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**The American University in Cairo
School of Global Affairs and Public Policy**

**The Influence of Hekayat Banat on Egyptian Women's Perceptions of Ideal Relationships
and Couples**

A Thesis Submitted to

Journalism and Mass Communication Department

**in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts**

by Yomna Sallam

under the supervision of Dr. Mohamad Elmasry

May/2013

Abstract

This study is based on feminist theory. It uses critical textual analysis and ethnography-inspired in-depth interviews to examine the influence of *Hekayat Banat* on women's expectations and perceptions of ideal couples and gender roles. The textual analysis examines seven series episodes and the title song. Results from the textual analysis suggest that the serial offered several themes that serve as advice for women, including: friendship is important in supporting one's daily life; women should be strong and self-confident in order to eliminate being the property or under the control of men; women must find and keep men; communication and forgiveness are important in any relationship; life goes on no matter how deep our sad memories are seated inside us; and women's control over body weight keeps men and improves the image of Egyptian women.

The in-depth interviews were carried out with twelve Egyptian females aged 22 to 35, selected through a purposive sample. I stayed with each interviewee while watching each of the thirty episodes and observed her comments, reactions, and feelings towards the scenes. The in-depth interviews' discussion suggests that women watch drama serials in order to learn from others' experiences and to receive a certain dose of romanticism.

Hekayat Banat has an influence on women's romantic expectation, but does not have an influence on women's perceptions of ideal couples and gender roles. Viewers often discussed drama serials when they feel the serials are related to them, when they need more understanding on certain ideas, or when there is something they want to share with their female friends. Women wish to achieve more understanding of their situation and the situation of others through discussing relationship behaviors portrayed in *Hekayat Banat*.

To my mother

Acknowledgments

This thesis, and the effort applied in it, would not have been accomplished without the support and incentive of several individuals who have kindly provided their esteemed support in presenting this work the way it is.

First of all, I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Mohamad Elmasry, for his continuous support throughout my research work and for his time, effort, and knowledge sharing. Without his support and follow up, it would have been a struggle to finish my thesis.

I also would like to thank Dr. Amani Ismail and Dr. Sheila Peuchaud for their great support and assistance. My greatest appreciations and thanks go to my committee members for their effort and time.

Last but not least, I would like to express my sincere appreciation to my wonderful and lovely mother, Iman El Kaffass, for her great support and endless care. Mom, I want you to know that you have been my loyal and closest friend, my support, and my source of strength. God bless you. I would like to thank my amazing sisters, Sara, Farah, and Hana, for their belief in me and for their support. I would also like to thank all my friends for their support and encouragement. Also, I would like to thank my interviewees for their participation in my research; it was a nice and enjoyable experience.

Finally, I want to thank you God for giving me the strength to manage my stress and earn my Master's degree and for answering my prayers. Thank you God

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Introduction	1
II. Literature Review	4
A. <i>Portrayal of women on Western TV and the media:</i>	4
B. <i>Portrayal of women on Arab/Middle Eastern TV and the media:</i>	7
C. <i>Why women watch drama serials?.....</i>	10
D. <i>The influence of viewing drama serials on women’s expectations and perceptions:</i>	14
III. Theoretical Framework: “Feminist Theory”	18
IV. Methods.....	25
A. <i>Critical Textual Analysis.....</i>	27
B. <i>Ethnography-Inspired In-Depth Interviews</i>	29
V. Analysis	34
A. <i>Textual Analysis</i>	34
B. <i>In-Depth Interview Analysis:</i>	52
VI. Discussion and Conclusions.....	73
VII. Limitations:	82
VIII. Implications for Future Research:.....	82
IX. Interview Guide	84
X. References	91

I. Introduction

Egyptian drama serials are highly popular in Egypt and in the rest of the Arab world, since hundreds of Arab satellite channels rely heavily on the serials for programming. Egyptian drama goes back several decades and has been a regular part of Egyptian life, especially to women. The viewing of Egyptian drama serials reaches its peak during the Holy Month of Ramadan: a time of heavy television competition and consumption. During Ramadan 2010, for example, about \$200 million was spent on the production of various television drama serials (Al-Mahadin, 2011). Typically, Egyptian serials are comprised of thirty episodes; one for each of the thirty nights of Ramadan.

This research discusses the influence of Egyptian drama serials on women's perceptions about ideal relationships, gender roles, and romantic expectations. The analysis is limited to one controversial drama serial, *Hekayat Banat*, broadcast during Ramadan 2012, which has since re-aired several times on different channels due to its popularity. The serial was aired on ART, MBC, and Dream TV. The viewership was high to an extent that audiences started to develop Facebook groups to discuss the serial and to express their interest in it. It was mentioned on *Bawabet El Sherouk* that the rate of downloading the serial from YouTube reached 1,000,000 downloads (Bawabet El Sherouk, 2012).

Hekayat Banat portrays the different relationship stories of four young female friends. Each female discusses her own issues and concerns about her relationship with the other three in a different way that indicates her character, background, cultural pressures, family pressures, expectations, and perceptions of the ideal relationship and "Mr. Right". The serial presents the

problems and issues girls face in their relationships, social life, and professional life. It discusses the happiness, sadness, disappointment, and surprise of women.

The serial presents four main characters. Ahlam, played by Saba Mubarak, is an ambitious, hard worker and is an active character who enjoys writing stories. Ahlam is so close to her mother and is a romantic girl looking for the perfect husband. Salma, played by Dina El-Sherbini, has an extroverted personality and aims to becoming famous. A third character, Mariam is played by Reham Ayman. She is a traditional and calm character controlled by her traditional and closed-minded father and husband. Mariam doesn't work and lacks self-confidence. She was engaged to a police officer whom she marries throughout the serial. The fourth female is Camelia, played by Horeya Farghali. She is a beautiful, attractive, rich woman with a strong personality. Camelia was engaged to a well-known businessman whom she marries, but turned out not to be loyal to her.

The study is important as it looks for understanding the nature of gender roles, how females perceive relationships through watching Egyptian drama, especially *Hekayat Banat*, the influence of watching *Hekayat Banat* on their own expectations from their partners, and their interests and preferences while approaching a new relationship. The study also strives to find out whether or not stereotyping impacts women's perceptions about their own relationships. The main research questions aim at identifying the main themes presented in the television serial and at analyzing why women view *Hekayat Banat*. The questions aim to find the influence of viewing portrayals of relationships on females' perception about their own relationships, gender roles, ideal romantic couples, characteristics of ideal and failed relationships, and females' expectations from their partners. They also seek the answers of how do women negotiate

relationship behaviors portrayed on *Hekayat Banat* among each other and under what circumstances.

Based on previous research addressing females' exposure to romantic media content, it is assumed that Egyptian females may watch drama serials for different purposes, which may include spending leisure time, escaping from everyday pressures, feeling hope and emotional support, and others (see Radway, 1991). As can be the case in the West (see Radway, 1991), it may be that Egyptian females sometimes resort to drama serials in order to complement what they miss in their real life: security, feelings of to love and be loved, kindness, loyalty, romantic couples, happy endings, caring hero, gentlemen, and living the happily-ever-after fantasy.

Not many in-depth studies were conducted to analyze why women in Egypt watch drama serials, their expectations and perceptions about gender role and ideal couples based on viewing drama serials, and their negotiation abilities toward the relationship behaviors portrayed in Egyptian drama serials. This research presents the contradicting views of women about men and relationships, their different needs that are based on their background and family, and their beliefs about the extent to which they can express their needs freely. Moreover, it presents the different views of women who watched the serial before and who watched it for the first time during the research, and it depicts how these women internalized ideas about love, marriage, relationships, and sexuality. Additionally, the in-depth interviews with women viewers present their attitudes and beliefs about the portrayal of relationship behaviors portrayed in the serial. Therefore, my research will be of added value to explain and analyze the impact of drama serials exemplified by *Hekayat Banat*.

II. Literature Review

This literature review is organized into two main sections, following the basic divisions of my research. The literature review starts with a general background about portrayal of women on Western, Arab, and Middle Eastern media, then is divided into the following two sections: *Why women in Egypt watch drama serials* and *What is the influence of viewing drama serials portraying relationships on women's expectations of their own relationships, of their perception on ideal romantic couples, and of gender roles?* Articles and books have been written on these subjects that support my study. This literature review will refer to the most relevant of these articles and books to the main sections of the study. In order to analyze the listed sections, and to know the influence of such portrayals on viewers' perception, there first needs to be a clear idea about the general portrayal of women in the media.

A. Portrayal of women on Western TV and the media:

As part of the impact of viewing TV programs on viewers' perception, it is essential to learn about the portrayal of women in the media, which then logically affects the viewers' perceptions (Hawkins, 1997; Auter et al., 2005).

An article by Wortzel (1974) shows that the act of portraying women as sex objects, or in a negative image, exists since at least the 70s in the West. It mentions that when women are portrayed in a professional or working image, the desirability of buying a product will be more than when women are portrayed as sex or fashion objects. Moreover, it found that women feel comfortable when they are portrayed as home maker, fashion or sex objects (Wortzel, Frisbie, 1974). In a more recent study, Hawkins (2012) found that reality dating shows present women as sex objects and men as sex driven; also they presented romantic dating as a game (Hawkins,

2012). Hawkins' article stresses on the concept of gender inequality and unfairness posed on women by the culture and society as stated by the feminist theory. A study by Auter et al. (2005) argued that some TV programs portrayed women in a lower status than men; men are shown as workers and women are shown as housewives (Auter et al., 2005). The article also argues that there is an improvement in the portrayal of women in the media nowadays, as media is presenting the role of women in economic, social, and political life in a way that increases women's empowerment (Auter et al., 2005). Egyptian and American culture is becoming more liberal over the years (Auter et al., 2005).

Low and Sherrard's 1999 study researched whether gender role stereotypes in the media can be found in photos of women in college textbooks on human sexuality, marriage, and family. They conducted content analysis of more than a thousand photographs of women. Results indicated that in the 70s, photographs reflected the traditional role of women; however this changed in the 90s, as more non-traditional photos of female workers were displayed, yet the traditional (housewives, sex objects) photographs still dominated (Low & Sherrard, 1991).

Another study done by Press (2011) argues that the media has an impact on women, gender, and sexuality. The feminist movement increased women's ability to engage in sexual acts (Press, 2011). The article wanted to discuss violence against women, unbalanced economic power, sexuality, and unequal income, which are the main elements discussed by the feminist theory. The feminist movement requested that females express their sexuality freely; before the movement it was normal to penalize any girl interested in sex (Press, 2011). In many cultures, teen movies focus on virginity and limitations to the expression of sexual desires, which shapes the manner through which ideas are imposed on women by their culture and society. The author

mentioned that the media needs to pay attention to the portrayal of females' rights and to analyze narratives that they think influence cultural and societal situations (Press, 2011).

The effect of cultural norms on the portrayal of women on Western TV and the media:

When talking about the portrayal of women in media and females' sexuality, TV scripts can shape our perceptions about different issues. Females from different places around the world were exposed to the idea of fairy tales telling them that beauty is power and that romance is a way out from the burdens we experience in daily life (Ussher M., 1997). Bordo (1993) argues that women learn from their infancy that their beauty is their power. Females are trained every day—and are provided with instructions—on how to move, eat, speak, and sit, how to look at a man, and how to behave according to their body requirements, which makes them the most vulnerable (Bordo, 1993). Ussher mentions that there are three main steps that are important and seen as a goal for each girl: “finding, getting, and keeping a man” (Ussher M., 1997). Men think of love as sex, while, from the other side, women think that romance is their way to reply to males' sexuality. Females change themselves to satisfy men; they always feel that they have the negative characteristics or that the leak is in them rather than in men (Ussher M., 1997). Since men are interested in sex to achieve physical pleasure and women are interested in sex out of love, there should be a common ground where they both can stand—which is having sex out of love and not out of physical desires (Ussher M., 1997). The previous point mentioned by Ussher asks for gender equality in order to ensure that men and women have the same right to express their physical desires as stated by feminist theory.

Apart from Ussher, Bordo aimed to analyze the media, movies, and advertisements portraying the female body. Women can take risks and implant silicon because they think that

their body will shape the perception of men and increase their desires. The surroundings and culture of a female show that any part of her body can be changed or modified (Bordo, 1993).

As per Bordo's explanation of mass cultural representations of sexuality, gender, and beauty, the mass cultural representation homogenizes these aspects as it removes any differences and puts limitations on their validity. Moreover, it normalizes these aspects so that they become models for people to follow (Bordo, 1993). Beauty and sexuality can greatly affect the degree of power exercised against the other gender; in this case powerless or of less power than the first gender. The author did a comparison between women's body image according to the patriarchal culture and postindustrial culture (Bordo, 1993).

Culture teaches women to always watch their weight and body to look perfect; it teaches them how to perceive themselves, what type of food to eat, and what to disregard to be thin; even little girls in school started to realize that it is important to do daily exercises in order to remain thin and meet the expectations of boys in their classes (Bordo, 1993). Culture is always having an impact on the female body. The medical models assume that the body is passive and that the disorder is the active agent that affects it (Bordo, 1993). Women discuss sex more openly than before—they can explain what they feel and what their desires are more openly and freely, which is a sign of independence, as per the author's opinion (Ussher, 1997). Ussher mentioned that the common idea is that girls are waiting for "Mr. Right", and that they have the power to wait until they meet the perfect man that will make them happy (Ussher, 1997).

B. Portrayal of women on Arab/Middle Eastern TV and the media:

There are many examples in the Arab world that can be used as evidence for the positive images of women, such as Aisha, Prophet Muhammad's wife, who was an image for pleasure

and joy to her husband and a source of knowledge at the same time (Allam, 2008). Moreover, in the contemporary age, Arab women are increasing their participation in the social, economic, and political life and in the establishment of many organizations in an effort to discuss women's problems, issues, and rights (Allam, 2008). Despite positive examples and possibilities, women in the Arab world are often portrayed along narrow lines.

Allam (2008) suggests that, despite some positive changes over time, women in the Arab world are often portrayed as being illiterate, inexperienced, weak, and dependent (Allam, 2008). Most of the Egyptian television soap operas portray women in traditional roles (Allam, 2008). As per Allam's article, it was shown that television dramas focus on middle-upper and upper classes only; they portray women as housewives or university students but not as professional workers (Allam, 2008). Also, Al Mahadin (2011) argues that females' image is negatively portrayed in the media. Al Mahadin's article compares the two serials, *Zahra Wa Azwajeha El Khamisa* and *Ma Malakat Aymanakum*, portraying the body of females in a way that is not integrated into social life or reality, which causes traumas and anxieties (Al Mahadin, 2011). These dramas portray women as humans that have more preference for money than morals, and they also portray them most of the time as sexual beings (Al Mahadin, 2011).

