



**HAL**  
open science

(2017), “ Saudi Women and Socio-Digital Technologies: Reconfiguring Identities ”, *CyberOrient*, vol. 11, n° 1.

En ligne:

<http://www.cyberorient.net/article.do?articleId=9822>

Hélène Bourdeloie, Caterina Gentiloni Silveri, Sara Houmair

► **To cite this version:**

Hélène Bourdeloie, Caterina Gentiloni Silveri, Sara Houmair. (2017), “ Saudi Women and Socio-Digital Technologies: Reconfiguring Identities ”, *CyberOrient*, vol. 11, n° 1. En ligne: <http://www.cyberorient.net/article.do?articleId=9822>. *CyberOrient*, 2017, 11 (1). sic\_02106100

**HAL Id: sic\_02106100**

[https://archivesic.ccsd.cnrs.fr/sic\\_02106100v1](https://archivesic.ccsd.cnrs.fr/sic_02106100v1)

Submitted on 22 Apr 2019

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

URL: <http://www.cyberorient.net/article.do?articleId=9822>

## Saudi Women and Socio-Digital Technologies: Reconfiguring Identities

**Hélène Bourdeloie, Caterina Gentiloni Silveri and Sara Houmair**

Université Paris 13 Sorbonne Paris-Cité – LabSIC and Costech (UTC), Institut d'Études Politiques de Paris and Université Paris Descartes

CyberOrient, Vol. 11, Iss. 1, 2017

### Abstract

Drawing on research conducted in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, this paper explores the specific uses of digital technologies by Saudi women. It shows how these women – whose gender identity is strongly constrained by a host of social and religious norms characterizing Saudi society – make use of digital technologies, and particularly mobile telephones. The various applications available for mobile telephony open up to them a whole range of choices on how to communicate and use photography, thus enabling them to circumvent their assigned gender identity, at least at the margin.

### Keywords:

[social media](#), [identity](#), [Muslim women](#), [gender](#), [Saudi Arabia](#)

### Introduction

As part of a research project on Saudi women and digital technologies uses in Saudi Arabia,<sup>1</sup> this article<sup>2</sup> focuses on Saudi women's identity and how this is evolving through their specific uses. Indeed, the findings of the Individuals Report ICT Survey results<sup>3</sup> (CICT 2015) on Saudi Arabia by the Saudi Communications and Information Technology Commission (CITC) show that information and communication technologies (ICT) usage is higher among women than men. This trend is contrary to that found in several Western countries, where Internet usage has been marked for many years by a gender divide that is predominantly masculine. However, in Saudi Arabia, a country characterized by gender segregation, the use of technology is higher for women. For Internet usage, the percentage of female users is 96 percent against 88 percent for male users (CICT 2015:15-16)<sup>4</sup> and they spend more time on-line: 45 percent of female web users report spending from four to eight hours a day on the Internet, compared with 25 percent of male users (CICT 2015:34-35). One of the main reasons is that, as the statutory gender identity assigned to women confines them more to the domestic space, they are more inclined to make use of these technologies. It is thus significant that their Internet connection rate is higher than that for men: 90.51 percent of female web users connect from their home, against 77.44 percent of male web users (CICT 2015:33). Furthermore, they also connect more to the Internet via smartphones: 78.36 percent against 72.48 percent for men (CICT 2015:47). But what chiefly characterizes their web usage, and particularly their mobile Internet usage, are their visits to socio-digital networking sites - a finding that also applies to the United States (Greenwood and al. 2016) and France (Croutte

and Lautié 2016). These socio-digital networking sites are very popular with Saudi web users as they represent the foremost mobile Internet activity for both men and women (82.23 percent) (CICT 2015:50) and the country has the world's highest penetration of the microblogging sphere (GMI 2016) - 91 percent of web users use online social networks, 89.21 percent use WhatsApp, 75.79 percent use YouTube, 59.5 percent use Facebook, etcetera (CICT 2015:67-68). And the majority of users are women. Apart from Facebook, which is more popular with men (38.73 percent for women compared to 63.56 percent for men (CICT, 2015:69)), most online social networking is the women's domain (88.08 percent use WhatsApp against 77.18 percent for men, 45.6 percent use Twitter against 41.85 percent for men, 45.6 percent use Instagram against 35.38 percent for men, 25.76 percent use Snapchat against 17.72 percent for men (CICT 2015:69). More broadly, when it comes to personal use of digital technologies, a culture of mobile telephony unquestionably prevails, particularly among women, who are less often employed than men and thus, as housewives, they spend more time on digital technologies. Moreover, as they are forbidden from driving, they spend most of their transport time in chauffeured cars on their connected smartphone (public transport<sup>5</sup> being underdeveloped and mainly used by migrant workers).

In a country that offers very little place for recreation and where young people - especially young women - are especially prone to a malaise known as *tufshan*, which denotes a feeling of inadequacy, and boredom<sup>6</sup> (Ménoret 2014), the cell phone offers a perfect tool for having fun, communicating, expressing oneself, while at the same time constructing your identity and forging social ties (Allard, Odin and Creton 2014). Multi-functional, it offers spaces of freedom and self-staging where you can show oneself on the sidelines of the social sphere. As a result, Saudi women invest this composite digital object with multiple values that are hedonistic, distinctive, expressive or expressivist in that the mobile object constitutes a medium for performing one's identity (Allard 2009), and even for creating multiple identities (Haraway 2007) given the profusion of "identity-expressive" applications and platforms available.

In light of these considerations, our interest here is to investigate the impact of Saudi norms and traditional codes on women's uses and behaviors on the Web, and several key questions have driven our approach. First, how and to what extent have women developed specific uses of digital technologies in a country characterized not only by strict gender segregation but also by a mix of modern technologies and rigorous religious traditions? Second, what behavior do Saudi women have on the Web regarding the photographic portrayal of the human form,<sup>7</sup> given the gender norms of Saudi customs and society requiring women to cover their face?

