

# Examining the level of trust of Saudis towards the Social Media

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**Abstract:** - It is a known fact that Saudis make very heavy use of all types of information technologies, especially smartphone texting and social media socializing. The question is what are the deeper qualities of this behavior and how do they impact the Saudi society overall. This is one part of the study of Social Media impact in Saudi Arabia and is focusing on the motives or obstacles for revealing, or not, one's true identity over the social networks. The results of this preliminary qualitative study suggest Saudis are reluctant to accept the motivations for such an action but they don't seem to agree with the proved concerns related to the threads associated with it.

**Key-Words:** *Social Media, Identity Disclosure, Motives and Obstacles, Saudi Arabia*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The evolution of the Internet from a simple Bulletin Board System (BBS) where users can exchange software, data, messages, and news, to a widely and heavily used social multi network system, unearthed the growing necessity of the societies to communicate better and faster in different ways [1].

Nothing seems powerful enough to stop the proliferation of social media among Internet users. Even the famous digital divide issues didn't block the adoption of social media technologies in large numbers like in the case of Egypt and elsewhere with the well-known social and political transformations. Of course this is not the case for underdeveloped countries like Afghanistan or Iraq, for example, as Stepanova suggested. Clearly, there is a given impact of the use of social media in every country's identity deriving from the above granted transformations [2].

The social media influence on large masses of population worldwide make evident the great power of these online communication tools on individuals. Consequently, justified concerns have been emerged from social media challenges that need to be dealt with [3]. It goes without saying that every nation is a special case in the field of social media impact in its societies with similarities and differences closely related to their current social and political scene. Saudi could be thought of as a special case in this manner particularly so because of its leading social media usage penetration numbers.

## II. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Revealing one's true identity over Social Media lurks some serious fears for person privacy breach, justified or not. This

second part of a comprehensive preliminary study of Social Media use and impact in Saudi Arabia aims to reveal those fears but, also, emphasize Saudis' enthusiasm in using social media. The goal is to provide a general picture of the level of trust of Saudis on the Social Media. The main objectives are to address the following questions:

-What is the current perception of Saudis on the benefits of revealing their true identity over social media?

-What are the reasons that would discourage them to reveal their true identity over social media?

-How does Internet usage affect this level of trust (or lack of it)?

## III. LITERATURE REVIEW

The issue of the true identity disclosure in social media has attracted a great deal of attention especially the past decade or so. Social media applications like "Facebook" or "Goggle+" insist on their policy of true identity usage but others have more loosened attitude on the matter. The concept of using the real names is seemingly attached to the effort of those social media to model real world social space as accurately as can be. On the other hand, and for security, cultural, social, personal privacy or other reasons the usage of pseudonyms prevent public opinion from been attached in one's real identity which seems to be more convenient [4]. Moreover extraverted personalities tend to engage more in social media use than introverted personalities. This is especially so in the case of those media that do not provide anonymity options [5].

Additionally, according to Livingstone, self-actualization is a social process that includes more and more a careful negotiation between risks and opportunities afforded by Internet mediated communication. By risks she refers to privacy, misunderstandings or abuse issues and by relative opportunities to building one's personal identity, intimacy and improved socializing. She was especially focused in teenagers, willing to point out the turning phase from a stylistically elaborate fake online identity choice to a more authentic online self-exposure. In the first case, younger teenagers exposed an attitude of playing with their fake identity online. In the second case, however, teenagers of an older age tended to care more about creating authentic relations deciding to reveal online their real and aesthetic identity [6].

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A later research showed an effort to balance the new opportunities associated with the use of social media and the new risks that need to be tackled through increased social media literacy especially focused on the more vulnerable youngsters. Online bullying, privacy exposure, harassment, reputation damage, violent behavior, racist attacks are some of the potential risks for the social media user [7].

For example in UAE youth community the revealing of true identity lurks some great risks like identity theft, personal info exploitation, reputation damage and abuse. The responsible attitude of the whole community should be to establish mechanisms for measuring the risks by monitoring, evaluating, educating youngsters on the potential dangers of using social media and take safety measures. That way the community will benefit more from social media by making socializing easier regardless of time and distance, finding new professional orientations and freeing themselves for the need to hide one's true identity [8].

