

Watching television while forcibly displaced: Syrian refugees as participant audiences

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Abstract:

In this article, I explore how Syrian refugees and internally displaced people are using social media to reshape interpretations of their own status through their engagement with quality TV texts that tackle the refugee crisis. I focus on the discourse surrounding the Syrian Television Drama series *Ghadan Naltaqi (GN)* [*We'll Meet Tomorrow*] which is particularly interesting because of the dialogue that has developed between the forcibly displaced segment of its audience and the writer/creator of the show, Iyad Abou Chamat.

Methodologically, this research is based on 26 semi-structured interviews conducted in Arabic language: one interview with Chamat, and 25 interviews with members of his audience who friended Chamat on Facebook after *GN* aired. I demonstrate that Facebook serves as an outlet for interactivity between displaced drama producers and audiences in a way that imitates the dynamics of live theater. While such interactivity is facilitated by technology, the emergence of this interactive relationship is owned to the desires for (re-)connection of both drama creators and audiences stemming from the alienation of war, violence and displacement. The particularity of the Syrian war-related topic in *GN* and its applicability to both the creator of the series as well as to audiences' lived experiences evoked a significant level of online participation with Chamat. I use the term 'participant audiences' to describe the interactive, emotional responses of displaced audiences and their online engagement with TV content that address the disconnections they experience because of conflict and displacement while offering them possibilities for coping with violence, marginalization, and suffering. I show how the entertainment interventions of drama creators help displaced people both to mitigate the traumatic effects of a highly polarizing conflict, and to find a healing space from violent and alienating dominant media discourses.

Keywords: Audience; participation; interactivity; television; social media; refugees; Syria.

Western literature on media audiences and suffering tends to imagine television audiences as of 'the white middle class,' only encountering suffering from a geographic and social distance. For such audiences, it is other communities that experience suffering (Ong 2014). Such research emphasizes audiences' emotions of distance and detachment when consuming media texts of trauma and suffering (Jorge and Dias 2016). At the same time, scholarship on social media audiences, like that of Schwarz (2016) and Wilson (2016), has explored the ways in which social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, are used by TV producers and audiences in different cultural, political, and techno-commercial settings globally. However, the experiences of marginalized non-western audiences like refugees and asylum seekers have been understudied in the literature of both television's and social media's audiences. In this article, I focus on how this plays out in the context of the Syrian war and refugee crisis. Specifically, I examine the ways in which TV audiences of the Syrian Television Drama *Ghadan Naltaqi* (GN) [*We'll Meet Tomorrow*] interpret this series in relation to their lived experiences. I will be particularly interested in their motivations for participating online with the writer/creator of the show, and what the meaning of that participation has been. My aim is to describe what happens when non-Western refugees and internally displaced people bring their experiences to bear on the production of interpretation by engaging online, not only with each other, but with television writers and producers. Such engagements, I contend, foster the production of a healing space that exists at a critical remove from violent and excluding dominant media discourses.

GN ran during Ramadan in the summer of 2015. It is particularly interesting because it provides a case where Syrian TV audiences used Facebook as a space to engage with the producer of a show that undertook to represent Syrian refugee experiences.¹ The show focuses on the daily lived experiences of a group of Syrian refugees who rent separate rooms in one modest building in Lebanon. The group is composed of individuals coming from different social positions in prewar Syria, and representing diverse political views vis-à-vis the conflict. The show depicts many of the political, economic and cultural challenges that face Syrian refugees who live in neighboring countries such as Lebanon. It is also an example of the challenges that face Syrian television drama producers after the 2011 uprising. The series received positive reviews from Arab critics and audiences, and it was awarded, on October 14, 2015, the best comprehensive drama series of the year – shared with *The Godfather-East Club* – by the Television and Radio Mondiale in Egypt (Abdullah 2015; Alaraby Aljadid 2015). The show also generated controversy over gender-related themes and scenes around sexuality and virginity, which resulted in the decision of Arab TV stations such as Abu Dhabi Al Emarat TV to delete such scenes from broadcast because they did not fit with their censorship standards. However, an uncensored version of the series in high definition, uploaded by the series production company 'Clacket Media Productions,' is available on YouTube free of charge.²

In the 1990s and 2000s, scholarship on media and audiences' participation was dominated by an enthusiastic approach to online participation and its potential in democracy and civic engagement (Domingo et al., 2008). However, recently in the 2010s,

with the spread of cyberbullying, populism, and fake news, emerging research shifted toward analyzing ‘dark participation’ (Quandt, 2018). In this research, I aim to show that despite the recent research trend to the darker side of media participation, there are still cases where non-western audiences challenge the harsh conditions they live in to use information and communications technologies (ICTs) and participate in the media in meaningful, positive ways. Thus, for the purposes of this paper, I use *interactivity* to refer to the ‘property often designed and programmed into [communication] technology and thus is much more likely to be under the control of media producers’ and *participation* to refer to the ‘property of the surrounding culture [which] is often something communities assert through their shared engagement with technologies, content and producers’ (Jenkins 2014, 283). As Jenkins (2006) clarifies: ‘The technological determinants of interactivity (which is most often pre-structured or at least enabled by the designer) contrasts with the social and cultural determinants of participation (which is more open-ended and more fully shaped by consumer choices)’ (287). Thus, this research is inspired by a ‘social shaping of technology’ approach.³ I avoid, in this article, describing the audiences’ members of *GN* as fans, because members included in this study neither define themselves as fans nor produce necessarily cultural activities to share their feelings and thoughts with a community of like-minded fans (Jenkins 1988). I also avoid describing them as an ‘intervening audience,’ a term that refers to TV fans’ online activism that represents a threat to industry interests (Park, Yun, and Lee 2011). While few of *GN*’s audience members included in this study fit the profile of a fan or even an ‘intervening audience’ member, most of the 25 audience members included here can be described better as ‘participant audiences,’ a term I use to describe the forms of online engagement that *GN*’s audiences performed in their participation with *GN* creator’s Facebook page and in this research.

