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University of San Francisco

**Understanding the Impact of Social Media During the Tunisian Revolution for the
LGBTQIA+ Tunisian Community**

An honors thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the distinction of
Honors
in the International Studies Department
in the College of Arts and Sciences

by

Jared Leandro Bisbikis

December 2022

Abstract

The Tunisian Revolution of 2011 was significantly influenced by the widespread use of social media platforms which aided in the advancement and eventual overthrow of the regime of President Ben Ali. With the newfound power of social media, the once invisible LGBTQIA+ community within Tunisia began to utilize social media to advance Tunisia's social and political culture regarding LGBTQIA+ advocacy. LGBTQIA+ Tunisian and Middle Eastern history reveals that French colonization was the most significant factor in creating anti-LGBTQIA+ laws and culture within the region. In Tunisia, this resulted in the Penal Code of 1913: Article 230, which criminalizes sodomy between two consenting adults. Despite Tunisia's independence in 1956 and the Tunisian Revolution, which significantly modified the Tunisian Constitution, Article 230 remained untouched, perpetuating and encouraging a greater divide between Tunisians and LGBTQIA+ Tunisians, rooted in not solely colonialism but additionally Islam. However, the newfound use of social media for advocacy allowed LGBTQIA+ Tunisians to unite alongside organizations to begin fighting against Tunisian laws, legislation, and social culture. Recorded in a survey and through interviews, it was revealed that life for LGBTQIA+ Tunisians has continued to be extraordinarily violent and discriminatory, leaving many LGBTQIA+ Tunisians to feel secluded and forced to hide their true identities. The use of social media has brought new hope after the Tunisian Revolution to the community. It has allowed them to take broad steps forward in retaliating against the government to create an equal society. Social media has allowed a new sense of hope to develop in a community that has been historically oppressed and silenced. Continued advocacy through social media alongside governmental institutions has allowed and will continue to allow the LGBTQIA+ community of Tunisia to fight for a Tunisia which recognizes equality.

Keywords: LGBTQIA+, Tunisia, Arab Spring, Social Media, Middle East LGBTQIA+, Tunisian Revolution, Jasmine Revolution

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Introduction

The 2011 Tunisian Revolution forced the resignation of President and dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and began the only semi-successful democratic transition in North Africa and the Middle East region. The revolution became an essential outlet for the interconnectivity of LGBTQIA+ Tunisians and sparked a previously unheard conversation about the LGBTQIA+ community in Tunisia. Prior to the revolution, the LGBTQIA+ community of Tunisia was invisible. Conversations regarding the community were forbidden, forcing the community to avoid the public sphere. Media participation, mainly through social media apps like *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and dating apps such as *Grindr* and *Tinder*, allowed the unheard conversations regarding the queer Tunisian community to come to the forefront of national and international conversation (Mzalouat). This research paper will examine the internet's crucial role in liberating and beginning the conversation about being queer in Tunisia. Additionally, sharing personal interviews provides Tunisians perspectives on being LGBTQIA+ in Tunisia in order to better understand the community before and after the revolution. Analyzing the varying generational perspectives between Gen Z Tunisians and millennial Tunisians on the importance of the internet in aiding in LGBTQIA+ liberation and progress in Tunisia.

Looking at the historical context of the Tunisian Revolution and the Arab Spring will provide important context on the genesis of the Tunisian Revolution, why it was provoked, and how the Tunisian Revolution influenced and impacted other North African and Middle Eastern countries. Additionally, observing the cultural history of being LGBTQIA+ in North Africa and the Middle East will give important insight into how being LGBTQIA+ in Tunisia is viewed within a societal and religious context. This research will also observe Article 230 of the Tunisian Constitution, which criminalizes sodomy, understanding how this law came to be due to

French colonialism and how it is enforced over 100 years after its creation will provide evidence of the ongoing homophobia active within Tunisia now. Observing recorded LGBTQIA+ violence by the government and the police will provide additional perspective on the urgency of the issues faced by the Tunisian LGBTQIA+ community.

This research paper aims to analyze and understand the effects the Tunisian Revolution, cyber platforms, and the internet had on the LGBTQIA+ community in Tunisia while also understanding the impact the Tunisian Revolution combined with social media had in liberating the once virtually unseen community. By conducting an anonymous survey, the answers and data collected and recorded will provide personal insights and accounts into the everyday lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ Tunisians. Additionally, by asking participants of the survey about the importance of social media within the LGBTQIA+ Tunisian community and the Tunisian Revolution, participants will provide a variety of perspectives on the importance of social media in the context of the Tunisian Revolution. Additionally, three surveys with LGBTQIA+ Tunisian men provide an essential insight into the generational perspectives within the Tunisian LGBTQIA+ community on the importance or lack of importance that social media played in liberating the community. Combining the data collected from the survey with the three interviews highlights being LGBTQIA+ in Tunisia before and after the Tunisian Revolution but additionally the role social media had in creating a newfound movement and sense of community which can be seen by the variety of Tunisian LGBTQIA+ organizations which were created in the post-revolution era.

Ultimately, this research aims to understand how and what impact social media had on the LGBTQIA+ community and the Tunisian Revolution. By evaluating and understanding the impact of social media, we can see the importance social media plays within nations that are

continually fighting for issues of importance to them, whether that be democracy or LGBTQIA+ rights. Additionally, this paper hopes to shine a light on the underground LGBTQIA+ community highlighting the history of struggles and oppression they have experienced and acknowledging their violent and overshadowed history within Tunisia. By researching and allowing the voices of LGBTQIA+ Tunisians to be finally heard, this research aims to provide a glimpse of hope for the future of LGBTQIA+ Tunisians, giving them a voice and highlighting their stories.

Literature Review

Introduction

This literature review aims to provide an overview of the Tunisian Revolution and eventual Arab Spring, social media's role in the Arab Spring and within the LGBTQIA+ community of Tunisia and lastly LGBTQIA+ history and culture within the Middle East, North Africa and more specifically Tunisia. The aim of this literature review is to provide readers with important context and information regarding how the Tunisian Revolution and Arab Spring were ultimately influenced by social media and how this influence brought visibility to the disregarded and hidden LGBTQIA+ community of Tunisia.

The Tunisian Revolution and the Arab Spring

The Tunisian Revolution, also known as the Jasmine Revolution of 2011, which ultimately led to the Arab Spring throughout the Arab world, began on December 17th, 2010, with the suicide of twenty-six-year-old Mohamed Bouazizi in Sidi Bouzid. Bouazizi, a fruit and vegetable vendor, was penalized by Tunisian authorities for selling his produce without official documentation and permission from the municipality of Sidi Bouzid. In response, Bouazizi was physically attacked, harassed, and humiliated by Tunisian officials leading the distressed

Bouazizi publically to set himself on fire on December 17th (Aleya-Sghaier). This desperation and selflessness of Bouazizi ultimately became a symbol and cry for social justice within Tunisia and would be the catalyst to the beginning of not only the Tunisian Revolution but additionally the Arab Spring revolts, which spread to five other countries: Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria, and Bahrain (Robinson and Merrow).

Protests began to erupt throughout the south of Tunisia and so did police and state violence. Tunisians began to draw international attention and criticism as many protestors were intentionally killed by the Tunisian police, including women and children. Additionally, it was recorded that nearly 2,000 people were arrested during the protest period between December 2010 and January 2011 (Boussen). This international attention and criticism forced President Ben Ali to dismiss Rafik Belhaj Kacem, the interior minister. Ben Ali made this decision with the promise of creating an investigative committee that would further investigate police and civilian violence, but ultimately this promise was not fulfilled. By the time the protests had spread north and eventually to the capital of Tunis, state violence only continued to grow in size and strength. The government deployed troops to various demonstrations throughout the capital city. In a televised speech on January 13th, Ben Ali apologized for the violence that had occurred as a result of troops and police and promised citizens that guns would not be used in protests throughout the country except for self-defense. Additionally, to satisfy angered Tunisians, Ben Ali announced he would not seek reelection at the end of his 2014 term. He promised to loosen internet restrictions and censorship in addition to food prices (Dahmani).

Ultimately Tunisians were not satisfied with Ben Ali and his promises, and clashes between protestors, troops, and police continued after January 13th. The next day on January 14th, the Tunisian government declared a state of emergency. It stated that the government had

been completely dissolved and elections for a new government would be held in the next six months. Later that day, after more continued unrest, President Ben Ali stepped down as president and fled the country to Saudi Arabia, where he would spend the remainder of his life avoiding criminal charges in Tunisia. Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi would now assume power as president of Tunisia. The following day, January 15th, Ghannouchi would be replaced by the former lower speaker of the Tunisian Parliament, Fouad Mebazaa. However, the replacement of Ben Ali did not mean peace throughout the country. Civil unrest continued with many Tunisians upset that Ghannouchi and Mebazaa were members of the same party controlled and dominated by Ben Ali: Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique or RCD. In addition, many loyal Ben Ali supporters made violent outbreaks throughout Tunisia to defend Ben Ali and Ennahda (Kamal Eldin Osman).