Al Mahadin claims that Arab society does not value or appreciate the role of women in participating in social, economic, or political activities (Al-Mahadin, 2011). Arab establishments now urge the audience to be directed towards the fantasies of life through increasing the rate of women's portrayal in sexual image (Al-Mahadin, 2011). The new trend of drama series is to portray female sexuality in Arab societies (Al- Mahadin, 2011).

There is some evidence that the portrayal of women in Arab media elicits a variety of different types of responses and reactions from women. El Toukhy and Brown (2010) argue that women who are more religious have negative attitudes toward the sexual type of portrayals. These women show rejection for pre-marital sex and stricter judgment on characters engaged in these kinds of acts (El Toukhy & Brown, 2010). Egyptian women mentioned that sex on TV may reflect reality in other cultures but not in the Egyptian culture (El Toukhy & Brown, 2010). Sexuality on TV is more effective for men than women because they socialize to increase sexual pleasure, but for women the timing of sexual relationships was more important as women are sexual gatekeepers (El Toukhy & Brown, 2010).

Yegenoglu (1998) analyzed travel literature and other texts, claiming that colonialism was interested in knowing about what was under the women's veil; the colonialists used the illustration of cultural difference to suggest sexual variances (Yegenoglu, 1998). She defeated the assumptions of the West on Eastern females and called to liberate Eastern women hidden under the veil (Yegenoglu, 1998). Her book analyzes and criticizes the cultural representation of the West; she explains how the communication of gender with Orientalism is growing and provides an analysis that does not lower the explanation of sexual differences. The author focused on the communication of sexual and cultural differences, as the fantasy is making the West perceive the East's sexuality in a wrong way; a way that is distinct from reality (Yegenoglu, 1998).

In Toukhy and Brown's article, they mentioned that there is a common idea of presenting women at a lower status in the media. They also argued that women are portrayed on TV as working inside the house, while men are portrayed as householders and successful workers (Toukhy & Brown, 2010). This argument goes against research by Bennett (2011), which found

that most of the females portrayed on TV are shown as responsible and intelligent mothers, wives, and family members. (Bennett, 2011) disagrees with Allam's article, which states that the media is always disregarding the importance of women's role in the society (Allam, 2008). Allam stated in her article that the portrayal of women as illiterate, weak, servants, and submissive is the base for increasing the problems of negative portrayal of women in the Arab media (Allam, 2008). The media does not focus on the positive aspects of women; therefore, there is a need for developing and fixing the issue of portraying negative images of women in the Arab media (Allam, 2008).

C. Why women watch drama serials?

In "Dramas of Nationhood," Abu Lughod argues that the media defines the cultural form through which people are brought up together to belong to the same nation (Abu Lughod, 2001). The author shows how Egyptian serials depict the social and political life, Islam, education, development, health, and gender (Abu Lughod, 2001). She also discusses how television portrays modernity and economic, political, and cultural lives in Egypt. Furthermore, she shows how the Egyptian television has changed norms of citizenship and gender so far (Abu Lughod, 2001). Armes (2007) argues that women are pioneers of Arab cinema; the role of women in the production of films is so significant (Armes, 2007). Egyptian women played a great role in establishing the industry of national film (Armes, 2007). There are some figures in the filmmaking industry that cannot be neglected such as Assia Dagher, Leila, Fatma Rouchdi, Amira Mohamed, Asma Al-Bakry, Inas Al Deghidi, Aziza Amir, and Bahiga Hafez. All these women played a great role in the filmmaking industry of the Arab world (Armes, 2007).

Egyptian serials are mostly social drama, because they present family relations and couples problems. Most of last Ramadan's serials, and the one before, were social drama serials that presented one hero and one heroine, several heroes and several heroines, or family relationships. The focus of my research, *Hekayat Banat*, is presenting couples' relationships—four heroines and their partners. It focuses on the problems that couples face during the early phase of their relationship, their perception about love, marriage, and their expectations from their partners.

Egyptian drama serials are the most familiar in the Arab World (Al- Mahadin, 2011). In Ramadan 2012, there were several interesting drama series including *Firqet Nagy Atallah*, *Al-Safaa*, *Taraf Talet*, *Al-Baltagy*, *Ragol Men Haza el-Zaman*, *Fi Hadret el-Gheyab*, *El Shahroura*, and several others.

When women resort to drama serials, they must have a reason behind spending some time watching these serials. Egyptian young women are more likely to spend more time to learn about gender roles, romantic relationships, and socialization through watching TV (El Toukhy & Brown, 2010). Watching TV dominates the leisure time of young Egyptian women (El Toukhy & Brown, 2010). A related study by Radway (1991) dealing with Western women and romance novels explained that the act of reading a romance was a way of participating in a large female community, refusing the demands associated with their social role as wives and mothers, declaring independence, securing privacy, creating a feeling of hope, and measuring their dissatisfaction with heterosexual options (Radway, 1991). Reading romance provides emotional sustenance and care, and meets the needs, desires, and wishes that male partners could not provide (Radway, 1991).

Radway also mentioned that a marketing research was applied in 1979 and found that 1) female readers constitute more than half of the book reading public, and 2) romance novels provide a reading experience enjoyable to women that motivate them to repeat that experience whenever they can (Radway, 1991). The author shows that women readers are more than men and that the experience of reading romantic novels is special to women in such a way that they enjoy reading whenever they can to accomplish the above mentioned needs, including feeling independent, having some privacy, gaining emotional support that they miss in their real relationships, and satisfying unfulfilled needs (Radway, 1991).

Radway acquired some knowledge through the interviews: reading as an escape is a good therapy, as it makes readers fulfill deeply-rooted psychological needs, achieve the emotional gratification and relaxation, learn about faraway places and times, escape daily problems, and wish to live a romance like the heroine's. Because romantic stories are never sad or depressing, women read them during times of stress and depression (Radway, 1991).

According to the author, the interviews revealed that the most important ingredients in a romance are happy endings, descriptions of the developing love between hero and heroine, details about them after they have gotten together, and love scenes with some sexual description (Radway, 1991).

Moreover, Radway listed the elements that reduce the appeal of the romance to the female readers: rape, sad ending, explicit sex, physical torture of the heroine or hero, bed hopping, premarital sex, cruel or weak hero (Radway, 1991). She also included some characteristics of a good heroine: intelligence, independence, initiation, self-sufficiency, and enjoy a high sense of humor (Radway, 1991). On the other hand, the ideal romantic heroes

should be attractive, intelligent, independent, tender, protective, strong, brave, and have a high sense of humor (Radway, 1991).

Overall, Radway's study led to the following results: ideal romances from the point of view of the female viewers are the ones that focus on a single developing relationship between the heroine and the hero, involve gradual removal of emotional barriers between two, heroine and hero function as the single, dynamic center of the novels, makes the reader lives the heroine's relationship with the hero without distraction, shows unusual intelligence of the heroine and independence, starts with expressing the feelings of female gender instead of focusing on usual sexual division of labor, heroines are immature female psyche, childlike innocence and inexperienced and completely unaware that they are capable of passionate sexual urges, female beauty is linked to sexuality in the romance, the hero should be: strong but gentle, masculine but caring, protective of her, a he- man but a lover boy too, wealthy, leader, and characterized with sexual fidelity (Radway, 1991).

Radway (1991) addresses the needs that are not met by patriarchal institutions and engendering practices. It supplements the avenues traditionally open to women for emotional gratification by supplying them vicariously with the attention and nurturance they do not get enough of in the round of day-to-day existence. The focus of Radway's book is similar to my first research question, which aims at explaining why women watch Egyptian drama serials. Radway mentions that the behavior of women—after reading romance—cannot be judged except through an in-depth interview, which I used in my research in order to analyze how drama serials' viewers think about their own relationships and marriages and how women behave after viewing romance.

Additionally, Radway (1991) mentions that changes in the perception of women are being generated in romance writers and readers. In my second research question, I am seeking to understand to what extent drama serials influence women's perceptions and expectations of their own relationships.

Radway used feminist theory as her theoretical framework—which I did, too—in order to discuss what the perceptions of women about relationships and an ideal couple are, and what they expect from their own relationships. Radway focused on the reasons why women read romance and the characteristics of successful and failed romances, while I focused on the influence of viewing drama serials on women's perceptions of an ideal couple and their expectations from their own relationships. Radway's research was too inspiring for me in terms of ideas, theory, method, and interview questions. The responses of the interviewees, too, were inspiring to my research.

D. The influence of viewing drama serials on women's expectations and perceptions:

Other sections of my research tackle the influence of viewing drama serials portraying relationships on women's expectations of their own relationships and of their perception of ideal romantic couples and gender roles. There are some studies talking about the influence of viewing TV on viewers' perception. Auter et al., (2005) study looked at the perceptions of the society, family, relationships, couples, marriage, and love formed by viewing drama serials. This article helps in making the differentiation between the nuclear families and the stem families. The nuclear family is a common form of family among Americans; while the stem family is the most known among Egyptians (Auter et al., 2005). In both societies, it is clear that male partners have great influence over females; in Egypt the tradition is that the husband is the breadwinner and the wife is the householder and is responsible for the domestic work (Auter et al., 2005). The great

influence of men over women needs to be eliminated in order to create equality and fairness among both genders as per the feminist theory.

Audiences watching TV frequently believe that TV presents real life. TV has strong effects on socialization of viewers especially those that are heavy consumers of TV (Auter et al., 2005). El Toukhy & Brown (2010) argue that viewing TV drama serials affect females' perceptions of relationships, gender roles, and ideal couples. The authors aimed at analyzing young Egyptian women's frequent viewing of Western television programs that present expectations of relationships, gender roles, and ideal romantic couples (Toukhy & Brown, 2010). The authors also mention that Western television is full of scripts about dating, sex, and romantic relationships, which makes TV a means of socialization, as audiences acquire knowledge and attitudes about romance and sexuality through it (Toukhy & Brown, 2010).

Talking about the influence of viewing drama serials on viewers' perception, Scharrer (2002) wrote an article about the third person perception and television violence. Some audiences believed that they may not be influenced by the effects of TV viewing, while thinking that others may be influenced more by it (Scharrer, 2002).

Furthermore, a thesis done by Hawkins (2012) aimed at analyzing the drama of *Mad Men* according to the cultivation theory through determining the cause of negative relationship; whether it affects males, females, or both. It was found that negative consequences affect only the character of females; not males. The amount of viewing influences the perception of different messages through the media. As per the cultivation theory, the continuous or frequent viewing of a certain message may influence the viewer in such a convincing way to propel them into believing that it is happening to them in reality (Hawkins, 2012). The article mentions that it was

shown by some studies that people who watch romantic movies or dramas are the most affected and influenced in their own relationships, including the idea of love from first sight and compromise (Hawkins, 2012).

TV portrays healthful and unhealthful relationships as a means for socialization, offering lessons about the types of family lives and the types of couple interactions (Bennett, 2011). It was shown that single, married, and divorced individuals use portrayals of relationships on TV to guide their own behavior (Bennett, 2011).

Bennett (2011) article agrees with Auter et al. (2005) and with Hawkins (2012) as it found that audiences' beliefs about relationships can be affected through their exposure to TV by the media's influence on them or by reinforcing deeply-rooted beliefs, stated by the cultivation and learning theory (Bennett, 2011).

Hawkins (2012) mentioned that heavy viewing and exposure to messages presented on TV affect audiences' perception of certain issues on reality (Hawkins, 2012). It also mentions that television presents information in a way that people should follow to handle romantic relationships; however, they portray the negative side most of the time which impacts audiences in their own real relationships (Hawkins, 2012).

The serial presented by Hawkins is similar to my topic about *Hekayat Banat. Mad Men* presents a marriage relationship that is, to some extent, negative, which made many to assume that the only relationship behaviors portrayed are negative (Hawkins, 2012). The main aim of Hawkins's (2012) study is to analyze the portrayal of relationships on *Mad Men* and to determine whether negative relationships have major consequences or not. The study analyzed the themes of relationships portrayed in the drama serial's first episode, the consequences that are presented, and whether these consequences occur to males or females (Hawkins, 2012). It also included

information related to my second research section, which studies how watching TV is connected to couples' expectations about marriage. It found that frequent viewers of television had *negative* expectations of marriage, while watching romantic movies or dramas increase the *positive* expectations of couples about marriage (Hawkins, 2012). The study was able to correlate between viewing TV and couples' expectations about marriage (Hawkins, 2012). It found also that "(1) marriage means one's figurative life is over; (2) sexually active women won't get married; (3) mutual respect and attraction can only be found outside of marriage; (4) centerfolds preferred; and (5) while the wife is away, the men can play" (Hawkins, 2012). The notion that states "marriage means that life is over" is also portrayed in the serial that I am studying. The serial shows that men fear commitment and think of marriage as an end to their freedom. Moreover, males' control over females' sexuality, which feminism tried to eliminate, is presented in *Hekayat Banat*. Also the idea of "players" is portrayed in *Hekayat Banat*, as Camelia's husband, Kareem, was cheating on her most of the time before they got married.

Overall, the literature review supported the assumption that drama serials affect women's perception of relationships, that women watch drama as a way out and to learn from them, and that women portrayal in the media in many cases is still traditional.

III. Theoretical Framework: “Feminist Theory”

Feminism in the nineteenth century meant the promotion of women’s rights. By the beginning of the twentieth century, women started to look for their participation in politics, economics, health, work, and sexuality; they wanted to eliminate males’ power over females’ sexuality, minds, and bodies (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). By the end of the twentieth century, feminism’s focus shifted to the theories of male dominance and how to change or eliminate the power exerted by males over females (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). Feminism consists of three main concepts: women existence, the well-defined gender role that women have regardless of the cultural indecisiveness and the overall principles for equality and inequity (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). As per Grant (1993) some people think that feminism came out as reaction to men’s sayings or to some theories related to men; however, feminist theory came out because of its own split perception (Grant 1993).

According to Grant, there are three main core concepts of feminist theory: women, experience, and personal politics (Grant 1993). The idea of feminism came when women felt that they were politically oppressed. It mainly arose due to political oppression, common held beliefs, and cultures. There are many media studies that have applied feminist theory, such as Thornham’s book, in which the author argued that the images of women in the media have been a central focus of feminist researchers (Thornham, 2007). Women’s images in advertising, journals, film, and drama were the target of feminist researchers; these researchers think that images of women present inaccurate stereotypes and have corrupted perceptions about women (Thornham, 2007).