Carpentier (2011) distinguishes between active engagement (audiences who participate in media production) and passive engagement (audiences who only interact with media content). This distinction applies to the audiences who participated in this study. Some of them performed online active engagement with *GN* ranging from posting original commentaries, articles, and memes to liking the posts of *GN*’s creator. Others only performed passive engagement, limited to lurking on *GN*’s creator’s Facebook page. Still, I describe them as ‘participant audiences’ because both these groups of audiences shared two forms of participation: they befriended *GN*’s creator on Facebook after the series was aired on TV, and they agreed to participate in this research, which is another indicator of their affection for this show and what it represents. For example, Nour (a Syrian woman who resides in the United States) said:

I click ‘like’ on all Iyad’s Facebook posts about the series, though I very rarely ‘like’ any post on Facebook. Indeed, I participated online on his page because I love the series so much. This is the reason I’m doing this interview with you because I feel the show deserves this attention.

Nour's quote is an example of what I mean by 'participant audiences,' because Nour is not a person who is generally active online; however, her affection for *GN* motivated her to become active on Chamat's Facebook page and to participate in this research.

Additionally, using 'participant audiences' emphasizes the intersection of new and old media systems. As Carpentier (2011) highlights, 'the routines, identities, practices, conventions, and representations that circulate in the old media system have not been lost, but still co-structure the 'new' media system' (207). Furthermore, 'participant audiences' fits with the social shaping of technology approach and highlights that 'the participatory potential of media technologies remains dependent on the way that they are used and the societal context of which they are part' (Carpentier 2011, 207). In the example of television drama serials in the Arab world like *GN* that are designed to premiere and air during Ramadan, producers still control the show's production process from beginning to end. Such complete control over production is due to the fact that to produce a series to air over the course of a month, the entire series is generally completed by the time the first episode airs. It is correct that audiences' online interaction with producers might influence these producers' future work, but still the drama serials are produced according to the traditional television rules.

Finally, I draw on the work of Appadurai (1996, 2004, 2019) to show how media content such as *GN* provide refugees with materials that enable them to craft new scripts of imagined selves and possible worlds; a process that Appadurai calls 'the capacity to aspire.' In this way, media helps refugees to construct what Appadurai describes as 'the migrant archive.' As Appadurai (2019) clarifies:

Migration [forced or voluntary] tends to be accompanied by a confusion about what exactly has been lost, and thus of what needs to be recovered or remembered. This confusion often leads to a deliberate effort to construct a variety of archives, ranging from the most intimate and personal (such as the memory of one's earlier bodily self) to the most public and collective, which usually take the form of shared narratives and practices (p. 562).

I argue that *GN* functioned as an entertainment intervention that provided displaced Syrians with scripts to interpret their nostalgic past in Syria, their painful present in diaspora, and their hopeful future that contains newfound freedom. Generally, Appadurai (1996) argues that in the era of globalization migrants' and refugees' movements and media representations create disconnection between location, imagination, and identity. *GN* can be understood as an attempt to bridge such disconnection by creating possibilities for coping with violence, marginalization, and suffering. It represented connections for audiences by providing an archive of narratives, images, models, and scripts they can turn to in order to reflect/interpret on their own stories and traumatic experiences.

Methods

As a Syrian displaced woman scholar who lives in the United States, I watched *GN* during Ramadan 2015. Like many other Syrian audiences of the show, I friended the series writer Iyad Abou Chamat on Facebook. I was struck by this interactive trend on social media of befriending, specifically during Ramadan, writers/producers of successful Syrian TV drama serials. I have observed this online trend before with Yam Mashhadi, writer of the 2014 series '*Qalam Humra*' (*Lipstick*), and Samer Radwan, writer of 2013's *Manbar Al Mota* (*Platform of the dead*).⁴ Similar to Chamat and many other displaced Syrians, I left Syria in 2012 at a time when the conflict deteriorated into an intense, violent civil war.⁵ As a coping mechanism with my displacement, watching Syrian TV drama serials—like the aforementioned examples and following related pages on social media—provided me with ways to connect with my family, friends, and other displaced Syrians all over the world. In the 1990s and 2000s, I grew up with a ritual of watching TV drama serials during Ramadan with the rest of my family. It was a common family tradition that constructed shared memories between Syrians. Personally, I did not see my family since 2012. Separated by borders and racist politics, I found watching Ramadan TV serials and discussing them online with family members, friends, and other diasporic Syrians as a continuation of that nostalgic tradition from pre-war life in Syria. A sentiment my research participants shared with me.

