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Costa, Elisabetta

Published in:
Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication

DOI:
[10.1163/18739865-00902006](https://doi.org/10.1163/18739865-00902006)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2016

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Costa, E. (2016). The Morality of Premarital Romances: Social Media, Flirting and Love in Southeast Turkey. *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, 9(2), 199-215.
<https://doi.org/10.1163/18739865-00902006>

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The Morality of Premarital Romances

*Social Media, Flirting and Love in Southeast Turkey**

Elisabetta Costa

British Institute at Ankara (BIAA), Turkey

e.costa@ucl.ac.uk

Abstract

This article explores how young women use social media to experience premarital romances in Mardin, a medium-sized town in southeast Turkey. It argues that love stories mediated by social media are integral to the enactment of a gendered moral self. The ethnographic data presented here indeed highlight how premarital romances and Muslim morality are not two contradictory and opposing ideals, but rather two constitutive aspects of the same mediated practices. Secrecy, lack of physical co-presence and the performance of a virtuous self in public and semi-public online spaces are common elements of the new romances. Yet social norms ruling the use of the online platforms to start and live premarital relationships are not shared by everybody, and different understandings of religion, morality and modernity have generated different and contrasting expectations. The article aims to contribute not only to the study of the effects of social media on interpersonal relations, but also to the understanding of how, in Muslim societies, moral norms are entangled with everyday practices mediated by digital media.

Keywords

social media – premarital romances – normativity – love – morality – Islam

* Fieldwork for this article was founded by the ERC, as part of the Global Social Media Impact Study (GSMIS), based at UCL Department of Anthropology. The article was written with the generous support of the British Institute at Ankara (BIAA). I would like to thank Elena Magdalena Craciun, Dina Matar, Laura Menin and Daniel Miller for their valuable feedback.

Introduction

I have unfriended all my male friends from Facebook. My boyfriend asked me to do it, and I did it. I am happy with it, we are Turk and Muslim, and these are our traditions. We can't lose morality ... my friends understood it, and they will not be hurt. Other female friends did the same, here it's normal!

With these words, Aynur,¹ a young veiled woman in her early twenties, started to explain to me how she used Facebook to live her premarital romance with Besim, and at the same time maintain respectability and affirm her morality. In Mardin, a medium-sized town in southeast Turkey, middle-age people and the elderly often condemn social media for facilitating illegitimate and immoral friendships and romances. Yet many young women use social media to live premarital relationships that they consider moral and legitimate.

This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Mardin between April 2013 and September 2014, when the peace process between Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) was underway. By following the stories of two young women, I describe how female morality in Mardin is constructed and maintained through specific uses of online platforms. Young female social media users choose between different media, actively change privacy settings to create different online spaces inhabited by different kinds of people, and convey a variety of images of themselves to meet the expectations of relatives, friends and sweethearts. By doing so, they craft their online world and maintain mediated relationships that satisfy their understanding of morality and moral ideals. Thus, I argue that premarital romances mediated by social media can be understood as the enactment of a moral Muslim self.

In Mardin, where Islam, gender segregation and traditional values of honor dominate social life, social media have multiplied the opportunities for mixed-gender friendships and romances among teenagers and young adults. Young people now meet, flirt and talk online, beyond the gaze of their parents and relatives. Facebook, WhatsApp, Tango, Viber,² Instagram and mobile phones have facilitated the diffusion of new secret and semi-secret mixed-gender friendships and romantic relationships, which break with traditional gender roles

1 To protect privacy, all the names in this article are pseudonyms.

2 Tango and Viber are smartphone applications used mainly for text messaging and free video calls.

and family-based forms of sociality. Yet, at the same time, social media have expanded opportunities for a new public presentation of the self that conforms to traditional and conservative social norms of public conduct.

