

# **Social Media, Women and Saudi Arabia:**

**Facebook as Sites of Identity Negotiation among Female Students of Universities**

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# Chapter Five CONCLUSION

This final chapter reviews the objectives of the thesis, determines how the research conducted in this thesis meets these objectives, summarizes the findings, takes stock of research challenges and scope, examines the limitations faced, and makes suggestions for future research.

Social networks are here to stay, and they're constantly evolving. Globally, more than 2.8 billion people — or 37% of the world's population — use social media, but the way those users interact with each other, and the platforms they adopt, vary widely.

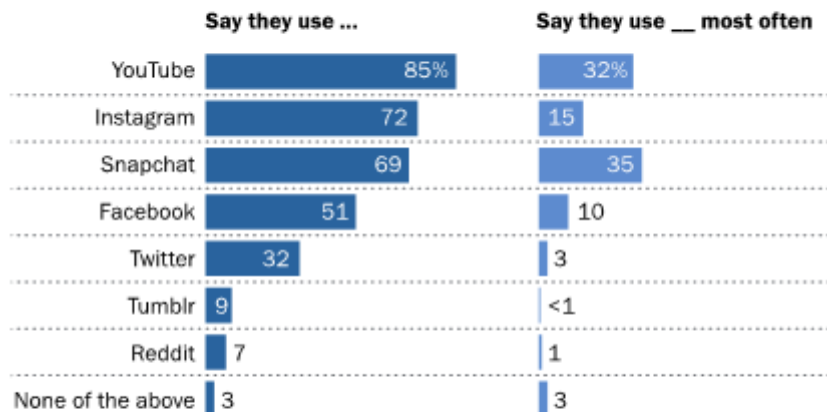
Before examining the summary of findings of Saudi Arabia, where 18-35 year old female University students formed the scope of study, it would be worthwhile to have a quick overview of global social media behavior, more specifically the US, as it is the originator of this social networking phenomenon. It is a revolution like no other, where both young and not-so-young are drawn deep into the vortex of social media activity, and some irrevocably so. Our study may be juxtaposed against the worldwide social media use and behavior to draw meaningful comparisons and understand the finer nuances as to how and why social media usage in Saudi Arabia are similar or different. In the US market, gender, income, and education level have little influence on whether an individual has adopted social networking as an activity or not. Age *does* remain a factor here — younger internet users, more so the

teenagers or the new millennial, tend to be more likely to engage in social networking overall, and adopt specific social platforms.

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### YouTube, Instagram and Snapchat are the most popular online platforms among teens

% of U.S. teens who ...



Note: Figures in first column add to more than 100% because multiple responses were allowed. Question about most-used site was asked only of respondents who use multiple sites; results have been recalculated to include those who use only one site. Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted March 7-April 10, 2018.

"Teens, Social Media & Technology 2018"

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The above figure bears a close resemblance to data collected and analysed from the research data of Saudi Arabia. While Facebook was more popular when the research started, in a couple of years, competitors like Instagram, Youtube, Snapchat, Tumblr gained immense popularity among the young female crowd here. To quote a young 20 year old female University student during an interactive session “ *Younger generation love the new alternatives, Instagram, Snapchat, Tumblr, Youtube, etc;*

*while Facebook is for the oldies*". It looked like there was an unspoken rule for choices made. The older lot liked to continue on the facebook account they got accustomed to; while the younger lot were more adventurous to dabble in new technology, coming in new packages and alternatives. However, Facebook Live serves as a marker of Facebook's intentions to keep up with the latest social trends and a signal to its competitors that it won't be outcompeted.

While social platforms offer tools and wherewithal that let marketers target their desired audience segments, advertisers must be adept to track how these audience bases — and their behaviors — are shifting. Nearly 70% of US adults use at least one social media site, according to Pew Research Center, up from 60% in 2013 and 50% in 2010.

The last few years have seen Social networking sites exploding: new technologies, new players coming in to the fold to offer and compete with Facebook, generating excitement at the opportunities opened by new technologies. Facebook, one such social networking site, was the epitome of social media communication and boasted of a huge following amongst young people who engage in online communication. This virtual platform, provided them with the opportunity to create and recreate identities and showcase their relationships with their peers. However, little research has been conducted in this part of the globe, Saudi Arabia, since the explosive membership growth and widespread popularity of Facebook in the first decade of the 21st century and now with its gradual decline of fan following with the younger generation and the new millennial. However, we are also yet to see the consequences of a generation of young people who have grown up online.