The medium I used to watch all 30 episodes of *GN* is YouTube.⁶ This online availability allowed me to rewatch the episodes several times, and take notes that not only summarize each episode, but also highlight the main themes. I also analyzed secondary materials (such as the media coverage of *GN*) to place the series within the broader Arab media context. After the end of the 2015 Ramadan season, I conducted, in Arabic language, 26 semi-structured interviews: an interview with Chamat, the writer/creator of *GN*, and 25 interviews with members of his audience who friended Chamat on Facebook after *GN* aired.⁷ First of all, I interviewed Chamat via Skype and asked him at the end of the interview to share my recruitment message on his Facebook page (please see **Appendix 1** for the list of questions that I asked Chamat). When Chamat shared my recruitment post 36 persons expressed their interests via clicking 'like' (please see **Appendix 2** for an English translation of the recruitment post). Out of these 36 persons, 25 participants communicated with me via Facebook or Gmail to schedule an interview (please see **Appendix 3** for the list of questions that I asked audience members). Three interviews – including the interview with Chamat – were audio recorded. The rest of the participants preferred written forms of interviews. Of these, three participants sent me their responses via email, two participants asked me to interview them question by question via Facebook chat, and eighteen participants asked me to send them the questions via Facebook message in order to respond to me at their convenience. Out of the 25 participants, 10 were women and the rest were men. In term of geographical location, Chamat fled Syria to Lebanon then to France where he has resided since 2012. Five out of the 25 audience members reside inside Syria. The residency of the rest of my participants included Germany, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, France, Dubai, Morocco, and the United States. For security reasons and to protect the

safety of participants, real names and personal information, such as education, place of origin in Syria and occupation, were not recorded. However, one piece of demographic information I can share is that the age of my participants ranged from 18 to 40 years old. The only real name I use in this research is Iyad Abou Chamat because he is very publicly associated with the series, and he is already engaged with his fans in semi-public online space (i.e. his Facebook page).

While I observed online the interaction between Chamat and his audiences on Facebook, I did not directly quote any of the Facebook page's posts in this paper. However, my online observation informed my interpretation and understanding of both the producer's and the audiences' perspectives. All quotes I use are only based on the 26 semi-structured interviews that I conducted. I translated all the interviews from Arabic to English. To analyze my interviews, I used thematic analysis which 'is a systematic process for categorizing the content of text and identifying relationships among the categories' (Berg, 1989). A theme 'is a pattern found in the information that at minimum describes and organize possible observation or at the maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon' (Boyatzis, 1998, p.vii). The main themes I explore in this article relate to: interactivity, participation, and reconciliation.

The cultural production context of Syrian television drama

It is important, foremost, to explain the cultural context in which *GN* was produced in order to not only understand the conditions of producing this show but also how these conditions contributed to its significance in the audiences' eyes. Martín-Barbero (1993) emphasizes the importance of the specific conditions of production and the marks that a particular productive system leaves on the formats. He urges us to focus 'on the ways in which the television industry, as a productive structure, semanticizes and recycles the demands coming from the various 'publics' and the uses of television by these publics' (221). From its establishment in the 1950s and until the beginning of 1990s, Arab television was mainly owned and operated by authoritarian governments. In 1991, the inauguration of the Middle East Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) in London by Saudi business entrepreneurs who are well-connected to the royal family started an era of private satellite television prosperity in the Arabic-speaking countries (Kraidy 2002). Kraidy considers transnational satellite television stations a significant factor towards integrating the Arab world within the global community. And yet, private ownership of satellite television did not necessary translate to political freedom or political pluralism because such satellite television stations are privately owned and controlled by national ruling elites (for example, MBC and LBCI). Still, as Salamandra (2011) shows, drama creators 'both accommodate and resist the neoliberal and Islamic revivalist currents that are reshaping Arab public culture' (288).

Before the inception of the early 1990s Pan-Arab satellite era, Egyptian shows dominated the Arab television scene with safe, uncontroversial content and well-worn themes. However, with the growth of the Pan-Arab satellite era, Syrian-based media production started to compete strongly with Egyptian-based media production (Dick 2005;

Kraidy 2006). Dick (2005) calls this stage/period of Syrian production an ‘outpouring of (television) drama’ (*al-fawra al-dramiyya* in Arabic), in which Syrian drama (*Musalsalt* in Arabic) ‘quickly became a staple in the Arab world’ (2). An underlying cause of the ‘outpouring’ was that Syrian authorities, around 1986, started quietly to encourage private television producers to film their shows inside Syria instead of places such as Greece. This new environment along with the subsequent emergence of the Arab satellite market led to the creation of dozens of production companies. As Salamandra (2011) shows, in the 2000s, constraints such as neoliberal policies, the rise of Islamism, and perceived failures of nationalism shaped the conditions of Syrian TV drama production. However, Salamandra clarifies that Syrian drama creators – who view themselves as both artists and activists for social and political transformation – were able to find in their serials alternative media spaces to expose structural inequalities and the corruption of the ruling social and economic elites in Arab societies.

In spite of the successes of the Syrian drama industry, the Syrian media sector suffered from several challenges and limitations. Kraidy (2006) describes the Syrian media sector as a ‘schizophrenic’ one. Though Syrian television dramas continued to prosper, the Syrian news and public affairs programming continued to fail because Syrian officials did not carry over the successful artistic and policy innovations of the drama sector to the news sector. The dearth of quality news-media contributed to motivating TV drama creators ‘to shed light on issues difficult to broach in non-fiction media, hoping to spark discussion and, ultimately, social and political transformation’ (Salamandra 2011, 280).

After the Arab Spring in the early 2010s, additional challenges would face the Syrian media sector, including the television drama industry. From the early phases of the Syrian Uprising in 2011 when around 300 actors and creators signed the Milk Petition that condemned the siege of Dara’a and demanded humanitarian assistance to be delivered to children in the city, the Syrian conflict split the drama sector.⁸ After the Milk Petition, 20 production houses announced their decision to never work again with those who signed the petition. Such acts led, first, to the departure of hundreds of unemployed, pro-uprising actors and creators, and second, to the retreat of the Gulf television channels from buying Syrian drama due to their governments’ disputes with the Syrian government (Van Tets 2014).

