

## Trans-Jurisdictional “Publivate” Cyber Self- (Re)presentation: The Transformation of Compartmentalization in Iranian Social Life

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Article Info	Abstract
<p>Special Issue Paper</p> <p>Main Object: Media</p> <p>Received: 30 November 2024 Revised: 27 December 2024 Accepted: 27 December 2024 Published online: 01 January 2025</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> cyber self-(re)presentation, normalization, pluralistic ignorance, public/private compartmentalization, “Publivate” space, trans-jurisdictional regulation.</p>	<p><b>Background:</b> Space is a constructed concept: a cultural and ideological segmentation, and a translation of the sociopolitical structures of society. On social media platforms, the public becomes a composite of privates, where individuals’ multiple selves are (re)presented before a multiplicity of audiences within a third type of space, which we coin the “<i>publivate</i>” sphere. This sphere emerges from the combination and blurring of public and private spaces on social media platforms.</p> <p><b>Aims:</b> This article aimed to shed light on issues related to cyber self-(re)presentation within this “<i>publivate</i>” space.</p> <p><b>Methodology:</b> We utilized cross-level integration, synthesizing micro- and macro-level theories, and interdisciplinary integration, incorporating concepts and theories from diverse fields, including social media studies, sociology, psychology, and regulatory perspectives.</p> <p><b>Discussions:</b> We discussed how the interplay among public, private, and “<i>publivate</i>” selves, along with the reciprocal influences of conformity, pluralistic ignorance, normalization, and normativity, have been transforming the traditional compartmentalization of spaces in Iranian social life. Additionally, we discussed the complications of trans-jurisdictional regulation of cyberspace and their implications for users, particularly Iranians.</p> <p><b>Conclusions:</b> Given the dynamic nature of societies, norms, and cultures, effective governance of cyberspace and cultural practices should account for sociocultural dynamics.</p>

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## 1. Introduction

Space, from any theoretical perspective, is a constructed concept and is seen as a culturally prescribed, and therefore ideological, segmentation, as well as a translation of the sociopolitical structures of society (Arjmand, 2017). Space is narrated, borders are metaphors, and territory is socially constructed (Forsberg, 2003). Spatial social divisions can be conceptualized as gendered spaces, producing “a complex and dynamic dichotomy of men/public and women/ private” (Arjmand, 2017), or extrovert/ masculine and introvert/ feminine in Iranian culture (Taghavian & Taheri Kia, 2021).

Public space is a space that *is* public or *is made* public by force. Indeed, a private space can become public when the public demands it, and a public space can become private when the public owner refuses to give it up (Acconci, 1990). Public and private spheres relate to what can be displayed or what must be hidden in public (Wirman et al., 2022). Serving both functional and symbolic purposes, public spaces are shaped by varying degrees of public and private composition (Ghasemzadeh et al., 2011).

The emergence of photography blurred the boundaries between public and private through the explosion of the private into the public and the creation of a new social value: the publicity of the private (Ravn et al., 2019). The electronic age redefined the public as a composite of privates (Acconci, 1990). With the advent of social media, an emerging social space has been shaped, “that occup[ies] a liminal territory between ‘open’ and ‘closed’”, “neither prototypically ‘private’ nor obviously ‘public’” (Burkell et al., 2014), which we coin here as “*Publivate*”: a third space resulting from the combination of public and private spheres in cyberspace.

The constant availability of mobile devices has been blurring the boundaries between public and private life (Forghani & Mohajeri, 2018), and the private has become public (Şimşek, 2018). In a context where the self and information are, and even need to be, disclosed, it is impossible to determine where the private sphere ends and the public sphere begins (Tombul & Sarı, 2021). Indeed, the private space is constantly narrowing, thereby extending the boundaries of public space (Wirman et al., 2022).

Social media platforms provide virtual stages where users can act as both performers and spectators of others’ performances, presenting and displaying themselves on a stage before audiences (Şimşek, 2018). Digital platform users’ online publics can be defined as intimate publics (Ravn et al., 2019) or blurry-edged networked publics (Burkell et al., 2014). Online viewing behavior, referred to by some scholars as lurking or voyeurism (Lopez & Robbins, 2022), social surveillance (Marwick, 2012), spectatorship, and even scopophilia (i.e., looking and being looked at as a source of pleasure in social media consumption) (Şimşek, 2018), is central to learning online social norms, creating identities, and

posting on social media (Lopez & Robbins, 2022).

Although social media platforms are utilized for both public purposes (e.g., posting or browsing) and private purposes (e.g., interpersonal communication) (Beyens et al., 2024), some users deliberately blur the line between public and private (Ravn et al., 2019). People consensually choose to disclose and reveal personal information while self-monitoring their online actions (Marwick, 2012). Consequently, the private is consumed publicly through the sharing of intimate family photos as part of broader aims to publicize identity, brands, or businesses (Ravn et al., 2019). This practice seeks to gain “attention capital” (Smith & Fischer, 2021), which is scarce (Celis Bueno, 2015; Smith & Fischer, 2021) in social media’s attention economy (Casero-Ripollés, 2021), characterized by “a media and consumer society, organized around the production and consumption of images, commodities, and staged events” (Kellner, 2005).

