

# How Iranian Women Express Themselves through Social Media Photos: A Case Study of Instagram

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## Abstract

In this study, the issue of using Instagram social network by different groups of Iranian women and their interests and desires in publication of photos is investigated. The purpose of the study is to identify the common aspects and differences in women's lives reflected in their self-expression efforts based on their social characteristics. Therefore, the women were classified into eight groups based on the elements affecting the way they show their daily lives, such as education level, occupation and marital status. Then, qualitative method, including virtual ethnographic techniques, content analysis and online interviews, was used. Photos posted on Instagram by 32 users were studied and analyzed, and these users were interviewed. Questions were asked about their tendency towards posting photos of their daily lives on Instagram via direct messages. The conceptual framework of the study included Bourdieu's theory of 'distinction' and Baudrillard's concept of 'system of objects'. Results showed that women in each group select specific approaches to the publication of photos based on their social conditions. In the present article, these differences are discussed in detail. The significance of this research lies in the possibility of understanding different aspects of women's everyday life and their individual identity through self-reports in the new media as opposed to the traditional media which only presents a standardized type of identification. Since studying women's efforts in presenting themselves on social media has been neglected in studies conducted on social networks in Iran, this study leads to a better understanding of Iranian women's diverse identities.

**Keywords:** image, Instagram, self-expression, women.

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## Introduction

Internet users have turned to a variety of social networks in recent years. These networks serve as both entertainment and part of everyday activities of many people. Therefore, these days, issues related to these networks have a greater impact on people's lives. While in the global social networks ranking, Facebook is ranked on top (Most popular social networks worldwide as of January 2019, ranked by number of active users, 2019), among the Iranian users, Instagram is the number one social network. Women all over the world are considered more active users on the picture-based social networks like Instagram (Rainie et al., 2012). Iranian women are no exception based on the most recent list of Iranian active influencers (Shafizade, 2019).

Posting images of the objects, activities and special occasions on Instagram has become a kind of daily pastime for many women. The subject of these images in many cases is not necessarily the woman herself or a special occasion. Workplace, environment, decorated dining tables, beautiful landscapes, attractive decorations and designs, details of clothes and shoes, and even what they are studying or watching can be the subject of Instagram images.

Understanding different aspects of women's everyday life and their individual identity, through self-expression on social media provides policymakers with a reliable source of realistic data. Studying women's efforts in presenting themselves on social media leads to a better understanding of the everyday life of various groups and their individual identity. Thus, the questions of this study include: What are the common aspects of women's lives reflected in their efforts at self-expression? What are the differences of interests between the various groups of women based on their social characteristics and how do they present them? We will seek answers using qualitative research methods, including virtual ethnography, content analysis and online interview techniques.

## Review of the literature

There have been very few studies conducted on Instagram or other image-based social networks in Iran. The studies on Persian blogs have addressed women's self-expression in cyberspace; for instance, the thesis written by Farshbaf Shaker (2010) and Khalili (2005). While blogging habit has been widely replaced by social media posting, Facebook and other social networks have become popular means of writing and expressing ideas. According to Memar, Adlipour and Khaksar (2012: 155-176), individuals suffer from confusion in building identity while facing social networks. Shahramnia, Mehrabi Koushki and Pourranjbar (2014: 121-141) dealt

with the issue of social networks and national identity. Moreover, Sabouri Khosroshahi and Azargoun (2013: 9-25) determined the effect of virtual social networks (Facebook) on social identity. The study conducted by Ghasemi, Adlipour and MirMohammadtabar (2013: 125-150) on social networks showed that Facebook affects young people's identity-building. In their study, Rahbar, Rashidi and Danaie (2019) concluded that the more active women are on social media, the more likely they are to redefine their gender identity. Ghanizadeh (2019) studied Instagram sub-cultures created by Iranian highly-followed pages.

There are also international studies that have been specifically conducted on online self-expression. For example, Ganda (2014) explained that identity is now more influenced by feedbacks and popularity. Yau and Reich (2018) found that perspective taking skills and the need for peer approval influence adolescents' self-presentation online. Harris and Bardey (2019) demonstrated that there is a difference between how the observers perceived the Instagram account holders' personality and the Instagram account holders' personality self-reports.

Some other studies showed the following results; women are the pioneers of pictorial social networking on Pinterest and Instagram (Rainie et al., 2012). Van House et al. (2005) considered self-expression and self-representation as two of the important functions of mobile camera photos. Ibrahim (2015) studied the beautification of everyday life and the photography of banal images where mobile phones record everyday activities with their cameras. The exploitation of everyday life in digital photography has led to the daily display of non-events and routines. According to the above-mentioned studies, the ordinary things have now become attractive subjects.

