**How do Saudi youth engage with social media?**

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**Abstract**

Social media use is growing rapidly in the emerging market of Saudi Arabia. It is critical for both businesses and developers wishing to build a social media presence in this region to understand the cultural characteristics of their potential users. In this article, we explore how young Saudi social media users engage with the social media platforms Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat. We gathered data from face-to-face interviews, questionnaires, and analysis of participants’ social media profiles. From this, we constructed two personas (male and female) representing typical young Saudi social media users. Our results reveal several significant implications for those wishing to engage with users in the region, either in terms of marketing and engagement, or in the development of the platforms themselves.

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**Introduction**

Social networking services offer users new ways to communicate and interact. The distinctive feature of these services is that the flow of information is directed and managed by users within the framework of the platforms used. Understanding how users interact with these services helps with developing techniques to promote user engagement. To gain this understanding, we need to look at how users act and react to these services, and the factors that might have a direct impact on how they interact. Understanding users’ needs, behaviors, and types of engagement has become critical for social media developers, for businesses planning a marketing strategy around social media, and for those who study online interaction and online identity.

Many of the most popular global online social platforms had their origins in North America. However, as their reach expands, social media developers must not over-generalize and assume that communication styles and engagement types are similar across cultures. Kwon and Wen (2010) argued that social factors and affective factors (relating to moods, feelings, and attitudes) are important to explain how people use social networking services. Pookulangara and Koesler (2011) argued that the way a consumer uses a social network is influenced by their cultural background, which makes sense in a media environment reliant on user-generated content.

boyd and Ellison noted in 2007 that we had a limited understanding of who was and was not using these sites, why, and for what purposes. Since then, there have been several studies that have examined the impact of culture on social media use (e.g., Kim *et al.*, 2011; Jackson and Wang, 2013; Pornsakulvanich and Dumrongsiri, 2013; Rui and Stefanone, 2013), but to date these have focused on the United States, Europe, and Asia. There have been few studies of social media use (or even information technology use in general) in the Middle Eastern context, and much of the recent research in this region has focused on its political and activist elements (Shirazi, 2013) rather than on general, day-to-day use. However, it is arguable that the everyday use of social media in this region operates within some interesting cultural constraints that are worthy of further analysis.

**Why social media?**

The International Telecommunication Union noted that “[s]ocial media sites have become the most accessed websites by users in both developed and developing countries” [[1]](#endnote-1). Data from the Middle East confirm that social networking platforms and applications are popular across the region, especially among young adult males. Salem, Mourtada, *et al.* (2014) reported that over half of the 135 million Internet users in the Arab region in 2013 used social networking services. Nearly two-thirds of these social media users were male, and nearly half were under the age of 25 (GO-Gulf, 2013).

Saudi Arabia is an emerging economy, and is experiencing rapid growth in the use of information and communications technology (ICT). Saudi Arabia is in the top ten most highly performing countries since 2010 on the ITU’s ICT Development Index (ITU, 2015, p. 51), and the Communications and Information Technology Commission (CITC) of Saudi Arabia found that Internet use increased from 13 percent of the population in 2005 to 64 percent in 2014. This dramatic increase in the use of Internet services and broadband was mainly associated with high use of social networking applications (CITC, 2014).

Salem, Mourtada, *et al.* (2014) reported that Facebook was the most popular social networking service in the Arab region, with 91 percent of those surveyed having an account. This was followed by Google+ (70 percent of those surveyed), YouTube (60 percent), Twitter (57 percent), LinkedIn (37 percent), and Instagram (22 percent). Having an account, however, is not the same thing as using it.

However, only one-third of the Arab Facebook population in 2013 were women (MBRSG, 2014). For Saudi Arabia, this was even lower: about one-quarter (Younis and Al Khatib, 2013), despite the gender ratio of the Saudi population being almost exactly 50:50 (GaStat, 2016). This raises questions as to what drives such a significant gender imbalance with Arab Facebook users in general, and Saudis in particular. Why are Arab women not present on the most popular social media services in the Arabic world?

We need to explore how offline factors, such as culture and religion, can influence social media adoption. As noted, there has been limited research on how non-Western cultures use Western-style social media platforms like Facebook. This article therefore investigates how young Saudi Arabian social media users are motivated, how they present themselves, and how they engage with social media sites. Saudi Arabia is a particularly interesting country to investigate, as it has strong and complex relationships between culture and religion that influence people’s daily lives and behavior.

Social media platforms are often deployed in non-Western settings without accounting for the cultural norms or conventions of those countries. To attract more users in non-Western settings, and to expand global presence, social media developers need to consider more than just technical and aesthetic concerns. In particular, they may need to expand their scope to look at the cultural pressures acting on users in non-Western settings.

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) classified social media into six forms: collaborative projects (e.g., Wikipedia), blogs, content communities (e.g., YouTube), social networks (e.g., Facebook), virtual game worlds (e.g., World of Warcraft), and virtual social worlds (e.g., Second Life). However, social networks arguably dominate the digital scene. According to the ITU, social networking platforms are almost synonymous with the Internet for many users: “Social networking platforms have the potential to become integrated communication platforms that offer social networking, voice, e-mail, text messaging, and a wide range of content”[[2]](#endnote-2). These platforms are also rapidly becoming one of the most popular marketing tools. According to The CMO Survey (2014, pp. 35–36), in 2014 marketers spent 9.4 percent of their budgets on social media, which is expected to grow to 21.4 percent by 2019.

Growing social network popularity is due not only to network and technology factors, but also to users’ social desires (ITU, 2011). Social networking services are framed as a virtual space for users to express their passions and preferences, while also allowing them to socialize with others of similar interests and backgrounds (Lai and Turban, 2008). Social networking services enable their users to informally interact not only with people they already know from offline, but also with new people that they know only online. Relationships can be developed more freely, regardless of a user’s physical location.

