In this chapter we will examine the influences that social media has had upon gender relations, gendered norms and identities across our field sites. By gender we refer to the socially and culturally constructed differences between femininity and masculinity, shaped by countless factors including the use of technology and digital media. Early internet research often marvelled at the uniqueness of online social spaces in which personal characteristics such as gender, race, age and also apparent physical aspects of the body could seemingly be erased, as you could adopt an entirely distinct online persona. Feminist internet scholars emphasised the role of digital media in providing empowering tools, enabling both women and men freely to perform selves and identities that they chose for themselves online, escaping from the oppressive gender norms of the offline world.

Donna Haraway provides one of the best known arguments for this trend, emphasising the power of technology to transform gender relations and identity. Furthermore, because gender could potentially become erased or irrelevant online, this was seen as itself evidence that notions of gender were culturally constructed, created through interactions between the social world and the material culture (and technologies) around us, rather than being merely biological fact. At that time other digital optimists emphasised the internet as enabling the constitution of new forms of individual and collective gender identities. For them the internet facilitated a genuine expression of women’s own agency rather than something imposed upon them.

In retrospect these notions of free-floating online identities, detached from real-world bodies, have proved short-lived. As social media has replaced more anonymous types of interactions such as chat rooms and forums, offline identities have become increasingly important in determining online identities – particularly in contexts where
social norms and notions of respectability significantly influence or control social relations. In the 1990s some saw online as potential freedom from fixed gender identity. Others, continuing from debates in the 1960s and 1970s, tended to emphasise the role of technology in reproducing male domination. In this case the revisions came through recognition that digital technologies can destabilise gender differences.6

After these decades, which swung from one emphasis to another, most people today recognise that technology is neither patriarchal nor liberating in and of itself. Technology creates potentials, made manifest according to the contexts in which they are embedded. Some more recent studies have focused on the way in which social media has provided new tools for self-presentation and management of gender identities, especially among young people and teenagers.7 Others have highlighted the dynamic of self-disclosure as the main element of this process.8 However, what has remained unclear is the degree to which one could generalise beyond the Euro-American context in which most of the influential research was conducted.

This chapter uses ethnographic examples to investigate the ways in which social media has at times strengthened existing gender relations and dominant ideals of masculinity and femininity, but in other instances led to transformations in the way gender differences are imagined and practiced. A concern with cultural difference relates not only to the range of sites, but also to diversity within each site by considering regional, religious, class and urban/rural and ethnic variation. The chapter is divided into two main sections. The first explores the ways in which social media has facilitated the reproduction and the strengthening of existing gender norms, highlighting similarities between the online and the offline. The second section discusses some of the transformations brought by social media to gendered relations and gendered norms. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of non-heteronormative – including gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender – sexual identities and practices. It describes whether and how social media may give opportunities for people with such identities to expand their opportunities for private or secret interactions or, contrarily, to achieve more public visibility.

**Continuities: gendered self-presentation**

In all nine field sites of our study social media has reproduced and reinforced norms that regulate gender differences in the offline world, but in different ways and to different extents. In particular the reproduction
of dominant ideals of femininity and masculinity in public-facing social media such as Facebook is a common theme seen across almost all our sites. Public online spaces have emerged as often highly conservative, reinforcing established gender roles. Self-crafting on social media continues to have a gendered aspect, as one part of an individual’s various intersecting identities, just as in everyday offline life.

The field site in southeast Turkey perhaps best illustrates the conservative nature of platforms such as Facebook. Here men tend to portray themselves as successful professionals, while women emphasise their aesthetic qualities, or rather their adherence to Muslim values of modesty and purity; they all omit those aspects of their life that do not reflect the dominant values of female and male honour and Muslim moralities. For example, women’s interactions with men are rarely represented in those spaces of Facebook that are seen by the general public of friends and relatives. Conversations between young women and men in secular and gender-mixed settings such as school and universities are routine, but this would not be apparent online. Also the gathering of gender-mixed groups of relatives for drinking coffee and tea together in semi-public spaces such as cafes and restaurants is rarely portrayed, as they can potentially result in gossip and misunderstanding.

