RESEARCH PAPER

We Are All in the Same Boat: Opportunities and Challenges of Humanitarian Inclusion, Vulnerable and Marginalised Groups on Digital Technologies

Dr Heyla A. Selim
King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia
Email: halsleem@ksu.edu.sa

ABSTRACT

PURPOSE: Fostering diversity and equality to encourage the involvement and integration of a society's groups is a major goal of social cohesion. Social media has a significant impact on the way we interact socially, so it is crucial to reflect on how it aligns with wider social cohesion goals. Social media can contribute to positive cross-cultural and intergroup interactions, enhance feelings of belonging, and enable self-expression. However, disparities in technology access and digital literacy can lead to the exclusion of some groups from fully participating online. Additionally, hostile and harmful experiences on social media can further deepen current divisions and impede social cohesion.

DESIGN: This paper, drawing on concepts of social identity and cultural diversity and examining examples of vulnerable or marginalised groups in society, examines the prospects and difficulties of social cohesion in the digital age.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS: Areas of priority for promoting social cohesion are addressed, with an emphasis on e-inclusion, digital citizenship, research, and policy.

KEYWORDS: *Social cohesion; social media; social inclusion; e-inclusion; social exclusion; cultural diversity; social identity; online shared identity; digital inequality; digital citizenship*

INTRODUCTION: CULTURE, SOCIAL IDENTITY, COHESION AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Culture is generally identified as a collection of shared characteristics that distinguish a group of individuals from others. It encompasses a collection of values that are passed down from one generation to the next (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 1991). Being part of a certain society therefore necessitates individuals to abide by cultural rules. Researchers in cross-culture have suggested several dimensions of culture, but dichotomous concepts of culture, such as East versus West or individualism versus collectivism, have shaped the basis of much research in this area. This point of view makes comparisons by classifying Eastern nations as collectivist in nature and therefore more reliant on conformity and the needs of a wider society, while Western nations are classified as individualistic with an emphasis on individual freedoms and accomplishments. However, these reductionist views of culture have been critiqued (Ailon, 2008; McSweeney, 2002; Vignoles *et al*., 2016), with suggestions that they wrongly place cultural groups in opposition to each other and presume that these categorisations reflect uniform values across individuals within certain cultural groups (Schwartz, 1992; Schwartz and Bilsky, 1990). Subsequently, broader cultural aspects or values have been suggested to further the exploration of nuances of culture and its subsequent influences on attitudes, behaviours, and sense of self in relation to individuals (Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Schwartz, 1992).

The social identities of individuals are formed by multiple group memberships, such as age, gender, race, political views, or sexual orientation, with culture playing a major role. Social identity theory suggests that peoples' social identities result from their knowledge, pride, and sense of belonging to certain societal groups. Solidarity and trust are essential for developing common values and a feeling of shared identity (Holtug, 2017). Such group belongingness constitutes a key part of what people are, contributes to our overall identity, and is a cause of self-esteem (Reicher *et al*., 2018). As for social identities, they are defined in contrast with and with reference to certain 'other' groups (i.e., outgroups). Social categorisation and social comparison processes underlie this and result in positive ingroup identities amongst individuals (see, for example, Brown, 2000; Haslam *et al*., 2017; Turner, 1975). Adequate intergroup solidarity and trust in society are needed for intergroup behaviour that is positive, responsible, and reciprocal (Breidahl *et al*., 2018). This bonding between groups can be a source of unity within society. However, bonding can be endangered by factors such as national, cultural, or religious diversities where differences are stressed between groups (Uslaner, 2012), resulting in competition and division by means of comparison. Although findings in this regard are varied (Breidahl *et al*., 2018; Holtug, 2017) and likely differ across countries because of complex and changing economic and political factors, societal divisions give rise to vulnerable groups who are excluded from opportunities or participation relative to other social groups.