The present study *Social Media, Women and Saudi Arabia: Facebook as sites of identity negotiation among female students of Universities*, conducted among 214 Facebook users studying in four universities in Riyadh and Al-Kharj, – between the age of 18 and 35 – was set out to explore the current position of Facebook in young peoples' lives, their use of these sites, their online behavior pattern, including how they think about, and engage in/with bridging and bonding social relationships on such sites. The purpose of this study was to examine if and how Facebook provides new ways of self-expression and identification among Saudi females and to investigate what kind of social relationships are created on virtual platform, and their strategies of online identity creation.

News of a royal decree allowing Saudi women the right to drive from June last year had rightfully caught the headlines. However, the bigger news has perhaps been behind the scenes, as Saudi Arabia has been working to define the long-term objectives and near-term reforms needed to achieve its Vision 2030 targets.

Vision 2030 is an ambitious economic and social undertaking, which is effectively a roadmap to position the kingdom for a future that is less reliant on oil. Saudi Arabia needs a more diverse economy to create greater numbers of sustainable jobs, and reduce unemployment for a rapidly expanding young population.

Initiatives include a plan to convert the Public Investment Fund into the world's largest sovereign wealth fund; boosting private sector contribution to 65 percent of GDP; reducing unemployment to seven percent from 11 percent; privatising government services; reforming education; and continued investment in infrastructure.

### **From goals to action plans**

Launched last June, two months after Vision 2030, the National Transformation Program (NTP) 2020 aimed to crystallize some of those longer term goals through more workable near-term targets that address economic policy and social reforms.

Boosting female participation and building a digital economy will also realize more economic potential for the country that so far remains untapped. Female participation in the workforce is one of those key goals to be defined in the new version of the NTP. Women currently account for 22 percent of the workforce, but 50 percent of university graduates, making them an under-utilised resource.

Some of the challenges Saudi women face range from social acceptability of having women work in conservative Saudi households, to regulations requiring segregation of men and women, and the most conspicuous of all, male guardianship. One challenge Saudi women faced for decades was that of transportation, with limited public transport facilities, as women were not allowed to drive. Hence allowing women the right to drive from June this year was a very powerful signal on the willingness of policymakers to take the decisions needed to implement important structural reforms.

### **Summary of Findings:**

The first aspect of the present study was regarding the growth and use of social networking sites in general and Facebook in particular. Empirical data collected from young University students surveyed in this research shows, Facebook's growth though followed pretty much the same exponential curve initially, it could not ultimately keep pace as that of other social networking sites. Membership to this most popular social networking site reached its peak only a few years later, around 2009-2010. Survey data showed that 76.9 per cent of Facebook users were members

of at least one more social networking site, other than Facebook. Most of these respondents were introduced to the concept of online social networking with Orkut, on the Google platform. Majority of the respondents (67.4 per cent) said, they had accounts in 2-3 social networking sites. However, a quarter of the respondents (25.8 per cent) had deleted their other accounts, the reasons for which were varied and diverse.

The intensity of Facebook usage was measured both in terms of quantity- the frequency of logging-in and the amount of time spent on the site, and qualitatively - by exploring the whole array of their online engagements.. The results indicated that respondents spent a substantial amount of time on social media, while Facebook over the last two years or have seen an unprecedented decline- losing out subscriptions to competition. Having said that, their engagement with Facebook and social media was second to none- while more than 92% of the students had access to or owned a smart phone, and that facilitated their frequent online browsing. More than 76% of them spent more than 3 hours each day browsing and more than 80% used it several times a day. Smart phones, apart from becoming a status symbol, has been the real determinant for such online influx. More than 70% of them have more than one social media account, and the intensity of social media engagement can be gauged from that. This is regardless the fact that their online discourses were limited to the Arabic language, and hence visible to a limited audience.

Another interesting finding was the universal presence of peer pressure in social media usage. The dominant reason for having more than one social media profile, and for migrating from Facebook, was the pressure from friends to do so, and for

fun. Understandable, they were in sync with the digital onslaught of rival technologies and were out to leverage the advantages of all considered suitable.

Their online activities over Facebook is something noteworthy here. Unlike their global counterparts, they were not seeking to forge new friendships . Their primary reason was to be in constant touch over their “closed” circuit of friends to discuss and share personal feelings (about 94% contended that). It was just a means to be an extension of their friendships after they have parted from school/ university campus. Here it may be worth mentioning that women typically do not visit their friends at home, due to societal expectations. Though they may meet up at a mall or public space for fun activities, which was also limited until recently, social media offers that perfect stop-gap arrangements over holidays and college breaks. Their online engagement to like or comment over friends’ posts is unanimous. However, their posts and updates were predominantly impersonal in nature. They were reticent to divulge anything personal to themselves, and were more comfortable sharing news related or public posts. The fun factor, notwithstanding (42%), their posts were merely to share news, information and advice on various issues (68%). And the people who make it to their friendlist are mainly their classmates- old and new. Or often times their own family members. However, it was interesting to note that male members from their family- Mahram or non-Mahram were generally outside their purview of friends. As one student may be quoted as saying “*We respect our father, brothers and uncles way too much to be showing them our selfies or photos. Though they are our Mahram relations who get to see us everyday, it is our respect for them that they don’t have to see our pictures online*”. This was a very novel way of looking at online behavior, which was not queer to them however. Several students around her consented to her viewpoint which makes to understand that it is their



