

Breaking Barriers: Arab Women and Social Media Activism

Roma Sheth '23 (Co-Authored by Madeline Merrill '23)

Abstract

This paper investigates the role of social media in facilitating activism, particularly among Arab women in Egypt, Tunisia, and Saudi Arabia. It builds upon prior studies that have examined social media usage during the Arab Spring uprisings, as well as research focused on female engagement on these platforms. Employing a qualitative methodology, this study analyzes various case studies and academic journals. Through a comprehensive literature review, the findings reveal that social media served as a valuable tool for Arab women in all three countries during the Arab Spring, enabling their participation in activism and advocating for change.

ARAB WOMEN & SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISM

Introduction

Arab Spring Background

On December 17th, 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi died, after setting himself on fire. Mohamed, a jobless Tunisian graduate, had been selling vegetables without a permit, leading to police confiscation of his cart and his subsequent act of self-immolation (Dewey et al, 2012). In the days that followed, his death, paired with the publication of U.S. criticisms against the Tunisian regime, sparked massive riots and protests across the country. Awareness of these events, captured and shared online, quickly spread to other Middle Eastern nations like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait (Dewey et al, 2012). By 2011, pro-democracy protests had overtaken the entire region, and the Arab Spring was in full swing.

With goals of cultural freedom and regime change, the Arab Spring would leave a lasting impact on the region. Presidents stepped down, parliaments were dissolved, and in some nations violence erupted. The Arab Spring outlined a desire for democratic governance, highlighting values like freedom of expression and assembly. While the long-term success of the movement is often debated—in large part due to the current instability in the Middle East and the resurgence of authoritarian governments—the 2011 events still highlighted the ability of mass protest to craft demands and apply pressure.

Perhaps the most salient development which grew out of the Arab Spring was the use of social media as a tool for activism. Sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube were employed to spread messages within national borders, but also on a global scale. Through these online platforms, news of protests and political happenings quickly traveled to foreign shores, settling into the morning headlines. Extensive organization and mobilization became possible, as protest details circulated online, and new widespread coalitions formed. Because of the

ARAB WOMEN & SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISM

expansion and focus placed on social media during the Arab Spring time period, marginalized groups also notably gained access to activism occurring and organized on social media.

Arab Women and Barriers to Activism

This research focuses specifically on one such group—Arab women. Throughout history, Arab women have faced enormous cultural barriers when it comes to participation in activism. Whether these take the form of government censorship, family values, or other societal pressures, such barriers are omnipresent and hard to overcome. A primary cultural barrier in certain Arab nations is the lack of social norms surrounding women’s participation in activities involving messages that are perceived as controversial. This form of speech is highly related to activism. Arab women who participate in activism are often judged or condemned for their actions. The act of women attending protests or other political events, for instance, frequently results in severe judgement and condemnation by religious leaders, political leaders, and even other women themselves. Before the social media uprising throughout the Arab world, this cultural factor has served as a significant barrier to participation in activism among Arab women.

This paper aims to explore how social media facilitates activism among Arab women, centering on the Arab Spring and overlaying certain modern contexts. The former proved that Arab women have the desire to engage in activism. While women took on many behind the scenes roles like organizing supply drop-offs and supporting demonstrations, thousands could also be seen protesting in the streets and leading rallying cries. In Egypt’s Tahrir Square, women routinely protested late into the night, accepting the risk of harassment and assault. Over the course of four days, 91 women were sexually assaulted (Human Rights Watch, 2013). In Bahrain, “women were among the first wave that descended on Pearl Square in the capital –

ARAB WOMEN & SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISM

some with their children – to demand change” (Rice et al, 2011). In Yemen, a 32-year-old woman named Tawakul Karman, became the face of revolution when she led university demonstrations against former President Ali Abdullah Saleh (Rice et al, 2011). Actions like these contributed to a wider trend of increased activism among Arab women, which this paper will argue was in part because of certain social media features.

In the Arab world, government-imposed barriers are also present for Arab women. In countries where the press is government-sponsored, and the line between fact and fiction regularly wavers, social media is a necessary resource to reach influential world powers. Its nebulous nature allows for exemption from the typical tactics of government news manipulation, and younger generations using the sites have repeatedly shown their unwillingness to be co-opted and controlled (Jelassi, 2018). Our focus nations—Egypt, Tunisia, and Saudi Arabia—fit this description of heavily censored press. The 2020 Reporters Without Borders’ World Press Freedom Index ranked Egypt and Saudi Arabia in the bottom 20 countries for freedom of press, with abuse scores of 68.88 and 66.37 percent respectively. Tunisia fared slightly better, ranking 72nd, with an abuse score of 29.45 percent, but was still categorized as a country to monitor. While these barriers to reporting and activism impact all genders, Arab women face additional adverse effects because of the presence of other barriers like cultural stigmas and a tendency to self-police (Guta & Karolak, 2015).

