Art in Tunisian LGBTQI++ NGOs

Emma Cooney

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Art in Tunisian LGBTQI++ NGOs

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Abstract

This study examines how non-governmental organizations use the arts to support their missions in a context of Tunisian LGBTQI++ activism. Homosexuality in Tunisia is punishable by three years in prison, and the LGBTQI++ community is under threat of both legal action and homophobic violence. Yet, since the 2011 Revolution, queer activists have founded several associations to advocate for their community, and the associations have formed a strong connection to the arts.

In this study, I spoke with art organizers from three Tunisian LGBTQI++ associations to document their plentiful art activity. Film and art festivals are prevalent among a wide variety of mediums. I identify the common logistical difficulties the NGOs encounter. The broad challenges are marketing, funding, and staffing, and each obstacle holds unique complications in the specific context of queer activism in Tunisia. Finally, I analyze why three busy organizations choose to put some of their energy toward the arts. I find that the NGOs see a unique power in the arts to attract interest; once they have an audience, they tailor each art project to raise awareness, create a safe space, or spark a dialogue with the public.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my research supervisor, Shams Abdi; my academic director, Mounir Khélifa; and the rest of the SIT Tunisia staff. Thank you all for supporting my research.

I must also acknowledge the inspiring activists who are interviewed in this study. Thank you for giving your time to speak with me about your work. I am especially grateful to the Mawjoudin Cinexist film club for your warm welcome.

I so appreciate the support of my American family and my Tunisian host family during this research period. Many thanks to the Cooneys in Lincoln and the Bouderbalas in La Marsa!
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Introduction

Activists in the Tunisian queer\(^1\) community face a monumental challenge, fighting for LGBTQI++\(^2\) rights in a country where homosexuality is illegal. Article 230 of the Tunisian penal code sets a punishment of up to three years in prison for homosexual activities,\(^3\) and though the article dates back over a hundred years to French colonial rule, it is still the basis for arrests and imprisonment in Tunisia today.\(^4\) Violent hate crimes are similarly a serious threat to queer Tunisians, stemming from homophobia and transphobia in society.\(^5\) The LGBTQI++ NGOs currently active in Tunisia take on these obstacles daily as they advocate for the queer community.

Their energy is divided between legal support, emotional support, physical security, changing public opinion, sexual health education, and political advocacy—to list just some of their valuable efforts. Every association does not work on every project, yet they all find time to devote some of their work to the arts. From art festivals to film clubs to online radio, each NGO has found their own way to connect art to activism. The intention of this study is to document this artistic activity and analyze the value art holds for Tunisian queer activism.

My research covers three LGBTQI++ associations in Tunisia: Mawjoudin, Chouf, and Shams. Damj, the only other active association, was not available for this study. The Tunisian Coalition for LGBTQI+ Rights is made up of Mawjoudin, Chouf, and Damj; Shams is explicitly not a member.\(^6\) My research took place in Tunis, the capital city of Tunisia, where the four

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1 See “queer” in the glossary of terms.
2 See “LGBTQI++” in the glossary of terms.
3 Limam, *Tunisian Active NGOs*, 3-4.
4 Association Shams, “Emerging Democracy.”
5 Ibid.
6 Tunisian Coalition for LGBTQI+ Rights, “Statement.”
associations are based. I focused on NGOs, rather than independent artists, to investigate how organizations with administrative constraints and defined activist missions engage with the arts.

This paper first documents the large presence of art activity within Tunisian queer NGOs. I give a brief of each NGO’s unique mission followed by summaries of each art project or event they produce. I then investigate the logistics of art in a Tunisian queer NGO, including practical concerns such as marketing, funding, and staffing. Finally, I analyze why the NGOs choose to use the arts despite logistical obstacles. I will argue that art in this context holds immense potential in increasing public awareness and building meaningful communities.

Previous scholarship exists on Tunisian LGBTQI++ NGOs. In 2016, Meagan Burt wrote an independent study project, also for the School for International Training, titled “‘With My People’: Tunisia’s LGBT NGOs and Activists.” She studied three NGOs—Mawjoudin, Damj, and Without Restrictions—and the individual experiences of seven activists. She found that each of the NGOs has a different specialty within the larger cause and provided a detailed look at their activities and philosophies. She recommended that further studies include Shams and Chouf. Since her study, the president and vice president of Without Restrictions have moved to Canada, and the NGO is no longer active. Jinane Limam also published a 2017 study titled “Tunisian Active NGOs in the Field of LGBTQI++ Rights.” This study gives a more comprehensive overview of all the associations in the community and their activity since the 2011 Tunisian Revolution. Both of these studies make few mentions of the arts and cover the many other activities between which the NGOs split their time. Art activities in this community have
received substantial press attention recently but I could not find any academic research on the topic.

**Methodology**

My research consisted of interviews with five art organizers, first-hand observation of art projects, and reviews of both media mentions and social media. Each person I interviewed had a leadership role in the NGO’s art activity. I was connected with most of my interview subjects through Shams Abdi, my supervisor and a Mawjoudin member. I spoke with Karam, Abdou Mezzi, and Dylan from Mawjoudin; Sahar Yahiaoui from Chouf; and Amina Sboui from Shams. I reached out to Sahar Yahiaoui from Chouf separately and found her through an acquaintance who volunteers with Chouftouhonna, their art festival. I heard multiple perspectives from Mawjoudin and only one each from Chouf and Shams. This imbalance did impact my research; I am more confident that my list of art activity is comprehensive for Mawjoudin, compared with the other two. All interviews were conducted in person. I prepared potential questions ahead of time, but began each interview asking my interviewee to explain their involvement with the NGO and give me an overview of the ways the NGO works with the arts. I conducted the rest of each interview in a conversational style, asking follow-up questions to get more details. I chose this style for my research because the interviews were the first time I had heard about many of the art projects. A film club and a magazine will inspire two different sets of follow-up questions. I referred back to my list of general questions throughout to make sure we covered them.

I observed as much of the art as I could first-hand. Some of the events weren’t happening during my stay in Tunisia, but I referred to online YouTube videos of the events to get a sense of the atmosphere. I attended a meeting of the Mawjoudin film club and watched the Shams
documentary. I also used social media as a very helpful resource to learn more about the NGOs. Facebook is a huge platform for communication in Tunisia, and both Mawjoudin and Chouf use their Facebook pages as replacements for broken websites.

Obstacles to my research included difficulty contacting Damj and my own language barrier. I know Damj does work with the arts, as they are involved with the art festival Dream City. However, I was unable to get an interview with anyone from the organization to learn more. I did get in contact with the president of Damj through the NGO’s Facebook page, but he was traveling at the time and never responded to a later request for an interview. Additionally, my research was more difficult because I only speak English. Everyone I interviewed was able and happy to speak with me in English, but the language barrier made viewing the actual art more difficult. For the short Mawjoudin cartoon booklet, my academic director kindly translated the Arabic; for the much longer Shams Mag magazine, I read the English sections and translated seemingly key words from the French and Arabic parts.

I do have possible sources of bias in this research. I am a heterosexual, cisgender woman from the United States; I am not a member of the community I am researching. My understanding of queer culture, rights, and activism is through a U.S. lens. Both the previous studies by Burt and Limam and the art projects I observed helped improve my background understanding of the queer experience in Tunisia. I am also a theatre major in the U.S., which could create a pro-art bias in which I overemphasize art’s role in the NGOs. For this reason, I avoid making any claims that the arts are a better tool for activism than any other activity. Finally, my research supervisor Shams Abdi is a member of Mawjoudin and is open about her own anti-Shams (the NGO) bias. I had to decide whether or not to include Shams the NGO in my
research, given that the other NGOs have cut ties with them over ethical concerns. I chose to include them, but have dedicated an upcoming subsection to this decision.

