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Social Media in Southeast Turkey: Love, Kinship, and Politics by Elisabetta Costa

Social Media in Southeast Turkey by Elisabetta Costa is an ethnographic account of social media use in Mardin, Turkey, and it is a larger part of the "Why We Post" series, which covers the use of social media in everyday life in different local contexts including Brazil, Chile, China, England, India, Italy, and Trinidad. The book is the end-product of 15 months of field research using participant observation between April 2013 and August 2014, whose primary aim is to provide personal accounts of social media use in Turkey.

The timing of the research coincides with the Gezi protests that shook the country and the first comprehensive government-imposed social media bans. Because of the regional focus of Costa's research and the Gezi protests' limited impact on the region, the protests were mentioned throughout the book merely as a political event of the time. Costa's field research is an important contribution to social media anthropology because of its focus on ordinary uses of social media platforms and its innovative methodological approach to studying digital technologies through the incorporation of both online and offline analysis. Despite being published in 2016, Costa's work remains one of the most comprehensive studies on social media anthropology in Turkey to this day.

To conduct the research, the author built close connections with ten families and hundreds of individuals in Mardin, Turkey. The research entailed conducting 100 extensive interviews and surveys involving 250 respondents, analyzing 200 Facebook profiles, as well as a few Instagram and Twitter accounts. A combination of online and offline research methods was utilized, with a strong commitment to holism in anthropology. The book provides an in-depth portrayal of individuals living in the new city of Mardin, including their personal lives, families, and everyday relationships. By looking at the lives of specific individuals living in the new city of Mardin and their social media usage, Costa explores the major issues Turkish society has grappled with for decades. These issues include minority identities such as Kurds and Arabs, the persistence of conservative values, the challenge of modernization, and rapid urbanization.

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The study aims to challenge the universal assumptions made by media and internet scholars concerning digital technology by calling into question the idea that digital technologies are transformative forces of modernity in which individualism thrives and/or conventional modalities of everyday relations fade away. On the contrary, the author draws careful conclusions about her field research by underscoring the ambivalence that social media usage entails and the contradictory implications of digital technologies on culture. The main ontological assumption of the book is firmly grounded in a critical view of technological determinism as it gives prominence to the agency of local contexts by emphasizing the distinct uses of digital technology by different cultures and groups. Costa's core argument about social media usage is two-fold: While social media may emerge as a force of modernity at times by opening up previously unexplored medium for people who have traditional values and live in close-knit communities, it often times creates online replicas of traditional values and norms present in the offline world. A more striking finding of the study is that because of the fear of surveillance and retaliation, people in tight-knit communities tend to refrain from sharing their real lifestyle choices, creating a mundane, hyper-conservative online environment where differences between different cultural and social groups become invisible.

The first chapter opens with an intricate account of the personal lives of seven Arab women living in Mardin. These women are often seen sitting together, chatting, sipping tea, indulging in sweets, and talking to their significant others on their smartphones without their parents' open acknowledgment. In particular, one of these women is Yağmur, who is 23 years old and uses social media platforms such as Facebook, Tango, and Instagram quite frequently. Yağmur's engagement with social media tools is a peculiar case for the author as Costa describes her personal story, as well as her use of Facebook in excruciating detail. Yağmur has been using Facebook to privately communicate with her boyfriend whereas her public profile showcases her religious and moral beliefs through symbols and verses from the Koran, as well as her support for the ruling AKP and Prime Minister Erdoğan.

The first chapter of the book also describes the field site by giving the necessary social and political context in Yenişehir, Mardin. Yenişehir is the rapidly expanding center of Mardin with new construction sites and modern amenities such as shops, markets, schools, cafes, and restaurants especially after the AKP came to power. Inhabitants of the old city began moving to the new city in the late 1990s, resulting in a blending of different ethnic groups sharing the same environments. According to Costa, Mardin is striving for modernity, positioning itself as a provincial capital with a growing population of civil servants and public officials. Then, Costa continues by introducing two additional characters, Leyla and Seçkin along with a more detailed account of Yağmur. Yağmur is an insurance employee with strong family support, Leyla is, a 26-year-old Arab woman who flirts with men, and Seçkin, is a Kurdish teacher facing political turmoil who struggles to balance his modern lifestyle with his Kurdish identity.

