YOUTH AND SOCIAL MEDIA IN GCC
CHANGING TRENDS IN COMMUNICATION, SOCIAL PARTICIPATION AND IDENTITY

ZARQA PARVEZ

Zarqa Parvez is lecturer at College of Humanities and Sciences at Hamad Bin Khalifa University, Qatar. She is also a PhD student at Durham University Government and International Affairs and her research focus includes: Nationalism, Gender, National Identity, Women, State and Society in the Gulf Region.

Abstract

Social Media has revolutionized the communications and connected people across continents; its effects are seen worldwide. In Middle East, societies have been transformed through the influence of social media platforms and new trends in social participation, identity making and communication. The Gulf States have witnessed high usage of social media amongst its youth. The Middle East and Gulf have the highest population of youth in the world and one of the highest rates of social media usage. The combination of the two has translated in to new realities for the region. Social media has become a tool for progress, social participation and overcoming traditional boundaries placed on communication and information sharing.

Key words: Social Media, Youth, Gulf, Qatar, Identity, Twitter
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Introduction

Social Media has revolutionized the communications and connected people across continents; its effects are seen worldwide. In Middle East, societies have been transformed through the influence of social media platforms and new trends in social participation, identity making and communication. In the recent decades, the Gulf States have witnessed high usage of social media amongst its youth. The Middle East and Gulf have the highest population of youth in the world and one of the highest rates of social media usage. The combination of the two has translated in to new realities for the region. Social media has become a tool for progress, social participation and overcoming traditional boundaries placed on communication and information sharing.

The youth in Gulf States has experienced the influence of social media unlike any generation before them, leading to trends that did not exist before, hence creating new modes of scholarship, concepts, norms and codes. In this paper, I will discuss the role of social media amongst the youth in Gulf countries in creating a sense of social participation, changing concepts of identity, and reshaping communication. The paper will be divided in to 7 parts; the first part will explain the background on Social Media, the second part will contextualize Social Media in Gulf States, third part will discuss "Twitter and Social Participation in Gulf," the fourth part elaborate on "Social Media and Identity in Gulf", fifth part will explain "Social Media and Communication Trends in Gulf", sixth part will analyze Individual Choices and Social Media in Gulf and the last part will conclude all of the sections discussed above.

Methodology

The purpose of this paper is to study and analyze the role of social media amongst the youth and in Gulf countries in particular look at the factors of sense of social participation, changing concepts of identity and reshaping new communication trends. All of these factors are to be studied in relation to the social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat and Youtube. Social Media has become an increasingly important field of study in relation to human societies. Although the field has been studied from various aspects, this papers looks at the philosophical standpoint of set a theoretical framework suitable to study human behavior on social media

and how it influences new societal trends. In this regards the paper build son certain theories such as Habermas "communicative action" and Goffman's theory of "presentation of self" as relevant theories to study some of the prevalent social media trends in Gulf States. The paper will mainly use secondary sources such as quantitative and qualitative studies on social media trends in the Gulf region and covering broad concepts and theories in general. In addition to this, the paper will use cyber-ethnography to analyze relevant social media public accounts to study common and emerging topics relevant to the focus of the study.

1. Background on Social Media

Social media has revolutionized Internet usage all around the world. It is shaping societies and individual identity globally. The evolving effects of social media are prominent in the Middle East specifically in the Gulf region. The region has one of the world's highest populations of youth. According to a study more than "33% of the GCC population is under 25 years old." [1] The impact of social media is evident in the fact that GCC has one of the highest penetration rates of mobile Internet in the world.[2] The access to Internet on mobile phone makes social media accessible from anywhere and any part of the world. This has tremendously shaped the way youth in GCC communicates not only with each other but also with society as a whole.

There are many definitions of Internet, however most post-modern narratives describe it as a "virtual space, characterized by its ability to create places apart from social life".[3] Social anthropologists take a different approach and challenge the separation between the real and the virtual, Daniel Miller and Don Slater explain "the Internet is not a monolithic or placeless 'cyberspace'; rather, it is numerous new technologies used by diverse people, in diverse real-world locations" [4]. Social media is an extension of traditional media and can be defined as "forms of electronic communication, such as websites for social networking and micro blogging, where users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content such as videos"[5]. Lev Manovich further explains that "social media enhances the pace and quality of interactions through an electronic net of people, cultures and organizations"[6].

