

Social Media Use and Its Impact on Palestinian Women's Well Being and Self-Empowerment

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Social media usage and its effects have been studied extensively in communication, psychology, and a wide range of disciplines. One relatively under researched area is the role and influence of social media on underrepresented groups, particularly women living under prolonged conflict and humanitarian crises. The current study focuses on the role of social media in influencing Palestinian women's self-empowerment, the most socially marginalized group due to the ongoing conflict and issues related to gender exclusion in that region. Building on uses and gratification theory (UGT), this study surveys 364 Palestinian women in Gaza and the West Bank to examine the

effects of social media on self-esteem, satisfaction with life, perceived social support, and loneliness. Findings indicate that young women are heavy social media users, especially Facebook. Both perceived social support and loneliness are related to Palestinian women's social media use. Findings imply that despite the vastly researched and reported negative effects of social media, there are some positive effects, especially on marginalized populations.

Keywords: social media, women empowerment, well-being, uses and gratification

Researchers have examined the effects of social media use and its relationship with self-esteem, self-efficacy, and increased feelings of psychological well-being (Yıldız Durak, 2018). Despite the overwhelmingly negative effects of social media highlighted in research, these networks continue to play a fundamental and transformative role worldwide, mainly for specific demographics. Social networks have amplified voices and fostered greater participation among minorities on these platforms (Ortiz et al., 2019). Previous studies suggest that youth and women from underrepresented groups use social media to add a different perspective and make such spaces more ethical and equitable (Literat, 2019). Additionally, social media users constantly seek to cultivate communities, facilitate engagement, and promote self-definitions and personal agency through community building and advocacy (Montgomery, 2018).

Such virtual networks offer space for sharing information and communicating risks in real time to facilitate the easy and efficient dissemination of information leading to cooperation and community-building, which are crucial when someone needs support (Jurgens et al., 2018). The advent of social media platforms has rendered individuals from mere content consumers to active producers, particularly as interactive audiences post comments and hashtags online (Monshipouri & Prompichai, 2018). Some scholars suggest that social media has been considered empowering for many women in the Arab and North African regions (MENA) due to opportunities to increase income and visibility and the rise of feminist activism (Hurley, 2021; Radsch & Khamis, 2013; Al-Maimani, 2021; Gangwani et al., 2021). This is noteworthy considering the persistent inequality in the region at legal, political, social, and technological levels (Ghobadi, 2013).

The growing use of social media was noticeable as a part of Arab women's activism and feminism movement during the Arab Spring to disseminate information, encourage participation in the protest, and highlight the desire to bring change (de Vries & Majlaton, 2021). Social media was also used to resist social and cultural norms, discuss stressful events, and lobby with other like-minded groups for social change (Tadros, 2005). One notable impact of social networking sites on enhancing women's movements to mobilize more quickly is that communication requires fewer resources than mainstream media, thus providing broader access to online platforms (Zeitsoff, 2017).

Furthermore, social media networking sites function as 'alternative media channels' and are seen as spaces for discussion and public exchange of ideas and support through networks (Cummings & Neil, 2015; Medranda-Morales et al., 2023). From a feminist perspective, Nancy Frazer, in "Rethinking the public spheres," acknowledges that marginalized members of subordinated groups and women who are excluded from the dominant public sphere tend to form their public spheres through what she conceived as a "subaltern counter-public sphere" (Frazer, 1992).

Before social media networks such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and YouTube, very few spaces—public or private—existed for Arab women to exchange ideas and seek support from others sympathetic to their cause. In some countries, Arab women are still denied education and professional opportunities and operated under men's guardianship (Odine, 2013). They are still restricted from expressing their identities and views under authoritarian regimes and endure stressful lives under ongoing conflicts and humanitarian crises.

Social media usage has not only amplified the voices of women in various parts of the world, but it is also closely linked their sense of empowerment. Empowerment can be conceptualized as a multidimensional construct with empowerment in one area of women's lives influencing other areas including but not limited to psychological, political, social, and economic (O'Neil et al., 2014; Soharwardi & Ahmad, 2020). Yet, if studies are to measure and adequately understand women's empowerment and the socio-cultural norms behind it, data on social attitudes and behavior in the community must be gathered on women's personal characteristics and views (Taylor & Perezniето, 2014). Few studies have investigated the benefits of social media network usage and its role in women's self-empowerment, specifically Palestinian women living in an ongoing conflict. Given this gap, it is crucial to examine how social media can influence women's social, economic, and individual empowerment (Awan, 2023).

Therefore, this study explores Palestinian women's self-reported attitudes toward using social media and its relation to their empowerment. For Palestinian women, the use of social media is perceived as a time of respite and building resilience after childcare, household chores, or performing some farming work in rural villages. Female workforce participation in the Palestinian Territories is among the lowest in the region at 18%, an environment acutely challenging to women-headed families, which comprise 11.2% of the population in the West Bank (World Bank, 2017).