Additionally, public and private spaces on social media demonstrate a controlled and commodified spectacle (Wirman et al., 2022), where presentations and representations of the “self” have gained significant importance. Self-disclosure (i.e., providing personal information about oneself to others) (Krämer & Schäwel, 2020) and the revelation of personal space and daily life, aimed at creating direct interactions without state control, have succeeded in attracting audience attention—public attention that sidelines local Eastern cultural values (Wirman et al., 2022).

The rules, standards, and norms of cyber micro-communities, in fact, more immediately affect their members, while the Internet has weakened the creation of macro-communities with established social norms, values, and hierarchically imposed rules (Meraji Oskuie, 2020). With the commercialization of private life and its transformation into a salable commodity, the way individuals perceive sociocultural values, taboos, and relationships has been changing (Wirman et al., 2022).

This transformation has resulted in varying levels of awareness and ignorance about social norms and lifestyles, as well as changes to them, transforming public and private spaces. These shifts have long raised concerns among Iranian governments, leading them to employ various social control measures, such as filtering, forcing users to migrate to domestic social media platforms, and criminalization.

In this article, we delved into the issues of (cyber) self and self-(re)presentation, the compartmentalization of public and private spheres in the real world (though cyberspace, as a space with tangible social and societal implications, is equally real), and the “*publivate*” sphere on social media. We discussed how the interplay among public, private, and “*publivate*” selves, along with the reciprocal influences of conformity, pluralistic ignorance, normalization, and normativity, have been transforming the traditional compartmentalization of spaces in Iranian social life. We also discussed the complications of trans-

jurisdictional regulation of cyberspace and its implications for users, particularly in Iranian society.

## 2. Methodology

This article employed “theoretical integration” (Benefiel, 2014; Krohn & Eassey, 2014) to scrutinize cyber self-(re)presentations within the “*publivate*” space on social media platforms. Theoretical integration combines logically interrelated propositions and ideas from multiple theories into a larger set of propositions to form a new theory, providing a more comprehensive explanation of a given phenomenon (Krohn & Eassey, 2014). We utilized cross-level integration, synthesizing micro- and macro-level theories, and interdisciplinary integration, incorporating concepts and theories from diverse fields (Krohn & Eassey, 2014), including social media studies, sociology, psychology, and regulatory perspectives.

## 4. Discussions

### 4.1. Self and Multiple Selves

Cyber self-(re)presentation revolves around the concept of the self. The self is considered multifaceted (Thomas et al., 2013), and humans are not “one self” but multiple contextualized selves (Showers & Zeigler-Hill, 2007; Rozuel, 2011; Clifford et al., 2020). These multiple selves are shaped, managed, and represented in social interactions, in terms of multiple self-aspects, such as different roles, relationships, or contexts important to people’s identities (Rozuel, 2011; Thomas et al., 2013), to suit social expectations and one’s own internal expectations, in a process of role-taking or role-playing (Rozuel, 2011). People’s roles are their self-perceptions when they relate to their surrounding environment and others within different contexts. Each social role contains, and also differs in terms of, a set of norms, expectations, rights, duties, behaviors, activities, and decision-making patterns (Su et al., 2021). Individuals learn to adapt separately to the specific norms and standards of the different spheres they participate in, and to some significant extent, dissolve into their roles (Rozuel, 2011; Pinto-Garay et al., 2022). Individuals’ selves are displayed simultaneously through their actions and others’ interactions with them, in front of a multiplicity of audiences (Wittkower, 2015).

The cognitive representations of these multiple selves can be referred to as self-aspects, consisting of “self-knowledge in the form of self-beliefs, attributes, or episodic memories”—either overlapping or distinct elements across different self-aspects (Thomas et al., 2013). Self-concept, or the experienced sense of self, consists of distinct, contextualized, and quite flexible identities or self-aspects that can correspond to some combination of private and public selves, internal and affective states, external environments, roles, social relationships, social identities, behavioral situations, experiences, or relational and

collective identities. They are conceptualized as cognitive structures containing sets of specific attributes or beliefs, with significant amounts of affect-laden content and information (Showers & Zeigler-Hill, 2007; Clifford et al., 2020). Individuals' self-concepts can vary in complexity, i.e., the degree to which the self-concept is compartmentalized, with a greater number of self-aspects and stronger distinctions or boundaries between them (Clifford et al., 2020). An individual's personality, rather than being a single, unified entity, is a collection of small interacting or sometimes contradicting egos or sub-personalities, forming an integrated self (Rozuel, 2011).

Individuals wear masks, adopt personas (Rozuel, 2011), and activate different selves in different situations to achieve personal goals (Thomas et al., 2013), such as recognition, status, gaining favors (Rozuel, 2011), self-enhancement, self-consistency, accuracy, self-improvement, or resilience. If these goals and motives change, the self-structure can change as well (Showers & Zeigler-Hill, 2007).

