Hachimi (2015) suggest that native speakers are to a certain degree aware of such supranational dialectal groups but tend to be strongly influenced in this by the existence of national border. So, while native speakers are aware that the dialects of some countries are quite similar, they seem too often overlook the differences within those countries (Hachimi; 2015: 47).

Not surprising for such a big and geographically diverse area, dialects can be very different from one another. There are many dialects that are more or less mutually intelligible with a bit of effort on the side of the speakers. But depending on the situation it is possible that e.g. a speaker of Moroccan Arabic and a speaker of Syrian Arabic might prefer to communicate in another language than Arabic for convenience.

Studies and experience have shown that a hierarchy seems to exist between the different Arabic dialects. With some enjoying a higher prestige than others. This means that in a conversation between certain dialects, almost always one will adapt to the other and never the other way around (Chakrani; 2015: 10). In a conversation between a Moroccan and an Egyptian for example, the Moroccan- speaker will almost always adapt his speech to be closer to Egyptian Arabic, while the Egyptian-speaker will not feel any need to adapt to his Moroccan interlocutor (Chakrani; 2015: 8). This adds extra complexity to the study of dialects, meaning that in many cases through convergence, dialects might adapt in conversations to one another depending on the origin of the speakers. This can lead to dialects being mixed or at least influenced by others.

So e.g. for the topic of memes it is entirely thinkable that even someone whose native dialect is not Egyptian could use Egyptian Arabic in a meme, depending on the setting. In contrast, this means that for a meme in a less prestigious dialect we can assume with good reason that this dialect is actually the native dialect of the author. This can give us clues to the origin of the author. If we find a meme on the other hand that is mostly written in MSA we can assume an educated person as the author. It is also not uncommon to find a mix of dialect and MSA within one meme, with code switches occurring (Al Zidjaly; 2017: 579). This again could mean that an author was trying to write in MSA but failed to do so consistently because of either lack of motivation or proficiency. All this is speculative of course and could not possibly be confirmed beyond any doubt, but it is in many cases the closest clues we can obtain concerning the author of a meme.

### **2.2.3. Egyptian Arabic**

Many of the memes in the corpus of this study are composed in Egyptian Arabic (EA) which holds a special position among the Arabic dialects and deserves further explanation. More correctly EA can be called Cairene Arabic, as it is actually the native dialect of the middle and upper classes of Cairo and the surrounding region (Woidich; 2006: 1). Within the Egyptian

context it is part of the dialects of the central Nile valley and within the greater Arabic context it is part of the so called eastern Arabic prehilalic dialects, making it closely related to the Syrian-Palestinian urban dialects (Woidich; 2006: 3).

Though one might be tempted to assume, the name EA is not meant to suggest that it is the native dialect of all Egyptians, as multiple different Egyptian dialects exist throughout the country. It is in fact referred to as Egyptian Arabic, because it is the most important dialect within Egypt and takes up the position of a standard variety within Egypt (Woidich; 2006: 1). Besides the mandatory military service bringing almost all Egyptian men in contact with this dialect at some point in their lives, mass media plays an important role in this (Woidich; 2006: 4). Since the use of MSA in TV or radio is mostly confined to the news, commentary and limited topics, such as religion or politics (Woidich; 2006: 1), Egyptian Arabic has a very important role in audio-visual media.

This extends far beyond the borders of Egypt, since Egypt is not only home to a third of all Arab speakers (Woidich; 2006: 1), but Cairo also has long served as an important place for movie and music production for the Arab audience (Woidich; 2006: 1). Even many western films and shows that are translated into Arabic, are not synchronized in MSA, but rather into EA, as the audience feels it is more appropriate, especially for content made for children. Many Arab native speakers, in and outside of Egypt, feel that EA is much more jovial and funnier than MSA, just like the Egyptians are considered to be a jovial and funny people. But the special position of EA does not end here, as it is also the only spoken dialect that has a literary tradition, with books and documents long found to be written in EA. While most other dialects were, until the advent of the internet, mostly limited to oral use, EA as a written variety can be documented as early as the Middle Ages (Woidich; 2006: 2).

Today, a big corpus of books and other texts can be found in EA, however one thing EA lacks is an official standardization (Woidich; 2006: 2). Among writers of EA there is no consistency in how words are spelled, with some trying to depict the pronunciation as well as possible and others simply trying to stay as close as possible to the spelling of MSA (Woidich; 2006: 2). In the latter case there are sometimes only special Egyptian words that show a text to be Egyptian and clarifying how words are supposed to be pronounced (Woidich; 2006: 2). This lack of standardization by native speakers is based in the aforementioned cultural disregard for the dialectal variety which is present throughout the whole Arab world. Most regular Egyptians and scholars alike do not feel the same admiration for EA as they do for MSA, regarding it as somewhat corrupted and not worth to be studied

(Woidich; 2006: 3). Additionally, the study of particular dialectal varieties goes against the most prevalent ideology of the unity of Arabic and by extension the unity of the Arab people (Woidich; 2006: 3). So, while there are some notable exceptions of linguistic works on EA by native speakers, such as e.g. Hamdi Qafisheh or El-Said Badawi (1986), it is only now with the advance of mass media and the internet that we see a factual standardization happening (Woidich; 2006: 3)

With the exception of Egyptian Arabic and MSA, the only other dialects in the corpus of memes studied in this thesis are Gulf Arabic (Khaleeji) and Levantine Arabic. Levantine Arabic has somewhat built a reputation as being the dialect of love, due to many telenovelas and love songs coming from Syria and Lebanon. In a 2015 study on attitudes towards different dialects among Moroccan native speakers Hachimi (2015) even found that among her study group Syrian had surpassed Egyptian in terms of prestige, especially among younger participants (Hachimi; 2015: 55). Gulf Arabic on the other hand is seeing a rise in importance due to the thriving economies of the monarchies along the Persian Gulf and a rising self-esteem in these countries. However, they do not own such a long and rich literary tradition as the Egyptian dialect.

In addition to diglossia and regional variation, an interesting feature of Arabic in some countries is also the differences between the speech of Bedouins which are a (formerly) nomadic part of society, and sedentary people (Nydell; 2012: 215). This distinction however does not appear to be relevant to the topic of this thesis and is thus not further discussed here.

#### **2.2.4. Relevant grammatical aspects**

The Arabic language complex is rich and fascinating with highly interesting linguistic structures. To give a full overview of the language would go far beyond the scope of this thesis. There are, however, a few grammatical aspects very prevalent in the corpus of this thesis and as such deserve further elaboration. They mostly apply to MSA but are also generally true for most dialects.

Firstly, as many will know, Arabic is read from right to left. This might seem trivial, but it should be kept in mind when studying memes in Arabic. This is relevant beyond the comprehension of textual elements. The western mind, through the use of the Latin script is used to not only read texts from left to right, but also do so with pictures. Objects on the left

side of a picture will be studied before objects on the right and memes, containing different corresponding elements, make use of this. For pictures in the context of the Arabic language one should therefore assume the opposite. This should be kept in mind, even if, as Yus (2019: 108) points out, there might be other important attributes, such as salience of objects that shape the path a user takes when reading a meme.

Furthermore, it should be pointed out that Arabic distinguishes between two genders - male or female in most types of words, from verbs and pronouns to nouns and adjectives (Badawi et al.; 2016: 30). Through this, gender can be visible in an Arabic sentence, even if it lacks names or pronouns. The Grammatical gender always corresponds to the natural sex or gender of a person. This means that gender is more visible in Arabic than it is in English. In plural, however, Arabic, like many European languages, mostly the male form for all- male or mixed groups. The female form on the other hand is only used if the whole group, up to the last individual, is female. Since this thesis is written in English this is not a trivial point, as it means that gender is an aspect that might get lost in the translation of memes from Arabic into English. To avoid confusion, in cases where it is not clear from context, male forms can be marked by (m) and more importantly, explicitly female forms by an (f) in the English translation of the memes within this thesis.

Another aspect, familiar to all those being proficient to some extent within the Arab scripture, but nonetheless important to point out, is that of vocalization. Excluding some very few situations, the Arabic language is written without marking the (short) vowels within a word. This is generally not a problem to someone being proficient in the Arabic language as the correct (short) vowel mostly becomes apparent through context. It also helps that the (standard) Arabic language only knows three vowels, being *a-*, *i-*, and *u-*. If it is felt necessary these vowels can be printed as special diacritical markers, but this only happens in a few and rare situations (Badawi et al.; 2016: 23), with only few examples being found within the corpus of this thesis. While mostly being irrelevant it does make a difference in the aforementioned question of gender, as sometimes the difference between a female and a male form is nothing more than a short vowel which would not be visible to the reader without vocalisation. And while in this situation the gender most of the time becomes apparent by context, this means that some forms, being clearly gendered when read aloud could in their textual form be argued to be gender neutral if gender is only marked by a short vowel.

Another noteworthy aspect of Arabic is the existence of a vocative which is quite commonly used and by far more often in comparison to English. The vocative is, for the most part,

marked by the particle *yā* followed by the person or object one is addressing (Badawi et al.; 2016: 43). The closest thing to a literal translation of this construct would be a Shakespearian ‘oh,...’, as in ‘oh, brother John...’. In the memes of this corpus, we can find the vocative multiple times, however, since the literal translation would seem very outdated it is simply omitted in the English translation.

Furthermore, it seems helpful to point out that negation in Arabic can be fairly complex with multiple negation particles existing throughout different varieties. In MSA, for instance, the negation particle varies depending on the tense of the verb. A minimum is that in MSA “all negative particles precede the element they negate” (Badawi et al.; 2016: 521). This is generally true for most dialects as well, although in some dialects we can find a circumfix negation for verbs with a particle in front of the element it negates and an extra particle behind it. This for example, this is the case in Egyptian, where negation of verbs happens through the particle *mā-* in the front and the particle *-š* behind the verb. Generally, the particle *mā* is used for negating all verbal tenses in dialects and used to be very common in Classical Arabic too. It is thought, however that this negation fell out of favor in MSA due to the stigma of being the preferred negation within the dialects (Badawi et al.; 2016: 521).

Lastly, an attentive reader of this thesis might wonder that some Arabic letters seem to have multiple different transcriptions. However, this is easily explained, as it accounts for dialectal differences in pronunciation. An example of this is the letter *Ġīm* (ج). This letter is pronounced ‘ġ’ in MSA and many other dialects but becomes a ‘g’ in Egyptian Arabic. Similarly, the letter *Qāf* (ق) is realized as a ‘q’ in MSA, a glottal stop (ʔ) in Egyptian Arabic and a ‘g’ in many dialects of the Arabian gulf. Since the transcription of the dialects is strongly concerned with depicting the actual pronunciation, it makes sense to see the same Arabic word being transcribed differently in memes that contain a different dialect. This will be further explained in the Methodology chapter (3.3.).

### **2.2.5. Arab culture**

In addition to linguistic remarks there are also a few notes that should be made regarding the cultural context of these memes. And while, of course, these should not be understood as more than broad generalizations, they might provide clarification when dealing with certain aspects of Arabic memes in general, and Arabic memes on gender, relationships and intimacy in particular.

An important thing to keep in mind when studying public statements, such as memes, in the Arab context is the question of freedom of expression. As mentioned before, there are certain restrictions on freedom of expression in Arab societies that are in general no longer present in the west. Apart from political topics, this is often less so because of governmental regulation and more because of societal norms that everyone is expected to follow. Honor, be it that of oneself or that of one's family, plays a big role in everyday life, as well as gossip. This means that people will by themselves restrict what they express and show publicly since their public image is not only important to themselves, but also to their family. Having a bad reputation can not only mean disadvantages, such as worsened prospects of marriage, for oneself but also for other family members. For researchers trying to have a deeper look into Arab society this means that there are factors that have to be taken into account if one for example wants to find out what people really think about a certain topic.

The question of honor is also quite important to note, when researching gender and relationships. Especially in situations involving the mixing of gender or relationships, it becomes an important factor. Contact between males and females can be highly regulated in order to help avoid situations that could damage the reputation of a person and by extent that of their family (Nydell; 2012: 33). Oftentimes neither the individual, nor the family really has a choice in these matters but is instead bound to the culture if they want to participate in society (Nydell; 2012: 33). The degree of separation between men and women depends on the country and social group, but it is never as free and casual, as in western societies (Nydell; 2012: 34). However, one should add that separation between genders is oftentimes not merely obliged, but also preferred by men and women themselves (Nydell; 2012: 33).

But no matter the reason, it is a fact that in traditional patterns of Arab society there is less room to openly discuss matters of intimacy or gender roles. If such discussions take place they will be mostly among one's own gender. This is however something that is changing with the internet (Nydell; 2012: 38), as men and women are able to contact each other freely and away from the vigilant eyes of society. And while it is often argued that most men and women in the Arab world do not view traditional gender roles as repressive or even restrictive (Nydell; 2012: 45), this is where it becomes interesting to see how such topics are discussed online. After all, we would expect a higher degree of truthfulness by people within the anonymity provided by the internet, than in real life, where most of the time there is a strong societal pressure to give the answer, one is expected to give.

This is also a major point that should be kept in mind: The actual diversity of the Arab world is often hidden under norms and stereotypes. Most Arabs understand themselves as a homogeneous group from the Atlantic Ocean to the Persian Gulf (Al Zidjaly; 2012: 414) and many outsiders would think so too. There are certainly aspects that permit such a statement e.g. a shared set of basic values and beliefs that are held regardless of social class or nationality within the entire region and that are arguably more homogeneous, than those within 'the west' (Nydell; 2012: 2). The prevailing conservatism within Arab society demands a high level of conformity from its members (Nydell; 2012:2). Traditions are held in high regard, as well as traditional family values (Nydell; 2012:2). And since (social) mobility has historically been lower than in other regions (Nydell; 2012:2), the social group and family still holds much control over the individual lives of their members, at least concerning the public sphere.

This should however not deter the critical analyst from questioning this picture every once in a while, as the homogeneity of the Arab world is not just simply a state of existence, but also an image that Arabs themselves like to cultivate, both inwards and outwards. Many of the strict rules and the conformity are mostly only about the public image and often the appearance is more important than reality (Whitaker; 2011: 10/ Al Atom; 2015: 219). Often, in secrecy and under discretion, we find Arab society to be a lot more diverse than many would think.

This is especially true regarding the topic of this thesis, as relationships, gender and sexuality have a public, but also a very private component. And it's exactly in this privacy, where people in Arab societies will live out their individual expectations or desires, maybe even more so, than people in other cultures. These expectations and desires are usually only revealed to close and trustworthy friends. So, when studying Arab societies and their members it is always important to keep in mind that there might be a sizable difference between the public image and actual life in many regards. Or simply put: Not everything might be as it seems at first glance and only with this in mind we can begin to look behind the façade.

### **2.2.6. Memes in the Arab context**

As mentioned before, the study of memes continues to be a relatively small field and this is even more true outside of the English-speaking world. Yet, if we look specifically at the

Arabic context, we can find a few notable researchers specializing in the topic of memes within the context of the Arabic language.

One of those is the Omani scholar Najma Al Zidjaly, who has written several studies on memes within her home country of Oman, in which she often highlights the sociopolitical dimension of Memes e.g. as a way of openly voicing dissent in a non-democratic context.

We know from western movements that memes can be a powerful tool to facilitate protest and foster civil discourse (Milner 2013: 2387). This becomes evident in the Arab context as well, when looking at the importance social media, and by extension, memes had on the 2011 protest movement known as “the Arab spring” (Al Zidjaly; 2017: 574)

However, regarding the context of the Arab world, where in most countries freedom of expression is severely limited, additional factors come into play, when explaining the popularity of memes. Here it’s not only the anonymity of the internet or how easy it has become for almost everyone to make their own memes, but also the fact that the playful and funny character of memes helps to voice critique in a face-saving way. This is quite important in the context of Arabic culture, as in collectivist cultures, like the Arabian one, saving face is very important especially for the group an individual belongs to (Al Zidjaly; 2017: 576). This is also related to the previously mentioned importance of honor. The anonymous nature in which memes are created and distributed allows individuals to indirectly criticize authority (Al Zidjaly; 2017: 577).

Another interesting aspect of the distribution of memes in an Arab context would be the importance of messenger services, such as WhatsApp, Instagram or X (formerly known as Twitter). According to Al Zidjaly (2017) especially WhatsApp is popular among Omanis, because it allows to keep a discussion private via closed groups (Al Zidjaly; 2017: 578). The most used social media service still appears to be Facebook, although the user numbers have been dwindling quickly in favor of other social media services (Al-Qattan; 2021: 152).

While it is difficult to say whether messenger services are used more frequently for sharing memes than in other cultures, it would hardly be surprising if this were to be the case. Al Zidjaly argues for example that this is, at least in Oman, on par with the general disposition of Omani culture not to interfere in other groups internal affairs (Al Zidjaly; 2017: 578). We can find a similar argumentation from Moussa et al. (2020) who studied political boycott memes on the other side of the Arab world within the kingdom of Morocco, arguing that WhatsApp is the most used social media platform in Morocco.

Lastly, it should be remarked that the term ‘meme’ in Arabic seems to be similarly vague, as it is in English. This is mentioned in Al Zidjaly (2017: 579), where she admits that most Omanis would be referring to the objects she is describing as ‘jokes’, rather than memes.

### **3. Methodology**

Having discussed the relevant context to the topic of this thesis, the next chapter will be focusing on the practical aspects of its methodology.

The process in which this thesis was brought forth can hardly be called linear. Rather a grounded theory approach with several stages of analysis and revision was chosen. This often saw the replacement or change of strategies that proved less fruitful than expected. None the less, the following chapter aims to deliver the best possible explanation of the process leading to the genesis of this study, as well as its corpus, starting by the theoretical framework employed to facilitate the analysis of the corpus of memes lying at the heart of this thesis.

In the following, the process of data collection will be outlined. While it is impossible to provide the exact origins of these memes it is still relevant to anyone studying them to know as much as possible about the environment they hailed from.

And lastly, we will see the system behind the transcription and translation. This as we will see, is not trivial either, as we are confronted with multiple different dialects in this corpus. Therefore a mixed approach had to be found which both allows for comparability and adequately considers the linguistic differences of various varieties of Arabic.

#### **3.1. Theoretical Framework**

For the analysis of the memes themselves a critical discourse analysis was chosen that starts by first dissecting each meme into its components, before judging it as a whole and interpreting it. This process was loosely based on Yus’ (2019) process for analyzing memes which is based on what he calls “division of labour” (Yus; 2019: 106). Hereby the researcher looks at the picture and text of a meme separately, before interpreting the different aspects combined.

Seeing that memes, as a genre of social studies, is still in its infancy, the methods of studying them in many scientific works often seems to be quite experimental. There does not appear to

be one commonly agreed on method. Several researchers (Shifman; 2013/ Sultan & AlKhafaji; 2022/ Milner 2013/ Al Zidjaly; 2017) have laid out their own individual methods of analysis, however always tailored to the individual topic of their own research. Seeing the diversity of topics that can be explored and also the diversity within memes itself, it might not even be surprising to see such a diversity in methodology. One unifying aspect is, however that most studies on memes make use of critical discourse analysis (CDA) also sometimes referred to as critical linguistics.

CDA is a sociological approach to texts and language which is in itself characterized by its diversity. It does not in itself constitute a single method, as it does not offer clear pathways or instructions to the researcher (Meyer; 2001: 14). While of course a clear analytical procedure would make its application much easier, this ambiguity is in fact intentional. Some theorists of CDA, such as Teun van Dijk (2001) even go so far, as to stress that others should not simply copy their research design (Van Dijk; 2001: 95). He argues simply following somebody else is not compatible with the critical thinking CDA derives its name from (Van Dijk; 2001: 95). He puts it as follows:

*“CDA is not a direction of research among others, like TG grammar, or systemic linguistics, nor a subdiscipline of discourse analysis such as the psychology of discourse or conversation analysis. It is not a method, nor a theory that simply can be applied to social problems. CDA can be conducted in, and combined with any approach and subdiscipline in the humanities and the social sciences. Rather, CDA is a - critical - perspective on doing scholarship: it is, so to speak, discourse analysis ‘with an attitude’. It focuses on social problems, and especially on the role of discourse in the production and reproduction of power abuse or domination.” (Van Dijk; 2001: 96)*

Meyer (2001) puts it similarly, when he says:

*“[...] CDA does not constitute a well-defined empirical method but rather a cluster of approaches with a similar theoretical base and similar research questions becomes most obvious here: there is no typical CDA way of collecting data.” (Meyer; 2001: 23)*

This ambiguity could, at least in part, explain CDAs popularity with the research of memes, as it not only means that it can easily be adapted to serve a wide array of different topics, but also for new approaches within topics where no established methodology exists yet.

On the other hand, of course, it does make it somewhat difficult to pin down, what exactly CDA is or is not. Wodak and Meyer (2009) argue that what sets CDA away from regular discourse analysis among other things is its “constitutive problem-oriented, interdisciplinary approach” (Wodak & Meyer; 2009: 2). This means that its focus lies not with the particular object it is studying, but rather at the problems and phenomena laying behind it. So, additionally to the analysis at hand, CDA always requires extensive analysis of the context in which it is performed (Van Dijk; 2001: 98). We can see this quite well in the analysis of this thesis, where the corpus of memes might be the object of study, but the main objective lies in understanding the underlying assumptions and messages concerning relationships, gender roles and intimacy.

Discourse in CDA is understood by many scholars in a broad sense, relating to social interactions in general. While this includes text and conversational speech, it also includes objects, such as symbols, pictures or media (Van Dijk; 2001: 98). For example, pieces of graffiti on a wall or, in the case of this study, memes, easily fall within the definition of ‘discourse’ to CDA, since they are created by someone in order to provoke a reaction in somebody else. Multimodal discourse analysis expands this somewhat even further, by arguing that not only the linguistic layer of any discourse, e.g. words or speech, should be subject to the analysis, but also all other semiotic modes, such as layout or images producing social context (Machin et al.; 2016: 303). Interest for multimodality has strongly increased with the importance of the internet, where oftentimes different modes of communication (such as text, audio, visual etc.) are combined to form one single message (Mahfouz; 2021: 107). Since memes are mostly multimodal, as Al Zidjaly (2017) points out, the analysis in this paper will, of course, also be multimodal in nature.

While, as Meyer (2001) put it, there is “no typical CDA way of collecting data” (Meyer; 2001: 23), data collection in CDA does generally happen akin to grounded theory, whereby there is no specific phase for data collection, as data collection happens all the way along the analysis (Meyer; 2001: 23-24). Thus, a study in CDA may begin with a general analysis in the context of a discourse, or its context, and then after closer analysis of the text these aspects might be revisited to apply the new findings to the theoretical framework.

This attitude leaves the researcher, of course, in a somewhat awkward position of having to build most of his or her research design from scratch, as few instructions are given. Many different theoretical frameworks have been proposed to solve this, with everyone proposing their own method specific to their research. Especially this, however, has been criticized, as

with everyone inventing their own methodology critics argue that there is a lack of consistency concerning the definition of concepts and terminology (Machin et al.; 2016: 304). This can make studies hard to compare, even when they focus on similar topics, as each study uses its own individual angle. Machin et al. (2016) even went so far as to see the discipline in danger of getting lost in theoretical discussions and neglecting its real purpose on studying human social life (Machin et al.; 2016: 304).

This is not to say that there are no good methods to study memes or other multimodal media. As mentioned, this thesis follows an approach introduced by Yus (2019) which offers a very useful methodological framework that can be quite universally applied to memes. And while, of course, this research paper stays in the tradition of CDA not to follow any role-model 100% it also takes inspiration from Yus (2019). This is not the first time that this framework is applied by someone else than Yus to study memes, as Mahfouz (2021) already borrowed from his approach. Whether this is just a singular occurrence, or the beginning of a consolidation of the discipline around one theory, however, goes beyond the scope of this paper.

Yus (2019) offers the following process, or strategies, as he calls them:

*“Strategy 1. To decode and inferentially enrich the verbal content of the meme (top and bottom lines of text) in order to obtain the explicit interpretation of the text or explicature.*

*Strategy 2. To derive implicatures from verbal content, if these are necessary to reach a relevant interpretation of the verbal content of the meme.*

*Strategy 3. To decode and inferentially enrich the picture to yield a visual explicature.*

*Strategy 4. To derive implicatures or implications from the picture in the meme, if these are necessary to reach an adequate interpretation of the meme as a whole.*

*Strategy 5. To infer possible combinations of text and picture to yield interpretations*

*Strategy 6. To access as much contextual information as is necessary to obtain interpretations out of strategies 1-5 above. (Yus; 2019: 107)*

This is by no means meant as a linear process, or a fixed succession, but rather can be adapted to serve the needs of the researcher. Additionally, as is custom in grounded theory, the results of one strategy might lead to revisit the results of another strategy (Yus; 2019: 107). There is

a general idea that memes, such as other visual objects would be read from top to bottom, but the salience of some elements, e.g. the picture, might change this, for a meme (Yus; 2019: 108). The same obviously goes for the horizontal direction which in western settings is left to right, but in Arabic, following the script, right to left. The question of the most salient elements might vary a lot from meme to meme, even within those who form a certain category (Yus; 2019: 108). Salience can be realized by visual effects, size, color etc., however in the end the question of salience always remains one of individual perception and speculation (Yus; 2019: 108).

Within memes Yus (2019) differentiates between two main parts of the analysis. One being the semiotic aspects and the other one being the interpretive aspects. So in other words, first comes a description of all factually visible aspects, while afterwards the underlying meanings and messages are being analyzed. While the analysis of the former will naturally be more descriptive in nature, the analysis of the latter part becomes more speculative, the more in depth it gets. This is where Yus' (2019) analytic framework is very comprehensive. While it starts by interpreting the separate aspects of memes, it also has a strong focus on how these aspects in the end come together. According to Yus (2019) this is the most interesting part, as it is also where the user constructs the final meaning of the meme through his or her interpretation (Yus; 2019: 107).

Naturally, these last interpretive aspects are also where context and social aspects matter the most and the most interesting findings can be achieved. It is, however, also a more speculative part of the analysis, as it works strongly by describing what the observer of a meme would possibly feel or understand in a meme. On the other hand, while the primary descriptive part of analyzing a meme might not be the most interesting by itself, it can be very useful to other researchers as it is the closest to the facts and only in small part influenced by the individual researchers own way of thinking.

It has to be pointed out that the samples in this thesis cannot reasonably be assumed to be representative and any findings will need to be proven again independently to safely draw definitive conclusions from them. As a whole, representativity is a difficult subject in CDA. Its interdisciplinary nature which aims at analyzing from multiple, if not all possible perspectives, can mean that analyzing discourse becomes quite extensive. This means that most of the time CDA is qualitative in nature and uses relatively small sample sizes, as is the case for this thesis. So, while one or a few texts might of course not exemplify hundreds of other similar texts, it is obvious that analyzing a representative number of texts is generally

outside the possibilities of a single researcher (Van Dijk; 2001: 101). This is made even harder by the fact that often the nature of the topic makes it further impossible to properly determine a representative number of samples as not the whole extent of the phenomenon is known or accessible. E.g. in the case of memes, where it is almost impossible to prove or even find the author of most memes and due to the delocalized nature of the internet it is likewise impossible to pin down the exact place of origin of a meme. Even a meme in the strongest dialect of northern Oman might have actually been made by a recent migrant from northern Oman living in any other country with internet access, just to name an example. Even if it were possible to find the author of a meme through its digital signature one could not be certain if he was the original author of this meme or merely recreated a meme, he had seen somewhere else. As with all cultural matters, one can reasonably assume that what is true for a small sample might also be at least partially true for a bigger sample, but in the end one can never know for sure.

### **3.2. Data Collection**

Following a nonlinear process, the idea to analyze memes about relationship stereotypes and gender roles, as well as intimacy in general, was not yet existent at the beginning of data collection but was rather born after sighting the initial data collected. Initially the goal was to simply acquire authentic Arabic memes that were circulated and sent by Arabic native speakers. To attain this goal convenience sampling was adopted and a contact living in the Sultanate of Oman as well as a contact living in Vienna (but having recently migrated from Egypt) were asked to provide as many memes in Arabic language as they possibly could. This was done without further specifying which type of meme was sought for. Upon receiving a broad array of memes, the topic of relationships, gender and intimacy was chosen as the topic for this thesis in general, as memes with this overarching theme were numerous and seemed quite interesting both in their message and diversity. Therefore, all memes that did not relate to gender, relationships or intimacy were excluded from the corpus which led to a final corpus of 32 memes.

