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# Seeking Personal Autonomy Through the Use of Facebook in Iran

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## Abstract

In Iran, where males and females are kept separated in different spheres, Facebook may be used as an opportunity to bridge this gap between the genders. However, this study showed that Facebook, as a *anonymous* platform in which people are in contact with their already-made *social ties*, didn't seem to be liberating from the existing norms and rules within society. Facebook was a *stage* that became restricted with the involvement of *social ties*. The study's analysis of interviews with six young Iranians showed that social meanings and norms of self-presentation on Facebook are defined to a large degree in terms of gender. The informants used a variety of strategies when presenting themselves on Facebook. They used Facebook simply for *gaining personal autonomy*. *Strategies* were adopted especially when one's *personal and community needs* were in conflict. Efforts made to apply strategies were gendered and were used mainly by females. Males conformed to and women resisted societal norms and expectations.

## Keywords

Facebook, Iran, youth, strategic self-presentation, and social control

In Iran, where males and females are kept separated in different spheres, the Internet can be used as an opportunity to bridge this gap between the sexes. Based on Islamic law, both sexes in society should dress according to the Islamic dress code. Therefore there is not much room for choosing dress according to personal preferences. Different aspects of everyday life, *voices*, freedom of speech, and acts are regulated by the Islamic rules and gender segregation policies. In such a society where the choice of dress is strict, Facebook may provide a vocal opportunity to this muted population both textually and visually. It might also provide an environment for people to experience online the way of life they choose while living under the control of the authorities.

There are different scholarly approaches toward the Internet depending on whether it is a context-dependent or an independent platform from offline life. Given these approaches, there is tension among scholars over whether the Internet is an open virtual space independent from the offline world or an extension of the offline world (Bryant, 2008). Many scholars have considered the Internet as an independent sphere from offline life, its structures, discourses, ideologies, and so. They believe that online life is independent from offline life, and therefore it can make its own discourses, which are free from the offline discourses (Kendall, 2002; Mitra, 2005; Turkle, 1995). Thus, people can behave independently in regard to their offline life and experience a new way of life on the Internet. Accordingly, those who haven't had a *voice* before get a chance to be heard and might be able to present themselves as they wish. In this regard, the

Internet is viewed as a free space in which people can portray their identity freed from the structures within society. The Internet allows them to experience different aspects of themselves, evaluate their identities, and play different selves (Bryant, 2008; Turkle, 1995). Other scholars consider the Internet as parallel to offline life, representing and reflecting the structures of the offline world (Agger, 2004; Fornas, Klein, Ladenfork, Suden, & Sveningsson, 2002). With respect to this view, the Internet can act like a mirror and can show how people behave and live in the offline world. However, it doesn't need to reflect the offline world perfectly, but can be along the same lines with its structures and norms. Considering the Internet as either *mirror* of the offline life (see Agger, 2004, Fornas et al., 2002) or *independent sphere* from the offline life (Kendall, 2002; Mitra, 2005; Turkle, 1995) seems mutually exclusive. To make a conclusion to what extent the Internet is dependent on or independent from offline norms, structures, and so, one should focus on a specific context, for instance a sociocultural situation in which the Internet (generally) and social media (specifically) are used. The approach presented here is inspired by Markham's (2004) definition of the Internet as "a

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communication medium, a global network of connections, and a sense of social construction” (p. 119). According to Markham, “the shape and nature of internet communication is defined in context, negotiated by users that may adapt hardware and software to suit their individual or community needs” (p. 119). This approach encourages a refreshing view of the Internet that goes beyond online and offline segregation and motivates studying the Internet within the context in which it is used.

When studying the Internet (generally) and social media (specifically), it is important to make sure not to fall into a *naïve belief and cyber-utopianism* approach (Morozov, 2011) that considers them as liberating and emancipatory per se, without considering their downsides, especially when it comes to authoritarian states in which social media can be used as a tool for *controlling, tracking, and harassing* people based on their acts (Morozov, 2011). It is no longer possible to segregate between online and offline when people get *arrested, tracked, and harassed* due to their acts online (Morozov, 2011). According to this approach, the Internet and social media are an extension of one’s life, rather than parallel to or separate from it, and people use them to fulfill their *individual or community needs* (Markham, 2004).

In symbolic interactionism tradition, all actions have *social meaning* (Farquhar, 2009). However, as Farquhar (2009) points out, “in the tradition of Mead, social meanings and norms are fluid” (p. 26). Accordingly, even though social meanings and norms are socially constructed, they are negotiated by the users and therefore are all *fluid*, rather than being fixed and static. As Farquhar writes, drawing on Boyd (2004, p. 9) “it is not that we live separate lives, one in the technology, one in the ‘real’ world. Rather, it is that we live lives with a mix of interaction types” (p. 17). Therefore, actions would be based on “the norms and meanings of society in general and the Facebook community specifically” (Farquhar, 2009, p. 23). That is, Facebook, due to both the limitations and the possibilities that are part of the technology, might make possible the construction of new *social meanings* in conjunction with the users’ own individual and community norms. The self-concept, according to Farquhar, drawing on Mead (1932, 1936, 1938) and Goffman (1959) “comes through experiences with those around us” (p. 27). Accordingly, the self is not constructed in isolation, rather is constantly *constructed socially* and in relation and in interaction with others and their perceptions, expectations, and attitudes. Accordingly, any self-presentation is basically made to be performed before others—who are called *Friends*—on Facebook. As Farquhar points out “Facebookers would learn how to perform their own identities from their interpretations of other Facebookers” (p. 31).

Inspired by the definition of the Internet provided by Markham (2004) as fulfilling one’s *individual or community needs*, and also *fluidity* of *social meanings* and *norms*, this study investigates how a small number of young Facebook

users in Iran reflect on their own self-presentation on Facebook (on a daily basis). In particular, this study investigates whether there are any gender differences between these reflections, and also how these reflections, claims, and self-presentational acts are in line with or different from the social meanings and norms in the sociocultural context of the society (Iran) in which they live and use Facebook.