Feminist theory is used for gender studies, communication, and social change (Rakow & Wackwitz, 2004). Sexual roles and gender domination were studied by several researchers

through using feminist theory (McCann, 2003). Calhoun (2000) argued that gender roles, sexuality, lesbian and gay topics are mostly analyzed and studied through feminist theory; the author also compared between lesbian theory and feminist theory (Calhoun, 2000). The widespread discussions of lesbian women, sexuality, and housework were the basis for the presence of feminism; females saw themselves treated as inferior humans and as an oppressed group (Grant 1993). They believed that they were oppressed because they were women and that their nature was their problem; they were oppressed biologically through sexual control by men and socially through gender role that was dominated by men in most cultures (Grant 1993). Women were known to be the property of men (husbands or fathers) and were not allowed to work (Grant 1993).

Feminists found that ideologies developed by men were focusing on the idea that sexual problems are not valid because they depended on the situation; feminists thought they had to develop their own ideology depending on their experience because most of the existing ideologies are developed by men (Grant 1993). Then came the personal politics, which was about females' problems regarded as personal complaints. Politics existed when one group ruled another; now, in most societies and old ideologies, males were the ones who were ruling females. Therefore it was a political problem not a personal complaint (Grant 1993).

Feminist theory ideology was mainly based on female knowledge through which they worked to resolve the experiences of women especially in the area of female identity, sexuality, and gender roles. It was mainly about changing the nature of or the role of females in males developed cultures (Grant 1993). In my research, I am interested in knowing to what extent dominant global stereotypes of women have made their way into Egyptian drama serials and how and to what extent have women internalized patriarchal messages.

There were several media studies and books that based their research on feminist theory, one of which was by Baxter (2009). The study was about the American serial *Sex and the City*. It presented the relationships, cultures, and types of lives of four middle class women. It also presented the nature of their emotional and sexual relationships. In the article, the author did a comparison between the modernist and post-modernist feminism perspective of *Sex and the City*. The article states that *Sex and the City* was a successful TV serial as women were presented as powerful, independent, and sexually active humans.

The author concentrated on three main discourses: gendered discourses, consumerist culture (the idea of lifestyle identities and branding the self), and life as a journey which includes the changes and lessons learnt.

The other study was done by Bordo (1993). It focused on the portrayal of the female's body and how the body was seen as an animal concerned with fulfilling the pleasure. It argues that females were all about body image; they seduced men and capitalized sexual desires (Bordo, 1993). The book presents some arguments on the ideas of dualism, which noted that the body is part of negativity and since females are all about body image, they are negativity itself as they distract men away from knowledge (Bordo, 1993). The author also argues that women learn from their infancy that their beauty is their power; females are trained every day—and are provided with instructions—on how to move, eat, speak, and sit, how to look at a man, and how to behave according to their body requirements, which makes them the most vulnerable (Bordo, 1993). Moreover, women can take risks and implant silicon because they think that their body shapes the perception of men and increases their desires (Bordo, 1993).

A further study by Ussher (1997) discusses gender roles, sexuality, how females expressed their sexual desires, how girls became women, whether they should express these desires to males in an explicit way, and whether or not it was accepted by males to let women express their desires (Ussher, 1997). The author interviewed males and females to identify the elements that shaped the concept of sex and femininity. The author tried to reframe what people usually think of sex and femininity, the script of femininity: sex, romance, and beauty (Ussher, 1997).

She argues that fairy tales tell us that beauty is power and that romance is our way out from the burdens we experience in our daily life. Moreover, there are three main steps that are important and seen as the main goal for each girl: finding, getting, and keeping a man (Ussher, 1997).

Radway's (1991) book analyzed the impact of reading romances on the perceptions of women concerning the ideal relationship, couple, and hero. It also analyzed the influence of reading romances on women's expectations from their partners. The author analyzed specific romances and researched the question of why women consume these novels; some of the reasons were as follows: participation in a large female community, refusal of the demands of their social role as wives and mothers, independence, privacy, hope, and emotional support (Radway, 1991).

Reading romance addresses the needs that are not met by patriarchal institutions and engendering practices (Radway, 1991). It supplements the avenues traditionally open to women for emotional gratification by supplying them explicitly with the attention and nurturance they do not get enough of in the round of day-to-day existence (Radway, 1991).

I based my research on feminist theory in order to study relationships portrayed in the Egyptian TV drama serial and its influence on females' perceptions of gender role, ideal couples, and expectations from their lovers, fiancés, and husbands. Also to study whether women see sexuality controlled by men, by themselves, or equally shared, and whether their body, mind, or personality is the main focus of men. Moreover, I studied the way through which females discussed the portrayals of relationships and couples on TV drama serials, how they discussed the ideal or failed couples, how they related their own experience to the ones portrayed in TV drama serials, and how they built their expectations and perceptions based on what they watched on the serials. I based my research on feminist theory which helped in building an image about the perception of females about their own relationships, experiences, opinions, and expectations.

The importance of the study is in the attempt to understand the nature of gender role: how females perceive relationships through watching Egyptian drama serials, what is the influence of viewing such drama on their own expectations from their partners, what are women's interests and preferences while approaching a new relationship, and whether stereotyping impacts their perception about their own relationships. The main research questions will be aiming at analyzing why do women view Egyptian drama serials, the influence of viewing Egyptian drama serials portraying relationships on females' perception about their own relationships, gender role, and ideal romantic couple, the characteristics of ideal and failed relationships, females' expectations from their partners, and how women negotiate relationship behaviors portrayed on Egyptian drama serials among each other's and under what circumstances.

Research Questions:

RQ#1:

Why do women in Egypt watch and follow *Hekayat Banat*?

RQ#2:

What is the influence of viewing *Hekayat Banat* portraying relationships on women's expectations of their own relationships, and of their perception of ideal romantic couples and gender roles?

RQ#3:

How do women viewers discuss relationship behaviors portrayed in *Hekayat Banat*?

The first research question aims at analyzing the reason behind why women in Egypt watch and follow *Hekayat Banat*. It aims at analyzing if the reason is to learn new things about relationships, to receive a certain dose of romanticism, to have some answers to questions regarding their relationships, or to have some of their relationship happenings explained or resolved. Moreover, it intends to provide a better understanding concerning whether there is an element of fantasy or escape involved in their viewing of *Hekayat Banat*.

The second research question aims at analyzing whether viewing *Hekayat Banat* has an influence on women's perceptions of ideal romantic couples and gender roles, and whether it has an influence on their romantic expectations or not. The purpose of the question is to understand what Egyptian women expect from their partners and how their perceptions about gender roles are influenced by the portrayal of relationships in *Hekayat Banat*. Moreover, it intends to

comprehend what the characteristics of failed and ideal romances are; whether the perceptions about these characteristics are influenced by *Hekayat Banat* or not.

The third research question aims at analyzing how women viewers talk about the portrayal of relationship behaviors in *Hekayat Banat* and whether women follow up on what they have viewed by discussing it. Additionally, the question intends to comprehend the circumstances under which women discuss the portrayals and what the women viewers hope to achieve from their discussions.

IV. Methods

The focus of my research is on *Hekayat Banat*: a romantic television drama serial aired originally in Ramadan 2012 and re-aired several times ever since. I chose this serial because of its popularity and because of the central role romance plays in the serial. The serial presents a group of four girls that have been friends since childhood. It presents their emotional relationships, their career lives, and their relationships with their families. The portrayal of the four female characters, to which any woman can relate, was fascinating because most of them were looking for true love and a peaceful marriage.

In an effort to answer my research questions—to understand the reasons behind watching and following drama serials, the influence of viewing drama serials on women’s expectations of their own relationships and perceptions of ideal couples and gender roles, and the way through which women negotiate behavioral portrayals—I used critical textual analysis and ethnographic-inspired in-depth interviews. The former was used to uncover the deeply-rooted meanings in the serial; the latter, to understand how women negotiate relationship behaviors portrayed in the serial and to study the extent to which women internalize patriarchal messages concerning love, marriage, and sexuality. Furthermore, the interviews were to determine the serial’s influence on women’s relationship expectations and perceptions.

Before describing the methods, a brief explanation of the serial might be a little helpful. *Hekayat Banat* consists of thirty episodes; the main themes of the analyzed episodes are described by several scenes and in the form of messages written by the storyteller, Ahlam (Saba Mubarak).

One of the characters of the serial is Mariam. She is a very calm, obedient, and romantic person. Mariam doesn't work and is engaged to Hesham—a police officer who didn't share her romanticism, which made her upset all the time. Mariam does many compromises during her period of engagement, even when she decides to get married to Hesham. The three other girls perceive Mariam as a polite, obedient, romantic, and classic personality. Mariam is a traditional girl who believes in the patriarchal messages about marriage and sexuality. Hesham, her husband, controls her heart, mind, and body. He believes that he is the one who could express his physical needs but not her. When she tries to express her needs once to him, he accuses her of being impolite and badly nurtured.

The second character is Camelia. She is a rich businesswoman. Her boyfriend is not loyal to her. She believes that all that attracts a man to a woman is her body. After marriage, Kareem's mother forces him to marry another woman to get children; Kareem is forced to accept her request. Camelia suffers from depression for some time, but starts to look for a new job and to get over her painful experience with Kareem.

The third character, Salma, wants to be famous. She dates a famous person who seems to be of a low-standard but is a famous football player. He ends up dumping her. She starts to love Youssef, believing that he *is* her Mr. Right; however, for him it is too late to get back to her.

The fourth character is Ahlam, the storyteller throughout the serial who writes the SMS that included the main idea of each episode. Ahlam likes to read and write novels and has always dreamt of a good-looking, emotional, loving, caring man with a strong character. She also wants to feel his presence and wants him to be an ambitious hard worker. She meets a guy called

Assem, whom she feels destiny has granted her. Ahlam feels so happy about it; at the end Assem tells her that he would leave the country for a whole year as he had a good job offer.

The serial shows how friendship affects the decision women take in their relationships, engagements, or marriages. The four girls discussed together and agreed on how most men aren't loyal and how they should be strictly treated in order to remain close to their female partners. They also discuss how most men only focus on females with an attractive body.

All of the characters were beautiful women who dress in a stylish manner, which means that it is an essential factor in keeping their relationships. They keep telling themselves that if a man does not return to one of them, it means that he doesn't deserve her and that he is the loser. They do support and advise each other before going in dates with different potential boyfriends. Moreover, the serial covers many notions supported by feminist theory: the control of males over females' sexuality, inequality between men and women, men playing around and cheating on their wives, and the patriarchal messages that most of the four girls believe culture pushed.

This serial is connected to my topic, as it presents many relationships and characters and describes how females perceive relationships, their expectations from their partners, how they negotiate their relationships with each other, and how they form their perceptions about gender roles and ideal relationships through their families and cultures.

A. Critical Textual Analysis

Textual analysis clarifies the context of behaviors and transfers the research from the description and comparison stages to the explanation stage (Hennink et al., 2011). It has to be applicable, obvious, comprehensible, effective, impulsive, and productive of new information and detailed explanations (Hennink et al., 2011). Textual analysis is a technique of studying the

contents of a subject that follows qualitative procedures, while examining perceptions (Scott, 2006). It is used to understand the context of a document; this could be done through examining the frame of reference of the researcher (Scott, 2006). It is concerned with cultural, social, and media studies (Mckee, 2003).

I applied the textual analysis to episodes 1, 2, 10, 15, 16, 29, 30, and the title song. I selected these episodes for the following reasons. The first two have much information on the characters and background of each of the four girls. Episodes 10, 15, and 16 talk about Camelia and Mariam's weddings. Episodes 29 and 30 conclude the serial and present what happened at the end of each of the four stories. It was essential to know the main characters of the serial, the most important events in the serial, and the conclusion or discussion of each story's ending. I watched the episodes, took notes, described the episode, and then analyzed and summarized the main ideas.

I conducted an analytic search by focusing on specific questions in such a way so that the responses answered the main research questions. Through the research questions, I analyzed, described, and compared the context of my topic to develop answers to the questions validated by the data presented through the serial. I explained the content, characters, and story of each character in the serial and I did a thorough description of the scenes in which the four female characters sit together to discuss their relationships and their perceptions about these relationships. I aimed at developing a complete explanation of concepts discussed in the serial to formulate a valid ground for answering my research questions.

Furthermore, a comparison of the four females' background was conducted to find how their backgrounds formed their perceptions about relationships and ideal couples. I conducted the

textual analysis to explain the characteristics of the four main characters and the obvious and hidden messages contained in the serial.

Textual analysis, in some cases, is difficult as the content and the message may not be direct; characters may present their opinions in an abstract manner that the researcher needs to study well in order to provide an accurate explanation; however, I conducted a textual analysis of *Hekayat Banat* to explain the opinions, perceptions, and behaviors of the four characters. The textual analysis helped in gaining information about several aspects: the characters' experiences; how each discusses relationships, along with the special words and expressions they use throughout the serial; their expectations from their partners and their ideas of ideal couples and relationships. The textual analysis helped with displaying how the characters internalize patriarchal messages and how they respond to males' control over females' minds, hearts, and sexuality.

B. Ethnography-Inspired In-Depth Interviews

In-depth interviewing is a qualitative data-gathering technique that includes open-ended questions that seek more description and explanation of a certain phenomenon. It is a valuable reflection of reality (Reinharz 1992). "In-depth interviewing is a qualitative research technique that involves conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on a particular idea, program, or situation" (Boyce & Neale, 2006-Page 3). It can be defined as a purposeful conversation between two individuals (interviewer and interviewee) (Hennink et al., 2011). In-depth interviews may be used to understand certain attitudes towards a specific phenomenon (Reinharz 1992); in this thesis, I aimed to understand the attitude of female viewers towards the portrayal of relationships and couples' behaviors in an

Egyptian TV drama serial. In-depth interviews are the best method to learn more about females' ideas, attitudes, opinions, and personal experiences, as they consist of a set of open-ended questions that cover the different sides of the studied phenomenon (Reinharz 1992) and they allow the respondents the opportunity to express themselves, their perceptions, their motivation for certain behavior, and to reveal sensitive information and introduce new ideas that may not have been realized had the questions been closed-ended (Hennink et al., 2011).

In-depth interviews helped in developing a relationship or a bond between the interviewer and the interviewee, which led to a trustworthy conversation between them (Reinharz 1992). The in-depth interview includes a semi-structured interview guide, a building of a relationship with the interviewee, open-ended questions, and hard work to motivate the interviewee to talk openly (Hennink et al., 2011). They are commonly used, especially in feminist studies. A researcher, Denise Connors, used this method in conducting a research similar to mine about the nature and development of relationships; she mentioned that each woman interviewee had a unique character that stood out during the interview (Reinharz 1992).