It should also be noted that the pictures sent after this request were quite heterogeneous in their nature. While most of them are internet memes in a rather conservative definition of the term, for others it is not so clear. As mentioned in the previous chapter (2.1.), this is not unusual, as many of those using the term ‘meme’ are not aware of the original definition or might even have a clear idea about their own definition. It does, however, pose a dilemma of

which pictures to include and which to omit. With this in mind, it was chosen to simply include all pictures received in the corpus, as they were clearly ‘memes’ in the eyes of the contacts who sent them upon the request for ‘Arabic memes’. If memes included in this corpus do not clearly appear to be memes, this lack of clarity in their definition is addressed drawing from the context compiled in the previous chapter (2.1.) within their individual analysis.

The memes were not altered except for adjustments in size to fit the document. The way they can be found in this study is the way they were acquired from the contacts which is why sometimes additional information can be seen around the actual meme.

As previously mentioned, the sample collected for this thesis cannot possibly be viewed as representative. Not only is it far beyond the possibilities of this thesis to collect such an enormous number of memes, as to allow for this, but also the choice in sampling severely limits the general representativity, as convenience sampling only allows for very limited transferability of results and data (Saumure & Given; 2008: 562). However, convenience sampling was not, as the name might suggest, merely chosen for convenience. Nonprobability sampling, as in this case has a particularly strong advantage in reaching closed-off communities or parts of life not publicly accessible (Saumure & Given; 2008: 562).

While it would have been possible to collect a larger, more diverse corpus of memes from public websites or social media accounts, this would have, among other things, had the disadvantage of not knowing whether these memes were actually circulating among native speakers and used to communicate with each other. In any culture, but as pointed out previously possibly even more so in Arab culture where appearance is quite important, people tend to post different content publicly, as they would among their friends in a smaller circle. Likewise, most people will not talk about the same topics publicly, as they will in private surrounded by a small group of their friends. So, while of course being less representative this way, the hope is that acquiring memes in this way makes up for this by possibly offering a deeper glimpse into the reality of memes circulating among Arab native speakers.

All contacts were duly informed of the nature and topic of this thesis and their consent for using the pictures provided by them was sought. No further personal data were collected neither of the contacts themselves, nor of their meme sources. Only in a few instances they were asked about the context in which they had acquired those memes, without collecting exact names or sources.

As Saumure & Given (2008:562) mention, nonprobability sampling is also quite appropriate for preliminary and pilot studies, and this is really how this thesis should be understood. This thesis should be regarded, more than anything, as a probe into the topic of gender, relationships and intimacy in Arabic memes, to which, at least to the awareness of the researcher, there has been very little academic research so far. If we look at the topic of memes specifically for the Arab speaking context most research tends to focus on the political dimension of memes such as Moussa et al. (2020) or Al Zidjaly (2017). Concerning the topic of memes and gender Lesmana (2021) should be mentioned as a pioneer work, but besides this there seems to have been little research on Arab-speaking memes into this direction so far. In contrast, especially within English gender studies we can find a range of articles on gender within memes, such as Drakett et al. (2018), Gbadegesin, (2020) or Mahfouz (2021) and a few on relationship stereotypes in memes, such as Sultana et al. (2023) although admittedly the field still appears to be in its infancy here as well.

This is where this thesis wants to contribute by helping to lay a foundation as well as inspire and encourage others to study this dimension of Arab-speaking memes. For this reason, the main focus of this thesis lies more in describing and analyzing the memes at hand rather, than on basing broader conclusions on them. Simply put, the idea is to process the memes at hand properly, so that future researchers may be able to use them within their own studies. That is why, in this research paper the aim is to thoroughly note the descriptive and semiotic aspects of the memes in questions, so that even someone not well versed in the Arabic language could use them for further research. Additionally, of course, their meaning and social context as a whole will be interpreted in order to form generalized statements on gender and relationships in Arabic memes. However, as pointed out, any such conclusions will be made with caution and should also only be taken up by others with caution, as assumptions that have once been expressed can easily be mistaken for the truth and further be counterproductive to academic research, by slowing it down.

### **3.3. Transcription**

When it comes to transcriptions of the Arabic language, there often is no coherent norm even within academia that everyone adheres to.

Luckily for MSA there is little discussion on how words are correctly spelled, as transcription here aims to accurately portrait spelling as well as pronunciation. However, there are some

sizable differences concerning the use of symbols particularly for letters non-existent within the Latin alphabet. A *ḥāʾ* (ح), for example might be either transcribed as ‘-kh’ or ‘-ḥ’. The transcriptions in this study follow the transcription norm of the German Oriental Society known as the Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft (DMG). For the spelling of MSA, if unclear, Wehr & Kropfisch (2020) were consulted as well as Badawi et al. (2016).

Unfortunately, concerning dialects the picture is much less clear. Here the aim is to properly depict the pronunciation of word, as dialect is understood as primarily oral in nature. This means that researchers will determine the correct spelling of a word by listening to native speakers. However, this is still subject to rules and standardization, in order to guarantee intelligibility. As the same native speaker might not always pronounce a word in the same way, even within the same sentence, a certain (correct) spelling is established for each word. And while this makes a lot of sense unfortunately those determining said correct spelling often do not agree with each other leading to different spelling, even among the supposedly same dialect.

In this thesis for the transcription of the dialects the spelling of the most predominant dialectal dictionary was used for most words. For EA mostly Woidich (2006) and Woidich (2020) were used. In rare cases, where an Egyptian word could not be found within the aforementioned works Spiro (1974), Woidich & Heinen-Nasr (2004), as well as Hinds & Badawi (1986) were being consulted. For the examples of Gulf Arabic Qafisheh (1996) and Qafisheh et al. (1997) were used and proved quite extensive. For Syrian dialect the VICAV online dictionary, containing almost 3000 words in the dialect of Damascus, was used. In cases where this proved inadequate the rather old works of Stowasser & Ani (1964) as well as grammatical work of Grotzfeld (1965) were consulted. The more recent work of Al-Masri (2015) was used, where possible to confirm the transcriptions of Syrian dialect, but unfortunately only a handful of relevant words could be found there.

However, as there is no agreed upon norm for the transcription of letters within dialects either, where necessary the transcription was altered to be more in line with the DMG norm to allow for uniformity. This includes the transcription of long vowels which in many dialectal dictionaries are simply written by doubling of vowels (e.g. ‘aa’). This was changed according to the transcription norm of the DMG and instead a single vowel with a macron on top was written in the case of long vowels (ā). Additionally, like in MSA, letters that have no counterpart in the Latin alphabet such as *Hamza* (ʾ), *ʿayn* (ع), *ḥāʾ* (ح) *šīn* (ش) were written by using the symbols assigned to them by the DMG. In the case of sounds that are unique or at

least emblematic to certain dialects the transcription of the prevalent dictionaries was chosen, such as the *gīm* (g) instead of *ǧīm* (ǧ) in Egyptian or the *šwa* (ə) in Levantine dialect.

## **4. Memes**

For analysis the corpus of memes was divided into subcategories further based on their content. This was done on the one hand for reasons of clarity and maneuverability, but also because during the first sightings of the memes some reoccurring themes emerged.

### **4.1. The troubles of dating**

The first underlying theme that was found in several of the memes in the corpus was, broadly speaking, frustration with the struggles of dating. In addition to their humoristic purpose many memes seemed to also seem to serve a purpose in voicing frustration with former romantic partners, with some of them even showing resignation, presumably in the face of bad experiences. It appears that these memes serve a function in processing these experiences, but also in deflecting responsibility for the failure of relationships. Right away, the first meme is one such example of this.



Fig. 9 Meme: Struggles of dating (#1)

<u>Transcription (Egyptian):</u>	<u>Translation:</u>
Header: waḷḷa ya gamāṣa ana miš hayinfaf adaḥḥal fi ḥayāti ḥadd tāni ana istiḥmilt nās ʾahālīhum nafsuhum kānu kārhīnhum	Header: by god, I cannot let any new person enter into my life, I tolerated people, whose family themselves would hate them

This meme, which is a screenshot from Social Media, hints to a possible explanation why the modern layout has become so popular, as it can easily be made simply by posting a picture on social media and writing a caption above. While it is necessary for the classical layout to alter the picture and insert the text directly, in the modern layout the picture can be left as is and the text simply put above.

The meme at hand can be viewed as part of the *word specific* category, as the picture is not necessary to the message, but rather only illustrates it (Yus; 2019: 109). In the picture we can see a man in a traditional Arab dress arguing passionately with both his hands gesturing to someone in front of him, as if he wanted to emphasize a point. He appears to be at a crowded place at night and the person he is arguing with is not visible. Beside and behind him are two men looking directly at him.

The text in the header is his direct speech, and by extension that of the author. There he proclaims that he will not start any new relationship and argues that he was way too tolerant in the past, as he even had relationships with people who nobody, not even their own families, liked.

This picture is a screenshot from the Egyptian Film *Round Trip to Ismailia* (*ismā'īlīa rāyih gay*) from the year 1997 which is about the story of an Egyptian family from Ismailia that is displaced after the 1967 war. The genre is drama and comedy at the same time (“Ismailia Rayeh Gay”; n.d.). In this scene the main character tried to flirt with a woman who was not responsive to his attempts, which prompted his friends to drag him away, so he would not further embarrass himself. He however does not want to accept this and maintains that she was in fact flirting back at him. This leads him to gesture vigorously, as he is trying to defend his honor in front of his friends (Aflam Cima; 2023: 37:27). So, the message that the picture conveys here can be interpreted as someone emphatically trying to defend their honor and the point they are making.

As the meme is a screenshot, we can see the profile of the person posting this meme. However, if we look up the name *@mahmoud\_elbaz25* no such Instagram profile can be found, possibly meaning it was deleted in the meantime.

The humor in this meme lies in the intensity of the words combined with the picture. There is no joke in the content of what he says, but rather the choice in words, and the lack of euphemisms is what creates the humor. Especially in Arab culture, where it is quite common to veil strong messages in euphemisms (Nydell; 2012: 95) this serves to create an incongruity, between the way one would expect someone to talk and the way he actually chooses his words. Almost every culture in the world believes that families should stick together no matter what and for a family to abandon a family member only the worst behavior can be deemed an acceptable reason in most cultures. This is even stronger in the Arab world, where loyalty to one's family tends to take strict precedent over all personal preferences (Nydell; 2012: 3) and all disagreements within the family should be kept hidden to outsiders if by any means possible (Nydell; 2012: 56). Allegiance to the own family is perceived as more important, than loyalty to friends, one's country or the demands of one's own job. Even personal antipathy is not regarded as a valid reason to not help a family member in need (Nydell; 2012: 63-64). So, while it is hard to imagine that saying someone is hated even by his own family would be a compliment in any culture, it is particularly insulting to an Arab.

To say this about another person is hardly any less than accusing them of being the absolute worst. And while it is most likely an exaggeration this creates the humor in this meme.

However, this meme could also serve a purpose as a coping mechanism. It could be something a person would say after a breakup, as not only is it quite common for people in such situations to swear to quit dating altogether, but also the argument that one was way too lenient in the past makes sense, as it deflects the question of who is to blame for the breakup. By arguing that one had too low standards, one might admit some fault of their own, but ultimately the blame is put on the other person for not being good enough. By arguing that he or she had been with people in the past, who their own family hated they are stating that really nobody liked them. So, the logic is, if not even their family supported them anymore, they must truly be horrible people, and the person speaking wasn't the one at fault for the relationship failing.

Such a meme could be used by a heartbroken person to voice his or her frustration publicly and in a generalized way, without having to talk about the case they are referring to and admitting to their own self-doubts.

لما الجاثوم يخنق أفضل من الأكس..



Fig. 10 Meme: Struggles of dating (#2)

<u>Transcription (MSA):</u>	<u>Translation:</u>
Header: Lammā al-ğāṭūmu yaḥnaqu ʔafḍala min al-ʔiksi..	Header: When your sleep paralysis demon chokes better than the [your] Ex..

This meme is a prime example of the modern layout, where the text is above the picture. It is also an example of a “when” meme, where a when clause is paired with a seemingly unrelated picture. However, through the ‘when’ the reader is made to connect the text with the picture by negotiating the incongruity and finding relevant aspects of the picture to create a shared meaning (Lou; 2017: 108). In other words, the picture becomes a metaphor to describe a feeling, situation etc. described in the text. In this case the picture certainly adds to the joke, although it would probably be possible, to understand the better part of this meme by just reading the text. The picture-text relationship therefore appears to be *additive* (Yus; 2019: 112).

In this meme, we can see a woman being choked on top of a pillow by another person, who is only partially visible. It is completely unclear, who the person choking the woman is, although it seems that the person could be wearing a suit jacket, which begs the assumption that it is a man. The woman is laughing while being choked, seemingly unimpressed by the assault, or maybe even enjoying it.

The text above states that this is, what it feels like, when your sleep paralysis demon is choking you better than your ex-(boyfriend). With this it is clear that the laugh of the woman is meant to show her enjoying being choked, as well as being happy about having broken up with her ex-(boyfriend), who was not able to properly satisfy her sexually. By taking being choked by a sleep paralysis demon which generally is considered a very unpleasant experience (Jalal et al.; 2014: 12), and arguing that it is better, than being choked by her ex-(boyfriend) while having sexual intercourse, she is not only playfully stating her preference for being choked in a sexual way, but also commenting on the bad sexual performance of her ex-(boyfriend). Technically of course, the word ‘ex’ is gender neutral, as it is an English loan word, so the meme could also be talking about a lesbian ex-partner.

The picture is a Screenshot from an old Egyptian movie called *‘afwan ayōha al-qānūn* from the year 1985. It is about a recently married couple, where the husband has a condition that makes him unable to sleep with her. She helps him to solve this condition, however this leads to him having an affair with another woman (“Afwan Ayoha Al Qanoon”; n.d.). In this scene, we can see him after a dispute with his wife, in which he tries to choke her after beating her. Ultimately, she is rescued by another character rushing into the room and separating the two (Al Masreya Al Lobnaneya المصرية اللبنانية; 2016: 37:55). Her laughter in the scene appears to be out of madness rather than pleasure or amusement, at the absurdity of this situation. This appears to also be the impression the picture in the meme wants to convey.

A sleep paralysis demon or succubus is the folkloristic superstitious personification of a medical condition known as sleep paralysis, whereby the patient finds him- or herself awaking from sleep into a semi-conscious state in which they are conscious but cannot move and feel a strong pressure on their chest making them feel like suffocating (Cox; 2015: 3). In some cases, this is accompanied by hallucinations of scary and malevolent creatures being next to them or suffocating them (Jalal et al.; 2014: 7). This has had the effect of different cultures in different times all similarly explaining this phenomenon by evil spirits haunting the patients (Cox; 2015: 2). The Arab world is no exception and studies suggest that today the number of patients attributing sleep paralysis not to medical factors, but rather to *ǧinn* (Islamic demons) is higher than in western society, especially among those without higher education (Jalal et al.; 2014: 5). No matter what explanation however the patients choose, it is always described as very scary and distressing experience for them (Jalal et al.; 2014: 12). So, when sleep paralysis demons became a trending topic for memes in 2019 with memes depicting funny representations of their sleep paralysis demons (“Sleep Paralysis Demon”; n.d.) it is possible that this was a way for people affected to process their trauma. It did however similarly have the effect of raising the awareness of non-affected people as well, so while it is possible that the author of the meme suffers of sleep paralysis and made this meme to process her or his trauma, it could also just be an unaffected person drawing from this memetic reference to slander their ex-partner.

The humor in this meme mostly comes from the breaking of social taboos. The one being, openly complaining about the sexual performance of one’s partners, and also possibly from openly admitting the sexual preference of being choked. While certainly being humorous by itself it is likely that this meme could also serve a purpose in coping with a breakup. By criticizing their ex-partner this meme could serve as a coping mechanism after a breakup, by reminding oneself that the ex-partner was not so great after all and breaking up should not be viewed as a loss.



Fig. 11 Meme: Struggles of dating (#3)

<u>Transcription (Mixed Egyptian and MSA):</u>	<u>Translation:</u>
Header: Iḏā lam tastaṭīḥ isʿādī fa-ma-tnakkidš-ī ʿalayya ʾilāhi yusturak..	Header: If you cannot help me do not complain to me, may my god protect you...

Whilst this meme, again in the modern layout, uses the picture to emphasize its message it does not rely on the picture for its message. It appears to thereby fall into the *word specific* category (Yus; 2019: 109).

In the picture we see a man talking to someone, of whom we can only see the back. The man talking has the palm of his hand raised towards his interlocutor, as if he was making a statement or showing boundaries. Behind the man talking there stands another man with a determined face, seemingly being there to back him up. In the background we can see another person and a doorway, but no indication as to where exactly this interaction takes place. In the upper right-hand corner, we can see the blurred-out logo of a television station suggesting that this picture originally is a screenshot from a film or series shown on TV.

The header is direct speech by the protagonist of the meme stating to someone else that if the interlocutor cannot help him or her, they should not complain to him or her either. The religious phrase at the end is supposed to be a polite way of ending the conversation and

telling the interlocutor to go away. By saying, may God protect you at the end the speaker stresses that he or she is not disappointed or mad at the other person, but that he or she simply has no time for someone who is of no use to him or her and has no interest in continuing the conversation.

The man speaking in the picture is the famous Egyptian actor *Adel Emam* in the film *‘arīs min giha ‘amnā* from the year 2004 (“Aris min geha amneya”; n.d). In it a rich businessman is very fond of his adult daughter. He does not want her to get married, as to him that would mean losing her. However, when a man, who is ominously described as ‘working for the security apparatus’, asks for her hand in marriage the businessman cannot refuse the proposal. Because he still does not want to lose her, however, he tries to find other ways to sabotage the marriage. In the scene where the screenshot is taken from, he is seen talking to the construction workers building the new flat for his daughter, in which she will move into with her husband after getting married. The construction workers tell him that the flat will soon be finished, but instead of reacting happy about this the businessman bribes the foreman to delay the construction for a few more years. Additionally, he threatens him, should he not delay the construction, while pretending to be someone powerful working for the government (MiNi-Film 10; 2020: 00:40). So, while the text in the meme is not the same as in the scene, it is most likely the vehemence which is meant to be portrayed in the picture. Just like the businessman who is willing to bribe, threaten and lie about his credentials, the person talking in this meme is similarly determined to bring his or her point across and set boundaries.

This meme makes use of both MSA and Egyptian Arabic. It does this not only by using words which are uncommon in Egyptian Arabic, but also grammatical structures which clearly belong to MSA and are generally absent in dialect. Specifically, the perfect negation with the particle *lam* is exclusively used in MSA, as opposed to the circumfixed negation with *ma-* and *-š* that is commonly used in Egyptian and seen in the second half of the text. It is linguistically quite interesting to see that the author of this meme not only chose to use two different forms of negation in the same sentence, but also used negations from two different linguistic varieties. In a spoken language situation, which this meme wants to depict, a possible explanation for this could be that the speaker intended to talk completely in MSA, as it conveys higher status, and thought better about the first part of his sentence, than about the end. Since he or she had more time to think about the beginning of their sentence the speaker chose the more prestigious MSA variety but then fell back into his or her native dialect.

Another indication for this lack in proficiency by the author is a spelling mistake in the word *tastaṭīʿ* where a long *Yāʾ* (ي) is unnecessarily inserted as the penultimate letter.

Interestingly there is no apparent joke in this meme, but rather it seems to be a statement made to another person. While it could of course be making fun of people who conduct themselves in a selfish unapologetic manner, it does not really seem to be meant negatively or jokingly. It is rather more likely to imagine that this meme is intended to be used as a way to communicate to another person that one is choosing to prioritize one's own wellbeing over them. In particular it seems to be made for the context of romantic relationships, where it is meant to tell the receiver that the person sending them does not view them as helpful or good for them, and thereby wants to stop all relations to them. This could be used to break up with someone, or at least warn them that if they continue to be annoying one will break up.

However, another possible context would be online dating, if someone was looking for casual sex, rather than something more dedicated. Then this meme could be used, to end a discussion with someone who wants to negotiate something more or might even be complaining about the other persons superficiality. The person sending the meme is telling the receiver that he or she is looking for something specific and that this is not open for debate. And, if this is not what the other person is willing to provide, he or she has no interest in further interaction.

While popular perception might still generally consider memes as a humorous phenomenon, there is a steadily growing number of studies, focusing on internet memes as part of a broader political and societal discourse (Milner; 2013/ Al Zidjaly; 2017/ Moussa et al.; 2020/ Drakett et al.; 2018/ etc.). While humor is certainly one of the main characteristics of memes (Moussa et al.; 2020: 5922) some researchers, especially within gender studies, point out the power structures behind humor (Drakett et al.; 2018: 5). However, it appears that humor and societal discourse in memes are less fixed but rather move on a spectrum. We can find memes which put a big emphasis on being humorous, while having little subliminal messages. On the other hand, some memes only use the apparel of being humorous, when in fact the emphasis appears to be on their message. Those memes might share nothing more but the physical structure with their humorous counterparts. Understanding that humor is mostly subjective, we can find such examples in research, e.g. when looking at the memes from a boycott in Morocco, studied by Moussa et al. (2022). There we find examples of memes, in which humor, if at all, seems to play only a minor role. If we take for example a meme arguing that the month of Ramadan is better without certain products which shows these products crossed out, (Moussa et al.; 2022: 5928) there seems to be little comical reference in it.

- باينها هتبقى سالونات ولا أيه!!



Fig. 12 Meme: Struggles of dating (#4)

<u>Transcription (Egyptian):</u>	<u>Translation:</u>
Header: bāyinha hatib'a šalōnāt walla ē?	Header: Apparently it will be an arranged marriage or what?

This meme is yet another example of the modern layout. The category of text and picture relationship could be best described as *additive*, as the picture works to elaborate the text above (Yus; 2019: 112).

In the picture we can see a man looking at another person, who, judging by the earrings this person is wearing, most likely is a woman. From the look on his face, the man appears to be sad and maybe even desperate. The woman on the other hand has her back towards the camera and her face is not visible.

The text in the header has him asking, if this means that it will be an arranged marriage now. Though not further specified, it seems that he is talking about himself, meaning that he is the one who will now be having an arranged marriage.

The picture is a Screenshot from the Egyptian comedy movie *wiṣ ʿigrām* from the year 2006, in which a man, who up to this point continuously failed in his life, by chance becomes the leader of a dangerous gang of criminals (“Wesh Egram”; n.d.). Although this sees him becoming rich it is also dangerous for him. In this scene the main character expresses his exhaustion with the dangerous life he is living now to his girlfriend, saying that he just wants to live with her in a tiny apartment in peace without luxury ( سينما أفلام - Sinima Aflam; 2023:

01:32:24). This wish for the stress and hassle to stop and just to live happily without high expectations, is probably what the picture in this meme is supposed to convey. The person speaking has enough of the stress of (unsuccessful) dating and now is willing to agree to an arranged marriage (*ṣālōnāt*) just so he, or possibly she, can have a partner and settle down.

The word *ṣālōnāt* is derived from the Egyptian word *ṣālōn* meaning living room, because the partners in such an arranged marriage only meet in the living room once the terms of marriage are already being discussed. This means that the decision of matchmaking is completely left up to the families. So, while some would argue that oftentimes Arab weddings are arranged merely in a sense that the family of both sides is strongly involved, this meme speaks of an arranged marriage in which both groom and bride only have a very limited say in choosing their partner.

Unlike other memes in this thesis, there is no name tag of the author visible. In the lower right hand corner we can see a small logo, but it is very pixelated and unclear what it belongs to. Even without the name tag a google image search gives us one result of a Facebook meme page named ‘*Okay*’ with 4,3 million followers (Okay .; n.d.). This meme was posted on this account on the 16<sup>th</sup> of November 2019 (Okay .; 2019). Of course, if the person administering this page is indeed also the author of this meme is impossible to tell. It is however very likely that the author is Egyptian, as the text is in a thick Egyptian dialect.

This meme plays on the feeling of a young person who would like to be in a relationship and marry, but so far has been unsuccessful in finding a partner and now has to deal with the fear of being left behind. While arranged-marriages are still widespread in most Arabic countries, it appears, in many Arabic societies the aspect of love and partnership has grown in importance.<sup>2</sup> So while this does not mean that initiating relationships out of love is new to the Arab world (Norbakk; 2018: 51), it seems that especially nowadays, with family networks being disrupted through individual mobility men are even more proactively looking for a suitable romantic partner in a potential wife than maybe was the case in the past. (Norbakk; 2018: 59). This makes family-arranged weddings to a complete stranger less desired. In addition to this, of course, there is also the shame of not being able to find a partner by oneself, which can be very embarrassing, as it might lead people to believe that one is not an

---

<sup>2</sup> As an anecdote I once asked a friend in Oman why it was so popular for people to marry their cousins there and he answered by saying: “They usually wanted someone else, but when this person refused they settled for their cousin.”

attractive suitor for women. This is the same kind of self-doubt we saw being deflected in the previous memes.

It seems however unlikely that this meme is supposed to mean that the author will actually seek a *ṣālōnāt* wedding, because within the meme the author clearly shows very negative feelings to this kind of marriage. It seems more likely that this meme is a way of stating that one is ready to abandon one's high standards and will be happy with anyone and anything just to finally find a permanent relationship.

## **4.2. Difficult partners**

Another theme found quite often was complaints about marriage. And while some of them criticized the concept of marriage itself (see 4.3.) in a big group of them the criticism was particularly aimed at the partner, blaming him or her for making life difficult.

This is also quite common in western memes, although those tend to be associated with the generation of 'baby boomers' sometimes exemplified by the phrase 'I hate my wife' (Gilbert; 2021: 74). More correctly of course would be 'I hate my spouse' as these memes exist for men and women alike. Hence, this kind of humor, which portrays being married to the other sex as an annoyance, is often dubbed 'boomer humor'. So far, there appears to be little academic research on this topic, and surely further investigation on humor about marriage and how it correlates with age could prove very fruitful.

We can find one example of such an archetype in the following meme:



Fig. 13 Meme: Difficult partners (#1)

<u>Transcription (Egyptian):</u>	<u>Translation:</u>
Text above picture: ana maḥnū <sup>ʔ</sup> a wi- <sup>ʔ</sup> aṛfāna min il-bēt w-il-mas <sup>ʔ</sup> uliyya wi- <sup>ʕ</sup> ayza aḥiss bi-zāti w-aḡayyar gaww	Text above picture: I'm being suffocated (f) and disgusted (f) by the house, and I want (f) to feel myself (f) and get a change of air
gōzi=	my husband=
Upper text in picture: gōzi	Upper text in picture: my husband
Lower text in picture: aywa ma- <sup>ʕ</sup> amaltīš ḡada lē ya'ni	Lower text in picture: yes, so why didn't you (f) make lunch then?

This meme is in the modern layout and following the taxonomy of Yus (2019) could be categorized as *word specific*, as the picture adds nothing significant to the joke. What is remarkable is that the meme uses not only writing to assign roles to the characters in the picture but also uses stickers. Noteworthy as well is that the language of the meme clearly indicates that the author is talking about herself.

In the picture we can see a man sitting in a car, while another, older man is bending in through the window, to talk to him. Unfortunately, the picture is not in a good quality, but it looks like the man bending in through the window is passionately explaining something to the man sitting in the car. The man sitting in the car wears a flower crown which is clearly edited into the picture, as it is drawn and in different colors than the original photo.

The text above the meme is direct speech by a woman stating that she is overwhelmed by having to do housework and that she needs to change her life, as she is very unhappy about her current situation. The fact that the person answering is labeled: “my husband” clearly shows that the woman in question is a wife and that the meme is written from her perspective. The text in the picture labels the man, bending in from the window as “my husband”. This is somewhat redundant, as the text in the header already states that the picture is the husband talking and the man from the window is clearly the one talking in the picture. It does however clarify that the author is talking about herself and not in generalized terms. Interestingly the other man is labeled to be the wife, not by text, but by a cartoon sticker of a flower crown, generally signifying femininity. It is not clear, why the author did not simply choose to put down the written label “me” (“*ana*” in Arabic) as would be the custom in this kind of meme.

The picture itself is a screenshot from an Egyptian movie named ‘Assal Eswed’ (*asal iswed*) with famous actor Ahmed Helmy from the year 2010. It is about a 30-year-old Egyptian man returning to Egypt after living for 20 years in the USA and fighting with the cultural differences upon his return (“Assal Eswed”; n.d.). In this scene the main character has just rented a car and wants to drive to the pyramids. He has however difficulties in understanding the navigation system, which is why a local man helps him (F.M Production; 2023: 17:30). Interestingly, contrary to the meme, the conversation in the film is actually a rather helpful one. The main character is quite helpless, but the local man helps him out very friendly and respectfully. This is in stark contrast to the rather accusing tone of the husband in the meme, who does not care for the problems of his wife, but only for his lunch.

