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Liminality and Monopoly: Contextualizing the Transformations within the Egyptian Digital Music Scene after 2013

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LIMINALITY AND MONOPOLY: CONTEXTUALIZING THE TRANSFORMATIONS WITHIN THE EGYPTIAN DIGITAL MUSIC SCENE AFTER 2013

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Abstract | Les répercussions des bouleversements politiques, notamment en Égypte après 2011 et ailleurs dans le monde arabe, ont donné naissance à une structure supra-monopolistique des systèmes de production musicale et des plateformes de streaming, reflétant les stratégies politiques postrévolutionnaires dans un contexte de restauration autocratique dans toute la région. Si l'ère numérique a initialement offert une plus grande liberté et créativité à une « classe dissidente médiatisée » en plein essor et aux courants musicaux contre-culturels, les stratégies post-2013 ont de plus en plus instrumentalisé les plateformes numériques pour imposer un contrôle autoritaire et restreindre l'expression musicale. Parallèlement, les réseaux sociaux, qui sont devenues essentielles pour la médiation, la promotion et le marketing musicaux, ont reflété les polarisations sociales et politiques plus larges qui ont émergé après 2013.

Cet article vise à examiner la scène musicale numérique ultra-contemporaine en Égypte dans ce contexte socioculturel plus large. Comment les producteurs des courants indie, mahragānāt et electroshaabi ont-ils contourné la censure institutionnelle, les impositions autoritaires et les divisions sociales ? Dans quelle mesure ont-ils conservé leur indépendance par rapport à la musique pop mainstream et sont-ils progressivement devenus partie intégrante de ces courants dominants ?

Je soutiens dans cet article que la monopolisation des systèmes de production et de distribution musicales, ainsi que les réglementations structurelles soutenues par l'État régissant les espaces de médiation musicale, ont repris sous une forme numérique, dans le cadre d'efforts plus larges visant à contrôler et à contenir les mouvements sociaux controversés sur les réseaux sociaux. Ce paysage en pleine évolution remet en question les dichotomies traditionnelles – telles que pop contre underground, numérique contre physique, commercial contre indépendant, et local contre mondial – dans un cadre culturel défini par les

tendances du remix, les positionnements sociopolitiques confus, et le contrôle concentré de l'industrie musicale numérique.

Mots-clefs | Liminalité, supra-monopole, Cairokee, Massar Egbari, Black Theama, schismogenèse, cyberpolarisation, electroshaabi, mahraganat, musique indépendante, plateformes numériques de streaming, manosphère, néopopulisme. Néonationalisme, féminisme.

Abstract | The echoes of the political upheavals, notably in Egypt post-2011 and elsewhere in the Arab world, have produced a supra-monopolistic structure of music production systems and streaming platforms, reflecting postrevolutionary political strategies amid autocratic restoration across the region. While the digital age initially offered greater freedom and creativity to a rising “mediated dissidence class” and countercultural music currents, post-2013 strategies increasingly instrumentalized digital platforms to impose authoritarian control and restrict musical expression. In parallel, social media platforms, which have become crucial for musical mediation, promotion, and marketing, have mirrored broader social and political polarizations that emerged in the post-2013 period. This article seeks to examine the ultracontemporary digital music scene in Egypt within this broader socio-cultural context. How had producers in indie, mahragānāt, and electroshaabi currents navigate institutional censorship, authoritarian impositions, and social divisions? To what extent had they maintained independence from mainstream pop music, and had they gradually become a part of those dominant streams?

I argue in this account that the monopolization of music production and distribution systems, and the structural state-backed regulations of musical mediation spaces, have resumed under a digital guise, as part of broader efforts to control and contain contentious social movements on social media. This evolving landscape challenges traditional binaries—such as pop versus underground, digital versus physical, commercial versus independent, and local versus global—within a cultural framework defined by remix trends, perplexed sociopolitical positionings, and the concentrated control of the digital music industry.

Keywords | Liminality, supra-monopoly, Cairokee, Massar Egbari, Black Theama, schismogenesis, cyberpolarization, electroshaabi, mahraganat, indie music, digital streaming platforms DSPs, manosphere, neopopulism. Neonationalism, feminism.

Introduction

In the aftermath of Egypt's 2011 uprising, musical subcultures known for their socially conscious tone gained more visibility emerging from a broader cultural mobilization led by a "mediated dissidence class" of avant-garde cyberutopians¹ fueled by expanding digital networks that both preceded and followed the revolutionary moment. After 2011, producers of indie, mahragānāt, and electroshaabi music gained unprecedented visibility, capitalizing on the potential of online platforms, which offered alternative modes of circulation and visibility beyond the reach of the monopolistic production labels that had long dominated the Egyptian music industry, which rendered them ill-suited to accommodate artists with countercultural sensibilities or a strategic command of digital technologies—particularly at a historical juncture when the musical landscape in Egypt and the wider region was undergoing rapid transformation.

Yet the post-2013 period ushered in a markedly different political and media environment—one in which autocratic restoration, regional media convergence and rivalries, and state-backed digital infrastructures joined to redefine the conditions under which music is produced, circulated, and received.

This article investigates how contemporary Egyptian music scenes—particularly within the indie, electroshaabi, and Egyptian trap genres—have adapted to the transformations of the post-2013 period. I argue that, amid increasingly polarized regional and domestic conditions and a persistent postrevolutionary liminal crisis, digital streaming platforms (DSPs), regional satellite channels, and social media platforms now operate within what can be described as a supra-monopolistic ecosystem. Within this ecosystem, media exposure and aesthetic choices are shaped by a constellation of factors that extend beyond platform guidelines and monetization algorithms. Musicians are increasingly compelled to reposition themselves—and, by extension, their digital identities—within ideologically demanding cultural economies, where artistic visibility is entangled with broader political, commercial, and sharply polarized operative logics.

The consolidation of cultural power across increasingly polarized regional media blocs has further amplified these dynamics. Within this supra-monopolistic ecosystem, indie musicians have been compelled to navigate a complex process of negotiation, compromise, and adaptation. Participation in state-sponsored "national" events, visibility through high-budget festivals, and inclusion in corporate advertising campaigns have expanded their reach—but often at the cost of disengaging from sociopolitical themes and aligning, implicitly or explicitly, with a sanitized cultural ethos. The outcome is an uneasy convergence of genres, artistic personas, and market logics, which increasingly blurs the boundaries between mainstream commercial production and formerly quasi-independent cultural circuits.

1- GONZALEZ-QUIJANO Yves, *Arabités numériques : Le printemps du web Arabe*, Paris, Actes Sud/Sindbad, 2012.

These transformations have had a particularly pronounced impact on electroshaabi and Egyptian trap music circles. Once rooted in working-class neighborhoods and centered on themes of marginality, transgression, and social critique, these genres have undergone significant recalibration in response to shifting platform dynamics and evolving censorship frameworks. Successive generations of mahragānāt and electroshaabi producers have faced recurring confrontations with the leadership of the Musicians' Syndicate, which has proposed varying strategies over the past decade to “rehabilitate” the genre. These efforts have led many artists to avoid overt sociopolitical commentary or sexually explicit content and to comply with Syndicate-imposed regulations governing live performances. In parallel, electroshaabi artists have managed to reach new audiences through branded festivals within and beyond Egypt, capitalizing on emerging media and entertainment landscapes, particularly in Gulf countries.

It is crucial to approach the digital music scene not as a separate sphere but as part of a hybrid infrastructure in which online and offline modes of music mediation and control, co-constitute one another. The visibility and career opportunities of contemporary Egyptian musicians increasingly rely on the complementarity between algorithmic exposure on DSPs and access to physical performance spaces, sponsorships, and sociopolitical positioning. This interdependence reveals the digital monopoly's expansion beyond platform governance, embedding itself in concert programming, festival curation, venue access, and the social networks' following and viewership.

Methodologically, this article adopts a digital sociology approach that conceptualizes music as a multi-dimensional practice situated at the intersection of sociopolitical, digital, and cultural fields. It draws on critical discourse analysis of musical content, contextual analysis of the roles of power structures and sites of regulation and control within the Egyptian music industry, and digital ethnography within online music productions and deliberations across social networks. Particular attention is paid to shifting power relations, evolving sociopolitical contexts, and the strategies of musical mediation under liminal conditions. This approach enables a contextualized reading of contemporary Egyptian music scene as a dynamic site of negotiation—where the redefinition of boundaries, techniques of political hegemony and repression, and practices of resistance converge to shape a new phase, transcending conventional binaries within the local music industry.

I. The Sociocultural Transformations within the Post-2013 Context

As a turning point, after the removal of the president Mohamed Morsi in June 2013, the military takeover and the outlawing of the Muslim Brotherhood organization were solidified with the election of military general Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi as president of Egypt. The establishment of Sisi's regime initiated a process of autocratic restoration marked by a severe crackdown on political

dissent, social mobilization, independent media platforms, and avenues of public expression.²

Following the authoritarian restoration in 2014 and the election of President Sisi, a new mediatic landscape began to unfold. The regime started an organized move to create “a state-aligned media monolith.”³ Suffocating the public channels of political and social expression escalated gradually and was executed top down through the deployment of governmental resources and tactics.⁴ A full grip on private media was guaranteed by its confiscation and acquisition by state-backed companies in partnership with pro-regime businessmen.⁵

Digital rights’ experts⁶ in their recent analyses, consider the recently enacted laws like Anti-Terrorism Law (2015),⁷ Cybercrime Law (2018),⁸ Press and Media Regulation Law (2018)⁹ and Personal Data Protection Law (2020),¹⁰ as tools of an extensive legal arsenal enabling widespread censorship and surveillance of both public and private life. These laws provide the political regime with near-total control over legislative and judicial processes, fostering a “state of exception” that allows deep intrusion into personal accounts and data, both online and offline.

