



# Cyber Orient

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# CyberOrient

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Editor-in-Chief: Daniel Martin Varisco

Associate Editors: Vít Šisler, Anders Ackfeldt

Graphic Designer: Eva Nečasová, Richard Alexander

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## Algerian Youth and the Contestation over Sound on TikTok

Luca Bruls

### Abstract

*In Algeria, youth form attitudes towards music as a result of their TikTok usage. The responses of governmental institutions, Facebook users, and middle-class TikTokers to popular raï songs unfold the contestation over sound. Drawing on nethnography, I expose the moralizing and politicized responses that couple these different groups in their criticism. Through an account of the conversations and interactions with middle-class Algerian youth, I demonstrate TikTok's subdivision into two opposed, yet interdependent scenes. The text draws on examples of the engagement between the two groups to reveal how youth call attention to their class identities by listening and sounding, as well as related expressions of dancing and dressing. The friendships and engagements online are a result of youth's scaling practices in TikTok's For You algorithm. Through their negotiation of songs, performances, and humour, middle-class youth create a sonic class line that separates them from vulnerable classes. The moralizing stories that these middle-class youth tell are an everyday representation of the different classes in Algeria. Studying sound on TikTok can help ethnographers learn about the concomitant memes and stereotypes that circulate online.*

### Keywords

TikTok, sound, youth, class

It is Friday night and I am having dinner at a friend's house. I reach for my phone and open TikTok. Sixteen new notifications! Wait, what? That is more than usually after two hours. I click on my inbox and find that an Algerian girl called Sihem has dueted my recent TikTok. I open the TikTok and watch myself perform a dance style called *way way* on the right side of the screen, while on the left side Sihem shakes her head and laughs away the accompanying sound snippet by raï singer Cheb Bello:

*Ya tibgī sāwt, tibgī sāwt. Ma-tsāwtahaš, ma-ṭhalālhaš.* [Oh, she likes to get hit, she likes to get hit. Don't hit her. Don't show her mercy.]

I click on Sihem's TikTok profile. My heart skips a beat when I see she has 270 thousand followers. I watch the TikTok again and re-read its description: "girl don't worry, you're safe now."<sup>1</sup> And the added text to the video: "This girl from netherland who's doing a study on Algerian tiktok is stuck on straight tiktok and it's killing me go interact with her and get her out plz." I open the comment section. Sihem's followers are equally astounded at the sight of my appearance: "oh god somebody pls save her," "OMGJDKNDKF," "*Amma ra3tt bdahhk* [I sweat from laughter]," "*Hadik hadik* [Approving sound of clapping]," "Noooo please have mercyyyyyy." In the following days, I receive more messages from TikTokers who voice their dislike of my participation in a performance style that is popular on Algeria's *straight* TikTok. They advise me to become involved in Algeria's *alt* TikTok.

The exchange between Algerian youth and me in the introductory vignette raises questions about participation in performance. Anthropologists argue that performance represents how people make culture. According to Victor Turner (1987) "culture" can even be seen as a series of performances. The idea that performance is an everyday manifestation indicates that it is more than theatre or entertainment. Performativity is life-in-action. Routines of embodied and mimetic practices communicate and carry-on stories about practitioners' taste, goods, customs, and politics. Routines thus disclose socioeconomic positions and relations. Performance does not happen in

<sup>1</sup> The reactions correspond with the original language usage of their authors.

solitude. Rather, it reflects the practices of a mass who collectively make their messages heard (Kunreuther 2018, 2). Kunreuther argues that performance *sounds*. It resonates the silences, voices, and songs of power, representation, and agency. Performance may enable human beings to “gain a voice” and express their standing.

On Algerian TikTok, youth disclose their socioeconomic backgrounds and moral positioning through sounded performances. Hence, in Algeria, TikTok performances are signatures of class relations. The musical aesthetics of the short 6–60 seconds videos resonate the distinction between vulnerable working classes on the one hand and middle classes on the other hand. It follows that, I set out to shed light on this class tension, by discussing the scenes, conversations and lived realities that online performance-making enable. In this article, I question: how is sound central to youth’s creation of status, bonds, intimacies, and virtual homes on Algerian TikTok? Based on ethnographic encounters with informants I suggest that sound in the form of lyrics, the digital production of *raï* music, as well as sonic expression through dance, is a social class signifier that accommodates meaning making and ethical self-fashioning. In the following paragraphs, I first sketch the importance of sound in relation to politics and socioeconomic dynamics in Algeria. Thereafter, I make evident how these issues translate to online mediaspheres. I show that sound is an essential reason why people stay in or away from certain digital media environments, not unlike the scenes they avoid in physical space. In the third and fourth section, I discuss comments and interviews to show how youth moralize TikTok practices in order to express their social status. I hereby participate in the debates of sonic ethnographers who argue sound to be political and consequential for moral action, as well as lengthen their significance for online space. Understanding how digital media affects the realities we live in requires attention to resonance, which is at the core of collective experience.

## Becoming a TikToker

The pandemic has accelerated TikTok usage in Algeria. TikTok is the most downloaded app of the past three years. From September 2020 to January 2021,

I conducted nethnographic fieldwork on the app, while I was at distance in the Netherlands. Nethnography refers to the theoretical study of online environments and humans' digital communicative practices, and to the methodological approaches for grasping the nature of online participation (Boellstorff et al. 2012, 4). During the five-month fieldwork period, I collected data by day-to-day scrolling the *For You* page on TikTok, screenshotting significant conversations, and following hundreds of Algerians who perform a trend that is popular on TikTok: dancing to *raï*. Since TikTok is a closed-off space, that only allows users to interact through messenger if two users follow one another, I negotiated access by participating in TikTok-making myself. I engaged in dancing, lip synching, liking, and commenting to TikTok performances. My own TikTok profile became the main gateway to meet informants and a data source, as people started to interact with my content. Because of my username, profile description, as well as several TikToks I made about my research, my followers could notify the scholarly reasons of my presence. Through TikTok chat and Facebook videocalls, I interviewed ten informants from different Algerian cities and had short chat conversations with eight more.

## Controversial sounds

During fieldwork, I saw “microcelebrities” gain hundreds of thousands of followers. They derive their fame from TikTok and cross-medial sharing on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. But, their expressions are also the cause of controversy, a controversy rooted in an Algerian history of the politics of sound. Microcelebrities and less-acclaimed youth have to deal with the expansion of “a new conservative online ‘public’” and thus carefully manage their public visibility and audibility (Costa and Menin 2016, 140). Youth do so at various levels, because the seemingly rigid online “public” in reality exists of numerous groups, who surveil and criticize youth for their subversive behavior. For example, the moral anxieties about the actions of youth online appear in statements of the government. On January 9, 2019, Algeria’s Ministry of Education issued a statement on TikTok, warning of the dangers and risks of the application. The statement, ironically posted on the ministry’s Facebook page, focused on the risks of the ease with which users can share artistic performances, including songs, dance, comedy, *taqlīd*

(imitation) and challenges. According to the ministry, these performances could result in unethical and endangering situations exposing youth to exploitation and blackmailing<sup>2</sup>.

The present-day “state-hearing” intervention emulates an authoritative history in Algeria wherein sounds and bodies are made to fit into “Islamic,” as well as elitist laws and norms. During the 1980s, when economic hardship and social inequality pressured the country’s population as a result of the collapse of oil prices and the pressure on housing, the food industry, and the education system (McDougall 2017, 263), groups of unemployed youth found their way to the street to express their dissatisfaction with the sitting political elite. Surrounded by the daily sounds of a protesting city, many youths found their joy in *raï*, a popular musical genre produced by musicians who translated the postcolonial conditions of Algeria into their prevailing vernacular lyrics focusing on love, sexuality, death, imprisonment, poverty, and the pleasures of alcohol (al-Deen 2005, 601). The listening habits of youth were not well received by ruling politicians, who considered *raï* as an example of poverty, violence, and the degradation of morals among youth. *Raï* symbolized a lack of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) and an anti-Muslim way of life, characterized by supposedly westernized signs and colonial remises (Schade-Poulsen 1999, 20).

These classist stereotypes continue to reflect in the debates surrounding TikTok, where *raï jdīd* (a new style of *raï*) is a most prominent genre. The deep socioeconomic divide in Algeria is at the heart of this discussion. *Raï jdīd* and the complementary dance style *way way*, of which the movements and facial expressions correspond to the musical lyrics and thus are not a practice detached from sound, emerged from *sha‘abi* districts (lit. popular, known as urban districts populated by low-income vulnerable classes). These socially segregated districts with inadequate access to clean water, education, and health care, materialize in the outer circles of cities, while affluent Algerians live in the inner-city zones or luxurious suburbs. The ministry’s proclamation of TikTok performances as dangerous reflects fears of residents from *sha‘abi* neighborhoods, where the most widely circulating TikToks come from. Sound

<sup>2</sup> For full statement see (El-Bilad 2019).



is a domain of control and censorship. Lippman rightly states: “controlling sound becomes a biopolitical project in that sonic control is perceived as a means of policing violence, crime and sexuality particularly stereotyped as problems of the poor [...]” (Lippman 2019, 25). Surveilling *raï* online is a method of silencing those groups considered as noisy, tasteless, and violent. Surveilling groups warn vulnerable classes for using their voice, for telling their stories in certain dialects, accents, rhythms, and tones of voice. By issuing a statement, the ministry cautions citizens against tuning into these sounds.

Besides the surveillance in public discourse by governmental institutions, the expressions of youth from vulnerable classes also cause controversy in the comment sections of Facebook pages with daily TikTok compilations. Mostly female young TikTokers appear full-bodied or with their upper body and face dancing to *raï* in their bedrooms, kitchens, on the beach, or in a backstreet. Mimicking one another, they lip-synch trending songs and perform a set of hand gestures known as dance style *way way*. At the time of the study, one of the most popularly used songs was the *raï* hit *Bye Bye Lmiziria* by Didou Parisien. In the comment sections of TikTokers using this song, there are clashing encounters between people who celebrate the content and others who disapprove. The latter group criticizes the women and their male kin for their lack of respect and ability to uphold family morals, expressing their dislike through comments such as “may God curse you” or “may God punish you for your deeds.” Additionally, they condemn dance and music by (re-)posting images (Image 1 and 2). Their statements echo the governmental discourse and common conservative and pious ideas prominent in artistic and literary representations of Algeria (Bouari 2021, 412). While the class distinctions between the commenters and TikTok makers are perhaps not so neat, such a statement would require more research, the images and comments do exemplify how religion and gender shape listening.



Image 1: Condemnation of TikTok and dance. (Facebook comment sections of TIK TOK, 2020)

[Oh female dancers on TikTok. You know that there is no difference between you and the female dancers in cabarets. Only that she dances for an audience and you dance for the world. May Allah guide us and you.]



Image 2: Condemnation of music. (Facebook comment sections of TIK TOK, 2020)

[The sanctity of stringed instruments  
Ibn Qadama Rahma-tallah said: “Entertaining  
instruments, like the tanbour  
(a string instrument), the mizmar (a  
double reed wind instrument), and the  
shababa (a reed flute) are instruments  
of sin according to Islamic consensus.”]

The makers of Images 1 and 2 claim a condemnation of dance, music, and musicians based on an orthodox Islamic train of thought. The contestation surrounding the legitimacy of music and physical expressions thereof is not new to the field of anthropology nor to Muslim scholars. Heterodox sonic practices play a role in the embracing of different forms of piety and support Muslims to expand their understanding of the meanings of Islam and being Muslim (Jouili and Moors 2014, 979; van Nieuwkerk 2011, 4). Informed by Islam and local traditions, the perceptual understanding of sound in Algeria can be understood with Charles Hirschkind’s concept “ethical sensibilities” (Hirschkind 2006, 8). Based on a study of cassette sermon tapes in Egypt, Hirschkind illustrates that sermon listening practices encourage Muslims to live piously according to Islamic ethics implied in recordings. It follows that the urban environments intensified by these soundscapes can function as “spaces of moral action” (Hirschkind 2006, 22). Facebook and TikTok comment sections similarly function as spaces of moral action, because here Muslims express a fear of immodesty that comes with listening to raï and consuming dance. The commenters express their presumed righteous religioethical positioning through likes and comments. But, as drawn out above, the controversiality surrounding TikTok and sound usage is not limited to orthodox Islamic opinion. In Algeria, Islam is only one element in a larger structure of the contestation over sound. Research on sound and the Middle East tends to focus on the relationship with Islam and hereby runs the risk of overemphasizing Muslimness in contrast to other identity markers. Listening and sounding also have racial, gendered, and class-based differences and these differences are essential to understand conflict.

Historian Ziad Fahmy (2020, 7) mentions in his colorful description of street sounds in Egypt that the elite and middle classes create a “sonic class line” through their expressions and discourses about the noises of vulnerable classes. Deriving from the concept “sonic color line” (Stoever 2016), a sonic class line means the construction and materialization of an aural border between vulnerable classes and others. Human beings communicate their status in terms of class positioning through listening habits and sound usage. What sound is proper or disorderly is a socially constructed question of class hierarchy and associated capital. Sounding spaces, be they clubs or *sha‘abi* districts, separate those in powerful class positions from communication with those in vulnerable positions. An aural border alike is also constructed in Algeria’s TikTok spaces.

Namely, in addition to the disciplinary public introduced, there is a group of young Algerians active on TikTok who dislike and criticize the popularity of *raï jdīd*. These 18–24 year olds, whom I befriended, are part of the (upper) middle class. Chitchat about jobs in service economies, university education, the possession of expensive smartphones, and symbolic capital in terms of TikTok fame or number of followers indicated their status. Although these Algerians use TikTok themselves and express their joy in using it, a disapproving, often sarcastic view on *raï* is widespread among them. Algerians who dance to *raï* are met with disdain and the attempt of my informants to exclude them from their TikTok networks, indicates their implicitly middle-class experience. Similarly, their language and music choice reflects an Algerian urban high-educated context, where cosmopolitanism is linked to and communicated through a hybrid mix of English, Arabic, and French. Through language, these youngsters separate themselves from *raï* listeners, who “simply” communicate in and listen to songs in the Algerian dialect.