Aspects related to shared social identity are critical for social cohesion even though social identity and social cohesion are different theories (Holtug, 2017). Similar to the concept of social

identity, social cohesion encompasses the ways in which individuals come together, including elements such as a shared sense of purpose, belonging, common values, and identity, as well as a tolerance for diversity reflected in behaviour (Hulse and Stone, 2007). Social cohesion is a complex idea, with multiple definitions and an abundance of literature that explores various aspects of that cohesion (Friedkin, 2004; Rogers and Lea, 2004; Schiefer and Van der Noll, 2017). Despite being an analytical term to describe social or political changes, it can also be used in the context of public policy to advocate for government action (Chan *et al.*, 2006). From the viewpoint of public policy, social cohesion describes the social interactions and actions performed in daily life to minimise disparities and inequalities between groups and individuals, with the aim of combating social exclusion (Hulse and Stone, 2007). Social exclusion is the mechanism that diminishes individuals' ability to take part in society (Kennan *et al.*, 2011), while social inclusion encompasses participation in various aspects of public life and opportunities (e.g., community, labour market, health, education) (Marlowe *et al.*, 2017). Both are integral to the concept of social cohesion. While there are different perspectives on how the construct is defined and measured, it is generally considered as a desirable state of social relations within a specific context (Marlowe *et al.*, 2017), a state that can have positive or negative effects on a society's groups and individuals.

Promoting social cohesion is currently a primary objective for G20 countries, with an emphasis on enhancing quality of life for all by guaranteeing the inclusion and participation of all societal individuals and communities, including vulnerable groups such as the disabled, immigrants, the elderly, refugees, or minorities of gender or sexual orientation. The goal is to advance cultural diversity and equality and to encourage social creativity, integration, participation, and entrepreneurship, including the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) (Grimalda and Tänzer, 2018). The emergence of Web 2.0 and the incorporation of social media into our daily routines has brought about a seismic shift in how we interact with each other. As Marlowe *et al.* (2017, p.85) pointed out, this "social/digital nexus" has a profound impact on social cohesion. Social media acts as a catalyst for building connections and creating opportunities for engagement in like-minded communities, thereby strengthening our social networks and social capital. The social networks we form online are a tapestry of our closest confidants as well as more distant connections such as acquaintances or strangers, often all on the same social media platforms. This alteration in the make-up of our social networks opens the door to opportunities for positive engagement between groups and cultures. It can grant freedom of expression, cultivate a sense of belonging, and pave the way for the formation of a shared online identity. However, the unequal access to technology and variations in online provisions and digital literacy means that certain individuals are precluded from full online participation. Furthermore, the encounters of harm and hostility on social media can worsen existing divisions and obstruct social cohesion.

This paper delves into the concepts of social identity and cultural diversity by exploring the experiences of vulnerable and marginalised groups, and examines the relationship between connectedness, integration, and social cohesion in relation to social media. It highlights the prospects

and challenges of using social media for promoting social cohesion. Additionally, it identifies key areas for promoting social cohesion in an online world, such as e-inclusion, digital citizenship, research, and policy, as areas of priority.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR SOCIAL COHESION

Social media creates opportunities for cross-cultural interaction and community co-operation that can increase a sense of belonging within a diverse society. It can also give a voice and empower those who may not have the same opportunities afforded to them offline (Marlowe *et al*., 2017; Nemer, 2016). Due to affordances of online environments (e.g., anonymity, invisibility) social identities do not necessarily operate in the same ways online. Choice of online platform and user preferences mean that individuals can choose not to express aspects of their cultural or social identity, allowing them to momentarily break away from the constraints or norms that may exist in relation to offline cultural or social dynamics. Similarly, individuals can choose to express their true self freely without the confines or consequences that may exist in their offline lives. Self-presentation and freedom of expression can foster cohesion by connecting individuals and groups outside of the barriers that may exist offline, thus building social capital within and between groups. Aspects of belonging, social capital, self-expression and resistance are examined further in the following sections.

ONLINE SOCIAL CAPITAL AND BELONGING

Social capital comprises the vast array of associations and networks that are available both online and offline, offering a fortune of social resources to individuals. It includes both bridging and bonding social capital, respectively referring to our distant and close relationships with others. The formation or dissipation of social capital relates to the processes that either bring people closer to each other or lead to more division (Jakubowicz, 2007). From this viewpoint, bonding forms connections within groups while bridging forms connections between groups (Jakubowicz, 2007), thus relating to social cohesion.