Social networking services also give users more control over how they present themselves during online interactions. Chayko (2008, pp. 144–145) notes that modern technology can grant a greater feeling of control over interpersonal situations, enabling people who are less comfortable communicating face-to-face to better express themselves.

Social media platforms help users communicate and interact with others online on a much larger scale than offline. However, communication style varies across cultures (Gudykunst *et al.*, 1988), and culture is not abandoned at the login screen. There are still questions about the impact of a user’s cultural background on how they communicate and interact on social networks, and how that might hinder effective engagement with social networking platforms. This is particularly relevant for platforms developed in one cultural context and used in another.

User engagement is a complex phenomenon that has been described as “the quality of the user experience that emphasises the positive aspects of the interaction, and in particular the phenomena associated with being captivated by technology”[[3]](#endnote-3). Increasingly, researchers are investigating and exploring user engagement, and the factors that make up that engagement (e.g., O’Brien and Toms, 2008; Attfield *et al.*, 2011). According to van Vugt *et al.*, “understanding what determines user engagement is important because engagement highly predicts user satisfaction in human-character interaction”[[4]](#endnote-4). Indeed, promoting and enhancing user engagement is critical for both technology success (Attfield *et al.*, 2011; O’Brien and Toms, 2008) and the business case for social media platforms.

User engagement is a key measure for gauging the success of a social networking service. It can be tracked by visible patterns of user activity, such as follows, comments, shares, likes, favorites, and retweets. However, some patterns of activity, such as browsing, are effectively “silent” and invisible, and thus difficult to measure (Benevenuto *et al.*, 2009). To gain a comprehensive understanding of user engagement with social networks, we therefore need to go beyond visible interactions to capture silent behaviors, such as a user’s feelings, attitudes, beliefs, opinions, and experiences. These shape a user’s presence, and perhaps more critically, their absence from a platform.

**The cultural conundrum**

“Culture” as a broad term defines the shared norms, values, and markers that are shared by a particular group or community. “Culture is always a collective phenomenon, because it is at least partly shared with people who live or lived within the same social environment, which is where it was learned. Culture consists of the unwritten rules of the social game”[[5]](#endnote-5). The values, practices, symbols, and rituals of a culture identify individuals of a social group and distinguish one social group from another.

Hofstede *et al*. (2010) assert that culture can be seen as “mental programming” or “software of the mind” that relies on the surrounding environment of a society:

“The sources of one’s mental programs lie within the social environments in which one grew up and collected one’s life experiences. The programming starts within the family; it continues within the neighborhood, at school, in youth groups, at the workplace, and in the living community…A customary term for such mental software is *culture*”[[6]](#endnote-6).

Culture as mental programming exists in several layers: national (the social entity as a whole), regional (differences within a nation), gendered, generational, social class (educational and occupational), and corporate (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010, p. 18). Our research focuses on Saudi Arabian culture with respect to the national, regional, and gendered layers.

National cultures are made up of different social structures, rules, values, and norms. These differences in social and cultural characteristics can create differences in social media adoption. For this reason, it is critical to adopt a framework as a guide to distinguish cultures from each other based on common indicators. National cultural differences can be assessed by several indicators or value dimensions (e.g., Hall, 1976; Schwartz, 1994; Hofstede, 1984, 1991). Hofstede’s framework is dominant, despite being based on relatively old data from a single organization (IBM between 1967 and 1973), and has been adopted widely in cross-cultural research in many fields such as international management, marketing, and cross-cultural psychology (e.g. Bochner, 1994; Shankarmahesh *et al.*, 2003; Minkov and Hofstede, 2014).

Hofstede introduced a composite measure known as “cultural dimensions” to distinguish among cultures in different societies. There are currently six dimensions:

* Power Distance (PDI)
* Individualism versus Collectivism (IDV)
* Masculinity versus Femininity (MAS)
* Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI)
* Long-term Orientation (LTO)
* Indulgence versus Restraint (IVR)

Hofstede’s framework was used in this research to assess how cultural norms influence social media adoption among Saudi youth. We chose it because it was developed using a dataset that covered more than fifty different countries, including five Arab countries (Hofstede, 1984), and has been used effectively in many cross cultural-studies. Using Hofstede’s framework also enables us to compare our study findings with other studies of culture and social media adoption (e.g., Al Omoush *et al.*, 2012; Jackson and Wang, 2013).

We focused on the dimensions of Power Distance (PDI) and Individualism vs. Collectivism (IDV) in our study, because these two dimensions tend to be negatively correlated. According to Hofstede and Hofstede (2004), people in collectivist cultures like Saudi Arabia are “usually also dependent on power figures”[[7]](#endnote-7), while the opposite tends to apply in individualist cultures such as the United States, home to many of the major social media sites. Hofstede and Hofstede also predicted that the values associated with these two dimensions are likely “to exist and to play a big role in international affairs”[[8]](#endnote-8) well into the future.

Countries in the Arab region are classified as having high power distance. This dimension measures a culture’s acceptance of authority, and has been defined as “[t]he extent to which the members of a society accept that power in institutions and organizations is distributed unequally”[[9]](#endnote-9). Hofstede (1984) closely observed cultures that were higher on the power-distance scale. He noticed that at the family level, children of all ages were always expected to obey their parents and to show them loyalty, respect, and devotion. This behavior is considered a supreme virtue in such cultures, and can be seen in other social relationships, such as that between teachers and students. Students are expected to show respect to their teachers and not dispute their teachings. That is, teachers are treated as unquestioned sources of wisdom (Hofstede, 1984).

