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**An Investigation into the Meaning of Locally  
Produced Entertainment Media to Lebanese  
Women:**

**A Concentration on the Film *Sukkar Banat (Caramel)***

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**An Investigation into the Meaning of Locally Produced  
Entertainment Media to Lebanese Women:  
A Concentration on the Film *Sukkar Banat (Caramel)***

**Carol Haidar**

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**ABSTRACT**

This dissertation attempts to examine the meaning of locally produced entertainment media to Lebanese women's lives; this question was operationalized by studying the reception of the film *Sukkar Banat (Caramel)*. The entire study was based on theories that came from the fields of sociology and cultural studies of media, all of which were approached from a feminist perspective. The empirical research was conducted through a qualitative methodology, which included eleven face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. The analysis was conducted through a grounded theory approach, using coding and thematic analysis to answer three main sub-questions which in turn answered the main research question. The three sub-questions considered the significance of the film being locally produced, how the 'social taboo' scenes were interpreted and how the film was received in terms of empowerment. Each of these were answered at length, however, the main result of the study was that locally produced films become meaningful to women on several levels. They are used as a tool to safely voice their opinions about social norms, a safeguard from individual consequences of speaking or acting against social norms, and an instrument to help drive social change.

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## INTRODUCTION

*“I make films for Saudi’s. I want to talk to them. Provoke them. Make them think about the issues”*  
(Haifaa Al-Mansour, Saudi Filmmaker on the cultural issues of women’s *abaya*)

*“I realized there were so many stories no one was telling”*  
(Ibtisam Maraana, Israeli-Arab Filmmaker on arranged marriages and child custody issues)

*“We criticize ourselves because we love our society and want to help it improve”*  
(Buthina Khoury, Palestinian Filmmaker on the issue of honor killings)

*“[This film] was just something I needed to talk about, I needed to express myself as a woman living in this country and just showing things the way they are and its up to you to make your own interpretation about what you see”*  
(Nadine Labaki, Lebanese Filmmaker on the issue of social taboos in Lebanon)

The Middle-East is a place where patriarchy and unequal distribution of power amongst the sexes is firmly in place. Gocek explained that patriarchy is the “the privileging of male and elder rights and the use of kinship structures, morality, and idioms to legitimate male and elder privileges” (In: Joseph, 2002, p. 174). The patriarchal organization of domestic relations has given males and elders considerable domestic power over junior family members and females- both over their actions and voicing their opinions. (Joseph, 2002).

However, with the development of communication technologies and more specifically satellite television and imported films, globalization, or more specifically Westernization (Tomlinson, 1999), began to rattle the traditional patriarchal system in the Middle-East. LBC (Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation), launched in 1985, has been a nationally and pan-Arab industry trend-setter reflecting the rise of American style broadcasting by both importing American programs as well as producing shows locally which were adapted from the West (Kraidy and Khalil, 2009). The end products of these Western adapted shows proved to be sites where cultural and social taboos were redefined, and where gender and class roles were renegotiated. Kraidy and Khalil wrote in their book that gender, religion, and youth issues are among the touchiest topics in the Arab world today and television programs that question or depict alternatives to established gender roles routinely stir controversy and are also the very topics that make for a successful program (2009).

Among the many lively debates that take place about Arab television is that which considers television’s implications for power balances between women and men. The medium is presented as a potential means for women to exchange ideas and a platform for ‘empowerment’. (Sakr, 2007). There have been attempts to provide a lively public for women to discuss their issues beyond traditional roles and social taboos such as, Al-Jazeera’s *Lil Nisa’ Faqat* (For Women Only), *Kalam Nawa’em* (Women’s Talk), and *Al-Makshuf* (In the

Open), however, all of these locally (mainly in Lebanon) produced shows reflecting feminist responsibility have mainly been talk shows. (Kraidy and Khalil, 2009).

Then, in 2007, the film *Sukkar Banat (Caramel)* was released at Cannes Film Festival and was the first feature film to be produced in Lebanon, in Lebanese Arabic and addressed real 'social taboos' and issues women deal with today that became so popular; it is the best selling Lebanese film and second biggest selling Arab film of all time (after *The Yacoubian Building*) (Syria News Wire, 2008). Labaki was the first Lebanese director to take recognize the Westernization of the media taking place in Lebanon and use it to create a film that might not have been acceptable before- a social commentary that deals with sex before marriage, the hymen reinstatement surgery, repressed sexuality, female duty vs. desire, and aging struggles. It is important to note here that the majority of the Lebanese population watch films on television as opposed to going to the cinema thus, for the purposes of this paper the differences between cinema and television does not bare importance and references to television and television audience studies will remain prevalent throughout the paper.

The quotes provided at the beginning of this chapter came from an article celebrating a new voice for women in the conservative, male-dominated Middle-East: Film (Harman, 2008). The article pays much homage to Labaki's *Sukkar Banat* and presents interviews with filmmakers following in her steps. Due to its popularity and strikingly different approach to addressing social issues and challenging traditional gender roles, doing a reception study on the meaning of *Sukkar Banat* to Lebanese women's lives would make an interesting topic to study as well as contribute to the literature in media and communications studies. Furthermore, Sabry wrote a chapter entitled, *In Search of the Arab Present Cultural Tense*, which calls for research within the field of media to be conducted in the Arab world to better understand the present tense of Arab culture. He writes, "There is today no substantial research using empirical methods to examine how Arab audiences interact with the media...Audience research in the Arab world is fragmentary and largely underdeveloped" (Sabry, 2007, p.159), he continues, "What is required is qualitative research with the potential for investigating the social world of Arab audiences and their interpretations of it" (Sabry, 2007, p.160).

Thus, by responding to Sabry's call I was able to inform the literature concerning audience reception studies and Arab culture. The following is a qualitative empirical study on the meaning of locally produced entertainment media with concentration on film *Sukkar Banat*. It is framed in theories from the fields of sociology and cultural media studies, which were approached with a feminist perspective.

## **A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE**

This chapter puts forth the most relevant viewpoints within each of the theories that this study is based on. First the perspective from which this study is being approached, a feminist perspective, is explained. Then the theories of cultural proximity, gender roles and active audiences are discussed respectively; Previous studies are also referenced all through out the literature review in order to support the relevance of this study. The chapter ends with a statement of the conceptual framework and the research questions and objectives of the study.

Feminist study of media encompasses a variety of media forms, each of which employs a distinct set of issues ascertained by the medium, how it is used, and by the various theoretical and methodological traditions through which scholars have studied the medium (Lotz and Ross, 2004). This study is situated in the theoretical framework of the cultural studies while taken from a feminist perspective. Lotz and Ross argued that theorists who approached the study of media through the theoretical framework of British cultural studies with a feminist perspective can be organized in two areas- studies of soap operas and audience research; this study contributes to the latter of two.

### **Feminism, Cultural Studies and Previous Studies**

Feminist contributions to media studies have shown that watching television and films have the potential to both contest gender inequality and reproduce it. It is through feminist scholarship that we better understand how women selectively use media to make sense of and inform their own lived experience. (Watkins and Emerson, 2000). A number of studies taken from a feminist perspective have been conducted that show how media is meaningful or empowering to women, however most of them are usually about: the reception of Western television shows in distant countries (like Ang's 1990 study), the reinterpretation and appropriation of dominant ideological meanings of daytime soap (like Mumford's 1995 study) or the meaning of talk shows as providing a public space for women to discuss social issue (like Shattuc's 1997 and Manga's 2003 studies). This study contributes to what is already known in this field by looking at the reception of a locally produced (rather than Western) film to local women that deals with women's social issues (challenging patriarchal values) in the form of fictional entertainment film (rather than talk shows/ documentaries/ reality). Furthermore, the study informs the literature on feminist perspective media studies about the Middle-Eastern audience.

