

# Cultural Adoption Through Online Practices Across Social Media Platforms: The Case of Saudi Women

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## Abstract:

*This article reports ongoing qualitative research into Saudi women's online practices across several social media platforms (SMP). It is based on eight semi-structured interviews conducted between March and September 2015 with four Saudi women from different cities in Saudi Arabia. This work's findings address the knowledge gap between the accelerating consumption of SMP and the limited existing scholarly literature to understand empirically the relationship between Saudi women's online practices and the changes in Saudi culture in terms of values, norms and traditions, such as veiling and cross-gender communication.*

## Keywords:

*identity, Muslim women, social media, gender, Saudi Arabia*

## Introduction

Since the launch of the Internet in Saudi Arabia in 1998 (Al-Tawil 2001), the country has gone through enormous transitions (Kuppuswamy and Rekha 2015). Taking into account that Saudi society is extremely conservative, several studies of Saudi women's online practices have focused on how virtual communities have eroded several Saudi cultural norms, for example, how the absence of formal gender segregation on social media has enabled Saudi women to build online relationships with men (Al-Saggaf 2004) and how online forums and social media platforms (SMP) have become spaces for self-expression, resistance, and demands for Saudi women's rights (e.g., in relation to driving) (Tønnessen 2016). Saudi women's advocacy online accompanied and were a part of offline changes, such as legal issues and domestic abuse (Eum 2013)<sup>1</sup>. For example, a royal decree on September 26, 2017 lifted the ban on Saudi women driving (Chulov 2017), and this is seen

by SMP users as a victory for Saudi women's online campaign throughout 2011 and 2012 via the hashtag #women2drive (Hubbard 2017). Since then, the #Endguardianship Twitter campaign has exceeded 800 days,<sup>2</sup> at which point a royal decree recommended the repeal of guardianship law (Oliphant 2017). At the time of writing, the Saudi Consultative Assembly was debating the first proposal to end guardianship law on Saudi women (Alshomrani 2018).

The present study explores how SMP practices are challenging existing Saudi cultural norms, values and traditions. For Saudi women interacting online, certain highly restricted social norms are becoming more relaxed. For example, removing the niqab or hijab is becoming more acceptable and tolerated in online images of social media participants. The objectives of this study are therefore two-fold, to examine: (1) how Saudi women adopt SMP in terms of their cultural context (norms, values, and traditions), and (2) how SMP have re-shaped aspects of Saudi cultural norms, that is, veiling and cross-gender communication. Existing research on SMP consumption by Saudi users utilize quantitative methods such as questionnaires (see for example: Al-Khalifa et al. 2012; Shahzad et al. 2014; Xanthidis and Alali 2016). Only a few studies have adopted a qualitative approach to gather information on Saudi women's SMP consumption and behavior (Bourdeloie et al. 2017; Alsaggaf 2015; Karolak and Guta 2015; Asadi 2011; Hayat 2014). Therefore, the goal of this article is to contribute to this line of research and to introduce it into the more mono-dimensional studies of women's online social media use in Saudi Arabia

Moreover, this work seeks to bridge the gap between computer science approaches and sociological perspectives in tackling cultural adoption and appropriation in online activity. It underscores the importance of studying digital phenomena from a sociological perspective - Digital Sociology (DS) (Wynn 2009) - rather than squarely within Human-Computer Interaction or Human Factors in Computing Systems (Sauter 2013; Wynn 2009; Knoblauch 2014). Although there is a growing body of research in Human-Computer Interaction and Computer-Supported Cooperative Work on social media adoption by Saudi users (Vieweg and Hodges 2016; Vieweg

et al. 2015; Abokhodair and Vieweg 2016; Abokhodair et al. 2017), their primary intended contributions relate to how software developers should re-consider privacy design in cross-cultural contexts. This study's concern lies beyond design and programming; it focuses on how Saudi women adopt SMP *vis-à-vis* their religious and cultural norms and values by setting different boundaries in different SMP to regulate public, semi-public and private aspects of their lives where gender-segregation and veiling are represented through their online practices. The structure of this article is as follows. The literature review addresses the terms of online practices and online identity on SMP and discusses how this article builds on scholarly works, which have explored concepts of cultural adoption through online practices across SMP. This review is followed by the methodology, findings, discussion and conclusion.

