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Algerian Youth and the Contestation over Sound on TikTok

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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

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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 tibġī sāwṭ, tibġī sāwṭ. Ma-tsāwṭahaš, ma-tḥalālhaš.* [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."[1] 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," "*Ammma 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

[1] 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 resonation, 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[2].

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

[2] 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 dancers 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 instrumtn), 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 cosmopolitism 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 *ʿamīq* 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 *ʿamīq* 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 *ʿamīq*- 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 "cringey." 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, *ʿamīqīn* were the youth who started following, liking, and responding to my TikToks.

ʿamīq (plural *ʿamīqīn*), 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 *ʿamīq*. 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 *ʿamīqīn* (Catalonia 2020). This video went viral on YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. In the video, Catalonia made fun of *ʿamīqīn* by referring to them as weirdos and anime fans. Contrarily, *ʿamīq* TikTokers themselves thought being *ʿamīq* was beautiful, cool, and positive. They proudly mentioned alternative listening practices, dress styles that derive from emo culture, anime, literacy, and educational capital. Nevertheless, *ʿamīq* TikTokers also said theirs was a complex identity that caused conflict. In Algerian society other youth, like Zaki, used the word *ʿamīq* 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 *ʿamīq* 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-waʿra*) and a gentle guy (*anūš*), who has authority (*yaḥkam*), 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. *ʿamīq* TikTokers described *meryūl(a)* as "*ḥağa mašī malīḥa* [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 *meryūlīn* and *ʿamīqīn*, 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 *meryūl* (straight) TikTok overlapped with

trends in Tunisia and Morocco, the users of *ʿamīq* (alt) TikTok had stronger ties with (im)material culture that was trending in Japan, Korea, America, and Europe. *ʿamīq* 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. *ʿamīqīn* kept *meryūlīn* at a distance and ridiculed their behavior.

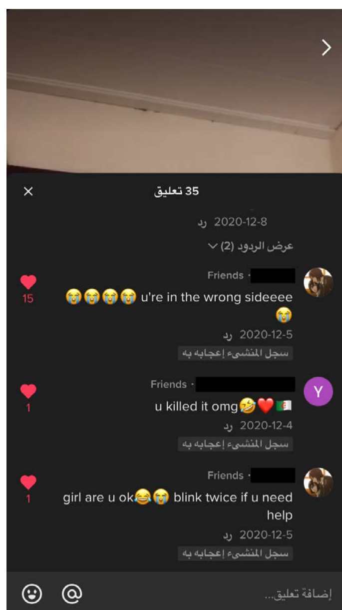

Image 4:
Comments on Luca's TikTok on *Tebghi Sawt*

The ʿ*amīq* TikTokers embodied a sense of superiority because they presumed their members' audibility to be better than that of *meryūlīn*. Although ʿ*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*ʿ (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*ʿ. […] 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, ʿ*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 *ʿamīqīn* 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, *ʿamīqīn* 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.

Cringey TikToks, guilty pleasures, and inside jokes

For *ʿamīqīn* 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 *ʿamīq* 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.

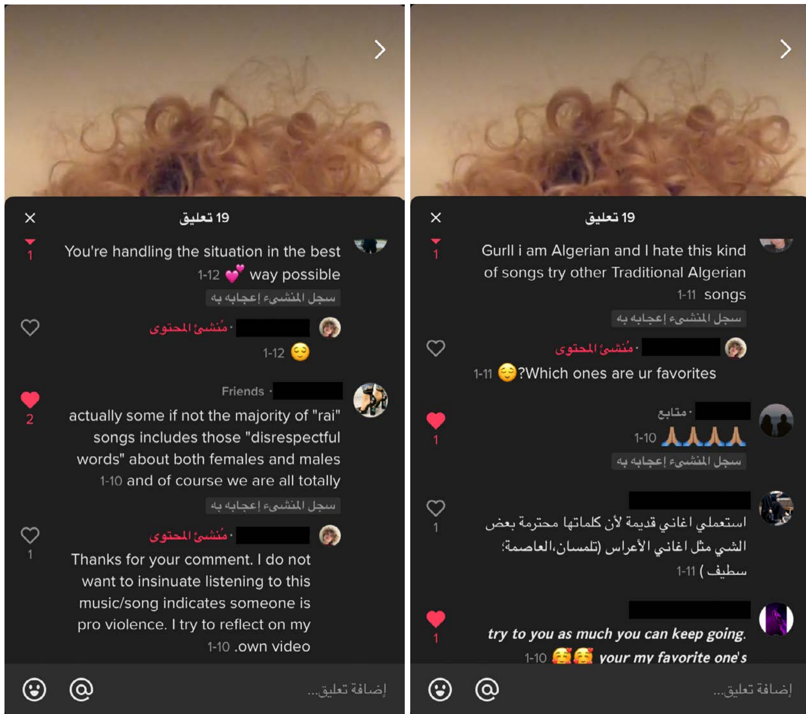

Image 5: Comments on Luca's TikTok of a reflection on *Tebghi Sawt*

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 *shaʿabi-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. *ʿamīqīn* 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. *ʿamīqīn* 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, *ʿamīq* TikTokers mainly called attention to the drugs to portray the lives of *meryūlīn*. The audibility of youth from *shaʿabi* 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. *ʿamīq* 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 *ʿamīqīn* 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.

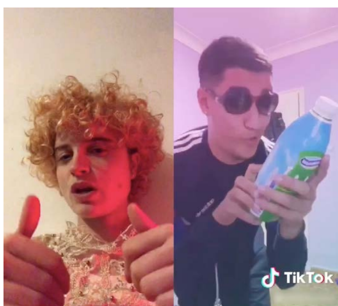

Image 7: Luca's duet to *Jiboli Lagmy* by Chinwa Problem (download Link)

Another avenue that *ʿamīqīn* 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)[3] a famous TikToker dances to the trending raï 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 *ʿamīq* TikTok and is an example of scalable sociality because *ʿamīqīn* post audiovisual material on social media that only makes sense to the people they are close to and who understand what it refers to. *ʿamīq* 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 *ʿamīqīn* with laughter and collectively they shared their class-based ideals of taste, belief, and affiliation. *ʿAmīqīn* 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.

[3] 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 TikToker in their *ʿamīq* 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. *ʿamīqīn* 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 *ʿamīqīn* part them from other youth in the TikToksphere. 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 *class*ify 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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