Female creators and the politics of (dis)appearance on YouTube
Abstract

Building on in-depth interviews with prominent Arab YouTube creators, this paper takes the nascent trend of makeup and lifestyle vlogging as an entry point to examine the gendered nature of user-generated culture. With a focus on the case of YouTube in Morocco, the paper traces the micro-processes through which offline gender norms are reproduced online in order to create gendered spaces of creative expression and cultural production. The key argument advanced in the paper highlights the contradictory qualities of women’s social media production; it contends that while patriarchy’s shadow looms large in female practices of user-generated content production, emerging spaces of female participation in digital public culture allow for contesting the very patriarchal norms that shape gender-segregated spaces of UGC production.

Keywords: Arab youth, YouTube, creator culture, appearance, gendered participation, cultural production, UGC, digital spaces, Morocco
Consistent with global and regional trends, the field of user-generated culture across much of the Arab world is characterized by a staggering gender disparity in the number of prominent content creators and in the volume of content produced. Yet, women are not completely absent from the sphere of social media content production. Female YouTube creators, for example, seem to engage in the production and circulation of a qualitatively different genre of user-generated content, namely makeup, fashion and lifestyle video.

This paper takes the nascent trend of makeup and fashion vlogging as an entry point to examine the gendered nature of user-generated culture and participation in the case of Morocco. To that end, the paper deploys a battery of online ethnography tools and methods (Kozinets 2010), including in-depth interviews with twenty prominent YouTube creators conducted in person across 10 urban locations in Morocco between summer 2016 and 2018 combined with immersion in online spaces of female content production. Although I do not conduct formal analysis of the contents circulated in these spaces, the paper draws on my online participant observation in and of a wide array of digital media practices and texts. This includes the video content produced and circulated in these spaces; the views, comments, likes and dislikes such content generates; the cross-media circulation and promotion of content on such platforms as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Google+; and hyper-local news and popular press coverage of female social media spaces. Table 1 lists the beauty, fashion and lifestyle YouTube channels that I have frequented in the course of conducting fieldwork for this paper.

Building on the observation that young women engage in the production and circulation of qualitatively different types of user-generated video, this paper explores the gendered aspects of participatory social media production among youth on YouTube Morocco. The majority of female creators specialize in the production of makeup and fashion vlogging to attract female
viewers, drive away male ones and build gender-segregated online spaces. The key argument advanced in this paper highlights the contradictory qualities of women’s social media production; it contends that while patriarchy’s shadow looms large in female practices of user-generated content production, emerging spaces of female participation in digital public culture allow for contesting the very patriarchal norms that shape gender-segregated spaces of UGC production. The paper traces the micro-processes through which offline gender norms are reproduced online in order to create gendered spaces of creative expression and cultural production. In turn, these gendered female spaces are used as salutary sites for contesting entrenched patriarchal norms and beliefs. In this paper, I outline some the ways in which offline gender norms are enforced and gender boundaries are policed online, and I argue that, in the case of young female creators, the newness of digital media technologies does not necessarily and radically change the condition of women in a patriarchal Arab society. Instead, the paper suggests that the newness of media technologies affords young women creators a space where social and gender norms are strategically appropriated to contest entrenched patriarchal discourses.

In what follows, the first section summarizes extant research on the affordances of digital media technologies for Arab women’s political struggle and feminist cultural production. The second section, examines how offline gender norms are enforced and gender boundaries are policed online in order to create gender-segregated spaces of cultural production and expression. The third section considers how the appearance of women on the Moroccan social web has been linked to scandal. This section traces the challenges that young female creators face by situating female digital creative practices and public appearance in online space in local tropes and imaginaries of Arab patriarchy. The last section discusses how ostensibly apolitical gendered
spaces, which are built according to the logic of patriarchy, function as spaces to contest entrenched gender norms.

**Arab Women, Politics and Digital Media**

Despite the contributions and role of women in grassroots activism, democratization and public life in the Middle East and North Africa, the political reform agendas of post-Arab spring states did not address women’s issues. Al-Ali (2012) notes that the institutionalization of the demands of the protest movements have prioritized male-dominated issues and women’s rights have been violated and their “gender-based issues sidelined, occasionally even ridiculed” (p. 28). First, women’s rights movements have been co-opted by enlightened authoritarian regimes with modernizing gender policies; state regimes in Morocco and Tunisia, for example, have introduced policy measures to increase gender equality but only in so far as they legitimated authoritarian rule and did not undermine state power. Second, the emergence of Islamist constituencies as the most organized and the most persuasive and appealing to popular political taste has undermined the struggle for gender equality and rights (Al-Ali 2012, p. 30). In fact, women activists who recognize this paradox lament that “women’s status has somehow gone backwards” after the revolution in Egypt and in Tunisia as women came to be considered “second-class citizens” (Perdersen & Salib, 2013, p. 259).

