**Use of social media by Saudi youth**

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

**by Nigel Stanger, Noorah Alnaghaimshi, and Erika Pearson**

**Abstract:**

The use of social media is growing rapidly in the emerging market of Saudi Arabia. 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. 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.

**Contents**

Introduction

Why social media?

The cultural component

Why Saudi Arabia

Method

Cultural impacts

Religious impacts

Developing the personas

Recommendations

Conclusions

**1 Introduction**

Social networking services offer users new ways to communicate and interact. The distinguishing feature of these services is that the flow of information is directed and managed by users themselves. Understanding how users interact with these services helps 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 these interactions. 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.

boyd and Ellison noted in 2007 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 when developing engaging social networking services to understand differences in actions, behaviors, values, and ways of thinking across different groups and for different intents.

Social media developers furthermore 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) 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.

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 more recent research in this region has focused on its political and activist elements (Shirazi, 2013) rather than on more 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.

**2 Why social media?**

The International Telecommunication Union (ITU, 2014, pp. 16–17) noted that “[s]ocial 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 that over half of the 135 million Internet users in the Arab region used social networking technologies. Nearly two-thirds of these 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, however, is not the same thing as using it. As this paper argues, 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), despite the gender ratio of the Saudi population being almost exactly 50:50 (CDSI, 2015). Why is there such a high gender imbalance among Arab Facebook users in general and Saudis in particular? What leads Arabic women to not use Facebook, when it is one of the most popular social media services in the Arabic world?

To answer these questions, this article needs to explore to what extent external factors, such as culture and religion, can influence use of social media. To date, there has only been limited research on how Western-style social media platforms like Facebook have been used in non-Western cultures; therefore, this paper will investigate some of underlying motivations, self-presentation, and type of engagement with social media sites by users from this region. 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 accounting 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 pressures acting on users in 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 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” (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). Culture is not abandoned at the login screen. There are still 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, particularly 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” (Attfield et al., 2011, p. 1). 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. (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 is used as 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 that shape their presence, and perhaps more critically, their absence, from a platform.

**3 The cultural component**

“Culture” as a broad term defines the shared norms, values, and markers that bound 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” (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 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 gender layers.

National cultures comprise 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 as the framework because it was developed using data from 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 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, people in collectivist cultures like Saudi Arabia are “usually also dependent on power figures” (2004, pp. 83–84), while the opposite tends to apply in individualist cultures. 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” (2004, p. 114) 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 perform pro-social behavior (Bontempo et al., 1990). Members of a collectivist culture are “likely to be more conforming than individualists” (Hui and Triandis, 1986, p. 230). 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). 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 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 common spoken language in these countries. Family is also one of the most important community values that Arabic people honor and respect. Arabic people consider family to be the core of their social unity, which they should be 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” (Bassiouney, 2009, p. 99). Arabic culture is collectivist (Hofstede, 1984), so 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 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 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” (Al-Saggaf, 2011, pp. 1, 4).

Arguably, to gain a deeper understanding of the collectivist Saudi culture, 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 along gender divides: what is culturally acceptable for men can be different for women. However, there are conflicting aspects between Islamic teachings regarding men’s and women’s duties and responsibilities, and Saudi cultural traditions and values. 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 more females than on males.

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” (Al-Saggaf, 2004, p. 11). However, modesty and *haya* are culturally imposed more on females than on males. Saudi women are strongly expected to be shy and 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 norms and values. 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” (2004, p. 2).

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), female family members have 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’ ” (Al Lily, 2011, p. 120).

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 perform.

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**

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 drawn 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. The interviewer also made note of any non-verbal behaviors that could skew response interpretation.

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 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 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 correlate 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 completed 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 focused on 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 after 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.

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 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 respondent’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 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 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 being 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 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 on campus, which would have helped reinforce their religious norms. Finally, global communication technology may also extend the influence of their home communities around the world to help them retain their sense of Saudi/Islamic identity.

