Saudi Women Online Practices on Social Media Platforms: A Qualitative Multi-Method Study

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Abstract. This study is a part of an ongoing PhD research into Saudi women's online practices across a number of social media platforms (SMP) (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram). The focus of this thesis is first to discover Saudi women's online practices across different SMP, and second, to explore the relationship between these practices and Saudi women's identities. A qualitative multi-method approach is adopted, including online observations and semi-structured interviews. Following purposive and snowballing sampling, twelve Saudi women from different cities in Saudi Arabia (Jeddah, Riyadh, and Dammam) participated. Initial findings indicate that (a) Saudi women's online practices vary across SMP by appropriating platforms' features and affordances, (b) SMP are used as spaces where Saudi women cautiously manage contexts' collapse and divide with different audiences across SMP, and (c) Saudi women's online practices have reshaped their offline identity and vice versa, and Saudi women's offline identities are represented online as a part of their online identities. Though there is a growing body of literature in HCI, CHI, and CSCW[1] in social media studies within the Arab and Gulf regions (GCC[2]), there is little research addressing Saudi women's online practices on SMP in particular. Therefore, this study aims to make a novel contribution to the field of socio-technological integration, and particularly how cultural contexts shape technology adoption, to help form a greater understanding of the challenges involved.

Keywords: cross-cultures technology adoption; social media platforms; online practices; Saudi women; online identity

1 Statement of contribution

This research extends existing research on technology cultural adoption by users in the Arab and Gulf regions to a more focused and under-tackled topic in the fields of HCI, CHI, and CSCW, specifically, Saudi women's online practices on social media platforms (SMP). The research

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[1] Computer-Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing
[2] Gulf Cooperation Council

investigates how, over time[3], Saudi women's online practices on the Internet in general and on SMP in particular have changed in terms of their (Saudi women's) online representation including veiling and cross-gender communication. It also reveals how the offline/online spheres are continuously confronted and integrated through SMP online practices. In other words, the research explores how online practices on SMP, that is, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, represent different angles of Saudi women's identities (e.g., religious, national).

Moreover, previous studies tackling Saudi women's online practices, to the best of my knowledge, have not covered the diversity of SMP that this study tackles using a multi-methods qualitative approach. Therefore, through different affordances (e.g., interfaces, features), these platforms offer their users various ways to construct their online identity, which pertains to one of the key questions of this study. Meanwhile, a number of HCI, CHI, and CSCW scholars have tackled technology adoption by users in the Arab and GCC regions (see Al-Ani, Mark, & Chung, 2012; Mark, Al-Ani, & Semaan, 2015; Wulf et al., 2013; Al Omoush, Yaseen, & Atwah Alma'Aitah, 2012; Abokhodair, Abbar, Vieweg, & Mejova, 2016; Abokhodair, Hodges, & Vieweg, 2017; Abokhodair & Vieweg, 2016; Vieweg & Hodges, 2016). Hence, the sociological perspective, namely, digital sociology (e.g., Lupton, D., 2014) is overlooked. Therefore, examining the interrelationships between the social aspects and the technological features would fill the gap of further investigation into Arab and GCC users' technology adoption. Considering the dominant western contexts in these fields - HCI, CHI, and CSCW - this study aims to enrich the existing scholarly literature with a non-western cultural context: Saudi women.

2 Research Summary

2.1 Aim and Objectives

Saudi women who use social media platforms are the focus of this research, which aims to discover Saudi women's online practices on and across different SMP (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram), and to explore the relationship between these practices and Saudi women's identities. The two primary objectives of this study include: (1) discover

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[3] The average of participants' online experience is 14 years

Saudi women's online practices across different SMP, and (2) explore the relationship between these practices and Saudi women's identities.

2.2   Methodology

A qualitative multi-method approach is adopted. Regarding sampling, twelve Saudi women from different cities in Saudi Arabia (Jeddah, Riyadh, and Dammam) were recruited via purposive and snowball sampling. Two data collection methods were adopted: online observation in the form of netnography (Kozinets, 2015) and semi-structured interviews (King & Horrocks, 2010). The online observation techniques can be summarised as follows: (a) I created a researcher's account on the SMP which my participants authorized me to follow, and then I observed those SMP on both a daily and a weekly basis, (b) I took screenshots and saved pdf files of participants' online practices on these SMP, and (c) I kept a netnographer e-journal (on Evernote IOS app[4]) to log my notes following participants' online practices. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in two stages: the first interview and then a follow-up one, both face-to-face, via Skype or the phone, conditional to participants' and the researcher's availability. Regarding the analysis, two methods are applied: thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2013) for the textual-interview data, and Kozinets' analytical coding (Kozinets, 2015) for the visual-online observation data. A pilot study was conducted between March and September 2015, to test the data collection and analysis techniques, and the second phase of data collection took place between February 2016 and April 2017.

3   Initial findings

3.1   Audience awareness/Context-collapse

Though several studies (Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Sibona, 2014; Vitak, Lampe, Gray, & Ellison, 2012) have focused on audiences' and contexts' divide/collapse, they have considered the case of Saudi users in general, while the case of Saudi women is distinctive. For instance, if the audiences' segregation is between academic-non-academic or family-friends in western contexts, the case of Saudi culture is more complicated. Saudi women are aware of online audiences where their online practices adhere to social censorship, and they are aware of how

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[4] https://evernote.com

their practices may be judged culturally as taboos, such as veiling, or expressing controversial opinions, e.g., political or religious views. Audience awareness evolves from the online societal pressure/censorship (Saudi online society) towards participants' online practices, and how these align with the heritage and reputation of participants' families. This applies to all SMP which participants are active on, and through participants' longitudinal online experience on these spaces[5].

3.2 Scalable privacy; scalable sociality

One of the few studies which have scoped how cross-cultural adoptions of SMP differ is by Miller et al. (2015), who coined the term 'scalable sociality', which, they said, was 'employed to differentiate platforms as more private or more public sites for socializing' and further stated that 'each of these platforms corresponds to a position of greater or lesser privacy and smaller or larger groups' (Miller et al., 2015, pp. xvii- 5). Similarly, the case of my initial findings echoes the findings of Miller et al. (2015) where SMP's classifications of private-public and privacy settings - in the context of Saudi women - differ across different platforms. Results have scoped how Saudi women consume SMP as a scalable sociality where Twitter, for example, is considered public, Facebook semi-public, and Instagram private. These different platforms are practices in different online spaces, where Saudi women's online identities and representations differ in their online representation (e.g., profile pictures, biographies and headers pictures).

4 Discussion

The findings extend the previously highlighted scholarly literature by asserting that online identities are shaped through the difference between SMP interfaces (van Dijck, 2013). Indeed, the variation of self-representation across different SMP echoes Goffman's original framework - as an explanatory framework - to understand identity through interaction and the presentation of self in the online world (Bullingham & Vasconcelos 2013). To conclude, what is being represented in this extended abstract is only snippets of the data analysis; thesis submission is expected to be between April and June 2018. Thus,

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[5] As mentioned previously: the average of participants' online experience is 14 years

the researcher aims to bring richer scrutiny of the relationship between
Saudi women's online and offline identity facets.

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