
Understanding Online Communication through Arab Eyes

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Abstract

As we strive towards a unified theory of online communication, we need to understand the role of cultural values in technology adoption and design. Here, in the spirit of defamiliarization, we present key findings of a study of Arab couples using new technologies to maintain long-distance relationships. We demonstrate how Western values are designed into the technology, and how Arabic values play a role in how the technology is used and re-appropriated. In doing so we argue that a unified theory of online communication must use care to ensure mainstream cultural values are not theoretically reified.

Keywords

Online Communication Technologies, Gender, Long-Distance relationships, Arab-world

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

Introduction

Recent studies have aimed to document usage patterns of online behavior in response to new technologies [3, 4, 7, 9]. Yet, as the organizers of this workshop rightly claim, there is a lack of research that reaches across

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CHI 2010, April 10–15, 2010, Atlanta, Georgia, USA.

ACM 978-1-60558-930-5/10/04.

this body of work, linking it theoretically so as to make a broader contribution. In this paper we present findings from a study of the use of technology by Arabic couples who are in Long-Distance Relationships (LDRs). While this might be understood as another specific contribution to the existing work on intimate computing [e.g. 1, 6], the HCI community has made only limited attempts to study Eastern culture [10]. Therefore, a focus on the Arab world allows us not only to understand a new domain of online communication use, but it also, in line with Bell, Blythe and Sengers, allows us to defamiliarize communication technologies and, by “making strange”, open up the design space [2].

In this paper, we highlight three contributions of our work. First, this study highlights how poorly we understand technology use in the Arab world. Second, aspects of our methods, which were carefully tailored to the cultural context and thus have allowed us to collect sensitive data, are described. Finally, and of most interest, our findings illustrate the ways in which our participants’ patterns of online behavior are highly culturally situated, being shaped through cultural conventions including religion and gender roles.

Method

The participants were eleven Arab individuals who are currently in LDRs (5 males and 6 females, average age of 26). Some live in the Arab world and others live in Europe or the US. Participants were recruited either through family/friendship connections or through adverts placed in social networking websites and forums.

A qualitative approach was chosen for the study: a voice interview via the internet and a diary kept for a

week were followed by a second voice interview also conducted over the internet. Transcripts were analyzed using grounded theory techniques. Voice interviews were chosen for two reasons. First, the geographic spread of participants around the world made face-to-face meetings impractical. Second, the first author, an Iraqi citizen who studied in Egypt, recognized a cultural hesitation to discussing relationships and emotions in a face-to-face context, which stems from a cultural taboo surrounding discussing intimacy. Thus, the use of voice interviews was judged to be more effective in ensuring rapport when talking about relationships. The first author drew on her command of English and Arabic dialects to conduct the interviews, as it emerged that choice of language and whether to use familiar or formal forms of Arabic address was critical.

Key findings

First, our findings highlight how the social/religious status of the couples in our sample was a factor in their choice of communication media within the relationship. For example, we observed how the use of voice and video calls in LDRs is subject to Arabic socio-cultural boundaries, particularly those relating to whether or not a couple are religiously engaged (this denotes a stage in the relationship where a marriage contract has been signed and the couple are announced as husband and wife, even though a civil marriage has not yet been conducted). According to cultural norms, couples who are not engaged should not ‘physically’ be in the same place without a male relative being present, and this expectation was found to also have ramifications for online behavior. Video calls were felt to have a different social meaning to voice calls, and were seen by some religious Arabs as crossing boundaries, by being a means with which a couple could virtually see each

other without supervision (thus resembling being physically in the same place). On a related point, female participants reported negotiations around whether it was appropriate to be unveiled when talking online to a man to whom they were not yet religiously engaged. Ozaki and Lewis [7] have argued that it is important to understand the boundaries of a specific culture to predict use of current technology; here we see how the use of various communication media is actively negotiated in response to religious norms.

Second, our findings show how the online communication practices of our couples reflected broader values relating to women within Arabic culture. Particularly salient points to emerge within the interviews included the perception of support for and protection of women by men, from both male and female perspectives. Men tended to cover communication costs and felt that they were expected to pay for phone calls, especially international calls, as well as internet calling credits and other expenses. This had ramifications for control over communication, with men being perceived to be more in control than women over the initiation of communication and the duration of calls. Financial practices such as these are underpinned by a culture and religion in which the male role is associated with that of provider; most of our participants (male and female alike) felt that men are obliged to cover expenses as a way of showing responsibility for their partner's well-being.

Further, our findings regarding online behavior were indicative of a larger Arab cultural belief that women should be protected by men. Men were seen to have a degree of power over how their partners used communication technologies, and use of technology

was also seen to sustain an asymmetry of power. For example, most women stated that their male partners knew the passwords to their email accounts, online profiles and instant messaging accounts. Yet, some of these same women did not know the passwords to all of their partners' accounts. Also, while the presence of female friends within men's social networks went unremarked, the presence of male friends in a female's contact list was the subject of considerable discussion. Several of our participants expressed that men had the right to monitor who their partner should interact with under the protection umbrella. Finally, most female participants felt obliged to ask permission from their partner if they needed to go out by at least sending a text message. Consequently, online behavior for Arabs in LDRs needs to be interpreted in light of culturally prevalent values with regards to gender.

At the same time, our findings indicate how technologies were utilized in ways that help renegotiate gender roles. For instance, some women, who might not feel comfortable initiating calls, adopted practices in which they called and then hung up on their partner. By allowing communication without cost, this 'missed call' behavior empowered them to initiate communication. Couples were found to attribute rich meanings to missed calls, from morning wake-up alerts, to signals for "I miss you", or "please call me back". Here, the technology's utility is extended so as to adapt to cultural values.

It is of note that this use of communication technologies runs counter to Western values pertaining to gender equality; indeed, such practices might not be interpreted in terms of support and protection from a Western perspective. However, for the purposes of

understanding technology use in Arabic culture, it is of course essential to view and interpret practices in light of Arabic norms. Furthermore, these findings also highlight the values that typically underpin design of communication technologies in HCI, which tend to emphasize balance and reciprocal access to controls. This study exemplifies how values negotiated through use of technology can differ from those of the designer.

Discussion

Kaye argues that values are integrated into technology design [5]. This work highlights such values by exploring technology use in a different cultural context, while also demonstrating how they can be resisted in use. Our findings demonstrate how Arab couples adapt technologies to complement prevalent cultural attitudes towards gender and religion, and further, how they are used in ways that challenge cultural norms; the renegotiation of gender roles is one example of how these are open to redefinition and re-inscription.

When striving to create a theoretical understanding of online behavior then, it is important to distinguish between the values designed into the technology when it was created, the values present in the culture where the technology is being used, and those that emerge in response to the technology itself. We question how the present, decidedly Western, focus in HCI research can adequately address these issues, and argue that additional cross-cultural research is required before a holistic theoretical understanding of online behavior can be reached. The present Anglo-European emphasis in HCI research limits the applicability of unifying theories, and we point to the results of this study as an exemplar of the need to avoid reifying mainstream cultural values theoretically.

Acknowledgements

We thank Ann Blandford and UCLIC, where Alsheikh and Rode were based during this study, and Abigail Sellen and Microsoft Research Cambridge for sponsoring the research. We also thank our participants for sharing such private aspects of their lives.

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