

Impact of romantic Facebook “crush pages” on the Egyptian youth

Alamira Samah Saleh

*Department of Radio and TV, Faculty of Mass Communication,
Cairo University, Giza, Egypt*

Abstract

Purpose – Like many social media trends, the romantic craze charms Egyptian youth. Romantic Facebook crush pages popped up locally in the past few years among university students particularly. They expressed a new aspect of online social interaction that has raised red flags with some adults, while thought to be a new healthy way to pour youth's hearts out anonymously in a so-called a conservative society for others. Some crush pages, in particular, drew concerns of several parents for they are more vulgar and aggressive submissions. Laying between the two arguments, this study aims to examine the extent to which Facebook users make use of it to pursue romance, if Facebook's characteristics and social context reflected in users' perceptions of romantic relationships, the implications of being in a romantic relationship on Facebook and if such FB practices could pose a state of *moral panic* or a public concern.

Design/methodology/approach – A survey of 200 Facebook users between 18 and 25 years was gathered. Furthermore, a content analysis of three Egyptian universities' “crush pages” posts was applied.

Findings – The study highlighted the conflicting ideals of today's Egyptian youth moral lives. Ultimately, there is an evidence that practices of using Facebook online crush pages have been creating new contested but delightful moral normative rules around love.

Originality/value – Crushes pages have been sweeping across Egyptian colleges and faculties; however, almost no Arabic study was done to figure out its impact. Furthermore, the study takes into account the socio-cultural background of the Egyptian society.

Keywords Facebook crush pages, Egyptian Muslim Youth, Romantic relations, Moral Panic, Society concerns

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Despite the growing dominance of online social interactions, research has yet to catch up with the potential entanglements for how our romantic relationships simultaneously unfold both online and offline. The public nature of social networking sites (SNSs) makes it easier to gather and disclose information about our romantic relationships to a broader network of people and to do so much more quickly than via traditional face-to-face communication (Fox *et al.*, 2013, 772).



Now, quickly as we could imagine, SNSs can proclaim the news loudly and broadly across the user's online network, which, according to the recent studies of college students, averages between 200 and 250 friends (Kalpidou *et al.*, 2011). These websites have documented how our personal, intimate lives have become increasingly blurred and intertwined with the public arena, a transformation that increased talks and concerns about intimacy troubles.

Females represent the largest population of SNS communities. With the advent of the internet, some scholars felt that these open online spaces would provide a space for young women to express themselves away from the society's traditional gender binary. On the other hand, young men sometimes create explosive atmospheres via the same online spaces by teasing, flirting with or harassing girls. Both sorts of behavior constrain girls' mobility and limit their opportunities to develop.

Locally, although it becomes a foregone matter that using social media is now a daily routine in the Egyptian youth's life, yet there are still many socio-cultural obstacles that hinder young people and their right to use and communicate via different social media outlets. In a tightly controlled social life of youth, many "gatekeepers" play critical roles in those young people online and offline life.

Girls here are the most vulnerable target. Young men are crucial actors in shaping girls' lives in many Arab societies. Once a girl reaches puberty, the brothers often monitor her behaviors to protect her from impropriety or damaging interactions. It could affect the degree that girls might be denied as future wives just for having a Facebook account with her photos uploaded! However, at some cultural point, could both young men and women feel pleased, ashamed, conceited, embarrassed and/or malcontent when they express their love via social media venues?

Although, young people have the opportunities to self-represent and self-express their intimacies to possibly large audiences, however, living in a specific socio-cultural context appeared to create the need for assessing the role of Facebook in the supplementing or replacing face-to-face interaction in relationship development for a growing number of university students.

The study in hand seeks to unfold two main issues relevant to Facebook's crush pages in Egypt; firstly: to analyze three Egyptian universities' "crush pages." These three web pages represent the different types of the educational system in Egypt and reflect three different students' core characteristics, which in turn affect how they use Facebook crush pages and the texts being circulated. Moreover, I chose to assess those that seem the most dynamic crush pages of each type of education.

Secondly, the study tries to answer five main topical research questions:

RQ1. To what extent do Facebook users make use of it to pursue romance?

RQ2. What are the attributes of individuals who use it in such a way?

RQ3. How are Facebook's characteristics and social context reflected in users' perceptions of romantic relationships through relevant practices?

RQ4. What are the implications of being in a romantic relationship on Facebook?

RQ5. Does such a social media's practice pose a state of *moral panic*, or are the public concerns over romantic relations on Facebook justified?

The scene

Although the Egyptian students are not the inventors of this social media trend, secret admirers and crushes pages are sweeping across colleges and faculties around different university campuses around Egypt.

There we go! Anonymously send in the name of the guy or girl you have been crushing on at your university and Facebook will handle the rest. Students can submit anything their heart desires, no matter how personal or vulgar, and the admins of the page will post it. Consequently, the current research assesses a sample of textual information from three universities’ “crush pages” on Facebook [1], which considers a widely used social media website among the Egyptian youth. Furthermore, I conducted a survey study on 200 participants whose ages ranged from 18–25 years (Table 1) to record and analyze university students’ reactions to and experiences with crush pages.

The “Mass Comm crush” [2] is a Facebook page for the faculty of Mass Communications students; a governmental faculty lies in Cairo University (6.7k followers). The majority of the students here belong to a middle socio-economic class. The students are almost keen on hard studying and excellence for social and economic mobilization.