Finally, confidentiality was a very important component of my interviews because members of the LGBTQI++ community are at risk of legal troubles and homophobia. I should recognize first of all that I did not ask any of my interviewees about their sexuality, and none of their sexualities can be assumed by their participation in this study. Yet, I was very aware that there are risks for a Tunisian to have their name linked to LGBTQI++ activism. I gave all my interview subjects the choice of how they wanted to be identified. Amina Sboui, Sahar Yahiaoui, and Abdou Mezzi chose to use their full names, and Karam chose to use just his first name. My final source asked me to refer to them by just Dylan, a different name than the one with which they were introduced to me.

*Shams and the Tunisian Coalition for LGBTQI+ Rights*

Mawjoudin, Damj, Chouf, and Shams do not all collaborate within one united community. I include the details of their relationship here to both document recent events and explain the ethical question I encountered.

Mawjoudin, Damj, and Chouf work together under the name Tunisian Coalition for LGBTQI+ Rights—of which Shams is not a member. Until April 2018, the coalition worked with Shams on projects, including the recent *Couleurs d’Avril* culture week at the French Institute. However, eleven days after the culture week ended, the coalition released a statement announcing its decision to “no longer collaborate directly or indirectly” with Shams. There

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9 Dylan uses they/them pronouns.
10 Tunisian Coalition for LGBTQI+ Rights, “Statement.” (See Appendix 1 for full statement.)
were several reasons cited that revealed fundamental differences in values and methods between the coalition and Shams. The statement included the following concerning lines:

We believe that individuals who are in a precarious situation and who are very vulnerable cannot give an enlightened consent…In fact, the coalition members, as well as other allied organizations, have repeatedly received complaints of sexual harassment and inappropriate behavior towards minors, perpetrated by the president of Shams organization. The coalition requested, on several occasions, that Shams’ executive board makes a firm decision about this, yet, the answer has always been negative.\textsuperscript{11}

Pursuing vulnerable minors from a position of power would indeed be deeply irresponsible and immoral. I asked Amina Sboui of Shams about this statement, and she confirmed that the president had kissed a minor at an official Shams event, but dismissed the concern.\textsuperscript{12} As the vice president of Shams, she is part of the same executive board criticized by the coalition for a lack of action.

I spoke with Sboui after I decided to include Shams in my study. I included them to be both comprehensive and objective in my research. I must be honest that I entered my research with a potential for bias against Shams because of the president’s actions. However, they have added significant depth to my research, and my conclusions are in no way anti-Shams. I instead recognize their success in adapting the arts to their specific needs.

**Art Activity by NGO**

Each of the three NGOs uses multiple types of art activity. I use “art activity” to mean any art projects, artworks, or art events that are an official part of the NGO. In some cases, the

\textsuperscript{11} Tunisian Coalition for LGBTQI+ Rights, “Statement.”
\textsuperscript{12} Sboui, interview with author.
artist is a member of the NGO; in others, the NGO displays art created by an outside artist. The mediums used vary widely, but film and art festivals are particularly common. The NGOs were also all involved in the French Institute’s 2018 “Couleurs d’Avril” LGBTQI++ culture week.

**Mawjoudin**

Mawjoudin was founded in January 2015 by activists who were tired of other human rights organizations avoiding the LGBTQI++ fight.\(^{13}\) Today, they have between two hundred and three hundred members.\(^{14}\) The NGO defines its mission as:

achieving equality, human rights, bodily rights and sexual rights for the LGBTQI+ community and other marginalised groups and individuals…[including] people coming from different backgrounds, age groups, genders, sexual orientations and different cities and remote areas across Tunisia.\(^{15}\)

Inclusivity is a major part of their identity as an NGO, and they recently updated their terminology to “LGBTQI++”, adding an extra plus to emphasize inclusivity.\(^{16}\) They support the queer community in a variety of ways, including “advocacy, documentation, capacity building, awareness-raising, safe spaces and lobbying.”\(^{17}\) One of Mawjoudin’s founders focused on capacity building as the organization’s primary purpose in a 2016 interview with Meagan Burt. He told her, “We do a lot of training for our members to learn about human rights and sexual rights, training for public communication, training for digital security.”\(^{18}\) At the time of this interview, close to two years after the organization’s founding, Mawjoudin’s focus was indeed

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\(^{13}\) Burt, “With My People,” 16.

\(^{14}\) Karam, interview with author.

\(^{15}\) Mawjoudin, *Who We Are*.

\(^{16}\) Karam, interview with author.

\(^{17}\) Mawjoudin, *Who We Are*.

on training activists and making sure they were well-prepared. I recently spoke with Karam, an organizer of the Mawjoudin Queer Film Festival, who explained how the organization’s purpose has since begun to shift. After three initial years of capacity building, Mawjoudin is now expanding their focus to include the public outside the queer community.19

Artistic projects have been a part of Mawjoudin since the beginning. Many members are artists themselves, as both hobbies and careers. Karam explained that “art is a specific point of Mawjoudin…to raise awareness and bring people together.”20 Mawjoudin’s abundant art activity includes a film club, film festival, cartoon booklet, artistic committee, music club, and many ideas for future projects.

_Cinexist Film Club_

Cinexist is Mawjoudin’s film club. I attended a meeting as my first introduction to Mawjoudin and interviewed Dylan, the current coordinator, and Sahar Yahiaoui, a founding Cinexist member. Cinexist began in February 2017 as one of several clubs within Mawjoudin. At its start, it was a weekly club of four or five friends who were interested in film.21 Now, it meets biweekly, typically trading off weekends with the English Conversation Club.22

Each club meeting features an LGBTQI++-related film and a following debate. Dylan told me, “You don’t have always the chance to debate after seeing a movie…Many LGBTQI++ movies are filled with emotions and with debates you’re able to open up and share a similar experience.”23 From my own observations and speaking with Dylan, it seems debates can cover three main topics: the LGBTQI++ topics in the film; connections to the members’ personal

19 Karam, interview with author.
20 Ibid.
21 Yahiaoui, interview with author.
22 Dylan, interview with author.
23 Ibid.
experience; and a review of the cinematography, performances, screenwriting, etc. Coordinators either come in with prepared discussion topics or let the conversation flow naturally. \(^{24}\)

Cinexist projects films that connect to the global LGBTQI++ community. Dylan explained that they are less likely to select films from Europe and the United States. \(^{25}\) When I attended, the film was *Una mujer fantástica*, telling the story of a Chilean transgender woman dealing with grief and transphobia. In the debate, members discussed their surprise at the relative openness with which the transgender character was able to express her gender identity in Santiago, Chile. Dylan highlighted the club’s struggle to find quality films for every meeting. Cinexist sometimes chooses to project films that contain clichés about the queer community or come from heterosexual, cisgender creators. They then use the debate to discuss the clichés or “heteronormative vision” they just witnessed. \(^{26}\) Dylan’s vision for the future of the club includes opening up the film choices to intersectional human rights topics, such as feminism. \(^{27}\)

The films are downloaded for free from the internet, \(^{28}\) so anyone can access them on their own, but Cinexist offers a unique community for queer film fans. Dylan explained that “there are a lot of people [in Mawjoudin] interested in cinematography, from artistic backgrounds,” \(^{29}\) and Cinexist gives the opportunity to engage in their passion in a very safe environment. It began with a handful of members in the small Mawjoudin headquarters in downtown Tunis and remains a small affair. \(^{30}\) Attendance can range from three and eighteen; it was around twelve the

\(^{24}\) Dylan, interview with author.
\(^{25}\) Ibid.
\(^{26}\) Ibid.
\(^{27}\) Ibid.
\(^{28}\) Yahiaoui, interview with author.
\(^{29}\) Dylan, interview with author.
\(^{30}\) Yahiaoui, interview with author.
week I attended.\textsuperscript{31} According to Yahiaoui, it isn’t a publically open club and “you have to know someone to get there.”\textsuperscript{32} I was brought in by Shams Abdi, my research supervisor and a Mawjoudin member.

