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Humorous Takes on Marriage in the UAE

Digital Comics, Social Media Comedy and Short Films

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Abstract

This article investigates humorous representations of marriage in digital comics, stand-up comedy and short films created by Emirati artists and content creators who primarily rely on social media as their most effective form of distribution. Studied against theories of humor in the Western and the Arabic traditions, selected examples demonstrate that the story-based genre appears less light-hearted in its combination of comic with tragic plot turns, while the snapshot characteristic of graphic art allows comics and social media skits to focus on the joke. The latter is thus more appealing to larger audiences, especially via electronic media. Depending on whether the image is accompanied by text in either Arabic or English, the content targets specific viewer groups. Relying on content analysis and audience reception, this study demonstrates that the relief regarding marital dilemmas provided through humor, particularly satire, is

greater in the less text-based presentations. Generally, humor is a preferred mode by artists and content creators in the UAE to represent marriage because it can take the edge off sensitive topics.

Keywords

digital comic – humor – satire – short film – social media – UAE

1 Introduction

'Who Is the Right One? The Meaning of (Marital) Love in the United Arab Emirates', by Laure Assaf, presents extensive fieldwork confirming the importance of parental inquiry in the context of marriage planning (Assaf 2018: 129). Assaf's study further argues that the distinction between arranged and so-called love marriages has become more fluid in recent decades. Beyond culturally specific complications engendered by the customs of an Arab Muslim tradition, couples in the UAE also struggle with more universal issues related to neglect, jealousy, obsessions or miscommunication. As in the development of the Arab sitcom, creative representations of marital dilemmas across different genres have become more courageous during the past two decades in the Arabian Gulf (Sayfo 2015: 82). Through analyses of digital comics, social media skits and short films by Emirati artists and content creators, our study shows that humor, in particular satire, is a preferred mode for discussions of marriage in visual arts. The symbolic relief provided by this mode of creative expression generates much encouragement in viewer reactions.

Jeanne Mathieu-Lessard offers a comprehensive overview of relevant theories in *Framing Literary Humour: Cells, Masks and Bodies as 20th-Century Sites of Imprisonment* (2020) from a Western perspective. With a focus on European authors, Mathieu-Lessard illustrates the theories of Bergson, Freud, Pirandello, Lewis and Bakhtin, the last of whom appears most pertinent for the present study. According to Bakhtin's ideas, 'laughter is pictured either as providing individual relief [...] or, on a larger scale, as a moment of collective relief from socially imposed structures' (Mathieu-Lessard 2020: 6). Some of the genres studied here gravitate in particular towards satire to achieve the kind of relief Bakhtin had in mind. Marital or pre-marital problems addressed in the selected examples include perceived or actual incompatibility of partners, exaggerated involvement of family members, conflict between tradition and globalization, jealousy, individual obsessions, neglect and promiscuity. While some of the

presented scenes could be imagined in many other cultural contexts, the interpretation of others depends on knowledge of local customs, such as religious holidays or specific wedding rituals.

During the 1970s, most Arab nations used comics and graphic novels as a form of political and cultural propaganda (Ghaibeh 2015: 326–327; De Blasio 2020: 120; Guardi 2020: 16–18). In the UAE, political humor and satire through comics was first attempted by the Emirates Fine Arts Society and Art Atelier's founder, Hassan Sharif (Derderian 2017: 13; Abu Dhabi Culture 2021). Sharif started his career as a political illustrator in 1973, but it was not until decades later that locally produced animated sitcoms would satirize social, political and even religious issues (Sayfo 2015: 82). These shows were often released in ways that aimed at controlling the satirical messages to avoid harsh feedback (Ibid., 84). In the new millennium, comedic and satirical art, across genres, has become 'less timid in expressing critical attitudes towards hierarchies and values' (Ibid., 82). Such values include the context of marriage conventions.