Given the distinct multilayered and multifaceted challenges Arab women face, Palestinian women are identified as one of the most vulnerable groups, being more susceptible to economic deprivation and social marginalization.

Children in these families are also more likely to face challenges related to health and education. Investing in women's empowerment is valuable for both individual well-being and societal advancement. Such investments lead to positive changes that impact families and communities and create a broad ripple effect (Harlow, 2015). If social media networks have some influence on women's self-empowerment, it could be a starting point for affecting change, particularly in war-torn regions with prolonged conflicts and humanitarian crises.

Gender Inequality and Living in Prolonged Conflict and Humanitarian crisis

Palestinian women are considered among one of the most marginalized in the world due to the ongoing conflict in the region and an extremely patriarchal society. They face a multitude of challenges and have endured a prolonged Israeli-Palestinian conflict since 1948, exacerbated by a humanitarian crisis that has excluded many from the public sphere (Lukacs et al., 1992). Women's marginalization cannot be attributed to a single factor, nor can it be solely ascribed to one specific cause; wars and armed conflict have for so long undermined women's empowerment and gender equality (Pelc, 2020). War's impact has severe consequences on the individual and community levels (Williams & Drury, 2011; Elcheroth, 2006). In fact, ongoing wars have negative impacts on psychological, social, and physical well-being, particularly for women, girls, and children, who are primarily impacted by the traumatic events of war (Snoubar et al., 2016). According to a recent report by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), since October 7, 2023, women, children, and newborns in Gaza have been disproportionately affected by the intensified conflict in the Palestinian territory. Not only suffering as casualties but also due to diminished access to health care (UNICEF, 2023).

Furthermore, in a male-dominated and patriarchal society, gender roles are seen through culturally acceptable lenses and norms, in which women's roles might be seen as limited to specific roles inside households or on farms. Such inequality can also be seen on social media platforms as the digital gap between men and women is wider in such cases due to social and cultural norms that construct the roles and expectations of women (de Vries & Majlaton, 2021). This

inequality is only exacerbated in the poverty-stricken communities of Gaza, which has one of the highest rates of unemployment worldwide (World Bank, 2015). According to a 2018 UN OCHA report, 68% of households in Gaza, or about 1.3 million people, are now food insecure, with children being the most likely to face challenges related to health and malnutrition. Increased food insecurity and poverty rates in Gaza have affected families' ability to meet basic needs, resulting in a sharp decline in both standard of living and nutritional status. Moreover, lack of opportunity has rendered over 70% of youth and 78% of women unemployed, and the unemployment gap between men and women continues to grow.

Gender inequality exists for women in many countries. Historically, women were limited in their networking and isolated from communication, networking or sharing information as well as denied some basic human rights (Primo & Khan, 2003). Studies show that women who are socially empowered contribute more to their families, societies and national economies (Harlow, 2015). Digital divide can also be a decisive indicator for gender inequality for the most vulnerable groups like women and girls in a male dominant community under the sense of protection. For all these reasons and more, an exploration of the role of social media in influencing Palestinian women's sense of self-empowerment is important and timely. More precisely, our study explores the effects of social media use and intensity on Palestinian women's perceived self-empowerment, which is conceptualized as a combination of self-esteem, satisfaction with life, perceived social support, and loneliness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Before we delve into specific literature on social media usage, uses and gratifications of social media use, and the relationship between social media use and self-empowerment, it is worth examining some basic social media usage statistics. There has been an increase in the use of social media in the Arab world as a transformative tool for expressing opinions, particularly among young adults. Facebook is by far the most popular social media platform in Arab

countries (Khalife, 2017). Arab nationals spend considerable time socializing online. This population has made it the ideal market for companies like Instagram and Snapchat, but Facebook is still the most dominant platform for the Middle East, with more than 180 million users; conversations are mostly taking place about brands, businesses, and services alongside fashion, politics, and religion (Hamid, 2019). According to the Palestinian Bureau of Statistics (2022), 91% of Palestinian families have access to the Internet, and Facebook is ranked as the most popular platform. Another digital report by Ipok (2020) on Palestine indicates that 76.9% of the participants declared that Facebook was the most popular platform for Palestinians. Women's users make up 46.8% of the total users of Palestine.

Despite the lack of job opportunities, young Palestinian people are active on social media. They are heavy users of mobile phones and use social media for their freelancing opportunities. A recent study found a small but growing number of online freelancers in the Palestinian Territory, particularly in Gaza (Cano et al., 2019). With a life shaped by poverty but with access to technology, the number of people in the Palestinian Territories using social media to communicate with the world is growing. The broad positive impacts of women's empowerment on overall social and economic development highlight that "greater gender equality means a country is associated with better education and health, higher per capita income, faster and more inclusive economic growth, and greater international competitiveness (World Economic Forum, 2015).

