

Paper title: The WVS findings put to the test of qualitative inquiry: Social media and sexuality in Kazakhstan¹

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Introduction

So far there is little research on the question of what influence social media have on the wider public's understanding of gender and sexuality in Central Asia. Poor internet penetration via fixed connections and a lack of infrastructure make mobile headsets and smartphones an easy on-the-go option to access social media. Thus, especially since the wider availability of cheaper 3G and 4G mobile technologies in the 2010s, the broader public in Kazakhstan has access to global social networks (such as Instagram and Facebook). As a result, Kazakhstanis have an easy access to content that promotes values, narratives, cultural practices that challenge the dominant local gender narratives, such as the active promotion of gender equality that go beyond formal equality and focus instead on sexual expression and queer culture. There is little research to date on how exposure to content on social media may affect the wider population's understanding of divorce and same-sex relationships in Kazakhstan. The purpose of this study is to examine and understand how Kazakhs' exposure to information and content on social media affects their approval of divorce and homosexuality. As a case sui generis this paper uses a partially mixed sequential equal status mixed-method design that confronts wider statistical trends identified from the World Values Survey Wave 7 (Haerpfer et al. 2020) country data set on Kazakhstan (2018) with empirical data from 26 focus groups conducted in Aktau (5), Almaty (5), Astana (7), Kyzylorda (3) and Shymkent (6) regions of Kazakhstan in 2019 in which a total of 113 respondents were involved.

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The paper is divided into four sections. In the first, we provide some historical and socio-political context to issues relating to gender and family values in Kazakhstan. It allows the reader to make sense of the current dynamics and underline the conflicting narratives about gender within different socio-economic circles which generate intense societal debates on- and offline. Second, the methodological approach employed and some of its shortcomings are discussed. Third, we proceed with the statistical analysis and reveal a strong correlation between frequent social media exposure and Kazakhs' approval of divorce and same-sex couples. The statistical analysis will demonstrate that exposure to information on social networks can both lessen and enhance people's support for traditional gender norms in Kazakhstan. We then proceed to juxtapose the quantitative results with our own qualitative data and reveal that the discourses expressed by various participants confirm that the power of Kazakh family values and mentality relating to gender identities runs deep. Apart from female Kazakh youth, the growing visibility of non-heterosexual and female groups on social networks was met with skepticism by young men and the older generations.

By examining how Kazakhs' support for divorce and homosexuality is related to their exposure to information obtained on social media platforms, this study seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature on the transformative forces of social media platforms in Kazakhstan.

Family and gender dynamics in contemporary Kazakhstan

Like many postcolonial nations, Kazakhstan's independence in 1991 led to major transformations, including the redefinition of socio-economic and political values devoid of socialist content and propaganda. Nation-building efforts included the promotion of national, traditional values that seem to redefine the gender order established during the Soviet Union (Arystanbek 2020; Cleuziou and Dierenberger 2016; Kudaibergenova 2018). Given that Kazakhstan was the only Central Asian republic where the titular nation did not constitute the majority of the population, discourses celebrated motherhood in a context where fertility rates were plummeting due to the difficult economic transition in the 1990s. Yet, the gender and family dynamics in Kazakhstan remain heavily influenced by the legacy of the Soviet modernization and the female emancipation project that shook the traditional organization of communities living in the USSR from its early beginning (Northrop 2004). The Bolshevik

government was one of the first to grant women the right to vote, to divorce and to perform abortions in 1917 (Thibault 2018, 38). Yet, the Soviet of female emancipation was grounded in strong heteronormative norms that favored monogamy and a conservative approach to sexuality. Homosexuality was even criminalized during long periods of time in the USSR (Kon 1995).

Unlike Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan decriminalized polygyny same-sex relations in 1998 but some restrictions remain. For instance, Kazakhstan officially prohibits homosexuals to serve in the army and other security organs, to marry and to adopt children. Also, weak legislative provisions around non-discrimination and equality, and a lack of recognition of the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity make members of LGBTQ communities particularly vulnerable (KIBHR – Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law, 2013). Yet, in 2015, the Constitutional Court rejected the Law “On protecting children from information that is harmful to their health and development” which aimed at prohibiting LGBT propaganda (Human Rights Watch 2015).

Marriage and family remain strong institutions and an overwhelming majority (82,5 per cent) of young people in Kazakhstan (14-29) envision their future as married with kids (Friedrich Ebert Foundation 2019, 50) and their answers match the very high marriage rate in the country. In 2017, the country registered 7,9 marriages per each 1000 inhabitants (a rate that is higher than most OECD countries’.² Yet, despite people’s belief in marriage, divorce rates are high and nearly 40 per cent of marriages end up in a divorce (Smayyl 2020). Divorce laws are fair and recognize the obligations of both spouses, including the payment of alimonies even though a number of men seem to evade this obligation (Sakhova 2020). Interviews and focus-groups have revealed that divorce is no longer a taboo in Kazakhstan since it is so common. Yet, social stigma continues to affect unmarried and childless individuals whose lifestyle is seen as a failure or selfishness.

As a legacy of the gender socialist emancipation, literacy and women’s labour force participation rates are relatively high in Central Asia in comparison with countries that possess similar or better socio-economic indicators. For instance, Kazakhstan has a far better Gender Inequality Index (0,190) than Turkey’s (0,306), which has a fairly similar Human Development Index.³ Furthermore, in Kazakhstan, more females (55.5 per cent) than males (44.5 per cent)

² <http://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm>

³ The lower the number, the less inequalities there are. <http://hdr.undp.org/en/indicators/68606>

receive higher education.⁴ Formal gender equality is a principle that is not really contested by political actors in Kazakhstan. On the contrary, the state has adopted different official gender strategies and policies which brought improvements in many spheres, including political representation (Tlegenova 2021). The objectives however very much focus on formal, legal equality and neglect prevailing problematic private and family dynamics that hegemonic heteronormative conceptions of gender, in which heterosexual males are favored and females and non-binary individuals are undervalued and/or victimized (Arystanbek 2020). For instance, domestic violence is prevalent within Kazakhstani households and each year, approximately 400 women are killed by a family member and the laws regulating domestic violence are very lenient towards aggressors (Aktanova 2020).

Symbolic violence is also carried by both state and society's narratives towards women's bodies. Even though women around the world face pressure to conform to dominant heteronormative standards of femininity, it becomes particularly acute in Kazakhstan given the nation-building process (Kudaibergenova 2019). Female bodies are subjected to scrutiny and critique and imposed conformity to local understanding of proper female behavior, defined as caring and modest. Conformity is imposed through "*uyat*", which translates as "shame". *Uyat* can be understood as a cultural practice that consists in shaming an individual who has deviated from the norm and done something deemed shameful by the rest of the community. Traditionally used as a form of socio-political self-regulation, its reminiscence in the 21st century has evolved into a form of moral policing, mostly imposed on women (Khegai 2020). Given how Kazakhstani communities remain tightly knit and how extended families depend on each other for social and economic support, the culture of shame is an efficient way to discipline individuals. Even though not part of any official policies, some state discourses and practices contribute to the reinforcement of this culture of obedience and shame.