Scholarship of humor in the arts has been focused on Western 'thought and ethics' (Kazarian 2011: 329), even though since ancient times, humor has been a popular mode in Arab literature. Although they are not abundant, we have consulted sources in Arabic to clarify the relevant terminology from a Middle Eastern perspective. Humor (*alfukāhatu*), as defined by Abdul Hameed, is a funny representation of an action in speech or writing that is intended to cause laughter and amusement (2003: 13). Waqafsadeh emphasizes other goals for the use of humor, such as a means of rehabilitation, making corrections and rectification (2001: 102). Humor is perceived as a coping style that a person uses to overcome psychological pain. Laughter as an indication of escapism is considered healthy since it provides symbolic comfort and relief (Abdul Hameed 2003: 8; Waqafsadeh 2011: 103). This perception parallels the Bakhtinian theory already mentioned, and it applies to all examples studied in the following sections. Taha differentiates between cognitive and affective responses to humor and underlines that satire (*sukhriyah*) requires an understanding of the social context (1978: 21). Satire acts as a monitor that challenges individual or social actions and norms (Taha 1978: 17–18; Abdul Hameed 2003: 51), whereas irony (*altahakum*) is the kind of humor which is based on two main components: sarcasm and destruction (Taha 1978: 21). It is used to belittle and humiliate opponents (Abdul Hameed 2003: 40–41). This last form of humor is the least apparent in our selected examples. The kind of satire described by Abdul Hameed and Taha is most prominent in the first two sections, and it is the more culture-specific form, as the examples will indicate. Regardless of the humorous form employed, all studied examples draw attention

to various marital problems in a way that preempts offended reactions because of the comic relief provided.

2 Methodology

Samples of digital comics, social media skits and short films were selected according to their humorous depiction of various problems related to the concept of marriage in the UAE, as well as according to their engagement with respective audiences. Guiding questions in the selection process were linked to the types of concerns artists and content creators expressed, as well as to the types of humor they used to convey these concerns. In the second step, audience reception was studied via comments on Instagram and YouTube. This step allowed the authors to assess differences in reach, and the general nature of respective feedback. This approach does not address specific demographics, which should be considered in a future study. Unobtrusive methods, allowing the researchers to collect data without the direct involvement of audiences (Hirzalla and van Zoonen 2017), were used through the 4K Stockgram application, while texts and images were downloaded and then separated. Following sentiment analysis methods, audience texts were placed into categories of opinion. With this method, researchers could assess three categories of comments: favorable, hostile and neutral to the posts.

The findings of this study thus rely more on content analysis paired with audience reception. They demonstrate that humor is a preferred mode to represent marital problems in a variety of creative genres because of its capability to provide symbolic relief and because of its ability to disguise the discussion of sensitive topics. The study's first section introduces digital comics emphasizing the wife's point-of-view in given relationships. This section is followed by investigations of social media comedy, mostly by male comedians, though one of them partners with his actual wife for the skits. The third section, on short films, highlights neglect in jaded marriages. Although directed by male filmmakers, two of the films side with the wives in this context. Comparisons between the genres underline story lengths, common concerns and the prominence of specific humorous elements. They all demonstrate that the use of humor allows Emirati artists and content creators to draw greater attention to common marital problems, especially via social media, due to the popular appeal of comedy.

3 Digital Comics

While marital satisfaction remains a sensitive topic in Emirati public discourse (Al-Darmaki et al., 2014: 1704), the theme thrives among social media users, notably on Instagram. Through comic illustrations and cartoons, a major and universal form to express cultural critique (Maurz and Danner 2014: 265), a group of well-known Instagram-based artists are offering their followers a very introspective and colorful point-of-view on marital relationships in the Arabian Gulf, also referred to as *Khaleej* (the Arabic word for 'Gulf'). In this first section of our study, we analyze the visual work of three female artists who, with their humorous illustrations, bring to light the social dynamics of Emirati couples. These artists work under the pseudonyms @emmy.art (Figs. 1–3), @sono_moza (Figs. 4–5), @danao1946 (Fig. 7), and their Instagram followers count between 20,000 to 570,000 to date.

The upper half of the first image shows how a male character is accused by his family members in Gulf Arabic of not getting married soon enough (Fig. 1). One relative recommends that it would be convenient to get married during the COVID-19 pandemic so that the wedding would be cheaper. When the young Emirati presents a picture of a potential spouse, in the lower half of the image, the others disagree with his choice. Someone complains that the woman he has chosen is not from a well-known family. Another does not consider her pretty according to family standards. Finally, the last character suggests that the man should marry his cousin. Thus, the two parts of this comic run the entire gamut of possible conflict regarding a young family member's pre-marital difficulty due to the involvement of older relatives.

