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Constructing and Consuming Gender through Media

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Gender is constructed, performed and consumed through media in multiple ways. In this special issue of CyberOrient, we aim to bring together research on a range of Middle Eastern and Muslim cultural media products. In addition, a couple of the articles and essays shed light on the ways in which gender and gender activism may be enacted online in a variety of ways. The overarching goal of this special issue is to examine how gender roles are constructed, transmitted, performed and negotiated, and at times put forward as part of lifestyle or ideological choices. At the same time, we are interested in how such media products are received, imagined, and consumed in the everyday lives of audiences. This special issue focuses both on media practices and media cultural production in the Middle East as well as products intended for consumption by Muslim and Middle Eastern diaspora. Examples of media products include TV-series, YouTube videos, social media, and Islamic branding online. Even if a multitude of media formats are produced primarily for entertainment, much of popular cultural production promotes particular worldviews, gender dynamics, political stances, consumerism patterns, and lifestyles. The worldviews and subjectivities of the individual media users, and the modes in which they engage with the media are therefore equally important to analyse, in order to understand the complex responses of media audiences. Guiding questions for the select articles include: To what extent are cultural media products embedded with an ideological agenda or a blueprint for ‘ideal’ gender relations? How do audiences respond to media products’ prescriptions on gender and/or lifestyle? In what ways does consumer culture play into the media products?

In the recent Egyptian TV-series hit Nelly and Sherihan the multiple levels of intertextuality between media, consumerism, class, and gender is tangible. In fact the very name of the series is a reference to two of the most and iconic stars of the Ramadan-specials called fawazeer - renowned in the Arab world and devoured by eagerly by many Arab publics worldwide. Like many other Arabic language entertainment products, Nelly and Sherihan is available on YouTube, strengthening transnational links of Arab viewer-
The audience is invited to relish in the multiple references to the real Nelly and Sherihan since this unlikely combination of names causes many comic intricacies in the plot, adding a layer of entertainment for audiences familiar with the fawazeer. This multi-layered TV-series is an excellent example of how Egyptian TV-serials tend to incorporate all sorts of social and current issues into the plot. The Arab spring, police inaptitude, lack of political change, are all deftly and seamlessly integrated into the scenes. Nelly and Sherihan’s personae build on familiar female screen-characters and the ways their gender and class-affiliation has been depicted in Egyptian drama. Nelly is portrayed as a spoilt brat and incredibly selfish upper class woman who is always to be seen with coiffured hair and a perfect screen of makeup. Sherihan is a lower class girl, a kind and gentle soul who has to play it tough in order to survive. She is portrayed as an untamed beauty who will make eyes pop once she drops her rough manners and gets a makeover. These gender types are not only typical of Egyptian drama but also represent global trends of drama and comedy that depict a rugged heroine as a rough diamond which can be polished into a jewel. In Nelly and Sherihan the two women struggle with each of their class-appropriate gender roles, and the main plot circles around their class differences and complete incompatibility in terms of worldview and background. One of the biggest breakthroughs in their relationship is when Turkish TV-soaps are on the TV and they are both drawn to the screen like moths to light. In this scene their differences are wiped out, and they are equal in their fandom and united in their shushing anyone who steers them away from the captivating content on the screen.

This serves as another excellent example of Nelly and Sherihan’s intertextuality and self-parody. The ironic touch in this scene is that it is in the hugely popular Nelly and Sherihan. Here audiences see its two main characters (and stars) overcoming differences by watching the Turkish soaps that are said to have mesmerized Arab audiences, while simultaneously hinting at the parallel story of Nelly and Sherihan’s enchanted audience. The fervent public debates following the Turkish soap operas, dubbed in the melodic Syrian accent, left the impression that these shows were so emotively powerful that they instilled unrealistic gender ideals, ruined marriages, and destroyed lives in the Arab world. The characters Nelly and Sherihan enact how such TV-series bring people together - not only in the search for idealized gender relations - but also in their quest to be supremely entertained. Thus this message also functions as a promotion of the very entertainment
product viewers are watching. As Lila Abu-Lughod’s iconic study, Dramas of Nationhood, on Egyptian TV-Serials demonstrates, media producers may at times have strong ideological messages, which they wish to convey to their audiences through their media output. However, audience responses may not always match the intentions and anticipations of the producers.

In this special issue, Anne Sofie Roald, discusses moral panic and the complex ways in which Jordanian youth consume satellite TV. Roald also demonstrates how various global TV products are consumed and understood at times in rather contradictory ways, and points to gender patterns, and the relevance of social and class background. In my own article on counselling sexuality on an Islamic website, I discuss attempts at moving sexuality from 'taboo' to 'talked about' in online spaces, and argue that the idealized image of the Prophet Mohammed as the ‘ideal man’ and the iconic screen character ‘muhanad’ of the Turkish soap-operas share many key characteristics. Kristin Peterson examines Islamic fashion YouTube videos, and delves into the rendition of the ideal Muslim woman as positive, smart, pious and trendy. She demonstrates how such videos entail the negotiating of boundaries of gender, Islamic identity, lifestyles and life choices. Olesya Venger unravels a highly gendered political attack and shaming of an Iranian human rights activist, and how this backfired through social media users’ counter-narratives. She also relates her discussion to how one gender may be ideologically envisioned as a priori shameful, and used as political weapon for shaming. In addition to the abovementioned peer-reviewed articles, there are two essays in this special issue. Sahar Khamis provides a rich overview of - and reflects on online gender activism and women’s achievements and obstacles in furthering a feminist agenda since the Arab Spring. Jon Nordenson draws on his recent Ph.D. research about online civic engagement in Kuwait and Egypt, including research on anti-harassment online campaigns. Nordenson calls for more context-sensitive and grounded analysis of online activities.

Together these articles and essays paint a rather broad picture of how gender is constructed, performed and consumed through media in the Middle East, and its diaspora.

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Performing Piety and Perfection: The Affective Labor of Hijabi Fashion Videos

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Abstract:
This article examines the work of a popular Muslim woman on YouTube, Amena Khan, who has attracted over 310 thousand subscribers to her channel and runs a successful online boutique. While Amena’s hijab tutorials and lifestyle videos might appear to be just about superficial topics like fashion or makeup, this article argues that she does actual labor to not only produce an aesthetic style but to also create an affective condition of what it means to be a Muslim woman living within a neoliberal context. Amena’s videos illustrate what Michael Hardt (1999) defines as “affective labor” within this neoliberal economy. Amena might sell hijabs online, but she does not actually produce physical objects. What she does produce is an affective state—feelings around how to properly act within this neoliberal culture while still maintaining Islamic piety. The space of YouTube also allows for Amena to blend different affects and aesthetic styles, such as neoliberal elements of aspiration, creativity and individuality with Islamic ethics like piety, modesty and submission. Ultimately, the reason why Amena can attract viewers and run a successful fashion business is because she works to produce an affective state that seamlessly moves between Islamic ethics and neoliberal values.

Keywords:
social media, fashion, identity, Muslim women, gender

Introduction

In a series of commercials for Dr. Pepper, young and innovative individuals are profiled for being “one of a kind” or for doing something extraordinary. One of these 30-second spots profiles Michelle Phan (2014), one of the most popular “makeup gurus” on YouTube. The commercial features visuals of Michelle working as a waitress and then at home creating her famous makeup tutorial videos. Throughout the commercial, Michelle narrates, “Plenty of people start out waiting tables, but not many spend their days
off making beauty videos. Even fewer become famous for them. And now, instead of living off tips, I’m giving them to the whole world. I’m Michelle Phan, and I’m one of a kind.” The message of this commercial and others in this “one of a kind” series is that in this competitive neoliberal context, not everyone can post YouTube videos and become famous. There are thousands of other women who post videos in the hopes of also being famous, but there is something about Michelle that is unique and attracts so many followers. In the current digital media context, the opportunities for individuals to become famous are changing and expanding in interesting ways. Michelle Phan did not need to audition for the role of a makeup guru; she earned this title through her work and through attracting millions of followers. In order to be successful, individuals like Michelle need to do real work to create a particular affect that will be shared by the viewers. This is generally a positive affect of pleasure, enjoyment and amusement, which both works to keep viewers coming back to watch more videos and also creates a sense of connection between the video-makers and among the viewers. While YouTube video-makers frequently do work to sell products, the real work that they do is to create an affective state on YouTube. How successful they are at doing affective labor influences how many followers they attract.

Following the example of mainstream lifestyle gurus like Michelle Phan, several young Muslim women in Western countries have begun creating their own versions of the lifestyle videos that incorporate elements of Islam into discussions of fashion, makeup, beauty and relationships. One of the most popular women in this online community of YouTube “hijabis” is Amena Khan or Amenakin, as she is known on YouTube. Amena is a young Muslim woman who lives in Leicester in the U. K. and has created hundreds of videos that focus on hijab tutorials, makeup tips and modest fashion styles. She has over 310 thousand subscribers on YouTube and her videos have been viewed around 27 million times. Amena also runs her own boutique called Pearl Daisy in which she sells modest clothing items, such as her own invention of a hooded hijab, called a “hoojab.”

While Amena’s hijab tutorials and lifestyle videos might appear to be just about superficial topics like fashion or makeup, Amena does actual labor to not only produce an aesthetic style but to also create an affective condition of what it means to be a Muslim woman living within a neoliberal context. Amena’s videos are excellent illustrations of what Michael Hardt (1999)
defines as “affective labor” within this neoliberal economy. She might sell hijabs online, but she does not actually produce physical objects. What she does produce is an affective state that viewers embody as they feel, act and perceive in a certain manner based off the aesthetics of her videos. Amena creates an affect that is intended to shape her viewers through her use of aesthetics and bodily comportment, such as how she dresses, how she looks, her way of talking, her engagement with viewers, and her exhibition of emotions.

The space of YouTube allows for individuals to blend different affects and aesthetic styles, so Amena can imitate the affects and styles of the mainstream lifestyle videos on YouTube while incorporating a particular Islamic sense of piety. While YouTube allows for this hybridization of styles and affects, Amena is particularly astute at blending neoliberal elements of aspiration, creativity and individuality with Islamic ethics like piety, modesty and submission. Amena manages to straddle a difficult barrier between the stringent ethical code of how to be a proper Muslim subject and the flexibility and pleasure of being a neoliberal subject. She is able to be pious while also having fun putting on makeup and buying the newest fashion trends. Ultimately, the reason why Amena attracts so many viewers and run a successful fashion business is because she works to produce an affective state that seamlessly moves between Islamic ethics and neoliberal values. Amena represents a pious Muslim subject who is also a popular leader and entrepreneur. Through her successful use of the affective medium of YouTube, Amena strives to mold viewers into a particular Islamic subjectivity that structures their actions, feelings and sensations.

Critical Discourse Analysis

In this article, I analyze the affective labor that Amena Khan performs on her video channel, focusing on the overall style of Amena’s videos from 2013-2014. I also provide a more detailed analysis of seven videos, which highlight emotions outside of Amena’s normal upbeat style, such as when Amena exhibited frustration, anger, sarcasm or sadness. The majority of Amena’s videos from these two years serve as a control group of positive affects that are then compared to the distinct style of these seven videos.
I engage with critical discourse analysis and incorporate different theories on affect to understand how the affects, aesthetic styles, gestures and physical embodiments in Amena’s videos constitute the subjectivities of viewers and create larger cultural meaning. I apply Gillian Rose’s (2012) definition of discourse as a “particular knowledge about the world which shapes how the world is understood and how things are done in it” (190). Images as well as written or spoken words are all forms of discourse, in that the presence or absence of certain visual images does the work of supporting a particular knowledge regime. Discourse, as it is distributed through images and language, is productively powerful. Discourse produces claims to truth about what it means to be a pious Muslim and what it means to be fashionable, and these claims discipline the behavior and thoughts of individuals.

Discourse analysis, according to Rose, allows for an exploration of how “specific views or accounts are constructed as real or truthful or natural through particular regimes of truth” (2012: 196). The analysis of Amena’s videos examines the power struggles within the videos, as Amena uses affects and visual styles to reinforce certain discourses about Islam and to counter other hegemonic discourses. Digital spaces like YouTube have the potential to shift religious authority, thus allowing young Muslim women like Amena the chance to speak to a larger audience about Islamic topics and to question dominant discourses. In their study of Islam online, Mohammed el-Nawawy and Sahar Khamis (2011) found that the Internet creates a more equal community because it “has challenged the vertical channels of communication from the religious elites to the subordinates, and has questioned the exclusive divine authority of the traditional religious institutions” (60). This environment allows for “secularly trained new religious intellectuals” to discuss and debate issues in this new Islamic public sphere (el-Nawawy and Khamis 2011: 47-48). Although Amena would not claim to be an official religious scholar, she still uses the online spaces to counter dominant discourses about Islam, femininity and neoliberalism.

**Debates in Islam over Fashion, Neoliberalism and Piety**

Amena’s work as an Islamic fashion guru can be examined within the larger picture of how Muslim women balance aesthetic styles and fashion with religious ethics. Emma Tarlo and Annelies Moors (2013) approach the topic
of Islamic fashion not by focusing on the debates about public displays of Islamic attire (i.e. “the veil”) but by looking at the debates about fashion within the Islamic community. Islamic fashion can be a way for women to engage with contemporary culture and to appear as hip and modern, but these Islamic fashion movements—Amena’s videos, street fashion, Islamic fashion designers, the Mipsterz video—are never accepted without criticism. It is significant to examine the “ethical and aesthetic concerns expressed through new forms of Islamic fashion” and also the ambivalence that many Muslims feel towards this fashion (Tarlo and Moors 2013:1). Tarlo and Moors present two approaches to ethics and aesthetics within Islam. One is to see the aesthetics of fashion as not superficial elements of Islam but as a way to attract more people to the faith by presenting a beautiful and positive image of Islam. Under this formulation, “Islamic virtue is seen not as external to fashion but potentially integral to it, thereby making the creation and wearing of fashionable styles a form and extension of religious action” (Tarlo and Moors 2013:13). Amena’s work would fit into this category since she presents Islamic aesthetics as beautiful and attractive through her use of visual style and affects. The other approach would be to view ethics and aesthetics in tension and to “see fashion as a means by which Islamic values and priorities become diluted, distorted or lost” (Tarlo and Moors 2013:13). This is what the authors call the “anti-fashion” approach, and this approach would likely be critical of the work that Amena does in her videos.

Although the term “Islamic fashion” has been used in recent times to discuss Muslim women who blend contemporary styles with elements of their faith, it is important to note that the practice of Muslims keeping up with fashion trends and wearing makeup is not something that is unique to the current neoliberal moment in the West. Going back to the time of the Prophet, there have always been discussions within Islam about clothing, makeup and adornment. Creativity, fashion and innovative styles are not necessarily in opposition to living a pious Muslim life. As mentioned above, wearing beautiful and creative clothing can serve as a way to attract people to Islam. What is unique in the current neoliberal context is the increasing pressures on women, both Muslim and non-Muslim, to meet certain standards of feminine beauty. Muslim women like Amena face a challenge as they negotiate how to wear fashionable clothing that highlights the beauty of Islam over the neoliberal standards of beauty.
Additionally, Amena’s work online fits into larger debates about what it means to be a proper pious Muslim subject. Amena presents a version of Islamic piety that advocates for women to be positive and attractive representations of the beauty of Islam while at the same time not being too critical or assertive about religious teachings. Muslim women should exhibit through their appearance, behavior and attitudes the positive values of Islam, and independent thinking should be left to the experienced male scholars. While this is hardly a universal understanding of how women should embody Islamic virtue, Amena’s version of Islamic piety connects to some of what Saba Mahmood (2005) found in her study of the women’s mosque movement in Egypt. Within this movement, Egyptian women chose to embrace more traditional practices: wearing the headscarf, being subservient to men, and acting in a more shy and passive manner. Western liberal feminists might find it difficult to understand Muslim women like Amena, who choose to wear a headscarf and act in ways that appear to be subservient to men, if these feminists assume that women exhibit agency by challenging established norms (Mahmood 2005: 5). The concept of agency can be expanded beyond just resistive acts, so that a woman can assert agency “not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms” (Mahmood 2005: 15). In addition, Amena’s embodiment of specific norms of Islamic piety, such as wearing the headscarf and acting in a more passive manner, can be a way for her to cultivate Islamic virtue. Following Aristotelian ethics, a person can become more virtuous on the inside through exterior practices. For instance, there is a connection between the abstract norm of modesty and wearing the veil, “such that the veiled body becomes the necessary means through which the virtue of modesty is both created and expressed” (Mahmood 2005: 23). Amena embodies piety by ensuring that her inner status matches her outward behavior and vice versa.

YouTube as an affective medium

Before discussing the concept of affective labor and the work that Amena does on YouTube, it is essential to present some of the theories of affect that might relate to the space of YouTube. The assertion in this article is that YouTube serves as an affective medium, an inter-subjective space in which affects flow between subjects. Amena works to create affects, but how do
these affects shape the subjectivities of her viewers within this affective medium? First, affects are not just emotions that are distinct from cognition. This separation between emotions and intellect has long been deconstructed by feminist anthropologists like Catherine Lutz, Lila Abu-Lughod and Michelle Rosaldo. Lutz and Abu-Lughod (1990) understand emotions not as private, interior feelings but as social phenomena that are shown through actions and discourse. They argue that we need to understand emotion as a discursive practice that, like other forms of discourse, constitutes subjectivities (Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990:10-11). “We should view emotional discourse as a form of social action that creates effects in the world” (Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990:12). They advocate for ethnography that examines discourse, actions and embodiment as manifestations of emotions, which are never private feelings but influenced by one’s culture.

Several contemporary affect theorists, under the leadership of Brian Massumi (2010), take a neuro-scientific approach to understanding affects, so that affects are seen as having a universal impact on individuals and as operating on a level that is pre-cognition. These arguments appear quite convincing when reflecting on how in the post-9/11 environment the Bush administration was able to harness the affect of terror to gain support for the country’s foreign policies. It appears that affect provides a scapegoat to explain how so many people were convinced, against rational argument, that the U. S. had a legitimate reason to invade Iraq. This makes sense to think about how affect can move people to do things without thinking, but this doesn’t help explain smaller affects that we experience on a daily basis and that influence social behavior. For instance, people who watch Amena’s videos do not have a universal response; the viewers think and feel in different ways depending on their social background. Amena may present particular affects in her videos, but the viewers’ interpretations of these affects will not necessarily be the same.

Michelle Rosaldo (1984) was particularly astute at theorizing the connections between emotions and cognition. While Rosaldo does not distinguish the term “affect” from emotions or feelings, focuses on this inter-subjective space that is between the individual self and the social world. The way that individuals think, feel and act is always moving between individual interpretations of cultural meaning and social interactions. Rosaldo defines affects as “cognitions—or more aptly, perhaps, interpretations—always culturally
informed, in which the actor finds that body, self, and identity are immediately involved” (1984:141). As Clifford Geertz (1973) wrote, individuals are suspended in a web of cultural meaning, and Rosaldo adds that individuals interpret this meaning and that their emotions are “embodied thoughts” (1984:143). Emotions are not interior and private experiences, but are instead how people are involved in the society and make sense of their position within this society (Rosaldo 1984:143). Individual subjects are not just passively controlled by their culture, but instead culture influences the thoughts and feelings of subjects. The subjects are able to interact and through these inter-subjective interactions, create meaning. When studying these YouTube videos, the emphasis is less on the individual interpretation of meaning and more on the shared sense of affect within the medium of YouTube. While affect is not this universalizing force that influences all viewers of Amena’s videos in the same way, YouTube is still an affective space that works to mold subjects differently. The viewers are free to interpret Amena’s videos on their own, but the affects in the videos can move the viewers in various directions and create a sense of connection to others.

Analiese Richard and Daromir Rudnyckyj (2009) provide another useful description of affect as a “medium in which subjects circulate” instead of as an object that moves between subjects (59). They describe how “an economy of affect forms a milieu in which subjects find themselves enmeshed” (Richard and Rudnyckyj 2009:73). In other words, Affect is not a particular feeling that Amena tries to imbue on her viewers. Instead, Amena and her viewers are all part of a larger affective space. Affect is also distinct from private emotions because the affective medium is an inter-subjective space and not based on individual feelings (Richard and Rudnyckyj 2009:61). These theories on affect help to conceptualize YouTube as an affective medium in which subjects are suspended in emotions, sensations, modes of embodiment and discourse. Subjects are shaped by this affective space and their connections to others, but they still have agency to offer their own interpretations of their cultural surroundings.

The Affective Labor of Creating YouTube Lifestyle Videos

If we understand YouTube to be an affective medium in which subjects are suspended in a space of affects, then it is necessary to also emphasize the work that goes into producing and maintaining this affective medium. Mi-
Michael Hardt (1999) writes about the concept of “affective labor” to explain the transition in postmodern, global capitalism from the production of material objects to the production of immaterial objects, such as information, data and affects (90). This transition exhibits a preference towards immaterial labor so that “information, communication, knowledge and affect come to play a foundational role in the production process” (Hardt 1999:93). Hardt acknowledges that feminist scholars have already done significant work to emphasize the immaterial labor of domestic work and family care, but he argues that what is new in this situation is “the extent to which this affective immaterial labor is now directly productive of capital and the extent to which it has become generalized through wide sectors of the economy” (1999:97). Affective labor is now highly valued in this economy, and this explains why corporations are going to YouTube stars like Michelle Phan and, even to a certain extent, Amena in order have the women “sell” their products to the viewers. Amena mostly sells the products in her own boutique, but she is successful at selling these products by appealing to affects of positivity, engagement and confidence. She presents a perfect image of a modest, beautiful and successful Muslim, and her viewers can emulate these affects through buying and wearing one of her headscarves. Individuals like these YouTube stars have become the contemporary “Oprah” figures; they use affects to create brands for themselves, to keep viewers coming back for more, and to constantly hawk the latest consumer products.

Affective labor, as defined by Hardt, is “immaterial, even if it is corporeal and affective, in the sense that its products are intangible: a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion—even a sense of connectedness or community” (1999:96). The work that Amena does on YouTube perfectly fits into this definition. She attempts to create affects of pleasure, encouragement and fulfillment through her videos. She also tries to create connections with her viewers and also among her viewers, so that they all feel like they are part of a larger community of “hijabis”—young Muslim women who want to maintain pious values while still being hip and wearing the latest fashion trends. Amena’s work falls into the third type of immaterial labor that Hardt says “involves the production and manipulation of affects and requires (virtual or actual) human contact and proximity” (1999:97-98). Amena tries to produce and manipulate affects to shape the subjectivities of her viewers and to form connections among them. While affective labor requires human contact, Hardt acknowledges that this contact can occur
through a medium like a film, TV show, or in this case, a YouTube video (1999:96). Real human contact can occur through Amena’s videos.

Amena is also skilled at using certain techniques of the YouTube medium to form tighter connections with viewers. She always recognizes her viewers and makes efforts to interact with them. She begins most of her videos with the phrase “As-salaamu-alaikum ladies,” signaling both that the viewers are all connected because they are Muslim women but also that Amena addresses the viewers as her “ladies” or her friends. It is common for YouTube stars to talk about their viewers not as “fans” but as “family” or “friends.” Amena also ends her videos with the phrase “tootles,” which becomes her trademark word and is another informal connection with her viewers. Amena acknowledges her viewers when she appeals to them in her videos to post comments, to ask questions and to suggest future videos. She will occasionally respond to comments in the comments section, and more frequently, she addresses these comments in future videos. Viewers also have the chance to meet Amena in person when she travels and hosts meet-up visits. If you can’t go to the meet-up, you can still watch a video of the meet-up online and feel a sense of connection to Amena and the other hijabis in the videos. Amena creates intimate connections with her fans by filming her videos in her home, taking her camera with her on her travels, and documenting her interactions with friends. She involves her viewers in most aspects of her life (excluding interactions with her children), so viewers feel that they know the real Amena. This is a similar phenomenon to the affects around a celebrity gossip magazine. People read these magazines, in part, to see the “real lives” of celebrities: to see the celebrity walking out of the yoga studio, to find out what type of cereal she eats, or to watch the celebrity hanging out with celebrity friends. Viewers can read these magazines, live vicariously through the celebrity, and feel a connection to the celebrity because she is a real person, like anyone else. Amena effectively uses the medium of YouTube in a similar way to appear as authentic and to connect with her viewers.

Affects also constitute the subjectivities of individuals specifically through embodiment, emotions and discourse, as Richard and Rudnyckyj (2009) describe in their concept of “economy of affect” or a space in which “affect serves as a means of conducting conduct and thus forming subjects” (57).
This concept of an “economy of affect” can be applied to the work that Amena does to produce an affect that shapes her viewers through discourse, aesthetics, emotions and bodily comportment. Affect can be understood as a type of conduct and “a means through which people both conduct themselves and conduct others by structuring possible courses of action” (Richards and Rudnyckyj 2009:61). Through her videos, Amena conducts herself as a proper Muslim subject—respectful, modest, positive, encouraging and caring—but she also tries to conduct the subjectivities of her viewers through her actions and affective labor.