The writer of *GN*, Chamat described to me the cultural production environment of Syrian drama after the Arab Spring and the Syrian war as both negative and positive. Chamat listed the following as major negative consequences of the Syrian war for the drama industry inside the country:

- 1) The departure of the most qualified drama makers from Syria which has resulted in the majority of dramas produced inside the country being directed by unqualified makers.
- 2) The severe decrease in production budgets of drama serials inside Syria has negatively affected the quality of the final products. Chamat

clarified: 'Nowadays in Syria the whole budget of an entire series is about \$100,000. Before the war that was the number that would have been paid for one actor.'

- 3) The spread of banal, second-rate comedy serials as a form of escapism from the reality of the war. Such serials do not have a chance to be distributed to channels outside Syria because of their low quality and thus they are broadcast only on the local government-owned TV channels.
- 4) The new generations of actors and actresses who graduated from the Higher Institute for Dramatic Arts during the ongoing war have very low employment opportunities in comparison with the previous generations.⁹ Therefore, they are trapped into accepting low-paid jobs in second-rate serials.
- 5) The general war-related stressful environment of drama production in Syria. For instance, to move from one filming location to another has become a long, dangerous process with several military checkpoints and with Syrian opposition armed groups firing daily mortar shells into Damascus, including filming locations.

Chamat added that outside Syria, Syrian drama production went in two directions: 1) Drama that escapes from reality through the genre of soap opera. Most of these serials are co-produced by Syrian, Egyptian, and Lebanese companies and do not tackle current political events, instead they tell stories about rich, beautiful people. 2) Drama that explicitly tackles the current political events in Syria and the Arab region. Such serials benefited from the relatively increased freedom of expression that resulted from the Arab Spring. *GN* is a representative example of this type of drama.¹⁰

Production and broadcast of *Ghadan Naltaqi* (GN)

During Ramadan 2015, *GN* premiered on two private Arab satellite television stations: Abu Dhabi Al Emarat TV which is owned by the governmental media organization Abu Dhabi Media Company, and Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation International (LBCI) which is a private television station owned by Lebanese businessmen. The Syrian team of Clacket Media Productions saw the series as a quality product to tell the story of the Syrian crisis and signed a contract with Chamat before he even finished script writing. Moreover, they agreed to recruit all the actors and actresses that Chamat and Ramy Hanna (the director of the series) suggested without negotiating their rate, and they hired one of the best cinematographer in the Arab drama industry.¹¹ Additionally, while most Syrian drama serials during the current war are limited financially to a maximum of 70 or 80 days of shooting on location, Clacket agreed to 120 days. These now-rare production conditions contributed to the fact that *GN* was noted by both audiences and critics to approach feature film-quality.

The following comment is an example of audiences' admiration of the film-quality production of *GN*:

I felt that I was watching cinema not television. The series' cinematography and soundtrack are very hard to be repeated in another series. Even the characters, everyone can be the hero of the series. Everyone performs his role in a highly professional way. (Atef, male, resides inside Syria).

Drama production companies in the Arab World make most of their profits by selling their products during Ramadan. Clacket sold *GN* to two satellite channels: Abu Dhabi Al Emarat TV and LBCI. Each of the two broadcasts suffered from its own problem: As I mentioned previously, on Abu Dhabi Al Emarat TV, censors deleted all political dialogues and bold social content like the scenes from episode 13 between Wardeh (the female leading character) and Mahmood (the male leading character) which included making out and a discussion of virginity. While Abu Dhabi Al Emarat TV has high-definition broadcast, LBCI did not have high-definition service, which affected the image quality perception of audiences who watched the series on LBCI. Regardless of that, the positive side of LBCI broadcast was that the channel did not censor the series' content. Censoring the content that tackles sexuality from the series angered some Syrian critics (such as Brksiah, 2015) because that omits new experiences of personal freedom many refugees encounter once they move out of their traditional, conservative communities inside Syria. Indeed, one of *GN* contributions – to the representation of gender issues in Arab media – is showing the agency of refugee women and the new margins of freedom that displacement offer for women to explore newfound bodily pleasures.

Chamat highlights the positive role of YouTube in overcoming the previous challenges. Two weeks after the end of Ramadan, Clacket uploaded all 30 episodes of *GN* onto its YouTube channel with high definition quality and without any censorship. Chamat explained that in the Arab World most profits from drama production are made during Ramadan. After Ramadan they call the series 'available supply', which make little profits. Thus Clacket's decision to upload the series on YouTube did not affect their profits. Additionally, the availability of *GN* on YouTube allowed audiences like Moneer (male, resides in Germany) to watch it. Moneer clarified: 'I watched the series on YouTube because I do not have an Arabic Television broadcast in Germany...' Therefore, the availability of the series on YouTube provided broader access to audiences around the world who had no other way to watch the series.

Interactivity

The content of *GN* relates to the lived experiences of both the creator of the media text as well as its audiences. This plus the availability of social media provided the conditions for the emergence of a highly interactive relationship between the creator of the media text

and the audiences. Facebook, in particular, has provided a medium for interactivity between TV audiences and drama creators that imitates the dynamics of live theater. No less important to the emergence of this relationship, however, are the desires for (re-)connection of both creators and audiences stemming from the alienation of displacement. Chamat informed me that his relationship with social media was very modest before the Syrian war; however, this has changed dramatically:

When Syrians dispersed all over the world, we tried to maintain our connections through a virtual homeland. Thus my Facebook page became important to stay in contact with my friends and later with my fans who share with me their ideas and feedback about the Syrian topic in a very interactive, constant way.