social ethos that make them think and believe so. Online engagement has a paradigm shift here. It is meant for women, if by women, and vice-versa. Gender segregation online is maintained- as they perceive the platform to be an extension of their real identity. For the ones that go with an alias or a graphical representation, the story is no different. Masked identity to them is not about finding a private space for wishful indulgence. They were guided by their usual societal expectations as regards their online activity too. The connect in their online discourse were real too- 68% used Facebook to get news, information, advice while 33% used it to connect to friends and family, while 32% found it as a platform for sharing and discussing personal problems (figures count more than 100% as multiple choices were allowed). Clearly, it was not frivolity that brought them online, as may be perceived- that this platform gave way to forging new friendships which was otherwise unthinkable in this conservative society. The fun factor notwithstanding, they were also not using this as a liberation from their gendered role (only 2.8% thought so). Another conspicuous finding was the absence of peer pressure to checking others and improving one's own lifestyle. This is a departure from the usual tendency to do so.

As far as joining Facebook was concerned, it was mainly from peer pressure as their friends were already on the platform, or *just like that*. Regarding the most preferred activities on Facebook, they were mainly to share personal feelings or updates within a closed group (93%), followed by reacting to friends' posts (63%). It was very less about updating own information and photographs. In fact, most of them opined that Facebook's "on the face" visibility was something they were not comfortable with. Pictures and videos were more of their personal domain which they did not like squandered. They like to guard them with utmost care keeping in mind that they otherwise veiled themselves. (0% of Saudi women, or maybe even more veiled

themselves in public. Even after the attire relaxation announced by the Crown Prince, the Saudi women have preferred to remain status quo, though some other women of other Arab nations have started appearing unveiled. Veil, to the Saudi women, was a projection of their Islamic identity, and not a social obligation.

The section of research that delved into how a Saudi woman portrays herself in online domain makes for some interesting findings. While 62% have a profile picture, that picture is often just a graphical representation. They do not bother to have a face to their online identity. Only 12% had their real picture which was an astounding finding. Profile names also go with alias, though a substantial number (74%) also had their real names on their Facebook accounts. Interestingly, family names were a critical point. Most of them (60%) preferred not to use their family name. Arab society is tribal in nature- affiliations to their clan is a very sacrosanct matter. Hence, any online onslaught on family name could attract the attention of all menfolk, which they regard unnecessary. Identity to them is a very precarious matter, when the family name is attached. While the good may be welcomed, online trolling on Facebook is not an unknown matter. That could lead to feuds within the society, and was to be guarded against. Hence they preferred to mask their family name. However, as far as revealing their gendered identity goes, (88%) had no qualms about revealing their true gender; while the rest preferred to show otherwise. It shows that women now are more confident to deal with online discourse, and handle criticism and applaud with equal aplomb. They do not feel the need to be masked, or feel incapacitated with their gendered identity.

Changing of profile pictures is a very popular activity for people trying to forge an online identity. The females included in the sample are reticent when it comes to assuming and displaying their outward identity. Their shared value and belief system

has a bearing on their mindset, and this may be reflective in the ways they shun public glare and prefer anonymity – frequency of changing profile picture being a yardstick. Similarly, for Cover photo which has great options in Facebook with pixel-perfect representation of how one wants to portray oneself or even one's business- Saudi women were found to be impersonal in their approach here too. They were deterrent as far as flaunting or showcasing their wellbeing or affluence was concerned. They did not believe in highlighting their personal disposition as that may be a reason for envy. So, forging an identity by flaunting or highlighting their entitlements. Traditional Saudi families are known for rather underplaying their entitlements. It is against their ethos to portray themselves in the public sphere, more so when it comes to women. Hence, their online behavior is reflective of their underlying cultural and societal milieu.

As far as administering any groups is concerned, they are minimal at that too. Only 12% who have administered group accounts are of the view that it should be closed and be invite-only accounts, to ward off unnecessary attention. Hence online identity management for them is a distant reality. They do not assume to be torchbearers of a cause, or take on leadership roles- which may, otherwise, have had a very positive impact on their online identity negotiation. 61% of them believed that their online behavior conformed to their religious and social ethos. Having such a mindset, it may well be expected that their online discourses and expressions would denounce any trace of ostentation.

