VIDEO GAME ENGAGEMENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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VIDEO GAMES AND SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Gaming in the Middle East is still an under-researched topic, especially if one takes into account that the region has "the fastest growing communities of online gamers in the world, and demographics mean this is likely to remain true for many years."[1] Instead of examining the portrayal of Arab characters in Western or Middle Eastern video games, conducting ethnographic research on Arab gaming communities, or treating gaming as a form of resistance—topics that are covered by Bushra Alfaraj and Pierre-Alain Clèment's essays in this anthology—this chapter is focused instead on social media engagement by players in the Middle East. As far as the researchers are aware, no previous study has explored this area of research, making this chapter unique. As indicated in the introduction to this anthology, there is a need to examine video games in culture rather than as culture alone, and this is especially so in relation to the unique consumption of video games in the Middle Eastern context. A focus on social media engagement is also relevant because social networks are important spaces to exchange gaming information and experiences as well as to create networks and connections, without which the gaming experience will be greatly lacking richness and depth.

Previous research on video gaming in the Middle East has largely focused on topics such as the pejorative representation of Arabs and Muslims,[2] while the general portrayal of race and ethnicity in video games has received significant attention from scholars.[3] Several studies have focused on the way Arab Muslims represent Westerners and themselves in video games that are produced in the Middle East, including games made by political groups like *Special Forces* (Hezbollah, 2003)[4] as well as those produced by commercial companies such as the Saudi game *Unearthed: Trail of Ibn Battuta* (Semanoor, 2013)[5] or the Syrian-developed title *Quraish* (Dar Al-Fikr, 2005). The latter game "allows the players to witness the origin of Islam and 'replay' key battles from its early history, including the defeat of the Iranian Sassanid empire and the Byzantine Empire."[6] Other examples include *The Stone Throwers*

1. Nour Merza, "Demographics, Local Tastes Fuel Arab Video Game Industry," *Reuters,* 14 March 2012. http://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-gaming-idUSBRE82D10N20120314.
2. Vit Šisler, "Digital Arabs: Representation in Video Games," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 11.2 (2008): 203-220; Ahmed Al-Rawi, "Iraqi Stereotypes in American Culture: The Case of Video Games and Films," *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies* 2.2 (2008): 225-249.
3. Anna Everett, "Serious Play: Playing with Race in Contemporary Gaming Culture," in *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*, eds. J. Raessens and J. Goldstein (MIT Press, 2005): 311-326; Dean Chan, "Playing with Race: The Ethics of Racialized Representations in E-Games," *International Review of Information Ethics* 4: 24-30; Christopher L. McGahan, *Racing Cyberculture: Minoritarian Art and Cultural Politics on the Internet* (Routledge, 2013); Yasmin B. Kafai, Gabriela T. Richard and Brendesha M. Tynes, eds., *Diversifying Barbie and Mortal Kombat: Intersectional Perspectives and Inclusive Designs in Gaming* (ETC Press, 2017); Jennifer Malkowski and Andrea M. Russworm, *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games* (Indiana University Press, 2017).
4. David Machin and Usama Suleiman, "Arab and American Computer War Games: The Influence of a Global Technology on Discourse," *Critical Discourse Studies* 3.01 (2006): 1-22; Helga Tawil Souri, "The Political Battlefield of Pro-Arab Video Games on Palestinian Screens," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27.3 (2007): 536-551.
5. Merza, "Demographics, Local Tastes," 2012.
6. Vit Šisler, "From Kuma/War to Quraish: Representation of Islam in Arab and American Video Games," in *Playing with Religion in Digital Games Playing with Religion in Digital Games*, eds. H. Campbell and G. Grieve (Indiana University Press, 2014): 109.

(Hamza, 2000), which depicts the struggle of Palestinians in Israel which was produced by individual creators as well as *Quest for Bush* (Global Islamic Media Front, 2003), which was made by altering the code of the U.S.-developed game *Quest for Saddam* (Petrilla Entertainment, 2003).[7] In addition, a few other studies have focused on the use of video games by Middle Eastern terrorist organizations such as ISIS[8] and Al-Qaeda.[9] More recently, thousands of video game apps have been developed by and for Arab users, providing new horizons of gaming experience for people living in the Middle East and the Middle Eastern diaspora, including titles such as the game *Mariam* (Salman Al-Harabi, 2017), which sparked controversy by asking players for personal information.[10] Further, by examining the top 50 mobile app games in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Egypt and Bahrain (see Image 3.3.1), we find that many of the most popular games are actually made in the Middle East and are designed for Arabic speakers, including *Drift – Hajwala* (RABABA Games, 2016), *Puzzle games* (Mesk Lab, 2014), *Words Crush* (Zytoona, 2016) and *Blue Whale* (Umayma Asfour, 2018).[11]

In general, many games produced by Arab Muslims are made to counter hegemonic Western portrayals, which are mostly negative in nature. In this way, video games provide a venue for alternative perspectives which allow some players to more readily identify with the characters and perhaps to feel empowered.

One of the benefits of using social media are its affordances, or the ways it capacitates communication and sharing of information related to other realms. In his original theory of affordances within the discipline of ecological psychology, James Gibson mentions that the environment affords people many benefits that enhance communication and interaction.[12] The term itself was coined by Gibson in the pre-Internet era to refer to the complementary nature of people and their environments—the equivalents of users and social media in the context of this chapter—, and many scholars used the theory to explain the way social media provided functional tools for their users to further communicate and interact.[13] Put another way, there is a symbiotic relationship that binds users and technologies together: "the mutuality of actor intentions and technology capabilities that provide the potential for a particular action."[14] Previous studies have shown that people who are part of a large network are more likely to talk and share ideas,[15] since networks often provide different types of support through various channels of communication.[16] In this regard, social support can be defined as "the perception or reception of coping assistance or as attributes of one's social circle."[17] And in

7. Adrienne Shaw, "Beyond Comparison: Reframing Analysis of Video Games Produced in the Middle East," *Global Media Journal* 9.16 (2010).

8. Ahmed Al-Rawi, "Video Games, Terrorism, and ISIS's Jihad 3.0," *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2016): 1-21.

9. Jarret M. Brachman, "High-Tech Terror: Al-Qaeda's Use of New Technology," *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 30 (2006): 149.

10. Huffpost-Arabi, "A Game that Creates Panic in the Gulf: Kuwait is Concerned and Dubai Warned Against It after its Statement on 'Punishing Qatar,'" *Huffpost-Arabi*, 9 August 2017, http://www.huffpostarabi.com/2017/08/09/story_n_17710704.html.

