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The Image as a Site of Transgression:

The Case of Beirut Counter-Visuality since October 2019

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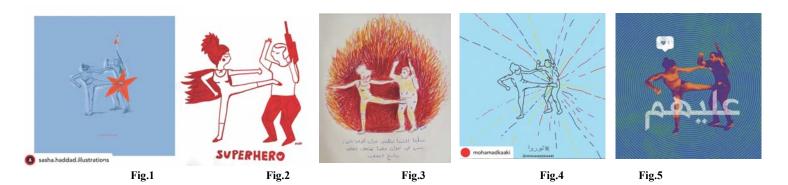
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On 17 October 2019 in Beirut, a Lebanese state bodyguard confronted by demonstrators opened fire when a female protestor hit him with a side kick. Another protestor recorded this moment on his mobile phone. A single frame of the video footage was remediated shortly after as a still image and gained rapid traction across social media platforms, as did the original video. The circulation of the content online inspired a group of artists to remediate the digital image themselves into a series of artistic works, adding in the process additional layers of meaning and interpretation to its original context. Taking the digital image of the side kick as a case study, this qualitative research examines how five young Lebanese artists use 'cyberartivism' to participate in the rising wave of political and social transformation. Based on empirical material that consists of a series of interviews with five Lebanese artists, this study aims to understand the role of digital images in their transition from forms of evidence to remediated sites of transgression in the context of the October 2019 Revolution in Lebanon. Its purpose is to explore the way camera witnessing, connective witnessing, and the creative modification of an image and its circulation on social media can foster a sense of solidarity and dissent by empowering and strengthening protestors' voices, thus generating new forms of leadership and agency.

Keywords: visual activism; counter visuality; middle east uprising; digital image; social media; camera witnessing; connective witnessing

Introduction

| Fig.1 | Fig.2 | Fig.3 | Fig.4 | Fig.5 |

This article examines an image of a female protestor side-kicking a state bodyguard, which went viral during what was referred to as the October 2019 Revolution in Lebanon (Geha 2019; Sinno 2020; Makdisi 2021; Melki & Kozman 2021; Karam & Majed 2022). After fifteen years of civil war (1975–90) and three decades of postwar neoliberal policies, the Lebanese took to the streets to voice their discontent against a "kleptocratic" ruling class of sectarian leaders who have been using their political power to expropriate the wealth of the Lebanese (Makdisi 2021: 436). The incident of the side kick was made all the more significant by the location in which it occurred, right in front of a major Lebanese bank in downtown Beirut. The timing of the incident coincides with the collapse of the banking system in Lebanon. It occurred in response to new tax measures and rampant corruption among the ruling class responsible for the collapse of the economy in Lebanon. The austerity measures implemented by the government prompted protestors to voice their discontent and demand major reforms.[1] They advocated to end a fraudulent, sectarian, and patriarchal system that is deeply rooted in the way Lebanon has been governed for the past three decades (Makdisi 2000).[2]

The night of 17 October 2019, a member of the security forces of a Lebanese politician was confronted by a group of angry protestors.[3] The armed man opened fire

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when Malak Alawiye, a female protestor, hit him with a side kick right between his legs. Another protestor recorded this moment on his mobile phone. A single frame of the recorded footage was remediated shortly after as a still image that gained rapid traction across social media platforms, as did the original recording.[4] The speed with which the image circulated on social media and in the press, expressing anger and dissent, was unprecedented, as was the burst of creativity that followed (Dutton 2019).

Taking the digital image of the side kick as a case study, this qualitative research is twofold. In the first part, it looks into the role of digital images as evidence or camera-witnessing (Andén-Papadopoulos 2014), while in the second part, it focuses on the remediation of digital images and the way they foster a sense of solidarity and dissent by empowering and strengthening protestors' voices, thus generating new forms of leadership and agency (Doerr, Mattoni & Teune 2013; Mirzoeff 2011). This latter part demonstrates how the online circulation of the digital image of the side kick inspired a group of artists to further remediate the content of the image into a series of artistic works, adding in the process additional layers of meaning and interpretation to its original context. The study draws from the literature on social media materialities during protests (Neumayer, Mortensen & Poell 2019) and research on the development of iconography through the circulation of digital images on social media (Olesen 2015; Adami 2016; Drainville 2018; Mielczarek 2018) in order to examine how images travel and become performative and symbolic (Boudana, Frosh & Cohen 2017), all while exploring their mobilizing functions.