Finally, we question whether women's uses of digital technologies lead them to shape a new identity or identities that which may overpass their assigned social role and duties.

### **Methodological approach**

Saudi Arabia and its capital Riyadh were chosen as our research field because there are very few scientific studies that address the qualitative usages of digital technologies by Saudi women. In fact, the use of Internet in Saudi Arabia is considered to be "at its beginnings," and sparks heated controversy on whether it is an advantage or curse for society (Sadiq 2003). Extant studies (e.g., the above-cited CICT Individuals Report 2015) deal more with the perspective of improving the quality of Internet services, and aim to help firms and public policy shape new digital systems. This study, however, has an innovative dimension in that it

focuses on the qualitative usages of virtual space by a specific segment of the Saudi population, namely the women, whose behavior in "real" public and private spaces is extremely normed. Admittedly, there were many ethnographic hurdles, mainly due to the respondents' gender, which also necessarily meant that we could only recruit women onto the research team. The hurdles also stemmed from the logistics involved, such as travelling around, making appointments and finding places to hold them - as women's freedom of movement is limited in the public space. There were also technical constraints when the interviews had to be conducted using videoconferencing software.<sup>8</sup> The qualitative survey also raised numerous methodological and epistemological questions. For the researcher, entering a new field of research, in an unusual context in a society whose values are extrinsic to those he usually encounters, invites him to step outside his comfort zone, to try and see the country through Saudi eyes, and become used to conditions such as potential control over what the respondents say<sup>9</sup> given that the interviews were most often held in public spaces.

The research field is highly complex as it is difficult to access for both practical and cultural reasons: obtaining an entry visa<sup>10</sup>, the daily availability of a taxi driver for a female researcher since women are not allowed to drive and it is impossible to talk to a man for cultural reasons,<sup>11</sup> etcetera. A further difficulty, but one that was also an "epistemic privilege",<sup>12</sup> lay in the gender of the project leader and her two assistants. Certainly, it would have been impossible to conduct a field survey on women without being a female.

This complexity shaped our methodological approach and led us to develop different tools to establish contact with the population studied. To apply our methodological plan, we thus had to employ several courses of action, including a questionnaire, interviews, and observation of profiles on all the social media and forums used by the sample population.

After having been put in touch with a teacher from a women's university<sup>13</sup> by the Service de coopération et d'action culturelle (Cooperation and Cultural Department) at the French embassy in Riyadh, we organized a seminar during which we presented our research project and asked the students present if they would respond to our questionnaire. Rather than being a genuine methodological device, the questionnaire (written in French and translated into Arabic) was an artifice allowing us to make contact with young Saudi women and collect their contact details (email address and phone number) in order to obtain an interview with them to focus on their Internet and mobile usages. It included questions on their uses of the Web and social networks, and the frequency of utilization; the online identity used on social network sites (the profile picture chosen, the registration name, the address chosen for logging in, etc.); the relationship to photography and the choices made in sharing pictures online; and the digitalization of silver halide photographs. Two main waves of answers were received; the first (37 responses) mainly included a group of young female students from this university. The second (11 responses) comprised Saudi working women or students from other universities. In the interval between the first and second wave of responses, the questionnaire was slightly modified so that it could be better understood by the Saudi population. While the questionnaire drew a total of 48 responses, only ten women completed an interview:<sup>14</sup> four face-to-face interviews were held in Riyadh, mainly in English with some Arabic, and seven interviews were conducted exclusively in Arabic using videoconferencing software (Line and Facetime), from France, with the university students.

Written in Arabic, the questionnaire thus helped us to collect contacts available for the interview, during which they gave more details on all the information covered in the questionnaire. The interviews themselves were initially conducted in English, but the use of a

foreign language seemed to prevent the interviewees from expressing themselves fully and frankly. Moreover, when interviewed in English, the women tended to perceive the interview as having more of an "academic" nature. This triggered a mechanism of self-censorship, leading the women to want to present a positive picture of their country and avoid all criticism. Furthermore, the exchanges turned out to be less in-depth than when they were conducted in the interviewees' native language. The following interviews were thus held in Arabic, which created a more trusting atmosphere and enabled greater sincerity and communication. For all this, language was nonetheless an obstacle. The project leader did not master Arabic well enough to carry out the interviews. A third-party who mastered the Saudi dialect was thus brought in to help with translation but this actually created a barrier and negatively impacted the course of the interview. In the end, we chose to use English, with a little Arabic, for the face-to-face interviews and have no third-party present. The videoconferencing interviews were held totally in Arabic. Even so, although our female collaborators spoke Arabic, they did not master the Saudi language<sup>15</sup>, which has its own specificities. We were aware that this was another factor that impacted the relationship during the interview, and thus the results.

In addition to the 12 interviews, during which the respondents were asked to describe their personal use of digital technologies, and particularly their smartphone applications, which were pivotal in their expressive uses, we regularly followed the personal profiles (on Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, etc.) of the young women interviewed. We took screenshots of their publications and then analyzed the possible discrepancies between their discourse (during the interview) and their actual practice on the Web (their way of using social networks). We observed their choice of profile picture and the changes they made to it, the nature of their hashtags and tweets, their confidentiality policy, and their activity or passivity on the social media.

