

Social Media Governance: An Expert Perspective on Cyber-Acculturation and Subcultural Encounters

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Abstract

Purpose: Social media governance is a multifaceted and complex sociotechnical process, particularly when exposure to different cyber-subcultures leads to acculturation and subsequent cultural change. This research addresses the cyber-acculturation dilemma in the context of social media governance.

Method: We explored the opinions of 18 Iranian media experts through online interviews to examine the manageability of the cyber-acculturation process and the measures that may guide users toward adopting positive aspects of cyber-subcultures while avoiding negative ones. Using a basic qualitative approach, we employed Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis with an inductive (bottom-up) method for data analysis.

Findings: Our findings are presented in a thematic map of social media governance for cyber acculturation, which includes: Infrastructural Measures (10 sub-themes); Educational Measures (Cultural, Moral, and Media Literacy

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Education); Cultural Measures (6 sub-themes); Media-Based Measures (4 sub-themes); and Social Control Measures (Formal and Informal Social Control, and Inaction). We also acknowledge the unmanageable aspects of cyber acculturation (the inherent nature of acculturation and social media, and the indefinability of comprehensive criteria).

Conclusion: This research contributes to ongoing debates on how governments can govern social media and cyber acculturation in the context of exposure to cyber-subcultures. The suggested map can inform governments about the nature of cyber acculturation and cyber-subcultures, enabling them to govern social media more effectively.

Keywords: Social Media Governance, Cyber Acculturation, Cyber-Subcultures, Social Media Exposure.

Introduction

Social media governance is inherently sociotechnical: the design of a technological system must consider its social impacts, while its social impacts must be understood through design and politics (Schoenebeck & Blackwell, 2020). Governance is carried out via a complex matrix of local, national, and international regulatory communities, platform governance, and users' self-governance (Venkatesh et al., 2021). Effective cyberspace governance requires scrutiny of cyber cultures and subcultures, as culture influences technology transfer, government–business relationships, managerial ideologies and attitudes, and the way people think and behave (Onyusheva & Changjongpradit, 2018).

Exposure to different cyber cultures and subcultures triggers acculturation. Acculturation refers to the meeting of cultures and the resulting changes (Sam & Berry, 2006). Digital integration represents a state of acculturation through dynamic interaction with online and offline environments, involving the selective adoption of certain cultural attributes from another group (Dey et al., 2020). Social media plays a significant role in cultural adaptation (Li & Croucher, 2020). The effects of online networks “exceed person-to-person influences and allow for strong identification with specific attitudes” (Jamal et al., 2019). Thus, social media platforms can form and reform norms, enforce or render them obsolete (Meraji Oskouie et al., 2023b). Social media use has also altered ethical norms and behaviors (Barrett-Maitland & Lynch, 2020), raising emerging ethical issues (Çiftçi, 2020). In Iran, cultural shifts from traditional to more cosmopolitan views have led to concerns among governmental, religious, and traditional sectors, resulting in strict regulations, criminalization, filtering, and forced user migration policies (Meraji Oskouie et al., 2023a).

In this study, we examined the cyber-acculturation dilemma in social media governance to better understand effective measures that can guide users toward adopting positive aspects of cyber-subcultures while avoiding negative ones.

Literature Review

Culture is defined as a set of shared beliefs and behaviors, often referred to as the “collective programming of the mind” (Prakash & Majumdar, 2021), and as a system of learned behavioral patterns acquired through ongoing socialization (Reddy-Best, 2020). National culture distinguishes members of one group from another (Prakash & Majumdar, 2021),

encompassing language, literature, art, thinking styles, dreams, lifestyles, customs, traditions, and values—all of which contribute to its development and integration with features of other cultures (Ergashev & Farxodjonova, 2020). An individual's cultural orientation is shaped by social identities based on socioeconomic background and by achieved identities through occupation or other group memberships (Knight et al., 2018).

The variation and complexity of human culture stem from cumulative culture, in which the beliefs, behaviors, and inventions of previous generations are accumulated, modified, recombined, and transmitted, creating socially heritable bodies of knowledge (Legare, 2019). A sociology of retrospection emphasizes how human conduct and statements are shaped by a changing mix of traditions, fantasies, interests, and opportunities (Olick, 2008). Cultural repertoires may include obsolete elements that no longer fit the current social order. Although these may serve nostalgic or analytical purposes, they otherwise have little functional value (Blommaert & De Fina, 2016).

A subculture is a cultural minority or subdivision within a nation (Chow, 2017). Subcultures form when the dominant culture does not meet members' needs or shared experiences related to particular identities (Reddy-Best, 2020). As a subgroup within a larger culture, subcultures provide social identity (Jain & Yadav, 2018 & 2019). They adhere to values, beliefs, consumption patterns, and lifestyles distinct from the mainstream, though not entirely separate from it (Nwalozie, 2015). Subcultural groups are often labeled subordinate or deviant, distinguished by class, ethnicity, language, poverty, age, or generation (Nwalozie, 2015). Their distinctiveness attracts attention and may position them in opposition to dominant culture (Blackman, 2014). Subcultures persist as long as they remain aligned with prevailing sociocultural values and orders (Yudha, 2023).

