Stereotyping the Arab Character on Netflix: *The Spy* Series as a Case Study

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ABSTRACT: Every now and then, the name of the Netflix platform enters a state of controversy in the Arab world for considerations connected to national, political, or ideological sensitivities. One of those occasions was related to Netflix's streaming of a series called *The Spy*. In this research, the content of the six episodes analyzed for the purpose of examining the framing and stereotyping of the character of the Arab through the Netflix platform. The figures that resulted from the content analysis indicate a high percentage of stereotyping of the Arab in the series *The Spy*, regardless of religion, being Muslim, Jewish, or Christian. The highest percentage of stereotyping was for the Muslim Arab, followed by the Jewish Arab, with the lowest percentage for the Christian Arab.

1. Introduction

Every now and then, the name of the Netflix platform enters a state of controversy in the Arab world for considerations connected to national, political, or ideological sensitivities. One of those occasions was related to Netflix's streaming of a series called *The Spy*, which tells the life story of the Israeli spy Eli Cohen who was recruited by the Israeli Mossad in Syria under the name "Kamel Amin Thabet." This spy assumed the personality of a Syrian national who grew up in Buenos Aires and wanted to return to Syria to start a new life in the "home of ancestors."

"Kamel Amin Thabet" infiltrates the ruling class in Syria, gets access to extremely classified military information, and continuously transfers it to Israel, until he is finally exposed and sentenced to death.

The controversy surrounding the series is due to its content of false historical information, which is historically refuted by some historians. The aforementioned situation brought the series under scrutiny, which created a case of stereotyping of the character of the Arab in the episodes of the series, whether he was an Arab Jew (Eli Cohen and his wife being of Arab origin), or an Arab Muslim (most of the characters that appeared in the series from the Syrian and Arab side are Muslim characters), or a Christian Arab (specifically the character of the journalist George Seif, a friend of Kamel Amin Thabet).

In this research, the content of the six episodes will be analyzed for the purpose of examining the framing and stereotyping of the character of the Arab through the Netflix platform, thus making the series *The Spy*, a model, a series produced by Netflix and deals with an issue that directly affects the Arab world.

The figures that resulted from the content analysis indicate a high percentage of stereotyping, which focused on the character of the Arab with a percentage

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of 29.5%, followed by mixed stereotyping with a percentage of 22.2%, and then the stereotyping of the behavior of the Arab with a percentage of 11.9%, and the stereotyping of the nationality of the Arab with a percentage of 10.6%, followed by the stereotyping of the Arab's appearance by 7.3%, followed by the stereotyping of the reaction of the Arab by 7%, and the religious stereotyping of the Arab comes with a rate of 0.3%, while the stereotyping of the Arab is absent in 11.2% of the rest of the sample.

2. Problem of The Study

Western artworks abound with stereotyping and molding of the Arabs within frameworks in which they appear as inferior to others, especially when the opposite party is Western. Similarly, when the Arab is the "Antagonist", as opposed to the Israeli "Protagonist" in the artworks presented by the West, when dealing with the Arab-Israeli conflict, it is done without presenting the political facts on the ground, namely the Israeli occupation of Palestine, along with the Syrian Golan Heights, Sinai Peninsula Egypt, and southern Lebanon.

These facts seldom appear in Western artworks that deal with the details of this conflict. Rather, these works are full of stereotyping of the image of the Arab, whether this stereotyping is related to his appearance, his reactions, his character or his behavior, or whether it is framing and stereotyping of a certain Arab nationality with everything that is connected to it, including political or cultural symbols.

This stereotyping appears clearly in the series *The Spy* produced by Netflix in 2019 and deals with the biography of the Israeli spy Eli Cohen, who was planted in Syria in the early 1960s. The handling of the character of Eli Cohen in the series appears full of humanism, sympathy, and an attempt to provide justification, without presenting the other side of the story, which is the Arab right to the land that was occupied, and its inhabitants displaced. The viewer of the series notices a high degree of stereotyping and framing of the personality of the Arab. So, it was necessary to try to accurately examine this discrepancy by analyzing the content of the episodes, and to resort to previous literature related to the stereotyping and framing of the image and character of the Arab in Western artworks.

