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Facebook Usage Among Arabic College Students

Preliminary Findings on Gender Differences

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ABSTRACT

With immense popularity and candid participation, social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook have great impacts on both commercial and social life. Despite their popularity, research on SNS is far behind the practice. Particularly, research outside of western countries is very limited, given the global nature of SNS. With the young generation in the Arabic world embarking on Internet use, SNS, and particularly Facebook, have become a main arena for their identity construction and relationship development, playing a vital role in shaping future society. The purpose of this exploratory study is to provide descriptive information about the use of Facebook by Arabic college students, with a focus on gender differences in motivations and perceived consequences of Facebook usage. This study represents an initial attempt to tackle the SNS phenomenon in the Arabic world, and its results suggest a promising research opportunity in gender differences in SNS usage patterns. By contributing empirical evidence from the UAE, our study helps develop an understanding of the regional uniqueness in SNS usage.

Keywords: Social networking sites, IT usage.

According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), social networking sites (SNS) are 'web-based services that allow individuals to 1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, 2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and 3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system'. In the past couple of years alone, SNS such as Friendster, MySpace, and Facebook have become immensely popular among college students. Among various SNS, Facebook is currently considered as a rich site for researchers interested in social networks, due to its heavy usage patterns and technological capacities that bridge online and offline connections. Facebook, originally created for college students, had by January 2009 attracted more than 150 million active users with more than half of them outside of college (Facebook, 2009). The fastest growing demographic consists of those 30 years old and older. Facebook has become an integral part of daily life. On average, each user has 100 friends on the site. Worldwide, more than 3 billion minutes are spent on Facebook each day. More than 13 million users update their status at least once each day and more than 3 million users track certain pages on a daily base. More than that, Facebook is increasingly employed by politicians, protesters, social activists, etc. to achieve a wide range of objectives. A good example was Barack Obama's US presidential campaign in 2008.

Compared to traditional online communities, Facebook enforces a strict policy against the use of pseudonyms, which helps cultivate a culture of honesty that is not always found in other online communities. With immense popularity and candid participation, Facebook

shows a greater potential in developing customer communities, promoting online presence, advertising, and customising of services and products. For instance, several libraries have set up a Facebook profile to provide a customised service for college students. Facebook is also embarking on e-commerce by partnering with Amazon.com. Although many business models are still in the experimental stage, no one should ignore Facebook's potential in e-commerce.

While most people take such technologies for granted, our understanding of SNS is very limited (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009). At this moment, key research questions remain about what people do with SNS and user-reported reasons for using those sites (e.g., Pempek et al., 2009; Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008). Despite the global scope of Facebook, the majority of studies have been conducted with US samples and limited understanding has been achieved of usage outside the US. In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a high Internet penetration rate has brought the younger generation online. According to Emirates Internet and Multimedia (EIM), there were 2.3 million Internet users by March 2008, accounting for 49.8 per cent of the total population (Internet World Stats, 2009); most of them were adolescents and emerging adults, who are characterised by a heightened vulnerability about the self (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). In parallel, we have also witnessed a fast growth in the number of Facebook users in the UAE (>20%) (O'Reilly Radar, 2009). With the younger generation in the Arabic world embarking on Internet use, SNS such as Facebook have been used as a main arena for their identity construction and relationship development, playing a vital role in shaping future society (Pempek et al., 2009). However, in contrast with the wide popularity of SNS in the UAE, little research has been done to shed light on its local specificity in the usage of SNS, as well as the implications of this. Finally, as indicated in prior research (e.g., Straub, Loch & Hill, 2001), culture and social norms play an important role in shaping Internet usage. The younger generation in the Arab world are influenced by both traditional Islamic and modern cultures (Solberg, 2002), which may not stay in harmony. For instance, using SNS may create a great controversy with respect to the traditional Islamic/Arabic culture, when people are empowered with more possibilities in extending their social networks, and more sources for identity exploration and development. Saudi preacher Ali al-Maliki, a leading critic of Facebook, claims the network is corrupting the youth of the nation: 'Facebook is a door to lust, and young women and men are spending more on their mobile phones and the Internet than they are spending on food' (Facebook, 2009). Given strong cultural notions of gender in the Arabic world, there is no reason to assume equal adoption, pursuit and perception of social networking sites between male and female users.