However, despite the serious structural challenges they face, young Arab women do not quite fit with the global representations and discourses that portray them as passive, oppressed and voiceless. In the *Arab Human Development Report 2016*, Al-Ali and colleagues (2016a) observe that young women in the Middle East and North Africa are “negotiating and contesting regimes of power and inequality in diverse, creative and transformative ways” (p. 89). One of the arenas where young Arab women creatively contest and negotiate discursive and cultural barriers
to social justice and equality is online activism. Not only does online connectedness inspire the exchange of cross-border strategies and the building of solidarity networks, but women activists also use their blogs and social media platforms to report human rights abuses and produce alternative news stories to challenge and compete for state media attention (Al-Ali et al. 2016b). Citing two anti-sexual harassment campaigns organized by women activists in Morocco and Egypt, Skalli (2014) argues that women harness the affordances of mobile technologies and social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter in their struggle against the political and patriarchal forces that sustain and reproduce sexual harassment.

In addition, Al-Ali and colleagues (2016b) identify the field of cultural production (namely art, design, music and literature) as another important space where women contest structural forces that obstruct their access to rights and equality. Arab women’s cultural participation takes on political valence in this region for two main reasons. First, female artists, novelists, film-makers, and rappers bring stories based on female experiences to popular consciousness. Second, female cultural producers challenge male-dominated productions as they address silenced issues related to relationships, intimacy, and sexuality in political undertones (Al-Ali et al. 2016b). Similarly, Skalli (2006) documents the impact of women’s participation in political culture across the region, especially in such fields as newspapers, magazines, periodicals, satellite television, radio programs, documentaries, feature film and the Internet. In so doing, her study highlights the impact of “crusading female journalists, feminist film producers/directors, publishers, and feminist cyber ‘bloggers’” in producing alternative discourses and knowledge about women’s issues, citizenship and political participation.

In the context of social media production, this mode of politically-inflected cultural production is further nuanced by Arab women’s tendency to comply with local structures of
patriarchy in order to create online gendered spaces for contesting patriarchal discourses and structures. Newsom and Lengel (2012) argue that local feminist agency is inherently situated in virtual spaces of resistance, and they define such gendered online spaces as liminal sites of contained empowerment, “where normative rules are suspended in favor of generating alternative norms” (p. 38). These spaces restrict women’s empowerment because the modes of power circulating in them may not directly impact offline hegemonic structures. Rather, the flows of (counter-)power percolating through these online spaces of containment “must be negotiated with formal, systemic power structures to gain recognition and acceptance as a form of agency” (p.37). Highlighting the pressing need for more research on the role of women and their use of social media technologies post-Arab spring, Newsom and Lengel (2012) conclude that local women activists “have determined it is possible to build identities online, masked in patriarchal characteristics, so as to access power that generates feminist ideals” (p. 38).

Borrowing from these insights, this paper explores how local norms of patriarchy are suspended and/or enforced in these online spaces in order to forge alternative identities, practices and norms. The paper addresses the following questions: how do practices of producing and circulating female user-generated content on YouTube Morocco contribute to the building of masked and gendered spaces of containment (or what I call spaces of disappearance)? And what is the political purchase of seemingly apolitical spaces of disappearance or contained empowerment?

**Spaces of (dis)appearance**

*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.* Proverbial wisdom has is that the more things change, the more they stay the same. Reflecting on the newness of digital media technologies, Couldry (2015) warns against an emerging discourse that presents commercial social media platforms as “a new site of the social,” a space where social collectivity naturally emerges in an ostensibly
neutral space. He calls this discourse the *myth of natural collectivity* and compares it to the twentieth century myth of the mediated center of society, whereby traditional mass media presented themselves as mediators of the center of society when in fact they constructed ideological and socially differentiated imaginations of the nation. With the proliferation of social media, Couldry argues that “*instead of the ‘nation now’, we have ‘us now’*” and cautions against accepting human activity on social media as evidence of broader social and political processes.

Applied to the case of women creators on YouTube Morocco, the myth of natural collectivity would suggest that social media platforms offer women an emancipatory space where they come together in the most natural of ways, and experience the equality of appearing in public and the freedom of being in the presence of their equals (Cf. Arendt 1959). These “spaces of appearance,” following the logic of the myth of natural collectivity, will emerge as sites of equal and collective participation in the public realm of the *polis*.

But contrary to these prognostics, what emerges in my observation of female creative participation on YouTube Morocco is a gendered mode of (dis)appearance. The female YouTube creators I examine in this paper are caught between the rigidity of offline social norms, which define gender roles vis-à-vis appearance, speech and participation, and the seductive interpellation of new media technologies to *share*. Caught between these two forces, the majority of young female creators use content specialization as a strategy to insulate themselves in gender-segregated online spaces. The majority of prominent female creators on YouTube Morocco produce beauty and lifestyle user-generated video that attracts female viewers. Typically, these YouTube channels feature anywhere from tens to hundreds of videos on a variety of subjects related to feminine cosmetic consumption, lifestyle, health, and fashion. While the majority of female creator videos offer advice, product reviews, and tips on health,
lifestyle and beauty, some include comedy sketches on female-themed topics and travel vlogs. Prominent makeup, fashion and lifestyle channels in Morocco attract a high number of subscribers and views, with top-tier channels carrying more than half a million subscribers, and lower-tier channels maintaining a subscription base of approximately 30 thousand each.

