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Beyond Stereotypes: MBC's Reality Programs and the Empowerment of Arab Women

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Abstract

Since the 1990s, supporting Arab women's rights has been a major aspect of U.S. foreign policy towards the Arab region. American endeavors, coupled with the efforts of female organizations and Arab rulers' growing commitment to the female cause, have improved the situation of Arab women in several Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia. Taking the example of the Saudi channel MBC and Drawing on feminist theory, the present paper examines the portrayal of women in the MBC channel. This qualitative content analysis includes two of MBC's most popular reality programs, which are *Project Runway Middle East* and *Top Chef*. A random sample of episodes from the two seasons of *Project Runway Middle East*, produced between 2016 and 2017, and from the five seasons of *Top Chef*, broadcast from 2016 to 2022 was selected and coded, using the qualitative content analysis software MAXQDA. The coded material concentrated on the utterances, actions, and looks of women as well as the comments men gave about women in the two programs. The codes covered three content categories, which were the looks category, the role category, and the character category. The study's findings indicate that MBC's reality programming shows a progressive depiction of Arab women, which moves beyond the stereotypical image of females in the Arab world.

Keywords: Empowerment; MBC; reality TV; foreign policy; women; content analysis; stereotypes

Beyond Stereotypes: MBC's Reality Programs and the Empowerment of Arab Women

Rim Letaief, Ph.D.

The subaltern status of Arab women and their lack of legal, economic, and political rights had stirred the attention of Arab feminists in the early 1900s (United Nations Development Program, 2007, p. 124). Yet, the beginning of Arab feminist activism came about in the second half of the twentieth century, following the establishment of several feminist organizations in a handful of Arab countries, such as Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Sudan, and Iraq, to name a few (United Nations Development Program, pp. 124-125). For almost fifty years, the latter feminist organizations failed to effect much change in Arab societies. During the second half of the 1990s, however, with the sponsorship of the UN, feminist organizations in the Arab world took part in several women-focused conferences and they started lobbying for the legal improvement of women's status. They pushed for the enactment of egalitarian laws and the eradication of discriminatory policies in their societies (United Nations Development Program, p. 131). In many Arab countries, feminists reaped the fruits of their struggle and succeeded in bringing Arab rulers to adopt state feminism, which implies commitment to improving the situation of

women. In Egypt and Tunisia, for instance, several pro-women laws were introduced, and women witnessed access to educational, economic, and political opportunities (United Nations Development Program, p. 135). Rola El Husseini (2003) suggests that Arab rulers' embrace of state feminism and their championing of the cause of feminists aimed at countering the rising Islamist forces in their countries and appealing to the international community, especially the U.S (par. 1).

Starting in the 1990s, driving the rights of Muslim women, especially in the Arab world or the MENA region, has become a major aspect of American foreign policy towards the Arab world.¹ Although the Arab world's Muslim populace constitutes roughly 21% of the world's Muslim population, American policy makers show a special interest in the region because it harbors many Muslim women who are seen as victims of oppression (Grim & Hsu, 2018, p. 15). President Bill Clinton, for example, organized a large campaign that aimed at putting an end to the Muslim practice of genital mutilation common in some Arab countries, such as Egypt (Shannon, 2018, p. 97). His successor, George W. Bush, manipulated the cause of Muslim women to serve his political agenda and justify his intervention in the Arab world. (Sakleh, 2021, p. 3). After the 9/11 attacks of 2001, Bush drew Americans' attention to the violations of Women's rights in Arab countries like Iraq (Sakleh, p. 1). During the Bush era, there was a widespread "claim that the U.S. is responsible for the liberation of Middle Eastern women (who constitute a fair part of Muslim women) from oppressive, patriarchal, and authoritarian regimes," in the words of the journalist Andrea Sakleh (p. 1). Barack Obama carried out the same mission of empowering Arab women (Shannon, p. 173). Through the Office of Global Women's Issues, the Obama administration made partnerships with Arab countries whose basic goal was to give Arab women more education and more employment opportunities (Shannon, p. 174). During the Trump era, the American Congress considered imposing sanctions on Saudi Arabia and Libya for their violations of women's rights (Danon & Collins, 2021, p. 6). The Biden administration, in its turn, showed the same commitment to the empowerment of MENA women by allocating \$85 million to sponsoring female-oriented initiatives in the region (Danon & Collins, p. 5). In the last three decades, "women's rights were one barometer by which Americans judged social progress in [Arab] societies," as stated by

1. The MENA region stands for the Middle East and North Africa, a geographical area that comprises about 22 countries, whose main language is Arabic. Therefore, throughout this paper, the MENA region will be used interchangeably with the Arab world.

Kelly J. Shannon, Associate Professor of History at Florida Atlantic University (p. 10). As a result, the US harnessed a variety of tools that ranged from diplomatic endeavors to economic assistance to bring Arab countries to advance women's rights (Shannon, p. 115).

American endeavors, coupled with the efforts of female organizations and Arab rulers' growing commitment to the female cause, led to an improvement in the situation of Arab women. Despite being ranked as the lowest in the world in terms of gender equality by the 2021 Gender Gap Report (Danon & Collins, 2021, p. 1), the MENA region has witnessed several gender developments. Such a point is maintained in the following extract from *The Situational Analysis of Women and Girls in the MENA and Arab States Region: A Decade Review 2010-2020*:

Areas such as education and health have seen significant improvement in gender-related indices, and specialized programming aimed at supporting women's and girls' rights and empowerment have accelerated in many countries in the region. While governments have significantly stepped-up efforts to ensure that they meet their agenda-based human rights obligations, it is also necessary to highlight the increasing engagement of civil society, particularly women's and youth feminist civil society in advocating for and securing gains (IMC Worldwide, 2020, p. 15).

These lines come to highlight the Arab world's growing awareness of and attention to women's rights and to promoting gender parity. They also shed light on female achievements in both educational attainment and health-related fields. Other areas that reflect females' improved status include economic activity and politics. The MENA region's average female participation in the labor force in 2021 reached 29.2%, which, despite lagging the global average of 47.2% and being marked by inconsistency (Danon & Collins, p. 13), can be considered a significant step in Arab women's empowerment journeys. In the political arena, 14 countries in the MENA region adopted gender quotas, which contributed to increasing female representation in Arab parliaments and can lead in the future to the implementation of more pro-women legislation (Çavdar, 2022, pp. 285-286). All the above-mentioned indicators prove that most countries in the MENA region, although to varying degrees, are showing increasing support for women.

Even the conservative Gulf country of Saudi Arabia is endorsing women. In the last few years, several reforms targeting women have been implemented in the Kingdom. Saudi women have been granted the right to drive, to enter stadiums, to take part in physical education classes, and to travel without male guardianship, to name a few (Begum, 2018, par. 1). Recently, Saudi Arabia has been trying to communicate a liberal stance towards them, which is well-echoed through its transnational channels (Sakr, 2008, p. 403).

