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## Gender Identity and Facebook: Social Conservatism and Saving Face

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## Gender Identity and Facebook: Social Conservatism and Saving Face

### Abstract

People increasingly log on to Social Networking Websites to remain updated with the latest News and to share their thoughts and their significant life events. Their perception of their own and others' identities influences their self-presentation on social media. There is a mental image of the audience on the mind of online users when they share content. The extent to which individuals reveal or conceal aspects of their identities within a socio-cultural context affects the presentation of their digital gender identity. We have explored Internet accessibility and use of social media relating to adult users for both Iranians living in the country that are experiencing filtered social media and those living outside of the country. The identified influential elements through conducting this in-depth research was an attempt to address the gap in online identity formation in the Iranian context. This qualitative case study examined online interviews (N=9) and follow-up Facebook observations (N=10) from ten Iranian male and female Facebook users. A relationship was found between the specific identity-presentation and the individuals' gender and their level of conservatism. Regardless of the socio-cultural conservatism, individuals make themselves known via the manipulated digital images and Facebook avatars.

### Keywords

Digital Self-Presentation, Gender Identity, Online Education, Social Conservatism

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## Gender Identity and Facebook: Social Conservatism and Saving Face

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The evolution of communication through the Internet has been shaping and reshaping the self-presentation of social media users. Online communities both connect people and give voice to the voiceless, allowing them to present themselves nationally and globally. Social media provides a context for multicultural discourses which increases the pace of globalisation and facilitates opportunities for intercontinental communication (Bouvier, 2015). The type of interconnectivity in social media is complex and different from other forms of communicative connections. Intercultural communication in today's world is dominated by power relations which affect online discourse. In this research, we elucidate the power of social media which contributes to the understanding of identity formation through digital spaces in the Middle East and countries with filtered social media.

Gender-based social stereotypes in a male dominated society impose considerable restraints on women. Regardless of the socio-political avoidance of Western values and culture, aspects of globalisation and Western hegemony penetrate into the social context of countries such as Iran via Internet and immigration to the foreign countries. Western discourse becomes partially accessible because of Internet / social media and the perspectives towards the context of the West via fantasy or an actual visit. Men have also been affected and involved in experiencing and handling the contradictions and social stereotypes by encountering the contradictions between the local and global cultures which dramatically impacts female citizens.

Gender continuously shapes how people experience and express their identities via social media tools. Gender issues have been discussed in the literature in regards to the Internet. For instance, on average females posted 5.3 more pictures of themselves with another on Facebook, and the number of female Facebook users is four to five times more than men (Lewis

et al., 2008). Young women also demonstrated a particular motive in protecting the privacy of their information on social media (boyd & Hargittai, 2010). The unexpected impact of gender issues implies the tendency of users to construct a different online identity based on their gender through Facebook profile activities (Walther et al., 2008). However, not much research has been done on presentation of gender identity in online environments.

This project explores the significance of social media in online gender identity presentation of ten adult Iranians living inside and outside the country. Analysis of online interviews and the observation of participants' Facebook activities emphasised their digital identity formation based on gender. Participants expressed their thoughts about reasons of sharing a content on Facebook and the tendency of representing the "idealised self." The users' desired self was hidden in some cases to protect their social and academic status as well as future career opportunities.

### **Presentation of Self: Performing Through Images and Gender Identity**

Online self-presentation influences the formation of individuals' identities, specifically gender identity presentation is explored with the focus on the use of images on social media as well as other gender-based preferences and expectations in online spaces. Individuals from the same cultural background interpret and exchange the meanings of the world around them in an approximately similar way. Their feelings' expression can be understood to a considerable degree by others in the same cultural group. The meaning production happens in various social and individual interactions which, in turn, gives an understanding of one's self-identity. The construction of identity is based on the cultural environment (Hall, 2003). Norms and regulations in each society are based on social meanings in that context.