### *Second-Wave Feminism*

“All feminist positions are founded upon the belief that women suffer from systematic social injustices because of their sex and therefore any feminist is...committed to some form of reappraisal of the position of women in society” (Whelehan, 1995, p. 25). The perspective that I am approaching this study with comes from that which deals with anti-patriarchal values and goals of equality between the sexes which are addressed in ‘second-wave’ feminism. (Laughey, 2007). Before I continue I would like to note that it is recognized that second-wave feminism was a women’s liberation movement that took place in the US in the 1960s, however, the very ideals that women were fighting for then, are what Lebanese women are fighting for today and what the film *Sukkar Banat* deals with. Also, due to the lack of an appropriate feminist perspective to come from the Arab world, I am further obliged to apply this Western concept to Arab society.

### *A Synopsis of the Film*

The film revolves around the lives of five Lebanese women. Loyal runs a beauty salon in Beirut, which is where all the stories of the women are tied together, and she is having an affair with a married man even though a bachelor is interested in her. Rima is a Lesbian who likes a customer of theirs. Nisrine, who is a modern compared to the rest of her conservative Muslim family, is engaged to be married but has had pre-marital sex with a different man and has to undergo the hymn reinstatement surgery before the wedding. Jamale is divorced with two children, going through menopause and in denial about her age. Finally, there is Rose, a single old lady that works next door to the salon as a seamstress, she is so busy with taking care of her older sister that she ends up missing her last chance for love.

The film raises several social issues and taboos that question traditional gender roles and patriarchal values in Arab- Lebanese society. The film deals with unofficial inequalities such as family and social issues, which is why the second-wave perspective was deemed the most appropriate perspective for this study. The film does not radically oppose the values and norms of society, rather it just mirrors the issues and each is left to develop their own interpretation, which is why third-wave/post-feminist perspective is not appropriate; nor does the film deal with legal equalities, which is why the first-wave feminist perspective was also deemed inappropriate. (Whelehan, 1995).

### **Locally Produced Entertainment Media: Cultural Proximity**

As early as 1971, Pool observed that audiences prefer references to their own culture and that they would rather watch nationally produced fiction if it was up to the quality standard offered in North-American programs. Straubhaar also emphasized the importance of local television programming in the early 70s (In: Trepte, 2003). This preference that audiences have for locally produced media has been termed a longing for 'cultural proximity' (Straubhaar, 1991). Straubhaar argued that cultural proximity predicts that locally produced genres, programs that are closest or most directly relevant to the audience in cultural and linguistic terms, will be selected over imported programs.

While cultural proximity is based to a large degree in language, there are other levels of similarity or proximity based in cultural elements such as dress, ethnic types, gestures, body language, type of humor, story pacing, religion etc. (Straubhaar, 2003). There have been a number of studies that support this notion, a few include: Leila Abu-Lughod's (1995) research on the viewing practices of women villagers in Upper Egypt which concluded that local productions are generally more popular than foreign imports, Dhoests (2009) article about multi ethnic communities gave sufficient evidence that people like to see people like themselves in the media and are influenced by them more, and one of the most frequently cited examples in this context contributes to the international popularity of Latin American 'telenovelas', is the audience ratings and prime time slots taken in the schedules in several Southern European countries as well as Spanish speaking audiences or Latino Diaspora communities in the US (Bittereyst and Meers, 2000).

Cultural proximity is important to the research as the film in focus was produced in Lebanon, contained Lebanese actresses and was executed in Lebanese Arabic and humor. This is one the few films to have dealt with social issues and more importantly a women's perspective on the issues that was done to such a high standard and in Lebanese Arabic, as such films would either be imported from the West and dubbed (in Syrian Arabic usually, not even Lebanese) or films produced in a different Arabic dialect. While there may have been a few underground films/shows produced in Lebanese Arabic they did not reach nearly as many people as *Sukkar Banat*. The fact that it was locally produced shortens the distance between what is being said and to whom it is being said to which may impact the manner in which the film's meaning to the viewer is created.

## **Gender Studies: An application to Arab Society and *Sukkar Banat***

The development of gender studies was triggered by second wave feminism in the late 1960s. It developed critiques in gender inequalities in both personal relationships and social positioning. (Pitcher and Whelehan, 2004). The following is a discussion of the themes from gender studies that apply to Arab- Lebanese society and its relevance within the film.

### *Gendered Double Standards*

Feminism has long been concerned with the existence of double standards. Feminists have argued that women should enjoy the same citizenship rights and rewards as men do. The concept of the double standards has more recently been associated with the analysis of informal norms and rules of behavior, particularly within sexual culture. (Pitcher and Whelehan, 2004). “The double standard of sexuality means that sexual behavior deemed inappropriate in a woman, and which she is shown social disapproval, may be regarded as appropriate and as praiseworthy in a man” (Pitcher and Whelehan, 2004, p. 34); this is most definitely rings true for Lebanese society. For example Beck and Keddie (1978) explain in their book that in Middle Eastern traditional family, tremendous importance is given to a bride’s virginity and they don’t usually experience freedom until they are not sexually vulnerable anymore- after menopause, whereas men are actually encouraged to go out with no restrictions from an early age and be sexually active. This concept was addressed through Nisrine’s story in the film, who has to get a hymn-reinstatement surgery because she had sex before marriage and can not face telling her fiancé.

### *Gender Order vs. Patriarchy*

“Gender order is a patterned system of ideological and material practices, performed by individuals in a society, through which power relations between women and men are made, and remade, as meaningful” (Pitcher and Whelehan, 2004, p. 61). The concept was introduced by Jill Mathews and it was born out of her study of the historical construction of femininity. The term gender order refers specifically to the systematic way in which societies turn barely differentiated babies into social men and women and order the patterns of relationships among and between them. She explained that one can refer to a number of relationships within societies, e.g. economic or racial ordering, and thus ‘gender order’ refers to a particular ordering in social life allowing for isolation in analysis. (Mathews, 1984). While this may apply to Lebanese society and, as Pollert (1996) wrote, this approach recognizes the active part played by individuals in the creation and recreation of gender

relations which allows for possibility of social change, criticism prevails which makes it less applicable to this society.

West (1989) argued that gender roles fails to include either race or ethnicity as key concepts, which led to the labelling of this theory as a 'white social theory of gender'. Furthermore, while the notion of patriarchy gives less agency to individuals it seems to be more applicable to Middle Eastern Arab societies. As Mince (1980, p. 30) wrote in her book entitled, *The House of Obedience: Women in Arab Society*, "from an early childhood girls are taught obedience. This amounts to thorough-going conditioning and is justified by Koran law which lays down that women should be respected but also stipulates that their position is inferior to men's". Patriarchy, according to Pilcher and Whelehan (2004), means rule by the male head of a social unit (family, tribe, etc). The patriarch, typically a societal elder has legitimate power over others in the social unit. However since the earliest twentieth century feminist writers have used the concept to refer to the social system of masculine domination over women. Of course not all women are subjected to traditional patriarchal values yet as Mince (1980) writes, the effects of modernization and freedom from this system tends to only be in effect with women who have access to genuine education and information or those who are part of higher or 'privileged' classes. Moghadam (2007, p.2) wrote in her book that, "the Middle East is a site of patriarchal ruling... cultural battles and social change...for women this is a time of transition from patriarchy to empowerment". The film *Sukkar Banat* very clearly addresses this masculine domination over women in a variety of ways and I predict that women will refer to it both in explaining the meaning of the film to them as well as the manner in which they decoded it concerning this patriarchal system.