Introducing their page in Arabic and English, the students of the faculty of mass communication, Cairo University, wrote in the “About” section” of the page:

Leave the secret you want to tell – a page for Faculty of Mass Communication, Cairo University. Whatever you want to say, send it on Ask.fm and we will publish الصفحة خاصة بطلبة إعلام جامعة القاهرة، أي حاجة عايزيد تقولوها ابعتوها على اسكو وهننشرها.

The second university is “Misr International University” (MIU) [3], which represents the private sector universities with (5.8k followers). These kinds of universities need higher admission fees compared to the governmental/public ones. Private universities also have lower admission standards and are considered by many to be of lower quality than the public universities (Buckner, 2013). Hence, the commercialization of the education process is a clear theme in accounts of students in these institutions “all they care about is the money” was a repeatedly noted concept (Barsoum, 2014).

It is worth to note that the higher the high school grade, the higher the chance to join a public university, and the lower the grade, the higher the chance to join the private university. Therefore, the private universities are often less competitive than at public ones,

Table 1.
Demographical
variables

Demographical variables	F	(%)
Gender		
Male	54	26.7
Female	148	73.3
University level		
Freshmen	23	11.4
Sophomore	45	22.3
Juniors	28	13.9
Seniors	45	22.3
Graduates	50	24.7
Postgraduate	11	5.4
Type of education		
Governmental	152	75.3
Private	37	18.3
International	13	6.4
Marital status		
In a relationship	35	17.2
Single	151	74.8
Engaged	10	5
Married	6	3

so they tend to absorb those students who could not get admitted into public high education system. Such characteristics of the private universities' sector sometimes reflect, in turn, a specific type of students who are mostly described as less skillful (Roach, 2019).

We are here for you to release your words for your crushes. Then, you pray they will get your attention. Send a message on Ask.fm MIU's crushes about section.

Compared to the other two universities, the third type of universities here are the international ones represented by The American University of Cairo, (AUC) [4]. An English-language university that embraces the very high socio-economic class students in Egypt. The AUC's students carry many characteristics of their affiliation, with more liberal, explicit declarations and fewer restrictions on rights and wrongs of ideas and behaviors. For some, it can get to zero consideration of what socially inappropriate consequences that may bring. "AUC Crushes" started on March 21, 2013, allowing people to write about their crushes on campus by sending anonymous messages. After the AUC Facebook page took off, other Egyptian universities' students created their own.

Within a week, the AUC crushes page had 14,000 Likes. Given that there are less than 6,000 students on campus at this time, a number that suggests that even some non-AUCians have joined. (El-Araby, 2013). The AUC crush Facebook page had taken anonymity and love declarations to a whole new level. The page has jointly operated with an AUC project page called "Project DateMe," a project that urges young people to "market themselves" and matches them up with others on an anonymous basis. All they have to do is to open a link, fill information about what they are looking for in a partner and provide means for communication. It could be their fake or real account, whatever makes them comfortable (Refaat, 2017):

We help people connect based on similar interests and preferences. What happens next is up to the adults put in contact (AUC's about section).

Generally, despite core differences among the youth of these different types of Egyptian universities, crush Facebook pages are the new go-to for lovebirds. You can find all sorts of messages there. It could be love poems:

While I was writing about her in my notebook, my pen stood still as I could not express your gorgeous beauty. Even the sweetest songs cannot do this (Mass comm Crushes).

It could be weird observations or even some girl-on-girl fights over one guy, or vice versa:

It is so frustrating being a girl and trying to flirt with other girls like you tell them they are cute and go. "Aww, thank you,!! No, no, I'm gay with you. Homo intended damnit (AUC Crushes) (Figure 1).

However, it is not only love and sexual orientation that necessarily needs to be anonymously declared, sometimes it is hate:



Figure 1.

Daily, I see a girl at the main gate of the faculty. She runs after me, and I run escaping from her. Hey guys, if you guessed who she is, just tell her that I hate her (MIU Crushes).

Another some unusual posts:

I have a confession to make. I have a crush on the guy who works at Cinnabon. His name is Hatem. He is the one with the cute, sexy smile. Every day, I get coffee from Cinnabon just so that he can smile at me and say good morning. He is beautiful. I do not know how to tell him, though, and I do not know how to react. I love Hatem, the Cinnabon man (AUC Crushes).

Whatever it is, it all falls under the very same anonymous hearts out. What is worth mentioning is that the message-poster specifying not only the crush’s name, distinctive body feature, types of clothes, personal traits, but also college ID number, which raises some privacy issues, as intensive stalking and incredible effort would be required for her/him to know this information.

In this game, almost “Nobody wins”; the girls might feel ugly, not exciting or sexy enough, or unnoticed if they are not mentioned in one or more of these Facebook posts. On the contrary, when they do get singled out in an objectifying anonymous mention, they either get excited, sad or feel very targeted and upset (Table 2) (Rowland, 2013).

Therefore, new emerging rights and responsibilities come to the forefront in making decisions about controlling and accessing such intimate self-representations but also making choices about how to give shape to the breaking boundaries, conservative traditions, rituals and gender identities in these specific mediated places (Plummer, 2004). Such complications have become prominent in young people’s everyday lives, often leading to societal moral panic (Table 3) related to untraditional romantic relations and technology (Thiel-Stern, 2009).