Through a series of in-depth personal interviews—60 minutes each, conducted over the phone, recorded and transcribed in 2021— with five young established artists from Lebanon who witnessed the political upheaval and creatively modified the digital image

of the female protestor's kick, and building on a body of literature that explores various forms of "creative insurgency" in the MENA region, especially since 2010 (Gruber & Haugbolle 2013; Cooke 2016; Kraidy 2016; Shilton 2021) and a rising scholarship on women's active participation and leading roles in protests since 2010 (Sadiqi 2016; Allam 2018; Pratt 2020; Stephan & Charrad 2020), this study traces the journey of a digital image of a female protestor kicking a state security officer from image-as-evidence to image-as-transgressive. In her writing on women's contribution to the October 2019 Revolution in Lebanon, Myriam Sfeir, the Director of the Arab Institute for Women at the Lebanese American University, describes the role that women played during the Lebanese uprising as follows: "Women were the thrust of the revolution, participating in the protests and calling for long overdue reforms and the importance of having a civil state where all citizens are treated equally and the government respects, protects, and fulfills its obligations to international treaties and women's rights" (2022: 250). With the purpose of highlighting women's participation in the October 2019 Revolution, this study also addresses the role of feminist mobilization in the uprising. It uses a semiotic approach in discourse analysis method to understand how, why, and the purpose for which the original image of the side kick was modified in five different variations of the original digital images extracted from Instagram. I use discursive analysis to understand the way the five artists have used iconic and indexical signs in their illustrations and how these signs generate meaning within the particular gender dynamics and political context of October 2019 Beirut protest.

By employing the proposed theoretical framework, this study contributes to the already considerable and worthy body of work on the Arab Spring protests. It is

particularly significant in advancing literature on creative image production and its modification and circulation during a period of unrest in Lebanon.

Camera-witnessing and Social Media

The camera phone has been widely recognized as a significant tool for activism, its most obvious use being that it facilitates the logistics of communication within a protest situation (Andén-Papadopoulos 2014 & Mortensen 2015). It also provides an on-the-ground, witness-based visual record of activist events for immediate circulation via global media (Andén-Papadopoulos 2014). In line with scholars of social media activism (Doerr, Mattoni & Teune 2013; Andén-Papadopoulos 2014; Mirzoeff 2011), this section argues that camera witnessing has become a participatory and reflective act in the dissemination of news. It will explore the way the camera phone allowed for new "performative rituals of bearing witness" (Andén-Papadopoulos: 753) when a protestor recorded an act of dissent against authority—kicking the state bodyguard—via his personal phone and then used the footage as a graphic testimony to produce political solidarity. This act is now seen as a civic action, which has a bearing on the communication, media coverage, and political handling of the event of the side kick. This act can also be understood as a surveillance tool to denounce and shame the state's abuse of power—the armed security forces shooting in the air to disperse protestors and put an end to civil disobedience (Mielczarek 2018). Throughout its proliferation, and with added textuality, the digital image generated new narratives as will be further explored in the second part of this article.

One of the early tweets referencing this digital image invites admiration and praise for the female protestor: "Admire this badass Lebanese protestor, she got the thug properly with that kick" tweeted @KarlreMarks on 18 October 2019.[5] This tweet, taken

from Enzo Mokdad's account, was viewed 700.6K times, retweeted 574 times, and liked 1,880 times. The recording swiftly made it to the headline news with titles such as "Lebanon 'kick queen' hits government where it hurts" (France 24, October 18, 2019). Even a few months after the event, the press continued to closely watch the protest icon, whose digital image of the kick was still being brought up when discussing the protests. This means it was still circulating when she was brought to trial by the Lebanese government (Middle East Monitor, February 20, 2020), and when she got married in the midst of protests in the streets of Beirut (Khalifeh, 2019). By granting the original event broader moral and emotional meaning, this digital recording and the still image gave birth to new events. The recording of the kick was not merely a camera-witness of a random incident resulting from tension between civilians and the state apparatus in Lebanon: indeed, its circulation in the news became an event in its own right, contributing to a series of other events including protests against the state, but also against corruption, misogyny, and other injustices.