- 2- AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, *Egypt: Unprecedented crackdown on freedom of expression under al-Sisi turns Egypt into open-air prison* [online], 2018, Available at: <https://www.amnesty.nl/actueel/egypt-unprecedented-crackdown-on-ngos-human-rights-activists-risk-prosecution-asset-freezes> (Accessed June 25, 2025).
- 3- Committee to Protect Journalists (2015), *We Completely Agree: Egyptian Media in the Era of President El-Sisi* [online], Available at: <https://cpj.org/2015/04/attacks-on-the-press-egyptian-media-in-the-era-of-president-el-sisi/> (Accessed June 25, 2025).
- 4- FRANCE 24, *الإعلام المصري في عهد السيسي: من التزغيب إلى التهيب* [online], 2018, Available at: <https://www.france24.com/ar/20180322-%D8%A5%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85-%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%B1%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A9-%D9%82%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA> (Accessed January 13, 2025).
- 5- MADA MASR, *Looking into the Latest Acquisition of Egyptian Media Companies by General Intelligence* [online], 2017, Available at: <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2017/12/21/feature/politics/looking-into-the-latest-acquisition-of-egyptian-media-companies-by-general-intelligence/> (Accessed January 9, 2025).
- 6- ASSOCIATION FOR FREEDOM OF THOUGHT AND EXPRESSION (AFTE), *Paper on “Restrictions on Media freedom”* submitted by AFTE to the National Dialogue [online], 2023, Available at: <https://afteegypt.org/en/research-en/research-papers-en/2023/09/26/35509-afteegypt.html> (Accessed January 9, 2025).
- 7- MASAAR, *Anti-Terrorism Law مكافحة الإرهاب* [online], 2015, Available at: https://masaar.net/ar/egypt_laws/%d9%82%d8a7%d9%86%d9%88%d9%86-%d9%85%d9%83%d8a7%d9%81%d8ad%d8a9-%d8a7%d9%84%d8a5%d8b1%d9%87%d8a7%d8a8-%d8b1%d9%82%d9%85-94-%d9%84%d8b3%d9%86%d8a9-2015/ (Accessed June 25, 2025).
- 8- MASAAR, *Cybercrime Law مكافحة جرائم تقنية المعلومات* [online], 2018, Available at: https://masaar.net/ar/egypt_laws/%d9%82%d8a7%d9%86%d9%88%d9%86-%d9%85%d9%83%d8a7%d9%81%d8ad%d8a9-%d8ac%d8b1%d8a7%d8a6%d9%85-%d8aa%d9%82%d9%86%d9%8a%d8a9-%d8a7%d9%84%d9%85%d8b9%d9%84%d9%88%d9%85%d8a7%d8aa/ (Accessed June 25, 2025).
- 9- MASAAR, *Press and Media Regulation Law تنظيم الصحافة والإعلام* [online], 2018, Available at: https://masaar.net/ar/egypt_laws/%d9%82%d8a7%d9%86%d9%88%d9%86-%d8aa%d9%86%d8b8%d9%8a%d9%85-%d8a7%d9%84%d8b5%d8ad%d8a7%d9%81%d8a9-%d9%88%d8a7%d9%84%d8a5%d8b9%d9%84%d8a7%d9%85/ (Accessed June 25, 2025).
- 10- MASAAR, *Personal Data Protection Law حماية البيانات الشخصية* [online], 2020, Available at: https://masaar.net/ar/egypt_laws/%d9%82%d8a7%d9%86%d9%88%d9%86-%d8ad%d9%85%d8a7%d9%8a%d8a9-%d8a7%d9%84%d8a8%d9%8a%d8a7%d9%86%d8a7%d8aa-%d8a7%d9%84%d8b4%d8ae%d8b5-%d9%8a%d8a9/ (Accessed June 25, 2025).

It is evident that repression intensified and broadened in scope to lower the bar for free speech and expression in fields beyond the political sphere. Since 2015, the gradual confiscation, possession, and tacit nationalization of satellite media, drama production, and advertisement companies imposed a tight governmental grip on journalism, media, and freedom of artistic expression. Two governmental decrees¹¹ were issued to impose severe restrictions on organizing cultural or artistic events and to reinforce the role of the decades-old Central Authority for the Censorship of Works of Art (subsequently CACWA).

Furthermore, the repeated arrests of independent artists in different fields of music and drama took place, and some of them were accused of terrorism-related crimes.¹² It is important to note that the increasing number of Egyptian citizens targeted by the state due to digital expression has been steadily rising.¹³ In addition, Egypt's parliament passed a law that would treat social media accounts and blogs with more than 5,000 followers as media outlets, which would make them vulnerable to prosecution for publishing fake news or any "incitement to break the law."¹⁴

Amid these structural shifts, the music currents that embraced digitalization during and after the political upheaval (2011-2013) underwent profound transformations. Since the 2000s, the Egyptian music scene could be broadly categorized into three main streams: mainstream pop, eclectic/experimental/indie music projects, and hip-hop-influenced electroshaabi music. These categories reflect the larger frameworks of music production and distribution that shape musicians' careers, work environments, networks, audiences, and musical styles.

Prior to 2011 there was a gradual emergence of indie music projects and electroshaabi productions within Egypt's evolving digital landscape. The proliferation of music subcultures, essentially linked to the usage of new media, and the circulation of digital artifacts,¹⁵ became partly one of the representations of a broader cultural mobilization paralleled by the rise of a mediated dissidence class¹⁶ that energized the youth-led activism during the popular uprising. Platforms like SoundCloud, YouTube, and Facebook became vital channels for rising artists in both music cultures (indie, electroshaabi) supporting the distribution and marketing of their music, live performances, and enabling them to reach broader

11- HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, Egypt: Campaign to crush artistic freedom [online], 2018, Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/08/16/egypt-campaign-crush-artistic-freedom> (Accessed January 18, 2025).

12- Ibid.

13- GLOBAL FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, Columbia University, *The Rise of Digital Authoritarianism in Egypt: Digital Expression Arrests From 2011-2019* [online], 2019, Available at: <https://globalfreedomofexpression.columbia.edu/publications/the-rise-of-digital-authoritarianism-in-egypt-digital-expression-arrests-from-2011-2019/> (Accessed December 29, 2024).

14- REUTERS, Egypt Targets Social Media with New Law [online], 2018, Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/egypt-targets-social-media-with-new-law-idUSKBN1K720I/>.

15- MORENO-ALMEIDA Cristina, *Memes, Monsters, and the Digital Grotesque*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2024, p. 3-4.

16- KARAWYA Fayrouz, *The transmutes of the Egyptian Memesphere: navigating cultural dynamics and social changes post-2013* [online], HAL theses, 2024. Available at: <https://theses.hal.science/tel-04882876> (Accessed June 22, 2025).

audiences. Musical mediation, for both subcultures, combined individual and local communal practices in parallel to adapting to the rising mediating role of algorithms and online distribution within music streaming services, as the ethnomusicologist Sophie Frankford elaborates.¹⁷

In contrast, mainstream pop artists, traditionally controlled by major production labels, faced significant challenges due to the rise of online piracy. These labels operated within a tightly managed model that relied on their financial capacity for album production and their ability to collect royalties and intellectual property copyrights.¹⁸ However, this model survived within an underdeveloped system, marked by a lack of transparent infrastructure, inefficiency and inequality in collecting and distributing IP rights, and weak adherence to electronic publishing ethics. As a result of these deficiencies, larger labels were able to dominate the commercial market and exert control over artists' careers, as well as institutions like Egyptian radio and TV and the Society of Authors, Composers, and Music Publishers of the Republic of Egypt (SACERAU). However, the proliferation of online piracy disrupted this dominance, forcing mainstream artists and labels to adapt to the rapidly changing conditions of the music industry.

As this analysis shows, major production labels tried in vain to wage war in the new era of “illegal file sharing” and the rapid and continuous piracy of albums as soon as they were released. Major companies created their own subscription to satellite channels and digital download models, with new technologies making the process of downloading music to computer or mobile phone accessible and affordable. However, the production process slowed down, and sometimes the rising piracy levels led to the gradual withdrawal of many producers,¹⁹ paving the way for pop artists to adopt the “self-production” model that would become the standard model after 2011 as digital streaming platforms (subsequently DSPs) proliferated, gradually replacing physical music stores, as production companies limited themselves to the distribution process.

17- FRANKFORD Sophie, “Cleaning up sha’bi: Music and class-cultural divides in Cairo”, *Ethnography*, vol. 0(0), 2024, p. 1–22.

18- “Egypt’s mainstream model of revenue sharing typically has the record label assume the role of music producer and distributor at the same time. According to Mirage record label representatives, this is a major difference from the international business model, whereby the record label is usually responsible for the production and management of the musician’s artistic output, and shares revenue both with the artists and with a partnering distributor who is responsible for supplying the record to the different sales outlets.” (RIZK Nagla, “Stories from Egypt’s Music Industry”, in Rizk, N., Shaver, L. (eds.), *Access to Knowledge in Egypt: New Research on Intellectual Property, Innovation and Development*, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2010. Available at: <https://www1.aucegypt.edu/faculty/naglarzk/pdf/A2KEgypt.pdf>)

19- By 2010, the Saudi-owned production company Rotana dominated the Arabic music market, controlling approximately 75% of its share. According to the company’s public records, it represented over 100 singers by 2008. Rotana operated six satellite channels, four of which were exclusively dedicated to music (Rotana 2009). In contrast, the Egyptian audio production company Alam El Phan managed two music channels, Mazzika and Zoom. At one point, Mazzika was sold to Rotana but was later reacquired by Alam El Phan that controlled approximately 20% of the Arabic music market. While several smaller labels compete in the Egyptian music industry, none possess their own satellite channels, leaving them with significantly smaller market shares; (*Ibid.*)

As this study demonstrates, the technological shift has increasingly blurred the lines between the three music scenes, bringing them closer together. Indie/experimental and electroshaabi producers, once considered avant-garde, have seen their distinctiveness eroded as DSPs, operating within the framework of globalized capitalism, have become dominant forces. These platforms, shaped by restricted transparency and diluted accountability, functioned as expansive spaces that unify local music genres, encouraging further genre blending and convergence. Simultaneously, they standardized marketing strategies, leveraging social networks to promote music production and distribution in ways that diminished the unique edges of previously pioneering streams.

None of these changes would have been possible without the emergence of an ideological space where cyberpolarization and cultural wars became integral to governance in the post-revolutionary era. Social polarization, fueled by the unresolved fallout of failed political mobilization since 2011, persisted in a heavily censored and restricted public sphere after 2013. Social networks became battlegrounds for conflicts between diverse ideological groups—including pro-revolutionary sectors, state supporters, Islamists, and conservative factions—shaping the digital landscape. The actual status of cyberpolarization²⁰ inevitably spilled over into the digitalized music scene, influencing its evolution and dynamics in profound ways. Post-2013 political divisions, combined with the participatory logic of social networks and the internet's visibility-driven economy, amplified digital incitement, remix cultures, disinformation, and internet memes. These dynamics became central to producing and marketing music, as well as sustaining artists' presence in a polarized digital landscape.²¹

The duality—marked by political repression and a highly polarized digital sphere—profoundly shaped the strategies and content of music producers. Rising movements like electroshaabi and indie musicians, once imbued with countercultural energy, were compelled to adapt. They adopted varying approaches to navigate the shifting sociopolitical and musical environments, often at the expense of their more oppositional elements, as they sought to survive and thrive in these challenging conditions.

