An Exploratory Study of the Effects of Social Media in Everyday Life and Consumer Behavior in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

Objectives/Methods: The study attempts to describe the effects of social networking in Saudi everyday life and consumer behavior. The data were gathered from a peer-moderated and pre-tested questionnaire (appendix) that was, then, made available on- and off-line. **Findings:** The results suggest that Saudis are making very heavy use of the Social Media Networks mainly because they want or need (or both) to socialize and enrich their cultural life as much as possible given the general lack of other opportunities available especially in non-central cities. They don't seem to care or understand the possible negative issues associated with the extensive use of social networking. **Conclusions:** These suggestions are meant to lead to more systematically organized studies in the near future from the local authorities in an effort to better facilitate the organization of the online social community in the country and form policies aiming to mitigate possible threats from over-engagement.

Keywords: Consumer Behavior, Exploratory Study, Saudi Arabia, Social Media

1. Introduction

It goes without saying that Social Media is a focal point of discussion of many communities, especially those related to IT but also from the business world and the society all over the world. Everyday a number of research studies and commercial articles are being published with discussions related anyhow with the advent, rapid growth and most recent behaviours in Social Media usage[1,2]. The need is such that web sites are developed with the aim of monitoring these developments, in real time, even in countries that perhaps one would not expect a couple of years ago, like in the Middle East (go-gulf.com, socialbakers.com). In fact, the trend is such that even technology giants get deeply involved, somehow, with the Social Media either by acquiring related companies or building their systems with eSociety in mind, e.g., Apple acquiring Topsy (a small analytics firm focusing in Social Media) as Wakabayashi and MacMillan[3] inform.

The penetration of the use of the Social Media is so extensive that it is no longer enough to just address questions related to the population of their users or just their demographics like several local sites do[4]. It is necessary to delve much deeper into the attitudes of the average users and the effect of an individual's personality into such behavior, the positive feelings but also the worries of such involvements, their perception of the advantages or disadvantages of the Social Media, etc[5,6].

This is especially so for the newly developing countries, like those in the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council Countries, i.e., Saudi Arabia, U.A.E., Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait). In these cases, with Social Media use being the trend and the governments and local businesses trying to "catch up" with these rapid and dramatic changes in the personal behavior of the local residents[7,8], it is necessary to study these changes in depth.

According to[9], the higher the online social presence the larger the social influence depending on the personal

profile of the user. Constant social online presence seems to be more and more important for social media users and especially to those who want to enjoy commercial benefits[10]. Social Media platforms like "Twitter" enable constant social presence and, according to[11], improve social interactions, which occur more naturally.

More particularly in the Arab world the number of social media users has grown exponentially since 2011. Once merely used as a social and entertainment tool now social media has penetrated in almost every aspect of the Arabs' daily lives, transforming the way they socialize, do business, communicate with government officials and government agencies and participate in civil movements.

At the same time, though, the Saudi governments in particular but also others in the region have made attempts to control and, in some cases, to block particular online communities. This decision was made, on the one hand, in an effort to protect the public from misinformation and/or harmful political attitudes that aim to disturb the social peace and local traditions. On the other hand, it was aiming to promote interaction between the government and its citizens. Social media experts suggest that governments might want to see these new communication channels as an opportunity to reach a part of the society they were not able in the past. They believe that with the right regulation framework and through a process of trial and error governments will be able to cope with this increased flow of information and, eventually, find the balance they seek in favor of people's common wealth and prosperity[12].

The social media broad acceptance from the local communities in the GCC region attracted the attention of the commercial sector as well. Currently, the most important marketers in the GCC area have engaged in social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to perform low cost advertising projects for their products[13]. Salem's findings concerning the use of Facebook suggest it is the most popular social network followed by Google+. These online communications channels indeed have replaced the traditional communications between people who now use all the more the social media for socializing[14].

Because of this huge success a great debate continues over the value of this use of the communication medium in the education and commerce fields, governmental usage and possible consequences on Saudis' everyday life

taking as given the acceptance of social media in Saudi communities[15].

2. Objectives and Methods

This is a causal exploratory study of the effects, positive or negative, of the use of Social Media Networks in everyday life and consumer behavior of the Saudis and follows a blended mostly quantitative but also qualitative approach. The investigative questions it sought to answer are:

- What are the effects, both positive and negative, in their everyday life and behavior?
- What is their perception of the role of Social Media as a mediator between consumers and (online) business?