Like other works that shed light on how women use the Internet to live their romances while preserving their reputation in Muslim gender-segregated societies (Kaya 2009; Wheeler 2006), in this article I argue that in Mardin premarital relationships made possible by social media tend not to damage women's respectability. Rather, flirting, courtships and romances are experienced as legitimate by young people, as long as they are kept secret and are carried out following specific social norms. In exploring this issue, I privilege a *theory of mediation*, which sees media technologies and social relationships as mutually constituted (Couldry 2000, 2008, 2012; Madianou and Miller 2012; Silverstone 2005; Wajcman 2002). I also draw from studies that focus on the idea of religion as mediation, and 'concentrate on the significance of the processes of mediation and mediatization without and outside of which no religion would be able to manifest or reveal itself in the first place' (de Vries 2001, in Engelke 2010: 374).

Flirting as Moral Practice

Previous ethnographic studies of digital media have shown that new technologies are domesticated as normative and moral in different contexts (Gershon 2010; Ito et al. 2009; Miller and Horst 2012; Madianou and Miller 2012; Silverstone, Hirsch and Morley 1992). In this regard, Miller and Horst affirm that 'the astonishing feature of digital culture is not this speed of technical innovation, but rather the speed by which society takes all of these for granted and creates normative conditions for their use' (Miller and Horst 2012: 28). The ethnographic material I present here can be interpreted in terms of a *theory of attainment*, according to which new media are often initially used to realize a prior desire that was not technically possible, but then the new 'facility becomes the merely taken-for-granted condition of what people simply presume as an integral aspect of who they are' (Miller and Sinanan 2014: 12). Social media indeed have been used to satisfy young women's desires to experience friendship and premarital romances, and have become a constitutive and taken-for-granted component of what they and their relationships are. However, elements of the ethnographic evidence that I present in this paper are not fully accounted for by this theory, and they show that the shaping of new normative conditions of social media uses is an incomplete, negotiated and contested process, something which has been underestimated in these previous works (Ito et al. 2010; Miller and Sinanan 2014; Miller and Horst 2012; Madianou and Miller 2012). In

Mardin, there are no clear normative conditions for the use of social media in courtship and romances. Women of similar age, class and social background have different relationships to religiosity and morality, and these differences are reflected in the variety of ways they use social media.

The investigation of mediated premarital romances can in turn shed light on how moral norms and everyday practices are constituted in relation to one another in Muslim societies (Deeb 2015). The 'everyday' is not conceived here as a site of non-normative ways of being, or resistance to Islamic discipline, but rather as the context in which new social norms are created as the result of various understandings of morality and religion. Along with Lara Deeb (2015) I argue that normative religiosity, moral norms and everyday life infuse one another, and they should be understood together. Some anthropologists of the Muslim world, who have worked extensively on premarital romances, love and emotions in relation to Islamic moral discourses or traditional codes of honor, have shown the complexity of moral choices and behaviors (see, for example, Abu-Lughod 2000; Marsden 2007; Lindholm 1982; Tapper 1991; De Munck 1996; Schielke 2009a, 2009b). In this article I contribute to the understanding of moral norms in Muslim society, conceived as changing and mutable, and entangled with processes of mediation and the incorporation of new digital media. I do not understand morality as a system or a set of discourses, which can be more or less coherent. The moral Muslim self is not seen here as created and practised in line with 'big' ideologies and discourses (see Mahmood 2005; Asad 1993; Hirschkind 2001, 2006), not as characterized by ambivalences, contradictions, conflicts and fragmentation (see Schielke 2009a, 2009b; Lambek 2000; Marsden 2007). On the contrary, I suggest that Muslim morality can be conceived as a mediated practice. From this perspective, religious values and desires of premarital love are not opposite and contradictory aims and ideals. Instead, piety and premarital love mutually constitute and shape one another. On social media platforms, many young women in Mardin simultaneously fulfill their desire for premarital romance and affirm their morality and piety. When reflecting on their flirting, they describe the fulfillment of romantic love and the enactment of a moral self as two compatible and coherent aspects of the same experience. Before discussing these aspects in details, I provide a brief description of Mardin.