Table 2.
How the sample react
when they receive a
romantic message

Reaction	F	(%)
Happy/excited	75	58.1
Upset, because the message embarrassed me/made my friends mock me	16	12.4
Caring so much to know who wrote the message	24	18.6
Ignoring	9	7
Writing a reply shows upset	3	2.3
Writing a reply that is insulting the one who wrote the message	2	1.6

Table 3.
Why fear online
romantics

Fears from intimate internet use	F	(%)
Stalking/lurking	18	9.4
Penetrating personal privacy	37	18.8
Cyberbullying or harassment	37	18.3
Cyber manipulation	55	27.2
Wrong/negative escapism	12	5.9
Envy and jealousy among friends	41	20.3
Sadness/depression if not being loved as well	19	9.4

Perspective#1: hearts out in the social networking sites space

Many studies indicate that the internet created an alternative free public space in conservative countries where the physical public sphere is too restrictive and does not allow for young men and women to meet, interact and engage in love and romantic practices.

Facebook is now defined by many researchers as an environment that provides new ways of accessing and expressing information about people who had previously never been available. However, this access to information leads to surveillance of users' extremely private feelings by one's online community.

In their comparative study of Brazil and India, Arora *et al.* found that young Indians use Facebook to find romantic partners and interact with the opposite sex outside of the circle of people they know. In contrast, Brazilians more commonly use it as a tool to keep in touch with friends they know offline. Similar arguments have been made about young people in the Muslim world. The internet allows young Moroccans to have intimate communications between males and females without transgressing physical boundaries (Sotoudeh *et al.*, 2017). While, Facebook users from Pakistan, Tunisia, Iran, Turkey and Algeria proved no systematic relationship between the country's aggregate levels of restrictiveness and singles' use of the internet to seek out members of the opposite sex for dates (Sotoudeh *et al.*, 2017).

A crush is defined as "a strong feeling of romantic love for someone that is usually not expressed and does not last a long time" (Kibbe, 2015, p. 2). Relations through such Facebook crush pages could be defined as a cross-cultural and transnational phenomenon, which could sometimes offer a catharsis of sorts, attracting heartfelt disclosures and it could – at the same time – raise flags of moral panics when we take the social, religious and cultural context into account. Such pages receive anonymous romantic dedications from students on ask.fm and post them on their page with the name of the beloved whom the message is dedicated to.

Knapp's relational stage model offers a foundational explanation of individuals being involved in romantic relationships where they seek to maximize their rewards and minimize their costs through engaging in or disengage from relationships based on a virtual base (Kibbe, 2015).

The central argument here revolves around the observation that Facebook crush pages could be spaces for an intense, intimate politics to proliferate young people's everyday lives. Exposing the socio-cultural complexity behind such reflection of intimate stories demands attention for the dictated rights and wrongs; how it might substitute the tangible, real and real love for the imaginary; and what is the acceptable frameworks regulating intimacy in young people's everyday life.

Long before the social media and the widespread of pop culture, it was easier to implant whatever customs and traditions that we want to be followed, but as the world becomes a small village due to the internet, this changed. Young people became increasingly exposed to the rest of the world (Rashid, 2017). Today, their visions and values are no longer based on what their parents or preaches hold, but in what social media and pop culture influencers might be saying and doing. Then there is the limitless online world.

Moreover, the language used in these new media outlets helps create a hybrid identity. Youth usually use and molded a mixture of language to describe their specific emotions, feelings and attitudes. For instance, how the English language and its use changes in the Egyptian context is proof of its importance in the new media's life of the Egyptian youth. Although native Arabic language tools are available in the market, the students resort to using the English/Anglo-Arab (Arabizi) language to express their views and sub-culture.

This has, in turn, resulted in the creation of a new corpus of language systems that uses the English/Anglo-Arab alphabets to write the Arabic language. This language system can

only function within the digital space where the speaker and receiver both are aware of the rules connected to the language. In most cases, the language structure and syntax are wholly broken down, which might be considered to be an outcome of the user's growing impatience with rules and grammar. The use of language and whether it was only pure English, a mixture of English/Arabic or Anglo-Arab words also helped distinguish and categorize the various Egyptian colleges and universities (Figure 2).

Perspective#2: small steps to true love?

In Egypt, social media and Facebook have become an essential arena of premarital romance and free platforms that help people connect based on similar interests and preferences. Smartphones, cafés and global youth fashion signal the urban consumer culture and an active middle-class lifestyle. Simultaneously with the spread of digital technologies, new mixed-gender spaces like malls and cafés have emerged in Alexandria, as in other Egyptian cities, widening the number of places where young women and men can meet each other. The spread of new technologies has come to mean that young men and women can stay connected even when face-to-face meetings are not possible.

While modern communication technologies and new semi-public spaces have enabled mixed-gender socializing, a different way of the self-presenting has emerged. Social media have opened up new means of self-presentation in the visual and textual forms.

Facebook, WhatsApp, Tango, Viber, Instagram and mobile phones have facilitated the diffusion of new secret and semi-secret mixed-gender friendships and romantic relationships, which break with traditional gender roles and family-based forms of sociality. Young people now meet, flirt and talk online, beyond their parents and relatives. In particular, young women can escape much of the social control that exists in the physical world.