Resistance, Subversion, and Arab Women's Mobilization

Hariman and Lucaites argue that the circulation of iconic images enhances civic engagement and public culture (2007). Building on Hariman and Lucaites' argument, this section draws from a broad theoretical study on the impact of circulating images in the global media to look into and compare the side kick image in Beirut with other images that collectively express protestors' discontent with the ruling class and the way the image went viral on social media and in the press. It is particularly indebted to recent work from within the field of media studies focusing on digital images and their diffusion on social media, such as in the work of Paolo Gerbaudo's (2015) and Thomas Olesen's (2018) that traces the transformation and reinterpretation of images and their

construction of collective identity on social media. It is also indebted to the rising

scholarship on women's active participation and leading roles in protests on social

media since 2010 in the Arab region (Newsom & Lengel 2012; Khamis & Mili 2017;

Esposito & Sinatora 2021).

Camera-witnessing, combined with social media as a site for political

provocation, has proven to be effective in mobilizing large communities (Gerbaudo

2015; Olesen 2018). Such practices are now broadly spreading during acts of

disobedience to the state in different parts of the world (Boudana, Frosh & Cohen

2017). For example, in January 2011, at the height of the protests against dictatorship in

Tunisia, the icon of 'Captain Khobza' or the 'Baguette Man' holding a loaf of bread,

pointed like a machine gun at the anti-riot police, widely circulated on Tunisian social

platforms.[6] The etymological significance of bread in the Tunisian imaginary can be

drawn from its symbolic meaning as the minimum dietary requirement for survival. The

failure of the state to provide this staple for the maintenance of basic living conditions

in Tunisia became a cause for revolt against the Tunisian political system. Similar to

Captain Khobza's icon, the female side kick iconography in Beirut symbolizes the

Lebanese government's failure to instill a functioning civil society. It is as if both icons

are articulating the following logic: the Tunisian state has failed to provide security and

stability for its people, just as the Lebanese government has been neglecting the basic

needs of its own citizens, and, therefore, both the Tunisian and the Lebanese states

deserve to be subverted—either by being 'shot' or 'kicked,' as seen in the images.

The widely circulated digital image of Alaa Salah in Sudan is another example in which

a woman appears standing in a public space openly opposing the regime. While the

image in Beirut reveals a woman (Alawiye) aggressing the state security officer, the

image in Sudan shows a woman (Salah) brazenly standing on top of a car in a street of

Khartoum in her traditional white dress, leading a crowd of protestors as they chant anti-regime slogans (Reilly 2019).[7] Salah, dubbed the "Nubian Queen," (Friedman 2019) and Alawiye, the "Kick Queen," (*France 24* 2019; *The News International* 2019; *Middle East Monitor* 2020) both gained worldwide media attention when a significant number of social media users in Lebanon, Sudan, and these two countries' respective diasporic communities, changed their profile pictures to Salah and Alawiye's images in expression of support for both digital female icons.

In Tunisia, where 70% of protestors were women, the wide proliferation of the digital image of the 'Nubian Queen' coincided with the so-called 'Women's Revolution' that ultimately led to the overthrow of Omar Bashir in April 2019 (Reilly 2019). This is especially crucial considering the fact that historical narratives have often erased Arab women from the pivotal role they have played throughout their countries' protest movements (Coleman, 2011). Just like Alawiye's digital image, the images of Salah symbolize a female citizen defying authoritarian rule. Both images represent the integral role women play on the frontlines of protests, and the proliferation of these images dispels claims about protests and political agitation in Arab countries being exclusive to men (Nassar, 2019).

[PLEASE PLACE FIGURES 1-5 HERE]

Artivism and the Image as a Site of Transgression

Artivism, as explained by Hana Shaltout, is the interplay between forms of cultural production and activism (2021). It is a transgressive form of art that intersects with political, social, and gender issues with the ultimate goal of producing social change (2021). It is a term that stretches from a strategic communication and protest tool to an

aesthetic expression calling for action by interpreting and reinterpreting an event represented in an image (Korpe 2013).

Drawing from the scholarship on iconicity and image appropriation in the digital era and guided by the theoretical frameworks of participatory digital culture and Internet memetics (Mirzoeff 2011; Doerr, Mattoni, & Teune 2013; Mortensen 2017; Olesen 2018), this section addresses questions on why the images (figs. 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5) are transformed the way they are and how they are assigned particular political meanings. It builds on the literature on the appropriation and the construction of icons and their dramatic diffusion on social media such as the Alan Kurdi digital image and memes (Mortensen 2017; Olesen 2018) and the reaction these images have sparked in their diffusion. In seeking to offer an explanation of the proliferation of the Kick Queen image in different forms, this section illuminates some new powerful trends in activism around protest images.