Due to TikTok’s personalized algorithm, which depends on a user’s language preference, location, the country code of a phone number, content characteristics, and user’s activity, youth can create a landing page, also *For You* page, with an endless scroll of their desired content. As a result, the spaces in Algerian TikTok are roughly divided in two: *meryūl* or *straight* TikTok for youth who perform

way way on *raï* and *‘amīq* or *alt* TikTok for youth who contest *raï* and defy trends popular on *meryūl* TikTok. The second group negotiates and produces space by generating relations that underscore their different and alternative cultural capital. They claim to be modern and expose to have knowledge of “good taste” in terms of dress style, dance, and music, hereby trying to give a positive image of local youth culture. Youth’s negotiation of sensory interests creates a sonic class line because it results in them spending time in different, yet closely related, algorithmically curated spaces on TikTok. The ethnographic particulars show that sound and movement are at the heart of this differentiation and that it is a source for ethical discussions. For *‘amīq* TikTokers, as well as the ministry and Facebook users, *raï jdīd* threatens class ideals and religious meaning-making. Middle-class and elite Algerians classify certain TikTok soundscapes as controversial and meanwhile search for a distinct audibility that represents their sophistication. In essence, the segregation happening in digital media spheres is not much different from that in offline spaces. Class contempt is historically deeply engrained in Algerian society at large. Hence, taste preferences among affluent classes and political elites run as a parallel structure to what is happening on TikTok. Nevertheless, the social stratification on TikTok is set in the particular context of digitalization and generational change. The question that follows is: how did youth respond to these tensions in the ethnographic context?

### Songs make scenes: from *‘amīq*- to *meryūl* TikTok

In the days after Sihem dueted my TikTok and commented on my use of *straight* TikTok, we talked on TikTok chat. Sihem is nineteen years old and lives in Algiers. She studies journalism and started using TikTok in June 2020 during the pandemic, whereupon she quickly arose as a star. Her content exists of sketches with funny characters (played by herself) or she dances to American hip-hop. Although she is unsure about making TikTok into a job, one thing is certain: she wants to be famous on *alt* TikTok.

Sihem explained to me the difference between *alt* and *straight* TikTok. *Straight* TikTok, on the one hand, consists of dance content, challenges, verified TikTokers such as Loren Grey and Charli Damelio, and is popular among conservative people. Sihem referred to it as “cringe.” As an example,

she sent me a TikTok of a Trump supporter, who apparently downplayed the political ideals of “proper” TikTokers. *Alt* TikTok, on the other hand, is short for alternative TikTok. This side includes comedic and artistic content made by and for people with alternative music interests. According to Sihem, the terms *alt* and *straight* TikTok are not commonly known in Algeria, because of the lack of English-speaking communities. Nevertheless, Darija-speaking TikTokers are well aware of the difference and Algerian TikTok has become standardized around two specific groups of users. Sihem said that the closest local terms are: “Lmeryoulin for people who do videos like yours. And 3ami9in for people who do ‘alt videos.’” Young Algerians who make “alt videos,” craft TikToks in English, make anime fan videos, or dance to American pop, rock, and metal songs by artists such as Tame Impala and Billie Eilish. Although these genres and artists are mainstream on the global market, in the context of Algerian TikTok, youth consider these acoustics to be meaningful denominators of someone’s alternativity and their fluency in a bilingual culture. As a consequence of Sihem’s duet, *‘amīqīn* were the youth who started following, liking, and responding to my TikToks.

*‘amīq* (plural *‘amīqīn*), also known as 3ami9, literally means deep in Arabic, but in the context of TikTok, youth use it to refer to a side (*alt* TikTok) or a person. Sihem explained that Zaki Catalonia popularized the term *‘amīq*. She referred to Zaki as “your basic meryol,” a comment that well signified the friction between the two groups. Zaki Catalonia frequently did live sessions on Instagram, where he played raï music and talked to his fans. In one session he spoke about *‘amīqīn* (Catalonia 2020). This video went viral on YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. In the video, Catalonia made fun of *‘amīqīn* by referring to them as weirdos and anime fans. Contrarily, *‘amīq* TikTokers themselves thought being *‘amīq* was beautiful, cool, and positive. They proudly mentioned alternative listening practices, dress styles that derive from emo culture, anime, literacy, and educational capital. Nevertheless, *‘amīq* TikTokers also said theirs was a complex identity that caused conflict. In Algerian society other youth, like Zaki, used the word *‘amīq* as an insult or to mock. My informants struggled with being called gay or weird and had anxiety to wear their favorite outfits or piercings on the street. Many lived by double standards and TikTok was one of the few spaces where they could

stand up for themselves and connect with people who were alike in their self-articulation. Although the label *‘amīq* often carried negative connotations, youth re-appropriated the label to mark their status as insiders of a group of deviants.

The other side of TikTok is called *meryūl* TikTok. The term *meryūl* (feminine *meryūla*, plural *meryūlīn*) derives from the Italian word *mariolo*, meaning a cunning person (Daoudi and Miliani 1996, 265). The phonetic Arabic term is known from *raï* songs. It has plural meanings and definitions. In *raï* songs, *meryūla*, for example, corresponds to a femme fatale. In the viral TikTok song *Omri Chikour*, Cheba Siham Japonia (Image 3) refers to *meryūl* as the dangerous one (*al-wa‘ra*) and a gentle guy (*anūš*), who has authority (*yahkam*), gets drunk (*yiskir*) and attacks (*yazdam*). My informants used the term to indicate a person who enjoys life: *la moda* (the latest trends), dancing *way way*, listening to *raï jdīd*, going to cabarets and nightclubs, smoking, drinking alcohol, taking drugs, wearing a lot of makeup, wearing Lacoste, and dating various people. The term had a negative connotation. *‘amīq* TikTokers described *meryūl(a)* as “*ħaġa mašī malīħa* [something unpleasant],” “a person who is not romantic,” “not beautiful,” “not elegant,” and “reckless and impulsive.” The ethnography brought forward that the contestation was foremost about sound, nevertheless, youth also contested other modes of expression such as language and fashion corresponding to particular sonic consumption.



Image 3: Luca dancing to *Omri Chikour*, Cheba Siham Japonia (download [Link](#))

The division of TikTok into two main sides, of *meryūlin* and *'amīqīn*, should be seen in light of “scalable sociality.” Miller et al. (2016) introduced this theory to explain the different scales people use social media for. Meaning, people use different social media platforms to interact with a specific group of users (2016, 6). Scalable sociality corresponds to the levels of privacy people negotiate when they socialize on a platform. In the context of Algeria, youth generally use Facebook for their family, Instagram for their close friends, and TikTok for contact with friends or strangers of their same age group. TikTok is a space where youth can avoid the adult gaze. But, on their *For You* page, they get recommended both *alt* and *straight* TikToks and thus unwillingly engage with people from different positions of social privilege. To control this contact, Algerians like, make, or follow TikTokers from a particular side and thus scale in order to socialize with people with whom they feel connection and have fun. This connection is stratified by socioeconomic positions. Affluent youth like Sihem make class-conscious decisions to connect with their community by consuming “alternative” sounds. Mary Douglas theorized the relationship between consumption and class, arguing that consumption is a central arena where people generate culture and share group identity (Douglas and Isherwood 1979, 37). Music and dance are among the goods that communities consume to make their culture audible and visible. Will Straw conceptualizes the consumption patterns of cultures in geographically specific spaces, where certain recreational activities or musical genres are the point of attention, as “scenes.” Scenes refer to the collective set of habits of people who get together based on a certain enthusiasm. Straw describes it as followed:

“Scene” is used to circumscribe highly local clusters of activity and to give unity to practices dispersed throughout the world. It functions to designate face-to-face sociability and as a lazy synonym for globalized virtual communities of taste. (Straw 1970, 6)

The concept is meaningful for the discussion of TikTok cultures. Viewing the participation of Algerian youth in certain “sides” on TikTok as scenes allows one to order and map the local character and global interconnection of virtual spaces. While the trending music on *meryūlin* (straight) TikTok overlapped with



trends in Tunisia and Morocco, the users of *'amīq* (alt) TikTok had stronger ties with (im)material culture that was trending in Japan, Korea, America, and Europe. *'amīq* TikTokers exhibited cosmopolitan interests. Yet, most interactions of both groups were limited to local clusters. The scenes were inherently “glocal” in that youth responded to global trends in a local matter. They responded to the activities that represented the other scene, in order to consolidate their different interests and status.

The interactions as a result of my TikTok illustrate the contradictory positions of youth (Image 4). During fieldwork, I participated in performances typical to *meryūl* TikTok. People in this scene encouraged me to continue dancing to *raï* with comments and likes. But after Sihem’s duet to my TikTok to Cheb Bello’s song, other people commented that I was “stuck on the wrong side of tiktok due to the songs,” which signaled their disturbance with the actions and behaviors associated with TikToks on *raï*. Participants in *meryūl* trends failed to inhibit a certain behavior that fitted the youth’s notion of the “right” side of TikTok and this was linked to the sounds and lyrical content. *'amīqīn* kept *meryūlīn* at a distance and ridiculed their behavior.

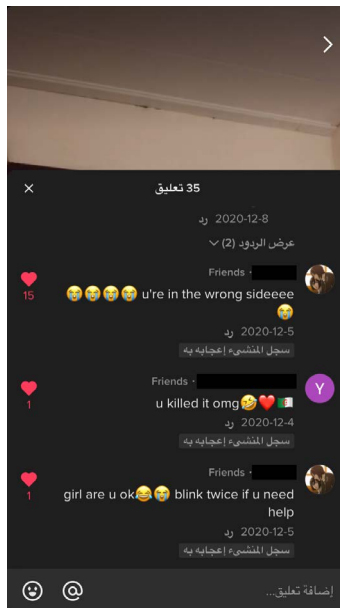


Image 4:  
Comments on Luca’s  
TikTok on *Tebghi Sawt*

The ‘*amīq*’ TikTokers embodied a sense of superiority because they presumed their members’ audibility to be better than that of *meryūlīn*. Although ‘*amīqīn*’ advocated that everybody was allowed to be strange and different, they shifted their ethical registers when speaking of the appearance and listening practices of *meryūlīn*. Hichem, a nineteen-year-old student who works in a smartphone store in Algiers and dreams of becoming a famous influencer travelling the world, pointed out that *meryūlīn* encouraged a *ḥaram* (prohibited) lifestyle. He said that their search for trouble was a result of the sociopolitical circumstances in Algeria, where the government did not take care of the streets and the Algerians. Hichem gave a sociopolitical explanation for the attitudes of Algerian youth. Although the political elite was neglecting all Algerians, they did especially little for precarious districts with high unemployment rates, which reflects the issues of the 1980s. These conditions presumably nurtured people into lifestyles with excessive alcohol consumption and unaccepted lyrical music. Hichem said that this distinctive behavior was also the result of the impact of *aš-šāri* ‘ (the street), where he presumed people take drugs, steal from others, and use violence. When I asked if this related to *meryūlīn*, he explained: “Yes it is so related to *meryūlīn*. A lot of *meryūlīns* they learn those things from *aš-šāri* ‘. [...] When you are born in a popular place, we call it *ḥuma sha‘abiya*. When you are younger and get to the street and start talking to people, people will teach you their lifestyle and how they see things, how they react. And they will be inspired by them and become a *meryūl*.”

Hichem’s depiction of *sha‘abi* neighborhoods as dangerous and violent exemplifies the affective and moralizing responses that proliferate in Maghreb countries (Strava 2022, 66). The presumed loudness and aggression of the masses needed to be civilized. According to middle-class Algerians, the precarious nurture of certain youth was a logical explanation for their consumption of *raï* and *way way*, interests that were equally associated with vulgarity, trouble, and a lack of culture. The looks, sounds, and behaviors of vulnerable Algerians were to be managed and silenced according to the norms of middle-class citizens. These classist norms show resemblances with the elite’s judgments in the 1980s. Moreover, like the orthodox commenters on Facebook, ‘*amīq*’ TikTokers engaged in “discourses of sensory shaming” (Fahmy 2020, 8) by expressing their class anxieties and judgments.

Anthropologists working with Muslim communities demonstrate that consuming leisure is a moral project. In a study of café culture in Beirut, Lara Deeb, and Mona Harb describe how local youth negotiate piety in their search for and organization of leisure activities (Deeb and Harb 2013, 8). The conversations with Hichem tell that in the context of TikTok, balanced consumption was also based on notions of what is *ḥalal* (permissible) or *ḥaram*. Algerian youth's moral judgments regarding music consumption can thus be framed in terms of "halal fun" (Jouili 2014, 1080). Whoever acts *ḥalal* lives according to dominant norms in society. Like consumption, leisure has religious and class implications and is a marker of status and cultural capital. Youth literally have time "to spend" and make audible their leisurely activities. Whoever consumes *raï* seriously or engages in the leisurely scene called *meryūl* TikTok, fails to behave according to dominant societal norms. The examples show that *'amīqīn* embrace similar norms and values to other wealthy groups in Algerian society. However, their engagement in an online protest and the acceptance of TikTok-making as a meaningful practice to learn about these norms and values differentiates them from other middle-class and elite generations. Technological change has impacted how a new generation of youth position themselves towards dominant norms in Algerian society. Moreover, *'amīqīn* did not always strictly live according to the moral registers. The examples below illustrate in more detail how TikTok is a unique space for the way Algerians figure an understanding of ethical behavior and contextually negotiate when they listen to transgressive sounds.

### Cringe TikToks, guilty pleasures, and inside jokes

For *'amīqīn* *raï jdīd* was an "assault on the ears." Holger Schulze argues that the regulation and rejection of unwanted sounds have to be explained by beliefs on "unwanted cultural practices, lifestyles, forms and expressions of existence" (Schulze 2019, 205). He conceptualizes the erasure of particular sonic consumers as "sonic cleansing." The classification "unwanted sound" has class implications because it is often the cultural elites who publicly define what is considered noise and what not. In the context of TikTok, youth disassociated themselves from and protested against the producers and consumers of *raï jdīd*, who besides their undesirable lifestyles and lack of

cultural taste, were presumably aggressive, narrow-minded, and homophobic. Contrastingly, the imagined behavior of people on *'amīq* TikTok was based on correct interactions: they were respectful, open-minded, and tried to normalize queerness and feminism. The anime and American music they listened to themselves were not a point of discussion. It reflected the listening practices of educated middle and wealthy classes. Although the makers of *meryūl* TikToks were transgressing conservative styles of dress and music, by dancing to songs about alcohol, sex, and drugs, their attitudes and expressions did not conform to middle-class youth's presumed morally superior values of freedom. According to the latter, youth could signal a conception of freedom by practical knowledge of virtues. They saw aural codes as symbols of morality.