## Literature Review

### Online Practices and Online Identity across SMP

The concept of online identity is a part of online practices but, conversely, these practices shape users' online identity. Drawing on a number of definitions (Horvath 2011; David 2014; boyd and Ellison 2010), online practices can be classified as (1) online self-representation, such as choice of profile pictures, name, biography and location, as well as the ways in which these are expressed; (2) shared interests, namely, knowledge and opinions; and (3) choices of what to share online. These issues are related to users' self-representation and impression management (Shafie et al. 2012). Online identity can also be defined as "a configuration of the defining characteristics of a person in the online space" (Kim et al. 2011:2). These characteristics consist, initially, of symbolic communication and textual communication, for example, profile image or avatar, header-background picture, username and biography, as online users choose their usernames, profile pictures and biographies to represent themselves and manage their online impression. Thus, social media users build their online identities from their online practices, choices and activities on these platforms.

Social media platforms (SMP) can be defined as “those digital platforms, services and apps built around the convergence of content sharing, public communication, and interpersonal connection” (Burgess and Poell 2017:1). SMP differ in terms of their interfaces, features and affordances; consequently, online practices and identities across various platforms also differ. Several studies have investigated this phenomenon. Van Dijck argued that online identities are shaped through the differences between social media platform interfaces (2013). Dyer investigated young people’s online practices across two SMP (Facebook and Twitter) and concluded that “the differences in design across the two sites affected the roles the participants found themselves fulfilling, the audience they felt they were performing for, and the way and modes through which the participants acted, interacted, and described themselves” (2015:4). All these findings suggest that online practices differ across different platforms and that social media users themselves are not only aware of such differences, but incorporate them in their strategies of social media use.

## **Cultural Adoption across SMP**

Abokhodair and Vieweg suggest that Islam and its cultural traditions construct the practices of privacy and identity management on SMP by users in Gulf Cooperation Council<sup>3</sup> countries. Significantly, they found that privacy is a “process of optimization” whereby a female may want to show a photo of herself without hijab to only female friends and mahrams<sup>4</sup> (2016). They conclude that users construct their online identities in two different ways: in a constant relationship with their offline identity (e.g., using real names), and by exploiting the anonymity offered by online platforms by managing their audience through two different accounts (Abokhodair and Vieweg 2016). There is a recent study tackling Saudi women’s photo sharing on SMP which resonates with those findings: Bourdeloie et al. found that Saudi women “try to place themselves on middle ground between compliance with the rules on the separation of public-private space, or the licit-illicit, and the characteristics and features specific to social networks” (2017).

In this article, the relationship between social media and Saudi society is a non-linear one, meaning that although the Internet in general and practices on SMP have affected Saudi culture in several ways (especially in regard to Saudi women due to the restrictions imposed on them, such as the driving ban, limited public sphere presence, etc.), the offline and pre-existing Saudi culture (encompassing norms, traditions and values) appropriates these technologies and aligns them to Saudi cultural fundamentals such as religious beliefs. Moreover, the participants' culturally pre-established beliefs and values interact with their online practices in a dynamic, negotiated and reciprocal relationship across their gendered and cultural identities as *Saudi* women.

## Methodology

This article reports on eight semi-structured interviews (two per participant) conducted between March and September 2015. Purposive sampling (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003) was used to recruit four participants through the Path application (Path.com) online community. There were four justifications for choosing Path: (1) it is an online community to which I have access; (2) participants know who I am, where I live, and they were familiar with the topic of this research; (3) I could benefit from my experience and observations of these genuine SMP accounts over a long period, as I have known the participants online for at least two years.

Between March 30 and April 10, 2015, three initial face-to-face interviews took place in Jeddah, one in Alkhobar and the fourth participant was interviewed on Skype (March 5, 2015) due to transportation difficulties. The follow-up interviews were completed on Skype between August and September 2015. The interview questions focused on two different areas, aiming to identify and track transitions in online practices over time: (1) interviewees' Internet experience in general, such as how their usage and practices differ now from their early Internet experience, and (2) interviewees' SMP usage, for instance, whether they hold more than one account on the same platform. Participants were also asked to describe one episode they had experienced when they started using SMP, which they consid-

ered important and which they remembered in detail. All the interviews were transcribed verbatim (King and Horrocks 2010) and an inductive approach to thematic analysis was used (Alhojailan 2012). Two main themes emerged: (1) online gender segregation and online veiling, and (2) more “relaxed” judgments on veiling (niqab and hijab).

