

## **Saudi Females on Facebook: An Ethnographic Study**

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### **Abstract**

The article reports on an empirical study conducted in 2009 which used ethnographic techniques to collect the data. The study aim was to provide a rich description about the experiences of young Saudi females on Facebook. To report the perceptions of these females in relation to their experiences on Facebook, the author conducted 15 semi-structured interviews. In addition, the author also observed the 'walls' of three of these interviewees to get a feel of what was really going on in Facebook. The study found that these females used Facebook to maintain ties with their friends, old and present; to express their feelings and to share their thoughts through updating their status; and to have fun taking the quizzes. Two interesting themes also transpired from the interviews: one, is that while self-disclosure was very common among these participants, they appeared to be conscious about their privacy; two, to express their political views about their public affairs they joined Facebook groups. In terms of the effects of their Facebook experience on their lives, while some participants said Facebook made them more sociable and more self-confident, others expressed concerns about the time Facebook took away from family and study.

**Keywords:** Social Network Sites – Facebook – Saudi Arabia – Females – Ethnography techniques

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### **Introduction and Background**

Saudis gained access to the Internet on December 15, 1998 (Internet Services Unit 2009). Today, there are 9.8 million Internet users in the country, according to the Communication and Information Technology Commission (CITC) Annual Report (CITC 2010), which is about 38% of the total population. The estimated proportion of women who use the Internet in Saudi Arabia is 41% which suggests that women are not poorly represented online. A large number of Saudi Internet users also use Social Network Sites (SNS) such as Facebook (CITC 2010).

Saudi Arabia exercises strict control over Internet access. Any material that contains pornographic, anti-Islamic, or criticism of Saudi Arabia, the Royal Family, or other Gulf states is blocked (CITC 2010). The CITC, which is the government body which controls access to the Internet in Saudi Arabia, filters all the web traffic that flows to the country by implementing country-level proxy servers. These proxy servers contain massive databases of banned sites (CITC 2010). However, SNS such as Facebook are not subject to this heavy censorship. That is, accessing, joining and contributing to these sites is allowed in Saudi Arabia.

Although SNS are not blocked in Saudi Arabia there is a restriction on what can be said on these sites, as freedom of expression in the country is limited. People who write articles that support the terrorist ideology, or Bin Laden, or the insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan, or who criticise the government, or who include personal slanderous attacks against public figures, or who criticise the religious police, for instance, can be severely reprimanded by the government. Despite this, SNS mean a great deal for individuals because they offer Internet users a medium to discuss politics with each other and express their opinions about what is happening in their country. These sites also provide an outlet to discuss and debate issues that concern them as a group particularly, since there are not many channels in Saudi Arabia for people to express themselves, as local media is also controlled by the government.

That said, while females are well represented in online forums like 'the social', 'the women issues only' and the 'beauty and fashion' forums, there is a notable absence of females in political online forums. Three reasons for this notable absence stand out. One is because women in Saudi Arabia are less interested in discussing politics and public affairs compared to men or discussing politics is not among their favourite topics (Al-Saggaf & Weckert 2006). Two, is because men are less tolerant towards women when it comes to discussing politics as they consider politics a 'male thing' (Al-Saggaf 2007). For instance, a study conducted by this author showed that although some male members responded positively to the participation of the few women in the observed political forums, most male members appeared very critical and attacking of these few women. Many of their comments were sexist in nature making the women experience in these forums unpleasant. The following quotations from male members towards female contributors demonstrate this point: "I wish you took care of your house and children, if you have any, and stayed away from politics" and also "looks like you said this while you had your period" and "women, are deficient in both mind and religion". A third reason is because discussing politics sometimes involves "talking back" and engaging in confrontations and upfront arguments, which are things Saudi women normally try to avoid, as these things do not conform with the traditions of Arab women (Al-Saggaf 2007). Their culture demands that they be shy, reserved and modest so that they meet their society's expectations. Being shy, reserved and modest in the case of

these women means, among other things, they should not be too outgoing and should not utter obscenities, should not talk across gender lines and so on.

The findings of the current study are interpreted from within Saudi social and cultural contexts. In order to understand these findings, including the perceptions of the participants, it is essential to understand a little about Saudi society and its culture. Saudi society is one of the most conservative and religious societies in the Arab world. Despite its efforts to join the modern world, religion and culture still play a vital role in shaping people's attitudes and behaviours and defining their norms, values and practices. For example, male honour and family reputation are to a large extent in the hands of the female members of the family. If it was discovered that a woman, for example, committed adultery or engaged in an illicit sexual relationship with a man or just met secretly and privately with him in the real world, the family honour and reputation could be destroyed. The story in the press about the Saudi woman who was murdered by her father for chatting with a man on Facebook (McElroy 2008) clearly shows that family honour and reputation are seriously taken by Saudis.

