AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

BETWEEN THE BLOGOSPHERE AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE: EGYPTIAN WOMEN BLOGGERS BEFORE AND AFTER THE JANUARY 25TH REVOLUTION

By
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A project
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of Master of Arts
to the Department of Sociology Anthropology and Media Studies
of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences
at the American University of Beirut

Beirut Lebanon

May 2015

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

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Project Defense: April 29, 2015

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Hatim El Hibri for planting the seeds of this project, and for his enthusiasm and assistance. Thank you for all the time you spent reading and rereading my project and making time, even when you had no time. Thank you for contributing to my study and believing in its importance.

Additionally, I would like to thank Dr. Jad Melki for his guidance, support, advice, and encouragement throughout the duration of my graduate studies. I deeply appreciate your generous feedback and insight.

Thank you to my parents for their patient understanding of the time and effort demanded by this project. Thank you for believing in me, encouraging me, and always appreciating my efforts.

AN ABSTRACT OF THE PROJECT OF

Rand Ali El Zein for Master of Arts
Major: Media Studies

Title: Between the Blogosphere and the Public Sphere: Egyptian Women Bloggers Before and After the January 25th Revolution

This study examines how Egyptian women bloggers have engaged in public issues and become significant interlocutors in an online public sphere in Egypt. The project aims to answer the following research questions: What have Egyptian women blogged about in terms of harassment, religion, and personal life? Did their content orientation vary after the outbreak of the Egyptian revolution of 25 Jan. 2011? The study relies upon a qualitative textual analysis of five blogs by five Egyptian women.

The findings reveal that these five Egyptian women bloggers have indeed constructed new social dynamics within their blog space. At the same time, however, they have also reproduced older forms present throughout history in other media, in the speech of women who challenged religion and the male gaze, in the work of writers who worked under the cover of anonymity, in the political satirists who used humorous insinuations and sarcastic hinting as form of political resistance, and in the blogging of activists who challenged dominant narratives in mainstream media reportage.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A. Background

The digital age has witnessed the rapid rise of blogging in the Arab world (Khiabany and Sreberny, 2007). Blogs became new platforms for political discussions, debates, and self-expression while sometimes functioning independent of state-controlled media. Although most scholars remain uncertain of the ability of bloggers to instigate a revolution, blogs are nonetheless empowering enough to reshape the Arab public sphere. Lynch (2007) claimed the blogosphere is one of the places where mediated political debates and taboo topics find expression. Skalli (2006) provided a precise gendered perspective on the Arab public sphere. She claims that an understanding of the public sphere will remain incomplete if the role of women and the media are not investigated alongside each other. Annabelle Serberny (2002) has argued, "Women and the media are increasingly taken as a key index of the democratization and development of society" (p. 15). Moreover, El Sadda (2010) claimed that Arab blogging has created online literary counter-public, especially for Arab women who do not have easy access to traditional literary circles, such as coffee houses.

Historically and until today, women's access to the public sphere has and will vary in intensity and exhibition with the changing sociopolitical realities of each Arab country (Skalli, 2006). Arab nations are not homogeneous in their regime structure and cultural norms; the phenomenon of women's activism and the public sphere continues

to grow heterogeneously. Therefore, this research paper focuses on only one Arab country in terms of its blogging and the online public sphere: Egypt. Egypt has a large online population and was one of the main countries in the Arab uprisings. Egyptian bloggers account for the largest number of blogs in the Arab blogosphere and almost half of the Egyptian bloggers are women (Etling, Kelly, Faris, and Palfrey, 2010). Thus, Egypt has the largest number of female bloggers in the Arab blogosphere. The important role played by Egyptian women within the Egyptian blogosphere in particular and the Arab blogosphere in general lends import to an analysis of their blogging activity, style of writing, and content.

B. Purpose and Significance.

The purpose of this study is to explore the different roles played by blogs in helping Egyptian women engage in public issues related to political, social and cultural life. This study examines the research question: How did Egyptian women blog about harassment, religion, the revolution, before and after the outbreak of the recent Egyptian revolution (post January 25th 2011)? — a time during which Egyptian women faced myriad social, political and cultural challenges while undertaking critical roles in activism and blogging.. This study addresses an important topic that has not received adequate scholarly attention. It will enrich the media studies field by addressing a relatively new subject concerning the Egyptian women blogosphere. It will also assist scholars interested in women's studies to understand the potential role of blogging in Egyptian women's lives in terms of self-expression and activism.

C. Brief Summary of the Method

This study engages in a qualitative textual analysis of five popular blogs in order to investigate what Egyptian women articulate within the space of their personal

blogs. In this study, blogs will be examined as texts, which include written articles, images, videos, and audio, as well as comments posted on the blog post**.** Five blogs have been selected for this study. Each blog is unique in terms of style of writing, blogging content, blogger ideology and interests. These blogs are written by Egyptian women bloggers. To answer *how* Egyptian women blogged, as mentioned earlier, this study investigated the blogger's topic choice and modes of address within blog posts written between the time range of years 2005 and 2014. I analyzed two blog posts from every blog. In the first stage of my preliminary analysis, I familiarized myself with these blogs in order to point out the dominant and related topics discussed by the bloggers. In the second stage, I began analyzing each blog separately under the three principal themes 1) Harassment 2) Religion 3) the Egyptian Revolution. These three themes were chosen after reading the blog content several times in the first stage of the analysis. In the third stage, which is the interpretation stage, I analyzed the inter-textuality of the blogs. This stage included the interpretation of the possible relationship between all the signs within the texts I have analyzed in the previous stage. Throughout this process, I pointed out the connotative meaning behind the signs incorporated in the blog text, and interpreted them through a larger framework.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

A. A Brief History of Egyptian Women Writers

From the 1900s until the recent 2011 revolution, Egyptian feminists and activists have mobilized their actions during street protests in demonstrations in Egypt (Amar, 2013). Throughout the late nineteenth century a considerable number of women were writers in Egypt. These women frequently remained anonymous by using pseudonyms when publishing their articles (Dabbous, 2004, p. 40). For instance, in 1894, Egypt introduced the first woman's magazine "Al-Fatah", which was a major step toward putting women's perspectives in public arena (Dabbous, 2004, p.41). Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Egypt witnessed a rise in the number of women journalists and writers. "Mostly upper-class Egyptian women began to write about and promote greater freedoms for women" (Fleischmann, 1999, p. 90).

Moreover, Egyptian women began organizing 'women's societies, associations, unions, and federations' (Fleischmann, 1999, p. 90). Huda Al Shaarwi, for example, was a women's rights advocate in the early 1900s. In 1923, she established the Egyptian Feminist Union (Dabbous, 2004, p. 44). Shaarawi is considered a pioneer in Middle Eastern feminism, which gave upper-class women significant presence in public life. The political and public activities of such women were reported in newspapers with photographs of their faces (Ahmed, 1988).

Dabbouss (2004) researched press debates in Egypt during the 1919 revolt. She claimed that during this period, both men and women used media such as "books, newspaper, magazines, and meetings" to express their opinion concerning women's

privileges and tasks. Dabbous (2004) described Malak Hifni Nassef as one of the first female pioneers in the Egyptian national press. Similar to the female writers in the 1800s, Nassef wrote under a pseudonym "Bahithat al Badiya." However, she tackled controversial issues that concerned women during the early 1900s such as "marriage, divorce, polygamy, education, and the veil" (Dabbous, 2004, p. 43).

Egyptian women's contributions to public debate within the Egyptian press have significantly facilitated the emergence of the Egyptian women's movement (Dabbous, 2004, p. 52). Through publishing in the press, women writers attempted to form their future and influence the future of Egypt, especially after the 1919 revolution. In the early 1920's, Egyptian women's public activism became highly visible; this process expanded their lives into public space (Dabbous, 2004, p. 44). Although most of the women active in public life came from the upper class, the notion that Egyptian women traditionally lack any freedom within urban social life is by principal misleading.

Entering the twenty first century, the Arab world has witnessed a rapid rise of blogging activities, especially among Arab women who are using these spaces as online public forms of self-expression (El Sadda, 2010). Therefore, understanding Egyptian women's blogging activities, especially before and after the 2011 revolution, as well as how these bloggers react differently to events on their personal blogs, becomes directly tied to the understanding of women public practice in today's digital age. Since blogging is a communication tool, it is important to contextualize this practice within the communication landscape in the Arab region, and specifically in Egypt.

B. A Survey of the Communication Landscape

Before the 1990s in the Arab world, the free press was limited and governments strictly controlled mass media. Thus, there was a finite amount of freedom to lead independent debates and 'participate in ongoing political controversies (Khamis and Sisler, 2010; Al-Nawawy and Khamis, 2013). During the early 1990's, satellite television and Internet began spreading throughout the Arab world. Some scholars labeled the spread of satellite television and the Internet as the new media revolution (Khamis and Sisler, 2010). Nevertheless, the region still suffers from the 'digital divide' due to poverty, high illiteracy rates, and digital illiteracy in many Arab countries. For instance, Egypt has high illiteracy and a limited spread of Internet connectivity. In 2010, only 22.1% of the Egyptian population was connected to the Internet (Internet World Stats, 2010). Nevertheless, in 2008 Egypt had more than 20 million mobile subscribers (Radsch, 2008), and this number continued to grow exponentially year over year. Moreover, Cairo and other major cities in Egypt have also inherited a large number of Internet cafes available, while home computers and laptops are more common within middle and upper class Egyptian households (Radsch, 2008). Internet penetrations are still on the rise (Al-Nawawy and Khamis, 2013).