#### **4.2. Cyber-Self and Self-(re)presentation**

Self-representations are always about communication and have always been social. These self-expressions on social media can be seen as both representations (signs/objects, constructed in some way, that stand in for a concept or thing) and presentations (acts of presenting oneself) (Rettberg, 2017). Social media users must manage their self-presentations through selective disclosures to anticipated audiences (Shelton et al., 2015). "When representations are shared out of context, their meaning is often constructed differently by the new audience" (Rettberg, 2017).

Early theories of self-presentation, such as Goffman's dramaturgical perspective, are useful for understanding self-presentation processes on social media (Hollenbaugh, 2021). For Goffman, life is a goal-directed, distinctive, and selective self-representation—or a stage performance—in which people (i.e., actors) perform certain (social) roles, selectively share information, and take cues from their various audiences (i.e., fellow performers). Using props in a play (social interaction), they manage the transition from backstage to front-stage and effectively hide their self behind the characters they portray. Thus, in social interactions, the self evolves and develops alongside the performance of self and the roles people enact (Rozuel, 2011; Shelton et al., 2015; Hollenbaugh, 2021; Lopez & Robbins, 2022), creating a growing, crystallized self. Some aspects of the crystallized self may be more appropriate for presentation to particular audiences at specific times (McEwan & Flood, 2018).

Social media are platforms for the formation, management, and negotiation of identities (Meraji Oskouie et al., 2024). Identity is a performance of the self, tailored for specific audiences (McEwan & Flood, 2018). It can be defined as "the unity of a narrative embodied in

a single life,” which may be obscured by a compartmentalized lifestyle involving different norms and roles across various social spheres, including distinct groups (Pinto-Garay et al., 2022). Consequently, the self, as the core of one’s identity, is multiple and ever-changing (Rozuel, 2011). Although people’s actions are ultimately governed by free will rather than dictated solely by their roles (Rozuel, 2011), identity performance relies on impression management—namely, the ability to manipulate and exert control over how they are perceived by others on the front stage (Lopez & Robbins, 2022). This effort aims to create a positive first impression (Iftikhar et al., 2024) and aligns with the expectations of their perceived audience (McEwan & Flood, 2018).

People may feel pressured to perform a positive self-presentation by creating a specific image for their audiences that does not necessarily reflect their actual reality (Iftikhar et al., 2024). Through various verbal and nonverbal communication cues, tactics, and methods, they present themselves favorably via appearance, language, and actions to influence their audiences’ perceptions of their identities, whether actual or ideal selves (Hollenbaugh, 2021; Iftikhar et al., 2024). From Goffman’s perspective, the theatrical side of self-presentation is friendly to public life, but hostile to private life (Tombul & Sari, 2021).

Social media gives shape to distributed communities (Wirman et al., 2022) and provides users with spaces to perform their identities and exhibit representations of self through their posts (McEwan & Flood, 2018). Similar to real-world life, individuals attempt to segment their online self-presentation for multiple audiences (Shelton et al., 2015) and constrain these identity performances based on their pre-perceived understanding of the online audience (Tagg & Seargeant, 2016; McEwan & Flood, 2018). However, each individual’s social circle is growing wider, less differentiated, and less knowable on social media (Lopez & Robbins, 2022). Users take into account “imagined audiences” when engaging in online self-presentation and impression management (Shelton et al., 2015; Ravn et al., 2019). They perform their identities online based on perceived shared communicative practices, reflected in their audience design strategies for style, language choice, topics of conversation, and the use of existing or former social roles and relationships (Tagg & Seargeant, 2016). Self-presentation before multiple, yet unknown audiences can result in role conflicts.

### **4.3. Cyber and Real-World role conflicts**

Role conflict occurs more easily on social media platforms, where the phenomenon of holding multiple roles is more latent and significant (Su et al., 2021). Social media users are more concerned with being watched by key members of their extended social network, such as bosses or parents, than by governments or corporations (Marwick, 2012). Any role conflict (i.e., incompatibility and incongruity in expectations

between a person's different social roles) that requires different or incompatible behaviors (Nambisan & Baron, 2021; Su et al., 2021) induces difficulties in complying with their simultaneous and contradicting role expectations (Carpenter & Lertpratchya, 2016), such as in work-life conflict (Liu et al., 2020). With the invasion of the workplace into personal social spaces, the boundary between personal and work spaces is blurring, raising work-life conflict and creating a dilemma of how to meet organizational requirements for employee social media sharing while maintaining emotional connections with friends and family (Zhou et al., 2023), who are connected through intimate self-disclosures and voluntary social interactions (Su et al., 2021).