The following sections examine the evolving dynamics of Egyptian indie and electroshaabi music soundscapes, within the broader post-2013 digital music scene. Through key examples, this study explores how sociopolitical changes and intensifying online polarization have reshaped Egypt's cultural and musical landscape.

20- SUNSTEIN Cass R., "Polarization and Cybercascades" in *Republic.com 2.0.*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 60.

21- GRIFFIN Rachel, "The Law and Political Economy of Online Visibility. Market Justice in the Digital Services Act", *Technology and Regulation*, vol. 2023, 2023, p. 69–79. <https://doi.org/10.26116/techreg.2023.007>.

II. Indie Musicians: Liminal Crisis and Repositioning Strategies

In his book “Martyrs and Tricksters,”²² the cultural anthropologist Walter Armbrust deploys the studies of the anthropologist Gregory Bateson and the social theorist Bjørn Thomassen’s conception of “schismogenesis,”²³ to analyze the cascade of events leading to the fragmentation of the different elements of the Egyptian popular uprising in 2011. Schismogenesis in times of political revolution, as explained by Thomassen, “is a process that is particularly prone to unfold in liminal moments, and that it can, under given circumstances, establish itself as a lasting form.”²⁴ The acts of schismogenesis, according to Walter Armbrust, involve constructing permanent opponents and producing “a rhetoric neatly mirrored by those who have been labeled as outside the scope of social recognition.”²⁵

The advancing postrevolutionary “liminal void”²⁶ was populated by the fragmentized components of the revolutionary and counter-revolutionary camps. The continuous dynamic of contestation and disruption that shaped the cultural world on social media and empowered the dissidence media class in the years 2011-2013 was confronted, post-2013, by the rise of neonationalist and pro-state online groups engaged in online cultural wars in support of Sisi, and advocating for the de facto situation by comparing it to alternative threatening scenarios. The term *al-dawlagiyya*²⁷ served as a digital identity/nomenclature that assimilated the rising neonationalist groups and motivated them to become an influential front on dominant online discourse after 2013.

The surge of online nationalist support²⁸ for Sisi helped silencing the opposition and backed his political and social plans. Supporters ridiculed January revolution slogans, framing the 2011 uprising as a conspiracy orchestrated by a Turkish-Qatari-Muslim Brotherhood alliance allegedly backed by the Bush-Obama

22- ARMBRUST Walter, *Martyrs and Tricksters: An Ethnography of the Egyptian Revolution*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2019.

23- “Gregory Bateson was a biologist by training (his father William Bateson invented the term ‘genetics’). He understood the latmul village as a fragile ecology, a ‘dynamic equilibrium’ (a term he borrowed from chemistry and coined for anthropology). Schismogenesis was a generative principle in this cultural ecology, but, unrestrained, it would destroy it too. He delineated two forms of schismogenesis: symmetrical – where the parties reacted with equivalent intensity to each other’s sallies –and complementary – where increasingly active display was met with an increasingly passive response.” (WARDLE Huon Oliver Bliase, “Schismogenesis in a Belfast urinal”, *Anthropology Today*, 2001, 3/17, p. 25-24.)

24- THOMASSEN Bjørn, “Notes towards an Anthropology of Political Revolutions”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 54/3, 2012, p. 679–706.

25- “A New Normal? The Iron Fist and the False Promise,” (ARMBRUST Walter, *op. cit.*, p.224.)

26- “Scripting a Massacre,” (ARMBRUST Walter, *op. cit.*, p. 158.)

27- AL-MASRY AL-YOUM, ABU AL-HASAN Gamāl, *الدولجية* *Al-dawlagiyya* [online], 2015, Available at: <https://www.almazryalyoum.com/news/details/780937> (Accessed January 13, 2025).

28- Facebook,  *الدولجية-إتحاد مؤيدي الدولة* *Al-dawlagiyya- The union of state supporters* (12.2K members) [online]. Link: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/471022103261451> (accessed on June 27, 2025).

administrations.²⁹ Importantly these online groups, not only promoted conflicting narratives and delegitimization of the revolution but also helped establish a “semiotic ideology” that shaped the use and interpretation of symbols to construct ethical and political judgments during periods of polarization.³⁰

The online proliferation of *al-dawlagiyya* meme pages³¹ and social media bots³² created an active front for leading cyberattacks that leveraged a quasi-chauvinistic tone to reinforce pro-state narratives. These efforts sought to suppress dissent by reshaping the revolutionary narrative and amplifying a divisive “us versus them” binary. This digital shift heightened tensions among online factions and increased scrutiny of dissident groups and cultural activities tied to the 2011 uprising.

Indie music projects, often regarded as a burgeoning avant-garde movement, began to take root during the transformative years of 2005–2011,³³ when a new form of youth participation and organization in the public sphere became visible and self-aware. A coupling between invading the digital cultural world and impacting social reality started to materialize as new amateurs, bloggers and activists joined the cultural underground scene of publishing, journalism, and creative industries.³⁴

However, these musical currents struggled to navigate the rapidly shifting social landscape after 2013. Once gaining significant popularity³⁵ thanks to their vocal

29- KHATIB Lina, DUTTON William H., THELWALL Michael, “Public Diplomacy 2.0: An Exploratory Case Study of the US Digital Outreach Team”, *The Middle East Journal*, 66/3, 2011.https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228194201_Public_Diplomacy_20_An_Exploratory_Case_Study_of_the_US_Digital_Outreach_Team

30- KEANE Webb, “On Semiotic Ideology”, *Signs and Society* (Chicago, Ill.), 6/1, 2018, p. 64–87.

31- Facebook, Nationalist state supporters’ public meme page, ميمز قومية - Memes Kawmia (75K followers) [online]. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100089592260983> (Accessed June 27, 2025).

32- “Social media bots are automated programs used to engage with social media. These bots are either partially or fully autonomous fashion and are often designed to mimic human users.”

“Social media bots do not need to “know” how to converse, and many social media bots do not communicate using language at all, they only perform more simple interactions, such as providing ‘follows’ and ‘likes.’”

“Social media bots are very simple to manage, and oftentimes hundreds or even thousands of social media bots are managed by a single person.” (CLOUDFLARE, *What Is a Social Media Bot?* [online]. Available at: <https://www.cloudflare.com/learning/bots/what-is-a-social-media-bot/> (Accessed December 29, 2024).)

33- These years witnessed the rise of youth political movements like the “Youth of 6th April” and the “Youth for Change.” In parallel, the escalating political outrage against Mubarak’s regime led to the rise of the “Kifāya” (Enough) alliance, which combined secular opposition, mostly of nationalist and leftist affiliations, and the Muslim Brotherhood. These political bodies endorsed a scheme for democratic transition and focused on the imminent inheritance of Egypt’s rule by Gamāl Mubārak, the son of the president, and deputy secretary-general of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) at the time.

34- HERRERA Linda, *Revolution in the Age of Social Media: The Egyptian Popular Insurrection and the Internet*, London, Verso Books, 2014.

35- Albernameg-YouTube, فرقة مسار اجباري في البرنامج مع باسم يوسف (A video showing Massar Egbari rock band featured in the sarcastic show of the comedian Bassem Yusif) [online], 2023, Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oHMyoQ_QoEA (Accessed June 27, 2025).

support³⁶ of the popular uprising, some indie bands found themselves grappling with new challenges as neonationalist online groups gained prominence. Facing pressure from a transformed audience, the dissenting tone that characterized the successful songs of bands like Cairokee,³⁷ Black Theama,³⁸ and Massar Egbari³⁹ became increasingly alienated within a new ecosystem.

During 2017–2018, Cairokee band faced repeated cancellations of their live concerts without clear explanations. While the shows were sold out well in advance, some reports suggested that the cancellations occurred after the Egyptian censorship authorities rejected several songs from Cairokee's new album at the time.⁴⁰ Despite this, the band surprised everyone by releasing the album online in 2017, including the censored tracks.⁴¹

Amir Eid, the band's lead singer, addressed the issue on X (formerly Twitter),⁴² revealing that since the cancellations, he had been receiving calls from "foreign" journalists seeking provocative statements. Eid asserted that the situation was an "internal matter" and emphasized that the band would not allow their project to be used to serve specific political agendas. His remarks, however, triggered backlash on social media, particularly from the band's passionate fan base, many of whom were likely aligned with pro-revolutionary youth movements. To this segment of Cairokee's audience, Eid's tone appeared to align with the dominant nationalist propaganda disseminated by official media and regime mouthpieces, who framed the revolution as part of a "foreign" conspiracy.

Eid responded to the criticism by clarifying his stance, arguing that some of the accusations leveled against the band were unfounded. He described these critics as "bidders," accusing them of questioning the band's commitment while ignoring the high price they continued to pay for their work.

36- CairokeeOfficial-YouTube, *Cairokee ft Aida El Ayouby Ya El Medan* كايروكي و عايدة الابوي [online], 2011, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=umlJJFvGYVI> (Accessed June 27, 2025).

37- CairokeeOfficial-YouTube, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCp-brkrLhdNTkAVoR1qH-m3A> (Accessed June 27, 2025).

38- Black Theama-YouTube, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/@BlackTheama> (Accessed June 27, 2025).

39- Massar Egbari-YouTube, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/@MassarEgbari> (Accessed June 27, 2025).

40- FILFAN, الرقابة تمنع بعض أغنيات ألبوم «نقطة بيضاء» لكايروكي... هكذا رد الفريق (Censorship bans some songs from Cairokee's album "Nuqta Bayyda." Here's how the band responded) [online], 2017, Available at: <https://www.filfan.com/news/70026> (Accessed June 27, 2025).

41- CairokeeOfficial-YouTube, Album playlist "Nuqta Bayyda." (A drop of white) [online], 2017, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LoIGoppRl0o&list=PL8n3QgImB3ifcAbcYTzTH1uFazHFNBOso&index=1> (Accessed June 27, 2025).

42- ALARABIYA, إلغاء متزايد لحفلات «كايروكي»... تغريدة غريبة وهجوم (Increasing cancellation of "Cairokee" concerts... Strange tweet and attack) [online], 2018, Available at: <https://www.alarabiya.net/culture-and-art/2018/01/14/%D8%A5%D9%84%D8%BA%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D9%85%D8%AA%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%81%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%83%D8%A7-%D9%8A%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%83%D9%8A-%D9%88%D8%AA%D8%BA%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A8%D8%A9-%D9%88%D9%87%D8%AC%D9%88%D9%85-#:~:text=%D9%88-%D9%85%D8%B9%20%D9%83%D8%AB%D8%B1%D8%A9%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%A4%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA%D8%8C%20%D8%A7%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%B0%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%82,%D8%A3%D9%86%D9%87%D9%85%20%D9%84%D9%86%20%D9%8A%D8%B3%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%88%D8%A7%20%D8%A8%D8%A3%D9%86%20%D9%8A%D9%83%D9%88%D9%86> (Accessed June 27, 2025).