Participant acronym	Year of birth	City of residence	Educational level	Length of Internet experience in general (since)	Length of SMP experience (since)	Employment status	Marital status
M1	1992	Jeddah	Bachelor	2006	2010	Newly employed	Single
A1	1992	Jeddah	Now MA <sup>6</sup>	2005	2011	Newly employed	Newly married
A2	1991	Al Khobar	MA <sup>7</sup>	2011	2012	Employed	Married with a newborn boy
I4	1992	Al Kharj	Bachelor	2004	2009	Employed	Single

**Table 1. Interviewees’ acronyms and characteristics** <sup>5</sup>

Table 1 supplies some anonymized background information about each participant. It is important to note that Saudi Arabia has considerable geographical variation in conservative practice. For example, Jeddah is more tolerant about women removing the hijab or niqab whereas Riyadh has been more conservative for several years. In the last few years, veiling restrictions have relaxed<sup>8</sup>, especially following a recent law (2016) to restrict the authority of the Saudi Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (Alarabiyah English 2016). Other rural or less developed parts of Saudi Arabia are still highly conservative and exercise censorship concerning the debate on veiling and changes to norms - a conclusion based on my own experience as a Saudi citizen living in Saudi Arabia. For example, in such areas, “relaxed” veiling practices (removing hijab or niqab) would attract vocal criticism from the religious conservative public. One interpretation is that because the local community is smaller, where “everyone knows everyone,” censorship has a stronger impact on these community members.

Venues for the interviews varied. I met M1 in a library in Jeddah, a place chosen by her because her parents did not allow her to meet strangers outside her house unless it is a “formal” place such as a university or library. There is a women-only sector inside the library. A1’s interview took place at the food court in one of the malls in Jeddah. She usually wore a niqab but when we sat down for the interview she removed the niqab and kept the hijab. In Alkhubar, I met A2 in a cafe at one of the hotels. A2 speaks English fluently; in our first interview, she asked for the interview to be conducted in English as she thought it would be easier for me to transcribe and analyze the data. When I met A2, she was wearing a hijab only but told me that she wore a niqab in her mother’s presence. She gave me permission to share this information and also told me that since her marriage, she no longer wore the niqab. The fourth participant, I4, was interviewed via Skype. Both of us were unveiled; however, based on my previous knowledge of I4, she always wore the niqab outside her house (Alkharj is a conservative city).

## SMP in this Article

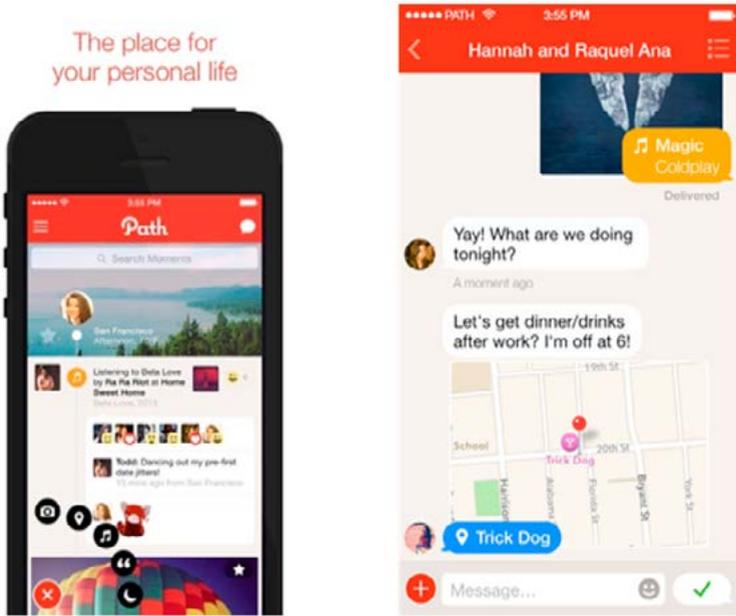
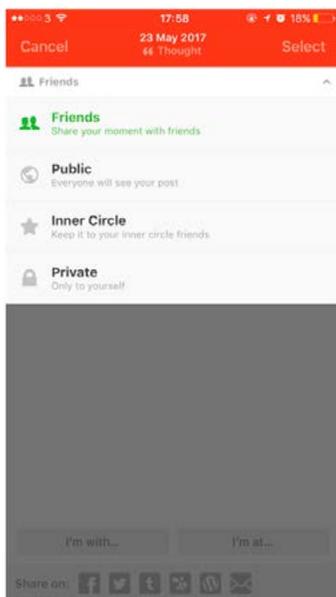


Figure 1. Screenshots of Path and Path talk applications' interfaces (Top Apps 2014; Path 2014)

There are five SMPs addressed in this article: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and Path. Of these five platforms, Path is the least known platform in Europe. Therefore, I will explain in detail how Path functions rather than elaborate on the other four (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat) which are already familiar to most people.