While online spaces spawned by politically-inflected user-generated video are fraught with frenzied personal attacks and uncivil commentary, what female spaces of beauty and lifestyle vlogging have in common is an overall shared sense of quiet and decorum. First, the commentary that lifestyle and beauty videos generate is quantitatively less than what politically controversial videos receive, and the number of comments on female creator videos does not fluctuate enormously from one video to the other. While this could indicate the presence of a more committed base of fans, it certainly makes responding to comments and interacting with viewers more of a manageable and personal experience for the creator. Second, with occasional remarks from male users, comments on the lifestyle and beauty content category are made predominantly by female users, who tend to post more positive and encouraging comments. But to avoid essentializing female users as meek, this could largely be a function of the non-controversial, informative, and tutoring nature of the beauty and lifestyle videos produced by female creators. The comments on beauty and lifestyle video are, therefore, qualitatively different from comments on politically-inflected content. Indeed, most comments on the lifestyle and beauty content genre come in the form of compliments, wishes for success, expressions of gratitude, and/or requests for clarification. When a male user in this space volunteers an offensive comment, he is either disregarded or rebuked by other female commentators on the page. If the argument spirals so much out of control that it becomes a distraction from the video
content, Amal tells me that she will usually hide the offensive comment through her creator dashboard.

Female creators’ strategy to maintain a wall around their gender-demarcated spaces uses content specialization as a means of attracting female users and inhibiting male users. This process of filtering users through content provision exploits offline gender separation norms and beliefs. In a patriarchal society with strong demarcations of gender boundaries, it is rather unbecoming of a man to hang out in a space conventionally reserved for women (like the kitchen for instance); hanging out in feminine spaces literally undermines a man’s claim to masculinity and harms his social image as man among his peers. On gender demarcated social media spaces, specializing in the production of feminine content exploits this offline cultural premise to build a fence against male intrusion. A properly socialized male user should find it least shameful to openly participate in the consumption and circulation of makeup tutorial videos or other content designated for feminine consumption. Just as female creators shy away from male dominated spaces of satirizing politics lest their femininity is attacked, male users do not want to be seen in female spaces.

In fact, two derogative terms have recently emerged in digital youth culture that condemn male and female individuals, who do not act according to their gender in online and offline spaces. A young man who is often seen around women and treats them with respect and gallantry is labeled *aniba* (عنيبة), literally a sweet grape. The Moroccan social web is replete with social media posts, videos and memes, ridiculing young *aniba* men, whose gentle treatment and approach of women is mockingly labeled *tanab*. In a recent mockumentary about the phenomenon, a character presented as the President of the National Campaign against *tanab* explains,
“aniba can be described in many ways, first he is not a man; he is an abomination to all men. He ripens the grape [a young woman], but does not savor its sweetness. I hate him. Wherever he goes he is surrounded by beautiful women. But he does not do much. All he does is take them to a café, buy them orange juice, some flowers, some teddy bears, and wastes the chance on other men whose abilities exceed those of a zebra by 150 horse power!”

Because he enjoys platonic relationships and the company of college-age female friends and is often seen around women, aniba is not man enough—at least not for a patriarchal mindset that sees women primarily as objects of sexual desire. Aniba is a man who refuses to accept the perception that women are to be approached only as objects of masculine desire (literally, as fruits) and, in so doing, he becomes a “sweet grape” himself. The function of the term aniba, therefore, is to transpose offline gender-separation norms to online space by discouraging male users from appearing in female spaces. But to retain their patriarchal identity, men who comment on lifestyle and beauty channels will usually attack women for engaging in religiously illicit activities (makeup) or lament the “olden days” of patriarchy when women could not be seen flaunting their bodies before cameras.

If the specter of aniba inhibits male users from participating in feminine online spaces, there is another cultural dynamic that polices women’s participation in the production of content about issues that are culturally perceived as the domain of men. Such dynamic takes the form of another derogative term coined to troll and insult female creators, who produce politically-inflected user-generated video. The term mostacha was first used on social media to describe women, who fail to keep up their facial hair removal routines on fasting day. Male users will use the word mostacha (موسطاشة) to deny politically-engaged female creators their femininity. If
the label *aniba* constitutes an attack on a man’s masculinity, using the label *mostacha* to liken politically-nuanced female content creators to men questions their femininity. There is a wide array of social media memes, videos and Facebook pages dedicated to trolling and ridiculing the social conduct and stereotypical image of *anibas* and *mostachas*.