The Saudi channel MBC, which was established in 1991 by Walid Al Ibrahim, a

relative of the royal family (Ayish, 1997, p. 475), has, in recent years, shown signs of improving the image of Saudi and Arab women. Such a fact is maintained by Zeinab Abu Alsamh, General Manager of MBC Studios, when she notes that “From a company point of view, MBC has always had a thrust to empower women, whether it be in productions or empowering executives within the organization” (as cited in Lodderhose, 2022, par. 11).

MBC’s attempt to advance women’s rights is also mirrored through its constant endorsement of female-oriented conferences and forums. In January 2010, the MBC Group broadcasted and took part in the Second Annual BNP Paribas Women and Leadership Conference, held in Bahrain, under the sponsorship of the United Nations Industrial Development Organization and the United Nations Information Center (Baz, 2011, par. 1). Similarly, in 2022, MBC co-organized, with the Dubai Council for Businesswomen, the “Women in Media” forum, which aimed at discussing the various opportunities available for Arab women in different sectors (*Arab News*, 2022, par. 1).

This study examines whether MBC’s pro-woman policy extends to its reality TV programming. By carrying out a qualitative content analysis of two of MBC’s American-based reality formats, which are *Top Chef* and *Project Runway Middle East*, the paper attempts to investigate the degree of female inclusion and visibility in MBC’s reality programming. Through an analysis of the different areas of female portrayal, the current research also seeks to assess MBC’s depiction of Arab women and check whether its reality shows perpetuate or move beyond the stereotypical image of Arab females.

Theoretical Framework

Female media portrayal in MBC’s reality programming is examined with reliance on feminist theory. Feminism is a political movement that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to call for women’s rights and gender equality (Haradhan, 2022, p. 2). The major demands of feminists are outlined by Sandra G. Turner and Tina M. Maschi (2015) as follows:

Central to feminist theory is the belief that the inferior status delegated to women is due to societal inequality, that the personal status of women is shaped by political, economic and social power relations and that women should have equal access to all forms of power...feminist analysis helps women to understand how they are oppressed and dominated and often inspires them to engage in efforts to bring about broader social change (p. 152).

Hence, what can be understood from this account is that enabling women to access forms of power is the basic preoccupation of feminists.

Female empowerment is the center of attention for the fourth wave of feminism, which came to light in 2012. Fourth-wave feminists seek to challenge gender norms and encourage women to express themselves freely and to have control over their bodies and over their lives (Mahbub, 2021, p. 3). They also attempt to promote women's empowerment at the economic, political, and social levels by increasing women's ability to engage in paid labor, reach political positions, and get access to higher education and healthcare (Mahbub, pp. 5–6). By spurring women to be empowered in various areas of life, fourth-wave feminists hope to decrease the gender gap and place women along egalitarian pathways.

By making use of communication technology and social media, the fourth wave of feminism tries to connect women worldwide by offering them virtual spaces to share experiences and build alliances to combat sexist cultural practices (Parry & Johnson, 2018, p. 6). Describing fourth wave feminism, Dianna C. Parry argues that it adopts “a globalized lens... [to pursue] gender equity issues and to provide empowerment to all women, regardless of their race and nationality” (p. 7).

The intersectional and global dimensions of fourth wave feminism seem to be interesting ideas to study in relation to *Top Chef* and *Project Runway*. Although the two latter programs are traditional media forms, their creator, Magical Elves, is engaged in the promotion of gender parity, a point that is maintained in the following extract:

Magical Elves...is one of the few unscripted production companies with women in the majority of our leadership. Co-CEOs Casey Kriley and Jo. Sharon, along with their executive team, make it a priority to continue to push for diversity, equality and inclusion in our staff and on our shows - in front of and behind the camera (Magical Elves, 2023).

These words show that creating a balance in media visibility between males and females is a core aspect of the Magical Elves' mindset and a key characteristic of their reality programs. The feminist sensibilities of Magical Elves can be deemed as a way of seeking global empowerment for women, especially since their formats, including *Top Chef* and *Project Runway*, have copycats in almost all world territories. Additionally, studying female portrayal in the Arab versions of *Top Chef* and *Project Runway* can be considered a means of testing the feminist influence of the two formats under study and reality TV's contribution to empowering women in the Arab world.

Literature Review

Several researchers have examined the role of media in empowering females

(Narayana & Ahamad, 2016; Premlata & Jukariya, 2018; Singh, 2018). Indian researcher Pooran Singh (2018) thought that the media had the capacity to reach wide audiences, which made them responsible for women's empowerment (p. 441). For him, gender mainstreaming could come about through "broadening women's involvement and access to expression and decision-making in and via the media and new communication technologies [and] encouraging the media to depict women in a more balanced and non-stereotypical manner" (pp. 441-42).

Arab scholars have repeatedly emphasized the power of media in painting a positive image of Arab women. Although Arab and Muslim women are associated with negative stereotypes, whether in American media (Adams, 2019; Issaca, 2017; Falah & Nagel, 2005; Manley, 2009) or in Arab media productions (Kharroub & Weaver, 2014; Nassif & Gunter, 2008; Al-Shehab, 2008), there have been multiple efforts to overcome the stereotypical depiction of Arab women. Newsom and Lengel (2012) praised the role of social media in promoting female activism in the Arab region and bringing about relative female empowerment. Similar findings were uncovered by Mohamed Abdul Hamid, Abdul Basid, and Isma Nida Aulia (2021) in their investigation of the articles published on the online platform "Midan Al Jazeera," where they maintained that "Arab women [were] shown as individuals who [were] free from their roles in the domestic realm as a mother and wife, those who [had] the right to get better education and have a place in the political sphere" (p. 101).

While the above-mentioned researchers concentrated on the empowering narratives of online media, others chose to focus on traditional media forms. Relying on the feminist perspective, Naomi Sakr (2002), British Professor of Media at the University of Westminster, stated that transnational Arab channels, like Future TV, Abu Dhabi TV, and Al Jazeera, started giving voice to ordinary Arab women by enabling them to discuss taboo topics, such as harassment, sexual violence, rape, and others, in their female-oriented programming (p. 840). In another article entitled "Women and Media in Saudi Arabia: Rhetoric, Reductionism, and Realities," Sakr (2008) discussed the effort made by Saudi channels like Rotana and MBC to boost the visibility and power of Saudi women by including them as hosts in famous shows like MBC's *Kalam Nawaem* (p. 400).

