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## **Veiling and Blogging: Social Media as Sites of Identity Negotiation and Expression among Saudi Women**

By Hala Guta<sup>1</sup> and Magdalena Karolak<sup>2</sup>

### **Abstract**

This paper aims at assessing how Saudi Arab young women use social media for negotiating and expressing their identity. Through in-depth interviews with a sample of seven Saudi females aged 20 – 26, the research revealed that the internet, with its protection of individual privacy, provided the participants a space to negotiate the boundaries imposed on them by cultural and societal rules. Participants employed several tactics of negotiation such as using nicknames, concealing their personal images and using first names only in order not to be identified by their family names. Using multiple accounts is also popular among participants. Without gatekeepers, the internet brings new ways of self-expression and identification among Saudi females, thus creating a safe space where female body, predominant in daily life, is non-existent and only thoughts count.

*Key words:* Saudi Arabia; social media; women; identity; gender

### **Introduction: the interplay between Saudi Arab culture, society and gender**

Women in the Middle East in general, and Saudi Arabia in particular, have been portrayed frequently in the Western media as passive, submissive and an oppressed lot. These portrayals have been challenged by many feminists who rightly argued that these portrayals conceptualize non-Western cultural identities as static and ahistorical and only served to reinforce the illusion that Middle Eastern patriarchal institutions are unchanging and untiring (Abu Lughod, 2002; Mohanty, 1988; Narayan, 1997; Oyewumi, 2003). Indeed, women have strived to play an active role in the Saudi Arab public sphere (Karolak, 2013) and the blossoming of the new communication technologies may offer further opportunities for changes to women realities in such societies. Unlike other media, where gatekeepers play a role in what message to

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be broadcasted, the Internet creates an open space with no gatekeepers. Internet access grants anybody the opportunity to communicate to the masses without control.

Saudi Arab society is regarded as largely conservative. Given its status as the birthplace of Islam, religion plays a central role in the Kingdom's culture, and "[Islam does] not only shape people's attitudes, practices, and behaviors, but also shape the way they see and do things and perceive their lives" (Alsaggaf & Williamson, 2004, para 5). Saudi society observes a strict segregation between genders. Women are not allowed to mix with unrelated men in public. Most educational institutions, banks, restaurants, and work places have separate divisions for males and females. For instance, until recently women education have been governed by a separate entity "to ensure that women's education did not deviate from the original purpose of female education, which was to make women good wives and mothers, and to prepare them for 'acceptable' jobs such as teaching and nursing" (Hamdan, 2005, p. 44). The need for such segregation is most often legitimized by citing Islamic teachings although some scholars challenge this notion (Hamdan, 2005). It is important to note that some Saudi Arab religious scholars, among others, Sheikh Abdullah al-Mutlaq, stress the need for the gender segregation to be enforced also on social media portals.

### **Women and Social Networking in Saudi Arabia**

In 2005 the novel "Girls of Riyadh" (Banat Al Riyadh) by Rajaa Al Sanea was published stirring a controversy in the Saudi Arabia. The novel narrates the lives of four Saudi young females in a form of email exchanges in a yahoo group. The authenticity of the lives of the novel characters remains a subject of dispute. Nonetheless, the novel brings to attention how, in a traditional society where women are confined to the private sphere, the blooming of the new communication technologies brought significant changes to women realities in these societies by providing new space for self-expression.

The general Saudi public was granted access to the internet by end of the 1990s. Saudi Arabia has approximately 13 million Internet users as of June 2012. Of the 13 million Internet users Facebook users comprise 5.5 million (Internet World Statistics, 2014). Users between 15 and 29 year old constitute 75% of users in the Middle East and 67% of users in Saudi Arabia. Women in the Middle East constitute 30% of the total number of users of social network. The percentage is approximately the same for Saudi Arabia (Mourtada & Salim, 2011). Women in the Middle East have embraced blogging in particular as "a place to express themselves, often anonymously, in a way that would not be possible in other public forums" (Otterman, 2007). It is in the blogging activity that numbers of active Arab women equal the numbers of men. This situation is reflected in Saudi Arabia where 50% of Saudi blog are written by women (de Vriese, 2012). As in other parts of the Middle East (Otterman, 2007), female bloggers in Saudi Arabia are young, aged on the average between 18-30 years old, and educated (de Vriese, 2012). Gibson (2001) emphasized that in societies that lack civil and democratic values strong ties to family and the clan tend to be a prevalent form of association "inhibiting interactions with those outside the network" (p. 188). Creation of new ties through social networks is thus important in order spread new ideas. Hence, the activity of female bloggers is innovative in the sense that it enables full participation of women in this new public sphere and it enhances their ability to acquire a form of influence in society. It comes as no surprise that that CNN has called Arab women bloggers "agents of change" in their societies. Dalia Ziada, a prominent Egyptian blogger, emphasized the fact that when using Internet women are not "under control" and are "free to speak" unlike in

