

Shifting Paradigms of Cultural Expression: Toward a Critical Framework for Arab Digital Cultural Studies

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Abstract

This study proposes a critical framework for Arab digital cultural studies by examining the dynamic intersections of aesthetics, digital infrastructures, and power structures within Arabic social media literature. It interrogates how digital platforms shape processes of cultural production, resistance, and creative agency, addressing significant gaps in current scholarship—particularly the lack of epistemological reflexivity. Drawing on two case studies, the research explores themes of participatory creativity, platform politics, and algorithmic governance, shedding light on how digital environments enable new modes of literary expression while simultaneously constraining them through mechanisms of control and commodification. Utilizing an interdisciplinary approach, the study challenges technologically deterministic narratives and foregrounds the socio-political conditions that influence digital cultural practices. The findings demonstrate that although digital media extend the expressive horizons of Arabic literature, they also entangle it within the logics of platform capitalism and geopolitical asymmetries. This study contributes to rethinking authorship, resistance, and cultural agency in the Arab digital public sphere.

Key Words: Arab digital cultural studies; digital authorship; Digital literary production; Participatory creativity; Platform politics; Geopolitics of creativity

تحولات في أنماط التعبير الثقافي:

نحو إطار نقدي للدراسات الثقافية الرقمية العربية

الملخص

تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى تطوير إطار نقدي للدراسات الثقافية الرقمية العربية من خلال تحليل تقاطعات الجماليات، و البنى التحتية الرقمية، و بُنى السلطة في الأدب العربي المنشور على وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي. و تتناول الكيفية التي تُعيد بها المنصّات الرقمية تشكيل الإنتاج الثقافي، و المقاومة، و الفاعلية، في سياق فجوات معرفية في الأدبيات القائمة التي غالبًا ما تقتصر إلى الوعي الإبستمولوجي الذاتي. و من خلال تحليل عمليين أدبيين، تستكشف الدراسة الإبداع التشاركي، و سياسات المنصّات، و الحوكمة الخوارزمية. و باعتماد منهجية متعددة التخصصات، تنقد الدراسة الحتمية التكنولوجية، و تسلّط الضوء على الممارسات الاجتماعية-السياسية التي تحيط بالإنتاج الأدبي الرقمي. وتكشف النتائج أن الوسائط الرقمية، رغم ما تتيحه من إمكانيات جديدة للأدب، فإنها في الوقت ذاته تُخضع الإنتاج الثقافي لمنطق رأسمالية المنصّات والقيود الجيوسياسية. و من خلال تقديم عدسة تحليلية دقيقة ومتعددة الأبعاد، تسهم هذه الدراسة في تطوير حقل الدراسات الثقافية الرقمية العربية، وتغرز من انخراطه مع التحولات المتسارعة في مفاهيم التأليف الرقمي، وحوكمة المنصّات، والقوى الاجتماعية-السياسية التي تُشكّل الإنتاج الأدبي العربي المعاصر.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الدراسات الثقافية الرقمية العربية؛ التأليف الرقمي؛ الإنتاج الأدبي الرقمي؛ الإبداع التشاركي؛ سياسات المنصّات؛ جغرافيا الإبداع السياسية.

1. Introduction: Revival of Arab Cultural Studies

In recent years, the field of Arab cultural studies has witnessed a renewed engagement with the intersections of literature, politics, and digital media. As Arabic literary production increasingly responds to shifting socio-political realities, scholars have sought to reassess the frameworks through which these texts are analyzed. This revival has been driven by the need to account for evolving themes, narrative strategies, and the impact of globalization on Arab cultural expression. Within this context, the relationship between literature and its surrounding environments has become central to contemporary debates on representation, identity, and resistance.

In 2007, Muhsin al-Musawi emphasized the shifting relationship between Arabic literature and its sociopolitical, cultural, and global contexts. He observed that contemporary Arabic literature has expanded its thematic and representational scope, addressing issues such as family, tradition, nationhood, and the global flows of economy and culture. This broadening of focus demonstrates a reciprocal dynamic, where literature not only reflects but also influences the environment from which it emerges.

Al-Musawi argued that Arabic literature has moved beyond the preoccupations of literary modernity and the fragmented concerns of postmodernism to confront more urgent questions tied to identity, territoriality, and cultural heritage in an era of globalization. He asserted, “what is at stake now relates to identity, territorial fact and meaning, as well as to one’s cherished tradition and culture.” This perspective requires a historically grounded approach that situates these literary transformations within the broader trajectory from colonialism and the rise of

nation-states to a global reality characterized by complex agendas and far-reaching consequences.

This evolving global reality, according to al-Musawi, presents both significant challenges and opportunities for Arabic literature. The "fact on the ground" of globalization demands creative and representational strategies that can navigate its complexities. Arabic literature, he argued, possesses a unique capacity to engage with these realities by reflecting and negotiating the interplay between local traditions and global influences. In doing so, it maintains its critical relevance, offering a platform for meaningful dialogue in an increasingly interconnected world (2007, 329).

Building on Muhsin al-Musawi's insights into the dynamic interplay between Arabic literature and global contexts, Tarek El-Ariss (2013) deepens the critique of applying "Western" literary theories to Arabic texts, calling for a reevaluation that accounts for their cultural, historical, and political specificities. He underscores that Eurocentric models often fail to address the unique transformations within Arab societies, particularly in light of the socio-political upheavals surrounding the 2011 uprisings. For El-Ariss, Arabic texts must be analyzed within their own cultural frameworks, emphasizing their distinct manifestations and the socio-political landscapes they reflect (163–164, 11–12).

El-Ariss further critiques earlier research for reducing Arabic literature to binary frameworks, viewing texts merely as acts of resistance to or adoption of Western cultural models. He argues that such approaches oversimplify modernity as a narrative of complicity with a hegemonic West, portraying it as a force that suppresses Arab-Islamic traditions. This reductive perspective, he suggests, neglects the agency of Arabic texts and their multifaceted engagements with tradition, modernity, and cultural transformation. Instead, El-Ariss advocates for recognizing the

complexity and autonomy of Arabic literature, urging scholars to move beyond reactive paradigms and explore the rich interplay of historical, cultural, and political forces that shape these texts (10).

Extending the discussion from the specificity of Arabic literary analysis to the broader field of Arab cultural studies, Tarik Sabry in the introduction to his book, *Arab Cultural Studies: Mapping the Field* (2012) argues that Arab cultural studies, although a nascent field, has several manifestations in scholarship but lacks the epistemological consciousness of "itself or its parts-of-the-whole." He contends that existing works in the field are not "conscious" of their own existence or the historical and contextual moments they respond to. He argues that this field has not yet engaged in a reflective, "thinking-about-thinking" approach (1-2). Sabry suggests that achieving such epistemological consciousness is essential for the development of a more critical and self-aware Arab cultural studies. He advocates for a critical approach that considers the structures and processes of social communication within Arab societies. While El-Ariss underscores the importance of analyzing Arabic texts within their own cultural and socio-political frameworks, Sabry highlights the need for Arab cultural studies as a discipline to cultivate an epistemological consciousness that critically examines its own structures, processes, and intellectual foundations.