Naomi Sakr was one of the first scholars to suggest MBC's orientation towards empowering women, especially Saudi ones. Another study that tackles MBC's positive depiction of Saudi women is the paper titled "From Dureen to Sama: The Evolution of the Representation of Saudi Women in MBC's Reality Programming" (Letaief, 2023), which uncovered the gradual empowerment and unveiling of Saudi women in the reality programs

aired on MBC from 2006 to 2019. Apart from these two studies that focus on MBC's positive depiction of Saudi women, there is a shortage of research on MBC's portrayal of all Arab females and on female depiction in Arab reality TV.

Most of the works that probed the image of women in reality TV were conducted in Western countries, especially in the U.S. Andrea Schweikhard Robinson (2009) applied Entman's framing theory to the American program *Project Runway*, and she concluded that women were portrayed in that reality show through three major frames, which were the motherly, bitchy, and hysterical females (p. 77). Her analysis suggested that reality TV perpetuated two female stereotypes, which were those of affection and emotionality. Andrea Mary Bergstrom (2005), in her turn, criticized reality TV's focus on the physical aspect of women by portraying them as overtly attractive. Yet, she also acknowledged the fact that in the sample of reality shows she worked on, women outnumbered men, with a percentage of 59.8% (p. 74).

Other studies of American reality TV, however, came to associate the genre with positive female depictions. In her research paper "Portrayals of Women in Prime-Time Reality TV Programs," Ivonne Martinez-Shepherd (2006) asserted that American reality programs projected women in a positive light by assigning them major roles within the programs' narratives, displaying them in professional contexts, and associating them with "positive characteristics" (pp. 43–45). In a similar vein, in his study dealing with the depiction of African American women in *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, Steven Herro (2015) drew on intersectionality, post-sexism, and post-racism theories to reveal that there was a move towards a "progressive representation" of black women in American reality TV. He stated that "while the show did represent some of the women as Black Bitches, it also portrayed most of the women as strong and assertive" (p. 3).

While most of the above-mentioned studies opted for studying female depiction in American reality TV, the paper at hand will try to contribute to the literature on reality TV by offering a probing of the delineation of women in the Arab adaptations of two American reality formats. By investigating the different images employed in the depiction of Arab women in MBC's *Top Chef* and *Project Runway Middle East*, the current research attempts to fill the gap in the literature concerning the portrayal of women in MBC's adapted reality TV programs.

Method

Choosing to work on reality TV is triggered by the popularity of the genre in the Arab world, a point that is stressed by Nouredine Miladi (2015), Tunisian Professor of Communication at Qatar University, when he notes, “Across the Arab region, reality programs... have been popular among audiences from different age groups, especially the youth” (p. 100). For Miladi, the ascending admiration for reality TV is owed to transnational Arab channels, like MBC, which have contributed to introducing these Western programs to wide audiences (p. 100).

Some of MBC’s factual entertainment hits include *Top Chef* and *Project Runway*, two programs that have proven to be successful in America and the Middle East. The Emmy-awarded program *Project Runway* has gained much acclaim in the US since its debut in 2004. Describing the smash of the program, American journalist Vanessa Friedman (2015) writes that “it speaks to the evolution of fashion into a pop culture phenomenon; it is impossible to ignore the transformative effect it has had on fashion’s profile in the general population... and its hold on the popular imagination” (par. 1). Similarly, the culinary program *Top Chef* has been a hit in the US. It has managed “to stay on air for years [and to] stand out as one of the best,” in the words of Brianna Wellen (2022, par. 1). Thanks to the accomplishments they have reached in the US, *Project Runway* and *Top Chef* have been in high demand worldwide, with each of them having dozens of copycats in numerous countries and regions (Wellen, par. 5). In the Arab world, local versions of *Project Runway* and *Top Chef* were adapted by MBC in 2016, and they both achieved much success and were able to keep Arab viewers hooked (Vivarelli, 2022, par. 3). The positive reception of both programs can be attributed to their formulas, which entail suspense, competition, and entertainment. Being created by Magical Elves, a major producer of American reality content, the two programs under study share the same formula or concept, as they both put a group of male and female contestants in competition against each other in professional contexts to prove their worth. Another common feature between the two programs is their creator’s commitment to gender diversity and equality, which makes *Top Chef* and *Project Runway* pertinent case studies that can be employed to test whether MBC continues the same gender-progressive trend of the American-based formats or reverts to stereotypes in its depiction of Arab women. Additionally, the two latter reality shows’ inclusion of many women who come from different Arab countries, such as Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco, turns *Project Runway Middle East* and *Top Chef* into suitable subjects for the examination of the media portrayal of Arab women, regardless of the religion they embrace (Islam or Christianity).

The investigation of these two reality programs takes the form of a qualitative content analysis. A pertinent definition of content analysis is offered by *The Handbook of Social Measurement* as “the research methodology in which messages or texts (often but not exclusively those in media) are examined, summarizing their characteristics by using systematic procedures to place content into carefully constructed categories” (as cited in Bergstrom, 2005, p. 37). According to this definition, content analysis is based on coding media content and categorizing it, which is established in this paper that aims at probing the content of *Project Runway Middle East* and *Top Chef*. Following the random method of sampling, episodes from the two seasons of *Project Runway Middle East*, produced between 2016 and 2017, and from the five seasons of *Top Chef*, broadcast from 2016 to 2022, were selected. The episodes were randomly selected from the beginning, middle, and end of the programs’ seasons to ensure an inclusive analysis of the two reality shows under study. For each season, two episodes were chosen for analysis. Hence, this study’s overall sample was made up of fourteen episodes, which were viewed, transcribed, and then analyzed using the qualitative content analysis software MAXQDA.

The analytical functions of MAXQDA include coding multi-type material, establishing a hierarchical category system, providing code search, and classification with variables and code frequencies (Rädiker & Kuckartz, 2019, p. 5). The first MAXQDA feature employed in the present study is coding. The utterances, actions, and looks of women as well as the comments men gave about women in the two programs were coded into three content categories, which were the looks category, the role category, and the character category. Using the hierarchical system of categorization, the three initial codes were provided with other subcodes that aimed at exploring the three content categories in depth. A summary of the study’s codes and subcodes is included in Table 1.

Table 1
The Study's Codes and Subcodes

Code	Subcode	Explanation of the subcode
Looks code/ category	Veiling	Investigates whether women are veiled or unveiled.
	Other physical attributes	Tries to examine the physical attributes used to describe women, such as beauty, elegance, class, femininity and cuteness.
Role code/ category	Social role	Studies whether women perform domestic or professional roles.
	Role within the program	Looks at women's roles within the two programs under study and whether they have primary or secondary roles.
	Role in the competition	Tries to see whether women are depicted as winners, losers or safe contestants.
Character code/ category	Intelligence versus limited mental capabilities	Tries to study whether women are portrayed as intelligent or as individuals with limited intelligence.
	Confidence Versus hesitancy	Investigates whether women have faith and trust in their capabilities or are insecure and hesitant.
	Strength Versus weakness	Examines whether women are depicted as strong or as weak and dependent on others for help.
	Emotionality versus control over emotions	Studies women's emotionality level.
	Skill versus lack of skill	Tries to investigate women's skill level.
	Creativity Versus conformity	Investigates whether women are delineated as creative individuals who think out of the box or as conformists.