Prior studies focused on the power distance index at the institutional and organizational level, where the level of power distance refers to “the degree of centralization of authority and the degree of autocratic leadership”[[10]](#endnote-10). In the Saudi community, where religion and culture have historically influenced each other, it can be argued that religious leaders have a strong influence on individuals within the community. This means that they are also part of the power holder hierarchy at the national level. At the family level, parents and elders from extended families are also presumed to have authority over family members, and the husband has authority over his wife. The tribe is also another influence on Saudi society and individuals. Chai (2005) discussed the impact of tribal factors in Saudi Arabian society. He noted that while tribal authorities were “a major channel of communication” with the national government in Riyadh, “their influence seldom extended beyond the geographic locus of the tribe itself”[[11]](#endnote-11). The hierarchy of power holders in Saudi society is summarized in Figure 1.

**Figure 1:** Hierarchy of power holders in Saudi society.

Arabic countries are also classified as collectivist societies (i.e., low IDV). This dimension is concerned with whether a community defines its self-image in terms of “I” or “We”. Collectivism stands for “a society in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout their lifetime continue to protect them, in exchange for unquestioning loyalty”[[12]](#endnote-12). Individualism, in contrast, stands for “a society in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after him/herself and his/her immediate family only”[[13]](#endnote-13).

Group acceptance or “getting along” is the main priority in collectivism, whereas individualism focuses more on individuals “getting ahead” (Hui and Triandis, 1986; Jetten *et al.*, 2002; Triandis, 2001). This explains why collectivists usually follow their group’s rules and perform pro-social behavior (Bontempo *et al.*, 1990). Members of a collectivist culture like Saudi Arabia are “likely to be more conforming than individualists”[[14]](#endnote-14). It has been suggested that individuals in collectivist cultures are expected to show loyalty to the family by sharing resources with relatives (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010). Another difference is that collectivist children learn that opinions are predetermined by the group. Personal opinions are not encouraged and a child who repeatedly voices personal opinions is considered to have bad character. Individualist children, on the other hand, are encouraged to voice personal opinions and a child who takes their bearings from others is considered to have a weak character (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010).

**Why Saudi Arabia?**

Arabic culture is complex: not only do cultural differences exist among the 22 Arabic countries, there are also regional differences within each country. These cultural differences are a result of diversity in linguistic, ethnic, and religious communities and groups in the Arabic world. However, there are several factors that bind these diverse groups. Arabic, the formal Islamic language, is the common spoken language in these countries. Arabic culture is collectivist (Hofstede, 1984), so family is also one of the most important community values that Arabic people are proud of and loyal to. “Arabs from different countries define themselves according to the tribe they belong to, the family they belong to and finally the country they belong to”[[15]](#endnote-15). Arabs also share other significant collectivist values such as modesty and honor (Bassiouney, 2009, p. 149).

Islam is the religious basis and guide for daily life in Arabic countries, and plays a critical role in shaping the Muslim lifestyle. This influence also extends to people’s attitudes and behaviors: “In Islamic countries, the influence of religion is obvious in every aspect of Muslims’ lives, affecting social norms, behaviour and relationships”[[16]](#endnote-16). This religious influence can be hard to tell apart from cultural influence: “Non-Muslims sometimes become confused about whether a Muslim is doing something because it is a religious duty or because it is part of his or her culture”[[17]](#endnote-17).

Saudi Arabia is representative of many other Islamic countries. Religious values are tightly interwoven with cultural values and in many cases are hard to separate, making Saudi culture complex to untangle. “Saudi Arabia’s culture is in its very nature, religious. … Religion and culture in Saudi Arabia not only shape people’s attitudes, practices, and behaviours, but also shape the construction of their reality about their lives”[[18]](#endnote-18).

Arguably, to gain a deeper understanding of the collectivist Saudi culture, we also need some understanding of the Islamic teachings and values that are practiced in that culture. Islamic influence has been examined in many areas such as tourism development in Muslim countries (Din, 1989), management practices (Abuznaid, 2006; Mellahi and Budhwar, 2010), attitudes towards TV commercials (Michell and Al-Mossawi, 1999), and Islamic features (i.e., beliefs, ethics, services, symbols, and values) and their influences on the use of Islamic Web sites (Aliyu *et al.*, 2013). However, to our knowledge the influence of Islam on the use of social media platforms is under-examined.

Saudi cultural expectations for behavior are often constructed along gender divides: what is culturally acceptable for men can be different for women. However, there are conflicting aspects between Islamic teachings and Saudi cultural traditions regarding men’s and women’s duties and responsibilities. Some gendered expectations that are applied to one gender only may have no relation to Islam: they are purely cultural values. Others are Islamic values that are not gender-specific but which are imposed more on one gender by cultural forces. There are few English language studies that deeply explore and distinguish between cultural and religious influences according to gender in Saudi Arabia. We will therefore briefly review some of the most critical Saudi cultural values and practices that are imposed along gender lines.

Both males and females in Islam are equally expected to behave in a modest and decent manner in all aspects of their life — “…shyness [known in Arabic as *haya*] is considered an essential tenet in Islam, and it is important that individuals remain shy and modest”[[19]](#endnote-19). However, modesty and *haya* are culturally imposed more on females than on males. Saudi women are strongly expected to behave modestly at all times, especially in front of male strangers. Shyness and modesty must be exhibited in all aspects of personal performance, from dress to social behaviors. Al-Saggaf noted that modesty and shyness were two important features that profoundly influence Saudi life, and that “[s]hyness in women is even more stressed than in men”[[20]](#endnote-20).

