

My Silenced Voice – The Cultural and Establishment Challenges Facing Young Bedouin Women in the Digital Space

Dr. Lior Solomovich

Kaye Academic College of Education, Beersheba, Israel

Abstract

The Bedouin society in Israel is a vulnerable group, traditional and conservative society, but the enormous changes of the 21st-century technologies have forced the Bedouin society to change and become a society that strives for modernization (Abu Asaba, 2008).

Social inequality studies examine how different ethnic groups use the Internet and how these uses may increase or decrease social discrimination. Minority groups with low human capital in the offline space appear to retain this status in the digital world (Ragnedda, 2017; Robinson et al., 2015; van Dijk, 2020).

In recent decades, the digital divide between Jewish and Bedouin students in the Israel academy has been stable, but during the Corona period, it became more acute.

Reflecting the lack of suitable communications infrastructure (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2019), partial and inferior access to the Internet (Tahauko et al., 2021) poor digital literacy (Schejter et al., 2018).

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Today, a high level of digital literacy is considered a national interest, which includes the individual's ability to use ICT (information-communication-technology) to access information, manage it, integrate it, and acquire higher education.

The assimilation of digital literacy among Bedouin female students is intended to encourage creative thinking, national and international collaborations, communication methods, knowledge-building processes, national products, and more.

In the present study, we will present the effects of the digital divide on the higher education system and the use of the Internet and social networks among Bedouin female students during their academic studies. According to Abu-Kishk (2020), the digital space is subject to social and political pressures. Its use by women is subject to societal standards, including control and supervision by the family and society and the fear of political persecution.

The study applied a quantitative methodology. An anonymous online questionnaire was distributed in November–December 2020 via educational institutions and female and student WhatsApp groups, receiving responses from 200 female students.

The results show that only 32.5% reported regular internet access, indicating persistent infrastructural inequalities even among higher education students. At the same time, social media presence is widespread (85.2%). Their social media posts focus primarily on social (66%) and personal (17.7%) issues, while political expression is minimal (1.5%) and stems from concerns about censorship. Some of their digital activity is linked to their student identity and therefore some of their internet use is learning-oriented (73%), with an emphasis on coursework and educational experiences. The majority, 87.6%, reported a strong sense of control due to family and community norms, alongside concerns stemming from political sensitivities.

The findings point to a multidimensional digital divide that combines access constraints with gender surveillance and socio-political pressures. The study discusses the implications for higher education institutions and calls for culturally responsive digital inclusion strategies that address infrastructure and skills while addressing the social conditions that silence women's voices online.