

## AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF ATTITUDES TOWARDS PRIVACY IN SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE THREAT OF BLACKMAIL: THE VIEWS OF A GROUP OF SAUDI WOMEN

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### ABSTRACT

The Saudi Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, or the Religious Police as it is commonly known in the west, has dealt with 1834 incidents of women being blackmailed by men in 2014 and of those 22% (N= 403) were initiated using Social Network Sites (SNS). In light of the reality about these crimes, this study asked the following questions: (1) Are Saudi women concerned about their privacy in SNS? (2) Are Saudi women worried about falling victim to blackmail in SNS? (3) Do Saudi women know how to change the privacy settings in SNS? (4) Are Saudi women comfortable with communicating across gender lines in SNS? To address these questions, qualitative interviews with 16 women who used Facebook regularly and a focus group discussion with another group of 10 Saudi female students were conducted. The findings of the study show that the Saudi women interviewed appeared concerned about their privacy in Facebook, worried about falling victim to blackmail, knew how to change the privacy settings and are not comfortable with communicating across gender lines. This suggests that the participants in this study are not the likely victims of blackmail crimes. Further research is needed to understand the profile of the victims of blackmail and the root cause of these crimes.

**Keywords:** Blackmail, Social media, women's safety, self-disclosure, privacy, Facebook, Saudi culture

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Online harassment is becoming exceedingly common worldwide. A Pew Research Centre<sup>1</sup> report on online harassment has found that 40% of online users have personally experienced online harassment. Of these, 23% of women between the ages of 18-24 were physically threatened, 18% were harassed for a sustained period of time, 26% were stalked and 25% were sexually harassed. Blackmail is also becoming a commonly experienced crime worldwide. Collins Dictionary defines blackmail as “*a form of sexual exploitation that employs non-physical forms of coercion by threatening to release sexual images or information to extort sexual favors from the victim.*”<sup>2</sup> and/or money from them. In 2014 Police arrested 58 people in the Philippines for involvement in a global blackmail network<sup>3</sup>. The victims came from Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States.<sup>4</sup> In Spain, a study of 873 Spanish adults revealed that 37 % (N = 323) of the sample reported experiencing some type of Online Sexual Victimization (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2015). In the United States blackmail gained

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<sup>1</sup> Pew Research Center, October 2014, “Online Harassment”: <http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/10/22/online-harassment/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.collinsdictionary.com/submission/8290/Blackmail>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.scmp.com/news/asia/article/1502388/58-arrested-philippines-over-global-blackmail-ring>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/philippines-58-held-blackmail-cases-1447159>

infamy when Miss Teen USA 2013 Cassidy Wolf was the victim of this crime. In Morocco similar cases have been reported in the media.<sup>5</sup> In Dubai, United Arab Emirates, police records indicate that blackmail crimes increased by 25%.<sup>6</sup>

In the case of Saudi Arabia the blackmail figures are exceptionally high. In 2014, the Saudi Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, or the Religious Police as it is commonly known in the west, dealt with 1834 incidents of women being blackmailed by men. According to them this figure is alarming given prior to 2013 the number of these kinds of crimes was in the order of a few hundreds. The increase in the number of blackmail crimes is consistent with the increase in the adoption of ICT among Saudis (see Internet in Saudi Arabia section below.) In the popular television program on the Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC) - "al-Thamina ma Dawood" (8 O'clock with Dawood) on 30 December 2014, the Religious Police revealed that 57% (N=1050) of all blackmail crimes in Saudi Arabia were facilitated using Information and Communication Technology (ICT). During the program it was also revealed that 22% (N=403) of these crimes were initiated using Social Network Sites (SNS), 21% (N=387) were initiated using 'non-smart' mobile phones and 14% (N=258) were initiated using the blackberry. The increase in blackmail crimes in Saudi Arabia has resulted in thousands of media reports covering these crimes.<sup>7</sup>

The aim of this study is to understand Saudi women's attitudes towards privacy in SNS and their awareness about the risk of falling victim to blackmail. The reason for studying a group of Saudi women is because loss of personal data in their case can cause serious harm to them (and their families' honour and reputation), due to the conservative<sup>8</sup> nature of their society, in a way, not directly applicable, for example, to western women.<sup>9</sup> To Saudis, family honour is crucial (Madini, 2012) and to men, family honour and reputation reside to a large extent in the hands of the female member of the family (AlMunajjed, 1997). If it became public that a woman, for example, committed indecent act or engaged in an illicit relationship with a man or just met secretly and privately with him in the real world without a legitimate reason, the family honour and reputation could be seriously affected (Almakrami, 2015).