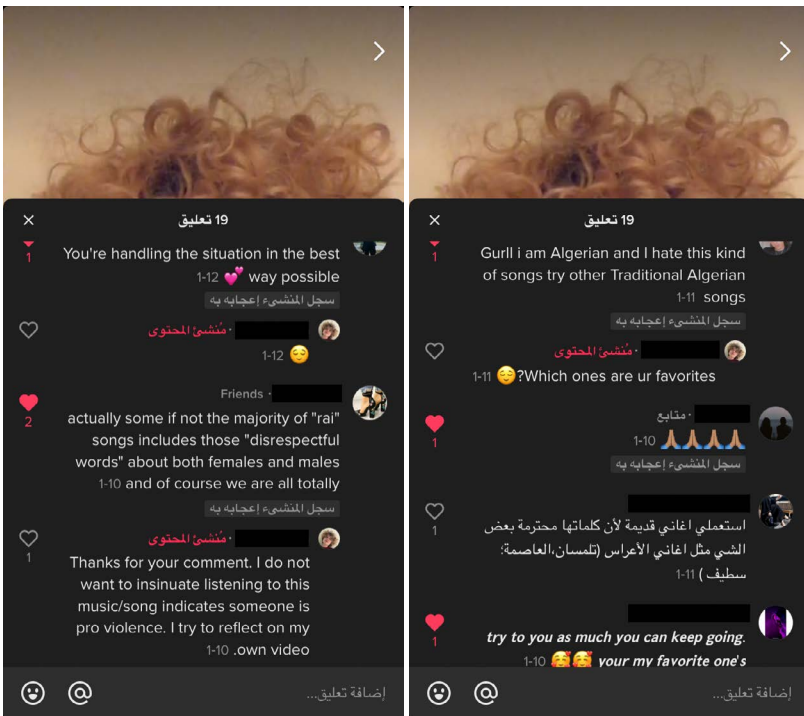


Image 5: Comments on Luca's TikTok of a reflection on *Tebghi Sawt*

Image 6: Comments on Luca's TikTok of a reflection on *Tebghi Saw*

For example, one month after I made the TikTok to *Tebghi sawt*, Adham, a university student and big fan of Radiohead who lives in Oran and Bel-Abbès, commented “Luca delete this video.” In a private voice message on Facebook, he told me that he found the lyrics sexist and he thought that raï songs like these normalize abusive behavior among young men. I explained that I decided not to delete the TikTok because it marked an important realization point in my research. Nevertheless, we agreed that the lyrics were sexist, so I made a TikTok where I clarified my opinion and suggested people approach me if they had further questions. This TikTok manifested temporal bonds with my followers, who praised my initiative and brought to the surface arguments against listening to raï *jdīd*.

One girl addressed her issue with raï by talking about respect (Image 5). Although supposedly “all” Algerians consider respect important, raï singers lacked it. The girl had ethical concerns that listening to entertainment for the masses overshadowed gender equality. Loudly playing raï through smartphones might lead to disorder. By commenting on my TikTok, this girl expressed her wish to silence raï consumers in public space. Other followers and informants equally expressed their sentiments by talking about respect, such as in the eighth comment (Image 6): “Use the old songs, because their words are respectful to some extent, such as weddings.” With a serious tone, this girl made explicit raï music’s intergenerational differences. Contrary to raï *jdīd*, listening to raï *qadīm* (old raï) was a way to learn and get disciplined. With raï *qadīm* my informants referred to both *sha‘abi-malḥūn* practiced by a *cheikha* in the 1930s and 1940s, as well as the Egyptian, American, and French-influenced raï from the 1970s and synthesized songs from the 1980s and 1990s practiced by a *cheb(a)* (Schade-Poulsen 1999; al-Deen 2005). While a scholarly history of when and why raï *jdīd* emerged is still awaiting, this research shows that Algerians refer to it as a modern type of raï associated with digitalized sounds, idols such as Cheba Warda Charlomanti and Cheb Mohamed Benchenet’s breakthrough song *Way way* (Benchenet 2014) and its concomitant dance style.

The moral distinction between raï *jdīd* and raï *qadīm* was frequently highlighted in conversations with my informants. Romaissa, for example,

explained to me that she thought *raï jdīd* was immodest and insulting to listen to with family and people she respected, whereas the old songs were meaningful. The shifting politics to *raï qadīm* songs among families indicates how taboos change from one generation to another and as a result of internet usage. *‘amīqīn* collectively memorized *raï* of the past as a “clean” genre with a *risāla* (message). It installed among its listeners social knowledge about “pure” love and family matters. Contrastingly *raï jdīd* singers’ messages were empty and vulgar because they chanted about alcohol and sex.

The available literature on *raï* contradicts this perception. Marc Schade-Poulsen’s ethnographic account demonstrates that the lyrics on drugs and sex were also common in the 1980s and 1990s. One of the examples in his book is Cheb Khaleds’ *Dallāli*, *dallāli* where he sings “*Nṣawwaṭha w nbakkiha* [I’ll beat her and make her cry],” a sentence that reminds me of the disputed lyrics by Cheb Bello I danced to. Schade-Poulsen explains that these lyrics were also the reason for discussion and for the organization of listening practices: “People I met during my fieldwork in Algeria rarely commented on *raï* without mentioning the problems of listening to it in the family. It was not the musical part as such that was problematized, but mostly words such as *slām* (kisses), *rūj* (red wine), *birra* (beer), *sakra* (drinking alcohol) [...]” (Schade-Poulsen 1999, 143). Similar to the judgments in the 1990s, when *raï* was played on the radio and cassette stereo systems, youth object to the genre in the contemporary mediasphere, because of the taboo on singing about substances and particular online subcultures. Although from a historical perspective, this music was no less controversial than *raï jdīd*, from a contemporary perspective it was, because today’s youth did not associate *raï qadīm* with *meryūl* TikTok. They associated it with the favorable norms of their parents or a nostalgic past that passed without a little protest. *Raï jdīd*, on the other hand, was an important marker of someone’s social status in online subcultures. *‘amīqīn* distinguished themselves and their scene by embracing *raï qadīm* as a better alternative to *raï jdīd*. Hereby they further demarcated their scene and used music and lyrics as an attribute of power to moralize the sonic expressions of *meryūlīn*. Moreover, they justified their contempt by showing that outside the realm of TikTok affluent Algerians also rejected *raï jdīd*.

Although the *raï jdīd* singers equally sang about love, *‘amīq* TikTokers mainly called attention to the drugs to portray the lives of *meryūlīn*. The audibility of youth from *sha‘abi* neighborhoods was attended to as a problem. The conversations about the “cringey” TikToks on *raï jdīd* signal the friction between Algerian middle classes and vulnerable classes over definitions of good and bad music. Youth’s concern about “unrefined” sounds, in contrast to their own sensible and pious lifestyles, indicates a search for class distinction, where middle classes attempt to distinguish themselves from “ordinary” Algerians. This results in the reproduction of hierarchies between the dominant and those with poor living conditions online as well as physically. Listening practices and media consumption were important factors to evaluate ethical and class behavior. *‘amīq* TikTokers stereotyped and moralized sounds to mark their different attitudes, knowledge, and taste. But, although they criticized *meryūl* TikTok, youth did not feel the need to have a consistent aural morality. They engaged in “situational ethics” (Masquelier 2010, 226), where their mundane actions demonstrated contradictory and inconsistent “moral registers” (Schielke 2009, S29). If they wished to fulfill their joy with consumption of *raï*, they could do so without that being a sign of their lack of morality. For example, Romaissa frequently sent me TikToks with *raï jdīd* and admitted having “guilty pleasures.” Although *‘amīqīn* demoralized *raï* songs as “guilty,” they allowed occasional or sarcastic consumption of them, because it was a way to make fun of another scene and bond with their own. As long as the youth did not identify with the context associated with these sounds, they justified this behavior.



Image 7: Luca’s duet to *Jiboli Lagmy* by Chinwa Problem (download [Link](#))

Another avenue that *‘amīqīn* used was ridicule and sarcasm. They made TikToks where they mocked or mimicked the trends on *meryūl* TikTok. For example, in the TikTok above (Image 7)<sup>3</sup> a famous TikToker dances to the trending *rāi* song *Jiboli Lagmy* by Chinwa Problem. He totters around his bedroom with a bottle of milk in his hands, sipping it, and pretending to be drunk. Yasmine explained to me: “The singer is talking about a type of wine called ‘lagmy’ but since he can’t drink because it’s haram he is using milk.” This TikTok, where the maker portrayed *meryūlīn* as alcoholics and made fun of their dance style, circulated on *‘amīq* TikTok and is an example of scalable sociality because *‘amīqīn* post audiovisual material on social media that only makes sense to the people they are close to and who understand what it refers to. *‘amīq* TikTokers enjoyed the videos because they built on similar “sonic stereotypes” (Schulze 2019, 181). Sonic stereotyping is based on fixed notions of what people listen to and how they live. These ideas are reductionist and reenact the existence of “the other.” In a study on colonialism and anthropology, Michael Taussig acknowledged the significance of the other in mimesis and sarcasm (Taussig 1993, 19). He argued that people meme others in order to become other. Taussig suggested that the body is central to actualize mimesis and that camera and film opened up new ways to mimic images and characters. Similarly, Douglas Rushkoff stated the internet facilitated media viruses, where memes in the form of events, music, messages, and images infectiously spread through communities in mediaspheres (Rushkoff 1994, 9–10). TikTok is an example of a mimetic platform that enables people to pass along body languages, images, and sounds, also referred to as “audio memes” (Abidin and Kaye 2021). Instead of verbally defining stereotypes, youth imperfectly imitated stereotypes about *meryūlīn* through sensuous images that easily spread online. Audiences met the humorous videos of *‘amīqīn* with laughter and collectively they shared their class-based ideals of taste, belief, and affiliation. *‘Amīqīn* socially exchanged conceptions of irony and mockery and further marked the boundaries of their scene and social position in Algerian society, by imitating or commenting upon *meryūl* TikToks.

<sup>3</sup> This TikTok contains content from a public profile of a user with over 1.3 million followers. I argue using this TikTok is ethical, because I treat TikToks as public texts and as examples of microcelebrities who seek to spread their messages to a broad audience (Wheeler 2018, 173).



Like in the case of the guilty pleasure, the TikTokers did not want to be taken seriously when they used *raï jdīd* for their videos. One strategy to disclose the irony and sarcasm of their music usage was the use of text balloons in English with commentaries on the songs or videos. The display of linguistic education was used as a device to separate from the Darija-dominant *meryūl* TikTok. Another strategy that clarified their irony was the installment of overblown facial gestures and body languages. For example, youth who mimicked *way way*, made up movements that subverted the original quality of the movements. In one trend, people replied to a comment where someone questioned their Algerian nationality. A pop song by Tame Impala accompanied a shot of the TikTok in their *'amīq* dress. This was followed up by a shot of them dancing to a *raï* song in a dress that was presumably typical to *meryūlīn*. The second shot functioned as “proof” of their Algerian nationality and their knowledge of Algerian culture. *'amīqīn* constructed an “alternative” and “modern” Algerian culture, by referring to non-Algerian audible and visible markers and by using English. In contrast, the aurality and visibility of *meryūlīn* corresponded to the imagined “traditional” Algerian culture. Algerian youth constructed notions of modernity and traditionality by criticizing and making fun of *meryūl* as a “popular” and “uncreative” character that undermined the cosmopolitan qualities of a high-educated class.

Ridicule on TikTok thus has political and social functions. The inside jokes of *'amīqīn* part them from other youth in the TikTokosphere. Within their scalable scenes, they know what rules apply for appropriate ridicule. Or as Adham told me: “I laugh at these videos when they make fun of each other, but I get mad when they cross the line. When they judge people.” The defining line between judgment and freedom of expression was ambivalent, yet my informants agreed that they could enjoy the imitation of *way way* and listening to guilty pleasures, as long as it was done inside the social spaces of their scene. Youth thereby engaged in a conversation of power. Whether someone was able to grasp the humor in *raï* listening, indicated their class position online as well as offline.

## Class sounds

The study of nondiscursive expressive forms enables researchers to unmask social, economic, and political dynamics. There is a lot to gain from digital ethnography with a focus on sound, because this disciplinary combination caters a holistic and vibrant perspective of the contemporary world. Mediaspheres transform the soundscapes around the world. As the sounds of digital media platforms muffle those of cassette tapes, people alternatively reflect on and listen to the past and present. They gain other sensory knowledge to make sense of modernity and tradition. Above all, people's activity in less controllable spheres of algorithmic environments creates new conditions to deal with unwanted sounds. "Scalable sociality" offers insights into how people control their environments online.

Social media usage, from TikTok to YouTube to Facebook, changes not only how people consume, but also how they classify sounds and visual markers that go along with particular sonic expressions. In Algeria, the musical media economy makes youth want to distinguish themselves through their participation in performances. In line with Kunreuther's argument, Algerians collectively express themselves and *classify* by sounding particular music genres. This is not a new phenomenon, as the introductory example of the 1980s demonstrated. However, digitalization influences the way in which youth are in conflict about music, lyrics, and sonic expressions of dance. TikTok is a place of protest, through which Algerians recreate notions of the dominant and the other. The juxtaposition of the two distinct scenes on TikTok enables youth to shape their classist attitudes towards Algerians of a vulnerable class. Due to the participation in a scene, people cultivate with who, when and where they share music. Hereby, they position themselves within and outside of the norms of Algerian society. Elsewhere, the cultivation of music or dance might be subject to questions around gender, race, or sex. Multiscalar spaces are thus central to understanding how communities express intersectional identities and make aesthetic and moral connections in society. The resulting hierarchies affect people online and beyond. As digitalization has quickly slipped into the everyday, it can seem difficult to grasp what it means and feels like for people to (not) belong to a digital network. This

thus asks for reflection on the interactions between (online) communities. By tuning in to digital environments, researchers cater embodied ways of knowing—acoustemologies—that go beyond epistemics of rational thinking. This embodied method is especially important if researchers want to shed light on how the smartphone is not only a catalyzer of sounds, but also of images, dreams, and fantasies.