Content specialization as a strategy adopted by female YouTube creators exploits offline gender-separation norms and is facilitated by such online practices as labeling, trolling, and name-calling, which after all are nothing but online expressions of entrenched social and gender norms. Making use of offline gender-separation norms and their online manifestations, young female creators build gender-segregated spaces of participation in the production, circulation and consumption of public culture. Yet, these online spaces that women’s content specialization spawns are simultaneously spaces of appearance and disappearance; women appear in gender-demarcated enclaves in a space that is public in access and private in substance. That is, while these spaces are technically open to the public, the gendered nature of the content provisions circulating in them render them private; the feminine taste and interest that imbue female user-generated content provisions act as gender filters, favoring female users and fending off male nuisance. The filters, however, will only function as long as the content provisions are limited to feminine taste and interest. Offering politically-inflected content (men’s enterprise) on female channels invites trolling and name-calling from male users. Such online practices of trolling and name-calling come to serve as mechanisms of social control in the sense that they enforce offline gender norms and police gender boundaries online. Content specialization and online expression of offline social norms render women’s appearance and participation in online gendered spaces a form of disappearance. The gendered enclaves that young women build through content
specialization are semi-private spaces where young women appear without making a claim to equal or full participation in the mediatized public sphere.

But this is not the end of the story; as I have alluded to above and as I will argue below, young female creators strategically choose to specialize in the production of feminine content genres to build gender-segregated spaces, which are then used as sites for learning the tools to contest patriarchy offline. But before I take up this argument, the next section traces the origins of the cultural anxiety that surrounds the public appearance of women in Arab Moroccan society.

In order to understand why female creators shy away from producing gender-neutral content that engages issues of public interest, we need to examine the political implications and meanings of women’s appearance in Arab patriarchy. To understand why female creators avoid tackling issues of political and public interest in their digital media practice, we need to probe the work of female creators against the backdrop of local tropes of femininity, body, appearance and scandal.

**The scandal of appearance**

What pressures female YouTube creators to insulate themselves in online gender-segregated spaces? Perhaps the first mechanism that deters young women from seeking equal public appearance and participation on social media platforms is the family. Young female creators face an uphill battle trying to enter the field of user-generated content production compared to young men. Generally, families discourage their daughters from appearing online because women’s appearance on the social web had historically been linked to scandal. One of my informants tells me that the most scandalous case of female appearance on the social web in Morocco, and perhaps the most detrimental to young women’s struggle to appear equally, is the case of Sina.
In summer 2013, Ibtissam Najjari (also known as Sina) became the subject of scathing ridicule and mockery for an odd amateur music video she posted on YouTube. The lyrics of the music video mixed English, Turkish and Moroccan *Darija*, and featured Sina singing and flaunting her body in a rather crude and ostentatious display of vulgarity. The lyrics, a glut of nonsense, included the literal English translation of at least one Moroccan pop song that hardly made any sense. The singer’s thick accent, tacky clothing, vulgar and graceless dance moves, garish makeup and the raw amateurish quality of the video made Sina an infamous web character. Her video went viral, attracting more than four million views, 25,000 dislikes and more than 8,000 insulting and mocking comments. Countless parody videos and memes circulated on YouTube and Facebook, ridiculing the “scandals of Sina.” But Sina was a rather peculiar character. She followed up on her music video with equally absurd songs and with numerous newspaper and radio interviews, in which she indignantly defended her performance and bragged about being a more talented dancer than Colombian singer Shakira. There were reports circulating on hyper-local news websites and social media pages that Sina suffered a mental illness, but nothing that could be verified with certainty.

While the absurdity of Sina was a source of ridicule across social media platforms in Morocco, her record presented subsequent female creators with the formidable challenge of undoing her legacy, especially given how her record seems to validate local patriarchy’s stereotypes of female incompetence and unruliness. For many female creators, Sina was a disgrace to the cause of women struggle for equal access to online public appearance and a black mark in the record of female presence on the social web. As Amina tells me, the idea of female appearance became closely tied to scandal and made it rather difficult for female creators to be accepted as leaders in substantive user-generated content production.
We have had a problem with the image of women on the web to the extent that only women with a scandal, like Sina, got attention on the web. People are not used to seeing a woman on YouTube presenting quality content, especially one that critiques the problems of such public sectors as education, economics, youth employment, healthcare and politics. (Amina)

Because of the meanings of indecency and dishonor associated with women’s online appearance, amateur female creators from conservative backgrounds have had to work against family restrictions, as many parents would see their daughter’s appearance on the social web as a threat to the girl’s modesty and the family’s honor. Parents are concerned that their daughters’ presence on social media could attract unwanted masculine attention as well as flirtation and/or association with men that could sully a girl’s reputation and honor. To put this in historical perspective, in pre-Islamic tribal Arab societies families moved out of their tribes when a poet were to even mention one of their female household members in his poetry. In fact, there is a longstanding Arab literary tradition of enamored poets reciting elegies at the home ruins of their lovers, whose families departed a tribe to avoid having the names of their women appear in public art. Traditionally, the symbolic appearance of a man’s women (i.e. daughters, wives, and slaves) in the public sphere, as mediated by the cultural and literary medium of poetry, was seen as damaging to the family’s honor and reputation. While this archaic mindset may no longer manifest in such visible ways in Arab patriarchy today, its legacy nevertheless permeates contemporary Arab societies’ gender norms—albeit in geographically variable forms and with stricter gender-separation norms in tribal and rural settings. Today, young and unmarried women are still regarded as a potential threat to the family’s honor, and their appearance on social media platforms is met with a degree of anxiety and concern from male guardians.
For a girl to appear on the web it’s a big problem, and it takes courage. My father tried many times to convince me to stop although I was producing educational content. This is because girls are still prone to criticism like “cover your hair!”;

“Really? You cannot see past my hair?!” It is impossible! So, when do I as a woman get to say something?