These indicate that even when exposed to non-Saudi cultural influences, Saudi youth are likely to retain their 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**

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 of 2.97 out of 4.00 corresponded 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. 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 were much more 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 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 users’ acceptance of and patterns of engagement with social media technologies are highly associated with their cultural values and norms.

In summary, it is clear from the results that religious and cultural values 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.

In interviews, regardless of gender, the majority of 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 who they were, 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 of the participants were comfortable with the idea of adopting a fake identity. 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 fake name 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 participation 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 participation was intrinsically tied to the participation of others in their networks. The participants’ desire for managing and protecting a carefully constructed public self-identity could 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 perceive them, especially those from their offline network. For these respondents, there was no distinction between online and offline behavior, and no perceived space to deviate from the expected behavior demanded in their collectivist culture. To be seen positively, participants demonstrated obedience and respect to cultural and religious values, norms, restrictions, knowing 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 with the carefully cultured lack of personal identifying information. 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 worry that posted content could still be negatively received was minimal.

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, 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 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, though as noted earlier, the line between a religious and cultural expectation is blurred.

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 be seen sharing religious content. This helped to remind, encourage, guide, and bring a sense of shared virtual spirituality. 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 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 Hajj, compared with the rest of the year. This suggested a period a higher degree of religious commitment, and commensurate 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 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 clearest in the attention paid to the religiously-orientated content they share: religious content is an acceptable form of sharing and leads them to engagements with social media 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 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 stock photos]. |

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, 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 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.

For many aspects of these personas, gender is secondary to collectivistic and religious identity. Behaviors such as checking in with friends, or posting non-identifying or personal content (such as photographs of landscapes) are consistent with both Nouf and Ali.

However, some highly personal online behaviour shows significant gender segmentation. Nouf, as a young married female, desires social media that gives 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 very 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 kids. 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.

**Recommendations**

Advertisers and marketers who aim to build relationships with Saudi clients as exemplified by 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. For example, as a collectivistic, religious culture, Saudis respond well to social and online media messages address the group, and group leaders, rather than individuals. Saudis, including social media users, will also be strongly swayed by the opinions and instructions of those who are higher in the social power structure. Furthermore, online messages and content targeted at this 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”.

Social media platform developers 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.

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, 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 and more likely to follow without posting or keeping personal content online. Nouf and Ali demonstrate 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.

A significant concern for these users is privacy. Our results revealed that participants were generally not satisfied with social media privacy features. They reported concerns such as undesirable people snooping on their accounts, and misuse of their public profile data by others. To satisfy their need for privacy, most participants actively took further steps to protect their privacy, such as concealing or even falsifying personally identifiable information while online. Many of these steps were “workarounds”, leveraging the affordances of the platform in unexpected ways.

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 offered alongside the more common “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, and allow her to actively manage her performance of “shyness”, which would win her social approval and 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 report feeling more comfortable sharing content on Snapchat that they might not on other social networking platforms. Giving users more control in this way 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 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). Snapchat also, at least in theory, notifies if a copy is made, whereas Twitter offers no similar feedback. These are two extremes on a continuous spectrum of possibilities. Giving the user the choice of how long their content is displayed would provide them with more control. (In July 2016 Snapchat introduced the Memories feature that enables users to permanently save their snaps into albums. Future research may track how this changed the way users engaged with the platform.)

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 risk in 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 and may contribute to platform fatigue. 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 and secure 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 female users 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 vetted 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.

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 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. This added level of control may encourage Saudi users to engage more frequently and openly while maintaining *haya* and an appropriate collectivist identity.

**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 rather than the functional and technical variances between the platforms. This influence is at a level where Saudi users will work around platform functionality, or engage in extremely limited and tactical social sharing behaviors, in order to conform to the norms and values of their communities and to 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 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.

About the author

E-mail:

Notes

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

**References**

Samir Abuznaid, 2006. “Islam and management: What can be learned?,” *Thunderbird International Business Review*, volume 48, number 1, pp. 125–139.

