Exploring the affordances of popular private Facebook groups for women-only in Egypt

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Abstract

In Egypt, the creation and usage of private Facebook groups for women-only is vastly popular. Despite scholarship on women's social media use, research examining the emergence of online women communities, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa region, is scarce. This article draws upon a case study of five popular Facebook groups for women-only, which includes data collected from observation of the Facebook groups' features, twelve semi-structured face-to-face with Facebook group creators and members, and archival content. It uses the conceptual framework of Affordances to account for the mutual influence of the Facebook groups' structure, their users' perceptions, and their social context to understand why and how Facebook group creators and members use these Facebook groups. Results show that Facebook group creators and members perceive Facebook groups as safe spaces to express their personal and social distresses due to their privacy and exclusivity to women. These collective experiences have led to the manifestation of these Facebook groups as self-care spaces where FB group creators provide their members with information and entertainment to improve their health and well-being. Concurrently, FB group creators embarked on entrepreneurial practices by collaborating with brands and entities to provide these services.

Keywords: *Affordances, Facebook groups, social media, women-only, safe spaces, online communities*

1. Introduction

Technology-based affordances in Africa, such as mobile phones and social media platforms, have become highly accessible due to the presence of faster and cheaper internet provided by telecommunication companies (Ukpere et al., 2014). An ICT indicators Bulletin released by the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology in Egypt (2021) shows that Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) usage among Egyptians has become increasingly prevalent, particularly in urban households. It also shows that the usage of various forms of communications and information technology among male users is higher than that of females. For example, Internet usage was 61.5% for males compared to 53% for females, and owning a smartphone was 58.6% for males compared to 48.6% for females. However, among those who use the internet, females use ICT to participate in social network sites, nearly as much as men, with the indicators showing 89.9% for females and 91.1% for males. These figures indicate the potential of social media usage for female empowerment (Hurley, 2019).

However, recent literature exploring how women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) use opportunities that emerge via social media is scarce. On the contrary, Egyptian women's internet usage for activism and mobilization during the Arab spring in 2011 has gained vast academic attention

(Elsayed, 2016, p. 51). Even beyond the internet's role in a short revolutionary period, media generally play a substantial role in women's daily lives, essentially operating "as tools enabling them to assess, understand, negotiate and critique the world around them" (Elsayed, 2016, p. 51). Accordingly, it is relevant to recognize current trends in the MENA region of women's use of particular media platforms beyond visible political activism. Similarly, Skalli (2006) has called to study the forms of communication that women in the MENA region use to communicate their needs, produce capital of knowledge, and exhibit their issues and complex realities (pp. 39-40).

This article explores a popular trend of Facebook group (FB) creation for women-only and its usage in Egypt that started to be noticeable in 2015. Nowadays, there are countless Facebook groups for women-only that encompass thousands to hundreds of thousands of members, indicating their proliferation and popularity. Accordingly, the article aims to identify the reasons behind women's usage of these particular platforms. It uses the conceptual framework of Affordances as it offers guidance on accounting for the mutual and relational relationship between the perceived particularities of the platform structure, platform users' practices, and their social context. Hence, the following research questions are proposed:

Why do Facebook group creators and members use FB groups for women-only?

How do FB group creators and members perceive their usage of FB groups for women-only?

After the research questions have been identified, the existing literature on social media and identity will be reviewed to demonstrate how group-based identities, especially in relation to gender, are formed. Then the article presents literature on the conceptual framework of Affordances and its uses in media and communication studies to make sense of social media usage and practices. This is followed by a description and justification of the qualitative research design encompassing a case study approach of five popular Facebook groups for women-only. Lastly, after the results are presented, the discussion part draws back on the concept of Affordances.

2. Literature review

Since its early stages, social media platforms have cultivated connections among individuals and supported community building via technological features that enable users to form and sustain an extensive network of relationships (Ellison et al., 2011, p. 875; van Dijck, 2013, p. 200). Among other social networking sites, Facebook contains a wide online population of individuals whose online networks can be clustered into group-based identities (Nekmat & Lee, 2018, p. 2). Group-based identities are particularly visible in Facebook groups, as Facebook enables users to create a group based on common interests (Lijadi & van Schalkwyk, 2015, pp. 3-4).

