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Empty Streets, Active Feeds: Moroccan Youth Activism in the Age of Social Media

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Empty Streets, Active Feeds

Moroccan Youth Activism in the Age of Social Media

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Abstract

Since the February 20 movement in 2011, Morocco has not witnessed large waves of political activism from its young population. However, Moroccan youth are not inactive citizens, and it would be a mischaracterization to call young Moroccans apolitical or disinterested. Rather, Moroccan youth are finding new ways to interact with political and social issues. With the increase in access to the Internet over the last fifteen years, social media has become an important forum for Moroccan youth, who have often felt marginalized from more traditional forms of political participation like unions and political parties. This research explores the ways that Moroccan youth use political activism on social media to confirm and challenge their identities, looking specifically at the cultural and political contexts that define the way young Moroccans create and view content. Using the World Values Survey, Power 2 Youth research, and qualitative interviews, this research finds that while Moroccans under the age of 29 are limited in their political activity in traditional methods, they use social media as a forum to express their activist leanings and feelings toward current events, while still maintaining a careful awareness of their commentary on and relationship toward the state.

Key Words: youth activism; social media; political participation

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When I first applied to study abroad in Rabat this semester and began considering possible topics for my independent study project, I never imagined that I would be writing my project from my living room back here in the United States. Though I wish nothing more than to have been able to have completed my semester in Morocco and to have finished exploring the country and making Rabat feel even more like home, I am thankful for the time that I did have, and the wonderful people I met along the way.

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Introduction

As the world remains home during the 2020 COVID-19 crisis, individuals on all parts of the globe are turning to their cell phones for updates on the pandemic, communication with family and friends, and mindless scrolling to keep busy in a time where everything seems uncertain. The dependence on social media and the Internet is not a new phenomenon, but is heightened in a time when it has been forced to become a primary mode of communication for the masses. Besides its more rudimentary uses like photo sharing and status updates, social media has played an important role in giving voice to individuals who may not be able to speak in the public sphere. Based on the relative anonymity the Internet offers as well as the little perceived consequence tied to Internet interaction, it has been found that individuals are often likely to express their true selves more quickly and effortlessly on social media platforms (Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimmons 2002).

When looking at the Moroccan context, and more broadly the Arab world, we see that individuals are, and have been, using social media for these reasons. Two important processes that occur during interaction with social media are judgmental social comparison and informational social comparison, which relate to the ways individuals use social media to reflect on their own identity and to the information they receive about others and events (Yang, Holden, and Carter 2018). When applying these two factors to the Moroccan context, it can be said that Moroccan youth use the Internet and social media to collect and create information, but also to compare themselves to other youth in their activities both on and off the Internet. Based on these fundamental principles of understanding identity on social media, this research will further explore how youth political activism on social media confirms and challenges Moroccan youth identities,

especially focusing on the context of Morocco as a hybrid regime with a population weary of political efficacy weary of what they perceive as a low level of political efficacy.

According to a National Democratic Institute (NDI) study on Moroccan youth, only 31% expressed confidence in the government, with that number dropping to a 13% trust in political parties and parliament (Zuidema, 2017). Despite this, or perhaps because of perceived corruption and marginalization, the voter turnout among youth, and the Moroccan population in general, is chronically low and the degree of faith in the efficacy of government is often lower than that. In addition to a lack of confidence in governmental systems, particularly due to the nature of the hybrid regime, youth in Morocco also find issues with social services and educational resources that are available to them. Although there is a separation between Moroccan youth and traditional politics, they are becoming involved in politics in other ways – largely on social media and other Internet platforms. On social media, youth have been able to create their own version of a forum for activism, just as they did during Morocco's February 20th Revolution (Radi, 2017). As of now, Moroccan activism on social media has continued despite increased policing and repression of speech. It will be interesting to track as those elements come to a head, as Morocco nears another democratic election and individuals turn to their phones for information and activism as the Internet becomes increasingly crucial during the circumstances of the COVID-19 crisis.

Literature Review

Identity Processes on the Internet

Integral to understanding the motivations and limitations of youth political activism is the concept of identity. Identity is understood as the self-definitions that represent the various meanings attached to oneself (Hegtvedt and Johnson 2018). An individual's identity is not only formed, but also maintained, in constant interaction with others and the environment. Thus it is often said that identity is not how one views oneself, but rather, how one views how others view oneself. Though confusing in wording, when broken down the meaning is simple: our identity is dependent largely on how we perceive the ways that other people see us. Traditionally, research on identity formation has focused largely on in-person, face-to-face interaction. As new technology and social media becomes more prevalent in day to day life, new research has surfaced on the way identity formation differs when interaction takes place on Internet forums.

Seidman (2014) argues along this line of thought that the self is multi-faceted, and that each individual has both an actual self and an ideal self. While the actual self is how we currently see and present ourselves, the ideal self is who we want to be and how we want to be seen. Somewhere between these aspects lies the true self, which is made up of the qualities that individuals possess but don't activate or express in everyday life. Oftentimes, these are traits that one would want to have validated by others, but are unsure how to express in regular interaction (Seidman 2014). Research into social media usage has led to the conclusion that social media might be a forum for the expression of this true self.

In their research on the activation of true self on the Internet, Bargh et al. (2002) argue that the internet provides a unique opportunity for individuals to be relatively anonymous and free of

traditional societal constraints. The costs and risks of social sanctions are decreased, though this concept needs to be explored more in terms of the political risks that can be incurred from discussion on the Internet. Traditional barriers to expressing oneself like identity disconfirmation and judgement from peers may be lessened when interaction in non-traditional forums like social media (Bargh et al. 2002).

