The Digital Bahdala: Recoding National Humiliation Across Postrevolutionary Lebanon And Egypt

Heather Jaber
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The Digital Bahdala: Recoding National Humiliation Across Postrevolutionary Lebanon And Egypt

Abstract
This dissertation analyzes three transnational social media scandals in the postrevolutionary contexts of Egypt and Lebanon. It offers these as cases of digital bahdala, or the didactic performative mode and state of humiliation, embarrassment, or shame which utilize the affordances and imaginaries of digital media platforms. It examines the rhetorical techniques, performances, and symbols used by transnational publics on three different social media platforms around these scandals. It finds that audiences engage in recoding, or the cultivation of alternative feeling states, to repair national imaginaries which are exposed as incompatible with a cosmopolitanism which was once promised. It also finds that activists can leverage the digital bahdala and its reliance on digital affordances meet demands for national accountability in exploitative labor conditions. In doing so, it offers digital bahdala as a diagnostic for a national belonging which is threatened but which carries the potential for repair.

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THE DIGITAL BAHDALA:
RECODING NATIONAL HUMILIATION ACROSS POSTREVOLUTIONARY LEBANON AND EGYPT
Heather Jaber
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in
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Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania
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To my parents, Radwan and Shannon; my siblings, Mahmoud, Adam, and Emma; and my partner, Firas.
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ABSTRACT

THE DIGITAL BAHDALA: RECODING NATIONAL HUMILIATION ACROSS POSTREVOLUTIONARY LEBANON AND EGYPT

Heather Jaber

Marwan Kraidy

This dissertation analyzes three transnational social media scandals in the postrevolutionary contexts of Egypt and Lebanon. It offers these as cases of digital bahdala, or the didactic performative mode and state of humiliation, embarrassment, or shame which utilize the affordances and imaginaries of digital media platforms. It examines the rhetorical techniques, performances, and symbols used by transnational publics on three different social media platforms around these scandals. It finds that audiences engage in recoding, or the cultivation of alternative feeling states, to repair national imaginaries which are exposed as incompatible with a cosmopolitanism which was once promised. It also finds that activists can leverage the digital bahdala and its reliance on digital affordances meet demands for national accountability in exploitative labor conditions. In doing so, it offers digital bahdala as a diagnostic for a national belonging which is threatened but which carries the potential for repair.
# Table of Contents

**Acknowledgment** ........................................................................................................................................ IV

**Abstract** ....................................................................................................................................................... VI

**Table of Figures** ............................................................................................................................................. VIII

**Introduction** .................................................................................................................................................. 1

(UN)belonging and the global body politic ................................................................................................. 7

*Baḥdalā*, affect theory, and digital media ................................................................................................. 13

Staging, recoding, engineering *baḥdalā* .................................................................................................... 22

Methodology .................................................................................................................................................. 29

Recapitulation ................................................................................................................................................ 39

**Staging the *Baḥdalā* at the World Economic Forum: The Affective Trial of Lebanon** ................................................. 41

The affective trial of Lebanon ..................................................................................................................... 54

The schadenfreude: “Cutting through” with *baḥdalā* ........................................................................... 71

Transnational affinities: The lost cosmopolitan and its discontents ....................................................... 76

Recoding from humiliation to dignity ....................................................................................................... 85

Conclusion: Feeling good about feeling bad ............................................................................................ 93

**Recoding the *Baḥdalā*: Egypt, YouTube, and the Digital Economy of Atonement** .............................. 96

Introduction .................................................................................................................................................... 96

Egypt and Lebanon background ................................................................................................................. 101

The case of Mazbouh .................................................................................................................................... 107

Recoding with Mo Salah .................................................................................................................................. 111

The YouTube response video ..................................................................................................................... 125

Performing atonement on television and YouTube ...................................................................................... 134

Conclusion ..................................................................................................................................................... 142

**Engineering the *Baḥdalā*: This Is Lebanon and the Digital Pressure Group** ........................................... 145

Introduction .................................................................................................................................................... 145

Kafala system and *This Is Lebanon* ........................................................................................................... 148

Platform exposure and the manipulation of the cosmopolitan ideal ....................................................... 152

Engineering the digital *baḥdalā*: The digital as transnational ................................................................ 159

Paranoia and economies of visibility .......................................................................................................... 168

Pressure in the digital pressure group ....................................................................................................... 176

Conclusion ..................................................................................................................................................... 189

**Conclusion** ................................................................................................................................................ 191

Recapitulation ................................................................................................................................................ 194

Implications and contributions .................................................................................................................... 200

What is to be done? ........................................................................................................................................ 207

**Appendices** .............................................................................................................................................. 211

**References** ............................................................................................................................................... 223

c
iv

v

vi

vii
# TABLE OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Appendix A1:29</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Appendix A1:31</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Appendix A1:32, 33, 34</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Appendix A1:34, 35, 36</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Appendix A2:2</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Appendix A1:37, 38</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Appendix A1:5, 9</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Appendix A1:39, 40, 41</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Appendix B1:10, Translation: “The 3 most dangerous pieces of information about the case of Mona Mazbouh the Lebanese woman”</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Appendix B1:19, Clip from since-deleted video of featuring Egyptian poet Gamal Bakheet</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Appendix B3:13, 8, 14, Translations in Appendix</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Appendix B2:6, 14, 15, Translations in Appendix</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>A sample of TIL’s correspondence with an employer (Azhar 2019)</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Translation: “Blackmailing and talking about people in this way is shameful”</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Facebook post by TIL one month after her jump from the balcony (Appendix C1:14)</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>A comment on a post by TIL about Tufa’s case (Appendix C1)</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Appendix C2:15</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Screenshot of a TIL post sharing a Dutch news article link (Appendix C2:16)</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Appendix C2:1</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Appendix C2: 8</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Appendix C2</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Appendix C2:3</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>TIL shares the phone number of an employer on their Facebook page (Appendix C2:8)</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Appendix C1</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Appendix C1</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Exchange between &quot;Tina&quot; and a Facebook account holder</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Appendix C1:24, Screenshot from documentary by TIL about Tufa's return to Ethiopia</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Appendix B3: 6, A still from talks how interview with Mazbouh's mother</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

If the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions in 2010-2011 were the beginning of a metanarrative of possibility about the MENA region, then the Beirut port explosion of August 4, 2020 was a tragedy of epic failure. What happened in the decade in between involved speculative scholarship and coverage of the region, investigating the uprisings’ causes, effects, successes, and failures. Since then, Lebanon and Egypt have been speculated to be “failed states” in Euro-American media (Carnelos 2021, Cordesman 2020). Lebanon is described to be tragically descending into socioeconomic failure, while Egypt has taken on a brand of human rights failure (Hessler 2016). These headlines populate the news feeds and timelines of transnational publics who are invested in these narratives of economic and therefore moral failure, whether as intimate insiders or ‘global’ audiences watching on.

This dissertation explores these narratives of failure and their relationship to bahdala, a colloquial Arabic term which refers to the feeling or the didactic performance of ridicule or censure. In particular, I examine the way that transnational audiences contend with narratives of national failure and how these narratives are mobilized in popular press, entertainment, and activism. Taking the term from its roots in performative admonishments and ridicule in social settings, I show how it is a diagnostic of digitally mediated revolution and its aftermath. The digital bahdala, like its older form, works didactically to recuperate national failures by implying that the path to repair is through reincorporation. Differently than the public square or street, digital bahdala exposes the anxieties of sovereignty in an era marked by seepages and flows of bodies, viruses,
toxins, across national and bodily thresholds. This is not the revolutionary discourse of the exposure of oppression and exploitation, but a post-revolutionary discourse of reconciliation within an economic global order.

In this dissertation, I analyze digital media content related to three controversies around slighted nationalisms across Lebanon and Egypt as these two countries contend with the aftermath of national mobilizations. At these sites, publics negotiate national imaginaries that are under threat, working to cultivate better political feeling around their circulation. They give way to entertaining and profitable media spectacles where influencers, news anchors, and television networks capitalize on the post revolution, when conferrals of failure are not only entertaining content for global audiences but have material effects.

I have operationalized digital bahdala here to mean performances of ridicule and authority which are mobilized transnationally, activating colonial relationships. In the digital realm, bahdala is not only performed locally, but crosses national borders. This analytic then directs us to transnational spectators who engage in performances to remediate the bahdala on digital platforms. Despite sometimes divergent reactions to the bahdala, all are audiences invested in politicians’ performance at international forums, the opinions of tourists on holiday, and the journalistic coverage of migrant workers' conditions. Rather than agreeing on their politics, they share an orientation toward an ‘external’ community. I offer that they share investments in the way that the nation is represented to the ‘international’ community, working didactically to bring it back into the fold.
In this way, digital bahdala is a way of placing the transnational at the foreground of digital media and embodiment at the foreground of communication. In a digitally mediated world, where we are constantly reminded of who we are to others, affect is central to these cases, as people again and again express a desire to see blame-worthy others feel something—shame, sorrow, regret—for their role in national failure. In doing so, they work toward an aspirational cosmopolitanism that is at risk of being lost. I look at the kinds of value which can be mined from these moments and their aftermath, where journalists, politicians, and emerging content creators build followings by channeling bahdala and its cathartic function. In doing so, they fulfill a desire for globally conscious publics who are concerned with their place in a global body politic.

The three sites this dissertation turns to take place as post-revolutionary Lebanon and Egypt are experiencing contrasting but related structural shifts. In Egypt, a decades-long regime gave way to a military rule which has in some ways wielded a harder hand than predecessors but has revived a narrative of continuity with Egypt’s civilizational past. Egypt in this way represents a broader trend in nation-branding, where distinct cultures are foregrounded through links to a prior era. Lebanon, on the other hand, sustains its debilitating fragmentary imaginaries, with its sectarian and extra-national imaginaries drawing out legacies of civil war and proxy war. It has been circulated as a tragic story of lost cosmopolitan promises. Both countries grapple with the loss of exceptional status—Lebanon as a Christian Western experience in the colonial period, a mosaic of identities with its Muslim-majority but also celebrated and criticized multi-sectarian system, and Egypt as the heart of the Orient and Arab culture—invoking them
as their saving grace. They both do this looking outward, at an imaginary “international community.” After all, to whom or what can a nation be exceptional?

With these current events in mind, this dissertation turns to the emotional dynamics of these imaginaries, investigating the kinds of symbols, ideas, and bodies that circulate to recuperate lost cosmopolitanisms. This comes at a time when both academic and popular culture are increasingly concerned with ‘affect’ or ‘emotion.’ From pop-psychology memes to documentaries around tech corporations’ manipulation of our emotions, the way we feel has become a dominant discourse in popular and political culture. Questions of shame and exposure have accompanied an increasing reliance on digital technologies to mediate desirable and undesirable realities. There is no coincidence that the rise of commercialized digital platforms and the preponderance of emotion and affect discourse have accompanied what some call neoliberalism, late capitalism, hyper-capitalism, or globalization. The desire to map networked flows of feeling has been one way of rendering the world around us legible, visible, and manageable (Ahmed 2004, Chun 2016). Each of the sites I turn to in this dissertation offer an example of this, where Internet users are made aware of themselves in relation to global others.

This orientation, the feeling of a direction toward something beyond one’s own national imaginary, is rooted in a longer history of asymmetrical power relations between postcolonial nations and their others, including occupation, intervention, war, and proxy battle. It has also meant histories of local struggle to confront both colonial and postcolonial aggressors, forged between these dualisms. In this context, both digital media and the uprisings have offered both rupture and site of possibility, where political
expression was framed as being freed from these discursive trappings. Emotion became a central area of interest, with think-pieces and articles describing the impetus to forge new political futures less in instrumentalist narratives and more in affective ones (Papacharissi 2015, Pearlman 2013, Weitzel 2019). In the aftermath came the evaluation by international media, where the success or failure of these mobilizations became consumable content. As publics who have been constituted in international discourse through speculation and metanarrative, they are particularly capable of telling us what the threat of ‘national failure’ can look and feel like.

While much work has examined the uprisings and the revolutionaries, activists, and journalists who held central places in the mobilizations (El-Ariss 2019, Kraidy 2016), this dissertation turns to the less revolutionary—those who are losing access to an imagined cosmopolitanism. This project is concerned with the desire for global legibility that takes place on digital platforms and in the context of revolution, investigating the ways that national publics recode these narratives, utilizing dominant encodings of national exceptionalism to recuperate a sense of global belonging. Through a variety of performances, rhetorical techniques, and aesthetics, people work to join in, accept, or reroute the humiliation that is doled out on the nation.

These case studies take place between 2018 and 2021 across Lebanon and Egypt, in the lead-up to or aftermath of their mass mobilizations. The first chapter covers the case of what many called the “grilling” of Lebanese politician Gebran Bassil at the World Economic Forum in January 2020, just months after the revolution broke out in Lebanon, introducing the idea of the affective trial, where those responsible for national failure are made to atone. The next chapter discusses the case of Lebanese tourist to Egypt, Mona
Mazbouh, who was arrested and deported after sharing a video where she lambasted the Egyptians and Islam after an experience of sexual harassment. Here, publics engage in recoding practices through several conversion points, reaching for figures and symbols who would help generate the right kinds of political feeling—pride in the place of humiliation. In the final case study, I discuss This Is Lebanon, the group which works to exploit cases of exploitation in the *kafala* system, or the migrant worker sponsorship system in Lebanon. Here, I theorize the digital pressure group as harnessing the power of digital *bahdala* to provoke paranoia, or the threat of shame, to meet their demands.

Heeding the ever-relevant call for a “triple analysis of socio-political context, technical developments and major events” (Kraidy 2007, p. 140–41), I turn to transnational scandals in the aftermath of the revolution for the way they articulate national belonging when the stakes are high. From staging to recoding to engineering the *bahdala*, this dissertation charts the way that this media genre is activated at the intersection and disjuncture of conflicting national imaginaries—one that wants to recuperate a belonging in the world and another which wants to forge a more autonomous sovereignty. In the context of speculation about the status of nations as failed states, *bahdala* is a diagnostic of a crisis in national and bodily sovereignty. Confronting the reality of an unescapable relationality with other nations and bodies, it is a way of remediating a conferred unbelonging from places which were one open to these publics. By paying attention to the things people do through screens, I offer *bahdala* as an intervention into the study of digital media and affect, arguing for a reparative approach which recognizes the very desire to map and name what it is that pulls us in one direction or another as part of a coevolution of digital technology.
(Un)belonging and the global body politic

In the context of what many have called neoliberalism, hyper capitalism, late capitalism, or globalization, the moves toward multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, and connectedness have become favored modes of being in the world. This happens at the same time as structural shifts, from the environment to mass mobilizations to a pandemic, have reactivated interest in the global as a mode of analysis. What all share is a recognition of increasing precarity for most people. In postcolonial contexts, this sense of connection and relationality is built upon legacies of asymmetrical power relations. After a wave of literature and coverage of mass uprisings across the MENA region (Castells 2015, Howard & Hussain 2013, Papacharissi 2015, Weitzel 2019), the post-revolution has been judged in popular discourse for its potential success or failure.

Lebanon and Egypt are two countries which have housed some of these mobilizations, serving as connected sites of analysis. In both contexts, international media have followed the countries’ futures, lamenting on their successes and failures to live up to their imaginaries of national exceptionalism, reflecting their almost opposite national imaginaries. Egypt boasts a long history of relations with Western nations, including the US, due to military, academic, and other strategic relations. It has been viewed as the birthplace of the most material and popularly produced form of pan-Arab nationalism, invested with the lost potential to cultivate an anti-colonial and anti-imperial imaginary, and at the same time it was enjoyed as a site of civilizational continuity. Lebanon, on the other hand has been imagined as a haven for the colonial, comprising an experience for French Christians for whom a creeping and increasing Muslim population
threatened sovereignty (Traboulsi 2007).\textsuperscript{1} Its governance structure institutionalizes a sectarian power-sharing agreement meant to maintain a diversity of representation and more specifically, avoid a Muslim majority (Traboulsi 2007).

Their relationship to Islam is one vector through which questions of global belonging are framed, reflecting histories and anxieties of secular nation-building (Asad 2003). Europeans imagined Lebanon as a site for Ottoman reformation—their “[w]ritings and paintings evoked a timeless biblical land, a mountain refuge, that pleaded to be saved from Islamic Ottoman domination” (p. 15). Egypt’s post-independence entrenched a tenuous relationship between the state and Islam. The manifestation and continued existence of the Muslim Brotherhood played a major role in the uprisings and their aftermath, when fears of a fundamentalist and democratically elected Islamic rule led to a military coup to wrest back governance.

It is also a vector through which the publics in Egypt and Lebanon differently carve out forms of sovereignty as they articulate their brands of cosmopolitanism. Lebanon has been constructed as a cosmopolitan space, from its multiculturalism to its luxury real estate to its tourist destinations. Its multiconfessional system produces this imaginaries of diversity and consensus, one which maintains peace among what are hegemonically constructed as adverse religious sects. Egypt on the other hand, as a Muslim majority country, has experienced Islamic revivals and houses some of the most significant Islamic institutions in the world. At the same time, its centralized state has

\textsuperscript{1} During Lebanon’s independence, Lebanon’s Christian Maronite community represented a pull away from notions of pan-Arab nationalism, fearing broader unity based on Islam. When Lebanon was added to the Arab League to establish its sovereignty, it also linked it to Arab relations (Kalawoun 2000).
long grappled with questions of the secular and religious. While Egypt has been and continues to be imagined as a site of antiquity for the region and world, Lebanon has been and continues to be imagined as a multicultural enclave. Egypt works on reviving its narrative of historic continuity and homogeneity and Lebanon maintains a narrative of tolerance and modernity.

These national imaginaries are valuable in a global marketplace. Both countries rely on foreign flows of goods and capital. They have witnessed steady privatization through crediting by groups like the World Bank and International Monetary Forum (IMF). Both have a significant tourism and hospitality industry, attracting foreign visitors and laborers who travel to learn Arabic, to see its attractions, or to work.

The revolutions and their aftermath jostled and threatened these very imaginaries. Egypt’s mobilizations were some of the first in the region, serving as an initial object of inquiry for speculating international discourse around statehood. They began in 2011, resulting in the toppling of the decades-long rule of Hosni Mubarak, who ruled for thirty years in a state of emergency. What came next in 2012 was the short-lived election of Muslim-Brotherhood leadership, followed by a military coup in 2013 which pushed the Musli—Brotherhood back into dissident status. The former defense minister and current president, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, took over, running on the promise of an improved economy. Since then, he has led campaigns on what is considered state extremism, enacting crackdowns on both Islamists and the secular alike. Some have described el-Sisi’s rule as wielding an even harder hand than his predecessor and offering a continuation of older policies which align with wider regional state crackdowns, as well as crackdowns under the guise of moral policing in the Global South more widely (Amar
This has accompanied what the military state has framed as economic growth but is fueled mostly by debt in the form of interest rates meant to attract investors which in turn has placed pressure on the poorest who bear the brunt of less government spending and support (Mandour 2022). This reliance means that the economy is also vulnerable to geopolitical tensions which have helped trigger market crashes in places like Lebanon.

In contrast to Egypt’s centralized state which wields a more unified hand and approach to collapse, the Lebanese state has a multisectarian makeup which has proven to foster fragmented and conflicting visions of the country’s past, present, and future. For this reason, when the uprisings broke out years after Tunisia, on October 17th, 2019, as some of the most recent mobilizations in the region, popular discourse framed the mobilizations as unprecedented. Building on prior movements, the 2019 “October Revolution” was unprecedented especially for its composition of citizens across sectarian, religious, and class lines. These protests brought about millions of people to the streets to demand the fall of the decades-long ruling order, systems of corruption, clientelist networks of resource provision, and rising inequalities. These can be traced to the aftermath of the civil war, when Lebanon entrenched a reliance on tourism, its financial sector, foreign aid, and diaspora remittances (TRT World 2021).

The eventual collapse of 2019 took place after foreign aid and investment was withheld following a variety of regional events and tensions, from the Syrian civil war to geopolitical tensions with Iran and Saudi Arabia. This led many depositors, especially in the Gulf, to rescind their investments and pull out their deposits, rocking the tiny nation.

2. In 2015, the garbage crisis became the most visible and symbolic failure of the Lebanese state in decades, ushering in the largest recent demonstration since the 2005 protests against Syrian occupation.
This mobilizations which began in October demanded accountability for what was to become an economic collapse of epic proportions, bringing the state’s strategy of “financial engineering” into public discourse.

In the aftermath of revolution, collapse, and conflict, the majority of national inhabitants bear the burden of such economic policies and geopolitical tensions. Both countries in the post-revolution have increased the burden of social welfare on the people, decreasing public services from the jurisdiction of the state. Part of this is related to the history of neoliberal restructuring in the 1970s and 80s, when dependencies were entrenched in the MENA and other countries in the Global South by setting up debt programs with the IMF and the World Bank. Today, discussions around political reform predominantly take place with an eye to negotiations with such creditors, setting up implicit and explicit expectations which help maintain the Global North and South as differently sovereign.

While much important work has described the creative revolutionaries and digital leakers who moved power around from ‘below’ (El-Ariss 2019, Kraidy 2016), the less revolutionary, more ‘globally conscious’ public I turn to is part of this circuit of cosmopolitanism. This is not to say that they are not political in their own rite, but rather that they make legible the cracks and disjunctures of such imaginaries, showing us what it looks like when those who have previously felt close to those imaginaries lose access to them. These are not only the wealthy or mobile, but also those who are invested in the stakes of national representation and global belonging. As postcolonial contexts like

3. What is now known as “financial engineering” created a muddied, mutually beneficial relationship between the banks, state, and ruling elite for years, leading to a dependency on the flow of fresh US dollars into the economy (Halabi & Sami 2019).
Lebanon and Egypt show, these narratives have real, material effects. Narratives of national failure impact decisions about loan crediting, intervention, and even coups, cycles which are part of postcolonial conditions. Further, these narratives have great circulatory power online, revealing undergirding economies which help sustain imaginaries built on national exceptionalisms.

Social media platforms were a key site of fascination through which judgments of revolution took place due to the imaginaries they are embedded in. They are not neutral sites through which information spreads but exist in overlapping media systems where narratives of global connectedness are intrinsic to their design and usability (van Dijck 2013). Developing out of an infrastructure which cultivates techno-utopian imaginaries of connectivity, platforms have promised interconnectedness and community as vital parts of everyday life, even while they have become increasingly corporatized and baked into everyday functions. While concepts like “following,” “sharing,” and “liking” are expressed in human-centered ways, they are also guided by forms of value-acquisition and goals of growth which guide and sustain these platforms. This is key to thinking through their connections to desires for global belonging. In these ways, the imaginaries of connectedness which shape platforms align with the cosmopolitan imaginaries of these differently ‘exceptional’ nations.

This also means that they are prime sites for the staging of failures to live up to ideals of tolerance, connectedness, and openness. It is to these scandals of economic and moral failure that I turn to next through the lens of the digital bahdala. These are transnational scandals where national figures are invested with shame, embarrassment, and humiliation for their failure to instill cosmopolitan nationhood. These show how the
digital *bahdala*, as an event and state of feeling, is a way of contending with the threat of unbelonging in what feels like an increasingly precarious world.

Each of the selected case studies were chosen because of their relationship to the idea of *bahdala*. Publics specifically reference *bahdala* in some form, whether it is accepted as deserved or refuted in resistance. These reactions have included conferrals and rejections of Third World status, worldliness, and national exceptionalism. These are sites where a threatened modernity is conjured and feelings like shame, embarrassment, and humiliation are mobilized. In these ways, *bahdala* can be thought of as an orienting emotion and event, cohering subjects into divergent collectivities. It is both a framework and a phenomenon through which to understand how people work to repair slighted nationalisms.

The next section will discuss and contextualize the digital *bahdala* through related concepts in communication and media studies. I will first situate it within work on affect and emotion, and then discuss its manifestation online.

**Bahdala, affect theory, and digital media**

As a digital genre, *bahdala* has a set of conventions and codes that relate to both the content and way in which the content is being communicated and shaped. As a social and technological concept (Gledhill 2000, Neale 1980), genre provides frames for recognizing interrelated codes and meaning in a digitally mediated world. Other scholarship has explored the genre conventions of political speech, viewing US political discourse post-911 as melodrama (Anker 2014), or analyzing public discourse around the ICC and pan-Africanist pushback through genre conventions like victimhood and martyrdom (Clarke 2018). The leak has been offered as a digital genre through which to
understand the scandals and movements in the MENA region over the last decade, but also beyond, to the limitations of understanding Wikileaks or the leaks of images at Abu Ghraib as liberal Enlightenment rather than embodied communication (El-Ariss 2019). This dissertation draws on this work to similarly offer bahdala as a digital genre which explains the maintenance of contemporary national imaginaries through a focus on embodied communication.

*Bahdala* can be linked to other embodied concepts and practices like the “clapback,” the “read,” the “call-out,” and respectability politics through its relationship to authority, respect, and performance. It has been described as ridiculing someone to make others lose respect for them, often by commenting and messing with their appearance and dress (Abdelhamid 2018, Fakhry 2016). As defined in the *Hans-Wehr Dictionary*, its verb form means “to insult,” “to treat contemptuously,” “to expose,” and “to make a laughingstock of” (Wehr & Cowan 1994). It has also been linked to colloquial terms like *tajris*, which relates to the days when suspected criminals would be placed on a donkey and paraded around town while someone rang a bell and announced their crimes (Abdelhamid 2018, Fakhry 2016). In this way, *bahdala* is an entire event which involves a subject, an audience, and an embarrassing talk-down.

*Bahdala* has a strong didactic component which is apparent in the colloquial usage of the term to describe a familial scolding, often one which comes from an elder. There is a material component to *bahdala*, evidenced by colloquial phrases like, “*akalet bahdala*,” which translates literally to, “I ate humiliation.” Across Twitter, a search of variations of the word *bahdala* will return images of animals, dumbfounded facial reactions, and embarrassing situations which warrant embarrassment.
*Bahdala* can be compared productively to respectability politics due to this didactic nature and its relationship to mobility imaginaries. Respectability politics, or what Frederick Harris (2014) has called “the turn-of-the-twentieth-century black middle-class ideology” refers to practices which are enforced to ensure upward mobility (Pitcan et al 2018). Its reliance on individual progress and its moral policing of appearance and behavior are argued to promote neoliberal aspirations, “where uplift entails transforming individuals rather than transforming communities” (Harris 2014, p. 34). The emphasis on correction of bad behavior finds links with *bahdala* through similar commentary on individual dress, speech, and bodily comportment as a site of moral policing.

*Bahdala* and respectability politics are intertwined through their relationship to didactic performances within family and authority structures. In the US context, this occurred through policing and self-policing in order to facilitate socioeconomic success. Extrapolating this diagnostic of socioeconomic dependency to the global context, it is a useful framework for thinking about postcolonial countries and their relationship to former colonial countries and international institutions like the IMF and the World Bank. Both concepts relate to an economic viability which is sought and reproduced, highlighting the way that national structures are maintained through relationships of dependency.

Both *bahdala* and respectability politics share a connection to shame. Shame has been a central affect in the discussion of digital media. In communications research, shame has been central to discussions of media and exposure (Banet-Weiser 2018, Chun 2016, El-Ariss 2019, O’Neill 2022, Paasonen 2021). This research describes the proliferation of shame through networked communication and the very reliance of social
media platforms on the power of shame. Shame is recognized for its troubling of the boundaries of the public and private, boundaries which digital media remap. It is also said to be increasing, if the critical mass of literature is an indication of its perceived prominence in digital life.

Shame has also occupied a central position in work on affect theory. In one of the first texts that ushered in the “affective turn” in the 1990s, Evelyn Sedgwick (2003) wrote of shame’s important role in both affect theory and communication. Locating an important origin of affect theory between structuralism and poststructuralism in the work of Silvan Tomkins, Sedgwick and Frank (1995) offer that this helped to recognize the cognitive and the affective as inescapably intertwined. Relevant to this project, shame becomes part of a thinking and feeling mechanism which is connected to ideas of failure and rejection, but also a potential interest or enjoyment which has been cut off and leads to shame. Shame can be understood as a communicative event which says something about personal, social, and political desires.

At the same time, a significant segment of communication studies opts toward a different strand of affect theory which recognizes affect as networked. Drawing on an alternative to the Sedgwick-Tomkins dialectic of affect theory, the Massumi-Deleuzian dialectic of affect theory views affects as autonomous and outside of structure. In his work, Massumi offers the contemporary networked media moment as a particularly affective time. While both dialectics recognize the need for non-linguistic theories of power, this first branch adopts a less rigid binary between affect and emotion. In contrast, Massumi’s (2002) autonomous affect stands apart from emotion based on consciousness.
and signification, separating feeling into things that bodies feel and things that make those bodies feel. Affect here takes on a relatively disembodied quality.

Proponents have utilized this strand to offer accounts of networked publics and affect (Dean 2015, Paasonen, Hillis & Petit 2015, Papacharissi 2015), describing the ways that intensities are transferred through complex configurations of humans, non-humans, and machines. Such accounts note that “networked digital structures of expression and connection are overwhelmingly characterized by affect” (Papacharissi 2015, p. 8), describing the ways that affects have become central to the analysis of digital publics. These also align with earlier work on affective and immaterial labor. In an illustrative example, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) have referred to the “production and manipulation of affect” which is indicative of what they call a new “informational economy.”

We can see that when we utilize this autonomous notion of affect and its capacity to move through networks, we lose sight of important questions of power that the performative practices of respectability politics and bahdala foreground. For one, the power differentials and distribution of resources are flattened, suggesting that affects like shame move across national boundaries through digital technologies. Bahdala, as a communicative event, disrupts the idea that digital technologies have the power to move emotions in and out of bodies. It recognizes instead the politics of mobilizing emotion, questioning metanarratives of the revolution and their role in this body of literature.

Introducing a transnational perspective can help complicate the above assertions of a networked affect and attenuate material histories as integral to the discussion of affect. Recognizing this, Dan Schiller (2015) questioned Hardt and Negri’s
conceptualization of “information society” and claims that networks constitute a whole new realm of affective, immaterial, and intellectual labor. Schiller (2015) notes that rather, part of the issue is the focus on the work of those in wealthy countries who have outsourced manufacturing labor. In other words, he emphasizes the need to carefully interrogate power relations as they take place across nations, shifting view from vantage points or a focus on the computerized side of labor. These and related interventions (Ahmed 2004) show how labor produces affects and imaginaries, complicating notions of disembodied, networked affect moved by machines and into bodies.

In doing so, we can see that some of this literature on networked affect as not only relevant to the Arab uprisings but formed directly through a fascination with the uprisings and their narration as technologically mediated and sparked call to action. Much of the work on networked affect has referenced or focused on the uprisings as prime examples of networked communication in action, facilitating the spread, flow, and transmission of affect into bodies across the region (Boler & Davis 2021, Castells 2015, Papacharissi 2015). In such formulations, affect becomes “the energy that drives, neutralizes, or entraps networked publics” (Papacharissi 2015, p. 7). Affect here is described as the glue that binds publics through Internet technologies.

Such approaches to digital media which describe affect as autonomous energy help extend metaphors of platforms as purveyors of liberation and autonomy from oppressive structures, like the nation. This form of networked affect comes to resemble the way that “networks have helped in a myriad of ways to enable the extension and recomposition of global commodity chains” (Schiller 2015, p. 11). Indeed, in 2010, the year before the uprisings took place, Facebook executive noted the significant size of
their market in the Arab world, saying, “‘Now is the time where there are enough people [to make] brands sit up and listen’ (Schreck 2010 as cited in Sakr 2013, p. 324). This is important considering that imaginaries of cyberspace were themselves predicated on Orientalist fantasies of navigation (Chun 2021). As Chun (2016) notes, formulations of networked affect must be understood with these histories in mind, as they tell us more about the conditions which give rise to them than they do about the technological power they describe.

Rather than opting toward networked affect, I identify digital bahdala by opting toward Sara Ahmed (2004)’s approach to emotions as operating through affective economies. In Ahmed’s formulation, emotions are generated as objects circulate. Like capital, they gain value by circulating and moving through the world. Through this framework, an emotion like shame is powered through affective economies. This approach to the sociality of emotions in what Ahmed (2010) calls ‘feminist cultural studies’ (Ahmed 2004, Cvetkovich 2012, Schaefer 2015) gets us away from essentialist notions of what emotions or affects intrinsically are, and closer to materiality, or what they do in the world. Ahmed’s phenomenological approach does this by recognizing embodied life as part of any analytics of power. This has helped to complicate the literature on the psychology of emotions, offering a framework for the sociality of emotions. It critiques an “inside-outside” or “outside-in” model of discrete emotions which exist inside or outside the body, complicating the idea of disembodied and networked affect.

By viewing emotions as produced through affective economies, bahdala can be examined for the value it creates. Rather than focusing on the shame of the recipient of an
embarrassing talk-down, *bahdala* is a pedagogical and didactic performance meant to put someone in their place. Its definition focuses not on the individual subject and its feeling, but on making others lose respect for someone. As a moment of impression-making, *bahdala* focuses more on the audience that is implied as watching the person who is being made a laughingstock. Through its links to older practices like *tajris*, it recognizes the embodied and pedagogical spaces in which objects and subjects are made and remade. *Bahdala* is a way of maintaining and repairing sutured nationalisms.

Taking a cue from Edward Said’s understanding of Orientalists, I find that the understanding of networked affect as sparking the MENA uprisings says more about the imaginaries in which those discourses are shaped than it says about the uprisings in the region. Here, the Arab world can be a framework for complicating the fantasy of autonomous, networked affect. Some scholarship at the intersection of media and the uprisings has adopted a more capacious understanding of communication which brings performance into the picture. This work has investigated cultural traditions which can complicate contemporary digital media practices as inherently more affective. For example, “tagging” in late 19th century Egypt can be connected to contemporary forms of tagging on social media platforms, helping Egyptians turn British officials into comedic devices rather than centers of authority (Fahmy 2011). This foreshadows and sustains into the digital practices of the contemporary moment, when creative insurgents projected their body in the mobilizations (Kraidy 2016), as well as the data leak, as ‘leaking’ is also a trope in Arabic literature and therefore an affective condition across place and time (El-Ariss 2019). This work productively examines the region and its uprisings as a framework and not a case study for the study of media and mobilization.
This approach homes in on a pedagogical dimension, cultivating subjectivities in the face of threatened global belonging. One framework for this pedagogy which this dissertation relies on is Ahmed’s (2004) approach to the transmission of affect. Describing it, Donovan Schaefer (2015) writes:

“The pedagogical space is not constituted simply by a passive field of receptors, but by a recursive dynamic of embodied histories receiving impressions, marking, scoring, and reshaping them, then rebroadcasting them to other bodies. TOA is not only a unidirectional broadcast—a signification—but a queer recursion, a dynamic of spiraling transmission and reconfiguration” (p. 66).

Bahdala and the recoding that takes place are one example of this pedagogical space. It orients our attention to the communication that takes place through learning. For Ann Pellegrini (2007, 2009), evidence of this pedagogy comes in the messages which teach the more mundane things, or the very transcendent things. Drunk driving videos, for example, work to recode feelings of recklessness that might be associated with driving, into feelings of fear around crashing. Religious conversion performances, similarly, work to recode practices or experiences that might seem pleasurable—like adultery, drugs, or homosexuality—seem fearful.

In this way it allows us to develop the link between recoding and communication. In this formulation, we must look at the points of recursion that are part of communication. While shame has been described as a “an immediate situation of two-way communication, something seemingly denied when in actuality amplified in networked communications,” (Chun 2016, p. 154) Bahdala alerts us to the recursive, relational, and social dimension of affect. For this reason, we need to understand the
kinds of symbols, performances, and rhetoric used to cultivate different ways of feeling in the world. It is to this dimension in popular media that I turn next.

**Staging, recoding, engineering bahdala**

Of interest to this dissertation is the way that people perform online the kinds of admonishments, refusals, and acceptances that will help them to recuperate the economic and moral failure of the nation. As an event which relates to one’s status and place in the world, it is helpful to think of *bahdala* as a genre along longer histories than the digital in which this social dynamic is present. This opens opportunities to think about linkages between digital phenomena and older performative practices in which public shaming took place (Clark 2020, El-Ariss 2019, 2020; Fahmy 2011; Kraidy 2016, Stewart 1996). For example, the practice of *radh*, a speech pattern of verbal mudslinging (Stewart 1996) in Egypt serves as a diagnostic of Sunni and Shiite Muslim tensions, as it has pointed to public forums where sanctioned denunciations of the Shiite were performed.⁴ Fahmy (2011) also writes of the collective shaming which took place in pre-independence Egypt coffee shops where anticolonial revolutionaries publicly denounced as traitors those who wanted to take a more moderate stance toward the British. During the recent uprisings in the MENA region, satirical and carnivalesque performances and visuals were produced and performed to ground the classical leader, or the one who is untouchable in less revolutionary times (Kraidy 2016). Such performances, wielded from ‘below’ or ‘above,’ have longer communicative traditions. The semi-public and public sites here range from

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⁴ Stewart identifies this speech pattern to show how leadership in the Egyptian region cultivated negative feelings around the Shiites through performance, even linking this speech pattern to public conversion rituals to Sunni Islam
coffee shops and streets, where people wielded the power to ground or embarrass, to social media platforms where it can be returned across national contexts.