According to Boyce, in-depth interviews have some advantages, including providing more information and details about a specific issue and providing a friendly environment for the interviewees to talk more freely and openly (Boyce, 2006). In-depth interviews provide information about the interviewees' personal experiences, feelings, and stories (Hennink et al., 2011). On the other hand, in-depth interviews have some limitations: they are time-consuming and they might give rise to the interviewees' biased views (Boyce, 2006). While conducting the in-depth interview, the interviewer should avoid yes/no questions, be objective, be clear and precise, and not use leading questions (Boyce, 2006). The interviewer should have specific skills to listen and interact with the interviewees and should be flexible (Hennink et.al, 2011).

I borrowed aspects of Radway's (1991) method; she used ethnographic-inspired in-depth interviews with sixteen females. The interviews lasted two to four hours each, during which the interviewees filled out a pilot questionnaire and the author added a field work journal. The sample was random, the conclusions drawn from the study were used to formulate a hypothesis that she wanted to test. Women selected stories that were relevant to the oppression and emotional abandonment they suffered in real life (Radway, 1991). I used her findings as a background to consider and to compare with, while building my findings concerning the main ingredients of a romantic drama serial. In my questionnaire, I included some questions to learn more about the viewers of *Hekayat Banat* and their opinions about the ideal heroine and the ideal romantic hero.

Additionally, I included some questions to find out the main reasons why viewers watch drama serials. As for Radway, her interviews concluded that escape was the main reason for females to read romance novels, as it is a special reward a woman gives to herself: it meets the feminine need for emotional support and validation (Radway, 1991).

I took notes of the additional questions that came out during the interviews—to include them in the following interviews—and added them to the interview guide. The guide first included an introduction explaining the purpose of the research, questions to learn about the background of the interviewees, involved the interviewees in the interview, and motivated them to talk more openly. Second, it included opening questions or broad questions that helped in building rapport with the interviewees. Third, the key questions were the essential parts of the interview, as the interviewer got detailed information about the stories and experiences of the interviewees. Finally, the guide came to an end by using closing questions to leave the

interviewee in a peaceful manner and to thank her for her time (Hennink et.al, 2011). As per *Qualitative Research Methods* book, there are some characteristics of a high-quality interview: it should be informational, applicable, comprehensible, effective, transparent, reflexive, productive, and ethical (Hennink et.al, 2011).

When the interview guide was ready, I sat and watched the thirty episodes with each of the twelve interviewees. I conducted a pilot test with two interviewees, first to make sure that the concepts were clear, the questions were easily understood, the order of the questions was rational, and the responses were answers to my research questions. Then I conducted the in-depth interviews with the purposive sample at my home to make sure that none of the other candidates can hear the interviewee expressing her feelings and personal experiences.

I used in-depth interviews in my study to get the maximum information I can get from females about their own experiences, how they see and discuss relationship portrayals in Egyptian TV drama serials, their expectations from their partners, and how portrayals of relationships form their perceptions of gender role, ideal couples, and ideal relationships.

I asked twelve females aged 22 to 35 based on a purposive sample to watch the serial with me. Some of those were my friends, some were relatives, and others were friends of my friends. Seven out of twelve interviewees had watched the serial before; the other five watched it with me for the first time during the research period. The interviewees had different ages, some were married, and others were in a relationship. Moreover, some of them came from relatively traditional families, while others were from modern or open-minded families.

I sat with the women and watched the thirty episodes. I conducted an in-depth interview for one hour after every three episodes with each of the twelve candidates. The interviews

included in-depth open-ended questions about their past experiences, perceptions, and expectations about relationships before and after viewing the serial, which of the four characters best related to their own character and what were the positives and negatives of each character. I also question them do they discuss the portrayals of the four girls' relationships with their own friends or families, whether the portrayals of ideal couples on the serial affected their own perceptions of ideal couples, and other questions—all aimed at building a detailed knowledge about the influence of Egyptian drama serials on women's perceptions. Moreover, the ethnographic-inspired in-depth interviews were conducted to observe the reactions, comments, and feelings of the interviewees while and after watching the drama serial.

V. Analysis

A. Textual Analysis

In the textual analysis section, I analyzed seven episodes and the title song and, ultimately, eight main themes emerged. I analyzed episodes 1 and 2 of *Hekayat Banat* because they set the stage for what was to come and introduced the characters and presented background. I also analyzed episode 10 because it focuses on marriage and, thus, substantively addresses one of my research questions ("What is the influence of viewing *Hekayat Banat* portraying relationships on women's expectations of their own relationships, and of their perception of ideal romantic couples and gender roles?"). The content of episode 10 surrounds Camilia's wedding party. The episode shows what the three women—the friends of the bride—think about marriage and what they expect from their future husbands. On the other hand, the episode shows how the three men, partners of the bride's friends, think about marriage and what they expect from their future wives.

I also analyzed episodes 15, 16, 29, and 30, and the serial's title song. Episode 15 presents the fears of each character and how they deal with their inner ghosts and get over their fears. Furthermore, episode 16 shows how important communication is in a relationship, how men ignore women's concerns and needs, and how males have control over females' feelings and sexuality. Episodes 29 and 30 present how the story of each of the four girls ended or in specific terms started a new story. They also present how the four girls felt about their experiences; each character moved on to a better future. Finally, the title song was essential to analyze because it summarizes the main idea of the serial. The song includes sentences,

comments, and suggestions on how relationships should work and the expectations of women out of their own relationships.

In *Hekayat Banat*, the analyzed episodes have some scenes and SMS's that the storyteller writes at the end of each episode. These SMS's and scenes are presented throughout the analysis in terms of themes that describe the main idea or message of the episodes. I analyzed the scenes and SMS's that discuss the themes or the main ideas of the selected episodes.

In episode 1, there was an emphasis on the strength of female friends' relationships, how they support each other, and how they stand next to one another whenever there is a happy or sad event to eliminate each other's fears of oppression from what they may be experiencing with men and cultural stresses. In episode 2 we find that most men are selfish; therefore, women have to show strength and not fall easily in order to change the idea of being controlled by men, being the property of men, and being oppressed and inferior due to ideas developed by their male dominating culture. Episode 10 highlights that marriage in a relationship is the main goal for a woman; for a man, there are many considerations before making marriage a goal. Most women look at marriage as their main goal; they are obsessed by finding and keeping men. Episode 15 puts a weight on the idea that a woman's self-confidence shapes the manner through which a man treats her; women need to develop a strong character in order to eliminate males' control over their minds, feelings, and body. In episode 16 there was an emphasis on the importance of communication in a relationship. The episode shows how miscommunication depresses women and—even if in a relationship—makes them feel lonely. This episode shows that women have certain needs either emotional or sexual and these needs are not satisfied by men due to the deeply-seated cultural beliefs that make men stronger, dominant, and controlling. In episode 29, there was a stress on the importance of forgiveness in any relationship; it makes couples get over

their past fears or pains and let them move on. In Episode 30, we find that life goes on no matter what happens. Moreover, there was a stress on the idea of keeping women's body always in shape in order to keep men close and to save the image of Egyptian women.

Theme# 1: "Girl-talk gives women strength"

Episode#1 introduced each of the four main characters. The first several scenes were important because they established and defined the basic character types. Mariam is a classic, home-loving, and romantic person. Camelia is a beautiful, rich, businesswoman who takes good care of how she looks. Salma is aiming at being famous by any means. Ahlam is looking for the right man whom she will deeply love and whom destiny will bring her way.

Theme#1 – "Girl talk gives women strength" – emerged through the dialogue and in various scenes of episodes #1, #2, #15, #29, and #30, which demonstrate the importance of friendship. The following scenes focus on the idea of female friends' relationships and how these relationships are of value to women for several reasons. Through talking to one another about men and relationships, females are able to gain strength, clarity, and support. Those talks also reduce women's fears of oppression and cultural stresses. For example, in episode 1, the storyteller writes an SMS stating that "A friend is a person with whom you can share your happiness to let it increase and you can share your sadness to let it decrease."

In the first episode, there was a scene presenting Salma calling Ahlam and informing her that she will not study anymore in her life as she is finally graduating. Salma wanted to share her happiness with her friends. Ahlam was smiling, her eyes shining from happiness; she also told Salma that she had great news for her. Salma thought it was about a potential groom, but Ahlam told her it wasn't that. It was a job promotion. The four girls conducted a conference call to

congratulate Salma and agreed to go out to celebrate the event. The connotative meaning of the text shows that friends start feeling they are true friends when they share both happy and sad events together; when they care to share each other's concerns.

A later scene in episode #1 presented the four girls wearing evening dresses, sitting in a nice café with light music running in the background. They were discussing Salma's graduation after spending seven years in college and the weekly messages Ahlam sends to her customers. The denotative meaning presented the four girls' opinions: Mariam she said the messages should be about love; Salma said the messages should tell them what to tell their spouses; and Camelia said the most important is a fish meal. Concerning the connotative meaning, Mariam was so romantic, shown in her opinion about the content of the SMS, Salma was so disturbed and unfocused so she wanted the messages to tell her what to do, Camelia was focusing on how she looks and dresses and how to attract men so she thought the messages should include sexual information; however, Ahlam still believed the messages should be informative and humane.

The last scene of episode #1 was in Ahlam's room, she had her computer on her lap thinking about the message of the week. She thinks that friends are the persons with whom you can share your sadness in order to minimize it and with whom you can share your happiness in order to maximize it.

Episode#2 features a scene that presents Salma calling Mariam, asking her about her suggestions concerning jobs at media companies. Mariam provides a thorough list of companies to help her secure a decent job and achieve her dreams of being famous. This scene shows how friends stand next to each other.

Episode #15 includes a scene presenting Camelia, Mariam, and Salma talking to Ahlam about Assem. They were discussing his positive and negative characteristics and expressing their fears from his continuous absence and negative impact on Ahlam's feelings.

A further scene presented Ahlam, Camelia, and Salma cleaning the house for Mariam and helping her to prepare for Hesham's family dinner. Because they regarded her as their close friend, they felt obligated to help her in the beginning of her marriage life to be able to manage the housework and deal with Hesham's traditional character.

Episode #29 includes a scene portraying Ahlam and Camelia talking to each other and discussing her separation from Kareem. Camelia was so hurt from Kareem and his disloyalty to her, and so she needed to share her sadness and pain with her friend.

Episode #30 includes a scene in which the four girls were sitting together discussing with Mariam what would help her in keeping her husband and tracking her weight and body shape. They were trying to help her to keep her romantic relationship with her husband and to take care of her look and weight as not to ruin the image of Egyptian girls.

A further scene in episode #30 presented Mariam in the hospital delivering her baby. The three girls were standing next to her, taking care of the baby. This scene connotes that friendship is more than a few people going out together to have fun. Friends stand next to one another through thick and thin and take care of each other.

The above scenes and SMS's show the importance of female friends' relationships, which supports the first theme.

Theme #2: “Women must be strong and put strength of self before emotional love”

Episode #2 includes a scene presenting Camelia, Salma, and Ahlam sitting in a café, talking about how men are mostly similar to one another. Camelia said that girls should prevent men from mistreating them and that they should make men respect them. She mentioned that women’s strength is so important in order to eliminate men’s control over females or otherwise men won’t respect women and will always search for others.

A further scene supports the basic theme by presenting Ahlam’s colleague who was crying as she just broke up with her fiancé. Ahlam told her not to be weak or upset and that there are many men out there. Ahlam thought of why her should friend be upset if a man left her. This connotes that Ahlam thinks a woman should be strong even if her fiancée left her and that she shouldn’t be upset because breaking up isn’t *that* strong of a reason.

A later scene presents Camelia in the pool of the same hotel that Kareem went to with his new girlfriend. The background music was fast and sharp as Camelia was so nervous and wanted to make Kareem jealous. She went there with another man and walked around the pool. When Kareem asked her who this guy was, she walked away and left him. This scene connotes that Camelia loves Kareem, but wants to show him her strong character. On the other hand, Kareem, above all else, loves himself and, despite enjoying his time with another girl, still wants to keep Camelia.

A further scene showed Ahlam, Salma, and Camelia sitting in the café and discussing why men neglect their women and look for other ones. Camelia said all men are the same and that a woman must ignore a man if she wants to either keep him or get him back. By this statement, Camelia implied that men were *always* going for other women, that they couldn’t feel

satisfied with only one woman, and that the only way to handle that is by women ignoring them to bring them back. Therefore, women should be strong in order to manage men's selfishness.

The last scene of episode #2 was in Ahlam's room. Ahlam was on the couch with her laptop switched on. In the background—on shelves—were piles of books. Ahlam was thinking about the message of the week. She wrote, “The difference between women and domestic animals is that animals don't cry, while the difference between men and wild animals is that men trim their nails... sometimes.” This message connotes that women are friendly, kind, and when feeling unfairly maligned they cry; for men it is different because men are like wild animals, they only think of themselves and of satisfying their needs without being fair with others. The idea is clear in Hesham and Mariam's relationship, in Camilia and Kareem's relationship, and in Ahlam's colleague and her ex-fiancé.

Episode #15 includes a scene presenting Camelia and Kareem, where she was talking to him, trying to convince him that he shouldn't interfere in her career life because this is a red line for her. Camelia is a strong character and she didn't want anyone to interfere in her career path or her performance at work.

Episode #29 includes a scene presenting Camelia throwing away her pictures with Kareem to get over her painful memories and to remain strong.

A further scene in episode #29 portrayed Camelia sitting with Kareem in their living room. They had just got divorced; Camelia was wearing black, her face was red, and her eyes were swollen from tears. Kareem was sitting, looking at the wall as he had not realized yet that they wouldn't be together anymore. Camelia didn't want to cry in front of him and told him that she would leave the house in the morning; he told her that he wanted her to know one thing: “I

love you and I will always do.” He then stood up and left the house. Camelia started crying heavily after he left.

Ahlam went to visit Camelia and found her drinking and crying heavily. Camelia told Ahlam, “Kareem broke me when he decided to marry another woman to bare him children, even if he loved me, he left for another woman.” Camelia’s words to Ahlam connotes that she had a strong personality and that she refused to let her husband and mother-in-law break her. She decided to leave him and get a divorce once they started talking about wanting children and when she knew she bare any. Even if Camelia was so shocked from what Kareem did, she didn’t want to break in front of him. Ahlam held Camelia and started crying as she was so upset and felt so sorry for her friend.

These scenes support the theme “Women must be strong and put strength of self before emotional love.” This theme supports the notion of “women existence” by feminist theory. It shows that women are trying to be strong in order to eliminate men’s control and oppression and in order not to be property of men or inferior in their society due to ideas developed by their male dominating culture.

