

REALITY TV AND THE PROMOTION OF THE INDIVIDUALISM THESIS: MBC'S *TOP CHEF 2* AS A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

Format localisation is one of the recent trends in media production. MBC, the most watched Arab channel, has achieved much success thanks to its adapted factual entertainment programmes. *Top Chef*, the US-based programme, has been one of MBC's most successful reality TV productions, running for five seasons. Based on Lévi-Strauss's binary-opposition theory, the study at hand attempts to prove that this programme contributes to the promotion of the American cultural tenet of individualism. Through applying a qualitative textual analysis to the thirteen episodes of *Top Chef 2*, the current paper seeks to uncover the interplay between the thesis of individualism and the antithesis of collectivism in the programme, revealing the conflict established between these two opposing cultural dimensions. The synthesis to the contradiction between the collectivist nature of Arabs and the individualistic narrative of the made-in-America *Top Chef* is reflected through valorising individualism and encouraging the Arab chefs to embrace different Individualistic tendencies, from the quest for uniqueness to self-interest and self-reliance in order to achieve success in the programme.

Keywords: binary opposition; collectivism; individualism; MBC; reality TV; *Top Chef 2*.

1. Introduction

Ever since its emergence in the year 2000, reality TV, the form of programming that displays ordinary people or “non-actors under constant surveillance reacting in spontaneous and unscripted ways to their environment” (Handfield, 2012, p. 3), has been able to secure its place as “the most exorbitantly noticed form of programming in television's history” (Deller, 2020, p. 1). Although the most commercially successful formats originated in the Netherlands, the UK as well as in the US (Bechtold, 2013, p. 458), the Western-born genre of reality TV was popularised in the United States of America, mainly in the year 2000 with the broadcasting of CBS's *Survivor* (Yahr, 2015). From that moment on, Americans have become enthralled with the factual entertainment programming, which is revealed by Danielle Ligocki, faculty member at Oakland University, when she notes that “from 2000 to 2010, the number of reality television shows on the air increased from 4 to 320” (n.d., p. 1). Owing to their low-production costs and their entertaining nature, reality programmes have witnessed extensive proliferation and producers, from every corner of the globe, have raced to purchase and adapt reality TV formats to benefit from the high revenues they could garner (Handfield, p. 8). As a result, many formats,

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like *Idol*, *Got Talent*, *the Voice*, *Top Chef* and others, have turned into global phenomena and have managed to attract viewers worldwide (Nwafor & Erike, 2015, p. 4).

The high popularity of reality TV programmes has spurred many researchers to study the factual entertainment genre. The American scholar Jeffrey Weiss employs Gerbner's cultivation theory to uncover the influential role played by reality TV in shaping Americans' perceptions of gender, race and wealth (Weiss, 2020). Further probing into the impact of reality TV on the US is offered by Kristin Michael Barton (2007), who based on the same theory of cultivation, proves that exposure to competition-based reality TV leads to the embrace of anti-social behaviour. Other researchers, on the other hand, try to uncover reality TV's contribution to the promotion of certain cultural tenets, from neoliberalism (Coudry, 2008) to materialism (Oprea, 2016) and individualism (Wood & Skeggs, 2008).

Given that the reach of reality TV goes beyond the confines of the US, interest in reality TV programmes is shared by third-world scholars. Several Indian researchers choose to investigate the cultural influence of the Indian adaptations of American and Western reality TV content on the Indian youth and reveal the glocal programmes' shaping of young people's mannerisms, dress codes, language and behaviour, etc (Shamala, Davas & Barclay, 2019; Kader and Parveen, 2019). A similar concern with reality TV's promulgation of Western and American ideals in Africa is expressed by Igbino (2014) and Nwafor and Onyekachi (2015) in their examinations of *Big Brother Africa*. In the Arab world, localised reality television shows are seen as means of modernising the region (Kraidy, 2008), bringing about social change, political engagement and democracy (Kraidy, 2005; Miladi, 2015) or menacing traditional Arab cultural principles (Macfarquhar, 2004).

