Introduction

Digital Intimacies: Exploring Digital Media and Intimate Lives in the Middle East and North Africa

Elisabetta Costa*
British Institute at Ankara (B1AA), Turkey
e.costa@ucl.ac.uk

Laura Menin
University of Milan-Bicocca, Milan, Italy
laura.menin@hotmail.it

Over the last decade, the spread of digital technologies has reshaped intimate lives worldwide, changing the ways in which people are involved in personal relationships and experience love, sexuality and emotions in their everyday lives. In the Middle East and North Africa, millions of users utilize computers, mobile phones and smartphones on a daily basis to communicate, create and maintain relationships with relatives, friends and lovers. They also discuss marriage, sexuality and love, along with other sensitive topics that they would not dare to mention in other social situations. Social media, online platforms, dating applications, forums, blogs, SMS, and voice calls all enable people to chat, text and share images with their lovers and friends discreetly and secretly. Through digital media, young people experience and reimagine ideas and practices of love and friendship alongside and against predominant gendered roles, as well as religious and societal values.

Despite the pervasive presence of digital technologies in people's everyday lives, the transformations they have brought about in the spheres of personal relationships, love and sexuality in MENA countries are largely unexplored and are rarely the specific object of study (for exceptions, see, Bowen, Green and James 2008; Costa 2016; Faris and Rahimi 2015; El Feki, Aghaziaran and Sarras 2014; Hijazi-Omari and Ribak 2008; Kaya 2009; Kuntsman and al-

* We are particularly indebted to Dina Matar, Lina Khatib and the MEJCC Editorial Board for supporting our project from the onset. A special thanks to Samuli Schielke for his insightful comments on an earlier version of this introduction.
Qasimi 2012). Whereas scholars have engaged with the study of the use of the Internet for activism and political participation, very little is known of the complex and nuanced ways in which digital platforms and technologies ‘remediate’ (Bolter and Grusin 2000) lived experiences of intimacy. So far, indeed, academic scholarship on digital media in the region has been dominated by a focus on politics and religion, reflecting a long-standing obsession with these themes in understanding this part of the world (Armbrust 2012).

When satellite television first burst onto the scene, scholars privileged the investigation of journalism and news reporting (as exceptions, see, for example, Mernissi 2005; Davis and Davis 1995). More generally, new media have been studied in connection with politics and religion, with a focus on the formation of the public sphere and its potentials for ‘democratization’ (most notably discussed by Eickelman and Anderson 2000). More recently, a growing body of literature has investigated the entanglement of media and religion in people’s lives, and the ways this has changed the textures of religious experiences and moral practices (see, among others, Bunt 2002; Hirschkind 2006, 2012; Moll 2010; Rollier 2010; Spadola 2014). Finally, on the wave of the Green Movement in Iran in 2009, the uprisings and revolutions in Arab worlds since 2011 and the Gezi Park protests in Turkey in 2013, the pivotal role of social media in the organization of protests and the mobilization of political action has come to the forefront, becoming a widely investigated object of study (see, among others, Gerbaudo 2012; Tufekci and Wilson 2012; Khamis and Vaughn 2011, 2012; Salvatore 2011). Stressing the centrality of politics in the study of digital media in North Africa and the Middle East, Albrecht Hofheinz argues: ‘This is an attitude that attaches greater importance to the “serious”, the public, the political uses than it does to the private and the personal’ (Hofheinz 2011: 1424).

With this special issue, we hope to fill this gap in the scholarship on digital media in North Africa and the Middle East by exploring the material, gendered and imaginative implications of digital technologies in the rich and complex texture of people’s intimate and affective worlds. We use the term digital media in a broad sense so as to include ‘all that which can be ultimately reduced to binary code’ (Miller and Horst 2012: 3). In our terminology, digital media comprise mobile phones, laptops and computers, as well as the variety of new platforms that have spread in the recent years, including social media, blogs, dating applications and matrimonial websites. With the expression digital intimacies, we indicate the spheres of personal relationships, affects and sexuality mediated by new digital communication channels. In particular, we concentrate on love and romance, as well as on premarital and sexual relationships...