Secular, well-educated women who are in premarital relationships known to their friends never make this public on social media. This is illustrated by the case of Leyla. Whenever some of her friends take pictures of her together with her boyfriend, she is always very careful to make sure that nobody will post these pictures on their Facebook wall. Fortunately people usually ask for authorisation before posting pictures on Facebook. Gender segregation and conformity on Facebook is thus even tighter and more extreme here than it is offline, simply because this space is subjected to continuous scrutiny, to a greater extent than most spaces offline. It is common for young women and men to receive phone calls from their older relatives demanding clarification and justification around the context of specific images they have seen on Facebook. People spend considerable amounts of time patrolling and speculating about their Facebook friends’ walls. Any deviance from the norms can become an object of rumour and gossip, potentially resulting in shame and the ruin of the individual and family’s reputation.

A young man named Fatih attended an event in a local restaurant with two special guests: female DJs from Istanbul who were performing that night. The women wore clothes that appeared completely shameful according to local standards. Although he and his friends spent the
entire evening taking pictures of the two women, none of them posted any of these images on Facebook. On the online spaces visible to hundreds of friends and relatives these men strictly conform to moral rules that impose on them virtuous and pure conduct.

Dominant ideals of femininity are reproduced also through a contained online public presence of women’s bodies: young unmarried women from more conservative backgrounds often use Facebook with fake profile pictures and fake names in order to avoid being seen by older male relatives. By doing so they reproduce current social norms that traditionally prevented them from having a presence in public spaces; yet this simultaneously also produces new opportunities to transgress these norms, by secretly maintaining spaces of representation outside the family’s control.

The partial exclusion of women from the more public spaces of social media is not limited to southeast Turkey. In our rural Chinese field site several women who had recently married removed many strangers from their contact list; they had arrived there as a result of previous ‘indiscriminate adding’ sprees prior to marriage. Others might stop using social media altogether. Pregnant women often defriend many people and make themselves less visible on social media, representing a transition out of public life and into the private institution of motherhood. Women’s lack of visibility on social media is thus heightened with the passing of certain life stages. Yet in contrast married women are particularly active and visible in offline public spaces, such as in organised dance troupes.

In this case it is the connotations of the online as an immoral space that discourages some women from overt online activities. Those women who are active online make considerable use of the greater anonymity afforded by Chinese social media. It was rare for women to use their own photographs as their avatars or in their QZone profiles, and many women followed the practice of ‘locking’ their QZone albums, typically with questions such as ‘What is my name?’ so that only contacts known to them personally would be able to view these images. In rural China online normativity is expressed through a reinvention of traditional relationships based on traditional ideals. Women and men publicly share material which portrays what they see as traditional family relationships, including pictures portraying children and parents or happy spouses, as well as memes with romantic messages. The QQ platform has become an important place to express these traditional family and romantic values, often seen to embody ideals inflected by Confucianism.
In the Italian field site too the limited visibility of women’s figures in public spaces corresponds to a lack of visibility on social media. It is extremely unusual for married women to post photographs of themselves on Facebook, and they limit these to special occasions, such as birthday parties, family reunions or specific events with female friends. The lack of photographic images that portray their bodies is balanced by abundant images of domestic objects, internet memes, artistic photographs or pictures of their own children. In this case the transformations over the course of women’s lives replicate the shifts in visibility for women in the offline spaces of the town. Married women, especially after becoming mothers, are expected to change the way they appear in public spaces and to stress their roles as wives and mothers. As a consequence on social media they do not overtly display images of themselves, as these can be interpreted as signs of flirting.

By comparison adult men and friendships between men are more visible in the public-facing social media. In addition adult men share typical content conventionally associated with masculinity, such as politics, news, powerful motorcycles and sports. They are also relatively creative in posting. For example, they might edit photographs in order to create personalised, meme-like posters or use a more diversified range of status updates. In contrast to women, men are willing to engage in self-derision online; for example, by using free online software to create avatars for themselves or by creating short stories in which they make fun of a specific situation in their life.