The creator of a Facebook group could then interact with other users on this common interest by inviting them to join the group (Lijadi & van Schalkwyk, 2015). Alternatively, the creator may receive requests from Facebook users to join their Facebook group (ibid.). Accordingly, Facebook groups that are based on shared interests could be perceived as what (Marwick & Boyd, 2011) term "goal-oriented spaces" (p. 116) where their creation is based on imagined interested individuals that share similar

views as the creator. The visibility of individuals' interests falls in line with how Facebook's structure discloses individuals' identity information, which facilitates communication, enables social-information seeking behaviors, discussions on socially oriented issues, and fosters social engagements (Ellison et al., 2011, p. 887).

As social network sites, such as Facebook, support the concept of individuals displaying a single transparent identity (van Dijck, 2013, p. 200), it is noteworthy to account for the role of gender as identity information in social networking sites. Users are often required to identify their gender for access (Carstensen, 2014, p. 487). Gender identification is further emphasized on social networking sites, as "online identities are often strongly tied to offline bodies and social lives" (Dobson, 2015, p. 51). Furthermore, Friz & Gehl (2016) indicated that Pinterest's sign-up interface favors a feminine performance. Their study sheds light on how gender can be rooted in technological systems, which materializes as a product usually positioned across a dual-gendered spectrum of masculine and feminine (Friz & Gehl, 2016, p. 689).

Moreover, it is common among social media users to significantly exhibit the need for clear gender identities (Carstensen, 2014), as gender functions as a "social lubricant" for individuals to benefit from platforms and gain social knowledge (Marwick & Boyd, 2011, p. 120). This is reflected in the limited literature that empirically focuses on gendered, closed-off, and separatist private digital spaces (Clark-Parsons, 2018, p. 2129). For example, Clark-Parsons (2018) study showcased the development of a private Facebook group for women by a group of women that was perceived as essential to share experiences and distresses based on womanhood (pp. 2125-2126). Similarly, Pruchniewska's (2019) study showed that private Facebook groups for professional women are crucial to endorse women's interests by enabling them to self-represent themselves, express themselves, and seek support (p. 1364). Their results showed that potential members should exhibit a woman's identity to access its content, engage with other members, and exchange information. Furthermore, it shows how the concept of privacy has become "increasingly networked" as users' data are socially and locationally connected (boyd, 2012, p. 348).

In the context of the MENA region, Hurley's (2019) study on the female visual culture in the Arab Gulf region contributed to extending the focus from political actors and offered insights on how women's visual representations on social media shape highly gendered practices and are also influenced by socio-cultural context (p. 14). As for women's engagement in private digital spaces, Newsom & Lengel, (2012) indicated that women in the MENA region prefer to be heard in online spaces that are exclusively for them. While Hurley (2020) noted that many women in the MENA region are generally culturally discouraged and unwilling to display their faces or bodies online. These attitudes correspond with the prevalence of women enduring sexual harassment in North African societies that are revived in online spaces (Skalli, 2014, p. 46). However, exclusive spaces for women in the MENA region historically and currently have a significant impact. For example, offline private spaces for women had a multidimensional significance in constructing societal bonds and popular culture in Egypt (Sayigh, 1981). Mahmood (2001)indicated that spaces encompassing women's persistent presence, and spaces in which women self-regulate their lives away from men's influence, offer many prospects for

women's fulfillment and self-realization (p. 28). Nowadays, the prevalence of Facebook groups for women-only as private spaces has stirred public opinion and gained considerable attention from popular local television channels in Egypt on their impact on women's well-being and society. Accordingly, my article relevantly contributes to expanding the literature on the particular ways women use social media in the region by exploring the phenomenon of the prevalent usage of private Facebook groups among Egyptian women.

3. Affordances as a conceptual framework

Gibson (1986) initially developed the concept of Affordances to highlight the various prospects belonging to and offered by the environment. He pointed out that humans position themselves with objects in their environment, the range of affordances provided for action. In addition to including objects of the physical environment in his discussion of Affordances, he included people as a source of affordance (Hopkins, 2020, p. 49). He stated, "The richest and most elaborate affordances of the environment are provided by other animals and, for us, other people" (Gibson, 1986). Furthermore, for Gibson, human's direct perception is fundamental to identifying affordances.

Social scientists and media and communication scholars adopted the notion of Affordances to demonstrate the connection between technological properties, structures of social relations, and how users incorporate technological potentials into their practices (Evans et al., 2017; Hopkins, 2020; Hutchby, 2001, 2003; McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015). They have extended or re-grounded Gibson's concept of Affordances (Costa, 2018; Hurley, 2019; Hutchby, 2001; McVeigh-Schultz & Baym, 2015). For example, McVeigh-Schultz & Baym (2015) developed the idea of Gibson's emphasis on perception and used the term "sense-making" instead (p. 2). They indicated that this term allows a wider discussion on more multifaceted issues developed through mediated encounters that unravel over time and include the participation of multiple actors.