In the upper lefthand corner we can see the name *Romy Mohamed*. Presumably this is the author of the meme. It is however noteworthy that half of the first letter has been cut off, which might indicate that the meme was copied and posted by another person, who slightly cropped it. After all, it would not make sense for the author to include a signature, only to partially crop it out. We can also see that there is writing under the name tag, indicating that *Romy Mohamed*, if she is indeed the author, repurposed the template from a previous meme. When looking up the name online one can find a Facebook profile of a *Romy Mohamed* who, according to her profile is a digital creator and originally from Alexandria. It is very likely that she is the author, as many of her memes have the same name tag, as well as her depicting herself through a flower crown sticker in her memes (Mohamed; n.d.). It is possible that this might be something akin to her signature, hence not the ‘me’ tag. Google image search reveals that different Facebook pages have reposted this meme, so where this particular image

was downloaded from is not clear. It is in any case no longer available at the Facebook page of *Romy Mohamed*.

Although most likely meant as a joke this meme can also be read as a criticism on marriage and the typical behavior of husbands. The wife, who is struggling under her burdens is being left alone by her husband, who does not care about her problems at all. His response to her complaints is not one of finding solutions, but rather egoistically demanding to be fed instead.

Such a meme, being composed in the first person and describing a negative situation could of course be understood as a coping mechanism, allowing the author to complain about her husband in a playful way. The feeling of not receiving enough help from their spouses after all is a common sentiment within marriages all over the world. However, it seems a lot more likely that the situation in this meme is hyperbolic, as it is improbable that a woman would react to such a situation by making it into a meme to complain online.

There is certainly a criticism of Arabic husbands here: ‘Arabic husbands, care more about food, than the well-being of their wives.’ This is a common hyperbolic stereotype about Arab men within the Arab world and besides being a trope in jokes can even be found in Arab literature. E.g. the Syrian author Zakaria Tamer makes use of this trope in one of his short stories simply titled *Men* within his book *Sour Grapes*. Here the protagonist Haleem endures constant humiliation by his wife while repeatedly threatening to divorce her, without ever doing so even after she has born the child of another man while lying to him. In the end of the story, however, he finally takes the harsh step to divorce her only after she forgot to add salt in the food, she cooked for him (Tamer; 2023: 31). Considering this trope, the most likely explanation for the meme is to simply be meant as a joke while possibly coping with the feeling of many house wives of not being supported by their spouses in their daily struggles.

It does fit in any case neatly in the previously mentioned category of “I hate my wife” memes. As mentioned, they are also popular in the west, albeit usually to an older audience. The internet user Fenix19 describes them as follows:

*“The “I Hate My Wife” meme is a humorous way to express the frustrations of being married. [...] The meme has been making the rounds on social media for years and has become popular due to its relatable content and comedic approach to marriage struggles. Whether you’re happily married, single, or somewhere in between, the I Hate My Wife meme is sure to bring a smile to your face. People make I Hate My Wife memes for a variety of reasons. For some, it may be a way to vent frustrations they are*

*feeling in their marriage. Others may use the meme to express feelings of being overwhelmed or unappreciated by their wives. Some couples who are in a long-term marriage may use the meme as a way to joke about the frustrations that come with being married for a long time. Regardless of the reasons why people make I Hate My Wife memes, it is important to remember that these memes should never be taken seriously and should only be used as lighthearted jokes or expressions of frustration.”* (Fenix19; 2023).

However, he also argues that one should be cautious with those memes, as they can be taken seriously as well, and others might think that one really hates their spouse (Fenix19; 2023). This is certainly true, as this type of meme is definitely controversial.

For one it appears that many younger people feel annoyed by this kind of humor, arguing that the person should simply not have married their spouses if they feel so annoyed by them. This is expressed in memes specifically criticizing this kind of humor (Know Your Meme; 2023). In a recent opinion piece on this kind of humor in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, a social media producer argued that these kinds of jokes feel like “a coping mechanism for a generation facing pressure to wed”, (Dib; 2023) arguing that one could get the impression that nobody actually loves their spouse. In her opinion this should make people reflect about the viability of traditional marriage patterns, while not arguing against marriage entirely (Dib; 2023). Considering that especially in Arab society there is strong pressure for young people from family and society to get married (Nydell; 2012: 23) this could certainly be a viable theory. Others again harshly criticize these kinds of jokes regarding them as fostering negative images of marriage (Sultana et al.; 2023: 879).

Some even agree that such memes about marriage are a way of normalizing sexism online by masking it with humour (Sultana et al.; 2023: 872). Interestingly however this criticism in academia seems to be exclusively applied to cases, where husbands are complaining about their wives. No such criticism is known to the author about memes, where the opposite is the case and the husband is being criticised, such as the one at hand.



Fig. 14 Meme: Difficult partners (#2)

<u>Transcription (Egyptian):</u>	<u>Translation:</u>
Header: [her:] inta ya zift ṣāliḥni ,	Header: [her:] You (m) crap, reconcile with me!
[him:] inti ḥōla inti illi miza <sup>ss</sup> alāni	[him:] You (f) dummy, you are the one that made me angry

This meme, which is in the modern layout, appears to be a screenshot from the social media website *Facebook*. The picture itself is not necessary to the meme but illustrates it and helps in intelligibility, making it part of the *word specific* category (Yus; 2019: 109).

The picture shows a man who can be seen from the front passionately arguing with a woman, who is seen from behind. They appear to be standing next to a river at night, as we can see a bridge in the background.

The text is a dialogue between the two. This is not marked in any way and is only obvious, because grammar tells us that the first line is directed at a man, while the second line is directed at a woman. In the first line she insults him and asks him to apologize to her. He answers by insulting her as well and pointing out that she was the one who made him angry

and not the other way around. It appears that she upset him and is now demanding an apology of him for being upset with her which he points out, does not make sense, as she should apologize for upsetting him in the first place. Interestingly, while in MSA one can not see the difference between a male and a female ‘you’ in an unvocalized text, in dialects sometimes the female form is written with a long *Yāʾ* (ي) at the end to specifically mark it as a female form. The fact, that it lacks diacritical dots does not mean that this letter is an *alif al-maqṣūra* (ﺀ) but rather in Egyptian it is common to omit the diacritical markers of the *Yāʾ* (ي).

The picture is a screenshot from the 2005 Egyptian comedy and love film *abu ʿali*, in which both main characters meet each other while both being on the run and eventually fall in love. The main characters, who are both in the meme are played by the actors *Karim Abdel Aziz* and *Mona Zaki* (“Abo Ali”; n.d.). In the scene, where the screenshot is taken from, the main characters have to spend a night sleeping under a bridge. He argues that this is an acceptable place to sleep while she is very unhappy about it and complains that it stinks. She goes away from him, only to be harassed by a group of men coming to the bridge to urinate against it. He hears this and chases them away with the help of a broken bottle which he uses to threaten them. When after this she comes back to his sleeping place the fight continues with her arguing that he should yell after the men who tried to harass her. This leads him to vigorously point out that this doesn’t make sense, as he already chased them away (Watch MX; 2020: 01:01:30). The words in the film are not the same, as in the meme, however the idea of this screenshot is to emphasize the strong emotions in this dispute and the ridiculousness and of her demands, just as with the argument in the film.

We can see the profile who posted this meme in the screenshot. However, if we look for *@relations92* we cannot find an account with this name, meaning that it has most likely been deleted.

While this meme could be understood as a simple joke, it falls in the line of a common criticism on perceived female behavior in relationships in memes. A sentiment that is not uncommon in memes about relationships by men in western societies, is the criticism that their partners do not take responsibility for upsetting them. In a situation, where the feelings of the boyfriend/husband are hurt, the criticism goes that many women will not admit wrongdoing or apologize, but rather try to in turn make him feel bad by arguing that him being upset with her is making her feel bad. This criticism seems to be mostly brought up by men, however since it is easy to simply adapt a meme to the opposite gender or simply use it

universally, it is not possible to tell if this is actually the case. To the awareness of the researcher no academic study exists on this type of memes.

Likewise, to the researcher's awareness there is no study confirming that this is in fact 'typical' female behavior. Some studies actually arguing that women apologize more than men (e.g. Turiman et al.; 2013: 958; Beckers & Bsati; 2006: 535), although it seems to be a lot more complicated, than simply one gender being 'better' at apologizing. It appears to be very likely that each gender often feels like they are the ones more ready to apologize, similar to how most people tend to value their own behavior and intentions better than those of others. However, to determine this clearly goes beyond the scope of this thesis. Doing deeper research into memes including this kind of sentiment might however be a promising subject for future studies.



Fig. 15 Meme: Difficult partners (#3)

<u>Transcription (MSA and Egyptian):</u>	<u>Translation:</u>
Text in upper picture (MSA): w- <sup>2</sup> in marra yawm min ġayri ru <sup>2</sup> yāk	Text in upper picture: And if a day goes by without your sight
Text in lower picture (EA): yaḷḷa fi dahya	Text in lower picture: never mind, fuck it

This meme consists of two pictures on top of each other. While not being a common meme template it is in the form of an image macro, with the text being laid onto the picture itself. The picture helps more easily identify the reference contained in this meme, but the text by itself would probably work as well. As such one could argue that it falls into the category of *word specific* (Yus; 2019: 112).

The pictures are in black and white and show a woman in an ornate dress, with a handkerchief in her hand. In the first picture she has her hands folded in front of her in an almost praying like pose, while in the second picture she has her arms wide open and smiles upwards.

The text is her direct speech. In the first picture she starts a lament, by saying: “And if a day goes by without seeing you”. Only to abruptly end it by strongly claiming that she does not care at all. We are to assume that the person she is talking to is most likely her lover.

The woman in the picture is the famous Egyptian singer Oum Kalthoum and the text from the first picture is a quote from her song *Awedt Einy*. In the first verse of this love song, she sings: “And if a day goes by without seeing you...it won't count as part of my life” (“Awedt Einy”; n.d.). However, in this meme, instead of finishing the phrase, she ends in the second picture by stating that she doesn't care at all by using quite a strong expression.

This is a good example of humor created by an incongruity-resolution, in which the reader faces an incongruity that does not fit with the expectation of what would be to follow (Yus; 2019: 110). In this case, the reader would expect the phrase in the first picture to end the same way, as in the song, or at least in a loving way. However, the opposite is the case. This is made even funnier, by contrasting Oum Kalthoum's poetic language with a rather vulgar second half.

In addition to being funny it might also serve a purpose of showing to others that one is too cool to care about love. Especially in the case of a woman, where it could be understood as a statement against the idea that she needs a man in her life to be complete.



Fig. 16 Meme: Difficult partners (#4)

<u>Transcription (Egyptian and MSA):</u>	<u>Translation:</u>
Header: iš-šēḥ ḥālīd al-gīndī: is-sitt illi ma-bitṣalliš lan tarā zōgaha fi ig-ganna.	Header: Sheikh Ḥālīd al-Gīndī: The woman which does not pray will not see her husband in paradise.
Lower picture: bīra ʿawza bīra	Lower picture: Beer, I (f) want beer

This meme is not in any typical layout or could even be seen as a merger of the modern and classic layout. Since the two pictures are stacked on top of each other it is safe to assume that the lower picture is meant as an answer to the upper one, and this is also, where the joke is created. In the taxonomy of Yus (2019) both pictures fall into different categories and need to be classified separately. The relationship of the upper picture to the text can be seen as *word specific*, since the picture does not add significantly to the joke and mostly illustrates its message (Yus; 2019: 109). The lower picture is essential to the meme, as without it we would not know that the lower text is spoken by a woman. Thus, it would fall into the interdependent category (Yus; 2019: 115).

On the upper picture we can see a man sitting and smiling. His fingers are touching each other in a gesture that is directed towards the camera, as if he was explaining something. The white screen behind him looking like it might be a white board or projector screen only adds further to this impression. Although only his upper body is visible, it is obvious that he is an Islamic scholar by his clothes and the round hat he is wearing. The picture on the bottom shows a woman gesturing with her hands in a demanding way, as if she was asking for something. The woman wears jewelry and appears to be dressed rather formally. Her facial expression seems agitated, maybe even frustrated.

The upper text is above the picture, like a meme in the modern layout and it quotes the scholar in the picture by stating that he, sheikh Ḥālīd al-Gīndī, said that a woman who does not pray will not see her husband in paradise. The lower picture has the text within the picture, in front of the woman, to signalize that this is her direct speech. She proclaims by stating repeatedly that she wants beer. It is unclear, why the sheikh's speech is further marked as such, although the picture would suffice to tell the audience that these are his words. It is possible that this is done to further highlight that these are his official words, or maybe the upper half was already a meme by itself that the author simply copied into the meme.

The upper picture is a picture of the famous Egyptian televangelist sheikh Ḥālīd al-Gīndī, who is regarded as being quite close to the political elite of the country (Aysha; 2011: 40) (there is no consensus on how to write his name in Latin characters with other possibilities being Khaled Al-Gundi or Al-Ginedy. He is well known for his TV-appearances, as well as for his *fatwās*. As a public figure and religious authority, he is somewhat controversial within Egypt (Galal; 2023: 271) not only because of his proximity to the regime, but also because of some of his views.

The picture on the bottom is a screenshot from an Egyptian movie called *ʿāyiz haqqī* (“Ayez haqqi”; n.d.) from the year 2003. The woman in the scene is actually saying: “air, I want air” because she has trouble breathing (Hafid google; 2021: 28:09). So, the text: “beer, I want beer” in the meme can be understood as someone needing beer very urgently, like a person suffocating needs air.

The joke seems to lie in the fact that the Sheikh is saying a woman, who does not live a pious lifestyle will not be reunited with her husband in afterlife, as a warning for women to live their life in accordance with religion. The assumption behind his words is that a wife will want to stay united with her husband even after death and therefore will want to avoid

anything jeopardizing this outcome. This is contrasted with the reaction of the woman, asking for beer to drink, an act considered unlawful and a sin in Islam, even if there exists some ambiguity (Matthee; 2014:102). By this she implicitly states that not only does she not mind to not see her husband in the afterlife, but also that she might even prefer not to see him again. Thereby she rather takes the warning of the Sheikh to be an instruction for her. This meme can be considered another example of an “I hate my wife” meme, as we already saw in example *Difficult partners (#1)* (Fig.13)

An interesting question, that is not within the scope of this study, is whether such a meme, mocking a religious man would be possible with any sheikh, and thus could be understood as a criticism on religious authorities or even religion as a whole. Another possibility might be to understand this meme as a direct critique on *Hālid al-Gundī* who, as a televangelist, has not only had to deal with allegations that he was only using religion to gain money (Galal; 2023: 271) but who lost many sympathies with the people of Egypt for his perceived collaboration with the regime even in the face of revolution (Aysha; 2011: 40).

#وحده سألت صاحبها الجواز حلو ولا وحش  
 قالت زي الكورونا أول 14 يوم مفيش اعراض  
 بعدها تحسى باختناق وضيق ف التنفس  
 وبعدها وانتى ومناعتك 😂😂



Fig. 17 Meme: Difficult partners (#5)

<u>Transcription (Egyptian):</u>	<u>Translation:</u>
Header: #waḥḍa saʿalit ṣaḥbitha ig-gawāz ḥilw walla wiḥiš	Header: #One [woman] asked her friend (f): Is marriage good or bad?
ʿālit zayy il-korūna ʿawwil aḥbaʿṭāṣar yōm ma-fiš aʿrāḍ	She said it's like Corona, the first fourteen days there are no symptoms.
baʿdaha ṭḥiss b-iḥtināq w-ḍayyiʿ fi-l-tanaffus	After that you feel suffocated and tight in your breathing.
baʿdaha w-inti w-manāʿtik (2x laughing while crying emoji)	And after that it's you (f) and your immune system.

This meme is also in the modern layout although at the same time being different from previous memes, as the picture serves to rather underline the text, than to elaborate on the text. The text in the header itself is already a complete joke without the picture and could be told without any visual clues, making it fall into the category of *word specific* (Yus; 2019: 109).

The picture shows a woman standing up and having her eyes closed in what appears to be frustration with someone or something. She wears a blue ornate dress, big earrings and her hair also appears to be styled.

In the text above the picture one woman asks a female friend what it is like to be married, who responds by comparing being married to getting infected by Covid-19. She elaborates that in the beginning, just like in the incubation phase, everything is still fine. After this honeymoon phase marriage becomes painful and suffocating like a Covid-19 infection. After this one gets used to the reality of being married and it depends on one's 'immunity' how one fares from there. 'Immunity' probably referring to stress tolerance.

The picture is a screenshot from the Egyptian series *I will not live in my Father's robes* (Lan i'īš fi gelbab abī) which is about the son of a successful merchant not wanting to join the family business and rather going his own way in life (Ln A3esh Fe Gelbab Aby; n.d.). The picture is a screenshot that shows his mother being annoyed and exhausted with him, which is the emotion that the picture is supposed to convey here.

Something peculiar is also the number sign, or 'hashtag', at the beginning of the text. While not common in memes at all, the 'hashtag' usually signals relationships with topics. This is most famous on the social media platform Twitter, but also used on other platforms. In this case, the hashtag could indicate that the text itself is one complete paragraph by itself, as it is sometimes used in enumerations. It could, of course, also be understood as a numbers sign, but this seems unlikely, as there is no number behind. While being peculiar it is very likely that this 'hashtag' serves no further purpose to mark the beginning of a paragraph.

The joke within this meme lies in the strange comparison of marriage with a contagious and possibly dangerous disease, but also within the fact that usually married people are expected to promote marriage to younger people and not discourage them from marrying. Marriage is not only portrayed unfavorably, but also as something that never really becomes good and one simply gets used to.

In the context of the picture, this meme can be understood as the familiar trope of husbands driving their wives crazy. Thus it could be seen as another "I hate my wife" meme. Alternatively it could also be understood however as a criticism of marriage in general and as a message to young women to be aware of the hardships of married life and to not just rush into marriage.

It could thus also be counted to the following subgroup of memes criticising the dominant concept of marriage.

### 4.3. Criticism of marriage

As we can see in the previous meme it is not always easy to separate criticism of one's own partner and relationship from the criticism of marriage and relationships as a whole. However, while in the previous subgroup the criticism underlying within the memes was mostly directed at one's own partner, or men and women as a whole, the criticism in the following memes seems to rather be directed at traditions and conventions, than any single person. This is nowhere stronger than in the following first meme, which of all memes in the corpus also has by far the most direct societal criticism and strongest underlying message.



Fig. 18 Meme: Criticism of marriage (#1)

<u>Transcription (MSA):</u>	<u>Translation:</u>
Upper text: al-qāyimatū w-aš-šabkatu taslī'un li-l-mar'ati	Upper text: The bridal list and the dowry are the commodification of a woman
Lower text: lakinna t-ta'adduda w-aṭ-ṭalāqa š-šafahīya w-aṭ-ṭalāqa l-ġiyābīya w-ar-radd al-ġiyābīya wa-bayta ṭ-ṭā'ati w-al-'iġtiṣāb az-zawġīya takrīmun li-l-mar'ati	Lower text: but polygamy, oral divorce, divorce in absence, remarriage in absence, obedience of the house and rape in marriage are honoring women

This meme can be considered an archetypical example of an image macro in the classical layout. In the early days of internet memes, it was quite common to see this type of meme which is a hybrid of two memes known as the ‘socially awkward penguin’ and ‘awesome awkward penguin’. According to the internet meme encyclopedia Know Your Meme, the ‘socially awkward penguin’ meme is all in blue and used to describe “uncomfortable life situations, highlighting an exceptionally clumsy or inelegant response” (“Socially Awkward Penguin”; n.d.).

The ‘awesome awkward penguin’ meme on the other hand is using red as the background and has the penguin mirrored along its y-axis. It is used as an antithesis to describe situations in which a person did something awkward but managed to turn it into something he or she is proud of (“Socially Awkward Penguin”; n.d.). The hybrid combines half of the former with half of the latter meme. Both red or blue can be on top, and the choice depends on whether the author wants to describe a situation that started out uncomfortable and turned out good, or if it was a good situation that turned uncomfortable (“Socially Awkward Penguin”; n.d.). Here the red side, which is meant to portray a good situation or outcome, is on top and the blue side, meaning to portrait an uncomfortable or awkward situation, is on the bottom. This means that the meme describes something that starts out good and turns bad later. Following Yus, this meme has to be regarded as *interdependent* since without the picture vital information would be lost about the message of the meme (Yus; 2019: 115)

The argument itself starts by criticizing the Egyptian marital traditions of *qāyma* and *šabka* as a commodification of women. This part is marked as positive by the red background. The argument then however proceeds to name other aspects of traditional Islamic marriage, namely polygamy, verbal divorce, divorce in absence (of the woman), as well as remarriage in absence, the so called ‘house of obedience’ and rape within marriage. Those aspects the argument states, contrary to the aforementioned two, are practices that honor women. This second part is held in blue, to visualize that this proclamation is seen as negative.

All concepts and topics surrounding marriage in this meme are complex and the topic of vicious social and legal debate. The following explanations are meant as introductions to the concepts and criticisms raised in this meme and are thus presented very simplified.

Firstly, the *šabka* is a form of dowry given to the bride to be. Ferrero (2015) describes the *šabka* as follows:

*“The shabka is the amount of gold that the groom gives the bride as an engagement gift and, depending on his economic prospects, can range from a simple ring to a large amount of gold. The delivery of the jewels is a public celebration that is considered the official engagement. This agreement may be rescinded by simply returning the gold received.” (Ferrero; 2015:5).*

The *šabka* is almost always exclusively paid by the groom and stays the exclusive property of the wife even after a divorce. It is meant to act as a sort of insurance for her (Singerman & Ibrahim; 2003: 22-23). For the man on the other hand it is one extra financial burden he has to stem, if he wants to get married (Singerman & Ibrahim; 2003: 21). This might be even further increased by rising gold prices, as well as rising expectations by the women especially towards those earning money abroad (Ferrero; 2015:4).

The *qāyma*, which in proper MSA should actually be spelled *qāʾima*, on the other hand is an Egyptian wedding tradition that can also simply be translated as ‘the list’. It is a sort of inventory that exactly lists the furniture and prices the family of the bride, or in some cases the wife herself, contributed to the founding of the couple’s new household. In case of a divorce the husband is expected to repay this as part of the settlement which at least in some cases has led to families using this as way of leverage against divorce. By inflating the price of the items on the list families of brides can drive up the price of a divorce for the husband (Norbakk; 2018: 49).

So, as we can see both these practices albeit in a different way, drastically increase the price of marriage for men. The total sums this accumulates to are no small amounts, as statistic tells us that in Egypt the average cost of marriage is a whopping eleven times the annual household expenditure per capita with this going up to twelve times in some rural areas (Singerman & Ibrahim; 2003: 21). This makes achieving marriage no small feat for an average Egyptian man, strongly influencing their life choices on career, education or migration already years before marriage (Singerman & Ibrahim; 2003: 23). This has led to arguments from men criticising that getting married has become more about trying to afford it financially than anything else, thus reducing marriage to a business transaction, in which it feels almost like ‘buying’ a wife, and not like finding a partner for life.

In the blue part, on the other hand, the first topic we see criticized is that of polygamy. Islam permits polygamy however a big part of the Muslim world agrees that it does not generally recommend it (Odine; 2013: 8). Polygamy is possible for men only, who can marry up to four

wives at the same time. Not all Arab countries allow polygamy, such as Tunisia, and some only allow it under certain circumstances. Examples of countries permitting polygamy are Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE, Libya, Jordan, Morocco, Lebanon, and Egypt (Nydell; 2012: 44), from where this meme likely stems. It should however be understood that most men, as well as women, prefer monogamous relationships, with the percentage of polygamous marriages being about 1-2% on average in the Arab world, with some regional differences (Nydell; 2012: 43). Nonetheless its mere existence is a topic of hot debate, with many parts of Arab society objecting to it (Nydell; 2012: 43). Apart from the obvious inequality that only men can practice polygamy, the most common criticism of polygamy is the effect it has on the first wife, who in many cases will feel replaced and cast aside.

*“In Saudi Arabia, Hana Hajjar draws pictures depicting how a woman feels when her husband takes a second, or even third wife. She draws how the man’s action rips apart the woman’s heart.”* (Odine; 2013: 8)

Next is the concept of verbal or oral divorce or *ṭalāq šaffahī*. It describes a divorce, only available to the husband, where he can simply divorce his wife instantaneously by uttering his wish to divorce her three times and without having to give any reason (Bani & Pate; 2015: 138). It is mostly a concept of Sunni Islam, as it does not exist in this oral form in Shia Islam. However the Sunni schools of Islam are fairly homogenous in their concept of verbal divorce (Bani & Pate; 2015: 139).

*“No specific formula or use of any particular word is required to constitute a valid talaah. Any expression which clearly indicates the husband’s desire to break the marriage is sufficient. It need not be made in the presence of the witnesses.”* (Bani & Pate; 2015: 139)

In most situations such a divorce is regarded as valid, even when uttered in a state of (voluntary) intoxication or as a jest (Bani & Pate; 2015: 138). A woman on the other hand does not have such possibilities according to strict religious tradition. She can only divorce her husband if he transfers such a right to her under an agreement or if there exists a valid reason, such e.g. false charges of adultery, insanity, or impotency of the husband (Bani & Pate; 2015: 139). Here again the problem is not only the inequality in choice, but also the power a husband has over his wife, as generally a divorce does not mean a worse financial situation for him. The wife on the other hand generally experiences a drop in her living

standards and material insecurity because of divorce (Sonneveld; 2010: 113) since in most cases the man is the bread winner.

The *ṭalāq al-ġiyābī* mentioned in the meme criticizes the aforementioned right of a husband to divorce his wife in a legally binding manner, without her consent being needed and even if she is not present while enacting the divorce. So, in addition to not needing to name any reason he does not even have to inform her for it to be valid. There are extra laws in many countries, e.g. in Egypt that oblige a man to inform his wife of the divorce and also to officially register the divorce for it to become legally effective (Rehman; 2007: 119), but this still means that a divorce by the husband can be entirely without consulting or involving his wife. This, of course, creates a high level of insecurity on her behalf, as a divorce could basically happen at any time if her husband feels like it and could even happen without her having the possibility to speak to him about it.

The mentioned *radd al-ġābī* is also a part of this, in that it means that he also has the unilateral power to walk back on the divorce within a set waiting period of three months known as *al-ʿidda*. Within this time, he can recall his divorce and thus render it null and void. While this period is meant to determine, whether she is pregnant from him and entitled to further maintenance (Fluehr-Lobban & Bardsley-Sirois; 1990: 40), it is also easy to see how it makes a unilateral divorce by the husband even more difficult for the wife. Not only does he have the power to divorce her anytime he wishes to do so, but he can also reverse his decision anytime within three months keeping her in a state of insecurity about her future. Just like with the divorce neither her agreement, nor her presence are required to effectively annul the divorce.

While many of the criticized concepts go far beyond the Egyptian context, the next concept of *bayt at-ṭāʿa* is one that is rather regional. Usually translated with ‘House of Obedience’, it is generally understood as the court enforced obedience of a wife to her husband, in particular in regard to her living with him (Shaham; 2009). Since according to Islamic law, and by extension many national laws, a wife is entitled to dowry and maintenance by her husband and in turn he is entitled to sexual access and obedience by his wife, it is argued that a woman who removes herself from the conjugal home is being disobedient and loses her right to maintenance. There are of course valid reasons for her to do so, such as abuse by the husband or the house not being an appropriate Islamic living space (Fluehr-Lobban & Bardsley-Sirois; 1990: 40-41). If however, she cannot prove any of these reasons the husband has the possibility of asking a court to declare her as disobedient which mandates her to go back to

him and frees him of his obligation to pay maintenance to her until she has complied (Shehada; 2009: 38). In the past this order could even be enforced through the police by physical force in Egypt and Sudan, until the end of the 1960s when the law was changed, although there is evidence that enforcement continued up until the 1980s (Fluehr-Lobban & Bardsley-Sirois; 1990: 41). Calls for the abolition of the enforcement of these orders through the police were already existing decades before, however those who argued against the abolition stated that if a man could be put in jail for not paying maintenance to his wife, he should also have means of enforcing his legal rights (Shehada; 2009: 38). Even though today there is no longer any Arab country in which a woman can be forced to return to her husband's house, it should be noted that the legal concept itself still appears to exist not only in Egypt and Sudan, but also in Israel and the Palestinian territories, where it however appears to be somewhat reluctantly applied by judges (Shehada; 2009: 35). And while it is no longer enforced through physical force, the decision by a court of law declaring her 'disobedient' can still put significant pressure on her to submit, since she is then trapped in a legal limbo state, where she is not entitled to maintenance but cannot remarry, since her marriage contract stays in effect. If her husband chooses to, he can prolong this state for the rest of her life (Shehada; 2009: 35). Additionally declaring her disobedient not only tarnishes her reputation, but also that of her family which can lead to negative consequences for them in the long term and further increases pressure on her to submit (Shehada; 2009: 42-43).

