UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE BY FEMALES IN SAUDI ARABIA: A DESCRIPTIVE FINDING

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ABSTRACT

Recently, Social Media (SM) platforms are not only functioned for entertainment but also for the exchange of information, collaboration and overcoming of cultural boundaries. Social media can provide many opportunities to Saudi females who are faced with many cultural boundaries such as unemployment and segregation between genders. However, the use of SM by Saudi females is still lesser than that of Saudi male. Few studies have yet investigated the involvement of Saudi females in SM. This study was conducted to determine the effects of SM on Saudi females. A comprehensive online survey was conducted and 632 valid responses were collected from Saudi females. Saudi females use SM to spend their spare time or for entertainment, to stay up-to-date with news and current events and to connect with friends and family. The study reveals a low percentage of SM use among Saudi females for business purposes. The finding also show that SM is potential to play a significant role in empowering the life of Saudi females at early age hence more effort should be undertaken to encourage more uptake of SM for business and commerce regardless of gender.

Key Words: Social media, Saudi Arabia, females, data screening

1.   INTRODUCTION

Saudi Arabia has accomplished great success in the deployment of Information Communication Technology (ICT) services, as it provides Internet services to everyone in Saudi Arabia despite its large size and the wide distribution of its population [1].

With around 31.85 million Saudi population in 2016, the number of active Internet users in Saudi Arabia has continued to rise rapidly, reaching around 20.29 million, or63.7% of the total population [2]. In addition, there are11 million active SM users in Saudi Arabia, which is 34.53% of the total population [2]. The most popular services are Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Google+, and LinkedIn[2]. In Saudi Arabia, SM applications have become the leading online technology [3].

Females are generally considered as secondary importance, especially in third world countries in regard to the engagement with SM [4]. Saudi females are faced with many cultural boundaries [4] such as gender segregation and high levels of unemployment. Social behavior is also significantly affected by religion. As Saudi Arabia is an Islamic state, gender segregation is a legal requirement. It is normal that members of the different genders do not interact with each other in public places, such as in educational institutions or the workplace [5]. However, there is no restriction on communication by means of technological devices [6]. Thus, SM is regarded as an appropriate tool for communication and cooperation between the male and female population throughout the country [6]. Saudi females feel more comfortable contacting the opposite sex if they know that it has not seen as going against their beliefs or moral standards. This may happen in various areas, including education [6]. SM also help Saudi females to express their opinions freely. A research by [7] showed that SM applications have had a significant impact in Saudi Arabia on both women and men because they enable them to become more relaxed when debating and expressing different viewpoints. For instance, Saudi women who rely extensively on SM to support her in a governmental project are able to get feedback from the electorate [8].

In Saudi Arabia, 50% of its citizens with college education who hold degrees are females, yet, due to the conservative culture, exceptionally more females are unemployed compared to the male group [9]. SM offer Saudi females the possibility to work. One of the most popular online services, Instagram, facilitates females in conducting different and creative initiatives to promote and trade online. Any woman is able to apply her skills in whatever area she excels such as sewing, cooking, arts, knitting, decorating, or planning events. This way, she is able to develop a business that can help her become more independent and gain greater control over her life [9]. SM facilitates the entry of Saudi female into the labour force, where they can market their handmade products online [10]. It enables them to conduct their work while maintaining their privacy and safety, as well as work from home. In addition, running a business through SM applications is more cost-effective than starting up a physical store [10]. According to a study by [11],83% of Saudi females consider that SM has improved civil

sharing within the community, and 93% of Saudi females believe that SM has enhanced their ability to transfer their thoughts to society. Therefore, Saudi females have more reasons for using SM than males, as it enables them to overcome the social and cultural barriers they encounter in a Saudi society [4].

The Saudi culture in relation to females is completely different from other countries. Saudi females are faced with many cultural boundaries such as family, political, etc. [4] segregation between genders, and the society is extremely conservative [7, 6]. Consequently, there are still several unresolved issues that need to be addressed pertaining to Saudi females adopting SM. Therefore, it is important to involve Saudi females in SM use in order to help overcome cultural boundaries so that they might benefit from the latest technology. Most of the studies that have previously been conducted on SM engagement collected data from countries such as the US [12]. Cultural diversity among countries is considered a significant problem in the acceptance of computer application [13].This is because problems that might seem trivial for developed countries could be serious in developing countries. However, few studies in the literature discussed the role of Saudi females in SM [10]. In fact, there has been only one study [14] on Saudi females' use of Facebook that examined the effect of SM on this particular population. The study used semi-structured interviews, and it found that Saudi females utilized Facebook for social purposes, such as to maintain relationships with family or friends, as well as to express and share their ideas and feelings with others. Therefore, in order to bridge the aforementioned gap, this study was conducted to determine the use of SM among Saudi females.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1   Technology Acceptance Factors