On January 17th, Ghannouchi, once again Prime Minister, announced the formation of the new government of Tunisia. However, once again, Tunisians were not pleased with Ghannouchi because the new "unity" government included many former parliament and cabinet members from the Ben Ali era. Ghannouchi defended their presence by saying that they did not actively play a role in the violence that occurred against protestors. This ultimately forced several new ministers to resign over continued pressure and protest by Tunisians over the continuing Ben Ali ministers the next day. In an attempt to signal change, Ghannouchi, Mebazaa, and many ministers withdrew their support and association with the Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique. By February, the new government had officially suspended all activities connected with and related to the Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique (Zeidan).

Tunisia's transition to democracy did not occur quickly. Still, the Tunisian Revolution and the ousting of President Ben Ali, and the change in government due to continued protest by Tunisians allowed progress towards democracy in a country ruled by a presidential regime to happen exponentially faster. It was not until 2014 that a constitution was finally produced. The constitution took several years to be created due to tensions between secularists and Islamists, particularly Ennahda, the Islamist far-right party within Tunisia (March). Additionally, in 2014 the first new democratically-elected president and parliament were elected: Mohamed Beji Caid Essebsi. Five years later, in 2019, Tunisia would complete its first democratic transition of power from first President Beji Caid Essebsi to second President Kais Saied and a second parliament (Yerkes and Mbarek).

Tunisia's quick succession of Ben Ali inspired other nations throughout the Middle East and North Africa to partake in similar protests and revolts to topple their nation's authoritarian regimes; this would become known as the Arab Spring. After Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution, Egypt was the next nation in the region to protest and demand the end of its authoritarian regime and government. Known as the January 25th Egyptian Revolution of 2011, Egyptians, similar to Tunisians, took to the streets in massive protests, protesting President Hosni Mubarak, who had been the nation's authoritarian leader for nearly 30 years. Inspired by Tunisians' use of social media as a platform for advocacy and a strategic tool for international awareness, Egyptian computer engineer and activist Wael Ghonim was one of the main organizers of the January 25th protests. Using social media and his computer science knowledge, Ghonim organized a mass social media campaign that encouraged Egyptians to protest against the Mubarak dictatorship and government. The Egyptian government and military attempted to control the mass protests by offering concessions, but national protests continued to grow. The Egyptian Army eventually

announced they would no longer use force against the protestors. Losing the support of his military, Mubarak was forced to resign on February 11th, 2011 (Aouragh and Alexander).

Egypt, similar to Tunisia, was prosperous in succeeding both Ben Ali and Mubarak, two of the longest-ruling authoritarian leaders in North Africa. The Arab Spring continued its momentum in less successful ways in other nations, including Yemen, Bahrain, Libya, and Syria. However, these protests were less successful than those of Tunisia and Egypt. In Yemen, protests sparked once again by social media began against President Ali Abdullah Saleh and his authoritarian government. Although initially hopeful because of the military and tribal leaders backing the pro-democracy protestors, Saleh gave power to Vice President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi in November. Hadi's lack of fulfillment of the promises of protestors eventually led to the bloody Yemeni Civil War, which would begin in 2014 (Issaev et al.). In Bahrain, protests began in February 2011 and focused mainly on economic and political reform within the government. Protests were led not only by Bahraini activists but additionally the marginalized Shi'a Muslim community within the nation. Aided by the Gulf Cooperation Council, which used excessive military force, the protests came to a halt in less than a month by the end of March. The protests resulted in the mass imprisonment of Shi'a Muslims suspected of protesting and the destruction of dozens of Shi'a mosques and religious monuments throughout the nation. Much like the Yemeni attempts for reform, Bahrain's attempts at invoking political change throughout the nation resulted in increased government retaliation and control (Mabon).

Similarly to Yemen, both Libya and Syria's attempts at reforming authoritarian government control resulted in the beginning of bloody civil wars between rebel groups and governments. In Jordan, Oman, Algeria, and Morocco, the threat and influence of the Arab Spring posed a threat to the nation's stability, forcing them to offer various concessions to their

citizens to avoid conflict between the nation's citizens and governments (Britannica). It goes without saying that the Tunisian Revolution began a regional cry for democracy through North Africa and the Middle East, which was influenced and promoted by the strategic use of social media, which aided in the regional visibility of authoritarian regimes. The success of these various protests varied greatly, with significant successes in Tunisia and Egypt, little change in Bahrain, and civil war in Yemen, Syria, and Libya. However, the influence of the Arab Spring continued as recently as 2019 with mass protests in Algeria which toppled and forced the resignation of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika (Del Panta). The impact of the Tunisian Revolution, which led to the Arab Spring, continues to shape modern North Africa and the Middle East, encouraging social media, protests, and mobilization to fight against authoritarian regimes and for democracy.

Social Media's Role in the Tunisian Revolution

During the Ben Ali regime, which lasted from 1987 until 2011, Tunisia's internet freedom was one of the worst in the world, ranking below China and Iran. However, this lack of internet freedom did not stop hundreds of thousands of Tunisians from joining *Facebook*, and by the end of 2009, nearly 800,000 Tunisians had joined *Facebook*. During the peak of the 2011 Tunisian Revolution, over 2,000,000 Tunisians had access to a *Facebook* account, meaning that nearly one-fifth of the whole country of Tunisia had personal access to the internet and to *Facebook* particularly (Rosen). Through *Facebook*, Tunisians were given the opportunity to connect and talk with each other during a vital moment in Tunisian history. From 2009 until 2011, *Facebook* was used mainly as an interconnective tool that allowed Tunisians to communicate with each other, share common concerns and find new important information regarding the regime of Ben Ali (Beaumont). However, Ben Ali and his administration knew about what was taking place on

Facebook and began placing even stricter restrictions on thousands of Tunisian accounts and groups. Joe Sullivan, the former Chief Security Officer of *Facebook*, recounted that during the winter of 2011, shortly after Mohamed Bouazizi set himself aflame in an attempted suicide, cyber security throughout social media platforms decreased rapidly. Tunisian hackers hired by Ben Ali and his administration were hacking Tunisian *Facebook* IP addresses, deleting Tunisian *Facebook* accounts, and deleting various political posts, groups, and events. Shockingly, the Tunisian hackers were able to additionally steal users' information, keeping strict tabs on who posted what inevitably to use against Tunisians who spoke poorly of Ben Ali, his administration, family, and the regime (Madrigal). It took *Facebook* and Sullivan over a week and a half to discover and uncover what Ben Ali's expert hackers were doing and what information they were stealing. Once discovered, *Facebook* was quick to resolve the issue and protect the data leakage of potentially hundreds of thousands more Tunisians ("How Facebook Found Itself in the Midst of a Revolution"). Tunisians knew that Ben Ali had been and continued to manipulate internet and personal freedoms but once uncovered by *Facebook*, Ben Ali and his administration's manipulation was the subject of international headlines, marking the beginning of the eventual downfall of Ben Ali.

After Mohamed Bouazizi's suicide, protests began to spark throughout Tunisia, and although Bouazizi acted as a spark that ignited the revolution, the damage of the Ben Ali regime was felt in all parts of Tunisians' lives. Low unemployment rates, poor infrastructure, and lack of freedom of speech, both in-person and online, were just some of the catalysts that began the revolution, which lasted for three months during the end of 2011 and the beginning of 2012. While protests began throughout the country, starting in Sidi Bouzid and central Tunisia, social media became an essential part of connecting Tunisians together, aiding in organizing protests

and demonstrations nationwide. Additionally, social media once again forced the rest of the world to draw attention to Tunisia, and in the matter of a month, because of social media, the whole world had its eyes on Tunisia. What became particularly important was the use of photos and videos; the accessibility of social media allowed other Tunisians and people around the world to see with their own eyes the sheer amount of people speaking out against Ben Ali (Metz). Additionally, videos showing the mistreatment of Tunisian protestors at the hands of Tunisian police officers and military officials caused national and international turmoil and aided in creating a revolution in which people around the world were invested in. International media coverage combined with social media awareness of the protests allowed people globally to watch and follow the events of the Tunisian Revolution, creating an international outcry of support and hope for the North African nation. The Arab League, United Nations, and European Union were just some of the many international institutions who voiced their support for Tunisians and their fight for democracy (“In Quotes: Reaction to Tunisian Crisis”).

Tunisians were able to completely transform social media from a system that was strategically used against them into a system that not only benefited and connected them together but also helped to speak and fight against the very political system and leader suppressing them in the first place. Ultimately Tunisians were able to use social media, primarily Facebook and *Twitter*, despite the tight restrictions held over them by Ben Ali (Müller, Marion G., and Celina Hübner, 17-20). This manifested in large protests and demonstrations organized by influential Tunisian cyber-activists who helped facilitate these mass movements throughout the country, leading to protests in Tunis that gathered tens of thousands of Tunisians demanding the resignation of Ben Ali.