A series of in-depth personal interviews with five young established artists from Lebanon who witnessed the political upheaval and creatively modified the digital image of the female protestor's kick were conducted over the phone. Artists such as Sasha Haddad (Fig. 1), Pascale Hares (Fig. 2), Noemie Honein (Fig. 3), Mohamad Kaaki (Fig. 4), and Rami Kanso (Fig. 5) have created each their version of the photo and disseminated it on social media. The purpose of the interviews was to allow the artists to reflect on the reasons for modifying the Kick Queen image, and the way they have used the image and its diffusion to assert their agency. The findings provide data for analysis to understand the process and outcome of the five artists' creative dissent. The interview questions revolve around their personal experience of learning about the event, the impact of the event and the drive to produce digital images, and the reason for

uploading them online. In short, the interview focused on the following three questions:

(a) How did the different versions of the Kick Queen icon spread online?

(b) What was the artivists' drive in appropriating and interpreting the Kick Queen? (c)

What new meanings did the modified digital images of the Kick Queen generate online?

The five artists were selected based on their posting on Instagram of an appropriated

version of the original Kick Queen. All five are based in Beirut, except for Rami Kanso,

who lives between London, Doha, and Beirut. Two of them, Kanso and Kaaki, are

militant activists as seen through their recurring dissident posts on Instagram. In the

next part, I will analyze my findings in addressing why the images (figs. 1, 2, 3, 4, & 5)

are transformed the way they are and how they are assigned particular political

meanings.

Findings

   (a) **How did the different versions of the Kick Queen icon spread online?**

A few hours after the side kick event on 17 October 2019, modified versions of the Kick

Queen icon dramatically proliferated on Instagram. One of the artists, Rami Kanso's

image (Fig. 5) was liked 8,124 times on Instagram, whereas Sasha Haddad's image (fig.

1) was viewed 1,033 times. All five images (figs. 1, 2, 3, 4 & 5) were shared and used

as profile pictures by a large number of social media users in Lebanon as well as in the

diaspora, and many of these changed their profile pictures to different versions of the

Kick Queen digital image.

      How we see and react to images is influenced by the lived experiences of

occurring sociopolitical changes (Doerr, Mattoni & Teune 2013). Pascale Hares

describes the unexpected way people reacted after she uploaded her modified version of

the Kick Queen (fig. 2). She says:

Right after I produced my version of the Kick Queen, I shared it on my

Instagram account. Less than an hour later, I was surprised to receive 341

likes, 115 shares, and a reach of 2,807 viewers! Social media has changed

the way we interact with images and consequently the way we produce

them.[8]

Sasha Haddad further explains, "When I first uploaded my image of the Kick

Queen on my Instagram account, I realized the interactive effect it could have on

my followers and its impact on the wider social media users as a communication

medium." [9] This acceleration of information-as-image has led to more critical

awareness of what images actually mean and what they can accomplish within the

context of uprisings (Gerbaudo & Treré 2015). In response to this acceleration of

information-as-image phenomenon, Nicholas Mirzoeff explains that as soon as an

image is uploaded to social media, it is activated—it becomes a kind of

participation (2011). Its role expands to a form of collective communication that

leads to connective action (Bennett & Segerberg 2012). Calling for connective

action as such manifests itself through the creation of a collective identity, which is

understood as a set of operations by means of which social participants define their

collective sense of self, who they are, and what they stand for (Gerbaudo & Treré

2015). Consequently, the rapid circulation of images on social media increases the

artivists' responsibility not only as image-makers but also as policy-makers. When

they upload such images, Hares and Haddad become political activists; they act as

political agents. Through their images, they can mobilize public opinions

(Papacharissi 2016).

The image here not only amplifies the activists' voices but also invites viewers to participate in its meaning-making when they comment on it and repost it. Its role is not complete without the users' participation. This participatory role is exemplified in the way a number of artivists added text to their modified images in order to generate an additional layer of meaning to the original Kick Queen digital image which invited more viewer/user interaction. Kanso who often uses text to complete the meaning of his images, added the Arabic word 'alehom,' to his version of the Kick Queen (fig. 5). 'Alehom' is the title of one of Mashrou' Leila's prominent controversial songs, and it means 'to strike back' against the regime.[10] Mohamad Kaaki, on the other hand, added a hashtag to his image (Fig. 4)—-*#thuru* (rebel)—that calls people to rebel against the established regime. While Kanso and Kaaki used their versions of the Kick Queen (figs. 4 & 5) as an icon calling for retaliation against the ruling oligarchy, Haddad (fig. 1), Hares (fig. 2), and Honein (fig. 3) chose to emphasize and identify with the woman's brave act of fearlessly kicking the armed man. Hares reinforces this claim by adding a title, 'SUPERHERO,' to her image. Haddad, on the other hand, seems to identify with the Kick Queen, as the image becomes a tool for self-identification (Gerbaudo & Treré 2015). "The woman aggressing the security officer who caught my attention in her brave act standing against corruption could be any woman. In fact, the one I drew is based on myself, this woman is me," Haddad claims.[11] Haddad's powerful image invited users to identify with the Kick Queen through the process of identification with its icon as explored by Raymond Drainville's analysis of the users' responses to the iconic photograph of Ieshia Evans' arrest at a Black Lives Matter protest that went viral on Twitter. Evans' photograph showed recurring patterns in the ways users interpret the photograph (2018) that are similar to the