For instance, in October 2017, two female psychologists working in the mayor's office in Nur-Sultan invited themselves to Nazarbayev University (a state university international in character) to conduct a seminar entitled: "The Moral Upbringing of Ladies" which emphasized modesty and family values. The female students attending the talk were very critical of the message and challenged the two older psychologists who were left baffled by the unexpected opposition they faced.⁵ In the summer of 2020, a short clip sponsored by the Shymkent mayor's office appeared online created a scandal in Kazakhstan because of its female shaming message

⁴ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?locations=KZ>

⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x5O_fJ3yVkw

(Diusengulova 2020). The clip depicts a young woman in a short black skirt and a white top trying to catch a taxi. A man in a black Mercedes picks her up and on the way, he asks about the cost of her ‘services’, pretending to think that she is a prostitute. The woman is offended and demands to stop but before he lets her out of the car, the man lectures her about how she should show respect to Kazakh culture and dress with more decency. The video created a national controversy and the Mayor’s office had to publicly distance itself from it. These are some examples among many that show how those messages are conveyed at the political level and because of their official character, are likely to have a resonance within the society. Yet, the fact that they are met with fierce resistance reveals something about ongoing battles over female bodies and values in Kazakhstan. The following section introduces the key points of contention underlying the current scholarly debate on social media’s transformative potential with regard to sexual liberty and diversity in general and in the context of Kazakhstan in particular.

Social media, sexual liberty and diversity

Especially in the last ten years, sociologists and political scientists have sought to describe and understand the power and role of social media in shaping and influencing people’s values and norms around the globe. Social media platforms have become an indispensable part of everyday life for people all over the world. In 2020, almost half a billion users joined social media, taking the global total to 4.2 billion in early 2021 (We are Social 2021). Previous scholarly literature on social media offered useful insights into how digital interactions influence identities, bodily representations, sexuality and dating behavior (Adams-Santos 2020). According to social media advocates, social media platforms enable the discussion of wider and more diverse issues that are often deemed unsuitable by mainstream print media (Manduley et al. 2018). Initially, social media platforms were deemed to be equalizing and democratizing forces, encouraging women and LGBTQ+ subjects to speak up and demand change in the face of institutional failure (Vivienne 2016). They are integral to the advent of fourth-wave feminism (Retallack et al. 2016).

Yet, sceptics find that growing digital visibility increases exposure to cyber mobbing, harassment, trolling and even reinforces existing gender and racial privileges (Norrahan et al. 2018; Tsatsou 2012). “The same platforms that were going to give [previously marginalized

groups] a voice are also giving users new opportunities to harass, insult and silence them.” (Are 2020, 741). Dick pics, racial hatred and shaming of individuals who do not conform to the heteronormative view of femininity, masculinity, and moral purity are common everywhere (Korkmazer et al. 2020). In addition to online abuse, female and queer bodies, nudity and sexuality are regularly censored by Instagram, Facebook, and Tumblr’s algorithm policy, preventing them from reaching wider audiences (Manduley et al. 2018). In April 2019 Instagram introduced a “shadow ban” (Are 2020, 742), a form of light censorship demoting violent, graphic/shocking, sexually suggestive, misinformation and spam content from the platform’s explore page. Feminist and queer activists’ online posts are disproportionately targeted by this machine-learning algorithm censorship. Similar to Instagram, rather than promoting diversity, digital-dating platforms such as Tumblr and Tinder were found to replicate the white heterosexual gaze online. Previous work on dating apps shows how sexual racism continues to dominate online dating by highlighting how Black women and Asian American men are disproportionately deemed undesirable by users (Hwang 2013; Robnett and Feliciano 2011; Yancey 2009). Finally, not everyone enjoys equal access to social media because they are missing the necessary digital and media literacy as well as financial means. In short, according to cyber-pessimists, social media platforms, rather than challenging, seem to be replicating the power dynamics and inequalities insinuated by class, race and gender found in the real-world, online.

A microcosm of this debate has unfolded among Central Asian experts in recent years. Numerous studies (Dall’Agnola 2021a; Kabatova 2019a; Kikuta 2019; Kudaibergenova 2019; Sekerbayeva 2017; Udod 2018) have demonstrated the importance of mobile internet connection, in forcing women’s and queer issues onto the public agenda in settings where street protests and public expressions of sexuality carry severe penalties. According to cyber-optimists, mobile phones provide activists with easy on-the-go access to social media platforms where they can share and promote their alternative views to a wider audience, despite the growing authoritarian grip on the news media in Central Asia. Kikuta (2019) illustrates how the use of smartphones is changing dating and marriage arrangements in the populous Ferghana Valley in the eastern part of Uzbekistan. Following the digital hashtag campaign #IAmNotAfraidToSayIt in Ukraine in 2016 (Lokot 2018) and #DontKeepSilent in Kazakhstan in 2017 (Udod 2018), the Instagram collective @tellme_sister in showcasing anonymized stories of victims of sexual violence and harassment openly began to speak out against the Central Asian culture of victim-blaming and stigmatization of survivors of sexual abuse in

Tajikistan in 2020 (Dall’Agnola 2021a). In Kazakhstan, more and more young feminist, and fashion bloggers such as Madina Musina (@ladykolbasa) and Nurlan Alimchodzhaev (@nuchi_amazing), through provocative posts, openly criticise the discourse of *uyat*, blaming especially, but not exclusively, Kazakh girls and women for having pre-marital intercourse and for sharing photos of themselves in revealing clothes online (Kudaibergenova 2019; Telekanal KTK 2021). In dressing in an effeminate and gay manner, as well as discussing female pleasure and homosexuality online, they are challenging the normative views of Kazakh femininity and masculinity. Thus, unsurprisingly the internet and social media platforms remain the main source of information for sexual education in Kazakhstan (Kabatova 2019a).

Yet, sexual liberation and queerness are not equally welcomed by everyone in Kazakhstan. Especially among the generations (30+ and mid-40s) who were born and partly socialized in the Soviet period, the open display of sexual liberation and normalization of same-sex unions on social media platforms are met with aversion (Friedrich Ebert Foundation 2019). Social media networks are identified as unsafe and highly sexualized digital environments that need to be controlled and censored by the state to preserve and protect traditional family values and Kazakh culture (Dall’Agnola 2020). A representative nation-wide survey conducted in 2019 by the “Institute for Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities of Kazakhstan” in cooperation with the “Centre of Civil Initiatives”, which featured 3,000 Kazakhstani divorcees, found that 28 percent of all respondents believed that their exposure to content on social media platforms has had a negative influence on their partnership and was the reason why they filed for divorce (Nurbai 2020). The study found that in particular women are now more likely to file for divorce than men as a result of their exposure to social media platforms. In short, there is an assumption that the promotion of sexual liberation and diversity on social media platforms increases the number of divorcees in Kazakhstan. As a result, more and more conservative groups, such as the *uyat-man* (shaming man) movement, are using social media for their own purposes to promote their understanding of tradition and shame among their followers (Isaacs 2019; Kudaibergenova 2019).