McVeigh-Schultz & Baym (2015) study focused on how their study participants understand the affordances of a micro-social platform called Couple, which enables interaction among two individuals (p. 2). One of their study results showed that their study participants made sense of the affordances of Couple by comparing it to other social media platforms (pp. 6-7). For example, the participants found other social networking sites less suitable for romantic communication due to the presence of different publics. Consequently, their perspective highlights the perceived advantage of micro-social platforms. Furthermore, McVeigh-Schultz and Baym (2015) contended that remarkable insights arise from exploring how individuals make sense of micro-social platforms' "new and unfamiliar affordances" (pp. 6-7).

In her study, Costa (2018) criticized how the concept of affordance has been used to imply fixed properties of a platform, even though they have been centered on showing patterns of use within Anglo-American social contexts. As an example of this issue, she draws on Marwick and boyd's (2011) work that indicates that social media affordances have contributed to the collapse of social contexts that were initially separated in the offline world. Her ethnographic results on social media usage in Mardin, a south-eastern town in Tukey, show that a collapse of context does not exist there. Mardinities, in her

study, actively formed their online environments by using social media affordances such as the privacy setting and creating various online spaces that accommodate different groups of people. Her results show that Facebook's structure is not standardized and unchangeable and can only be comprehended within a particular cultural context.

Similarly, Hopkins (2020) emphasized human agency within the conceptual framework of Affordances (pp. 52-53). He points out that the perception of utilizing an affordance can develop from individuals' ability to contemplate their condition and goals and re-orient their practices accordingly to reach them. Furthermore, he believes Affordances is fruitful for understanding how users include new technologies in existing practices and create new practices enabled by these technologies (Hopkins, 2020, pp. 52-53). Furthermore, individuals not only actively use media to adapt to their environment but also create environments to improve their cognitive abilities and produce new ways of being affected to modify their emotional state and behavior (Hven, 2019, p. 115).

Hurley (2019) suggested paying attention to social media's triadic levels of affordances in relation to social actors and their situated context to evade universalizing and ethnocentric perspectives (p. 14). She elaborated that, firstly, the material affordances of social media are associated with certain actions such as sending a text or liking posts. Secondly, the conceptual or symbolic affordances of social media are reflected in identities, lifestyles, and faithfulness to communities through linguistic and visual gestures. This is reflected, as an example, through interacting in a shared language, exchanging pictures of hobbies, and partaking in local customs and rituals. Thirdly, the imaginary level of affordances is exhibited through practices signifying aspirational desires, sometimes implicitly, through image manipulation, image consumption, identity, self-presentation, and symbolic practices. She pointed out that recognizing these levels within the concept of affordances illuminates how affordances of social media are influenced by gender and sociocultural contexts (Hurley b, 2019, p.2).

Evans et al. (2017) indicated that Affordances is not a particular theory. Rather, it is a relational concept that develops in mutuality between users of technologies, the material characteristics of those technologies, and the situated context of use (Evans et al., 2017, p. 36). Accordingly, what individuals could acquire about and through affordances is influenced by this relationality (Lievrouw, 2014).

4. Methodology

4.1. Methods of data collection

A qualitative Case Study method was beneficial in exploring the current phenomenon of women's usage of Facebook groups exclusively for women. As this article's research questions are how and why oriented, this approach permits various aspects of the phenomenon to unravel (Baxter & Jack, 2015, p. 544). A case study approach encompasses multiple methods of data collection such as, and not-limited-to, observation and in-depth interviews (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 534). Furthermore, using various methods of data collection provides the flexibility to approach the particularities of electronically mediated social environments and allows the researcher to be creative in collecting data and analyzing it (Urquhart & Vaast, 2012, pp. 6-7).

Five Facebook groups were purposively chosen as case studies to exemplify the popular types of FB groups used by women in Egypt. They share common structural characteristics, in which they are 1) private FB groups, 2) created by Egyptian women, 3) created for women-only, 4) "women-oriented" through content that includes a mixture between family and marital relationships, motherhood, fashion, and beauty topics. Also, they were chosen for their popularity and prevalence based on the number of members in the FB groups, high traffic postings, and high interactions between platform users (Kozinets, 2002, p. 63).

