



Songs from Egyptian Slums to Media

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Abstract

Mahraganat is a new genre of songs in Egypt with Arabic and Western music besides strange lyrics. This genre is influencing and being influenced by cultural, social, economic, political and technological changes especially after 2011 revolution. It has started in slums in Cairo and has gone viral among Egyptians especially the youth even between high and middle social classes. Mahraganat is considered a new phenomenon that needs to be studied and understood. The research study applied Bordieu's cultural capital theory and Peterson's cultural omnivore theory to explain the popularity of Mahraganat songs. The researcher conducted a survey of 100 Egyptian university students from rich districts in Cairo. The results show that Mahraganat is an example of the shift from univore taste to omnivore taste among youth from high social classes. Also, mass media and new media have been playing an important role in its widespread and popularity.

Keywords: Egyptian Mahraganat music and songs; Egyptian Shaabee songs; Egyptian songs; Egyptian media; Egyptian youth; Cultural capital; Cultural omnivore; Music and songs' tastes

Mahraganat Songs

"Mahraganat" is an Arabic word which means festivals. These songs have appeared in Madinat El Salam (Salam City) which is an hour outside Cairo and was built to be a place for 1992 earthquake homeless who were over 50,000 persons. DJ Sadat is considered one of the earliest and godfathers of Mahraganat songs. Sadat met with DJ Fifty, Figo and Amr Haha and created together this type of new and innovative music [1]. Mahraganat songs gain success and popularity on YouTube once they are uploaded [2].

Early artists and many new ones download free basic mixing programs from the internet to create their songs and music. They depend on peer to peer distribution through internet and flash drives. Their main revenues come from weddings. Their songs talk about the problems of poor citizens [3].

After 2011 revolution, Mahraganat has been gaining more audiences due to the political environment which was welcoming songs about social problems and was lacking distribution constraints. Singers Okka and Ortega have gained popularity in mainstream media and performed abroad [4].

Others consider DJ Figo is the pioneer of this genre. Most of the singers and artists are in their twenties. Egyptian Mahraganat and UK electronic music artists met through workshops and projects in both countries led by London Rinse FM and supported by the British Council in Egypt [5].

Mahraganat artists and singers showed their fear from western musicians who always come to meet them to discover their music and songs. In their opinions, if western musicians understand the secrets of Mahraganat music, they will develop it by making the music more appealing internationally through improved technologies and big production which can make Egyptian singers lose their success and uniqueness [6].

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

Songs play an influential role in our lives and in all domains. They present all phases and aspects of an individual's lives from birth till death [7]. Songs entertain, energize, change mood [8], express people's feelings and emotions [9], present social and cultural identity [10], record and transmit history from one generation to another [11] and promote for social causes and issues [12]. Also, they are used in education to teach language and knowledge [13]. Songs evoke nostalgia by being associated with personal memories, moments and events [14]. Political messages are found in songs to enhance nationalism [15], promote for political change and encourage protests and resistance [16]. Also, music therapy uses music and songs in treating patients to release tension [17]. Songs are considered an example of globalization of popular culture [18]. However, other researchers show negative impact of songs such as creating negative stereotypes about women [19] and encouraging violence [20].

Researchers have been trying to discover variables and factors of audiences' music and songs' tastes' preferences and consumption which have been explained from different angles

including economic status, social class, educational level, age, gender [21], personal characteristics, mood [22], culture, community, society, identity, lifestyle, place, ideology [23], race [24] and political orientation [10].

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and Richard Peterson's theory of cultural omnivore are popular in studying music and songs' tastes' preferences and consumption through focusing on social classes [25].

Cultural capital is developed by Pierre Bourdieu. He identifies three forms of cultural capital. Embodied cultural capital includes what we inherit from socializing through time which forms one's habitus. Objectified cultural capital consists of physical objects and materials which are owned and can be transmitted for economic profit or symbolic capital of the person. Institutionalized cultural capital is the recognition of the institution that the person belongs to and shows credentials and skills [26]. According to Bordieu, cultural consumption is influenced by class hierarchy [27]. Elites distance themselves from low class culture including musical genres [28]. Bordieu suggests that aesthetic taste is based on social stratification [29].

Cultural omnivore is developed by Richard Peterson and contradicts Bourdieu's cultural capital. Peterson suggests that people from high social class are omnivores who accept and appreciate different forms of culture [30]. Peterson's theory shows a transition of the upper class from snob taste to an omnivore taste [31]. Diversity of taste is a new indicator of higher classes' tastes. Peterson and his colleagues argue that highbrow individuals like more genres than middlebrow and low highbrow individuals [32]. Also, highbrow music forms can reach all individuals through mass media. Being prejudice is a sign of ignorance so educated people respect cultural expressions of others and appreciate different types of music [31].