As the first case study in this dissertation shows, they may be seen as “cutting through” systems of signification to ground the responsible. These can be thought of as quasi-trials, or justice-making sites in spaces where more formal mechanisms are felt to have failed. This is itself a belief which is itself embedded in a cosmopolitan imaginary of international frameworks of justice (Brants 2012, Clarke 2018), especially about postcolonial contexts. Such trials have been recognized at colonial contact zones in Arabic literature and political texts (El-Ariss 2013), the ushering of the satellite era in the region (Kraidy 2009), the role of television in contending with proxy war and violence (Osman 2020), and the real and felt sites of justice-making around the ICC and Pan-Africanist pushback (Clarke 2018). These trials stage “performances and contestations… of modernity” (El-Ariss 2013) and make the body a site of contestation (Mourad 2014), where it is mined for its representational value. Wazmah Osman (2020), writing of the Afghan context, notes that television serves a justice-making function, operating “as the judge, jury, and executioner of warlords and criminals” (p. 184). At these sites, national imaginaries are contested and reproduced.

If national imaginaries coevolve with media technologies, then tracing digital scandals along a longer history of media development shows that the satellite television era is an important precursor to social media platforms for their own trials of national failure. The introduction of satellite television in the 1990s offered the Arab world the “largest share of the public sphere” (Mellor et al 2011, p. 96). Since then, much work was done on journalistic practices during this time, especially Al Jazeera, but another group
of work has examined popular media and the national scandals which took place on television programming (Della Ratta 2014, Kraidy 2009, Salamandra 2012). Musalsalat, or Arabic-language television drama stirred controversy around notions of modernity and desirability in imported Turkish programming (Salamandra 2012). More relevant to these case studies is reality television due to its framing as a predecessor to social media content production and consumption in offering audiences the chance for what has been called “the promise of interactivity” (Andrejevic 2004, p. 11). In the MENA region especially, reality television brought new modes of engagements by publics who engaged in spectatorship and judgment around contested forms of authenticity (Kraidy 2009). These included contestation around proxy war, intervention, social custom, and other dimensions of national politics.

With this literature on popular media in mind, I turn to the way that publics recode the bahdala, or perform and cultivate more desirable ways of belonging in the world. As a way of creating and resisting structures of respectability and belonging, the digital bahdala attunes us to the way that people wield resonant symbols, artifacts, and rhetorical moves to cultivate more favorable ways of belonging in the world. These recoding performances involve the restaging of events or experiences marked as embarrassing or humiliating and turning them into the grounds for pride, strength, and dignity. To understand the meaning of these processes, I offer the notion of recoding to describe the ways that people take part in processes and performances of cultivating different affective states. I do this by turning to scholarship in not only communication but studies of affect, religion, and gender (Anker 2014, Butler 1993, El-Ariss 2019, Hall 1973, Pellegrini 2007, Schaefer 2015). This literature offers ways of building a theory of
recoding as cultivating new feeling patterns around events and experiences, such as the ones that contribute to national imaginaries.

Perhaps the most notable contribution to this literature is Stuart Hall’s (1973) discussion of the encoding/decoding model. This describes the production and reception of messaging and involves a range of approaches which explain how texts are ascribed with meaning. This includes analyzing production by considering socioeconomic and cultural factors and patterns, decision-making, and motivation. They also include analyzing the reception of texts by analyzing whether decoders and encoders recognize the same meaning in texts, leading to preferred, negotiated, or oppositional meanings (Hall 1973). This means that scholarship working through this framework has often investigated whether there is a gap between intended and received meanings. Recoding helps to introduce alternative problematic to this process as it takes place online, offering meaning as interpreted and performed.

Hall’s model of social reproduction was instructive for an analytic like recoding. Hall’s project was different from behaviorist models of communication at the time which adopted sender-receiver models. He recognized the discursive realm of communication as capturing a set of institutional conventions and structures of production which inform messages, such histories, events, and institutional structures which enter the discursive realm at a particular moment of production. This leaves room for an analytic which works beneath, beside, and around the discursive, not quite encapsulated by it but related to it. Hall’s (1985) later mediation on Althusser’s recapitulation of Marx emphasizes this through the idea of social reproduction, offering a model of structure which is based on past practices—“practice is how a structure is actively reproduced” (p. 95-6). This offers
a way of thinking about the reproduction of social structures as they are actively lived. In the production and circulation of these digital practices, social reproduction helps explain the way that practices of recoding utilize encoded meanings to forge new decodings.

In the digital media context, where social media consumers create new media texts as they respond to others, retooled frameworks are required to understand how meaning is created. Recoding is especially relevant to digital practices and brings affect into the discussion of media texts by considering them as not only texts but performances. Such approaches recognize performativity as enacting and producing reality through speech acts which connect to broader accepted codes and norms (Butler 1993). This can be mined by examining rhetoric and symbols used in such performances, recognizing the way that emotions are mobilized to enact meaning and accord value to ideas. As Ahmed (2004) notes, these are “performative and they involve speech acts, which depend on past histories of association, at the same time they generate effects” (p. 13). In performance, such codes are relied upon even as they are reworked to feel differently. For example, Ann Pellegrini (2007, 2009) offers that evangelical communities utilize secular pedagogies of fear to cultivate belief and the feeling of marginalization. In theatrical performances like the Hell House, or the evangelical church’s version of the secular haunted house, identity is reaffirmed through the recoding of scenes of pleasure into scenes to be feared. As such, what they confirm through performances is a vulnerability which motivates them to craft new feeling states in response to undesirable ones.

Taken together, Hall (1973, 1985) and Pellegrini (2007, 2009) offer a way of recognizing the world outside of discourse but also its relationship to discourse as a
tangible way of tracing it. Hall’s recognition of the realm outside of the discursive which must be structured into the discursive to be mediated, and Pellegrini’s recognition of performance’s mobilization of dominant codes to change one’s feeling toward them, offer a way of studying the role of embodiment and feeling in communication. Recoding emerges as an analytic that describes the interface between publics remediating cultural texts by utilizing encoded meaning.

These modes of communication which foreground performance and embodiment take on important meaning in the aftermath of revolutions which became entertainment for international publics watching on, inevitably shaping metanarratives of their rise and fall. Since the uprisings, much work has studied the relationship between platforms and political mobilization, including news practices, protest organization, and public discourse (Castells 2015, Howard & Hussain 2013, Lim 2012, Khatib 2012, Papacharissi 2015, Papacharissi & Olivera 2012, Tufekci 2017), investigating them for evidence of challenges to dominant structures. Across this literature, the power of citizens and protestors to wield counter-hegemonic meaning that challenges dominant power structures.

Less work has examined digital practices after the uprisings, where publics work to reproduce national imaginaries and ideals, contending with a status of worldliness that is under threat. There are new opportunities to channel narratives of national failure, including through social media ‘influencers’ and ‘microcelebrities’ who generate rewards for their digital practices (Banet-Weiser 2018, Marwick 2015) as well as the entrenchment of persisting centers of power, such as politicians and television networks (Sakr 2013). In this dissertation, television networks, news anchors, and media hosts
converge with emerging digital activist groups and content creators, all on social media platforms to recode conferrals of national failure, rendering legible the purchase of national exceptionalisms mobilized in defense to these conferrals.

Cosmopolitan imaginaries of the nation and social media platforms then converge in this dissertation. Rather than neutral sites of public discourse, platforms may present as neutral sites which offer real-time empowerment but are inseparable from the regional and state politics, as well as the commercial logics of broadcasting, production, and publishing industries (Gillespie 2010). What is of interest to this dissertation is the way that imaginaries around digital technologies foreground the performative dimension of communication. For example, Taina Bucher (2018) notes the importance of recognizing the cultural power of algorithms, drawing attention to not necessarily their technical components, but the ways that they are inseparable from widely accepted imaginaries of what they do. What is more, gendered economies are revealed to prop up these imaginaries, revealing the forms of value for some which are conferred through the labor of others (Banet-Weiser 2018, Hochschild 1983).

This dissertation takes a transnational approach to the above literature, positioning the nation-state as a vital organizing framework for understanding popular digital culture today. In doing so, it joins other work which recognizes the ways that digital cultures require a retooling of concepts like “cultural imperialism, dependency, heterogeneity, resistance, cosmopolitanism, and hybridity” and an incorporation of newly resonant concepts like “precarity, data, affect, circulation, and sharing” (Punathambekar & Mohan 2019, p. 4), bringing together scholarship on global media, popular culture, and affect. I
next describe my methodology for investigating such questions, aiming for a relational approach to communication through the foregrounding of affects and emotions.

**Methodology**

This project utilizes a mix of qualitative and interpretive approaches to the study of digital media, large-scale events, and sociocultural and geopolitical contexts. To understand the world around these events, I employ boundary-making strategies for my case studies and analyze them using a mixture of textual, thematic, and hermeneutic approaches. These approaches have allowed me to examine the production and maintenance of national imaginaries, as well as the kinds of value and legitimacy they generate in the media and political landscape.

My approach and interest in asking such questions is the result of my experience living in the US and Lebanon and attending schooling and university across both countries. As a PhD student at the University of Pennsylvania, I was faced with questions about context which forced a constant reflexivity and produced the very context that was sought out. These questions of context, combined with the ‘canon’ of communications, led me to seek out topics which I could converse with fellow peers about. I turned to cases around economic collapse, sexual harassment, and what has been called ‘modern-day slavery,’ or the *kafala* system. In the process, I found that what resonated were feelings of shame or embarrassment about the stories I was reading and writing about in the US context. As a Lebanese American, I sought to trouble this feeling and question its structural source and analytical utility. Each case was then both personal and structural, making affect theory a useful framework to consider political imaginaries.
For this reason, I considered the kinds of affects which were being invoked in these postrevolutionary events, in parallel considering the material structures I was situated within. This lens then shifted from shame or humiliation to a more targeted notion of bahdala. This was twofold: I found that each case had several social media posts which described the events as bahdala. This helped to complicate the popular discourse around social media and shame, which tended to focus on the potential feelings of shame in those who were being exposed online. With bahdala as a framework, I was able to consider the kinds of value and labor which were being produced through these practices, rather than being able to specify whether shame was being transferred into bodies. This helped inform my methodological approach to bounding these case studies and my conception of emotion which approached it as part of an affective economy.

I rely especially on Sara Ahmed (2004, 2010) as a guiding methodological framework to tether together and analyze my media artifacts as case data. Ahmed’s (2004) approach identifies affective economies channeled through rhetoric in public culture. Through the mobilization of narratives, such as the shame of the nation or the strength in resistance to attack, concepts and ideas are produced, such as Egypt as the “mother of the world” or Lebanon as a “mosaic” of diversity. Attention to these “sticky,” or affectively resonant, symbols (Ahmed 2004)—like the international football star or the adult film star—helps identify the “links between bodies and power” (Schaefer 2015, p. 9). I gathered my case data by following such rhetoric and its objects and analyzing the social media commentary, online news media, and television programming which were referenced in relation to the events I analyzed. Further, Ahmed’s (2004) approach recognizes the inherently relational and social nature of emotion and the subjects and
bodies they bring to life. Commensurate with feminist scholarship, this was integral to considering the way that the good feeling of some depends on the labor of others. In this way, a focus on the economy of affect allowed me to consider questions of power and value as they become legible in moments of national scandal. This is especially important for a geopolitical analysis which considers the way that imaginaries are channeled through both rhetoric and capital. Such an approach is not only useful but imperative to understanding the way that value is created and invested into the subjects and objects that circulate through digital media.

I join other scholars who are using Ahmed’s (2004) framework as methodology, developing a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to the study of affect. As Anna Berg, Christian von Scheve, Yasmine Ural, and Walter Walter-Jochum (2019) write in their work on the methodological links between discourse, language, and affect, this approach “foregrounds affective phenomena as a hermeneutic lens, capitalizing on affect and emotion as sensitizing concepts in the interpretation of discourse” (p. 51). The hermeneutic circle (or spiral) is an apt way to consider the meaning of affective articulations as part of an interpretive practice. This recognizes the traditions through which communicative communities make sense of and interpret, making a recognition of the sociohistorical context imperative. It also privileges the social nature of meaning-making, understanding, and interpretation, making it a useful approach to recognize that the rhetoric about affects like shame is employed to mobilize more desirable realities.

Approaching texts in this way allowed me to consider digital practices as recoding, considering the meaning they interpreted and applied to national scandals. In the process, I also engage with the historical and cultural traditions which inform bahdala and the
meanings of folkloric and colloquial language, considering their meanings as communicative traditions. By supplementing a hermeneutic approach with a phenomenological approach, it also introduces a “systematic attempt to uncover and describe the structures, the internal meaning structures, of lived experience” (Van Manen 2016, p. 10). These structures of experience were invoked as national publics contended with the aftermath of revolution and narratives of state failure. Adopting this approach helped me to think through this rhetoric as part of both everyday life and major events which alter these structures in profound ways.

To complicate the idea of networked autonomous affect through these frameworks, I focused on the connections between platforms, publics, and the sociopolitical and geopolitical context as I collected data. To do so, I combined two approaches. The first was to incorporate Marwan Kraidy’s (2009) approach to studying reality television in which he examined several transnational scandals, a media form, and a geopolitical and industry analysis. The second approach was to borrow methods from anthropology as a boundary-making strategy. These methods included George Marcus’ (1995) approach to multi-sited ethnography, Jenna Burrell’s (2009) extension of this work into networked field sites, and Kraidy’s (2016) method of ‘scraping’ historical and popular archives to investigate symbolic practices of creative insurgency. Marcus’ instructive to “follow the metaphor” provides a productive way to track and trace affective economies that generate bahdala. Burrell’s extension also applies some of Marcus’ approaches to networked multisite ethnography, including “follow the person,” “follow the object, and “follow the metaphor” (1998a:79 as cited in Burrell p. 183). These are ways of recognizing the materiality of the person, object, or metaphor (as
discourse) while also opting for attention to movement and mobilization. She writes, “These arguments highlight how movement is central to social practice but also that coherent cultural processes may take place across great distances, linking up disparate entities” (1998a:79 as cited in Burrell p. 183). Kraidy’s (2016) and El-Aris’s (2019) approaches allowed me to link bahdala and relevant symbolism to older performative practices in the Arab world. By following metaphors and objects, I sketch out episodes of bahdala as digital genre. In each chapter, I follow the metaphors of humiliated nations, proud soldiers, and suspicious outsiders, as well as textual objects like memes, videos, and phrases which are continually invoked. In doing so, I sketch out the symbols and ideas that are particularly useful in engaging in bahdala. This gave me a sense of the desires and fears that shape these publics.

I focused on a different platform in each case to highlight a different aspect of bahdala, selecting case studies which predominantly took place on one platform over another. This meant incorporating understanding of the affordances and sociotechnical qualities of the platform which are part of the imaginaries they project. Social media platforms, landing pages, and mobile applications cultivate alternative forms of interaction due to their different affordances. This also helped to theorize the interface between bodies and machines as just that—embodied. With these in mind, I was able to consider these media texts as evidence of performances toward an imagined audience, as evidenced by the rhetoric and the platform logic itself.

To begin collecting this data once I bounded the sites of study, I began with the original pieces of media which ignited controversy across Lebanon and Egypt and collected social media content which came in response. I used these as orientation points
through which to collect other kinds of social media content. After familiarizing myself with the original content and examining the keywords and hashtags that were being used to be part of conversations about the events, I began conducting keyword and hashtag searches on the different platforms.

My ability to find this content was dependent on the platform affordances themselves and the algorithms which affect which content becomes visible to account holders (Rieder et al., 2018). However, in considering myself, as researcher, as a part of an assemblage with algorithms, I did not separate myself from the world of social media content in order to record all data around the scandals. I rather viewed myself as part of the Lebanese-American diaspora interacting with, consuming, and producing such content daily. At the same time, I balanced this subjective position by first examining several social media accounts who posted about the events in question. I was interested in those with social and economic capital, especially journalists, politicians, and influencers, due to their reliance on nationalist rhetoric to gain rewards and legitimacy around what was framed as national humiliation. With this iterative process, I found the keywords and hashtags which were being utilized and conducted broader searches to examine the most popular pieces of content. My goal was to identify the major themes and trends in the most popular commentary about the scandals which were popular in diaspora networks, allowing me to follow the stories and pull in related content which addressed these themes across different platforms.

Because I was interested in the content which achieved traction with social media personalities and news networks, I utilized hashtags and keyword searches across platforms. While hashtags have been critiqued as a way of studying political resistance
and activism (Frost 2020), I turned to them to understand which kinds of content were popular amongst social media influencers, journalists, and politicians who engaged in nationalist messaging around these scandals. Hashtags have been utilized in work around affect for their ability to “makes complex phenomena…addressable in a concise way” (Slaby et al., 2019, p. 30). Hashtags were most useful on Twitter, where I conducted a preliminary analysis of major accounts who were posting about the event, including the journalist and politicians on the panel, as well as Lebanese social media influencers, journalists and media networks commenting on the event. By beginning with these popular accounts and finding the hashtags that were being used most often, I collected the top Tweets which used these hashtags. In doing so, I identified three major trends in the data and stopped collecting once I achieved thematic saturation. These themes, discussed further in the first case study, were similar to those collected in the third case study which also took place in Lebanon, allowing me to distinguish between Egyptian and Lebanese bahdala. Additionally, I examined Tweets by notable media figures who received substantial engagement on Twitter through quotes, replies, and retweets. These included the panelists in the case study, but also journalists, entertainers, and political figures with substantial Twitter followings.

Keyword searches were most useful on YouTube and Facebook, in the second and third cases, respectively. While on Twitter the hashtag is a useful way to contain an analysis to those who wish to flag their posts as part of broader discourse about a topic, I used keyword searches on one profile on Facebook and more widely on YouTube. In this second case study on YouTube, I additionally I drew from Charles Hirschkind’s (2012) approach to analyzing YouTube videos, examining the profiles of YouTube accounts and
watching other content that they produced. With this approach, I identified a group of digital content creators who regularly post vlogs about social issues in Egypt. I also analyzed the television programming that was uploaded to YouTube by Dream TV, one of Egypt’s first two satellite networks launched in 2001, around the Mona Mazbouh case and analyzed the comments from these videos to get a sense of the traditional media coverage of the event.

In the third case study about This Is Lebanon, I turned mostly to Facebook. I examined all posts which took place around one case, identified resonant themes from these posts and their comments, and connected these themes to commentary in the wider media landscape. After following the event for some months, I collected all content around the event by conducting keyword searches in English and Arabic using Tufa’s name as well as her employers, the Ajami-Khalil family. I then analyzed the posts and comments, finding general themes which paralleled results from the first case study about the Lebanese context. In parallel, I followed the page for several months and collected secondary content which related to the case.

With these frames in mind, I collected and analyzed 62 YouTube videos, of which 24 made it into the final analysis (Appendix B and C), 29 Facebook posts (Appendix C), and 254 Tweets of which 30 made it into my final discussion (Appendix A), removing content which was not centrally related to my chosen cases but which reflected elements of *bahdala* that were replicated in the chosen content. All content was found by using Arabic or English terms, or a mixture of both.

I also considered, as a secondary layer to these social media interactions, developments in these cases that were central to my analysis as they emerged over the
last three years. I followed these cases by following hashtags, Facebook profiles, and YouTube accounts, identifying patterns in their activities. This has allowed me to consider 1) the way that content was erased and removed from these archives, 2) the role of censorship as well as feelings about posting after the fact, and 3) the effects of major events like the Beirut port explosion in Lebanon or the Egyptian state’s recent military spectacle and how they figure into the meaning of these events as precursors to what is emerging today. This approach of following the cases over time revealed a gender dynamic to the kinds of content posted, suggesting feelings of vulnerability about repercussions to expressing feelings of anger online. It also revealed the ways that these cases are imbricated in the aftermath of revolution and the maintenance of national imaginaries.

With this data, I identified major themes using Van Manen’s (2016) thematic analysis until achieving thematic saturation. I analyzed the narratives, rhetorical frames, and tone to identify the affects that were being channeled and thus how these publics performed different ways of interpreting the events. This in turn allowed me to consider bahdala as a kind of digital genre, where codes and conventions are established and shared across contexts and forms. Genre conventions constituted one way of grasping the political import of these events and the kinds of reasoning that they legitimate. Combined with attention to affect, I found that feeling patterns emerge around bahdala, likening it to the feeling patterns that are part of, for example, the communicative traditions of melodrama (Anker 2014). Identifying these patterns led me to the conception of digital genres as invoking performances from interpretive communities.
With this thematic framework in mind, I utilized a form of rolling, inductive open coding to identify the themes across the social media content as I was gathering it. By both identifying the codes as I searched and reforming codes as I gathered new data, this approach allowed me to get a sense of the kind of data as a whole as well as the way that each piece of content fit together and apart from the whole. This approach is commensurate with the hermeneutic circle (Gadamer 1994, Van Manen 2016) and allowed me to differentiate between Egyptian and Lebanese imaginaries, as well as the relational labor which produces these imaginaries. Van Manen’s (2016) approach to hermeneutic phenomenology recognizes the pedagogical dimension of everyday lived experience, writing, and theory-building. As such, it is relevant to theories of affect which recognize the pedagogical component of everyday life and theory construction (Pellegrini 2007, Schaefer 2015, Sedgwick 2003).

I achieved thematic saturation once all of the data I was analyzing could be grouped into two broad categories with two subcategories within each: invoking bahdala—either as the nation’s, or as the fault of a problematic minority—or rejecting bahdala—as the nation’s or as one’s own. This led me to view both broad categories as similarly concerned with albeit differently oriented toward a ‘global’ community. As such, these informed my understanding of cosmopolitan imaginaries as those which do not necessarily determine political orientation but orient it. This interpretation of the data follows from work on affect theory which recognizes its non-deterministic but orienting nature.
Recapitulation

I consider these frameworks, histories, and approaches to examine digital practices around national failure in two countries which share relational but distinct national imaginaries—Lebanon as a moral and economic failure of multicultural governance and Egypt as a moral and economic failure of human rights. In this way, bahdala becomes an intervention into universalist theories of affect as well as notions of an autonomous networked affect. It merges communication and performance theory to bring an embodied dimension into studies of digital media, geopolitics, and scandal. In the following chapters, I examine the production of national imaginaries as they are produced online, focusing on how they are staged, recoded, and engineered.

My methodological approach combines affect theory, communication theory, and communication’s interdisciplinary others, like anthropology, to draw the boundaries of the bahdala. I do this by identifying affective economies and following their discursive, rhetorical, and performative dimensions in popular media. Of particular interest are the symbols, ideas, and people that are invoked to recode the bahdala and to utilize it toward activist and entertainment ends. In this way, I carve out a method for studying affective economies in digital media.

The first chapter turns to the staging of the bahdala, where a public invested in cosmopolitan imaginaries channels it toward a member of the ruling regime. This chapter highlights the way that bahdala is an entertaining and didactic event—it establishes as it draws on a hierarchy of global belonging by activating colonial relationships between nations. It previews the second chapter and its focus on recoding, or the process of turning an experience felt as humiliating into an event which becomes the grounds for
pride. In this way digital *bahdala* becomes the means through which to launch nationalist resistance, where publics take hold of encoded symbols in the national imaginary and use them to convert conferred shame into strength. Here, I examine the gendered labor which constitutes the *bahdala*, as national imaginaries rely on the labor of women, the gender non-conforming, and exploited others to maintain them. In the third chapter, I flesh out what is different about this gendered labor as it takes place online by examining the temporal dimension of digital *bahdala*. This chapter reveals that digital *bahdala* relies on paranoia, or a future-oriented exposure, of. In the last case study, the *bahdala* is a tactical method to meet activists’ goals, at the same time drawing on the labor of the exploited to make others feel something.
“What does it mean for the theory and practice of social transformation when feeling good becomes evidence of justice’s triumph?” (Berlant 1999)

“Shame can linger, layer, and grow into a sense of humiliation, it can be perceived in the much lighter hues of embarrassment, and it can slide by so that others become embarrassed for the one who shows no shame.” (Paasonen & Sunden 2021)

For a Lebanese public on the heels of a revolution, the 2020 World Economic Forum (WEF) became a curious media spectacle. The annual event which gathered the global elite—corporate leaders, politicians, media moguls, NGO directors, and select academics—was not widely considered to be primetime entertainment. However, the invite-only event which took place on January 23 in Davos, Switzerland made headlines across the country due to the controversy that erupted around the presence of one of Lebanon’s most notorious political actors, Gebran Bassil. Bassil was not only the leader of the largest Christian bloc of Lebanese parliament but was the son-in-law of Lebanon’s president and had served in a host of ministerial positions in the years past. In the context of mass mobilizations that had erupted on October 17, 2019, Bassil’s was one of several names chanted in calls for the downfall of the ruling regime. In an unprecedented if cosmetic and ultimately temporary move, the cabinet stepped down following weeks of protests against corruption and deteriorating socioeconomic conditions.

Following the announcement of a panel entitled, “The Return of Arab Unrest” which was to include Bassil as a speaker, a petition circulated online calling for him to be
disinvited. It cited his inability to represent Lebanon “on the world stage” (“Gebran Bassil no longer” 2020), asking Klaus Schwab, Chairman of the WEF to remove Bassil as a speaker. However, Bassil was not disinvited, and the event became an anticipated one after CNBC International correspondent Hadley Gamble promised through the screen not to go easy on Bassil. Keeping her promise, her questioning of Bassil became something of a spectacle for its performative dimension. As the panel vacillated between a grilling, a roast, and a trial of Bassil, spectators watched on, releasing a flurry of memes, jokes, and admonishments online. These material tracings of Internet users’ feelings ran the spectrum from articulations of humiliation to joy. Some opined Bassil as a dignified martyr who stood in the face of Western imperialism while others celebrated correspondent Gamble as the heroic journalist that the Lebanese public deserved. Some contested his complicity in a nepotistic ruling order and others couldn’t stomach Gamble’s posturing, contrasting her comportment with friendly allies.

Of particular interest to this chapter is the WEF ‘grilling’ as bahdala, or the moment or state of didactic humiliation or ridicule. Building on work on scandals in the region (Kraidy 2009, 2016; El-Ariss 2019) I offer bahdala as a framework to consider the way that national publics recuperate the nation in the context of economic turned moral failure. While exposure and scene-making marked the revolutionary period of activist mobilization and artistic production, the post-revolutionary audience I turn to is invested in recuperating the national structures that were exposed to mend them. At sites like the World Economic Forum, where global capital is evaluated, dissected, pledged, and recirculated to an elite minority, bahdala is a way of teaching a nationhood that is economically viable. Digital bahdala in this chapter is a postcolonial pedagogy of
national respectability which utilizes the affordances of the Internet to playfully point out the source of failure and ultimately recuperate the nation.

In the digitally mediated post-revolution, such mobilizations of *bahdala* become entertaining content for global audiences. I examine the joyful expressions of catharsis and vengeance which reflected a desire to see the state put on the spot and humiliated. These moments become quasi trials, where national figures in the region are tried by media personnel to perform affective justice. I offer that national publics are attuned to the way that digital media seems to “cut through” systems of signification and embarrass leaders who show no shame. They take evidence from these performances, using them to recode symbols and scenes of humiliation and shame into ones of dignity and pride.

However, by incorporating notions of embodiment in communicative practices, I find that while some wish to feel joy by watching the ousted leader be roasted it has relational effects on spectating others. In wielding shame through the digital *bahdala*, there is no guarantee that it will hit its target. Rather, while social media platforms like Twitter may make the untouchable leader feel like they are closer to touch, it is spectating others who will be impacted by conferrals of not only failure, but inferiority. In this way, this chapter discusses the relational dimension of affect and the embodied dimension of communication. It does so to complicate notions of individual nations and bodies which propagate in liberal discourses of sovereignty.

In what became a media trial, the international forum becomes the backdrop for narratives of national failure. Lebanon has been many things to many people since its inception, and the digital commentary around the spectacle reflects the quagmire of these alternative imaginaries. These come to the fore as nationals and diaspora contend with the
reality of a revolution, in all its hopes and defeats, but contend with the impending loss of what has been produced as an exceptional space by colonial powers and local elites. These affective economies also bind transnational publics together, from Lebanon to Pakistan, where others contend with similar discourses of shame and humiliation of “global” proportions. These connections show how such forums give publics the evidence needed to perform better political feeling about narratives of failure, and the way that wielding it elsewhere impacts other bodies beyond the one who allegedly shows no shame.

I offer the WEF as one node in affective economies of bahdala. To do this, I first offer an overview of the relationship between Lebanon and institutions like the World Economic forum. I then turn to the interview which took place on the Davos stage and examine the affects channeled through the performances of the panelists and interviewer. To further elucidate the affective work, I turn to commentary around the interview on digital platforms like Twitter, where transnational publics shared their interpretations and declarations of feeling. I then discuss the implications for recoding performances as they relate to practices of conversion, where national figures utilize the rhetoric of embarrassment, shame, and humiliation to advance geopolitical and class/political economic interests.

**Lebanon, the WEF, and the 'world stage'**

The scandal at the WEF must be understood by contextualizing Bassil’s place in the Lebanese landscape. Bassil is a member of a political class that is commonly in attendance at the annual meeting of global elite at Davos. He has lauded several titles in Lebanese politics, including the leader of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), Former
Minister of Energy and Water, and Former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Emigrants in Lebanon. He is also the son-in-law of the president, making him the symbol of a nepotistic regime by detractors. The FPM, which Bassil took leadership of in 2015, is one among several political parties in Lebanon. As the largest Christian bloc and political bloc in parliament, it retains the ability to oppose various measures. The FPM is also allied with Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shi’ite group and political party, an alliance which has been increasingly criticized by the US for the group’s alliance with the Syrian and Iranian regimes.

This is a short preview into the sectarian makeup of Lebanon’s power-sharing system. In the twentieth century, sectarianism has persisted as a more institutionalized of governance as pacts and agreements which have attempted to settle questions of economic interests and regional balances. It also has roots in independence from France in 1943, when a National Pact distributed quotas for governance along sectarian lines, making Lebanon a state which operated through a ‘balance’ of the confessional denominations of the various groups. While the pact helped reach a kind of compromise for alternative visions of what Lebanon was and to whom its sovereignty was defined, the post-war Ta’if Accord of 1989 became another institutionalization of sectarian power-sharing as well as a peace treaty for the end of the civil war. This became a “more pragmatic approach to Lebanon’s changing demographics and the sectarian military balance in the country” (Salloukh et al 2019, p. 21). However, the quota of government posts were made to reflect population ratios without accounting for population change, meaning that population control is baked into to the anxiety of the nation state today.
Today, sectarianism is often cited as the reason for Lebanon’s failure as a national project, revived again and again in international news around the 2019 uprisings.

Sectarianism appears in Orientalist imaginaries as an essentially archaic mode of governance and culture, referenced in policy, research, and journalistic commentary as a relic of the past and an obstacle to move beyond on the path to democratic reform. It has been linked to “tribal” identities (Gause 2013), cited as the reason for economic failure (Collard 2019). These are not new sentiments, as even Ottoman and European voices of the time described conflict in Lebanon as part of an archaic and historic clash of tribes which prevented it from achieving a secular and tolerant state (Makdisi 2000), minimizing their own role or ideological complicity. Tempting as they might be, such narratives paint a complex set of historical junctures into a neat box.

These views of sectarianism as an archaic past to be overcome positions Lebanon has a failed project. It offers Lebanon as “a metaphor for a failed nationalism in the non-Western world” (Makdisi 2000, p. 3), a discourse which is prevalent in the WEF interview discourse about its national failure. Rather, as Ussama Makdisi (2000) has noted, “sectarianism is an expression of modernity” (p. xi). It was a mode of exchange and problem-solving between local, European, and Ottoman powers, inseparable from colonial, imperial, and local contact zones (Makdisi 2000, Mikdashi 2014). As such, it was less an imposition of colonial or imperial rule, and more an asymmetrical exchange of practices and knowledge (Makdisi 2000, p. 8).

Recognizing sectarianism in this way allows for an understanding of competing imaginaries which persist to the present day. Up to the nineteenth century, Lebanon (then Mount Lebanon) was part of Ottoman Empire’s own modernization efforts, where they
tried to establish an Islamic State while still maintaining friendly relations with other bodies of power. However, in a problem which would continue to renew itself in new forms, they struggled because “they were still confronted with the problem of elaborating a notion of modern Ottoman sovereignty in an age of European hegemony” (Makdisi 2000, p. 11). This European hegemony included interest in what they viewed as subjugated Christians in the empire and the production of secular statehood. Makdisi (2000) describes the intermingling of colonial and imperial visions of Lebanon in the mid-nineteenth century through this politics of religion, writing:

“This context of flux created the conditions for sectarianism to arise not as a coherent force but as a reflection of fractured identities, pulled hither and thither by the enticements and coercions of Ottoman and European power.” (p. 11)

Sectarianism then sets the stage for Lebanon’s conflicting and overlapping imaginaries within and without, internally and externally. In the 20th century, the country’s borders were negotiated by imperial, colonial, and local powers, with tensions between the country’s economic autonomy and visions of a French protectorate, a Christian refuge, and a cosmopolitan pathway to the ‘Orient’ (Traboulsi 2007). These questions were also fueled by anxiety around the majority Muslim population of Syria, of which Greater Lebanon was part. As such, there were conflicting visions of sovereignty between a sovereign Lebanese state or one that identified with a pan-Arab nationalism. The former, which resonates with Bassil’s rhetoric, drew on a supposed Phoenician heritage of the Lebanese (and mainly Maronite Christians) as direct descendants of a “modern” and

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5. These have also been referred to as Lebanism and Arabism, essentially constituting either a Lebanese or an Arab nationalism (Salloukh et al 2019).
culturally and racially distinct Phoenician people (Salloukh et al 2019). On the other hand, the pan-Arab vision drew on a distinctly Arab territory and people. These tensions were not always or primarily dictated by religion or sect, but rather conflicting visions of Lebanon’s exceptional status.6

These tensions played out in the interview, where the US journalist Hadley Gamble, the Dutch official Sigrid Kaag, the Emirati real estate mogul Hussain Sajwani, and the ousted Lebanese minister Bassil channeled discourses of secular nationalism, the value of Lebanon in the region, and comparisons of European and MENA states. While geopolitically, those on the stage appeared to have an adversarial relationship with Bassil, they all channeled popular discourse of Lebanon as exceptional, building on hegemonic and colonial visions from nineteenth century discourses about Lebanon as a Christian protectorate in an otherwise Muslim region. In many ways, they agreed with Bassil’s history of emphasis on Lebanese national identity as separate from regional Arabs and crises.

However, the interview revived historical tensions of the Europeans and Ottomans doing their part to enact their visions of what Lebanon was to mean for their own empires. It revived European imaginaries of Lebanon as a “surrounded, and to some extent contaminated, by and Oriental decadence” (Makdisi 2000, p. 16). Bassil’s alliance with Hezbollah stood in opposition to the constructions of modern nationhood that were enacted at the WEF, in large part due to geopolitical considerations. These geopolitical

6. Within mostly Christian Maronite discourse, there were debates about whether the Lebanese were a distinct people to be protected from Muslim domination of the region or rather a Mediterranean people who must work with other Arab countries (Traboulsi 2007, p. 98).
tensions involve the polarity\textsuperscript{7} between Saudi Arabia and Iran which inform the split in political alliances within Lebanon. Hezbollah, the FPM, and others under the banner of “March 8” forming a coalition which have the backing of Syria and Iran ‘against\textsuperscript{8} the “March 14” coalition which is led by former prime minister Saad Hariri, son of assassinated Prime Minister Rafic Hariri and which has the backing of Saudi Arabia. While some have framed it as a Shi’a-Sunni clash, it is due to contingent rather than essential reasons—“partially because those are the lines of division in relation to other geopolitical and local economic and political issues in this particular historical moment” (Nucho 2018, p. 37). For these reasons, Bassil’s place in the “March 8” coalition presents as an impediment to economic prosperity in spaces like the WEF, more friendly to Saudi Arabia’s modernization path than that of Iran.

Indeed, the WEF was the location which enacted decisions impacting the future of these countries, building on deeper regional anxieties and tensions between competing visions of Lebanese sovereignty. In these ways, Lebanon “was to be periodically reproduced by means of a compromise between the dominant regional and international powers” (Traboulsi 2007, p. 108). Fadi Bardawil (2020) has described these conflicting imaginaries, writing:

“Lebanon, founded on a compromise between different infranational sectarian communities and their supranational (Arab and Western) imaginaries and loyalties, would continually fail to produce a hegemonic unifying narrative for what it means to be a Lebanese national” (p. 33)

\textsuperscript{7} Joanne Nucho (2018) describes these as relatively recent and contingent in nature.
\textsuperscript{8} This has been framed as a rivalry, but in these groups shift allegiances depending on the geopolitical landscape.
The anxieties around this failure run through both the interview and the commentary that ensued, intensified by the country’s economic collapse and its relationship to supranational forces. In the years leading up to Lebanon’s mass mobilizations, regional shifts helped exacerbate an economic collapse as deposits decreased and neighboring economies fluctuated. Lebanon’s sovereignty has been tied to not only geopolitically to neighboring Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Palestine, but to streams of foreign capital by expatriates across the world. Lebanon has been a place where foreign capital was welcome and sought out, with attractive interest rates for investors and banking secrecy laws helping it become a haven for the wealthy. Since its inception, the country has relied on diaspora remittances, or what has jokingly been called Lebanon’s “natural resource” (Azzi 2021). In this way, the steady inflow of and dependency on US dollars has intensified older questions of sovereignty.