Where conservative culture prevails, gender segregation and traditional values of honor dominate social life; social media have multiplied the opportunities for mixed-gender friendships and romances among Egyptian young adults. Accordingly, new media are often initially used to realize a prior desire that was not socially and culturally possible. However, the new “facility becomes the merely taken-for-granted condition of what people simply presume as an integral aspect of who they are” (Miller and Sinanan, 2014):

We want to expose the community to itself, how it perceives its members, how it perceives itself, and how outsiders perceive it. We want to see how the community perceives these facts and whether it gets to them, whether AUCians are integrated into Egyptian society or living in



Figure 2.

isolation in their bubble. Plus, we want people to think and rethink these issues and be true to themselves. Our understanding is that change in this aspect of stigma (Dating) can't be a sudden change. So, we use gradual techniques (Part of the "About" intro of the AUC'S dating Facebook page).

On the other hand, conservative voices, such as the leadership of the Muslim brotherhood and some well-known Islamic "Shaykhs," have prohibited women's presence in virtual communities because of being more vulnerable to the risk of *fitna* (temptation; allurements) and other alleged problems (Jyrkiäinen, 2016, p. 184).

In a society where offline dating can potentially harm young women's reputation, a decent public image is considered a valuable symbolic capital (Herrera and Bayat, 2010). This is especially true for some of the current study sample, who are brides-to-be.

The following quotes are several students' answers to the study's survey question on their opinion on the Facebook status of being in a relationship:

"A decent young woman should write that she is engaged rather than in a relationship." "An unethical relationship that has become acceptable by the time." "I do not consider it a real phase in an emotional relationship."

However, some believe that people started to write posts about themselves to feel some self-worth and to find a safe venue to pour their hearts out because this page is becoming a standard for popularity:

Sometimes, we make explicit declarations that we cannot afford to utter in our real-life.

"We can get to falling in love and acting upon that." "I ask myself, "when I am going to fall in love?"

"They must mask aspects of their behavior that may be condemned as morally and thus culturally inappropriate, and they have thus developed strategies for navigating through certain moral expectations about sexuality, purity, virginity, and modesty" (Jyrkiäinen, 2016, 182) even if they do not agree with such atmosphere anymore:

We believe in dating with a very oppressive society that labels dating as a mechanism for blasphemy and whores/players machine. We offer this platform for you to use as you wish to expand your network, get to know other people, and hopefully find the person of your dreams (**A group of AUC students who believe in fighting the dating stigma, as they defined themselves**).

Given that most people in Egypt are family-centered and patriarchal attitudes are widespread, religion is expected to play a central role in people's lives. However, young people, defined as 18–25-year-olds, selected as the focus of this study, are demographical, socially and culturally significant because they form about a quarter of Egypt's population (capmas, 2012) and have been viewed as a potential source of freedom, aspiration and modernism. They have been best described in literature "as peril and promise" (El Shakry, 2011). One of the reasons that best justify such a contradiction when describing online romantic relations for Egyptian young people is that many have to postpone marriage and rely on their parents for shelter and financial support for several years after graduation (Habibi and El-Hamidi, 2016).

A status that let the vulnerable to high levels of material and emotional discontent (Habibi and El-Hamidi, 2016).

"The forces of modernity and the forms of education that capitalist production requires, have greatly extended the period of youth and delayed the age of marriage" (Swedenburg,

2007). Social media, indeed, have been used to satisfy young people’s desires to experience friendship and premarital romances and have become a constitutive and taken-for-granted component of what they and their relationships are. However, while 91.1% of the sample agrees that they could experience a love relation via social media, 81.2% believe that this kind of relations is not real and strong enough to turn into reality, true love and marriage.

It does not necessarily follow that the pursuit of love depends on it. Those singles who want to marry for love do not typically turn to the internet to arrange encounters with their beloveds. Table 4 shows that 51% of the single people who think of expressing their love for someone do not use the internet to do that (Table 5).

As we grew up in a society where beliefs about gender roles and stereotypes all confirm that “it is the guy who must approach the girl and not vice versa,” such pages did not significantly succeed in pushing online relations forward to real ones.

Perspective#3: halal love for young Muslims?

It is perfectly okay to feel attracted to someone in Islam. Until you can commit before Allah to that person, there are certain restrictions. You cannot justify your material attraction to someone by now, making it look like a spiritual one. Do the right thing for the right reasons, and Allah will, inshAllah, grant you what/whom you want (Ulama, 2015).

Since the 1970s, Islam has increasingly become a dominant force in public discourse in Muslim countries. The recent wave of revolts in the Arab world seems only to have reinforced this process. Meanwhile, putting to the question dominant conservative and fundamentalist discourses on Islam remains highly problematic. In this sense, religion may be considered the greatest taboo in the Muslim world. Since the 19th century, Muslim modernist reformers have raised critical questions regarding, for instance, the status of women and non-Muslims, tolerance toward and dissident interpretations and the relationship between religion and state (Schielke, 2009, 162).