This methodological approach came up against several difficulties that had a fundamental impact on the research. The difference between what was said in the interviews and reality, the difficulty in arranging the interviews (conducted either through social media or face-to-face), and the need to dispel the Saudi women's initial suspicion and mistrust when questioned about their private use of social media were all key determinants of how we deployed our methodology plan, and were all factors that deeply influenced the research (Al-Saggaf and Williamson 2004). During the interviews, it was not rare to feel that the respondents were holding back on what they said and adopting an "acceptable" discourse in line with the norms and values of Saudi society. This self-restraint was even more obvious when the interviews were held in a public place.<sup>16</sup>

### **Political and religious context of Saudi Arabia**

To understand how women used the technologies, it was crucial to see the country through Saudi eyes and integrate the complexity of the Saudi identity and its historical, cultural, economic and geographic components (Ménoret 2003).<sup>17</sup> Its identity does not conform either with that attributed to it by the Western media, or with the mainstream representations of Muslim women (Piela 2013). A glimpse of the historical origins of the Saudi State - founded on a partnership formed in the 18th century between the princes and the *ulama*<sup>18</sup> (doctors of Islamic religion and law) from the Wahhabi school of Islam (Lacroix 2015) - reveals the regime's underlying tensions between the princes and *ulama* (Lacroix 2015), which reflect the complexity of this conservative regime. Geographically, Saudi Arabia is the largest country in the Gulf Region, covering about 2,149,690 km<sup>2</sup>. In 2015, the country's population stood at

30.8 million, 43.5 percent of whom were women.<sup>19</sup> Historically and politically, Saudi Arabia is a "young state," established in 1932 by King Abdulaziz bin Abdul Rahman Al-Saud, with Arabic as its official language and Islam as the official religion. The country's Bedouin heritage with its tribal identity and the dominant Sunni Wahhabi doctrine of Islam play a central role in society (Lacroix 2015) and deeply influence written and customary Saudi norms and rules, as well as social and gender relations. The Wahhabi doctrine is characterized by a literal reading and interpretation of Islamic sources: the *Qur'an*, the *Sunnah* (the traditions of the prophet Muhammad), and the *hadiths* (the words and acts attributed to Muhammad). It considers many of the *hadiths* to be authentic, whereas this authenticity is variously challenged in other Islamic schools. This rigorist religious tradition exerts a strong control over the Saudis' social behaviors since Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy and justice is administered through a system of religious courts in strict application of Islamic law (*sharia*). The *Qur'an* is thus not just a holy book, but also - together with the *Sunnah* - the country's constitution, and the primary source of *sharia* (Tønnessen 2016). Saudi Arabia, with its ultra-conservative religious system and heritage, experienced sudden and rapid economic growth thanks to the discovery of oil in the 1930s and the exploitation of these resources since the 1970s. The country now has around one fifth of the world's conventional oil reserves. The resulting economic wealth has had a major impact on Saudi Arabia and led to a rapid uptake of modern technologies. On the other hand, the Iranian Shi'a revolution of 1979 also impacted Saudi Arabia, as it prompted the country to strengthen its religious leadership of the Sunni community (Hamdan 2005). In this singular setting, the role of women in Saudi society has long been a subject of debate. Some authors, such as Madawi Al-Rasheed (2013), consider that the status of women is due more to a tacit partnership between the Al-Saud royal family and Wahhabism (headed by the *ulama*) in order to further their political and religious interests, than to Islamic culture and the religion itself.

Until 2001, women were seen as "an extension of their male guardians" (Hamdan 2005), if only in civil life, as before this date women did not possess their own identity card but registered as a member of their father's or husband's family. Their freedom to move around, and participate in public life is deemed by religious police (employed by Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice) to derive from dangerous "Western ideas" (Arobi 1994), especially since American presence in the country became highly visible due to the USA's involvement in Saudi oil production. At the end of the 1990s, reform movements emerged calling for democratic change within an Islamic framework. A prime example was the petition launched by intellectuals in 2003 and presented to the Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud (Lacroix 2004). In line with this trend, King Abdullah (1924-2015) embarked on various reforms in favor of women. Since 2014,<sup>20</sup> women have no longer needed permission from their adult male "guardian" (*mahram*) to work. Even so, many companies still ask for this authorization under the pressure of social conformism or for fear of contravening tradition. Saudi Arabia is a country that strongly forbids a mixing of the sexes, and gender segregation has become a national moral hallmark that distinguishes the Saudi population from resident foreigners (Le Renard 2011a:155), who represent some 33 percent of the total population.

### **The social status of women in Saudi Arabia and their access to the socio-digital networks**

Saudi Arabia, and especially its capital Riyadh, is highly gender-segregated, which has often led to large gender inequalities that are evident in the women's absence and silencing in public life (Smith: 1987). Hamdan (2005:45) suggests that "the uniqueness of the Saudi women's situation is derived from their presence and yet non-presence in the public sphere." A major

issue that strongly limits Saudi women compared to men is mobility. Apart from the fact that they are not allowed to drive, they are constrained by the male guardianship system which impacts women's everyday life. Women need a *mahram's* authorization to travel, benefit from health care, get married or leave prison after serving a prison sentence (Tønnessen 2016). Gender segregation is thus enshrined in the law and justified by the constraints of the surrounding society, as for example, the need to avoid being exposed to the dangers of the city and public spaces (Le Renard 2011a). This context explains the dress codes for women, who are compelled to wear the *abāya* - a long over-garment, generally black in Riyadh - and the *hijab*, which is a scarf covering the head, or even the *niqāb*<sup>21</sup>, a veil covering a part of the body and the face, except for the eyes.

Gender segregation is the result of a compromise between the Government and the State's religious authorities (Vassiliev 2000:310), dating back to the 1960s when gender mixing was officially forbidden at school and at work.

As for education and employment, the first university women's campus at Riyadh's King Saud University, opened its doors in 1979. However, until 2002, women's education was overseen by the Department of Religious Guidance, rather than by the Ministry of Education, which was in charge of male education (Hamdan 2005:44-51). Since that time, women's education programs have stressed the importance of proper ethical behavior, which implies their being controlled outside the school or university walls - in all public spaces - by the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, or in other words, the Saudi religious police (Hamdan 2005). Gender norms are everywhere and permanently weigh on women's conduct, which has to be in keeping with that of "girls from a good family" (Le Renard 2011a:169). Nevertheless, women's access to university has not led to equal access to the labor market. In 2015, the Central Department of Statistics and Information reported that the percentage of women university graduates is much higher than that for male graduates: 66.6 percent of working women have a university degree as compared to only 26.9 percent of men. However, Saudi women represent 70 percent of the unemployed population and 71.3 percent of women aged 25-39 years are unemployed, while the percentage of unemployed men in the same age group is 46.6 percent (Koyame-Marsh 2016:462-463).