On TikTok, users share, embody, reuse, and remix memes that are easy to copy. In spite of TikTok's algorithm, the musical viruses depend on the input of young users. What is bound to succeed depends on popular and moral understandings in local social networks. The more often people use sounds, mimic dance moves or ridicule dress styles, the more symbolic their memes become for their communities. The finding that sounds can go viral gives a new ethnographic understanding of how stereotypes come into existence. Inside online spaces, the contagious sonic and visual symbols can become alienating or even disturbing to some people whereupon they magnify the “strange” expressions and make them their own. The simplicity with which middle-class youth described and mimicked vulnerable classes shows how easily they spread their biased beliefs of another group in Algerian society and thus how discriminatory sonic stereotypes come into being. This finding resembles the increasing academic interest in conspiracy theories, misinformation, and disinformation because it shows a connection between viral media and othering. Therefore, to make sense of biased beliefs, I encourage academics to adopt a creative, sensory approach to learn about people's schemes to acquire knowledge. What can scholars assess from the truths, lies and stereotypes circulating on TikTok? And how does that push them back to long-existing debates on facts and fiction and objectivity and subjectivity? These are pressing questions that go beyond any field. They tie into societal debates of who has the power to distribute truth claims and what people do to hold on to their “alternative facts.” Although sound is not yet at the core of this conversation, it is an important field where identities and realities play out and where people, like Algerian youth, are able to find their “alternative realities.”

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## Palestinian Youth Engagement with Online Political Contents Shared by Citizen Journalists—The Case of Save Sheikh Jarrah

Rola Khalid Yousef

### Abstract

*Initial research on online political activism reveals that new information and communication technologies (ICTs) have increasingly become a growing and supportive space for political participation, which has influenced the conception of political activism. Furthermore, ICTs have become a facilitator for the formation of online political networks and communities. The shocking images of young children killed in the latest genocidal onslaught by Israel against Gaza in 2021 and the clashes that broke out in Sheikh Jarrah and Al Aqsa Mosque dominated the global news and online media platforms. Online political activists, such as Muna El Kurd, who represents the phenomenon of “Citizen Journalism” in Palestine, took to the internet and social media channels to ardently express their discontentment about the unhumanitarian actions and human rights violations being committed. This article aims to map out the Palestinian youth engagement with online political content disseminated by Muna El Kurd’ Instagram and Twitter accounts, by employing an empirical approach using a quantitative research method to collect primary data while relying on the literature review to discuss in-depth online activism and the concept of Citizen Journalism in the Middle East. An online survey, in Arabic language, was conducted following the simple random sampling technique, targeting one hundred college-educated and technologically advanced Palestinian youth respondents (18–29 years old). The data collected was used to examine and address specific research questions related to what information sources the youth use to acquire political information and to what extent they rely on social media platforms*



*belonging to citizen journalists. The study concluded that Palestinian youth participate in many online activities and rely on social media platforms for information; their interests and knowledge of politics are growing; the surveyed youth in Palestine are highly interested in political matters and are moderate participants in online political discussions.*

### *Keywords*

*Online Activism, Political Participation, Palestine, Citizen Journalism, Social Media Platform, Sheikh Jarrah*

## Introduction

Human access to information has significantly changed over time and through the ages. We have witnessed numerous sources being used to spread information and news until recently, especially in the 20th century, represented by newspapers, radio, and television. People have gathered around the television or radio or waited for the newspaper to be delivered, all in order to satisfy the human yearning for information and knowledge, as well as to keep up with the latest news and events in their tiny communities or the entire world. People can now connect with the entire globe anywhere, at any time, and read or listen to about any issue with the touch of a button on a computer or mobile device, thanks to technical advancements and the rise of social networking sites. This is due to the rapid and continuous development of information communication technologies, which has led to a shift from traditional sources of information such as newspapers and radio in favor of more modern forms of technology such as the internet, mobile phones, and social media networks, which are characterized by their speed of communication, intellectual exchange, and social and political activities (Vegh 2003).

In relation to these modern social media platforms, they are one of the pillars of online political and social activity around the world and the Middle East, which is the focus of this article. These sites contributed to changing the way political activity and social initiatives were planned and implemented. Furthermore, it changed the traditional role of individuals from a recipient of political information and messages to a producer and an active participant in presenting events and producing news, whether political or social, particularly in countries where political oppression, occupation, and suppression of freedoms of expression are prevalent (Dwonch 2021). As a result, the phenomenon of online political activism emerged, as we saw in the Arab Spring and recent events in Jerusalem and the neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah, to name a few examples (Noor 2017).

In fact, social media platforms represented a qualitative leap in the lives of Palestinians and other users around the world. This is true, particularly for

people whose freedoms have been stripped and who suffer from oppression. Activists for the Palestinian cause who were looking at Palestinian activists on the ground through screens without having the capabilities to interact with them, theorize with them, or mobilize for their implementation were disconnected until the winds of the Arab Springs blew and demonstrated the efficacy of social media platforms in promoting and motivating online political activism (Hoigilt 2013). Indeed, the Palestinians followed in the footsteps of the rest of the Arab world, using these sites for purposes other than entertainment. Palestinian youth interact with many issues and events via social media, and their interactions with political issues gradually peaked in 2014 and 2021, when human rights violations worsened in the Gaza Strip and conflict heightened in Jerusalem (Nasasra 2022).

Youth political participation and activism can be driven by different motivations and objectives. In Palestine, youth participate and engage in political activities in order to show signs of resistance to the occupation, create change in their societies, and gain recognition. If more youth become more engaged in different political activities that lead to a better understanding of the political situation, they can influence political decisions and strategy (Dwonch 2021). As a result of this political persecution and suppression of free speech, particularly in the case of Jerusalem, which is the focus of the study, Palestinian youth took it upon themselves to play the role of journalists, collecting, documenting, and disseminating the Palestinian narrative through their social media channels to the entire world. Pages and social media accounts supervised by young Palestinian activists were activated in many languages describing to the world what was happening in Palestine and Sheikh Jarrah in particular (Nasasra 2022).

## **Methodology**

This article aims to investigate the relationship between social media platforms and political activism in Palestine and to examine the role of citizen journalists in using social media platforms to support and promote online political participation and activism among the youth. We witnessed the role of social media platforms in the 2011 Arab Spring events, and their unique features in initiating, facilitating, and organizing demonstrations and protests

both offline and online. This was a clear representation of the new role of social media in political activism and participation. The latest clashes in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood inspired us to investigate in more depth this relation with Palestinian youth political activism. Based on this, the proposed hypothesis for this study is designed to test the relationship between the various variables involved in the study, primarily political participation and activism, social media platforms, and citizen journalists, all within the specific context of Palestine and with a focus on the case of Sheikh Jarrah, with the goal of enriching our understanding and bringing new valid information to the field.

## **Hypothesis**

H1: There is an association between political participation and social media platforms as a tool for activism.

H2: Youth in Palestine trust Citizen Journalists' social media platforms as a credible source of political information.

H3: Political participation is widely spread among youth in Palestine.

In order to test the validity of the three hypotheses discussed above, the research design for this article used a quantitative research method and limited the research context to the case of Sheikh Jarrah and the Palestinian activist Muna El-Kurd and her selected social media accounts.

The researcher created an online questionnaire to collect data to analyze in depth the relationship between Palestinian youth and social media as platforms to practice online activism and identify their online political participation and concerns. Ten questions in Arabic were created and shared with the target audience to fulfill the objectives of the research and to test the hypothesis. The targeted population (respondents of the research) were one hundred respondents who belonged to the youth category in Palestine and fell in the age group of 19–29 years old. They are primarily from two main cities in the West Bank (Ramallah and Hebron), where social media platforms and specific political backgrounds can be found. The sample of participants was chosen using the simple random sampling technique.

The data collected was used to examine and address specific research questions:

- 1/ What information sources do the Palestinian youth use for political information?
- 2/ To what extent do they rely on new social media platforms belonging to citizen journalists for political exchange?
- 3/ What is Palestinian youth perception towards the credibility of political contents shared by citizen journalists on social media platforms?
- 4/ Do Palestinian youth assert that new media channels enhance their political participation?

## **The Case of Sheikh Jarrah**

Since the Israeli occupation of Jerusalem in 1976, Israel has sought to reduce Palestinians' geographical interdependence, particularly with the occupied city of Jerusalem in order to establish a coherent Israeli settlement entity. The city of Jerusalem's village of Sheikh Jarrah was also under occupation in 1967. Due to its strategic location on the dividing line between the City's eastern and western sides, the village was the target of arbitrary Israeli practices that sought to expel its original owners from their lands and homes and completely seize them (Image 1). Since then, al Quds (Jerusalem) has experienced a massive number of demonstrations and protests that shape and reflect the daily routine and practices of its Palestinian population. Recently, al Karama demonstrations during Ramadan 2021 indicate a dramatic shift. The main reason for the 2021 protest movement is Israel's policy of expelling an increasing number of Palestinians from the borderland zone, in an effect to attempt to control the most important geopolitical space in East Jerusalem—the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood—and imposing supremacy over the Damascus Gate and its steps (Nasasra 2022).



Image 1: Sheikh Jarrah (Sky News 2021)

As previously stated, problems in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood can be traced back to its occupation in 1967. In 1970, the Israeli parliament passed an unjust law claiming that the ownership of the land in Sheikh Jarrah belonged to Israeli Jews, and based on this decision, the Israeli government constructed settlements and housed religious Israeli Jews in them. In addition to filing legal cases claiming Israeli Jews' ownership of this land and homes built in Sheikh Jarrah, the Israeli government demanded the evacuation of Palestinians and the expulsion of Palestinian resettles. The first official eviction decision was issued in 2022 against a number of Palestinian families. Currently, three thousand Palestinians live in this neighborhood on a small portion of the land that remains after thousands of dunams were confiscated from their original residents. There are pending cases in Israeli courts where 28 families are awaiting possible evacuation in order to build more settlements (Nasasrah 2022). Sheikh Jarrah is an example of Israeli arbitrariness and continues to be a vivid view into the perpetually tense regions where we witness the many forms of Palestinian struggles to preserve their land and Palestinian identity.

## Muna El-Kurd

As a result of the unjust and equally questionable treatment experienced by Palestinian citizens in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood, massive, yet peaceful

demonstrations in solidarity with the residents took place in Jerusalem, additional Palestinian cities and towns, the Gaza Strip, and Palestinian towns in Israel. Despite the Israeli army's efforts to prevent the leakage of news and events from inside the neighborhood by cordoning off the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood and prohibiting anyone from approaching or entering the neighborhood unless the individual could verify that they were a resident (Edwards 2021). Palestinian activists have been merged inside the neighborhood, particularly young Palestinian twins Muna and Muhammad El-Kurd, whose houses are under threat of evacuation and who were able with their online activism to advocate the continuous Palestinian struggle. The El-Kurds were able to transmit daily events and clashes with the help of the internet and social networking platforms such as Twitter. Hence, I argue that Muna and Muhammad's initiatives are a true representation of the phenomenon of online activism, Palestinian youth political participation and the phenomenon of citizen journalists.

Muna El-Kurd, a 23-year-old Palestinian woman, was a young activist who took on the responsibility of informing the world by documenting and disseminating what is happening in East Jerusalem, particularly the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood, of inhumane practices against Palestinian citizens. Through her political work, the world could observe the present-day attempts to forcibly expel Palestinian families at the hands of the Israeli government. Furthermore, she also led a successful Twitter and Instagram campaign to save Sheikh Jarrah. Mona El-Kurd's initiative and political activity on the internet were widely publicized and covered by Arab and international media networks, making this young woman a symbol of the phenomenon of citizen journalism. Due to her dedication, motivation, and most notably, bravery, to relay the truth to the world, she was selected as Time Magazine's 100 most influential figures in 2021 (Edwards 2021).

Therefore, and in line with the study goals which are to examine Palestinian youth perceptions and political participation and its relationship with political information and political content shared by Muna El-Kurd, it is critical to study the content of her social media accounts, particularly her Instagram and Twitter accounts. Muna joined Twitter in March 2021 and has over

100 thousand followers. The first analysis of her account shows that she created and dedicated this Twitter account to advocate for Sheikh Jarrah as her first Twitter post (Image 2), marked March 12, 2021, states: “From the day I became aware of the world, and I lived in a state of fear and the threat that I would be evicted from my home, especially since Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood is one of the most Jerusalem neighborhoods threatened with eviction and displacement. Every day I was asking myself where we want to go.” Through the accumulation of her daily posts of texts, images, and videos, Muna promoted and contributed significantly to the spread of the #SaveSheikhJarrah hashtag, which went viral nationally and internationally.



Image 2. Muna El Kurd Twitter Account (@kurd\_muna 2021)

Muna El-Kurd’s Instagram account has 1.6 million followers, the initial analysis of her Instagram account besides the high numbers of viewership, followers, and comments reflects her eagerness to advocate and disseminate the Palestinian reality on her Instagram account. Instagram, as a platform that focuses on media content, being a visual medium, the storytelling features, and the impact of photography on the audience, has made Muna feel more comfortable dedicating her time and efforts to creating posts that illustrate causes and initiate dialogues, if not boycott and actions, as illustrated in (Image 3), “No to the siege of Sheikh Jarrah. The people of the neighborhood invite you to stand by them against the illegal closure imposed on them. Saturday May 22 at 5 PM.”





Image 3. Muna El Kurd Instagram Account (Muna.kurd15 2021)

## Literature Review

This literature review section will focus on discussing activism within cyberspace and the current debate on the internet in relation to activism. Additionally, this section will introduce and discuss the concept of citizen journalism with a special focus on the Middle East region and Palestine.