The last topic criticized, not only in this meme but also broadly by international organizations, is that of marital rape. In almost all Arab countries nonconsensual sex within a marriage, perpetrated by the husband, is not punishable by law and not legally considered to be rape. And even in the few countries, where marital rape is criminalized, such as Tunisia, it is reported that these laws are only applied in rare cases (Kehoe; 2013). This comes down to the aforementioned understanding of marriage, as a sort of deal between the two partners, in which the wife is entitled to dowry and maintenance by her husband and in turn he is entitled to sexual access and obedience by his wife (Fluehr-Lobban & Bardsley-Sirois; 1990: 40). The legal argument goes that just as he is not allowed to withhold maintenance from her without valid reason, she is not allowed to withhold sex from him if she is (Fluehr-Lobban & Bardsley-Sirois; 1990: 40).

It seems that the mentioning of all the concepts within the blue part of the meme, is meant to criticize the hypocrisy of the person making the argument within the red part of the meme. By criticizing two aspects of marriage that are presumably problematic towards the status of

women, but in fact more problematic for men, and ignoring or maybe even praising other practices that are arguably even worse for women it shows that the argument is not really about the rights of women. Thus, the whole meme could be understood by someone contrasting the criticized concept with those not criticized and thus showing the cognitive dissonance inherent in this argumentation.

If we interpret the meme as two people arguing, it could be understood as simple whataboutism, it might however go even deeper than this, as the discussion taking place could be understood as an argument between the male, and the female point of view. If we assume the red upper half to be a man talking and the blue lower half to be a female - which would also be in line with classic gendered color coding – we see the man arguing against the practices, within traditional marriage that are a burden to men. The woman then reacts ironically by mentioning other practices which are far more damaging to women and sarcastically states that these are in contrast honoring women.

In any case, it seems clear that the sentence in the blue lower half is meant sarcastically and in order to ridicule the red upper half. At first it seems strange that the criticism in the upper half is met with such aggressive sarcasm. It is not difficult to understand this point of view, as the costs of marriage in Egypt, but also in the rest of the Arab world, as mentioned before are truly staggering. Since marriage is putting such financial pressure on men, forcing them to wisely choose their lives and careers years in advance to be able to marry (Singerman & Ibrahim; 2003: 23) or not being able to marry at all, it is easy to see how getting married can start to feel more like a business transaction and less like the romantic quest for a life partner. This after all cannot be in the interest of the woman either, one would think, since putting a price tag on her somewhat commodifies her, as the meme states, and it could potentially mean that she might miss out on marrying someone she might love dearly, simply because he is not able to raise the amount necessary to marry her.

However, what we forget here is that the *šabka* directly goes to her and becomes her exclusive property which nobody can take away from her and that the *qāyima* functions as a guarantee against sudden divorce by her husband, as in that case he becomes financially liable for the items on the list. Thus, while not purely positive for women either these two traditions mostly work in their favor. This becomes especially important when we remember the aforementioned concept of marriage as a deal between the partners with rights and duties for both of them. When we remember that maintenance is the main benefit of a wife, while she is expected to be obedient and sexually willing in return we can understand why the abolition of

even a part of the duty of maintenance might seem unfair to a woman, if in return women are not released from their obligation to be obedient or sexually willing, both aspects that we find at the heart of concepts such as house of obedience or the permissibility of marital rape. In this vein we can understand the meme as a criticism and exposing of a standpoint that cloaks itself in a liberal and feminist appearance, when it in fact only seeks to strengthen the position of men in marriage.

In the case of the meme at hand we can see a slight variation of the original idea, as the meme originally was used to describe social situations, and in this case the meme is used to describe an argument that starts out sensible and turns unreasonable. However, it could also be understood as a discussion between two people with the first person stating their point comfortably and the other person making him or her loose face with the answer. This would bring this meme closer to its original idea.



Fig. 19 Meme: Criticism of marriage (#2)

<u>Transcription (Gulf Arabic):</u>	<u>Translation:</u>
Header: ?Inti bass wāfigi w-ana b-adallilič u-b-afarfirič bi-l-šālam killu.... Hiyya baʿad ṭalāṭa sanawāt (laughing while crying emoji) (downwards pointing hand emoji)	Header: You (f) just say yes, and I will spoil you and show you the whole world...she after 3 years

In this meme that again follows the modern layout by having the text outside, rather than inside the picture, the picture itself is an integral part of the joke. This places it clearly in the *interdependent* category of memes (Yus; 2019: 115).

In the picture we can see a cat sitting like a human on her behind with her back leaned against a wall. The cat is sitting on top of a children's bed with a litter of four kittens on its left and two full baby bottles next to it. On its lap there is yet another kitten and a baby bottle. The cat itself is dressed in a blue t-shirt and very baggy green pants. These clothes seem like one would rather wear them indoors, than outdoors, as they are not particularly stylish. Both the t-shirt and pants mask the cat's body, of which only its head and forelegs are visible, giving her an almost human appearance.

In the header we can see the direct speech of an unspecified person. By context we can deduce that it is a man trying to propose to a woman in the dialect of the Persian Gulf. He tells her that if she agrees (to marry him), he will spoil her and show her the world. This is followed by the author of the meme challenging this by claiming that the picture, which shows a cat dressed up as a mother surrounded by kittens, is how the women's life will really look like 3 years after she agreed to the proposal of the man.

As in the previous memes the direct speech is not marked by quotation marks or marked by the specification of the speaker. Rather the author uses dot dot dot to separate the direct speech from his or her statement. The dot dot dot most likely also serves to emphasize the passing of time and how her being a mother is the consequence of the man convincing her to marry him. The header ends with a laughing emoji and a downwards pointing emoji. This is interesting, as neither of these emojis would be necessary to understand the meme as it is. By simply recognizing this by its form as a meme, it is clear that the picture underneath is connected to the text. Similarly, there is no point in adding a laughing emoji to make a reader understand the humorous nature of the meme.

While not mentioning marriage directly, this meme is most likely to be understood as a critique of traditional marriage patterns and how they tend to 'trap' women in their role as mothers, bound to the household and childcare. This feminist critique found in many cultures stresses the fact that getting married and by consequence becoming mothers often means that women must give up their dreams. Furthermore, the critique goes, societies in traditional marriage patterns tend to downplay this consequence, thus misleading young women. This is

what we see in this meme, where the man insinuates that marrying him would mean the fulfillment of her desires, while after only three years she has several children and must take care of them, presumably with little help from her husband and little time for anything else in her life.

For the Arab world, a study by Segal-Engelchin et al. (2016) among Arab Muslim women in Israel who married early illustrates this point. In asking both young adolescent women, who were engaged, and older women, who had married at a young age, they compared their motivations and the outcomes. Through this they found that young adolescent women about to marry saw marriage as a way of attaining freedom, not only from their restrictive families, but also from poverty among other things (Segal-Engelchin et al.; 2016: 8). For many of them the idea of having their own house and ownership of space was a strong motivation to get married, while they felt confident about correctly judging the risks they took by this (Segal-Engelchin et al.; 2016: 10). The interviews with married women however revealed that quite the opposite was the case and that all of them, even the ones that were happily married, regretted their decision to marry early, and would not want their daughters to marry as early as they did (Segal-Engelchin et al.; 2016: 19-20). They felt that through marrying early they missed out on an education and financial security coming from being able to work (Segal-Engelchin et al.; 2016: 15). Many of them even spoke of their wish of actively warning young women against the choices they took (Segal-Engelchin et al.; 2016: 22).

In this light one could very well interpret this meme not only as a joke, as the emojis suggest, but also as a quite serious warning towards young women to consider the risks and drawbacks of being too eager to marry. In a society in which everyone is expected to marry (Nydell; 2012: 23) and with marriage going beyond love as well as being strongly directed by social considerations (Segal-Engelchin et al.; 2016: 4) it is easy for young people to have an idealized picture of marriage. There are those wanting to break with this notion in order to save young women from making the mistake of naively getting married only to later be confronted by the rather harsh reality of being a housewife, with household and child raising burdens, while simultaneously feeling their life being very boring and stagnant (Segal-Engelchin et al.; 2016: 18).

It should be noted however that while this idea can be understood as a fight against rigid traditions, it generally seems not to be a criticism of marriage itself. Within the aforementioned study even those women who were unhappily married and divorced at a

young age still dreamt of a happy marriage, identifying their mistake in marrying too early, not in marrying at all (Segal-Engelchin et al.; 2016: 18).



Fig. 20 Meme: Criticism of marriage (#3)

<u>Transcription (Egyptian):</u>	<u>Translation:</u>
Upper right hand corner: ?ahlaha	Upper right hand corner: her family
Upper middle: ig-gēš	Upper middle: the military (service)
Middle right hand side: zurūfak il-maddiyya	Middle right hand side: your financial circumstances
Middle: inta	Middle: you (m)
Middle left hand side: il-ʿalʿa illi ?aʿda fi bēt abūha bititʿallif zayy il-bahāyim	Middle left hand side: the leech which is sitting (f) in her father's house, being fed like a (farm) animal
Lower left hand corner: klāsikāl ārt mīmz	Lower left hand corner: classical art memes

This meme belongs to the genre of classical art memes, as the signature in the lower left hand corner further points out. This is a type of meme, where pieces of classical art are taken and interpreted in a different way through the addition of text. They can take the form of an image macro, photoshops or any other type of meme. Often however, as is the case here, the humorous effect is accomplished by reinterpreting parts of the picture by labeling them. This means that most classical art memes fall by their very nature into the *interdependent* category of memes (Yus; 2019: 115). This one is no exception.

In the picture we can see a man beset on his right by what appears to be soldiers and fighting them off with one hand. They seem to be overpowering him and are tying a rope around him. Meanwhile he is looking at a woman lying to his left, who looks back at him. His look is desperate, almost pleading, while she too looks at him with a sad look and raises her arm towards him.

The man in the middle is labeled as 'you', while the enemies are labeled as 'military service', 'your financial circumstances' and 'her family'. The woman is labeled to be 'the lazy leech that still lives at her father's house and is fed like a farm animal'. From context we can assume that she is meant to signify his girlfriend or fiancé.

The picture is the painting *The Capture of Samson* from the Flemish painter Anthonis van Dyck. As the name suggests, it depicts the capture of the biblical hero Samson by the Philistines, who are aided by his lover Delilah. After Delilah had discovered that the source of Samson's extraordinary strength was his hair she cut it off in his sleep and by doing this left him powerless towards his enemies. The painting of van Dyck concentrates strongly on the ambivalent feelings of the protagonists ("The Capture of Samson"; n.d.). Although Delilah was the one who betrayed Samson she reaches for him, almost as to stop his captors from taking him away. Samson on the other hand looks at Delilah in pain over her betrayal, while almost seemingly lost in thought trying to resist his enemies which are tying ropes around him.

The meme reinterprets this scene by labeling *Samson* as the reader of the meme, who, like *Samson* by his enemies, is overwhelmed by his financial situation and the mandatory military service. During this struggle the family of his girlfriend/fiancé/wife stands watching in the form of one of *Samson's* enemies, who stands by ready to also draw his sword on him.

It can be assumed that his financial situation is rather challenging, especially if he intends to marry. As mentioned previously mentioned in *Meme: Criticism of marriage (#1)* (Fig 18.) in Egypt the cost of marriage usually amounts to several times the annual income of one person and if they plan to marry, they will have to plan this very well in advance (Singerman & Ibrahim; 2003: 23).

It is also obvious how mandatory military service is adding to his struggles. In Egypt, where this meme most likely comes from, all males between the ages of 18 to 30 have to serve a compulsory military service that can last between one to three years depending on the education of the conscript (Central Intelligence Agency, 2023). The conscripts are paid

relatively poorly and far beneath the salary they could potentially make in the private sector (McGregor; 2006: 283). In recent years other Arab countries have also reintroduced the mandatory military service for men, although conditions here vary (Ardemagni; 2023). However, it is probably safe to say that perhaps beside some sense of pride to serve their country, most men being conscripted in any country in the world feel that they could have used this time more productive if they had been left the choice and therefore see it as a disadvantage.

Her family meanwhile is depicted as standing by, watching him struggle, but also prepared to further add to his struggles, as depicted by the enemy having his hand on his sword, ready to draw at any moment. This might not be completely unfounded as, in Egypt there is a tradition of the family of the bride attempting to tire out the to-be husband to test his financial stability. An indication of this is mounting criticism of families of brides putting too much pressure on young men by having too high expectations (Singerman & Ibrahim; 2003: 20).

*Delilah* meanwhile is labeled as the girlfriend/fiancé/wife of the protagonist. The exact relation is not visible as she is simply labeled as a ‘leech’, a parasite, presumably for metaphorically sucking him dry financially. The label goes further into detail, stating that she is doing this, while comfortably living in the home of her parents, where she is spoiled by her family. The words chosen for her are quite hostile, as neither the word leech, a blood-sucking parasite, has any positive connotation, nor the comparison to a farm animal being fed is something that could be understood in a non-offensive way. Quite directly she is meant to be portrayed as selfish and lazy, making his life harder, which is already clear through the depiction as *Delilah*. Instead of being a partner or ally to him, she actually somewhat betrays him, by joining in with the rest of his problems to make his life and finances more difficult.

This meme, in contrast to the previous ones, seems to best be understood as a criticism of the traditional relationship model from the perspective of a young man. In Egypt, where this meme most likely stems from, a 2003 study found that the cost of marriage ranged between four to six times the GDP per capita (Singerman & Ibrahim; 2003: 21). And while the contribution of the bride and her family has grown over the years, especially in urban areas, the vast majority of expenses are still paid by the groom and his family (Singerman & Ibrahim; 2003: 22). Interestingly education appears to have no significant effect on the sharing of costs between groom and bride (Singerman & Ibrahim; 2003: 23). There have been some efforts, especially by religious groups, to make marriage more affordable again, by

trying to establish ideas of marriage, with low or token bride prices (Singerman & Ibrahim; 2003: 20). However, this seems to only be moderately popular.

While certainly having problematic consequences for young men, there might also be good reasons, why women are reluctant to give up their financial privileges, when it comes to marriage. Singerman & Ibrahim (2003) for example note:

*“that marriage represents, for women in particular, who tend to inherit less than men for both religious and customary reasons, the largest inter-generational transfer of assets in their lifetime.” (Singerman & Ibrahim; 2003: 23)*

The criticism on the traditional system of marriage in this meme is connected to the criticism within the previous meme *Criticism of marriage (#1)* (Fig. 18), which points out that abolishing financial obligations of husbands mean a disadvantage to women, who are already quite disadvantaged within the traditional concept of marriage as a whole. It is the criticism from an exclusively male perspective that disregards the negative effects of traditional marriage towards women, or at least sees them as unimportant in comparison. While many young Arab men, in particular Egyptians might be able to identify with this meme, it stands to reason that it would create outrage from the feminist perspective and spark reactions not unlike the blue part of the meme *Criticism of marriage (#1)* (Fig. 18).



Fig. 21 Meme: Criticism of marriage (#4)

<u>Transcription (Egyptian):</u>	<u>Translation:</u>
Upper text: maḥkamit il-ʿusra	Upper text: family court
Lower text: ya waʿdi ya waʿdi	Lower text: oh my, oh my

This meme is another example of a meme, where a picture is reinterpreted by labeling the objects within. Within the taxonomy of Yus (2019) it would be best described as *additive*, as it would be possible to have this meme without the picture, but it would most likely not have the same humoristic effect (Yus; 2019: 112).

It consists of a picture of a cat being held by a person in a pink shirt and appearing to wear some kind of jeans jacket. The cat is wearing sunglasses and has a half-smoked cigarette in its mouth. This makes the cat look unbothered and detached. One could argue that it looks cool which is a quite common association with someone wearing sunglasses, as their eyes and by extent their emotions are masked. The cigarette on the other hand can have different associations, however, it is commonly understood as a way of dealing with stressful situations, as the nicotine within the cigarettes have a calming effect on those who smoke them, especially those addicted to them. Because of this, showing someone smoking a cigarette can be a way of showing them processing a traumatic or stressful experience.

The labels tell us that this meme is about the family court most likely in Egypt, as the text is in Egyptian dialect. In particular, the text labels the cat as “family court”. The text on the bottom of the picture is supposed to be the direct speech of the cat (family court) expressing

shock and or astonishment. By saying “oh my, oh my” the family court is portrayed as neutral and detached, but nonetheless shocked by what it must witness.

Within the meme there is also the name tag “hagar nour-elden” written in the Latin alphabet. Since it is not written in Arabic, we can assume that it is not part of the meme, but rather the name of the author. The information present in the meme is, however, not really sufficient to properly identify the author. It is not an uncommon female name and upon googling it one can find many profiles with this name. So, while it can be assumed that this is the name of the author, it is not really clear anymore who this person was. Also, there is a symbol in the upper right-hand corner of the meme which could be a watermark from the website or app used to create this meme. Again however, an online search of this image brought no clear results.

The so-called family courts mentioned in this meme were established in Egypt in 2004 in order to centralize all legal cases pertaining to personal status and as a way mediate marital disputes (Sonneveld; 2010: 110). This mediation is meant in particular for so called *hul'*-cases in which a woman wishes to unilaterally divorce her husband without the requirement for a specific reason (Sonneveld; 2010: 100). This form of divorce was first implemented in the Egyptian legal system in 2000 and requires the wife to pay back her dowry and renounce all legal claims (Sonneveld; 2010: 100). Since this can be damaging to the status of both partners, the courts try to usually mediate for a consensual divorce which spares husbands from humiliation and usually has more favorable financial outcomes for the wives as well (Sonneveld; 2010: 114). Interestingly Sonneveld (2010), who studied these courts a few years after they were established, somewhat seems to confirm the idea of this meme of judges and employees of the court being neutral and professional on the outside while keeping their private opinions to themselves. She found e.g. that at work and in formal settings many judges appeared to agree with the liberal nature of the laws they exercise. In private however, many of them had a very negative view on women seeking unilateral divorce. (Sonneveld; 2010: 108). Of course, it is not clear if this is precisely what the meme tries to point out.

The meme stays all in all quite vague about what it wants to express, but it seems reasonable to assume it being a commentary on how chaotic and messy divorces can and often do become, as the typical reason to come to a family court would be a divorce.

Divorce being a chaotic and messy process is nothing special to the Arab world. When two partners separate there is often already bad blood between both sides. The fact that usually families get directly involved as well (Sonneveld; 2010: 114) only adds to the chaos and puts

pressure on those getting divorced. In this emotional situation it is also quite common for either side to go to great lengths in order to win against the other side. Both partners want to avoid the shame of being divorced and being viewed as ‘tossed out’ by the other (Sonneveld; 2010: 113).

Additionally to this, since as mentioned in the meme *Criticism of marriage (#1)* (Fig. 18), marriage is a costly endeavor, so is divorce quite a costly matter for most marriages in Egypt and the Arab world. Women want to retain their dowry which under certain circumstances they are obliged to pay back, with some courts even forcing them to pay back more, than they actually received (Sonneveld; 2010: 105). The men on the other hand want to repossess as much of the money they paid to their wife as possible. So, it is not hard to see how the role of mediation of the family courts might be quite difficult at times. During all the drama employees of the family court which is generally only consulted if an out-of-court solution is unattainable, have to stay neutral and make sure that the law is upheld. They are not supposed to become emotionally invested in the cases, as they have to remain impartial. But them being humans they still silently pass their own personal judgments.

This is most likely what this meme is trying to express. One could argue that representing the employees of the court as a cool cat could be regarded as a compliment. In any case, there seems to be almost an admiration in this meme, for those employees who manage to keep their cool even when witnessing drama unfolding in front of them every day. Another possible, albeit complicated, explanation for this meme, is for it to be a commentary on the messy nature of divorces. As such it could as well be understood as possibly criticizing traditional marriage patterns in general, if the chaos of divorce is portrayed as such a typical outcome.



Fig. 22 Meme: Criticism of marriage (#5)

<u>Transcription (MSA):</u>	<u>Translation:</u>
Header: lā tatazawwaġī ʾin lam takun hādihī raddatu fiʿlihi ʿinda l-ḥuṣūli ʿalayki (black heart emoji) (panda emoji)	Header: Don't marry (f), if this is not the reaction he makes when he gets to have you

This is another meme in the modern layout. Interestingly, it appears to be mounted on a background of what appears to be the same picture from the meme but blurred and darkened. Going by the taxonomy of Yus (2019), this meme clearly belongs to the *interdependent* category, as the text itself would make no sense without the picture (Yus; 2019: 115).

The picture shows a man dressed in formal attire, who is cheering enthusiastically, as if he cannot believe his luck himself. While it is unclear, who the man is and where the picture was taken, it looks like it could be from a wedding in Egypt or possibly Syria. While many Arab countries, such as on the Arabian Peninsula usually prefer their traditional dresses for

weddings it is very common in Egypt (Taranski; 2023) and other neighbouring countries to get married in a Tuxedo and a black bowtie.

The header itself is written in standard Arabic and while directly addressing the reader is not marked as direct speech. This text tells the reader, specifically female readers, to not marry a man unless his reaction to being able to marry her is like the one in the picture. The text is followed by two emojis, a panda and a black heart. It is not entirely clear, what this is meant to signify. Generally, the panda emoji would be used to express cuteness, however in this case it might also, along with the black heart, be used to imitate the black and white tuxedo that the person in the picture is wearing.

Under the header is a second piece of text in the Latin alphabet, which reads ‘Insta:m0od.0’. This is presumably the profile name tag of the meme author. However, when looking on Instagram no account with this exact name can be found. Possibly the account has been deleted or the user simply changed the name, but it is also possible that it has not been posted publicly on social media and was further distributed in private chats.

Also notable is that there appears to be no joke whatsoever in this meme. The main purpose does not appear to be the entertainment of the reader, but rather to share an opinion. Unlike in the meme *Struggles of dating* (#3) (Fig. 9) however, this opinion is not a personal announcement, but is demanding something from others. Even more so, the reader is directly asked to agree with the opinion stated and to only marry a man, if he is openly enthusiastic about the prospect of marrying her.

While it is impossible to know the exact origin of this meme, especially since it is written in MSA, it has been acquired from a contact living in the Sultanate of Oman. At first glance one could understand this meme as a challenge to the still predominant system of arranged marriages that exist on the Arabian Peninsula. However, it might be more complicated than this. While it is true that family-arranged marriages are still the preferred way in most Arab societies (Nydell; 2012: 67) the Arab world has simultaneously followed global trends in shifting the focus of marriage away from economics and more towards romance and companionship (Inhorn & Naguib; 2022: 6). However, Inhorn & Naguib (2022) point out that the separation between arranged marriage vs. marriage out of love which we can often witness in literature might be too simplistic, as family-arranged marriages are not exclusive to love (Inhorn & Naguib; 2022: 6). While the marriage itself might be arranged by the families in most cases, this includes opportunities for the prospective bride and groom not only to get

acquainted but also to accept or reject the proposal. The extent to which an individual is given a say in this matter depends on their family (Nydell; 2012: 67). While in many cases the parents will try to find a partner for their child without being specifically asked, it is also possible that an individual chooses a partner for themselves, with the parents merely functioning as negotiators, since direct contact before marriage is frowned upon. A *ṣālōnāt* as mentioned in the meme: *Struggles of dating (#4)* (Fig. 12) is among the extremer examples of a family-arranged wedding.

However, in all this it is clear that the family has a strong influence and has ample opportunity to impede a marriage they don't agree with. Especially in rural areas, many families might also urge their children to marry first or second cousins, as it makes things considerably easier for the respective families since arising issues can be resolved within the family (Nydell; 2012: 67). Additionally, there is also strong pressure on individuals to get married as everyone is expected to get married, disregarding how they feel about it (Nydell; 2012: 23). So, it is plain to see, how, in the situation of a proposed marriage, someone might feel under pressure to accept a partner they are not sure about, simply to make their parents happy by getting married.

Here this meme demands the exact opposite of the reader by imploring them to only marry if their partner truly and openly desires them. The fact that the author, and by extension every person posting this meme, does not just claim these standards for their own lives, but also wants to convince others to do the same is quite interesting. Seeing that the text is clearly addressed to female readers it seems that this is the target group of the message. It might be that the goal, similar to the meme *Criticism of marriage (#2)* (Fig. 19), is to dissuade young women from being too hasty in getting married. While the message itself to only marry out of love could also be targeted towards men, it is unclear whether men would identify too much with this particular meme.

#### **4.4. Pressure to commit to a relationship**

As previously pointed out, many young people within the Arab world are under a strong pressure to get married and find a suitable partner. This pressure not only comes from the outside but also from within. As we have already seen, even throughout all criticism surrounding marriage, the concept itself is universally regarded as something positive and desirable. And while the fear of being left on the shelf is something that is quite universal

throughout cultures, it could be said that at least compared to the west this fear starts earlier for most young people within the Arab world.

Memes discussing this make up the largest group within this corpus, which might however be also due to the fact that both contacts providing these memes were unmarried and in their late twenties.



Fig. 23 Meme: Pressure to commit to a relationship (#1)

<u>Transcription (Egyptian):</u>	<u>Translation:</u>
Header: Ana irtabaṭṭ	Header: I got into a relationship
Ana tazawwagt	I married
Ana sāfart	I traveled
Ana taḥarragt	I graduated
W-inti/a?!	And you (f/m) ?!
Ana šuft il-fāṛ is-sundu? illi ?akal il-bundu? fō? saṭḥ il-fundu?	I saw the sunduk mouse that ate a hazelnut on the roof of the hotel

This meme belonging to the modern layout could be seen as an example of the *word specific* category, with the picture serving to merely illustrate the punchline but being unnecessary to the joke (Yus; 2019: 109).

The picture shows a middle-aged man dancing in what appears to be a changing room. He's dressed in a tucked in shirt, but has a tie hanging open around his neck which adds to the impression that he is in the middle of changing.

The text above sees a group of people talking with the protagonist, who speaks last. Each person talking is marked by a hyphen at the beginning of each line, except for the penultimate line. This is most likely meant to show that in this line everyone is talking, except for the protagonist. The first person proclaims to have gotten engaged, the second one to have gotten married, the third one used his or her time for traveling and the last says he or she finished university. After this exchange they directly address the person, from whose point of view the meme is being written by asking "And you?". The only thing this protagonist can think about in this situation is an Egyptian children's song, talking about how he saw a mouse eating a hazelnut on the top of a hotel.

This meme is most likely meant to address the feeling of many young people that their achievements lack behind those of their peers which especially becomes visible in meetings, such as school reunions or big festivities, such as marriages. When others brag about their accomplishments, it brings the protagonist in an uncomfortable situation, not really knowing what to talk about, as he or she has no comparable accomplishment to talk about and is reminded of his fears of falling behind. The stress of this situation makes the protagonist panic and recite a nonsensical song from their childhood in order to say anything at all.

The joke is that, since all the others started their sentence by saying "I" and proclaiming a verb in the past tense the beginning of the song appears to make sense within this conversation. Basically, everyone is mentioning something they did, and from a grammatical point of view seeing a mouse is no different. In terms of content however, it could, of course, not be more different from the previous sentences.

A notable grammatical feature within this meme are the diacritics on the question of "and you?". While diacritic markers are virtually nonexistent in dialects and usually are a sign of MSA this appears not to be the case here, as the "you" is clearly dialect. We can see this by the position of the hamza on the bottom of the alif, meaning that it is *inta*, as is typical in dialect, and not *?anta*, as would be correct in MSA. While there are no diacritics being used in

the rest of the text, it appears that the author has chosen to use these diacritics particularly in order to mark the word “you” as gender-neutral by adding both the diacritics of the male and the female ending at the same time. This is a rare case of a meme being marked as gender-neutral and the only example within the corpus of this study.

The name of the song is *El Far El Sondok* by Hamada Helal. It is from the Egyptian movie *This is love (il-hubb kida)* which was released in the year 2007 (“El Hob Kedah”; n.d.). The main character, who is trying to deal with the children of the woman he fell in love with performs this song at the end of the film together with one of the children (Aflam – أفلام; 2020: 1:24:20). It is not clear, what a *sundu*<sup>2</sup>-mouse is supposed to be as it is not a common Egyptian word and even Egyptian native speakers, who were asked in the making of this thesis did not recognize this word.

The man in the picture of the meme is the famous Egyptian actor Adel Emam dancing to a song however it does not seem entirely clear, why this picture was chosen for this meme as he is not dancing to the song within the meme. The screenshot is not from the movie *This is love* as Adel Emam did not feature in this one. The picture is actually a screenshot from the 1984 Egyptian comedy film *wahda bi-wahda* (“Wahda Bi Wahda”; n.d.). In this scene, we can see Adel Emam’s character dancing in a silly way while fantasizing about staying at home together with the female main character after she told him that he could stay with her (Al Masreya Al Lobnaneya المصرية اللبنانية; 2016: 1:32:05). It is most likely that this silly and lighthearted reaction is meant to be conveyed by the picture in this meme.