Therefore, it is safe to say that Egypt has witnessed a moderate shift in media use through the introduction of social media technologies that rely on Internet access. The communication landscape became more pluralistic and diverse. New media are providing alternative spaces for competing voices to disseminate. These new spaces have become hubs of self-expression hubs, as well as useful platforms for practicing mediated politics (Khiabany and Sreberny, 2007). Nevertheless, social media have also proliferated government surveillance.

In 1993, the Mubarak regime financed Internet infrastructure as part of its strategy to boost the Egyptian economy and create jobs. However, this investment has also given the government power to supervise and control online information and communication. The regime's ability to scrutinize political messages disseminated online led to the detention of many activists. Moreover, on 27 Jan. 2011, the Mubarak regime shut down Internet access for four full days, as well as mobile technology for 24 hours, across Egypt in the aim of suppressing the uprising's roots online. Additionally in February 2011, the SCAF (Supreme Council Armed Force) applied forceful surveillance to monitor online discussions. Many bloggers and activists were menaced, persecuted, and imprisoned (Kamel, Rateb, and El-Tawil, 2009).

Another problematic issue within social media in the Arab world is the digital divide. Some labeled the 2011 revolution as "Egypt's Revolution 2.0" (Herrera, 2013, p.47) and gave significance to technological determinism as a dominant source of change during the Arab uprisings. Others stated that the uprising was significantly dependent upon Internet technologies that were being used by the educated middle class and the dominantly young population (Benmamoun, Kalliny, and Cropf, 2012, p. 26). Evidently, these notions have disregarded the importance of territorial place**.**

While social media and satellite television reported of the real-life occurrences of the Egyptians marching in large groups through the streets of Cairo, folk media played a vital role as well (Dajani, 2012). In public urban space, people were chanting resistance songs, holding slogans and posters, and drawing graffiti on public walls. It was the people of Egypt who acted (Dajani, 2012). Moreover, El-Hibri (2014) claimed that balconies and rooftops became convenient locations to capture professional and unprofessional footage that went viral on broadcast news and social media (p. 9). While scholars have discussed the importance of ground-level actions during the

revolution, it is also important to discuss the gendered character of Egyptian public spaces and the limitations they may underscore.

C. Gender and Public Space in Egypt

Hierarchal gender discrimination characterizes public space and social life in Egypt. Winegar (2012) stated that gender, age, and space-highly defined the attendance of protestors and supporters in Tahrir Square. During the revolution many women were overwhelmed with other duties; they weren't able to physically join the demonstrations in Tahrir. For instance Wineger stated:

> Taking care of children was the more common experience of women during the revolution. They cooked for their male relatives who were demonstrating, took care of the children whose schools were closed, managed the household budget after banks closed and people were not paid, and stood in long lines for food in anticipation of shortages. (p. 68)

Some females were restricted from joining the protests due to the dangers they may encounter, such as sexual harassment and police brutality against demonstrators (Wineger, 2012).

Furthermore, Koning (2009) studied public urban spaces in Cairo in terms of class and gender. Her ethnographic research included participant observations and interviews from middle class citizens in their mid-twenties and early thirties. She specifically focused on different coffee shops in Cairo. She claimed that Cairo's streets and *Ahawi baladi* (traditional coffee shops) are vastly "characterized by male entitlement". Men dominate these public spaces 'to spend time, observe and interact with passerby'. On the other hand, people present at the cafés might see unaccompanied Egyptian women in public cafés as disreputable. In other words, some consider it shameful for young women to gather at these public cafés.

Koning (2009) stated that the only types of coffee shops that allow mixed-gender interaction are the newly introduced Western style cafés. Western-style coffee shops broke such gender boundaries by locating their venues within isolated upper class neighborhoods. Thus, these shops target a specific demographic, especially educated and with a high purchasing power. These coffee shops became meeting places that merged people from different clubs, universities, companies and families into one public space. Koning (2009) stated:

> They [coffee shops] provided upper middle class professionals [specifically women] with new opportunities for socializing, finding partners, and other forms of networking and self-presentation. In contrast, the possibility for visiting 'ahawi baladi was resolutely dismissed by all women. (p. 138)

In these bourgeois cafés, the *shilal* (group of young people) mingled, showed off their fashions and socialized within a mixed gender social space. However, the private space of the coffee shop still implied certain limitations in terms of self-expression. Many women still felt self-conscious during conversations and debates that incorporated controversial topics and taboos (Koning 2009). However, history does provide notable examples of Egyptian women who have been significantly involved in public life.

Women's activists are still adopting the legacy of Huda Shaarawi as they continue to fight the severe inequalities that still exist between men and women in Egypt in terms of "income, life chances, education, and public influence" (Curran, 2012, p. 54). However, Amar (2013) represented a different argument on the issue of gender inequality, as he stated that public space and particularly the issue of street harassment is underpinned by social class hierarchies and not just gender differences.

Amar (2013) pointed out that both men and women have been brutally harassed and assaulted by the 'hired' street thugs during the Tahrir demonstrations (p. 200). The security police have justified their brutal enforcements towards working-

class males through the emergency security measures they applied to protect middle-class women protestors. These practices have devalued working class males and embodied them as subaltern 'parahuman' subjects. Amar (2013) stated, "Gender-sensitive coverage of the revolution by Egyptian, as well as Western, media outlets provided two contrasting frames of representation constructing two incommensurable sets of metaphors for the gendered security predicament of Tahrir square" (p. 201). More importantly, this discrimination brutality has pushed women from physical spaces to online spaces.

Therefore, how bloggers, Egyptian women in particular, have responded to those conflicting narratives becomes a significant aspect to examine. Women today are instilling the discussion of controversial topics into public openings such as Internet chat. The diversity in the media text articulated by these new media represents different perspectives of public opinion and privileges marginalized voices of women and other minority groups (Sakr 2004, p. 4).

The particular advantages of online blogging among Egyptian women in particular cannot be disregarded as it continues to prosper as an online activity (Curran, 2012). Moreover, it remains important that future research account for both the different writing genres used by the bloggers and the spatial transformation the online blogosphere has entailed for Egyptian women (Pahwa 2015). These questions raised may strengthen my analysis of how Egyptian women blog, by examining their different writing styles as they discuss similar topics.

D. The Importance of Blogosphere

Blogs are alternative social networks that provide online forums for self-expression, political mobilization, as well as direct discussions and debates (Elsadda

2010). In general, blogs are "a form of online diaries. Anyone with access to the Internet can create a blog platform, and may choose to reveal to the world whatever is on their minds (Seymour, 2008, p. 62; Al-Nawawy and Khamis, 2013, p. 7). Moreover, a "blogosphere" is a web of interconnected blogs. Unlike traditional news media that have vertical structure and by its very nature limits interactivity, the blogosphere enables the sender (blogger) and receiver (audience) to connect directly through posting comments and sharing links (Al-Nawawy and Khamis, 2013, p. 8). Ideally, blogs are a space where the blogger becomes the gatekeeper and news provider, but a great deal of blogging is commentary on mainstream media reporting. The blogger expresses his/her views on any subject or issue out there, and engages with "meaningful conversations" and debates (Al-Nawawy and Khamis, 2013, p. 7).

Therefore, blogs become crucial elements for the online public sphere. They allow active dialogue and peer-to-peer conversation. The most important aspect of blogs is their "independence and autonomy" from mainstream media and state-controlled media. For instance, as mentioned earlier, the issue of sexual harassment and street thugs in Tahrir Square received extensive attention from Arab and western media as well as online bloggers. Many male and female bloggers and citizen journalists were able to precipitate mainstream media coverage. This also pressured the Egyptian regime to respond (Al-Nawawy and Khamis, 2013, p. 5).

In relation to mainstream media, blogging is evidently an alternative tool for self-expression and public debates (Curran, 2012, p. 56). But the notion of *how* bloggers may become significant interlocutors in the online public sphere in Egypt is a larger aspect to be examined. Whether the blogosphere introduces new—and reproduces old—forms of communication is another significant concept that has been understudied. Moreover, the very fact that those bloggers are women affects the

understanding of their blogging activities and styles of writing. Therefore, it is noteworthy to study how Egyptian women blog, and what they blogged about before and after 25 Jan. 2011.

E. The Egyptian Women Blogosphere

Knowing that women have written publicly in Egypt for several decades, these online practices are not exclusively present in digital space. Nevertheless, we cannot disregard how the blogosphere became a new and important venue for Arab women to create alternative discourses about womanhood, citizenship, identity, sexuality, human rights, and female political participation in the online public sphere (Skalli, 2006). Not all Egyptian women's blogs are feminist blogs, some are concerned with political activism, and others function as personal diaries for public self-expression (El Sadda, 2010).