Research Question and Objectives

This research seeks to answer the question “How does social media facilitate activism among Arab women?” Throughout this paper, activism will be defined broadly as action taken to bring about political or social change. The means of activism encompass but are not limited to, social media activism, or activism conducted through the employment of social media sites. A

ARAB WOMEN & SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISM

main sub-question to this research is “What are the primary features of social media that facilitate activism among Arab women?” This inquiry expands on the primary research question to identify certain features of social media that boost Arab women’s participation in activism. There exist numerous advantageous features of social media, such as convenience, the element of anonymity, and networking opportunities. This research will gauge which general features of social media are most compelling for the purpose of activism.

This research hopes to meet several objectives to derive a thorough and comprehensive conclusion. A principal objective is to determine the main ways in which Arab women use social media to engage in activism. This question expands on the aforementioned objective by identifying different platforms and mediums through which Arab women engage in activism. There are several potential reasons that social media can be utilized for activism, such as education, organizing protests, spreading information, and many other positive benefits. This research will determine the predominant reasons that Arab women engage in activism. An additional objective is to discover the shortcomings of social media. While social media provides substantial value, it is critical to also comprehend what limitations exist to social media to evaluate the effectiveness of social media in facilitating activism from both perspectives.

This paper will briefly touch on a few other topics, including the use of social media among Arab women in comparison to their male counterparts. Although this research encompasses Arab women, considering ways in which the use of social media differs between men and women in the Arab world will provide more context to the employment and effectiveness of social media as it pertains to Arab women. Additionally, the findings seek to include references to the predominant platforms and methods in which Arab women utilize social media to engage in activism, and whether this is generalizable for women across the focus

ARAB WOMEN & SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISM

countries, or if it varies depending on social or domestic factors. Furthermore, this paper will begin to explore how social media among Arab women has brought about actionable change. This sub-objective is slightly beyond the scope of the research question, and it is possible that relevant data does not exist, since actionable change can take years to achieve, and Arab women's use of social media is rather recent.

Finally, by a preponderance of findings, this research hopes to build off scholarly articles of the past, in order to reflect the significant expansion of social media that has occurred in the most recent years. Social media is constantly expanding and evolving, and several prior research analyses that were conducted may not accurately portray the current reality of social media use in the Arab world. These findings seek to update any prior inconsistencies with recent data. The purpose of this research is to explore how social media is used as a tool for female involvement in activism, particularly among Arab women. If these findings of this research illustrate that social media has a significant positive effect on levels of activism among Arab women, they can serve as a basis and motive to work to provide other regions of the world access to technology, in order to further development on a global scale.

Methodology

To tackle these research questions and objectives, a complete qualitative approach will be employed. The primary research method is to conduct a literature review. Journals, case studies, and scholarly articles that pertain to social media and activism among Arab women, particularly as a result of the Arab Spring, will be thoroughly analyzed. This compilation of sources will allow an assessment of the collective evidence and findings of how social media facilitates activism among women in the Arab world. Major case studies on specific regions, including Egypt, Tunisia, and Saudi Arabia will be analyzed to narrow the findings down and to avoid

ARAB WOMEN & SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISM

broad generalizations of the entire Arab world. Supplemental evidence will also be gathered from nations like Kuwait. Case studies and other components of the literature review will be selected in order to meet a certain objective or aspect of this research. Each case study will encompass either one of the focus regions or the Arab world as a whole and serve as evidence that supports a specific key finding of this research.

To establish the most effective methodology for this topic, the literature review included an analysis of methodologies used in previous studies on the intersection of Arab women and activism. Understanding the approaches taken by past researchers can shed light on how to tackle new information-gathering. An examination of the methodology used in research by Hande Eslen-Ziya, a Norwegian professor of sociology at the University of Stavanger, and by the research team comprised of Hala Guta, a professor at Qatar University, and Magdalena Karolak of Prince Mohammad bin Fahd University in Saudi Arabia, proved insightful. Both papers centered around the emergence of social media as a site for action by Arab women. Eslen-Ziya, Hala, and Guta all conducted interviews with Arab women to gather human perspectives on identity, daily life, relationship with social media, and social activism. The women additionally conducted deep analyses of content posted online, periodic news articles, and other primary and secondary sources. Supplementing interview findings with a qualitative analysis of literature would have been a useful approach for this research, but was not feasible with time constraints. Instead, based on an exploration of successful methodologies used by other scholars, a qualitative approach and high-volume gathering of a variety of sources will be the best approach.

All of the aforementioned questions and objectives will be answered by evaluating and comparing the components of the literature review. Each article will initially be analyzed

ARAB WOMEN & SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISM

independently by determining both the key points and findings of each article, as well as how they are relevant to this particular research and which research objective they meet. Next, the components of the literature review will be analyzed collectively by identifying common themes and patterns between a large pool of articles and relating similar findings to each other.