In the past years, however, the debates about such issues have lost much of their dynamism and visibility. The most significant development of the past decade seems to point in the opposite direction: Salafism’s spectacular worldwide rises, a puritan, fundamentalist form of Islam. The movement holds a strong attraction for Muslim youth

Table 4.
Reasons behind
using crush pages

Why using crush pages	F	(%)
Freely expressing our feelings anonymously	67	33.7
Feeling bored and seeking fun	81	40.5
Need someone to talk with without embarrassment	42	20.8
For being ethically deviant	10	5

Table 5.
Ways to tell someone
you are in love with

How to tell someone that you are in love with	F	(%)
By changing the Facebook status	20	9.9
Via a messenger message	51	25.2
Via (Saraha) application	15	7.4
Via a message by a crush page	1	0.5
Via a mobile message	27	13.4
Via a mobile phone	39	19.3
Face to face	100	51

worldwide and is a source of concern for western and Muslim governments alike who view it as an incubator of radical groups (e.g. ISIS). The sudden popularity of Salafism and radicalism is the result of many factors. However, one of them is the Salafist monopoly on the internet, both in the English and Arabic language realms (Schielke, 2009, p. 164).

A wave of religiosity has reached virtually all classes of society; mosques' attendance, especially during the holy months, has overgrown; the headscarf has become the standard dress of almost all young Muslim women. A general sense prevails about the importance of religion in everyday practices and how state and society are run (Schielke, 2009, p. 160).

This wave often referred to as "(re-) Islamization" (aslama) or "Islamic revival" (as-sahwa al-islâmiya) has inspired vastly amounts of research that turned to analyze the motivations, manifestations and effects of the religious revival in people's everyday lives and the ways they imagine themselves, the community they live in and the practices, rights and obligations that make up the society (Schielke, 2009, p. 162).

"At the same time, new forms of mixed-gendered socializing have emerged, at first among the upper-middle class," and increasingly among other classes (Schielke, 2009, 161). Emotions are considered unacceptable and inappropriate outside the confines of marriage. However, love and romance are not only continuously consumed as the subjects of poetry, love songs and films, but also experienced in romantic affairs of various kinds that evolve in neighborhoods, institutes of education and, increasingly, on the internet (Schielke, 2009, p. 161).

My intention in this part of the study is neither to moralize nor to solve the contradictions between the abovementioned societal statuses when it comes to online romantic relations. Instead, I attempt to take these contradictions seriously, considering the ways young people live them and struggle to make sense of their lives through.

In Egypt, a single young woman of a respectable social class culturally should have little contact with men, except for close male relatives. The control was built on the Islamic rule that women are better not to closely interact with strange men, a status that requires modesty of the woman. Therefore, a respectable young woman was understood never to interact with unrelated men. It was the responsibility of her father and brothers (and by proxy, her mother), then her husband to guard her chastity, and finally, her sons to guard her safety and reputation. The conduct of a family's women is considered a matter of honor and any damage that had real consequences for the status and power of the men and other women in the family (Friedland *et al.*, 2016) (Figure 3).

People can argue for conservative and strict standards of young people's gender relations at one level of relations, but express somewhat liberal ideals of romantic love at other times. Getting to see and know each other and making the informed decision to marry is not an alien concept in Islamic societies. However, balancing religious views with the desire for emotional intimacy, still the most critical morality dilemma, results from different moral



Figure 3.

registers that exist parallel to and often contradict each other. Therefore, “behind the scene,” online uncommitted relations and the term “dating” still invite an offensive meaning for many Egyptians, the older ones and even a significant portion of the young ones, irrespective of how honest the relationship may be. Dating is still linked to its western origins, which implies underlying expectations of sexual interactions, which religious texts prohibit (Islam and Christianity), if not an outright premarital sexual relationship.

New preachers who took over their shoulders the mission of modernizing Islam and guiding young Muslim people usually adopt the discourse that true love leads to halal. True love helps the two people who are attracted to each other realize that they need to be better Muslims, reinforcing their purpose of life. Also, when married through nikah (marriage), true love is the one that brings peace to the relationship by bringing these two people closer to Allah (Ulama, 2015).

However, changing ideas about modernity, widespread urbanization and the west’s cultural hegemony influenced something as intimate and personal as relationships. Today’s multicultural generations are growing up with a very hybrid moral compass rooted in some influences and not just the local.

Egyptian young people seem to realize that a lot of their families’ deep disapproval on their intimate romantic relations stems more from the fear of people in their neighboring communities gossiping than it does from the actual interaction the couples have. There is this general concern that people are going to talk. So, it seems that the parents who are not worried about themselves all the time, but instead because they do not want their daughter to be talked about or whatever, as well as they, are the ones worrying about their family name and becoming part of a gossip mill (Table 6).

Depending on this, an incoherent and unsystematic morality, for those who may be deemed too “open-minded,” the highlighting of religious and familial values can be smart. “The so-called ‘open-minded’ brides-to-be often conform to society’s expectations and produce self-presentations that highlight the beauty, religiosity, and moral values” (Jyrkiäinen, 2016, 196).

Facebook is a suitable tool to play that game. When a “non-conservative” girl starts to talk about religion on Facebook, she could be considered as giving a clear sign that she wants to find a husband and get married. Thus, a young woman who previously posted party, semi-naked, beach’s swimsuits, [. . .], etc. pictures can be internally forced to switch to a more religious tone and start sharing verses from the Qur’an – a strategy that may attract men who look for a well brought up and a tradition-bound bride.

