

# ARAB CULTURE AND PRIVACY OF SOCIAL MEDIA: A THEORETICAL STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

Same as the rest of the world, Arabs are using social media networks for different purposes, such as communicating with friends and relatives, shopping, seeking jobs, and so on. Social media platforms continue to attract Arabs in various countries across the region, and simultaneously, the number of fixed and mobile internet users has also increased. Despite that social media has become an integral part of our lives, it comes with its own set of privacy concerns. Some of the most common social media privacy issues include social media phishing scams, hacking and account takeovers, shared location data used by stalkers and predators, data mining leading to identity theft, privacy “loopholes” exposing your sensitive information, employers or recruiters evaluating you based on your posts, doxing leading to emotional distress or physical harm, cyberbullying and online harassment. this research aims to understand the role that morality and ethics that are driven by Islam and Arab culture are playing in regulating users’ interaction with others over social media websites if associated with national laws that govern such interaction.

**KEYWORDS:** Social media, Privacy, Arab World, Ethics.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The development of the internet and social media has dramatically altered the way people communicate and share information, creating new opportunities for social interaction, business, and entertainment. Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram allow people to communicate with each other in a real-time, despite their physical location. Furthermore, social networks have expanded and diversified their offerings. For example, Facebook has acquired Instagram and WhatsApp, and it has launched features such as Facebook Live and Facebook Marketplace. Likewise, Snapchat has introduced new features such as Snap Map and augmented reality filters. As well, LinkedIn has introduced new tools for job seekers and recruiters, and Twitter has expanded its focus on news and live events. In general, social media platforms make it easy to share news, articles, photos, and videos with friends, family, and followers (Dizikes, 2020). Overall, social media networks have evolved to become an integral part of daily life for many people, with a wide range of uses and features. According to Smart Insights, the number of social media users globally increased from 4.2 billion in January 2021 to 4.62 billion in January 2022. Furthermore, there are currently 4.76 billion social media users worldwide, which is slightly less than 60% of the global population. Precisely, the growth of social media users has slowed down in 2023, with the addition of 137 million new users in 2023, equivalent to a modest annual growth rate of 3%. It appears that social media platforms have been the major beneficiaries of the shift to digital in the world of digital advertising. In fact, data shows that global spending on social media advertising has more than doubled since the coronavirus outbreak, reaching USD 226 billion in 2022 (“Five Countries”, 2023). As a result, people post 500 million tweets, share over 10 billion pieces of Facebook content, and watch over a billion hours of YouTube video during the day (Chaffey, 2023).

Same as the rest of the world, Arabs are using social media networks for different purposes, such as communicating with friends and relatives, shopping, seeking jobs, and so on. For example, social media networks are widely used by elites and everyday citizens to discuss politics and achieve political goals. In this context, a study by National Endowment for Democracy found that social media has become a powerful tool for political mobilization in the Arab world. Researchers have also used social media data to study political behaviour in the Arab world (Siegel, 2019). Furthermore, a report by Pew Research Center claimed that social media played a role in the Arab uprisings that began in 2010 (Brown, Guskin & Mitchell, 2012).

After the discussion initially focused on the "right to communicate" and the "right to knowledge and access to information", it has shifted towards protecting human rights from the risks of new media, especially the right to privacy (the sanctity of private life). Users' data, personal information, and communications are stored, collected, and electronically processed not only by network management and specialized companies but also by anyone with the ability and means to do so, including hackers, service providers, governments, and other entities. In addition to the opportunities provided by these means of communication, they have enabled users to violate each other's privacy and publish what they want under pseudonyms, without any regulations or ethics governing these tools and their users, particularly in the absence of international standards (Alfaisal & Sayed, 2017). Hence, this research aims to understand the role that morality and ethics that are driven by Islam and Arab culture are playing in regulating users' interaction with others over social media websites if associated with national laws that govern such interaction. In this way, the researchers believe that the research will introduce an overall image that could be used to make social media platforms a safe place for users, especially while interacting with others. Also, it can represent a starting point for future research to empirically determine the factors that impact social media privacy in Arab culture.