In his analysis of Saudi society's gender segregation and inequality, Le Renard (2014) has evoked the concept of "homosociality," which designates the fact of sharing common social spaces, based notably on one's gender, such as the place of work or study, shopping malls, etcetera - all of these being spaces that enable individuals to create a collective (gender) identity. This concept is relevant to characterize young urban Saudi women. In fact, this group tends to develop a new and distinct identity through the use of women-only public spaces, such as shopping malls, universities, and rooms for young women's religious meetings. These young urban girls share similar lifestyles and develop a new approach to the public sphere, which now includes spaces reserved for them. The new identity that homosociality tends to foster eventually bridges the social and tribal gaps that prevailed in the previous generations and highlights the aspects unifying this group, such as the fact of being "young women, citizens of Riyadh," or "young women experts on religious issues." The Internet represents one of these spaces of homosociality, "a space of autonomy, wrested from the family" (Le Renard 2014:169). More than all the other spaces, the Web allows the crossing of borders and "since Saudi women, as all women in any given society, differ in their class, race, and cultural background, to challenge gender inequality, there is an urgent need for them to cross borders and ignore their cultural and class differences" (Hamdan 2005:46). The Internet can thus play a crucial role.

Public access to the Internet in Saudi Arabia began in 1999, which was late compared to the rest of the world. However, from 2000 to 2009, the service penetration rate increased by 3.750 percent, which means that the service growth rate in Saudi Arabia was almost ten times the world's service growth rate over the same period (Simsim 2011; Online Project 2015). If the results of the Individuals Report ICT Survey results (CICT 2015) show that women use more digital technologies than men, They also show that compared to the other socio-professional categories, students are the largest Internet users (97.96 percent) and those who declare that they are "Always connected" to online social networks and respond as and when needed represent 49.32 percent of the student population (CICT 2015:74). The report also found that the usage of Internet through mobile telephony is higher among those aged 20-29 (76.42 percent) and lowest for the eldest 50-65 age group (47.90 percent) according to the same report (CICT 2015:47).

Given the widespread diffusion of information and communication technologies devices in Saudi society and their high rate of utilization by Saudi women, social networks and smartphone applications have had significant success. According to the Dubai School of Government (2011), in 2011, Saudi Arabia accounted for over 40 percent (2.4 million users) of all active Twitter accounts in the Arab region. As such, Saudi Arabia appeared in the top five largest active Twitter populations in the Arab region, including Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Egypt (Dubai School of Government 2011). Moreover, the country has the highest per capita YouTube use of all countries in the world. Concerning mobile applications such as WhatsApp and Snapchat, the Global Web Index report says that the Kingdom comes in tenth globally for use of WhatsApp. As for Snapchat's base in the Kingdom, this is growing fast and the majority of users range from 16 to 20 years old (Globalwebindex 2015). According to a British research company cited in the Saudi press, 8.2 million Saudis use Snap daily, 45 percent of the users are male and 55 percent female,<sup>22</sup> and Saudis are the top users of Snapchat in the Arab world, and second worldwide.<sup>23</sup>

Given the rapid success of social networks, the positioning of the governmental and juridical authorities that rule on the citizens' use of the Internet is not always stable. In 2015, the Twitter account of King Salman (@KingSalman) attracted two million new followers in six months (Jones and Al Omran 2015). The long-term vision of the Saudi Government is "the transformation into an information society and digital economy so as to increase productivity and provide communications and information technology services for all sectors of the society in all parts of the country and build a solid information industry that becomes a major source of income" (Simsim 2011:102). The Saudi Government continues to promote Internet use as a tool for economic development and e-government services (Freedomhouse 2016). Nevertheless, the authorities have institutionalized repression on the grounds of the fight against terrorism and cybercrime. These measures have instilled fear into activists and ordinary social media users alike, creating an environment of pervasive self-censorship (Human Rights Watch 2014) in the country.

We now further explore the question of women's usage of social media and the factors that determine the everyday choices that they make when deciding whether or not to publish information, a picture, a video or a tweet. A key question involves the way that women self-present on the Web and the extent to which official and traditional norms influence this. The profile picture and other personal pictures that may be published on a social network account are among the main features of every social network. On the other hand, they represent a topic that is closely linked to the issue of women's visibility. In fact, there is no law in Saudi Arabia that officially bans the publication of personal pictures showing the human form, but the issue



is widely debated among the country's Muslim scientific community, some members of which consider that taking such photos is illicit. Their stance is based on some of the Prophet's hadiths that forbid images of the human form, seen as an emulation of the divine creation.<sup>24</sup>

However, the Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and Issuing Fatwas,<sup>25</sup> along with the fatwas issued in Saudi Arabia, has decreed that photography does not constitute an imitation of the divine creation, as photographs can be compared to a mirror and thus taking them is not an illicit act. As a result, the Saudi religious courts do not condemn picture-taking, neither do they forbid Saudi women from publishing personal photos on the social networks.

In fact, what usually restrains women from sharing their personal pictures on social media is not the prevailing norms or sanctions, but rather the potential manipulation of a woman's pictures by hackers, as this could strongly affect her own reputation as well as her family's. What is at stake here is more a question of culture and tradition than one of religion. Reputation and the wish to adhere to strict rules of etiquette and social convention remain the foremost concern of Saudi women and also explain why Saudi men usually personalize their profile pictures online, whereas women do not.