While previous research examined the use of social media as empowering for Arab women and the MENA region, our study focuses on Palestinian women, a group often overlooked in media research. The current study with its quantitative approach, despite data collection challenges due to regional conflict and access to sample, offers insights into the gendered aspects of social media usage and its role in self-empowerment using tested and reliable scales often used in communication research. Building on uses and gratification model (UGT) as a theoretical framework that explains that social media users are active, selective, and motivated to use a given medium. UGT assumes that individuals

use media technologies to enhance their gratifications (Katz et al., 1973). Some researchers used the model to examine the adverse effects of social media on users (Korhan & Ersoy, 2016), and others used the model to explain the usage of social media to communicate, build relationships, or seek affection (Eginli, 2018; Lin & Chu, 2021; Chen, 2011).

Previous research on social media users has suggested that increased use of social media leads to better psychological well-being and life satisfaction (Beyale et al., 2019). However, scholars also argue that while social media use may enhance life satisfaction, this relationship is complex (Maziriri et al., 2022). For example, (Raza, 2020) found that mediating factors such as social overload and social benefits can affect life satisfaction among college students. Another study examining social media use among adolescents and life satisfaction pointed out unfavorable social comparisons and upsetting online experiences as factors that are likely to affect their life satisfaction (Keresteš & Štulhofer, 2020).

To examine the influence of social media sites on life satisfaction, Kross et al. (2021) suggest identifying key gratifications and motivations, as social media can enhance or diminish well-being depending on its use. Thus, future research should further understand the complexities to advance knowledge in this area and particularly among marginalized groups (Wang et al., 2023).

Online users may discuss life problems and other issues related to their lives. Discussions with like-minded people are an opportunity to increase self-esteem and gain social power that they may not be able to develop otherwise (Baumeister et al., 2003). In addition, previous studies suggest recommendations to explore the role of social media in empowering women and other marginalized populations (Gangadharbatla & Khedekar, 2011; Kadeswaran et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2023). For minority groups, self-empowerment is dynamic; for example, African American students' self-empowerment is the act of survival achieved through community members working together (Obiakor & Beachum, 2005). Furthermore, the concept of empowerment for Palestinian women is interlinked with resistance against societal powers and patriarchy to gain rights and control

their choices (Kuttab, 2010). Although education is the rooted tradition of empowerment for Palestinian women, making an autonomous decision is still in the hands of male guardians (Johnson, 2010).

Previous studies on the use of social networks often ignore the gendered nature of social media usage and the ones that do focus on women's social media use for political participation and activism often adopt a qualitative approach (de Vries & Majlaton, 2021), leaving a gap for a quantitative examination of women's usage and its relationship with self-empowerment. There have been some studies examining Palestinian women's endurance in the micro context of life as an everyday practice under an ongoing Israeli occupation (Nguyen et al., 2008). In these studies, endurance was conceived in terms of support from friends and family along with community networks that have become a central element to sustain individual well-being (Hamad et al., 2021). Such well-being is viewed as garnering community social support (Tribe et al., 2020).

This current study contributes to the existing literature in two ways: first, it explores the extent to which the above-mentioned practices have been transformed in a social media world, which is also quickly becoming an everyday practice for Palestinian women. Second, it brings a quantitative approach to the area of gendered aspects of women's everyday uses of social media and its impact on their self-empowerment, particularly for a group of women living in extraordinary conditions and the daily adversities of an ongoing war.

Theoretically, women's empowerment can be operationalized using four concepts: self-esteem, satisfaction with life, perceived social support, and loneliness within the context of social media usage (Gangadharbatla & Khedekar, 2011). However, few studies have examined these concepts and its relationship to social media use for Palestinian women living in an ongoing humanitarian crisis, and even fewer have connected the intensity of social media use to a Uses and Gratification (UG) framework to further our theoretical understanding. In the following section, we briefly revisit the uses and gratification framework and apply it to the context of social media for populations living in ongoing conflicts and humanitarian crises.

Uses and Gratification Framework

Scholars have used the Uses and Gratification (U&G) framework to understand the reasons why people tend to use a specific medium to satisfy their needs (Katz et al., 1972; Dhir et al., 2017). While there is intense debate in the field of communication whether U&G is a rigorous social science theory or not, it has undeniably served a valuable role in explaining why people use media and what gratifications they derive from them that influence people's media use. One of the concerns researchers pointed out is a methodological limitation of U&G's over-reliance on respondents' perceived knowledge and self-reporting in generating data (Bracken et al., 2001). Additionally, O' Donohoe (1994) criticized the theory for often merely generating a list of reasons why audiences engage with media rather than providing deeper insights or explanations. Another limitation is that the theory often presumes that audiences are always agentic, active, purposeful, and attuned to media (Perks & Turner, 2019). According to Rubin (2002, 2009), a further criticism of U&G is that it overlooked a clear distinction between gratification sought (GS), which refers to the users' motivations, and gratification obtained GO, which refers to the actual satisfaction and benefits of using the media.

However, the Uses and Gratification framework provides a user-centered perspective on social and psychological motives sought from the media (Leung & Wei, 2000; Wu & Kuang, 2021). Briefly put, Katz et al. (1972) proposed five social and psychological needs that are often gratified by individuals' media use: cognitive needs, affective needs, integrative needs, social integrative needs, and tension-release needs.