As far as identity negotiation goes, this study reveals some interesting attributes of the Saudi women towards their Facebook portrayal. In the study regarding their attitudinal engagement toward self portrayal in social media, Saudi women in the survey come across largely as a simple, straight-forward lot- with 39% contending

that they prefer to present themselves as they are. The lack of pretense, which otherwise in social media is highly rampant, makes it a refreshing sign of changing times here. 23% of the respondents do not portray themselves in their Facebook account- they are mostly kept as blank with very minimal identity attributes. This faceless anonymity is something they revere as they guard their privacy. 16% are ambivalent to the prospect of getting the opportunity to showcase a personality. They do not care, they state. Only 22% of the female Saudi University students like to highlight their positive attributes- this is in true reflection of what their peers elsewhere are. They like to create an identity around their positive traits to help build a favorable and likable online personality.

Facebook as sites of identity negotiation among Saudi Female students makes for a very interesting study. Understanding the Identity Negotiation theory have highlighted that it (INT) concerns the importance of negotiating sociocultural membership identity and personal identity issues in intergroup communication situations. And Facebook being the ensemble of social media interactions, it promises a tug of war between negotiating the personal self with the perceived self. The term identity refers to an individual's multifaceted identities of cultural, ethnic, spiritual/religious, social class, gender, age, sexual orientation, professional, family, and relational role, and personal images based on mutual meaning-construction level. In the Saudi Arabian context too, sociocultural identities can include ethnic membership identity (Islamic) to family role conceptions (women as homemakers), and personal identities can include any unique attributes that they associate with their unique, individuated self in comparison to those of others.

The study has tried to investigate where and how do these competing forces come to play, and how the women have managed to forge an identity for themselves.

Facebook discourse opens up a vista of splendid opportunities for the interaction between the sociocultural membership identity, sociorelational role identity, and the unique personal identity issues in intercultural–intergroup boundary-crossing journeys. While it is an online domain, nonetheless, the mutual interaction has its traction to help Saudi women negotiate their identity within the interplays. And the study has seen that the sociocultural membership identity is largely weighed on their minds taking centerstage, and the individual self takes a backseat. However, the societal expectations of behavioral propriety plays a predominant role in their online discourses. Any goals of Identity management is relegated to a distant future, with what takes its toll in negotiating socio-cultural boundaries. While an individual's polygonal identity shapes her/his social cognition, motivational drive, affective being, and communicative tendencies, individuals acquire their composite identity through sociocultural conditioning process and their individual lived experiences. Here in Saudi Arabian context, the religious guidance is deeply pronounced and is the foremost framework where society is concerned, and for any Saudi women (individual), personal selves is subservient to its purview. The socio-religious context is derived from its primary cultural socialization and sustained culture contact experience. This, in turn, is the primary regulator in terms of how these Saudi women assign meanings, redefine identities, and draw boundaries in constructing their own and others' social and personal selves. The personal selves through the online identities they construe are found to be harmoniously in tune with their socio-cultural milieu. Their veiled selves are seamlessly reflected in their veiled online presence for the public. In their personal space, within women groups, they are more forthcoming, sharing in experiences and soliciting advice- which is also reflective of their religious scope. The Saudi women in Universities that formed part of the

survey, were keen and adaptive to technology, and yet reticent in their online demeanor. They were vivacious and forthcoming in their blogs and private groups, yet distant and impersonal in their public space. It may be construed that their online avatars change with changing audience. Understanding the Saudi women behind the lens of scrutiny will reveal that they are as enterprising, forthcoming and vocal about their individuality, like their global counterparts, but on the online platform they succumb to the societal diktats. They guard their online privacy fiercely and are reticent to troll or be trolled. They tread on a safe path and would like to maintain online decorum within those boundaries.

As far as choosing their online friends, they are as meticulous as their posts, carefully choosing people they know, or only women, if unknown. Only half of the surveyed Saudi women have lived or travelled outside the country, and hence the conditioned grooming with a limited worldview. Their real friends outside their nation is very limited, if at all, and indicative of their narrow search for online friends. Unfriending or befriending for acquiring likes and comments on their posts is not common. Rather they may not be very encouraging when it comes to online posts and comments from strangers. They also feel their online presence has no better deal to offer them – they do not think they are more popular online, nor do they consciously seek to garner friendships or fan following. The gratification dimension of Facebook is also in congruence with their cultural ethos- they are avid users but not addictive to attention or popularity.

As far as their ideation about playing around their online identity- it is found to be of limited scope. Though Saudi men and women are known for their online sharing of video files, they are less forthcoming to working on their online profile. They have nothing to accentuate and position themselves to world at large- what with their

limited exposure to the English language. Their online profiles are at best searched for or are befriended by the Arab community – and which is workable for them due to the language barrier.