## **2. SOCIAL MEDIA INDICATORS IN ARAB WORLD**

Social media platforms continue to attract Arabs in various countries across the region, and simultaneously, the number of fixed and mobile internet users has also increased. According to the annual report published by Global Media Insight (2023) on the latest global internet usage figures, the number of internet users in Egypt reached 75.66 million users in January 2022, in which internet penetration rate was 71.9% of the total population (102.3 million) at the beginning of 2022. As a result, Internet users in Egypt increased by 1.4 million (+1.9%) between 2021 and 2022. On the other hand, these figures reveal that 29.55 million people in Egypt did not use the internet at the beginning of 2022, meaning that 28.1% of the population remained unconnected to the internet at the start of that year. With regards to social media users in Egypt, in January 2022, the number of social media users reached approximately 51.45 million, which is equivalent to 48.9% of the total population. It's important to note that the number of social media users may not represent individual users, as there could be multiple accounts held by the same person. Therefore, the actual number of social media users in Egypt may be lower. In Lebanon, the number of internet users at the beginning of January 2022 was approximately 6.01 million, equivalent to 89.3% of the total population (6.825 million). This means that 716.9 thousand people in Lebanon did not use the internet at the start of 2022, indicating that 10.7% of the population is not connected to the internet in the country. There were 5.06 million social media users in Lebanon by January 2022, representing 75.2% of the total population. The number of social media users in Lebanon increased by 690 thousand, a growth of 15.8% between 2021 and 2022. In Morocco, the number of internet users reached 31.59 million at the beginning of that year, with an internet penetration rate of 84.1% of the total population (36.91 million). This indicates an increase in the number of users by 1.2% compared to the previous year. However, 15.9% of the total population in Morocco is still not connected to the internet, though these numbers may be influenced by the impact of COVID-19 on search activities.

In Algeria, there were 27.28 million internet users, representing 60.6% of the total population (43.85 million) with an increase of 1.8 million users (+7.3%) between 2021 and 2022. In Iraq, 20.58 million people used the Internet, with a penetration rate of 49.4% of the total population (40.22 million) at the beginning of 2022. Currently, there are 28.35 million social media users in Iraq, representing 68.0% of the total population. This marks a significant jump of 13.4% compared to the previous year. In Qatar, the internet penetration rate reached 99.0% of the total population (2.881 million) at the beginning of 2022. This substantial figure means that only 1.0% of the population is not connected to the Internet. The usage of social media platforms in Qatar also corresponds to this high rate, reaching 99.8% of the total population. In Saudi Arabia, there were 34.84 million internet users, accounting for 97.9% of the total population (34.81 million) at the beginning of 2022. The number of social media users in Saudi Arabia stands at 29.30 million, representing 82.3% according to the latest global figures (“Arab World”, 2022). Figure 1 shows the increased use of social media in some Arab countries between 2014 and 2019. This growth in social media usage can be attributed to various factors, including the development of ICT, the increasing availability of affordable smartphones, high internet penetration rates, and the growing popularity of social media platforms among Arab youth (Alammary 2022).

For instance, figure 2 shows the number of cellular users in Jordan, in addition number of internet and social media users.

Figure 1. Social Media Followers in Arab Countries. Source: (Social Media, 2019).