### **Women's visibility in the virtual space: strategies to bypass rules and codes**

The Web has unquestionably brought a certain visibility to Saudi women. If only because of the dress codes they have to conform to, they have learnt how to become "invisible", at least in mixed spaces. They have of course used many strategies to bypass this social injunction for social invisibility, for example, by frequenting places such as shopping malls (Le Renard 2014) or upmarket cafés that are "reserved" for women (here, they outnumber men) - places where they are splendidly attired in fashion accessories and the like often from Western labels. Despite these strategies to circumvent norms that comply with *khalwa* (seclusion), the modes of women's expression and visibility remain constrained by the pervasiveness of these dominant norms and codes. However, without paving the way for a certain technological determinism, the Web has certainly extended these strategies into other spaces. While some transgressive phenomena such as *boyat* - taken from the English "boy" to describe women who adopt a masculine style - were already present in these homosocial spaces, social networking sites have opened real spaces for expression and visibility that allow women to perform and consolidate the expressivity of self, whether or not this bypasses the norm of the dominant gender. This does not mean that the women no longer comply with the codes governing these spaces, but that some of them seize on the technical potential - digital profiles using aliases, specific formatting for messages and photos, etcetera - to contravene social norms (Guta and Karolak 2015) through self-staging and self-expression.

Saudi women's self-presentation on the Web, and particularly on socio-digital networks, is essential to understanding their digital usages. Two main aspects of self-presentation have guided this research, namely the confidentiality policy chosen by Saudi women (i.e., to whom do these women allow access to their social profile), and the factors they consider when deciding whether or not to publish a personal picture. The main question underlying both issues is that of women's visibility in the virtual space. We explore to what extent this differs from their visibility in real space, mentioned above, and is deeply normed. We steered the interviews onto these issues (confidentiality policy and way of sharing pictures) and concluded that two main elements influence Saudi women's visibility on the Web, in two different ways. These elements are instantaneity and anonymity.

## **Instantaneity: a new identity every day**

In Saudi Arabia, the act of taking pictures of the human form is defined by tradition and social codes. Mariam<sup>26</sup> (aged 30), a Saudi university student, explained to us that in her country marriage celebrations are never mixed, but she also pointed out: "The groom is only allowed to enter the space reserved for women at a specific moment during the celebration, and only to take souvenir pictures with the bride. The groom's entry into women's space means that the other women must again put on their *abāya* and cover their head" [with a *niqāb*].

The rules governing social life are reflected in the virtual sphere of life, and thus in the relation to photography and its diffusion on social media. The interviews we conducted show that the women are constantly trying to find a balance between the role of pictures on social networks and the Saudi customs and traditions on taking, visualizing, and sharing pictures. They try to place themselves on middle ground between compliance with the rules on the separation of public/private space, or the licit/illicit, and the characteristics and features specific to social networks.

In all of the interviews, we noted that Saudi women very frequently take pictures of themselves. These can often be private and intimate pictures (i.e., without the scarf), where they are very well coiffed, dressed, and made-up. They take this kind of picture alone or with friends or sisters and share them on the Web to show themselves and to inform their friends and family - mainly females - of their activities. They certainly have a strong desire to show themselves, but when they take a picture, these women are faced with a first choice: whether or not to post the picture. This choice is carefully thought out and never immediate or irrational. They take into consideration the space in which the picture was taken, the subject of the picture, and its privacy setting. Arwa (aged 37, supervisor and tutor), who lives in a well-to-do part of Riyadh and works at a Saudi Ministry,<sup>27</sup> explained to us that she never publishes a picture taken with her husband in a private space on social media, but she does publish it when they are in public spaces. As she commented: "I don't know what 'private' means exactly for you, but, you know, there is a privacy that we can't transgress. For example, I don't snap [share a picture on Snapchat] while I'm with my husband in a private space, I don't share pictures of us in the private spaces. If we are in the public space or in the car it is fine, but at home, no, I won't publish it."

The example of Arwa shows the extent to which the rules governing the public sphere spill over into the virtual world. However, from a woman's viewpoint, the technical and social possibilities offered by applications such as Snapchat mean that women can now "show" themselves in line with the prevailing social codes: the pictures they share are simply representations of themselves. Moreover, an intimate picture can be shared on the Web, even with male strangers, if the picture does not last; on condition that it is "fleeting" and "escapes" any kind of storage or archival. As no trace remains, this means that she is able to keep her reputation intact.

In fact, the specific advantage of the Snapchat mobile application is that it allows the exchange of files but these are automatically deleted once visualized. This means that it is possible to chat with friends, send them pictures or videos, and then also decide on the lapse of time that the recipient has to view the photo. The application also has features for modifying pictures and adding emojis, stickers or humorous items. Moreover, it notifies the sender whenever the recipient takes a screenshot of the traces - which, of course, serves as an indication of the recipient's level of trustworthiness. However, various methods are now

available whereby a "snap" can be saved permanently without the sender's knowledge (taking a photo with a camera, using a screenshot affordance, downloading specific apps, etc.). While these strategies "divert" the rules of the application (which prohibit such screenshots), above all, they could potentially expose Saudi women to dangers such as being blackmailed with content likely to compromise them regarding their compliance with public morals.<sup>28</sup> A self-portrait (selfie) of an unveiled woman circulating untowardly on social networks could be detrimental to its author. Then, in July 2016, Snapchat developed a "Memories" feature enabling users to create their own personal collection of Snaps and Stories, which are saved to the Snapchat servers.<sup>29</sup>

According to the Oxford Dictionary, a *selfie* is a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically with a smartphone or webcam *and shared on social media*. Saudi women take self-portraits, because they share pictures of themselves, on the condition of instantaneity. And this certainly helps explain the resounding success of social media in Saudi Arabia, such as Snapchat oscillates between two expressive forms: the self-portrait and the cartoon. As in the self-portrait, the selfie or the snap (the main type of picture shared on Snapchat) is based on an artifice of duplication; the photographer interprets two roles simultaneously: she is the subject of the action and its object. In the past, the reasons that pushed an artist to paint self-portraits were intimate: a self-investigative tension in order to defy time and death. The reason behind the success of the selfie and the snap is not rooted in the dimension of memory, traces and fear of passing time, but relates more to the desire to self-present, create alternative profiles of oneself, and finally to attract others' attention. As Jonas (2008) suggests, digital photography is a moment that we share and we forget.

