**Use of social media by Saudi youth**

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

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**Abstract:**

Saudi Arabia is an emerging market, and the use of social media is growing rapidly there. It is critical for 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. Based on these data we constructed two personas (male and female) representing typical young Saudi social media users. Our results also reveal several significant implications for businesses and developers wishing to engage with users in the region.

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**1 Introduction**

Social networking services offer users new ways to communicate and interact. The distinguishing feature of these services is that they are user-based, i.e., the flow of information is directed and managed by users themselves. Understanding how users interact with these services helps us develop techniques to promote user engagement. To do this we need to look at users’ actions and reactions towards these services, and the factors that might have a direct impact on such interaction. Understanding users’ needs, behaviors, and types of engagement has become critical for social media developers, businesses that are planning a marketing strategy around social media, and for those who study online interaction and online identity. (see Section 2)

The understanding of how and why users accept and adopt social networking services is still at a relatively early stage. Boyd and Ellison (2007) noted that we have a limited understanding of who is and is not using these sites, why, and for what purposes, especially outside the United States. It is critical for those developing engaging social networking services to understand differences in actions, behaviors, values, and ways of thinking across different groups and societies. They 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 in explaining how people use social network services. Pookulangara and Koesler (2011) further argued that the way consumers use social networks is influenced by their cultural background. Much of the information posted on social networking services is user-generated, and therefore seems likely to be influenced by a user’s culture.

There have been several studies that 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, which poses some interesting cultural constraints. (see Section 4)

**2 Why social media?**

The International Telecommunication Union (ITU, 2014, pp. 16–17) noted that “Social media sites have become the most accessed websites by users in both developed and developing countries”. Data from the Middle East confirm that social networking platforms and applications are popular in the region, especially among young adult males. Salem, Mourtada, *et al.* (2014) reported more than 135 million Internet users in the Arab region, over half of whom used social networking technologies. Nearly two-thirds of social media users in the region in 2013 were male, and nearly half were under the age of 25 (GO-Gulf, 2013).

Saudi Arabia is an emerging economy, and has been 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 usage 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 is not the same thing as using it, however. As we will see later, there seems to have been a recent shift away from Facebook in favor of Instagram and Snapchat.

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). The latter in particular is an interesting discrepancy, given that the gender ratio of the Saudi population is almost exactly 50:50 (CDSI, 2015). Why is there such a high gender imbalance among Arab Facebook users in general and Saudis in particular? Why do Arabic women not use Facebook, when it is one of the most popular social media services in the Arabic world?

The popularity of social media platforms and applications has exploded around the globe in recent years. It is therefore important to consider how social media has been adopted across countries, and to what extent external factors, such as culture and religion, can influence use of social media. There is a limited body of literature investigating underlying motivations, self-presentation, and type of engagement with social media sites across cultures. This raises the question of how Western-style social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, are being used in non-Western countries. We are particularly interested how social media are used in countries like Saudi Arabia, which have 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 adopting features that account for the cultural norms 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 aspects of those non-Western settings.

Social media has been classified by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) 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 are dominating 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” (ITU, 2011, p. 16). 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 network services create 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 network 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 in a less constrained way regardless of a user’s physical location.

Social network services also give users more control over their self-presentation during online interactions. Chayko (2008, pp. 144–145) notes that modern technology can give a sense of control over interpersonal situations, and a feeling that they can express themselves, to people who are less comfortable with face-to-face communication.

Digital media platforms facilitate users’ communication and interaction with others online on a much larger scale than the offline setting. However, communication style varies across cultures (Gudykunst et al., 1988). This raises questions about the impact of a user’s cultural background on their communication and interaction on social networks, and how that might inhibit effective engagement with social network platforms.

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” (Attfield et al., 2011, p. 1). There is an increasing amount of research 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. (2007, p. 277), “understanding what determines user engagement is important because engagement highly predicts user satisfaction in human-character interaction”. Indeed, promoting and enhancing user engagement is critical for technology success (Attfield et al., 2011; O’Brien and Toms, 2008).