### *Representations of the Female Gender*

One of the most crucial areas of interest brought up by second wave feminists was the issue of representation, and in Lebanon today it is still a very ripe issue. When the issue was first introduced it was argued that the way women perceived themselves and were perceived by others was inescapably shaped by the ways in which images of women were constructed and communicated to the population at large. It was suggested that these images reinforce dominant ideologies of gender difference and the qualities of ideal-type femininity. Feminists at that time were convinced that people were substantially affected by the images they saw and over exaggerated the passivity of the spectator. Much of the work expressed was concerned with stereotyping feminine behavior and physical appearance; this work was extended to wider cultural criticism to show how women and men might be affected by the way gender is represented to them. Representation is still a key issues in all fields but it has

grown away from the simplistic notion of the stereotype, and into the way women as viewers can appropriate images to their own ends; that there are many meanings to be yielded and grasped by women. (Pilcher and Whelehan, 2004).

Leila Rahbani (2010, p. 9) wrote in her paper that “misperceptions of women and representing them as sex objects [have been] seen in Arab media for decades”. She continued to write about how there has been much concentration either on female roles in media as sex objects or mothers and wives and other images inline with the patriarchal system in Arab society. According to a UNDP report that analyzed the main characteristics of 31 Arab films (mainly in Egyptian films as they produce the most widely received Arab films) produced between the 1990s and 2000. They found that there were major “shortcomings in the presentation and embodiment of the image of women and the confinement of the latter to a number of similar models...[and] women’s social political and cultural roles were conspicuously absent from the films, indicating that Arab cinema shows no concern for the evolution of women’s positions in Arab societies” (UNDP/ RBAS, 2005, p. 157). From articles and reports such as these it is clear that representation, an issue brought up and dealt with in the 1970s during the second wave of feminism is still an issue being dealt with today in Lebanon, further making this perspective an appropriate one. The film *Sukkar Banat* was produced in Lebanon (as opposed to Egypt where most Arab films are produced) and was the first of its kind to deal with stereotypical as well as challenges to the stereotypical image of women. The film deals with a variety of representation of women (mainly five characters with their respective issues) and one even plays the role of a lesbian. As Pilcher and Whelehan (2004, p. 138) wrote, “for many feminists a greater variety of images of women available in the mainstream would be an important step forward and visibility for [images like] lesbian women is a huge leap”.

### **Active Audiences: A Cultural Studies Approach**

#### *Passive vs. Active Audiences*

Audience response or ‘audience reception’ studies, as discussed above in the feminist perspective section, views audiences as active rather than a passive and since the debate as to whether audiences are passive or active is over-drawn and much established I will not be addressing this issue. Research within the field, ranging from research on social and demographic links to reception to studies on the encounter between “foreign” cultural texts and local audiences, provide ample evidence that audience reception is an active and selective process whereby viewers negotiate the meaning of a text in ways which are related to their

social, cultural, and individual experiences (Michelle, 2007). Thus, I immediately reject the Frankfurt School of thought and the administrative model of communications in which audience members are viewed as passive and declare a culturalist approach.

### *Models of Decoding*

The cultural studies theorist argues that semiotic and psychoanalytical reading of film tend to isolate the viewer from the text, therefore they are more concerned with asking how cultural systems produce meaning and how ideology is replicated through cultural institutions, practices and texts. (Nelmes, 2003). Models of decoding assist cultural studies theorists understand how meaning is made from institutions. In 1980 Stuart Hall introduced the *encoding/decoding* model to integrate text and audience studies. He suggested that media texts are encoded ideologically with a 'preferred meaning' to be decoded by the audience but that the audience has a degree of freedom for their interpretations/decoding. Therefore allowing them to accept the preferred meaning, negotiate it, or reject it (oppositional decoding). (Hall, 1980). Hall's model still holds strong today and is the grounds upon which many theorists have created their models, however concerning this particular study there are much better suited models. However, Michelle (2007, p. 194) criticized Hall by claiming that his categories are "insufficient to accommodate the full range of interpretive modes that can be adopted by audience members at different moments."

In 1986, Schroder put forth a model including the nature of inferential/transparency in texts, which addressed issues like 'suspension of disbelief' in order to enter into the fiction and partake in its pleasure. However, this type of decoding may be more useful for studies on cross-cultural texts and local reception where as this study is concerned with local texts and local audiences. There were a variety of other models that was also produced such as Corner (1995) and Lewis's (1991) respective models on decoding in terms of *comprehension* and *interpretation* and Dahlgren (1988) noteworthy model on *official* and *personal* modes of decoding. However after careful scrutiny and analysis of my pilot study, Liebes and Katz's model was deemed the most applicable to this study.

### *The Selected Model: Referential and Critical Decoding*

Liebes and Katz's (1986; 1989; 1990) work is one of the most substantial pieces of work to date and while their study was on cultural differences in the interpretation of American television drama Dallas, I found, through the pilot study I conducted, that the audience I was studying were decoding the film in a similar manner to this one. Their model dictates two

ways of decoding: *referential* and *critical*. Referential decoding is when the audience makes connections between the fictional ‘reality’ depicted on screen and their knowledge of the world. Viewers reading from a referential mode tend to refer to characters as though they were real people and they also compare these characters to people and situations in their own lives. Critical reading is when the audience member is aware of the constructed nature of the program. Most usefully, Leibes and Katz identify two distinct types of critical reading. One is *semantic* – when criticism takes the form of inferences about the text’s ideological theme or message, they may also be expressed in comments about aims of producers or viewers’ identifications of what could or should have been said, but was not. The other is *syntactic* – a less involved style of viewing, as evident in comments about narrative construction, dramatic functions of characters and so on, which offers a degree of protection from ideological content. (Leibes and Katz, 1986; 1989; 1990). This model is mostly suited to assist in understanding the meaning of *Sukkar Banat* in Lebanese women’s lives because it combines most of the important aspects of interpretation that are offered by previous models and describes the various ways in which I predict these women will decode the film based on the pilot I conducted prior to this study.

### **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVES**

This study is approached from a second wave feminist perspective and is framed in theories from gender studies and cultural proximity and active audiences. The theories from gender studies that were brought to the forefront were those of double standards, patriarchy and representation as they assisted in conveying how Lebanese society functions, where women stand and what the issues are that women face in that society today. Cultural proximity was selected as a key theory as *Sukkar Banat* was produced and received locally and it was the first of its kind to deal with women’s social issues and taboos. Finally the theory of active audiences allowed for audiences to be seen as active meaning makers and in this particular study Liebes and Katz’s decoding model is applied to how I predict the audience will decode the film. Therefore in this study the model itself will not be scrutinized in the analysis section and looking at the ways in which women decoded rather it is used as a operationalization of the idea that viewers decode and make meaning of films and thus the women interviewed all have their own unique meaning of the film to them.