The studies dealing with Arab reality TV either focus on the political values disseminated through the glocal reality programmes or adopt a generalised negative stance towards the genre, accusing it of posing a threat to Arab culture, without offering a thorough investigation of specific cultural principles that are promulgated through reality TV programming. Therefore, the paper at hand will address this gap by canvassing the value of individualism that is advanced in Arab reality TV. It also aims at contributing to the body of literature on reality programming in the Arab region by offering an examination of an under-researched programme, which is the Arab version of the American reality programme *Top Chef*.

The selection of *Top Chef*, in particular, stems from its popularity and success. Indeed, *Top Chef* is one of the most successful US formats that ran for 19 seasons in the United States (Wellen, 2022), becoming "part of the pop culture firmament, permaculture," in the words of the journalist Joshua David Stein (2022). This culinary show has equally managed to give birth to various spinoffs, such as *Top Chef Junior*, *Top Chef Masters* and *Top Chef Family Style*, to name a few (Wellen), and it has about 24 clones and adaptations over the world (Prensario, 2020). In the Arab world, Bravo's *Top Chef* was purchased and localised by the Arab world's most popular broadcaster MBC (Aliouat et al, 2016, p. 129). In recent years, MBC has sought to maintain dominion over the Arab market by resorting to entertainment-oriented programming, namely reality TV (Al sharif, 2014). One of MBC's reality hits is the Arab adaptation of *Top Chef*, named *Top Chef Moch Ayi Chef*. This programme, which was produced for 5 consecutive years, between 2016 and 2021, proved to be a winning formula for MBC, drawing a large number of Arab viewers to the MBC1 channel. In this paper, focus will be put on the second season of the programme (2017-2018), a season that was quite popular and that entailed many aspects of individualism. In addition, the above-mentioned season included contestants from all the regions of the Arab world: the gulf (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain), the Maghreb (Algeria and Morocco), the Levant (Lebanon, Syria and Palestine) as well as Egypt, which allows for the analysis of the reaction of multiple Arabs to the thesis of individualism inherent to *Top Chef*.

This study's probing of *Top Chef* will be carried out using a qualitative textual analysis. Jason A. Smith (2017) describes this method as:

[An approach] interested in gathering information about how individuals in particular contexts make sense of the world around them. This approach recognizes the variety of ways that a text can be interpreted and utilized by those who view it. Invoking interpretive research, the focus is on how meaning is revealed and experienced, with an emphasis on sense-making, description and detail (p. 3).

According to this statement, a qualitative textual analysis revolves around understanding, describing and interpreting a given text, which is the reality TV programme *Top Chef*, in the present case. In its analysis of this culinary programme, the paper at hand strives to investigate the actions and speeches of the 15 Arab participants who take part in the 13 episodes of the programme and discern the individualist values they embody, with special emphasis on three basic principles, which are self-interest, self-reliance and uniqueness. The interpretation and examination of *Top Chef 2* will be accomplished in light of the collectivism- individualism paradigm. To be able to showcase the opposition between the programme's individualism and the collectivism of the Arab participants, Lévi-Strauss's theory of binary opposition will be employed.

2. Lévi-Strauss's Binary Opposition Theory

Binary opposition is a theoretical framework that was developed by the French thinker Claude Lévi-Strauss. Influenced by the work of structural linguists such as De Saussure, who considers linguistic opposition as "the means by which the units of language have meaning or value," (cited in Solikhah 2015, p. 8), Lévi-Strauss manages to adapt the principle of binary opposition to the domain of anthropology. For him, binary opposites can be applied to different fields because they form the basic structure of the human mind, which is communicated by Lévi-Strauss in the following statement:

Specialized cells in the brain cortex carry over a kind of structural analysis ... According to its kind, each cell either in the retina, in the ganglions or in the brain, only responds to a stimulus of a given type: opposition between motion and immobility, presence or lack of colour, changes in light or dark, objects with positively or negatively urged curves, direction of motion either straight or oblique, from left to right or the reverse, horizontal or vertical, and so on. Out of this roster of information which becomes remarkably well registered in the brain, the mind rebuilds, so to speak, objects which were never actually perceived as such (Lévi-Strauss, 1972, pp. 20-21).