The importance of social capital online has been exhibited by several studies (e.g., Selim *et al*., 2021; Ahn, 2012; Ellison *et al*., 2007; Johnston *et al*., 2013; Williams, 2007), where having access to one's bridging and bonding social capital is a simultaneous occurrence. This is generally applicable to online users and specifically to vulnerable groups. For refugees, accessing social media allows them to remain connected with family abroad and to interact with individuals in their new host country, thus promoting integration and leading to a positive impact on wellbeing (AbuJarour and Krasnova, 2017; Alencar, 2018). Social media also fosters associations with other refugees, promotes the exchange of information, and facilitates maintaining a cultural identity in the new host country (AbuJarour and Krasnova, 2017; Alencar, 2018). Additionally, social media helps ethnic minorities and communities of migrants increase connections across transnational and diasporic spaces (Marlowe *et al*., 2017). Therefore, social media could potentially lead the fostering

of new ways of feeling at home in a new country (Gifford and Wilding, 2013). It is also associated to creating a sense of belonging through the ongoing process of establishing connection, familiarity and security (Yuval-Davis, 2011). Engagement in online space could also create a greater sense of connection to a larger global community and promote a personal identification with global citizenship. In addition to constructive effects on well-being associated with social feelings of connection and belonging, social capital has been positively associated with improving economic output, community development, social inclusion, and social reform (Zinnbauer, 2007).

Whether within a certain community or at an overall international level, a sense of citizenship encompasses a socio-political process to create social places that are diverse and socially inclusive. Research shows how social spaces online provide young people with an active voice for participating in political and civic spheres, including a sense of personal rights and obligations in relation to belonging and cultural identity (Harris, 2010; Harris and Johns, 2021). Social media makes this possible at a global level with digital interconnectedness and increased diversity (Culver and Kerr, 2014; Harris and Johns, 2021). Additionally, it has the potential to create opportunities for learning and understanding between cultures and has been found to enhance anti-racist civic action and solidarity (Johns and McCosker, 2015). However, online interactions on social media tend to centre around shared ethnicity (Wilding, 2012). Therefore, while social media and digital platforms can foster valuable social connections and build social capital, it remains uncertain to what extent this occurs across ethnic, cultural, religious, class, sexual, or age distinctions (Marlowe *et al*., 2017). Therefore, further research is required to explore ways to promote diverse and intercultural interactions online and to investigate the barriers that exist in this realm.

ONLINE SELF-EXPRESSION AND RESISTANCE

Social media has led to broader inclusion and new self-expression opportunities, especially for minorities who could be experiencing disempowerment or feeling excluded from participation in more formal political or civic expression in offline spaces (Harris and Johns, 2021; Marlowe *et al*., 2017). Individuals may be given self-expression opportunities more freely online since the environment does not have the same constraints that may be found offline within particular cultural, societal, or religious contexts (Selim *et al*., 2014). Through social media, marginalised voices can be amplified and engage in some sort of psychological resistance that could otherwise be unfeasible or unsafe offline. For instance, a study that looked at the use of a feminist hashtag by Saudi Arabian women on Twitter illustrates the power of social media as a tool for societal engagement and solidarity, as these women shared their experiences of social oppression and found common ground through a shared identity (Selim, 2018). Twitter conversations also revolved around challenging the validity of existing power dynamics, putting forward alternative perspectives, and offering a sense of guidance to mobilise collective action, as well as garnering support from fellow users (Selim, 2018). This exemplifies the potential for social media to serve as a powerful tool for women to unite against the *status quo*. By sharing common experiences, shaping a shared reality and strategising

joint action, a sense of shared identity emerges (Haslam and Reicher, 2012; Reicher *et al*., 2018). Although such resistance and action can also be catalysed online, it is contingent on the capabilities of the medium employed and the broader societal context (Selim, 2018). Despite these limitations, it illuminates the possibility for self-expression through social media.

Studies have also pointed out potential social media opportunities for minority ethnic groups in relation to addressing marginalisation issues and creating a sense of belonging to a virtual community and identity within struggles for political independence as a way of activism online (Chiluwa, 2012). Similarly, LGBTQ+ community members were found to rely on social media to voice their concerns to empower other members of the community and to defy prevailing heteronormative discourse (Fox and Warber, 2015). However, individuals with sexual orientation that was not public knowledge felt their voices were stifled by the dominant heteronormative group (Fox and Warber, 2015), highlighting the limitations of self-expression for individuals both within and between social groups. These studies highlight that individuals navigate a complex range of identities, online and offline, which are expressed differently. Additional research on LGBTQ+ individuals revealed that social media and digital platforms provide valuable access to resources, opportunities for to explore identities, and societal support (Craig and McInroy, 2014; Lucero, 2017), and offer young people the opportunity to practice and participate in "coming out" about their sexual orientation virtually before doing so in person (Craig and McInroy, 2014). According to self-discrepancy theory (which states that there are three selves – ought, ideal and actual) (Higgins, 1989), it is apparent that online spaces allow for the expression of our actual or ideal selves without the limitations or consequences that may be encountered offline (e.g., Hu *et al*., 2018). Consequently, social media has the potential to intensify individual and community voices in a manner that can be empowering.