Forming Affects through Emotions, Embodiment and Discourse

So far, this article has examined how YouTube can be understood as an affective medium in which subjects are suspended and through which individuals like Amena are able to do affective labor to shape the subjectivities of members of this YouTube community. Next, it is important to elaborate on the specifics of how Amena strives to form a new Islamic subjectivity through her affective labor. Rudnyckyj’s study (2010) of the spiritual training that occurred in an Indonesian steel company relates to Amena’s video work because in this spiritual training “affective practices and discourses about affect were frequently invoked in connecting Muslim piety to becoming a responsible, productive, and competitive employee” (Richard and Rudnyckyj 2009:60). The training employed affects in order to constitute a new Muslim subject, who strived to be both a pious Muslim and an ethical and diligent worker. Affects were managed by invoking visible signs of emotions, such as tears; embodied practices that illustrated emotional transformation, such as recreating the actions of participating in the Hajj pilgrimage; and discourses around labor as a spiritual act, such as the concept that God will judge those who are lazy at work and cheat their company out of their labor potential (Rudnyckyj 2010). While Amena does not train her viewers to do actual labor in a factory like in the Indonesian example, I want to argue that Amena does affective labor by shaping her viewers to act, to feel and to carry their bodies in a way that will lead to success in this neoliberal market. Amena is the representation of this potential success: a pious Muslim with an attractive husband and two loving kids, who is also an entrepreneur with her own boutique. Amena also emphasizes a more
A conservative form of Islamic piety that highlights Muslim women’s roles as beautiful and positive models of Islamic virtue but more passive participants in sharing religious teachings.

**Promoting Positive Emotions**

First of all, Amena does affective labor to produce a particular set of emotions and affects that her viewers can emulate. Unlike some other videos that share confessions or personal religious testimony, Amena’s videos don’t usually employ powerful affects that would cause emotional responses in the viewers, such as tears or emotion-driven comments. Instead, Amena’s videos convey affects of pleasure and enjoyment, in a similar way to the affects of watching a celebrity interview or a romantic comedy. Amena is always smiling and positive in her videos. She frequently gives comments of praise and gratitude to her viewers, other online hijabis, and her friends and family. She rarely says anything negative about anything, and it is unusual for Amena to appear as overly flustered or stressed. In several of her videos, her children can be heard playing in the background, or sometimes they interrupt her filming, but she never appears bothered by their interruptions.

In a recent video, “KICKED OUT OF OUR HOTEL ROOM!” (Khan 2014a), which was taped during a visit to the U.S., Amena is clearly dealing with a lot of stress. She has just arrived in the states and then she finds out that the fashion exhibit that she will be selling her products at has not sold very many tickets. She is driving in the car with her friend and fellow YouTuber, Nye Armstrong, and the two women are laughing while talking about this problem. Amena says, “We have a lot of Pearl Daisy stock [laughter]. We are laughing not because we are amused, not because the situation is funny. It’s very sad, and I think we are in shock.” The women are upset about the situation, but instead of complaining, they just make jokes about how Nye’s father will have to wear all the Pearl Daisy outfits and scarves. Then Amena says, “I’m trying not to express a few things that I feel like, had they been put into place, then this whole situation could have been avoided.” She doesn’t elaborate on this, but it can be deduced that Amena is upset about the organization of the fashion show, but she does not want to say something negative on camera. The very next clip in this travel video is of Amena, her sister and Nye at the Hershey’s chocolate factory, taste-test-
ing chocolate and touring the factory. The earlier concerns are now gone as they have fun consuming chocolates and buying stuff to take home. In the same video, the women then return to their hotel to find out that there was a mistake and their room was double-booked, so Amena and her sister have to leave this hotel. In a rare sign of negative emotions, Amena looks stressed on camera, but then she reflects on the situation with Nye. Amena says, “As far as I’m concerned, personally, like I said, it could be worse. We all have our health, maybe not our uh...” Nye interrupts, “our sanity!” Both of the women burst out laughing. The underlying message of this video, and many of the other videos in this series about Amena’s trip to the U.S., is that when things don’t go as planned, just keep a positive attitude and laugh about it. If all else fails, you can always go eat chocolate or go shopping. Throughout the videos, Amena uses these positive affects, and a lot of her viewers will respond by posting comments of praise, describing Amena as caring, intelligent, enthusiastic, beautiful inside and out, encouraging and helpful.

Practical Advice on Maintaining Piety and Positivity

In addition to her popular hijab tutorials, Amena creates videos that offer practical advice for Muslim women while still incorporating humor and a positive tone. For example, she created a video called “SHEIKH GOOGLE!” (Khan 2013d) that mocks the trend of Muslims who search on Google for whatever religious teaching or fatwa will fulfill their needs. So if they want to find out whether what they are doing is allowed in Islam, they will just find a teaching that reinforces their behavior, or if they want to prove that someone else is wrong, they will find a teaching for that. Amena’s video is a fake commercial that advertises the service of a person named “Sheikh Google” who will answer all of your questions about Islamic teaching. This video is clearly critical of Muslims who use the Internet in this manner, but the style of the video is more positive than just Amena sitting in front of the camera and criticizing other Muslims. It is a more subtle form of criticism or correction of the behavior of other Muslims. In addition, the “Sheikh Google” video reinforces a more conservative interpretation of Islam, which emphasizes that Muslim women should go to male scholars with their religious questions. Amena stresses that Muslim women should not try to find answers on their own and risk finding erroneous information or critically questioning the teachings of scholars. As Saba Mahmood (2005) discusses
in Politics of Piety, Amena promotes a more constrained form of agency that discourages women from being too assertive and questioning religious norms.

In a video about another more traditional topic, “HOW TO NOT TOUCH MEN” (Khan 2013e), Amena uses humor to reenact uncomfortable situations when Muslim women might be forced to touch a man who is not a relative. This practice of touching the other gender is seen as forbidden by some Muslims. Instead of elaborating on the reasons why it is forbidden to touch men, which would be a topic for a knowledgeable scholar, Amena gives practical advice on this topic in an entertaining way through funny short skits. In these two humorous videos, Amena offers practical Islamic information but in an entertaining and positive manner. She exhibits the affects of being a pious Muslim who is also easy-going and cheerful.

Affirmation from Others

Amena’s positive affects are also reinforced when she films videos with other people. She has filmed a lot of videos with her friends and several with her husband, who is just as attractive and positive as Amena is. In a video called “HUSBAND TAG!” (Khan 2013f), Amena asks her husband, Osama, a series of light-hearted questions that viewers submitted on YouTube and Facebook. The couple uses the 12-minute long video to show the viewers the affects of their relationship. They smile and laugh together, are respectful when the other person is talking, flirt with and tease each other on camera, and encourage each other. They show their love for each other through the video. Amena also asks questions that get Osama to reflect on Amena’s personality and emotions. He reaffirms a lot of the emotional qualities that are exhibited in Amena’s other videos. Osama reflects on his first impression of Amena, “I thought she seemed very confident. She minded her own business. She wasn't like in your face, attention seeking. She was just having a coffee, having a good time, with her sisters, and I liked that. I don't know why but that’s what attracted me to you first. And you are beautiful obviously, but it comes with the package.” This quote reaffirms the proper affects that Amena tries to convey in her videos: be beautiful, confident and positive, but don’t be too assertive. If you are upset or want to criticize something, then shift these emotions to laughter and positivity. If all else fails, go shopping and buy new products to make yourself feel beautiful. Osama
mentions other emotional traits about Amena throughout the video; he says that she is inspiring, hard-working, caring, and creative. Finally, Amena asks Osama what he thinks her best trait is as a mom. He responds, “I think, uh, when you teach the kids spirituality, teaching them responsibility, teaching them all the good habits to raise them to be good human beings.” This quote again reinforces that Amena is a positive and nurturing person who is raising her children to be good Muslims. It could also be inferred that the work that Amena does to teach her children spirituality is similar to her work on YouTube to teach spirituality to her viewers.

Addressing Serious Topics

While the majority of Amena’s videos are about positive and entertaining topics, she does create a few videos about more serious subjects. In a video called “GIVING UP” (Khan 2013a), she reflects on going through difficult periods, such as illnesses, that seem like they will last forever. She encourages viewers to not give up hope. She says that there is a danger in being apathetic, “Or the worst thing of all, of losing hope in the mercy of Allah. We’ve got to always remember that any hardship that we go through, if anything, will bring us closer to him.” She advises her viewers to always look for the silver lining. Again, she encourages others to maintain positive emotions. In another video entitled, “MARRIAGE PROBLEMS” (Khan 2013b), Amena offers advice on dealing with marriage issues. She encourages her viewers to seek help through a third party since she cannot answer these questions. She also discusses the emotions that women need to embody within marriage. She says, “What do you do with something that is sacred [marriage], you deal with it with patience, with gentility, with understanding, with compromise, with forbearance.” Amena does make note that women should not just deal with abusive situations. These emotions that Amena lists are what she consistently promotes for her viewers and what she tries to embody through her videos.

Finally, Amena employs distinct affects in her video, “TAKE OFF YOUR HIJAB!” (Khan 2014b), which is formulated as an address to unnamed British politicians who frequently argue that Muslim women are not free when they cover. This video is somewhat jarring because Amena’s emotions are significantly different from her other videos. She smiles occasionally in this video, but her overall tone is more serious. She begins and ends the video.
with a stern face, instead of her normal enthusiastic greeting of her viewers. Amena’s affective performance in this video appears to be formulated for an audience of politicians and public critics of Islam. In all likelihood, the audience for this video is made up of mostly young Muslim women. While the video appears to address critics of Islam, the real purpose of the video appears to be providing the Muslim viewers a powerful retort to opponents of Islam and also encouraging pride and self-confidence in Muslim women. Amena is quite sarcastic in this video; she reads a script that argues her opinion and points out all the contradictions in the politicians’ arguments. She says at one point, “So, freedom means to conform to your criteria about what I should wear, right? Do I have that right? RIGHT?” Later on she says, “But of course, it’s not about freedom, really? I make you uneasy because my hijab reminds you that I am trying to obey God and not you, and that bugs you.” This video is unusual for Amena because of its sarcastic attitude, but Muslim female viewers may still walk away from watching the video with positive feelings of pride and strength in their Muslim identity.

**Embodiment as Affective Labor**

Amena also does affective labor to portray how to be a good Muslim and a successful entrepreneur through forms of embodiment, such as pinning the hijab in a particular style, wearing fashionable outfits, applying flawless makeup and employing Islamic phrases. The viewers may have the desire to imitate Amena’s aesthetic style and bodily conduct. First, it almost goes without saying, that Amena always presents herself in stylish clothing and a beautiful headscarf. She never films a video of herself in her pajamas or without makeup. Amena does several fashion “look book” videos in which she exhibits different outfits of that season, similar to a fashion magazine spread. She also makes numerous hijab tutorials that feature different methods of tying the headscarf. She always makes these styles look simple, but the tutorials usually feature several complicated steps. In her other videos that are not about fashion, Amena still appears as well put together in unique headscarves and outfits. She always posts links in the videos’ description boxes so that viewers can go to the Pearl Daisy store and purchase the items that appear in her video. Amena may be talking about a serious topic, like tips for fasting during the month of Ramadan, but the description box will include links so the viewer can buy the headscarf or necklace that Amena
is wearing. No matter what the videos are about, Amena’s appearance and how to imitate that appearance are always front and center.

Amena also does affective labor through her actions and the way that she holds her body. She maintains proper bodily comportment; she sits up straight and makes flowing gestures with her hands. She might laugh in her videos but never in an obnoxious manner, such as a loud cackle or a snort. She talks in a very smooth and calm style, never raising her voice or talking too fast. Her British accent gives her voice a soothing effect. She also edits out any mistakes that she makes when speaking. Her demeanor might be more formal, but she is still open and nurturing, especially when connecting with viewers. Overall, Amena holds her body in a very sophisticated manner, but she still can laugh and have fun, as was shown in the examples above.

Another way that Amena disciplines her body is through her use of language. It goes without saying that Amena would never use offensive language, and she rarely uses language that expresses negativity. She frequently uses Islamic phrases in her videos: as-salaamu-alaikum as a greeting at the beginning of her videos, al-hamdulillah and masha'allah as expressions of praise and gratitude to God, and insha'allah to express hope in God’s plan for the future. While these are the literal translations of these phrases, often times Amena and her viewers use these phrases out of habit, so God’s control over the future may not always be reflected on when saying insha'allah. Through her use of Islamic phrases, Amena both signals that she and her viewers are part of a larger religious community, but she also performs a certain form of Islamic subjectivity through the embodiment and affects involved in saying the phrases. The use of Islamic phrases is a way to discipline the body so that one’s focus is always on God, even in the bodily action of speaking. When speaking about the future, one says insha'allah to remember that the future is in God’s hands. Whenever a good thing happens, saying al-hamdulillah is a way to thank God. When greeting fellow Muslims, one says as-salaamu-alaikum to share God’s peace with them. By employing these Islamic phrases in her videos, Amena tries to perform as a pious Muslim subject and use the affects associated with these terms to connect with her viewers.
Affective Labor through Discourse

In addition to her affective labor through emotions and embodied actions, Amena also does work to form her viewers through discourse. As mentioned before, most of Amena’s videos are about lifestyle topics, such as hijab tutorials, fashion trends, makeup tips, travel vlogs, or shopping trips. She discusses some serious topics, such as the reasons why she wears the hijab, advice during Ramadan, and helpful information for new converts to Islam. While a lot of her videos don’t have in-depth discussions of Islamic issues, she did create one video titled, “WE ARE MORE THAN WHAT WE WEAR” (Khan 2013c), in which she discusses the pressure for Muslim women to dress in a particular manner. In this video, Amena says that Muslim women should not be judged by what type of hijab they wear or if they don’t wear hijab. She discusses meeting women in public and how they are often self-conscious that their hijab is not as trendy as Amena’s. She addresses these women in the video, “Sisters, trust me, I don’t notice your hijab styles or your hijabs. And I mean this in the nicest way. What comes across above all of the exterior is you as a person.” She encourages her followers to focus on wearing the hijab for God and not because of peer pressure, and she explains that wearing the headscarf is just one part of living as a Muslim. She emphasizes that interior character is more important than exterior appearance. She says, “Let your soul shine through, not your hijab style or your hijab color or how trendy or fashionable you are.” In this video, Amena tries to reconcile the fact that most of her videos show an image of a Muslim woman who is always beautifully dressed, has flawless skin and makeup, and is wearing gorgeous and impeccably pinned hijabs. The majority of her videos present an image of Islamic beauty that is about maintaining a perfect exterior appearance and exhibiting positive emotions, but Amena uses discourse to argue against the dominant imagery in her videos. She argues that beauty is about what is inside and that women cannot just, as she says, “buy empowerment” by purchasing material things. She directly contradicts the prominent affective message of her videos: that it is through purchasing fashionable clothes and beautiful Pearl Daisy headscarves and through embodying a positive affect that one will become a pious and successful Muslim woman. Amena goes on to say in this video, “The only thing that can empower you is the state of your own soul and the relationship that you have with Allah.” Clearly, Amena is aware that viewers frequently interpret
her videos as promoting the exterior elements of being Muslim, and so she attempts to discursively argue that being a pious Muslim is about one's interior. When the majority of Amena's video channel focuses on exterior appearances, it is difficult for this discourse to have a significant impact. The most powerful elements of the affective labor that Amena does relate to her use of emotions and embodiment, which are usually displayed visually, instead of her appeal to discourse about Islamic issues.

The Impossible Goal of the Perfect Muslim Subject

Through her YouTube videos, Amena Khan does affective labor to produce a particular way of being a Muslim woman living in this neoliberal context. She creates an affective state of how a Muslim woman is to feel, act and embody her Islamic subjectivity. Amena is one of the most successful Muslim women on YouTube because she flawlessly incorporates both Islamic affects of modesty, positivity, prudence and care with neoliberal affects of individuality, self-promotion, authenticity and hard work. Amena works to create this affective state, which is not a universal Islamic affective state. Her videos represent one of many interpretations of how Muslim women should live, feel and act within the Western and neoliberal context.

The contradictions exhibited above between Amena’s “WE ARE MORE THAN WHAT WE WEAR” (Khan 2013c) video and most of her other fashion videos represent an important debate within the community of young Muslim women. In most of her videos, Amena presents this perfect image of exterior Islamic beauty but then qualifies in this one video that Islamic beauty is really about what’s on the inside. It would be difficult to argue that the rhetoric in this one video is enough to counter the powerful emotions and images in most of Amena's videos. Amena presents a version of life as a Muslim woman that is a goal to aspire to through consumption, but never to achieve. If a viewer just buys the perfect fashionable but modest clothes, wears a beautiful hijab in a unique style, applies makeup perfectly, and maintains a positive attitude at all times, then she will be as happy and successful as Amena. These aspirations can be classified as a version of what Lauren Berlant (2010) calls “cruel optimism,” as some of Amena’s viewers are motivated to consume more and more in the hopes of finally reaching fulfillment (94). As Berlant explains, “consumption promises satisfaction and then denies it because all objects are placeholders for the enjoyment of
never being satisfied” (2010:111). Viewers may strive to achieve what Amena has through consumption of various products, but in the end, only a few individuals can achieve Amena’s public level of success.

Amena’s videos are part of a larger conversation about what Islamic fashion means for Muslim women, especially in the contemporary context. Several elements of Amena Khan’s work online are unique and have been examined throughout this article. She mostly engages with the space of YouTube, which is an affective medium that allows for the circulation of affects. YouTube is also a flexible space that permits Amena to blend Islamic ethics and neoliberal values. Finally, YouTube is a visual medium that allows for the display of aesthetic styles and for more affective connections to be formed between Amena and her viewers. Through her videos, Amena does significant affective labor to create a certain way of feeling, acting, embodying and displaying Islamic subjectivity. While it may be difficult to measure how Amena’s use of affects shapes the subjectivities of her viewers, as few viewers leave comments, this does not lessen the fact that Amena’s videos circulate among a large audience and construct an affective condition of how to live as a fashionable, pious, confident, successful and positive Muslim woman in the contemporary world.

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Let’s Talk About Sex: Counselling Muslim Selves Online

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Abstract:

Islam Online Arabic, and particularly the counselling service Problems and Solutions, received harsh criticism for being too ‘open’ or even ‘un-Islamic’ in their views and dealings with sensitive topics, not least with regards to sexuality. The counselling service Problems and Solutions can be considered the emblem of Islam Online’s efforts to unite secular and Islamic perspectives and relate to contemporary Muslims’ real lives and problems. Counsellors argue that there is a total lack of sexual education in the Arab world, a problem which must be faced head on. Problems and Solutions questioners could ask the most intimate of questions without shame or embarrassment. This article provides an overview of the types of questions about sexuality and sexual relations that questioners sent to Problems and Solutions counsellors. Moreover, the analysis sheds light on: 1) the various aspects of contemporary Arab marriages and taboo-ridden sexuality which counsellors believe to be detrimental to marriages, and 2) a variety of proposed local remedies, including encouraging men to aspire to the ‘new man’ ideal.

Keywords: masculinity, sexuality, social aspects, religion online, Middle East, Islam, gender

Title: I am thinking of divorce and my husband is very religiously committed

Female Questioner:

I have been married for approximately three years. [...] My husband is very religiously committed (multazim) and he does not dishonour me at all, and is very kind to me, and in short is a man of good manners and morals. He loves our daughter a lot and is from a good family. And all of these traits are all another wife could wish for. My problem is that my husband does not love me, and he has confessed
this to me and that he married me because his family suggested me, and he found me suitable and I feel this in all his interactions with me. [...] I do not hear from him what a wife would like to hear from her husband, not even during sexual intercourse and intercourse has an allotted time, and is not related to love or desire for his wife. I am very romantic and this truly pains me [...] because I am not the woman my husband wishes for, and we have talked about this matter a lot, and he says that this is out of his hands [...] this life is harming my psyche [...] so what are your opinions? [...]

Second¹ Counsellor Response:

As for me, I sympathize with you [...] I cannot get past your ‘religiously committed’ (multazim) husband’s actions, this word that has become hollow for us [...] Religious commitment, (al-iltizām) my sister, is following the path of the Prophet [...] and he was the gentlest of people and nicest of people. [...] Once he returned from travelling and he gave each of his wives a ring as a present, he gave it to each one in secret and told her not to tell the others about the ring. When sitting amongst them (his wives) one of them asked, ‘Who is the dearest to you?’ The Prophet responded, ‘the one who has the ring!’ [...] No, my sister ... the religiously committed (al-multazim) as I know him does not tell his wife that he does not love her, and that he only married her because his family urged him to do so, this is at best ‘rude’ as Egyptians say, or at worst, psychological abuse and harsh. And some men have no knowledge of a woman’s psyche and her needs. And the truly religiously committed will learn this from the school of Mohammed Peace Be Upon Him - and the school of life - interacting with women and humans in general - an art, a science with many perspectives and literatures [...]²

Excerpt from Problems and Solutions (mashākil wa hulūl) (IslamOnline.net, 2004b 101-104).³

Introduction

Muslims have been seeking advice about their personal lives on Islamic websites for over a decade. While numerous studies have dealt with Islamic
advice or fatwas¹ in a variety of contexts both on- and offline (Agrama 2010, Bunt 2003, Kutsher 2009, Larsen 2011, Mariani 2006, Masud et al. 1996, Sisler 2009, Skovgaard-Petersen 2004, Stowasser and Abul-Magd 2004), there has been little scholarly documentation and analysis of other forms of counselling services on Islamic websites. In contrast, this article focuses on an interactive, Islamic, Arabic-language counselling service, which draws on global therapeutic counselling trends and tackles sexual relations head on.

IslamOnline.net was one of the most successful and influential Islamic websites worldwide, and was produced and run out of Cairo for more than a decade (Gräf 2008; Hofheinz 2007). Islam Online (IOL) was founded in 1997 as a website intended to deal with all aspects of life, drawing on an array of disciplines, including secular sciences such as medicine and psychology. Indeed, according to Gräf (2008: 1-2), IOL founders believed that Islamic jurisprudence and theology, although important, could not alone provide sufficient knowledge in all areas of life. This appears to be the case with regards to the counselling service Problems and Solutions (mashākil wa hulūl), which was a pioneering counselling service,⁵ hosted by www.islamonline.net, and, later, www.onislam.net.⁶ The current text uses a mixed method approach consisting of: 1) a longitudinal (offline) ethnographic study of the work environment in Cairo where Problems and Solutions was produced,⁷ and 2) analysis of online counselling exchanges and counselling essays. I conducted my main fieldwork in the Islam Online offices in Cairo from the beginning of December 2009 until the end of June 2010.⁸ I observed regular work tasks and sat in on the meetings of the IOL employees tasked with running the counselling service. In interviews I shared my analysis of the online counselling content, and invited my research participants to comment on my preliminary findings. All names in this article are pseudonyms for IOL counsellors.⁹ In subsequent sections I write in ethnographic present.

IOL’s ‘WOW factor’, according to my research participants, is derived amongst other things from being a pioneer with regards to tackling sexual relations in an educational and professional manner, and in the Arabic language. In my research participants own rendition they were pioneers in talking about sex in this fashion. They maintain that popular TV shows, like Kalām kibēr (big talk) with the renowned sexologist Heba Kotb, on Arabic
sateilte channels, came much later on, and largely borrowed the ‘how to talk about sex’ from Islam Online (Abdel-Fadil, 2011, 2013). Problems and Solutions can be considered the emblem of IOL’s efforts to unite secular and Islamic perspectives and relate to contemporary Muslims’ real lives and problems.

Individual users seek out Problems and Solutions counselling with all sorts of personal and relational problems. Many questions deal with love, marital problems, and sexual relations. This appears to mirror global trends with regards to online counselling. Unparalleled by any other Islamic website, Problems and Solutions is serviced by counselling professionals with a background in secular fields such as psychology and psychiatry. IOL and Problems and Solutions counselling is founded on ‘the message’ (al-risāla), which connotes a middle-way approach (wasatiyya) to Islam, is contemporary and centred on real life, tackles controversial topics, and aims to empower and create self and social awareness amongst its users (Abdel-Fadil 2011a, 2013a). At times, IOL - and particularly Problems and Solutions - receives harsh critique for being too ‘open’ or even ‘un-Islamic’ in their views and dealings with sensitive topics, not least with regards to sexuality. Some critics maliciously retorted that IOL ought to have been called ’secularism Online’ rather than ‘Islam Online’ (Abdel-Fadil 2011a, 2013a).

Graphic and detailed depictions of sexual interactions do at times feature as part of the counselling process. While many of those who write to the counsellors appear fairly clueless about what to do between the sheets, there are of course segments of Arab society who live in an entirely different realm of sexuality, and who are knowledgeable, experienced, and far less taboo-ridden (Saad Khalaf, 2009). They are not, however, the typical candidates for Islam Online’s guidance on sexual issues.

One memorable Problems and Solutions counselling exchange starts out with a man asking the following: ‘I have been married for a few months now. I wonder if you can help me. Is there more than one sexual position?’ The response from the counsellor lists a number of sources for sexual education on this matter, including the Kama Sutra. This example of a counselling exchange serves to illustrate the level of knowledge that some of the questioners operate with. It also gives a preview of the type of answers counsellors may provide in response.
In an interview, Kamilia confirms that IOL (Arabic) has a particular emphasis on sexual education:

You know the problem with Arab society is that there is no good sexual education (thaqafa ginseyya). There is a total lack of sexual education. People need to get educated about sexual relations. So we in IOL try to address these issues. Of course, some people think it is outrageous that a website called something with Islam does this. We are not exactly taqlīdī in our approach to Islam. We are very open-minded.