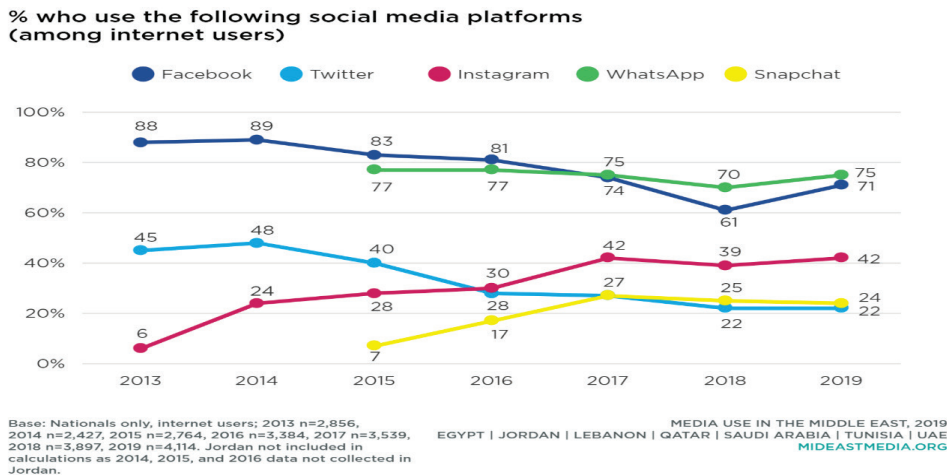
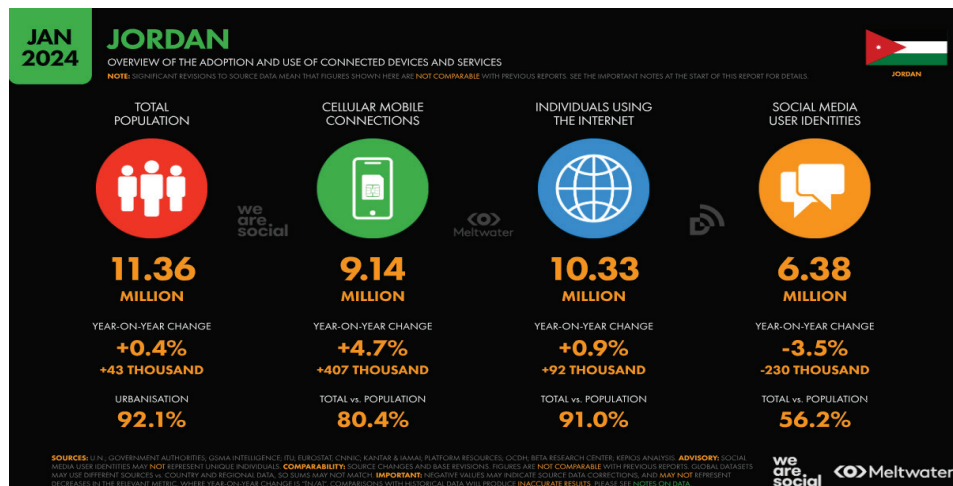


Figure 2. Use of connected devices and services in Jordan. Source (KEMP, 2024).



### 3. PERCEPTION OF PRIVACY IN ARAB CULTURE

The tremendous advancement witnessed in communication technologies and information systems has led to a new understanding of the right to privacy, linked to the concept of individuals' ability to control the flow of their information, particularly in the face of the risks associated with its collection and processing in digital environments unique to these technologies. This concept has been coined to prevent misuse or abuse of these technologies against individuals, ensuring legal protection for personal information, which includes identifiable details like names, addresses, phone numbers, and more (Al-Bashtawi, 2017).

Informational privacy encompasses the rules governing the collection and management of data specific to individuals, such as those related to identity cards, financial records, and medical information, as well as the confidentiality of telecommunications, both over the Internet and through email. The focus of informational privacy is to safeguard personally processed data, considering the increasing restrictions on its use under legally defined circumstances. Such data is prone to various violations, either through unauthorized commercial exploitation, government surveillance, or malicious theft, resulting in potential harm to the individuals concerned (Oraby, 2022).

Despite that social media has become an integral part of our lives, it comes with its own set of privacy concerns. Some of the most common social media privacy issues include social media phishing scams, hacking and account takeovers, shared location data used by stalkers and predators, data mining leading to identity theft, privacy "loopholes" exposing your sensitive information, employers or recruiters evaluating you based on your posts, doxing leading to emotional distress or physical harm, cyberbullying and online harassment. Furthermore, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram collect and store massive amounts of personal data from users, including their location, search history, and social interactions (Zhang et al., 2020). This data is used to deliver personalized content and advertising to users, which can be beneficial for some individuals. However, concerns arise when this personal data is misused, shared without consent, or exploited for profit. For instance, millions of Facebook users' data was harvested without their consent and used for political advertising (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018). Moreover, Children are at risk of online grooming, cyberbullying, and exposure to inappropriate content, while individuals with disabilities may be more susceptible to online scams and phishing attacks (Kargupta & Kumar, 2021).

The right to privacy is considered one of the fundamental constitutional rights that bind the natural person in their human capacity. This right precedes the existence of the state itself. Therefore, the private lives of individuals have obtained constitutional and legal protection in all countries around the world (Jaber, 2021). With social media's emergence and widespread use, the concept of privacy and personal life has become different. In the past, many actions and activities were considered private, such as family and emotional life, and these details were not shared with anyone on the internet, considering them sacred. People used to refrain from disclosing information or details about their day to anyone other than close family or friends. As for the pictures, they were extremely private. Nowadays, many people share their personal information without hesitation. There is a trend where individuals publish their private and personal details without being asked, assuming an audience is ready to receive and engage with them (Kadwani, 2022).