When asked about if Facebook gave them a sense of liberation- from their gendered self, they were conspicuous by their absence. They did not feel the need for liberation, as they felt they were already liberated, and all reticence was self-imposed. As one student narrated – “ *We are like precious gems- fully covered and honored. Our face is for our own to see, not for public display. Covering our faces is a sign of our higher honor.*” Hence it seemed redundant to suggest that unveiling may give them sense of liberation. It was undoubtedly a matter of pride for them. One student referred to a tale of history- that female slaves were unveiled (before slavery got abolished), and that was the distinction for a royal descent. Similarly, the emancipation gratification was also an alien concept for them. They denied being not emancipated; and that their self-imposed restrictions – online or otherwise- were misconstrued by the Western media. They consider it a malicious propaganda to undermine their worthiness. They have taken pride in their veiled identity, and that Facebook, or social media, have no role to play for their liberalization. They were already liberated by their own definitions. They vehemently disapproved of the media rhetoric about the need for emancipation. However, they had been very forthcoming and lauding the efforts towards women driving clause, and the Vision 2030 plan for women job reservations and empowerment. They asserted their rightful place in the workforce, and also in some governmental representation, without the brouhaha attached to it. They felt that they were going strong and resonated their future king’s vision plan to make them self-reliant. Government sponsored foreign education, women driving, job reservations for women, attire

relaxation- were few of the women-centric visions that found resonance in their own sense of identity management. To be being able to contribute proactively to their families, or to the nation at large, were some of their self-perception as far as identity creation was concerned. They were not drawn to the controversies surrounding the enigmatic Saudi women, and were reticent to refute it since to their minds it did not exist. The driving ban on women was lifted in June 2018, and plans for opening of a high-tech, widespread metro system for the first time in the city of Riyadh—due to be full operational by 2021—will ensure the fluidity with which the workforce can move around the city will increase drastically.

Women are increasingly found in positions of leadership and authority. “Working offers women a chance to expand beyond the traditional confines of family, and create an independent life, as well as the more obvious benefits of economic independence,” explains Professor Anne Sinnott, executive dean of Dublin City University (DCU) Business School, Dublin.

A more liberal outlook has and will open a wealth of opportunity for women in the country—last year, Sarah Al-Suhaimi became the first woman to be appointed as chair of the Saudi stock exchange. She is the first woman to chair a major financial institution in the Kingdom. In the next 15 years, as part of the reforms, there is a plan to increase female participation in the workforce from 22% to 30%. For instance on the education empowerment sector, Dublin City University (DCU) Business School signed a partnership in 2012 with the Princess Nourah Bint Abdulrahman University in Riyadh—the world’s largest women-only university. They offer a Bachelor in Business Studies International Finance (BSIF), and a Bachelor of Marketing, Innovation, and Technology (MINT). And to date over 70% of the first batch of MINT graduates, the class of 2017, have found employment in Saudi Arabia—



among the companies to have hired the grads are the Saudi Arabian Monetary Authority, EY, BCG, Siemens, and SAP.

It is the women with education and job empowerment which would sow the seeds of changes to come.

Sociologist Erving Goffman's performance theory and **symbolic interactionalism** seem to be well suited to the understanding of online identity construction on Facebook. According to Goffman, performance is "all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants". Facebook can be seen as part of a "front stage" where people construct identities as part of their performance before an audience. It is the perfect opportunity for individuals to use props such as group membership, photographs, and befriending as tools in the continuous process of performing identity.

Drawing heavily on the work of Goffman, the researcher found that symbolic interactionism is also an approach that lends itself very well to studying online identity construction on Facebook. Symbolic interactionism holds that humans act towards objects and events because of the meanings they possess, that meanings arise from social interaction, and that humans interpret objects and events to generate meaning (Furnham 1995).

While traditional theories consider **self** to be bounded and immutable, symbolic interactionism conceptualizes self as reflexively constructed through interaction in the social world. Our sense of self is therefore not innate but rather gained from our perception of society's evaluation of us (Robinson 1995). Self can be embodied, but it is not bounded and is constantly renegotiated in interactions (Robinson 1993). This 'looking glass' self is a reflection generated by a generalized other and that other's judgment as a person imagines it (Robinson 1994). Therefore on Facebook, as the

research found, in performing identity, the individual tries to take the position of the other and guess how they will interpret his or her symbols. As such, The Saudi women (individuals) try to manage the audience's impression of their performance by guessing what they will think. They try to keep their online behavior in tune with societal expectations of them.

