

Article

Instagram as a Tool to Counter the Image of Countries as Unsafe: the Case of *#LiveLoveLebanon*

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Abstract

The emergence of social media has created new means of intercultural engagement. On Instagram, there is a growing trend of travel pages and travel bloggers whose aim is to introduce and share the highlights of the destinations they travel to. Locals in these destinations also wish to portray their country positively and promote it as a tourist destination, particularly in certain countries of the Middle East where there is the added challenge of an 'unsafe' image to combat. This research focuses on Lebanon to find out to what extent Instagram can be considered a means to this end, and if users who come across depictions of Lebanon on Instagram perceive the country as a potential tourist destination. The study draws on Said's conception of the 'other' (1978), Hall's system of representations (1980) and Pieterse's hybridization paradigm (1996), and it used a mixed methods approach combining surveys and semi-structured interviews with Canadian participants. Findings broadly show that while Instagram can effectively be considered a tool to counter the 'unsafe' image of Lebanon, and while the country may be branded as a potential tourist destination to users who come across favorable depictions of it, algorithm restrictions limit the potential for such contents to fulfill their potential as they do not always reach users who perceive Lebanon to be an 'unsafe' place.

Keywords: Instagram, representation, Lebanon, destination image, orientalism.

Introduction

Since its launch in 2010, Instagram has become an immensely popular platform for brand marketing and self-promotion. More recently, travel pages through which influencers share pictures of their favorite destinations to vacation in have taken the platform by storm (“25 Awesome Instagram Travel,” n.d.). Inhabitants of these places have followed suit, seeking to portray their city, region or country positively and promote them as tourist destinations. In a region like the Middle East, such place-branding efforts seem geared to countering the image of destinations that have been depicted as dangerous by Western media (Avraham, 2008) and/or are considered ‘unsafe’ due to ongoing crises. Governments too have sought to leverage initiatives using social media platforms and hashtags to encourage tourism in their country and to frame its ‘destination image’, that is, its perception as shaped “by tourists’ prior knowledge, experiences, commercial and noncommercial information sources, and, in today’s media environment, content generated by tourists themselves” (Stepchenkova & Li, 2014, p. 4). Examples include #Live.Love.Syria, a crowd-sourced initiative that aims to showcase a positive image of Syria; #MyDubai, which was launched to depict the lives of Dubai’s residents and visitors (The National, 2014); and #LiveLoveLebanon, a campaign ostensibly led by regular Lebanese citizens who use social media interactions to show what life in Lebanon is “actually” like and “to show what most foreigners are not aware of” (“Live Love Lebanon,” 2014).

#LiveLoveLebanon is of particular interest. Since its launch in 2014, it has gained over 412,344 followers on Facebook and 666,000 followers on Instagram with over 1.8 million hashtag mentions, seemingly to challenge traditional media depictions of Lebanon as a war-torn country. For example, the TV show *Homeland* has portrayed it as a hub of terrorist activity and has depicted its most famous party street, Hamra street, as one that harbors terrorists, even resulting in a threat by the Lebanese tourism minister to sue the show in 2012 (“*Homeland* angers minister,” 2012). The show is one of many that exemplify the concept of ‘Orientalism’ and the ‘othering’ of Middle Eastern people through depictions that portray them as ‘exotic,’ ‘backwards,’ and ‘barbaric’ (Said, 1978). When social media users choose to share posts depicting a different Lebanon, they can simply brand them with the LiveLoveLebanon hashtag through a caption or ‘mention’, thus adding them to an extensive catalogue of pictures, stories, and/or videos that aim to portray a genuine and positive image of the country

and to reveal “its hidden beauties on an international scale” (“Live Love Lebanon,” 2014). But are such initiatives effective in changing the public’s perception?

Destination image and social media

Said (1978) coined the term Orientalism and he explained how it has been used as a “Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (p. 3). What Said refers to as the ‘other’ indicates the Orient as seen and depicted from the West’s perspective – dangerous and ‘unsafe’ – essentially, a threat to Western safety and prosperity. Alsultany looked at the increase of “positive” depictions of Arabs in U.S. Television after 9/11 (Alsultany, 2013, p. 161) and the rate of crime and discrimination against Arabs in the U.S., which rose exponentially (p. 161). She argues that these representations rationalize the need to push forward racist policies through “simplified complex representations,” which counter a negative depiction with a positive one and are meant to “challenge or complicate earlier stereotypes, yet contribute to a multicultural or postrace illusion” (Alsultany, 2013, p. 162). These stereotypes sometimes include an image of Arab women as oppressed and passive. Indeed, a range of studies have focused on the representation of Arab women by traditional media outlets following 9/11 and found an increase in that type of depiction (Eltantawy, 2007; Dahlan, 2011; Al-Hejin, 2015; Mishra, 2007), particularly that of the Hijab, which is taken as a sign of oppression of women (Eltantawy, 2007; Falah, 2005). For his part, Karim argues that depictions in the U.S. media have influenced the content of their Canadian counterpart (as cited in Herman, 2001).

Many studies have focused on the possibility to alter the image of places that have been considered ‘unsafe’ due to ongoing crises such as natural disasters and armed conflict. The concept of ‘place branding’ has been deployed to define a “distinct identity that includes functional, emotional, and sensual layers” (Avraham and Ketter, 2008, p. 197). Avraham (2013) distinguishes between strategies that can benefit “organizations that have undergone an immediate crisis” (p. 1353), and the need for strategies that can allow destinations in the Middle East to counter their ‘unsafe’ image, which have been shaped by long lasting crises and negative depictions in the media. To better understand how tourism marketing affects tourists’ perceptions of destinations and incentive to travel to them, studies have distinguished between the “country image” and the “destination image” of a country (Mossberg and Kleppe,

2005). Mossberg and Kleppe (2005) define the concept of country image as “simply all associations linked with the country” (p. 497), while Crompton (1979) defines the image of a destination in terms of its touristic value as “the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impression that a person has of a destination” (p. 18).