Much of the attention given to SNS in the past has focused on Western countries but less on the Arab world. This is because in sheer quantitative terms there is a dearth of research on the use of the Internet in Arab countries conducted by Arabic researchers. To the best knowledge of this researcher, this is the first study of its nature, which makes this article a good step in the direction of addressing the gap in the literature. The article reports on an empirical study conducted in 2009 which used ethnographic techniques to collect the data. The study aim was to provide a rich description about the experiences of young Saudi females on Facebook.

## **SNS and Facebook**

The population on SNS is growing exponentially everyday, with people from all over the world believed to be using these sites to develop new friendships and/or communicate with older friends whom they cannot meet regularly face-to-face. There are many SNS on the web including Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, Hi5, Flickr, Orkut, LinkedIn and BeBo. While people from all ages are using SNS, several studies have shown that they are more popular among the younger generation (Jones et al. 2008; Lenhart 2009; Valenzuela, Park & Kee 2009; Young 2009). The recent study by Lenhart (2009), for example, revealed that younger adults are much more likely to use SNS than their older counterparts, with 75% of adults between 18-24 years old using these networks compared to just 7% of adults aged 65 and older.

In addition to communicating with others to build relationships and maintain friendships, users on these SNS can also share personal information with others and create their own online identities (Jones et al. 2008). To create their identities on SNS, users need to create their own profiles which may contain personal and biographical data such as name (a real name or alias), date and place of birth, citizenship, nationality, photos, hobbies, and any other information members would like to post on their profile. SNS, which are designed originally to allow members of the site or the community to communicate with other members of the same site, allow users to communicate with others using voice, videos, online chat, offline messages, blogs and 'walling'<sup>1</sup>.

Although the SNS phenomena is fairly recent, the literature does contain a good number of studies about this topic, see, for example, Boyd and Ellison (2007), Jones et al. (2008), Lawrence (2009), O'Donovan (2009), Peterson and Siek (2009), Valenzuela, Park and Kee

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<sup>1</sup> The participants in the current study call the activity of posting comments and other objects on their Facebook wall to communicate with their friends as 'walling'.

(2009), Vetere, Smith and Gibbs (2009) and Young (2009). There are not, however, many definitions of SNS. The FREE Dictionary (2009), for example, defines SNS as “a Web site that provides a virtual community for people interested in a particular subject or just to ‘hang out’ together”. Al Hasib (2009: 288), on the other hand, defines SNS as “the network spaces where the individuals are allowed to share their thoughts, ideas and creativity, and also to form social communities”. For the purpose of this article, however, SNS will be defined as outlined by Boyd and Ellison (2007):

Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (Boyd & Ellison 2007: 211).

The definition incorporates most of the elements found on Facebook such as being a platform where groups of individuals form new social connections with each other or maintain existing ones and in doing so, facilitated by the design of the platform, share personal information, photos, videos, thoughts and feelings.

Facebook was founded in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg, who was a sophomore student at Harvard University at that time. The site was initially intended for college and university students and staff, but after a short time it was made available to anyone who wanted to join. The first thing people do when they register is create their own profile which they can set to be either private or public. As with any other SNS, Facebook provides its users with the ability to upload photos, videos and emotional states into their profiles. The site also allows outside developers to build applications which users can then use to personalise their profiles and perform other tasks, such as compare movie preferences and chart travel histories (Boyd & Ellison 2007). Facebook's latest statistics indicate that people spend more than 700 billion minutes each month on Facebook (Facebook.com 2010).

According to the most recent rankings from Alexa.com (2010) of the top 500 sites globally, Facebook is ranked second in the top 500 sites globally (in terms of the total number of page views) followed by Youtube third and Twitter tenth; suggesting social networking is one of the popular Internet activities among the 1.996 billion world digital citizens (Internet World Stats 2010). This makes Facebook, which Alexa.com describes as “A social utility that connects people, to keep up with friends, upload photos, share links and videos”, the most popular and widely used SNS on the web. According to Facebook latest statistics, there are more than 500 million active users on the site and more than 250 million users log on to it each day. In Saudi Arabia Facebook is ranked fifth most frequently accessed website (out of the top 100 websites nationally; Alexa.com 2010).

