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Jasser Hammami

Mawjoudin and the Politics of Queer Artivism in Post-Revolution Tunisia: Reclaiming Spaces, Amplifying Voices, and Redefining Identities (2019–2024)

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Mawjoudin and the Politics of Queer Artivism in Post-Revolution Tunisia: Reclaiming Spaces, Amplifying Voices, and Redefining Identities (2019–2024)

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Zusammenfassung

Diese Studie untersucht die dynamische Entwicklung des queeren Artivismus im Tunesien nach der Revolution von 2019 bis 2024 und konzentriert sich dabei auf die Pionierarbeit der NGO Mawjoudin. Vor dem Hintergrund rechtlicher und gesellschaftlicher Einschränkungen untersucht die Studie, wie künstlerischer Aktivismus die öffentliche Meinungsäusserung und Sichtbarkeit der LGBTQ+-Gemeinschaft verändert hat. Anhand einer vergleichenden Analyse wichtiger Meilensteine, darunter das Mawjoudin Queer Film Festival 2019, IDAHOBIT-Drag-Performances, RightsCon-Präsentationen und die Tunisian Queer Residency 2024, zeichnet die Arbeit einen Weg nach, der von diskreten Akten des Widerstands zu mutigen, digital verstärkten kulturellen Interventionen führt. Unter Einsatz von teilnehmender Beobachtung und digitaler Inhaltsanalyse zeigt diese Studie, wie sich die Strategien von Mawjoudin weiterentwickelt haben, um physische Räume zurückzugewinnen, die digitale Sichtbarkeit zu verstärken und lokale sowie globale kulturelle Elemente zu vermischen. Diese Veränderungen verdeutlichen ein wachsendes Selbstbewusstsein in der öffentlichen Meinungsäusserung, während gleichzeitig anhaltende Herausforderungen durch Tunesiens Rechtsrahmen und gesellschaftliche Normen bewältigt werden. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, wie Artivismus sowohl als Instrument des Widerstands als auch als Medium zur Neudefinition queerer Identitäten in restriktiven Umgebungen dient. Indem diese Entwicklungen in den Kontext der umfassenderen soziopolitischen Veränderungen in Tunesien gestellt werden, trägt diese Forschung zum Verständnis bei, wie marginalisierte Gemeinschaften ihren Aktivismus an sich wandelnde Kontexte anpassen. Sie unterstreicht die Rolle kreativer Praktiken bei der Förderung von Resilienz und der Stärkung von Rechten in postrevolutionären Gesellschaften.

Schlagworte

Queerer Artivismus; Post-revolutionäres Tunesien; Mawjoudin; Raumpolitik; temporärer ‘safe space’; Kriminalisierung queerer Identitäten; kulturelle Hybridität; digitaler Aktivismus

Abstract

This study explores the dynamic evolution of queer artivism in post-revolution Tunisia from 2019 to 2024, focusing on the pioneering efforts of the NGO Mawjoudin. Against a backdrop of legal and social constraints, the research examines how artistic activism has transformed public expression and visibility for the LGBTQ+ community. Through a comparative analysis of key milestones, including the 2019 Mawjoudin Queer Film Festival, IDAHOBIT drag performances, RightsCon showcases, and the 2024 Tunisian Queer Residency, the paper traces a trajectory from discreet acts of defiance to bold, digitally amplified cultural interventions. Employing participant observation and digital content analysis, this study reveals how Mawjoudin's strategies have evolved to reclaim physical spaces, amplify digital visibility, and blend local and global cultural elements. These shifts illustrate a growing confidence in public expression while navigating persistent challenges posed by Tunisia's legal framework and societal norms. The findings highlight how artivism serves as both a tool for resistance and a medium for reimagining queer identities in restrictive environments. By situating these developments within broader socio-political transformations in Tunisia, this research contributes to understanding how marginalised communities adapt their activism to shifting contexts. It underscores the role of creative practices in fostering resilience and advancing rights in post-revolutionary societies.

Keywords

Queer Artivism; Post-Revolution Tunisia; Mawjoudin; Spatial Politics; Temporary Safe Space; Criminalisation of Queer Identities; Cultural Hybridity; Digital Activism;

1. Introduction

In post-revolution Tunisia, where the state criminalises queerness and society often shrouds it in silence, art is not a luxury. It is a mode of survival. While Terry Eagleton (2017: 89) famously argued that "works of art cannot save us," in contexts of systemic erasure, art performs a function far more urgent than mere sensitisation: it carves out space where none exists.

Since the ousting of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in 2011, Tunisia has witnessed a fragile and uneven process of democratisation. The post-revolutionary period, initially heralded as a turning point for civil liberties, has revealed deep ambivalences, particularly in relation to gender and sexual rights. Although the transitional political climate allowed for the emergence of new actors in civil society, including LGBTQ+ organisations, this apparent opening was circumscribed by persistent legal and cultural constraints. Article 230 of the Penal Code, which criminalises same-sex relations, remains in force and is routinely used to justify arbitrary arrests, invasive medical testing, and public shaming. State institutions, far from being neutral arbiters, often reinforce moral conservatism through legal enforcement and tacit encouragement of societal homophobia.

Within this contested terrain, queerness is not only criminalised by law but actively instrumentalised by dominant discourses. It is positioned as a constitutive foreign threat to national identity, religious values, and social cohesion. It is not pushed to the margins so much as placed at the centre of nationalist rhetoric as the negative term against which a normative Tunisian subject is defined.

Media representations, political rhetoric, and even progressive reform agendas often omit or instrumentalise LGBTQ+ communities, further entrenching their precarity. Against this backdrop, visibility becomes both a risk and a necessity. It is in this space of tension that queer artivism emerges as a radical practice. Creative expression, particularly as practised by organisations like Mawjoudin, becomes a form of political intervention, one that reclaims public and digital spaces, challenges normative narratives, and offers fleeting yet vital sanctuaries for queer existence. In such a politically charged context, art does not simply reflect reality, it reimagines it.

This study traces the evolution of queer artivism in Tunisia from 2019 to 2024, focusing on the initiatives led by Mawjoudin, a prominent LGBTQ+ non-governmental organisation. Through a comparative analysis of four key events, the 2019 Mawjoudin Queer Film Festival, the IDAHOBIT drag show in the Medina of Tunis, the performance staged at RightsCon 2019, and the 2024 Tunisian Queer Residency, this research examines how queer artivism has adapted in response to Tunisia's shifting political, social, and technological landscape.