Although some, such as Kunzick (1997), have argued that once individuals have internalized certain images and stereotypes of a place, it is difficult for leaders and citizens to produce a new perception that outsiders might have, it is worth considering the role social media might play in this respect – particularly since, as Qutub (2013) argues, an effective way to counteract negative images associated with Arab women and men is for outsiders to learn about “the ‘other’ from the other’s perspective” (p. 152). There are countless “studiously crafted personality profiles” of individuals (Campbell et al., 2006, p. 425) on Instagram that use hashtags such as #LiveLoveLebanon to generate attention to their pages, craft an image of themselves, and perhaps promote tourism in Lebanon through these depictions. However, the role of content creators and message spreaders is not limited to locals in the destination country – tourists and/or visiting immigrants from said country also tend to post their representations of it. When this happens, they also spread the campaign message within their own social networks (Avraham, 2012, p. 292).

Research is limited when it comes to representations on Instagram as a strategy for nation and place branding, but some studies have endeavored to address this gap in knowledge (Uzunoglu, 2016; Shuqair & Cragg, 2017; Smith, 2018; Molinillo, Cabanillas, Sanchez & Buhalis, 2018). Uzunoglu (2016) found that a collaborative effort across all sectors of a city and/or country is required to achieve the level of exposure desired for city branding on the platform (Uzunoglu, 2016). Others, such as Smith (2018), view users, particularly “world travelers” on Instagram, as capable to appropriate and assign meaning to a place through negative representation (p. 173). In contrast, authors such as Molnillo et al. (2018) and Shuqair & Cragg (2017) found that such online representations can increase the intent to visit such destinations.

On the whole, despite geographic distance among individuals in different towns, cities, countries and even continents, social media-led campaigns such as #LiveLoveLebanon can play a similar role to that of traditional media in heightening the awareness that said individuals have of each other (Anderson, 1983) despite the

likelihood that most of them will never know one another. To the extent that these new tools are used to promote images of Arabs and Islam that contrast with those typically put forward by traditional media, one might even argue, following Pieterse's (1996) views on interconnectedness and hybridization, that they can help to counteract cultural differentialism. However, Pieterse's hope for social media interconnectedness is only realizable if users can actively seek out relevant contents and, conversely, if campaigns such as #LiveLoveLebanon are able to reach target audiences who would not otherwise be exposed to such content, thus penetrating the 'filter bubbles' (Pariser, 2011) and 'echo chambers' (Sunstein, 2017) engendered by the algorithms that tailor content to users' existing online behaviors. So, while social media may constitute an obstacle to achieving interconnectedness, it paradoxically may enable to counter the 'unsafe' images of places such as Lebanon when used specifically for the purpose of challenging perceived stereotypes and misrepresentations.

Based on the considerations above, this paper asks: to what extent can Instagram help to combat the image of Lebanon as unsafe? And do users who come across depictions of Lebanon on Instagram perceive the country as a destination they would consider visiting?

Representation, hybridization and 'the other'

As outlined above, Said's conception of 'the other' enables a thematic framing of the way Western users perceive Lebanon and Lebanese individuals when they are exposed to relevant depictions on Instagram. Furthermore, Hall's encoding/decoding model is useful in analyzing social media representations through audience members' perspectives and it acknowledges the role that individuals' cultural backgrounds and own experiences play in shaping how they translate these representations. Hall also acknowledges the transformation of a raw event into a 'communicative event' when the producer encodes it and it takes on 'message form' or 'form of appearance' (Hall, 1980, p. 164). Hall's take on semiotic and discursive representation also pushes things one step further from how these representations are interpreted and read, to how they can have an emotional and political impact on audiences since they can influence the way they think, feel, and act about a certain topic (Hall, 1997).

Lastly, this study's significance is highlighted by the potential for representations by the 'other' to contrast traditional media depictions of the 'other.' In the context of this study, the former can be seen to foster stronger intercultural communication between Lebanese individuals or even Lebanese diasporic communities and users who might have previously internalized such stereotypes. This is why the hybridization paradigm is used to look at the 'intercultural mingling' between Lebanese individuals and other users while acknowledging their marginalization as a result of cultural differentialism (Pieterse, 1996). However, if depictions of the 'other' do not reach their target audience, then this intercultural mingling might not be achievable. As such, Pariser's (2011) 'echo chamber' is useful to analyze if users who come across depictions of Lebanon on Instagram are exposed to them as a result of their interest in it, or if the algorithm proposes such content regardless of their interest and/or disinterest in it.

Method

The study employed a mixed methods approach combining a survey and semi-structured interviews of Canadian participants. The former aimed to gain general insight into participants' use of social media and Instagram, views of Lebanon, and the ways through which they formed them, while the latter featured a sample of survey respondents whose perceptions were further explored.

Participants were identified as Canadian citizens and/or immigrants who have lived most of their lives in Canada, and whose media exposure would consist mainly of traditional Canadian and U.S. outlets. I limited the population size in Canada to that of Ottawa, which 14% of Canadians with Lebanese origins call home. Participants were recruited through the University of Ottawa's Integrated System for Participation in Research (ISPR). Interviewees had to be regular users of Instagram and familiar with its features to generate an insightful discussion and provide reliable qualitative data. They were also required to have some general knowledge about Lebanon to talk about it with confidence and ease. The online survey using SurveyMonkey was completed by 169 respondents in winter 2019¹, 15 of whom signed up for the interview portion of

¹ Data collection was completed in May 2019. At the time, the financial crisis which has overtaken Lebanon since September 2019 had not started. Since then, Lebanese people have taken to Instagram

the study. Using a semi-structured format, the in-person interviews took place over the span of two weeks. Each interview was audio recorded and was manually transcribed. Transcriptions were thematically coded.