Okabe and Ito (2003) argued that mobile camera users tend to turn ordinary and unimportant objects into subjects worthy of photography. Moreover, studies conducted by Makela et al. (2000) and Kurvinen (2003) on mobile photos suggested that mobile photos aim to tell stories. As stated by Makela et al. (2000), the narrative has changed with the introduction of digital technologies, stories are told through photos and pictures speak for themselves. Edwards (2001) stated that photographs can be regarded as a display or performance in a social biographical text where "things" are animated and create meaning.

Taking photographs of everyday, ordinary things has now become the dominant activity on Instagram, and is particularly popular amongst women. The role of photography in human everyday life is undeniable. According to Bourdieu (1990), domestic and personal photography has combined public and private affairs. Hence, it could be said that pictures

have surrounded us and are clearly and decisively present in our private and social lives.

As mentioned earlier, there have been very few studies conducted on the new social networks in Iran and there is a clear gap in the studies of the issue of publishing photos on social networks. None of the researchers have focused on the diversity of Iranian social media users and how these users, especially women, have highlighted social differences. Objects used in the photos have never been the subject of studies by Iranian researchers. This study tried to answer some of the questions and describe the use of social networks images from the perspective of various groups of women.

### **Conceptual framework**

The conceptual framework of this study is based on Bourdieu's theory of "distinction" and Baudrillard's concept of "system of objects". Distinction generally describes capital as the distinguishing factor of different social groups, while "system of objects" specifically looks at the effect of owning objects on the appearance of people belonging to each group. So these two concepts are used consistently and do not contradict one another.

Bourdieu's goal in discussing distinction is to show how consumption gives meaning to social differences. Bourdieu views capital as the main factor distinguishing social groups, but he does not consider capital to be limited to economic assets and provides a new classification. According to him, the social space or the field has a competitive nature, and social actors use different actions to manage or improve their position. What is at stake in the field is capital and raising it. Capital is both a process and a product of the field. Bourdieu proposes four types of capital: economic (e.g., money and property), cultural (e.g., scientific knowledge, tastes, cultural preferences, language, etc.), social (e.g., kinship, family, cultural and religious heritage) and symbolic (e.g., academic and art degrees) (Bourdieu, 1984).

People's behaviors result from their acquisition of various forms of capital. On the other hand, people's manner of consumption functions as the external representation of the capital they possess. In an analysis of consumption and its relationship with different capital forms, Bourdieu speaks of objects and situations that can identify the whole lifestyle of a social group. This includes issues such as the style of decoration and clothing. This is caused by the fact that social relationships objectified in the familiar objects are perceived through unconscious physical experiences (Bourdieu, 1984). Social network users also utilize these networks to exhibit desirable identity features.

The concept of “distinction” as proposed by Bourdieu (1984) is employed in this study. Instagram users present themselves in various ways, and they, willingly or unwillingly, reveal distinction in different aspects of their lives. Such a distinction is created by means of consumption which is manifested through the presence of objects within the frame of photographs. The presence of books, flowers and plants, decoration, and worktable link Instagram women to the groups to which they belong in real life (Bourdieu, 1984). Photos on social networks are not just a means of giving information and preserving memories, but they become means of self-expression. They are means of communication for women who express themselves in various ways.

The concept of the “system of objects” in Baudrillard’s view is also considered in this study. He believes that “The way objects are used in everyday life implies an almost authoritarian set of assumptions about the world” (Baudrillard, 1996: 58). Baudrillard’s idea of the power of objects to associate individuals with social groups is as follows: what is consummated and consumed is never the object but the relationship itself, signified yet absent, simultaneously included and excluded; it is the idea of the relationship that is consumed in the series of objects that displays it (Baudrillard, 1996: 201). By publishing photos of different situations and things, Instagram users try to present themselves and show the things they use in their everyday lives.

## **Methodology**

This study is conducted based on qualitative research methods including three techniques; the main one is virtual ethnography, completed by content analysis of pictures and online interview.

Virtual ethnography is a technique in which researchers are members of the community in cyberspace, where they interact with people under study (Crichton & Kinash, 2003). Here, the researcher is actively involved with people and records events (Emerson et al., 1995). Moreover, general methods of field observation can be used in this method (Wimmer & Dominick, 2012).