After coding the content, the quantitative feature of code frequency was utilized to compare between the different coded categories and to see which images received the highest

amount of coverage, the positive or the negative, stereotypical ones. To increase the study's reliability, intercoder agreement, which is another feature offered by the qualitative software MAXQDA, was employed. Apart from the researcher, another coder coded the same content, using the same codes and subcodes. For the 150 coded segments, there were 132 agreements and 18 disagreements. To determine the intercoder reliability, Holsti's 1969 formula ($\text{Reliability} = \frac{2M}{N1+N2}$) was used (as cited in Martinez-Sheperd, 2006, p. 33). By adding the number of coders to the number of agreements and dividing the total by the number of coded segments, a reliability rate of 0.87 was found.

Results and Discussion

The outcomes of content-analyzing *Top Chef* and *Project Runway Middle East* reveal an orientation towards increasing female visibility. The overall percentage of females in the two programs under study is 52% compared to 48% for males, which mirrors an overrepresentation of women (see figure 1).



Figure 1
Gender Representation in the Sample

The results of the present study contradict those reached by Kharroub and Weaver (2014) and by Al-Shehab (2008), the researchers that outlined the underrepresentation of females in Arab drama series and children's programming. This paper's findings, however, do go in line with the conclusions reached by Bergstrom (2005) whose analysis of gender, sex and romance in American reality programming highlights an ostensible female dominance over US reality-based shows (p. 73), which echoes the gender progressive aspect of reality TV, the genre that is deemed by Sirin Kale (2022) as "one of the most feminist formats on TV today" (par. 2). Hence, the visibility accorded to women in *Top Chef* and *Project Runway Middle East* can be credited to the reality TV genre of these two programs, which allows for a high inclusion of women in their plots, as well as to *Magical Elves*' feminist tendencies and commitment to promoting

gender parity in its programming.

Yet, it is worth mentioning that despite the presence of women in both programs, *Project Runway Middle East* outperforms *Top Chef* in terms of female visibility. While in *Top Chef*, there are 74 females as opposed to 86 males in *Project Runway Middle East*, females significantly outnumber males as there are 48 females and 27 males. These results reflect the gender dynamics of the cooking and fashion design domains.

Professional kitchens are considered the realm of men as they hold dominion over the culinary industry throughout the world (Harris & Giuffre, 2010; McIntosh, Harris & Goodsir, 2020). Therefore, in most of the studied *Top Chef* episodes, the number of male chefs exceeds that of female chefs. In the judges panel, there are two male chefs, Bobby Chinn and Maroun Chdid, and only one Saudi female chef, Mouna Mousli. In singular episodes, the number of males is usually higher than that of females. In the fifth episode of season four, there are five female chefs, Majda, Tala, Sama, Joumana, and Samar, and about seven male chefs. Similarly, in the third episode of season three, five women, Wed, Sabrina, Dima, Arij, and Khawla, compete head-to-head with nine men.

Project Runway, on the other hand, revolves around the fashion industry, which is described by Allyson Stokes (2013) as a “feminized” business that is “associated with highly feminine cultural interests and practices” (p. 18). Therefore, the number of women on *Project Runway* is high. In episode seven of the first season, the overall number of women is 20, as opposed to seven men. In addition to the five female designers (Lucie, Ilhem, Emna, Luma, and Hiba), the episode involves Jessica Kahawati, a model who also serves as the host of the program; Afef Jnifen, another model who acts as a judge; Yosra, a guest judge; and twelve models.

The female visibility that is noticeable in both *Project Runway Middle East* and *Top Chef* can be seen as a sign of female empowerment. The latter proclamation is backed by Bhekizulu Bethaphi Tshuma, Lungile Augustine Tshuma, and Nonhlanhla Ndlovu (2022), who note that the media have huge potential for advancing and empowering women by enabling them to participate and to be heard (p. 267). According to feminist theory, empowering women can be equally brought about through presenting women in a positive and non-stereotypical manner (Tshuma, Tshuma, & Ndlovu, 2022, p. 267), a point that is investigated in the next part dealing with the depiction of women in *Top Chef* and *Project Runway Middle East*. In the two programs under study, female portrayal is studied through the adoption of three major content categories, which are the looks category, the role category, and the character category.

The Analysis of Looks

The looks category includes two major areas. At first, there is an investigation into whether the participants who appear in *Top Chef* and *Project Runway Middle East* are veiled or not. The second area pertains to other physical characteristics used by males and females to refer to women. The results of the analysis are shown in Figure 2.