Based on a review of SM acceptance literature, Perceived Ease of Use and social influence, are the most validated factors that affect users' acceptance and use of SM [15].Technology acceptance factors were developed to study computer-based technology, and they have been applied extensively in previous studies on SM acceptance [12, 16, 17] Thus, technology acceptance factors are convenient to be applied into the study of social co-creation acceptance as a related field to SM acceptance. Overall, the present study aims to test the relevance of technology acceptance factors within a new technological context, such as social co-creation. This will lead to the realization of acceptance determinants of social co-creation. Social influence is the most common variable found in acceptance theories and models which highlights the importance of SI regarding users' acceptance of new technology. Many studies

found that Social influence has a positive affected on user intention to use SM directly and indirectly [12, 17].

2.2   Related Demographic Element

In regard to social influence, females arefound to be influenced by people's opinions to accept a new technology [18].In addition, it is also proven that perceived ease of use has more effect on females in the short term more than males [19]. Gender differences are considered as an important factor to determine decision-making when using new technology [18].

Another demographic perspective, many scholars found that customers' experiences plays a significant role in motivating users into using the technology [20]. However, SM acceptance studies have neglected important customers' experiences factors that may impact SM acceptance behaviors.

Therefore the scope of the current study focuses on the descriptive demographic findings regarding females group with regard to SM acceptance.

2.3   Objective of the Study

The primary objective of this paper is to address the following questions in order to determine the effects of SM on Saudi females.

- At what age do Saudi females start using SM?
- What are the most common purposes of Saudifemales to use SM?
- Are Saudi females nowadays utilizing SM for business?
- Does SM empower the role of Saudi females? If so, in what aspects?

3. METHODOLOGY

The study was performed as an online survey using the site www.google.com/forms/ to design the questionnaire. To increase the response rate of the SM participants, the study was placed as a survey link on the Instagram accounts of 20 famous females in Saudi Arabia. These accounts were chosen because of their popularity. At any time during two months, potential participants could respond to the online survey by entering the link provided on the message.

4.   ANALYSIS

Thus, the current study conducted the data screening of the missing data, outliers and normality by using SPSS 23.

4.1   Missing Data

The study was performed as an online survey using the site www.google.com/forms/ to design the questionnaire. This research avoided missing data by setting up the software in such a way that the respondents cannot continue to the next questions without answering the prior question. Therefore, the survey had no missing data.

4.2   Outliers Test

During this stage, outliers are identified in box plots as shown in Figure 1.The purpose of Box plot diagram is that uses in determining the maximum value and minimum value beyond which any data lying will be considered as outliers.
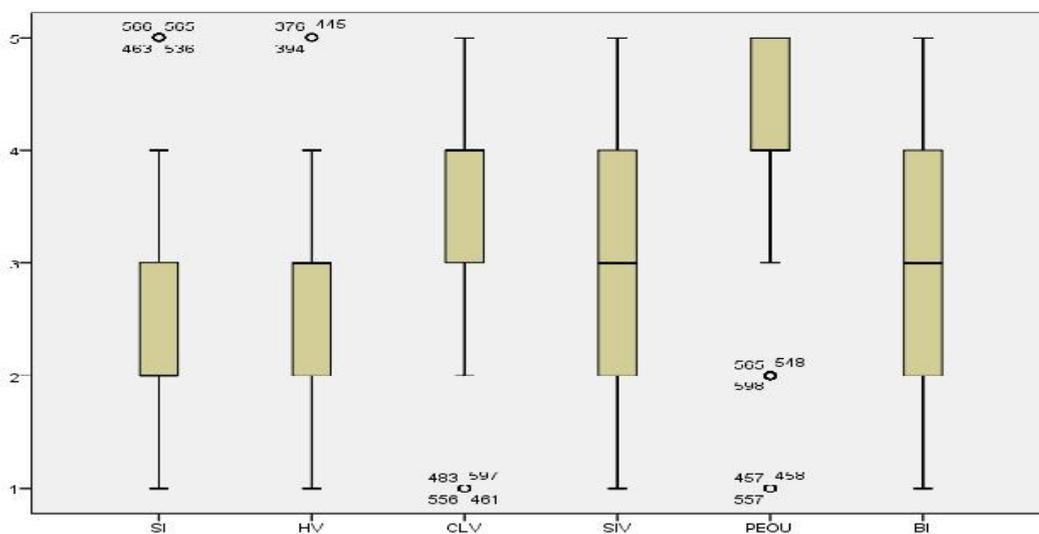

Fig.1. Inbox Plot

Aguinis, Gottfredson and Joo[21] suggest that there are two main techniques of handling outliers. The first technique is trimming by removing the case and second technique is winsorising by assigning outlier the next highest or lowest value found in the sample that is not an outlier. This study follows the second technique. After outliers test, there were 632 responses for the main analysis.