As Farquhar (2009) notes, computer-mediated communications (CMC) “offer greater control over presentation of self” (p. 30; Boyd, 2004; Turkle, 1995), compared with unmediated communication. In a similar sense, social networking sites, as Papacharissi (2011) writes, “enable individuals to construct a member profile, connect to known and potential friends, and view other members’ connections. Their appeal derives from providing a stage for self-presentation and social connection” (p. 304). Facebook members can communicate with other members and engage in interaction on an everyday basis. Users can create a personal profile, add personal information, exchange information and messages, and get in touch with other people. However, on the Internet in general, and Facebook specifically as Farquhar points out, we can see “the influence of institutions . . . the influence of societal norms and group affiliations; and individual ability to make decisions” (p. 33).

## Facebook in the Middle East and Iran

### *Less “Fictional” Self-Presentation and Social Control on the “Anonymous” Platform of Facebook*

According to Grasmuck, Martin, and Zhao (2009) people tend to be more *realistic and honest* in more *anonymous* websites. This is in contrast to the anonymous websites in which people tend to “act as somebody else” (Grasmuck et al., 2009, p. 158). The *anonymous* setting refers to an environment in which “identity claims appear to be grounded in offline realities” (Grasmuck et al., 2009, p. 158). It is assumed that people are more realistic, are honest, and act as themselves, and they, for instance, reveal their real name and identity. However, the *anonymity* of environment doesn’t guarantee that there would be no fake identities.

Even though on Facebook, users themselves construct the self they want to present before others, self-presentations seem to be less *fictional* compared with previous means of using the Internet in which self-presentations were generally anonymous, *fictional*, and *fabricated*. However, it doesn’t mean that Facebook users do not exaggerate some aspects of their identity plays using the platform. On Facebook, users often interact with their “pre-existing networks of social ties” (Boyd, 2004; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2006, in Farquhar, 2009, p. 31) of *friends* who might be generally familiar with who they in fact are.

When talking about social meanings and norms in this study, the focus is not only on the rules and codes imposed by

the Islamic Republic but also on cultural meanings and norms within the socioculture context of Iran.

Possibly, one of the most significant cultural concepts in the Middle East including Iran, according to Moghadam (2003), is *social control*, especially *control over women*.

The social network opportunities that Facebook offers increase drastically in importance when Facebook is utilized by a society like that in Iran, in which all media are state-run and the media contents are controlled by the authorities. Iran has a relatively young population. In 2010, “about 66 percent of Iranians are age thirty and younger” (Hashem & Najjar, 2010, p. 126). Many of the youth own computers and mobile phones and are adept at using them for a variety of purposes. In addition, “Iran is a well-wired and networked nation, with more than twenty million people who use the Internet on a regular basis” (Hashem & Najjar, 2010, p. 126).

Facebook can be considered as a place where gender segregation is harder to enforce and it also allows “for more playfulness about identity, and the possibility of adding a transnational context to it” (Khosravi, 2008, p. 101). Accordingly, Facebook can be considered as a *stage* for “practice of defiance” (Khosravi, 2008, p. 3). However, this doesn’t mean that the downsides of social media use are neglected here. On the contrary, their use has turned into a *tool* for authoritarian states to *control, track*, and identify opposition (Morozov, 2011). Morozov’s (2011) insights regarding social media is most accurate for defined political acts, but for instance, when it comes to decreasing the gender gap within the society, providing a platform for people to have dialogue with one another, and also for banal practices, social media may be more liberating compared with what is practiced within the society and between people.

“Cultural invasion” (*tahajom-e farhangi*) has always been one of the state’s main concerns over the introduction of new communication technologies and media to the country and according to Khosravi (2003, p. 32) “is perceived to be conducted by the Great Satan, i.e. The US, and its ‘indigenous agents’... [and is considered to be ] more dangerous than the military ones. According to Esfandiari (2011), drawing on the Islamic authorities, social media are basically made to “lead young Iranians astray and to distance them from the ideas and principles of the republic” (Esfandiari, 2011).

As York (2012) writes “for months . . . another story about the Islamic Republic’s ambitions has been gaining ground: that story is about the Iranian government’s attempt to create its own ‘halal’ internet, cut off from the outside world” (York, 2012). According to her, “Iran’s intent, it would seem, is to create an Internet where Iranians are ‘safe’ from the pornography, hate speech and cultural influence that the World Wide Web provides” (York, 2012). As she further writes, “despite an official ban on the site, Facebook is widely used (through

the use of proxies and VPNs, which a reported half of Iran’s population uses) and Twitter is increasing in popularity.”

Access to the Facebook website since the 2009 election onwards has been blocked and its usage is considered as illegal in Iran. Its use might be considered as a “cultural crime” (*jorm-e farhangi*). “Cultural crime”, as Khosravi writes (2003, p. 42), “appeared in the post-revolutionary Penal law as a new term for breaking Islamic rules.

According to Sharif (2012), “officials of the Iranian regime consider the new media and social networks on the Internet [as] serious threats to the existence of [the] regime” and that is the reason why they use any means to limit the access of social media to the Iranian people. The Islamic republic authorities, as Sharif writes, “have just recently announced that Iranian Cyber Police has begun operation in Tehran arresting a number of social activists on Facebook.”

Accordingly, Facebook users are “branded as law-breakers in their trivial everyday life” (Khosravi, 2008, p. 125), as mundane practices like “showing more hair or skin than allowed” (Khosravi, 2008, p. 125) can violate the “‘collective sentiment’ of the Muslim community” (Khosravi, 2008, p. 17). According to JakartaGlobe (2012), citing an Iranian ayatollah, “the social networking service Facebook was un-Islamic and being a member of it a sin.” The growth of Facebook has increased in a way that has caused concern and led to Islamic clerics issuing a *Fatwa* on Facebook, which introduces its use as *Haram*. According to one of the highest clerics in Egypt, Facebook use is considered absolutely immoral, as it threatens family cohesion, causes more break-ups, and increases the number of divorces (Haaretz Service, 2010). This *Fatwa* was issued a little while before the political unrest in Egypt.