The latter argument asserts that the human mind thinks in opposites and that most of life-experiences are structured around pairs that have opposite meaning to one another.

Lévi-Strauss's binary opposition framework finds expression in his study of three Salish myths where he purports that myths are constructed around setting sets of binary opposites against each other, such as earth and sky, raw and cooked, light and dark, man and woman, etc. His probing of the opposing terms that build up the mythical narrative enables Lévi-Strauss to derive much knowledge about Salish economic, cosmological and social realities (Aplin, 1981, p 16).

Indeed, in Lévi-Strauss's perception, understanding the individual culture of any group of people should necessarily imply breaking up the opposing elements that constitute that culture because all the people, whether they are educated or primitive, tend to think in terms of structural "dualism" (Lévi-Strauss, p. 22). Culture, in Lévi-Strauss's view, is best understood

through the thesis, antithesis and synthesis framework. Any conclusion is necessarily reached after juxtaposing the thesis and antithesis and exploring the various relationships that bind them together. In every binary opposition between thesis and antithesis, one element is delineated in a more positive light (Wordpress, 2017). The synthesis acts as the resolution to the opposing relation (Messer, 1986, p. 11).

Lévi-Strauss's thesis, antithesis and synthesis triad, which was originally used in the study of mythical narrative, will be used in the present paper to investigate a media narrative, which is the reality TV programme *Top Chef 2*. The analysis of the reality show will examine the binary opposition between the individualistic tenets that are inherent to the American-based format *Top Chef* and the collectivist nature of the participants in MBC's Arab version of the format and will unveil the programme's resolution of the conflict between Arab and American core values.

3. The Opposition between American Individualism and Arab Collectivism

The concepts of individualism and collectivism, which serve to explain the behaviour of individuals in different cultural contexts, are perceived by Rebecca LeFebvre and Volker Franke "as opposite ends" (LeFebvre and Franke, 2013, p. 133). While individualism "pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose [and] everyone is expected to look after himself or herself" (Hofstede 2001, p. 76), collectivism refers to "societies in which people from birth onward are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetimes continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty" (ibid). Hence, it can be suggested that individualism is tied to independence and the pursuit of self-interest, whereas collectivism is associated with dependence. In collectivist societies, loyalty to the group is given priority over personal goals and individual fulfilment is maintained by the success of the group (Al-Issa, 2005, p. 153).

Between 1968 and 1972, the Dutch researcher Geert Hofstede carried out his cultural dimension survey in 72 countries, where he investigated several cultural elements, including individualism and collectivism (Hofstede, pp. xix- 351). The results of Hofstede's research confirm the cultural opposition between the individualist nature of Americans and the collectivist tendencies of Arabs. While American people turn out to be the most individualistic in the world, Arabs are declared as the most collectivist. Hofstede's findings are corroborated by Richard Buda and Sayed M. Elsayed-Elkhouly (1998) who assert that "differences exist in individualism-collectivism between Americans, Egyptians and residents of the Gulf states. The US sample scored higher on the individualism scale than either the Egyptian or the Gulf state sample" (p. 491). The work of Buda and Elsayed-Elkhouly equally suggests that Arab countries do not have the same degree of collectivism, arguing that people of the Gulf are more collectivist than Egyptians. Yet, regardless of varying levels of collectivism, Arabs remain collectivist in nature.