In this process, the difference between a selfie and a snap is the decisive moment for modification. By adding effects and filters, we can circumvent the objectivity of a normal photograph. Snapchat represents an immense ephemeral masquerade that allows us to change identity (and even sex) many times a day. Yet, these "snaps" - immaterial digital elaborations - do not live on eternally; they are destined to self-destruction, leaving no trace behind them.

One question that could be asked, however, is to what extent the use of such applications may be subversive since, by overstepping the frontiers of intimacy, they enable transgression of the rules of decency.

Snapchat's ephemeral and instantaneous features, combined with the illusion of creating new - albeit only playful - identities, explain the application's enormous success among young Saudi women. May (aged 24), a university student in Riyadh, confided to us that she uses Snapchat and sends intimate photos and personal videos to male friends in which she is not wearing a scarf, as she knows that the pictures will last only few seconds, then disappear. She explained that she receives appreciative comments from these men and is not bothered by their comments, but rather enjoys receiving them. This behavior could be strongly condemned in Saudi Arabia for courting the dangers of sexual mixing. Nevertheless, social media hijack this taboo, ultimately rendering such behavior "acceptable" in the eyes of Saudi girls, as long as everything takes place in the virtual space. By removing the fear of being hacked and having one's reputation as a woman damaged, instantaneity resolves the complex relation to taking and sharing self-pictures.

## **Conclusion**

Traditional Saudi norms and codes view the visibility of women as problematic, and tend to implicitly condemn women's self-presentation through pictures and videos. In contrast, instantaneity makes such representation possible, allowing pictures to link up with Saudi women's identity, thus creating a space where women can become visible.

Thanks to applications such as Snapchat, the Web not only represents a space where women can be physically present, but it also creates a new space for discussion where women can become informed about their social position and express their ideas. Social networking sites thus offer new spaces for homosociality given that research on the usage of these sites shows that individuals tend to develop networks that fall into already existing sociabilities (Casilli 2010:26), intensify these networks (Cardon 2011:145) and sometimes connect them up with new networks. Yet, as an extension of what exists in the shopping malls, which are spaces that women have appropriated to display a "visibility" and assert themselves (Le Renard 2014), social networking sites also constitute heterosocial spaces in that they offer the possibility of hi-jacking prevailing social codes. A woman can send a man other than her father or male siblings a photograph of her unveiled face. Certainly, anonymity offers an ideal way of communicating, as it avoids negative reactions from their family or other social institutions. The women can decide to open an account using an alias, create their own invisible community, and discuss freely with their virtual friends. Abeer (aged 22), a university student, describes her Twitter account, which is anonymous, and opens with these words: "I share my own ideas. If I had some members of my family on this account, my ideas would be limited and conditioned by their presence.... I don't want to create brutal family debates... I share all this with myself and with the society that I have on Twitter, a society that I have built in a confidential and private way."<sup>30</sup>

Anonymity creates new identities, which are fake but "active," or in other words, offer the freedom to express personal opinions and explore forbidden subjects. Of course, not all Saudi women choose this type of social media profile. Most of the girls that we interviewed insisted that they always carefully tend their online profile, as they want to fit the image of the "girl from a good family." These girls do not therefore use anonymity, and identify themselves on the social media with their real first name and family name.

Summing up, the Internet is not a space in which Saudi women defy head-on their social reality, gender segregation and gender inequality. However, it is a space where these women can make choices, decide what self-image they wish to communicate, and find a way to circumvent rules and codes, perhaps shaping new identities for themselves. Regardless of gender norms, which mainly derive from religion and tradition, Saudi women have now found subversive ways of using spaces such as mobile Internet and notably social networking sites, where they can become visible and express themselves.

## References

Allard, L. 2009. Britney Remix: singularité, expressivité, remixabilité à l'heure des industries créatives. Vers un troisième âge de la culture. *Poli 1*: 65-81.

Allard, L., Creton L., and Roger O., dirs. 2014. *Téléphonie mobile et création*. Paris: Armand Colin.

Al-Rasheed M. 2013. *A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Al-Saggaf, Y., and Kirsty W. 2004. Online Communities in Saudi Arabia: Evaluating the Impact on Culture Through Online Semi-Structured Interviews. *Qualitative Social Research* 5(3): <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/564/1226>, accessed March 10, 2017.

Arebi, S. 1994. *Women and Words in Saudi Arabia: the Politics of Literary Discourse*. New York: Colombia University Press.

Cardon, D. 2011. Réseaux sociaux de l'Internet. *Communications* 88: 141-148. <https://www.cairn.info/revue-communications-2011-1-page-141.htm>, accessed March 20, 2017.

Cardon, D. 2008. Le design de la visibilité. Un essai de cartographie du Web 2. *Réseaux* 6 (152): 93-137, [http://www.cairn.info/resume.php?ID\\_ARTICLE=RES\\_152\\_0093](http://www.cairn.info/resume.php?ID_ARTICLE=RES_152_0093), accessed March 20, 2017.

Casilli, A. 2010. *Les liaisons numériques. Vers une nouvelle sociabilité?* Paris: Seuil.

CICT (Communications and Information Technology Commission) 2015. Individuals Report ICT Survey Results, 2015. [http://www.citc.gov.sa/en/reportsandstudies/studies/Documents/PublicIndividualReport2015\\_V5\\_En.pdf](http://www.citc.gov.sa/en/reportsandstudies/studies/Documents/PublicIndividualReport2015_V5_En.pdf), accessed March 15, 2017.

Crouette, P. and Sophie L. 2016. *Le baromètre du numérique 2016*. Paris: Credoc, l'Agence du numérique, l'Arcep, Conseil général de l'économie, de l'industrie, de l'énergie et des technologies, <http://www.credoc.fr/pdf/Rapp/R333.pdf>, accessed March 15, 2017.