Family honor is one of the most critical cultural values in Saudi Arabia. Family members are always expected to behave in ways that protect family honor. The father or oldest son is usually the master of the family and all decisions that concern the family’s presentation and honor in the community must be taken or approved by him. However, it seems that in Saudi Arabia, like many other Arabic countries, female family members bear a greater burden of responsibility for protecting family honor. The positive or negative outcome of female behaviors and actions will affect not only them as individuals, but also the whole family: “…if a family loses its honour, it loses everything. Dishonour is nonetheless most strongly associated with potential misdeeds against the chastity of female members. That is, any impropriety committed by a woman may ‘raise suspicion or provoke an attack on her morality, the consequences of which the entire family would suffer’ ”[[21]](#endnote-21).

Differences in social media use by these women may therefore be influenced by both personal beliefs, and also the wider cultural values of family and community leaders that they know they are expected to follow.

In our research, we closely examine the relationship between social media use and Saudi cultural norms. Since religion and culture strongly influence each other in the Saudi context, Islamic values and practices are also critical for understanding social media use in Saudi Arabia.

**Method**

The primary data source was individual face-to-face interviews. A core script made up of a mixture of closed- and open-ended questions was designed to reveal participants’ behaviors, opinions, and values while using social media. Questions were developed using similar studies (Kim *et al.*, 2011; Jackson and Wang, 2013; Pornsakulvanich and Dumrongsiri, 2013; Rui and Stefanone, 2013) as a guide, with consideration given to Saudi contextual differences. The interviewer asked unscripted follow-up questions as necessary to gather more detail, clarify what participants said, and explore their experience with and their opinions of social media sites. The interviewer also noted any non-verbal behaviors (e.g., body language) that could affect how responses were interpreted.

Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, and was audio recorded (with the participant’s permission) to ensure accuracy. We conducted the interviews in Arabic. They were then transcribed and translated into English. We interviewed new participants until we reached a state of “data saturation”; that is, until we started to see nothing but the same themes repeated, and thus gained no further new information (Bazeley, 2013). This approach yielded a sample of 18 female participants from the middle (Riyadh), west (Jeddah), and east (Dammam) regions of Saudi Arabia, and 9 male participants attending university in southern New Zealand. As the interviewer was female, interviewing males in Saudi Arabia was not feasible—somewhat ironically—due to cultural constraints.

Where consent was given, we also examined the online profile contents of participants. This enabled us to detect additional themes that were not revealed in the interviews. It also enabled us to compare whether what a participant claimed about their online behavior matched their actual online behavior. For Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook (where applicable), we examined profiles after the participant had left the interview. With Snapchat, however, shared content disappears in seconds, so we had to examine Snapchat profiles while the participant was still present. Participants who used Snapchat were asked at the end of the interview if they could share some of their recent snaps with the interviewer. This reduced the risk of leading the participant’s responses during the interview.

To improve our understanding of factors that influence Saudi youth engagement with social media, we focused on the profiles and comment threads that participants followed. Many of these profiles were of imams (religious leaders) and Saudi youth social media activists. We also analyzed publicly available local data, such as news, magazines, and hashtags for wider context.

Finally, we asked participants to complete two scale-based questionnaires after the interview. The responses to these scales helped us better explain how Saudi youth use and accept social media platforms with respect to their internalized norms and understandings of cultural expectations. The scales also provided further support for the responses of participants during interviews. We constructed both an English and an Arabic version of each scale.

To date we have not found a scale in the literature that specifically examines collectivist cultural effects on social media engagement. Therefore, this first scale considered collectivist values that were explored in previous studies (e.g., Hui and Triandis, 1986; Jetten *et al.*, 2002; Triandis, 2001; Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Hu, 1944). It consisted of 14 statements, answered on a four-point scale of “strongly disagree”, “somewhat agree”, “agree”, and “strongly agree”. Eight statements measured cultural influence on the participant’s sense of belonging to a group, and on day-to-day behavior in general. The remaining six statements focused specifically on cultural influence on social media use.

The second scale measured religious influence on daily decisions and behaviors. Again, we have not found a scale in the literature that directly examines religious influence on social media use and acceptance. Our scale comprised 26 statements, 24 of which were answered on a four-point scale of “never”, “sometimes”, “frequently”, and “always”. The remaining two statements focused specifically on religious observances, which required slightly different scales from the other statements. The statements fell into four groups: belief (3 statements), acts of worship (3), day-to-day behavior (3), and use of social media (17). We based the statements in part on Sethi and Seligman’s (1993) Religiousness Measure, and on Roof and Perkins’ (1975) Salience in Religious Commitment Scale, both modified and expanded to focus on online behavior in an Islamic context.

We coded the responses for both scales as numbers in the range 1 to 4, where:

* 1.00 to 1.75 represented “strongly disagree” or “never”,
* 1.76 to 2.50 represented “somewhat agree” or “sometimes”,
* 2.51 to 3.25 represented “agree” or “frequently”, and
* 3.26 to 4.00 represented “strongly agree” or “always”.

An obvious concern with interviewing participants living in New Zealand was that living in an individualistic culture for an extended period might erode the influence of Saudi norms on personal behavior. To test this, we split the male participants into two groups. Six had been in New Zealand for less than a year, with stays ranging from one to eight months. The remaining three had been in New Zealand for between two and four years.

We found no obvious differences in social media engagement between these two groups. The experience and behaviour of those who had been in New Zealand for only a few months was almost identical to those who had been in New Zealand for several years. One possible explanation is that all male participants were studying on Saudi government scholarships and were therefore not permanently resident in New Zealand. They were not continuously exposed to New Zealand cultural norms, and there were regular opportunities to reinforce Saudi cultural norms when they returned home during university holidays. There was also a strong Islamic community on campus, which would have helped reinforce their religious norms. Finally, global communication technology may have extended the influence of their home communities to help them retain their sense of Saudi/Islamic identity, even while embedded within an individualistic culture.