However, unlike many users who appear to be glued to the social networking website because it allows them the opportunity to create an identity for themselves, Saudi women are nonchalant about their online identity. Their deep sense of privacy forbades them to draw an online identity for themselves. That social media is becoming increasingly visual in nature and the photograph is fast becoming the centre of a large proportion of social media engagement, is the very reason for their reticence. Clearly, the normal tactics of un-tagging and selective posting of photos on Facebook find no place within the Saudi women, by and large. They would rather go for a graphical representation to save themselves such a dilemma. That they may choose and display as many photos of themselves as they wish is redundant for them. Worldwide, there is a photo-sharing explosion with Facebook users connecting with their friends through the common language of photos. It is clearly the contrary with Saudi Arabian women. It is the visual onslaught that they prefer to avoid. They seem to detest the *narcissistic obsession* with self-display. It is contrary to their religious guidelines and social ethos.

However, the study found that *wall posting* was an immensely popular activity among Facebook users. Wall posting is highly focused and inherently interactive. When an individual creates a wall post, they signal a relationship with an individual in the public's eye. Furthermore, reciprocal wall posts act as a form of verification signal, providing observers direct evidence of a relationship. The feeling of closeness

associated with such a public display of connection may very well be linked to increased feelings of inclusion, awareness, and connectedness - all hallmarks of bridging social capital. However, wall postings were impersonal in nature when it came to public posts, and personal within closed groups.

Making *status updates* also was found to be quite engaging for these respondents. This activity that allowed them to share whatever was happening in their own lives, clearly empowered Facebook users to create an image of themselves in front of their peers. Through the Facebook News Feed, there was increased visibility, and that was alright with them. The young people in this research did not like to provide small snapshots of their activities and thoughts unless in closed, trusted groups. For the public again, it was impersonal and information sharing in nature, though sometimes accompanied by a photo, web links, or videos. Normally, the updates not only allowed *perpetual contact* (Joinson, 2008) with one's social network but it helped in creating an identity for Facebook users among his/her list of connections. For the Saudi women it was unintended and inconsequential. While they shared what they had to, they did not perceive it to be a tool for image creation.

Facebook profiles are digital bodies, public displays of identity where people can explore impression management. Because the digital world requires people to *write themselves into being*, profiles provide an opportunity to craft the intended expression through language, imagery and media. For the women covered in the study, it was not of prime importance. Their real image, as understood by friends, were more relevant to them. Digital self was just an extension, not to accentuate what they don't have in them. They expressed their need to *just be themselves*.

Self-claims and self-descriptions did not go well with them. They were very succinct in their “About me” section, not desirous of any popularity. Peer validation was limited for their activities, not for construing their online persona. Likewise, *Facebook Groups* which were found to be another large part of identity performance on Facebook and help construct virtual communities, was not a favored one for Saudi women. They were only there for some active forums for discussion and information and not out of a feeling of obligation to be in the group or the need to have more groups listed on one’s profile. Clearly, the participants primarily used Facebook to keep in touch with old friends and to *maintain or intensify relationships* characterized by some form of *offline connection*. For many, Facebook merely provided a way to keep in touch with high school friends and acquaintances. The research found that Facebook adds to the repertoire of communications media that people use, with its application for different types of relationship very much evident, depending on the quality, longevity, intimacy and regular face-to-face contact nature of the existing relationship. Facebook did not affect existing close relationships.

With the growing popularity of Facebook, more and more personal information is being displayed on the site. This is despite the fact that privacy groups advise Facebook users not to “reveal personal details to strangers or ‘just-met friends” (McCandlish 2002). Privacy groups cite social consequences of risky online behaviour as harassment, stalking, and spamming (“Privacy in Cyberspace” 2005). With Saudi women, it was the core of their online presence. They were well attuned to the nuances of privacy issues. From the results obtained, the researcher found that, overall, the majority of students were aware of the ability to restrict the amount of information they provided to different Facebook users.

## **Research Challenges and Scope**

The ambit of research in SNS and Saudi Arabian women, in particular, are wide and large. There are often times scholarships on offer for undertaking empirical studies on variety of issues that may be identified from time to time. For instance, how social capital is perceived by Arab women, how friendship connections are made and maintained considering their conservative background; empirical studies of the number of friends of Arab women on Facebook and the type of social behavior; kinds of Facebook use and the maintenance and creation of social capital; studies on dimensions of *bridging social capital*; whether Facebook has replaced face-to-face communication in this region; the *psychological well-being parameters* of *self-esteem* and *life satisfaction* studies and the like. Arguably, the range of activities and goals that users are employing SNSs to meet, and the diversity of the user base, make social networking sites a relevant context for scholarship in almost every discipline. However, studying social networking sites also poses unique challenges. The most pressing challenge before SNS scholars lies in the rapid pace at which innovations and technical changes are implemented in this space. SNS companies have outpaced and outwitted each other on several fronts and it is not an easy task to keep abreast with their changing game plans. They do have a direct and indirect bearing on the interpersonal, psychological and sociological processes they are studying. However one may be diligent, it is a challenging task for researchers to keep pace with changing technology, much of which is technological to start with, and may be released only belatedly, while the study was already on. With new additions come new research questions or hypothesis, which may be difficult to incorporate at a later. Likewise Company mergers and corporate affiliations may be difficult for a social researcher to quickly understand and incorporate in the study.