their daily lives (Alonzo, 2012). Internet creates thus a safe space where female body, predominant in daily life, is non-existent and only thoughts count. The internet creates a space where women have an equal access and they are able to contribute to the public sphere in ways that are not possible outside of the virtual world where they are always regarded as women, beings subordinate to men. Blogs such as Saudi Eve, Saudiyat, Saudiwoman's weblog and women2drive campaign are examples of women bloggers trying to bring about a change of their status in Saudi society.

### **Gendered identity**

Identity is one of the most complex constructs as different approaches led to multiplication of its meanings rendering the concept difficult to grasp (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). However, as Hall (1996) stated, identity is “an idea . . . without which certain key questions cannot be thought at all” (p. 2). Many scholars argue that identity is a fluid construct that is constantly shaped and reshaped by our experiences and interactions as well as social context (Giddens, 1991; Hall, 1996; Stern, 2008). Goffman (1959) introduced the idea of identity as performance. He argued that in social interactions we present ourselves to others in a way that conveys the way we want them to define us. In other words, we perform our identities through interactions that are context and audience bound. Identity, as Hall (1996) argues, is “a narrative of self”, and accordingly, constantly negotiated through one's everyday life and experience.

Simone de Beauvoir introduced the concept of the socially constructed gendered identity. She argued that “One is not born but becomes a woman” (cited in Butler, 1988, p. 519). Building on De Beauvoir's argument, Judith Butler (1988, 1990) argued that “becoming a woman” involves constant negotiation and performance of identity. She further argued that gender identity, “is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts (Butler, 1988, p. 519). Gender identity is a performative construct. Females, and males for that matter, learn to perform their gendered identity in accordance with cultural and societal expectations of the roles and identities associated with each gender.

New technologies and new media brought new realities to women lives, especially in patriarchal societies. Considering the realities of Arab women, the internet can provide a space where women can express their voices globally. It can also provide access to information that might be obstructed by cultural and political and local barriers. It can offer opportunities of networking that cannot be viable otherwise (Wheeler, 2004). Moreover, the cyberspace provides spaces of identity articulation and negotiation that were not available before through traditional media. However, if we conceptualize that the gendered self, is performed and “must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self;” the question that arises is how this performance takes place in the absence of the body? Indeed, “bodily features like face, age and gender are considered as the fundamental standard of defining one's identity in most societies. Therefore, the representation of “self” in society is mostly constructed by one's appearances, through observing a person's outlook, people are able to define his or her identity such as their gender, age or even the social standard of the person (KiYanC, 2010). With the absence of the body in the performative construction of identity, the internet can be thought of as sites of “disembodiment or dislocation of the self” (Gomez, 2010, Stern, 2008). In societies where women identities are still defined “so closely in terms of the home and the family”, by using the

internet to express themselves women do not need to “ ‘step outside’ into the social settings in which the only available identities [are] those offered by male stereotypes” (Giddens, 1991, p. 216). In this paper we would like to understand “how the lack of the body may shape and color one’s perception of culture and one’s location within culture” (Stern, 2008, p.4).