These deteriorating socioeconomic conditions in the country in the lead-up to the 2019 revolution offered a renewed glimpse into the policies which accelerated inequality and tied its sovereignty to streams of foreign capital and benefited the ruling elite. Policies of “financial engineering” have exacerbated the increasing divide between the elite and the masses. Through policies which promised high interest to depositors and required the steady influx of fresh US dollars to keep the Lira-USD currency peg afloat, the banking sector helped prop up what has been called a “Ponzi scheme” (“Deconstructing the Lebanese” 2020). This, combined with austerity and privatization measures, have led some to call it the “the experiment that shows neoliberalism’s failure” (Chehayeb 2020). The recession of state functions in the last few decades has occurred with the approval of international aid which helps power this system (Bazzi & Hassan
In a piece focusing on the impact of these policies on the health care sector during the COVID pandemic, Kareem Chehayeb (2020) wrote, “If Lebanon’s public health care system is a patient on life support, then international donors are the ventilator.” Such donors include international institutions like the World Bank and the IMF which have introduced structural adjustments to many countries in the Global South. As the collapse raged on, an IMF loan became one of the points of note in public discourse around the collapse, with debates around whether the loan would further entrench the local regime (Daher 2020, Malik & Haidar 2020, Schellen 2020). This discourse has intensified after the port explosion of August 4, 2020, when the capital was decimated by ammonium nitrate which had been stored in port warehouses, plunging the country into deeper economic turmoil (Bazzi & Hassan 2020).

This history shows the entanglement between Lebanon and its international community of institutional donors offering conditional aid, tourists attracted to its romanticized cosmopolitanism, diaspora sending back money in the form of remittances, and wealthy investors who have aided in the privatization of the country. This international community was invoked through the WEF Forum and prompted a petition contesting Bassil’s presence. What was being contested was his ability to present Lebanon to this international community, “on the world stage” (Khalife 2020). This is part of the reason that the controversy made a mediatized spectacle out of an event which does not usually figure as scandalous or popular viewing content for national publics. In the context of the collapse, with headlines suggesting and questioning whether Lebanon was a “failed state,” the public had renewed interest in their politicians performing on “international” stages.
However, beneath the spectacle lies the reality that the WEF is an annual performative space, rife with stages, audiences, and events. It features the global elite, like Bassil and Gamble, who are enmeshed in networks of transnational capital and engage in discussions about the flow of such capital through moralistic rhetoric. In recent years, several English-language news and think-tank pieces have called attention to the exclusivity of the event, questioning its elitism (Burke-White 2020, Lu 2020, Thomas 2020). With keywords like “sustainability,” “innovation,” and “skill,” operating as buzzwords in panel titles and op-eds about the forum, private sector lingo is awash. Critics suggest that the WEF has promoted neoliberal discourses and policies which do not address structural issues of wealth distribution (Child 2018). WEF leadership has responded to criticisms by promoting initiatives around “more sustainable capitalism,” (Stiglitz 2020) opting toward a market-based approach to which advocates the need to involve corporate leadership in questions of global concern (Burke-White 2020). In the same year as the Bassil spectacle, WEF advocate and economist Joseph Stiglitz (2020) suggested that “[w]e need to see corporations taking ownership of their actions and leading by example.” A moralizing element underlies WEF discourse, suggesting a kind of “trickle-down” approach to rising inequalities.

We may think of it as a pedagogical space where failure and success are performed. Moralizing discourses pulsated through the panel in question, where he was charged for his failure and responsibility to provide a sustainable socioeconomic foundation for the country. This mirrored WEF discourse around the actions of individuals and companies in delving out more just solutions to inequity, violence, and climate change, reflecting a neoliberal discourse which personalizes and narrativizes the
structural determinants of such issues. In an example of this, just two days before the Bassil interview, when WEF Chairman Klaus Schwab held a panel on “stakeholder capitalism,” a concept which has gained critique for being more of a PR campaign than structural change (Denning 2020). Here, the questions of a more moral capitalism were discussed. The framing was one of immoral and corrupt leadership which had failed at securing Lebanese sovereignty.

This is how the stage is set for the bahdala, or the moment of humiliation or ridicule. As I have noted, bahdala is a colloquial Arabic term which describes a performance which aims to ground a person in the eyes of others. It is connected to fadiha, or the Arabic word meaning the event of exposure (El-Ariss 2019), as well as traditions of public embarrassment meant to bring disgrace (Fakhry 2014), pointing to its pedagogical function. In this way, both the WEF and Twitter as a platform are at the intersection of where bahdala finds its natural home. Both project an ethos of worldliness which make conferrals of national failure a highlight circulatable discourse within each.

In the context of the WEF as an international forum, bahdala operated as a quasi-trial for concerned spectators. It is a site where “affective justice” (Clarke 2019) is carried out, bringing to the fore the performative dimension of justice-making. Such trials have been linked to contestations around modernity which come from transnational contact zones of postcolonial contexts. In a related example, Marwan Kraidy (2009) has examined the scandal-trials that unfolded as reality television was introduced to the MENA region, tracing them to the proliferation of new media formats and development.

9. Panel members like Bryan Moynihan, Chief Executive of Bank of America, have often described a “virtuous circle” which can be measured through metrics to demonstrate the power of stakeholder capitalism (Woellart 2022).
They figure as “modernity’s ‘endless trial’ in which various segments of the Arab public – or more accurately, various Arab publics and counterpublics – play the roles of defendant, plaintiff, prosecutor, defender, and judge” (p. 202). In the process, they reflect desires to be read as legible in particular ways.

It is largely these trials and their conferrals of failure that I am interested in. In the context of its digital mediation, bahdala invites audiences who are invested and standing to lose the most to watch and witness the conferral of failure to an individual positioned as deserving it. Bahdala does not only move into a digital space, but it is at home on platforms like Twitter and the WEF, two institutions which cultivate imaginaries of a world which is much less representative than they claim it to be. Indeed, just 10% of the Lebanese population is reported to use Twitter (Dennis et al 2019), reflecting a small segment of the population. Likewise, the WEF—high-powered corporate leaders, former and current politicians, academics from private universities and research centers, celebrity journalists—invokes an audience who invest in its imaginary. In this way, bahdala sits at the intersection between the nation’s technological and economic imaginaries.

While much work in the last decade has investigated the role of social media in the uprisings, as noted in my introduction, I am interested in the audience that is attuned to this scandal. I next turn to the trial before discussing how it was digitally mediated.

The affective trial of Lebanon

The bahdala finds its perfect home on Twitter as event, due to the imaginary it proffers and the audience that it interpellates. These are the globally-focused—journalists, politicians, academics, activists—that the bahdala is oriented toward. Twitter has been
described as a “‘nervous system for the planet’ and a ‘global newsroom,’” becoming a central site for the proliferation of news and culture (Burgess & Baym 2020, p. 3-4). As a corporation, Twitter espoused neutrality and decentralization in its inception, promising in its early days to be “a platform that empowers citizens to voice opinions and emotions, that helps stage public dialogues, and supports groups or ideas to garner attention” (van Dijck 2013, p. 73).

It is this imaginary of debate and dialogue may be evidenced in the home that Twitter content has found in traditional media outlets. In this case, the WEF as bahdala was largely recognized by several international outlets. While some press gestured to a split in audience reactions (Chehayeb 2020), its embarrassing aspect was identified across the board. Many articles alluded to heat and fire in relation to the panel, noting that Bassil was “grilled,” (Hilton 2020) came “under fire,” (Ahmad 2020) and was “roasted,” (Chehayeb 2020). These narratives are largely evidenced by Tweets from the event embedded in the articles. Numbers of digital signatures—12,000 signatories here, 6,000 signatories there (“Public uproar” 2020)—and Twitter polls—76% voting against Bassil’s presence (Ahmad 2020)—were cited to represent the dissent of Lebanese worldwide. Through this discourse, clicks and electronic signatures were presented as legitimate indicators of a nation’s public sentiment.

It was these online petitions, social media posts, and press outlets who contributed to the making of the trial. Several posts and petitions noted that Bassil was a corrupt and incompetent member of the ruling order and would thus be unfit to represent Lebanon with other dignitaries, while others came to his defense, unleashing petitions to defend Bassil as a dignified representative with the nation’s interest at heart. Several US-based
and regional outlets featured Tweets criticizing his place in Davos as well as the petition that circulated contesting his ability to represent Lebanon. The Change.org petition called Bassil “a failed, corrupt and especially an ousted minister” and contested his ability to represent Lebanon on the “world stage” (Khalife 2020).

While the event became a scandalous grilling of Bassil, it was meant to be a panel entitled “The Return of Arab Unrest” with Dutch Foreign Trade Minister Sigrid Kaag, and Damac Properties Chairman Hussain Sajwani, and Hadley Gamble, the CNBC financial news journalist and moderator. The panel quickly turned into an interview with Bassil, focusing mostly on the party leader with occasional input from the other panelists. It became a kind of trial, with Bassil as defendant, Gamble playing the prosecuting lawyer, and Kaag playing the calm and reasoned judge handing down her sentence: guilty. With these actors, the stage was set to reprimand and shame the ruling regime of Lebanon for its failure with Bassil as proxy.

The failure was fiscal and moral. Lebanon, once a pathway to the Orient, a Christian haven for French colonial powers (Traboulsi 2007), a model of religious co-existence, and more recently, a country with lax banking secrecy laws, was now on the chopping block for its economic failure. On a panel focused on magnifying and examining “Arab Unrest,” a colonial dynamic was activated, with a knowing West exposing inferior governance structures. Their questions described superior economic and political structures in the allied US, Europe, and Gulf states but a failure to instill the same values in the rest of the MENA region. In one instance, Gamble asked, incredulously, what Bassil thought he could possibly teach Boris Johnson and Donald Trump about running a country. Gamble and Kaag took alternative roles in admonishing
the former official for his part in state failure, demanding that Bassil take responsibility for what was unfolding. Gamble asked, “Are you taking responsibility for the fact that this is a very bad situation?” Through questions about personal responsibility and moral failure, failure was individualized and placed upon a bad actor.

In this way, Lebanon was ultimately portrayed as a good investment gone bad. Kaag noted that the stakes of this economic failure were the loss of Lebanon as a “mosaic” and a “public/regional good.” She described the country through a familiar hegemonic discourse of pluralism and coexistence, gesturing to Lebanon’s secular model of rule, pointing to the fact that the president must be a Maronite Christian to illustrate this point.

The bahdala here as trial then revives familiar legacies of postcolonial contexts that are positioned as failing in comparison to successful national models—here the US and the UK. Positioned as a conversation about “Arab Unrest,” it ushered in histories of intervention and structural adjustment in the region only to minimize them as outside of the here and now. Sajwani gave reasons for instability in the region, identifying civil war, proxy war, 9/11, Israel and Palestine, and other events in history, only to have Gamble briefly recognize that these happened, but they happened a long time ago. In this way, the nation was imagined as an autonomous, sovereign container.

However, the bahdala is shaped by histories of colonialism and imperialism which persist into the present day. Kaag’s reference to Lebanon as a “mosaic” parallels colonial discourses about civilizational others who have defined Lebanon’s success through its governance structures which include Christian representation. Ussama Makdisi (2000) writes of the way that the ‘mosaic’ metaphor was also part of European
views on Christian “minorities” in the Ottoman Empire, representing them as a suppressed people while also helping to produce categories of people that “existed as separate and autonomous cultural and physical units” (p. 10). Of course, these minorities were still viewed as civilizational others for their place in the Ottoman Empire, but they became useful rhetorical devices in empire-building (Makdisi 2000). This echoes the colonial histories of Asia and Africa by Europe, who “spoke of the value of the regions” once they had them under their control” (Prashad 2008, p. 9). In a related vein, Bassil’s alliance with Hezbollah also brought to bear legacies of European anxiety about the Ottoman Empire and Muslim encroachment. In these ways, the characters in the WEF setting reflect longer colonial histories coming into contact.

While the speakers disagreed on whether the role of the Western intervention, wars with Israel, religion, or sect posed more threatening influence on the country and region, there was a recognition that people in the region were unable to make sound, rational electoral decisions due to a particular lack of sovereignty. By invoking a secular Lebanon, these speakers made religion and emotion problem-objects to be dealt with by the state10. All panelists then agreed on a kind of secular discourse of the separation of emotion and rationality, one that proposes the removal of emotion and religion from the public sphere, where voting happens. Much like Clarke (2019) has noted of liberal legality and international justice frameworks, such affective trials disavow their emotionality, denying their own place in affective economies while operating as

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10. Sajwani, a successful businessman in the Gulf, supported Bassil’s point about foreign intervention, citing the several wars, the consolidation of Arab states, the creation of Israel, and the coups in Iraq and Egypt as some of the reasons for recourse to emotion, religion, or sect in making electoral decisions.
channelers of emotion. Clarke writes that “those engaged in the instrumentalization and dissemination of this discourse do not necessarily recognize how their speech acts depend on affect” (p. 52). As such, while discursively, they denied the ways they were pulled, affectively, they were enmeshed in affective economies.

While Bassil’s geopolitical alliances were oppositional, this agreement highlighted the investments the panelists shared. While the explicit goal of the panel was to discuss “Arab unrest,” the affects that pulsated through the interview said otherwise. It was a site of pedagogy, performance, and play for both Gamble and Bassil. While the influence of emotion on politics was presented as regressive, they worked to reach and capture their audiences. If we are to think of them as alternate channelers of emotion for such publics, Gamble and Bassil reflected less opposing ideologies and more sparring partners seeking to capture the audience. Gamble presented herself as the advocate for victims of Lebanon’s corrupt state, pinning a video to her Twitter profile previewing the interview and promising not to go easy on Bassil to ensure its visibility to her social media followers. Bassil interrupted Kaag throughout the interview, saying “let me finish,” and “let me continue,” various times. At one point, Gamble turned to the live audience behind them and said, “He says that to me all the time.”

Her comment to the crowd, as well as viewers at home, elicited laughter and highlighted the presence of audiences. Rather than appearing as neutral, she recognized and took part in the making of the scandal by joining in the social media posting about the event. Twitter users, including Gamble who herself made the joke, referred to the interview as pornographic, with the connotation being that Gamble penetrated Bassil.
Bassil also gestured to this audience, referencing the fact that the interview was trending online. He said, “Me representing Lebanon has trended on social media and as long as I still have this, I have to abide by this.” His legitimacy was linked to a Twitter hashtag, placing power in the digital circulation of discourse. Gamble recognized the same digital economy. Acknowledging that Bassil had watched some of her segments, she feigned flattery, saying “You watch me on CNBC?” He responded that he had, adding, “Especially when you declared your intentions in this debate,” to murmurs and laughs in the crowd. Gamble chuckled, saying, “Our numbers definitely went up!” Ideology becomes a secondary lens through which to understand these playful jabs between these sparring partners legitimated through online petitions and hashtag campaigns. Their sparring dynamic was not of two fundamentally opposed worldviews coming into contact. Rather, each sought to capture an audience of viewers and followers tuned into the trial.
Indeed, *bahdala* as national failure becomes consumable social media content for those who are invested in the way that the country is represented amongst the ‘international’ community so important to Lebanon’s imaginary as a tolerant and cosmopolitan place in an otherwise volatile region. For this reason, it is important to identify the affects and emotions powering such nodes of power. Turning to the audience in the background behind the trial-stage reveals the affective economies that undergirded the *bahdala*. Of particular interest is the way that spectators online used segments of this interview to express their joy, humiliation, or ambivalence. Some shared images of Gamble’s playful facial expressions counterposed with Bassil’s stoic face as she asked pointed questions and posed, waiting for his responses. The screenshots of her expressions juxtaposed Bassil’s blank looks in Internet memes, memes which Gamble ultimately shared herself. Here, the expressions of each character became fodder for claims to justice online. In
sharing these screenshots, clips, and quotes from the interview, Internet users took part in the recoding of these scenes as humiliating, pleasurable, or dignified.

Indeed, for Twitter users who expressed their feelings about the interview, the panel was less about finding answers to enduring questions and more about the media event that CNBC, the WEF, Gamble, and Bassil helped engineer around national failure. One of the most popular clips to circulate online was of a segment where Gamble asked a confused Bassil how we got to Davos, inferring that he was. When he answered that he was invited by a friend, Kaag said, “We’re not allowed to have friends like those in government.” The clip was shared with Twitter users expressing pleasure with seeing Bassil taken to task for what was framed as corruption.

The commentary and circulation of it across international news platforms suggests that the Twitter bahdala invokes an audience which is concerned with national standing and stands to lose the most from Lebanon’s bad showing. It is not only this professional class of national representatives, such as politicians and journalists, that stands to gain from engaging in digital bahdala. It is also that it speaks to an audience that stands to lose from the country’s fall from grace. We see in the commentary that audiences perform jokes and insults toward Bassil, the one who fell from grace. In the next section, I discuss what such media moments offer to national publics who are contending with the aftermath of revolution and economic collapse. In this case, this audience engages in performances of shame, humiliation, joy in ways that position themselves toward the nation.
The pleasure in the roast

There were two broad trends in responses to the interview which are inherently related. There were 1) those who accepted the bahdala as a moment of humiliation, and 2) those who refuted that it was humiliating. While the former was mainly English-speaking supporters of Gamble who identified Bassil as the source of the country’s failure, the latter were mostly Arabic speakers who were supporters of Bassil. While the former identified aligned with and affirmed an aspirational cosmopolitanism that would be at home in spaces like the WEF, the latter aligned with a brand of nationalism that saw the panel as an attack on Lebanese sovereignty. They show how bahdala connects us to others in the same stroke through the relational nature of emotion.

By turning to Twitter commentary, I offer that the bahdala as trial figures as a site of affective modulation, where emotions appear to be channeled, transformed, and quelled. To do so, I draw especially on two theorists of affect and communication: Sara Ahmed’s (2004) theory of affective economies and Silvan Tomkins’ (1963) taxonomy of affects. I do this to understand the way that affects or emotions operate in a kind of social, relational, and interconnected feedback system. Tomkins (1981) writes that his model was developed through an understanding of early cybernetics theory which conceptualized “multiple assemblies of varying degrees of independence, dependence, interdependence, and control and transformation of one by another” (p. 309). In a collection edited by Evelyn Sedgwick and Adam Frank (1995), Tomkins’ work is recognized for its structure but also non-determinism, allowing for a multiplicity of possibilities for the way that affects—conceptualized along an analogic continuum of
intensities—and drives—conceptualized as a digital on/off switch—trigger one another and bring about different orientations toward the world.

As noted in the introduction, Ahmed (2004) intervenes to offer that we must consider the way that feelings about objects and subjects are learned, applying not only an understanding of systems but of economies. Taken together, these theories emphasize a relational understanding of the work of emotions, recognizing the ways that the shame or humiliation of one can be read on the body in different ways and have a reverberative effect on the pleasure of another.

I will focus in this section on the English-speaking audience, especially those who joined in on the pleasure of watching Bassil be ‘roasted.’ This is because they illustrate the way that bahdala works to cohere an audience that joins in on the bahdala. Many comments referred to the event as a grilling, a roasting, a dragging, and murder:

“I am so happy GB @gebran_bassil is in Davos. Some interesting grilling session.🥳🥳🥳 #GbinDavos #GBGrilled” (Appendix A1:2)

“The roast of Gebran Bassil #GbinDavos (Appendix A1:4)

“Gebran being dragged to mud is so fun to watch #GbinDavos I’m so glad he attended (Appendix A1:11)

“How...HOW did I miss Gebran Bassil basically getting hela hela helo’d by @_HadleyGamble at Davos? Has anyone reported this murder and dismemberment to Interpol yet? 😂” (Appendix A1:26)

This desire to render the elite, wealthy, and corrupt touchable was on full display in regional and national mobilizations. The posts around the interview thus channeled in the chants, symbolism, and play of the protests to illustrate the humiliating display on the
WEF stage. They ushered in the joy of the street, where chants against the ruling order included memes, songs, and swears at individual representatives and the regime. In Lebanon, Bassil’s was one of several names chanted. A particularly popular chant went: “Hela hela hela hela hela ho, Gebran Bassil kes emmo,” (translating to “Fuck Gebran Bassil”), which was referenced in various Tweets. Countless emojis, jokes, and descriptive commentary reflected a *jouissance* in the spectacle.

Much of the digital commentary pointed to a joyful exuberance around Bassil’s performance, and in particular, his humiliation. What these make evident is the element of desire and pleasure that undergirds the humiliation or shaming of another through exposure. Scholarship on the mobilizations across the region have called attention to the expressions and performances of the body in response to repressive states and socioeconomic conditions (El-Ariess 2019, Kraidy 2016, Mourad 2014). In his work on digital scandals and leaks in the Arab world, El-Ariess (2019) complicates positivist and Enlightenment era models of deliberation and communication by offering *fadiha*, or exposure, as an affective framework. In the Arabic-speaking world, *fadiha* is a form of exposure which causes a scandal and makes a scene (El-Ariess 2019). It is not simply a transfer of information or message, but an entire apparatus of power which involves the body, stage, and audience. Tracing such exposure across place and time to Greek scandal and adultery, he suggests that there is something powerful to consider in the transgressive act of uncovering. El-Ariess (2020) writes, “Scandal is thus about the desire for revelation, the desire for political exposure, but also the desire to render the famous and powerful touchable, shaming and humiliating them” (p. 6). If the spectacle is a machine of desire, then it is a desire to witness the usually unreachable to be put on the spot.
Writing of such practices in the region, Marwan Kraidy (2016) shows how different forms of “creative insurgency” in the mobilizations were not signs to be translated but affect-laden performances. For example, images of Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak as a cow or of Tunisia’s Ben Ali as trapped in an airplane were part of turning classical bodies into grotesque bodies, debasing and grounding those who have ruled through a cult of personality. Similarly, in the context of the WEF interview, Bassil was compared to dogs, mops, and criminals, evidenced in the above screenshots.

If Bassil’s image was leveled, Gamble’s was raised to the level of royalty. There were several posts which praised Gamble’s performance. These included images of bouquets and screenshots of her facial expression which linked to a joy in what took place on the Davos stage. She was pictured as the famous Mona Lisa painting, featuring one of the expressions she made during the interview and as a royal figure in the Bugs Bunny cartoon, hitting the head of a subject with her scepter. Several Twitter accounts expressed gratitude for her evisceration of Bassil.
“if Hadley Gamble came and did an interview with the president how fun would that have been?” (Appendix A1:6)

"@HadleyGamble Gebran bassil and his allies are our daily nightmare

Here s a gift for you our beautiful idomitable avenger !!! 💖💖💖💖💖

#GBinDavos #Davos #Davos2020 (Appendix A1:8)

“I can never get enough of this interview” (Appendix A1:25)

The references to Gamble as professional, a superhero, and royalty must be understood within the context of the Lebanese media landscape. They pointed to the difference between local journalists and the US journalist. Many referenced local journalists like Samar Bou Khalil and Jad Ghosn, contrasting Gamble as more critical and professional. One Twitter user thanked Gamble on behalf of the Lebanese, calling her a national hero and saying that Bassil was “not used to this.” There was an emphasis on the way that
Bassil was forced to reckon with difficult questions due to Gamble’s superior professionalism.

These Twitter users referenced a media landscape where each major news network is majority owned by those affiliated with political parties. As a result, political officials are rarely questioned by foes or rivals, preferring to be interviewed on their own affiliated networks. Several Twitter users emphasized the desire for Bassil to be in the hot seat, in contrast to interviews conducted locally. They suggested that Lebanese channels colluded with him to portray him in a more positive light.

Indeed, we can compare this interview to one in the Lebanese context that several social media comments referenced. This was an interview that took place just days prior to the WEF interview, on January 8th, 2020, on the Lebanese Al Jadeed television network by journalists Jad Ghosn and Samar Bou Khalil. The channel has been described as airing “daring interviews with controversial personalities and political figures,” launched in 2001 (Mellor et al 2011, p. 96). Its ownership by Sunni businessman and rival to Saad Hariri, Tahsin Khayat, earned it a reputation for its “mildly leftist voices critical of Hariri’s neoliberal postwar policies” (Salloukh et al 2019).

It was not the content of this interview, but the tone, comportment, and lateral space Bassil was given that is of significance. For four hours and in Bassil’s home, Bassil gave an account of his status as a minoritarian leader, even while his political history has included posts in the telecommunication, energy, and foreign ministries, as well as leadership of the FPM. During the interview, he accused her of cutting him off while he indeed did the same, at one point asking her, “are you serious?” He told her to not mix up issues and to not ask him the same question several times. He likewise interrupted Ghosn,
saying, “he doesn’t want to hear what I have to say.” He sighed continuously, told them their questions were taking too long, and exasperatedly demanded to move on to more pressing matters. In contrast to the WEF grilling, he was given the time to control the conversation—four hours of it—as a condition of access.

It serves as an example par excellence of the kind of interviews of officials to which publics are accustomed and the frustration that publics, but particularly detractors who joined in on the WEF grilling, expressed about Bassil’s escape from censure in the local context. They suggested that other local journalists dodged important questions, backed down, and even helped politicians to avoid exposure. One Tweet compared the two interviews:

“You thought you were going on Jad Abu Ghosn or Samar Abou Khalil”

(Appendix A1:7)
The *bahdala* as quasi-trial, with its discursive intent to hold leadership accountable, channels in desirable emotions, especially for postcolonial contexts. As Kraidy (2016) notes of the trial spectacles of fallen dictators, “They show key characters in a national drama participate in a catharsis as they reveal and contest once jealously guarded secrets” (p. 88). While Bassil may be considered part of a dictatorial but pluralistic regime, and he is all but fallen in the current political moment, catharsis is sought in a revelatory moment. These practices are part of “an economy of exposure and confrontation that vindicates, relieves, comforts, and gives pleasure” (El-Ariss 2019, p. 75). This catharsis relies on the conferral of affects like humiliation to those who are felt to deserve it.

Digital *bahdala* appears to offer a way to reach or touch the source of failure, to join in and help produce the humiliation. El-Ariss describes this opening created during and after the uprisings as *waiʿi*, or awareness/consciousness, or new modes of encounter with centers of authority (El-Ariss 2019). Here, there was a desire to “cut through” systems of signification (imperialist/anti-imperialist, progressive/conservative, religious/secular) and to wield affects like shame at those in power. This becomes attenuated for postcolonial contexts who turn to the international forum mediated through the Internet to see the source of failure suffer and to orient themselves along proper models of nationhood. Digital media appears to help bypass systems of signification which encode meaning, allowing agency to individual users who can help reproduce the nation as an ideal. The next section discusses the postcolonial desire to “cut through” such systems by witnessing the humiliation of national representatives for their role in national failure.
The schadenfreude: “Cutting through” with bahdala

Even those who recognized Gamble’s own political agenda described a kind of catharsis and pleasure in the scenes. In an article about the interview on the regionally focused, English-language platform *Middle East Eye*, Lina Mounzer, a translator and writer, spoke of the pleasures of watching a member of the ruling class, Bassil, “treated with the same open disdain and contempt with which they treat us” (Chehayeb 2020). While she recognized the differential treatment with which Gamble has interviewed members of Bassil’s rival political factions, displaying US foreign policy interests, she emphasized rather the feeling of watching the interview:

“All of the things he said about Syrians, the way he so shamelessly benefits from the nepotism…[going] after people who say bad things to him on Facebook,” she explained. “[The] schadenfreude was wonderful.” She continued: “I don’t need to endorse Hadley Gamble as a person, embrace her politics, or agree with her,” Mounzer said. “But let me take some pleasure [in this].”” (Chehayeb 2020)

Mounzer spoke of the pleasure of witnessing Bassil’s treatment, evidenced here through the word, “schadenfreude.” This word refers to the desirable element of the witnessing of misery, ill-fortune, or humiliation, and is line with the expressions of many other spectators who expressed joy in the performance. What is of particular interest is that she clarifies that even though she feels this way, she does not identify with Gamble’s politics. Given the online discourse around the superiority of journalists like Gamble, Mounzer’s comment echoes others who reject the premise, refusing to grant Gamble privileged status. In this way, they reflect a desire to see Bassil, a Lebanese official,
suffer without that pleasure crystallizing into evidence of a particular political
subjectivity, identity, or ideological complicity.

Several scholars of anthropology, literature, and religion highlight the way that
representative mechanisms like identity and ideology tell us part, but not the entire story
around political life (Clarke 2019, El-Ariss 2013, Pellegrini 2007, Schaefer 2015,
Sedgwick 2003). These representational quagmires have taken on new form as national
mobilizations are digitally mediated, but they also precede digital media technologies. El-
Ariss (2013) references these as the trials of Arab modernity, describing the affects and
expressions which complicate the rigid constructions of subjectivity in postcolonial sites.
By analyzing the cultural production of writers traveling through and residing in
European and Arab countries, he is attuned to the negotiations taking place between
different conceptions of modernity and civilization. He writes,

“the emphasis on the linearity of colonialism and its underlying binary opposition
and unilateral and teleological movement from North to South (West to East)
stifles theoretical frameworks by reducing debates to the politics of representation
and the binaries of tradition and modernity” (El-Ariss 2013, p. 86).

The WEF interview operates as one of these trials, triggering and activating these
epistemologies, but also revealing their affective mechanics. Sedgwick similarly turns to
the performative dimension of knowledge production to complicate rigid representational
structures. She writes, “Attending to psychology and materiality at the level of affect and
texture is also to enter a conceptual realm that is not shaped by lack nor by
commonsensical dualities of subject versus object or of means versus ends” (Sedgwick
2003, p. 21). Drawing on Tomkins, she offers that, in contrast to drives which are
instrumentalized in particular ways, affects can be autotelic, meaning that their aim can simply be the fulfillment or arousal of the affect itself. Different from drives which have an instrumentality, positive affects are fulfilled when they achieve joy, interest, or excitement. They can also be attached to other affects. Sedgwick writes, “one can be excited by anger, disgusted by shame, or surprised by joy” (p. 19). Mounzer’s comment reflects a desire to feel joy in humiliation.

This also points to the capacity of affect to soften and complicate rigid notions of identity and ideology and tendencies toward essentializing their characteristics. Sedgwick writes, “The object of affects such as anger, enjoyment, excitement, or shame is not proper to the affects in the same way that air is the object proper to respiration” (p. 19). In other words, there is no essential link between an affect and its supposed object. As such, Mounzer’s comment references the desire to fulfill a particular affect, like a pleasurable joy at a shaming, without it being swept up in postcolonial narratives of instrumentality and motivation. This is familiar to questions of coloniality and the self-other binaries that are enacted as “always-already” representational structures. Of the cultural production of Arab writers responding but also opting out of these frameworks in a variety of languages and across various metropoles, El-Ariss writes, “Through affects and embodiment, this counterdiscourse bypasses the dialectical engagement with European models of cultural difference to which many Arab intellectuals succumbed” (p. 73). They point to something beneath the level of discourse that is not essentially linked to it and does not reproduce it by countering it, but that undergirds and transforms it.

This becomes key in the discussion of digital media and its production of kinds of evidence, whether in the form of discursive categories, motivations, or narratives. It
points to the “affective transparency” (El-Ariss 2019) sought through digital media, where evidence is sought through a performative uncovering. El-Ariss writes of such practices during the mobilizations:

“Affective transparency becomes a new mode of showing and seeing the inside (heart, chest), and of showing and seeing, as in “I will show you!” and “You wait and see!,” which are threats of exposure, of scene-making, and of physical violence.” (p. 75)

Kuntsman and Stein (2011) write of the need to investigate alternative interpretive frameworks such as these to complicate Western and academic discourse around the uprisings in the region as ushering in a kind of digital transparency. El-Ariss (2019) describes the way that digital media and the regional uprisings have enabled the experience of “‘concrete personal lives’ and a ‘directly felt present’” (p. 87). He calls this wa’i, or a digital consciousness whereby bodily performances cut through the systems of signification that Mounzer distances herself from. This is like Pellegrini’s (2007) account of Evangelical Hell House conversion performances, where “[t]he appeal is to the heart, not the head” (p. 914). Kraidy also describes the bodily performances of “creative insurgents” who “cut through” the plethora of debates, videos, and reportages that comprise the Syrian, Tunisian, and Egyptian public spheres in the time of revolution with bodily performances and symbolism. In another kind of trial than the WEF, ousted Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak cried from a cage in the courtroom, “declar[ing]…that this was a man unable to control his own body.” (Kraidy 2016, p. 89). These insurgents help ground leaders through bahdala, signaling to others that they had lost their sovereignty.
However, while Kraidy writes of the revolutionaries worked to wrest the body politic from the sovereign leader by debasing him, and El-Ariss writes of the activists and authors who exposed bodily violence and hurl invectives at the state, these forms of *bahdala* operate differently. The creative revolutionaries were motivated by their capture of the body politic. The Tweets in this case, however, must be understood as belonging to those invested in cosmopolitan imaginaries that orient attention outward, to the *global* body politic.

In this way, audiences join in the *bahdala* through the Twitter post, the *bahdala* helps reaffirm the models of nationhood which were established during the ‘grilling.’ Proper models, in this case and the next section of this case, are tied heavily to economic health and openness to American and European markets. The *bahdala* activates performances which turn away from embarrassing national practices and identities and adopt aspirational versions. They appear to be able to touch or ground the elite leader, but they affirm national ideals that are under threat of being lost—worldliness, cosmopolitanism, belonging.

In the next section, I show how the maintenance of national exceptionalism is a comparative, border-making which establishes a hierarchy of belonging through expressions of shame and humiliation. Unlike shaming or humiliation, which can be done ‘from below,’ *bahdala* relies on and affirms an authority and establishes a hierarchical relationship. To illustrate this, I examine transnational connections to this case which featured similar discourse around Pakistan’s Prime Minister Imran Khan at the WEF, who is presented as lost to the wrong kind of Islam. In doing so, I analyze the conferral of shame, embarrassment, and humiliation at the international forum and find that it cannot
be isolated to the body that it singles out. Rather, it permeates through publics who are attuned to the *bahdala* and shows the kinds of loss of access that publics fear.

**Transnational affinities: The lost cosmopolitan and its discontents**

Turning to a similar case shows us the transnational resonances and therefore, how this case connects to broader anxieties around an aspirational cosmopolitanism that is channeled on the WEF stage. In a connected case, national publics took to Twitter to make similar disavowals of a political leader. These Tweets made intertextual references between Lebanon and Pakistan, and of Bassil and Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan. Twitter users connected one of the most highly circulated clips from the interview where Gamble asks Bassil how he got to Davos.

Khan has been both a revered and reviled leader in and of Pakistan, shooting to popularity in the 1970s and 80s as a cricket player and then the captain of the country’s national cricket team. He was a popular face in international tabloids for his dallying with the famous, including Princess Diana, and dating actresses and models. He became a figure of cosmopolitanism, but also a popular local figure through his philanthropy. Later in life, Khan veered into politics, forming a political party, Pakistan Tehreek e Insaf (PTI), and rose to popularity, becoming prime minister in 2018. As a populist figure, Khan has also had to contend with the alternative visions for Pakistan’s future that clash under the banner of nationalism.

Criticism of Khan’s “playboy to puritan U-turn” (“Imran Kan” 2006) has risen around his politicization and what has been narrativized as a turn to Islam. The global circulation of this figure strikes familiar hegemonic anxieties around an encroaching Islam, connecting both Pakistan and Lebanon as nations which contend with (lost)
cosmopolitan potential (Ahmad et al 2020, Shehadi 2021). This tension is reflected in discourse between India and Pakistan, where Khan’s rule is seen as a dangerous turn to fundamentalism. It resonates with anxieties around Bassil’s alliance with Hezbollah in this case.

In this way, each official’s presence at the international forum was connected through a failure to produce proper models of nationhood. This is evidenced through intertextual references and similar expressions used by spectating publics. Like the Bassil interview, which featured a pointed question about the financing of Bassil’s trip to Davos, several posts questioned Khan’s sponsorship. Several accounts reshared the clip of Kaag telling Bassil “we’re not allowed to have friends like that when you’re in government,” tagging the Pakistan’s Khan, the PTI, and Gamble.

Several accounts noted that Khan had himself financed his trip to the WEF through what was positioned as shady business dealings. Beyond the interaction with shared digital content, similar expressions were used to confer shame to public officials like Khan and Bassil who were in the hot seat. Twitter users gestured to the “shamelessness” and lack of “dignity” of the politicians, with one Tweet calling them “shame-proof people” and “#shamelesscreatures” (Appendix A1:26). Others called them “corrupt,” likening them to “looters” and “plunderers.¹¹” Others simply wrote the word “shame” at the end of their comments.