Employing participant observation for the 2019 events and digital content analysis for the 2024 residency, the study investigates the progression from relatively discreet, in-person forms of resistance to more publicly visible and digitally amplified expressions of queer identity. It explores how Mawjoudin's strategies have evolved in terms of spatial reclamation, cultural hybridity, and digital engagement, reflecting broader shifts within LGBTQ+ activism in Tunisia. The central research question guiding this inquiry is: How has queer artivism, as practised by Mawjoudin, evolved in its approach to creating safe spaces and affirming queer identities in post-revolution Tunisia between 2019 and 2024?

To answer this, the study sets out three key objectives: first, to analyse how cultural interventions challenge oppressive legal and social norms and contribute to forms of resistance and transformation; second, to examine the increasing role of digital platforms in extending the reach, visibility, and impact of queer artivism; and third, to investigate how the blending of traditional Tunisian cultural elements with contemporary queer aesthetics redefines national belonging across both local and global registers.

This paper argues that the evolution of Mawjoudin's artivist strategies reflects a growing

audacity in public expression and an increased capacity to navigate the complex terrain of legal repression and social taboo. Through spatial interventions, multimedia storytelling, and transnational dialogue, queer artivism in Tunisia is not only responding to its environment but actively reshaping it. By analysing this shift, the study contributes to broader understandings of how art functions as a tool for social change, identity formation, and human rights advocacy in politically precarious settings.

A note on terminology is warranted before proceeding. This article employs "queer" and "LGBTIQ+" in distinct registers. "LGBTIQ+" denotes the organisational and political category through which identity-based rights claims are articulated. It is the language of association registration and international human rights frameworks. "Queer," by contrast, operates as both an analytical term and a self-designatory one within Mawjoudin's own cultural practice: it signals not a fixed identity but a critical relationship to heteronormative and gender-normative regimes. Where the article follows Mawjoudin's own framing, it uses "LGBTIQ+"; where the analysis concerns modes of being, resisting, and performing that exceed categorical boundaries, "queer" is the more precise instrument. The two are not interchangeable, and this distinction is maintained throughout.

2. Literature Review

In recent years, scholarship on LGBTQ+ activism in the Middle East and North Africa has increasingly engaged with the complexities of queer identity and political expression within shifting socio-political landscapes. Post-revolution Tunisia, following the 2011 ousting of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, has emerged as a critical site for exploring these dynamics, becoming both a testing ground and a contested space for sexual minority rights (Marks 2019: 35; Sadiki 2015: 24). Scholarly conversations emphasise that the revolution's initial relaxation of state repression presented activists with new opportunities to mobilise publicly, but also underscored persistent conservative attitudes and legal obstacles, notably Article 230 of Tunisia's Penal Code, which criminalises same-sex relations (Marks 2019: 47). Thus, the Tunisian context confronts activists with a delicate balance between visibility and vulnerability, a tension central to contemporary queer activism in the region (Dalacoura 2014: 144).

Within this complex terrain, Tunisian LGBTQ+ organisations, such as Mawjoudin, have increasingly employed cultural strategies, particularly through artivism, to navigate social and legal barriers (Zemni 2014: 82). Artivism is described in the literature as a dynamic intersection of creative practice and political engagement, distinguished by its use of aesthetics, symbolism, and emotional resonance to "challenge societal norms and structures of oppression" (Duncombe 2016: 118; Felshin 1995: 9). Artivism's effectiveness is partly attributed to its capacity to stimulate dialogue and provoke critical reflection in ways that conventional activism may not, creating spaces for what Chantal Mouffe describes as "'agonistic pluralism,' where conflicting viewpoints coexist productively" (Mouffe 2013: 41).

However, debates persist regarding the applicability of global frameworks to Arab contexts. Joseph Massad, for instance, critiques the universalising of Western LGBTQ+ models, cautioning against overlooking the specificity of local understandings of sexuality and gender (Massad 2007: 160). Massad's perspective is instrumental in interpreting Mawjoudin's artivism, highlighting how local activists simultaneously engage with and resist globalised narratives. While drawing inspiration from international queer discourses, Mawjoudin's initiatives, such as the Mawjoudin Queer Film Festival and drag performances during IDAHOBIT, embed global influences within distinctly Tunisian cultural settings, thereby asserting queer identities without detaching from local traditions (Halberstam 2005: 88; Amar 2013: 76).

Digital media further complicates this dialogue between local conditions and global frameworks. Recent studies underline digital

platforms' centrality to LGBTQ+ activism in repressive contexts, emphasising how social media enables marginalised groups to cultivate visibility, solidarity, and community-building while circumventing state surveillance and societal backlash (Ennaji 2020: 231; Zayani 2015: 103). However, scholars also caution that the digital sphere introduces its own vulnerabilities, including risks of online harassment and digital surveillance. In Tunisia, where activists face continuous threats, digital activism represents both "a lifeline and a precarious domain" (Zayani 2015: 105).

Current research has recognised Mawjoudin's role as a crucial actor in these intersecting spheres of culture, politics, and digital activism, noting its unique position within Tunisian civil society as an openly registered LGBTQ+ organisation operating amid significant legal and social constraints (Merone 2015: 54; Sadiki 2015: 25). Mawjoudin's formal registration in 2015 was itself made possible by Decree-Law 88 of 2011 on the freedom of association, widely regarded as one of the revolution's most significant institutional legacies, which permitted organisations to register under principles of human rights and freedom of expression rather than explicit identity categories, creating a legal entry point for queer organising into Tunisian civil society (Kréfa 2019; Kebaïli 2019). This strategic use of institutional openings, documented in the scholarship on post-revolutionary associational life, preceded the artivist period this study examines and forms an important part of its background.