This uniqueness makes this study a contribution to the scarce literature on computer-mediated communication (CMC) in gender-segregated societies such as the Saudi (Madini & de Nooy, 2013). Given the conservative nature of the Saudi society (see below section for more details on this issue) and the sensitivity of the topic it is difficult for a male researcher to recruit let alone interview women who had actually suffered from blackmail. The Religious Police, who handles these crimes, deal with the victims in the strictest of confidence; to protect their family honour and reputation. In the above mentioned television program the Religious Police said they do not even tell the women's parents that their daughters are implicated in such crimes. However, a great deal can be learned from comparing the reality about blackmail crimes with Saudi women's attitudes towards privacy in SNS and their awareness about the risk of falling victim to blackmail. In light of the reality about blackmail crimes in Saudi Arabia, the study asked the following questions:

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<sup>5</sup> [http://ankathab.blogspot.com.au/2015/03/blog-post\\_210.html](http://ankathab.blogspot.com.au/2015/03/blog-post_210.html)

<sup>6</sup> <http://24.ae/article.aspx?ArticleId=77807>

<sup>7</sup> When the words 'blackmail', 'religious police', 'female' and Facebook (all in Arabic), were entered in the Google search area, 25,900 hits were returned. When these media reports were examined, hundreds of them described unique cases of blackmail.

<sup>8</sup> While it is true that the Saudi society is largely conservative, it is not in its entirety as there are several pockets in the country such as in Jeddah where people are 'progressive' in their thinking and approach to life.

<sup>9</sup> There have been instances in western societies of 'cyberstalkers' using social networking sites to intimidate victims.

- (1) Are Saudi women concerned about their privacy in SNS?
- (2) Are Saudi women worried about falling victim to blackmail in SNS?
- (3) Do Saudi women know how to change the privacy settings in SNS?
- (4) Are Saudi women comfortable with communicating across gender lines in SNS?

Studying Saudi women's attitudes towards privacy in SNS may provide clues, albeit limited, about the profile of the victims, or the non-victims, of blackmail crimes. The findings will be limited to Facebook. Much of the focus of previous work on social media and privacy has been from the perspective of western countries. There is little research in this area from the perspective of the Arab world. This paper contributes to the limited but growing body of literature that focuses on women in traditional societies.

## **2. BACKGROUND**

### **2.1 Women in Saudi Society**

More than 14 years ago when online communities started to become popular in Saudi Arabia, Al-Saggaf (2004) predicted that they will bring about radical transformations to the society's social landscape. But they did not. In 2016 the Saudi society is still largely conservative. It is still largely faithful to its religion and culture, which continue to shape the society's attitudes and behaviours (Madini, 2012). While they are among the first to adopt the latest technology (Al-Saggaf & Weckert, 2011), their behaviour and actions are still influenced to a large extent by their religion and culture (Madini, 2012). Bajnaid's (2016) findings relating to Saudis use of matrimonial websites support this conclusion. Bajnaid found that while the Saudis who use matrimonial website may be viewed as radicals because they deviated from the traditional methods of finding a spouse, his findings showed that "they do not totally challenge their social norms when searching for a future spouse through this nonconventional online method". This suggests that Saudis don't abandon their religious and cultural values and conservatism when they are on the internet; these follow them online.

Among the aspects of the society that makes it conservative is gender segregation and family honour. When it comes to gender, the Saudi society is mostly conservative (Alsaggaf, 2015). Gender segregation is observed in all aspects of public and private life (Madini, 2012). This segregation, which does not permit women to mix with unrelated men in Saudi Arabia, is applied to education, banking, public transportation and the workplace (AlMunajjed, 1997) and is enforced by the Religious Police. For example, if the Religious Police becomes suspicious that the driver of car and the female passenger are not related by blood or marriage they would stop them and if it turns out they are not related they would arrest them. If they don't stop, they would chase them. Several car chases ended up in tragedy. In not so long ago, the driver who lost his life during the chase was actually the husband of the female passenger.

Although women are not allowed to communicate with unrelated members of the opposite sex for social relations, they can communicate with them for professional purposes, such as buying and selling, and asking a teacher or instructor for information or advice (Madini, 2012). Nevertheless, whenever a Saudi woman needs to communicate with men, she is expected to keep the communication to a minimum (Al-Lily, 2011). Alsaggaf (2015) adds:

Within the private sphere, women can express love, care, joy, sadness, or any other emotion, freely, in the form of, for example, laughter, hugs, or crying, whereas the expression of emotion is restricted and limited in public spaces. ... On the other hand, men are free to express the whole range of emotions publicly so long as the emotion in question is not directed towards a woman.

AlMunajjed (1997) notes that the practice of segregation and confining women to their own company is prescribed by the Islamic religion to regulate women, to protect their chastity and to prevent other men from encroaching on the male honour of the family.

In Saudi Arabia, men are responsible for women (Madini, 2012). Before a woman can enrol in a university course, apply for a job, travel abroad or file a court case she has to produce a written permission from her male guardian (Al-Lily, 2011), who is often a husband if the woman is married or the father if she is single. This makes Saudi women highly dependent on their male relatives (Madini, 2012). Family honour and reputation, as mentioned above, are in the hands of the female member of the family. Harris (1959, as cited in Madini, 2012, p.10) says that dishonouring the family is strongly associated with potential misdeeds against the chastity of female members. Woman who commit indecent acts or engage in illicit relationships with men could cause serious damage to the family honour and reputation. For this reason, and so as to close the door on any opportunity for illicit relationship that could damage family reputation, men often instruct women for whom they are guardians to avoid face-to-face contact with unrelated men. Online, however, these restrictions don't apply, as men and women communicate with each other with ease (Al-Saggaf, 2012; Madini, 2012; Alsaggaf, 2015; Almakrami, 2015).