While the first image includes a considerable amount of dialogue in Emirati Arabic (Fig. 1), the second comic uses no words at all. The latter shows a heart-broken woman in the foreground whose husband loves his car more than her (Fig. 2). The car is a white four-by-four, a preferred vehicle type in the UAE. The woman's pose does not suggest sadness as much as anger. She looks ready to literally put her foot down on the unacceptable situation. This sentiment establishes a parallel between the comic character and the two wives discussed in the context of short films in the fifth section of our study. Both images are satirical for local audiences aware of the average wedding cost, for example, or the status symbol of the depicted car (Figs. 1–2). The majority of viewer comments express empathy via laughing emojis. Some refer to personal experience and offer advice on possible solutions for respective conflicts. For example, in the comment section for the first image, someone cautions about the value of family harmony, which may be fortified by marriage with a cousin (Fig. 1). One reaction to the second notes the high number of deaths in traffic crashes resulting from an obsession with cars (Fig. 2).



FIGURE 1
@emmy.art, 28 Sept 2020
INSTAGRAM

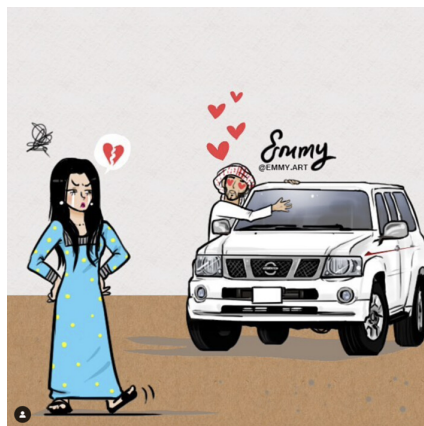


FIGURE 2
@emmy.art, 28 Jan 2016
INSTAGRAM

Idealization contrasts with caricature, but both depart from realistic portrayals, leading in opposite directions. Caricature distorts proportions within the visual language to exaggerate the salient physical and moral traits of a character (Grove et al., 2009: vi). Moreover, the first image presents several distortion factors: the blank expression on the man's face with his big eyes wide open and his agitating fingers, along with bubbles appearing next to his face, left of the speech balloon (Fig. 1). The second uses an emoji face replacing hearts for eyes on the male character (Fig. 2). All these graphic elements are borrowed from Japanese Manga (Nesti Willard and Tariq 2021: 219), and are indicative of the character affected by strong emotions. The other characters are depicted with simple lines, open shouting mouths and upside-down semicircle-shaped eyes, often associated with anger and frustration. In a few lines, the exciting, extenuating and traumatic—at least for some—soul-searching process is sketched out. In comics, paradoxical situations exposed satirically often highlight the scenario's absurdity and force the readers to focus on the comic effect. In their brevity, they rarely propose solutions (Barker 1989: 98).

The following comic, also by @emmy.art, further demonstrates these qualities. 'Tackling Polygamy' is a sequence of four images beginning (left to right) with a woman who shouts at her husband because he is late (Fig. 3). She accuses him of favoring his other wife. The next illustration represents this other wife shouting at the same man, angry about his absence the previous night, suggesting that he prefers the first wife's cooking skills. In the third image, the man, Mohamed, is seen meditating. He encourages himself to come up with an idea. The final image reveals this idea to be the search for a third wife. This



FIGURE 3 @emmy.art, 27 Nov 2017
INSTAGRAM

is a rare example of irony, as described by Taha, because it questions the male character's intelligence. He seems unable to take an active part in arguments, and it requires a major thinking process for him to decide on a step that is bound to make his marital dilemma worse eventually. Corresponding to the first image (Fig. 1), the dialogue is in Emirati Arabic. The man wears a traditional *kandura*, the white gown for Emirati men, while the women are without *abaya*, the black cloak worn outside the family circle. This detail locates the setting within the privacy of homes. Some of the viewer comments on this comic sequence show concern for the male character because he remains silent and passive.

To conclude this section, three comics by two other artists, @sono_moza and @danao1846, reveal ironic reactions to habits that partners in romantic relationships may exhibit. These images portray the struggle with each other's obsessions (Figs. 4–5). In the first, a man loses his patience and carries his wife away from her shopping frenzy (Fig. 4). The second presents a proud man unable to leave the house because his wife has tied him to a chair (Fig. 5). Special attention is drawn to facial expression in the enlargements on each side of the image. Both of these comics suggest a kind of imprisonment as conflict resolution. The immobility is imposed by the husband (Fig. 4) and by the wife (Fig. 5). In contrast, the next image is not about mobility itself (Fig. 6) but about the specific ways in which one partner attempts to leave the home. The husband here tells his wife to cover her hair properly, so she plucks the single uncovered strand in defiance.