Even though online activism may not necessarily result in offline action or protest, research indicates that social media platforms could be a powerful means of motivation and self-affirmation for collective action and political change (Kende *et al*., 2016; Alaimo, 2015). The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement is a prime example of how social media can amplify approval and solidarity (Ince *et al*., 2017), challenge mainstream narratives, and mobilise large groups of people (Mundt *et al*., 2018). Social media also enables the scaling up and formation of alliances across different social groups, both within and beyond specific movements (Mundt *et al*., 2018). This sort of large-scale collective identity, which is propelled by social media, has played a pivotal role in contemporary political protests and revolutions (Boulianne, 2019; Breuer, 2012; El-Nawawy and Khamis, 2012), highlighting the immense power of social media to drive change.

CHALLENGES FOR SOCIAL COHESION ONLINE

While social media provides many opportunities for social cohesion, there are also challenges to consider. Some cultures, groups, and languages may be excluded from certain aspects of social media engagement because of inequalities that exist offline and affect digital accessibility and

literacy. This can lead to further separation and barriers to online participation and engagement within an international online culture. Additionally, online exchanges can have aspects of hostility and harm, with negative experiences such as hateful speech and discrimination possibly impacting offline interactions between groups and individuals. This can cause further alienation, divide social groups, produce new inequalities both online and offline (Douglas, 2007; Schäfer and Schadauer, 2018; Verdegem, 2011; Watanabe *et al*., 2018). The following sections will address the effects of digital inequality, hostility, and harm on social cohesion.

DIGITAL INEQUALITY AND EXCLUSION

Obstacles to social inclusion can stem from differences in access and utilisation of technology as well as the extent to which online resources are available and provided. Limited access to technology can mirror present social disparities, such as age, socio-economic status, education, gender, geographic location, religion, ethnicity, and language, all of which can affect access and participation in online spaces (Charmarkeh, 2013; Dekker and Engbersen, 2014; Gray *et al*., 2017; Kennan *et al*., 2011; Stork *et al*., 2013; Yu *et al*., 2018). This not only affects where and how a person can access technology, but also extends to one's ability to take part in areas such as culture, education, health, and civic engagement (Stewart and Askonas, 2000; Warschauer, 2004). For example, at the time of COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures, children who did not have access to the internet at home had to navigate a vastly different version of home-schooling. Recent research has shed light on this divide in relation to children (Dietrich *et al*., 2021), but this has been studies in broader contexts (Zheng and Walsham, 2021). However, it is not just about access to technology, because digital inequality also encompasses disparities in digital literacy and online provision (DiMaggio and Hargittai, 2001). It is essential to examine digital technology as a reflection of existing power systems and to be more attuned to how groups and individuals are positioned within society, as Zheng and Walsham (2021) suggest. These are obstacles to social inclusion as they inevitably exclude certain groups from the benefits of online environments.

Language is a major barrier to access and engagement in online spaces; this is because it connects to other social divisions such as ethnicity, nationality, and culture, and impacts how groups access and create information online, express their cultural or social identity, and interact with others (Yeh and Swinehart, 2019). In a world where English reigns supreme in the offline sphere (Guo and Beckett, 2007), it is essential to ponder how technology shapes expression and behaviour individually and collectively. For instance, international students commonly miss out on the chance to form online communities beyond the classroom because of obstacles such as a lack of familiarity with the target language culture and the concern of committing mistakes and being known as an outsider (Yeh and Swinehart, 2019). Fear of judgement and worries about the reactions of other users showcase digital disparities and place some individuals in the position of outsiders (Yeh and Swinehart, 2019). This can cause users to adopt a more passive approach to their social media participation, resulting in more online lurking (Popovac and Fullwood, 2019). This underlines the

importance of giving more thought to how online spaces can be designed to facilitate participation that is more equal.