## Online Activism in the Middle East

The debate on the relationship between the internet and activism has both supporters and detractors. Vegh (2003, 71) argues that the internet facilitates the process of political activism, enhances tactics, disseminates information

that enables faster and more effective communication and defines online activism as a “Politically motivated movement relying on the Internet.” This argument is valid in the case of the Middle East. In fact, Arab societies have gone through a series of transformations and changes on technological, political, and social levels. Therefore, and with the assistance of the internet revolted against the dictatorial rules aiming to achieve political and social justice. The mass protests in Egypt during January and February of 2011 for example, were led and organized by virtual activist communities as a representation of the online political activism phenomenon. This is reflective of the relationship between technology and activism. “As may be expected with any technology-enabled phenomenon, the patterns of activists’ online behaviors shifted with development in technology” (Eaton 2013, 4).

On the other hand, other scholars such as Diani (2000) and Polat (2005) argue that the internet and social media platforms never had a direct relation with political activism, but they became one of the most supportive components in activism. They claim that trust is the main element that maintains action and that trust cannot be established easily through online interactions only. This argument is strongly related to this study because the collected data analysis confirms that social media platforms are important for online political activism. However, participant trust in the online activist is also important for strengthening their online political participation and activism.

In relation to this debate, the researcher argues that Howard (2011, 145) definition of online activism: “the act of using the Internet to advance a political cause that is difficult to advance offline” can be applied to the Arab Spring movement and the Sheikh Jarrah demonstrations, where insurgent politics, created by online activism compounded the effect of political protests and movements. This argument is supported by Khamis and Vaughn (2011) investigation of how the use of the new information communication technologies and the internet during the events of the Arab Spring helped to advocate and inform the world about the ongoing protests, supported the political movements online as well as offline, and contributed to organizing the massive protests of January 25.

Cyberspace spawned new styles of representation and interaction that included many social and political aspects (Gibson 1996). It is represented by the internet and new information communication technologies, it allows for a new style of social and political interaction and activism, which affects the nature of human experience as it allows for a more efficient, fast, and cost-effective communication tool accessible to the general population (Chinnasamy, Ramli, and Hashim 2017). As a result of the existence of cyberspace and the continuous development of information communication technologies and social media platforms, and in order to keep pace with the times and communicate and live in the required modern and technological way, ordinary citizens in the Middle East were able to experience new cultures, forming new levels of consciousness, and becoming highly engaged in various political and social issues in cyberspace, forming a whole new experience that overcame the traditional political system and authorities (Bayat 2017).

Citizens of the Arab world have utilized blogging technologies and social media platforms to develop and distribute media and opinions faster than governments can control, censor, or regulate (Eaton 2013). Early Arab activists opted to write in English after adopting and embracing the internet-based technology of activism. The 2003 Iraq War was a starting point for several activists to depict the situation while reporting on the war on a daily basis (Sifry 2006). As a result of their awareness that they had an audience, several of these early activists took on sensitive political, human rights, social, and economic issues. They learned that their blogs could be a valuable source of information, a supplement to traditional media, a vehicle for lobbying and networking with like-minded citizens. In certain cases, they were capable of bringing a cause to the notice of the international community (Levinson 2005). As the technology for writing in the Arabic language improved and became more widely available, a flood of Arabic-language activists arose, allowing them to reach a larger, more domestic audience. Authorities were irritated by the strength of some of these activists, leading to a crackdown and outrage among academics and activists over the lack of protection for those who freely use this technology (HRinfo 2006).

As discussed by Eaton (2013) and Ben Moussa (2013), the younger wired generations of activists in Egypt, influenced by the revolution in Tunisia, dedicated their time and efforts to establishing and organizing massive political and social protests using social media platforms. The brutal murder of Khalid Saeed, by the Egyptian police, started the first online activism community page on Facebook, “We Are All Khalid Saeed,” which mobilized demonstrations against the regime demanding freedom and justice. According to Giglio (2011, 2), this Facebook page was “the country’s largest and most active online human-rights activist group” and led to the removal of the Egyptian president from power. Although Arab activists have succeeded in deposing authoritarian rulers in some countries, such as Egypt and Tunisia, they have failed to depose others, such as Syria’s Al Asad.

Furthermore, following the 2011 revolution, most authorities in the Middle East passed new legislation that allows for mass censorship and media blocking. Various restrictions on freedom of expression and the implementation of censorship practices have been observed. Egyptian authorities’ practices and judgments are harsher in application. It is now more dangerous to criticize Egypt’s government than at any other time in the country’s recent history. “Egyptians living under President al-Sisi are treated as criminals simply for peacefully expressing their opinions” as claimed by Najia Bounaim, Amnesty International’s North Africa Campaigns Director (Amnesty International 2018).

The government’s censorship practices and regulations on social media speech remain a source of concern. Censorship will be implemented on these platforms as governments accuse them of supporting terrorism and extremism and spreading false information (Amnesty International 2018). In Palestine, the situation is similar, if not worse. Palestinians living under occupation are subjected to regular, if not, daily checks via mass surveillance technologies, checkpoints, and face recognition software both offline and online, imposing restrictions on Palestinian freedom of expression and resistance (Taha 2020).

## **The Concept of Citizen Journalism**

Citizen journalism is a media concept centered on how ordinary citizens engage in journalistic activities such as reporting on specific issues and raising awareness about issues that are important to them; these individuals lack professional journalism training but have a strong ability to produce and distribute news to their communities via the internet (Miller 2019). Many critics, however, continue to be concerned about the phenomenon's news credibility and inability to authenticate news content, as well as citizen journalists' lack of professional training (Noor 2017). In relation to this, most studies on the phenomenon of citizen journalism have focused on concerns about the extent to which it has reached in producing journalistic content and news qualities that match traditional journalistic standards. For example, traditional journalism has a variety of news sources based on official sources where citizen journalism identities are being communicated more freely (Miller 2019).

Furthermore, Chinnasamy, Ramli, and Hashim (2017) examined the relationship between the phenomenon of citizen journalism and news reliability, claiming that as a result of the increase in audiences' trust in the news provided by citizen journalists, their ability to freely share their experiences online, and their ability to highlight sensitive issues and imposed them to the news agenda, all of this has impacted the trust and credibility of traditional-official journalists and news sources. Simultaneously, it has helped to strengthen the concept of "citizen journalism," which emphasizes the process of gathering, reporting, evaluating, and disseminating news and information in several existing definitions of "citizen journalism" (Muhamed, Omar, and Krauss 2021). As a result of this rise, the journalism industry and academics were forced to reconsider what defines journalism and how to identify reporter characteristics and roles. Citizens journalists' involvement in news gathering and reporting undermined the traditional media newsroom by calling their credibility into question; however, citizen journalists' impact extended beyond the constitution of journalism to include a comparison between them and their professional counterparts (Miller 2019).

It was noted that for many years practicing journalism was restricted to a select group of professionals with specialized education and training, as well as a journalism degree; however, because of the internet and information communication technologies development, the field of journalism has undergone a significant shift, allowing ordinary citizens to be citizen journalists, gathering, and producing news content (Channel 2010). As new information communication technologies are becoming a part of our everyday life practices such as education, communication, consumption, and entertainment and with the advent of digital modernity, social media platforms, and smart devices, it has become very common to be involved in the creation and dissemination of news content (Lyon 2017). According to Balaraman et al. (2016) social media platforms such as Facebook offer novel ways to increase ordinary citizens' involvement in public and social issues, while advances in information communication technologies and internet penetration aided the concept of the public acting as journalists and the rise of online citizen journalism. The 9/11 attacks provided an early example of the phenomenon of citizen journalism, as we witnessed how ordinary citizens shared images, videos, and news about the attacks, and how the internet's capabilities spread the same beyond the borders of New York and the United States (Muhammed, Omar, and Krauss 2021).

Arab activists, like their international counterparts, do not consider themselves journalists and do not believe they should follow journalistic conventions, rules, or ethical standards. Instead, they are specialists at establishing unfiltered, raw communication flows, and they are known as "citizen journalists" (Hamdy 2009). They don't have the same resources or standards as professional journalists, but they share the global blogging culture's values of outspokenness, humor, intellectual honesty, and openness to different viewpoints, as did other "citizen-blog reporters" around the world (Domingo and Heinonen 2008).

With Israel's attacks on Gaza, the region is entering another politically turbulent period, bloggers and activists are ramping up their coverage, analysis, and commentary on the conflict. Ordinary citizens and activists wield significant power, and they are seizing the opportunity to represent

this new concept of citizen journalism. We observed how Al Jazeera, the Arab world's most powerful news organization, has combined rapidly updated citizen journalists' images, reports, videos, comments, and links from conflict zones such as Gaza with verified news sources.

From another perspective, today, over 3.8 billion people use the internet; 70 percent of them live in countries where posting and disseminating information on political, social, or religious matters can lead to arrest; and 65 percent live in countries where people have been attacked or killed as a result of their internet political activity (Al Jazeera 2019). The author claims that this is exactly the situation in the Middle East, particularly since the Arab Spring. The expansion of citizen journalism's roles and goals has irritated authoritarian regimes in the region, who have tried to limit and control this expansion, which will have a severe impact on the region's political and social movements, as well as online activism (Eaton 2013).

## **Data Analysis and Discussion**

As a result of the data collected from the online questionnaire being analyzed and statistical data being extracted, this section will discuss the research findings. Table 1 depicts the respondents' social demographics background, which discusses the respondents' socioeconomic background, such as age, city, education, and sex. This study concentrated on two major cities in Palestine's West Bank, which are Ramallah and Hebron, as they have the highest population and political activity. While 53 percent of those surveyed live in Ramallah, 47 percent live in Hebron. All questions in this online survey were answered by all the participants. The participants reflect a variety of levels of education as summarized in Table 1.—66 percent of respondents were highly educated as they were either studying at a university or had graduated from it, which indicates the importance of education in Palestinian society.

<u>No.</u>	<u>Category</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
<u>Respondents' Age</u>			
<u>I.</u>	18–22 years old	50	50%
<u>II.</u>	23–25 years old	34	34%
<u>III.</u>	26–29 years old	16	16%
<u>Respondents' Sex</u>			
<u>I.</u>	Male	55	55%
<u>II.</u>	Female	45	45%
<u>Respondents' Education</u>			
<u>I.</u>	Highschool	34	34%
<u>II.</u>	At university	22	22%
<u>III.</u>	Graduated	44	44%
<u>Respondents' City</u>			
<u>I.</u>	Ramallah	53	53%
<u>II.</u>	Hebron	47	47%

Table 1. Respondents' Social Demographics (Age, Sex, Education, City)

## **Palestinian Youth Online Activism**

According to the United Nations, youth is defined as the population sector that falls between the ages of (15–24 years old). However, the United Nations allows countries to adjust this age group to fit the nature and special circumstances of each country. As a result, the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) defines youth in Palestine as the population that falls between the ages of 18–29 years old (PCBS 2018). Palestinian youth are politically, socially, and geographically divided into three groups: those in the West Bank who are under the control of the Palestinian Authority, those in Gaza who are under the control of Hamas, and those in East Jerusalem who are under the control of the Israeli government. What these groups have in common is their activism for the Palestinian cause, and they are said to constituents what is called the



Palestinian State (Daibas 2021). Youth age group (18–29 years) constituents make up 22 percent of the total population in Palestine and age group (15–29) years constituents are 30 percent of the total population. Due to these numbers, we can describe the Palestinian society as a young society, and they are almost evenly divided between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (PCBS 2021).



Figure 1. Digital 2021: Palestine (Kemp 2021)



Figure 2. Digital 2021: Palestine (Kemp 2021)

This segment of the population age group (18–29 years) who are the target of this study suffers from a very high unemployment rate, as well as many social, economic, and political forces. On the other hand, they can be described as a technologically savvy generation where 86 percent of the youth population in Palestine are internet users and 94 percent are active social media users (PCBS 2021). Furthermore, according to Kemp (2021) the use of the internet and social media networks is very popular in Palestinian society. The total population in Palestine is 5.16 million where out of this total population 84 percent are mobile users, 70.6 percent are internet users, and 60.1 percent are active social media users (Figures 1 and 2).

Analyzing the internet and social media usage figures in Palestine shows that the same figures are unique, and they keep pace with global figures and trends as Palestinian society is heavily influenced by international trends. There is an annual increase in social media users of 15 percent, and nearly 99 percent of social media users access these platforms through their mobile phones. Furthermore, 100 percent of interviewees indicated that they have a social media account and 70 percent stated they use social media to follow political information (Figures 3 and 4). Since nearly 99 percent of users access platforms from mobile phones, this access is instantly available 100 percent of the day, and can be available to pass on information with current timing.

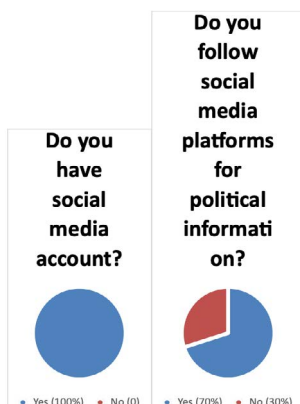


Figure 3 and 4

In the context of Palestine and aside from using the internet and social media platforms as a source of political information, it is important to highlight how the same tools and platforms were and continue to be used by the Palestinian youth to form what we can call the electronic resistance, aiming to overcome the daily struggle of checkpoints and curfews in Palestinian territories implemented by the Israeli occupation, overcome the difficult social and political atmospheres surround them and benefit from this electronic resistance and activism by advocating for and broadcasting the Palestinian situation (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2012).

In addition, it is important to note that while Palestinian youth use the internet to access knowledge and challenge the implemented restrictions on freedom of speech, freedom of expression, freedom of movement and mobilization, and to challenge the unjust and unbalanced existing dominant power systems in Palestine, they unintentionally contribute to the strengthening of the powers of those who already control it (Fatafta and Nashif 2017). In this case, we're talking about the Israeli occupation and their hold on power in the political, economic, and social spheres. By using the internet and social media platforms to express their knowledge and opinions, they allow the oppressor to learn more about them, and in exchange, the Israeli forces gain more control over them through advanced surveillance, monitoring, and censorship technologies (Taha 2020). In this regard and to demonstrate the above point of view I would rely on Fatafta and Nashif (2017, 2) study as it states:

This happened particularly in October 2015, when Haaretz, the prominent center-left daily newspaper explained that the reason for attacks of Palestinian teenagers was that they were incited by social media and therefore, the Israeli security system began to watch Palestinians' social media accounts tightly and punish Palestinians based on their online expression. Israel has arrested around 800 Palestinians because of their posts on social media, particularly on Facebook, Palestinians' preferred platform.