Tolerance for cultural multiplicity is growing, with fewer judgments of superiority or inferiority (Ulusoy & Firat, 2018). In multicultural societies, cultural pluralism is essential, fostering appreciation and tolerance for diversity (Ahmed, 2017). From this perspective, an ideal democratic society is cosmopolitan, valuing cultural differences (Bernstein, 2015).

Cyberculture is a contemporary sociocultural form characterized by specific techniques, practices, attitudes, ways of thinking, and values. Emerging from interactions between society, culture, and digital technologies, it unites people globally around shared interests in

cyberspace (Cardoso, 2021; Zolotukhin et al., 2020).

(Cyber) Acculturation involves cultural, social, and psychological changes in individuals' and groups' attitudes, behaviors, and cultural patterns. These changes result from continuous, direct contact shaped by the qualitative and quantitative nature of interactions and reciprocal cross-cultural influence (Li et al., 2019; Li & Croucher, 2020). Berry's acculturation model identifies four immigrant strategies: assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization (Li et al., 2019). Integration—blending aspects of both cultures—is often the most beneficial for personal development and intercultural understanding (van der Zee & van Oudenhoven, 2022). Cultural flexibility, or the ability to substitute one's cultural activities with those of the host culture, is positively associated with adjustment, self-esteem, and self-confidence (Tarique & Weisbord, 2013).

Acculturation in globalization occurs through exposure to foreign influences via media, travel, and products (Wang et al., 2016). Social media fosters intercultural communication and distinct cybercultures (Ming, 2022), supporting adaptation to new environments while preserving home culture ties (Sawyer & Chen, 2012). Remote or “virtual” acculturation takes place through media, food, and tourism, shaped by pluralist–constructivist globalization (Li et al., 2019). Social media platforms, with strong potential for culturalization, socialization, and education, are vital spaces for identity formation and self-expression (Meraji Oskouie et al., 2023b; Bhoj et al., 2022). Subculture communities have been recreated online, where practices often diverge from mainstream norms and may face social classification and regulation (Nwalozie, 2015).

Social Control refers to formal and informal mechanisms by which societies influence behavior to maintain order and morality (Abulhul, 2021; Meraji Oskouie et al., 2023a). Social control can be internal (internalized norms and values) or external (family, school, religion, unions, or the state) (Abulhul, 2021). Social norms can constrain behavior without legal enforcement (Stamkou et al., 2019). Psychological health, awareness-raising (Meraji Oskouie et al., 2023a), and even inaction (no sanctions for deviance; Horwitz, 1990) affect norm compliance. Conformity and deviance are context-dependent, varying across social space, place, and time (Carr et al., 2018; Meraji Oskouie et al., 2023b). Positive deviance—voluntary behaviors departing from norms in beneficial ways—can identify and promote exceptional performance

(Herington & Van de Fliert, 2018).

Social Media Regulation faces inherent limitations. Internet regulation is never fully effective due to decentralized networks, bottom-up content creation, borderless subcultures, jurisdiction dilemmas, cross-border legal issues, and evasion through encrypted or offshore networks (Gangadharan, 2015; Flew et al., 2019; Zolotukhin et al., 2020; Demirel, 2022). Social media's transnational and user-driven nature undermines traditional censorship and policies (Flew, 2015; Edwards et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, the Internet is not ungovernable. Regulation depends on platform self-management and technical infrastructures (Flew, 2015). Regulatory modes include laws, codes, norms, and markets (Haynes et al., 2016). Algorithmic governance (Katzenbach & Ulbricht, 2019) and algorithmic regulation (Yeung, 2018) are increasingly important. Platforms use content moderation to manage unwanted or illegal material (Scheuerman et al., 2021), though voluntary rule internalization may be more effective than sanctions (Venkatesh et al., 2021). Social capital created by connectivity promotes trust and communication, strengthening regulation (Sumkoski, 2018). Regulations must address cybercrime (Umeugo, 2023), child protection (Mubarak, 2020), online safety (Scheuerman et al., 2021), and information disorder (Kandel, 2020).