The emergence of queer organisations must also be situated within the broader arc of Tunisia's contested democratic transition — a concept (al-intiqāl al-dīmuqrāṭī) that has long occupied Tunisian political and intellectual discourse (Lamloum 2006; Melliti 2020). The partial openings of this period created not only new spaces for queer activism but also platforms of dialogue, however uneven, between queer organisations and feminist associations. Engaging with this intersection is essential to understanding Mawjoudin not as an isolated phenomenon but as part of a wider field of civil society actors negotiating the terms of post-revolutionary inclusion. However, this being said, a gap remains in fully understanding how Mawjoudin's strategic use of artistic and digital interventions has evolved over time, particularly regarding the creation of safe spaces and affirmation of queer identities within Tunisia's post-revolutionary landscape.

This article contributes to addressing that gap by closely examining Mawjoudin's queer artivism from 2019 to 2024, a critical period marked by increased public visibility and intensified socio-political pressures. Drawing methodologically from participant observation and digital content analysis, it explores how Mawjoudin's practices reflect broader scholarly debates about cultural hybridity, intersectionality, and the situatedness of queer identities (Butler 1990: 45; Puar 2007: 77). Through analysis of events like the Mawjoudin Queer Film Festival, IDAHOBIT drag shows, and the Tunisian Queer Residency (TQR), the study highlights how Mawjoudin effectively blends local aesthetics with global queer practices, navigating between affirming identities locally and aligning strategically with global movements.

By positioning Mawjoudin within this scholarly conversation, the research contributes deeper insight into how artivism in Tunisia represents not merely symbolic resistance but tangible social intervention. It underscores the transformative potential of cultural production, showing how Mawjoudin's initiatives challenge dominant narratives about sexuality, gender, and Tunisian identity. Ultimately, this article extends the dialogue by demonstrating how culturally rooted and digitally mediated queer artivism can reshape political possibilities, foreground marginalised experiences, and foster broader movements toward inclusive citizenship in Tunisia.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine the evolution of queer artivism in Tunisia, focusing on the case of Mawjoudin between 2019 and 2024. It draws on two

complementary methods: participant observation for events in 2019 and digital content analysis of activities in 2024. This dual strategy enables an exploration of both the continuity and transformation in queer activism, as well as shifts in the mediums through which it is expressed and disseminated.

Participant observation, rooted in anthropological inquiry, was employed for three key events in 2019: the Mawjoudin Queer Film Festival, the IDAHOBIT event in Kouri Khaireddine (otherwise known as the Écuries du Palais de Khaireddine Pacha, a nineteenth-century palatial stable complex classified as a historic monument since 1992 and subsequently converted into a high-end cultural event venue within the Medina of Tunis), and the organisation's participation at RightsCon. This method is particularly valuable when researching marginalised communities and sensitive topics, as it allows for "insider perspectives while maintaining ethical considerations" (DeWalt & DeWalt 2011: 17; Kawulich 2005: 8). The approach facilitated insights into the construction of safe spaces, the visual and performative dimensions of queer identity, and the organisation's strategies for ensuring the security and comfort of participants in a context where visibility entails risk. In line with established ethical practices for working with vulnerable populations, no photographs were taken, and locations are described in general terms to preserve anonymity (Liamputtong 2007: 17).

In contrast, the 2024 Tunisian Queer Residency is analysed through digital content posted on Mawjoudin's Instagram platform. This methodological shift reflects the organisation's increasing digital visibility and broader trends in queer activism, where digital media serve as critical tools for community-building and advocacy (Freelon 2018: 9). As physical gatherings remain precarious, digital platforms offer accessible and semi-anonymous spaces through which activists may articulate their identities and distribute political messages (Poell & van Dijck 2015: 530). The move from physical to digital engagement aligns with the evolving field of digital ethnography, which acknowledges the significance of online spaces in shaping and recording cultural and political practices (Pink et al. 2016: 11; Postill & Pink 2012: 126).

The researcher's own positionality, as someone personally embedded within the LGBTQ+ community in Tunisia, introduces both unique access and the need for critical reflexivity. This duality resonates with the framework of "insider ethnography," which values the nuanced understanding that comes from shared experience, while also demanding continual self-reflection to minimise interpretive bias (Brannick & Coghlan 2007: 63; Berger 2015: 229). Reflexive practices were sustained throughout the research process as a means of interrogating, rather than merely acknowledging, the influence of the researcher's standpoint on data collection and analysis. In practical terms, this involved maintaining a reflexive journal during the 2019 events, recording observations alongside notes on moments of identification, affective investment, and instances where proximity to the community risked shaping what was foregrounded or overlooked. During the IDAHOBIT performance, for instance, the researcher's familiarity with the cultural references being deployed (the garments, the spatial setting, the shared social world) initially produced an interpretation centred on celebratory reclamation. It was only through subsequent critical reflection, and engagement with the scholarship on performative risk and vulnerability, that the security anxieties and logistical precarity underlying the event came into equal analytical focus. This correction was consequential: it shifted the analysis from a reading organised around affirmation toward one more attentive to the tension between visibility and danger that runs throughout this study.

Equally significant, though less commonly foregrounded in reflexivity discussions, is the researcher's fluency in the Tunisian dialect, which qualifies as a dimension of insider access that is not merely social but linguistic. The TQR's deliberate use of Tounsi as a political instrument, analysed below, is only fully legible to a researcher who inhabits that language rather than

encountering it through translation. Shared idiom, in this context, is not incidental to the analysis; it is a condition of it.

This study does not purport to offer a comprehensive representation of queer life or public attitudes in Tunisia. Rather, it focuses specifically on the forms of queer expression and activism facilitated by a single organisation within a defined temporal frame. This aligns with the principles of case study methodology, which allow for "in-depth examination of specific phenomena within their real-world contexts" (Yin 2018: 15). The methodological structure thus enables a situated analysis of how artistic and digital practices have evolved as strategies of resistance, identity-formation, and community-building.

Rigorous ethical measures were undertaken to protect the safety and privacy of participants, with pseudonyms used where necessary and all data securely stored. The study adhered to the principle that participant wellbeing supersedes data collection, and observations were terminated if any risk arose. Given the criminalisation of same-sex relations in Tunisia, every effort was made to protect participant anonymity, especially when dealing with non-public settings or vulnerable individuals.

While this research provides valuable insight into a specific strand of queer artivism and LGBTIQ+ organising in Tunisia, it does so with certain limitations. Focusing exclusively on Mawjoudin, it may not reflect the full diversity of Tunisia's queer artivist landscape. The focus on Mawjoudin necessarily leaves unexamined other significant artivist formations, notably the Choufthounna festival, a feminist and queer initiative that has mobilised cultural production from a distinctly women-centred perspective and has received dedicated scholarly attention (Burillo 2020). Comparative engagement with such formations would enrich the analysis considerably and is identified here as a productive direction for future research.