When his series was broadcast during Ramadan 2015 a large number of viewers started to contact him, send him their feedback on a daily basis after the end of every episode, and 'share' with him specific clips or dialogue lines that they liked from that day's episode.¹² On top of that, several journalists sent him their articles about the series asking him to share it on his page. Chamat used Facebook as an archive for all the online feedback that he received from audiences and journalists. The most significant aspect of Chamat's Facebook interactive relationship with his audience is clarified in his following comment:

I was able to receive the fresh impressions of the people as they were experiencing [the episodes]. This was a great and bizarre experience, at the same time, to be able to share with your audience their feelings and excitements. I would have been watching the series during Ramadan and people would send me messages during the broadcast. My phone would keep ringing and I would open it to see Facebook messenger full of messages of people telling me things like 'what a great scene that has just passed.' I felt that my condition of receiving feedback is very similar to the condition of theater where an actor while he is on the stage receives the audience's feedback immediately in the hall.¹³ Social media provided me with the same condition. This is very bizarre to be able to interact and see your audience feedback on your Facebook page.

Audience members confirmed their interactive relationship with Chamat. Salmah (female, resides inside Syria) said: 'Sometimes I leave comments on Iyad's Facebook page. It is not a mere critique rather it is a request encouraging them [drama makers] to become bolder in their political content.' The following comment illustrates further the type of interactive relationship between the writer and his audience:

When lyad posts something that I like on his Facebook page, I 'like' that. If I did not love a post, I simply do not 'like' it. I am happy to read and I respect his perspective. Once I sent him a message expressing my admiration of his series and my fear that he might lose his writing talent by participating in co-produced Arab serials due to pressure from producers. At that time, I read a news article which said that the same producer of *Ghadan Naltaqi* has announced that lyad was working on writing a script of a co-produced Arab series. I did not like the article and felt it was such a loss of a Syrian talent who expresses the pulse of the Syrian people. He replied to my message quickly in a warm way. (Rami, male, resides in Morocco).

Nour (a Syrian woman who resides in the U.S.) clarifies further the ways in which Facebook provoked interactivity between *GN* audiences and Chamat: 'This was his first time writing a screen script and he did it creatively. This is the reason why audiences interacted with him significantly on Facebook. Facebook reduced the distance between the artist and his audiences.'

In addition to *GN*'s timely topic, high quality production, and Chamat's devotion to interacting with his audiences on Facebook, what further induced the social media interactivity between Chamat and his audiences is that Facebook served as a platform for pedagogical exchange. Like in live theater where, after the performance, audiences may be able to approach the cast to inquire about certain scenes and storylines, after each episode *GN*'s audiences were able to communicate with Chamat to praise, critique or clarify some aspects of the series' narratives. For example, Huda (female, resides inside Syria) illustrates the pedagogical role of social media interactivity with drama makers: 'Facebook helps in promoting Syrian serials and helps us to understand correctly drama serials because we can communicate with the writer, the director, and other cast members and ask them to clarify the idea of the series in a correct way.' Similarly, Omar (male, resides in Turkey) explains the reasons that he became a Facebook friend with lyad: 'It's not for the sake of communicating with other fans, there are forums for that. It's more because I saw lyad, through *Ghadan Naltaqi*, as an intellectual that has something to say. Therefore, I became interested to learn more about his ideas through his Facebook posts.' Huda's and Omar's comments show that social media can be a way for audiences to learn more about the perspectives of drama makers through communicating with them via their personal social media pages in a way that imitates, occasionally, the dynamics of live theater.

Motivations for Online Participation

Georgiou (2010) confirms that media play an important role in the lives of diasporic communities not only to 'reinforce a sense of belonging but also awareness about links and possibilities for links and connections' (30). The particularity of the Syrian war-related topic in *GN* and its applicability to both the creator of the series as well as to audiences' lived

experiences evoked a significant level of online participation with *Chamat*. He assured me that the series was inspired in many ways by his real-world experience. In 2012, he fled Syria, due to the ongoing war, to Lebanon. Then he traveled to France, a country where, in 1996, he had received post-graduate training in scenography after he graduated from the Higher Institute for Dramatic Arts in Damascus, Syria. *Chamat* clarified the reasons behind writing his series:

The events that were happening in Syria caused me a lot of pressure and pain. I felt that it would be appropriate for me that the first work I would write, would be about the Syrian topic, which I am a part of. I am living it and everyone around me is living it daily. I tried to transfer into my TV script such details and feelings that a Syrian person experiences today everywhere inside and outside Syria.

Chamat recognized that, not just the writing, every aspect of the show – from casting, writing, directing, music, location, costuming, to decorating – contributed to the success of the series. However, he identified the most significant element in this success as the topic of the refugee crisis. He explained:

Today this topic is urgent and fateful. It is not just a topic of a series. It is the topic of the life of every Syrian. We live this topic and it is not hypothetical at all. It's very real and important for every Syrian and that's why everyone is celebrating the series. This is why people were looking forward to seeing the series during Ramadan. They knew in advance that it would talk about them.

The particularity of the Syrian war, which resulted in the displacement of at least half of the population inside or outside the country, was the main motive for audiences to connect online with *Chamat* via Facebook. For example, Karim (male, resides inside Syria) said: 'There is no doubt that the series is successful. Actually it is overwhelmingly successful because it is very close to our reality. There is no makeup. It is an in-depth expression of our life.'

