

# Emirati Youth Trends toward Some Social Networking Issues

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## Abstract

This study aims at exploring Emirati Youths' trends toward three social networking issues which are credibility, privacy and impact on family relations and how their awareness of these controversial issues affect their use of social media. A total of 330 youngsters aged 19-35 were interviewed. The sample was selected from the seven different Emirates within UAE. Moreover, focus group discussions were conducted with three different groups of Emirati students from five different universities and 50 other students were asked to answer an essay exam related to the future of social networks in UAE with respect to these three issues.

Keywords: Social Networks, Credibility, Privacy, family relations

### 1. Introduction

Most of us admit to going through withdrawals and depression if we have to be away from the Internet, cell phones, or social media for a long period of time. Statistics indicate that "Face book" site ranks first among social networking sites, as it is used by more than 500 million visitors worldwide. 18-29 year olds continue to represent the bulk of social media users, these data highlight how social media platforms like Twitter and Face book are becoming more diverse and more mainstream. Fully 93% of people who do have an online profile are on Face book. MySpace continues to lose, with only 23% of the surveyed users being there. Twitter users are up, but still only account for 11% of online profile.

According to May 2012 statistics, the total number of Face book users in the Middle East and North Africa reached fifteen million users. In UAE, the "Dubai College of Government Administration" pointed out that UAE is the first between Arab countries in using Face book taking into account its population, as 45.38% of Emirati inhabitants have accounts on the most famous social site "Face book", thus placing UAE in the ninth rank worldwide.

Moreover, a study which was conducted by the National Centre for Youth Research at King Saud University (2010), found that Face book (69.5%) ranks first among Arab youth users followed by Twitter (18.5%). While the percentage of users of other social

networks like Netlog do not exceed 7.2%. This is justified by the scholar Ammar Khalid who indicated that there are public and private networks however, this is not well known in the Arab world.

Each social media platform also seems to have its own personality and function as Pew study pointed out:

1. Blogs relied heavily on stories of emotion, with topics such as group rights and ideological passion.

2. Twitter's main focus leaned toward technology, with topics often referencing Twitter itself. In other words, people on Twitter tweet a lot about Twitter. The site is generally used to pass along info and links to news stories on sources such as Mashable and CNET.

3. YouTube was well ... YouTube. The most popular content was the most visual

In respect to productivity, Jennifer Shewmaker (2009) in her study confirmed that American young people surf the social networking sites not only as consumers, but also as producers. On the other side of the world, Ammar Al-khaled (2011) described «gulf youth» as «un productive» in dealing with social networking. And he stated that their productivity do not exceed two percent. Young people may be using the social media actively (not passively) for a number of motives ranging from information seeking, social interaction and entertainment. Information seeking encompasses a number of issues including; finding out about relevant events and conditions in immediate surroundings, society and the world; seeking advice on practical matters or opinion and decision choices; satisfying curiosity and general interest; learning self education; and gaining a sense of security through knowledge. But on the contrary, they may face some problems due to false information or difficulties in managing privacy controls. **Parents complain as social networks affected negatively family relations.**

### Credibility:

Social Media is also the source of news for the majority of young people. Half of Americans say they rely on the people around them to find out at least some of the news they need to know, according to the Pew Report

Some 44% of online news users get news at least a few times a week through emails, automatic updates or posts from social networking sites. In 2009, Twitter's monthly audience increased by 200%.

Most broadly, the stories and issues that gain traction in social media differ substantially from those that lead in the mainstream press. But they also differ greatly from each other. Of the 29 weeks that PEW center tracked on all three social platforms, blogs, Twitter and YouTube shared the same top story just once. That was the week of June 15-19, when the protests that followed the Iranian elections led on all three.

The extensive stats offered up in the Pew report (2011) don't offer any easy solutions for mainstream media as it grapples with ways to wrest our short attention spans from the rest of the Internet. Case in point, the study found that stories that do gain traction in social media don't hold our attention spans for long, often leaving the top spot on social networks within hours after arriving.

Although Finberg, Stone, and Lynch " ( 2001- 2002 ) concluded that Internet users consider it as a secondary source of news, Flanagan and Metzger "(2000) revealed that the credibility of Internet exceeded the credibility of TV ,radio and magazines, but not at the level of press credibility. Also " Johnson and Kaye " (1997, 2000) in their study confirmed that new media are more credible, accurate just and in-depth than traditional media .