Firstly, the Facebook groups' structure that included the FB groups' names, descriptions, rules, and technical features were observed. These elements contribute to the Facebook groups' structure, which is important in understanding the developments by which they are produced or consumed (Mason, 2002, p. 106). Also, it supports exploring how platforms' affordances influence certain trajectories (Hopkins, 2020, p. 49). It is important to note that communication patterns are complex, occurring across multiple channels (Hampton, 2017, p. 171). The private Facebook groups in this study are linked to public sister Facebook group pages. Through links, certain forms of communication relevant to the Facebook groups under study occurs through sister platforms. Thus, data is also collected from the Facebook groups' sister public pages, such as Facebook pages and public Instagram pages. Bryman (2012) noted that qualitative researchers who study online support groups often merge document collection and online ethnography as data collection methods. This merge results from technological features that allow researchers to observe earlier interactions (Hampton, 2017). Accordingly, this data collection form is similar to content analysis and archival methods (Hampton, 2017). However, restricting the study to observation does not fully account for users' culture and social context (Hampton, 2017, p. 171). Furthermore, it does not account how individuals use particular social media and why they use them (Goggins & Petakovic, 2014, p. 1379).

Therefore, this article additionally accounts for the perceivable orientations of technology users (Hutchby, 2003). It took an interactive approach with FB group creators and members via interviews (Bryman, 2012, p. 445) to understand platform users' "logics of use and social expectation" (Couldry, 2008, p. 383). This approach is useful for understanding how the platform's structure converges with platform users to create particular affordances or uses (Hurley, 2019, p. 1).

Before approaching participants for interviews, observation was used to gain information to get acquainted with the online communities' features, such as group membership, interests, and language (Garcia et al., 2009, p. 63; Kozinets, 2002). This observation was required to extensively plan and prepare to conduct interviews with key informants with the knowledge and expertise related to the research's specific questions (Hicks et al., 2021, p. 2859). Then Facebook group creators and active members were identified and approached for qualitative interviews. Accordingly, a purposive sampling strategy was used to get hold of interviewees and explore the phenomenon in-depth with its complexities (Mason, 2002, p. 121). FB group members and creators were two categories of individuals purposively sampled to provide diverse, distinct, and vital information about their usage of the Facebook groups (Mason, 2002).

Twelve semi-structured face-to-face and online interviews were conducted. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in Cairo in 2019 with two Facebook group creators, and online-based interviews were conducted with three Facebook group creators and seven members. Five online interviews were similar to telephone-based interviews but were mediated by technology (Bryman, 2012, p. 669). They lasted between 60 to 90 minutes, except for one interview that took 25 minutes. The other five online interviews with Facebook group members were conducted via chatting on Facebook messenger. They took place through an asynchronous discussion. I asked a question at a time, and users responded at their convenience over 2 to 3 days. They live in urban cities, mainly in Cairo. Their ages are between the late 20s and late 30s. I translated the interviews from Arabic to English.

The FB group creators interviewed are Zeinab Al Ashry, the creator of Confessions of a Married woman FB group; Mai Demerdash, the creator of *7ad Ye3raf (Ladies ONLY)* FB group; Dina Nasser, the creator of *Mini Mom* FB group; Salma El-Awaam, one of the creators of *Sisters Gang* FB group, and Shereen Niazy, the creator of *EVEpedia* FB group. However, all the interviewed FB group members' names in the results section are pseudonyms to protect their privacy, and they are members of multiple FB groups included in this study.

4.2. Ethical considerations

Electronically mediated social contexts provide the opportunities to collect various data, which have recently become integral to a social researcher's toolbox (Vaast & Walsham, 2013, p. 10). However, ethical issues concerning collecting data from the internet have recently been extensively discussed and contested (Bryman, 2012, p. 679). These issues pose challenges and considerations in collecting and analyzing social data (Olteanu et al., 2019, p.2; Vaast & Walsham, 2013, p.10). Even though the FB groups under study contain thousands of members, the content of these Facebook groups is only visible to their members due to the privacy setting of the Facebook group. Accordingly, the data collected from observation are publicly visible and accessible information from the FB groups' interface, such as the FB groups' names, descriptions, names of creators, and technical settings. Furthermore, images presented in the article's results section are retrieved from public sister media pages associated with the studied FB groups. As for the interviews conducted, informed consent was received from the participants.

4.3. Data analysis technique

Thematic Analysis was used to identify patterns by constantly comparing and contrasting data segments between interview responses, observation, archived documents, and existing literature (Floersch et al., 2010, p. 409). Furthermore, arising themes particular to the studied phenomenon were compared with similar previous phenomena (Floersch et al., 2010, p. 409). By considering various previous literature indicates, similarities, contradictions, and reasons were explicated (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 544).