In a decentralized sphere of “prosumers” (Ritzer et al., 2012) and global media companies, literacy emerges as a democratic alternative to centralized regulation (Buckingham, 2020). Cultural literacy frames socio-cultural issues through literary thinking (Segal, 2015). Education fosters ethical and moral awareness, tolerance, and intercultural understanding (Romanovska, 2021). Media literacy equips individuals to engage critically with information across platforms (Polanco-Levicán & Salvo-Garrido, 2022), empowering responsible participation (Schreurs & Vandenbosch, 2021). Digital literacy extends these skills to the use of technologies for problem-solving and content creation (Kaeophanuek et al., 2018). Social media literacy integrates ethical, technical, and cognitive skills, including netiquette and online social norms (Manca et al., 2021; Heitmayer & Schimmelpfennig, 2023). Critical thinking is essential for managing the vast flow of online information (Polanco-Levicán & Salvo-Garrido, 2022).

Ethics concerns moral values and obligations (Wa-Mbaleka, 2019). While “good” is difficult to define, it is not inherently vague (Yeşilkaya, 2022). Ethics emphasizes responsibility and care across differences in worldview (Mostovicz et al., 2009). It encompasses norms that guide

social behavior (Çiftçi, 2020). Social ethics addresses problematic conditions and proposes solutions (Chadwick, 2012). Ethics education focuses on awareness, analysis, and action (Watts, 2020).

Social media is user-centered (Johnson, 2013) and shapes public opinion (Wu, 2019; Shengliang, 2020; Yang et al., 2023). Governments can use it as a tool for social governance and more acceptable policymaking (Al-masaeed, 2019; Shengliang, 2020). Big data analytics further aids decision-making by mapping communication patterns and user behaviors (Rathore et al., 2017; Bazzaz Abkenar et al., 2021).

In this research, we investigated expert opinions on the manageability of cyber acculturation and the measures that may guide users toward adopting positive aspects of cyber-subcultures while avoiding negative ones.

Method

Adopting a basic qualitative research approach (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2015), we employed Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2022) with an inductive, bottom-up strategy (Dawadi, 2021) for data coding. The analysis proceeded through three phases—data reduction, data grouping, and concept formation—to address the research questions (Kygäs et al., 2020). In vivo coding, which captures participants' actual spoken words (Manning, 2017), was used as an initial analysis step with NVivo 10 software.

Data were collected through interviews with 18 Iranian media experts and an online questionnaire (created with Google Forms) distributed via WhatsApp and Telegram. The questionnaire included four closed-ended demographic questions and seven open-ended questions. This article focuses on responses to two open-ended questions that explored governance strategies enabling Instagram users to adopt positive or reject negative cultural elements, lifestyles, thoughts, and behaviors associated with cyber-subcultures.

We used expert sampling, a purposive non-probability technique where participants are selected based on analytical, logical, or theoretical grounds (Berndt, 2020). Sample adequacy was assessed through the principle of saturation (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). In this study, saturation was reached after 10 interviews, consistent with the range of 9–17 interviews commonly observed in studies with relatively homogenous populations (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

Participants were media experts (72% male, 28% female) with 5–35

years of experience ($M = 21.5$ years) in media production (83.3%), media management (50%), media consultancy (44.4%), and university teaching (33.3%). In terms of education, 50% held Master's degrees, 38.9% Doctorates, and 11.1% Bachelor's degrees.

Trustworthiness was ensured by applying four criteria from Eryilmaz (2022): credibility (peer debriefing with another researcher), transferability (thick description and purposeful sampling), dependability, and confirmability (audit trail and external audit). Because quantitative measures of intercoder reliability are epistemologically problematic for qualitative work (Braun & Clarke, as cited in Cofie et al., 2022), we did not conduct stepwise replication or calculate intercoder reliability (Eryilmaz, 2022).

Findings

Analysis of expert perspectives on the cyber-acculturation dilemma in social media governance revealed six themes.

Unmanageability of Cyber Acculturation

As summarized in Table 1, some experts argued that cyber acculturation cannot be managed. One noted: "Unfortunately, no considerable work has been done so far." The reasons include:

- a) The Nature of Acculturation —described as an intrinsic personal and social process that cannot, should not, and does not need to be managed.
- b) The Nature of Social Media —considered unmanageable through traditional media management methods, particularly given jurisdictional ambiguity and the ineffectiveness of national policies.
- c) The Indefinability of Comprehensive Criteria —the lack of clear standards for normative versus non-normative behavior adds to the complexity of governance.