Social media provides opportunity for belonging and self-presentation, both factors that are integral to the development of self. As individuals, we desire our identity to be approved of and confirmed by others, a process called self-verification, and social media networks allow for an instant feeling of confirmation that may allow individuals to more openly express themselves (Seidman 2014). Social media, which has continued to become more prevalent in the day to day life of individuals around the world, is used for socializing, entertainment, status seeking, and information (Sabik, Falat, Malagnos 2019). Weaved into each of these motivations are processes of judgemental social comparison and informational social comparison, which relate to the ways individuals use social media to reflect on their own identity and to the information they receive about others and events. These processes allow individuals to participate in more identity reflection, which is the active engagement with one's identity and the attempt to understand different facets of self through identity exploration (Yang, Holden, and Carter 2018).

Social Media Activism

Research has been conducted on the ways that individuals, most notably youth, have used social media around the world to participate in social and political activism. "There has been an increased interest in the role social media plays in facilitating activism, particularly since the wave of protest that erupted in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008" (Allsop 2016). However, there

has been debate about whether social media encourages traditional forms of political involvement or hinders political behavior. In their book on the Egyptian Arab Spring protests, Gunning and Baron explain a paradox in media usage, that “while social media may facilitate debate, they may at the same time discourage offline activism” (Gunning and Baron 2014).

Though some believe social media provides an excuse for citizens to take the easy route through “slacktivism,” others argue that social media acts as a facilitator for more traditional methods of political activism, like voting or protesting (Allsop 2016). Three common features explain why social media is able to be a helpful mediator in protest: social media provides a low cost option to share content to those who have access, can reach many people at one time, and can create an interpersonal connection between the sharers and receivers of content (Larson 2019). In a 2013 study on Chilean activists on social media, Valenzuela found a relationship between those who frequent social media and those who attended street protests, with a significant portion of these accrediting their attendance to social media information. He suggests that “social media is a tool used for, but not a cause in itself, of political action” (Allsop 2016). Further, he examines three main explanations for the relationship between online presence and protest behavior, which explain the breadth of usage of social media for political use. Citizens and activists use social media for information, for opinion expression, and for activism (Valenzuela 2016).

Valenzuela’s uses of social media aid in the understanding of active citizenship in the modern age, but also fit into the research on the relationship between social media and identity. Informational social media usage in the context of activism refers to individuals using social media as a source of news, which leads to the informational social comparison that allows individuals to draw opinions and relations between personal situations and grievances and that of others (Yang,

Holden, and Carter 2018). This informational social comparison, combined with relevant information about social issues, may be a cause for individuals who use social media to move their participation onto the streets. The opinion expression aspect of social activism on the Internet, defined as the use of social media to express political opinions, also feeds into this idea and subsequently also leads people to participate in activism (Valenzuela 2016). Individuals seek verification of their opinions, and through subsequent feelings of solidarity, are more willing to take action. The activism relationship between media and participation combines these two ideas, as individuals use media for “joining causes and finding mobilizing information” (Valenzuela 2016).

Alongside the facilitator role of the Internet in activism movements, “social media is fundamentally changing political behavior and challenging existing power structures in society in a potentially revolutionary way” (Allsop 2016). In their research on new media in the Middle East, Karaguezian and Badine (2013) continue to explore this line of thought. They argue that new technologies, including Internet forums and social media, have shaped dynamics of societies, shifting away from traditional centralized structures and moving toward a more horizontal distribution. This led to shifts in the ways power and information was able to be shared among individuals and communities, and played an important role in the social and political changes taking place in spaces and institutions outside of the Internet (Karaguezian and Badine 2013).

The Arab Spring, Youth Activism, and Social Media

The argument for the “paradigm shift” occurring alongside the rise of new media is supported by research on the activism that occurred in the 2011 Arab Spring. After the 2008 financial crisis, civil society in Europe, the Arab world, and South America took to the streets in

movements for opportunity and liberation, and societies were “awakening... due to the severe nature of the political and economic crises they face” (Cavorta 2012). These protests were given nicknames like “The Twitter Revolution” or the “Facebook Revolution” and headlines in international newspapers across the world commented on the integral role in social media in these protests. In fact, most modern protests have used social media in some way as an organizational and informational strategy (Larson 2019). While it is important to note the important role of social media in these protests, especially in those during the Arab Spring, it is also necessary to recognize that social media can only go so far. Larson argues while the three common features of social media – low costs, large audience, and personal sources – can make protests larger and occur more often, there need to be other conditions allowing for the protests to take shape (Larson 2019).

In the case of the Arab Spring, other shifts were happening alongside the rise of social media that allowed for widespread protests to occur across the region. Prior to the Arab Spring, “with a mixture of repression, co-optation and divide-and-conquer strategies, regimes had virtually emptied civil society activism of its counter-power abilities” (Cavorta 2012). Traditional civil society groups, in both the liberal and Islamist sectors, were allowed room to operate, but also were strengthening the authoritarianism of the regime in the process. The societal uprisings against regimes across the Arab world thus did not rise up from these traditional parts of civil society, but rather from pockets of activism that existed outside of these spaces. Individual citizens with previously little access to mobilize began to come together and use their networks, one of these being social media (Cavorta 2012). That these pockets were able to come together in a time of desperation “testifies to society’s vitality, even under the repressive authoritarian measures of the regimes in power” (Cavorta 2012).

In the 2011 Arab Spring protests, youth were an integral subsection of the activated citizens who took to the streets protesting for dignity, bread, and freedom. Previously, Arab youth had been written off as apolitical and disinterested in the affairs of the state. Youth make up a significant portion of the population, but have been known for low turnout and political participation. A study in Egypt at the Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic studies concluded that the majority of young people in Egypt, one of the countries that experienced an Arab Spring revolution and period of protest, show no interest in politics or political participation. Included in this report was data showing that only a slight majority consumed political news regularly, and that an overwhelming majority knew little about political policies of different parties. The two main reasons for this lack of political interest were determined to be a fear of politics and a lack of family encouragement (Lange 2011).

