

# Online Communities versus Offline Communities in the Arab/Muslim World

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## ABSTRACT

*There is a major transformation taking place in the Arab and Muslim worlds. People in these nations are poised on the edge of a significant new social landscape. Called the Internet, this new frontier not only includes the creation of new forms of private communication, like electronic mail and chat, but also web-based forums, which for the first time enables public discussion between males and females in conservative societies. This paper has been written as a result of an ethnographic study conducted in Saudi Arabia during the period 2001–2002. The purpose of the study was to understand how online communities in Saudi Arabia are affecting people. The results of the study indicate that while participants to a large extent used online communities in accordance with their cultural values, norms and traditions, the communication medium and the features associated with it, such as the anonymity and lack of social cues, have affected them considerably. For example, many participants became more flexible in their thinking, more aware of the diverse nature of people within their society, less inhibited about the opposite gender, and more self-confident. On the other hand, participants neglected their family commitments, became less shy and some became confused about some aspects of their culture and religion. These findings and their implications for the Arab and Muslim worlds will be highlighted in this paper.*



## 1. INTRODUCTION: INTERNET IN SAUDI ARABIA

The Internet was introduced in Saudi Arabia<sup>1</sup> in late January 1999 after a long period of discussion and consultation within the Saudi authorities. These resulted in a tailored version being made available to the Saudi public. To enable this, a huge filter system was set up in Riyadh in conjunction with an American company. The reason for having such a filter system was that the Saudi authorities had serious concerns about the arrival of undesirable material (including pornography) on home computer

screens. Other cultural, religious and political reasons also lay behind the decision.

Currently there are 1.9 million Internet users in the country (Alriyadh, 2003), which is about 10% of the total population. According to a recent study, of this 1.9 million, 51% participate in asynchronous online communities (JeddahNews.net, 2004). The use of online communities, in a country where Islam acts as a primary force in determining social norms, values and practices, is disrupting long-established traditions, enabling the mixing of the genders, and making people aware of different ways of living.

## KEYWORDS

Online  
Communities

Web-based  
forums

Asynchronous  
communication

Saudi Arabia

After a brief discussion about the Arabic culture and Islamic religion, the paper examines online communities in the literature. It then discusses the conceptual and methodological aspects of the study. This includes how data were collected and analysed. A discussion of the findings of the study follows. Then the implications of these findings for the Arab and Muslim worlds will be highlighted. Finally, the conclusions drawn from this study are presented.

Arab and Islamic countries share many characteristics. Many of the results of the study on Saudi Arabia may have implications for the Arab and Islamic worlds.

## 2. BACKGROUND: RELIGION AND CULTURE IN ARAB/ISLAMIC WORLDS

In order to understand the impact of online communities on offline communities in Saudi Arabia and Arab and Islamic worlds it is essential to gain some understanding of the religion and culture of these communities. The culture in many of the Arabic and Islamic countries in its very nature is religious. That is, Islam plays a central role in defining the culture, and acts as a major force in determining the social norms, patterns, traditions, obligations, privileges and practices of society. This is especially so since Islam is not only a religious ideology, but a comprehensive system which embraces detailed prescriptions for the entire way of life (AlMunajjed, 1997).

One of the important features that profoundly influences every aspect of public and social life in Muslim countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and previously Afghanistan, is the segregation of the sexes. Segregation, which does not permit women to mix with unrelated men, is prescribed by the Islamic religion (AlMunajjed, 1997; Ember, 1998; Wheeler, 2000). It is a general rule that applies to education, banking, and access to public transportation and job

opportunities. It also applies to hospitals, restaurants, schools, libraries and shopping centres. The practice of segregation and confining women to their own company is an institutional mechanism designed to regulate women, to protect their chastity and to prevent other men from encroaching on the male honour of the family (AlMunajjed, 1997).

Shyness<sup>2</sup> is another important characteristic that people in these countries should adopt. Shyness is also prescribed by the Islamic religion. The prophet Mohamed (peace be upon him) was reported to have said: "Shyness is a branch of Faith.<sup>3</sup> He who has no shyness, has no Faith" (Islamonline.net, 2004). One of the good things about shyness is that it can stop people from misbehaving. That is, shyness can be considered as a mechanism that can regulate people's behaviour. For this reason the attitude of shyness is beneficial to the society as a whole. Being shy means that people should not dress improperly, should not be confrontational, should not talk about things that may cause embarrassment to them or to others, and so on.