Studies' findings show that elites do not show highbrow cultural taste but middlebrow to lowbrow [33]. Middle class consumers have omnivores' taste [34]. They like different music genres [35]. On the other hand, other studies show that omnivores are from higher status and younger, but univores are from lower status and older [36]. Also, results indicate that education and political tolerance are associated with musical tolerance [37]. It is found that upward mobility of the lower and middle classes brings their lowbrow tastes to upper classes [38]. Omnivores' taste is influenced by age, gender, class and race. For example, high class hierarchy, women and white people are more omnivores [39]. Moreover, advertising is playing a role in the shift from elites' taste to omnivores' taste in music and songs [40].

Globalization influences cultural and tastes' preferences and consumption especially through the dominance and widespread of western and American popular music [41]. There is an emergence of cosmopolitan cultural capital due to globalization [42].

Based on the relation between socioeconomic class and culture, Herbert J. Gans explains that low culture which belongs to lower class becomes popular culture through mass

media [43] due to mass media interest in consumer needs and economic profits [43,44].

Music is associated with youth culture and is considered part of young generations' identities and lifestyles [45]. Young people like new musical genres and are attracted to new waves of music [46]. They are usually adopting and attracted to new ideas and innovations [47]. Also, they prefer to be unique and different in their musical tastes [35].

Method

The researcher conducted a survey of 100 Egyptian university students from rich districts in Cairo.

Results and Discussion

Results showed that all the respondents which are university students from rich districts in Cairo like to listen to Mahraganat songs. Concerning parents' opinions about Mahraganat songs, most of university students (96%) said that their parents do not respect Shaabee local songs whether the songs are old or new. They do not like to listen to these songs due to their vulgar and unethical lyrics. In the past, Shaabee was considered a genre of songs and music of poor, low social class, slums and uneducated people in Egypt. Egyptians from high and middle social classes criticized these songs for lacking taste and sense. At the end of the 20th century, they have started to accept old Shaabee such as the singer Mohamed Adawaya whose songs in the past were considered a bad and low taste among people from high and middle social classes. However, in these last years, Adawaya songs are considered classical Arabic songs and authentic. After Adawaya, Shaabee singers have appeared and gained success because they looked modern such as Hakim who sang a duet with James Brown. Other singers were very local such as Shabaan Abdel Rahem who is accepted as being funny and folkloric. So, Egyptians had been used to accept the Shaabee songs at the end of the 20th century which helps the Mahraganat songs to be accepted in the 21st century. Moreover, Egyptian movies have a great impact on people by transmitting the norms and culture from a socioeconomic status to another. Movies in these last years have been presenting many Mahraganat singers.

The highest percentages of the sample (95%) heard and knew about Mahraganat songs after 2011 revolution.

The majority of university students from rich districts in Cairo heard and knew about Mahraganat songs for the first time through the following: trailers of Egyptian movies that are shown on private satellite channels (30%), Egyptian movies which show Mahraganat songs and singers (24%), television commercials and advertising that present Mahraganat singers (14%), friends (10%), YouTube (6%), Egyptian satellite channels that are specialized in Shaabee local songs and have appeared on Nile Sat after 2011 revolution (4%), tuk tuk (4%), minibuses (2%), taxi (2%), oriental café or restaurant (2%) and modern café or restaurant (2%).

It was found from the above results that university students heard and knew about Mahraganat songs from mass media. This showed the role of mainstream media in spreading music and songs from poor slums to other social classes.

The results showed that university students like Mahraganat music because of the following: new music that they want to discover and explore due to curiosity (82%), strange music (80%), very energetic music that encourages them to dance and move (80%) and sounds like western music that they are used to listen to (60%).

It was noticed from the above results that young generations like to discover any new phenomenon and are always attracted to different and unusual music and arts. Also, the students are used to listen to western music and songs.

Most of university students said that they like the music more than the lyrics but what they like in lyrics are their strange and weird ideas and words (96%), funny ideas (94%), courageous and free topics (82%), showing poor problems (80%), using Egyptian slang (76%) and making them learning poor areas' language and slang (70%).

Concerning the singers, university students mentioned that they like singers' energy and movements on stage which encourage audiences to dance (84%), innovative movements and dances (72%), appearances which look like western singers (68%), development of Shaabee songs (52%) and different and strange styles of singing (50%).

It was noticed that the students do not mention the voices of the singers when they talk about what they like about Mahraganat phenomenon.

It was found that one of the most element and factor of Mahraganat success is that it encourages youth to dance through its fast beats and energetic and dynamic movements of the singers. Some of the singers have dancers around them on stage. The Mahraganat songs are always performed with dances and movements which are a mix of break dance, belly dance, robotic dance, Moulad and Zar. Moulad is a celebration of the birthday of a religious person with special oriental dances and performances. According to superstition, Zar is a party with special rituals including music and dance to make the devil and bad spirits go out from a person.

