Guest Editors' introduction: Digital intersectionality in the Middle East and North Africa

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The Middle East and North Africa region (MENA) contains substantial heterogeneity in categories of political governance, economic parameters, demographic profiles, and a multifaceted cultural tapestry defined by linguistic diversity, ethnic plurality, and variances in religious adherence. Widespread inequalities at the inter-country and intra-country levels pervade the region. Hydrocarbon resources and population are two crucial factors shaping the composition of MENA countries. Based on this, the countries in the region fall into three primary groups (MENA-OECD Investment Programme, 2011): Resource-rich, labor-importing countries such as the UAE and Qatar have considerable economic resources, a small population, high per capita income, and relative social stability, a significant percentage of the total population of these countries is foreign. Resource-poor countries such as Egypt, Jordan, and Palestine are more economically diverse but have large populations, smaller economies, and lower per capita income levels. Resource-rich, labor-abundant countries such as Algeria and Iraq depend highly on oil. However, their per capita income levels are similar to those of resource-poor countries, and their populations are mainly indigenous (MENA-OECD Investment Programme, 2011: 44).

More than half of the population across MENA is young people, which is well above the OECD average. Youth unemployment is among the highest in the world, and almost half of this young population lives in conflict-affected areas (OECD, 2022).

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Despite notable advancements in gender equality within the region over the past decade, especially in some countries, such as women's higher enrolment in higher education institutions compared to men, women's rise above the OECD average in STEM studies, and reforms against wage discrimination (Yermo, 2020), when looking at the region as a whole, there are still substantial shortfalls in gender equality as compared to global benchmarks. Although women's participation in the workforce varies significantly among MENA countries, in general, women's employment in the MENA region is well below the world average (OECD, 2022).

These offline inequalities also manifest themselves in the online. Furthermore, the inequities transported to the online sphere exacerbate the disparities experienced in the offline world. In the MENA, digital inequalities are evident between and within countries, just like offline inequalities. The digital inequalities among MENA countries cannot be attributed solely to economic disparities but also to factors such as political instability, the deterioration of infrastructure in conflict zones due to ongoing conflicts, distinct political structures, and varying governmental pressures (Raz, 2020). In the region, social media use is widespread. Almost all Internet users use social media with a greater adoption rate across various platforms than in other nations (Radcliffe and Abuhmaid, 2023). While Facebook[2] is the most preferred social media platform throughout the region, different platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram[3], and Twitter have different popularity in different countries (Wee, & Li, 2019: 12). Similarly, although social media is an essential source of information across the region, trust in social media varies between countries in the region (ibid).

Despite the widespread use of social media, the region's digital economy is growing very slowly (Cusolito et al, 2022), making it difficult to benefit from the contributions of digitalization to countries, use digital technologies to increase capital and overcome digital inequalities. Optimists estimate that digitalizing the economy can solve many problems in the region, such as a more than 40% increase in GDP per capita, a 70% increase in the number of tourists and a corresponding increase in employment, a significant decrease in the long-term unemployment rate, and a doubling of women's participation in the workforce (Cusolito et al, 2022: xi). According to the report, while social media usage in the MENA countries is higher than in other countries with similar GDP, participation in the digital economy is low compared to the comparison countries, and the

[2] Belongs to Meta company, banned at the territory of the Russian Federation.

[3] Ibid.

report states that this cannot be explained only by technological reasons such as inadequate ICT infrastructure, access, and low Internet speed. A society's utilization of digital opportunities in its economic activities is fundamentally contingent on the trust placed in institutions such as government and banking (Cusolito et al, 2022).

While demographic factors like income, age, and education are pivotal in shaping digital inequalities in MENA, gender-based digital inequalities are notably more pronounced in this area than the global average (Raz, 2020). Although digital inequalities have become more visible all over the world after the COVID-19 pandemic, women, who were already in a more disadvantaged position before the pandemic due to the cultural characteristics of the region, have experienced problems in accessing many vital services such as education and health, which have primarily shifted online during the pandemic, and digital inequalities have started to be experienced more severely in the region, especially for women (Khamis, & Campbell, 2020).

MENA is a region where the rate of women's labor force participation is the lowest in the world (Ramos, 2020), and more than half of the women participating in the labor force work unregistered (Afouaiz, 2021). By one estimate, making women's labor force participation equal to men's could increase the region's GDP by up to 47% (Yermo, 2020). One of the leading reasons for women's inability to participate in the labor market is gender-based digital inequalities (Afouaiz, 2021). Digital tools and digital literacy increase women's participation in the private sector and entrepreneurship; therefore, women's digital skills should increase their participation in formal economic activities (Afouaiz, 2021; Tannous, 2022).

These show us why issues should be addressed separately by regions and countries in solving digital inequalities. However, most research on digital inequalities has focused on Western countries. According to a bibliometric review of research outputs on the "Digital Divide" literature published in Web of Science from 1999 to 2021, the USA is the most productive country in this field, followed by the UK and Spain, respectively (Basit et al, 2021). Few studies emerged from developing countries (Aissaoui, 2022). There needs to be more digital inequality research on MENA, and there are significant challenges in adapting digital inequality research methods developed in the West to Arab-dominated and highly diverse MENA regions (Al-Sumait et al, 2023). Digital inequalities vary across countries, and the influence of socio-demographic factors on these inequalities does not follow a consistent pattern across nations (Vimalkumar et al, 2021). With this in mind, our objective is to contribute

to bridging this research gap by bringing together digital inequality research conducted in various MENA countries within this special issue.