Also similarly given the rapidly changing infrastructure and the timeframe of academic publishing, the site at the time of data collection is likely to be very different from its incarnation at the point of publication. Furthermore, features that one scholar examines one year may simply disappear the next. And there may be additions in features not earlier contemplated. Socio-technical contexts change, as also socio-behavioral changes take place over the period of study, which may show up as different and contradictory results, while not being so. SNS subscriptions change with changing features, and if the study was activity based, it could formulate into results which may be difficult to quantify if a feature is called off or changed. Changed features also comes with marked differences in people's preferences. While some may change preferences, others may start to react in a different way – taste may change to distaste. Thus, since SNS shapes their experiences of it, activity-centric analyses require contextualization and translation is required. Researchers must clearly describe the socio-technical context of the particular site, service, or application their scholarship is addressing and also make a concerted effort to include the date of data collection and to describe the site at the moment of data collection and the relevant practices of its users. SNS research typically involve unprecedented quantities of data concerning human interaction. This presents unique opportunities and challenges. Handling effectively such data is a worthwhile exercise in itself, lending reliability to the study. Also being behavioral in nature, there may arise serious questions of research ethics and new types of biases that must be examined and addressed (Boyd & Crawford, 2011). Despite the large datasets that may emerge from research of such a scale and order it is essential that researchers do not become too enamored with these new systems and lose the critical insight. This may happen only with proper articulation of the assumptions and possible biases of

their methods and the need to embrace the possibilities these contexts offer for refining existing theories and developing new ones.

### **Future Research:**

Social Networking research in this Arabian kingdom is still in its nascent stage. SNS studies of the Arab world abound, but when it comes to women in Saudi Arabia, it is a different story, much of which is contextual. Saudi Arabian women do not meet strangers, more so if they are male. They are highly reticent, and any University would not give access to them without a valid reason. Their families too maintain a similar stance. Reach to them is a foremost challenge. Nonetheless, there is immense scope for doing research on behavioral studies on them, which could be really eye-opening. Western media have stereotypical reports about them, which they vehemently deny and refute. This paves the way for scope direct interaction, and undertaking studies that may be gratifying for the research community at large. Also, Social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat have given businesses an unprecedented view into the consumer psyche. With the stated mission of connecting people with friends and family, social media has unknowingly (somewhat knowingly) created the holy grail of consumer insights. And the best part of it is- at its most basic level, it's easy and free to access.

These micro-blogging websites are so rich in utility that an entire industry has formed around mining and interpreting the data they produce. From social media listening tools to social media focus groups, businesses looking to conduct market research on their target audience can now source this data from their social media networks, revealing a more granular assessment of the consumer buyer's journey. So

apart from social research standpoint, even businesses have much to gain by conducting research here.

### **Current Social Media Market Research Landscape**

There is emerging research capabilities yet to be revealed within social media. To get an understanding of the current social media research landscape, we may divide the tools currently available fall into two high-level categories:

1. **Passive listening** – passive listening tools put the researcher in a passive role, more ethnographic, unseen by the “respondent”. Social media listening tools can scrape vast amounts of profiles for things like brand mentions and parse them into a range of positive and negative sentiment analyses.
2. **Active listening** – active listening can incorporate passive listening, but allows for the researcher to interject themselves into ongoing social media conversations or jump into existing conversations. This is more like traditional market research which involves a “question/answer” scenario. Social media active listening can be conducted in the comfort of one’s own home on a platform that is familiar for the respondent making it an attractive and cost-effective tool to use.

Clearly, emerging technologies in social media can be game changers for businesses looking to gain a better understanding of their audience. For instance, Virtual Reality Focus Groups – With the launch of Facebook Spaces, Facebook now presents an exciting opportunity for companies looking to source qualitative data (measuring the quality of an experience through open ended questions) through informal focus groups. Current technologies enable focus groups to take place online through either video or discussion boards. Stories – The format pioneered by



Snapchat is now popular everywhere, from Facebook to Instagram. Stories represent an interesting development for research opportunities. Sharing pictures on Instagram and Facebook are seen as permanent as they live on the user's timeline and feed until deleted. So, they tend to be highly curated and not necessarily a representation of "real" life. The short-lived nature of stories, however, lends itself to greater transparency, rewarding companies with deeper insights into consumer behavior. This bespeaks of new ways of conducting both active and passive research on intended subjects.