Goffman's (1959) theory of "presentation of self" is applied in this study to understand identity formation through digital communications. In his framework, Goffman illustrated social media users are such theatre actors on-stage who are aware of being observed by audiences. Their performance is controlled by certain social regulations to protect their "face." Their offline life is similar to back-stage where they may have a different performance. Goffman employed the metaphor coined by Park (1959), "mask," to explain the specific aspects of one's self. Some self attributes can be highlighted while at the same time others are marginalised. The private-self in a given moment can be captured by individuals via photography to offer their visual self-presentation (Van Dijck, 2008) which may be consumed in the public sphere (Barthes, 1981). Digital photography and online sharing of the images have transformed the traditional physical photographs which led to the digital exhibition exposed publicly online. Photos that serve online and social-medialized functions are used as both performance tools and memory tools. Facebook users may request an untagging, deletion, or other privacy changing settings when their photos have been shared by others without asking for their approval (Lang & Barton, 2015). Female Facebook users were more likely than male users to request the deletion of their Facebook images and untag themselves from shared photos (Strano & Wattai Queen, 2012).

Goffman (1959) introduced two types of self-presentation: "acquisitive self-presentation" for the purpose of gaining approval and "protective self-presentation" through modest and neutral expressions to avoid rejection and disapproval from the audience. The assigned roles based on gender and culture lead to specific social behaviour (Eagly, 1987). Cultural norms and sharing photos through online space guide offline interaction and continue to guide individuals' online presentation of self (Rui & Stefanone, 2013). Individuals' constructed face in protecting their identity contributes to maintaining an expected impression which reminds us of Goffman's concept of mask (1990). Social media users manipulate the presentation of self to provoke a more favourable reaction from the audience (Bailenson &

Beall, 2006). Some aspects of their identities are emphasised, and the others might be hidden behind their online or theatrical presentation. Surrounding identity performance and presentation are established cultural norms.

### **Taboos and Social Media**

Social media is an unlimited context for people to connect in diverse ways which gives them the chance to be informed of a variety of opinions. White (1950) first mentioned the concept of “gatekeeping” which refers to filtering information by social media users (Ali & Fahmy, 2013). Social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube influence the Middle Eastern social opportunities for journalists and people to become engaged. The range of topics can be diverse and include entertainment, politics, and education, as well as topics which are considered taboo and are prohibited socio-culturally or religiously. Educational materials based on taboo contents such as girls and boys in out of marriage relationships and Western fashion are not legally available. Facebook, the world’s most popular Social Networking Website, and some other social media tools have been blocked since 2009 in Iran and only accessible externally through Virtual Private Networks (VPNs). To fill the information gap in some social and educational areas, some Facebook pages and Telegram channels have been created. Access to Telegram chat application is normally possible without VPNs. For example, Iran’s pioneer e-learning institute, Tavaana (meaning powerful), was launched on May 17, 2010 to support active citizenship and civic leadership (Tavaana, 2016).

### **Iranian Concept of Politeness: Ta’arof**

Contemporary Iranian identity including ways in which self may be presented, is formed from its cultural-historical perspective through the development of Iranian indirect language (Ta’arof). After the Arab Muslim conquests (651 CE) in the time of the Persian Empire (550 BCE - 651 CE), most of the Iranian population were made to convert to Islam from the ancient Persian Zoroastrian religion. Since then non-Muslims have been considered as outsiders and have been marginalized as citizens. Iranians who could never accept being defeated by the Arabs invented a complex and indirect language system:

This was called *ta’arof* and was done in order to make the listener believe that he would get exactly what he wanted even though the speaker had absolutely no intention of giving it to him. The Persians learned to tell their new Muslim rulers exactly what they wanted to hear because it gave the Persians time to develop strategies to circumvent their rulers’ wishes. (Cohen, 2015, p. 7)

Ta’arof is constructed from five concepts: politeness, respect, being shy or ceremonious, humility, and hospitality (Sahragard, 2000). Polite behaviour is a moral obligation and is regarded as both cause for and expression of respect. Iranians usually make judgements about others’ degree of politeness based on cultural norms. People decide whether a verbal or non-verbal act in the real or virtual environment is respectful or not. Persian language speakers use indirect refusal strategies such as cursing fate, asking for forgiveness, apologising, and generally avoiding direct refusals such as, “No, I cannot” (Hashemian, 2012). A person who knows ta’arof and uses it properly is considered polite. Ta’arof is manifested in both verbal and non-verbal communication and in online presentation of self, including how men and women understand their Iranian identity.