Other gendered strategies can also be used on Facebook. One involves unfriending all males when getting engaged:

I have unfriended all my male friends from Facebook. My boyfriend asked me to do it, and I did it.
I am happy with it, we are Turk and Muslim, and these are our traditions. We cannot lose

Table 6.
Parents’ reaction on
their young people
interactions on
Facebook

Parents’ reaction on their young people interactions on FB	F	(%)
Use inappropriate words among each other	15	21.7
Interactions contradict our custom and traditions	14	20.4
Facebook is only for acquaintances not for romantic relations	7	10.1
It is inappropriate or acceptable for young men to have online romantic relations via the internet	18	26.1
Romantic relations on the internet are not a serious one	10	14.5
Facebook crush pages will spoil your virtue, and it is not suitable for us	5	7.2

morality [...] my friends understood it, and they will not be hurt. Other female friends did the same, here it is normal! (Costa, 2016) A status that also best describes many Egyptian girls.

Some young women do not accept friend requests from men but keep their Facebook profiles as women-only space. In their profiles, many women are keen to state and manage impressions about their personalities when they signal their account's name as "Proud of my veil," "Sticking to my Islam," "I believe in God, ...etc. For an Egyptian Facebook audience, it signals that the person is decent and is unwilling to become acquainted with members of the opposite sex.

Moreover, dating apps and social media's pages allow people to filter their searches based on religiosity, the kind of relationship they are looking for and other aspects such as whether the woman wears a headscarf and the man sports a beard. Privacy settings within these apps allow people to hide their pictures until the match gets more severe and even allowing a guardian to have access to the chat to ensure it remains halal (Rashid, 2017).

While the men behind these apps launched them with the hope of giving young Muslims a real platform to interact, there are still many in their societies that oppose the idea of young couples interacting.

Perspective#4: answers that count

In more recent and slow shifts that have witnessed the rise of the internet as an exciting social and cultural space where discourses thrive, there is no surprise to see this space being used and sometimes exploited for romantic purposes. These relentless processes of modernizing love registered a remarkable change in the social and cultural composition of the Muslim youth's lives. Therefore, it imposed the need for a deep understanding and anticipation of these young people's stories, struggles, visions, despair and hope and let their feelings of love begin and survive through such outlets.

In western societies, we can chart a history of romantic development processes and a more open approach, even to the very extreme related issues. The emergence of feminism in the mainstream in the 1960s questioned the patriarchal view of society and the sexual relations underpinning it. We can also see the internet playing a part in such a development (Nixon and Dusterhoft, 2018).

In the same vein, liberals in many Muslim countries have been enormously involved in discussions that men's and women's sexual segregation is one of the main reasons behind unhappiness in marriage and arranged marriages in which they were associated. They argue that if youth could choose their partner from among others, he or she could see and talk with; this would, therefore, lead to having greater affection and love (Friedland *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, feminist advocates promoted passionate marriage, and some even argued that traditional arranged marriages reduced women to objects of male sexual pleasure.

However, one can assume that being prominently affected by the use of digital media for romantic purposes. Specifically, Facebook crush pages here are a matter of sub-culture hype that soon dies in front of other social media trends that attract youth.

The practical experiences and testimonies gathered for the current study would suggest that building upon online romantic relations for a real-life experience of relationship is a short-life one. Moreover, this type of relations are still being evaluated by a majority of the study sample as being a sin that God forbids for the sake of chastity and keeping oneself for a real and publicly known relationship (Tables 7 and 8).

The answers and implications that count of publicly declaring oneself as "In a Relationship" with another person on Facebook raise new issues around the improper behavior, which could be shown up in varying degrees up to a full boogie:

Oh, God! It means that they are in an illegal relationship.

He or she is trivial and disrespectable. It is a kind of normalizing mistakes and forbidden behaviors that our Islam prohibits out of the legal relations.

It is an illegal relationship that becomes valid and permissible.

It is such a bold thing to share and declare. We are not Westerns. It is a necessity to follow our religion's teachings. I always do expect that this relationship will not be completed as God will not bless them. Our Islam set controls for the relationship between men and women that begins with the official engagement and marriage after that. I can hardly remember a successful relationship of such a kind.

"Excessive boldness!" "No one can guarantee if it is true love" "No one knows if it is true love or fake feelings!"

Nothing! I do not give it much thought. They could make out in front of others, and I could not care less.

Taking the above-stated opinions in mind, we can see that most of the possible arguments indicate that as we embrace new technology, the fear and shame of using it for much more overt purposes will perhaps fall away. Though there are issues of contradiction between what has become almost normal and what is genuinely thought of and accepted, there is a great deal of resistance to technological hearts.

Therefore, could we be near the evidence that these types of online relations will only serve for breaking boundaries in socially and culturally contradicted societies for a while? However, the wrestling mode of relations will be the typical case!

Table 7.
How likely to begin a romantic relationship via the internet

Romance via internet		Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
Yes	F	52	132	184
	%	96.3	89.2	91.1
No	F	2	16	18
	%	3.7	10.8	8.9
Note: $\chi^2 = 2.462$; df = 1. Sig. = 0.117				

Table 8.
How satisfying is it to maintain a romantic relationship via the internet

How satisfying		Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
Yes	F	7	31	38
	%	13	20.9	18.8
No	F	47	117	164
	%	87	79.1	81.2
Note: $\chi^2 = 1.651$; df = 1. Sig. = 0.199				

The surprising inner conservatism of the Egyptian youth for the current study, compared with their public claims to modern styles of culture and identity, reveals the conflict and struggle between interpretations of online romantic relations side by side with the Islamic/Egyptian culture. Females' perceptions, in specific, characterize these relations as equal to free expression of female sexual desire and grooming. However, young Egyptian women may be engaging more freely in premarital romantic relationships. They do so in a socio-cultural context, which is still very much structured by the privileging of male desire over female love expression (Sadeghi, 2008).