In short, the existing scholarship on Central Asia and Kazakhstan indicates that social media platforms can be expected to promote, but not exclusively, liberal gender norms in Kazakhstan. We therefore agree with social media optimists (Dall’Agnola 2021a; Kikuta 2019; Kudaibergenova 2019; Udod 2018) who argue that social media platforms not only shape consumption patterns and beauty standards but may also shape Central Asian people’s

understanding of gender identities and, more broadly, their world view. This leads us to hypothesize that the frequent exposure to social media influences and in some cases even increases Kazakhs' approval of divorce and homosexuality.

Methodology

Regression analyses

The objective of the quantitative analysis is to test whether frequent exposure to information on social media – the independent variable – affects Kazakhs’ acceptance of divorce and homosexuality – the dependent variables. Data were drawn from the World Values Survey Wave 7 (Haerpfer et al. 2020) country data file on Kazakhstan. Overall, the survey involved 1,200 respondents, but since the focus groups only featured Kazakhs we narrowed this down to focus only on respondents who identified as ethnic Kazakhs and who have answered the necessary questions (a total of 458 respondents). The survey was conducted in interviewees’ choice of Kazakh or Russian by the local staff of the Public Opinion Research Institute in Astana (since 2019 Nur Sultan). The survey took place in October and November 2018 and covered all five regions of Kazakhstan: North Kazakhstan, Central Kazakhstan, West Kazakhstan, South Kazakhstan, East Kazakhstan, as well as the three cities with republican status – Astana (capital), Almaty and Shymkent. Respondents comprised individuals aged 18 and older. The sampling procedure was designed to capture a representative sample of Kazakhstan’s adult population. The data was collected using a multistage stratified sampling method. The stratification was based on territorial-administrative units and rural and urban populations. Households were selected randomly within each stratum.

The questionnaire items chosen to capture Kazakhs’ approval of divorce and homosexuality (our dependent variables) were: “Is divorce justified?”, “Is homosexuality justified?” and “Homosexual couples are as good as parents as other couples.” Respondents’ answer to the first two questions was captured in a ten-point Likert scale from 1 (= not justified) to 10 (= justified). The third item measuring Kazakhs’ assessment of same-sex parenting was captured in five categories (1 = Agree strongly, 2 = Agree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Disagree, 5 = Disagree strongly).

Additionally, the models included a variety of controls, reflecting the findings in the previous literature on how people’s interaction with social media pages influence their views on gender roles in Kazakhstan (Blum 2016, 2019; Dall’Agnola 2021b; Friedrich Ebert Foundation 2019; Isaacs 2019; Kabatova 2019a; Nurbai 2020). Variables consistently found by previous studies to be associated with Kazakhs’ concerns about divorce and homosexuality are: age, with younger people being more open towards sexual liberation because they are more

frequently exposed to content on social media platforms; gender, with Kazakh men being less tempted to file for divorce and more likely to dismiss any content on social media that might reduce their privileged position over women's sexuality and that might promote same-sex relations; religious, with religious people displaying dissatisfaction with the growing number of divorces and increasing visibility of queer culture online than non-religious people; urban/rural and class, with urban middle-class Kazakhs being more likely to file for divorce and more open towards LGBTQ+ issues than their working-class counterparts living in the countryside; duty to have children, capturing respondents' support of and conformity with Kazakh mentality that it is a duty towards society to have children.

In the statistical analysis, the critical independent variable is Kazakhs' exposure to information on social media. To assess the information outlets and sources respondents consume on a daily, weekly, monthly and less than monthly basis or never, respondents were asked to rate how frequently they obtain information from social media. Unfortunately, the WVS only allowed us to capture Kazakhs' exposure to information on social networks more broadly and not specifically for the different social media platforms. Yet, according to the Central Asian Barometer survey wave 4 (which was conducted in the same period as the WVS, namely in October and November 2018) Kazakhs' favourite social media platform was Instagram in autumn 2018, with the exception of the generation fifty plus who preferred WhatsApp and Odnoklassniki over Instagram (for more details see figure 1A in the appendix). Afterwards, respondents' answers were changed into binary variables, with *daily* and *weekly* exposure to social networks combined into the category *frequently exposed* and the remaining ones into *not (frequently) exposed*. Another shortcoming which needs to be addressed here is that the WVS questionnaire did not include a question about what kind of information respondents are consuming on social networks. Nevertheless, the statistical component is valuable and necessary because it allows us to identify general trends that can be confronted with the empirical data from focus groups in a second step.

Focus groups

The focus groups were conducted by both authors as part of two separate research projects between June 2019 and January 2020 in different regions of Kazakhstan. The recruitment methods, size and composition of the focus groups differed slightly. Scholar #1 (Jasmin) is a foreigner who visited Kazakhstan as part of data collection for her doctoral dissertation on the impact of globalization, including ICTs, on national identities in Kazakhstan. Scholar #2

(Hélène) is a foreigner who works and resides in Kazakhstan. Her focus groups were part of a research project examining marriage and polygynous relations in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Even though divorce, same-sex relationships and social media were not the primary topics of the focus groups, discussions around those themes were very frequent and we decided to use this material to put the World Values Survey's results to the test of qualitative inquiry.

Jasmin's focus group participants were successfully recruited in the field through existing and associated contacts and through so-called "insider" recruiting (Krueger and Casey 2015, 85). Insiders recruited their relatives, friends and working colleagues. Using pre-existing social groups allowed the incorporation of diverse participants (students, professionals, entrepreneurs, office workers, market salespersons, nurses, etc.) and facilitated a generally relaxed atmosphere during the interviews. Hélène's focus groups were organized through a third-party organization located in Nur-Sultan called Data Hunters. The firm specializes in marketing and social research and recruited participants through their established networks. Therefore, participants did not know each other except for one group in Almaty in which two female friends participated and one in Kyzylorda in which a mother and her son participated. The focus groups held with students at Nazarbayev University were conducted by two research assistants to avoid any discomfort since Scholar #2 is a professor at this University. We acknowledge that our identity as foreign scholars might have had an impact on the nature of the discussions held. Participants might have assumed us to hold "liberal" values and might have refrained from expressing ideas that they thought would have been unpopular with us. However, due to the variety of positions expressed during the focus groups, we believe this was not the case. All focus groups were conducted in Russian language with the exception of some conversations partly held in Kazakh language in Kyzylorda and Shymkent. Even though this might be seen as a drawback since Russian was some of the participants' second language, we think that on the contrary, the fact that the conversations were held in Russian might have represented an opportunity for participants to speak more freely about topics related to gender relations and sexuality. Indeed, in Kabatova's focus groups speaking about sex education with teenagers, participants were more comfortable to discuss such topics if they spoke in Russian instead of Kazakh, a language some deemed too noble to talk about sexuality (Kabatova 2019b).