## Online Gender Identity: Iranian Context

Social norms in the current Iranian context are affected by sociocultural meanings within the society. The existence of “social control,” particularly over women, is one of the most notable cultural concepts in the Middle Eastern countries such as Iran (Moghadam, 2003). There is an interdependence between young Iranian Facebook users’ gender and their online self-presentation (Hajin, 2013). The engagement of male and female informants is slightly different in producing the “social meanings” in the Iranian context. While male informants are reproducing the social norms such as reputation and gender related issues in a natural way, women are feeling more obligated to take responsibility over reproducing norms that may affect their family reputation. Female informants, however, appeared to be more opposed to the contemporary norms within the society compared with men. Internet access and the diasporic websites gave women more liberty of expression and context for social collaboration in Iran (Nasirpour, 2016). These websites have the potential to transfer information and make connections between those inside and outside Iran, addressing diasporic concerns and controversial issues.

This study contributes to the ways “gender identity” is reconstructed and represented via social media and Facebook. Constructions of online selves and digital presentations of identity appear to be based on gender and closely interconnected to individuals’ living locations. “Saving the face” in its cultural sense is considered to be a vital factor in projection of online identity for both genders. Social media offers another space to individuals where their presentation of identity is being controlled and observed constantly by themselves, other users, and the authorities. This research investigates how being online affects “social stereotypes” and changes or moderates them. The imposed socio-cultural restrictions on women have different projections on social media which affect the identity of both genders. The new digital age via the virtual environment is closely connected to Western culture, modernity and open-mindedness.

## Methodology

In this qualitative, multiple case study, we sought to enable participants to voice their experiences (Creswell, 2005) and we describe, clarify, and offer deep understanding of individuals’ experiences within a particular context (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Dörnyei, 2007; Remenyi, 2012). Qualitative research is not generalizable to a population but affords the possibility to undertake in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). We investigated Iranian social media users’ perceptions of their digital identities in online communities and how this reflected on their life (Creswell, 2013). We also explored how the participants’ backgrounds, language choices, and virtual self-presentation shape their cultural identity formation and their online performativity. In these virtual and natural settings, the first author, Nastaran, is both insider and outsider in the research process as she is an Iranian, adult woman who has been living in Australia for four years. Her background of living in Iran and overseas provided her with cultural awareness of this research participants. Multiple methods were used to collect data through online interviews and analysis of Facebook interactions. The second author, Jane, is an Anglo/Celtic-Australian woman well-versed in qualitative research methodologies and her role was to analyse, interpret, and question cultural assumptions. We drew our conclusions about the forms of participants’ digital self-construction/presentation and their reasons for censoring the self, based on our analysis. Given that this research is “an analysis of social phenomena specific to time and place” (Ragin & Becker, 1992, p. 2), a case study has been selected as the research method. The case selected is Nastaran’s “Facebook friend list” which includes more than 300 Iranian and non-Iranian

“friends.” Ten Facebook users participated as real cases and enabled us to investigate “a contemporary phenomenon (the case) in-depth” in the virtual world of social media (Yin, 2014, p. 16). We received permission to undertake this research from our university’s ethics review committee.

We used purposive sampling as a way to target a particular group of individuals, that is, participants were selected with a particular purpose in mind (Schutt, 2006). The first author posted an invitation on her Facebook profile. The invitation post was open to all her Facebook friends who were mostly between the ages of twenty to forty. She invited them on two occasions and several weeks apart through timeline posts and privately messaged them. The first author received several positive responses. The invitation text was as follows:

Dear friends,

I am looking for some participants to do my research study. I need to interview (online) my research participants and analyse their use of social media. I will be very happy if the interested people who have these two criteria, contact me via sending messages: 1. Iranian nationality (inside or outside of Iran) 2. Between the age range of 25 to 35. If you have any questions, please inbox me your query and I will be glad to answer your questions.

The explanatory and consent forms were also sent to those who had accepted the invitation to participate. To participate in this study, individuals had to be active users of Facebook, meaning they had a Facebook account and logged on to it at least once a week. We had no participation requirements regarding frequency of use because we were interested in the activities of a variety of users and studying a range of Facebook users to explore their experiences. We ended up with participants between the ages of twenty-six and thirty-five. In terms of the criteria for selection, we put emphasis on being Iranian (inside or outside of Iran) and within the ages described above. Initial invitation was open to all of the first author’s Facebook friends (over 300 at that time). During the recruitment phase of the study, the first author organized online interviews with her Facebook friends who agreed to participate in this study over two months (September to December 2015).