The second chapter describes the media ecology of Mardin, explaining the different social impacts of traditional media such as television, and new media tools such as smartphones and social media platforms. Social media is depicted as a tool that increases individualism whereas traditional media tools are depicted to reinforce traditional family values and bonds. The chapter explores how social media has provided opportunities for women and younger individuals in Southeast Turkey to act autonomously, distinct from their older male relatives. However, new ideas of modernity that accept individual-based relations, such as friendship and romantic love, have not accompanied this autonomy.

In the third chapter, the topic of discussion is how individuals in Mardin maintain a conservative online persona, while also showcasing their affluence and social status. This is primarily due to the fact that social media is perceived as a means of surveillance, and people are cautious about constructing their desired image. Likewise, social media is regarded as a modern-day platform for visual communication, and its widespread use has resulted in concerns about morality and increased vulnerability. These concerns actually amplify the visibility of conservative and traditional values on social media platforms, thereby creating a mundane hyper-conservative online environment, where people from vastly different cultural backgrounds have a similarly conservative outlook on social media. However, this online environment is not a reflection of the offline world, in which different lifestyles, cultures, and views are much more visible in the public arena.

In chapter four, the book explores the different ways social media is utilized to maintain and strengthen kinship ties, tribal relations, and friendships. The main finding of the chapter is that social media contributed to the strengthening of weak ties among people with up to 400 relatives. Costa underlines the distinct ways social media is used among different socio-economic and ethnic groups. More specifically, for many Kurds social media functions as a political tool for resistance against assimilation while also helping them connect with the members of their extended families who live far away. In that sense, Facebook is used extensively to observe distant relatives living far away from each other thereby reproducing the kinship network already existing in the offline world. According to Costa, as they significantly have less sense of connection to their distant relatives, Arabs' online networks tend to include fewer relatives.

The fifth chapter discusses how women in Mardin face restrictions on their freedom, including limitations on going out in public and to cafes. As a result, many women turn to social media to communicate with the world. The author also explores how social media has created new opportunities for mixed-gender relationships and romances in a society undergoing significant social change. While this change could be seen as a movement towards a more modern and secular society, new conservative values and public social norms have also emerged. This chapter's main emphasis is on how social media provides an opportunity for lovers to privately communicate with one another in the presence of strict traditional norms, which brings about contradictory aspects of a modernizing local community.

The sixth chapter depicts the political use of social media in Mardin. The chapter argues that political discussions and activities are kept at a minimum and different ethnic groups live in the region peacefully through a society of "public secrecy". Its reflections can be seen on Facebook, where politically controversial topics or views are deliberately avoided due to the fear of political surveillance of the state. However, social media has created a new medium for expressing regional interests more freely. Regarding political participation, government opponents feel threatened by state surveillance, while pro-government supporters are much more visible on Facebook.

Overall, the book's contribution to social media research is immensely important since it provides a nuanced approach to digital technologies by tracing their particular use in a local context. By presenting a detailed account of locals' contradictory social media practices and hands-on experiences with digital technologies, Costa critiques the major claims of technological determinism, which sees technological development as a strong indicator of linear progress in society. The book makes a strong case that technology does not always bring about individualism and modernization in a progressive fashion, as it can also be used to strengthen family bonds, as well as replicate or even amplify traditional values and religious norms.

One point of consideration is that Costa's work delves so deep into the specific issues that concern Turkey that she does not consider the possible implications of global design features in social media tools. This makes the whole analysis on social media use very localized and, therefore, very specific to the Turkish case, leaving little room, for instance, for comparative research. In other words, with regard to the agency-structure debate in social sciences, the author focused too much on the agency of the individuals using social media and does not explore the ways these digital platforms influence ~~how individuals use them~~ individual use. Focusing on the platform architectures and how they lead to common social media use ~~cases~~ without disregarding the agency of the individual users may create new avenues for comparative research in social media anthropology.

Another point is that Costa does not distinguish between different digital platforms clearly throughout the book. For instance, she deals with WhatsApp as a social media tool. This is understandable for the time the book was published when clear distinctions between different digital tools were yet to be made. However, private messaging tools like WhatsApp are quite different from social media platforms like Facebook. WhatsApp is a private medium where online conversations are closed to public view and end-to-end encrypted. In fact, this very distinction between public and private communication in digital spaces can be a starting point for further research in the field of digital media anthropology in Turkey because the two may have wildly different implications for digital technology usage.