Table 1. Unmanageability of Cyber Acculturation

Sub-Theme	Category	Example (Translated from Persian)
a) The Nature of Acculturation	Unfeasibility of Vertical Management	"It is not capable of being top-down managed"; "Personally, I don't consider acculturation management to be feasible and correct"; "In my opinion, there is
	Intervention Needlessness	
	Individualistic Nature	

	Intrinsicality	no need for this”; “Basically, I consider the field of social networks to be the field of human living”; “Acculturation is a process that occurs in the heart of real and virtual society”
	Impropriety of Intervention	
b) The Nature of Social Media	Unfeasibility of Comprehensive Management	“It cannot be acknowledged that this space can be completely managed”; “I believe that it cannot be managed with the management methods of a traditional media”; “Since social media is not specific to a certain geographical area, it basically do not fit into the framework of policies, rules and principles that each country specifically considers for its nation”.
	Inapplicability of Traditional Media Management Methods	
	Politico-Geographic Beyondness	
c) The Indefinability of Comprehensive Criteria	Ambiguity	“Basically, I disagree with this kind of positive and negative valuation. Who is the criterion for this positive and negative [valuation]? Basically, it is no longer possible to give credit in this way to human behaviors”.
	Relativeness	

Infrastructural Measures

The emerged Infrastructural Measures addressed the sub-themes presented in the Table 2:

Table 2. Infrastructural Measures

Sub-Theme	Example (Translated from Persian)
a) Recognition of Cyberspace	“Officialization of virtual space by the government”
b) De-Emphasis on Outdated Cultural Elements (by non-compliance with, and not making policies on these elements)	“Not adhering governmentally and policy-wise to, and [no longer] complying with cultural characteristics and traditions that were once common but society no longer accepts or wants them”.

c) Tracing Back Socio-Cultural Tendencies (toward subcultures to control their potential negative impacts on the society)	“If in a society, the majority of cyberspace users tend toward the negative and destructive aspects of cyberspace, there are definitely problems in the management and infrastructure of the social and cultural system of that society that must be rooted out”.
d) Reforming Cultural Structures (through constructive culturalization and education to influence cyber acculturation)	“Revising and reforming flawed cultural structures through education and affirmative rather than privative culturalization, maybe it is a suitable way for recognizing positive thoughts and behaviors and applying them and being influenced by them.”
e) Indirect Opinion Leadership (in an implicit, nonclassical manner, via indirect intervention)	“[You] should covertly manage thoughts, using classical methods and direct intervention won’t work”.
f) Moral Atmosphere Enhancement (as a tool for distinguishing proper from improper behavior)	“Improving the moral atmosphere in the society will also be helpful in creating a tool for distinguishing right from wrong in people”.
g) Amendment of Policies, Laws and Regulations	“Amendment of regulations and governance guidelines to resolve inter-institutional conflicts”; “Adopting policies related to this area [cultural capitals]”.
h) Improving Societal Mental Health (by employing extensive treatment of mental illnesses such as depression, addressing dark triad personality traits, and enhancing self-control through training individuals, parents, and teachers)	“Increasing self-control of people through training parents, teachers and people”; “Raising the level of mental health (reducing the level of depression, treating mental illnesses such as the dark triad) in society”.
i) Inaction (and not persuading users by forbidding specific contents)	“Tolerance and inaction against different non-normative behaviors that do not cause social damage and are simply different”; “When we ban or eliminate and obstruct, we have encouraged users to use more”.

j) Big Data Analytics (such as continuous assessment and categorization of media content, and providing topic-specific solutions)	“Creating knowledge management mechanisms (categorization and continuous evaluation of contents, topic-specific solutions, ...)”.
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Educational Measures

This theme included three sub-themes and their categories, as shown in the Table 3:

Table 3. Educational Measures

Sub-Theme	Category	Example (Translated from Persian)
a) Cultural Education	Cultural Literacy Improvement	“Raising the level of cultural literacy of the audience”.
	Provision of Role Models	“Providing role models that are suitable and in accordance with positive social norms”; “There will be little possibility of change if people cannot choose the right models”.
	Education on Resistance Against Improper Cultural Elements	“Enlightenment on the importance and necessity of resistance against conflicting cultures”.
	Education on Conditions Requiring Cultural Flexibility	“Conditions of cultural gentleness”.
	Diversity Acceptance Education	“Education on tolerating diversity and difference in society”.
	Introduction to Subcultures	“Informing the audience”; “People should be able to [get] to know all subcultures”.
	Adaptation to Subcultures	“Adapt to the existence of all these subcultures”
	Provision of Questions and Answers (short, scientific, comprehensive and general questions and answers)	“Outlining general and comprehensive questions and teachings for people by providing short and scientific answers that can be fact checked by every individual, and involving them in discussions, and simple but important questions in the [human] life”.
	Edutainment	“Indirect education combined with entertainment”.