Developing the argument on the criticality of Arab cultural studies, Sabry (2023) critiques the uncritical application of British cultural studies to Arab contexts. He highlights that British cultural studies, shaped by specific historical events and bound to a particular temporal and linguistic framework, often imposes interpretive paradigms that do not align with the realities of Arab cultural experiences. Sabry calls for a shift in focus toward the *everyday* as a critical site of inquiry, proposing a

methodology that bridges philosophical discourses of Arab modernity with the lived experiences of modernity in the Arab world. This approach reframes cultural studies to prioritize local specificity and ontological reflexivity (46), aligning with El-Ariss's call for a nuanced exploration of Arabic texts and resonating with Al-Musawi's emphasis on grounding interpretations in the distinct socio-cultural and historical realities of the Arab world. Together, these perspectives underscore a shared commitment across these scholars to decolonize critical approaches, moving beyond universalist or Eurocentric paradigms to embrace frameworks that are reflective of and responsive to the lived realities and intellectual histories of the Arab world. By foregrounding local specificity and ontological reflexivity, their arguments collectively advocate for a more nuanced and culturally sensitive lens in Arab cultural studies.

Criticality in Arab cultural studies has recently found expression in digital culture, where the intersection of digital infrastructures and socio-political realities shapes new modes of cultural production. Nele Lenze's (2017) examination of protest poetry and online cultural production in the Arabian Gulf aligns with and enriches the criticality of Arab digital cultural studies by foregrounding the ethical and geopolitical dimensions of digital media. Her analysis of Bahraini poet 'Ayat al-Qormezi, whose protest poetry critiquing state violence gained traction through YouTube, highlights the dual role of digital platforms as tools for amplifying marginalized voices and as mechanisms of surveillance and control. This duality exemplifies the broader dynamics of platformization, where creators navigate the affordances of digital infrastructures to challenge oppression while remaining vulnerable to authoritarian retaliation.

Lenze's situating of online poetry within a historical continuum, tracing its evolution from pre-Islamic traditions to

digital forms, further emphasizes the relational and processual nature of “cultural translation,” a concept proposed by Sabry (2023) to mean a process of negotiating between local traditions and global digital aesthetics. By using regional dialects and colloquial language, online poetry engages local audiences while contributing to global resistance discourses. Additionally, Lenze’s critique of state-sponsored platforms highlights the ethical trade-offs creators face, balancing visibility and institutional support against constraints on autonomy.

In the same context, my concept of “digital post/colonial feminism” exemplifies the critical turn of Arabic digital cultural studies by centering the lived experiences of Arab women and their creative expressions. I critique Eurocentric models of feminism and digitality, advocating for an inclusive, intersectional approach that foregrounds the specificities of Arab socio-cultural contexts. My exploration of how Arab women use digital platforms to resist patriarchal and colonial oppression highlights the transformative potential of digital media in amplifying marginalized voices (Hosny 2024). This intersectionality of digital infrastructures, cultural production, and socio-political contexts, as articulated in the above-mentioned arguments, marks a significant shift in Arab cultural studies, emphasizing the criticality and unique dynamics of digital cultural production in the Arab world.

Building on these critical interventions, this study seeks to advance the field by developing a holistic, interdisciplinary, and epistemologically self-aware framework for Arab digital cultural studies. Focusing specifically on Arabic literature emerging from social media platforms, it investigates how aesthetics, digital infrastructures, and power structures coalesce to shape literary creativity, cultural resistance, and political agency. In doing so, it responds to the challenges posed by platform capitalism and

shifting geopolitical conditions, offering a nuanced analytical lens through which to understand the evolving dynamics of Arabic digital cultural production in the 21st century.

2. Knowledge Gap and Research Questions

While existing scholarship has made valuable contributions to Arab digital cultural studies—particularly by adopting critical perspectives—much of this work remains circumscribed by the limitations of traditional Arab cultural studies frameworks. Notably, many analyses lack the epistemological self-awareness that Tarik Sabry identifies as essential for a truly critical and reflexive approach. Sabry’s emphasis on *ontological reflexivity* and *relational totality*—as methodological and philosophical imperatives for studying Arab cultural production—is largely absent. As a result, prevailing studies often adopt fragmented approaches that inadequately account for the complex entanglements of digitality, culture, and politics in the Arab world.

Moreover, much of the existing literature tends to isolate individual dimensions of analysis—such as aesthetics, ethics, geopolitics, or digital infrastructures—without integrating them into a cohesive analytical framework. This lack of methodological integration hinders the ability to capture the full spectrum of transformative dynamics shaping Arab digital cultural production. Although insightful, these studies often fall short of offering the depth, coherence, and interdisciplinarity needed to understand the layered and evolving nature of digital cultural expression in the region.

In response to these gaps, this study proposes the development of a holistic, interdisciplinary, and epistemologically self-aware critical framework for Arab digital

cultural studies. Drawing on and extending the insights of prior scholarship, this framework seeks to integrate theoretical and empirical approaches in order to foreground the interplay of aesthetics, digital infrastructures, and power structures. It offers a comprehensive lens through which to examine the socio-political, technological, and cultural dimensions of Arabic digital literature. The subsequent section outlines the theoretical and conceptual foundations that underpin this proposed framework.

Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How can Arab digital cultural studies develop a critical, holistic, and epistemologically self-aware framework that accounts for the specific socio-political and historical conditions of Arab digital expression?
2. In what ways do digital infrastructures—such as social media platforms and algorithmic systems—shape, enable, or constrain Arabic literary production and cultural resistance?
3. How do aesthetics, participatory creativity, and platform politics interact in contemporary Arabic digital literature to express and negotiate agency, identity, and power?

These questions collectively inform the design and application of the analytical framework proposed in this study, which centers on the interrelation of aesthetics, digital infrastructures, and power structures in shaping the landscape of Arab digital cultural production.

3. Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations

The above introduction highlights the urgent need to revitalize Arab cultural studies by foregrounding criticality as a

lens for examining Arab cultural production, particularly in its transition to the digital paradigm. The interaction between traditional cultural theory and contemporary digital media studies, specifically the recent artificial intelligence (AI) and large language models (LLMs) advancements, presents a unique opportunity to redefine the field. This study builds on existing scholarship and asserts that Arab cultural production is at a transformative juncture shaped by the convergence of digital technologies, socio-political realities, and cultural traditions. The proposed framework seeks to illuminate the distinctive dynamics of digital cultural production in the Arab world, offering analytical tools to navigate its complexities while addressing the ethical, geopolitical, and aesthetic dimensions that define this evolving landscape.

Claire Taylor's framework in *Electronic Literature in Latin America: From Text to Hypertext* (2019) is a significant source of inspiration, offering a nuanced lens for analyzing digital literature as a cultural and socio-political phenomenon. Rejecting simplistic narratives of technological determinism or radical rupture, Taylor situates electronic literature within a continuum of literary tradition, while critically engaging with its technological and ethical dimensions. Moreover, the socio-political and structural contexts of Latin America intersect with those of the Arab world in meaningful ways, making her approach particularly relevant. Taylor foregrounds three interrelated components—aesthetics, technographics, and ethics—that collectively illuminate the intricate interplay between digital media and cultural production.

Taylor's first key argument is that digital literature should not be viewed as a revolutionary departure from prior forms but as a negotiation with and an extension of earlier literary traditions. She asserts that digital works frequently engage in intertextual and metatextual dialogues with canonical and experimental

literature, reinterpreting these forms within the affordances of the digital medium. As Taylor explains, “we must conceive of digital literature as being in negotiation with previous literary forms so that it functions as both continuum and break” (1). This perspective challenges the view of electronic literature as an isolated phenomenon and instead positions it as part of a broader literary and cultural trajectory.

Simultaneously, Taylor examines the role of digital technologies in shaping these works, cautioning against technological determinism. While recognizing the procedural affordances of digital platforms, such as hyperlinking and interactivity, she critiques the notion that these features inherently democratize or empower. Drawing on the work of scholars like N. Katherine Hayles (2008), Taylor highlights that “digital technologies do not determine the cultural product, and that technologies are not inherently liberatory or experimental per se” (14). Instead, she argues, the radical potential of digital literature lies not in its technological structures but in its creative and critical engagement with them. This approach dismantles the utopian assumptions of first-wave hypertext theory, emphasizing that the paths and interactions within digital works remain pre-designed by authors, thus complicating claims of reader agency.

Most significantly, Taylor’s framework insists on embedding the analysis of electronic literature within its material and ideological contexts. She foregrounds the ethical dimension, which critiques the socio-economic conditions underpinning digital technologies, particularly within the specific realities of 21st-century Latin America “such as the manifestations of late capitalism, the use of culture as an instrument for building markets, and the rise of the immaterial commodity, amongst others” (2). Digital literature, she argues, operates within a system of technocapitalism that commodifies culture while

simultaneously providing a platform for resistance. Taylor elucidates that the selected authors “attempt a neo-Marxist gesture of unmasking the structural inequalities that are upheld by, and naturalised by, technocapitalism” (2). This ethical critique not only exposes the complicity of digital technologies in reinforcing global inequalities but also underscores the capacity of digital literature to contest these systems through its content and form. By integrating aesthetics, technographics, and ethics, Taylor’s framework offers a contextually grounded model for understanding digital literature as a site of negotiation between past and present, creativity and critique, and local and global forces.

Taylor’s structural and contextual analysis is complemented by a relational, processual, and decolonial methodology developed by Tarik Sabry (2023) through his concept of “interrupted phenomenology.” Sabry shifts the focus to a methodological and philosophical interrogation of how culture, media, and society are studied, particularly within the Arab world. Sabry’s interrupted phenomenology challenges reductionist and linear frameworks by rejecting essentialist identities and deterministic narratives. Instead, it offers a dynamic, relational approach that foregrounds the visible and invisible dimensions of cultural phenomena. This perspective emphasizes that cultural practices are shaped by historical, social, and affective forces, and it calls for an engagement with the “relational totality” of these phenomena. Sabry’s methodology is inherently processual, drawing on Abdelkebir Khatibi’s *pensée-autre* to propose a “double movement” that navigates between cultural contexts and epistemologies, disrupting fixed categories and creating space for new inquiries into media, culture, and digitality.

Central to Sabry's approach is "the decolonization of the sign"—a critical intervention against the dominance of Western epistemologies. He advocates for a "double critique" that simultaneously interrogates local (endogenous) and external (exogenous) cultural forms, enabling a reconfiguration of meaning that resists ideological purity and essentialism. This process of cultural translation is continuous and necessary, reflecting the complexities of Arab cultural studies in a digital age.

Moreover, Sabry emphasizes the ethical responsibilities of researchers, highlighting the importance of reflexivity and acknowledging their positionality within the structures they study. This ethical dimension involves attending to the hidden and invisible conditions underpinning visible cultural practices, fostering a relational and affective engagement with research subjects. Sabry extends this reflexive approach to digital media, framing "being digital" as an ontological condition tied to the relational and multisensory aspects of human existence. Digitality, he argues, is part of a broader "equipment-whole" that shapes sociability and agency, offering a lens to explore the intricacies of digital cultural practices in the Arab world.

Miriyam Aouragh and Paula Chakravartty's (2016) work on *Infrastructures of Empire* extends the theoretical foundations laid by Taylor and Sabry by foregrounding the intersections of media, geopolitics, and digital infrastructures within a broader framework of colonial legacies and imperial power. Their critique of the dominant framing of the Arab Uprisings as "technologies of freedom" exposes the reductive nature of such narratives, which often obscure the material and historical conditions underpinning digital technologies. By framing the Arab Spring as a supposed validation of Western liberal democracy, Aouragh and Chakravartty argue that these narratives erase the structural

legacies of empire and ongoing Western geopolitical interests: “The Arab Spring was a vindication for the universal appeal of Western liberal democracy delivered through the gift of the Internet” (560). This perspective resonates with Sabry’s call for decolonizing the sign, emphasizing the need to interrogate the hidden conditions that shape cultural practices and digital production, while also reinforcing Taylor’s critique of technocapitalism.

Aouragh and Chakravartty also highlight the dual role of digital infrastructures as tools of both empowerment and control. They argue that telecommunications and social media platforms, while providing spaces for creativity and resistance, often collaborate with state power to enforce suppression, particularly in authoritarian contexts: “Telecommunications and social media companies alike comply, co-operate, and bend to state power” (565). This duality mirrors Taylor’s analysis of the affordances and limitations of digital platforms in shaping the visibility and aesthetics of cultural production. By examining how digital platforms mediate both creativity and suppression, Aouragh and Chakravartty underscore the necessity of a critical framework that situates Arab digital cultural production within its geopolitical realities.

Furthermore, their advocacy for a materialist approach to digital media complements Taylor’s focus on digital affordances and Sabry’s emphasis on relational and processual methodologies. By conceptualizing infrastructures as an integration of both technical and cultural systems (564), Aouragh and Chakravartty provide a framework for understanding the reciprocal relationship between digital technologies and social relations.

The arguments presented thus far underscore the critical emphasis cultural studies scholars place on ethical and decolonial

dimensions, a focus that is particularly relevant in light of the ongoing geopolitical conflicts and genocides currently affecting the Arab world. Researchers in the field have been particularly invested in critiquing entrenched power structures that shape global narratives, especially in contexts of conflict and resistance. Hamid Dabashi's (2024) incisive critique of European philosophy, which examines the ethical failure of Western intellectual traditions to address the colonial and imperial dimensions of the war on Gaza, is a significant contribution to this discourse. Dabashi exposes the moral and epistemological shortcomings of dominant Western frameworks, which marginalize the voices and experiences of non-European subjects and fail to engage critically with the enduring legacies of colonial violence.

Dabashi's critique aligns with Claire Taylor's exploration of the complicity of technocapitalism in reinforcing global inequalities and Miriyam Aouragh and Paula Chakravartty's examination of how digital infrastructures perpetuate imperial legacies, extending the analysis to the ideological and geopolitical dimensions of cultural production. His decolonial lens complements Tarik Sabry's call to decolonize the sign, emphasizing the importance of cultural translation and the relational, processual methodologies of interrupted phenomenology. Together, these perspectives underscore the necessity of situating Arabic cultural production—particularly within digital spaces—within a broader critique of the geopolitical and ideological systems that sustain global hierarchies.

All the above-discussed arguments foreground the necessity of an ethically engaged and decolonial methodology that challenges hegemonic narratives. However, a holistic framework that celebrates and considers the transformative potential of

Arabic cultural expression in digital spaces needs to be developed. This study aims to achieve this with a particular focus on Arabic literature on social media. Through the practical exploration of two case studies of Arabic social media literature, this study aims to formulate a holistic critical approach for Arab digital cultural studies. Before doing this, the following section will shed light on the nature and development of Arabic literature on social media platforms and formally introduce the two case studies.

4. Social Media and Arabic Literature: Literature Review

Adab al-Modawanat (blogs literature) emerged as an early form of Arabic social media literature during the first decade of the new millennium, marking a significant shift in the Arabic literary scene. Critics such as Abdel-Messih (2009), Elsadda (2010), El-Ariss (2010), Pepe (2011, 2017), and Lenze (2019) have explored how a new generation of Arab writers transitioned from the blogosphere to traditional publishing, often transforming autobiographical and “autofictional” narratives into printed works. Hoda Elsadda identifies 2008 as a pivotal moment when well-known publishing houses, such as Dar al-Shorouq, began publishing literary blogs in book form. These works, characterized by their use of colloquial dialects, young authorship, and topics outside the purview of “high” literature, reflect what Elsadda (2010) describes as a fresh and dynamic perspective in contemporary Arabic writing (315). Teresa Pepe (2017) classifies this writing as a distinct genre she terms “autofictional blog,” defining it as “personal blogs dealing mainly with the authors’ lives and presenting some elements of literariness” (75).

Elsadda (2010) highlights the transformative role of social media in creating "competing counterpublics," challenging mainstream literary and political spaces by amplifying marginalized voices, particularly women, and fostering grassroots activism. Social media bypasses state-controlled media, enabling individuals to organize and document state violations, reshaping political participation in the Arab world. Despite censorship and surveillance, users have used these platforms to resist authoritarianism and advocate for change (312–314). Similarly, I argue that social media, despite Pariser's concerns about digital bubbles, have driven significant political and social change. Ordinary citizens became activists, contributing to the downfall of dictators and promoting awareness, especially among youth and women (Hosny 2018, 188–189).

Lenze (2017) expands the scope of Arabic social media literature by referring to it as online literature, encompassing a broad spectrum of practices. This includes early forums and blogs in the early 2000s that hosted traditional Arabic literary genres like poetry and short stories, the mid-2000s proliferation of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, and the evolution of more sophisticated born-digital genres known as electronic literature (e-lit) (212, 217). Electronic literature, as a natural progression from earlier digital forms, reflects a deeper engagement with the technological possibilities of digital media. In parallel with forums and blogs, Arabic electronic literature emerged in the early 2000s, pushing the boundaries of interaction between digital media and Arabic literary forms.

Electronic literature, as defined by the Electronic Literature Organization (ELO), encompasses "works with important literary aspects that take advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer" (Hayles

2008, 3). Unlike *Adab al-Modawanat*, which primarily uses digital platforms as tools for disseminating traditional literary forms, e-lit actively incorporates the affordances of digital media—such as animation and soundscapes—to create multimodal artifacts. This distinction highlights the sophistication of e-lit as a genre that bridges traditional Arabic literary aesthetics with the paradigms of digitality.

Elsewhere, I argue for the emergence of a global, interconnected literary form of social media writing that reflects cosmopolitan ideals of unity, cross-cultural dialogue, and shared human experiences. I call this new literary form “Cosmo-Literature,” distinguishing it from traditional electronic literature (Hosny 2018). While e-lit is often seen as monocultural and locally confined, Cosmo-Literature transcends these limitations by embracing a global, intercultural, and participatory approach. This transformation is largely influenced by the capabilities of social media platforms, such as Twitter (currently X) and Facebook, which enable real-time collaboration and the integration of diverse cultural voices. In contrast to the more isolated, individualistic nature of e-lit, Cosmo-Literature fosters collective engagement and creates a space where people across the world can contribute to, shape, and interact with literature in ways that are inherently interconnected and culturally pluralistic (191 - 193).

The two case studies explored in this study exemplify the advanced use of digital media’s capabilities, differentiating them from *Adab al-Modawanat*. These works not only engage with the aesthetics of Arabic literature in its digital transformation but also reflect the socio-political, economic, and geopolitical contexts in which they were created. This interplay between aesthetics and structural dynamics will be further explored in the next section, following a description of the two selected works.

Nissmah Roshdy's *La 'eb Al-Nard* [*The Dice Player*] (2013) is a video poem based on a work of the same title by the celebrated Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish (1941–2008). Published posthumously in Darwish's final collection, *La Uridu li-Hadhihi al-Qasida an Tantahi* [*I Do Not Want This Poem to End*] (2009, 21), the poem is a long and reflective meditation on fate and existence. Roshdy's adaptation reimagines the poem in a digital medium, condensing its thematic and aesthetic essence by selecting specific lines to animate as striking visual compositions. This adaptation extends the audience of Darwish's work beyond the Arab world, engaging Western viewers through English translations and earning international recognition, including the Zebra Film Prize for Best Poetry Film. Roshdy's work exemplifies the transformative potential of digital tools in amplifying and reshaping poetic expression.

The second case study, Abdel-Wahid Stitu's Facebook novel, *'Alā Bu 'd Milimitir Wāḥid Faqat* [*Only One Millimeter Away*] (2013a), further illustrates the transformative possibilities of digital media in Arabic literature. It won the 2017 Literary Creativity Award. Developed collaboratively on a Facebook page, the novel exemplifies participatory storytelling. Over two months, Stitu posted chapters online, actively inviting feedback and suggestions from readers, thereby democratizing the creative process. This interaction reflects the post-Arab Spring ethos of inclusivity and dialogue, transforming the traditional hierarchies of literary production into a collective endeavor.

Together, these works—Roshdy's video poem and Stitu's Facebook novel—demonstrate how Arabic digital literature navigates the intersection of aesthetics, politics, and technology. Each work exemplifies the dual role of digital platforms as spaces for creativity and sites of socio-political negotiation, enriching

our understanding of contemporary Arabic cultural production in the digital age.

5. Analysis

5.1 A Critical Framework for Arab Digital Cultural Studies

This section seeks to develop and test the proposed critical framework by applying it to two case studies of Arabic digital literature on social media. Building on the arguments presented in the earlier sections of this study, the objective is to establish a comprehensive and practical framework for analyzing Arab digital cultural production. It also aims to demonstrate the framework's analytical utility in navigating the complexities of digital cultural expression in the Arab world. By examining specific works that embody the intersection of creativity, resistance, and negotiation, this section highlights the evolving dynamics of Arabic literature in the digital age and showcases the framework's capacity to address the socio-political, technological, and aesthetic dimensions of these works.

Digesting the above discussion and building on the explored arguments particularly Taylor's (2019) tripartite model, the following analysis will be conducted with an awareness of the risks of technological determinism, recognizing that digital platforms and tools do not inherently dictate cultural practices or outcomes. Instead, they function as mediating infrastructures shaped by, and shaping socio-political, economic, and cultural contexts. This relational and dynamic understanding of digital cultural production underscores the agency of creators and audiences as they negotiate the constraints and opportunities offered by technology. Simultaneously, the analysis will be

guided by reflexivity, self-awareness, and an engagement with the present moment, ensuring a deep attunement to the lived realities and socio-political urgencies that define Arabic digital cultural production. It will critically interrogate the ethical and epistemological dimensions of the explored works, situating them within the broader historical, technological, and geopolitical contexts that influence and inform the practices and expressions of Arab creators in the digital age.

The proposed framework is structured around three interrelated axes—Aesthetics, Digital Infrastructures, and Power Structures—that collectively provide a nuanced lens for analyzing Arab digital cultural production. The Aesthetics axis explores the interplay between traditional Arabic literary forms and the innovative affordances of digital media, examining how creators reimagine and extend cultural expressions in digital environments. The Digital Infrastructures axis interrogates the role of platforms, tools, and algorithms in shaping the production, circulation, and reception of digital literature, while maintaining a critical stance toward the non-deterministic influence of technology. Finally, the Power Structures axis investigates the socio-political and economic forces that underpin digital cultural production, addressing themes of censorship, commodification, resistance, and decolonization. Together, these axes create a comprehensive framework for unpacking the complexities of Arabic literature in digital spaces, providing a critical framework applicable to other forms of digital cultural production in other geographies, particularly in the Global Majority.

The selection of the two case studies—Nissmah Roshdy's *La'eb Al-Nard* and Abdel-Wahid Stitu's *'Alā Bu'd Milimitir Wāḥid Faqat*—is guided by their diversity in medium, genre, socio-political context, and gender representation, ensuring a broad and representative exploration of Arabic digital literature.

By engaging with distinct yet interrelated forms of digital storytelling—video poetry and interactive fiction—this selection allows for a multifaceted analysis that captures the evolving aesthetics, infrastructures, and power structures shaping Arabic digital cultural production. Each work contributes uniquely to the digital cultural landscape, offering insight into the ways Arab creators navigate digital platforms, negotiate visibility, and engage with audience participation.

In terms of medium, *La'eb Al-Nard* employs video poetry, blending animation, soundscapes, and visual art to reinterpret/reimagine a traditional text by Mahmoud Darwish. This multimodal approach presents an opportunity to examine how digital tools reshape the aesthetic experience of Arabic literature. *'Alā Bu'd Milimitir Wāḥid Faqat*, on the other hand, is a collaborative Facebook novel that embodies participatory authorship, illustrating how digital spaces have democratized narrative practices and fostered reader engagement. This contrast not only underscores the adaptability of Arabic literature to digital platforms but also highlights the intersection between traditional literary forms and emergent digital aesthetics.

These case studies also span various genres, from poetic adaptations and visual storytelling to long-form narratives. This diversity offers valuable insights into the evolving literary practices within the digital age. Thematically, these works grapple with issues of resistance, identity, and socio-political critique, reflecting the broader concerns of contemporary Arabic cultural production. *La'eb Al-Nard* amplifies themes of Palestinian resistance and resilience by digitally reimagining Darwish's poetry, situating Palestinian struggles within a global discourse on colonialism and cultural survival. Meanwhile, the detective novel *'Alā Bu'd Milimitir Wāḥid Faqat* exemplifies how platform affordances facilitate new modes of participatory

storytelling, foregrounding the ways local and regional power structures shape youth agency, digital activism, and literary production in the post-Arab Spring era.

By analyzing these case studies through the three axes of the proposed framework, this section seeks to offer a detailed examination of how Arabic digital literature navigates the intersection of aesthetics, technology, and power. The framework moves fluidly between different scales of power, transitioning from the broader colonial and geopolitical context in the first case study to the regional and national power dynamics in the second. Thus, the framework zooms in and out, shifting between macro and micro levels of analysis—from the transnational forces of colonialism and digital capitalism that influence cultural production to the localized negotiations of narrative authority, readership engagement, and literary democratization within regional digital publics. This analytical fluidity is crucial for understanding how Arabic digital literature operates within overlapping systems of power, highlighting the tensions between creative autonomy, platform governance, and the commodification of resistance in the digital age.

The selected works not only represent the creative possibilities of digital media but also highlight the socio-political and structural challenges that shape their production and reception. Through the lens of this framework, the study of Arabic digital literature extends beyond an examination of aesthetic innovation, positioning it as a dynamic field where artistic expression, technological infrastructures, and socio-political realities continuously interact and redefine each other.

5.2 Case Study (1): Nissmah Roshdy's *La'eb Al-Nard*

Nissmah Roshdy's *La'eb Al-Nard* serves as an exemplary case of how Arabic digital literature can reimagine traditional poetic works through the innovative use of digital media. This video poem adapts Mahmoud Darwish's *La'eb Al-Nard*, a reflective and expansive meditation on fate, identity, and existence, into a condensed yet powerful digital poetry. By leveraging the multimodal affordances of digital media, Roshdy transforms Darwish's long poem into a visually and emotionally impactful video, bridging traditional Arabic literary aesthetics with the creative possibilities of the digital age.

5.2.1. Aesthetic Analysis

The aesthetic dimension of Roshdy's adaptation is a testament to her ability to skillfully condense Darwish's sprawling poetic work while preserving its core themes and emotional depth. Darwish's original poem is rich with existential and symbolic reflections, expressed through intricate language and evocative imagery. However, the transition to the digital medium imposes creative and material constraints. Transforming such a long, text-heavy poem into a short video demands a precise balance between retaining the poem's essence and utilizing the capabilities of digital storytelling tools.

Roshdy achieves this balance by selectively highlighting key verses and complementing them with carefully crafted visual and auditory elements. For instance, at minute 1:47, Darwish's verse, "And I worried and worried / About my father, about my brothers / And I worried about a time made of glass," is reimaged as a scene depicting a father, a boy, and a girl walking outdoors. Their peaceful moment is abruptly shattered as they dissolve into

pieces, symbolizing death, loss, and the destruction of Palestinian families under occupation. The imagery of “a time made of glass” is not merely depicted but expanded upon through animation, as the fragility of glass becomes a poignant metaphor for the precariousness of Palestinian lives. The portrayal of the elderly father, bent with age and clutching a walking stick, underscores the indiscriminate brutality of the occupation, which spares neither the young nor the old.

Another significant example occurs at minute 00:59, where the verse “If this farm hadn’t been ravaged / Maybe I would’ve turned into an olive” is brought to life. The digital adaptation shows a young boy standing beside a tree in a tranquil farm setting, only to be struck by an air missile. The farm is obliterated, and the boy is subsumed into a stream of Arabic calligraphy before finally transforming into an olive. This sequence juxtaposes the peace and vitality of the farm with the violence and devastation of the missile strike, highlighting the dichotomy between creation and destruction. The incorporation of Arabic calligraphy symbolizes the ongoing Palestinian quest for identity, reinforcing the poem’s themes of resilience and cultural heritage.

These examples demonstrate how Roshdy’s digital artistry enhances the emotional and political resonance of Darwish’s poem. The visual, auditory, and symbolic elements do not merely illustrate the verses but expand their interpretive horizons, creating a layered and immersive aesthetic experience.

5.2.2. Digital Infrastructures

The role of digital infrastructures is central to the production, circulation, and reception of *La’eb Al-Nard*. Platforms like YouTube and Vimeo serve as the primary vehicles for disseminating the video poem, enabling it to reach audiences far

beyond traditional print literature's geographic and linguistic boundaries. Subtitles in Arabic and English further extend its accessibility, allowing global viewers to engage with its themes of resistance and identity.

The participatory features of these platforms, such as comment sections and sharing functionalities, foster a cultural space where viewers can interact with the work and with one another. Comments under the video frequently reflect solidarity with the Palestinian cause, offering emotional responses that resonate with the poem's themes. This interactivity aligns with the participatory ethos of digital media, transforming the audience from passive consumers into active participants in the work's reception.

However, the reliance on digital platforms also introduces significant challenges. Algorithms designed to prioritize engagement metrics like views, likes, and shares ultimately shape the visibility of *La'eb Al-Nard*. Political content, particularly narratives critiquing hegemonic powers such as Israel, often faces suppression due to platform moderation policies influenced by geopolitical dynamics. This algorithmic bias creates a paradox: while digital platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for visibility and engagement, they also constrain the circulation of politically sensitive material.

To critically navigate these dynamics, it is important to avoid the pitfalls of technological determinism. Platforms like YouTube and Vimeo are not neutral tools that inherently enable democratization or resistance. Their governance is shaped by economic, political, and ideological factors that influence what content can circulate. For example, algorithms optimized for commercial gain often amplify viral or apolitical content at the expense of works like *La'eb Al-Nard*. Nevertheless, creators like Roshdy demonstrate agency by strategically navigating these

infrastructures, utilizing their affordances to amplify marginalized voices while resisting the systemic barriers imposed by technocapitalism. Recognizing digital platforms as contested spaces allows for a nuanced understanding of how cultural resistance operates within the digital sphere.

5.2.3. Power Structures

Primarily, *La'eb Al-Nard* is a narrative of resistance, deeply embedded in the socio-political realities of Palestinian life under occupation. The poem, in both its original and adapted forms, encapsulates the collective fears, losses, and hopes of the Palestinian people. Through its digital adaptation, Roshdy amplifies these narratives, visually materializing the structures of both oppression and resilience. The shattered imagery of families, the juxtaposition of peaceful farms with violent missile strikes, and the symbolic transformation of individuals into cultural icons such as the olive tree poignantly reflect the lived realities of Palestinians. These visual and symbolic elements critique the systemic oppression of the Israeli occupation while asserting the enduring strength and identity of the Palestinian people.

The 2023–2025 genocide in Gaza and the world's deafening silence, critiqued by scholars such as Dabashi (2024), provide a stark backdrop against which the power structures addressed in *La'eb Al-Nard* can be further understood. The poem challenges not only the systemic oppression of the Israeli occupation but also the global mechanisms that sustain such violence through complicity and inaction. The silence of international bodies and media is actively produced by asymmetrical geopolitical power dynamics, where Palestinian suffering is marginalized or reframed to align with dominant discourses. This silence reflects

the prioritization of strategic geopolitical interests over human rights, further entrenching systems of global hegemony.

Furthermore, digital platforms, while enabling the amplification of Palestinian voices, are deeply entangled in these power structures. Algorithmic biases and content moderation practices disproportionately suppress narratives critical of hegemonic powers, framing them as politically sensitive or polarizing (Hosny and Nasef 2025). Similarly, individuals and organizations engaging with pro-Palestinian content and initiatives face various forms of censorship, including what has been termed the “Palestine Exception,” where advocacy for Palestinian rights is met with heightened scrutiny, suppression, and institutional backlash (Palestine Legal 2015).

At the same time, the commodification of resistance stories transforms the cultural and emotional labor of documenting oppression into profit for tech corporations. Social media platforms are not neutral; they are embedded within what Tarleton Gillespie (2010) describes as “politics of platform,” where algorithms, affordances, and economic imperatives influence user interactions and content visibility. As Gillespie explains, platforms are not merely spaces where content is hosted but are active agents in shaping public discourse through their algorithms, content moderation policies, and economic models (12). These platforms' design choices influence how literary works are produced, shared, and consumed, making them integral to understanding the contemporary dynamics of Arabic literature.

The paradox of *La'eb Al-Nard* lies in its ability to mobilize solidarity and bridge divides while simultaneously being subjected to the commodification and depoliticization inherent in technocapitalism. The genocide in Gaza and the global silence surrounding it highlight how overlapping layers of power—from military occupation to digital infrastructures—perpetuate both

material and symbolic forms of oppression. Within this context, *La'eb Al-Nard*, with its aesthetic, digital, and political dimensions, emerges as an act of defiance, resisting not only occupation but also the deeply entrenched global order that sustains such injustices.

5.3 Case Study (2): Abdel-Wahid Stitu's '*Alā Bu 'd Milimitir Wāḥid Faqat*

Abdel-Wahid Stitu's '*Alā Bu 'd Milimitir Wāḥid Faqat* offers a profound exploration of how digital platforms, particularly Facebook, can reshape traditional literary practices. By introducing interactivity and collaboration into the creative process, Stitu's novel represents an innovative departure from conventional literary production, reflecting broader socio-political and economic dynamics of the digital age. Through the axes of aesthetics, digital infrastructures, and power structures, this case study examines the novel's ability to challenge entrenched norms, foster collective authorship, and reveal the tensions inherent in digital cultural production.

5.3.1. Aesthetic Innovation

At its core, '*Alā Bu 'd Milimitir Wāḥid Faqat* redefines authorship by embracing participatory creativity. Unlike the traditional solitary act of novel writing, Stitu's project invited readers to become active collaborators, engaging with the work in real time. Over two months, Stitu posted chapters of the novel on a dedicated Facebook page, soliciting feedback, suggestions for plot developments, and votes on critical narrative decisions.