My Research Question is:

What is the meaning of locally produced entertainment media to Lebanese women’s lives?
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The reception of the film *Sukkar Banat* is studied as an operationalization of the broader research question. My three sub-questions are:

1. What is the significance of the film being locally produced?
2. How were the scenes dealing with social taboos and issues received?
3. How was the film received in terms of empowerment?

Feminist perspectives on audience reception studies has mainly been concerned with the reception of Western film and shows in other cultures or reception in the West or on the meaning of serials such as talk shows and soaps. The concentration on feminist perspectives of locally produced media, especially in the Middle East presents a major gap reception studies. Thus, with this study I will be informing the literature on how Arabs are interacting with the media, as Sabry (2007) suggested researchers should begin to do, as well as contributing to balancing the field of media and communications which is predominately filled with Western perspectives or studies concerning the West.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Philosophy, Approach and Strategy**

#### *Phenomenological Philosophy*

While the researcher's philosophical worldview and approach remains largely hidden it remains important to be identified. Phenomenology, the philosophy that this method is built upon, is a school of thought that emphasizes a focus on people's subjective experiences and interpretations of the world. (Creswell, 2009). Phenomenology contributes to deeper understanding of lived experiences by revealing taken for granted assumptions about these ways of knowing. Thus, the philosophy is applicable as the focus of this study is on the subjective meaning of the film *Sukkar Banat* to a variety of Lebanese women and how their understanding of Lebanese culture and gender is appropriated in this process.

#### *Grounded Theory Approach*

Grounded theory is a systematic qualitative research approach in the social sciences emphasizing generation of theory from data in the process of conducting research (Martin et al, 1986). It is used to build theory rather than test it (Patton, 2002). There are two

perspectives that have emerged within this method: objectivist and constructivist. I have assumed the role of a constructivist qualitative researcher in that I deny the existence of an objective reality and instead assert that, "realities are social constructions of the mind, and that there exists as many such constructions as there are individuals [although clearly many constructions will be shared]" (Guba and Lincoln, 1989, p. 43). Thus, instead of searching for a "truth" I am more interested in understanding how each individual makes meaning of the film and how their social context plays a role in doing that. Furthermore, in taking a constructivist grounded approach I immersed myself into the data and became a co-producer of meaning. The reason in doing this is to enrich the data by making meaning of and rendering participants' experiences into readable theoretical interpretations. (Charmaz, 2001).

#### *Exploratory Strategy and Semi-Structured Interview Method*

The research strategy chosen was exploratory as it is a valuable means of finding out "what's happening; to seek new insights; to ask questions and to assess phenomena in a new light" (Robson, 1993, p. 42). Exploratory research goes hand in hand with the phenomenological philosophy and grounded theory method as it is interpretive in nature rather than scientific or positivist. The data collection method chosen was the semi-structured, in-depth interview. This was deemed appropriate as it places more emphasis on exploring a person's answers in depth allowing for lengthy responses that would assist me in understanding the reasoning behind their answers (Lewis et al, 2000; Mason, 2002; Arksey and Knight, 1999).

Quantitative methods such as surveys or qualitative methods such as structured interviews would not have been sufficient as they do not allow free interaction between the interviewer and the respondent, neither do they allow for opportunities of clarification (Reinharz, 1992). As for ethnography, the method was considered to only be advantageous as a supplement to the interviews but would not have been sufficient enough on its own to explore the research questions effectively. Content analysis was also deemed inappropriate as the study was focusing on what the meaning of the film was to women as opposed to representations of women and Lebanese society within the film. Face-to-face interviewing was specifically chosen because it allowed for "thick description", which explained the context (body language, tone of voice, etc) in addition to the speech (Geertz, 1973); this was important as Arab cultures use a lot of gestures and expressions that add deeper meaning to words.

### **The Credibility of Research Findings: Reliability and Validity**

A number of techniques were employed to enhance reliability and validity such as building 'rapport', a relation of respect and trust that stimulates and facilitates the participant's articulation of her experience, and following the interviewee's lead concerning posture, speed of speech and language- conscious decisions of what language I spoke were contingent upon what the interviewee would speak in (O'Connor and Seymour, 2002; Van Zoonen, 1994). Prompts that encourage informants to illustrate, expand and clarify their initial responses also contributes to validity (Arskey and Knight, 1999), therefore "probing questions" and "follow-up questions" were used through out the interviews. Truth-value was another aspect that was accounted for in two ways. First, via a consent form the interviewee's were assured them of their anonymity, which allowed them to relax and speak more openly (Healey and Rawlinson, 1994). Second, by providing fair translations for interviews that were in Arabic. I translated the interviews myself which was the best option as I am a native and therefore understand the deeper meanings behind what was said however I tried to remain as objective as I could and asked for a second opinion on aspects that I was unsure of. (Temple and Young, 2004).

Neutrality was a difficult task but was achieved through a balancing act. I had to be perceived as Lebanese enough so that my interviewee's felt that I could understand them and the cultural aspects they were referring to and at the same time I had to appear Western enough so that the women would not feel as though I was judging them or feel as though they couldn't trust me, especially concerning issues related to sex (Goffman, 1959). Cassell (2005) wrote that the constant negotiation of multiple identities on the researchers behalf has an impact on the validity and reliability of data and findings, in that it shapes the data collected and not collected and interpretations made and not made. Therefore the 'balancing act' conducted may present a limitation of this research, although this was perceived as the best way to proceed.

### **Sampling Method**

Researchers who take a grounded theory approach usually adapt a theoretical sampling method (Charmaz, 2008) however due to time constraints and the fact that a pilot had been conducted earlier which gave me insights as to what my sample should be, I decided to apply heterogeneous purposive sampling instead. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to select the respondents for the study because they illustrate some of the qualities that they are interested in (Silverman, 2000). Purposive sampling assists in choosing valid and reliable

interviewees according to the research questions and objectives. Furthermore, it works particularly well when the data to be collected is qualitative (Patton, 1990).

Criteria for the selection of the respondents were decided upon prior to the selection and had two principle aims. The first was "to ensure that all the key constituencies of relevance to the subject matter are covered" (Ritchie et al, 2003, p.79). Therefore, all of the respondents selected had to be female and had watched *Sukkar Banat*, whether they liked it or not. The women also had to be Lebanese and lived most of their lives in Lebanon to ensure that they understood the culture and women's issues and in essence were a part of it. Women from the age of 22 till 56 were interviewed; a total of 11 people were interviewed. While I was reluctant to stop data collection at 11 interviewees I was only able to fly to Lebanon to conduct the interviews for a limited amount of time and thus was constrained by this factor. However, a number of themes became recurrent throughout the interviews and therefore it was deemed ok to end collection then.