Family ties are a priority in Arabic and Islamic cultures. In this context a Muslim is expected to keep contact with one's blood relatives at all times by regularly visiting them and offering them gifts and money if they are needed, and by being compassionate and showing them cheerfulness and the respect that they deserve. The following verse from the *Qur'an* (47: 22-23) illustrates the importance of kinship ties:

Would you then, if you were given the authority, do mischief in the land, and sever your ties of kinship? Such are they whom Allah has cursed, so that He has made them deaf and blinded their sight.

In brief, a Muslim must maintain family ties at all times and offer help and support whenever necessary.

Not all practices of people in these countries necessarily stem from religion. Some are derived, for example, from the ancient Arabic culture. An example of this is hierarchy in family structure, or power distance as Hofstede (1997) calls it. Hierarchy, which is very significant in many Arabic/Islamic societies, can mean the inability of an individual to challenge the ruling of an elder in

the family, for example, a grandfather not allowing a grandchild to study abroad or marry a particular spouse.

### 3. ONLINE AND OFFLINE COMMUNITIES

#### 3.1 Definition

Having understood a little about the culture of Saudi Arabia, we now proceed to the discussion of online and offline communities. An offline community for the purpose of this paper is:

- (1) A group of people (2) who share social interaction (3) and some common ties between themselves and the other members of the group (4) ...who share an area [physical space] for at least some of the time (Hamman, 2001, p.75).

In addition to the above, this researcher suggests that a fifth point is added and that is a 'defining authority', such as values, rules, culture or religion which govern the members of a community. The reason for adding this fifth point to the above definition of an offline community is that offline communities in the Arab/Islamic worlds, like many other offline communities particularly in collectivistic cultures, are characterised by the existence of a leader, such as the leader of a tribe. These offline communities are also governed by rules, which in the case of the Arab/Islamic offline communities are manifested in the teachings of Islam and the values of the culture.

Meanwhile, there are many accounts of what an online community is in the literature (see for example Holmes, 1997; Jones, 1997; Kollok and Smith, 1999; Wellman & Gulia, 1999; Preece, 2000; Jones & Kucker, 2001), but for the purpose of this paper an online community should be understood here as consisting of:

- (1) People who interact socially as they strive to satisfy their own needs or perform special roles such as leading or moderating. (2) A shared purpose such as interest, need, information exchange or service that provides a reason for the community. (3) Policies in the form of tacit assumptions, ritu-

als, protocols, rules and laws that guide people interaction. (4) Computer systems to support and mediate social interaction and facilitate a sense of togetherness (Preece, 2000, p.10).

The above definition of 'online community' shares most of the elements as presented in the definition of 'offline community' above, although the shared area in the case of an online community is cyberspace and the interaction is achieved through computer-mediated communications (CMC). Additionally, Preece (2000) included in her definition the new element, 'defining authority',<sup>4</sup> which was proposed in the definition of 'offline community', to give a sense of online and offline communities in Arab/Islamic worlds.

#### 3.2 Types of online communities

Online communities develop around many specific purposes, including research, business, educational, and religious communities. The communities that are the focus of the present study were social communities. People join social online communities to meet other people, make new friends, talk about the meaning of life, discuss their social problems, fall in love, and so on.

In addition, the mode of communication in online communities can be asynchronous or synchronous. Asynchronous communication means that the interaction among participants in these communities takes place in delayed time, that is, without everyone gathering at a particular time. This is unlike synchronous communication in which interactions between participants take place in real time, that is, all participants have to be online at the same time. Examples of forms of CMC which are of this type are MUDs, MOOs and IRCs. The online communities that are the focus of the present study were asynchronous online communities which are based on public discussion forums on the Web. Web-based forums<sup>5</sup> are specific types of software that facilitate public discussions through the exchange of messages via computer networks (CSU, 2004).

One way asynchronous web forums differ from other asynchronous forms of communication is that all messages exchanged reside on one server that all participants can access

via the web. Another way is that web forums allow access to messages in the same way a web page is accessed – by clicking a hyperlink.