Even though the drama series is fictional, many participant audience members relate to it as factuality. For instance, Moen (male, resides in undisclosed place outside Syria) stated: 'The series described what is happening now in a very realistic way. I felt that the characters in the series are real-world people who live among us and what the characters have experienced in the series, we experience it every day as Syrians.' The relatability of *GN* for its audiences of displaced Syrians evoked a significant level of emotional response and engagement with the series. This emotional engagement can be described as 'emotional realism' because 'what is recognized as real is not knowledge of the world, but a subjective experience of the world' (Ang 1985, 45). Reem's (female, resides inside Syria) following

comment clarifies this point: ‘The series, for me, is my voice, my opinion, my ideas. It is everything that is going on in my head and my heart about what is happening in Syria. The series described what is happening in a very professional and honest way.’ Similarly, Moen expressed his feeling about the series: ‘It is a small, painful picture of the current Syrian reality. I enjoyed watching it as much as I suffered.’ Reem’s and Moen’s comments demonstrate the participant audiences’ use of ‘emotional realism’ as an interpretive strategy to make meaning of *GN*, a popular cultural text that resonates with their lived experiences (Alhayek 2017).

Another motive for participant audiences to engage with *GN* and its writer/creator was their identification with the represented experiences of the series’ characters. Most research participants identified with the whole represented lived experiences of the series’ characters and preferred not to name any particular character as the one that they identify with the most. A representative response of this sentiment is: ‘I cannot identify completely with any particular character, but I think every Syrian might identify with several characters because the cause of the series is our cause’ (Moneer, male, resides in Germany). However, several participants named Jaber as the character that they identify with the most. Maybe because Jaber (regardless of his political positions as supporter of the Syrian regime) is the character that deals the most with the challenges of displacement and transferring from a middle-class lifestyle in Syria to an impoverished lifestyle in Lebanon. Unlike his brother Mahmood, who is a poet, and Wardeh, who continues her on-demand job in bathing the deceased, Jaber came to Lebanon after he lost everything in the war including his small shop.¹⁴ Thus his storyline focuses on his search for any job while he finds a way to emigrate to Europe. The following comment explains the reason behind some participant audiences’ identification with *Jaber*:

Ghadan Naltaqi represented the suffering of every Syrian inside and outside the country. I saw myself in the suffering of Jaber while he was searching for a job, while he was wandering the street selling CDs in order to live with dignity not needing anyone. I saw myself in a lot of things beginning with the dream of migration and living in peace. I saw myself in the suffering of Syrians in Lebanon. In sum, this work touched everyone, touched Syrians in their happiness and sadness. (Ibrahim, male, resides in undisclosed place outside Syria).

GN audiences’ online participation with *Chamat* is also motivated by recognizing and admiring *Chamat*’s political intervention and reading of the Syrian conflict through the text’s symbolism. Joubin (2013) argues that Syrian drama creators use metaphors of love, marriage, and gender (de)constructions indirectly to challenge and explore larger issues of political critique, nationalism, government oppression, and corruption. My research supports Joubin’s argument. *Chamat* confirmed that the main storyline in his series – about the love triangle between Wardeh and two brothers Jaber and Mahmood (who reside next

to Wardeh's room in the same Lebanese school building that was turned to a refugee location for Syrians who rent separate rooms) – is a metaphor of the Syrian war. Wardeh is a symbol of Syria, Jaber is a symbol of the Syrian regime, and Mahmood is a symbol of the Syrian opposition. Chamat clarified this point: '...this symbolism was explicit and implicit. The audience figured out quickly this symbolism and they dealt with Wardeh in a real way as if she was Syria.' Chamat admits to having a larger pedagogical message in his series: 'Today there is a complete political failure in tackling the Syrian war; therefore, I depend on art to speak to Syrian people's consciences. Art is very important when politics fail.' Several audience members explain this symbolism by referring to a scene from episode 26 where Jaber and Mahmood fought in Wardeh's room over who loves her and deserves her more, which accidentally causes the burning of the room. Batoul (female, resides inside Syria) said: 'The most amazing scene was the fire scene in Wardeh's room because this scene summarized four years of the Syrian crisis. The two brothers burnt the room of the girl who they both loved.' Similarly, Huda (female, resides inside Syria) refers to this metaphor:

The scene when Jaber and Mahmood fought each other inside Wardeh's room and caused the room to be burnt. This is the situation of Syria where the two parties fought and killed each other until they burnt Syria. All of that is under the pretext of loving Syria. Though they forgot what Syria really wants.

In Batoul's and Huda's responses we can see that they connect symbolism to a situation that they are familiar with and that they somehow identify with.

Salamandra (2011) notes that Syrian drama creators, before the current war, were known for confronting audiences with the consequences of corruption and neoliberal policies by using 'stark social realism' (285). After the war, *GN* symbolizes, for Syrian audiences, a continuity of this respected tradition of Syrian art and culture that reflects and critiques the power structures of their society. Zeno (2017) demonstrates that refugees' experiences are dominated by feelings of loss and humiliation; thus, it is important for them to find cultural references that invoke a sense of dignity and pride to cope with their displacement. Based on that, *GN* served as a source of national pride motivating audiences to participate online and engage with Chamat and his show. Research participants reported feeling national pride because of the series' success in representing on TV the experiences and stories of real-world people like them who suffer from and survive through the Syrian war. For example, Karim (man, resides inside Syria) said:

The series meant to me that we are still creative people and the kings of Arab TV drama. Certainly, it was an expression of our situations. All of us. It reported the reality as much as possible and this is something that I did not see in any other series.

In a current cultural production environment that largely ignores the Syrian war or tackles it in very ideological ways, participant audiences like Salmah saw *GN* as a national responsibility that was performed by Chamat. As it is obvious in Karim's comment, *GN* was also an indicator to the audience members that Syrian drama can still provide a competitive high-quality product within the Arab television market.