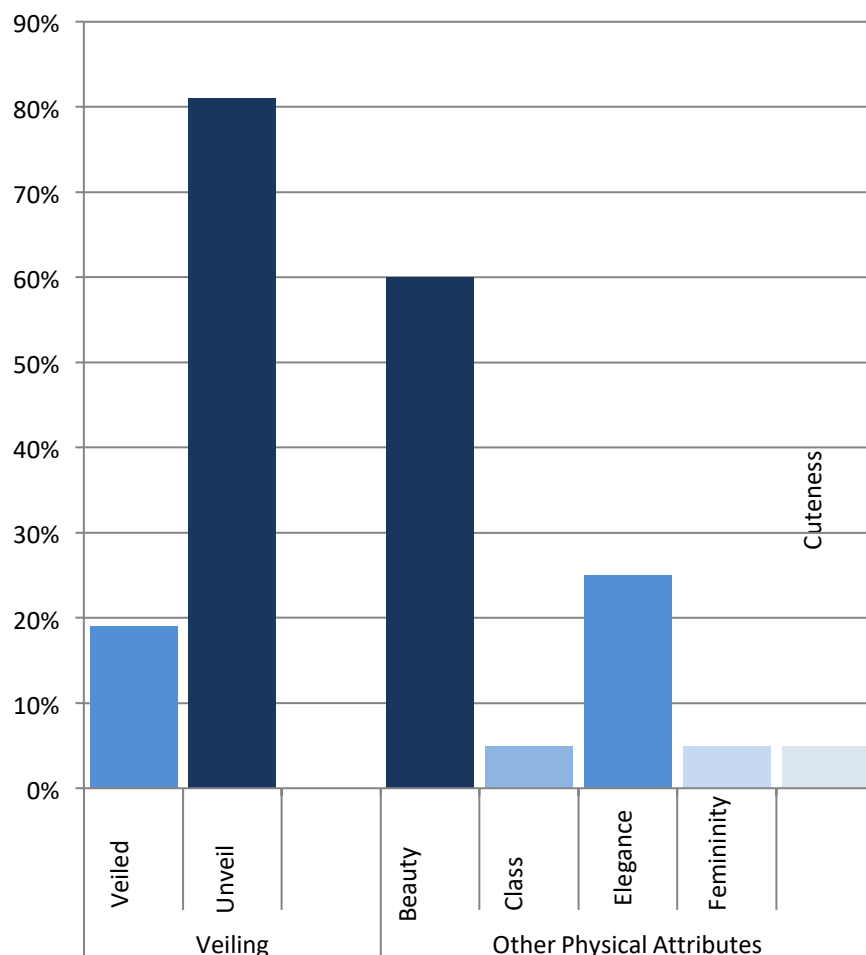


Figure 2
The subcategories of the looks category

As far as veiling is concerned, the results show that 81% of the Arab women featured in *Top Chef* and *Project Runway Middle East* are unveiled and only 19% are veiled (see figure 2), which shows that the programs under study project veiling as an exception rather than a trend for Arab women. The limited number of veiled women in MBC's *Top Chef* and *Project Runway Middle East* reflects modern Arab societies where women are gaining much physical visibility. The findings of the current study do question Western media's tendency to equate Arab women with hijab by proving that hijab is a look that is chosen by a minority of Arab women.

In episode three of the third season of *Top Chef*, except for the Saudi chefs Wed and Ariq, who wear a sort of hijab cap, the three other female chefs, Dima, Sabrina, and Khawla, are unveiled. In the eleventh episode of *Top Chef 4*, out of the nine women who are featured in the episode, only two are veiled. The two veiled females are two Saudi women, named Fatma and Thouraya, and they appear in the episode as guests in the quickfire challenge. The rest of the primary chefs are all unveiled, and they include the Saudi chef judge Mouna Mousli and the Saudi participant Sama, along with the Bahraini participant Tala.

The limited number of veiled female participants is similarly discernible in *Project Runway Middle East*. In the fifth episode of season one of *Project Runway Middle East*, in addition to Hiba, the veiled Saudi designer, two female guests appear in *hijab*: the Egyptian mother of Mohannad and the Moroccan sister of Ilham. These three women are the only veiled females among the eighteen women who are pictured in that episode, making them a slim minority. In the second episode of *Project Runway Middle East 2*, out of the six female designers in the reality program, only two are veiled: the Saudi designers Abrar and Rim.

According to the analysis of the veiling aspect of women in both *Top Chef* and *Project Runway*, most of the veiled participants come from Saudi Arabia, because in this conservative Gulf country, wearing the hijab had been forced by law on women. Yet, after Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman announced in 2018 that women were free when it came to choosing their clothing (Staudenmaier, 2018, par. 3), many women in Saudi Arabia were encouraged to abandon the hijab, a trend that is quite observable in the fifth season of *Top Chef*, which features five unveiled Saudi women. The Saudi chef judge, Mouna Mousli, and the four Saudi participants, Turkan, Najla, Machael, and Ridha, appear to be unveiled. The results of this study regarding the decrease in the number of veiled Saudi women in the two programs under study over time go in line with the findings of Letaief (2023) that suggest the gradual unveiling of Saudi women and the development of Saudi society from a society where all women used to wear the veil to a country where images of veiled and unveiled women do intermingle. The increase in the number of unveiled Saudi women in MBC's reality programs shows the Saudi regime's commitment to promoting female visibility on the media screens as well as in society.

Women's abandonment of the veil, which is tied in the feminist and Western mindset to male oppression over women, could be seen as a positive sign for feminists (Bullock, 2002, p. xv), who believe that the veil is an indicator of "a woman's refusal to engage in what are taken to be the normal (western) protocols of interaction with members of the opposite sex"

(Mancini, 2012, p. 413). These negative views of the veil do not emerge in the programs under study. Despite the dominance of unveiled women over veiled ones, the women who are portrayed with hijab looks do not display any signs of oppression or reticence and do show an openness to interact with their male colleagues. Throughout the programs under study, being veiled or unveiled appears to be a personal choice that has nothing to do with women's relationship with the opposite sex or with any oppressive cultural practices.

Along with veiling, the looks frame includes several other physical attributes associated with women. Beauty is perhaps the most common feature employed to describe the physical attire of women (60%), followed by elegance (25%), class (5%), femininity (5%), and cuteness (5%) (see figure 3). All five physical characteristics are mainly positive, and there is an absence of the use of negative descriptions to delineate the female bodies.

Most of the above-mentioned physical attributes are mentioned in *Project Runway Middle East*, the program that deals with fashion and that takes particular interest in women's physical appearance. In the fifth episode of the first season of the reality program, the word beautiful is used several times to refer to the guest models of the episode who happen to be related to the participants. They are either the designers' mothers, friends, or siblings. Describing Mohannad's mother, Elie Saab says, "Your mother is very beautiful." Similarly, he addresses Alaa's mother, saying "beautiful mom." Female beauty is also acknowledged by women. For example, Luma compliments the look of her friend Bochra, arguing "she looks so pretty" (Aboud, 2016). The emergence of beauty as the most prevalent physical feature employed to delineate women is an expected finding given that the word "beautiful" is found to be the most frequently used adjective in the description of women ("Women are Beautiful," 2019, par. 1). Elegance is the second most common female physical trait, which reflects the nature of *Project Runway*, a reality program that revolves around designing fashion clothes that aim at enhancing women's looks and turning them into elegant individuals.

Overall, in the programs under study, physical appearance does not seem to be a major focus, especially in the culinary program *Top Chef*. In the latter reality show, beauty is seldom used to refer to women because the program is interested in women's culinary skills and not in their looks. The word beautiful is only heard when referring to the eye-catching appeal of dishes. Such a lack of interest in women's physique evidences a transcendence of the treatment of women as mere looks and echoes a desire to approach women as individuals with multiple character attributes.

The Character Category

When it comes to the character category, the analysis of the seven personality traits constituting this category reveals a progressive depiction of Arab women. The portrayal of women is done with recourse to positive traits rather than negative ones (see figure 3). The positive values of speech, confidence, creativity, intelligence, and strength are given much salience by granting them the largest amount of coverage compared to the opposing traits: 96% for speech versus 4% for silence, 73% for confidence versus 27% for hesitancy, 80% for creativity versus 20% for conformity, 83% for intelligence versus 17% for limited mental capacities, and 81% for strength versus 19% for weakness.