Amina raises an important point about why her male viewers cannot see past her hair or other uncovered body parts. Her question relates (1) to the place of women in the private/public configuration of space in Arab society and (2) to the very meaning of a term that I have been using loosely thus far: scandal. Let me take a stab at explicating the former by untangling the latter.

The Arabic word used to describe the social media adventures of Sina, and which I translate to scandal, is *fadiha* (فضيحة). The verb *fadaha* means to cause what was out of sight to appear by illuminating it or by pulling off a cover. The noun *fadiha* describes a situation where an object or action that should have stayed out of sight has been uncovered and become apparent for the public to see. When Sina’s music video was labeled as *fadiha*, the act was an invitation for the public to see what must have otherwise stayed private. *Fadiha*, therefore, describes the resulting situation of movement from the hidden cover of the private sphere to the bright nakedness of the public realm. This movement or passage from the private to the public is heavily policed and regulated, and begins with the clear delineation of what and who belongs where. Arab patriarchy places women’s bodies into the private realm and prescribes myriad social norms that govern their crossing from the private to the public. The wearing of a veil, for instance, is a rite of passage from the private to the public, through which the private body retains its privacy under the cover of a cloth. Amina’s frustration with her male viewers who
“cannot see past her hair,” is a moment of policing and enforcing offline gender norms at the private/public border. The semantic closeness between the word *dohur* (appearance) and *fadiha* (scandal) is no coincidence for there is a fine line between modest appearance and scandalous display.

At the heart of the policing of women’s appearance in public space, including social media sites, is a patriarchal cultural economy that regulates the consumption of bodies in public. As private bodies, women in Arab patriarchy are understood as extensions of the social and corporal body of man. The Arabic word *‘ird* (عرض) literally means ‘body’ or *badan* (بدن), but also signifies all that can be praised or insulted about a man like his relatives and those trusted to his guardianship. A man’s *‘ird*, or his social body, extends beyond his corporal mass to include the bodies of those whom he is responsible for. The Arabic noun *‘ird* collocates with a number of action verbs denoting symbolic and physical violence to a person’s social and corporal self: to chew someone’s *‘ird* (to insult), to bite and tear the flesh off someone’s *‘ird* and eat it (to gossip), to break or make a whole in someone’s *‘ird* (to rape). The intricacies of these verbs, which I am only able to capture partially here, illustrates some of the many ways a person’s *‘ird* (physical and social body) is symbolically and physically consumed. The protection of *‘ird* in Arab patriarchy traditionally falls on the man, who applies the public/private apparatus to safeguard his body against *fadiha*—the public consumption of what must remain privately *his*. In public space, gossip, harassment, gazing and rape are illicit modes of consuming the social and proprietary body of man, and it is such illicit acts that the private/public apparatus regulates.

The online appearance of young female creators exposes their family’s *‘ird* for public consumption. The creators I have spoken to agree that female user-generated content producers
are subjected to a barrage of insults, ridicule and harassment online that have pushed many to give up their digital practice.

They [female creators] have stopped because of audience mockery and ridicule, because of inappropriate jabs, and because of harassment, etc. Add to this […] the risk of finding yourself in a porn website, which happened to me as well. I found my face in a video on a website that I did not even know. My fans and people I know sent me the link and I found my face with all the horrible tags and my name attributed to shameful things. (Amina)

To illustrate the ridicule, jabs and harassment that Amina alludes to, her episode on Arabic calligraphy and the value of teaching handwriting skills at schools, for example, received many encouraging posts but also comments of this nature:

“If you were a true house-girl you would not be making these videos, large-knee whore”

There are two dynamics in this comment. The first is one of reminding the YouTube creator of her place in the private sphere. The commentator attacks the creator by denying her affinity with a household, meaning that Amina does not truly belong to any true home or private sphere. The comment suggests that because the creator has chosen to appear in public through the practice of making user-generated video on issues of public interest, she is no longer the faithful daughter of her household (literally, not the daughter of the house). She has departed the privacy of her home and crossed into the public space of men where she can only exist as a “whore.” The second dynamic in this comment is in referring to the creator’s knees. Large or strong knees (بو ركابي) in Moroccan darija signify masculine strength and sturdiness. So, not only does the comment banish the creator from the private realm of the household (allegedly the place for a woman’s
dignity and respect), but it also denies Amina femininity by assigning her a male signifier—strong knees.