To check for possible gender and "respect for elders" (Blum 2016, 112) biases, in addition to big mixed-age and mixed-gender focus groups, local agents and recruiting offices

were instructed to organise small focus groups (with 2-3 participants). Moreover, to control for the liberal versus conservative values divide on sexual liberation (Isaacs 2019), interviews in five different regions of Kazakhstan were conducted: in Nur-Sultan and Almaty, cosmopolitan urban centers that due to their global interconnectedness are known to be more tolerant of sexual diversity (Isaacs 2019). It seemed sensible to additionally conduct focus groups in Kyzylorda and Shymkent, located in South Kazakhstan, a region normally perceived to be the most socially conservative in Kazakhstan. For instance, during the boys band Ninety One’s 2016 tour in Kazakhstan⁶, young men in Kyzylorda and Shymkent made use of social media to organize protests asking the authorities to prevent the band’s concerts in their cities (Isaacs 2019). Finally in Aktau, which due to its geographical position on the eastern shore of the Caspian Sea is now a centre for oil and gas fields and therefore, is more exposed to foreign labour and expats working in the oil and gas sector than the four other cities. For more details regarding the composition of the focus groups see table 1 below. Age ranges from 19 to 60 years old. With only a few exceptions of participants of Russian descent in Nur-Sultan and Almaty, all participants identified as ‘Kazakhs’. This selection bias was unintentional but reveals something about the ethnic impermeability of social networks.

TABLE 1. Overview of focus groups

Place	Date	FG no.	Gender	Age	Profession
Aktau	19.07.2019	FG 1	2 males	32, 44	Yoga teacher, tour guide
	19.07.2019	FG 2	2 females	19, 20	Students
	20.07.2019	FG 3	4 females, 1 male	24, 26, 26, 26, 37	Banking employees
	20.07.2019	FG 4	2 males	32, 33	Taxi driver, hairdresser
	20.07.2019	FG 5	3 females	29, 37, 59	Unemployed, nurse, ticket officer
Almaty	17.06.2019	FG 6	3 females	22, 23, 23	Students
	17.06.2019	FG 7	2 females	19, 28	Hairdressers
	27.10.2019	FG 8	4 females, 4 males	30, 31, 36, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43	Secretary, taxi driver, beauty salon, 2 teachers, jurist, programmer, accountant
	27.10.2019	FG 9	6 females, male	32, 33, 40, 43, 44, 49, 55	2 Beauty salon, programmer, factory worker, engineer, specialist, unemployed
	28.10.2019	FG 10	5 females	35, 36, 39, 42, 49	Accountant, beauty salon, sales manager, admin in dentist clinic, accountant
Nur-Sultan	01.07.2019	FG 11	4 males	25, 27, 32, 32	Employees in export firm
	19.10.2019	FG 12	3 males, 3 females	22, 25, 30, 35, 44 60	Student, manager, accountant, programmer, office worker, professor
	19.10.2019	FG 13	6 females	22, 23, 30, 32, 45, 47	2 students, housewife, 2 accountants, hairdresser
	20.10.2019	FG 14	6 males	22, 24, 38, 39, 41, 44	Student, comedian, doctor, factory worker, programmer, factory worker
	28.01.2020	FG 15	6 females	18, 19, 19, 20, 20, 21	NU students

⁶ Ninety-one is a popular boys band, inspired by Korean pop music (known as Q-pop in Kazakhstan). Their androgynous looks and colorful outfits made them very unpopular among conservative circles in Kazakhstan, who accused them of insulting national culture (Tan 2021).

	28.01.2020	FG 16	5 males	18, 19, 20, 20, 21	NU students
	29.01.2020	FG 17	3 males, 3 females	18, 18, 19, 19, 20, 21	NU students
Kyzylorda	02.11.2019	FG 18	3 males, 3 females	21, 39, 41, 42, 43, 47	Student, 2 economists, driller, accountant, electrician
	02.11.2019	FG 19	6 females	22, 28, 29, 31, 34, 45	Student, clerk, salesperson, housewife, teacher, nurse
	03.11.2019	FG 20	6 males	22, 29, 30, 31, 41, 42	Student, unemployed, 2 programmers, jurist, construction worker
Shymkent	12.07.2019	FG 21	5 females	23, 27, 35, 36, 50	Doctors
	13.07.2019	FG 22	3 males	29, 54, 56	Primary school teachers
	13.07.2019	FG 23	2 males	43, 53	Wards
	13.07.2019	FG 24	1 male, 3 females	40, 41, 53, 58	Primary school teachers
	13.07.2019	FG 25	2 females	28, 43	Housewives
	14.07.2019	FG 26	2 females	23, 29	Students

Statistical analysis

Prior to the presentation of the regression analysis, it is worth looking at how rates of internet and social media penetration have grown in Kazakhstan in recent years as well as how often Kazakhs who participated in the WVS wave 7 in October and November 2018 made use of digital communication technologies to obtain information about events in their country and the world in general.

Much of the scholarship about Kazakhstan’s digital landscape has changed significantly in recent years, so much so that scholarship on internet culture in the country published five years ago barely reflects the current situation. Internet access in Kazakhstan rose from 3 per cent of the population in 2005 to 31 per cent in 2010 and then climbed to 80 per cent of the country in 2018 (World Bank 2019). Between 2018 and 2021 the numbers of active social media users doubled from almost 6 million to 12 million in Kazakhstan (We are social 2021). According to the Central Asian Barometer survey wave 4 (CAB 2018), more than 95 per cent of their Kazakh interviewees owned a cell phone in the autumn of 2018. More than 70 per cent were using their mobile phone to access the internet and 68 per cent used the internet to log on to social media platforms on a *daily* basis (for more details see figure 2A in appendix).

The WVS 7 country data on Kazakhstan confirms the trends identified by the Central Asian Barometer survey in as much as it finds that the device most frequently used by Kazakhs to obtain information online in autumn 2018 was their mobile phone. Table 2 below illustrates the frequency of Kazakh’s use of various technologies to access information online. Overall,

more than 55 per cent of respondents, irrespective of age or gender, made use of their mobile phone on a *daily* or *weekly* basis in 2018. Yet women seemed to use their mobile phone slightly more frequently (9 per cent) than their male colleagues. While more than a quarter reported never using social media networks to access information online, the highest social media penetration was found among the country’s youngest adult cohort, the so-called “Nazarbayev generation” (Laruelle 2019, 1), the generation that was born during Nursultan Nazarbayev’s rule. Moreover, urban Kazakhs were almost 50 per cent more likely to access social media platforms to get information on local and international news than their counterparts in the countryside in 2018. A similar urban/rural divide can be observed for internet and smartphone penetration. Also, university-educated middle-class Kazakhs were more likely to access social media networks to read online news than their less educated, less well-off counterparts.