We purposively selected the participants of this study based on the similarities in their characteristics and backgrounds (Creswell, 2005, 2012). This selection gives voice to silenced people and develops a detailed understanding through purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2012). Although the results were not generalizable because there was no claim that everyone had similar experiences, the typical features of participants’ experiences are listed. We asked the participants to share their experience/process of self-presentation on Facebook. In addition, we analysed their Facebook activities and interactions.

It was necessary for the authors to consider the ethical requirements when the data had been collected, prior to the dissemination of findings (Merriam, 1998). We asked for the participants’ consent before collecting data to meet the qualitative studies’ ethical codes (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2014). We informed our participants about the research aims, the process of data collection, and how it might be beneficial for them to participate in our study, and we made sure that there was no power differential. We made it clear that participants could withdraw from the study at any stage without providing a reason. We did our best to maintain the participants’ anonymity as well.

## **Data Collection**

Data were collected by Nastaran, the first author, via observing and recording participants’ Facebook posts over a period of six months, and online interviews were

undertaken throughout that time period. Facebook activities and interactions included visual content such as photos. Activities were collected via screenshots. Although all participants were Nastaran's Facebook friends for at least six months prior to becoming research participants, nothing changed in terms of their Facebook interactions and online performances. They behaved online as before and stressed that they were encouraged to act as they normally would during the Facebook observation. Nastaran gathered documents from the participants' Facebook activities in relation to their identity formation. The first author made screen-shots of their Facebook profiles posts on a weekly basis.

Semi-structured, online interviews (Creswell, 2005) were undertaken through online video chat tools such as Skype (Creswell, 2012). We created prior-interview checklists, and Nastaran wrote while-interview notes and post-interview reflection. These data were kept to inform the data analysis process. Below are some examples of the main online interview discussion topics:

- Pace of Internet; filtering
- Conservatism on Facebook
- Imagining different identities; your "selves" on Facebook
- The changes in affiliations and attitudes as a result of using Facebook

The video-recorded online interviews were based on semi-structured interview questions that were very open to create a relaxed environment for participants to encourage a personal, historical account of identity, explanation of Facebook use, and expression (Creswell, 2012). Interviews took about 30-45 minutes but were open to divide to two sessions to accommodate participants (Polkinghorne, 2005). All participants preferred to stay focused and have a single session. The online interviews took place synchronously via a direct chat tool such as Tango, Skype, or Imo. To help participants share their unique practice, they were encouraged to illustrate their responses with real or online life events. Participants conveyed their intended messages via telling a story or describing a memory. This form of response personalized the online interview data.

## **Data Analysis**

In this research, we relied on two principal data collection methods which were online interviews and Facebook analysis. One of the basic features of case studies is relying on different sources of evidence (Yin, 2014). The data collection procedures resulted in open-ended, non-numerical data which was analysed by non-statistical methods. In the online interview parts of this study, we analysed the transcribed recordings using qualitative content analysis (Dörnyei, 2011). The content analysis of Facebook was based on feedback from participants' online interviews. We identified a number of different types of content before starting the Facebook analysis period.

Data from both sources were coded. As employed in this study, coding consists of two phases: initial and focused coding. Focused coding also involves sorting, synthesizing, integrating, and organizing large amounts of data. In qualitative coding, segments of data are categorised "with a short name that simultaneously summarizes and accounts for each piece of data" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 43). The codes form the basis of analytic interpretations which are sorted thematically (Dörnyei, 2011). Themes support deep understanding of experiences (Creswell, 2012). Generally, many codes are identified in the first stage of data analyses that are then reduced to five or seven main themes. Themes usually consist of two to four words. Layering themes builds on the idea of organizing the major and minor themes. Interconnecting

themes can be the next step to connect the themes that display a sequence of events (Creswell, 2012).

### **Data Representation and Findings: Facebook Observations**

#### **Participants' Initial Online Identity Presentation**

A variety of issues may influence individuals' choice of identity representation in the online communities that they are part of. Family background, education, social class, and the society are factors that may influence choice of identity representation in online communities. One's formation of self is under the influence of social interactions which may affect an individual's social status, academic achievements, and future career opportunities. Therefore, one's identity is being determined by both outside and inside factors. Most of the time, Facebook users choose to have an online interaction which may increase their popularity. One of our participants, Shervin, declared, "On Facebook people mostly want to show that they are cool." Here we expand this issue through some examples from our participants. In each case we have covered their face to protect their identity.