way the artivists and their audience interpret the Kick Queen. The responses from the artivists (the use of 'Alehom' and SUPERHERO in the title) and the audiences, as seen in their comments reflect their emotions that range from sympathy, outrage, antagonism, and more. For Drainville, images can be the "starting-point of a dialogue" with audiences and artists, who "reproduce, re-use, and re-situate them in different contexts" (26), and in doing so, they provide "the provision of figural resources for collective action" (Hariman and Lucaites 2007: 12 cited in Drainville).

As for the use of hashtags that plays a crucial role in image-sharing in the media ecosystem (Rambukanna 2015 & Papacharissi 2016) and in the case of the 2019 October Revolution, when hashtags on Twitter and Instagram—such as *#thawra* (the Arabic word for revolution) (31,800 posts), #artofthawra (5,000+ posts), #thawraartists (1,000+ posts), #thawra2019 (1,000+ posts), and #thawraart (100+ posts), among many others— were on the rise (Kozman 2022). Hashtags operate as forms of user-generated tagging that enable the cross-referencing of content sharing, and thus were instrumental in the diffusion of connective images such as the Kick Queen.

(b) What was the artivists drive in appropriating and interpreting the Kick Queen?

As expressed in literature on protest images and social media activism, image production, mediation, and remediation are now enmeshed within almost every protest experience (Mirzoeff 2011; Doerr, Mattoni, & Teune 2013; Gerbaudo and Treré 2015). The remediation of images gives protestors the space to widen their scope through a networked visual protest. Ariella Azoulay calls this 'the civil potential of photography' in which the image shifts from a documentary role to a co-constitutive agent of activism

(2008). The work of the artivists mentioned in this paper is a testimony to this potential, as the artivists here operate as an interface, a network that extends the power of individual action and fuses the individual with the collective (Bennett & Segerberg 2012). How did the five artivists use "countervisuality," a term used by Mirzoeff to express a different way of looking at images in using a set of "tactics to dismantle the visual strategies of the hegemonic system" (2011: 23). Countervisuality in the case of the Kick Queen is to look or develop a looking experience that generates new meaning bestowed upon the image. Here it is in turning Alawiye into a protest icon. This section investigates the multiplying participation in the reception as well as the production of the image that has grown into examples of "connective action" (Bennett & Segerberg 2012) that is based upon individual motivation to partake in image production and image circulation turning the activity of seeing, into feeling, sharing and remediating images thus into a politically meaningful action.

For all five artivists, seeing the footage of Alawiye kicking the minister's bodyguard had an isolating effect; it made them feel responsible and frustrated at the Lebanese Government inability to improve their living conditions and that of their fellow Lebanese citizens. Realizing the inability of the state to resolve the socioeconomic situation triggered a sense of collective responsibility to make visible social inequalities. Hares recalls feeling angry, but also proud of the woman's action, when she saw the footage of the female side kick on Instagram: "I felt the anger in her at the moment of the kick. She reacted with a kick instinctively without thinking," said Hares.[12] The footage prompted Hares to produce a quick sketch with her bold, red felt pen on paper. She uploaded her sketch (fig. 2) after tagging it with her signature, 'SICOU' using another feature to multiply the image outreach on social media platforms.[13] As for Honein (Fig. 3), she joined her own lived experience with the

footage she saw to produce her personal visual interpretation of the event. Honein combined the Kick Queen event with angry flames drawn in the background. These flames represent the fire that erupted a few days before the event. She recalls,

> Watching the news of the forests burning in the suburbs of Lebanon on TV on 17 October 2019, with the government being inactive about it, and simultaneously seeing the Kick Queen footage on my phone screen, made me think how both events were mishandled by the government. This sparked my anger. I felt helpless… Armed with my color pencils, I started sketching aggressively on my notepad.[14]

Honein's illustration (Fig. 3) depicts two horrific incidents that were neglected by the state: the devastating fires that erupted in the forests of Lebanon, and the clash between armed bodyguards and protestors in downtown Beirut.