4.3   Data Normality Test

The normal distribution is examined by Kurtosis test and the distribution balance is examined by Skewness test [22]. The Kurtosis and Skewness test is where $\pm$ 2.58 is the critical value [22]. The study findings indicate that all Items in model were normally distributed.

5.   RESULT

5.1   Respondents' Profile and Characteristics

The data collected included information about the demographics. Two demographic variables were used as the acceptance criteria, namely gender and nationality. A data selecting process was conducted and out of 746 completed questionnaires, 114 had to be discarded as the respondent was either non-Saudis or males. The final usable data came from 632 questionnaires. These data were used to attain the study aims. The demographic variables used were age, occupation and education level, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Demographics of the survey respondents (N=632)

Demographic	Percentage	Item
Age	38.4 %	Under 20
	43.4 %	20 to 30
	14.5 %	31 to 40
	3.3 %	41 to 50
	0.5 %	51 or over
Total	100%	632
Education	13.13%	Lower Than High School
	34.02%	High school
	43.51%	Bachelor's degree
	5.1%	Master's degree
	1.42%	Doctoral degree
	2.85%	Other
Total	100%	632
Occupation	59.0%	Student
	9.5%	Employee-government firm
	3.5%	Employee-private firm
	1.0%	Employed
	25.5%	Unemployed
	2.4%	Others
Total	100%	632

5.2   Age

Regarding the respondents, 38.4 % were less than 20 years old, 43.4 % were between 20 and 30 years old, 14.5 % were between31 and 40 years old, 3.3 % were between 41 and 50 years old, and 0.5% were51 years or over.   The results are encouraging in that most of the SM users were young. This result coincides with the results of a survey conducted in 2013 that found the age groups that most used Facebook in Saudi Arabia were the 26-34 and 18-20 year olds[23]. Perhaps most Saudis who use SM are young because it frees them from societal restrictions and allows them to express themselves and interact with their community [4]. Therefore, SM is a suitable platform to reach young customers.

5.3   Education

In terms of educational qualifications, the largest number of SM users held Bachelor's degrees, 43.51%, followed by high school, 34.02%, less than high school, 13.13%, a Master's degree, 5.1%, and a Doctoral degree, 1.42% with' other' making up the final 2.85%. The result indicate that the most of Saudi females who use SM held the Bachelor's degrees. This result might be because the most of Saudis haveBachelor's degrees.

5.4   Occupation

Regarding their occupation, the study showed that 59.0% of the respondents were students. This group was followed by the unemployed, 25.47%, then by employees in government sector, 9.5%, employees in private firms, 3.5%, the employed 1.0% and 'others'2.4%. The cause could be that the SM attract the young Saudi as students whereas the unemployed have free time to spent on SM that consider also effective platform to create their job.

5.5   The Age at Which Female Saudis Start to Use SM

In regard to the age, this study found that the females groupstart to use SM from an early age. The results showed that 33.23% of Saudisfemale started to use SM when they were between10 and15 years of age, 26.58% started using SM when they were between16 and 20 years, 18.2% started to use SM when they were between21 and 25 years, 8.54% started to use SM between26 and30 years of age, and 6.33% of female Saudis started to use SM when they were 31 years or older as shown in Figure 2.

This suggests that females potentially enjoy using SM early in life. The cause could be that the Internet is available in all Saudi cities thus this result confirms the prior studies that claimed the SM could attract the young Saudi [4].
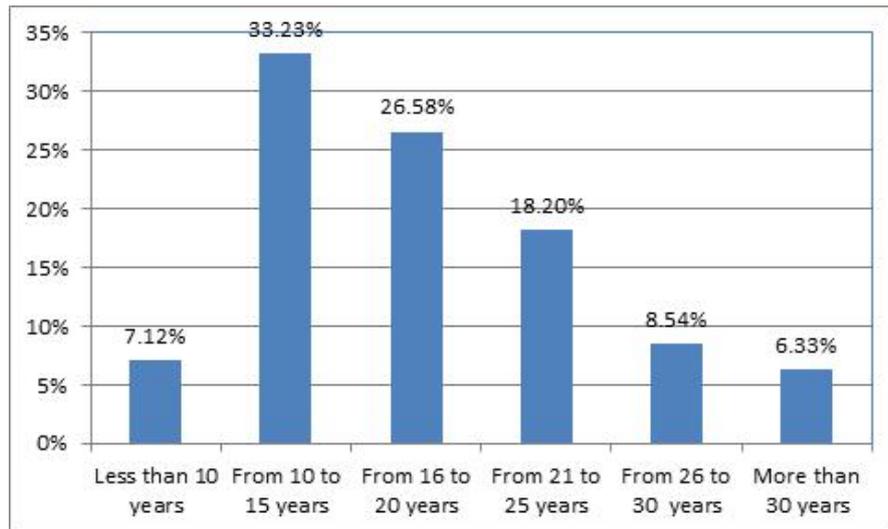
Fig.2. Age Group