Cairokee and Amir Eid's response to censorship and marginalization saw the band songs gradually shifting their focus away from politically charged and socially critical themes. The transformation was evident as the most prominent band to emerge from the 2000s indie music scene adjusted its direction to align with the restrictive post-revolutionary context, where the narratives and cultural discourses that thrived before 2011 faced significant constraints.

While Cairokee's most recent album (*Roma*-2022)⁴³ largely maintained their signature synth-driven alternative rock style, their lyrics have shifted towards romantic and nostalgic themes, preserving their distinctive lyrical flow. Since 2022, Amir Eid has expanded his public presence, through appearances across a sequel drama series⁴⁴ produced by the state-backed streaming platform "Watch It,"⁴⁵ created to compete in the digital streaming era. Additionally, he has become a prominent figure in advertising for the government-endorsed initiative "*Ḥayā Karīma*" (Decent Life),⁴⁶ an initiative launched under President Sisi's Egypt Vision 2030 to improve living conditions in the country's poorest rural communities.

The drama series "*Rivū*," starring Amir Eid, was bolstered by a widespread advertising campaign (figure 1), reflecting the influence of social media pages acquired by affiliates of media and production companies aligned with the state.⁴⁷ These companies aimed to control digital trends⁴⁸ by promoting artistic productions under the umbrella of United Media Services (UMS), the state-backed media conglomerate.⁴⁹

This effort formed part of a broader strategy through which a triad of nationalist meme pages, social media bots, and social media accounts across various domains functioned as media arms of the political regime. These digital tools

43- CairokeeOfficial-YouTube, "*Rūmā*." Album playlist [online], 2022, Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QKMUdSLauQ&list=PL8n3QglmB3idjo1vAYOVoo6-xiXO_U-4q (Accessed June 27, 2025).

44- ELCINEMA.COM, *Rivū* 2022 [online], 2022, Available at: <https://elcinema.com/work/2074438/> (Accessed June 27, 2025).

45- Available at: <https://www.watchit.com/#/> (Accessed June 27, 2025).

46- EXTRA NEWS, *لو حلمنا في تحقيق «حياة كريمة» في كل قرى مصر اتحقق.. ممكن تبقى عاملة إزاي؟ — أمير عيد* (What if our dream of a "decent life" in every village in Egypt was achieved, how Egypt would be? — Amir Eid) [online], 2022, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=417LQjjsNUo> (Accessed June 27, 2025).

47- ASSOCIATION FOR FREEDOM OF THOUGHT AND EXPRESSION (AFTE), *Who is to conquer: Drama Production between the Private Sector and Intelligence Services* [online], 2020, Available at: <https://afteegypt.org/en/research-en/research-papers-en/2020/09/27/20036-afteegypt.html> (Accessed June 27, 2025).

48- MADA MASR, *نظرية «جعفر العمدة» أو كيف تحتكر الدولة «التريند»* (Ga'far al-'umda theory or how the state monopolizes "trends") [online], 2023, Available at: <https://www.madamasr.com/2023/07/19/feature/%D8%AB%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%A9/%D9%86%D8%B8%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AC%D8%B9%D9%81%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%A3%D9%88-%D9%83%D9%8A%D9%81-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%AA%D9%83%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84/#:~:text=%D8%A3%D9%86%D8%AA%20%D9%83%D9%86%D8%AA%20%D8%A3%D8%AD%D8%AF%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B2%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%86%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%AF%D9%81%D9%8A%D9%86,%D8%A3%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%87%D8%8C%20%D8%AD%D8%AA%D9%89%20%D8%A8%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%86%20%D8%AF%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%A9%20%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%A8%D9%82%D8%A9> (Accessed June 27, 2025).

49- UNITED MEDIA SERVICES (UMS) [online], Available at: <https://ums.com.eg/> (Accessed June 27, 2025).

were instrumental in disseminating pro-regime political messages, countering rumors, and combating disinformation—particularly countering media outlets and narratives associated with or supportive of the Muslim Brotherhood’s agenda.

It is noteworthy that After 2013, the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamist groups continued restructuring their online presence and communication strategies. Through satellite channels based in Turkey, like ‘Mikammilin’⁵⁰ and “Al-sharq”⁵¹, alongside the Al-Jazeera network, and a wide network of online influencers and Facebook pages, they launched a media counteroffensive against the Sisi regime. Their broadcasted TV shows often hosted by Egyptian anchors, online campaigns, and social media accounts, aim at discrediting the regime’s propaganda and pushing counter-narratives, in a sensationalist tone, invested in another demagogic publicity.

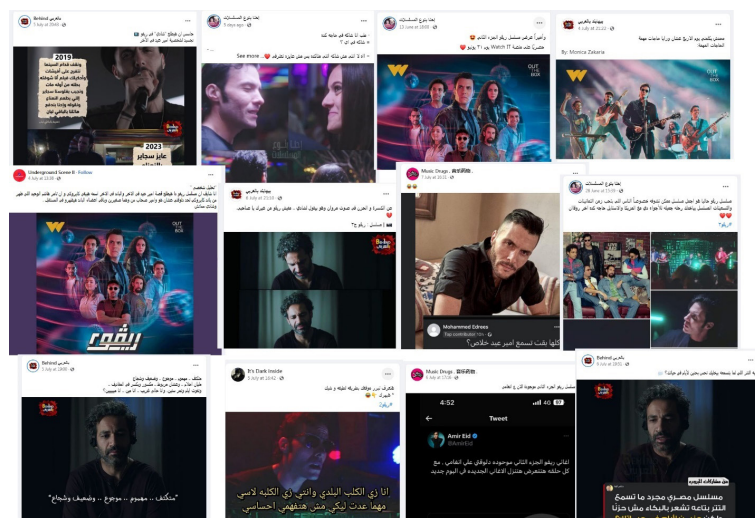


Figure 1: A collection of screenshots from Facebook pages featuring promotional posts for the drama series “Rivü” during its broadcast period.⁵²

In March 2022, Cairokee performed their first concert in Riyadh,⁵³ coinciding with Saudi Arabia’s ambitious reform initiatives aimed at transforming the country’s arts and culture sector. These efforts are part of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s Vision 2030,⁵⁴ which seeks to restructure the Saudi arts and entertainment landscape as a cornerstone of the nation’s broader economic and social development plan.

50- MEKAMELEEN TV [online], Available at: <https://mekameleen.tv/> (Accessed June 27, 2025).

51- AL-SHARQ TV [online], Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/@ElsharqTVOOfficial> (Accessed June 27, 2025).

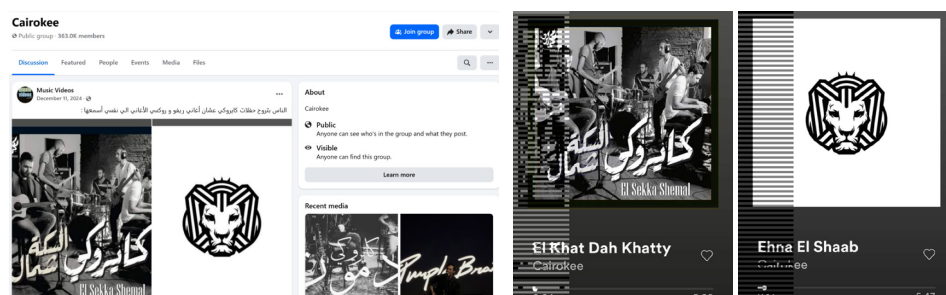
52- MADA MASR, «نظريّة «جعفر العمدة» أو كيف تحوّل الدولة «التربند»», *op. cit.*

53- CAIROKEE for the first time in Saudi Arabia [online], 2022, Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=354274013262362> (Accessed June 27, 2025).

54- Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington (2019). CIOFFOLETTI Michelle, *The Restructuring of Saudi Arts and Entertainment* [online]. Available at: <https://agsi.org/the-restructuring-of-saudi-arts-and-entertainment/> (Accessed June 27, 2025).

Importantly, including Cairokee⁵⁵ and Amir Eid within the frameworks of Egyptian and Saudi state-backed plans and initiatives—conditioned by the removal of their protest songs from their setlists—marks a significant shift, underscoring a prolonged trajectory of censorship, negotiation, and compromise. This evolution has unfolded against a backdrop of polarized online mobilization, cyberattacks, and strategic adaptability within a highly volatile digital ecosystem during a period of liminal crisis.

The convergence of media, bridging online platforms⁵⁶ with offline state-backed/controlled enterprises, has established a supra-monopolistic structure that surpasses the traditional dominance of music labels at the turn of the century. While this new model offers limited opportunities for oppositional cultural currents, it simultaneously provides their members with greater visibility, albeit under tightly controlled and narrowly defined conditions.



*Figure 2: A Facebook post⁵⁷ shared by a public Cairokee fan page and originally published on the “Music Videos” page in December 2024 reads: “People go to Cairokee concerts for the songs from Rivü (a drama series starring Amir Eid) and Roxi (a newly released sequel/anthological music track),⁵⁸ while the songs I want to listen to...” The accompanying images highlight two older Cairokee tracks with a distinctly political protest tone: El Khat Dah Khatty, based on a poem by renowned Egyptian protest poet Ahmed Fouad Negm addressing the Palestinian struggle, and Ehna El Shaab (“We Are the People”), released in 2012 and featuring excerpts from the celebrated Egyptian poet Abdelrahman Al-Abnudi’s collection *Al-Aḥzân al-‘Ādiyya* (“Ordinary Sorrows”).

The postrevolutionary schismogenetic phenomena threatened other indie bands with falling “out of social recognition” due to their previous supportive stances of the popular uprising. Splitting from the tarnished image of the “pro-revolution” became critically important during the congested climate surrounding the governmental bill, proposed to the Egyptian parliament in 2019, calling for

55- MBC MASR – YOUTUBE, حفلات صيف جدة | تفاعل رهيب من جمهور كايروكي في حفل صيف جدة أثناء غنائهم بسرح وأتوه (Jeddah Summer Concerts | Awesome interaction from the Cairokee audience at the Jeddah Summer Concert as they sing along to Basrah watuh) [online], 2024, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aap2ZeC3ZMU> (Accessed June 27, 2025).