As for Kanso (Fig. 5), he saw the footage on his phone screen when he was in London and felt frustrated because he couldn't be physically present to participate in the long-awaited protests in Beirut. "I waited so long for this moment," Kanso said, "I wanted to join forces with my compatriots, to express my discontent, and show my support to the brave woman who had the balls to stand against this corrupt ruling class!" For him, posting his interpretation of the event was a way to join forces with his comrades protesting in the streets of Beirut against injustice and a corrupt government.[15] Kanso's approach in particular exemplifies the way social media platforms can be used across geographical borders as sites of collective identification (Gerbaudo and Treré 2015). Kanso's attitude asserts the need among artists and civilians to account for the cultural configurations of protest activities that ultimately shape the content and meaning of social media activism.

All five images (figs. 1, 2, 3, 4, & 5) are to be understood as sites where a new iconography has been forged contributing to the emergence of collective agents of change. This collective identity is revealed in the unifying choices the five artists have made in designing their modified versions of the Kick Queen as demonstrated here.

(c) What new meanings did the modified digital images of the Kick Queen generate online?

The subject of the initial image is amplified by these artists, who use aesthetic techniques in their interpretation of the event (as seen in Figs 1-5).

In their modified graphic interpretations, the five artivists use different media ranging from color pencils to felt pens, to collages, to mixed media and digital media effects to add or amplify details in the image as an aesthetic technique for generating additional meaning. Seeing the blurred quality of the original digital image of the Kick Queen, Haddad, in an attempt to complete missing fragments adds elements to the image. She claims that working with an image that is blurred and unclear opens up opportunities for multiple interpretations. The inability to see a clear image prompted her to reinterpret the event by imagining and adding missing parts such as the woman's right arm which is cut off in the initial still image being hidden by a man in the crowd. In that sense, the ambiguous pixelated low quality of the digital image provided space for imagining different scenarios in representing the Kick Queen as a hero (fig. 1). In her interpretation of the Kick Queen (Fig. 1), Haddad drew a large red star against a blue background to symbolize the impact of the female side kick which is represented as more powerful than the two bullet shots represented by smaller stars above the bodyguard. Hares in her version (Fig. 2) on the other hand, added props such as the red cap in order to associate the Kick Queen to the figure of superwoman. Kanso (Fig. 5) designed a collage using a background of reverberating lines to highlight the Kick

Queen's powerful kick, while Kaaki (Fig. 4) emphasized the kick by making it the focal point of his drawing. He used dotted lines protruding from the center, the point at which the woman's foot makes contact with the bodyguard. All five artists simplified their compositions by using reductive techniques in getting rid of all unnecessary details to focus on the female kick. In all five graphic interpretations, the two main figures, the Kick Queen and the bodyguard are deliberately isolated from the crowd in the background—as seen in the original still image.

How was Alawiye portrayed in the five modified images? Was she portrayed as the perpetrator? the victim? the bystander? or the liberator? All five images (as seen in Figs. 1-5) feature the female protestor as the liberator violently attacking the state's security officer. All five focus on the specific moment in which the vulnerable protestor gains power by revolting against the armed bodyguard. These decisions are informative as they help us understand the affective impact of images that can communicate through emotive expressions (Papacharissi 2016). All five focus on the moment that represents resistance and refusal to be coerced by the state. The symbols associated with the heroic figure are highlighted in the artists' work, and while physical strength, power, and determination are traits commonly attributed to men, these traits are the ones associated and highlighted in the artists' portrayal of the female protestor.

The symbolic meaning of this act—kicking the bodyguard of a politician—is that it is equivalent to attacking the state. It is through this lens that I analyze this transgressive image, an image that could be considered dangerous to produce and circulate, especially during this period in which the Lebanese government is becoming increasingly intolerant of criticism.[16] Recently, there have been increasing reports of cases of arrest, imprisonment, and detention of dissident people attempting to denounce state corruption. According to a Human Rights Watch Report (2019), in recent years,