Amina tells me that some women are stauncher defenders of patriarchy than men, and in fact this comment was made by a user with a female username and picture. Of all the comments this video received, I find the above comment accusing her of being a large-knee whore to be the most malicious remark. Comments from male viewers, on the other hand, tend to be objectifying and sexist.

“You are getting sexier by the day”

“Beautiful Lolita, married or not yet!”

The two comments above were made by what appears to be male users on the same preceding video episode. Both comments avoid the subject of education and art raised in the video and, in so doing, refuse to engage women in a rational exchange about issues of public interest. Amina complains that it is rather hard for her male viewership to stay focused on discussing the issues tackled in the videos.

It is hard for a man to focus on discussing ideas with a woman or a girl whose hair, her arms, etc. are uncovered. It becomes a source of distraction. She can even cover her hair and body and some would still criticize her for tweezing her eyebrows. They will use a hadith to argue that she must not pluck them. (Amina)

As the written account of the sayings and reported daily practice of the prophet, hadith in Islamic tradition is encoded with considerable legal and divine significance. Amina notes that exponents of patriarchy will selectively invoke religious texts, such as hadiths, to cast divinity on otherwise self-serving interpretations of the sacred. Shrouded in religious connotations, the patriarchal insistence on seeing women as objects of masculine desire and as distraction id deployed as a
mechanism of enforcing gender separation norms and upholding the public/private division on social media. Pleasure and its objects, this sentiment seems to suggest, must either remain indoors or only appear under the condition of observing gender norms of public appearance.

In addition, the refusal to interact with female creators’ treatment of issues of public concern hinges on the normative belief that inhabitants of the private sphere are incompetent minors and, therefore, unequal to bearing the full citizenship of the public sphere. Because they are intellectually incompetent and physically distracting, the infantilized and perpetually incomplete citizens of the private sphere are denied equality in the public realm.

It is really difficult for him to accept discussing ideas with you and overstep his belief that you are incomplete as a woman (i.e. incapable of rational judgement) and that he, the man, is the one who knows best, and is the shepherd, etc. This is all in our subconscious mind as a society and it is causing us such a confusion and suffering. It is also one of the main barriers that thwart the potential of the web as a means of expression for both genders, but more so for women. I mean these ideas do not let discussion move forward. They drown us in a sea of mockery and insult, we are never able to be objective in our treatment and discussion of important issues. We are not even equipped to sustain a discussion at that level […] who will discuss the topics and issues with you objectively? As a woman, you just wish that he would debate the topic and not you [the creator]. (Amina)

The incompleteness of women, which Amina references here, is a cornerstone of Arab patriarchal discourse and is based on the normative belief that women are essentially emotional beings and, thus, incapable of rational judgment. Such ostensible incapability (literally lack, نقص) is, in turn, used to justify their occlusion from public deliberation. Yet, as men apply their
“superior” rational faculties to the public realm, their emotional/irrational energies are exercised in the private sphere. The shepherd, observes Amina, knows best, but the shepherd in Foucault’s pastoral power also cares for his flock from birth to death. In the private sphere, the normative patriarch, much like the devoted shepherd, is a loving and caring guardian, trusted with the well-being, security and protection of his ‘ird.

You see, we did not raise our girls and women to believe that they can be independent. Even in the basic jobs, our society insists that she has to find somebody who will “complete” her because she is “incomplete.” (Amina)

The digital practices of young female creators on YouTube emerge against the backdrop of Arab patriarchy. In their appearance on the social web, young female creators in Morocco work with and against the cultural orthodoxies and normative hierarchies that structure everyday cultural practice in much of the Arab world today. What I have attempted to do in this section is unpack the sheer cultural anxiety surrounding female appearance, its semantic proximity to scandal and its place in a cultural economy of public visual consumption. The patriarchal anxiety fuels online practices of policing gender boundaries and enforcing offline social and gender norms. Yet, this process of enforcing old norms in emerging spaces does not exactly lead to the reproduction of social and gender norms in online space. While it is true that young women are contained in gendered spaces of creative and cultural expression and participation (i.e. spaces of disappearance), young female creators use content specialization as a strategy to overcome online harassment and trolling and to build exclusive spaces for empowering women in their offline everyday lives. Young female creators strategically specialize in the production of female-targeted YouTube content that serves their cause offline. Indeed, women are not inherently less political because they (dis)appear in ostensibly apolitical online spaces—i.e.
makeup and fashion channels. On the contrary, young women’s online (dis)appearance has its own politics.

**The politics of disappearance**

Structurally, the format of gender-segregated online spaces may indicate a transposition of offline gender norms to online space, but the content produced and circulated on beauty and fashion YouTube channels does not necessarily reflect this trend. The sheer harassment and trolling that female creators are subjected to online surely influences their decision to insulate themselves in online gendered enclaves through content specialization. In format, these enclaves may bear the mark of a triumphant and resilient patriarchal regime, transposing its norms to online spaces. Yet, it is the content of what I have called the online spaces of disappearance that begins to challenge the grip of patriarchal values on the lives of young female creators and their followers. The political purchase of female creators’ seemingly apolitical digital media practices lies in the type of knowledge circulated on beauty and lifestyle channels and the significance such knowledge holds for its producers and consumers.

