Religious and Censorship Authorities: Afraid of Affection

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Introduction

This report assesses two instances where freedom of cultural expression was violated in Lebanon. While they happened on separate occasions, they have several common underlying themes. Firstly, mid-June 2022, the movie “Lightyear” was prevented from showing in Lebanon as Walt Disney Co. were refused the license to broadcast the film in cinemas. This ban was seen across 14 other countries in the MENA region. The main problem, in Lebanon at least, was a scene where one of Buzz’s female friends married another woman and shared a brief kiss with her.

The second violation occurred on July 7, and it pertains to the banning of a Minions movie called “Minions: The Rise of Gru”. No official confirmation was given for the removal of the movie from cinemas, however there were speculations regarding the rationale. The first reason is a scene displaying two “minions” sharing a romantic stare. It is worth noting that the minions are creatures with no gender. The second reason involves showing an evil nun (a member of the “Vicious 6” villains in the movie), which would be viewed as an affront to religious figures. Regardless, these are not unusual reasons when looking back at the history of censorship in Lebanon. In fact, this censorship comes at a time where LGBTQ+ community in Lebanon is experiencing its most oppressive days while sectarian tensions increase.

SKF monitored the social media reactions, in Lebanon, to the banning of the two movies, with the aim to assess where the Lebanese public opinion stands on key freedom of expression debates. In the endeavor to be as accurate and efficient as possible in the monitoring process, SKF has partnered with Reputell, a data service provision company (Reputell) that has access to large amounts of data as well as the software to sort through it and get the relevant content. This process renders it safer to understand whether or not the discussion around the case study were reflected in the online arena and if so, how. It is also important to note that this study was not conducted as a comprehensive view of the digital landscape but with the aim to highlight prominent actors, the platforms used, and possible patterns as true to life as possible. This is the first in a series of reports which will utilize such technology to paint a clearer picture of the discussions taking place in the Lebanese online sphere around controversial freedom of expression debates.

Monitoring period: from June 13 to July 31, 2022.

The keywords fed into the machine learning monitoring software are as follows:

- Film
- Movie
- Lightyear
- Minions
- Minions: The Rise of Gru
- Despicable Me
- Censorship
- Homosexuality
- Evil nun
- قبلة
- مثليين
- مثلي
- لوطي
- لواط
- شاذ
- شاذة
- شاذ
- طبي
- راهبة
Sentiment Analysis

Gender Stats

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Gender</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Chart 1: Account distribution by gender*

Sentiments Stats

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentiment</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accounts posting against Lightyear and Minions</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accounts posting neutrally about Lightyear and Minions</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accounts posting in favor of Lightyear and Minions</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Chart 2: Account distribution by sentiment*

Chart 1 above showcases a distribution by gender among males, females, and accounts that could not be identified as either. Of the monitored accounts, the gender of 45% was deemed unidentifiable, a mere 5% were women, while 50% were men. Furthermore, Chart 2 reflects how the larger portion of the accounts (42%) posted neutrally about the movie censorship decisions, either reporting or simply asking questions for clarification. Therefore, one can state that the topic is not exactly considered “hot” for the online community. Negative-sentiment accounts made up only 20% of contributors, emphasizing narratives such as the “dangers” of exposing children to such content, the affront to religious figures and Middle Eastern morality, as well as Disney/the West’s continuous attempts to impose their values through hidden agendas. On the other hand, positive-sentiment accounts were more numerous as they constituted 38% of the contributors. Among those, alternative media outlets were the top performing contributors in terms of content quantity and metrics, promoting a more progressive outlook.

Accounts condemning the censorship of the movies primarily criticized the government’s priorities, as seen in Img. 1 below. The decision was met with a high amount of sarcasm in light of the plethora of crises crippling Lebanon. Even top influencing accounts such as Adeela joined, citing the lack of available cancer medication in the country. Others brought up the rampant gun violence and culture of impunity. There was also a focus on the notion that it is simply the citizen’s right to decide what media they wish to consume.
Two alternative media outlets (Naqd Politics and Daraj) proved to be among the top positive-sentiment accounts through the number of posts, the metrics as well as the discourse adopted. As shown in Img. 4 below, Daraj called the decision to censor the movies “laughable.” Naqd Politics on the other hand referred to the succession of censorship decisions as a literal “series,” raising questions about Lebanon’s direction as a country that was once a beacon of the arts, culture and freedom of expression. In another tweet, Naqd added that censorship contributes to the country’s isolation and deterioration of its cultural capital.
Despite how controversial of a topic censorship may be, neutral-sentiment accounts were the plurality. However, it is important to reiterate that this may simply be because the topic was not picked up by enough people or because it was not deemed important enough to tackle. Outlets such as The961, Megaphone, Raseef22, The New Arab, Annahar, L'Orient Today, and Al Mayadeen posted content that counts as neutral, not swaying the public in any direction. The same could be said about prominent activists and journalists, who either asked questions about the circumstances or discussed updates as they unfolded, as shown in Img. 7-9.
Lebanon Reportedly Banned The Screening Of "Lightyear" Due To Same-Sex Kissing Scene