Regardless of the age of a social user, the more frequent the social media engagement the larger the social influence on the user. Online social presence depends on the level of users' social disclosure and, thus, identity exposure. Personal identity disclosure determines the kind of relationships formed between social media users [1]. Constant social online presence seems to be more and more important for social media users and especially to those who want to enjoy commercial benefits [9].

It is, however, rather possible for this process of building an online identity to be disrupted because of social media usage drawbacks arising fears concerning privacy, security and freedom of expression due to special political conditions [10]. The policy and design of social networking sites have different impacts on different countries due to cultural, religious, social or other particularities particularly because of the variety of ways these fears are addressed in different regions [1]. Add to this another issue concerning the overuse of the social media that is individuals run the serious risk to forget the importance of the real world and have just a little or even no desire for building an identity offline [11].

If revealing one's true identity online is considered a requirement to maintain a transparent and safe environment for all social media users then a common ground could be for all stakeholders to respect the privacy and security rights of every individual online. Of course there is no easy solution to that problem and the gap between the interests of the governments, the industry and the users is still wide open [12].

#### IV. METHODOLOGY

This is the second part of the study of the impact of social impact in everyday life and activities in Saudi Arabia. It is qualitative in nature and focused in discussing the reasons that individuals in the country would reveal (if at all) their

true identity on the social networks or their main concerns blocking such a thought.

After the initial contacts necessary to test the online questionnaire (20 individuals), like in the first part, a full-scale survey followed and deployed during a period of three months (from March till June of 2013) and 596 individuals agreed to participate in it either offline through personal face-to-face interviews or through an online survey using Google docs. The sample size is considered as appropriate enough as this is only a part of a larger study that includes more countries of the Golf area as already mentioned earlier.

The authors had to do some "cleaning" of the responses since a very significant number of them were given by people not residing in Saudi Arabia but in other countries of the GCC and, also, in North African countries and even in U.S.A. and E.U. This was necessary so as to avoid the distortion of the data that was planned to involve only Saudi Arabia residents for this part of the study.

The final set of data for this part of the study included 394 responses from Saudis. Those individuals mainly under 45 years old accepted to contribute to this research. Indeed, 385 of the participants revealed their age and of those 18 were less than 18 years old (4.6%), 169 were between 18 and 25 (42.9%), some 110 were in the range of 26-35 (27.9%), 59 more were 36-45 (15%), another 24 between 46 and 60 (6.1%) and, finally, 5 were the elders, i.e. older than 60 years old (1.3%). As to the gender the sample is, actually, quite balanced, as 49% were male (192/392) and 50.5% were female (199/392). The majority (222/386 individuals; 56.3%), as expected, has an undergraduate degree; some 49 more (12.4%) hold a graduate degree and 13/386 (3.3%) are with a Ph.D. Just 1 individual finished the elementary school (0.3%) and only 6 finished the intermediate school (1.5%). A considerable 67/386 of the sample got a secondary school diploma (17%) and 27 more (6.9%) any other type of diploma. There were also 2 persons that did not want to say or could not say (0.5%).

The main part of the sample population included those employed (186/383 responses; 47.2%) followed closely by the students (138/383; 35%). A small 6.3% (25/383 individuals) are unemployed and a quite similar 6.1% (24/383) declared housewives. Just 10 are retired from work (2.5%). Different types of professions were identified as those of the participants, including medical/nursing, education, technology, linguistics, financial, cultural/religious, management, trade, public services and military. Each of these had a share of between 2% and 4.6% except those in education (probably students included) with a 17.5% and those in management with 8.1%.

Finally, as to the use of Internet in general, 363 individuals accepted to reveal the frequency of their use. The majority 48.5% (191/363) admitted using the Internet always, at all times and everyday, a large 30.5% (120/363) reported using it "a lot" everyday, just less than 10% (38/363 individuals; 9.6%) use it "often", only 2%, 0.3%,

1% and 0.3% use it “a little”, “rarely”, “only for emails” or “never”.