## **Review of the Literature**

The review will first discuss the reasons for joining SNS, then the characteristics of participation in SNS and finally the effects of this participation, which are the major themes that emerged from the present study. It should be noted, however, that since SNS phenomena is fairly recent and that much of the work on SNS is still in the process of being published, the discussion below will also be informed by the literature on online communities. That said, every effort however, will be made to draw from the literature on SNS. It is also important to note that, although SNS and ‘online communities’ are very similar to each other, the author takes the position of distinguishing between the two terms. While the former, defined above, revolve around people, not interests, with the individual at the centre of their own community, the latter refer to sites that are dedicated to communities of interests, structured by topics or according to topical hierarchies (Boyd & Ellison 2007).

### **Friendship Online and the Reasons for Joining SNS**

The literature on online communities indicates that there are many reasons why people join these sites including developing relationships, socialising, enjoying themselves, relaxing, having fun, forgetting about their problems or killing free time (Al-Saggaf 2003). Expressing oneself intellectually is another reason why people go to these places. Several researchers have concluded that many people find online communities good places to voice their opinions and views (Dyson 1998; Hauben & Hauben 1997). Mitra (1997), for example, noted that online communities help people exercise their freedom of expression. Given that freedom of expression in Saudi Arabia, particularly in relation to political views, is restricted, online environments have become a channel through which people can express themselves intellectually, as well as their feelings and emotions about the events of their day (Al-Saggaf 2006).

Many SNS researchers, however, contend that the major reason behind people joining SNS is often to maintain social ties; particularly existing ones, and to gain emotional support and fellowship as a result of these relationships (Boyd & Ellison 2007; Jones et al. 2008; Valenzuela, Park & Kee 2009; Young 2009). This finding also accords with the literature on online communities (see, for example, Dyson 1998; Garton, Haythornthwaite & Wellman 1997; Hauben & Hauben 1997; Jones 1998; Rheingold 2000). Dyson (1998) for example, notes that people join online communities for the purpose of fellowship and security and to escape the routine of daily life.

Human beings are social animals. They cannot live in isolation from others, and so socialising is the common factor that links them together (Dyson 1998). Rheingold (2000) adds that it is the social network capital and communion that bind online community members together, and one thing these members do to increase their social capital is to accumulate friends (Jones et al. 2008), a process which can be achieved through viewing and linking profiles (Lange 2007).

Socialising on SNS differs from socialising in offline environments. Jones et al. (2008) argue that the definition of friendship in SNS differs from the definition of friendship in offline environments. Recently a British judge made this definition official when he ruled that friendship on Facebook could not be defined as "friendship in the traditional sense" (Emerson 2008). Indeed, adding a new friend to a contact list does not necessarily mean that this is a sign of feelings for that friend. Rather, it is seen as an expansion of one's social network (Jones et al. 2008). Boyd and Ellison (2007) concur with this adding that:

"Friends" on SNS are not the same as "friends" in the everyday sense; instead, Friends provide context by offering users an imagined audience to guide behavioural norms (Boyd & Ellison 2007: np).

Boyd (2006, np) also distinguishes friendship from Friendship: the first refers to a close relationship between two people, and the second refers to an online tie that connects people on an SNS.

### **Characteristics of Participation**

There are many characteristics that define participation in online environments but the sense of community that the participants experience online, the sense of intimacy that the participants have for one another and the self-disclosure that participants enjoy online are some of the most important ones. The sense of community is indicated in members' feelings of belonging and commitment to the 'place' (Barnes 2001; Blanchard 2000; Valenzuela, Park & Kee 2009; Watson 1997). Feelings of commitment to the online community often develop

when members expect the relationships in the community to continue into the future (Parks & Floyd 1996). Commitment is also developed when members feel that the communities they have invested in, and the relationships they have formed, have become important in their lives (Dyson 1998).

Intimacy is another important characteristic of participation in online communities and an essential ingredient of a true community (Fernback 1999; Wong 2000). It is also important for sustaining the relationships in a community and what distinguishes strong ties from weak ties. When individuals in the community care for each other and show that they care, it is an indication of the strength of their relationships. When relationships are strong and intimate the feelings of belonging, attachment and commitment to the community will also be strong (Rifkin 2000).

Self-disclosure is another salient feature of participation in both SNS (Jones et al. 2008; Valenzuela, Park & Kee 2009) and online communities (Dyson 1998; Horn 1998; Kollock & Smith 1999; Markham 1998; Rheingold 2000). Self-disclosure occurs online due to many factors, but trust between online communicators has been shown to facilitate its occurrence (Valenzuela, Park & Kee 2009). Both self-disclosure and trust are vital for personal relationships (Cocking & Matthews 2000; Preece 2000; Rheingold 2000; Rifkin 2000; Wallace 1999; Weckert 2003).