11. Note that Umayma Asfour's Blue Whale is a children's game that is not related to the controversial Blue Whale Challenge that has become associated with teenagers' suicide attempts in the MENA region and elsewhere; see Al Arabiya, "A Survivor of the Blue Whale Killer [Game] Reveals What Happened to Al-Arabiya.net," 14 December 2017, *alarabiya.net*, https://bit.ly/2H1p43X; CNN, "Family Finds Clues to Teen's Suicide in Blue Whale Paintings," *CNN.com*, 17 July 2017, https://www.cnn.com/2017/07/17/health/blue-whale-suicide-game/index.html.

12. James Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Psychology Press, 1986).

13. Bernard Enjolras, Kari Steen-Johnsen and Dag Wollebæk, "Social Media and Mobilization to Offline Demonstrations: Transcending Participatory Divides?," *New Media & Society* 15.6 (2013): 890-908; Daniel Halpern and Jennifer Gibbs, "Social Media as a Catalyst for Online Deliberation? Exploring the Affordances of Facebook and YouTube for Political Expression," *Computers in Human Behavior* 29.3 (2013): 1159-1168.

14. Samer Faraj and Bijan Azad, "The Materiality of Technology: An Affordance Perspective," in *Materiality and Organizing: Social Interaction in a Technological World*, eds. P. M. Leonardi, B. Nardi and J. Kallinikos (Oxford University Press, 2012): 237-258.

15. Jack M. McLeod, Dietram A. Scheufele, Patricia Moy, Edward M. Horowitz, R. Lance Holbert, Weiwu Zhang, Stephen Zubric and Jessica Zubric, "Understanding Deliberation: The Effects of Discussion Networks on Participation in a Public Forum," *Communication Research* 26.6 (1999): 743-774; Robert Huckfeldt, Jeanette Morehouse Mendez and Tracy Osborn, "Disagreement, Ambivalence, and Engagement: The Political Consequences of Heterogeneous Networks," *Political Psychology* 25.1 (2004): 65-95.

16. Junghyun Kim and Jong-Eun Roselyn Lee, "The Facebook Paths to Happiness: Effects of the Number of Facebook Friends and Self-Presentation on Subjective Well-Being," *CyberPsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 14.6 (2011): 359-364; Xiaoqian Li, Wenhong Chen and Pawel Popiel, "What Happens on Facebook Stays on Facebook? The Implications of Facebook Interaction for Perceived, Receiving, and Giving Social Support," *Computers in Human Behavior* 51 (2015): 106-113.

17. Jingbo Meng, Lourdes Martinez, Amanda Holmstrom, Minwoong Chung and Jeff Cox, "Research on Social Networking Sites and Social Support from 2004 to 2015: A Narrative Review and Directions for Future Research," *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 20.1 (2017): 44-51.
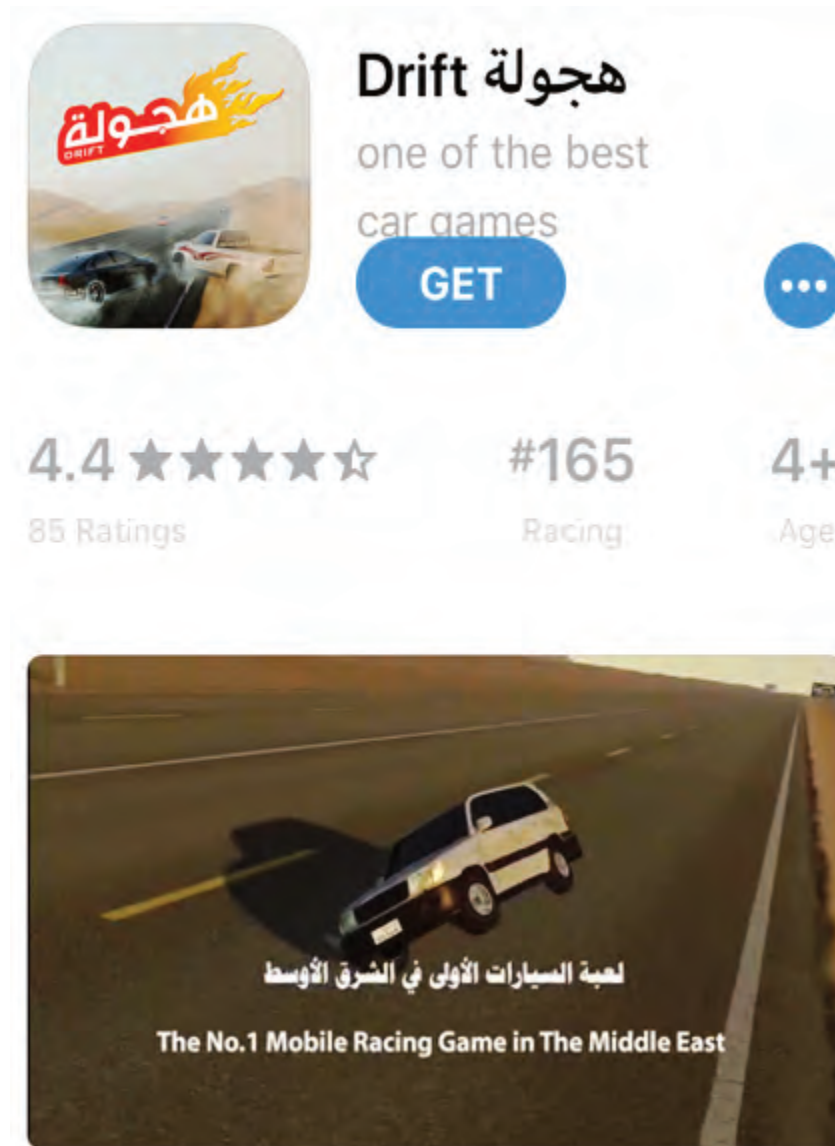
Image 3.3.1. A screenshot of Jordanian game Drift in Apple's App Store.

fact, along with a strong network, social support is regarded as one of the most importance types of affordances to mental health and well-being.[18] This is also evident in research on Internet use and online communities,[19] as well as on social media use.[20] In brief, social media engagement in connection

18. Alan Hall and Barry Wellman, "Social Networks and Social Support," in *Social Support and Health* (Academic Press, 1985): 23-41; Barry Wellman and Scot Wortley, "Different Strokes from Different Folks: Community Ties and Social Support," *American Journal of Sociology* 96.3 (1990): 558-588; Brian S. Butler, "Membership Size, Communication Activity, and Sustainability: A Resource-Based Model of Online Social Structures," *Information Systems Research* 12.4 (2001): 346-362; Schaefer, Catherine, James C. Coyne and Richard S. Lazarus, "The Health-Related Functions of Social Support," *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* 4.4 (1981): 381-406.