3. Hypothesis and Questions of The Study

The study is based on three hypotheses, the first of which is that there is a stereotyping of the character of the Arab on Netflix platform, regardless of their religion, whether they are Muslim, Christian or Jewish, even though the Muslim Arab is the most targeted by stereotyping. The second hypothesis stipulates that the Arab woman is more subjected to stereotyping than man. The third hypothesis posits that the image of the Arab is framed through Netflix platform, whereby the Arab is treated as inferior to the Western individual.

The study raises a number of questions, including: Does the Arab, regardless of religion, suffer from stereotyping on Netflix platform? Does the gender of the Arab affect stereotyping of him/her? Does stereotyping feed into a category that degrades the Arab compared to the Western individual? What are the most stereotyped aspects of the Arab's image on Netflix?

4. Literature Review and Previous Studies

Media Frame Analysis

Media frame theory is considered among the most significant theories that permit researchers to assess the non-explicit content of journalistic news coverage of matters that are handled during a specific time period. Framing, according to Entman, is the selection of certain elements connected to a specific topic and, at the same time, ignoring others, thus foregrounding particular aspects more than others, having interpretation, assessment, and processing as the intended purposes (Baysha & Hallahan, 2004).

The role of this theory in guiding the public and shaping the realities of their lives was examined by Tashman, among other researchers. Such media frames become regulatory to the journalists' work regarding the speed at which data can be identified and categorized (Scheufele, 1999).

D'angelo (2002) defined four objectives of the framing theory during his work. These include defining the frameworks, analysis of circumstances that produced them, ways of activating them, and how they can be connected to previous individual experiences for the purpose of influencing the mindset of the receiver, and directing information, the decisions made, and review of entailed results, in addition to their position in controversial matters and the related construction of public opinion.

De Vreese (2005) states that researchers stipulate that framing creates settings, identifies the problem, diagnoses its causes, makes ethical judgements, and recommends solutions when addressing an issue.

When evaluating the structural frame of the news item, which incorporates headings and subheadings, selection of photos and attached captions, the provided pieces of

evidence, the selected sources, along with quotes, slogans, statistics, data and closing paragraphs, we can appreciate significance of the news story and its implied content, and eventually the analytical view concerning those issues with their different and diverse significance.

Lasch and Gamson defined a group of psychological and logical tools, which may operate separately or collectively to create frames. The emotional tools of framing reveal themselves in the form of attractive metaphors, statements, examples, descriptions, and visual images. On the other hand, rational tools manifest themselves in the form of offering explanations, reasons, backgrounds, and results of the related issue. Stone added rhetorical descriptions and figures for two reasons: first, because language is employed by rhetorical descriptions in such a way that the part represents the whole; and second, because figures offer a normative nature when handling phenomena and events (Baysha & Hallahan, 2004).

D'Angelo (2002) employed four levels in his analysis in order to comprehend the intellectual directions of the Framing Theory: the first level is the contents of the frames, which are listed by Entman as follows: the correspondent, the transmitted text, the receiver, and the culture. D'Angelo adds that the frames are populated with numerous words and images which are then handled by the tools of the frames.

Second, he offers an explanation on how news frames construct different layers of the truth, regardless of the content of the story, whether it is on medicine, nuclear power, the federal budget, social reforms, or political campaigns. Subsequently, the frames impact the creation of the public opinion, along with individuals' and groups' knowledge.

Third, drawing on Kinder's and Sanders' opinions, D'Angelo suggests that frames have a double function. The internal structure of the mind is the first, while the other is a political debate tool, i.e., individuals handle political matters through their psychological frames on such matters.

Fourth, frames shape the public debate on political matters. The ideological pledge of the media to diversity is revealed here.

Janice (1997) and Schumakerner (1996) list several influencing framing resources of media content. Below are three of them (Hubenko, 2012):

The first resource is related to the journalist, and it refers to what is uncovered in his/her frame construction and the data obtained. What is revealed here includes ideologies, tendencies, and professional values, which all influence the media coverage of the journalist.