(Kamilia 2009)

Indeed, talking about sex is considered taboo in many segments of Arab society, particularly prior to marriage (Yousef & Abdel-Fadil, 2008). Still, the anonymity of the online counselling service allows for a safe space in which Muslim counselees can ask detailed intimate questions such as ‘is it ok to masturbate in Islam?’ Being hosted on an Islamic website presumably assists Problems and Solutions in their mission to enlighten Arab populations about sexual relations.13

The Problems and Solutions counselling service can be understood as part of a global trend in societies. According to Hoover (2006), one of the characteristics of contemporary societies is that individuals are seeking ways to improve and develop their ‘self’. Hoover (2006) describes this trend as the rise of ‘the culture of therapy’ and maintains that it is largely ‘based on and available’ through media. Indeed the boom of popular psychology and self-help books and websites in the last few decades support this analysis. Problems and Solutions’ unique fusion of Islamic ethics and therapeutic counselling appears to be the result of the counsellors’ own adaptation of Western secular counselling models to an Arab context (Abdel-Fadil 2015).14

All Problems and Solutions questions and answers are anonymised and then posted online. Each individual response is linked to similar and/or other counselling exchanges that might be of interest to the questioner. This practice can be interpreted as part of a commitment to displaying a plurality of views on a given topic, particularly when taken together with the fact that Problems and Solutions moderators frequently send complex questions to
more than one counsellor, and subsequently publish opposing views on possible solutions to the problem online. Problems and Solutions counsellors and moderators alike are intent on reaching as many users as possible, even if they are unable to meet the high demand for the interactive counselling services. A multitude of counselling essays are published in attempt to reach a wider readership than only those who receiving a one-on-one dialogue with a counsellor. Counselling essays sum up common problems and provide step-by-step guides on how to solve them, and feature titles such as ‘How to romance your wife’, and, ‘the hush-hush guide to intimate conversation and a caressing touch’. In fact, one key finding of my research is that there appears to be much more emphasis on realizing good sexual relations in counselling essays on IOL Arabic than on IOL English (Abdel-Fadil, 2013b). On IOL Arabic it is repeatedly stated that sexual education is sorely lacking in Arab societies, and as a consequence many Arab spouses do not know much about sex prior to marriage. IOL Arabic also published collections of online counselling exchanges in book format with titles such as ‘sexual Education’ and ‘sex from A to Z’. The volume ‘sex from A to Z’ is reported to have sold better than any other title.15

Without the presence of body language and tone of voice, e-counselling requires learning how to interpret clues in the text. Problems and Solutions counsellors exchanged expertise with one another, such as how to look for: key phrases, uneven first person narration, use of punctuation, clarity and formulation of problem, repetitions, (dis)organisation of thoughts, and aspects of the situation that may have been left out. To the trained eye, such clues can reveal a lot about the counselee’s life, personality and mental state. Amongst other things, counsellors discussed their interpretations of particular usernames or email addresses which may at times reveal something about the counselee’s perspective on herself, with nicknames like ‘sad rose’, ‘lovely girl’, ‘desert jasmine’ or ‘lonely forever’.16

Counsellors referred to in this study have over a decade of ‘hands-on’ collective expertise of what troubles husband and wives in the Arab world in marital and sexual relations. Counsellors believe that problems in marital and sexual relations are embedded in local societal problems, and necessitate context-sensitive remedies. This article sheds light on various aspects of contemporary Arab marriages and sexuality, which online counsellors believe to be detrimental to marriages.17 The structure of this article and
the subheadings mirror the societal problems that Problems and Solutions counsellors believe undermine Arab marriages. According to the counsellors, one of the fundamental problems Arab couples face today is the marriage system itself.

The marriage system

*Traditional taqlīdī marriages*

‘Why marry when you do not know each other?’ asks Samir rhetorically. Samir explains that society during the time of the Prophet was not gender-segregated and that marriage and re-marriage were easy - far more easy than today. Samir bases his call for reform of the contemporary marriage system on his reading of the time of the Prophet Mohammed (which is to be emulated). He declares the whole contemporary marriage system is ‘faulty’ and ‘un-Islamic’. Indeed, Samir and the other Problems and Solutions counsellors critique the practice of traditional (*taqlīdī*) marriages, ‘*gawāz al-salunāt*’ or ‘arranged marriages’. Such marriages (in their most conservative form) are arranged by the families of the spouses, and entail meeting with the prospective spouse only briefly, in the presence of many others, before marriage. The counsellors all agree that these types of marriages ought to be done away with, because one is basically marrying a stranger. The counsellors highlight how marrying someone you do not know means that there are no intimate feelings. When this is coupled with limited interaction with the opposite sex - and not least, severe lack of sexual knowledge and experience - this is a recipe for disaster.

Counsellors are sceptical of *taqlīdī* marriages because they do not allow for a well-informed selection of a spouse. One remedy as conceived by many counsellors is allowing for a long engagement and dating period in order to properly get to know each other before deciding whether to marry or not. On a whole, the counsellors place emphasis on deeds and interactions rather than the ritualistic aspects of religiosity when choosing a spouse. This is also why counsellors often advise counselees to observe their betrothed interactions with as many people and in as many situations as possible, in order to learn about their fundamental traits and character and to better assess their compatibility as a couple (IslamOnline.net, 2004a).
It is common to distinguish between ‘love marriages’ and ‘arranged marriages’ (taqlidi) in academic literature about marriages in the Arab world. Still, it is a widespread perception among Egyptians that ‘arranged marriages’ and ‘love marriages’ have roughly the same odds with regards to possibly ending in divorce. However, as Peterson and Abu Hashish (1999) rightly point out, although most contemporary marriages in Egypt may not necessarily be self-initiated ‘love marriages’ or represent a clear break from ‘arranged marriages’, one could perhaps argue that today many marriages are ‘transitional’ in that they are increasingly being brokered with the involvement of the spouses to be (Peterson and Abu Hashish, 1999). In other words, in practice there may be blurry lines between ‘arranged’ and ‘love’ marriages in an Arab context. It is against this backdrop that ‘choosing skills’ become important.

Lack of choosing skills

Maysoon believes that many marriages fall apart due to lack of compatibility:

High divorce rates are related to the wrong choice [of partner] not because one of them [husband or wife] is bad, just that I chose someone unsuitable. There were no selection criteria, so it doesn’t fit.

Problems and Solutions counsellors maintain that many people in the Arab world suffer from a lack of self-awareness and in turn do not how to choose a prospective spouse. As a result, ‘anything goes’. In the words of Lamia you ‘marry anyone, as long as you avoid becoming a spinster. Or, there is no awareness about marriage, or finding a life-partner’. 20 Several of the counsellors elaborate on how Arabs have ‘no choosing skills’, and argue that they simply do not know what they are looking for beyond, the superficial.21 As Reem elaborates,

When choosing a partner [...] beauty [as a criterion]... what types of beauty? Is beauty what makes a good marriage, or good sexual relations? We need to work with preconceptions, deconstruct them and discuss them. 22

Here, Reem appears to be asking whether choosing a spouse based on beauty, attraction, or whimsical lust is what makes a good marriage or leads to agreeable sexual relations. This is in fact a reference to the multiple coun-
selling exchanges and essays which deal with the pitfalls of steaming desire. A striking trait is the humoristic way in which many of the counsellors poke fun at how common it is to lust after a partner with film star looks - without taking any other traits into consideration or even factoring in their own attractiveness. In essence, the Problems and Solutions counsellors draw on a combination of the wisdoms of both ‘love marriages’ and traditionally brokered ‘arranged marriages’. In the counsellors’ reading, choosing a compatible spouse is not simply about selecting eye-candy or opting for the one who makes your heart race. It is not that the counsellors deny the existence of sexual chemistry. In the counsellors’ rendering, however, selecting the right marital partner is also about deeper qualities, which, in turn, may induce the desire to make love.

The remedy on the micro-level is to create awareness and make tools and skills available to counselees. At the societal level, the remedy is a call for reform of the marriage system, and introducing marital - and sexual - education to Arab populations.

Intimacy and martial communication

Tense communication

‘They (husbands and wives) do not know how to communicate with each other... they do not have communication skills...’ - Lamia.

Problems and Solutions counsellors believe that young Arabs not only severely lack skills in choosing a partner but also lack the skills and tools for ‘managing’ a marriage, such as communication and problem-solving skills. This skill set is of course relevant to the sphere of intimate relations. The counsellors’ cultivation of ‘choosing skills’ is an attempt to make counselees more self-aware and consequently assist them in making a more informed choice about who to marry, and can be seen as interlinked with Problems and Solutions’s overall ‘awareness project’ (Abdel-Fadil, 2011a). Moreover, this strong emphasis on lack of skills is in accordance with counselling models catering to individuals and couples in other corners of the world (Illouz, 2008; Hough, 2006; Miller and Rose, 2008; Rose, 1999). Still, on Problems and Solutions the focus on skills carries a local flavour. On a more
elaborate note Rania discusses the importance of working on developing marital communication, and adds:

They must learn how to talk about emotions together, both the positive and the negative. [...] Couples must set aside time, time that is only yours as a couple, regardless of all [external] pressures... time that is not for sex. Marital life is a seed, you must continue to care for it. If you do not it will die. Or else you have one of those pretty trees that are hollow on the inside.

Rania focuses on the importance of developing verbal and emotional intimacy. This may involve hard work but the rewards are well worth the effort. Moreover, the emphasis on techniques for creating intimacy is in accordance with Illouz’s (2008) analysis on marital counselling in the US. Nonetheless, there are culturally specific challenges to the intimate relations in Arab marriages, as discussed by Salwa:

The wife is tense in the relationship. There is no communication with the husband. The problem is that she does not understand herself [...] and, she did not choose her partner or husband... This creates problems and complaints. Then, you find out that they have sexual and communication problems.

Here Salwa is discussing tense communication from the point of view of a wife. Salwa also relates that there is often a correlation between good communication and good sexual relations, a point that several counsellors make, and will be elaborated on shortly. Talking openly about sex may be taboo even within the constraints of a marriage. While this may apply to both husband and wife, the wife may feel extra obliged to lay a lid on her sexual preferences. In Samir’s words: ‘she (the wife) is constantly worried and tense, not knowing whether to express or not express herself freely (about sexual relations), so there is <miscommunication> in life.’

Pushing a similar point about sexual relations and communication being interrelated, Khaled says:

For example with communication... people see their problem in daily life but not necessarily the reason behind it. Is it related to econo-
mic pressures? Or is it because I do not allow my wife to participate in daily decisions, etcetera? Or, is it related to the bridge of years between us? Or, our cultural or class differences? ‘We do not talk... he thinks of me as a thing.’ With sexual relations and communication.... Which is the illness and which are the symptoms?24

Khaled discusses how several problems can affect marital communication and sexual intimacy. He also draws attention to the tension between the questions ‘which is the illness?’ and ‘which are the symptoms?’ Furthermore, in his citation of a female counselee who complains that her husband thinks of her as ‘a thing’ and does not include her in decisions, lies a critique. Khaled appears to be suggesting a different type of union and partnership, one that is based on an equal footing. Moreover, much like Salwa, Khaled is suggesting that communication problems will manifest themselves in sexual relations.

It is evident that the Problems and Solutions counsellors draw attention to some of the same things, such as the link between verbal intimacy and sexual relations. Next, the relationship between communication and sexuality is explored.

Sexual ignorance, anxiety, fear and shame

In the upbringing of girls, sex is either not talked about... silenced, ambiguous or (considered) indecent (eib) or terrifying.<Enter> ignorance, not understanding, no satisfaction, and hating it. Imagine, twenty years routine, for women having to do it but with no satisfaction, without feeling loved, etc. The suppression [...] Women are brought up to not accept sex, to believe that it is indecent, etc. Suddenly she has to deliver... it is difficult, a shock... she does not know sex from where (on her body)... ignorance. Instability in the sexual relations leads to general instability in the marriage - Salwa.

Salwa discusses how Arab women are brought up to fear sexual relations and to think of it as shameful and indecent. Additionally, she maintains that women are severely lacking in basic knowledge about sex. These factors together contribute to fear and hatred of sexual relations. ‘Imagine, twenty
years routine, for women having to do it but with no satisfaction, without feeling loved, etc.’ she says. Here Salwa is also signalling that there is a problem on the part of the husband who is equally sexually ignorant and unable to satisfy his wife’s needs or communicate love, factors that no doubt only make matters worse. Salwa’s focus is thus on mutually satisfying sexual relations. Moreover, Salwa concludes that when sexual relations do not work, this rocks the entire marriage.

Lamia discusses how sexual relations are an important pillar of marriage:

The husbands complain of the wife’s frigidity [...] I think this comes from two things: One, we do not have sex education, and two, the relationship between the husband and wife is not only about sex, you know, in the end it is <based> on communication. There is a problem in communication, so it echoes in the intimate relationship.

Here, Lamia focuses on the link between good communication and good sexual relations. Moreover, she maintains that one of the problems facing couples is that there is no form of sexual education, which, in turn, leaves both husband and wife clueless as to what to do between the sheets. It is against this backdrop, that one begins to fathom that the question ‘is there more than one sexual position?’ as posed by one of the questioners, may be rather representative of how severely lacking sexual knowledge is for large segments of Arab populations. Actually, according to the counsellors there are two prevalent problems amongst Arab men with regards to sexuality: 1) being totally blank with regards to intimate relations, or 2) having highly skewed views about sex because everything they know is gleaned from watching porn. Women, broadly speaking, tend to suffer from 1) fear of intimate relations or 2) lack of sexual satisfaction, in the counsellors’ rendition. Reem lists some of the common questions counselees ask about with regards to sexual relations. In her own words:

They write about everything starting from anxiety, fear of marriage, or virginity [...] A wife writes that her husband does not satisfy her needs, or does not understand her... Or, premature ejaculation, erectile dysfunction ... Or, complaints about the husband being too busy, or not into sexual relations. It is more common in our societies, that the husband complains about the wife being preoccupied with the
home etc. [...] Women complain about the Internet, porn sites and films, that the husband is satisfied with that... that he satisfies himself <solo>.

In accordance with other counsellors, Reem mentions fear and anxiety as commonplace problems among women, in addition to unsatisfied sexual needs. There is also mention of the husband being egotistical in his self-satisfaction through masturbation. In fact, the husband’s pornography addiction as a barrier to or substitute for intimate relations with the wife is a topic that often surfaces in counselling exchanges. This might signal that Arab men may also struggle with expressing their sexual desires to their wives.

Sexual relations are profoundly shaped by the fact that many couples do not really know each other before their wedding night. Elaborating on this view and offering a slightly different angle on the question of sexual relations against the backdrop of ignorance coupled with shame, Samir delivers the following serious message with comic effect:

You ruin the natural relationship... If two love each other, they are going to want to touch each other, etc. Everything is messed up on this issue. The same goes for women. The woman who is raised with sex being haram and indecent and cover here and how, etc. ... All her life she was programmed like this.... then press a button, and taratatata she will start to undress and be I don’t know what [...] how realistic is that - and how? Often it is a man she does not know .... She met him once or twice for 30 minutes! After an hour and a half: ‘undress!’... How? (laughter). But ...how? (laughter) ... make me understand, how?! (laughter). By the way, we often say it is a problem for women, but it is also a problem for men, [...] He is standing in front of a woman he doesn’t know! What do you mean undress in front of a woman he does not know? What do you mean? Sleep with her... how... you know? And by the way, many of <erectile dysfunctions> are from this... he is doing something <unnatural>. What is natural is that there is a real relationship between us, and when this relationship develops, we will want to do that .... We will just be waiting for the right moment. But, brrrruppp!26 ... what is it? Undress! Undress! ... Who?! ... Guys, this is not what we agreed upon! (laughter). So this is <miscommunication>. The same goes for women. The woman
is afraid of expressing herself freely about sex in case her husband says (alters to comic voice and laughingly), ‘Uhuh, and where did you get that information from?’ Ok? ... So, she does not know whether to express it or not.

Samir launches a critique at the entire taqlīdī marriage system that ‘forces’ sexual relations upon both men and women before they have even gotten the chance to know each other, let alone develop feelings for one another. One of the intriguing aspects of Samir’s response is that he is criticizing the indoctrination of shame into females from an early age. At the other end of the spectrum, we have a wife who is knowledgeable about sexual relations, but is fearful of expressing her real desires and needs to her husband, in case there is backlash from her husband or suspicion of her and her propriety. Samir is not the only counsellor to mention in interviews that women may experience suspicion or unwarranted accusations of sexual promiscuity if they confess to knowing anything about sexual relations. Problems and counsellors are highly critical of the ideal that women should be ignorant of all aspects of sexual relations. On a slightly different note Rania says:

The number two problem amongst marital couples is sexual relations... lack of acceptance, lack of agreement, lack of honesty [...] We think talking about sexual relations is important, but it has to be professional. [...] Sexual relations within marriage is one way of expressing love, it is not only about love, but is part of marriage [...] Sexual relations, is part of marriage - not the whole marriage. Sex is not an ISO standard!27 (laughter).

Problems that relate to sex are reportedly very common in counselling exchanges. Rania points to imperative problems in contemporary marital sexual relations: lack of acceptance, honesty and agreement. She indicates that these three issues must be rectified in order for both husbands and wives to enjoy pleasurable sexual relations. Moreover, Rania maintains that sex is only one way of expressing love and creating intimacy; it is not the entire marriage. An interesting aspect of Rania’s response is that she suggests that there is a need for sex education amongst counselees, and that it is better that they receive guidance from a website that is both halal and scientific. Rania says, ’sometimes people say do not discuss this... Pretend it is not there ... Put your heads in the dirt... They say you are outside of Islam... I
disagree’. This represents the general sentiment amongst my research participants. Indeed, Maysoon is the only person I interviewed who was against the discussion of sexual relations in such a detailed fashion. She is also critical of the use of ‘sexy titles’ or ‘hot headings’ to draw the reader’s attention. Moreover, Maysoon maintains that counselling answers about sexual relations should not be public:

The answer must go to his private (email) address. Imagine, I have been married for 20 years... everything is okay, we have some problems but in general it is okay. Then I read someone’s problem, which is close to my situation, and the counsellors say your rights and your pleasures and the sexual relation has to be one, two, three, four... (and you think) damn! I’ve been fooled! Where is this awareness? What awareness?!

Thus, Maysoon questions the goal of creating awareness about sexual relations. She fears that this type of openness about sexual relations framed in a ‘rights’ perspective can create a sense of deprivation, followed by tension in the marriages of Problems and Solutions readers. It is important to note that some counselling responses are not published online for all to see.\textsuperscript{28} In practice, this means that some of the questions that deal with sexual relations are already being channelled away from the public eye. Still, it would seem that Maysoon would like all counselling exchanges about sexual relations to be private. However, this stance appears to run counter to the goals of creating sexual awareness that other counsellors share. Most of the Problems and Solutions counsellors believe that too little sex education is a pressing problem in Arab societies, which in turn creates: fear, taboos, ignorance and in consequence, unsatisfactory sexual relations. The counsellors advocate for sexual education with the goal of achieving gratifying sexual relations that satisfy both spouses, which in turn, is an important step towards a thriving marriage.

\textit{Lack of partnership}

In counselling essays, counsellors discuss how some wives consider sex a duty to their husbands, a token for his pleasure - and may even negatively sanction their husband by withholding sex. This is held to be counter-productive since sexual relations ought to be based on intimacy, love, warmness,
and mutual satisfaction (Abdel-Fadil, 2013b), According to Reem, a common problem in marital relations is ‘treating the other their way, without compromise or reaching common ground, then they discover differences they are not able to handle’. Thus, Reem calls for understanding the other’s needs, and a willingness to compromise. She maintains that if spouses are unable to reach ‘common ground’ this may jeopardize the marital relationship. In a similar vein, Maysoon states, ‘there is also the problem of selfishness… what he wants is not necessarily what you want. You have got to learn the other’s desires’. This relates to differentiating between the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ in a relationship. Both Reem and Maysoon are advocating for ‘togetherness’ in the marital unit, in order for it to work. Envisioning the relationship as some form of ‘togetherness’ has clear implications for intimacy on all levels. Elaborating on the concept of selfishness, Maysoon says:

Selfishness: ‘I should be happy, you should make me happy.’ Why not make each other happy? Even women say, ‘I am trying to make him happy’ - she will be doing it in a way that she thinks will make him happy - not in the way that will actually make him happy.

In her response, Maysoon describes how both spouses must learn about the one another’s needs, and then respond to them. Togetherness is dependent on learning to understand and accept the other. On a slightly different note, Reem shares her ideas about marital partnership:

mawada wa rahma (love and mercy, Quranic reference) in marriage. What does it mean? How do we achieve this? We can even disagree with the fiqh. We are not like some books that state that women were created to satisfy men. God did not create one gender for the satisfaction of the other. We have duties and commitments to one another [...] sexual relations, emotional, and body. There must be a deep communication between the two in order to achieve mawada wa rahma. We must break the axioms, the everyday beliefs about gender.

Qur’an verse 30:21, on the ‘tranquillity’ and ‘love and mercy’ (mawada wa rahma) of spousal relations is a common reference for ideal marital relations, and many counsellors refer to the example of the Prophet Mohammed in this context. The prophet Mohammed is portrayed as egalitarian and a
loving and affectionate husband. This is significant since the Prophet Mohammed serves as a model for emulation for contemporary Muslims. Here, Reem discusses mawada wa rahma: ‘What does it mean? How do we reach this?’ she asks. In her opinion, the answer lies in mutual obligations and commitment to one another on all levels, including sexual intimacy. In Reem’s view, achieving mawada wa rahma is contingent upon abandoning misogynist ideas of women being created for the satisfaction of men only. Another interesting aspect of the counsellors’ responses is that they mirror the way ideals for prospective spouses are changing in the Arab world. Whereas in the past, a husband’s main attribute was to be a reliable financial provider for wife and children, nowadays, at least for certain segments of society, an ideal husband is a partner in ‘deep communication’ who is both communicative and emotionally expressive. This type of masculinity ideal overlaps with what has been deemed ‘the new man’ in counselling literature, a point I will return to shortly. Elaborating on gender constructs, Samir says:

We are swimming in a sea full of myths, illusions, and fantasies. [...] You have to work with the conceptions. It is as if the man’s goal is sex and in return he can deal with some feelings. And the woman wants emotions, and therefore can give sex. That is ridiculous! (laughter). Both are human, both want sex and emotions, perhaps in different ways, or this may change at different times of women’s or men’s lives, or from woman to woman. But, the two want both things. But, these conceptions.... ‘Yeah. If a man gets close to a woman, he wants (only) one thing.’ And the man becomes programmed that if he wants (that) something from a woman, he must get close to her. You ruin the natural relationship.

Here, Samir is concerned about how myths about gender are ‘programmed’ into men and women and how they guide behaviour away from natural gender relations. Indeed, he argues that gender stereotypes affect not only the way men and women see one another, but also the way they see themselves. His other claim is that confessing to, and internalising the fact that women and men are not all that different from one another may positively impact sexual relations. The issue of togetherness, intimacy, and pleasurable sexual
relations are very much interlinked according to Problems and Solutions counsellors. Samir shares a revelation he had on this topic. In his own words:

I was trying to understand. It came gradually, it was like a <puzzle>, getting small parts, then I got the whole picture.[...]. I will try to remember some of the steps for you (....) sexual relations [...] Eventually I felt it was something deeper than this (....) the next revelation was that,’this is marriage without a relationship’!32 Same house, kids, sex (but) without a true, real relationship, in the human sense, love, and, and, and... this was <amazing> to me.33 This is common. Another step was the psychosexual (....) Now I believe it is related to the system of marriage, it is faulty from A to Z. Now I find those who say if we repair sexual relations, everything will be fine, silly. It is only a small part of the story [...] First we must admit that the whole system is faulty before we try to fix it. Those who say sexual relations, or choice of partner, that we must help people with these matters... Choose how? 30 minute sittings, three times? Choose without sufficiently knowing them? We must have sufficient time to start relations or else it is a choice in the dark.

In this excerpt, Samir explains how he had this epiphany of ’this is marriage without a relationship!’ Once again, Samir’s critique of the whole marriage system ‘from A to Z’ surfaces in his response. Samir is without a doubt the counsellor who is the most explicit about the whole marital system being faulty and formulates his critique of the entire marriage system into one condensed sentence. This sets him apart from the other counsellors. However, by putting together the arguments of any of the other counsellors, it is evident that they highlight a number of the very same problems that Samir critiques. Nonetheless, what is truly unique to Samir is the suggested remedy:

I am giving you a noovi34 idea (laughter), if we considered marriage a <healing partnership>... to heal both their (husband and wife) problematic backgrounds... If we think of it as therapeutic... It will make a huge difference. Marriage, expectations, needs, coalition, healing partnership, let’s consider it a healing programme! It will be a different entry. The system is faulty [...] until we sort that out, this is not
marriage, ok legally it is, but humanity and relationship-wise, it is not marriage. If we do this, we will benefit. I am entering (marriage) to heal and be healed.

In Samir’s analysis, marriages in the Arab world often lack a true relationship. This affects the psycho-sexual dynamics of the couple negatively. Samir’s proposed remedy is to consider marriage a ‘healing partnership’ where husband and wife together heal from the negative effects of their upbringing, including shame and sexual traumas. This is an original take on the problem of ‘a marriage system that is a fiasco from A to Z’. While none of the other counsellors suggest considering marriage as a healing relationship, several of them emphasize the importance of forging togetherness and a partnership. This emphasis on spouses seeing one another as ‘life-partners’ is echoed in counselling essays on IOL (Abdel-Fadil, 2013b). As will be illustrated, the ‘new man’ is particularly well-suited for a partnership with his wife.

**Men do not follow the example of the Prophet and ‘the New Man’**

The men over here have not been trained to express their feelings. Quite the opposite: ‘the man should not cry’ and I don’t know what... ‘the man who expresses his feelings is a woman’. You programmed the boy to not express his feelings, and then you want to press a button and have him express his feelings (all of a sudden)? How, you know?! (laughter). It will not happen. [...] We try to work with this, to men: forget this stuff about you not expressing your feelings... It is nonsense. - Samir

Intriguingly, Samir, discusses how Arab men have been socialized into a concept of manhood that does not allow for them to show emotions, such as crying. Samir calls on men to become more comfortable with expressing their emotions. This form of manhood can be seen as an exemplification of Connell and Messerschmidt’s (2005:832,838) concept of ‘hegemonic masculinity’:

Hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honored way of being a
man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it [...] Thus, hegemonic masculinities can be constructed that do not correspond closely to the lives of any actual men. Yet these models do, in various ways, express widespread ideals, fantasies, and desires. They provide models of relations with women and solutions to problems of gender relations. Furthermore, they articulate loosely with the practical constitution of masculinities as ways of living in everyday local circumstances. To the extent they do this, they contribute to hegemony in the society-wide gender order as a whole.