One of the female participants, Golab (living in Iran), was chosen as a participant because of the quality and significance of her Facebook activities. Although she participated in an online interview, this data was not used as she appeared to be concerned about the possible consequences of what she was saying and to provide controlled responses.

Figure 1 shows Golab's current profile picture on Facebook with her face covered to protect her identity. This photo is limited to her face circle to make it hardly recognisable whether she has head cover or not that seems to be a sign of personal dilemma in online presentation of self.



Figure 1: Golab's profile picture

This moderate conservatism could be for saving face and not losing employment opportunities. Golab is sharing more personal information with her Facebook friends which are not mostly available to the public audience.

Rana, another female participant living in Iran, mentioned that she was comfortable with both online and in person communications. She learned which information was real and which was not through Facebook.

Rana used filters for some of her profile photos (Figure 2) to change their colours and to make them less clear which could be for personal advantage and avoiding problematic situations.



Figure 1: Rana's profile picture

In her online interview, Rana comments on how conservatism entices people's curiosity about each other's affairs.

It is not good to show off everything on Facebook and need to be somehow conservative. I prefer to be more careful. Some people's habit in Iran is looking through others' affair. For example, I go to work and my friends say that they know I was in a party last night and they saw my photos and they know what I wore and what I did and I was with those guys.

As argued in the online interviews with participants, cultural conservatism on a variety of different levels has affected Iranian relationships. There might be considerable inconsistencies between what people present of themselves and who they are or who they believe themselves to be.

### **Data Representation and Findings: "Online Interviews"**

Participants' challenges in encountering conservatism and censorship in their online and offline lives and its reflection on the formation of their identity were explored through online interview questions. Gender was one of the influential factors that continuously shape the ways participants experienced and expressed their identities through Facebook. Male and female participants in this research reported different types of Facebook usage and demonstrated distinctly different online representations of self. Our approach relied on participants' accounts of identity representation through their one-hour online interview and over a period of six months Facebook use and a thematic analysis of the contents of data. Digital identity is part of a changing process involving self-presentation, the use and display of photos and the visual content. Particular attention was paid to the tools that people use to present and represent their identities.

Gender-based social stereotypes in a male dominated society impose considerable restraints on women. Regardless of the socio-political avoidance of Western values and culture, aspects of globalisation and Western hegemony penetrate into the Iranian society via Internet and immigration to the foreign countries. Western discourse becomes partially accessible because of Internet/social media and the perspectives towards the context of the West via fantasy or actual visit. Encountering the contradictions between the local and global cultures impacts dramatically on female citizens. As it is explained, men have been also affected and involved in experiencing and handling the contradictions and social stereotypes. The consistency of the participants' Facebook activities and online interview data revealed some important themes which are presented here.

### **Positioning Women: Social Stereotypes and Globalisation**

Social factors in the Iranian society contribute to the creation of stereotypes about men and women such as (1) emphasizing the distinction between male and female based on their biological differences, (2) keeping them socially apart to avoid the generation of unwanted intimacy among them and the following negative consequences that may arise, (3) considering men as both physically and intellectually superior to women which leads to discrimination in allocating career positions and to marginalization of individuals' social engagements because of being a female or even a male.

## **Waning Conservatism of Iranian Women**

Avaa, one of this research's participants, was an immigrant woman with particular interest in women's rights as was observed in her Facebook profile activities. She spoke at length on aspects that affect her freedom of expression regarding political issues that are related to living location and its impact on the online lives of Iranians. Women who have been behaving conservatively, either because they have chosen to do so or they have been controlled by the social or family environments, have found social media to be a space for behaving in a less controlled manner. She believes that immigration to other countries has accelerated this visible change:

My friends on Facebook, who used to live in Iran, are different here. They are not worried about what they say or do. Before and after social media is different. Conservative women have changed, and they put their photos for their social media profile picture. In my city [in Iran] people are very conservative. Social media has changed people's cultural relations. Now, a woman puts happy birthday posts for her male family friends on Facebook. It has opened the relationships. They find a space to be more themselves or to create a new self.

