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Title

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Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7k7462z2

Journal

Cyberpsychology Behavior and Social Networking, 17(5)

ISSN

2152-2715

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Publication Date

2014-05-01

DOI

10.1089/cyber.2013.0338

Peer reviewed

The Influence of Social Networking Technologies on Female Religious Veil-Wearing Behavior in Iran

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Abstract

Social networking technologies can influence attitudes, behaviors, and social norms. Research on this topic has been conducted primarily among early adopters of technology and within the United States. However, it is important to evaluate how social media might affect people's behaviors in international settings, especially among countries with longstanding, government recommended, cultural and religious traditions and behaviors, such as Iran. This study seeks to assess whether Iranian women who have been using social networking technologies for a longer time (compared to those who have recently joined) would be less likely to cover themselves with a veil and be more comfortable publicly displaying pictures of this behavior on Facebook. Iranian females ($N = 253$) were selected through snowball sampling from nongovernmental organizations in November 2011 and asked to complete a survey assessing their use of Facebook, concerns about not wearing a veil in Facebook pictures, and their actual likelihood of wearing a veil. Items were combined to measure lack of interest in wearing a veil. Length of time as a Facebook user was significantly associated with not wearing a veil ($b = 0.16$, $p < 0.01$), controlling for age, education, and frequency of using Facebook. Results also revealed a significant relationship such that older people were more likely to adhere to the religious behavior of wearing a veil ($b = -0.45$, $p < 0.01$). Social networking technologies can affect attitudes and behaviors internationally. We discuss methods of using social media for self-presentation and expression, as well as the difficulties (and importance) of studying use of technologies, such as social media, internationally.

Introduction

RAPID GROWTH IN THE USE of online social networking has allowed these platforms to be used as technological tools for changing religious, political, and economic attitudes and behaviors.[1–3] With Facebook alone, recently reporting nearly 1.2 billion active monthly users and 728 million active daily users,[4] it becomes important to study and understand the implications of the global reach and influence of social networking technologies. Social networking platforms allow users to communicate globally and learn from people from various cultures, religious ideologies, and political affiliations. Social media have made a particular impact on providing access to information and communication among people living in countries with restricted media, such Iran.[5]

Online social networking technology usage has already been associated with social and behavioral norm formation and change in a variety of domains such as health,[6] politics,[7,8] and fashion.[9] Research on the relationship between social networking content and perceived social norms suggests that content on Facebook news feeds and friends' profiles impact people's attitudes and behaviors.[10] For example, researchers studying the effect of social media content on college drinking norms had participants view Facebook profiles that included or did not include alcohol-related content and asked them to report their perceptions of alcohol use. Those exposed to the alcohol experimental group estimated that the average student drank more frequently and in higher quantities than those in the control group.[11] Despite societal norms against binge drinking and risky sexual behaviors, social networking technologies had an effect on users' perceived social norms, leading them to engage in behaviors prevalent among their social network.[10,12]

Social networking technologies might also affect social and behavioral attitudes and norms in global settings. The majority of work on social networking technologies and behavioral norms has been conducted among early adopters of technology within the United States, a group and location

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that values change and adaptation.[13] However, research on this topic might be particularly interesting and important in countries with restrictive governments, such as Iran, where the ability to use social media might be rapidly changing the longstanding cultural and religious traditions. For instance, recent research suggests that social networking technologies provide citizens of Arab countries facing societal, cultural, and political limitations a platform for expressing their beliefs and values.[14] Results from one study suggested that individualism, adherence to traditions and values, and masculinity were significantly associated with the attitudes of Facebook members from those regions. The authors concluded that social networking sites have the ability to increase freedom of speech and reduce the effects of traditional cultural values that limit free social interaction.[14] Although numerous news, popular culture articles, and blogs suggest that social media affect the cultural and religious attitudes and behaviors of people living in Middle Eastern countries with restrictive governments,[5,15–17] this work has not been researched or published in academic journals.