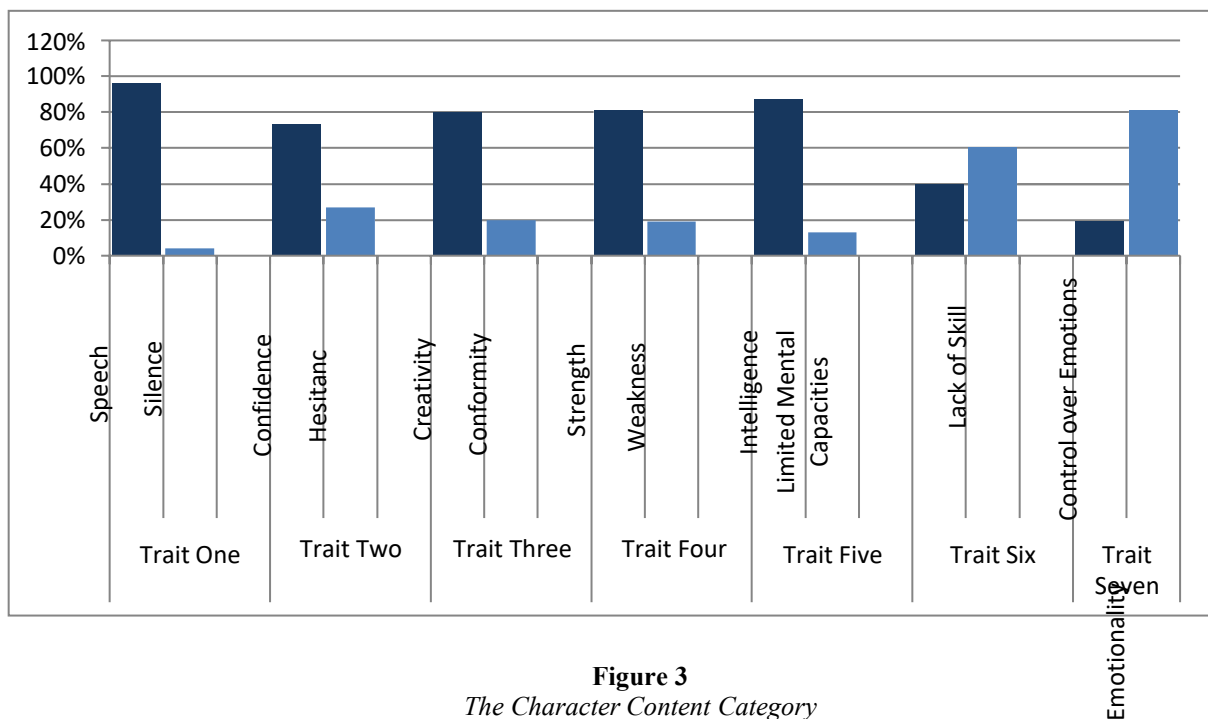


Figure 3
The Character Content Category

For the first trait of speech, the women featured in *Top Chef* and *Project Runway Middle East* are presented as highly expressive. They are involved in different speech situations, and they often express themselves through talking about their emotions, presenting their dishes or designs, commenting on the different challenges, and giving opinions about their colleagues' output. In the two programs under study, women are even allotted the roles of mentors and judges, roles that require much verbal assessment. In *Top Chef*, the Saudi chef Mouna Mousli, along with the weekly female guest judges, tends to voice her approval and dissatisfaction with the dishes presented by the different contestants and often participates in determining the winners and losers of the weekly challenges. Similarly, in *Project Runway Middle East*, the Saudi mentor Rim Alfaysal as well as the Tunisian model Afef Jnifen and the Egyptian actress Yosra are constantly seen lavishing the designers with words of praise or lambasting them with

critical remarks and urging them to improve themselves to guarantee continuity in the program. By providing women with a voice, the two reality shows under study challenge the stereotypical view of Arab women as silent individuals.

Further debunking of the stereotypes associated with Arab women is seen through the tendency to present them as confident rather than hesitant. The confidence of Arab women is highly visible in *Project Runway Middle East* and *Top Chef*, as women are delineated as individuals who have faith in themselves and in their talents and who have much appreciation for the works they produce during the different challenges. In the fifth episode of *Project Runway Middle East*, the Egyptian participant Amna appears to be extremely confident. Commenting on her design, she notes, “I like my design on Rama very much. I am in the top three.” She also adds, “My design is the best and has the most character” (Aboud, 2016).³ The Iraqi designer Achtar, from *Project Runway Middle East 2*, embodies a similar degree of confidence when she comments, “I like my style. I feel proud, and I want to be in the top three.” (Aboud, 2017-2018). In line with *Project Runway Middle East*, the participants of *Top Chef* are portrayed as confident as well. Lebanese chef Roiya, who is one of the first season’s participants, gives an appraisal of her dish in the seventh episode by saying, “I like my dish because it’s delicious, and I am confident about it” (Sokar, 2016).

The positive value of creativity is equally given much visibility in *Top Chef* and *Project Runway Middle East*. Throughout the selected episodes, women are depicted as individuals who think outside the box and who produce original designs and dishes. In week 9 of *Top Chef 3*, Dima, the Syrian participant of the season, excels at the elimination challenge thanks to her creativity and her “imagination” and manages to be in the top three (Sokar, 2018–2019). In the final episode of *Top Chef 5*, for instance, the Bahraini chef Nassim is praised by the judges for her innovative ideas, and she is described as having “a unique style,” and the Lebanese chef Maroun Chdid even goes as far as stating that “no one resembles Nassim” (Sokar, 2021–2022). Uniqueness and originality are analogously the basic traits of Dana’s designs. This Saudi designer, who takes part in *Project Runway Middle East 2*, manages to win over Afef Jnifen, the highly demanding judge. In episode 9 of the program, Jnifen announces that she likes Dana much owing to her creative hand.

Along with their creativity, the women in *Project Runway Middle East* and *Top Chef* sound smart and sophisticated. In episode 2 of *Project Runway Middle East 2*, the Kuwaiti designer Noura demonstrates a high level of intelligence by showing a marvelous ability at scanning dozens of shoes and guessing the matching pair of shoes in a glimpse, which leaves

her colleagues in awe (Aboud, 2017–2018). In a similar vein, in episode 5 of *Top Chef 4*, the judges seemed fascinated by the dish that Bahraini Tala presents in the elimination challenge. Despite being forced to work with canned ingredients, Tala manages to come up with a wonderful dish that shows, according to the judges, a high degree of intelligence. Chef Bobby Chinn describes Tala's dish, noting "she's excellent in her idea and in her use of canned food" (Sokar, 2020). Just like Tala, most females on *Top Chef* are characterized by their smart cooking ideas. Chef Hala of *Top Chef 1* is one such example. In episode two of the program, her dish receives the appreciation of judges for the interesting idea she implements, which places her among the winning dishes in the elimination challenge (Sokar, 2016).