2.1 The Instrument

It was decided to include the gender, age, education, income, profession and frequency of use of the Social Media (Appendix A: Questions 1-6) as the first part of the questionnaire seeking to find possible causality between these and the investigative questions. The second part included those that would address the main points of this particular study (Appendix A: Questions 7-10).

The validity of the constructs/contents of the instrument was secured by moderating the questionnaire to make it appropriate for the particular Saudi context. Five (5) reputed individuals, 3 academics and 2 professionals, were given the questionnaire and were asked to moderate it, i.e. to suggest possible corrections. This process resulted in serious modifications in the case of income and age to reflect the Saudi society. Also, some other minor changes were made to make the main points more clear for the participants to address them.

Then, a pilot survey was conducted with the help of 20 conveniently selected individuals from the capital of Saudi Arabia, Riyadh. The goal was to run the survey on a small sample and make corrections that would make it, perhaps, more clear to everyone in the actual survey.

2.2 The Sample[16]

Nonprobability convenient sampling was the method used for the study. The main reasons for that were:

- The geography of this country and the lack of a big number of persons in the various places sufficiently

trained and informed enough to explain the study to the participants where that would be necessary.

- The difficulty in reaching female participants as a result of the particularities of the local society and culture.
- The limited number of related research in the country which made clear an exploratory study was necessary to shed light for others locally to follow.

Both the computer-assisted self-administered mode (using Google Docs) and the intercept mode were used to collect the data for the study. The 4 major metropolitan areas of the country, i.e., the capital Riyadh, the major port of Jeddah in the west, the oil-rich region of Dammam, Khobar, Dahran in the east, and the southwest region, were the geographic scope of the survey. The anonymity was secured as there was no question on personal information apart from the demographic ones mentioned previously.

2.3 The Data Collection[16]

A full-scale survey followed the pilot phase between (March to June 2013) with 576 individuals participating in it. Cleaning of the data was required to exclude those individuals not residing in Saudi Arabia but in other countries and, at the end of this process, 394 responses were used for the study. This was deemed necessary to secure the data involved only the Saudi residents.

The characteristics of the sample followed rather closely the classification of the local society based on gender, age, education, and income. Indeed, 385 of the respondents (out of 394) revealed their age:

- The majority between 18 and 25 (42.9%, 169/385).
- A large part in the range of 26-35 (27.9%, 110/385).
- A smaller number between 36 and 45 (15%, 59/385).
- Very few middle aged, i.e. between 46 to 60 (6.1%, 24/385).
- Just 5 were elders more than 60 years old (1.3%, 5/385).
- The rest were youngsters aging less than 18 (6.1%, 18/385).

As to the gender, the sample is quite balanced as:

- 49% (192/392) were male.
- 50.5% (199/392) were female respondents.
- The rest did not reveal their gender).

Concerning their education (two persons did not want to disclose this information):

- The majority (222/386, 56.3%) have an undergraduate degree.
- Some of them (49/386, 12.4%) hold a graduate degree.
- A small 13/386 (3.3%) are with a Ph.D. degree.
- A considerable number (67/386, 17%) have secondary school diploma.
- 27 more (27/386, 6.9%) have any other type of education.
- Just 1 individual only finished elementary education (1/386, 0.3%).

In terms of employment the statistics are as follows:

- The main part included those employed (186/383; 47.2%).
- A smaller number were students (138/383; 35%).
- A small 6.3% (25/383) complained they were unemployed.
- A similar 6.1% (24/383) self-declared as housewives.
- Just 2.5% (10/383) were retired.

Finally, different types of professions were identified including medical/nursing, education, technology, linguistics, financial, cultural/religious, management, trade, public services and military with each of them between 2% and 4.6% except those in education (probably students) with a 17.5% and those in management with 8.1%.

The only problem with the sample was that its geographic distribution was far from representative i.e., Riyadh: 233, Jeddah/Mekka: 77, Dammam / Khobar / Dahran: 37, Abha: 47 respondents respectively.