The second principle was "to ensure that, within each of the key criteria, some diversity is included so that the impact of the characteristic concerned [could] be explored" (Ritchie et al, 2003, p. 79). Thus, I made sure to select people from various religions, education and class statuses, although it was very difficult to reach lower class and poorly educated people and those who I did reach had not seen the film so the study was limited in this respect and only involved the middle and upper middle class's opinions. In order to find these women I employed convenience sampling, which is when people are selected based on their availability and willingness to respond. While it may be considered a weak form of sampling there are precautions that researchers can take to minimize limitations of reliability such as making sure the sample included all of the criteria I needed as well as eliminating bias in the selection. (Gravetter and Forzano, 2009). To do this I went to different areas in Lebanon (as the country is sectioned according to religion, and class) and went to various hair/ waxing salons and schools and chatted with the women there (mothers, teachers, clients, hairdressers). I also went to my parent's acquaintance's offices and spoke to them and their colleagues and those who showed interest allowed me to interview them in the office. Also acquaintances of friend's and family allowed me to go to their homes and interview them there. It is important to note here though that I never interviewed any friends or family of my own as that would decrease the validity and reliability of the study.

## **Design of Research Tools**

### *Pilot*

The pilot study conducted not only supported the relevance of this study but it also produced information that allowed me to ameliorate it. Firstly, it showed that my sample should consist of women who spoke Arabic as their first language and lived most of their lives in the Middle-East to ensure they understood and were a part of the Arab mentality as I am interested in the meaning of the film to these women as opposed to women who are Westernized. Second, the pilot revealed that even the women that really enjoyed the film were having trouble recalling aspects of it therefore I used stills from various points of the film and of each character and they were shown to the respondents as the interview progressed- this helped their memory and conversation flow. Finally, new questions were brought to the fore due to this pilot both in terms of questions to be asked during the interviews and areas of interest for the sub-questions of the research.

### *Topic Guide*

The topic guide was structured into three main sections each corresponding to the sub-questions being asked in the study. Each section consisted of questions pertaining to the area of the sub-question. Following Bryman's advice the topic guide was structured so that the topics followed a certain order so the questions flowed and that the language used was comprehensible and not leading (2008). The questions in the topic guide were sculpted according to Kavale's nine types of questions, i.e. introductory, indirect, etc (1996). The interviews each lasted about 45 minutes and I recorded each of them with a voice recorder and then transcribed them fully using thick description.

### *Analysis Method*

Grounded theory dictates that coding is an essential first step to analyzing data and it is a multi-step process. My initial coding was sparked by a set of 'sensitizing concepts' that reflected the disciplinary assumptions and theoretical concepts that the study was based on. Once this initial step of coding was established, the second step- selective coding- was applied where the most frequently appearing initial codes were synthesized and conceptualized (Charmaz, 2003). Then the "factual" data gathered from coding was interpreted into meaningful themes (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Wolcott, 1994). These themes were then used to answer the research questions.

## Results and Analysis

This chapter is structured into three sections, each one pertaining to a sub-question asked in this study. Within the first two sections the results and analysis are discussed simultaneously and the themes that arose are linked back to the theoretical framework that the study is based on to answer the two sub-questions. The third section combines the information gathered from the first two sections to answer the third and final sub-question.

### What is the Significance of the Film Being Locally Produced?

#### *Theme 1: There is no Translation Equivalent*

In terms of both the actual Lebanese Arabic and the cultural references that come along with speaking in a certain language, the majority of the interviewees felt passionately about the need for this film to be in Lebanese Arabic for it to ‘work’. Two trilingual interviewees explained that watching it in French was not as enjoyable and the value of the film was diminished:

I have watched it with the translation.. [lowers voice and shakes her head] it's not the same effect. The Lebanese dialect. It's different totally, because no matter how you translate the Lebanese humor, it's just not the same. So, in a way I am very sorry for those who have watched it same without knowing the real Lebanese dialect. (Maryela)

I tried it, I tried to read the subtitles and it was like “ah ok, it's normal, not anything special”. So, yeah it was very very good that it was put in Lebanese speaking. (Elisa)

Almost all of the women strongly asserted that the film could not have been as successful or understood properly if it were dubbed in a different Arabic dialect or if it was in Lebanese Arabic but filmed abroad. The respondents explained that there are implications embedded in the film that a viewer would only understand if they came from that culture. This was implied by answers like Randa's, who said, “Because we are Lebanese we have a different way of viewing and acting” and Dakhelo's, who said, “the film had to be in *our* Arabic on *our* issues in the manner in which *we* speak in”.

Remarks such as Abeer's, “I'm so happy we can actually produce movies of this quality from our own country it is refreshing seeing our issues on the big screen” also show how even though several films are being imported to the country that deal with similar issues as *Sukkar*

*Banat*, there is no equivalent even if dubbed that could be as satisfying as it being wholly from their country. It was also common that women felt more prompted to watch this film due to nothing like it being produced from Lebanon or in Lebanese Arabic, this implies that there is a longing for these issues to be spoken of and in their native tongue. When asked about the importance of the film being in Lebanese Arabic, Fatima, who does not usually watch films at all, said:

It was SOO important. I was actually surprised. Honestly, it was my daughter who told me about it, I hadn't heard of it and she brought the DVD and she said to me "mom I brought this DVD, my friends are telling me its really nice maybe we should watch it" and I said to her "is it in Lebanese??" so I said, "yeah put it on, lets watch it!"

*Theme 2: It is Not What is Being Said it is the Language it is Being Said in*

This theme was in a sense unexpected. When I originally began researching I thought women would mostly be concerned with the issues the film dealt with and perhaps identify more with the film because of its cultural proximity. However, it became clear that creating this type of film in Lebanese Arabic meant so much more than just a film, it meant that Lebanese culture as a whole is changing. Furthermore, what was found to be unique was not that Lebanese people are speaking of these issues or even watching films about these issues it was that they were speaking of these issues in *Lebanese Arabic*. Also, it was not just an underground film that as Nazeema said, "you might expect these films in Lebanese Arabic from the LAU (Lebanese American University) students or just the younger generation because they are all so free with themselves anyway, but to come from Nadine Labaki and become so popular...this is big", shows how unexpected it was for society. Another Interviewee said, which sums up what a lot of women said in their interviews:

You know it would have been received a lot easier and would not have received so much attention had it not been in our Lebanese Arabic. That's my opinion, like for example in a Western language, the topic is talked about and passes and you are not surprised. But when it is in our Lebanese Arabic you know what I mean, you think "Whoa.. we have become that daring and bold that we are talking about these kinds of issues?" (Randa).

Randa's shock at fact that these issues were addressed in Lebanese Arabic shows how much more significant and eye catching dealing these issues is when it is done in her native tongue. Maryela said that the fact that the film was done in Lebanese Arabic was "charming, and brilliant, and very very brave of Nadine Labaki". Saying that Labaki was "very very brave" suggests that discussing those issues in Lebanese Arabic was an unusual and risky task as it

has not been done before and opens itself up to criticism from society. Thus, the fact that the issues were being spoken of in Lebanese Arabic becomes meaningful to women as it implies that culture is evolving and that women's voices may actually be heard, not just listened to.

*Theme 3: A Film for People Abroad vs. A Film Made for Locals*

While overall, the women were pleased with the film being produced locally and executed in the local language there was a slight discrepancy concerning whether this film was created for the Lebanese people as a means of getting the issues out and discussed or for people abroad to learn about Lebanese culture. Some of the women discussed the 'realism' of the film and how important that was to them. This indicates the use of the film as a means of reassurance that other women in society are going through similar issues as themselves:

The film really pulled me into it. I felt like it was easy going but strong at the same time. You didn't feel like it was complicated and you felt like it was so natural.. I think that's what I liked a lot about it actually. You know I felt like this is a neighborhood and I am living with them." (Fatima). "It's very real and very different from all the other films shown on LBC and those channels. It's very, very real, and in the context we are living and our daily lives. (Elisa).