Therefore, it is important to investigate the usage of SNS in general, and Facebook in particular, among the Arabic younger generation. Before pursuing any causal claim, we first adopt an exploratory approach in this study and aim to provide descriptive information about the use of Facebook by Arabic college students, with a focus on gender differences in motivations and perceived consequences of Facebook usage. Crucial questions for understanding the use of such applications address self-perception in Facebook, frequent activities, the influence of others in Facebook adoption, perceived trust and perceived consequences of using Facebook. The purposes of this study are twofold. First, we expect to confirm the usage of Facebook among the local Arabic youth and its relevance for future research. Second, we hope to identify the important issues in such usage, which can then be the basis for future theoretical development and empirical validation.

The article is organised as follows. We first provide a brief introduction to Internet usage in the UAE and justify the focus on gender differences. Then discussion of the research questions is followed by a description of the method. After that, we report the descriptive results and discuss their implications. Finally, we conclude the article with a discussion about the contributions and implications for future research.

INTERNET USAGE AND FACEBOOK ADOPTION IN THE UAE

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) was established in 1971 as a federation of seven emirates. Within 30 years, this country has undergone significant social, economic, and cultural changes. ETISALAT has provided Internet services to the UAE since August 1995. The country now has one of the highest rates of Internet usage in the Middle East and its telecommunications sector is the most highly developed in the region. Facebook in particular has become very popular among young people in the UAE. Although the exact statistics are missing, its popularity is signalled through some discussions about Facebook in various venues, and a recent event of 'blocking Facebook' in the UAE. The author's casual survey of students in the classroom also reported about 60 per cent of Facebook adoption. Meanwhile, the UAE has promoted gender empowerment by encouraging women to receive education, and take an active part in economic and political life. According to a UN report,¹ the UAE ranks 25th out of 108 countries in the gender empowerment measure, with a value of 0.691. This also indicates that compared to other Arabic countries, the UAE offers more opportunities for women to access Internet resources. All evidence indicates that Facebook has emerged as a significant social phenomenon worth much attention in the UAE.

The Internet is a global phenomenon, but with distinct regional profiles (Anderson & Eickelman, 1999). As indicated in prior research (e.g., Straub et al., 2001), culture and social norms play an important role in shaping Internet usage. Despite opportunities for hiding identities online (Pinsonneault & Heppel, 1998), users' online behaviour is still subject to their offline identities (Smith & Kollock, 1999), which are largely the result of complicated cultural and social influences. Research on refined understandings of the digital divide also found that equal access to Internet resources does not guarantee homogeneity among users' online pursuits (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Celeste, & Shafer, 2004; Hargittai & Shafer, 2006). Among various offline identities, gender has been demonstrated to influence a wide array of user-technology interaction (Gefen & Straub, 1997; Venkatesh & Morris, 2000). Therefore, in this study we focus on gender differences. UAE nationals, being the minority (15–20 per cent) in their own country, have kept firm ties to their cultural traditions. Of particular interest to us are those traditions or social norms enforced for different gender groups. Although recently the government has encouraged Emirate females to join the workforce and take leadership roles in running the country, strong social norms remain applicable for females. For instance, a female cannot show her face except to close family members, a female is not allowed to interact with others, particularly males, without permission from her family, and a female is not allowed to touch or be touched by males (e.g., a handshake with a work colleague is not permitted). Such traditions may run counter to the affordance of Facebook, which empowers females with more possibilities for extending their social network, and provides more sources for identity exploration and development. The conflict brought about by the usage of Facebook and exposure to western culture is expected to be stronger among women than men in the UAE, which implies significant gender differences in Facebook usage and perception.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How do people perceive themselves in Facebook? According to Erikson (1958), identity is the main developmental task of adolescence. Research in developmental psychology has demonstrated that as the Internet becomes a main social environment for most people, it becomes an essential arena for identity experimentation and exploration, playing an important role in adolescent development (Subrahmanyam, Smahel, & Greenfield, 2006). The same theories are also applicable to Arab youth. For instance, Ayed's (2005) field study demonstrated that the Internet plays an important role in shaping political attitudes and culture among youth. The younger generation in the Arab world is influenced by both traditional Islamic and modern cultures (Solberg, 2002), which may not stay in harmony. The conflict brought about by Internet usage and exposure to western culture fundamentally shapes the self-perception of the younger generation, and understanding of their self-perception in Facebook would be the first step for researchers in understanding this process of identity exploration and formation.