19. Lindsay H. Shaw and Larry M. Gant, "In Defense of the Internet: The Relationship between Internet Communication and Depression, Loneliness, Self-Esteem, and Perceived Social Support," *Cyberpsychology & Behavior* 5.2 (2002): 157-171; Louis Leung, "Stressful Life Events, Motives for Internet Use, and Social Support among Digital Lids," *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 10.2 (2006): 204-214; Shereene Z. Idriss, Joseph C. Kvedar and Alice J. Watson, "The Role of Online Support Communities: Benefits of Expanded Social Networks to Patients with Psoriasis," *Archives of Dermatology* 145.1 (2009): 46-51.

20. Christy MK Cheung, Pui-Yee Chiu and Matthew KO Lee, "Online social networks: Online Social Networks: Why Do Students Use Facebook?," *Computers in Human Behavior* 27.4 (2011): 1337-1343; Kim and Lee, "The Facebook Paths to Happiness" (2011): 359-364; Robin L. Nabi, Abby Prestin and Jiyeon So, "Facebook Friends with (Health) Benefits? Exploring Social Network Site Use and Perceptions of Social Support, Stress, and Well-Being," *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 16.10 (2013): 721-727; Eline Frison and Steven Eggermont, "The Impact of Daily Stress on Adolescents' Depressed Mood: The Role of Social Support Seeking through Facebook," *Computers in Human Behavior* 44 (2015): 315-325; Meng, et al., "Research on social networking sites," 2017.

to video gaming communities is important in many ways, including its role in cementing social support among gamers who rely on each other to become more informed and efficient in their play.

In general, different types of affordances fulfill functions similar to those emphasized by gratification theory, since gaming-related engagement on social media offers certain gratifications, including sharing experiences and finding communal support.[21] Carolyn Lin, for example, mentions that Internet use has several functions, including surveillance, escape, companionship, identity and entertainment.[22] Social media provides users with the tools to understand their environment and benefit from through affordances like seeing "who else is in a chat room, who was co-sent a message, or who are the friends of my friends on a social network site."[23] Social networks also enable the establishment of connections with like-minded users in order to gain further information, spread the word about news and gaming issues or receive psychological and moral support and validation when needed. Other social media affordances include making use of status updates, which are often used to get feedback and validation from others.[24] Other types of feedback might come from offline sources, like receiving a phone call or an actual meeting that, like gaming, "provides an awareness of the attentiveness of others to one's need for support."[25] Zheng and Yu refer to this theory in their study of the Free Lunch for Children program in China, which was launched on the social media platform Weibo.[26] Their research linked the theory of collective action to the affordances-for-practice concept, while Halpern and Gibbs used the same theory to explain how social media can be a catalyst for online deliberation.[27] Likewise, Majchrzak et al. have examined how information sharing via social media can develop into "a continuous online knowledge conversation of strangers, unexpected interpretations and re-uses, and dynamic emergence," especially by providing four types of affordances: metavoicing, triggered attending, network-informed associating and generative role-taking.[28]

In sum, social media has provided gamers with affordances for personalization of their experiences by establishing a platform for online communities whose members can support one another by sharing relevant and interesting information about a variety of topics, including new video games, strategies for playing them and cheats which allow them to restructure and/or deepen their gaming experiences.[29] This chapter also takes up O'Donnell and Consalvo's 2015 challenge to more closely examine individuals' play activities as they intersect with social media.[30] Doing so both acknowledges the importance of gaming and play to activity on social networks, and also shows how activities on social media can shape game culture. With this in mind, the remainder of this chapter will offer an analysis focused on the nature of social media use by Middle East online gaming communities.

21. Robert LaRose, Dana Mastro and Matthew S. Eastin, "Understanding Internet Usage: A Social-Cognitive Approach to Uses and Gratifications," *Social Science Computer Review* 19.4 (2001): 395-413.
22. Carolyn A. Lin, "Online Service Adoption Likelihood," *Journal of Advertising Research* 39 (1999): 79-89.
23. Bernie Hogan and Anabel Quan-Haase, "Persistence and Change in Social Media," *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 30.5 (2010): 309-315.
24. Keith N. Hampton, Chul-joo Lee and Eun Ja Her, "How New Media Affords Network Diversity: Direct and Mediated Access to Social Capital through Participation in Local Social Settings," *New Media & Society* 13.7 (2011): 1031-1049.
25. Weixu Lu and Keith N. Hampton, "Beyond the Power of Networks: Differentiating Network Structure from Social Media Affordances for Perceived Social Support," *New Media & Society* 19.6 (2017): 861-879.
26. Yingqin Zheng and Ai Yu, "Affordances of Social Media in Collective Action: The Case of Free Lunch for Children in China," *Information Systems Journal* 26.3 (2016): 289-313.
27. Halpern and Gibbs, "Social Media," 2013.
28. Ann Majchrzak, Samer Faraj, Gerald C. Kane and Bijan Azad, "The Contradictory Influence of Social Media Affordances on Online Communal Knowledge Sharing," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 19.1 (2013): 38-55.
29. Mia Consalvo, *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames* (MIT Press, 2009).
30. Casey O'Donnell and Mia Consalvo, "Games Are Social/Media (ted)/Technology Too...," *Social Media Society* 1.1 (2015).