56- FRANCE Pierre, « Pourquoi Le Streaming N’a Pas (Encore) Bouleversé La Musique Dans Le Monde Arabe », *Orient XXI* [online], 2020, Available at: <https://orientxxi.info/lu-vu-entendu/pourquoi-le-streaming-n-a-pas-encore-bouleverse-la-musique-dans-le-monde-arabe>, 3955 (Accessed January 9, 2025).

57- Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/195549210523935/posts/9236476819764417> [online], 2024, (Accessed June 27, 2025)

58- EID Amir, Roxi (*The Late Night Show*) [online], 2024, Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Ymbm1XYOk&list=RD7Ymbm1XYOk&start_radio=1.

sweeping constitutional changes that would increase Sisi's power and allow him to rule until 2030. The bill, which was ratified in a popular referendum after the MPs' approval, included a set of amendments that would also give the president more power over the judiciary and further enshrine the military's role in politics.⁵⁹

After the MPs approved the constitutional amendments, the subsequent move to a popular referendum within a few months required an extensive campaign promoting the changes. This effort was spearheaded by official media outlets and reinforced by posters plastered across streets, urging Egyptians to vote "yes" to the proposed amendments.



أبو الوفا
@Aboul_Wafa · متابعة



Unpopular opinion:

أنا مش زعلان من مسار إجباري، وفاهم يعني إيه حد يتخط في الموقف ده.

ورغم رأيي الشخصي اللي أنا عارفه ومعروف عنّي، مش عارف لو مكانهم كنت هتصرف إزاي. أحياناً الشجاعة حماقة، خاصة لو عندك عيال.



٥:١٠ م · ١٧ أبريل ٢٠١٩

Figure 3: A tweet on X from a Massar Egbari fan addressing the growing backlash against their song "Inzil wa Shārik" reads: "Unpopular opinion: I'm not upset with Massar Egbari, and I understand what it means to find yourself in their position. Despite my personal beliefs, which you know, and I know about myself, I can't say what I would do if I were in their place. Sometimes, courage borders on foolishness, especially when you have children."

As part of the campaigns supporting the constitutional amendments, youthful indie bands like Massar Egbari and Black Theama were enlisted. In April 2019, Massar Egbari sparked controversy by releasing a song titled "Inzil wa Shārik" (Go and Participate)⁶⁰ featuring shaabi singer Aḥmad Shiba. The song encouraged citizens to participate in the referendum on the constitutional amendments, scheduled for April 19–23. The backlash came primarily from the band's fan base, who viewed their support for the amendments as a form of complicity with the regime's repressive policies and counterrevolutionary agenda.

Massar Egbari, a band which originated in Alexandria and entered the indie music scene in 2005, carries a quasi-ironic name that translates to "An Obligatory Path," reflecting a critique of societal constraints that stifle creativity and innovation. As part of an emerging countercultural movement, the band gained recognition

59- BBC NEWS, Egypt Constitutional Changes Could Mean Sisi Rule until 2030 [online], 2019, Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-47947035> (Accessed January 11, 2025).

60- NOON POST, أغنية "مسار إجباري" تحاصر الفرقة بين التحول والضغط، (Masar Egbari' song traps the band between change and pressure) [online], 2019, Available at: <https://www.noonpost.com/27402/> (Accessed June 25, 2025).

for blending influences from rock, jazz, and blues with Egyptian and eastern musical traditions, creating a unique and evocative sound. Their alignment with the referendum campaign, however, marked a contentious departure from their earlier reputation as part of an alternative music scene often associated with social critique and artistic independence.⁶¹

Black Theama, a band known for its fusion of black music styles and its celebration of the Nubian heritage, features three lead singers of Nubian origin along with a diverse group of collaborating musicians and lyricists. Since their debut in 2004, Black Theama has gained recognition for their bold and socially conscious lyrics, addressing issues such as police brutality,⁶² political repression,⁶³ and systemic racism against black-skinned Egyptians. Their work has also contributed to the revival and preservation of Nubian identity and culture⁶⁴ within the broader Egyptian social fabric.

In 2016, the band released their promotional music video “Yalla/Abdi‘*Inṭaliq*” (Go/Innovate)⁶⁵ composed by ‘Amr Muṣṭafa, a melodist known for his close ties to the Mubarak and Sisi regimes. The song title carried the same slogan as the National Youth Conference, a forum established to facilitate dialogue between Egyptian youth and representatives of the government and its institutions under President Sisi’s patronage. In July 2019, Black Theama performed the song during the opening session⁶⁶ of the seventh National Youth Conference, held in the new administrative capital in the presence of Sisi.

The conference was part of a broader effort by Sisi’s administration to institutionalize the regime and align it with a series of ambitious national projects, including the controversial new administrative capital. While touted as a symbol of progress and innovative approaches, the capital has been criticized for its questionable feasibility and the immense financial burden it imposes.⁶⁷ As Egypt’s debt crisis⁶⁸ deepened and the country faced the fallout of a prolonged

61- MASSAR EGBARI – YOUTUBE, Massar Egbari - E2ra El Khabar | مسار إيجاري - اقرا الخبر [online], 2013, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aGEjtPMY8ho> (Accessed June 25, 2025).

62- BLACK THEAMA – YOUTUBE, Black Theama - Magnoun | مجنون - بلاك تيما [online], 2012, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xl57j31Ua7o> (Accessed June 28, 2025).

63- BLACK THEAMA – YOUTUBE, Black Theama - Zahma (Audio) | زحمة - بلاك تيما [online], 2012, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ignUyzCbsoE> (Accessed June 28, 2025).

64- BLACK THEAMA – YOUTUBE, Black Theama FT Sayed Rakaby - Ne3na3 El Genena | بلاك تيما و سيد ركاى - نعناع الجنينه [online], 2020, Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_QRooFYaZ4 (Accessed June 28, 2025).

65- BLACK THEAMA – YOUTUBE, Black Theama - Yalla | يالا - بلاك تيما [online], 2016, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cEE-8-7L5Tg> (Accessed June 28, 2025).

66- SHOROUK NEWS, شاهد... أغنية «ابدع انطلق» لـ«بلاك تيما» خلال افتتاح مؤتمر الشباب (Watch Black Theama's song “Innovate/Go” during the opening of the Youth Conference) [online], 2019, Available at: <https://www.shorouknews.com/news/view.aspx?cdate=31072019&id=d3958364-b19d-407f-9214-22cf9dff7587> (Accessed June 28, 2025).

67- WALSH Declan, YEE Vivian, A New Capital Worthy of the Pharaohs Rises in Egypt, but at What Price?, The New York Times (NYTIMES) [online], 2023, Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/08/world/middleeast/egypt-new-administrative-capital.html> (Accessed January 4, 2025).

68- MANDOUR Maged, Budget Breakdown: Addressing Egypt’s Debt Crisis, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace [online], 2023, Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2023/09/budget-breakdown-addressing-egypts-debt-crisis?lang=en> (Accessed January 9, 2025).

economic downturn and currency devaluation, the National Youth Conference was discontinued as its extravagant displays and high costs drew widespread criticism and ridicule on Egyptian social networks.

As this study contends, the deliberate estrangement of indie bands from their original fan base and the backlash against their recent stances reflect the new dynamics of governance, where even small margins of cultural independence and socially critical musicianship are no longer tolerated. This shift is also tied to the rise of a digital supra-monopoly in the Arab region, where dominant digital platforms increasingly align with broader political agendas.



Mostafa Maher ©

متابعة · @MostafaMaherKh



بلاك تيماء أغنية لمنتدى شباب العالم
مسار اجباري اغنية للمشاركة في الاستفتاء
كدا نستنى أغنية كايروكي السيسي رئيسي ٢٠٢٤



٢٠٣٩ م ١٧ أبريل ٢٠١٩

Figure 4: A 2019 tweet reads: “Black Theama releases a song for the World Youth Conference. Massar Egbari drops a song promoting participation in the referendum. At this rate, we’re just waiting for Cairokee’s ‘Sisi is My President’ in 2024.”

State-backed media adopted sharply polarized strategies after 2013, as two major political blocs—Egyptian and Gulf platforms on one side, and Qatari-owned Al Jazeera network, and Turkish-backed channels hosting Muslim Brotherhood-affiliates’ programs on the other—established rigid criteria to shape their political propaganda. These strategies included mobilizing a carefully selected group of anchors, artists, influencers, and public figures to reinforce their respective narratives and rally their audiences within an intensifying digital climate of political and cultural polarization.

The visibility afforded to indie artists and bands during “national” events,⁶⁹ coupled with their partial departures from the original ethos of their projects, can also be viewed as a process of assimilating indie musicians into the mainstream pop scene and the cultural framework of digital streaming platforms (DSPs). This convergence signals the blurring of once-distinct boundaries between musicians, production infrastructures, and marketing strategies, giving rise to a reconfigured musical economy. Preserving a thriving musical career path within post-2013 contexts now hinges on navigating the complementarity of digital and physical spheres—where access to live performance circuits, media exposure,

69- ELWATANNEWS, عامنا من النجاح ٢٠ أكتوبر... نصر أكتوبر... (Black Theama dazzles everyone at the October Victory celebrations... 20 years of success) [online], 2024, Available at: https://www.elwatannews.com/news/details/7641981#goog_rewarded (Accessed June 28, 2025).

DSPs' marketing strategies, and sociopolitical positioning operate as mutually reinforcing vectors shaping professional musical trajectories.

This shift is underpinned by the consolidation of music producers in the region under a supra-monopolistic digital framework, shaped by broader political agendas and unfolding against the backdrop of an ongoing liminal crisis. The result is an increasingly homogenized cultural landscape where the autonomy and critical edge of independent music are subsumed by the commercial and political imperatives of the digital monopoly.

III. The Cultural Forces Driving Censorship and Assimilation of Electroshaabi Performers

Throughout its modern post-independence history, Egypt's artistic censorship apparatus CACWA has been notorious for its strict and convoluted legislative frameworks,⁷⁰ coupled with opaque and bureaucratic security strategies designed to enforce prior censorship on artistic works and activities. Rooted in nationalist/religious conservative ideologies, this framework has created a labyrinth of red lines surrounding the depiction of politics, religion, and sexuality in art. For successive political regimes, restricting artistic freedom has consistently been framed as a matter of "national security," particularly in the case of widely accessible and popular art forms such as cinema, music, theater, and large-scale public performances.⁷¹

However, the rise of new media platforms, fueled by web-based technologies and an increasingly integrated media ecosystem⁷² (online and offline media convergence) has since the early 21st century provided artists in the Arab region with alternative avenues for expression. This proliferation of pan-Arab satellite media and digital platforms has diluted the influence of traditional censorship tools and diminished the impact of official restrictions on artistic content.