Yet, despite the previous characterizations of Arab youth, thousands took to the street across the Arab World in 2011 and the years following. It is important to note the conditions leading to this shift in participation that encouraged this previously marginalized pocket of society to take action. As Cavorta (2012) explained, these informal groups were activated because of specific events or triggers. As economic growth was improving after the 2008 world wide recession, youth were among those left out of the benefits. Arab countries were experiencing extremely low reporting rates of accountability and satisfaction among the population. Citizens, especially youth, were frustrated with high levels of corruption and low levels of opportunity, especially in the job market. This was especially true for young graduates who, after obtaining degrees, faced a market with little to no space for them (Ghanem 2016). Most importantly, youth

felt excluded from whatever small growth there was, leading to growing frustrations about their future.

Cavorta explains that the lack of traditional interest and affiliation among youth actually served as a benefit in the 2011 protests, as the unaffiliated activists were more ideologically flexible and thus able to create effective coalitions to come together under a unified front of desiring change. Young people, already connected through social media, were able to take to the web with enthusiasm to discuss these grievances, and with the closure of free spaces of discussion, social media became more and more of a necessity for individuals to discuss their problems. “Once the wall of fear crumbled, even the repression seemed to be an incentive to continue with the protests,” and soon, thousands took note from the ideas spread on social media and stepped out onto the streets (Cavorta 2012).

February 20 and Morocco’s Arab Spring

Morocco’s Arab Spring revolution came in the form of February 20, which “kicked off the social, economic, and political agenda in 2011” (Radi 2011). The protests were products of growing challenges against the regime following rises in unemployment and policy and a withdrawal of the state from public services. “The paradox between the skyrocketing costs of living and falling income, when available, drove scores of bitter young graduates into poverty, unemployment or the practice of a job that neither matched nor valued their university skills” (Radi 2011). In addition to social grievances, Moroccan citizens of all ages felt the elections did not respond to any real concerns of the people, and youth especially felt under-represented, shunning the elections and institutions that encouraged their marginalization. Moroccan students had organized previously, with movements starting after independence in 1956 (Mounsif 2018).

Students and other protesters took to the street on February 20th, 2011, calling for bread, freedom, and social justice. Despite beatings and harassment, protests continued while King Mohammed VI declared a commitment to constitutional reform and separation of powers, and though the regime never fell, numbers dwindled and opposition silenced as a new constitution was written and promises were made to ensure human rights (McManus 2016). The Moroccan experience of the Arab Spring, though not resulting in regime change, the movement's introduction of deliberative street politics "offered those engaged in it an opportunity for their voices to be heard, to exercise dignified agency in the midst of repressive sociopolitical surroundings, and the solidarity of their peers in a shared battle for a more free and equal Morocco" (McManus 2016).

This movement in Morocco initially emerged "from Facebook where it issued its initial statement for Moroccans 'to demonstrate peacefully'"(Radi 2017). Social media continued to have an important role through the progression of the protests, as photos and videos of both the activities of the protest and flaws of the regimes were posted to the internet with commentary. In essence, this strategy, as explained by both Cavorta and Radi, broke the wall of fear among citizens, creating a shared identity and group consciousness that social media has the unique capabilities of fostering quickly and in such a wide manner. The Internet in February of 2011 also allowed for quick dissemination of information and the convergence of opinions, which allowed the leaders of the movement to not just trigger mobilization, but also provide a seemingly valid alternative to the information of the regime. The youth involved in Morocco's movement benefited, like in other parts of the Arab world, from their relative lack of party sectarianism and

leadership battles, which contributed to group solidarity as the movement progressed with an organized message.

Moroccan Youth Activism

Now, nearly ten years after the February 20th movement, Morocco still faces many of the issues that led to the 2011 protests calling for change. Much of the Moroccan population still struggles economically, and because the informal work force employs around 2.4 million Moroccans, many are left without economic and social protections (Elouazi 2018). There are still feelings that there are not enough high quality jobs for the number of graduates of higher education, and feelings of doubt towards traditional political institutions remain. Despite the continuation of these issues, there has not been recent large scale protest movements to the extent of February 20. There have been smaller movements like MALI (Alternative Movement for Individual Freedoms), which campaigns for citizens rights to individual freedom. This movement has focused its campaigns on social media, beginning as a Facebook group, and since has publicized violations of individual freedom and led many campaigns fighting for the protections of marginalized groups.

A possible explanation for the lack of physical expression of grievances by youth in public places comes from the repression of speech and action that challenges traditional institutions. Despite the adoption of the 2016 Press and Publications Code, which has been framed as a step in the right direction for press freedom, nonviolent speech offenses that depict the monarchy negatively have continued despite protections. Included in the penal code is the criminalization of “causing harm to Islam and the monarchy, giving offense to the king or members of the royal family, and inciting against territorial integrity” (Goldstein). Thus, non-traditional media has

played an important role in modern Moroccan activism, as it has yet to experience the same degree of repression as traditional media and protest methods.

Methodology

The research design for this project combines multiple data collection and analysis methods. Given the circumstances surrounding COVID-19 and unexpectedly having to return from Morocco, field data was unable to be collected in a large scale as was intended. Thus, the bulk of the research was no longer able to be first hand data in the form of either survey or interview research. In order to still involve primary data in my work and to better understand the current situation in Morocco, I opted to conduct a small number of virtual interviews.

The limited scope of my qualitative research subsequently led to limited sampling opportunities. In order to find participants to interview for my research, my advisor Professor Mourad Mikinsi connected me with students at the Ibn Tofail University in Kenitra, Morocco. After extending the opportunity to students, I received the contact information of five potential participants. Upon reaching out and explaining my research and intentions, I heard back from two students who were willing to participate via video chat. These interviews were both conducted via WhatsApp video chat, and the participants received a basic outline of the questions prior to the interview so they could familiarize themselves with the questions and prepare for further discussion. Before beginning the interview, I obtained oral consent from each participant and made sure they were aware that they could stop at any time. In addition to these two interviews conducted over video chat, one additional interview was conducted with a third student from Ibn Tofail University. This interview was conducted via email, and along with the questions a written consent was also sent to the participant (Appendix 1).