Specifically, this research seeks to examine case studies identifying trends that highlight the most useful features of social media that facilitate activism among Arab women. The focus of this research is not the outcomes of the activism efforts profiled or whether certain groups highlighted in case studies were successful. Rather, this paper emphasizes characteristics of social media that encouraged participation in activism in some capacity, particularly among Arab women—a group that has historically been inactive in these efforts.

Initially, the data collected will help discover beneficial features and uses of social media for women within each focus country, then analyze whether or not these features are consistent throughout each country being studied, or whether they are region-specific. If it is found that Arab women in each of the focus countries utilize social media for the same primary purposes, this research will prove to be conclusive and hold high probative value. By determining trends between the different components of the literature review, the goal of this research is to be able to generalize a conclusion of how social media facilitates activism among Arab women, in the Arab Spring and beyond.

Suggestions for Further Study and Limitations

For further study on the topic of social media activism among Arab women, researchers could expand the region of focus. This research looks primarily at three nations, but compiling these findings with data from other Arab countries could help reach a conclusive generalization as to how social media facilitates activism. Another way to expand on this research is to conduct

ARAB WOMEN & SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISM

a study that compares either these focus nations, or the Arab region as a whole, to the rest of the global population in order to identify what elements of social media activism derived from this research are specific to the Arab region, and which are uniform on a global scale. Another comparative study idea is to contrast both the usage and purposes of social media between Arab men and women to identify which features of social media both Arab men and women benefit from, and which are specific to Arab women.

There exist several limitations this research faces, one of them being the possibility of confounding values. All three of the focus regions possess unique populations and institutions. Regime type, for example, was not explicitly addressed for each focus region, but could serve as a confounding variable to these findings, as there is a possibility that the type of government could affect the different ways in which social media activism is facilitated. Other possible confounding variables include the age and education level of Arab women; these were not accounted for in this research, but it is probable that both variables have a significant effect on which groups of Arab women are more likely to take advantage of social media and engage in activism.

Throughout the summer of 2020, interviews with Arab women activists were conducted to provide real-life examples as to how social media has facilitated activism in their lives. However, IRB approval was required to incorporate previously conducted interviews into this research. The process of obtaining IRB approval did not align with the timeline of this research, and therefore the interviews were unable to be utilized. The ability to include these interviews in this research would have truly enhanced these findings; the conclusions derived from the literature review could have been compared to the stories that Arab women described in these

ARAB WOMEN & SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISM

interviews, confirming and strengthening the identified trends of this research. Thus, the fact that these interviews could not be employed in this research represents a limitation to these findings.

Research Findings

The findings of this research illustrate the key features of social media that have effectively facilitated activism among Arab women. Through the qualitative approach and literature review, there exist three primary features of social media that have effectively facilitated activism: the feature of anonymity, the opportunity to communicate globally, and the ability to form communities which inherently opens the door for mobilization. All of these features of social media have proved successful in magnifying Arab women's engagement in activism and impact, in several of the outlined focus countries.

Finding 1: Anonymity

A principal finding derived from the literature review is that the feature of anonymity allowed by social media platforms has made the process of activism participation less costly and more accessible. According to Guta and Karolak, Arab women tend to engage in self-censorship. The researchers looked at Saudi women specifically, and found that because of the cultural concept that what a woman says reflects on her entire family, many women avoid controversial topics to adhere to social norms. Political affairs are often considered controversial for Arab women to engage in, so many women are unable to advocate for themselves and their rights. This truly acts as a barrier for Arab women to engage in activism and elicit social change.

Furthermore, in the Arab world, men believe women should not be permitted to use social media unaccompanied. Several male Islam leaders have concurred with this opinion. In 2004, two sheiks created a fatwa, an Islamic law, that forbids women from exploring the internet

ARAB WOMEN & SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISM

and social media without the accompaniment of a male (Stephan 2013). Both educated and uneducated Saudi men tend to agree with this fatwa, as they believe that the internet possesses many dangers and inappropriate content, and that exploring the internet on her own could destroy a woman's purity (Stephan 2013). There have also been multiple cases in which Arab men prevented their wives from utilizing the internet and the media without the presence of a mahram, or a male guardian (Stephan 2013). When women are able to remain anonymous online, they can engage in activism privately and reduce the risk of being shamed for using online platforms without being overseen by a male.