Lebanon's criminal defamation laws have been used against activists, artists, and journalists who posted artwork denouncing the ruling class and criticized the current state. Malak Alawiye herself, against whom charges were brought over that kick a month after the incident took place, was summoned to military court in Lebanon. In November 2019, she faced trial, charged for bodily harm and insulting the security forces. Beirut has gradually become a country where censorship runs rampant, as the ruling class continuously attempts to stifle dissident acts, including the production and circulation of images that are not aligned with its agendas and therefore threaten its existence. As images similar to that of the Kick Queen are proliferating on social media, the ruling class has begun taking new measures to restrict their circulation by identifying their authors' accounts and having intelligence services subsequently put activists and image makers under surveillance for having published these images. Maintaining this effort to intimidate artists and put an end to their dissident practices, hundreds of activists have been detained, beaten, and interrogated since October 2019. These coercive acts, however, have failed to stop artivists from producing transgressive images. As soon as such images are released, young activists and image makers continue to produce and circulate even more dissident messages. Visually or verbally, they refuse to be silenced. "Nothing scares me, I will not stop drawing what is on my mind" said Haddad (2020). "I refuse to be silenced" asserted Kanso (2020). Their perseverance and the endurance of their images help sustain their acts of resistance as their images continued to circulate across media platforms not only on Instagram but also Facebook, Twitter and other media platforms. All five artivists during the interviews recognize the importance of posting their modified versions of the Kick Queen on social media, they also acknowledge the space they provide to confront and address social issues (Gerbaudo & Treré 2015).

A few months after the incident of the side kick, Danielle Arbid, a Lebanese film director based in Paris, posted a snapshot to her Instagram account depicting a wall on a street in Paris on which the following inscription was spray-painted: "Kick like a Lebanese woman," referring to the act of Alawiye, caught in the image analyzed in this article, as a model to be followed (Fig. 6). This eyewitness digital image of an inscription once again presents Alawiye as a hero, not in an illustration but in textual form, as a call to action to combat injustice and oppression. Years after the side kick incident in Beirut, the image is still traveling in various forms and on different surfaces: not only in the form of stencils and graffiti on the walls of Beirut, but also on banners held by protestors in Montreal and other cities around the world. Hares saw her illustration of the image in the international news on TV, when a protestor appeared in Montreal holding a banner with Hares's interpretation of the side kick (Fig. 3).[17] And when Kanso released the copyright of his female kick drawing, turning it into an open-source image for wider distribution, two friends of his had the image tattooed on their arms. These enduring images stand for the persistence in putting an end to ongoing injustices and for pursuing major political reforms yet to be determined for Lebanon, they also insure the extension of the protests in Lebanon.

Fig.6

Conclusion

This research that investigates the currency of the Kick Queen digital image in its circulation and remediation on social media platforms since the 2019 October Revolution in Lebanon engages with current literature from the field on digital imagery, protest, creative mediation, and socio-materiality to examine creative insurgency by comparing it with other creative insurgency in Tunisia and Sudan and by looking into the different ways five artists have visually interpreted the original image to voice their political claims.

By tackling notions of camera-witnessing, connectivity and other creative insurgency in relation to emerging themes related to the October 2019 Revolution in Lebanon, this study contributes to the recent body of literature on protest and social media in the MENA region and the rising scholarship on women's active participation and leading roles in protests since 2010. It subsequently deepens scholarly knowledge in building on a larger theoretical framework on the use of digital images as evidence, the notion of connectivity and the broader literature on visual protest.

It examines how digital protest images transition from a form of evidence to remediated sites of transgression. It does so by drawing on a compelling case study, that of a photo of a female protestor who side kicked a bodyguard during the 2019 Lebanese October Uprising and became viral while offering valuable insights on the transformation of the image and on the role and intentions of the artivists.

On the methodological front, research on visual protest and social media is crucial to understand protest dynamics in the context of Lebanon given the burst of creativity that occurred since the first days of the uprising and what it tells us about the causes, the demands, and the possible impact of such movements. However, it is important to recognize the limitations of such a study in the challenges of addressing the

dilemmas of collective identity and citizenship in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious context that has been witnessing a growing political and military turbulence (Yahya 2009). Visual and social media research through the open dialogue established between the artivists and their audiences as demonstrated in this research can help us understand complex sociopolitical concerns. The line of inquiry used in this article allows for a deeper understanding of the meaning-making processes and the cultural dynamics that lie at the heart of visual digital protest communication in Lebanon. In seeking to offer an explanation of the diffusion of the Kick Queen image, this article illuminates some new trends in artivism in the middle east by using an interdisciplinary approach cutting across social media studies, creative insurgency and sociopolitical issues.

The study not only contributes to the recent body of literature on protest and social media in the MENA region but it also deepens scholarly knowledge on digital images by using interviews to support visual content analysis.