When talking about Facebook, it is not all about popularity and growing usage. There are many people who leave Facebook every day for different reasons such as privacy concerns, or seeing it as a waste of time or too superficial. Although Facebook is in decline in certain parts of the world, it is still popular and peaking in the Middle East (Itameri, 2011). The number of Facebook users in the Middle East has increased by 30% from the time when political unrest began in the region (Itameri, 2011).

Facebook has been one of the few social networking sites that has experienced such rapid growth in popularity among Iranians. Despite Facebook being blocked during the Iranian presidential election in 2009 and afterwards, its usage is still increasing among Iranians. There is however, no clear statistic showing the exact number of Facebook users in Iran as the website is blocked and people access it through the VPNs and proxies and therefore the real number of users cannot be specified. However, as the Green voice of Freedom (2011) reports referring to an official website, “17 million Iranians are Facebook members and in a way, live on this website, despite the fact that this website has been censored in Iran.”

## Aims

This study relies on the individual Facebook users' own experiences and reflections, and instead of assuming Facebook as a political or a social platform, takes an inductive approach by which individuals themselves lead the researcher to come to a conclusion in this sense.

This study doesn't claim to be representative of Iranian youth on Facebook, rather each informant is a case here. Each informant informs the researcher, not only about his or her own experiences of self-presentation on Facebook but also about a larger network of social meanings and norms. This study also explores whether social meanings and norms are opposed or reinforced by the informants' use of Facebook in the context of Iran.

This qualitative study focuses particularly on how young Iranians themselves reflect on their own self-presentation on Facebook. To do so, a limited number of young Facebook users (five informants) who currently live in Iran and were interested in participating in this study were recruited and then interviewed in person.

The main questions that are explored in this study are as follows:

- How do young Iranians (informants of this study) reflect on their own presentation of self on Facebook?
- Are there any gender differences in the informants' reflections and if so, which differences?
- To what extent are the existing social norms and meanings of the society seen as being reinforced or opposed through the informants' reflections?

## Strategies

In the following, the term *strategy* will be defined using definitions provided by Wodak, de Cillia, Reisigl, and Liebhart (2009) and Erving Goffman (1959). These definitions will then be combined and modified in relation to self-presentation on Facebook.

As Wodak et al. (2009) write, "the concept of strategy derives from Greek *strategia* and, since the nineteenth century at the latest, has meant 'the art of a commander-in-chief; the art of projecting and directing the larger military movements and operations of a campaign'" (p. 31). According to Wodak et al., drawing on Oxford English Dictionary definition (1998, p. 852, point 2a) "a strategist is someone who is skilled in leading an army."

As Wodak et al. (2009) further write, "abstracted from a purely military context, the concept of strategy generally denotes a more or less accurate plan adopted to achieve a certain political, psychological or other kind of objective" (p. 31). Moreover, they write that "the strategist attempts to anticipate all those factors which may have an impact on his or her actions" (Wodak et al., 2009, p. 31). In fact, the use of the term *strategy* in this study is particularly derived from the

latter definition in which the *strategy* refers to anticipations that one makes in order to control factors which might have impact on his or her actions. As Wodak et al. write, drawing on Bourdieu's definition, "the significance of strategies cannot be associated with a simplistic, finalistic and voluntary perspective" (p. 31). According to Wodak et al., "strategic action is oriented toward a goal but not necessarily planned to the last detail or strictly instrumentalist; strategies can also be applied automatically" (p. 31). In addition to the definition provided by Wodak et al., Goffman (1959) writes that "when an individual appears before others his actions will influence the definition of the situation which they come to have" (p. 6). He further argues that "sometimes an individual will act in a thoroughly calculating manner, expressing himself in a given way solely in order to give the kind of impression to others that is likely to evoke from them a specific response he is concerned to obtain" (Goffman, 1959, p. 6), and sometimes he acts in "a calculating manner" because of "the tradition of his group or social status require this kind of expression and not because of any particular response" (Goffman, 1959, p. 6). However, the definition provided by Goffman seems more applicable for self-presentational situations in which people's use of strategies/calculating manners might be modified due to "the tradition of his group or social status" which necessitates those types of expressions. According to both of these definitions, there are some anticipations or calculating manners considered to be able to make some aims or needs met. Accordingly, the term *strategy* here will refer to the anticipation and calculating manner that one considers to *denote a plan* to achieve a/some particular aim(s) or an "attempt to anticipate . . . factors which may have an impact on his or her action" (Wodak et al., 2009, p. 31).

In the following paragraph, self-presentation is defined and discussed in relation to online self-presentation and also in relation to Facebook and young Iranians.

## Self-Presentation

Self-presentation in Goffman's (1959) view is compared with a theatrical performance. In relation to any presentation, there is an *actor*, a *performance*, *setting*, *viewer(s)*, *front stage*, and *backstage*. What is important in this definition is to see how actors perform before people on the *front stage* where they are separated by the *setting*. Goffman uses the word *performance* to refer to "all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period . . . before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observation" (p. 22).

In relation to the importance of self-presentation and impression management, Leary et al. (1994) write that "because people's outcomes in life depend, in part, on others' perceptions and evaluation of them, people sometimes try to convey impressions that will help them obtain valued goals" (p. 664). Leary et al. further write that "as a result, they often monitor and attempt to control the impressions



they are making, a process known as self-presentation or impression management” (p. 664).

According to Zarghooni (2007), drawing on Walther, Slovacek, and Tidwell (2001, p. 110), “one of the reasons why self-presentation on social networking sites may be different from face-to-face is that online one may ‘inspect, edit and revise’” (p. 4). So, one can present himself or herself before the presentation is made available to others. According to Zarghooni, “the self-presenters are the same people as before, but they have got a new self-presentational tool and a new arena for social interaction” (p. 6). Therefore, it seems that the two main concepts of this study: *strategy* and *self-presentation online* are quite interconnected. Self-presentation online provides a situation in which one can *inspect, edit, and revise* for managing it suitable for some particular aims.