Indeed, collectivism has for long been an integral part of Arab culture. This point is expressed by Jon B. Alterman (2019) when he states that "ties of obligation, often through family and tribe, have been a consistent theme in Arab history" (p. 3). One of the early pioneers of Arab collectivism is the Tunisian thinker Abdulrahman Ibn Khaldun who writes that in-group ties are cultivated through "social intercourse, friendly association, long familiarity, and the companionship that results from growing up together, having the same wet nurse, and sharing the other circumstances of death and life" (cited in Alterman, p. 8). For Ibn-Khaldun, maintaining harmony with the social group is necessary for the well-being of individuals and for their success in life, especially that most of their history, Arabs lived as Bedouins in the desert. They relied on social bonds and kinship for hunting food, protection and survival (ibid,

p. 1). Having to live in clans and tribes made Arabs preoccupied with maintaining group unity more than pursuing personal goals and with preserving tribal and social traditions more than opting for change (Rohm, 2010, p. 9).

Early Americans, on the other hand, lived on the frontier, which is described by the American historian Frederick Jackson Turner as follows:

The frontier is productive of individualism. Complex society is precipitated by the wilderness into a kind of primitive organization based on the family. The tendency is anti-social. It produces antipathy to control and particularly to any direct control. The tax gatherer is viewed as representative of oppression (cited in *ibid*, p. 2).

From the frontier experience, Americans learned to care only for themselves and their immediate families. The difficult conditions on the frontier also pushed Americans to become independent from all social pressures and to rely only on the self for success and prosperity. As a result of the frontier trials, valuing self-interest, working independently and standing out from the crowd became major markers of American individualism (Rohm, p. 8).

Another factor that determines people's orientation towards individualism or collectivism is language. A study carried out by Kashima and Kashima (1998) outlines that speakers of English, a language, which necessitates the use of the pronoun "I," are more inclined towards individualism, whereas Arabs whose language allows for the drop of the "I" pronoun tend to be more collectivist. For Kashima and Kashima, employing the "I" in speech signifies that the individual "is highlighted as a figure against the speech context that constitutes the ground; its absence reduces the predominance of the speaker's person, thus reducing the figure-ground differentiation" (p. 465). The claims of Kashima and Kashima are further consolidated by the Lebanese scholar Huda Ayyach-Abdo (2001) whose analysis of Lebanese students' cultural dimension shows that the students who attend the Lebanese American university, which employs English as the language of instruction, demonstrate a higher individualist propensity than Lebanese students who go to the Lebanese University and Arabic University and who use Arabic as the major medium of communication (p. 513).

Apart from language, Arab collectivism is weakened by the growing urbanisation. According to Jon B. Alterman (2019), due to Arabs' movement to urban centres, "people are more mobile, families are more scattered and economic rewards come as a result of what you do, not who you are." Moving to cities has limited young Arabs' reliance on the hierarchical tribal networks, which, in their perception, no longer served them (*ibid*). Alterman suggests that:

urbanization not only allows individuals to live more anonymous lives in cities, but it also allows people to live far away from members of a network who might seek to control their actions, and it creates greater opportunities for individual success and failure, absent group support (pp. 9- 11).

Alterman's statement unveils the city's contribution to creating favourable conditions for the development of individualism in the Arab world. Distance from the tribe and family makes Arabs more self-reliant and in control of their lives, which gives them more room to make their own choices and advance their personal interests. Yet, what Alterman fails to mention is the role played by exposure to American media products, such as reality TV, in degrading Arab collectivism.

4. Reality TV and the Promotion of Individualism

Made-in-American reality formats are built around the idea of individualism. Delineating the factual entertainment programming, Elliot and Lemert (2006) stipulate that “individualism serves as one of the main values among RTV [reality TV] genres...not only are the shows broadcasting an individualist value, but also most of the characters seen on a RTV show possess individualistic personalities” (pp. 217-218). For Elliot and Lemert, the “participants of RTV shows are individuals who place themselves first before anyone else” (ibid, p. 217). The culture of individualism that fills American reality TV is well nurtured in light of the capitalist work ethic, which is communicated by Tamar Salibian (2020) as she notes that “[under the auspices of capitalism], individualism rests within two coexisting notions: the capitalist receives the benefits of the worker individual, and the individual must conduct themselves as a self-commodifying entity in order to succeed within capitalism” (p. 111). What can be concluded from the latter statement is that the individual is highly valued in capitalist societies as a worker and as a commodity, which is evident in the reality programmes that make use of the free labour of the individual participants and encourage them to sell themselves as commodities to the audience to gain popularity and acclaim. Additionally, capitalism’s emphasis on competition has transpired in a spirit of competitive individualism “which has carried the logic of individualism to the extreme of a war on all against all, the pursuit of happiness to the dead end of a narcissistic preoccupation with the self” (ibid, p. 110), features that are quite observable in competition-based reality formats, where each participant has to engage in a war against others to reach the finale, be branded the winner and be able to claim all the prizes and benefits.