Tunisian LGBTQIA+ Culture, Law, and Social Media Influence

Critical in understanding LGBTQIA+ people in Tunisia is understanding LGBTQIA+ culture in Tunisia and throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Contrary to popular belief, same-sex relationships and love have been ever-present in Middle Eastern society for thousands of years, even reflected in the Qur'an, the holy book of Islam (Dalacoura). Additionally, power and sexuality have worked together to create gender and sexuality norms that have been prevalent in Middle Eastern society for thousands of years, creating a culture that associates sexuality strongly with gender, which has, in turn, created an environment and society that justifies and defends homophobia (Dunne). However, attitudes towards LGBTQIA+ people throughout the Middle East and North Africa vary greatly. In many countries throughout the region, men who penetrate men are often punished for acts of homosexuality, as this is a crime. The region's interpretation of what is and is not queer varies greatly. In some areas of the region, men who get penetrated are the only ones seen as gay, while the one who enacts the penetration is not. These various interpretations of what is and is not homosexuality make a definition and identity for gay men, in particular, complex and excluding. They argue this is because sex is interwoven with gender, and masculinity plays a vital role in Middle Eastern culture and history. In Tunisia, specifically, insulting words such as "miboun" and "attaiy" are used as an insult against gay men in particular and have become a part of Tunisian culture, even being used and pushed by Tunisian politicians when discussing homosexuality nationwide. This behavior encourages homophobia in Tunisia and ultimately influences the punishment against gay men in the country. Three years in jail is the punishment for acts of homosexuality in Tunisia, although many imprisoned people never leave prison even after their sentence is done. In surveying gay men in Tunisia, the authors found gay Tunisian men do not have a secular culture or expectations

to rely on for support (Hamdi, N., Lachheb, M. and Anderson, E.). The variance of LGBTIQIA+ culture throughout the region creates various interpretations and expectations of the large and growing LGBTIQIA+ population in the Middle East and North Africa ultimately influencing Tunisia and its LGBTIQIA+ policies, culture, and attitudes.

Tunisia's legal history against LGBTIQIA+ Tunisians much like their cultural LGBTIQIA+ history does not have ancient roots but can rather be pinpointed during the early 19th century when France began its protectorate of Tunisia in 1881 (Holt and Chilton, 220-221). It was not until 1913 that the French, working alongside Tunisian officials, would draft Article 230: Penal Code of 1913, which established imprisonment for private acts of sodomy among consenting adults ("*Constitution de la République tunisienne* [Tunisia]"). Although influenced by the French, France had abolished its laws against sodomy nearly 100 years before entering Tunisia ("Tunisia"). However, this is not to say that the French had little to no influence in drafting the Penal Code against sodomy. Pre-colonisation, North Africa and the Arab world more broadly were known for their inclusion of gay men throughout social culture, with gay men being prevalent in social roles that were historically restricted for women (Crémieux). It was common during the 16th century for Europeans to travel to North Africa, escaping the Catholic Church with hopes of exploring their sexual identities freely in the Muslim world, where historically, gender and sexuality had been less binary than that of Europe (Khouili and Levine-Spound, 43-44). Furthermore, when creating the Tunisian laws under the French protectorate, the French potentially could have had more influence in creating the anti-sodomy law than the Tunisian officials, who are often solely credited for creating Article 230. The colonial influence of France played a significant role in shaping the laws of Tunisia. Imposing

their Western influence allowed France to control and change the aspects of the Muslim world and culture that were foreign and forbidden in their Western perspective.

Another essential component of understanding the influence and genesis of Article 230 of the Tunisian Penal Code of 1913 is cultural relativism in the context of Sharia law, an important religious and cultural text that guides the laws of Islamic nations in the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia. Sharia law is a set of religious laws within Islam that Muslims must follow (Robinson). Being an Islamic nation, Tunisia includes much of Sharia law and its teachings in its law and constitution. Therefore, when creating the protectorate constitution alongside the French, it is important to note the potential influence Sharia law could have had on creating laws, including Article 230. Although not explicitly stated in the Qur'an or Sharia law, homosexuality and same-sex relationships are strictly forbidden due to *liwat*, the Quranic Arabic word for sodomy (Javaid and Polymenopoulou). Although it is important to note that during the creation of the protectorate constitution that a Hanafi (Sunni Islamic scholar) and a Maliki Tunisian *cadi* (Sunni Islamic judge) were present in creating the constitution, it is recorded through documentation that either had significant contributions to the creation of Article 230 (Khouili and Levine-Spound, 35-36). Therefore, the influence of Islam in the form of Islamic law had little to no influence in creating Article 230, further revealing the influence and impact of French colonialism within Tunisian law in its creation and now. Even after the constitution was significantly modified in 1956 after Tunisia's independence from the French, the nation's strict laws on sodomy remained untouched. The same sodomy law imposed and created by the French in collaboration with Tunisians remains the same today. Tunisians LGBTQIA+ activists began publicly fighting against Article 230 during the Tunisian Revolution and are continually fighting for the removal of the laws against sodomy from the Tunisian Constitution.

Hate crimes by the Tunisian government and police force against members of the Tunisian LGBTQIA+ community, which have been defended with Article 230 of the Tunisian Constitution, have been in existence since the introduction of the Penal Code in 1913. Although many cases which have used Article 230 and imprisoned LGBTQIA+ Tunisians pre-Tunisian Revolution have been hidden or been undocumented, making it extremely difficult to pinpoint an exact estimate of how many times or cases Article 230 has directly harmed and affected the LGBTQIA+ Tunisian community. Although, after the Tunisian Revolution, due to increased media coverage and advocacy for LGBTQIA+ Tunisians, more cases that utilized Article 230 began getting reported and recorded. In 2016 two Tunisian men were accused of “looking” gay and were forced to be anally probed before serving eight months in Tunisian prison; both men were assaulted by police officers who forced them to confess their sexuality (Guellali). More recently, in January 2020, one Tunisian police officer, alongside two accomplices, physically assaulted three transgender women in Tunis after one of the women, named Frifta, wrote a complaint about the officer for his recorded discrimination and harassment towards the LGBTQIA+ Tunisian community and Tunisian sex workers. Frifta had to be hospitalized, and despite the crimes of torture committed by the police officer, the three women were sentenced to prison under Article 230 by the First Instance Court in El Kef ("Tunisia 2020 Human Rights Report"). This case of Frifta and her other transgender friends highlights how Article 230 is used by the Tunisia police, government, and judicial system to unfairly and unjustly torture LGBTQIA+ individuals—defending their tortious actions by "defending the law" of the nation misguided by Article 230. These cases and numerous others in recent years highlight the discriminatory actions of police officers towards the Tunisian LGBTQIA+ community encouraged by the Tunisian government, officials, and its written constitution.

Prior to the revolution, the LGBTQIA+ community of Tunisia was silenced, and conversation regarding the community was forbidden, forcing the community to be discrete and invisible in the public sphere. Media participation, mainly through social media apps like *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and dating apps such as *Grindr* and *Tinder*, allowed the unheard conversations regarding the queer Tunisian community to come to the forefront of national and international conversations (Mzalouat).

Social media has continued to play an essential role in Tunisia that is particularly meaningful within the LGBTQIA+ community post-Tunisian Revolution. With the lack of online freedom during the Ben Ali regime, the LGBTQIA+ community throughout the country faced an extreme lack of personal freedom, online freedom, and visibility. Social media played a significant role in toppling the Ben Ali regime. Because of social media websites and apps, including *Facebook*, *Instagram*, and *Twitter*, the visibility of issues occurring throughout the country was now being watched by people worldwide (Metz). With this newfound international platform, issues occurring throughout the LGBTQIA+ community were seen and amplified around the Middle East and, more broadly, the West.

The amplification of the issues present among the Tunisian LGBTQIA+ community and, more broadly, the North African and Middle Eastern communities was highlighted during the Tunisian Revolution and the Arab Spring, particularly due to the widespread use of social media. LGBTQIA+ issues globally but particularly in the West were at the forefront of conversation during the 2000s and 2010s; during 2010 and 2011 alone, Iceland, Portugal, and Argentina legalized gay marriage bringing increased media attention globally to LGBTQIA+ concerns, particularly on social media (Masci, David, et al.). Therefore, when issues regarding LGBTQIA+ rights within Tunisia and the Arab world were brought to the international attention of the West,

visibility for the community was shown for the first time in the nation's history. This newfound visibility through international media coverage propelled by the use of social media allowed the Tunisian and Arab LGBTQIA+ community to find a voice in a battle that had, up until this period, been completely undiscussed within their society. Using social media platforms such as *Twitter*, *Facebook*, and *Instagram*, LGBTQIA+ Tunisians could freely advocate for their community internationally (Kreps). Therefore through international media coverage in combination with social media awareness, the Tunisian LGBTQIA+ community was able to find their public voice and begin to publicly advocate for their concerns, particularly pertaining to Article 230 of the Tunisian Constitution, among other LGBTQIA+ concerns within Tunisia. Without social media providing a platform for this community within Tunisia during the Tunisian Revolution, the advocacy for LGBTQIA+ Tunisians through national organizations would not have been able to garner international support and allyship.

This visibility led to a rise in LGBTQIA+ organizations throughout the country. For the first time in the country's history, Tunisians were able to advocate and fight against the anti-LGBTQIA+ laws being performed regularly by the Tunisian government and police ("Preliminary Observations on the Visit to Tunisia by the Independent Expert on Protection Against Violence and Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity."). Although this newfound visibility after the Revolution, which was fueled by social media, did not come without difficulty for LGBTQIA+ Tunisians. LGBTQIA+ Tunisians are a highly targeted population, and advocating and fighting for their freedoms, whether in person or behind a screen on social media, puts them at extreme risk for hate crimes to occur online or in-person ("Tunisia: Police Arrest, Use Violence against LGBTI Activists."). As recently as April of 2021, the Tunisian government and police have used institutionalized crime and threats to target

LGBTQIA+ individuals and organizations. Tunisian police have been recorded using various technologies, including drones and social media, to deliberately target and harass LGBTQIA+ individuals and organizations (Ebel). Therefore although social media has become a prominent tool to promote and advocate for the freedoms of LGBTQIA+ individuals throughout Tunisia, it has also become a source for institutionalized targeted harassment against outwardly LGBTQIA+ Tunisians.