Blogs started emerging during and after the 2003 Iraqi war, including many women. The blogosphere continued to develop in 2005 during the launch of the al-Kifaya movement in Egypt (Radsch, 2008, p. 7), and grew exponentially after the outbreak of the recent Egyptian revolution (Hirschkind, 2011). Otterman (2007) studied the evolution of Arab women bloggers. Women in Egypt have used blogs to challenge social norms by publicizing personal thought and personal dilemmas into the public (i.e. homosexuality, drug use among females, domestic violence etc.) (Otterman, 2007). Otterman (2007) claimed that publicizing the private is a crucial step because there is a sense of agency and empowerment in just being able to write, even if nobody very important reads it" (Otterman, 2007, p.16). Therefore, this notion leads to the question: What kind of public sphere is the blogosphere part of?

F. Theoretical Framework

German philosopher Jürgen Habermas initially introduced the term "public sphere", which indicates a public space "between civil society and state, in which critical public discussion on matters of general interest was institutionally guaranteed" (Habermas 1989, p. xi; Al-Nawawy and Khamis, 2013, p. 28). Moreover, "it was a sphere of private people coming together as a public to discuss matters of shred interest and to engage in stimulating debates" (Habermas, 1989, p. 27). However many critiques emerged to touch upon the "universality" of the Habermasian public sphere. Universality refers to "the guaranteed access to all citizens to convene and participate in discussions with no restrictions" (Al-Nawawy and Khamis, 2013, p.28). What characterizes the public sphere as ideal is its "Universality", hence it is important to keep in mind who is involved in the public sphere in Egypt and who is left out.

Fraser (1990) introduced a concept called "counterpublics". She claimed that the notion of the public sphere is always premised on excluding marginalized parts of the public. "These exclusions [are] based on race, class, and gender" (El Sadda, 2010, p. 314). A 'counterpublic' — women, workers, people of color, and gays and lesbians—"that have no arenas for deliberation among themselves about their needs, objectives, and strategies" (Warner 2002, p. 118). These subordinated social groups—that were initially excluded from the traditional 'Habermasian' bourgeois public sphere—make use of alternative spaces such as literary reading arenas to participate in public debates (Skalli, 2006).

Therefore, the "counterpublic" is not separate from the public sphere, but functions within it (Warner, 2002). More importantly, the counterpublic speaks publicly as a contrary voice within the dominant sphere. Fraser also asserted,

> Subaltern counterpublics have a dual character. On the one hand, they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics. It is precisely in the dialectic between these two functions that their emancipatory potential resides" (Fraser, 1990, p. 124).

Skalli (2006) stated that the "dual character" of the counter-publics — as Fraser explained above—is a crucial factor for women in order to take control of their "inner spaces" before mediating their access to the dominant public sphere in the Arab world. There is indeed a struggle amongst Arab women to enter the Arab public sphere, as the case with all publics that generate gendered exclusions. Skalli (2006) stated that the Arab public sphere remains dominated by patriarchal power. Therefore, Arab women's access to the public sphere is still challenged. However, Arab women are making use of alternative spaces to claim their presence, by sharing blogging content that represents their own perspectives on controversial topics as well as issues related to daily life routines. These alternative spaces can be publishing houses, research centers, e-magazines, websites, and blogs (Skalli, 2006, p. 53)

Another important notion is that the ideal public sphere is not restricted to a physical format or sphere. Thus, we can look at a public sphere as a metaphorical terminology that signifies a reading public where "people's conversations, ideas and minds meet" (McKee, 2005, p. 4). Therefore, the significance of the public sphere is not in its physical format but in a social space that allows room for unlimited deliberation (Al-Nawawy and Khamis, 2013 p. 28). This social space can exist online and offline. Rasmussen (2007) claimed that:

> Unlike the traditional public sphere, which was characterized by face-to-face interactions and then the mass media, the Internet propels a more differentiated public sphere that is more niche-oriented, both because of a more diverse media-scape and because of a major ethically and culturally pluralistic society in general. (p. 8)

Therefore, although blogs are a relatively new phenomenon, they have the potential to transform into a virtual public sphere, "one of shared interests rather than a shared geography" (Al-Nawawy and Khamis, 2013 p. 28). Indeed, blogs became "electronic coffeehouses" that foster "low-cost, semi-decentralized and transnational communications" between citizens who can afford the technology and know how to use it (Dahlberg, 2007; Al-Nawawy and Khamis, 2013, p. 29). Although some people blog in favor of the regime, blogs still can undermine authoritarian regime's censorship. "In the networked information environment, everyone is free to observe, report, question, and debate, not only in principle, but in actual capability" (Benkler, 2006, p. 272). These online avenues enable ordinary citizens to document street protests and incidents that indicate government brutality, as well as point out flaws in the political system, such as corruption and violation of human rights (Al-Naway and Khamis 2013, p. 3).

Otterman (2007) also claimed that the blogosphere is one of the few public arenas where Egyptian women can be equally represented to men. On the other hand, Nakamura (2008) rebuffed this notion as she asserted that the Internet does not make markers like gender, race, and class less obvious (p. 34). Yet, El Sadda (2010) still declared that bloggers deliberate on public issues with the least amount of social and gender restrictions (El Sadda, 2010). I will examine this notion in throughout the analysis stage of this study. Hence, the notion of how Egyptian women blog about issues such as harassment, religion, and their personal lives, becomes an interesting arena to be examined under the nature of the online public sphere. More importantly, looking at how these blogs may act, as a "counterpublic" within the dominant online public sphere will also give a remarkable understanding of the prominence of the Egyptian women blogosphere.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

A. Unit of Analysis

In order to study the Egyptian women blogosphere in terms of what women articulate on their personal blogs, a qualitative textual analysis will be used to analyze the blogs chosen for this study. Content analysis is a research method that focuses on actual content of the medium chosen. Textual analysis is a type of content analysis that "aims at revealing some hidden and out of sight values, positions, and perspectives" in the text shared (Ayish, 2010, p. 33), and understand the social interactions that happen online (Paltridge, 2006). Text usually denotes "books, essays, interviews, newspaper articles, and historical documents" (Ayish, 2010, p. 33).

In this study blogs will be examined as texts, which include articles written, pictures, videos, and audio shared, as well as comments posted on the blog post. The main reason why this research will focus on blogs only and not other types of social media is examination of "dialogues" rather than "monologues" (Hall, 2006). For instance, Twitter and Facebook do not adequately demonstrate contextualized content to be sufficient for textual analysis. In other words, the researcher might be at risk of "reading too much into too little" because tweets and even Facebook posts tend to be written with forced brevity (El-Nawawy and Khamis, 2013, p. 23).

Five blogs have been selected for this study. They were selected after looking at ten different Egyptian women blogs and thoroughly choosing the five most unique ones in terms of style of writing, blogging content, blogger's ideology and interests. These blogs have been written by Egyptian women bloggers. They include two

languages: English and Arabic. Each blog has a minimum of ten entries written before and after January 25th 2011. This time span is important because my research question tries to identify how the Egyptian women blogged before and after the outbreak of the revolution by looking at the dominant themes and mode of address changed after the revolution. The blog posts I analyzed fall between the time range of years 2005 and 2014. I analyzed two blog posts within every blog. Some fall before the outbreak and others fall after the outbreak.

The list of blogs is:

1. https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCZd9GfV5HL_kVjDj5Q3e2Yg (Asmaa Mahfouz - Egyptian Arabic)
2. https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCtvDYoWa9xf01eVxE7MZ3Gw (Sarrah's World - Egyptian Arabic with English subtitles)
3. http://nerro.wordpress.com/2014/09/ (Pseudonym: Narnoura - English)
4. http://arebelsdiary.blogspot.com/ (Aliaa El Mahdy - English and Arabic)
5. https://alexandrakinias.wordpress.com/ (Alexandra Kinias – English)

These five blogs were consciously chosen because they were (1) written by Egyptian women, (2) had posts before and after January 2011, (3) and had high public viewership and popularity.

I measured the popularity of each blog through using an actionable analytic website entitled: www.Alexa.com and by looking at the number of subscribers and views. Asmaa Mahfouz's Video-blog has 1,882 subscribers and 3,620,618 views on YouTube. The average amount of time spent on the blog is 1 hour and 17 minutes. Nermeena's blog had a global traffic rank of 12,842,069 and the visitors visited her blog at least once per day. Aliaa El Magdy's blog had a global traffic rank of 1,250,521. The visitors of the blog engaged with a bounce rate of 3.2% and visited the page at least two and a half times per day. The average amount of time spent on the blog is 3 hour and 50 minutes. Alexandra Kinias' blog had a global rank of 12, 099, 373. The visitors visited the page at least twice per day. The average amount of time

spent on the blog is 4 hour and 53 minutes. Sarrah's VideoBlog had 10,652 subscribers and 874,332 views on YouTube.

B. Analysis Plan

To answer *how* Egyptian women blogged, as mentioned earlier, I looked at the blogger's choice of topic and modes of address. The complex process of textually analyzing those aspects mentioned above requires three distinctive stages introduced by Stuart Hall (1975). Hall described the first stage as "preliminarily [soaking] into the text, which allows the analyst to focus on particular issue while preserving the big picture" (Hall, 1975, p. 15). The second stage requires "a close reading of the chosen text and preliminary identification of discursive strategies and themes" (Hall, 1975, p. 15). And the third stage constitutes "the interpretation of the findings within the larger framework of the study" (Hall, 1975, p. 15).