What do they do with Facebook? Facebook was originally designed to be a social networking site for connecting college students, but now extends to high schools and other organisations. When people join Facebook, they start by creating a profile, which can be used to identify connections to those who share similar characteristics. Members can also connect to those they meet through the site. Built on this basic networking function is the rich communication and relationships among members, fulfilling a number of purposes. Despite equal access to Facebook, different users may have their own online pursuits (DiMaggio et al., 2004; Hargittai & Shafer, 2006). We are particularly interesting in gender differences in Facebook activities. Since women are subject to more limitations in physical life than men, Facebook, providing an alternative online playground, may be perceived to be more important among women than men. Therefore, in this study, we try to provide some preliminary results regarding the specific pursuits on Facebook among young Arabic students, and gender differences in Facebook activities.

Who are the most influential others for Facebook usage? According to the theory of planned behaviour (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), one of the determinants of behaviour intention is subjective norms, defined as 'a person's perception that most people who are important to him think he should or should not perform the behavior in question'. Such perceived pressure from important others exerts its influences through three major mechanisms: compliance, internalisation and identification (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002). Compliance means the person is motivated by the need for approval from significant others. Internalisation refers to the adoption of a decision based on the congruence of one's values with the values of another. Identification suggests that the person defines him/herself in terms of features of social category that render the self stereotypically 'interchangeable' with other group members, and stereotypically distinct from outsiders (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Subjective norms are particularly relevant in understanding Arab students' Facebook usage, due to the fact that the traditional Islamic values remain influential, especially for female students. The initial attempt in this study would be identification of important others, and gender differences in social influences.

Do they trust people in Facebook? Trust deals typically with beliefs regarding the ability, benevolence, and integrity of the trusted party (Gefen & Straub, 2004). As a central concept in social exchange, trust helps reduce uncertainty, enhance predictability, and alleviate complexity in social interaction (Jarvenpaa & Tractinsky, 1999) and human-computer in-

teraction (Gefen, 2000). Existing evidence also demonstrates that trust is one of the major factors for sustaining virtual communities (Tung, Tan, Chia, Koh, & Yeo, 2001), guaranteeing successful IT adoption (Gefen, 2000), enhancing business-to-business (Pavlou & Gefen, 2002) and business-to-consumer electronic commerce (McKnight, Choudhury, & Kacmar, 2002). Particularly for people interacting in Facebook, trust may affect their information disclosure and willingness to enter and carry on relationships with the others (Dwyer, Hiltz, & Passerini, 2007). Therefore, in this study, we are interested in trust in the other social actors in Facebook.

What are the perceived consequences of using Facebook? Perceived consequences are from Triandis' model (Triandis, 1980). According to this model, each act or behaviour is perceived as having a potential outcome that can be either positive or negative. An individual's choice of behaviour is based on the probability that an action will provoke a specific consequence. Identifying the consequences of using Facebook would shed light on the determinants of Facebook usage.