Another example of the way dominant gendered norms are reproduced and reinforced on the more public spaces of social media comes from our south Indian site. Here gender emerges as an element of traditional family roles, such as the behaviour of the new bride or the established mother-in-law. Families collectively put effort into the Facebook profiles of the individual family members, so that the overall effect is an outward-facing expression of a respectable, idealised family. The intention is to avoid any appearance of family disputes or disharmony, and maintaining gendered familial roles online is important to this representation. Public-facing social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram or QQ provide a space for the conscious construction of appearance, performing the self or, as in the south Indian case, the family. While certain posts may have specific individuals or groups in mind as their audience, public-facing social media also creates a sense of a more general public or an imagined generic audience.
The field site in northern Chile again confirms this observation that public-facing social media has reinforced gendered norms; here both women and men behave according to social expectations, presenting a limited representation of gender models. Haynes writes that the differentiation between men’s and women’s work often reinforces gender norms: men primarily work in mining, construction and ports, while women manage the home or work in customer service or caring professions. Men’s pride in work is very often expressed on social media, portraying their work as a sacrifice of time to provide financial support for the family. In contrast women frame their labour as caring for the family, a role that can appear as the naturalisation of gender differentiation. Such representation at times suppresses individual variation and gender categories appear far neater than they are in the offline world – where plenty of women tune up their own cars and many men are quite adept at baking cakes.

A generic public is also the imagined audience of the visual postings that often dominate social media. The advantage of studying gender norms through social media is perhaps most apparent in our other comparative volume, *Visualising Facebook*. This is partly because that book consists largely of visual posting, enabling readers quite literally to see what gender norms look like for different populations within the English and Trinidadian field sites. Researchers in every field site have looked through thousands of photographic images that people have posted online. As a result the main conventions and genres used for the portrayal of normative forms such as gender become particularly clear after a while, and are supported by considerable evidence. The point is that, as academics, we can now literally perceive cultural norms as the constant repetition of images – so also can the people whose images we are looking at.

In particular we can now ‘see’ how the reproduction of gender identities works, often through a series of contrasting associations. For example, in the English material there is a very common association made between males and beer. One is likely to see this association hundreds of times when browsing online postings. By contrast large numbers of postings create an equally strong link between women and wine. There is never any suggestion that there are different kinds of wine, or that women have any interest or expertise in these differences. A single generic category called ‘wine’ emerges, becoming the basis for many funny memes about how women are supposed to be doing this domestic labour or showing an interest in that activity,
while actually just wanting to sit back with a glass of wine. Memes may simply express the fondness for wine as in ‘my book club only reads wine labels’ or ‘I am never drinking again... Oh look... wine.’ Wine has given women something to apply symmetrically to male use of beer. Offline we would associate clothing as the means by which gender is dressed to conform, but online where, as here, drink becomes a kind of dressing, there are wider arenas of potential gender distinctions that can be rendered consistent.

The corresponding differences in Trinidadian visual postings are usually based more on gender as a physical dimension; female images relate to glamour, sexuality and the flesh, though masculinity is just as closely associated with dressing and accessories. Many men appear with what is called ‘metal’ – i.e. heavy gold chains, rings or armbands that supposedly indicate wealth as much as strength. In Trinidad gendered norms also intersect with class and ethnicity. For example, young Afro-Trinidadian men tend to subscribe to or play the ‘gangsta’ image from US hip-hop, posting images of themselves in sunglasses, low-slung jeans, branded clothing and ‘bling’; Indo-Trinidadian men, on the other hand, emphasise their professional or vocational image on Facebook. Middle-class women commonly post around areas of lifestyle and consumption, and people of all ages tend to emphasise attractiveness in images of themselves – or at least they would never post an image in which they did not look attractive. This again strongly contrasts with English usage. There is no suggestion of any change or transformation in either male or female uses of these associations. They simply make the wider associated material culture of being masculine and feminine much more visible. If there is an additional component, it is the ability to make fun of these associations through other visuals such as memes. It is very common for women to find fault with and disparage the way another woman has chosen to present herself online, but then this seems to be just as common offline.

