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Gender and Social Media: Delving into Young Adults' Daily Participation on Facebook

Masa Tantawy
The American University in Cairo

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INTRODUCTION

The consumption of social media has become increasingly popular over the past few years. Social media is a term used to describe various digital platforms and technologies that enable users to share content, engage in communication, collaborate on ideas, and build online communities (Correa et al.,2010; Muscanell and Guadagno, 2012). These online services revolutionised communication, allowing communication with friends and family or any other acquaintances or even strangers (Herring and Kapidizic, 2015). Due to the prevalence of social media, it is crucial to study the role that gender plays in its use. This is because gender constantly shapes who we are, plays a notable role in our daily interactions and communication with ours, and affects our identity. Thus, it will be intriguing to examine whether gender continues to impact one's offline behaviour like in the real-world. Unlike sex, gender is a social construct that individuals reaffirm via performances that align with cultural norms; these performances may differ based on gender-defined societal expectations, which are not only biological (Emara, 2017). The aim of this study is to understand how the social construction of gender affects and is affected by social media, particularly by tackling social media, Facebook specifically, usage among young adult males and females especially Middle Easterns, and women's constrained freedom online in the Arab countries. The terms "women," "girls," "boys," and "men" are used in this research paper to refer to cisgender individuals which are individuals whose gender identity corresponds with that expected of their sex at birth. I argue that although social media gives space for one to choose who they want to be and represent themselves away from the social constructs, gendered social expectations still apply online to a certain extent. In other words, individuals have greater freedom online compared to in-person such that they can use social media as a tool for beautification, yet they, particularly women, are obliged to abide by the restrictions enforced by their gender according to the society, limiting their choices online. This paper focuses on young adults' use of Facebook due to its popularity as there currently is 2.9899 billion active monthly users globally as of April 2023 and due its multi-functionality and ability to offer a tailored user experience (Facebook Statistics and Trends, 2023).

BACKGROUND

One of the main reasons for the accelerated use of social media nowadays is the COVID-19 pandemic, which propelled communities to turn towards online communication due to lack of physical means of communication (Chaffey, 2023). It is arguable that the rise of social media began with MySpace as it was the first to reach a million active users per month at around the year 2004 (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). Ever since, the number of social media users has skyrocketed to the extent that social media today has become a critical part of everyday

life, and it is difficult to imagine life without it. As of January 2023, almost 59% of the human population are users of social media platforms, spending an average time of more than two and a half hours per day (Chaffey, 2023). As an Egyptian student, I believe that it is important to look into social media patterns produced from the global south since knowledge production regarding this topic is often produced from a western perspective. In the Arab world and particularly in Egypt, 46.25 million people use social networking sites as of January 2023 reached, which is equivalent to 41.4% of the population, although this figure does not necessarily represent unique individuals (Kemp, 2023). Generally, social networking sites are dominated by younger individuals compared to older ones (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). This is because social media offers this generation the opportunity to be connected with the world while being in place; additionally, young adults have the ability to cope with the quick pace of the new technologies and its updates unlike the older generations who are still attached to old communication means such as phone calls.

In order to analyse the use of social media, it is necessary to first recognize the popular platforms today. The world's top four social networking sites that have the highest number of users in January 2023 are Facebook, Youtube, Whatsapp and Instagram (Chaffey, 2023). Since the second part of this paper focuses on Arab women's use of social media, it is equally important to shed light on the website they spend most time on; in Egypt and Qatar, Facebook is also the most popular social networking site in March 2023 (Similarweb, 2023a; Similarweb, 2023b). It is worth noting that Egypt ranks last among the top ten countries that have Facebook users in January 2023 (Facebook Statistics and Trends, 2023). Facebook first appeared in 2004, created by Mark Zuckerburg, a Harvard University student, to share and discuss opinions and within two years, it became "one of the fastest growing and most popular online social networks" (Emara, 2017, p.86) since anyone on the internet who is above the age of 13 could use it (Similarweb, 2023a). Through having a profile on this website, one can create their identity via functionalities such as status posts, photos, likes and comments (Emara, 2017). Globally, there are more male Facebook users than females, and likewise in middle-eastern countries; in 2023, the median age of users is 32 and the largest age group of users is 25 to 34 (Facebook Statistics and Trends, 2023; Similarweb, 2023a; Similarweb, 2023b).

FREEDOM ON SOCIAL MEDIA: A GENDER ANALYSIS

As the popularity of social media continues to grow, it is crucial to delve into its use: how it differs between males and females and what social media platforms permit their users to do.

The main reason young adults in the United States use social media is to stay in contact with friends and other connections, which is an inevitable share of how most of them spend their free time; nevertheless, there appear to be more dimensions to its use (Herring and Kapidzic, 2015). The use of Facebook is analysed through statuses, posting pictures, commenting, sending private messages and sending friend requests. According to Emara (2017), a Facebook status permits one to "post information or express certain views, and it provides opportunities to friends to comment on what is posted or simply to like and sometimes share their friends' status updates" (p.86). This section will focus on the differences that gender presents in how males use social networking platforms, mainly Facebook, compared to females, as well as how users can create online identities and employ social media for impression management.