Drama's role in reconciliation efforts

If *GN* participant audiences and Chamat saw the series as a continuation of a respected social realism tradition of Syrian drama creators' commitment to criticism of power structures in society, one wonders what possibilities drama can facilitate in the future of war-torn Syria. Generally, both participant audiences and Chamat challenge the notion that Syrian television drama like *GN* can play alone a significant role in social change issues such as reconciliation efforts and changing negative attitudes toward Syrian refugees. However, they acknowledge margins and conditions where Syrian drama and art in general can play a role in social change. Chamat said: 'If freedom of expression and appropriate intellectual environment were available, drama can play a role in reconciliation efforts, but if the aggressive political and social environments that exclude the other side continue to exist, I don't think drama can play any role.' He also added that drama cannot change negative attitudes toward Syrian refugees, especially if they are from a lower socioeconomic status:

I don't think *Ghadan Naltaqi* can change the world's attitude toward Syrian refugees. There are few cases in which Syrians are welcome around the world. Today the world's relationship with Syrians is problematic especially when they are poor. Poor Syrians are paying the biggest price. No one likes to host poor people anywhere. Maybe you would see the series and sympathize with the characters, then you would go to the street and see a poor Syrian refugee and forget immediately your earlier sympathy.

Participant audiences' perspectives were largely similar to Chamat's. Moneer's (male, resides in Germany) comment is an example of that: 'Maybe drama can help in reconciliation, maybe it cannot. The thing is that the problem is bigger than a series. However, I think drama can help in raising awareness that there is another party that is destroying the country.' Participant audiences' perspectives show that the main intervention of drama serials like *GN* is complicating news media narratives about the Syrian conflict by representing diverse, complex characters and storylines that resemble the lived experiences of participant audiences in contrast to the news media that is either ideological or stereotypical or both (Alhayek, 2014). One particular strategy that *GN*'s team used was to choose famous actors who are known for supporting or opposing the Syrian government and assign them opposite political positions in the show. Participant audiences saw and appreciated this strategy as an intervention to encourage audiences, as Moneer's comment

indicates, to listen to the opposite political views from their own and to acknowledge that no political side is solely responsible for the destruction of Syria.

Conclusion

In this article, I aimed to contribute to scholarship such as D'Acci's (1994) that combines production and reception analysis to understand the ways in which televisual representations resonate with audiences' lived experiences. However, I focused on the experiences of marginalized non-western audiences in the context of the Syrian war and refugee crisis which have been understudied in the literature of both television's and social media's audiences. In the case of the Syrian Television Drama *Ghadan Naltaqi (GN)*, I showed that Facebook serves as an outlet for interactivity between a TV drama producer and audiences in a way that imitates the dynamics of live theater. While such interactivity was facilitated by technology, the emergence of this interactive relationship is owned to the desires for (re-)connection of both drama creators and audiences stemming from the alienation of war, violence, and displacement. The particularity of the Syrian war-related topic in *GN* and its applicability to both the creator of the series as well as to audiences' lived experiences evoked a significant level of online participation with Chamat, the writer/creator of *GN*.

To describe the audiences who agreed to take part in this research, I used the term 'participant audiences' because this term avoids the dichotomy of active/passive audiences and accommodates both the active and passive forms of online engagement that *GN*'s audiences performed in their participation with *GN* creator's Facebook page and in this research. 'Participant audiences' explains the interactive, emotional responses of displaced audiences and their online engagement with TV content that address the disconnections they experienced because of war and displacement while offering them possibilities for coping with violence and marginalization.

Drawing on the work of Appadurai (2019) in regard to 'the migrant archive,' I argue that *GN* functioned as an entertainment intervention that provided displaced Syrians with scripts to interpret their nostalgic past in Syria, their traumatic present in diaspora, and their hopeful future that contains newfound freedom. I showed that the main motivations for *GN*'s participant audiences' online participation with Chamat are: the resemblance of audiences' and drama creators' lived experiences with *GN*'s characters; the role of Facebook as a platform for pedagogical exchange where participant audiences can share their feedback and inquiries immediately with the drama creator; the participant audiences' recognition and admiration of Chamat's political intervention and reading of the Syrian conflict through his use of symbolism; and the perception that *GN* symbolizes the continuation of the respected social realism tradition of Syrian drama creators' commitment to criticism of power structures in society. These motivations demonstrate that *GN* helped participant audiences to create possibilities for coping with a highly polarizing conflict, and to find a healing space from violent and alienating dominant media discourses.

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Appendix 1:

Interview protocol: Questions for the writer Iyad Abou Chamat

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself?
2. Can you tell me about your background with Syrian TV drama?
3. What inspired you to start working in the field of Syrian TV drama? How did you start your career?
4. Can you tell me little bit about the production environment of your series?
5. How you use social media to promote your work and interact with audience?
6. What was the feedback that you received about 'See you tomorrow/Ghadan Naltaqi' series?
7. What inspired you to create and write 'See you tomorrow/Ghadan Naltaqi' series?
8. What are other Arabic drama work that deal with Syrian refugees' stories? Do you think of your work as standing out in any particular ways?
9. How would you describe the tone of your show, and why do you think it might be attractive to Syrian and Arab audience?
10. A main goal of a show like yours is to entertain its audience. Do you think of what you do as also having broader social or political goals beyond entertainment?
11. Do you have a sense who your audience are?
12. Can you estimate how many people requested your friendship via Facebook after they watched your series 'See you tomorrow/Ghadan Naltaqi'?
13. Do you remember any significant feedback that you got from your TV show audience through your Facebook page?
14. What do you think has been the impact of social media for Syrian drama series like you?
15. What do you think makes your show attractive to its audience?
16. What do you think has been the impact of the Arab Spring and the Syrian conflict on Syrian drama industry?
17. Do you think Syrian TV drama has helped in any way to promote the acceptance of Syrian refugees in hosted communities and beyond?
18. Do you think Syrian drama can contribute to reconciliation efforts in the transitional period and in post-conflict Syria? Why? How?
19. What are your recommendations to develop Syrian TV drama shows that deal with Syrian refugees' stories?