Interviewees were shown #LiveLoveLebanon Instagram posts to gain insight into their beliefs about the country and to explore representations of Lebanon on Instagram in more detail. While scrolling through the hashtag #LiveLoveLebanon, a clear pattern of themes emerged. Posts that depicted nature and scenic landscapes, popular religious monuments, touristic activities, authentic cuisine, nightlife, and pictures of Lebanese individuals in these various locations were predominant. I chose at least 3 posts under each section to show the interviewees. My choice for the posts I selected was based on their level of popularity, number of likes (at least 50-100 likes), and some comments. Based on these criteria, I determined that they would be able to elicit conversation with interviewees.

Results and analysis

Throughout this section, interview excerpts are presented alongside survey results to provide depth and context. Pseudonyms are used when referring to interviewees.

Representations of Lebanon and Lebanese people

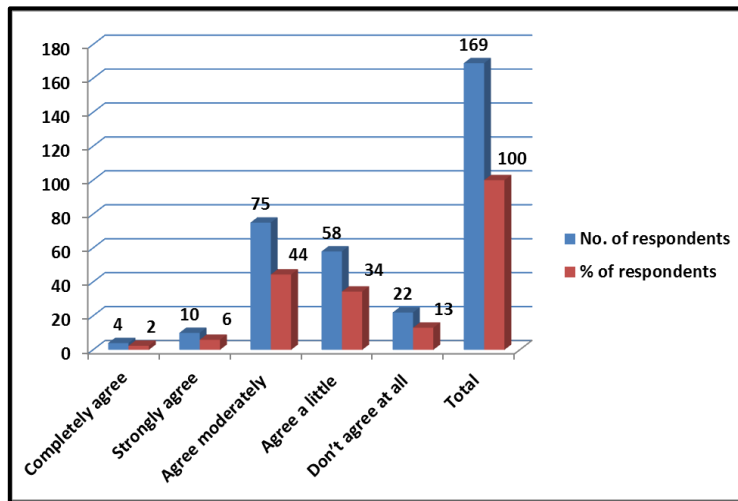
Survey respondents were asked about their understanding, beliefs, and perceptions of Lebanon. First, when asked how they would fare in a conversation about the cultural and social aspects of Lebanon, most respondents claimed to have little knowledge (40%) or no knowledge at all (36%). A combined 24 % of respondents claim to have moderate, advanced or expert knowledge of the country.

to express their frustrations and represent their revolution against the government. Thus, currently, users who are exposed to content on Instagram depicting Lebanon might have different views or beliefs of the country than participants of the study. Thus, the chosen cohort might not be representative of current views anymore. Participants' views since data collection was completed might have also changed. However, their views at the time remain timely and relevant given the study's goal to find out the extent to which Instagram can be considered a tool to counter the 'unsafe' image of countries such as Lebanon and if users who come across such depictions consider the country to be a potential tourist destination.

Modernization

Respondents were asked about their level of agreement with the statement: Lebanon is a country that has yet to modernize. Most respondents (79%) either moderately agreed (44%) or agreed a little (34%). A small percentage of respondents strongly or completely agreed (8%), and 13% of respondents did not agree with the statement at all.

Figure 1: Lebanon is a country that has yet to modernize



Interviewees elaborated upon modernity and/or modernization in Lebanon by linking it to ideology in Lebanon; the ‘open-mindedness’ of Lebanese families and/or people, Lebanese women in relation to their families and/or household; the religious, political and conflict situation pertaining to Lebanon. The cautious/ambivalent responses to the survey question can perhaps be explained by the fact that the notion of modernity is taken as relative: a few interviewees seem to define and compare the level of modernity in Lebanon to that of neighboring countries and/or Canada. Thus, Lebanon is more modern than the former in certain aspects but, when compared to Canada, it does not have as much to offer.

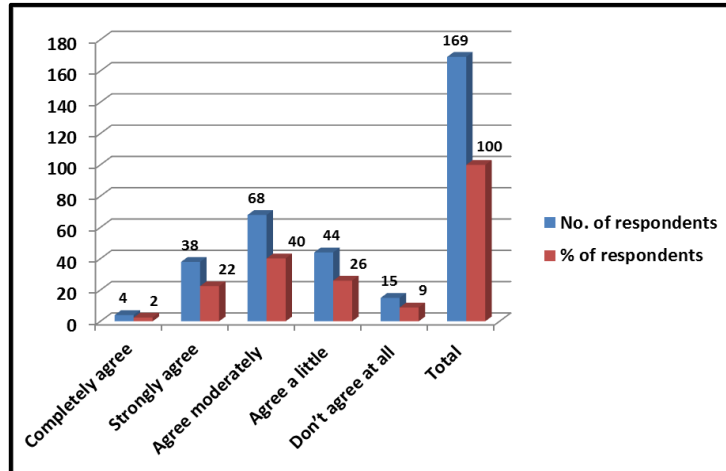
Women

A majority of respondents (52%) strongly (26%) or moderately (26%) agreed with the statement: Women in Lebanon do not enjoy the same freedoms as Western women. Interview talk echoed survey responses that reflected an agreement with the above statement. The reasons for that were various, such as: restricted/conservative parents and/or families; cultural differences; religious differences; different personalities and/or mannerisms; lack of women's rights. However, many interviewees clarified that the reasons for which these restrictions might apply are not all negative or related to the oppression of Arabic women, but rather, with different social norms that are not always seen as normal by people in Canada or the West.