In summary, the descriptive results suggest that only a marginal part of Kazakhstan’s society, the young, urban, university-educated, middle class, was actually exposed to content promoting liberal gender norms on social media platforms in late 2018.

TABLE 2. Descriptive statistics of Kazakhs’ use of various communication technologies to obtain information (WVS 7, 2018)

	<i>Exposure to Internet</i>	<i>Exposure to Social Media</i>	<i>Exposure to Smartphone</i>
Frequency			
<i>Daily</i>	45.0%	36.5%	51.3%
<i>Weekly</i>	14.6%	10.0%	10.9%
<i>Monthly</i>	7.9%	9.0%	7.0%
<i>Less than monthly</i>	7.6%	9.0%	10.2%
<i>Never</i>	24.9%	35.5%	20.6%
Gender*			
<i>Women</i>	59.5%	47.4%	66.6%
<i>Men</i>	60.0%	45.9%	57.5%
Generation*			
<i>18-29 years old</i>	66.8%	60.0%	73.8%
<i>30-49 years old</i>	58.7%	47.5%	60.4%
<i>50 + years old</i>	55.2%	31.8%	55.1%
Area*			
<i>Urban</i>	70.7%	60.3%	78.9%
<i>Rural</i>	46.6%	30.3%	42.6%

*Use of ICTs on a daily or weekly basis

Table 3 presents models designed to test the principal hypothesis of this paper, namely that Kazakhs' exposure to information on social media has a positive influence on their acceptance of divorce (model 1), homosexuality (model 2) and same-sex parenting (model 3) in their community. The results of these analyses are presented in Table 3.

TABLE 3. Regression analysis for the impact of social media on divorce, homosexuality and same sex parents

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Intercept	5.299 *** (0.600)	2.343 *** (0.403)	3.771 *** (0.248)
Gender (f)	0.334 (0.280)	0.164 (0.187)	-0.018 (0.115)
Age: 30-49	0.802* (0.348)	0.336 (0.234)	0.232 (0.145)
Age: 50-91	0.117 (0.411)	0.070 (0.275)	0.060 (0.172)
Education	0.111 (0.302)	-0.099 (0.202)	0.138 (0.124)
Lower Middle Class	0.132 (0.329)	0.027 (0.219)	0.205 (0.135)
Working Class	-0.006 (0.358)	0.421 (0.241)	0.006 (0.149)
Religious	-0.595 (0.429)	-0.582* (0.296)	0.030 (0.176)
Duty to have children	-1.822*** (0.294)	-0.006 (0.195)	-0.384** (0.120)
Urban	0.818** (0.300)	-0.199 (0.199)	-0.321** (0.123)
Frequent Social Media user	-0.909** (0.297)	0.185 (0.198)	0.219* (0.124)
R²	0.123	0.030	0.060
Adj. R²	0.104	0.008	0.038
Num. obs.	458	458	458

*** p < 0.001, ** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05

As model 1 in table 3 shows, *urban* and *age: 30-49* correlate significantly and positively with Kazakhs' approval of divorce. Both correlations are significant at the p<0.01 level for *urban* and at the p<0.05 level for *age: 30-49*. They suggest that Kazakhs in their thirties and forties who live in urban areas were therefore more supportive of divorce than their younger counterparts in their twenties and late teens who lived in the countryside in the autumn of 2018. The findings in table 3 for the variables of *age* and *urban* support previous observations on divorce demographics in Kazakhstan (Nurbai 2020) in highlighting that people in their thirties who live in big cities were more likely to file for divorce in Kazakhstan in 2018. In line with the Central Asian heteronormative behaviour patterns that dictate to a Central Asian woman to marry young and have children (Beyer and Finke 2019: 318), respondents who believed that it is a person's duty towards society to have children were unsurprisingly less likely to support a

legal dissolution of a marriage in 2018. In contrast to previous studies on *divorce*, *gender*, *university education*, *religious* or *class* are not associated with Kazakhs' acceptance of marriage annulment. We think the findings reflect the extent to which patriarchal values (such as to marry young and have children) are embedded in Kazakhstan's social norms that these other traits do not correlate with approval of divorce. Finally, Kazakhs' frequent use of social media for information purposes is significantly and negatively related to their approbation of divorce (significant at the $p < 0.01$ level). This suggests that Kazakhs who were exposed to information on social media platforms on a *daily* and *weekly* basis tended to less likely agree with people's wish to file for divorce than their counterparts who were not on social networks in 2018. The findings contradict to a certain degree previous surveys' observations (Nurbai 2020) which found that Kazakhstanis' exposure to social media seems to increase their likelihood to support divorce. In short, rather than exposure to liberal gender norms on social media, it was their Kazakh cultural tradition to have children, as well as their age and place of residence that influenced Kazakhs' approval of divorce in autumn 2018. Being exposed to social networks does not inevitably increase Kazakhs' tendency to register divorce.

Whereas frequent exposure to social media is observed to affect Kazakhs' approbation of marriage annulment, it does not correlate with respondents' approval of homosexuality (see model 2 in Table 3). However, in line with existing scholarship on the growing visibility of queer people in Kazakhstan (Dall'Agnola 2020), Kazakhs who claimed to be religious were less likely to approve homosexuality than their non-religious or atheist fellow citizens in their society in 2018. Yet, contrary to previous studies (Dall'Agnola 2021b, 2020; Isaacs 2019) that found people who identify strongly with their local rural Kazakh community display more illiberal attitudes towards homosexual couples, the variable of *urban* is significantly and negatively correlated with respondents' acceptance of same-sex parents (see model 3 in Table 3). This correlation is significant at the $p < 0.01$ level and seems to suggest that people who were living in urban centres in 2018, because they are usually more exposed to queer culture offline (Buelow 2012; Sekerbaeva 2017), tended to display less favourable attitudes towards same-sex couples. Frequent exposure to information on social media platforms had an opposite effect on them. Kazakhs who were frequently exposed to liberal gender norms on social networks were more likely to display sentiments of acceptance towards same-sex parents than their counterparts who are not on social media platforms (significant at the $p < 0.05$ level). In line with the reported findings for divorce, people who voiced their support for the Kazakh convention that dictate to both men and women that it is a duty towards society to have children

were less likely to agree with the statement that same-sex couples are as good as parents as heterosexual couples (significant at the $p < 0.01$ level).

Broadly speaking, the evidence presented here only partially supports the hypothesis that Kazakhs can be expected to become more likely to approve divorce, homosexuality and same-sex parenting in their society through frequent consumption of information on social media platforms: on the one hand, frequent social media users tended to disapprove practices of divorce, whereas they were at the same time more likely to approve same-sex parenting. The results suggest that the power of family values, such as the duty to produce offspring, runs really deep in Kazakh society – so even if someone is exposed to liberal gender norms on social media platforms, she or he is not necessarily going to embrace them.