In these narratives, only some wealth is seen was theft and only some mechanizations and hierarchies of power were seen as corrupt. Similarly to the Bassil interview, several users suggested that local reporters in Pakistan should learn from

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¹¹. The Tweet has since been deleted.
Gamble and Kaag’s questioning of Bassil. One Tweet which reflected this read, “Sadly in our part of the world we proudly tell everyone that we have “friends like this when in government” (Appendix A1:28). Several posts cited this as an embarrassment and reasons for the country’s third world status.

Like the hashtag #Gebran_Bassil_was_humiliated, the hashtag #PakHumiliated was also used in relation to Khan’s performances at international forums. Twitter users referenced the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in June of 2020, especially in relation to its dispute with India over Kashmir, when Pakistan did not vote for India in the election to the council. Tweets using this hashtag referenced Pakistan’s continued failure at these forums. Additionally, news clips of both Khan and Bassil speaking to US press on programs like PBS News Hour and CNN Connect the World featured commentary about these officials being cornered by incisive news anchors.

Both cases about Pakistan and Lebanon feature public expressions of humiliation and shame, pointing to feeling publics that are signaling a disavowal of national failure. Ahmed writes, “our shame means that we mean well, and can work to reproduce the nation as an ideal” (Ahmed 2004, p. 109). Declarations of shamelessness point to desires to be recognized like others who mean well and who can spot the shameful; here, Western nations which come to constitute the “international” community. However, in their declarations of shame— "A man in @wef saying such is shame !” (Appendix A1:12); “Shame on you” (Appendix A1:23). “It's a shame that leaders of rogue nations like Pakistan @ImranKhanPTI @SMQureshiPTI are given space on this platform” (Appendix A1:13).
These articulations also admit a vulnerability. If shame is not privately contained but relational and social, then social media users articulate a founding tenet of shame—the failure to be recognized by the other (Sedgwick 2003). Indeed, these expressions, rather than showing that Pakistani or Lebanese publics are full of shame, render visible an investment in a kind of imaginary which is at risk of being lost. Khan and Bassil share a dalliance with political groups and governance which has been labeled Islamist or terrorist in Euro-American contexts. In this way, shame is not an orientalist descriptor of a culture, but it is a relationship activated at a contact zone.

In examples of this around Bassil’s interview, one user wrote that Lebanon just “needs one more push to be lower than a razor on the ground,” posting a screenshot of Lebanon’s ranking of 177 on the “passport index” (Appendix A1:38). Another posted a photo of a person standing on a torn flyer with Bassil’s face on it, a performance of disrespect toward the political figure (Appendix A1:39). Posts like these are performances, cultivating an ethos of shame as they work to rechannel it and confer it elsewhere.
These posts align toward international others who comprise the forum. This also means that other national others were invoked as inferior and shame-worthy, aligning the commenters away from them. There are several examples of this. Many Tweets made jokes about Bassil’s use of the English language:

“I'm not okay with the fact that I had to improve my English language, grammar and accent in order to represent my school at an MUN conference, while @Gebran_Bassil represented the entire country using grammar rules of his own creation. #لبنان_ينتفض #GBinDavos” (Appendix A1:10)
"Are we going to ignore the fact that Gebran Bassil said ""we are independerst"" instead of independent TWICE? #Gebran_Bassil_doesn’t_represent_Lebanon (Appendix A1:14)

“you feel like the people praising Bassil have either not seen the interview… Or they dont know eng...or sorry they maybe french edu. 😂 Rolling on the floor laughing 😂😂😂 #لبنان_يتنافس #لبنان_يثير #كلن_يعني_كلن #ثوره #Davos2020 #GBinDavos #ما_في_ فرصه (Appendix A1:3)

“Zer iz itizz another version 😁😀” (Appendix A1:24)

These accompanied Tweets with images of figures facing Western press in Turkey and the US judiciary-as-entertainment. In one post, there is a screenshot is of Bassil’s face from the interview next to a screenshot of a man being interviewed by a reporter in Turkey. The latter screenshot came from a viral video where a reporter asks a Turkish man how to get to Taksim Square, in English. In the video, the man appears to either not understand the woman or chooses to ignore her and responds with words that are undecipherable to her. In the meme with Bassil’s photo, the user (Appendix A1:5) writes, “Close enough,” indicating a similarity between the Turkish man and Bassil’s own mistakes speaking in English during the interview with Gamble. The meme was premised on the relative inferiority of the Turkish man and Bassil in the face of the Euro-American press. Additionally, one Twitter user shared a photo of a black woman in a televised court appearance on the US program “Couples Court.” The Tweet quoted the woman speaking with a drawl, saying “lemme contiyu” (Appendix A1:9).
While Bassil was a contentious figure in Lebanon for his own nationalist statements around refugees, labor, and citizenship, through these Tweets he was painted as inferior, backwards, and dumb in relation to his peers on the WEF stage. These Tweets work to reroute attributions of inferiority to classed and racialized subjects across contexts. As such, by virtue of their digital nature, these expressions of shamelessness did not confer shame only to Bassil, but to racialized, classed others across national contexts. This dynamic can be read into a strand of responses which described a feeling of shame in the body, absorbed through the screen. One Facebook user expressed feelings of shame and ridicule through the screen, indicating a level of identification or entanglement with Bassil’s positionality. He wrote,

“Am I the only one who HATED every minute of the Bassil Davos interview? I honestly felt shame, not exoneration nor joy, every time she pissed on him and he took it like a dog, because he was there with his tail between his legs begging
for money and pissing on every ounce of self-respect we never had but always wished we had as a nation.

… -and I did not enjoy that she ended up doing the job that our own journalists should have done, with much more legitimacy. He may be a thug but he is our thug and the neoliberal hacks get no browning points for taking him out.

…. Finally, I could not cheer for his ridicule because I felt the ridicule myself…In the eyes of the world his humiliation is really our humiliation because he is very much a product of our own shit and our own politics. Whether with our fear or zeal or apathy or whatever he is a monster we created and one we should solely be responsible for ending.” (Zeidan 2020)

This comment and others like it depict an inability to do what Mounzer desired; to confer shame to the postcolonial leader without being read as imperial or colonial. Rather, there is an identification with the one in the hot seat and the humiliation is felt as one’s own.

Scholarship on digital media has suggested that affects like shame are easily transferrable and have become essential characteristics and conditions of contemporary media (Chun 2016). As Paasonen & Sunden (2021) note of scandals around male ‘dick pics,’ “the circuits of shame also operate in expansive and immersive vein encompassing their audiences,” highlighting the way that it permeates various bodies as a relational experience. Also calling attention to the relational capacity of shame, Schaefer (2020) draws on Tomkins to explore how shame operates in the body as a “sort of master switch responsible for suppressing other affective responses, like joy or excitement” (p. 5). Sedgwick and Frank (1995) conceptualize this as performing a kind of double move. They indicate shame’s capacity to create new kinds of relationships and examinations of
oneself within and apart from a group. Citing Wilden, they write that the affect of shame “is activated by the drawing of a boundary line or barrier, the ‘introduc[tion] of a particular boundary or frame into an analog continuum,” (p. 520). This is not to say that shame will determine a particular identity, but that it does cultivate individuating markers. Sedgwick (2003) develops Tomkins’ work, offering that shame “floods into being as a moment, a disruptive moment, in a circuit of identity-constituting identificatory communication” (p. 36). The double move is then “toward painful individuation, toward uncontrollable relationality” (Sedgwick 2003, p. 37), indicating both insider and outsider status in the same movement.

The transnational stage produces these moments of “uncontrollable relationality” (Sedgwick, p. 37), where figures like Bassil become “our thug,” and where “his humiliation is really our humiliation” (Zeidan 2020). Viewing publics are themselves part of affective economies of shame and humiliation activated by the international forum, not shielded from them through a sovereign desire to confer them elsewhere. If affects cannot be contained within the private, individual body and rather operate to modulate other affects and drives (Tomkins 1981), understood as social processes which produce bodies and boundaries (Ahmed 2004), then we must next examine the responses which worked to recode these humiliating scenes into scenes of dignity and pride.

I have examined the commentary of those who expressed joy and humiliation at the way Lebanon was presented to the world. In what follows, I will examine expressions of pride and dignity which came in response to the interview and discuss the implications for such performances. I argue that these constitute moments of recoding, whereby spectators rechannel and resignify texts and symbols to make them mean and feel
differently. Spectators engage in the recoding of censure, ridicule, and humiliation, transforming these as the grounds from which feelings of dignity and pride can be mobilized. While publics engage in performances which work to confer bad feeling over digital media platforms, they are also inseparable from them. They also resonate with other feeling publics, opening possibilities to be channeled towards nationalist ends.

**Recoding from humiliation to dignity**

In this section, I discuss the responses of pride and dignity that came in response to the interview. While they articulate as nationalist through the invocation of politicians and sectarian groupings, examining the affective dimension shows us why this is not essentially the case. Rather, if affects are autotelic, resistant to teleological logics, we can learn something about what undergirds and transforms discursive constructions like sect, religion, and race. By turning to the performances of those who expressed their support for Bassil online, I offer that they seek to cultivate new feelings out of humiliation by refusing it. They turn the *bahdala* into the grounds for dignity and pride. In this way, the *bahdala* informs broader political subjectivities.

In response to the discourses of humiliation and *bahdala* which pervaded across social media and news platforms, many social media posts refuted such claims, offering Bassil as a symbol of pride. Several posts used the hashtags in support of Gebran, such as “#Gebran_Bassil_represents_me” and #Gebran_Bassil_represents_Lebanon” [Translated], and expressing pride—“You make us proud of you” (Appendix A1:15), “Proud of you ❤️❤️❤️,” “How much we are proud of you” (Appendix A1:16). Some referred to him with deferential language and using the orange heart emoji to represent
the official color of the FPM party. Most common were posts that referred to him as royalty, trustworthy, and brave:


“ملك الدبلوماسية….. جبران باسيل” [Translation: “Gebran Bassil…King of diplomacy”] (Appendix A1:18)

“We trust him and we are proud of him😍😏 #GBinDavos” (Appendix A1:30)

“proud of you president” (Appendix A1:19)

These posts asserted that, in contrast to accounts of the interview by regional press, it was a point of pride for national publics. Many of these posts were accompanied by images of Bassil. They featured portrait-style photographs of Bassil smiling during and pointing to crowds or giving interviews to Lebanese media networks. Several bytes featured Bassil making forceful claims about Lebanon’s sovereignty, challenging local television hosts and journalists.

Figure 8: Appendix A1:39, 40, 41
While this will be discussed further in the second case study, I argue that these figure as recoding performances. They perform a conversion of bad feeling to good, though recoding can also do the opposite. I draw on both Stuart Hall’s work on encoding and decoding as media processes and Ann Pellegrini’s (2007) notion of recoding to explore these processes. Both identify the ways that discourse is both an outcome and a tool in the production of feeling. Hall’s (1973) work recognizes the ways that meaning is produced using existing codes and conventions to capture something ‘more,’ like a story or an experience. This recognizes the relationship between what is structurally capturable and what is left out. In her work on the Hell House, or the evangelical church’s version of the secular haunted house, Pellegrini recognizes codes as both tool and outcome by turning to performance. In Pellegrini’s (2007) account, church members guide audiences through scenes of sin in the hopes of (re)investing “a deeper structure of religious feeling that can tie together disparate, even contradictory, experiences, bodily sensations, feelings, and thoughts” (p. 918). Pellegrini notes that these performances still invoke the scenes and ideas they are trying to make feel and mean differently. They “draw upon even as they move to recode experiences of ‘safety’ and ‘fear,’ ‘reality’ and ‘unreality,’ in the service of a fundamental spiritual transformation” (p. 915). In other words, recoding is a way of cultivating different feeling around already encoded ideas and symbols.

These posts about a resistant and strong Bassil indeed drew upon moments from the WEF interview, reframing them as moments of pride. We see this in the way that the WEF posts reframed and recoded moments of scenes which were otherwise coded as
humiliating to spectating publics through references to animals, mops, and racialized and
classed bodies. Bassil the King is a recoding of Gamble as Queen wielding her scepter. In
a more intensified line of commentary, users expressed a kind of assertion of dignity and
defiance in the face of attack:

“Because you are loyal, honest and brave, they fear you! 

(Appendix A1:1)

“Every time they falsely attack you, you are big and become bigger in our eyes,
and they shrink and are shrinking more and more” [translated] (Appendix A1:20)

Pellegrini notes that the performance associated with conversion practice is more than
simple missionizing work. It is “an aggressive theater of transformation” (p. 925), doing
the work of recoding through an “emphasis on the culture and cultivation of feeling” (p.
914). As such, recoding makes evident that the move to assert feeling states of pride or
dignity may stem from the grounds of less desirable ones.

On the “international” stage, the very scene of humiliation becomes narrativized
as resistance to attack by global, foreign others. This rhetoric re-entrenches and advances
sectarian and nationalist narratives, crystallizing into geopolitical tensions. Of the WEF
interview, one Twitter user wrote, “Imagine if it was Saad in his place or Jumblatt or
Berri or Sami…12This man is strong and bold and smart and cultured and despite blow
after blow he stands up and doesn’t give up and strikes back with more force. We are
proud of you and we trust you” [translated] (Appendix A1:21). Another user wrote of the
alliance of Bassil’s FPM with Hezbollah, writing, “Thats what happened when GB talks

12. These are in reference to Saad Hariri, Walid Jumblatt, Nabih Berri, and Sami Gemayel,
political leaders of rival factions in Lebanon.
about #hizbollah and thats why they try to humiliate him #GBinDavos” (Appendix A1:22). Various users channeled charges of shame and humiliation and deflected them, rerouting and recoding them through their commentary.

Such recoding has often been found in anticolonial discourse in postcolonial sites. Clarke (2019) points to discourses of humiliation around the International Criminal Court (ICC) and Kenya in the speech of President Uhuru Kenyatta, whose father was a famous anticolonial figure during one of the most violent periods of settler colonialism by the British troops. In his speech he says, “Our forefathers waged a struggle of conviction and principle, supported with no resources except the burning fire of humiliation and the indefeasible yearning for independence and respect,” before going on to describe the victories of the anticolonial struggle against colonial forces (p. 93).

We can see this in the way that the image of Lebanon and the Lebanese was revived during transnational controversies in the months and years following the revolution. Several media controversies have been described as “humiliating” and “embarrassing” after the economic collapse and revolution. On August 4, 2020, Lebanon’s port city of Beirut experienced a deadly blast that killed anywhere from 190 to 251 people and destroyed much of the surrounding areas (The Public Source, n.d.). In the wake of the revolution which began the year prior, it became another transnational spectacle, with images and videos circulating rapidly across social media. The explosion and destruction of the capital’s historic restaurant, bar, and cultural center was read as the final nail in the coffin by many. The economic collapse and pandemic accelerated after the blast, plunging the country into more intensified discourses of shame and humiliation.
This has often been channeled through the upwardly mobile class of the Lebanese. In one example, a public relations specialist named Mariana Wehbe shared an Instagram video of herself denouncing Lebanese minister of foreign affairs, Charbel Wehbe, after he made insulting remarks about a Saudi Arabian representative on Lebanese television (“Saudi furious over” 2021). On live television, the now former minister blamed the Gulf country for the rise of ISIS, referring to the representative as a “nomad” or “bedou.” The PR specialist took to Instagram to describe her embarrassment at the scene, emphasizing that the minister was not representative of her or Lebanon (“Mariana Wehbe Public” 2021). Referencing the ignorance of the country’s warlords in contrast to the Gulf countries for their hospitality and progress as nations, she said, “I’m so embarrassed to be Lebanese,” as she apologized on behalf of the country. To these countries, she said, “I know that you know, that this is definitely not the way we think,” invoking a national “we” that means well (Ahmed 2004). The moment of national embarrassment became a catalyzing call for national dignity.

These sentiments have also been mobilized by state officials and members of the political class. As Lebanon’s economic collapse has deepened and fuel shortages have rocked the country, long lines of cars waiting for a rationed amount of subsidized car fuel became regular daily sights and images circulating through social media platforms. Hezbollah chief commander Hassan Nasrallah drew attention to these images, saying in an address to the nation, “we can no longer tolerate these scenes of humiliation” (MEE 2021). The phrase “scenes of humiliation” was also used in popular regional press, full of images of people waiting in long lines for gas (Choucair 2021). His speech included plans to import fuel from allied Iran, challenging the state to stop him. Nasrallah’s “we”
was also a national “we,” cohering a collectivity which included the faction. It also produces a narrative whereby Nasrallah stands outside the state, with the broader public, when in fact he and his party are inextricable from state practice. Most significantly, he mobilizes an urgency in cohering away, but also through, humiliation.

These examples highlight the need to understand the affective motivations which drive calls for justice. From a PR agent to a party official, national figures channel feelings of embarrassment, shame, and humiliation to save face and dignity. What is more, they ensure that this dignity takes on national character. While they turn to opposing geopolitical alliances—Wehbe toward the Gulf and Nasrallah toward Iran—they both channel in an awareness of how Lebanon is represented outwardly and how that may be altered. In this way, they operate not as omnipotent figures controlling the feelings of constituents, but through bodily performance and rhetorical technique to engage with listening and watching publics.

In a similar affective dynamic which parallels conversion performances of the Hell House, Donovan Schaefer (2020) turns to former US President Donald Trump’s speeches and followers’ commentary which “converted shame into a felt sense of dignity” (p. 3). He draws a line of continuity with what Sedgwick (2003) has called “a highly politicized chain reaction of shame dynamics” around political correctness in the US (p. 64) and those who refuse to embrace shame and alter their language, viewpoints, and dominance in public space. Schaefer argues that through his rhetorical techniques and bodily comportment, Trump commandeers a “mastery of a circuit of shame and dignity” (p. 2) that emerges by those who have felt ashamed as they contend with losing
their dominance over space. It is therefore “the thrust and counterthrust of shame and humiliation” (p. 7) that powers and mobilizes supporters.

With this in mind, we can reread the still-images of Bassil during the interview that were circulated online as evidence of his stupidity, as detractors suggested, and instead see how the images are recoded into evidence of resilience. For these social media users, Bassil was not merely the victim of a grilling, but a channeler of affects of pride and dignity. These parallel portraits of Trump which feature what Schaefer (2020) calls “a face that obliterates shame” (p. 13). Trump’s vocal refusal to feel shame resonated with supporters and fueled, among other things, performances of dignity which cohered into nationalist sentiment and racializing rhetoric. In the US context, these performances cohere into “the identitarian logic of whiteness” (p. 15), one which to refuses to accept the cultivation of white shame.

However, in this case, the performances of pride and dignity come in response to colonial logics themselves, even while Bassil acts as a channeler of such discourse within Lebanon. Schaefer (2020) asks if there is a difference in the shame of the marginalized or those who are contending with demands to concede privilege and dominance over space. As I show in the next two case studies in this dissertation, questions of feeling and the way that they compare across differently situated groups is itself evidence of the renewed value of feeling in contemporary debates around power and identity. Rather than answering the question of whether these bodies feel shame the same way, I will show in the rest of this dissertation that the very question of fellow-feeling is indicative of a political juncture, where feeling is sought as an ends rather than as a means to an end.
**Conclusion: Feeling good about feeling bad**

What can we make of the rerouting of such affects to others who are felt to deserve it? Or the public declarations of emotion that characterize our digital media landscape, cohering different publics together? These questions were previewed by Lauren Berlant in 1999 when they asked, “What does it mean for the theory and practice of social transformation when feeling good becomes evidence of justice’s triumph? (p. 58). This, they wrote, was the fetish of “true” feeling and its beckoning in contemporary US national justice frameworks. Similarly to Berlant, Ahmed (2004) asks, “What is the relation between the desire to feel better and the recognition of injustice?” (p. 102), while Clarke (2019) writes that “affective justice of the contemporary period is as much about publicizing one’s emotional alliances as it is about demanding action” (p. 128). In these instances, it is the publicness of the emotions of those supporting the cause which are recentered.

This chapter has introduced the digital bahdala in “post”-revolutionary media. At the WEF, a Lebanese public contending with “loss” and “failure” in hegemonic imaginaries of its national standing turned to the international forum as a space to convert bad feelings into more desirable ones. The trial of a nepotistic and populist local leader, allowed for a cathartic release for some of this public, outsourcing felt justice to Western officials who acted as prosecutor and judge. Through the online commentary, audiences channeled in the performative dimension of the event and the national protests, aligning pointing fingers at the local leader who, in the local context, showed no shame.

At the same time, while the exuberant reactions to the bahdala, schadenfreude, or humiliation appear as the most emotional and apparent displays of feeling, other affects were channeled through this site, inseparable from the joy that many took in wielding
shame. While some found Bassil’s reactions to be stoic and evidence of stupidity, provoking racializing comparisons to other classed and raced others, he too channeled in affects that were inseparable from the “global” *bahdala*. Expressions of pride and dignity came, recoding his performance as evidence of victory. These crystallized into sectarian and nationalist discourses, emphasizing the ways that these sites, through the modulation of affects, can intensify, transform, and entrench discursive constructions of race, sect, gender, and other forms of identity.

This site shows us the way that “affect systems emerge…as the preferred method for bodies navigating the ambiguity of information-rich environments” (Schaefer 2015, p. 46). As publics experiencing such wide-scale transformation turn to media to contend with these changes, they must also contend with changing global relationalities. In this context, we find that the national grilling or *bahdala* becomes the grounds for relational affects to be generated. Examining the contact zones which generate this affective work means contending with the fact that there are “more chances to be shamed” (Schaefer 2020), and therefore, more opportunities to recognize different kinds of relationalities.

The Lebanese nation, constituted through often conflicting infranational and supranational imaginaries, provides an interesting site to display the different kinds of affective work taking place. This opens connections to transnational others, from the US, to Pakistan, to Kenya, and Egypt, where, across ideological and identarian lines, national publics convert bad feeling to good. More broadly, it comes in the context of calls for more humane and *feeling* states to respond to rising inequities across the world.

Following the reverberative and relational nature of *bahdala*, I turn to the Egyptian context to another media trial which featured Lebanese tourist to Egypt, Mona
Mazbouh. Mazbouh made international headlines after she posting a video lambasting the Egyptian people and Islam due to her experience of sexual harassment while visiting the country. In what follows, members of the Egyptian public responded to her video with forceful and vociferous performances of dignity and honor. In doing so, they recoded Egypt into the beating heart of Arab culture and identity, refusing her admonishments and her labeling of Egypt as the “land of the dancers.” In this context, the responses parallel the Lebanese responses to the WEF grilling, but with a more intensified and unified force. By examining a variety of YouTube videos which feature long, edited, and even playful reactions to Mazbouh, I find that Internet users draw on a rich history of cultural production and performance in the staunch defense of the nation, returning the bahdala and revealing its value to not only content creators but state institutions.

The third chapter will examine the paranoid media environment cultivated in the mobilization of the bahdala. In that chapter, I return to the claims by Gamble and Bassil on the WEF stage, where they debated Bassil’s genuine feelings—“you look happy, you’re smiling!”—and social media posts by audiences that contested the ulterior motives of Gamble and Bassil, with claims that she was a pro-Zionist journalist and that he was a terrorist-sympathetic local official. I also return to claims raised in the second chapter around the medicalized behavior of Mazbouh. In each case, the body’s tells are sought to come to conclusions.
RECODING THE BAHDALA: EGYPT, YOUTUBE, AND THE DIGITAL ECONOMY
OF ATONEMENT

“I am constantly on a daily basis working on getting rid of the programming my mother put into me. Every fucking day. That you’re ugly like your daddy, you’re not good en—
you’re stupid you’re dumb, you’re never going to be shit like your daddy. It’s so many things. What are you an idiot? You can’t make…just do the simple—pay attention! All these things. And so I get in the mirror—and I talk to my therapist every week—but I get in the mirror every day, and I imagine that every cell in my body is a little computer, right? And you program that cell with the words that you say and the thoughts that you have and the feelings that you feel. And as a human, you can change your mood, you can change it really quick. I learned that from Instagram. Cuz one second I’m looking at a picture and I’m like ‘Aw this is cool!’ Next second I’m laughing, next second I’m watching somebody die and I’m like, “Oh my god what the fuck?” So your emotions can change pretty quick. And you can decide because you are control of this machine, this human machine, so I get in the mirror and I look at myself in the eyeballs and I don’t look at anything else. I look at the darkest part of my eyes, and I go “Tiffany Haddish, I love and approve of you. Tiffany Haddish, I love and approve of you.” And sometimes I cry so hard because I’m not in a loving approving mode, I’m not feeling that way.”

- Tiffany Haddish on Conan O’Brien Needs A Friend podcast

“Like I can be ashamed in my house by myself. You know what I’m saying? I can be iiiinnn shaaame, like a boiling pot of shame. But embarrassment to me is much more traumatic. I feel like if you ask me stories about embarrassment, they’re all going to be stories about how somebody saw me.”

- Kiese Laymon discussing writing his book “Heavy,” on This American Life podcast, “My Bad”

Introduction

This chapter turns to a scandal which broke out in June of 2018 between Egypt and Lebanon when a Lebanese tourist, Mona Mazbouh, released a Facebook-live video where she both recounted experiences of sexual harassment in Egypt and conferred failure upon Egypt for its backwardness, inferiority, and poverty. When her video was reshared across the Internet, she was arrested on charges of spreading false rumors and attacking religion and public decency. Her case made national and international headlines as a transnational
media circuit was activated across Lebanese and Egyptian borders. Along this circuit, Egyptian publics shared their own videos returning the bahdala, or moment of ridicule, back upon Mazbouh and her country of Lebanon.

Following the first chapter’s advancement of bahdala as a didactic warning of a failure to belong to a cosmopolitan world, this chapter is a repudiation of the charge. It presents the (re)production of an alternative cosmopolitanism, one which is forged through its Arab and Islamic history. While the first chapter showed how Lebanese publics reached toward the country’s colonial and European continuities, in this chapter, Egyptian publics reject such continuities. Instead, they engage in processes of recoding, or the cultivation of alternative feeling states. Recoding in this dissertation takes place as national publics reject what is framed as colonial and claim alternative nationalist sovereignties rooted in claims to antiquity and resistance.

State crackdowns like the kind discussed in this case are not new in the Egyptian landscape as President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi extends and intensifies the security state following his 2013 military coup. Several activists, journalists, artists, and general social media users have been arrested, charged, tried, and jailed by the state for crimes related to social media use. This follows along a longer history of state policing of both Islamist and secular dissidents. However, this case turns away from the state and toward the digital economy of media users who respond to what they consider insulting or offensive attacks on Egypt. It turns to the way that Mazbouh’s video was cut up online, republished, and reamplified by several Internet users who responded to the bahdala of national proportions. While in the Lebanese context, the bahdala lamented Lebanon’s cosmopolitan multiculturalism on charges of corruption, the bahdala targeting Egypt
took on a civilizational and racializing rhetoric, framing Egypt as backward, dirty, and unmodern. While in the first case, many reacted by claiming a cosmopolitan modernity, all videos that this bahdala activated highlight Egypt’s historical value to the region and world.

Across the videos, a variety of embodied performances contrasted speech which said Mazbouh was not worth speaking about. Many avoided using her name or did so by mocking it and twisting it into other words. Reactions oscillated between anger, incredulity, and mockery, with some speaking slowly and deliberately and others speaking quickly, pointing their fingers into the camera to punctuate their points. Others laughed and smirked as they mimicked her or made jokes. The performative function of these videos also included poetic meters, memes, filters, and physical displays of strength. The demographics and digital presence of these users ran the spectrum, most visibly across age and gender. Striking across many of these YouTube videos is an almost paradoxical suggestion that Mazbouh did not deserve a response, but they were unable to not respond—many of the users indicated that they felt compelled. While they articulated with words that Mazbouh was not worth naming or speaking about, many of their videos lasted for over ten minutes as they went through her video point by point. The existence of these videos on YouTube also indicates a desire, after recording, to propel their responses outwards.

The vociferous reaction to the video was paired with a media circuit which forced Mona Mazbouh’s mother onto Egyptian television network to apologize on behalf of her daughter, offering her tears, along with medical notes which excused her daughter’s brash behavior. If the previous chapter offered Gebran Bassil, the nepotistic politician who
refused humiliation through stoic responses, Mazbouh’s mother absorbed the humiliation, hanging her head down to diffuse the situation through her own pain and ashamedness. While Egypt’s status as “mother of the world” was revived and repeated by social media users responding to Mazbouh’s comments, this chapter makes clear the currency of scenes of suffering mothers in the maintenance of national boundaries.

I also identify in this case a digital economy of male YouTubers who are building a brand on the conferral of bahdala to those who they frame as insulting Egypt. This comes at a time when Western media have both celebrated and admonished the country for its revolution while at the same time conferring failure to it through the lens of its own liberal movements. One campaigner for Amnesty International described the arrests of activists, journalists, tourists, and others embroiled in national scandals as “a reverse #MeToo” (Buchanan 2018). While this is a familiar Orientalist conferral of backwardness to the Arab despot, what is of interest is the way that this narrative obscures. Namely, the history activated between Lebanon and Egypt, whereby contrasting national exceptionalisms came to a head in the aftermath of the Egyptian revolution. As such, I offer that it is important to consider the role of national exceptionalisms in generating digital scandals.

I continue to examine the tensions activated through the bahdala, or the act of humiliation, discussing why it is that the bahdala works. The previous chapter described the way that postcolonial affects hinge on desires to feel and witness those responsible being taken to account, shrinking the felt distance between them and the masses, but the inevitable effects that they can have on many bodies when they take place at the international forum. This chapter settles deeper into the effects that such performances of
justice can have in the way of humiliation and shame, especially as such subjects identify
with the one receiving the embarrassing call-out. I find that social media users, through
recoding process, seek to cultivate alternative feelings which mobilize performances of
conversion. This conversion can be linked to processes of conversion on YouTube, where
video-posters seek to capture audiences.

In this way, I carve out the need for understandings of digital practices as
enmeshed in older forms of performance and cultural production, as well as tied to
political economic structures which accelerate the wealth of the few at the expense of the
most. I situate the apology that was demanded within a genre of reaction videos which
runs on this desire to feel differently. It highlights the digital economy of shame and
atonement that this case is situated, connecting it to other cases of perceived insults to
national publics in inescapably transnational contexts. In this way, I offer that the forms
of empathetic viewing it generates help to produce the felt distance between nations,
reinforcing national forms of identification.

I first discuss relationship between Lebanon and Egypt, then situate this case
within Egypt’s history of media production and state crackdowns on dissent, before
considering the post-revolutionary landscape. Next, I discuss the case and the responses
that followed, identifying common themes across the video which point to resonant
symbols of dignity, like Mo Salah. I identify the bodies and symbols as “conversion
points” (Ahmed 2004) in which there is a narrative of switching one feeling to another. I
discuss the digital media economy in which these kinds of response videos circulate,
meditating on the kinds of pain and injury which circulate more freely than others. I end
by examining the gendered dimension of bahdala, requiring some to perform the right kind of feeling for spectating publics.

**Egypt and Lebanon background**

This case study brings Egyptian-Lebanese relations into the frame due to its transnational nature. To understand the current events, we must turn to Egypt’s relationship to Lebanon and its state in the post-revolutionary landscape. This relates to Egypt’s changing role in the region, its loss of cultural and economic capital following the revolution, and contemporary moves to revive and capitalize on its exoticized relationship to antiquity.

As noted previously, Lebanon and Egypt share alternative regional and international imaginaries as ‘exceptional’ nations, producing forms of cultural, economic, and political capital. If Lebanon’s exceptional status has been a cosmopolitan mosaic of identities, Egypt’s exceptional status has rested upon its status a model of antiquity and civilization. Lebanon’s status lies in its history as something of a Western enclave, a Catholic French experience in the Orient (Traboulsi 2007). This included competing visions of what the country meant to the colonial order and to the region, with some opting toward autonomous and majority Christian rule, and others opting toward a more pan-Arab and/or Islamic vision. Its internal governance through a power-sharing agreement has led to the institutionalization of sectarianism, making it susceptible to demographic anxieties, in-fighting, and proxy-war.

While Lebanon was discussed in the previous chapters as a site where a lack of unified vision for the country’s future—as a colonial outpost, as part of a broader pan-Arab nation, as a site of Phoenician civilization—it can be contrasted here with Egypt’s relationship to the Arab world. Unlike Lebanon’s fragmented and contested allegiances
and futures, Egypt has a long history as a center of pan-Arab nationalism. This brand of nationalism can be traced to nation-state formation, when first president of Egypt Mohamed Naguib and second president of Egypt, Gamal Abdel Nasser, overthrew the British-deposed King Farouk. Abdel Nasser’s pan-Arab vision\(^\text{13}\) and his status as a leader in “Third World” politics brought revolutionary fervor to regional inhabitants (Prashad 2008), mobilizing an Arab nationalism that is “mostly remembered as a world saturated with strong political emotions” (Bardawil 2020, p. 40). For these reasons, his speeches have been described as some of the most emotional moments for regional publics and intellectuals.

At the same time, Abdel Nasser’s legacy is contested due to his firm grip on internal dissent, including his decimation of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1950s. Abdel Nasser’s approach parallels current president Abdel Fatah el-Sisi’s own army coup and crackdowns on the Muslim Brotherhood in the aftermath of the 2011 revolution. After their brief rise and fall in 2012, the military leader began wielding a heavy hand on political and religious discourse by regulating media content and religious centers in the name of national stability and counterterrorism. In this way, his actions have been a continuation of Abdel Nasser’s own paternalistic approach, albeit without pan-Arab visions that he has been remembered for. These visions of pan-Arab nationalism were perceived as threatening to countries like Lebanon, who have feared since before independence the possibility of Muslim unification throughout the region (Kalawoun 2000).

\(^{13}\) During Nasser’s time, Syria merged with Egypt, representing to some the possibility of a wider trend of unification across the region (Strasser 2014). While this vision was never brought to fruition, it represented a time that visions of unification were arguably most felt as possible.
While contested, his persistence in the national imaginary and popular culture as a figure who represented glory for an Egypt which could stand up to colonial nations and realize pan-Arabism, reflects a nostalgia for a worldly conversant with cosmopolitan others, one which is revived in this case. It was Abdel Nasser’s reign in 1956 which nationalized Egypt’s industry as well as encouraged Arab socialism and a welfare state while discouraging imports (Abu-Lughod 2004, p. 18). This period of Egypt was also characterized by Nasser’s leadership amongst “Third World” countries, such as Cuba, India, Yugoslavia, Indonesia, and Ghana (Khaled 2021, Prashad 2008). At the time, anti-imperialist sentiment was channeled, as well as hopes for a pan-Arab future prompted by the unification of Syria and Egypt for a time (Strasser 2014).

In this case study, he is invoked as a counter to conferrals of national failure, even while Nasser’s censorship of press and paternalism have been critiqued (Abu Alghar 2021, El-Ariss 2019). Nostalgia around Abdel Nasser is paired with a nostalgia for the “golden age” of Egyptian culture, when Egyptian language, culture, and history permeated the region through its exportation of cultural production. From its early adoption of radio, its prevalent film and television industry, and its plethora of artists and entertainers, it has remained the major source of cultural production, “in terms of scale and seniority” (Abu-Lughod 2004, p. 7). It was the first adopter of state television, preceded by Abdel Nasser’s domestic communication reaching Egyptian audiences through radios (Hammond 2007). In the 1950s until the 1970s, Egyptian drama proliferated through the region as the center of cultural production (Kraidy and Khalil 2009).
However, Egypt’s hegemonic nationalism was fading\textsuperscript{14} by the 1970s and into the 1990s, and this is reflected in its shifting media landscape. After Abdel Nasser’s death and Anwar Sadat’s reign, Egypt adopted an economic “open-door” policy, changing the terms of Nasser’s legacy. Under Sadat, Abdel Nasser’s nationalization projects were overturned and government restrictions on economic growth were lifted (Cox 2015). Television, for example, was centralized and state-controlled before turning in the 1980s toward advertising. In the 1990s, it was further transformed through neoliberal reforms, the advent of satellite television, and increased privatization (Abu-Lughod 2004, p, 10). During this time, Egypt’s “traditional media hegemony” was challenged by satellite television from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Lebanon\textsuperscript{15} (Hammond 2007, p. 208).

For countries across the region, satellite television brought new questions of sovereignty, leading to new ministries for culture and information, media laws and policies, and regulatory bodies tasked with controlling flows of media. These challenges to sovereignty have also been articulated through several geopolitical and industry clashes and controversies following the Arab uprisings. In the years since Egypt’s revolution, geopolitical tensions have shifted and entrenched especially due to the role of the regime in trying to quell the Muslim Brotherhood and simultaneously contending with declining national media industries (Kraidy 2019). Following the 2011 revolution, the Muslim Brotherhood’s leader Muhammad Morsi was elected president only to be toppled by current president Abdel Fatah el-Sisi, former minister of defense, in a military

\textsuperscript{14} Discourses of Islamism and globalization were gaining ground (Abu-Lughod 2004, p. 14).
\textsuperscript{15} Syrian dramas became a major competitor due to Gulf demand and financing, making it more of a regional export (Salamandra 2011) and Egyptian drama a more domestic product (Kraidy 2019).
coup. Given the support of the Muslim Brotherhood by Turkey but also its dominance in
the transnational drama sector, the Egyptian media sector boycotted Turkish productions.
However, this was also due to industry concerns, "a humiliating role reversal from
regionally dominating the sector to being a nationally struggling industry," indicating the
ways that geopolitics and industry concerns articulate (Kraidy 2019).