### **Online identities**

In her groundbreaking work *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, Turkle assessed that “computer-mediated communication can serve as a place for construction or reconstruction of identity” (1995, p. 342). Moreover, she concluded that people adopt “multiple identities” as “many more people experience identity as a set of roles that can be mixed and matched, whose diverse demands need to be negotiated” (Turkle, 1995, p.180). Internet offers users the possibility to forge completely new online identities, which can be multiple, or to reshape their offline identity carefully choosing “what information to put forward, thereby eliminating visceral reactions that might have seeped out in everyday communication” (boyd, 2007, p.12). Indeed, altering elements that may cause rejection in the online community or simply presenting an online “better” version of oneself are common practices. On the other hand, online identities are often fragmented, which means that they are spread over various social media networking sites. Consequently, the internet “has contributed to thinking about identity as multiplicity” (Turkle, 1995, p. 178). Thanks to this “disembodiment or dislocation of the self”, the multiplicity of identities can be easily practiced online. Turkle, for example, researched the world of Multiple-User-Domains (MUD) where players create their own imaginary characters or avatars. Her study revealed that many MUD players find creating an online identity a way to escape problems they encountered in real lives. On the other hand, users of social media “may even change their nationalities and genders to gain respect from other web users” or swap gender or race of online identities “to get experience that they are not able to have in real world” (KiYanC, 2010, online document no page numbers). In addition, social media allow people with stigmatized real life identities to disclose online embarrassing aspects of their life, which would jeopardize their relations with other people in real life (McKenna & Bargh, 1998). All in all, thanks to the Internet “mixed and matched” identities can be lived and performed in real and online lives. Despite these possibilities offered by the Internet, Paasonen (2002, p. 25) found out that distancing oneself from the offline real identity, especially gender, is problematic online:

Gender (as well as the category thought of as ‘sex’) is constituted as the ritualized reiteration of norms that govern cultural intelligibility, as compulsive repetition. This ‘doing gender’ is far from voluntary activity, it is performativity that concerns the very sense of the self... Since being gendered (raced, classed) is a precondition for thinking, living and making sense of the world, the individual cannot take up any identity position s/he pleases.

Consequently, online users may not be willing or they may not be able to fully dissociate themselves from their real lives. It is, according to Paasonen, especially true in the case of blogs that usually are closely related to one’s daily lives. In addition, Suler (2002) noted that users may not be fully in control and fully conscious of the way they dissociate their identities. Choices related to usernames, avatars or online communities may all have a meaning and a motivation hidden to the user. It is important to note however that revelation of one’s gender online has potentially

negative consequences for the user as Mayer and Cukier (2006) observed that users with female identifiers were “far more likely” to receive malicious private messages and slightly more likely exposed to receiving files and links. This paper will assess, among others, to what extent Saudi female users can use internet as liberating disembodied space (Reid, 1993, 1994) or whether it contributes to reiteration of traditional gender norms (Herring, 1993, 1995).

Identities are constructed within, not outside of discourse; hence we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies (Hall, 1990, p. 4). In the context of assessment of online identities we agree with boyd that “through the act of articulation and writing oneself into being, all participants are engaged in performance intended to be interpreted and convey particular impressions”. Apart from the sheer textual part of user’s online presence, even the look of a personal profile or a personal site can provide cues about user’s “identities and tastes” (boyd, 2007, p. 11). Thus the analysis of online identities should also include non-textual elements.

### **Research approach and results**

This paper adopted a qualitative in depth-interviewing methodology. The purpose of the in-depth interviews, “is to understand themes of the lived daily world from the subject’s own perspective” (Kvale, 1996, p. 27). Qualitative interviewing aids in gaining deeper understanding of the interviewee’s thoughts, experience, and perspectives; “we interview people to find out from those things we cannot directly observe” (Patton, 2002, p. 341). In this research, interviews have a special significance since the research deals with experiences, meaning construction, and interpretation, something can hardly be identified by observation alone.

The study involved seven undergraduate female students. Participation was voluntary and all participants received full disclosure of the purpose of the study. The interviews were conducted in English, and in some cases, in Arabic and lasted between 30 minutes to one hour.

Preliminary screening of data confirmed that participants are avid Internet users. Participants indicated that they use Internet around 4-6 hours a day, while some confirmed that they would spend more time online if it was not for other obligations. Apart from using social media to connect to family and friends or to make new friends, participants would also use social networks to get news, share religious content, and support a specific cause or express themselves through photography and writing. All interviewees stated that they have used Facebook. The second most popular site was Twitter, followed by Tumblr.