The cultural knowledge that beauty and fashion content creators produce and circulate on YouTube encourages girls and young adult women to seek independence through learning to master a cosmopolitan look and lifestyle. As brokers of cosmopolitan aesthetics, YouTube beauty vloggers in Morocco teach girls and young women the rudiments of mastering and deploying their femininity in pursuit of social mobility and equal appearance in offline public spaces. Describing her base of followers, Amal tells me that her YouTube channel caters to a niche audience of girls and young adult women between the ages of 18 and 30 years old. What Amal has in common with her followers is a genuine ambition for an education, a professional job, and the need for a boost of inspiration and advice on how girls and young women should
organize their lives in pursuit of such goals. The beauty, fashion, makeup and lifestyle content that Amal produces and circulates provides such advice and knowledge and, over time, accumulates into a video repository of instructions and tips on how to prepare for appearing on such occasions as school presentations, job interviews, thesis defenses, wedding parties, dates and other social events.

At the heart of this form of digital knowledge that the repositories of YouTube beauty vloggers offer is an invitation to appear and participate in offline public space.

My message to all girls who follow my channel is: Do not stay home. Not just because you are a girl, you should give up travelling, going out and discovering the world around you. No, go out and discover the world…do not stay home. You should be active, go places, and do stuff, and this will give you happiness and a lot of energy. (Amal)

Indeed, the knowledge offered on beauty and lifestyle user-generated video is reflected in the everyday life practices of young Moroccan women in urban spaces. In the case of Amal’s followers, their public appearance includes such activities as traveling for leisure, attending job interviews, sitting in cafes, eating in restaurants, going out on dates, and attending universities.

Amal tells me that based on her YouTube creator dashboard, the majority of girls and young women following her channel live in Casablanca, Rabat and other metropolitan centers in Morocco (and overseas). For these young women, Amal’s channel offers a guidebook for cosmopolitan lifestyle.

For young women who are used to going out to a café, I want them to explore new places. I want to be a guide for them, I have done the research for them and
all I want them to do is go to these new places and explore them…I urge them to go out more, to go to museums or to visit art galleries instead of staying home, watching TV or sleeping.

Beauty and makeup YouTube channels, which I have described above as gender-segregated spaces of disappearance, come to serve as learning grounds and sites of organizing and circulating knowledge resources on how to appear in offline public space and pursue a cosmopolitan lifestyle and subjectivity.

Yet, while Amal’s digital creative practices of producing and circulating beauty and makeup video content encourages female viewers to appear in offline public space, her digital media practice is motivated by a broader political conviction. As a young woman, Amal refuses to adhere to the charted life course of traditional Moroccan society and believes that women must first and foremost struggle for independence.

I think women in Morocco should struggle for personal freedom and independence. Women should become an independent entity; they cannot always be under someone else’s guardianship, from family to your husband to your sons…I want to see women independent and happy and well aware of the fact that they are a whole and complete person before they enter a relationship and surround themselves with families. Before all that they should own their identity.

Their identity must not depend on someone else.

Amal is well aware that the path to independence begins with access to education and later employment, and insists that her user-generated content is primarily aimed at women in urban spaces—as opposed to young girls in rural space. In urban metropoles, the lifestyles, values and modes of appearance that Amal’s channel inspires offer girls and young adult women a resource
for seeking independence through cosmopolitan subjectivities. Elegant and chic self-presentation in public space, I am told, is important for young adult women as it makes them comfortable and confident about “showing your person and yourself” in public.

I pressed Amal on the meaning of female empowerment, but at every turn she challenged the idea that the content of her makeup, fashion and lifestyle vlogging could be objectifying to women. She gives primacy to female embodied experiences of wearing makeup and embracing fashion over structural critiques that reduce feminine aesthetic labor to passivity inducing narratives of female objectification.

As long as the woman is comfortable with what she is doing, as long as she is not forcing herself to do something just to fit in society, and as long as she is doing that and she is happy and convinced of the reasons why she is doing it, it is OK.

In emphasizing the primacy of women’s embodied and emotional experiences in the act of public appearance, Amal is in conversation with the patriarchal norms that insist on locating the female body in the domestic, private sphere. The argument of Arab patriarchy against the appearance of the female body is based on stigmatization. In Arabic, *awrah* refers to a point of vulnerability or a weak spot that may compromise, for instance, the life of soldiers in battle. While the *awrah* of a mountain in Arabic refers to its deep cracks, the *awrah* of a man is the intimate body parts that he is ashamed of showing in public. For the male body, *awrah* is the part stretching from the navel to the knee. For the woman, who is part of the social body of man, all of her body is *awrah*, except for the face, the hands and the feet. As a source of humility, stigma, vulnerability, and compromise, *awrah* must be covered. Yet, the feelings of shame associated with the appearance of *awrah* in public are experienced from the gendered position of man; it is the man who feels vulnerable and humiliated upon the public exposure of his social body. The stigma and
humiliation that surround the appearance of the female body in public space is the public humiliation of man. Amal feels differently wearing makeup and thrusting her feminine body into public space,

…for me looking sharp is very important because it matters to you in the first place. It makes you comfortable in your own looks and you are happy and confident about showing your personality and yourself. It helps you become more accepted by others.