### 3.3 Online communities in the literature

The literature indicates that people online behave in ways that differ from their behaviour offline. Wallace (1999) observes that people can act in uninhibited ways when they think no one can find out who they really are (p.239). The degree of anonymity affects behaviour in important ways and may lead to de-individuation – a state where the normal constraints on an individual's behaviour are removed, which may lead to dis-inhibition.<sup>6</sup> According to some computer-mediated communication (CMC) researchers, people communicating via computer screens may be de-individualised (Joinson, 1998, p.49). Additionally, public self-awareness, which is induced by situations in which an individual is aware of the possibility of being evaluated, is reduced as a result of interactions via CMC and can also lead to dis-inhibition (Joinson, 1998, p.51). The lack of public self-awareness is related in some way to the thinking that, because individuals may not encounter others in their offline life, they tend not to worry about being evaluated and thus more easily vent negative feelings towards each other (Calcut, 1999; Preece, 2000).

Researchers have noted a number of possible effects of participation in CMC environments such as people becoming more confident (Markham, 1998), more flexible in their views (Turkle, 1995; Brody, 1996) and less shy (Turkle, 1995; Parks and Floyd, 1996; Horn, 1998; Markham, 1998; Rheingold, 2000; Preece, 2000; Utz, 2000; Wong, 2000).

On the other hand, most of the above researchers have also noted some undesirable effects of participation in CMC environments such as participants becoming addicted to these environments (Turkle, 1995; Wellman & Gulia, 1999; Rheingold, 2000) and drawn away from real-life family and friends (Turkle, 1995; Wellman & Gulia, 1999; Kraut *et al.*, 2000; Rheingold, 2000). Findings, however, by the Pew Internet and American Life project (Horrigan, 2001) and UCLA Center for Communication Policy (Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 2002) do not suggest that Internet use always means that

people are feeling lonely or isolated sitting at computer screens.

### 3.4 The difference between online communities and offline communities

Although the definitions of offline community and online community are similar, this is not to say that offline community and online community are qualitatively the same. One example of this difference is that many online communities welcome intellectual activity more easily than an offline community does. This view is also shared by Hauben and Hauben (1997) who note that people online are encouraged to be thoughtful and to present their ideas to the others. People, they add, are allowed to be intellectually interesting and interested (p. 4). Another example is that participants of some online communities may only have regular access to each other through their computer screens while participants of some offline communities may have more opportunities for chance meetings on the street, in public places, or through a number of communication technologies. Participants of some online communities are particularly unlikely to meet one another by chance on the street because there are large geographic distances separating them physically and because they often do not know what other members of the community look like (Hamman, 2001). The last example that demonstrates the qualitative difference between online and offline communities is that people offline can check frequently with each other to ensure they understand the conversation as it progresses; online this is difficult. Moreover, and related to the previous point, online communications tend not only to be more elongated compared to face-to-face communications, but also more fragmented as messages suffer interruptions, lapses and sporadic frequency (Kozinets, 2001).

## 4. THE STUDY

### 4.1 Conceptual Framework and Methodology

This was an interpretive, naturalistic study, the method of which was guided by a con-

constructivist paradigm, which emphasises understanding the multiple meanings people make of the phenomenon under study. Social construct theory (one of two constructivist theories)<sup>7</sup> provided the theoretical lens through which the method in this study was applied and the data were interpreted. Social constructivists recognise the effect of the social environment, culture and religion on how people construct their realities about their world (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). They argue that meaning is developed through the interactions of social processes involving people, language and religion (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). They see people as developing meanings for their activities together, that is, people 'socially' construct reality (Williamson, 2000, p. 30). Religion and culture in the Arab/Islamic world not only shape people's attitudes, practices, and behaviours, but also shape the way they see and do things and perceive their lives. Similarly, the social environment, in the case of online communities 'the web-based forum technology', may also exact some influence on people's behaviour both online and offline. This makes social construct theory appropriate for understanding online communities in these societies. Additionally, the use of this theory to investigate and understand online communities is also in line with the literature (see, for example, Jones 1998, p.5; Markham, 1998; Costigan, 1999; Fernback, 1999; Dodge & Kitchin, 2001; Manaszewicz, Williamson, & Mckemish, 2002).