METHOD

In order to understand the gender differences in Facebook usage among UAE college students, we conducted a survey in a private university in the UAE during the 2008 spring semester. In the survey, we mainly focused on the following subjects: self-perception in Facebook; frequent activities with Facebook; perceived consequences; subjective norms; and overall attitude to using Facebook. Prior to the survey, we organised a focus group discussion with 20 female students who did not participate in the survey study, in order to identify the measures for frequent activities with Facebook, perceived consequences, and influential others in measuring subjective norms. For instance, many students identified some negative impacts of Facebook on their family relationships and culture, which were included in the measures for perceived consequences. The results of focus group discussion were used to adapt the existing measurement for trust (Gefen & Straub, 2003), and for subjective norms (Limayem, Khalifa, & Frini, 2000).

The survey was distributed to 128 students taught by one of the authors, and a total of 70 students returned a valid response, 35 female and 35 male. Participation was voluntary without any motivation. Table 1 summarises the demographic information of the participants. The majority of participants were undergraduate students ranging between 19 and 30 years old. The distribution of nationality was consistent with the general ethnic distribution in the university. Despite the diversity, almost all students are Muslims and comply with the traditional Islamic culture. A subsequent test indicated insignificant national difference.

More than half of the participants had more than five years' experience with the Internet, which confirmed that using the Internet has become their daily routine. More particularly, 84.3 per cent of participants had at least six months' experience with Facebook and 54.3 per cent of them logged in on a daily base. Consistent with our early survey results, Facebook was very popular among the younger generation of the UAE. Moreover, ANOVA testing did not report a significant gender difference in experiences with the Internet and Facebook, or frequency of Facebook usage. This may suggest that both females and males enjoy similar Internet access.

Table 1: Demographic Information

Age	Count (%)	Nationality	Count (%)
19–30	65 (92.9)	Syrian	15 (21.4)
31–45	5 (7.1)	UAE	17 (24.2)
Frequency of login	Count (%)	Palestinian	11 (15.7)
Daily	38 (54.3)	Egyptian	7 (10)
Weekly	17 (24.3)	Indian	7 (10)
Monthly	15 (21.4)	Lebanese	7 (10)
Experience with Internet	Count (%)	Pakistani	6 (8.6)
< 1 year	4 (5.7%)	Education	Count (%)
2–5 years	26 (37.1)	Undergraduate	61 (87.1)
> 5 years	40 (57.1%)	Masters	9 (12.9)
Experience with Facebook	Count (%)	Membership of Facebook	Count (%)
< 6 months	11 (15.7%)	< 6 months	18 (25.7)
6–12 months	22 (31.4%)	6–12 months	20 (28.6)
> 12 months	37 (52.9%)	1–2 years	23 (32.9)
		2–5 years	9 (12.9)

DESCRIPTIVE RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We conducted ANOVA to examine the gender difference in terms of the purposes of self-perception in Facebook, frequent activities with Facebook, subjective norms, perceived trust, and perceived consequences of using Facebook.

Self-perception in Facebook

A key task in adolescent development is the formation of identity. How do people in Facebook perceive themselves? In this survey, we tapped three self-perceptions: sociable/unsociable, conservative/outgoing; independent/dependent. Selection of these items was based on the gender stereotype in the UAE. As one respondent put it: 'As a UAE guy, I find something that doesn't meet our cultural or religion morale. For instance, a girl can come to my account and say how sexy I am. This is not allowed in our culture.' Table 2 reports the gender difference in self-perception in Facebook. Different from the general stereotype, female and male students reported similar levels of sociability and conservativeness, higher than what has been perceived in their physical life. Moreover, although both groups reported a relatively high level of independence, significant difference was found between the female and male students. It seems that the female students who live in Facebook feel more independent. However, this explanation warrants further examination as it might be the result of selection bias.