Privacy concerns have significantly increased, especially after the infamous Cambridge Analytica incident, where the data of Facebook users was leaked, and the Equifax data breach, which was exploited in the U.S. elections. These incidents raised numerous concerns about the privacy of the information on social media platforms (Stier et al., 2020). The issues extended to the extent of surveillance and the use of such platforms for spying on individuals, as evidenced by the accusations against the CEO of TikTok, Cheng Cho, by the U.S. Congress. They affirmed that the program was used

for espionage on various institutions and for leaking user data. Additionally, accusations were made that the Chinese government was allowed to use the platform for spying on user data in the United States. The matter did not stop there but extended to the exploitation of social media sites to promote dubious websites that advocate against morals, as seen in the case of "Hanin Hossam" in Egypt. She utilized her followers to promote content contrary to societal norms and traditions, leading the public prosecution to level serious charges, including human trafficking (Ibrahim & Taha, 2020).

The Arab world is a rapidly growing market for social media platforms, with a high rate of social media adoption among its population. Understanding privacy concerns in the region is crucial for social media companies that wish to tap into this market and build trust with their users (Khawla F Ali et al., 2020). Also, privacy is a fundamental human right, and social media privacy concerns in the Arab world are no exception. In this context, the previous research focused on the effect of cultural restrictions on individuals' motivation, users' attitudes, intentional behaviour, and social media's actual use, in addition to understanding the purposes, benefits, and risks of its use (e.g. (e.g., Askool, 2013; Abaido, 2020; Asiri et al., 20217). Also, some of the previous research investigated the role of Islam and cultural traditions in constructing norms around privacy (e.g., Abokhodair et al., 2017; Shehu et al., 2017). However, there are limited studies that investigate the impact of culture and governing laws in mitigating the negative impact of privacy while using social media websites. In particular, understanding and respecting the privacy boundaries of other users while interacting with them on these platforms.

The basis for morality and ethics in the Arab world, especially for Muslims, is primarily derived from the Qur'anic text and the verbatim quotes from the Prophet Muhammad, known as the Sunnah. These sources constitute the foundation of Sharia law, which not only shapes the judicial system but also establishes societal norms and expectations for behaviour. The concept of privacy is highly valued and is an integral part of daily life in the Arab world. The Holy Quran emphasizes the importance of seeking permission before entering someone's home as a means of safeguarding privacy and maintaining the sanctity of the house and body. The act of knocking on a door three times before entering is intended to prevent unintentional intrusion on one's private space, especially in situations where one may be in a state of undress or with their spouse or family. Failing to seek permission and entering without consent can lead to an invasion of privacy (Norah & Sarah, 2016).

The Arab world has a unique cultural and social context that affects the way people view privacy. For instance, people in the Arab world may value privacy differently than people in the Western world. Understanding these cultural differences is crucial in designing effective privacy policies that are sensitive to the needs and expectations of the Arab population (Askool, 2013). Besides, studying social media privacy concerns in the Arab world is required to understand cultural differences, political implications, business opportunities, and human rights issues. It is essential also to develop effective privacy policies and protect the privacy of individuals in the region (Norah & Sarah, 2016). Furthermore, social media has played a crucial role in the Arab Spring uprisings that took place in the region. These events have highlighted the importance of social media platforms as tools for political mobilization and expression of dissent. In fact, privacy concerns in the Arab world are not just about protecting individual rights, but they also have significant political implications (Abokhodair et al., 2017).

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Controlling privacy on social media platforms poses a significant challenge, especially given the widespread use of these platforms and the multitude of entities associated with user interactions. As the usage of these platforms is notably increasing in the Arab world, all countries must establish

comprehensive laws and regulations to govern this usage and ensure the protection of privacy for all users. Therefore, there is a necessity to study the factors that ensure the protection of personal privacy for users of social media platforms in the Arab world, considering the uniqueness of Arab culture and its inherent elements. If associated with appropriate legislation, these elements can contribute to regulating the secure use of social media platforms and limiting privacy violations.

In this context, researchers and public institutions play a crucial role in conducting empirical studies to define these regulations. They need to identify factors that enhance the concept of respecting privacy and those that may encourage privacy violations. This effort aims to help legislators formulate laws capable of regulating privacy on social media platforms, maintaining them as a secure environment for all users, regardless of their gender or age.

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