Men and women in Saudi society have distinct roles. Men are expected to be the breadwinners while women are expected to be responsible for home duties. Although, foreign housemaids work in most homes in Saudi Arabia, Saudi women are still responsible for ensuring the cooking, cleaning and other household chores are done. They are also responsible for raising the children, taking care of them, helping them with their homework and in some cases looking after other dependants at home. Saudi women are also responsible for maintaining family and relatives relations although men are also expected to do their share of this duty. Men expect other men in society to be, for example, strong physically and emotionally and expect women, on the other hand, to be affectionate, compassionate, and caring. Women, however, don't necessarily see themselves in this way and may not agree with this stereotype. Regardless, gender segregation is one of the mechanisms that is used as a means to maintain the distinctiveness of the roles that the two genders play (Al-Saggaf, 2012). That is probably why segregation enjoys support from a diverse range of members of the society particularly the Saudi Islamic scholars. It should be noted that Saudi women make 16.4% (N=811,458) of the Saudi labour force, excluding foreign workers<sup>10</sup>, of which about 398,385 work in the public sector with the remaining 413,073 working in the private sector<sup>11</sup>. 20% of the Saudi women who work in the private sector work as sales women.<sup>12</sup>

## 2.2 Internet in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is one of the advanced nations when it comes to the usage of the latest ICT (Al-Saggaf & Weckert, 2011). Saudis are among the biggest adopters of the internet in the Arab world (Al-Saggaf & Simmons, 2015). They are also among the first to utilize the latest technological trends such as social media, smartphone, mobile broadband etc. (Al-Saggaf & Weckert, 2011).

In 2015 more than 67.3% (21 million) of the total population (30.7 million) in Saudi Arabia use the Internet<sup>13</sup>. A survey<sup>14</sup> of 3000 people in Saudi Arabia conducted by the Saudi

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.cdsi.gov.sa/english/index.php?option=com\\_docman&task=cat\\_view&gid=296&Itemid=162](http://www.cdsi.gov.sa/english/index.php?option=com_docman&task=cat_view&gid=296&Itemid=162)

<sup>11</sup> <http://portal.mol.gov.sa/ar/Statistics/Pages/2014.aspx>

<sup>12</sup> <http://portal.mol.gov.sa/ar/Statistics/Pages/2014.aspx>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.citc.gov.sa/arabic/Reportsandstudies/Indicators/DocLib/Indicators%20Q3-2015-Arabic-Final.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.citc.gov.sa/arabic/Reportsandstudies/Studies/Documents/IT022A-PublicReportforIndividuals-Household.pdf>

Commission and Information Technology Commission (CICT) in 2014 of which 62.88% were male and 37.12% were female found that 96% of the women surveyed used the internet compared to 89% in the case of men and 94% of the women surveyed used mobile broadband compared to 86% of the men. Among those who were not using the internet at the time 27.66% of the women surveyed said they plan to use the internet in the next six months compared to only 9.59% of the men surveyed who said this. Also more women (87.5%) used the internet from home compared to 69.37% of men and more women (32.05%) accessed the internet more than eight hours a day compared to 18.5% of men. These statistics suggest that women are well represented online.

Interestingly, due to the anonymity, segregation is not generally observed by members of the opposite gender (Al-Saggaf, 2012; Madini, 2012; Alsaggaf, 2015; Almakrami, 2015) even if this may violate social norms and traditions (Madini, 2012). Madini notes that Saudi men and women use online forums for cross-gender social interaction because it is exotic and therefore attractive. Interestingly, in the forums she studied, which were used by expatriate Saudi students in Brisbane, Australia, there was very little cross-gender communication in the Saudi students' discussion forum. But that is because in that forum students were representing their country (sponsored by the Saudi government) and so they wanted to maintain their Saudi traditions (Madini, 2012). Also not only students may have known each other in offline settings (i.e. university campus) but the students also know that their behaviour online may be monitored by their embassy.

That said, the use of social media in Saudi Arabia has brought about many advantages including the promotion of freedom of expression and political participation, where participation in public affairs is rarely encouraged (Al-Saggaf & Simmons, 2015). However, it is not without drawbacks. The Religious Police have found themselves increasingly occupied with an emergent problem, namely the use of social media by men<sup>15</sup> to obtain images and private information of women with the intention to blackmail them into performing indecent acts or paying large sums of money in return for the destruction of their private information (Almakrami, 2015). If the women fail to comply with the demands, the blackmailer threatens to distribute the images<sup>16</sup> to others, including the family members of the victim. In Almakrami's study (2015, p.229) the Saudi participants rated blackmail as the main threat associated with the violation of their privacy on Facebook. For this reason they often think before they post anything; only post appropriate and socially acceptable content; post ambiguous messages that only make sense to certain people; don't use their real names; use private messaging to communicate sensitive information; and divide their Facebook friends into groups to selectively share information (Almakrami, 2015).