The cultural/legal battle between the rising generation of *electroshaabi* music performers and the Musicians' Syndicate after 2014 is a comprehensive example of this transformation. The genre faced increasing backlash as it gained traction after 2011, permeating mainstream popular culture and countercultural spaces alike. From appearances in popular movies,⁷³ advertising campaigns⁷⁴ and live

70- MKSEGYPT, التعبير الفني بين الرقابة وحقوق الملكية الفكرية.. دليل قانوني للعاملين في المجال السينمائي (Artistic expression between censorship and intellectual property rights: a legal guide for film professionals) [online], 2023, Available at: <https://mksegypt.org/ar/posts/13> (Accessed June 28, 2025).

71- JACQUEMOND Richard, Conscience of the Nation: Writers, State, and Society in Modern Egypt, trans. David Tresilian, Cairo and New York, The American University in Cairo Press, 2008.

72- GUAAYBESS Tourya, "Media Policy in the MENA: The Political Impact of Media Confluence", in Khalil J.F., Khiabany G., Guayyebess T., Yesil B. (eds.), *The Handbook of Media and Culture in the Middle East*, New Jersey, Wiley Blackwell, 2023, p. 93–106.

73- YOUTUBE, Song | mahragan | shehta karika | elalmany [online], 2012, Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=15VAMWokTfo&list=RD15VAMWokTfo&start_radio=1 (Accessed June 28, 2025).

74- ORANGE EGYPT – YOUTUBE, أغنية موبينيل دأها مع بعض Mobinil Ramadan song 2012 HD [online], 2012, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G-eWMIgZkJo> (Accessed June 28, 2025).

performances,⁷⁵ electroshaabi's growing presence sparked tension, highlighting its salient influence on traditional cultural and institutional norms. Because of their bold lyrical content transcending the conventional pop songs' lyrics to cover a myriad of subjects fearlessly (like drugs,⁷⁶ sexual relations,⁷⁷ police brutality⁷⁸ and daily life in slums), mahragānāt and electroshaabi tracks were portrayed as a real threat to the "middle-class value system;" an allegory to the hegemonic moral order imposed by the authorities, conservative audiences and music gatekeepers.⁷⁹

Musicians' Syndicate started to attack and censor electroshaabi performers "as according to the law the artist must be enrolled in one of the arts syndicates or have a one-time work permit, which is renewable. The law also requires getting a permit from the Department of Censorship of Artistic Works; the only entity legally responsible for the content."⁸⁰

Tracing the history of Egyptian musicians' syndicate's development (1942-2020), the ethnomusicologist Sophie Frankford refers to the tacit balance that the syndicate kept between the "contradictory functions of providing welfare for its members on the one hand, and its heavy-handed policing of the music scene on the other."⁸¹ Such functions, policing and welfare provision, according to Frankford, have increased in tandem, accelerating in the late 1970s:

"The syndicate's welfare services are financed by membership fees, taxes on members' wages, and importantly fines levied against non-members.

75- MAWRED.ORG, *بَرَه الصورة... موسيقى الأحياء الشعبية لأول مرة على مسرح الجينية* (Out of the picture... Music of popular neighborhoods for the first time on Al-Genina Theatre) [online], 2011, Available at: <https://mawred.org/%D8%BA%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D9%85%D8%B5%D9%86%D9%81/%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%91%D9%87-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A9/> (Accessed June 28, 2025).

76- MOLOTOF – YOUTUBE, *حصريا مهرجان الكيف لـ سادات العالمى و مولوتوف* | MOLOTOF FT. SADAT - EL KEF [online], 2019, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wqH5Kqhbfoo> (Accessed June 28, 2025).

77- PUIG Nicolas, « De quoi le mahragān est-il le son ? Compositions et circulations musicales en Égypte », in Jacquemond R., Lagrange F. (eds.), *Culture pop en Égypte : Entre mainstream commercial et contestation*, Paris, Riveneuve, 2020, p. 387–422.

78- SADAT EL 3ALMY – YOUTUBE, *مهرجان حكاية ثورة* (سادات و فيفتى و فيجو - مهرجان حكاية ثورة) | Sadat El 3almy ft. 50 - Mahragan 7ekayet Thawra [online], 2015, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KqbfAUmuJeE&t=1s> (Accessed June 28, 2025).

79- *Ibid.*

80- "Article 178 of the Egyptian Penal Code No. 58 of 1937 states:

"A penalty of imprisonment for a period not exceeding two years and a fine of not less than five thousand pounds and not exceeding ten thousand pounds, or either of these two penalties is imposed on whoever publishes, manufactures or possesses -for the purpose of trading, distribution, rent, posting or displaying publications-manuscripts, drawings, advertisements, engraved images, hand or photographic drawings, symbolic signs, or other objects or images in general, if they outrage public decency".

This text allows the Egyptian authorities to prosecute creators on charges of outraging public decency, despite this text's violation of article (67) of the constitution. Here, there is gap ignored by the legislator after the adoption of the constitution in 2014, as the articles of laws that contradict the constitution have not been amended or abolished."

(ASSOCIATION FOR FREEDOM OF THOUGHT AND EXPRESSION (AFTE), *Long live degenerate art: The old state faces mahraganat songs* [online], 2019, Available at: <https://afteegypt.org/en/research-en/research-papers-en/2019/08/29/18097-afteegypt.html> (Accessed January 5, 2025).)

81- FRANKFORD Sophie, "Between Welfare and Exclusion: A History of Egypt's Musicians' Syndicate" [online], *Egypt Sudan Arab Worlds*, 25, 2024, published online January 13, 2025. Available at: <http://journals.openedition.org/esma/3362> (Accessed June 20, 2025).

The syndicate has increasingly responded to members' demands for higher pensions and improved healthcare with rhetoric about how this must be financed through fining and taxing musicians who perform without syndicate membership. Similarly, the syndicate's long-standing promise to help its members find work is premised on the exclusion of rival musicians, with foreign musicians and new musical styles in particular being positioned as a threat to members' livelihoods, thus something that needs to be controlled."⁸²

The battle with electroshaabi musicians exemplified the traditional use of professional arts syndicates as tools of censorship in Egypt.⁸³ These syndicates, tasked with controlling permits and enforcing mandatory membership for artists in various fields,⁸⁴ wield significant power over who can legally engage in artistic activities such as performing music in public spaces, filming, distributing, or publishing artistic works. In this capacity, the syndicates, with other governmental bodies, effectively act as extensions of the authoritarian state, managing and regulating the artistic sphere.

On September 14, 2015, former Justice Minister Aḥmad al-Zind issued two decrees (No. 6614 and No. 8737) granting the heads of the Acting Professions Syndicate Council and the Musicians' Syndicate a "judicial officer status"⁸⁵ for crimes violating Law No. 8 of 2003 on unions and professional syndicates. Two civil society organizations⁸⁶ challenged these decisions in court, arguing that judicial authority can only be granted to state employees, not union members who are practitioners of creative professions with no oversight duties. These appeals contested the legality of granting judicial powers to individuals whose roles are solely to represent and serve their unions' members.

In April 2016, the Administrative Court suspended the Justice Minister's decision granting judicial authority to members of the Acting and Musical Professions' Syndicates. The case was referred to the Supreme Constitutional Court to assess the constitutionality of provisions in the Criminal Procedure Code and the Syndicates Law.⁸⁷

82- *Ibid.*

83- MADA MASR, AL-ASWĀNĪ Muḥamed, رحلة الإنتاج الموسيقي وتنظيم الحفلات في مصر (From censorship apparatuses to the syndicate: the journey of music production and concert organization in Egypt) [online], 2018, Available at: <https://www.madamasr.com/2018/08/03/feature/%d8%ab%d9%82%d8%a7%d9%81%d8%a9/%d9%85%d9%86-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b1%d9%82%d8%a7%d8%a8%d8%a9-%d9%84%d9%84%d9%86%d9%82%d8%a7%d8%a8%d8%a9-%d8%b1%d8%ad%d9%84%d8%a9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a5%d9%86%d8%aa%d8%a7%d8%ac-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%85%d9%88%d8%b3/> (Accessed June 28, 2025).

84- ASSOCIATION FOR FREEDOM OF THOUGHT AND EXPRESSION (AFTE), A closed door... A paper on membership as an entry point for independent artistic syndicates in Egypt [online], 2021, Available at: <https://afteegypt.org/en/research-en/research-papers-en/2021/03/22/21293-afteegypt.html> (Accessed June 28, 2025).

85- ASSOCIATION FOR FREEDOM OF THOUGHT AND EXPRESSION (AFTE), Legalizing Mahraganat: Recognition vs. Identity Erasure [online], 2020, Available at: <https://afteegypt.org/en/research-en/research-papers-en/2020/06/20/19282-afteegypt.html> (Accessed June 28, 2025).

86- The organizations are the Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression (AFTE) and the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights.

87- ASSOCIATION FOR FREEDOM OF THOUGHT AND EXPRESSION (AFTE), القضاء الإداري يوقف قرارات منح النقابات الفنية صفة الضبطية القضائية ويحيل ٣ مواد للدستورية العليا [online], 2016, Available at: <https://afteegypt.org/advocacy/statements-2/2016/04/17/12091-afteegypt.html>

Equally significant is the role played by civil society and human rights' groups in providing legal advocacy in the battle of electroshaabi performers with arts syndicates marked a substantial achievement and propelled the Musicians' Syndicate to adopt a more lenient approach with the election of a new head of the syndicate, lyricist and melodist Muṣṭafa Kāmil in 2023. Unlike his predecessor, singer Hānī Shākīr,⁸⁸ Kāmil started his term by affirming his different approach:

“Regardless of my personal opinion on mahragānāt songs, I will defer to the guidance of my senior colleagues and mentors in the profession to establish clear standards, whether for rap or mahragānāt music. I will not deprive anyone of their livelihood, and all decisions will be made collectively by the syndicate's board, not unilaterally by Muṣṭafa Kāmil.”⁸⁹

Kāmil's approach capitalized on a strategy that prioritized raising the syndicate's revenues⁹⁰ and increasing the retirement pensions for its members,⁹¹ which meant including new members from the rising youth generations, especially those enjoying wide popularity within the live performances' circuits. To host a musical event, organizers must first obtain approval from the Musicians' Syndicate. This involves paying fees to the syndicate for both the event and the musicians (foreign musicians and musicians of renewable/temporary membership). The syndicate's approval is granted only after a lengthy licensing process, which is then submitted to several other authorities.⁹² Of particular importance is the Ministry of Interior, which holds the final authority over whether the

88- “Underlying Shaker's anti-mahragānāt campaign were two interrelated impulses. First, a disdain for non-elite culture, aligning with a broader state-driven narrative against the popular classes and the informal housing areas with which they are associated (and where mahragānāt originated). Second, as audiences increasingly wanted to listen to electronic mahragānāt above other styles, the livelihoods of older established musicians (who were syndicate members) were felt to be under threat, and Shaker aimed to exclude mahragānāt artists from the scene to protect members' income. In this way, Shaker's campaign against mahragānāt echoed earlier syndicate campaigns in the 1980s and 1990s against sha'bī and shabābī music. And as in the past, moments of increased policing appear to result in increased syndicate membership: in 2006 there were 28,000 members; in 2013 there were 43,282 members; in 2015 there were 53,526 members; and in 2016 there were 63,023.” (FRANKFORD Sophie, “Between Welfare and Exclusion: A History of Egypt's Musicians' Syndicat”e, *op. cit.*)

89- VETOGATE, مصطفى كامل: ضوابط عاجلة للتعامل مع أغاني الراب والمهرجانات... وممن هقطع عيش حد (Mustafa Kamel: Urgent regulations to deal with rap songs and mahragānāt... and I won't cut off anyone's livelihood) [online], 2022, Available at: https://www.vetogate.com/4713727#goog_rewarded (Accessed June 28, 2025).