Conflict and religion

Survey respondents' perceptions of conflict and religion in Lebanon were deemed important to assess given the focus of traditional media outlets on these themes. An overwhelming majority of respondents (89%) moderately agreed (27%), agreed a little (37%), or surprisingly did not agree at all (25%) with the statement: Lebanon is a war-torn country. Responses were almost equally split when it came to the statement: conflict in Lebanon is due to various religious affiliations. 24% of respondents strongly or completely agreed with the statement, and 26% agreed a little with it. However, most respondents (40%) moderately agreed with the statement and only 9% did not agree with it at all.

Figure 2: Conflict in Lebanon is due to various religious affiliations.



On religion, interviewees are generally aware of the presence of the two main religions in Lebanon: Islam and Christianity. Interviewees had varying perceptions about the impact of religious differences on conflict in Lebanon. 40% of interviewees think Lebanon either does not have, or has less conflict in comparison to neighboring countries. Many of these interviewees think conflict in neighboring countries is more pertinent because they know/have heard more about these countries' state of unrest either through word of mouth, traditional media depictions, or personal experience. Furthermore, interviewees highlighted the lack of conflict in Lebanon. Particularly, Nick mentioned the lack of representation of conflict in Lebanon in the news. As a result, he perceives Lebanon as peaceful. He explained:

“Whenever I listen to the Middle East in conflict over there I usually think, their big stories are in Israel or Egypt now or before because of all the political conflicts, but I have not heard much about Lebanon.”

Tourism and Safety

Positive statements in the form of Likert-scale questions addressed touristic possibilities in Lebanon such as nightlife, scenic landscapes, authentic cuisine, the ‘open-mindedness’ of Lebanese society, and the desire to visit Lebanon. Less than a quarter of respondents (23%) completely or strongly agreed with the statement: Lebanon is an appealing tourist destination, whereas most respondents (62%) agreed

moderately or a little. A small but significant percentage of respondents (16%) did not agree at all with the statement.

However, when it comes to Lebanon's natural beauty, most respondents (85%) completely, strongly, or moderately agreed with the statement: Lebanon has beautiful, natural, scenic locations. 12% of respondents agreed a little with the statement, and only 4% of respondents did not agree with it at all. When asked about their perceptions of safety in Lebanon, most respondents (68%) moderately agreed (31%) or agreed a little (37%) with the statement: Lebanon is an unsafe country. 9% of respondents either completely (1%) or strongly (8%) agreed with the statement, and 23% did not agree with it at all.

To gain insight into their perceptions of safety and tourism in Lebanon, interviewees were asked what they would do when in Lebanon and if there were activities they would avoid. While all interviewees expressed excitement at the prospect of tourism in Lebanon, safety concerns were brought up by most (10 out of 15) interviewees. However, interviewees clarified that their safety concerns about Lebanon have little or nothing to do with any preconceived perceptions they might have about the country. In an example, Gaëlle explained that "all countries have bad areas" and she would look into those. One interviewee in particular admitted to those prejudices and attributes some of her safety concerns to them. While Lara is interested in the Mediterranean ocean and ruins located in Lebanon, she said she "would avoid anywhere near the borders just because of my preconceived notions."

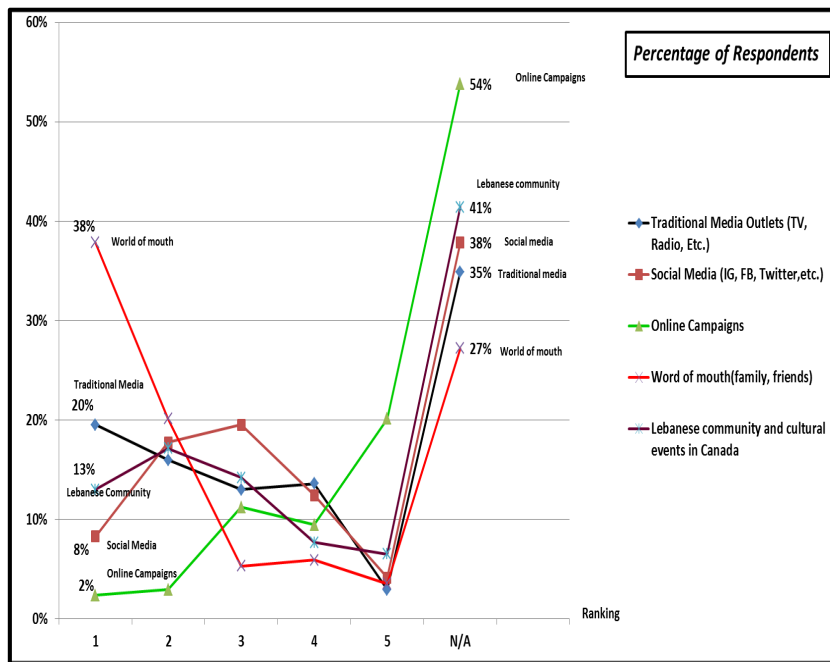
Safety concerns also came to light when interviewees discussed the reliability of #LiveLoveLebanon posts. Interviewees had concerns that safety in Lebanon may be misrepresented or overlooked. For example, Lara noted that the positive depictions make her think about wanting to go there even though she is "still a little bit nervous" because she is "holding on to things" she's "seen on TV and other traditional news outlets rather than social media."

As shown in the foregoing, respondents have strong views when it comes to Lebanon that seem to be a result of exposure to various media depictions and/or interpersonal communication. The following section will focus on studying depictions and media that have most informed their perceptions and beliefs.

Origins of representations of Lebanon

When asked to rank the means through which they have formed their opinions and beliefs about Lebanon, most respondents (38%) claimed that word of mouth has had the biggest impact on their views, followed by traditional media outlets (20%), “Lebanese community and cultural events in Canada” (13%), “social media (IG, FB, Twitter, etc.)” (8%), and finally, “online campaigns” (2%). Thus, it seems that half of respondents (50%) claim to have formed their views of Lebanon through some form of direct social experience and/or interaction, and 50% claim to have formed it through exposure to various media.