But a study by Madini and de Nooy (2013) has found that almost all of the women revealed their gender in the Saudi online communities they studied; either through the choice of their usernames or within the content of their messages. Revealing sensitive information in SNS such as address, city where one lives or school where one studies in addition to indicating gender can make users, especially Saudi women, vulnerable to blackmail. It should be noted that the personal photos or the video clips that Saudi females post on Facebook don't need to be sexual in nature to expose them to the risk of falling victim to blackmail (Arab News, 2009). Photos or video clips of women that reveal some skin, taken for example at wedding parties, or show them in mixed gender gatherings, or engaging in other acts that are not religiously and socially acceptable are sufficient to cause damage to the woman's

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<sup>15</sup> All the blackmail crimes that were reported in the media were committed by men.

<sup>16</sup> In order for these threats to be effective most of the time they include slanderous accusations against the women involved

family's honour and reputation (Almakrami, 2015) and therefore can be used as material for blackmail.

### 2.3 Self-Disclosure and Privacy

One of the factors that exacerbates this problem is women's tendency to reveal sensitive information about themselves in SNS (Al-Saggaf & Nielsen, 2014). The revelation of personal information is associated with a desire to engage in self-disclosure online (Al-Saggaf & Nielsen, 2014), which is increasingly becoming widespread on SNS (Sar & Al-Saggaf, 2014). In recognition of the pervasiveness of this phenomenon, Chambers Dictionary selected 'Overshare' as its 'word of the year' for 2014. Chambers Dictionary defined 'Overshare' as "to be unacceptably forthcoming with information about one's personal life"<sup>17</sup>. While on the one hand, users are more than ever concerned about their safety (Young, 2009; Al-Saggaf, 2011), on the other hand, users are finding it difficult to stop themselves from disclosing their personal information online (Edwards & Brown, 2009).

Revealing too much personal information in SNS can lead to loss of privacy which in turn can lead to serious safety problems (Al-Saggaf & Nielson, 2014). Self-disclosure in SNS is becoming habitual; engaging in such activity often leads users to disclose very sensitive personal information about themselves (Al-Saggaf & Nielsen, 2014). While users worry about their privacy in SNS (Young, 2009; Al-Saggaf, 2011), they are doing little to reveal less about themselves online (Edwards & Brown, 2009).

There are several factors that predict self-disclosure including maintaining offline relationships, initiating new relationships, self-presentation and reciprocity (Almakrami, 2015). Almakrami argues that the social exchange theory and the social penetration theory explain most of constructs relating to self-disclosure on Facebook because they are based on the weighing of costs and benefits. Almakrami (2015) notes that the perception of the benefit of social relations lead to greater communication between parties which in turn leads to greater interaction and self-disclosure. According to Ellison et al. (2014) self-disclosure is then an important motivator in forming relationships. Al-Saggaf & Nielson (2014) found loneliness to be another predictor of self-disclosure. Their findings showed that women who are lonely are also more likely to disclose personal and relationship information and their address on Facebook than women who are not lonely.

In addition, researchers have put forward several other motivations for self-disclosure in SNS including low self-esteem (Forest & Wood, 2012), anonymity (Bonetti et al., 2010), narcissism (Mehdizadeh, 2010; Ryan & Xenos, 2011; Ong et al., 2011); to show off (Wang & Stefanone, 2013) and also because doing so is fun, enjoyable and entertaining or to store meaningful information or in order to keep up with trends (Waters & Ackerman, 2011). Self-disclosure is also associated with the level of trust between communicators (Valenzuela et al., 2009). If communicators trust each other, and perceive their friendships to be strong they will reveal more about themselves.

Studies of gender differences in disclosure on SNSs found that men and women disclose information in SNS in a similar manner to that in which they disclose information in face-to-face relationships. Women generally tend to disclose more information in social networking sites than men, as well as disclosing a wider variety of personal information than men on their SNS profiles (Bond, 2009; Hoy & Milne, 2010). Women also tend to exhibit a higher level of awareness of privacy protection than men (Hoy & Milne, 2010). The number of peers using SNSs is also more of an influencing factor in disclosure for women than for men (Lin & Lu, 2011). For these reasons, women in general tend to be more successful social

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/oct/23/overshare-word-of-the-year-2014-chambers-dictionary>

network site users than men (Thelwall & Kousha, 2014). Conversely, Nosko et al. (2010) discovered that gender was not an important variable in differentiating between who was likely to disclose personal information on Facebook, that, unlike face-to-face interactions, where females traditionally demonstrated a higher level of disclosure than men, online social networking facilitated disclosure at the same level between males and females. Based on these findings the authors inferred that interactions through SNSs do not conform to the same social rules or stereotypes as face-to-face interactions, in which there is pressure for males in the latter not to disclose personal information with the same frequency as females.

Nevertheless, disclosing private information voluntarily is not the only problem, SNS user's information can also become available to others through tracking by others (Sar & Al-Saggaf, 2014), or when SNS reset the privacy settings to the default values (due to the regular iterative changes made to these settings), or when users forget or neglect to change the privacy settings, due to the difficulty in choosing what information to hide (Boyd, 2008; Livingstone, 2008), or fail to properly use the privacy settings because they lack the technical skills as Livingstone's (2008) study has shown.