The anonymity feature has attracted new female users in the Middle East, allowing them to reap the benefits of engaging in social media activism without fear of repercussions. It serves as a solution to this tendency for Arab women to engage in self-censorship. For Arab women, remaining anonymous reduces the risk of being judged by others, and allows for an enhanced feeling of physical safety. Women can educate themselves, spread information, communicate with other women, and engage in other forms of activism all anonymously. They can still support certain movements and illicit actionable change without actually sharing personal information. One Saudi woman, interviewed by Guta and Karolak, expressed the sense of freedom she feels when operating anonymously online:

Of course, [using a nickname] gives more freedom because you can write more and express yourself more. You can post your opinions more clearly without caring about offending people. Honestly, [if I use a nickname] I wouldn't be thinking of my family or how it will affect them. (Guta & Karolak, 2015)

ARAB WOMEN & SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISM

A study conducted on women in Kuwait coincides with these findings. Kuwaiti women have struggled for decades, during the Arab Spring and in the following years, trying to gain a right to participate in the political decision-making process (AlSalem, 2016). There have been various actions that have been considered taboo for them to pursue. The anonymity of social media has proven to be one of the most beneficial elements in helping Kuwaiti women become key players in activism. This study found that “anonymity fosters online social inclusion because it allows people to self-select their identities for better impression management (AlSalem, 2016). 87 percent of participants in this study use some platform of social media, with 76.6 percent not using their real names and 61.3 percent opting to leave out self-identifying pictures. (AlSalem, 2016). This large majority that does not provide personal information on social media illustrates the power of anonymity that social media possesses. Overall, this study concluded that Kuwaiti women who are more anonymous online are more likely to engage in activism than those who are less anonymous (AlSalem, 2016). This study on Kuwaiti women elucidates the power of anonymity that social media holds among Arab women.

Finding 2: Global Reach

The online environment is characterized by the unique ability to reach virtually any location around the world. Whether a user is sitting on a remote beach or standing in the center of a bustling city, with an internet connection and access to a phone or computer, global communication is possible. Social media sites increase the ease with which these worldwide connections occur. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram allow users to scroll through posts originating from various countries, and reshare content they like. In recent years, these sites have taken on the new role of “informant.” Firsthand perspectives of newsworthy events can be recounted, and quickly reposted by users who view the information as important. The speed at

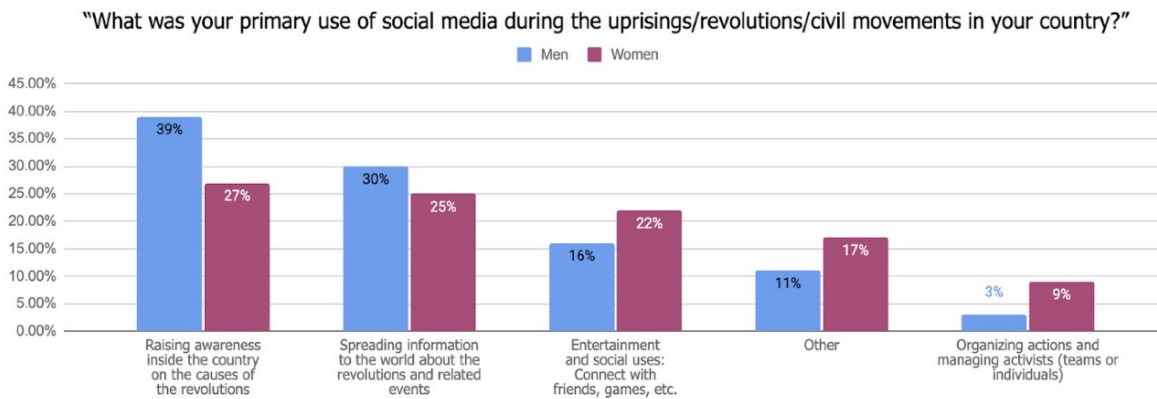
ARAB WOMEN & SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISM

which these interactions occur allows for information of a specific happening to spread globally within a matter of hours. Content can also be tracked by location, or grouped under hashtags for easy exploration (Turley & Fisher, 2018).

For Arab women, this global interconnectedness of social media has proved critical to overcoming both government and self-censorship. The main strategy of activists is often to reach the widest audience, in order to spread awareness of pressing political and social issues. This becomes especially challenging when authoritarian regimes are present, able, and willing to control access to information using mass media. In Tunisia, state-sponsored tactics have involved threats, bribes, coercion, and abuse (Jelassi, 2018). Online, the space for physical abuse diminishes. The 2011 Arab Social Media Report conducted by the Dubai School of Government confirmed this stipulation that awareness-raising was a major goal of Arab Spring activism. This report included multiple surveys, asking men and women in Egypt and Saudi Arabia a series of questions. In one instance, participants responded to “What was your primary use of social media during the uprisings/revolutions/civil movements in your country?” (Salem & Mourtada, 2011). The most prevalent response, chosen by 39 percent of men and 27 percent of women, was raising awareness on the causes of the revolutions inside the country. The second most prominent response, spreading information on the revolutions to the rest of the world, was selected by 30 percent of men and 25 percent of women, further confirming the tendency to use social media as an international awareness-raising tool.

ARAB WOMEN & SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISM

Figure 1: Social Media Use During the Arab Spring



Data collected by Salem & Mourtada, 2011. Visualization by Merrill and Sheth.