Goffman (1959) uses the term *front* to refer to “that part of the individual’s performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance” (p. 22). Therefore, in relation to the *front* itself, it would be interesting to see “what seem to be standard parts of front” (Goffman, 1959, p. 22). I use the word *standard* not only referring to standard and visible factors in *front* such as *furniture, décor, and physical layout* which Goffman calls *setting* but also to standard behaviors, acts, norms, manners, and activities. As Goffman writes, “those who would use a particular setting as a part of their performance, cannot begin their act until they have brought themselves to the appropriate place and must terminate their performance when they leave it” (p. 22). But more interesting than the term *setting*, Goffman writes about “the scenic parts of expressive equipment,” or *personal front* which is “the expressive equipment . . . [which] we most intimately identify with the performer himself,” such as “clothing, sex, age . . . size and looks; posture; speech patterns; facial expressions; bodily gestures” (p. 24). As he carries on, sometimes “the signs are relatively fixed and over a span of time . . . [and some] are relatively mobile or transitory” (p. 24).

Drawing on Goffman’s (1959) definition of *backstage*, Courtney, Britt, and Mckibben (2011) write that *backstage* is “an area as a place where individuals can drop their guards, expose their flaws, and seek to determine how they will later portray themselves” (p. 19). Goffman writes that “very commonly the back region of a performance is located at one end of the place where the performance is presented, being cut off from it by a partition and guarded passageway” (p. 113). He further writes, “the back region will be the place where the performer can reliably expect that no member of the audience will intrude” (p. 113).

### Middle Stage and the “Detached Self”

Zarghooni (2007) uses the term “detached self-presentation” (p. 17) to refer to the self, shaped somewhere in between the

*backstage* and *front stage* self (offline), that modifies his self-presentation (online) in a way to distance himself from his own self and from the *current state*. What he refers to is more applicable in relation to the online and the offline selves.

Similar to the difficulty of separating between *front* and *backstage*, it seems that it is quite difficult to specify where public and private spheres meet on Facebook. These two spheres seem quite overlapping and in many ways the characteristics of both are observed, for instance, in *private groups* where access can vary from public to private/closed members. Moreover, people can make private groups in which the access is limited to those addressed. Private group access however varies between private and public.

### Conforming to the Norms and Expectations of Society?

According to Goffman (1959), “when the individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society, more so, in fact, than does his behavior as a whole” (p. 35). I assume that this statement might be correct in the offline (in person) interactions, and in situations in which people are in contact with those they know. On Facebook, however, it may be a bit complicated. Depending on people’s intentions for using Facebook, their audiences might vary from closer friends to newly met people and even strangers. Therefore their actions might not necessarily conform to the expectations and norms of the society in which they live. People might be there to experience something new. Moreover, they might manage to perform different selves in different spheres.

Goffman (1959) writes that “in thinking about a performance, it is easy to assume that the content of the presentation is merely an expressive extension of the character of the performer and to see the function of the performance in these personal terms” (p. 77). According to him, “this is a limited view and can obscure important differences in the function of the performance for the interaction as a whole” (p. 77). As he writes, “it often happens that the performance serves mainly to express the characteristics of the task that is performed and not the characteristics of the performer” (p. 77). Accordingly, if young Iranian Facebook users try to perform different roles in different situations simultaneously, it shouldn’t be read simply as their own characteristics but rather as the characteristics of the task which can be a self-presentation on Facebook.

Leary et al. (1994) write that “the kinds of impression people try to create are affected” by different factors such as “norms and roles, the characteristics and values of the people whom the person want to express, others’ existing impressions of the person, the person’s own self-concept, and his or her desired images of self” (p. 664). Therefore, to get a better

image about self-presentation, in addition to presentation itself, one should give particular attention to the cultural, social, and religious context/situation in which the performance is made.

### Self-Presentation in Different Cultures

Jungsik, Seongsoo, and Wansuk (2011) investigate “how the length and strength of an expected social relationship are related to different self-presentation” (p. 63). They reflect on Eastern cultures such as Korean, Japanese, and Chinese. They write that in Korea, “being a collectivist culture, the Korean participants might feel a greater need for humble self-presentations” [and there is more pressure] “when an individual is in a long and intensive relationship” to get socially accepted (p. 71).

Moore (2000) argues that there is a need for empirical case studies which consider the *double consciousness* of people who inhabit plural or multiple cultures. In relation to *double consciousness*, which was brought up in Moore's study, Khosravi's (2008) study on young Iranian youth also shows that they perform different public and private selves simultaneously. As Khosravi writes “everybody knows the rules of the game. They know where and when they should switch from one to the other. The youth of today have grown up in this between-ness” (p. 123). However, one might discuss that it may not be unique only to Iran. Jungsik et al. (2011), explain “how Japanese people manage two opposite selves, ‘honno’ (inner self) and ‘tatemae’ (self-expressed to others) to coexist in an interdependent structure” (p. 71). They write about “dual selves” and conclude that their study has shown empirically that “Koreans seem to flexibly handle such dual needs for individual competence and being socially humble in response to the opportunities” (p. 71). They also criticize “the research on self-view and self-presentation [since they] have neglected various social situations as influencing self-presentation behaviors” (p. 71). They write that, “self-presentation and the motivation behind it must be understood within a context of social relationships, rather than within isolated individuals” (p. 72).

Chiung-Wen, Ching-Chan, and Yi-Ting (2011) in a similar study on Taiwanese users of Facebook discuss that the users might “interact differently with different types of friends when choosing Facebook tools” (p. 474). However, that cannot be limited to the Eastern culture, rather to everyone who wants to make sure which types of image one gives of oneself. They also discuss the differences in interaction, and write that “users might act differently with their new friends than their close friends” (p. 474). Their study's findings show that the users “tend to choose less time- and effort-utilizing tools to interact with newly met friends and more privacy-controlled tools when interacting with closer friends” (p. 476). They don't discuss their findings further, but one can interpret that in relation to the *social control* by which one might feel more concerned about the impression

they give to close friends and family members rather than newly met people (Moghadam, 2003). As mentioned by Leary et al. (1994), as people's outcome in life depends on how other people perceive and evaluate one, people try to transfer impressions that help them attain appreciated aims.