But what is privacy anyway? Tavani (2013) mentioned several ways in which people use the term privacy in everyday life including being lost, diminished, breached, invaded, eroded, violated or intruded upon (Tavani, 2013). Despite being one of the hottest topics in the literature (Al-Saggaf & Weckert, 2011); there is no universally agreed upon definition for privacy (Tavani, 2013). However, three theories of privacy stand out in the literature: accessibility privacy, which defines privacy in terms of one's physically "being let alone," decisional privacy, which focuses on freedom from interference in one's choices and decisions, and most importantly for the purposes here, informational privacy, which defines privacy as control over the flow of one's personal information (Tavani, 2013, p. 135-136).

Helen Nissenbaum's (2010) theory of contextual integrity has also received considerable support in recent years from those researching the impact of ICT (Sar & Al-Saggaf, 2014). According to the contextual integrity theory of privacy, norms of appropriateness determine what types of information are/are not appropriate for a given context (Nissenbaum, 2010). Nissenbaum argued that the process used to gather information should be appropriate to a specific context and acceptable with regards to the norms that govern the flow of information in a given context. Contextual integrity, is respected when norms of appropriateness are respected; it is violated when any of the norms is violated. In determining whether normative protection of data is needed, we should attend to the context in which information flows and not to the nature of information itself (Nissenbaum, 2010).

Nissenbaum's the contextual integrity theory of privacy is similar to van den Hoven's (2008) notion of information use in unintended spheres. Van den Hoven (2008) argues that a harm can result when information intended for one sphere, i.e. for one purpose, is used in another. For example, personal healthcare information is collected and stored for health insurance reasons, in the health insurance sphere, but if it is then used to stop people getting loans from banks, it is being used in a banking sphere.

Moor's (2000) account of privacy is also gaining ground in the literature. His theory encapsulates all the first three theories discussed above: non-intrusion, non-interference and informational views of privacy. To Moor, an individual has privacy in a situation if in that particular situation the individual is protected from intrusion, interference, and information access by others (Moor, 2000). Moor also distinguishes between naturally private and normatively private situations. According to Tavani this distinction allows us to distinguish between the conditions required for having privacy (in a descriptive sense) and having a right to privacy in the normative sense. According to this distinction, if a person sees another picking her nose in the library, then that person lost her privacy but her privacy was not violated. But if that other person peeps through the keyhole of her apartment door then her

privacy is not only lost but also violated. What is significant in Moor's account of privacy is his treatment of privacy as an essential prerequisite for security. Moor argues that privacy is the articulation or expression of the core value security (Tavani, 2013). Given the threat from blackmail crimes is predicated upon women protecting their privacy in SNS, viewing privacy and security as two sides of the same coin makes great sense.

Another influential account of privacy is the one by philosopher James Rachels (1975). Rachels argued that what makes privacy so important, even when it comes to everyday personal information and situations, is because it affords individuals the ability to selectively disclose information relating to themselves (Al-Saggaf & Islam, 2015). This control and management over self-presentation is vital for individuals to be able to successfully create and maintain different kinds of personal relationships (Al-Saggaf & Islam, 2015). In other words, our ability to navigate a variety of social interactions depends on our ability to control information about us. Without privacy, the variety of relationships individuals can participate in would disintegrate (Al-Saggaf & Islam, 2015).

In summary, this literature review has revealed that self-disclosure can lead to loss of privacy which in turn can lead to serious safety problems including falling victim to blackmail. Given privacy is the articulation or expression of the core value security, viewing privacy and security as two sides of the same coin suggests SNS users should not disclose too much sensitive information about themselves so as not to expose themselves to the risk of falling victim to online predators, who could, for example, blackmail them. On the other hand, this literature review has also shown that self-presentation, among several other factors, predicts self-disclosure in SNS. In order to take advantage of the opportunity to form social relations SNS users need to disclose more to present themselves to others. Thus, to remain secure in SNS and at the same time take advantage of the opportunity to form social relations, then users should not disclose all types of information. Users should disclose information selectively. It is this self-presentation that makes it possible for individuals to maintain different kinds of personal relationships. Privacy is the ability to have control over self-presentation.

### **3. METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative design. The qualitative approach is appropriate for studies that aim to explore a relatively new and under-researched phenomenon such as this (Williamson, 2002). Data were collected in this study using two techniques: face-to-face interviews and a focus group discussion. The interviews were conducted in 2011 by a team of female students who were trained to conduct interviews during an undergraduate research training course. The interviewers recruited a total of 16 female participants from a pool of women in the university where they studied. The interviewers adopted purposive sampling to select the participants. Purposive sampling is qualitative researchers' most preferred sampling technique (Williamson, 2002). Purposive sampling allowed the interviewers to select interviewees who were balanced on a range of personal characteristics, such as age and country of origin, to ensure the sample is representative of most of the students in the university (Williamson, 2002). Here, 'representative' is not in the probabilistic sense; rather in the generalisability of the sample to the personal characteristics of the selected sample (Al-Saggaf, 2004).