According to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) hegemonic masculinities are subject to both change and challenge. Here, Samir appears to be challenging hegemonic conceptualizations of Arab masculinity of being ‘tough’ and ‘assertive’ (Armbrust 2006, Peteet 1994). The alternative masculinity construct Samir proposes is a ‘softer’ version, a man who talks about his feelings and flirts with his wife - a man who is still a man if he weeps in public.

Furthermore, Samir’s call for men to become more comfortable expressing their emotions, is reminiscent of Illouz’s argument that the American popular psychology trend has produced a new, ‘softer’ ideal of masculinity. Illouz (2008) terms this ideal ‘the new man’, a man who is both more in touch with his feelings and able to express his emotions. ‘the new man’ can be considered a masculinity construct that challenges ‘hegemonic masculinity’. Moreover, the call for ‘the new man’ in the Problems and Solutions context looks for inspiration in the past, from the ideal character of the Prophet Mohammed. As exemplified by Omar:

[...] If a problem’s solution will become clearer by incorporating religious references like ahadith, we will do this. For example, using the Prophet as an example and role model for fathers could add strength to an argument, that fathers should spend more time and play with their children. You know, in Middle Eastern society this is not necessarily a given. Actually we ran an episode on Anā (short-lived satellite counselling channel) asking male viewers: if their child asked them to go down on all fours and be a camelback ride for them - would they accept? You would be surprised at the amount of fathers
who said, ‘No! I could never do that! That is indecent, etc. and here it is very called for to refer to ahadith about the Prophet’s relationship to his children and his playfulness. I mean, if the founder of the first nation of Muslims had the time and the ability to do this, so should other fathers! (laughter). The example of the camelback is good, because there is a hadith about the Prophet doing just this in his play with children. So in this context... to add extra vigour to an argument, the use of religious sources is very helpful.

Here, Omar uses the example of the Prophet to project the image of an ideal father, who is gentle and playful in his dealings with his children. The example of the Prophet is thus used to strengthen the call for Arab men to transform their ‘masculinity’ along these suggested lines. It can be interpreted as a challenge to hegemonic masculinity constructs. This is evidence of a call for a gentle form of Muslim masculinity, and is consistent with Samuel’s (2011:309) argument that constructs of Muslim masculinity, drawing on the example of the Prophet Mohammed, are being reconfigured towards a ‘gentler more feminised male’. I would point out that the ‘gentle Muslim masculinity ideal’ is also reminiscent of ’the new man’ ideal of contemporary American counselling and popular psychology as assessed by Illouz (2008), that is a man who is more emotionally available, actively participates in nurturing the family, and feminist. Similar pleas for a ‘new man’ are made in online counselling exchanges of Problems and Solutions (IslamOnline.net, 2004b). A number of IOL counselling essays explicitly address men on topics such as how to romance their wives, or how to create an intimate atmosphere. IOL also ran a series of counselling essays ‘what is wrong with...’, some of which were clearly addressed to male readers such as ‘what is wrong with a man saying he is sorry’. In these essays hegemonic masculinity constructs were explicitly challenged.

In the introductory quote from a counselling exchange, Samir invokes the example of the Prophet, who is portrayed as a loving, playful, intimate and romantic husband. The Prophet Mohammed is depicted as the ideal role model for contemporary husbands to emulate. Both Omar and Samir argue that if the leader of a nation of Muslims had the time to prioritize flirting and romancing, then, so should contemporary Muslim men. By citing the exemplary role of the Prophet, the counsellors add extra vigour to their
gender position. They are saying that not only are alternatives to hegemonic constructs of masculinity commendable, but that they are part an parcel of living by the sunna, the example of the Prophet’s life (Abdel-Fadil, 2011a). Arab countries are local contexts where religious interpretations carry a significant weight. Counsellors are well aware of the impact factor of religiously tailored arguments (Abdel-Fadil 2015).

The ‘new man’ in Problems and Solutions counselling also shares commonalities with the alternative, idealized, soft, masculinities in Egyptian melodrama - which are clearly pitted against hegemonic forms of masculinity (Abdel-Fadil and Van Eynde 2016). Such depictions of alternative masculinities send a clear message to Egyptian and other Arab men that they must evolve into softer and more egalitarian forms of masculinities. In a similar vein, some Problem and Solutions counsellors jokingly refer to Turkish soap operas dubbed in Syrian dialect, shaking many marriages in the Arab world. Particularly the lead character Muhannad in the series Noor is said to have lead to unrealistic expectations of the gentle, compassionate and romantic nature of an idealized husband, and to have contributed to marital conflicts. The Turkish soap opera hype and the widespread admiration for the dashing Muhannad represented as a soft-hearted ‘new man’ is to have created turmoil in numerous marriages in the Arab world, and has therefore received both journalistic and scholarly attention. In fact, heightened expectations to romantic partners based on comparisons to the dreamy heroes of Turkish soaps do pop up in Problems & Answers counselling exchanges. Still, it can be argued that Muslim ideals of masculinity depicted through the idealized character and gentle nature of the Prophet Mohammed as compassionate, soft-hearted and romantic man, share a number of the very same traits as the mesmerizing and ionic screen-character Muhannad, the alternative masculinities in Egyptian melodrama, and the ‘new man’ ideal in counselling literature.

Conclusion

Taboos, shame, and widespread ignorance about sexuality shape and create serious discord in sexual relations for many Arab couples, according to Problems and Solutions counsellors. The overarching goal is thus to create awareness about sexual relations, thereby enlightening Arab populations
and eradicating ignorance and fear. Most counsellors believe it is important to discuss sexual relations because this may contribute to both healing and improving marriages.

Problems and Solutions counsellors’ counselling perspectives and skills focus connects them to global therapeutic trends. Nonetheless, the Problems and Solutions counselling service also has a distinctly local flavour. The types of problems that husbands and wives write in about point to particular relational problems prevalent in the Arab world. The counsellors link sexual problems at the micro-level to societal problems at the macro-level - problems they consider specific to Arab and Muslim contexts. One such example is the practice of *taqlīdī* marriages, marriages where the spouses have very limited knowledge of each other before tying the knot, which may have serious repercussions throughout the marriage - not least in intimate relations.

Counsellors list the local societal problems that they believe affect marital life, and prescribe remedies such as increasing self-awareness, sexual awareness, bettering communication skills and broadening the range of gender roles.

One interesting local adaptation that shapes Problems and Solutions counselling is the use of religious knowledge to undermine what counsellors consider to be prevalent erroneous interpretations of gender attributed to Islam. A fascinating example of this is projecting the Prophet Mohammed as a ’soft masculinity’ for Arab men to emulate. Intriguingly, this form of masculinity is both reminiscent of the ‘new man’ promoted in global trends of family therapy, and of the romantic heroes of Egyptian melodramas and popular Turkish soap operas.

Cultivating sexual awareness and teaching tools of communication and problem-solving at the level of the individual can be considered important remedies that help ward off sexual ignorance in the Arab world. The goal for Problems and Solutions counsellors is not only to help ‘fix’ a relational problem, but also to contribute to reforms in marital practices and perspectives on gender and sexuality that would in turn help improve relationships between spouses in the future. This is why the Problems and Solutions counselling exchanges about sexual relations are published for all to see.
- and learn from. In this sense, the ambition of Problems and Solutions counselling is grander than simply counselling individual counselees about sexuality. Assisting counselees in solving a sexual problem is, from this perspective, only a temporary solution at the micro-level. What is really needed is a series of larger societal reforms at the macro-level, that will benefit the intimate lives of all husbands and wives. The overarching goal of Problems and Solutions counselling is to assist Arab populations in cultivating both the knowledge and the necessary skills to nourish healthy marriages and satisfying sexual relationships -in every possible way.

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References


Notes

1 This is one of the instances in which more than one counsellor responded to the query of the counselee.

2 In an effort to reach audiences with limited Internet access and hence overcome the digital divide, Islam Online published counselling exchanges on a range of themes in an affordable book-format. This quote is from one such book, but was originally published online.

3 The excerpt from Problems and Solutions has been formatted differently, so as to not confuse it with quotes from interviews, later on in the text. It is my own translation into English from Arabic script.

4 Religious opinions on what is permitted or prohibited in Islam.

5 Problems and Solutions user statistics indicate that there is an over-representation of female users from Egypt and Saudi Arabia and that most users are young and educated surfing either from home or work, suggesting a middle class affiliation (Abdel-Fadil 2011a).
Due to funds being pulled from On Islam (Arabic) in the post-Mubarak transition, the counselling service has not been active since then - but a decade of previous counselling exchanges was still available and searchable on their website, well into 2013. At the time of writing (February 2016), the website appears to be temporarily suspended, possibly due to Mr. Hisham Gaffar, one of the prominent journalists of On Islam (and previous Islam Online) being behind bars. Media reports indicate and campaigns for his release state that he has been imprisoned under allegations of being a member of the banned organization The Muslim Brotherhood and of operating illegally with the aid of foreign funds. This dire situation reflects political tensions in Egypt. Despite protests from a spectrum of concerned citizens and activists, Mr. Gaffar has not been released.

By virtue of being of partial Egyptian decent, in the field, I am neither fully an ‘insider’ nor an ‘outsider’ but fluctuate somewhere in between. I understand most cultural codes, but am nonetheless not entirely immersed in them. In addition, my research participants and I have overlapping modes of professional knowledge, since I have previously worked as a counsellor. In my view, my counselling background has been as important as being a partial ‘insider’ with regards to both facilitating my fieldwork, and the subsequent analysis. In this sense my study can be considered a case of what Hannerz (2004) calls ‘studying sideways’. During my fieldwork, I observed first hand, how those responsible for running the Problems and Solutions counselling service were not just passionate about raising awareness with regards to consensual sexual relations, but were also ardent about creating awareness about societal taboos such as rape and incest (Abdel-Fadil, 2013a).


Anonymization of the quotes is done in light of recent developments in Egypt and following the imprisonment of Mr. Gaffar.

The show explicitly deals with sexual relations and Islam, and at times in a most graphic fashion. The producers of Kalām kibēr consider the show pioneering in the way it talks about sexual relations (Swank 2007).

For instance 55 percent of those polled in an American survey, listed ‘relationship issue with partner’ as their reason for seeking online counselling (Pollock, 2006).

This is an emic concept, and the main trope of what I have analysed as IOL’s ‘institutional narrative’, building on Linde (2001). For more details on ‘the message’ and IOL’s institutional narrative, see Abdel-Fadil 2011b, 2013a.
13 Over the last decade or two, Arabic satellite channels have been following suite. For instance the MBC program Kalām Nawa'ēm, which translates as ‘sweet Talk’ is a hit.

14 ‘Home-grown’ adaptation of secular counselling models to fit religious values, is commonplace amongst religiously committed counsellors in other corners of the world as well (Onedera 2008; Zinnbauer and Pargament 2000).

15 I was unable to secure myself a copy for this very reason.

16 These techniques are in accordance with general guidelines for online counsellors (Murphy, & Mitchell, 1998).

17 As a general rule premarital (or extramarital) sexual relationships are considered ‘illicit’ (zina) and beyond ‘Islamic boundaries’ by the counsellors. Yet, ideals do not always match reality, and counsellors often receive questions relating to ‘illicit’ relationships as illustrated in Abdel-Fadil (2015), counsellors are well attuned to counselees’ weaknesses but may have different ‘zones of toleration’ (Worthington et al., 2008) on the basis of which their responses may vary from clear-cut admonishment to a more forgiving approach.

18 All subsequent quotes from Samir are from this interview. All interviews were conducted by myself in the colloquial Egyptian dialect of Arabic. All translations into English are my own. I have improved some translations of quotes since I last quoted from the same interview. This has to do with the fact that with the benefit of time and distance, it easier to detect residues of direct translations from Arabic into English which make little sense to non-Arabic speakers. I have therefore taken the liberty of bettering the English, even though some segments have been published elsewhere, regrettably in less comprehensible English.

19 The Problems and Solutions counsellors’ stance on religious commitment places a lot of emphasis on mu‘amalāt that is interactions between humans rather than merely performing rituals of worship (,ībadāt) (Abdel-Fadil, 2011a).

20 All subsequent quotes from Lamia are from this interview.

21 The Problems and Solutions counsellors’ analysis of counselees not knowing how to choose spouses or focusing on superficial selection criteria is consistent with the findings of Peterson and Abu Hashsish’s (1999) study of matchmaking in Cairo. In this study, men’s main criteria for selecting a prospective wife were: marital status (never married) and attractiveness, while women viewed education and financial status as their ‘top criteria’ for prospective husbands.
22 All subsequent quotes from Reem are from this interview.

23 Words bracketed in this fashion signify that the word was inserted in English in the midst of a conversation conducted in colloquial Egyptian.

24 All subsequent quotes from Khaled are from this interview.

25 This is not a word but a sound effect or jingle signalling a swift transformation.

26 This is a sound effect (not a word), added for comic effect and to signal a sudden shift of scene.

27 Here, pronounced ‘EZO’ in Arabic. This is a reference to the standards developed by the International Organization for Standardization. See http://www.iso.org/iso/home.html for more information.

28 This is either in response to the request of the counselee or based on a decision the counsellors make based on the sensitivity of the topics discussed.

29 This ideal is specific to certain socio-economic and educated segments of society.

30 Illouz (2008) discusses how the term ‘new man’ has been used in counselling literature to describe new masculine ideals from the 1980s an onwards. In an Arab context see for instance Inhorn (2012) and Naguib (2015) for recent ethnographic research on the concept of ‘new man’.

31 Samir also conveys that gender stereotypes are a universal problem.

32 Emphasis in speech.

33 Another example of the mixture of English and Arabic: amazing is said in English, while the rest of the sentence is in Arabic.

34 Slang for ‘new’ or ‘innovative’.

35 Arguments about the Prophet Mohammed’s egalitarian nature, his taking part in household chores and child-rearing for instance (not only claims to his playfulness and romanticism) have been put forward in other contexts. See for instance, Mernissi (1995) and Abdel-Fadil (2002).

36 The emphasis on preferable forms of masculinities is indeed a crucial point, since melodramas in the Arab world target mixed gender audiences and are often viewed by nearly as many men as women.
See for instance Gubash (2008), Buccianti (2010), Salamandra (2012) for more on how Arab audiences are entranced by Turkish soap operas. Their critical analysis shows that the character Muhannad represents far more, than an idealized soft-hearted, romantic McDreamy who swears his utter devotion to his beloved and challenges patriarchal structures. This of course does not alter the way the character is perceived in everyday imaginations.
When Shaming Backfires: The Doublespeak of Digitally-Manipulated Misogynistic Photographs

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Abstract:

This study examines the case of an iconic digitally-manipulated news photograph, a controversial product of political propaganda featuring Majid Tavakoli, a student leader of the Iranian opposition in 2009, human rights activist, and political prisoner. The photograph depicts Mr. Tavakoli wearing a chador, traditional women’s clothing in Iran, and appears to be digitally manipulated with the help of image-editing software. Published during the “Green Movement” protests of 2009, it triggered controversy and the production of a series of political memes mocking the Iranian authorities. This study analyzes how misogynistic shaming tactics utilized to discredit Mr. Tavakoli failed, transforming his digitally-manipulated image into the symbol of resistance. Accounting for the role of social media in raising awareness about the public’s discontent regarding gender inequality, human rights violations, and media censorship in Iran, the study extends the typology of standard photojournalistic icons (Perlmutter, 1998) by adding the dimension of credibility to categorize ambiguous digitally-manipulated photojournalistic content in contentious times.

Keywords:

Iran, gender, journalism, photography, censorship, Internet, media studies, social media

Introduction

In December of 2009, many Iranian men went online to post photos of themselves wearing headscarves.\(^1\) Aimed at raising awareness about human rights violations and women’s rights, this social media campaign was triggered by the publication of a photograph that portrayed Majid Tavakoli, one of the outspoken critics of the Iranian authorities. Published by FARS\(^2\) and IRNA,\(^3\) pro-government news agencies, the photograph depicted him wearing a chador.\(^4\) This case of the journalistic digitally-manipulated photo-
graph portraying Majid Tavakoli can be used as a lens to explore misogyny as a phenomenon of political technology, media tradition, and culture in the Islamic Republic of Iran during the “Green Movement” protests.\(^5\)

Intended to discredit and shame Mr. Tavakoli by showing him cross-dressed as a woman, the publication of this digitally-manipulated photograph ultimately backfired at the Iranian authorities and government-controlled media, paving the way to satirical social media campaigns that ridiculed the leaders of Iran (Tait, 2009). Following the publication of Tavakoli’s photograph, the opposition supporters utilized social networks and the Internet to disseminate political memes, i.e. user-generated and digitally-manipulated visual media that relied on satire (Shifman, 2004; Rahimi, 2015). Social media users digitally manipulated photographs of Iranian leaders, producing memes that featured Iranian state leaders in headscarves in a manner similar to that of Tavakoli. Given the role of media as an intermediary between the authorities and the public, Tavakoli’s digitally-manipulated photographs and political memes of Iranian leaders that originated from it became symbols of resistance during the biggest protests since the late 1970s in Iran.

To frame this article theoretically, it should be noted that the age of media convergence created a suitable environment for the controversial digitally-manipulated photograph of Majid Tavakoli to enter the online circulation (Perlmutter, 2003) as an iconic image, a news photograph (Hariman and Lucaites, 2002), and a political meme. The social media campaigns relying on political memes called for justice and attention of the international community to the situation of women in Iran and the ease with which misogynistic stereotypes can be used to shame any individual. The “Green Movement” protests of 2009 triggered the desire of Iranians to employ satire to raise awareness about violations of the rights of political prisoners, human rights in general and women’s rights in particular (Osborne, 2013).\(^6\)

That the “Green Movement” demonstrations of 2009 presented many opportunities for the media to produce mega media events merits research attention, since the coverage of the protests stimulated intense public involvement, representing the “history in the making” moments for the Iranian nation regarding sensitive social, political, religious, and cultural issues (Dayan and Katz, 1992). Comprised of multiple media narratives, the me-
dia coverage of “Green Movement” rallies constructed media events that contributed to the tone of the future Iranian presidential elections. Voicing the expectations of the public and the authorities, it provided venues for the re-examination of the status quo; contributing to the creation of the media culture, it stimulated public discussion.

Due to their ambiguous nature - since only the producers of memes can be certain whether a specific event referenced in the digitally-manipulated photographs has happened - the digitally-manipulated photographs can sway the public opinion or cast doubt. This ability makes them perfect ideological conduits that funnel their messages through digital manipulation, sustained by media censorship. The tone of the media coverage during the major media events depends on the political atmosphere and mainstream religious sentiments in the countries where religion’s role in politics is crucial. Hence, the conclusions drawn from the investigation of digitally-manipulated photographs depicting major political media events can enhance an understanding of the interrelationships between the political and the religious institutions in the countries with similar media systems to those of Iran (Hallin and Mancini, 2004; Moe and Sjovaag, 2008). For instance, political memes can elaborate on the information censorship in the country, where republicanism co-exists with religion, and where the media system is considered to be an “interactive, dynamic, and convergent .. [with] .. religious communication” (Bahonar, 2009, p. 242).

The purpose of this article is to reveal digitally-manipulated photographs and political memes as tools of propaganda charged with cultivated and long-established gendered stereotypes, given the major media events and their packaging by the media. In order to do that, this article fits digitally-manipulated photographs within the typology of standard elements of photojournalistic icons, celebrated products of photojournalism (Perlmutter and Wagner, 2004). Building upon the elements of typology for photojournalistic icons (Perlmutter, 1998), this article extends it to include digitally-modified photographs to examine them through the lens of credibility in the context of the Iranian media system and the strategic communication tools it employs for media coverage. Specifically, the digitally-manipulated iconic photograph of Majid Tavakoli and discussions regarding the tactics of political shaming associated with it offer a possibility for making conclu-
sions regarding the role of social media in the country, where the state and religion are inseparable. Investigating the case of the iconic social media photograph of Tavakoli, this study seeks to demonstrate how established and newly published symbols, mediated by social media, change their original meanings, transforming public attitudes regarding gender inequality and human rights violations.

To contextualize the situation in the Iran before and after political memes gained popularity, a review of conditions related to the gender inequality, media censorship, role of the religion in the state-making, and violations of human rights is necessary.7

Gender inequality and the making of media events in Iran

Some of the world’s major disparities regarding gender equality are ubiquitous in the Iranian society. The Islamic Republic of Iran was ranked 137th out of 142 countries on the Global Gender Gap Index (World Economic Forum, 2014). As of 2009, the labor force consisted of 18 percent of women versus 86 percent of men. The number of women in the labor force decreased to 16 percent in 2013 (Statistical Centre of Iran, 2013). On average, women’s salaries are up to five times less than those of men’s. Aimed at increasing country’s population, multiple edicts issued by the Iranian authorities during the regime of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei made the situation regarding women’s participation in labor force even more problematic.8 Habitually disqualifying female candidates during the elections since the early 1980s, the Islamic Republic of Iran, especially during its Ahmadinejad period, has become known to the world as one of the countries that achieved an anti-record regarding women’s political participation.

Media censorship, access to information, and media coverage

Even though media censorship was present before the early 2000s in Iran, and women’s and gender issues were a particular target, Iranians were still able to visit some international sites until 2009, the year of the mass “Green Movement” protests. After the protests, the Iranian media system adopted media censorship as a predominant method of operation. For instance, to prevent any information about human rights abuse reaching the international community, the Iranian authorities strengthened existent media censor-
ship and Internet filtering regulations (e.g., by banning the access to foreign websites associated with politics). In general, the media content was censored if it was associated with articles about (1) art and culture, (2) media and journalism (e.g., biographies of journalists, news services in Farsi offered by major western news agencies, such as BBC-Persian), (3) human rights (e.g., human rights violations, gender issues, and critiques of the regime), (4) religion (e.g., Baha’i), (5) sex and sexuality (e.g., pornographic videos), (6) civil and political rights (e.g., the protests and controversial elections), and (7) other content related to different realms of life that may be considered inappropriate by the Iranian authorities (Anderson and Nazeri, 2013).

A series of media censorship techniques helped the Iranian authorities to stop the strategic communication tools of international social and popular mobilization movements, including color revolutions that changed the political regimes in several Eastern European countries, from being transported to Iran. To prevent people from using social networks as a means of spreading news about Iran, the authorities blocked social networks such as Facebook immediately after the first protests of 2009. Hence, only the people who knew how to avoid the Internet filters through proxy servers were able to access social networks. Moreover, to prevent Iranians from coordinating their actions during protests, the authorities practiced shutting down mobile communications.

Acknowledging that “politics of the protest animates demonstrations not only through public squares, but also, and it happens more often than not, through the media” (Cottle, 2008, p. 853), the authorities and the Iranian opposition craved for media attention. In pursuit of the media spotlight, the Iranian authorities shut down the oppositional newspapers or media that expressed reluctance to favor the authorities in the media coverage (CNN report, 2009). As a result, the Iranian media were limited to publishing only “what was permitted,” refraining from publishing “what was possible” (Debord, 1994, p. 20). Furthermore, in a situation when international journalists were banned from Iran, “the ruling order” was able to win the battle for the domestic media attention, overwhelming the public with the monologues of self-praise and political shaming of those who opposed it. Implementing strict policies regarding domestic media coverage, the Islamic government aimed to limit the coverage of any media events related to
the “Green Movement.” Instead, the pro-government media often cited the Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who referred to the opposition supporters and participants of the anti-government protests as “dust and dirt” (New York Post, 2009). The demonization of the opposition supporters, while relying on religious references, was one of the most important tasks of media censorship in making the protesters invisible and authorities of the Islamic Republic of Iran invincible.

**Representations of women’s rights and gender inequality in media and society**

Given the restrictions on public appearance and behavior in Iran, a comparison of the differences in the treatment of men and women regarding basic human rights in Iran and the Western world may not suffice, because it can lead to misleading conclusions (Osanloo, 2000). The dichotomous structure of the political life in the Islamic Republic of Iran that relies both on republicanism and Islam has resulted in “the Islamization of ...[women's]... social and legal rights” (Moghissi, 2009). Hence, the question of how to approach women’s rights remains controversial (Afshari, 2012), even though Baderin (2007) claims that Islam can contribute to solving complex issues regarding human rights in Iran. Nevertheless, mapping the structure of gender inequalities can contribute to an understanding of why and how some Iranians defy the regime, despite the restrictions established by the state and religion.