L'Orient Today
@lorienttoday

Lebanon won't be screening Walt Disney's new Pixar movie "Lightyear" over a same-sex kiss.

@JoudSally reports:

today.lorienteljour.com
Lebanon bans Pixar movie over same-sex kiss
BEIRUT — Lebanon won't be screening Walt Disney’s new Pixar movie "Lightyear" over a same-sex kiss, according to Reuters. Lebanon joins at least ...
Img. 7-9: Media outlets adopting a neutral or informative tone

Img. 10
As for the negative-sentiment tweeting accounts, they comprised the smallest portion but not by a large margin. Aside from the blatant hate speech, a common pattern can be observed as seen in Img. 11-13, such as limiting of LGBTQ+ to a matter of cultural difference instead of accepting the community as a part of society. Several accounts expressed satisfaction that the movies were banned, citing concern that the films are “another attempt by the West to impose their values” or stating that this is “interference with the way we raise our children.”
Img. 11

Accounts supporting the removal of the movies alongside those spreading blatant hate speech

Twitter Stats

Charts 3 : Tweet distribution by type

The number of monitored tweets is a mere 174 during the entire monitoring period. All were counted as original (written by the account itself) while 386 retweets (shared from the original ones) were documented. Equally, by looking at the chart to the right, the split indicates that out
of the total 141 accounts contributing to the online discussions, all were “Original” creators. Meanwhile, 357 accounts retweeted their posts (Retweeters). A third “Common” category exists, and it is usually a mix of both “Original” and “Retweeters.” This category did not include more than eight tweets. Despite the lack of data and Internet clout, certain learnings can still be extrapolated. For instance, the fact that all the contributing accounts were “Original,” while the number of contributing accounts (141) is lower than the number of tweets authored (174). This shows that several accounts created multiple tweets on the matter. Furthermore, the lack of tweets is in itself a strong indicator and learning point. The topic of movie censorship, despite the wide monitoring period and the relatively high number of retweets, did not gain the anticipated online momentum.

Word Cloud

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Keyword/Hashtag</th>
<th>Word Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>فيلم</td>
<td>339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>لبنان</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lightyear</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>عرض</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>منعت</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minions</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chart 4: Word cloud showcasing top words(hashtags) used
While looking at the monitored tweets, it is worth noting that the accounts with the most overall retweets, likes, reach, and other metrics did not post any content that could be categorized as positive or negative but rather neutral. This hints that the most influential accounts across Twitter had no clear intention of steering the conversation in any direction but to primarily report on the events taking place or inquire about them. Those were often either media outlets or random accounts that only posted news, instead of cyber armies or organized networks.

In addition, among the thousands of monitored tweets during the selected period, the top 3 keywords/hashtags used were "فيلم", "لبنان", and "Lightyear." This reaffirms that the keyword selection entered into the machine learning software indeed monitored the conversations most relevant to the case study at hand. Looking at other words in the word cloud shows words such as Minions, Lightyear and لبنان, further reinforcing the accuracy of the research methodology, without indicating, nevertheless, that the discussions are being steered towards a particularly negative or positive direction.

**Conclusion**

The fact remains that the conversation must take a more positive approach, as defined in this report, if we are to see proper support for freedoms in Lebanon, as well as to secure rights of vulnerable minorities, such as the LGBTQ+. Negative posts use emotive language and fearmongering to provoke a sense of urgency, and this makes even the smallest amount warrants concern. Lesser numbers do not necessarily mean victory for human rights and apathy remains high amid all the crises hitting Lebanon, as shown by the highly neutral contribution count. Overall, there was certainly an air of disbelief as the online community was perplexed by the decisions of the Lebanese government and its worrisome priorities in a collapsing nation.
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