User engagement can be a key metric for gauging the success of a social networking service. It can be tracked by visible patterns of activity and interaction behaviors of users, 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). Consequently, to gain a comprehensive understanding of user engagement with social networks, we need to go beyond visible interactions to capture silent behaviors, such as a user’s feelings, attitudes, beliefs, opinions, and experiences.

**3 The cultural component**

“Culture” as a broad term explains the unique features of a society or group. Individuals who grow up in a similar community tend to act in a comparable way. “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” (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 6). 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*. 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*” (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 5). Culture as mental programming exists in several layers: national (the nation as a whole), regional (differences within a nation), gender, 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 gender layers.

National culture differs across countries and each national culture comprises different social structures, rules, values, and norms. These differences social and cultural characteristics can create variation 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). Hofstede’s framework 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. It was chosen because it is a universal framework that was developed from surveys in more than 50 Western and Eastern countries, including five Arab countries (Hofstede, 1984). The framework has also been used effectively in many cross cultural-studies. Using Hofstede’s framework also enables us to compare our study findings with prior 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, pp. 83–84), people in collectivist cultures are “usually also dependent on power figures”, while the opposite tends to apply in individualist cultures. Hofstede and Hofstede (2004, p. 114) also predicted that the values associated with these two dimensions are likely “to exist and to play a big role in international affairs” well into the future.

Countries in the Arab region are classified as having high power distance. The power distance dimension measures a culture’s acceptance of authority, and has been defined as “The extent to which the members of a society accept that power in institutions and organizations is distributed unequally” (Hofstede, 1984, p. 83). 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. In addition to showing respect to teachers, students in such cultural settings are expected to 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” (Hofstede, 1983, p. 81). 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 also represents another source of influence on Saudi societal structure and individuals. Chai (2005, p. 76) discussed the influence 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”. 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. 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” (Hofstede, 2007, p. 417). 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” (Hofstede, 2007, p. 417).

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 enjoy performing pro-social behavior (Bontempo et al., 1990). Individuals in a collectivist culture are therefore “likely to be more conforming than individualists” (Hui and Triandis, 1986, p. 230). It has been suggested (Hofstede et al., 2010) that individuals in collectivist cultures are expected to show loyalty to the family by sharing resources with relatives. In contrast, members of individualist cultures are usually the exclusive owners of resources. 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 a bad character. Individualist children, on the other hand, are encouraged to voice personal opinions and a child who takes his or her bearings from others is considered to have a weak character (Hofstede et al., 2010).

**4 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 essential spoken language in these countries. There are also many community values that Arabic people honor and respect, one of the most important of which is family. Arabic people consider family to be the core of their social unity, to which they should be loyal and proud. “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” (Bassiouney, 2009, p. 99). Arabic culture is collectivist (Hofstede, 1984), so Arabs also share other significant values such as modesty and honor (Bassiouney, 2009, p. 149).

Islam is the basis and guide for daily life in Arabic countries, and plays a critical role in shaping and influencing 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” (Michell and Al-Mossawi, 1999, p. 428). 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” (Williams, 2008, p. 8).

Saudi Arabia, the focus of this study, is like many other Islamic countries. Religious values are tightly interwoven with cultural values and in many cases are hard to separate, making Saudi culture one of the most complex and sensitive. “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.” (Al-Saggaf, 2011, pp. 1, 4)

This raises the question of whether it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of Saudi culture from the collectivist aspect alone, or whether we also need some understanding of the Islamic teaching 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), attitude formation 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 websites (Aliyu et al., 2013). However, to our knowledge there are few studies examining Islamic influence on the use of social media platforms.