Table 2: Gender Difference in Self-perception in Facebook

		Mean	Std.	Error	ANOVA
In Facebook, I am very sociable =1 unsociable=8	female	3.31	2.53	.43	Insignificant
	male	2.77	2.08	.38	
In Facebook, I am very conservative=1 outgoing =8	female	5.11	2.13	.36	Insignificant
	male	5.10	1.77	.32	
In Facebook, I am very dependent =1 independent=8	female	6.23	2.16	.37	p<.05
	male	5.13	1.85	.34	

Frequent Activities with Facebook

Social networking sites are designed to foster social interaction. Enhanced social networks also provide rich information sources and fulfil different pursuits of users. Table 3 reports the frequent activities with Facebook identified in focus group discussion, which generally covers most needs of social networking site users, e.g., information needs (Items 1–5), social needs (Items 6–8), entertainment needs (Items 9–10), and development needs (Item 11). The survey results also indicated significant difference in all activities between male and female students. Specifically, the female students reported more frequency in all activities, indicating that Facebook plays a more important role in the female students' life than it does for their male counterparts.

First, the female students reported themselves to be more active in information seeking and contributing activities. As one student mentioned in the focus group discussion: 'Since I am a woman, I found that it is the only way [online] I could express my opinions and ideas freely.' This confirms the claim that the Internet in general and Facebook in particular are playing a very important role in empowering women in the Arabic world. Second, both male and female students considered Facebook as a social venue for networking and seeking social support, although such demands seemed more salient among the female students. Third, Facebook was also considered more as a playground for female students than for male students. This may also be related to the fact that male students enjoy more freedom and choices for entertainment. Finally, Facebook was found to be an important venue for the female students in experimenting with different roles, while such activity was not salient among the male students. This result might be related to the difference in enforced limitations between females and males in real life. As we mentioned before, despite its economic and social progress, the UAE remains close-tied with the Islamic/Arabic traditions, and women are subject to more restrictions. Overall, the usage of Facebook for male students is consistent with its basic function, social networking, while for female students Facebook seems to fulfil various roles and constitutes an important complement for limitations in their physical social life.

Table 3: Gender Difference in Frequent Activities with Facebook

(1=never; 8=always)		Mean	Std.	Error	ANOVA
1. To get information	female	4.66	2.49	.42	p<.05
	male	3.43	1.81	.34	
2. To learn how to do things	female	4.29	2.14	.36	p<.05
	male	3.07	2.03	.38	
3. To provide others with information	female	6.20	2.21	.37	p<.01
	male	3.38	2.58	.51	
4. To generate ideas	female	5.59	2.16	.37	p<.01
	male	2.81	1.87	.34	
5. To solve problems	female	4.69	2.31	.39	p<.01
	male	2.67	2.11	.39	
6. To seek social support	female	5.20	2.51	.42	p<.05
	male	3.53	2.74	.50	
7. To meet new people	female	5.71	2.15	.36	p<.05
	male	4.46	1.90	.37	
8. To socialize with people similar to me	female	6.17	1.51	.25	p<.05
	male	5.19	2.06	.37	
9. To be entertained	female	6.91	1.70	.29	p<.01
	male	4.29	2.21	.42	
10. To relax	female	6.20	1.94	.33	p<.01
	male	3.00	2.18	.40	
11. To play another role that I can't in the real life	female	5.80	1.28	.22	p<.01
	male	3.19	2.94	.53	

Subjective Norms

Based on the focus group discussion, we identified four important others in influencing students' decisions: relatives (family members), friends, professors, and classmates. While peer influence was the same across the two groups, female students reported themselves to be more influenced by their relatives and professors than male students were. Despite the varieties in online activities as indicated in Table 1, getting approval from certain authorities seems important for female students' Facebook usage. However, it is not clear whether and how subjective norms also play a role in influencing online activities.