There are also differences with regard to digital literacy, that is, the technical and social abilities acquired by individuals in their exploration of technology. Digital literacy has an influence on the ability of a person to assess information accuracy and reliability, and impacts an individual's perception of online social norms (Third *et al*., 2014; Yeh and Swinehart, 2019). Individuals with higher digital literacy can traverse online content with greater speed, proficiency, and security, and have more opportunities to take advantage of social media due to their capacity to engage with online spaces in more nuanced ways. Therefore, future research should explore the connection between digital literacy and social cohesion. Even in the absence of issues related to digital access, inequality, or literacy, diverse social and cultural norms play a crucial role in not only the social media platforms used by individuals but also in how they interact within them and their privacy concerns. For example, individuals in more conservative societies or where censorship or government influence is significant may have concerns about how they communicate and interact. Some individuals may be seriously concerned about being located through IP addresses (Hachten and Scotton, 2011; Selim, 2018). In addition, cultural and social norms also shape usage and risks perceived (Carter *et al*., 2016).

HOSTILITY AND HARM

In addition to fearing consequences because of expectations and norms related to social or cultural behaviour, exchanges between social media users can also be harmful, and this can include hate speech, hostility, and discrimination such as racism, sexism, and xenophobia (Awan, 2014; Douglas, 2007; Lingiardi *et al*., 2020; Schäfer and Schadauer, 2018; Watanabe *et al*., 2018). This can drastically impact social cohesion online and offline as a result of harmful intergroup dynamics. For example, refugees have reported that social media can stress stereotypes related to them and that interaction on social media did not reduce the discrimination and racism levels that they experienced (Alencar, 2018). Experiencing hostility online unreasonably affects marginalised and vulnerable groups, reflecting inequalities present in offline contexts. For example, children of ethnic minorities and other groups facing discrimination are exposed to a higher risk of negative online exchanges and discrimination than the general public (Harris and Johns, 2021; Livingstone *et al*., 2011). Moreover, a main topic reported regarding cyberbullying experiences by adolescents was related to identity aspects such as their sexuality, race, religion or socio-economic status (Popovac, 2017); however, this is not just the case with adolescents (Siapera *et al*., 2018). Being exposed to online hostility could have a significant influence on individuals' psychological and emotional well-being (Dana *et al*., 2020; Harris and Johns, 2021; Saha *et al*., 2019).

Online spaces also offer opportunities for the rise of extremism and creation of hate groups (Daniels, 2018; Siapera *et al*., 2018), and joining these groups can foster a similar sense of social identity and belonging among members. Social media can be a draw for some to connect with

like-minded individuals and express extreme views. These groups can normalise divisive attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours, which can harm social cohesion. The anonymity of online environments, the ability to disseminate views widely and instantly (Brown, 2018; Douglas, 2007), the biases in algorithms and searches (Noble, 2018), the emergence of echo chambers that support extremist viewpoints (Cinelli *et al*., 2020; Hirvonen, 2013), and the spread of fake news that fuels hate (Pate and Ibrahim, 2020) are all major concerns. Apart from the detrimental effects on social cohesion that online hostility can foster, with the potential to divide and fuel ethnocentrism (Harris and Johns, 2021), it can also serve as a catalyst for offline violence targeted at specific groups (Müller and Schwarz, 2020) or even certain individuals or public figures, such as activists involved in counter-protests (Mundt *et al*., 2018). Therefore, the hostilities present in social media can have a ripple effect on society as a whole.

PROMOTING SOCIAL COHESION IN AN ONLINE ERA: THE WAY FORWARD

The international community places a significant emphasis on achieving economic and policy goals within an information society. For instance, the eEurope Action plan aims to leverage the benefits of the information society for all citizens with the goals of cohesion, integration, and opportunity, however, much of the recent emphasis has been on economic potential through e-learning and e-commerce as opposed to social or cultural areas (Verdegem, 2011). It is crucial to understand the impact of social media on wider social processes related to inclusion, exclusion, and diversity when crafting strategies to maximise potential and minimise risks. In a way, online environments may hold the key to making multiculturalism a norm. While promoting online participation and integration is crucial, it is also important to address social inequalities, rights, and justice to create a more equitable and fair online environment. This requires introducing more coherent laws, policies, and accountability measures to ensure all users know their rights and obligations in the virtual world. By mapping these rights and obligations to offline efforts for social cohesion, we can create safer online environments. To truly achieve this, an holistic and inclusive approach is needed to not just integrate but also to address the social issues in the online world. From the government and policy-makers to technology providers, practitioners, and researchers, there is an opportunity to promote social cohesion through targeted initiatives for e-inclusion and digital citizenship, as well as through research and policy development.