Mardin

Mardin is the capital of the Province of Mardin. Located in the Kurdish region of Turkey, the town is inhabited by a majority of Sunni Muslim Kurds and Arabs,

but also by Orthodox Syriacs, Catholic Armenians, Turks and, more recently, a significant number of Syrian refugees. The ethnographic research was based in the new neighborhood of the city, locally called Yenışehir (new city), which has greatly expanded in the last fifteen years. The new city is the wealthiest part of the town, and is inhabited by people who moved there from the old city and from other towns and villages in the province, and by civil servants from all around Turkey. Mardin is undergoing significant social transformations as a result of urbanization, neoliberalism, economic development and increased access to higher education and job opportunities for women. These changes occurred in the context of the conservative religious politics of the current AKP government, which has been running the country since 2002, and was governing the town until the local election of March 2014, when the Kurdish party BDP gained the majority.

Mardin is a religiously, ethnically and politically heterogeneous city. Sunni Muslim Arabs, Kurds and Turks, and Syriac Christians all live near each other, in the same streets and in the same modern buildings of the new city. The town has experienced many political tensions, which are now embedded in inter-community relationships (Biner 2007). A history of political violence and events, such as the massacres of the Armenians in 1915 and the conflict between the PKK and the Turkish armed forces, have had lasting effects on the lives and relationships of the people of Mardin. In public spaces people do not talk about politics (Costa 2016), and 'public secrecy' (Taussig 1999 in Biner 2007) dominates public life, facilitating the 'co-existence of oppositional and conflicting social forces' (Biner 2007: 40). However, everyday relationships are not always ruled by fear, dislike and antipathy. For example, friendships and marriages between Kurds and Arabs are common, even if often characterized by a certain degree of difficulty (Costa 2016).

The young population of different ethnic groups has been affected in similar ways by urbanization, education and digital technologies. Young adults are more educated and have more consumption opportunities than the previous generation; they attend new, modern cafés and restaurants with mixed-gender forms of sociality, and on the Internet they are in contact with a wider network of people. Middle-aged and elderly Mardinites are keen on stressing generational differences, and they like describing people in their twenties and early thirties as lacking moral principles and shame (*utanma yok*).

During fieldwork, local narratives on ongoing social change were part of daily conversations. Similarly, stories on the use of social media were common, and used by Mardinites of all ages to reflect on current social transformations and to express their views of modernity, tradition and religion. Answers to my questions on the uses of the Internet revealed different ideological positions

and identities: some women proudly affirmed their refusal to use social media, to highlight their morality and modesty, whereas other women nobly asserted their active online presence as a sign of modernity and civilization. Some women stated that their practices of social media were virtuous and pious, in contrast to more compromising ways in which other women used social media; conversely, some women described their behavior as developed and advanced (*ileri*), and accused others of being conservative and backward (*geri kafalı*). In Mardin, there was no agreement on the appropriate behavior for women online, and both women and men wanted to express their ideas, which disclosed different ideological views on evolving gender roles, marriage, love and emotions.

The ethnographic material I present in this article can also be interpreted in the context of discourses about social media promoted by Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan that circulated widely at the national and local level. After the Gezi Park protests in summer 2013 and the corruption scandal preceding the local elections in March 2014, the Turkish government employed a campaign of demonization of social media (Tufekci 2014). Government officials called social media a 'force for evil', a 'destroyer of families', a 'purveyor of child pornography', and a 'haven for treason' (Tufekci 2014: 7). Governmental discourses on the dangers and risks of social media contributed to shaping a local attitude of distrust and suspicion toward the new online platforms, and reinforced local narratives on their immorality and sinfulness. Indeed, local discourses on the indecent implications of social media were quite common in Mardin, and stood in contrast with the way young women considered their social media use as 'normal', 'natural' and 'taken for granted'.