Social media has become one of the most relevant fields of study in academia. Social Media is an innately multi-disciplinary field of study. While one aspect of this field is to study it from the technological lense, another research stream focuses Information system (IS) to study social media. This stream uses multiple disciples such as data science, data design, social science and behavioral science to understand social media. This paper considers some philosophical and sociological theoretical standpoints to study the human's social media usage behavior. Qi et all (Qi et all) suggest that the social media usage can be elaborated through a framework of philosophy. They suggest looking at the intersection between the considerations of "others" in the use of social media versus the presentation of the "self", the individual's life world. The consideration of others may be viewed in two different lenses, either looking at others as means in the form of instrumentalization or using others as an end. The question of consideration of the "others" relates to Habermas theory of "communicative action"[7]. He raised the question of how we consider others, do consider them as instruments in achieving our objectives or do we consider them ends in themselves. Similarly the question of self relates to Goffman's theory[8] of the presentation of the self. In his book the Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life, he explains that "regardless of the particular objective which the individual has in mind" (p. 3), and ''thus, when an individual appears in the presence of others, there will usually be some reason for him to mobilize his activity so that it will convey an impression to others which it is in his interests to convey" (Goffman 4). These theories of "Self "and "Others" are essential in locating human social behavior in social media platforms and why people may act or behave the way they do on these mediums.

The youth in Gulf States use social media for various purposes, these include, political, humanitarian, entertainment as means of social participation by engaging in online debates on issues of common interest. This is rapidly changing the way societies are shaped in the region and how individuals place themselves within their countries and globally. However, despite the positive aspects of social media, it has also been used for spreading fake news and propaganda. Although fake news is not new or pertinent to social media, it is the ways in which social media capitalizes on and spreads fake news and propaganda, which is relevant to the social and political development of the world. Konrad Niklewicz explains that 'The sharing of fake news on social media is deliberate,

1   Abdul Ghaffar, Mahmood. "Social Media: Impacts on Arabian Gulf Youth and Governments." *State and Society Relations in the Arab Gulf States*: Gerlach Press, n.p., n.d. 61-76. Print.

2   "The Growth of Social Media in the Gulf." Chatham House. N.p., n.d. Web. 03 June 2017.

3   Assaf, Laura. "The Internet and Youth in the United Arab Emirates." State and Society Relations in the Arab Gulf States. N.p.: Gerlach Press, n.d. 13-33. Print.

4   Assaf, pg. 15

5   Abdul Ghaffar, pg. 61

6   Ibid

7   Habermas J. The theory of communicative action. Volume 1: Reason and the rationalization of society McCarthy T, translator. Boston: Beacon Press; 1984.

8   Goffman E. The presentation of self in everyday life. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc.; 1959.

undertaken by an organization or an individual, with the aim of fabricating and disseminating information that is fully or partially false in nature in order to influence opinion or stir controversy, or for financial gain.[9] J. Gillin further explains that 'fake news' usually contains "kernel of truth" which is blown out of context and exaggerated to add false details.[10] The intentionality of fake news may vary from one context to another, it is not always directed at changing people's minds such as in American presidential elections of 2016, sometimes the aim is to polarize the society and or to create a sense of emergency and or chaos. Relating to this changing nature of fake news, the concept of "bots" more specific to Twitter. Bots are "special programs able to operate autonomously, mostly pretending to be a genuine profile managed by a human being. Bots can mass-send content, and share or retweet chosen items at machine-gun speed, reacting to a pre-programmed sequence of words, hashtags and so on". [11]

In Gulf societies, where conventional civil societies are weak, the "virtual civil society" created through social media out lets such as (Twitter, Youtube, blogs, Facebook) may provide some space for individual agency within power structures. This experience of social media creates a sense of empowerment within the youth and allows them to be active participants within the virtual civil society created through social mediums However, the strength of "virtual civil society" is questionable as explained by Mark R. Beissinger[12] but with an illusion of "civil society". He explains that a robust "virtual civil society in combination with a weak conventional civil society "reinforces already weak political organization, breeds a false sense of representativeness, dilutes collective identities within oppositions"[13].

2. Social Media in the Gulf States

The popularity and widespread use of social media in Gulf countries is due to the tremendous development of telecommunications and Internet infrastructures in these countries and due to the declining costs of these services, high income and a young population.[14] As a result, youth in Gulf has increasingly adapted to social media and "nurtured avenues for relatively free forms of self-expressions, relative economic empowerment and global connectedness."[15] They have surpassed older generations in this technological experience, creating a generational gap in some ways.

According to Chatham House video on "Growth of Social Media in Gulf", the world is now in the 'pockets' of youth in Gulf. The fact that they can do everything online has created a radical change.[16] In addition to this, social media has challenged and changed the hierarchy of communication in the region. The rules and traditions relating to communication have been overcome through social media"[17].