It was important to recognize my positionality in both the structure of these interviews as well as in the content of our discussions, and also note the barriers that existed in conducting this

research. To start, I used English as the language of the conversation which, although studied in school at a high level, is not the first language of the students that I interviewed. In order to alleviate this possible barrier, I sent the questions in advance in order to allow participants time to familiarize themselves with the topics. Another issue that came up was that because the participants are confined to the home, I wanted to make sure that they were comfortable talking about topics such as politics and their social media usage given their location.

Given the topic of my research, it was important for me to recognize my own biases, as I am an American student from a country that has what the West defines as a free and fair democracy. In addition, I was only in Morocco for a short period of time and was basing many of my assumptions on this limited scope. From my standpoint, it was easy to assume that since the system in Morocco is different from my own that it is automatically less representative or ineffective. My experience with freedom of speech and speech repression has been widely different from that in Morocco, but I wanted to ensure that I was not judging the differences and rather looking at how these conditions have affected Moroccan civil society. Despite my own point of view and judgments, I hoped to enter into conversations with an open mind and ability to recognize that politics and norms are part of a larger social and cultural environment of a place.

In addition to the two interviews that I conducted, I decided to continue my research by analysing prior research and data focusing specifically on the Moroccan experience of youth activism and politics. In order to do this, I looked firstly at the World Values Survey in order to understand more about the Moroccan political and social context. The World Values Survey is a global research project that has looked at the values and beliefs of individuals around the world since 1981. The most recent set of data, Wave 6, was collected between 2010 and 2014, and in

2011 data was collected in Morocco. It is certainly a limitation that this data is not collected more recently, but with many questions pertaining to political participation as well as a large and diverse sample size, it is a valuable resource to analyse. The target population for the World Values Survey 6 is all people aged 18 years or older residing in private households in each country. The World Values survey researchers used representative sampling methods and a stratification scheme to adjust for the population and to make the sampling method more efficient and representative. When looking at the data from the World Values Survey, I specifically looked at the responses from the male and female participants under the age of 29. Out of the total sample size of 1,200 participants, 491 respondents fall into this age group that I am considering as Moroccan youth. Because I was looking only at responses for one age group (those under 29) and the World Values Survey country results sheet already included reports divided by gender and age range, I did not have to perform cross-tabulations and chi-square tests in order to draw conclusions about youth compared to other age groups and to analyse general societal and cultural trends.

The World Values Survey, while representative of the Moroccan population and covering a wide variety of subjects, is dated and does not focus specifically on the population and subject of interest to this research study. In order to draw more conclusions upon the specific population of youth in Morocco, I looked at the 2016 study titled Power 2 Youth - Youth Activism in Morocco: Exclusion, Agency and the Search for Inclusion. This study was conducted by Saloua Zerhouni and Azeddine Akesbi from Mohammed V University in Rabat in 2016 in attempts to expand on the research of political participation among Moroccan youth, which previously only looked at formal participation. The research attempts to explore alternative modes of youth engagement, and the factors that promote or inhibit youth participation in politics. The data collected came from

qualitative surveys conducted between April and October 2015 in focus groups and interviews in Rabat, Casablanca, Tangier, and Marrakech. “The focus groups and interviews aimed at examining youth’s perceptions about their conditions, identifying factors that promote or limit the involvements and participation of young people in the political sphere, and analysis youth agency” (Zerhouni and Akesbi 2016). Participants in the study were between the ages of 18 to 30 years old that were either currently in university or holders of BA or MA degrees. Though I did not obtain the raw data set for analysis, I used the in-depth Power 2 Youth report as an important source of data on this topic.

The limitations due to the COVID-19 crisis and the distance created between myself as researcher and the subjects of interest led to this approach to research involving 3 distinct sets of data. However, each plays into each other in a way that allows a cumulative understanding of youth politics and activism in Morocco. The World Values Survey data set provides background and context on the political and social situation in Morocco after the 2011 Arab Spring movement. Zerhouni and Akesbi’s 2016 Power 2 Youth research study dives into the issue of youth political participation and discusses places of activism like social media. The interviews conducted with students from Ibn Tofail University in Kenitra provide supplementary qualitative responses to these two larger research studies, as well as providing updated and first hand accounts specifically looking at the issue of social media in Moroccan youth activism.

Findings and Analysis

Political Disinterest, or Disillusion - World Values Survey

Participants of the World Values Survey were asked to indicate how important certain aspects of their life are, including family, friends, leisure time, work, religion, and politics. Individuals were asked to rank these facets on a scale ranging from “very important” to “not at all important.” When asked about religion, 86.6% of respondents under the age of 29 reported that it is very important to them, while less than half a percent reported that it is not at all important (Fig 1). A similar trend followed for the question on family, with 91.9% percent of the 491 young Moroccans saying that family is very important in their life. Similar trends occurred for the different age groups when asked these same questions (Fig 2). When the question asked about politics, the numbers look quite different. Only 7.7% of participants under the age of 29 answered that politics were very important to them, and the highest percentage of respondents, 51.5%, said that politics are not all important in their lives (Fig 3). For all age groups, politics was much more heavily leaning toward the “not at all important” answer than when asked about work, friends, family, and religion.

Participants were also asked about the qualities that children can be encouraged to learn at home and were told to mention the ones that they consider especially important. These characteristics included determination, religious faith, generosity, obedience, thrift, tolerance and respect, imagination, independence, hard work, and responsibility. The group under the age of 29 prioritized independence, imagination, determination, and self-expression more often than those in the 30-49 and the 50+ age groups (Fig 4). Those under the age of 29 were less likely to mention obedience or hard work as being important qualities to teach their children. These two sets of

questions provide a snapshot of the paradox that is Moroccan youth. Moroccan youth, and Arab youth in general, have often been characterized as apolitical, and while only 7.7% of Moroccan youth reported that politics is very important to them, this number is even lower, 6.8% and 2.0%, for those ages 30-49 and 50+ respectively (Fig 3). The lack of overt political interest is not a youth problem, but an issue spanning generations and social groups. However, the questions about important qualities in some way challenge the narrative of Arab youth adhering to familial and parental values. Moroccan's under the age of 29 mentioned qualities that encourage moving away from tradition and standing up for personal values more often than older age groups when asked the same question.