In what follows, I discuss the cases of two women in their mid-twenties who used social media to live premarital relationships. Although the two stories are not representative of the entire spectrum of online flirting and romances going on in the town, the comparison between them can shed light on how different ideas of morality, religion and modernity have shaped different *genres* of social media usage.

Aynur

Aynur and Besim are a young couple in a semi-secret premarital relationship. They are both Mardinites and Arabic speakers in their early twenties who live in the new city with their parents and siblings. Aynur is a religious, veiled woman who works as sales assistant in a furniture shop, one of the many that have opened in recent years as a consequence of the expansion of the

building sector in the new city. Her family is originally from the old city of Mardin and belongs to the Arab elite of the town. Besim's family is from another town in the province and moved to the new city when he was a child. He is a student at Mardin Artuklu University and he also occasionally works in the office of his older brother, who is a graphic design. Aynur and Besim first met on Facebook. Besim sent Aynur a friendship request after he saw that they had a few friends in common. Before accepting the invitation, she carefully observed every significant detail of his Facebook public profile: his profile picture and the other photos portraying him with his friends; the 'liked' pages, which let her know his political views, interests and football preferences; the few visible conversations with his friends; the family and the town he was originally from; and his friends and kin networks.

Facebook made possible a first contact and interaction, and supplied each of them with important information about the other. Aynur and Besim's Facebook walls were both decorated and embellished, with the purpose of being attractive to people of the opposite sex. Aynur chose a profile picture that highlighted her beauty, but also her modesty, expressed by the veil that was properly covering her head. Modesty was also conveyed by the lack of other photos of herself, which showed her intention to protect herself from the undesired gazes of men. In public, she preferred to share memes with poems, proverbs, or images of beautiful landscapes or flowers. Although he rarely wore an elegant suit in his daily life, Besim chose as his profile picture an image of himself wearing one, because it conveyed the ideal image of the reliable man and successful professional.

Aynur and Besim's public Facebook profiles revealed selves that were mostly consistent with their offline identities. Information about leisure activities, political views, kin networks and town of origin were posted online and contributed to providing information about themselves. The town of origin, in particular, constitutes an essential part of a person's identity, especially in the new city of Mardin, which is inhabited by people from a variety of towns. The lack of anonymity that characterized these online interactions stood in contrast with the practices of Internet chatting in the years before social media, which in the Muslim Middle East often enabled forms of sociality that were separated from people's families and from the social surveillance of the kin network (see, for example, Kaya 2009).

After a careful study of Besim's Facebook profile, Aynur accepted his friend request, and they started chatting on Facebook every day, many times a day. Like many other people of similar age, they started a romantic relationship that was lived mainly online. In the very private and secret space of the chat, they enjoyed the freedom enabled by the absence of other people's gaze. They

very rarely met face to face, because they had to keep the relationship discreet and private. In six months, they only met a couple of times in a café at the shopping mall, located twenty minutes away from the city center. They were quite worried that some of their relatives or family friends might see them together. They also met once in the park after sunset, together with a close friend of Aynur's. They tried to meet offline whenever they had the opportunity, but their relationship was mostly lived online, within the rich set of platforms and online spaces at their disposal.

Aynur did not have a broadband connection at home, because her father thought that the Internet was dangerous and could lead his daughters to behave improperly. The complete absence of the Internet in the house was the safest option. The Internet was also controlled in Aynur's workplace, where the shop owners decided to ban Facebook and YouTube to prevent their own teenage daughters from using it when they came to visit the shop after school. Despite all these bans and restrictions, Aynur was a massive social media user, and spent many hours every day on her beautiful white shining Samsung smartphone, either at work or at home. She used it far from the gaze of her father, who used to spend most of his free time outside the home, sitting with his friends at the *kahvehane*.³ The smartphone was a pivotal communicative tool in Aynur's life; it made possible most of the relationships that were not mediated by her family. In the offline world, indeed, the majority of her connections were either at work with strangers, or at home with people integrated into her kin-based social network.