**Cultural impacts**

Participants agreed that Saudi culture had an impact on how they engaged with social media platforms. The overall mean across all statements on the cultural scale was 2.97 out of 4.00, corresponding to the category “agree”.

Unexpectedly, responses to the statement “I feel that I am an independent person: I do not depend on my group or family” had a mean of 2.81 (“agree”). This seems to contradict Hofstede’s framing of how collectivists usually see themselves. It could be that participants interpreted the meaning of “independent” differently, or perhaps they were trying to give the impression that they had more personal control of their lives. Similarly, the statement “My group’s interests are not more important than my own needs and rights” had a mean of 2.85 (“agree”). This again could be a result of participants (perhaps because of their youth) trying to emphasize the importance of their own needs. These were the only two statements with unexpected responses, however.

Responses to the other statements were in line with the expected collectivist mindset. The five most agreed with statements on the cultural scale were (in descending order):

1. “While I’m using social media services, I try to not behave in a way that is unacceptable to my group members” (mean 3.15).
2. “I would not post photos if doing so may be received negatively by my group members” (mean 3.15).
3. “I would provide financial support when I can to those of my own group members who need support” (mean 3.15).
4. “To avoid loss of face in front the community, I try to behave in a decent way under any circumstances” (mean 3.11).
5. “I have a responsibility to maintain the group harmony” (mean 3.07).

These results suggest that users’ acceptance of social media, and the ways they engage with these technologies, are highly associated with their cultural values and norms.

In interviews, regardless of gender, most participants showed no interest in recognition and were not comfortable with revealing information about themselves in public. They considered their personal information to be private and wanted to keep it secure. Profile analysis confirmed that participants sought to keep their identity private on social media, even when their account was not publicly visible. What they shared did not reveal anything about their identity, their personality, or their personal experiences and achievements. All participants repeatedly emphasized that even though they accepted strangers as followers, meeting new people was not what motivated them to engage with social media platforms. They were therefore cautious about creating a relationship with anyone they did not know, and always took the consequences of self-disclosure seriously.

Interestingly, most participants were comfortable with adopting a fake identity or pseudonym. While participants in general tried not to post false information, they did not consider giving false identifying information (such as name, age, location, nationality, and even gender) to be unethical. They felt this was justified to protect their privacy online, especially for women. Most of the female participants used their first name only for their accounts, while two used pseudonyms. Participants also reported that they would consider setting up accounts under a pseudonym so that they could interact more freely with people who were not family members. We saw a similar pattern with public profile images, which are also an important part of a user’s online identity. All female participants used images of things like flowers and landscapes instead of photographs of themselves.

Collectivists are group-oriented, and this appears to apply just as much online as offline. Being socialized with the group is fundamental for Saudi youth to participate online. This desire is a key motivation for their continued use of a social media platform. Participants mainly used social media platforms to keep in touch with family and friends, and their continued use of a platform was tied to others in their network using the platform. The participants’ desire to manage and protect a carefully constructed public face could in part explain why they are followers (lurkers) more than active posters on their social networking accounts.

The content that they do share reinforces this desire for group cohesion. Subjects who actively used Instagram frequently posted images recording their day-to-day activities. This seemed to offer them a greater sense of closeness to those in their network (particularly their offline network), which is a typical collectivist trait. This willingness to share their day-to-day activities did not contradict their desire for privacy, however: the photos showed *what* they were doing, but revealed little about *who* they were, and on the site there were no comments from peers.

Our data suggest that Saudi youth, both male and female, place high value on how others see them, especially those from their offline network. For participants, there was no difference between online and offline behavior, and they saw no room to deviate from the expected behavior demanded by their collectivist culture. To be viewed positively, participants demonstrated obedience and respect to cultural and religious values, norms, and restrictions, knowing that their online behavior was being culturally observed.

Participants were careful when creating and sharing content and showed great concern about how their followers would receive it. Any content they shared had to conform to cultural and religious standards. Sharing unacceptable content was a risk few were prepared to take, even those who had made significant efforts to hide their identity. While some participants said that they would delete any content that was received negatively by their group, many found the suggestion surprising. The content they posted was so carefully curated that it was almost unimaginable that they might post something that would later need to be deleted.

With regard to comments posted to their profiles by others, both male and female participants reacted strongly to negative or culturally unacceptable content, and took these as a personal insult. The usual response was to delete the offending content. Many also permanently blocked the person who posted the content. Participants felt that allowing negative third-party content to remain visible on their profile reflected poorly on them, and would negatively impact how their followers saw them as a person. For that reason, they would only accept followers and follow those who had what they called a “clean profile”—that is, a profile that contained only culturally and religiously acceptable content.

Saudi youth will therefore go to great lengths to avoid conflict with their group. Behavior that deviates from expected cultural values and norms in online settings is at odds with the Saudi desire to maintain harmonious relationships. To function as an integral part of the group, Saudi youth therefore tend to act and represent themselves on social media platforms in the same way as they do offline, and social sanctions are harsh for non-compliance. Their behavior is in accordance with the group’s wishes and expectations, and with prevailing cultural norms and values.

That said, some small measure of rebellion against cultural restrictions was revealed during interviews. Three participants (two female, one male) had created what they called “trusted friends only accounts”. These were separate accounts that were accessible to their most trusted friends only, not to parents or family members. Some even created several such accounts, effectively using them as a way to split their followers into groups with varying levels of access and trust. This enabled them to express themselves more freely without the fear of family or group repercussions. This rebellious behavior is entirely consistent with collectivism, however, as it is “rebellion in private”, and invisible to those who would otherwise impose cultural sanctions.