90- YOUN7, مصطفى كامل يعلن تحقيق ٢٧٢ مليوناً و١٢٢ ألف جنيه إيرادات لنقابة الموسيقيين (Muṣṭafa Kāmil announces revenues of 272 million and 122 thousand pounds for the Musicians' Syndicate) [online], 2024, Available at: <https://www.youm7.com/story/2024/8/5/%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B7%D9%81%D9%89-%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%84-%D9%8A%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%86-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D9%82%D9%8A%D9%82-272-%D9%85%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86%D9%8B%D8%A7-%D9%88%D8%A3%D9%84%D9%81-%D8%AC%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%87-%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%84%D9%86%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A9/6664430> (Accessed June 28, 2025).

91- ELWATANNEWS, مصطفى كامل يعلن زيادة معاشات الموسيقيين بنسبة ١٠% (Mustafa Kamel announces 10% increase in musicians' pensions) [online], 2024, Available at: <https://www.elwatannews.com/news/details/7396239> (Accessed June 28, 2025).

92- MADA MASR, AL-ASWĀNĪ Muḥamed, رحلة الإنتاج الموسيقي وتنظيم الحفلات في مصر (From censorship apparatuses to the syndicate: the journey of music production and concert organization in Egypt), 2018.

license is approved. Organizers must also comply with requirements from the Tax Authority, the Ministry of Manpower, and sometimes the Ministry of Tourism. Furthermore, the syndicate imposes fines for administrative and routine procedures while continually increasing membership requirements and fees for foreign performers. These measures reflect the syndicate's focus on enhancing its revenue by collecting percentages and fines from concerts, musician payments, and other musical activities.

Kāmil's bargain⁹³ with electroshaabi performers resolved the issue of membership and legalization by designating a division for popular festival singers under the name "vocal performance" for the first time in the syndicate's history. In return, he announced new conditions for mahragānāt singers, requiring them to stop using "offensive" language, perform with a live band of at least 12 active members, avoid using flash drives (for playback) on stage, and secure prior approval from the syndicate for performances outside Egypt. Performers are issued a quarterly permit, with permanent membership granted to those who demonstrate consistent compliance and competence.

The Syndicate Council secured pledges from several electroshaabi singers (including Ḥasan Shākūsh, Ḥammū Bikā, Muṣṭafa 'Inaba, Shiḥta Kārīkā, 'Iṣām Ṣāṣā, and Ortega) to adhere to these rules. Violators will face removal from the syndicate's registry. The head of the syndicate emphasized that no mahragānāt singer will be allowed to violate societal values, stating that "the temporary permit is reviewed every three months to evaluate each artist's commitment to the new conditions, ultimately leaving their fate in their own hands."⁹⁴

The legal/moral reorganization of the electroshaabi performers' activity marked a resolution that took in consideration the relative market weight and popularity acquired by this musical wave despite all attempts to obstruct or contain its musicians and performers. The deal also reflected an understanding from the authorities to the expansion of electroshaabi styles and performers, as a second generation of creators, bigger in numbers, emerged in the post-2013 period, grasping the production and marketing dynamics of the stabilized DSPs' formula.

The pioneering generation of mahragānāt producers (like Sadat, Okka & Ortega, Fifty Elostora) has been succeeded by a rising cohort of artists more attuned to the mechanics of music production and distribution through digital audio workstations DAWs and DSPs. This new generation has rapidly gained prominence by leveraging these platforms to develop musical formats that bridge the gap between the local mahragānāt scene and international rap and

93- ASHARQ, مصر... شعبة لـالمهرجانات الشعبية» في نقابة الموسيقيين لأول مرة (Egypt: A division for "popular mahragānāt" is established in the Musicians' Syndicate for the first time) [online], 2022, Available at: <https://asharq.com/art/41436/%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1-%D8%B4%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%80%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%87%D8%B1%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4-%D8%B9%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%86%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A9/> (Accessed June 28, 2025).

94- Ibid.

hip-hop genres. These hybrids are often labeled as “Egyptian trap” on streaming platforms;⁹⁵ an ill-defined category as the younger producers are marked by their fluidity, shifting swiftly between waves of sound, rhythms, and styles to cater to diverse audiences.

Importantly, the so-called process of “refinement of electroshaabi,” has unfolded along intersecting paths. On one side, it aligns with authoritarian aspirations to sanitize and regulate the genre. On the other hand, it reflects changes in the profiles of music producers and their audiences. What began as a movement rooted in rebellious countercultural expression, with an experimental nature at the levels of linguistic registers and musical production,⁹⁶ emerging from peripheral urban areas marginalized by social exclusion and urban decay (commonly referred to as ‘*ashwā’iyyat* in official discourse)—has expanded to include performers and creators from varied class backgrounds.

Some newcomers focus their creative efforts on commercialization and profit within the growing scene, while others align culturally with narratives that are not far removed from hegemonic discourses. For the latter, some of their contributions to hip-hop and trap often appear as a repackaging of traditional themes from the Egyptian pop music world, albeit in updated linguistic⁹⁷ and rhythmic⁹⁸ forms, attuned to the tincture of the times, signaling a departure from the experimental and subversive⁹⁹ spirit of the genre’s origins.

The integration of electroshaabi producers aligned seamlessly with the operational logic of digital platforms, which leverage artificial intelligence (AI) to analyze vast amounts of audience data. By tracking varied preferences and trends, these platforms curate mood- and context-based playlists and retarget users with personalized content based on their listening and search history. Such transformations which revolutionized music distribution networks, fostering shift to more decentralized model. No longer confined to urban centers, the widespread availability of mobile phones has extended access to rural and marginalized areas, fostering the revival of musical subcultures and local dialects, and deviating from the long-lived dominant lexicon of Arab pop songs.

This shift has impacted the pricing and accessibility of music across the Greater Maghreb, Egypt, Sudan, and the Levant, as well as reviving interest in projects aimed at digitizing Syrian¹⁰⁰ and Moroccan¹⁰¹ cassette archives to further root

95- Public playlist: *The Sound of Egyptian Trap* [online]. Available at: <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/2C1aQIm29aKkdToPHXDr39> (Accessed June 28, 2025).

96- PUIG Nicolas, *op. cit.*, p.387-422.

97- MARWAN MOUSSA – YOUTUBE, MARWAN MOUSSA - AMOT ANA | اموت انا [online], 2024, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HG6aZ9Fys5Y> (Accessed June 28, 2025).

98- WEGZ – YOUTUBE, Wegz - ElBakht | ويجز - البخت (Audio) prod. Rahal [online], 2022, Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_RHIECWv728 (Accessed June 28, 2025).

99- SADAT EL 3ALMY – YOUTUBE, توزيع الدكتور عمرو حاحا, الحب ثقافة (فيديو كليب) [online], 2017, Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ztiji_aConk (Accessed June 28, 2025).

100- Syrian Cassette Archives [online], Available at: <https://syriancassettearchives.org/> (Accessed June 28, 2025).

101- Moroccan Tapes [online], Available at: <https://moroccantapes.com/rouicha-tichkaphone-tck-1156> (Accessed June 28, 2025).

local identities. Following the popular uprisings, the Arab region has experienced a resurgence of interest in traditional and regional music, as well as a renewed appreciation for musical heritage. Contemporary genres such as rap, trap, electronic music, and pop are being adapted to local contexts, while previously excluded genres and marginalized dialects find their voice in hybrid musical formats¹⁰² that integrate traditional sounds¹⁰³ with electronic instrumentation.

The influence of younger electroshaabi producers on DSPs has unsurprisingly left a significant mark on the pop music scene, as it transformed into a globally popular sound that reflects the tastes of younger generations. Interestingly, pop stars who initially criticized¹⁰⁴ the mahragānāt during their early rise have gradually shifted their approach. They now incorporate these new sounds into their productions¹⁰⁵ and adapt their lyrical content,¹⁰⁶ to more bold directions, often drawing on reimagined versions of classical shaabi terms¹⁰⁷ and melodies.

The newly adopted cultural strategies in Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia¹⁰⁸ and the United Arab Emirates marked a significant shift that directly challenged Egypt's traditional censorship policies. Backed by strong political and economic support, the emerging artistic landscape in Gulf nations began attracting Egyptian artists and industry professionals, signaling the rise of a major soft power contender in the Arab region. This shift forced Egyptian authorities to adjust their approach, at times easing restrictions on artistic freedoms and renegotiating the "red lines" imposed on local artists.

Electroshaabi performers capitalized on these changing dynamics to navigate the liminal crisis' conditions. The proliferation of artistic events across Gulf countries provided them with new platforms¹⁰⁹ to reach wider audiences and

102- El Wailli-YouTube (2023), Mnml with @DoniaWaelll // منمل مع دنيا وائل [online]. Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dB_7lQkFctg (accessed on June 28, 2025).

103- SULISIZER – YOUTUBE, Sulisizer x Nada Abbas el sake | سولي وندي عباس الساقى [online], 2025, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OqUE4lMj-7g> (Accessed June 28, 2025).

104- NRJ EGYPT – YOUTUBE, رامي صبري : أنا مش مع المنع عن الغناء بس هاني شاكر فنان كبير مبنفعش الشباب اللي طالع (Rāmī Šabry: I'm not against banning singing, but Hānī Šākīr is a great artist. It's not right for young people to speak ill of him) [online], 2022, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l483HdgQx1s> (Accessed June 28, 2025).