While existing research uses content analysis to trace the evolution of memes and images (Mortensen 2017; Olesen 2018), this research combines both (a) visual data/content analysis and (b) interviews with the artists to better understand the context, the production process and the intention of the artists.

Visual data/content analysis help identify and examine the common signs used in the five illustrated variations of the original digital images while in-depth interviews add significant meaning that has been overlooked in existing research using other methods (e.g. Mortensen 2017; Olesen 2018). Interviews are useful as they provide detailed information about the artists' thoughts, emotions and intention in using specific signs to emphasize on the message that they aim to convey to their audience. Interviews not only provide context to the visual data but they also offer a more complete picture

of the logic and reason for modifying the image in this case study. Learning about the experiences, feelings and perspectives of the interviewees, allows for a better understanding of the image. More specifically, stories told during the interviews inspire thoughtful discussions beyond the scope of study. This methodological contribution deserves to be highlighted as it proves that the use of interviews can teach us about the process of modifying images, which content analysis cannot tell as demonstrated earlier.

More broadly, the research findings reveal unique trends in protest culture in Lebanon and the MENA region. These findings tackle the limitations to freedom of expression and how the use of images by the protestors present an opportunity to navigate these limitations. They also address emerging popular demands of Lebanese youth as expressed by other studies of political expression in Lebanon (Karam & Majed 2022). The findings of this research highlight the role of feminist politics in Lebanon and the region which calls for more substantial research on the way images help reshape a public imaginary around the role of women in politics and protest on one hand and on the different visual tactics between locally engaged and diasporic Lebanese artivists on the other.

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Notes

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[1] According to Amnesty International, the protests since October 2019 in Lebanon have been met by the Lebanese military and security forces with beatings, teargas, rubber bullets, live ammunition and pellets.

[2] For more on the way Lebanese warlords took over the country after the Civil War, see

Ussama Makdisi, 2000. When the *Grand Liban* (Greater Lebanon), an independent

modern state, was established after the First World War, under the French mandate,

it was founded on a sectarian system enshrined by a constitution that divided the

ruling authority by assigning the presidency to a Maronite, the House of

Representatives to a Shia, and the position of Prime Minister to a Sunni. In the late

1990's, the Taif Agreement was signed to secure mutual coexistence and power-

sharing among the country's religious groups. This agreement reinforced the

separation between different communities, fostering separation instead of unity. And

as the ongoing violence in the country shows, Lebanon is arguably just as divided

and unstable as it was three decades ago.

[3] The incident occurred when the convoy of the Lebanese minister of education was

confronted by protestors. One of the minister's bodyguards stepped out of the car and

fired an assault rifle in the air, sparking an angry reaction from the crowd.

[4] The half-a-second footage and the still digital image can be accessed on the following

link:

https://twitter.com/karlremarks/status/1184968531286343680?lang=en

[5] https://twitter.com/karlremarks/status/1184968531286343680?lang=en

[6] The photo can be seen at the following link

https://taipeitimes.com/News/world/archives/2011/07/21/2003508785

[7] Alaa Salah's image is taken by Lana Haroun in April 2019.

[8] Personal communication, June 3, 2021.

[9] Personal communication, July 14, 2021.

[10] Mashrou' Leila is a Lebanese progressive indie rock band who sings lyrics that touch

on topics that remain highly controversial in the Arab region.

[11] Personal communication, July 14, 2021.

[12] Personal communication, June 3, 2021.

[13] Personal communication, June 3, 2021.

[14] Personal communication, September 2, 2020.

[15] Personal communication, November 21, 2020.

[16] Although Lebanon is perceived to be one of the Arab world's freest countries, it has

witnessed an alarming increase in attacks on freedom of expression over the past few

years.

[17] Personal communication, June 3, 2021.

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Captions

Figure 1. Sasha Haddad, untitled, digital drawing, 2019. Courtesy of Sasha Haddad.

Figure 2. Pascale Hares, SUPERHERO, digital drawing, 2019. Courtesy of Pascale Hares.

Figure 3. Noemie Honein, untitled, colored pencil drawing on paper, 2019. Courtesy of Noemie Honein.

Figure 4. Mohamad Kaaki, #thuru, digital drawing, 2019. Courtesy of Mohamad Kaaki.

Figure 5. Rami Kanso, 'Alehom,' digital drawing, 2019. Courtesy of Rami Kanso.

Figure 6. Danielle Arbid, photograph uploaded on her Instagram account, 2019. Courtesy of Danielle Arbid