The method<sup>8</sup> used in this study was ethnography. Constructivism is one of a number of frameworks in which ethnography can be carried out.<sup>9</sup> The purpose of ethnography is to produce a written description of a people's way of life, beliefs and daily activities (Fetterman, 1989). As this requires an in-depth understanding of the people, events, activities and social structures under study, ethnography conducted from within a constructivist paradigm appeared to be the best approach. One of the important aspects of constructivist ethnography is that it allows the eliciting of the individuals' perceptions about their experiences. Another aspect is that it allows multiple interpretation of realities and alternative interpretations of data to be presented (Fetterman, 1989). The use of ethnography to study online environments is advo-

cated by many researchers including Paccagnella (1997), Hine (1998, 2000), Markham (1998), Miller and Slater (2000), Nocera (2000), Preece (2000), Rheingold (2000), Hamman (2001) and Mann and Stewart (2000). Ethnography also provides constructivists with a variety of different techniques for data collection, one of which is semi-structured interviewing (Saule 2000).

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## 4.2 Data Collection

One of the key ethnographic techniques used to collect data in this study was online semi-structured interviewing.<sup>10</sup> Other techniques used in this study include silent observation of an online community; a participant role taken by the researcher in a similar online community; and face-to-face semi-structured interviews with key informants.

Potential interviewees were selected from the online community,<sup>11</sup> which was silently observed for a year, as described in Al-Saggaf *et al.* (2002b). Selected interviewees were approached through the MSN Messenger (a real time chat software). The sample included seven males and eight females representing different ages, educational levels/employment status and locations (within Saudi Arabia). (Table 1 sets out details of the participants selected for online interviews.<sup>12</sup>) These people were approached to participate in this study while they were online. The participants were interviewed online after the informed consent sheet was forwarded to them. The interviews were conducted in Arabic and followed a semi-structured format with open-ended questions.

## 4.3 Data Analysis

Data were analysed as they were collected. Interview passages were inserted as Rich

**Table 1**  
Demographic  
Information of  
Interviewees

Participant's Names	Gender	Age	Educational levels/ employment status	City	Marital status
Samy	M	26	University	Jeddah	Married
Hanan	F	18	University	Jeddah	Single
Mohamed	M	26	University	Jeddah	Single
Nadia	F	19	University	Riyadh	Single
Wafa	F	15	School	Riyadh	Single
Ali	M	20	No data	Riyadh	Married
Arwa	F	19	University	Madinah	Single
Safa	F	18	School	Madinah	Single
Ahmed	M	26	Employed	Taif	Single
Reem	F	21	University	Riyadh	Single
Ibrahim	M	25	Employed	Tabook	Single
Nawaf	M	24	University	Riyadh	Single
Nada	F	22	University	Riyadh	Single
Asrar	F	45	Housewife	Riyadh	Married
Faisal	M	20	University	Riyadh	Single

Text Format into NVIVO (Software for analyzing qualitative data) for further analysis. After editing the interview documents in the NVIVO editor, keywords were identified within each of these documents after careful study of each word and each line in the document passages. Themes were then developed based on these keywords.

For the purpose of ensuring the appropriateness of these themes, each was defined and evaluated. The process of evaluation involved ensuring that certain phrases (or similar to them) are found in a participant's statement for a theme to be assigned to a participant's statement. (Table 2 shows an example of this process.)

Following the evaluation process, came the further structuring or organising of all themes into groups based on the general concepts of the research they addressed. In this step also themes were compared and contrasted to ensure that they were assigned appropriately. Finally, for the purpose of producing a summary of the data, statements that encompassed the developed themes were written. These statements were combined to form paragraphs that formulated the results presented below.

## 5. THE STUDY RESULTS

Before discussing the effects that became evident from the analysis of these inter-

views, two points are made: first, classification of these effects as positive or negative was made according to the perceptions of the interviewees in this study. That is, the designation was made based on how these interviewees perceived these effects. Second, the brief explanations written below about these effects are made based on the religious and cultural contexts of Saudi society. This is because, as mentioned in section 4.1, the findings of the study are interpreted from within the Saudi social and cultural contexts.