These forms of self-imposed and government-led censorship make it challenging for Arab women to reach their intended audiences and are barriers to engagement in typical protest activities. In Egypt’s Tahrir Square, for example, mass demonstrations attracted global attention, but also left many women in attendance fearing for their lives. As the sun went down each day, women who decided to stay in protest faced mob sexual assaults and other forms of harassment (Dean, 2013). In part because of safety concerns like these, many female activists in Egypt turned to non-movement resistance efforts like organizing *lagan shaabiyya*, neighborhood watch patrols. After President Mubarak withdrew police protection from Cairo neighborhoods, these community policing groups prevented violence, and used social media to mobilize activists on the local and international level (Newsom & Lengel, 2012). Because the Western press focused on more visible actions, social media was crucial for spreading the word of new ideas and happenings, especially those organized by women. The women of the Arab Spring revolution found a space of safe expression online, taking advantage of the “horizontal and non-hierarchical” structure of social media sites, to gain global visibility (Khamis & Vaughn, 2011). When faced with repressive regimes and cultural constraints, Arab women’s activism

ARAB WOMEN & SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISM

functioned “as a type of contained empowerment; localized power restricted by social norms” yet in a space dedicated to welcoming new voices, activism flourished (Newsom & Lengel, 2012).

Finding 3: Ability to Form Communities and Mobilize Others

In the midst of the Arab Spring and after the revolutions concluded, social media was filled with messages, thoughts, and demands that spread all around the world. The expansive nature of social media platforms increased exposure to activism among previously isolated Arab women and highlighted the possibility of creating change without facing culturally motivated backlash or physical harm. A regularly occurring phenomenon among Arab women was the online transition from passive citizens to activists (Gheytonchi & Moghadam, 2014). After creating social media accounts for personal reasons, unrelated to pushing for widespread political change, women were often exposed to new female voices. Seeing other Arab women successfully share their experiences and take on leadership roles in activist groups made social media’s efficacy as an advocacy tool apparent for non-activist women. This realization that the online environment could be used to vent frustrations and prompt progress led to new involvement among Arab women. “Accidental” female activists were another common occurrence at the time, seen in Iran, Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco (Gheytonchi & Moghadam, 2014). Drawn in by online communities, Arab women began to see that cyberspace was a safer environment for them to express feelings of frustration and explore previously taboo issues.

After extensive research, certain social media features have emerged as key activism motivators for Arab women. One prominent case study is Facebook groups—online sub-forums that can be easily joined and expanded. These groups united women under a common identity, served as a platform for productive conversations, and could be easily rebuilt if shut down by the

ARAB WOMEN & SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISM

government. Perhaps most importantly, Facebook groups showcased that women could be at the forefront of organizing efforts. A prime example is 30-year-old Esraa Abdel Fattah Ahmed Rashid, who co-founded the April 6 Strike Facebook group (Shapiro, 2009). During the Arab Spring, the group had 70,000 members, mostly made up of energized young men and women who found themselves participating in activism for the first time (Shapiro, 2009). Rashid, an Egyptian woman, worked during the day as a “training coordinator for a company that makes Islamic DVDs” and had no formal activism training. Although Rashid was later arrested and jailed for over two weeks, she remained a role model, demonstrating what Arab women in positions of power could achieve, even without an activism background. A ripple effect ensued as more women were pulled into the movements sprouting ferociously across the Middle East.

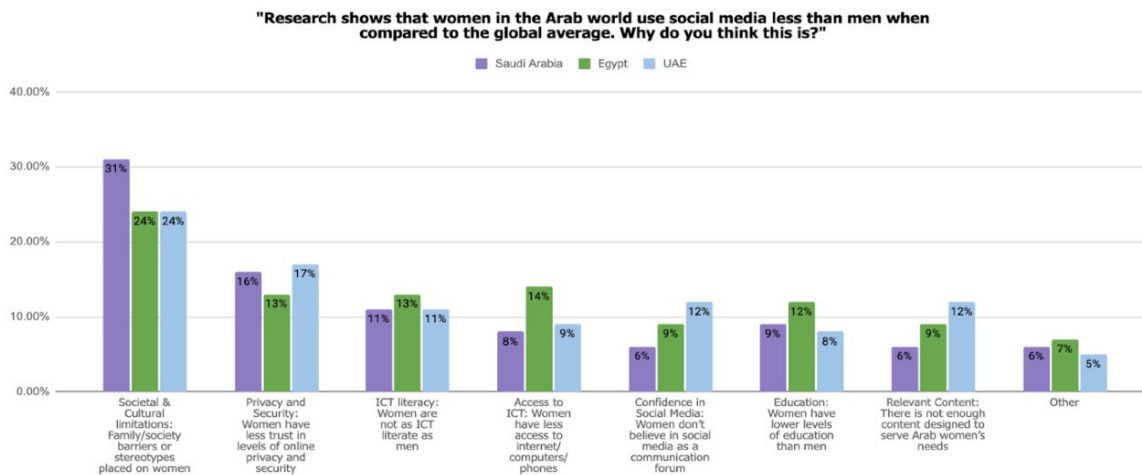
To further illustrate the efficacy of Facebook groups, Egyptian women harnessed their power to organize protests. Facebook groups allow for the dissemination of information to other women on a vast scale and in a small amount of time, which plays a significant role in the mobilization of Arab women. Female activists were able to spread information to tens of thousands of their Facebook followers and group participants, often including details on events like mass protests (Gunter and Elareshi, 2018). This social media medium resulted in the mobilization of thousands of women in civil protests in attempts to facilitate a change in government (Gunter and Elareshi, 2018). Facebook groups even allowed for Egyptian women to reach other women beyond national borders. This international mobilization exhibited that Arab women’s usage of social media was not solely to facilitate online activism, but also to build expansive networks to engage in in-person events.