The second resource relates to the choice of the frameworks. This choice is influenced by several factors, such as the political orientation quality, which Janice calls regulatory routine.

The third resource is related to external factors, which include authorities, groups, stakeholders, and political personalities.

5. Stereotyping

According to Ross and Bantimaroudis (2006), stereotyping refers to the cognitive outcomes and beliefs that are mostly negative about a certain group in a certain society.

Merskin (2004) defines stereotyping as a kind of diminished characteristic of an individual or a group of people, or sometimes, several diminished characteristics, which are usually connected to a pattern of expectations, and are then considered to be that same pattern.

According to Abu Asba (2016), the media typically influence people, knowledge, opinions, perceptions, and attitudes to a great extent. We continuously receive information in the form of images and news stories, and we are inclined to organize our knowledge of the world that surrounds us by sorting out these images and stories that we receive. These are suited in accordance with perceptions, and we determine our knowledge system by applying a kind of simplification to them.

Abu Asba (2016) adds that these knowledge systems, with their varied representations, define our perception of the world and the way we perceive others. Moreover, they significantly impact the course of everyday life through our connection to our social surroundings, along with what can be achieved by perception, understanding, emotion, and expectation, and by observation of the related situation.

According to Bouchaala (2016), stereotyping is based on specific experiences, in addition to simple, general, fixed, and inaccurate concepts that come from present, as well as historical, sources which include the media, education, and various patterns of socialization.

6. Previous Studies

Maatouk (2021) conducted a study in which he extrapolated the content of some artworks displayed on the Netflix platform, including Stateless, Gods of Egypt, Messiah, Al Hayba, Sand Castle, and Fauda.

Maattouk thinks that Netflix is one of the most modern and popular platforms for the production and reproduction of orientalist discourse.

The study was based on Edward Said's vision of Orientalism, and it concluded with the following results:

When Arabs are not being depicted as wholly evil or different, they are portrayed as the positive Other, i.e., ethnic Arabs who share the same military exhaustions, speak the same language, and are pursuant of a similar agenda. The neutral Other, on the other hand, are those in need of a white savior, i.e., the US military.

Western people are depicted in a completely different way, a way that evokes sentiments of empathy, familiarity, trust, companionship, and heroism in their audience.

A study conducted by Sandhu (2020) reviewed how races and people with disabilities are stereotyped in both Hollywood and Netflix and recommended that it should be imperative on funders, directors, and decision makers to hire people with disabilities, and press to make changes in the narrative in such a way that makes it represent disabled people's real-life experiences in a positive way. Moreover, there should be some special requirements when hiring physically healthy people to play roles of disabled people. The study also stated that voices should be raised in the media to increase visibility of disabled people who are discriminated against until corporations change their ideology regarding hiring disabled actors of Color.

Robinsson (2019) examined stereotyping of gender roles on the Netflix platform through The Kissing Booth movie, in particular. The researcher concluded that if women are frequently portrayed as looking, acting, and behaving in a certain submissive way, this might affect viewers in various ways, in a conscious or subconscious way, and might or might not be what the filmmakers wish to convey, depending on whether they are aware of the portrayal. These submissive expressions can be used to get deeper than the language spoken in the film and examine how body language can be used to communicate a feeling or message.

Kidd (2015) cites in her research titled "Archetypes, stereotypes and media representation in a multi-cultural society" what Lippman says about stereotypes. She states that Lippman (1922) developed the concept of stereotypes for the purpose of explaining the way people are influenced by and make sense of mediated messages. The idea was that people develop stereotypes to serve as mental maps that assist us to deal with the complexity of groups and peoples. Based on this, a

stereotype is an impartial system of categorization. Nevertheless, the modern definition of stereotype is focused on the intrinsic problems in depicting a co-culture, employing clichéd, limited characteristics.