Divorce and Social Media

In general, focus groups participants organized by Scholar #2 expressed more negative opinions than positive ones toward social media even if some of the positions were nuanced. In Kyzylorda, when asked whether or not family values were changing in Kazakhstan, one female participant answered that they were degrading and mostly blamed the upbringing of children and that children nowadays were not listening to their father because they “are all obsessed with the Internet”. She lamented the poor discipline of younger generations, and the absence of respect between husband and wife, parents and children. She even associated it with divorce because nothing was sacred anymore. Yet, someone in the same group later associated social media with freedom of speech and thought that young people today were more alert and more resourceful because of their access to the Internet.⁷

In Scholar #2’s focus groups, most discussions about divorce were connected to the issue of polygyny and whether or not a man who wants to take a second wife should simply divorce his first wife in order to remarry or if a woman whose husband takes a second wife should file for divorce instead of accepting to share her husband. Yet, there were instances where the issue of divorce was discussed as a separate topic and in connection to ICTs. As mentioned earlier, divorce is fairly common in Kazakhstan and divorcees do not necessarily face social stigma. Understandably, divorce is not seen as something positive since, by its own

⁷ FG 19, female participants aged between 22 and 45, Kyzylorda.

nature, it implies the failure of two individuals to build a long-lasting love relationship. At the exception of one young male (unmarried) in Nur-Sultan who mentioned that divorce was not a bad thing because it represented a way out for people in unhappy relationships⁸, a majority of focus group participants expressed negative opinions about divorce. More importantly, increasing divorce rates were understood as an unwanted consequence of changing family values, a perceived cultural degeneration as well as the use of social media.

In many instances, focus groups participants specifically highlighted the fact that social media allows individuals to get in touch with new people, flirt effortlessly, which might eventually lead to cheating and escalate in divorce. And their assumptions were right to some extent since it was identified as the third most important reason for divorce by the divorcees surveyed in Kazakhstan in 2019 (Nurbai 2020). Scientific literature also proves them right. A study conducted in the United States concluded that the use of social networks “is negatively correlated with marriage quality and happiness, and positively correlated with experiencing a troubled relationship and thinking about divorce” (Valenzuela and al. 2014, 94). Another study conducted in China found a positive correlation between mobile phone penetration and the divorce rate during the period 2001–2016 (Zhang and al.2018). Even though phone penetration could simply be a proxy variable for economic well-being, the authors specifically argue that the use of mobile phones and ICTs can affect people’s interpersonal communication, and relationships between couples.

Coming back to the Kazakhstani context, even though marriage and polygyny were the main focus of discussions of Scholar #2’s focus groups, participants frequently mentioned the negative influence of the Internet and mobile phones on people’s morals. For some, access to the Internet provided too many opportunities to meet new people and potentially develop feelings for them. In Almaty, one female participant⁹ mentioned that many young girls have poor values nowadays and are too influenced by the rich celebrities they see online. In her opinion, young women were lazy so they use social media to meet rich men who can provide for them financially. Other participants agreed that this was the reason so many men got mistresses and divorced.

Discussions of the male-only group in Kyzylorda also included the negative influence of the Internet, computers, and phones on peoples’ values and interpersonal relationships. A

⁸ FG 14, unmarried male participant aged 26, Nur-Sultan.

⁹ FG 10, female participant aged 42, Almaty.

jurist¹⁰ complained that people did not read books anymore and only spent time on their phones, ignoring the world around them. The absence of face-to-face communication was to blame for the worsening of relationships. Speculating a bit further, he even mentioned that unequal access to electronic devices might also become a source of conflict, and eventually divorce. He described a potential scenario in which a husband has a tablet, his wife does not so she insists that he buys one for her but he refuses. They fight over that and eventually end up divorcing. This improbable sequence of events is far-fetched but it reveals something about the negative perception that some people have toward electronic devices and time spent surfing the Internet. Another male participant¹¹ went as far as pointing out that divorce has unintended, horrific consequences and that it has been proven that maniacs and killers often come from incomplete families in which the father is absent.

Interestingly, focus groups participants from Nazarbayev University did not address the causes of divorce nor did they emphasize the influence of ICTs in socio-political dynamics in Kazakhstan. Nazarbayev University is a Kazakhstani state-funded university that is located in the capital city of Nur-Sultan and which is very international in nature. The education is provided exclusively in English and a majority of the Faculty members are foreigners. It is considered to be a very liberal university in Kazakhstan. In their discussions, students strictly stuck to the topic of polygyny, which they discussed in a highly conceptual, intellectual terms. Unlike other participants from the ‘general population’, they did not spontaneously make connections between changing family values and divorce, nor ICTs. Their own liberal mindset (Bigozhin 2019) and frequent use of social networks could explain why they did not raise these issues. However, it is also possible that divorce appeared to be of no concern to them because of their young age and the fact that most of them were not married.

Generally speaking, focus-groups participants, both men and women, from the South as well as the North, highlighted a negative relationship between the use of electronic devices, time spent on the Internet and the quality of interpersonal relationships, in particular, marriage. For them, online communication was damaging marriage because 1- it gave opportunities to meet new people and have extramarital affairs, 2- it undermined existing love relationships by reducing real, genuine interactions. There seems to be a gap between generations however with

¹⁰ FG 20, male participant aged 41, Kyzylorda.

¹¹ FG 12, male participant aged 60, Nur-Sultan.

young people finding divorce and social media usage less problematic. The next section will reveal similar nuances.

Same-sex and female bodily representations on social media

Overall, interviewees displayed a positive attitude towards the availability of new communication technologies and in particular social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, V Kontakte and Odnoklassniki in Kazakhstan. These tools not only allow them to stay in touch with their friends, but also to access global news outlets and “to learn more about foreign [= Western] peoples’ lifestyle and culture”¹². However, not all aspects of Western culture on social media platforms are equally accepted by participants. In particular nudity posts by female and same-sex subjects on social networks stir up controversy among the focus group participants. There seems to be a gender divide between male and female Kazakh youth with regard to their appropriation of same-sex and female bodily representations on social networks, as the following section will highlight.

In line with previous scholarship on the increased conspicuousness of queer culture in Kazakhstan (Dall’Agnola 2020), among older generations and young Kazakh men the growing visibility of same-sex couples on social networks was seen as violating the traditional monogamous and heterosexual model of a family propagated by Islam and the Christian Orthodox Church.¹³ Often interviewees emphasized that what matters the most to them is the formation of a family that will secure the survival of the Kazakh nation. Therefore, to preserve the Kazakh ethnicity from extinction, “a Kazakh family must consist of a healthy mother, father and children”.¹⁴ Same-sex unions were identified as contradicting a person’s obligation to produce offspring.¹⁵ The interview data, therefore, confirms to some extent the assumption of the statistical analysis that religious people who are in favour of the Kazakh cultural tradition to have children are less likely to approve homosexuality and same-sex couples than their modern atheist counterparts. However, the predicted positive influence of exposure to information on social media platforms on Kazakhs’ appropriation of same-sex unions is not validated. Apart from university-educated female respondents in their late teens and early

¹² FG 22, male participant aged 29, Shymkent.