Next to *Adel Emam* in this picture there is a watermark which apparently someone tried to conceal by blackening it. The name however is still visible upon closer inspection and appears to read: ‘@MESHPUFF’. This is most likely the name of a social media profile, while the @ suggests that it might be a X (formerly Twitter) or an Instagram account. This of course is only a guess, as the @-Symbol is also widely used on other platforms.

When looking up @MESHPUFF online there exists both a X (formerly Twitter) and an Instagram account with this name as well as a Facebook profile. The only one of those still active however, appears to be the Instagram account, as the last visible activity on Facebook has been in 2015 with the newest post on X comes from 2013. When inspecting the Instagram account, one can find the meme in question posted on the 20<sup>th</sup> of December 2020. This one does not bear a watermark at all, suggesting that the meme in this thesis must have been altered at least two times since then. First, when someone added the watermark and then,

when someone tried to erase it. Whether this really is the origin of this meme, is, of course, impossible to find out conclusively.

It is interesting however that the author of the final version of this meme would go to such lengths as to black out the tag of the previous author. This could be seen as an attempt to claim ownership of the meme, but since there is no copyright on memes and it is very common to freely share them, this does not really answer the question why the final author deemed this necessary.

أفضل النساء يحصلن علي أسوأ الرجال وأفضل الرجال يحصلون  
علي أسوأ النساء



Fig. 24 Meme: Pressure to commit to a relationship (#2)

<u>Transcription (MSA and Egyptian):</u>	<u>Translation:</u>
Header (MSA): ʔafḍalu an-nisāʔi yaḥṣalna ʕalā ʔaswaʔi r-riḡāli wa-ʔafḍalu r-riḡali yaḥṣalūna ʕalā ʔaswa ʔi n-nisāʔi	Header: The best women get the worst men and the best men get the worst women
Text in picture (Egyptian): ana ma-ḥaṣalitš ʕala ḥāga ḥāliṣ	Text in picture: I didn't get anything at all

This meme is an image macro in the modern layout, again using a screenshot from an Egyptian film. In the taxonomy of Yus (2019) it would most likely fall into the *interdependent* category, as the picture not only helps to know who is talking, but also creates the joke (Yus; 2019: 115).

In the picture we can see a young man in a white shirt looking in strong disbelief, almost dumbfounded. Partially visible in the lower corner we can see the back of the head of another man, whom he appears to be talking to.

The text states the wisdom that the best women get the worst men, and conversely the best men get the worst women. Maybe this is direct speech from the person talking to the man in the shirt, but it might as well just be a common wisdom he is referring to. In contrast to this the man in the picture states that he didn't get anyone, thereby voicing his frustration at being single.

This wisdom, according to contacts and the internet, does not appear to be a commonly known saying. However, it appears like one of the multiple common wisdoms that exist among people relating to love and dating, so one can easily accept it as something that people might say. The frustration of the speaker could be understood that either he considers himself to be one of the best, or one of the worst people and thereby should have a partner. It could however also mean that he considers it unfair that even the worst man and women can find partners, but he, not being one of the worst, can't find anybody.

In the upper right-hand corner, we can see a name *Ahmed Sukhtian* in Latin script, most likely the name tag of the author of this meme. When searching for this name on Facebook we can find a profile with the same name of a Jordanian-born man currently living in Egypt. On this profile we can find many memes like this one, with the same name tag as this one. Most of these memes are also using pictures from Egyptian movies (Sukhtian; n.d.). This particular meme was posted in this profile on the 29<sup>th</sup> of July 2020 (Sukhtian; 2020).

The picture is a screenshot from the Egyptian comedy movie *A natural born fool (gabi minno fi)* from the year 2004 about a mentally challenged man, who wants to marry his girlfriend and tries to acquire the money for this. The person in the picture is the main character being played by Hani Ramzi ("Ghabi Minnuh Fih"; n.d.). In the scene of the screenshot the main character is arguing with the uncle of his fiancé, Dabash, who wanted him to rob a villa together. After the failed attempt Dabash explains to him, why it is permissible to steal from the wealthy. He begins by stating that there are two kinds of people in the world: Those who have a lot and those who have nothing which gets the main character to burst out that he has absolutely nothing. So, while the text in the picture is not the exact text from the movie it is very close (zyad aflam; 2021: 34:57). This suggests that the author is not only relying on the picture itself, but also on the shared knowledge of his audience about this movie, as we have

seen in previous memes. While anyone can see the dumbfounded disbelief in the face of the man in the picture, only those who know the film know how prompt and emphatic he states that he has got nothing at all. This gives this meme an extra layer of meaning only accessible through background knowledge in Egyptian films.

While certainly being humorous this meme also relies on the viewers ability to relate to this situation. It stands to assume that most people know the feeling of frustration, when everyone else seems to be able to find a partner, but oneself is lonely. In addition to being funny, such memes can be seen as a coping mechanism, in which lonely people can voice their frustration about not having a partner in a socially acceptable and face-saving way. After all it might lead to uncomfortable questions if they were directly complaining about their lack of romantic success, which might even see their character and them being put into question. So, by veiling the complaint as a joke it could be seen as a way of talking about their feelings in a subtle way.

While by simply complaining about one's loneliness the usual reaction of others would be one of pity, in this case joking about it signals to others that while not happy about this situation one can deal with it. This is also more comfortable, to others, who might feel pressured to help by a direct complaint.

Linguistically we can see a quite common mistake that is especially typical for native speakers of EA. In the header, as well as in the text within the picture, *‘ala* is spelled incorrectly with a long I in the end, which is a common occurrence in Egyptian, as in EA often times the *alif al-maqṣūra* (ﺀ) and *Yāʾ* (ﻱ) are mixed up. This is due to the fact that Egyptian informal (hand) writing often omits the dots at the *Yāʾ* (ﻱ) due to convenience and since it is usually obvious from context if a letter is an *alif al-maqṣūra* (ﺀ) or a *Yāʾ* (ﻱ).



Fig. 25 Meme: Pressure to commit to a relationship (#3)

<u>Transcription (Levantine and Egyptian)</u>	<u>Translation:</u>
Header(Levantine): lamma təʔʊod tfakker ʔanno kəll rəfʔātik mərtəbʔīn u-ḥāʔbīn u-mətzawwaḡīn ʔəlla ʔənti:	Header: When you're thinking that all your friends are in a relationship, engaged or married except for you?
Text upper picture (Egyptian): ʔana singil ʔašān ʔana malāk	Text upper picture: I'm single because I'm an angel
Text bottom picture (Egyptian): w-il-malāk ʕaʔb al-imtilāk (tilted laughing while crying emoji)	Text bottom picture: And an angel is hard to acquire.

This meme, again, is in the modern layout since the text is located within a header above the picture. However, the picture itself contains a lot of text as well and could work almost the same without the header. The header is written in MSA, while the text in the picture appears to be in Egyptian dialect. Since the picture itself is not important to the meme it falls into the *word specific* category (Yus; 2019: 109).

In the picture, or rather pictures, there is a white cat with cute big black eyes between pillows looking aggravated and seemingly trying to defend itself from something in the direction of the camera.

The header of this meme serves as a headline and description to the image, by saying that the image represents you, the reader, when realizing that you are the last one of your female friends to be unmarried and single. The text in the pictures is direct speech of the cat that proclaims that it, and by this the person depicted metaphorically in the meme, is single, because it is an angel, and angels are hard to possess.

This meme is another example of a meme of a person being single and feeling the need to justify him- or herself for it. However, in this meme the person is quite defensive, as is shown by the cat, while in the previous memes the feeling was rather one of embarrassment or frustration. By proclaiming him- or herself to be an angel the person in the meme basically argues that the troubles he or she has in finding a partner, do not stem from the fact that there is a problem with him or her, but rather that it is because he or she is too good for most people. The laughing while crying emoji at the end is most likely meant to take some seriousness out of this proclamation, as saying one is single because one is too good for most people could also be perceived as quite arrogant.

It is assumed here that the author is in fact a woman, since her Profile name tag is “My\_girlfirend\_2” and because it would be generally untypical for a man to portrait himself as a cute cat. Grammatically speaking the person in this meme is masculine. The text within the pictures is held in gender-neutral forms, as both the word for ‘angel’, as well as the English loan word of ‘single’ is gender-neutral terms. This could simply be due to dialectal preference of the author. It is also possible however that the author intended for it to be mostly gender-neutral so both genders could identify with it. Another possibility is of course, that this meme is specifically made for gay men.

The contact who sent this meme, a gay man, said that he would use this meme to tell people why he is not married yet which suggests that at least as a gay man he had no problem identifying with this meme. The question on whether men can identify with memes having very strongly female connotations, and vice-versa in other memes, would be a very interesting topic for further study, not only limited to the Arab world.

In this meme, the author has left two tags with her profile name on Instagram, both in Arabic and Latin alphabet. When following the profile tag, we can find that it leads us to a meme

page with 3.502 posts and 580.000 followers. As the name would imply most to all memes of this author are held rather feminine and cute. The meme in question was posted there on the 25<sup>th</sup> of Mai 2021 and has received 5.129 likes (صديقتي: \$ ♥; n.d.). The admin of this meme page, who links to herself in the bio claims to be a graphic designer who comes from Syria and is currently living in Istanbul, Turkey (J O U R Y | جوريه 🌸🌸; n.d.). This would seem coherent with other clues about the identity of the author, but as with any other meme we cannot be completely sure, if the owner of the profile is the original creator of the meme as well.



Fig. 26 Meme: Pressure to commit to a relationship (#4)

<u>Transcription (Egyptian):</u>	<u>Translation:</u>
Header: Inta illi ʿaddak miggawwizīn wi-mḥallifīn dilwaʿti	Header: Those who are your age are married and have children now
Right: yāāh, ʿala l-ʿingāz	Right: Oh my, what an accomplishment.
Left: miš mumkin ʿala l-ʿaẓama	Left: Not possible, such greatness!

The layout of this meme is again firmly belonging to the modern meme layout category, where there is a header with a message and a picture underneath to underline the message or give a response. In the taxonomy of Yus (2019) it would most likely fall into the category of *additive*, as the picture is not completely necessary to understand the meme but helps immensely with emphasizing the sarcastic nature of the lower text. However, one could also argue that the sarcasm behind the answers would be visible even without the picture.

The picture is a screenshot from the Egyptian movie *Romantic Sayed* (*saīd el-‘āṭīfī*) from the year 2005 (“Romantic Sayed”; n.d.). In this scene two of the main characters are trying to destroy the reputation of a businessman by claiming in a live talk show he wronged them. This is rendered comical by talking in a completely overdramatized way, even when mentioning minor details of their made-up story, like what color some object had (Bee Movies; 2023: 1:26:25). This sarcastic exaggeration of one’s reaction is the emotion the picture is meant to convey in this meme. As with many previous memes the text in the memes is not the same as the dialogue in this movie scene, but merely the emotion of the scene is conveyed in the meme. Online we can find multiple examples of this meme template being used in Arabic meme sites, with the reaction of the characters in it generally symbolizing sarcasm like their theatrical and exaggerated claims in the movie scene.

The text in the header appears to be direct speech by a person addressing the reader. As with many previous memes, this is not marked by quotation marks or other markers, but only becomes clear from the way it is written. Even without the speaker being specifically identified, it seems very likely to be meant to portray an older family member like a mother or aunt, telling the reader that everyone else their age is already married and has children. The text in the picture is exorbitant, and apparently sarcastic, praise for this. This is most likely meant to show the answer of the person metaphorically depicted in the meme to the comments by their family member. In any case, it seems that the speaker is a person the protagonist of the meme owes respect to as he or she seemingly cannot answer honestly and reverts to sarcasm.

The picture and the text in it mean to highlight the sarcastic nature of the reader, as he or she pretends to be impressed by the fact that everyone else is married and having children, while actually being quite happy about not being married or having children. Or maybe he or she simply does not like the pressure this comment puts on him or her. We can further assume that it is meant to show the typical reaction of young people, when being nudged by their relatives about having to start a family.

As in many conservative societies, within Arab families one is generally expected to find a partner and raise a family as fast as possible (Nydell; 2012: 24). This imperative is quite absolute and it is common for one's family to not even consider the possibility that one would be happier unmarried and without children. Those being nudged by their relatives do often feel their kin being overly intrusive, by making remarks like this aimed to exert pressure on them and are quite annoyed by this behavior. However, they cannot directly show this, as those making such remarks would argue that it come from a place of caring. Additionally, status within middle eastern families rises with age, so society expects a certain amount of respect towards older relatives. This applies to all ages and continues even after one has reached adulthood (Nydell; 2012: 65). Telling an older relative to leave one alone would thus be seen as a sign of disrespect and of being rude. With this, often the best reaction seems to play along to such remarks and act like one agrees.

In contrast to the previous meme, we can see that in this example the pressure to commit to a relationship is less exerted by oneself, but rather by one's environment. And like in any culture one of the strongest places to exert pressure on young people to settle down is one's own family, with the organizational structure of Arab families strongly adding to this even further. In the Arab world marriage is not merely an individual matter, but rather that of the family as well. The responsibility of families towards their children reaches far into their adult life (Rashad & Osman & Roudi-Fahimi; 2005: 2) and it is very common that every adult helps with parenting (Nydell; 2012: 70), extending parental figures far beyond the core family. This instills a deep respect towards relatives, as the most important requirement for a 'good' child is to be respectful towards adults. It includes the obligation to politely greet, converse for a few minutes if being asked something and neither talk back, nor interrupt (Nydell; 2012:70).

Additionally, and even though especially Muslim Arabs highly value privacy in general, there is little concept of privacy within the family structure (Nydell; 2012: 65). Due to the tightly knit fabric of Arab families, it is also far more uncommon for young people to openly rebel against their families even when reaching adulthood and becoming financially independent, as is the case in western culture (Nydell; 2012: 66).

All these aspects can culminate in situations, as expressed in the meme, where a young adult, being confronted with uncomfortable remarks, sees little other possibility than to play along, feeling obliged to continue the conversation seeing that it's culturally unacceptable to express their real feelings of annoyance.

Just as in the meme *Pressure to commit to a relationship* (#2) (Fig. 24) the ‘ala is written with a long I instead of the correct *alif al-maqṣūra*.



Fig. 27 Meme: Pressure to commit to a relationship (#5)

<u>Transcription (Egyptian):</u>	<u>Translation:</u>
Header: miš murtabiṭa lē li-ḥadd dilwaʔti	Header: Why are you (f) not in a relationship with anyone yet?
- Baṣḥi mitʔaḥḥar fa ma-balḥaʔ-iš (smirking emoji)	- I sleep (f) in late and haven't caught up (smirking emoji)

This meme is another example of the modern layout. In the taxonomy of Yus (2019) it could be considered to be part of the *additive* category, as the picture is not important to the joke, but rather only serves to illustrate the witty way the text is meant to be read (Yus; 2019: 112). If counting the smirking emoji as part of the text one could however argue as well that it is rather *word specific* (Yus; 2019: 109), as the emoji appears to convey the same message as the picture, making the picture somewhat redundant.

In the picture we can see an older man on the left, dressed in a suit talking to what appears to be a man in drag on the right, dressed up in a shiny red outfit. Behind them, there is a red

stage element which looks like it could be form a talent show or theatre play. The body language of the two appears as if the man in a suit was asking the other person something and the other person wittingly but shyly looking away while answering.

The text in the header has the old man asking, why the other person, whom he addresses as a woman, is not engaged yet, with the other person answering that she overslept and has not caught up yet. From the grammatical gender used it is clear that the second person is a woman. This answer is followed by a smirking face emoji, probably meaning to highlight the wittiness of the answer.

The picture is a screenshot from an Egyptian theater play, called *ḥazimnī ya*. from the year 1994 which was filmed and now exists as something of a hybrid between film and theater play, with this particular recording being regularly played on Egyptian television. The man on the left is the actor Hassan Hosny, while the man on the right is played by the actor Mohammad Henidy (“Hazmni ya”; n.d.).

In this scene the main character is dressed in drag with his friends to trick someone, but is surprised by the brother of one of his friends, who suddenly comes in. Since the brother does not recognize the main character, he thinks him to be a prostitute and lectures him on being too young for living this way. The main character reacts to this by acting as if he was indeed a defiant young girl and talking back to him coquettishly (CBC Egypt; 2018: 2:53:40)

It appears that the underlying message of this meme is quite similar to the meme: *Pressure to commit to a relationship (#4)* (Fig. 26), with the difference that instead of choosing to answer with passive aggressive sarcasm, the person in this meme chooses to deflect by humorously answering the question. Similar to the meme *Pressure to commit to a relationship (#1)* (Fig. 23) it appears that the person also feels a pressure from within that she is late in having found a relationship and that she is somewhat uncomfortable about being single. It seems however that she is actively telling herself and others that she has simply not yet found the right partner and tries not to commit to her self-doubts. It could however also be that she simply does not want a relationship and chooses to use time as an excuse to silence the question for the moment.

In any case however, the question being asked about her being single by someone older and possibly a family member is still somewhat uncomfortable for her. One could argue that the pressure to find a partner and get married is even stronger for women within the Arab world, as the appearance and good reputation of a woman is arguably much more of a collective

family responsibility, than that of a man (Nydell; 2012: 33-34). So, the gossip and rumors frequent in traditional societies about not being married at a certain age, can be seen as particularly damaging to the family of a woman which in turn will prompt them to put even more pressure on their single daughters.

By answering that one has slept in, which is most likely meant to mean that one was late to start dating and relationships, the person being asked basically says that it will only be a question of time until he or she will get engaged like everyone else. The fact that everyone else is getting engaged except for her, is not her fault, but her time has simply not come yet. This also means that there would be no point in rushing her and no need to worry about her. So, whatever the intentions of the person being asked are towards finding a relationship, this answer can be seen as another strategy to deal with this intrusive question.

While in itself being somewhat humorous this meme could also serve as a piece of advice to those confronted with this question on how to best answer, especially in a situation, where an older relative asks this question. It might also be simply sent to someone, as a playful way for this person to reassure him or her that there is nothing wrong with oneself to not being engaged.

Just as in the previous meme *Pressure to commit to a relationship (#4)* (Fig. 26) and in *Pressure to commit to a relationship (#2)* (Fig. 24) with *ʿala* we can find a spelling mistake within *baṣḥa* being falsely spelled with a *Yāʾ* (ﻱ) instead of the correct *alif al-maqṣūra*, showing just how common this mistake is. This is probably due to the authors not being used to differentiate between *alif al-maqṣūra* (ﺀ) or a *Yāʾ* (ﻱ), but using a keyboard or application that offers both letters which makes them feel the need to differentiate as well.



Fig. 28 Meme: Pressure to commit to a relationship (#6)

<u>Transcription (Gulf Arabic and Egyptian):</u>	<u>Translation:</u>
Header: Lamma ʔanazzil kalām rumānsi ʕādi ma aḡsid fiyyu ʔaḥad!	Header: When I upload any normal romantic words without mentioning anyone!
"ʔaṣḥābi":	"My friends":
Text in picture: ya diblit il-ḥuṭūūba ʕuʔbālna kullina	Text in picture: Oh engagement ring, hopefully we all will be next!

This meme is another example of the modern meme layout, wherein the picture is crucial to understanding the joke by showing a reaction to what is mentioned in the header. This makes it fall into the *interdependent* category of text-picture relationships (Yus; 2019: 115) It follows the quite popular pattern of ‘when-memes’, where it introduces a situation by starting with ‘when’, to follow it up by a picture metaphorically depicting this situation in a humorous and hyperbolic way.

The picture consists of a collage of different pictures of people or cartoon characters smirking at the camera knowingly as if they share a secret with the reader. Most of these belong to

famous memes, where some of them are international, such as characters from the children show *SpongeBob* and some are Egyptian, coming from Egyptian movies. This collage is an interesting example of the creative way memes can be used. All the memes within the collage express a similar notion and usually an author would use one of those memes, when creating a meme that should transport this notion. In this case however, the author used several of those memes to depict a group of people having the same reaction.

The author speaks about him- or herself in the header by saying that the picture below is the reaction of his or her friends, whenever he or she posts any romantic words online. Grammatically there is no indication here to the gender of the author, as the whole phrase is held in the first person and thus gender neutral. Within the collage of memes, we can see a phrase written out in Arabic that is actually the name and a line from a famous Egyptian love song from the year 1953 by the singer *Šādiyya* (Insomnia; 2012). Roughly translated this text means: “Oh engagement ring, hopefully we all will be next”, and is very commonly played for engagements. The picture together with this phrase both means to express that whenever the author posts something romantic, his or her friends start assuming he or she has started a serious new relationship or is in love. The memes of people smirking knowingly are meant to show them believing themselves to be smart for understanding his subtle ‘code’ when actually he or she really just meant to post a phrase he or she liked or found meaningful.

People teasing their friends like this is a common occurrence online and offline and not limited to Arab culture. This could be either because they believe that the person has fallen in love and want to get in on the gossip or because they know that the person hasn’t fallen in love, but still like to tease them. While this meme could be understood as a comment on gossiping in Arab culture it could also be viewed non-specific to any culture, as the joke would most likely work the same way in any modern culture. Friends being overly interested in one’s life is nothing specific to any particular culture and neither is gossip. On the other hand, it might simply be a complaint about one’s friends being nosy.

What’s interesting here is that in contrast to the previous memes, we see the expectations and by extent pressure coming not from one’s family but rather from one’s friends and acquaintances. This goes to show, just how omnipresent the pressure to find a partner and settle down can be to young people within Arab society. This on the other hand also could explain the prevalence of this theme within the corpus, especially considering the age of the informants.

On top one can see the profile name of the person who posted this meme on *Instagram*. The Account @2sazi which apparently is a wordplay with the English words ‘too sassy’ is an active account on Instagram that boasts 37.000 Followers but appears to have ceased posting memes as of March 2023 (ساز | SazZ; n.d.).

One interesting aspect of the meme on a grammatical level is the use of the quotation marks around the word ‘my friends’. This could be understood as the author making clear that the people teasing him are not really his friends, however native speakers that were asked about this didn’t think that this is what the author wants to express and that he or she is indeed talking about real friends. A different possible explanation then would be that the author is not very familiar with the Latin grammar where quotation marks come from, and simply uses them wrong. It is possible that the quotation marks are meant to serve the purpose of pointing towards the picture as well.

#### **4.5. Discussing Homosexuality**

Homosexuality is a topic that even open-minded Arabs are generally reluctant to discuss publicly and those finding themselves attracted to the same sex generally live out their desires in secrecy (Whitaker; 2011: 7-9). As far as most people in the region go, it is an issue that simply does not exist (Whitaker; 2011: 10). When it must be discussed it is widely regarded as an un-Islamic, western perversion that has no place in the traditional Arab world (Whitaker; 2011: 9). Contrary to what most people in the western world think, however, there exist thriving gay scenes in even the most conservative Arab countries fairly unbothered by authorities, being open secrets to almost anyone familiar with the region. However, this should not be mistaken for acceptance, as it remains very important that this activity is done in such a clandestine way, so that it can reasonably be denied by society. Appearances are what really counts in the end (Whitaker; 2011: 10) and if it does not officially exist, nothing must be done about it.

Concerning relationships, homosexuality might not even be accepted by society as reason for not marrying (someone of the opposite sex) and being childless. This is partly due to homophobia. However, it might also be due to the fact that Arab society, unlike other societies, does not regard sexuality as something fixed, but rather a choice to be made and far more dependent on acts, than on preferences (Whitaker; 2011: 10). So, when it comes to getting married, people might just be expected to ‘stop being gay’. This, of course, does not

mean that their attraction to men ceases to exist but rather them submitting to societal pressure. This also explains, why men using gay dating apps within Arab countries might find that a surprising lot of their contacts for casual sex seem to be married and have children.

Interestingly, the strict honor system, which usually is quite burdensome to women in Arab society, seems to somewhat work in the favor of lesbian women. While a gay son will often be considered a big problem, it seems that families are generally far less concerned about their daughter's inclination towards women. On the one hand, this might be due to the fact that in general far bigger aspirations and hopes are put on male offsprings by the family, but also due to the fact that the main requirement for women is not to dishonor the family by losing their virginity or getting pregnant before marriage. So, when the daughter turns out to be uninterested in men, they can rest easy knowing that at least this is nothing they need to worry about (Whitaker; 2011: 23-24).



Fig. 29 Meme: Discussing Homosexuality (#1)

Transcription (MSA):	Translation:
Headline: ʔunzur ʔilā aṣ-ṣūrati wa-tawqqaʔ mawḏūʕa ad-darsi	Headline: Look at the picture and anticipate the topic of the class

This meme is one of the more atypical memes within the corpus. It works simply through the combination of two pictures without any extra text added by the author. The joke is created by the second picture showing the reaction to the first picture. In fact, one could argue that the text could even be completely omitted leaving the joke behind the meme still at least partly intact. In this example we see the taxonomy of Yus (2019) reaching its limits. Strictly speaking it clearly falls into the category of *picture specific* seeing that, as mentioned, the text is not necessary for the meme to work (Yus; 2019: 110). One could even argue that the text is in fact part of the picture since it wasn't added by the author of the meme. However, this is also where one could argue that the idea behind Yus' (2019) taxonomy was to study the relationship between image and text in image macros which one could see as somewhat pointless in a meme that lacks added text.

In the first picture we can see the upper half of a page from what looks like a school textbook. There we see a drawing and above it we see instructions that says to look at the drawing and to imagine what the topic of the class might be, adding to the impression that this might be a school textbook. In the drawing we can see two people that both look like male teenagers holding both of each other's hands. In the background trees are visible and right behind their heads appear to be floating pink hearts that are about twice the size of their heads. The second picture underneath is one of a dog squinting his eyes, as a person would do when they are wondering if they saw or understood something correctly. Generally, the squinting of the eyes is used to portray suspicion or close examination. So, in this case it is most likely meant to express the uncertainty of someone seeing this picture, wondering if they interpreted it right.

This interpretation of the upper picture for most viewers will be that both boys are in love romantically, as the hearts and holding hands strongly suggest, and that the topic of the class has to be homosexual love. This however is an unthinkable topic for a high school lesson in all Arab countries. All Arab countries are culturally more or less conservative and both regular sexuality and homosexuality are strong taboo topics. This incongruence is what creates the joke, as on the one hand it is very difficult not to understand the picture in a homoerotic sense, while on the other hand it is quite difficult to imagine that this was in fact the intended meaning.

As mentioned previously, generally speaking for Arab society homosexuality is something that simply is not supposed to exist. This however also means that according to this logic

there is no reason for the education system to address this topic, making it almost unthinkable to find a discussion of homosexuality in an official textbook.

It is unclear, where exactly this textbook is from, and if it is indeed a high school textbook. The Omani contact, from whom this meme was acquired, had himself received it in a chat on a gay dating website. He argued that it is unlikely to be of Omani origin, as in Omani textbooks children are generally shown in the traditional garment of the country. It is also unclear, whether the intention of the textbook author was to depict a homosexual couple or if the picture is rather meant to show brotherly love or love between friends.

In fact, if this really is an official textbook for school the latter is by far likelier. Of course, it could also be a page from a textbook by a NGO, advocating for the legalization and normalization of same sex relationships, but that would also seem unlikely in most Arab countries considering the current political situation. When asked, the contact who provided the meme said that he certainly cannot imagine it being from an actual textbook, but rather thinks it is either a mistake or possibly photoshopped.

It is noteworthy that in instances where this picture was posted, we can find people arguing that this picture is not meant to portray homosexual love, but rather brotherly love or friendship. These comments however appear to be quite defensive and certainly a minority. While it is true that, especially in some Arabic countries, it is common for male friends to hold hands in public and touching between members of the same sex is generally more common than in western contexts (Nydell; 2012: 25), most Arab native speakers seem to agree that this drawing has strong romantic connotations.

One other option of course could be that the upper picture is from a western textbook, aiming at Arab-speaking immigrants for one of the courses on western culture and values. These have become mandatory in many European countries for refugees and immigrants over the past decades. In this case it would of course make sense that the teenagers depicted in the drawing are in fact a couple, since the acceptance of LGBTQ+ sexualities tends to be part of these courses. However, in this case we would usually expect to see adults depicted and not children.



Fig. 30 Meme: Discussing Homosexuality (#2)

<u>Transcription (Egyptian):</u>	<u>Translation:</u>
Upper picture: ya-sṭa iwʿa tiʿūl li-ḥadd inni ba[h]jibbak	Upper picture: Dude, don't tell (m) anyone that I love you.
Lower picture: ʿaēb ʿalēk ya-ʿamm, inta ba[h]jibb ṛāgil	Lower Picture: Shame on you man, you love a man.