One of the stages of ethnography is data collection that requires cross-sectional discovery at various stages of the study. As stated by Fazeli and Talebian (2012), data collection in ethnography is relatively non-structured in most sectors. This means that, firstly, the study does not follow a fixed and precise design from the beginning. Secondly, the categories that are prepared for the interpretation of the statements and functions are not created through a planned observation or questionnaire in the process of data collection. On the contrary, the

categories are built during the process of data analysis. The study also usually focuses on a small number of samples, and is conducted on a small scale (probably an environment or a group of people). This provides a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

The qualitative content analysis technique was used to analyze the observations, especially pictures. The qualitative method of content analysis that is sometimes defined as the inference of results based on the existence or lack of specific features in the message [images], has often been employed for the better implementation of the study issues in applied social sciences (Holsti, 1994).

Internet Interview is the third technique applied. Internet interviews are conducted in depth through online communication methods (Salmons, 2010). Fontes and O'Mahony (2008) found that instant messaging on social networks could be a good economical way to advance qualitative studies including interviews. The remarks of these users can inform us of what is going on in users' minds of which the researcher is not aware. Thus, a combination of observation techniques, content analysis and interview was used to conduct the study.

In this study, all profiles which have had the following three conditions constitute the statistical population: 1. Public pages, 2. Pages with more than 1000 followers, and 3. Pages with obvious display of everyday life, objects and environments in which the individual lives. As the number of these profiles is not accessible to the study, theoretical sampling was used. Theoretical sampling, in field observation technics, is a sampling method where "the researcher chooses cases that seem to be most representative of the topic under study" (Wimmer & Dominick, 2012: 132).

The women were classified into eight groups based on their social characteristics including educational level, occupation and marital status. The factors of age and residence/non-residence in the capital (Tehran) were not considered because it was only during the interview that one could find out the age and the residence place of the user, which itself confirms insignificance of these factors. Moreover, what is obvious among the active profiles in terms of economic factor and classification of the middle users is the dominance of the users who are members of the middle class, because the lower class is a minority that is not widely seen among social network users. The rich are not included in the study as they are not known as ordinary Instagram users.

According to the abovementioned differences, female Instagram users can be divided into eight groups:

Group 1: Bachelor's degree or less/employed/single,

Group 2: Bachelor's degree or less/employed/married,

- Group 3: Bachelor's degree or less/ unemployed/single,
- Group 4: Bachelor's degree or less/unemployed/married,
- Group 5: Master's degree or more/employed/single,
- Group 6: Master's degree or more/employed/married,
- Group 7: Master's degree or more/employed/single, and
- Group 8: Master's degree or more/unemployed/married.

In each of the eight groups, we found 4 cases that consented to be interviewed. Interviews were conducted in written form via Instagram direct messages. Some groups consisted of many members and some other groups had smaller number of members. Therefore, in some groups, those who met all the conditions were hard to find. In such cases, respondents were selected from volunteers who lacked one of the conditions. Finally, 32 people were selected. An interview with each of the 32 subjects along with analyzing 5 images from their respective Instagram pages was conducted. As it was mentioned above, for data collection in ethnography, small samples are selected using purposive and theoretical sampling to allow the researcher to conduct a deeper analysis of the cases.

As these users are the same subjects that we interviewed and informed of publishing few of their photos in the research, their consent to participation in the study and the use of their photos is assumed. Also according to Instagram copyright policy, 'fair use' doctrine 'allows people to use someone else's copyrighted work without permission in certain circumstances. Common examples include: criticism, commentary, news reporting, teaching, scholarship and research' (Instagram help center). In the following section, the findings of the study are reported.

## Findings

Common points among the groups were found through content analysis of interviews and photos selected from Instagram pages. Common features were also identified that indicate the tendency of most Instagram women towards specific approaches. The differences and the way they were caused were recognized as well. Our observation in this study shows that women with specific characteristics follow the same patterns to publish their photos. Several groups of women can be identified among Instagram users as follows:

The first group includes women with a Bachelor's degree or less who are employed and single. These women are interested in showing their work and social activities. Since these people are single, their focus on publishing the photos of their homes is often limited to their own personal room, and socializing with friends has a significant role in their

lives. Many of these girls tend to publish more photos and exhibit their abilities, including artwork, and also share photos of their trips. The second group also consists of women with a bachelor's degree or less who are employed and married. These women also act like the members of the previous group, but since they are married and not living with their families, in their photos, the whole home space is much more in the center of attention than their personal rooms. Sometimes, these women combine their public and domestic duties in their images, and display the balance between the two.

The third group consists of women who have a bachelor's degree or less and are unemployed and single. These women are either a group of younger people who are doing undergraduate studies, or women who have graduated but have not yet found any specific goals to pursue. Most of the photos in the profiles of these users include images of tours, remembrance of special occasions and personal spaces, and the favorite ones are designed and colorful pictures. The materials from the school and university, pamphlets and books play a major role in the photos of this group. Many of these women are interested in spending more time with their friends, and there are more photos of socializing with friends in their profiles. The fourth group consists of women with a bachelor's degree or less who are unemployed and married. These women are more interested in housekeeping, and their photos are more likely to be devoted to colorful and attractive dishes and their collaboration with their spouses. These women tend to show off their own good taste and, in many cases, they write about their spouses and family members and publish photos depicting them.