While the U&G framework initially originated in pre-digital times, there have been many follow-up modifications where scholars have employed a U&G framework in studies related to the internet (Dhir et al., 2015). While the basic UG framework still holds in a digital context and internet users still seek similar uses and gratifications from this medium as traditional media, the interactive nature of digital media does make some aspects of UG more salient than others. Some scholars such as Ruggiero (2000) have argued that U&G models in the 21st

century should include concepts such as interactivity, demassification, hypersexuality, and synchronicity among others.

The evolving nature of digital and social media should make certain aspects of U&G more salient than others and even activate additional needs and gratifications that are not often associated with traditional media. For instance, the networked and interactive nature of social media does make seeking social support easier and decreases one's perceived sense of loneliness. Furthermore, the ideas of deriving self-esteem and satisfaction with life from media is not something often highlighted in the UG framework or associated often with traditional media. All four of these factors are theoretical additions to the existing UG framework that ought to be considered when studying social media use in general and particularly when it comes to marginalized groups living in extraordinary conditions. In that regard, the perceived uses and gratifications that Palestinian women might be seeking from social media use include a sense of self-empowerment through increased self-esteem, satisfaction with life, social support and a decreased feeling of loneliness. In the following sections, we examine each of these concepts in greater detail.

Empowerment through Online Social Networks

Empowerment has been defined by many authors as an individual's control over his or her life and a connection with community through some sort of participation. It has been conceptualized under the four categories of cognition, competence, self, and determination related to life outcomes (Spreitzer, 1995). Empowerment has also been seen as increasing organizational performance by empowering employees in the workforce and providing more opportunities for participation (Gardiner, 1996). Most recently, empowerment was also defined as a process through which marginalized or oppressed individuals or groups gain greater control over their lives and environment so they can gain resources and rights to achieve important life goals and reduce social marginalization. (Maton, 2008). Globally, people use social media to interact with like-minded people and share their thoughts and life problems.

In communities like the Palestinian territories, where life is shaped by a prolonged conflict, economic pressure, high rates of unemployment, and restrictions on movements, the usage of media, particularly social media, has many implications and a high level of motivation for usage for women. In an ever-changing sociopolitical environment and during an ongoing conflict, the use of social media can serve many needs including providing a much-needed support network that can influence women's well-being among other things.

Previous studies found that Palestinian women have sought and obtained social and emotional support from friends and community, particularly during ongoing conflicts and humanitarian crises (Veronese et al., 2021). The current study investigates to what extent this sense of self-empowerment conceptualized in terms of social and emotional support among other factors is sought by Palestinian women from their circle of friends and community online, and how it is related to their social media use during the current ongoing conflict. Previous studies in this area that have focused on college students' well-being in the United Arab Emirates and Jordan have found evidence for a link between individuals' spiritual well-being and their perceptions of social support, feelings of loneliness, and satisfaction with life that they derive from their networks (Al-Khatib, 2012; Alorani & Alradaydeh, 2018). In this study we conceptualize self-empowerment in terms of self-esteem, satisfaction with life, feelings of loneliness, and perceived social support based on literature in this area (Gangadharbatla & Khedekar, 2011; Crisp et al., 2014; Kanbur et al., 2020). In the following sections, we will further examine the relationship between social media usage and all four of the concepts of interest: satisfaction with life, self-esteem, feelings of loneliness, and perceived social support.

Social Media and Satisfaction in Life

Life satisfaction is often correlated with how much a person positively evaluates or likes the overall quality of his/her life. Diener (2008) defines life satisfaction as the factor that influences health, family upbringing, personality, relationships, and work. Well-being has been proven to enhance physical and mental health as well. Many scales were used to measure life satisfaction;

however, the most recent scale is the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS), which is one of the most widely used measurements for life satisfaction (Larsen & Emmons, 1985). Researchers have pointed out the benefits of developing a support network online including its relationship to satisfaction with life. Engagement with online communities helps expand contacts' networks and serves as a counseling platform for others, thereby having a positive effect on individuals' satisfaction levels with life.

Self Esteem and Social Networks

Self-esteem can be defined as a positive evaluation of the self; people who have high levels of self-esteem have confidence in their own abilities. Scientists have noted a highly positive relationship between self-esteem and individuals' health, relationships and careers. "Self-esteem, produced partly through self-verification, stabilizes the group because it motivates individuals to form and maintain relationships that verify identities." (Cast & Burke, 2003, p. 25). On the contrary, poor self-esteem is dangerous for individuals and it might lead to both internal damage or cause harm to the surrounding communities, for example anxiety, stress, loneliness, and increased likelihood of depression.