In a study by "Tseng and Fogg" (1999) about the credibility of computer technology in general shows that the computer users tend – in general - to believe all information provided through the internet but this confidence often wavered when published through internet false information.

" Rasha Abdulla and others" ( 2002) found that what undermines the credibility of online news media is the difficulty of access to the true source of information, unlike traditional media. Researchers have noted that- in general – the Internet audience was less negative than newspapers and television audience

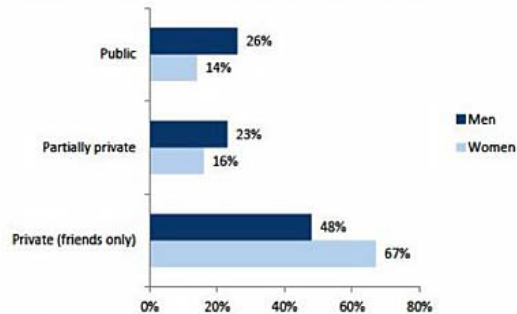
#### Privacy issues:

The most recent Pew Internet Study takes a look at privacy management practices among both sexes. According to Pew, 63% of adults have some sort of online profile. That's up about 20% from 2006. Of those online profiles, only about 20% are completely public. Most people (58%) have their profiles set to friends only. There's also a percentage (19%) who use a setting that allows friends and friends of friends to see profiles. Out of that 19% who allow friends and friends of friends to see what they post, about 26% say they set privacy for individual posts that will bar some from seeing posts. Turn that around, it means 74% of that minority of users are allowing friends to spread around anything they want to share.

Pew (2011) identifies the habits of women as more "conservative in basic settings." The following chart by Pew is labeled as privacy gender gap

**The privacy gender gap on social media**

% of social networking site users in each group who have chosen various privacy settings



Source: The Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project, April 26 – May 22, 2011 Spring Tracking Survey, n=2,277 adults ages 18 and older, including 755 cell phone interviews. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish. Margin of error is +/-3 percentage points for SNS users (n=1,015)

The US Congress constituted a sub-Committee to reduce clutter breaking of the privacy. This came after the site "Twitter" acknowledged last month that it copied numbers and addresses of phone books of a large number of users on mobile, and stored on site servers, without the permission of most users.

On the other hand, Jeff Neuburger says that people who live in glass houses should look for somewhere else to wear their clothes. He refers in this regard to the individuals who put personal information and photos on their accounts and make it available to the public.

The concept of privacy also extends to the robbery of literature , films and musical literature ,scientific research and literary, breaking the copyright and selling it at very low prices.

#### Family Relations:

Two-thirds of online adults (66%) use social media platforms such as Face book, Twitter, MySpace or LinkedIn. These internet users say that connections with family members and friends (both new and old) are a primary consideration in their adoption of social media tools. Roughly two thirds of social media users say that staying in touch with current friends and family members is a major reason they use these sites, while half say that connecting with old friends they've lost touch with is a major reason behind their use of these technologies. Other factors play a much smaller role—14% of users say that connecting around a shared hobby or interest is a major reason they use social media, and 9% say that making new friends is equally important. Reading comments by public figures and finding potential romantic partners are cited as major factors by just 5% and 3% of social media users, respectively.

Some studies have shown that the use of new media led to deterioration of the entire communication process. Kraut showed that the growing use of the Internet led to a decrease in the level of communication with family members, and a decline in per capita social Chamber size and increase in levels of depression and loneliness.

On the other hand, Daniel and Merka spoke in their book on migration and new media about their meetings with immigrant mothers who confirmed that new media consolidated their relations with their families through the Web SKYPE program and social networking.

In conclusion, Social media is an important part of young people's everyday life in several countries including the Gulf and UAE, but still there are voices that are against the intensive use of this new media particularly as a source of news and at the same time express concern regarding some important issues as credibility, penetrating privacy and weakening family relations. And the dilemma here is where do Emirati youth stand from these issues and how could their trends shape their relationship with this new media and its uses.

## 2. Study Objectives

1. Identify how UAE youth are surfing social networking sites and the existence of substantial differences between males and females in this regard.
2. Clarify how UAE youth are using social networking and how it relates with consumption or production.
3. Youth trends toward some important issues such as credibility, penetration of privacy and weakening family relations.