20. Do you want to add anything that my questions did not address?

Appendix 2:

Recruitment post via social media:

If you watch '*See you tomorrow/Ghadan Naldaq*' Syrian drama series and you communicated with the creator of this series via social media like Facebook, I am interested in your experience with Syrian drama. If you want to share your experience with me, I would like to listen to your opinions and feelings, negative or positive. If you like to participate in my research please reply to this email katty.alhayek@gmail.com. All responses are confidential and will only be used for research purposes. A copy of the final draft can be provided upon your request.

Appendix 3:

Interview protocol: Questions for members of the audiences who communicate with the series' writer (creator) via Facebook

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself?
2. Why did you choose to watch '*See you tomorrow/Ghadan Naldaq*'?
3. What are the other series that you watched during 2015 Ramadan season?
4. Do you think '*See you tomorrow/Ghadan Naldaq*' is a successful show? why?
5. Why you decided to become a friend with the writer of '*See you tomorrow/Ghadan Naldaq*'?
6. Where did you watch '*See you tomorrow/Ghadan Naldaq*' (TV, YouTube, other..)? Also, where you have been (inside Syria, in Lebanon, neighboring countries, other..)?
7. How you describe your Facebook friendship with the writer? Did you provide him with any feedback? Do you comment on his Facebook page?
8. Did you become a Facebook friends with the writer mainly to connect with the writer himself, or to connect with a community of likeminded fans?
9. Do you follow Facebook posts from other fans of '*See you tomorrow/Ghadan Naldaq*' or other Facebook pages that tackle the series?
10. Do you think that Facebook helped to promote Syrian TV drama like '*See you tomorrow/Ghadan Naldaq*' and provide new understanding to it?
11. Did you watch the show alone or with friends or family members? What did the show mean for you?
12. Do you feel that you identify with any character of '*See you tomorrow/Ghadan Naldaq*'?
13. Which storyline you think was more successful or powerful in the show?
14. Have been aware of any differences in political opinion between the actors, actresses, and the producers of the serious, and if yes, did that affect how you watched the show?
15. Based on your experience with watching Syrian drama (Musalsalt), particularly '*See you tomorrow/Ghadan Naldaq*', do you think Syrian drama can help in advocating for reconciliation efforts in post-conflict Syria?
16. Do you want to add anything that my questions did not address?

Notes:

¹ Ramadan: is the holy month for Muslims where they fast from dawn to sunset. According to the Islamic (lunar) calendar, Ramadan is the 9th month. In 2015, Ramadan occurred between June 17- July 17. Most Arab TV series consist of 30 episodes that premiere the first day of Ramadan and then broadcast daily during the holy month.

² Clacket: is a Syrian drama artistic production and distribution company. In 2014, it was awarded the best production company in the Middle East by the International Broadcast Pro magazine and the Arab States Broadcasting union.

³ Social shaping of technology is a middle ground approach between technological determinism and social construction of technology emphasizing that 'the consequences of technologies arise from a mix of 'affordances'—the social capabilities technological qualities enable—and the unexpected and emergent ways that people make use of those affordances' (Baym 2010, 44).

⁴ This series is the third sequence of a series called *Welada Men El Khasera*. The first two sequences aired in 2011, and 2012 respectively.

⁵ In June 2012, a UN official for the first time proclaimed Syria to be in a state of civil war after the conflict escalated dramatically. Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-18417952>.

⁶ All episodes are uploaded online by Clacket at: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLVINE_LNHJj3wVHGkvp7fsTMpZsE_nUW5.

⁷ I use pseudonyms to refer to all audience members I interviewed for this study.

⁸ Dara'a is the name of a Governorate and a city in south-west Syria. The city was a center of anti-Syrian regime demonstrations.

⁹ The Higher Institute for Dramatic Arts is the main academic institution in Syria to prepare students in the areas of Acting, Theatrical Critique and Dramatic Arts. It was founded in Damascus in 1977.

¹⁰ While Chamat was proud of *GN* as a representative example of Syrian drama that explicitly tackles the current political events in Syria, later for Ramadan in 2018 he wrote a co-produced Syrian/Lebanese drama series called *Tango* that was supported by Eagle Films, a Lebanese company. *Tango* was a very different work from *GN* fitting in the trend of serials that escape from reality through the genre of soap opera, it was loosely based on an 'Amar Después de Amar,' a 2017 Argentine telenovela produced by Telefe Contenidos and broadcast by Telefe.

¹¹ Iyad Abou Chamat (Born in 1974) is a Syrian actor and writer who graduated from the Higher Institute for Dramatic Arts in Damascus 1996. He is known for writing *Ghadan Naltaqi* (2015) and *Tango* (2018). Rami Hanna (Born in 1972) is a Syrian actor, writer, and director who graduated from the Higher Institute for Dramatic Arts in Damascus 1997. In 2007, he directed his first TV series 'Antara'. He also directed *Ghadan Naltaqi* (2015) and *Tango* (2018).

¹² Through Facebook's Share Button a person can publish a post to their timeline and tag other people.

¹³ Chamat was an actor in theater and TV before writing *GN*.

¹⁴ Bathing the deceased: is an Islamic ritual that is considered to be a part of the Islamic Sharia, in which bathing the dead body is preferred to occur within hours after death. This ritual is also performed in other religions, including Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism.