

# Reflecting on media texts as platforms for sexuality research in Arab countries: the case of Jordan

Ebtihal Mahadeen

---

*Sexuality continues to be an under-researched and overall taboo subject in the Arab world. In this snapshot I propose that media texts, particularly interactive online media texts, offer important platforms for sexuality research, enabling researchers to maneuver the restrictions placed on this kind of inquiry in other settings. Based on my doctoral project, I discuss the potential that critical and Foucauldian discourse analyses hold for this type of media-and-sexuality research and offer a few findings from my empirical study as examples of the methodological and theoretical promise of this type of analysis.*

*Keywords: Sexuality, Media, Arab Women, Virginity, Discourse Analysis*

---

Sexuality continues to be a taboo subject across the Arab world. This collective silence poses considerable challenges to young people's access to sexuality-related information and healthcare, and poses a significant challenge for researchers attempting to explore topics related to sexuality. This snapshot argues for the potential of media texts – particularly online media texts – to provide a platform for researchers attempting to access data on attitudes towards, and perceptions of, sexuality in order to address the current lack of information on sexuality more generally. This proposal is premised on the rising rates of

internet penetration in the region as well as the unprecedented broaching of previously-taboo sexual topics in Arab media, such as hymen reconstruction surgeries and fake hymens. To this end, my own approach to researching the representation of virginity in Jordanian online media is presented as a case study.

A number of studies have found that access to sexual health services and information is heavily restricted in the Arab world (Almasarweh 2003; DeJong et al 2005; Khalaf et al 2010). Farzaneh Roudi-Fahimi and Shereen El Feki's (2011) detailed study of young people's sexuality and reproductive health in Arab

countries demonstrated that youths are ill-informed, and lack knowledge and access to services. It also revealed that there is a gender gap in sexual knowledge as men are implicitly allowed to pursue sexual adventures while women are strictly prohibited from doing so. DeJong et al had previously reached the same conclusions in 2005: young Arabs lack information on sexual matters, the family unit compounds their ignorance through its excessive protectiveness, and health providers do not recognise the needs of young people and do not welcome them, particularly if they are unmarried. As DeJong et al put it, 'within the public domain, an overt recognition that young people have sexual needs and desires and may be sexually active before marriage, and that married couples experience sexual and reproductive health problems is deeply problematic' (DeJong et al 2005, 52).

Taking a closer look at Jordan, the case study at hand, the same sensitivity surrounding sexuality exists. Several scholars shed light on the problems created by public policy silence on matters pertaining to sexuality (Almasarweh 2003; Khalaf et al 2010; Al-Shdayfat and Green 2012). In fact, these researchers have agreed that there is a glaring absence in sexuality research in the country due to social and official restrictions placed on conducting such research. Because of entrenched taboos, this type of research contin-

ues to face tremendous challenges, especially if it aims to focus on the sexual lives of unmarried people. Researchers have thus found it very challenging to conduct research on premarital or extramarital sexual practices in Jordan. Al-Shdayfat and Green's testimony about the difficulties they faced while conducting research on Jordanian Bedouin women's sexuality is expressive of the deep-seated prohibitions placed on the subject:

Talking about sexuality is so taboo in Jordan that in this study it proved impossible to ask any questions to married and unmarried Jordanian Bedouin young women about pre-marital or extramarital sexual behaviour. Neither was permission obtained to ask participants their attitudes about sex outside marriage (Al-Shdayfat and Green 2012: 107)

Clearly, the collective silence on sexuality in Jordan not only restricts young people's access to information and health services, but also researchers' ambitions and abilities to access information, analyse it, and gain knowledge in order to inform sexuality-focused policy and practice. From where do young Jordanians receive sexual information? And how can researchers obtain information on sexuality in light of the social and official censorship currently in place?

The lack of information on sex in the Arab region is somewhat offset

by Jordanian and Arab youths' avid consumption of the media. This consumption has been identified as a potential way for youths to overcome public censorship of sexual matters (Almasarweh 2003; Roudi-Fahimi and El Feki 2011; Al-Shdayfat and Green 2012). The media, therefore, can play a vital role in addressing this gap in knowledge, even if only a partial one. While the media cannot compensate for access to sexual and reproductive health services, it could perhaps be used to educate and bring to Jordanian youths' attention issues which they might be unaware of, such as protection and safe sex. However, it is worth noting that the types of media Jordanian youth consume remain unidentified and it is therefore difficult to assess their advantages and disadvantages as sources of sexual education. What little information is available points to high consumption of pornography among Arab youth in general (Roudi-Fahimi and El Feki 2011), which poses many questions about the quality and the type of sex education youths are being exposed to in the absence of more balanced and healthy alternatives. This indicator also calls for more in-depth studies to gauge the true nature of media consumption in the region and its potential for providing positive sex information in a manner that overcomes the lack of such information in other settings.

In addition to the media acting as a potential source of sexual informa-

tion, media texts on sexual subjects can serve as sources of rich data on sexual norms and practices. In Jordan, for example, topics that were traditionally taboo have surfaced in media coverage in recent years. Issues such as virginity tests, hymen reconstruction surgeries, and fake hymens appeared in Jordanian media texts both offline (in print newspapers) and online (in independent news websites and the websites of newspapers). The emergence of this type of coverage is in itself a phenomenon worth investigating, as it may indicate a shift in the social perception of these issues as unapproachable. It may also point to nascent liberal attitudes to sexuality in society at large – a hypothesis which still needs testing through targeted studies. Either way, this coverage affords researchers a window of opportunity that was not available before: a plethora of texts (news items, investigative reports, and opinion columns) that now openly tackle sexual issues, offering a wealth of data to tap into. More importantly, as I will discuss below, these texts invite readers' input, adding another layer of complexity to their make-up.

My own doctoral research takes advantage of this recent development by investigating how virginity is represented in Jordanian online media and what this might tell us about gender, power, and sexuality in Jordanian society. My project relies on a marriage between critical discourse analysis (CDA) and Fou-

cauldian discourse analysis (FDA) (1972, 1980, 1984, 1996) as a basis for its theoretical and analytical framework. CDA in particular is a useful lens through which to conduct this type of research. The works of Ruth Wodak (2001), Wodak and Michael Meyer (2001), Teun A. Van Dijk (2001) and Norman Fairclough (1995, 2001a, 2001b) provide an extensive framework for this analytical approach. CDA is a kind of dissident discourse-analytical research that concerns itself with the study of the relationship between semiosis (ways of making meaning) and power. Michel Foucault's work on the relationship between discourse, power and knowledge had a strong influence in CDA. Foucault maintained that discourses play a crucial role not just in constraining participation through their determination of subject positions within social life, but also in constructing objects through the use of particular vocabularies (Foucault 1984). These two effects of discourse, in turn, have a normalising role and a regulatory orientation (Carabine 2001; Wooffitt 2005). In other words, Foucault asserts that discourse is the site of knowledge and power, and it is the location where they are expressed through a number of statements which come together to build a representation of an issue (Foucault 1984). Discourse is thus productive in the sense that it produces the objects it speaks of and it has power outcomes such as defining

what is normal or 'true' at any given moment in history, and what is not (Carabine 2001). The most important implication of this theoretical framework was the grounding of my findings in both texts and context. Moreover, the use of CDA and FDA in my project has been instrumental in shaping my understanding of the discourse of virginity propagated in Jordanian media through the use of several sub-discourses: medial, religious, legal/state-control, and social discourses which all reinforce this dominant discourse and lend it legitimacy.

Yet the true potential of media texts for sexuality research lies, as I have found, in their participatory and interactive capacity. This is especially true since online Jordanian media have taken a step towards interactivity by offering readers the opportunity to express their views in comments. These comments, while subject to moderation policies, offer a wealth of data. In fact, I argue that the interactivity of online Jordanian media enables researchers to access both the original texts and reader-contributed texts as well, thus allowing them to identify the dominant discourses present in both levels and any attempts to challenge them. This renders media texts (and by media texts I mean both the original media items and readers' comments) into a rich and multi-layered resource that grants researchers access to aspects of attitudes towards sexuality that are difficult to

reach otherwise. Readers' ability to post comments anonymously without fear of being identified enhances the chances of genuine self-expression, as opposed to respondents' reluctance to speak on premarital and extramarital sex in personal interviews – a difficulty encountered in traditional qualitative studies such as Al-Shdayfat and Green's (2012). In my own study and, given the challenges facing sexuality research in Jordan, it would have been prohibitively difficult to collect data about readers' reactions to media topics relating to virginity in Jordan in any other way. My position as an unmarried Jordanian woman would have complicated this quest even further due to the enduring sensitivity of the topic. Therefore, I relied on readers' comments to gauge their responses to and attitudes towards media stories. One of the key findings of my study was the active role readers played in supporting or resisting the discourses used in the original texts on virginity. Readers actively engaged with the texts, interpreted them, and wielded considerable power over channelling the discussion towards certain discourses at the expense of others.

Despite its versatility, the theoretical and methodological approach I chose for my project is merely one strategy to capitalise on online media in order to conduct sexuality research in the Arab world. If anything, internet research methods are varied and versatile enough to

be tailored to the specific conditions of sexuality research in the region. Targeted online questionnaires, email interviews, and other methods made possible by the internet are all promising approaches that can aid researchers in their quest for data on both sexual practices and attitudes to sexuality in Arab countries. The rising levels of internet access across the region provide a solid grounding for this type of research, anchoring it in increasingly larger sample sizes.

### **Conclusion**

This snapshot has demonstrated that while the challenges of conducting sexuality research in Arab countries are tremendous, media texts, and in particular interactive online media texts, can be useful to academic researchers eager to access data on sexuality in these countries. This, alongside their potential for addressing the gap in sex education in these societies, makes them useful on more than one level. I have argued for the promise of online media texts to sexuality research, grounding this argument in the theoretical and methodological approaches I used in my doctoral study whilst emphasising the flexibility of online research methods. Finally, as I have tried to illustrate in this snapshot, the intersection between media and sexuality studies in the region remains vastly under-explored and, as this snapshot has argued, merits academic attention.

## References

- Al-Shdayfat, N. and G. Green. 2012. Reflections on Sex Research Among Young Bedouin in Jordan: Risks and Limitations. *Culture, Health & Sexuality: An International Journal for Research, Intervention and Care* 14: 101-111.
- Almasarweh, Issa. 2003. *Adolescent and Youth Reproductive Health In Jordan: Status, Issues, Policies, and Programs*. [http://www.genderandaids.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=103:adolescent-and-youth-reproductive-health-in-jordan&catid=36:arab-states&Itemid=116](http://www.genderandaids.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=103:adolescent-and-youth-reproductive-health-in-jordan&catid=36:arab-states&Itemid=116) [Accessed 15 March 2012].
- Carabine, J. 2001. Unmarried Motherhood 1830-1990: A Genealogical Analysis. In Margaret Wetherell, Stephanie Taylor, and Simeon J. Yates eds. *Discourse as Data: A Guide for Analysis*. London: Sage.
- Dejong, J., R. Jawad, I. Mortagy, and B. Shepard. 2005. The Sexual and Reproductive Health of Young People in the Arab Countries and Iran. *Reproductive Health Matters* 13: 49-59.
- Fairclough, Norman. 1995. *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*, Harlow: Longman.
- Fairclough, Norman. 2001a. Critical Discourse Analysis as a Method in Social Scientific Research. In Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer eds. *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*. London: Sage.
- Fairclough, Norman. 2001b. The Discourse of New Labour: Critical Discourse Analysis. In Margaret Wetherell, Stephanie Taylor, and Simeon J. Yates eds. *Discourse as Data: A Guide for Analysis*. London: Sage.
- Foucault, Michel. 1972. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Foucault, Michel. 1980. *Power/Knowledge*. New York, Pantheon.
- Foucault, Michel. 1984. *The Foucault Reader*. Harmondsworth, Penguin.
- Foucault, Michel. 1996. *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961-1984*. New York: Semiotext(e).
- Khalaf, I., F.A. Moghli, and E.S. Froelicher. 2010. Youth-friendly Reproductive Health Services in Jordan from the Perspective of the Youth: A Descriptive Qualitative Study. *Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences* 24: 321-31.
- Roudi-Fahimi Farzaneh and Sher-een El Feki. 2011. *Facts of Life: Youth Sexuality and Reproductive Health in the Middle East and North Africa*. <http://www.prb.org/pdf11/facts-of-life-youth-in-middle-east.pdf> [Accessed 15 March 2012].
- Van Dijk, Teun A. 2001. Multidisciplinary CDA: A Plea for Diversity. In Ruth

Wodak and Michael Meyer eds.  
*Methods of Critical Discourse  
Analysis*. London: Sage.

Wodak, Ruth. 2001. What CDA is About  
- A Summary of Its History, Important  
Concepts and Development.  
In Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer  
eds. *Methods of Critical Discourse  
Analysis*. London: Sage.

Wodak, Ruth & Michael Meyer eds.  
2001. *Methods of Critical Dis-  
course Analysis*. London: Sage.

Wooffitt, Robin. 2005. *Conversation  
Analysis & Discourse Analysis:  
A Comparative and Critical Intro-  
duction*. London: Sage.