When discussing different cultures and how self-presentational acts are performed, one should refer to some cultural factors within the Iranian culture that seem important to be mentioned. In addition to the *social control* which was mentioned earlier, one of the main cultural factors in Iran is one's own and family *reputation* (Moghadam, 2003). It is important to mention that, as Moghadam (2003) writes, “a family's honor and reputation rest most heavily on the conduct of women . . . sex segregation and veiling, legitimated on the basis of the Shari'a, is part of the Islamic gender system” (p. 123). Women usually, according to Moghadam “is seen as a direct threat to manhood, community and family” (p. 165). And that can be appeared in forms of “the control of extended families over women” (Moghadam, 2003, p. 60). Compulsory veiling, according to her “has been a mechanism of social control: the regulation of women” (p. 160).

It is worth mentioning that veiling is not only limited to physical coverage but also to voice, ways of conduct, looking, and so on (Khosravi, 2008). However, meanings attached to veiling should be explored in any particular sociocultural context, rather than generalization. According to Naficy (2000, p. 562) “veiling of the voice includes using formal language with unrelated males and females, and decorous tone of voice, avoidance of singing, boisterous laughter, generally any emotional outburst in public than the expression of grief or anger” (cited in Khosravi, 2003, p. 73). “The patriarchal father's attention to the female virtue (namous) of his family is now part of how the state manages space” (cf. Foucault 2000: 207, cited in Khosravi, 2003, p. 74).

Veiling may not be all about limiting women; different studies have shown that within closed and fundamentalists situations, it has provided some sort of freedom of acts for women to be participants within the society and live in public (Mohanty, 1991). Hourani (1991) gives a cultural background about the Middle East and explains how public and private spheres had been separated along the gender lines by which public spheres were in control of men, business, and trades, and private spheres of home and family were in control of women in which women could have “maintained a culture of their own” (p. 120). One of the factors he mentions in relation to separation of public and private is “hijab” (women's head to toe veiling), which was actually meant to separate public from private, so women could still keep their private spheres even while attending in public.

According to Goffman (1959), as it also mentioned earlier people's presentation of self might differ depending on the audience's gender, age, facial expressions, and so on. This is particularly accurate in Iranian culture in which there is a wide range of different norms and social meanings enacted differently for men and women. Iran is a gendered

segregated society in which males and females are expected to present themselves differently.

In relation to the theoretical discussions above, it is important to clarify how principal issues such as *needs*, *strategies*, and *resistance* are interrelated with each other, both on Facebook and within the context of Iranian society. There are *needs* when one decides to use Facebook. Needs can range from *personal* to *community* and involve a variety of social, cultural, and political expectations. However, *needs* are not always compatible with one another, and sometimes are in conflict. In these types of situations, in order to fulfill conflicting *needs*, one might apply *strategies*. *Strategies* are useful as long as one tries to maintain two or more expectations, but when one prioritizes satisfying one *need*—for instance, the *personal* over the *community*—a form of *resistance* can appear. This *resistance* doesn't necessarily appear with the larger aim of transforming cultural and political restrictions, but rather can be simply for gaining one's own *personal autonomy*. Thus, *resistance* is closely related to the acts of fulfilling one's personal *needs* and striving for *autonomy*.

## Method

### Focus Group Interviews

The overall approach to the methodological perspective of this study is *symbolic interactionism* (Blumer, 1969).

The main method used in this study is focus group. After focus group interviews were done, the interview transcriptions were further analyzed using qualitative *thematic analysis*.

Focus groups, as Flick (2006) writes, “start from an interactionist point of view and want to show how an issue is constructed and changed in a group discussing the issue” (p. 197). It started from a critical point of view toward regular interviews in which the interviewees are “separated from all everyday relations during the interview” (Flick, 2006, p. 189). Focus groups aid “extending the scope of data collection . . . to create a situation of interaction that comes closer to everyday than the (often one-off) encounter of interviewer and interviewee” (Flick, 2006, p. 189). They “correspond to the way in which opinions are produced, expressed, and exchanged in everyday life” (Flick, 2006, p. 191) and the stress is “laid on the interactive aspect of data collection” (Flick, 2006, p. 197). Accordingly, focus group interviews aim to provide a social context similar to that of everyday life in which people's opinions are produced, expressed, and exchanged in relation to others. Interviewees are allowed to reflect, respond, and comment, not only on their own opinions and attitudes but also on those of other interviewees. Thus, focus groups appear to be a proper method for capturing the dynamic, interactive, and vibrant nature of self-presentation, as people's self-presentation is constantly constructed, negotiated, and even changed within the group and

in relation to others. Therefore, it should be analyzed in relation to others as it is presented and performed.

### Analytical Method: Thematic Analysis

The analytical method used for the focus group interviews' transcriptions is qualitative *thematic analysis* (Yin, 2003). This analytical method is based on a *pattern matching* procedure which starts with readings of the transcribed material over and over again and then classifying all informants' answers according to the questions posed. It aids the process of analysis with finding similar or different patterns in regard to the theoretical discussions in the empirical materials to construct a descriptive approach (Melián, 2012; Yin, 2003).

### Data Gathering Strategy and the Informants

The informants of this study were gathered through a *friendship network*. To recruit the informants, the researcher informed her own *friends* on Facebook (those who have a large number on their friend lists, that is, about 500 and more) about the study. Those “friends of friends” who accepted to be the informants of this study were then sent a friendship invitation on Facebook by the researcher and were recruited for the interviews in person in Tehran. After a 2-week period, 10 informants (five males and five females) accepted to be participants of this study and attend two focus group sessions during a 10-day period. The number of informants, considering the qualitative approaches of this study, as well as the illegality of using Facebook in Iran and it being a “cultural crime,” seemed appropriate.