Aynur had several applications on her Smartphone, including Tango, Viber, WhatsApp, Instagram and Facebook, but she used Facebook more than anything else. When I first met her, Aynur had around 250 Facebook friends of both sexes, but she unfriended all the men after starting her relationship with Besim. They mutually agreed to eliminate all friends of the opposite sex, and Aynur was pleased not to interact with any other man on Facebook. She described this act as a demonstration of love, loyalty and fidelity to Besim, but also as evidence of her morality and respectability. With the beginning of the relationship, she also carefully changed the privacy settings to make her profile completely private, so that she could not be found by any stranger. Furthermore, she and Besim exchanged Facebook passwords so that they could check each other's private chat, activity log and friendships. She also changed her Facebook profile picture, which now portrayed some verses from the Koran and not an image of her body. On her Facebook account she created two closed

3 The *kahvehane* is the traditional male only coffeehouse attended mainly by male elders.

'groups', one with her female cousins of similar age, and one with her boyfriend. In the first group she shared more informal and 'irreverent' pictures, comments and jokes that she did not like displaying to the wider population of her Facebook friends. In the second group she enjoyed sharing images of herself with Besim, and he shared images of himself in turn. This was a 'secret' online space where they exchanged photos that nobody else could see. These two private groups were then replaced by other WhatsApp groups, once this application started to spread in the town and she had installed it on her smartphone.

Aynur actively molded Facebook as a safe place, protected from the threat of the outside world, and from the gazes of strangers and potential impostors, who—it was said—could steal women's pictures to create obscene and sexual images. Although she first used Facebook to meet new friends and her current sweetheart (*sevgili*), she then changed her online presence and habits to please him, and to live a love story in line with her moral values of modesty and piety. She created an intimate, private and safe space, away from the public domain of the unknown world and inhabited only by close female friends and female cousins. Aynur described this new crafted online place as safe and moral, just like her home and hometown, all portrayed in opposition to a dangerous outside world. In the conversation we had together she stated that this was the appropriate use of Facebook for good Muslim Turkish women.⁴ Facebook could have easily led to shameful (*ayıp*) and sinful (*günah*) behaviors, but this was not the case for her.

Her mastery in managing the privacy settings to craft Facebook as a configuration of different online spaces with different degrees of privacy and different numbers and kinds of participants⁵ gave her the opportunity to live the romance with Besim and keep it secret from the gaze of friends and family. It also enabled her to perform a different self in each online place, and to satisfy the expectations of different people.⁶

Aynur used Facebook more than any other platform, but she also started using WhatsApp when it became popular during the course of my fieldwork. In addition, she used Tango for text messaging and video calls, whereas she used Instagram and Viber only rarely. The endless communications with Besim created a particular sense of intimacy despite physical distance. When she ran out of Internet credit, she would switch from Facebook and WhatsApp to SMS.

4 Unlike the Kurds, the Arab population in Mardin identify themselves as Turks.

5 See also the definition of social media as 'scalable sociality' in Miller et al. 2016.

6 For more about the use of social media in Mardin, see Costa 2016.

When she was alone in the house she sometimes talked to Besim on the phone, but she did not like it very much. She became shy and felt like she was not able to talk. Voice calls created embarrassment, and were more suited to ordinary conversations with parents and relatives. In contrast, the private chat was incredibly appropriate to emotional disclosure, and to the exchange of sweet and romantic words. It facilitated interaction and enhanced communication between them, but it also ensured the necessary distance to satisfy her ideals of romantic and pious love. In exceptional situations, Aynur made video calls on Tango to see Besim's face while talking with him. She revealed her hair to him as a proof of love and trust. In the video calls, the visual component was pivotal, and they liked to comment about each other's appearance, looks and clothes.