As the Iranian society was de-secularized after the Shah was deposed during the revolution of 1979 (Matin-Asgari, 2006), both men and women were required to obey multiple restrictions, enforced by the police (Afshari, 2001; Afary, 2004). For example, unmarried men and women cannot date, kiss or hold hands in public (Sciolino, 2000). But in comparison to men, unmarried women cannot travel without the consent of their male relative. In contrast to men, women can only file for divorce under certain circumstances. Moreover, the punishment for marital infidelity is more severe for women than for men, and can include fining, stoning, and flogging. Even though the Shi’ite Iranian tradition of temporary marriage allows men to have intimate relationships with women, including sex, for a limited period of time, men can have many temporary wives at the same time, whereas women can only marry one temporary husband (Boe, 2015). Woman’s virginity is also not considered a personal matter. If a woman is detained by the police for being on a date with a man, she can be a subject to a virginity exam. If the results of a virginity exam performed on an unmarried woman show that she is not a virgin, she faces punishment.
The institutionalized control over women and their bodies and the restrictions on public behavior and appearance contributed to the plethora of media shaming tactics aimed at causing a political or community death of ordinary citizens in Iran. Iranian media heavily relied on exploiting restrictions, religious traditions, and gender stereotypes. Shaming tactics contributed to building a stigma, which branded a person as the “untouchable,” an outcast (Goffman, 1963). Stigmatization made it easier for the society to spot the enemy, who is believed to be responsible for the past or future plight of the community. In Iran, the misogynistic shaming tactics associated with gender stereotypes became typical for the country where “[b]eing a woman is considered so shameful that if you are an outspoken male opposition supporter in Iran, the press will release a picture of you wearing a headscarf and chador to humiliate you” (Muslim Media Watch, 2010). This quote, applied to the digitally-manipulated photograph of Majid Tavakoli, can explain why the authorities relied on his depiction in women’s clothing as a shaming tactic.

Despite multiple restrictions on public behavior, Iranian people invented multiple ways of defying them. For instance, since Iranian culture has strict rules regarding women wearing makeup; many defy these restrictions by wearing layers of makeup (so that the outer layer could be removed on the demand of the moral police, whereas the inner layer could stay). This is only one example of how Iranian women are expressing their protest and defy the established restrictions (Mahdavi, 2008). The ritual of expressing the protest was covered by *The New York Post* in June of 2009. Contributing to the international iconology of the “Green Movement,” it highlighted “[t]he red nail polish, black eyeliner and side-swept bangs of young Iranian women,” labeling them as “the symbols of dissent,” which were:

So conservative by American standards, yet revolutionary by Iranian ones: these women, who by law can do and say and expose and adorn almost nothing, are agitating for the most basic human rights in the smallest of ways (New York Post, 2009).

**Gendered stereotypes in media frames**

Providing a comprehensive media coverage of the Iranian authorities’ actions, the Iranian media tended to omit information about the opposition or
mock the opposition supporters, while relying on gender stereotypes and including them in the media coverage templates. The instances when domestic Iranian media distorted the information about protests to favor the Iranian authorities were omnipresent. For instance, after the arrest of the daughter of one of the opposition leaders, the media covered this event in an article entitled: “The daughter of the opposition leader was arrested during the demonstrations to be protected from the rioters” (Anon, 2009a). Relative silence of the media on the account of women’s rights and human rights violations can be explained not only by the union of the state and religion in the Islamic Republic of Iran, but also by the media censorship practices. Since many political prisoners were detained when expressing their protest against the regime, many of them faced accusations of criticizing senior religious clerics, values of the Islamic revolution of 1979, and core values of Islam. As a result, when covering media events related to human rights violations, the media would habitually reference religious myths, while blaming the political prisoners for causing sedition and turmoil among conscientious public of the Islamic Republic of Iran.13

In addition to the established practices of not talking about human rights violations and “Green Movement” protests, the government stimulated the information blockade of the Islamic Republic. The main premise of this decision was to maintain the status quo and to avoid reporting human rights violations that peaked during the “Green Movement” protests. Tightened censorship of all media and absence of foreign journalists, who were sent out of the country as the protests of 2009 became more populous, ensured the existence of the information vacuum, which was filled with the media statements approved by the government. Numerous instances of abuse and torture of political prisoners were left unreported and only occasionally reached domestic or global media.

Even though the information about political prisoner abuse was sparse, tortures had become an established ritual in prisons throughout the Islamic Republic of Iran that were mostly omitted by the official media coverage, but known to the masses through word-of-mouth (Abrahamian, 1999; Afshari, 2001). Iranians also knew that the practices of torture were genderless. Despite the fact that Henderson (2004, p. 1034) categorizes virginity tests along with threats of rape and actual rape as forms of an “essentially women’s repression,” Iranian political prisoners arrested during the protests
of 2009 were often subject to rape regardless of their gender while in prison or under investigation (Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, 2011). These practices of demasculinization intensified an existing gender divide in Iran, spotlighting the privilege to be a man as opposed to a misfortune to be a woman - or treated as if one were a woman - in the Iranian society. As one of the most infamous and well-publicized practices of demasculinization that aimed to destroy a person’s reputation, banishing him from participating in the political life of the country, a digitally-manipulated photograph of Tavakoli disseminated by the media, portrayed him not only a protester/rioter, but also as a person who practices cross dressing. Relying on the media as a propaganda device and gendered stereotypes as tools of communication that are capable of being perceived as credible by the public, the Iranian authorities attempted to create a photojournalistic icon that would feature the anti-hero, who can be blamed for the disruption of peace in the society governed by the state and religion.

Credibility and legitimization of media coverage

Almost every media story about the protests of 2009 contained multiple comparisons of the events that happened in 2009 to the events that happened during the time of Mohammad and his disciples. The pro-government media metaphorically compared the “Green Movement” protesters or the United States and Israel to the enemies of the prophet who were always defeated by him and his disciples. Iranian media referred to the people of Iran who support the authorities as victorious disciples of the prophet (party of Hossein), who were able to defeat those serving the enemy (party of Yazid). Furthermore, citing multiple references to the meanings of religious holidays and not necessarily the interactions that happened on those holidays between the protesters and the police, the Iranian media broadcast only the information strengthening the general public’s belief in the state and state leaders as the paramount authorities in interpreting religious traditions and books for Iranians. For instance, to emphasize the condemnation of the opposition supporters and to praise those who support the Iranian authorities (metaphorically represented by Hossein and his supporters), Iran wrote an article entitled: “[w]eeks after insulting the founder of the Islamic Revolution, the rioters insulted reverence of Ashura; the people mourning for Hossein clashed with rioters in central streets of Tehran following which the
rioters had to flee” (Anon, 2009b). Hence, not only Iranian media sustained the Iranian authorities’ right to be the only interpreters of religious texts, it also made it clear to the public that the Iranian authorities’ interpretations of the events, if framed in religious terms, cannot be questioned.

The pro-government media always presented media coverage of the opposition supporters in a disparaging manner. For instance, when covering violent confrontations between the protesters and the police, the pro-government newspapers tended to shift the blame from the police to opposition, assuring the public that the opposition supporters as rioters who disturb the peace would be punished. Iranian media glorified those citizens who supported the Iranian authorities, framing the media spectacle of disparaging the opposition supporters with their help. To back the government claims about the public suffering from the protesters, *Iran* quoted Tehran Chief of police: “People filed 10 thousand complaints to the rioters” (Anon, 2009c).

Mainstreaming the public opinion that the majority of the public supports the Islamic government, Iranian media emphasized: “The people mourning for Hossein in Tehran didn’t spare the rioters” (Anon, 2009d). In general, Iranian media broadcast the official government rhetoric of denying opposition any chance of being seen by the public in a good light: “The presence of people neutralized the sedition” (Anon, 2009e). To back the government claims about the public suffering from the protesters, Iranian media constructed a myth about threats to the united society that emanate from the opposition, by quoting the police chief of Tehran: “[p]resence of insurgents and members of terrorist groups along with their use of weapons are the main cause of fatalities” (Anon, 2009f).

The Iranian media coverage of the protests demonstrated that while using references to religion as signifiers for righteousness, the pro-government media strategically utilized religion to legitimize the practices of vilification through creating a series of symbolic social dramas in society (Venger, 2016). In order to enhance the trustworthiness of media events, Iranian media frequently used religious metaphors that made references to the good and the bad when comparing the authorities and the opposition. Religious references in media legitimized media coverage, adding much needed authority and credibility to the statements. Respected and followed by the majority of the public in everyday life, they contributed to persuading the public
that media coverage is trustworthy. Additionally, media also relied on gen-
dered stereotypes to convey their messages and make them more effective, since some gendered representations and stereotypes are well-established and mainstreamed in the Iranian society. The next section elaborates on the attributes of Tavakoli’s photograph as a photojournalistic icon and how it became a political meme, which surpassed in its effectiveness the Iranian media’s practices of using religious references as tools of strategic commu-
nication.

Theorizing photojournalistic icons

The digitally-manipulated photograph of Majid Tavakoli fits into the typo-
logy of the standard elements of a photojournalistic icon, comprised of the following: (1) importance of the event depicted, (2) metonymy, (3) celebrity, (4) prominence of display, (5) frequency of use, and (6) primordiality (Per-
lmutter, 1998).

The first element of a photojournalistic icon is the importance of the event. Tavakoli was previously detained for criticizing the regime. He was also a well-known leader of the opposition. The publication of his photograph in a chador made the political persona of Majid Tavakoli even more important in Iran, because the photograph triggered debates about his ability to lead the opposition, as it portrayed Tavakoli in a disparaging for an Iranian man manner.

The second element of a photojournalistic icon is metonymy, represented by the ability of images to embody the greater events. The publication of Majid Tavakoli’s photo was intended to disgrace him. However, as the discussion around the credibility of the photos intensified, the misogynistic meaning of the photograph got reversed by the Iranian public who defied the regime and expressed protest.

The third element of a photojournalistic icon is the celebrity status of the image. The photo of Tavakoli achieved a celebrity status not only because he was one of the leaders of the student opposition, but also as a result of the online discussions centered on whether it was digitally manipulated. After the image-editing of the photograph was evident, the opposition supporters digitally modified the photographs of the most powerful men in Iran. Por-
traying them in chadors, they used the same image-editing techniques that were utilized by the media who digitally manipulated the image of Tavakoli. That is how the misogynistic portrayal of Majid Tavakoli backfired at those who wanted to discredit him.

The fourth attribute of the iconic news photograph, id est, prominence of display, is closely related to the fifth element of the photojournalistic image, id est, frequency of use. In the case of Majid Tavakoli’s photograph, the authorities and opposition used it frequently for different purposes. Digital manipulation of the photographs, if noticed, stimulated public debate, resulting in the prominence of display and frequency of use.

The final element of the photojournalistic image is the primordiality - “a theme embedded in a specific visual and literary culture” (Perlmutter, 1998, p. 101). The primordial theme represented in Tavakoli’s photograph is that of the conflict between the opposition and the authorities. Even though the authorities were successful in persuading some of the public that the elections were legitimate, they failed to unite the country. As a result of the alleged fraud committed during the presidential elections of 2009, the society was divided.

The standards of photojournalistic icons can be applied to Tavakoli’s photograph not only because he was a leader of the opposition, but also because the photograph gained the iconic status by multiple people reposting it online. Since people who raised awareness about the photograph were concerned if the image was edited, the typology of the standards of photojournalistic icons should be extended to analyze digitally-manipulated content, accounting for its credibility. The credibility of the photograph stands for any retouching/airbrushing of the original photograph performed with the help of image-editing technologies, which is discussed in the next section.

Credibility of photojournalistic icons on social media

The photo of Majid Tavakoli (Figure 1a) stimulated the debates centered on whether it was airbrushed with image-editing software from the first moments of its publication. The discussions of digital manipulation ignited the debate about the credibility of information regarding his arrest. Bloggers posted detailed descriptions of the digital manipulations performed on Tavakoli’s photographs (Figure 1b).
Introducing the attribute of credibility to the typology of standard elements of photojournalistic icons, this study posits that the investigation of the role performed by the digitally-manipulated content is possible by accounting for credibility of the image. The proposed extended typology of photojournalistic icons accounts for (1) the event that took place, (2) the intended effect of the digital manipulation, (3) the credibility of the photograph based on the features of digital manipulation, and (4) techniques of digital manipulation (Table 1). The addition of the dimension of credibility to the typology of photojournalistic icons accounts for the demand of the digital era, where the digitization of information is almost unavoidable. As an attribute of an extended typology, credibility encompasses the ability of the photograph to depict the situation as it happened without adding or removing anything to or from it.

The extended typology for photojournalistic icons can be applied when analyzing a content of digitally-modified photojournalistic icons (Figure 1a) and political memes (Figure 1c). For example, the relatively easy procedure of making political memes by image-editing the original photographs of Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who was an Iranian President from 2005 to 2013 (Figure 1c and 1d), provided additional context to how the photo of Majid Tavakoli could have been digitally manipulated.

When considering the credibility of the image and the role of social media, the analysis of a photojournalistic icon reveals media events in a new light. According to Hudson (2013): “...at its best, social media has given a voice to the disenfranchised. At its worst, it’s a weapon of mass reputation destruction...” The case of Majid Tavakoli’s photograph demonstrates how the authorities attempted to use media, including social media, to destroy the reputation of the opposition and its leader. It also shows how social media gave voice to the opposition, transforming not only the meaning of the photograph, but also reversing the meaning of gendered stereotypes.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The event that took place</th>
<th>The intended effect of the digital manipulation</th>
<th>Credibility of the photograph: Features of digital manipulation noted in the coverage of the media event</th>
<th>Techniques of digital modification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Majid Tavakoli, a leader of student opposition is shown wearing women’s clothing</td>
<td>Create and contribute to the atmosphere of shaming of the opposition leader</td>
<td>The photograph portrays Tavakoli with one hand and the other hand is missing, as if it was chopped off</td>
<td>Image-editing software (e.g., Microsoft Paint or Adobe Photoshop) is used to portray Tavakoli wearing chador and headscarf</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Credibility as an attribute of the iconic digitally-manipulated photographs and political memes.

Iranian social media users ruined the attempt of the authorities to destroy the reputation of Tavakoli in 2009. They did so by discussing the evidence of the photograph’s digital manipulation and raising awareness about it online. Acting upon their discovery that the photograph was digitally manipulated and to express their protest with the actions of the authorities and human rights situation in the country, the opposition supporters bestowed a new meaning of resistance to the regime upon the photograph and upon the stereotype of cross dressing as a woman. In contrast to the pro-government media that rarely provided a balanced coverage of the protests, social media gave a voice to the opposition and provided opportunities for glorifying the underdog in the case of Tavakoli and for women’s rights in general.
Discussion

This article set out to explore the role of misogyny, digitally-manipulated content, and social media in the case of a digitally-modified journalistic news photograph that became an icon. The news photograph of Tavakoli, a controversial product of political propaganda, was published in a society infamous for political prisoner abuse, human rights violations, and gender inequality. Examining the selection of news pieces about the “Green Movement” protests published in the Iranian newspapers in 2009, this article accounted for the role of religious media references and gendered stereotypes in the legitimization of media events. Contextualizing the research on the digital manipulation of the photojournalistic icons within the two pillars of the Islamic Republic of Iran, i.e. the state and religion, this study demonstrated the complexity and impossibility of solving the issues related to gender inequality, political prisoners’ rights, and human rights without accounting for the role of the state and religion in Iran.

The ability of any country’s media to produce and disseminate photojournalistic icons can solidify stereotypes, which contributes to stigma, but it can also dispel them. After the Iranian authorities arrested Tavakoli and institutionalized the process of political meme-making through supporting the Iranian media’s efforts in the dissemination of Tavakoli’s digitally-manipulated photograph, Tavakoli’s supporters started the social media campaign in his support. These efforts paved the way for other campaigns, with Iranian men and men of other nations sharing on the World Wide Web their cross-dressing selfies they took to protest sexism and misogyny (e.g., Kurd Men for Equality). Donning chadors, they protested against the practice of punishing criminals, who routinely were ordered by court to be paraded on the streets in women’s clothing (The Daily Beast, 2013). Given the importance of public etiquette in the Iranian society, the government propaganda relied on the political repression and misogyny to vilify those who defy the authorities. At the same time, the supporters of opposition and those who wanted to express their protest chose to do so by reversing the meaning of the media events covered in the pro-government media and spreading awareness about how to defy the authorities on social media.

The misogynist shaming tactics used for the purpose of shaming Majid Tavakoli by the Iranian media were supposed to be successful because of the
deplorable condition of women’s rights in Iran; however, the participatory nature of social media helped to transform the meaning of Majid Tavakoli’s photograph from one that tarnishes his reputation to one that glorifies it. Thousands of Iranian men defied the regime by logging into their social media accounts through proxy servers in order to reach out to domestic and international audiences, telling the story of Tavakoli. Questioning the ambiguity of digitally-manipulated photographs in general and Tavakoli’s photograph specifically – which has been sustained by the Iranian media, in part, through media censorship – social media users resorted to examining the photograph’s credibility. Conducting the analysis of the photograph and investigating the possibility of digital modifications, the opposition supporters also raised awareness about the practice of media censorship regarding the major media events in the country. The social media users reinvigorated an image of Tavakoli, glorifying him for his resistance to the regime. An underdog detained by the authorities for his protesting against human rights violations in Iran, Majid Tavakoli was commemorated online by his supporters not only in Iran but worldwide.

Organizing social media campaigns, online forums, and discussions, the opposition employed political satire to highlight inhumane conditions, tortures, and abuses of political prisoners. Symbolically supporting Tavakoli by wearing chadors, his supporters protested against fraudulent elections and human rights violations at the same time. The use of digitally-manipulated photographs and memes demonstrated the lack of fear of cyber activists after 2009 protests. Moreover, they made digitally-manipulated counter-memes to stylistically resemble a photograph of Tavakoli but featuring the leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran (e.g., Ahmadinejad) wearing headscarves. Quickly disseminated through social media, these counter-memes ensured that as the involvement of social media users grew, the shaming tactics of the Iranian authorities aimed at the opposition backfired at the authorities.

To sum up, the mega media spectacles covering the major events can attain new meanings when mediated by social media. For instance, the mediated context of discussions on social media facilitated the transformation of the meaning of a chador not only as a part of women’s clothing or a symbol of resilience and resistance to the regime, but also as a symbolic way of moc-
king the government through political memes. The case of a digitally-ma-
nipulated photograph of an opposition leader, ridiculed by the authorities,
presented an opportunity for young Iranians to defy the regime, confirming
the notion that many young Iranians “see style as a form of warfare” that will
help them to defy the authorities (Mahdavi, 2008).

The techniques of digital modification of iconic photojournalistic images
represent an underexplored frontier for the development of political satire,
photojournalism, and image-editing technologies. Successful in attracting
the attention of the public, they ignite debates regarding the implications
of these technologies for journalistic professionalism and ethics, as well as
political spin doctoring (Stuart, 2005). These debates shape journalism as
a field in the digital era of information control and provide opportunities
for political participation for the public in the countries known for their
repression of human rights.

Conclusion

The success of the social media activities of the public aimed at protec-
ting against the Iranian authorities and the media as their mouthpieces
demonstrated that the use of photographs and their digital manipulation
for political means and ends can no longer be considered the most effec-
tive tool of strategic communication, even when supported by religious or
stereotypical sentiments, traditional for society. Exploring the content of
the photograph featuring Majid Tavakoli, a prominent leader of the Ira-
nian opposition, this study demonstrated how the intended misogynistic
meaning of this photograph as a digitally-manipulated media formation
was mediated by social media and people’s desire for social change, event-
ually becoming an iconic political meme that (1) changed the course of
strategic communication online from blaming the opposition to glorifying
it and blaming the regime, (2) changed the meaning of being a woman in
Iran from someone who is ostracized to someone who is respected, and (3)
changed the understanding of religious rhetoric from something previously
unquestionable to something that needs additional context and open mind
regarding interpretations. These results contradicted the original aim of the
Iranian media’s decision to disseminate a digitally-manipulated photograph
of Majid Tavakoli.
Analyzing the photograph of Tavakoli as a precursor to a series of political memes defying and mocking the Iranian authorities in the context of human rights violations and gender inequality, this study investigated how and why the meaning of the photograph got transformed, given gendered stereotypes and misogynistic attitudes supported by the authorities in Iran. First, as mnemonic and metonymic functions of photojournalistic icons are crucial to the shorthand of journalism (Perlmutter, 1998), the credibility function of the image enhances their operationalization in the era of information control and online media. Second, the theme of a primordial conflict between those who support the state of affairs as is and those who fight for changes stimulates all participants to act, using media coverage to their advantage. In the country where the media mostly voices the rhetoric of the authorities, political satire and the digitally-manipulated photographs or political memes posted online represented the only tools available for the opposition supporters to spread the word about their protests domestically and internationally. The extended typology of photojournalistic icons, specifically, digitally-manipulated photojournalistic icons, proposed in this study, categorizes the content of digitally-manipulated photographs, outlining a route for the exploration of digitally-manipulated photojournalistic content, including iconic content, in the future through the attribute of credibility. Future studies can examine the effects of digitally-manipulated photographs of the opposition rallies in Iran that were manipulated with a goal of swaying the public opinion.

References


Anon. 2009b December 28. Weeks After Insulting the Founder of Islamic Revolution; The Rioters Insulted the Revered Day of Ashura. Iran. p. 1


Appendix

Figure 1a. The digitally-manipulated photojournalistic icon of Majid Tavakoli, a critic of the regime.

Figure 1b. The digitally-manipulated photojournalistic icon of Majid Tavakoli, a critic of the regime.
Figure 1c. The political meme of the Supreme Leader in 2009.

Figure 1d. The political meme of the Iranian President in 2009.
Notes

1 Chador is a large cloak wrapped around the head that reveals only the face. It is considered a traditional attire for women in Iran.

2 FNA or FARS news agency is referred to as a “semi-official” media outlet (Time, 2010), because even though it claims to be an independent media, the media coverage provided by it aligns with the official rhetoric of the Iranian government.

3 IRNA or the Islamic Republic News Agency is the official news agency of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which is funded by the government.

4 The Islamic Republic of Iran is a country, where the cross dressing is punished by law. Moreover, it is not unusual for the judges to order dressing the convict in women’s clothes and parading him around town in order to humiliate a criminal (Hoffman, 2013).

5 The supporters of the protesters and opposition chose the green color to represent their struggle for fair elections and human rights. For the protesters, the choice of green color was also symbolic, since they wanted to convey their oppositional stance, and that is why they adopted the colors associated with Kalemeh Sabz (Green World), the main publication of the opposition.

6 One of the social media campaigns organized by the feminists in 2013 was the mass posting of selfies by cross-dressed Iranian men, who wanted to express their indignation with the state of women’s rights in Iran. An Iranian court punished a criminal by making a decision to dress him in women’s clothing and parade him through the streets in April of 2013.

7 The religion needs to be accounted for since it is essential part of traditions, politics, culture, and life in general in the Iranian society.

8 The Supreme Leader of Iran is the head of the state and the highest ranking political and religious authority in the country.

9 Ukrainian democratization movement of 2004 and Lebanon’s democratization movement of 2005.

10 The first protests of the “Green Movement” started after the presidential elections in June of 2009.

11 An Iranian president from 2005 to 2013.
12 Having the authority to detain those who do not follow the established etiquette of public behavior, the moral police detains women whose chador is too loose or couples on a date. The purpose of the moral police is to guide the public how “to be better citizens” (Economist, 2013).

13 The notion of the “conscientious public” became popular during the Islamic Revolution of 1979. It stands for those people who support the authorities. Consequently, the task of the authorities is to protect the nation and its people or conscientious public who obeys the authorities.

14 During the Islamic Revolution of 1979 the regime of the Shah, the ruler of Iran up to 1979, was overthrown and a regime of religion and republicanism was established.

15 A religious holiday in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Violence is forbidden in the month of Ashura. According to the tradition, the government must never execute people during this month.

16 A practice of controlling the media coverage of the event in order to impact the public opinion.
Satellitization of Arab Media: Perceptions of Changes in Gender Relations

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Abstract:
This article explores how students living in East Amman in Jordan perceive a link between global television entertainment and social changes, particularly changes in gender relations. The study relies on a questionnaire distributed among university students in Amman in 2009 and 2010 with 946 Muslim respondents, and focus group discussions and individual interviews with 44 Muslim students living in East Amman in 2013. The theoretical framework for the discussion is cultivation theory, moral panic, and audience reception. The main conclusion from this study is that many students believe that watching television makes viewers see ‘reality’ in view of TV programs. Another conclusion is that students seem to tailor their use of television according to their own needs. A third conclusion is that many students experience moral panic and see global television as an attack on cultural values. Other students, however, welcome global television’s transmission of what they consider new liberal ideas. The students’ experience is that television entertainment products such as Turkish and American films and series, have an actual impact on social changes linked to gender relations in the East Amman society. The impact of global TV on local society is envisioned as being either “good” or “bad”.

Keywords: youth, popular culture, media studies, satellite TV, gender, Jordan

Introduction
The satellitization of Arab-medium television, starting in the 1990s, has radically changed the supply of news and entertainment in the Middle East. Up to the 1990s, the population in the Arab world mainly had access to state controlled television, and news and entertainment were strictly regulated within national borders. The development of Arab-medium television into global satellitization
and the easy access to the Internet in the twenty-first century is one important area of social change in the MENA region (Middle East and North Africa). The flow of global entertainment -- American sit-coms and films, as well as dubbed TV-series, such as Mexican and Brazilian telenovellas -- increased dramatically in 1991 as the Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC), one of the first private companies, began satellite broadcasting (MBC webpage). As regards regional media productions, Arabic-medium countries have different socio-cultural settings influencing production. Some countries are more and some are less liberal when it comes to gender relations and social relations in general (Ghannam 2013; Al-Atum 2011; Droebber 2012; Jad 2008; Efrati 2012). The former Egyptian monopoly of cultural production in the Arabic language ended as Syria, Lebanon, Morocco, and the Gulf nations got involved in the huge Arab entertainment production industry (Salamandra 2011). The cultural exchange within the region has therefore recently become diversified (Sakr 2007; 2013).