Even though the strategy of *friendship network* was used to gain the informants' trusts, and they had been reminded of the interview the day before, five of the interviewees never attended on the day of the interviews. The study continued with six informants present. The absent informants were contacted by telephone the same day to explore the reasons for their absence. Two of them never answered their mobile phones. The remaining three provided different explanations that implied they were concerned about attending interviews about their Facebook use. One of them explained on the telephone that “well . . . You know . . . when signing my new job contract (in a bank), I was asked to sign a commitment letter beside that too, not to join Facebook . . . I signed the paper, while I was active on Facebook and I continued using it having a pseudonym . . . honestly, I got afraid of participating in the interviews, after I thought more about it . . . I am so sorry, I should have told you in advance . . . I don't want to risk losing my job after a long time [of unemployment]” (Female, age 28).

The result of this study was gathered through the use of focus group interviews that were conducted with six young Iranian Facebook users (remaining informants) in Tehran in late 2011.



The empirical material of the study includes the complete transcription of two session focus group interviews with six informants (including notes on their *perspective* and *point of view* about their own self-presentation as well as their reflection on each others'; Silverman, 2006). All six informants showed their profiles to the researcher on Facebook and the relevant information was considered during the interviews.

The informants all were between 18 and 25 years old. Three of the interviewees were male and three were female. They were again assured that they would remain anonymous. All of them were living in Tehran at the time of the interviews and claimed to use Facebook almost every day. All of the informants either had just started studying at university or had completed their education at the bachelor level.

The interviews were conducted twice with the same set of users. The order of questions was not followed strictly as planned, and the interviewees were given the chance to lead the interviews to a certain extent to grasp their main issues and concerns. Interviews were held in Persian and were conducted at the researcher's home in Tehran. Each interview lasted for about 60 min and they were recorded by a mobile phone's recording device and were transcribed immediately afterwards.

I introduced myself as a doctoral student and explained my doctoral project as well as the aim of these interviews. I assume that I was perceived as relatively neutral. The informants reported afterwards that they had had a pleasant session.

## Analysis

The interview analysis revealed that the informants' everyday self-presentational acts and experiences on Facebook appeared to be more important and negotiable than the political ones. Informants of the study themselves declared that *everyday issues* are what they are *engaged with* constantly, while political self-presentations through the use of links, pictures, and videos seem to be *short-lived* and limited to specific moments and events which are forgotten as quickly as they start.

A number of themes were identified through the discussions in the focus group interviews which can be categorized into *Strategies: New and old users and public/private distinctions* and *need for confirmation (Likes)*. These themes might not be specific only to Iranian Facebook users, as separating spheres between public and private might be seen elsewhere as well. It is common for people to want to have *control* over their self-presentation which is performed before others.

Analysis of the interviews in the context of Iran revealed that there is a large gender difference between how men and women in this study tended to present themselves as well as reflecting on each other's self-presentation. *Self-presentational strategy* was a theme which was heavily gendered and was connected to cultural factors such as *social control* and one's own as well as *family reputation*. Female

informants claimed to experience a tension between taking responsibility for their own or their *community/family needs* and expectations, as they were usually in contradiction.

*Strategies: New and Older Users and Public/Private Distinctions.* Duration of being on Facebook seemed to play an important role in how the informants tended to present themselves. There appeared to be a relatively significant difference in usage between newly joined Facebook users versus those users who had been using Facebook for 3 to 4 months or more. New users wanted to be seen and presented themselves quite openly. They easily shared their personal information and pictures, and declared their political and religious views on their profiles while placing political links and pictures in their statuses. These six Facebook users added people as friends even though they hardly knew them in real life. They were explicit when they described where they had been and with whom, what they had done recently, and tended to tag (Facebook Help Center, 2013) their friends and relatives in their albums and also be tagged in pictures. However, it seemed that after a while when their *friend lists* had become extensive (not only with close friends and relatives, but also with colleagues), they started to be more cautious in the way they shared their information. They thought that it may not be safe to present their views so openly. Therefore, they used different *strategies* for controlling what they shared, how they shared, as well as with whom. Some of these users presented strategies they had used to separate closer friends from their family members. In this way, they wanted to keep their *voice* heard by the right audience. One of the users said that,

In real life, I am used to considering the age, gender, level of respect, and intimacy when I talk to people, but on Facebook, it is difficult . . . I need to keep using strategies to make sure that my words don't reach the wrong audience . . . I also found out that it is becoming harder for me to update statuses if they are visible to everyone. (Female, age 21)

The informants mentioned that they use the Facebook privacy-control tools to control how they share dissimilar content to different audiences (*friends* on Facebook). This strategy however didn't appear to be so popular. They assumed that their information had leaked out, and their audiences realized that they were using strategies to hide some information from them. According to Zarghooni (2007) "a person who self-presents very differently from audience to audience may have difficulties to maintain . . . [favorite] impressions over a long time" (p. 10). This is particularly relevant here; one of the informants mentioned the use of privacy settings (which are applied differently to different audiences) as "disgraceful and tiresome," as the audiences may "discover [what you are doing] eventually" (Female, age 21).

Some other users mentioned that they use multiple accounts for different purposes and for addressing different audiences (e.g., separating family and friends). That was one

of their main concerns on a platform in which they were supposed to be presented *nominously* with their real names (Grasmuck et al., 2009). On the *nominous* platform of Facebook, users can be found easily by the members of their *social ties* (families and relatives). Using multiple accounts allows them to separate between closer and less close Friends and more importantly, they could draw a line between family and friends. The use of *private groups* and creating different accounts (*selves*) for diverse purposes and audiences were, so far, their most reliable strategies.

The informants also showed concerns about how extensive their *Friends lists* had become, to include family members and relatives with whom communication had become uncensored and *front stage*. This issue recalls two cultural aspects, which might not be specific only to Iran, but also relatively prominent in Iranian culture: *social* and *family control*. The matter of *reputation* and *control* makes people concerned about how society (their own *social ties*) evaluates them. The closer *social ties*, the more tensions, considerations, and controls should be applied. It is worth mentioning that controls, tensions, and considerations were gendered and addressing women.