Community-building through online group membership drew in new members to activist networks while simultaneously building a strong sense of trust among participating women.

ARAB WOMEN & SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISM

Engaging in the information community online came with risks—smaller and less costly ones than in-person acts of activism—but the possibility for disciplinary action remained real. For this reason, Arab women who chose to log on, share information, and help craft plans of action within the metaphorical walls of the digital realm developed strong two-way trust with other female community members (Gheytauchi & Moghadam, 2014, p. 14). The development of online relationships with other women through mechanisms like Facebook groups was crucial for Arab female activists, as many expressed a lack of trust in online privacy measures. This finding is supported by the Arab Social Media Report. Men and women in Egypt, Tunisia, and Saudi Arabia were asked the following question: “Research shows that women in the Arab world use social media less than men when compared to the global average. Why do you think this is?”

Figure 2: Why Women Use Social Media Less Than Men



Data collected by Salem & Mourtada, 2011. Visualization by Merrill and Sheth.

Scores were then totaled separately for surveyed women and men. Sixteen percent of men and 15 percent of women chose the response expressing concerns about levels of online privacy and security. A lack of trust, inability to easily connect with other activists from similar

ARAB WOMEN & SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISM

backgrounds and absence of encouragement to participate were prevalent issues hindering the number of Arab women who joined activist efforts. Online communities such as Facebook groups help to combat these challenges, slowly chipping away at the stigma of being an Arab woman in activism.

Finding 4: Shortcomings of Platforms

This paper has focused on the admirable facets of social media, or more precisely those features that, when used effectively, can prompt tangible and positive change. We have outlined social media safety features, explained how online sites allow for the circumnavigation of government-imposed barriers and highlighted the presence of female-led community spaces. Social media has much to offer, but it is important to briefly acknowledge the shortcomings of these far-reaching and well-connected sites. One significant issue is the potential for male dominance of spaces initially directed by women. Jessica Megarry, a professor at the University of Melbourne's School of Social and Political Sciences, finds that social media has brought women's activism into the public sphere, but that this sphere is male-owned and male-controlled (Megarry, 2017). Indirectly, the visibility of these women's efforts is directed by the underlying structure of male power, as all major social media sites were designed by men. Even the algorithm by which content is sorted and presented can make it challenging for women engaging in activism to reach their intended audiences, preserving patriarchal values in an underlying and rarely transparent manner. Additionally, with new visibility comes new potential for intervention and monitoring. With a constant flow of posts, women can be more easily tracked and backlash is possible (Megarry, 2017).

The negative effects of social media can be directly exemplified by examining cases of blackmail in Saudi Arabia. In 2014 alone, the Saudi Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and

ARAB WOMEN & SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISM

the Prevention of Vice was presented with 1,834 incidents of men blackmailing women, and 22 percent of these cases occurred through social networking sites (Al-Saggaf, 2017, p. 1).

Interviews with 16 Saudi women who regularly use Facebook revealed a large concern over online privacy, frequent worry over blackmailing, and a lack of comfort communicating with other genders through social media (Al-Saggaf, 2017, p. 13). When using social media platforms it is easy to forget the ease with which content can be re-shared and circulated. While the sites potentially solve one safety issue, allowing for anonymity, they create novel challenges. The structure of social media perfectly facilitates awareness-raising and interconnectedness, yet the flipside of the coin is the ability to leak personal information quickly and widely. These breaches are particularly harmful to Arab women, who often face strict cultural norms. After envisioning the possible impacts of private information being circulated without permission, one interviewee reflected: “It will be a serious disaster especially for girls, because we live in an Arabic society that has traditions and customs that are different from any other community” (Al-Saggaf, 2017, p. 11). The duality of social media features is that direction of impact depends fully on the user. On the two extremes of the spectrum, platforms can be used to objectively benefit large swaths of the population, sounding the global alarm to expose government malpractice, or to harm individuals dramatically, exposing personal and perhaps culturally-sensitive information. When praising the assets provided by these modern platforms, it is crucial to keep in mind the adverse effects that can arise as a result of usage.