In the first stage of my preliminary analysis, I aimed to familiarize myself with these blogs to point out the dominant and similar topics discussed by the bloggers. I read each blog several times. In the first several readings, I became familiar with the blog's content and was able to understand each blog differently. I then undertook the second round and read the blogs in combination with each other. This led me to an understanding of the dominant themes, issues, topics, and intended audience. I then selected the most significant parts of the text (i.e. sentence, paragraph, image, video, or audio) and analyzed in detail. Any peer-to-peer debates present in the comments section of the blog post selected were included in the analysis process. It was important to examine the peer-to-peer debates (comments) on the issues discussed because the notion of an "exchange of opinion" is key to understanding online publics.

In the second stage, I began analyzing each blog separately under three themes which presented themselves as 1) Harassment 2) Religion 3) Egyptian Revolution. These themes represent the dominant topics discussed by the bloggers. These three themes were chosen after reading the blog content several times in the first stage of the analysis. A minimum of two themes overlapped among every blog. During this stage, I examined each blog by keeping in mind how dominant themes changed before and after the outbreak of the revolution.

Aliaa Al Mahdy, Asmaa Mahfouz, Alexandria Kinias, and Sarrah discussed (1) harassment throughout their blogs. I defined "harassment" as a theme that dealt with incidents of sexual and verbal harassment that occurred in Cairo before and after the revolution. Asmaa Mahfouz and Aliaa Al Mahdy discussed (2) religion throughout their blogs. I defined "religion" as a theme that constitutes issues regarding the veil, Islamic law, and the Quran. All five bloggers discussed the recent (3) Egyptian revolution throughout their blogs. However, each blog has a different take on the subject.

Afterwards, to further analyze *how* did Egyptian women blog about harassment, religion, and the revolution—which are the chosen themes—I examined a number of modes of address that were important to blogging in this period. A mode of address is a type of writing genre. Fairclough (2003) defined writing genres as a "way of acting and interacting linguistically" in the course of social events (p. 17). Some bloggers adopted discursive styles of writing; they adopted more than one mode of address throughout their blog. The modes of address that these bloggers adopted are: 1) online activism in the style of a political activist or citizen journalist 2) political satire and cyber-humor 3) public private blogging. These modes of address will help the analysis of the blog posts because they aid my understanding of how each blogger

adopted a distinctive writing and linguistic style to deal with the same topic or social event. Bloggers who might adopt online activism in the style of a political activist or citizen journalism will be indirectly makings their authentic voice heard and tell their side of their story on issues related to regime corruption or violation of human rights. Bloggers who might use political satire as their mode of address, will be subtly taunting governmental power in the context of political resistance. Bloggers who engage with their blog as a public private diary may challenge the mainstream public discourse on what counts as political and significant and what doesn't.

In the third stage, which is the interpretation stage, I analyzed the inter-textuality of the blogs. This stage included the interpretation of the possible relationship between all the signs within the texts I analyzed in the previous stage. Throughout this process, I pointed out the connotative meaning behind the signs incorporated in the blog text, and interpreted them through a larger framework. In the interpretation stage, the text analyzed was re-contextualized in dialogue with other texts.

Saussure (1983) asserted that a sign does not have an independent "absolute" value. In other words, the connotative meaning behind each sign is somehow dependent on its social context. Each sign co-exists with other signs and shares a mutual social context (Saussure 1983, Chandler, 2007).

Fairclough's understanding of the interpretation stage of textual analysis is:

> Interpretation of meaning in a text is partly a matter of understanding what words or sentences or longer stretches of text mean, understanding what speakers or writers mean. But it is also partly a matter of judgment and evaluation: for instance judging when someone is saying something sincerely or not, or seriously or not; judging whether the claims that speaking or writing in ways which accord with the social, institutional etc. relations within which the event takes place, or perhaps in ways which mystify those relations. (Fariclough, 2003, p. 11)

Therefore during the textual analysis that included semiotics, the awareness of cultural context was always taken into account, as well as the myth of authorial intent, which indicates that the author's intent is not the true meaning of the text, and should not be objective of analysis. Different cultures have different interpretive approaches. A text always has multiple connotations (El-Nawawy and Khamis, 2013, p.22). There can be several interpretations to the same text. Therefore the approach used for the analysis of these Egyptian women blogs was to consciously keep in mind the social, cultural, and political context of Egypt.

C. Limitations of the Research Design

This research design has several limitations that I hope will be tackled in future studies on gender and social media in the Arab world. This study's first limitation is that it is confined to examining popular blogs of these particular women. The focus and analysis of Egyptian women blogs, rather than social media in general is another limitation. Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter were not included in the study. Hence, the findings of this research will be applicable only to these blogs and not social media generally. The second limitation is that the research design ignored all other Arab women located outside Egypt, although many countries in the region have witnessed a rise of female blogging. The third limitation is that the research is constrained within a narrow timeframe. Blogs are updated regularly. Therefore, it is difficult to predict whether these women are adopting new themes and topics on their blogs or if they had deleted some posts or comments. The fourth limitation is related to the anonymity of the bloggers included in the research design sample. All of the bloggers examined below have mentioned that they are female and from Egypt, but only three bloggers have specified their current geographic location: Sarrah, and

Nermeena from Cairo. Also, there is one blogger (Nermeena) who used a pseudonym to hide her real identity. Finally, because this research design is not a general survey of blogging as a whole, there are some limits to its ‘generalizability’. There is also a limited set of claims that can be made about the political role of blogs, which changes after this period.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS OF BLOGS

This chapter is divided into five parts, each discussing a different blog. Under each part, I analyze the blog under the three dominant themes discussed in the methodology section. I also examine the blog content by pointing out the different modes of address each blogger incorporated in their writing.

A. Aliaa Al Mahdy's Blog: A Rebel's Diary

Aliaa Al Mahdy is considered an outlier within the Egyptian women's blogosphere. According to many bloggers and activists Aliaa Al Mahdy signified shame and dishonor for traditional Egyptian values (Kraidy, 2012), particularly after she used digital photos of her naked body to express her bold thoughts and opinions. Other bloggers such as Alexandria Kinias labeled Al Mahdy as 'a rebel with a cause' (Kinias, 2011). Al Mahdy started blogging in December 2008. In her early stages of blogging she generally posted poems she wrote about her thoughts, feelings, and ambitions. Subtleness pervaded her pre-revolution blog. Al Mahdy did not initially gain any recognition as a blogger. She mostly interacted with her blog as an online public diary. Publishing a nude photo of herself after the outbreak of the revolution in October 2011, however, brought Al Mahdy extensive attention online and off (Kraidy, 2011).

1. Discussing Harassment through Personal Narratives

On 23 Nov 2014, Al Mahdy narrated a series of personal incidents about sexual harassment. She began her post by claiming that she used photographs of her nude body to express the thoughts and opinions Egyptian society has prohibited her from articulating in public. She narrated the sexual harassment incidents she faced throughout her childhood. Al Mahdy was able to discuss and describe her experience of sexual harassment in detail, without censoring herself and without being censored by society or mainstream media. Al Mahdy, however, did censor her readers by disabling the comments button on her blog, thus disallowing readers from sharing their opinions in the comments section.

Al Mahdy's post broke an important boundary. According to Kraidy (2012), Egyptian talk shows have exploited the topic of sexuality to gain viewership. Nevertheless, these talk shows are produced through a dominant narrative contextualized under the male gaze (p. 72). Granted, many female voices are silenced when it comes to the issue of sexual harassment in Egypt. This issue is considered a controversial topic. Eltahawy (2014) stated, "Egypt's traditional, conservative culture teaches us not just that speaking out about such assaults is shameful, but that being the victim of sexual assault is shameful." Yet harassment exists in private and public spaces (Eltahawy, 2014). Social institutions such as family, schools, and the media bowdlerize stories that contain social taboos or controversial topics (i.e. harassment). For instance, photojournalist Eman Helal (2015) described fifteen incidents of sexual harassment in an article for the New York Times; among them was one incident showing the hardcover diary of an Egyptian girl called Esraa.

Helal (2015) stated: "[This is] Esraa's diary. Esraa wrote a school essay about sexual harassment after she was assaulted on the subway. Her male teacher read the

essay and sent her to the female principal, who demanded that she stop writing about sexual harassment." What is important about Esraa's story is that it demonstrates how media outlets in Egypt are not alone in potentially censoring news directly related to female sexual harassment, but social institutions such as family (as demonstrated in Al Mahdy's blog post), as well as educational institutions may limit the Egyptian females' freedom from speaking their minds about personal incidents that articulate sexuality or gender violence. Al Mahdy used her blog as a medium of self-expression to discuss her female body. Al Mahdy's hews to a *via media* through "blogging as a private public diary", which is the mode of address incorporated in this blog post. A more important aspect here is the fact that her blog posts before the revolution did not contain bold statements. Al Mahdy never blogged about sexual harassment before the outbreak. She never shared anecdotes about her childhood that included intimate thoughts, ideas, and incident.