Researchers have also found that as people become familiar with others online, they tend to reveal more about themselves (Barnes 2001; Horn 1998; Markham 1998). The lack of oral and non-verbal cues, and lack of public self-awareness all have a positive effect too. Since they cause abandonment of social inhibitions and detachments from social conventions, they can also lead to self-disclosure online (Barnes 2001; Joinson 1998; Mar 2000; Preece 2000; Rafaeli & Sudweeks 1997; Wallace 1999).

### **Effects of Participation**

The literature indicates that one possible implication of spending too much time online is opportunity for greater skill development particularly in the area of socialisation (Young 2009), which suggests people could become more sociable as a result of their online experience. Another positive outcome of participation is in making members learn about themselves. Hamman (2001) notes that since people have been known to be very open and self-reflective online, they often improve their self-awareness. This increased self awareness has also made some people gain confidence and self-esteem (Barnes 2001; Markham 1998; Wellman & Gulia 1999). Additionally, Jones et al. (2008) add that, another way in which self-esteem can be gained is through positive feedback and emotional support received by members on their profiles. In the case of women, the ability of the technology to reduce the fear of rejection and to lower inhibitions, made women find it easy to connect with others from all over the world (Bastani 2000), which also increased their self confidence.

Negative outcomes of participation in online communities are also seen, particularly in participants wasting too much time online (Young 2009), thereby neglecting their family commitments (Haythornthwaite & Wellman 2002; Rheingold 2000; Wellman & Gulia 1999). One of the reasons why this occurs is because, online, participants gain a great deal of emotional support from their online friends, as Jones et al. (2008) have noted.

Some participants waste too much time online and subsequently neglect their studies (Karpinski & Duberstein 2009). In fact, Karpinski and Duberstein (2009) found a link between lower grades and Facebook, not only in the case of undergraduate students but also in the case of graduate students. Furthermore, Karpinski and Duberstein (2009) reported that

graduate students who initially had Grade Point Averages (GPAs) as high as 3.5 and above (out of four), received lower GPAs when they started using Facebook.

## Method

The study conducted face-to-face interviews with 15 participants to report their perceptions about their experiences on Facebook. The interviews followed a semi-structured format, because it was considered more appropriate than other forms of interviewing for revealing the perceptions of participants. The interviews were conducted in English, to avoid issues that could arise from translating the text, and they relied mostly on open-ended questions to allow the interviewees to express themselves freely.

The interviewees were all young females in their early twenties (19 -24 years of age) attending a private university in Saudi Arabia. They were all single, living in a metropolitan city but studying different courses within their institution and at different levels of study (that is, first year to fourth year). Before the interviews were conducted permission was sought and an email message warning the students of the presence of a male researcher on campus was circulated to students. The interviews were conducted in the student main sitting area of the university. Participants were selected conveniently at this venue and were approached to seek their interest in involvement in interviews. To recruit participants the researcher simply walked to the potential interviewees in a random fashion and asked them if they were willing to take part in an interview that would only take them about 30 minutes of their time and would involve asking them questions about their experience on Facebook. If they agreed to be interviewed, the researcher would introduce himself to them, very briefly discuss the aim of the research study with them and then give them the informed consent sheet and the informed consent form to sign. The informed consent sheet included statements about the participants' rights, such as their right not to answer a question or to stop the interview or leave the place at any time they wished, and also information about their confidentiality and anonymity. Once the potential interviewees signed the informed consent forms, the interviews would begin. Interviews were not tape-recorded; rather the interviewer took notes while the interviewees were answering the questions. Interesting quotations, however, were carefully transcribed verbatim by the researcher.

To get a feel for what was really going on in Facebook, the researcher asked the participants at the end of interviews if he could look at their 'walls' on their laptops. Three participants agreed to this request and the researcher then recorded field notes from these observations in a journal. This step involved the researcher focusing his attention on certain information such as relationship status, number of groups, number of pages linked, number of friends, the presence of photo albums, the quizzes taken, and other related information such as the emotional state of the participants. The researcher recognised the potential for these participants to feel obligated to agree to let the researcher look at their Facebook profile and was also conscious that they might be concerned about their privacy. For this reason he assured them that they did not have to show their Facebook page to him and, indeed, they were under no obligation to do so. Furthermore, he reiterated that choosing not to do so, would not disadvantage them in any way. He also assured them that should they agree to let him gaze at their 'walls', that their confidentiality and anonymity would be carefully maintained and protected at all times.

## **Findings**

### **Reasons for Using Facebook**

#### ***To Maintain Strong Ties with Friends***

Participants in this study reported a number of reasons for using Facebook but the most important reason, according to them, was because they wanted to be in continuous contact with their friends. The participants talked about two types of friends; their childhood friends who they could no longer meet face-to-face because they no longer studied with them or lived nearby and their new ones whom they met at University. Other participants stated they joined Facebook because they needed to remain in touch with their friends who live abroad and rarely met face-to-face. One 22-year-old Business Administration student explained that she joined Facebook because she found it easier to communicate with her friends whom she could not meet face-to-face; adding that the Facebook platform gave her a lot of information about these friends including details (supported with pictures) about 'what they are up to' and reminders of their birthdays and other revealing things about their personalities.