Increased access to higher education for both genders, increased female presence in the labor market, and increased consumption in the last few decades play important roles in social development in the region. However, media might influence such developments. For instance, Lundby, a researcher of mediatization, states that modern media shapes “society and culture as well as the relationship that individual and institutional participants have to their environment and to each other” (2009, 4). Before the advent of the Arab Spring many researchers of Arab media expressed disappointment with how ‘little’ the satellitization of Arab media, particularly the outspoken approach of al-Jazeera, had brought about in matters of democratization of Arab society (Zayani 2005; Hafez 2008). Hafez, however, stated that despite the tardiness of political changes he believed that the inflow of new entertainment would most probably lead to social changes on the individual level which would, at a later stage, be manifested in society in general (Hafez 2008, 5). This study will not however, deal with actual social changes, rather it will explore Jordanian students’ perceptions of possible effects of satellitization of Arab-medium television. The study relies on responses to open-ended questions in
a media survey, focus group discussions, and individual interviews.\(^1\) The theoretical framework for the discussion is cultivation theory, the moral panic paradigm, and television reception.

**Cultivation theory**

Researchers in cultural studies have focused on cultural analysis, where media is regarded as one part of the cultural totality. Media’s importance is expressed by Servaes and Lie: Communication media are “the institutions by which the new meaning systems are transmitted in a ritual manner in a community” (2010, 14). Servaes and Lie’s view of media indicates, however, a less globalized media context than that of the MENA region. What is particular for the globalization of media in this region is firstly the vast media production in the various Arab-medium countries. In a transnational manner this vast media content is mediated to the whole region and to the Arabic-speaking diaspora communities. Secondly, there is the enormous non-Arabic entertainment production (mainly American, Latin-American, and lately Turkish) which many of the most popular satellite TV-channels supply the Arab-media audiences with.

Cultivation theory is to a certain extent based on the notion that frequent television viewers regard the content of television programs to be an image of social reality (Perse 2001, 215–218; Yang and Oliver 2010). Perse’s explanation of cultivation theory is that “the dominant effects of television violence are cognitive (beliefs about social reality) and affective (fear of crime)” (2001, 215).

Many cultivation theorists seem, though, to draw broader conclusions of media effects, not relating the effect only to violence and fear (Perse 2001, 216–217). In 2002, for instance, Gerbner et al. discussed cultivation theory in view of the relation between frequent television watching and the forming of beliefs, attitudes, and values (Gerbner et al. 2002). In their study they used the concept ‘cultivation‘ “to describe the independent contributions television watching makes to viewers’ conceptions of social reality” (Gerbner et al. 2002, 47). Yang and Oliver talk about cultivation theory in terms of television as a ‘socialization agent’ that “instills ‘television reality’ into individuals’ minds”
(Yang and Oliver 2010, 119). Even Morgan and Shanahan’s (1997) meta-study on media effects indicates that cultivation theory might explain social developments and social change.

The general consensus among media researchers in the late twentieth century is that the media effect thesis was inaccurate. Thus the understanding of media’s vast impact on society was modified and even Perse expressed that “media do have some impact on various dimensions of social life and structure” (2001, 6), but that that the media effect was limited, as well as varying from one society to another and from one individual to another (McGuire 1986; Perse 2001). One example of this individual decoding of media messages can been seen in Abu-Lughod’s study on Egyptian mini TV-series (musalsalat) prior to the satellitization of the Arab-medium television (2005). Abu-Lughod looked into the particular aspects of the TV-series her informants tended to be absorbed in and conducted an analysis of how television is received, interpreted, and used in order to cope with specific life situations (2005, 36–40). Abu-Lughod’s informant, Zainab, for instance, receives and decodes the encoded material of the TV-series by basing her interpretation of the message on her cultural background (a small village in Egypt) and her own life experience (as a mother of six with a husband who migrated to the city and rarely visits, making her almost a single parent). The meaning received from the TV-series is thus created in the intersection between the content and the viewer/receiver. Abu-Lughod’s example shows that rather than a passive audience being influenced by media, individuals seem to select and use media according to their needs. To evaluate media impact is thus problematic and needs specific research where the direct link between media use and actual behavior is implicitly measured (Livingstone 1998, 249).

Gender relations in the MENA region

The Arab Human Development Report (AHDR) from 2005 forms the underlying background of this study. The AHDR claims that the issue of women’s rights is one of the three major “critical development ’deficits’... that have held back human development throughout the Arab region despite considerable natural wealth and great potential
for economic and social progress“ (2005, 1). AHDR highlights in particular social structures built on patriarchal (collectivistic) organizations that: “Male control at the economic, social, cultural, legal, and political levels remains the abiding legacy of patriarchy” (AHDR 2005, 16). Furthermore, the report states that despite women being protected by law in some matters, the social environment nevertheless dominates women’s minds and prevents them from demanding their rights through legal processes (AHDR 2005, 19).

A slightly different view of gender relations in the MENA region is portrayed by Abdel-Fadil and Van Eynde (2016) in their analysis of the screen characters of two famous female actors in Egyptian films back in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. In contrast to the stereotyped Arab women as ’tormented and oppressed’ the two researchers indicate a more complex reading of gender roles in Arab-medium film production even back in the 1950s and 1960s by looking behind the stereotyped female portrayals. They confirm Abu-Lughod’s conclusion that whereas Egyptian films and series portray women’s daily lives they at the same time also anticipate modernity with new constructs of national selves (Abu-Lughod 2002, 116; see also Abdel-Fadil and Van Eynde 2016, 19).

Abdel-Fadil and Van Eynde regard the films of the 1950s and 1960s as “marked by utopic visions of how societal ills could be rectified through the modernist project,” whereas in films of the 1970s there was “a disenchantment with the modernist nationalist project” which seemed to have brought “more dystopia and thus realism into Egyptian melodrama” (Abdel-Fadil and Van Eynde 2016, 22). However, the two researchers see a paradox in the screen roles of women in these melodramas in the last half of the twentieth century. On the one hand they challenge patriarchal structures, but on the other they reproduce traditional structures of “controlling women’s bodies and sexuality by upholding a strict moral matrix of suitable sexual conduct” (Abdel-Fadil and Van Eynde 2016, 24).

With both the AHDR report and Abdel-Fadil’s and Van Eynde’s reflections on twentieth century melodrama gender roles in mind, I will discuss students’ perceptions of social change based on the respondents’ views, the informants’ discussions in the focus groups, and
the interviewees’ responses.

Case study: East Amman, Jordan

The similarity of Arabic as the official language has made it too convenient to draw conclusions of the Arab region as one homogeneous region. However, countries in the Arab-speaking region are as heterogeneous as countries in other regions. Moreover, within each country and each town, various layers, such as class and ethnicity, create a more profound heterogeneity between families and individuals.

With such heterogeneity in mind I have selected East Amman as a case study. First and foremost, this was due to my frequent visits to the town and the various fieldworks I have conducted there. Secondly I have chosen East Amman as, heuristically speaking, patriarchal trends, as portrayed in the AHDR-report (2005), seem to be more prominent in this area than in other parts of Amman, as also noted by al-‘Atum (2011). In West Amman, mainly a higher-middle-class to upper-class area, many young people tend to have free mobility and similar clothing, attitudes, and behavior to that of youth living in Europe or in the US. In East Amman, mainly a middle- and lower-class area, women’s mobility is more often restricted, and male (and female) control of female relatives tends to be firm (al-‘Atum 2011). My own observation is that East Amman seems to be more homogenous than West Amman with most women wearing headscarves, and some even face-veils. It is not very common to see women in the streets alone, and the social control of women’s clothing is strict. In this sense, East Amman in general can be regarded as a community with ‘tight’ social structures (Triandis 2001, 911).

Material

The present study builds on 946 responses (Muslim respondents- 38 Christian respondents’ responses are left out in this study) from a media survey I conducted in May 2009 and May–June 2010 in two Jordanian universities. I handed out the questionnaire in four different faculties: Sharia, Humanities (adab), Social Science (ijtima‘iyyat), and Engineering (handasa). As I had the permission from the head of the university, I could get a nearly 95 percent answer rate. I handed out the
questionnaire the last quarter of the class and collected the answers at the end of the class. The questionnaire had questions about topics such as religious belonging, religiosity, religious practice, living area, favorite television program, daily hours of television watching, and use of Internet. Many students wrote that they would watch series and films both on television and on the Internet. Whereas some students stated that they would follow entertainment programs and news on the Internet, most students used the Internet, in the following order, for (1) communicating with friends on Facebook, (2) watching music videos, and (3) reading the news. Respondents spent on average two hours a day watching television or entertainment programs on the Internet. Some students watched four to five hours daily, whereas a handful stated that they rarely or never watched television or entertainment programs on the Internet. The favorite programs were, in the following order. (1) Turkish TV-series (women much more than men), (2) the Syrian mini-series, mainly Bab-al-Hara (The Neighborhood Gate), which was aired at the time of the survey, (women and men alike) (3) various music programs (women and men alike), (4) American sit-coms and films (women and men alike), and (5) news and political and social discussion programs (men much more than women). Religious programs were less popular, even among Sharia students. Interestingly, the media habits of many Sharia students did not differ from the students at other faculties with regards to their overall preference for films, series and music programs. However, a small number of the Sharia students stated that they never watched entertainment on television or the Internet.

At the end of the questionnaire there were two open-ended questions on how the students perceive the relationship between television/Internet and social and personal changes. For the present study I have used the Muslim students’ answers on these two open-ended questions.

I further conducted qualitative fieldwork in East Amman in October 2013. I arranged four focus groups: two gender mixed groups with six informants in one group (three women and three men) and ten in the other (six women and four men), and two gender segregated groups
with four male informants in one group and six women in the other. In addition, I conducted individual interviews with sixteen university students from various universities in Amman, both private and governmental. All in all, I met with forty-four students, all Muslims living in East Amman. Most of the informants regarded themselves as ‘urban’ (madaniyyin) and some had a peasant (fallah) background, but had lived all their lives in Amman. I asked six university students from various academic fields to gather students from East Amman for the focus groups and for the individual interviews. The age of the informants was between 18 and 25 years. In every focus group and interview, I informed the participants of the research project. In the group discussions I asked the informants about watching films and series and whether they watched them on television or on Internet. In the following discussion I will not distinguish between whether the informants and interviewees watch films and series on television or on the Internet, as the emphasis is on the consumption of global entertainment. All interviews were conducted by me in Arabic.

There is a possible methodological problem in surveys and to a certain extent also in interviews dealing with perceptions of social and individual changes. Whereas many research participants may see or experience changes (particularly negative changes) in other individuals and in society in general, they may rarely see similar changes in themselves. This became obvious in many of the respondents’ answers, which reflected a negative portrayal of changes in society, and with statements that “I am the same as I always have been” in answer to the question about individual changes. Thus this study does not necessarily show how it ‘really’ is; rather it shows how students perceive the society and individuals around them. However, the qualitative discussions and focus groups give a further understanding of personal attitudes and values.

As this study mainly uses qualitative data (answers to the two open-ended questions in the questionnaire, and the discussions in the focus-groups and the answers of the interviewees), percentage in numbers will be avoided. Thus only general trends such as for instance “many informants stated...” and “others stated...” will be stated.
Perception of change in local traditions

The survey was conducted in the spring of 2009 and 2010, before the onset of the Arab Spring. In general, most respondents stated, without specifying, that the satellitization of television had both negative (*silbi*) and positive (*ijabi*) influences on Jordanian society. However, some students, particularly students from the Sharia Faculty, believed that media had no influence on society whatsoever. One female Sharia student stated for instance in a positive manner that Jordanian society is as it has always been, as “our society keeps strict to the traditions (*al-adat wa al-taqalid*)”. Many respondents from all faculties mentioned the Turkish series as having an effect on society, be it ‘bad’ or ‘good’.

It is interesting to note that mainly male respondents pointed out the influences of television on democratization and political liberal processes, whereas both men and women pointed at changes of local social traditions. One female respondent at the Faculty of Humanities stated:

> The television channels influence our traditions and our culture. They have changed our ways to gather the family and our ways of communicating with each other. They also negatively affect small children and their way of thinking. Some of the changes we see are positive as they are useful for our society, but the negative influences are greater.

Similarly, a female respondent at the technical department also regarded television influences in negative terms. She wrote:

> The global television affects a lot on local traditions and makes the Arab society more open-minded (*infitah*). We, the Eastern youth, rely on conservative (*mubafia*) social relations, whereas most television programs rely on an open-mindedness, which we do not want as it leads us to lose our identity (*dhiy'a shakh-siyyatina*).

In the focus groups most informants discussed global television’s positive effects in terms of general development of knowledge and an
increased openness to individual freedom, whereas at the same time they pointed to negative side-effects in terms of a perceived breakdown in social relations. On the one hand, the television content, such as American films and sit-coms and to a certain extent Turkish TV-series, tend to advocate individual freedom. The entertainment industry thus offers students a person-focused mind-set, and what might be considered an additional socialization process into an individualistic structure. On the other hand, family and the educational institutions primarily socialize the youth into traditional values such as family cohesion and self-sacrifice for the group, thus upholding patriarchal structures. These differences in approach might be one of the reasons why the same participants would praise individual freedom and at the same time denunciate media’s influence on the “traditional Arab family system with close affinity between the family members”, as one male informant stated. The youth’s attraction towards the individual freedom pattern portrayed in the global entertainment and the fear of “bad” influences, often expressed in terms of excessive female freedom, can be linked to Abdel-Fadil’s and Van Eynde’s notion of a paradox between female screen roles with challenging of patriarchal structures, and at the same time reproduction of traditional structures of strict control of women’s sexuality (Abdel-Fadil and Van Eynde 2016: 24). The participants’ answers indicate hybridity in the cultural complexity of the MENA region.

The participants’ statements concerning the negative influences of media on Arab society have to be regarded in view of Buccianti (2010) and Salamandra’s (2012) discussions of how the new global entertainment, particularly the Turkish TV-series, has triggered moral panic expressed by the religious leaders as ‘cultural invasion’ (al-ghazw al-thaqafi) and ‘attack on Arab tradition and values’ (Salamandra 2012, 53). Some conservative religious scholars Islamists even demanded the death penalty for those responsible for broadcasting the programs (Buccianti 2010, 6). The moral panic is also obvious in the statement of a female respondent at the Sharia Faculty who never watched television. She stated:

There is a media war going on. Through the films and the series
they [e.g. ‘the West’] want to damage the youths’ mind, and they rarely make good and useful programs. The Jordanian society has become a blind imitating society. We only take the bad from the West, both in our thinking and in our behavior.

This view reflects the religiously conservative view that (Western) television can be equated to a ‘cultural invasion’ and an ‘attack on Arab traditions and values’. However, not only sharia students, expressed ideas reflecting religious scholars’ moral panic. This type of sentiment is expressed by respondents from other faculties too. For instance, a female respondent from the Faculty of Humanities stated that the effect of television was both positive and negative, but that the negative effects dominated. In her own words: “global television wants to change Arab tradition”. It is interesting to note that in contrast to the respondent from the Sharia Faculty above who stayed clear of TV, this respondent from the Faculty of Humanities watched films and series, as well as music programs three to four hours every day. Furthermore, a male respondent in the engineer department pointed particularly at the influence of global television on sexual behavior. His answer points both at the moral panic the Turkish TV-series has raised (Buccianti 2010; Salamandra 2012) and to Abdel-Fadil’s and Van Eynde’s ‘paradox’, with sexuality control. He wrote:

The dirty Turkish, Italian, and Spanish series affect our traditions (‘adat) and values. The girls [al-fatat, i.e., unmarried women] start to imitate the actresses and will love other men than their husbands. They will become unfaithful and will have sexual intercourse outside marriage (al-zina). Even men will be unfaithful.

The respondent’s view indicates how he perceives a change in sexual behavior, a change he considers in negative terms. Khalaf, in her discussions with university students at the American University of Beirut also discovered that students claimed to have a total different view of sex than their parents had, with more open discussions about sex and an acceptance of sex before marriage (Khalaf 2006, 178-182). However, in contrast to the statement above, the students in her study regarded this change of sexual behavior in positive terms.
The idea of Jordan as an ‘imitating society’ was expressed by many respondents: by looking at global entertainment ‘we’ imitate without thinking, many respondents wrote, voicing the conspiracy theory of the religious scholars. The notion that ‘the West’, and particularly the US, deliberately wants to destroy ‘Islam’ and Muslims’ affiliation to their religion and traditions is widespread and has penetrated many countries with Muslim majority populations (Sardar and Wyn Davies 2003; Friedman 2002). In the survey many Sharia students, but also students from other faculties, as indicated above, referred to this conspiracy theory, reflecting the moral panic response of the religious scholars to the first Turkish soap opera, Noor, aired in 2008 on MBC (Buccianti 2010; Salamandra 2012).

Still, many respondents, mostly females, from the faculties of Humanities, Engineering and Social Sciences, voiced a positive attitude towards the global influences, and particularly their effect on women’s rights. One female respondent from the Faculty of Engineering expressed that “the individual’s thoughts and attitudes develop and the many satellite channels with their various ideas give a woman the possibility to choose her own way of life”. One female respondent who regarded television influences in positive terms nevertheless expressed a disheartened statement, saying:

> The Jordanian society, despite its openness, is still a traditional (taqlidi) society with strong traditions. We will never manage to free ourselves from these traditions and this is the reason why I believe that global television does not have an influence at all on our society.

It is possible to see the respondents’ view above of media and change towards a more modernist pattern with individual freedom by relating to Abdel-Fadil’s and Eynde’s study on gender dynamics portrayed in Egyptian melodramas back in the 1950s and 1960s, which relied, at least to a certain extent, on modernist gender roles. As many participants expressed that media gives potential for change, one female respondent seems to aspire to such a change, but is pessimistic of whether this is possible or not. This respondent’s pessimistic statement reflects how media is understood in the intersection between
the media message and the personal lives of the informants, as discussed by Abu-Lughod (2005).

Three of the four male informants (all students in social science departments) in the gender-segregated focus group had a negative view on global influences on society. They talked about how society was ‘falling apart’ (*taflit*). Walid spoke against global values, claiming that “in our society we need to keep to our traditions which we have inherited from our parents. We do not accept all this talk of free love in American films”. Still he watched American films more than once a week. When I asked him which film had touched him the most, he mentioned an American romantic film “A Walk to Remember”, a film many of the respondents and the interviewees also referred to. He exclaimed that he cried every time he watched this film. The film might, to a certain extent, be regarded as being within the context of Arab entertainment culture with an emphasis on sentimentality and no sexual promiscuity. The film deals with a young couple where the woman suffers from leukemia. As she dies in the end, the man changes his way of life by becoming more socially responsible. The lead character explains his development towards a responsible human being as a result of his wife’s angel-like behavior and her way of handling her fatal illness. In view of Abu-Lughod’s cultural interpretation of Zainab’s response to specific elements in the Egyptian serials (2005, 36-40), it is possible to assess Walid as an active media user who attaches himself to the part of the global media which he can identify with and to that which is the most similar to his own value system, while at the same time decoding the media messages according to his own experiences.

Munir was the only man in this group who regarded influences of global television on society in positive terms. He was critical towards how the older generation dealt with recent social changes. He claimed that the youth in Jordan are in the midst of a personal crisis (*al-azma l-shakhsiyya*) due to the wide gap between what happens in the families and what they watch on television. “The youth”, he said, “want to try everything they learn from the television and most of these things are totally different from what they have learnt and observed at home”. He believed that his parents’ generation should
adapt more to ‘modern’ ideas, as it is impossible to stop the development towards more individual freedom for the youth. However, at the same time, Munir stated that “we need some changes, but if these changes lead us to a society similar to America, we will be in big trouble”. He explained, “In America, individuals have full freedom at the age of 18. They have to move out of the family home, and after that the family will not help them and they will be completely alone without anybody to support them.” He further argued that in the US many people commit suicide, criminality is pervasive, public space is insecure for common people, and many people carry weapons. Munir’s view of the US might be based on his consumption of American films and series, particularly as he said that he watched American films more than two times a week. His reaction can be regarded in view of Perse’s idea of media effects, where she believes that “the dominant effects of television violence are cognitive (beliefs about social reality) and affective (fear of crime)” (Perse 2001, 215). By watching American-produced crime films and series, Munir imagines what he sees on television as ‘the truth’. This is expressed in his statement that Jordan should never follow the American way and that “there should always be a punishment for carrying weapons”, a common comment from informants on American ‘reality’.

Munir continues: “There must be a limit for a person’s freedom (hadud al-hurriya)”. When I asked him which boundaries should be set, he focused on the family and on common security: “It is necessary to respect the father, as the best thing in Jordan is the strength of the family,” he exclaimed. Thus even Munir, who in general had an accommodating attitude towards individual freedom, responded in an ambiguous manner towards the negative and the positive influences of media content, indicating an influence from the moral panic response to the satellitization of Arab media (Salamandra 2012, 59). It is also interesting how Munir cherishes both patriarchal structures and individual freedom, thus voicing what Abdel-Fadil and Van Eynde see as the paradox of how female screen characters in Egyptian films in the mid-twentieth century both challenge patriarchal structures and at the same time reproduce them (2016, 24). A similar paradox can be found in the first Turkish series launched, which took the Arab
medium world by storm in 2008. Despite its emphasis on individual freedom, it also strongly conveyed the patriarchal character of both Turkish and Arab society, a notion strongly emphasized by Munir. As Buccianti has noted, “the Turkish touch” of the Turkish soap operas is “the patriarchal model” (2010, 3). The portrayal of the wise head of the Turkish families in the series reflects the notion of the benevolent patriarch in Islamic legislation (Roald 2013).

In contrast to many male respondents and informants, Munir unequivocally expressed that he enjoyed watching the Turkish series. Other men admitted that they sometimes watch these TV serials too, particularly when women in their families watch them. However, Munir watched these series through the lens of ‘life in Turkey’ being so different from Jordanian society. He also believed that it is easier to identify with the Turkish than with the American series. “Turks are Muslims like us”, he said, “however, they are not totally similar to us. They do not follow Islam as we do, but still, they are Muslims and they have some traditions which we should adapt to”. When I asked him which traditions he referred to, he stated that individuals have more personal freedom, and that this freedom is within the accepted boundaries of Islam. “It is not like in America where sex outside marriage is common and accepted; the Turks keep within the boundaries (hudud) of Islam in this respect.” Again Munir’s statement anticipates the paradox pointed out by Abdel-Fadil and Van Eynde (2016, 24).

Khalid, in the same focus group, claimed that it is mainly women who watch the Turkish series. This is also my impression, reflected by both the survey and the statements of the informants and interviewees. According to Buccianti, however, many men did watch the first Turkish series on MBC, Noor (2010, 2). “Women want a life like the actresses in the series have,” Khalid stated. Munir then stated that even he wants Jordanian society to be more similar to Turkish society. “The Turks have sound and open social relations,” he exclaimed, “they emphasize family relations, just like us.” Khalid’s answer to Munir was that Jordan is much better than both Turkey and the US. “If we start to open up, it will continue to change”. He explained his position:
If we think that we want Jordan to be like Turkey we will eventually end up as America. Just look at how the youth today have boyfriends and girlfriends. Our parents did not have this and if we tolerate such behavior it will never stop.

Khalid ends by saying that the youth today believe that what they watch on television is the ‘truth’ (al-haqīqa). “They imitate, but do not understand that what they watch is only a fantasy world (al-hayat al-khayali),” thus reflecting Perse’s view of media reception.

The discussions in the focus groups and in many of the individual interviews indicated a complexity of media reception, where every participant attached themselves to elements in media which they could relate to according to individual experiences, as also observed by Abu-Lughod (2005).

**Gender relations**

Many respondents, informants, and interviewees described the ‘bad’ influences of global television in terms of changes in women’s dress and their behaviour in the public sphere; one example given was that of women going out in the evenings without a chaperon. But also male ways of dressing were commented on. The answer from a male Sharia respondent, who wrote about the youth in general, can illustrate this view: “Television influences the youth (shabab) in their clothing, their looks and their movements and the reality out there is the evidence of this.” Some informants stated that there are obvious influences both from Turkey - the Turkish female headscarves and clothes - and from the West: tight tops and tight jeans. These opinions reflect the moral panic pattern presented by Islamic scholars.

Many of the interviewees and informants talked about the new wave of gender mixing (ikhtilat). Khalid exclaimed that in his father’s generation men and women never mixed outside the family as they do now. He stated: “Women and men are mixing in schools, universities, and at work. Now women get more money and therefore they are more self-confident”. He continued: “Women start to smoke, to dress immorally, and they do not show respect for their elders (la yah-tarimu l-kibar). “The women of today”, he said, “go to the malls and
they date men. Television is mainly responsible for this new, inappropriate behavior”. Khalid’s statement reflects the moral panic expressed by the religious scholars. Salamandra describes, for instance, how women’s cinema-going raised such moral panic, with women as the “crux of concern” in the early twentieth century Damascus (2012, 59). A similar expression of moral panic was expressed by a female Sharia respondent who wrote that television is the reason for increases in divorces. This was a notion I met in nearly all the discussions in focus groups and in the individual interviews. There is a common idea that Turkish television series have had an immense impact on marriages and gender relations in general, and that it has increased the divorce rates in Jordan (Buccianti 2010, 5; Salamandra 2012, 46).2

In one of the focus groups, I asked which reasons they saw for the popularity of the Turkish TV-series, and which effect they consider these series have had on Jordanians in general. Malika jokingly narrated how her whole family watched the Turkish TV-series every evening. “My mother cries and my father makes ironic comments, and we, the young girls are looking at the beautiful blonde Turkish hero, wishing that such a person would turn up on our doorsteps asking for our hands in marriage”. She pointed out what she perceives as the discrepancy between the Jordanian reality with husbands who nag their wives and treat them harshly and ’the blonde beautiful Turks’ who deal with their wives in a nice caring way and bring them flowers. Malika stated: “Anyone would exchange this harsh Arab behavior and treatment with decent Turkish behavior. This is the reason for the high frequency of divorces in our society.” Salamandra argues that the moral panic, or what she calls “media panic”, raised by the conservatives over the Turkish series is a result of what she calls ’the Muhannad effect’ (2012, 60), named after the ‘Nordic-looking Turk’, the hero in Noor. Muhannad, she claims, is regarded by conservatives to “threaten to smuggle in a sexually ambiguous Western secularism like a beautiful Trojan horse” (Salamandra 2012, 62). However, this perception of patriarchal control, misogyny, and brutal men versus “soft, kind, honourable, and romantic” men is not a new phenomenon in the MENA media context (Abdel-Fadil and Van Eynde 2016, 24). Abdel-Fadil and Van Eynde observed a similar discrepancy between
various types of male archetypes in Egyptian melodrama in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, with the female screen characters falling in love with the soft and kind type of men (2016, 24).