SPSS was used for the statistical analysis and Excel was used to provide the charts.
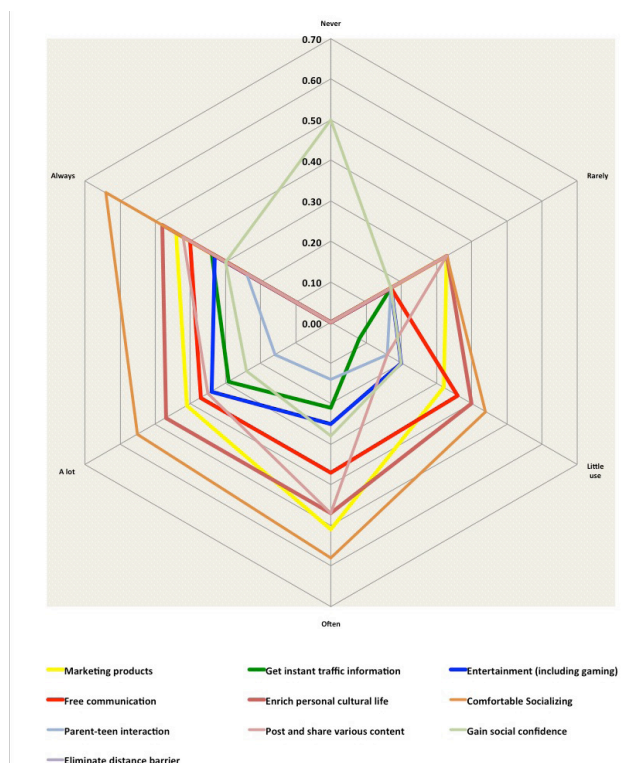
3. Findings

Of the 363 individuals that accepted to reveal the frequency of their use of the Internet, the majority 52.6% (191/363) admitted using the Internet always, at all times and every day. A large 33.1% (120/363) reported using it "a lot" every day, just more than 10% (38/363; 10.5%) use it "often", only 2%, 0.3%, 1% and

0.3% use it "a little", "rarely", "only for emails" or "never" respectively.

3.1 Benefits of the use of Social Media in Everyday Life

Tables 1(a) and 1(b) detail and Figure 1 illustrates the results when the participants were asked if they agree that various suggested benefits that come from the use of Social Media are applicable in their case.

The main benefit that the Saudis enjoy from their heavy use of Social Media is, much as expected, "comfortable socializing" (58%). Almost half of them (46%) feel this behavior helps them "enrich their personal cultural life". Less than half (43%) see the SMN as a good means for "marketing products". A sizable 38% find this type of net-working as a good "free communicator" and a convenient way to "post and share various contents online" (also 38%). About a third of the sample (31%) uses them for "entertainment including gaming" and another 28% just want to "get instant traffic information". A good 27% use it to gain "social confidence" and, finally, 19% of them find it a good tool for "parent-teen interaction". Not one of the participants admitted using them to "eliminate distance barrier" a reason thought of, by the authors, as important as, perhaps, "comfortable socializing".

There are two more elements that are worth noting. One is that these results come from one of the most conservative societies worldwide. A society in which information technology and, in fact, online socializing, either through personal computers or other electronic devices, is just introduced the past few years. The local authorities presumably take actions to control the use of these media either by making an effort to block some of them altogether or by, at least, introducing ways to somehow control them. The second is that from a deeper analysis of these basic findings it appears that the heavier the use of the social media the more the aforementioned suggested elements are affecting in a positive way.

3.2 Concerns of the Local Society Associated with Social Media Use

It is a common secret worldwide and the core subject of many discussions, as pointed in the literature review, that the use of SMN, apart from its benefits, also brings along several negative issues that cause major concerns as the results show (Tables 2(a) and 2(b), Figure 2).

The most important issue associated with socializing online is it is "time consuming" as almost ¾ of the sample believe (74%). Following closely the participants believe