Theme #3: “Marriage is the ultimate goal for a woman, but not for a man”

Episode #10 has a scene that presents Ahlam in her room preparing her dress for Camelia’s wedding. She was staring at the wall thinking that Camelia was getting married to the one she had been in love with for three years. This connotes that female friends may think about marriage when one of their friends gets married; they can get excited about it and start thinking about what they are missing.

A further scene was presenting Ahlam dancing with Assem while looking at Camelia and Kareem. Her look connotes that she was thinking whether the day will come when she gets married to Assem. Ahlam then went with Assem to the ballroom's garden. She shared how much she liked the way Camelia and Kareem looked; Assem replied that it was always like that in weddings and that people in Egypt have a wrong perception of relationships. He said that people think that they should get married at a certain age, like not after being thirty years old, while they should get married only when they feel that marriage will be better for them. This showed how men may think about marriage. They may think that marriage is not a must, not even when they love their partners; they think that they have to feel that marriage will make their lives better and if not then they won't get married.

Another scene in episode 10 was presenting Mariam with Hesham, where they were dancing together in the wedding; while she was happily smiling at him, he had a frown as he was concerned that this luxurious wedding may raise Mariam's expectations.

Salma was sitting with some potential boyfriend that she had met in the wedding; she asked him why he feared marriage and he told her he didn't like anything that had the potential of controlling his life and that he wanted to live freely. Hayam, a secondary character asked Thair—Ahlam's best male friend—about what he thought of marriage. He said he was afraid of it, as it could compromise his freedom, and that, for him to accept, there should be a very good reason and motivation behind it.

These answers show how certain men fear commitment. The representation was fair and accurate as these men throughout the serial showed how they were concerned about commitment

and marriage. The background music was aiming to describe more the disappointment of the females after hearing the opinions and perceptions of males about relationships and marriage.

Episode #29 includes a scene that presented Ahlam and Assem staying together in Assem's office and discussing their relationship. Assem told Ahlam that their perceptions about love were different, as Ahlam thought that love ends with marriage while Assem deemed marriage was not suitable for him. He did not want to get married at the end of their relationship.

These scenes highlight that marriage in a relationship is the main goal for a woman, while for a man there are many considerations before making marriage a goal. Most women look at marriage as their main goal; they are obsessed by finding and keeping men. Through several conversations between the main characters of the serial and their partners, the level of concern about marriage was determined for each one of them. Moreover, the central theme is supported by the storyteller's SMS, which stated that "Marriage is like swimming: when you are on shore you may be afraid to step in, but if you jump into the water you will learn how to manage." This SMS connotes that marriage is the main concern of women and that they are obsessed with finding suitable men, while men consider it their last concern.

Theme# 4: "Self confidence is the most important characteristic a woman should have in a relationship"

Episode #15 includes a scene that presents Ahlam and Assem sitting on a lobby's couch. Assem gave her a gift he got from Paris, which makes her happy. Then she imagined Lamia, Assem's ex-wife, sitting in front of them. She was so disturbed and her eyes rolled every second because she was seeing Lamia in front of her. Assem asked her what was wrong with her, but she kept silent as she didn't have an answer to his question. Ahlam was taking her eyes away from

Assem. This scene implies that Ahlam saw Assem's experience with Lamia as a barrier between them. She feared Assem might leave her just as he left another woman whom Ahlam sees much better than herself.

Another supporting scene was in Mariam's room after she got married to Hesham. She was praying and then Hesham comes in to the room and asks her how she could cheat on him and tells him that she cannot have sex with him at the moment. Then Hesham took her to bed and switched the lights off. This scene shows that Mariam was afraid of having sex for the first time and so she tried to postpone it as much as she could. Hesham, on the other hand, was rushing for it. This scene connotes that Mariam's family did not talk to her about the subject and that they did not give her enough information about marriage and couples' relationships. Her closed environment did not open a door for her to know more about marriage, relationships, and sex. This, consequently, developed a lack of self-confidence in Mariam's character.

A later scene was in Ahlam's room. She was on the couch with her laptop switched on and there were piles of books on the shelves behind her. She was thinking about the SMS of the next week. She was holding the necklace that Assem got her, as she was thinking about the message. The SMS connotes that Ahlam decided to remove the ghost of Lamia, Assem's ex-wife, from her mind and go on with her relationship with Assem without fearing his past experience with Lamia because she believed she should be confident about her character and courageous enough to go through the relationship.

Episode #16 portrayed a scene in which Camelia was telling the other three girls that she cannot depend on Kareem, her husband, on getting her a job because she has been successful in her career since she started working and so cannot depend on anyone else. Camelia was so self-

confident and, fearing that her image as a successful businesswoman might be affected in front of Kareem, she didn't want to feel vulnerable in front of him.

Another scene presenting Camelia and Salma, Camelia was saying that if she met someone like Ismail, a guy that Salma went out with for some time, she would have attracted him within two days. Camelia always displayed her self-confidence and was sure she can easily attract men whenever she wanted.

The theme connotes that a woman's self-confidence shapes the manner through which her partner deals with her, which in turn shapes the nature of their relationship and helps her eliminate a man's control over her mind, feelings, and body. The theme is supported by the SMS that the storyteller writes stating that "A ghost is created only by your fears; if you are courageous, there will be no ghost." This SMS connotes that inside every human being, there is a ghost that he or she needs to get rid of in order to keep going.

Theme #5: "Communication is the most vital thing in a relationship"

Episode #2 presents a scene in which Mariam was sitting with her fiancé. She asked him to take her out because she wanted to go to the cinema. Hesham replied that they can go to the social club. Mariam looked at him and, with her eyes shining, was about to cry but remained silent. Mariam's look connotes that she wanted to go with Hesham to a romantic place; not to the social club that is full of families. She missed him and wanted to spend some special time with him, yet he didn't give her a chance. The background music in this scene was well used as it clarified Mariam's disappointment from Hesham's careless behavior.

A further scene presenting the viewpoint of Mariam and Hesham's relationship was in a café. Mariam was observing him as he was on the phone arranging a trip with his friends. She

told him that, while they haven't gone out together for a whole month, he was busy arranging a trip with his friends. His reply was, "When we get married, you will not think of going out because you will be so bored with us being together all the time." This statement disappointed Mariam even more as she felt he didn't care about how she truly felt. Mariam's eyes filled with tears in just the same way they did whenever he upset her. Yet, she didn't want to cry in front of him as she knew he wouldn't appreciate her feelings. This scene shows that Hesham is selfish; he wants to spend all his leisure time with his friends and does not consider her rights as his fiancé. It also connotes that Hesham is a typical Egyptian man who believes that men should dominate women and that women should only follow men's desires.

Salma was sitting in the living room, watching TV with her father, mother, and brother. The lighting of the living room was so dark, which means they were having a movie night. Everyone was watching TV without talking to the other. Salma tried to talk to her mother but she replied with "Salma, wait we want to see what will happen in the movie." Salma then asked her brother if he wanted to go to the social club, but his answer was "Leave me now to watch the movie." The scene connotes that Salma's family was not much connected, that they didn't give much attention to her needs or problems, and that she might feel too lonely even when around them. Salma then called Youssef and asked him to take her out because she needed to talk to someone.

Episode #15 includes a scene presenting Salma and Youssef sitting in a romantic cafe. He was discussing his career and she gazed at him with shiny eyes; she was amazed with his character. He then told her that he got himself a gift. She looked in his eyes as he told her that it was her who was his gift. Salma was shy and her eyes were shining from happiness. This scene connotes that women are interested in men's discussion when it makes the woman feel like a

priority. The scene ended by zooming out and including the whole café into the camera's vision; Salma and Youssef, looking happily at each other, somehow, felt they were starting a relationship.

Another scene connoting the need of women to be listened to was one where Hesham was watching TV in the living room and Mariam came out of the kitchen, stating that she would be with him in a little while after finishing cleaning up. He told her not to worry as he would go to sleep; he then stood up and left the room. Mariam was distraught with what Hesham did. Worth mentioning was the background music in the scene: it was tragic, reflecting Mariam's sadness because of the way Hesham treated her. This scene shows that Mariam felt that Hesham was not interested in her in the same way he was before they got married. He showed more happiness being with family, friends, and parents. Mariam wanted their discussions and their special moments together back. Moreover, she had sexual needs as a married woman, but, due to her character, the way her parents brought her up, her culture, and her adoption of patriarchal messages, she couldn't discuss her needs with him.

Episode #29 presented a scene that revolved around Mariam and Hesham as Mariam was trying to convince Hesham to stay with her during the week when she is expected to deliver her baby. Hesham was going to a business trip and he didn't want to listen to her needs.

A further scene portraying Salma and her father is of interest. They were discussing her current job and the negative effects posed on her by it. Salma accused her father for not caring about her and for being the reason behind her sister's death. Salma felt that communication between them was almost nonexistent.

The main theme connotes that communication provides an exchange of information, feelings, and interests between couples. If communication is not taking place or if it stops altogether, a block will be created between the couple. It also connotes that women become depressed and feel lonely, feeling that neither their emotional nor sexual needs are met.

The theme is strengthened through various scenes in different episodes presented by the main characters of the serial and their partners. It is also supported by the storyteller's SMS which states that "A woman needs a man that listens to her, even if he doesn't have a reply.

Theme #6: "Forgiveness is a woman's article"

Episode #16 includes a scene that presents Mariam and Camelia talking together about their problems. Camelia forgave Mariam even after she stayed away from her due to the perception of Hesham, Mariam's husband, about Camelia's attitude.

Episode #30 presents a scene on which Ahlam was in hospital with Youssef, waiting for the results of Salma's checkup. Youssef was trying to forget what Salma did to their evolving relationship and to get back to her. Salma was trying to forget her parents' problems. When she was in the hospital, she felt happy that they were all around her. The theme connotes that people forgive because they seek security and stability to go on in their lives.

A further scene showed Ahlam and Assem in his office. Assem told Ahlam that he would travel for a year on a business trip. The room was too dark; Ahlam's makeup was light, which portrayed her grief and depression. She said, "Thanks for telling me that you are traveling," took her purse, and stood up to leave the office. Assem asked her to stay, to which she asked him what she represented to him. He said she was the only one in his life. She then said, "You are the one who is in my life; not me. You were my prince charming and asked me to put all my memories

away to start a new life with you. You knew that you would leave me at the end so why did you do this to me and occupied this place in my life?” He told her that he loved her. She then asked him if he loved her why would he leave her for a whole year? His reply was that their way of thinking was different: she thought love should lead to marriage.

As Ahlam cried heavily, Assem looked at her; she held his hands and told him, “Sorry for all what I said and thanks for all what you did for me.” She put her hands on his face and told him, “I love you too.” She left the scene after this revealing sentence. Assem was so miserable, but he couldn’t handle it because he knew he didn’t want any commitment in his life.

The main theme was supported by various scenes and conversations that took place between either the main characters of the serial or between the main characters and their partners. The scenes demonstrate how essential forgiveness is in any relationship. Through forgiving others, people can go on in their lives with no hard feelings.

Theme# 7: “Even if a relationship doesn’t work out, and painful memories are unforgettable, life should go on”

Episode #30 includes a scene that was presenting Ahlam in her office, she was celebrating her promotion. Ahlam was so happy that she succeeded in her position and was promoted. All the people around her were dressed well; they were clapping and congratulating her. Ahlam was smiling most of the time and felt real happiness.

A further scene was presenting Camelia, she was looking for a new job and starting over her life in order to get over her failure with Kareem.

Moreover, another scene was presenting Salma in a hospital bed with Youssef trying to feed her. Ahlam came in and was happy that Youssef was standing next to Salma taking care of her. This scene connotes that after the problems that happened to Salma, she started to feel how much she loved Youssef and wanted him to stand by her.

The above scenes show that every character regardless of her past experience started a new life and moved on to wish for the best in the future. These scenes support the main theme which demonstrates that even if life goes wrong at some point in time, we will survive no matter what. Moreover, the theme is supported by the storyteller's SMS stating that "Even if the past had sad memories and the present has fears, life will go on no matter what".

Theme# 8: "Women's bodies shape the image of Egyptian women and keep men"

In episode #30, the closing scene presented the four girls in a restaurant. They were talking about Mariam's body shape after she gave birth; they told her that Hesham may look for another woman if she started to neglect her look and body. They were giving her advices on how she could keep him for herself forever. Also they mentioned that the body image affects the image of Egyptian females all over the world, so it is better to keep her body fit in order to protect that image.

Title song:

The title song includes words such as "ways to women are a hundred ways", "I can't make him happy when I am upset with him", "the way to my heart is loving only me and getting me flowers", "most men like many girls, while a girl likes only one man." The connotative meaning of the first sentence is that men should know that women could be pleased by a hundred

ways but they should know what exactly fits each character. For the second sentence, a woman will not be able to make her man happy and relaxed unless he makes her happy, cares for her, and loves only her. The third sentence shows how a man should focus on how to make his woman a princess, how to please her and make her feel loved: by being gentle and by means of little gestures, such as getting her flowers, gifts, and using romantic phrases. The last sentence means that women perceive men as capable of having a number of relationships at a time and are usually not satisfied with one woman; on the other hand, a woman loves only one man for his special character and do not search for happiness with any other man except the one she loves.

Together the analyzed episodes provide evidence of the importance of female friends' relationship and discussions as a support system to eliminate each other's fears of oppression from what they may be experiencing with men and cultural stresses. Women have to be strong and wise to avoid the pain of men's selfishness and to change the idea of being controlled by men. They should also avoid falling into the trap of becoming men's property and of being oppressed and inferior due to the ideas developed by their male-dominating culture. Moreover, communication is essential in any relationship. If that is lacking, women will feel lonely and depressed. Furthermore, forgiveness is important in a relationship and a woman's self-confidence shapes the manner through which she is treated by her partner. Moreover, the episodes provide evidence that fear of marriage is sometimes a part of a man's character while marriage being the main goal in a relationship is mostly a part of a woman's character. Women are obsessed by finding and keeping men most of the time. They also show that life goes on no matter how hard or easy, sad or happy the past experiences were. Finally, there is a stress on the importance of keeping women's body in shape in order to please and keep men and not to ruin the image of Egyptian women.

B. In-Depth Interview Analysis:

Throughout the interviews, there were several themes that developed related to the main research questions of this study. In the responses given, there were some relating to the first research question on *why do women in Egypt watch and follow Hekayat Banat?* There were three main themes that developed in relation to this RQ:

- 1- Learning about others' experiences is a female's primary guide for solving her personal problems.
- 2- Women are missing romanticism and happiness brought by love.
- 3- Women get answers about questions they may have in mind through drama series.