Conservative women might be constantly worried about their photos being distributed publicly and among strangers who may have the intention of taking advantage of these photos in some way. From a "very old-fashioned perspective," there might be men who desire to abuse women by having their photos or videos. In addition, a traditional woman's uncovered appearance in a photo could have some socio-cultural consequences for her such as negative reactions from family members who may regard presentation of these photos as a face-threatening act for her which impacts the family's reputation as well. There may also be criticism from the conservative career or social communities of which she is a part.

Social media has opened the way for communication and interaction among both genders even in the most conservative contexts inside Iran and restrictive conservatism has declined. This is evident in the way that these women are uploading their personal photos on social media as described by Avaa. Through experiencing the process of deciding to upload their photos on social media, the conservative women's identities are subject to change. While they are selecting suitable photos to be uploaded on Facebook, conservative women may think more carefully than others about their audience and those that will or may gain access to the photos they are sharing of themselves. Further, the after-upload feedback they may have received appears to have a stronger impact on them than on less conservative women, particularly regarding their concern for saving face.

The point that Avaa raised here reveals that photo sharing on Facebook and becoming engaged with social media has gradually affected Iranian women's self-presentation and made male and female communication more comfortable. While their attitudes towards their online identity and digital performativity are changing, they may tend to become less traditional and more open-minded in their offline life as well. Male and female digital communications are not restricted under the socio-cultural boundaries as much as face-to-face conversations and interactions. Those selves that have a chance to become digitalized end up reconstructing their identities and having different social relations as a result.

## **Showing Off "Fake Happiness"**

In reflecting on the reasons for conservative behaviour in Facebook, Avaa offered the thought-provoking theme of "showing off fake happiness" among her female friends.

They emphasise on happiness. If I meet them, I see they are very sad in the same day that they put a happy post. Unreal appearance that focus on prosperity. There are those who do not save their face... maybe to pretend about happiness is saving face in our culture.

Avaa's quote embraces a distinctive aspect of digital self-presentation which enables an individual to manipulate the demonstration of their identity. A user may decide to present an online identity which does not match with their present physical self-presentation. The reasons for this inconsistency may vary. In the case raised by Avaa, cultural issues and saving the face may influence some Iranian women Facebook users to present their online image differently. They have a tendency to portray themselves with an attractive appearance and a desirable life which is recognisable through their uploaded photos with happy faces or the content of their shared posts. As a default, their presentation of their identity conveys the message that "all is well," both with themselves personally and with life in general.

In explaining the reasons for the tendency to project themselves "happy and content" in their lives, individuals may choose to present themselves on special occasions or in certain locations with particular people. There is careful use of symbols or items to support their intended message such as sharing photos that were taken in a nice café having a fancy dinner or in the foyer of a luxury hotel. There is an equally careful choice of actions and activities in which they are involved. For example, the action might be playing games with friends. Facial expression and body posture in this photo indicate that individuals are happy and excited while playing and that they have friends to socialize with. They would choose this photo instead of another photo that presents a person sitting alone in nature who seems to be thinking deeply with a serious look, which conveys an entirely different message.

### **Being the Self or Not**

Avaa describes her online-self as remaining relatively the same as her offline identity because she is not covering her hair in either presentation of self. She suggests that social media may reveal aspects of individuals we cannot recognise in real life. However, it may not be the case for many Iranian women that they feel free to present their uncovered hair via uploading their photos, although they are in fact wearing their hijab in all other parts of their offline life.

Perhaps, but others should say [if I have changed after using Facebook]. It has been influential [on me] but not for hijab because I have never had hijab. I share my life with a group of close friends, not with everyone. "Me" on Facebook is the same as the one outside on streets and parties. I have learned a lot from Facebook. It has influenced knowing people. The self that is shaping in virtual environment might not be in a complete shape, but it will help knowing people. For example, we will see that a person is religious or goes to football while we never thought so about them.

Social media tools such as Facebook provide the space for individuals to reveal aspects of self that have been hidden because of the individuals' personal preferences, self-censorship, or the restrictive social environment. Avaa thinks her online identity does not deviate from her offline self as she has not been following hijab in either of these. Avaa's reference to "going to the football" is significant because shows the potential for social media to uncover aspects of individuals' life that were hidden. She suggests that in most cases users present or create a digital personality which reveals previously hidden aspects of their identity and assists her in

knowing them better. The reference to attending football matches is linked to the restrictions on women as they are not allowed to be present in football stadiums inside the country, which leads to representation of sports as an exclusively male activity.