And as far as Saudi Arabian women are concerned, extensive research would be beneficial in discovering the capabilities of an individual who uses alternative identities to find if, and how and to which severity they may use that alternative identity. The findings of such a study may have a number of important implications for the understanding of identity construction in society.

Future research on this topic needs to look into the effects of individual characteristics while examining identity construction in different environments. Most studies on online self-presentation have been conducted using a single-setting design, which makes it difficult, if not impossible, to rule out selection effects in cross-setting comparisons. The next logical step in advancing this line of research is to combine investigators' 'objective' coding of the profiles with users' subjective interpretations of their own activities. Such multi-method approaches can help us gain a better understanding of identity construction in different online environments.

Emerging adults are using Facebook to maintain large, diffused networks of friends, with a positive impact on their accumulation of bridging social capital. This may be an interesting area of research.

Methodologically, SNS researchers' ability to make causal claims is limited by a lack of experimental or longitudinal studies. Although the situation is rapidly changing, scholars still have a limited understanding of who is and who is not using these sites, why, and for what purposes. Such questions will require large-scale quantitative and qualitative research. Richer, ethnographic research on populations more difficult to access (including non-users) would further aid scholars' ability to understand the long-term implications of these tools. The researcher hopes that the work described here and included in this report will help build a foundation for future investigations of these and other important issues surrounding social networking sites.

## **Limitations**

Although the researcher was able to have direct access to a representative sample, there were a number of limitations discovered within the process.

First of all, was the language barrier. All students were conversant only with Arabic, and the researcher had very little working knowledge of it. This necessitated the need for an Arabic translation of the survey as also a volunteer interpreter who explained the purpose, objective and conduct of the survey. They had very little understanding of English, even though medium of instruction was officially English.

The research suffers from the quality of the composition of the sample. By virtue of consisting of university students alone, the sample was not sufficiently heterogeneous. The limited heterogeneity in respondents' demographic characteristics could have affected both the nature and the extent of the predictor variables and could have given results, which would not be the case in a real world social networking.

Another limitation that was identified in the study was the unequal amount of participants in relation to religious background. It would've been interesting to study

how identity was negotiated across religious affiliations. It would've given a more diverse result, in the same age category. But Islam being the official and only religion for Saudi Arabian nationals, it was an interesting find in itself too, with its typical demographic situation.

Another limitation was the sample size and geographical limitation. These results are only a guideline and not region-wide indicator to show link of Facebook with identity negotiation. Research in this area is very much in the evolutionary stages, so more detailed uncovering is essential for future findings. Also, coverage of other Arab provinces could've given more appropriate and diverse results.

The respondents were shy and reticent in the beginning. As they were not used to outsider in their University premises, it did take some time to open up. Surveys followed after an informal discourse. The pilot study in Alkharj University helped formulate the questionnaire though.

Having a lengthy interview schedule helped in in-depth analysis of the research, yet it caused problems during data collection. Respondents were initially reluctant to be part of this research because of the lengthy schedule.

Finally, it can also be argued that in this study, the mere survey of the Facebook users did not suffice to conclusively establish the variables under study. Content analysis of their Facebook profiles would've been complementary, but could not be done as they were all in the Arabic language, and researcher had little knowledge of the language.

## **Conclusion**

The researcher hopes that the findings unveiled in this study have contributed to the complex discussion of using Facebook as sites of identity negotiation by Female students of Universities in Saudi Arabia. The study was also delve deep into the Saudi Arabian society, its women and their social media usage. The researcher being a resident of the country for a decade and more, was highly positioned to bring about the nuances that contribute to understand the enigmatic Saudi Arabian women. Accessibility to them is the foremost challenge- they do not meet strangers, more so if not women. So, the researcher happened to be at the right time at the right place to find access and conduct the study. It is also not common for one to get a visa and conduct studies there, more so ethnographic, as they are highly guarded in their privacy. It was groundbreaking finding to see that Saudi Arabian women students of Universities did not consider Facebook as sites for identity negotiation. They were nonchalant in their attitude towards forming an online identity, preferring to represent themselves *just as they are* without any endeavour to highlight or position their positive attributes. Rather they were wont to underplay their online image, relying heavily that their friends already knew them; and Facebook was just an extension to reach out to fellow classmates and friends in off times. They had no ambitions to work around an online identity in the public space and drew complacency that they were being led by a Vision 2030 that worked towards enabling them to empowerment. Women's driving has been the biggest change during the research period. It remains to be seen, if after the driving ordinance goes more popular and women are allowed to drive and travel without male guardianship, if their outlook and worldview changes. The, they might even like to forge and carve out an online avatar for themselves. But that it for future research to see!