ANALYZING GAMING-RELATED SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The study analyzes two sets of data; the first one was taken from Twitter by investigating all the Arabic tweets associated with the hashtag #PokemonGo—referencing the wildly popular augmented reality mobile game *Pokémon GO* (Niantic, 2016)—taken from a total of 11,190,283 tweets posted between 23 July 2016 and 16 August 2017 by 3,248,208 unique users (see Table 3.3.1). The data was drawn from the Boston University Twitter Collection and Analysis Toolkit (BU-TCAT).[31]
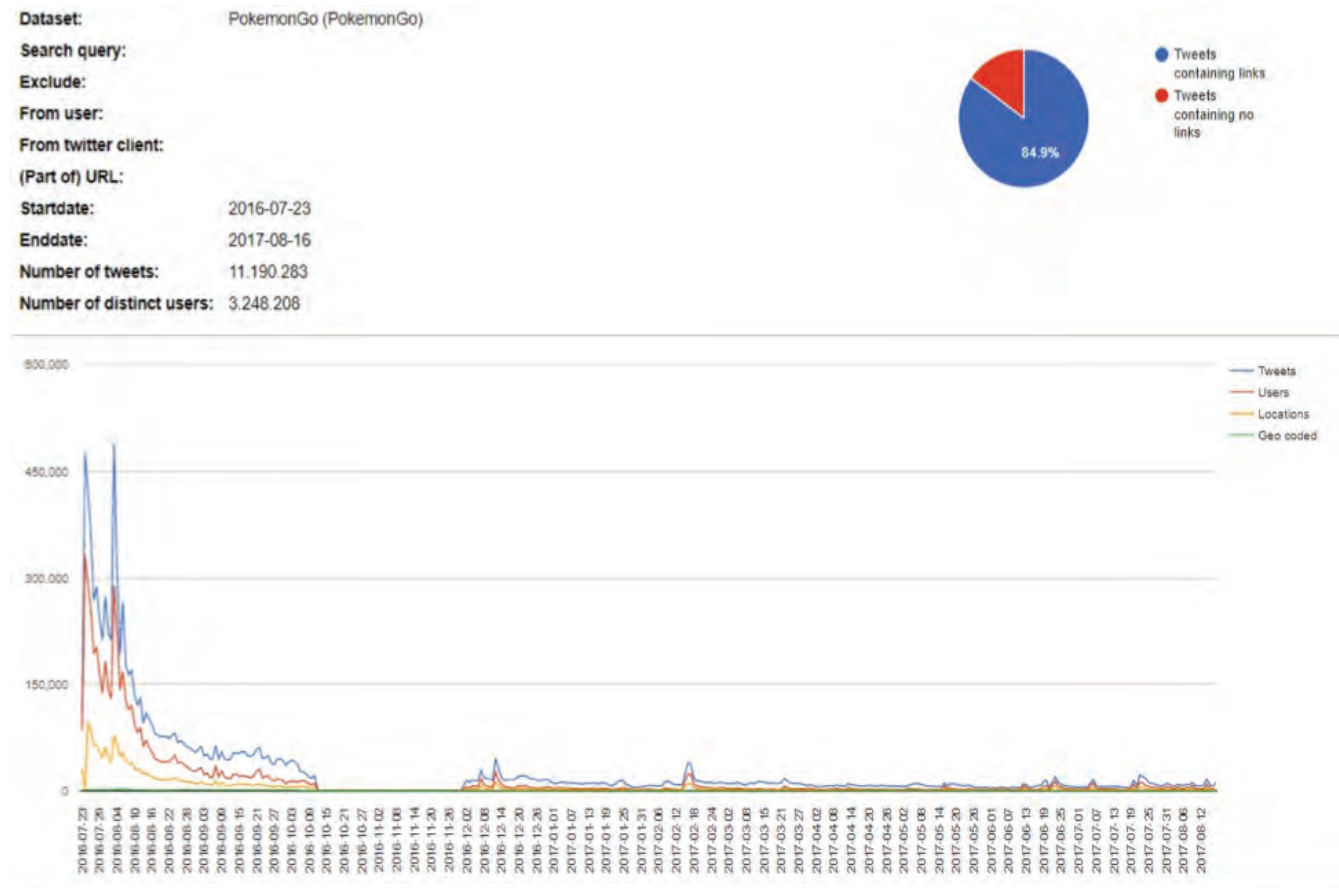

Table 3.3.1. A time series distribution of Tweets mentioning the hashtag #PokemonGo.

The second set of data was taken from Facebook. About 65,000 comments were mined on 6 December 2016 using an online tool called N-Capture for NViVO, and three Arabic Facebook pages were examined: eSports Middle East (42,673 likes, 6,447 comments, 986 images, 2,328 posts),[32] PlayStation Middle East (332,363 likes, 57,323 comments, 2,407 images, 3,515 posts)[33] and Games Middle East (77,511 likes, 1,238 comments, 112 images, 169 posts).[34] The latter Facebook page was removed from Facebook in early 2017 for unknown reasons. These three Facebook pages were selected after they were determined through Facebook searches in Arabic to be the most popular based on the number of likes.

Textual analysis of the overall comments was conducted by using a computer-based program called

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31. Erik Borra and Bernhard Rieder, "Programmed Method: Developing a Toolset for Capturing and Analyzing Tweets," *Aslib Journal of Information Management* 66.3 (2014): 262-278; Jacob Groshek, "Twitter Collection and Analysis Toolkit (TCAT) at Boston University," *bu.edu*, 2014, http://www.bu.edu/com/bu-tcat/.
32. eSports Middle East, Facebook Group, https://www.facebook.com/ESME.
33. PlayStation Middle East, Facebook Group, https://www.facebook.com/PlayStationME.
34. Games Middle East, Facebook Group, https://www.facebook.com/gamesmiddleeast.

QDA Miner-Word Stat that provides indicators of audiences' online interactions. A further aspect of the study involved researching the top ten most-liked Facebook posts on each site in order to understand the issues most frequently mentioned by players in the Middle East. Finally, a social network analysis of the three Facebook pages and their connections with other pages was made using Netvizz[35] and was visually presented using Gephi, an open-source software application.[36] These tools are important in both mining the data and visualizing it, helping to offer insight into the nature of the Facebook groups and the connections they have with other online groups and communities.

This study examines social media engagement among online gaming communities in the Middle East by investigating the data taken from Twitter and Facebook referenced above. In terms of the hashtag #PokemonGo, we found that there were only 5,777 Arabic language tweets mentioning #PokemonGo, constituting a very small sample of the overall tweets relative to the most-used languages of English, Japanese and Spanish (see Table 3.3.2). It is important to note here that there are other relevant hashtags in Arabic for the same game, such as بوكيمون كو and بوكيمون جو, but they have not been incorporated into this study. In general, the availability of such hashtags in Arabic shows that online communities in the global north and those in the global south are not always interacting on the same platforms, since different audiences are not homogenous. Rather than being divided by technology or social class, the main barrier here is language, since Arab gamers who are only familiar with and comfortable using Arabic seem to disseminate and use Arabic hashtags like the ones cited above in order to guarantee that their tweets or retweets will reach other users in their community. In other words, there are *sphericules*,[37] or filtering bubbles, that separate gaming communities from each other not because of income, ideology or politics, but due to language barriers. Out of the total tweets, 3,036 (52.5% of the total corpus) were retweets of other Twitter posts.

	Language	Frequency
1	English	2,844,209
2	Japanese	553,131
3	Spanish	535,588
4	French	396,655
5	Thai	196,608

Table 3.3.2. The top five most-used languages associated with the hashtag #PokemonGo.

As for the most retweeted posts, they fell into several categories, including game cheats, technical advice, humor and social activism. We found that the most popular tweet (n=225) was related to a humorous caption for a photo showing a couple caught in a seemingly compromising position with the man pleading with another man present that: "RT @Ramy_khalifaa: Of course you won't believe me if I swear that I'm here to catch a Pikachu #PokemonGO" (see Image 3.3.2).[38] The second-most retweeted post (n=196) satirizes the devotion of football fans, featuring a photograph of two men—one perhaps chasing the other—who are in street clothes and running on a soccer pitch that states: "RT @Muhamed_samir95: When you meet your Pokemon and try to catch it???? #PokemonGO" (see Image 3.3.3).[39]

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35. Bernhard Rieder, "Studying Facebook via Data Extraction: The Netvizz Application," in *Proceedings of the 5th Annual ACM Web Science Conference* (ACM, 2013), 346-355.
36. Mathieu Bastian, Sebastien Heymann and Mathieu Jacomy, "Gephi: An Open Source Software for Exploring and Manipulating Networks," *Icwsm* 8 (2009): 361-362.
37. Ted Gitlin, "Public Sphere or Public Sphericules?," in *Media, Ritual and Identity*, eds. J. Curran and T. Liebes, (Routledge, 2002)" 168.
38. @Ramyy_Rkhalifa, tweet, 11 July 2016, https://t.co/kUrRcSbaZ1.