The temporal comparison between 2019 and 2024 offers a meaningful contrast but remains a snapshot rather than a continuous account. Digital analysis is likewise constrained by the curated nature of social media and the potential exclusion of voices with limited online access. Finally, the researcher's embeddedness carries a specific limitation: the risk that events experienced as politically significant or affectively resonant were analysed in ways that reproduced that resonance rather than interrogating it. The 2019 events in particular, attended as a community member prior to the formal conception of this study, involve a degree of retrospective interpretation that cannot be fully disentangled from the experience of having been present (Berger 2015: 232). This does not invalidate the analysis, but it does mean the findings should be read as one rigorously positioned account rather than a neutral or exhaustive record.

These limitations do not diminish the significance of the findings. Rather, they highlight the methodological and ethical complexities of researching queer activism in contexts of legal and social precarity. At the same time, they underscore the value of documenting how cultural production becomes a vital tactic for asserting visibility, solidarity, and resistance in hostile environments. This study therefore contributes to broader conversations on digital activism and queer politics in non-Western settings, while also illuminating the specificities of the Tunisian case.

4. Findings

The five-year arc between 2019 and 2024 was not a period of steady or linear progress. President Kais Saïed's 2021 consolidation of power, the suspension of parliament, and the 2022 constitution significantly contracted the space available to civil society. By 2024, the conditions governing queer public presence were materially different from those of 2019, when the political horizon, however constrained, still accommodated some degree of organised visibility. Reading the TQR's openness as evidence of growing social acceptance would therefore be analytically misleading. What the trajectory reveals is instead an organisational deepening: a capacity to persist in, and indeed

intensify, artivist activity despite a deteriorating political environment — a disposition less of liberation than of strategic resilience.

The empirical material collected through observation and digital analysis reveals a compelling transformation in the practices, aesthetics, and political strategies of queer artivism in Tunisia as mobilised by Mawjoudin between 2019 and 2024. Through a progression of carefully curated events, the Mawjoudin Queer Film Festival 2019, the IDAHOBIT drag performance, the RightsCon drag showcase, and the 2024 Tunisian Queer Residency (TQR), Mawjoudin's work demonstrates a shift from spatially cautious and symbolically charged interventions to more assertive, multilayered, and publicly visible forms of cultural resistance.

The 2019 Queer Film Festival constituted a landmark initiative, not only in terms of artistic content but also through its strategic engagement with space. Hosted in a centrally located, historic cinema adjacent to Tunis's Main Avenue, a site infused with the memory of the 2011 revolution, the event signalled a calculated act of symbolic occupation. The choice of venue was itself an assertion that queer narratives deserve not only space but visibility at the heart of national cultural life. By embedding LGBTQ+ voices within a space more commonly associated with mainstream heritage and revolutionary pride, Mawjoudin disrupted the spatial boundaries that often relegate queer identities to the margins (Marks 2019: 47).

The festival's structure, integrating film screenings, live poetry, prose readings, and dance, extended the political project of reclaiming space into an aesthetic one. These diverse artistic forms invited multiple entry points for participants and audiences to engage with queer experience visually, sonically, emotionally, and corporeally. This multiplicity served to dislodge essentialist notions of queer identity, instead constructing it as a layered and relational phenomenon expressed through varying media and artistic registers. The temporary yet affectively resonant safe space the festival created was not simply a refuge from social exclusion, but a vibrant site of expression, affirmation, and dialogue.

Yet the temporariness of this space is itself analytically significant. The cinema was not a permanent queer venue; it was borrowed, briefly, through negotiation. What access required, whether formal permission or strategic ambiguity about the event's precise character, reflects a broader dynamic in the spatial politics of Tunisian urbanism, where queer gatherings occupy sites not designed for them, contingent on tolerance rather than right. This condition of temporary occupation does not diminish the political force of the gesture; it is, arguably, its very logic. To occupy a heritage cinema at the heart of Tunis, however briefly, is to make the argument that queer culture belongs there, and the act's ephemerality does not cancel that claim but sharpens it. A permanent occupation would imply assimilation — a tolerated, negotiated presence. The temporary occupation makes the claim in its purest form: that queer culture belongs there not as a conditional exception, but as a matter of right. The inclusion of international works further embedded the Tunisian queer experience within a wider transnational circuit, creating an interface through which global solidarities were not only referenced but actively inhabited (Massad 2007: 163; Halberstam 2005: 115).

Later that year, the IDAHOBIT drag performance unfolded within a dramatically different, though no less symbolically potent, spatial register. The venue, Kouri Khaireddine, a nineteenth-century palatial stable complex classified as a historic monument since 1992 and repurposed as a cultural event space, carried its own layered significance. Originally built for a Husainid-era statesman and now operating as a high-end venue for private and cultural functions, the space sits at the intersection of Ottoman heritage, French protectorate history, and contemporary bourgeois Tunisian cultural life. It is not a venue associated with dissent or marginalised communities; it is, in many respects, a space of institutional prestige. That Mawjoudin staged a queer drag performance within it is therefore doubly charged: not only does

queerness enter the Medina, it enters one of its most formally distinguished interiors, a space ordinarily insulated from political provocation by its very exclusivity.

Furthermore, the Medina of Tunis, a location deeply embedded in national history and tradition, has long served as a visual and material signifier of Tunisian identity. By staging a queer performance within this iconic environment, Mawjoudin reconfigured the relationship between queer expression and national belonging. The event was not merely situated in the Medina; it entered into a performative dialogue with it. The drag artists' deliberate incorporation of culturally recognisable garments alongside contemporary queer aesthetics did not represent a fusion for spectacle's sake. The Chachiyya (the traditional red felt cap, tasselled and stiff-brimmed, historically worn as a marker of Tunisian male civic and religious belonging) and the Sefseri (the draped outer garment traditionally worn by women in public, its white folds carrying centuries of associations with urban respectability and modest femininity) were not worn reverently or parodically. Set against bold makeup, heightened silhouettes, and the gestural vocabulary of drag performance, these garments were inhabited differently: their cultural familiarity made strange by the bodies wearing them and by the explicitly queer intent of the event. Rather, it constituted a material interrogation of what it means to be both queer and Tunisian, a challenge to the assumption that these identities are mutually exclusive (Sadiki 2015: 79; Halberstam 2005: 88).