I asked Aynur several times if she thought that her romance was appropriate for a Muslim Turkish woman, as she defined herself. Her simple answer was: 'I love Besim'. Love justified her premarital relationship, which was deemed 'normal' and legitimate as long as it did not become public and was not lived in private physical co-presence, something that could have led to compromising sexual intercourse. Not only has social media created a mediated relationship that satisfies the two requisites of secrecy and lack of physical co-presence, it has also made it possible for Aynur to chat only with women, to perform a modest public self, and not to show images of her body in public. Furthermore, text messaging and visual communication have enhanced and facilitated the interactions between her and Besim. In short, social media has made possible the simultaneous realization of a romantic love and the enactment of a moral self. Social media practices have embedded both Aynur's values and conception of Muslim morality, and her desire for premarital love. Although these could be seen as two contradictory and opposing aspirations, social media enabled the actualization of both.

The romance between Aynur and Besim is similar to many other romances lived by young adults and teenagers in Mardin. Premarital relationships among young people are very common, and they are all mediated by social media. Facebook, Instagram, Whatsapp, Viber, WeChat, Tango and SMS have given romances and love stories new possibilities to flourish, and have become a constitutive part of the relationships. Yet, social media is not used in the same ways by everybody. Some practices followed clear social norms; for example, men and women would not display a premarital romance on public-facing social media. Such romances are not legitimate in public, either online or offline. On the other hand, young women and men think of their relationships and live them according to different notions of morality. There were no clear social norms that rule over online flirting. The mediated practices reflect different

interpretations of modernity and Islam, and were negotiated with partners and friends.

Hilal

Hilal is a Kurdish woman in her mid-twenties who works as an English teacher in a private school (*dershane*) in Mardin. She lives in a house in the new city with an old female friend from school. They are both originally from Kızıltepe, a town located thirty minutes away from the new city. Hilal is a veiled woman who defines herself as Muslim and takes religion very seriously. Yet she often expresses criticism of the religious ideology of AKP. Hilal is an avid social media user, and owns a new, smuggled (*kacak*) iPhone that was bought for less than half of the official price. She uses her fancy phone to communicate with friends of both sexes and also with Hasan, her sweetheart, who comes from the town of Mardin, where he still lives with his family.

Hilal and Hasan met for the first time in a café in the new city. They were sitting and drinking tea with their respective groups of friends and cousins, when Hasan's cousin—who knew Hilal from the school where she was currently working—introduced them to each other. Hasan immediately liked Hilal, and started asking for information about her from common friends. To speed up the courtship process, he sent her a friend request on Facebook. There was the chance they would meet again in other cafés together with other friends, but Facebook was faster, safer and also considered the 'common' way to court women.

When Hilal saw the friend request she immediately accepted it. She did not allow strangers on her Facebook account, and she would never accept the friendship of a person that she had not met before. But she liked using the platform to talk and keep in touch with women and men that she could not easily meet offline. She had a Facebook account with her real name and picture. She did not like the idea of a false profile and criticized those women who had one. For example, she said, 'Yes, they often do it to protect themselves from malicious gossiping and avoid conflicts with parents and relatives, especially if they live in conservative families. But they will likely end up behaving in improper ways—chatting with male strangers—because they can't be recognised.'

She emphasized that she used Facebook differently from 'backward' women who had to hide themselves. She saw her presence online, with her real identity and picture, as a sign of both modernity and honor, and a proof of sincerity and honesty. On Facebook she had friends of similar age, but she had unfriended

most of her older relatives, because she preferred to be 'free' from the social surveillance of the family.