It would appear that one of the things that made Facebook attractive to these young women is the curiosity it satisfied. For example, it was noted, these females put a great deal of information about themselves in their 'walls' allowing their friends to discover many things about their personal characteristics. A 19-year-old Psychology student said:

If you are to befriend someone and you need to discover her personality, you don't have to talk to her to know who she really is; just observe her wall and read the comments she makes about her feelings and also observe the results of the quizzes she takes and the groups she joins and you will know.

As can be seen from this quotation, it seems this student uses Facebook to discover her friends' personalities. Thus, the more members in a Facebook community participate in quizzes, express their current status on their walls and participate in other activities, the better their friends get to know them, which in turn makes maintaining their relationships easier.

Peer pressure is another reason why some participants joined Facebook. According to three participants in this study, the reason they joined Facebook was because their friends kept talking about it in front of them until they could no longer ignore or resist the temptation to join. One participant joined Facebook because her friends constantly talked about it:

They (her friends) persuaded me indirectly to join it by talking about it in front of me all the time. It became very famous and the most popular website. Also, when I left the school it was hard for me to contact my school friends, because of the time limitation between me and them, so we found the easiest way is to communicate through an asynchronous tool, and the best choice for it was Facebook.

On the other hand, some other participants joined Facebook because they were invited by their friends who already had Facebook accounts. It should be noted that Facebook allows its members to search for their friends by their names on Facebook and then invite them to join their friends' list. They can also invite their friends to join even if their friends don't have Facebook accounts, by sending them out email invitations. Of course the idea is that the more friends they have the merrier. That is, in order to enjoy this unique online experience, everyone should invite their friends to participate.

### ***To Express their Feelings and Share their Thoughts***

The second most important reason why the participants in this study joined Facebook was because they wanted to express themselves better and share their thoughts with others. When asked what she normally wrote on her 'wall', one 20-year-old student said, greetings to her friends, her most up-to-date feelings about her day, her emotional state, and also her thoughts about the things that happened to her during the day. For instance, this student wrote on her wall: "I am happy today", because she wanted everyone to know something about her. Such comments typify those that were posted on the walls of these female students.

Some of the other ways in which the three participants expressed themselves on Facebook, in addition to their personal photos, included posting on their walls information which related to their interests, political views, personal opinions, personal experiences, stories, words of wisdom and suggestions. One such suggestion advised others to have a real, very honest one-to-one conversation with themselves in order to listen to their hearts. Participants indicated that the Facebook environment was very conducive to expressing their innermost feelings and sharing deep thoughts. One interesting feature in Facebook is the 'status' box which Facebookers utilise to describe their emotional state at a given moment. A 22-year-old student, for example, said she always wrote a comment in the status field to express her feelings:

I use my status to tell others that I am in love or not in the mood today, I am happy, or to show sympathy for some issues in the world. For instance, during Gaza war, I wrote many comments in my status that sympathized with the people there.

Facebook could thus be considered a safe avenue for these young women to express themselves, let their voices be heard and discuss their problems and concerns, especially in light of the lack of tolerance towards women discussing politics in online political forums, as discussed previously.

Participants made good use of smiley faces or emoticons to convey their emotions. Various smiley faces, similar to the ones used in MSN Messenger, were used by the participants including :-)"smiling". Members used them regularly to give a "sense of life" to the message and make it appear more dynamic and interactive. One of the important aspects about using smiley faces, in addition to conveying emotions, was that they helped to avoid misunderstandings and confusions that can easily arise via the written word when intonation was lacking.

Facebook members often write statements on their walls telling their friends their latest news because they want to receive comments from them on their news. That is, most of the time Facebookers post comments on their walls to hear the reaction to their comments from their friends. According to two participants, the whole purpose of posting comments in the status field was to find out what their friends would say about what they wrote. One participant said if she wrote "I hate University", "I miss Dad" "or "I hate homework" it was because she wanted her friends to become curious and ask her what was happening so that they could sympathize with her. An example she gave was when the university introduced a new printing policy, which was designed so that students paid more fees, she posted a comment on Facebook that read "the new university policy on printing is unfair". Many of her friends, she said, commented back and they had a good discussion together about it and later decided to complain.