\textit{Mawjoudin Queer Film Festival}

I interviewed Karam, the first coordinator of Cinexist and subsequent coordinator of the Mawjoudin Queer Film Festival. In Cinexist, he came up with the idea to connect LGBTQI++ films with a larger audience—far beyond the capacity of Mawjoudin’s small office.\textsuperscript{33} The first edition of the Mawjoudin Queer Film Festival took place in January 2018.\textsuperscript{34} As Dylan told me, “The idea for the Queer Film Festival came right from the club—to gather as many people as they could.”\textsuperscript{35} On the first day of the festival, between three hundred and four hundred attendees flooded a 150-seat theatre, sitting on the floor or one another’s laps.\textsuperscript{36} Karam considered this turnout a definite success with an unexpectedly large impact in press coverage and worldwide attention. He called the film festival the first openly LGBTQI++ project of this type in Tunisia.\textsuperscript{37} (Though the Chouftouhonna arts festival came first, it is marketed to the public as a feminist festival.)\textsuperscript{38}

The festival was four days of film screenings, debates, cultural events, drag shows, opening/closing ceremonies, and a painting exhibit. On the final day, a jury of well-known

\textsuperscript{31} Dylan, interview with author.
\textsuperscript{32} Yahiaoui, interview with author.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{35} Dylan, interview with author.
\textsuperscript{36} Karam, interview with author.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{38} Yahiaoui, interview with author.
Tunisian actors announced the winning films. The eligibility criteria posted on the film festival’s website was:

All participating films should have a particular focus on the topic of non normative gender and sexuality. The official competition will include films based on the following criteria:

- Short and medium films (not exceeding 59 minutes)
- Highlight the experiences and the life stories of individuals coming from Africa and Middle East.

Films that did not meet the length or geographic requirements were eligible for inclusion in the festival, but not in the competition. Ultimately, there were nine entries in the competition and five non-competing films. Only one (a German film) was from outside Africa and the Middle East, and three were Tunisian. A main focus of the film festival was thus examining the specific LGBTQI++ experience and fight within Tunisia and its larger regional community.

Day one of the festival began with the Tunisian documentary Upon the Shadow. Upon the Shadow tells the story of a shelter for homeless queer people, and I spoke with the shelter’s director, Amina Sboui, about her experience having her story told. (Sboui is also the vice president of Shams.) She told me that the documentary’s director is a friend who had the idea to make the film while visiting Sboui. Sboui and the other residents struggled having their busy lives covered by a camera crew, but they are happy with the final product, sharing their story

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39 Karam, interview with author.
40 Mawjoudin Queer Film Festival, “Registration.”
41 Ibid.
42 Mawjoudin Queer Film Festival, The Program. (See Appendix 2 for full film list)
with the world. The film was not entered in the competition part of the Mawjoudin Queer Film Festival, but it offered a perspective from within the Tunisian queer community.

**Campaign Project**

The campaign project is a cartoon booklet in Arabic created by artists from Mawjoudin. The creators drew upon real experiences and met with queer youth in Bizerte. Abdou Mezzi, the illustrator, explained to me, “They shared their stories with us, and we included their stories in the comic, even some of their exact word.” In the first half of the booklet, a girl is a constantly berated by her mother and those around her for being too masculine. Her family forces her to get married, and she wonders—crying in bed—what it would be like to be with a woman instead. The section’s last line, translated into English, reads, “And the story continues, baby girl after baby girl, baby boy after baby boy…” The second story shows a gay school boy being bullied and beaten up. Another boy helps him and passes him a note about the help Mawjoudin has to offer, welcoming him into their community. Both stories illustrate what it is like to grow up queer in Tunisia.

The booklet also pairs the two valuable stories with helpful resources. The front of the page offers Mawjoudin’s contact information. The back of the booklet features an illustration by a Mawjoudin artist that explains the differences between gender identity, gender expression, biological sex, and sexual orientation. It was distributed at the Mawjoudin Queer Film Festival, in Mawjoudin headquarters, and on Facebook.

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43 Sboui, interview with author.
44 Mawjoudin Queer Film Festival, The Program.
45 Mezzi, interview with author.
46 Mezzi, Mawjoudin Campaign Project, 3.
47 Mezzi, interview with author.
Other Art Activity and Future Projects

I encountered two other artistic groups within Mawjoudin: the music club and the artistic committee. I did not speak with anyone involved in the music club, but Dylan described it as a small club of the musicians in Mawjoudin. Though it doesn’t have regular meetings, the members play at the NGO’s events. I did speak with Abdou Mezzi, who has been the coordinator of the artistic committee since March 2018. Artistic committee meetings are open to anyone interested in Mawjoudin and currently have few attendees. Mezzi hopes attendance will increase under his leadership. Karam was clear that not all Mawjoudin art projects are the work of the committee, but the committee’s purpose is to brainstorm and support art projects. One idea the committee is currently working with is, in Mezzi’s words, an “art contest with a queer theme for members and allies to discover new talents and showcase their work.” This contest is one of the few times in my research that I encountered allies targeted as potential artists.

Mawjoudin members have many further ideas for future art projects. Karam intends to make the Mawjoudin Queer Film Festival an annual event with more art forms included. He mentioned that other members are considering creating a YouTube channel or radio. Mezzi is planning to draw another comic series—this time with multiple installments. He also told me Mawjoudin is considering a “small workshop for our members where they can create items/product[s] to sell in public events.” The artistic activity of Mawjoudin is evolving rapidly and will likely continue to change in the near future.

48 Dylan, interview with author.
49 Mezzi, interview with author.
50 Karam, interview with author.
51 Mezzi, “Interview Last Month,” e-mail message with author.
52 Karam, interview with author.
53 Mezzi, interview with author.
54 Mezzi, “Interview Last Month,” e-mail message with author.
Chouf

Chouf was founded in 2013 and describes itself as “a feminist organization that fights for bodily, sexual, and individual rights of women in their complexities and differences.” Chouf, like Mawjoudin, was meant to fill a gap in Tunisian civil society. The founders had encountered two problems: feminist associations were reluctant to work on LGBTQI++ rights, and queer associations were dominated by men. They chose to create an association of LBT women (lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women) to merge feminist and queer activism. Currently Chouf only has nine members, with thirteen members of their associated arts festival Chouftouhonna. Chouf has gained a reputation among the other NGOs as the art specialists, and Sahar Yahiaoui of Chouf told me, “We take arts as our weapon against all the discrimination.” These “weapons” include the Chouftouhonna festival, a film club, a film project in prisons, and other art activities.

In the case of Chouf, I do not consider this study a comprehensive list of all their art activity. Yahiaoui was the only member with whom I was able to speak, and she has professional experience with film. She was clear that her answers centered around Chouf’s film events and that other members would focus on their own passion projects if I spoke with them. Chouftouhonna stands out from the rest of the projects, but the other art activities below should be seen as just a few examples from a long, rich engagement with the arts.