In her thesis entitled "Stereotypes of Arab and Arab-Americans Presented in Hollywood Movies Released during 1994 to 2000," Elayan (2005) states that, although all races, at one time or another, may be negatively represented, it seems that some races, Arabs and Arab-Americans in particular, may be recognized as being associated with numerous negative characteristics. Elayan drew in her thesis on the writings of the academic Jacques Chahine. She reports that Shaheen surveyed movies released between 1896 and 2001. His wide-ranging research process continued over two decades, and he found that Hollywood portrayed Arabs as villains in more than 900 movies. Most portrayed villains are notorious sheikhs, women, Egyptians, and Palestinians.

With regard to the negative impact of stereotyping, Elayan (2005) says that, not only do negative stereotypes impact the public's perceptions about certain races, but these negative images also impact the way stereotyped races feel about their heritage, culture, religion, and self-esteem. Elayan employed the content analysis methodology in her study and used every film scene featuring an Arab, a unit of measurement.

Roumie (2004) concluded in her study, which reviewed several movies that witnessed the presence of the Arab figure, that those movies exhibit negative stereotypes that work to create an inaccurate representation of an entire population. While numerous groups have been assigned negative representations in American movies during the past century, such false representations have declined significantly over the past decades.

Sari (1988) reviewed the image of Arabs in Western literature and the British media as part of his doctoral dissertation at the University of Bradford. He concludes with several results, foremost of which is the imbalance in the coverage of the British and American media. The most evident in such imbalance is the use of terms that in favor of the Israeli occupation at the expense of the Arabs. For example, the Palestinian rebels are labeled "Arab terrorists," the West Bank is called "Judea and Samaria," and the occupied Arab lands are described as "open or liberated lands." Sari believes that this will influence over time the social and political ideas about the Arabs, even in Europe, which has a long experience in the politics industry.

7. Methodology

This study employs the method of content analysis which commonly relies on transforming written information into figures and percentages that describe the issue under study.

White and Marsh (2006) define content analysis as a research method utilized to describe the apparent content objectively, quantitatively, or qualitatively, with the aim of collecting information about a specific phenomenon or problem by referring to research sources like books, audio and video recordings, and textual records.

Neuendorf (2002) defines content analysis as a quantitative summary analysis of the content which relies on the scientific method, which includes objectivity, internal subjectivity, initial design, reliability, truthfulness, generalizability, reproducibility, and testing of hypothesis. It is not confined to measurable types of variables, nor to the context of the displayed content.

Content analysis, according to Wimmer and Dominick (1989), encompasses several steps which include:

1. Formulating the research problem or hypotheses.

2. Defining the study population.

3. Selecting a suitable sample from the study population.

4. Selecting and defining the unit of analysis.

5. Preparing categories for the content to be analyzed.

6. Creating a quantitative analysis system.

7. Carrying out a pilot study to achieve reliability.

8. Encoding the content depending on the created definitions.

9. Analyzing the accumulated data.

10. Deriving conclusions and seeking indications.

Numerous studies have utilized the content analysis method, including one carried out by Al-Skaji (2018). It aimed to analyze the content of scientific programs in Arab satellite channels. The study investigates the impact of these programs as an informal learning method. A similar study is the one conducted by Al-Mansour (2015). This study aimed to analyze the content of Arab newspapers during their coverage of

Trump's decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem, considering it as the capital of Israel.

8. Monitoring Sample

The research sample will be the six episodes of the series *The Spy*, which was produced by Netflix in the year 2019. These episodes are available at the following link: Watch *The Spy* | Netflix Official Site

Results

Table 1. The stereotyped Arab's religion in "The Spy"

#	An Arab's religion	Frequency	Percentage
1	Muslim Arab	170	%56.3
2	Jewish Arab	105	%34.8
3	Christian Arab	8	%2.6
4	None	19	%6.3
	Total	**302**	**%100**