The more recent research showing low numbers of youth membership in political parties is supported by the data in the 2011 World Values Survey. In 2016, voter turnout rate for all ages in the national election tapped in at 43% (El Amraoui 2016). Participants were asked about their membership status and activity level for a variety of organizations, including political parties. 94.3% of the 491 Moroccans under the age of 29 reported that they are not a member. Active membership was only slightly higher for those in the older age groups, though still quite low (Fig 5). It must be said, however, that membership in other organizations including charities and environmental groups was also reported to be extremely low. Alongside the low numbers of membership in political parties, political interest among all age groups was also found to be very low. Only 3.3% of the 491 youth participants reported that they were very interested in politics, and a majority of the sample reported that they are not at all interested (50.5%) or not very interested (31.2%) (Fig 6).

With the survey being written and administered in 2011, the questions asking about political participation all refer to traditional methods of participation, including strikes, boycotts, and petitions. Less than 10% of those under the age of 29 reported having participated in these forms of activism, and around the same number answered that they might in the future participate in some form of activism. A large percentage, ranging between 70-80% of the participants, answered that they would never participate (Fig 7).

These numbers, though collected in 2011, still remain true as formal methods of political participation among all age groups remain low. Another factor that has remained relatively standard over time is trust in government. According to a National Democratic Institute (NDI) study on youth in Morocco, only 31% expressed confidence in government, and 13% reported that they trusted political parties and parliament (Zuidema, 2017). The World Values Study report from 2011 drew similar conclusions from its sample. Only 4.7% of participants under the age of 29 reported a great deal of confidence in political parties, and a combined 70% answered they have not very much or no confidence at all (Fig 8). While 17.5% expressed confidence in national government, the numbers still heavily lean toward little to no confidence (Fig 9). In addition to political institutions, confidence and trust of the press is also reportedly low among all age groups, but especially those under 29. A measly 12.4% have a great deal of confidence in the press, and a 54% majority answered “not very much” or “none at all.” (Fig 10).

This data is integral in understanding the extent of distrust and dissatisfaction with government and traditional institutions. In 2011, coinciding with the Arab Spring, it makes sense that when asked to judge different types of governing styles, 72.5% of those under 29 said that having a democratic political system was very good. This number was significantly higher than the

52.6% of those 50 and older who said a democratic system was very good (Fig 11). Young people in Morocco have expressed distrust in government and institutions, as well as a desire for democratic systems. They have also noted that they believe in independence, perseverance, and responsibility, and yet they are not taking part in the political participation that is traditionally considered a political responsibility. Thus, they must be active in other ways.

New Forms of Activism - Power 2 Youth

The 2016 Power2Youth research study was an attempt to explore these other ways in which young people in Morocco are remaining active and interested in politics. According to Zerhouni and Akesbi, existing “empirical studies on Moroccan youth are limited in numbers and provide only partial answers about youth political attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions of the institutional framework” (Zerhouni and Akesbi 2016). The study makes an important point as to not make a hard distinction between active and passive and formal and informal participation, but rather to look at how youth move in and out of these spaces and modes and create new ways to have their voices heard.

Even before the new 2011 constitution following the February 20 Arab Spring protests, the regime created policies and campaigns aimed at encouraging youth to carry out their civic duty and vote, and with the voting age lowered to 18 in 2003, youth technically have been given formal spaces to participate politically. Despite this, Moroccan youth voting turnout has been relatively low, and membership in political parties has been even lower. One of the factors causing this is the fragmented party system, which has led to trade unions and further segmentation of formal politics, leaving young people to the margins. One space where membership has flourished is in associational life, which traditionally has been controlled by the regime promoting and sponsoring

pro-regime associations. New voices, many of them from young Moroccans, have come forward in the form of human rights and cultural associations. While a 2014 study by the Ministry of Interior only shows that 8% of associations are created and led by young people, this number is supplemented by the many involvements of youth in clubs and associations at their universities.

As access to the Internet has increased substantially over the last 15 years, the Internet has also become a place of informal activity for youth, who “took advantage of connection tools to create new spaces to socialize, network, play and voice their demands and grievances” (Zerhouni and Akesbi 2016). The virtual sphere led to a new type of activism, where young activists used their critical voices to inform and mobilize others on a variety of issues. The researchers do note, however, that the virtual sphere in Morocco is complicated because despite the low barriers to entry and access, there are still restrictions by the state. In fact, open discussion on the Internet has provided a new way for the government to stifle political activism, to spy on activists and disrupt campaigns.

An important aspect of the Power 2 Youth research was the focus on youth culture and youth identity. One of the main struggles that they found participants face is the tension between the desire to become more autonomous on one hand and the traditional Moroccan familial structures and relations on the other. In addition to the economic tensions this causes many young Moroccans, this dichotomy spills into ideological differences as well. One participant explained that his parents fear him getting involved in politics, and another explained that his beliefs in individual and collective freedoms often cause arguments between him and his more conservative parents. Another commonality among youth participants was a feeling of frustration towards the many prohibitions in society, and that in society you cannot express yourself freely. Many

expressed frustration with the ambiguities in the legal system, noting that it is often opponents of the political system that suffer from the arbitrary rulings.

Youth involved in the research expressed many grievances with the educational system, and some even consider this the core reason for social disparities and other issues later in life. One of the other issues expressed by participants was unemployment, which is especially high among young people. Thus, youth have many reasons to be frustrated with social services and the government that provides them. The participants often used the Arabic words *tahmish* and *alkama* meaning marginalization and oppression respectively to describe “the difficulties and pressures they are faced with” (Zerhouni and Akesbi 2016).