What unfolded was an act of cultural translation that disrupted the assumed antagonism between tradition and queerness. In this recontextualisation, queer bodies did not appear as interlopers but as rightful occupants of a national space too often imagined in exclusionary terms. The Medina thus became a contested and reimagined stage, one where the political stakes of occupying public space were negotiated through movement, costume, and embodied presence. The spatial reorientation of queer artivism into historically loaded settings such as Kouri Khaireddine illustrated not only a bolder aesthetic strategy but also a more incisive political one, namely, the insistence that queerness belongs within the cultural heart of Tunisia.

The performance was reprised in a third, radically different setting: RightsCon 2019, an international human rights forum that brought global institutional attention to Tunisia. Though the artistic content of the performance was largely unchanged, its repetition in a new discursive space radically extended its meaning. Presented in front of diplomats, activists, and representatives of international NGOs, the show became a kind of transpositional artefact, carrying with it the memory of the Medina performance but resituating it within a global discourse of rights and representation. This act of reiteration was not mere reproduction; it was a tactical re-performance, or what Judith Butler might describe as "performative reiteration," a form of repetition that gains political power through strategic citation (Butler 1990: 140).

In this new context, the drag show performed a dual function. Locally, it continued to affirm the visibility of queer bodies and experiences in a society where their erasure remains institutionally sanctioned. Internationally, it positioned these same expressions as integral to the broader human rights conversation. Mawjoudin thus employed the platform of RightsCon not only to make a cultural statement, but to intervene in a globalised language of rights and justice, asserting that LGBTQ+ rights are not peripheral, but foundational to any discussion of human dignity and democratic inclusion (Puar 2007: 215; Sadiki 2015: 89).

By 2024, the Tunisian Queer Residency demonstrated a significant evolution in the public face and spatial politics of queer activism. No longer confined to discreet or invitation-only audiences, the TQR was openly promoted online, with full schedules and locations disseminated via social media. This openness marked a profound shift in visibility. Whereas the 2019 events operated within carefully managed degrees of discretion due to security concerns, the 2024 residency publicly embraced the risks

and opportunities of full exposure. The act of promoting a queer art residency in Tunisia's most historically significant neighbourhood marked not just a continuation of spatial reclamation, but a deepening of cultural legitimacy (Freelon 2018: 14; Zayani 2015: 104).

Figure 1. Promotional poster for the Tunisian Queer Residency, May 2024, disseminated via Mawjoudin's Instagram page. The image deploys an iconic Medina doorway, a visual shorthand for Tunisian cultural heritage, overlaid with the TQR's graphic identity in yellow, purple, and cyan. The choice to frame the residency through this architectural symbol is not incidental: it asserts, visually and before a single performance has taken place, that queer cultural production belongs within, not outside, Tunisia's national spatial imaginary. Source: Mawjoudin [@mawjoudin.we.exist], Instagram, 2024.

Importantly, the residency's projects were not monolithic in form or message. Stand-up comedy acts such as "Glue Pads" used humour to deconstruct everyday gender norms, offering audiences an accessible entry point into difficult conversations. Narrative performances like "Beetle" addressed the intersection of queerness and HIV stigma through deeply personal storytelling, while immersive installations such as "Path of Noor" invited audiences to experience the sensory and emotional landscapes of trans and non-binary life. Each of these works employed distinct artistic strategies, yet collectively, they rendered visible a diverse spectrum of queer experience in Tunisia.

The exclusive use of the Tunisian dialect across performances and the deliberate inclusion of only Tunisian artists articulated an important political message. These choices foregrounded the local as the site of queer expression, rejecting any implication that queerness is a foreign imposition. Instead, the TQR reasserted the notion that queer identities and experiences are deeply embedded in Tunisian culture, language, and history (Massad 2007: 172). Language here was not merely a communicative tool but an instrument of belonging.

This choice gains full analytical weight only when set against the broader linguistic landscape of Tunisian civil society and gender activism, in which French has historically functioned as the dominant medium of NGO communication, formal advocacy, and intellectual production. The legacy of the French protectorate left deep stratifications: French was the idiom of the institutional and the legible-to-the-outside, while Tounsi was coded as domestic and sub-institutional. For Mawjoudin to conduct an entire residency in the vernacular is therefore not a curatorial preference but a linguistic decolonisation, a refusal of the idiom through which minority experience has long been mediated to international audiences. Performing in the vernacular allowed these stories to resonate with broader audiences, offering emotional accessibility without sacrificing political edge.

The Medina's role in the residency expanded from a singular performance site to a constellation of stages for multiple, simultaneous artistic interventions. This proliferation of queer presence in a space so deeply associated with tradition subverted the dominant cultural imaginary and opened new possibilities for collective memory and identity formation. The residency's expansive digital documentation, via Instagram posts, reels, and artist features, further extended its impact beyond the physical confines of the Medina, embedding the experience in a public digital archive and allowing for its circulation within global queer networks, though not without constraint. Digital platforms subject queer content to opaque content moderation

regimes that may restrict or suppress material not legible within dominant algorithmic assumptions, meaning that what reaches international audiences is itself a curated and contingently surviving archive. Mawjoudin's Instagram page constitutes, in this reading, a primary source as much as a platform. It can be seen as a continuously updated record of the organisation's political self-presentation, to which this study is directly indebted (Mawjoudin [@mawjoudin.we.exist], 2024)

Figure 2. Artist profile card for Rym Amami (RyA), scriptwriter and producer, one of the Tunisian artists featured in the TQR's public digital documentation. The bilingual Arabic-English format, the archway motif drawn from Medina architecture, and the explicit identification of each artist by name, role, and nationality constitute a deliberate act of counter-representation: queer subjects are rendered visible, named, and professionally located, which constitutes a direct reversal of the anonymity that safety had previously demanded. Source: Mawjoudin [@mawjoudin.we.exist], Instagram, 2024.

