



## Studying the Challenges of Using Social Media in Iran: An Explorative Approach

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Received: Feb. 9, 2022; Accepted: May. 8, 2022

### ABSTRACT

In recent years, especially with the outbreak of the Coronavirus, social media has become a platform for interactions with user-generated contents among online communities. Despite undeniable advantages of social media in individual and social domains, its applications have also confronted human society with numerous ethical issues. Since these issues have been less focused by researchers, the present study intends to identify and prioritize ethical challenges being posed by social media. As such, a sequential mixed research method has been applied to reach the desired outcome. At first, after reviewing the existing literature on technological ethics in general, and social media ethics in particular, ethical challenges is defined and classified. Thereafter, a survey method is used to assess and localize the challenges identified by experts. The statistical population in both stages is professors and experts of information technology and social media, who were selected by the purposeful (judgmental) sampling method. The results indicate 7 main dimensions and 42 indicators in social media ethics such as: privacy/confidentiality, psychological/social effects, cyber bullying, accuracy (information content), intellectual property, and freedom of expression issues. The findings can provide policymakers in the field of technology with a comprehensive insight into the challenges of using social media and its importance.

*Keywords:* social media, information technology, ethics, privacy

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## INTRODUCTION

Although social media technologies provide digital platforms for community participation a variety of tech-enabled activities; but they also create favorable conditions and context for the emergence of ethical challenges, including a more recent phenomenon of cyber victimization. The increasing use of such media, especially social networking sites, and their flexibility allow people to adopt unethical and illegal paths. Therefore, everyday users face many ethical problems and need to decide how to deal with them (Jafar Karimi et al., 2016). Not surprisingly, given the widespread influence of social media on people's daily lives, ethics has become a more challenging issue for researchers and hence, its teaching and education is vital (Forbes, 2021). In other words, due to ever-increasing growth of social media and its users around the world, it is very important to pay attention to ethical issues related to social media (Monkman et al., 2018; Terrasse et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2021). Since, the online communication is revolving around values and rituals, the emerging social media culture can transform the existing cultural norm of a society (Lipschultz, 2020). As a matter of fact, the study of ethical challenges posed by social media in the country, given different cultural, social and religious contexts, is an undeniable necessity.

## PURPOSE

Most social media studies focus on how to use such technologies in organizations and their benefits, and pay less attention to social media ethics (White and Boatwright, 2020). Since ethical issues in one country are different from another, the challenges of pervasive social media should also be assessed and identified according to cultural and ideological requirements of a society. Therefore, in this study, the researchers have taken into account ethical issues in social media based on the Iranian-Islamic culture and by considering the religion, values, and beliefs of individuals; they tried to identify their dimensions and indicators. In brief, this study aims to explore ethical challenges and classify them with a comprehensive review of social media ethics based on culture and social context in Iran.

## METHODOLOGY

The present study, in terms of its purpose, is applied research which uses a mixed-method in two stages. In the first, other than a holistic literature review, a qualitative method of the focus group has been used in order to comprehensively extract ethical issues as well as summarize and classify them. The focus group is in a social context to answer questions with an in-depth interview. Here, the search keywords for related resources include information ethics, information technology ethics, social media ethics, ethics in new technologies, and so on. After extracting ethical issues, a focus group consisting of 5 experts in the fields of ethics and technology ethics was formed and then the identified issues were enriched and

classified. The focus group meeting lasted about 120 minutes and ended with the group agreeing on ethical issues and their classification. In the second stage (survey method), a larger volume of experts was surveyed to validate the ethical issues and their classifications.

### FINDINGS

In the first step, the articles reviewed were from 1990 to 2021 and were from some scientific databases such as Elsevier, Emerald, JStore, Google Scholar, and Wiley. The main question of the content analysis of the articles as well as the focus group meeting was: "What are the challenges and ethical issues in social media?" The results show that the ethical issues can be grouped into seven categories and 46 criteria.

In the next step, using a questionnaire designed based on ethical issues extracted in the first stage, a survey was done with a number of experts on IT and social media ethics to validate and prioritize the categories and related issues based on Iranian culture. To analyze the data, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, binomial test, and Friedman test were used. In this stage, four criteria were not confirmed and eliminated from the final framework. The result of the Friedman test showed that the privacy challenges category had the top priority whereas the access category had the lowest priority among Iranian experts (See Table 1).

### CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, it can be stated that the ethical challenges were identified in 7 main categories and 42 indicators. Prioritization can help policy and decision-makers in the field of social and cultural media domains in formulating policies and prioritizing resource allocation to make appropriate plans to prevent and address ethical issues in social media.

Table 1. Main categories of ethical issues of social media and their priorities

Priority	Categories	Mean rank of Friedman test
1	Privacy / Confidentiality	5.03
2	Psychological / social effects	4.32
3	Cyberbullying	4.23
4	Accuracy of information (information content)	4.03
5	Intellectual property / asset issues	3.73
6	Issues related to freedom of speech	3.34
7	Access issues	3.28



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## **NOVELTY**

In previous studies, ethical challenges had been emphasized in a scattered and limited way, and lacked a holistic approach that could explore each of the challenges and provide an appropriate classification of challenges.

Second, to make policies and decisions in this area, it is necessary to prioritize ethical issues to develop an appropriate plan, which was neglected in previous studies.

Third and most importantly, since ethical issues in one country differ from those in another, the challenges of social media must be identified according to cultural and doctrinal requirements of the society. Therefore, this study has taken up ethical issues in social media according to the Iranian-Islamic culture. In short, the most important contribution of the present study is the development of a holistic framework of ethical challenges posed by social media and their prioritization in social and cultural contexts of Iran.



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Vol. 15  
Issue 2  
Summer 2022

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