This meme consists of two cartoon screenshots put on top of each other. It is not an image macro neither of the new, nor the classical layout. Technically one could argue that this meme is more of a comic strip, than anything else, thus somewhat pushing the definition of what a meme is. If one were to apply the taxonomy of Yus (2019) one could argue it to be *word specific*, as the pictures are not necessary to understand the joke and only help to illustrate (Yus; 2019: 109).

In the meme we can see two men atop what appears to be a boat talking to each other. They appear to be on the ocean or a big lake with green Mediterranean-looking hills on the shore. The scene appears to be at sunset and looks quite romantic. The man on the left, who appears to be the one talking in the first picture is topless and wearing jeans. He is holding a bottle of what seems to be beer in his hand. He looks at the other man solicitously, while caressing the

other man's head with his hand. The man on the right is wearing a tank top and shorts. He is looking at the other man stroking his head with a facial expression, looking a little bit shocked. In the upper picture the focus is on the face of the first man, in the lower picture it is the other way around.

The text in the first picture is direct speech by the topless man telling the other man that he loves him, while at the same time telling him not to tell anyone about it. The lower text is the direct speech of the other man reacting slightly shocked by shaming the first one for "loving a man". The direct speech is not marked in any way. However, the pictures make it quite clear who is talking when. In both pictures the middle of the word "love" is blacked out, giving it the impression of censorship, as is typical done with sexually explicit content or swearwords.

This meme consists of two screenshots from the American TV-Show 'Rick and Morty'. More precisely it is from the fourth episode of the second season of the series ("Total Rickall"; n.d.). The text however is not the original text from the series. In this scene two male characters are on a boat drinking beer together which shortly leads to them kissing after flirting with each other. This is somewhat comical, as up to this scene both characters are not portrayed as being homosexual. The character who is seen topless is called *Sleepy Gary* and the other character is called *Jerry* ("Total Rickall"; n.d.). Just like in this meme, in the series it is *Sleepy Gary* who is starting the romantic action, while *Jerry* goes along with it.

*Jerry's* answer can be interpreted in a few different ways. It could be that he is in fact homophobic and because of this is somewhat disgusted by *Sleepy Gary's* advance, as they contrast with the social norms, he deems acceptable. While, as mentioned, the moral climate towards homosexuality in the Arab world is a hostile one (Whitaker; 2011: 10) and homophobia is widespread, this seems the most unlikely explanation, as *Jerry's* facial impression is not one of anger and such a meme would neither be funny, nor really serve a purpose, other than to voice one's own disagreement with homosexuality. And while expressions of anti-gay sentiments are not uncommon online, they usually tend to be a lot more hostile and offensive than this. Adding to this Pascoe and Diefendorf (2019) point out that not all seemingly homophobic expressions among young men should be understood as anti-gay language. This kind of talk can be a way of young man to attempt to express feelings of affection towards other men, they see as incompatible with their picture of masculinity (Pascoe & Diefendorf; 2019: 12).

Another possibility is that it is meant to portray a discussion between heterosexual young men taunting each other, where one states his friendship, and the other one taunts him by purposefully understanding it in a romantic, homosexual way. Studies among western teenage boys have shown that in transition from boyhood to manhood there is a feeling among many young boys of needing to clarify that their close friendships to other males are not a sign of them being homosexual (Way; 2012: 126). While this could explain the underlying concept of this meme it is not clear, if this can be assumed to be equally valid in an Arab context, as open expressions of love among men are significantly more accepted in Arabic culture than in western culture. However, to the knowledge of this author, as of now there exists no such study in the Arab world exploring such feelings among young men. A counterargument to the interpretation of it being about friends teasing each other over friendship appears to be the censorship of the word “love” which would in this case not make sense, as platonic love would hardly be considered a subject for censorship by anyone.

The other possibilities are that *Sleepy Gary* is making a romantic pass at *Jerry* and *Jerry* is either oblivious of the intention, or plays oblivious, in order to taunt his lover, by playing on societal homophobia.

While most memes try to be obvious in their message this meme stays rather vague. Even the contact who provided this meme was left to speculate about what was meant exactly. In the case of this meme however the vagueness could also be understood as a feature. Like other memes we have seen before it is unlikely that this meme would be sent with no further intention, going past simply making a joke. While humor might be subjective, it can safely be stated that this meme simply does not contain enough of a joke for it to be sent without further intentions and context. It is possible that this meme could be used to playfully steer the conversation towards a taboo topic, in this case homosexuality. This is because while not being directly in favor of homosexuality, but also not really condemning it, a man could send this meme to another man he is romantically interested in, but still claim to have simply made a homophobic joke, should the other man react in a hostile or negative way.

In this meme we can see yet again the previously mentioned spelling mistake at the word *iw<sup>ʿ</sup>a*, which is falsely written with a *Yā<sup>ʾ</sup>* (ي).



Fig. 31 Meme: Discussing Homosexuality (#3)

<u>Transcription (Saudi):</u>	<u>Translation:</u>
Upper text: ygūl-lu mnawwir ġidda	Upper text: He says you have enlightened Jeddah (He says: Welcome to Jeddah)
Banner: 'affa ya-ḥā! 'affa wa!la	Banner: Shame, bro, shame, by god
Bottom: muḥāyil 'asir / muḥāyil muḥāfazāt	Bottom: Mahayel Asir, Mahayel Asir Governorates

The picture in this meme looks like it came from a social media app, most likely Snapchat. It is not an image macro, although it works similarly by having text within the picture. However, the text is in different fonts and has no coherent style. This is another example of

how far the meaning of the term ‘meme’ can be stretched in popular language. If one were to try and apply the taxonomy of Yus (2019) to this meme it would fall into the *interdependent category*, as text and picture only together create the meaning behind this meme (Yus; 2019: 115).

In the center of the picture, we can see a dark-skinned man in a yellow polo shirt and red shorts shaking the hand of a man in white shorts, black t-shirt and yellow hat. While the face of the latter man is not visible, we can see the former smiling a very big smile. The handshake appears not to be a formal handshake but rather one which would be typical for close friends, with the faces of the men almost touching. They appear to be standing in a parking lot, or a small street without much traffic but parked cars being visible around them. Someone, presumably the author, has drawn a red box around the pants that the dark-skinned man is wearing. In the bottom left of the picture that same person has included two pictures of this type of pants in black, one of them on the hips of a woman. These pictures look like they could be from an online shopping site, where one could buy those pants. This is clearly meant to point out that the shorts the man is wearing are in fact women’s shorts.

The upper text describes what is happening, namely the man, presumably the dark-skinned man, welcoming the other man to the city of Jeddah. The word *manawwar* is, according to the contact who sent this meme, dialect of the Arabian Peninsula for a very friendly welcome often accompanied by compliments. By telling someone that he or she has lightened up the place he or she has just entered one bestows respect upon guests.

The text in the banner on the other hand appears to be speech directed towards the dark-skinned man wearing women’s shorts, voicing the authors disappointment of him about him wearing these shorts. The word *āfā* is an expression of shame that according to the source of this meme is also very dialectal.

The message of the meme appears to be that it is a shame and/or funny that a man is wearing women’s shorts, while welcoming others to Jeddah. The contact who sent this meme pointed out that the fact of a dark-skinned man wearing those shorts, further adds to this sentiment, as in the Arabian Peninsula black Arabic man are usually associated with especially masculine traits. So, it seems to be the typical structure of incongruity creating the humor here (Yus; 2019: 110), since a person expected to act especially masculine, in this case a young black man, is dressed in a way deemed effeminate.

The text in the bottom is the name of a governorate in Saudi Arabia. It is however not clear, what this is supposed to mean. From the upper text one would assume that the picture was taken in Jeddah. Jeddah however is not in the Mahayil Asir Governorate, but in the Makkah Province next to it. When asked about this, the contact who sent this meme speculated that it's possible that the picture was from the Mahayil Asir Governorate but that it said Jeddah, because the city of Jeddah among others has a reputation for having a big clandestine homosexual scene, at least among the gay community of the Arabian Peninsula. He argued that the name Jeddah could be used to refer to a city of questionable reputation, similar to Amsterdam in Europe. To find out about the exact background one would, of course, have to ask the author of the meme, which is not possible, as there is no clue to the author within the picture.

It stands to question, however, that this meme was ever intended for a more global audience. It is very unlikely that it would be perceived the same way throughout the Arab world, or even properly understood outside the Arabian Peninsula, as the dialect is quite special in its choice of lexis. Furthermore, the racial stereotype underlying this meme might not be understood in other countries within the region, where these stereotypes do not exist in the same way. When showed to a different contact, who grew up most of her life in Egypt, she said that she did not understand the meme, or what was supposed to be funny about it.

#### **4.6. Negotiating Gender Roles**

While many of the previous memes were particularly directed at men or women, many of them had messages that could be universally applied to men or women. However, we have already seen examples of memes in the previous chapters that included certain gender roles. This was particularly the case for the last chapter, where already the question of masculinity met with the topic of homosexuality. The following memes were however put in their own category, as they not only touch on gender roles, but have them at the very heart of their messages.

لما تقوليله انا نازله ويقولك لا فتقوليله ليه



Fig. 32 Meme: Negotiating Gender Roles (#1)

<u>Transcription (Egyptian):</u>	<u>Translation:</u>
Header: Lamma tiʔūlī-lu ana nāzla w-yiʔūl-lik la fa-tiʔūlī-lu lē	Header: When you tell him that you go out, and he tells you no, so you ask him why
Text in lower picture: waḷḷahi ya-binti m-ana ʕārif ʔaddīna binistargil	Text in lower picture: by God, my girl I don't know, here we are just acting manly

Unlike the last memes this meme is another example of the modern layout. Following Yus (2019), it would be best described as *word specific*, as the picture does not add anything significant which was not already in the text (Yus; 2019: 109).

In the picture we can see an old man in a suit and tie sitting in the car looking with a serious and imposing face. The picture is taken at night, but the man is lit up making him appear even more imposing. His face contains very little expression and mostly he seems to be contemplating while talking.

The text in the header is written from the point of view of a woman and describes the situation as follows: She told him, presumably her boyfriend or husband, that she will go out which he forbade her. On being asked why, the picture shows his response in which he states in a condescending way that he himself does not know but that he simply wanted to act like a man. While the meme gives the impression that this is the boyfriend or husband of the woman talking, we cannot be sure, as it is not specified. It might also be the brother or the father of a

woman talking to her and could be any male figure feeling the need to act dominant towards a woman. The use of first person plural for oneself is usually done to show politeness, but in this context probably means to reinforce the idea of a ‘big’ man talking.

The picture is a screenshot from the Egyptian film *‘ala ganb ya usta* from the year 2006 (“Ala Ganb Ya Usta”; n.d.) and the man on the picture is the Egyptian actor Metwaly Elwan (Metwaly Elwan; n.d.). In this scene the main character returns to his taxi from a pharmacy, just to find an old man sleeping and snoring in the back of his taxi. He asks him, where he got onto the taxi, to which the old man replies that he does not know anymore. In the following short conversation, it becomes clear that the man does not really care where he goes, but would just like to sleep in the car, while the main character is driving around. The man, even though well dressed, appears to be somewhat senile (C I M A 4 U; 2019: 42:13). As in other memes, we can see that the screenshot was chosen in accordance with the message of the meme. While the character is not saying the same as in the movie, the notion of him being confused and asking for something nonsensical is exactly what the meme wants to convey about the answer of the man in the meme.

In the picture we can also find a name tag in the Latin alphabet reading: *doaa yasser*. This could presumably be the name of the author. When looking up this name on Facebook one can find several people with this name. Telling however who of them, if any, was the author of the meme is not possible.

This meme appears to be meant to make fun of macho behavior, by arguing that oftentimes, when men try to dominate women, even they themselves do not know why, but simply just behave the way they think is expected of them. This behavior of course is ridiculous and completely pointless, especially when doing it in private, which this meme wants to point out. If the person saying these words is serious about them one has to picture either a very young or very insecure man.

However, it could also be understood as a broader criticism on male guardianship over women. Usually, the argument of men putting limitations on their wives and girlfriends is that of protecting them from harm. Another reason might be to protect the family from shame, whose reputation is jeopardized much more by the misbehavior of women, than by men (Nydell; 2012:33). So, in this case, the expected argument for not letting her go out would be that it is too dangerous or that she might bring shame onto the family. While some women might appreciate the care behind this ban, most women would feel themselves capable to

judge the danger of going outside or of bringing shame onto themselves. Additionally feminist critique argues that this system provides free hand for men, to control women almost at random, while always being able to invoke the ‘collective good’ as a trump card (Said-Foqahaa & Maziad; 2011: 236). So, the man in the meme stating that he had no particular reason could also be understood to be the answer men would give, if they were being honest about their behavior from a feminist perspective. In any case it appears to criticize the traditional role of men not only having authority about women, but also being expected to exercise this authority by society.



Fig. 33 Meme: Negotiating Gender Roles (#2)

<u>Transcription (Egyptian):</u>	<u>Translation:</u>
Top: ʔabl ig-gawāz	Top: Before marriage
Woman: ḥabībi iftaḥ-li il-barṭamān miš ʿarfa aftaḥu	Woman: Honey, open the jar for me, I cannot open it.
Bottom: baʿd ig-gawāz	Bottom: After marriage

This meme does not really belong to the classical or modern meme layout and, like *Discussing Homosexuality (#2)* (Fig. 30) could rather be classified as a comic strip. In the taxonomy of Yus (2019) it falls into the *interdependent* category, as the pictures are crucial to the understanding of the text (Yus; 2019: 115). It seems however safe to say at this point that the taxonomy of Yus (2019) seems to be a lot more viable for typical Image Macros, than for comic strips.

The meme is separated into two pictures, with the one on top showing a woman in front of a man and holding a jar in her hands. Her appearance is quite feminine with big chip eyes and highlighted cheeks. Further adding to this we can see her wearing a dress and makeup, visible through lashes being drawn at the side of her eyes. The man has his right hand on the jar as if to open it and has his chest sticking out as if to show how strong and muscular he is. He is depicted as a strong and caring man helping her with her problem, while she is depicted almost child-like and helpless.

In the picture on the bottom, we can see the same woman wearing a shirt and shorts. This gives her a much less feminine appearance in contrast to the first picture. Marks under her eyes, which seem to be eye bags, show her as not wearing makeup. While she is vacuuming, she lifts one side of the couch with her right arm, in order to be able to vacuum underneath it. She appears to do so with ease and without even thinking about it. Her face shows a relaxed smile, and her eyes are focused on the floor she is vacuuming. She does not seem to notice the man, who is sitting on top of the couch clinging to the headrest. While the rest of the meme is a drawing his face is a picture cut out from a photograph of a man looking puzzled. His stare is directed at the woman with two exclamation marks next to his head further highlighting his puzzlement.

The upper picture bears the headline “before marriage” and the lower one the headline “after marriage”. As such the two figures, one being female and the other male, obviously are meant to portray husband and wife before and after being married respectively. In the upper picture the wife to-be can be seen speaking and telling her soon-to-be husband that she is unable to open a jar by herself and needs his help. Except for the two exclamation marks highlighting the puzzlement of the husband there is no further text in the lower picture. In the meme we can see a name tag, presumably of the author, but due to it being in white and the background being white as well most of it is not visible.

As the headlines suggest, the upper picture is meant to supposedly show how women behave with their future husbands before marriage and the other one shows their behavior after marriage. In the first picture she is shown as in need of help and dependent on her husband. This act is exposed in the second picture by her lifting the couch he is sitting on seemingly with ease in order to vacuum under it. This is meant to say that women tend to act helpless around men, when courting them, but stop this act once they feel their relationship is sealed. It can also be viewed in a somewhat feminist sense about women not actually being dependent on men but rather only making men feel this way in order to make them feel manlier and to be more attractive to them. The meme also shows that this strategy appears to actually fool men as the husband in the second picture appears to be genuinely surprised by the strength of his wife.

In contrast to the previous meme, this is an example of a positive discussion of gender roles. It is meant to reaffirm typical feminine behavior by arguing that the perceived weakness of feminine women is merely an act, and that a woman can both act feminine and helpless and still be strong and independent.

What's interesting is that everything in this meme is drawn in a cartoonish style, except for the face of the husband in the second picture which is cropped out from a screenshot of a famous Egyptian movie from the year 2004. The name of the comedic movie is *Great Fava Beans of China* (*fūl iṣ-ṣīn il-ʿaẓīm*). In it the main character is a mild-mannered son of an Egyptian gangster family, played by the actor Mohamed Henedi, who gets sent to China by his family and has to prove himself there in a cooking competition ("The Great Fava Beans of China"; n.d.). In the scene that's shown in the meme the protagonist is coming home at night after cowardly leaving his brothers behind at a shootout. Surprising to him however, they are already awaiting him and ready to beat him up when he arrives home, hence the astonished face (Arabic Cinema In English; 2020: 3:50)

According to an Egyptian contact it is a very famous and popular movie in Egypt among many generations which is a big part of popular culture and gets referenced a lot throughout all generations. Interestingly only showing the cropped face of the actor in this meme, was enough for her brother to instantly tell which scene the screenshot was taken from.



Fig. 34 Meme: Negotiating Gender Roles (#3)

<u>Transcription (MSA):</u>	<u>Translation:</u>
Upper tweet: bikulli iḥṭiṣārin; nazʿu al-ḥiġābi huwa bidāyatu ṭarīqi al-ʿihri...!	Upper tweet: in all shortness; taking off the veil is the beginning of the way of whoring.
Reply: anā muḥaġġabatun wa-ʿāhiratun	Reply: I'm veiled (f) and a whore.

This meme is another example that can be considered a meme in more of a broader sense, as it is in fact not more than a screenshot of the social media platform X (formerly known as Twitter) and appears not to have been altered in any way by the author. In fact, this meme existing in the form of a picture does not add anything to the joke beyond the idea that allegedly this conversation really took place and was not made up. It does as such barely make sense to fit it into the taxonomy of Yus (2019), but if one were to do it anyway it would clearly be *word specific* for obvious reasons (Yus; 2019: 109).

In this conversation the first person, a woman, is making a public statement on whether a woman is supposed to wear a hijab or not, by arguing that not wearing the hijab would lead to indecent behavior. She appears to feel confident in making this point, as seemingly both her face and actual name are visible in the post next to her profile tag. While it is not clear how

long the post had been up at the time the screenshot was made, we can say that with 70 retweets and 630 likes the post itself did generate at least some attention, although it would probably be an overstatement to say that this tweet went viral. To know how much of a virality this meme developed, we would of course have to know at what time the screenshot was taken and the further development afterwards. The person answering her on the other hand does not show her real name next to her profile and does not appear to have a profile picture. She is answering the original post by stating that she is herself a woman wearing a hijab, but nevertheless is engaging in indecent behavior. Her answer has a lot less retweets and likes; however, this could be simply due to her answer being written only shortly before the screenshot was taken. Again, we cannot know, as we don't know the time of the screenshot itself.

By this she is not directly challenging the post itself, but rather challenges the underlying assumption that if taking off one's veil leads to becoming indecent, wearing the hijab by contrast ensures decency.

This is also where the humor lies in this meme, as one would expect someone disagreeing with the original post to argue against the idea that not wearing a hijab would make a woman become indecent. One could very easily see how a woman, not wearing a hijab, might be offended by this assumption and pointing out that not wearing a piece of cloth does not automatically make her morally inferior. Instead, however the second poster chooses to undermine the underlying assumption, rendering the original argument pointless. What also makes this argumentation unexpected is that it comes at her own personal expense.

By saying that she is wearing a hijab, but it is not stopping her from being indecent the second person places the original poster in somewhat of a difficult situation, since her argument was directed at women who do not wear a hijab. The argument however that the hijab is not stopping anyone brings her in the uncomfortable situation which by answering she would either have to agree that decency is not a question of being veiled, in which case her argument would become irrelevant, or she would have to admit that she still thinks women should wear the hijab, regardless of the question of decency and thereby exposing herself as hypocritical.

The hijab is controversial both outside and inside the middle east. While many Muslim women reject the obligation of wearing it, deeming it a sign of oppression, there are also many others, who view it as part of their religion and identity (Nydell; 2012: 40). Most Westerners assume the hijab to be something old-fashioned and out of time. However, when

talking to Arabs from the Middle East they will often point out that hijabs have actually made a comeback within the past decades, and that in many places within the Arab world they used to be far less common within older generations, as they are now.

The question of oppression with the hijab is not as straightforward as many people in the west think either. While there are certainly those families which leave their daughters no real choice but to wear the hijab, other, more liberal families, might even be distressed by their daughter picking up the veil (Nydell; 2012: 40). And while those opposing it argue that it restricts women in their lives, those advocating for it argue that wearing the hijab actually makes them freer by liberating them from the sexualization of women happening within society (Nydell; 2012: 41). As for the writing of this thesis no Arab country forces women to wear the hijab, but in some like Tunisia there are restrictions forbidding to wear a hijab in certain places (Nydell; 2012: 41). While many Islamic scholars regard the hijab as mandatory for a good Muslim woman it has to be noted as well that the *qur'ān* says nothing explicitly about veiling (Nydell; 2012: 42) and even some Muslim scholars have argued that the veil is a cultural rather than a religious practice.

Unfortunately for women the truth is that they might face negative consequences and stigmatization by society whether they decide for or against the hijab. While a woman choosing to wear a hijab might find herself being judged as a fundamentalist and conservative, a woman deciding against wearing the hijab might be judged as morally questionable, as we can see in the meme.

This meme could be regarded as advocating exactly for the freedom of women to choose themselves, as it shows a veiled woman arguing for her fellow women who do not want to wear the veil, against a person who wants to pressure women into wearing a veil. Like the meme *Negotiating Gender Roles (#3)* (Fig. 34), the message of this meme can be seen as ridiculing those trying to enforce traditional and exaggerated gender roles.

## **4.7. Talking Sexual**

Although talking about gender roles and relationship stereotypes, we have thus far not seen much mention of intimacy or sex, with maybe the exception of the meme *Struggles of dating* (#2) (Fig. 10), where it is implied that the author is talking about being choked in a sexual way. Even still it is quite a subtle reference. Sex and intimacy are strong taboo topics within the Arab world, much more than they are in the west, with few possible situations in which one would consider sexualized language socially acceptable.

Out of the personal experience of the author of this thesis, there are some who might argue that even while performing a sexual act they would expect the other to use euphemisms about sex and related terms. Sexual terms in Arabic are considered very vulgar and if used they are often rather used for insults. In the following memes we have quite strong references to sex which would be considered tacky even in most western languages. Interestingly, as we will see, even still within these memes the authors are quite careful about which words and euphemisms they use.

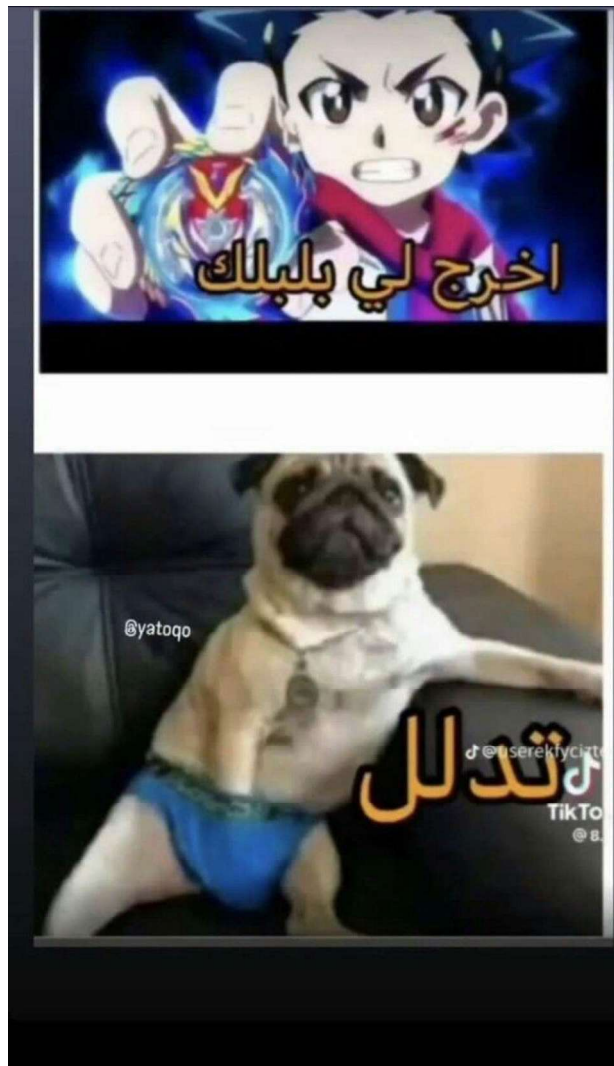


Fig. 35 Meme: Talking Sexual (#1)

Transcription (MSA):	Translation:
Upper picture: aḥriġ lī bulbulak	Upper picture: Take out your spinning top.
Lower picture: tadallal	Lower Picture: Enjoy

Like the memes *Discussing Homosexuality* (#2) (Fig. 30) and *Negotiating Gender Roles* (#2) (Fig. 33) this meme creates a dialog by showing two pictures on top of each other with each one showing the direct speech of the people in them. Even though one would probably not consider this meme to be a comic strip, seeing as the lower picture is a photograph, it does at least function like a comic strip. Considering Yus' (2019) taxonomy this meme could be considered to be within the *interdependent* category, where picture or text themselves could not convey the same message, as they do in combination (Yus; 2019: 115). But as seen in

previous examples, it becomes clear that Yus' (2019) taxonomy was not created for this kind of meme.

This meme consists of two pictures on top of each other which together form a simple dialogue. The upper one is a screenshot from an anime TV series, while the lower one appears to come from a video from the SocialMediaApp TikTok, guessing from the fact that the TikTok watermark is partially visible. The screenshot in the upper picture shows a young boy with a spinning top in his hand holding it up in a challenging way. For added dramatic effect there is a blue glow or fire around him.

This picture is contrasted by the lower picture, which shows a pug dog sitting on a black leather couch in a position, as a human would sit. The dog is wearing blue underpants and has one of its front paws inside of these underpants, as a human male would do, when touching his penis or even masturbating. The tags around the dogs neck has the appearance of a decorative yet somewhat tacky chain, while the underwear is not particularly aesthetic and of a kind that is typically worn by older men. The accessories, as well as the general form of the dog both give the impression of an older half naked man, likely being considered as not very aesthetic by most people. Similarly, his pose would be off-putting to most people, if it was done by a man, since he is openly touching his groin. All this gives the dog quite a sexualised look, while at the same time being quite tacky, which adds to the provocative nature of the picture.

The text in the first picture is the teenager challenging his opponent to a spinning top duel, by telling him to take out his spinning top. The second picture has the dog telling him to enjoy, while reaching in his pants, presumably to take his penis out.

The upper picture is a screenshot from the Japanese children series *Beyblade Burst* which is a series about children and teenagers fighting against each other in spinning top tournaments ("Beyblade burst evolution"; n.d.). As usual for this type of TV series it is quite full of visual effects which we can actually see in the picture with the blue glow around the character. Also, as typical for this genre, it features very strongly dramatized fighting scenes. These are often preceded by iconic catch phrases, so one has to imagine the character shouting: "Take out your spinning top!" in an enthusiastic and challenging way.

As mentioned before, the second picture appears to be a screenshot of a video on the social media platform TikTok. In it we can find two tags. One right next to the aforementioned TikTok watermark on the right side of the picture and one in the center left right next to the

dog. The tag next to the TikTok watermark, which appears to link to TikTok is, just like the watermark half cut off. However, it appears to be the tag of the author of the original TikTok video, from which the screenshot of the dog was taken.

The other tag, saying @yatoqo, on the other hand, appears to be for an Instagram profile which is presumably the profile of the author of the meme (Hairi; n.d.). On this profile which posts quite frequently and regularly memes, we can find this meme as part of a video in which several memes are shown one after the other to the tune of *Funkytown* by the band Lipps Inc. The post has 437 likes. Interestingly the other memes in the video seem thematically unrelated to the meme in question (Hairi; n.d.).

This meme appears to be an instance of a meme that serves a different purpose, than just to be amusing, because while there is undoubtedly an element of humor here it is quite crude and raunchy. Even in a western context this meme would not be acceptable to casually sent to most people, and the taboo on sexuality in all levels of society is even stronger within the Arab world (Dialmy; 2005: 29).

It appears that this meme would more often serve the purpose of breaking taboos, like teenagers would do among their friends in order to show defiance to cultural rules in front of their peers. Another purpose could be turning a conversation towards a more sexual avenue with another person. Similar to the previous meme *Discussing Homosexuality (#2)* (Fig. 30) it could be a playful way of moving a conversation towards a taboo topic. Especially among homosexual men this could be used to move a conversation towards sex and lust in a more subtle way. This is also supported by the fact that the contact of this meme said he had it sent to him on the homosexual dating app Grindr. Further research would however be required to tell if this is indeed a viable theory.