Path is a mobile-based social media application which launched in 2010. To date, Saudis are the second highest consumers of Path after Indonesians. In Path's first year (2010), users could add only a limited number of people (50) as friends, increasing to 150 friends in 2012, and more recently in 2016 Path has removed the friends limit entirely. Sharing options on Path include images, music, books, movies and a check-in (location) option (see Figure 1). Users' posts are called *thoughts*. Removing a friend

is called an *unshare*. Also, there are currently four sharing privacy options (see Figure 2): (1) *public*: thoughts that can be seen by all Path users in general; (2) *friends*: posts that are shown only for added friends; (3) *inner circle*: a special customizable list of close friends—users who can see all posts once the user selects the *inner circle* star button; and (4) *private thought*: customized list of friends who can see certain posts.



**Figure 2.** A screenshot taken by my iPhone of Path’s app sharing privacy options.

As with many SMP, Path has a text messaging option. This was previously built into the Path application itself, but in June 2014 Path introduced Talk as a parallel application where account holders can use their Path ID to send and receive messages (see Figure 1). Users on Talk can activate or deactivate the option of read messages (indicators that messages have been read, similar to Whatsapp’s two blue ticks). On Talk, there is a range of other communication options (Path 2014) including voice message recording. The findings and discussion sections below provide more detail on the read message and voice message functions in relation to participants’ strategies.

## Positionality

I offer personal insight into this research, through my role as a “female indigenous researcher” (Altorki 1994:66; Alsaggaf 2015:71) and offline insider on the one hand, and SMP “devotee” (Kozinets 1998)<sup>9</sup> and on-line insider on the other. As a Saudi woman and a keen Internet user since 1999, I have observed closely how Saudi women utilize spaces in the online sphere and how the virtual realm has occupied a large proportion of their everyday routines. For example, in recent years, several Saudi women have become influencers as Youtubers and Snapchatters (Mirdhah 2015; Taylor 2015), sharing their daily lives with the public with and without the niqab or hijab. Thus, I started to question the relationships between these online practices and the offline sphere, given that the Internet has provided Saudi women with greater opportunities to express their opinions, discuss the challenges they face, establish their own businesses, and become bloggers and writers and more. Moreover, as an active member of both the online and offline Saudi communities, I am ideally positioned to investigate, grasp and describe the complex relationships between Saudi women’s offline and online identities.

## Findings

### Online Gender Segregation and Online Veiling

When offline gender segregation enters the online sphere of SMP, this segregation is less strict and takes a different form. Saudi women do communicate with men online, so the gender segregation depends on the nature and type of communication and interaction in a given scenario. For a woman to add a man as a Facebook friend and have a public conversation with him, for example, is different from using direct messages or revealing her picture. This theme presents different aspects of online gender segregation depending on the social media platform and its features. It also reveals different practices of Saudi women regarding communicating and interacting with men online.

Participants recalled how their interactions with the opposite sex have slowly changed since their early online practices on social media. Previously, the offline gender segregation rules dominated their fear of adding men as friends on Facebook, one of the earlier SMP where they created accounts. They considered that the religious concept of *kukwah* (prohibiting private communication between men and women alone in the same place) would apply if they added a man to their Facebook friends list. For example, A1 and I4 explained their early experiences with Facebook: “Actually, when I signed up I was very afraid of ‘online friends’, especially the opposite sex, I felt terrible.” (I4, March 5, 2015)

For I4, having a man as an online friend was equivalent to having his number on her mobile, which Saudi culture prohibits as it could indicate that a woman is having a romantic relationship with a man<sup>10</sup>, as I4 explained: “I have always treated my Facebook account as my personal cell number.” (I4, March 5, 2015)

After a while, I4 decided to “relax” her cautious approach, but her sister would not tolerate such a practice, so I4 found a “mid-way” solution: she would not add men to her friends list, and she would follow them only for certain purposes, as she explained:

There was this one time when my sister asked me how I add people that I don’t really know; she scared me a little, and I almost deactivated it, then I sensed that it’s not that scary, I kept it, but I stopped adding accounts from the opposite sex. I just followed them if they had personal skills or talents in writing or reading or something like that. (I4, March 5, 2015)

A1’s early online experience was similar to I4’s. A1 considered that adding men as friends on Facebook was *haram* (the Islamic concept of prohibited deeds; the Muslim person who performs them is a sinner): “I was very uncommunicative when it came to adding men. I thought it was haram to add a male friend. It was the *alsabwa* [Islamic awakening] era. I am a very different person now.” (A1, March 31, 2015). Thus, A1’s initial online

practices were influenced by the concept of *alsahwa*<sup>11</sup>. However, by the end of her answer, she had concluded that she herself had changed significantly, meaning that she eventually accepted that adding men as friends on SMP is allowed.

