Ethical Considerations for Using Social Media: "Is it Okay to Share?"

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Abstract

Digital media and its technologies facilitated for young people to participate in a wide range of activities including creation and collaboration of engaging content in various ways on social media. In the light of the recent events in Egypt, digital media represented in social media, such as Facebook, played a vital role in creating and shaping public opinion and responses of its users, especially young people, to various societal topics and situations. However, there are no official rules neither ethical considerations that regulate and manage creation and contribution of content on social media as a free space, but merely unspoken basis. Those dynamic participations on social media raised an important ethical question, which is: "what is considered to be appropriate to post or share and what is not?" to ensure safe and equal participation for all the citizens. The paper is a qualitative research based on systematic reviews to draw conclusions and answer the research questions. The major finding for the study that the Ethical considerations for creating, participating and sharing content on social media are debatable due to the lack of definitive norms because of still experiencing how social and digital media work, the rapid exchange of information and ability of being anonymous.

Introduction

New media with all the social media platforms had taken over the young generations' time, as they participate in various activities including blogging, vlogging, gaming, social networking, instant messaging, downloading different content and uploading their own creations and sharing them with other people.

Specifically, social media like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, Snapchat, etc., enable its users to play multiple roles and serve multiple purposes that differ from the classic communication process model. They are their own publicists and do not depend on the support of an editor to make their content publicly available (Kvalens, 2020). Also, ones of the prominent thrills of social media use include the rapid exchange of ideas, the impulsive posting of content and the great possibility of instantly going viral.

They have become one of the daily routines of most of the people. In February 2019, there were over than 3.484 billion social media users, according to Smart Insights' reports, especially on Facebook, as it becomes one of the most used social media websites. New media generally and social media specifically can hold a lot of opportunities as well as risks especially to the younger generations especially that they happen in a fast rhythm. This fast rhythm and rapid exchange of information creates ethical problems and challenges that may be not new in its nature, but they go beyond those addressed in traditional media ethics (Kieran, 2002). Therefore, researches have encountered the ethical part in social media platforms, because traditional media ethics fail to fully cover neither address the scope of newly arose ethical issues that resulted under these radically changed communication conditions (Kvalens, 2020).

The social media have ushered in a new unlimited set of boundaries (Gardner 2007b). Frontiers and boundaries are open spaces: they lack comprehensive and well-enforced rules and regulations, which hold huge promises and risks. Nevertheless, on the other hand the social media permit and encourage the culture of participation. Many questions should be asked specifically regard what content to be uploaded and shared with others and what are the users' boundaries on one hand, and how equal participation and freedom of expression on social media can be guaranteed on the other one. From here, the ethical considerations and dilemmas emerge in posting or sharing over social media platforms.

Research Problem

Social media have removed many frontiers and boundaries that allowed the freedom of expressing and sharing with other people. However, many ethical considerations and dilemmas have been raised as a result on these virtual

platforms.

These ethical considerations and dilemmas include invasion of privacy, cyberbullying, sexual assault, harassment and rape disclosure, dishonesty and distortion, duty of care, and finally boundaries of youth participation and engaging with new digital media generally and social media specifically.

Moreover, there is no official rules neither ethical considerations that regulate and manage creation and contribution of content on social media as a free space, but merely unspoken basis.

Hence the research problem could be formulated as:

Discussing ethical considerations and dilemmas on social media as a result of participation and engagement of social media users, especially the youth, and defining rules and regulations to ensure safe and equal participation for all the citizens.

Research Objectives

• Discussing the most common ethical considerations and dilemmas on social media.

• Defining the rules and regulations to ensure safe and equal participation for all the citizens on social media as cautious actions to prevent their harms.

Research Questions

Antman (1992) & Oxman (1993) stated that systematic reviews as attempts to collate all empirical evidence that fit pre-specified eligibility criteria in order to answer a specific research question. Systematic review is used to provide reliable and unbiased findings from which conclusions can be drawn (as cited in Higgins et al., 2011). Hence, the researchers decided that this paper would rely on answering specific research questions based on the findings of previous related empirical researches that have been done in the domains of the research paper, which is the ethical consideration of using social media. Consequently, no specific theory would be relied on in this paper. The research questions are:

1. How youth are redefining participation as they engage with the digital generally and social media specifically?

2. What are the ethical dilemmas that should be considered by young social media users and their criticalities because of their participation and engagement?