b) Moral Education	Education on Ethics	“Teaching ethics at the societal level and improving the level of ethics in society”
	Education on (Non)normative Behaviors (especially, harmful behaviors and attitudes; not complying with human rights; unethical and criminal social media use; and nonnormative subcultures)	“Raising awareness in order to prevent violence, crime, felony and not fueling it, especially in the social media space, such as paying attention to the issue of cyberbullying”; “Raising awareness in order to make a compliance with human and general rights of people, especially children and minorities in the Instagram space”; “Raising awareness about nonnormative and negative behaviors and thoughts that are harmful to society and individuals (informing and educating about negative deviance)”.
	Awareness Raising about Negative Consequences	“Enlightenment and awareness raising about the harms of unethical and criminal use of the cyberspace facilities, here, specifically Instagram”; “Making people more familiar with its consequences”.
	Developing the Distinction Ability (through moral and media literacy education)	“Improving the moral atmosphere in the society will also help in creating a tool for distinguishing right from wrong in individuals”. “If it is to be influential, media literacy should be increased so that the individuals, themselves, can decide to choose positive content for themselves and from their own point of views”; “Increasing individuals’ media literacy to identify positive behaviors among the multitude of Instagram flaunts”; “The strongest lever in this regard is to strengthen the media literacy of users”
c) Media Literacy Education		

	Promotion of Critical Thinking (the Ability for Criticism and Critical Choice; Spirit of Inquiry; and Logical/Philosophical Thinking)	“Efforts in the field of expanding media literacy and the ability of criticism and critical choice”; “Strengthening the spirit of inquiry”; “Philosophizing and rationalizing the mind of the audience”.
	Self-Respect in Media Consumption	“Teaching the audiences to respect themselves and not give their precious lives to others, cheaply and for free”.
	Effective & Comprehensive Training of Managers/Users (through employing Training Programs and Packages; Netiquette Training; and Content Production in All Media Platforms, and With All Means)	“Unfortunately, even in managerial ranks, a clear definition of this concept is not understood and does not exist, and it is not possible to develop this paradigm until views are revised in that sector”; “People’s knowledge of Netiquette should be specially promoted under media literacy”; “Designing appropriate training packages [for amending regulations and governance guidelines to resolve inter-institutional conflicts]”; “Training and raising media literacy and informing about the results and negative effects can be a way forward”; “Using other media such as television in this regard”; “Using all media [platforms]”.

Cultural Measures

Cultural Measures included the sub-themes and their categories as presented in the Table 4:

Table 4. Cultural Measures

Sub-Theme	Category	Example (Translated from Persian)
a) Preservation and Promotion of National	Retrospection	“Our country is known as the country of literature. The giants of Iranian literature and wisdom have such strong roots over long

Identity and Culture		centuries at a global level that they cannot be eliminated that easily [...]. Using Iran's intellectual and cultural roots in different ways in programs [...]"
	Promotion of National Culture	"To preserve and spread the culture of a country, the culture can be enriched and proliferated in a deep way". "Encouraging famous figures to show their interest in their own cultural characteristics and pay attention to sub-cultures is definitely one of the effective factors"; "Honoring cultural capital".
	Promotion of National Identity	"Highlighting the elements of one's own cultural identity and valuing these elements is very effective"; "Creating a spirit of self-confidence and hope in people by introducing individual and native values in the society".
b) National Culture and Lifestyle Redefinition and Change	Redefinition of National Culture and Lifestyle	"In my opinion, the Iranian lifestyle should be defined correctly, considering the requirements of urbanization and modernity [...]. For years, books have been written about the Iranian and Islamic lifestyle, but a correct definition has never been presented".
	National Culture and Lifestyle Change	"Changing culture and lifestyle takes a lot of time"; "A Willingness to change".
	Avoidance of Superstition	"Unfortunately, Iranian culture and lifestyle are a mixture of superstitions, customs and religion, so the contradictions of Western culture are more attractive."
c) Respect for Social Values	Acceptance of Diversity	"Respect for different thoughts, all of which are placed next to the same concept of respect for diversity in society"; "Preventing the creation of social resistance in the society"; "Not suppressing diversity in society by stigmatizing

		and labeling groups that are different”.
	Pluralism	“Cultivation of pluralism in society”.
	Freedom	“Facilitating, persuading, fostering and supporting freedom of expression and dissent”; “Giving cultural freedom and freedom of choice to people”.
d) Comprehension of Socio- Cultural Changes	The Nature of Culture, Society, and Change	“Changing culture and lifestyle takes a lot of time, you have to be patient”; “Acculturation is a process that occurs in the heart of real and virtual society”; “Knowing the society and recognizing the cultural and social changes that occur gradually in the heart of the society (society is dynamic, so it has the right to change)”.
	National and Global Socio-Cultural Leveling Trends	“Due to different people’s use of global culture and norms, the cultural integration and moving toward the dominant culture is inevitable”.
	Global Cultural Commonalities and Differences	“The contradictions of Western culture are more attractive”; “It is necessary [...] to work on commonalities”.
	The Nature of New Technologies and Social Media	“Due to the facility of public use, this public space is, however, full of different cultures [;] and the dynamics of the ‘culture’ subject matter has caused different subcultures to enter this space from the external space, or even subcultures specific to this space to be born”; “The appeal of these modern devices will be transitory and temporary”.
e) Dissemination of Sub-Cultures	Support of Sub- Cultures	“Media [support] and social support of minority groups and subcultures”.

