

Cultural Identity and Self-Censorship in Social Media: A Qualitative Case Study

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Abstract : The evolution of communication through the Internet has influenced shaping and reshaping the self-presentation of social media users. Online communities both connect people and give voice to the voiceless allowing them to present themselves nationally and globally. People all around the world are experiencing censorship in different aspects of their life. Censorship can be externally imposed because of the political situations, or it can be self-imposed. Social media users choose the content they want to share and decide about the online audiences with whom they want to share this content. Most social media networks, such as Facebook, enable their users to be selective about the shared content and its availability to other people. However, sometimes instead of targeting a specific audience, users self-censor themselves or decide not to share various forms of information. These decisions are of particular importance in countries such as Iran where Internet is not the arena of free self-presentation and people are encouraged to stay away from political participation in the country and acting against the Islamic values. Facebook and some other social media tools are blocked in countries such as Iran. This project investigates the importance of social media in the life of Iranians to explore how they present themselves and construct their digital selves. The notion of cultural identity is applied in this research to explore the educational and informative role of social media in the identity formation and cultural representation of Facebook users. This study explores the self-censorship of Iranian adult Facebook users through their online self-representation and communication on the Internet. The data in this qualitative multiple case study have been collected through individual synchronous online interviews with the researcher's Facebook friends and through the analysis of the participants' Facebook profiles and activities over a period of six months. The data is analysed with an emphasis on the identity formation of participants through the recognition of the underlying themes. The exploration of online interviews is on the basis of participants' personal accounts of self-censorship and cultural understanding through using social media. The driven codes and themes have been categorised considering censorship and place of culture on representation of self. Participants were asked to explain their views about censorship and conservatism through using social media. They reported their thoughts about deciding which content to share on Facebook and which to self-censor and their reasons behind these decisions. The codes and themes have been categorised considering censorship and its role in representation of idealised self. The 'actual self' showed to be hidden by an individual for different reasons such as its influence on their social status, academic achievements and job opportunities. It is hoped that this research will have implications for education contexts in countries that are experiencing social media filtering by offering an increased understanding of the importance of online communities; which can provide an educational environment to talk and learn about social taboos and constructing adults' identity in virtual environment and through cultural self-presentation.

Keywords : cultural identity, identity formation, online communities, self-censorship

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