The data analyzed were coded line by line using terms and words produced by the participants or data sources (Charmaz, 2015; Floersch et al., 2010; Gioia et al., 2013). For example, Facebook group creators and members mentioned terms such as emotional support, encouraging words, stress, a place

to vent out, seeking advice, raising awareness, me-time, self-care, gifts, having fun, and stress-free zones. Then themes developed through Axial Coding, in which codes were compared for mutual characteristics and meanings (Floersch et al., 2010, pp. 413-414). At this stage, similarities and differences were developed between categories by creating labels or phrasal descriptions (Gioia et al., 2013). These labels provided contextual information to the codes. For example, codes such as venting out, emotional support, and stress-free zones were labeled with the contextual background of women in Egypt organized by society, cultural traditions, religion, and economic situation.

Furthermore, in the coding process, patterns of interaction between Facebook group creators and members of the Facebook groups were revealed. For example, codes produced from members' interviews related to their well-being were compared to codes that reflect FB group creators' entrepreneurial practices of providing gifts, beauty, and self-care. Thus, the coding process developed in subsequent phases as concepts and themes concurrently and progressively emerged (Vaast & Walsham, 2013, p. 18).

For the selective coding stage, the author referred to the existing literature on digital and social media platforms and the conceptual framework of Affordances. This stage is alternatively termed by (Kalpokaite & Radivojevic, 2019, p. 52) as Elaborative Coding. Concepts identified from mentioned literature and conceptual framework are compared to emerging data. This is particularly important for research, which relies on a limited number of case studies (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 545).

5. Results

5.1. Structure of Facebook groups for women-only

The Facebook groups' structures combine several elements that function, as Burgess (2015) describes, as taglines that convey their affordances (pp. 282-283). Firstly, the names of the Facebook groups highlight their relationship with womanhood. For example, Confessions of a Married 'Woman' 'Miss'basket, Mini' Mom,' 'Eve' pedia, 7ad ye3raf 'Ladies Only' 'Sisters' gang. Secondly, the description of Facebook groups indicates that they center on women-related topics. Such as, the FB group description of Sisters gang describes the topics discussed in the FB group as "anything that women care about". While the description of Rahet Bally (peace of my mind) – It's a Happy Mommy Place, states that it provides "an inclusive support platform for all Egyptian mothers".

The name and description of Facebook groups convey that their content is similar to the prevalent content of women's magazines, which includes discussions about current social or family-related concerns, parenting, health, and fashion (Sawchuk & Ly, 2022). Furthermore, they are based on what Friz & Gehl (2016)describe as a range of gender stereotypes and imageries, which targets a particular gender demographic and are built on pre-existing notions of femininity (Van Oost, 2003, p. 195, as cited in Friz & Gehl, 2016, p. 689).

Another important element that contributes to the structure of 'Facebook groups for women' is its setting as Private FB groups, which means only Facebook group members can see the content of the Facebook group. On a visual level, most of these Facebook groups are pink-themed. Furthermore,

while they are online groups, FB group creators have pinned the geographical location of the FB groups to Egypt. These structural elements chosen deliberately by the FB group creators to show how they particulary cater for Egyptian women. Similarly, Friz & Gehl (2016) indicated that platform designers conceive how their users to be like and how they want them to perceive their platform (p. 690).

5.2. Facebook groups for women-only as safe spaces

The Facebook group creators and members interviewed frequently described Facebook groups in this study as a "safe space" for their exclusivity to women. FB group members drew on their social and cultural environment for their preference and attraction to use and engage in these online spaces created just for women. For example, fear of harassment, particularly sexual harassment from men, was one of the attributed reasons. This sentiment is reflected by Yara, a member of multiple private FB groups for women-only:

> *"You cannot imagine the amount of harassment [by men in public Facebook pages/ groups]. So, of course, all these Facebook groups do not have men on purpose. It will not be a safe space with men in it, just like the community itself [refering to offline public mixed spaces]."*

Moreover, it was also generally indicated that exclusivity for women-only provides a safe space to share information about topics that are culturally perceived as personal or sensitive related to, and not limited to, women's physical, sexual, and mental health. FB group members explained that such topics are perceived as "taboo" in public offline or online spaces making these Facebook groups ideal spaces where women in Egypt could share their stories. Such topics convey patriarchal domination and oppression within the home in Egypt, linked to women's direct surroundings, including mothers, fathers, relatives, lovers, and spouses, which are generally still perceived as taboo (Al-Ali, 2000, p. 115). For this reason, Rana, a member of multiple Facebook groups, indicated that FB groups exclusively for women are essential for women in a conservative society to speak about their concerns and seek solutions. She believes women's issues conveyed in these FB groups mirror societal and community problems that women face in Egypt that are often silenced.