Fig. 36 Meme: Talking Sexual (#2)

<u>Transcription (MSA):</u>	<u>Translation:</u>
Text: Tarā tisʿatan wa-sittīna	Text: You see, 69
nafsu sittatin wa-tisʿīna	is like 96.
al-farqu innahum ḥalaṣū wa-nāmū	The difference is that they finished and went to sleep.

This meme, like the meme *Negotiating Gender Roles (#3)* (Fig. 34) is an example of how broad the term meme can be used, as it really is only a picture of a funny quote written by someone on a mirror. Just as in meme *Discussing Homosexuality (#1)* (Fig. 29) one could argue that the text is indeed part of the picture itself. It could also be seen as a real-life image macro, although in this case it somewhat lacks a picture. If one were to try to fit this meme into the taxonomy of Yus (2019), it would arguably be *word specific*, as the picture (except for the text) is entirely irrelevant for the joke. Seeing, as the text is part (and actually the biggest part) of the picture however it is questionable how sensible the use of this taxonomy is in this instance.

In the picture we see a mirror in a room, on which someone printed a quote in Arabic. The quote itself is a joke about the double meaning of the number 69 as a sexual position. The quote in the meme argues that this logic also applies to the number 96, only that in this number the two humans have finished their sexual act and now sleep next to each other by facing the back to one another.

The sexual meaning of the number 69 is derived from both numbers possibly being understood as stick figures, with the circle at the end of each number being the head and the spur at the other end depicting the body. With this in mind, the numbers can be seen as two humans lying next to each other, with each of their faces being at the area of the other persons genitals meaning that they are able to satisfy each other orally at the same time.

As mentioned before the picture itself seems entirely unnecessary to the meme. If the quote were simply written as a text on a blank background, it would have the same effect. At most it might be slightly amusing to the reader to think that someone printed this quote on their mirror, and hung it up in their home, since it would be tacky or maybe even offensive by many people. This quote is certainly not something that most people would want to have hanging on their wall, when having family or other guests over visiting. However, this has no influence on the joke itself. It would be an interesting question to know, why the person who sent this decided to send it as a picture and not simply to write out the phrase as a text message. This question however will have to remain unanswered for the time being.

This meme is interesting in so far that it shows quite well how the term ‘internet meme’ has come to encompass quite a lot of formats which at times don’t really seem to share commonalities. This meme is really just a picture of a funny decoration and still many young people would consider it a meme, albeit in the broadest sense. In the case of this study this is an example, where the fact that it was sent by a contact from Oman in reaction to the specific request for memes acts as proof that this can be considered a meme, at least by some accounts.

However, it might not only be the fact that it is a funny picture on the internet that makes this a meme, even though that is arguably the most important aspect. As mentioned in the beginning of this thesis Al Zidjaly (2017) regards intertextuality (drawing on prior discourse) as one of the important characteristics of memes (see 2.1.4.). The number 69 is a good example for this.

It is quite a big reference in pop internet culture and as such the nature of the joke is also an aspect that defines this picture as an internet meme. In many ways, one could argue that in a broader sense (see 2.1.3) of the word meme, the number 69 itself has become an internet meme itself.

Certainly, according to the internet this is a number of special memetic reference, where it has been a prevalent slang term at least since the early 2000. It became another facet richer in the summer of 2008, when people began to reply to the mention of this number by writing or saying the word “nice” in reference to a South Park episode (“69 / Sixty-Nine”; n.d.). In this episode an underaged schoolboy has sexual relations with his attractive elementary school teacher. His brother tries to point out the pedophile nature of these relations, but because the teacher is attractive nobody seems to mind. Everyone simply reacts to hearing about this relationship by exclaiming the word “nice” with an elongated hissing ‘s’ at the end of the word. It is with this same manner that people react to the number 69.

While being a meme only in a broader sense of the word it is certainly safe to say that the number 69 has become one of the most widespread memes online and beyond, due to its long history, the allure of sexual taboos and its simple nature. So, while it certainly constitutes an outlier in the corpus of memes at hand there are good reasons to argue that this is as much of a meme, as any other of the pictures presented in this study. It does, at the very least show that the memetic reference of 69 is not limited to western memes but is known in the Arab world as well.

#### **4.8. Snake Memes**

The last category of memes in this corpus somewhat differs from the previous groups, as the memes within it were not so much clustered for their message, but rather for them using snakes as metaphors for women. This choice was made, as these memes seemed to be unlike the common memes about snakes the author of this thesis is familiar from western memes.

Now, it is true that memes can be at times quite creative and experimental, however in this corpus of 32 memes we cannot just find one, but three memes containing pictures of snakes, with one additional meme making a reference to snakes. In all these memes it appears that women are being depicted as, or at least compared to snakes, although not purely in a negative sense. All of these memes could of course be the work of one single author, who simply likes to use snakes in memes in such a way, but it does not seem that these memes

came from the same source, as their formats are slightly different, which would be unusual for the same author. And while, of course, the size of this corpus does not allow for a definitive conclusion, it could point towards a bigger genre, somewhat unique to Arabic memes, or maybe even a phenomenon specific to one region. Maybe future research might shed more light on the genre of snake memes. For now, we have the following examples:



Fig. 37 Meme: Snake Meme (#1)

<u>Transcription (MSA):</u>	<u>Translation:</u>
Header: ʿasānī ʾanāmu maẓlūmatan wa-lā ʾanāmu zālīmatan (3x laughing while crying emoji)	Header: I can sleep oppressed (f), but not oppressing (f)

This meme is a further example of the so-called modern layout, where the text is above the picture and not part of the picture itself and the picture is either a reaction or, as in this case,

used to expand the meaning of the text. The picture is necessary to understand the joke or the intended meaning of the author, placing it into the *interdependent* category (Yus; 2019: 115).

The picture shows a snake in a bed wearing plushy bunny ears. The snake appears to be crawling towards the camera. It is a big snake, being as long as the bed and possibly longer.

The header is direct speech of an unspecified person stating that they can sleep oppressed, but not oppressing someone. With this the person speaking most likely wanting to express that, while they themselves are being used to being a victim they could never in turn be unjust to someone else. The phrase is almost written poetically and makes heavy use of participles.

The picture underneath appears to metaphorically depict the speaker of the sentence in the header, thus ridiculing her words. From the grammatical structure we can tell that the speaker is a woman or at least identifies as one. This is added by the fact that the snake itself is usually associated with being a feminine animal, while also the plushy ears are generally something that would be socially more accepted for a woman to wear than for a man.

The message appears to be that the speaker is only pretending to be innocent and harmless, while in fact being evil and deceitful. In Arabic culture the snake can have positive connotations of being intelligent or protective, however this appears to be almost exclusively the case for men (Al Issawi; 2021: 47). In the case of women, it generally means to highlight cunning and destructiveness. Al Issawi (2021) quotes Arabic intellectual, Al-Rifai (2012), who compared women to snakes, by arguing that while snakes poison with their teeth, women poison with their tongue (Al-Rifai; 2012, as cited in Al Issawi; 2021: 48). Simply put, the picture is meant to show the real character of the woman speaking. The bunny ears, being plushy and playful are meant to symbolize the act of the speaker to try and mask her evil nature. The same effect could be intended by showing the snake in a bed, which also is associated with comfort and safety, but this is less clear. It might also be a hint to a promiscuous side of the woman in question.

This meme was acquired from a contact in Oman who claims to have received it from a chat on the gay dating platform 'Grindr'. So, there is also reason to believe that the snake could also symbolize a gay man being phony with someone else.

What is unclear, is why the sentence in the header is followed by two crying while laughing emojis, seeing that the sentence in itself is more of a statement, than a joke. The sentence 'Translate from Arabic' directly under the header is also interesting, as it does not appear to

serve any purpose in this meme. A likely explanation could be that the whole meme is a screenshot from a social media site, with the profile name having been cropped out. Alternatively, it is also possible that the header was not written for this meme, but rather is a comment from a social media site which the author of the meme took and put together in the current form.

The Tag on the picture, with a yellow, ghost-like, symbol and the name ‘Affreett’ appears to be the tag of the author. It was not possible to find an account with such a name to the author of this thesis, but this could simply mean that it has either been deleted or exists as a private profile. It is also possible that the tag is the watermark of a meme website or a meme generator, but in this case the exact source is unclear as well.



Fig. 38 Meme: Snake Meme (#2)

<u>Transcription (Gulf Arabic):</u>	<u>Translation:</u>
Header: ?agūl-lak waddni bēt ?ahli mā-gdar ?aʕīš maʕ ?ummak w-iḥwātak	Header: I tell you, send me to the house of my family, I cannot live with your mother and your siblings

This meme appears to be in the modern layout as well. This however stems arguably from the fact that it appears to be a Social Media Screenshot from a mobile device. This being a screenshot from a mobile device, such as a smartphone, seems not only likely because of its layout, but also because the dark blue background is indicative of a social media app in ‘night mode’, where the app is switched to a darker background color in order to make the screen less tiring to the eyes in a dark environment. Those generally do not exist in official desktop versions of these apps and to install them requires advanced knowledge of those programs. As such this is most likely a screenshot from a cell phone. Following Yus’ 2019 taxonomy this meme could be considered part of the *interdependent* category, as the meme would not be able to convey its message without the picture (Yus; 2019: 115).

The picture shows a snake sitting in the passenger seat of a car being strapped into the seatbelt and sitting upright.

The header is direct speech by an unspecified person, although presumably a woman. There she tells someone, most likely her husband that she wants to be brought home to her family, as she can no longer stand living with his family, above all his mother and his sisters.

In this case the gender of the speaker does not become obvious by the grammatical structure, but by context. If a married couple in the Arab world chooses to move into an extended family household, instead of moving together into a new apartment, it is almost always the woman that will move in with the family of the husband (Olmsted; 2011: 402). Also, the fact that the person speaking, particularly complains about the mother and sisters is a strong indicator that we have a woman talking, as it is normal for spouses to mostly interact with in-laws of the same sex.

The snake in this case is most likely meant to depict this woman as deceitful and evil, much like in the previous meme *Snake Meme (#1)* (Fig. 37), as the snake, if applied to a female, is usually associated with being malicious and lying (Al Issawi; 2021: 48). While she pretends to be the victim in this case, the picture tells us that she is in fact not innocent, but rather that she is the one who is in the wrong. We are left to assume that her conflicts with the family of the man arise from her own behavior of being disrespectful to the family of the man. Maybe she was expected to contribute to the household, like any other female member of the family is, but regards this as beneath her. In any case, we can only speculate what the reason for her differences with his family might be, but we are led to believe that she is the one to blame by her being depicted as a snake.

What seems remarkable about this meme is that the author of the meme seems to be quite unsympathetic towards the woman demanding to be sent back to her family. By depicting her as a snake the author basically depicts her as phony and evil. No consideration seems to be taken that she might have indeed been suffering at the hands of her husband's mother and sisters. While it is of course unclear in this case who is actually right and who is wrong, it seems interesting that an unrelated person would side immediately against the woman described.

In current western societies there is a strong stereotype of mothers-in-law being the bane of any wife often being depicted as insufferable or even jealous. In contrast to this, in Arab culture the relationship of a woman with her mother-in-law often tends to be quite close, at times even closer than to her husband, as the mother-in-law can be very helpful especially after the woman had her first child (Weisfeld; 1990: 43). However, it is nevertheless also quite common that women experience their mothers-in-law as domineering and meddling, as a high level of obedience and respect is generally demanded from the daughter-in-law (Weisfeld; 1990: 43). So even though there might be generally a bigger sense of devotion and responsibility of a bride towards the family of her husband, conflicts between a bride and her mother-in-law or even sisters in-law are something not unheard of in the Arab world.

In the upper right corner, we can see the profile name of the person posting the meme. It says the name of the poster is Reem and the profile name is *@i\_reem96*. This could be an Instagram profile but finding out exactly is hard to say. It is possible to find a profile with a similar name, specifically *@i\_reem96*. It is however not entirely clear, if this is the same profile, as it is a private profile with only very few posts.

أريد حبيبتي تكون بيضاء وناعمة وعيونها سوداء



Fig. 39 Meme: Snake Meme (#3)

<u>Transcription (MSA):</u>	<u>Translation:</u>
Header: ʔurīdu ḥabībatī takūnu bayḍāʔa wa-nāʕimatan wa-ʕuyūnuhā sawdāʔa	Header: I want a girlfriend which is white [skinned], smooth, and black-eyed

This meme in the modern layout is another example of an *interdependent* meme, as the joke is only produced by combining the picture and text (Yus; 2019: 115).

The picture shows two white snakes in a bed of what appears to be wood shavings, most likely inside of a terrarium. Both snakes are standing up in alert position looking at the camera, without showing any signs of aggression.

The text in the header is direct speech of an unknown person and states that the person speaking wants a girlfriend who is white(-skinned), smooth(-skinned), and has black eyes. By this, of course, they are talking about a woman with light pigmentation. This is in line with the general beauty standard in the middle east. While the exact preference on skin tone differs, it is generally true that a majority of people prefer a lighter skin color than the one predominant within their own ethnic group (Kashmar; 2019: 5). Additionally, she should have smooth skin free of acne or scars and dark brown eyes, giving them the appearance of almost being entirely black.

The joke however is that the mentioned attributes also apply to the snakes in the picture which are white and have pitch black eyes, as well, as smooth scales. The snakes in the picture are most likely leucistic. This is similar to albinism, in that their skin is almost completely white.

In contrast to albinos however leucistic animals do not have red eyes, but rather retain the typical color of their eyes, as we can see with the snakes in this picture (Deshmukh et al.; 2020).

It appears that the message behind this meme is to mock those who request such attributes from a woman, by misunderstanding them in a way in which they are not applied to a woman, but rather a leucistic snake. Their request is being ridiculed. The argument can be understood as such that by focusing only on physical attributes the man saying this might end up with a cunning and deceiving wife or girlfriend, since he only cares about physical properties.

However, it could also be understood as a statement against superficiality in general. While it is considered nothing bad in itself, to have certain requirements for a partner it is considered in many cultures to be bad to focus only on superficial attributes. Here the Arab world is no exception. There are multiple reasons why superficiality is generally frowned upon. First of all, people generally have little influence on their physical attributes or would have to go to great lengths to change them. This means that demanding certain physical attributes from another person is generally seen as asking too much of them or punishing them for something they have little influence in. Similarly, most people are aware that their physical beauty is temporary and feel much more comfortable building their relationship on character traits, as they assume that those will always stay the same. In this case, a person might have smooth skin, but would still feel uncomfortable if this is the most important thing about them for a partner, as it would mean that if they were to lose this attribute it would also mean losing their partner. In the Arab world, and especially within the Islamic faith, decency is an important virtue for women meaning that they should not be showing off too freely with their physical attractiveness and men are conversely expected to not focus too much on physical attraction.

Apart from these aspects, another reason superficial requests are frowned upon is certainly that it also shows a sense of entitlement by the person making these demands, in a position where he can negotiate, whereas the other person must accept him as he is. This could be understood as arrogance and could lead to ridicule, as we see in the meme.

All in all however, this meme stays somewhat vague about its exact message. While the joke behind this meme is obvious, the deeper meaning behind it leaves a lot of room for interpretation. Of course, it could also simply be a light-hearted joke with no deeper thoughts behind it.

In contrast to the previous snake memes *Snake Meme (#1)* (Fig. 37) *Snake Meme (#2)* (Fig. 38) this meme's criticism appears to not be aimed at women, but rather at men. While the snake is certainly an unflattering metaphor to a woman, the butt of the joke is still the person, presumably a man, who makes the demands in the header. It could, of course, also be a lesbian woman speaking.

هكذا تقوم الأفعى بتحديد فريستها بعناية !!



Fig. 40 Meme: Snake Meme (#4)

<u>Transcription (MSA):</u>	<u>Translation:</u>
Header: Hākaḏā tuqawwimu al-ʾafʿā bi-taḥdīdin farīsatahā bi-ʿināyatin !!	Header: This is how the viper restrictedly judges its prey carefully !!

This meme's layout, having its text on top and not inside the picture, is yet another example of the modern layout. Somewhat untypically however under the text there is not only one picture, but rather a compilation of four pictures, with the biggest one to the left and the remaining three pictures stacked on top of each other on the right side. In the taxonomy of

Yus (2019) it is an *interdependent* meme, as the joke in the text relies on the picture (Yus; 2019: 115).

The first picture is as tall as the other three combined, with the other three being of equal size. All four of these pictures depict a young attractive woman watching a basketball game. She is sitting in the front row which makes her whole body visible. The woman is dressed all in white which makes her stand out as the rest of the audience is mostly wearing darker colors. Her posture in three of the four pictures is laid back, but attentive. In the other picture she is bend forward. In all these pictures, it is clear that she is paying attention to the basketball game in front of her. In the three smaller pictures we can see that she is looking at one of the players in particular, who is partially visible in those photos. He is wearing a blue basketball uniform with a blue Nike-Logo and the word 'Clippers', as well as the number 22 on the front. On the back of his basketball jersey, it says 'Griffin' as well as the number 22 again.

While the bigger picture shows her from the front, so it is impossible to say what she is looking at, in the pictures on the right it is obvious that she is focusing on this man. In the biggest picture her face impression is neutral, but focused with her right hand touching her shoulder, as if being in thought. In the first of the smaller pictures, she bites her thumb, while looking at the man and there is a hint of a smile on her face. In the second of the smaller pictures, she is leaning over to a woman next to her with her arms crossed in front of her body and a smile on her face, while looking at the man in the blue jersey. In the last of the smaller pictures, she is sitting upright with her arms crossed in front of her body. Her face is serious, but again clearly focusing on the player in the blue jersey.

The text in the header states that 'this' is the way a viper carefully observes its prey. The text clearly appears to be talking about the woman. The message is that she is looking at this man like a snake observing its prey, stalking it. Interestingly the author of this meme felt that a compilation of several pictures would serve better to make his or her point. This also adds to the humor of the picture, by emphasizing the message even stronger. We can clearly see that it was not one odd picture that caught her looking like this, but rather that she really did stare at her this man in a focused way over a longer period of time during the game.

A quick internet search reveals that this woman is the American model and media personality Kendall Jenner. The man in blue is her then-boyfriend Blake Griffin, who at the time of the game was playing for the team of the LA Clippers (DAILYMAIL.COM REPORTER; 2018).

The game took place on the 20<sup>th</sup> of November 2017 at Madison Square Garden in New York according to the inactive X-Account 'Kendall Keek'. (Kendall Keek; 2017).

By comparing her to an animal of prey her stare is interpreted in a desiring way. Like a snake lying in wait will watch her prey and think about how to catch and eat it, Jenner supposedly is thinking about what she will do with her boyfriend, once she is alone with him after the game. Although not necessarily meant in this way, we can also assume some sexual insinuation in this. The choice of the animal is an interesting one, as this metaphor would also work with a number of predators, such as cats, wolves or lions that might arguably be more flattering to a woman.

Contrary to claims that positive connotations of snakes are usually only attributed to men (Al Issawi; 2021: 48), and unlike the previous memes in this chapter, we can see a clear example here of it being used in a positive way to refer to a woman. It seems unlikely that the comparison to a predator, or a viper in particular, in this case is meant in a negative sense. Since Jenner is a model and an attractive woman it is likely that especially women would not mind being compared to her. While it is clear in the pictures that she is staring at her boyfriend she is also looking confident and at ease. In none of the pictures does she look obsessed or undignified about her desires, but rather her pose and outfit is making her stand out confident compared to the people around her. Since also the man she is presumably desiring is her official boyfriend probably only few people would regard her staring at him as something amoral, but rather it could be seen as a sign of a healthy and as such desirable relationship.

In addition to this, preying animals are often associated with positive traits, such as cunning, ambition and a sense of high status. In Arabic culture there is also sometimes a sense of protectiveness associated positively with snakes (Al Issawi; 2021: 48). And while not as positively connoted as e.g., a lioness, snakes certainly are mighty and imposing animals as well.

In addition to people comparing themselves to this, many people attracted to women would most likely enjoy a woman as attractive as Jenner desiring them in such a way, as well. Invoking this fantasy might be another purpose of this meme.

The contact who sent this meme added that it was sent to him by a friend who said about himself that this was also the way he was looking at women, if he was interested in them. This is interesting, because even though anecdotally it shows that there seems to not necessarily be

an issue for a heterosexual man to identify with the picture of an attractive woman, if he agrees with the message.

The question of what makes people identify with memes is certainly an aspect that is understudied and would profit from closer examination. Often it is simply assumed that people will more easily associate with memes that represent their own gender, ethnicity or social group. Experience however often seems to paint a different or at least a more complicated picture. It stands to hope that future study on this topic will provide fruitful insight into this subject matter.

## **5. Conclusion**

Judging by this glimpse into the topic it seems to be no exaggeration that for every aspect of gender relationships and intimacy, there seems to exist a meme. In the following, final, chapter we will have a small recapitulation of the previous findings. Subsequently we will see an attempt at translating these findings into possible future topics for the study of Arabic memes discussing gender, relationships and intimacy.

### **5.1. Recapitulation**

In this corpus we can certainly see a plethora of topics discussed. Starting with memes made by those who are heartbroken or struggle with finding the right partner to those, in which the ones 'lucky' enough to have a partner vent about their partners' shortcomings. We even see a fair share of criticism regarding traditional marriage patterns. Still, it appears that all this negative outlook does not stop young people from longing for a stable relationship and marriage, not just being put under pressure by society but also putting pressure on themselves to commit to a stable relationship. We can see the topic of homosexuality being touched upon, albeit somewhat hesitantly and at times with ridicule. We can see gender roles being both affirmed and ridiculed, and sexual innuendo being packed up in supposedly funny memes. And lastly, we can see a seemingly unique genre of memes comparing women to snakes, albeit not always in a negative way.

There are however also a few things we don't see within this corpus. We do not see honest self-criticism neither when talking about past relationships nor about the current partner. When traditional marriage is criticized, we never see criticism of the idea of marriage as a whole, but rather only of traditions and aspects of it. We do not see much open self-

confidence on the side of those not having found a stable relationship as we are mostly confronted with deflection or excuses, why someone is single. We do not see outright condemnation of homosexuality, but we do certainly not see acceptance of it either, nor do we see acceptance of effeminate behavior in men. Even within the memes, directly talk about sex we cannot find the word 'sex' and within those memes using snakes to depict women as evil and deceitful, we often do not find what they did to deserve such a harsh judgment.

On a formal level we do see memes in various dialects, as well as MSA, with some mixed examples existing as well. It appears that while some meme creators view memes as something colloquial, many others feel memes to be formal enough to warrant the use of MSA. Some memes with mixed dialect and MSA exist as well, and while sometimes the reasons are obvious, it is often unclear if this is on purpose or a question of lacking proficiency in MSA.

Following the taxonomy of Yus (2019) we see that, like in his study, both the *interdependent* (13 examples) (Yus; 2019: 115) as well as the *additive* (5 examples) (Yus; 2019: 112) category are represented in highest numbers. We see that many of the memes, as one probably would expect, are making strong use of the combination of text and picture possible within memes. Interestingly however, we can see no example of *duo specific* (Yus; 2019: 111), the third of the most commonly used categories within Yus' (2019) study.

Instead, we can see quite a lot of *word specific* (13 examples) memes (Yus; 2019: 109) within this corpus making them just as numerous as the *interdependent* ones (Yus; 2019: 115). This seems strange at first glance, as it begs the question as to why these were made as memes at all, as they could have much easier been simple text messages. It could however be understood as indication that memes have become so normalized as a way to transport jokes online that people feel it appropriate to pack a joke into a meme, even if it would not be necessary.

As an outlier we can also see one meme within the corpus that appears to be *picture specific* (Yus; 2019: 110). As however we were able to see that Yus (2019) taxonomy proved less useful for the more atypical memes, this should not be overinterpreted. All in all, the taxonomy seems to be a promising tool for categorizing memes, although in the future it might be useful to determine certain characteristics a meme would have to meet to be considered suited for this classification.

## **5.2. Findings and Outlook**

What to make of all these findings without further research is rather difficult to determine. While, due to the limited sample size and broad focus of the corpus, the findings of this thesis cannot be understood as standing for themselves, a plethora of phenomena and peculiarities have become apparent during the analysis of these memes. Each of these certainly deserve further consideration and research in themselves and it seems apparent that many interesting aspects of Arabic meme culture yet remain to be discovered by the young field of Arabic memetics.

One noteworthy aspect of Arabic-speaking meme culture appears to be quite clearly the strong use of screenshots from Egyptian films. This contrasts with many non-English-speaking European countries, where the vast majority of meme templates come from foreign (American) films. Additionally, it seems that, whereas most western meme templates taken from films are understandable without the need to watch the film, many of the meme templates in this corpus taken from Egyptian films become a lot clearer if one has seen the film they come from. This gives the impression, as though these memes rely on the reader knowing and remembering the exact scene. And as we have seen with the anecdote of the Egyptian brother of one of the contacts easily recognizing an exact movie scene just from part of a screenshot in the meme *Negotiating Gender Roles (#2)* (Fig. 33), this seems to actually be the case.

This is interesting, as it shows the importance of Egyptian films, especially comedic films, for Egyptian society and culture. Apparently, these films hold a far greater significance for current pop culture among nearly all age groups, than domestic films do for example in almost every European country. The films in question interestingly appear not to be the most recent ones, but classics already more than one decade old. And it seems that this importance of Egyptian comedic movies and series to current pop culture extends, at least in part, to the rest of the Arab countries as well. The importance of classic Egyptian comedies to pop culture is of course nothing new to those living in Arab countries themselves and those familiar with them, but it is interesting to see just how relevant these, at times quite old, movies still are. Depending on the research topic it seems safe to say that one should not underestimate the significance of this phenomenon for current Egyptian and Arab culture.

Another difference that becomes apparent when researching upon those memes is that compared to western memes, Arabic-speaking memes appear to often be far more unique. While in western memes there usually exist certain screenshots from movies or series, used

over and over again, it seems that far more often Arabic meme authors create the templates themselves by taking them out of films rather than relying on already circulating pictures.

This assumption is due to the fact that when researching whether the templates of memes in this corpus had been used in other memes the results tended to be limited to a handful of memes. This could have other reasons, of course. It could simply be that the whole phenomenon of meme is somewhat younger and as such smaller than in the west. It is thinkable that some people in Arab countries prefer English speaking memes over memes in their own language, as is the case in many European countries. This would limit the overall size of Arabic memes available, as only a fraction of the population would use them. Likewise, it could be that, as alluded to before (2.2.6.), Arabs prefer to share their memes in private conversations rather than publicly due to cultural and political reasons. And lastly, it is entirely thinkable that, with most meme generator applications being in English and created for a western audience, it is simply not possible to rely on a big amount of already existing templates for creating memes with screenshots taken from Egyptian films.

Generally speaking, the memes in this corpus confirm what many have already pointed out in recent years, being that memes serve far broader purposes than simply to be humorous. Within the corpus, we have seen many examples of memes that in themselves do not seem to contain much of a joke, but rather seemed to serve the purpose of communicating the feeling of the person posting them. And it does make sense that this is the case. Memes have certain advantages by their nature other types of communication lack. One such advantage lies in their simplicity. The combination of textual and visual elements allows for a wide range of complex messages and emotions to be transported. Far more than would be possible by text alone. Furthermore, their reputation as being jokes means that any message conveyed by memes, as serious it might be, can claim at least some playful character. Especially in situations, where communication can be difficult this should not be underestimated.

As we have seen, particularly in the group of memes which commented on the difficulties of dating (4.1.), memes also allow, due to their subtle nature, the retelling of stories in one's own favor. This can be done somewhat inconspicuous and without having to tell the whole story. For example, by making a joke about the sexual performance of a former lover one can claim to 'only' be making a joke, while at the same time subtly persuade others that it was this ex-lover's shortcomings that led to breaking up and not one's own faults.

Another aspect that becomes quite clear, when looking at the corpus is the fact that memes allow also for great flexibility as to the clearness of the message. While some memes manage with little text and a picture to clearly and unmistakably communicate a message some remain quite vague. There could be several reasons why some authors tend to hold their memes vaguer. For one of course, it could be that the memes are quite clear to the intended addressee and were never intended for a broader audience, relying on inside jokes and other references. On the other hand, it is also entirely thinkable that, as we have seen in some cases, the vagueness might be a feature rather than a problem. Just like the playful nature of memes a vague message could allow someone to speak about a difficult topic and simply claim it to be a joke should troubles arise.