2. Scorning Islam in the Post-Revolution Era

Moreover, the blog post that stoked my attention the most was Al Mahdy's post on 26 Jan. 2014. Al Mahdy posted a photo of herself dressed as a devil accompanied with an attached voice note of her singing voice. The voice note mocked the Quran directly by taking original phrases from the holy book and then recasting them via rebellious assertions such as: "Woman is the greatest" instead of "God is the greatest", or "I thereby witness there is no god, nor ruler, nor father" instead of "I thereby witness that there is no higher power than God" (translated from Arabic).

These actions are not new among Arab women, as others throughout history had expressed their critical views towards Islam and the prophet publicly. For instance,

Hind Bint ʿUtbah, was a Meccan woman in the late sixth and early seventh century famous for her stout attitude and hatred towards the prophet Muhammad (Buhl, 2012). Another provocative female figure in the history of Islam is Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya al-Ḳaysiyya. The eighth century's "famous mystic and saint of Basra," Rabi'a walked through streets with a torch and bucket of water, saying she wants to burn heaven and douse flames of hell so people would love god for the sake of loving god and without coveting rewards or fearing damnation (Smith, 2012). Rabi'a shouted: "to hell with hell, to hell with paradise!"

Hence, the blogosphere did not introduce a new phenomenon into Egyptian society. Throughout history, men and women have relatively maintained dialogue on the nature of belief and the role of faith in society. Women have preached their disapproval of Islam for centuries. However, what made Aliaa Al Mahdy a provocative and rebellious figure was the combination of her nudity with those anti-religious slogans. This concept was presented in a film entitled *Submission* made by Ayaan Hirsi Ali. She is a Somali woman who fled to Netherland on asylum after she received several death threats for criticizing the prophet. Her film represents naked women inscribed with Arabic calligraphy (Leeuw and Wichelen 2005). These depictions came as a critique to Islamic cultures. Leeuw and Wichelen (2005) asserted that the visual narratives of female bodies in *Submission* have created a realm for Islamphobia, as they renewed notions of Orientalism that reaffirm anti-Islamic sentiments (p. 336).

Al Mahdy's first nude photograph that was posted on October 2011 gained wide media recognition and caused extensive public debate. In January 2012, one year after the outbreak of the revolution, Al Mahdy posted another picture of her naked body with slogans such as "Sharia is not a Constitution" and "Fuck Islamism" written on her

bare chest and stomach. In and of itself, rejecting Sharia as the basis of a constitution is not quite controversial, as in Egypt today support for secularism is somewhat mainstream. This support coalesced during the overthrow of Egyptian President Mohamad Morsi and the blacklisting of his Muslim brotherhood supporters following the takeover of Abdel Fatah el-Sisi.

However, fighting for those notions via a naked female body puts the blog post in a contested ground of an erotic-religious setting. This idea is reenacted when Al Mahdy posted an image depicting herself nude in dichotomous opposition to a woman wearing the niqab. They are standing in the same position and wearing the same shoes. The woman veiled in black is standing on a locked birdcage, which may signify the repression of women. On the other hand, naked Aliaa is stepping on the same birdcage but with an open gate as the bird is flying next to Aliaa's head, which can be read as a symbol of freedom and liberty. The combination between Al Mahdy's nudity and her anti-Islamic tone depicts Islam as backward and oppressive while reaffirming orientalist clichés about the cruelty and injustice of Islam. Aliaa Al Mahdy's naked body, which she directly associated with her stark criticism of Islam, became a scandal under the standards of Egyptian society.

B. Alexandria Kinias's Blog: Silenced Voices Wasted Lives

Alexandria Kinias is a women's rights activist, blogger, and writer. She started blogging on 9 Jan. 2010. The main topics she tackles throughout her blog are freedom of expression, women's rights, violence against women (before, during, and after the revolution), and a history of Egyptian women. All of her blog posts take up women's issues around the world, specifically in the Arab region and the Middle East. She never blogs in Arabic. Hence, her target audience consists of English-speaking

readers.

1. Blogging about Harassment Before and After the Outbreak

On 30 Dec. 2010, Kinias wrote an article dedicated to incidents of sexual harassment in Egypt. Kinias directly related the issue of sexual harassment to the Egyptian government. She criticized Suzanne Mubarak, the wife of President Hosni Mubarak, for her ruthlessness. She taunted a powerful female political figure for her heedlessness toward sexual harassment. Kinias' speech also implied that policemen, lawmakers, and street thugs are all responsible for those incidents.

Taunting the Egyptian regime for the sexualized assault of female protestors in Tahrir Square was the dominant narrative in western media reportage. Western media outlets represented the security police as brutal and inactive towards the protection of women. However, this narrative shifted almost completely after the Lara Logan incident in February 2011. The media coverage gave two contrasting frames of representation. The new narrative incorporated orientalist and sexist depictions of working-class males (Amar, 2013, p. 201).

On 20 Feb. 2011 Kinias reported the same news story about Lara Logan, the CBS foreign correspondent who was sexually assaulted and physically harassed in Tahrir square while reporting one of the demonstrations. Kinias expanded this single incident—i.e. attack on Logan—into a wider debate over the way Egyptian women are increasingly subjected to rape, harassment, and assault. She directly blamed males for this horrific incident. Kinias (2011) said: "The phenomenon indeed requires social scientists, psychologists and psychiatrist to study this male species. On one hand these men request a virgin to marry and can go out and kill their sisters or cousins to restore

the family honor, but at the same time have no remorse to harass women as a source of entertainment."

Kinias speech almost utterly repeats what media scholars may label as the western gaze towards the male Arab i.e. 'sex crazed' misogynist. Amar (2013) gave examples of how the New York Post and Fox News reported this very same incident of Logan's sexual assault. These media outlets represented the Arab street as a mob of Arab male protestors who were acting like savages and beasts in Tahrir Square by raping and assaulting women (p. 203). Kinias' criticism of the issue seemed to be in parallel with what Western media have framed with their orientalist framing.

Moreover, the blogger overlooked how security forces might have been taking advantage of their duty to protect women, as they used it as an alibi to oppress working-class males and 'interpellate' them as the preliminary street thugs, which lead to the arrest of many innocent proletariats. The blogger also disregarded the history of how street thugs prospered and were empowered by authoritarian politics, and how both men and women can be victims of harassment and assault. Amar (2013) described how the inceptive response of the Egyptian security state towards the escalating number of protests during the 1990s was "to attempt to delegitimize, intimidate, and blur both the image and messages of these movements by infiltrating and surrounding them with plain-clothes thugs, deputized by police and paramilitary security forces" (p. 211).

Therefore, when Kinias paints Arab males in one brush, she reinforces the mainstream Western media gaze that represents Arab men as savages and misogynists. As an Egyptian woman, she disregards how the elite state police may interpolate the working class men as dangerous in the aim of suppressing protests against the regime. All these actions are then shielded with the alibi of government's duty to protect

women from those same apparently menacing thugs. Kinias' accusations towards women's rights and female sexual assault in the two blog posts analyzed, evidently shifted after the outbreak of the revolution, in parallel to western media coverage.

Kinias discussed sexual harassment in two different timespans—namely, before and after the uprising —as she gave it exclusive significance. Throughout her blog activities, her main concern was women's rights. She directly tied the issue of sexual harassment to the revolution because this was a time when men and women gathered daily during demonstrations, leading to large numbers of women being harassed in centralized areas. These two posts are examples of how Kinias used her online blogging activities to further her women's rights activism, which was her mode of address—blogging for political activism. Since 2010 Kinias has been bold, firm, and fearless when discussing controversial topics that incorporated women's rights in Egypt. She did not feel the need to use a pseudonym, unlike Malak Hifni Nassef, who wrote under a pen name during the early 1900's. Nassef also had a bold women's activist voice as she called for the end of polygamy and the reformation of divorce laws (Dabbous, 2004, p. 43), which are topics Kinias also discussed on her blog.

The comments section on Kinias' blog is usually not very interactive. Knowing that it is difficult to predict whether Kinias had deleted some posts or comments, each post receives between three and six comments. For the blog post written in 2011, one of the commenters shared a story of another woman who was sexually assaulted. As for the blog post written in 2010, one of the commenters thanked Kinias for being the public voice for those who have been silenced. No comment challenged Kinias' opinion on the subject matter. This helped my understanding of the nature of this blog. Kinias' blog was certainly not a contested ground that challenged opposing views. Instead, Kinias and her commenters indulged with this blog arbitrarily to feed into

their existing personal narratives.

C. Asmaa Mahfouz's YouTube Blog

Mahfouz is an Egyptian activist. She was one of the founders of the "April 6 Youth Movement" in spring 2008. She gained fame and recognition as a blogger during the 2011 Egyptian revolution (El Naggar, 2011). She started her video blog on 10 Jan. 2011. Her blog posts discuss topics such as poverty, corruption, the presidential elections, the faults within the Egyptian parliament, the protests in Tahrir, and inflation. In her videos Mahfouz usually preaches to the public about the importance of the revolution and the political movements after the revolution. She taunts what she identifies as the corrupt regime of Hosni Mubarak and its followers. She advocates for saving the poor and emancipating every human being suffering under the regime.