FOCUS ON E-INCLUSION AND DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP

E-inclusion involves addressing the digital divide by taking steps to ensure equality in ICT access and provision. For instance, providing digital content in multiple languages can promote e-inclusion. Removing internet access obstacles and increasing digital literacy can lead to more meaningful engagement online. Therefore, it is important to consider how online platforms are set up and how to promote equal participation to prevent reinforcing existing power dynamics. Special attention should be given to marginalised groups. Consequently, the crucial objective is to establish more

consistent regulations to improve access and representation for all groups online, to foster diversity and positive interactions across cultures through social media, and to prevent social media from becoming a hindrance to social cohesion and harmony.

While e-inclusion pertains to the ability to access, comprehend, and utilise social media as a means of expression (Harris and Johns, 2021; Johns and McCosker, 2015), digital citizenship encompasses a broader perspective. It comprises one's sense of self and responsibility within the global online community (Third *et al*., 2014). This shift in perspective means that online behaviour is not solely focused on the individual, but rather viewed as a social endeavour and an integral part of online community engagement (Third *et al*., 2014); in turn this fosters the formation of participatory online cultures (Jenkins, 2009). To foster cross-cultural understanding and positive interactions, it is crucial to support and develop programmes that promote responsible and positive media engagement and a feeling of digital citizenship. This can be accomplished through government policies, education, and initiatives that focus on online context. While some work has been done in the field of global citizenship education (Buchanan *et al*., 2018), there is a need to expand this to include all age groups and to consider the online context, as social media platforms provide the opportunity for collective action, activism, knowledge sharing, and promoting cohesion and the rights of marginalised groups. Such an approach would foster a more inclusive and harmonious online environment. To ensure a safe and inclusive online environment, it is crucial to not only focus on providing digital access and literacy but also on promoting digital citizenship. This approach is essential to tackling social divides and polarisations that have been exacerbated by the online age. By incorporating digital citizenship education as a fundamental aspect of existing offline efforts to promote social cohesion within neighbourhoods and communities, we can create a more harmonious and equitable online space.

SUMMARY OF KEY PRIORITIES

1. Work towards consistency in regulation and enhancing technological access and online provision to aid representation of all groups online.
2. Promote diversity and positive cross-cultural online interactions via social media to facilitate social cohesion.
3. Prevent engagement on social media from becoming an obstacle to co-operation and peaceful living within society.
4. Move towards a focus on policy-oriented action research.

FOCUS ON RESEARCH AND POLICY DEVELOPMENT

Another major aspect of supporting social cohesion is making steps towards policy-oriented action research. Verdegem (2011) argues that researchers, as opposed to being objective investigators of phenomena, can enrich discussions and hold policy-makers accountable as part of the development

and sustenance of inclusive environments online. To fully grasp the complexities of online social cohesion, it is vital to examine issues through various theoretical perspectives and to enhance these theories in the context of online spaces. Additionally, using robust empirical research methods or developing new ones can aid understanding of the subtleties of social interactions and inclusivity from a cultural standpoint. By adopting this approach, researchers can offer practical suggestions to policy-makers and other key players on how to establish and preserve inclusive online environments that foster social cohesion.