Image 3.3.2. The most retweeted post in Arabic (n=225).

The other top retweets were related to providing practical guidelines on how to use cheats and hacks. For example, the third-most retweeted post (n=170) was for a YouTube video that explains how to supposedly catch a limitless number of Pokémon without a hack.[40] The fourth-most retweeted post (n=125) was on how to install *Pokémon GO* on the iPhone,[41] similar to the sixth-most retweeted post (n=119), which dealt with how to install the game on desktop computers or laptops.[42] The fifth-most retweeted post (n=121) stated, "Rescue Syria's children. Rescue Syria #PokemonGO" (see Image 3.3.4),[43] indicating a clear intention to spread the word about the plight of Syrian children by associating their plight with the hashtag #PokemonGo. This post is popular because it functions as a reminder to Arab Twitter users about an urgent matter that requires immediate intervention, unlike playing games like *Pokémon GO*.

39. @Ellonsh95, tweet, 11 July 2016, https://t.co/jKpaKD7KSE.
40. Kharbatsho, YouTube video, 23 July 2016, https://t.co/DZA4IbPBwv.
41. Kharbatsho, YouTube video, 15 July 2016, https://t.co/PLZl3YEMCn.
42. Kharbatsho, YouTube video, 30 July 2016, https://t.co/m9kziR3fVK.
43. @ahmednord55, tweet, 22 July 2016, https://t.co/2iz6z37wLR.

Image 3.3.3. "When you meet your Pokemon and try to catch
it???? #PokemonGO."

Another connection to Syria we observed on social media came in posts linking the capture of a Russian pilot to catching Pokémon. Several Twitter users commented on a tweet that states: "RT @adilfstk: Aleppo is being liberating and is victorious while some brothers are busy catching Pokemons #PokemonGO,"[44] while another one mentions that Pokémon were found in Aleppo (see Image 3.3.5).[45] There is no doubt that there is an intended irony here, aimed at mocking those who would fervently race to take pictures of the captured Russian pilot despite his obvious suffering. Finally, it is important to note that this is a clear example of the convergence of different social media platforms, as users often create links to their Facebook pages and YouTube channels to better connect with other online communities and spread information to as many people as possible. The remaining most-popular tweets were related to game hacks, tutorials and general news on Pokémon Go. This analysis demonstrates the value of studying the intersection of games and social media—in this case Twitter. Players can use/display gaming capital to show interest in the game, offer information to other players and even relate the game to current events, in both serious and humorous ways. Gaming is not always linked to pure entertainment, as shown in the highly evident political tone of the example below, demonstrating the ways politics and gaming frequently intersect. In a country afflicted with war and terrorism such as Syria, gaming becomes another venue for

44. @adilfstk, tweet, 1 August 2016, https://t.co/iB9qYSLPtx.
45. @AboJafarMgarbel, tweet, 1 August 2016, https://t.co/WoxAenzd2S.

Image 3.3.4. Syrian children appealing for help by using Pikachu and
Pokémon GO.

humorous expressions along with the ideological rejection of foreign military intervention in the region.

With regard to the Facebook data, 65,008 comments posted by members of the three Facebook groups were analyzed using a computer program called QDA Minter 4- Word Stat. Two of the Facebook groups belong to gaming companies, while the third page was a private page that was unexpectedly removed for unknown reasons. Neither the collected images (n=3,505) nor the posts sent by the Facebook page administrators (n=6,012) were included in the analysis. In order to understand the main statements shared among the social media audiences, we examined the top 50 most recurrent phrases of three-to-four words (see Table 3.3.3). The top most recurrent phrase was related to cheats, since the social media community seemed to be more focused on finding new ways to win or identifying possible cheaters. The phrase was repeatedly used in different formats (ranked 3rd, 10th, 16th and 26th). The second-most recurrent phrase references a popular YouTube channel called "Arab

Image 3.3.5. The link between capturing a Russian pilot and catching
Pokémon (the tweet mentions "Discovering a PokemonGo in
Aleppo").

Nerds," which posts news on game hacks and cheats.[46] Image 3.3.6 provides a visual representation of the top 100 phrases and their connections with one another. Each bubble represents a phrase, and the larger the bubble the more frequent the particular phrase was used (which is why the term "cheats, cheats, cheats" occupies the largest bubble).

An examination of the top most-liked posts shows that they are exclusively related to news about new video games and/or announcing prizes or special offers for Facebook audiences in order to encourage them to be more engaged with the companies' marketing campaigns. Here, companies are offering various rewards in order to further engage customers with their products, advertise new games, create brand loyalty and generate increased sales. Indeed, social media outlets are vital in connecting these companies with their customers, who can also be regarded as fans who often find communal spaces and connect with each other on the companies' Facebook pages (see Image 3.3.7). Only one of the top posts shared by the PlayStation Middle East Facebook page was not related to marketing. It asked the question: "Every second that passes in the gamers' lives is unique and abnormal. This is how we live our lives as PS4 players. Do you agree with us?." The post aimed to engage gamers by appealing to their emotional connection to gaming, and it received 1,026 likes, achieving the rank of the eighth-most liked post.[47]