The preponderance of individualistic messages in American reality programmes has led many scholars to deem the genre as a promoter of individualism. An article by the Columbus Dispatch blames reality TV for the increase in individualistic narcissism in the US as the ““Me Generation” and those that followed redefined individualism to favour “me” over “we”” (The Columbus Dispatch, 2020). Similar worries are communicated by Suzanna Johanna Oprea and Rinaldo Kuhne (2016) as they note that the “more reality TV adolescents view, the more...narcissistic they are” (p. 1). American youth cultivate more narcissism and selfishness after viewing reality TV due to the individualistic messages that permeate reality TV programmes, especially competition-oriented ones like *Top Chef*.

5. MBC’s *Top Chef* and Individualism

5.1. *Individualism as the Thesis in MBC’s Top Chef 2*

Top Chef is an American culinary programme. It is a competition-based format, whereby multiple participants have to embrace the spirit of competitive individualism and compete weekly in the quickfire and elimination challenges. The weakest contestant usually goes home at the end of each weekly episode and the most skilful participant is crowned Top Chef and goes home with a decent monetary prize.

Despite being adapted to the Arab world, MBC’s version of *Top Chef* retains the individualistic values of the American format creators. In fact, *Top Chef 2* is predicated on individualistic tenets that range from reliance on the self to pursuit of uniqueness and personal interest.

Throughout their journeys on *Top Chef 2*, the participants have to be self-reliant. First, they step into the programme as individuals, stripped off their familial and tribal connections. On the programme, they have no one to count on but themselves. Therefore, they are supposed to display a high degree of autonomy and independence to be able to complete the weekly

quickfire and elimination challenges. Perfect management of one's time and realising personal weaknesses are prerequisite for success. On the second episode of the season, the injured Algerian chef Chahrazed, who is unable to finish her dish on time, is criticised by her colleague Mahdi who states that Chahrazed has put herself in trouble by choosing to prepare a complicated recipe, that requires many ingredients, especially that she suffers from a hand injury. He mockingly adds she can't expect the angels to come and help her (Sokar, 2017-2018). Mahdi's remark mirrors well the individualist approach of the programme where each contestant is responsible for accomplishing the tasks given to him and completing his dishes alone.

On *Top Chef 2*, the participants are also required to stand out from the crowd and mirror a degree of uniqueness. In the opening episode of the season, the chef judge Bobby Chinn stresses the importance of distinctiveness in the culinary programme by saying "I advise you to go to your roots, to the dishes that inspired you but make it unique" (ibid). On episode six, chef Bobby reiterates the same message by noting that "creativity is a key ingredient for all great chefs" when presenting the week's quickfire challenge that implies preparing unique and creative dishes without the use of kitchen utensils (ibid). The necessity of uniqueness is highlighted in several other challenges and episodes as well. The elimination challenge of week six involves modernising a traditional dish and presenting it in a unique way. Similarly, on the season's finale, the three remaining participants are asked to offer unique and creative interpretations of three classics, which are stew, ceviche and cheese cake. *Top Chef 2*'s stress on uniqueness is acknowledged by the programme fans as well. Assil Omrane, Saudi TV presenter and fan of the culinary show who entrusts the *Top Chef* contestants with cooking for her personal guests in episode seven, states the drive for uniqueness as the main reason behind choosing the programme's chefs for the mission.