### 5.1 Participants Became More Flexible in their Thinking

One of the most favourable effects of participation in online communities in Saudi Arabia, based on the researcher's observation and according to seven online interviewees (4 males: 3 females), is in making them become more flexible in their thinking, discussions and expressions. Mohamed, when asked about the changes in his personality as a result of his participation in the community, said that he became "more open-minded". Samy, said the community taught him to accept others' views:

I learned something that is very important and that is for everyone a

**Table 2**  
An Example  
of the Process  
of Evaluating  
the Themes

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Definition (from within the context of this study)</b>	<b>Phrases that must be found in participants' statements</b>
self-reported aware and increased mindfulness	When participants indicate that they gained knowledge or realisation of something in life after they joined online communities.	'I realised that', 'I learned something new', 'I used to think that', 'now I am different', 'I now have changed', 'I did not know before that', etc.
Flexibility in thinking	When participants indicate that they showed flexibility in their views, ideas and beliefs after their online experience.	'everyone has a different point of view', 'I now listen to everyone', 'I used to force my ideas', 'I now listen to both sides of the story', 'I now consider different views', 'I am now open to new ideas', etc.
Self-confidence	When participants indicate that they felt more confident in themselves and their abilities after their online experience.	'I became more confident', 'my confidence in myself increased', 'before I was afraid from', 'it gave my ego a boost', etc.

point of view that must be respected. And it is a must that I listen to it and discuss it without forcing my ideas.

Females also held similar views with regard to becoming more flexible in their mind after they joined the online community. Safa reported:

The forum made me listen to both sides of the views. And respect all views. Before I used to see only my views as right and reject any other views. Today I listen to all views with an open heart.

Hierarchy in Saudi society limits the challenging of views and ideas and makes individuals follow dominant views held by their elders (Khaled, 2003). This may leave little room for discovering the point of view of others. For this reason many people think that "what they think is right". According to the study, all this changed online: individuals challenged ideas, listened to both sides of the argument or the story and listened to and respected other people's opinions. The on-going discussions with peers and friends online enabled these individuals, for the first time, to come across different opinions and from many angles. The point about members becoming flexible in their thinking is in line with the literature. Turkle

(1995) contended that participants online become more flexible in their views as a result of their interaction in CMC environments. The online medium plays an important role in facilitating these kinds of intellectual discussions, according to Hauben and Hauben (1997), because it allows participants the opportunity to consider multiple views. This may also be because hierarchical features online are reduced as age, race, gender, wealth, physical appearance and status characteristics, are blurred. However, results obtained from the one-year silent observation of the online community studied indicate that once members become close friends and regularly meet each other face-to-face, issues of status, age, race, wealth and physical appearance may come to the surface again.

## 5.2 Participants Became More Aware and Mindful of others

Another favourable effect is the increase in self-reported awareness. One way in which participation online raised individuals' awareness was by making them, particularly women, less naïve and more careful when dealing with others. Hanan reported:

In the beginning, I was naïve. I

looked at the members with good intentions and I treat them I don't know how to describe this but I used to treat them like my brothers. But some did not appreciate that and others took it in the wrong way. If I replied to somebody's poem, it means I was in love with him...now I am different. There is a big change in my personality. I am never the same as before. I treat people with defined measures. I stop those who violate the rules.

The view that participation online can make participants, particularly females, less naïve and more mindful was also held by Nadia who reported that she became less naive after she joined the community:

Of course the forum affected my personality. I used to think that people are naive like me, but now I don't think that way. I learned that people are different types. And that for everybody there should be a special treatment.

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Because in the offline community women are restricted to their own company and asked to stay at home, they seldom have a chance to mix with men and learn about their diverse nature. Based on observational field notes, when women went online and interacted with men, and some encountered uncivil behaviour from several male participants, they became more mindful about these types of men within their society. Hanan supported this view:

Because I was not used to communicating with lots of people, I did not know that such mentalities exist. And that some mentalities are bad mentalities.