46. DvLZGaME | دفلزقيم, YouTube video, 15 July 2018, https://www.youtube.com/user/DvLZGaME/featured.
47. The same company intends to continuously customize its print ads in order to make them more suitable to the Middle Eastern audiences. See, for example, Image 3.3.7.
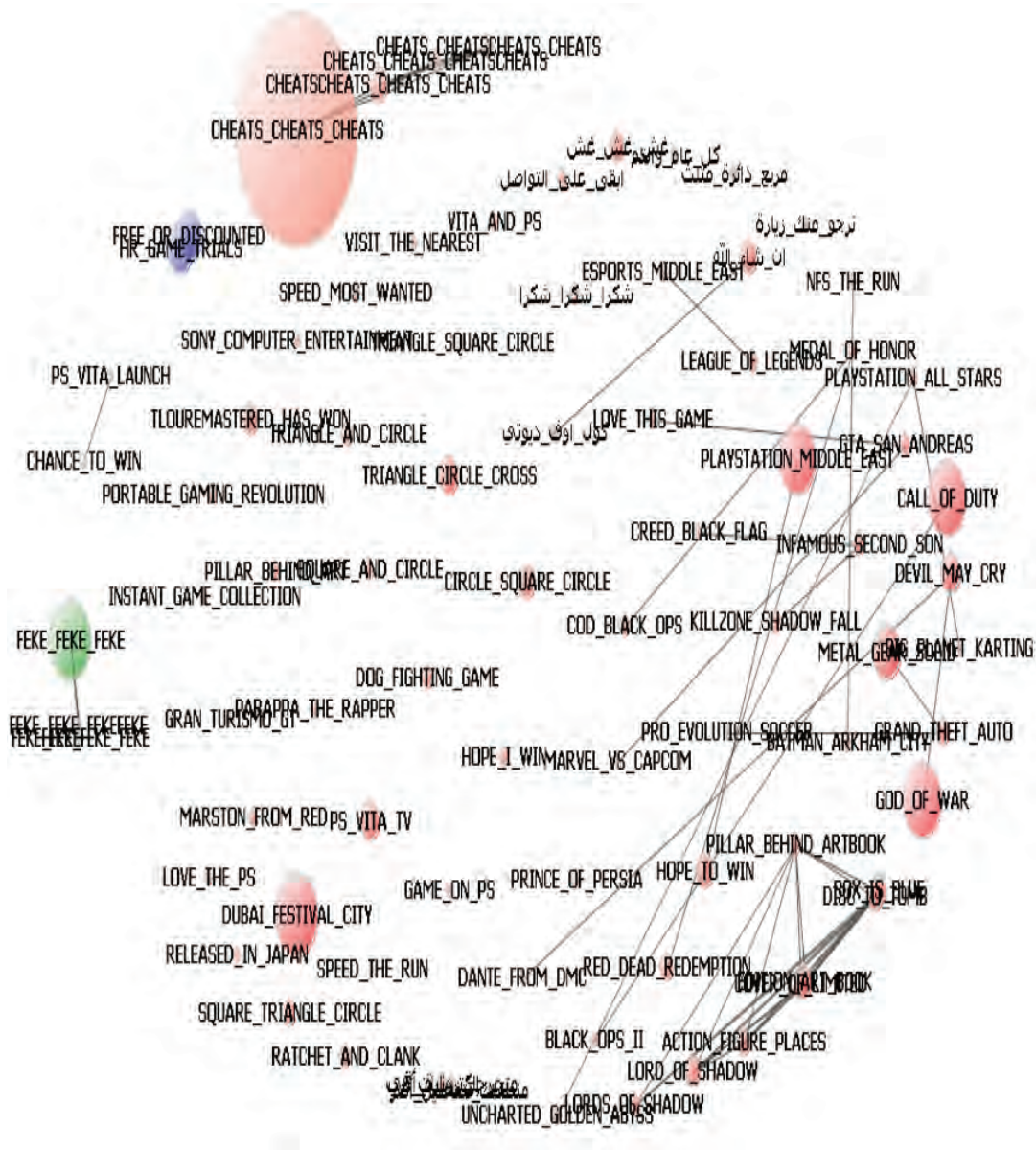
Image 3.3.6. The top 100 most frequently used phrases by Facebook audiences.

Finally, Images 3.3.8 and 3.3.9 provide a visualization of the social networking links among two Facebook pages by highlighting the connections each page has with other pages. The PlayStation Middle East page has stronger connections with other similar pages, as we can see that the majority of the connected Facebook pages are related to video gaming communities in the Middle East region, which reflects the close connections that exist among gamers.

As mentioned above, social media provides users with affordances for functional and social support. For example, many gamers from Yemen and Syria often complained on Facebook about the lack of customer support in their own countries, while other users often provided them with tips on where to purchase new games and find cheats. One user, for example, asked how to find alternative methods to update *Battlefield 4* (Electronic Arts, 2013) since his Internet connection in Syria was weak and electricity periodically got disconnected. Another user warned PlayStation about terrorism threats

	Term	Frequency		Term	Frequency
1	Cheats Cheats Cheats	10490	26	Cheatcheat Cheatcheat Cheatcheat	56
2	Dvlzgame Dvlzgame Dvlzgame	3106	27	Grand Theft Auto	47
3	Cheate Cheate Cheate	1496	28	Fake and Gay	45
4	Feke Feke Feke	1280	29	Dog Fighting Game	44
5	Dubai Festival City	482	30	GTA San Andreas	43
6	Call of Duty	404	31	Pillar Behind Artbook	42
7	God of War	385	32	Lords Of Shadow	38
8	Playstation Middle East	367	33	Dante From Devil	36
9	Metal Gear Solid	218	34	Cod Black Ops	35
10	غش غش غش (Cheat, Cheat, Cheat)	213	35	League Of Legends	35
11	Hr Game Trials	187	36	Infamous Second Son	35
12	Cheater Cheater Cheater	183	37	Skyrim Skyrim Skyrim	35
13	Dance Star Party	182	38	Ratchet And Clank	34
14	Devil May Cry	149	39	زيارة أقرب متجر (visiting the nearest store)	33
15	Dancestar Party Hits	146	40	أقرب متجر إلكترونيات (nearest electronic store)	33
16	Cheating Cheating Cheating	130	41	Killzone Shadow Fall	32
17	Ps Vita Tv	124	42	Prince Of Persia	28
18	Hope To Win	96	43	دبي فيستفال سيتي (Dubai Festival city)	28
19	ان شاء الله (By God's will)	94	44	Circle Square Circle	27
20	Duty Black Ops	86	45	Esports Middle East	25
21	Red Dead Redemption	84	46	Portable Gaming Revolution	25
22	Lord Of Shadow	66	47	Medal Of Honor	24
23	Tlouremastered Has Won	64	48	Hope I Win	24
24	Places Are Swapped	62	49	Instant Game Collection	24
25	Action Figure Places	59	50	Parappa The Rapper	23

Table 3.3.3. The top 50 most frequently used phrases by Facebook audiences.

and recommends monitoring the social media chat rooms of its games because "there are terrorist groups that use the game to brainwash the minds of children and youth." The user stresses that "we do not want to abandon PlayStation at all because we were raised since it first launched and we want to continue with it until the end." In this regard, Facebook allows this user and many others to directly interact with the video game provider (who, we should note, may or may not be taking an active role in responding to users) as well as with like-minded people who can provide extra support, guidelines and advice on different gaming-related issues.