Comments about these comics reveal a lively discussion among viewers. While they clearly confirm recognition of depicted conflicts, they are divided over the suggested solutions. The majority identifies with the irony of partners acting in ways not expected from them and states that they would like to interact in similar situations accordingly. However, others seem to take offense and declare the illustrations unacceptable. Overall, three groups of readers engage with the studied comics via posted comments. The largest group welcomes the comic relief and reacts with laughter. Another significant group identifies



FIGURE 4
@sono_moza, 28 Aug 2017
INSTAGRAM



FIGURE 5
@sono_moza, 26 Nov 2020
INSTAGRAM



FIGURE 6
@danao1846, 5 Feb 2016
INSTAGRAM

explicitly with a depicted scenario. The smallest group is the one whose members oppose the presented content.

All three artists have used only a few caricaturist elements to exaggerate certain scenes. We immediately understand the implications of each situation, though the satire is only clear for viewers familiar with the local language and customs. How has the humorous visual language become so familiar to the general public? According to Bottici and Challand, humor is a very helpful way of gaining access to the most fundamental assumptions both at conscious and subconscious levels. They explain that icons, to which we are exposed from childhood throughout life, slowly build up the fundamental basis with which we understand our environment. Dramatic representations especially, 'coagulate emotions by staging a play: it is from the impression of being part of a drama that the specific strong emotional response of myth derives' (2010: 30). When discussing the myths in question, Bottici and Challand are referring to social and political iconography, and how this is used to fulfil political agendas. We suggest that the themes of the selected illustrations studied here, the parallels between them and their propagation through social media, are becoming myths that can contribute to the formation of a stereotyped, satirical perception of marriage conventions in the UAE. The following sections show the counterparts detectable in two other forms of creative expression. While the social media skits discussed in the next section target a more international audience in the global language, English, the short films that are the subject of the last section return to Arabic, both Modern Standard and Emirati.

4 Social Media Comedy

As stated in the preceding section, Emirati kinship patterns and potential conflicts related to them are sensitive topics. There is a sense of tension between

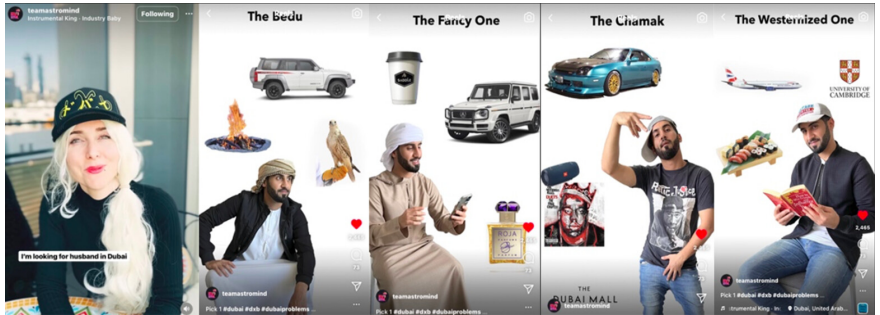


FIGURE 7 Ahmad Al Nuaimi, @teamastrmind, 20 June 2022
INSTAGRAM

Emirati men and women regarding the emotional and mental expectations of marriage (Sebugwaawo 2017; Al Nowais 2018). Much like the comic artists introduced in the first section, social media content creators have started to showcase the dynamics of their society in small skits. Only recently, this trend has drawn scholarly attention (Lesmana 2021; Nesti Willard and Tariq 2021). Unlike the cartoonists, these influencers use English, the lingua franca in the UAE, for their content. Their work appears more tied to urban settings and it is increasingly informed by a global context. This fourth section of the present study demonstrates how the same concerns of finding a spouse, dealing with a partner’s obsessions and maintaining a healthy relationship are performed and ridiculed via Instagram clips. The selected examples illustrate the plight of singles and experienced married couples, although unlike those of the digital comics, they foreground the perspectives of male content creators.

Ahmad Al Nuaimi, Abdul Razzaq Al-Khaja and Saif Al Muhairi are three Emirati comedians collaborating to create short skits. One image shows screenshots from one such skit about a foreign woman looking for an Emirati husband in a café (Fig. 7). This skit addresses a concern related to the preservation of local tradition (Salem 2013; Al Kuttab 2016) beyond the family interference with the choice of a spouse presented earlier (Fig. 1). The waiter offers a menu for the blond woman to declare her preference. Her four options include the ‘Bedu’, a more traditional man associated with falconry; the ‘Fancy One’, who likes takeaway coffee and selfies; the ‘Chamak’, shown in Western clothes and with a sports car; and finally, the literally ‘Westernized One’, who seems to have a degree from an elite university, reads a book and eats sushi.