### **Principal Driven Themes from Online Interviews**

We identified several chief themes from online interviews for further discussion and analysis such as Iranian conservatism, the place, and influence of Facebook and gender.

Avaa offers the theme of “showing off fake happiness” to uncover another reason for conservative behaviours. Those who tend to save their faces maybe pretend to be happy in Iranian culture. There is also an association between age and conservatism as Rostam (a male participant living outside of Iran) elaborated: “Previous generation was more conservative. Conservative people may not upload their photos. They think a lot about what they post.”

Protecting an idea in mind and not being flexible with changes is conservatism as Rostam replied. Soniya (a female living outside of Iran) combined the issues of age and cultural taboos and considered the older generation to be more conscious of taboos who did not accept losing face: “I have some family members in older ages on my friend list who do not accept girls’ and boys’ relationships or some code of dressing.” Soniya censored her online self-presentation and may even do not share much on Facebook to avoid the cultural tensions.

Cultural issues and saving face may influence some Iranian women Facebook users to manipulate the presentation of their online identity. Their presentation of self conveys the message that “all is well,” both with themselves personally and with life in general. There is an equally careful choice of actions and activities in which they are engaged in. Female users showed that they use techniques as a manifestation of a West-oriented or modern identity and to enhance their face. Female users’ more active social media participation may occur while they are traveling overseas and sharing photos from that trip. Their preference signifies the way they want to shape their online image. The conflict in males’ and females’ relations as the result of the social segregation after the Islamic revolution has led to lack of familiarity with the opposite sex and the creation of gender-based stereotypes and shortage of communication. The restrictions have generated curiosity about the opposite sex, especially about women from the male side and makes individuals use the online space to interact in ways which they would not in the real world.

There is a tendency for presentation of different identities and increased curiosity about the affairs of others. Men can be so cut off from interaction with women, and this encourages them to pretend to be a woman on social media. Gender continuously impacts the ways people experience and express their identities via social media. Male and female participants in this study reported diverse preferences in using Facebook and in their identity demonstration. Exploring the gender-based social stereotypes revealed that aspects of globalisation and Western hegemony penetrate the Iranian society via Internet.

### **Data Response to Socio-Cultural Taboos**

As our research findings suggest, conservatism and saving face encourage the tendency for participants to dismiss the status of Facebook and to declare that they do not want to invest too much in it. The more conservative participants focused on the academic use of Facebook and making connections with friends rather than willingness to discuss the socio-cultural impacts of social media and taboo topics. Some of our participants agreed that, regardless of their attempts at honesty in forming their online identities, they cannot showcase all aspects of their life in digital space. We interpreted this way of presentation of identity as self-censorship, designed to achieve social or personal benefits as users may imagine themselves to be

monitored by others on social media. Our participants' gender and degree of conservatism were found to have influences on the compatibility of their online identity and the offline one via the interview.

There is conflict in the male-dominated society between what is being projected as human rights towards giving women equal access as citizens and the more traditional understandings of the role and place of women. Just as women are trapped into socio-cultural regulations which instruct them on how to look and behave, men are trapped in their roles as being deemed more powerful and intellectual in the family as well as being expected to support their wife and family financially. Although men need to be modest in the way they treat women in general, it is women's responsibility first to reduce the "tension" and to be socio-culturally competent.

## Discussion

Social media has rapidly become pivotal to the lives of many individuals and to their personal and social relationships in today's world. In our study, participants reported the way they were interacting through social media, their experience of online interactions, and the process of their identity formation. Online interview questions caused them to reflect, often for the first time, on their online life. The majority of the participants indicated their interest in the questions by saying that they had not previously thought of these aspects of social media use. There was the possibility that they were, to some extent, ill-prepared to discuss some topics related to their presentation of self via Facebook and were also concerned about the possible consequences of what they were thinking and saying. Several of them expressed their confusion about the reason for our interest in Facebook rather than in other social media tools. Their facial expressions, laughter, or the seconds of silence after each question extended their particular description of social media tools such as Facebook.