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55 Chouf, “About.”
56 Yahiaoui, interview with author.
57 Ibid.
58 Burt, “With My People,” 44.
59 Yahiaoui, interview with author.
**Chouftouhonna**

Chouftouhonna is an annual art festival produced by Chouf. The festival began in 2015, and its fourth edition in September 2018. The four days of the festival combine art exhibits, performances, a craft market, film projections, conferences, workshops, and after-parties. Chouftouhonna thus has a longevity and diversity of mediums unmatched by any of the other art activity in this study.

Chouftouhonna brings together artists across disciplines and national borders. In total from the past three festivals, work from over 450 artists has been displayed. The areas of competition for 2018 are cinema, graphic arts, music, photography, scenic arts, and visual arts. The call for submissions is primarily launched through Facebook, and the call is shared online by a global network of activists. Both Tunisian and international artists are welcomed, and unlike the Mawjoudin Queer Film Festival, the international artists travel to Tunisia to be a part of the event. Yahiaoui described, “We have people coming from all over the world to expose their work.” People of all genders are also invited to submit their work. Artists who identify as women can offer up art on any topic, while men must submit work with a feminist theme. Any art with a homophobic message is removed from consideration. Chouftouhonna is part of Chouf’s intersectional fight for women’s and LGBTQI++ rights, so the art displayed is neither exclusively queer nor exclusively feminist.

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60 Yahiaoui, interview with author.
61 Chouftouhonna, Facebook update.
62 Ibid.
63 Yahiaoui, interview with author.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
66 Triki, “Autour de Midi.”
67 Yahiaoui, interview with author.
The festival itself is a busy affair, with many activities for its wide range of audience members. The selected art submissions are displayed (or projected or performed, depending on the medium). Each category has a jury composed of prominent Tunisian artists who attend and choose the winners. Now that the festival has been established for a few years, the organizers are often approached by public figures, such as actors or gallery owners, who want to be involved.\footnote{Yahiaoui, interview with author.}

In addition to the art exhibitions, Chouftouhonna offers workshops and conferences for its attendees. Past workshops themes include making cartoons, starting your own magazine, dance, percussion, and women’s soccer.\footnote{Triki, “Autour de Midi.”} Yahiaoui is planning a workshop to educate people who are “a little bit homophobic but open-minded.”\footnote{Yahiaoui, interview with author.} She acknowledged that her workshop has more in common with the conference portion of the festival. Conferences are an opportunity to hold discussions about the universal fight for human rights. Last year, they covered many topics, including Amazigh culture (the indigenous ethnic group in Tunisia).\footnote{Ibid.} One of the annual conferences is the “fishbowl,” where every artist in attendance gathers together to talk about a topic. This year, the chosen topic is feminism. Yahiaoui called conferences “one of the most important parts of the festival.”\footnote{Ibid.} They are not explicitly artistic, but they engage a community of international artists in valuable dialogue.

*CinéForum 7ème Genre*

Chouf also hosts a film club, titled CinéForum 7ème Genre. Unlike Cinexist, it is open to the public at Cinéma Amilcar in Tunis. The movies they project are a combinations of feminist and LGBTQI+-themed, resembling the future Dylan envisions for Cinexist. CinéForum does

\footnotesize{\begin{itemize}
  \item \footnote{Yahiaoui, interview with author.}
  \item \footnote{Triki, “Autour de Midi.”}
  \item \footnote{Yahiaoui, interview with author.}
  \item \footnote{Ibid.}
  \item \footnote{Ibid.}
\end{itemize}}

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have more restrictions on what movies they can project since they are in public. They can’t show anything too explicit and must obtain rights to each film through Cinema Politica, a Canadian media arts non-profit. Normally the club meets every week, but it is not currently active.\footnote{Yahiaoui, interview with author.}

\textit{Film Project on Sexual Assault}

Yahiaoui recently began another film project through Chouf aimed to educate audiences about sexual assault. She projects films about rape in prisons, university dorms, and centers for victims of violence. After the film, she holds a discussion and a training on Tunisia’s new law about rape and violence. In the prisons, some of her audience includes convicted rapists. She is a law student and calls one of her professors if she encounters a questions she cannot answer. Her audiences thus far have responded well, shown interest, asked many questions, and asked her to come back with another film. The project began in November 2017 and she believes it has been a definite success.\footnote{Ibid.}

\textit{Shams}

Shams was founded in 2014 and is the largest queer NGO in Tunisia, with around two thousand members.\footnote{Sboui, interview with author.} I interviewed the vice president from Shams, Amina Sboui. Sboui explained that, by design, “Shams is more public” than the others and emphasizes visibility of the queer community to the wider Tunisian public through protests and “old school activism.”\footnote{Ibid.} Sboui was clear that Shams identifies as activists first, and non-artistic projects tend to take most of their focus.\footnote{Ibid.} However, Shams still has a large amount of art activity, including a magazine, online radio, drag performances, and documentary.

\footnote{Sboui, interview with author.}

\footnote{Ibid.}
Shams Mag

Shams Mag is a magazine that was published by Shams in March of 2017 and called the first of its kind in Tunisia by HuffPost Tunisie. Physical copies were sent for free to the homes of around two thousand subscribers and a PDF is available on the Shams website, intended particularly for those who didn’t want their parents to see the magazine. The bold cover shows Fatma Ben Saidan, a Tunisian actress, wrapped in a rainbow flag and a Tunisian flag. Some highlights from the magazine, with sections in Arabic, French, and English, include: an interview with Saidan; explanations of sexual orientation, sexually transmitted infections, and the rainbow flag; a summary of the movie The Danish Girl, about a transgender character; profiles on LGBT+ rights in Tunisia and the MENA region; an editorial cartoon about homophobia; a photography contest; and a short story titled “Martyrs of Passion.” Sboui described the submission process for the magazine’s content: “We invite LGBTQ people to take photographs and send them so we publish them or to write things or to write poems. It’s really like a platform for LGBT people so they do whatever they want.” The magazine is a mixture of the arts, journalism, and educational material—with Shams’ contact information prominently displayed.

However, Shams Mag is also thus far a one-time publication. Though the magazine bears the label “Num°1,” or Number 1, no further issues are available on the website. Sboui told me, “When we did the magazine, we were a little bit disappointed that only two thousand people asked for the paper, so it’s not too much… I always say that Tunisia people are not really

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78 Boukhayatia, “Shams Mag.”
79 Sboui, interview with author.
80 See “MENA” in the glossary of terms.
81 Shams, “Shams Mag.”
82 Sboui, interview with author.
83 Shams, “Shams Mag.”
interested in reading, so maybe if we do something [with] audio.” In the name of reaching a larger audience, Shams Rad was born.

**Shams Rad**

When Shams Rad began broadcasting in December 2017, it made international headlines as the first online queer radio station in the MENA region. Sboui’s initial idea to improve upon the magazine was a YouTube channel, but another Shams member suggested a radio station.

Much like the magazine, the radio offers a wide range of content. Sboui described:

> It’s music, it’s people talking, it’s people saying poems, it’s people saying slams…everybody is expressing themselves in the way that they want to. So it’s not like ‘if you’re artists come in, if you’re not artists stay away.’ So it’s like for everybody. And I think even speaking is an art…the way of speaking or the way of saying the story.

Shams has embraced a wide range of content to connect with a wide range of audience members. The target audience includes members and allies of the queer community, along with a broader public.