In one way or another, Amal’s creative digital media practices invite women to consider and follow their own feelings about appearing and being visible in public. The digital video repositories that makeup and fashion vloggers produce and circulate among their base of followers are in effect tools to challenge the stigma and shame men experience when “their women” misbehave and flout gender norms by daring to appear in public. In so doing, these seemingly immodest practices contest the construction of the female body as an extension of the social body of man and invite young adult women to experience their bodies in ways that are not controlled by affective politics of patriarchy.

In addition to the feelings of stigma that surround the public appearance of the uncovered female body, what the creative practices of makeup and fashion vloggers seem to be in contestation with is the construct of feminine beauty as fitnah. In Arabic, the word fitnah (فتنة) is used to describe a state of frenzy, characterized by a lack of control and order and an absence of rationality. As a time of disruption to rationality and its symbolic order, fitnah can emerge as a result of irreconcilable disagreements in public opinion, but can also emerge from irrational and excessive admiration or infatuation with a person or object. The female body is closely associated with fitnah as its public appearance allegedly threatens rationality and restraint and
could thus cause *fitnah* in public space. Characterizing the female body as a potential threat to the rationality of the public sphere, in turn, reinscribes the female body into the private sphere. But female digital practices of producing and circulating makeup and fashion vlogging contest these social and cultural norms. Amal seemed especially frustrated with the patriarchal tendency to dismiss feminine aesthetic labor and public appearance as inviting masculine attention and inciting *fitnah*.

Why is it that we do not attack a pop artist for seeking attention with their beautiful singing voice? You see, makeup is also an art and taking care of your appearance is also an art, and there is no problem if you take it to a point where you want to attract attention. I want to attract attention, so what? People should not have the right to tell you what to do and not to do. That is terrible (Amal)

As the production and circulation of feminine digital media content pushes the boundaries of social and gender norms in Moroccan society, it is important to note that cosmopolitan Moroccan women have long incorporated makeup and fashion in their public appearance. Beauty and hair salons have existed in Moroccan society long before YouTube, but the contribution of fashion and beauty vloggers to this domain of social activity is one of scale. Feminine creative digital practices are mediatizing existing offline social phenomena and in so doing they are opening up new discursive spaces that become playgrounds for rehearsing feminine modes of appearance and cultural consumption that contest conventional social and gender norms. These modes of contestation are subtle and camouflaged, but not confrontational; incremental in their pursuit of change, but not radical. In one tutorial, for example, Amal invites her viewers to “prepare” with her for a first date occasion. As a somewhat taboo subject, dating culture is a common underground practice in Moroccan society especially among youth, but for a
female creator to openly invite her followers to prepare for a date is rather a step too far. To mitigate such effect, Amal ends the makeup tutorial video with footage of her date: her best girlfriend, Salwa.

You never forget the society where you live even when trying to give little hints. For example, I made a video about dating, meaning that it is ok to go on a date, but I am single… So I did not tell them that I do not go on dates, but I told them that I am single. This also means that if I were not single [if I knew someone], I would go out on a date. So, it was a very diplomatic way of putting it. I did not want it to be too direct…And I thought I would be making a statement about dating culture without showing you my personal life. My message went through without having to share my personal life.

Amal’s strategic choice is a case in point of the micro-politics of everyday digital creative practice that female creators engage in. Such politics requires tailoring their discursive strategies of contestation to avoid violent disruptions of social and gender norms. But it is through the micro-politics of the personal, performed from within gender-segregated spaces of cultural production, that young women’s creative media practices become political, or what Punathambekar and colleagues (2014) call ‘the new political’. Through encouraging women’s appearance in offline public space, their pursuit of social mobility, and their independence the content of cultural practices of beauty and fashion vlogging challenges the private/public division and the patriarchal norms of gender separation. What I have called spaces of disappearance become a pedagogic playground to teach and expose users to the tools that can contest the affective and ideological grip of patriarchy. Such is the political import of creating and participating in online gendered spaces of disappearance: working with the logic of
patriarchy to create gender-segregated digital enclaves that are then used to crack the ideological and affective surfaces of patriarchy in offline public space. These findings echo Newsom and Lengel’s (2012) conclusions that Arab women deliberately seek contained and masked gendered spaces for self-expression that are situated between mainstream feminism and patriarchy “where normative rules are suspended in favor of generating alternative norms” (p. 38).
References


Table 1:

Women’s beauty, fashion and lifestyle channels observed in the course of this research project

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