In an informal setting, social media has continued to become a primary tool for LGBTQIA+ Tunisians to connect, communicate and organize together. These communications occur through internationally popular apps, including primarily *Facebook* and *Instagram*, and through LGBTQIA+ targeted apps, including *Grindr*. These apps have become an important part of interconnectivity throughout the community. The use of fake profiles throughout these various social media platforms allows LGBTQIA+ Tunisians to express themselves freely and without fear or hesitation from family, friendly and Tunisian society. Additionally, these apps, particularly *Grindr*, had provided many Tunisians with romantic and sexual relationships that, before the Revolution, were nearly impossible to facilitate. Hookup culture, particularly with gay and trans-Tunisians, has become a new and significant part of teenage and early adult sexual development throughout the country. Like the United States, *Grindr* has become a platform used not only for sexual interaction but as a platform for communication within the LGBTQIA+ community. In order to better protect LGBTQIA+ individuals in anti-LGBTQIA+ countries like Tunisia, *Grindr* has recently allowed users to change the app's icon on their phones to provide additional protections to LGBTQIA+ individuals who must remain discreet to protect themselves (Harvy).

Continued use of social media, in addition to continued social progress and conversation regarding LGBTQIA+ rights, has sparked Tunisians to bravely advocate against LGBTQIA+ laws, legislation, and constitutional articles explicitly targeting the LGBTQIA+ community of Tunisia. The most prominent of these targeted legislative acts is article 230 of the Tunisian constitution which states, “Sodomy, if it does not enter in any of the cases provided for in the preceding articles, is punished with imprisonment for three years”¹ (Sbouai). This law, which has its roots in French colonization from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, is used by Tunisian authorities to target same-sex and LGBTQIA+ individuals throughout the country, and due to this law, thousands of Tunisians have been forced to spend three years sentences in Tunisian prison.

Social media has had the ability to bring awareness to the hypocrisy of the article, and many major Tunisian organizations and individuals are continuing with aid from social media to fight back and retaliate against the Tunisian government for their blatant anti-LGBTQIA+ laws. The continued activism resulting from the interconnectivity of social media has made minor progressions for gender and sexuality equality in Tunisia; in 2017, President Essebsi formed a gender equality committee in the parliament, a small win, and sign of social progress for LGBTQIA+ Tunisians (Khouili and Levine-Sound).

Methods

To consider the question, "How did social media and the Tunisian Revolution of 2011 play a role in progressing and shaping Tunisian LGBTQIA+ culture, politics, and policy?" I conducted an anonymous survey that collected demographic information regarding gender identity, sexual orientation, and personal response questions regarding being LGBTQIA+ in

¹ Translated from French: “La sodomie, si elle ne rentre dans aucun des cas prévus aux articles précédents, est punie de l’emprisonnement pendant trois ans” (Sbouai).

Tunisia. This survey was conducted digitally online and was sent out to LGBTQIA+ Tunisians through *Mawjoudin's* official *Instagram*. In addition to being sent out virtually through social media platforms, I also had the opportunity to meet a variety of LGBTQIA+ Tunisians in various underground gay coffee shops and nightclubs, where many members of the community meet to socialize. Through informal conversations and connections with these LGBTQIA+ Tunisians, I was able to form meaningful relationships and gain their perspectives in my survey.

52 Tunisians completed this 15-question survey, and all of them and their responses were recorded anonymously to protect the identities of all individuals. Of the 52 respondents, nearly all were located in the broader Tunis region, including the surrounding cities of La Marsa, Sidi Bou Said, Gammarth, and Ariana. Therefore, the recorded data does not accurately represent the whole Tunisian LGBTQIA+ community, particularly the additional struggles and challenges that many LGBTQIA+ Tunisians experience in the south of the country. Additionally, many participants were aged 18-25, with no respondents over the age of 44, therefore not allowing for a complete representation of middle-aged and eldest members of the Tunisian LGBTQIA+ community. Nearly all respondents responded in French and a few in Arabic; this language barrier played a vital role in my demographic analysis, as a majority of the recorded responses were translated into English for clarity throughout my research. Additionally, many questions asked throughout the survey were open-ended, meaning that respondents could write in as much or ask as little information as they felt comfortable.

In addition to my survey, I interviewed three Tunisian queer men in a semi-structured format to better understand and get personal and meaningful responses to questions about being LGBTQIA+ in Tunisia. These three interviews were performed independently of each other. Two of the three interviews were conducted in French and Arabic. This language barrier made it

difficult at times to comprehend the interviewees' responses, and ultimately their recorded responses, which have been translated into English, are not entirely representative of their precise answers. Additionally, all three of my interviewees were men, gay, and came from financially stable backgrounds making them not an accurate representation of the majority of the LGBTQIA+ community in Tunisia.

Lastly, I interviewed one American woman, involved in the management of a well-known gay nightclub in the environs of Tunis, in a semi-structured informal format. Her identity, which she asked to remain anonymous, does not accurately represent Tunisians and their feelings towards the LGBTQIA+ community and the impact Club Gingimbre has or has not had on the community. Her responses were paraphrased as the conversation occurred in an informal setting.

Questions 1 through 6 of the survey are demographic questions asking participants their gender identity, gender, nationality, age, relationship status, and where they live. These questions help to provide demographic information and context to the 50 people who participated in the survey and also show the variety of identities present throughout the survey responses. Questions 7 through 13 ask questions relating to the political awakening of the Tunisian Revolution and the marginal positionality of LGBTQIA+ individuals in the Tunisian political system. While questions 1 through 6 ask for data and numbers, questions 7 through 13 are response based allowing participants to write free-formed responses to the questions, meaning that the range of answers for these questions vary greatly. Using questions 7 through 13 I hope to analyze Tunisians experiences within the LGBTQIA+ community and relate their responses and experiences to social media and the impact social media had not only within their own LGBTQIA+ experiences but additionally within the Tunisian Revolution. Analyzing these

responses will allow me to understand the importance of the Tunisina Revolution and social media within a Tunisian LGBTQIA+ experience and reality.

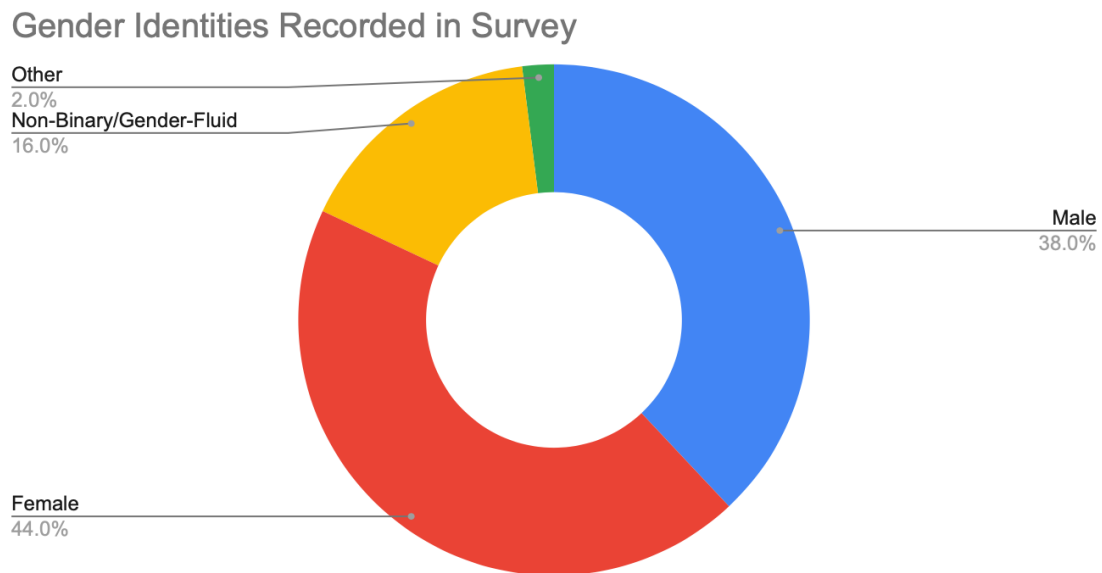
In addition to the surveys and interviews I performed, I chose to review and analyze various resources available about social media's impact on Tunisian society, particularly during the 2011 Revolution. Additionally, to understand LGBTQIA+ laws and culture in Tunisia, I reviewed the 2014 Tunisian Constitution and Article 230 of the Penal Code of 1913, which criminalizes sodomy and particularly affects LGBTQIA+ Tunisians. Data on social media usage before and after the revolution also provided evidence of social media's impact, particularly during the 2011 Revolution. Ultimately, this research focuses particularly on social media and the impact social media has had and continues to have on the LGBTQIA+ community of Tunisia. Due to time constraints, I could not interview as many individuals and organizations as I intended. However, I feel confident that my survey, combined with my recorded interviews and research into Tunisian LGBTQIA+ culture and policy, provides a glimpse into the social experiences of being queer and using social media to fight against a country that continues to perform and enact anti-LGBTQIA+ laws, legislation, and social culture.