## 3. Research Questions

1. The extent of UAE youth usage of social networking and the existence of substantial differences between them according to gender, age, the region and specialization?
2. What are the uses of social networking and to what extent are these uses related to consumption or production?
3. What are their trends or attitudes in relation to issues as credibility of new media, privacy and Family relations? and how it reflect on their use of social media?

## 4. Methodology:

The study focused on Emirati Youths' trends toward some important issues related to social networking as credibility, penetrating privacy and weakening family relations. The three issues were selected by a group of media experts and researchers, as the most important and controversial issues of social media, from a list of 15 issue prepared by the two researchers of this study. The aims of the survey were to study how young people use social media in terms of productivity, their trends toward these controversial issues and how does their attitudes affect their relationship and uses of these new media.

The sample consisted of 330 youth individual aged 19 to 35 years. It was divided equally between males and females taking

into account as far as possible the relative parity with the proportions of the population in society particularly in terms of gender and age. It is worth mentioning that the sample was selected randomly within these groups.

## 5. Data Collection:

The study did depend on several tools for data collection:

1. A questionnaire was designed and included a battery of questions to measure Emirati Youths uses and trends toward social networking and how it affects their relationship with social media at large.
2. Focus group discussions were conducted with three different groups of Emirati students from five different universities to discuss openly and freely their views in regard to the three controversial issues studied in this article. Each group included 10 male and female students from universities of United Arab Emirates (UAEU), Zayed (ZU), American University of Sharjah (AUS) and American University of Dubai (AUD) and Higher College of Technology (HCT). In terms of gender and age, the three groups of students were homogeneous to a great extent. Their views helped in designing the questionnaire and in the interpretation of findings of the study.
3. 50 students were asked to answer an essay exam related to the future of social networks in UAE with respect to these three controversial issues. Taking into consideration the conservative style of life in the Emirati society that make students feel free in writing their views better that expressing them in public venues, this tool proved to be effective in interpreting many of the findings of this study.
4. The study developed a scale to measure UAE youths' trends toward the three issues raised about social networking. The scale degrees ranged from five to one points, where five refers to the highest positive toward the issue and number one to the maximum negativness in regard to the issue at hand. The total points of the scale were to determine the extent of positiveness or negativitnness of trends toward social networking.
5. To measure the productivity of UAE youth on networking, the researchers invoked a scale of five criteria for measuring productivity that is arranged from lowest to highest as follows:
  - A. Open an account on networking without any significant activity from the user.
  - B. Open an account on social networking, and the user role is limited to exchanging views and posting photos for himself and others on his personal page.
  - c. The user have other activities at networking such as design blogs and formn pressure groups influencing the rest of young people in societal issues.

D. The user display his work and activities such as his paintings and writings for promotion reasons or selling them through social networking.

E. Form groups for community development through networking that have significant and active role on the ground such as environmental awareness campaigns, literacy, treat the poor and needy, and could also aim to change the political system.

The researchers allocated point to each criterion according to the productivity of the user through networking with ranging degrees of scale between one and five.

It should be noted that the study was applied during the period from January to end of March 2012

## 6. Key Findings

1. The study showed that there is a great youth turnout on social networking, where only 6.4% do not have an account on those networks. The main reason not to open an account on social networks is that they considered those networks a waste of time.

2. Face book ranked first (84%) among social networking which UAE Youth prefer, followed by the Twitter by 57%. This result is consistent with the results of previous studies that confirmed that Face book is a top network among Arab youth (National Centre of Youth Research (2009), King Saud University (2011) and Dubai school of government administration (2012))

3. Females surf the social media (96.2%) more than males (91%). This could be due to the nature of the Arabic societies and particularly UAE, where girls activities outside the family home are minimalistic

4. Although the proportion of young people from Abu Dhabi exceeded the rest of the youth from other Emirates in surfing social media, but the differences is not with statistical significance.

5. The relationship between young people and social networking is strong. This was concluded from the following findings:

A. 69.5% of the respondents have more than one account on different social networks as face book, Twitter and My Space.

B. More than half of the respondents (59%) have hundreds of followers. (66% females vs 34% males)

C. 59.5% of the respondents consider themselves activists on social networking. (55% females vs 49% males).

D. Varied and diversified activities are undertaken by young people on social networking between chatting with friends (72.5%), expressing their opinion (69.6%) commenting on issues raised on networks (50.7%) and posting pictures of personal accomplishments (49.3%).