Self-esteem has a robust relation in people's sense of self-empowerment. Social media can play a crucial role in connecting people in the professional world, for example finding job opportunities or a creative way to market a business. Social media sites like Facebook and Instagram can also be a reasonable way to remain connected with friends and family who live far away or who might not otherwise stay in close contact with. In other words, unlike traditional face-to-face communications, Facebook, for instance, allows people to change their cover page to support a cause, send message, or write on a friends' wall as methods of communications. Building virtual communities for communications has saved a lot of causes and businesses in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. This new reality of communication and platforms of connections can be applied to this study, which examines the relation between use of social media and increased self-esteem among Palestinian women who find themselves isolated, anxious, stressed, and often in harm's way.

Loneliness and Social Media Use

Perceived loneliness is correlated with a negative impact on mental health, especially if these feelings have lasted a long time. Some research suggests that loneliness is associated with an increased risk of certain mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, sleep problems and increased stress. Recent research suggests a very different depiction of loneliness. Loneliness not only disrupts social relationships; it also leads to increased depressive symptomatology (Cacioppo et al, 2009).

Previous studies showed that heavy use of social media plays a vital role in helping form and sustain relationships through platforms like Facebook and Instagram, and these online relationships may even turn into real face-to-face ones in time (Deters et al, 2013). Likewise, sites like Meetup can help people find local groups of people whose interests and activities align with their own. Generally, individuals' positive or negative experiences on Facebook are associated with individuals' number of friends and their engagement with their social network (Phu et al., 2019).

Perceived Social Support and Social Media

Group membership has been widely considered to be an empowering factor as it provides a major source of social support and social capital (Alkire et al., 2013). Social support means having friends or other people including family, to turn to in times of need or crisis such as the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Gaza. These circles give people a broader focus and perspective along with emotional support. Social support, in turn, enhances quality of life and provides a safeguard against adverse stressful life events.

However, according to the Stressful Life Events scale, many regular life events create immense stress, such as an increase in financial obligations, getting married, childbirth, or moving to a new home. For example, Holmes and Rahe's (1967) stress scale included 43 stressful events that contributed to illness and assigned a point value to each event based on its stressfulness. For Palestinian women, the stressful events are far beyond the typical negative life events and are extremely exacerbated by living under conflict.

In the Middle East, where life is precarious and in constant turmoil due to ongoing conflicts, stress levels are higher and beyond the control of individuals living in such humanitarian crises. In such cases, the role of social networks in providing the much-needed support to alleviate stress levels becomes crucial. Social networks offer assistance and quick responses from members of friends' networks that people can rely on for help to solve problems. Some role models or individuals who have a wider range of experience can also serve as a reference to explain certain events that they have undergone in the past. Finding role models outside of their immediate friends and family connections can be of great value and support for Palestinian women who are not only fighting for their survival but also fighting against social norms and gender stereotypes.

Impact of Age and Gender and Social Media Intensity

Research suggests that individuals' social media usage is correlated with their attitudes to such sites (Gangadharbatla, 2008), among other factors. For example, an individual's attitude can influence their feelings about using social networking platforms, which in turn affects their interactions with the site (Yuan et al., 2021). Psychologists define attitudes as a tendency to evaluate things in a certain way. Therefore, it can include evaluations of people, issues, objects, or events, which can be either positive or negative (Chaiklin, 2011).

Furthermore, previous research suggests a relationship between age, attitudes, and the intensity of social media usage. For example, young adults are the most active on social media platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok (Wojdan et al., 2021; Lim et al., 2022). People under the age of 35 tend to use social media frequently, often multiple times per day (Chan et al., 2007; Appel, 2012; Mougharbel et al., 2023). They tend to use social media for multiple purposes, such as building professional communities (Baker-Doyle et al., 2011), and for social purposes (Wilson, 2010). During crises, young web users increased their immersion in social media as a strategy to escape the impacts of isolation and bad thoughts (Hudimova et al., 2021). For example, young people's social media use, including help-seeking and mental health support, has increased during the pandemic (Mathews et al., 2024; Pretorius, 2021; Junus, 2023).

Mahon and Hevey (2021) suggest that age, gender, and the specific ways young adults engage with social media are crucial factors to consider when understanding potential risks and overall well-being.

However, little research has examined the combined impact of age and gender on social media well-being for marginalized groups, particularly young women living in prolonged conflict zones (Asi et al., 2016; Nazzal, 2020). In relating Palestinian women's self-empowerment to their social media use, we use a more comprehensive measure of Palestinian women's social media usage rather than just the amount of time spent on such sites. The scale includes not only the number of hours spent per day but also other indicators such as the number of friends, how long they have been using social media, and why they use social media.

This measure, called social media intensity, was developed by Ellison, Steinfeld, and Lampe (2007). They created a comprehensive scale that measures the total number of friends, hours or minutes spent on social media per day, attitudes toward social media, and some Likert scale items to gauge respondents' use of social media in everyday life. Social Media Intensity (included 8 questions), the first part of the scale collected data on age, gender, education, income, and occupation, and the second part included 5 questions to assess presence on social media, hours spent per day, type of the platform, number of friends, and what users seek from using the platform. The questions: 1) How long have you used social networking sites? 2)- On average, how much time do you spend daily on social media? 3)- What type of social media platform do you use more? 4)- How many contacts (friends) do you have on social networking sites? 5- Why do you use social media?