Table 4: Gender Difference in Social Norms

(1=Strongly Disagree; 8=Strong Agree)		Mean	Std.	Error	ANOVA
My relatives think that I should use Facebook	female	6.31	1.37	.23	p<.01
	male	4.19	2.07	.37	
My friends think that I should use Facebook	female	5.43	1.24	.21	Insignificant
	male	5.07	1.60	.30	
My professors think that that I should use Facebook	female	6.91	1.36	.23	p<.01
	male	3.76	2.08	.39	
My classmates at university think that I should use Facebook	female	4.66	2.25	.38	Insignificant
	male	4.60	2.09	.38	

Perceived Trust

Overall, our survey results did not indicate a high level of trust with people in Facebook, except for the dimension of integrity. First, their belief in the integrity of people in Facebook would convince the members of Facebook that their information would not be used inappropriately and their expected results from social interaction would be fulfilled. Our results showed significant difference in the belief in integrity between male and female students.

Female students tended to believe that people in Facebook were honest and reliable, while the male students seemed to have the opposite view. As one male respondent put it: 'In fact, when I first set up my profile ... I was afraid to add my real personal details and my profile stayed empty for more than three weeks because of my doubt with that website. I was afraid even to add friends to my profile when they sent me invitations.'

Table 5: Gender Difference in Perceived Trust in Facebook

(1=Strongly Disagree; 8=Strong Agree)		Mean	Std.	Error	ANOVA
Integrity	female	5.31	1.35	.23	p<.01
	male	3.87	2.07	.39	
Benevolence	female	2.55	2.11	.36	p<.05
	male	3.59	1.97	.42	
Ability	female	2.74	1.69	.36	p<.01
	male	4.52	2.07	.42	
Predictability	female	3.74	2.63	.32	Insignificant
	male	4.61	2.14	.47	

Second, benevolence deals with the belief that the trusted party actually cares about the trusting party. Our results reported that generally not all respondents held a strong belief in the benevolence of the members in Facebook. We also found that female students were more cautious than male students, as indicated by the significantly lower rating on benevolence from female students.

Third, the trust dimension of ability is the assessment that the trusted party knows the subject in question and that this knowledge enhances the certainty of the trusting party obtaining its expected outcomes from the relationship. Our results showed that female students had significantly lower trust in the others' ability than male students did. This might be because overall academic performance of female students is better than that of male students. In 2008, female students made up 70.4 per cent of total graduates. The enhanced education gives female students more confidence in judging the trusted party's ability.

Finally, the trust dimension of predictability means the trusted party behaves as expected by the trusting party. Compared to the rating for the trust dimensions of benevolence and ability, the ratings for the dimension of predictability are a little higher and there was no significant difference between two gender groups.

Perceived Consequences of Facebook Usage

Based on the focus group discussion, we identified the following four consequences tapping the potential impacts of Facebook: individuality (Item 1), time management (Item 2), social relationships (Item 3), and cultural conflict (Item 4). In the survey, except for Item 3 (Using Facebook keeps me away from real life friends and family), ratings for the other three items were significantly below 4.5. Moreover, significant gender difference was only reported for Item 2 (Using Facebook makes me lose precious time). Particularly, our results showed that using Facebook is not necessarily associated with being unique, which may confirm the popularity of Facebook among the younger generation in the UAE. Second, due to the multiple pursuits that Facebook can fulfil, using Facebook is not considered as wasting time, particularly among female students. Moreover, all participants were neutral regarding the potential impact of Facebook on physical social life. Finally, participants in our study did not think that using Facebook is against their culture. Instead of following the older generation's opinions about Facebook, the younger generation in the UAE tries to fit the new

technologies and changes into their existing culture system. As one participant put it: 'His [the Imaam's] opinion upsets me, and I often thought to myself that he was leader suitable for my grandfather's generation, not mine!'