3. What are the rules and regulations to ensure equal and safe participation for young users on social media and avoid these ethical considerations and dilemmas?

Methodology

This paper uses systematic review as a qualitative research method. Systematic review defined by The Cochrane Collaboration (2006) in Ham-Baloyi and Portia Jordan (2015) as "a review of a clearly formulated question that uses systematic and explicit methods to identify, select, and critically appraise relevant research, and to collect and analyze data from the studies that are included in the review." (p.122).

Systematic review was employed to answer specific questions on the ethical dilemmas of social media to give detailed and in-depth information about concepts, behaviors and interventions (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006), therefore this study is not depending on theoretical framework to as it depends on previous studies with different methodologies and different theoretical framework.

Results and Findings

1. First Question: Redefining Participation & Engagement:

Jenkins et al. (2006) defined participatory culture as "a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship" (p.3).

- **First: Participation in Digital & Social Media:**

James (2009) stated that participation focuses on the roles and responsibilities of the individual inside the society, and the world. Participation also takes various forms, like communication, creation, sharing, and use of knowledge and information and in different fields (politics, economic, and social issues).

Despite that the offline participation requires real-time and physical presence, the social media may be contributing to a renewed voluntary association model (Gardner 2007b), where the role of the participant is available to anyone with consistent access to all technologies that make up the social media and to the skills either technical or social to navigate them. Another distinctive feature of social media that contributes in the idea of participation is the ability to allow online content to be created, modified and shared by the users.

Therefore, participation is not limited to any specific credentials. In contrast, online spaces as represented in social media provide chances and opportunities to proceed beyond consumption and reaction to the proactive creation of content, including audio, video and journalism. (Floridi and Sanders 2005; Jenkins 2006a).

Participation can include neutral creations as well as principled ones. Other activities that are means of engagement and cyber-citizenship can be motivated by civic purposes, like promoting a cause, sharing information ,

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encouraging deliberation and problem solving (James, 2009).

- **Second : Benefits and Promises of Online Participation:**

Benefits of online participation through social media may come to the individual in the form of access, skills acquisition, sense of empowerment or efficacy, and exposure to different viewpoints, or the online communities through diversity of membership and sharing of information, and to society through citizen journalism, civic engagement, and democratic participation (James, 2009).

The openness of the new digital media generally provides young people with different opportunities to empower participants' roles, like: leadership, mentoring, and educating. It also can build other key skills, a sense of efficacy, in addition to interactivity with different participants through online means, which provides exposure to a wide range of ideas, opinions, and perspectives than exist in the offline form of participation (James, 2009).

All citizens can contribute to the creation and distribution of knowledge through social media, which led to the creation of civic participation and engagement that affect the public opinion that focuses on issues that are recent and important to the users comparing to the previously set up agenda in traditional media.

Bennett (2007) had stated that online participation in new media assembles young people to social and political action. According to Pettingill (2007), social media may emerge a new model of civic engagement. Jenkins (2006a) suggested that participatory cultures are powerful as they can help young persons to take actions and make difference. Therefore, participation can lead to an increased sense of efficacy, which is very important for social and political engagement (Jenkins 2006a, 2006b).

Previous studies on the role of Facebook in the political activities found that online engagement has a positive impact on the political participation (Jung & Zuniga, 2011; Vitak, Smock, Ellison & Lampe, 2011). Jung et al. (2011) stressed in their research that online political comments and posts have a positive relationship with offline political participation.

- **Third: Perils and Risks of Online Participation:**

The social media also hold a number of ethical risks. James (2009) mentioned that the access to the social media could be very easy and available for most of users; however, some of them, especially younger generations, do not have consistent social guidance to direct their use or participation on these platforms. Therefore, social media can be viewed as intimidating rather than engaging, and empowering; and participation is the now culminating ethical issue, such as identity, privacy, ownership, authorship, and credibility.

Sunstein (2007) stated that individuals might overcommit to certain communities and do not expose themselves to different communities with diverse perspectives. Hence, they might personalize their consumption of information and knowledge to be exposed only to their preferred news sources, which lead to social isolation and polarized agendas.

Result of a survey conducted in England revealed that one-third of teens believe that the information provided by the search engine is reliable and they do not fact-check their online sources (Bartlett & Miller, 2011). Such finding could be implied also on the possibility of these young users to believe what they also encounter on social media without considering fact checking. Hence, they might build their purposes and arguments of participation on social media on false information that lead to questionable ethical considerations.