Each of the twelve women interviewees provided a list of reasons for watching and following *Hekayat Banat*. The most mentioned reasons were 1) to learn more about relationships, 2) to receive a dose of romanticism, 3) to get answers to questions about their own relationships, 4) to have some issues in their own relationships resolved, 5) to reinforce their current mood, 6) to spend some leisure time, 7) to get rid of the daily stress, and 8) to escape reality.

Theme #1: “Learning about others’ experiences is a female’s primary guide for solving her personal problems”

Seven out of the twelve women interviewed stated that they watched the drama serial portraying relationships in order *to learn more about relationships*—especially at how the couples were treating each other—and to learn from their experiences.

First, Anita, a 33 year-old married interviewee, mentioned the following: “I try to learn from the experiences of others while I am watching serials; the drama serials that I prefer the most are the ones that portray relationships, because I feel I can relate to these serials more than other types.”

Another example, Deema, a 33 year-old married interviewee, mentioned that she watches drama serials to learn from others’ experiences. She said, “By getting exposed to other experiences, problems, and solutions presented for certain problems, I gain more experience in my own relationship and I learn how to resolve my problems.”

Theme #2: “Women are missing romanticism and happiness brought by love”

Six viewers stated that they watched drama serials *to receive a certain dose of romanticism*. They stated that they tend to view the serial to fulfill their needs for love. They were missing true love and the happiness it brought; thus they watched drama serials to receive a certain dose of love and romanticism.

For instance, Anita said, “I watch romantic drama serials when I am in need for love scenes, when I suffer lack of love feelings. I resort to watching romantic couples loving each other and living happily in order to fulfill what I am missing.” Anita feels that she misses being loved, being in a relationship in which she receives love, care, and loyalty. She is suffering in her own relationship and misses a lot of romantic feelings from her husband.

Moreover, there were three interviewees who stated that they hoped to have some *answers to questions they have regarding their own relationships* through watching the serial. An equal number of interviewees stated that not only do they hope to have some answers to questions they had regarding their own relationships through watching the serial but that they

also hoped to have some of their own *relationship issues/problems resolved* through watching these serials.

Theme #3: “Women get answers about questions they may have in mind through drama series”

Deema watches drama serials to get answers to questions about her own relationships and to have some issues in her own relationships resolved.

As for other reasons for watching drama serials, six interviewees mentioned *reinforcing their current mood*, five mentioned having some *leisure time*, four stated *getting rid of the daily stress*, and four mentioned *escaping reality* as a reason for watching drama serials in Egypt.

Razan, a 24 year-old engaged interviewee, mentioned that she watches drama serials to get rid of the daily stress and to escape a harsh reality. She said, “I watch TV when I get back from work to release the stress of the whole day. Moreover, whenever I have problems that I couldn’t manage to solve for some time, I watch drama serials to get exposed to other problems and to escape reality.”

It was shown from the discussion with the twelve interviewees that learning from the experiences of others and gaining some amount of romanticism are the main reasons why females watch and follow drama serials.

I also observed—when we were watching the serial—that the interviewees were so involved in the events happening in the serial. They were watching the serial as if they were in the place of the four heroines. Most interviewees felt they had similar friendships like the ones portrayed on *Hekayat Banat*.

In the responses given, there were some relating to the second research question on what is the influence of viewing *Hekayat Banat* portraying relationships on women's expectations of their own relationships and of their perception of ideal romantic couples and gender roles? There were four main themes that developed in relation to this RQ:

- 1- I expect him to care, love, and understand me like Assem and Youssef did.
- 2- Culture and families are more influential than *Hekyat Banat*.
- 3- The favorite serials are the ones portraying group of heroes and heroines similar to *Hekayat Banat*.
- 4- Aggressive behaviors and fantasies can ruin the viewership of the serial.

When expressing what Egyptian women expect from their partner (lover, fiancé, or husband) based on the portrayal of relationships in *Hekayat Banat*, seven interviewees out of the twelve said they expected their partner to *care for them*; five interviewees expected their partner to *love and understand* them, three interviewees expected, besides being a priority, *good treatment, loyalty, respect, and a sharing of interests*. Moreover, two interviewees expected *sacrifice and emotional support*.

Theme #1: “I expect him to care, love, and understand me like Assem and Youssef did”

Deema said, “I expect him to care for me, share his life with mine, and have some time for me like Youssef did with Salma. He goes out with friends most of the time.” Deema feels that she is by herself; she is living alone with her children and meeting her family without the presence of her husband. She always feels that he is missing and he doesn't have enough time for his small family even after seven years of marriage.

Anita said, “I expect my husband to make me feel that I am everything for him or that I am his priority, even if it is only a feeling without anything that is financial or materialistic. He should care for me and protect me from other people and he shouldn’t let anyone hurt me.” Anita feels insecure because her husband doesn’t care enough about her and he neglects her most of the time, which makes her feel that she is not a priority in his life. She was almost crying while talking about her broken heart. Her husband is married to another woman and she is suffering from his disloyalty and disrespect. Anita is feeling that she doesn’t exist for him and she feels that he is in control of both her feelings and emotions.

Ezzar, a 24 year-old interviewee, mentioned “I expect my husband to love me, take care of me, appreciate me, make me his priority, treat me well, make me happy, and compromise for me.” She went on to say, “I would want him to treat me like Assem, but I am afraid he leaves at the end.”

Minerva, a 24 year-old engaged interviewee, said, “I expect my fiancé to be caring, loving, understanding, loyal, and compromising.”

Basma, a 25 year-old married interviewee, said, “I expect my husband to be supportive, emotional, and kind. I also expect him to respect me, communicate with me, share his life with mine, and care for me. What if he treated me like Assem but didn’t leave like Youssef?”

Razan mentioned that she expects her partner to always care for her, treat her well, love her, and know well how to present what he needs from her to keep her happy. She said, “I wish his love never changes towards me. I wish he could do anything to make me happy until our last day together.”

Most interviewees had similar expectations from their partners.

Theme #2: “Culture and family background are more influential than *Hekyat Banat*”

When describing how the viewing of drama serials influenced their perception of gender roles, eight out of twelve interviewees mentioned their perceptions about gender roles were *not influenced by viewing the drama serials as culture, education, family, and experiences of others are the main factors* that influenced their perceptions. On the other hand, four out of twelve explained that their perceptions about gender roles *were influenced by viewing the drama serials because they believed that reality was reflected in drama serials.*

Deema said, “My perceptions about relationships and expectations from my husband are not influenced by viewing the drama serial but they are influenced more by my friends. However, when I watch the serial, I feel that I am influenced by the portrayal of men. I sometimes build my perceptions of my husband based on what I see in drama serials.” She also said, “I feel that when I see a romantic, or, caring hero portrayed in drama serials, I wish my husband does the same.”

Razan said, “When I act in a certain way and I find that the heroine did the same and the results of the heroine’s behavior weren’t pleasant, I decide to follow the other way so that I wouldn’t end up in the same situation as the heroine.” Concerning gender roles and the influence of drama serials, Razan said, “No, I never watch a serial and feel that my role in my house should be the same as that portrayed by the female in the drama serial because my personality and role are built upon other people’s experiences. For example, my female friends whose husbands did not want them to work in order not to compromise their families or house life affect my perception of gender roles.” Razan also mentioned that drama serials always present a

problem or a case that has some issues, so it does not portray a normal story that happens in our day-to-day life. She said, “The life I want to live in will never be portrayed in a serial.”

Anita said, “No, I don’t watch drama serials portraying gender roles and try to imitate them; my culture and family are the main factors shaping my understanding of my role in my own relationship. However, I always hope that my husband treats me like the hero, but I couldn’t find it even in my first marriage. Your expectations are always different from what happens in reality especially that men are not seeking to meet your expectations.”

Theme#3: “The favorite serials are the ones portraying groups of heroes and heroines similar to the ones in *Hekayat Banat*”

When describing what they saw as the characteristics of failed and ideal romances, and whether these characteristics were influenced at all by the serial that they watched, nine interviewees stated that they liked more the portrayal of *a group of heroes and heroines* in the serial because it presented several stories and experiences and they also liked *relationships of young people that ended with marriage*. The more the portrayal was *close to reality* the more it was liked by the audience, as stated by the interviewees. The other three interviewees preferred the portrayal of *family relationships* as they were married, had children, and could identify with the family lives portrayed in the serial.

Natalie, a 29 year-old married interviewee, said, “I like the portrayal of groups of heroes and heroines in order to be exposed to a large number of different stories and experiences.” She also said, “The more the portrayal presents real-life experiences and the more I can relate to the serial, the more I feel it is a successful romance.”

Anita also said the following: “I like the portrayal of family relationships because, having a big family myself, I can relate to them.”

Theme#4: “Aggressive behaviors and fantasies can ruin the viewership of the serial”

When describing the factors that characterized the failed romances, they mentioned *aggressive behavior, unrealistic stories or fantasies, unnecessary sex scenes, overly romantic serials, and open-ended stories.*

33 year-old married interviewee, Norma, mentioned that the unnecessary sex scenes make a failed romance. Norma said, “These scenes are done to attract the audience, but, in my opinion, I would disregard any romance that has unnecessary sex scenes.”

Natalie said, “Maybe I can accept to watch a drama serial under any conditions or when it has any defaults except when I feel that it is unrealistic or presents a fantasy. For instance, *Zuhra Wa Azwajeha El Khamsa*, the serial was a fantasy because there is no such thing as a woman discovering that she is married to five men in the same time and by mistake.”

Three interviewees mentioned that their opinions about failed and ideal romances were *influenced by viewing drama serials*, because they believed the serials portrayed reality so that their thoughts were inspired by the experiences in the drama serials. On the other hand, nine interviewees mentioned that their opinions about failed and ideal romances *were not impacted by viewing drama serials because they built their perceptions on life experiences and real life stories.*

Razan mentioned that her opinion about failed and ideal romances was influenced by the exposure to drama serials as she thought these serials present reality and real-life experiences.

Minerva mentioned that her opinion about ideal and failed romances was not influenced by viewing drama serials, but more influenced by real life experiences. She said, “At the end, these are serials, unrealistic stories that are developed to entertain the audience.”

When asked if women were able to maintain separation between reality and fiction in watching drama serials, ten interviewees showed they were aware of the difference between stories portrayed in drama serials and real-life experiences. They explained that they *were not much affected by some serials in real life experiences as they knew well that some of these stories were just fantasies.*

Natalie said, “Most of these serials are not real stories and some are simply 'fantasies'". She explained that she likes to watch drama serials and enjoy the experiences portrayed in them, but not to the extent of affecting her life.

Anita said, “I gain most of the information about others’ experiences from my family and friends’ relationship, so I won’t let drama serials affect my own life.”

Concerning the influence of viewing drama serials on her perceptions Natalie said, “I build my perception of ideal couples from my real-life and my friends’ experiences, and most of the time ideal couples do not get significant focus in drama serials as those serials focus more on the problems—rather than the common grounds—between couples; the serials focus on how the couples are different, but not on ideal couples.” Natalie also mentioned that sometimes drama serials fake the stories in a way that makes some serials failures at the end. She said, “For instance, couples are often portrayed as being extremely in love for every living second; this type of portrayal leads to a failing serial.” However, she said, “Sometimes you take ideas from what is happening in drama serials, the attitude the hero had towards the heroine, and understand some

behavior you didn't understand before that could be inspiring in certain situations. For instance, when your partner is so selfish and you see the heroine leaving her partner because of his selfishness, you feel that you need to take the same step as she did."

Deema said, "Sometimes you feel that what is happening in serials is really bad in a way that makes you appreciate your partner and sometimes you see that the heroine is not appreciating her partner who is doing less than what yours does. This might lead you to appreciating your partner more."

Minerva said, "When I see Assem doing a wonderful surprise party for Ahlam's birthday, I wish I had the same surprise done by my husband; however, Assem left her and went to America at the end. My husband, on the other hand, didn't do so, which makes me appreciate him more."

It was shown from the discussion with the twelve interviewees that the portrayal of relationships on *Hekayat Banat* influence their expectations from their partners but does not influence their perceptions about ideal couples and gender roles as much as the influence of culture, education, family, and personal experiences.

It was also shown that most females expect their partners to care for them, truly love them, communicate with them, be loyal, and share their interests.

Most interviewees like to watch drama serials portraying group of heroes and heroines to be exposed to several experiences. The more the portrayal reflects reality, the more the audience likes the serial.

Concerning the characteristics of failed and ideal romances, most interviewees agreed that an ideal romance is one that reflects reality and one which they can relate to, and a failed romance is one that portrays aggressive behavior, unnecessary sex scenes, and unrealistic stories or fantasies.

In the responses given, there were some relating to the third research question on *how do women viewers discussed relationship behaviors portrayed in Hekayat Banat?* There were four main themes that developed in relation to this RQ:

- 1- Women need a serial to which they can relate something similar to in their life experience.
- 2- Women need possible solutions to their problems.
- 3- I need topics that I can share with my friends and family.
- 4- Women watch serials to gain better understanding of their own situation and the situations of others.

Viewers discussed drama serials with female friends, mothers, and sisters most often. Ten interviewees mentioned that they discussed drama serials *when they feel the serials are related to them* and *when they need more understanding on certain idea* or *when there is something they want to share with their female friends*. Also, when the serials were *controversial*, viewers tended to discuss the story portrayed in order to get a better understanding of the serials and clarifications from each other. Two interviewees, however, mentioned that they rarely discussed the portrayals of drama serials because they cared more about stories from real life.

Nine interviewees mentioned that they discussed relationship behaviors portrayed in drama serials *when these behaviors were either ideal or similar to their life experience*. The other three mentioned they discussed relationship behaviors portrayed in drama serials when the *behaviors on the serials provided possible solutions to their personal problems*, when they felt *the behaviors would be of interest to their families and friends*.

Ten out of twelve interviewees stated that they discussed the portrayals of couples on drama serials and related these portrayals to different personal experiences *right after viewing the serials*.

Theme#1: “Women need a serial to which they can relate something similar to in their life experiences”

Anita said, “I discuss a drama serial when it is a successful serial that has high level of viewership, when it is similar to my life experience, and when it reflects reality.”

Minerva said, “I discuss the serials when I feel I need to have the same relationship presented in the serials.”

Razan said, “I discuss the events when they are happening and within the serials. I sometimes discuss cases from reality related to the scenes or the events of the serials but I do not discuss it after it ends.” She also added, “I discuss a drama serial when it is similar to my life experience.”

Theme#2: “Women need possible solutions to their problems”

Deema said, “When the problem portrayed in the serial provides possible solution to a problem I can relate to in reality, I discuss such portrayals with my friends and sometimes with my family.”

Anita said, “I discuss the serial when I feel it has solved a problem that I have in my own experience; one that I was searching for a solution to.”