Teresa Velázquez Garcia-Talavera and Lola Bañon Castellón, in their study titled *"The Knowledge Society and Information and Communication Technologies in MENA countries: Diachrony and comparison"*, discuss the development of the information society in MENA countries, the elements that hinder this development, and the steps that need to be taken in the region for all citizens to freely and equally benefit from the opportunities provided by the knowledge society. Based on the evaluation of secondary data, the study reveals that economic and political differences between the region's countries also differentiate inequalities in access to and use of information and communication technologies. The study shows that taking steps to improve democracy, human rights and freedoms, and gender equality in the MENA will enable countries to fully benefit from the opportunities of the information society while eliminating digital inequalities will support economic and political progress.

In *"The use of YouTube for self-education in the UAE: Equal opportunities, different interests, and outcomes",* Viola Gjylbegaj and Ahmed Farouk Radwan examine the use of YouTube as a self-education tool in the United Arab Emirates. The research explores the reasons for adopting YouTube as a self-education tool, the benefits it brings to individuals, and the factors that limit the effectiveness of this process. The findings show that YouTube improves people's skills in different areas and facilitates self-directed learning. The user-friendly nature of YouTube and its easy use on different devices increase the preference for YouTube as an educational tool. YouTube contributes to equality of opportunity in education by providing self-education opportunities to its users; however, depending on users' interests and language skills, the use of YouTube for educational purposes also varies. Some learn skills like programming or presentation, which we can call capital-enhancing use, while others use it for entertainment. Language barriers also may limit access to educational content as users often prefer their native language, potentially narrowing the pool of educational materials accessible and thereby constraining its utility for self-education.

In the study titled *"Digitization and political participation in the MENA region: Egypt, Kuwait, and Tunisia",* the authors discuss the relationship between digitization and political participation in Egypt, Kuwait, and Tunisia, all located in the MENA. It explores how the Internet and social media have significantly shaped political engagement in these countries. The study highlights the impact of social media in amplifying citizens' voices and fostering participation, especially during the 2011 Arab Spring. However, it points out

that the landscape has evolved post-Arab Spring due to state surveillance, digital inequalities, and changing politics. The research findings reveal that despite increased online political participation, there is a paradox of declining physical political participation in elections and interest in politics, which requires further investigation and analysis. The research results show the necessity of investigating the relationship between Internet use and political participation across varied contextual settings, notably encompassing countries characterized by different demographic, economic, cultural, and political profiles.

In their study titled *"Dwelling in a pandemic world: The role of new media in fostering anxiety and fear about Covid-19 pandemic in the United Arab Emirates",* Ahmed Mansoori and Muhammed Musa examine how digital inequalities occur among different groups living in the country during the COVID-19 pandemic. The UAE is one of the most digitally connected countries in the MENA region. However, research findings show that even in cases where first-level digital inequalities have almost wholly disappeared, second- and third-level digital inequalities affect the diversity and reliability of people's information sources regarding the epidemic, and those who are on the disadvantaged side of digital inequalities feel higher anxiety and fear in the face of the epidemic. As the level of education and digital literacy increases, the Internet increasingly becomes a resource to search for information. Conversely, groups with limited Internet usage and lower digital skills tend to rely on closed social circles like WhatsApp for information, intensifying anxiety and fear surrounding the epidemic.

Sameera Ahmed's *"Using a multi or metaliterary approach to enhance digital agency amongst undergraduates: A UAE case study"* emphasizes the need to unify different types of literacies, which have been treated and studied as separate categories in the past, under the name of multiliteracy or meta-literacy. Based on qualitative and quantitative data collected from undergraduate students in the United Arab Emirates, the author reveals that the intersectionality of different literacies is evident. It is crucial to equip the youth with the necessary skills to navigate the digital landscape effectively. The research demonstrates that adopting a multi-/meta-literacy model can enhance the digital competence of both individuals and groups. However, it emphasizes that they should not be left without direction simply because they are young and enthusiastic to use the digital space.

In *"Falling between the cracks: Bedouin students and the digital divide during the Covid-19 crisis",* Hama Abu-Kishk and Jonathan Mendels focus on the digital inequalities experienced by Bedouin students living in southern Israel compelled to switch to distance education during the pandemic and how these

inequalities affected their educational lives. Although the pandemic has made inequalities of opportunity in access to education more evident worldwide, the region's political problems and Internet infrastructure inadequacies exacerbated the existing inequalities. In recent years, very little research has focused on the first-level digital divide (Aissaoui, 2022). However, even in countries like the Netherlands that have been highly successful in overcoming digital inequalities, the first-level divide still manifests itself in different ways (van Deursen, & van Dijk, 2019), suggests the need to conduct such research in different contexts, adding different perspectives on the first-level divide. The research findings reveal that Bedouin students face significant digital inequality, mainly due to limited access to digital devices and a stable Internet connection. Such are prerequisites for distance learning, the lack of which reduces students' ability to complete their education and achieve academic goals.

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