Even the ‘Bedu’ is not depicted as strictly traditional since his headdress, the *ghutra*, is not white and is worn without an *agal*, the black rope used to keep the *ghutra* in place (see the final image in Fig. 3). Combined with the following



FIGURE 8
Abdul Razzaq Al-Khaja
and Ahmed Al Nuaimi,
@teamastromind
@Abdokhj, 27 April 2022
INSTAGRAM

impersonations, sporting rapper shirts and baseball hats, the sequence is well suited to poke fun of the stereotypical effects of globalization, underlined by the use of English, the global language, rather than the country's official language, Arabic. The video was played more than 270,000 times to date and has garnered 740 likes as well as 108 comments. The majority of the latter came from expatriate women who reacted with laughter and sometimes with their pick from the 'menu'. Other comments came from laughing men, both local and expatriate. The extent of this feedback is clearly much greater than for any of the examples discussed in the preceding section.

Similar to the first comic in the preceding section, the above image highlights the pre-marital dilemma related to choosing a spouse (Fig. 7), which is also the theme for one of the short films in the following section. However, in contrast, another image corresponds to the comics representing marital dissatisfaction (Fig. 8). In this skit, two married friends are discussing a dating app during the holy month of Ramadan. More specifically, Al-Khaja and Al Nuaimi satirize Tinder, a platform that is not always readily available in the UAE (Khalaf 2015). One of the friends asks the other what he is doing on his phone. The latter replies that he is preparing for Iftar, the breaking of the fast after sundown. When Ahmed investigates and checks the phone, he discovers that Abdul Razzaq, a married man, is browsing Tinder. The latter explains that he shortlists potential women to chat with after Iftar. The punchline is that the matches remain elusive since Abdul Razzaq's profile picture only showcases a close-up of his feet.

Corresponding to the 'Westernized' and the 'Chamak' characters (Fig. 7) mentioned above, Ahmed is wearing a baseball cap in the Tinder skit, but the irony centers on cultural reluctance to be photographed. Although both par-

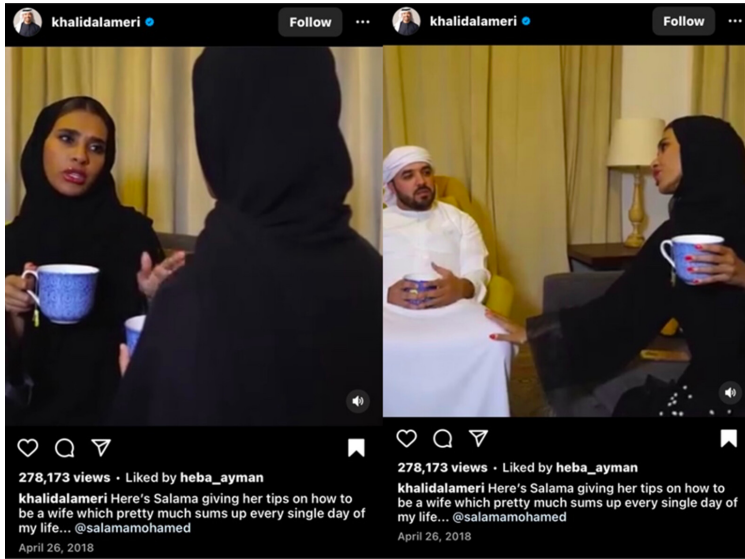


FIGURE 9 Salama Mohamad and Khalid Alameri, @khalidalameri, 26 April 2018
INSTAGRAM

ticipants in the dialogue appear Westernized, Abdul Razzaq does not comply with the app’s profiling conventions. The skit received 33,000 plays with 37 comments, which are mostly supportive laughing emojis. While the preceding section tackles polygamy (Fig. 3), a practice condoned in Islam, this comic is more suggestive of Western promiscuity (Fig. 8). Recent studies have shown direct links between the popularity of social media and dating apps and rising marital disputes in the UAE (Sebugwaawo 2017; Nouwais 2018). While the earlier comic is created by a female artist (Fig. 3), this skit presents the work of male comedians (Fig. 8). The next example is the result of an actual couple’s considerations.