One of the interviewees, Wafa, an unmarried student at the Faculty of Humanities, had the opposite view of the Turkish ‘ideal’. She said:

I often look at Turkish series, but I do not like their social reality. The Turks’ relationships between men and women are too open, and the men are too gentle and weak. I want a real man, a man with Arabic behavior. I want a man to be harsh and strong, not gentle and weak like the Americans and the Turks.

Malika’s and Wafa’s opposite view of male ideals above points at the cultural complexity as well as how media consumption and the perception of the media content varies between individuals, according to personal experience and life situation.

Khalid’s statement that “women do not understand that the television images are only ideals, whereas the reality is something completely different” is reinforced by a female interviewee, Lina. She spoke of the discrepancy between ‘the world of television’ and ‘the reality’. She enjoyed the Turkish TV-series as she could identify with ‘the Turks’. Lina stated that she often compared Turkish society as it appears in series with Jordanian society, and she wished that “we were more like the Turkish”. She stated: “The Turks have better relations between people in general and particularly between men and women. Their men are nicer and more caring than our men: The Arab men are very difficult.” Even in this statement, as in the statements of Malika and Wafa above, the perception of two total opposite male archetypes is expressed; the rough versus the soft male identity.

Lina claimed that the problem today is that many young women believe that what they see in foreign films and series is also true for Arab society. She said:

The changes in our society are only on the surface. Arab women feel cheated because we believed that Arab societies had changed. We believe that as the women have changed, the Arab
men have changed too, and have implemented the behaviour we witness in films and series. But they have not! Men take only the bad things from the television and not the good things. Men only deceive women, pretending to be open-minded, but in reality they are as conservative and traditional as men in our society always have been. We, the Arab women, are the losers. We have opened up for a new lifestyle: We want to have more freedom and less control and boundaries. Men, however, play with women who are open-minded, but they only want to marry women who keep to the old-fashioned way: The women who dress decently with long jalbabs (coats) and who do not date or even talk to men.

This statement reflects Perse’s view of how television is perceived as an image of social reality (2001, 215). It is interesting that in my discussion with a lecturer in Sharia Faculty at Jordan University in May 2009, during my distribution of the questionnaire, he expressed a similar idea. He stated:

The liberation of women promoted by the satellite television deceives Jordanian girls [unmarried women] to believing that Jordanian society has changed into a liberal society, which it most certainly has not. The girls are the losers as they behave liberally, whereas men still want the traditional women.

In our further discussion Lina admitted that she used to have a boyfriend whom she thought would marry her, but after she had accepted his sexual advances he left her. In Jordan, she explains, she is thus marked as a ‘used’ woman, who will have little prospect of getting married. As she told me, she would not even dare to accept a marriage as it will be discovered that she is not a virgin and this will create problems for her and for her family.³

The consequences of this new openness in sexual relations, also observed by Khalaf (2006), is still not thoroughly investigated. There seems to be a general perception that honour crimes are extensive in the MENA region as well as in South Asia among Muslims and non-Muslims alike. NGOs and independent lawyers in the area, such
as Asma Khader in Jordan (see for instance Human Rights Watch 2004) and Fatma Khafagi (2005) in Egypt, have been working against honor crimes and violence against women. However, statistics of possible honor crimes are difficult to establish (Chesler 2010) and there is a lack of research in the field. In contrast, activist reports as well as media reports on the theme flourish (Chesler 2010; see also Human Rights Watch 2004). What is obvious, however, is that Lina perceives that sexual activity outside matrimony might lead to heavy repercussions for women, a perception which I have observed in many young women in the region.

In all the focus groups the informants spoke of how even the Arabic-produced entertainment, such as the Egyptian films and mini TV-series (musalsalat), have changed radically within the last five to ten years concerning the roles of men and women and the relations between them. Entertainment has become much more licentious than it used to be, they claimed. When I asked how they could estimate the changes, they referred to their parents’ view of changes in the content of Arab-medium entertainment. They pointed at how they believe that Egyptian films and series have become ‘dirty’ (wasakh) and contain sex scenes, which according to their parents were very uncommon in their own youth. They referred particularly to the Egyptian films Yakobian House, with an explicit sex-scene between a man and a woman, and Messages from the Sea with a lesbian sex-scene.

The informants and interviewees were well aware that as most satellite television channels control and censor global entertainment, the same programs on the Internet have fewer restrictions. They thus further perceived the difference of how it used to be and how it is now, in terms of the difference between the censored films on television, which their parents watch, and the lack of restrictions on the same entertainment programs on the TV-channels’ webpages. One male interviewee, Hasan, stated: “With the Internet, parents have become less aware of what we, the youth, actually consume as entertainment, and this indicates a great change of social attitudes from when they were young. Our parents were not, and are still not, exposed to the same television content as we are.” Hasan links the exposure of sex
in the media to a more open attitude towards sexual relation in the youth compared to their parents. His view of a change of social attitudes towards sex reflects Khalaf’s observation of students showing greater acceptance of sex before marriage than their parents (Khalaf 2006, 178-182).

One of the interviewees, Muna, had just finished her university studies and she had been working for some weeks in a job relevant to her education. Her parents, however, forced her to quit her job as, Muna explained: “This job involved too much mixing with men (ikhtilat) and I had to work late shifts some days”. She told me how her brother came to her work-place once and she showed him around. She narrated:

We were walking around and I said hello, how are you, etcetera, to all my colleagues and men and women working in other work-places close by. My brother turned mad: Why do you greet all these men, he screamed. I told him, that I have to do that, they are my colleagues. He went home however and told my parents that they should have more control of me. And here I am now, out of work.

She continued:

The youth have a conflicting personality (tadarub fi-l-shakh-siyya). In films and series everything is permissible, whereas in our real life everything is forbidden. This creates frustration. Moreover, in working life we, the women, are supposed to be responsible and have a strong character (al-shakhsiyya l-qawwiyya), but at home we have to be submissive, have a weak character and accept everything the parents and the brothers say. My parents consider that I am getting impudent by working. It is so frustrating with such different value-systems. The parents are so afraid of giving young women too much power.

Muna’s statement reinforces Lina’s view above that some women seem to adapt to a more liberal way of relating to the other gender. Thus for women, this is experienced as implying constant contestation and
negotiation. As Muna’s example indicates, she gets one picture of women’s personal freedom and independency on television as well as in broader society, and another picture of how life should be lived as a young unmarried woman living with her parents. It is thus important to see both Lina’s and Muna’s reception of television shows in view of Abu-Lughod’s discussion of how students’ receive, decode and encode media content and how meaning is created in the intersection between the content and the individual viewer (2005, 36-40). Both Lina and Muna, in an audience context, are active television watchers. They seem to select and use media according to their own needs. Lina adapted to a liberal gender relation pattern with an intimate relationship before marriage, whereas Muna’s concern was whether she would be able to continue her professional career, despite the fact that many working places in Jordan are gender-integrated and therefore not acceptable to her family. Both seemed to view their particular experience as women in a patriarchal society with what they perceived as individual freedom conveyed by the satellite television.

Many of the informants and interviewees talked about changes in society in terms of selection of marriage partners. In the focus group with the four male students all of them stated that they would choose their own wives. “As it is now”, Munir said, “we get to know women at the university or at work and we want to choose for ourselves.” But what if the parents object to their choices? Khalid believed that he would accept his parents’ objections, whereas Munir stated that if he really loved the woman he would follow “his heart, as it is not my parents who will marry her, it is me”. Munir did admit however, that, in Jordanian society, it would be a difficult life and full of conflict if he married against his parents’ will. “The Arab family life demands a good relationship between all family members, as the extended family is the core of society”, he said.

Reflections

The participants’ perception of social changes related to changes in media content reflect media researchers’, for instance Hafez’ (2008), anticipation of a possible correlation between changes of Arab media (and entertainment) and social changes. However, as the students’
perceptions of social changes are the focus for this study, I have avoided possible anticipations of actual social changes in the study.

As the data in this study from East Amman indicates, television watching might make frequent viewers see ‘reality’ in view of television images. One example is Lina’s story above where she previously believed that the liberal gender relations conveyed by television series and films was manifested in Jordanian society, until her own experience showed that it was not so. For women aspiring for liberal gender relations, a conflicting situation with a constant need for contestation and negotiation of boundaries seems to have arisen, as the examples of both Lina and Muna indicate. Another example of how television images are perceived as “reality” is how Munir depicts American society based on the content of American films. It might, however, be easier to judge a different society than ones’ own in terms of television images as the individual has little pre-knowledge and thus might be lead to interpret the few images they are exposed to as “reality”. Even many of the participants’ perceptions of how media influence society in a “bad” way relate to Perse’s notion of media portraying “real life”. Whereas the statements of those students who wanted more changes towards a more liberal society, have to be regarded in view of Abu-Lughod’s idea of how viewers tend to adapt to those aspects they sympathize with or recognize from their own life.

Abu-Lughod’s notion of how the audience is active in selecting and creating meaning from the media content, according to personal life experience is also obvious in some informants’ perceptions. Lina related to liberal gender relations in terms of an intimate relationship between men and women. Muna is more concerned with a liberal gender relation pattern in terms of gender-integration in workplaces in broader society. Walid’s discussion of the film “A Walk to Remember” indicates how he attaches himself to media content which he can relate to in terms of morality and responsibility.

The moral panic approach is obvious in the informants’ statements, as also discussed by Buccianti and Salamandra. The ‘cultural invasion’ and the ‘attack on Arab tradition and values’(Salamandra 2012, 53), were frequently referred to both in many of the respondents’,
informants’, and interviewees’ answers. This can be illustrated by the female Sharia respondent who expressed that “the Jordanian society has become a blind imitating society” and that “there is a media war going on”.

Abdel-Fadil and Van Eynde have observed similar ideas of gender relations to those I observed in the present material in their analysis of Egyptian films in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. It is interesting to note that the Egyptian national media production of classic films raised similar contrasting ideas about gender relations to those circulated by the new global media from the 1990s onwards. It is particularly fascinating to note the congruence with regards to the idea of the rough versus the soft male ideal referred to Malika above, and in the classical Egyptian films. The ideas about gender are quite similar, although the form and how expressive the opposing ideas are, might differ in the various national media production and in the global media production which the MENA region now is exposed to.

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References


Webpages


Notes

1 In the discussion I will distinguish between respondents (participants in the survey), informants (participants in the focus group discussions), and interviewees (individual interviews). When I refer to all of them I will use the term “participants”. Mostly, when I quote informants and interviewees I have named them. All names in this study are pseudonyms.

2 Religious scholars see the rise in divorce in Jordan as a result of media influences (Jordan Times 2008).

3 This new openness towards sexual relations before marriage is confirmed in a newspaper article on youth in Cairo (Sydsvenska Dagbladet).
Contextualizing Internet Studies: Beyond the Online/Offline Divide

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Abstract:

This essay discusses the issue of contextualization in studies of online platform usage and online material. It argues that a separation between online and offline cannot be sustained, as social media users relate to many different online and offline contexts simultaneously. Why protagonists make use of online platforms, which platforms they use, how they make use of them, who they seek to reach, and so on, is all dependent on the various geographical and social contexts within which they work. At the same time, these users are also part of and are influenced by different online contexts that may be based on topic, identity, or geography, and which may be local, national, regional or international. When we study online material – be it activism, language use, discourse, or something else – we must do so with all these relevant settings in mind. Throughout the essay, I seek to illustrate these complex relationships between different online and offline contexts through concrete examples from Egypt and Kuwait. I argue that the material shows that we cannot generalize and simply assume similar patterns of usage of online platforms producing similar outcomes across different contexts. Still, research so far has provided insights that are important both in their own right and, not least, as methodological and theoretical considerations for future studies, and I conclude by suggesting three principles that should guide our investigations of online material.

Keywords:

Egypt, Kuwait, digital divide, social media, Internet

Introduction

It is clear, as argued by Shani Orgad, that the separation between online and offline cannot be sustained (Orgad, 2008, p. 37), as social media users relate to many different online and offline contexts simultaneously. This makes contextualization of studies of online material more difficult but also more important. However, even though the relationships between different contexts are complex, they are not
incomprehensible. While regional contextualisation carries merit, comparisons of online activism across national contexts in the Arab world is an equally important enterprise that serves to enrich and deepen our analysis.

In the aftermath of the 2010 and 2011 popular uprisings in the Middle East, the idea of “Facebook-revolutions” quickly gained popularity. Fortunately, this narrative has since been modified, although the use of social media routinely (and rightly) still is seen as an important factor in the events that unfolded. However, while social media may have been important for the uprisings in many different countries, they were certainly not equally important in all countries, and, not least, they were not important in the same manner in all countries. Why activists make use of social media, which platforms they use, how they make use of them, who they seek to reach; this is all dependent on the various geographical and social contexts within which they work. For instance, a particular platform may not be used in the same manner in Morocco, Egypt, Syria, and Kuwait. At the same time, users in these countries are also part of and are influenced by different online contexts that may be based on topic, identity, or geography, and which may be local, national, regional or international. When we study online material - be it activism, language use, discourse, or something else - we must do so with all these relevant settings in mind.

In the following, I seek to illustrate these complex relationships between different online and offline contexts through concrete examples from Egypt and Kuwait. I argue that the material shows that we cannot generalize and simply assume similar patterns of usage of online platforms producing similar outcomes across different contexts. Still, research so far has provided insights that are important both in their own right and, not least, as methodological and theoretical considerations for future studies.

Most of the examples given are taken from my recent study of activists’ use of online platforms in Egypt and Kuwait. More specifically, I looked at groups working against sexual harassment and violence in Egypt, and groups demanding democratic, constitutional reform
in Kuwait. Sexual harassment is a pervasive problem in Egypt that has long been covered in silence in public debate and ignored or even encouraged by security agencies, and the groups I studied fought to break this silence, force the state in to action and to change social norms. In Kuwait, the oppositional youth movements studied, centred in the tribal parts of the population, fought for radical, new solutions to the decades old problem of power sharing in the country, and demanded what they termed a constitutional emirate. All groups studied made extensive use of various online platforms, and while this usage at times was quite similar and/or sought to achieve similar goals, there were important differences related to the various contexts involved.

To begin with, there are of course important differences between the two countries in question that are bound to impact the work of activists. Egypt is a large country of 91 million people, whereas Kuwait is a tiny state of 3.7 million inhabitants, of which only about 1/3 are citizens. The majority of citizens in both countries are under 35 years of age. Kuwait is seen as a more conservative country than Egypt, not least in terms of gender relations. Neither country is democratic, and old and new media is subject to control and repression in both countries. While Egypt struggle with poverty, Kuwait is an extremely wealthy oil-exporter, and GDP per capita is almost ten times higher than that of Egypt. Kuwaiti citizens are generally wealthy, well-educated, and literate. However, the inhabitants that are not citizens - ex-pats and a large group of stateless inhabitants - do not enjoy the same privileges. Egypt, on the other hand, is a land of substantial socio-economic differences, where illiteracy is a problem. Yet, it is also a country with an increasingly well-educated young population, although youth unemployment in Egypt is widespread, and under-employment a problem for educated young people in both countries.

Not surprisingly, a larger part of the population uses the Internet in Kuwait than in Egypt. Numbers concerning usage and Internet access should always be used with caution, as they usually are based on self-reporting or assessments. Even so, they do provide useful information for our discussion. For 2014, the International Telecommunications Union stated that more than 40 percent of the Egyptian
people had access to the Internet, although not all make use of it. For Kuwait, the ITU states that about 78 percent of the population have access to and uses the Internet. Given the differences between citizens and non-citizens referred to above, the figure is probably higher among the former. In terms of usage, social media are widely popular in both countries. According to the Arab Social Media Report, almost a quarter of all Egyptians are on Facebook - and almost 75 percent of these Facebook-users are under 30 years of age, and about 64 percent are men. Twitter, on the other hand, is a small, elite phenomenon, used by just over 1 percent, although this still accounts for more than one million people. As with Facebook, about 65 percent of the users are male. A 2013 FAFO survey of the greater Cairo area found that the number of people who use “blogs and other websites” was markedly higher among those identified in the survey as the “rich third,” and among those with university education or higher (Kedebe, Kindt, and Høigilt, 2013). Accordingly, while Internet access is increasing, it seems the typical social media user in Egypt is young, relatively wealthy, well educated, and more often than not male. In Kuwait, The Arab social media report states that half the population is on Facebook, and a tenth on Twitter - the highest number of per capita Twitter users in the world (Mocanu et al., 2013). According to Miller and Ko’s analysis of its use in the 2012 elections, Twitter is “not an elite network”, but engages the general public (Miller and Ko, 2015, p. 2948). As follows, the typical Kuwaiti social media user is young, and as a citizen, relatively wealthy and well educated, but she or he may more often than their Egyptian counterparts communicate with users that are older.

As in Egypt, about two thirds of the social media users in Kuwait are male. As stated above, Kuwait is a conservative country, not least in terms of gender relations, and even liberal candidates for parliament separate men and women at campaign events. Women have long been un- or underrepresented in politics, and did not gain the right to vote until 2005. However, online platforms have helped Kuwaiti youth challenge traditional barriers (Wheeler, 2006), and both women and men took part online and offline in the campaign I studied, although men constituted a clear majority. Both women and men
took part in the campaign studied in Egypt as well, although women dominated in leadership positions in the groups. Although Egypt is a less conservative country than Kuwait, reaching out to women who had experienced harassment proved a challenge. While online platforms clearly were important, the groups recognized that many of those affected by the problem did not have access to the Internet, and so they also worked offline, and devised a solution by which SMS could be used to report harassment, as far more people have access to mobile phones. Again, while online platforms may help challenge traditional norms regarding gender relations, how and for whom they do so is dependent on the particular context in question.

The activist groups I studied predominantly made use of social media, although websites still retain a role for some groups, as do blogs. Which social media platform they preferred, however, differed between the two countries. While all Egyptian groups made use of both Twitter and Facebook, the Kuwaiti groups were only active on Twitter, even though Facebook has more users and provide features that would have been beneficial for the groups. There were two, related reasons for this: first, Facebook is seen primary as a private platform in Kuwait. Secondly, as we have seen, Twitter has a unique standing in the country, not least as a platform for political debate, in which established politicians and even members of the royal family take part. The Kuwaiti groups’ strategy to achieve their goals was to make their views and arguments known, and to mobilize people in the streets. Quite clearly, in order to reach the Kuwaiti political public that they sought, Twitter would be their best option online. The situation was different in Egypt, where Facebook was well established as a platform for activism, having been introduced as such by the April 6 movement in 2008 (Lim, 2012, p. 239), although we should not underestimate the importance of Twitter. A potential problem, of course, is that much research on online activism has been focused on Egypt, and so the view of Facebook as an important platform in this regard has perhaps been given a more general validity than what is actually the case. Similarly, while blogs already have been declared dead, they were very much alive in my material. Platform selection is not dependent on technical possibilities and novelty alone; it is highly dependent on the relevant contexts.
New and old media

Sexual harassment is a problem Egyptian women face every day; in schools, on the streets, at work, and other places. Even so, it was seldom discussed publicly. Women were often blamed, and admitting to being harassed was seen as shameful. The state at times denied the problem, at times used harassment and violence against women to suppress opposition, or sought to appropriate the problem to serve their own needs (Amar, 2011). Few complaints of harassment were registered with the police, which itself often was part of the problem. In other words, the groups studied fought an uphill battle. They wanted to reach out to those who experienced harassment, to tell them that it was not their fault and they should not be ashamed. They wanted to document the extent of the problem and expose it to the Egyptian public. They wanted to break the silence surrounding the issue, to articulate it as a problem, to change norms in society and to pressure the unwilling state into action.

In their remarkably successful efforts to achieve these goals, the use of online platforms was crucial for the groups. In fact, I argue that the main benefit activists gain from the use of online platforms, both in Egypt and Kuwait, is the counter publicness they provide, which allows subaltern groups to find together, document their problem and articulate their concerns and demands, and raise these to the public at large. However, given the figures on Internet access and usage in Egypt referred to above, other channels would be necessary to reach the wider public. This raises the question of the relationship between social media and the traditional media, which, in turn, tells us a lot about the importance of contextualization.

In general, many researchers have argued that social media are a positive contribution to the established media scenes in the Middle East in terms accessing, sharing and producing news, ideas and information. As argued by Elizabeth Iskander: “New media enable individuals to bypass the traditional gatekeepers to, and sources of, information” (Iskander, 2011, p. 1227). Social media platforms make it easy for users to rapidly and cheaply share pictures, videos and text, which in turn enable them to share information, break news stories,
and expose wrongdoings ignored by traditional media outlets. This is often referred to as “citizen journalism”, and has been seen as particularly important in autocratic countries in which the media otherwise often are subject to censorship and state control: no longer would it be possible to suppress the people without the world knowing.

This does not mean that social media replace traditional media, or that new and old media work independently of each other. Marwan Kraidy has suggested the term “hypermedia space” to denote “a broadly defined symbolic field created by interactions between multiple media, from micro-blogging to region-wide satellite broadcasting” (Kraidy, 2007, p. 140). This space has many points of access, is not easily subject to social or political control, and has a non-hierarchical nature that invites “a rethinking of Arab information dynamics” (Kraidy, 2007, p. 140) - many actors and different media are involved in creating, spreading and interpreting news stories. That different media and actors work together became extremely clear during the Arab uprisings of 2010 and 2011, both in terms of news production as well as mobilization. As argued by Kristina Riegert, the Arab spring demonstrated how “the interaction between mobile telephones, Internet, and pan-Arab satellite television circulated ideas found in social media to much wider national and international audiences” (Riegert, 2015, p. 458). In my material, I found that old and new media affected each other both in Egypt and Kuwait, but they did so differently in the two countries. Again, this was related to the different offline contexts, including the different media landscapes.

After decades of tight state control, the Egyptian media landscape opened up from the early 1990s, as the country introduced the first Arab satellite channel. In 2000, Egypt allowed for private satellite channels, and soon also private, independent newspapers (Faris, 2013; Sakr, 2012). At around the same time, Internet was becoming increasingly popular, although it remained a privilege of the relatively wealthy and well educated. Even so, from the early 2000s, Egypt witnessed a media liberalization coupled with the emergence of a vibrant blogosphere and an outspoken oppositional activist scene, and this parallel development was far from accidental. Rather, many argue that activists and journalists affected each other and sometimes
worked together (Sakr, 2012). While Internet access and usage was and is limited, both journalists and activists typically fall within those societal groups that do make use of the net. The interplay between journalists and activists helped expose a number of scandals on part of the regime, such as the famous case of the torture of a minibus driver in the hands of the police, which even led to the conviction of the police officers involved (Isherwood, 2008). Also international stations referred to bloggers and online sources, and during the 2011 revolution, al-Jazeera and other networks made wide use of content produced by protesters, such as videos showing the police attacking unarmed protesters, putting pressure on world leaders to react.

Returning to the activist groups I have studied in Egypt, these had an ambivalent relationship with traditional media. On the one hand, they wanted to reach out to the Egyptian people with their views and arguments, and they recognized the importance of TV and newspapers in doing so. On the other hand, they often criticized media outlets for not taking harassment seriously as a problem, or not respecting the privacy of those who were harassed. They sought to correct this, even inviting journalists to meetings and seminars, and by and large they succeeded: sexual harassment is generally treated as a problem in Egyptian media. Online platforms were important for the groups to reach the media: they documented the problem through photos, videos, and testimonies which were easily accessible, they documented their work demonstrating their credibility, and they continuously presented their arguments and their demands. For any journalist concerned with the issue, it would be natural to contact the groups. However, personal offline contacts were also important, and many of the activist involved had experience from the period of cooperation referred to above - the particular Egyptian historical context was of importance.

The interplay between different media, the hypermedia space referred to by Kraidy, was evident in the work of the groups I studied. Different media and different actors could create and affect a news story as it developed, and at times, activists or ordinary people could set the agenda or determine how issues were framed even on national TV. For instance, in one famous incident, harassment of a female
student in Cairo was filmed using a cellphone, the footage spread online, and it was picked up by TV stations. A representative of the university was interviewed on air, blaming the student herself. The activist groups reacted, condemning these statements online and on TV, and a TV-channel confronted the university representative, who soon retracted his comments.  

However, following the 2013 military coup in Egypt, things have changed. While all the post-2011 regimes have taken steps to control the media, dissenting voices in newspapers and on TV have almost disappeared over the last three years. Of course, there are still social media. Yet, while it is true that it is difficult to control social media, authoritarian regimes can make the potential price for speaking one’s mind online so high that most people chose not to, and tens of thousands of activists and intellectuals have been arrested in Egypt. Then, one might ask, can’t social media users expose their regime’s repression to the outside world? Yes, but here we face a central problem with the idea that citizen journalism will stop regime violence: documentation in itself is not enough. Change depends on people in power reacting to the images, that is “doing something” about the injustice and violence. Repression in Egypt is well known and well documented, but since 2013, no one with the ability to do so has interfered.