So far, their approach seems to be working. Sboui, herself among the radio presenters, said, “We have a lot of people that listen to the radio, even homophobics…and we have a lot of messages, a lot of people who sometimes call and say, ‘Oh I never understood this. We are sorry. We underestimated people.’” A March 2018 Economist article, citing information received

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84 Sboui, interview with author.
85 *The Economist*, “Gay-rights Activists.”
86 Sboui, interview with author.
87 Ibid.
88 AFP-JIJI, “An Arab World First.”
89 Sboui, interview with author.
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from Shams, stated that the radio is on six days a week and reaches 10,000 people in fifteen different countries.90

Drag Performances

Drag performances are also supported by Shams, generally in connection with larger events. Shams hosts an annual party for the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHOT)91 in May. The party always features drag performances, to which Sboui gives partial credit for the party’s popularity. (A contributing factor is also free alcohol.) At the “Couleurs d’Avril” culture week, Sboui performed in her own drag king show, along with a different artist’s drag queen show. She is also planning a drag festival for drag performers from the MENA region, but the project is in a very early stage of development.92

Documentary

In 2017, Shams released a documentary titled Au Pay de la Démocratie Naissante, or In the Country of the Emerging Democracy in English. This 37-minute video was released on YouTube. The subjects of the documentary are Tunisian men imprisoned for homosexuality, victims of homophobic violence, and queer rights activists. Among the activists who speak are Amina Sboui and the current director of Shams Rad. Each speaker tells their own story and then questions how Tunisian civil society received the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize when human rights are ignored. The documentary tells stories that are upsetting to hear—forced anal tests, police brutality, abuse in prison, and violent hate crimes. The interview subjects put themselves at risk to share their life stories, and the editor layers the clips together into a powerful narrative. Most

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90 The Economist, “Gay-rights Activists.”
91 This acronym is not a misprint. The HO stands for homophobia.
92 Sboui, interview with author.
of the interviews are in Tunisian Arabic. Subtitles are available in French, English, and Spanish, and the film appears to be an emotional, educational tool for a global audience.\(^{93}\)

**Couleurs d’Avril**

All four NGOs in the community—including Damj—contributed to the April 2018 “Couleurs d’Avril” culture week at the French Institute in Tunis. This event was prior to the coalition decision to no longer be associated with Shams. Most of the programming centered around a Friday evening and full Saturday.\(^{94}\) The French Institute contacted the four queer NGOs, the Tunisian Association Defending Individual Liberties, and l’Association Tunisienne de Prévention Positive (ATP+)\(^{95}\) with the idea to host the event.\(^{96}\) Amina Sboui from Shams called it “the biggest queer event in Tunisia” and “a combination between art and activism.”\(^{97}\) The event included workshops and conferences with international politicians and activists, as well as a movie projection, drag performances, music performances, a theatre show, DJ sets, and a writing contest.\(^{98}\) Sahar Yahiaoui from Chouf described an environment in which every collaborating organization had a lot of input. For example, she came up with the name, which translates to “Colors of April.”\(^{99}\) Sboui praised the creativity of the name and the value of having Chouf’s creativity with which to collaborate. The writing contest, meanwhile, was a contribution of Shams, and three winners were selected from a pool of queer-themed poems and personal

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\(^{93}\) Association Shams, “Emerging Democracy.”

\(^{94}\) Institut Français, “Couleurs d’Avril.”

\(^{95}\) Ibid.

\(^{96}\) Sboui, interview with author.

\(^{97}\) Ibid.

\(^{98}\) Institut Français, “Couleurs d’Avril.”

\(^{99}\) Yahiaoui, interview with author.
narratives. Sboui said the culture week will be an annual event, but it is unclear what exact impact the coalition’s statement against Shams will have on the future of Couleurs d’Avril.

**Logistics**

Part of my research covered the logistics of the art activities outlined above. My questions centered around common challenges in planning any activity in any organization—marketing, funding, and staffing. Through my interviews, common themes emerged around the specific obstacles to planning art events or projects in Tunisian queer NGOs. NGOs must balance security with publicity, funding with politics, and large workloads with limited labor.

**Marketing**

Marketing is a particular challenge for queer NGOs. The methods are fairly straightforward, such as social media, news profiles, and word of mouth. However, deciding on their message—how they want to present themselves to the public—is rarely so easy. They want to attract an audience without attracting homophobia, violence, or legal problems for members. Each NGO first tackled problem back when they named their organizations: Mawjoudin (meaning “we exist”), Chouf (“look”), and even Shams (“sun”). None of their names give concrete details about who they are, but registering with the government and marketing an art project require different approaches. Whenever an NGO wants an event or project to reach more people than their private Facebook group, they must again decide what branding will get them the audience for which they are looking.

Chouf and Mawjoudin both choose to adopt subtle keywords to describe their art events publically. Chouf leans on its intersectional identity and call Chouftouhonna a feminist festival. Sahar Yahiaoui explained, “We, in our Facebook profiles, mention it’s an LGBT fight, but to the

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100 Sboui, interview with author.
other people who are just listening to the radio, driving his son to his school, he doesn’t need to
know what it’s about.”\footnote{Yahiaoui, interview with author.} She has found that advertising Chouf activities as “feminist” is
effective in reaching open-minded, non-homophobic people. Chouftouhonna helps push
feminists to get involved in LGBT activism. Yahiaoui herself got involved with Chouftouhonna
after hearing a radio spot and didn’t know it was connected to LGBT activism until her first
meeting. Additionally, members of the queer community know what Chouf the NGO is and
would immediately recognize Chouftouhonna as part of the LGBT fight.\footnote{Ibid.}

Mawjoudin, meanwhile, settled on the keyword “queer” in marketing the Mawjoudin
Queer Film Festival. The festival organizers took the naming process very seriously and devoted
an entire committee to the task.\footnote{Ibid.} Karam explained that they chose “queer” as an indicator to the
LGBTQI++ community that is less well-known to the general public.\footnote{Karam, interview with author.} Skadi Loist and Ger
Zielinski, two scholars of international film festivals, identified a similar tactic in Chinese queer
film festivals: “As ‘LGBT’ or ‘queer’ finds its way onto the promotional material for the
festivals, it is often left in English to serve as a shibboleth.”\footnote{Loist and Zielinski, “Development of Queer Film Festivals,” 57-58.}
The Mawjoudin Queer Film Festival did still attract some homophobic comments on social media,\footnote{Karam, interview with author.} but likely would have had a harsher backlash if described as “gay” or “lesbian.”\v

By contrast, Shams art projects are openly LGBTQI++ and show the risks and rewards of
a completely public approach. For example, Shams Rad is publically queer and has a large
listenership, but the radio’s director has received thousands of online threats and insults.\footnote{The Economist, “Gay-rights Activists.”}
name of security, the Facebook event for their 2018 IDAHOT party was blatantly for the queer community, but the location was kept private. Guests had to register with Shams by private message to learn the location.\textsuperscript{108} Shams has plenty of first-hand experience with the risks they take on and chooses to match public marketing with security measures.

\textit{Funding}

Funding is another complex challenge. Funding is available from many sources, especially international sources eager to help the Tunisian fight for human rights. However, actually getting this money while avoiding political entanglements and maintaining creative control over the project is not an easy task.