This sample, though relatively small, provides a feeling of consistency as to the actual population and is good enough to provide quality results given this is a preliminary study of exploratory nature and suggestive of general trends in the country. The final set of data was processed through SPSS 20 for Mac for statistical calculations necessary mainly cross-tabulations and analysis of variance (ANOVA), and MS Excel 2011 for Mac was used to provide quality charts used to interpret the results.

## V. FINDINGS

### A. Low levels of trust on Social Networks

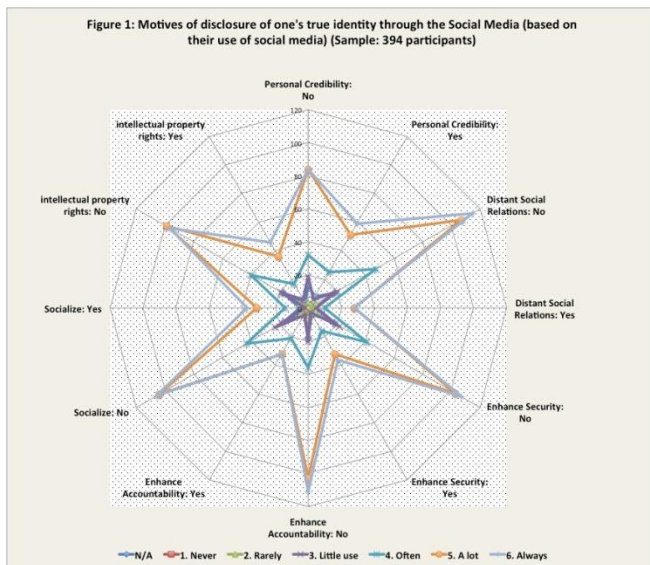


Fig. 1 Reasons for revealing true identity on the Social Media.

The participants of the study were asked, as mentioned earlier, for the reasons they would be willing to reveal their true identify on the Social Media. Figure 1 illustrates their answers on the issue cross-tabulated with their answers on how much use of the social networks they make. 394 individuals contributed to this particular question.

In the case of those who “use often”, “a lot” or “always” the social networks although one might, normally, expect that they might reveal their true identity to benefit from certain added values that the media provide to each individual involved, as suggested to them (see figure 1), the indications are far from this expectation. Indeed and on average the majority 59% (200/394) of them refuse they would reveal their true identity to gain personal credibility, an overwhelming part of the sample, i.e. 80.7% (269/394) stated they would not do it just to maintain their distant social relations, a vast 74.4% do not find it necessary in order to enhance their feeling of security online (251/394), a similar 72.4% (250/394) don’t believe that revealing true identity improves and enhances their personal accountability on the social networks. Even more

interestingly 75.5% of the respondents (253/394) don’t agree that showing their true identity over the social media improves their socializing online and another 70.4% (236/394) don’t see it as a means to protect their intellectual property online.

In the case of those that “never” use the social networks or use them “rarely” or “a little” the statistics show a slight shift towards even more negative answers although not a very significant one since anyway the overall negative feeling and attitude is overwhelmingly high regardless of the specifics of age, gender, financial situation, education, employment status, profession, Internet use as deeper analysis of the statistics prove (available upon request).

### B. Limited concerns about threads

The participants of the study were, also, asked about their concerns associated with the possibility of revealing their true identity over the social networks. At this point a number of rather negative issues were suggested to them aiming to find their feelings related to them as obstacles on the matter. Figure 2 illustrates vividly their responses of the 394 participants that agreed to contribute their thoughts and feelings.

It was to the surprise of the researchers that the three issues that one would expect to cause problems in one’s decision to reveal his/her true identity over the social media, given the particular nature of the Saudi society, i.e. cultural issues, social issues and religious issues are exactly those that do not seem to affect at all the local individuals decision on the matter. Indeed, in the case of those who make very heavy use of the social media in the country, i.e. use it “often”, “a lot” or “always” the overwhelming majority 77.9% (259/293) on average do not agree that their culture dictates they should hide their identity online, even more (84.1%, 283/394) refuse their society is against this action and, quite suprisingly, 87.7% (295/394) see the extremely conservative nature of their religion is not a burden for such behavior at all.