5.6   Reasons Given for SM Usage by Saudi Females

The study finding regarding the reasons for SM used by Saudi females shows that 69.15% of female Saudis use SM to fill up their spare time or for entertainment, 61.55% use it to stay up-to-date with news and current events, 53.64% use it to connect with friends and family, 12.66% use it to make new friends, 22.31% use it to share photos or videos and the details of their daily life with others, 20.25% use it to express their opinions, 9.65% use it to discuss various issues with the opposite gender without needing to mix, 29.11% use it to see new products,18.83% use it to buy new products and 5.10% use it to display their products or to connect with their customers as shown in Figure 3.

These results indicate that the percentage of female Saudis using SM for entertainment, keeping up-to-date with news and current events and for social purposes is much higher than the percentage of female Saudis using it for business purposes.

These results coincide with the results of a survey conducted by [4],which found that 87.6% of Saudis use SM to maintain in contact with their family members and friends, but 22.1% of Saudis also use SM for business activities to target and reach new customers, and 21% use it to build strong relationships with their current customers. Perhaps, the percentage using SM for business is not as high because most of the respondents were students, unemployed or young.
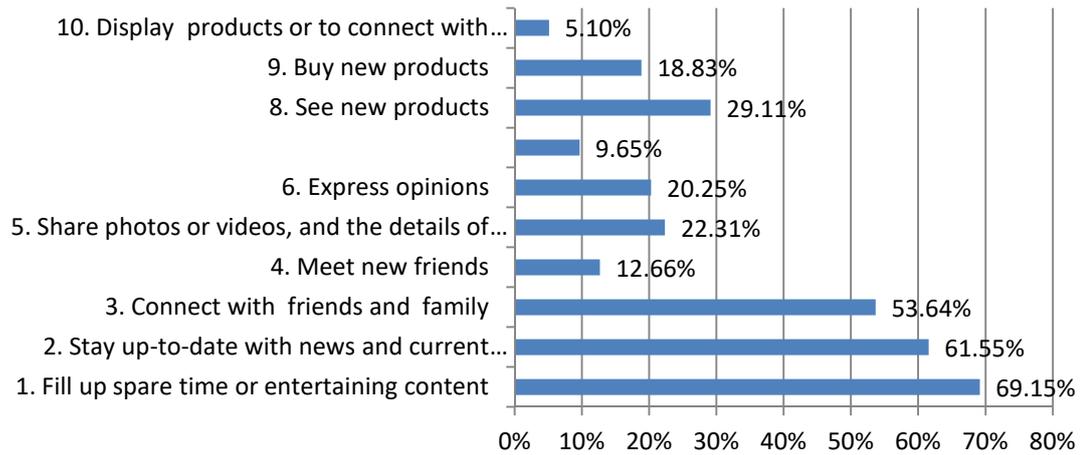
Fig.3. Purpose of SM Usage among Saudi Females

6.   CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

The study investigated the impact of SM on Saudi females. They use SM at an early age, and it becomes part of their life. The study revealed that most female Saudis start to use SM at a young age. Moreover, the most common purposes for Saudi females to use SM are entertainment and communication with their familyand friends. However, the use of SM for other purposes is lower, such as business and political. The findings point a need for a thorough understanding of the obstacles to using SM in business, so that its use in business can be further increased. In conclusion, SM empowers Saudi female to achieve their aims, without any boundaries. It is worthy to carry out future studies involving interviews with respondents, as this could help to provide a greater understanding of the motivations and obstacles in usingSM in business in Saudi Arabia. SM is considered the most successful tool to increase females' awareness and culture, especially youngerfemales. Therefore, this study recommends that the Saudi government should encourage SM use among females for commerce as well as in different fields such as learning and health.

7.   ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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