	Acceptance of Sub-Cultures	“Identifying positive characteristics in subcultures and promoting them in society and dominant culture”; “Emphasis on the strengths of subcultures”; “The first step is to accept subcultures as part of the cultural body of the society”.
	Promotion of Sub-Cultures	“Using the potential of popular influencers”; “Using the capacity of influential people on the platform of Instagram to expand these subcultures”; “Turning some of these subcultures into the dominant culture by the dissemination and repetition of them”.
	Purposive Localization of Sub-Cultures	“Making them [(i.e., subcultures)] purposeful in order to localize them can play a big role in shaping a positive form of modern life”.
f) Encouragement of Positive Deviance	–	“Giving people the opportunity, and encouraging them to experience positive deviance”.

Media-Based Measures

Media-Based Measures were classified into the sub-themes and their categories shown in the Table 5:

Table 5. Media-Based Measures

Sub-Theme	Category	Example (Translated from Persian)
a) Content Production and Dissemination	Audience-Centered Content	“[...] based on the recognition of the contingencies of target audiences and competitive fields”.
	Effective Content	“Preparing attraction mechanisms for texts”; “Participating them [i.e., audiences] in discussions, and simple but important questions of life”; “Being persuasive”; “It can be done [...] through effective informing and awareness raising about the desired subcultures, in order to persuade users”; “It can repel the raging flood of vulgarity by establishing more proximity and

		close relationships with people”; “Creating material/ non-material rewarding procedures for the target audience”; “Creating motivation with awards and incentives”; “Methods of presenting messages such as beauty, attention-grabbing”; “Right methods of messaging, repetition and persuasion”; “attractiveness”; “Outlining general and comprehensive questions and teachings for people by providing short and scientific answers”; “Be attractive”; “Scientificness and unpretentiousness in posts uploaded by experts”; “Providing short and scientific answers”.
	Normative Content	“Avoiding superficial and borrowed thoughts”; “Expansion of sites and pages providing normative contents”; “Analysis of negative messages [...] with simple language via another platform, or criticizing the same negative content in a format similar to the original content so that the negative aspects are highlighted and pointed out to the audience”.
	Information Disorder Confrontational Content	“Fact-checking should be possible for everyone”; “Communication and presentation of authentic documents and statistics in simple language by experts for the public, against the false and non-scientific documents that are presented in the cyberspace by profiteers”.
	Strategic Content Production	“Effective engineering of message”; “The media strategy must change; when the audience does not see a significant program in the television media, the motivation to use the virtual space increases”; “Production of targeted content, competitive with existing content”; “Quantitative and qualitative production of cultural content”.

b) User Analytics & Needs Assessment	–	“More effective organization of content in relation to the needs, desires, and coordinates of the target audience (language, timing, interests, needs, ...)”; “First of all, knowing the audience's interests and finding a way to penetrate the audience's thoughts, minds and hearts”; “Identifying the contingencies of target audiences”; “Establishment of feedback systems”; “Continuous measurement of attention span and effect”.
c) Media Movement Building	–	“Creating different campaigns to spread these subcultures”.
d) Professionalism	Training on Professional Content Production	“If the mother of the family is a good cook, other members of the family are less likely to take refuge in the local fast-food restaurant - I think that instead of closing down the local fast-food restaurant, the mother of the family should be taught how to cook”.
	Professional Content Production	“Leave the work to experts”.

Social Control Measures

Social Control Measures were classified into the sub-themes and their categories presented in the Table 6:

Table 6. Social Control Measures

Sub-Theme	Category	Example (Translated from Persian)
a) Formal Social Control	Government Legislation (including the criminalization of publication/promotion of harmful content like child abuse, violence against living beings, and hate speech)	“Criminalizing the publication and promotion of harmful content such as child abuse, violence against animals and humans, and hate speech”.
	Value-Based Regulation	“The general rules and principles that are humane, legal and accepted by all

	(based on universal principles and international laws and norms; humane principles; and user rights)	countries can be considered as universal and general norms”; “Informing in order to respect the human and public rights of people, especially children and minorities in the Instagram space”.
	Corporate Self-Regulation (including codes and algorithms for content moderation; development of user safety tools; and prevention of the spread of harmful content, such as aggressive, abusive, illegal content, and content promoting child and vulnerable people abuse, and discrimination based on ethnicity, sex, gender, nationality, religion, culture, and political opinions)	“The main custodians of social media, as the main owners of these media, consider codes and algorithms in the way of respecting the rights of their users”; “Creating individual regulatory tools for users in social media applications for blocking and removing such content to avoid incidental exposure to them”; “Using corporate self-regulatory tools on social platforms for not presenting inappropriate, violent content, ethnic/ gender/ sexual/ national/ religious/ cultural/ political discriminatory content, criminal content, harassing content, children and vulnerable people exploitative content, and such prohibited contents”
	Non-Coercive/ Indirect	“Not using coercive means of social control because it can create the opposite result and social resistance in the society, and can cause the strengthening of negative behaviors in the society”; “Making people more aware of its consequences without direct commanding or forbidding”.
b) Informal Social Control	External Reactions (including family and peer reactions)	“Using informal and non-coercive social control tools such as family and peer reactions”.
	—	“Tolerance and inaction against different non-normative behaviors that do not cause social damage and are simply different”; “When we ban or eliminate and obstruct, we have encouraged users to use more”.
c) Inaction	—	