Concerning more technical issues/obstacles that is online bullying, identity theft and age restrictions the pattern only generally shifts towards slightly more rejection of the fear of the suggested threads. On average 74.1% are not afraid of online bullying (247/394), a huge 88.2% (293/394) are not worried for identity theft and almost none recognizes age restriction as a problem. To make a long story short the pattern is very similar in other more personal but less technical suggested threads as are the “low self-esteem”, the “fear of exploitation and abuse” and possible “regrets for uploading personal material e.g. audio, video, pictures, etc. on the social media” which, on average, cause worries to only between 69% and 79% of the sample population.

In all the above cases the pattern remains almost the same only slightly moves towards more rejection of the suggested issues as threads.

The only issues that seem to bring a balance and a dispute between the Saudis that are really concerned and those who are not are those of personal privacy (56.1%, 188/394) and the fear of reputation damage (51%, 167/394). Once again the difference between those who make heavy use of the social media and those who don't is statistically insignificant.

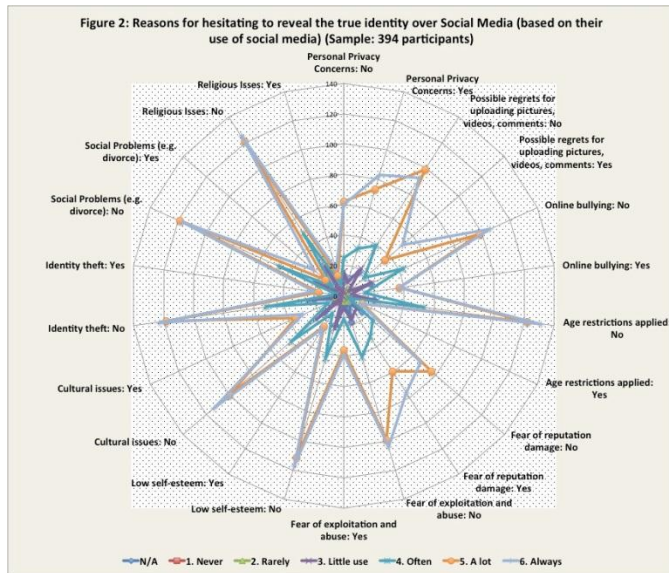


Fig. 2 Reasons for hesitating to reveal the true identity online

## VI. DISCUSSION-CONCLUSIONS

It is well known that Saudis make very heavy use of every type of information technology to the point of having jokes like “the most loved sports of the Saudis, after car racing, is texting and socializing online”. This does not mean, however, that their level of computer and Internet literacy is such, yet, as to allow them to deeply appreciate the benefits and the threads, if any, of such behaviors. This non-assumption is necessary in order to make clear that, although the researchers made every possible effort to explain, as thoroughly as possible, the suggested issues in favor and/or against the idea of revealing one’s true identity on the Social networks, it remains uncertain whether the respondents of this study were fully aware of the matters at hand.

That said and given the fact this is only a preliminary study, a part of it rather, there are 2 distinct suggestions that can be made easily. The first quick but safe conclusion based on the above stats (and others not provided here for economy of space) is simply that although the vast majority of the Saudis are making very heavy use of the social media, however, also the vast majority of them do not trust them enough to reveal their true identity regardless of the possible motives ones would suggest they might have.

This, as negative as it might seem at first, is not really discouraging for the future of the online communities of the social networks given the short life of these communities so far, i.e. no more than 10 years and some of them even less

than a couple of years. It should only be taken as a recommendation to the admins of these communities to work more on improving the online environments and provide to their members a enhanced sense of security aiming to just increase the number of the individual members with a positive attitude towards the idea of revealing their true identity over these networks.

The second conclusion, rather contradicting with the aforementioned first one could say, seems to be that Saudis do not feel any particular thread from their engagement in the Social Networks apart, to some extent and to half the online population, from some personal privacy and fear of reputation damage concerns.

More work is needed on the subject of course. This is only a first effort to delve deeper on the matter of social media impact in Saudi Arabia and is only one part of it.

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