This process disrupted the hierarchical relationship between author and reader, replacing it with a dialogic and egalitarian model of creative exchange.

The participatory nature of the novel aligns with Katherine Hayles's (2006) concept of text as a "process" rather than a fixed product. Hayles posits that digital texts unfold across temporal and spatial dimensions, shaped by the interactions between authors, readers, and technological infrastructures (185). In the case of Stitu's novel, Facebook's features—such as comments, polls, and likes—transformed the act of writing into a collaborative and dynamic event. The text became a living entity, evolving with reader input and reflecting the immediacy of their contributions. This interplay between writer and audience destabilized the traditional boundaries of authorship, positioning the narrative as a shared cultural artifact rather than the product of a single creative mind.

This transformation of literary authorship aligns with Pierre Lévy's (1997) concept of collective intelligence, which reimagines knowledge as a decentralized, evolving process shaped by digital interconnectivity and collaboration. Lévy defines collective intelligence as "a form of universally distributed intelligence, constantly enhanced, coordinated in real time, and resulting in the effective mobilization of skills" (13), highlighting how networked participation allows for the refinement and expansion of shared knowledge. Further, the combination of human and Internet capabilities has been perceived by Norman Johnson (1998) as "symbiotic intelligence," proposing the creation of a collective intelligence that surpasses their individual contributions. This symbiosis is evident in *ʿAlā Buʿd Milimitir Wāḥid Faqat*, where digital infrastructures enable an interplay between human creativity and technological affordances, allowing readers to act not just as passive consumers

but as active contributors in shaping the novel's development. The novel, therefore, is not a static literary artifact but a process of collective, symbiotic intelligence co-authored by a distributed network of engaged participants.

Building on Lévy's framework, Henry Jenkins (2006) extends the idea of collective intelligence into the realm of participatory culture, where audiences do not simply consume but actively shape and co-create content. He argues for "the shift from individualized and personalized media consumption toward consumption as a networked practice" (244), emphasizing that digital spaces enable users to engage in shared meaning-making. This phenomenon is evident in *'Alā Bu 'd Milimitir Wāḥid Faqat*, where the aesthetic value is not only derived from the text itself and its topic but also from the collaborative process of creation, in which readers' feedback, discussions, and suggestions influence the trajectory of the narrative.

Expanding on the principles of collective intelligence (Lévy, 1997) and participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006), Axel Bruns (2008) introduces the concept of "produsage," which merges production and usage to challenge the traditional division between creators and consumers. Bruns describes this process as one where "users are able to involve themselves flexibly and fluidly in the tasks confronting the collaborative, 'hive' community" (20) rather than acting as separate producers or consumers. Unlike conventional models that frame media as a finalized product distributed to a passive audience, produsage is defined by "an ongoing, perpetually unfinished, iterative, and evolutionary process of gradual development of the informational resources shared by the community." (20). Cultural texts in this model remain in a state of "continuing process, relying on the continued constructive participation of the ... community." (110). This model is exemplified in *'Alā Bu 'd Milimitir Wāḥid Faqat*,

where the novel's trajectory emerges through real-time audience engagement, reinforcing Bruns' argument that shared content is developed in a collaborative and networked setting, where the traditional separation between producers and consumers disappears, allowing everyone to take on both roles as contributors and users of information and knowledge.

Stitu's approach also reflects the constraints and possibilities of digital storytelling. As the author himself notes, the Facebook reader is "impatient and easily bored" (2017), demanding suspense, excitement, and surprise at the end of each chapter. These conditions forced Stitu to adapt his writing style, prioritizing narrative engagement over stylistic experimentation. While this necessity may appear restrictive, it also speaks to the adaptability required of writers in digital spaces, where immediacy and accessibility are paramount. The resulting work exemplifies how digital platforms can foster innovative narrative techniques while challenging traditional literary aesthetics. In this regard, *'Alā Bu 'd Milimitir Wāḥid Faqat* demonstrates not only the creative potential of participatory storytelling but also how Arabic social media literature embodies the evolving dynamics of collective intelligence and participatory culture.

5.3.2. Digital Infrastructures

Facebook served as both the creative and distributive infrastructure for *'Alā Bu 'd Milimitir Wāḥid Faqat*, enabling its participatory ethos. The platform's interactive features—commenting, liking, and polling—allowed readers to engage directly with the text, influencing its trajectory and deepening their sense of agency. This real-time interactivity transcended geographical and cultural boundaries, creating a virtual community of readers who co-created the novel with Stitu.

However, these platforms are not passive containers for cultural works but active forces that shape how literature is created, shared, and consumed. The very affordances that enable participation also structure the ways in which narratives unfold, shaping the relationship between authors, audiences, and texts.

The accessibility of Facebook was central to the novel's success. As a widely used social media platform, Facebook provided a familiar interface that required no specialized technical skills, making participation seamless and inclusive. This democratizing potential highlights the role of digital infrastructures in breaking down barriers to cultural production, allowing diverse voices to contribute to the creative process. Stitu's use of Facebook illustrates how social media platforms can act as spaces for literary experimentation, offering tools for collaboration that were previously unavailable in traditional publishing contexts. However, understanding the role of platformization—"the penetration of economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms into the web and app ecosystems, fundamentally affecting the operations of the cultural industries" (Nieborg and Poell 2018, 4276)—in Arabic literary production allows us to better grasp the relationship between digital media, cultural expression, and socio-political realities in the Arab world. Digital infrastructures do not simply provide spaces for creativity but actively shape the conditions under which cultural texts emerge, circulate, and gain visibility.

At the same time, the reliance on Facebook situates the novel within the exploitative framework of surveillance capitalism, as described by Shoshana Zuboff (2019). While Facebook facilitated democratic participation, it simultaneously commodified the interactions generated by the novel. Comments, likes, and votes became part of Facebook's data economy, harvested for targeted advertising and behavioral prediction. This

duality reveals the paradox of digital platforms: They enable new forms of cultural expression while embedding them within profit-driven infrastructures. In this sense, platformization is not merely a technological phenomenon but a socio-cultural one that must be understood in conjunction with the material and affective dimensions of cultural production proposed by Raymond Williams's (1977) cultural materialism and structure of feeling. The affective dimensions of user engagement—such as emotional responses, community interaction, and shared experiences—become entangled with the economic logic of platform capitalism, demonstrating how digital infrastructures mediate both creative autonomy and systemic constraints.

The shift of *'Alā Bu 'd Milimitir Wāḥid Faqat* from Facebook to a traditional print format (2013b) further underscores the unique affordances and limitations of digital platforms. The print version, stripped of Facebook's interactive features, reverted to a static form of storytelling, losing the participatory ethos that defined the original project. This transition highlights the transformative potential of digital media while exposing the constraints of traditional publishing in replicating the dynamic and collaborative nature of the Facebook novel. As Arabic literature continues to evolve within digital spaces, critically examining the role of platformization is essential in understanding how new forms of literary production both expand creative possibilities and reinforce systemic inequalities within the broader digital economy.