Abdulrahman E. A. Al Lily, 2011. “On line and under veil: Technology-facilitated communication and Saudi female experience within academia,” *Technology in Society*, volume 33, number 1–2, pp. 119–127.

Khaled Saleh Al Omoush, Saad Ghaleb Yaseen and Mohammad Atwah Alma’aitah, 2012. “The impact of Arab cultural values on online social networking: The case of Facebook,” *Computers in Human Behavior*, volume 28, number 6, pp. 2387–2399.

Mansur Aliyu, Murni Mahmud and Abu Osman Md Tap, 2013. “Features influencing Islamic websites use: A Muslim user perspective,” *Intellectual Discourse*, volume 21, number 1, at http://journals.iium.edu.my/intdiscourse/index.php/islam/article/view/367, accessed: 6 September 2016.

Yeslam Al-Saggaf, 2011. “Saudi females on Facebook: An ethnographic study,” *International Journal of Emerging Technologies and Society*, volume 9, number 1, pp. 1--19.

Yeslam Al-Saggaf, 2004. “The effect of online community on offline community in Saudi Arabia,” *The Electronic Journal of Information Systems in Developing Countries*, volume 16, number 2, pp. 1–16.

Simon Attfield, Gabriella Kazai, Mounia Lalmas and Benjamin Piwowarski, 2011. “Towards a science of user engagement (position paper),” In: D. Carmel, V. Josifovski and Y. Maarek (editors). *WSDM 2011 Workshop on User Modelling for Web Applications (UMWA 2011)*, Hong Kong, China: ACM, at http://www.dcs.gla.ac.uk/~mounia/Papers/engagement.pdf, accessed: 30 August 2016.

Reem Bassiouney, 2009. *Arabic sociolinguistics*, Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press.

Patricia Bazeley, 2013. *Qualitative data analysis: Practical strategies*, London, UK: SAGE Publications.

Fabrício Benevenuto, Tiago Rodrigues, Meeyoung Cha and Virgílio A. F. Almeida, 2009. “Characterizing user behavior in online social networks,” In: A. Feldmann and L. Mathy (editors). *Proceedings of the 9th ACM SIGCOMM Internet Measurement Conference (IMC 2009)*, Chicago, Illinois, USA: ACM, pp. 49--62.

Stephen Bochner, 1994. “Cross-cultural differences in the self concept: A test of Hofstede’s individualism/collectivism distinction,” *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, volume 25, number 2, pp. 273–283.

Robert Bontempo, Sharon Lobel and Harry Triandis, 1990. “Compliance and value internalization in Brazil and the U.S.: Effects of allocentrism and anonymity,” *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, volume 21, number 2, pp. 200–213.

CDSI, 2015. “Population by gender, age groups and nationality (Saudi/non-Saudi),” at http://www.cdsi.gov.sa/en/4068, accessed: 8 August 2016.

Winberg Chai edAA, 2005. *Saudi Arabia: A modern reader*, Indianapolis, Indiana, USA: University of Indianapolis Press.

Mary Chayko, 2008. *Portable communities: The social dynamics of online and mobile connectedness*, Albany, New York, USA: SUNY Press.

CITC, 2014. *Annual report 2014*, Communications and Information Technology Commission of Saudi Arabia, at http://www.citc.gov.sa/en/reportsandstudies/Reports/Documents/PR\_REP\_010Eng.pdf, accessed: 8 August 2016.

CMO Survey, 2014. *CMO Survey report: Highlights and insights*, at https://cmosurvey.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2014/09/The\_CMO\_Survey-Highlights\_and\_Insights-Aug-2014.pdf, accessed: 30 August 2016.

Alan Cooper, 1999. *The inmates are running the asylum: Why high-tech products drive us crazy and how to restore the sanity*, SAMS.

Kadir H. Din, 1989. “Islam and tourism,” *Annals of Tourism Research*, volume 16, number 4, pp. 542–563.