Figure 1. Positive effects of social media in everyday life.
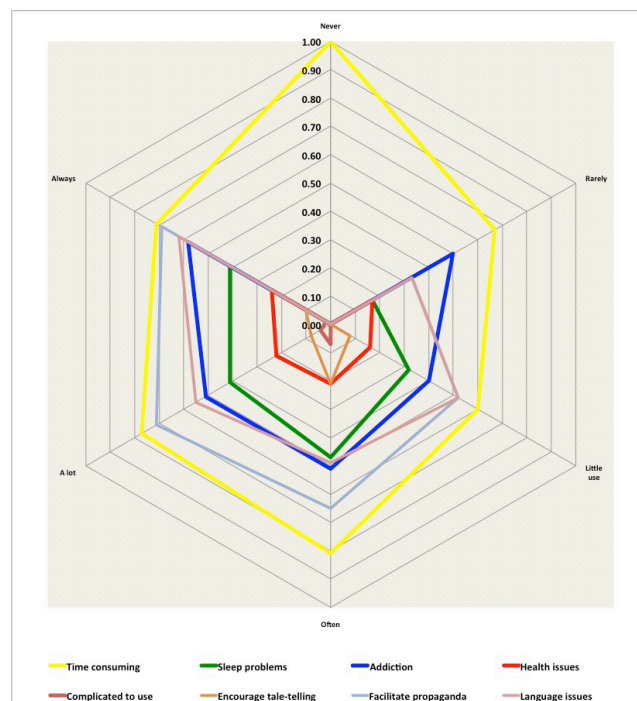
Figure 2. Negative effects of social media in everyday life

Table 1. **(a)** Positive effects of social media in everyday life (Part I) **(b)** Positive effects of social media in everyday life (Part II)

(a)

SMN use	Marketing products	Traffic info	Entertainment (e.g. gaming)	Free communication	Personal cultural life	N
Never	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	2
Rarely	33%	17%	17%	17%	33%	6
Little	32%	8%	20%	36%	40%	25
Often	51%	21%	25%	37%	47%	57
A lot	41%	29%	34%	37%	47%	135
Always	44%	34%	33%	40%	48%	143
Total	43%	28%	31%	38%	46%	368

(b)

SMN use	Confortable socializing	Parent-teen interaction	Post/share content	Gain social confidence	Eliminate distance barrier	N
Never	0%	0%	0%	50%	0%	2
Rarely	33%	17%	33%	17%	0%	6
Little	44%	16%	16%	20%	0%	25
Often	58%	14%	47%	28%	0%	57
A lot	55%	16%	35%	24%	0%	135
Always	64%	24%	42%	30%	0%	143
Total	58%	19%	38%	27%	0%	368

Table 2. **(a)** Negative effects of social media in everyday life (Part I) **(b)** Negative effects of social media in everyday life (Part II)

(a)

SMN use	Time consuming	Sleep problems	Addiction	Health issues	N
Never	100%	0%	0%	0%	2
Rarely	67%	17%	50%	17%	6
Little	60%	32%	40%	16%	25
Often	81%	47%	51%	21%	57
A lot	77%	41%	51%	22%	135
Always	71%	41%	58%	24%	143
Total	74%	40%	53%	22%	368

(b)

SMN use	Complicated use	Encourage tale-telling	Facilitate propaganda	Language issues	N
Never	0%	0%	0%	0%	2
Rarely	0%	0%	33%	33%	6
Little	0%	8%	52%	52%	25
Often	7%	21%	65%	49%	57
A lot	4%	8%	71%	55%	135
Always	2%	10%	69%	62%	143
Total	3%	11%	67%	56%	368

(67%) it "facilitates propaganda". In fact there is a contradiction in both these cases since the people that say so are the ones that make the heavier use of Social Media which means that although they see problems in their behavior still they continue to use it the most. More than half (56%) are annoyed because it brings "language issues" on the surface that makes its use less than comfortable, just a little less (53%), but mostly the heavy users, admit it is an "addiction" to many people and about 40% complain that it brings "sleep problems". About a quarter (22%) agree that Social Media use causes "health issues" and this feeling is just a little increased for those using them the most. Finally, very few (11%) see it as an instrument for "tale-telling" and almost nobody feels about the Social Media that they are "complicated to use" (3%).

These results, like in the case of those in the previous section, indicate that despite the particularities of the Saudi society its people are not feeling seriously different than the people in the rest of the world. The only major difference, at the moment since the local society is on the fast tract to adopting to technology change, is that they are not as concerned as other people about some possibly negative issues related to Social Media and this is,

most likely, because of the immature stage of technology deployment and adoption in the country. These, however, are almost certainly going to dramatically change during the years to come that will help bring Saudis even closer to the rest of the developed world as far as these matters are concerned.

3.3 Social Media and Consumer Behavior: Advantages

The participants were, also, asked to contribute their views on the effect of the use of Social Media in their consuming behavior (tables 3(a) and 3(b), Figure 3).