Having an online public presence was important to Hilal, and she was very careful to choose the right pictures and images to post in public. Photos usually portrayed her together with her little nieces, sisters, or other female family members. She had only a few images that portrayed her at work with male or female colleagues or students. In online public spaces, she preferred to appear as a daughter or sister more than as a teacher or friend. She did not like to display her friendships online, or images of herself sitting in cafés; in her view, such photos could have conveyed the idea of a lazy woman not committed to family duties and work. She also made fun of an acquaintance who shared photos of herself with grimaces and her tongue sticking out, and she did not like the Facebook profiles of those women who displayed what she considered alluring and sexy photos.

Hilal's ideal marriage was a marriage of love, and Facebook, according to her, was giving her the great opportunity to help realize this important desire. On Facebook she could deepen her knowledge of men while at the same time conforming to her ideas of modesty and piety. Before meeting Hasan, she enjoyed chatting with male friends online; it was a good way to get to know them better while not compromising herself in private offline meetings.

She chatted in private with Hasan on Facebook for the first few weeks. She then fell in love and felt closer to him. Only at that point did she give him her phone number, after which she started talking with him on the phone quite a lot. She thought that online chatting was appropriate to friendship and flirting, whereas voice calls better suited the need for intimacy and love that is typical of what she considered as a mature relationship. From then on the romance was lived out mostly on the phone, only secondarily on Facebook and WhatsApp, and very rarely face to face. They only met a few times, briefly and together with other friends, in the street or supermarket of the new city; even though Hilal was living away from her family, she never invited Hasan over to her house.

After starting the romance with Hasan, Hilal did not change her behavior online. She continued talking with male friends in both public and private online spaces, and this made him jealous. Sometimes he yelled at her on the phone. He used to get angry whenever he saw a man writing a public comment on her Facebook, but Hilal thought that there was nothing wrong with it. She thought that relationships should be based on transparency and trust. On the other hand, Hasan considered online public communications with other men inappropriate for a respectable woman. After a few months of arguments, they found a compromise, agreeing that she would never reply to a comment from a

man in online public social media. Hasan himself never wrote on her Facebook wall, in order not to create suspicion about them being together.

Being a Moral Sweetheart on Social Media

These two stories do not cover all the varieties of social media use and online premarital romances going on in Mardin. Over 15 months of fieldwork, I came across many different types of flirtations and romances between young adults of the opposite sex, and in all these cases, moral concerns played a significant role in shaping the interactions.

For example, more conservative women might refuse to open their own Facebook account, so as not to run the risk of being contacted and approached by male strangers; instead they would use a friend's or sister's account to gaze at pictures of their beloved sweetheart and look at his Facebook profiles, while communicating with him only through SMS. Other young women had two, three or even more Facebook profiles to use with different kinds of people; they would use the most anonymous one, with a false name and no profile pictures, to talk with their sweetheart, in order to avoid any risk of the relationship becoming public. Other women had only one false profile, in order not to show their face and body in public and not to be recognized by anybody, but in their private chats they flirted with different men living all around Turkey. Less conservative women had a Facebook profile with pictures and private information visible to a wider audience, but in order to keep the relationship with their boyfriend completely private, they preferred to chat only on WhatsApp, which is more private and safer than Facebook. Other couples used the private chat of WhatsApp at the beginning of their relationship, then moved to Facebook only after the engagement party, when they did not have to hide their relationship anymore. In some cases, women who could easily meet men at school, work or cafés did not use social media in the courtship stage, but only to maintain relationships with men they had previously met face to face. Like Hilal, they did not consider online courtship with strangers a moral and virtuous practice. In contrast, other women used social media mainly to meet new men, because talking with them face to face was considered less honorable and they had fewer opportunities to do it. In all these cases, the platform, the mediated relationship, and the enactment of a moral self constituted one another.