Strictures on participants' communication with men had eased over time. Two main factors contributed to such relaxation. First, I4 explained simply that "it is just the virtual world." By virtual she means the online sphere versus the offline one. In other words, the changes to communications with men do not include face-to-face communication. Secondly, A1 realized that adding friends of the opposite sex and communicating with them online is not haram as she used to think. Hence, despite Saudi women's growing ease in online communication with the opposite sex, they still set certain limits. For example, M1 stated that she had male friends on her SMP, with whom she drew boundaries such as ignoring them or giving a "formal-cold" reply to comments she felt were inappropriate:

I mean, I have men friends, from whom I keep my distance and certain limits, and I guess they have learned that quite well - hence our long communication. If I have been away for a while, for example, and one of them comes and says that he misses me, I won't reply most of the time, and if I do reply, I do it in a very formal answer. (M1, March 30, 2015)

Other techniques of online gender segregation reported in the interviews included the careful selection of the channels of communication between men and women, for example, Facebook messages and Path talk. Choosing to veil was another strategy, where the participants did not share their faces or accept as friends men who asked them to reveal their faces. For example, M1 recalled two incidents on Path when men made inappropriate "moves". One episode involved a Saudi man, a writer and intellectual who holds a high academic position, who followed M1's "digital trace" from Instagram to Path in order to see her face:

There was this famous writer and professor in university, who followed me on Instagram, and when I used my real first and last name once, he was able to find me also on Twitter. He sent me an add request and asked me if I liked reading - I have no idea what this has to do with anything - then he added me on Path, and told me that friendship is all about showing him my face. (M1, March 30, 2015)

We might argue that as more and more Saudi women diminish the boundaries between themselves and the opposite sex, and show their ease in the practices of adding men as friends, communicating with men online and sharing their daily activities, then these changes must be affecting Saudi men themselves. However, according to M1, Saudi men continue to expect all Saudi women to act the same. M1 explained that many of her male friends had asked to see her face as part of their “long friendship”:

I haven't a clue why many of my friends right now ask to see my face, saying that they will unfriend me if I don't<sup>12</sup>. No, this one has just added me here and there and asked to see my face immediately. [She laughs.] Why should I give him the privilege? What obligates me to show you my face? (M1, March 30, 2015)

For M1, seeing her face was a “privilege” that not just anyone could gain; it was her decision whether to reveal it, even if she is on SMP. While many Saudi women share their photos and profile pictures, other Saudi women continue not to reveal their faces and bodies as part of their online veiling practices.

A third issue relating to online gender segregation is how participants manage to segregate their audience across different platforms, designating a certain platform “for girls only”. This is the case for I4, who would add only women to her Snapchat account. As a mark of a relationship of trust, I4 would reveal her face on Snapchat as well as remove the hijab (on both

story and direct snaps) since only other women would see her. However, I4 once had to delete a story she had posted on Snapchat when one of her contacts took a screenshot of it. I4 was shocked, and when she challenged her friend about it, the friend explained in her own defense that she took the screenshot to show I4 how the colors of her contact lenses seemed uneven. Even after the friend apologized and deleted the screenshot, I4 was not convinced by the explanation:

Ah! [total silence and deep thinking] Actually, it's very rare for me to post anything and then delete it afterwards. It may happen just if I get certain replies or reactions from somebody. Actually, I have just erased a photo I posted yesterday on Snapchat, because of this girl who took a capture of it; it was the first time someone captured a photo of mine. I was very surprised, and she said that she was sorry about the capture. I thought, "It's an ordinary story that she can open anytime she wants, it doesn't need to be captured privately," so I was very surprised by her behavior and told her so, and she replied that she had erased it instantly! (I4, September 14, 2015)