¹³ FG 22, male participants aged 29 and 56, Shymkent/ FG 11, male participants aged 25, 27, 32 and 32, Nur-Sultan/ FG 1, male participant aged 44, Aktau/ FG 21, female participant aged 50, Shymkent.

¹⁴ FG 21, female participant aged 50, Shymkent.

¹⁵ FG 11, male participants aged 32, 25 and 27, Nur-Sultan/ FG 21, female participant aged 35, Shymkent.

twenties (see **Leyla's** quote below)¹⁶, their male peers and older generations (30+) tended to express their strong disapproval of the popular and open discussion of homosexuality on social networks, as the quote from a focus group discussion¹⁷ with two female students in Shymkent demonstrates:

Scholar #1: *Are there any possible negative influences of social media sites on Kazakh culture?*

Leyla: *This is a very sensitive topic, but, for example, we have very few homosexuals in Kazakhstan. Even though I have never been to the West, we learn through social media that there are many gay parades organized in Europe and the USA. The open deployment of homosexuality is not welcomed among most people in Kazakhstan. It is often seen as a negative aspect of European culture that is alien to ours, because it contradicts our Kazakh culture (...) Personally, I have a very neutral attitude towards same-sex unions, because people live their life according to their own moral standards and up-bringing.*

Yet, the data arising from focus groups offer additional insights into the impact of social media on gender norms in Kazakhstan. Often, respondents voiced their disapproval of the increased popularity of same-sex content and sexually arousing photos by young Kazakh women on social networks in the same breath, as the quoted discussion from a focus group¹⁸ in Shymkent with female doctors (35 and 50 years old) illustrates. To protect, in particular, Kazakh children from the Western infiltration of sexual liberty, most respondents like **Aigul** below stated their support for a law banning¹⁹ non-heterosexual and female nudity on social media platforms and extending the existing machine-learning algorithm censorship on Instagram (Are 2020).

Aigul: *Yesterday, I watched a documentary where Dumaschat (male Kazakh name) became Esil (female Kazakh name). He became a woman! She changed her gender...he changed his gender. (All five participants burst out laughing.)*

Gulzhan: *For somebody to change her gender does not fit in with our Kazakh mentality at all!!*

Aigul: *Exactly! (...) They also talked about young Kazakh women who uploaded erotic photos of themselves on Instagram. These Kazakh girls were only 18 or 19 years old and they took such photos. I do not believe that this is good. These girls believe that they can do with their bodies whatever, however and whenever they want. This is not right! (...) I think we need to ban this kind of content [gay propaganda and Kazakh girls' nudity posts] on social media to prevent it from subverting our youth, who anyway spend too much time on these social media sites.*

¹⁶ All names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

¹⁷ FG 26, female participants aged 23 and 29, Shymkent.

¹⁸ FG 21, female participants, aged between 23 and 50, Shymkent.

¹⁹ FG 22, male participants, aged 29, 54 and 56, Shymkent / FG 1, male participants aged 32 and 44, Aktau / FG 5, female participants aged 29, 37 and 59, Aktau / FG 4, male participants aged 32 and 33, Aktau.

Similar to the visibility of queer bodies, social media posts of Kazakh girls in revealing clothes were seen as evidence of young peoples' vulnerability to (negative) sexualized social media influences.²⁰ As previously discussed, this is rooted in the Kazakh cultural belief of *uyat* that women and their bodies are the bearers of morality and preservers of the Kazakh nation (Kudaibergenova 2019; Kabatova 2019a), which is fueling the desire to control teenage female bodies on- and offline in Kazakhstan. In this context, the exposure to information on social media was also identified as boosting Kazakh women's desire to get married to foreigners. Whereas people in their late thirties, forties, and fifties, strictly opposed interethnic marriages between female Kazakhs and non-Kazakhstanis,²¹ university-educated female Kazakh youth welcomed the growing number of "international" and "interethnic marriages" in Kazakhstan, as the excerpt below from a focus group discussion²² with banking employees in Aktau demonstrates.

Gaisha: "I think it is good that our cultural habits are changing through the contact with foreigners on social media sites. Thanks to this, we have many international couples today in Kazakhstan. Most couples remain together. However, in particular women fear that relatives oppose their decision to get married to a non-Kazakhstani. My personal opinion is that we live in a free country and that we have the right to fall in love with whomever we want to. (...) I believe that these mixed racial marriages will increase because people learn about other peoples' lifestyles on Instagram and Facebook. Moreover, peoples' approval of interethnic marriages differs across the different regions in Kazakhstan. Some families are more open towards such things and others are not ready to accept them."

Zarina: "These people are fossils [refers to people who reject interethnic marriages]! Cultured (civilized) people will embrace them."

Well-educated female Kazakh youth, such as **Zarina** and **Gaisha**, above, through their exposure to social media content seem to develop a more critical attitude towards their Kazakh cultural upbringing and as a result are beginning to openly speak out against the Kazakh mentality of *uyat*. They demand the freedom to make their own choices and decisions about their bodily representation on- and offline.²³ While nudity posts by Kim Kardashian on Instagram could be seen as women's objectification in the West, they are greeted by these young Kazakh women as denoting women's new-won sexual independence.

²⁰ FG 24, male participant aged 58, Shymkent / FG 4, male participants aged 32 and 33, Aktau.

²¹ FG 5, female participants aged 29, 37 and 59, Aktau / FG 25, female participants aged 28 and 43, Shymkent.

²² FG 3, female participants aged 26, 26 and 26, Aktau.

²³ FG 2, female participants, aged 19 and 20, Aktau / FG 6, female participants aged 22, 23 and 23, Almaty / FG 7, female participants aged 19 and 28, Almaty / FG 26, female participants aged 23 and 29, Shymkent.

Yet while young women seem to embrace the global celebration of female and non-heterosexual sexuality on social networks, the same seems to have an opposite effect on young Kazakh men and older generations. They openly resist messages that celebrate new freedoms of female and other marginalized groups' bodies, as the quote below from a banker, let's call him **Nurlan**²⁴, in Aktau illustrates. Undeterred by the presence of Kazakh women friends (**Gaisha** and **Zarina** in previous excerpt) he drank beer with, who were quite unlike the calm and subservient stereotype of Kazakh women, **Nurlan** expressed his indirect disapproval of his friends' chosen path:

***Nurlan:** "As a young man I am of course for the global knowledge exchange on social media platforms. However, as a future father the outlook of this is frightening. I am worried about my children, in particular about my daughter. Mainly because I can see now all these same-sex and provocatively dressed (koli lav) women on those social media sites and I do not want my daughter to become one of them. I want her to become a modest and traditional Kazakh woman."*

Not surprisingly, Nurlan's statement was met with astounded silence by his female colleagues. Also, his homophobic attitudes towards queer people were not openly shared by the female focus group participants. Nurlan's, but also older men's, resistance seems intentional because the existing patriarchal system serves his interest. Kazakh men only approve of globalizing representations of sexuality that support their traditional privileges over marginalized groups (such as women and same-sex people), while they dismiss any image that might reduce their control over them. Similar observations were reported by other scholars researching post-Soviet Central Asia (Bigozhin 2019; Blum 2016, 2019), but also by scholarship on Asia and the Pacific (Derné 2008; Puri 2008) and the USA and Europe (Norris and Inglehart 2019; Tsatsou 2012).