Other women were explicit about how the film being in Lebanese Arabic and filmed in Lebanon made them feel as though they were being spoken to specifically and couldn't help but be made to think of their own lives and situations in comparison to the lives of the characters in the film. Elisa's statement represented a majority of the interviewee's opinions when she said, "you can feel it's for us, for Lebanese people not other Arab people with other ideas, its Lebanese just for us, so we can understand how they are speaking and understand what's their message." This is indicative of the notion that there is a message to be received by women because it is being said to them in their local language and that *Sukkar Banat* is not just used for entertainment. This was further supported with Dalal's claim:

*Q: The film was in Lebanese Arabic. Do you think that was important?*

Yes of course! Look, if you want to talk to me and get a point across you are going to have to talk to me in my language. If I watch something in classical Arabic or something translated I don't feel like I'm involved that much, I just feel like I am watching a film. But because the language was in Lebanese Arabic and even things like the wardrobe, the scenery, the places- I'm telling you its like I'm living it. I'm living the story. Not as though I am watching a film. This was something that was necessary of the film.

*Q: What about if the film was made in a different Arabic dialect but was the exact same plot?*

Look it will always make you feel like you are watching a movie, you won't feel like it's your environment. Because already to begin with you are denying it and washing your hands free of these issues, it is not being brought to your attention that "no that might be you."

The film being produced in Lebanese Arabic to Dalal, and other women who said similar things in their interviews, was significant in that it made her feel involved and pay attention to the message of the film and to a certain extent a "lesson" from the film. To her, she could not turn the other cheek or "wash her hands free of the issues" because the film was in her native language and this prompted her to think about how to feel about the issues being spoken about because she felt like "it might be her" one day.

On the other hand, some women felt that it was produced locally for people abroad, for them to understand what Lebanese culture is like, and thus the significance of it being locally produced was to offer an authentic representation of the culture. All three of the following women decoded this film in a critical-syntactic manner. Dakhelo said, "they are dubbing the film in French and English so that people abroad can see what we are like". Farah said that the execution of the film in Lebanese Arabic was important for those who aren't Arab to get a feel, she continued "I mean when I watch an Italian movie, it is in Italian and then I have to read the subtitles because then you just get in the mood and the feel of the movie and the country." A different perspective arose from the interviews that is reflected in Soha's declaration:

Labaki showed a picture of our society. This is for people that are abroad, not living in Lebanon because these are all things that we have seen. She is showing how Lebanon is and so people abroad can see what we are like. We didn't see anything new, it was all normal. But the people abroad did find new things about us that they didn't know before.

In this respect, it was obvious that Soha was watching the movie in hopes of seeing a change in the way the women handled each of their situations. To her the film did not shed any light on challenging the traditional ways of handling issues or how society demands women to behave, it just mirrored the way society is and therefore it was created for people abroad. Yet, had the film approached the same social issues but challenged the norm of dealing with them, then it would have been 'meant' for the local audience. This indicates that Soha and women like her look to films as a place where social norms can be challenged and it is only then that

being locally produced and executed in the local language will become significant. Most of the findings support what Straubhaar and Pool had suggested in their research and theories especially concerning a drive towards cultural proximate media. Of course issues concerning understanding humor and cultural implications within speaking in Lebanese Arabic were brought to the fore with several of the interviewees, however the significance of the film being locally produced did not stop there. The study showed that purely speaking about these issues in Lebanese Arabic was a step in itself to dealing with the social issues that are occurring at the moment.

Finally, the theme concerned with film as for local audiences or for audiences abroad revealed that being locally produced may only be significant if it represents a challenge to the social norm as opposed to just mirroring society. Also, a few of the interviewees thought that being locally produced was significant in representing authentic Lebanese culture to audiences abroad and that these audiences may appreciate them more than Lebanese people. These finding tests Hoskin and Mirus's notion of cultural discount to a certain extent as the film may be valued more abroad than in the home country, where as 'cultural discount' preaches the opposite- that programs are valued less in foreign markets than in home markets because the appeal is reduced due to dubbing or subtitling and difficulty in identifying with myths, histories, beliefs, etc (1988). Perhaps this is an area suited for further studies but for now it shall remain as an observation.

### **How Were the Scenes Dealing with Social Taboos and Issues Received?**

The discussion of each of the characters within the film and the issues they dealt with led to emergence of three main themes: women viewing the film as a way to teach trickery, as a way to modernize, or as a way to teach moral lessons. The themes are linked together because they signify women watching the film as means to an end. To these women the film was not viewed as a piece of entertainment, they saw it as a tool to change society with. The difference between them was the way each of them interpreted this change was about. The following is a discussion of each of the themes that arose individually.

*Theme 4: Film as a Way to Teach Trickery*

Here, the film was received as a means to teach women to trick men and society into thinking they are following social norms and gender rules, when in fact they are living freely. The women that decoded *Sukkar Banat* in such a manner felt that society will never change so the only way around it is to 'cover up' the truth.

When asked about why the hymen-reinstatement surgery scene was put into the film the following women replied:

Well we have our society and our traditions, it's better not to ruin her life, like she should just trick him with this issue, as long as she is faithful while she is married...like it is silly for her to ruin her life because our society has all these demands of women, you know? (Dakhelo)

Because this was the only way to get married and had she been devirginated no one would accept to marry her and she had to hide it from her family, it is something to be looked down on and it is a MAJOR shameful thing (Maryela)

Mareyla and Dakhelo answered this question in relation to the way Lebanese society is in order to explain why the character Nisrine had to do the surgery, this is what Leibes and Katz classified as referential decoding. Also the use of words like "this was the only way" and "it's silly to run her life because of society" shows that women are not in agreement with current social order and their role in it; they saw the film as validating their own feelings concerning their inequality in Lebanon and how to deal with it- in terms of sex before marriage.

Dakhelo and Dalal took a very critical-semantic decoding stance concerning sex before Marriage and Nisrine's character by referring to the director as "they" and explaining "the message" that "they" tried to send to women through this film:

This film was for women, to enlighten them. They really make picture clear, "if you take this route, this is where you will end up" [speaking in a matter of fact manner]. The most important thing is that women are enlightened because men aren't going to change and the men will never have to care about his actions. At the end of the day whatever happens the woman is going to have to fix the situation she got herself into. (Dakhelo)

Sex before marriage is happening now in our society, they are trying to send a message, like look “if you get yourself in a don’t worry girls there are ways around it, its not the end of the world, don’t go commit suicide or something, you can fix it.” (Dalal)

It could be said that the women who decoded the film in the manner that Maryela, Dakhelo and Dalal did felt it was a means to challenge patriarchal norms and the role of women as meant to be “obedient” (Minces, 1980). By seeing the film as teaching women how to trick society, it stipulates that society wont change and women recognize that but there are ways around it for women to have a happy fulfilling life. The second theme is similar to this reading in that social norms are challenged, however women who saw the movie as a means to modernize took it one step further, these women believe society *will* and *is* changing.