### ***To Have Fun Taking Facebook Quizzes***

The third reason for using Facebook as identified by the participants in this study was because they wanted to have fun, particularly by taking the Facebook quizzes. When asked about the most interesting activities on Facebook, they all said taking the quizzes. For one student taking the 'silly' quizzes, as she put it, was her best way to have fun on Facebook. She liked them because she could share the results of the quizzes with her friends and then compare her results with her friends' 'so that they could have a laugh' about them.

I love them not because of the answers but because of the funny comments that my friends write about my results, I like to see my friends' quizzes' results to make comments on them and laugh at their funny results and I don't think the answers should be trusted because most of the time I get answers that are inconsistent with the nature of my personality.

This student took many quizzes online including 'what is your fit nationality', 'who is similar to you from world leaders', and 'what is your fit hair cut'. A quiz consists of a small number of multiple choice questions which are available in many languages and forms, and are usually created by Facebook members themselves. One thing about these quizzes, according to one interviewee, is that their titles are catchy and therefore attract attention. The interviewee said that Facebook users take quizzes simply by clicking on a quiz name. After users answer the questions, they are given the option to invite any of their friends to take that quiz. The results of the quiz are then displayed, giving the users the choice to either share the results with others or keep them to themselves. Whether the users publish the results or not, the fact that they took a particular quiz would always appear on the user's wall informing others what quizzes they had taken. What makes these quizzes attractive to take, according to the same interviewee, is that they are short, easy to do, and do not take a lot of time to complete. Thus, people do not feel bored taking such quizzes.

Another interesting aspect relating to taking quizzes on Facebook, in addition to being 'something to do for fun', is that the positive results from the quizzes that predict the future make those who take them optimistic and happy about themselves, according to one interviewee. The interviewee also added that the published results from personality quizzes, help people understand each other better and help them to know what kind of people they are dealing with, which in turn facilitates better communication between Facebook members. Overall, however, members did not take the results of the quizzes very seriously:

They (her friends) compare their results with their friends' to laugh at them because mostly they are silly. They do not really trust the results of the quizzes, especially when they feel that there is no scientific base for them – and this is usually the case, because anyone can create quizzes as I said before.

Despite some interviewees' criticisms that the quizzes were not scientifically validated, a waste of time and written by unqualified people who were not skilled or experienced in judging people's personalities, the interviewees still found the quizzes funny and entertaining.

### **Characteristics of Participation in Facebook**

#### ***Self Disclosure and Concerns about Privacy***

Participants do differentiate between the friends they know in the real (offline) world and the friends they meet on Facebook. A 21-year-old student said that relationships were easier to strengthen with friends who were from their offline lives than with virtual ones. According to her, friends from real life have the same lifestyle and share many things with each other. Her

relationships with the friends she knew only from Facebook were limited because of cultural differences. "For example", she said "I don't block my real life friends from seeing my photos, but I block others (virtual friends)". This suggests that this female is conscious about her status as a Muslim woman, is observant of her Arabic cultural values and fearful of the potential danger a stranger may pose to her reputation.

Facebook allows users to accept invitations from friends, or to reject them or ignore the requests altogether. Every one of the female participants in the current study had their own philosophy when it came to accepting invitations from friends. One student said:

I have to know the gender. If she is a female I will accept her immediately whether I know her or not. If he is a male whom I know, I will add him. If not, I will send him a message asking from where he knows me and who is he. If I like him, I will add him. If I don't I won't.

One female noted that when users became friends of others on Facebook, they (the users) were allowed to see the friends who had been added by their friends; the friends' walls and their profiles and all the activities that their friends had undertaken.

The findings of this study indicate that the women interviewed appeared to be conscious about their privacy. Not only were they aware of the security features on Facebook and how to use them to protect their personal information, but they also knew with whom to share their personal information and from whom to hide this information. This suggests that these females are not naïve and trusting of everyone; rather they are aware of the dangers of displaying their photos or other personal information online, like their mobile numbers. For example, one student who was cautious about displaying her personal photos said:

There is no harm in displaying my personal information and photos of me for when I was a young girl<sup>2</sup> and it was ok for the public to see me. However, I can't display my photos at this age because I don't know all the people on Facebook and I don't trust them because I am from a family that teaches me not to give anybody my personal information or my pictures.

These woman's concerns are legitimate because, as outlined earlier, recently the media in Saudi Arabia reported numerous cases of extortion<sup>3</sup> in which male criminals' blackmailed females to either submit to their sexual desires or face the consequences of revealing their photos on the Internet, thereby damaging their families reputations.

On the other hand, two of those interviewed said they had no problem sharing their photos or their personal information with others. Furthermore, data collected from observing three participants' profiles, also showed that these participants displayed their real names, ages, relationship status, personal e-mails and mobile numbers in the personal information section of the Facebook profile. They also displayed their personal photos, family photos, and childhood photos in the photo section of the profile. It is argued that they did so because of the trust they placed in the privacy feature of Facebook. As one of the participants said:

The privacy features in Facebook are really good since we can manage our own privacy and the blocking feature and the various security features are making Facebook a secure community.