The interviews followed a semi-structured format and relied mostly on open-ended questions to enable the participants to express their perceptions in their own words. The interviews were conducted in English, to avoid issues that could arise from translating the text. The interviewees were all females between 18 and 32 years of age and were mostly still studying. The majority of these participants came from less conservative backgrounds, spoke

fluent English and were relatively active social media users (see Table 1 below for more information about the characteristics of the interviewees).

It should be noted that these women, and also the women who participated in the focus group discussion –see below- are not representative of all Saudi women. These women are mostly *Hadari* (i.e. urban) (Bajnaid, 2016). *Hadari* people are known for being less conservative and less traditional compared to *Bedwen* people (i.e. tribal) (Bajnaid, 2016). But while *Hadari* people may take a more relaxed approach to their daughters using social media sites, to *Hadari* people family honour and reputation are as important as they are to *Bedwen*.

**Table 1. Interviewee' characteristics**

Interviewee No	Age	Nationality	Education/Employment
Interviewee 1	25	Saudi Arabia	University student
Interviewee 2	21	Yemen	University student
Interviewee 3	19	Saudi Arabia	University student
Interviewee 4	32	Saudi Arabia	Employed
Interviewee 5	15	Saudi Arabia	School student
Interviewee 6	21	Saudi Arabia	University student
Interviewee 7	21	Syrian	University student
Interviewee 8	23	Saudi Arabia	University student
Interviewee 9	19	Saudi Arabia	University student
Interviewee 10	19	Egyptian	University student
Interviewee 11	26	Saudi Arabia	Employed
Interviewee 12	19	Saudi Arabia	University student
Interviewee 13	20	Saudi Arabia	University student
Interviewee 14	23	Saudi Arabia	University Graduate
Interviewee 15	19	Saudi Arabia	University student
Interviewee 16	18	Saudi Arabia	University student

Permission to conduct interviews was sought from participants prior to the beginning of interviews. Before the interviews began, the interviewers forwarded the informed consent sheet and the informed consent form to the participants to sign. Once the participants signed the informed consent forms, the interviews began. Interviewees were asked about the reasons for joining Facebook, the benefits they derived from their experience as well as their perceptions with regards to the issue of privacy on Facebook.

To address the concern that these participants might agree to be interviewed because they felt obligated to do so, the researchers, explained to them how their confidentiality will be maintained at all times and how their anonymity will be protected to the fullest extent possible. They also explained to them their rights, such as their right not to answer a question or to stop the interview or withdraw from it at any time they wished. They also assured them that choosing not to do the interview would not disadvantage them in any way.

A focus group discussion, which lasted about an hour, was also held in 2011 with a class of 10 Saudi female university students who were between the ages of 18 and 22 years old. This group is different from the group who participated in the interviews. The focus group participants also came from less conservative backgrounds, spoke fluent English but not all of them were active social media users. The purpose of the focus group interview was to gain amongst these students a consensual understanding regarding their perceptions with regards to the issue of privacy on Facebook. The participants were asked the same questions that the individual interviewees were asked. The reason for this was to gain confidence with

regards to the credibility of the findings from the individual interviews. The focus group discussion took place during a class at one of the universities in Saudi Arabia.

Prior to the focus group discussion, the author explained how focus interviews work and what was expected from the students including the issue of turn taking. The focus group discussion began after permission was sought from participants. To allow the participants the opportunity to decline, the class was told about the focus group discussion two weeks before it took place and they were assured that not coming on the day would not disadvantage them in any way. This ensured only students who were interested in taking part joining the focus group discussion. At the start of the focus group discussion, the author explained to the participants how their confidentiality will be maintained at all times and how their anonymity will be protected to the fullest extent possible. He also explained to them their rights such as their right to remain silent during the whole discussion and only join if they wished to do so and their right to walk away from classroom at any time they wished.

Focus group interviews are appropriate when the interest is in understanding an idea, opinion or an experience, when the topic is impersonal enough to be posed to a group, and when it is important that the participants integrate other participants' views into their responses or build upon them (Williamson, 2002). The commonality of the participants backgrounds (certainly not their opinions) and their geographic locations was an important factor in the selection of the group.

In the context of this study and given a male researcher is involved, a focus group discussion was probably the best option since it is not possible, as explained above, to conduct face-to-face individual interviews with these participants. Alsaggaf (2015) points out that researchers wishing to conduct studies in Saudi Arabia face cultural obstacles that can limit the options available to them because gender affects the type of method that is suitable to the context of the study. Since a male researcher is involved, employing a focus group discussion also shows respect for the Saudi culture (Ryan et al., 2015). Ryan et al. (2015) also note that focus group discussions work well in this context because they offer a safe, non-threatening and comfortable environment.

Individual interviews and the focus group discussion were not recorded by tape; instead the interviewers took notes during the interviews. In the case of the focus group discussion a female administrative assistant who was experienced in writing in shorthand took notes during the conversation. The reason the individual interviews and the focus group discussion were not recorded by tape was because the author was concerned the participants might become reluctant to talk about some of the matters on tape since the subject is highly sensitive (Myers, 2013). Or, given the highly sensitive nature of the subject, students might not feel comfortable sharing their perspectives knowing they were being recorded. Another important factor was the unavailability of time. Transcribing verbatim from tapes can take a long time (Myers, 2013). Transcribing one hour worth of audio can take four hours from experienced professional transcribers. In the case of the students who conducted the interviews, one interview might take them more than eight hours to transcribe as Myers (2013) notes. These students simply don't have the time to do this. The students, who conducted the interviews during an undergraduate research training course, had other assignments and other courses to complete during the semester.