The fifth group consists of women holding a master's degree or more who are employed and single. These women often mention their jobs and skills in their profiles or mention the discipline they studied. They write less about themselves, but post more photos of their surroundings to introduce their lifestyle. Women of the sixth group hold a master's degree or more and are employed and married. These women's profiles are very similar to the profiles of the previous group, but the main difference is that these women are mostly at home. They exhibit their housekeeping activities in the photographs. Most of these women are interested in revealing their good tastes in life. However, they also significantly emphasize their work, and sometimes combine elements of work and family life in the pictures.

The seventh group includes women holding a master's degree or more. They are unemployed and single. This is a group that can hardly be found on Instagram or even in real life. Most single, educated women are

employed. But few of them who are still studying at universities may be unemployed. The eighth group also consists of women with a master's degrees or more who are unemployed and married. Photographs of this category of women are more similar to those of the educated, employed, married women. The difference is that housework and marital life are more prominent and job does not play a role in their photos.

After doing content analysis of the five selected photos from each group's profiles and conducting online interviews, it was found that each of the groups of women have characteristics that distinguish them from other groups. In addition, there are also similarities among women in each group. In the following, these similarities and differences are listed followed by a table summarizing the findings.

### **How to introduce oneself in the Bio section**

Women in different groups introduce themselves in the bio section using different contents. Women are not always employed so that they can introduce themselves with a skill. In the profiles of most unemployed women, personal skills and profession are still the first part of the users' description in the Bio section. Everyone has ways to display his characteristics in the photos, and everyone is happy with a number of characteristics, and considers them to be representative of himself. The common content of the studied profiles can be divided into several categories:

- Profession and skill; for example, "Graduate of textile design. Designer and Carpenter".
- Interests and beliefs; for example, "Book lover and crafty. Love fine arts, especially photography for Instagram".
- Family role; for example, "mother of two, wife".
- Others (name, nickname, residential area, emotional statements, abbreviation for name, etc.), such as "Based in Tehran".

Women in the sixth group of this study, namely, women with a master's degree or more/employed/married were more inclined to introduce themselves by their skills and the four members of this group introduced themselves in this way. Unemployed women and women with a bachelor's degree or less are also interested in introducing themselves with their skills and profession, although they do not use their skills as a job or source of income.

Writing about interests and beliefs is common in different Instagram pages and does not seem to be related to the abovementioned characteristics. Women in the present study are likely to introduce themselves with what they like and believe, regardless of the group to which they belong.

Introducing oneself with the family role (spouse, mother, etc.) among the members of the fourth group, namely, women with a bachelor's degree or less/unemployed/married, is more common, and three of the four members of the group introduced themselves with this role. These women seem to consider their familial and feminine roles to be the most important individual characteristics.

### **The purpose of the activity**

The purpose of women's activities on Instagram was one of the questions asked in the interviews. The answers were very diverse, but the common issue was "to share good feelings with others." Women active on Instagram participating in this study are interested in sharing positive moments and having a positive effect on others. In addition to this answer, different responses can be divided into several categories:

1. Introducing a lifestyle: "The most important thing for me is the release of happiness and hope because in my opinion, it is what life needs".
2. Getting familiar with people: "Finding people like me, good books and new experiences".
3. Fun and entertainment: "Taking pictures of everything beautiful and colorful that I see around me".

The first answer, which somehow interest in influencing others can be inferred from it- because the user is promoting a lifestyle by introducing it- is more common among users. Of the three participants who showed such a tendency, two hold master's degrees and one holds an undergraduate degree. It seems that among the participants in this study, employed women are more interested in introducing their lifestyle; a more modern lifestyle than the traditional ones, which seems to be newer and less known. Two of the three users who are willing to do so are married. A situation that has further increased the novelty of the lives of these women, they have to adapt their jobs with their family conditions and face a challenge that does not make sense to previous generations. This gives them more motivation to introduce their lifestyle.

Among the second group, that is, women with a bachelor's degree or less/employed/married, there is a greater tendency to get acquainted with others. Entertainment and fun are also a common answers to the question given by most groups.

### **The attitude of users about the possibility of women's social activity**

The women whose profiles were studied were interviewed and asked to share common thoughts about the roles and responsibilities of women.

In general, four beliefs were proposed showing the women's viewpoints on changing their living conditions. Some women mentioned one of the answers along with the fourth case, and emphasized that women themselves determine the attitudes of others.