While organizations should recognize the multiple aspects of workers' lives, individuals may limit their online self-representations to avoid the consequences of being surveilled and punished by organizational entities (i.e., Althusser's ideological state apparatuses, such as corporate workplaces and educational and religious institutions) for sharing backstage elements of their lives, identity facets, behaviors, or political beliefs that are deemed undesirable or potentially deviant (McEwan & Flood, 2018). Fragmenting involves micromanaging self-presentation by censoring and editing the self, displaying social desirability, and posting compartments of the self rather than the whole self, thus keeping personal and professional lives separate (Lopez & Robbins, 2022).

When people consciously attempt to compartmentalize their lives, they are more likely to feel cognitive dissonance resulting from incongruence between their offline self and online self (as an inaccurate representation of self), or between their professional identity and their self-beliefs. Therefore, they may use self-justification and spin to relieve the cognitive dissonance (Lopez & Robbins, 2022) induced by the compartmentalization. Cyber and real-world role conflicts can lead to greater compartmentalization of private and public lives.

#### **4.4. Compartmentalization**

Everyday life is compartmentalized into different domains, each with its own inherent logic (Sonnberger, 2022). Compartmentalization refers to dividing something into distinct and separate sub-sections (Rozuel, 2011). Social compartmentalization and segregation occur based on association (the demographic base of identity) and a justificatory ideology to avoid social contradictions (Wexler, 1996). Psychological compartmentalization occurs when individuals isolate and separate certain aspects of their personality from the rest of their personality or from their core self by actively classifying their life into rigid and exclusive categories. By compartmentalizing, individuals overemphasize some aspects of their personality while discarding others. Indeed, a persona-led ego is a primary manifestation of the

compartmentalization phenomenon (Rozuel, 2011).

The organization of self-knowledge, also called self-structure/ self-organization, constructs contextualized selves and is established on a continuum based on the distribution of positive and negative self-beliefs across a person’s self-aspect categories, ranging from evaluatively integrative (i.e., each self with a mixture of positive and negative attributes) to evaluatively compartmentalized (i.e., multiple selves, each consisting of either mostly positive or negative self-beliefs) (Showers & Zeigler-Hill, 2007; Rozuel, 2011; Thomas et al., 2013), in order to serve implicit or explicit self-goals, such as self-esteem and long-term psychic and emotional stability. The compartmentalized person may (un)consciously censor the feelings, emotions, aspirations, and moral values that are considered inappropriate or irrelevant to a certain context (Rozuel, 2011). Due to the perceived importance of each self-aspect to an individual’s identity, individuals may be positively compartmentalized, positively integrative, negatively compartmentalized, or negatively integrative (Thomas et al., 2013). Although the positive and negative affective self-related knowledge can show overlap or redundancy across different self-concepts (Clifford et al., 2020).

Psychological compartmentalization is a normal process that helps individuals “make sense of the world and cope with disruptions.” It can offer a psychological coping mechanism for alleviating extremely negative feelings or traumatic experiences (Rozuel, 2011). The concept of compartmentalization can also be employed in other life domains, such as consumption practices (Sonnberger, 2022). It is noteworthy that some scholars criticize compartmentalization of social life as a moral disorder, in which good behavior in one sphere can be at odds with another (Pinto-Garay et al., 2022).

The compartmentalization of social spaces is constructed socio-politically, culturally, and ideologically (Arjmand, 2017). In Iranian culture, the hijab and the principle of “respecting gender relationship boundaries” influence social space divisions and segregations, constructing gendered spaces and introvert (feminine)/ extrovert (masculine) relationships, leading to other spatial gender-based segregations (Taghavian & Taheri Kia, 2021). A strict compartmentalization between public and private spheres (equivalent to the dichotomy of men and women; (Arjmand, 2017)) can be observed in different domains of Iranians’ lives, where privacy is related to keeping the self, or parts of it, (un)consciously concealed from larger audiences to protect personal information (Lopez & Robbins, 2022). Each of these spheres has its own norms. Transgressing and deviating (un)consciously from these norms, moral or legal boundaries, and (un)written rules can induce both formal and informal forms of social control (punishment, discipline, and sanctions) (Meraji Oskuie et al., 2022). To avoid the negative consequences of these social control



reactions, some individuals may deliberately compartmentalize their public and private lives even more. However, when it comes to the representations of public and private lives on social media, these spaces face more complicated issues.

#### 4.5. “Publivacy” on social media

Place, territory, or seat have been losing sense on the Internet (Meraji Oskuie, 2020). Social media settings are independent of time and space (Wittkower, 2015; McEwan & Flood, 2018), detaching people from these dimensions by providing them with different contextual structures, resulting in a paradigm shift in space, self, self-presentation, and privacy (Tombul & Sari, 2021). Privacy has historically been built upon a set of spatial, temporal, or object-related dichotomies and divisions (Marwick, 2012). Privacy is directly related to space. Private sphere depends on how space is perceived, and any changes to this perception in cyberspace result in the blurring of the boundaries between the private and public spheres, which transforms privacy (Tombul & Sari, 2021). This results in a third space we call “*publivate*.”