HYPOTHESES

Despite the limited nature of research into the relation between the use of social media as a tool for Palestinian women empowerment in the West Bank and Gaza, based on the discussion in the previous section, we identified four factors that could potentially be impacted by Palestinian women's social media

use. And social media use can be conceptualized in a more comprehensive way to serve as the antecedent to self-empowerment. Therefore, we propose and test the following five hypotheses:

H1: Age is negatively correlated with time spent on social media for Palestinian women.

H2: The higher the social media intensity, the higher the level of perceived level of social support among Palestinian women.

H3: The higher the social media intensity, the lower the level of the feeling of loneliness among Palestinian women.

H4: The higher the social media intensity, the higher the level of self-esteem among Palestinian women.

H5: The higher the social media intensity, the higher the level of life satisfaction among Palestinian women.

METHOD

An online survey was created and translated into Arabic. The survey was emailed to a group of Palestinian women in West-Bank and Gaza who are working or volunteering at local nonprofit organizations. They were advised to share the link with their friends using a snowball sampling method. Upon clicking on the link, they were taken to a welcome page that presented a brief description of the study. They were informed of their rights as study participants and reminded that participation in the study is purely voluntary through the consent form. Three hundred and sixty-four women completed the online survey (N = 364).

The study is exploratory in nature and the goal is to test the relationship among the various constructs measured in the survey for future research to build upon. The survey instrument included a total of 61 questions and consisted of 6 major sections that assess: (1) a social media intensity scale developed by Ellison, Steinfeld, and Lampe (2007) that measured the total number of friends, hours or minutes spent on social media per day, and five Likert scale items to assist respondents' use of social media on everyday life and to which extend respondents selected how strongly they agree or disagree. The social media scale included questions (How long have you used social networking sites? On average, how much time do you spend daily on social media?; What type of social media platform do you use more?; How many contacts (friends) do you have on social

networking sites?; Why do you use social media?). (2) R-UCLA loneliness scale with 20 items (3) a perceived level of social support scale with 12 items adopted from the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) developed by Zimet (2016). (4) Satisfaction with life scale with five scale items and (5) self-esteem scale with eight items, both of which were adopted from Ellison, Steinfeld, and Lampe (2007).

The survey also included 5 items to assess attitudes towards social media (PEW Research Center, 2018). All scales were tested for reliability. To maintain anonymity, no names were collected on the questions. Participants also answered demographic questions that collected data on age, gender, education and occupation. This research obtained IRB approval from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

RESULTS

Data cleaning techniques were employed to remove corrupt and irrelevant data such as 14 responses that had gender as male, as that demographic was not the population of interest. The sample consists of 364 (N=364) women who either work or volunteer at local nonprofits or live in the West Bank and Gaza. They agreed to participate voluntarily in the research. Majority of the women in our sample were aged between 21-30 (45.3%), followed by 31-40 (26.1%), and 41-50 (19.2%). The largest group holds a BA degree at a total number of 254 (69.8%). The most frequent income for women ranged between \$0-\$500 monthly. As for occupation, 53 women work for nonprofits (14.6%), 68 women own businesses (18.7%); in addition, 179 unpaid volunteer's women consists (49.2%) of the total sample. Most respondents belong to one social media network 75.0% on Facebook and only 3.3% on Twitter and 21.7 use other social media platforms. The majority of respondents (86.0%) have been using social media for more than 4 years. The number of hours spent on the sites varies, the largest group 41.8% spent three to four hours a day and the second largest group 23.6% spent 5 to 6 hours a day while 15.7 spent more than 6 hours daily. The majority of respondents 69.5% have over 100 friends. The majority 47% of respondents use

social media to connect with family and friends while 33.8% use social media to gain knowledge and 13.5% use it for entertainment.

Reliability

The reliability assessment of all scales uses Cronbach's alpha. Scales are considered reliable if alpha exceeds the generally guideline of .70 (Hair et al. 1998). Table 1 summarizes the mean score, the variance and the reliability indices.

Table 1
Mean, Variance, and Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients

Scale	Mean	Variance	α
Social media Intensity (8 items, 5-point)	3.59	0.603	0.820
R-UCLA Loneliness Scale (20 items, 4-point)	2.01	0.335	0.912
Satisfaction with life (5 items, 5-point)	3.42	0.800	0.845
Self- Esteem (7 items, 5-point)	4.33	0.354	0.729
Perceived social support (12 items, 4-point)	4.56	1.732	0.935

The table shows a high reliability among all the tested scales which refers to the consistency of measurement. The value of alpha was above the required level of .70 for all measured scales. R-UCLA Loneliness Scale (.912), life satisfaction (.845), Self- Esteem (.729), Perceived social support (.935).