Discussion

This paper highlighted the ways in which social media facilitated activism among Arab women, focusing on the Arab Spring while tying in recent topical literature. From this research, three main findings have emerged as beneficial social media features in the context of making

ARAB WOMEN & SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISM

activism more accessible to previously excluded groups. The first is that the online space allows for an element of anonymity. Arab women can escape cultural constraints, detaching from images of self and the barriers that may come along with personal visualizations. Second, social media allowed Arab women to reach global populations, especially in focus nations with heavily-censored press. Finally, research indicated that virtual spaces housed myriad activist community groups, some led by Arab women. These spaces also emphasized Arab women who took on significant movement roles, and inspired other Arab women to join in activism.

The principal question that this research encompassed was “How does social media facilitate activism among Arab women?” To approach this question, a literature review was conducted and several key objectives were analyzed. Primarily, this research sought to answer the following sub-question: “What are the main features of social media that facilitate activism among Arab women?” The key features that were identified include the aspect of anonymity, the ability social media provides for global reach, and the opportunity to form online communities. Each of these features proved to be prominent in all three focus regions.

Furthermore, this research uncovered the main ways in which Arab women utilize social media for activism. Facebook was the most prominent example during the Arab Spring time period, although Instagram and Twitter are also commonly used for engagement. Arab women’s primary uses of social media were to educate themselves, spread information, form communities and connections, and spread awareness of various problems. These findings were consistent across all three focus nations. Another objective was to discover the shortcomings of social media. A significant shortcoming is the male dominance of social media in the Arab world which undermines women’s efforts and may make women feel uncomfortable communicating with other genders on social media. A final objective was to discover how social media activism

ARAB WOMEN & SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISM

actually facilitated actionable change. Findings pointed to the formation of communities and reaching individuals beyond the Arab world as key successes; however, since social media is constantly expanding and evolving, this is an objective that could be further researched with more recent data to study whether Arab Spring demands, especially those presented by women, were met in the long-term in part because of certain social media features.

Since the Arab Spring much has changed in our focus countries of Egypt, Tunisia, and Saudi Arabia. Social media-wise, usage has expanded dramatically. In 2019, nine out of every 10 young people in the Middle East used at least one form of social media per day, and many used multiple regularly (Mulcahey, 2020). This regional trend was also observable in individual countries. Egypt had 10.73 million Facebook users in June of 2012 as the Arab Spring was underway (Statista, 2012). In 2020, that number climbed to 42 million, for an increase of over 30 million users (Kemp, 2020). Saudi Arabia and Tunisia further cemented this growth in the same time frame, expanding from 5.15 million Facebook users to 15.11 million, and 2.59 million Facebook users to 7.42 million respectively (Statista, 2012). The expansion of social media has drastically amplified the findings presented in this research. This spike in Middle Eastern social media usage translates to a magnified capacity for global communication and community-building, which may not have been as observable in research published directly after the conclusion of the Arab Spring in December of 2012.

Political and social conditions have also evolved. In Egypt, authoritarian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi has willfully ignored human rights abuses. In 2019 he additionally supported the passage of a series of amendments consolidating authoritarian rule, expanding the power of the military to influence political life, and threatening the independence of the judiciary (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Saudi Arabia has faced similar struggles, entering into military conflict

ARAB WOMEN & SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISM

with neighboring countries like Yemen (Moghadam, 2017). With the expansion of the Sunni-Shia divide, tensions worsened between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran, exemplified by Saudi Arabia's revamped efforts to contain regional Iranian power (Woolf et al, 2016). Contrastingly, in Tunisia, Arab Spring outcomes have been more positive. The creation of a new Tunisian constitution in 2014 expanded rights, both social and political, and came with a host of personal freedoms. Women gained prominence through this new document partially because of the work of several feminist organizations. One Tunisian constitutional article even outlined that "the state is responsible for actions to end violence against women" showing notable progress (Moghadam, 2017).

One of the initial goals of this research was to update previous findings to account for the modernization and expansion of social media reflected in the past few years. Several of the literature review components date back to the era of the Arab Spring, which does not reflect the recent enlargement of social media. On a global scale, as each year passes, more individuals join social media sites. Policies, political stances, and technology have all evolved since the time period of the Arab Spring. Online activism methods used by Arab women have shifted within the past few years, however, there is no significant recent data that illustrates these changes. The findings outlined in this research apply to modern realities, especially since the scope of social media has expanded substantially along with Arab women's access and use of social media. It is important to be conscious of current realities such as changing technology and politics when considering the findings of this research.