The feelings of disillusionment spread into youth perceptions of and participation in politics. Many feel as though elections are manipulated and that weak political parties responsible for youth disengagement, as youth feel marginalized from party leadership and are often dismissed as young and naive by elites. Youth exclusion from traditional modes of participation “pushes some of them to combine their activism within political parties with other modes of participation such as social media” (Zerhouni and Akesbi 2016). Participants explained that social networks provide an opportunity for information to flow, and for individuals to express themselves. This self-expression aspect of social media put forth by participants supports prior research on the way individuals express their identity differently and more openly on the Internet than in face-to-face interaction, and as one participant explained, social media “is a good open space with a positive effect on freedom” (Zerhouni and Akesbi 2016). Most of the participants in the Power 2 Youth research believed in their own agency, and stressed the importance of using their different methods

of participation - be it associations, social media posts, or street protests - in bringing about a gradual process of change.

Qualitative Interviews - Understanding Moroccan Youth in 2020

The data from the three qualitative interviews further explores the topics of youth usage of social media and perceptions of others on social media. Each of the participants, a 27 year old male, 21 year old male, and 20 year old female, reported that they use social media in their daily lives, albeit for different purposes and in search of different content. A commonality among the participants was a consistent use of social media, ranging from 2-6 hours a day. Each individual noted that they use certain platforms like Whatsapp mainly for communication with friends and family. When it came to other popular platforms, like Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, the reasons diversified between the participants. The mentioned usages of social media echo Sabik, Falat, and Malagnos 2019 research, which found the main uses of social media to be entertainment, status seeking, and information. The Moroccan participants touched mainly upon the entertainment and information aspects, with the status seeking and self evaluation occurring on a more subconscious level. The mentioned purposes also line up with Valenzuela's research on protest movements, which found that activists mainly use social media for information, opinion expression, and activism.

While one participant noted that he usually uses social media for browsing and to keep himself busy when he has free time, the female participant explained that she “uses social media to interact with people, and share [her] opinions and beliefs with different people from different places with different backgrounds.” The older male participant mentioned that he uses Facebook for a variety of different reasons that fit into the research conducted by Zerhouni and Akesbi about

Morocco and into the more general research on social media usage. In addition to personal uses like updates from his friends and family, he explained that he “follows many pages and accounts that share information about social problems in society.” When further probed on examples of social issues that he sees on the Internet, he brought up the example of people using social media to help bring awareness of certain instances of struggle that a family or individual may face in hopes of gaining support. The ability to create solidarity quickly and among a large group is a unique feature that the Internet provides in this instance, and the participant’s explanation of drawing public attention to individual issues on platforms like the Internet is reminiscent of the way that a small event can trigger a large scale movement when enough attention is created.

Just as in the Power 2 Youth and World Values Survey research, the three participants were asked about their involvement with politics, and were asked to discuss further their participation in certain forms of political action. Responses varied slightly, though overall there was a low involvement in traditional politics by all three participants. The female participant further explained her reasoning, noting that due to her father’s work and her uncle’s warnings to her sister, who chose to become involved in political discourse, she chose to remove herself from politics for her own safety and the safety of those she cared about. She did also note, in a statement that fits the data on perceptions of corruption and mistrust toward the government, that “as a person [she] is not interested in the politics in Morocco especially [as] things remain the same with voting or not... for [her], politics is just a huge game where citizens are the victims and those who have power are the ones controlling everything.” This disillusionment with the government and its lack of representation for the marginalized is not a unique experience, but rather something that is definitive of the youth experience in Morocco.

Another participant furthered these points, explained that it is difficult to get involved in politics in Morocco, arguing that there is “no direct access to political parties, [it is] too dangerous to get too involved in politics, [and he] knows people who have been persecuted for gathering.” Despite this, he is interested in politics, and has attended student gatherings to talk about politics on campus. The younger male participant explained that one of his main reasons for having such low involvement in protests or other forms of social activism is that the goals are often not aligned with the social issues he cares about. One of the main issues he discussed was voter fraud and bribery in government, but he says he never sees protests about stuff like this that “actually matters.” In fact, he explained that it is hard to find people talking about important issues, even on the Internet. Personally, he avoids politics on social media because oftentimes people post fake content, or avoid posting topics that really matter because they either fear repression, or worse, believe that corruption is still going to continue happening even if they do speak up.

Conversely, the other male participant noted that when he wants to find out about important issues, the Internet is where he goes. Some important issues are hidden from the mainstream media, and are often talked about instead on social media. When asked for an example, the participant explained how when the government came up with new laws that citizens viewed as infringing on freedom of speech, activists took to Facebook to discuss trying to avoid this law getting passed. Another example of the usage of social media to discuss controversial issues was the use of Facebook to create a campaign against the government decision to add an extra hour to the school day. According to the participant, individuals used Facebook to create a unified platform meant to reach the government and a larger portion of the population. In addition to the

Internet being used to spread information and solidarity, in this instance it was also used as a facilitator, allowing frustrated students to organize protests on the street.

Though the participants noted benefits of social media as a way to express controversial topics and be confronted with differences of opinion, they also disclosed the issues they find with social media in Morocco. Two of the participants pointed out that the commentary on Facebook is often irrelevant, and that in many instances people start fighting in the comment section about politics in a disrespectful way. For this reason, all three participants said they use other sources of news in addition to social media. The other main issue is the fear of punishment for discussing politics too openly. While there is an abundance of social media influencers and channels that speak about new laws and issues with the government, they run the risk of arrest for crossing the traditional red lines of Moroccan media, mainly talking negatively about the King. One participant discussed an instance of a social media being arrested for 5 years for insulting the King while discussing a political issue on Facebook live. In this case, the police used an arbitrary accusation to arrest the individual, though his real offense was speaking against the King. For this reason, many influencers choose to speak anonymously on the Internet, in hopes of spreading information while limiting the danger that they put themselves in.