To conclude this section, we have found that in several of our field sites there is an association between the visibility of the more public-facing social media platforms and a conservatism in the portrayal of gender norms that in several cases exceeds that of offline conservatism. From a gender perspective one could describe public-facing social media such as Facebook as almost hyper-conservative. This seems to be clearly a reflection of the sheer degree of surveillance to which images on public-facing social media are subject. These then have largely become spaces in which individuals want to demonstrate, and to have confirmed, their adherence to cultural norms.
Discontinuities

We now turn to the ways in which social media has led to a break with offline gendered practices and norms. Disruptions of existing gendered norms by social media are more diversified between field sites, and elements shared across different sites are few. In addition the focus shifts from acts largely directed to the crafting of self-presentation on semi-public or public online spaces to the implications of social media as sites in which people interact, sometimes in more secluded online settings.

In southeast Turkey the impact of social media in changing gender relations is perhaps even more significant than its impact upon conformity. Social media has greatly extended women’s opportunities for social relationships where these are limited in the offline world. In Mardin the presence of women in public spaces has already increased in the last decade, with more female access to education and job opportunities outside the home. However, many young women express the desire to have more opportunities to extend their social networks; they complain about not only the lack of social events, but also about the control parents or husbands exert over them. As they often have limited access to public spaces such as cafes, restaurants and streets, young women use social media to maintain social relations and widen their social networks outside of family control. In the case of women from more conservative and religious backgrounds, effectively house-bound because their fathers or husbands do not allow them to study, work or meet friends, social media becomes a pivotal tool for keeping in touch with the external world. While physically within the home they can still remain in touch with friends – quite commonly through the use of fake accounts that maintain anonymity.

As well as creating new spaces for women’s autonomy, however, new opportunities have also emerged for men to control their female relatives, to flirt with and harass other women and to cheat on their wives. This ease with which strangers and friends of the opposite sex can engage in dialogue has also led to social media becoming the main place where courtship occurs and romantic relationships are lived. While the offline possibilities remain highly restricted, it is now very common for unmarried youths to find romance through the private messaging systems provided by WhatsApp, Facebook, Viber, Tango or via SMS.

In south Italy too social media has expanded opportunities for communication for women. Despite being less visible online, women tend to use social media such as WhatsApp and comments on Facebook more intensively than men, especially within lower income families. Once
again it is the women with more restricted opportunities offline, for similar reasons of respectability, who make fullest use of social media as an important tool for communicating with an extended network of others. Men have more opportunities to engage in conversations and social events offline, often meeting in bars, streets and the piazza. By contrast women rarely stop and talk in the streets for fear they would look lazy. As we saw in the previous section, this extensive communication is balanced by the way in which these women simultaneously develop strategies to preserve their respectability as mothers and wives.

In rural China, as in southeast Turkey, social media has opened up new opportunities for interactions between women and men. In Chinese culture there has been a long tradition of ‘female interiority’, with women being historically confined to the domestic sphere. Although recent decades have brought greatly increased freedoms as well as participation in labour for women, they nonetheless remain strongly associated with the domestic sphere; men are expected to be more mobile. To take an extreme example, women are typically restricted to their home during the period of ‘sitting the month’ immediately following the birth of a child. As a result many women now use social media to maintain regular contact with friends by sharing baby photographs online.

At the same time social media has also enlarged men’s social networks: their easier access to cars, for example, means that they can travel with greater ease than women. Many men frequently visit urban places and some use location-based friend-finding services such as Momo or WeChat’s ‘People Close by’ to talk to strangers, typically of the opposite sex. Some men told McDonald that they had organised affairs via this channel with women living in bigger urban areas; and though the numbers were likely to be small, it was enough to provoke widespread concern among townsfolk over social media’s impact on marriage. Men’s activities on social media were also partly legitimated by an expectation that men ought to be more ‘expansively social’ than women, and to cultivate social connections with other men. As such they tended to be heavier users of social media applications, which helped to provide ‘cover’ for taboo activities.