The last individualistic tenet that is inherent to the *Top Chef* culinary programme is self-interest. Given that *Top Chef 2* is a competition-based reality show, based on the winner-takes-all scenario (Abdallah, 2017), the Arab participants are supposed to do their best to reach personal success through winning the title of Top Chef the Arab world and acquiring all the material benefits associated with the title, including the cash prize of 375,000 SR (Sobhi, 2018). To ensure continuity on the programme, the participants have to prioritise themselves and make sure to advance their personal interests and goals through fighting their orientation towards collectivism.

5.2. *Collectivism as the Antithesis in Top Chef 2*

As opposed to the dominant thesis of individualism, collectivism is projected as the anti-thesis in *Top Chef 2*. Helping others and showing loyalty to competitors are shown in a negative light in this reality programme. In the quickfire challenge of week three, the Palestinian chef Assil runs out of time and is unable to plate his dish. As a result, he asks for help. The Algerian chef Mahdi and the Syrian chef Mahmoud run to his rescue and assist him in plating the dish. Thanks to their aid, Assil manages to win the challenge and receives immunity as a reward, which angers both chefs. Consumed with remorse, chef Mahmoud says if I had not assisted Assil, I would have guaranteed immunity for myself. In a similar vein, chef Mahdi decides that from that day, he will not help anyone. Yet despite the decision he makes, chef Mahdi's collectivist nature prevents him from pursuing his self-interest. His loyalty to his friends Mahmoud and Mustapha push chef Mahdi, who is the only pastry chef in the programme, to share his ice-cream recipe with them in the quickfire challenge of episode seven, a deed that proves to be unwise. While Mustapha and Mahmoud present delicious and successful ice-cream flavours to the judges, chef Mahdi fails the challenge and ends up in the bottom three, despite his expertise in ice-cream making (Sokar).

Additional corrosive outcomes of prioritising others over the self are underscored in the eleventh and fourth episodes. In week eleven, the Palestinian chef Assil plays head to head with the Egyptian chef Mustapha to prepare dessert. In spite of the competition between them, Assil chooses to help Mustapha by providing him with the chocolate recipe, which enables Mustapha to be the winner of the episode. Assil's collectivist behaviour is criticised by the Lebanese chef judge Maroun Chedid who blames Assil for contributing to Mustapha's victory and for putting himself in the bottom three, facing the danger of elimination at a critical point of the competition (ibid). Analogously, during the quickfire challenge of the episode, chef Ammar, from Saudi Arabia, helps his friend Abdallah clean his station after the latter spills the sauce and he also lends his grater to Selma. All the "charitable" deeds he performs consume much of his time and distract his attention from his dish. As a result, he ends up in the bottom with his rucola and avocado salad (ibid).

In fact, chef Ammar is one of the most collectivist chefs in the competition. He embodies with the Lebanese chef Serge the collectivist propensity towards group loyalty. On the eighth and ninth episodes of *Top Chef 2*, the participants have to work in groups in the restaurant-war challenge, on two separate episodes. Chef Ammar, who belongs to the second group, opens a restaurant with his group mates in the ninth episode. During this demanding challenge, the Saudi participant Ammar assumes many tasks. In addition to his complex and challenging dish, he volunteers to check the waiters and explain the menu to them, putting the interest of his team over his own interest. When his dish fails to impress the judges, he confesses that the multiple team-related responsibilities have weighted on his shoulders and have affected the level of his dish. Luckily for him, he is saved from elimination thanks to his team's victory. The same good fortune does not accompany chef Serge, though. As the leader of the first group that launches its restaurant in the eighth episode, chef Serge is expected to assume many duties. Apart from working on his dish, chef Serge has to check on the waiters, the tables, the decoration and make sure that everything is well done. These extra-cooking duties, which are fulfilled for the interest of the whole group, are done at the expense of Serge's dish. Ultimately, Serge does not find the time to finish his dish and when he requires help from his team mates, they refuse to assist him and choose to concentrate on perfecting their dishes. Serge's prioritisation of the group's success over his own personal fulfilment costs him much as he ends up with the worst dish and is, consequently, eliminated from the competition.