Through these findings, a clear arc of development emerges. Mawjoudin's interventions have grown more public, more varied in artistic form, and more assertive in their demands for cultural legitimacy. Queer artivism in Tunisia has not only intensified but has also refined its approach. The 2019 events, for all their symbolic audacity, were primarily responsive: conceived in direct reaction to the ongoing enforcement of Article 230, episodes of public exposure and shaming, and the precarious window opened by post-revolutionary political life.

By contrast, the 2024 residency was proactive. It was oriented, not toward countering hostility, but toward articulating what queer life in Tunisia might positively be. This shift from reactive resistance to proactive articulations of presence, belonging, and futurity marks the most significant evolution in Mawjoudin's artivist logic across the period under study.

These developments raise important questions regarding the nature of political resistance, the negotiation of cultural authenticity, and the intersection of visibility and vulnerability in authoritarian and transitional contexts. The analysis of these themes requires a turn toward theoretical reflection, to interrogate how the case of Mawjoudin both aligns with and complicates existing frameworks in queer theory, artivism, and post-revolution civic engagement. It is to this discussion that the next section now turns.

5. Discussion

The analysis of Mawjoudin's artistic initiatives between 2019 and 2024 offers a compelling case study for understanding the evolution of queer artivism in post-revolution Tunisia. This period has witnessed significant developments in the articulation of LGBTQ+ rights, both in the public sphere and through artistic expression, reflecting broader struggles for liberties, human rights, and societal transformation in the MENA/SWANA region. The following discussion synthesises these developments across four thematic axes: space reclamation and cultural hybridity; digital visibility and its expansion; artivism as a catalyst for social change; and implications for future research and activism.

Theme 1: Space Reclamation and Cultural Hybridity

Mawjoudin's strategic use of space, particularly within the Medina of Tunis, is emblematic of a broader effort to reclaim and redefine what constitutes Tunisian identity. The Medina,

historically a symbol of tradition and cultural continuity, becomes a battleground for visibility and resistance when infused with queer narratives. This reclamation of space is a powerful act of asserting that LGBTQ+ identities are a legitimate and integral part of Tunisia's cultural fabric. As Lefebvre (1991) argued in The Production of Space, space is not merely a physical entity but is socially produced and imbued with power dynamics. By hosting events like the IDAHOBIT 2019 drag show and the TQR in such culturally significant spaces, Mawjoudin challenges conservative perceptions and asserts that queer identities are an integral part of the nation's cultural landscape. This occupation was, of course, temporary in character — contingent on permission, negotiation, and the political conditions of each given moment. Lefebvre's (1991) conception of space as socially produced and inherently contested is most useful here not as a claim to permanent presence, but as a framework for understanding how these repeated, bounded interruptions function cumulatively. Each temporary occupation is a renegotiation of what that space can mean; none individually transforms it, but the accumulation of such gestures constitutes a sustained challenge to the spatial normativity that excludes queer presence.

Read through Butler's (1990) concept of performative reiteration, Mawjoudin's spatial strategy becomes legible not merely as a series of individual events but as a cumulative political act: each return to the Medina, each use of the same spaces and aesthetic gestures, is a citation of the claim that queer life belongs in Tunisia. Repetition here is not redundancy; it is the mechanism through which the claim becomes political reality.

Furthermore, the blending of traditional Tunisian elements with contemporary queer expressions in these events underscores the concept of cultural hybridity. This hybridity is particularly evident in the performances that mix traditional clothing with modern aesthetics, as seen in the drag shows. Such performances disrupt the binary between tradition and modernity, suggesting that these elements can coexist and enrich each other. Stuart Hall's (1996) work on cultural identity highlights how identities are not fixed but are instead continually constructed through processes of interaction and negotiation. The IDAHOBIT event's use of the Medina as a stage for drag, a practice rooted in both defiance and celebration, illustrates how artivism can transform spaces historically associated with conservatism into arenas for progressive and inclusive discourse.

What distinguishes Mawjoudin's interventions from the broader Tunisian artistic engagement with sexuality is a question of political grammar rather than subject matter. Tunisian theatre and cinema have long addressed homosexuality, but as a subject, typically rendered by artists working outside or alongside the communities they depicted. Mawjoudin's events reconfigure this relationship fundamentally: the community is not the object of representation but its agent. LGBTQ+ individuals performed, curated, and inhabited these spaces in their own names, in their own language, for their own community first and a wider audience second. That shift in authorial position, from being depicted to depicting oneself, constitutes Mawjoudin's specific and irreducible contribution to the Tunisian artivist landscape.

Theme 2: Digital Visibility and the Expansion of Artivism

The shift from secrecy to public engagement, particularly evident in the TQR's digital documentation and promotion, marks a significant change in the strategies employed by queer activists in Tunisia. The open visibility of the TQR, including detailed public announcements and online content, contrasts sharply with the more cautious approaches seen in 2019. This shift in public visibility does not reflect any broad societal liberalisation. The post-2021 political landscape renders that reading empirically untenable. What it reflects, rather, is a recalibration of risk within the community itself: not that the dangers have diminished, but that the calculus of what is worth exposing

oneself to has shifted. The growing confidence visible in 2024 is organisational in character: a deepened capacity to plan, publicise, and persist, rather than a measure of social tolerance.

Digital platforms have played a crucial role in this evolution, providing a space where queer narratives can be shared, celebrated, and amplified beyond the confines of physical events. Zayani (2015) highlights how digital platforms in the Arab world have become critical spaces for activism and community-building, offering tools for visibility and mobilisation that transcend traditional boundaries. The use of social media to document and publicise the TQR underscores the intersection of local activism with global digital networks, enabling Mawjoudin to reach broader audiences and engage in transnational dialogues. This digital visibility not only reinforces the legitimacy of queer identities in Tunisia but also connects the local struggle to the global fight for LGBTQ+ rights, demonstrating the power of artivism to transcend borders and foster international solidarity.

Theme 3: The Role of Artivism as a Catalyst for Social Change

Mawjoudin's initiatives exemplify the transformative potential of artivism in challenging societal norms and advocating for human rights. The diverse range of artistic expressions featured in the TQR, from narrative performances to immersive installations, reflects the richness and inclusivity of the queer experience in Tunisia. This multidisciplinary approach not only broadens the scope of what is considered legitimate within the realm of art and activism but also provides a platform for voices that have been historically marginalised.