Throughout their journeys in the two reality shows under study, women are equally portrayed as strong. They have the capacity to cope with the different challenges and all the hardships they encounter during their in-program adventures. In *Top Chef 1*, when the chefs are required to cook at the freezing temperature of Ski Dubai and to break ice blocks to extract the needed cooking ingredients, female chefs prove to be as powerful as their male counterparts. They are pictured helping their male partners and vehemently shattering the ice blocks with hammers. The Palestinian participant, Joumana, even proves to be stronger and more efficient than her partner, Adnen. When Adnen collapses as a result of the freezing cold and appears unable to complete executing his dishes, Joumana assumes the responsibility of plating his dish and hers. Thanks to her resilience and the double effort she has made, the group ends up among the winning teams. Recognizing her powerful contribution to the pair's success, Adnen stipulates that Joumana has played the role of ten men during the elimination challenge, which is a direct hint to her strength. In *Project Runway Middle East*, women are similarly portrayed as strong. In episode nine of the second season, the participants are asked to design a male and female look in a short period of time, and they are forced to spend the night in the workshop, deprived of sleep and rest. Commenting on the challenge, the Lebanese designer Zoubeida argues that she feels "sleepy and tired, but [she] won't give up[1]" (Aboud, 2017-2018), mirroring a strength of character and an ability to defy all difficulties to reach the dream of success. Such on-screen power granted to women aims at breaking away from the stereotypical image of the weak Arab woman.

The only female stereotype that persists in *Project Runway Middle East* and *Top Chef* is that of emotionality. From judges to participants and guests, women are mostly (81% of the time) pictured as emotional human beings who cannot control their flow of emotions (see figure 3), consolidating the consistent stereotype that women are more emotional than men (Plant et al., 2000, p. 81). In episode five of *Project Runway Middle East*, which entails designing looks

for relatives and friends, the viewer is exposed to a surge of emotions. The Moroccan participant Ilhem is featured while engaging in hysterical crying after encountering her sister Fatiha. The mothers of Alaa and Muhannad, who are the guests of the episode, are pictured with tears of pride on their cheeks when wearing their sons' designs. Luma, from Lebanon, and Lucie, from Jordan, are seen crying because of their failure to impress the judges. In *Top Chef*, the chef judge Mouna Mousli is perhaps the most emotional female in the program, as she is perpetually featured crying whenever a participant leaves *Top Chef*'s journeys during the five seasons under study. Such emotionality often makes women appear more vulnerable than their male counterparts, who are rarely seen in emotional states of being. Being emotional can also be a limitation to the empowering image of Arab women on MBC.

An additional constraint to female empowerment is their relative lack of skills compared to males in both *Top Chef* and *Project Runway Middle East*. Although there are several instances of highly skilled females, the skill level of women is limited when compared to that of the male participants in the two programs under study (see figure 3). In the opening episode of *Top Chef 5*, when three females are placed in competition with three male chefs and are given the same set of ingredients and assigned the same cooking tasks, in all three instances, women present worse dishes than their male counterparts. Nassim, Machael, and Turkan fail to impress the judges, and their culinary skills prove to be poor compared to their male competitors, who are Manaf, Oussema, and Nabil. Lack of skill is a relatively prevalent critique of women in *Top Chef* and *Project Runway Middle East*. In the third episode of *Top Chef 3*, the male participants are seen more than once criticizing the technical skills of their female partners. Talking about the Saudi chef Arij, the Tunisian contestant Slim mentions that she is so slow and that her dishes communicate her lack of skill. Analogously, chef Ali, from Jordan, is fettered when he is paired with the Algerian chef Sabrina in the elimination challenge, and he complains that her limited cooking abilities might drive him home. In the fifth episode of *Project Runway Middle East*, it is women designers who produce all the bottom looks. The Jordanian Lucie, the Saudi Hiba, and the Lebanese Luma are all criticized for their weak design techniques and their poor sewing skills. Women's lack of skill even affects the roles they play in the competition, which are duly discussed in the role frame.

The Role Category

The role category focuses on three major areas. It looks at the social roles that women play as well as the roles they assume in the programs and whether they appear in major or minor roles. Finally, it examines women's roles in the competition by checking whether they emerge

as winners, losers, or safe participants. The results are shown in Figure 4.