The second collectivist penchant that is negatively delineated in *Top Chef 2* is dependence on others. On episode seven, chef Selma fails her dish due to a lack of self-reliance. Feeling at loss during the elimination challenge, she relies on chef Mahmoud for inspiration and she accepts to work on a Baba Ghanoush recipe offered by him. Yet, her lack of mastery of the dish makes her in need of extra aid from her team mate Mahdi, who helps her finalise the dish. When her dish is judged to be one of the worst of the week, she blames her dependence on others for her failure. Just like Selma, chef Mahdi, from Algeria, fails during the same challenge and leaves the programme due to his inclusion of Mhamara (walnut dip) in his appetiser, which is a Syrian recipe given to him by the Syrian chef Mahmoud, and which he has no command over its method of preparation. In the two above-mentioned instances, dependence on others and inability to accomplish one's tasks alone result in fiasco.

In fact, being dependent on others and failing at imposing one's preferences are also elements of non-success. On the eighth episode of *Top Chef 2*, chef Assil expresses his disinterest in making dessert and his desire for preparing a hot-kitchen specialty but his team mates insist on pushing him to make the dessert because he is good at pastry. By the end, Assil's inability to impose his preferences and desires and his surrender to the dictates of the group cause him to present the worst dessert he has ever made on the programme.

The last cause of failure in *Top Chef 2* is reflection of tradition and limited display of creativity and uniqueness. On the elimination challenge of the sixth episode, all the judges hate George's Kebba because it exhibits no creativity. They equally do not appreciate Chahrazed's Algerian Hamis dish. The Lebanese chef judge Joe Barza thinks that there is nothing special about it and chef Bobby comments on the dish, saying "I feel I'm eating ratatouille at my parents' house." The failure of Chahrazed's dish emanates from her copying of a traditional Algerian dish and her inability to add a creative touch to the Hamis recipe. On episode seven, Chef Maroun Chedid criticises Selma's decision to make a classical and traditional dish like Baba Ghanoush whose recipe is quite simplistic and does not give any chef room for adding her unique signature. On episode eight, chef Assil's Nutella sandwich is denounced by the Saudi chef judge Mouna on the ground that it is so plain and lacking uniqueness. She adds that any mother can prepare a similar sandwich. Chef Mouna lodges similar criticism at the dish Ammar presents in the ninth week, noticing that it is not impressive and that any amateur chef can produce a similar dish and it is not up to the level of *Top Chef*.

By criticising the collectivist values of selflessness, dependence on others and loyalty to the group and to tradition and associating them with failure and with corrosive results, *Top Chef 2* strives to establish a binary opposition between the individualist narrative of the American-based reality programme and the collectivist nature of Arabs. By presenting individualism as the thesis and collectivism as the antithesis, a type of conflict arises, which requires resolution or "mediation," (Messer, p. 13) in the form of the Lévi-Straussian synthesis.

5.3. Embrace of Individualism as the Synthesis in *Top Chef 2*

Describing the working of Lévi-Strauss's synthesis, Messer asserts that "oppositions, paradoxes and contradictions are mediated, appropriately enough by mediators ... Their appearance signals that the contradiction being addressed has been defined in the form of an opposing relation and a resolution sought" (Messer, pp. 10-11). The resolution for the contradiction between the collectivist proclivities of Arabs and the individualism of the reality programme *Top Chef 2* is offered in the programme through the constant strife to accustom the Arab participants with the discourse of individualism by stressing the merits of possessing individualistic values.