Such commentary directly relates to the relations between Lebanon and Egypt in
the last several years as the revolutions have activated geopolitical tensions. Popular
culture is rife with examples of rivalry between Lebanon and Egypt, with jokes and
insults by notable figures triggering media coverage and demands for apology. One
altercation between Egyptian billionaire Naguib Sawiris and Lebanese singer Nicole Saba
took place in 2019 after he commented on the attractiveness of the women of the
Lebanese protests, likening the viewing of the protests as entertainment (Fawzi &
Mohammad 2019). Several commentators to this controversy posted about the
commodification of the Lebanese revolution, posting pictures of women posing for
photos at the protests to diminish the real ‘political’ nature of the movements (Taher
2019, Hend G 2019). Implicit is the comparison of the Lebanese revolution to the
Egyptian, painting the former a mouse in comparison to a lion—here, Lebanon’s national
movements are downgraded to ‘cute’ in comparison to a masculinist, hegemonic notion
of Egyptian nationalism, but also the reality of greater violence and turmoil that the
Egyptian context witnessed during its revolution.

This anecdote highlights their contrasting national imaginaries. As two
postcolonial countries, their ‘oppositional’ national exceptionalisms are then also
gendered and raced ones, often becoming most apparent during moments of controversy
or scandal. Lebanon’s dalliance with Western powers confronts Egypt’s claims to antiquity and civilizational legacies. This often leads to a racializing dynamic where, as we will see in Mazbouh’s case, the ‘modernity’ of Lebanon’s relationship to Western powers like France is contrasted against Egypt’s nationalist history, with significant anticolonial mobilization against the British and Ottoman Empire. As such, there is a colonial dynamic replicated, highlighting the relational nature of coloniality.

In a recent example of bahdala which activated these tensions in November 2018, just months after the Mazbouh case, Lebanese Minister of Tourism Avedis Guidanian spoke to the Lebanese daily newspaper The Daily Star about the status of Lebanon’s tourism industry. Comparing the context to Egypt, he said:

“I mean look at Egypt is there a place dirtier than it? People are louder than us, there is more traffic than here – people live in graves, OK? But there is tourism, because they know how to sell that country.”

Anger erupted across social media in Egypt and Lebanon, leading bloggers to apologize on the Lebanese minister’s behalf (El 3ama 2018) and the minister to issue an apology (“Lebanon minister apologizes” 2018). This is a dynamic which is replicated in this case, where nationals are pulled into transnational dramas to make public apologies online. What this highlights is the purchase of such scandals across borders, where the bahdala activates these historical tensions.

Indeed, the efforts of the Egyptian regime have been to return to the past as a mode of nation branding, recalling its claims to an originary civilization. President el-Sisi is working to build an Egyptian brand of culture and civilization in state spectacles of modernity which recall its arts and culture. We can think of the state’s 2021 sarcophagus
parade as one way in which its antiquity is spectacularly mobilized (Gubash & Cahill 2021). There have also been art exhibitions at the pyramids in a bid to fuse this sense of historicity with the present. As the head of an art consultancy that launched an art exhibition at the pyramids with this intention said, "The world knows Egypt’s artistic and cultural past. However, they are not aware of the present, the contemporary” (Barber 2021). This comment reflects a branding of continuity with the past and present. This extends to state and transnational media companies who work together to bring this sense of antiquity but also cosmopolitanism to life. For example, the former minister of state for antiquities Zahi Hawass, is leading the excavation of remains and working with Netflix to produce a piece on Tutankhamun (Barber 2021). This has been called Egypt’s ‘renaissance,’ where private and public sector work to restore and reproduce hegemonic narratives of Egyptian heritage.

This has also led to an uneasy relationship with media companies, as the arbiters of Egypt’s national image. In the last several years, crackdowns on activists and journalists, secular and Islamist alike, have increased, pointing to a longer history of media development and anxieties around national sovereignty. While all vocal dissidents are under threat from these crackdowns, what is gained most international attention is the arrests of women, reflecting the purchase of such stories in this media landscape. In this way, crackdowns in the security state point to old local anxieties which manifest in new ways with the shifting digital landscape. I next turn to the case of Mazbouh and contrast it with other similar cases to draw out its transnational dimension.

**The case of Mazbouh**
The Mona Mazbouh controversy broke on May 31, 2018, when online news platforms began announcing that the state was looking for the tourist due to a Facebook video she had posted. This came after she posted a video describing her experience of sexual harassment and general unhappiness with her trip to Egypt. While the video has since been deleted from her personal page, it remains on YouTube and various other platforms. In the selfie-style video, Mazbouh describes trying to have a meal in an Egyptian restaurant during Ramadan, the Islamic month-long fasting holiday, but being told that, because it was Ramadan, they could not serve her until it was time for Muslims to break their fasting in the evening. She also criticized her Uber driver, who told her that he had to get home in time to break his fast. To this, Mazbouh said that she was a heretic—“ana kafra!”—and that she should be able to eat when she wanted to eat, criticizing the wider Egyptian public. She spat, “Tfeh on Ramadan in Egypt and the Egyptians in Ramadan.”

Of the instance of sexual harassment, Mazbouh said that two men on the street commented on her body, saying that they wanted to “eat this white meat.” She said that she responded angrily, swearing at the men to the surprise of passerby. She suggested that there were no “effendi,” or gentlemen to be found in Egypt, calling them “sons of whores.” She also commented on the bodies and dress of Egyptian women, as well as the sensibility of Egyptian men toward them. She called Egypt “the nation of the dancers,” and said that Egyptians were prostitutes and dirty people, saying “you’re the dirtiest people God gave birth to.” She criticized the “kirsh,” or belly fat, of Egyptian women, contrasted theirs with her own appearance. She explained that the way she dressed was due to French influence on Lebanon, implying a more modern, Western sensibility than Egyptians. Finally, Mazbouh told Egyptians that they deserved what they were
experiencing under the rule of President al-Sisi and that she hoped there would come someone even more oppressive after him.

As *bahdala*, her video can be placed along a longer continuum of performances which make an event out of shaming. In this way, it can be related to *fadiha, sharshaha, zaff,* and *radh* for its performative dimension of exposure (El-Ariss 2019, Fakhry 2014).

Mazbouh’s *bahdala* especially adopts characteristics of *radh* considered an entire “Egyptian speech genre” (Stewart 1996, p. 45) which has been likened to “a verbal mudslinging” (Marsot 1993). It describes the public hurling of insults, often by women, toward an aggressor who has caused a perceived transgression (Marsot 1993, Stewart 1996). Devin Stewart (1996) describes the *radh* further:

“*Radh* often occurs in semi-public fora such as urban alleys, and takes place when the performer, a woman, feels indignation, sensing that she has been mocked, cheated, deceived, or exploited. The degree of indignation displayed varies according to the occasion and the parties involved, ranging from playful anger to murderous fury” (p. 45).

In the same family of performance as *bahdala, radh* identifies its gendered nature, connecting it to the public/private divide. As a mode of exposure that is for an audience, this performance is a way of approaching social media practices and their relationship with older cultural traditions. Digital *bahdala*, as an event to be consumed activated responses of recoding, which also become events to be consumed. By approaching *bahdala* as a digital economy, we can understand the kinds of values which it generates.

A critical response on social media followed, leading to ample news coverage on primetime television and commentary across digital platforms by the wider public. Days
after her first video was published, Mazbouh took it down and published a second apology video. In it, she noted that the initial video was meant to be posted privately amongst her friends on Facebook but had become public when someone shared it beyond her page. Mazbouh was arrested at the airport, detained, and charged with spreading false rumors and attacking religion and public decency, a common state tactic against those it brands dissenters. She received eleven years in prison, which was then reduced to eight years, then time served before she was finally deported and sent back to Lebanon.

In this way, her arrest was like the arrests which have been intensifying on activists, journalists, and marginalized groups under President al-Sisi. Unlike many of these crackdowns, however, her pointed video sparked a widespread response by the Egyptian social media sphere. This follows other cases of women who are arrested, some of whom were referenced in the Mazbouh controversy. A month prior, an Egyptian activist named Amal el-Fathy had shared her own Facebook-live video detailing her own experience of sexual harassment but linking the violation of her body with the violation of the state, focusing on issues of bureaucracy and corruption rather than its people. Following her post, she was arrested, tried, and jailed under charges of spreading fake news and public indecency, like Mazbouh. The case of Yasmine el-Narsh, an interior designer in the tourist destination El Guna, in May of 2015 earned her the nickname “Airport Lady” when she was filmed having an altercation with a police officer at the airport (Abdel Hamid 2017, Al-Saeed 2018). In the video, she appears to be upset about missing her flight and having her clothing commented upon by the airport employees. She disrobes, squats on the ground, and eventually shoves the police officer. Eventually she was arrested for a discovery of drugs that she was allegedly carrying. While el-Fathy
and el-Narsh spoke as Egyptians addressing the security state, Mazbouh spoke as a foreigner lambasting the entire nation for its lack of modern sensibility and hoping for the continuation of oppression under President Fatah al-Sisi’s regime. While Mazbouh was eventually deported back to Lebanon after her charges were greatly reduced and dropped, the Egyptian women were sentenced to several years in prison.

While online commentary ran across news platforms, Facebook, and Twitter, I focus on the YouTube videos for the kinds of performances they enacted. I am most interested in the videos due to the length of time users spent recording, editing, and publishing the videos, despite many of their admissions that Mazbouh did not deserve their words. In focusing on these videos, I offer that Internet users engaged in such performances like pointing into the camera, performing kicks on a punching bag, and reciting poetry to affirm a sense of dignity. I examine both the rhetorical dimension—the invocations of symbols, the uttering of phrases—along with the other performative dynamics—gestures, punches, and recitals—that interlaced this constellation of videos in order to understand the process of converting humiliation into dignity and mobilizing it in the face of attack. I next turn to these responses.

**Recoding with Mo Salah**

These reactions involved a range of social media users, from those who had posted little to no other videos, seemingly creating accounts from which to respond to Mazbouh, to those who posted a variety of videos commentating on social issues. The videos included women and men across a spectrum of ages, from children to older adults. Several common themes emerged, with most taking issue with her rejection of Ramadan, her
comments about Egyptian women, and her insults about Egyptians as dirty, poor, and unmodern.

In particular, the reactions can be viewed as recoding of the bahdala, making it the grounds for refusal and dignity. This section picks up on ideas introduced in the first chapter around recoding to pinpoint its mechanics. Recoding, as introduced in the prior chapter, is the process of cultivating alternative feeling states through rhetorical and embodied performance. I argue that these performances seek to convert conferrals of failure to the grounds for pride. This can be mined from the symbols and subjects that they invoke to perform better feelings, like resilience, dignity, and strength. Further, they represent a moment in time where some of the posters were building their entertainment careers as digital content creators, leveraging scandals like this one to channel indignation around the digital bahdala. These YouTubers will be discussed in relation to the platform and the geopolitical context in the next section.

If Gebran Bassil’s bahdala at the World Economic Forum, channeled humiliation through colonial rhetoric and racializing tropes, this controversy rejected such charges by channeling performances of dignity and strength in the face of foreign attack. In contrast to the previous case study at the WEF, where I focused on the trial as a moment of national humiliation, this case highlights the rich cultural artifacts that are reached for in postcolonial sites to contest conferrals of failure. This scandal is of interest for not only the range of ordinary people and bloggers that recorded videos, but also their portrayal of a desire to set the record straight in their commentary. What it also reveals is the relational nature of affect by showing how Lebanon can both receive and dole out
colonial *bahdala* in much the same way that Egypt has been both a colonizer to Sudan and colonized by countries like England.

What comes across in several of the videos is a rhetorical construction of Mazbouh as unworthy of commentary with performances that, affectively, say otherwise. Video posters said things like “all I want to say is two things…” (Appendix B1:6), going on to record and post a video which is 18 minutes long. They said, “I did this video to answer you even though you’re smaller than me,” (since deleted video). They said, “Your actions were too cheap for me to respond in words,” and “sometimes you get riled up and by replying to her people have degraded themselves,” but recited it within a several-minute long poetic verse staged in front of a television screen playing Mazbouh’s video in the background (Appendix B1:12). In a since-deleted video, a woman said, “I’m not going to waste time because you are someone who’s not worth it, and I’m not going to give you value” while posting an edited, 11-minute-long video.

They make the case for why it is important to turn to the performative component of media processes rather than simply the discursive constructions they engender. Throughout the videos, the performances suggest what is denied discursively—that Mazbouh’s comments and video were inconsequential and that they were unaffected. However, they ran the spectrum from quick selfie-style videos which lasted a few minutes to heavily edited videos lasting several minutes and featuring the video of Mazbouh herself, filters, and memes. Several of the videos feature Mazbouh’s own video within their compilation, emphasizing their points by referencing hers. Some included icons censoring Mazbouh’s cleavage or bleeps censoring her curses. In this way, they channel the very power of Mazbouh’s *bahdala*, rerouting it back to her.
Of particular interest to this project is the way that such practices are not simply a feature of digital media technologies, but performances that span place and time. Examples of such performances of recoding include US rhetoric in the aftermath of 9/11 and the so-called “War on Terror,” (Anker 2014) the dealings of judicial bodies like the International Criminal Courts (ICC) and the Pan-Africanist pushback (Clarke 2019), and conversion practices of the US Evangelical community (Pellegrini 2007). In Elizabeth Anker’s (2014) work on the melodramatic nature of US rhetoric after 9/11, she illustrates the ways that genre conventions of victimhood and suffering in official speeches helped mobilize the US public to support the “War on Terror.” In Kamari Clarke’s (2019)’s work on the ICC, she examines impassioned anticolonial speeches in African states about past humiliation and future victory. At these sites, images and rhetoric are used to change from one feeling state to another.

This does not only happen with nationalist rhetoric, but other kinds of rhetoric which coheres belonging. Ann Pellegrini’s (2007) work shows that religious communities like the US Evangelical church perform and channel melodramatic rhetoric around victimhood and righteousness through televangelism but also the Hell House, or the church’s version of the secular haunted house. Here, community members perform affective work to change incompatible feeling states. Pellegrini (2007) shows that they put on productions of the Hell House to recode conventionally pleasurable and sinful experiences into experiences of fear in order to lead people to salvation. What is more, other examples of utilizing a “pedagogy of fear” include secular practices like driver’s education, where new drivers and students are shown frightening videos of potential
accidents, scaring new drivers into safe behavior. Recoding affirms that something needs changing due to a greater purpose.

Closer to home is the way that recoding was done in Egyptian popular culture as a means of cohering Egyptian nationalism in the pre-independence era. Examples of this took place in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries around the influx of migrants from Southern Europe. As Ziad Fahmy (2011) notes, “The perceived differences between a native Egyptian (ibn al-balad, or literally “son of the country”) and the foreign (khawaga) “other” were often strengthened by the deliberate portrayals of this dynamic in colloquial culture” (p. 28). Theater, colloquial jokes, and music helped to recode a sense of ‘Egyptianness’ with Cairene Egyptian Arabic and positive qualities, like “patience, goodness, perseverance, and intelligence” in contrast to the nonfluent who were imbued with “exploitative greed, laziness, disloyalty, and naïveté” (p. 29). In this way, a sense of Egyptian identity was affirmed at transcultural contact zones by drawing on and cultivating more positive qualities in the production of nationalist identity. More recently, in his work on digital media scandals, Tarek El-Ariss (2019) shows how recoding practices like the online “leak” trace back to older understandings of the leak that span mediums. Cyber-practices like the leak recode centers of authority and operate not as adaptations of Western tools, but as embodied communication.

The video posters engaged in these performances by harkening to Egypt’s dignity and what the Arab world owed it. Several accounts expressed their superiority to the Lebanese Mazbouh. One since-deleted video featured a man saying, “you don’t even know the things that happened to us, we Egyptians fight in every direction, we cheat life to make a living, and still we have dignity” (since deleted). Another said, “Egyptians are
cleaner and more honorable than you” (Appendix B1:13). In another since-deleted video, a woman responds to Mazbouh’s comment about the bellies and weight of Egyptian women, saying, “of course the Egyptian women has a kirsh (belly fat), this kirsh brought many people that you can’t ever achieve what they have achieved” (since deleted). Belly-fat here is resignified from Mazbouh’s original video. Rather than unsightly excess, it is the proof of hard work and resilience. In another video, a woman dressed in red, black, and white clothing, including a scarf and her chair, the color of the Egyptian flag sat upright at a desk and emphatically pointed her fingers into the air to emphasize her points. She called Mazbouh an insect and said, “you think you’re beautiful. But that kind of beauty we throw in the trash. Our beauty is dignity.” While forceful in tone, she took moments to pause and smile slightly.

In these videos this takes place with filters, memes, jokes, editing, and embodied performances. One vlogger cut Mazbouh’s video into sections, interjecting to provide commentary through memes and sound effects. In response to Mazbouh’s comment about wishing to eat during Ramadan, he inserted a clip of the popular Egyptian poet Gamal Bakheet reciting a famous line from one his poems from the 2011 revolution. The line, which translates to: “Their fathers’ religion, what is its name?” became popularized during the protests by referring to the hypocrisy of the Muslim Brotherhood’s claim to Islam. In this video, it is meant to draw parallels between Mazbouh’s own lack of a respectable, pious upbringing and the Muslim Brotherhood’s own inauthentic claims to Islam. Another vlogger used a filter of an older man’s face, performing as an older figure speaking with authority over the younger Mazbouh.
These accompanied assertions of Egypt as cultured, tolerant (Appendix B1:3), and ‘the original,’ (Appendix B1:14), harkening back to constructions of Egypt as a center of civilization, a locus of anthropological encounters, and a site for strategic military interventions. Across the videos, they also used a common phrase: ‘Masr umm al-dunya’ (“Egypt is the mother of the world”). This has been a popular proverb in Egypt, drawing
on its rich history of cultural production and the permeation of its colloquial language throughout the region. Others adapted the phrasing by saying, “Egypt is your grandmother, Egypt is the original” (Appendix B1:14), drawing on tropes of Egypt as the birthplace of Arab culture and identity.

Given the performative and rhetorical techniques utilized in response to Mazbouh’s bahdala, I delve deeper into the mechanics of recoding by offering that the YouTube videos utilize “conversion points” or what Sara Ahmed (2004) describes as the turning of bad feeling into good feeling. Donovan Schaefer (2015) has described this process as “capturing an affective intensity but redirecting its force,” (p. 142) highlighting the mechanics which underly these media artifacts and performances.

Conversion points, in these formulations, can do the work of switching the direction of feeling from wider structural forms of violence and inequity to more specific bodies and ideas. Ahmed writes of the feminist “killjoys” who are made to be the source of negative feeling, moving away from recognition of more structural origins.

“When a feeling becomes an instrument or a technique it is not that some- thing is created from nothing. But something is being created from some- thing: a wavering impression of nervousness can strengthen its hold when we are given a face to be nervous about. To track how feelings cohere as or in bodies, we need to pay attention to the conversion points between good and bad feelings” (p. 227).

I find that these videos drew on tropes of the Egyptian “golden age,” global sports stars, and virtuous mothers to redirect feelings activated by Mazbouh’s bahdala. The recoding of bahdala uses a variety of conversion points, from Egyptian mothers, to belly dancers, to flags, making it the grounds for refusal and pride. To be effective, these conversion
points must make use of shared systems of meaning. As such, they require symbols which are encoded and invested with meaning, available in the cultural arsenal.

Of interest were the figures that several videos mentioned, revealing insight into how recoding works through already encoded meaning. In response to Mazbouh’s labeling of the country as “balad al ra’asat” (“the country of dancers”), video posters named figures like classical singer Umm Kulthum and former president Gamal Abdel Nasser. Figures like Abdel Nasser and Umm Kulthum\(^\text{16}\) are often paired together to harken back to what some perceive as the “golden age” of Egyptian history. The pair had a major role in projecting a unified vision of pan-Arabism to the rest of the world beginning in the 1950s and into the 1970s, encoding them as Egyptian and Arab symbols. They gestured to them as beacons of modernity when Egyptian cultural production was dominant in the entire Arab world.

The coding of these figures as nationalist symbols was done through state mediums which are inseparable from the icons themselves. Their encoded nature is inseparable from the media practices of the time, which helped establish Nasser as a commanding figure and Umm Kulthum as a pan-Arab icon. El-Aris (2019) notes the descriptions of the post-Nasser period, where some scholarship has noted an “awakening” of national publics who were described as almost cast under a spell of a paternalistic Nasserism. The instruments were TV and radio, encoding the leader with a larger-than-life quality. As such, as well-worn tropes of Egyptian and Arab culture, their examples

\[^\text{16}\] For example, Hammond (2007) describes the way that state leaders like Nasser took part in the recoding of cultural symbols as he established his order. For example, Nasser helped to transform Umm Kalthum into a symbol of the military’s new order rather than a symbol of the old royalty. Through performances on state radio, she became and still is “intimately linked in the minds of people all over the Arab world with Nasserist pan-Arabism” (p. 206).
drew upon a rich tapestry of popular culture and history, one that has been reinforced through state branding in entertainment, tourism, and real estate. In these ways, Egypt’s golden era is recalled to affirm its contemporary offering to the world.

However, encoded symbols can also be more contemporary. One contemporary figure that several mentioned was Mohamed Salah, a Premier League club Liverpool player and captain of the Egyptian national team. He shot to fame after scoring one of the winning goals for Liverpool in the Champion’s League final and for helping get Egypt to the FIFA World Cup. He has become a national and international celebrity gaining the label, “the ‘pride of the Arabs’ from Casablanca to Baghdad (Ali 2021, p. 97). Describing the role of international media events like the soccer/football match in 1990s Egyptian television, Lila Abu-Lughod (2004) writes that they are “vivid spectacles of local and national identity” where the masses were meant to be “made aware of the larger world” (p. 11). Like Nasser, footballer Salah provided Egyptian publics with points of contact with the extra-national, fulfilling what Amro Ali (2021) has called “the strong desire for international recognition” (p. 93).

He serves as a central conversion point in this case. One woman whose video referenced Salah related him to modernity, pride, and strength:

“If you don’t know who Egypt is, ask the people. Ask the whole world, ask about how Egypt is the country of hadara [modernity], the country that brought Ahmad Zweil, that brought…Mohamed Salah…that brought all the people that people take pride in…There are very strong names, but I swear to God I won’t waste my time because you aren’t worth it, so I won’t give you value.” (Appendix B1: 14)
As shown in this quote, Salah’s value is not only related to his athletic ability, but to his visibility as Muslim in global circuits of entertainment. Salah has become a symbol of modesty, piety, and dignity for his humble beginnings and his visible Islamic practice during games. Images of him performing the sujood after scoring a goal circulate in international press. In fact, this visibility has even been offered as a reason for the decrease in anti-Muslim sentiment in the UK. Whether or not Salah’s presence can be confidently said to have caused the reduction of racist sentiment, what is important here is the vested interest in the possibility of such a thing. A popular chant that accompanies Salah in the UK goes: “If he’s good enough for you he’s good enough for me, If he scores another few, then I’ll be Muslim too.” In this humorous chant there is also a conditional proposition. Him being good enough, a good immigrant, a good Muslim, for them depends on his performance. It highlights the stakes for success and good performance of immigrants in places like the UK, where he resides.

It is this “visibly Muslim” quality, but cosmopolitan circulation through the world, where he appears to evade representational traps, that gives him this allure to Egyptians and wider Muslim publics. Amro Ali (2018) quotes a barber in Egypt’s Alexandra who said of Salah, “I respect him as he is not embarrassed, nor does he try to hide his veiled wife after all that success.” In this statement, there is an assumption that one would be expected to possibly want to hide his veiled wife, ashamed or embarrassed.

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17. Research has been done to measure the possible effects of Salah’s presence in the international arena, suggesting that the visibility of Muslim figures has the potential to reduce anti-Muslim attitudes in the UK context (Alrababah et al., 2019). The finding was that greater exposure to Salah as “a visibly Muslim soccer player” reduced anti-Muslim sentiment online.
of her visible Muslimness. In a piece for *The New Yorker* about Salah’s allure, Yasmine Al-Sayyad (2018) similarly writes:

“What stands out to me most about Salah, who is far more conspicuously Arab and Muslim than I am, is that he doesn’t seem concerned with trying to blend into anything. He is simply himself. That, more than anything else he has done on the field, is what I admire most.”

These comments point to the potentially embarrassing feeling of being ‘visibly Muslim’ in a ‘global’ context like the international sporting event.

As such, he is a conversion point, converting bad feeling to better feeling. To draw a contrast from the first case at the WEF and show how some figures, once full of cosmopolitical and ‘transnational’ appeal, lose that status, we can compare Salah to Pakistan’s Prime Minster, Imran Khan. Not only has his brand of populism have been touted as embarrassing and shameful, but, in contrast to Salah’s wife as a symbol of pride for Egyptians, Khan’s wife has been referenced as evidence of his nonmodern status due to the *niqab*, or the veil that some Muslim women wear. As we see here, Salah retains the cosmopolitan that Khan lost. From Salah as a figure of pride and Khan as a figure of disappointment, we see how the circulation of symbols becomes invested with cosmopolitical hope.

They also show how the loss of cosmopolitical hope is tied to racialization. One response which came from Egyptian-German rapper and social media personality Khalid Gad, expressed this. In his selfie style video, he says:

“And regardless of my fervor (*hamawaya*) and my boiling blood, I don’t know how long we’ll give chances to these kinds of things to offend and wound us like
this. Why don’t we take legal action against any one of those and make an example of her for anyone who tries to touch on Egypt, even from afar, not from within? But this one is IN our country and is cursing us? I need you to forget the original topic and to forget everything and to grasp my screaming and the tone of my voice.” (Appendix B1:3)

The man asks viewers to ignore the words and to focus on the conviction with which he is speaking. In a since-deleted video, a woman looks at her camera and references “we, the ones in pain.” She speaks for several minutes about the rift created between Lebanon and Egypt, a rift of aggressiveness and pain. She says that the country is tired, saying, “Live our situation, live the sincerity/authenticity of our pain, to understand how much pain we are in. Live it.” She ends her video with a deep breath before saying, “Live what we are feeling/experiencing. I’m not going to say it more than that.” Many of the videos expressed a similar desire for others to feel for the Egyptian people through social media platforms.

These kinds of comments also point to the way that across place and time, bodies are compelled to restage and recode scripts of power—whether the performance is done in the service of vulnerable identity or to leak abuses of power. The performance of recoding, Pellegrini (2007) writes, “sutures gaps, soothes contradictions, and produces resonance amid discord” (p. 915). The various remarks by YouTubers are examples of this soothing and suturing work, admitting what is desired in the process. Pellegrini writes that Hell House performers, “draw upon even as they move to recode experiences of "safety" and "fear," "reality" and "unreality," in the service of a fundamental spiritual
transformation” (p. 915). In other words, recoding the bahdala is a way of affirming that there is a link between discourse and affects that needs altering.

In these videos, he appears to evade being trapped in dualistic systems of national signification. Here, we can draw a connection to the first case study, where publics expressed desires to ‘cut through’ rather than be ‘stuck within” systems of signification which inform public discourse. For example, Amro Ali (2021) writes that during the revolution especially, Egyptians were trapped between rigid binaries of "revolutionary versus counter-revolutionary, secular versus Islamist, civilian versus military, liberal versus hyper-nationalist, pro and anti-Brotherhood, among others” (p. 93) which pervaded national public discourse. Considering the history with the state and Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, Salah appears able to conjoin Islam and cosmopolitanism. More broadly, Salah’s mobility in the ‘world stage’ helped him evade such trappings conferred by national systems, becoming signified as a national among others. This is how “[i]ntertextuality, decontextualization, irreverence and subversion recode the iconic online” (Ibrahim 2021, p. 2).

However, this very visibility is not neutral. It is part of the affective and visibility economies which undergird social media platforms. Salah becomes visible in ways which are gendered. We can see this when these performances work to realign oppositional hegemonic brands of Egyptian and Lebanese nationalism. For example, across the response videos, men and women remarked about the virility of Egyptian men, suggesting that Mazbouh was more accustomed to effeminate Lebanese men. Nasser, Umm Kulthum, and Salah were contrasted with women like Mia Khalifa, a well-known former adult film star with Lebanese heritage, and Haifa Wehbe, a popular Lebanese
singer in the region. As a conversion point, Salah aligns viewers with the right kind of nationhood and Mia Khalifa and Haifa Wehbe with the wrong kind. Some referenced Lebanon’s plastic surgery industry, saying that Mazbouh came from the country of Mia Khalife while they were the land of Mohamed Salah. Additionally, several of the videos, some of which were deleted after posting, were of men expressing violent remarks about Mazbouh. Some featured physical displays of strength. In the next section, I will discuss the gendered dimension of the digital bahdala, describing the digital content creators on YouTube who have a built a following out of scandals like this.

The YouTube response video

This requires a discussion of the wider media landscape through which these videos travel and the kinds of geopolitical and corporate discourse they align with. Some of the videos analyzed included those who appear to have created accounts just to reply to Mazbouh, either deleting or leaving the videos as their only uploaded videos on their channels. However, there were also several who have since gained followings through their production of social commentary. This alerts us to a much wider YouTube economy of reaction videos which feature moral policing of especially women and gender non-conforming people. What unfolds is a digital economy of atonement, where those called out as threatening national respectability and exceptionalism are demanded to apologize and perform suffering.

The Mazbouh controversy alerts us to this group of YouTube creators and their connections with the state. Karim Alaa, one of the vloggers who responded to Mazbouh, shot to influencer status over the last few years since I began studying this case in 2018. In one of his earlier videos, related to the Mazbouh case, he stands in front of a boxing
bag hanging from the ceiling of what appears to be a gym (Appendix B1:13). In the since-deleted video, he positions the camera and begins to describe the Egyptian men as strong. Referring to Mazbouh’s apprehension by the state, he says, “They went and got her two days after her video came out, *she didn’t know we were strong*” (Appendix B1:13). He pauses from his speech to walk over to the punching bag and kick and punch it, a display of brute force and physical strength. He manifests the strength that his words gesture toward. His performance of physical strength is precautionary.

He, among others, reacts to what is framed as embarrassing, generating a YouTube following that comes to expect more. He regularly posts reactions to YouTube and TikTok videos which feature what he frames as disrespectful and offensive. Today, Alaa’s videos feature YouTube plaques in the background, received for his rising subscriber count, which at the time of this writing was 1.06 million (“Karim Alaa” n.d.). Many of these videos featured YouTube plaques in the background, received by content producers for milestone metrics. Through the years, Alaa’s plaques have changed from silver to gold, reflecting greater rewards for his improving metrics on the platform.

Alaa is only one of several YouTubers who feature this kind of content on their channels. While blogs have been cited as an important platform preceding the revolution (Pepe 2020), YouTube is one place where national exceptionalism have been channeled by Egyptian digital content creators in the last few years since the revolution. Of interest here are the male vloggers who have found followings by posting reaction and response videos to others, especially women, across social media platforms, policing their behavior. These videos feature men looking into the camera and providing commentary about the videos, interlacing them with clips and sound effects from Egyptian popular
culture. Several YouTubers have found success with this format, with popular YouTube channels having one million or more subscribers. YouTubers like Mahmoud Eldeeb (825,000 subscribers), Younes Mohamed (1,000,000 subscribers), Amr Eltmraya (211,000 subscribers), and Abdullah AlZabet (61,000 subscribers), post reaction, response, and commentary videos, often projecting their brands which cohere through a common theme of reacting to the Egyptian *bahdala*.

Their videos may be viewed through the rise of YouTube in 2005 as a video-hosting site. Since then, it has been considered as participatory culture (Miller 2012), a space of community (Gauntlett 2011), and a site to produce performance genres (Burgess & Green 2018, McDaniel 2020). Prior to its professionalization, which these vloggers take part in, its reliance on user-generated content was marketed as a way of creating and broadcasting the “self.” Eventually, its interface began to reflect a more consumerist agenda, moving away from community features to those resembling network television (Burgess & Green 2018, van Dijck 2013). This professionalization of YouTube was evidenced by the rise of projects like YouTube Creators and multichannel networks (MCN’s), the latter of which has become an intermediary between advertisers and content creators (Bucher 2018, Burgess and Green 2018, 2018; van Dijck 2013). This has led to a kind of entrepreneurialism in content production, where these intermediaries are favorable for the platform by making it “a more appealing space for advertisers” (Lobato 2016, p. 350–1). Several of the accounts are likely part of MCNs due to their similar background templates and the actual logos of the MCNs on their channels, likely reflecting different terms of agreement with the intermediaries.
One thing that has coevolved with these intermediaries is the rise of video genres. Vlog videos, as well as those uploaded by non-established companies, of which these are an example, have made up most popular user-generated videos on the platform (Burgess & Green 2018). User-generated videos are also the most discussed and responded to on the platform, while those by traditional outlets are the most viewed (Burgess & Green 2018), lending insight into the function that YouTubers may have to advertisers or other interested parties, such as the state or state-aligned groups, as well as the kinds of interactions publics have with traditional and new media personalities. In their overall content structure, they are like the genres of “reaction” and “response” videos which have become popular on YouTube but also spread to other platforms like TikTok, where they have become a feature built into the application (Lewis et al 2021). Reaction videos, for example, grew out of an awareness that creators could gain subscribers who were watching the original content (McDaniel 2021, p. 1629). Additionally, the response video “interpellates the target as if they were already defending themselves against response video’s creator and gives the respondent the last word” (Lewis et al 2021, p. 737). Indeed, these vloggers are positioned as having the last word, stopping the bahdala and returning it tenfold to where it came from.

The videos I analyze feature elements of both, serve as one way that these capture audiences and power of the bahdala. In this way, these YouTubers are working to craft a brand based on bahdala. These videos were sometimes comedic in nature, if the channel’s goal was to highlight the comedic skill of the host, or investigative videos about scandals or mysteries to be uncovered, or videos where the host offers musical
performances and plays different characters—from older men, to street sweepers, to army generals—as entertainment, mimicking theater performance.

On this subject, scholarship of digital media has explored the economies which undergird these kinds of content. Through their visual focus, platforms like YouTube generate value linked to the visibility of bodies and performances (Banet-Weiser 2018). In this way, it is linked to emerging as well as persisting centers of power, like technology companies and state-affiliated or -friendly news networks. Relevant to this case, Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012, 2018) has written of digital economies of popular feminism and misogyny, describing the forms of visibility and legitimacy they generate for social media figures. In particular, she notes that popular misogyny and popular feminism are connected through economies of visibility, where each drives the other, linked through their reactions to one another.

We see this relationality in the way that these YouTubers use the content of Egyptian TikTokers, often women, remixing them with pieces of popular culture. Many of the reaction videos often use as thumbnails screenshots of the women’s videos in their own videos to attract viewers. They also feature clips from these videos, blurring out what they consider to be inappropriate, such as parts of women’s bodies. These YouTubers respond to content on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, channeling audiences through the content of these women.
Figure 11: Appendix B3:13, 8, 14, Translations in Appendix
What is also important is these videos’ production of Egyptian exceptionalism through their aesthetics and rhetoric. They recall motifs and characters from Egyptian theater during the pre-independence era who were conjured to imbue positive or negative qualities with national others (Fahmy 2011). They also draw on the “golden era” of Egyptian film and entertainment, using clips of actors who appear as if they are reacting to scandalous TikTok videos. They engage in recoding by drawing on cultural traditions from Egyptian popular culture, as well as broader performance traditions.

One YouTuber who exemplifies this is Abdullah Al-Zabet. He interlaces clips of TikToks with his own commentary, jokes, songs, and clips from film and television to cultivate a sense of outrage or disgust about impropriety. He performs as various characters in order to make his case, drawing on histories of theater and vaudeville, the latter which Henry Jenkins (2006) has compared with YouTube itself. Using ‘embarrassing’ TikTok content, he makes this content the basis for his own brand of humor, producing skits as several characters in between the clips. One of these characters is an army general who wears a military cap with the YouTube logo on it. He is a YouTube general.

This recoding relies on a variety of conversion points which are encoded in the popular imaginary. Examples include depictions of Egyptian actors slapping one another, making incredulous exclamations of disbelief, or one-liners which answer Al-Zabet’s rhetorical questions. Offering an alternative, at the end of many of his videos, Al-Zabet features a counter to these various forms of bahdala in the form of more proper and respectable content. These are often TikTok videos of young women and men singing or speaking about religion. He zeroes in on the account names of these TikToks, providing a
form of advertising for what is deemed more wholesome and appropriate content. Through these features, he contrasts what is bad and good, sometimes ending his videos with a performative admonishment of TikTok itself, punching the logo out of screen view.