Figure 3: Which of the following options have most impacted your views and opinion on Lebanon (rank the following options in order of preference, 1 being the option that has influenced your opinion and image on Lebanon the most)?

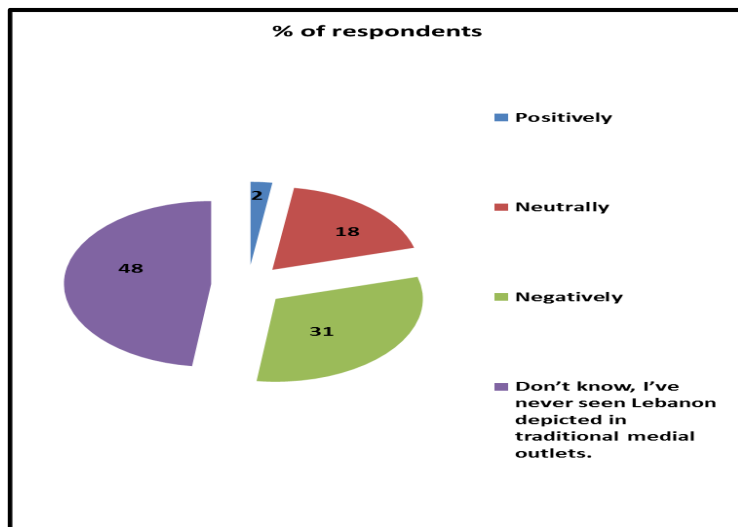


Traditional media outlets and news

When asked how they think Lebanon is typically depicted in traditional media outlets, most respondents (48%) chose the option: don’t know, I’ve never seen Lebanon depicted in traditional media outlets. This number might reflect respondents’

lack of traditional media content consumption. More plausibly, as stated in the Method section, it might also reflect a point in time when Lebanon was going through a period of stability (the data collection was completed in Spring 2019, prior to the financial crisis that the country is currently going through) and was thus not much covered in traditional media outlets. Whatever the case, 31% respondents think Lebanon is depicted negatively in traditional media outlets, 18% think it is depicted neutrally, and only 2% think it is depicted positively.

Figure 4: In your opinion, how is Lebanon typically depicted in traditional media outlets (i.e. TV, movies, radio, newspapers)?



Of the 52% of respondents who have seen Lebanon depicted in traditional media outlets, most (85%) think the depictions are somewhat, or a little accurate. Only 9% of respondents think the depictions are not accurate at all. Most of those respondents (63%) also think that traditional media outlets have somewhat, or a little changed their image and opinion on Lebanon. A significant number (19%) think traditional media outlets have changed their image and opinion on Lebanon a lot.

Many interviewees could not remember specific instances of seeing Lebanon depicted in traditional media outlets. Others likened the climate and geographical attributes of Lebanon to other Middle Eastern countries. When scrolling through the #LiveLoveLebanon posts, the presence of snow in Lebanon surprised Gaëlle since she expects weather in Lebanon to be similar to other Middle Eastern countries with

generally warm weather. Nour, who is originally from Trinidad, is under the impression that Lebanon includes a desert. When she came across a picture showing trees and streams in Lebanon, she said that it's "greener" than what she associates in her mind with the Middle East because she just thinks of "sand."

Thus, while interviewees could not remember specific instances of seeing Lebanon depicted in the news, their perceptions of Lebanon seem to be informed by other Arab countries' depictions in traditional media outlets and are thus considered one and the same. However, do the negative depictions of other Arabic countries in the news impact the potential for Lebanon to be seen as a destination country by people in countries such as Canada? According to Gabriela, sometimes they do. As a first generation Canadian originally from Lebanon, she said that some of her friends still get surprised when she tells them she is visiting Lebanon because "they don't necessarily know what it's like" and think "it's supposed to be a complete war zone."

The preceding sections have shown that respondents and interviewees' knowledge of Lebanon is either anecdotal (word of mouth), or based on depictions of other Middle Eastern countries by traditional media outlets that show the region as war-torn and thus promote the 'unsafe' image of these places. Since this knowledge is limited – unless respondents have direct ties to Lebanon – Instagram's ability to show a different side of the story might be deemed promising.

Social media and Instagram use

Participants were asked to rank in order of preference the social media applications they use most in a typical day. The applications proposed as answer choices were Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, Twitter, and Snapchat, given the popularity of these platforms in recent years. The number of respondents that chose Instagram as number one was overwhelmingly higher (55%) than all other platforms combined (45%). The second most popular choice was Snapchat (25%), followed by Facebook (8%), then Twitter (6%), and lastly Reddit (5%).

Respondents were also asked about the Instagram profiles that constitute the bulk of their followings among: friends, family, acquaintances, social media influencers, celebrities (movie stars, singers, etc.). The majority of respondents (72%) said they

mainly follow friends. 6% mainly follow acquaintances, while social media influencers and celebrities both garnered 5% of responses. Lastly, a mere 2% of respondents claimed their family constitute the bulk of their followings.

However, to what extent does the Instagram algorithm affect users' exposure to depictions on the platform? The following sections elaborates on its impact.

Instagram algorithm and control over content

When asked if they feel they can control the kind of content they see and are exposed to on the platform, most respondents (66%) strongly or moderately agreed with the idea that they can control what they are exposed to, while 12% completely agreed, 18% agreed a little, and only 4% did not agree with the statement at all. Many interviewees expressed that they can actively control the content that they see on Instagram based on their likes and dislikes. Sarah explained that because she tends "to like the same things over and over again," she gets exposed to the same kind of content. Other interviewees feel that they exercise control under certain circumstances. Matt believes he can manipulate what he sees on Instagram based on his likes and dislikes. However, Instagram's algorithm still recommends content that he might not be interested in. In contrast, other interviewees believe that the role they play in controlling the content they are exposed to on Instagram can only be passive. For example, Jenny said that it's never really what she "wants to see" and that she has to scroll through content she does not care about to get to what really interests her. Thus, interviewee responses indicate that while Instagram users receive content recommendation on the platform's explore page, the more they explicitly search for content they are interested in, the more it shows up as a recommended. However, content on their personal newsfeed is dictated by posts and stories shared by users they follow.