Conclusion

Moroccan youth have been characterized as apolitical by elders, party leaders, and researchers. When looking at traditional forms of political participation, this argument may be supported. Youth are voting, joining political parties, and protesting in relatively small numbers. However, it would be wrong to say that youth are inactive members of society in Morocco. In fact, young Moroccans have found new ways to get involved with politics and social issues that extend beyond the traditional modes of political participation. This research was an attempt to understand the ways in which youth are remaining active in one of these forums, the Internet. Thus, this research set out to discover how youth political activism, specifically on social media, confirms and challenges Moroccan youth identities.

Moroccan youth use social media as a forum to express their activist leanings and feelings toward current events, while still maintaining a careful awareness of their commentary on and relationship toward the state. Young Moroccans expressed that they and their peers worry about the content that they post, especially if it is controversial. This applies specifically when it is content that speaks negatively on the government, especially the King. Despite worries about posting this type of content, many of Moroccan youth turn to social media when looking for news and opinions that they cannot find on mainstream media sources. In addition to finding ways to be involved in politics on social media, young Moroccans are also becoming politically active through associations at their universities and by encouraging conversation with peers. While there has not been large scale youth protest like we saw in 2011 with the February 20 movement, youth are using social media and their associations to organize thoughts and create group solidarity, and in some instances this has led to street action.

More research needs to be conducted in order to fully understand the youth situation in Morocco. It would be interesting to see if the trends in the limited qualitative research I conducted would carry over into research on a larger and more diverse sample size of Moroccan youth. In addition, as the next wave of World Values Surveys are being completed, it would be valuable to see how responses have changed since 2011, especially considering the many social, economic, political, and technological developments that have occurred in the last 10 years.

There were many limitations to this project, many of them due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While this has created many personal challenges, it has also provides an interesting opportunity for further research. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the world will continue to be faced with lasting economic and social difficulties and changes. It will be interesting to see how this pans out in Morocco, especially when looking at the youth issue. One of the triggers for the Arab Spring protests in 2011 was economic struggles and unemployment, which is a major possibility looking forward. Thus, it will be important to watch as the world recovers, and see who is left behind from the recovery process. Young citizens, a typically marginalized group, may become active once again in the face of these new difficulties. Social media and the Internet, which have become essential for many during this time of crisis, may once again play an important role in the activism that we see once the dust clears.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Consent Statement and Interview Guide

Hello! Thank you for choosing to participate in my research, which covers the topic of social media activism and youth identity. I am hoping to learn a little bit more about you and your relationship with politics and social media through this conversation. As a reminder, you are welcome to stop at any time and if you are uncomfortable with answering any question, please feel free not to answer. If you have any questions for me, you may stop me at any point. I will be recording our conversation so I can use it in my research. Would you like to proceed?

1. How old are you?
2. What year are you in university and what are you studying there?
3. Do you live on your own or with your family?
4. If your friends had to describe you in 3 words, how would they describe you?
5. If your parents had to describe you in 3 words, how would they describe you?
6. If a stranger, after having one initial conversation, had to describe you in 3 words, how would they describe you?
7. If you had to describe yourself in 3 words, what would those words be?
8. What social media platforms do you use?
 - a. What are your main purposes for each social media platform?
 - b. How much time a week do you spend on social media?
9. If you were to describe what you usually post on social media how would you describe?
10. How would you describe the content that you usually view on social media
11. If someone who came across your social media profile had to describe you in 3 words, what would they say?
12. If you had to describe yourself on social media in 3 words, what would they be?
13. When you want political news/updates, what sources do you use?
14. Do you use social media to get political updates? When and where?
15. Describe your involvement with politics
 - a. Voting, protests, activism
16. What are your feelings towards those who comment on the regime on social media?
 - a. Do you see a lot of this? From who?

Figure 1. Indicate how important it is in your life: RELIGION

	TOTAL	Sex		Age		
		Male	Female	Up to 29	30-49	50 and more
Very important	88.9	89.4	88.4	86.6	90.4	90.9
Rather important	9.8	9.7	9.9	11.8	8.3	8.7
Not very important	0.8	0.5	1.2	1.0	0.9	0.4
Not at all important	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.2	0.4	-
No answer	0.1	0.2	-	0.2	-	-
Don't know	0.1	-	0.2	0.2	-	-
(N)	(1,200)	(596)	(604)	(491)	(456)	(253)

Figure 2. Indicate how important it is in your life: FAMILY

	TOTAL	Sex		Age		
		Male	Female	Up to 29	30-49	50 and more
Very important	90.7	89.6	91.7	91.9	89.3	90.9
Rather important	8.5	9.1	7.9	7.7	9.9	7.5
Not very important	0.3	0.5	0.2	-	0.4	0.8
Not at all important	0.3	0.5	0.2	0.2	0.4	0.4
No answer	0.2	0.3	-	0.2	-	0.4
(N)	(1,200)	(596)	(604)	(491)	(456)	(253)

Figure 3. Indicate how important it is in your life: POLITICS

	TOTAL	Sex		Age		
		Male	Female	Up to 29	30-49	50 and more
Very important	6.2	7.6	4.8	7.7	6.8	2.0
Rather important	9.3	11.6	7.1	11.0	9.6	5.5
Not very important	22.0	23.7	20.4	24.2	21.3	19.0
Not at all important	53.5	50.7	56.3	51.5	52.9	58.5
No answer	6.2	5.0	7.5	3.9	7.2	9.1
Don't know	2.8	1.5	4.0	1.6	2.2	5.9
(N)	(1,200)	(596)	(604)	(491)	(456)	(253)

Figure 4. Qualities that should be encouraged at home: INDEPENDENCE, IMAGINATION, SELF-EXPRESSION

	TOTAL	Sex		Age		
		Male	Female	Up to 29	30-49	50 and more
Mentioned	43.0	41.9	44.0	46.6	40.6	40.3
Not mentioned	57.0	58.1	56.0	53.4	59.4	59.7
(N)	(1,200)	(596)	(604)	(491)	(456)	(253)

	TOTAL	Sex		Age		
		Male	Female	Up to 29	30-49	50 and more
Mentioned	23.9	23.8	24.0	31.6	20.6	15.0
Not mentioned	76.1	76.2	76.0	68.4	79.4	85.0
(N)	(1,200)	(596)	(604)	(491)	(456)	(253)