The relationships among themes and sub-themes are illustrated in the Figure 1:

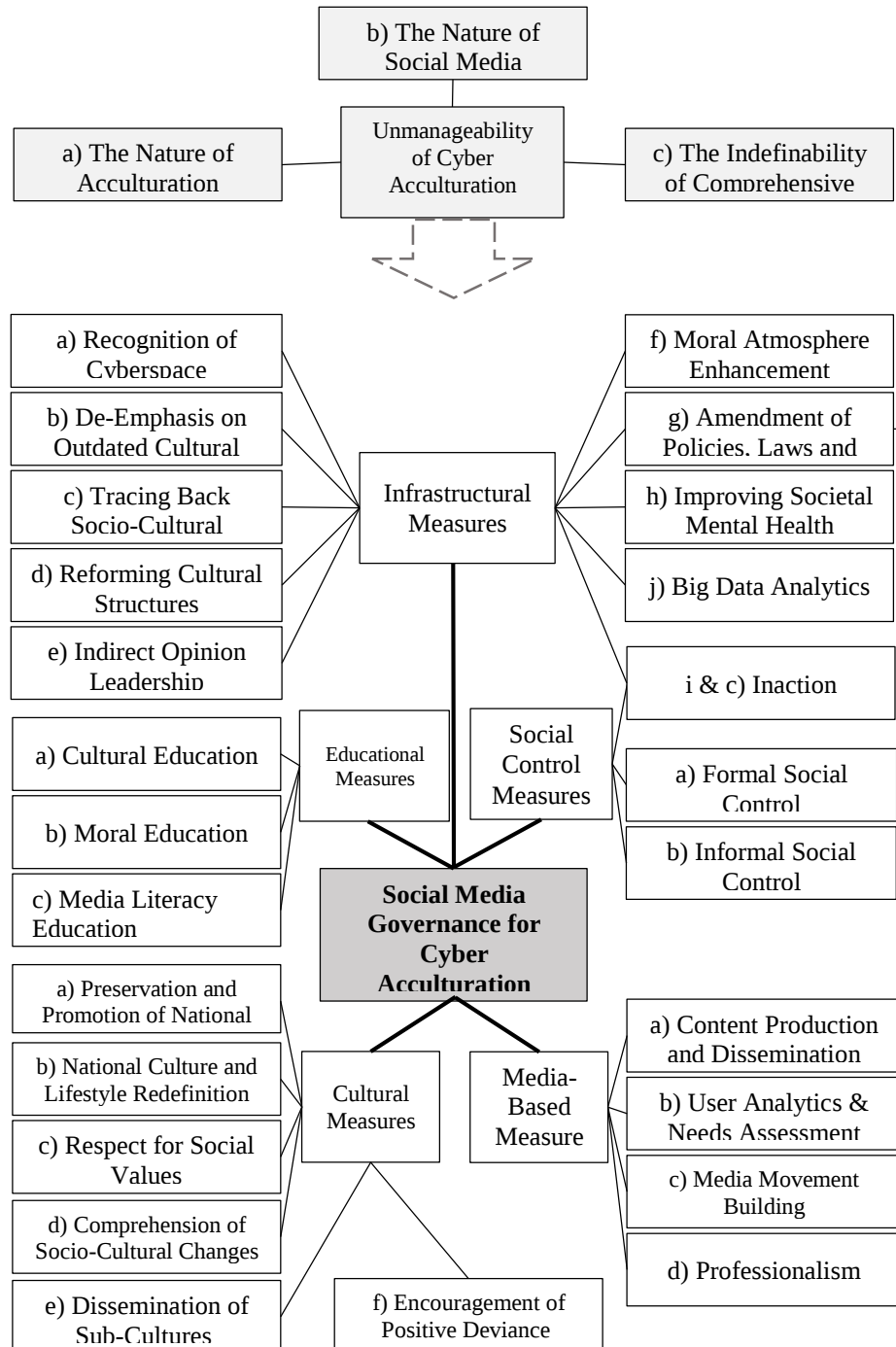


Figure 1. A Map of Social Media Governance for Cyber Acculturation

Conclusion

Electronic cyber-acculturation process, as some experts argued, may be unmanageable due to its dynamic cultural, social, and psychological nature (Li et al., 2019), jurisdictional dilemmas and cross-border legal challenges (Demirel, 2022), the lack of geographical boundaries in cyber-subcultures (Gangadharan, 2015; Zolotukhin et al., 2020), and the indefinability of what constitutes “good” (Yeşilkaya, 2022). However, our findings suggest that it is not ungovernable. The infrastructural, educational, cultural, media-based, and social control measures identified by participants are consistent with the strategies discussed in the literature review.