Saudi women's etiquette on Snapchat, according to I4, includes the norm that a girl does not take a screenshot of another girl's photo even if her Snapchat account is closed-private<sup>13</sup>. Taking a screenshot puts the sharing potential on another level where the photo can be stored and circulated on a different medium, and the picture could be shown in public<sup>14</sup>. This "audience segregation" extends to privacy features on SMP. M1, for example, had two Instagram accounts: the first was private: for her family and close friends, while the second was public: for strangers and the opposite sex. M1 explained that on her private account, she had revealed "her hand" (here, she means her hands literally) and that was why her account was private:

Yup, I have two accounts on the same platform: an account just for me, I don't want other people to see it or add anyone, only me. One of these platforms is Instagram. I don't like

to reveal my hand; this account is only for my family, and I added my other account (her public one). (M1, March 30, 2015)

## Becoming More “Relaxed” about Cultural Norms

The second theme emerging from this study’s findings is linked to the first theme presented. Not only had the participants’ online practices changed (e.g., initially refusing to add male friends, then later finding this acceptable), interviewees also discussed how there is greater acceptance and tolerance now, both offline and online, of some previously controversial online practices by Saudi women on SMP. As an example of this change, A2, and I4 highlighted the same point in their interviews.

Ghayda Aljuwaiser (researcher): Did the Internet and social networks especially make it more accepted [for women] to use their real face like avatars and their real names?

A2: Yeah, maybe in the last two years, I’ve noticed that, you know. Before that, I was, like, how like when you, like, listen in the beginning: “Oh a woman, a girl, her picture is on the Internet. Oh my God! She will never have a future in this country.” But now everyone is, like, posting; it is, like, more than men ... like, men, even they are turning to using avatars; women are, “I don’t care; I just post it” even if it is against their families or behind their families’ backs. I noticed that they do not even care. (A2, April 10, 2015)

Although A2 professed that it was a positive thing for Saudi women to use their photos as their profile pictures, through my online observations I noticed that A2 used her face as profile picture only on her Path account - which is represented to both male and female friends. According to the participants, Path is the platform where Saudi women are more likely to use their photos as their profile pictures with and without veiling (niqab and hijab). A2 explained:

For me, I am doing that even behind my parents' back. For me, I feel like it is normal; this is what it should be like. My face is my identity - why do I have to, like, to hide it? And more women are starting to think the same, so that is why they are using their real names, they are using their pictures, they are sharing their real stuff, their lives. So, yeah, I feel like women in Saudi in terms of usage of the Internet have changed a lot, a lot, a lot. (A2, April 10, 2015)

I4 also thought that Path has helped make it more acceptable to remove either the niqab or hijab:

I feel that the changes have happened in the past two years. Especially since I joined Path. I feel that girls have developed some easiness in using the Internet. People have accepted the fact that a girl can put her personal picture regardless of whether she is veiled in real life or not. A while ago, people never agreed with girls posting their personal photos. It was some kind of crime, and the girl could never show her face in the online world. Today, it's different. On the contrary, a lot of girls actually post their real face photos online, regardless of whether they are veiled or even wearing the niqab. (I4, September 14, 2015)

It is important to emphasize here that although the participants report on more relaxed cultural norms, their own representations of themselves online do not necessarily reflect such changes. A2 prefers not to use her authentic picture as a profile picture on SMP other than Path, and I4 has never swapped her avatar for her photo. This illustrates the heterogeneity among Saudi women's online practices on SMP in general and regarding their online representation specifically. The discussion below elaborates on these phenomena.

## Discussion

### Online Identity, Self-representation, and Audience across SMP

The findings presented in this article echo findings in previous published research. Participants' online identities were "faceted". They switched and adapted their online practices across different SMP, shaping their online identities through the differences between SMP interfaces. Saudi women appropriate aspects of their SMP use to align with their cultural norms and traditions (Bourdeleio et al. 2017). Their online identities reflect their familial and gendered identities. In this research, Saudi women's online identities are certainly gendered, and the women manage their online practices when addressing multiple, different audiences across different SMP. Indeed, all the participants managed their audiences across SMP to control and regulate their photo-sharing practices, reflecting other recent research (Abokhodair et al. 2017). I4, for example, designated Snapchat for women contacts only, while M1 made her Instagram account private because she did not want people other than her family to see her "hand". This echoes Al-Saggaf's observation that Saudi women are "aware of the danger of displaying their photos" and are "very conscious about their privacy" (2011:14). It also resonates with Bourdeleio and colleagues' work: "They take into consideration the space in which the picture was taken, the subject of the picture, and its privacy setting" (2017). Moreover, friends and family are part of the online audience; consequently, participants in this research "appropriate their shared content for the audience" (Dyer 2015:20). Hence, Saudi women's online practices on SMP are constantly negotiating with pre-existing offline cultural contexts. Therefore, practices such as cross-gender communication and veiling are changing over time by becoming more relaxed.