In summary, in addition to the growing visibility of homosexual bodies on social media, also nudity posts by young female Kazakhs evoked feelings of aversion and resistance among older generations and male Kazakh youth during the focus group discussion. In highlighting that social media platforms are not solely seen as promoting the visibility of same-sex but also female bodies, the focus group discussions offer additionally insides into how exposure to information on social networks can influence Kazakhs' perception of gender identities.

²⁴ FG 3, male participant, aged 26, Aktau.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings from the statistical and non-statistical analysis show that frequent exposure to information on social media platforms does not necessarily increase Kazakhs' approval of divorce and homosexuality. The reported findings illustrate that the religious and family values, such as the duty to have children, are deep-seated in Kazakh society. In particular, the results arising from focus group discussions illustrate that the growing visibility of sexual liberty and diversity on social networks, rather than challenging the status quo, may also serve to reinforce existing traditional, heteronormative beliefs in Kazakhstan. In this context, the data arising from focus groups also adds texture to the overall debate on how frequent consumption of social media content cement traditional gender norms in Kazakhstan, as the data suggests that it is not solely the open deployment of queer culture but also emancipative, nude photographs of Kazakh women that can be expected to produce a cultural backlash among young Kazakh men and the older generations in Kazakhstan. While some of these sexually provocative posts by Kazakh girls could be seen as sexism in the West, they are celebrated by university-educated Kazakh women as a symbol of female emancipation. The results therefore partially agree with the argument of previous regional studies (Dall'Agnola 2021a; Kikuta 2019; Kudaibergenova 2019; Udod 2018) that social media platforms may serve as a tool for female empowerment, even in the "networked authoritarian" states of Central Asia.

Nonetheless, we are cautious in drawing any final conclusion from our findings. One specific reason is that the statistical analysis did not reveal what type of information obtained on social media platforms affects Kazakhs' approbation of divorce and homosexuality. Having established that social media consumption contributes to shaping individuals' perception or understanding of certain issues –in that case, divorce and same-sex relations –it is difficult to identify a precise correlation, simply because we do not know the kind of content people consume online. A lot of social media content is determined by algorithms showing content that matches users' interests and world views, which inevitably results in circular thinking. This selective consumption is further enhanced by Instagram and Facebook's "shadow ban" (Are 2020: 742) that targets in particular non-heteronormative content.

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Appendix

Figure 1A. Kazakhs' social media preferences in autumn 2018 (CAB 2018)

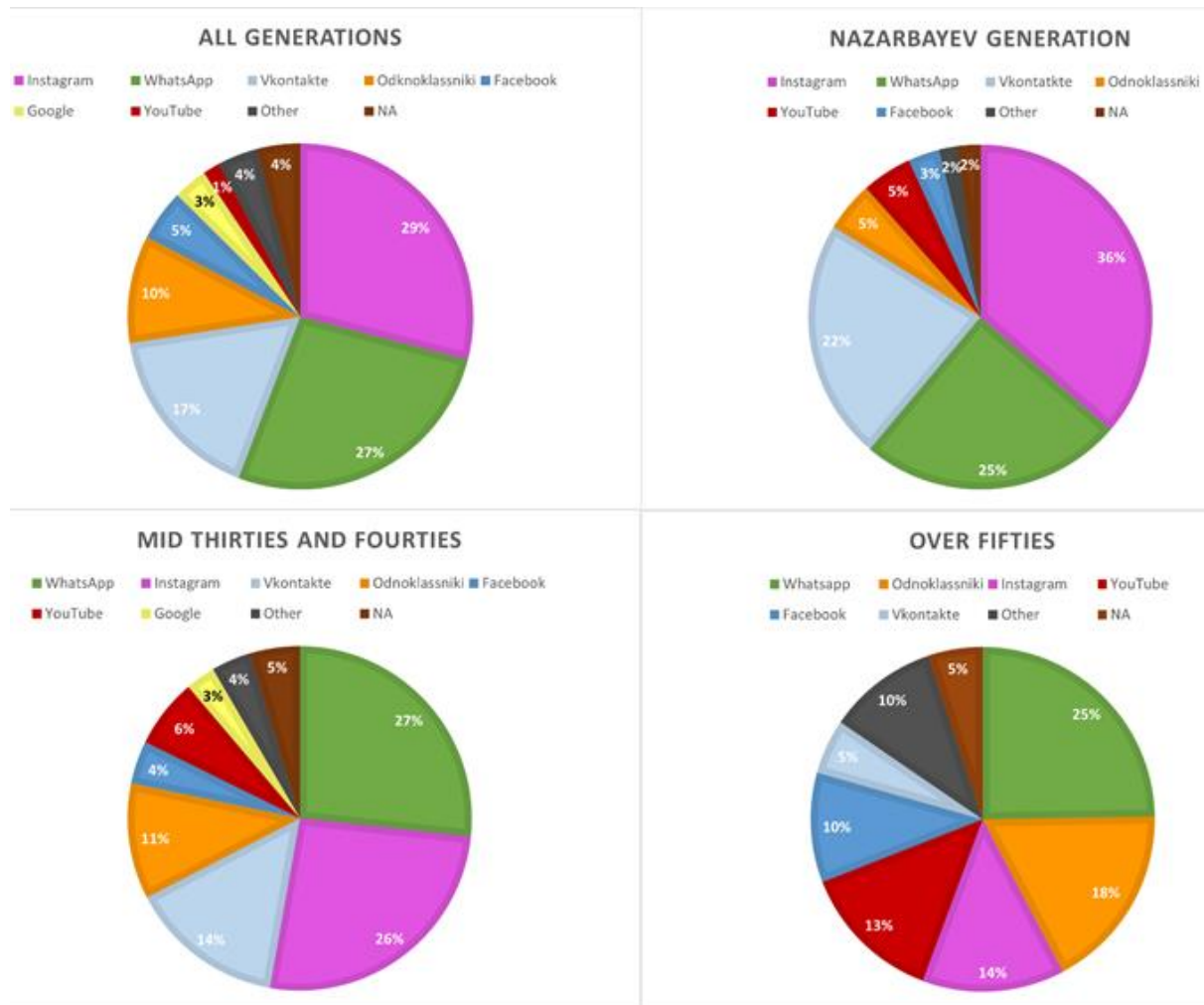


Figure 2A. Kazakhs' access option to internet and social media in autumn 2018 (CAB 2018)