Table 6: Gender Difference in Perceived Consequences of Facebook Usage

(1=Strongly Disagree; 8=Strong Agree)		Mean	Std.	Error	ANOVA
Using Facebook makes me different from the others	female	2.94	2.13	.36	insignificant
	male	3.94	2.22	.40	
Using Facebook makes me lose precious time	female	1.94	1.11	.19	p<.01
	male	3.35	2.81	.51	
Using Facebook keeps me away from real life friends and family	female	4.54	3.00	.51	insignificant
	male	4.06	2.50	.45	
Using Facebook may be against our culture, e.g., putting up other people's pictures online	female	3.83	3.05	.52	insignificant
	male	3.71	2.51	.45	

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This research provided an exploratory investigation of Facebook usage among university students in the UAE with a focus on gender differences. Seventy university students participated in the survey. Before we draw any conclusions, we would like to highlight some limitations of this study that should be considered in externalising the conclusions to the general population. Given the limited exposure, our sample size was small. We expect the results to provide some preliminary insight but not to be externalised to the whole population. Moreover, with the specific institutional design in the surveyed university, i.e., gender segregation, our study may have attracted many students who are relatively more conservative and more subject to the traditional social norms. Therefore, our results may reflect more about Internet usage and its impacts among conservative students in the UAE.

Despite the above limitations, our results contribute to the existing literature that is dominant with western evidence, by providing a preliminary understanding about Facebook usage among the younger generation in the Arabic region and by revealing significant differences between male and female students. The results of this study suggest further work is warranted to examine the following issues. First, with SNS increasingly integrated into young people's daily life, it will be important to examine the impact of such sites on the development of the young. Compared to their parents' generation, the younger generation in the UAE has more channels for social interaction, information activities and identity experimentation. Particularly, we identified the most frequent activities with Facebook, indicating the main pursuits of the surveyed UAE college students. The analyses of gender differences reveal that Facebook seemed more important for female UAE students to extend their social network, get information, and experiment with different identities. The identified activities could be used in future empirical research with a probability sample to get a more accurate picture about what young Arabic people do with Facebook. Such results can be further compared with those from different cultural groups to investigate the different usage patterns with Facebook across different cultures. Moreover, gender identity, largely, is emblematic of cultural and social influences and, therefore, can be considered as an entry point for understanding complicated cultural differences. Our results also confirm a promising research direction on gender differences in SNS usage.

Second, our exploratory results also identified the important others in exerting social influences. Unlike the young people in some western countries where peer influences are

very salient, the young UAE students are more subject to authority influences, and such influences are more salient among the female students. Again, this reflects the uniqueness of Arabic culture. The results in this study are ready to be implemented in future empirical validation as well. However, it is not clear whether and how such social influences shape online activities, e.g., whom to communicate with, what to communicate, etc. Future research could take a deeper look at whom those females are communicating with online and whether the online social networks are different from or the same as the offline ones.

Third, we also confirmed that Facebook influences the self-concept of young UAE students. Particularly, such influences profoundly transformed the stereotype of the female students in the UAE. What we found was more about the similarities between the two gender groups, rather than the differences. For instance, the female students, like their male counterparts, were ready to welcome new friends and new ideas. As one student commented after the survey, 'Facebook makes me more open to different perspectives'. Such findings suggest that Facebook may play an important role in bridging the gender gap and particularly in helping the female students in self-enhancement.

Fourth, the general low rating in perceived trust implies some possible hurdles for Facebook usage. Migrating from face-to-face communication to computer-mediated communication might be triggered by curiosity; but the continuous usage might be heavily influenced by social counterparts in particular communication settings. Prior studies have identified trust as an important driver for online transactions and virtual community participation. However, the surveyed students overall did not show a strong trust towards the other users in Facebook. The after-survey interviews also revealed that most of these students use Facebook to strengthen their existing social connections, e.g., friends and/or relatives, that had been developed offline. Lack of trust in the other users in Facebook might be one of the reasons that prevent them from expanding their social networks, which is worth further investigation.

To sum up, our results, despite their descriptive and exploratory nature, have revealed very interesting and significant gender differences in Facebook usage and related perceptions. This study represents an initial attempt to tackle the SNS phenomenon in the Arabic world. Based on these results, we would encourage future endeavours for theoretical development in understanding the gender differences in SNS usage patterns. By contributing empirical evidence from the UAE, our study helps in understanding the regional uniqueness in SNS usage.

NOTES

- 1 http://hdrstats.undp.org/2008/countries/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_ARE.html.

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