1. Mahfouz's Attempt to Spark the Revolution

When western media praised technological determinism for the spark of the revolution, they certainly disregarded the long history of Egyptian activism, and the hundreds of thousands of protestors who stood in front of the regime and asserted their rights in the 2011 revolution (Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 164). On 18 Jan. 2011, one week before the outbreak of the 2011 revolution, Mahfouz posted a YouTube video that went viral on social media. Mahfouz looked directly into the camera, as she ardently spoke in Egyptian Arabic and asked her fellow Egyptians to join her in Tahrir Square to protest against the regime. Mahfouz said: "This entire government is corrupt – a corrupt president and a corrupt state security. Come with me on January 25th, whoever

says it is not worth it, is considered a traitor, just like the president or any security cop who beats us on the streets" (Mahfouz, 2011). Her aim was to seed enthusiasm among Egyptians who had become fed up with the corrupt regime and desired to regain their honor and dignity. Many online users re-uploaded her video. Western media outlets such the *Washington Post* and *The New York Times* labeled this video as 'the video that helped spark the revolution'.

There is no doubt that participatory media such as written blogs and video-blogs support activism in Egypt by connecting people and across distant geographical locations, and distributing information absent from the Egyptian mainstream media (El-Naway and Khamis, 2013). However, an important notion to bear in mind is that Mahfouz's 'vlog' post challenged the corrupt Egyptian regime not because it existed in digital space, but because Mahfouz communicated thoughts that were highly critical of Egyptian regime's hegemonic power. This is in addition to her background as an active political activism since the formation of the April 6 Youth movement in 2008. That alone brings Mahfouz extensive attention as both an online speaker and a street activist. Gerbaudo (2012) stated that 6th of April activists have summed up the shift of the communication landscape before and after the outbreak of the revolution by indicating how: "before the 25th of January it was 80% Facebook, 20% face-to-face and after the 25th of January it was 20% Facebook, 80% face-to-face" (p. 63). This notion was emphasized in Mahfouz's speech when she said: "Talk to your neighbors, your colleagues, friends, and family and tell them to come. They don't have to come to Tahrir Sqaure, just go down anywhere and say that we are free humans. If you are sitting at home, and just following us on news or Facebook, this leads to our humiliation. This leads to my own humiliation!"

Moreover, YouTube did not protect Mahfouz from any online verbal harassment and sexist comments on her blog posts. She received numerous misogynistic comments under her video post. One commenter told her to shut up and go back to the kitchen where she belongs. This demonstrates that social media does not necessarily eliminate differences such as gender. Also, her 'vlog' did not eliminate the possibility of her detainment. Her blog is self-titled and that puts her at risk with the regime as a political activist. When she gave a long speech that taunted the Mubarak regime, she publicly declared her identity by using her full name and by showing a full portrait of her face on her 'vlog'.

2. Using Religious Sensibility to Call for Political Action

Unlike Aliaa Al Mahdy who scorned Islam for limiting her personal freedom, Mahfouz, a veiled woman, saw religion as inspiration capable of instilling hope in people's minds. She quoted the Quran to positively influence her audience and convince them that they are strong enough to face this battle and bring down the corrupt regime. Her quoting from the Quran did not come with the aim of creating an Islamic cultural sphere through her 'vlog', and she specifically stated at the beginning of the video that her message was intended for both genders, and people of all ages and all religious backgrounds, i.e. Muslims and Christians.

Mahfouz's speech fits in a broader context of history of visible women activists who lead protests on the streets of Egypt. Historically, many women formed unions to protect the wellbeing of the nation and used their practices to strengthen the economic and political situation in Egypt. These women were concerned with nationalism and saving the country from existing threats (Fleischmann, 1999, p. 92).

Moreover, Egyptian women have historically embraced politics of piety in their activism. Saba Mahmoud (2004) analyzed women's mosque-based "piety circles" in Cairo. Although the mosque has generally been an exclusive male domain, these women used those "piety circles" as Islamic forms of sociability to preach about feminist practices. These facts go against western feminist assumptions that perceive Islam as inherently oppressive towards Muslim women (Mahmoud, 2004). Mahfouz's Islamic headdress, or the veil, did not subordinate Mahfouz as a female political activist.

On the contrary, Mahfouz used quotes from the Quran, not for Islamist purposes, but to amplify her defiant speech for nationalistic purposes. She tried to disabuse Egyptian people of the idea that they were incapable of leading a revolution by saying 'God is on their side', as she tried to encourage people to take positive political action in the upcoming protest in Tahrir square.

D. Sarrah Abdelrahman's Youtube Blog: Sarrah's World

Sarrah is a video blogger. Her eponymous blog "Sarrah's world" appears on YouTube and she is always the speaker in every video. She speaks directly into the camera in Egyptian Arabic and provides English subtitles, and every video appears with titles in both Arabic and English. That she speaks in colloquial Egyptian Arabic suggests her principal target audience is Egyptian, while the English dubbing indicates her desire to reach a global audience as well. Sarrah started video-blogging on 19 Feb. 2011, roughly one month after the outbreak of the revolution. She is the only blogger in this study that did not have an online presence before the outbreak of the revolution. However, she was still included in this study due to her unique mode of address, and her online popularity as a "vlogger" that flourished extensively in a short period of

time. She posted a total of twenty-two videos. Thirteen videos depict Sarrah speaking directly into the camera and addressing her viewers directly. The topics she tackles range from police violence to sexual harassment.

Ten of Sarrah's videos bear the same main title, "Walla Eih??" and are made into a form of political satire. *Walla eih* is an Egyptian expression used as a form of sarcasm to challenge the person one is speaking to. This expression is used at the end of a sentence after insinuating or stating a personal, and sometimes critical, bold opinion. The literal meaning of the expression *walla eih* is, "or what?" This expression indicates contestation, usually vis-à-vis a sensitive or controversial topic. In these videos, Sarrah challenges her target by ending her train of thought by prodding, *wallah eih*.

1. Jokes that Taunt the Regime

Sarrah personally dedicated the fifth video of the *Walla Eih* series to the Egyptian army. The video was published on 12 May 2011. Sarrah expressed her warm support of the Egyptian army by indirectly taunting the street thugs, the SCAF, and the Mubarak regime. Bloggers like Sarrah were able to criticize situations like these through cyber humor. She squeezed in her taunts by hinting that the dictator (i.e. Mubarak) did not receive a military trial, street thugs were not punished for their violence, and that she feels disappointed that the army did not take action for the safety of the people and the country.

Sarrah's vlog post has two significant factors. The first factor is how Sarrah's video is dripping with sarcasm. She applied humor as a salve for the political woes her country was witnessing. In this 'vlog' humor is a significant mode of address. Used to express the people's immediate reaction to certain social, cultural, and political

incidents and events, humor is among a culture's most significant aspects. (Gorny, 2008, p. 79). Humor, as a form of communication, provokes laughter and can be leveraged as a means of forbearing during difficult or dire situations. With the dissemination of Internet culture, cyber humor [or online humor] became a global trend. Sarrah's cyber humor though has a political twist. Cyber humor could play a prominent role in incorporating political jokes within its satire (Shifman and Varsano, 2007), and most importantly create space in which hegemonic powers can be questioned (Sienkiewicz 2012, p. 107), which is what Sarrah demonstrated on her 'vlog'. Similarly, street graffiti were also other types of practices, which were used as forms of resistances and protest against the president Mubarak and the SCAF throughout the uprising (Lennon, 2014, p. 239).

The second factor then becomes how Sarrah taunted the Egyptian regime's 'hired' thugs who attacked the hospitals, and the Maspero radio and television building. These violent incidents received limited attention from Egyptian mainstream media (Iskandar, 2013, p. 88). Sarrah, as a female Cairene, demonstrated her parody on the situation through an online political satire—produced, filmed, and published by the blogger herself. This claim does not adopt the mainstream notion of technological determinism that was discussed widely during the Arab uprising. This claim, rather, emphasizes a significant notion that Sarrah was able to represent herself vigorously as a 'female' political satirist, knowing that there are very few female satirists in the comedy industry.

Recently in Egypt, the most famous political satirist is male in the name of Bassem Youssef. He hosted a satirical news program entitled "The Program" throughout and after the 2011 revolution. Having few or even no female political

satirist builds upon the notion of how women are subjected to public patriarchy. Therefore, the very fact that Sarrah is a woman affects the way her messages are received and the impact they have.

By the end of Sarrah's monologue that included several question directed towards the public audience, she asked her subscribers and viewers to provide feedback on the video in the comment section. Aside from the fact that her 'vlog' has a high number of viewers and subscribers, this particular video received 234 comments and around 48 thousand views. The comments the video received varied greatly. Some people thanked her for speaking her mind, indicating that her viewers saw her 'vlog' as a platform that communicated similar opinions as theirs. Another male commenter told her that she is beautiful girl, however the jokes and ridicule within her speech lessens her femininity. The commentator was not offended by Sarrah's mode of address; he was offended by the act of women telling jokes in public, which he found improper. This comment demonstrates that although Sarrah broke a gender stereotype by representing herself as a female political satirist, people in society may still consider comedic sketches and parodies as inappropriate for women. Sarrah also received comments and personal stories from Westerners living in Egypt. This proves that she appealed to audiences outside Egypt. Hence social media buffeted her chances for global recognition.