“Social media involves a collapse of social contexts and social roles” (Marwick, 2012). A private social media space is a “semi-public” space, not open to the general public but restricted to users’ friends: an “intradiversity” “shaped by complexes of personal networks, individual experiences and mutual friendships, rather than being either unpredictably diverse (or ‘superdiverse’)” (Tagg & Seargeant, 2016). The “context collapse” (i.e., middle region, or publicly private and privately public spaces) (Wittkower, 2015), or social network mergers (Hollenbaugh, 2021), means that users must strategically navigate concealing, revealing, and disclosing personal information to multiple ambiguous, unknowable online audiences, where the boundaries of work/school, home, friends, and family are blurred (Marwick, 2012; Tagg & Seargeant, 2016; McEwan & Flood, 2018; Tombul & Sari, 2021).

Digital content has the potential for great scalability (i.e., having great reach and visibility) (Tagg & Seargeant, 2016). Information shared online can be persistent, searchable, replicable, and accessible to unseen audiences, and prone to misdirected disclosures over time (Shelton et al., 2015; Wittkower, 2015; McEwan & Flood, 2018). Social media users encounter the “doubling of place” challenge, where they must align with more than one physical and/or social context, as well as the norms and expectations of both the immediate online space and the possible future contexts, where “their posts may be entextualized (embedded and reinterpreted in new contexts)” (Tagg & Seargeant, 2016).

From a dramaturgical perspective, social media can collapse Goffman’s front and back stages into a single space by allowing privately intended information to be broadcast to multiple public audiences, and delivering publicly produced information to private and

intimate audiences (Lopez & Robbins, 2022), where performances deemed appropriate for one setting may be inappropriate for another context due to the existence of multiple online discursive communities. Therefore, people may perform “identities deemed appropriate for the most conservative audience, by portraying compressed, conservative versions of a stable self” (McEwan & Flood, 2018). Manipulation of public and private space is a way for users to protect their privacy (with certain levels and layers) within public scrutiny (Wirman et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the desire for visibility is in conflict with the concept of privacy (Tombul & Sari, 2021). The “*publivate*” space has raised concerns about “whether we are losing our interiority altogether”, and the social norm of “let it all hang out” on social media, which may destroy the private self altogether, resulting in an age of conformity, where all aspects of people’s lives become performances before others (Wittkower, 2015).

#### 4.6. Conformity and Pluralistic ignorance

People shape their communication and perform their identities online based on observation and what they perceive to be a shared communicative practice (Tagg & Seargeant, 2016). They may voluntarily, and sometimes unconsciously, make changes to their personal opinions or behaviors to align with a majority holding an opposing opinion or behavior, in order to match a perceived group norm. This conformity, as a powerful social phenomenon (Smelser & Baltes, 2001; Wijenayake et al., 2020), occurs when people seek to feel included, secure, liked, and accepted (Iftikhar et al., 2024), as well as to be accurate, gain social approval, and avoid the consequences of appearing deviant (Smelser & Baltes, 2001).

Individuals may change their attitudes or behaviors to resemble what they believe most similar people would think or do (Smelser & Baltes, 2001), or they may withhold their personal judgments and opinions in the face of peer pressure within groups (Wijenayake et al., 2020). This can lead to pluralistic ignorance, a social psychological phenomenon (Sobotka, 2022), and a discrepancy between “first-order” beliefs (actual personal opinions) and “second-order” beliefs (perceived others’ opinions) (Eisner et al., 2020; Sobotka, 2022), where individuals “overestimate how widely their own opinions are shared” or “wrongly believe that their own opinions differ greatly from those of others” (Eisner et al., 2020), despite their views and values actually being similar. This leads to the majority of group members acting against their personal beliefs in order to conform to norms that none or few of them privately endorse. Simultaneously, they maintain private beliefs that do not reflect their public actions (Baugh et al., 2022; Sobotka, 2022). These misperceptions of social norms may lead individuals to engage in risky behaviors they otherwise would not have chosen to do (Baugh et al., 2022).

Arguably, though not empirically tested, pluralistic ignorance is more likely to occur for a limited period of time in a society, with debated attitude objects, by which individuals isolate or may isolate themselves in public (Eisner et al., 2020). Nonetheless, this is a frequently observed condition in a socially organized group where mutual observability of its members is slight (Miller, 2023). Before the advent of social media, the private lives of Iranians were strictly compartmentalized from the public sphere, due to religio-cultural norms and Islamic legal obligations. Hence, people were pluralistically ignorant about others' lifestyles, private behaviors, and attitudes. What was also represented on Iranian mainstream media after the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979 followed the same socially constructed public-private compartmentalization, avoiding the representation of the private sphere in the media as a public sphere. This contributed to maintaining a lack of awareness or pluralistic ignorance about private lives. Indeed, evidence suggests that the information conveyed by media is often not representative of the population and frequently generates pluralistic ignorance (Miller, 2023). This has led Iranians to compartmentalize their public and private spheres further, in order to conform to perceived social norms and rules, seeking social approval and avoiding the potential negative social consequences of being deviant.