Considering that so far, a considerable part of the interest in memes as a means of communication have come from scholars of gender studies (Drakett et al. (2018), Gbadegesin, (2020), Mahfouz (2021) etc.) the question of grammatical gender within memes might also prove an interesting topic for further research. As we have seen throughout the corpus some memes have been clearly marking their message towards one gender even if gender did not seem to be relevant to the message of the meme. On the other hand, some memes are held mostly gender neutral. If this was done on purpose or simply by coincidence, however, is difficult to tell, except for the meme *Pressure to commit to a relationship (#1)* (Fig. 23), where extra markers were used to specifically mention both genders.

On the other hand, we have seen, albeit mostly anecdotally, that people might identify with the message of a meme, even if the meme is specifically marked to a gender different than their own. It is often assumed that many people would have difficulties identifying with a meme that is not particularly tailored to them but, as previously mentioned, the truth seems to be more complex. Further research into this topic could e.g. likely provide valuable information to add to the debate on the implementation of gender-neutral language, which is currently held in many countries and languages.

And then there are further issues which this thesis has offered a glimpse into. On the one hand, memes that touch on the topic of homosexuality partially seem to be specifically made for the communication among homosexual Arab men. This of course is highly speculative, but further research in the role which memes have started to play in flirting, especially among those that must keep their real desires a secret, might lead to interesting discoveries. Do memes perhaps offer a new way of conversation for those finding it hard to talk about their actual feelings?

And even for flirting in general, we can see examples within the corpus that seem to rather serve the purpose of voicing one's expectations and desires, than mere amusement. Interestingly, while we find sexual expressions within memes that would hardly be imaginable in a real-life situation, it appears that those creating those memes still respect certain boundaries. Within this corpus for example even the memes containing sexualized content abstained from directly mentioning any anatomical or sexual terms and rather used euphemisms, never mentioning the word 'sex' even when talking about sex positions.

These findings beg the question of how memes are changing the flirting behavior of a young generation. Does it make communicating certain wishes easier for those involved, or is it just a niche phenomenon? How do memes, and especially those criticizing one's partner, impact relationships and marriages? Does it help relationship health that partners can find a playful way to vent their frustrations about each other or does it create resentment? And for all the memes seemingly used as coping mechanisms by those posting them: Does it help them to better accept their situation and be more content or is the effect on mental health negligible or even negative?

And what impact does the discussion of gender roles and criticism of problems in traditional marriage patterns have on societies. Will we start to see a change in those issues within a majority of society, starting within the internet? And if so, is it possible that memes shaped societal development or are they merely an expression of changes already in progress?

As we can see, in the crossroads of social sciences and memetic research within the Arab world many interesting questions remain, leaving a wide array of issues for future researchers to pick from. This thesis has been a probe into this fascinating and relatively new topic, showing the potential behind memes for future cultural and linguistic science. It stands to hope that it will serve its purpose in inspiring others to build upon its research and expand upon its findings.

## **6. Bibliography**

Al Atom, B. (2015). Arab attitudes toward gender roles: From homogeneous stereotype to heterogenous reality. *Sociology*, 5(3), 213-222.

Al Issawi, J. M. (2021). Cultural-bound meaning of animal names in Arabic. *English Linguistics Research*, 10(1), 42-55.

Al-Masri, M. (2015). *Colloquial Arabic (Levantine): the complete course for beginners*. Routledge.

Al-Qattan, A. (2021). Swearing on Twitter: Khaleeji Dialect. *European Scientific Journal*, *ESJ*, 17(33), 151-167.

Al Zidjaly, N. (2012). What has happened to Arabs? Identity and face management online. *Multilingua-Journal of Cross-Cultural and Interlanguage Communication*, 31(4), 413-439.

Al Zidjaly, N. (2017). Memes as reasonably hostile laments: A discourse analysis of political dissent in Oman. *Discourse & Society*, 28(6), 573-594.

Al Zidjaly, N. (2022). Covid-19 WhatsApp sticker memes in Oman. *Discourse & Society*, 33(5), 690-716.

Aysha, E. E. D. (2011). January 25: The day of Egypt's revolutionary historical makeover. *Studies in Political Economy*, 87(1), 29-47.

Badawi, E.-S. M., Carter, M. G., & Gully, A. (2016). *Modern written Arabic: a comprehensive grammar* / (Second Revision edition.). London ; New York: Routledge.

Bani, L. M., & Pate, H. A. (2015). Dissolution of Marriage (Divorce) under Islamic Law. *JL Pol'y & Globalization*, 42, 138.

Beckers, A. M., & Bsat, M. Z. (2006). The Effect of Gender on Apology Strategies. *RESEARCH YEARBOOK*, 207.

Benitez-Bribiesca, L. (2001). Memetics: A dangerous idea. *Interciecia* 26, 29–31. Available at: <https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/339/33905206.pdf> (09.07.2023).

Chakrani, B. (2015). Arabic interdialectal encounters: Investigating the influence of attitudes on language accommodation. *Language & Communication*, 41, 17-27.

Cox, A. M. (2015). Sleep paralysis and folklore. *JRSM open*, 6(7), 2054270415598091.

Dawkins, R. (2016). *The selfish gene (40th anniversary edition.)*. Oxford University Press.

Deshmukh, R. V., Deshmukh, S. A., Badhekar, S. A., Rewatkar, J., Pachare, V. P., & Kawale, S. B. (2020). First records of albinism or leucism in six species of snakes from central India. *Reptiles & Amphibians*, 26(3), 174-179.

Dialmy, A. (2005). Sexuality in contemporary Arab society. *Social Analysis*, 49(2), 16-33.

Dialmy, A. (2005). Sexuality in contemporary Arab society. *Social Analysis*, 49(2), 16-33.

Drakett, J., Rickett, B., Day, K., & Milnes, K. (2018). Old jokes, new media—Online sexism and constructions of gender in Internet memes. *Feminism & psychology*, 28(1), 109-127.

Ferguson, C. A. (1959). Diglossia. *Word*, 15(2), 325-340.

Ferrero, L. (2015). “Marriage with an absentee:” Marital practices in an era of great mobility. *DIFI family research and proceedings*, 2015(1), 6.

Fietz, K. (2007). *Langenscheidt praktischer Sprachlehrgang Arabisch : der Standardkurs für Selbstlerner ; orientiert sich an A2. Lehrbuch (2007), Langenscheidt Praktisches Lehrbuch Arabisch*. Berlin Wien [u.a.]: Langenscheidt.

Fluehr-Lobban, C., & Bardsley-Sirois, L. (1990). Obedience (Ta'a) in Muslim marriage: religious interpretation and applied law in Egypt. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 21(1), 39-53.

Gbadegesin, V. O. (2020). Gender ideology and identity in humorous social media memes. *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities*, 35(3), 529-546.

Gilbert, C. (2021). A Comic Road to Interiors, or the Pedagogical Matter of Gen Z Humor. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 21(4).

Grotzfeld, H. (1965). *Syrisch-arabische Grammatik : (Dialekt von Damaskus)*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

Hachimi, A. (2015). "Good Arabic, Bad Arabic" Mapping Language Ideologies in the Arabic-speaking World. *Zeitschrift für arabische Linguistik*, (61), 35-70.

Heylighen F., & Chielens K. (2009). Cultural evolution and memetics. In B. Meyers (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of complexity and system science*. Available at: <http://pespmc1.vub.ac.be/Papers/Memetics-Springer.pdf> (09.07.2023).

Hinds M., & Badawi, A.M. (1986). *A dictionary of Egyptian Arabic : Arabic-English*. Beirut: Libr. du Liban.

Inhorn, M. C., & Naguib, N. (Eds.). (2022). *Reconceiving Muslim men: Love and marriage, family and care in precarious times*. Berghahn Books.

Jalal, B., Simons-Rudolph, J., Jalal, B., & Hinton, D. E. (2014). Explanations of sleep paralysis among Egyptian college students and the general population in Egypt and Denmark. *Transcultural psychiatry*, 51(2), 158-175.

Jastrow, O. (2008). Das Spannungsfeld von Hochsprache und Dialekt im arabischen Raum. *Munske, Horst Haider (Hrsg.): Sterben die Dialekte aus? Vorträge am Interdisziplinären Zentrum für Dialektforschung an der Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, 22.10.-10.12. 2007.* < <http://www.dialektforschung.phil.uni-erlangen.de/sterbendialekte>>.

Johnson, D. (2007). Mapping the meme: A geographical approach to materialist rhetorical criticism. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 4(1), 27-50.

Kashmar, M., Alsufyani, M. A., Ghalamkarpour, F., Chalouhi, M., Alomer, G., Ghannam, S., ... & Rogers, J. D. (2019). Consensus opinions on facial beauty and implications for aesthetic treatment in Middle Eastern women. *Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery Global Open*, 7(4).

Kehoe, K. (2013). Factbox: Women's rights in the Arab world. *Reuters Foundation, November, 11*.

Lesmana, M. (2021). A Critical Reading of Arabic Internet Memes against Patriarchal Systems. *Journal of International Women's Studies, 22(5)*, 333-346.

Machin, D., Caldas-Coulthard, C. R., & Milani, T. M. (2016). Doing critical multimodality in research on gender, language and discourse. *Gender & Language, 10(3)*.

Mahfouz, I. (2021). A Multimodal Analysis of Gender Representation in "Men vs. Women Memes". *Textual Turnings: An International Peer-Reviewed Journal in English Studies, 3(1)*, 101-121.

Matthee, R. (2014). Alcohol in the Islamic Middle East: ambivalence and ambiguity. *Past & Present, 222(suppl\_9)*, 100-125.

McCloud, S. (1994). *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art. 1993.Reprint. New York: HarperPerennial*.

McGregor, A. (2006). *A military history of modern Egypt from the Ottoman conquest to the Ramadan war*. Praeger Security International.

Meyer, M. (Ed.) (2001). Between theory, method, and politics: Positioning of the approaches to CDA. In Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (Eds.) (2001). *Methods of critical discourse analysis, 1*, 14-31.

Milner, R. M. (2013). Pop polyvocality: Internet memes, public participation, and the Occupy Wall Street movement. *International journal of communication*, 7, 34.

Moussa, M. B., Benmessaoud, S., & Douai, A. (2020). Internet memes as “tactical” social action: A multimodal critical discourse analysis approach. *International Journal of Communication*, 14, 21.

Myhill, J. (2014). The effect of diglossia on literacy in Arabic and other languages. *Handbook of Arabic literacy: Insights and perspectives*, 197-223.

Norbakk, M. (2018). A man in love: Men, love, and hopes for marriage in Cairo. *Reconceiving Muslim Men: Love and Marriage, Family and Care in Precarious Times*, (eds), M. Inhorn and N. Naguib (New York: Berghahn Books), 47-63.

Nydell, M. K. (2012). *Understanding Arabs: A contemporary guide to Arab society*. Nicholas Brealey Publishing.

Odine, M. (2013). Role of social media in the empowerment of Arab women. *Global Media Journal*, 12(22), 1-30.

Olmsted, J. C. (2011). Norms, economic conditions and household formation: A case study of the Arab world. *The History of the Family*, 16(4), 401-415.

Parton, J. (1877). *Caricature and Other Comic Art in All Times and Many Lands*. Harper & brothers.

Pascoe, C. J., & Diefendorf, S. (2019). No homo: Gendered dimensions of homophobic epithets online. *Sex Roles*, 80(3-4), 123-136.

Qafisheh, H. A. (1975). *A basic course in Gulf Arabic* (1. publ.). Tucson, Ariz.: Univ. of Arizona Press [u.a.].

Qafisheh, H. A. (1996). *A glossary of Gulf Arabic* (1. impr.). Beirut: Librairie du Liban Publ.

Qafisheh, H. A., Buckwalter, T., & MacCarus, E. N. (1997). *NTC's Gulf Arabic - English dictionary: [a compact dictionary of the contemporary Arabic of the Mideast] /*. Lincolnwood (Chicago), Ill.: NTC Publishing Group.

Rashad, H., Osman, M., & Roudi-Fahimi, F. (2005). *Marriage in the Arab world*. Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau, 1-8.

Rehman, J. (2007). The sharia, Islamic family laws and international human rights law: Examining the theory and practice of polygamy and talaq. *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family*, 21(1), 108-127.

Retsö, J. (2013). What is arabic. *The Oxford handbook of Arabic linguistics*, 422-450.

Procházka, S. (2021). Arabic Dialectology. In: Ryding, K. C., & Wilmsen, D. (2021). *The Cambridge handbook of Arabic linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 214-243.

Said-Foqahaa, N., & Maziad, M. (2011). Arab women: Duality of deprivation in decision-making under patriarchal authority. *Hawwa*, 9(1-2), 234-272.

Saumure, K., & Given, L. M. (2008). Nonprobability sampling. In L. M. Given (Ed.), *The SAGE encyclopedia of qualitative research methods*, 562–563. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications.

Schett, S. (2021). *Memes und ihr Einfluss auf politische Kommunikation*. Master's Thesis, Department of Political Science, University of Vienna.

Segal-Engelchin, D., Huss, E., & Massry, N. (2016). The experience of early marriage: Perspectives of engaged and married Muslim women in Israel. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 31(6), 725-749.

Shaham, R. (2009) 'Bayt Al-Ṭā'a'. In *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, THREE, edited by Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas, and Devin J. Stewart.. doi:[http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912\\_ei3\\_COM\\_22946](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_22946). (Last accessed: 11. November 2023).

Shehada, N. (2009). House of obedience: social norms, individual agency, and historical contingency. *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 5(1), 24-49.

Shifman, L. (2007). Humor in the age of digital reproduction: Continuity and change in internet-based comic texts. *International Journal of Communication*, 1(1), 23.

Shifman, L. (2013). Memes in a digital world: Reconciling with a conceptual troublemaker. *Journal of computer-mediated communication*, 18(3), 362-377.

Shifman, L. (2014). The cultural logic of photo-based meme genres. *Journal of visual culture*, 13(3), 340-358.

Shousha, N. M. (2023). Breaking the Taboo: Determinants of Sexual Knowledge and Attitudes Among Egyptian Women. *Sexuality & Culture*, 1-14.

Singerman, D., & Ibrahim, B. (2003). The cost of marriage in Egypt: A hidden variable in the new Arab demography. *Cairo papers in social science*, 24(1/2), 80-166.

Sonneveld, N. (2010). Khul 'divorce in Egypt: How family courts are providing a 'dialogue' between husband and wife. *Anthropology of the Middle East*, 5(2), 100-120.

Spiro, S. (1974). *An English - Arabic dictionary of the colloquial Arabic of Egypt : containing the vernacular idioms and expressions, slang phrases, vocables, etc., used by the native Egyptians* (New impr. [of the] 1. ed., 1897). Beirut: Libr. du Liban.

Stowasser, K., & Ani, M. (1964). *A dictionary of Syrian Arabic : (dialect of Damascus) ; English - Arabic*. Washington, DC: Georgetown Univ. Press.

Sultan, A. H. J., & AlKhafaji, S. S. A. H. (2022). A Critical Discourse Analysis of Arabic Internet Memes. *Journals education for girls*, 2(30).

Sultana, N., Baig, F. Z., Sahhzadi, A., Aman, M., & Noreen, A. (2023). Stereotyping gender and sexism through memes on social media: a socio-cognitive discourse analysis. *Russian Law Journal*, 11(12s).

Tamer, Z. (2023). *Sour Grapes*. Syracuse University Press.

Turiman, S., Leong, A., & Hassan, F. (2013). Are Men More Apologetic Than Women?. *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities*, 21(3).

Way, N. (2012). Close friendships among adolescent boys. *Boyhood Studies*, 6(2), 116-136.

Wehr, H. & Kropfitsch, L. (2020). *Arabisches Wörterbuch für die Schriftsprache der Gegenwart: Arabisch-Deutsch* (6., von Lorenz Kropfitsch völlig neu bearbeitete und erweiterte Auflage). Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag.

Weisfeld, G. E. (1990). Sociobiological patterns of Arab culture. *Ethology and Sociobiology*, 11(1), 23-49.

Whitaker, B. (2011). *Unspeakable love: Gay and lesbian life in the Middle East*. Saqi.

Wiggins, B. E., & Bowers, G. B. (2015). Memes as genre: A structural analysis of the memescape. *New media & society*, 17(11), 1886-1906.

Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (2009). Critical discourse analysis: History, agenda, theory and methodology. *Methods of critical discourse analysis*, 2, 1-33.

Woidich, M., & Heinen-Nasr, R. (2004). *Kullu tamam!: an introduction to Egyptian colloquial Arabic* (2. print.). Cairo [u.a.]: The American Univ. in Cairo Press.

Woidich, M. (2006). *Das Kairenisch-Arabische: Eine Grammatik*. Otto Harrassowitz Verlag.

Woidich, M. (2020). *Wörterbuch Deutsch - Ägyptisch-Arabisch*. Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag.

Yus, F. (2019). Multimodality in memes: A cyberpragmatic approach. *Analyzing digital discourse: New insights and future directions*, 105-131.

## **7. Internet Sources**

Abo Ali. (n.d.) in *IMDb*. Available at: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0419416/>. (Last accessed: 28. October 2023).

Aflam – افلام. (2020). *Alhob Kda* [Video]. YouTube. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cxoi5CFjLHY>. (Last accessed: 14. October 2023).

Aflam Cima. (2023). *محمد هنيدي ومحمد فؤاد وخالد النبوي* ♥ *HD1080p* ♥ *فيلم اسماعيلية رايح جاى كامل* ♥♥ [Video]. YouTube. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BT7aysPaTiY&t=2238s>. (Last accessed: 20. November 2023).

Afwan Ayoha Al Qanoon. (n.d.). in *IMDb*. Available at: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8110814/>. (Last accessed: 22. October 2023).

Ala Ganb Ya Usta. (n.d.) in *IMDb*. Available at: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2341991/>. (Last accessed: 28. October 2023).

Al Masreya Al Lobnaneya المصرية اللبنانية. (2016) *Wahda Be Wahda Movie*. [Video]. YouTube. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bbJU4xSYX9I>. (Last accessed: 30. October 2023).

Al Masreya Al Lobnaneya المصرية اللبنانية. (2016). *Afwan Ioha El Kanon Movie* | فيلم عفوا ايها القانون. [Video]. YouTube. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tfkq1dwnZ3M>. (Last accessed: 22. October 2023).

Al-Rifai, M. (2012). Alafie is talking about the poison of women and snake. Available at: <http://www.lahaonline.com/articles/view/40819.htm>. (Last accessed: 23. October 2023).

Arabic (n.d.). In *WorldData.info*. Available at: [https://www.worlddata.info/languages/arabic.php#:~:text=The%20Arabic%20language%20\(native%20name,Arabic%20as%20their%20mother%20tongue](https://www.worlddata.info/languages/arabic.php#:~:text=The%20Arabic%20language%20(native%20name,Arabic%20as%20their%20mother%20tongue). (Last accessed: 18. December 2023).

Arabic Cinema In English. (2020). *Arabic Cinema In English - "Did he send us Van Damme or what?"* 🤔🤔 - film *The Great Chinese Beans*. [Video]. YouTube. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WTzVnM8g3i0>. (Last accessed: 15. October 2023).

Ardemagni, E. (2023). The Return of Conscription: Politics by Other Means. *Italian institute for international political studies*. Available at: <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/the-return-of-conscription-politics-by-other-means-130520>. (Last accessed: 13. November 2023).

Aris min geha amneya. (n.d.). in *IMDb*. Available at: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0418471/>. (Last accessed: 15. October 2023).

Assal Eswed. (n.d.). in *IMDb*. Available at: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2210441/>. (Last accessed: 23. October 2023).

Awedt Einy. (n.d.). in *Lyrics Translate*. Available at: <https://lyricstranslate.com/de/oum-kalthoum-awedt-einy-%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%AA-%D8%B9%D9%8A%D9%86%D9%8A-lyrics.html>. (Last accessed: 28. October 2023).

Ayez haqqi. (n.d.). in *IMDb*. Available at: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0419437/>. (Last accessed: 22. October 2023).

Bee Movies. (2023). *فيلم سيد العاطفي / بطولة تامر حسني و نور وزينة* [Video]. YouTube. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IyRsxM5pNqI>. (Last accessed: 14. October 2023).

Beyblade burst evolution. (n.d.). In *Beyblade Wiki*. Available at: [https://beyblade.fandom.com/wiki/Beyblade\\_Burst\\_Evolution#Episodes\\_\(Anime\)](https://beyblade.fandom.com/wiki/Beyblade_Burst_Evolution#Episodes_(Anime)). (Last accessed: 11. October 2023).

CBC Egypt. (2018). *مسرحية حزمي يا | Hazemny Ya play | كاملة* [Video]. YouTube. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mEBCChb2ieVI>. (Last accessed: 28. October 2023).

Central Intelligence Agency. (2023). Egypt. In *The world factbook*. Available at: <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/egypt/>. (Last accessed: 13. November 2023).

C I M A 4 U. (2019). *بطولة اشرف عبدالباقي Ala Ganb Ya Osta فيلم على جنب يا أسطى* [Video]. YouTube. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sBOUYxjXT9s>. (Last accessed: 21. November 2023).

DAILYMAIL.COM REPORTER. (2018). Traveling violation? kendall jenner may have to endure long distance relationship as beau blake griffin is traded from la to detroit.

*Dailymail.Co.Uk.* <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-5328003/Kendall-Jenners-Blake-Griffin-traded-LA-Detroit.html>. (Last accessed: 11. October 2023).

Dib, A. (2023). Unhappy wife, unhappy life: Does anyone actually enjoy marriage any more?. Available at: <https://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/life-and-relationships/unhappy-wife-unhappy-life-does-anyone-actually-enjoy-marriage-anymore-20230822-p5dyeq.html>. (Last accessed: 31. October 2023).

El Hob Kedah. (n.d.). in *The Movie Database*. Available at: <https://elcinema.com/en/work/1007913/>. (Last accessed: 14. October 2023).

Fenix19. (2023). i hate my wife meme. Available at: <https://memesfeel.com/i-hate-my-wife-meme/>. (Last accessed: 31. October 2023).

F.M Production. (2023). *حصرياً فيلم غسل اسود كامل - بطولة احمد حلمي بأعلى جودة*. [Video]. YouTube. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XaUIgeddM6U>. (Last accessed: 23. October 2023).

Ghabi Minnuh Fih. (n.d.) in *IMDb*. Available at: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0422319/>. (Last accessed: 28. October 2023).

Hafid google. (2021). *عايز حقى Ayez Haqqi*. [Video]. YouTube. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RXRGUGKti2Y>. (Last accessed: 22. October 2023).

Hariri, A. [@yatoqo]. (n.d.). *Posts* [Instagram profile]. Instagram. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/yatoqo/> (Last accessed: 11. October 2023).

Hazmni ya. (n.d.) in *elcinema.com*. Available at: <https://elcinema.com/en/work/1010523/>. (Last accessed: 28. October 2023).

Insomnia. (2012). *يا دبلة الخطوبة إهداء لكل عروسة*. [Video]. YouTube. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lOkHJtgQ180>. (Last accessed: 15. October 2023).

Ismailia Rayeh Gay. (n.d.) in *IMDb*. Available at: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2146682/>. (Last accessed: 28. October 2023).

J O U R Y | جوريي 🐱🐶. [@jorry\_9]. (n.d.). Posts [Instagram profile]. Instagram. Available at: [https://www.instagram.com/jorry\\_9/](https://www.instagram.com/jorry_9/) (Last accessed: 15. October 2023).

Kendall Keek [@kendallkeek]. (2017, November 21). 11/20/17: *Kendall and Hailey at the LA Clippers and the New York Knicks game at Madison Square Garden in New York*. [Image attached] [Tweet]. X. <https://twitter.com/kendallkeek/status/932986501520076800>. (Last accessed: 11. October 2023).

Know Your Meme (2023). *Baby Boomers - You CHOSE this, buddy.* | /r/memes [Digital image]. Available at: <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/2539509-baby-boomers>. (Last accessed: 31. October 2023).

Ln A3esh Fe Gelbab Aby. (n.d.). in *IMDb*. Available at: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2476684/>. (Last accessed: 14. October 2023).

Metwaly Elwan. (n.d.) in *elcinema.com*. Available at: <https://elcinema.com/en/person/1008814/>. (Last accessed: 28. October 2023).

MiNi-FilM 10. (2020). *عادل امام الجائزة باظت زوج من جهة أمنية*. [Video]. YouTube. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cr6w9zjcVK0>. (Last accessed: 06. November 2023).

Mohamed, R. (n.d.). Home [Facebook page]. Facebook. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/romymohame/>. (Last accessed: 23. October 2023).

Okay . (n.d.). Home [Facebook page]. Facebook. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/1Okay1>. (Last accessed: 28. October 2023).

Okay . (2019). *باينها هتبقى صالونات ولا ايه؟*. Home [Facebook page]. Facebook. Available at: [https://www.facebook.com/1Okay1/posts/812813852534863/?paipv=0&eav=AfaCsgnBuW5DIYSF9xAzJGgcTV1b9tifhENFKhXHaiHr2yEyR0OcWkZl4ieCuC9l\\_sQ&\\_rdr](https://www.facebook.com/1Okay1/posts/812813852534863/?paipv=0&eav=AfaCsgnBuW5DIYSF9xAzJGgcTV1b9tifhENFKhXHaiHr2yEyR0OcWkZl4ieCuC9l_sQ&_rdr). (Last accessed: 28. October 2023).

Romantic Sayed. (n.d.). in *The Movie Database*. Available at: <https://www.themoviedb.org/movie/56330>. (Last accessed: 14. October 2023).

Sleep Paralysis Demon (n.d.). in *Know Your Meme*. Available at: <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/sleep-paralysis-demon>. (Last accessed: 12. November 2023).

Socially Awkward Penguin. (n.d.). in *Know Your Meme*. Available at: <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/socially-awkward-penguin>. (Last accessed: 16. October 2023).

Solon, O. (2013): *Richard Dawkins on the internet's hijacking of the word 'meme'*. Available at: <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/richard-dawkins-memes>. (Last accessed: 19. June 2023).

Sukhtian, A. (n.d.). Home [Facebook page]. Facebook. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/ahmed.sukhtian/>. (Last accessed: 28. October 2023).

Sukhtian, A. (2020). أفضل النساء يحصلن على أسوأ الرجال وأفضل الرجال يحصلون على أسوأ النساء - Post [Facebook page]. Facebook. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=3387970177928447&set=pb.100001464955958.-2207520000&type=3>. (Last accessed: 28. October 2023).

The Capture of Samson. (n.d.). in *Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien*. Available at: <https://www.khm.at/en/objectdb/detail/645/?offset=2&lv=list>. (Last accessed: 23. October 2023).

The Great Fava Beans of China. (n.d.). in *The Movie Database*. Available at: <https://www.themoviedb.org/movie/455657-fool-el-seen-el-azeem>. (Last accessed: 15. October 2023).

Total Rickall (n.d.). In *Rick and Morty Wiki*. Available at: [https://rickandmorty.fandom.com/wiki/Total\\_Rickall#Major\\_Characters](https://rickandmorty.fandom.com/wiki/Total_Rickall#Major_Characters). (Last accessed: 11. October 2023).

Wahda Bi Wahda. (n.d.). in *elcinema.com*. Available at: <https://elcinema.com/en/work/1000854/>. (Last accessed: 30. October 2023).

Watch MX. (2020). كريم عبد العزيز و منى زكي و طلعت زكريا - HD فيلم أبو علي كامل بجودة عالية [Video]. YouTube. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CG46kRBPHlc&t=3569s>. (Last accessed: 28. October 2023).

Wesh Egram. (n.d.) in *IMDb*. Available at: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2247119/>. (Last accessed: 28. October 2023).

Whyman, T. (2019). *Why '30–50 Feral Hogs' Was a Howl of Despair*. Available at: <https://medium.com/wisecrack/why-30-50-feral-hogs-was-a-howl-of-despair-3dc2eec117af>. (Last accessed: 15. June 2023)

zyad aflam. (2021). *فلم غبي منه فيه بطوله هاني رمزي ونيلي كريم*. [Video]. YouTube. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OOdyzZz1PrU>. (Last accessed: 28. October 2023).

69 / Sixty-Nine. (n.d.). in *Know Your Meme*. Available at: <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/69-sixty-nine>. (Last accessed: 06.November 2023).

صديقتي \$ ❤️. [@my\_girlfriend\_2]. (n.d.). *Posts* [Instagram profile]. Instagram. Available at: [https://www.instagram.com/my\\_girlfriend\\_2/](https://www.instagram.com/my_girlfriend_2/). (Last accessed: 15. October 2023).

ساز | SazZ. [@2sazi]. (n.d.). *Posts* [Instagram profile]. Instagram. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/2sazi/>. (Last accessed: 15. October 2023).

سينما أفلام - Sinima Aflam. (2023) *فيلم وش اجرام كامل*. [Video]. YouTube. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6tWWbz6FJCw>. (Last accessed: 28. October 2023).