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**Participation online can make participants, particularly females, less naïve and more mindful**

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### 5.3 Participants Became More Self-Confident

The increase in self-confidence is another

positive effect of the online community experience. During the online interviews four participants (3 males: 1 female) reported that their experience in the forum had increased their self-confidence. In fact, Ahmed considered his increase in self-confidence as the best thing that he gained from his community: "The best thing I gained from my experience is increasing my confidence in my thinking and in my pen". This evidence is supported by Markham (1998) who noted that participation online can make people become more confident in themselves.

Because hierarchy is of great significance in Saudi society, as mentioned earlier, and older members of the community dominate face-to-face discussions, younger individuals are seldom given a chance to express themselves and develop their sense of individuality (Khaled, 2003). From childhood they are reminded not to talk in the presence of elders. This, in turn, may make them grow up lacking confidence in themselves, as was the case with the first author of this paper. Online, however, they were observed to be able to express themselves, stand up for their ideas and defend their views freely and in front of anyone. Nadia explained that it was the mingling around with others that gave her confidence:

My confidence in myself has been increasing. The mingling with people and our interactions gave me confidence in myself and the feeling that I can give more.

### 5.4 Participants Became Less Inhibited About the Opposite Gender

One of the interesting ways in which online communication between the opposite genders affected them, was by making them feel less inhibited about the opposite sex. Nawaf's personal experience is a good example of this:

In the beginning it was impossible for me to talk to a girl face-to-face, now I can talk naturally to any girl from our relatives. And that was noticed by my family.

In the offline community, men and women

seldom see, or talk to, each other, which is a situation that may have caused both genders to feel inhibited about the other. It may have also made some obsessed about the other gender, and yet others curious, as the quotation below, taken from one of the interviews, shows:

I can say that curiosity, or natural instinct, plays a role in this communication (and excuse me for saying that<sup>13</sup>). Curiosity of one of the genders in knowing how the other gender thinks. Knowing the things the other gender likes and the things that the other gender does not like.

Online communities are providing an opportunity for dialogue between the genders. The continuous dialogue between the two genders may make them get used to each others' presence and hence become less inhibited about each other. This reduction in inhibition is undoubtedly beneficial to society because it may make it easy for males and females to understand, and relate to, each other when they get married.

## 5.5 Participants Neglected Family Commitments

The most serious negative effect of participation in online communities has been seen in the amount of time spent by the online community members thereby resulting in neglect of their family commitments. Eight interviewees (4 males: 4 females) who lamented the time wasted online, admitted that their online participation ate away the time they spent with their family and friends; and the time they usually spent studying or doing private reading. Wafa, for example, said:

The forum took away the time I spend with my family. My family became very disturbed when I stay long on the Net. I did not sit with them. I was always busy with the topics and the search for topics to write. Even eating I did not eat...the forum made me close to people but far from my family.

Many researchers' findings support the above findings, including Turkle (1995), Wellman & Gulia (1999), Rheingold (2000),

and Kraut et al. (2000). While this is true, two recent studies offered opposing views to these findings. Studies by Pew Internet and American Life project (Horrigan, 2001) and UCLA Center for Communication Policy (Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 2002) suggest that Internet use does not reduce the time people normally spend with their family members.

Taking into account that family ties and relationships with relatives, according to religion, are very important, participation in online forums could be a danger to the fabric of the family structure. That is, family in a collectivistic society like the Saudi (Hofstede, 1997), where women do not drive and generally do not go outside the home to work, is important. When women need to move around, one of the male family members takes them in his car. When they want to go to school or to a shopping mall, a male member in the family takes them in his car to these places. Across families, relatives depend on each other for emotional and social support. Also poorer relatives depend on the support of richer relatives, as the government in Saudi Arabia, like other governments in the Arab world, does not offer financial support to the unemployed. Probably for these reasons, Islam compels people to take care of their families and to maintain family ties.