### Offline and Online Spheres

The findings here are in line with Alsaggaf's work regarding "the continuities between Saudi women's online and offline worlds [and] the ways that cultural expectations shape participants' online self-presentation and social

activities” (2015:2). In this study, the participants’ offline cultural expectations (such as veiling and cross-gender communication) shaped their online self-presentation and practices, and their *al-khososyah* (privacy) concerns dominated their online practices on SMP (Abokhodair and Vieweg 2016). Thus, the participants navigated their SMP behaviors according to their cultural contexts. Moreover, all the participants were highly educated. A2 had lived independently outside Saudi for a couple of years, yet she still hesitated to adopt her photo as her SMP profile picture. This chimes with Asadi’s observation: “While well-traveled and educated, Saudi women remain conservative enough to accept the traditional systems in Saudi Arabia.” (2011:5).

### What is New?

More relaxed cultural norms and traditions now extend across different SMP. Several studies of Saudi women’s online experiences have explored cross-gender communication and concluded that Saudi women are “less inhibited about the opposite gender” in online communication where “the continuous dialogue between the two genders may make them get used to each other’s presence” (Al-Saggaf and Begg 2004:10). This was apparently the case for A1 and I4. In their early online experiences, they refused to add men as friends on Facebook, but over time their online practices communicating with the opposite sex grew more relaxed. The findings of this article extend previous findings beyond matters of cross-gender communication, for instance by documenting how Saudi women’s online practices on Path have led to a loosening of certain cultural norms and traditions such as veiling. This contradicts Tamimi’s argument that “the Internet has not succeeded in breaking down gender and social boundaries as expected” (2010:49).

Saudi women’s online experiences are constantly challenging the offline cultural and societal rules. In participants’ early online experiences, cross-gender communication was the first thing to change; online spaces enabled women to establish free and open relationships with the opposite sex, which proved to be an Internet culture shock for Saudi women. With the rise of Web 2.0 and social media, veiling became the focus. For the increasing numbers of Saudi women who do not wear either the hijab or

niqab in the online sphere, social media affords a means of visual representation. As participants in this research stated, the online Saudi community is more tolerant now of seeing a Saudi woman without the veil. As Karolak and Guta argue, “the Internet provided Saudi women with a space to negotiate the boundaries imposed on them by cultural and societal rules” (2015:11).

The data presented in this article encompass a broader range of SMP (Facebook, Instagram, Path, and Snapchat) than in previous research in this area. The article adds to the field by demonstrating what these platforms mean to Saudi women users, contributing to cross-cultural comparisons of how people consume social media platforms. For example, in one study, Facebook was used like “a diary” by the participants (Dyer 2015), while in this research, Path is preferred as the most convenient platform for Saudi women to share their daily lives.

## **Limitations**

The results in this article are very promising, but there are several limitations to the study. Participants are of similar age. All of them are educated Saudi women living in modern cities. Three participants (A1, M3 and I4) were unemployed, two of them (M1 and A2) had traveled outside Saudi Arabia during the long time I had known them, while one (A2) had worked and studied in the UAE by herself. Furthermore, all speak English either fluently or at a good level. These homogeneous characteristics beg an important question: do Saudi women of other ages and educational backgrounds, who may not have traveled outside Saudi Arabia due to stringent restrictions imposed on them, have different stories to tell about their SMP practices? Another limitation is the small sample size. A larger group of participants would potentially strengthen the validity of the findings and yield greater depth of understanding (see future work section).

## **Future Work**

Further data analysis of a broader sample is complete. Moreover, with the expanded sources of data, online observations and semi-structured

interviews, this project has captured valuable information on topical and “trendy” Saudi women’s causes, for example the #endguardianship campaign. Future publications emerging from investigations in this project aim to achieve even deeper insights into Saudi women’s online practices on SMP, by adapting to and engaging with sociological theories (Sauter 2013).