2. Second Question: Ethical Considerations and Dilemmas and Their Criticalities:

The openness, rapid exchange of information, anonymity of new digital and social media platforms has facilitated participation, exposure and engagement for their user. However, they have also resulted in many disadvantages that can be ethically questioned and investigated, such as cyberbullying, online hate speech, other forms of misconduct, which can be encouraged by what is considered advantageous features. Khan (2015) mentioned that these ethical dilemmas and considerations on social media are escalating and growing in number. These ethical challenges fall under the categories of personal and professional. However, in this paper, the focus is on the personal ethical challenges and problems that can be created or be faced by users during their time on social media as given below.

- **First: Invasion of privacy:**

Moore (2008) and Turculet (2014) defined privacy in their papers from two different perspectives. First perspective is defining privacy from a positive point of view, as the individual's control over his/her own privacy circles, in the private space in the real world, personal integrity, social interaction and personal data protection. Second perspective is defining privacy from a negative point of view, as the highly limiting and restricting governments, companies and other factors to interfere in person's private data.

The rapid development of technology led to new definitions of privacy especially in the digital media. One of those definitions is 'Information Privacy', which refers to the control that one person has over his/her private data, thoughts and behavior while using the internet (Moore, 2008).

Actions that violate the concept or definitions of online privacy are

considered unethical practices that in some cases in some countries violate the law too. Khan (2015) defined these actions as any non-permissive approach taken to get any somewhat personal or any other kind of information about an individual that affects him harmfully in any sense.

Surprisingly, social media users are aware of such targeting strategy based on their personal data and activities on social media, and their concerns about their privacy have increased significantly through the recent years.

According to Rainie (2018), a study conducted by Pew Research Center in 2014 found that 91% of Americans "agree" or "strongly agree" that people have lost control over how personal information is collected and used by all kinds of entities. In addition, some 80% of social media users said they were concerned about accessing the data they share on social media platforms, and 64% said the government should do more to regulate access to their data, and who is benefiting from their participation.

Sometimes incidents of breaching private information on social media take dangerous turns that go beyond a person hacking a private account or an advertising firm analyzing online behavior to sell, but they reachinterfering in national security such as happened at the 2016 US Elections. According to School of Professional Advancement at Tulane University, a Russian firm has been accused of exploiting the private information of over 50 million American Facebook users to influence the results of 2016 American presidential elections through directing and manipulating the participation of those users on Facebook.

In the article 'Key Social Media Privacy Issues for 2020' of University of Tulane, it is arguable that social media platforms rise many ethical considerations through collecting and storing huge amount of personal data from its users and benefiting from their online participation with limited governmental oversight or regulations to serve agendas.

- **Second: Cyber-bullying:**

The Human Rights Council in the United Nations (2016) defined cyberbullying as 'an aggressive, intentional act carried out by an individual or a group using electronic forms of contact against a victim who cannot easily defend himself or herself. It is typically carried out repeatedly and over time, and is often characterized by an imbalance of power." (p.12).

Cyberbullying could happen by a single act online to a social media user in form of participation, yet it can be observed and disseminated by a large number of other social media users under the same concept too. Hence, the severity of this action and its toll on the victim when he/she experiences or re-experiences is still difficult to assess.

The rate of cyberbullying as an unethical action on social media has rapidly increased on social media. According to Patchin (2019), it has been increased by approximately 18% from May 2007 to March 2019 among middle and high school students in USA, indicating that it has been a growing negative trend recently.

Another important dimension of cyberbullying as an ethical dilemma is the unawareness of the victims about what they are facing or exposed to, thus their inability to take an action supported legally or ethically. Unawareness also could extend the offender who thinks what he/she is doing is a form of participation and opinion expression rather than a violation.

In Egypt, cyberbullying is one of the most prominent ethical dilemmas that is faced by Egyptian youth specifically. According to a study by Arafa and Senosy (2017) on the students of University of Beni-Suef, approximately 48% of the study sample reported being subjected to cyberbullying on social media. The respondents were exposed to harassment and flaming as cyberbullying on their social media accounts; and they responded to these actions through anger, hatred and sorrow.