In general, the Saudis do not have in high regard the role of Social Media as a mediator that tightens the bonds between consumers and businesses. In the best case they see them as a tool to "ease the communication" between them (52%) and a little less than half believe it helps "expand the business contacts" (46%) or allows businesses (especially online) to "acquire customer feedback" (44%). Although more was expected but just about 1/3 of the respondents believe the Social Media could be a good tool to help the businesses "increase their client base" (37%),
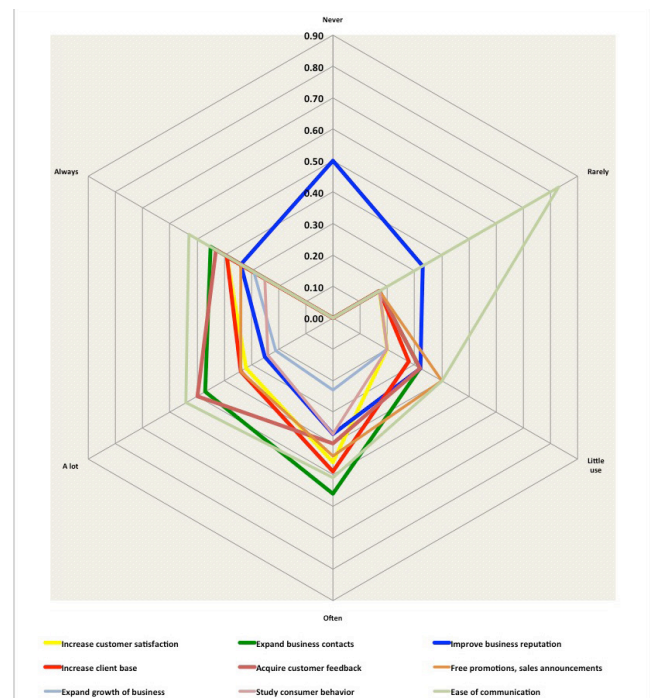
Figure 3. Social media and consumer behavior: Advantages.

Table 3. (a) Social Media and consumer behavior: advantages (Part I) (b) Social media and consumer behavior: advantages (Part II)

(a)

SMN use	Customer satisfaction	Business contacts	Business reputation	Increase client base	N
Never	0%	0%	50%	0%	2
Rarely	17%	17%	33%	17%	6
Little	20%	32%	32%	28%	25
Often	46%	56%	37%	49%	57
A lot	32%	47%	25%	34%	135
Always	39%	45%	34%	39%	143
Total	36%	46%	31%	37%	368

(b)

| SMN use	Customer feedback	Promotions/ sales' announ.	Business growth	Study consumer behavior	Ease of communication	N
Never	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	2
Rarely	17%	17%	17%	17%	83%	6
Little	32%	40%	20%	20%	40%	25
Often	40%	44%	23%	37%	51%	57
A lot	50%	34%	21%	24%	54%	135
Always	43%	34%	29%	25%	53%	143
Total	44%	36%	24%	26%	52%	368

or "increase customer satisfaction" (36%), or an alternative for "free promotions, sales and announcements" (36%) and even less (31%) see it as a medium to "improve business reputation". Finally, only a quarter (1/4) of them appreciates it enough to consider it as a means to "study consumer behavior" (26%) or "expand the growth of the business" (24%).

Definitely, at first glance these findings are disappointing and show serious lack of appreciation from the part of the potential online consumer of the role of Social Media in consumer behavior. This could be, however, a very shortsighted interpretation as it does not really take into account other factors that affect this behavior. For example, it is a common feeling in Saudi Arabia, and in the GCC in general, that online solutions in the region are both way too much overpriced and of very low quality not providing their visitors the opportunity to engage in serious online transactions. It is also common in Saudi Arabia that the local population, especially females, considers shopping as one of the most (if not the most) favorable type of entertainment! and one of the most preferable ways of socializing, other than home gatherings, in the absence of other alternatives such as movies, open coffee shops, etc. Add to these the fact, again as mentioned in the previous sections, that online societies and online markets are literally in their infancy in the country and the reader may understand the reasons behind this, not positive, behavior.

3.4 Social Media and Consumer Behavior: Disadvantages

Finally, the participants were, also, provided with a number of suggestions of possible disadvantages that the use of Social Media has when it comes to facilitate increased consumer engagement in online transactions. The results are detailed in Tables 4(a) and 4(b) and illustrated in Figure 4.