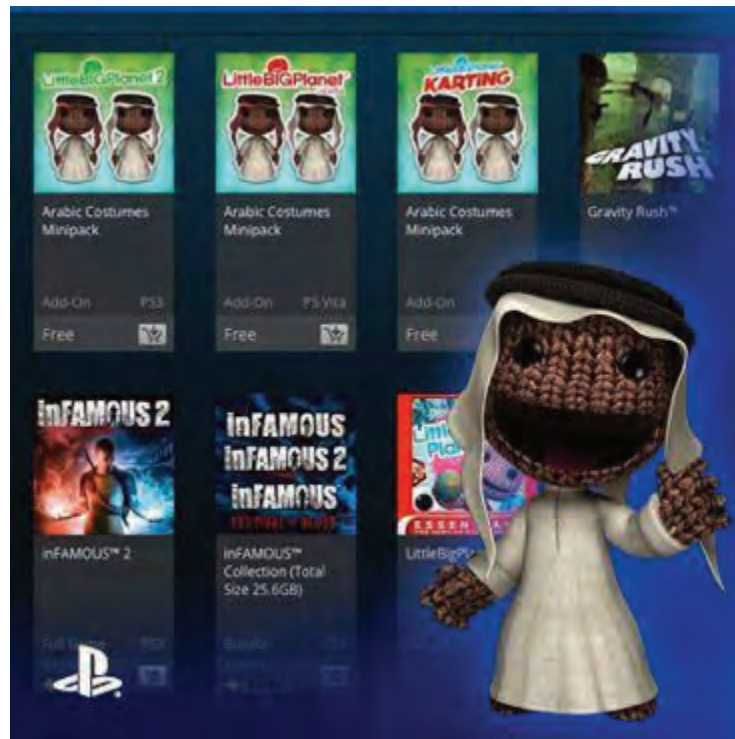Indeed, online space provides a venue for Middle Eastern gamers to share expressions on myriad

Image 3.3.7. An example of cultural adaptations in
PlayStation marketing strategies for the Middle East.

issues, including the portrayal of Muslim Arabs in video games. For instance, one user commented on a post by eSports Middle East on *Watch Dogs* video game (Ubisoft, 2014) that depicts a criminal character having clear Muslim/Arab features.[48] One Facebook user responds by stating that "it is shameful that some Muslims support Western games that negatively portray Islam," which is followed by a variety of responses, often agreeing with the above statement. However, many other gamers stress a different view; for instance, one Facebook user speaks of how "Muslims themselves distort the image of Islam more than anyone else," while another one stresses how Da'esh (ISIS) is itself an Islamic group. Another user agrees with the above, saying: "Trust me….ur average day people…give them more juice than they cant even handle….So if the guy and the girl in this game were christians or jews…that would be alright with u?" Finally, one more user mentions the following in relation to this online debate: "The [game] developers have Raised… this idea , that muslims are terrorist , muslims do bad things , and its [sic] not too far, you can see Da'esh [and] what [it] is doing…. the world see[s] us as terrorist because what happened in syria, and the Bombing in Lebanon, and what's happening already in Iraq…." The above responses are not unusual—far more often, there are voices that blindly defend Islam and Muslims, but it seems that the nature of the gaming community's discourse is somehow different from the mainstream.[49] A few responses from conservative voices objected that some gamers spend too much time playing instead of praying, while a few others expressed concern over the impact of games on their children's beliefs, highlighting a cultural tension between Muslim audiences and Western values. Interestingly, these voices were often silenced or mocked by other gamers, making us question to what extent they were members of the group, or if they came to the space mainly to critique those active within it.