5.3.3. Power Structures

The socio-political dimensions of *'Alā Bu 'd Milimitir Wāḥid Faqat* reflect the aspirations and frustrations of Arab youth in the wake of the Arab Spring. The novel's interactive and democratic

ethos resonates with the ideals of freedom, inclusivity, and social equity that characterized the revolutionary movements. By fostering a virtual creative community, the novel offered a space for readers to exercise agency and co-create narratives, mirroring the participatory practices of digital activism during the Arab Spring.

This democratic spirit is exemplified by the act of voting on narrative developments, which parallels the grassroots mobilization seen in initiatives like the Facebook page "*We Are All Khaled Said*," a key organizing platform in the Egyptian revolution. Just as these digital spaces facilitated collective action and dialogue, *‘Alā Bu‘d Milimitir Wāḥid Faqat* provided a literary exercise in democracy, allowing readers to experience collaborative decision-making processes often denied to them in real-world political systems. The novel's emphasis on inclusivity and shared authorship challenged the hierarchical and exclusionary practices of traditional literary production, positioning it as a reflection of broader societal shifts toward participatory culture.

However, the novel's integration with Facebook also underscores the tensions between participatory creativity and broader power dynamics. Matthew Hindman's *The Myth of Digital Democracy* (2009) critically examines this context, challenging the assumption that digital spaces inherently foster democratic participation and equal access to cultural and political discourse. While platforms provide unprecedented opportunities for content creation, Hindman argues that they do not necessarily democratize visibility or influence. Instead, digital engagement is shaped by entrenched hierarchies, algorithmic gatekeeping, and economic incentives that privilege elite actors.

Hindman introduces the concept of "Googlearchy," where a small number of highly linked and algorithmically favored

websites dominate online discourse, creating a winners-take-all hierarchy. He asserts that “the number of links pointing to a site is the most important determinant of site visibility” (55), reinforcing the concentration of attention around well-established institutions. Search engines, particularly Google, prioritize these sites, making it difficult for smaller, independent voices to gain traction. This algorithmic bias consolidates power among elite digital actors rather than distributing it equitably. In the context of Arabic digital literature, this means that while social media offers an alternative publishing model, discoverability remains contingent on engagement-driven algorithms that often favor mainstream or commercially viable content over experimental or politically charged narratives.

Additionally, Hindman challenges the notion that the participatory nature of social media translates into a more inclusive public sphere. While platforms allow anyone to publish content, visibility remains highly unequal, with only a handful of influential sites attracting the majority of traffic. He states, “Almost anyone can put up a political website, but this fact matters little if few political sites receive many visitors” (56). The economic pressures of digital media further exacerbate this divide, as successful sites require substantial financial and technical resources to sustain visibility and engagement. In the case of Arabic digital literature, this creates a tension between accessibility and sustainability, as independent authors must navigate platform economies that prioritize viral content over slow-burning literary works that challenge dominant narratives.

Thus, while *‘Alā Bu ‘d Milimitir Wāḥid Faqat* exemplifies the possibilities of participatory literary production, it also highlights the constraints of digital platforms as spaces for resistance. Social media platforms, driven by advertising-based business models, prioritize engagement-maximizing content, often at the expense

of nuanced cultural expression. This creates a tension for creators who must balance artistic integrity with economic viability. Hindman's critique further emphasizes that while the internet offers new opportunities for expression, it does not inherently challenge existing power structures; rather, it often reinforces inequalities, calling for a critical reassessment of digital infrastructures and their impact on cultural participation. In the context of Arabic literature, the success of participatory works like *'Alā Bu 'd Milimitir Wāḥid Faqat* depends not just on creative engagement but on how these works negotiate the algorithmic and economic forces that govern visibility and influence in the digital age.

6. Findings and Conclusion: Toward a Critical Manifesto for Arab Digital Cultural Studies

This study has developed a critical framework for Arab digital cultural studies by examining the socio-political, aesthetic, and infrastructural dimensions of Arabic literature on social media through two exemplary case studies: Nissmah Roshdy's *La'eb Al-Nard* and Abdel-Wahid Stitu's *'Alā Bu 'd Milimitir Wāḥid Faqat*. Situated at the intersection of creativity, resistance, and platform politics, these works illuminate how Arabic digital literature is shaped by and, in turn, shapes the forces of technological mediation, cultural agency, and political struggle.

The analysis of *La'eb Al-Nard* demonstrates the capacity of digital poetry to reimagine resistance aesthetics through multimodal forms, extending the legacy of Mahmoud Darwish while highlighting the algorithmic barriers to visibility imposed by commercial platforms. Roshdy's adaptation exemplifies how digital affordances can amplify marginalized voices but also underscores the constraints of technocapitalism and geopolitical

moderation policies that delimit what can be seen, shared, and remembered.

Conversely, *‘Alā Bu‘d Milimitir Wāḥid Faqat* reflects a model of participatory authorship that both embodies and complicates the ideals of collective intelligence. Stitu’s use of Facebook as a literary platform fosters democratic storytelling practices, yet also exposes the tension between grassroots literary innovation and the platform logics of data extraction, commodification, and algorithmic gatekeeping. As the study shows, the democratizing potential of digital literature remains uneven and contingent on the political economies of platform capitalism.

Together, these case studies reveal that Arabic digital literature operates within a contradictory field: it is a space of imaginative resistance and cultural renewal, yet simultaneously enmeshed in global systems of surveillance, censorship, and commodification. The digital is not a neutral medium; it is a site of negotiation, where artistic agency is constantly shaped by infrastructures of power.

From these findings, the study articulates a critical framework for Arab digital cultural studies—a manifesto for future inquiry—based on three interlocking analytical axes:

1. **Aesthetics:** Understanding how Arabic literary forms are transformed through digital affordances and multimodal expression, while remaining rooted in intertextual and cultural traditions.
2. **Digital Infrastructures:** Investigating how platforms, algorithms, and data economies shape the production, dissemination, and reception of digital literature, without succumbing to technological determinism.

3. **Power Structures:** Mapping the socio-political, geopolitical, and economic forces that condition digital cultural practices, from censorship and marginalization to the commodification of resistance.

This triadic framework offers a reflexive and interdisciplinary tool for analyzing the evolving landscape of Arabic cultural expression in the digital age. It resists reductive binaries—such as liberation versus control, or tradition versus innovation—and instead foregrounds the dynamic entanglements between technology, culture, and power.

Looking ahead, this framework invites further expansion across platforms and genres. Emerging spaces such as TikTok, Instagram, and decentralized digital networks offer new terrains for research, as do the growing influences of artificial intelligence, algorithmic recommendation systems, and automated moderation tools. Future studies must remain attentive to the shifting contours of digital authorship and the material conditions under which Arab cultural resistance and creativity unfold.

In affirming the critical value of Arabic digital literature, this study calls for a scholarly praxis that is as imaginative and insurgent as the works it seeks to understand—one that meets the complexity of the digital age with theoretical rigor, cultural sensitivity, and ethical engagement.

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