Only 24% of university students in the sample said that they imitate the singers' looks and appearances.

The most favorite singers for university students are Okka and Ortega who sing together, Madafaya group, Amr Haha, Waza, Sadat, Shaheta Kareka and Alaa fifty cent. These results show that the famous Mahraganat singers are the ones who appear in mainstream media especially movies, television programs and ads. Also, Mahraganat songs are sometimes more famous than their singers.

The most favorite songs among university students are empty pillow, give you, I am strong, my slippers are lost, give me a kiss girl, hit her yes harass her no and the people want 5 pounds cell phone credit.

The issues and topics that are discussed in the songs which university students listen to are high prices, traffic jam, transportation problems, poverty, love and flirting, unemployment, success of revolution, man strength and power, taking drugs and insulting competitive singers.

According to university students, Mahraganat songs have gained acceptance and approval in their society and community especially among their friends and colleagues when the singers Okka and Ortega appeared in Mobinil, mobile and telecommunication company ad which is actually a song representing different areas in Egypt. In the ad, this genre of music represented Cairo and its people from middle and low social classes' districts.

It was found that university students are active audiences while dealing with Mahraganat songs. The majority of the respondents (96%) look for new songs on YouTube, (80%) download the songs from YouTube and internet on their devices such as mobile phones, IPad, IPod, Laptop and computers, (62%) share the songs with friends through social media especially Facebook, (52%) go to shops specialized in downloading these songs, (53%) attend a Mahraganat live show party and (7%) go to specialized shops to create personalized Mahraganat songs.

82% of the students prefer songs that are produced in big studios because the quality is better than low budget production. However, 18% prefer homemade songs which are produced at homes with personal computers because these songs lack the commercial style and reflect the original and natural examples of this genre.

75% of the respondents prefer to listen to the songs in Shaabee local environment such as festivals and weddings where the performances and singers are more natural, energetic, exciting and free without any restrictions. When the singers have the chance to perform in prestigious and distinguished places such as hotels or famous restaurants, they put certain limitations and restrictions on the lyrics and performances to suit these places.

Most of university students in the sample (74%) think that there is a relation between 2011 revolution and the success and widespread of Mahraganat songs. They said that the chaos in Egypt after 2011 revolution had been helping the songs and music to be introduced to other social classes due to weak government and regime to impose laws. For example, tuk tuk was forbidden in Cairo main streets, but was found in all streets after the revolution and was playing these songs. So, people from different classes listened to Mahraganat. Also, songs were produced, circulated and sold without following the legal procedures of production. After the revolution, many Shaabee songs' satellite television channels were illegally established and have been broadcasting Mahraganat songs.

The majority of the students (79%) mentioned that many of these songs are unethical due to the lyrics which include insults, taboos and weak vocabulary.

The highest percentages of the students (93%) play these songs everywhere through their devices while being in restaurants, cafes, clubs and universities.

It was found that 42% of the students believe that these songs deserve to be broadcasted on television and radio and to have their specialized stations.

Results showed that 55% of the students consider Mahraganat songs as the Egyptian version of techno and electronic music. While others (49%) think Mahraganat is the Egyptian Shaabee Rap. And, 5% believe that these songs are a new genre which is unique without being influenced by other kinds and genres of music.

Most of the students (65%) believe that Mahraganat songs will not be disappeared and will live forever among Egyptian audiences.

The majority of the students (51%) think that these songs are influenced by globalization and westernization because they consider Mahraganat music is a mix of many western genres and styles of music besides the western modern appearances of the singers and the way they dance and move. It can be noticed that western influences are found even on middle and low social classes in Egypt due to mainstream media especially television which heavily shows western media and culture. Also, Egyptian media content is influenced by the western media. Moreover, the internet has given Egyptian young generations the opportunity to be exposed to western and global culture, media and arts.

Not few students (41%) said that Mahraganat songs are deteriorating musical taste because the singers lack great strong and beautiful voices and the lyrics contain unethical ideas, taboos, insults and weak vocabulary.

A high percentage (66%) mentioned that these songs are an influence of the slums and poor on rich and elites. It is an example of how low and middle social classes impose their culture especially songs and music on upper classes. This can be explained by the influence of the revolution as mentioned above in other results and by the influence of mainstream media which want to attract the audiences of poor areas especially that they are great in numbers. So, movies attract them to go to movie theatres through Mahraganat songs and singers especially that Egyptians like cinema and it is one of their favorite ways of entertainment. Also, television ads try to get benefit from these songs and singers to promote products that middle and low social classes need and buy.