#### *Theme 5: Film as a Way to Modernize*

The film received as a tool to help modernize Lebanese society could be observed through the anger that was seen in women’s reactions to the way the characters in the film handled the situation they were in. One of the characters many of the older women were anger or sad for was Rose. Sally talked about how the Middle-Eastern woman “gives a lot more than she should to her family” when discussing why Rose decided not to meet Richard for a date at the end of the film. Sally says with a firm, high-pitched tone, “She chose to be single because of her mom, to stay with her mom, well that’s wrong! Her mom lived her life, ok I’m not saying she should leave her mom I’m just saying she should have lived her life”.

This anger of women constantly sacrificing themselves for their families, more so than men, was a constant throughout the interviews. Randa expressed strong aggravation towards women putting their families before themselves and was very angry during this section of the interview, it was the most emotional that I saw her become. She lit a cigarette and stated in a firm voice “Rose was weak for not dating the man”. Nazeema was another respondent, like Randa who became very emotional when discussing Rose:

This happens a lot in our society, you know all the sibilings go off get married and there is always one left who doesn’t get married and they always end up having to take care the older parents or whatever. It’s like a rule or something!! She isn’t allowed to have her own life? Just because she didn’t get married!

When Nazeema was asked, “What do you think of older men and women dating?” she

said, “I think it’s good, she needs love in her life and it’s natural and I wish more than that happened for her, but it didn’t.” Maryela also felt upset about Rose’s outcome in life stating that she was “the saddest character in the film”.

These women’s responses are a strong indication of women’s urge for their position in society to change, for more respect and freedom to be put in place. There was a pattern with the age and generation of women that were concerned with Rose’s story, they tended to be older in age and seemed to be measuring themselves to her- referential decoding. It seemed as though they were either in a similar position or they were scared about becoming like her that made them reject the plight of this character.

Another character and situation that aggravated the respondents was Nisrine and her decision to do the hymen-reinstatement surgery instead of telling her fiancé the truth. Elisa said:

If she is doing that surgery that means that the man is not open minded, that he will not respect her, that he will put more lines and more conditions, “you should be the “housewife” and a virgin and you should not go out and you should always serve me and take care of the house” (mocking what men say)... it’s a very important condition, I think that she shouldn’t have done the surgery, she should’ve told him and seen how he’d react.

Elisa’s reading suggests that if a man doesn’t accept his wife being a non-virgin it means that he will expect all of the things of her that the patriarchal system expect, i.e. being obedient, not working just taking care of the kids and the man, etc. (Pilcher and Whelehan, 2004). Elisa makes it clear that she disagrees with this system and seeing it be employed in the film aggravated her to the point of wanting a more modern society. This shows that films don’t always necessarily have to go against or challenge the social norm to be a feminist or female empowering film. Seeing the patriarchal social norm applied (having a patriarchal society mirrored to an audience) can be equally as powerful and in turn empowering.

Farah was another respondent that felt really passionate about how wrong the surgery was and her disagreement with the patriarchal and double standard system:

If she explained that she wanted to do the operation for herself then I would say ok that’s your own decision but it was obvious in the movie that Nisrine was scared and she didn’t want to do it. This scene MOVED me the most. It frustrated me. As a woman. WHY would you put yourself through such a painful operation?? We did see in the film that it IS painful. This was VERY sad for me [she closes up and embraces herself].

Unfortunately we have crimes of passion and all that stuff and I guess Nadine Labaki wanted to highlight this. So IT WAS CRUCIAL TO SHOW THAT.

This comment suggests a number of things: first she decided the film here in a critical-semantic fashion because she refers to the Director, Nadine Labaki, and what her intention was of showing that scene. Second, because she thought that a message was being delivered through this scene it suggests that Farah watches films in hopes of helping society progress into a more modern world. Third, it showed that her understanding was that Nisrine did not want the surgery and that the pressure of societies demands forced her into doing it, which shows her disagreement and anger with present social norms. Anger towards society's double standards was shown in almost all of the women's interviews however Abeer's comment is the best representative for how all the women felt on the matter:

*Q: How did you feel when Nisrine did the hymen-reinstatement surgery?*

I wish she could have been honest and just told her fiancé the truth but I know even if he really loved her, he wouldn't accept it because every Lebanese man, and I know this because I have brothers, EVERY Lebanese man wants to marry a virgin they want to be the only one who she has slept with. Even though he can have as much sex as he wants before marriage, its ok, he is a man [said with sarcasm]. That's how our society works.

Finally, some of the interviewees were happy that a lesbian character was put in the film however they were a little disappointed with the level of attention she was given in the film which supports the notion that they were looking to film as a tool for progression:

Homosexuality is huge in Lebanon. I would have liked actually Nadine to portray something more powerful with that character. But then again maybe she was afraid to be attacked, I don't know. I WANTED TO SEE THAT because I know how much my gay friends suffer in Lebanon. (Farah)

Although most of the women did want to see more for the character some were happy that it was finally being brought up at all:

*Q: Why do you think this character was put in the movie?*

With a lot of, courage from Nadine, hats off to her that she touched on the subject of homosexuality in Lebanon whether it is lesbian or gay or whatever. Good for her. It is

coming out very slowly but it's there! I thought the scene with the shampoo was very sexy, rather erotic. Again, another courageous step from Nadine. I doubt it has been ever or at least I haven't seen any other Lebanese movie, that has touched the topic to this extent. Mind you, most Lebanese films are deprived of any real kiss from a woman to a man. Let alone deal with a taboo subject, the gay subject.

Therefore, this film supports a wider representation of women in media and supports the empowerment of women through representation in Arab media which battles the results of the UNDP report released in 2005 (see the literature review). According Pitcher and Whelehan's suggestions, this variety of female representations, especially the lesbian, should help women take a step forward in the battle of beating the patriarchal system and to becoming modern. While not everyone was delighted to see the lesbian role brought up in the film (mostly the older more religious women), the younger more educated generation were happy and felt the film was a tool that supported the cause towards modernization.

#### *Theme 6: Film as a Way to Teach Moral Lessons*

Many of the older women saw this film as a tool to teach the younger women the consequences of their actions and to teach them morals. This way of decoding suggests a different take on the way women's position in society is. These women seem to be in agreement with the patriarchal social norms and gender positioning in society and want those who are becoming modernized/Westernized to get back to their traditional roots.

The two most mentioned characters were Nisrine and Layal. Their issues were spoken of the most in terms of how their situations should teach women lessons. Fatima was adamant that Nadine Labaki had a message to send to the viewers (and it was the message Fatima herself understood) and that it was for women to "take care of themselves" and not get into the same trouble that the girls in the film did. This was clearly a critical-semantic decoding. She expressed her anger in the fact that Labaki had let the film end on a good note, that Nisrine had gotten away with the surgery implying that she "lives happily ever after". She firmly stated:

[In an aggravated, escalating volume] Nadine just took care of each problem and everyone went back to their lives and their work, but where is the rest of the story? Her HER especially Nisrine, what happens to her in her marriage?? If Nadine wanted to send a message for women to take care of themselves and remain virgins until marriage then she should have shown us what happened to Nisrine after she got married because now she just show her getting away with it. She was able to trick him, did the surgery, had her

wedding and it was fine. No. This isn't enough. She had to continue this film. (Fatima).