Our findings emphasize the importance of government recognition of cyberspace and highlight its potential as a valuable tool for social governance (Shengliang, 2020), decision-making (Rathore et al., 2017), and policy design that is publicly acceptable (Al-masaeed, 2019). In line with earlier studies, experts also underscored the need to de-emphasize obsolete cultural elements that no longer serve current social structures (Blommaert & De Fina, 2016), acknowledge globalization-driven acculturation (Wang et al., 2016), and consider the role of social identities in shaping cultural orientations (Knight et al., 2018).

Cultural change was a recurring theme in our findings. Cultural structures interact with social forces in ways that both constrain and enable individuals, fostering structural and cultural transformation (Patterson, 2014). Social structures influence how individuals interpret and manage circumstances, while subcultures may emerge when groups confront shared problems (Steinmetz et al., 2020). Some participants suggested avoiding superstitious beliefs, noting that what is considered superstitious in one culture may be deeply rooted in another. Superstitions, as part of cultural traditions and customs, play a role in shaping identity and a sense of belonging (Kalandarovna, 2023).

Cultures and societies are not static. Attitudes, norms, institutions, and cultural products evolve over time (Varnum & Grossmann, 2021). Integration with other cultures does not eliminate the independence of national cultures, but neglecting them may diminish their scale and influence. Preserving and developing the unique characteristics of a national culture aligns with the advancement of democratic and universal cultural development (Ergashev & Farxodjonova, 2020). Today, culture is increasingly transnational, shaped by rapid digital advances, intensified exchanges, and migration flows (Szulc, 2023). Globalization has created a new world culture where interdependence among cultures is inevitable

(Çöteli, 2019). This global culture can be seen as “a socio-cultural market of lifestyle identities” (Regev, 2019). While globalization fosters hybridization as part of cultural development (Chen, 2022), it also contributes to cultural leveling (Ayaz, 2021), whereby Western cultural elements diffuse into other cultures (Henslin, 2013). Nonetheless, cultural diffusion is not unidirectional (Ferris & Stein, 2018).

Social networking platforms provide opportunities for individuals to learn about other cultures, showcase national and minority cultures, and engage in cultural exchange (Ming, 2022). Technological developments influence values, attitudes, social relations, and behaviors, creating new subcultures, particularly among youth (Jain & Yadav, 2018, 2019; Yudha, 2023). Social media fosters online cultural communities and empowers transnational and marginalized groups. By facilitating exposure to diverse cultures, cybercultures provide opportunities to learn about minority traditions (Ming, 2022). Physical and cultural differences can thus serve as opportunities to nurture talents and build healthier relationships (Tutgun-Ünal, 2021).

Our findings on education resonate with the argument that literacy serves as a democratic alternative to centralized regulation in a decentralized technological environment (Buckingham, 2020). Edutainment—engaging learners emotionally and cognitively through media-based values (Isika, 2021)—can promote behavioral change and capability development by combining learning with enjoyment (Mateus De Oro et al., 2022). Online role models also play a role in providing informational benefits (Jenkins et al., 2016). In particular, during identity diffusion, youths may be influenced by celebrities who shape their worldview (Gao, 2022). Media professionals also play a growing role beyond content production, increasingly focusing on designing and facilitating diverse products, services, and platforms (Malmelin & Villi, 2017).

The social control measures identified by experts are consistent with existing literature, including government regulation and corporate self-management (Flew, 2015; Haynes et al., 2016; Flew et al., 2019), algorithmic governance (Yeung, 2018; Katzenbach & Ulbricht, 2019), external and internal forms of control (Abulhul, 2021; Meraji Oskuie et al., 2023a), and inaction (Horwitz, 1990).

This study contributes to debates on how governments can govern social media and cyber-acculturation in contexts shaped by exposure to cyber-subcultures. The proposed map provides insights into the nature of

cyber-acculturation and its governance through infrastructural, educational, cultural, media-based, and social control measures, while also acknowledging the unmanageable dimensions of the process. Nonetheless, the study is limited by its focus on Iran's cultural context and Instagram. Further research is recommended across diverse cultural settings and social media platforms, as well as in-depth exploration of the identified sub-themes, to better inform government institutions in developing effective governance measures.

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