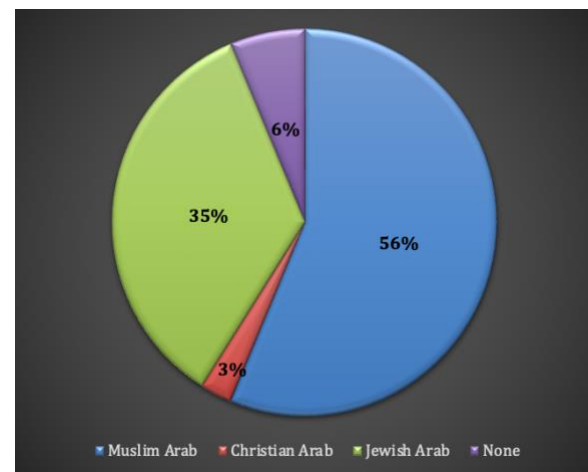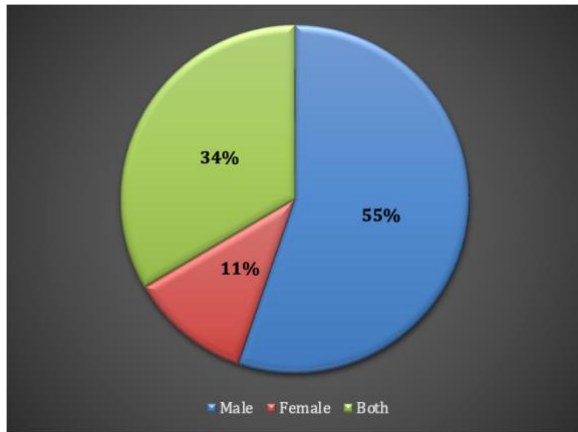**Figure 1. The stereotyped Arab's religion in *The Spy***

Table (1) data indicates that most of the stereotyped Arab's religion in *The Spy* via the Netflix platform were Muslim Arab, reaching (%56.3), followed by Jewish Arab at (34.8%), then Christian Arab at (2.6%), and lastly None at (6.3%).

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Figure 2. The stereotyped Arab's sex in *The Spy*

It is noticed from Table (2) that most of the stereotyped Arab's sex in *The Spy* were Male, reaching (%55.3), followed by both at (33.3%), and lastly Female at a rate of (11.3%).

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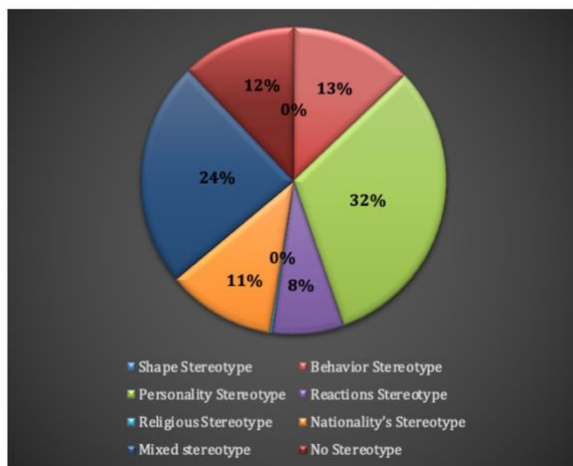**Figure 3. Kind of stereotypes in *The Spy***

Table (3) shows that most of the Kind of stereotype In *The Spy* was Personality Stereotype, reaching (%29.5), followed by Mixed stereotype at (%22.2), followed by Behavior Stereotype at (%11.9), followed by Nationality's Stereotype at (%10.6), followed by Shape Stereotype at (%7.3), followed by Reactions Stereotype at (%7), followed by Religious Stereotype at (%0.3), and finally No Stereotype at (%11.2).

9. Discussion and Conclusions

According to the aforementioned results, the first hypothesis on which the study is based, the existence of stereotyping of Arabs, is confirmed, with the Muslim Arab receiving the highest percentage (56.3%), followed by the Jewish Arab with (34.8%), and the Christian Arab receiving the lowest percentage (2.6%), while those whose religion was not specified received the rest of the percentage. This answers the first question of the study regarding the extent to which there is stereotyping towards the Arab in the series *The Spy*. The reason behind this may be that the Arab suffers from the same stereotype in the eyes of the West, regardless of religion, although the Christian Arab is the least affected by these stereotypes, considering the fact that Christian Arabs share the same religion with the West, although the sects differ.