1. The conditions of society are appropriate for women's social activity: "Our society has made a lot of progress and no longer considers a woman just as a housekeeper as in the old days."

**Azardokht (the third group)**

2. To some extent, conditions have changed and now women can work, but we still need change: "No one can deny the effective role women play in the economy of the family and society. But I feel our society is still patriarchal. One of the most important reasons is that housekeeping responsibilities are still undertaken by the employed women."

**Najme (the second group)**

3. Patriarchy is dominant, the situation is far from ideal and it does not provide conditions for women's social activity: "The prevailing idea is male superiority and that women should often deal with their duties and tasks at home."

**Sara (the fourth group)**

4. The women themselves prevent the change of circumstances and do not reform their thinking: "Unfortunately, our society is still very patriarchal and misogynistic. Majority of women hold the same ideas and are against themselves."

**Hoda (the first group)**

Three participants did not answer this question.

Distribution of the responses of the members in various groups shows that believing in the social roles of women and perception of women of the current situation in society do not rely on individual characteristics such as education, marital status and employment. Women of different groups each have their own inference of the status of women's social roles and general perceptions about it. However, the frequency of total responses indicates that women largely believe in the existence of patriarchy in society, and 12 out of 32 participants said that the situation is far from ideal. Nine participants stated that women now have more opportunities to participate in society, but these conditions are still not favorable. Four participants stated that the conditions are desirable for women's social

activities. Finally, nine of them believed that women themselves contribute to the general attitude towards the social role of women, and if their role is underestimated, they themselves are to blame.

### Home in the images

In the photos published by single users, they are often seen in their private space at home; that is, the bedroom; of course, if the photo is a wide shot and the surroundings can be viewed. However, married women consider the whole house as their own personal space (e.g., kitchen, living room, bedroom, etc.). They have decorated the whole house to their taste and interest, and they regard the entire home to be their private space.

Although it seems that it is of special importance to employed women to show their work spaces, the reality is that the home is a top priority in terms of expressing their status on Instagram. The personal room is the first option for the single women groups, and then the work environment and outside spaces are more important.

In contrast to images of men's cooperation, many women are also interested in considering the kitchen and their own appliances as specific to themselves and assume housekeeping as their own duty: "When your kitchen is shining clean". This picture is more prevalent among the housewives (with any level of education). They do not work outside the house and consider housekeeping their main job. Although many of them have high educational degrees and even introduce themselves with their discipline and expertise, being unemployed has caused them to have stronger feelings of ownership of home spaces and a greater sense of personal responsibility for domestic duties.



*Figure 1.* A participant from the eighth group loves publishing photos from the kitchen. She has higher education and also enjoys housework and presents it in different ways.

In the present study, one of the elements frequently found in women's profiles, which is very rare in men's profiles, is the corners of a house or

other environments that women introduce as the source of relaxation. In many profiles, women use phrases such as “cozy corner” or “my peaceful corner” and depict a spot in their house or room. For the singles, this corner is often a part of the personal room.



*Figure 2.* A participant from the fifth group shows her room with coffee making accessories ready. She doesn't even leave the room for coffee. Objects of work and university are on the table presenting her multiple tasks.

### **Photo size**

In photos of most women participating in this study you can close-up frames that only show some objects on the desk or in the hand. Personal spaces are similar in many cases; a cup of tea or coffee and a book; this is an image that is found in most profiles. Close-up shots can be seen more in the profiles of single women. They use more personal spaces and married women use more wide photos that were taken in different spaces of the house.

Of the 32 users whose pages were studied, 22 showed more interest in the close-up shots and more personalized spaces, and 10 people published more wide pictures.



*Figure 3.* A participant from the third group loves colors and drawing accessories are present in all her photos. We see a close-up of her private moment in her own room.

### Presence of others

In many photos, others are present, too; sometimes, only traces of people (such as their cup of tea) are seen. Sometimes, the hand or part of their body is seen in the frame, and sometimes people are clearly seen. Friends are the most prominent members on the pages of the singles. Family members, especially spouses, have a higher presence in married women's profiles, but friends sometimes appear in these pictures, too. It seems that women tend to show that they continue their personal relationships in spite of being married. Among the employed women, sometimes these people are colleagues.

One of the most popular activities among working women is to portray the participation of the spouse in the home tasks and show the division of labor. Employed women want to display and promote equal rights with their husbands. The most serious and outstanding cases can be seen in the profiles of women who have higher education, expect more equality in rights and want others to see that they are breaking the stereotypes. Employed, married women with higher education are more likely to display men's cooperation at home.