Throughout the second season of *Top Chef*, the most successful Arab chefs prove to be the ones who embody the individualist principle of uniqueness. On the street food challenge, the participants who flourish at adding distinctive touches to their countries' traditional street food are congratulated by the judges. Chef George who serves Taouk sandwiches with Haloumi, chef Selma who mixes the Egyptian Taamiya with tahina and beetroot sauce and chef Mahmoud who, brilliantly, combines Chawarma and Kebba in one dish are the winners of the tenth week's elimination challenge and they are praised by the judges for their creative culinary skills. On episode twelve, the Egyptian chef Mustapha decides to prepare an "out-of-the-box" salad, which works quite well for him. The chef judge Maroun Chedid is impressed by Mustapha's creativity and he notes that Mustapha has managed to gather a few ingredients and present them in a unique way. Ultimately, Mustapha's creative salad earns him the first spot in the semi-finals.

Mustapha's success on *Top Chef 2* also results from his individualist mentality. Though when working in groups, "Arabs value teamwork and collaboration more [and] they are less likely to act independently," according to Frederick W. Rohm, Jr (p. 8). As a team leader Mustapha believes in giving his team mates independence and space to work on the dishes they prefer and they feel at ease with, which is mirrored in the ninth episode. On this episode, Mustapha tries to prioritise his mates' personal preferences and goals over team goals. He listens to his team mates' wishes. When Selma states that she wants to serve the first dish, he

grants her the permission of working on the appetiser. Mustapha similarly respects Chahrazed's wish of serving dessert, though she possesses no experience in the pastry domain. By allowing his team mates to pursue their personal preferences, Mustapha reflects the individualist mentality of valuing individual interests over group harmony. His trust in the individual capabilities of his team members and the independence he has granted them prove to be fruitful as both Selma and Chahrazed excel in the challenge and he actually manages, with his team mates, to win the restaurant-war challenge thanks to his individualist mindset.

Another highly individualist participant is George, from Lebanon. From day one, George has recognised that to flourish in the programme, he has to shun his collectivist orientations and focus on his personal interest. On episode ten, George refuses to lend Mahmoud his blender and when Mahmoud touches it, he screams at him and prevents him from using it. Prioritising the self has helped George reach the finale and during the final episode, he proudly talks about his individualist behaviour in the programme, saying I am on *Top Chef* to work alone, not to work in a team. On the baby shower, my team lost but my dish won. George's revelation proves well that George possesses no loyalty to the groups he has worked for; he cares only about the dishes he cooks and about furthering his personal goals, which qualifies him to be a finalist on *Top Chef 2*.

Actually, George and Mustapha who display individualist propensities and behaviours are able to earn their spots in the finale, which communicates the message that taming one's collectivism and embracing the individualist principles of creativity, independence and self-interest are the markers of success on *Top Chef 2*. The synthesis and resolution to the binary opposition between Arab collectivism and the programme's individualism is achieved through making the collectivist chefs abandon their cultural orientations and adopt the individualist values promulgated in the programme in order to achieve their top chef dream. Chef Mustapha who shows possession of several individualistic tenets is the one who becomes the second season's Top Chef.

6. Conclusion

Through canvassing the duality between the cultural dimensions of individualism and collectivism, the present paper has shown that on *Top Chef 2*, collectivism is presented as the antithesis in this culinary reality show and collectivist values are undervalued and associated with negative messages and outcomes. The thesis of individualism, which forms the basis of the narrative of *Top Chef*, is highly valued and the Arab participants' adoption of individualistic practices is tied to success and achievement. Resolution to the conflict and opposition between individualism and collectivism, this paper has revealed, requires the Arab participants' acceptance and display of individualist values such as uniqueness, self-interest, self-reliance and independence. Regardless of the Arab country they come from, the *Top Chef* contestants have to shun their collectivist natures and embrace the principle of individualism to guarantee continuity and survival in the *Top Chef* world. Hence, it can be suggested that the Arab version of *Top Chef*, like all American reality formats, seeks to promulgate the individualist mindset among the participants of the programme and, possibly, among Arab viewers. Therefore, a quantitative study of the influence of the Arab *Top Chef* on Arabs' orientation towards individualism could be a pertinent future research project.

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