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<sup>2</sup> Young girls (depending on how developed their bodies are) don't have to wear the *Abbaya* and headscarf or cover their faces but when they grow up, i.e. 12 or 13 years and above, they ought to. Covering the face, however, is for the female and her family to decide.

<sup>3</sup>This address contains several links to such stories: <http://www.alriyadh.com/search?q=ابتزاز+في+السعودية&signin=+بحث+#result>

The privacy features on Facebook alone, however, are not enough to ensure privacy. The female students in the current study must also trust their friends and their friends' network of friends to maintain their privacy, because without this self-regulatory attitude these friends could easily allow others to access their photos.

### ***Political Participation through Joining Facebook Groups***

One way in which the participants in this study expressed their political views was by joining certain groups on Facebook; groups which are often formed to make a statement about a certain issue. By simply joining a particular group, members can indicate their support for a cause without even having to write a statement. The following comment from a 21-year-old Early Childhood Education student encapsulates the views of the participants in relation to joining groups:

Participating in groups that I like helps me say what I want in an easy way. For example, instead of writing my opinion about a specific thing, there might be a group discussing the same opinion. Therefore, I just become a fan or join that group and in one click I have already expressed my opinion.

To express their opinion further, group members can also post comments on the group's wall. Moreover, anyone can create a group on Facebook; and to make it easy for people to know what a group is all about, Facebook has a feature that makes it possible for groups to be classified into categories.

That these women use Facebook to state their opinions in relation to political matters is interesting because females in Saudi Arabia have been shown to be less interested in discussing politics and public affairs than men (Al-Saggaf 2007). Also, as discussed in detail above, discussing politics in online forums often involves engaging in upfront arguments which are things Saudi women normally try to avoid as these things are not in harmony with the traditions of Arab women (Al-Saggaf 2007). Joining groups on Facebook, however, to make political statements and express opinions regarding public affairs, is not as difficult to do as in political forums, because groups on Facebook consist of members who are friends. Also, given that individuals can express their opinions on Facebook by the simple matter of joining a group, renders Facebook a safe and friendly space for these Saudi women to engage in the public affairs of their country.

### **Effects of Facebook Experience**

Facebook allows its members to engage with each other in some serious discussions. These could be about public affairs, such as women's right to drive cars in Saudi Arabia or personal issues like "would you trust someone who betrayed you before?" for instance. According to one student, however, the majority of people she knew on Facebook were not really interested in serious discussions because their aim in joining Facebook was to have fun and to escape from their real life problems. According to this student, if a particular wall was too serious, they would leave it without even responding or commenting. However, one of the positive outcomes from the discussions on Facebook was an increase in individuals' self-confidence, as noted by another student:

I became more confident after my experience in Facebook because I was able to express my opinion freely and speak without any limitations or restrictions. I also became more sociable than before.

Becoming more sociable, as reported above, is another positive effect of the Facebook experience. As participants logged on to their Facebook accounts on a regular basis, if not

daily, to keep in touch with each other and to take part in social activities, they felt they had become more sociable than before.

The most serious negative effect of participation in Facebook, however, for these young Saudi women, was the amount of time spent online engaged in Facebook-related activities, thereby resulting in serious neglect of their family and studies. One student, who lamented the loss of time on Facebook, admitted that she usually logged on to Facebook to work with her friends on their assignments and projects, but usually ended up chatting with her friends about other things. Spending too much time on Facebook also detracted from the time these individuals spent with their families. A student reflecting on her own experience said that Facebook definitely affected her relationship with her family members, particularly with her mother who would always get angry with her:

My mom gets angry because her daughter does not spend time with her even during mealtime because I usually have my lunch in front of my computer

While two interviewees suggested that Facebook was addictive, three other interviewees did not think so, arguing that all Facebook did was reduce time often spent on other Internet activities. One participant said “Most of them were spending this time on the Messenger anyway. Now they are spending it on Facebook”. This suggests that Facebook did not take time away from other physical activities.