Findings

“Enquête tunisienne sur les LGBTQIA+” Survey Results

In an attempt to better understand the concerns and feelings of LGBTQIA+ identifying Tunisians, I conducted a survey that anonymously asked demographic information, including age, gender identity, sexuality, and personal questions that evaluate the role social media has had on the community post-Tunisian Revolution and the implications social media had within the Tunisian LGBTQIA+ community.

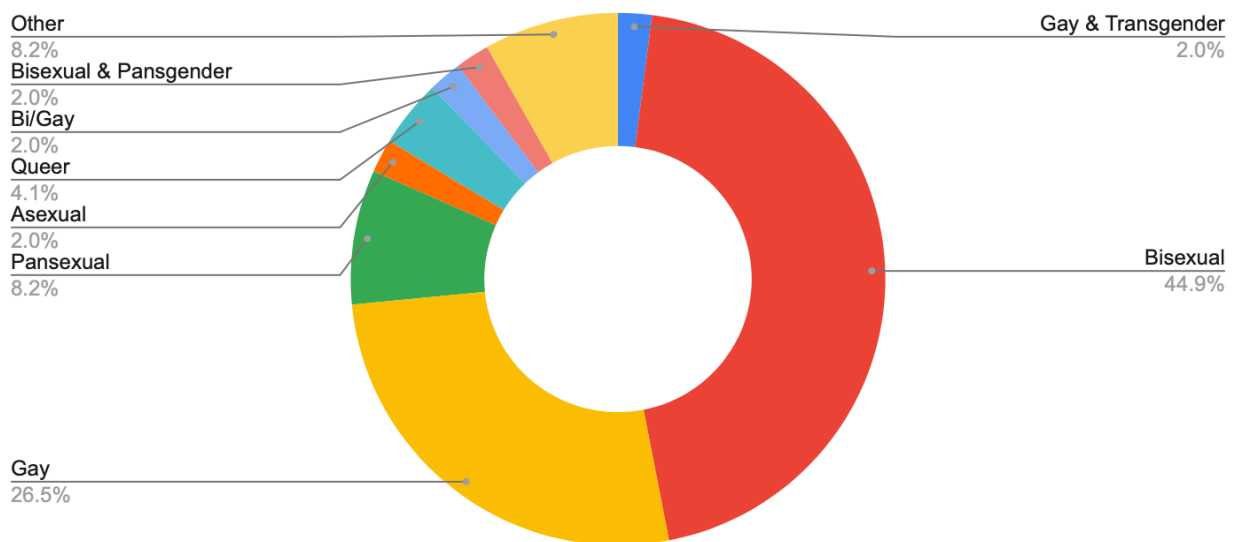
In order to better understand the survey's results, it is crucial to know the demographic information of the fifty people who completed the survey. Of the fifty Tunisians who completed the survey, 44% or 22 participants identified themselves as female, 38% or 19 participants identified themselves as male, 16% or 8 participants identified as non-binary or gender-fluid, and the remaining 2% or 1 participant identified as other (*see fig. 1*). Therefore, the majority of respondents in the survey were female-identifying.



In Fig. 1, we are shown the percentages of gender identity recorded during the survey titled, "Enquête tunisienne sur les LGBTQIA+." Male makes up 38% of the results, females make up 44% of the results, non-binary and/or gender-fluid makes up 16% of the survey, and lastly, other makes up 2% of the survey.

When surveyed about sexuality, the results of the 49 people who responded were diverse. The largest sexuality preference recorded during the survey was bisexual, of which 44.9% or 22 participants responded was their sexuality. The second-largest sexuality recorded in the survey results was gay, of which 26.5% or 13 people identified their sexuality as gay. Both pansexual and other are the third-largest sexuality preferences, both at 8.2% or four people (eight people combined). The remaining 12.2% or six participants identified as varying sexualities, including gay and transgender, bisexual and pansexual, asexual and queer (*see Fig. 2*). This data revealed that bisexuality throughout urban Tunisia in this 50-person sample was the most common sexuality reported.

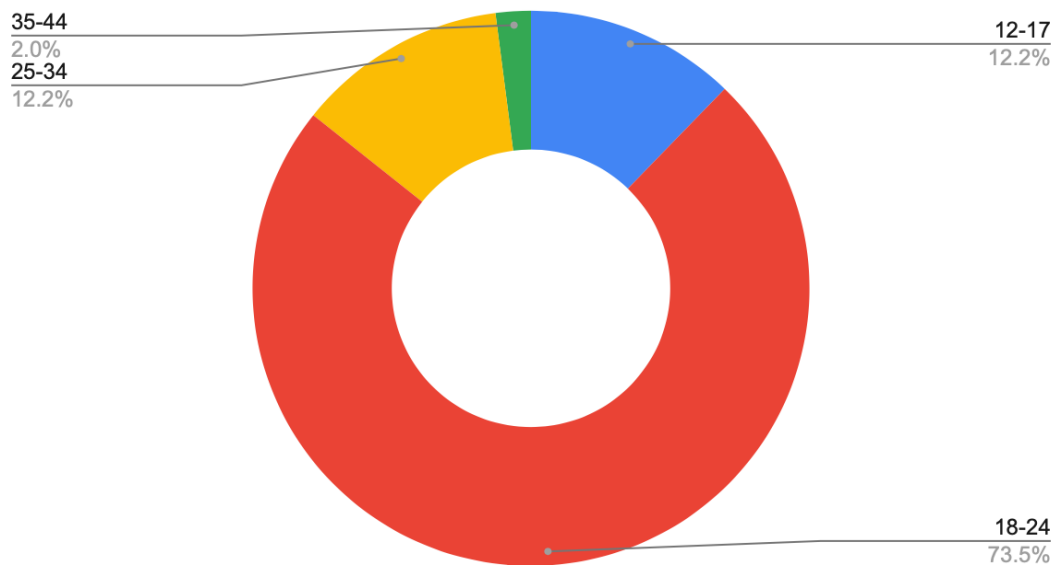
Sexualities Recorded in Survey



In Fig. 2, we are shown the percentages of varying sexualities recorded during the survey titled, “Enquête tunisienne sur les LGBTQIA+.” Bisexual is the largest percentage at 44.9%, followed by gay at 26.5%, followed by pansexual and other both at 8.2% each. Queer follows at 4.1%, asexual, gay and transgender, bisexual and pansgender, and bisexual and gay follow with 2% respectively.

Ages recorded in the survey revealed that the majority of participants participating in the survey were between the ages of 18 to 24, accounting for 73.5% or 35 people of the total survey respondents. Additionally, the age groups of 12 to 17 and 25 to 34 were both recorded at 12.2% or six people of the survey participants, combined totaling 24.4% or 12 of the total participants. Lastly, 2% or 1 participant of the survey indicated that they were in the 35 to 44 age group (see Fig. 3). The results of the ages recorded in the survey revealed that by a large majority, most of the respondents were under the age of 24, which can be attributed to the increased visibility and discussion of LGBTQIA+ identities after the Tunisian Revolution.

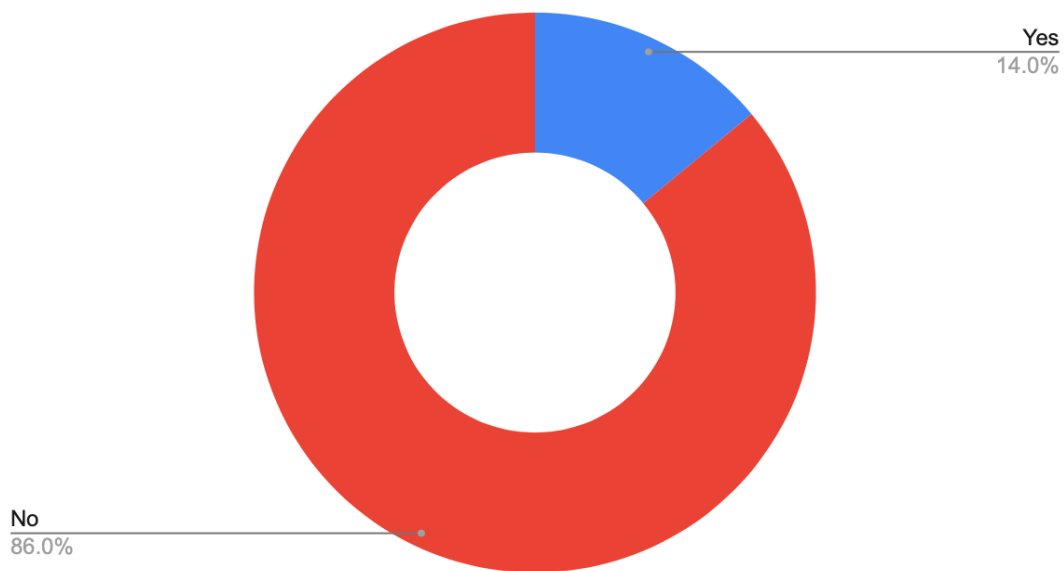
Ages Recorded in Survey



In Fig. 3, we are shown the recorded ages of participants who took the survey titled, “Enquête tunisienne sur les LGBTQIA+.” The age group of 18 to 24 is the majority, with 73.5% of participants being a part of this age group, followed by the age groups of 25 to 34 and 12 to 17, of which both have 12.2% of the total participants in the survey. Lastly, 2% of the participants were a part of the 35 to 44 age group.