Due to all these contradictions, what we cannot yet be aware enough of are the effects that such technological normalization of pouring feelings among youth in Muslim societies will have on them as individuals and on Muslim communities as a whole when it rings the bells of moral panics and hypes with the possibilities of dangers uncovered.

Discussion

Somehow, in many Arab and Islamic countries, young men could save tens of photos of beautiful girls uploaded via the internet, at the same time of feeling angry and shameful of seeing an unveiled woman or a veiled one without her husband, brother or father (Mahram). They could watch Oprah Winfrey show while they set in "a man-only" gathering. In Turkey, for example, Muslim women try to redefine modernism in their conditions. In contrast with the western terms of modernity, Turkish women consider wearing a veil while in university as a sign of both piety, equality and empowerment (Costa, 2016).

In other Arab countries, many TV dramas and talk shows promote the idea of the "freewoman but a conservative one." Young men could talk and interact with hundreds of women in a virtual world; however, search for a girl with zero experience in life to marry. This is how we could allocate the western lifestyle effect on the traditional ways of life for many young men and women in the Arabic/Islamic world. The preliminary romantic-wise observations and analysis of the Muslim young men and women's online practices seem to assert the growing attachment between such an age category and modern life through social media sites. Alongside the vibrant forms of self-representations and scrolling lives of many users, social media sites modify the forms and functions of self-disclosure, pouring life out and exploring how this contemporary social and cultural practices reflect the transformations of the hearts and minds of youth worldwide and in the Arab world in specific (Jyrkiäinen, 2016, 195).

Adding to the crush pages on Facebook, many young women diaries spread all over the site as new venues where they can chat, post and declare what we could be culturally labeled as very sensitive, unshamed and even vulgar stories, photos and thoughts. A phenomenon that drives many practical aspects of the current study where we could terrace and work on how offering free spaces via the social media sites create a progressively public sphere of holding off, adapting, familiarization and transforming lives of young people in the Arab world away from the physical existence of families, partners and/or friends. Many studies have documented, analyzed and examined the political implications of an SNS in Arab young men (de Ridder and van Bauwel, 2015). Yet, few studies have been devoted to the psychological, cultural and sociological effects of being young, Muslim and Arab. The question of how to have empirical implications of online romantic youth relationships is closely connected to how to interpret them. What interpretive methods and scholarly approaches are best suited to this form of interaction?

Finally, perhaps the question for the subsequent studies on the field is not how online romantic relations should be studied, but whether they should be investigated. Young Muslim online romantic relations reflect potentially disturbing effects of SNSs on our sense

of self, potentially disagreeable shifts in cultural norms of privacy and community and potentially unwelcomed directions for intimate relations and self-perception. The online romantic relations edges further into the margins when it goes online, calling into question what it means to hide behind a device; how we interpret, react and make meaning; and how young identities are constructed and lived.

Conclusion

This study was set out to discuss online romantic relations on Facebook's crush pages among a sample of Egyptian youth and analyze a sample of three of these pages that represent three different types of users based on their different educational systems. The findings indicate that universal features primarily relate to love experiences, so the Egyptian youth are not the inventors of such sweeping social media trends. Those youth put great value in such a kind of anonymous confession to be a very convenient way of expressing their love and romance. However, culturally influenced features are ones that pertain to the expressions of love and cultural rituals of love. The experience of being in love is colored by one's cultural values and the society to which one belongs. People express their love explicitly and implicitly (Karandashev, 2015).

The Egyptian Islamic culture emphasizes explicit and direct ways of love expression to a romantic partner, while many young people, nowadays, mostly depend on implicit and indirect ways of expressing their feelings, pouring their hearts out and then deciding what could happen further. Therefore, the study sample overweighs the fun purposes of these crush pages rather than being a step for an offline, real and full romantic relationship.

The study highlighted the opposing and conflicting ideals of today's Egyptian youth moral lives. Ultimately, there is an evidence that practices of using Facebook online crush pages have been creating new contested and uncertain but delightful moral normative rules around love and in-relations romances that are the results of compatible expectations simultaneously fulfilled desires.

The implications of being in a romantic relationship on Facebook cannot be merely characterized as being good fun or total evil. Yet, these pages succeeded in creating effective and passionate discourse. Many of the posts on these pages are from people who think that they are the only ones who act or feel a particular way of love or romance until the spot is on a similar case with a similar personal experience, which is sometimes crossing the boundaries of the young people to their parents and families.

Finally, these findings shed light on the importance of considering Egyptian morality as entangled in mediated practice, rather than as a set of more or less coherent beliefs or discourses separated from the material and the social media world people live in. Some anthropologists of Islam emphasized the coherence of the self and focused on how morality is socially and culturally created through conscious practices that aim to develop a moral, religious and pious humanity.