Various themes were detected through the interviews, but main categories emerged from the data are:

- (1) Societal rules and boundaries
- (2) Online negotiation of rules and boundaries
- (3) Impact of the social media on societal change

#### *Societal rules and boundaries*

Interviews revealed that the use of Internet among Saudi women is clearly influenced by established social rules. To begin with, the collectivism of Saudi society is reflected in the belief that a woman represents not only herself but the whole family as well as the extended family. Actions of an individual will thus impact the perception of one’s family in society and, if considered inappropriate, they will bring dishonor to all family members, especially male

relatives, as a group. It is true especially for women as their behavior “is a measure of the honor (or shame) for an entire family. There is an Arabic saying that states that ‘honor rides on the skirts of women,’ and women are held more responsible for upholding family honor than men.” (Shoup, 2009, p. 177). Losing honor in society leads to rejection equal almost to a loss of one’s own existence. Thus, breaching social norms and bringing dishonor is to be avoided at all cost. Expressing openly views that criticize the established norms, such as calls for religious, legal and political reforms as well as women’s rights, is one of such areas as stated by one participant:

You see [discussing controversial issues] publicly, other than you face rejection, as a culture you don’t only represent yourself, but you represent your family. . . Your name is connected to your family. They will always say the daughter of so and so did this and that. So before you say anything, you always think of your family, your tribe, your [male paternal] cousins and you think it is unfair that they will be judged by what you do or say.

This concept of representing not one’s self but the whole family lead participants to engage in a process of self-censorship. Many participants indicated that they avoid talking about certain issues in public because of the societal norms:

You see there are certain things I can discuss with my friends or between two people, but there are certain societal rules that prevent women from discussing issues in public. That is the problem. So we can discuss in twitter, in facebook, but discuss it publicly, no, you will be rejected from your society.

On the other hand, rigidity of social norms in Saudi is especially visible in the strict segregation of men and women, which is almost considered a national and religious duty. This custom, which is applicable to virtually every aspect of public life is also valid online and prohibits female-male friendship or any other contact between women and men outside of the bonds of family.

#### *Online negotiation of cultural rules in the Saudi Arab society*

According to de Certeau social life may be defined through the concepts of strategies and tactics. A strategy is “the calculus of force-relationships, which becomes possible when a subject of will and power [...] can be isolated from an ‘environment’” (de Certeau, 1984, p. xix). These institutions and structures of power determine the social reality for the “consumers” who are in position of powerlessness. Nonetheless, in this predetermined environment, “consumers” employ tactics in order to manage their way by seizing what de Certeau calls “opportunities”. Strategies that exist in Saudi society dictate strict social rules and imposed boundaries and severely limit the possibility for seizing “opportunities”, especially for women. Nonetheless access to new technologies multiplied the availability of tactics to evade the strategies pervasive in the society. Given the fact that in this particular society, women are the weakest “consumers”, analyzing how female Internet users are able to make their choices and employ “tactics” to express themselves and negotiate their identity is especially interesting.

Despite the very conservative culture, interviewees indicated that they usually have no hesitation to reveal nationality, gender or age in social media. Most interviewees even indicated that they use their real first names. However, the specific context of Saudi Arabia is pushing

young females to use tactics to negotiate their identities when discussing controversial issues for fear of being rejected, which we will explore in detail in the following sections.

The first tactic, not surprisingly, is using a nickname. As stated by participants such freedom may be only experienced online:

Of course, [using a nickname] gives more freedom because you can write more and express yourself more. You can post your opinions more clearly without caring about offending people. Honestly, [if I use a nickname] I wouldn't be thinking of my family or how it will affect them

As indicated earlier, participants often feel that they don't only represent themselves but their families as well. Hence, it is not surprising that another tactic the females use is to use their first names only or a modified family name. Not using a family name disconnects a female from her family and gives her more freedom to express herself, as one of the participants indicated:

If you are a female from a certain family everyone in that family can follow you, and I don't like that . . . I want to have more freedom, I don't want everyone in my family to follow me and scrutinize everything I am writing . It is not good for a female to use her family name, unless she has two accounts. You can have for instance two accounts on twitter and have one account for people who know you as your public face and another account in another name.