## 5.6 Participants Became Less Shy

Contrary to their cultural values, individuals, particularly females, became less shy as a result of participation in online communities. Eight interviewees (5 females, 3 males) stated that their online community experience made them less shy, more talkative and outgoing. Nawaf, for example, said:

In my first days in the forum I felt uneasy to talk to girls over the Internet but these days I no more feel that way. I do not know what happened to me, but I am not shy with them any more

Arwa felt the same thing about herself:

The change in my personality was a counter change. Before the forum I was very quiet but after that I became

outgoing and naughty...after my experience in the forum I became less shy.<sup>14</sup>

The fact that online communication can make participants less shy and more outgoing is expected. Many online community researchers as mentioned above found this to be true (Turkle, 1995; Parks and Flyod, 1996; Horn, 1998; Markham (1998); Rheingold, 2000; Preece, 2000; Utz, 2000; Wong, 2000). One of the reasons for participants becoming less shy is the anonymity inherent in the medium and the lack of public self awareness which may cause de-individuation which in turn may lead to dis-inhibition (Joinson, 1998; Wallace, 1999). Because participants online are anonymous and because they are unknown to others which means no risk on their own reputation or family reputation, they tend to act in an unrestrained manner.

It is worth noting that, while becoming less shy is viewed by the above Western researchers as a positive outcome as it encourages individuals to be more sociable and outgoing, in the case of Saudi society it is considered as a negative effect. Shyness, as mentioned above, can prevent people from misbehaving. For example a male who is shy will not talk about sex in the company of others because it is embarrassing to all parties. A female who is shy will not use the word 'damn' in the company of others because it is something of which the society does not approve. Shyness, thus, is considered as an instrument that people adopt to restrain their behaviour. Probably for this reason shyness is considered an essential tenet in Islam, and it is important that individuals remain shy and modest.

### 5.7 Participants Became Intellectually Confused

Another serious effect of the online community experience on individuals' offline lives is the cultural influence or participants' exposure to ideas and views that are against their religious and cultural values. Ahmed was worried that some members may influence others online because he believed that there were some kinds of participants whose writings were against accepted traditions, and sometimes directly or indirectly attacked one's religious beliefs. Ibrahim said that after join-

ing his community he became confused about many things in life. Specifically he said:

In plain language, the person before has brains but the contradictions of the things in the forum with that in the real life cause the person to have a spilt in his personality to the extent that lately I gave myself a rest by not entering these types of discussions.

Faisal during the interview, argued that there is large potential for influence. He said the author has the ability to influence the reader, especially if the author is respected by others:

There are some readers whose [intellectual] level is lower compared to the writer. So he [the reader] will believe what the writer says, even if he was wrong...when the writer is well read and well informed...the intellectual level of the writer, his presence, his medals, his charisma and prestige, he influences the reader.

With individuals online coming from different backgrounds, taking part in continuous conversations in these public discussion forums, the chances that there will be an influence on individuals' religious and cultural values and beliefs are increased. There is also the possibility that some participants may purposefully try to influence others' thinking. There is a possibility that some participants deliberately spread beliefs and values that are contradictory to the Saudi culture.

## 6. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ARAB/MUSLIM WORLD

As mentioned in section 2, Islam plays a vital role in defining the culture, social norms and practices of many Arabic/Islamic countries. Islam also offers the people of these nations detailed prescriptions for their entire way of life. While it is true that the degree of upholding the religious and cultural values varies from country to another, Islam is still the dominant feature among them. Similarly, while the degree of hierarchy and gender segregation vary from

country to another within the Arabic/Islamic worlds, they are nevertheless existent in all these countries. Most countries within these regions also share other similar characteristics such as the importance women's honour and family ties. All the above makes applying the findings from Saudi study to other Arab/Muslim countries possible.

Reduction in inhibition and increased awareness of the opposite gender as a result of online communication are likely to be significant in more conservative and gender-segregated communities such as Yemen and the gulf states, than in liberated countries like Lebanon, Egypt and Syria, where there is less gender-segregation. However, as the Internet penetrates the countryside of these less liberated communities, which is usually more conservative than urban parts, reduction in inhibition and increased awareness of the opposite gender will become more noticeable.

The same applies to the finding that individuals are becoming less shy as a result of online communication. This effect is highly likely to take place in more conservative communities than in liberated ones. Also as Internet adoption increases in the rural parts of these less gender-segregated and liberated communities, individuals may become less shy and more outgoing.

As mentioned earlier, hierarchy, which is very important in the way people conduct themselves within their family or group, is very significant in the Arab/Islamic worlds. The question that arises is how computer communication technologies are impacting this hierarchical structure. The answer to this question is provided to a large extent by the findings of this research and that is, individuals are developing self-confidence and becoming more flexible in their thinking and expressions, contrary to the dominant views held by the elders.