Other members' stated that these Facebook groups provide the strength to face societal judgments and stigmas. Samira and Rokaya indicated that they like to share their success stories on FB groups to inspire and motivate other women who identify with the same societal stigmas to follow in their footsteps. For instance, Rokaya recalled sharing her personal experience with divorce on Facebook groups to break stigmas surrounding women getting a divorce and stepping out of abusive marriages:

> *"I like to share my story in women-only groups to show women that you can leave an unhappy marriage and be happy. I tell my story because it is very common, and I want to educate women. I want to empower them and tell them we can achieve more. Facebook groups for women raise awareness and perhaps give hope to end a cycle of abuse."*

Similar sentiments were expressed by Noha, a member of multiple FB groups, about wanting to be a role model, create awareness and inspire women going through the struggles of divorce. She said:

> *"Before I got divorced, I didn't have a role model. There were no posts on Facebook groups for divorced women on what to do. So maybe my post is like a heads up for any girl who will pass through the same circumstances to make the best out of it. She can continue or develop her education or do something for herself amidst all that [struggle]."*

Noor, a member of multiple FB groups, pointed out that seeing FB group members' stories makes women stronger in the face of adversity through learning from their experiences. For this reason, she believes FB groups for women have impacted her personally and women in Egypt. She explained:

> *"Their [FB groups] impact has made the woman stronger. My mom thinks that our generation has become stronger than her generation. We [women in Egypt] didn't know many things, like our rights. We help each other out. FB groups give power to the woman. It makes her feel I [the woman] am an entity and very important in society. The most important aspect of it [FB groups] is that it lifts their [women's] morale, and then everything else that follows becomes easier."*

The FB group members' perspectives shed light on the importance of the usage of FB groups to express personal and social struggles. These sentiments have paved a foundation for women's usage of these FB groups as a getaway from their daily life struggles. As a result, FB groups have become spaces for self-care to uplift women's spirits.

5.3. Facebook groups for women-only as self-care spaces

The FB group creators interviewed exhibited a responsibility to enhance their FB group members' well-being and lives by engaging them with entertaining content that promotes self-care. Shereen Niazy, the creator of *EVEpedia* FB group, believes that women put themselves as the last priority due to daily struggles and pressures. For this reason, she finds her FB group significant as a space that fosters self-care and self-love among its members. Likewise, Mai Demerdash, the creator of *7ad Ye3raf? (Ladies ONLY)* FB group considers FB groups for women as platforms for awareness on how women could take better care of themselves and "go out, buy things, wear them and have fun".

Furthermore, Salma El-Awaam, the creator of *Sisters gang* FB group, pointed out that women need to attain information related to self-care because they do not have time for themselves. She relied on her personal experience with this issue and perceived it as a shared struggle among most Egyptian women:

> *"Egyptian women, 99% of their problems are feeling pressured. You will find that 50 percent of the information [in her group] is related to skincare and making time for yourself because this is what the women in the group need. Personally, I have a problem with time. I cannot find time for myself. When my son sleeps, I use my phone, go on the group, see what has been happening on it, and create a funny comic, and sometimes this is my' me time'. At night the activity [in the group] is the highest when women finish all their work. They engage, like, and comment."*

This sentiment of having limited time was similarly echoed by Nasser, the creator of *Mini Mom* FB group, who dedicates a day in the week in her group for 'me time' to encourage women to post something to make themselves feel better:

> "It could be something as simple as having a coffee or watching TV to the bigger things, such as women traveling outside Egypt and leaving their children with their mothers. Some women would even post that they could not have any me time. They do not have the time to eat or shower, simple things that a normal human needs, they cannot do it."

FB group creators have also used their FB groups to connect women with various experts who provide information on women's well-being and health. Shrook, a member of multiple Facebook groups, explained that FB groups for women-only provide her with live-videos tutorials that feature doctors, life coaches, nutrition experts, and make-up artists. She emphasized the practicality of these FB groups in

providing services "without having to pay for it" while saving up the time she would have wasted on commuting to receive those services if it wasn't for these FB groups.