## Conclusion

Al-Jabri and colleagues assert that “the personal and social motives behind the use of social network sites in the Arab region particularly Saudi Arabia is ill understood due to a dearth of research on the region” (2015:3). This study helps bridge the existing gaps in the research literature on social media consumption and usage with regard to Saudi Arabia in general, and Saudi women in particular. Moreover, the study brings “Intersectionality into DS” (Cottom 2016:1) given that “we are living in a global era yet too few studies address how non-western cultures adopt technology” (Mark et al. 2009). The findings presented in this article add to the ongoing scholarly conversation on cross-cultural adoption of SMP and the extent to which online practices on SMP have reshaped the offline sphere.

This article aimed to understand Saudi women’s cultural adoption of SMP and the relationship between their offline sphere and online practices across different SMP. Findings illustrate that Saudi women navigate their online practices on SMP with different “techniques” and they adopt SMP as “places” where complex social interactions occur based on the Saudi cultural context. To construct online representations of offline gender segregation and veiling practices, Saudi women appropriate SMP privacy options, reveal different aspects of their daily activities, and navigate across different platforms. Moreover, the participants perceived that different platforms afford different levels of privacy, ranging from public (Facebook) and semi-public (Instagram and Path) to private (Snapchat), representing different online spaces where Saudi women’s online identities and representations differ across platforms. The last section of the findings addressed how strict cultural norms on veiling (niqab or hijab) are in some cases becoming more relaxed.

A recent article in *Forbes* describes the fast pace of change in Saudi Arabia as being harder to keep up with than the Kardashians (Lindland 2017). There is no doubt that the situation of Saudi women is changing, but as Lindland observes in her closing comments: “The decree may change at a moment’s notice, but it doesn’t mean a woman’s life will change at the same speed” (2017). Herein, this research study acknowledges its own limitations and calls for future studies to explore the dichotomy in the offline and online spheres for Saudi women. How is the online sphere impacting the offline sphere? In which practices and attitudes and to what extent? How do Saudi women react to such transformations? The present findings offer glimpses of Saudi women’s online practices across SMP in light of Islamic and cultural values of the Saudi social context. More in-depth understanding is needed, but we should heed Silverman’s (2015:446) arguments on the value of qualitative research in comparison to journalism. Despite the “Kardashian” pace of social change for women in Saudi Arabia, scholarly investigation enriches the literature landscape, not by trying to “catch up” with the latest transformations, but instead by offering a thorough investigation of Saudi women’s voices, reactions to and negotiations of such changes.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In July 2016 #saudiwomendemandtheendofguardianship went viral on Twitter; a few months later, Saudi mufti announced that guardianship in Islam applies only in marriage. See, for example *Reuters Online* 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Check the hashtag on Twitter: [اسقاط\_الولاية\_نطلب\_سعوديات\_#] [#Saudiwomendemandtheendofguardianship]

<sup>3</sup> "Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), political and economic alliance of six Middle Eastern countries - Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman.

The GCC was established in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in May 1981. The purpose of the GCC is to achieve unity among its members based on their common objectives and their similar political and cultural identities, which are rooted in Islamic beliefs. Presidency of the council rotates annually” (Encyclopædia Britannica 2015).

<sup>4</sup>The male guardian in Islam is a relative by blood or marriage to a woman, for example, father, brother, uncle and husband.

<sup>5</sup>Their educational levels, employment, and marital statuses have changed since 2015.

<sup>6</sup>Masters student

<sup>7</sup>Masters student

<sup>8</sup>What I have observed on my last visit to Riyadh in January 2016 and what Saudi women whom I know mentioned several times in our discussion regard veiling restrictions in Riyadh.

<sup>9</sup>A term Robert Kozinet coined in 1998 to mean an Internet user who is engaged in the network and in activities on various platforms.

<sup>10</sup>Of course, it is different if the number belongs to the driver, the janitor, or another man who has any other formal or professional purpose in the woman’s life.

<sup>11</sup>An “intellectual highly religious-conservative ideology” era that Saudi Arabia went through between the end of the 1970s until the late 1990s. For more details, check *Le Renard* (2012:108).

<sup>12</sup>Here, I commented, ‘Even after knowing each other for years?’ She answered by mentioning the first incident.

<sup>13</sup>In general, there is an “unwritten rule” among Saudi women on Snapchat: girls do not take a screenshot of another girl’s photo if her Snapchat account is closed. Even on Path, if a girl shares her picture in a “closed thought” (only for girls), she assumes that none of them will save this picture.

<sup>14</sup>The case is not the same for all Saudi women, of course; there are a number of public Snapchat accounts by Saudi women who wear the niqab the hijab or neither. This research does not aim to generalize these practices to all Saudi women; it illustrates only what the study participants have reported.