	TOTAL	Sex		Age		
		Male	Female	Up to 29	30-49	50 and more
Mentioned	29.7	33.4	26.0	33.4	25.0	30.8
Not mentioned	70.3	66.6	74.0	66.6	75.0	69.2
(N)	(1,200)	(596)	(604)	(491)	(456)	(253)

Figure 5. Membership status: POLITICAL PARTY

	TOTAL	Sex		Age		
		Male	Female	Up to 29	30-49	50 and more
Not a member	92.1	91.4	92.7	94.3	91.2	89.3
Inactive member	1.9	2.5	1.3	1.4	2.4	2.0
Active member	1.2	1.5	1.0	1.2	2.0	-
No answer	2.3	3.0	1.7	1.2	2.6	4.0
Don't know	2.4	1.5	3.3	1.8	1.8	4.7
(N)	(1,200)	(596)	(604)	(491)	(456)	(253)

Figure 6. How interested would you say you are in politics?

	TOTAL	Sex		Age		
		Male	Female	Up to 29	30-49	50 and more
Very interested	3.2	4.0	2.3	3.3	3.9	1.6
Somewhat interested	11.8	15.1	8.6	14.3	10.3	9.9
Not very interested	28.2	30.0	26.5	31.2	28.1	22.9
Not at all interested	53.4	48.7	58.1	50.5	53.7	58.5
No answer	1.2	0.5	1.8	-	1.5	2.8
Don't know	2.2	1.7	2.6	0.8	2.4	4.3
(N)	(1,200)	(596)	(604)	(491)	(456)	(253)

Figure 7. Participation in PEACEFUL DEMONSTRATIONS, STRIKES, PETITIONS

	TOTAL	Sex		Age		
		Male	Female	Up to 29	30-49	50 and more
Have done	8.6	9.6	7.6	11.0	8.8	3.6
Might do	9.3	9.4	9.3	12.4	8.6	4.7
Would never do	74.7	74.5	74.8	72.9	75.2	77.1
No answer	2.9	2.9	3.0	1.0	3.1	6.3
Don't know	4.5	3.7	5.3	2.6	4.4	8.3
(N)	(1,200)	(596)	(604)	(491)	(456)	(253)

	TOTAL	Sex		Age		
		Male	Female	Up to 29	30-49	50 and more
Have done	6.6	6.7	6.5	10.2	5.0	2.4
Might do	10.5	9.2	11.8	13.8	9.2	6.3
Would never do	75.9	77.9	74.0	72.5	78.9	77.1
No answer	3.2	3.5	2.8	1.0	3.1	7.5
Don't know	3.8	2.7	5.0	2.4	3.7	6.7
(N)	(1,200)	(596)	(604)	(491)	(456)	(253)

	TOTAL	Sex		Age		
		Male	Female	Up to 29	30-49	50 and more
Have done	3.7	4.7	2.6	4.3	3.5	2.8
Might do	9.0	9.1	8.9	13.2	7.2	4.0
Would never do	79.7	79.7	79.6	78.2	81.6	79.1
No answer	2.4	2.2	2.6	0.6	2.9	5.1
Don't know	5.2	4.4	6.1	3.7	4.8	9.1
(N)	(1,200)	(596)	(604)	(491)	(456)	(253)

Figure 8. Confidence in: POLITICAL PARTIES

	TOTAL	Sex		Age		
		Male	Female	Up to 29	30-49	50 and more
A great deal	7.3	7.0	7.6	4.7	7.9	11.5
Quite a lot	17.9	18.0	17.9	17.3	18.6	17.8
Not very much	37.0	39.1	34.9	36.9	38.6	34.4
None at all	27.8	28.2	27.3	34.4	25.2	19.4
No answer	4.4	3.7	5.1	2.9	4.8	6.7
Don't know	5.6	4.0	7.1	3.9	4.8	10.3
(N)	(1,200)	(596)	(604)	(491)	(456)	(253)

Figure 9. Confidence in: NATIONAL GOVERNMENT

	TOTAL	Sex		Age		
		Male	Female	Up to 29	30-49	50 and more
A great deal	19.6	19.0	20.2	17.5	20.2	22.5
Quite a lot	24.8	23.8	25.7	25.3	25.2	22.9
Not very much	31.7	32.0	31.3	31.6	32.5	30.4
None at all	17.0	19.3	14.7	21.0	14.9	13.0
No answer	3.0	2.7	3.3	1.8	3.3	4.7
Don't know	4.0	3.2	4.8	2.9	3.9	6.3
(N)	(1,200)	(596)	(604)	(491)	(456)	(253)

Figure 10. Confidence in: THE PRESS

	TOTAL	Sex		Age		
		Male	Female	Up to 29	30-49	50 and more
A great deal	14.1	12.8	15.4	12.4	15.4	15.0
Quite a lot	29.1	30.2	28.0	26.9	31.8	28.5
Not very much	31.8	34.9	28.8	37.5	30.0	24.1
None at all	13.9	13.8	14.1	16.7	11.6	12.6
No answer	3.8	3.4	4.3	2.2	3.9	6.7
Don't know	7.2	5.0	9.4	4.3	7.2	13.0
(N)	(1,200)	(596)	(604)	(491)	(456)	(253)

Figure 11. Rating of political systems: DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL SYSTEM

	TOTAL	Sex		Age		
		Male	Female	Up to 29	30-49	50 and more
Very good	64.7	66.9	62.4	72.5	62.9	52.6
Fairly good	20.1	19.5	20.7	17.9	21.9	20.9
Fairly bad	1.3	2.3	0.3	1.6	1.1	1.2
Very bad	0.5	0.3	0.7	0.6	-	1.2
No answer	5.8	4.7	7.0	3.7	6.8	8.3
Don't know	7.6	6.2	8.9	3.7	7.2	15.8
(N)	(1,200)	(596)	(604)	(491)	(456)	(253)