Other women showed similar readings of the film such as Dalal, she said that she felt that Labaki was trying to say that “we should really study a situation before getting involved”. Speaking about Layal's affair she continued, “look today woman are going all the way [having sex] in relationships but you have to think of the end point. Where is this going?” Statements such as this one show that the film was viewed as a tool to show “the moral of the story”, to help women not make the same mistakes as women like Layal. Dakhelo makes this very clear in her critical semantic decoding of the scene:

*Q: Why do you think Layal's character was in the film?*

The message from the whole thing is not just to show the stories, it was to enlighten other girls to not get themselves stuck in those situations. She [Labaki] shows how Layal shouldn't have put herself in that position to begin with she really lowered herself by having an affair and she didn't have to do that. Labaki really showed it well it was amazing, very nice.

The character Layal seemed to catch all of the women's attention and almost all of them said the said exact thing when we were discussing her, “MEN. NEVER LEAVE THEIR WIVES.” They all approached this with a referential reading of the film comparing Layal to them or their friends and said that it was so important to see the hurt from Layal's side, that there was not even one good scene for Layal concerning her affair because it never works out, the man never leaves his wife and he is just using the girl because he is a womanizer. They all commented on how lovely the wife and child were and how all men in Lebanon (and this is why they did not find it important to see the man in the film) are like this so “we must learn from it and not fall into their traps anymore”. Nearly all of them had a story about how a friend or sister cousin of theirs is/had an affair and how it never ended well and that they were happy this was shown in the film. This implied that they were looking to the film to teach their friends and family lessons on having affairs.

Finally, a lot of the women agreed that the character Jamale was put in the film to show older women how ‘silly’ they look (another lesson) when they try to act and look young. A lot of the women made comments such as “That is so Lebanese and we really need to get over trying to be 20 when we are 40”. Abeer's comment is representative of how many of the women spoke about Jamale and her aging issues:

[despondent tone of voice] When I saw that scene when Jamale is at her friend's wedding and she goes to the bathroom and puts that dye on her pants to show that she still gets her period, it really really hurt me. I mean I felt bad for her because she needs to make a point to herself about her youth but at the same time I felt like she was so simple minded, so silly.

### **How Was the Film Received in terms of Empowerment?**

Firstly it is important to clarify what is meant by the term empowerment. As this study is taken from a 'second-wave' feminist perspective, empowerment in this context means freedom from the current patriarchal order that is in place. The way that empowerment is being measured is through analyzing the results that emerged in the first and second section of this chapter.

When reviewing the results and themes that emerged for the question of the significance of the film being produced locally, it was clear that the women found it to be very significant and empowering to them as a gender specifically because it was produced in their native language. The results showed that it would not have been enough if the film addressed the same social issues but was executed in a foreign language or even in Arabic but another dialect. Clearly the women felt that the film had to be in Lebanese Arabic so that, to quote one respondent, Dalal, "when it is in your own dialect, you can not wash your hands of the issues". What she, along with other women who agreed with Dalal, means is once the issues are spoken in your dialect all barriers come down and you must listen to what is being said and you are more open to really taking in what is being said by default. Viewing the results in this manner implies that *Sukkar Banat* was a tool that gave women a voice in the patriarchal, unequal society they live in. Being in Lebanese Arabic alone was enough for some women to feel like they were being liberated, that social norms were changing because the issues were being spoken about in their own language.

In a society where double standards and patriarchy are firmly in place and women are not given the opportunity to speak their minds- either in private with their families or in public amongst society- this film became meaningful to them in that it gave them a safe place to state their issues. I highlight the term safe here because in Arab society (both traditional and Westernized families- although traditional families more so) if a woman tries to speak or act out of order she will either be silenced or reprimanded (Minces, 1980). Thus *Sukkar Banat* acted as a platform to voice issues that several women are experiencing in Lebanese society, without pointing to any women in particular, thus it acts as a safeguard from individual consequences of speaking or acting against social norms.

The scenes that dealt with 'social taboos' were decoded in three different ways and in turn presented three different level of empowerment that women experienced in watching the film. The women that interpreted the scenes in a way that meant they should be tricking society into thinking they are following the social norm when really they are not, found this film to be empowering at a superficial level. These women feel that society is not going to change and therefore if they want to be liberated they must adjust and deceive accordingly. The women who got angry when watching the scenes because they did not like the way the characters handled their situations they were in or those who were felt happy to see certain representations of women could be interpreted as feeling empowerment at a substantial level. These women felt a real urge to modernize due to the anger they felt watching the women in the film slavishly adhere to the current patriarchal and double standard system. This anger provoked them to want and advocate change within the real social world. Therefore substantial empowerment was took place by watching the film. Finally, the third theme that arose from the decoding of the film were not as clearly against the patriarchal norms in place, nonetheless they still felt a sense of empowerment, I called this form of reversed empowerment. These women want to see the women in society revert back to tradition rather than modernize which does not necessarily comply with second wave feminism it does still go hand in hand with helping women feel happier in society. Thus, it is still a part of the feminist initiative but in a different respect.

## **CONCLUSION**

The entire purpose of this study was to understand what the meaning of locally produced entertainment media is to Lebanese women. The film *Sukkar Banat (Caramel)* was used to operationalize this question. This main research question was answered was by asking three sub-questions and the results were all analyzed from a 'second-wave' feminist perspective. In answering the first sub-question, the significance of the media being locally produced, it was shown that not only was it important that the film be in Lebanese Arabic and shot in Lebanon for the viewers to understand and feel a connection with the material but, to women, hearing their social issues being spoken about in their native tongue was in itself a step forward for a change in social norms. In answering the second question, how were the scenes dealing with social taboos and issues interpreted, it was clear that the respondents all decoded the film as a means to change the patriarchal and double-standard society that they live in. While there were three different ways of viewing the film– film as a way to teach trickery, as a way to modernize and as a way to teach moral lessons, they were all bound by the fact that not one of the respondents viewed the film as a piece of entertainment or just an enjoyable film rather

they all interpreted it as a tool to change society. The third sub-question, how was the film interpreted in terms of empowerment, was answered by analyzing further the results from the first and second questions. This revealed that the viewers did find this film empowering on different levels- superficial, substantial and reversed, according to three different themes that emerged from the respondents' decoding of the scenes dealing with 'social taboo' and issues.

What all of this implies is that women in Lebanon are not just watching locally produced controversial films, such as *Sukkar Banat*, as a source of entertainment; these films become meaningful to them because they are used as a tool to safely voice their opinions about social norms, a safeguard from individual consequences of speaking or acting against social norms, and an instrument to help drive social change. Due to time, space and scope constraints I was forced to eliminate a number of other sections that would have made this study more comprehensive and further developed in terms of the themes established the results section. One of the most interesting aspects that I was not able to develop and hope that another researcher will is the opinions of the lower class women from more conservative families in Lebanon. It was a bit difficult for me to reach these women and those who I could reach had not watched the film, which is an interesting point in itself, it felt as though these women were not allowed to be exposed to this genre of media thus it would have been interesting to understand why, and what they thought of the film after they had watched it. Further research suggestions would include researching these lower class women's opinions and perhaps the methodology be changed to a triangulation method that included ethnography. It also may be interesting to study the male's perspective of this film, to understand what it means to them.

“Would you like to see more films like *Sukkar Banat*?”

“Yes, and I want MORE!”

(Maryela, Sally, Abeer, Dakhelo, Nazeema,  
Dalal, Farah, Fatima, Soha, Elisa, Randa)

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