E. Nermeena: Blogs From Cairo with Love

Nermeena has been blogging since 28 Feb. 2005. Her blogging activity is very frequent. She writes posts ten months out of the year, on average. Her blog posts are usually written in English, with very few in Arabic. Nermeena sees herself as a regular

female living in Egypt. She does not affiliate herself with any political or social movement, but she defined her personality through her zodiac sign. Almost all of her posts express personal thoughts in which she discusses her future ambitions. Because most of the content she posts is personal and even self-indulgent — noting that public discourse labels self-indulgent thoughts as trivial, especially those of a woman—, her audience is difficult to pinpoint. In many of her blog posts she uses a stream-of-consciousness style of writing in which she speaks to herself, apparently as a means of expressing her personal thoughts aloud.

1. Blogging as a Self-indulgent Activity

Nermeena's blog is an online archive dedicated to her random thoughts and her personal stories. On 21 Dec. 2010, Nermeena blogged about the things she might be doing wrong but won't stop doing. She discussed her "emotional diarrhea". She stated her personal opinion on forgiving people who have done wrong. She also described why she wears her heart on her sleeve. The post was simple, honest, and self-indulgent, like almost any other post on her personal yet public blog. At the end of the post Nermeena said: "Disclaimer: that post is not meant to be as egocentric as it reads ;D". Although Nermeena claims that her blog post is not meant to be egocentric, she is squarely at the center of her blogging activities.

She is the narrator and the subject at the same time. In other words, her posts carry individualistic characteristics, in a way that she never mentions a subject that is significant on the macro-level or on the societal level. All topics discussed on her blog are micro-oriented and concern with Nermeena as a person. Hence, her mode of address is blogging in a form of public private diary.

Knowing that it is difficult to tell whether Nermeena deleted any negative comments on her blog, the comments that are present are always positive compliments, her blog posts never triggered a heated debate between the readers. Many commenters complimented her blog and asked her to check out their own personal blogs. Others were reading her blog from outside Egypt, some of them shared their personal experiences when they visited Cairo, others were planning on visiting Cairo, and hence they asked Nermeena about the city. Nermeena, as resident of Cairo, was able to use her online identity to interact with global citizens and to share her personal and distinctive thoughts about her city while she received the same from her online friends.

Before and after the outbreak, there was an obvious alteration in the topics she covered on her blog. Nermeena never posted anything related to the regime or the presidential elections or anything that relevant on the macro-political level. All of her posts were strictly personal and individualistic. However, after the outbreak of the revolution she shared a post on 8 Feb. 2011 called the "Tahrir Taghyeer" or "Tahrir Square and Change" (transcribed to English). Nermeena was personally surprised that she was actually blogging about the revolution. The post discussed the social welfare of the Egyptian people. This post can still be analyzed as self-indulgent because Nermeena was still blogging about her intimate thoughts and feelings, however the only difference here is that the topic has a collective streak.

All the topics she discussed on her blog prior to this were individualistic. They revolved around Nermeena's personal life. However, the post concerning the revolution indicates how Nermeena wanted to have a say in what was happening in Egypt and felt like contributing by posting an opinion piece about the current situation in Tahrir Square. In other words, as mentioned earlier, Nermeena's blog strictly deals

with her individualistic self, however, the outbreak of the revolution might have influenced Nermeena's personal and emotional state, hence she decided to blog about it.

Nermeena did not touch upon controversial issues about human or women's rights or putatively verboten topics. She, in essence, used her blog as a space for self-indulgence during times when she needed to escape from her daily life routines. However, her public private diary, which dictates her mode of address, enhanced her chances to develop her individuality on a public level, but to some extent without public interference. Nermeena interacted with her blog as a space where she could come to be, to react as, to or do whatever she pleased. She reproduced herself and/or her identity without being fundamentally managed by external surroundings. Nermeena's blog functions as "a space to develop [her] true self away from the contamination of public representation" (McKee, 2005, p. 57), but it is also available to a global public to read within the public realms of the Internet. Nermeena's blog posts, that represent her personal concerns as a woman, become no longer less important than other topics that exist within public discourse. This process is by itself a political act because needless to say, "trivial private realm traditionally belonged to women; and the worthy public realm of politics belonged to men" (McKee, 2005, p. 35).

In times past, Egyptian women writers often sought anonymity when publishing their articles by using pseudonyms (Dabbous, 2004, p. 40). The use of pseudonyms is presented online as well. For instance, Nermeena opted to hide her real identity, which might make it easier for her to discuss topics on the personal level. Rheingold (2004) said: "People who might not ordinarily be heard in oral discourse can contribute meaningfully, and people who might not ordinarily be rude to one's

face can become frighteningly abusive online" (p. 270). Nermeena related to the former notion and the latter notion was seen in the verbal harassments Al Mahdy and Mahfouz received on their blogs.

CHAPTER V

A FURTHER DISCUSSION OF THE BLOGS

At this point, blogs become a significant medium that may provide women and girls a medium for self-expression to tell their story to the public—at least within the realms of the digital space. Sakr (2004) claims that providing means of self-expression for Arab women evidently plays a significant role in empowering women (p. 7). However, these wider margins do not necessarily provide equal opportunities for both genders in terms of self-expression as well as adequate representation of Arab women (p. 5). Knowing that empowering female participation is a social rather than technological issue (Ayish, 2010, p. 200), women bloggers are able to spread their thoughts and opinions, and let their voice be heard on a digital global scale, as they have the chance to pursue what is significant to them and what is not. Bearing in mind the function of digital space as a venue for self-expression, the question naturally arises: How does harassment endure in digital space as it prevails on the streets and behind closed doors?

A. The Endurance of Harassment in Digital Space

While Aliaa Al Mahdy and Alexndria Kinias discussed the issue of harassment within the realms of the web, it is important to consider how harassment endures in digital space. There is a popular perception that online media eliminates differences such as gender, race, and age. For instance, Otterman (2007) claimed that the blogosphere is a unique public arena where men and women are represented equally.

The blogs analyzed here belie this notion. Asmaa Mahfouz and Aliaa Al Mahdy received a raft of comments that included sexist insults amounting to verbal harassment among the comments sections in their blogs.

Throughout history, Egyptian women have been objectified. Egyptian cinema has sexualized the female body on the big screen (Khatib, 2004). This process represents a simple shift of women's bodies from private patriarchy to public patriarchy on the big screen. Hence, "the idea that the female body is protected from overt sexualization in Egypt is false" (Kraidy, 2012, p. 71). Granted, the sexualized female body is no longer excluded from the public sphere, it is actually sexually objectified and subordinated within it.

In the digital visual capital (in this case it's the blogosphere) women are both subjects and objects of interactivity. They are able to create new images of gender as well as redefine pre-existent ones, yet at the same time are subjected within it by other online users (Nakamura 2008). Hence, women continue to be subjugated under the male gaze even in online media, but at the same time they are given the advantage of having control over the content shared and the comments posted. However, although social media may enable a putatively free realm for self-representation and authority, gendered attacks endure in digital space (Nakamura, 2008, p. 40). Since Al Mahdy maintains complete agency over what she posts and doesn't post on her blog, her nudity was not governed, controlled, or managed by male authority.

Her nudity was not subjected to the male gaze before going public, nor did it receive such an imprimatur. Her nudity became a contested terrain where she was able to raise questions that embarrass society or challenge social norms—as we saw in the paragraph she attached under the picture. Her nudity was not on display for satisfaction of the male "Scopophillia", as Mulvey had discussed in her article. Her

nudity was actually performing the contrary role, it shouted: No one will control my body.

One might argue that the principal motivation behind the verbal abuse and harassment online and off was the fact that Al Mahdy faced sanction for directly challenging social norms and breaking taboos. She turned her back on religion as she called for a sexual revolution through her naked photographs and the other visual media she used. For instance, Hegland (1999) argued that the *hejab* might lessen the chances of female harassment, as the Islamic headdress may signal a woman's acquiescence while she engages in public activities such as expressing her public opinion.

However, the logic behind the veil did not apply in the case of Asmaa Mahfouz. Mahfouz may be seen as a veiled female political activist who used her religious identity as a form of power and resistance in order to face the regime and encourage people to attend the demonstrations in Tahrir i.e. when she used quotes from the Quran to revive hope in the public's eyes. Nevertheless, her Muslim identity did not immure her from the deluge of sexist comments under her video posts. Both bloggers, although they come from different ideological backgrounds, became the targets of overt sexism that was translated into textual forms online through sexist comments or posts that contain verbal abuse (Nakamura, 2008, p. 40). Hence, Al Mahdy's anti-religious activities did not position her any differently than Mahfouz's religious approach to her political activism. Both of these bloggers were harassed online, Al Mahdy might have received more brutal comments—i.e. people were calling for her capital punishment—although blogs provided a relatively free space for those women to express themselves, nevertheless this digital space did not eliminate gender differences. However, bloggers such as Sarrah did use the realms of digital

space to break a gendered stereotype in mainstream media, which I will discuss in the coming section.