## **Palestinian Youth and Political Participation**

Political participation is defined as “ordinary citizens’ behavior aimed at influencing some political outcomes” (Brady 1999, 737). This behavior and motivation may vary depending on demographics, sociopolitical surroundings, and environments, which affect how people use social media platforms for political information and participation; however, most studies measuring the use of social media platforms for political participation discovered a positive relationship (Nekmat, Gower, and Zhou 2019; Schmiemann 2015). In relation to this many authors such as Gibson and McAllister (2012) and Schmiemann (2015) investigated the relationship between social media platforms and political participation, concluding that social media platforms contributed positively and increased political participation, interactions, and communication due to the ability to discuss political issues freely and openly online.

Respectively, youth political participation refers to engaging them in a variety of political activities and viewing them as active participants in political systems, particularly in Western democracies that develop special political programs to encourage and advocate for youth political participation and political empowerment (Bessant 2004). However, in the absence of these political programs in the Middle East, youth political participation can be linked to the concept of “wired citizen,” which refers to how communication attitudes change and follow new trends as a result of the new technological era, new communication users or wired users and the change in their perception and participation in the social and political systems (Herrera 2014).

Since 2011 and the Arab Spring events, the role of new information communication technologies and their influence on youth social and political participation and their effectiveness for both online and offline political activism and participation has many supporters (Bayat 2017; Ghonim 2012; Cole 2014). Furthermore, Towner (2013) and Vitak et al. (2011) emphasize the distinction between online and offline political participation, on one hand, they define online political participation as political activities conducted through the online space, such as sending a political message to political

authorities, while defining offline political participation as participating in physical demonstrations and argue that it is important to pay attention to the effort and motivation behind practicing political participation on social media platforms.

In relation to this, effort is defined as the measurable time and energy required to perform an activity related to political participation. This political participation effort can be high or low, with low effort political participation requiring less energy and time, such as signing a petition, and high effort political participation requiring more energy and time, such as protesting (Table 2). In fact, measuring the effort, motivations and objectives is crucial when analyzing political activism as a behavior of participating or not. The achievement of this objective is determined by the amount of effort (time and energy) put in (Krishnan, Netemeyer, and Boles 2002). The author argues here that (Krishnan, Netemeyer, and Boles's study's) examples for the low and high effort participation can justify why only 45 percent of the survey participants answered yes when they had been asked if they participated in political discussions conducted on social media platforms. In my opinion, they were not completely aware of the different kinds of political participation (low and high effort) especially when the majority confirmed that they consider social media platforms as a tool to perform political activism (Figure 5).

	Low effort	High effort
Off-line	Displaying campaign signs (buttons, stickers, posters, etc.) Signing a petition on the street Reminding someone to vote	Attending a political meeting Attending a political demonstration Contacting a political candidate Working for a party/candidate
Online	Liking a political actor or cause Sharing political information Posting short political comments Signing an online petition	Sending an Email to a politician Writing a political blog entry Engaging in political discussion Creating a political group on social media

Table 2. Examples of low and high effort online and offline participatory activities (Krishnan, Netemeyer, and Boles 2002, 287).

However, this newer wave of online political activism and participation in Palestine, which can be described as digital and nonviolent, was able to overshadow the traditional and historical resistance movement and demonstrations such as the first and second intifadas, which occurred in the early 1980s and early 2000s, respectively (Dwonch 2021). This fact and perception were confirmed by the response of the participants where 87 percent of interviewees considered and perceived social media platforms as a tool for political activism and participation in Palestine (Figure 6).

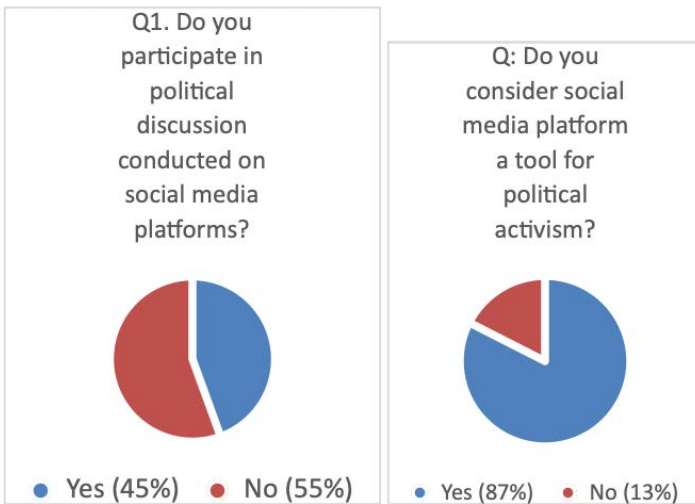


Figure 5 and 6

Furthermore, beside the low–high effort political participation justification for Palestinian youth’s online political participation, we argue here that youth and online political activism in Palestine cannot be studied without considering the unique historical and sociopolitical contexts, as well as the theoretical implications of the internet and social media platforms. This approach will help to understand the motivations and hesitation of youth political online activism and participation in that unique context, such as corrupted political authorities, occupation, and segregation in Palestinian society (Dwonch 2021).

The continuous Palestinian struggle against the Israeli occupation, the corrupted political leadership and system, and the uncertainty towards the Palestinian State's future have been crucial factors that affect Palestinian youth political participation negatively. Palestinian youth online political participation through social media platforms in Palestine is not only controlled by Israeli intelligence forces, but it is also restricted and monitored by Palestinian authorities, particularly when it comes to criticizing the leadership and political system, and spreading political dissent in Palestine. It does so by circumventing new laws such as the electronic crimes law, which further restricts freedom of speech and expression. Justifying such laws by claiming that they aim to protect state security and social harmony, while such laws have put Palestinian activists, internet and social media users, and journalists at risk of arrest (Fatafta and Nashif 2017).

As for the phenomenon of “citizen journalism” which became popular in Palestine, particularly during the recent events in Sheikh Jarrah and the War on Gaza in 2021, when ordinary citizens, such as activist Mona Al-Kurd, turned to social media to provide a true and realistic content about the events through writing and creating audio and visual content that aimed at creating interaction, introducing the Palestinian cause and raising awareness about it, particularly among Palestinian, Arab, and Western youth who support and sympathize with the Palestinian cause.

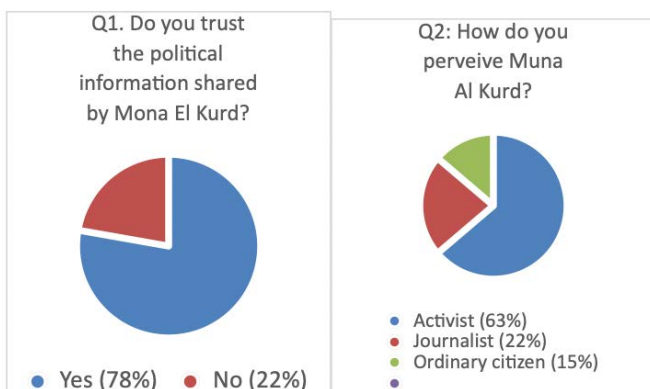


Figure 7 and 8

It was important to examine the relationship between youth and the phenomenon of citizen journalism which we found in this research as highly connected. We witnessed an uprising and an electronic revolution that began with a distress call published by Mona Al-Kurd to save Sheikh Jarrah from a wave of Israeli settlers, and this reflects and justifies why the majority of Palestinian youth in this study (78 percent) confirmed that they do trust the political information shared by Muna El-Kurd (Figure 7) and they perceive her as an activist as 63 percent confirmed the same (Figure 8). Results show that those who engage in social media and follow Muna El-Kurd are aware that this is political information being shared. The majority trust the information to be of an activist nature, rather than a reporting one. Thus, the sharing of information comes with an intent to be politically involved in some form. Depending on the activity, this could include low or high effort participation.

## Conclusion

The role of the internet and information communication technologies, particularly social media platforms, in political activism and participation has sparked intense debate among academics. Supporters of social media's positive role in organizing protests, documenting events, and disseminating news base their case on the platforms' ability and potential as a cyber public sphere, platforms for free speech, its ability to overcome distance, enable ordinary citizens to be news producers, overcome fear and build efficacy, and reduce transaction costs. Other schools of thought, on the other hand, hold that there are many limitations and risks that surround the ability of social media platforms to create change alone, claiming that it is the people, not the platforms, that influence people to feel good about online participation while decreasing offline participation, which can have a negative impact on democracy and reform movements, and, most importantly, authoritarian governments control and mollify.

Inspired by the techno-utopianism perspective highlighted above, the goal of this article was to examine and explain the positive relationship between social media platforms, youth online political activism and participation, and the phenomenon of citizen journalists within the Palestinian context in



particular, focusing on the cause of Sheikh Jarrah and the activism of Muna El-Kurd to support this cause. The revolution in internet and information communication technology has a massive impact on marginalized individuals and societies, such as the Palestinian community. Since the beginning of the Second Intifada in 2000, there has been a massive increase in the number of internet users among Palestinian youth, who rely on the internet and online sphere to articulate new approaches for online politicization and resistance.

The sample of active youths presented reveals the three hypotheses that were developed and tested in this study. The high proportion of those who used social media platforms reflects the widespread use of social media platforms as a source of political information and activism. Youth is a tech-savvy and digitally educated population with the ability to use new information communication technologies. Their familiarity with cyberspace enabled them to provide greater freedom and a broader scope in the media environment. The sample shows that those involved are aware that these platforms belonging to citizen journalists are transparent and can be trusted as a source of political information. By confirming their awareness of the venues' political rather than reporting nature, and their perception of them as citizen journalists.

Furthermore, the study demonstrated the extent to which the internet and social networking sites have infiltrated Palestinian youth's lives. Participants unanimously agreed that they are linked to social networking accounts and that these platforms are a source of political information, particularly about the Palestinian struggle and resistance. They also respected and accepted the work of citizen journalists, believed the political information they published, and saw them as political activists.

According to the participants' responses to the hypothesis of the spread of political participation among Palestinian youth, political participation and the expression of political opinion via the internet have not been proven, as political participation via the internet is still subject to several restrictions, some imposed by the occupation and others by the Palestinian Authority, aside from the social constraints imposed by the family, the fear of being subjected to legal accountability and reprimanding the family may be a reason for not participating in politics.

In contrast, the relationship between the three elements of citizen journalism, youth, and new media platforms merits further investigation. The author suggests that more research be conducted and that a qualitative research method, such as focus groups and interviews with selected participants, be used to understand in depth youth perceptions of the phenomenon of political participation and activism within online and social media platforms, identify and clarify the different types of political participation, and investigate the reasons for hesitation in online political participation in order to fulfill the author's call.

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**Comment:****Digital Monitoring as a Threat to Human Mobility****Mirna Wabi-Sabi***Abstract*

*During the COVID-19 pandemic, a “privacy nutrition label” was introduced to the Apple applications store. Its aim was to simplify access that consumers have to the content of terms and conditions, specifically to its implications on individual privacy. Nevertheless, undocumented migrants in the United States and Europe were and still are subject to invasive digital monitoring, begging the question of how to handle unhinged uses of technological advances by government institutions. Artificial intelligence has been used to predict the geographical movements of migrants, and phone applications have been used as an alternative to incarceration and ankle bracelets. It seems that technological advances do not move parallel to improvements in the human condition, which is why keeping up with these advances is a challenge to those who are struggling to improve their living conditions. In the following article, Artificial Intelligence and Integration Contracts of asylum requests are discussed within the framework of immigration rights and modern tools of governmental abuse of power.*

*Keywords*

*Artificial Intelligence, Integration Contracts, asylum seekers, privacy, human mobility*

*To sign off on; phrasal verb meaning “give one’s approval to something.”*

We all sign things nowadays, but not all of us get to sign off on things. The use of a signature as a way to grant approval is not the same as the more commonplace practice of signing things like “terms and conditions.” This distinction ought to be made because in identifying when a signature is not empowering or representative of consent, we can look for alternative tools of resistance against the established order—one which uses signatures to control and subjugate disenfranchised segments of the population.

Signatures earn significance through institutions of power by governments that establish order and have the resources to enforce this order. In any hierarchical structure, signing off on something is indicative of a status difference, as is the ability to make someone sign an unfavorable agreement.

A good example of this is our routine practice of downloading apps into our smartphones. Apple, for instance, signs off on the apps it allows on its app store, but the terms and conditions we agree to when we download them are certainly unfavorable to us as consumers. In an attempt to mitigate this issue, a “privacy nutrition label” was introduced to apps in the store during the covid pandemic, supposedly simplifying access consumers have to the content of these conditions.

The labels are probably a result of the GDPR, which Apple cites in its page detailing Privacy Policies (Apple Store 2022) and requires not only transparency over these policies but also for this information to be presented in a way people can easily understand. Unfortunately, these “nutrition labels” are neither effective nor accurate (Fowler 2021), exacerbating the issue of unfavorable agreements we consent to through digital signatures.

Earlier in 2022, in the wake of abortion bans in the United States, women encouraged each other to remove period-tracking apps from their phones for fear of potential privacy breaches and legal backlash. This is a way of not signing, not consenting, to personal data sharing. It is also a form of

a general strike, provoking a sharp turn in the industry. To be able to delete something from your smartphone is thus a privileged position to be in.

Nearly a quarter of a million immigrants in the United States are tracked by ICE with the use of an app that officials describe as more “humane” (del Rio 2022) than ankle bracelets or incarceration. Unsurprisingly, many do not agree with this description, which is why there is an ongoing court case against the Department of Homeland Security, claiming a violation of the Freedom of Information Act and concern over the “drastic increase in the Intensive Supervision Appearance Program (ISAP)” (US District Court Northern District Of California 2022). This program embodies how, nowadays, privacy policies of applications can quite literally become virtual prisons.

In Europe, due to the 2015 “refugee crisis,” data monitoring was considered by government institutions as a tool for predicting the “movements of migrants into Europe.” The European Space Agency pitched several EU organizations, including Frontex, on “commercially viable ‘disruptive smart technologies’” (Black 2020). In a report from 2019 on this subject, the ethical and practical limitations of this program were considered, but no guarantee is given that this tool has not been or is not being used. Even though the report acknowledges this technology can be and has been used for racial profiling—which they describe as an “overfocus on African countries” (IOM 2019)—and that machine-learning reliant on unpredictable data produces unreliable results, the conclusion describes this method as a “nascent workstream.” In other words, if this deeply flawed and unethical method of handling humanitarian crises is not yet widespread, it surely is about to become so.