Artivism, as demonstrated through these events, operates on multiple levels: it disrupts the status quo, fosters community, and creates spaces for critical dialogue. Judith Butler's (1990) concept of performativity is particularly relevant here, as it underscores how repeated performances of identity can subvert and challenge dominant norms. The TQR's engagement with themes such as transgender identity, mental health, and HIV stigma illustrates how art can be used to address complex social issues in a way that is both accessible and impactful. These performances do more than just entertain; they educate, provoke thought, and inspire change, making artivism a powerful tool in the broader struggle for queer rights and social justice in Tunisia.

Theme 4: Implications for Future Research and Activism

The case of Mawjoudin's artivism provides a rich field for further research, particularly in exploring the intersections of cultural identity, digital activism, and queer rights in the MENA/SWANA region. The evolution of queer artivism in Tunisia offers valuable insights into how marginalised communities can leverage cultural production to assert their identities and challenge oppressive systems. Future research could delve deeper into the role of language and local dialects in queer artivism, the impact of digital platforms on LGBTQ+ visibility, and the ways in which cultural hybridity can be used as a strategy of resistance.

Moreover, the success of Mawjoudin's initiatives highlights the importance of space reclamation and the symbolic power of public performances in challenging societal norms. Activists and researchers alike can learn from these strategies, particularly in contexts where queer identities are not only criminalised but instrumentalised — centred as cultural and political threats rather than simply pushed to the margins — and where artivism must therefore engage with reclamation, visibility, and symbolic refusal simultaneously. The continued evolution of artivism in Tunisia will likely inspire further innovation in the ways that art and activism intersect, making this a dynamic area of study and practice in the years to come.

6. Conclusion

This paper has explored the evolution of queer artivism in Tunisia from 2019 to 2024, using Mawjoudin's artistic initiatives as a case study. Through a detailed analysis of events such as the

Mawjoudin Queer Film Festival, the IDAHOBIT 2019 drag show, the RightsCon 2019 drag show, and the Tunisian Queer Residency, we have seen how artivism has become a powerful tool for challenging societal norms, reclaiming cultural spaces, and advocating for LGBTQ+ rights in Tunisia. These events illustrate the resilience and creativity of the queer community in navigating and reshaping the socio-political landscape of post-revolution Tunisia.

The journey of queer artivism in Tunisia has been marked by significant progress, particularly in the visibility and boldness of LGBTQ+ expression. The shift from the discreet, cautious approaches of 2019 to the open, publicised events of 2024 signals a growing confidence within the LGBTQ+ community and reflects a broader societal shift towards greater acceptance and inclusivity. By occupying historically significant spaces like the Medina of Tunis and leveraging digital platforms to amplify their voices, queer activists have successfully inserted themselves into the national narrative, challenging traditional notions of identity and belonging.

Academically, this study contributes to the understanding of how art can serve as a catalyst for social change, particularly in contexts where political and cultural resistance are intertwined. The contribution of queer artivism specifically, however, is not reducible to this broader claim. What distinguishes it from other forms of progressive cultural activism is the particular condition it operates within: queer subjects in Tunisia are not simply excluded from national discourse. They are, as this article argued at the outset, actively centred within it as a constitutive threat, the negative term against which normative Tunisian identity is consolidated. Mawjoudin's artivism does not merely resist this exclusion; it dismantles the symbolic logic that produces it. By occupying national spaces, performing in the national vernacular, and insisting on the Tunisian-ness of queer life, these interventions refuse the terms of instrumentalisation itself. This is what gives queer artivism its specific disruptive force: not simply opposition to repressive structures, but the reoccupation of the very cultural ground on which those structures depend. Future research would benefit from extending this analysis comparatively, examining how other queer artivist formations across the MENA/SWANA region navigate the same dialectic between instrumentalisation and self-reclamation.

From a human rights perspective, the successes of Mawjoudin's initiatives offer a hopeful vision for the future. These events demonstrate that even in conservative and challenging environments, artivism can create safe spaces, foster community, and drive social transformation. The increasing visibility of queer identities in Tunisia, coupled with the growing acceptance of LGBTQ+ rights as an integral part of the human rights agenda, suggests that the groundwork is being laid for lasting change.

The optimism that emerges from this study is twofold. Academically, it points to the potential for further research into the dynamics of queer artivism in the MENA/SWANA region, encouraging scholars to explore the rich intersections of culture, identity, and resistance. Practically, it provides a blueprint for activists, showing that through creativity, resilience, and strategic use of cultural spaces, it is possible to challenge entrenched norms and build more inclusive societies.

Looking forward, the continued evolution of queer artivism in Tunisia will likely inspire similar movements across the region, fostering a wave of cultural and social innovation. The successes of Mawjoudin and similar organisations affirm that the pursuit of human rights and liberties, though fraught with challenges, is a path that can lead to meaningful and lasting change. As Tunisia and other nations in the MENA/SWANA region continue to grapple with questions of identity, freedom, and rights, the role of artivism in these struggles will remain crucial, offering a powerful means of expression, resistance, and hope.

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Kommentar

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In Jasser Hammami's account of Mawjoudin's queer artivism in post-revolution Tunisia, art is not framed as an aesthetic add-on to political work. Rather, art, and the creative labor that underpins it, is one of the forms through which queer life is made livable under strenuous conditions, from legal criminalization to social homophobia and nationalistic campaigns of moral panic. Hammami's opening claim that "art is not a luxury. It is a mode of survival" offers a conceptual entry point for the article as a whole (Hammami, 2026). What the piece allows us to think through is how artistic practice acts as an imaginative politic in its own right, allowing visibility to grow even alongside material danger.

The central tension running through the article is therefore the double bind of visibility. In the Tunisian context Hammami describes, queer visibility is neither emancipatory nor risky in a complete sense. It is a demand that holds promise and risk simultaneously; it is an attempt to survive with the constant potentiality of surveillance and harm. The article's most productive insight can be situated exactly here, namely that queer artivism does not (and does not need to) disentangle or remove this paradox. It becomes embedded within its logic. Mawjoudin's interventions are refreshing in the sense that they experiment with forms of 'being present' or 'being here' that are ever shifting and also collectively re-imagined.