The individual interviews and the focus group discussion were analysed using thematic (qualitative) analyses, but unlike in the case of individual interviews where the unit of analysis was each interview, in the case of the focus group discussion the unit of analysis was not each individual who participated in the focus group but rather the whole conversation. This required extra care to be paid when analysing the interaction of responses (i.e. conversation between participants). Data analysis was completed with the help of QSR NVivo 10, a software package for managing qualitative data. First, free nodes (i.e. nodes not

organized or grouped) were created based on keywords in the interview notes. The nodes represented themes that revolved around the main ideas in the interview notes or a specific concept that emerged from the data or a pattern or trend in the data. Similar text within the interview notes was then located and assigned to these nodes after thoroughly reading through the interview notes and ensuring the text assigned captures the theme that the node represents (the themes, which emerged from the text, are the same as the nodes in NVivo). Finally, these free nodes were further divided into tree nodes. That is, broader categories were developed to group the free nodes.

## 4. FINDINGS

### 4.1 Concern about Privacy

The findings of this study indicate that the majority of the participants in this study (11 participants) appeared to be concerned about their privacy on Facebook. Their comments included: *“setting privacy doesn’t mean that your account is private”*; *“I worry a lot about Facebook privacy”*; *“I do worry; sometimes I get reluctant from publishing pictures or news because I do not want all added people to see it”*; and *“one of the main reasons I have high privacy settings is due to the culture and environment I live in, it is the misinterpreting of personal information that worries me.”* One student in particular was concerned about the Facebook Apps accessing her account, saying that this is a real problem for her. That said, five participants asserted they are not concerned about their privacy on Facebook. One, for example, argued *“if you didn’t want your information to become public add the right people and modify your security settings.”* Nevertheless, participants appeared to be careful and conscious about the importance of maintaining their privacy on Facebook. One interviewee said *“the females are now more aware about these things; they add only people they know, and make their profiles private so nobody can access their profiles and personal information.”* It would appear from the above that these women have a profound understanding of what privacy means in their context and what kind of information they consider as private and what they need to do to maintain their privacy.

### 4.2 Worry about Falling Victim to Blackmail

The findings indicate that the participants in this study worry about falling victim to blackmail. The following quote from one interviewee exemplifies this point:

and if they do, some people can blackmail me with such personal information; not only that, but also some personal information can affect the career path one person takes

Upon contemplating the possibility of private information falling in the wrong hands on Facebook, one student commented:

It will be a serious disaster especially for girls, because we live in an Arabic society that has traditions and customs that are different from any other community.

One student advised that *“people shouldn’t post anything that might get them into trouble later.”* Another interviewee added *“I prefer to take my caution like hiding my personal e-mail or my last name [sic].”*

Family names are critical to people in the Arabic peninsula because people can recognize each other easily from their last names. Because of this, family and tribe reputations are tied to family names. If a female user’s family name was disclosed on Facebook, another user could use this information to readily locate her relatives. He could

publicly defame her or cause damage to her reputation and then possibly blackmail her for his own advantage. Given that women's honour, as mentioned before, is critical to family reputation, it makes sense that they don't disclose their real names.

Overall participants appeared aware of the importance of keeping their photos safe. Their comments that demonstrate this awareness included: *"they take care of their photos and make their accounts private so no one can access their information and photos"* and *"they control who can see their photos so I guess none of them will ever face a problem."* From these findings it is probably safe to conclude that the participants in this study worry about falling victim to blackmail. It is possible that the almost daily media reports that cover these crimes have contributed to improving their awareness but this is a question for future research.

### 4.3 Knowledge of Privacy Settings

Ten out of 11 participants, who were asked about their level of comfort with Facebook privacy settings, indicated they were comfortable with how to adjust them and did not think adjusting the privacy settings was a hard thing to do; but a few of them found modifying the privacy settings according to their needs a difficult thing to do. Moreover with regards to the participants' satisfaction with the security settings the majority appeared satisfied. One interviewee, for example, said *"I think it is pretty good, especially that in our culture privacy is important and I think this made it (Facebook) more popular."* Another interviewee agreed arguing *"it makes you feel safe to be able to control what information is to be public and what must be hidden from others such as pictures, videos and posts and so on."* A third participant concurred; adding *"Facebook has great tools for protecting your privacy."* However, one interviewee disagreed saying:

In many Social networks the privacy settings are not really that good. For example, in Facebook even though you can manage your settings, people can still see your pictures in some way... PLUS many people can simply hack into accounts! If the privacy settings were THAT good then no one should be able to hack our accounts! So I'm not really satisfied with the Privacy settings.

Another interviewee, who was also dissatisfied with Facebook privacy settings, argued *"when a person adds you on Facebook, for example, he can see your statuses even if he is still on the waiting list ... has not become a friend yet."* This suggests that not all participants were satisfied with Facebook privacy settings, which in some way reflects a concern about privacy that they have as women living in a predominantly conservative society.