48. http://es.me/2014/06/222014, ‏واتش-دوغز-تسيء-للمسلمين‏.
49. Ahmed Al-Rawi, "Online Reactions to the Muhammad Cartoons: YouTube and the Virtual Ummah," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 54.2 (2015): 261-276; Ahmed Al-Rawi, "Facebook as a Virtual Mosque: The Online Protest Against Innocence of Muslims," *Culture and Religion* 17.1 (2016): 19-34.
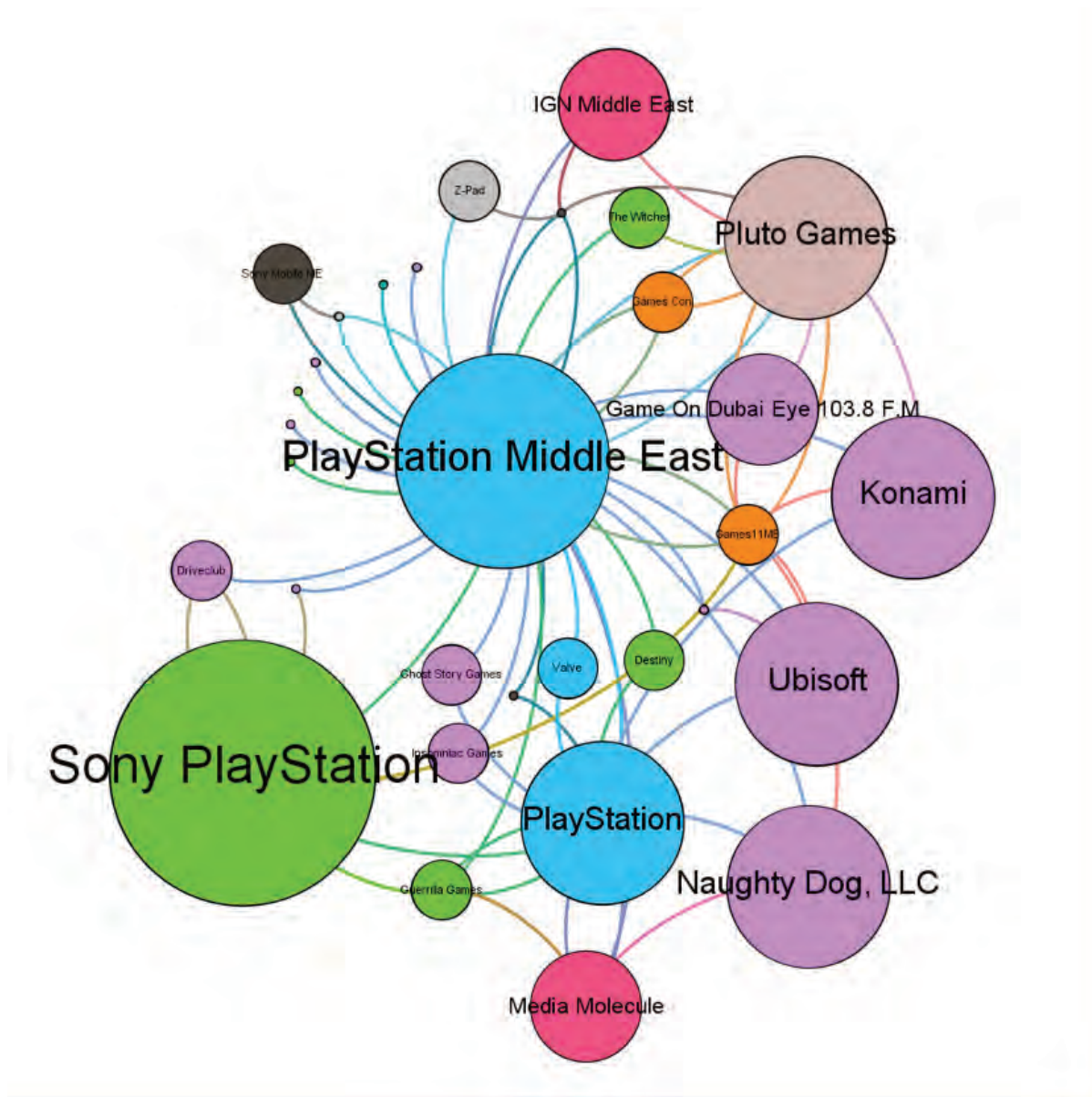
Image 3.3.8. Social networking analysis of PlayStation-Middle East Facebook page.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, different social media channels provide players in the Middle East with affordances to community-building, including various venues in which to share jokes and get practical information, tips, cheats, hacks and guidelines on how to better enhance their gaming experience; as well as opportunities to build meaningful and impactful bonds among players through the use of related but distinct media platforms—just like players in North America, Europe and Asia. More importantly, the online gaming community is publicly constructed, and therefore is not homogenous in nature and includes individuals of both liberal and conservative viewpoints. A shared identity is based on the commonalities that gamers feel due to their use of Arabic along with English, their geographical proximity and their sense of shared history and possibly religion. The war in Syria, for example, was often cited by Twitter users in order to remind gamers of the important issues taking place in the Middle East. In this way, gaming—which is frequently viewed as an activity exclusively dedicated
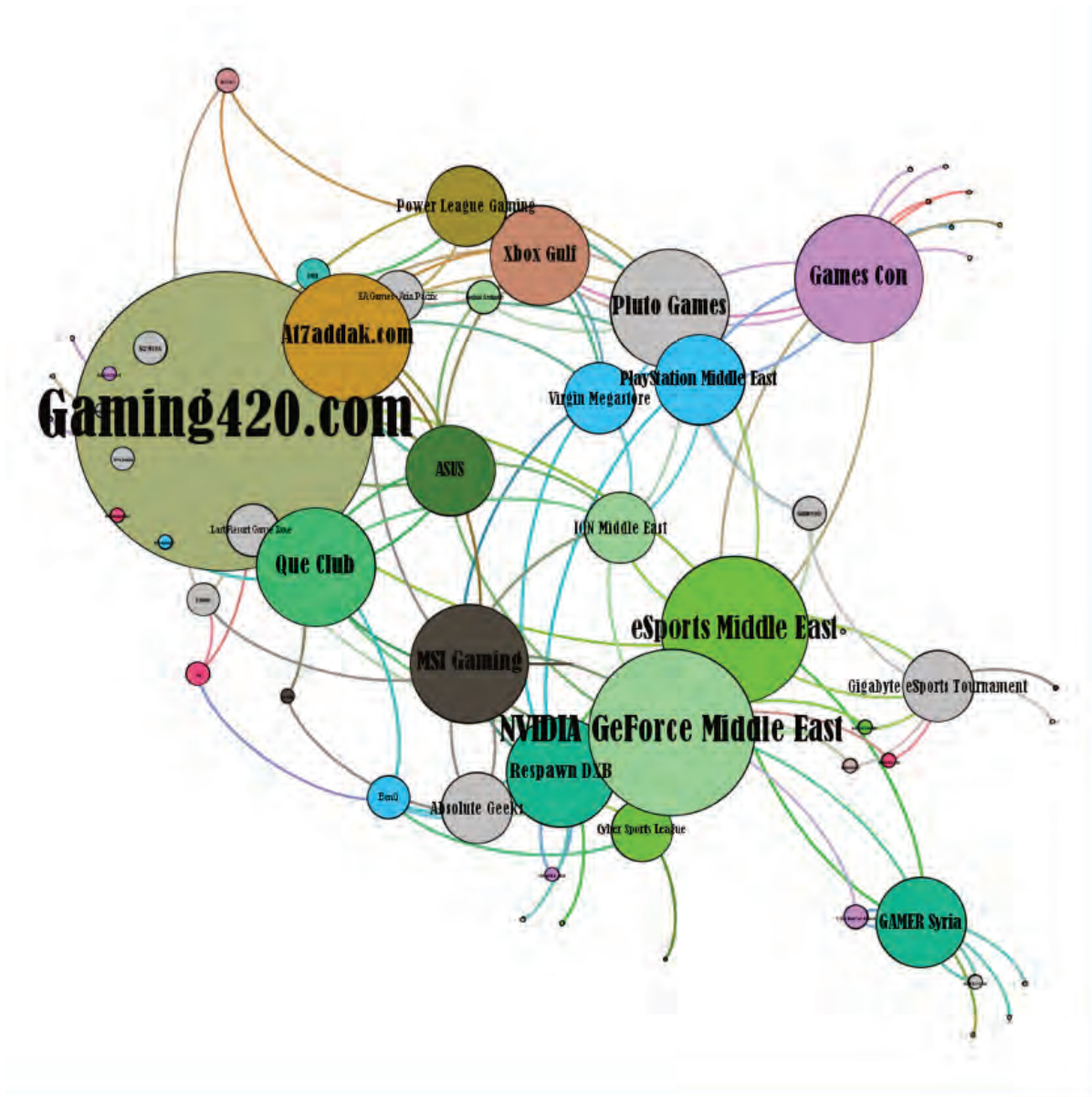
Image 3.3.9. Social networking analysis of eSports Middle East Facebook page.

to entertainment—is being utilized by Arab activists to raise awareness about the plight of Syrian refugees and civilians and to seek ways to assist the victims of war. Politics intersect frequently with the gaming experience due to the rapid and ongoing political, economic and social reforms taking place in the region. Future research might focus on other social media platforms such as YouTube, which has become increasingly popular in many Arab countries, as large online gaming communities are also being formed on this platform. In fact, YouTube can be regarded as an important alternative media outlet and entertainment hub in countries like Saudi Arabia, which has only recently legalized movie theatres. In addition, ethnographic research involving interviews with Middle Eastern game makers remains a highly under-researched area of study despite the fact that there are plenty of game companies and individual developers in countries such as Jordan. Finally, empirical research on Middle Eastern gaming audiences remains highly lacking, especially if one takes into account that young people in countries afflicted with violence, such as Iraq, are increasingly playing video games

instead of leaving their homes as a safety measure. For these and so many other Middle Eastern players in different situations and contexts, gaming remains one of the most important entertainment venues available, and establishes the groundwork for the development of important relationships and social support.

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