The other reason that is probably behind the stereotyping of the Arab Jew in the series *The Spy* is a controversial issue in the Israeli society, that there is racism against the Arab Jew, especially in the early years of Israel's foundation, and hardly a period of time passes without digging up more papers of this Racism and its implications in Israeli society. Perhaps the reason, then, for this framing is discussing the image of the Arabs in Israeli society, and the racism that they suffered. However, if this was intended, then those in charge of the work committed stereotyping, through their portrayal of the Arab-Jew as inferior to the rest of the components of Israeli society and is an scapegoat who is willingly sacrificed due to materialistic pressure and efforts he exerts to prove himself efficient to the rest of the components of society. The Arab Jew was also portrayed less beautiful than the rest of the Jews who make up Israeli society, which answers one of the study's questions regarding whether stereotyping of the Arab in the series degrades his status in favor of the Western individual.

When analyzing the content, we were wary of categorizing Eli Cohen when he was stereotyped by the producers of the series. That is because at times he was stereotyped as an Arab Jew when he was staying in the occupation state, at other times, he was stereotyped as an Arab Muslim when he impersonated Kamel Amin Thabet.

The stereotyping of the Muslim Arab was almost the same as that of the Syrians because all the characters featuring in the series were Muslims, with the exception of the journalist character, George Seif. Therefore, the Arab Muslim was the most stereotyped as most of the events and characters were in Syria or in the Syrian embassy in Buenos Aires.

When there is stereotyping of the Arab-Jew in a scene that brings him together with the Muslim Arab, the scene is usually in favor of the Arab-Jew, who appears more civilized than the Muslim Arab (though the Arab Jew appears in a lower rank when compared to the Western Jew). In these scenes, the Jew is stereotyped as loyal, gentle, emotional, light-hearted, bold, physically fit, has a strong memory and sharp intelligence. The Sephardic society is stereotyped as having warm family relations, generosity, tan complexion, black hair, a general feeling of persecution, and an acceptance of a professionally and socially lower rank compared to the Ashkenazi Jews.

Another thing that is worth pointing out is the intense stereotyping of the Arab Jew in the first episode of the series. This is probably done for the purpose of placing the viewer in the social context in which Eli Cohen finds himself, which later prompts him to accept what the Mossad offers him, despite the danger it entails.

The second hypothesis of the study, which stipulates a higher stereotyping of Arab females than Arab males, has not been verified. It was found that the stereotyped Arab males in the series *The Spy* were 55.3%, while the stereotyped Arab females were 11.3%, and the remaining percentage of the sample, 33.4%, was for both of them together, i.e., stereotyping them as a couple or group. When the hypothesis was put forward, it was in light of the assumption that the Arab woman is often considered the least fortunate in the Arab world in terms of rights and opportunities, and consequently, the highest stereotyped, especially with the association of her appearance in Western cinema with the veiled and broken, usually one among a group of wives of one man. This answers one of the study questions about whether the gender of the Arab affects profiling.

When analyzing the content, the hypothesis was proven wrong. Perhaps this is due to the fact that most of the scenes are restricted to men, including spies, Mossad, the army, camps, and cafes in Syria, where only men attended at the time.

The third hypothesis, which assumes there is framing of the image of the Arab on Netflix platform, is confirmed through the series *The Spy*, and this is true in light of the selected sample. We can apply the framing theory referred to in the theoretical part of the research, which states that there are points that are neglected while others are highlighted, for the purposes of reaching the goals of framing. In addition, the linguistic, emotional, and even rational effects are used for the purposes of reaching the goals of framing desired by the message creator, invoking the elements that were discussed in

the theoretical part, namely the message, the message creator, the message recipient, and culture. The image of the Arab Jew is framed through all the aforementioned, while the image of the Muslim Arab, who is the Syrian in this series, is framed by making him greedy, corrupt, bribed, a skeptical dictator, and easily deceived when the Israeli is the maestro of the trick.