The use of social media is more probable among extroverted men and women; research indicates that gender can be a predictor for social media use (Correa et al., 2010; Herring and Kapidzic, 2015). One example is that websites visited by each gender are most likely to differ from one another despite the majority of social media platforms being used by both males and females, or the activities of males compared to females online are dissimilar (Herring and Kapidzic, 2015). Among English-speaking teens in the United States, for instance, girls are more active users and spend more time on social media than boys (Herring and Kapidzic, 2015). This is consistent with the previously mentioned global ratio of male to female Facebook users.

Furthermore, girls tend to highlight their friendships online by posting pictures with each other, whereas boys lean towards humorous posts or ones about technology or sports, and adults follow the same pattern (Bond, 2009, as cited in Emara, 2017; Herring and Kapidzic, 2015). One aspect that also appeared to differ between girls and boys in the younger age group is the disclosure of information related to location; because girls have higher chances of facing sexual solicitation and harassment online compared to boys, they are less likely to provide details of their location and are more likely to limit who can view their profiles (Herring and Kapidzic, 2015). These privacy concerns were still evident among undergraduate students since women's profiles had fewer indications of who they were than men's, and they had fewer online activities, such as posts or comments related to sex or alcohol (Muscanell and Guadagno, 2012).

In a study conducted on a national sample of US adults, it appeared that gender imposed a difference in the relationship between the use of social media and personality traits. Notably, it was found that as emotional instability increased among men, they were more likely to be regular users; this was not the case among women, where emotional stability played no role in their use of social media (Correa et al., 2010). This is because social media is attractive to men for boosting their feelings through communicating with others (Correa et al., 2010). The variations in offline communication between the two genders are mimicked online, such that women use social media for emotional interpersonal purposes while men use them in task-oriented individual manners, which is clear from their language patterns (Emara, 2017). Women's use of social media is highly focused on maintaining their current relationships and belonging to a community, such as by using affiliative language or being more positively emotional when replying publicly or privately online than men (Correa et al., 2010; Muscanell and Guadagno, 2012). Female Egyptian young adults tend to post about situations they have experienced thus reflecting empathy and other feelings (Emara, 2017). On the other hand, creating new friendships or romantic relationships is why men use social media, making more frequent contacts on Facebook. Adolescent boys' online affiliations tend to be ones distinct from their offline friends. Men's positive emotional language appears more in the private context than in the public one, and their phrases show control and success by being more assertive; for example, male Egyptian young adults' status updates reflect dominance and independence (Emara, 2017; Herring and Kapidzic, 2015; Muscanell and Guadagno, 2012). It is worth noting that negative emotional language did not differ between males and females (Emara, 2017).

These variations can be explained by gender roles where men are expected to be more risk-taking and open to building connections while women, due to privacy issues, as discussed earlier, may trust their acquaintances more and are less viable to contacting those they do not know

(Muscanell and Guadagno, 2012). Moreover, if men exhibit emotions, this might make them appear less strong and consequently less masculine, which is why feelings are more dominant in the Facebook statuses of female Egyptian young adults compared to their male counterparts (Emara, 2017). This not only indicates that social media users are likely to conform to societal gender constraints and norms, but it also shows that they have the freedom to control how they present themselves online.

Online self-presentation is one of the facets that social media affords its users to control through what they share on their profiles. Users tend to present themselves in a commendable manner—a form of impression management –which is done in numerous ways, such as disguising some aspects of personality, yet all convey gender identities among teens particularly (Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2013; Herring and Kapidzic, 2015). This is due to the fact that gender has an indispensable effect on one's identity that is constructed depending on societal values and norms (Emara, 2017). Although teenagers avoid faking their online identities, the most common group of social media users, young adults, utilise means such as pictures or posts showing their opinions or personal information and the size of their friends to present "an edited version" (Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2013, p.108) of who they are due to cultural pressures (Herring and Kapidzic, 2015). A study in the United States found that female participants post pictures that appear "cute" (Herring and Kapidzic, 2015, p.4) in contradiction to males whose online activity is "self-promoting" (Herring and Kapidzic, 2015, p.4) through content pertaining to sex or alcohol. This matches the true common belief that girls focus more than boys on choosing photos where they look attractive; one example is profile pictures where the female appears alluring or is wearing revealing clothes.

Consequently, not everything online is true; in fact, some may choose to identify by age or ethnicity that is different from reality or beautify other information albeit the high likelihood of maintaining the same personality aspects among adolescents (Herring and Kapidzic, 2015; Jyrkiäinen, 2016). Research indicates that users might embellish different aspects of who they are on social media to abide by society's views, such as beauty standards, despite the widespread notion that a Facebook profile is a true representation of its owner (Jyrkiäinen, 2016). It appeared that male teenagers had higher chances of falsifying information in their posts, perhaps to appear more tough or masculine, compared to girls who desired to look older and more pretty (Herring and Kapidzic, 2015).