Salama Mohammad and Khalid Al Ameri have more than 1.2 million followers. Their audience consists mainly of expatriates and only very few citizens, or ‘locals’. In fact, several Emiratis have been annoyed, commenting that the posts are misleading and distorting the ‘true’ Emirati marital bond, accusations to which the couple respond with reference to their use of humor (Chatterjee 2021). One example of the couple’s work can be seen observed in the image above (Fig. 9). Salama is having tea with her best friend, and she is giving advice on how to control a husband. She goes into detail about how women should effectively negotiate with their spouses and provoke apologies during arguments. The scene then changes to reveal that Khalid is actually sitting close to Salama, silently listening to her lecture. When he asks Salama if he



FIGURE 10 'Ali Al Sayedy, @alsayedcomedy, 1 Feb 2022
INSTAGRAM

might leave, she rejects his request, turning the traditional patriarchal structure (also see Figs. 5–6) upside down. This is an example of satire explained by Abdul Hameed and Taha in this article's introduction. While Western viewers might understand this skit to ridicule the woman, the Arab perspective provides a contrasting interpretation. The post received 280,000 views, with more than 200 likes and 964 comments to date. The majority display encouragement through symbolic laughter or phrases, including 'you go, girl' and 'women power'. A considerable number of tags show male Arab names, indicating potential discourse encouraged by the skit.

While Al Ameri teams up with his wife for their comic skits, the concluding example in this section is limited, again, to the male spouse's perspective on marital dynamics, although this comedian collaborates with his wife on performance training. 'Ali Al Sayedy is a comedian based in Dubai who makes snippets of his stand-up comedy available via social media. One comic provides examples of such snippets when he discusses the difficulty of maintaining a healthy relationship throughout many years of marriage (Fig. 10). This difficulty is also at the center of two short films discussed in the next section, and even though these films are directed by male filmmakers, they highlight the woman's perspective. Al Sayedy's post received 8,600 views, with 200 likes (Fig. 10). Again, the majority of responses were laughing emojis, this time mainly from men. Al Sayedy replies to every comment, thus maintaining continuous interaction with his viewers.

Al Sayedy has performed his comedy worldwide, showcasing how local aspects of his material tie in with global contexts. He is married to Mina

Liccione, an award-winning dancer, comedian and art educator from New York, and founded the company Dubomeddy, where he trains aspiring performers.

In contrast to the comic artists discussed in the preceding section, the emerging Emirati comedians at the center of this section rely on English for their performances. Dissimilar to the comic artists, they use their actual names rather than pseudonyms. The mini-stories presented in their skits are longer than those visible in the comics, though they do not involve the kind of plot development at stake in the following section. However, the three genres all share common concerns regarding marriage in the UAE. These concerns highlight the choice of a spouse, family involvement in this choice, patriarchal family structures and jaded relationships. The brevity of the social media comedy, much like the immediacy of the comic panels, leads to accelerated reach, observed in the number of followers and comments. It also accounts for a more light-hearted effect than that created by the short films, which are the subject of the last section.

5 Short Film

Although the Emirati Cinema Movement is still comparatively young (Hambuch 2018; Mirgani 2020; Nashef 2023) it has produced hundreds of short films during recent decades. The short form serves not only as a training opportunity, much like the short story often does for novelists, but also as a type of cinematic expression with rapidly growing popularity, especially in emerging industries in the Arabian Gulf. Hania Nashef, who studies the rise of comedy alongside that of the horror genre within the Emirati Cinema Movement, confirms that 'comedy affords UAE filmmakers more latitude' (Nashef 2023: 11). We hold that this fact also applies to the cartoonists and comedians discussed in this study. The following analysis establishes parallels between the humorous modes present in the digital comics and social media skits and selected short films that also revolve around the theme of marriage. Even though these films are primarily produced for the festival circuit and thus initially encounter comparatively smaller audiences, they later appear on artists' YouTube channels and engender similar viewer reactions to the other forms of creative expression analyzed above.

Three short films were selected because they foreground different stages of the marital relationship. Mansour Ahmed's *Asli* (2019) introduces two young characters who would like to get married and struggle with parental interference. The kind of family involvement also witnessed in certain comics (Fig. 1)