In most cases, each art project requires its own source of outside funding. Shams, for example, has a budget set aside for legal assistance that has no room for art projects. Amina Sboui explained, “Whatever project it is, if you can fund it, go ahead…every project needs a lot of money, and we don’t have that much money.”\textsuperscript{109} Thus, outside grants are required to support Shams’ art activity.\textsuperscript{110} A similar situation can be found in Mawjoudin. Karam did explain that funding depends on what the project is and how much money it needs, but big projects like the Mawjoudin Queer Film Festival require funding proposals to outside organizations.\textsuperscript{111} Chouf projects are also supported by a wide variety of sources. Chouftouhonna in particular does not keep consistent sponsors from year to year and normally has to put together money from a number of sources. (This year is an exception, with one primary sponsor.) Chouftouhonna has

\textsuperscript{108} Shams, Facebook update.
\textsuperscript{109} Sboui, interview with author.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{111} Karam, interview with author.
such complex funding needs that Sahar Yahiaoui, as Chouf’s financial manager, recognized that untangling finances is a compelling reason to separate Chouftouhonna from Chouf.\textsuperscript{112}

Luckily, unlike many art producers around the world, the Tunisian queer community has many financial backers who are eager to support them. Common sources include foreign embassies in Tunisian, international institutes, and human rights organizations.\textsuperscript{113} Examples of funding relationships include the following:

- Dutch Embassy funds Shams Rad.\textsuperscript{114}
- The French Embassy funds Chouf’s films in prisons project.\textsuperscript{115}
- The French Institute hosted and funded Couleurs d’Avril culture week.\textsuperscript{116}
- Heinrich Boell Foundation (German) funds the Chouf film club.\textsuperscript{117}
- British Consul funds the fourth edition of Chouftouhonna.\textsuperscript{118}

Europe’s particular interest in Tunisian LGBTQI++ rights in Tunisia is clear from the above list. Notably absent, however, is the audience as a source of funds. The art projects are without exception available for free to their audience. Mawjoudin’s campaign booklet, Shams Mag, Shams Rad, and Shams’ documentary are all available for free online. Mawjoudin’s\textsuperscript{119} and Chouf’s\textsuperscript{120} festivals and film clubs all have free admission. Chouftouhonna is even able to pay

\textsuperscript{112} Yahiaoui, interview with author.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{114} The Economist, “Gay-rights Activists.”
\textsuperscript{115} Yahiaoui, interview with author.
\textsuperscript{116} Institut Français, “Couleurs d’Avril.”
\textsuperscript{117} Cinema Politica, “Cinema Politica Tunis.”
\textsuperscript{118} Yahiaoui, interview with author.
\textsuperscript{119} Karam, interview with author.
\textsuperscript{120} Yahiaoui, interview with author.
for their visiting artists’ hotel rooms to make the event financially accessible.\textsuperscript{121} The NGOs are able to avoid passing their costs onto their audience thanks to ample outside sponsorship.

However, outside funding can create problems with the Tunisian government and threaten the integrity of the art. The government views funding from foreign LGBTQI++ sources as other countries forcing their beliefs upon Tunisia. Similarly, accepting money from a foreign embassy could “touch the sovereignty of Tunisia as an independent country” in the government’s eyes.\textsuperscript{122} Yahiaoui was very clear that Chouf would never ask for money from the United States, due to the complicated American relationship with the MENA region.\textsuperscript{123} (Of course, Europe and especially France have complex relationships with this region as well because of colonialism.)

As seen above, plenty of foreign organizations and embassies still do sponsor LGBTQI++ projects. Yahiaoui described how Chouf in particular operates indirectly to avoid unnecessary government scrutiny. Money from an openly LGBTQI++ association in Europe goes through a European feminist association before coming to Chouf in Tunisia. Similarly, when the German embassy offered them money, she insisted it first go through a different, non-LGBTQI++ association before coming to Chouf.\textsuperscript{124} Though she only spoke on behalf of Chouf, Karam similarly refused to tell me the name of an international LGBTQI++ organization supporting the Mawjoudin Queer Film Festival.\textsuperscript{125} (However, from looking at the film festival poster, I am putting an educated guess on the Hirshfeld-Eddy Foundation.)

Once a path for funding has been agreed upon, the receiving NGO’s autonomy must also be discussed. Yahiaoui tells the sponsors that she is grateful for their help, but they are not

\begin{footnotes}
\item[121] Yahiaoui, interview with author.
\item[122] Ibid.
\item[123] Ibid.
\item[124] Ibid.
\item[125] Karam, interview with author.
\end{footnotes}
entitled to creative control or ownership of the project. The French ambassador to Tunisia wanted to go with her on a prison visit because the French Embassy funds her film project in prisons. She turned him down because it would make Chouf’s work seem like a French project. On the other hand, she described the French Institute as the perfect partner for “Couleurs d’Avril”:

They were wonderful. We choose whatever we want; they’re present with us. They give the suggestions; we say yes or no. We give our ideas. That’s how it’s supposed to work. They give us the place, they help, they propose, we take their proposals, but they don’t force. Because other countries can force.

As this event was proposed by and hosted at the French Institute, they played a larger role than many other, silent partners would, but they still managed to find a balance that shared power with the participating Tunisian organizations.

Funding is difficult to navigate, but overall, grants for Tunisian queer art projects are plentiful, from a wide variety of sources. This gives the queer community opportunities to express themselves and gather together free of charge.

**Staffing**

Art events do not plan themselves, even with generous funds. This section will focus on staffing for clubs and festivals. Most Tunisian LGBTQI++ events are run by an overworked volunteer staff. Art organizers from the three NGOs are, across the board, busy people. They generously commit to passion projects in artistic activism. Yet, plenty of higher-priority

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126 Yahiaoui, interview with author.  
127 Ibid.
activities, like legal support to people arrested under Article 230, rightfully compete for their attention. Packed personal and activist schedules can limit the art the NGOs are able to produce.

Karam and Yahiaoui spoke to me about the labor behind each of their festivals. During the four days of the Mawjoudin Queer Film Festival, they had twenty-five people on staff, but there was a much smaller staff leading up to the event. They had to put in many hours of work to make everything come together in a few short months. Karam was responsible for selecting the films that would be shown, which he called a very hard task.128 Yahiaoui also found that a small organization team makes a festival challenging to put together. Chouftouhonna has thirteen members, and Yahiaoui said, “It may look like a small festival, but—trust me—the fact that we are few people makes it more difficult than the Carthage Film Festival.”129 They have been working on the September 2018 festival since November 2017.130 For both the Mawjoudin Queer Film Festival and Chouftouhonna, the events have been huge successes but seriously stretched the capacities of their staffs.

By contrast, both organizations’ clubs have not fared as well. The Cinexist film club in Mawjoudin has struggled to retain a coordinator. Karam was the club’s first coordinator, but stepped down focus on the film festival.131 Ever since, the club has gone through multiple coordinators and periods with no fixed person in charge. The meeting I visited on March 24th, 2018, was Dylan’s first meeting as the new fixed coordinator. Dylan told me that Mawjoudin leadership roles do tend to have a lot of turnover, which both gives new people the chance to lead and deprives the groups of stable leadership.132 The Cinexist club has survived this turnover;

128 Karam, interview with author.
129 Yahiaoui, interview with author.
130 Ibid.
131 Ibid.
132 Dylan, interview with author.
the Chouf film club has been on hiatus for months. The organizer went temporarily to Italy and no one else in Chouf had the time to take over.\textsuperscript{133} All of these conflicts are very understandable and speak to the impact staffing limitations can have on art events.

Chouftouhonna has one plan in the works to address this issue. They received more funding than expected from the British Consul and are thinking about professionalizing the 2018 festival. Since the staff is small, paying them for their work is feasible. Sahar told me, “It’s not about the money, it’s about the fight…but it has to be a minimum for me to be able to live. We work on this for three months straight, and I need money to live, eat, sleep.”\textsuperscript{134} Compensating art organizers for their time could ease financial stress, reduce other money-making commitments, and perhaps attract more staff who have had to work other jobs instead of volunteering their time.

Overall, Tunisian LGBTQI++ NGOs have developed creative and successful methods for dealing with the logistical challenges of the arts. Staffing is the major area of concern that has yet to be fully addressed. However, the unusually plentiful funding available may be a solution. If Chouftouhonna does professionalize its staff, the impact on the festival could be key for other art events struggling with the same problems.