Saudi cultural expectations for behavior are often constructed according to gender: what is culturally acceptable for a male can be different for a female. However, there are conflicting aspects between Islamic teachings regarding men’s and women’s duties and responsibilities on the one hand, and Saudi cultural traditions and values on the other. Some cultural values that are applied to one gender and not the other may have no relation to Islam: they are purely cultural values. Others are Islamic values that are generally applied to both genders equally, but the culture may impose them more on one gender than the other. 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 more females than on males.

Both males and females in Islam are equally expected to be shy and 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” (Al-Saggaf, 2004, p. 11). However, modesty and shyness are culturally imposed more on females than on males. Saudi females are strongly expected to be shy and behave modestly at all times, especially in front of male strangers. Shyness and modesty must be shown not only in the way they dress but also in the way they talk and behave with others. Al-Saggaf (2004, p. 2) noted that modesty and shyness were two important features that profoundly influence Saudi life, and that “Shyness in women is even more stressed than in men.”

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 the oldest son is usually the master of the family and all the 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), females have a greater burden of responsibility than males 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’ ” (Al Lily, 2011, p. 120).

Differences in social media use may therefore be influenced not only by the natural differences between genders but also the differences in cultural influences according to gender.

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.

**5 Method**

We collected data using several methods. The primary source was individual face-to-face interviews. This enabled us not only to gather answers to the interview questions, but also to evaluate the participant’s voice and body language. We followed a core script made up of a mixture of closed- and open-ended questions designed to reveal participants’ behaviors, opinions, and values while using social media. We used questions from similar studies (Kim et al., 2011; Jackson and Wang, 2013; Pornsakulvanich and Dumrongsiri, 2013; Rui and Stefanone, 2013) as a guide when considering 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 opinions of social media sites.

Each interview lasted about 45 to 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 repetition of previously seen themes, and thus gained no further new information (Bazeley, 2013). This approach yielded a sample of 18 female participants from three different regions in Saudi Arabia, and 9 male participants attending the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand. (Interviewing males in Saudi Arabia was not feasible—somewhat ironically—due to cultural constraints, as the interviewer was female.)

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

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

Finally, we asked participants to complete two scale-based questionnaires during the interview. The responses to these scales helped us better explain Saudi youth use and acceptance of social media platforms. They also provided further support for the responses of participants during interviews. We constructed both an English and an Arabic version of each scale.

The first scale measured collectivist cultural effects on social media engagement. To date we have not found a scale in the literature that specifically examines this. We therefore developed a new scale by considering 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 comprised 14 statements, answered on a four-point scale of “strongly disagree”, “somewhat agree”, “agree”, and “strongly agree”. Eight statements measured cultural influence on the 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 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 somewhat different scales from the other statements. The statements formed 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 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 being in an individualistic culture for an extended period might cause them to change their behavior. That is, long-term exposure to New Zealand norms might erode the influence of Saudi norms. 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 between two and four years.

We found no obvious differences in social media engagement between the two groups. The experience and behaviour of those who had been in New Zealand for only a few months was similar to those who had been in New Zealand for several years. One possible explanation is that the male participants were studying on Saudi government scholarships and were therefore not permanently resident in New Zealand. They were not continuously exposed to non-Saudi cultural norms, and there were regular opportunities to reinforce Saudi cultural norms when they returned home during University holidays. There is also a strong Islamic community in Dunedin, which would have helped reinforce their religious norms.

This indicates that even when exposed to non-Saudi cultural influences, Saudi youth are likely to retain the same cultural influences. The impact of Saudi cultural values on user engagement with social media will therefore remain an issue into the future.

Consistent with an earlier preliminary study involving female Saudis living in New Zealand. (Honours project) ??