Notes

- 1 None of the Facebook crush pages is run by the university of the students affiliated, so, all of the three analyzed pages are unofficial run.
- 2 <https://www.facebook.com/mass.commcrushes>
- 3 <https://www.facebook.com/susisvzlos/>
- 4 <https://www.facebook.com/AUC-Crushes-120540008136461/>

References

- Barsoum, G. (2014), "The challenges of private higher education in Egypt", The Economic Research Forum (ERF), p. 10, available at: https://erf.org.eg/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/833_modified.pdf
- Buckner, E. (2013), "Access to higher education in Egypt: examining trends by university sector", *Comparative Education Review*, Vol. 57 No. 3, pp. 527-552, doi: [10.1086/670665](https://doi.org/10.1086/670665).
- Costa, E. (2016), "The morality of premarital romances", *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, Vol. 9 No. 2, pp. 199-215.
- De Ridder, S. and van Bauwel, S. (2015), "Youth and intimate media cultures: gender, sexuality, relationships, and desire as storytelling practices in social networking sites", *Communications*, Vol. 40 No. 3, doi: [10.1515/commun-2015-0012](https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2015-0012).
- El Shakry, O. (2011), "Youth as peril and promise: the emergence of adolescent psychology in postwar Egypt", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 43 No. 4, pp. 591-610.
- El-Araby, N. (2013), "AUCians spellbound by new AUC crushes Facebook page", The Caravan, available at: www.auccaravan.com/?p=725 (accessed April 5 2019).
- Fox, J., Warber, K. and Makstaller, D. (2013), "The role of Facebook in romantic relationship development", *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, Vol. 30 No. 6, pp. 771-794.
- Friedland, R., Afary, J., Gardinali, P. and Naslund, C. (2016), "Love in the middle east: the contradictions of romance in the Facebook world", *Critical Research on Religion*, Vol. 4 No. 3, pp. 229-258.
- Habibi, N. and El-Hamidi, F. (2016), "Why are Egyptian youth burning their university diplomas? The over-education crisis in Egypt", *SSRN Electronic Journal*.
- Herrera, L. and Bayat, A. (2010), *Being Young and Muslim: New Cultural Politics in the Global South and North*, Oxford Scholarship Online, Oxford.
- Jyrkiäinen, S. (2016), "Online presentation of gendered selves among young women in Egypt", *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, Vol. 9 No. 2, pp. 182-198.
- Kalpidou, M., Costin, D. and Morris, J. (2011), "The relationship between Facebook and the well-being of undergraduate college students", *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, Vol. 14 No. 4, pp. 183-189.
- Karandashev, V. (2015), "A cultural perspective on romantic love", *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture*, Vol. 5 No. 4,.
- Kibbe, M. (2015), "Themes of sexualisation, racialization, and intersectional objectification in university crush pages on twitter", Scholarworks.gvsu.edu., available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1437&context=honorsprojects> (accessed March 5 2019).
- Miller, D. and Sinanan, J. (2014), *Webcam*, Polity, Cambridge, p.12.
- Nixon, P. and Dusterhoft, I. (2018), *Sex in the Digital Age*, 1st ed., Routledge, London, p.1.
- Plummer, K. (2004), *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change, and Social Worlds*, Routledge, London p.151.
- Rashid, N. (2017), "How young Muslims define 'halal dating' for themselves", Npr.org., available at: www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/04/20/502461218/how-young-muslims-define-halal-dating-for-themselves (accessed 2 February 2018).
- Refaat, S. (2017), "Virtual reality love-stories: how college-crush Facebook pages are changing how people interact", What Women Want, available at: <http://whatwomenwant-mag.com/2017/01/12/virtual-reality-love-stories/> (accessed 5 February 2019).
- Roach, E. (2019), "Education in Egypt", available at: <https://wenr.wes.org/2019/02/education-in-egypt-2> (accessed 28 May 2020).
- Rowland, L. (2013), "The problem with twitter crush accounts", Seventeen, available at: www.seventeen.com/life/school/a20623/college-twitter-crush-accounts (accessed 3 January 2019).

- Sadeghi, F. (2008), "Negotiating with modernity: young women and sexuality in Iran", *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 28 No. 2, pp. 250-259.
- Schielke, S. (2009), "Ambivalent commitments: troubles of morality, religiosity and aspiration among young Egyptians", *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 39 No. 2, pp. 158-185, doi: [10.1163/157006609x427814](https://doi.org/10.1163/157006609x427814).
- Sotoudeh, R., Friedland, R. and Afary, J. (2017), "Digital romance: the sources of online love in the Muslim world", *Media, Culture and Society*, Vol. 39 No. 3, pp. 429-439, doi: [10.1177/0163443717691226](https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443717691226).
- Swedenburg, T. (2007), "Imagined youths", MERIP, available at: www.merip.org/mer/mer245/imagined-youths (accessed 3 March 2019).
- Thiel-Stern, S. (2009), "Femininity out of control on the internet: a critical analysis of media representations of gender, youth, and MySpace", *Girlhood Studies*, Vol. 2 No. 1.
- Ulama, J. (2015), "Love and romance in Islam", MuslimVillage.com, available at: <https://muslimvillage.com/2015/08/13/57752/love-and-romance-in-islam/> (accessed 8 April 2019).

Corresponding author

Alamira Samah Saleh can be contacted at: samahsaleh2002@cu.edu.eg