*Figure 4.* The man is doing a house chore which is considered one of the most feminine works to do and creates a very unfamiliar scene. As mentioned in the caption, he is then going to cook.

### Work, life and education

Many women show a mixture of different aspects of their lives in photos. Although it is expected that any photo be taken in a specific situation (student, occupation or housekeeping), photos include all of these spaces in many cases. For example, a child is sitting on her mother's papers and work stuff is seen in pictures of some employed women as well as housewives. The effect of this combination can be seen in the description of photos:

"Soon the busy, stressful days began. I did not sleep well last night. My child was ill. I attended the university in the morning. I reached home at 5:00 pm. I wanted to sleep, but it was not possible. I put my baby to sleep and worked on my new project till 6:30 pm. Now, I am at work".

For working, single women, work is the focus of daily activities even while studying. They do not have a particular task, and their job is the most important element that has given them identity. These women are interested in introducing themselves with their profession and record their moments while working.



*Figure 5.* A participant from the second group has published an image in which her child is sitting next to the books and university stuff showing a combination of different roles.

### **Recommendations for a better life**

Female Instagram users participating in this study are interested in sharing the pleasant aspects of their lives rather than the negative aspects. This interest with the desire to influence the audiences is frequently seen among the users who introduce themselves with their jobs or skills. They use more imperative sentences and in the interviews, often express their interest in Instagram because of good feelings and the opportunity to communicate with others. Many of these women use positive sentences or phrases such as “Good morning” or “Have a nice day”, or sometimes use the word “happy” written on paper. These people talk about deeper concerns in their texts. They do not express just their personal and everyday issues but rather share many personal views with the aim of influencing others and drawing a general conclusion. Positive messages and expressions of good feelings are part of these women’s efforts to change the attitude of others. For example: “You can eradicate racism and hatred through promotion of music and love in the lives of people.”

### **Moments for oneself**

Most female Instagram users portray their moments of spending time alone, like sitting in a café. The moments that show that although they are working or married women or even have children, they can still spend some time for themselves and keep their personal space or privacy.

The image of the house in the absence of the spouse is one of the pictures posted by married women. They portray their moments alone or waiting for their spouses and preparing the home. Some depict themselves doing various activities at home while it has become the

feminine territory.

Single women also show a positive reaction to their aloneness. They show their personal moments in a way that displays the pleasure of life. They see life as beautiful in spite of their aloneness and try to show positive and attractive aspects of their lives. The pictures that show leisure activities play a prominent role in these profiles.



*Figure 6.* A participant from the sixth group shows a moment spent in a café alone, although she is married.

### **Role of objects**

The existence of fancy, unnecessary objects is frequently seen in most of the photographs posted by women in different groups. Objects that their absence does not eliminate anything from life, but their existence is essential. A fancy pen, a mug with a favorite image on it, and a sculpture in your photo change everything. For many working women, these objects are the elements of pleasure and peace at the workplace. Many of them are on worktables and help beautify the setting. For housewives, they are the means to make the home space more attractive, and for unemployed singles, they are the necessary appliances along with pamphlets, books and films.



*Figure 7.* A participant from the fifth group shows her desk full of her lovely objects with images of owls on them while writing for a cinema magazine. The

fancy objects make working more enjoyable for her.

### **Everything is enjoyable**

Studying with a cup of tea, working with colored notepads and floral and spotted notebooks, kitchens filled with vases, and light on green pots... no matter what you are busy with, everything is attractive and beautiful in Instagram photos, and women do not tire of doing their tasks.

Although it may seem that women are increasingly willing to be employed and work after graduation and the employed women must be happier and have a better feeling about life, analysis of the Instagram pages under study showed that women do not mention their jobs as their satisfaction criterion, but they try to present their status as pleasurable under any condition. Interviews with many women indicated that they do not prioritize different roles, but they believe that the best role for any woman is what she herself chooses. Female Instagram users are happy and satisfied with whoever they are.

Table 1 summarizes the findings explained above.

*Table 1.* Summary of common categories and differences between the groups

<b>Central issues</b>	<b>Common categories</b>	<b>Differences between the groups</b>
How to introduce oneself in the Bio section	Profession and skills	Mostly women with a master's degree or more/employed/married Less attention paid to it by other groups
	Interests and beliefs	No difference
	Family role	Mostly women with a bachelor's degree or less/unemployed/married
	Others	No difference
The purpose of the activity	Sharing good feelings with others	No difference
	Introducing a lifestyle	Mostly employed/ married and educated women
	Getting familiar with people	Mostly having a bachelor's degree or less/employed/married
	Fun and entertainment	No difference