This parallels other performances of masculinity, like Alaa’s mentioned earlier, not only part of a masculinist showing of dominance, but a cultivation of strength in response to bahdala, the threat of unbelonging. In this way they emphasize the performative and productive nature of “reaction” videos. By recoding the original content, they invest it with meaning even as they are also consumers of this content. As McDaniel (2021) notes, “reaction videos become a way to stage their power as consumers, turning the affective dimensions of listening into a performance that they can package and circulate for others to witness” (p. 1626). As such, they depend on bahdala, taking what they frame as humiliating affronts on national reputation and using it to propel their careers forward. Through their performative dimension and their utilization of conversion points, they are both a pedagogy of masculinist postcolonial nationhood and a method of branding which uses the bahdala to channel latent and more systemized feelings of bahdala.

In some ways, these scandals are not new. Other scandals have coevolved through the role of media corporations and state bodies. In recoding what is perceived as national failure or embarrassment, this economy of videos aligns with state crackdowns on women and gender-nonconforming people that have taken place far before the advent of social media platforms. For example, the state has operated through televisual media through the exposés and raids of public and private places (Amar 2013) as well as social
media and dating applications like Grindr to entrap gay and queer people. Indeed, “electronic entrapment” is by far the state’s most utilized method for arresting those who are in the LGBTQ+ community (Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights 2017). We can see this in the connection between state practices and a digital economy of morality policing.

Indeed, these YouTubers have also had explicit connection to the arrest and persecution of women who have boasted TikTok followings. They have gained legitimacy and aligned with state and legal institutions, helping to lead persecutions of not only women like Mazbouh, but many Egyptian women (and likely other Egyptians) on platforms like YouTube and TikTok. One YouTuber has referenced the way that the state uses social media to aid in its policing:

“The work of morality police officers has developed. Now, they sit on the internet, they watch YouTube, TikTok, all the live broadcasts. They follow, they watch who publishes things that aren't right.” (Hajjaji 2022)

These vloggers have also been directly connected to state campaigns of moral policing. One such example is a campaign called “Purify Society” which was linked to Karim Alaa through his relationship to the lawyer leading it. The lawyer noted that the goal of the campaign was “the balance between freedom of expression and silencing the pollutive audiovisual voices” online (Hajjaji 2022). While he “denied his initiative is swayed by YouTubers, saying that his complaints are based only on evidence that a crime was committed under Egyptian law” (Hajjaji 2022), he noted that Alaa alerts him to potential cases of interest. However, Alaa, according to Hajjaji (2022), has gone on to create his
own campaign called “Bel Mersaad,” which refers to practices of surveillance and watching.

On digital media, the role of these video is not only to police within the nation, but to bolster nationalist affect through digital media’s transnational reach. Alaa is instructive for his origin story, which began with a video reacting to Mazbouh. It was one of several others which began to respond to those who insulted Egypt online. In one of his first response videos which generated almost two million views, one of his most popular videos of all time, he called it, “A reply to everyone who insulted Egypt and her people in this latest period” (Appendix B3:1). While his first videos were relatively unedited simple comedic skits and vlogs using a selfie camera, they have become increasingly edited as he exclusively reacted to scandals and affronts to Egypt. Across his most popular videos reacting to insults by other MENA nationals about Egypt, he generates expressions of transnational support.

This case study’s transnational perspective lends insight into purchase of bahdala across national borders. In the next section, I show how traditional centers of power like media institutions utilize this platform to benefit from the affective economy of bahdala and its appeal across national borders. I show this in the next case by turning to YouTube videos by Egyptian and Lebanese media networks around this case. These videos reflect the way that these outlets mobilize the power of digital bahdala to capture not only Egyptian audiences but transnational audiences who may sympathize. It is to this landscape that I turn next.

**Performing atonement on television and YouTube**
If we turn to the wider media landscape, toward Egyptian and Lebanese television, particular kinds of scenes are associated with *bahdala*. From the first case study at the WEF event to sociopolitical talk-shows in this case study and the next, there are conferrals of responsibility to those who are expected to absorb it. Traditional networks have picked up on the appeal and value of digital *bahdala*.

Several channels featured segments with Mazbouh’s parents as they apologized on behalf of their daughter and implored the Egyptian state to return her safely to her home country. The program which featured the most significant coverage of the event was the popular Egyptian *al-‘asher Masa’an* (10pm) on Dream TV. On this channel and network, Mazbouh’s parents appealed to the regime and the public to forgive their daughter in the days after her arrest.

The coverage on Dream TV is significant because of its relationship to the Egyptian media landscape. It is one of Egypt’s first two private television networks, initiated in 2001, relatively late in comparison to other countries in the MENA region (Kraidy & Khalil 2009, Sakr 2007). While the Egyptian state has had more control of terrestrial networks, Dream TV became one of the first private networks, owned by businessman Ahmad Bahgat, who was close to the regime. It was launched, as Naomi Sakr (2007) notes, as quintessentially a ‘business project’ – a vehicle for advertising goods produced by the business empire of Ahmad Bahgat” (p. 7). For Dream TV, this eventually led to “public-service-style talk shows,” where they asked public figures questions on behalf of the public (Sakr 2007, p. 7). The network led the way to more political analysis and social commentary within Egypt, however at the same time, toed the line between censorship and economic survival. Sakr (2007) writes of this time:
“Repeated warnings issued to Egypt’s Dream TV about its political content demonstrate the fine line between, on the one hand, attracting audiences by showing programmes that are relevant and different from other channels and, on the other, abiding by vaguely worded prohibitions on criticizing people in power’’ (p. 37).

This programming on this station originally featured call-in confessional programming (Sakr 2013) of which elements have been retained, including the call-in by audiences of *al-’asher Masa’an* in this case. Hosted by Wael El-Ebrashy, it featured guests to comment on social affairs and controversies, sitting them down to speak on these issues and to allow call-in viewers to ask questions and make comments. It was also known for hosting public figures and asking them about contemporary issues (Sakr 2010).

Reflecting a theme around gendered scandal in this case study, the program was originally hosted by Hala Sirhan before she left due to restrictions on content and tensions arising from what was framed as risqué programming (Kraidy & Khalil 2009, Sakr 2007)

The program was especially notable in this case for its focus on Mazbouh’s mother. In the segments, her mother and lawyer spoke about the case to El-Ebrashy. They apologized and explained Mazbouh’s work history, her countless visits to Egypt, and her medical history. El-Ebrashy asked questions about the law, her medical history, and possible outcomes. In one segment, however, the Egyptian public was invited to call in to air their grievances against the Mazbouh family. In the most-watched video from the case, Mazbouh’s mother sits silently as several Egyptian women call in to admonish her daughter (Appendix C2:6). Viewers are invited to watch as she quietly sits and absorbs
the words, at one point covering her face. This video is the most watched of the segment and the one which has the most comments.

As a transnational scandal, this case also highlights the purchase of these scenes for Lebanese audiences, especially those who watch from outside of the nation. Diaspora-targeted satellite channels like the Lebanese Diaspora Channel (LDC), capitalize on such scandals. In this case, Mazbouh’s parents were invited to speak about it on Joe Maalouf’s program “Hawwa el-Horriya” (Appendix B2:14). Maalouf has a history in television programming around scandal, having led one of the most infamous Lebanese media raids in the last two decades of an abandoned theater which was known as a cruising venue for gay men (Awadalla 2012). In a clip of the interview on YouTube, Mazbouh’s original video plays while the camera focuses on the parents’ reactions. As Mazbouh refers to the Egyptian people as dirty, the camera focuses on her mother biting her lip quickly and taking an intake of breath.
We also see this in the case of Yasmine El-Narsh, the woman who was invoked by several Egyptians on social media as a predecessor to Mazbouh. On the YouTube account of Youm7, an Egyptian daily newspaper owned by pro-government businessman Ahmed Abou Hashima (Bahgat 2017), one video about El-Narsh’s case focuses on her mother reacting to her conviction trial. The video is entitled, “In the video…The collapse of Yasmine el Narsh’s mother during the trial of the ‘airport incident,’” dramatizing her reaction (Appendix B2:15). The video features El-Narsh in court and pans to her parents in the audience. Her mother, dressed in pearls, a scarf covering her shoulders, and a well-coiffed updo, looks around and put her hands to cover her mouth.

This digital economy is part of the pedagogical work that the bahdala does, performing the links between ideas and affects. For example, in the conversion work of Evangelical performers leading audiences to salvation, there is a reliance on both pedagogy and performance to alter feeling states. Pellegrini (2009) suggests that US
secularism relies particularly on pedagogies of fear to cultivate its ethos. Like the Hell House, she offers public school videos like drivers’ education videos of drunk driving accidents as a parallel example of the kind of pedagogical tool that utilizes fear to train the body to feel afraid of certain objects and subjects. These media “solicit and bind” (p. 213) feelings and concerns and attach them to structures of lived experience. They can be thought of as a “retraining and a reteaching of bodies” (Schaefer 2020, p. 6), where there is a habitual, repetitive, embodied aspect to conversion pedagogies like recoding.

Like these driver’s education videos or the salvation whose goal is conversion, this identifies the source of bahdala in women who have experienced their own form of bahdala through harassment, policing, and other modes of systemic violence and exploitation. Along the way, rhetoric, symbolism, and performance aid in cultivating different ways of feeling about the source of bahdala. In the Hell House, the conversion points are the non-monogamous, homosexual, or drug-using characters, becoming the means through which to achieve salvation. They aim to both affirm an identity or way of belonging while also seeking to transmit those affects to audiences.

One YouTube video of Mazbouh’s mother in the interview reflects the didactic nature of bahdala and the affordances which make it possible. While most of the videos from this programming feature judgment of Mazbouh and her family, these are markedly different. In the video which features Egyptian women calling in to admonish Mazbouh’s mother for her daughter’s actions, more comments are compassionate than they are judgmental. To Mazbouh’s mother facing the callers on television, they wrote:

18. We can think of Wendy Chun’s (2016) work which engages with habit as a framework for understanding new media.
“Poor mother, that’s enough forgive her and return her daughter to her, God will be able to help her. I’m from Algeria, greetings to the Egyptian people 🌸💖💖💖💖”

“We are Egyptians have high morals and good hearts. I say to the Lebanese mother you are respectable and are welcome to Egypt.”

“There is no power or strength but in God, the tears of a mother are very precious, people”

“Egyptians, you are good people. The mother has no guilt, nor her father”

“People, the creature made the mistake, why did you hurt her mother?”

“Poor mother, she cut/broke my heart” (Appendix B2:6)

This sample of sympathetic comments is a stark contrast to the other videos, reflecting a different kind of reaction to the content. In the video, as women call and berate Mazbouh’s mother, publics are invited to witness the bahdala being returned. On YouTube, they can judge and are invited to share their stance.

The comments beneath this video in particular highlight the way that gendered labor is part of digital bahdala, where there is a demand for the performances of women as proper victims of it. In the process, they show how these national exceptionalisms are themselves gendered, relying on the labor of women to change bad feeling to good. This is not limited to the triggering scandal, but to the bahdala that is more systemic, activating the very actions that these women turn to social media to expose. As I have mentioned, because of its digital nature, the bahdala is an entire reverberative event which generates reactions, and as noted in this section, lead to an anticipatory production of bahdala. This production requires the content of other content creators, but also,
evidence of suffering for their transgressions. In the next chapter, I will examine this anticipatory quality of the *bahdala*, and the paranoia that it generates.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the way that publics, the state, and media institutions engage and facilitate this recoding of events to change meta narratives of the nation. By turning to the recoding of the *bahdala*, I have identified the way that publics reach for a variety of artifacts and symbols to convert humiliation into pride. Attention to such artifacts and ideas can help us understand the kinds of affective value that symbols of modernity, cosmopolitanism, and national exceptionalism offer to postcolonial contexts grappling with structural rupture. They are symbols of a sense of ‘global’ belonging that is under threat due to not specifically the *bahdala*, but the failures of national projects to deliver the imaginaries they promise to most people.

I have also shown how national exceptionalisms are gendered. Egypt, as the “mother of the world,” demands the affective labor of mothers who have failed to produce docile subjects. This reveals a reliance on the policing of women to maintain national projects. In this way, this case study considers an additional dimension to the notion of networked misogyny, showing how national projects inform such scandals and the way that digital genres are created. Ultimately, it shows how relations of dependency are illuminated and attenuated during national crisis, highlighting the labor required to produce cosmopolitan imaginaries.

I next turn to the paranoid media environments which emerge as social media users confront media environments where they are individually working to cultivate different ways of feeling. We see this in the Mazbouh case, where several commenters
asked where she was from and whether her video was conspiracy. Like the other cases in this project, elements of paranoia also abound in news coverage of her and other women who have crossed the state. Across national television on political talk shows, news hosts question her motivations and her origins. On one channel, the host asked a litany of questions:

“Our brothers in Lebanon, if she’s from Lebanon (this creature), if she’s Lebanese, disown her. If she’s really Lebanese, and I doubt it, because I know a lot of Lebanese. This is not like you, it’s not possible. Maybe she has a nationality, or she got the nationality. But her roots and her origins can’t be Lebanese. You have to find the truth and find out her story. What’s her truth? Who is she?”

In the next chapter, I examine this push to read for truth in the case of Lensa Tufa, an Ethiopian migrant domestic worker who became the subject of a global scandal after jumped from the two-story balcony of her employers and claimed that her employers, an elite Lebanese family, were abusing her. In what followed, international and national media covered the event, leading to paranoid posturing, recantation, and conspiratorial questioning on national stages. I focus especially on “This Is Lebanon” (TIL), a digital activist group that harnesses the power of bahdala to free women from imminently violent conditions.

In doing so, I continue to highlight a digital economy which comes to anticipate, and even rely on the bahdala. I examine this anticipation and its production of paranoia around the bodies of migrant domestic workers and their capacity to tell the truth about their experiences. In this case and the next, bahdala alerts us to the fact that reading the
body for evidence of a feeling or quality—incapacity, suffering, pain, pleasure, shame—is not a power-neutral task.
ENGINEERING THE BAHDALA: THIS IS LEBANON AND THE DIGITAL PRESSURE GROUP

“If consumers want to be entertained, and the images shown us as entertaining are images of violent dehumanization, it makes sense that these acts become more acceptable in our daily lives and that we become less likely to respond to them with moral outrage or concern.”

— bell hooks. “All About Love.”

Introduction

On April 2, 2018, Lensa Tufa was wheeled on a hospital bed onto the stage of the Lebanese television program, “Lil Nasher” (For Publication) to share her side of what had become a national news story in the weeks prior (Chamoun 2018). Tufa, an Ethiopian domestic worker employed by a wealthy Lebanese family who owned a couture fashion line, had recorded what became a viral video recounting her experience of abuse at the hands of her employers. The original video was shot by her aunt from Tufa’s hospital room, where she had been recovering after allegedly jumping from her employers’ balcony to escape. The Lil Nasher television episode invited Tufa, the daughter of the family employer, and the family’s lawyer to uncover the truth of what had become a heavily mediated event across Lebanon and had even reached the international press (“Lensa’s hospital bed” 2018). During the televised episode, Tufa recanted her story, offering that she had lied in order to return home to Ethiopia, while the family lawyer suggested that these kinds of spectacles were orchestrated by international organizations working to misconstrue the facts of many cases of alleged abuse, exploitation, and
violence against domestic workers. Here, Tufa was linked to international actors seeking to blackmail Lebanese families and destabilize the nation. It is to this paranoid posturing, where international shadow actors are posited to be behind local developments, that I turn in this chapter.

While stories of abuse of domestic workers by employers are common in a country where two migrant domestic workers die per week (“Lebanon’s new domestic” 2020), Tufa’s case with Eleanore Ajami’s family became not only a national but an international news story following the circulation of her video across social media. These stories highlighted the role of This Is Lebanon (TIL), a group which works to expose abuses of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon, in publicizing Tufa’s story. The group, comprised of nine relatively anonymous members who reside outside of Lebanon, works to expose employers who are abusing or withholding pay from the migrant domestic workers that they employ. At times, this results in screenshots of WhatsApp conversations with and personal information—phone numbers, emails, screenshots of GPS work locations—about employers being shared on their social media platforms and website (www.thisislebanon.work) to prompt action. In these cases, it also involves extended campaigns to pressure authorities to act.

I offer that TIL works as a “digital pressure group,” a version of the pressure or lobby group which works to influence policy or government decisions using the imaginary of global reach on social media platforms. They wield the cosmopolitan imaginary of Lebanon that has been an aspirational mode of belonging and a method of nation branding, and they expose it as a lie, pressuring employers to meet their demands. This produces not only the actual exposure of some employers, but an anticipatory threat
to those who are invested in the imaginaries that both kafala and social media platforms proffer. Using an anticipatory humiliation and the paranoia it cultivates, the digital pressure group tactically wields the spectacle of social media platforms like Facebook to meet their demands.

However, I also argue that as a digital pressure group relying on the bahdala, there is labor required by the migrant domestic workers to perform the right kind of suffering. In wielding the power of the bahdala, they wield these affective scenes as “pressure points,” invested with the power to guide audiences toward other ends.

Drawing on affect theory which complicates universalist theories of feeling, I show how wielding and even reading for affects is not a power-neutral task, as there is a demand for legibility so that others may find evidence. The relationality of emotions shows that when we rely on narratives of national failure, it makes demands on others to perform the right kind of victimhood. As such, this last case study comes full circle to describe the kinds of readings and judgments that transnational publics engage in. These affective trials are the sites where different forms of evidence are produced and judged by spectators.

In the following pages, I provide background on the kafala system and its relationship to upholding a cosmopolitan imaginary of Lebanon. I next discuss TIL’s work in the landscape of kafala activism in Lebanon and in relation to the Tufa case. I offer that TIL utilizes the cosmopolitan imaginary of both Lebanon and of platforms to channel paranoia, or the potential for shame, around impending exposure to a global body politic. I lastly discuss the way that this places the impetus on women in the system to perform the right kind of suffering.
Kafala system and This Is Lebanon

This Is Lebanon gives us an opportunity to consider the *kafala* system’s role in propping up an imagined cosmopolitanism which has been one of Lebanon’s greatest exports and which gives the *bahdala* its power. The *kafala* system as it stands is a migrant sponsorship system which exists in some form in the Gulf and the larger Middle East. In its contemporary form, migrant workers can enter countries under the sponsorship of a *kafeel* (sponsor) to whom they are dependent for mobility and employability. Within this system, much has been written about the abuses and exploitation it engenders (Kassamali 2017, Dagher et al 2020, Fernandez 2021), but what differs especially in countries like Lebanon is the relative lack of role of the state in regulating workers’ rights and protections (Kassamali 2017). This gives private citizens and companies jurisdiction over the treatment of migrant workers while the state recedes into the background (Motaparthy 2015). Through this privatization, a particular class of consumption and mobility is maintained. This has occurred partially through nation-state formation in the region. Some have traced the system to the indentured labor contracts of the Gulf states, where British colonial powers regulated labor and policing the population of migrant workers working as pearl divers and in the oil industry (Longva 1997, AlShehabi 2019, Fernandez 2021). In the Lebanese context, it has also been connected to the rural-to-urban migration of Lebanese women to upper-class homes or regional migration to be under sponsorship contracts in exchange for domestic chore work (Zein 2020). At the same time, after the Gulf oil boom in the 1950s, migrant domestic workers especially

19. The amount of money made from the industry in the private and public sectors has been estimated at $105.6 million in 2019, with an unknown amount making it to migrant domestic workers themselves (Dagher et al 2020).
from South Asia traveled to not only the relatively wealthy Gulf countries, but to Lebanon as a new node in the *kafala* system (Zein 2020).

In this way, an already gendered and classed labor practice became a racialized system as migrant workers from South Asia and East Africa began migrating to Lebanon in the 1970s (Fernandez 2021, Zein 2020). This has given way to a demographic anxiety, one which is baked not only into the *kafala* system, but Lebanon’s sectarian order. In Lebanon, colonial and post-independence era laws have regulated the maintenance of sectarian groupings in national governance, reflecting population anxieties around Muslim and pan-Arab majorities. An 18-sect political system which requires power-sharing and sects to achieve consensus means that gridlocks block legislative reform often (Dagher et al 2020). Shifts in demographics signal shifts in sectarian representation, provoking fears around refugees and migrant workers on paths to citizenship. *Kafala* is another example of this kind of anxiety, leading to a transnational industry where migrants are differentially treated according to hegemonic hierarchies of race and ethnicity. Migrant domestic workers are graded on a pay-scale which largely correlates with skin color (Dagher et al 2020).

Population anxieties also relate to the informal nature of the *kafala* system across national contexts, and therefore the relatively informal nature of *kafala* in Lebanon. In the Gulf, where non-nationals outnumber nationals, the system is more formal and there are relatively stricter laws. Foreign workers born outside of the region often outnumber local citizens, and informal systems became formal “through the diffuse assemblage of these practices with regulations and laws” (Fernandez 2021, p. 4). In contrast, in Lebanon, domestic work is not part of labor law, existing rather as a set of regulations. Here, where
the ratio of “nationals” is greater than migrant domestic workers, the system remains relatively informal, leaving work that happens inside of the household unaccounted for under labor law (Dagher et al 2020). There exist some 250,000 foreign workers in the kafala system (Barkawi 2020, “Lebanon to abolish” 2020) out of the almost 7 million national inhabitants.

Given the connection between the oil boom, rural-to-urban migration, and other labor patterns, kafala is inherently connected to the cosmopolitan imaginaries produced about capital cities in the region. In the Gulf, migrant workers have built the fixtures of capital cities like Dubai and Doha and are a necessary but not officially advertised component of Saudi Arabia’s own “modernization drive” to diversify the economy off oil (Black 2017). In Lebanon, kafala fills a gap left by a lack of state social services, including caretaking for the elderly (Dagher et al 2020). Migrant domestic workers are most often employed by families with dependents (Fakih & Marrouch 2014). In countries like Hong Kong and Taiwan, where there are similar industries of labor, hiring a worker makes it more likely that the female employer will also participate in the labor force (Suen 1993). In Lebanon, distinct from the Gulf and Hong Kong, it is also the middle class that employs migrant domestic workers rather than only the upper class (Fakih & Marrouch 2014). Given the gap between their average pay and minimum wage—estimates state that migrant domestic workers earn $230 in contrast to a national minimum wage of $450—and the wider network of kafala workers working outside of domestic spaces, Lebanese publics writ large benefit from this supply of cheap labor (Dagher et al 2020).
While there are several groups working on the issue of kafala, at the same time, local laws and media ownership structures limit the kinds of coverage and organizing that take place around the issue. This Is Lebanon is one among several groups working to support migrant workers in Lebanon. In this landscape, several NGOs and civil society organizations have campaigned for reform around and abolishment of the kafala system, including groups like Kafa (“Enough”), Anti-Racism Movement (ARM), Caritas, Insan (“Human”), and the Migrant Workers Task-Force. Another recent group which has had overlap with ARM’s Migrant Community Center (MCC) is Enga Legna Besdet20, a feminist group of Ethiopian women who run workshops, campaigns, and solidarity-building projects for other workers across Ethiopia and Lebanon. Therefore, forms of extra-national labor that the transnational Enga Legna Besdet group utilizes are often helpful because non-nationals face limitations or prohibitions in their ability to navigate the legal landscape.

For these reasons, the turn to social media has become an effective way to bypass local laws which limit the organizing potential of workers and regulations which control the coverage of these issues in the wider media landscape. This Is Lebanon (TIL) is a group which runs partially or mostly through extra-national labor but differs from Enga Legna and predecessors in its tactics. According to their website, TIL in its form on social media was founded on May 1, 2017, Lebanese Labor Day, by two former migrant workers named Dipendra Uprety and Priya Subedi. While they now reside outside of the country, Uprety has shared in interviews with international press his experience of

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20 The group was founded in 2017 by Banchi Yimer, a former domestic worker in Lebanon who now runs it from Canada (Sabaghi 2021). The group has helped repatriate hundreds of migrant workers during Lebanon’s continuing socioeconomic collapse (Barkawi 2020).
imprisonment and abuse as a migrant worker in Lebanon. After finding sponsorship with a local church, he began helping abused migrant workers as an honorary representative of the Nepali Consulate. On the website, Uprety notes that while he has witnessed dozens of accounts of women dying in the kafala system, he has only once witnessed one person responsible brought to justice for these kinds of crimes—that person was a non-Lebanese. Uprety explained to Al Jazeera the reason behind his turn to social media, saying, "I had dealt with over a thousand cases. I had a huge headache, we couldn't get them justice. But when we went to social media, we started seeing results" (Azhari, 2019, par. 9).

**Platform exposure and the manipulation of the cosmopolitan ideal**

This turn to social media began with the exposure of a few Lebanese employers, including a man posing as a police officer and a politician and women’s rights advocate. On their website, they write that they are “the first organisation to expose and name the abusers; it was thought that if the abusers were named and shamed, it would act as a deterrent to others” (“About – This is Lebanon” n.d.). The posts on TIL’s Facebook page include a steady stream of content which highlights the experiences of migrant domestic workers who turn to the page for help receiving their salaries, exposing abuse, or finding them a way back home. These posts connect to a website which features more extensive stories and information about these women.
The stories often recount the events in narrative fashion, with titles such as “Serial Abuser Ahlam Hamade Is the Monster in Your Bad Dreams: Caught Mistreating Her 5th Worker,” “Abdallah and Maha Rafi: Lawyers & Slaveholders,” and “The Mighty Cesar Gebara is a Violent Man.” Within these pages there are timelines recounting the events, images of the migrant workers and employers from their personal social media pages, and telephone phone numbers, social media profile URLs, and GPS locations of the employers’ homes and places of work. Along with the employers, the page features the contact information of agencies, journalists, and officials who This Is Lebanon has
rendered complicit with the exploitation of migrant domestic workers. The Facebook page serves to generate audience commentary around the stories.

Uprety has noted that they first try to deal with employers privately before resorting to exposing them on social media. It is this exposure which has received its fair share of attention, praise, and criticism by Lebanese and international press. Several articles describe TIL’s tactics as “shaming” (Allouche 2020, Azhari 2019, Nashed 2019), referencing the ways that TIL exposes the “personal” information of employers as a pressure point for them to meet their demands to end exploitative behavior. In these ways, they invert the gaze of surveillance toward those who have otherwise been able to maintain their privacy. B. Fernandez (2021) notes that part of the power that employers wield over workers is their sovereignty over the home space. This combines with the state’s role in both receding in terms of protection and exerting itself in terms of surveillance and spectacle trials, leaving the home which doubles as place of work at the discretion of Lebanese employers.

Figure 14 Translation: “Blackmailing and talking about people in this way is shameful”

Through their ability to leverage the imagined power of social media platforms, TIL is a new permutation of older groups which work to pressure political action. These have included pressure groups that push citizens to vote by sending mail threatening to reveal their voting status, AIDS activism, and advocacy around the plight of migrant workers
Pressure groups have been described as groups which work to influence or lobby for sociopolitical change in the realm of policy or other efforts. These have included journalist lobby groups in the MENA region (Sakir 2007), US groups working against media violence in the 1960s (Carwile 2021), those on either side of the issue of abortion (Lovenduski et al 1986), grassroots organizations working on activism around the AIDS epidemic (Gould 2009), churches and labor unions (Watts 2007), and environmental issues (Carnwath 2016).

TIL is also an NGO, registered in Canada and the US, which can act as pressure groups. They have been called “civic pressure groups” (Arts 2004), operating at the local, national, and global level. They are considered non-governmental organizations which work toward “the delivery of services to people in need, and the organization of policy advocacy, and public campaigns in pursuit of social transformation” (Lewis 2009), first introduced in 1945 by the UN Charter after World War II (Martens 2002) and proliferating in the 1980s and 1990s development era. Further, their relationships to states and government institutions vary, with some working closely with policymakers and others focusing on public influence (Baggott 1995).

The very reliance on NGOs like TIL for activism and politics is related to both the formation of nation states in the MENA region (and other postcolonial sites) and the application of structural adjustment policies. In the 1980s and 1990s, with structural adjustment policies came a lack of public investment by the state and decreased social welfare. This began generating a gap for international aid money and civil society organizations to take on these sectors and roles. There was a larger proliferation of NGOs and civil society discourse across countries that have contended with proxy war, civil
war, and foreign intervention like Lebanon, Palestine, Afghanistan, and others (Jad 2007). Some have written of the way that this perpetuates asymmetrical power relations, whereby “much activism within NGOs is creating an economy of victimhood that is ultimately dependent on funding provided by states in the Global North” (Abu-Assab et al 2020).

This points partially to the way social media functions in contexts where socio-legal protections are mainly provided by political parties or NGOs rather than the state. In the MENA region, what has been called “NGO-ization” or “NGOism” by some has led to a reliance on international donor aid and development models for issues of social change21 (Armstrong & Prashad 2005, Jad 2007). This may be seen as part of a larger proliferation of NGOs and civil society discourse which expanded exponentially in the 1980s and 1990s (Choudry 2010), when structural adjustment policies, a lack of public investment by the state, and decreased social welfare has produced a gap for international aid money and civil society organizations to take on these roles. The turn to social media to fill the gap left by state functions then follows along such extra-state histories.

For issues like kafala, advocacy and reporting are often done outside of formal systems of complaint and reporting. Farah Salkah of the Anti-Racism Movement in Lebanon, has reflected on this, writing:

Critics should first look at the failures of Lebanon’s non-existent legal justice system in relation to migrant domestic workers,’ she says. ‘Are all the cases on

21. Islah Jad (2007) has described the “NGO-ization” of social movements, whereby “issues of collective concern are transformed into projects in isolation from the general context in which they are applied and without taking due consideration of the economic, social and political factors affecting them” (p. 177).
This Is Lebanon’s site 100-per-cent accurate? I don’t know… But how does one really get evidence of all the atrocities that are happening in the houses around us in this country if the authorities don’t intervene? (De Stone and Suber, 2019)

She points to the way that social media activism is filling a gap left by formal justice mechanisms. Formal groups working within Lebanon face obstacles in organizing around kafala, including citizenship prohibitions for heads of NGOs, the threat of arrest, and other legal regulations. This is why TIL turns to social media to expose issues of exploitation. In doing so, they join other social media groups like ThawraMap who have tracked and shamed politicians out of social establishments during the revolution (Collard 2020). In the absence of formal mechanisms, social media can be seen as filling a gap in protections for migrant domestic workers.

The turn to social media for 157amingg and shaming” as a political tactic has garnered much discussion in studies of digital media and communication (Banet-Weiser 2018, Burgess et al 2017, El-Ariss 2019, Chun 2016, O’Neill 2022, Paasonen & Sunden 2021). Wendy Chun (2016) has discussed the related “epistemology of outing,” a logic which comes from the imaginary of networks that digital media has cultivated. These logics prompt questions about the power of exposure and information leak online, questions like, “what form of humanitarianism does not also rely on the assumption that, if atrocities happen, it is because they are not known?” This recalls a point made over a decade ago, when Evelyn Sedgwick (2003) referenced the paranoid mode of reading, one which “acts as though its work would be accomplished if only it could finally, this time, somehow get its story truly known” (p. 138). In other words, there may be other reasons for exposure that have less to do with its outcomes and more to do with the way it is felt.
This recognizes an affective dimension to exposure which is more than information-uncovering (El-Ariss 2019).

The paranoid mode that Sedgwick cites points to TIL’s ability to leverage exposure and its associated affects. It is the threat of exposure that TIL weaponizes through the digital *bahdala*, mobilizing not necessarily shame or embarrassment, but generating paranoia about its potential. Paranoia, according to some affect theorists, can be viewed as a response to waiting for potential shame or humiliation (Sedgwick 2004, Tomkins 1963). It can come from the degree to which shame or humiliation appears to be peaking around the corner, constituting a “strong theory” of a negative affect (Sedgwick 2004). This means that there is a temporal nature to the work of paranoia; it stays effective by never bringing the thing to be feared to fruition (Ahmed 2004). Paranoia saturates the world with the potential for negative affects like shame or humiliation, working through temporal frames.

Paranoia is inherently connected to social media through visibility paradigms. Erik Erikson (1965) describes shame as being “visible and not ready to be visible” (p. 244). This happens while new economies of visibility have emerged around the social media and neoliberal landscape put more emphasis on visibility as “an end in itself” (Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 67). On platforms like Facebook, where TIL mostly functions, visibility operates as an organizing framework (Banet-Weiser 2018). These are what Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) has called economies of visibility, which rely on a marketplace of consumption, labor, and production. She offers that “[t]hese are also the spaces that enable visibility of the body, that ask users to evaluate and judge the body,
that function as spaces for public shaming” and “where profit is in some ways contingent on number of views” (p. 27).

These meditations on exposure recognize paranoia as baked into the logics that networks rely upon, a paranoia which “stems from the attempt to solve political problems technologically” (Chun 2005, p. viii). These modes of exposure are the logic of social media platforms like Facebook, which TIL is very active on. They are part of this trend toward publicizing what was previously considered private life (Thompson 1995, van Dijck 2013). Platforms like Facebook were launched with visions of global imaginaries, projecting notions of transparency and a distributed empathy that would be the solution to social ills. Their leadership has referenced its goal of a more open, transparent, and empathetic world (van Dijck 2013). These discourses of a global village have long circulated in neoliberal imaginaries of networked communication. It is thus the relationship between social media platforms and the generation of audiovisual evidence and paranoia that make the digital pressure group different from the pressure group.

As such, digital bahdala, with its conferral of failure, brings out the paranoia of exposure to an imagined cosmopolitan audience connected through the platform. In the next section, I return to Tufa’s case, describing how TIL leverages these imaginaries in the digital bahdala.

**Engineering the digital bahdala: The digital as transnational**

I focus on the case of Tufa as a particular manifestation of a wider phenomenon of the engineering of the digital bahdala, or other practices of “naming and shaming.” Namely, it is instructive for the way it activated an international media circuit, operating as a case par excellence of the pressure applied through extra-national labor. In its commentary
and reliance on narratives of national failure, it shows how the bahdala, as a repeated tactic for the digital pressure group, relies on the desirability of a place in the global body politic. It shows how this provokes a paranoid media landscape which contends with the threat of being shamed toward a transnational audience, one that is invested in the way the nation is represented to others, but also those who are interpellated by spectacles of victimhood and violence.

Due to Tufa’s employer, Eleanore Ajami, the owner of the Lebanese fashion line, Eleanore Couture, the case is a prime example of the way that TIL operates most effectively, as they provided an example par excellence of a cosmopolitan imaginary to be shattered. Tufa’s case gained visibility online nine months after she began working in Lebanon. She reportedly came from Ethiopia in July of 2017 and began working for the Ajami-Khalil family (“This Is Lebanon” 2019). In a documentary shot by TIL following Tufa’s return to Ethiopia, she explains that the conditions that she experienced upon her arrival did not match what she was promised. Her passport was taken upon arrival, she worked from 6 AM to midnight without days off, sewed clothing for the company rather than cleaning, and was forced to sleep in the shop rather than in a bedroom in a house. In the documentary, she recounts the physical abuse she experienced by the family when she made mistakes with the sewing or when the house was not clean to their satisfaction (This Is Lebanon 2019). On March 11, 2018, she jumped from the second-story balcony of the family’s house. When the video of her from her hospital bed circulated by TIL across social media, international press began to pick up the story. As soon as it did, TIL began to reshape on their own Facebook profile, urging others to share the coverage and boosting their posts accordingly.
TIL’s use of *bahdala* here is illustrative, especially because it displays the role of diaspora in contexts like Lebanon, where significant remittances are sent home by nationals living abroad. As a digital pressure group, TIL uses the *bahdala* to trigger an economy of desire to belong to a global body politic. They reshared news about the case by Euro-American and Western publications and platforms like the UK’s *The Sun* and *The Daily Mail*, Australia’s *News.com.au*, and *Human Rights Watch*. They launched a campaign to inform international customers of the Eleanore Couture dresses that the employer was embroiled in controversy. What is more, they invited page followers to interact with celebrities who were spotted wearing their dresses, letting them know that the dresses were made through “slave labor.” They also explained that they boosted posts to reach these audiences, referencing this in comments underneath posts about the case.
In this way, they leverage the power of exposure to this imagined world to prompt employers to meet their demands. Their very name—“This Is Lebanon”—convinces an audience who will soon know the truth about Lebanon, rather than what is presented in hegemonic discourse of the country as modern, cosmopolitan, and liberal in an otherwise troublesome region. It resonates with content that has been used both as a tourism campaign highlighting the wonders of Egypt’s heritage and history—Egypt’s tourism campaign, “This is Egypt” (“This is Egypt” 2017)—as well as social commentary around police brutality in the US—Childish Gambino’s “This is America” music video (Murai 2018). “This is Lebanon” merges both, suggesting that there is something that needs to be seen. Common tropes around Lebanon as a tourist destination, including its ski slopes, its beaches, and its nightlife, were, following this genre of video, meant to be shattered.

It echoes commentary around *Capernaum*, a film depicting the refugee crisis and the *kafala* system in Lebanon, of which one journalist notes, “There is no sight of the Mediterranean Sea or the glamour of the so-called Paris of the Middle East. This is another side of the Lebanese capital” (Qureshi 2018). TIL conjures an audience who has an idea of the tourism and luxury imaginary which must be busted with the reality of life for those in the *kafala* system.