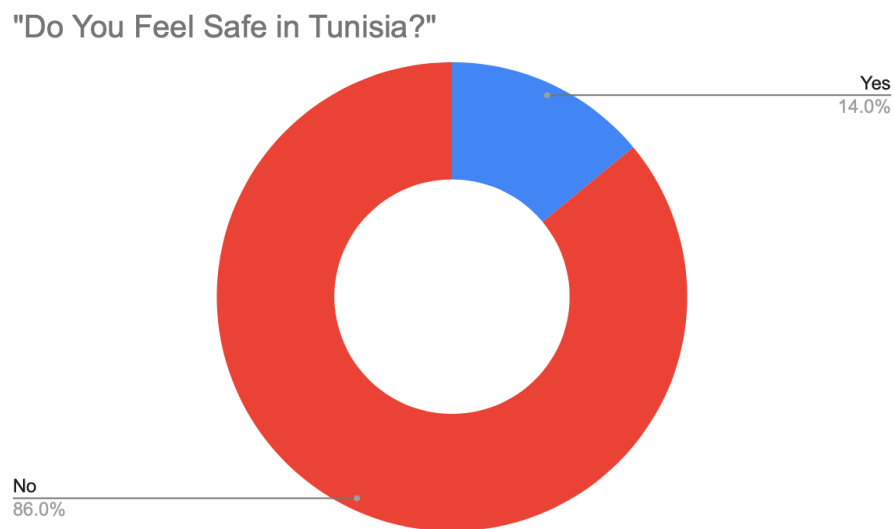
When asked about relationship status, 74% or 37 of the respondents indicated that they were single, 22% or 11 people indicated that they were in a relationship, and 4% or 2 people indicated that they were married (*see Fig. 4*).

"Do You Feel Safe in Tunisia?"



In Fig. 4, we are shown the recorded relationship statuses of participants who took place in the survey titled, "Enquête tunisienne sur les LGBTQIA+." The majority of participants indicated they were single at 74%, followed by in a relationship at 22%, and lastly married at 4%.

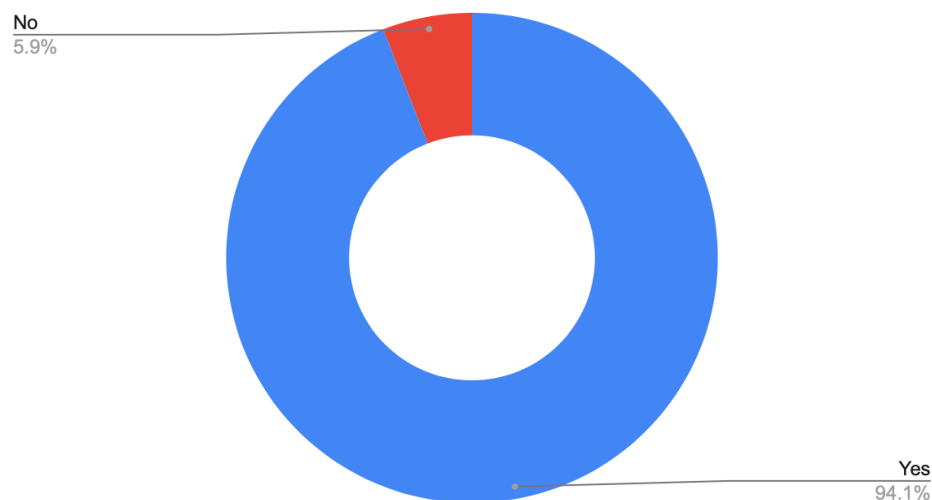
The remaining sections of the survey asked personal questions rather than demographic questions, which allowed participants of the survey to explain in as little or as much detail as they wanted. The first of these questions was simple, asking if, as an LGBTQIA+ Tunisian, “Do you feel safe living and expressing yourself and identity in Tunisia?” The response was overwhelmingly negative, and of the 50 survey participants, 86% or 43 of the respondents said they do not feel safe expressing themselves in Tunisia (*see Fig. 5*).



In Fig. 5, we are shown participants responses to the question, “Do you feel safe in Tunisia?” in the survey “Enquête tunisienne sur les LGBTQIA+.” 86% or 43 participants said that they do not feel safe to express themselves in Tunisia, 14% or 7 participants said that they do feel safe to express themselves in Tunisia.

I additionally asked participants of the survey what they felt was the hardest thing they have endured being LGBTQIA+ in Tunisia; the results I received were devastating. Many participants explained having a lack of freedom and constantly reserving your true identity in fear of rejection by society. One respondent summarized nearly all of the 50 participants' responses, writing, "It is hard existing, being something that is considered disgusting, being illegal and losing relationships." This theme of feeling excluded and exiled by society particularly by family and friends was a commonality throughout many of the survey participants' responses. Many respondents also wrote that they felt they had to hide their true identity from the people close to them for their own safety and security. Additionally, I asked respondents if they would ever consider leaving Tunisia for another country, overwhelmingly 94% of all respondents said they would leave their country if they had the chance (*see Fig. 6*). Even as progress has been made slowly throughout Tunisia socially after the Tunisian Revolution, the survey revealed that the majority of LGBTQIA+, if they have the means and opportunity, would leave Tunisia to flee to a safer country for LGBTQIA+ individuals.

"Do You Want to Leave Tunisia?"



In Fig. 6, we are shown the participants' response to the question, "Do you want to leave Tunisia?" in the survey "Enquête tunisienne sur les LGBTQIA+." Overwhelmingly, 94.1% of participants said that yes, they would like to leave Tunisia. 5.9% of participants said no, they would not like to leave Tunisia.

Lastly, in the survey, I asked participants how they met other community members and if social media played an essential role in the interconnectivity of the Tunisian LGBTQIA+ community. The respondents overwhelmingly talked about the importance of social media, particularly the social media apps Facebook and Instagram and the gay dating app Grindr. Many responded, explaining that they could use fake profiles on various social media platforms to express themselves more authentically without the risk of their identity being shared with family and friends who know them. Many respondents also expressed that they frequently used Tinder, another dating app, to meet and talk to other community members. These apps allow members of the LGBTQIA+ Tunisian community to find each other and create romantic relationships and connections that would otherwise be nearly impossible to form independently in everyday Tunisian society. These social media platforms give LGBTQIA+ a safe and protected environment where they can express themselves without fear of societal rejection. It becomes clear through the survey results that the Tunisian LGBTQIA+ community finds safety, comfort, and security through the use of social media platforms. These platforms allow the community to engage and connect with each other while additionally allowing the community to collectively advocate against the anti-LGBTQIA+ rhetoric that is deeply ingrained in Tunisian society, both politically and socially. Additionally, social media has allowed LGBTQIA+ to form organizations, social media group chats, and support groups, which allow LGBTQIA+ Tunisians to connect with each other over their shared struggles regarding sexuality and identity. The results of this section of the survey made it clear that although there is still significant difficulty

and progress to be made within Tunisia regarding LGBTQIA+ rights and respect, that social media allowed the community to come together in a way that without social media would have otherwise not been possible. The use of fake profiles and dating apps also allowed LGBTQIA+ to connect and form a new culture of dating and hookup that, previous to the revolution, was highly secluded. The importance of social media, particularly after the revolution, allowed for a new and developing culture and conversation among the LGBTQIA+ community that would have otherwise not been possible.

Analyzing the survey results reveals the complexity and diversity of the LGBTQIA+ community within Tunisia and the shared struggles the community faces regardless of age, gender, sex, or social class. When asked what the most challenging part of being LGBTQIA+ within Tunisia is, responses revealed that a majority of respondents felt similarly. Many responded bluntly by writing, "everything," "not being able to be yourself, not feeling safe and not being accepted," and "family and Islam." The shared experiences and traumas that come with being LGBTQIA+ in Tunisia resulted in many respondents feeling that every aspect of their sexuality and identity was the most challenging part of their existence and experience within Tunisia. When asked what they could change about Tunisia in any aspect, respondents' responses varied. However, many commented particularly on Article 230 and the laws within Tunisia that forbid and criminalize homosexuality which puts every community member at risk. This lack of security leaves LGBTQIA+ feeling hopeless that they will never be able to express themselves freely without severe repercussions. Many respondents also shared that if they could change anything about Tunisian society's view on LGBTQIA+ Tunisians, they would change the mentality against LGBTQIA+ members of Tunisia. The deeply ingrained history of homophobia within Tunisia makes LGBTQIA+ Tunisians feel discouraged that a societal will change due to

anti-LGBTQIA+ views reflected in every aspect of Tunisian life, including Islam, law, and government.