Social media use within Middle Eastern countries has grown exponentially in recent years, and has been the driving force behind many societal changes in the Middle East, such as gender reform.[18] More notably, social networking sites played an integral role in the 2011 ''Arab Spring'' political protests, leading to the mobilization of many young adults.[19] Due to the growth of social media as a vehicle for change, many Middle Eastern governments began trying to preserve traditional and religious values.[20] However, despite the enormous social, political, and cultural implications of the increased use of social media, few studies have attempted (or have been able) to document the effects of social media on social norms and behavior in these regions.

In Iran, for example, social media use might be associated with women's interest in wearing a veil (hijab), a government-recommended cultural and religious tradition that has existed for more than 30 years.[21] In an attempt to display individualism, social networking users often avoid traditions such as religion[22] and cultural behaviors.[23] Similarly, female Iranians who have been using social networking sites for an extended period of time might prefer to avoid wearing a veil, as well as to avoid displaying themselves wearing a veil in their social media pictures. However, no research has studied this topic.

Methods

This study received a waiver of consent from the University of California, Los Angeles, institutional review board. An initial sample of 25 females at a university in Iran were approached and asked to complete a 15-item questionnaire on their use of Facebook, attitudes and beliefs about religious customs (including wearing a veil in pictures displayed on social media), and their likelihood of using drugs and engaging in sexual behaviors. Although initially approved by the local university in Iran, we were asked to remove the sex- and drug-related content in the questionnaire and to move to a different location.

The drug- and sex-related items were removed, and new sites were chosen. Female participants ($N=253$) were selected through snowball sampling from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in November 2011. Due to the na-

tionwide ban on social networking Web sites, many social networking users have a strong desire to remain anonymous. Snowball sampling was determined to be the most effective way to sample participants in order to locate the hidden population of Facebook users. Three family cultural centers, as well as multiple public parks in Isfahan City, Iran, were chosen initially. Participants were approached at these locations, given a leaflet, and asked if they would like to participate in the study. Leaflets contained the following: (a) information about the goal of the study; (b) a statement ensuring that participants and their answers would remain fully anonymous; and (c) a link to the online survey. All surveys were completely anonymous, and results were saved to a secure database. Participants were then asked to pass the leaflet to friends and acquaintances who might be interested in participating in the survey. Participants were not paid for their involvement in the study.

Measures

Due to participants' desire to remain anonymous and not be contacted again, it was not possible to conduct a randomized controlled trial or to sample participants at multiple time points. Therefore, one cross-sectional survey was conducted where we attempted to measure the influence of having a Facebook account over time by measuring associations with the age of participants' Facebook accounts. The basic demographic information we asked of our participants included their age and level of education. Participants were also asked to report the amount of time they had had a Facebook account, the amount of time they used the Internet on a daily basis, and the number of friends they had on Facebook. All data gathered from participants were through self-report. The amount of time as a Facebook user was measured in months, and daily time spent on the Internet was measured in hours.

Participants were also asked a number of questions about their religious veil-related attitudes and behaviors. Wearing the veil incorrectly according to religious tradition is known as ''keeping improper hijab.'' To attempt to measures change over time, we asked participants how those attitudes and behaviors might have changed compared to 6 months ago. For example, participants were asked, ''In comparison to 6 months ago, how likely are you to post Facebook pictures showing that you do not properly wear your veil?'' (5-point Likert scale where 1 = ''very unlikely'' and 5 = ''very likely''), and ''In comparison to 6 months ago, how worried are you that others see and criticize your level of wearing a veil in Facebook in pictures?'' (5-point Likert scale where 1 = ''not at all worried'' and 5 = ''very worried''). We also asked participants how likely it was that they would feel embarrassed knowing that their photos are seen either by friends or strangers (5-point Likert scale where 1 = ''not at all worried'' and 5 = ''very worried''). Lastly, we asked participants, ''In comparison to the last 6 months, how likely are you to put more photos with improper hijab on your Facebook profile?'' (5-point Likert scale where 1 = ''not at all worried'' and 5 = ''very worried''). Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was calculated to assess the internal consistency of the seven questions assessing adherence to the traditional Islamic custom. Items had a high internal consistency rating (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.90$). The seven items were summed together and combined to measure general lack of