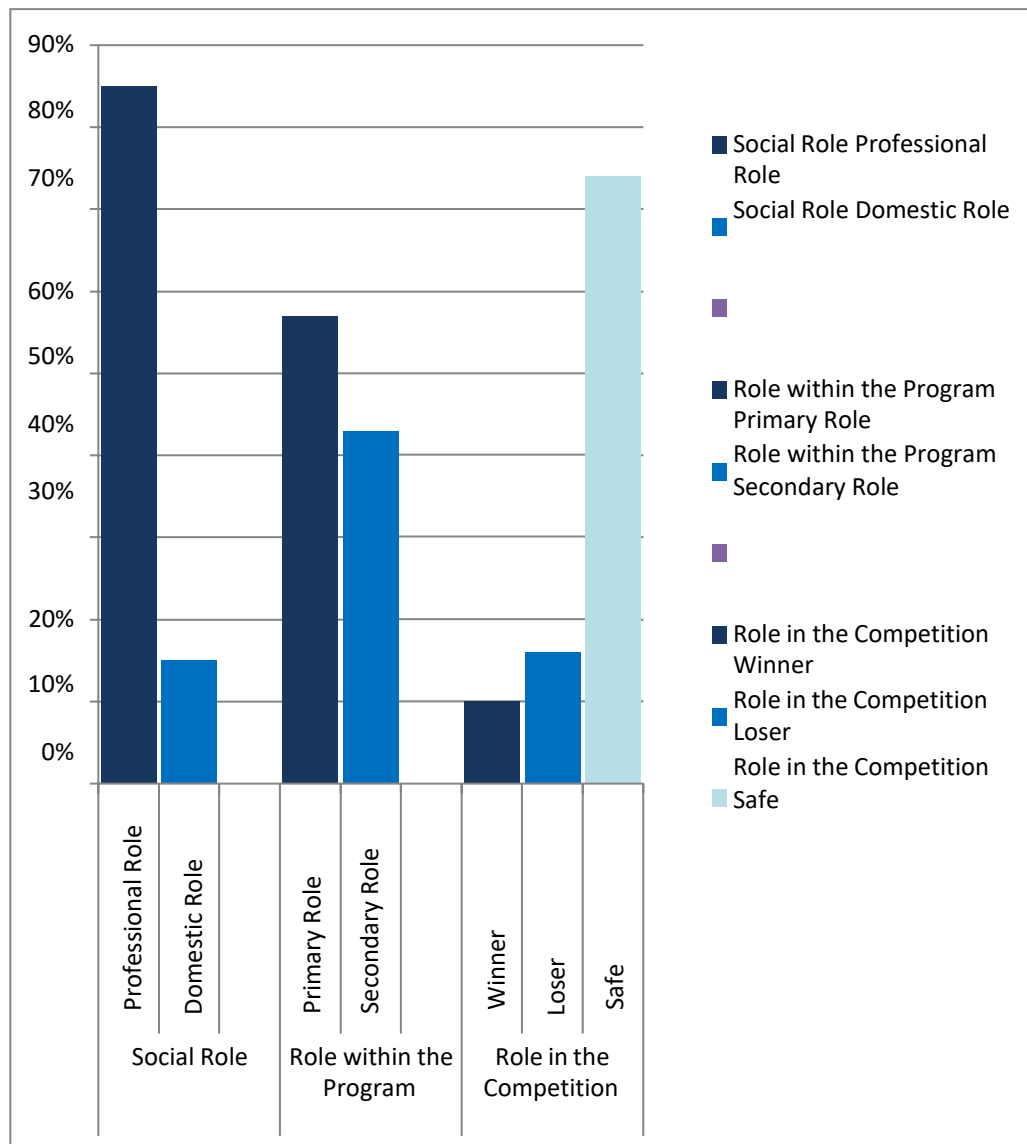


Figure 4

The Subcategories of the Role Category

The study's findings show that, in terms of social roles, the two programs under study focus on portraying professional women. Since both *Top Chef* and *Project Runway Middle East* deal with the fashion and culinary domains, the majority of women incorporated within their unscripted plots are designers, models, or chefs. Women are portrayed while engaged in professional activities, whether cooking in the *Top Chef* kitchen or designing clothes for *Project Runway Middle East*. In the two above-mentioned programs, women's professional roles are given more salience than their domestic roles of mother or wife, which are often excluded or rarely mentioned (85% versus 15%) (see figure 4). Only in rare cases do the programs under study include domestic women or make reference to women's domestic roles. In episode eleven of *Top Chef 4*, six mothers are invited to the quickfire challenge, and they pair with the

professional chefs to prepare identical dishes under the guidance of the program's chefs. Yet, their presence is only temporary, as they are guests who fill minor roles in the program. Such a focus on picturing professional women who compete head-to-head with men serves to encourage women to free themselves from the domestic sphere and opt for economic empowerment through getting engaged in paid labor.

To give further empowerment to women, females are principally allotted primary roles within the two programs under study (see figure 4). Fifty seven percent of the women who appear in *Top Chef* and *Project Runway Middle East* play major roles, and they are either participants, judges, hosts, or mentors, roles that guarantee them large coverage and much on-screen presence. 43% of women who hold secondary roles are often guests of reality programs, and they appear in single challenges or episodes, which makes their impact limited compared to that of the major female characters.

Despite the revolutionary steps taken by Arab women in respect to fulfilling professional duties and playing major roles in reality programming, in *Top Chef* and *Project Runway Middle East*, women are presented as losers more than winners during the different challenges they undergo while participating in the programs (16% versus 10%). In episode nine of *Top Chef 3*, the two women Dima and Wed present bottom dishes, whether in the quickfire or elimination challenges. Dima's quickfire challenge dish is criticized due to its lack of technical skills. Chef Souzana Houssaini, the Palestinian Chef judge of the challenge, considers it akin to home-made food rather than fine dining. In a similar vein, chef Wed delivers a very poor dish in the elimination challenge. Most of the time, women act as safe participants, and they fail to impress the judges and reach the top (see figure 4), which accounts for the limited number of women who have won the *Top Chef* and *Project Runway* competitions.

Except for Sama Jad, from Saudi Arabia, who won the title of season 4 of *Top Chef*, the winners of all the other seasons under study have been men, which suggests that women still lag behind men in terms of culinary and fashion achievements. Yet, Arab women's limited accomplishments compared to Arab men can be understandable given women's recent entry into the professional domains of cooking and fashion design. Indeed, chef Sama's success in garnering the *Top Chef* title has given a strong boost to the careers of many aspiring female chefs. Such a point is maintained by Rabih Rammal, *Top Chef's* producer, who contends that:

A woman from Saudi Arabia winning "Top Chef" had an impact on the culture that transcended Saudi Arabia in itself. Before she won, just like in the rest of the Middle East, it was a little bit weird to be a female chef...but from then onwards her victory

has helped a lot with the culture in making people understand that a chef is a chef, it's not male or a female (as cited in Vivarelli, 2022, par. 7).

Rammal's words elucidate the influence of media messages on people's perception of women's roles in society.

By adopting media images that downplay the stereotypical ideas traditionally tied to Arab women, such as domesticity, weakness, silence, veiling, unintelligence, and conformity, and opting instead for presenting women as powerful, intelligent, creative, and outspoken career women, MBC seeks to offer a fresh and empowering image of Arab women that is similar to the female portrayal found in American reality programs and outlined by Sheperd (2006) and Herro (2015). The findings of this research paper concerning the positive images of women on MBC's reality programming go in line with the conclusions reached by Hasna Hussein (2016) and Mohamed Abdul Hamid, Abdul Basid, and Isma Nida Aulia (2021), which show Arab media's new tendency to present an improved and progressive picture of Arab women, whereby females are featured in non-traditional roles and non-stereotypical images.

Conclusion

The paper at hand has revealed that, as a result of the push for gender parity in the Arab region by American policymakers, regional feminists, and rulers, MBC has been playing its part in promoting female empowerment, a point that is mirrored through the content categories adopted in the portrayal of women in MBC's reality programming. The content analysis of fourteen episodes taken from *Top Chef* and *Project Runway Middle East* has shown that there is a constant emphasis on transcending the stereotypes associated with Arab women by choosing to dismiss women as domestic, veiled, weak, silent, and unintelligent creatures and opting instead for increasing female visibility and portraying women as capable professionals who have the power, mental capacities, and creative output to be able to compete with men side by side. With the exception of a few limitations such as emotionality and lack of skill, the depiction of women in the studied episodes is mostly positive, which suggests that MBC's reality programs do reflect the same feminist tendencies embodied in American reality programs and try to grant Arab women a degree of empowerment that is inspiring. The combination of verbal and non-verbal clues incorporated in the looks category, role category, and character category adopted by the programs' producers could have an influence on the female viewers of MBC and could serve as an inspiration for them to seek empowerment. Another finding of the present paper is that the gender-progressive depiction of Arab women in MBC's reality programming goes in line with the MBC group's pro-female stance and the Saudi

regime's progressive policies towards women, as well as with Arab media's recent trend of enhancing female portrayal.

Yet, given the limited number of episodes under study, which does not exceed 14, it seems impertinent to overgeneralize MBC's positive delineation of Arab women. There is a need for more comprehensive research that includes a larger sample of episodes and of reality programs as well. Additionally, carrying out quantitative research that uses the survey method to test the impact of viewing MBC's reality programming on a study group of Arab female viewers could form a suitable future research project.

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