**6 Cultural impacts**

* Who influences? (7/47 = 14.9%)
* Life goals (3/47 = 6.4%)
* Decision drivers (3/47 = 6.4%)
* Experience goals (3/47 = 6.4%)
* End goals (4/47 = 8.5%)
* Motivations (5/47 = 10.6%)
* Attitude (3/47 = 6.4%)
* Behaviours (11/47 = 23.4%)
* Beliefs (6/47 = 12.8%)
* Online profile (2/47 = 4.2%)

The data from the cultural scale show that participants agreed Saudi culture has an impact on their engagement with social media platforms. The overall mean was 2.97 out of 4.00, which corresponds 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 how collectivists usually see themselves. This could be because participants had a different interpretation of what it means to be “independent”, or that they were perhaps 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” has 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 revealed a much more 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 by 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 social media technologies are not culture-free. Rather, users’ acceptance of and engagement with these technologies can be highly associated with their cultural values and norms.

In summary, it is clear from the results that both culture and Islamic values and teaching are important external variables that influence Saudi youth relationships with social media platforms. Obtaining an in-depth understanding of how and to what extent these external variables affect those users’ online behavior and engagement experience with social media platforms would be essential to the design of social media tools and features that emulate the targeted user needs and preferences.

The majority of participants, female and male, 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 really reveal anything about who they were, their personality, or their personal experiences and achievements. Participants of both genders 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 of the participants were comfortable with the idea of adopting a fake identity. While participants in general tried not to post false information about themselves, 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 completely fake names. Participants also reported that they would consider setting up accounts under a fake name so that they could interact more feely with people who were not members of their family

We saw a similar pattern with public profile images, which are also an important part of a user’s online identity. None of the female participants used personal photos as a profile image. Instead, they used images of things like flowers and landscapes. The participants’ desire for managing public self-identity and protecting real private self-identity from being disclosed to the public could explain why they are followers more than participants in their social networking accounts.

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 participation online. In fact, 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. If family and friends lost their desire to use those platforms for some reason, this also reduced the participants’ desire to use those platforms.

The desire to maintain a strong relationship with their group is also reflected in the content that participants shared. Participants who 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 they shared had few or no comments. The photos showed *what* they were doing, but revealed little about *who* they were.

Our data suggest that Saudi youth, both male and female, place high value on how others perceive them, especially those from their offline network. A positive perception by others while online makes them fit better into their group, and vice versa. This is consistent with collectivist behavior, where group loyalty and compliance are highly valued. To be seen positively, participants demonstrated obedience and respect to cultural and religious values, norms, restrictions, and expectations both online and offline. Indeed, in an online setting there was no negotiation: behavior expected offline *must* also be followed online in order to garner a positive impression from people in their offline network. 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 risky and would negatively affect their reputation. While some participants said that they would delete any content that was received negatively by their group, many were surprised at the suggestion. Given the care they took to ensure that the content they shared was acceptable, the possibility that it could be negatively received never occurred to them in the first place.

Both male and female participants reacted strongly to negative or culturally unacceptable content or comments posted to their profile. They took these as a personal insult, and usually deleted 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 their followers’ perception of 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 for maintaining 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. 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 partition 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. Ironically, this rebellious behavior is entirely consistent with collectivism, as it is “rebellion in private”, and invisible to those who would otherwise impose cultural sanctions.

**7 Religious impacts**

The data from the religious scale showed that participants were less certain about the impact of Islamic beliefs and teachings on their engagement with social media platforms. The overall mean across all statements 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 youth engagement 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.

To explore this further, we asked participants (both on the religious scale and during the interview) whether they followed imams on social media networks. Participants varied in their attitudes to online communication with religious leaders, and responses fell into three groups. The first group said that following religious leaders on social media was important to satisfy their desire to 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 the attraction of the imam’s content rather than 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*[[1]](#footnote-1), and prayers.

Sharing religious content was one of the most common social media activities we observed in this study. Participants were always keen to share religious content. This helped to remind, encourage, guide, and bring a sense of virtual spirituality to their Muslim followers. They also felt that 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 an incitement to 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 we made is 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 solely 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 automatically tweet *hadith*, prayers, and short Quranic scripts through his Twitter account.