Concealing identity from the scrutinizing of family members in an online environment that protects individual privacy, enables females to explore other subjects of interest that cannot be tolerated in public : "Yeah, I am a girl . . . we talk about boys. We talk about what we are comfortable with, and who did what and we will discuss what the guys do and of course I wouldn't talk about that with my family."

On the other hand, online environment allows Saudi females to negotiate more than one identity depending on the set of people this identity is presented to. Our interviewees noted that they would use two identities online for example a different one in front of family and another one in front of their friends:

You know teenagers the way they speak to each other and the posts and things like that. There are certain things that I don't want my family to see. So I have my family to be . . . Maybe different statuses, different biography about myself. I think it would be just different, something just for the family and something else for my friends that I would share.

Similar difference will be made depending on the social background of one's friends and their level of openness as negative judgment and gossip in society is to be avoided:

Well, if certain people add me on Facebook I wouldn't add them because of my pictures, because of the society we live in. Even some of my friends that I am close with here, I wouldn't necessarily accept on Facebook because of the pictures I have. Let us say friends from Saudi school I wouldn't accept them because they will talk and gossip about the pictures I have up. But let us say my



friends who are from an open background and my friends from the States, I would accept them because they are OK with these kinds of things.

One area that is strictly regulated in Saudi society is exposure of personal images of females, which is also frowned upon in public, hence leading to the popular use of *niqab* (full face cover) among Saudi women. Another tactic participants use is the absence of their photos. Our informants were clear about the fact that posting their own pictures publicly online would be a breach of cultural norms: “We have conservative culture. For example it is not acceptable for my brother’s friend to see me, do you understand?”. Another interviewee was clear about the paradoxes it would entail: “The most important thing is that my family would not accept, but also because I wear niqab in public, then how can I use my photo [online], it is not possible”. On the other hand, even women who would not necessarily object showing their picture are forced to do so due respect of the collective culture and family, “I am not wearing hijab but I put my picture in hijab because my mom doesn’t want people to talk about me and saying her daughter is such and such... like if my dad cousin see me.” Consequently, some interviewees decide to post profile pictures using images of children in their family or other images such as the Dome of the Rock.

Online presence also allows females to network online and make new acquaintances. One interviewee noted, however, the following: “I met a friend on Facebook, later we met face to face and we became friends. But both of us feel ashamed to say that we met first on Facebook.” The shame associated with developing a real life friendship that first was established online is very informative. It indicates that online networking will be perceived an inappropriate way of making new connections and will be frowned upon in society rather than accepted. Nonetheless, some of the interviewees indicated that they have established online connections and uphold friendship with men, which is strictly forbidden in Saudi Arab society. Our interviewees appreciated such opportunities:

Yes because Facebook gives me freedom to speak to the people that I wouldn’t speak to necessarily. Like I can speak to my friends in the States males and females and it just makes it easier. It is not like here, even if I have male friends I can’t really speak to them.

And they felt a sense of satisfaction from an online acquaintance only:

There is this guy I knew him from 2008, . . . and we got disconnected for long time. We just share information, nothing deep. . . Then he opened a café in my university and he sent me a message on Facebook telling me that he is opening this café and he found out from my Facebook that I am in X university so he wanted me to be the first to try our coffee and give him feedback. I was so happy.

#### *Impact of social media on Saudi Arabia*

Despite quite recent popularity of social media, various authors have pointed out that their use among Saudis has an impact on political debate in society, which traditionally remains a taboo subject (Worth, 2012) and on socialization for women (Alqudsi-ghabra, Al-Bannai & Al-Bahraini, 2011, p. 55) among others. Our interviewees perceived some negative aspects of social

media; however the advantages of their use outnumber the disadvantages and very slowly transform the Saudi society in new surprising ways.

The perceived disadvantages relate to relaxed mores, especially among women, and the exposure of body as way to attract attention of the opposite sex. One interviewee explained that:

If you go to Twitter for example you see all these pictures and personal stuff. For me I would rather not, I mean.... If you respect yourself you wouldn't do something that would offend yourself, offend your family and offend those who surround you, . . . especially females. Females would have Twitter all about followers. They would put pictures of themselves half naked. I find that absolutely humiliating ... why do you have to objectify yourself to attract followers.