Just more than half (54%) complain about "delayed business responses" when engaging in online transactions of any type through the use of Social Media and the heavier the use the more increased are the complaints. Another third of the sample (37%) point to the "lack of information given by the businesses" to them with the use of Social Media not helping improve this reality. Other than that they largely disagree on the businesses' arguments about their potential or actual customers' "lack of feedback" to the businesses (only 19% agree), or that the whole process is "time consuming for
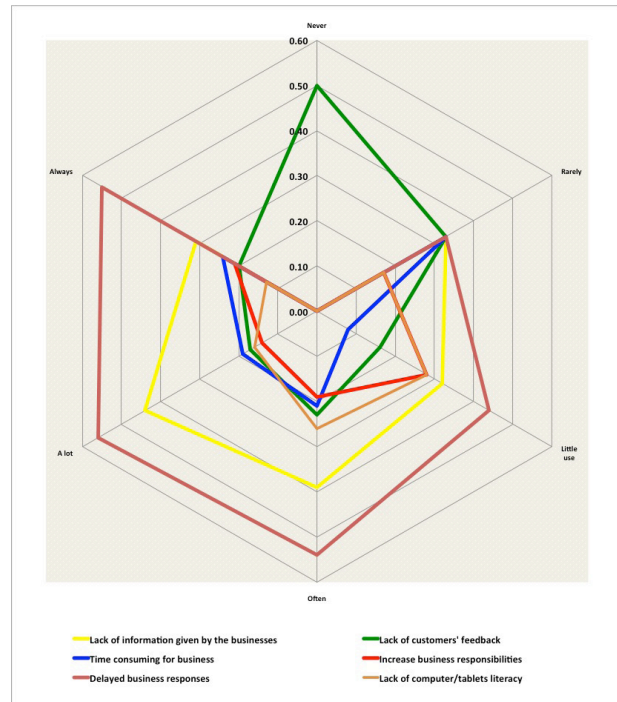
Figure 4. Social media and consumer behavior: Disadvantages.

Table 4. **(a)** Social Media and consumer behavior: disadvantages (Part I) **(b)** Social Media and consumer behavior: disadvantages (Part II)

(a)

SMN use	No info by the businesses	No customer feedback	Time consuming for businesses	N
Never	0%	50%	0%	2
Rarely	33%	33%	33%	6
Little	32%	16%	8%	25
Often	39%	23%	21%	57
A lot	44%	17%	19%	135
Always	31%	20%	24%	143
Total	37%	19%	21%	368

(b)

SMN use	Increased business responsibilities	Delayed business responses	No ICT literacy	N
Never	0%	0%	0%	2
Rarely	17%	33%	17%	6
Little	28%	44%	28%	25
Often	19%	54%	26%	57
A lot	14%	56%	16%	135
Always	21%	55%	13%	143
Total	18%	54%	17%	368

the business" (21%), or that it just "increases business responsibilities" to their on- or off-line customers (18%) and they definitely disagree the problem is "lack of computer/tablets literacy" that causes whatever miscommunication (17%).

Once again the safest interpretation of these findings could be that there is no particular problem between local consumers and online businesses but the major issue is the lack of maturity of the whole environment caused from the fact that the local online society is still in its infancy.

4. Conclusions

Asking from the population of a renowned conservative country- in which many of the, thought of as even basic, behaviours that an individual in the rest of the developed or developing countries is engaging are either absent or even prohibited - to follow closely the technology and other changes brought by the advent of ICT is not a very wise thought. Saudi Arabia is a very rich country where a lot has been done the past 10 years or so to develop a modern educational system, a proper telecommunications infrastructure, a solid business environment and give some "slack" to societal and individual activities just unthinkable a few years ago and there are plans for much more for the years to come. To find "deep" and "complicated" or even "sophisticated" interpretations of the effects of Social Media in everyday life and behaviour in the country is just wrong. Following Occam Razor's basic principle the general conclusion when studying personal behaviour in such a country could go like this: "among different alternative interpretations the one most simple is the one that should be selected".

That said, the authors feel that Saudis are only making very heavy use of the Social Media because they want or need (or both) to socialize as much as that is possible given the society restrictions they must follow and the lack of other opportunities available to them especially in places other than the capital Riyadh and their biggest ports of Jeddah (area) and Dammam (area). Many of them, also, find it an effective means to enrich their cultural life and, perhaps, learn from other cultures and religious/philosophical systems around the world. They either don't care or they don't understand or, even worse, they ignore the basic negative issues related to Social Networking.