Central issues	Common categories	Differences between the groups
Views about the possibility of women's social activity	Appropriate conditions	Not relevant to education, marriage and employment (no difference)
	Relatively appropriate conditions	
	Far from ideal	
	Women's resistance	
Home in the images	Personal room	Single women
	The whole house	Married women
Photo size	Close-up	Single women
	Long shot	Married women
Presence of others	Family members	Married women
	Friends	Single and married women
Work, life and education	Home and social roles	Married/employed/studying
	Work as a specific role	Mostly employed single women
Recommendations for a better life	Inspiration and positivity	No difference
Moments for oneself	Moments for oneself	No difference
	Private time in the absence of the spouse	Married women at home
	Positive reaction to aloneness	Single women
Role of objects	Fancy objects to make the women's life more enjoyable	No difference
Everything is enjoyable	Education	No difference
	Work	
	Home	

The first column of the table shows all issues found in this study which are presented on the pages of women under study. The second column describes the issues in more detail emphasizing the common characteristics in all women. Finally, the third column shows the possible differences between women regarding different issues based on their social characteristics such as marital, occupational and educational status. On the whole, the table can be interpreted to show one important and paradoxical concept which is unity in diversity. Women have undergone processes in their self-representation using new media which are common in one aspect. These processes are also different based on social characteristics of women. Marriage seems to be the most effective factor in shaping the structure of differences, followed by the effect of occupational status which is still important but less effective than the marital status. Finally, the education status is the least effective factor, still raising the interest in influencing others. In the following section, the concept of unity in diversity is discussed under a description of changes which have occurred in modern societies, including Modern Iran.

### **The effect of social changes**

The social factors discussed revealed the common categories and differences in interests of groups of women, although these factors may not be the only effective factors to discuss. Many social and cultural changes can also affect the process of activity in social networks. In the present study, “individualization and changes in the role of women”, “the effect of new technologies and media”, and “consumption and importance of objects” will be discussed.

In relation to individualization and changes in the role of women, it can be said that sociologists throughout the world have spoken about individualization in societies. After the beginning of the modern era and observing the changes in the new world, sociologists claimed that in the new world, individuals act as independent social units. Individualism makes the individual the focus of attention and values independence and self-reliance. The global development also occurred in the Iranian society; a change that has had a further effect on the role of women in society. Women, who were already known by familial roles, especially in cities, were no longer just a member of the family, but they themselves were independent units that had to be defined and play independent roles without dependence on the male members of the family.

Along with the individualization of Iranian society, importance of “self” and “personal interest” has increased. In addition to family roles, women adopted an individual identity for themselves, and defined

themselves based on it so that they could differentiate themselves. The women who are considered forces of new labor markets, new students of universities and individuals with the role of spouse or mother now define their identity, profession, and discipline and use modern communication tools to benefit from their own definition of a modern perspective.

On the other hand, women who have adopted traditional and family roles are not willing to consider it as a role detached the conditions of the modern rather they are interested in presenting it as their own choice. They attempt to justify the belief that changes in the lifestyle of some women does not necessarily mean change for all women. Women can still choose their favorite lifestyle without prioritizing it.

Regarding the effect of new technologies and media, it can be said that the younger generation has been influenced by social networks. At the moment, Instagram is at the peak of popularity in Iran as a social network.

Today, women have tools that can portray the group to which they belong. Employed women have been able to display what they do on a working day along with other duties, such as housekeeping or studying, and familiarize audiences with their life routine. The self-presented everyday image of many of these women (for example, housewives) cannot be recognized as a source of dignity for individuals in classical sociology. Now, the individuals themselves define the value of their roles and introduce them as attractive and important. Through their photos and descriptions, they can speak for themselves and value their own distinctions.

The importance of consumption and objects is the last issue which is discussed here. With the development of societies, a level of well-being is achieved that leads community members to more consumption beyond real needs. The development process taking place in various societies is also occurring in the Iranian society. Consumption does not necessarily mean consumerism, which is a negative concept, but it can be the result of achieving a level of well-being and a positive sign of improving the quality of life. Objects have gained values other than fulfilling the essential needs. As described by Baudrillard (1998: 77), "The object becomes substitutable in a more or less unlimited way within the field of connotations, where it assumes sign-value." He believes objects are distinction intermediaries and connect people to social groups. This has led to the attention paid to decorative and fancy objects in a way that there are many things in every home that are not important, but their existence affects the quality of life.

In social networks, this kind of consumerism which helps introduce individuals and their social group with the help of objects is frequently seen and is very popular among users. Objects have become invisible

roots that strengthen the relationship among members of each group and can link individuals to the groups to which they belong. Objects have the power to be the external form of people's inner tendencies and interests. They can portray what they have in mind. Now, consumption can speak instead of skills.