Another negative aspect of social media is proliferation of false accounts in order to take advantage of naive users: "I think Saudis understand Facebook wrong. They use it in bad ways. Like people making accounts that aren't them or people steal someone else's picture and use it [...]." Given the protection of female images in Arabian Gulf societies, stealing online photos of women has become a new type of fraud where a thief asks the family for ransom in order not to divulge the photos publicly and thus, bring shame on the family (Alqudsi-ghabra *et al.*, 2011, p. 55). Despite these drawbacks, social media have been slowly opening doors for new opportunities. One of these areas is search for suitable marriage partners rather than relying on the family to find a future spouse:

[...] my cousin got engaged to a lady whom he knew from Facebook. That amazes me. Oh God, I wish I would meet my future husband this way. I mean you exchange ideas, discuss issues. I mean if I marry someone I know, it is different from the traditional way; someone I don't know who comes and asks to marry me, arranged marriage. I like this idea and I am really thinking of it.

The crossing of male – female boundaries in strictly segregated society has been outdone online to the satisfaction of our interviewee:

[...] in Facebook I have boys friends, so..., in real life I wouldn't have a boy as a friend no matter what. I feel like in Facebook I can be friend with boys. And I feel like being... I don't know [me: comfortable] yeah... something like that

Similarly the ability to express one's opinions freely without fear and limitations helps Saudi women to achieve their full potential.

Yes in this aspect it [social media] helped, you can still express yourself. And as I said before, you can use a nickname and have more freedom to express your opinions. Indeed it is the same opinion and same personality, you won't change your opinions or your personality, actually when you say it you express yourself more, but when you write in your name, no, you have limits, I will reach here and that is it, I can't really cross certain boundaries.

## Conclusion

The interviews revealed the internet with its protection of individual privacy provided the participants a space to negotiate the boundaries imposed on them by cultural and societal rules. It is apparent that social media contributed to granting women their voice and agency and destabilized the portrayals of them as victims of longstanding patriarchal oppressive practices. Internet offers users the possibility to negotiate their identities or to reshape their offline identity carefully choosing “what information to put forward, thereby eliminating visceral reactions that might have seeped out in everyday communication” (boyd, 2007, p.12). For instance one participant used a nickname that she felt reflected who she was more than the name given to her by her parents:

I want to use a name when someone look at it, is going to think, oh she is special, she is someone different. It is not just a name, it is not just “so and so” it is more than that , it is a name that have a meaning behind it, it is like an icon for me. That is why I am having a different name than mine, it is not different, it just has a different meaning. It is like a *lughab* (nickname). If you have your name . . . what? One hundred people [have names] like your name.

All in all, thanks to the Internet “mixed and matched” identities can be lived and performed in real and online lives.

However it is important to note that, despite these possibilities offered by the Internet, distancing oneself from the offline real identity, especially gender, is problematic online, since “‘doing gender’ is far from voluntary activity, it is performativity that concerns the very sense of the self . . . Since being gendered (raced, classed) is a precondition for thinking, living and making sense of the world, the individual cannot take up any identity position s/he pleases” (Paasonen, 2002, p. 25). That might explain why, while changing other aspects of their identity such as adopting nicknames or veiling / concealing personal images, none of our participants distanced herself from being a female.

In conclusion we argue that identities are constructed within, not outside of discourse; hence we need to understand them as “produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices” (Hall, 1996, p. 4). In the context of the Saudi society, the social media sites, in the absence of the body and without gatekeepers, brought new ways of self-expression and identification among Saudi females. They were able to articulate themselves for whom they think they really are, not whom the society wants them to be. As summed up by one participant:

I think for some females social networks are their escape. It is their escape from reality where they can be whoever they want to be, to act however they want to act, even if they want to act openly . . . For some people it is a second life, they create their own identity.

In conclusion we argue that for significant change to women’s status to occur in Saudi Arabia “there will need to be considerable interaction between those who carry altered gender expectations and those who maintain traditional representations of both fact/fiction and male/female” (O’Brien, 1996, p. 66).

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