GO-Gulf, 2013. “Social media usage in Middle East — Statistics and trends,” at http://www.go-gulf.ae/blog/social-media-middle-east/.

William B. Gudykunst, Stella Ting-Toomey and Elizabeth Chua, 1988. *Culture and interpersonal communication*, London, UK: Sage Publications.

Edward Twitchell Hall, 1976. *Beyond culture*, Garden City, New York, USA: Anchor Press.

Geert Hofstede, 2007. “Asian management in the 21st century,” *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, volume 24, number 4, pp. 411–420.

Geert Hofstede, 1984. “Cultural dimensions in management and planning,” *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, volume 1, number 2, pp. 81–99.

Geert Hofstede, 1983. “The cultural relativity of organizational practices and theories,” *Journal of International Business Studies*, volume 14, number 2, pp. 75–89.

Geert H. Hofstede, 1991. *Cultures and organizations: Software of the mind*, New York, USA: McGraw Hill.

Geert H. Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede and Michael Minkov, 2010. *Cultures and organizations: Software of the mind* third., New York, USA: McGraw Hill.

Geert Hofstede and Gert Jan Hofstede, 2004. *Cultures and organizations: Software of the mind* second., McGraw Hill.

Hsien Chin Hu, 1944. “The Chinese concepts of ‘face,’” *American Anthropologist*, volume 46, number 1, pp. 45–64.

C. Harry Hui and Harry C. Triandis, 1986. “Individualism-collectivism: A study of cross-cultural researchers,” *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, volume 17, number 2, pp. 225–248.

ITU, 2011. *Confronting the social media regulatory challenge* Global Industry Leaders’ Forum 2011 Discussion Paper, International Telecommunication Union, at https://www.itu.int/ITU-D/treg/Events/Seminars/GSR/GSR11/documents/07-Social-Media-E.pdf, accessed: 29 August 2016.

ITU, 2014. *Measuring the information society report 2014*, International Telecommunication Union, at http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/publications/mis2014.aspx, accessed: 8 August 2016.

ITU, 2015. *Measuring the information society report 2015*, International Telecommunication Union, at http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/publications/mis2015.aspx, accessed: 8 August 2016.

Linda A. Jackson and Jin-Liang Wang, 2013. “Cultural differences in social networking site use: A comparative study of China and the United States,” *Computers in Human Behavior*, volume 29, number 3, pp. 910--921.

Jolanda Jetten, Tom Postmes and Brendan J. McAuliffe, 2002. “‘We’re all individuals’: Group norms of individualism and collectivism, levels of identification and identity threat,” *European Journal of Social Psychology*, volume 32, number 2, pp. 189–207.

Gerald C. Kane, Maryam Alavi, Giuseppe (Joe) Labianca and Steve Borgatti, 2014. “What’s different about social media networks? A framework and research agenda,” *MIS Quarterly*, volume 38, number 1, pp. 274--304.

Andreas M. Kaplan and Michael Haenlein, 2010. “Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of social media,” *Business Horizons*, volume 53, number 1, pp. 59–68.

Yoojung Kim, Dongyoung Sohn and Sejung Marina Choi, 2011. “Cultural difference in motivations for using social network sites: A comparative study of American and Korean college students,” *Computers in Human Behavior*, volume 27, number 1, pp. 365--372.

Ohbyung Kwon and Yixing Wen, 2010. “An empirical study of the factors affecting social network service use,” *Computers in Human Behavior*, volume 26, number 2, pp. 254–263.

Linda S. L. Lai and Efraim Turban, 2008. “Groups formation and operations in the Web 2.0 environment and social networks,” *Group Decision and Negotiation*, volume 17, number 5, pp. 387–402.

Hazel R. Markus and Shinobu Kitayama, 1991. “Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation,” *Psychological Review*, volume 98, number 2, pp. 224–253.

MBRSG, 2014. *Arab social media outlook 2014*, Mohammed bin Rashid School of Government, at http://www.mbrsg.ae/HOME/PUBLICATIONS/Research-Report-Research-Paper-White-Paper/Arab-Social-Media-Outlook-2014.aspx, accessed: 8 August 2016.