### 4.4 Cross Gender Communication

The majority of participants in this study approached cross gender communication with caution. The following quote from one of the students *hints* at the *existence* of this cautious attitude:

My friends dared me to add this guy ...so I did ... I made up a whole story about how we met at some point and I asked him if he remembered it. When he accepted my friendship request I deleted him.

Even though the interaction on Facebook is somehow abstracted in a sense that the participants' bodies are absent during this interaction and participants are not physical co-presence is not possible, female users tend to be cautious when it comes to talking to men on Facebook. According to one of the interviewees this cautious attitude towards the opposite

gender is necessary: “I am fearful for my privacy, because if I added them, they could download pictures and things. I don't even add people who have mutual friends with me.”

But not all interviewees thought there is a problem with communicating with the opposite gender in Facebook. One woman said *“some people may feel comfortable in dealing with the opposite gender on Facebook but not in real life.”* Another woman explained that *“talking online with a person from the opposite gender is normal because only opinions are shared.”*

However, the majority of the interviewees agreed that the culture does not generally approve of this kind of communication. One student commented that *“the culture doesn't allow girls to befriend boys even online”*. Another student agreed arguing *“the culture definitely plays a role in how careful you have to be online and who you can let into your life. That's just how the culture is”* adding she would feel uneasy about a male adding her to his list of Facebook friends. One student shared that she became disappointed when she *“checked once on a family member and found inappropriate stuff about her on Facebook.”* This student's view provides evidence for the existence of the disapproval of Saudi society of online communication across gender lines.

It would appear that the inclination to share personal information on Facebook is influenced by family background. The females interviewed in this study who came from progressive families tended to take a more relaxed approach to their daughters using SNS. In contrast, those who came from less progressive families tended to be more cautious. To illustrate, one interviewee reported that that her older brothers, who originally come from the southern region of Saudi Arabia, would not let her publish anything on Facebook that they would not want their (male) friends to know about because of concerns about their image and reputation. Communicating with the opposite gender in her case is clearly not on the table.

But when asked about their reasons for joining Facebook, participants in this study reported a number of reasons including to remain connected with other people, keeping updated about what is happening (i.e. news and events), for entertainment purposes especially playing Facebook games (five participants); for sharing photos and links and to express political views or to benefit from being members of groups related to courses. Similarly, when asked about the benefits of using Facebook participants mentioned the ease of finding friends, the ability to express themselves, keeping updated about their friends, staying in touch with friends and making new ones. Their reasons for joining Facebook and the advantages they gained from using social media that they highlighted during the interviews suggest that these women are not keen to avoid using social media just because there is a risk of falling victim to blackmail.

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The conservative nature of the Saudi society and the sensitivity of the topic made it difficult for a male researcher to interview women who had actually suffered from blackmail. However, a great deal was learned from comparing the reality about blackmail crimes with Saudi women's attitudes towards privacy in Facebook and if they worry about falling victim to blackmail in SNS. The findings of this study have shown that the Saudi women studied appeared concerned about their privacy in Facebook; worried about falling victim to blackmail; knew how to change the privacy settings; and were not comfortable with communicating across gender lines in Facebook. This suggests that the participants in this study are not the likely victims of blackmail crimes.

Social networking is an unstoppable worldwide phenomenon and Saudi women, like others, want to be part of it. The advantages from using Facebook make joining SNS, knowing the risks involved, highly irresistible.

Given eleven out of the 16 participants appeared concerned about their privacy on Facebook, it is clear these women are aware of the risks on Facebook. Having grown up immersed in ICT, one would expect this generation of young women, who are predominately the 'Z' generation, sometimes are also called the 'Digital Natives', to be more trusting of ICT and less fearful of it. But because their culture demands them to maintain their purity and since they know they are the targets of blackmail, as the media reports have shown, it is understandable why they are concerned about sharing their personal information on Facebook.

The findings of the study showed that the participants appeared cautious about their privacy and seemed to know how to make sure their personal information does not fall into the wrong hands. They didn't appear to be naïve about the dangers that await them in SNS and seemed to be alert to the threats "out there". A limitation to this study is that data were collected in 2011 so the findings reported here should be consumed with this in mind. That said, it is not likely that the women whose views were reported in this article would have become less concerned or less cautious about their privacy online five years later. In fact, a recently completed PhD thesis on Saudis in matrimonial websites by a Saudi student (Bajnaid, 2016) confirms that Saudi women are still concerned about their privacy and worried that the information they disclose in these websites can be used by sexual predators to blackmail them.

The findings of the study do not provide clues to the ongoing increase in the number of Saudi women falling victim to blackmail in SNS. But then, these participants are educated, spoke fluent English and are active social media users. If they are not the potential victims, what is the profile of women who fall victim to these crimes? What is their level of education? What is their level of awareness? What is their level of conservatism? And how do they fall victim anyway? Only future research preferably by female researchers, because of the sensitivity of the issue, can unlock the door to the answers to these questions. Hopefully, this article will pave the way for such future research.

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