Agreeing to dangerous terms and conditions of applications which track movement and seek to predict future movements of people like you infringes upon freedoms of whole segments of the world population. Considering that today it’s nearly impossible *to not produce data* (from the day we are born, documents and data are collected and stored about us), what can we do to disrupt data processing strategies, ensure a certain level of privacy, and allow for freedom of movement?

## Integration Contracts

*Asylum requests in Europe are signed off on by government officials, and seekers are made to sign several forms—including “integration contracts.”*

The criteria used by those with the power to sign off on asylum requests are kept from the segment of the public with the most stake in these immigration policies: asylum seekers. It could be said that it is in the interest of EU countries to maintain asylum seekers oblivious to the inner workings of its institutions and the decision-making processes. These government branches may not want asylum seekers to have information which can help them present their case more effectively.

This is exemplified in the 2014 court case *YS and others* (Wabi-Sabi 2022), where incoherent legal justifications were used to deny migrants the right to access their personal data, a right protected by European privacy laws. In some instances, it was claimed that the right to privacy of government staff and their line of reasoning trumps the plaintiffs’ rights, and that the applications did not contain the personal data of migrants. There is no doubt, however, that immigration request files contain the personal data of the applicant, and so does the written analysis of government staff about these applications.

Meanwhile, when an asylum request is approved, the migrant is required to sign contracts which, among other things, subject them to compulsory “civic training” (Ministère de l’intérieur 2020). The French Office for Immigration and Integration (OFII) calls this the “Republican Integration Contract (CIR)” (République Française 2020), where “newly arrived foreigners” (Ministère de l’intérieur 2022) are taught “the principles [and] values [...] of the Republic, the rights and duties associated with life in France and the organization of French Society.” The granting of the immigration request comes attached to the requirement to resign certain aspects of your cultural identity. Namely, robust integration efforts are not only about inserting immigrants into the workforce, but also a “shield against radicalization” (Rush 2018)—an umbrella term for extreme cultural differences.

The Netherlands has a similar program, where “knowledge of the Dutch society” (European Commission 2021) is mixed in with Dutch language skills. They go even further in requiring “voluntary” work in businesses and demanding health insurance from companies which refuse to provide information in any language other than Dutch. I have gone through this process—twice or three times a week when I “volunteered” to vacuum a video store. Here I learned about “black pete” (but not about the country’s colonial history) and had to sign up and pay for health services I could not use, because workers refused to give me information in English over the phone.

In Brazil, a parallel can be made with the integration efforts of Venezuelan refugees. In official reports there is no mention of civic training and values; instead, there is mention of opportunities for certification and work (The UN Refugee Agency 2021). The UN Refugee Agency report from 2021 describes Venezuelan refugees in Brazil to be more likely to have completed stages of education but they earn less and work more hours than their Brazilian counterparts. There is no compulsory integration program, therefore, this practice is not intrinsic to immigration policies everywhere.

A new “action plan” (European Commission 2020a) for the integration of migrants in Europe, released in 2020 and aiming to pan out between 2021 and 2027, lays out a clear connection between “inclusion” and “monitoring.” This monitoring is essentially digital surveillance, though it is described rosily as a follow-up on integration projects the European Union funds, to ensure its integrity and effectiveness, as well as an “anti-discrimination” initiative (European Commission 2020b). Researchers have quickly voiced their concerns over how these follow-ups on integration policies, paired with a new European Digital Agenda, can easily become “a mass surveillance framework” (Regina and Capitani 2022) and an infringement on the values of a democratic society.

The digitalization of public services goes much beyond the immigration sector, but the specific push towards the integration of migrants now involves digital training. Improving the digital skills of any segment of the population is, in theory, a good thing. But this can also hand over an immense amount

of power to the State, both of what information to share and how. Anyone nowadays sees new technologies marketed as helpful for the performance of a certain task, while crucial information about how your data are collected and shared is omitted. We are all susceptible to it, especially immigrants.

## **Artificial Intelligence and Action**

A response analysis of a “public consultation” on the topic of migrant integration, done with mostly EU citizens, shows that nearly a quarter of those interviewed “reported adopting the local culture and customs [...] as factors for successful integration.” In this digital era, these integration efforts pose worrying questions about what Artificial Intelligence can do to track, predict, and manipulate people’s behavior. The more integrated people are, the easier it is for machine learning to spot abnormal behaviors within infinite pools of data. If we can not come back from that, we ought to move forward knowing what these technologies can do, and how to have control over them—as opposed to being controlled by them.

First, let us learn from people and groups which do not have a stake in promoting these integration policies and technologies. To trust tech companies and the government to teach us about their own tech innovations is like trusting McDonald’s to teach us about how their meat is produced; of course, they will describe themselves with unreal amounts of flattery. Though impartiality is nearly impossible to achieve, as are conflicts of interest difficult to completely eradicate, a democratic society has a duty to provide plurality of sources and diversity in access to information.

Second, let’s promote the embracing of cultural differences over integration efforts. Social integration is marketed by government immigration offices in Europe as “anti-racist,” generous and empowering. It is none of those things. As part of my “integration” classes, I “volunteered” at a video store where I had to vacuum a closed section dedicated to porn. For a Muslim immigrant, which in 2015 made up the majority of people in my class, this would be mortifying. At the time, the secularism the Dutch always promoted as progressive turned into blatant bigotry (Bahceli 2015), and “integration”

meant the hostile pressure to learn the local language quickly and hide any non-Christian markers. It is no wonder that scholars (Regina and Capitani 2022) have pointed out the dangers of AI technology becoming a new tool to enact old fascistic European behaviors (Hayes 2018).

Certain counter-terrorism tactics which are considered acceptable in the United States are, in theory, not acceptable in Europe, at least anymore. As Paola Regina and Emilio de Capitani point out in a study published in March of this year (Regina and Capitani 2022), artificial intelligence is pushing, or needs to push Europeans to “re-evaluate” their antifascist efforts around government surveillance and the right to privacy. Technology has expanded the scope of data access (Bigo et al. 2013) by government institutions, and the terrorist attacks of 9/11 have for two decades served as a “recourse to insecurity, real or imagined” (Hayes 2018). This fuels a desire for “the securitization of international migration.”

The differences in ethical and historical perspectives between the US, UK, and EU have proven to not withstand this geopolitical paradigm and the lightspeed of technological advances. Studies on this issue tend to mention the Snowden revelations of 2013 with a sense of concern (Bigo et al. 2013) in the face of such massive pools of data paired with some of the most secretive government institutions. A *Public Intelligence* study (Bigo et al. 2013) goes further to question the extent to which this practice “can be tolerated in and between democracies” in particular. That is, as if the issue arose when Europeans became targets of mass surveillance, not when Arabs were targets of it, or peoples anywhere else in the world. “In and in between democracies” excludes anti-democratic attitudes “by” democracies towards everyone else.

Migration flow into Europe, due to propitious geography and Western-induced unrest in the Middle East and North Africa, led to disorganized digital profiling, or “mass surveillance activities carried out without clear objectives” (Bigo et al. 2013). It seems as if the second decade of the 2000s is marked by discoveries of how these digital technologies seeped into every little crack of our lives. And it is only now, in the third decade, that we are coming closer to defining, and labeling, what has been happening. How can

we get better at tracking and predicting the technological movements of Powerful institutions?

Preventing these technologies from being developed is virtually impossible, assuming democracy and freedom are the values supposedly being defended by those who are engaged in this debate. What is within our reach is understanding how these technologies work, how they have been used, and as a result, gain clarity as to how they might come to be used in the near future. For that, we need *independent networks of digital training*.

Many of us already know what Photoshop can do with images, so we are now learning what face-editing effects can do to videos. It's clear that this type of AI technology is already being used to track and racially profile people, and that it's not only immoral but also unreliable. It would be safe to assume that the direction the established order is going is one where much more effort is being put towards solving the issue of unreliability, than of immorality.

Deleting period-tracking apps only handles the issues of the past, when we thought we could still shy away from problematic digital hotspots. In a landscape where there are assumed to be no bad apples, there is just a very large rotten one upon which more than half the world's feasts (Chaffey 2022). Sometimes I think increasing data input, and so decreasing its predictability would be useful. Machine learning and algorithms cannot be effective in predicting human behavior, especially when we as humans resist the efforts being put towards turning us into machines. Encouraging difference and uniqueness can be a radical thing, because the pressure to "integrate" is more than a de-radicalization tool, it is an effort to predict and control our behaviors, even our most intimate ones.



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**Comment:****“All Compressed and Rendered with a Pathetic Delicacy That Astounds the Eye”: Midjourney Renders Ambergris as Constantinople****Emir Alışık***Abstract*

*Text-to-image software have become widely accessible over the last few years, and the resolution of the images generated by these machine-learning software has increased to such a degree that the images attract more and more public attention. Midjourney is one of the few available AI tools that provides images to textual prompts. With early beta access granted, I have put the abilities and biases of the tool to the test by prompting it to blend a fictional city (i.e., Ambergris, created by Jeff VanderMeer in 1993 first for a novella) with a historical one (i.e., Constantinople). The ontological distance of these two cities would not pose a problem, for the textual and visual data for both are vastly available on the internet, which data the software utilizes to generate images. The decision to blend these two is based on Ambergris's quality of being a city influenced by the history of Constantinople, yet diverging from it in other aspects. The software ended up generating images, where it employed various periods and urban features of both cities, all the while conforming to depiction styles that can be associated with both Ambergris and Constantinople.*

*Keywords*

*Constantinople, City of Ambergris, Midjourney, Digital art, City portrait*

Ambergris is the fictional city in the eponymous novel cycle by Jeff VanderMeer<sup>1</sup>. He worked on Byzantine history while preparing his trilogy, so much so, that history of the city of Ambergris to a large extent alludes to the history of Byzantine Constantinople, especially in its early days. Ambergris's appropriation of Byzantine history is difficult to grasp at the surface level, due to the eclecticism and the severe transformation of Byzantine elements (tropes, nomenclature, art, etc.) in the process of its appropriation for creating a fantasy storyworld. In various instances, Jeff VanderMeer testified how Byzantine history influenced the world-building of Ambergris novels and shared insights on his understanding of history and its place in fiction. (Alışık 2022; Gevers 2002)

Recently we have witnessed a digital breakthrough, where various software tools that render texts into images became available for wider use. Thus, there is now a possibility to imagine fictional Ambergris and historical Constantinople, ontologically disparate two cities, visually as one. I received trial access to one of such softwares, *Midjourney* beta, text-to-image tool in June 2022, just before the company opened the beta version to the public use in July. Simply put, the software renders a textual prompt into four low-resolution images at which point the user could upscale and—or variate any of them to high-resolution images.

Earlier, in an interview, VanderMeer had stated that he would like to see a sequel to *Finch*, the third installment in the Ambergris cycle, in comic format, where the depiction of the city would bear some resemblance to Byzantine Constantinople (Alışık 2022). I had a very limited number of prompts to try and decided to explore the city of Ambergris incarnated as Constantinople. So, I typed “city of Ambergris depicted as Constantinople in a graphic novel” into *Midjourney*'s console. Here are three of the four preliminary low-resolution images the software rendered:

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<sup>1</sup> *City of Saints and Madmen* was originally published in 2002 by Prime Books; *Shriek: An Afterword* was originally published in 2006 by Tor Books; *Finch* was originally published in 2009 by Underland Press. A compendium volume has been published eventually, see VanderMeer (2020).

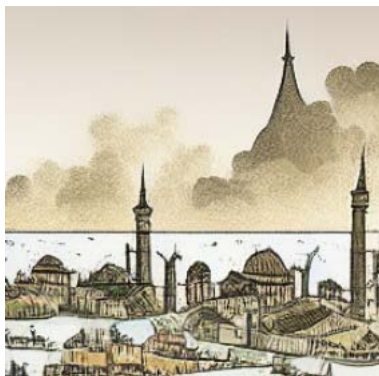


Figure 1a.



Figure 1b.



Figure 1c.

The first image (Figure 1a) has a looming and very familiar-looking tower among the mists on the far side of the body of water. The dome formations in the second image (Figure 1b) present a certain quality of the *gray caps*, a community depicted in the novels, and the architecture they had developed in their city *Cinsorium*—whose ruins the early colonizers founded Ambergris on. The third image (Figure 1c) peculiarly comes close to a miniature style. Two large domes in the background were reminiscent of giant *freshwater squid* heads, aquatic creatures native to the *River Moth*, by which Ambergris is located. I wanted to see more details, so I upscaled these three images.

The first image turned out to be this (Figure 2):



Figure 2.



Figure 3a.



Figure 3b.

Domes, spires (minarets or columns), a large body of water, and a labyrinthine urban fabric are prominently visible. These elements are part of the geography and depictions of both cities (i.e., Constantinople and Ambergris). Ambergris sits on the banks of *River Moth*, whereas Constantinople is by the Bosphorus. Spires in the form of minarets and columns are also characteristics of the two cities. For instance, the image on the left (Figure 3a) resembles a minaret more whereas the other (Figure 3b) alludes to a column with a statue on top of it.

This makes it difficult to isolate the reason for putting minarets in the city; it could either be due to the Ambergris's input—which features both columns and minarets—or because *Midjourney* understands Constantinople as an Ottoman city as well as a Byzantine one, consequently making the juxtaposition of statue topped columns—a Byzantine element—and minarets possible. It can be safely concluded that it does not imagine the city as contemporary Istanbul in this image.

Presence of the looming tower in the background—with its location on a steep hill and its architectural form—implies that the depiction bears elements from the later periods of both cities. The tower is strikingly reminiscent of Galata Tower—a Byzantine period structure—and a magnified version of its mid-19th-century phase at that (Figure 4). Therefore, it is certain that the software reads “Constantinople” as both Byzantine and Ottoman. In addition, the inclusion of a structure located in Pera shows that the software considers it a part of Constantinople, which resonated with a post-Byzantine understanding of urban geography.