With the advent of social media in Iranians' lives, the dissociative anonymity (i.e., anonymity promoting a sense of dissociation among users) (Shelton et al., 2015), afforded by trans-jurisdictional social media platforms, induced the emergence of an evolving "*publivate*" space, where private lives found opportunities to go public. This new space, with its own norms and expectations, disrupted the pluralistic ignorance about others' private lifestyles and attitudes, as Iranians could now observe their peers' (real or ideal) private lives before their eyes, comparing them with their own. This led more users to share their lives "*publivate*ly".

Social media platforms like Instagram, which emphasize popularity, likes, and followers, may contribute to social conformity pressure among users, especially adolescents. The frequency of social media use influences users' perceptions of social conformity pressure. People compare their skills, appearances, and actions with those of others, especially those they perceive to be either more successful or less fortunate (Iftikhar et al., 2024). These comparisons can lead to changes in people's online representations. Indeed, shifts in self-presentation styles can, in turn, shape the kind of space within which participants interact (Tagg & Seargeant, 2016).

The more users interact within this "*publivate*" space, the more its norms and expectations become normalized, and the more attitudes and lifestyles change. Cyberspace and real-world space reciprocally influence each other. Hence, the emergence of a new "*publivate*" space in cyberspace can lead to changes in the boundaries between public and

private spaces in real-world lives, as can now be clearly observed in Iranians’ daily lives.

Pluralistic ignorance can turn into a “pluralistic awareness”, which may induce cognitive dissonance. This pluralistic awareness can result from intentional or inadvertent exposure (i.e., not actively selecting or searching for content; Meraji Oskouie et al., 2024) to fragmented homophilic representations on social media. In social networks, individuals tend to be homophilic (rather than heterophilic), meaning they prefer to connect with those who share similarities in sociodemographics, information-sharing, opinions, characteristics, and cultural preferences (Meraji Oskouie et al., 2024). They also seek congruent information and selectively avoid exposure to heterogeneous opinions, posts, or attitude-inconsistent information (Jeong et al., 2019). Individuals align themselves with content that reflects or reinforces their desired image while avoiding content that contradicts it (Meraji Oskouie et al., 2024) to reduce cognitive dissonance or psychological discomfort (Jeong et al., 2019), as well as the discrepancy and inner pressure to maintain mental consistency (Bai et al., 2019). These homophilic attitudes can lead to the formation of social and informational echo chambers, fostering increasingly extreme views rather than averaging out moderate and universally accepted perspectives (Wittkower, 2015).

Additionally, digital media provide like-minded individuals with opportunities to gather, form subcultures, and establish group norms across time and space. Consequently, traditional norms are increasingly unable to uniformly direct all lifestyles. Overlapping norms among different cyber groups are diminishing “due to psychological preferences, recommendation systems, and limited time and attention resources”, leading “to the heterogeneity of attitudes and opinions, and possibly differentiated lifestyles”. However, some “communities are duplicated rather than isolated” (Zhou & Zhu, 2022). These fragmented homophilic exposures to echo chambers within a simultaneously heterophilized space, in turn, have the potential to create new forms of pluralistic ignorance. The interplay between pluralistic ignorance and awareness influences the processes of normalization and normativity.

#### **4.7. Normalization and Normativity**

Public consensus among users and their audiences regarding the normality of disclosing personal private spaces on social media grants them control. This implies that the (in)appropriateness of such disclosures depends on the collective agreements established within users’ social networks (Wirman et al., 2022). Normalization is a process involving norm-changing, the introduction of new norms, and the more or less evident acceptance and strategic legitimation of deviance (i.e., not normality) or previously deviant positions as normal (rather than abnormal), thereby establishing a new normative order (Krzyżanowski,

2020). In fact, global media and corporations, word-of-mouth, and online social communications contribute to the creation of new social conventions—established patterns of behavior, social interpretations, norms, rules, and legitimization processes that constrain actions and shape typical behavior patterns (Meraji Oskuie, 2020).

Shifts in the boundaries of public and private, along with the resulting changes to their norms and values, both online and offline, can be considered normatively and, at times, even legally transgressive in Iranian society. Transgression arises from transcending culturally prescribed and established norms and can induce both liberating effects and severe consequences. Constraints or limits maintain an intense relationship with the desire to transgress those very limits and are constant experiences in human actions, rendering humans social and producing humans' behaviors (Meraji Oskuie, 2020).

Transgression, as the act of transcending limits or engaging in edgework or the carnivalesque, is a defining feature of contemporary life. Societies often celebrate the opposition between order and excess desire through periodic carnivals (Meraji Oskuie, 2020). Social media platforms, especially those offering some degree of anonymity, can function as Bakhtin's carnival spaces, where codified ethics are temporarily set aside by disinhibited users in favor of ethical situationalism, creating a momentary escape from daily life (Shelton et al., 2015). Escapism occurs when individuals facing persistent hardships detach from their reality and problems, retreating into imaginary worlds. Alongside entertainment and passing time, escapism is one of the gratifications provided by (social) media (Meraji Oskuie et al., 2024). These carnival spaces allow prevailing norms to be subsumed by “culturally institutionalized shamelessness” and enable “freedom of speech over even the most taboo of subjects” (Shelton et al., 2015).