Also as have been previously mentioned, family ties are a priority in Arab and Islamic countries, despite the fact that today's nature of life and work is changing globally through the use of technology. Meanwhile, Internet addiction is now a known problem in the West (Rheingold, 2000) and is causing people to spend less time with their family. If the Internet enters the Arab/Muslim worlds and the chances are that it will, given its importance in the sharing of information and the

connection of people, the consequences for the Muslim family structure could be serious. Bayat (2002) provides a useful advice for this type of addiction and according to him:

A Muslim must be concerned that being 'connected' to the 'net' must not 'disconnect' him from Allah and being online should not take him 'off track' from the 'straight' path.

But it can be argued that such an advice can only be heeded by mature Muslims with a sound knowledge of Islam and observance of its practices. According to the authors of this paper, the answer is likely to be found in providing sound Islamic and general education on a large scale within the Arab/Muslim world (Al-Saggaf, 2003; Begg, 2003).

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

It was clear that the participants learned a great deal from their interactions with each other and from the sharing of their life experiences. While the interaction with others made them more aware of the wider characteristics of the individuals within their society, the ability to express themselves raised their self-confidence. The listening to multiple views and opinions online made them become flexible in their

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**Increased awareness of the opposite gender as a result of online communication are likely to be significant in more conservative and gender-segregated communities such as Yemen and the gulf states**

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thinking and expressions. The communication channel that the online community has created between the two genders has made them become less inhibited about each other. Unfortunately the features inherent in the technology, particularly its anonymous and addictive nature, have

affected members' behaviour in ways that are against the teachings of their religion. It caused members to become less shy and to neglect their family and friends. It also made some participants become confused about aspects of their culture and religion. While these participants revealed positive and negative effects of participation in online communities, on balance the positive effects, according to them, outweighed the negative effects.

It can be said that for Saudi society to benefit from this technology in the future, and to avoid some of its negative impacts, the solution lies in education, training and raising people's awareness. Education can alert people, particularly the youth, about the dangers of online communities while at the same time showing them how to benefit from joining online communities. Continuing to uphold the cultural and religious values and norms in Saudi society can greatly help people make the right decisions for correct use of this new technology.

While some generalisations made through this research are possible within the Arab/Muslim world, clearly more research is required to understand the wider impacts of the Internet on traditional Islamic societies. For example, researchers from various Muslim countries should conduct similar research to verify these findings and also look at other impacts of technology on the Muslim world like the impact of chat rooms and E-business. Also researchers from Muslim countries should do collaborative research on the impact of technology in various Islamic countries. The authors of this paper would welcome any comments by Islamic scholars and would urge them to make active contributions to the study of the impact of Internet technologies on the Arab/Muslim worlds.

## NOTES

1. Saudi Arabia is one of the countries in the Middle East, the population of which is predominantly Arabs who strictly adhere to Islam.
2. Shyness in the context of Saudi culture should be understood as an attitude by which individuals show that they are decent and modest particularly in their language and appearance.
3. Narrated by Al-Bukhari and Muslim.

4. See point 3 in the definition of 'online community', namely "Policies in the form of tacit assumptions, rituals, protocols, rules and laws that guide people interaction".
5. Other names for forums are online message boards, electronic bulletin board, and online conferences.
6. Opposite to 'inhibition' – when behaviour is constrained or restrained through self-consciousness, anxiety about social situations, worries about public evaluation and so on (Joinson, 1998, p. 44)
7. Another constructivist theory is the personal construction of reality.
8. This researcher takes the position of distinguishing between the terms 'technique' and 'method'. The former should mean the specific procedures that are used to collect or analyse data. The latter should mean the general rules that govern the implementation of these procedures.
9. Other frameworks are critical theory and post-modern ethnography (Saule, 2000).
10. For a detailed description of this technique see Al-Saggaf et al. (2002a)
11. A social web-based forum used predominantly by Saudi nationals.
12. To preserve anonymity, the names given here are fictitious, although other details are actual, except for city names. While city names are real, they are swapped across interviewees. So that if the interviewees read this text, they will not be able to recognise themselves.
13. She felt a bit shy sharing this with others.
14. She means in a light and humourous way.

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