Add to that the fact that the local business environment is not well developed yet and, largely, follows the stereotypes of the local society in terms of its (not) openness to the outside world in its effort to cope with two conflicting realities: 1.The newly developed and, in several cases and large regions of this vast desert country, still poor telecommunications infrastructure and 2. The low level of computer and ICT literacy of the vast majority of its population despite their extreme use (may be thought off by many as overuse or even abuse) of the information technology. However, it should be noted that it is quite certain that the huge investments, mainly public but also private, in all relevant directions and the intense promotion of "western" practices in all areas of business, education and others will yield the fruits of these efforts in due time. The signs are clear and visible that the next generation of Saudis will behave much different than the current one to such extend as to not be able to distinguish its people's behavior and mentality from the rest of the developed countries. Saudis are on the fast tract to achieve this.

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Appendix

Administrative, Technical, Social and Cultural challenges of Social Media in the Arab World

1. What is your gender?
_ 1. Male   _ 2. Female

2. What is your age?
_ 1. Below 18   _ 2. 18 to 34   _ 3. 35 to 49
_ 4. 50 to 65   _ 5. Older than 65   _ 6. Don't know/can't say

3. What is your educational level?
_ 1. Elementary level   _ 2. Secondary level (high school)
_ 3. Undergraduate level (BSc)   _ 4. Graduate level (M.Sc)
_ 5. Postgraduate level (PhD)   _ 6. Other:_____
_ 7. Don't know/can't say

4. What is your personal (or family) income (SAR per year)?
_ 1. 0 – 4000 SR   _ 2. 4001 – 8000 SR   _ 3. 8001 – 15000 SR
_ 4. 15001 – 25000 SR   _ 5. 25001 – 45000 SR   _ 5. More than 45000 SR
_ 6. Don't know/can't say

5. What is the nature of your basic profession?
_ 1. Medical/Nursing   _ 2. Education   _ 3. Technology
_ 4. Humanities (e.g. Philosophy, Languages)   _ 5. Financial   _ 6. Transportation
_ 7. Cultural/Religious officer   _ 8. Management   _ 9. Trade
_ 10. Public services (e.g. public servant)   _ 11. Military

_ 12. Don't know/Can't say   _ 13. Other:_____

6. **How frequently do you use the Social Media networks?**
_1. Never
_2. Rarely

_3. Little
_4. Often
_5. A lot
_6. Always

7. Select any of the following everyday activities or behaviors that social media would significantly or heavily influence in a positive way.

_ 1. Marketing products
_ 3. Entertainment (including gaming)
_ 5. Enrich personal cultural life
_ 7. Parent-teen interaction
_ 9. Gain social confidence
_ 11. Don't know/can't say

_ 2. Get instant traffic information
_ 4. Free communication
_ 6. Comfortable socializing
_ 8. Post and share of various contents
_ 10. Eliminate distance barrier
_ 12. Other: _____

8. Select any everyday activities or other behaviors that your involvement with social media would significantly or heavily influence negatively.

_ 1. Time consuming
_ 4. Health issues
_ 7. Facilitate Propaganda
_ 9. Don't know/can't say

_ 2. Sleep problems
_ 5. Complicated to use
_ 8. Language issues
_ 10. Other: _____

_ 3. Addiction
_ 6. Encourage tale-telling

9. In the field of communication between businesses and customers' relationship, what are the advantages of the social media as a mediator?

_ 1. Increase customer satisfaction
_ 3. Improve business reputation
_ 5. Acquire customer feedback
_ 7. Expand growth of business
_ 9. Ease of communication
_ 11. Other: _____

_ 2. Expand business contacts
_ 4. Increase client base
_ 6. Free Promotions, sales announcements
_ 8. Study consumer behavior
_ 10. Don't know/can't say

10. In the field of communication between businesses and customers' relationship, what are the disadvantages of the social media as a mediator?

_ 1. Lack of information given by the businesses
_ 2. Lack of customers' feedback
_ 3. Time consuming for business
_ 4. Increase business responsibilities
_ 5. Delayed business responses
_ 6. Lack of computer/tablets literacy
_ 7. Don't know/can't say
_ 8. Other: _____