B. The Politics of Blog-based Humor

Sarrah's jokes, like those of other political satirists, became a direct method of mockery that enables people's thoughts and feelings to reach into the public. While citizens may be forbidden to criticize and dissent against powerful figures, as in the case of Egypt, jokes and cyber humor become a form of self-expression and protest that may incorporate national, political, and cultural themes. Furthermore, Sarrah's gender gives her video-blog greater significance. The fact that Sarrah is female and an online political satirist at the same time breaks an ongoing stereotype. There is a dominant stale public jibe that implies 'women are not funny'. There are very few female satirists in the comedy industry, and political satire remains a male dominated arena globally (Greengross, 2013).

Although many recent Egyptian films have shifted the traditional subsidiary representation of women within the limited space of the household into a more recent depiction of women at the workplace and public arena, this shift does not necessarily imply the emancipation of the female image from patriarchy (Khatib, 2004). In many Egyptian movies, female characters are represented humorously. However, arguably witty dialog is one of the few ways women get to be funny, which in this case is Sarrah's mode of address i.e. cyber-humor and political satire. She represented herself as an analytical political satirist, and demonstrated narratives about societal events and issues from a female point-of-view.

Indeed, storytelling can be an empowering act since the blogger is able to tell a

different story than the dominant narrative, by using a different mode of address than those that mainstream media allow. Blogs also opened this previously non-existent medium for women to become prominent and well-known interlocutors in digital space. Bloggers like Sarrah gained online and global popularity through her online activity. And eventually, the more these women or bloggers in general speak to power, and the more they demonstrate their side of the story, the higher the chance these narratives gain acceptance as part of the truth, or at the very least challenge the dominant narrative. Moreover, this process grants the blogger the choice to demonstrate what is significant to discuss and what is not, even if those topics are seen as trivial by society. This leads to another question: what is the purpose behind bringing the trivial into the public sphere?

C. Bringing What Society Sees as 'Trivial' into the Public Sphere

Nermeena saw her blog as a private virtual home away from all the social and cultural pressures imposed on Egyptian women. She used her blog to express personal ideas to the public, and only after the outbreak did she share her social, and political thoughts that were directly related to the revolution. Nermeena's blog can be an example of what Pahwa (2015) has described as online space that empowers women through granting them digital mobility (Pahwa, 2015) Nermeena becomes a digital body living in her digital home (i.e. her public private blog). In her digital habitus, she shares alternative narratives and truths about her life and daily routines, as well as chats with people across borders. Nevertheless, what is the significance behind the self-indulgent forms of blogging?

According to Mckee (2005) there are topics and issues that are missing from the public and ought to be included, because what is seen as personal can sometimes be translated into the political (Mckee, 2005, p. 43). Although society at large may view these as trivialities that divert the public's attention from more important topics, McKee (2005) claimed that people, and especially feminists, try push to what is seen by society as "trivial" topics into the mainstream public sphere, because "what is personal is political." In other words, when Nermeena discusses these personal and intimate topics on her blog, which is a public forum and space. Her blogging activity, which de-trivializes those topics, is one step towards becoming part of a political act.

Bloggers like Nermeena are then able to shift the trivial nature of women's personal concerns into visible topics that exist within public discourse. These 'trivial' topics can be how Nermeena finds it socially inappropriate to publicly discuss her emotional diarrhea, yet still does it on her blog. Another topic is how society does not expect her to confront a secret lover about her true feelings due to traditional gender roles. However, she still does express her love towards him on her public diary. Her blog becomes a "counterpublic" space that introduces topics that did not exist before in the online public sphere. This process describes Warner's notion of how 'counterpublics' are part of the main public sphere, yet they speak publicly within a contrary voice. A contrary voice can be exemplified in how Nermeena is challenging the dominant discourse to unlabel those issues as 'trivial'.

The media landscape in the Middle East has been altered drastically as it gave women a role in public communication. After years of discrimination between male and female voices, the changing media climate in the Arab world may have

empowered women by providing wider slots for freedom of expression (Sakr, 2004). However, are all those bloggers part of a 'counterpublic'?

Alexandria Kinias, the women's rights activist blogger, has incorporated fighting for women's rights as her dominant narrative throughout her blog. She expressed her opinion concerning women's privileges and tasks within the digital space of the blogosphere before, during, and after the 2011 revolution. This study analyzed a very limited amount of posts on Kinias' blog. In the two posts analyzed—which were published before and after the outbreak—the study demonstrated how Kinias' opinion was changing in parallel with western media coverage. However, this notion is not generalizable to Kinias's entire blog due to the limited amount of posts analyzed. Moreover, there is a possibility that her personal opinions on the matter might simply be ideologically similar to western discourse, hence, the parallelism.

While the opinions of many bloggers may be coopted by State ideology (El Nawawy and Khamis, 2013) or Western discourse, many scholars have also indicated that citizen journalists and bloggers can influence mainstream media coverage (El Nawawy and Khamis, 2013). Therefore, it becomes interesting to expand on Kinias' blogging activities and examine the opposite of this notion. Do all bloggers demonstrate an alternative narrative?

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the different ways in which Egyptian women have used blogs to engage in public issues and become distinct interlocutors in the online public sphere in Egypt. The project has analyzed five different Egyptian women bloggers. Each blogger had a different ideological agenda, used different writing style with a unique self-identification. To answer the research question: How did Egyptian women blog about harassment, religion, the revolution, before and after the outbreak of the recent Egyptian revolution (post-25 Jan. 2011)? ,the study relied upon a qualitative textual analysis.

The findings show that Asmaa Mahfouz's monologues incorporated notions previous Egyptian women activists have adopted historically. Moreover, as a political activist/blogger, Mahfouz used her religious identity and video-blogging to challenge regime power. Nevertheless, her Muslim identity did not eliminate online sexist verbal harassment on her blog. On the other hand, Aliaa Al Mahdy used a form of rebellious speech that contested religion. Her anti-Islamic tone became more visible and straightforward after the outbreak. Along with Asmaa Mahfouz, and Al Mahdy received a raft of comments that include online sexist insults amounting to verbal harassment. This reveals that digital space does not necessarily eliminate gender differences. However it does provide a space to break gender stereotypes, which is one step towards confronting the male gaze, because the blogger is providing an alternative narrative that does not conform to mainstream depictions of gender.

On her video-blog, Sarrah used humorous insinuations and sarcastic hinting as form of political resistance. Sarrah's mode of address broke an ongoing stereotype where women are infrequently associated with witty dialogue. Throughout her blog, she challenged this dominant stereotype, while she represented herself as an analytical political satirist. As for the notion of publicizing private issues, Nermeena contributed on her personal blogs to get involved as "women" to speak truth about what she feels, and what she thinks is significant to write about and discuss.

Nermeena, an anonymous blogger, used her anonymity to her advantage. The use of pseudonyms has been common since the early 1900's in Egypt. Women writer in the Egyptian national press hid their identities to avoid public judgments while they discussed sensitive and personal topics. Nermeena used her blog as a space for self-indulgence. Her public private diary tackled personal and individualistic issues, which brought trivial issues into the public sphere. The act of publicizing the private has been labeled as a political act by feminist discourse. After the outbreak of the revolution Nermeena decided to have a say in what was happening throughout the revolution, as she started blogging about the demonstrations in Tahrir.

As a blogger, uninvolved with any political group, Kinias' mode of address adopted a women's activist voice. Kinias has revived the norm of expressing personal opinion on topics concerning women's issues within the digital space of the blogosphere. She had a strong and direct women's activist voice before, during, and after the 2011 revolution, as opposed to Sarrah who started blogging only after the outbreak of the revolution. Kinias discussed controversial topics and provided her perspective to the online public sphere. However, the study was not able to find to what extent her blogging activity was autonomous from mainstream media coverage.

Therefore, this notion should be examined in future studies.

In conclusion, these five Egyptian women bloggers have constructed new social dynamics within their blog space. At the same time they have reproduced older forms present throughout history of Egyptian press and feminist movement. Given the limitations created by the digital divide and the disparate rate of access necessitated by issues of literary, income, and leisure time, blogging is no doubt an elite exercise. However the mere fact that these bloggers are women affects the way their messages are received and the impact they have. These bloggers demonstrated alternative narratives that challenge the dominant ones in the public sphere, and sometimes reinforce pre-existing ones. After all, the process of writing helps to enhance and discover one's deepest thoughts, which inevitably generates better train of thought. Since blogging is a form of self-expression and writing, the act of it strengthens women's likelihood to become practicing thinkers, which eventually leads to social and political change. Therefore, blogging is a great tool that enhances people's chances to express and fight for their ideas, especially women and minority groups that are not part of Egypt's press or mainstream media in general.

Future studies on Arab women bloggers in general may profit from addressing the uses and gratifications these female bloggers gain from their blogging activities. Some of these women started blogging after 25 Jan. 2011, and it would be of interest to examine: What drove these women to start blogging in the first place, and why after the outbreak of the revolution? How did their blogging activities satisfy certain discursive or personal needs and what are gratifications behind this activity? As the dust of the revolution continues to settle, there is no doubt that further lines of inquiry and new insights will continue to come into sharper relief.

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