Another normative issue that has raised concerns among Iranian governments is the process of cultural leveling (i.e., homogenization)—a (two-way) process in which unique and distinct cultures become increasingly similar, particularly due to the diffusion of Western culture into others (Meraji Oskuie et al., 2024)—facilitated by social media use, which has increasingly influenced Iranian lifestyles. Social media shapes norms and rules, is an indispensable part of everyday culture and public communication, and affects people's lifestyles—a “structurally, positionally and individually determined phenomenon” (Ying, 2020). A person's social network structure can be considered a proxy measure for an individual's lifestyle. Indeed, social ties reflect individual sociability in particular domains with distinct norms and values. Hence, sizeable and diversified personal networks on social media can contribute to varied daily activities. There is increasing differentiation among individuals in daily rhythms, as no dominant lifestyle guides what one's life looks like (Zhou & Zhu, 2022).

At the same time, when speaking of culture in a global context, transnational spaces, flows and connections, and processes of cultural homogenization, appropriation, deterritorialization, and hybridization come under the spotlight, rather than cultural differences (Boussebaa, 2021). Globalization in general, and digital globalization in particular, reduce nation-states' sovereignty by inducing cultural leveling, which creates indistinct national boundaries and restructures markets (Meraji Oskouie et al., 2024). On the other hand, the differences in behaviors and media consumption habits of media audiences lead to a change in the dynamics of communication and social changes, resulting in the hybridization of digital society (Plenković & Mustić, 2020). Cultural hybridity (or glocalization), a transnational cultural dynamic where disjuncture and mixture of cultures co-exist, promotes and strengthens cultural diversity as a means of achieving cultural sustainability through simultaneously receiving global culture and maintaining local cultural codes (Lee et al., 2020).

These normative and cultural changes resulting from the normalization process of once-deviant behaviors, attitudes, conditions, or deemed Westernized/ hybridized cultural values, embodied through social media use, have long been the subject of debate in Iranian social media governance, raising concerns about social control and regulation across governments. This is especially true because the Internet and its socio-technical affordances have questioned traditional regulatory notions, such as privacy and the boundaries between the public and private (Ravn et al., 2019). In the next section, we will discuss the complications of trans-jurisdictional regulation of cyberspace and their implications for users, particularly Iranians.

#### **4.8. Trans-jurisdictional regulatory issues**

Regulability is a government's capacity to regulate behavior within its proper reach (Meraji Oskouie, 2020); however, cyberspace is often considered a borderless, limitless, and boundless phenomenon (Roy, 2022). The architecture of cyberspace renders cyber life less directly regulable (Meraji Oskouie, 2020), due to the decentralized nature of online networks, the bottom-up nature of content creation and distribution, and the challenges of determining territorial jurisdiction (Flew et al., 2019). Yet, cyberspace can be considered the most regulable space, as it can, through its architecture, reveal the identity, location, and actions of its users, and monitor and identify all interactions within it (Chang & Grabosky, 2017). Regulatory design in cyberspace employs socio-technical-legal modalities, rather than socio-legal ones pertaining to the physical world (Meraji Oskouie, 2020).

Different theories for cyberspace regulation have been proposed, including Reidenberg's theory of Lex Informatica (Meraji Oskouie, 2020), Symbiotic Regulation (Murray, 2008), and Lessig's four modalities of regulation and protection, which include law, norms,

markets, and architecture, along with their respective constraining means: the threat of punishment, application of societal sanctions, price and price-related signals, and physical constraints such as software and hardware code and design (Meraji Oskuie, 2020).

Architecture is the physical organization of our public and private spaces and affects and shapes what people can and cannot do. The shape and size of the spaces we are contained in constrain us. Software and hardware are also forms of architecture and regulatory forces with both limiting and enabling functions (van den Berg & Keymolen, 2017). Where law-making processes are lengthy and reactive rather than proactive, and lag behind the velocity of technological development—leading to the deterritorialization of law—cyberspace relies on code as law. This means that cyberspace can be built, architected, or coded in a way that protects the values perceived as fundamental to communities or in a way that allows those values to disappear (Meraji Oskuie, 2020).

Although criticized as undemocratic and nontransparent, regulation by design (or techno-regulation) has become popular among both public and private parties on the Internet because it is considered effective, efficient, easy, and cheap, leading to very high levels of compliance (van den Berg & Keymolen, 2017). Additionally, the media literacy of users is considered a democratic substitute for centralized regulation, especially where governments and companies are unwilling to regulate; thus, consumers need to regulate themselves (Buckingham, 2020).