In south India the situation is similar in some respects. It is relatively common to find some young women from higher castes and young men using social media to flirt, despite significant differences in social class and caste. The main effect of social media has been in allowing people to meet others from beyond the boundaries of their traditional social networks, expanding their contacts beyond the workplace and educational institutions. Venkatraman shows how young men in his
field site friend women from other Indian states, or even foreign countries such as Brazil or the United States.

The general understanding is that, when men use Facebook, they would be able to friend women from around the world, which could lead either to flirting online or at least potentially romantic relationships offline. To achieve this these men generally lied about their social status, stating that they attend a prestigious university or are employed by a reputed company in the belief that such claims enhance their appeal. In the Indian field site, in common with those in southeast Turkey and rural China, this desire to experience new intimate and friendship relations propels both women and men into a far wider network of people. In these three different field sites social media has opened new, private channels of communication, changing the notion of love and redefining local notions of masculinity and femininity. Women’s social networks have expanded, and in some cases those of men have expanded more.

In our Brazilian site social media seems to have contributed to more gender equality in several domains of social life. As a consequence of the expansion of communication technology, growth of the tourism industry and expansion of Protestant churches, women now have increased access to job opportunities and more public visibility. Spyer suggests that social media has contributed to a general movement towards the visibility of new and alternative feminine and masculine identities that involve both the online and the offline world simultaneously. Facebook profiles, for instance, are used to share images displaying one’s pride over the independence gained by having a formal job. Work has become an alternative to remaining subordinate to men, to a point that regional businesses prefer to hire women as they are seen as more productive and responsible. Young women as a whole do not see family as being the only or the main objectives in their lives; having a career and earning money is perceived as being equally important.

A significant break with normative models of femininity and masculinity occurred in industrial China. Whereas in rural China more public social media are used to reinforce normative notions of romance and family, in industrial China, among factory workers, both women and men often publicly perform unconventional gendered selves. Social media in industrial China is a place where people may experiment with what they cannot be in their offline lives, operating partly as a shelter from the constraints oppressing people offline. In the industrial Chinese site social constraints governing public behaviour are less powerful and rigid than elsewheere. Here social media allows people to perform a
desired fantasy world. Men appear to display a greater variation between their online and offline lives than women do. In their daily life they must respect clear masculine norms that do not include romanticism, sweetness and sensitivity; they have to be emotionally tough and resolute, and in the offline places of sociality, such as the dinner table, they talk about politics and make dirty jokes. By contrast, on social media they feel free to express their romanticism. They share the same posts about romantic love that are shared also by women. They also portray themselves as young women, and express quite un-masculine ideals. In doing so they resist the expectations that society has over them, although they would be afraid to lose face if they expressed similar sentiments offline.

With respect to women Wang describes how ‘sajiao’ (‘acting like a spoilt child’) is a common strategy employed by young women to win men’s affection in offline situations. It is also socially acceptable for women deliberately to craft themselves as dependent and vulnerable, emphasising their weakness and helplessness in order to extract attention, care or favours from others. What has changed is that online the visual postings of sajiao are popular among both female and male migrant workers. Male Chinese factory workers tend to live in particularly harsh conditions; in this context social media becomes a very important space where they are able to carve out alternative lives in a more desirable world. By contrast, there is more consistency for women between their online and offline world – in much as being seen to be publicly moral and respectable remains a priority in both domains.

**Non-heteronormative sexualities**

Not surprisingly social media has also had an impact on LGBT populations. In more cosmopolitan urban areas digital media has been used by LGBT activists to engage in organised politics, leading to gay identities becoming more visible. In the Brazilian field site social media has contributed to a general process of increasing the visibility of LGBT people, part of a wider process facilitated by social media that has made individual and group peculiarity more visible. In the context of a town such as Mardin, however, social media has simply facilitated the ability to meet. In places such as southeast Turkey, where being openly gay is socially unacceptable, social media has created more opportunities for secret interactions among men. Gay identities have not become more visible and public, but homosexual encounters may now be secretly arranged more easily.
In north Chile, where non-normative sexual practices are somewhat more accepted, social media are sometimes used to proclaim such identities, for example on Instagram with selfies labelled as #instagay or #instalesbian. Grindr is also a popular app among men searching for same-sex partners (whether for romantic or purely sexual encounters), though primarily among more affluent men in the larger city of Iquique. Gay men and lesbians seem to have their presence on social media accepted as long as they perform in gender normative ways, for example remaining closely associated with their natal families and taking on work considered appropriate for their gender; in such cases they report experiencing little discrimination. However, those who act outside of gender norms experience disapproval. As a result individuals such as men who perform in drag create fake social media profiles for such pursuits – as one man put it, ‘so as not to worry my mother’.