During the examination of framing, there was even framing and stereotyping of the music used when playing scenes of the Syrians. It is worth noting that during this framing, there were errors, such as the presentation of scenes from Morocco as being in Syria, and even one of the gates of Fez appears as if it were in Damascus. This shows a state of indolence among those in charge of framing in the series *The Spy*, which is the same indolence that is evident in the historical errors in the series, according to a number of writers who reviewed the historical events.

Table (3) answers one of the study questions, namely, what are the most stereotyped aspects of the Arab's image via Netflix? The result was as follows: The highest percentage was for character stereotyping by 29.5%, i.e. showing the character of the Arab in several places as impulsive and ill-tempered and lacks depth. In addition, the character of the Arab is portrayed as morally and materialistically corrupt (the Syrians in the series), distrustful (bin Laden), broken and vulnerable, but loyal, faithful, family member, pious, generous, and willing to prove himself with all the power he got (the Arab Jew).

In the second place came mixed stereotyping, in which more than one type of the mentioned stereotyping was used, with a rate of 22.2%, followed by stereotyping of behavior with a rate of 11.9%. The behavior of the Arab is portrayed as naive and easily deceived even when assuming a high military rank. Such behavior is also morally decadent, both men and women, in addition to the fact that their impulsive behavior is not based on rationality. Then comes nationality stereotyping with a percentage of 10.6%; this is the stereotyping that focuses entirely on the Syrians in this series. The nature of the generalization of nationality was mainly evident in the review of the military and intelligence side, in addition to the ruling class. Next comes the stereotyping of the appearance with a percentage of 7.3%, so the stereotyped Arab appears in a shaggy, dusty look, wearing miserable gowns in the streets of Damascus, while the Arab Jew appears with a stereotypical appearance in terms of face, hair color, and clothing style, all of which is inferior to the image of the Western Jew.

Stereotyping of reactions comes next with a rate of 7%. The typical Arab's reactions are betrayed as based on temper, insulting, spitting, torture, shouting, and inability to resist temptation. This is followed by religious stereotyping, which came at a small percentage of 0.3%. Perhaps the reason for this is the absence of a religious rise at the time (in the 1960s, when the dominant trends were nationalism, Baathism, and the left, but not religion). Stereotyping was absent from the rest of the sample by 11.2%.

In light of the foregoing, the following are the most significant results:

- There was stereotyping of the Arab in the series *The Spy*, regardless of religion, being Muslim, Jewish, or Christian. The highest percentage of stereotyping was for the Muslim Arab, followed by the Jewish Arab, with the lowest percentage for the Christian Arab.

- The male Arab received the highest stereotyping compared to the Arab woman, and this was mostly due to the political and artistic overwhelming presence of the male character in the narrative.

- The issue of treating the Arab Jew as a second-class citizen in Israeli society was projected on the proposals of the series, especially that the period discussed at the time was at the beginning of the foundation of the state of Israel. Such projection manifested itself in a lot of framing and stereotyping of the shape, character, and social status of the Jew and the Arab.

- The Arab-Jew in the series is stereotyped as loyal, gentle, emotional, light-hearted, bold, physically fit, and possessing a strong memory and sharp intelligence. The Sephardic community is also stereotyped as having warm family relations, generosity, tan complexion, black hair, a general feeling of persecution, and an acceptance of a professionally and socially lower rank compared to the Ashkenazi Jews.

- The Muslim Arab (Syrian and Saudi) is stereotyped as suspicious, emotional, corrupt, debauched, incapable of resisting temptation, naive, and incapable of revealing the plots of the occupation and its spies. He is also depicted as playful and unworthy of trust with the state secrets and its military and war capabilities.

- The framing theory was applied to the sample through the presence of the framing elements referred to in the theoretical framework, including neglecting certain aspects of the issue at hand, while highlighting others, in addition to employing artistic, linguistic, and other factors for the purpose of achieving the objectives of the framing user.

- The highest percentage of stereotyping of the Arab evident in the series *The Spy* was for stereotyping of character, followed by mixed stereotyping, behavior stereotyping, nationality stereotyping, appearance, reactions, and religious stereotyping being at the end of the list.

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