Dubai School of Government 2011. *Civil Movements: The Impact of Facebook and Twitter, Arab Social Media Report* 1(2): 1-30. <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/dsg/unpan050860.pdf>, accessed March 16, 2017.

Freedomhouse 2016. *Freedom on the net Saudi Arabia Key developments*: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2016/saudi-arabia>, accessed March 16, 2017.

Globalwebindex 2015. *GWI Social. Globalwebindex's quarterly report on the latest trends in social networking, Q1 2015:1-36*. <http://www.thewebmate.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/GWI-Social-Report-Q1-2015.pdf>, accessed March 20, 2017.

GMI (Global Media Insight) 2016. *Saudi Arabia Social Media Statistics 2016*. <http://www.globalmediainsight.com/blog/saudi-arabia-social-media-statistics/>, accessed March 16, 2017.

Greenwood, Shannon, Perrin, Andrew and Maeve Duggan 2016. *Social Media Update 2016*. Pew Research Center. [http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2016/11/10132827/PI\\_2016.11.11\\_Social-Media-Update\\_FINAL.pdf](http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2016/11/10132827/PI_2016.11.11_Social-Media-Update_FINAL.pdf), accessed March 15, 2017.

Guta, H., and Karolak M. 2015. Veiling and Blogging: Social Media as Sites of Identity Negotiation and Expression among Saudi Women. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 16(2): 115-127: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol16/iss2/7>, accessed March 15, 2017.

Hamdan, A. 2005. Women and education in Saudi Arabia: Challenges and achievements. *International Education Journal* 6(1): 42-64. <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ854954.pdf>, accessed March 3, 2017.

Haraway, D. 2007. *Manifeste cyborg et autres essais. Sciences, fictions, féminismes*. Paris: Exils.

Human Rights Watch 2014. Saudi Arabia: New Terrorism Regulations Assault Rights. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/03/20/saudi-arabia-new-terrorism-regulations-assault-rights>, accessed March 20, 2017.

Jonas, I. 2008. Portrait de famille au naturel: les mutations de la photographie familiale. *Études photographiques* 22(9). <http://etudesphotographiques.revues.org/1002>, accessed March 20, 2017.

Jones, R., and Ahmed Al O. 2015. New Saudi King Amasses Twitter Following, *The Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/new-saudi-king-amasses-twitter-following-1422401589>, accessed March 20, 2017.

Koyame-Marsh, Rita O. 2016. The dichotomy between Saudi women's education and economic participation. *Proceedings of the Australia-Middle East Conference on Business and Social Sciences 2016, Dubai* (in partnership with The Journal of Developing Areas, Tennessee State University, USA). <https://www.aabss.org.au/system/files/published/001319-published-amecbss-2016-dubai.pdf>, accessed March 3, 2017.

Lacroix, S. 2015. L'Arabie saoudite: un magistère sur l'islam contesté. *Pouvoirs* 152(1): 43-52. <http://www.cairn.info/revue-pouvoirs-2015-1-page-43.htm>, accessed March 16, 2017.

Lacroix, St. 2004. Between Islamists and Liberals: Saudi Arabia's New 'Islam Liberal' Reformists. *The Middle East Journal*, 58(3): 345-365.

Le Renard, A. 2014. *Society of young women: opportunities of place, power, and reform in Saudi Arabia*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Le Renard, A. 2011a. Genre, classe, nationalité et accès des femmes aux espaces publics à Riyad. *Sociétés contemporaines* 84: 151-172. <http://www.cairn.info/article.php>, accessed August 11, 2016.

Le Renard, A. 2011b. *Femmes et espaces publics en Arabie Saoudite*. Paris: Dalloz Press.

Ménoret, P. 2014. *Joyriding in Riyadh. Oil, Urbanism, and Road Revolt*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ménoret, P. 2003. *L'Énigme saoudienne. Les Saoudiens et le monde, 1744-2003*. Paris: La Découverte.

Online P. 2015. Reintroducing Social Saudis: How Saudi's Social Media Behavior changed over the past two years. Riyadh: The online Project Market. [http://theonlineproject.me/files/reports/Reintroducing\\_Social\\_Saudis\\_English.pdf](http://theonlineproject.me/files/reports/Reintroducing_Social_Saudis_English.pdf), accessed March 14, 2017.

Piela, A. 2013. I am Just Doing my Bit to Promote Modesty: Niqabis' self-portraits on photo-sharing websites. *Feminist Media Studies*, 13(5): 781-790. DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2013.838358, accessed June 11, 2017.

Sadiq M., Sait 2003. Trends in Internet Usage & its Social Effects in Saudi Arabia. Dhahran: King Fahd University of Petroleum & Minerals. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/258119628\\_Trends\\_in\\_Internet\\_Usage\\_its\\_effects\\_in\\_Saudi\\_Arabia](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/258119628_Trends_in_Internet_Usage_its_effects_in_Saudi_Arabia), accessed March 15, 2017.

Simsim, Mohammed T. 2011. Internet usage and user preferences in Saudi Arabia. *Journal of King Saud University - Engineering Sciences* 23(2): 101-107. <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1018363911000304>, accessed March 15, 2017.

Smith, Dorothy E. 1987. *The Everyday World as Problematic*. Toronto: Toronto University Press.

Tønnessen, Liv. 2016. Women's Activism in Saudi Arabia: Male Guardianship and Sexual Violence. Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI) Report. <https://www.cmi.no/publications/file/5696-womens-activism-in-saudi-arabia.pdf>, accessed March 2, 2017.

Vassiliev, A. 2000. *The History of Saudi Arabia*. London: Saqi Books.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Entitled FANAS (*Femmes et usages mémoriaux et patrimoniaux du numérique en Arabie Saoudite* [*Women and memorial and heritage uses of digital technologies in Saudi Arabia*]), this project (2015-2017) is part of the network *Usages des Patrimoines Numérisés* (Uses of Digitalized Heritages - UDPN) coordinated by the Université Sorbonne-Nouvelle Paris 3. This research is a continuation of the ENEID - Digital Eternities project (2013-2017), funded by the Agence Nationale de la Recherche. The research is ongoing and at this stage the results are still exploratory.