Thinking with this compelling piece, I ask how a materialist reading can push the piece's conceptual tension even more. Visibility, here, can also be measured in terms of the time needed to access venues and secure them, extent of artivist mobilities, and the labor required to create art with serious political messaging. This also, relatedly, includes care for those who may be exposed to vulnerability by appearing or participating in these spaces. The interesting puzzle here becomes how queer visibility is constructed and organized in the Tunisian context.

My intervention is to suggest that feminist and queer Marxist thought can extend Hammami's crucial analysis by shifting attention from queer visibility as an expressive practice to queer visibility as a material process. Hammami compellingly shows how Mawjoudin's artivism produces queer presence through culturally specific performance and space. A feminist Marxist reading asks what forms of labor make such artivism possible, and who bears their costs. Rosemary Hennessy's (2018) insistence that sexuality is embedded in the totality of capitalist social relations, John D'Emilio's (1983) account of the historical relationship between capitalism and sexual identity formation, and feminist Marxist accounts of social reproduction (Federici 1975; Vogel 1983; Fraser 2016; Bhattacharya 2017) together help foreground the often-invisible work through which queer visibility is produced. For example, Mawjoudin's artivism becomes realizable through caring for participants or building up digital archives in the pursuit of constructing temporary conditions in which queer life can mark its presence under criminalization. Feminist and queer Marxism therefore add to Hammami's article by also making visible the affective and reproductive labor through which art becomes a means of sustaining queer life.

Once visibility is understood as a material process, a further set of questions become inevitable. Who can afford to be visible in the first place, who bears the cost of the disproportionate costs of visibility, and what forms of queer life remain politically central precisely because they cannot be made explicit or performed?

Hammami's diagnosis of Mawjoudin's practices is very unique because it refuses to neutralize or depoliticize space. The cinema, the Medina of

Tunis, the historic venue of Kouri Khaireddine, and digital social media spaces are very much geographies where a Tunisian identity and subjectivity is negotiated and reinterpreted by participants. When one looks at very explicit art performances such as queer film, drag, among others, and how they enter these spatialities, it is easy to see how they disrupt strongly held assumptions that queerness must always exist externally to SWANA geography and far enough from the public eye. Agreeably, the leverage of Mawjoudin's artivism lies in its insistence that queer life is not external to Tunisia but already part of its cultural, linguistic, and historical fabrics.

Here, a materialist reading asks us to analyze the spatial-political claim through the conditions that make a queer space possible in the first place. A queer performance in a historic venue is politically powerful because it interrupts traditional narratives of who belongs in such spaces. Yet this disruption does not happen simply because the space hosts queer people. It is also shaped by the routinized and ordinary yet largely decisive material conditions necessary to organize events, such as securing venues, mobilizing finance, and deciding who can participate without being prone to harm. The question, then, is one of access. Who gets to enter these spaces and events and at what cost?

This is why the temporariness of Mawjoudin's is so central. The events analyzed by the author are often short-lived in the sense that they are not fixed in space and time. But their temporary nature is also part of why they are so politically significant. Their ephemerality allows the observer to trace the conditions under which queer visibility was made possible and negotiated, even in such a restrictive political environment. Without any exception, these spaces mentioned in the piece are borrowed for a short period of time, inhabited and then dispersed. The socio-political significance of queering these spaces surpasses the actual time spent there; this drives an important point, namely that the erasure of queerness from national geography is not inherent to the nation. It can be renegotiated and is quite contestable through creative labor.

The spatial dimension of Hammami's article highlights the sites where queer visibility is negotiated. The discussion of cultural hybridity, in turn, reveals how that visibility becomes locally intelligible. The discussion of cultural hybridity is thus most useful when read as political strategy. By drawing on Tunisian garments and dialect for example, Mawjoudin is seen to contest the nationalist fantasy that queerness is foreign to Tunisia's social and historical life. This holds importance because it shows us how queer artivisim can be a way for queer people to feel less estranged from their land and familiar geographies.

This work of rooting queer artivism in Tunisian cultural practice can offer a political opportunity for organizers in the South to engage in such forms of activism more critically and creatively. This is largely because queer activism in SWANA contexts often navigates a complex politics of legibility (Cheaito and Delatolla 2026). In this context, rights language can offer limited forms of protection, but it also deems queer life digestible only when it appears in respectable forms that make sense to donors, NGOs, or liberal audiences more broadly.

Lisa Duggan's (2002) critique of 'homonormativity' provides a useful lens when read through Hammami's distinction between LGBTQ+ rights discourses and queer cultural practice. Mawjoudin's artivism is seen as a political force in how it moves across NGO and international human rights spaces while also exceeding them, by being grounded in culturally specific forms of performance. The use of the Medina, Tunisian garments, local Tounsi language, and relying on the labor of local artists counters the superimposition that queerness is a product of Western culture, or its import. Following this reasoning, Mawjoudin's work complicates a homonormative model of inclusion by rejecting to make queer belonging depend on global respectability standards or donor-recognizable narratives.

This thinking brings the argument back to the materialist question with which I began. What 'work' does queer artivism do beyond making queer life visible?

Queer artivism should not be understood only in terms of visibility in the abstract sense, which the author is also theoretically against. The way

Mawjoudin creates spaces where queer life can manifest itself fully pushes us to think about what those spaces do for the reproduction of queer life itself. These spaces sustain intimate relationships through which queer communities build and support one another under hostile conditions. This is where queer artivism can be read as a form of social reproduction, not in the narrow sense of reproducing the heterosexual family, but in the broader sense of sustaining the conditions under which queer life can continue to persevere. A film festival, drag performance, or even a social media archive can represent the invisible form of queer care work. These practices shape conditions in which queer people can gather and relate to one another. They produce necessary affective and social relations crucial for survival, especially when formal institutions and laws criminalize or abandon queer life completely.

Future research might ask how such locally grounded form of art is sustained within fields shaped by NGOs and global development actors. Put differently, how can queer organizations maintain politically sharp and locally situated artivist practices while navigating funding landscapes and forms of international visibility that may privilege market-legible forms of queerness? A materialist reading therefore extends Hammami's central paradox of visibility by asking us to think of risk not only in terms of surveillance or social harm, but also a structural and material one, namely that queer artivism may be absorbed into systems that flatten the complexity of queer life in Tunisia and the broader region.