Of course, as the examples of southeast Turkey and north Chile make clear, the visibility of social media posts impacts on what types of information may be revealed. Similarly in the English field site a gay, middle-aged male constantly posts overtly sexual and sometimes deliberately outrageous images on his Facebook, while a young lesbian never explicitly refers to sexuality, although her relationships with women may be inferred from her pictures. Here men’s ease with a more public representation of sexuality and women’s relatively less explicit representations continue to follow gendered norms. Not only does this illustrate the range of visibility with which different people are comfortable, it also shows the ways in which more traditional gender roles continue to impact upon men and women’s social media usage, even as they identify as LGBT.14

Conclusion

In this chapter we have explored when and where social media has reinforced, disrupted or simply shifted systems of gender relations and gender norms. The examples here demonstrate that the internet, and digital technologies more generally, are not inherently transformative or conservative. Instead they exist only through variable social practice. If, as this book argues, the world has changed social media, then one example is the way in which different gender relations, and different ideas of what it means to be a man or woman, have been inscribed upon social media. Cultural expectations for men and women in Turkey and Trinidad could hardly be more different from each other. There
are occasions, such as the period leading up to Carnival, when women in Trinidad try to display as much flesh as possible within the context of a flamboyant sexuality, accompanied by the hyper-masculinity of Trinidadian men’s ‘gangsta’ style. By contrast some religious women in southeast Turkey take huge precautions to prevent the visibility of flesh, or even a single visible body hair. In each case there is considerable internal variation. The same field sites included a wide range of different concerns over respectability, given that they both also include secular, ethnically diverse people and a wide spectrum of religiosity, for example, Pentecostalism in Trinidad. In other places, such as our south Italian or rural Chinese site, the main differences emerge through the course of life events, with women radically transforming their online portrayals following marriage or the birth of a child.

However, we did not limit our analysis to the observation of how social media reproduces gender relations. The unique opportunity of comparing nine different field sites allowed us to identify and highlight common patterns and to make anthropological generalisations. We found that the more public-facing social media in almost all our field sites (with the exception of industrial China and to a certain extent Brazil) have reinforced gendered normativity and are often more conservative than offline gendered sociality. By contrast in offline contexts women and men tend to perform more varied practices and roles, sometimes embodying both masculine and feminine aspects, on social media they tend to adhere more strictly to societal expectations on how they should behave. More public spaces of social media, such as Facebook or QZone, have created extraordinarily conservative spaces where women and men become especially concerned with meeting gendered ideals. In this regard the public-facing parts of social media emerge as the antithesis of the use of the internet prior to the development of these platforms, when it was welcomed as a liberating space by feminist theorists. Though ‘online’ may refer to both these previous internet and current social media spaces, their consequences for gender have been starkly different.

Yet, because social media are a configuration of different forms of scalable socialities, they also include smaller and more private groups where women and men are less concerned with following appropriate behaviours. These include platforms such as WhatsApp or private messaging on other platforms. Men and women also find ways to create the conditions for anonymised interactions. It is precisely these opportunities to create new and atypical social relations that have led to a disruption of existing gender relations and gender roles. One of the most
significant consequences of social media may be that women living in the most restricted conditions can now, for the first time, find ways to create personal online relationships with people they would previously have not been able to encounter. This is why, in conclusion, it is important to understand social media as scalable sociality; this concept allows us to understand how social media can be simultaneously both more conservative and more liberating than life offline.