<sup>2</sup> We thank Gill Gladstone, an English-speaking translator, who did much to improve the quality of the text, and Omar Kurdi for his careful rereading and advice. We would also like to thank the Alliance Française in Riyadh (and especially Amina Hammad) and all those who helped us with our project.

<sup>3</sup> The analysis is based on a total sample of 3,000 respondents from across the Kingdom, 1,876 of whom were Saudi nationals (62.54 percent). The percentage of Saudi male respondents is 34.89 percent, and Saudi female respondents 27.65 percent.

<sup>4</sup> These statistics should nonetheless be viewed with caution insofar as the use of applications is developing very quickly in Saudi Arabia.

<sup>5</sup> Several subway lines are under construction and due to come into operation late 2018.

<sup>6</sup> The introduction of recreation and entertainment are included in the objective of an ambitious program for reform and economic diversification, Vision 2030, launched in April 2017 by Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the Saudi King's son.

<sup>7</sup> Although the question of Islam is not evoked in the field of research, we should nonetheless underline both the complex relationship between Islam and photographs representing the human form, and also the religious heritage that requires women to adopt a code of bodily modesty.

<sup>8</sup> Some videoconferencing software programs such as Skype or Face Time are blocked to protect the commercial interests of the communication operators and to control communications. To get around this obstacle, it is necessary to be equipped with a Virtual Private Network (VPN).

<sup>9</sup> The scope of this text does not deal with purely methodological questions. These will be fully addressed in a forthcoming paper.

<sup>10</sup> Saudi Arabia does not deliver tourist visas. Foreigners who are admitted are migrant workers, Muslims on the Haj pilgrimage to Mecca or visitors invited by foreign residents in the country. We were able to obtain a long-stay visa for personal reasons and carry out this research.

<sup>11</sup> We were well aware that examining the practices of one gender category, here of women, is always problematic when one does not take an interest in the other categories (men, transgender, etc.) - even on an exploratory basis. This could well have the effect of influencing our understanding of the social sphere. The attempt to interview a man, albeit informally, revealed the limits of such an undertaking as following the interview the person involved sent us a text message with compromising content.

<sup>12</sup> Inspired (among others scholars) by the work of the American feminist Peggy McIntosh, the notion of "epistemic privilege", which we remodel here, does not refer to the privileges enjoyed by the dominant (e.g., the fact of being a white Western male belonging to the advantaged social classes, etc.) but to the fact of our belonging to a sex and class here enabled us to access the feminine part of the social world. We would like to thank Marco Dell'Omodarme (Université Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne) for the exchanges we had on this subject.

<sup>13</sup> For reasons of confidentiality, we do not give the name of the university.

<sup>14</sup> We do not include in the scope of this exploratory paper the second interview campaign, including 15 interviews, conducted in February and April 2017, exclusively in Saudi Arabia.

<sup>15</sup> We had not find a research assistant mastering the local dialect.



<sup>16</sup> One often hears that the *mukhabarat* (intelligence services) are very present in public places.

<sup>17</sup> We should point out that we are not specialists of Saudi Arabia, but of digital technologies and gender questions. This field was totally new to us and the exploratory interviews very soon prompted us to study the complexity of the regime and its way of life in order to better understand the opinions expressed.

<sup>18</sup> "*Ulama*" (عُلَمَاء) is the Arabic word for Islamic scholars (plural).

<sup>19</sup> Source: <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL.FE.ZS?locations=SA>, "Population, female (percent of total)", accessed March 16, 2017.

<sup>20</sup> This guide on women's work published by the Ministry of Labor follows on from the Royal Decree No. A/121 enacted by King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud on June 3, 2011 (i.e. July 2, 1432 AH, according to the Hijri calendar followed by Saudi Arabia). See: <https://portal.mol.gov.sa/ar/ProgramsAndInitiatives/PublishingImages/Women%20working%20guide.pdf> (in Arabic).

<sup>21</sup> The *niqāb*, most common in the Gulf States, must not be confused with the *burqa*, a dress that covers the whole body and face, except for the eyes, which are covered by netting. Mostly blue, the *burqa* is worn specifically by Afghan women. This dress code is more cultural than religious, as Islam does not advocate covering a woman's face.

<sup>22</sup> See: <http://saudigazette.com.sa/life/art-and-culture/meet-the-snapchat-team-in-saudi-arabia/>, accessed June 7, 2017.

<sup>23</sup> See: <http://www.arabnews.com/saudi-arabia/news/881841>, accessed June 7, 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Among the *hadiths* that are used as an argument by the groups of the religious elite, are found: "The people who will receive the severest punishment on the Day of Resurrection will be those who try to make the like of Allah's creation" (Al-Bukhari, 7/542, no. 838), or "The people who receive the severest punishment on the Day of Resurrection will be those who try to Imitate Allah's Creation" (Al-Bukhari 7/541, no. 835) <http://fatwa.islamweb.net/fatwa/index.php?page=showfatwa&Option=FatwaId&Id=1935>, accessed March 16, 2017.

<sup>25</sup> Created by the King, this body publishes the rules of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and prepares research papers informing the King of the religious arguments.

<sup>26</sup> For reason of confidentiality, personally identifiable information like names used have been changed.

<sup>27</sup> For reasons of confidentiality, we do not cite the name of the ministry concerned.

<sup>28</sup> We did not meet any Saudi women who had experienced this type of blackmail; most of the respondents actively use social networking sites, and keep a careful eye on their accounts.

<sup>29</sup> See: <https://support.snapchat.com/en-GB/article/using-memories>, accessed June 7, 2017.

<sup>30</sup> This excerpt has been translated from Arabic into English.

webmaster: [Vit Sisler](#) programmed by: [MathAn Praha, s.r.o.](#) ISSN 1804-3194