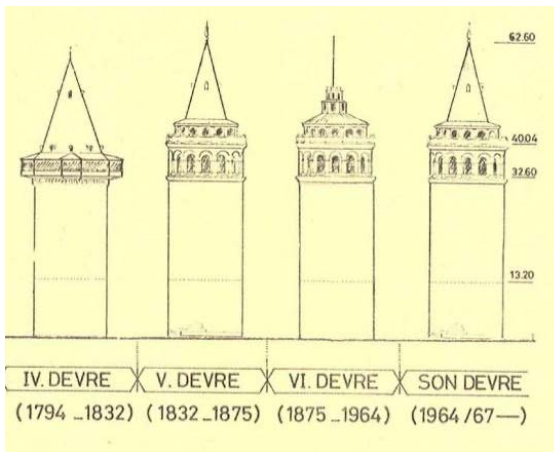


Figure 4. Various phases of Galata Tower (detail, *Mimarlık* 1979, 52)

As far as the chronology of Ambergris is concerned, the tower can be dated to a later period of the city. As a late development in Ambergris Cycle an uncanny, alien tower was constructed high above the city by the enslaved



labor of its inhabitants. It is visible from all over the city. The tower in the background might refer to that monument as well. While in its earlier periods Ambergris occupied only one bank of the River Moth, later it was flooded and divided by canals. Therefore, Figure 4 reflects the topographic parallel with the later ages of the fictitious city.

The mist is another prominent element in this scene, surrounding the gargantuan tower and its neighborhood. Such mist has been no stranger to Ambergris as it certainly has not been to Istanbul over the years. In many different periods of the city, this extraordinary phenomenon keeps appearing. First, when the founders of Ambergris had landed on the area: “[t]he Cappan found the city cast in a weak light, wreathed in mist come off the river. It must have been an ethereal scene—perhaps even a terrifying one” (VanderMeer 2002, 103). The second encounter is hundreds of years later: “The mist deepened until Dradin could not tell the difference between the world with his eyes shut and the world with his eyes open” (VanderMeer 2002, 60). Finally, in the last novel Finch, the mist is still thickening: “A white smoke had overtaken the black smoke. It looked now like the thick green spheres slamming into the Spit were dissolving into a cloud bank or a thick mist” (VanderMeer 2009, 242). So, the presence of mist can allude to any period of Ambergris, not really helping to date the image.

When upscaled, the second image (Figure 5) transformed dramatically:



Figure 5.

This time the body of water is prominent. It is very likely the flood of Ambergris in its later periods (in *Finch*) that is the source for this scene, because the small patches of land are visible among the waters. This perspective, where a look from a residential area towards another one across the water is repeated in the second image, and is a common formula, especially in the panoramic depictions of Constantinople from the 18th century on (Figure 6).<sup>2</sup>



Figure 6. View from Beyazıt Tower, towards Galata Tower (Robertson 1853)

A monumental dome with a huge spire on it rises above the water level. Such a dome might refer to Hagia Sophia's, since it inspired all large domes in the city, and arguably is the most iconic of all. The 15th-century artist who never saw Constantinople depicting Hagia Sophia simplified the building to its most characteristic element: the dome. In the same spirit as the artist, the software also rendered the monument as the dome and its drum, merging the nave with the huge dome (Figure 7).

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, precedent city portraits employed a similar vantage point, a "perspective plan" (Nutti 1994; Maier 2012, 726).

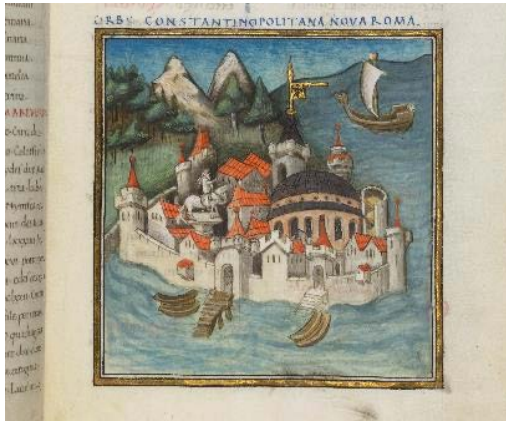


Figure 7. Constantinople as the new Rome. (Lamy 1436)

The dome with a huge spire on top of it is only logical in a blend of Constantinople and Ambergris, if the spire reflects a grotesquely magnified *alem* (finial) which adorns almost all the domes and minarets in Constantinople under Ottoman rule. Besides, Ambergris is teemed with domes and minarets too, their frequency increases in the Religious Quarter.

“[He s]tared speechless at the endless permutations of devotional grottoes, spires, domes, arches of the cathedrals of the myriad faiths, as if he had never seen them before.” (VanderMeer 2002, 174)

“Between the domes, the fiery green glitter and minarets of the Religious Quarter[.]” (VanderMeer 2009, 13)

In the foreground of Figure 7, a tightly packed urban fabric with many small mosque-like structures—with a combination of domes and minarets—scattered among them emerges. While the residential buildings resembled the architectural styles, not of Byzantine or Ottoman, but of early republican Constantinople—note the cement-built facades, the tower on the right side of the image is a peculiar building with its extraordinary height and its style reminiscent of the dome in the background. The image most probably reflects a juxtaposition of Ambergris and Constantinople in their various periods but mostly later ones.

The third image output was stylistically the most distinct (Figure 8):



Figure 8.

Compare it, for instance, with these 16th-century Ottoman and 13th-century Byzantine depictions of Constantinople (Figure 9–10):



Figure 9. İstanbul, *Beyan-ı Menazil-i Sefer-i Irakeyn* (Matrakçı Nasuh 1537).



Figure 10. Hyperpyron of Michael VIII Palaiologos (1258-1282), reverse.  
Virgin Mary within the walls of Constantinople. (Dumbarton Oaks Collection n.d.)

The software attempting to create a graphic novel manner by relying on the miniature form is interesting in itself. On the other hand, the prompt “Constantinople” might as well have triggered a miniature-like style, for both the Byzantines and Ottomans produced vast amounts of miniatures. Thus, the software opting for a miniature is not so outstanding. Here, too, residential areas are in the foreground, with multitudes of domes and spires—be it minarets or columns—dominating the background. In the foremost area, a dark blue and wavy patch suggested a body of water, and immediately on its banks, several human figures, distinct with their red *fes*, are depicted. This is unquestionably an Ottoman element and a 19-century one at that. In an 1829 regulatory law, *fes* were enforced to be worn (Uzunçarşılı 1954; Quataert 1997). In Ambergris, *Kalif*’s military officers wear a turban—another common head-dress worn by the Ottomans—but not *fes*. Above, dividing what seems to be the sky and a pitch-black line are pseudo-calligraphic scribbles, which, though including letters from probably Greek and Latin alphabets, do not mean anything. The presence of pseudo-calligraphy is not totally out of place, for it is common in city portraits and panoramas to include such “captions” as is the case with Figure 7 (Nuti 1994, 108).

In every instance, the software seems to concur following elements to be similar in both fictional Ambergris and historical Constantinople: a body

of water—be it *Moth*, Bosphorus, or Golden Horn; domes and spires—be it minarets or columns; a monumental architectural structure. In contrast, nature shows itself only in the form of water and mist. However, on closer inspection, it might be said that Figure 8 features vegetation among the domes in the background. In addition, Figure 2 and 8 are suggestive of the *freshwater squid*'s anatomical influence on two architectural elements, on the domes of Figure 8 and one spire in Figure 2. Another rare occurrence of living is the people in the foreground of Figure 8. This very limited presence of the biosphere is surprising because Ambergris is depicted to be teeming with various organic life in all the novels, while Constantinople surely has never lacked such a presence. In each image, there is at least one instance of grotesque magnification of a monument. That might be rooted in the extreme anatomy of *freshwater squid* or from the *gray cap* tower, which has extraordinary size. Alternatively, the software conforming to a miniature style in Figure 8 can explain the emergence of these huge monuments. To put it simply, a miniature does not conform to a natural perspective, but features a hierarchical order of objects. In other words, it is natural in miniature for an important building to be larger in the frame, regardless of the perspective. This kind of influence would explain the huge tower in Figure 2 and the huge dome in Figure 5.

There is not a single graphic adaptation of Ambergris yet, but Constantinople found its way to this medium many times<sup>3</sup>. In addition, the Ambergris Cycle makes use of various art trends and mediums, architectural styles, and it even has a chapter written as a psudeo-art history–crime story (VanderMeer 2002, 129–181). For instance, it is surprising not to see the style of Martin Lake's (a fictional artist in the novels) depiction of the Post Office Building, which has a vivid and striking textual description<sup>4</sup> and can be considered the equivalent of Constantinople's Hagia Sophia in terms of its centrality

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance: *Pilote* (1963); *Klassika* (1953); Yalaz (1963); Azzarello (2021).

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance “The astute observer will note that the Post Office walls in Lake's painting are created with careful crosshatching brushstrokes layered over a dampened whiteness. This whiteness, upon close examination, is composed of hundreds of bones—skulls, femurs, ribs—all compressed and rendered with a pathetic delicacy that astounds the eye.” (VanderMeer 2002, 137).



in the city and historical depth. On the other hand, the building resembling Galata Tower in Figure 2 and the huge domes that found their way to every image are what seem to be Constantinopolitan influences. All in all, all the tangible architectural forms appear to be based on the data from Constantinople, while the manner in which they are presented is shaped by the vibe of the Ambergris novels. It is difficult to map out *Midjourney*'s choices thoroughly when it depicts things. However, with the given keywords and the contexts of these notions, the algorithm reveals its biases, how it understands Constantinople and Ambergris, and what it highlights when the two come together.

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**Review:**

**Brunton, Finn. 2019. *Digital Cash: The Unknown History of the Anarchists, Utopians, and Technologists Who Created Cryptocurrency*. Princeton University Press**

**Michaela Slussareff***Abstract*

*The book Digital Cash: The Unknown History of the Anarchists, Utopians, and Technologists Who Created Cryptocurrency is a very important piece of work in the field of digital currencies development. The author applies the media archaeology method of research and points out the most important ideas, projects, but as well barriers and beliefs that influenced the way of thinking about digital currencies and their development. This includes description of political agendas of different stakeholders, and furthermore processes of setting up a basis for robust and reliable currency, but independent of governmental forces (like Bitcoin). The book surprisingly offers several positions for the reader, in the introduction and conclusion of the book the form is rather popularly educational, sometimes reflective, the middle part is, on the contrary, a very dense academic body of work filled with theories and facts from actual research and the author's independent historical work.*

*Keywords*

*cryptocurrencies; media history; media archaeology; Bitcoin*

The book *Digital Cash: The Unknown History of the Anarchists, Utopians, and Technologists Who Created Cryptocurrency* provides a philosophical, comprehensive but very fresh view on the development of the digital currencies as we know them today. The title may give the impression that the book will comprehend details about modern cryptocurrencies with a vast definition of Bitcoin and its creators. But this is not (only) a book about Bitcoin. It portrays the history of digital currencies overall. While this history goes decades back to explain the very first projects and ideas around the question of how to design a digital currency that will be able to protect privacy, like cash (keeping no record of a transaction between both sides). The author, Finn Brunton, is an associate professor in the Department of Media, Culture, and Communication at New York University and his preceding books are based on a similar method of academic work with the selected theme: *Spam: A Shadow History of the Internet* from 2015 and *Communication and Obfuscation: A User's Guide for Privacy and Protest* that he co-authored with Helen Nissenbaum in 2016.

Even though the title may make a reference to the digital aspect of the theme itself, the reader expecting a technological description of the cryptocurrencies would be disappointed. The book *Digital Cash* is rather a successful media archaeologist piece. Thus, instead of the historical (teleologic) perspective, the author applies the archaeologic (genealogic) one and builds the text around the question of creating value in digital objects, building trust in them, securing the anonymity of its users, or the question of safety of different digital solutions. As a good archaeologist, the author describes in detail all routes that directed the developers to the dead end or projects that failed. It not only confirms the contribution of the archaeological method—it rather explicitly proves that without such evidence we could not understand the story in its entirety and complexity.

The author dives into the work through a short introduction and description of the main motives to create digital currencies in history (introduction, *The Passing Current*; chapter 1, *Secure Paper*; chapter 2, *Blinding Factor*; chapter 3, *Collapse of Governments*). This sociopolitical introspection provides quite a detailed characterization of the bank sector and its challenges that the digital world provided. Within the following chapters (chapter 4, *Permanent*

*Frontiers*; chapter 5, *Nanosecond Suitcase*; chapter 6, *Hayek in Biostasis*; chapter 7, *Future Desires*; chapter 8, *Emergency Money*; chapter 9, *Escape Geographies*), the author traces the origins of digital currencies to technocrats, cypherpunks, crypto-anarchists, Extropians, libertarians, agorists, and neoliberal economists. This part of the book may be too dense for readers who are more interested in the technological development of the concept. It is saturated with philosophical reflections, outputs of major theoretical texts from media history, and different approaches and definitions of the diverse concepts needed to grasp digital currencies. On the other hand, in this part, the author explores the period of the first computers and the very beginnings of the Internet, whose culture was strongly reflected in the thinking about what digital money should and should not be able to do, what space or freedom digital space should provide them et cetera. For this reason, the book can also serve as a very good introduction for those who want to learn about the values of early internet communities, hackers, and digital enthusiasts.

The core of the book describes the work of pioneers of early digital asset research and applications: David Chaum, Adam Back, Hal Finney, Wei Dai, and others; as well as products like E-cash, hashcash, or b-money. All facts are introduced within philosophical perspectives presenting the different ways of thinking about infrastructures needed to allow for cryptocurrency-based payments. This includes a description of political agendas of different stakeholders, and furthermore processes of setting up a basis for robust and reliable currency, but independent of governmental forces.

The sociopolitical context of current society, beliefs and perspectives of Extropians and libertarians (that played a major role in the digital currency development), brings us to the last part of the book (chapter 10, *Desolate Earth*; and conclusion, *Sometime in the Future*). There, the author discusses possible scenarios of development and the issues that the situation in the digital world puts us in. The main questions marking the territory of the author's final thinking are: What makes money real? How the answer to this question defines the paradigm in which we live? Will we become cashless? And what would it mean in the world of surveillance capitalism and whose agendas the digital currencies might fulfil?