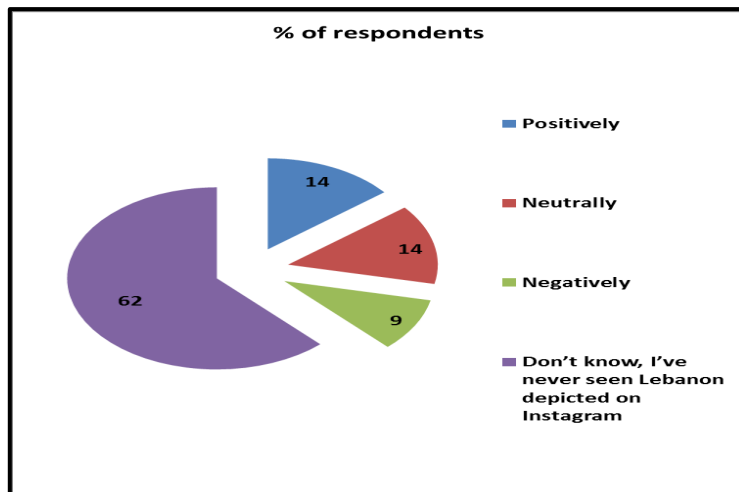
When asked about the extent to which they think Instagram allows them to discover new communities, places, and people that they would not know about otherwise, and using a 5-point Likert scale, 78% of respondents completely (20%), strongly (30%), or moderately (37%) agreed with the statement. A combined of 22% agreed a little or did not agree at all with the statement. Respondents were also asked

about the extent to which they agree that, compared to traditional media outlets (TV, radio, movies, newspapers), Instagram allows users to better discover new communities, places, and people. Most respondents (81%) agreed moderately, strongly, or completely. This was further highlighted by the fact that most survey respondents (87%) answered yes to whether they have considered traveling to a new destination after discovering it on Instagram. A significant portion of the respondents (13%) also admitted to having already travelled to a new destination after discovering it on Instagram.

Lebanon on Instagram

When asked how they think Lebanon is typically depicted on Instagram, most respondents (62%) chose the response option: don't know, I've never seen Lebanon depicted on Instagram. However, the data suggests that when the hurdle of access is overcome and individuals come across such images, the story is different. Indeed, of the 38% of respondents who have seen Lebanon depicted on Instagram, more respondents (14%) think they were positive than those who think the same of traditional media depictions (2%). 14% of respondents think the depictions are neutral, and only 10% of respondents think the depictions are negative.

Figure 5: In your opinion, how is Lebanon typically depicted on Instagram?



Out of all the respondents who have seen Lebanon depicted on Instagram, most (72%) think the depictions are somewhat, or a little accurate. However, more

respondents (27%) think that Instagram depictions of Lebanon are completely or a lot accurate than those who think the same of traditional media depictions (22%). Most of those respondents (67%) think Instagram has changed their image and opinion of Lebanon somewhat or a little, and 14% think it has changed it a lot. Furthermore, the number of survey respondents who claimed to have seen depictions of Lebanon through the #LiveLoveLebanon campaign was less than half (38%). As for the interviewees, only one confirmed having seen depictions of Lebanon through the #LiveLoveLebanon campaign prior to the individual meetings. However, given the ease with which one may caption a post with the #LiveLoveLebanon hashtag, more interviewees that confirmed to have seen depictions of Lebanon on the platform might have forgotten whether these posts were indeed part of the #LiveLoveLebanon catalogue on the platform.

Interviewees shared that when they come across posts depicting Lebanon, most of the time, these posts depict their Lebanese friends' travel there. Rarely, they appear on their newsfeed as recommended by Instagram. Sometimes, interviewees even claimed they have seen Lebanon depicted on Instagram but not on traditional media outlets. For example, Gaëlle said she follows her sister's Lebanese friend on Instagram and that "the only time" she sees Lebanon "is when she's there in the summer and she's posting pictures or stories on it."

Some interviewees also mentioned how interacting with posts depicting Lebanon increases the likelihood that Instagram will recommend them more often. Lara explained the process: "I think people go in the summer and I have a few Lebanese friends. So sometimes in social media if I interact with people who like photos of Lebanon or things about Lebanon, they'll show up on my feed." Thus, interviewees' responses generally indicate that users can be exposed to content depicting Lebanon on Instagram if they have a Lebanese friend and/or following who posts about the country, or through interactions with content related to Lebanon that increase the likelihood that such posts will appear on their feeds.

Interviewees also gave varying responses on how Lebanon is represented on Instagram and how that sometimes differs from how it is depicted in the news. Lara said it is depicted "more positively." Other interviewees brought up the personal side of Instagram depictions because Lebanese users can provide a glimpse into the

touristic activities that the country has to offer and can show what life is 'actually' like there. The trend of self-promotion or desire to portray oneself positively on Instagram inevitably translates to portraying one's surroundings, environment, and country in the same manner in order to increase one's likeability through the platform, whether intended or not. However, interviewees are aware of the trend to positively frame Instagram depictions and to cast a rosy view of them, and as such are skeptical of their reliability. Indeed, Tina expressed appreciation about the positive representations but is not hopeful that users would go out of their way to look up a hashtag such as #LiveLoveLebanon on their own. She explained: "They already have a bad perception in their mind because that's what the media told them or even if they see it on social media."