Theme#3: “I need topics that I can share with my friends and family”

Natalie said, “When the problem portrayed in the serial is related to one of family or friends, I like to discuss it. Also, when it portrays political situations of the country, I am interested to discuss it with my family and friends. I feel that I am gaining experiences when I discuss the serials with different people because the more you discuss serials with different people, the more you gain their own experiences through mentioning their opinions. When I discuss issues with different categories of ages, different levels, and different relationship statuses, I gain more experiences.”

As to what they hoped to achieve, or what they hoped would happen as a result of these discussions, ten out of twelve interviewees mentioned that they hoped to achieve *more understanding of their situation and the situation of others, gaining more experiences, and feeling relieved, and improving their relationships*. Two out of twelve mentioned that they hoped to *improve the defects they had in their personalities* by discussing the serial.

Theme#4: “Women watch serials to gain better understanding of their own situation and the situations of others”

Anita said, “I feel when I am discussing the events happening in the episodes that the relationship I am going through might improve, as I imagine that the happy ending of the serial is mine.”

Razan said, “I feel that I am gaining experiences when I discuss the serial.”

Natalie said, “I feel that I can improve my relationship when I discuss events and problems happening in the serial with my friends.”

Norma said, “Through discussing the serial with my family members and friends, I aim at improving myself and understanding my faults so that I'd be able to resolve them. This helps me becoming a better person.”

It was shown from the discussion with the twelve interviewees that they mostly discuss drama serials when they can relate to it, when they need to understand a certain idea, and when they need to share information with other female friends.

Moreover, most females hoped to achieve more understanding of their situation and the situation of others, to gain more experiences, to feel relieved, and to improve their own relationships.

General Findings:

Throughout the interviews there were some general findings that added to the research analysis:

- The average age of the interviewees was twenty four.
- Occupation: eleven females were working and one was a housewife.
- Seven were in a relationship, two were engaged, and three were married.
- The average age of starting to watch drama serials was at the age of nine.
- The average viewing hours per week was fourteen hours.
- The average number of serials watched per month was two.
- All interviewees would watch the same drama serial more than once.

Concerning the opinion of viewers about ideal couples and the heroes and heroines portrayed and their characters:

The opinion of the viewers concerning ideal couples mostly depended on their experiences and family background, not on what they got out of the drama serials.

Seven viewers thought that Egyptian drama serials portrayed characters similar to their own, while five didn't.

Six viewers had wished at some point in time to be in the place of the heroine to receive the same amount of love and respect from their heroes.

The behavior of couples in drama serials influenced only five of the twelve viewers in their own relationships. They stated that they would try to act in the same way as the heroine would or did to gain the same results that she (the heroine) gained by treating the hero in a certain way. They could get ideas from what was happening in the drama serials and understand some behavior they didn't understand before.

Four viewers thought that their character was similar to both Ahlam and Mariam, three similar to Ahlam, two similar to Mariam, and three similar to none.

Anita mentioned that she wants to be like Ahlam. She said, "I want to be like Ahlam because I want to feel that I am strong enough to leave a man who is not appreciating me. I am suffering from ungratefulness and careless behavior from my husband, and I feel that I need to gain the same strength that Ahlam has."

When the interviewees were asked which character in *Hekayat Banat* they would like to be, two mentioned they wanted to be like Salma because she behaved naturally and she was an

outgoing and funny young lady. Four said they wished to be like Ahlam because she was helpful to her friends, was successful in her job, cared a lot about her mother, and was strong enough to take the decision and leave Assem when he informed her that he was traveling for a year in a business trip. Two interviewees wished to be like Camelia because she had a strong character, and four wished to be like Mariam because she was dedicated to her husband, stable in her marriage, realistic, calm, and supportive.

When the interviewees were asked to list the characters they liked in each of the four girls portrayed in *Hekayat Banat*, they mentioned the following:

Mariam was kind and calm, she loved and obeyed her husband, and was romantic, mature, devoted, committed, and responsible. Mariam was able to handle her husband and make him do all that she wanted at the end of the serial while remaining a happy person. Mariam's expectations were reasonable which made her relationship stable.

Camelia was elegant, honest, ambitious, strong, successful in her career, and had high dignity. This is while Salma was funny, outgoing, kind, ambitious, and optimistic. Ahlam on the other hand was wise, helpful, caring, loved her friends, and was also kind, responsible, patient, emotional, and supportive to her friends.

Concerning female friends' influence:

All interviewees—with no exception—mentioned that their female friends influenced their decisions regarding relationships and ideal couples.

Concerning women opinion about men in general:

Also all interviewees agreed that the focus of men while choosing a woman is her body and that the focus of a woman while choosing her man is his character.

Ten out of the twelve interviewees mentioned that men have fears of commitment and of marriage.

When the interviewees were asked which male character they wished to have in their lives, none mentioned Kareem or Hesham, eight mentioned Youssef, and four mentioned Assem. Kareem was a playboy, dependent on his mother, selfish, and weak. Hesham was a dictator and a very controlling, manipulative husband. He never listened to his wife and wasn't sensitive to her needs. He was reserved and didn't want to spend much money on his wife, while he preferred to use the saved money to go out with his friends.

Assem was so mysterious and indirect, but he was a gentleman, good looking, and a successful businessman. Assem was charming, handsome, and, whenever available, he stood by Ahlam; but he was similar to other characters or to Egyptian men who have fears of commitment and marriage.

Youssef was a respectful person and was successful in his job. He forgave Salma for her bad character traits and misdoings because he truly loved her. He was kind, supportive, patient, caring, and—in the eyes of the interviewees—seemed like an ideal man.

Third person effect:

Interviewees who didn't think they were influenced by the serial thought that the serial might have influenced others more. They thought that the ones who would be influenced would be those who had similar characters to that of the serial or had similar lives of problems similar to those portrayed. Moreover, they mentioned that they had discussed the serial with other viewers and learned that some of them were comfortable to identify with the characters portrayed in the serial.

Also a couple of interviewees mentioned that they believe the serial to have more influence on viewers who had a weak personality or who were less well educated.

Influence of drama serials:

The comment of ten interviewees at the end of the interview was that drama serials influenced people based on problems portrayed in the serial. Some types of men portrayed made them feel that they should appreciate their own partners' characters. Some of the female characters portrayed on drama serial made them wish to be like them in the way they look, their character, and their behavior.

Future predictions:

When the interviewees were asked about their predictions about their own relationships, the answers were as follows:

Deema said, "I predict that the situation will continue as is, but I predict that the kids' responsibility will change somehow with the careless attitude of my husband. But I don't see that the problems will be completely solved one day."

Aloush said, “Unforeseeable end. Nothing is guaranteed; there are ups and downs in every relationship”.

Anita said, “A lot is missing: love, care, loyalty, and making me a priority. I am not happy about it. The serial can affect me in taking the decision to leave my husband because he doesn’t want to be committed to me.”

Doli said, “Despite my partner being an unromantic person, and despite having great differences in our nutrition and culture, I think our relationship could be a successful one because we understand our differences and we have the same vision of our future.”

Ezzar said, “I expect that the relationship will end because the parents did not agree, and this is an important factor in any relationship. “

Minerva said, “It will succeed because I love him a lot, and we were about to break up with each other but we were able to solve everything. It won’t be easy but we will go on hopefully.”

Natalie said, “It is getting stronger every time; I see it in a positive way more than negative way. It was a bit challenging at the beginning, but now we are much better than the beginning. However, you can never know the future. Nothing is guaranteed.”

Norma said, “It is a stable relationship and there are developments in our feelings and life. It is somehow exceptional because the kids are my kids only, but the relationship is surviving.”

Basma said, “My husband is fine so far but I have fears that marriage changes by time and, consequently, his feelings towards me might, too.”

Razan said, “It will be a successful relationship as long as he continues to love me and care about me as always.”

General comments:

When the interviewees were asked about their general or additional comments, the below answers were provided:

Deema’s general comment about drama serials was that it influences people through the problems portrayed and lifts them out of the real life cycle by making them feel they are involved in the story to a great extent. She said, “Some types of men portrayed in drama serials make me feel that I should appreciate my husband’s character while some of the female characters make me feel that I wish to be like them in the way they look, act, behave, and through the manner in which they raise their children. Drama serials make me spend time and feel that I have a task to do throughout the day since I am staying at home.”

Aloush commented with “It was a successful serial because it included several relationships and of course you will find some scenes that relate to you. People should be loyal and caring; loving each other in order to be ideal.”

Doli commented with “For a successful relationship, the society provides an ideal model of relationships, regardless of our perceptions. Our perceptions are based on the perceptions that our family and culture have. Not the expectations of the idealistic relationships portrayed on TV are the realistic one. They may be fantasies; the drama should stop showing fantasies because this might influence the perceptions in a negative way. *Hekayat banat* is reasonable and realistic as it provides real examples that we can see in our daily lives.”

Natalie said, “Friendship is the most important part in anyone’s life. It creates stability in our lives. It supports relationships. When friends are of your same age and mentality, they will understand you and care for you.”

Most interviewees agreed that it was a successful serial because it included several relationships, which guaranteed that each person would find a story that they could relate to. However, there was a consensus that people’s perceptions of relationships were not influenced only by TV serials but also by societal culture and own family experience.

Another consensus among interviewees happened on the value of friendship. Interviewees emphasized that, as mentioned in the serial, friendship is the most important part of anyone’s life. Similar to its role in the serial, friendship tends to create a sense of peace and stability in people’s lives.

Most interviewees enjoyed the experience of watching a complete serial with an interviewee, discussing their opinions, feelings, thoughts, and sharing their stories and experiences. It was enjoyable for the twelve interviewees that someone shares with them their experience and listens to their perceptions, expectations, and even hopes. They all mentioned that the topic was interesting and of concern for almost everyone because all of them are in relationship and are concerned with the topic and interested in discussing and sharing their experiences.

VI. Discussion and Conclusions

This study has been of value, in part because there is a dearth of research on the influence of a specific Egyptian drama serial on women's perceptions of ideal couples and relationships. In the review of other studies, it was found that Egyptian women view drama serials to learn about gender roles, romantic relationships, and socialization. Moreover, viewing drama serials dominates the leisure time of Egyptian women. It was also found that viewing romantic drama serials provides emotional support and fulfills some of women's needs. Other studies found that audiences' beliefs about relationships can be affected through their exposure to TV by the media's influence on their beliefs or by reinforcing already-existing beliefs. It was also found that viewing TV drama serials affects females' perceptions of relationships, gender roles, and ideal couples. Also, it was found that people who watch romantic dramas serials are usually the most affected and influenced in their own relationship.

Overall, the literature review supported the assumption that drama serials affect women's perception of relationships, that women watch drama as a way out of their "real" lives, that they learn from them, and that the portrayal of women in the media, in many cases, is still traditional.

On the other hand, this research found that Egyptian women view drama serials to escape reality and learn more about other's experiences. Additionally, it was found that romantic drama serials provide information and better understanding of their situation and the situation of others. Furthermore, it was found that women's perceptions about relationships and gender roles are not influenced by viewing drama serials as they are influenced more by their family and culture. This last finding contradicts with the findings of the literature review as the literature review found that viewing drama serials has an influence on viewers' perceptions according to cultivation

theory while this research found that drama serials do not have an influence on viewers' perceptions.

Moreover, the interviewees mentioned that they are not influenced by drama serials but that other audiences who have weak characters or unbalanced backgrounds may be affected strongly. This finding refers back to the third person effect theory which states that a person may think that some communication messages may influence others than him or herself.

The serial had some scenes and themes that are liberating, while others are repressive. For instance, Camelia talks about sexuality in an open manner and thinks that it is a females' right to express their needs. Mariam, on the other hand, had some issues with her husband concerning her sexual needs which she wasn't able to express for a long time due to her traditional background and her closed-minded character. Moreover, Camelia thought that the only thing that attracts a man to a woman is her body and that marriage is about sexuality, while Ahlam believed that love is the most important part in love and marriage and that a man should be attracted to a female's character, not her body. Therefore, there were different characters in the serial: some were traditional while others weren't. Moreover, the views of the four female friends sometimes contradicted each other due to the different background.

This study allowed a better understanding of the above mentioned findings as it analyzed how Egyptian women perceive relationships, ideal couples, and gender roles, and the reason why women in Egypt view and follow romantic drama serials. Additionally, the study shows how women negotiate the portrayal of romantic couples on TV drama serials and how they negotiate relationships with each other. Also the research presents the contradicting views of women about men and relationships, their different needs that are based on their background and family, and their beliefs about the extent to which they can express their needs freely. Moreover, it presents

the different views of women who watched the serial before and who watched it for the first time during the research and how these women internalized ideas about love, marriage, relationships, and sexuality. Additionally, the in-depth interviews with women viewers present their attitudes and beliefs about the portrayal of relationship behaviors portrayed in the serial.

The study was supported by the concepts of feminist theory as it included how women wanted to eliminate men's power over their sexuality, minds, and bodies, and how some of them hated the idea of male dominance. For Mariam, the patriarchal messages were deeply-rooted due to her background and traditional family. For Salma, the patriarchal ideas were almost rejected because she was an outgoing and sociable person who didn't want to be controlled by anyone. Ahlam was somehow traditional and she respected the man that respects his women, so she was against the unlimited control over females' sexuality. Camelia believed that all what attracts a man to a woman is her body and that all men are controlling.

How the four characters perceived gender role was mainly affected by their background, culture, and family. Their thoughts about sexuality and the expression of physical needs was also affected by deeply-rooted beliefs. They believed that sexuality is controlled by men and that women do not have the right to express their physical needs as men do.

I chose to utilize the techniques and methods used by Radway's (1991) book as a guide to study women's perception of ideal couples and relationships, the reason why they view romantic drama serials, and how they discuss relationship behaviors portrayed in drama serials. *Hekayat Banat* presents different essential elements in women's friendship, romantic relationships, and rules of life. The study shows that the serial does not have a direct influence on women's perceptions of ideal couples and relationships. Most women (interviewees) were influenced more

by their family, culture, and experiences of others than by *Hekayat Banat* in specific and drama serials in general.

In my research I did a textual analysis of episodes 1, 2, 10, 15, 16, 29, 30, and the serial's title song. Episodes 1 and 2 were introductory episodes. I wanted to analyze how the first two episodes of the serial introduced the main characters. It was also essential to analyze episodes 10, 15, and 16 as those presented Mariam's and Camilia's weddings which showed how the four women perceive and what to expect from marriage in comparison with their partners' perceptions and expectations. Episode 29 and 30 concluded each of the four main stories, which were important for my study to present a complete image of the main characters' experiences. In the textual analysis, I identified some themes that were brought up by ideas presented throughout the serial. I analyzed how the episode's scenes and SMS's related to the main themes of the serial. I observed eight themes: (1) girl-talk gives women strength, (2) women must be strong and put strength of self before emotional love, (3) marriage is the ultimate goal for a woman, but not for a man, (4) self-confidence is the most important characteristic a woman should have in a relationship, (5) communication is the most vital thing in a relationship, (6) forgiveness is a woman's article, (7) even if a relationship doesn't work out, and painful memories are unforgettable, life goes on, (8) women's body shapes the image of Egyptian women and keeps men.