Kamel Mellahi and Pawan S. Budhwar, 2010. “Introduction: Islam and human resource management,” *Personnel Review*, volume 39, number 6, pp. 685–691.

Paul Michell and Mohammed Al-Mossawi, 1999. “Religious commitment related to message contentiousness,” *International Journal of Advertising*, volume 18, number 4, pp. 427–443.

Michael Minkov and Geert Hofstede, 2014. “A replication of Hofstede’s uncertainty avoidance dimension across nationally representative samples from Europe,” *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management*, volume 14, number 2, pp. 161–171.

Heather L. O’Brien and Elaine G. Toms, 2008. “What is user engagement? A conceptual framework for defining user engagement with technology,” *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, volume 59, number 6, pp. 938–955.

Sanjukta Pookulangara and Kristian Koesler, 2011. “Cultural influence on consumers’ usage of social networks and its’ impact on online purchase intentions,” *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, volume 18, number 4, pp. 348–354.

Vikanda Pornsakulvanich and Nuchada Dumrongsiri, 2013. “Internal and external influences on social networking site usage in Thailand,” *Computers in Human Behavior*, volume 29, number 6, pp. 2788--2795.

Wade Clark Roof and Richard B. Perkins, 1975. “On conceptualizing salience in religious commitment,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, volume 14, number 2, pp. 111–128.

Jian Rui and Michael A. Stefanone, 2013. “Strategic self-presentation online: A cross-cultural study,” *Computers in Human Behavior*, volume 29, number 1, pp. 110--118.

Fadi Salem, Racha Mourtada and Sara Alshaer, 2014. *The Arab world online 2014: Trends in internet and mobile usage in the Arab region* White paper, Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government, at http://www.arabsocialmediareport.com/News/description.aspx?NewsID=14, accessed: 8 August 2016.

Shalom H. Schwartz, 1994. “Beyond individualism/collectivism: New cultural dimensions of values,” In: U. Kim, H.C. Triandis, Ç. Kağıtçıbaşı, S.-C. Choi and G. Yoon (editors). *Individualism and collectivism: Theory, method, and applications*, Cross-cultural research and methodology series, Thousand Oaks, California, USA: Sage Publications, pp. 85–119.

Sheena Sethi and Martin E. P. Seligman, 1993. “Optimism and fundamentalism,” *Psychological Science*, volume 4, number 4, pp. 256–259.

Mahesh N. Shankarmahesh, John B. Ford and Michael S. LaTour, 2003. “Cultural dimensions of switching behavior in importer-exporter relationships,” *Academy of Marketing Science Review*, volume 7, number 6, at http://www.amsreview.org/articles/shankar03-2003.pdf, accessed: 6 September 2016.

Farid Shirazi, 2013. “Social media and the social movements in the Middle East and North Africa: A critical discourse analysis,” *Information Technology & People*, volume 26, number 1, pp. 28–49.

Harry C. Triandis, 2001. “Individualism-collectivism and personality,” *Journal of Personality*, volume 69, number 6, pp. 907–924.

H. C. van Vugt, E. A. Konijn, J. F. Hoorn, I. Keur and A. Eliéns, 2007. “Realism is not all! User engagement with task-related interface characters,” *Interacting with Computers*, volume 19, number 2, pp. 267–280.

Stanley Wasserman and Katherine Faust, 1994. *Social network analysis: Methods and applications*, Cambridge University Press.

Julie Williams, 2008. *Islam: Understanding the history, beliefs, and culture*, New York, USA: Enslow Publishers, Inc.

Zafer Younis and Roula Al Khatib, 2013. *Getting to know social Saudis: A closer look on the behavior of Saudi users on social networks*, The Online Project, at http://theonlineproject.me/files/reports/Getting\_to\_Know\_Social\_Saudis\_-\_English3.pdf, accessed: 8 August 2016.

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)