As one of the informants mentioned,

I have some male friends with whom I keep in contact (on Facebook) as well. My boyfriend is also on Facebook who keeps writing to me and tagging me in pictures . . . this is while my relatives think that I have no boyfriend . . . Now they are on my friends lists because I couldn't reject their friendship requests . . . So you see, I need to use *strategies* to keep some information invisible to some people, otherwise it doesn't work. (Female, age 24)

She claimed (24 years old) that she couldn't reject the extended family friendship requests on Facebook as she could have been assumed to "be doing something improper, otherwise there was no reason [for her] not to accept their requests on Facebook." However, if she does accept, "they will find *something* to talk about." If her family and relatives realize that she is in contact with male friends, specifically having a boyfriend, it threatens not only her own but also her family *reputation*. According to her, "personal and family reputation for us are not two different things, but rather connected" (Female, age 24). Thus, analysis of the interviews in this study displayed a quite similar result to the one provided by Chiung-Wen et al. (2011) in their study. The informants in this study, similar to the Taiwanese Facebook users, were more concerned about how their family members and close relatives judge them and what *impression* they give to them, rather than to newly met people.

It is important to mention that *reputation*, according to the informants, seemed to be a gender issue and didn't seem to be as significant for the male informants. Male informants said that they are not concerned about it, and are not cautious about what other people might think about them, and more

importantly, there is no connection between their own and their family *reputation* (Moghadam, 2003, p. 123), though that was the case for women. Interviews showed that female informants experienced a *double pressure* and tension on Facebook in taking responsibility for their own *individual* as well as their *community needs* (Markham, 2004), because usually "these *needs* and expectations are in contradiction with one other" (Female, age 24). "Accepting or not accepting an insignificant friendship request on Facebook might raise an issue" (Female, age 21). Possibly, using strategies in self-presentation enables women to fulfill their own *needs*, being true to themselves as well as being responsible for their family *reputation* (Moghadam, 2003). However, as one of the other informants mentioned,

Using different strategies for controlling what we share on Facebook is exhausting and at the same time ironic . . . we are using Facebook to be separated from the limitations of our daily lives, but we take all of those limitations along [on Facebook]. (Female, age 21)

*Need for Confirmation (Like)*. The informants seemed to be concerned with receiving *like* from their *friends* on Facebook. It seemed that they were altering the way they presented themselves according to other people's tastes and approval. One of the male informants (22 years old) mentioned that "I don't update statuses which I know no one will *like*." The informants seemed to tend to upload pictures in which they looked perfect. This can also be interpreted in relation to *self-play* and people's effort in making the best *impression* of themselves before the social circle they are in contact with to receive approval.

Considering *double consciousness* for receiving approval by family, friends, and society in general was more of a concern for women than men, and women seemed to be more adept at that. The use of strategies for three of the informants seemed to be *automatic* (Gilroy, 1993, cited in Moores, 2000), while the other three found using *calculating manners* to be a challenging task, which was forced by the cultural tradition of the family and society in which they were living and using the platform. However, one might note that *double consciousness* in relation to one's self-presentation might not be specific only to Iranian society and can be seen elsewhere as well.

The informants' self-presentation on Facebook in relation to different *stages* seemed more complicated than the one presented by Goffman (1959) in everyday life. Self-presentation of the Facebook users in this study wasn't limited to separating only between the *front* and *back* stage, but also the *middle stage* in which they could experience the quality of both stages. The use of private groups by which they could go *backstage* and be with their own *team members* (Goffman, 1959) is one of the examples of using the *middle stage*. In these private groups, they could enjoy having a relatively *public sphere* and be in contact with those

they trust and with whom they experience less concern over how they present themselves and interact with one another.

Analysis of the interviews revealed that the informants use *strategies* to control what they share on Facebook and with whom. The use of Facebook for the informants wasn't *liberating* per se (from the cultural norms and codes in the society), because they needed to make sure they were not hurting the family *reputation* through their acts on Facebook.

According to one of the informants, "the use of Facebook for political acts gets limited to some specific time when political tensions are high, but it is temporarily, while everyday use of Facebook is constant and permanent" (Male, age 25). Accordingly, even though the use of Facebook for political acts was limited to some specific time periods, the use of strategies was constantly a method for *resistance*. For women, the use of strategies seemed to facilitate how they could play with the self they present, being fair to their own *needs* by using Facebook, while keeping cultural norms and codes in consideration.

Accordingly as mentioned earlier, *needs*, *strategies*, and *resistance* on Facebook are interrelated and should be understood within this context. *Strategies* are useful as long as one wants to fulfill contradictory *needs* (*personal* and *community*) at the same time. *Strategies* are not applied anymore when one stops trying to fulfill two or more contradictory *needs* and expectations, and instead prioritizes the *personal* over the *community* one, for instance. In this type of situation, a form of *resistance* appears which might not be necessarily aggressive and directed at changing cultural and political frameworks, but rather at gaining one's own *personal autonomy*.

## Final Words

The study's analysis of interviews with a limited number of young Iranian informants showed that *social meanings* and *norms* of self-presentation on Facebook are defined to a large degree in terms of gender. There appeared to be no specific definition of what is right and what is wrong to do on the platform in terms of self-presentation, but every act finds a specific meaning when gender of the users is considered. Gender played an important role in how informants presented themselves and interacted with one another on Facebook and even within the group discussion.

The analysis of interviews showed that social and everyday means of using Facebook seem to be more important, controversial, and debatable than the political ones. However, it depends on what one means by politics, and how one defines political acts on Facebook. If one means leading to direct political changes through the acts on Facebook, that might not happen. This is because in many ways, male informants at least appeared comfortable with maintaining the status quo, especially in terms of gender issues, *social control*, and women's responsibility for family *reputation* through one's acts on Facebook. However, if one defines

political acts in terms of any type of *resistance* toward the existing rules, codes, and guidelines, the informants are doing some sort of *resistance*. *Strategic self-presentation* was a form of *resistance* used to enable the users to get some sort of *control* through the medium of Facebook over their own self-presentation while dealing with existing expectations. However, it is worth noting that *resistance* was not shown particularly in relation to the Islamic Republic rules and norms, but rather to the existing norms of family *reputation* and gender issues within the socioculture situation of Iran. *Strategies* were helpful for the female informants to keep up with the norms and rules of *reputation*, while also fulfilling their own *needs*, for instance, wearing clothes according to their own preferences as well as using Facebook itself, despite it being illegal.