52% of the students consider Mahraganat songs as a revolution in music especially in Arabic Shaabee by mixing western and Arabic music. And, 78% consider Mahraganat is a rebel and revolt against old, traditions, culture and taboos. This is due to living in revolutions and protests' environment in Egypt in these last years.

Most of the students (82%) think that the gap between the rich and the poor will not be narrowed by Mahraganat songs and music.

According to university students from rich districts in Cairo, the disadvantages and negatives of Mahraganat songs and music are the following: hard to find new released songs in CDs and Cassettes' stores (88%), hard to attend the Shaabee streets' local weddings and parties (82%), inadequate to listen to some of these songs at home while the parents are around them (72%), low budget of some songs (71%), low quality of some songs (70%), rare parties, performances and shows in prestigious and famous restaurants (58%), bad image of the audiences (50%), meaningless ideas which are not related to each other (50%), similar music in many songs (50%), rare to find information about the songs and the singers (46%) and unethical lyrics (10%). It seems that unethical lyrics are not an important disadvantage and negative for many students.

Conclusion

University students from rich districts in Cairo listen to Mahraganat songs and music, but their parents do not like this genre. The old image of Shaabee songs are still adopted by the parents who represent high social classes. They consider these songs as vulgar and created for uneducated and poor people. It is noticed that the taste of the parents supports Bourdieu's cultural capital; however, the taste of university students supports Peterson's cultural omnivore. Also, Thornton subcultural theory and youth culture can explain the differences between university students and their parents by focusing on the youth tendency to be different in their cultural tastes including music [48]. Moreover, it is found that Mahraganat songs' disadvantages and negatives mentioned by parents are different from the ones mentioned by young generations.

The 2011 revolution played an important role in the success and widespread of Mahraganat songs. This explains why university students from rich districts in Cairo heard and knew about this genre after the revolution. New music and songs appear during revolutions [49]. Moreover, chaos in Egypt during and after 2011 revolution and weak government and regime to impose laws [50] help the songs and music to be introduced to other social classes through illegal procedures of production, circulation and selling of songs.

Mass media played and are still playing an influential role in spreading music and songs from poor slums to other social classes. This was found in other research studies and other musical genres for example rap which has moved from inner cities to popular culture through mass media [51]. The most famous Mahraganat singers and songs are the ones who appear in mainstream media especially movies, television ads and programs. Also, many songs are more famous than the singers.

These songs have been attracting young generations because they are new, different, unusual, funny, energetic, encouraging dancing, breaking taboos and having western touch. But, young audiences do not consider the singers' voices an important factor of the success of the songs especially that the music is higher than the singers' voice. So, it is hard to recognize many parts of the lyrics.

Mahraganat audiences are active mainly through YouTube and Facebook by downloading and sharing the songs. This indicates the importance of new media, social media and video sharing websites in circulation of these new types of music and songs among youth [52] especially from different social classes.

The songs are considered rebel and revolt against traditions, culture and taboos. But, not all the outcomes are positives. These songs are an example of a deteriorating musical taste in Egypt because many singers are untalented. The songs are considered low culture and lowbrow culture which belong to low social class [53].

These songs show that there is a change in the Egyptian society. People from slums and poor districts with their great number are imposing their norms and culture. Mass media try to attract them to gain a great number of audiences by presenting their taste of music, songs and arts. Media usually satisfy the interest of the dominant classes [54]. But, in the past, elites' ideas, thoughts and arts are shown to the public as the ones that should be followed by all Egyptians even poor and uneducated people. It is known by high culture and highbrow culture which are associated with high social class [55].

Egypt population reaches more than 100 million people and most of them are young generations. They can impose their taste in music and arts in Egypt with their great number in the society.

Economic problems in Egypt before and after the revolution are making changes in socioeconomic status. People who were belonging to high class are becoming middle class and middle class Egyptians are becoming low social class. So, these changes in social classes are influencing people's culture and taste of arts. Researchers found that people appreciate their past culture even with social mobility [56].

Mahraganat appears as if it can narrow the cultural gap between the poor and the rich in Egypt, but this gap is very hard to be narrowed. There are still findings that support the relation between taste and cultural capital [57].

The researcher recommends that future researches should analyze the content of Mahraganat songs because there are rare academic data and information about this phenomenon. Also, it is important to study Mahraganat from a musical academic point of view to understand the music and its contribution and influence on Shaabee songs.

Author Biography

Dina Farouk Abou Zeid is an Egyptian professor in Mass Communication Department, Faculty of Arts, Ain Shams University in Egypt. She received her BA (96) and MA (2001) both from Mass Communication Department at the American University in Cairo. She received her PhD (2007) with honor from Mass Communication Department, Faculty of Arts, Ain Shams University. She is the author of "Television Presenter's Skills". She is a supervisor of many MA and PhD theses. She is the head of social studies and futuristic studies branch in

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