**Religious impacts**

Participants were less certain about the impact of Islamic beliefs and teachings on how they engaged with social media platforms. The overall mean across all statements on the religious scale was 2.40 out of 4.00 (“sometimes”), and responses ranged from 2.00 (“sometimes”) to 2.96 (“frequently”). Participants responded “frequently” to seven of the scale statements, the five most notable being:

1. “My faith in the existence of God is constant” (mean 2.96).
2. “I refrain from insulting and abusing others in my posts” (mean 2.81).
3. “To be constantly in contact with God is extremely important to me” (mean 2.78).
4. “Following Islamic teachings is extremely important to me” (mean 2.70).
5. “You must obey your parents if they ask you to use any of the social media in certain ways” (mean 2.63).

These results suggest that Islamic teaching and beliefs have at least some influence on how Saudi youth engage with social media platforms. In particular, religious influences seem to enhance the self-monitoring and self-control that Saudi youth already practice on social media. However, as noted earlier, the line between a religious and a cultural expectation is blurred.

We asked participants (both on the religious scale and in interviews) whether they followed imams on social media networks. Participants varied in their attitudes to communicating online with religious leaders, and responses fell into three groups. The first group said that following religious leaders on social media was important to help them get a *fatwā* (a legal opinion or interpretation of Islamic law). The second group felt that following religious leaders on social media was part of their religious commitment to support those leaders in their preaching. For the third group, the decision whether or not to follow an imam depended more on how attractive the imam’s content was, than on any religious obligation. Regardless of the reason, the majority of participants followed and shared content from a variety of religious sources. Such content included short video clips of lessons and sermons, Quranic script, the Prophet Muhammad’s sayings, *hadith*[[22]](#endnote-22), and prayers.

Sharing religious content was one of the most common social media activities observed in this study. Participants were always keen to be seen sharing religious content. They also reported that they felt God would reward such behavior. Conversely, sharing content that was considered sinful (e.g., sexually suggestive music videos) would make them complicit in that sin, and could be viewed as inciting others to commit the same sin.

It seems that religious leaders have a strong influence on the younger Saudi population through their sharing of content online. The religious leaders that participants followed were skillful at communicating with and attracting the attention of young people on social media. They used different styles across different types of social media platform to deliver their religious preaching and to communicate with youth.

One particularly interesting discovery was the concept of a *da‘wah* account, used solely to proselytize or preach Islam. One participant regularly shared religious content on her personal Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter accounts in an effort to seek reward from God. However, her desire for even greater rewards led her to create a separate *da‘wah* account on Twitter, dedicated exclusively to sharing religious content. Another participant, who for similar reasons regularly shared religious content on his accounts, was concerned that he might not be able to access his account regularly enough to share such content. He therefore subscribed to a service that would periodically tweet *hadith*, prayers, and short Quranic scripts through his Twitter account, automating his performed devotion.

Participants also shared more religious content during the holy month, Ramadan, and the month of the Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca), compared with the rest of the year. This suggested a higher degree of religious commitment during these periods, and corresponding levels of acceptable identity performance within a collectivist, religious community. The Mecca\_live campaign in July 2015 is a good example of harnessing this commitment. A young Saudi, Ahmed Aljbreen, petitioned Snapchat to bring the 27th day of Ramadan prayers (13 July 2015) from Mecca to a worldwide audience through Snapchat’s “Our Story” feature.

Most of the research participants said they supported the Mecca\_live campaign. This supports the idea that they consider social media an important tool to practice the mission of *da‘wah* (i.e., “spreading the word” about Islam). The Mecca\_live campaign was a great success. On the 27th day of Ramadan, Muslims from different nationalities and cultures shared on Snapchat 300 seconds of their spiritual journey in Mecca. This generated a highly positive attitude to Snapchat in Saudi Arabia, based on Twitter and local media reports.

In short, based on the research data, we can conclude that religion and degree of religiosity have a strong influence on how Saudi youth engage with social media platforms. This influence is clearest in the attention paid to the religious content they share. Religious content is an acceptable form of sharing that leads them to engage with social media in ways that also align with wider collectivist and Islamic values.

**Developing the personas**

Based on our findings, we created two realistic and practical personas that are representative of typical young Saudi social media users. Personas are a useful tool for designing user interaction within a system, as they embody different use cases in a realistic and relatable way (Cooper, 1999). Personas are synthesized from observing and investigating the behaviors, attitudes, motivations, and preferences of real users. As Cooper notes, “personas are not real people, but they represent them throughout the design process. They are *hypothetical archetypes* of actual users. Although they are imaginary, they are defined with significant rigor and precision.”[[23]](#endnote-23)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | **Nouf** is 24 years old, married, and lives in Riyadh. She uses Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat, accessing them from her iPhone and iPad. She spends about six hours per day on social media.  (image credit: clearandtransparent, licensed from iStock) |
|  |  |
|  | **Ali** is 23 years old, single, and lives in Jeddah. He uses Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat, accessing them from his iPhone. He spends about four hours per day on social media.  (image credit: Todor Tsvetkov, licensed from iStock) |

Both Nouf and Ali are university students that grew up and live in Saudi Arabia. Both are Muslim. Nouf and Ali are both regular users of social media, each engaging (in Arabic) with more than one platform. Both first started using social media in 2013. Like many young Saudis, Nouf and Ali rely heavily on social media to communicate with people from their offline network rather than to meet strangers. Thus, their family members and friends form the core of their online network. Both Nouf and Ali use social media platforms intermittently every day, whenever they are connected to the Internet.