In other cases, they highlight gesture to this world through the news platforms that are exposing Lebanon’s slave system—“Readers all around the world, including UK and
USA, are finding out about slavery in Lebanon.” They regularly hashtag “#BlackLivesMatter” and highlight comparisons to police brutality in the US, beckoning toward US movements and political events. These include titles and comments like, “America has Donald Trump and Harvey Weinstein. Lebanon has Michel Hayek,” or comparisons made to the UK context. They invoke social media users to “SendUsHome” and #ChooseToChallengeKafala, conjuring an audience with the power to make a choice. They share news articles by sites like Vice as well as Dutch platforms and position them as “the world.” In these ways, TIL leverages desires and investments in global belonging that undergird the platform.

![Image](https://example.com/image.png)

*Figure 17: Appendix C2:15*
In this way, TIL positions their page toward an audience that is concerned with campaigns in the US around police violence, racial justice, and labor movements. They are positioned as ‘the world’ by TIL as well as audiences, evidenced by audience engagement with the page. In comments on posts which share information about other cases of abuse, this discourse of the “world” was repeated: “so that [t]he whole world would see it” (Appendix C2: 11), “a bad reputation around the world” (Appendix C2: 12) and “so that the world can get to know about them” (Appendix C2: 10). In many interactions with the page, commenters and TIL gestured to an outside world that would soon know about Lebanon’s horrors.

Their commentary reflects the imaginary upon which platforms like Facebook help cultivate. Social media platforms and especially Facebook have leveraged this sense of connectivity, transparency, and openness to the world, reflecting a language of
sociality rather than one of marketability and technological progress (van Dijck 2013, p. 50). While these platforms and their affordances boast concepts like “sharing,” these social veneers align with hegemonic discourses of cosmopolitanism, branded as the prized way of being in the world. As such, Facebook leverages the power of concepts like “sharing” and “transparency” to create a more appealing and profitable service that invites users to engage. If an imagined worldliness is desired, there is value to be generated from this desire.

There are affordances that facilitate and are built upon this imaginary. Through the integration of hyperlinks from external websites, they can create a narrative around news items, commenting on the audience sizes of the publications and using the imaginaries of platforms themselves to extend their imagined reach. Audiences are invited to discuss this commentary. Facebook account holders can comment on every post, as well as directly reply to other individuals. They can tag individuals to make a pointed comment to them, personalizing questions. They also use the platform to boost posts to the diaspora or to the local community in the area where the employers live. Indeed, they remark about the reach of these posts, noting that their videos are embedded in international news articles and sharing screenshots of the reach of these posts (Appendix C2:3).

TIL then mobilizes an imaginary of ‘the world’ who is witnessing the bahdala by utilizing the affordances of the platform. In this way, they channel the affects of diaspora and those who are interpellated by the spectacle of national failure on the platform. Underneath the posts, account holders are invited to respond to narratives of national failure, articulating either a defense of Lebanon or an acceptance of its shame. In several
posts, commenters explain that this is not ALL of Lebanon or the Lebanese. They contest the exceptionalism of *kafala*, bringing up examples of exploitation in other contexts. In one example, a commenter responds to a post that TIL posted comparing *kafala* to other national labor systems. She notes that the UK also has its problems. The commenter, and the others like her who point to other contexts where violence and exploitation take place, suggests that the nation cannot be a failure because other countries, countries that might not be thought of as failures, also have forms of exploitation.

![Image of a comment thread](image)

*Figure 19: Appendix C2:1*

In other examples, commenters on the page take the opposite stance, but still reinforce the same underlying logic of national failure by trafficking in the very shame that TIL does. For example, in response to one case highlighted by TIL, commenters lamented Lebanon’s third or perhaps fourth-world status. They position justice systems in the UK as superior and describe Lebanon’s chaotic and backward nature. Some comments refer to carceral logics as solutions for this kind of abuse, framing Lebanon as an uncivilized
country. In these ways, particular subjects become part of the right kind of ‘we’ by being on the right side of shame.

As such, these examples show two ways of reacting to the bahdala which are discursively different but rely on the same affective encounter. In generating and relying on debates about global belonging, the digital bahdala generates collectivities who are positioned differently in relation to shame. Several posts from Tufa’s case, as well as cases that followed, expressed such sentiments of shame in response to posts about the cases. As we saw in chapter two with the case at the WEF, these are those who either accept the nation’s shame, trafficking it in, or reject it. Those that accept the shame—“we should be ashamed” or “shame on them”—align toward cosmopolitan belonging and the fear of losing access to global imaginaries, while those that reject the shame—“this
doesn’t represent Lebanon”—align toward more nationalist ends, still concerned with the
global body politic but aligning toward a more autonomous mode of belonging.

These posts help cohere an audience which responds to narratives of national
failure, debating whether this *is* Lebanon. Comments are accentuated with emojis and
engaged with through ‘likes.’ These engagements, however, are not only an expression of
agreement or acceptance, but a valuable indicator for platforms and other corporations
(van Dijck 2013). These expressions of shame or its refusal generated through these
repeated exposures become the manner through which future activities are decided. It is
how TIL’s viability is secured; through the repeated engagement of those who consume
the national failure or *bahdala* as a genre of media. In this way, there is a temporal
dimension to digital *bahdala*, relying on the potential for humiliation which manifests in
paranoia.

**Paranoia and economies of visibility**

This question of futurity brings temporality to the forefront of what separates the digital
pressure group and the pressure group. While pressure groups have also historically
worked to influence the political landscape, digital pressure groups like TIL work by
producing the potential for exposure and humiliation as a mode of operation.

TIL’s viability is premised upon the belief that the platform connects to a wider
cosmopolitan world. This is not to say that they rely on the technical affordances of the
platform or the exposure of individuals, but rather on the imaginary of these affordances
as a spectacle of global access. We see this in the way that they remark about the ability
to use the platform to boost posts to the diaspora or to the local community in the area
where the employers live. These often look like screenshots of the reach of posts,
sometimes showing how many people have been reached through their budget and how many were reached through users’ engagement with the post. Their power then lies not in the actual access that they have to global audiences, but in their conjuring of these affordances of the platform. Much like Taina Bucher (2018) has noted about the way that algorithms take on a kind of spectacular power through their materialization as cultural artifacts which tell stories, the reach of posts becomes a spectacle of the power of the platform and its capacity to reach imagined audiences.

Access to this imaginary through the platform maintains their bargaining power with employers. In one response to a commenter who asked the page to “name and shame” the influencer that they were referencing, they note that they unfortunately could not expose her. They replied, writing that “this would compromise our ability to negotiate with employers in the future and would be detrimental to the cases of workers who presently
have or will have cases with us” (Appendix C2:13). In the process, they admit that the employer’s feeling about their potential for future exposure becomes their bargaining chip. They operate on the assumption that employers will not be able to know whether exposure and potential humiliation will take place, knowing rather that it could.

As evidenced in several posts about TIL’s cases, we see that they rely on the potential for reach to this imagined audience as a powerful affective motivator. Their screenshots which explain the ‘total’ and ‘organic’ numbers of people who are reached indicate their willingness to sponsor posts and the potential for this to then reach an audience that is larger than intended. Much like it is “the promise of potential stardom and economic revenue” that urges digital content creators to produce on platforms (Bucher 2018), it is the potential for access to cosmopolitan audiences that encourages desired behavior on the platform. Viewers are enmeshed in a pedagogical space that stages the habitual bahdala and its affective economies of shame. This shame is around the possibility to expose what has been “personal” or “private” for those who have previously been able to secure their privacy.
This also recognizes the way that paranoia, through questions of temporality, are baked into the logics of platforms, drawing on an affective condition around leaks as digital practices and embodied performance (El-Ariss 2019). Writing of the 1990s dot-com era and the rise of cyberporn, Wendy Chun (2005) notes that the uncertainty around whether information was being “seen” was part of the Internet’s technical specifications. In other work (2016), she notes that new media are by definition leaky, writing that “a networked personal computer is an oxymoron” (p. 12). In this way, “it is not that someone could be looking but that—at any point in the future—someone could look”

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22. Seeing, she notes, is not a straightforward concept, given the proliferation of fiber-optics (Chun 2005, p. 86).
(Chun 2005, p. 86). Paranoia, explains Chun, comes from the move toward “prevention” as a political and policing tactic.

This logic can be found in the rise of fiber-optics, large-scale events like 9/11, and policing practices, where control is sought through prevention, and where the idea of freedom that is produced that is based on fear (Anker 2014, Chun 2005). For this reason, we can think of the politics of the digital age in relation to the prevention of humiliation. In a piece which recognizes the role of shame as a kind of digital switch which cuts off good feeling or triggers bad feeling, Silvan Tomkins’ (1963) describes the body’s preventative work to detect evidence of potential bad feeling:

“The entire cognitive apparatus is in a constant state of alert for possibilities, imminent or remote, ambiguous or clear. Like any highly organized effort at detection, as little as possible is left to chance. The radar antennae are placed wherever it seems possible the enemy may attack. Intelligence officers may monitor even unlikely conversations if there is an outside chance something relevant may be detected or if there is a chance that two independent bits of information taken together may give indication of the enemy’s intentions…But above all there is a highly organized way of interpreting information so that what is possibly relevant can be quickly abstracted and magnified, and the rest discarded” (p. 433 as cited in Sedgwick 2003, p. 135).

In this formulation, the body is in a constant state of vigilance to prevent what Sedgwick (2004) calls “bad surprises.” Paranoia here is a way of policing borders to prevent ‘external’ threats from coming ‘in.’ In this way it is an apt affect to describe the structure of feeling which undergirds the *kafala* system itself. Systems like *kafala* which generate
racialized others in processes of nation-building are inherently ‘paranoid’—they rely on the difference between nationals and non-nationals. As Bina Fernandez (2021) notes, it is not only an issue of ethnicity; there is a production of racial others to affirm national citizenship.

Like these promises of networked communication as private and personal hubs of information (Chun 2005), *kafala* produces the privacy of national citizens. It is not a natural resource or quality one has, but a concept that is produced. *Kafala*, as a set of regulations which stands outside of labor law through its place in the domestic sphere, is a site of instability around the very divide of the private and the public. Both social media and *kafala* straddle the public and private divide, imbued with the capacity to upend it at a moment’s notice. Put together, *bahdala* alerts us to an uneasiness about the extra-national quality of both, highlighting a crisis of national and bodily sovereignty.

TIL upends this imagined privacy through its status as not only a digital pressure group, but an international NGO. As a digital pressure group, it can evade state capture through anonymity and extra national labor. However, as noted, when Tufa’s case became the subject of a media trial on the *Al Jadeed* channel, the Ajami-Khalil family lawyer suggested that these kinds of cases were often orchestrated by international organizations working to misconstrue the facts of cases of alleged abuse, exploitation, and violence against migrant domestic workers. She said,

“There are many organizations funded from abroad whose apparent goal is to support migrant workers…and to change the Lebanese laws…but in reality, what’s happening is that there is competition between these organization to see
who can get the media scoop by getting a case. Whether it’s true or not doesn’t matter to make a scandal (fadiha) to show funders abroad.”

While her comments may appear to be the stuff of conspiracy theory, they also point to legacies of intervention in the region, proxy war, coups, and the aforementioned “NGO-ization” of social services in the region (Jad 2007). While NGOs have provided these social services, at the same time, they have been critiqued for their role in pushing (neo)liberal and Orientalist discourses which resonate with imperial histories (Mahmood 2005, Massad 2008). For these reasons, paranoia around NGOs is baked into the structure of the postcolonial state. John Jackson (2008) has pointed to the suspicion and paranoia that has accompanied structural shifts in race relations in the US, writing that “subtler forms of racism, forms more difficult to define or even see, have actually made it tougher to operationalize the phenomenon today” (p. 8). In a similar way that the subtle racism of the late 1990s and early 2000s in public US discourse was a remnant of blatantly racist structural policies and regulations as they have crystallized as historical accounts and in bodies, NGO-ization can be seen as a remnant of colonial histories, provoking paranoia around intention and benevolence where it is made harder to visibly point out. While Jackson writes of these dynamics within the nation, this case incorporates the transnational, investigating what happens, recursively, when this paranoia is about foreign others to the nation and its citizenship structures. In this way, TIL diagnoses the paranoia of a postcolonial state which fears losing access its cosmopolitan imaginary. It grapples with the reality of a national imaginary supported by extra-national labor and capital in the form of kafala work and diaspora remittances. Introducing a transnational
dimension to questions of digital activism shows the forms of value that come from the production of national imaginaries online.

However, at the same time, leveraging this cosmopolitan imaginary through the digital *bahdala* still requires particular kinds of labor on social media platforms. We may think of TIL and other groups which work to ‘publicly shame’ through social media as operating through economies which structure and frame informal justice in this landscape. Drawing on scholarship around visibility structures and economies (Wiegman 1995, Gray 2013, Gambetti 2013) Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) argues that across media platforms in the neoliberal landscape, the politics of visibility are a profitable end in themselves, rather than a means to an end (p. 23). This means that value is to be generated through the visibility or representation of politics, making visual testimony desirable for platforms and activist groups alike. We have seen that TIL relies on these economies of visibility to leverage the threat of exposure, producing it as a form of valuable content. That sites like Facebook operate through these economies means that TIL must continue to provide content which generates engagement.

In this case, it is not only visibility, but affect, which becomes the end rather than the means to the end. If shame, or rather paranoia, is the telos, or end-goal, what is required to make people feel it? In the next section, I examine the labor required when a feeling is sought as an end, rather than a means to one (in much the same way Banet-Weiser argues that visibility becomes the end). In the next section, I examine the way that the digital *bahdala* relies on national others who are invested with the capacity to align publics toward cosmopolitan belonging, or away from it. The digital pressure group applies pressure, but that pressure is not generated in a vacuum. These women must then
embody the shameful practice so that others might feel shame or paranoia. As a group which works to change the feeling of those with power, it requires the work of those who are being exploited. By engineering the bahdala, digital pressure groups also pressure victims of the kafala system to interiorize shame on behalf of others who look on.

This reframes our attention away from the employing families who are often cited as losing out if the kafala system were to be dismantled. They draw attention away from the lucrative industry which helps produce cosmopolitan belonging as a mode of being. They instead locate the origin of their power in the performances of workers who are vital to the maintenance of Lebanon’s hegemonic cosmopolitan imaginary. In the next section, I discuss the emphasis placed on migrant domestic workers to be read in legible ways, offering that the digital pressure group produces paranoia temporally, through the future-oriented possibility of shame.

**Pressure in the digital pressure group**

While TIL and its capacity to trigger bad feeling in targeted audiences does work to free some women from imminently violent conditions, we must examine the way that power is structured in this dynamic. By relying on the desirability of cosmopolitan imaginaries, they must generate evidence that these employers fail to live up to those ideals. This means not only reemphasizing this cosmopolitan belonging as a desirable mode of being, but requiring visual performances of suffering to be effective. It upholds a dynamic where victims of exploitation must perform to generate paranoia in nationals. In this way, this section has implications for questions of fellow-feeling, empathy, and other forms of affect management that seek to make those with more power feel something. This can be
evidenced in the kinds of public discourse about the visibility of *kafala* in popular media as spectacular forms of violence.

In an instructive example of the kinds of visibility that *kafala* is achieving in international media circuits, the 2019 Lebanese film *Capernaum* achieved international recognition for its depiction of the refugee crisis and the *kafala* system in Lebanon. Some have described it was ‘poverty porn’ for the depiction of refugees and migrant domestic workers, as well as the decision to hire real people rather than actors to star in the film (Nasr 2019, Saghaier 2018). Nonetheless, international audiences cohering around the international festival marveled at the violent conditions it portrayed, with even Oprah celebrating the “compelling” and “worthy” film (McFarlane 2019). It becomes Lebanon’s second film to ever be nominated for an Oscar.

We see the political import of this in the local media context, where expressions of shame and embarrassment about *kafala* circulate through official and popular discourse. It has been called a “retrograde, immoral, and fundamentally embarrassing system” by Triangle, a policy organization in Beirut which works with major international NGOs (“Cleaning up” 2020). In an article about *kafala* in New/Lines Magazine, an Amnesty International campaigner says, “This shameful pattern of abuses has to end” (Di Ilio 2021). In 2007, an article by Nadim Houry on the *Human Rights Watch* website entitled, “Lebanon’s slaves, Lebanon’s shame” discussed a French documentary, "Liban, Pays des Esclaves,” (“Lebanon, Slave Country,”) and its criticism of Lebanon’s *kafala* system. In this piece, Houry wrote that rather than being outraged by Lebanon’s treatment of these workers, many Lebanese were outraged by their perceived reputation in France. He noted that while attitudes may be starting to shift, there was still
much work to be done: “Until then, we all share in the shame of the continuing abusive practices committed against migrants who came to work for us” (Houry, 2007).

Discourses of shame have also been mobilized in rhetoric by officials, generating their own forms of social capital. When labor minister Camille Abousleiman was appointed to his post in January 2019, press and activists wrote of a renewed hope for labor relations in the country, pointing to his international accolades from a UK-based institution and his lack of political affiliation with the usual Lebanese sectarian structure. They cited his attitude toward the kafala system as a welcomed change in state attitudes toward the kafala system. In a Twitter post on February 16, 2019, he wrote, “Withholding the passports of domestic workers in Lebanon is forbidden and illogical, and shame on us for behaving in such an inhumane way.” This statement received a response from Farah Salka, a co-founder of Anti-Racism Movement, one of the most active groups advocating for migrant workers in Lebanon. In an article by the London-based online news outlet Middle East Eye, she said, “I don’t expect anything to change, [but] the fact we have a minister who is ashamed about the situation is something to be happy about” (Chehayeb 2019). Here, expressions of bad feeling about bahdala are evidence of political progress and cosmopolitan belonging.

In this case study and others, the bahdala, as an event is experienced by more than the individual target. Rather than autonomous affects generated by platforms, we can think of those who must labor for it. Like any other affective economy, there is labor involved. In this case, the paranoia leveraged at employers is not, as Ahmed (2004) writes of the mobilization of emotions, something being made from nothing. To produce the potential for exposure and shame, labor is required. In this case, it is the labor of
those exploited in the *kafala* system that produces the potential for exposure by embodying the nation’s shameful practices.

This is evident in the way that shame is not only expressed by those speaking on behalf of or about the nation, but it is also read on the bodies of migrant domestic workers. Shame is especially invested in the bodies of migrant domestic workers in journalistic and academic discourse. A common description of laborers in the system is that they are humiliated or ashamed. Bina Fernandez (2021), comparing *kafala* to the Indian caste system, has called it a “system of racialized institutional humiliation” (p. 7). Journalists writing about it have described *kafala* workers as having shame. For *News/Lines*, the author describes a former worker remembering her experience “almost with shame” and speaking in an “ashamed” way (Di Ilio 2021). This Is Lebanon describes Tufa as being “humiliated” on television (“Lensa’s hospital bed” 2018). Across media coverage and academic discourse, shame is located in the bodies of migrant domestic workers, suggesting that those who stand apart from national violations can read it on their bodies.

When shame becomes attributed to others that are read as having it, it reveals an uneven but relational topography of feeling. Scholarship in feminist and queer studies have recognized this topography, describing the systems which invest particular bodies with feeling, making them legible in particular ways (Ahmed 2004, Chun 2016, Palmer 2017, Yao 2021). Interiorizing emotion in this way is to locate it as a personal feeling in the body rather than to understand it as a set of relations, rendering it personal and private, rather than structural. Such “inside-out” or “outside-in” models of emotion, writes Ahmed (2004), take for granted that the subjects they talk about are pre-given and
arrive to the table at neutral. They mirror notions of autonomous affect which ignore the way that feeling becomes invested in bodies within existing systems of power. If the happiness of some (Ahmed 2010), like the privacy of some (Chun 2016), is linked to others who must labor to produce it, and the privacy of some was built on the captivity of others (Chun 2016, Spillers 1987), then kafala conjoins both, helping to produce a cosmopolitan belonging in which some work for the good feeling of others. Kafala makes clear the need for a relational approach to affect, and beyond that, the economies that mobilize them, supposedly depositing them ‘into’ other bodies.

This is because TIL, as a digital pressure group, relies on economies of visibility which manage the way issues become represented in popular discourse. Writing of the corporations and industries that structure the way that political categories are made visible Banet-Weiser (2018) cites Zeynep Gambetti’s work on the Gezi protests to show how representations were “pinned...to available structures without letting new meanings emerge” (para. 1 as cited in Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 24). In an example of these structures of visibility, Didier Fassin and Estelle D’halluin (2005) recognize the development of immigration policies, medical expertise, and legal frameworks which render the need for evidence of violence to be visible on the asylum seeker’s body. Marking a shift toward more restrictive immigration policies, they note, “Although their word is systematically doubted, it is their bodies that are questioned; however, quite often these bodies speak little, for it is in the torturer’s interests to silence them” (p. 598). In this case, migrant domestic workers whose exploited labor does not always involve physical violence by employers have no recourse to action if their exploitation does not adhere to these economies of visibility.
Along these lines, I argue that what is made legible is not only bodies, but affect to be read on the body. As I have shown in the previous case study about the Lebanese tourist to Egypt, these bodies become bodies to be read and mined for the right kinds of affects—here, expressions of pain and suffering. This is evident in the circulation of Tufa’s place on the talk show stage, bandaged, in a hospital bed, recanting her statements about the family’s abuse. The apparent pain of her body, rather than in her words, achieved transnational circulation and triggered pronouncements of shame across Facebook. It becomes the means through which publics can judge, express belief, and name shameful ways of being. Several write that they were convinced of her account after reading her body for clues.

This economy demands that some become legible and visible, able to be read. As Banet-Weiser (2018) notes of the gendered and gendering nature of these digital economies, the body’s “value is constantly deliberated over, surveilled, evaluated, judged, and scrutinized through media discourses, law, and policy” (p. 28). Such platform logics of engagement invite this audience to take notice, read, and judge; indeed, they rely on it. In Tufa’s case, after the talk show interview, TIL’s Facebook page was the site of speculation about signs that she was being coerced to recant her statements by the family.
Several screenshots from a TV interview of her were shared, with one commenter reading for clues in her posture and clothing to gauge whether she was being truthful or coerced.

Across other cases highlighted by TIL, commenters engage in debates about how to read the bodies of migrant domestic workers. In several posts, workers or former workers are not only giving accounts of their experiences in verbal form but showing corporeal evidence of violence to audiences. In one account, a migrant domestic worker comments on the post herself, defending her claims by showing the ill-fitting slippers she
was forced to work with. Commenters then pose doubt about her claims, suggesting that the slippers aren’t that expensive in Lebanon.

This kind of comment exchange, where disbelief and suspicion take front stage, are not only desirable, helping to sustain their negotiation power, but inevitable when the digital bahdala, a tactic of the digital pressure group, depends on visual testimony. Writing of the experience of black women who are labeled “killjoys” for pointing out racism in hegemonic kinds of feminism, Sara Ahmed (2010) describes the way that gendered and raced bodies become invested with different interiorities. She writes, “The exposure of
violence becomes the origin of violence. The black woman must let go of her anger for the white woman to move on” (p. 39). She shows how the problem seems to emanate from the one pointing it out. In the example above, the friend of the employing family says that she “can’t believe” what “Tina”\(^{23}\) is saying about the experiences she had with her employers. Here, she becomes the origin of the problem for not simply asking —“you can ask them sure they will bring you.” Not only is this name likely given to her so that Lebanese employers would be able to more easily pronounce it (it does not match her Facebook profile name), but the woman blames her for the state of her own conditions.

These ways of reading the body point to the uneven topography of believability in such systems of exploitation. We see this in the comments which debate the truth-claims of women, suggesting that they are excessive—“she is overdoing it with her screaming”—or that their bodies are transparent—“If you look at that girl you can tell that she’s being told on what to say.” Their bodies come to be invested with affects and motivations, reflecting longer histories of associations between excessive emotionality and people of color. As scholars of race and affect have suggested, forms of animatedness are often associated with racialized others (Chen 2012, Ngai 2005, Palmer 2017, Yao 2021), and these ways of reading emotion help produce race as border-making (Ahmed 2004). In the very practice of reading others’ bodies, there is an expectation of “excessive affects and demonstrative physicality,” showing the very boundaries of universalist theories of the human and of affect (Yao 2021, p. 33).

By creating visual testimony that is open for debate, in fact meant to open debate on platforms like Facebook, we can see that the pressure that impresses upon the

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23. “Tina” is assumed to be the name that Nana Akua Adepa was given in Lebanon.
employers being exposed is generated by kafala workers. It is a pressure which requires workers to perform the right kind of suffering to be read as the proper victim. We can see this in other online campaigns which construct the body to be saved to activate the right kind of public feeling. In a social media campaign, which was started after Boko Haram’s 2014 kidnapping of schoolgirls in Nigeria, images of the girls veiled and stories of them being prohibited from receiving schooling prompted international campaigns. One such campaign was the #BringBackOurGirls campaign, where celebrities and officials expressed support across social media by using the hashtag and circulating images of the girls. Describing this campaign, Kamari Maxine Clarke (2019) writes:

> “Not only are the images and the block-art posters used in ways that enhance people’s engagement with it, they also represent contemporary democratic values that tie the logic of freedom to the body to be protected. This body is increasingly being seen as a site of global action” (p. 120).

The digital pressure group as requires this labor to generate alignments toward proper nationhood. As a site of global action, there is an emphasis on the body’s capacity to carry meaning for an imagined audience.

Often, it is visuals of women’s battered bodies which circulate, allowing audiences to express their belief or disbelief. In a similar case to Tufa, an Indonesian migrant domestic worker named Erwiana Sulistyaningsih became a poster child for the horrors of migrant domestic work in Hong Kong after her story circulated across social media. Like Tufa, Sulistyaningsih was interviewed from bed by press. A Google search of her name bring up images of her in academic, journalistic, and NGO spaces, contributing to the image of her as a victim-hero. She was even featured on the 100 Most
Influential People list by Time in 2014 (Wahyudi & Allmark 2016, Mam 2014). Like Tufa’s case, Facebook played a major role in activating the international news circuit, with coverage by outlets like CNN, BBC, and Al Jazeera circulating images of her bruised body. Like Tufa, she had similarly activated international press.

In this case, too, the body became framed as evidence of the shame of a nation. Echoing NGO and journalist discourse around Lebanon’s kafala, Hong Kong’s migrant domestic worker system was framed as its “hidden shame” (Kaufman 2014). The suggestion that these are “hidden,” and that Sulistyaningsih was “the public face of an invisible economy” (Chen 2015) points again to a global body politic as the imagined audience. While these countries do not have a great deal in common according to dominant characterizations of their economies or governance structures, they have both had major mobilizations over the last several years which have been evaluated in international media, and they both have sizable migrant domestic worker economies which help to sustain their cosmopolitan imaginaries. Specifically, they have been framed as sites which are “losing” freedom, liberal life, and hope after recent mobilizations and contestations over power (Ghattas 2021), reflecting anxieties about countries “losing” a cosmopolitan imaginary.

As bodies to be read, they become invested with the power to shock audiences, shame them, or make them feel the threat of exposure by embodying those emotions, for those audiences, themselves. Like VR technology or film festival cinema which promise

24 According to Wahyudi and Allmark (2016), when another Indonesian migrant worker at the airport, Yanti, encountered Sulistyaningsih with her injuries, she did not believe that they were from a skin condition, as Sulistyaningsih claimed. When she found that they were from abuse, she took a photograph and it was shared to Facebook, where migrant activists posted it.
empathy around social issues for audiences, the emphasis is on the audience means that their changed feeling is the goal. We see this by returning to *Capernaum*, the internationally acclaimed film which depicts the refugee crisis and *kafala* system. The filmmaker, Nadine Labaki, explained her approach to the film and her decision to direct it, saying:

"I used to make it a point at the end of the conversation to ask them: Are you happy to be alive?" she said. "And most of the times the answer was no. They just see themselves as insects, as parasites — some of them used those words. 'I'm just an insect. I'm just a parasite. I don't exist. I'm invisible.' So I wanted to translate this anger" (Qureshi 2018).

In the effort to translate anger into something useful for audiences, Labaki and the team use real people rather than actors in the film, even filming prisoners of the country’s infamous Roumieh prison behind bars. This was done as a means of getting as ‘close as possible to the real’ story, an immersive one for audiences (Qureshi 2018). While these kinds of films are not new, they become more attenuated in the digital age, where more empathetic solutions to social ills are touted to shock audiences into action. However, in doing so, they maintain the distance between audiences and the scenes they absorb, investing some with the right kinds of feelings.

I would like to contrast this appeal to empathy with another piece of content that TIL shared on their website and social media platforms. In one of the last pieces of media that TIL posted about the Tufa case, a different kind of affective work is taking place. The video is a documentary interview with Tufa upon her return to Ethiopia from Lebanon. In the video, she recounts her story, taking back her recantation, and admitting
that she was forced to work long hours and that she was made to sew dresses for Eleanore Couture. She discusses being locked in the home of the Ajami-Khalil family and the ways in which she was threatened. While the narrative elements of the video are important, providing an explanation of the reason she jumped from the balcony to escape the family, they are perhaps not the only important element of the video. Beyond its revelatory capacity, the video includes aesthetic elements which do a different kind of work than the TV interviews in the Ajami-Khalil house, in the hospital, or on the television stage. These elements include greenery from the garden space outside of her home, close-ups of her mother’s hands as she prepares food on a small stove, and shots of homes lining a street in her village. They also include a still of her staring straight into the camera from the center of the frame.

Figure 27: Appendix C1.24, Screenshot from documentary by TIL about Tufa’s return to Ethiopia
This documentary is not their most viewed video, and it did not reach the levels of engagement that the others did. But that may be part of the reason why it is worth dwelling on. While the video ultimately pivots around her status as a migrant domestic laborer and her abuse and is thus discursively based on her experience in Lebanon, affectively, through the imagery of her home, her mother, her environment, her voice in her own language, there is another kind of work being done. It reveals that this video is not intended for an audience that is invested in her suffering.

**Conclusion**

Since Lebanon’s 2019 revolution broke out and its socioeconomic collapse accelerated, the terrain has been shifting for the *kafala* system. Dependent on US dollars, against which the Lebanese pound has lost most of its value, an entire class of Lebanese people are unable to afford to employ domestic workers. Following the Beirut port explosion in which 2,400 tons of ammonium nitrate exploded and decimated much of the capital, this became even more extreme. As migrant workers struggled to leave the country and most of the country dropped below the poverty line, much remains to be seen when it comes to digital activism around *kafala* and the new techniques which will prove viable. What it does suggest is an even greater dissonance between global imaginaries of Lebanon and the reality of life for those living in it.

This chapter has argued for a relational approach to questions of digital activism and the targeting of emotion to bring about solutions to structural problems by highlighting the affective labor that is required to make those in power feel something. It has examined the kinds of pulleys and levers which must be pulled to cultivate the right kinds of feelings. Weaponizing the imaginary that provides the country with exceptional
status, TIL has managed to channel paranoia in targeted directions. At the same time, this analysis has also examined the pressure placed on those who must labor for the paranoia of others. It has shown that the investment of feelings, ‘our’ feelings, in others, is a modality through which power is experienced and lived in the digital age. Reading the bodies of some for evidence of truth is a power-laden act, and without paying attention to the directionality and quality of affects or emotions, we don’t have a systematic way to understand the unevenness of these demands.

The digital pressure group is a contribution which recognizes the temporality of activism which works through the imaginary of social media platforms as global spaces of transparency and connection. In leveraging the affordances of these platforms, they produce the threat of future-oriented exposure, one which lags as a potentiality rather than a current moment of uncovering. Producing paranoia, or leveraging the paranoia which is baked into commercialized social media platforms, requires the labor of migrant domestic workers as bodies to be read for potential shame and humiliation. Relying on cosmopolitan imaginaries helps to uphold violent structures of belonging.

In the conclusion to this dissertation, I return to ideas from the introduction which discuss affect theory’s relationship to digital media. In that section, we can see how the “affective turn” and the proliferation of digital media are not coincidental. Rather, the investment of bodies with networked feeling is part and parcel a digital phenomenon and a way of making sense of the ways we are pulled in different directions.
CONCLUSION

This dissertation has elaborated digital *bahdala* as a framework for understanding the desire for global belonging at a time when cosmopolitan belonging has become a preferred way of being in the world. Across social media platforms, locales, and performative traditions, people make sense of losing a place which was felt to be assured. As such imaginaries waiver, publics’ investments in them are exposed. Turning to their didactic expressions online then highlights the role of performance in maintaining national structures. In these performances of *bahdala* and subsequent performances of recoding, publics work to repair nationalisms which have been slighted or threatened.

From staged event, to a genre of response, to a future-oriented threat, *bahdala* urges us to consider the embodied dimension of communication as a non-discursive but integral aspect of meaning-making. It takes seriously the tight coupling of ideology, rationality, and affect in order to explain publics’ investments in nationalist projects. In this way, it develops recoding as an analytic which explains the way that dominant encodings of national imaginaries—Egypt as a site of antiquity and Lebanon as a beacon of multicultural tolerance—are enacted, but also how their contradictions are embodied. The social media users in this dissertation employ a variety of performances, rhetorical techniques, and symbols to repair what the revolutions set out to expose. Digital platforms, through their imagined affordances of global exposure, lay bare the paranoia around exposure integral to the maintenance of national projects in a neoliberal and neocolonial economic order.
To develop these concepts and explore the malleability of national imaginaries, this dissertation draws on theories of affect, performance, and communication. It finds inspiration in work which has examined the powerful politics of the popular in the region (Abu-Lughod 2004, El-Ariss 2019, Mahmood 2005, Kraidy 2016) as well as work which has given name to the often-nontangible qualities of that power (Ahmed 2004, Chun 2016, Pellegrini 2007, Schaefer 2015, Sedgwick 2004, Tomkins 1963). This literature gives shape to phenomena which takes place not only in postcolonial contexts, but in places where access to these imaginaries is rendered precarious.

Digital media appears to offer an efficient and cathartic way to access national others who are responsible for what is framed as national failure. It appears to offer a way of closing a distance and teaching something, wielding bad feeling at the target who shows no shame for what they have done. However, this grounding says more about digital publics than those who they are pointing to. The structure of bahdala alerts us to the work it does for audiences and spectators rather than the bodies that they point toward, alerting us to the way that social space is realigned. In this way, digital bahdala and attendant practices of recoding complicate the notion that what moves us is a disembodied Affect—rather than digital technologies as purveyors of Affect, they are a means to examine the value systems which prop up national imaginaries.

This happens at a time when individual progress, entrepreneurialism, and empowerment have become hegemonic models of being, investing in individual bodies interiorities which stand in for the weight of the structural. This is how what is framed as national failure—financial corruption, racism, sexual harassment—becomes invested as a shame in the individual body rather than a diagnostic of national projects. By discussing
events and frameworks like bahdala, this dissertation has resisted taking platform logics at their word, placing them into a wider historical and material context in which national projects are proving incapable of providing solutions to our most pressing concerns.

Given these systemic wounds, the bahdala does the work of turning some who have been impacted by this violence and exploitation away from and toward nationalist projects which promise them protection. This is because bahdala relies on and cultivates a hierarchy of belonging, talking down to nationals who have risked the nation’s place in cosmopolitan imaginaries. The recoding of bahdala is then a reaction to the feelings of shame or humiliation which are generated through conferrals of failure. In cases like the WEF publics who identified with Gebran Bassil’s brand of nationalism which relies on claims to Lebanon’s civilizational past, or with Hezbollah’s brand of resistance to what it identifies as imperial aggressors like Saudi Arabia and the US, turn away from the WEF bahdala and toward more identifiable structures of belonging. This is how bahdala intensifies sectarian and nationalist projects which promise the globally violated and racialized a form of belonging.

This transnational dimension strengthens an argument about national imaginaries by bringing their contradictions and paradoxes to bear. Egypt and Lebanon, with their oppositional claims to national exceptionalism, provide a compelling way of studying national imaginaries. In this analysis, their imaginaries are less oppositional and more alternative offerings to those interested in their brands of cosmopolitanism—politicians, artists, academics, diaspora. This draws similarities between national subjects who are grappling with the viability of these imaginaries in a global marketplace.
Further, this dissertation explores the labor dimension which upholds these national imaginaries. It does this by showing that the mobilization of emotion does political work and requires the labor of some figures who must work to remedy national failings. It has offered a method of drawing out relationships between national subjects, recognizing the distributions of power which make some performances expected and demanded for the nation to move on from what is narrated as an attack. The gendered and raced labor of national projects is embedded in the articulations of bahdala in this dissertation, showing the tight coupling between the affective and the political.

**Recapitulation**

In chapter one, I discussed the bahdala by turning to the staging of it as a pedagogical event. At the World Economic Forum, the performances of nations cohere collectivities through what are framed as humiliating events. The framing here does not only reflect but does something—it mobilizes people to align with the right kind of nationhood, provoking performances of pride, shame, and dignity. These events, framed as tragedies to wider audiences, also become entertaining trials for spectating publics who are invested in stagings of modernity. They provide the very material needed as evidence—of failure, embarrassment, strength, or resistance.