Hypotheses Testing

Our first hypotheses predicted that age and time spent on social media will be negatively correlated such that young Palestinian women are more likely to spend more time on social media than older Palestinian women. To test this hypothesis, we ran a bivariate correlation analysis between age and time spent on social media. Age and time spent on social media were found to be moderately negatively correlated, $r(362) = -.336, p < .001$. This means that when the age of Palestinian women increased, the average amount of time they spent on social media decreased. This relationship was significant at $p < .001$. Therefore, we

found support for our hypothesis that young Palestinian women are likely to spend more time on social media than older women.

To test our hypotheses 2-5, a series of linear regressions analyses were conducted to examine the relations between social media intensity and four different dependent variables: perceived social support, levels of loneliness, self-esteem, and satisfaction with life. As noted earlier, the independent variable, social media intensity, was measured using the number of friends, time spent on social media in addition to questions such as frequency of changing posts in support of a cause. Recall that social media intensity was hypothesized to predict women empowerment, which was conceptualized in terms of perceived social support, loneliness, self-esteem and satisfaction with life.

The findings indicate that hypotheses 2, 3 were supported with positive relations between social media use and intensity while hypotheses 4, 5 had no significant relations as presented in the tables 2, 3, 4, and 5 below.

To interpret the standardized coefficient estimates, each value represents the amount of change in “self-esteem” or “satisfaction”, or “social support”, or “loneliness” given a standard deviation change in X (X being social media intensity).

Table 2
Regression Analysis (Predictor – Social Media Intensity; Dependent variable – Perceived Social Support)

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
Constant	1.067	0.268		3.987	0.001
Social media Intensity	0.974*	0.073	0.575	13.365	0.001
Correlation Coefficient	0.575				
R ² = 0.33					
Adjusted R ² = 0.329					
* p < .05					

As seen in table 2, the relationship between the independent variable social media intensity and perceived social support is positive with an

unstandardized coefficient of 0.974. The R^2 is .33 meaning over 33% of variance in social support is explained by our predictor, social media intensity. This finding comes along with the demographic analyses indicating that the majority of surveyed women are social media heavy users and mainly use social media to communicate with family and friends. Therefore, social networks have offered assistance and quick responses from a family or friends that women can rely on for help to solve problems. Also, this finding is supported by the literature review in which group membership has considered to be an empowering factor. Therefore, H2 is supported.

Table 3
Regression Analysis (Predictor – Social Media Intensity; Dependent variable – Loneliness)

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
Constant	1.391	0.140		9.950	0.001
Social media Intensity	0.173*	0.038	0.232	4.547	0.001
Correlation Coefficient	0.232				
$R^2 = 0.54$					
Adjusted $R^2 = 0.051$					
* $p < .05$					

As seen in table 3, the relationship between the independent variable media intensity and loneliness is statistically significant with an unstandardized coefficient of 0.173. This relationship has an R-Sqr of .54, meaning over 50% of variance in loneliness in Palestinian women survey is explained by our independent variable, their social media intensity. It should be noted that the variable loneliness was reverse coded in our dataset so the positive coefficient implies that the higher levels of social media intensity are associated with lower levels of loneliness. In other words, the more Palestinian women spent time on social media, the less feelings of loneliness they experienced or reported. This finding supports our H3 and is in line with previous studies and literature in

this area that suggests that increases in social media use lowers levels of anxiety and depression in people.

Table 4

Regression Analysis (Predictor – Social Media Intensity; Dependent variable – self-esteem)

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error			
Constant	4.288	0.148		29.002	0.000
Social media Intensity	0.012	0.040	0.016	0.310	0.757
Correlation Coefficient	0.016				
R ² = 0.00					
Adjusted R ² =0.002					

As seen in table 4, the coefficient of social media intensity was not statistically significant, indicating that our data do not support our hypothesis 4 that social media intensity is positively related to self-esteem.

Table 5

Regression Analysis (Predictor – Social Media Intensity; Dependent variable – Satisfaction with Life)

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error			
Constant	3.052	0.221		13.790	0.000
Social media Intensity	0.102**	0.060	0.089	1.700	0.090
Correlation Coefficient	0.089				
R ² = 0.008					
Adjusted R ² =0.005					
** p < .10					

As seen in table 5, there was also not a statistically significant relationship between the independent variable social media intensity and respondents' satisfaction with life. The relationship was only significant at p<.10

but not $p < .05$. It could be said that the results were approaching significance and perhaps a larger sample size might increase the power and therefore might result in statistical significance. Therefore, we found partial support for H5.

Overall, we found strong support for three (H1, H2, and H3) of our five hypotheses, partial support for one (H5) and no support for one (H4). The lack of strong support for H4 and H5 can be attributed to small sample size, and the fact that there might be other factors that possibly contribute to the increase or decrease in Palestinian women's self-esteem and satisfaction with life given the fact that the majority of respondents were young women and were living in extreme conditions of conflict and poverty. These factors should be taken into account when measuring women empowerment in future research.