Future research should focus on how to foster cross-cultural interaction on social media in a way that positively engages individuals from different backgrounds, such as cultural, ethnic, or religious. This requires understanding the relationship between digital technology and systems of power. Studies should also investigate how digital spaces can contribute to harm and hostility, both online and offline. For instance, researchers have pointed out the need to recognise how online exchanges and information sharing through social media can put certain individuals or groups at risk of physical harm (Mundt *et al*., 2018) and how it can perpetuate stereotypes and prejudices that have offline consequences. Additionally, research should examine how existing hate speech legislation (or lack thereof) impacts exposure to hostility, and assess the strengths and shortcomings of such legislation for online users in relation to social cohesion (Hawdon *et al*., 2017). Effective approaches to creating safer online spaces are of vital importance and have long-lasting implications for governments, policy-makers, legislation, education, and technology providers (Awan, 2014). By involving all stakeholders in the process, researchers can help develop priority, evidence-based and uniform approaches to addressing issues related to social exclusion and online risks, as well as promoting digital citizenship and cohesion along the lines of offline efforts. Researchers therefore play a crucial role in identifying solutions and advising policy-makers to make sure that social cohesion includes the virtual realm.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Government and policy developers should work together with researchers on more focused policy action research.

Government and policy developers should:

– engage on developing consistent regulation to foster good values and ethics in relation to user interaction online; this should include a focus on social justice, rights and responsibilities on the internet;
– raise awareness around accountability of online behaviour and engage technology providers in relation to online safety concerns that can be a barrier to social cohesion within and between groups;
– develop targeted efforts for e-inclusion and digital citizenship that map on to existing offline efforts and goals of cohesion within society;

– promote digital literacy and participation through specialised online groups and communities that are more structured and have clear goals to instil confidence among users.
– ensure that online spaces do not inadvertently reinforce existing power structures, and that online provisions and access are critically assessed;
– develop their approaches through engaging stakeholders and evidence-based best practices in collaboration with researchers.

Research should examine:

– the extent to which interactions on social media occur across ethnic, cultural, religious, or cultural differences, and the extent to which inter-cultural and inter-group interaction can be further promoted;
– the aspects of social media engagement that lead to a sense of shared common online identity, and how values of empathy and respect can be instilled in this context;
– the effects of social media engagement on offline social processes, attitudes and behaviours within and between social groups;
– current configurations of online spaces and barriers to online participation for marginalised and vulnerable groups;
– factors that are central to promoting positive media engagement, social norms and cross-cultural action;
– strengths and limitations of existing legislation and policies across countries to inform best practice in relation to social cohesion.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we have examined the advantages and difficulties associated with social media for social cohesion from societal and cultural points of view. Social media can provide opportunities for developing a sense of belonging and building social capital, as well as opportunities for resistance and self-expression. However, it can also result in challenges such as inequality in terms of ICT access, provision, and digital literacy, and could lead to hostile exchanges and potential harm to both groups and individuals. E-inclusion and digital citizenship are crucial for overcoming barriers related to access and digital literacy. While internet access is on the rise, the ability to meaningfully use ICT remains a problem, especially for vulnerable or marginalised groups. Therefore, more effort should be made to support digital literacy and inclusion to allow users to take advantage of the prospects presented by social media. Promoting digital citizenship also leads to more active, positive engagement as well as a sense of online community, ultimately having a leading role in online safety, which further promotes social cohesion. To encourage positive and inclusive interactions online, developing smaller groups with common objectives should be considered. This could lead to developing the confidence and skills of new online users. Nurturing a sense of shared identity with clear group objectives in a

less intimidating context can promote support and participation, as well as positive cross-cultural interactions.

While acknowledging the potential of ICT to promote social cohesion, it is important to be realistic about the scope of its impact as it is only one among many ways in which social cohesion can be fostered. Therefore, these efforts should be carried out in conjunction with other established methods for promoting co-operation and communication among cultures, social groups, and communities in a comprehensive manner. Future research and collaboration between stakeholders can help to deepen our understanding of the possibilities for social cohesion online, how these can be integrated with offline efforts, and identify priorities and solutions for the development and implementation of sound policies.

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BIOGRAPHY

Dr Heyla A. Selim has a PhD in Social Psychology from the University of Sussex, United Kingdom, 2017. She has worked at King Saud University, Riyadh since 2008, and is currently an Associate Professor in Social Psychology, Chair of the Scientific Research Unit. Her research focuses on how people construct, maintain and defend their identities in different cultural contexts, using both state-of-the-art quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. Dr Selim has authored or co-authored more than 20 journal articles and book chapters. Her research interests focus on culture and societal changes, and she works with several international research groups on societal happiness and cultural aspects of human social behaviour, social and personal identity in online and offline contexts. She is the translator of the *Cambridge Handbook: Psychology of Acculturation*, and her teaching and postgraduate supervision focuses on social and cultural psychology.