- **Third: Sexual Assaults, Harassment, and Rape Disclosure:**

Sexual assaults, harassments and are rape defined differently from country to another, however, according to Burt (1980), society's attitude and attributions determine eventually how these cases are labeled and perceived.

This ambiguity of definitions and labeling has pushed victims of rape, sexual harassment and assaults to the social media, as platforms to speak up, tell their stories, call out their victimizers and seek justice and healing through their participation on social media. Hence, digital and social media are championed as strong public agitation tool against sexual assaults, harassments and rape incidents.

Awobamise et al. (2019) mentioned that while those victims get a lot of support on social media, yet they are still being strongly blamed, which might discourage other victims from opening up to share their stories on social media to be empowered to seek justice for their cases.

Participation on social media through hashtags plays a vital role in cases of sexual assaults, harassment and rape discourses. One of the most prominent hashtags in this area is #MeToo that has kicked off in 2017 with a tweet from a Hollywood-actress, which has folded years of sexually assaulted and harassed women in the entertainment industry in USA. According to Juneau (2020), several hashtags have followed #MeToo such as # WhyIStayed, #BeenRapedNeverReported and #IStandWithHer, which aimed to support victims to speak up about their traumatic incidents and participate on social

media through them, seek justice by calling out perpetrators, and warn others, especially women, about them.

#MeToo has reached also Egypt in a short time after going viral worldwide in 2017. El Saed (2019) mentioned the hashtag has helped the NGOs, Women National Council, and officials in spotting sexual harassment cases that aggravate in national and religious holidays in Egypt. In addition, an Egyptian hashtag has derived from this famous hashtag, which is امسك_متحرش# based on the participation of Egyptian women through sharing their stories and incidents. The participation under this topic has evolved in many forms in Egypt. Recently, according to Egyptian Streets (2020), in July 2020, an Instagram account called Assault Police appeared calling out Egyptian perpetrators, supporting victims and pushing the accusation to be lawfully filled in many famous cases such as case of Ahmed Bassam Zaki and case of Menna Abdelaziz's rapists.

This momentum from the disclosure of victims about their cases locally and internationally emanates many ethical dilemmas. On one hand, victims have the right to participate, express their thoughts and share their stories on social media as their only sanctuary to seek justice. Kulkarni (2020) stated that many victims avoid reporting their cases to the police or an internal legal organization out of fear or mistrust in the system, in addition to sometimes lack of financial resources and legal awareness of the reporting procedures.

In addition, anonymity as an option encourages victims to speak up and share their stories about sexual assaults, harassments and rapes to avoid negative stigma, online bashing and harming their reputations, which happen in real-life participation. However, anonymity of the accusations faces backlashes by other social media users, especially in high misogynist societies, where these accusations are labeled as false allegations (Awobamise et al., 2019; Juneau, 2020). Hence, an ethical question rises here about the victim's right to open up, call out perpetrators and share their stories to warn the others and seek justice.

On the other hand, victims face negative stigmas on social media that they are trying to avoid on reality by labeling them as "cry rape" or falsely accusing innocent individuals, especially that these cases usually lack of witnesses and physical evidence. They face great wave of suspicious questioning and doubts that equal the gained support, that might result in keeping other victims from opening up (Juneau, 2020; Online News Association, 2020). Hence, the ethical question here is about how victims could have guarantees or be supported to participate and tell their stories without facing backlashes and stigmas or defamation lawsuits that could be designed to prevent victims from speaking out. Negative backlashes against stories of victims on social media usually happens when the perpetrators in a position of prestige

and/or respectful in their own society (Awobamise et al., 2019; Juneau, 2020; Kulkani, 2020).

- **Fourth: Dishonesty and Distortion:**

Relationships between human beings are fundamentally created based on the concept of trust. According to Turculeṭ (2014), trust is an ethical need in order for a community to exist, even on real-virtual dichotomous space like social media platforms. Moreover, trust also depends on the context, and in the case of social media platforms, it depends on what context the users provide online as a form of participation. The given context by a user builds trust when it becomes a pattern of online behavior (Wickert, 2005).

However, social media users have the opportunity to provide false information under the umbrella of anonymity as an option facilitated by those platforms. They also can be deceitful as defined by Buller & Burgoon (1996) through intentionally relaying messages to elicit an inaccurate belief through complete fabrication of information to concealment, partial truths, and vagueness.