PERSISTENT RESTRICTIONS: WOMEN'S FREEDOM ONLINE

Regardless of users' ability to shape their online identities, women's freedom on social media appears to be much more limited. This is in spite of social networking platforms being the arena where women can break free of society's control. In the Arab world specifically, a woman's online activity is evaluated just like in the offline world, facing the same limitations (Rajakumar et al., 2017). For example, how an Egyptian woman behaves must suit the religious standards and be acceptable to her family since most Egyptians are religious and family oriented, often dominated by patriarchal views (Jyrkiäinen, 2016). This section examines how women are restricted when using social media in the Arab world, in addition to the reasons for this bounded freedom of choice.

One of the worries females around the world face is how their online activity or profiles might affect their employability; a survey conducted in 2013 found that young job applicants' rejection rate because of having inappropriate content on social networking sites was 1 in 10, yet this was not

a significant issue since young adults use these platforms mainly for communication and not for demonstrating professionalism (Herring and Kapidzic, 2015). Nevertheless, the online activity of Arab females has many more repercussions than just affecting work opportunities. In addition to peer pressure to abide by the cultural values, their families are important determinants of how they choose to present themselves online and the extent to which they conform to the cultural standards and gender norms (Emara, 2017; Williams et al., 2012).

One of these cultural standards is exemplified by Arab men, who usually avoid talking about any female relatives, including their mothers, daughters and sisters, or their relationships with women in public for safety measures, implicitly marginalising their pivotal role in the society; in Egypt, this neglect of speaking about women explains the custom of "male protection and supremacy" (Emara, 2017, p.107). This is surprising as with the rise of gender equality, it is expected for patriarchy to be less prominent and specifically online where one's activity remains existent through time- known as their online footprint.

Among the complex issues that appeared to create a dilemma in Arab countries commonly was the use of images or profile pictures on Females' Facebook profiles. According to Jyrkiäinen (2016), young Egyptian females maintain their reputation by not allowing all those on their Facebook friends list to see their pictures, particularly ones that can be viewed as romantic. A survey conducted on Qatari women found that as a form of using Facebook in a manner approved by those they know, such as family and friends and avoiding criticism, a considerable number of these females avoided uploading their pictures or even using their full names on social media profiles (Williams et al., 2012). Contra- dictingly, in Iran, many users neglect the strict Islamic standards when using Facebook; for example, many women who wear hijab daily share pictures online without it, regardless of any consequences. Still, it was found that those who share their pictures with hijab use their full names on their profile, while women who share photos without hijab do not use their full names; instead, a shorter one or a nickname is used such that their profiles do not appear in the search results of their full name (Ebrahimi and Salaverría, 2015).

There are multiple reasons for this limited freedom of women's online activity. To Qataris, it is unsettling to have pictures of them, even if appropriate, seen by everybody or circulate online with no control over them, highlighting privacy issues and the right to control when one is seen no matter what their gender, nationality or religion is (Williams et al., 2012). These pictures spreading might result in rumours or other effects on the reputation of the female's family; in other words, "a woman's face is an embodiment of her reputation and – by extension - that of her family's" (Williams et al., 2012, p.131), so what Qatari women post, comment, or like on Facebook must be inline with the culturally acceptable norms of a female Muslim. Likewise, Egyptian females' behaviour on social networking websites is conservative to the extent that sometimes women conform to the cultural norms and values more than they do in real life. Complete liberty in choosing which pictures to include on a woman's profile was proven dangerous, for several females faced threats, including death ones, after posting pictures labelled by society as inappropriate. One example is an activist named Aliaa el-Mahdy who was threatened to be killed for sharing a nude photograph in 2011. As a result, many women tended to adopt the masking technique, where they limit the visibility of their profiles and content online only to their close friends (Jyrkiäinen, 2016).

CONCLUSION

Finally, this paper studied how the social construction of gender affects and is affected by social media via analysing the use of Facebook by young adults', with a particular focus on Middle Eastern cisgender males and females, and the limited freedom women have on this social networking platform in the Arab countries. It is argued that despite individuals having some freedom online compared to offline, their choices, specifically that of women, are constrained within the borders set by societal gender norms. There were numerous variations between how males used social media compared to females, with the most prominent gender difference being that females are more likely to use it to maintain current relationships while males use it to create new ones. Additionally, social networking websites can be utilised as a tool for embellishment and impression management, for users tend to present an edited version of themselves online due to societal pressures and norms. As to Arab women's use of Facebook, there are multiple factors such as cultural norms and family expectations that restricted their freedom online. The use of profile pictures and the right to control one's online visibility were also discussed. The findings of this paper underscore the importance of understanding the role that gender and societal expectations play in shaping online behaviour and self-presentation. Moreover, they highlight the complex interplay between societal expectations and self-presentation online therefore understanding these dynamics is critical to creating a more inclusive and equitable online environment for all users. To conclude, it is important to question the reasons for the lagged progress in gender equality online and the ability of women to freely use social networking sites in comparison to the offline world where multiple advances have been accomplished.

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