As an extension of the function of popular programming in postcolonial contexts, these national trials enter the digital media sphere and introduce new ways of taking part in the crafting of these narratives. This is especially resonant in places which have faced the postponement and delay of more formal mechanisms to dole out what is felt as justice. Lebanon is an especially relevant context to show this, as its political
establishment is secured through ‘temporary’ power-sharing of sectarian leaders who fought in the civil war, and political assassinations are rarely ‘officially’ attributed to establishment figures. This chapter shows how the outsourcing of felt justice on Twitter becomes an entertaining and cathartic trial for postcolonial contexts, allowing for the feeling of justice taken into public hands. Through live digital commentary. At the same time, it calls into question the very binaries of ‘formal/informal’ and ‘official/unofficial’ which come from hegemonic state narratives of justice.

The chapter also highlights the desire for states to feel at a time when inequities are rising and, whether those inequities are not felt by some, we all face the realities of a global pandemic and impending environmental disaster. In doing so, they reflect a desire to ‘cut through’ systems of signification that trap discourse, turning to platforms like Twitter to evade state structures which limit what is felt as national justice. In joining in on the laughter of the media ‘roast’ in performances meant to ground the leader, national collectivities cohere through modes of respectability enacted at the international forum. In feeling better, the symbols they reach for show us how certain figures, like the girl boss or the resistance leader, gain social capital through desires to belong to a global body politic. It shows how we can learn something by tracing the objects and subjects that publics turn to cultivate better feeling. This chapter then complicates the epistemological move to turn to social media to “cut through” the traps of signification systems. I rather offer that participants do not literally send autonomous affects like shame through Twitter, but rather activate differently situated bodies through rhetoric, images, and gestures. This approach shows that there is a need to recognize the histories which shape national subjects, understanding online performances as contact zones which
make and remake identities and subjectivities through the mobilization of affects like shame or pride.

This is how the digitally mediated international forum acts as a site of affective modulation, enabling relational affects amongst transnational publics. At these sites, the same circulating image can have different but relational effects. For the grilling and grounding to be funny on the ‘international’ stage, inferior others are beckoned to act as pedagogical tools for the refashioning of the self. As chapter three will show, cosmopolitanism, like privacy, is not a naturally found quality. It is produced through the labor of national others. These are therefore pedagogical spaces in which expressions of shame are a way of refashioning oneself in relation to shifting patterns of legibility. In this chapter, I also introduce the concept of ‘recoding’ which takes place to make narratives of failure feel differently. I develop this in chapter two, offering the bахdala as embodied communication. I turn to the relationship between Lebanon and Egypt, where Egyptian publics engaged in vociferous debate about a scandal around a Lebanese tourist to Egypt. By turning to the way that they staged their own performances of strength and dignity to refuse and reroute the бахdala, I show how the bахdala has reverberative effects, requiring certain subjects to perform atonement.

If chapter one showed the way that narratives of national failure revive familiar postcolonial power asymmetries, chapter two shows how these are relational matters by turning to the tensions between two postcolonial national imaginaries. Just as Lebanese subjects can feel shame from the bахdala, they can dole this shame to others by drawing on tropes of secularism, civilization, and colonialism to make their case. This chapter shows the way that national publics interpret and do things with the bахdala, making it
into the grounds from which to affirm threatened identities. By drawing on socially mobile and cosmopolitan figures in politics, science, and sports, they cultivate ways of being legible and belonging. In this chapter, I offer that we must pay attention to these “conversion points,” (Ahmed 2002) or the symbols and ideas that are able to mobilize bad to better feeling. I offer that these conversion points are powerful indicators of desires for a certain kind of acceptance in the world, as well as a diagnostic for Islamophobia, racism, and sexism experienced by those contending with national ruptures in the aftermath of the revolution. On YouTube, these performances are part of digital genres of shame and atonement, reflecting a demand for genuine expressions of pain and suffering. In this digital economy, there are rewards given to those who can effectively mobilize conversion points around narratives of national failure. This case study reveals a landscape of digital content creators who have been able to leverage narratives of national exceptionalism, working to preserve it by calling out threats to the national order. These are not only individuals who gain transnational subscribers and followers, but older centers of power like state-affiliated television networks who use public resources to tap into these affective economies. Such digital scandals then help provide fodder for state imaginaries to be renewed and reaffirmed, highlighting the mechanics of state and corporate interests in moments when national exceptionalism is threatened.

What this chapter also emphasized is the uneven topography of feeling that exists for those who are implicated in bahlala, a point which I flesh out in the final case study. The wave of response videos on YouTube demanding atonement is inseparable from the stagings of quasi-trials on private television networks, where media hosts, as we see in all case studies, play the role of judge and counsel. They also show how, similar in the first
case study to the expressions of resistance to imperial attack on national figures, these expressions can resonate with nationalist figures in the state, entertainment, and journalism. I also introduced ideas about what this recoding relies on, which is an admission of vulnerability as well as an affirmation of affectedness. As the YouTube videos show, participants in the recoding of the *bahdala* do not only cultivate strength and pride, but they also point to experiences of racism and Islamophobia. At the same time, this chapter shows how the recoding of the *bahdala* through recourse to a superior national exceptionalism is still a wholly inadequate mode of repair. As it is recoded and rerouted, it takes on gendered and sexist dimensions which have effects beyond the container of the nation.

In chapter three, I discussed how this vulnerability is recognized and mobilized by actors who tap into the power of digital *bahdala* to meet their demands. Here, I discussed the structure of *bahdala* by turning to the *kafala* system and its role in upholding imaginaries of cosmopolitanism across the region. In this chapter, I showed how activists can tactically work to puncture Lebanon’s status as an exceptionally cosmopolitan country in the MENA region. They do this by orienting their content toward the diaspora and other international communities who are invested in the piercing of this imaginary. I offered the notion of the ‘digital pressure group’ as a group which tactically applies transnational pressure on national figures by virtue of its online tactics. “This Is Lebanon” (TIL), the activist group working to expose cases of violence and abuse in the *kafala* system, functions as one such digital pressure group through both their extranational labor and their reliance on international audiences to make their demands met. However rather than trafficking in shame, I offered that they rely on
paranoia as a negotiation tactic, mobilizing the potential for humiliation as a motivating force on employers. In doing so, digital pressure groups are part of longer histories of the NGO-ization of postcolonial contexts, where extra-national funding creates forms of paranoia in much the same way that the *kafala* system generates as an informal system of labor.

I turned to Facebook and examined the affordances which allow audiences to take part in the judgment about a variety of charges on Lebanese employers and accounts of violence of migrant domestic workers, finding that the focus on the feelings of employers maintains a power relationship which privileges their feeling at the expense of others. What is more, channeling these feelings of paranoia alerts us to the way that affects are sets of relations. This means that engineering the *bahdala* requires the labor of those who have the capacity to produce those feelings. I discussed the way that migrant domestic workers are tasked with providing this evidence in performances of suffering, requiring their bodies to be legible in the right ways.

Here, the issue at hand is not the outcome of the activism, as it releases some women from violent conditions. The issue of concern is the very desire that demands their labor, unchallenged by narratives of Lebanon as failing to live up to its cosmopolitan imaginary. Many activist groups in history have wielded shame, working to ground figures of authority through creative and militant means. In this case, however, this shame is dependent on the desirability of this brand of cosmopolitanism, at times working to reify it as a preferred mode of being, even as it shatters the facade of Lebanese exceptionalism. TIL highlights the way that *kafala* helps to produce this very imaginary, and how inverting this imaginary is not the same as dissolving its foundation.
Taken together, these chapters offer that *bahdala* is pedagogical because it teaches a way of being and a means to prevent the exposure of not really belonging. Returning to Tomkins’ offering of affect theory as well as the body’s dealing with affect as a way of learning to navigate affect-rich environments (Schaefer 2015), *bahdala* as a framework for and diagnostic of the contemporary moment of socioeconomic collapse, proxy war, and environmental crisis. The performances and expressions I offered as evidence show that these publics have awareness that this belonging is untenable. For if it was not at risk, then these narratives of failure would not have so much purchase.

**Implications and contributions**

With these discussions in mind, what do *bahdala* and its attendant expressions of shame, embarrassment, and humiliation about national failure tell us about communication? For one, I have argued that the mobilization of affects like shame does a distancing work. As Ahmed (2004) notes, expressions of shame protect national structures by preserving the distance between the nation and its atrocities. It also coheres national collectivities by making an “us” align on the right side of shame. *Bahdala*, as a pedagogical event, alerts us to the sociality of emotion, requiring a relational approach from the outset.

With such a framework, the performative dimension of communication is foregrounded. This emphasizes the material effects of discourse, paying less attention to what a nation *is* and more on what the imaginary *does* for publics. Indeed, it emphasizes the very way that such publics are constituted. This de-essentializes what it means to be Lebanese or Egyptian, emphasizes what it is that provokes these articulations in the first place, and draws a line of continuity between those who mobilize the discourse. In this way, affects like shame, humiliation, or embarrassment are seen as not only provoking
such articulations, but as concepts which lie underneath discursive categories like nation. This attention to relationality emphasizes something that is shared beyond national structures—here, anxieties around sovereignty which are linked to circuits of global capital.

What can we learn from the performative dimension of these scandals, as their mediation works to convert bad feelings into better ones? This dissertation offers not a mode of agency which lies solely in the body of the individual subject or a deterministic model of the structural, but the way in which structures are felt in the body and how they can also shift through embodied performance. As Wendy Chun (2016) notes of neoliberal precarity, “[n]eoliberal subjects are constantly encouraged to change their habits—rather than society and institutions—in order to become happier, more productive people; to recycle rather than regulate in order to save the world” (p. xi). In this dissertation, I have turned to several publics who are invested in cultivating more desirable ways of being legible to imagined, global audiences. This, writes Chun (2016), is one reason that theories of affect have become popular ways of not only doing scholarly work, but understanding the current political moment.

It is then no wonder that the “affective turn,” or the name for the intellectual production around affect in the academy in the early 2000s, and the commercialization of the Internet and the rise of social media as we know it, have coincided. To be on commercially driven platforms today is to be in constant proximity to conversion points, moving us in different directions. We identify bodies as the source of our bad feeling, but they are providing material form to what is more systematized bahdala. It disguises the wounds that systemic bahdala comes from—Islamophobia, racism and violence at
national and transnational levels, systems of labor exploitation, and the hyper accumulation of wealth. By turning to individuals and groups responsible for bad feeling and unbelonging, there is an identifiable source of pain.

This mining of communication’s embodied dimension recognizes what Talal Asad (2000) has called “our incomplete knowledge of and mastery over our bodies and desires” (p. 30). As he notes, it serves a function in its attribution of responsibility. He writes:

“Agency today serves primarily to define a completed personal action from within an indefinite network of causality by attributing to an actor responsibility to power. Typically, this means forcing a person to be accountable, to answer to a judge in a court of law why things were done or left undone.” (p. 33-4).

This is one way in which the bahdala is a framework for the contemporary digital moment, where demands for accountability look increasingly like expressions of individual responsibility. Such expressions are mobilized while systemic bahdala is harder to expose, complicating the idea of the digital platform as a networked public sphere. Rather, platforms like those discussed in this dissertation help maintain systemic bahdala by relying on relations of dependency between different kinds of national subjects. In this way, post-revolutionary digital culture is not a break from revolutionary digital culture. It is a dialectic which informs neoliberal nationhood in Global South contexts.

In postcolonial contexts like Lebanon and Egypt, this is even more relevant when there are states that sit on the deciding side of the table when it comes to structural adjustment and loans and those who sit on the side of choosing the best of few options.
One cannot understand the current conditions of the post revolutions in Egypt and Lebanon without understanding the ways that these legacies continue to shape distributions of state power. Digital bahdala and its recoding here are postcolonial frameworks for considering national viability, though they may be conceptualized as extra-national as well. They come to describe the anxieties of sovereignty in times of economic crisis, but they are also a framework to consider anxieties of bodily sovereignty in a time when environmental threats are increasingly part of our public discourse.

In these contexts, bahdala becomes a useful diagnostic as the value of these nations fluctuate in transnational marketplaces. The 2020 port explosion of Beirut was a pivotal moment for the shaping of Lebanon’s national imaginary. A population already fatigued by a raging pandemic, socioeconomic collapse, and months of prolonged protest suddenly found that news of the blast circulated across all international media networks and social media platforms, becoming one of the worst explosions in history. While the 2019 protests witnessed the vibrant and resistant occupation of public space by citizens across political affiliation and identity, a firm branding of national failure came not only from those on the streets, but analysts and intellectuals consuming the spectacle. In particular, the blast challenged hegemonic imaginaries of a cosmopolitan exceptionalism—the Paris or Switzerland of the Middle East seemed to return to the Middle East.

At the same time, the Egyptian state is renewing the country’s branding as a site of antiquity, heritage, and civilizational glory, staking its place not only in the MENA region, but the world. From archeological digs to spectacular parades of mummified bodies, Egypt joins other countries like Saudi Arabia that are branding their offerings
through the production of national imaginaries of modernity through history and technology, fusing the future with the past. At sites like these, initiatives like Saudi Arabia’s ‘Joy Awards’ attempt to recode the nation with new kinds of affects in the popular imaginary. This happens while at the same time, activists, journalists, and dissidents have remained in Egyptian and Saudi Arabian jails for years.

As such, one main contribution I offer is that the mobilization of feeling disguises a labor dimension. The uneven topography of feeling around national failure is gendered and racialized. Across Lebanon and Egypt, it is overlapping categories of women, migrant domestic workers, and mothers who are tasked with answering to affronts on the nation. However, there is also a labor to affects like empathy, where a distance between nations is maintained during disaster. Performances of empathy can reveal uneven power dynamics that structure political life. Expressions of empathy abounded in the countless accounts by Western journalists about the violence unfolding in Ukraine. In one exchange, the former deputy general prosecutor of Ukraine said, “it’s very emotional for me because I see European people with blonde hair and blue eyes being killed” and the BBC presenter who answered, saying, “I understand and of course respect the emotion” (‘Double standards’ 2022). In such exchanges, feeling structures are legitimated, maintaining racist modes of belonging. Empathy, and more specifically, the effort to cultivate empathy, must be complicated for the power structures that it maintains, especially in times of political uncertainty. These expressions of fellow feeling by those who appear to empathize with the nation’s tragic turn can do the work of reifying the right kind of nationhood.
These remarks were nothing surprising to those in contexts like the MENA, accustomed to a short supply of visible empathy in the form of coverage by media networks. Empathy here became framed as a resource that is in short supply on social media platforms structured by economies of visibility (Banet-Weiser 2018). Indeed, there are material effects to such discourses, evident in the way that conflict is reported, international aid is distributed, and investments are valuated. Resisting the idea that what we need is more empathy may be one path forward. In these case studies, we have seen how feeling, as a goal, means that some must labor to make it so.

This is more prescient at a time when conspiracy theory and a ‘post-truth’ moment are discursively linked to heightened emotionality. In this context, bahdala offers a framework for considering the affective motivations of knowledge production. Silvan Tomkins’ description of a person who is affectively engaged offers a meditation on the way that we feel our way to knowledge:

The individual whose affect is engaged is inevitably thereby confronted with such questions as: “What is happening?” “What is going to happen?” “How sure am I of what seems to be happening and what will happen?” “What should I do?” (2:369, as cited in Frank & Wilson 2020, p. 92)

Implicit here is the way that knowledge production—whether bodily or intellectual—is generated through affect, making it important to turn to events to understand affective motivations. Case studies, for example, provide a tangible way to understand the events which orient publics away and toward particular kinds of narratives. In particular, the kinds of figures and symbols that publics reach for in their commentary shed light on a certain kind of mobility and legibility to imagined others. This mobility allows these
figures to be both “sticky objects” (Ahmed 2004) but also ones that can evade representational dualisms. In other work, this can take the form of analyzing controversial events and the symbols that publics reach for to become legible.

At the same time, reading for evidence of feeling is also political. A final implication of this project takes up recent work on studies of race and queer theory to complicate universalist theories of affect (Palmer 2014, Yao 2021). They show that reading for affect is not a power-neutral task. It, like other frameworks, involves a decision to foreground issues and bodies and read them for their legibility. Bahdala is one framework for considering the structuring of feeling and its role in political life.

This recognition of vulnerability and materiality provides a kind of opportunity for new political imaginaries which take seriously the role of embodiment in modes of communication. These imaginaries can be cultivated not necessarily by toppling the failed leader, but by attending to the directions in which we are pulled. This means not only a reorientation in the way that we claim our politics, but also in the way we intellectualize them. I think here of the social media groups that began at the height of the Lebanese revolution to identify politicians who were dining in restaurants, at beaches, or at stores to publicly shame them and demand that they leave. This was a reclaiming of space which worked not only on the politicians through a transfer of shame to them, but as a collective refusal. Shame is wielded regardless of whether the target feels it or does not, cohering collectivities that can build new political imaginaries. In this way, attributions of responsibility can serve a less obvious function, which I argue is more important than those they point toward. Pointing out a source of violence or pain does political work for those doing the pointing, regardless of what is on the other side of the
finger. As Ahmed (2004) has written, affects cohere collectivities, creating a ‘we’ that needn’t be completely national in character.

What is to be done?
Looking forward, the events of countries like Lebanon and Egypt foreshadow the kinds of events that are becoming unexceptional in the world. From economic collapse to security crackdowns to environmental disaster, there is a sense in which what happens here is what can and will happen everywhere. We are witnessing reactions to this in the expressions of shock by Euro-American press around war scenes in Europe, reflecting entrenched modes of not only national but civilizational exceptionalism. All the while, a global pandemic which has not subsided is a stark reminder of our inescapable relationality.

If I have argued that bahdala does the work of cohering collectivities, then this means that we can analyze similar events and examine the grounds through which affects like shame are mobilized. This means examining rhetoric to think through the kinds of emotions that are being invoked to mobilize collectivities. Further, we must consider the rhetoric we turn toward to make sense of national events. As Ahmed (2004) notes, expressions of shame do distancing work by creating a “we” that is ashamed rather than a “we” who is implicated. What might get us closer to the feeling of being implicated in issues of corruption, sexual harassment, and exploitation, as if they are happening to an “us”? Could it be a different kind of cosmopolitanism, or even something else? More specifically, what might we take from historical transnational solidarities, such as pan-Arab movements, pan-African movements, and the Third World wave, as well as
solidarities which lay outside of identarian and geographic framings, such as those relating to labor, class, and climate change?

I offer that a relational approach to communication can recognize that intellectual work requires a meaningful foregrounding of issues, objects, bodies, and histories. This could look like considering the resonances between the ways that imaginaries like pan-Africanism and pan-Arabism are conjured and revived across geographic contexts, articulating through similar material relationships, such as class, but also through shared temporal structurings. This dissertation, in making different transnational connections in each chapter, shows how new knowledge is produced by opting for new comparisons.

With the knowledge of relational forms of affective labor which are required to sustain such national exceptionalisms, we are better able to examine the asymmetrical power relations which undergird nation imaginaries and attendant mobilizations of feeling. These cases alert us to the distribution of resources which affects the kinds of performances that larger corporations, networks, and personalities can channel. Television networks owned by figures affiliated with the state, media hosts who leverage social media followings, and international institutions like the WEF have a role in channeling and distributing capacities for feeling. This shows us how, for example, in the case of the kafala system in chapter three, where the digital pressure group operates through the paranoia of implicated employers as well as the empathy of invested audiences, then it stands to reason that redistributing resources to those in the kafala system would help shift the need to focus on the feelings of diaspora and other international audiences.
Finally, I will end with a reflection on a moment from the second case study with the mother of the Lebanese tourist who called out the Egyptian nation for its backwardness. When Mona Mazbouh’s mother did the press circuit for her daughter’s release from Egyptian jail, one of her main stops was the stage of talk show program, *al’Asher Masa’an* (“10 in the Evening”). As part of this, she sat on the set couch as Egyptian callers called in to the show to berate her for her daughter’s actions. In the YouTube clip from this segment, several comments express their empathy for the mother and her tears. However, amongst these, one comment reads: “I really feel hers are crocodile tears. I don’t know why” (Appendix B3:6).
I turn to this comment because it depicts the illegible body which resists an easy reading. The commenter doubts the sincerity of her tears, offering that they have no real reason for doing so. It mirrors the readings of Tufa’s body in the second case, where viewers read her body for signs of violence. Across these pieces of content, audiences debate the truth-value of these scenes, looking for evidence of shame. It suggests that Mazbouh’s mother may not truly care about the state’s perception of her daughter, but that she puts on a performance to free her.

In doing so, I do not deny the real systems of violence which structure such moments of visibility—it has been my aim to analyze their mechanics. Mazbouh’s future depends on her mother’s performance. However, I hope to take seriously the importance of performance implicit in this moment of communication. As Xine Yao (2021) has written of such accounts, “Unfeeling is the detachment to attachment to hegemonic structures of feeling and the potential for striving toward a radical politics of liberation” (p. 17). If our doubt about her performance upends the line between genuine and fake, revealing how culturally, socially, historically constituted this line is, then performance takes on a powerful role in political life.

With anxieties around the ability of algorithms to capture our emotional states and know our bodies better than we do, this moment serves as a reminder of the politics of emotional legibility. However, these slippages alert us to a possibility in the gap between what is said and what is done, and what is detect and what is undetectable. The gap between encoded and recoded meaning can be politically powerful because it attunes us to our malleability—a non-discursive dimension wherein lies the capacity for change.
APPENDICES

Appendix A

Appendix note: The following Twitter posts were selected by a) identifying major actors in the scandal and searching their content for hashtags, b) conducting keyword searches with these hashtags as well as relevant keywords ("#GBinDavos," “جبران ياسيل لا يمثل لبنان,” “جبران ياسيل يمثلني,” “Bassil Davos,” “Bassil WEF”) and c) analyzing the most popular content related to these keyword searches. I selected from the “Top Tweet” results and incorporated Tweets which circulated in media coverage about the events. After collecting data which referenced the event as a bahdala, humiliation, or joyful in some way, I had a collection of 254 Tweets which I then narrowed down to 41 Tweets for the final discussion (Table 1). I also collected three videos which relate to the case and offer a comparison to other political performances at the WEF as well as local political programming (Table 2). These served as counterpoints to the WEF interview and highlighted its status as a scandal. All videos were referenced in the Twitter data I collected.

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<td>Full Interview: Former Lebanon Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil</td>
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<td>[CNBC International]</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>1/8/20</td>
<td>حساب جبران [&quot;Gebran's Account&quot;]</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>1/24/18</td>
<td>A Conversation with Saad Hariri President of the Council of Ministers of Lebanon</td>
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Table 2
Appendix B

Appendix note: In the second case study, I selected the videos by conducting keyword searches on YouTube in English and Arabic as well as collecting videos from the top news networks covering the Mazbouh case ("Mona Mazbouh," “Mazbouh,” “مديحة مدبوع,” “مذى المذبوح”). I then followed each of the accounts by ordinary YouTube users to analyze their trajectories over the years following the incident. This allowed me to detect a group of YouTube content creators who have made livings on nationalist media production. I have separated all kinds of content into the following tables which include the original responses to Mazbouh by ordinary people on YouTube (Table 1; N=19), news coverage by major news networks in Lebanon and Egypt about the Mazbouh case (Table 2; N=15), and the top three most viewed videos from four YouTubers who appear to belong to MCNs (Table 3; N=14).

Table 1

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<td>Original has since been deleted but shared across various URLs</td>
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<td>انت الليبنانيه الحقيقه #خالد جاد المصريين خط احم #</td>
<td>The Lebanese ?? #Khaled Gad #Egyptians are the red line</td>
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<td>رد المصريي عل ماني منى مذبوح اللي شتمت مصر... هتفتدم لو منشوتش الفيديو ده</td>
<td>The Egyptian reply to Mona Mazbouh who insulted Egypt... You’ll regret if you don’t watch the video</td>
<td><a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AE3r5of">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AE3r5of</a> QEgw</td>
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<td>6/1/18</td>
<td>مذبوح ليبناني يرد على ليبنانه تشتم مصر والمصريين - مني مذبوح</td>
<td>Lebanese announcer responds to the Lebanese woman who insulted Egypt and the Egyptians – Mona Mazbouh</td>
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<td>6/8/18</td>
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<td>6/6/18</td>
<td>اقوى رد سوري على الكنانيه تشتم مصر وشعب مصر</td>
<td>Strongest Syrian response to the Lebanese who insulted Egypt and its people</td>
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<td>إلغاء إجراء مذيه مذبوح المستوي الرفيع في المدارس ونفل الهيكلية</td>
<td>Mona Mazbouh’s innocence… and cancelling higher level education in schools</td>
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<td>A message to the Lebanese woman who wronged Egypt and the Egyptians</td>
<td>Egyptian network</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>6/4/18</td>
<td>اخطر 3 معلومات في موضوع اللبنانية مني ذي ملحو</td>
<td>The 3 most dangerous pieces of information about the case of Mona Mazbouh the Lebanese woman</td>
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<td>أقوي رد علي مني ذي ملحو الحاج Ramadan Mercury</td>
<td>Strongest response to Mona Mazbouh, Mr. Ramadan Merhy</td>
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<td>5/30/18</td>
<td>الرد على العاهرة اللبنانية التي غلطت في المصريين</td>
<td>Response to the Lebanese woman who wronged the Egyptians</td>
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<td>6/13/18</td>
<td>أقوى رد من المصريه ايامي</td>
<td>نشاط على البنين اللبنانيين مني ذي ملحو</td>
<td>Strongest response from Egyptian Amy Nashaat to the Lebanese woman Mona Mazbouh</td>
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<td>6/13/18</td>
<td>الرد على مني ذي ملحو من أبو حسام</td>
<td>Response to Mona Mazbouh to Mona Mazbouh</td>
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<td>أقوى رد من بنين مصرية على اللبنانية مني ذي ملحو اليا شنت المصريين</td>
<td>Strongest response from an Egyptian girl to the Lebanese woman, Mona Mazbouh, who insulted the Egyptians</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>6/1/18</td>
<td>أقوى رد فعل من ابن البلد علي اللبنانية مني ذي ملحو التي اهانت كل مصر ....</td>
<td>Strongest response from the 'son of the country' to the Lebanese, Mona Mazbouh, who insulted all of Egypt....</td>
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<td>شاهد هاذ الفيديو موجه الي مني ذي ملحو اللبنانية</td>
<td>Watch this video directed to the Lebanese woman Mona Mazbouh</td>
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Table 2
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<td>رسالة والد اللبناني مني المذبوح لشعب مصر بعد الحكم على ابنتها</td>
<td>Watch the message from the parents of the Lebanese Mona Mazbouh to the Egyptian people after the verdict of their daughter</td>
<td>Egyptian network</td>
<td><a href="https://youtu.be/IrSK_sQzADw">https://youtu.be/IrSK_sQzADw</a></td>
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<td>اعتذار والدة اللبناني مني المذبوح على الهواة للشعب المصرى بعد الحكم على ابنتها</td>
<td>Mona Mazbouh's mother's apology on-air to the Egyptian people after her daughter's verdict</td>
<td>Egyptian network</td>
<td><a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jLmV2GIJNwx">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jLmV2GIJNwx</a></td>
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<td>رأى صادم من سمير صبري المحامى حول قضية اللبنانية منى المذبوح</td>
<td>Shocking opinion from Samir Sabry, the lawyer regarding the case of the Lebanese Mona Mazbouh</td>
<td>Egyptian network</td>
<td><a href="https://youtu.be/Ga--ZuuLdqQ">https://youtu.be/Ga--ZuuLdqQ</a></td>
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<tr>
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<td>7/22/18</td>
<td>ولمدآر من سيدي مصرى المحامى حول قضية اللبنانية منى المذبوح</td>
<td>Mona Mazbouh's mother reveals the real reason her daughter's video spread on YouTube</td>
<td>Egyptian network</td>
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<td>7/22/18</td>
<td>هجوم ناري من سيدي مصرى على والدة اللبنانية منى المذبوح</td>
<td>A fiery attack from the women of Egypt to the mother of the Lebanese Mona Mazbouh</td>
<td>Egyptian network</td>
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<td>المحامي منى المذبوح يكشف سر انتفاعها ونشرها للفيديو المسيء للشعب المصري</td>
<td>Mona Mazbouh's lawyer reveals her secret motive to post the offensive video to the Egyptian people</td>
<td>Egyptian network</td>
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<td>هجوم ناري من محمود عطية المحامي على نائمهما والدة اللبنانية منى المذبوح</td>
<td>A fiery attack from Mahmoud Attia the lawyer on those that are attacking the mother of the Lebanese woman Mona Mazbouh</td>
<td>Egyptian network</td>
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<td>لـ حبس منى المذبوح 8 سنوات بتهمة نشر فيديو مسيء للشعب المصرى</td>
<td>The mother of the Lebanese Mona Mazbouh explains the reason behind her daughter's swearing at the Egyptian people</td>
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<td>نفس المذبوح للشعب المصرى</td>
<td>The Lebanese Mona Mazbouh jailed for 8 years on charges of spreading offensive video to the Egyptian people</td>
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<td>Mona Mazbouh's family demands her return after the ruling</td>
<td>Lebanese TV network</td>
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<td>Mazbouh returns to her parents and tells Al Jadeed the story of her conviction in Egypt -- Layal Saad</td>
<td>Lebanese TV network</td>
<td><a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s8aYu6tts4Y&amp;ab_channel=ALJadeedNews">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s8aYu6tts4Y&amp;ab_channel=ALJadeedNews</a></td>
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<td>9/16/18</td>
<td>Your engagement: The insulter of Egyptians Mona Mazbouh reveals the secrets of her case</td>
<td>Saudi owned, Dubai based outlet</td>
<td><a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=979dBMpwy8Vs&amp;ab_channel=AlArabiya">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=979dBMpwy8Vs&amp;ab_channel=AlArabiya</a></td>
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<td>Lebanese TV network</td>
<td><a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NMd94SyhjUY&amp;ab_channel=hamdynasraldeen">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NMd94SyhjUY&amp;ab_channel=hamdynasraldeen</a></td>
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<td>10/3/15</td>
<td>بالفيديو...انهيار ووالدة باسمين النشر خلال جلسة محكمتها في &quot;واقعة المطار&quot;</td>
<td>Egyptian online publication</td>
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<td>The response to every Kuwaiti in the video insults the Egyptians The video that got 5 million views on Facebook</td>
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<td>7/14/19</td>
<td>؟ !!!يد لﺎﯿﻌﻟا ﻞھا ﻦﯿﻓ</td>
<td>Where are the parents of these children!!! ?</td>
<td>Cut the internet in Egypt already</td>
<td>That's enough</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>7/30/18</td>
<td>ﻲﻧﺎﻨﺒﻠﻟا ذﺎﺸﻟا ﻲﻠﻋ دﺮﻟا ﻲﻠﻋ ةﺪھﺎﺸﻣ نﻮﯿﻠﻣ</td>
<td>Response to the gay (derogatory) Lebanese</td>
<td>The one that wronged all Egyptians</td>
<td><a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XYRd3OLs-lGU&amp;t=126s&amp;ab_channel=karimalaa-%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%85%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%A1">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XYRd3OLs-lGU&amp;t=126s&amp;ab_channel=karimalaa-%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%85%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%A1</a></td>
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<td>1/14/20</td>
<td>كﻮﺗ ﻚﯿﺗ تﺎھﻮﯾﺪﻓ !! يووا ﮫﺒﯾﺮﻏ</td>
<td>Really strange Tik Tok videos!!</td>
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<td><a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RrH2B0Xfn4M&amp;ab_channel=%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B8%D8%A8%D8%B7-AbdullahAl-Zabet">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RrH2B0Xfn4M&amp;ab_channel=%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B8%D8%A8%D8%B7-AbdullahAl-Zabet</a></td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>4/2/20</td>
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<td>Tik Tok videos…Abdallah Al-Zabet React</td>
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<td><a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nw9_ZP7J-34&amp;ab_channel=%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%84%258%B8%D8%A7%D8%A8%258%B7-AbdullahAl-Zabet">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nw9_ZP7J-34&amp;ab_channel=%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%84%8%B8%D8%A7%D8%A8%8%B7-AbdullahAl-Zabet</a></td>
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<td></td>
<td>9/13/21</td>
<td>ﺔﯿﺎﻋﺮﺑ ﺔﯾﺪﻔﻟا اﺬھ ٍرﺬﻗا ﺶﺘﻓﻮﺸﻣ /ﻲﻋاﺮﻤﻟا</td>
<td>This video is sponsored by Marai Milk…You haven’t seen dirtier than this!</td>
<td><a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ry7x8loejNA&amp;ab_channel=%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B8%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%B7-AbdullahAl-Zabet">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ry7x8loejNA&amp;ab_channel=%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B8%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%B7-AbdullahAl-Zabet</a></td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>7/10/21</td>
<td>التّيك تّوك بقى اتوبيس والكل فيه راكتب&quot;</td>
<td>Tiktok has become a bus, and everyone’s a passenger!</td>
<td><a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PcIP2LLiEUE&amp;ab_channel=%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B8%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%B7-AbdullahAl-Zabet">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PcIP2LLiEUE&amp;ab_channel=%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B8%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%B7-AbdullahAl-Zabet</a></td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>2/15/22</td>
<td>قلعت وبينت الحجات عيان تّيجب لايكات ارخص من كدا مفتش!!</td>
<td>She stripped/took off her clothes And showed her stuff to get likes. It doesn’t get cheaper than this!</td>
<td><a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DiAsSk7gdEE&amp;ab_channel=%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B8%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%B7-AbdullahAl-Zabet">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DiAsSk7gdEE&amp;ab_channel=%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B8%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%B7-AbdullahAl-Zabet</a></td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>12/21/19</td>
<td>يالهوي علي البحصل في التّيك تّوك .. يخربيت كدا يااجدع!!</td>
<td>Oh dear, what is happening on TikTok! Curse that!</td>
<td><a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dDaKRR8-kol&amp;ab_channel=%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%85%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF-%MahmoudEldeep">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dDaKRR8-kol&amp;ab_channel=%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%85%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF-%MahmoudEldeep</a></td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>12/12/19</td>
<td>التّيك تّوك في مصر عنوان الابد والأخلاق2 ..</td>
<td>TikTok in Egypt is ??? of civility and respect??</td>
<td><a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6h1mqaGP9VU&amp;ab_channel=%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%85%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF-%MahmoudEldeep">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6h1mqaGP9VU&amp;ab_channel=%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%85%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF-%MahmoudEldeep</a></td>
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| 11 | 2/10/20 | مش معقول اللي بيحصل في الـTik Tok What’s happening on TikTok is unbelievable | | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yDs2zb1dhHU&ab_channel=%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%85%D9%88%D8%AF
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<td>أين البنات دي يتكبروا كذا؟.. أسوء محتوى علي الإنترنت!!</td>
<td>Why do these girls grow up like this? The worst content on the Internet!</td>
<td><a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7kie9SVJlqg&amp;ab_channel=%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%85%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%A8-MahmoudEldeep">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7kie9SVJlqg&amp;ab_channel=%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%85%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%A8-MahmoudEldeep</a></td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>4/9/21</td>
<td>البنات دي عدت للقليل... الا تحترام بمرحل!</td>
<td>These girls have trespassed the level of decency by many levels</td>
<td><a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gkztlt4VfF0">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gkztlt4VfF0</a></td>
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<td>1/5/22</td>
<td>التعلم علي واحدة ونص؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟؟�</td>
<td><a href="https://youtu.be/qVz3-FtV4G4">https://youtu.be/qVz3-FtV4G4</a></td>
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219
Appendix C

Appendix note: For the final case study on TIL, whose most active presence is on Facebook, I recorded all of TIL’s posts about Tufa in a one-year period. To cross-check I had found these and later posts about the case, I conducted keyword searches for Tufa’s name, variations of her name, and her employers’ names (“Tufa,” “Lelisa,” “Lensa,” “Ajami-Khalil”). I collected a total of 24 posts related to Tufa’s case (Table 1). I also followed the page for a one-year period and collected posts which related to notions of embarrassment or shame. 16 of these posts were included in my final discussion of the case (Table 2).

Table 1

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<td>&quot;Lensa's Hospital Bed Wheeled into Studio so she can be Humiliated on Live TV with Slaveholders Eleanore Couture #IAmLensa&quot;</td>
<td><a href="https://www.facebook.com/watch?v=369027166907664">https://www.facebook.com/watch?v=369027166907664</a></td>
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<td>Middle East Eye link</td>
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<td>Threats from Eleanore Couture</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>4/25/18</td>
<td>Link to countdown to release</td>
<td><a href="https://www.facebook.com/ThisIsLebanon961/posts/376800359463678">https://www.facebook.com/ThisIsLebanon961/posts/376800359463678</a></td>
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<td>Lawsuit against reporter Timour Azhari</td>
<td><a href="https://www.facebook.com/ThisIsLebanon961/posts/510474449249601">https://www.facebook.com/ThisIsLebanon961/posts/510474449249601</a></td>
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<td>Directions to report story to celebrities</td>
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