While they are online, Nouf and Ali are both highly concerned about protecting their positive self-image and about their group’s acceptance of their online behavior. What they share, who they follow, and who follows them are therefore critical to them. On the other hand, increasing their number of followers and gaining more attention and popularity are not important to them. What is vital is they ensure that they are being received positively by their immediate community and relevant hierarchy.

We have developed these personas in an effort to communicate the real-world concerns of young Saudi social media users to social media developers and marketers who are targeting the Saudi youth audience. Nouf and Ali can be used as a guide to help develop, design, and evaluate new user tools, or to enhance existing features and tools. They reflect how Saudi youth engage with social media, and the surrounding cultural, religious, and family values that influence and shape how they interact and participate online.

Our results highlighted several common themes or characteristics that we have included in the personas. These characteristics are detailed in Appendix A. For many of these characteristics, gender is secondary to collectivistic and religious identity. Behaviors such as checking in with friends, or posting non-identifying content (such as photographs of landscapes) are consistent with both Nouf and Ali.

However, some highly personal online behavior reveals significant gender differences. Nouf, as a young married woman, desires social media that give her rigorous fine control over who sees her content and online identity. Ali would also desire these controls, but not as strongly.

Online, Nouf is more likely to seek out information, and share religious content. She is also extremely unlikely to post pictures or video of herself (especially images that identify her), but is very likely to post images of the children in her life. In this regard, Ali is almost the opposite: likely to post a selfie but not a picture of his children. Though both Ali and Nouf would prefer a more ambiguous (possibly pseudonymous) online identity, Nouf’s desire for this functionality in her social media is far stronger than Ali’s.

In performing her online identity, Nouf is strongly aware of the performance of *haya* and maintaining the honor of her family and group, though this is also of concern to Ali. To varying degrees, each therefore tightly controls both their own online performance and who they are “seen” to be socializing with online. Nouf’s online presence is also more likely to be influenced by her husband, or by religious leaders within her offline hierarchy, which is reflected in her desire for fine control of her online presence.

**Recommendations**

Based on our research and the personas we have developed, we can make several recommendations for various platform operators, content providers, and online marketers seeking entry into the growing Arabic market.

One of the key pressures shaping Nouf and Ali’s engagement with social media is the maintenance of privacy and an appropriately modest online persona. Our research revealed that participants were generally not satisfied with existing privacy features on their platforms. They used workarounds like “trusted friends only” accounts or falsifying personal data (pseudonymity) to meet their need to protect personal information and to perform appropriate modesty.

Related to this are social pressures that come with being part of a collectivistic society, which often apply even more strongly to women. Nouf’s public self-image on social media affects not only her personally, but also the honor of her entire family. Our participants reported that they actively took steps to ensure that their self-image would be received positively. For example, when they received a friend or follower request they vetted the requester’s account to ensure that it only contained culturally appropriate content, as a person’s followers reflect on them both individually and as representative of their family group. Participants also reacted strongly when negative comments or inappropriate content were shared to their accounts. They considered it essential to delete such comments, and perhaps even permanently block the commenter from their account.

Our first recommendation, therefore, is to provide users with more fine-grained tools at the platform level for self-managing information and privacy. For example, Nouf might be able to assign an access code to a small number of “trusted friends”, allowing them greater direct access to her profile without having to expose it more generally. A related feature that may better serve the needs of Nouf and Ali is the ability to group friends and followers more easily, and to direct messages and content only to selected groups at a very fine-grained level. Facebook already has a feature like this, but the level of control may not be quite fine-grained enough to satisfy Nouf’s or Ali’s needs.

Similarly, giving Nouf and Ali more control over their posts and other site activity may conform better with cultural expectations of behavior. For example, many participants reported a preference for Snapchat due to how content expires and (as far as they understood) vanishes from the network. This contrasts to services like Twitter, which effectively archive content permanently (unless deliberately deleted). These services represent two extremes on a continuum of possibilities for managing the lifespan of posted content. Arguably giving Nouf and Ali more control over this aspect of their online activity would improve their levels of engagement. It may also mitigate some concerns held, either by Nouf and Ali themselves or by the hierarchies surrounding them, that may influence or discourage social media use.

A second way that platforms could meet the needs of Nouf and Ali is by supporting asymmetrical “friending” behaviors, that is, allowing users to follow or friend others without any requirement for a reciprocal connection. Twitter and Instagram are both examples of sites that enable this asymmetry. The ability to form asymmetric relationships with other users would work better for Saudi youth, especially women like Nouf, who is more likely to follow without posting, or to limit the amount of private information she publishes online. Saudi youth like to watch and follow, but cultural and religious demands, such as *haya*, limit the extent to which they feel comfortable presenting themselves online. They are therefore less receptive to services that force symmetric relationships as a cost of entry.

These cultural and religious pressures to remain modest and (by Western standards) reserved online should also be considered by social media marketers and advertisers who aim to build relationships with Saudi youth users like Nouf and Ali. Beyond basic linguistic considerations, these services need to account for the different types of information-seeking and engagement behaviors shown by Saudi users. For example, as a collectivistic, religious culture, Saudis tend to respond better to social and online media messages addressed to the group, or to group leaders in the hierarchy, rather than to individuals. Saudis, including social media users, will also be strongly swayed by the opinions and instructions of those higher in the social power structure. Furthermore, online messages and content targeted at Saudi culture should refrain from imagery and content, such as photographs of women, that may be at odds with both cultural norms and personal interpretations of *haya* or “shyness”.