Participants also shared more religious content during the holy month, Ramadan, and the month of Hajj, compared with the rest of the year. This clearly reflected their heightened feelings of spirituality and faithfulness during these times, suggesting a higher degree of religious commitment. 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 wider audience around the world through Snapchat’s “Our Story” feature. His campaign met with great approval from religious leaders. They saw it as an opportunity to change perceptions of Islam by showing the world how Muslims practice their religion.

Most of the research participants said they supported the Mecca\_live campaign. This supports the notion that they consider social media to be 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 Saudi youth engagement with social media platforms. This influence is clear in the content they prefer and share: religious content leads them to greater engagement with social media.

**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 the user interaction with 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 (1999, p. 124) 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.” We have constructed the following two personas:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Nouf.png | **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. |
|  |  |
| Ali.png | **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. |

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 highly concerned about protecting their positive self-image and about their group’s acceptance of their online behavior. What they share, whom 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 most important is to ensure that they are being received positively.

Our results highlighted several common themes or characteristics that we have incorporated into the personas. These characteristics are detailed in Appendix A.

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 are a reflection of how Saudi youth engage with social media, and the surrounding cultural, religious, and family values that influence and shape their online interaction and participation.

Importance of the personas

**Recommendations**

Advertisers and marketers who aim to build relationships with Saudi clients such as Nouf and Ali need to realize that their target consumers have specific characteristics and needs that are highly influenced by their cultural values and by Islamic teachings. What works for customers in Europe or America may not work for Saudis. Building social media strategies is not just about identifying which social media platforms target markets prefer to engage with, or supporting their preferred language. Careful consideration needs to be given to the types of topics and content that they prefer to engage with and the terminology that they normally use. Understanding such aspects might become critical for social media strategies. We therefore propose the following recommendations for businesses planning to use social media in the Saudi market:

1. Base social media strategies on common cultural beliefs and values rather than on platform type. Not all users come from the same background. Users across cultures use each platform differently and behave online differently.
2. Understand how Saudi cultural values and norms influence the way they behave and communicate online. This is an essential step in developing a successful social media strategy that will engage Saudi consumers with corporate pages on social media platforms. The best approach is to involve members of the target audience in the early stages of planning and designing a social media strategy.
3. Customize corporate page content to show cultural sensitivity and to conform to Saudi cultural restrictions. For example, avoid using photos of women or religious content, as these content categories are highly sensitive to Saudis.
4. Address customers as a group (i.e., collectivistic), not as individuals. Placing greater emphasis on the group’s benefits, success, traditions, and values would be received positively by Saudi customers.
5. Display appropriate content on corporate social media pages. Written content that refers to group, family, unit, and interdependence can create a positive impact. Saudi youth seem to prefer visual content, like photos and short videos. Using photos that show modesty, dignity, and community and family coherence could have a strong influence on consumer decision-making. Use of short humorous video clips could also help create a positive atmosphere.
6. Saudi Arabia has a high power-distance score, so the opinions of authority figures are taken seriously and respectfully. People do not rely just on statistics, figures, and facts to make their decisions. Taking advantage of positive power-holder opinions and reviews of the product could therefore attract more Saudi consumers.
7. Use members of the target audience to evaluate proposed content before it is published. This will ensure that the content is compatible with prevailing Saudi cultural values and will avoid any misconceptions.

Social media developers also need to understand the impact of Saudi cultural values, and the restrictions these place on how Saudi youth use social media platforms. They need to incorporate these cultural influences into the design of their platform’s tools so as not to alienate potential users. We will now discuss some significant design principles.