Discussion

Representations of Lebanon, Lebanese people, and the Other

When expressing their knowledge and perceptions/beliefs related to Lebanon, respondents tend to compare aspects of modernity and safety in Lebanon to those in Canada, and/ or neighboring countries in the Middle East. But why do respondents choose to express their knowledge of Lebanon by comparing it to neighboring countries in the first place? Is it because they make up for their lack of knowledge of Lebanon by drawing on their general beliefs about Middle Eastern countries? It seems to be the case as respondents tend to draw upon the stereotypical image of the 'Orient' to inform their beliefs and perceptions of Lebanon.

Even though interviewees seem to be mostly ambivalent about topics such as modernity, safety, conflict and/or religion in Lebanon, they claim that news reports have a tendency to depict the Middle East as war-torn and as such fail to show the other side of the story. Furthermore, when discussing the #LiveLoveLebanon posts, interviewees express their surprise at seeing depictions of modernity in Lebanon on Instagram. Although they aim to seem neutral or unafraid about Lebanon, they still use terms such as 'rural' or 'desert-like' that relegate its image as less than countries such as Canada. Interestingly, the lack of negative or stereotypical depictions of Lebanon on Instagram reveals the respondents' expectations in this respect. Indeed, interviewees are not completely trustful of depictions that only represent the touristic

aspects of the country or the beautiful landscapes. They explain that they would conduct thorough research before they consider travelling to the country. This suggests that despite the interviewees' general neutral disposition, they are still wary of Lebanon, expecting to find information that will confirm their prejudices about it, and associating it with the general political situation in the region whether real or perceived (per traditional media depictions). To that extent, regardless of the method through which respondents form their beliefs of Lebanon, its image is merged with that of other Middle Eastern countries which impacts the knowledge they claim to have of it directly or indirectly.

According to Said, the digital era also played a role in reinforcing the stereotypes "by which the Orient is viewed" (p. 26), and as such reinforces a culture of racism and dehumanization of Arabs and Islam in the West. As this research has shown, Instagram plays a small – yet significant – part in how users of the current digital age are or can be exposed to representations of places such as Lebanon. More respondents (14%) believe that depictions of Lebanon on Instagram are positive than those who believe the same of traditional media outlets depictions (2%). Interviewees who are exposed to Lebanon on Instagram claim to have seen it through friends' travels to the country, and as such are exposed to its touristic features and landscapes.

Furthermore, respondents tend to strongly agree with the idea that Instagram allows them to discover new communities, places, or people, and that it does so better than traditional media outlets can. Interviewees contextualize this statement by explaining how Instagram can be used to share 'personal' stories and as such provide a glimpse into the side that news don't often venture to when depicting places such as Lebanon. Also, interviewees highlight the trend of positive self-promotion and promotion of one's environment by users and/or pages on the platform which, whether intended or not, dictates that users who come across such depictions will often see it represented positively. Thus, Said's claim about the digital era perpetuating the stereotypes by which people from the 'Orient' are seen can be challenged given that the new era seems to facilitate the opposite. If users are constantly exposed to depictions that humanize and give back agency to Lebanese users or users from neighboring Arab countries, then the stereotypes by which they are seen and the system of propaganda that perpetuates them could possibly be undermined. However, according to respondents, while the potential is there, it is still short of reaching its

target audience due to restrictive features such as Instagram's algorithm, which makes it difficult for such depictions to reach users who would not necessarily be looking for places such as Lebanon on the platform. Thus, Said's theory holds given that users who view Lebanon or Lebanese people through that lens of the 'other' would most likely not be exposed to the country on Instagram unless they search for it purposely, and/or their Lebanese acquaintances or friends happen to post depictions of the country on their feeds.

While interviewees praise personal and human representations on Instagram that challenge negative depictions, they claim they don't always provide the full picture of Lebanon and/or other places given their rosy spin on things, which is acknowledged as a feature of Instagram. This explains their wariness and choice to not fully trust these depictions and to turn to more traditional and 'factual' sources of representations when necessary, even though they might be negative. Also, those with Lebanese friends and/or acquaintances are further exposed to alternative anecdotes and information regarding the country. According to participants, this information is mostly positive and it is key to their knowledge and beliefs about Lebanon. But their responses show that it is limited in nature and mostly associated with the person they are interacting with at the time, or the posts shared by that person on Instagram. Interviewee responses show that when such interactions are seen as primary sources of knowledge regarding Lebanon, they can lead to generalizations and limited views of the country. However, regardless of the means, it is clear that representations in different media – whether social or traditional – impact perceptions of new places and communities. As a result, respondents' exposure to Lebanon through either word of mouth, traditional media outlets, and/ or Instagram influence their beliefs of the country regardless of the level of exposure, and none of these methods stands out as the single decisive influence on these perceptions.

Lebanon and system of representations

Hall distinguishes between the semiotic approach and the discursive approach, which both make up the system representations that dictate how a group of people represents themselves, and thus form the image by which they are seen. On a semiotic level, generally, traditional media outlets depict the Middle East as war-torn and 'unsafe.' However, interviewees' responses show that Instagram is more likely than the

former to depict places with 'unsafe' images as potential tourist destinations using personal stories and 'real' people. As Nick, puts it: "The shots they take show the beauty of the place and they show the different parts and things you can do there." Thus, such depictions correlate with the touristic products and attractions that people tend to associate with the 'destination image' of a country (Avraham and Ketter, 2008; Crompton, 1978).