## Conclusions

As demonstrated in this study, there are many similarities and differences among women's groups in terms of their manner of representing themselves on Instagram. Findings of the present study indicate that women in the study generally enjoy their lifestyle and tend to display their distinctions with the help of objects and situations. However, these distinctions may not be what is known as a source of dignity in public opinion.

After analyzing some of the social changes in Iran, it was found that much of the users' interest in social networks could be attributed to social changes, including individualization, changes in the role of women, the effect of new technologies and media, as well as consumption and the importance of objects. These changes persuaded women in different groups to display their new lifestyle in some way, and value their own roles.

As stated by Bourdieu (1984), what makes social distinctions is access to all kinds of capital. Women of different groups with various academic backgrounds and professions have found their own particular condition in society and showed aspects of it in the cyberspace. Now, they are the ones who determine which aspects should be more accentuated to shape the people's mental image of them. They determine how much cultural capital (e.g., scientific information, taste, beauty, cultural preferences, language, etc.) will be displayed in front of the camera, what role social capital (e.g., relatives, family, cultural heritage and religion) will play in their pictures, and how symbolic capital (such as educational and artistic degrees) is presented in their life.

In a situation where many women do not enjoy equal opportunities (i.e., job, education, finance, etc.), they themselves have started to value the things and situations around them. They can show their simple home-based activities as valuable and effective, and create a form of cultural capital relying on their own taste. They can give a symbolic value to job fatigue by displaying what they have created. They can emphasize their social capital by including family members and colleagues in their photos and reinforce it in ways they like. Symbolic elements are still available to present them as belonging to the groups they like (e.g., the books belong to the intellectual groups, the cafes belong to the groups that have leisure time and the kitchen belongs to the group of housewives enjoying housework).

According to Bourdieu (1984), the role of consumption in the possession of different types of capital can be seen in front of women's cameras. They demonstrate objects to show their belonging to different groups and do not necessarily do this consciously or intentionally. As explained by Bourdieu, the whole lifestyle of a group can be understood through the style of decoration or clothing and this is caused by the fact that social relationships are perceived through unconscious physical experiences.

The use of objects in order to distinguish oneself is one of the simplest ways to reveal a sense of belonging to groups and classes. As stated by Baudrillard (1996), the primary function of furniture and objects is to personify human relationships, occupy a common space and enjoy the spirit. He explains that juxtaposition of these objects and usages has a distinctive effect.

This issue seems to be more highlighted for women because they suffer from many contradictions in the new world. On the one hand, they have undertaken new roles that were previously considered masculine. On the other hand, they have redefined their previously feminine roles as general roles which can be undertaken by either sex. This challenge can also be seen in the lives of many Iranian women, both in real life and in cyberspace. However, this new lifestyle is varied in accordance with women's different social roles, jobs and cultural classes. Women have now found new tools to narrate their everyday life, the objects and situations by which they express themselves.

What goes beyond Bourdieu and Baudrillard's ideas is a kind of value-giving activity that does not take place to create a sense of belonging to a high-ranking group, but rather it is done to give more value to the group to which the individual belongs. Many women make their simple activities look valuable with words and pictures and ask others to do so, too. Simple activities, including planting vegetables at home, do not appear to give preference to women, but the women accentuate them and show off their superiority due to the knowledge of a simple point and the ability to teach it to others. This is most commonly observed among Instagram women with very high numbers of followers. Many of them are housewives who only speak of their seemingly ordinary things, but they value them so much in order to attract thousands of people. Female Instagram users have learned well to display the simplicity and complexity of their lives in order to enhance their status in the minds of people and present their activities as valuable activities as if they were able to eliminate the issue of "higher" and "lower", "more important" and "less important" from their audiences' perspectives.

Women are trying to achieve a better social status, their number surpasses men in universities, they are also trying to highlight their

presence in work environments, yet traditional roles such as doing housework and domestic responsibilities still have to be performed by women. This is one of the challenges in their lives, and the outcome is revealed in two forms that include balancing the roles or choosing a role from possible roles. What is interesting is the level of respect women show for other women in choosing one of these situations. Responses of women in different groups to questions asked about women's roles depended heavily on individual choices and they do not believe in a single path for all. They recognize the distinctions and value and empower distinctions by using objects and displaying their photos on social networks.

This study adds another piece to the incomplete picture of social media users' activities in Iran, providing policymakers with genuine information to adjust their attitude towards social media. While downsides of social media usually outweigh the benefits in Iranian policymakers' point of view, the information can prove social advantages of being an active social media user.

The present research has provided the information by studying 32 accounts and findings should not be generalized. It is suggested that researchers study other aspects of online self-representation to add new pieces to the picture.

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