Turning to Kuwait, we see a different media landscape. Following a liberalization of the press law in 2006, the number of Arabic daily newspapers rose to 15 - hardly financially viable in a country of little more than a million citizens. Many argue that these newspapers are not intended to make money, but to rather to serve the interests of their owners. These owners generally belong to the wealthy business elite or the royal family who, naturally, support the ruling regime. As pointed out by Kjetil Selvik, the “clear majority of newspapers that emerged post 2006 are pro-government in orientation” (Selvik, 2011, p. 493).

As a consequence, the Kuwaiti opposition, including the activist groups I have studied, do not trust the traditional media in the country, referring to it simply as the “corrupt media” which serves the regime. Yet, as we have seen above, they did want to reach out to the
Kuwaiti public. Here, we must remind ourselves of the contextual differences between Egypt and Kuwait discussed earlier. Whereas Egypt is a country of 91 million people with limited Internet access and large socio-economic differences, Kuwait, is a tiny country of just over a million citizens, most of which have access to the Internet. The groups I studied addressed the Kuwaiti public directly through social media, and in particular Twitter, which as we have seen has a special standing in the country. And they were, at least for some time, extremely successful- at one point, they mobilized more than 100,000 people, almost 10 percent of the citizens, to a demonstration (Tétreault, 2012). Their relationship with the traditional media was different than among activists in Egypt, and again, we do not find support for sweeping conclusions on the effects of new media that transcends offline context.

This does not mean that the Kuwaiti activists ignored or were ignored by the traditional media - they often sought to correct what they deemed unfair or incorrect stories published. Moreover, old and new media interact also in Kuwait. There is a show in Kuwaiti TV dedicated to what is happening on Twitter, and statements made in newspapers were routinely discussed in social media and vice versa. However, for the oppositional activists, social media long proved sufficient to further their cause. That was, until the government decided that they've had enough, and began to repress the opposition: riot police violently attacked demonstrations, and oppositional social media users were arrested for what they wrote online. Again, citizen journalism seemed to offer a solution, and the groups documented the violence and appealed to Kuwaitis to react, but to no avail. They then addressed international media, as well as rights organizations. However, the Kuwaiti group organizing the protest, despite having 100,000 followers and posting dramatic footage, did not succeed in gaining much international attention, and no one interfered to stop the regime’s repression.

So we have seen two major problems concerning citizen journalism. First, it requires someone to react, but this does not always happen. Second: not all stories, and not all countries, are seen as interesting
by media outlets. Moreover, international news media have their own agendas which may affect coverage: for instance, al-Jazeera has been accused of largely ignoring the uprising in Bahrain due to the political considerations of its owners, in spite of Bahraini activists publishing footage of government violence on social media. So traditional media still hold much power in setting the agenda, not least in autocratic countries. While the hypermedia space Kraidy refers to clearly is difficult to control fully, authoritarian regimes can still censor traditional media and scare many people from being critical in social media - repression may have changed or become more difficult, but it is still far from impossible. And activists cannot depend on coverage from international media or on the outside world to react. This is not to say that social media are unimportant, it is to stress the importance of local, offline context with regards to the impact of social media.

Norms and practices

While following the groups in Kuwait, I came across numerous political debates that took place on Twitter in 2012, started by oppositional activists and organized around specific hashtags stating the subject of discussion. Surprisingly, most tweets were written not in Kuwaiti Arabic, but in Standard Arabic. This was not supposed to happen. The Arabic language has two varieties, Standard Arabic, often referred to as the “high” variety, and local dialects, often referred to as the “low” variety, and which are different from country to country. Standard Arabic has traditionally been used and seen as appropriate for writing, as well as formal speech, whereas local dialects have been reserved for informal, everyday speech.

It has been widely argued, however, that computer mediated communication, not least on social media, is shattering this separation and favour local dialects as a written variety- people write in local dialects online, in part as social media facilitates what Allman terms “speech like” communication (Allmann, 2009). This is seen as worrying by some proponents of Standard Arabic, and as contributing to obscuring the difference between Standard Arabic and local dialects. Either way, we would expect the Kuwaiti activists on Twitter to use
the Kuwaiti dialect, but they did not. This was particularly surprising given that a few years earlier, I had studied a Kuwaiti activist movement active in 2006 known as the Orange movement, which discussed politics in the comments fields of blogs. And they actually wrote in Kuwaiti Arabic. This called for closer examination.

I conducted a study of the language used in the two campaigns, and my findings were quite clear: in 2006, the activists favoured Kuwaiti Arabic, in 2012 they favoured Standard Arabic. I also included a random sample of Twitter usage in the country - in this, both varieties were employed equally. Moreover, Arabizi, that is, the practice of writing Arabic with Latin letters, was hardly employed at all, even though this has been declared a “funky language for teenzz to use” online (Palfreyman and Khalil, 2003). The question then, is how can we explain the apparent move from Kuwaiti Arabic to Standard Arabic online among activists in the country? I argue we find the explanation in the differences in the spaces in which the debates took place, and by extension, in the intended and expected audiences.

In 2006, 26 percent of Kuwaitis used the Internet, the majority of which were young people. All participants in the discussions on the blogs were visible on the site used, so they could also see who they talked to - and most of all, the activists talked to each other. In contrast, in 2012, most Kuwaitis were online, and Twitter had gained a special standing as a platform for debate engaging Kuwaitis from all parts of society. The debates generated thousands of tweets, and those participating could not know who everyone else taking part were. But in Kuwait, this means you could be writing to politicians, members of the royal family, or even the Prime Minister.

So the intended, expected and possible audiences for the activists in 2006 and 2012 were very different, and as Alan Bell argued in his influential 1984 work: speakers design their style for their audiences (Bell, 1984). The difference in language use in 2006 and in 2012 was no coincidence. The participants made choices in accordance with setting and audience: Kuwaiti dialect was considered appropriate when talking to fellow activists, and standard Arabic was chosen when addressing a large, unknown and possibly very influential audi-
ence. Clearly, language use online is far from accidental, and it is not dictated by the medium used: it is the result of deliberate choices.

Thus, we cannot speak of a “netspeak” that ascribe common features to the language used on online platforms,\(^\text{11}\) because “online”, “social media”, or even a particular platform is not one thing, one context, or one set of practices, but rather a myriad of publics, audiences, and conversations. In Kuwait, different practices were established for different online publics, which in turn may be different in other countries: The Egyptian activists I have studied, for instance, predominantly wrote in Egyptian Arabic also when discussing politics on Twitter. Clearly, online platforms make it possible for (the mostly) young social media users to challenge existing norms, for instance concerning the written language, but quite clearly, we cannot assume that this will always happen. And we must remember, the fact that social media users can challenge traditional norms and conventions does not mean that these disappear. For instance: while social media may help young Kuwaitis to bypass gender segregation, these young Internet users still face society’s, and perhaps their parents’ expectations offline - they have to deal with conflicting norms, values and influences. So what Herrera and Sakr calls “the wired generation” negotiates “a complex space that is simultaneously public and private, free and restrictive, liberating and repressive” (Herrera and Sakr, 2014, p. 7). This, of course, has wide reaching implications that go beyond the study of online material and deserve (and receive) academic attention from various disciplines. For this discussion, it once again reminds us of the many different contexts we must consider when studying online material, and of the dangers of focusing on a strict and artificial online/offline separation as defining criteria in terms of norms and practices.

Social media and other online platforms provide a wide range of opportunities, the direction and content of which is determined by the users. But whatever they do, they are still affected by both their online and offline contexts. There is no support for any technological determinism on part of social media: we cannot assume how online platforms are used and which effects this usage causes across different contexts. But we can, I argue, conclude with the following:
There is no sharp distinction between online and offline, influence moves both ways.

As follows, the online is not one thing, and we should not assume identical patterns of usage, or that social media necessarily lead to particular results across different offline and online contexts.

Clearly, when researching various aspects of the use of social media, we must ground our analysis of the material in the various online and offline contexts within which it was produced, shared and interpreted.

Finally, we should keep in mind that studies of the relationships between different contexts and Internet users in the Middle East will not only tell us much about the use and importance of online platforms, but they will also tell us much about the norms, values and identities of young citizens in these countries.

References


**Notes**

1 I would like to thank Mona Abdel-Fadil for great comments and feedback on this text. The essay is based on the author’s trial lecture entitled “Language, media and culture in Egypt vs Kuwait: how do they affect the social media scenes”, given at the University of Oslo, June 13 2016. Most examples are taken from the author’s PhD-project, “Online activism in Egypt and Kuwait: counterpublicness and democratization in authoritarian contexts”, forthcoming on I. B. Tauris.


10 The study is entitled “The language of online activism.”

11 For brief introduction to this and similar terms and how problematic they are, see Jannis Androutsopoulos, “Introduction: sociolinguistics and computer-mediated communication,” *Journal of sociolinguistics* 10(4) (2006): 419-438.
Abstract:

The Arab world witnessed unprecedented waves of revolt in 2011, which have taken the whole world by surprise, and led to many unexpected outcomes and varying results. Five years after this wave of revolt, it becomes necessary to examine its wide array of effects, especially on certain groups who played a significant role in the midst of these uprisings, such as youth and women. This article addresses a number of important points pertaining to Arab women and their future, such as the effect of the turbulent political environment in the Arab region on Arab women’s movements and their ability to organize; the impact of violations of human rights and the curbing of media freedom on Arab women’s online and offline activism; the implications of the prevailing environment of fragmentation and polarization in many parts of the Arab world on Arab women’s activism, both offline and online; rethinking the potentials and limitations of “cyberactivism” and “cyberfeminism” in terms of enhancing Arab women’s empowerment, activism, and inclusion; as well as coming up with a more inclusive and comprehensive approach, which accounts for different categories of Arab women, when rethinking the notion of “cyberfeminism.”

Keywords:

social media, Arab Spring, cyberactivism, gender

Five years ago in 2011, the whole world’s attention turned to the Arab region, where massive waves of citizen revolt swept across several Arab countries, starting in Tunisia and spreading to Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, shaking the thrones of long-time dictators, while shocking the world with a multitude of varying outcomes and unexpected results. Five years later, it became obvious that the path to de-
Democratization in many of the so-called ‘post-Arab Spring countries’ is far from smooth or straightforward. Syria is suffering from a brutal, ongoing civil war and an enormous, unprecedented humanitarian crisis. Egypt relapsed back to military rule, after overthrowing President Morsi in 2013, in what has been described by some as a military coup and by others as a popular uprising. Libya is in a state of total chaos and anarchy to the extent of becoming a stateless state. Yemen has internal rifts and tensions, which violently escalated due to military intervention from other countries, especially its powerful neighbor Saudi Arabia. Bahrain became the forgotten revolution or the invisible revolution, which no one talks about or pays enough attention to, primarily due to safeguarding the strategic interests of predominantly Sunni neighboring Gulf countries, as well as the strategic interests of Western superpowers, especially the United States. The only exception to this twisted and bumpy road to democracy and reform is Tunisia, which was recognized internationally by awarding the Nobel Peace Prize to some of its parties, hailing their peaceful and bloodless rotation of power, through effective coalition building.

Taking into account this complicated new picture in the Arab region and the fact that many activists who instigated and coordinated these massive protests relied on social media and new media to enact socio-political transformation, a phenomenon commonly referred to as “cyberactivism,” which is the use of new media to advance a cause which is difficult to advance offline (Howard 2011), it becomes essential to revisit this process and its potentials and limitations in the context of current developments and transformations in this rapidly changing region. This is especially important in light of the initial moment of social media euphoria at the inception of these new waves of sweeping revolt in the Arab world, which was reflected in the widespread description of these movements as “Egypt’s Facebook Revolution,” “Tunisia’s Twitter Uprising,” and “Syria’s YouTube Uprising” (Khamis and Vaughn 2011a, 2011b).

It is also especially important in the case of Arab women, in particular, who played an important, central, and visible role in the instigation, continuation, and amplification of these ‘Arab Spring’ movements. Hundreds of thousands of Arab women throughout the region, in-
cluding in some of the most traditional, conservative countries, like Yemen and Bahrain, took to the streets, alongside men, calling for an end to dictatorship and repression and demanding dignity and freedom (Radsch 2012, 2011a, 2011b; Khamis 2013, 2011; Kajeski 2011). In doing so, they were not confining themselves to stereotypical gender roles, such as nurturing or supporting men in their struggle for freedom. Rather, they assumed non-stereotypical gender roles by being in the front lines of resistance, risking their own lives, and exposing themselves to the dangers of arrest or assault (Al-Malki et al. 2012; Khamis 2013). Here it is worth mentioning that even though many women have historically assumed such front line roles in the midst of many conflicts, such stories of women’s bravery and heroism have not necessarily made it to mainstream historical (mis)representations, in both the literature and the media, which predominately and consistently stereotyped men as active and bold in facing danger, and stereotyped women as passive.

Many of these women became iconic figures and role models, not just for other women, but for fellow men citizens as well. For example, Tawwakul Karman, the Yemeni activist and journalist, who was the first Arab woman to win the Nobel prize, Asma Mahfouz, who was called “the most brave girl in Egypt,” due to her very bold vlog on YouTube calling people to go out and revolt on January 25th, 2011, and Ayat El Gomizi, the 20 year old Bahraini young woman, who was arrested due to publically reciting a poem against the king and the ruling family of Bahrain (Khamis 2013; Radsch and Khamis 2013).

Many of these women engaged in a dual socio-political struggle to launch parallel social and political revolutions in their respective countries (Al-Malki et al. 2012; Khamis 2011; Radsch 2012; and Radsch and Khamis 2013), through raising awareness about gender-specific issues, such as sexual harassment, rape, domestic violence, and women’s underrepresentation in politics and their exclusion from the public sphere.

In doing so, many of these Arab women, who became iconic figures of resistance, activism, and protest, relied on social media to enact
their activism and to get their messages across, a phenomenon commonly referred to as “cyberfeminism,” which could be defined as “the innovative ways women are using digital technologies to re-engineer their lives” (Daniels 2009, 103), to raise awareness about women’s issues, and to overcome the challenges confronting them. The innovativeness here could be said to stem from both the medium and the message simultaneously, in other words from the new vehicle of transmission in cyberspace, as well as from new forms of expression and new mediated messages and representations.

This was especially evident in the case of some of the women bloggers, such as Tunisian citizen journalist and blogger, Lina Ben Mehni, for example, who reported on the uprisings taking place throughout her country via social media, since her country had few international correspondents and domestic media were tightly controlled, but who additionally addressed women’s issues, demands, and concerns through her blog as well, in an attempt to increase awareness about them and to rally public support (Radsch and Khamis 2013). Another example is Egyptian blogger, Nawara Negm, who in addition to tackling important political issues, such as exposing governmental corruption and violations of human rights, through her popular and bitterly sarcastic blog, was also able to address some of the most sensitive, taboo social issues, such as sexual harassment on the streets of Cairo. By doing that, she was able, alongside a number of other activists and bloggers who championed the cause of fighting sexual harassment through launching a number of anti-harassment campaigns, to successfully influence the agenda of mainstream Egyptian media, who felt obligated to tackle this thorny issue in an unprecedented fashion (El Nawawy and Khamis 2013). Therefore, we can simply say that these women bloggers, and many others, were able to break the taboos in both the political and social domains and to create a spillover into the mainstream media domain.

The roles of these Arab women activists five years later, and beyond, have to be closely reinvestigated and reassessed to better understand the political, social, cultural, and communication factors which may be aiding, or hindering, their activism, both online and offline. In this
context, it would be wise to ask five important questions pertaining to Arab women's online and offline activism, in the context of ongoing changes and developments in the Arab region.

The first question is how does the overall turbulent environment in the Arab world impact women's movements and their ability to organize with some degree of effectiveness? We can argue in answering this question that while political turbulence and upheaval can negatively impact any movement, in general, this becomes particularly more true and more pressing in the case of minorities and marginalized groups, such as women, who are fighting parallel struggles simultaneously. In other words, beside engaging in the political struggle for freedom and democracy that has been, and still is, taking place in many parts of the Arab world, alongside their fellow men citizens, women are also engaging in an equally pressing, ongoing, gender-specific struggle, namely the struggle to secure legal and social gains for themselves, despite many challenges, such as reactionary social forces, the rise of political Islam, the imposition of a top-down, cosmetic feminism, which only serves those in power, and an unsafe public space, which poses the risks of rape, humiliation, and sexual harassment, as tools to curb women's activism and their visibility and participation in the public sphere (Khamis 2013). Five years after the eruption of the 'Arab Spring' movements, the gains which Arab women were able to achieve in the political, social, and legal domains remain very limited, with the exception of Tunisia, the only Arab country which had a relatively smooth transition to democratization, and which was able to secure some reasonable gains for women, such as a specific quota of representation in the parliament. This means that Arab women's political, social, and legal revolutions are still very much a work in progress.

The second related question is how does the increasing violations of human rights and the curbing of media freedom impact Arab women's activism, both online and offline? Here again, while, undoubtedly, such an atmosphere of intimidation, lack of freedom, and restrictions does have negative implications on all citizens, both men and women alike, and on any political or social movement or group, in general, it does have more negative impacts on traditionally marginalized groups,
such as women, in particular. This is especially true since women historically suffered from multiple layers of invisibility and oppression, and their bodies could very well be targeted as sites for struggle and as venues for exercising repression and domination, through physical violations, such as harassment, rape, or virginity testing.

One good example to illustrate the impact of these increasing violations of human rights on Arab women’s activism is the fact that many Arab women activists either curbed their offline and/or online activism for fear of arrest and other forms of governmental crackdown and intimidation, or they increased their reliance on pseudonyms and anonymous posts for this same reason. This anonymity, however, could be said to be a double-edged sword for Arab women activists, many of whom found social media to be an excellent window to see the rest of the world, while being seen by the rest of the world simultaneously (Khamis 2013). That’s mainly because, on one hand, the factor of anonymity could provide them with the needed protection, not only from political arrests and intimidation, but also from social stigmatization, especially in the most conservative, traditional societies, such as Yemen and Libya, for example. Yet, on the other hand, this anonymity could decrease their visibility, recognition, and credibility, by not allowing them to take credit for their activism or to be associated with it (Radsch and Khamis 2013).

Here it is worth mentioning that although social media are ideally best suited for these women’s activism, due to their grassroots, bottom-up nature, anonymity, accessibility, interactivity, and broad international reach, the tightening atmosphere of media surveillance, which now extended to cyberspace, with many Arab governments monitoring social media activism and engaging in advanced “cyberwars” against dissidents and opponents, including activities such as tracing, hacking, and sabotaging activists’ accounts and websites, made many forms of “cyberactivism” and “cyberfeminism” highly risky. This resulted in either halting or toning down online activism; resorting to anonymity; or increasing activism from the diaspora, as in the case of many Arab women activists who are carrying out their grassroots activism, both online and offline, while being in exile, such
as members of the Syrian and Bahraini opposition movements, for example (Khamis 2013).

The third question is how does the prevailing environment of fragmentation and polarization, which is characterizing the political scene in many parts of the Arab world today, impact women’s activism, both offline and online? For the offline part, we can certainly argue that it can add to the lack of solidarity and the absence of umbrella feminist movements in the Arab world, which has been a sad reality for many years. For the online part, it is important to bear in mind the differing role of social media, depending on the surrounding political environment and the degree of unity and solidarity, or division and fragmentation, which is demonstrated in it. If there is a moment of unity and uniformity motivated by common goals, for example, during the Egyptian revolution of 2011 when all Egyptians across the board chanted the same slogans: “The people want to overthrow the regime” and “Mubarak must go,” social media can be very successful in increasing this unity and amplifying the voices of protest, and they can help by acting as catalysts, mobilizers, and networking tools, which can aid the process of transformation and pave the way for change. However, once this moment of solidarity is gone, and is replaced, instead, by deep divisions, severe polarization, and dangerous fragmentation, as witnessed in many ‘Arab Spring’ countries today, including Egypt after June 2013, then social media can widen the gap between the different groups and increase the tensions and the divisions among them even more, since every group will use its social media venues as effective weapons to attack their opponents and defend themselves, while refusing to listen to their opponents’ views.

This could certainly be said to be true in the realm of Arab women’s online activism and “cyberfeminism,” where the prevailing political divisions and fragmentations resulted in increasingly more fragmented and diametrically opposed movements and groups locally, regionally, and internationally. Many of these groups have their own agendas and their own mediated platforms which are used to propagate them. This makes it harder to solidify women’s efforts in any coordinated manner for the purpose of achieving significant political, social, economic, and legal gains. One good example is the deep divisions in the
Egyptian political scene after 2013, which hampered the efforts of women’s groups, many of which reflected this highly polarized scene, to join forces together to advance women’s issues or to put forward a unified agenda representing Egyptian women across the board under any form of umbrella organization. The only exception again is Tunisia, where women’s movements were able to come up with some form of effective, collective coalition building, coordination, and rotation to advance women’s issues and to represent their interests, which paid off through securing concrete gains for Tunisian women, legally, socially, and politically.

The fourth question is how can we rethink about the potentials and limitations of “cyberactivism,” in general, and “cyberfeminism,” in particular, in the realm of enhancing Arab women’s empowerment, activism, and inclusion, in light of the developments which have been unfolding in the region recently? In terms of potentials, it is evident that many Arab women activists relied on social media venues, such as Facebook, blogs, and Twitter to achieve three main functions, namely: mobilization, education, and documentation. The mobilization function refers to the use of social media to increase the coordination of efforts and to expand networking and outreach, as in the case of rallying international help and support for Syrian women who were rape victims and/or refugees, through increasing the visibility of these disadvantaged groups, both nationally and internationally, in the hope of securing the needed medical, economic, and social support for them. The education function refers to increasing societal awareness about issues of particular salience and significance to women, such as rape, sexual harassment, domestic violence, and political underrepresentation. This could take place on two levels, namely: educating women themselves about these issues and about their own rights, as well as educating society at large about such issues and what could be done about them. Finally, the documentation function was largely carried out through women’s role as citizen journalists, who were able to act as eyewitnesses, in their various capacities as journalists, activists, and average citizens, taking advantage of the immediacy of social media tools and their wide outreach, which ensures that important events will get instant coverage and attention, both at home and abroad (Khamis 2013; Radsch and Khamis 2013).
Despite these important potentials of social media, however, it is worth investigating some of their limitations as well, five years down the road. Some of these limitations include the digital divide between the technological haves and have-nots, due to a variety of reasons, such as technical and technological barriers, economic, and infrastructural constraints, as well as educational and digital illiteracy barriers, all of which are prevalent and widespread in many parts of the Arab world, but become more visible and pressing in the case of some segments, such as women and rural populations, for example. There is also the danger of “slacktivism” and “clicktivism,” which refers to substituting words for actions, or substituting posting, texting, and tweeting for doing, as well as the fact that social media, no matter how effective they may be, cannot substitute for the absence of organized leadership on the ground and cannot fill the power vacuum resulting from the lack of active and organized civic engagement movements and institutions (El Nawawy and Khamis 2013). It could be said that these social media limitations need to be revisited and reassessed in each of the so-called ‘post-Arab Spring countries,’ especially in terms of their potential impact on Arab women’s online and offline activism.

The fifth, and last, question is how can we come up with a more inclusive and comprehensive approach, which accounts for different categories of Arab women, when rethinking the notion of “cyberfeminism”? This is particularly important since most previous research on this topic focused on certain categories of women, mostly elite, upper middle class, urban women, while excluding women who represent other socio-economic and geographic segments and other demographic profiles. This “urban-centric” and “elite-centric” approach was prevalent and evident in both previous media coverage, as well as previous academic research. Today, it needs to be revisited and reassessed to account for a much broader and more representative umbrella of Arab women activists, especially with the rising tide of activism among women in the diaspora and in exile, as well as the proliferation of new means of communication in rural areas and in less advantaged urban neighborhoods, due to their increasing affordability and accessibility, as well as the growing phenomenon of “secondary Internet users,” whereby those who are less digitally literate can depend on others.
to help them navigate the realm of online communication (Khamis 2013; Radsch and Khamis 2013). This expansion and extension of the process of “cyberfeminism” to make it more inclusive of a wider array of Arab women can help in overcoming the undesirable phenomenon of “tokenism,” whereby certain limited categories of elitist women are constantly overrepresented, whether in mainstream media coverage, in academic research, or in political representation, at the expense of much broader segments of women, who are more representative of their respective societies, but who constantly receive less media coverage, less academic attention, and less political representation, thus projecting largely flawed, skewed, or inaccurate depictions of women’s true realities and real needs and demands in this part of the world (Khamis 2013; Radsch and Khamis 2013).

In conclusion, in attempting to find answers to these pressing questions moving forward, it is wise and realistic to bear in mind that the perceived opportunities and threats related to the future of Arab women’s activism are directly tied to the uncertainties and the haziness of the political future of their respective countries and the directions they will take in the future. The uncertainty, volatility, and instability which characterize this region during these tumultuous times, make it extremely difficult to chart the political and social road ahead, with all the challenges posed by transitioning to new orders and shaking old ones. This similarly casts doubt on the status of Arab women, the salience of their issues, the future of their struggles, as well as the multiple forms and varying outcomes of their activism, both online and offline.

One thing remains certain, however. Just like there is no turning back on Arab citizen’s calls for change, reform, and transformation, despite all the pumps and detours on the road to democracy and freedom right now, there will be, undoubtedly, no turning back on Arab women’s strive for justice, equity, representation, and inclusion, despite all the challenges confronting them in both the political and social domains at present. The exact forms, shapes, outcomes, and impacts of Arab women’s ongoing socio-political struggles, through both online and offline activism, however, remains to be largely seen, and will be
dictated by both the will of the Arab women themselves, as well as myriad political, social and economic factors which will dictate the future of their own countries simultaneously.

References