Another survey question that revealed the complexity of identifying LGBTQIA+ in Tunisia was, "In one word, describe being LGBTQIA+ in Tunisia." The responses varied, but a theme of sorrow, pain, and feeling outcasted were prevalent among the responses. The three responses that appeared multiple times in the survey were the words "criminal," "suffering," and "difficult." Although words related to each other additionally appeared throughout the survey results, words such as "captivity," "impossible," "shameful," "constrained," and "scary." With as little as one singular word, LGBTQIA+ Tunisians who participated in the survey revealed the reality of living in a society that punishes you for loving whom you choose to love. This theme of complex and challenging daily life in Tunisia while being queer was shown throughout the free response sections of the survey, revealing that although progress has been made throughout the nation, fear still lingers throughout the community.

Interviews with Hazem, Alle, and Othello

I had the opportunity to conduct two personal interviews with three queer Tunisian men, 26-year-old philosophy professor Hazem Chikhaoui, 28-year-old accountant Alle Walhazi and 19-year-old university student Othello Mansour. During the three interviews, my goal was to understand if they felt that social media plays and has continued to play a vital role in their lives and the lives of thousands of LGBTQIA+ Tunisians. Additionally, I wanted to evaluate their differing perspectives on LGBTQIA+ social media post-Tunisian Revolution.

When asked if they felt social media played an important role in their lives as queer Tunisians, all three men insisted that social media was an important factor in connecting the LGBTQIA+ Tunisian community. Mansour, in addition to being a full-time student, is also an

Instagram influencer creating weekly vlogs, which he shares with his 6,000+ followers. Mansour explained that social media, particularly *Instagram* and *Facebook*, not only allow other LGBTQIA+ Tunisians to find each other but additionally gives Tunisians the opportunity to find and connect with LGBTQIA+ people across North Africa, the Middle East, and across the world. Mansour continued by writing, “Through social media, I am able to connect and advocate with and for other [LGBTQIA+] Tunisians.” Mansour openly uses his platform alongside the Tunisian organization *Mawjoudin* to advocate and educate Tunisians on being LGBTQIA+, including doing informal sex education videos and various posts and videos bringing awareness to critical LGBTQIA+ issues through Tunisia and the Middle East. Chikhaoui responded similarly, stating that social media is an essential tool to connect the LGBTQIA+ community and that without social media, the community worked very differently before the revolution. He added that in addition to interconnectivity, social media helps to give a voice and optimism to closeted Tunisians who feel hopeless. Walhazi said, “Social media is [a] very big part of the [LGBTQIA+] community here [in Tunisia], without it, it is very hard to find other people.”

Mawjoudin which translates to “we exist ” in Arabic also called “Mawjoudin Initiative for Equality ” is a non-governmental organization dedicated to advocating for the rights of LGBTQIA+ individuals in Tunisia based in Tunis. One of the many LGBTQIA+ organizations founded during the post-revolution period, founded in December of 2014 by LGBTQIA+ female Tunisian activists, the organization aims to provide safe spaces and resources for LGBTQIA+ Tunisians who have been victims of hate crimes doing so through organized psychological follow-ups and various support groups. It facilitates its various programs through peer listening, organized groups and meeting with other LGBTQIA+ Tunisians in the community. Additionally, *Mawjoudin* has a support network of psychotherapists, psychologists and doctors in addition to

lawyers and jurists who work to aid LGBTQIA+ Tunisians who have become victims to hate crimes committed throughout Tunisia. One of its biggest community events is the Mawjoudin Queer Film Festival hosted each year since its founding in 2018. The first queer film festival in Tunisia and in all of North Africa, the festival showcases films that highlight LGBTQIA+ people of the Global South. This annual film festival helps to normalize and bring people together throughout the region who have been historically discriminated against and targeted by hate crimes. Although due to security reasons, the location of the festival is kept secret, in order to attend the event, one must first contact *Mawjoudin* directly in order to get permission and the disclosed location of the event. *Mawjoudin* and its work have had a direct impact on the community, an organization which is the first of its kind in Tunisia, it provides a network for LGBTQIA+ Tunisians to connect, find hope and heal together as a community. Using social media has been identified by *Mawjoudin* intern Mansour as one of the main components of attracting and informing LGBTQIA+ Tunisians about the services and protections *Mawjoudin* provides. Mansour explained, “We find all of our members through social media, mostly *Grindr* and other dating apps but [also] *Instagram* and *Facebook* queer groups.”

I continued my discussion with all three interviewees by asking how they felt social media changed after the Tunisian Revolution and if they felt that the Tunisian Revolution helped the community become more seen through cyber platforms like social media. Mansour, who was only ten years old during the start of the Tunisian Revolution, recalled that in his youth, social media was rarely used except for his parents occasionally using *Facebook* to connect with family and friends. He wrote, “Before the revolution, I don’t remember social media being an important role in my life or the lives of [my] family.” Mansour was so young at the time of the revolution that he was not entirely confident if he really knew how the LGBTQIA+ community of Tunisia

connected, as from what he recalled, the community has always been a forbidden and taboo topic that was rarely if ever spoken about. Mansour continued by writing, “After the revolution, social media became an essential part of every Tunisians lives. We used social media as [a] news [source] and it soon became an important part of how queer Tunisian youth connected with eachother.”

Chikhaoui had a differing perspective from young Masour’s; when the Tunisian Revolution began in 2011, Hazem was 16 years old and already a part of the underground queer scene in Tunisia. Chikhaoui explained to me that the community was able to connect with each other in secret and that many queer Tunisians found each other through attending high school and university together. He continued saying that finding and meeting each other before the revolution was entirely in secret and that finding other queer youth was extraordinarily challenging and at times very isolating. He explained that after the Tunisian Revolution of 2011, social media was taken out of the control of the government, and this allowed hundreds of thousands, if not millions of Tunisians, to have access to a social network. This social network, *Facebook*, relayed important information to people across Tunisia and around the world and allowed Tunisians access to information that was not controlled and regulated by the Tunisian government. This newly found online freedom became a critical stepping stone for the LGBTQ+ community of Tunisia, allowing queer Tunisians to create groups, networks and message each other freely without fear of governmental or societal danger. Walhazi added on to this conversation, saying that Tunisians were so unsure of this newfound online freedom that a majority of LGBTQIA+ Tunisians created multiple *Facebook* accounts, many of which were fake profiles. This was done as Walhazi described it, as a “safety precaution” to avoid the risk of family or friends finding out about the private life of closeted LGBTQIA+ Tunisian youth.

Walhazi and Chikhaoui were both teenagers when the 2011 revolution began, and both similarly agreed that the lives of LGBTQIA+ Tunisians changed through social media after the Tunisian Revolution. Social media allowed LGBTQIA+ Tunisians to connect with each other in an environment that, for the first time, was allowing personal freedoms, in this case, online.

I asked the interviewees about LGBTQIA+ culture in Tunisia and asked how LGBTQIA+ Tunisians find each other and connect with each other, and if social media was the most important and frequently used platform used by queer Tunisians to connect together. Mansour and Walhazi responded similarly, explaining that although they both felt social media was the single most crucial connecting tool in the LGBTQIA+ Tunisian scene, that additionally LGBTQIA+ friendly bars in Gammarth and La Marsa had provided many LGBTQIA+ Tunisians with a safe place to express themselves without fear of societal danger. Both told me about *Club Gingembre*. This club located in Gammarth is known as an LGBTQIA+ safe haven in the wider Tunis area, and both Walhazi and Mansour explained that this club, in particular, has provided many queer Tunisians a safe space to express themselves freely. *Club Gingembre* hosts themed club nights, including drag shows, pride discos, diva nights, and many more themes that are marketed to attract LGBTQIA+ Tunisians (refer to Appendix Fig. 1). The club prides itself on inclusivity, and when speaking briefly with the owner, an American from New York who has lived in Tunis since 2017, she told me, "*Club Gingembre* is a safe space and community for everyone. Anyone is welcome here and we encourage self-expression regardless of gender or sexuality." While visiting *Club Gingembre* with both Mansour and Walhazi, I was surprised to see dozens of LGBTQIA+ couples dancing, embracing each other, and having fun. The club's environment is electric and reminded me of my time living in San Francisco, considered by many the gay capital of the world. Although electric and exciting, one lingering thought

remained in the back of my mind; I was still in Tunisia, and when I left *Club Gingembre* when they closed at 3 am, I would walk outside back into the harsh social environment that is Tunisia. Chikhaoui offered critical insight into his thoughts on *Club Gingembre*, which were similar to mine. Chikhaoui explained that the idea behind environments like *Club Gingembre* have good intentions but are often extremely harmful to LGBTQIA+ Tunisians. The biggest problem is accessibility and equity. These clubs are located in Gammarth, a suburb full of clubs and bars located outside of La Marsa and Sidi Bou Said, two of the most expensive areas to live in Tunisia (Global Property Guide). Chikhaoui continued saying that there is a socioeconomic privilege to have the ability to go to these clubs. A majority of Tunisians, particularly youth throughout Tunisia, do not have the financial ability to spend on night outs in these exclusive club environments. Chikhaoui concluded by saying that although the idea of a safe space is exciting for many queer Tunisians, it does not address or change the reality of being LGBTQIA+ in Tunisia. When queer Tunisians leave *Club Gingembre* after a night of freedom, they are met outside with security guards, police officers, and taxi drivers and their night of fun and expression comes to a drastic end. Chikhaoui feels that it is more important to focus on changing LGBTQIA+ laws, legislation, and social acceptance; without these necessary changes, the social rejection of queer Tunisians only continues to grow and develop.