\textbf{Value of Art to NGOs}

I found in my research that all three NGOs do a lot of work with the arts, but this work takes a lot of time, effort, money, and creative problem solving. The arts therefore must offer valuable benefits to these already busy NGOs. The major value these groups have found is the

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{133} Yahiaoui, interview with author.  \\
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid.
\end{flushleft}
ability of the arts to generate interest. This interest can then be used to build public awareness or carefully tailor meaningful communities.

**Interest**

The NGOs I studied have found that the arts have a unique power to capture an audience. People enjoy the arts and are more likely to show up or be engaged if the arts are involved. Dylan from Cinexist in Mawjoudin said, “There is a part of the club that is mainly for entertainment—not like a conference.” They explained that Mawjoudin members come to the club for the chance to engage in their passion for film. Amina Sboui also highlighted the difference in interest between conferences and the arts. She told me, “Queer people in Tunisia…most of them don’t want workshops or conferences. They are not really interested in that…They just want to party or they just want to watch art, to watch drag performances.” The Couleurs d’Avril culture week illustrated her point. Sboui often used hyperbole in our interview, so these numbers likely are not exact, but she compared conference and workshop attendance of ten to fifteen people with two or three thousand attendees at the main event with drag and music performances. Furthermore, the arts can encourage people already in attendance to participate more. Sahar Yahiaoui of Chouf said of her film project about sexual assault, “Arts can be a weapon, because I see how people are interested, how they listen to the training. Do you think if I just go and say ‘I have a training’, they will listen to me, in prison? They won’t.” All three NGOs I spoke with recognize the power of the arts to engage people in their fight.

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135 Dylan, interview with author.
136 Ibid.
137 Sboui, interview with author.
138 Ibid.
139 Yahiaoui, interview with author.
Art’s rallying potential is very valuable to Tunisian queer activists. Much of the Tunisian queer community is in the closet, and homosexuality is a taboo subject in public discourse. With this social context, getting people to show up for any queer activism is not simple. The arts have a raw power to gather an audience, and the NGOs can trade in this power for two key purposes: raising public awareness online and tailoring meaningful communities.

**Awareness**

Non-event art projects are primarily used to raise public awareness. Events meant to gather the queer community in one space come with more security concerns, but content shared online can reach a large audience with more protection for creators. Shams uses this tactic more than the other NGOs. Shams Mag, Shams Rad, and the documentary *Au Pays de la Démocratie Naissante* are all formatted to be distributed widely and consumed alone. Shams should receive a lot of credit for their success in this approach. Through Shams Rad, they stake a claim that their voices deserve to be heard. They prove their community’s existence to the Tunisian public and engage other countries in their fight. I found worldwide press mentions everywhere from the Washington Examiner to the Japan Times.\(^{140}\) The Washington Examiner op-ed was condescending and praised Shams at the expense of Western LGBT activists.\(^ {141}\) Nevertheless, Shams has gotten an international audience to think about and talk about the Tunisian fight for LGBTQI++ rights. They have found the arts are very successful for getting attention and spreading their message.

Mawjoudin also expressed a new interest in using this approach in the future. Their focus is beginning to shift from their internal community to the general public, and the arts have a

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\(^{140}\) AFP-JIJI, “An Arab World First.”

\(^{141}\) Washington Examiner, “Courageous LGBT Radio Show.”
major role to play in this new phase.\textsuperscript{142} Karam and Abdou Mezzi explained that there isn’t much representation of the queer community in North Africa. They are counting on the arts to publically show the fun side of queer culture to people who aren’t familiar.\textsuperscript{143} They are considering new, Shams-like platforms to spread their message, such as a YouTube channel or radio.\textsuperscript{144} Currently, Shams is very much the face of the LGBTQI++ movement in Tunisia. Their Facebook page has over 137,000 likes—fifteen times that of Mawjoudin.\textsuperscript{146} I can say anecdotally that when I told Tunisians I was researching LGBTQI++ organizations, they often asked if I had heard of Shams. In the past, Shams has worked to earn this visibility, while the other NGOs have chosen to cater to a smaller network. However, the Tunisian Coalition for LGBTQI+ Rights’ decision to stop working with Shams over differences in values provides new motivation for other NGOs to engage in public awareness. Mawjoudin could use artistic platforms that have worked for Shams to spread their own version of LGBTQI++ activism.

\textit{Community}

Building awareness online is a valid, important way to use the arts. However, all three NGOs have also tapped into the power of art events to build a variety of in-person communities. As discussed above, art as part of an event can draw in attendees. Within the event itself, the arts can be a catalyst for self-expression and dialogue. Tunisian queer activists use art events to create safe spaces, foster dialogue between the queer community and the Tunisian public, and connect with other fights for human rights.

\textsuperscript{142} Karam, interview with author.  
\textsuperscript{143} Karam, interview with author. Mezzi, interview with author.  
\textsuperscript{144} Karam, interview with author.  
\textsuperscript{145} Shams, Facebook.  
\textsuperscript{146} Mawjoudin, Facebook.
Safe spaces are essential for LGBTQI++ activism and challenging to create in Tunisia. Sboui of Shams told me how they have failed to find permanently safe night clubs for the queer community. A club may protect its queer customers for a few months but stop prioritizing their safety once the busy summer season rolls around. Safe spaces are about more than socializing; they are rare environments where queer people can express themselves and their passions without fear of backlash. The NGOs can turn to the arts to create such an environment. Sboui described the success of the Couleurs d’Avril culture week: “People just want to dance and want to act as they are, in a safe place. And everybody was in heels. Everybody was in makeup. All of them had fake lashes. It’s…wow.” She was speaking about the big event with performances and partying. Instead of risking their safety at a public club, they used an art event in the French Institute to create their own atmosphere of self-expression.

Art events prioritizing safe spaces are very different from art events prioritizing public dialogue. Chouf is the only NGO I found to really embrace the public dialogue approach, and the difference can be seen by comparing Mawjoudin’s Cinexist with Chouf’s CinéForum. Yahiaoui called the two clubs “complementary.” They each succeed in divergent purposes. Cinexist was started by film fans who wanted to explore their passion in a queer context. Everyone in the club is an approved community member or ally, and they are cautious with privacy. Members are thus able to freely discuss their own queer experience. By comparison, CinéForum is held in a public theatre. Moviegoers sometimes show up to Cinéma Amilcar to see a different film but are drawn by free admission to the CinéForum instead. Chouf’s club can safely be more open because it is

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147 Sboui, interview with author.
148 Ibid.
149 Yahiaoui, interview with author.
does not project exclusively LGBTQI++ films and avoids films with explicit ratings.\textsuperscript{150} The two film clubs embrace their divergent purposes as two valuable ways to serve the queer community.

Even the Mawjoudin Queer Film Festival—much more open than Cinexist—was primarily a space for the LGBTQI++ community. Yahiaoui said in praise of the festival, “It was amazing. It brought the community together, and there were people I haven’t seen for a while, they came there.”\textsuperscript{151} The festival was an inclusive place for queer Tunisians beyond Mawjoudin’s active membership. Dylan, who volunteered at the event, said that “the main objective was to guarantee the safety” and the staff checked the identities of any strangers carefully.\textsuperscript{152} By comparison, Yahiaoui described practically begging people off the street to come into Chouftouhonna last year.\textsuperscript{153} At the film festival, the general public was inherently less welcome than the queer community. Mawjoudin committed to creating a valuable, protected space for expression in the first edition of their festival. The festival both resembles Chouftouhonna’s early years and contrasts with what Chouftouhonna has become.