Participants explained that social media has become part of their everyday lives where they can present their identities. Their short silence or laughter after some interview questions could be sign of reluctance to discuss Facebook interaction. Although these sites are normally accessible to either the public or to a large number of users, some individuals consider social media activities private and personal. The examination and observation of Facebook interactions may have caused some degree of uneasiness in different stages of participation in this study. The online interviews and Facebook activities illustrated that users mostly want to show that they are "cool" and achieve popularity among contacts. There was evidence of some contradictions as participants agreed that social media was useful but most content was fake. Despite some participants claiming that using Facebook was time-consuming, they also reported engaging in strategies to enhance their virtual identity representation. In general, the Iranian adult participants in this study want to construct their online selves in a space where they feel less pressure from socio-cultural conservatism—to present their "desired selves."

In this study, we explored the reconstruction of "gender identity" and living-location-based self-presentation via social media. Male adult participants were less likely to refer to changes of their online identity presentation compared to female participants. Female participants talked at length about using social media to express the "concealed emotions" and "desirable identity." They reported the barriers they encountered in shaping digital identities that were compatible with their self-presentations in the Iranian society. Culturally, "Saving the face" revealed to be a vital factor in projection of online identity for both genders living inside and outside of Iran. However, female participants' concerns in portraying a culturally safe image of their identities were marked. It appeared through data that they were to some extent conservative in both their online and offline self-expressions in different ways.

Social stereotypes and the imposed socio-cultural restrictions on women regarding their appearance and manner of conduct have different projections in online context and affect the both genders' identities. The current virtual environment is closely connected to the values of Western culture and modernity. Data signifies, implicitly or explicitly, how men are trapped in traditional stereotypes and gender discrimination guidelines. Many male participants discussed their inclination to support female rights. Social media operates as a virtual place to gather and to stay in touch within a closed society and offers a means of establishing connection with the opposite gender. Digital self-representation provides a context to showcase women's beliefs about being covered and having hijab and how this also affects socio-cultural stereotypes of what it means to be male. Although online access to information is limited by filtering, data in this study indicates that features of social media and Facebook have significant implications in conservative societies.

The findings of this study work as a lens through which to view the current social landscape in the Middle East and other contexts that experience Internet filtering and media censorship. This study also has implications in contexts with gender-based identity crisis and social conservatism. Online communities create an educational space to share social topics and to learn through cultural self-presentation. Underpinning this study is the concept of an essential cultural identity, or an imaginary cultural essentialism, is constructed as a source of strength and meaning which is based on the synergistic functioning of race and culture in the ascription of identity (Woodward, 1997). The creation of one's cultural identity involves specific points to be identified within the cultural and historical discourses (Potowski & Matts, 2008).

Although there is much that remains to be investigated, our research has generated important findings in the field of social media studies and in contexts with socio-cultural conservatism, taboos, and restrictions. However, there were several limitations in the process of participant selection and processing the data. The main limitation of this research is that the study was conducted on a small scale with ten Iranian adult participants and, therefore, is not simply generalizable to the larger population. As mentioned above, the Iranian concept of "politeness" made the process of participant recruitment and identifying the main participants of this study challenging. There were difficulties in recognising whether they were genuinely willing to take part in our study or were just being polite by not rejecting or ignoring a friend's offer. The first author's cultural awareness contributed to solving this matter during the participant selection and selecting the most useful participants.

We chose Facebook because of the special position which it held among Iranian adults at the time of initiating this study. The first author was confident that a study on Facebook was more useful at that point in time as there was a longer history of using this social media tool. The decision to investigate Facebook as an online popular site among participants of this study had some drawbacks. Participants looked at Facebook and some online interview topics as either taboo and/or political since Facebook is one of the filtered social media websites and people may not feel comfortable talking about their Facebook activities for a variety of reasons. It was made clear from the beginning that this study did not have any political focus. Despite this, some participants found some of the online interview discussions sensitive such as conservatism, and cultural self-representation.

The other element raised during the process of undertaking this research and analysing the online interview and Facebook observation data was Iranians' indirectness in self-expression as a cultural element in Iranian society which is projected through poetry, literature, and artistic presentations of self. This issue may have affected the interpretation of data although we took care to consider the socio-cultural elements of the context of the study and explain any ambiguity it may cause for readers unfamiliar with these factors. This research does not only contribute to understanding a specific generation and nation but also to

recognising the value of providing a context for presentation of identity and maintaining social interactions.

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