ARAB WOMEN & SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISM

References

- Al-Saggaf, Y. (2016). An Exploratory Study of Attitudes Towards Privacy in Social Media and the Threat of Blackmail: The Views of a Group of Saudi Women. *The Electronic Journal of Information Systems in Developing Countries*, 75(1), 1-16. Retrieved November 18, 2020, from <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1681-4835.2016.tb00549.x>
- Amos, D. (2011, January 26). *Social Media Revolution Hits Saudi Arabia*. NPR. Retrieved November 8, 2020, from <https://www.npr.org/2011/01/26/133212623/social-media-revolution-hits-saudi-arabia>
- Dewey, T., Kaden, J., Marks, M., Matsushima, S., & Zhu, B. (2012). The Impact of Social Media on Social Unrest in the Arab Spring. *Stanford Public Policy Program*. Retrieved October 26, 2020, from <https://publicpolicy.stanford.edu/publications/impact-social-media-social-unrest-arab-spring>
- Human Rights Watch. (2013, July 3). *Egypt: Epidemic of Sexual Violence*. Retrieved November 8, 2020, from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/07/03/egypt-epidemic-sexual-violence>
- Human Rights Watch. (2020, January 14). *World Report 2020: Rights Trends in Egypt*. Retrieved November 8, 2020, from <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/egypt>
- Gheyntanchi, E., & Moghadam, V. (2014). Women, Social Protests, and The New Media Activism in the Middle East and North Africa. *International Review of Modern Sociology*, 40(1), 1–26. Retrieved October 13, 2020.
- Gunter, B., Elareshi, M., Al-Jaber, K., & AlSalem, F. (2016). Women and Online Political

ARAB WOMEN & SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISM

- Participation in Kuwait. *Social media in the Arab world: communication and public opinion in the Gulf states*, 135–155. Retrieved November 3, 2020.
- Guta, H., & Karolak, M. (2015). Veiling and blogging: Social media as sites of identity negotiation and expression among Saudi women. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 16, 115–127. Retrieved October 25, 2020.
- Issawi, F. E., Cavatorta, F., & Farmanfarmanian, R. (2020). Youth Activism and the Politics of 'Mediapreneurship': The Effects of Political Efficacy and Empowerment on Mediated Norm Conveyance in Tunisia and Morocco. *The Unfinished Arab Spring: Micro-Dynamics of Revolts Between Change and Continuity*, 216–240. Retrieved November 8, 2020.
- Jelassi, S. (2018). Social Media, Social Learning Systems, and the Women's Movement in Tunisia After the Jasmine Revolution. *Arab Women's Activism and Socio-Political Transformation: Unfinished Gendered Revolutions*. Retrieved October 25, 2020, from https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-60735-1_9
- Kemp, S. (2020, February 17). *Digital 2020: Egypt*. DataReportal. Retrieved November 8, 2020, from <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-egypt>
- Moghadam, V. (2017). Explaining divergent outcomes of the Arab Spring: the significance of gender and women's mobilizations. *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, 6(4), 666-681. Retrieved November 10, 2020, from <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2016.1256824>
- Mulcahey, T. (2020, February 19). *5 social media trends in the Middle East in 2019*. International Journalists' Network. Retrieved November 10, 2020, from <https://ijnet.org/en/story/5-social-media-trends-middle-east-2019>

ARAB WOMEN & SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISM

- Newsom, V., & Lenge, L. (2012). Arab Women, Social Media, and the Arab Spring: Applying the Framework of Digital Reflexivity to Analyze Gender and Online Activism. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 13, 31–45. Retrieved November 15, 2020.
- Rice, X., Marsh, K., Finn, T., Sherwood, H., Chrisafis, A., & Booth, R. (2011, April 22). *Women have emerged as key players in the Arab spring*. The Guardian. Retrieved October 25, 2020, from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/apr/22/women-arab-spring>
- Salem, F., & Mourtada, R. (2011). The Role of Social Media in Arab Women's Empowerment. *Arab Social Media Report*, 1(3), 1-26. Retrieved November 5, 2020.
- Shapiro, S. (2009, January 22). *Revolution, Facebook-Style*. The New York Times. Retrieved November 12, 2020, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/25/magazine/25bloggers-t.html>
- Statista. (2012, August 08). *Number of Facebook users in MENA region June 2012*. Retrieved November 5, 2020, from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/238565/number-of-facebook-users-in-mena-region/>
- Stephan, R. (2013). Creating Solidarity in Cyberspace: The Case of Arab Women's Solidarity Association United. *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 9(1), 81–109. Retrieved October 13, 2020.
- Wolf, C., Leveille, D., & Jaafari, S. (2016, January 4). *Iran and Saudi Arabia ratchet up long-simmering tensions over religious schism*. Public Radio International. Retrieved November 12, 2020, from <https://www.pri.org/stories/2016-01-04/iran-and-saudi-arabia-ratchet-long-simmering-tensions-over-religious-schism>