Consequently, other social media users can be exposed to false information consistently that it could provide a pattern to be assumed true or not doubtful such as fake news. Hence, deception occurs because of dishonesty and distortion, which results in taking advantage of those exposed social media users and hurt them in many different possible ways.

In addition, bot accounts fall under dishonesty and distortion, which are social media accounts run by computers rather than actual/real persons. Recently, bot accounts are used by many parties on social media to facilitate certain participatory tasks that serve their agendas. Not all of the agendas beyond creating bot accounts are purposively harmful; as some of them serves commercial social accounts as replying to inquiries. However, Salge and Berente (2017) mentioned that many problems have been reported against these bot accounts due to what considered their bad behavior. This behavior included disseminating spam and fake news to limiting free speech. Therefore, the notion of creating and using bot accounts raises many ethical questions, starting from being dishonest due to creations of social media accounts and imposing as real persons to participate, and ending with creating distortion through disseminating false information.

- **Fifth: Recruitment Practices:**

Recently, recruiters started to ask applicants to provide their personal social media accounts as a part from the filling application process. According to an article by Ethikos, a survey in 2011 that included 800 recruiters and

human resource professionals in Kansas State found that 64% request two or more social networks as part of their assessment practices when recruiting employees. Moreover, there are also specialist organizations that provide social media screening services for the employers as step to assess their validity to get the job based on their participation on social media.

This new and started to be increasingly common practice raises a very important question whether this practice is considered ethical or not due to the right to privacy for the applicants and fairness in selection. On the other hand, social media accounts are considered to great extent private spheres for the users where they share their personal lives, thoughts and activities.

- **Sixth: Duty of Care:**

Boundaries between personal and work life on social media is to great extent blurry. Users tend to express their opinions and experiences on their social media accounts about many different topics, including their work. However, expression of opinions and experiences might harm an organization reputation when they are negative. This situation falls under the term 'Duty of Care'.

According to Khan (2015), this situation raises an ethical dilemma where it is unclear the borderlines of ethical violations vs. freedom of speech. Broughton et al. (2009) added that part from dilemma for this ethical consideration is what control the organization has, if any, over the participation of their employees through posts and comments communicated on social media and what action it can, if any, or should take.

3. Third Question: Rules and Regulations for Ethical Dilemmas and Considerations:

The participatory nature of social media and how they enable users to be their own publishers would usually create new and unfamiliar ethical dilemmas. According to Kvalens (2020), majority of the ethical dilemmas and considerations are a result of lack established codes or norms of participation on social media and getting adapted to how they work. Bearing in mind, digital media is a free form of communication where rules are not respected as same as traditional media or face-to-face communication processes.

One of the proposed solutions lies in the structure of the social media platforms, where their rules and regulations in form of 'Terms and Conditions'. Facebook as a social media company usually updates its policies to avoid fake accounts, illegal content, fake news, identity-theft, invasion of privacy, cyberbullying and online bashing. The same goes for the other social media platforms owned by Facebook too such as Instagram. Terms and

conditions of social media platforms are regularly improved and proposing new drafts based on the collective participatory experience of their users, which is considered a step forward in regulating social media. However, they are not highly effective in preventing these ethical dilemmas, but providing considerable help and tools for the users to report and take a positive action.

However, allegations and accusations, especially in sexual context, remain the most critical ethical consideration on social media to balance between the rights of the victims to share and seek justice and not be stigmatized, and prevention of defaming the other party until the authorities are investigating the accusations. Online News Association (2020) argued that names would be withhold in such cases until authorities release them, or as soon as the names have been verified by repetition or credible sources. Nevertheless, withholding names could work in favor of prominent perpetrators in such cases to weaken the allegations.

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper aims to know the participation of users through social media and how this participation could enhance the ethical code of using social media; to regulate the negative usage of some users and raise the awareness of cyberbullying and how to defend it, using the legal ways.

The major finding for the study that the ethical considerations for creating, participating and sharing content on social media is debatable due to the lack of definitive norms because of still experiencing how social and digital media function, the rapid exchange of information and ability of being anonymous.

Social media specifically and online media generally, should be regulated in terms of privacy, identity, honesty and protection.

Recommendations

Social media specifically and online media generally should be regulated in terms of privacy, identity, honesty and protection.

Policy makers should pay attention to the rising ethical dilemmas, to balance between the right of free participation on social media while protecting users from the harmful side as a result from violating such freedom.

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