Product or service giveaway competitions sponsored by international or local brands are a prominent form of entertainment in these Facebook groups. Demerdash, the creator of *7ad Ye3raf? (Ladies ONLY)* FB group, indicated that she regularly posts announcements informing members of brand collaborations. She further explained that her FB members have a chance of winning a free product or service if they engage (for example, like, comment, and tag their friends) with these announcements. El-Awaam, the creator of *Sisters gang* FB group, explained the reason behind collaborating with brands:

> *"We wanted to be a comfort zone when we [she and her sisters] first started [the FB group]. Then when the group got bigger, and the responsibility got bigger, we wanted our groups to have sponsors. We have done collaborations [business] related to things the group members ask about like skincare, hair, micro-blading, nails, clinics, and dermatologists. We created a competition with a Brazilian micro-blading sponsor and things like cosmetics. So we got to the point that people like our group, so we want to make them happy."*

Yasmeen, an active member of many FB groups for women, indicated that such entertainment content is vital, or the Facebook groups would be depressing if they only conveyed women's struggles. Similarly, Niazy felt that her Facebook group *EVEpedia* is "not all serious," and it's a space where "women can zone out, have fun, and get gifts".

Figure 1. Example of a brand-sponsored competition retrieved from COMW FB page

Facebook groups for women-only explored in this study have public sister social media platforms, such as Instagram accounts and Facebook pages that promote product or service giveaways sponsored by international or local brands. Figure 1 shows an example of these brand-sponsored giveaway competitions retrieved from the *Confessions of a Married Woman* Facebook page.

It encourages members to share and inspire others with their life transformation stories through weight loss or sports under the #Love_Yourself_Live_Happy hashtag and get a chance to win a home appliance. Accordingly, these competitions stimulate members' engagement in FB groups by narrating their inspirational stories related to their life transformation (such as weight loss or successful careers) despite being primary caregivers and personal adversities.

6. Discussion

The Facebook groups under study are a gendered product of how Facebook allows the creators to design their Facebook groups' structure. Their names and descriptions visually and linguistically signal a woman's identity and commitment to the women's community in Egypt. This conveys what Hurley (2019) termed a platform's conceptual or symbolic affordance. Their privacy setting functions as what (Lievrouw, 2014) termed as a functional affordance that works to facilitate connection among those who identify as women and restrict access to those who identify as male users. It further functions to solidify a women-only private network, where users' data are socially and locationally bound (boyd, 2012, p. 348). This conveys that bodies and gender are becoming exceedingly inseparable from technological networks as they afford them with structure and meaning (van Doorn, 2011, p. 536). Accordingly, these elements structure these FB groups as spaces of shared interests, which consequently spark discussions on socially oriented issues and foster social engagements (Ellison et al., 2011, p. 887).

Equally important, media technologies need to be understood by recognizing their gendered cultural use (van Doorn, 2011, p. 536). Interviewed FB group creators and members largely attributed cultural and societal reasons to their preference to engaging in private Facebook groups exclusively for women. These results concur with Costa's (2018) argument that social media's structure impact on users is not standardized. Rather interview participants draw on their social context to make sense of their usage of a particular social medium. As a measure against sexual harrasment by males online and offline, the members interviewed preferred to engage in Facebook groups as segregated spaces for women-only. This mirrors offline segregated public spaces for women in Egypt, such as transportation, fitness facilities, and recreational areas Khairat (2019), which women opt to use to navigate day-to-day activities comfortably. Accordingly, this reflects how platform users integrate pre-existing practices into their media usage that is also culturally influenced (Hopkins, 2020, p. 53). Concurrently, the structure of the Facebook groups provides its members, in Friz & Gehl (2016) words, "the freedom of act within the parameters of a technical design" (p. 689).

Additionally, FB group members perceived FB groups as significant spaces for women-only to share their stories, seek help and find solutions to issues regarding their day-to-day struggles and societal stigmas they collectively face. These sentiments mirror the platforms' imaginary affordances in enabling the expression of aspirational desires (Hurley, 2019). Accordingly, gender in these female-dominated networks functions as a social lubricant for individuals to benefit from the platforms, gain social knowledge, and express shared experiences and circumstances (Madhavan et al., 2018, p. 843; Marwick & Boyd, 2011).

Meanwhile, these FB groups for women only provide what Papacharissi (2016) described as a "structure of feeling" where members could provide their narratives about "who they are, whom they imagine they might be and how to get there" (p. 14). Furthermore, their connective affordances enable what Soronen and Koivunen (2022) termed "platformed intimacy," where members develop "meaningful attachment" by imagining the presence of others (p. 4). Thus, this environment that invokes feelings of "proximity and belonging" reflects platforms' affective impact (Soronen & Koivunen, 2022, p. 14).