Furthermore, the trend inherent to social media depicting oneself and surrounding environment in a positive manner contributes to depictions such as the ones described above. According to interviewees who have seen Lebanon depicted on the platform, more often than not, the country is represented as a tourist destination. Thus, on a semiotic level, it can be said that Instagram may contribute to counterbalance the 'unsafe' image usually associated with Lebanon and neighboring countries and promotes them as tourist destinations. However, by drawing on Hall's discursive approach, one can reveal respondents' struggles to decide whether they are more trustful of traditional media depictions or Instagram depictions. This dichotomy is present when respondents talk about depictions of Brazil, Venezuela, and Haiti in the news, which elicit fear of going to these places. However, with the personal, positive light that Instagram depictions shed on these places, users are more willing to accept that they might not be as 'unsafe' as shown on news. Mary, who is originally from Haiti, shared her perspective about its depiction in the news versus on social media and/or in person: "My country Haiti. It's always the bad stuff, it's ugly or dirty, and then when you see it in actual person or when friends go there and you're like 'oh it's so nice' like there is actually other sides but they always show the bad side."

The same can be said about Lebanon. The previous section has shown that respondents tend to associate their knowledge, perceptions, and beliefs regarding Lebanon by drawing on that of other neighboring countries in the Middle East. Also, 31% of respondents believe that traditional media depictions of Lebanon are negative. Furthermore, even when they claim not to have seen Lebanon depicted on traditional media outlets, they seem to assume that its depiction is negative based on that of the Middle East. Thus, if the respondents are exposed to images of Lebanon mainly through the news, their views are less likely to be positive. Effectively, Sarah articulates how people might base their perception of Lebanon on these representations:

“[...] Definitely on the news, I don’t think they have a really good depiction. Based on that people would be fearful of going to these places. There might be some people who think that all Arabs are the same so they might think a Lebanese person is they’re supposed to be a certain way and they are not actually like that.”

Thus, it seems that the discourse presented by traditional media outlets is more likely to have an impact and shape views than Instagram. In that case, is the influence – i.e. the politics – of traditional media outlets on its audiences deeply rooted? It seems to be the case. But could an algorithm ‘fix’ allow Instagram depictions of places such as Lebanon to gain power, meaning, and value if more users are exposed to them?

Instagram algorithm, hybridization and social media interconnectedness

As shown in the literature review, Pieterse (1996) champions the hybridization paradigm, which provides a solution to cultural differentialism (of which participants’ perceptions of Lebanon can be deemed an instance) and increases cultural awareness because it aims to remove the negative connotations associated with the former by making the ‘different’ accessible and, as a result, more understandable and relatable. This research has shown that this is effectively possible, but only to an extent. While some users might be skeptical of the validity and reliability of positive representations on Instagram, they are regardless present all over the platform.

As shown in the Instagram algorithm and control over content section, personalized feeds, profiles, and search tabs are tailored to show users content they are interested in. This is where Pieterse’s hope for social media interconnectedness is halted. As respondents explain, their exposure to places such as Lebanon is limited to posts from friends who happen to travel to the country. The depiction is positive and promotes the country as a tourist destination. But if users are not exposed to Lebanon on their personal feeds, don’t purposely search for Lebanon on the platform, and/or don’t interact with ‘Lebanese’ content that increases the chance of exposure to it, then they will most likely not come across depictions of Lebanon on the platform, nor any neighboring Middle Eastern country for that matter.

Thus, while one might acknowledge users as active agents (Katz et al., 1974) who are able to tailor content as they see fit, the fact remains that they are most likely stuck in an “echo chamber” (Pariser, 2011) made of components and depictions that

they will agree with and find pleasant. As a result, Pieterse's hybridization paradigm is partly achievable if/when users are exposed to countries such as Lebanon on Instagram. However, due to algorithm restrictions on Instagram that make it difficult for users with no interest in Lebanon, and/or direct or indirect ties to the country to come across depictions of it, campaigns such as #LiveLoveLebanon might find it difficult to reach their target audience through the platform and are possibly better off finding alternative ways and media to counter the 'unsafe' image of the country.

Conclusion

Instagram can effectively be used as a tool to combat the 'unsafe' image of Lebanon, given the accessibility of the platform, its user-friendly interface, the inherent positive associations with content and depictions, and the ability to showcase the touristic aspects of the country. However, while the country may come across as a likely tourist destination to users who happen to see depictions of the country on the platform through their acquaintances and/or friends, or because of an existing personal interest in Lebanon, the 'unsafe' image of the country may be undermined – but not fully refuted – since campaigns such as #LiveLoveLebanon can't fully reach the audiences whose perceptions would need to be changed in the first place, unless the hashtag is used by friends and/or followings of such users to caption posts they share of the country. Thus, the algorithm issue remains to be addressed if campaign such as #LiveLoveLebanon wish to have a bigger impact on users' perceptions of countries that have been marginalized and depicted as dangerous by traditional media outlets.

Indeed, while this article has focused on the algorithm aspect of Instagram, branding initiatives can include the use of influencers – among others – to promote said content to their followers who may not be exposed to it otherwise. In this article, survey and interview responses provided data as to the importance that users credit the platform with when it comes to discovering new places on the platform, their beliefs surrounding places such as Lebanon, and the ways through which they have formed these beliefs. However, future studies can focus on users who use Instagram to promote a positive image of their country to research the extent to which they find Instagram a useful tool to promote their country as a tourist destination to other users. Furthermore, the current study's methodology did not allow measurement of long-term changes in respondents' perception of Lebanon. Future studies can focus on an

experimental component and ask Canadian respondents to view #LiveLoveLebanon posts for an extended period of time and compare their perceptions of the country before and following the exposure period.

Lastly, Lebanese people have taken to Instagram to affect the narrative surrounding the recent financial collapse on the country. They have done so to provide other users with the 'real' story surrounding the crisis, and as an alternative to 'fake' news being disseminated by the country's traditional media outlets. Thus, while to date, initiatives such as #LiveLoveLebanon have aimed to show the positive and touristic aspects of the country, it seems that Lebanese users don't refrain from depictions that might show the country in a state of turmoil to the rest of the world in times of need. As such, in the future, it will be interesting to watch out for the impact of such depictions on Instagram users and if/how they differ to traditional media depictions of the same financial crisis.

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