CONCLUSION

Social media network's use in the Arab world continues to rise, particularly among young women. People rely on them to gain information, express opinions, or simply communicate with family or friends. In addition, Arab women movement and feminism movements have widely used social media since the Arab Springs and a decade later to organize movements and campaigns on digital platforms. However, very little research examines the use of social media by the most marginalized groups who seek a normal life plagued by a prolonged never-ending conflict, limited access to public spaces and resources, and the oppression of patriarchy. More precisely, women living in Gaza and West Bank region have not been the focus of communication scholars, particularly those with quantitative approaches, due a variety of reasons including but not limited to the ongoing conflict and humanitarian crisis, poverty, instability, and access to such population.

Our study is exploratory in nature and attempts to bring some attention to the population and their social media use. Our findings support the literature review in many ways: one, the women surveyed in the sample were young and unemployed, but they are heavy users of the internet. Two, Facebook was the most widely used social media platform in this geographic region. The

demographic results of the 364 respondents were a satisfying reflection of the general status and conditions of the sample surveyed.

Next, our findings showed that social media intensity is attributed to the need to socialize and communicate with friends and family. Palestinian women's gratifications and intensive use of social media was highly correlated with perceived social support. This positive connection aligns with literature suggesting that the well-being of Palestinian women is often viewed within a communal context, such as groups of friends and the broader community, to help withstand daily life pressures (Hammad & Tribe, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2008). The perceived social support scale included questions such as, "I have friends on my social media with whom I can share my joys and sorrows." And "There is a special person with whom I can share joys and sorrows on social media." And "I have a special person who is a real source of comfort to me on my social media networks." This statistical alignment draws attention to further analysis on how the transformation of everyday practices in real life is increasingly mirrored in the daily use of social media for Palestinian women.

Lastly, social media intensity is also connected to a reduction in loneliness. No surprise that this relationship supports the above argument on the value of the online community of friends and family. All of these point to some positive effects of social media on Palestinian women's well-being and the conceptualized self-empowerment. Surprisingly, the research was inconclusive about the impact of social media use on Palestinian women's self-esteem and satisfaction with life. There might be other factors, activities, or justifications and variables that may contribute to these two variables for future research.

Limitations and Implications

Overall, there are a few limitations that should be addressed. Although this research has built upon and replicated previous research, using four well-established scales widely tested in previous research, it is still explanatory in nature. While this research contributes to a limited but growing research on Palestinian women and adopts a quantitative approach, more mixed-method

approaches may be needed to fully understand the relationship between social media and empowerment for Palestinian women in the West Bank and Gaza.

Mixed-method approaches may be needed to fully understand the relationship between social media and empowerment for Palestinian women in the West Bank and Gaza conceptualization of women's empowerment, such as gender role stereotypes, non-Western definition of resilience, autonomy, and coping with stress, to name a few.

Additionally, another valuable direction for future research is to incorporate mixed methods approaches that combine quantitative data with qualitative insights so data cannot only predict a "correlational" relationship but also explain the "causative" factors and the underlying reasons. One notable limitation, for instance, was found when the intensity of social media was related with loneliness among Palestinian women; results indicated that increased social media use reduced loneliness. However, only a quantitative approach cannot provide a comprehensive understanding of how social media impacts loneliness and other psychological outcomes. This limitation is further aligned with the U&G theoretical gap, which was identified in previous research and literature reviews, in which the theory cannot explain "why." Thus, this research will also benefit from qualitative research in addressing this theoretical limitation. Such findings may offer better guidance for future interventions and policymaking.

In exceptional places and contexts, additional research is required to investigate and explore "the concept of women empowerment" itself to better understand the relationship between social media and women empowerment among marginalized groups, particularly in conflict zones. Future research should examine women empowerment within other factors, such as cultural, economic, societal, entrepreneurial, and geopolitical contexts.

Lastly, we only surveyed the women in West Bank and Gaza areas, and future studies should include women from all surrounding areas. Sociopolitical context and the turmoil in the region coupled with difficulty to access participants led to this limitation in sample selection. While his research focuses on women living in Gaza and West Bank, we acknowledge a need to study

women living in East Jerusalem (which is still contested by Israeli- Palestinian control) and women in “Area C” which is fully under Israeli control and cut off from basic health services from Israeli and Palestinian authorities. Research requires further access to the population and obtaining specific permits from relevant authorities.

In terms of implications, on the practical level, studying the relationship between Palestinian women’s social media use and their sense of self-empowerment seems trivial given what they are currently going through on the ground. Their lived experiences and realities have shifted drastically given the recent set of events. Nonetheless, our study presents some implications and points to the importance of keeping access to social media and internet in general alive in this region. For instance, the positive relationship found between the perceived social support and use of social media can help interested nonprofits, or social campaigns directed to these communities to further investigate what activities and nature of internet use or content can increase Palestinian women’s social support or decrease their feelings of loneliness.

Another significant implication of our research is a need for a wider global women coalition and support through online communities. Palestinian women are at the epicenter of a humanitarian crisis, and it is time for women across the world to weave a virtual net using social media to provide not just emotional support but to also join them in their cause and fight for justice, liberation and survival on multiple fronts.

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Funding and Acknowledgements

The authors declare no funding sources or conflicts of interest.

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