Ethnographic research on the appropriation of new technologies into a new social context has emphasized the extent to which the creation of new genres of usage comes along with moral incorporations. Silverstone and Hirsch (1992) studied the processes of domestication of new technologies in the house-

hold through the frame of *moral economy*, a social, cultural and economic unit engaged in the consumption of objects. Hoover, Clark and Alters (2004) studied how parents control their children's uses of new media to cultivate their family identity and reputation. Horst (2010) showed that parents' values inform the strategies they employ to regulate media use in the family. In their research on transnational Philippine families, Madianou and Miller (2012) highlighted the moral and emotional implications of the choice of a medium for communication between family members in the context of a plurality of new media technologies, what they called 'polymedia'. Gershon (2010) argued that among university students in the United States, the choice to use a particular medium to break up with a partner is a strong moral act.

Whereas ethnographers of digital media seem to agree about the moral dimension of technological appropriations, they hold different opinions on the extent to which the genres of usage of a certain medium are shared by everybody. We can identify two different views on the level of agreement around the style of usage of a specific medium in a given social context. In their research on North American teens Ito et al. describe the online public as providing a context for youth to develop social norms. Youth online communication 'is conducted in a context of public scrutiny and structured by shared norms and a sense of reciprocity' (Ito et al. 2010: 37). Madianou and Miller (2012), in their research on Philippine families, found that normativity was imposed upon new forms of communication almost immediately. Miller and Horst argued that societies tend to take new digital technologies for granted and 'create normative conditions for their use' (Miller and Horst 2012: 28). They described the process of incorporation of new digital technologies into local contexts as producing new shared 'habitus', in the sense given by Bourdieu (1977). On the other hand, Gershon (2010) found out that there was not a widespread consensus on right and wrong ways to use a certain platform to break up with a partner. She gives an account of how students had different media ideologies, 'set[s] of beliefs about communicative technologies' (2010: 3), which led to different styles of uses. Madianou and Miller (2012) explained the difference between Gershon's results and their own as a consequence of the contrast between the individualistic attitudes of the North Americans studied by Gershon and the more collective dispositions of the Filipinos or Trinidadians.

The ethnographic material presented in this paper differs from both these two outcomes. In Mardin there was no shared understanding of what constitutes a proper use of social media for courtship and flirting, a clear normative cultural genre which was shared by all the female members of the same age group. Nor was there a complete diversification of individual ideas about it. Instead, a shared set of religious and moral values was interpreted

and understood differently, with the result that social media was seen as being morally appropriate in different ways by different women. In other words, digital technologies enabled a variety of moral Muslim selves, which reflected different understandings of morality, religion and modernity. The incorporation of social media into intimate everyday life has not created 'structuring patterns of behaviour' (Bourdieu 1977) unconsciously adopted by all users, but, as the ethnographic material shows, young unmarried women consciously attempt to live their moral dispositions. Through the use of the technologies at their disposal, they are involved in an active practice of forming the self, and at the same time they have been formed by the technology. The result is a multiplicity of patterns and habits and the lack of a clear normativity. This is a consequence of different interpretations of morality, but it is also the effect of the condition of secrecy in which flirting and romances are lived. There is no shared social context to develop social norms. Hence, it is only with difficulty that an agreement on the right and wrong ways for Muslim women to start and live premarital romances emerges.

Finally, these findings shed light on the importance of considering Muslim morality as entangled in mediated practice, rather than as a set of more or less coherent beliefs or discourses separated from the material and media world people live in. Some anthropologists of Islam (see, for example, Mahmood 2005; Asad 1993) emphasized the coherence of the self, and focused on the ways in which morality is created through conscious practices that aim at the development of a virtuous and pious personhood. Other scholars highlighted ambiguity, ambivalence and fragmentation of moral lives (see Schielke 2009a, 2009b; Lambek 2000; Marsden 2007). My research shows that practices of using digital media have been creating new (contested and uncertain) moral normative orders around love and premarital romances that are the result of an accommodation of desires that could not be satisfied previously. My interlocutors did not experience premarital love and piety as two opposing and conflicting ideals, but as compatible expectations simultaneously fulfilled by the new mediated practices. Rather than being in opposition with each other, these two 'moral registers' mutually shape one another.

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