FIGURE 11
Screenshots from *Asli*—the private investigator

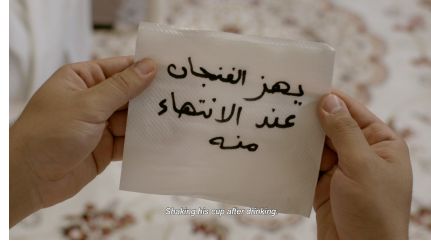


FIGURE 12
Screenshots from *Asli*—the originality test

is satirized in Ahmed's film via the character of a private investigator. In *Black White* (2011), the oldest content examined in this study, Omar Butti juxtaposes two different couples in mid-life. Abdulrahman Al Madani's *Laymoon* (2019) shares Butti's concern with fading romance but features an older couple. Butti's and Al Madani's films address the problems also presented in specific comics (Figs. 2 and 9). In the same vein as Nashef (2023: 11), Gayatri Devi and Najat Rahman write in *Humor in Middle Eastern Cinema* that comedy is 'in canonical criticism, classified as a lowbrow art form' (Devi and Rahman 2014: 7). We argue that the short films by Ahmed, Butti and Al Madani correspond very well with the selections presented in Devi and Rahman's anthology, selections that in the editors' words, 'all examine the various ways in which the humorous aesthetic triumphs over the rigid bondage of overbearing social roles, norms, and structures' (Ibid., 14). Norms and structures in question relate to the conditions of the marital contract at various stages during the marriage, the same conditions challenged by the cartoonists and comedians at the center of the preceding sections.

The couple-to-be in *Asli* struggles, much like one of the characters above (Fig. 2), with family involvement in their choice. The main obstacle to their union is the question of whether the future groom is an 'original' (*asli*) Emirati. Similar to *Black White*, which pays tribute to martial arts films, *Asli* plays with an established convention, the detective film. Despite having been on top of a *kandura*, the trench coat of the character above (Fig. 11) immediately evokes a Sherlock Holmes connotation. However, this character is actually imaginary and symbolizes the investigative machinery employed by local parents, at times, to help them choose suitable spouses for their children. Corresponding to some scenes above (Figs. 2 and 7), Ahmed's film exhibits satire. The specific characteristics that should identify the suitor as an 'original', are presented satirically on tissues that the imaginary detective checks during a dinner (Fig. 12).

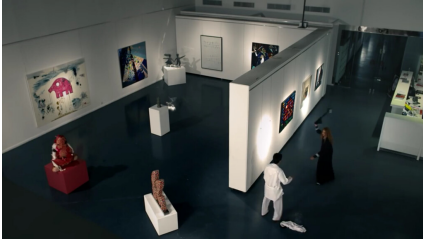


FIGURE 13
Screenshots from *Black White*—the martial art



FIGURE 14
Screenshots from *Black White*—the portrait theft

Assaf explains that the complications of choosing a spouse comprise three main agents in the UAE. The state propagates marriages between nationals, the family will favor a candidate with the same social status and the spouse-to-be combines these parameters with personal affinity. In contrast to some skits (Fig. 7), which insinuate dangers to cultural heritage through Westernization, Ahmed's film tackles ethnic background beyond the question of citizenship. '*Asli*' refers to what Assaf describes as 'a citizen from an Arab Muslim family with a long historical presence on UAE territory' (2018: 130). Characteristics of this person, include, for example, use of language (Fig. 11) and customs concerning meals (Fig. 12). *Asli* borrows not only from the detective genre but refers to a Bollywood happy ending for a seemingly hopeless courtship before the imaginary investigator throws away the requested DNA report. As in the following two films, and in contrast to the referenced Bollywood film, the end of *Asli* remains open. This technique allows viewers to consider the addressed problem as ongoing and leaves them to simultaneously imagine various solutions. While *Asli* tackles pre-marital conflict, the following two short films focus on stages of aged relationships.

Butti's *Black White* presents two contrasting couples whose lives are intertwined by the husband of the wealthier couple owning a gallery where the husband of the lower-class couple works as guard. The wealthier Emirati couple suffers from estrangement. In particular, the woman feels that she has become invisible to her spouse. The gallery guard, in contrast, wishes for a bit less attention from his partner. Not only does his wife interfere with his passion for martial arts films, but she is also observed presenting him with a long list of chores. The guard, himself a martial arts practitioner, ends up in a spontaneous fight with his employer's wife (Fig. 13), who is trying to steal a painting from the gallery.

The gallery owner's apathy culminates in the story's closure when he hears about the theft on the phone, while his wife passes behind him with the



FIGURE 15
Screenshots from *Laymoon*—the makeover



FIGURE 16
Screenshots from *Laymoon*—the third day

stolen and rather large portrait (Fig. 14). The robbery signals a criticism of her husband's work obsession and the kind of disregard hinted in earlier comics (Figs. 2–3). Likewise, Al Sayedy's depicted gig (Fig. 10) warns of potential problems in a matured marital relationship, the kind that Butti's gallery owner seems to display. Even though it was uploaded more than a decade ago, *Black White* continues to generate reactions, the last dated just two months ago. It has received 116,542 views and 76 comments, mostly displaying laughter and gratitude. One viewer remarks, 'I'm glad some people are branching out of domestic drama films', a sentiment that seems to find reassurance not only in the newer films discussed in this section, but also in the use of humor for respective comics and social media skits. In a different style, *Laymoon* sheds new light on the issue problematized in *Black White*.