TABLE 1. DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION ABOUT
WOMEN (N = 253) IN ISFAHAN CITY, IRAN, 2011

Variable	N (%)
Age; mean (SD)	21.8 (4.57)
Educational level	
Guidance school	24 (9.5)
Current high school student	28 (11.1)
Earned high school diploma	30 (11.9)
Current college student	68 (26.9)
Earned bachelor's degree	48 (19)
Current master's student	28 (11.1)
Earned master's degree	18 (7.1)
Current Ph.D. student	4 (1.6)
Earned Ph.D.	5 (2.0)
Time using Facebook	
Hours per day; mean (SD)	3.28 (2.49)
Months since joined; mean (SD)	13.56 (5.5)
Use Facebook for:	
Checking people's updates	44 (17.4)
Messaging	35 (13.8)
Commenting	39 (15.4)
Update wall/statuses	38 (15)
Groups	49 (19.4)
Searching for friends	26 (10.3)
Checking events and activities	22 (8.7)
% of friends on Facebook	
0–20%	42 (16.6)
21–40%	62 (24.5)
41–60%	61 (24.1)
61–80%	62 (24.5)
81–100%	26 (10.3)

observing traditional veil covering in pictures displayed on Facebook.

Results

Table 1 displays demographic information about the 253 female Iranian participants. Participants were on average almost 22 years old, with more than 30% being educated to high school level or below. More than 40% of women earned a bachelor's degree or higher level of education. Activities that participants carried out the most on Facebook were checking updates of their Facebook friends (17.4%) and using Facebook groups (19.4%). The average participant

joined Facebook about 1 year prior to the survey, and used Facebook for more than 3 hours a day.

Table 2 shows the reported religious attitudes toward wearing a veil in Facebook pictures and reported Facebook behaviors of the surveyed women relative to 6 months prior. Compared to 6 months earlier, participants were on average slightly less likely to be embarrassed if Facebook friends saw pictures of them wearing an improper hijab ($M = 3.39$, $SD = 0.97$). Compared to 6 months earlier, participants felt slightly less embarrassed knowing that strangers on Facebook would see photos of them without a proper hijab ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 0.96$). The respondents were also slightly less worried that others would criticize their levels of observing traditional Islamic customs of the hijab ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 0.87$). Women on average reported they would be slightly more likely to upload photos with an improper hijab in the future ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 0.88$). Participants also stated that, compared to the past 6 months, they felt less prohibited in uploading photos with an improper hijab onto Facebook ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 0.97$).

Table 3 displays the relationship between time having a Facebook account and keeping improper hijab in photos. There was a significant positive correlation between keeping improper hijab and time having a Facebook account ($b = 0.16$, $p = 0.005$), controlling for age, education, and daily amount of time using Facebook. Results also revealed a significant negative correlation between the participant's age ($b = -0.240$, $p < 0.01$) and keeping improper hijab, as well as a significant positive relationship between keeping improper hijab and daily amount of time using Facebook ($b = 0.23$, $p < 0.01$). No significant relationship was found between level of educational attainment and likelihood of observing religious traditions.

Discussion

Results suggest that use of Facebook can affect Iranian women's perceptions about and likelihood of engaging in a traditional Iranian religious behavior—the wearing of a head veil. These findings support research suggesting that social media users value personal identity, individualism, and avoiding traditional factors such as religion and culture.[22,23] As time spent on Facebook increases, it is likely that exposure to different cultures and beliefs increases, shaping people's perceptions of social norms. This work also builds on research suggesting that social media affects attitudes and behaviors[9,10] by investigating how Facebook might affect Iranian women's attitudes and

TABLE 2. ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS AMONG IRANIAN WOMEN (N = 253) RELATED TO WEARING
A RELIGIOUS VEIL (HIJAB), ISFAHAN CITY, IRAN, 2011

Variable	M (SD)
Freedom wearing less hijab in photos	3.36 (0.97)
Likelihood of less hijab in photos	3.39 (1.07)
Embarrassment knowing pictures with improper hijab are seen by friends*	3.39 (0.97)
Embarrassment knowing pictures with improper hijab are seen by strangers*	3.45 (0.96)
Worried that others will criticize your level of hijab*	3.60 (0.87)
Worried that your family will criticize photos of improper hijab*	3.45 (1.09)
Likelihood of putting up more photos with improper hijab	3.26 (0.88)

Items are listed on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = "less likely/worried" and 5 = "more likely/worried").
*Items were reverse-coded.