E. 44.9% have an account on networking for more than two years versus 24.6% have an account since less than a year.

6. The study confirmed the intensive use of social media among Emirati young people. This was concluded from the following:

A. More than half of the respondents access their personal account on daily basis (52.2%), Most of them access it more than once throughout the day while 18.8% access it once a day, compared with 7.2% access it only once a week.

B. 41.9% of the respondents access their personal accounts more than two hours per day compared with 27.5% access it for less than an hour. And there are no significant differences between males and females in that regard.

7. UAE youth are not productive on social networks, they are primarily consumers. This is because their roles on the networks are limited in the following: communicate with friends (79.7%), know the latest news (73%), make new friends (58%), view their friends photos (50.7%), listen to the opinions of young people about what is happening in their communities, and know the celebrities' news like artists and athletes (46.4%). All the above are mainly consumption usage. On the other hand, the role of Emirati youth in the formation of groups, adopting certain issues and real roles in community service or even sharing ideas or acts and marketing them did not exceed 17.4%.

8. 66.7% said they heard news on social networks that proved untrue later. They also admitted that many of the news spread by social media are false and fabricated (49.3%). They emphasized that frequent rumors and divergent views on the networks hit them by confusion (94.2%), but this did not make them unable to take a decision (85.5%)

9. Despite the awareness of the lack of credibility of social networking among Emirati youngsters, but they consider it the most important news source. This may be due to the following reasons:

A. Large freedom space available on social networking and many news on those networks are not available on the traditional media, which is in many cases and particularly in the Arab World, governmental media.

B. The quick and updated news service available on social networks that turned them to be one of the main sources of news for traditional media.

C. Young people tend to discuss everything that is posted on social media with friends and family members on the next degree. And those discussions help in confirming or rejecting the news.

10. 69.6% said they learned of the scandals of famous public figures or celebrities through social networking. They emphasized that those networks penetrate the privacy of

individuals (57.9%) which is unacceptable. However, they considered social networks as the main source to know celebrities' news like artists, athletes and poets (46.4%).

11. Young people surf social networks without realizing the possibilities of penetrating their privacy. This was confirmed by the following results:

A. The youth confirmed, especially females that they were posting their personal information and photos on their accounts by 86.2%, and 30.6% of them make it available to the public.

B. 52% of young people do not know about copyright and intellectual property issues on social media. They do not even know that the articles and films they produce can be sold on the net at very low prices.

C. 69.1% of the young people don't know anything about the Location based service that is offered by social networking, and 78% do not know about the Google on line Medical Service, and they are ready to disclose health histories and the evolution of their health status, if requested through social networking.

D. 46.1% do not see any harm from a friend posting their photos or their personal information on their accounts without their permission.

This demonstrates a lack of understanding of the social networking capabilities to penetrate privacy.

12. The respondents confirmed that social networking did not adversely affect their relationships with their families. They rejected the idea that no longer they have the time to talk with family members, or they ignore discussing life issues with family members. But their answers showed weak relationships with family, as evidenced by the following results:

A. 26% of respondents stated that their family members are not among their friends on social networking because they don't want their families to look at their personal account, or because family members are not active on networks.

B. Parents came in third rank among those who encouraged youngsters to open an account on social networking after friends and the University.

C. 77% of respondents confirmed that they are not keen to attend family gatherings at weekends, Fridays and holidays, but they may join them to meet the desire of parents. Even during these meetings they are attracted and concerned with the virtual world not the real world. Their physical presence doesn't mean communicating with family members, because each of them indulge in virtual world via BlackBerry and iPhone.

D. 68.1% affirmed that they communicate with their siblings and their parents within a single house through Face book and BlackBerry.

E. 75.4% does not consult their parents about the views they place on social networking, and approximately the same percentage indicated that their parents do know nothing about their friends on social networking (75.3%)

In conclusion, the study showed that Emirati Youth trends toward social networks are positive in terms of family relations. They believe social media strengthened their family relations. Meanwhile, they showed negative trends toward credibility and privacy as they believe that social media could spread false information and rumors and could penetrate their privacy. But this all did not affect their intensive use to social media. Neither did it affect their uses or practices on social networking. They still consider social media their main source of news and they post personal information on their accounts and make it available to the public. Even those who do not have accounts on social media indicated that the reason is not because of these dangers, but because they consider it a waste of time. Emirati young people expressed their concern about the future of social media and they cannot see any possibility to block this new media. Maybe we need to censor or regulate the unethical practices on the new media, but they can't survive without surfing the net and tweeting.

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