The pressure to maintain a positive image affects Saudi’s engagement with social media, leading to a tendency to minimize their network size and decrease their sharing behavior. We propose two ways that social media services can help users like Nouf and Ali manage their image. First, enable them to moderate or censor all posts directed to their profile before they are published. This will ensure nothing can be posted on their profile without their consent. Second, enable them to hide or mute members of their network. Any comments or content posted by a muted member will not be visible to other members of the network.

These added levels of control may encourage Saudi users like Nouf and Ali to engage more frequently and openly by increasing their sense of control over their personal privacy, and by allowing them to more carefully and deliberately engage with content. They would also be able to more easily maintain a social media identity that would both win social approval from their wider hierarchies and communities, and give them a more positive experience of the platform.

**Conclusion**

The use of social networking platforms is growing rapidly worldwide. However, social media developers need to carefully consider characteristics of Saudi and Islamic culture so that they can more effectively engage Middle Eastern users. Our results show that the attitudes and behavioral dynamics of young Saudi social media users reflect the values and norms of their national culture and religion. This includes expectations of modesty, and the strong influence of community and family leaders on individuals. This influence is at a level where Saudi users will work around platform functionality, or engage in extremely limited and tactical social sharing behaviors, so that they can conform to the norms and values of their communities and avoid sanctions from social and domestic leaders. Even living in an individualistic culture for an extended period does not appear to diminish the influence of either Saudi national culture or Islam on how Saudi youth engage with social media. We therefore expect that the way Saudi youth engage with social media will continue to be significantly influenced by Saudi and Islamic values and norms well into the future.

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**Notes**

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**Appendix: Persona characteristics**

*Who influences Nouf and Ali?*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| My parents |  |
| My partner |  |
| My friends |  |
| People from my offline network |  |
| Religious leaders | 4.jpg |
| Religious teachings | 5.jpg |
| Cultural values and norms | 6.jpg |

*Life goals*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| I want to have a stable  and secure life | 7.jpg |
| I want to be close to and loved  by my family members | 8.jpg |
| I want to be respected by my group | 9.jpg |

*Decision drivers*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| I am more likely to engage with a social media platform that gives me greater control over my personal data | 10.jpg |
| I am more likely to use a social media platform that makes it harder for people to find  me in searches | 11.jpg |
| It is important that a social media platform provides me with fine-grained access controls over who can see the content I share | 12.jpg |

*Experience goals*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| I want to feel secure and private | 13.jpg |
| I want to have full control over my personal data and how much of it followers can see | 14.jpg |
| I want to be able to customize my relationship with other users according to my needs | 15.jpg |

*End goals*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| I want to keep in touch with and get support from people in  my offline network | 16.jpg |
| I want to extend real- world connections | 17.jpg |
| I want to follow and be able to interact with power-holders  who would otherwise be inaccessible to me | 18.jpg |
| I want to discover new  things and ideas | 19.jpg |

*Motivations*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| I want to keep in touch  with family and friends | 20.jpg |
| I want to keep up to date with current news and events | 21.jpg |
| I want to get information  about various topics | 22.jpg |
| I want to have fun | 23.jpg |
| I want to occupy my spare time | 24.jpg |

*Attitude*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Regular use of social media takes up time that could be spent socializing with family and  friends in person | 25.jpg |
| Regular use of social media decreases the quality of interpersonal communication | 26.jpg |
| Regular use of social media decreases the level of  spiritual commitment | 27.jpg |

*Behavior*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Recording daily activities  and events | 28.jpg |
| Sharing religious content | 29.jpg |
| Sharing photos of landscapes | 30.jpg |
| Sharing photos of food | 31.jpg |
| Sharing personal photos  or videos with strangers | 32.jpg |
| Sharing photos of children | 33.jpg |
| Posting photos of people  wearing immodest clothing | 34.jpg |
| Sharing jokes and  short funny videos | 35.jpg |
| Posting personal opinions on political and sensitive social topics | 36.jpg |
| Discussing sensitive  religious topics | 37.jpg |
| Following religious leaders | 38.jpg |

*Beliefs*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| I must behave in a decent and modest way on social media,  to avoid loss of face in the  eyes of the community | 39.jpg |
| I must avoid social disapproval while using social media | 40.jpg |
| Use of social media negatively influences the attitudes and behavior of Muslims | 41.jpg |
| Online actions that are contrary to Islamic teachings are sinful | 42.jpg |
| Sharing religious content  will be rewarded | 43.jpg |
| The members of my online network (both followers and those I follow) reflect upon me as an individual, and upon my reputation | 44.jpg |

*Online profile*

|  |  |
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| Ambiguity of online identity | 45.jpg |
| Availability of personal information | 46.jpg |

1. (ITU, 2014, pp. 16–17) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. (ITU, 2011, p. 16) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. (Attfield *et al.*, 2011, p. 1) [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. (van Vugt *et al.*, 2007, p. 277) [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010, p. 6) [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. *Ibid.*, p. 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2004, pp. 83–84) [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. *Ibid.*, p. 114. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. (Hofstede, 1984, p. 83) [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. (Hofstede, 1983, p. 81) [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. (Chai, 2005, p. 76) [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. (Hofstede, 2007, p. 417) [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. *Ibid.* [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. (Hui and Triandis, 1986, p. 230) [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. (Bassiouney, 2009, p. 99) [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. (Michell and Al-Mossawi, 1999, p. 428) [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. (Williams, 2008, p. 8) [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. (Al-Saggaf, 2011, pp. 1, 4) [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. (Al-Saggaf, 2004, p. 11) [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. *Ibid.*, p. 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. (Al Lily, 2011, p. 120) [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. *Hadith* are reports or accounts describing the words, actions, or habits of the Prophet Muhammad. They are regarded as important tools for understanding the Quran and its commentaries. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. (Cooper, 1999, p. 124) [↑](#endnote-ref-23)