## **Study Findings and the Literature**

The results in this study are not inconsistent with the literature and, in fact, they suggest that young Saudi women are ‘just like everyone else’. That these users join Facebook mainly to maintain strong ties with friends, as this study has shown, has also been reported previously (Boyd & Ellison 2007; Jones et al. 2008; Valenzuela, Park & Kee 2009; Young 2009). That some participants joined Facebook because they were invited by their friends, who already had Facebook accounts, has also been observed by Young (2009). Whilst the participants in the current study reported that they joined Facebook primarily to express their feelings and share their thoughts through using status updates, the participants in Young’s (2009) study did not identify this as a reason to join an SNS. However, her study also showed that 40% of users regularly updated their status on Facebook, in keeping with the current study. In terms of the reasons for maintaining status updates, both the participants in this study and those in the studies by Young (2009) and Jones et al. (2008) reported that they updated their status because they knew their friends were interested in finding out about them and also because they were interested in hearing the reaction to their comments from their friends. Probably because, as Jones et al. (2008) discovered, receiving emotional support from their friends enhanced their self esteem. Finally, although the current study found that people joined SNS to have fun, particularly in the form of taking quizzes, this has not been previously highlighted elsewhere. In fact Young’s (2009) study indicated that SNS were less important as a form of entertainment. It is not clear if this difference is a result of differences in cultural contexts, that is, between Western and Arabic cultures.

Additionally, the current study found that although self-disclosure was common on SNS (as previously established by Jones et al. 2008; Valenzuela, Park & Kee 2009), users also appeared increasingly aware and conscious about their privacy – a result which has also been revealed elsewhere (Boyd & Ellison 2007; Jones et al. 2008; Young 2009). The few differences between the findings of these studies and the present study appear to be, arguably, the result of differences in cultural contexts. Saudi women fear that their personal information, such as photos, could fall into the wrong hands, which could result in serious damage to their family reputations. As reported in recent times in local media outlets, some

Saudi women are subject to sexual coercion by criminals (McElroy 2008) who threaten to release their photos or video clips on the Internet or publicly via Bluetooth on mobiles unless the women submit to their demands. If the women do not comply, the result can cause serious damage to their family's reputation which, as discussed above, is a grave matter in Saudi society. This may not be an issue for women in Western societies.

The current study found that participants expressed their political views simply by joining certain groups on Facebook. However, this finding was not supported elsewhere. While the work by Valenzuela, Park and Kee (2009) found a positive relationship between intensity of Facebook use and political participation, voicing opinions about public affairs through the mere joining of groups was not noted in their study or any other study. It is not clear if this is also the result of differences in cultural contexts between the studies.

With regards to the effects of participation in Facebook, several of the study results are in line with the recent literature. For instance, Young's (2009) study, like the current study, also found that Facebook enhanced participants' social skills. Similarly, both the participants in the present study and those in the study by Jones et al. (2008) reported increased self confidence and self esteem as a result of their participation in SNS. Jones et al. (2008) attributed this increase in self esteem to the emotional support participants received from their friends.

One negative outcome of using Facebook for the young Saudi females was the loss of so much time online. Several researchers like Young (2009), have also noted that SNS users found they spent too much time online. However, whereas the current study found that the time spent online using SNS took away from time spent with family; the recent literature did not support this result. Unlike Western societies where youth above 18 years of age often move out from their parents' houses to attend University or live on their own, in Saudi Arabia children often live with their parents during University and thus their parents inevitably tend to spend more time with them. It would appear that this difference is therefore the result of social and cultural contexts. The finding that participants neglected their studies is also supported by other researchers such as Karpinski and Duberstein (2009), who found a link between lower grades and Facebook.

## **Conclusion**

The study found that the Saudi females used Facebook mainly for three reasons; first to maintain close ties with older friends or to enjoy the company of their newer friends; second, to express their feelings through status updates and by sharing their thoughts with others and by detailing what they have been up to in a given day; and third, to have fun, particularly the fun they derive from taking the quizzes and sharing the results of these quizzes with others. Two interesting themes also transpired from the interviews; one, while self-disclosure was very common among these participants, they appeared to be aware of the danger of displaying their photos on Facebook and as a result were very conscious about their privacy; two, they joined Facebook groups mainly to express their political views about their public affairs. In terms of the effects of their Facebook experience on their lives, while on the positive side, some participants said Facebook made them more sociable and more self-confident, on the negative side, others lamented the loss of too much time which resulted in noticeable neglect of their family and study. While the study revealed positive and negative effects, it is not clear if on balance the positive effects outweighed the negative effects. Only further research will reveal this.

The research findings need to be considered in light of the following limitation: the results are limited to the sample used and cannot be generalised to the population as a whole. In fact,

generalisations were not sought in this study. The aim was to report the perceptions of members at a single university in Saudi Arabia in relation to their experiences using Facebook. Despite the above limitation, this study is significant in that hopefully it will pave the way for future research about the topic. For example, it would be very useful to examine in more depth, why participants join Facebook, what are the salient characteristics of their participation, what are the effects of this participation on their lives and what is the cultural context effect on this participation.

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