The textual analysis shows that the serial suggests that friendship is important in supporting one's daily life; women influence the decisions of each other, especially if it was related to a romantic relationship and they seek to eliminate men's oppression and control. Women should be strong and self-confident while facing their problems with their partners because this strength and self-confidence is reflected in the way the man deals with his lover or

wife, which, in turn, change the idea of women being property for men or being sexually or emotionally controlled by men. Women must know that marriage is not a priority for most—but not all—men in order not to be disappointed at the end; women are most of the time obsessed about finding and keeping men, while some men fear being committed. Communication and forgiveness are so important in any relationship in order to maintain it or else it will break down. Moreover, lack of communication makes women feel lonely, depressed, and not satisfied. Additionally, the serial suggests that life goes on no matter how deep our sad memories are seated inside of us. It also stresses on the idea of maintaining a constant and "right" body weight to keep men close and to protect the image of Egyptian women.

The findings of the textual analysis are supported by feminist theory as they mentioned women's strength, interaction, self-confidence, and need for communication are essential in a couple's relationship in order to eliminate the control of men over women's mind, feelings, and body, and so that women do not become the property of men. Moreover, it shows how women and men think differently about being committed and how women are obsessed about finding men. The finding of the analysis support the idea of women existence, their beliefs about gender differences regardless of the cultural pressures that they face, and their idea about what is a fair treatment and what is an unfair treatment by men. What I observed from the textual analysis is related to what the feminist theory states concerning women existence, gender role, and the standards for fairness and unfairness as stated by Ramazanoglu & Holland (2002). Moreover, the idea of sexuality and the control of males over females' sexuality was clear in the textual analysis. Women could not express their physical needs; if they did, they will be looked down upon and will be deemed as impolite or badly raised.

In addition to the textual analysis, I conducted in-depth interviews with twelve women. I sat with each one to watch the serial's thirty episodes and then conducted the interview after every three episodes. During the interviews, I learned a great deal about women's perceptions about relationships, marriage, family, men's nature, gender role, friendship, and sexuality. Moreover, it was important to analyze how these women discussed the portrayal of different relationships in *Hekayat Banat*. The interviews were supported by feminist theory as they presented how women think about relationships, unfairness presented by men, and how unequal they are in their own relationships. Moreover, they covered the manner through which women in Egypt adopt ideas and messages concerning love, marriage, and relationships, and the importance of having a man in their lives. It was clear from the interviews that women consider their relationship and/or marriage as their very first priority in life. The analysis of the in-depth interviews shows the following:

The reason why women in Egypt watch and follow *Hekayat Banat* was shown to be learning more from others' experiences and receiving a certain dose of romanticism. Viewing several kinds of relationships portrayed in *Hekayat Banat* inspired some interviewees with a guideline to follow while entering in a new relationship. Moreover, the way Assem loved Ahlam and Youssef cared about Salma provided the viewers with some amount of romanticism that they miss in their real relationships.

It was shown that the portrayal of relationships on *Hekayat Banat* has an influence on women's expectations from their partners as most women expect their partners to care, love, and understand them.

It was also shown that viewing *Hekayat Banat* does not have an influence on women's perception of ideal romantic couples and of gender roles as culture, education, family, and experiences of others are the main factors that influence their perceptions of gender role. The opinion of the viewers concerning ideal couples mostly depended on their experiences and family backgrounds but not on what they got out of the drama series.

It was revealed that women like the portrayal of relationships that is closer to reality; to which they can relate. On the other hand, they do not like fantasies or excessive aggressive behavior.

Viewers often discussed drama series with female friends, mothers, and sisters. They discuss drama series when they feel the series are related to them, when they need more understanding on certain ideas, or when there is something they want to share with their female friends.

It was shown that women wish to achieve more understanding of their situation and the situation of others, gain more experiences, and improve their own relationships through discussing relationship behaviors portrayed in *Hekayat Banat*.

All interviewees with no exception mentioned that their female friends influenced their decisions regarding relationships and ideal couples.

All interviewees agreed that the focus of men while choosing a woman is her body and the focus of a woman while choosing her man is his character.

Most interviewees agreed that Kareem was a playboy, dependent on his mother, selfish, and weak. Hesham was a dictator and a very controlling husband. Assem was so mysterious and

indirect gentleman; he was good looking and a successful businessman. Assem was charming, handsome, and, whenever available, he stood by Ahlam; but he was similar to other characters or to Egyptian men that have fears of commitment and marriage. Youssef was a respectful person, was successful in his job, and forgave Salma for her bad habits and misdoings because he truly loved her; he was kind, supportive, patient, caring, and, for the interviewees, seemed like the ideal man.

The general comment of the interviewees at the end of the interviews was that, in some cases, drama series influence viewers based on problems portrayed in the series. Some of the portrayals of men made them feel they should appreciate their own partners' characters. Some of the female characters portrayed on drama series made them wish to be like them in the way they look, act, and behave.

Most interviewees mentioned that it was a successful series because it included several relationships and, of course, as a result you will find some scenes that relate to you.

The series is reasonable and realistic as it provides real examples that we can see in our daily lives.

Through textual analysis of episodes 1, 2, 10, 15, 16, 29, 30, and the serial's title song, I concluded that female friendship is so vital among Egyptian women to eliminate men's oppression, women must be strong and confident in order to eliminate men's control over their feelings and body and not to become men's property, and they must know that some men fear commitment and do not prefer that marriage be their first or even fourth step. Moreover, communication and forgiveness are important in any type of relationship. Life goes on no matter how seriously painful past experiences were and no matter how deeply-seated memories are.

Also, females' control over their body weight keeps men and improves the image of Egyptian women.

Women watch drama serials to learn from others' experiences and receive a certain dose of romanticism. *Hekayat Banat* has an impact on women's expectations from their partners; however, it does not have a direct impact on their perceptions about ideal romantic couples and gender roles. Women discuss drama series when they feel the series are related to them, when they need more understanding on certain ideas and when there is something they want to share with their female friends. Women wish to achieve more understanding of their situation and the situation of others, gain more experiences, and improve their own relationships through discussing relationship behaviors portrayed in drama series. Finally, most interviewees mentioned that it was a successful series because it included several relationships and of course you will find some scenes and even characters that relate to you.

Women's perceptions are influenced by the perceptions and experiences of others, by their families, and by their culture. The expectations from partners were affected by what they view on *Hekayat Banat* as most women were influenced by Assem's charming character, how he treats Ahlam, and how he cares about her and loves her. Moreover, the interviewees were influenced by Youssef as he cared for Salma and forgave her even after she left him for other guys; they were amazed by how much he loves her to an extent that he forgives such acts.

VII. Limitations:

The current study was limited in at least a couple of ways. The research only focuses on one serial, which does not give a comprehensive view about the influence of Egyptian drama serials in general on Egyptian women's perceptions and expectations. Moreover, I relied on informants' responses which may be misleading in some cases as informants can hide information, lie, or tell the interviewer what he/she wants to hear; however, using two qualitative methods helped in providing a complete understanding of the research subject.

VIII. Implications for Future Research:

A suggested area of future research is how different types of TV programs—not just drama serials—impact women's perceptions of ideal couples and relationships. Nowadays, TV programs and talk shows are mushrooming and they may have strong influence on viewers' perceptions and expectations.

Another area of interest would be the rate of TV viewing and its relationship with the affected perceptions.

Research could be conducted to provide better understanding of the entire serial not just the selected episodes and also to include men and women in the in-depth interviews not just women.

Also the research could include the difference between relationship portrayals in Arab and Western drama serials.

Observation of interviewees while viewing drama serials and interaction with their friends could provide better understanding of how women discuss couples' behavior portrayed in drama serials.

IX. Interview Guide

Introduction

This research is conducted in order to know the influence of *Hekayat Banat* on women's expectations of their own relationships, perception of gender roles, and ideal romantic couples. Moreover, it aims to understand why women follow Egyptian drama series and how women negotiate or discuss relationship behaviors portrayed in Egyptian drama series.

I am conducting this research for my Master's thesis at the American University in Cairo for the Journalism and Mass Communication department. I am interested to know your opinion about the influence of *Hekayat Banat* on your expectation of your own relationship. Kindly note that all the information you will provide will be only used for this research and that the information will be anonymous.

Shall we start now?

First 3 episodes

I will start with some background information:

- Age:
- Occupation:
- Parents status:
- Address:
- Relationship status:
- Education:

Opening questions:

- 1- At what age did you start watching Egyptian drama series?
- 2- How many hours per week do you watch TV?
- 3- How many drama series do you watch per month?
- 4- How often do you watch drama series you have watched before?
- 5- How often do you discuss drama series with your female friends?
- 6- Who do you discuss drama series with?
- 7- Under what circumstances do you discuss drama series?
- 8- When do you discuss couples behavior portrayed in drama series?
- 9- What do you hope to achieve when discussing these episodes?

Key questions

- 10- What presentation of romantic drama series do you prefer the most?
- 11- Which portrayals lead to a failing romantic drama series?
- 12- Which portrayals lead to an ideal romantic drama series?
- 13- What are the characteristics of an ideal couple in your opinion?
- 14- Do you believe that your answers in the above thirteen questions are influenced by watching drama series on TV?
- 15- After you watched the first three episodes in Hekayat Banat, which character of the four girls you think you are similar to? (Ahlam, Mariam, Salma, Camilia.)

Second 3 episodes

- 16- Are the characters portrayed in drama series similar to your character?

- 17- What are your main reasons to watch romantic drama series?
- 18- Have you wished sometimes you were in the place of the heroine?
- 19- Does portrayal of certain couple behaviors in drama series influence your behavior in your own relationship?
- 20- How?
- 21- Are your expectations from your partner influenced by the behavior of the hero?
- 22- How?
- 23- Have you ever thought that the gender role portrayed in drama series reflects your real relationship?
- 24- How?
- 25- Do you think that the portrayal of gender role in drama series influences your understanding of your role in your relationship?
- 26- After watching the second three episodes of Hekayat Banat, did your opinion change concerning which character you may relate to the most or the one that is similar to you? (Ahlam, Mariam, Camilia, Salma.)
- 27- To what extent do you feel that your female friends are essential in your life and are playing a role in your perceptions and decisions?
- 28- What is the main element that motivates a man in his relationship?
- 29- What is the main element that motivates a woman in her relationship?

Third 3 episodes

- 30- What do you expect from your partner in your relationship?
- 31- After watching the third three episodes, which character in Hekayat Banat, do you feel is the most similar to yours? (Mariam, Camilia, Salma, Ahlam)

32- Why?

33- Which character do you wish to be like?

34- Why?

35- Do you believe that the first love has a special memory for you like it had for Camilia and Mariam?

36- Do you think that your partner is the one whom you can resort to when you have a problem or when you need support?

Fourth 3 Episodes

37- After watching the fourth three episodes, which character in Hekayat Banat, do you feel is the most similar to yours? (Mariam, Camilia, Salma, Ahlam.)

38- Do you believe than most men have fear of being committed to a marriage, like Assem?

39- In Episode 11, Ahlam mentioned that it is not acceptable to love or marry a foreigner. Do you agree or disagree?

40- Which characteristics did you like the most about Mariam?

41- Which characteristics did you like the most about Camilia?

42- Which characteristics did you like the most about Salma?

43- Which characteristics did you like the most about Ahlam?

44- Which of the following men portrayed in Hekayat Banat is the most similar to the character you wish to have in your life? (Kareem, Hesham, Assem, Youssef.)

Fifth 3 episodes

45- After watching the fifth three episodes, which character in Hekayat Banat, do you feel is the most similar to yours? (Mariam, Camilia, Salma, Ahlam)

46- Do you think that men change after marriage? Do they stay interested in their wives? Or do they lose interest?

47- Do you think that men get attracted more to women that make them feel they have other priorities?

48- Do you think that Camilia was right when she left her job in order not to be the wife of El Serafy?

49- Were Mariam's expectations about her apartment and wedding party reasonable?

Sixth 3 episodes

50- Was Mariam wrong when she left her husband's wife when he didn't give her a chance to express her sexual needs or to complain about his absence?

51- Do you think that mothers' pressure on their daughters to get married is a factor that makes girl grow up on the idea that the soonest the better to get married?

52- What did you feel when Ahlam's mother passed away?

53- Do you think that Salma was wrong when she approached Youssef before falling for him?

Seventh 3 episodes

54- Was Assem right when he approached Ahlam after her mother's death?

55- Do you think that Hesham is a good husband?

56- Do you think that men are selfish?

Eighth 3 episodes

57- Have you ever felt that you are missing a husband although you are married?

58- What do you think about Camilia's opinion about the women's rights to express their needs?

Nineth 3 episodes

59- Do you believe that men can change their character, behavior, or attitude when they truly fall in love?

60- Do you agree that getting divorce is sometimes an end to pain and suffer?

61- Do you think Camilia was right when she took her decision to leave Kareem?

62- What do you think about Hesham's attitude when he knew that the baby is a girl?

63- Do you think that Ahlam was right when she decided to leave Assem when she knew that he is travelling for a year?

Tenth 3 episodes

64- What do you like or dislike about Mariam's character throughout the series, if anything?

65- What do you like or dislike about Camilia's character throughout the series, if anything?

66- What do you like or dislike about Salma's character throughout the series, if anything?

67- What do you like or dislike about Ahlam's character throughout the series, if anything?

68- Were Mariam's expectations reasonable?

69- Were Camilia's expectations reasonable?

70- Were Ahlam's expectations reasonable?

71- Were Salma's expectations reasonable?

72- Were Camilia's perceptions about relationships correct?

73- Were Ahlam's perceptions about relationships correct?

74- Were Salma's perceptions about relationships correct?

75- Were Mariam's perceptions about relationships correct?

76- What is your comment about each male character?

Closing Questions

77- What are your predictions for the future of your relationship?

78- Do you feel that your behavior was patterned in a way or another after watching this series? If yes, how?

79- Have any of the stories presented in Hekayat Banat happened to you before?

80- Have any of the stories presented in Hekayat Banat influenced the way you think?

81- Did Hekayat Banat influence your perceptions about relationships and gender roles?

82- Do you think it may influence others? How.

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