105- RAMY SABRY – YOUTUBE, Ramy Sabry - Ana Gamed Keda Keda [Official Lyrics Video] | رامي صبري - أنا | جامد كده كده [online], 2024, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l483HdgQx1s> (Accessed June 28, 2025).

106- RUBY – YOUTUBE, Ruby - Namet Nenna [Official Music Video] | روبي - نمت ننه [online], 2022, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IEkQqkocSCo> (Accessed June 28, 2025).

107- AMR DIAB – YOUTUBE, Amr Diab - Aam El Tabeeb (Official Lyric Video) | عمرو دياب - عم الطبيب [online], 2020, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8CXVicv9-Ng> (Accessed June 28, 2025).

108- MADA MASR, المملكة الترفيه السعودية العربية: الفن برعاية تركي آل الشيخ (Saudi Arabia's Kingdom of Entertainment: Art under the patronage of Turki Al-Sheikh) [online], 2019, Available at: <https://www.madamasr.com/2019/03/07/feature/%D8%AB%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%A9/%D9%85%D9%85%D9%84%D9%83%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%81%D9%8A%D9%87-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%86-%D8%A8/> (Accessed June 28, 2025).

109- YOUTUBE, شاهد حفل «أورتيجا» و «المدفعجية» في السعودية [online], 2019, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SSzOHqZyxgk> (Accessed June 29, 2025).

rebrand themselves as rising regional stars,¹¹⁰ benefiting from the broader cultural transformations underway.

However, the shift in cultural influence and market dynamics led to an implicit, unwritten understanding between emerging players in the art and entertainment industry, such as the Gulf states, and established hubs like Egypt. This tacit agreement aimed to align censorship policies in a way that respected the “red lines” specific to each country. This dynamic is evident in the Musicians’ Syndicate’s exploitation of the temporary permit system granted to electroshaabi performers that allows the syndicate to suspend them or denying them permits for their concerts if they violated its regulations.

It is worth noting that the continuous restructuring of the state-owned media giant, United Media Services, culminated in December 2024 with the appointment of Ṭāriq Nūr,¹¹¹ a prominent private media and advertising mogul, as chairman of its board. This move signaled an effort to address ongoing policy and financial challenges. The involvement of private sector expertise in such a large state-backed organization reflects a growing recognition that censorial and repressive media policies are increasingly difficult to enforce.

This shift in policies is driven by the evolving media landscape, the rising influence of regional competitors,¹¹² and the growing presence of Arabic artistic productions on international platforms.¹¹³ For electroshaabi and Egyptian trap performers, local and regional shifts have provided greater exposure through lucrative festivals¹¹⁴ (sometimes featured alongside iconic figures of classic Arabic pop)¹¹⁵ and advertising campaigns.¹¹⁶ However, this exposure often comes in a sanitized form, with relevant exceptions,¹¹⁷ aligning with their “assimilation and refinement” process, under the constraints of supra-monopolistic conditions.

The contextual and technological transformations shaping the electroshaabi and trap scene have significantly influenced its class dynamics, marketing strategies,

110- HASSAN SHAKOSH – YOUTUBE, *هوبا رجعتنا ليكو - حسن شاكوش من حفلة موسم الرياض السعودية حصرها* [online], 2021, Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u_Rolq9pCLE&t=1s (Accessed June 29, 2025).

111- AL-MASRY AL-YOUM, *طارق نور رئيسًا... إعادة تشكيل مجلس إدارة الشركة المتحدة للخدمات الإعلامية* (Tarek Nour appointed chairman... Restructuring of the board of directors of United Media Services) [online], 2024, Available at: <https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/3326352> (Accessed June 29, 2025).

112- ARABIAN GULF BUSINESS INSIGHT (AGBI), *Streaming platform Shahid to drive growth, says MBC TV* [online], 2024, Available at: <https://www.agbi.com/media/2024/04/streaming-platform-shahid-to-drive-growth-says-mbc-tv/> (Accessed June 29, 2025).

113- MILLEWORLD, *Netflix is Taking Arab Content Global, and We're Here for it* [online], 2021, Available at: <https://www.milleworld.com/netflix-is-taking-arab-content-global/> (Accessed June 29, 2025).

114- RED BULL SIKA – YOUTUBE, *MARWAN PABLO X ABYUSIF - KARMA (Red Bull Symphonic) | مروان بابلو x أوبيوسف - كارما (ريد بُل سيمفونيكا)* [online], 2024, Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UmDP3kf6Mro&list=RDUmDP3kf6Mro&start_radio=1 (Accessed June 29, 2025).

115- ANGHAM – YOUTUBE, *انغام مع ويجز - كل ما تقرب والبخت | ليلة صوت مصر* [online], 2023, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fwzC1JmT6k4> (Accessed June 29, 2025).

116- VODAFONE EGYPT – YOUTUBE, *الفليكساوية من فودافون | محمد سعد و دينا الشربيني و أوبيوسف* [online], 2021, Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vitK_NZ3ZUI (Accessed June 29, 2025).

117- MARWAN PABLO – YOUTUBE, *MARWAN PABLO - DÉJÀ VU (OFFICIAL MUSIC VIDEO)* [online], 2024, Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XQ6eom_jRtA&list=PLpmQMCj_-l4QiUoLp6rNGcz_gw_k-PcU4 (Accessed June 29, 2025).

and thematic content. By sidestepping overt sociopolitical themes and steering away from the quasi-pornographic elements¹¹⁸ in some productions—largely to avoid suspension and censorship—the genre has amplified its masculinist tone, a characteristic rooted in the first generation of its productions. Themes such as virility,¹¹⁹ vengeance,¹²⁰ gang disputes,¹²¹ and misogyny¹²²—reminiscent of the stylings of Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg—came to dominate the tracks of the second generation. Despite the growing presence of female performers and producers within the newer wave, electroshaabi, as it expanded, retained its masculine undertone “in its production, as well as its themes.”¹²³

Enrooted in a day-to-day ethos, in sound and language, electroshaabi music styles had deeply influenced the contemporary Arab and Egyptian pop soundscape, incorporating diverse influences. With an expansive and integrated presence, a new generation of music producers held the potential of infusing the music scene with innovative sound perspectives and coming up with creative ideas blending hybrid musical resources. And despite that the repeated cycle of sociopolitical impositions that often seek to contain countercultural music waves by assimilating them into broader streams, the outcomes rarely adhere to a deterministic pattern.

The rise of algorithm-driven DSPs’ distribution systems has exposed indie and electroshaabi music to broader audiences, presenting both challenges and opportunities. These conditions require artists to navigate local demand, competitive standards, and creative aspirations, opening new possibilities for musicians who once thrived underground but now operate in an unpredictable mainstream environment. This fluid positioning further challenges rigid binaries—pop/underground, commercial/independent, mainstream/niche, and local/global—in an era defined by remix cultures, memetic creativity, and the digital music market’s supra-monopolistic domination.

118- LAGRANGE Frédéric, « Chanter le désir, mimer l’obscénité », in Lagrange Frédéric, Savina Claire (dir.), *Les Mots du désir : La langue de l’érotisme arabe et sa traduction*, Paris, Diacritiques Éditions, 2020, p. 326–368. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.diacritiques.2373>.

119- KOZBARA – YOUTUBE, 2024 [حببي لو زعلان - احمد بحر] Ahmed Bahr – Habibi [online], 2024, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gMo3pltzUew> (Accessed June 29, 2025).

120- SHEHAB – YOUTUBE, Shehab X Horizon X Alfay - 3al 3mom [Official Audio] | شهاب مع هريزون و الفي عالموم [online], 2024, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yNpWLKocso8> (Accessed June 29, 2025).

121- AFROTO – YOUTUBE, AFROTO - KEBDA FT ONUY | عفروتو - كيدو (OFFICIAL MUSIC VIDEO) PROD BY WEZZA MONTASER [online], 2024, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QOI15CIBm4c> (Accessed June 29, 2025).

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ملخص | أنتجت أصداء الاضطرابات السياسية، لا سيما في مصر بعد عام ٢٠١١ وفي أماكن أخرى من العالم العربي، بنية فوق احتكارية لأنظمة الإنتاج الموسيقي ومنصات البث الموسيقي، ما يعكس الاستراتيجيات السياسية لما بعد الثورة في ظل استعادة الاستبداد في جميع أنحاء المنطقة. وبينما أتاح العصر الرقمي في البداية حرية وإبداعاً أكبر لـ"طبقة المعارضة الوسيطة" الصاعدة والتيارات الموسيقية المضادة للثقافة، إلا أن استراتيجيات ما بعد ٢٠١٣ استغلت المنصات الرقمية بشكل متزايد لفرض السيطرة السلطوية وتقييد التعبير الموسيقي. وفي موازاة ذلك، عكست منصات التواصل الاجتماعي، التي أصبحت حاسمة في الوساطة الموسيقية والترويج والتسويق الموسيقي، استقطابات اجتماعية وسياسية أوسع نطاقاً ظهرت في فترة ما بعد ٢٠١٣.

يسعى هذا المقال إلى دراسة المشهد الموسيقي الرقمي المعاصر للغاية في مصر ضمن هذا السياق الاجتماعي والثقافي الأوسع. كيف استطاع المنتجون في تيارات الإيندي والمهرجانات والإلكتروشعبي أن يتخطوا الرقابة المؤسسية والفرض السلطوي والانقسامات الاجتماعية؟ إلى أي مدى حافظت هذه التيارات على استقلالها عن موسيقى البوب السائدة، وهل أصبحت تدريجياً جزءاً من تلك التيارات المهيمنة؟

أجادل في هذا السرد أن احتكار أنظمة إنتاج وتوزيع الموسيقى، واللوائح الهيكلية المدعومة من الدولة لفضاءات الوساطة الموسيقية قد استؤنفت تحت ستار رقمي، بوصفها جزءاً من جهود أوسع نطاقاً للسيطرة على الحركات الاجتماعية المثيرة للجدل واحتوائها ضمن وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي. يتحدى هذا المشهد المتطور الثنائيات التقليدية - مثل البوب مقابل الأندرجراوند، والرقمي مقابل المادي، والتجاري مقابل المستقل، والمحلي مقابل العالمي - في إطار ثقافي تحدده اتجاهات إعادة التوزيع، والتموضع الاجتماعي السياسي المحير، والسيطرة المركزة لصناعة الموسيقى الرقمية.

الكلمات المفتاحية | الحدية، الاحتكار المفرط، كايروكي، مسار إجباري، بلاك ثياما، الانشقاق، الاستقطاب الإلكتروني، الكهروشعبي، المهرجانات، الموسيقى المستقلة، منصات البث الرقمي DSPs، المانوسبير، النيوبوليستية. القومية الجديدة، النسوية

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