Moreover, the privacy setting of the FB groups invokes feelings of familiarity and intimacy further, making what seemed like private-oriented discourses become more public by allowing individuals to "listen to others' stories" (Wetschanow, 1999, p. 3). These vernacular shared and recognized mediated experiences in the form of story-telling carry a feeling of commonality and produce solidarity to receive emotional support and relieve stressful circumstances (Madhavan et al., 2018, p. 843; Pribram, 2019, p. 182). Simultaneously, the central affordance of these private FB groups in offering tangible support through the like and comment feature provides validation, acknowledgment, and encouragement of women's shared personal stories (Pruchniewska, 2019, p. 1374). As a result, emotions manifest in the platform offering a sequence of prospects (Pribram, 2019, p. 182).

One of these prospects is the manifestation of these FB groups as platforms for self-care. FB creators utilized their FB groups, as Hven (2019) terms "affective niches" (p. 107), which implies the usage of a medium to modify and direct its users' emotional situations and produce new forms of affective practices. They connected their FB group members with various tools for self-care via the FB groups to uplift their members' collective feelings of gendered pressure and struggles. Self-care tools included connecting their members with experts to inform them on how to care for their health and well-being. Thus, the platform's usage in connecting its users with various entities highlights its relational affordances in providing opportunities for agentic action (Hutchby, 2001; Lievrouw, 2014).

Lastly, Facebook group creators' collaboration with international and local brands to give away products or services highlights how they embarked on entrepreneurial practices that emerged as a result of the thousands of members' active usage of their Facebook groups. This concurs with McVeigh-Schultz & Baym (2015) assertion that individuals discover opportunities from the available affordances and create unanticipated new practices (p.2). Furthermore, their new entrepreneurial practices illustrate how new media platforms enable the usage of "affective niches" in marketing mechanisms (Hven, 2019, p. 107). On the one hand, these advertising practices indirectly influence members as potential purchasers via camouflaged engaging content, alternatively termed advertainment (Czarnek-Wnuk, 2017, p. 73). On the other hand, commercial entities profit from this discourse of pleasing women by exposing them to targeted advertising of cosmetic services and promotional packages (Gill, 2007, p. 153).

7. Conclusion

Drawing on the conceptual framework of *Affordances*, Facebook groups for women only provide the space where its members adapt to their life circumstances via a collective way of expression (Pattwell,

2019). The Facebook groups' structure as private FB groups for women only provides an environment where members share their stories, struggles, and aspirations comfortably. Furthermore, it enables its users to display support, which fosters community building and a feeling of belonging (Soronen & Koivunen, 2022, p. 14). These stories are often related to pressures, struggles, and societal stigmas that FB group creators and members collectively connect to and empathize with as women.

FB groups for women enabled a new form of female entrepreneurship to surface that incorporates larger practices of sociality (Steel, 2017, p. 235). FB group creators developed audience-building practices, similar to traditional media work, by providing various affective media content that merges information with entertainment (Czarnek-Wnuk, 2017, p. 73; Duffy, 2016, p. 14; Papacharissi, 2016). Entertainment builds rapport among members, amplifies feelings of a supportive community, and appeals to potential users (Baym, 2010; Czarnek-Wnuk, 2017, p. 68). Consequently, women's engagement with affective and amusing content become commodified via the platform's capitalist structure that sustains affective attachment (Dean, 2019, p. 173; Duffy, 2016, p. 14). This suggests that while the structure of these Facebook groups has enabled story-telling and solidarity, social media platforms are structured to stimulate and monetize the activity of content sharing (Pattwell, 2019, p. 129).

However, even though neo-liberal capitalist tendencies ingrained in social media structures ultimately influence platform users' practices, platform users are not merely submissively receiving goods or meanings (Livingstone, 2014, p. 24). The manifestation of these Facebook groups from platforms of story-telling to self-care platforms highlights the importance of accounting for the context in which self-care information is prevalent and perceived as important (Downey, 2014). In the face of shared gendered personal and societal pressures, FB group members' usage of Facebook groups for self-care exhibits what Jackson (2014) describes as "subtle acts of care" and "everyday repairing" (p. 222). Accordingly, these Facebook groups serve as safe spaces in times of distress, whereas they serve as spaces for self-care when amusement is required.

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