Since Chouftouhonna began in 2015, its objective has evolved. In a 2018 radio interview, one of the organizers explained that the aim of past festivals was creating a space for open expression. They were not very selective and let most non-homophobic art into the festival.\textsuperscript{154} The first two editions of Chouftouhonna took place at CinéMadart in Carthage, a wealthy suburb of Tunis. Carthage is less conservative and has a greater art presence than the rest of the country. The festival’s feminist and queer attendees felt comfortable scattering among surrounding

\textsuperscript{150} Yahiaoui, interview with author.  
\textsuperscript{151} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{152} Dylan, interview with author.  
\textsuperscript{153} Yahiaoui, interview with author.  
\textsuperscript{154} Triki, “Autour de Midi.”
cafés. It was a positive, yet insular community of activist-artists. Then, in 2017, they changed locations in their first step toward integrating a wider audience. They moved to the National Theatre in Halfaouine, a poorer and more conservative neighborhood near the city center. Chouftouhonna no longer fit in with its surroundings, and the organizers saw this as an opportunity to welcome a new audience. They found last year that neighbors were very reluctant to come inside the festival; however, those that did attend had very positive things to say and discussed their own interests in the arts. Because the community was reluctant to enter the theatre, the organizers brought their work outside into the community. Last year, they projected a movie outdoors at a nearby café. The café is a predominantly male space, but was temporarily flooded with female artists and attendees. The café owner thought the event was a huge success and invited them back. For the upcoming 2018 festival, the art categories will be more selective as the main objective is now to be public/audience oriented.

Chouftouhonna’s evolution could be a predictor for the Mawjoudin Queer Film Festival’s future path. Mawjoudin wants to reach out more and improve the representation of the queer community. The festival could conceivably change from a queer safe space to a diverse public event. However, Mawjoudin would also encounter more security risks, because they are completely LGBTQI++. Chouf calls itself feminists committed to the universal fight and can be public with less fear. Another strong possibility is that the film festival and feminist festival will remain as two complementary events—a safe space and a place for public dialogue, respectively.

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155 Yahiaoui, interview with author
156 Ibid.
157 Ibid.
158 Ibid.
159 Triki, “Autour de Midi.”
The film festival will continue to develop but stay committed to a mostly queer audience, while Mawjoudin tries out other online platforms to build public awareness.

Conclusion

Art produced by Tunisian LGBTQI++ NGOs is plentiful and has a bright future. The NGOs are only a few years old and has already problem-solved many of art’s tricky logistical challenges. Each NGO taps into a different primary use for the arts—raising public awareness (Shams), building safe spaces (Mawjoudin), and fostering public dialogue (Chouf). They can all learn from each other as they continue to dabble in the other uses in the future.

Future scholarship is needed beyond the perspective of the art organizers. This study focused on the organizers self-reporting whether their project was successful; qualitative research on the audience experience would provide a deeper picture of success. Furthermore, the upper leadership of each NGO could be interviewed to learn more about how the arts fit into their vision for the NGO.

Both Chouftouhonna and the Mawjoudin Queer Film Festival would be excellent subjects for future study as well. This research only provided an overview of each of those complex festivals. Attending them and speaking with participants on-site would give valuable insight into the community building power of the arts. Finally, Damj is the missing piece of this study. A review of their art activity would give a much more complete picture of art’s role in Tunisian queer activism.
“LGBTQI++” describes the community that includes—but is not limited to—lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex people. The double pluses stand for a commitment to inclusivity to sexualities and gender identities not represented by the first six letters.

“LGBTQI++” is the acronym used by Mawjoudin, and I default to it within this paper because it is the most inclusive term I encountered in my research. That being said, I do use other acronyms in specific instances when the organization itself has chosen to use LBT, LGBT, LGBTQI+, or another permutation.

The “MENA” region stand for Middle East and North Africa.

“Queer” is used interchangeably with LGBTQI++ in this paper. I should note that, while most activists in the Tunisian LGBTQI++ community embrace the term “queer,” Sahar Yahiaoui expressed her hatred for the term in our interview. She feels it equates the community with being strange, though they are normal human beings. I use “queer” in this paper as a less cumbersome alternative to LGBTQI++, recognizing that it is not universally accepted.
Appendices

Appendix 1: Tunisian Coalition for LGBTQI+ Rights Statement

Statement

Tunis on April 25th, 2018

We, member organizations of the Tunisian Coalition for LGBTQI+ Rights, believe in a particular set of values and ethics that guide our work in order to create a safe space for our community members. We fight for the protection and anonymity of our members as well as those who reach out to us for help. We attach great importance to the human aspect in the work that we do, and insist on the need to create a strong community that is able to count on its members.

In this context, it may be recalled that Shams organization is not part of the Tunisian Coalition for LGBTQI+ Rights and that we, member organizations, have decided to no longer collaborate directly or indirectly with this organization for the following reasons:

- The practice of “outing” that is being constantly used by this organization, goes against the coalition’s values regarding the protection of private life and space. On several occasions, Shams organization used “outing” as a tool to challenge the homophobic statements of certain public figures. Although the coalition denounces all statements using homophobia and transphobia as a main argument, it condemns the “outing” method.

- Privacy violation of vulnerable LGBTQI+ individuals, who refer to this organization for help, by exposing them to media in order to tell their stories, without assessing the legal and social consequences that could be generated through this exposure. We consider that it is the organization’s responsibility to protect these individuals and that consent can only be valid if the person is able to bear the consequences that could eventually result from this visibility. We believe that individuals who are in a precarious situation and who are very vulnerable cannot give an enlightened consent.

- In fact, the coalition members, as well as other allied organizations, have repeatedly received complaints of sexual harassment and inappropriate behavior towards minors, perpetrated by the president of Shams organization. The coalition requested, on several occasions, that Shams’ executive board makes a firm decision about this, yet, the answer has always been negative.

- Similarly, the position of the president of Shams organization towards the Zionist entity and the call for total normalization with it, goes against our principles and our ethics.

It is therefore necessary to remind that the TUNISIAN COALITION FOR LGBTQI+ RIGHTS refuses to be affiliated with Shams organization, and that the actions and activities of Shams do not relate or represent in any way the Coalition.

Chouf Mawjoudin Damj

LA COALITION TUNISIENNE POUR LES DROITS DES LGBTQI+
Appendix 2: Mawjoudin Queer Film Festival Program

16 janvier :
De 13h à 17h

*vision (Deutschland, docu, 21min, En Stfr)
* Chronic by Mohammed Sabbath (Lebanon, Fiction, 89min, Ar)
* half a life by Tamara Shogaolu (Egypt+USA, Animated Docu, 12min, Ar VOSTer)
* women and girls by Cherien Dabis (Jordan, Fiction, 13min, Ar)
* Il fera jour by Mehdi Hajri (Tunisia, Fiction, 38min, Ar)

17 janvier :
De 13h à 20h

* The Wound by John Tregove (South Africa, Fiction, 88min, xhosa st)
* I’am Sheriff by Teboho Edkins (Lesotho/ South Africa, Docu, 28min, Sesotho,VOSTer)
* Tchindas by Pablo García Pérez de Lara & Marc Serena (Cape vert, feature docu, 54min, Créole, VOSTfr)
* African shorts (80min)
* Queer voices from Sudan by Mesahat (Sudan, Docu, 18min, Ar)
* femmes by Mehdi Hajri (Tunisia, Fiction 29min, Ar)

18 janvier :
De 11h à 13h

* Eccomi...Eccoti by Raed Rafei (Lebanon, Docu, 74min, Ar+fr+It)
* Empty Talks by CTDC* (MENA,Docu, 30min,Ar VOSTer)
* The pact by Hosam Omran (Jordan, Animated fiction, 3min, Arabic)

N.B.: Les titres en rouge désignent les films de la compétition.
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