I wanted to conclude my interviews with all three men by asking them about if they felt social media personally has affected their everyday life and experience as a LGBTQIA+ Tunisian, additionally I asked if they had any other information or details that they felt would be important for my continued research on the LGBTQIA+ community and social media. Mansour assured me that without social media not only would he be without a platform, but he would also not have the ability to help advocate for those who do not have access to social media throughout

conservative Muslim countries like Tunisia and more broadly North Africa and the Middle East. Mansour wrote, “With social media, I am able to educate and share my voice with a broad audience. I hope that [I] give hope to Tunisian youth. I wish that when I was coming to terms with my sexual and gender identity as a child, that I had someone who could guide [me] through.” Without social media Mansour continued, I would not have been able to connect with thousands of people going through the same struggle as me. He concluded writing, “Social media has impacted me and helped me through the shitty situation that is being queer in Tunisia, I’m thankful for that.” Chikhaoui who spends his time as a professor of philosophy and publishing work on gender studies offered me a lens of the reality of what being LGBTQIA+ in Tunisia is; that the struggle is aided with social media, but that social media is not the savior of the LGBTQIA+ community in Tunisia. There is work to be done, politically and socially, and although social media has advanced this progress, ultimately it is still as dangerous to express yourself as an LGBTQIA+ person in Tunisia as it was five years ago. Chikhaoui said organizations like *Mawjoudin*, *Chouf* and *Damj* provide him and his community with hope for the future. Lastly, Walhazi explained to me that comparing the LGBTQIA+ community of Tunisia before and after the revolution shows the leaps in progress Tunisia has made in becoming a more welcoming and accepting society. Walhazi said simply, “Social media has helped to bring awareness to all Tunisians, gay or straight.”

Interview Analysis: Generational Perspectives and Differences

Interviewing Othello, Hazem and Alle provided me with personal accounts of the impact social media has had and has continued to have on the LGBTQIA+ community of Tunisia after the Tunisian Revolution, which took place in 2011. In analyzing the responses of all three men's

interviews, it became apparent the differences generational perspectives have on the revolution and cyber platforms, including social media.

Mansour is placed directly in the middle of Gen Z and grew up with technology surrounding him. This familiarity with technology and social media has impacted him significantly as he now uses social media daily to communicate and aid his thousands of followers. His responses to many of my questions varied greatly from Chikhaoui and Walhazi's responses because of Mansour's age during the revolution. Mansour, who was still a child, has a different perspective on the Tunisian Revolution and social media in general. In speaking to other Tunisians aged 17 to 21, I observed that they all very similarly viewed the Tunisian Revolution from a similar perspective. They were only children when the revolution occurred; they have very little remembrance of how life was before the revolution, particularly how life was for LGBTQIA+ Tunisians before the revolution. They truly only know how life post-revolution is for the queer community of Tunisia, and I often found these Gen Z individuals to speak negatively about the revolution, saying that life before the revolution was better regulated and controlled. This perspective on the revolution is an interesting take, but life is hard for them as LGBTQIA+ youth right now, so they are quick to assume that life before the revolution was or could have been better than it is for them now as they struggle to live authentically in Tunisia in the current times. Additionally, I found that Gen Z individuals found social media to be an essential part of their lives and that without it, life from their lens would be unbearable in Tunisia. This conclusion is normal; Gen Z has grown up surrounded by social media and technology, which ultimately affects their day-to-day experiences and perspectives (Dufty). This is no different with Gen Z Tunisians, ultimately they will find social media to be the most critical tool in their everyday lives, and for LGBTQIA+ Gen Z Tunisians, this

importance means more than just checking their feeds but also as an essential tool for interconnectivity, hope, and inspiration.

Both Chikhaoui and Walhazi, who were both teenagers during the revolution and are millennials, provided a drastically different perspective on the importance of social media not only to their everyday lives but to the revolution and the LGBTQIA+ community. In speaking with queer Tunisian millennials, I found that although they agree that social media is a crucial part of the current LGBTQIA+ community of Tunisia, before the revolution without social media, the community still existed and communicated with each other in different forms. However, most importantly, Tunisian millennials agree that life after the Tunisian Revolution for the LGBTQIA+ community of Tunisia has improved drastically, and nearly all millennials agree that the Tunisian Revolution was a critical and necessary step towards equality for all Tunisians. Millennials offer a different perspective from their younger Gen Z counterparts because, unlike Gen Z, millennial Tunisians grew up surrounded by little technology, and it was not until their late teens that technology and social media became a prominent part of their everyday lives (“How Millennials Use and Control Social Media.”). Therefore, millennials can and do recognize the importance of social media now but can also openly acknowledge that there is more to fighting for equality than using social media. In many millennial queer Tunisians perspectives, social media is an essential tool for fighting for equality. However, there is much more work to be done, starting with changing the social conversation around gender and sexuality and working to fight against the infamous article 230 in the Tunisian constitution.

Looking at the generational differences in perspectives of both the Tunisian Revolution and social media helps bring important contexts to the differences in discussion and importance among the LGBTQIA+ community of Tunisia. Although there is no one correct answer or

solution, both generations are working together to fight for an equal Tunisia. Gen Z, who is tech-savvy and more comfortable and fearless with their own self-expression, is aiding the more resilient, wise, and at times more reserved millennial Tunisians to form an alliance to fight anti-LGBTQIA+ laws, legislations, and mentalities of their parents and grandparents generations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, through both survey and interview responses, it became clear that social media has and continues to play a valuable role in the LGBTQ+ community in Tunisia. Survey results showed that most LGBTQIA+ Tunisians feel unsafe and unwelcome throughout Tunisian society and that through social media platforms and apps, LGBTQIA+ Tunisians can interconnect, providing them with support systems. Through interviews with three queer Tunisians, it became more evident that social media is commonly used as a mask to protect queer Tunisians from social rejection while providing a platform for self-expression. Additionally, social media and its importance vary depending on the generation of the Tunisian user. Through interview analysis, it was found that younger Tunisians have become reliant on social media as a tool for social connection, conversation, and activism. Older generations of LGBTQIA+ Tunisians who use social media find social media as a valuable tool but only when used in collaboration with the advocacy for governmental and institutional changes. In analyzing the effect social media played in the Tunisian Revolution, it became clear that after the 2011 revolution, social media became an integral part of Tunisian society, particularly with the LGBTQIA+ community. Social media provided this once-underground community with the opportunities to connect with other LGBTQIA+ people in Tunisia and worldwide. This has led to a new culture throughout the LGBTQIA+ community, which includes casual romantic sexual

relationships allowing LGBTQIA+ Tunisians the opportunity to experience a newfound sense of normalcy in the dating and sex scenes in LGBTQIA+ Tunisia.

Social media and its power during the Tunisian Revolution empowered LGBTQIA+ to come together and advocate for their community, which had been neglected, socially rejected, and isolated since the formation of the nation. Using social media platforms as a tool for interconnectivity, LGBTQIA+ Tunisians were able to begin conversations among Tunisians in order to advocate for their concerns regarding their safety and rights. Although this is only the beginning of a very long journey for LGBTQIA+ Tunisians who will, in the coming years, alongside the continued use and growth of social media, will continue to demand necessary changes to Tunisia politically and socially to a nation that incorporates and supports the community. These demands for change can already be seen through the increasingly discussed conversation regarding Article 230. LGBTQIA+ Tunisians are allowing their voices to be heard, enforcing the tools they learned from social media during the Tunisian Revolution to create a Tunisia that includes and protects all of its citizens regardless of sexuality or gender identity. These demands are supported by the growing number of national LGBTQIA+ organizations, which alongside activists, are providing resources and education to Tunisians on topics regarding the LGBTQIA+ community. With social media and institutional support mechanisms like NGOs, the public space that was once invisible is multiplying, and LGBTQIA+ Tunisians are becoming more fearless and motivated than ever to create an inclusive national environment, not suppressive. The motivation among Tunisians during the Tunisian Revolution and the Tunisian LGBTQIA+ movement shows that, more than ever, Tunisians are enforcing the change they want to see in their new democratic country. Although they may face suppression challenges

from the Tunisian government and society, nothing will get in the way of the movement which has just begun.

Social media has made the once unheard and unseen Tunisian LGBTQIA+ community come to the forefront of social conversations throughout Tunisia post-Tunisian Revolution. The impact social media has had and will continue to have as apps and conversations develop will allow LGBTQIA+ Tunisians to spark more critical conversations about social norms and expectations, traditions, legislation, and laws. In the past ten years since the revolution, more progress has been made in the Tunisian LGBTQIA+ community than in any other social and political movement throughout Tunisia. Social media and its implications provide hope to the LGBTQIA+ community of Tunisia that their voices are heard and that progress is on the horizon.

Appendix



In Fig. 1, we are shown a poster published and created by Club Gingembre for the weekend of November 25, 2021, to November 27, 2021. The advertisement shows various themes of the week, including “Glitterdaze: SAF” (drag performance), “No Escape: Dinner and Party,” and “LA Boom” (disco theme). These promotional posters are used in addition to a strong social media presence to advertise their LGBTQIA+ events to Tunisians following *Club Gingembre* on their *Instagram* with over 12,000 followers and *Facebook* with over 15,000 followers.

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