As the next images show (Figs. 15–16), Al Madani's couple is considerably older than the two couples in Butti's film, but both films share the theme of neglect. The entire plot of *Laymoon* revolves around the wife's attempts to revive the jaded marriage. The comic effect is created through exaggerations of these attempts and through funny renderings of social media advice. The different stages of the wife's efforts include the preparation of a special dinner, her personal make-over (Fig. 15), and finally, romantic candle light decoration (Fig. 16). The chauvinist husband rejects all attempts in the same offensive way. Much like the Tinder user above (Fig. 8), this husband prefers the virtual world of Snapchat beauties to the reality of his wife. However, in the end, he no longer gets away with malice when his wife leaves a pile of take-out menus and departs with the female friend who gave her the advice. Viewers are invited to imagine the consequences of this change, but it is clear that the abusive routine is broken.

Within only a couple of years, *Laymoon* received 43,000 views, 676 likes, and 51 supportive comments in Arabic and English, accompanied by laughter, applause and thumbs-up emojis.

Discussion of the three films establishes various parallels with the issues analyzed in the aforementioned sections. The neglect felt by the wives in *Black*

White and *Laymoon* is part of the marriage fatigue addressed by Al Sayedy (Fig. 10) or also by @emmy.art (Fig. 2), where the man is more interested in a car than his partner. The problem of acceptance in *Asli* relates to the jokes made by @emmy.art (Fig. 1), as well as by Al Nuaimi (Fig. 9). While the comics and skits come across as more relaxed in their brevity, the short films present tragic and comical plot elements. The three genres equally generate overwhelmingly positive responses among their online audiences, a finding that supports the effect of comic relief.

6 Conclusion

The analysis of diverse examples from a myriad of genres throughout this article has demonstrated that Emirati artists prefer to rely on humor, and to some extent on satire, to represent marriage in their creative expression. The concerns addressed by digital comic artists, social media comedians and short filmmakers revolve around the involvement of family members in the choice of a spouse, social status, the significance of material value in romantic relationships, a partner's individual obsessions, jealousy, the fading of relationships and the effects of globalization. The illustrators discussed in the third section of the article condense specific concerns into a few panels, thus offering only the apex of a situation at a time. This immediateness is a unique characteristic of comics and does not apply to short skits or films. Comic illustrations hold the characteristic of represented time availing of the space given (Barbieri 1991: 229). The image, on printed or online, is still. It only implies movement, which binds the past, present and future within one single scene (Ibid., 231). At times, these images speak for themselves without text.

The social media skits presented in the fourth section add little more time to the immediateness of the comic. Their focus remains on the punchline and the cause for laughter. In contrast to the selected comics, which feature Emirati Arabic for their minimal dialogue, the skits use the global language, English, as their medium of communication. The latter is more appealing, though by no means exclusively, to the large expat community in the region. The Arabic dialogue of the short films becomes accessible to non-Arab viewers via subtitles. Overall, disregarding demographics, the majority of responses to the studied humorous representations of marital problems appears positive. In the three sections, the largest group of viewers is observed responding with laughter and gratitude, encouraging respective artists with applause and heart emojis.

In their brevity, the digital comics and social media skits appeal more to affective reactions, while the films depend more on cognition (Taha 1978). In

comparison, the former thus appear more light-hearted, while the latter foreground the pain along with its comic relief. While some of the presented scenes could be imagined in many other cultural contexts, the interpretation of others depends on knowledge of the local language and customs. This is particularly pertinent to satirical elements (Ibid.). Overall, the examples demonstrate that humor is a preferred mode to represent marriage in a variety of creative genres because of its capability to provide symbolic relief, and because of its ability to disguise the discussion of sensitive topics. Emirati artists rely on digital media to reach larger audiences and receive feedback, the majority is encouraging. Given that some of the depicted concerns are universal, so are some of the employed forms of humor. Others, in contrast, depend heavily on a viewer's insider location within the represented context (Figs. 1–2, 7–9, and 12).

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