TABLE 3. REGRESSION OF RELIGIOUS VEIL-RELATED
ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS ($N=253$), ISFAHAN
CITY, IRAN, 2011

Variable	Beta	Confidence interval	p-value
Age	−0.24	[−0.45, −0.11]	0.00*
Education	0.02	[−1.37, 1.92]	0.74
Daily time spent on Facebook	0.23	[0.24, 0.74]	0.00**
Time as a Facebook user	0.16	[0.31, 0.18]	0.01*

*Correlation is significant at the $p<0.05$ level (two-tailed).
**Correlation is significant at the $p<0.01$ level (two-tailed).

behaviors about engaging in longstanding cultural and religious traditions.

As social networking technologies continue to grow, and as researchers continue to find more ways to study countries with restrictive access, it will be interesting to investigate more thoroughly how social media and other technologies impact people's attitudes and behaviors. In the United States, for example, people of almost all age groups, religious ideologies, and political affiliations use social networking sites, exposing users to multiple ideologies and beliefs in addition to the norms prevalent in their own networks. In Iran, populations currently using social networking sites are primarily younger individuals with higher education levels and similar political views, which is representative of only a segment of the population. Those actively involved on social networking sites are possibly exposed to foreign ideas and values, influencing their attitudes and behaviors. However, in the future, it is conceivable that as Iranians with more conservative views begin using social networking technologies, the experience will become more like that of the United States where users are exposed to all types of social norms and not just specific to the groups one joins.

Although this study finds that longer term use of social networking technologies is associated with reduced likelihood of wearing a veil in Facebook pictures among Iranian women, it is possible that results may be different in other Middle Eastern countries. For example, in the historically secular Middle Eastern country of Turkey, women have been increasingly wearing a veil by choice, and the veil has become a sign of following popular trends.[24] In Turkey, use of social networking technologies might therefore be associated with increased observance of wearing a veil. Future research can explore these issues to determine how social norms may differ among countries with strong cultural and/or religious traditions and how social networking technology use affects attitudes and behaviors among people in those countries.

There are several limitations of this research, most of which are a result of government restrictions and our respect to observe these rules and participant needs. For example, due to participant concerns regarding being contacted again, we were unable to conduct a randomized controlled trial or measure multiple time points to determine change in wearing a veil over time as a result of Facebook use. However, this study provides an initial methodology that can be used to research attitudes and behaviors in Iran and other countries with similar politics. Additionally, we believe the present study is an initial approach at demonstrating an unstudied and interesting effect on how social media can affect atti-

tudes internationally. Future research might explore this question using more controlled methods by studying this question in other countries. We found it was much more difficult to conduct this research than it has been for us to conduct research in other international settings, including difficultly in accessing participants, conforming to and respecting government recommendations, and ensuring the comfort and safety of research participants. However, we believe this study is important in providing a call for researchers to begin studying the effects of social media internationally while being able to respect the wishes of different types of governments. As social media and access to information and people continue to grow in countries such as Iran, it will become easier for researchers to study the impact of technologies on citizens of those countries and help us to understand whether and how technologies can be used to improve the lives of people in these countries.

This study provides initial support that, among Iranian woman, social media use is associated with reduced concerns about adhering to veil-related social norms and behaviors on social media. Because of the lack of research on this topic and within these regions, this study aims to provide a call for future research to understand better how technology might impact cultural and religious changes in important international settings.

Author Disclosure Statement

No competing financial interests exist.

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