Social media platforms that target Saudi youth should use an indirect communication style. In other words, users need the ability to build connections based on attention only. This is a one-way or *asymmetric* model of social connections, of which Twitter is a prime example. Nouf can follow others without any requirement to directly interact with them, or for them to make a reciprocal connection with Nouf. Platforms like Facebook, in contrast, use a two-way or *symmetric* model (Wasserman and Faust, 1994; Kane et al., 2014). If Ali wishes to follow someone, then they must also follow him. A symmetric social media platform will tend to foster stronger connections between users than an asymmetric one. However, we believe that the ability to form asymmetric relationships with other users would work better for the likes of Saudi youth, who are less open to self-disclosure. Nouf and Ali show that Saudi youth prefer to see what others are doing and looking at, rather than to express themselves and define their personal identity. This is facilitated by an asymmetric environment. Additionally, an "asymmetric" environment can help to address the strengths and types of relationship among users, which is a fundamental need for Saudi female users like Nouf. She can follow whomever she wants (within culturally acceptable bounds), without the need for reciprocity or to create a close connection with those she follows.

Another significant concern is privacy. Our results revealed that participants were generally not satisfied with social media privacy features. They reported concerns such as unwanted people snooping on their accounts, and misuse of their public profile data by others. To satisfy their need for privacy, the vast majority of participants actively took further steps to protect their privacy, such as concealing or even falsifying personally identifiable information while online. Social media platforms wishing to cater to these privacy needs could upgrade their profile privacy settings to give users more options. For example, a “hidden” setting could be added to the existing options (typically “public” and “private”). Another option is for platforms to provide users with finer-grained control over which parts of a profile can be viewed, and by whom. For example, Nouf might be able to assign a PIN or access code to a small number of selected followers, giving them more direct access to her profile without having to expose it to others. This will increase her sense of control over her personal privacy, which in turn will give her a more positive view of the platform.

Similarly, giving users more control over their data can reduce the impact of some of the cultural restrictions around sharing of content. Snapchat content expires quickly, so Saudi users may feel more comfortable sharing content on Snapchat that they might not on other social networking platforms. Giving users more control can improve their level of engagement with a platform. We have identified two ways that social media platforms could provide greater control to users.

The first way to provide more control is to give users more flexibility over how long content is displayed. Content on Snapchat is time-limited to a maximum of ten seconds, while content on Twitter is effectively permanent (unless explicitly deleted). These are two extremes on a continuous spectrum of possibilities. Giving the user the choice of how long content is displayed for would provide them with more control. (In July 2016 Snapchat introduced the Memories feature that enables users to permanently save their snaps into albums. It will be interesting to see how this develops.)

The second way to provide more control is to give users more fine-grained control over who can see what in their profiles. The existence of “trusted friends only” accounts suggests that Saudi youth want this. Creating such an account reduces the danger of posting culturally inappropriate content by hiding that content from those who can impose sanctions. However, it means that users have to manage multiple accounts, which dilutes their level of engagement. Social media platforms could enable users to assign their followers or friends to different groups with different levels of visibility. Content could then be shared only with the group(s) that the user selects. This would improve engagement by focusing the attention of the user on just one account instead of many. Facebook has a similar feature to control which groups of followers can see a post (e.g., Public, Friends, Acquaintances), but the control is not as fine-grained as what we propose here.

Saudi youth are collectivistic and thus are highly sensitive about their personal image and how it will be perceived by their group. For females in particular, their public self-image on social media affects not only them personally but also their 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 checked the requester’s account to ensure that it only contained culturally appropriate content. This is because a person’s followers reflect on them personally. 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.

Management of their public image is critical for Saudi youth. The pressure to maintain a positive image might affect their engagement with social media, because of their tendency to minimize their network size and decrease their sharing behavior. We propose two ways to help users manage their image while using social media. First, allow users 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, give users the ability 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.

**Conclusion**

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 rather than the functional and technical variances between the platforms. 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 youth engagement with social media. We therefore expect that Saudi youth engagement with social media will continue to be significantly influenced by Saudi and Islamic values and norms well into the future. 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.

Personas

Recommendations

Section 1 ..... [1]

Section 2 ......

Section 3 .....

Section 4 .......

...

Conclusion .......

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E-mail:

Notes

1. Author last name, year, pp. nnn-nnn.

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License?

**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*

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

1. *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. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)