The informants' attitudes and self-presentational acts didn't seem directed toward any social or political movements, instead they sought "individual autonomy rather than political freedom" (Khosravi, 2008, p. 128). Their reflections and sentiments on their own as well as others' self-presentation within the group provided a refreshing contradiction to how both transnational and Iranian state media depict them and their lives. However, the lack of observation of any clear-cut political acts in this study could be challenged due to the self-selection of the informants. The possibility of having politically active informants has decreased in this study, as political activists might be reluctant to present their political actions within a group of semistrangers or even participate in these types of studies.

According to the informants, the use of Facebook for political acts seems to be limited to specific periods of time in which Facebook users may want to present their political views, but everyday, social and cultural reasons for using Facebook seem to be predominant and permanent. It is worth mentioning that the use of Facebook itself is considered illegal and is a form of *cultural crime* (Khosravi, 2003, p. 42). let alone direct political acts on it.

The primary aim of this study was to grasp how young Iranians reflect on their own self-presentation on Facebook. Interviews were initially planned to be conducted with 11 young Facebook users. Even though the data gathering strategy was based on a *friendship network* and a *mutual trust* between the informants and the researcher, and they were assured that they would remain anonymous, 5 informants who originally accepted didn't attend on the day of the interview; 2 of them didn't answer when contacted by telephone, 1 claimed that they were busy, and 2 said that they were concerned about attending the interview. The study nevertheless continued with 6 remaining informants in attendance.

The use of strategies appeared to be an important part of their self-presentation, especially for female informants. The strategies used varied from the use of privacy-control tools, through the use of private groups in which they could address particular audiences, to the use of different accounts for different purposes. The informants appeared to be adept at



performing differently while being on *stage* before different audiences simultaneously. The informants used different strategies for different audiences and knew how to play *the game*. However, this might not be the case only for Iranian Facebook users, as it can be practiced to varying degrees all over the world.

The analysis of focus group interviews and interaction between the informants within the context of Iranian society showed some themes to be important such as *reputation*, *social control*, and *gender* issues (Moghadam, 2003). Facebook, as a *anonymous* platform in which people are in contact with their already-made *social ties*, didn't seem to be as *liberating* from the existing norms and rules within society compared with older ways of using the Internet where people could enjoy being completely anonymous and experience different selves simultaneously. Facebook in this study showed that it is a *stage* on which to be observed but this stage becomes restricted with the involvement of close *social ties* in the context of social control within Iranian society. Accordingly, it seemed that it is no longer conceivable to draw clear lines between *back* and *front stage* concerning how people present themselves on Facebook, as one can play between different *stages* and go back and forth between them simultaneously. *Strategies* were therefore used to link different *stages* and give some sort of control to the informants over self-presentational *impressions*. The informants seemed to draw a clear line between the way they presented themselves before their family members/family relatives, friends, and newly met people. With family relatives, they were more concerned and cautious about how they presented themselves, while they felt more comfortable before their friends and newly met people. Accordingly, the closer the *social ties*, the more concern was experienced regarding how they are perceived and which types of *impressions* are made. *Strategies* used and informants' approaches toward them were very gendered, though. Women seemed to need to use *strategies* to be able to enjoy relative freedom: being fair to their own personal *need* to be connected through Facebook and at the same time taking responsibility for the family's *reputation need*. The use of *strategies* seemed both natural and *automatic*, and also *challenging* and *ironic*. *Challenging and ironic* because they weren't intentionally using Facebook to conform to the existing social norms within society, but were conforming indirectly.

Self-presentational claims were different in isolation, compared with when they were analyzed in relation to each other. Analysis of the profile information alone without considering people's reflections on their own as well as others' acts could be misleading, because what informants said about themselves seemed to be slightly different than how they reflected upon others' reflections, as well as how they expected others to present themselves. For instance, even though male informants claimed that they are *modern* and *open-minded*, their expectations from women and their self-presentation on Facebook were in line with the existing

traditional values of the *patriarchal* society in which different aspects of acts and experiences are biased based on gender and are expressed as *social control* under the shadow of family *reputation*. In other words, male informants' *front* and *backstage* seemed to be different. Thus, the traditional norms and meanings were reinforced by males through their acts and claims. *Facebook community meanings* and norms appeared to force them to appear *modern and open-minded*. However, the larger society's norms and social meanings seemed to be in contradiction with the platform's meanings and norms.

Self-presentation as a dynamic and interactive phenomenon, which is constantly *constructed socially* and in relation to others cannot be analyzed in a one-sided way without considering in which contexts it is performed. Therefore, it is important to use methods that keep track of both self-presentation as well as interaction, as they complete each other and each self-presentation is basically made to initiate an interaction.

Both male and female informants in this study were engaged in the process of reproducing the *social norms and meanings* of the Iranian society. However, that was slightly different for men and women. While male informants were reproducing the norms and codes of the society (such as *reputation*, *social control*, and *gender issues*) in a natural way, women were more forced to do that, due to having to take responsibility for their own as well as family *reputation*. However, in many ways, female informants appeared to be more *resisting* toward the contemporary norms and rules within the society compared with men.

The result of this qualitative study is about a very limited number of informants and their reflections on their own presentation of self on Facebook. It is not representative and cannot be generalized to all Iranian Facebook users, nor Iranian culture, codes, and norms. Instead, this study had an inductive approach, within the social context of focus groups to understanding self-presentation on Facebook and how it is *negotiated* within the sociocultural, political situation of the Iranian society in which they live and use Facebook.

The study's analysis confirmed that self-presentation is an interactive phenomenon and is *constantly constructed* in the society and in relation to others. However, a larger number of users may be needed to strengthen and pursue further the findings of the study. Other qualitative studies could include a wider range of people from different cities and sociocultural backgrounds. Other qualitative studies could explore for instance how one individual manages to fulfill one's own *personal needs* which are contradictory to family and community expectations and *needs*, while preserving the *reputation* being socially acceptable within the society.

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