The complications of regulation are induced by the nature of the Internet itself. The Internet is a decentralized technology (Buckingham, 2020), within which any citizen has the capacity to broadcast their opinions globally and instantly. Hence, the traditional editorial and censorial control over who can contribute to public debates has been bypassed (Edwards et al., 2021). It is largely impossible and ineffective for national regulatory agencies to undertake classical or command-and-control regulation, and content policing through censorship and classification laws, due to the scale and speed of interactions on social media. This is why governments are heavily dependent on alternative mechanisms of control, including self-regulation and quasi-regulation (or private regulation), which rely on responsive corporate governance and platform architecture/design (or algorithmic regulation; Yeung, 2018), as well as co-regulation (or joint regulation: an effective mix of public/government and private regulations) (Flew, 2015; Meraji Oskuie, 2020). Self-regulation offers more pronounced speed, efficiency, flexibility, sensitivity to market circumstances, and less government intervention (Chang & Grabosky, 2017). Nonetheless, social media corporations, while having national headquarters, hold legal obligations with various governments in different national territories (Flew, 2015).

Additionally, the Internet is an international medium and space

(Meraji Oskuie, 2020), in which almost all forms of social media interactions occur on platforms that are both transnational and private (Flew, 2015). Therefore, banning an online activity in a certain country would be ineffective when subjects of regulation (i.e., service providers and consumers) have sufficient mobility in their operations or activities to access that activity outside their national jurisdiction, regulated by another regime, and register in physical jurisdictions where extradition is difficult (Flew et al., 2019; Meraji Oskuie, 2020).

Hence, a domestic social media platform can be considered the embodiment of national jurisdiction as a means of social control. Nonetheless, Iranian social media governance experiences have demonstrated the failure of government efforts to filter content and migrate users to domestic social media platforms due to the widespread daily use of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) among Iranian users (Meraji Oskuie et al., 2023). Additionally, users can evade law enforcement online by turning to encrypted or hidden virtual networks (darknets) (Flew et al., 2019). Therefore, any direct, strong intervention to curb individual freedom in cyberspace requires strong social or economic incentives to encourage users to support this intervention (Murray, 2008).

As our daily observations of Iranian social media also indicate, Iranian users take refuge in trans-jurisdictional platforms to “*publivate*” manifest their lifestyles, desires, and opinions, especially those deemed socio-religio-politico-culturally nonnormative. These no longer private spaces eventually adjust the needs and desires of their audiences (Wirman et al., 2022), and, reciprocally, the desires and needs drive media use, with users seeking content that fulfills these needs, motivations, gratifications, and goals (Meraji Oskouie et al., 2024). Hence, social media is imbued with self-presentations of what people yearn to become (Tombul & Sari, 2021), and helps individuals of all ages create their own worlds as part of a participatory cyber culture on a global scale (Tutgun-Ünal, 2021).

## 5. Conclusion

The current article aims to bring into the spotlight the issues related to cyber self-(re)presentation in a third type of space resulting from the combination and blurring of the boundaries between the public and private spheres in cyberspace, which we have coined as the “*publivate*” sphere—a space that has been transforming the traditional compartmentalization of spaces in Iranian real-world social life.

For centuries, Iranians’ lives were strictly compartmentalized into public and private spheres, shaped by religio-cultural norms and rules. After the advent of social media in Iranian lives, the pluralistic ignorance of other people’s lifestyles, private behaviors, and attitudes was disrupted by constant, direct exposure to the real or ideal self-representations of others’ lives online. Whether these self-



(re)presentations are real or ideal, they manifest and reveal the desires, wants, and needs of individuals.

These self-representations have been enabled by the sense of freedom, impunity, and disinhibition that trans-jurisdictional social media platform affordances provide users with. By private lives going public in a “*publivate*” sphere with its own norms and expectations, people have become more accustomed to seeing (dis)similar lifestyles and attitudes compared to their own. The normalization of these new cyber norms has led to their greater incorporation into social lives, which, in turn, induces significant changes in real-world self-presentations, lifestyles, attitudes, and, eventually, in consensually accepted social norms in both public and private spheres.

This process of new social norm legitimation and formation can be accelerated by constant exposure to fragmented homophilic cyber representations in a simultaneously heterophilized space, which can result in new forms of pluralistic ignorance regarding the real existing diversity of lifestyles and attitudes, creating new forms of conformity to these new norms. Additionally, this norm legitimation and formation can be influenced by the reciprocity among affective-evaluation-laden self-beliefs about the public, private, and “*publivate*” selves, and the resulting cognitive dissonance. The more the “*publivate*” self is positively evaluated by individuals, and endorsed and encouraged by their audiences, the more the public and private selves in the real-world change.

Societies, norms, and cultures are dynamic. Hence, to be effective, cyberspace and cultural governance should take these sociocultural dynamics into account. Researchers can further empirically study these dynamics to illuminate individuals’ perceptions of public, private, and “*publivate*” selves, their boundaries, norms, and expectations, as well as their socio-psychological implications in creating cultural change.

### **Conflict of interest**

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

### **Authors' contributions**

All authors contributed to the original idea, study design.

### **Ethical considerations**

The authors have completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc. This article was not authored by artificial intelligence.

### **Data availability**

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available

from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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