Social media usage is linked with certain types of social networking websites such as Facebook, Twitter, blogging and Youtube. According a study, by March 2012, Facebook had over 830 million active users and Twitter had 200 million active users in the region.[18] Facebook allows the youth to share thoughts, information and ideas and to access restricted content. As a result it has challenged Internet censors in the region and illustrated how youth has developed new methods of overcoming the regulated content.[19]

Twitter is a 'micro-blogging' platform and is increasingly becoming more popular in the region. It allows the youth to share their thoughts on latest issues concerning the society, individual or the State. Twitter is a unique platform with its own cyber-culture, it has distinct vocabulary, such as RT, # and @ for user interactions. The most significant function of Twitter is the concept of 'retweet', it allows information to spread amongst wider audiences.[20] According to a survey 'Go-Gulf' to study the trends of social media in Middle East, about 88% of the population in the Middle East uses social media networks daily and 52% of the population uses Twitter. Twitter has highest user rates in Bahrain, UAE and Qatar and Saudi Arabia.[21]

Twitter rose to prominence in the Middle East during the Arab Spring. It became a popular social media platform to engage in debate, express personal opinions, and connect with global audience and share information. When protests started in Bahrain in 2011, popular mainstream media like Al Jazeera channel and local news channels

9   Niklewicz, Konrad. "Weeding out fake news: an approach to social media regulation." European View 16.2 (2017): 335-335.

10   . Gillin, 'Fact-Checking Fake News Reveals How Hard It is to Kill Pervasive "Nasty Weed" Online', Punditfact, 27 January 2017

11   Niklewicz, pg. 18

12   Beissinger, Mark R. "" Conventional" and" Virtual" Civil Societies in Autocratic Regimes." Comparative Politics 49.3 (2017): 351-371.

13   Beissinger, pg. 352

14   Abdul Ghaffar, pg. 64

15   Abdul Ghaffar, pg. 62

16   "The Growth of Social Media in the Gulf." Chatham House. N.p., n.d. Web. 03 June 2017.

17   Ibid

18   Abdul Ghaffar, pg. 64

19   Abdul Ghaffar pg. 65

20   Ibid

21   "Social Media Usage in Middle East - Statistics and Trends [Infographic]." Dubai Web Design. N.p., n.d. Web. 03 June 2017.

ignored them. However, social media empowered and mobilized the Bahraini citizens as they voiced their opinions through Twitter and Facebook. Nabeel Rajab, the president of Bahrain Centre for Human Rights at the time clearly stated that 'Most media sources, including the well-known Arabic news source Al- Jazeera, are ignoring and silencing Bahrain'. However, social media was a strong alternative in this case, Rajab stated "Bahrain is very much educated in social media, and now every level of age group and every level of society are very aware, Thank God it's not yet been blocked."[22]

The increase in the use of social media in the Gulf States has also lead to a larger degree of State control and surveillance on the type and quality of content, discourse created and discussed on line[23]. The new cyber laws introduced mainly after the Arab Spring have arguably led to higher "level of intrusion into its citizens' lives than pre-existing legislation has done"[24]. Many of these laws that have been associated with fighting terrorism and extremist tendencies in their respective States have been vague and used as a blanket to cover heavy censorship. However, at the same time, technological advances and trends in social media have led to new security issues, which have to be addressed legally. The growth in social media usage has also changes in State-society dimensions. While some scholars have referred to the concept of "virtual civil society" others have highlighted the higher level of State accountability on certain matters as they are discussed publicly on social media platforms. A recent workshop by Chatham House called "State, Society and Social Media in the Gulf" stated that "debates on social media platforms have forced Gulf governments to accept a greater degree of accountability as scandals, unpopular policies and current affairs are posted and commented on in real time"[25]. Resultantly there has been an increased political and civic awareness amongst the Gulf citizens. They may even feel a sense of participation in political debates especially since some social media debates have directly influenced political decisions by decision makers. However, the strength of this influence in decision-making remains a question. It may be that such participation online creates an illusion of political participation while in reality such participation remains minimum. It is critical to note that international audience views citizens' criticism of ministers or State policies on social media, as the content is available across the world. This would create a sense of pressure on the local governments to respond to some of the citizens' demands in order to avoid negative international image.

Despite the controlled freedom on social media, there is a general move away from the dominant discourse of consistent positive public representation of overly exaggerated and mostly positive images of State figures and heads through mainstream media outlets. There is a shift away from the idea of "senior leaders being above reproach or infallible is disappearing, as is any sense of insulation from societal concerns, participants agreed"[26]. The nature of social media and the availability of multiplicity of options for profile creation mean people have the option of choosing different names and identities. This ultimately makes it more challenging for the official authorities to permanently silence voices as users can simply create new profiles with different names and disguise themselves in a different identity. Social Media users have alternates of speaking through different identities and names[27].

In addition to an increased sense of political participation, social media usage has facilitated the emergence of counter narratives on issues of identity, which have existed all along but were rarely discussed in the open. Both the citizens and government is faced with alternate realities and identities present within the State, there is an increasing "awareness of different perspectives and historical narratives while previous ideas of close-knit communities and homogeneous national identities fade into the background"[28]. Finally, while social media may encourage personal expression and freedom of alternate identities, it may alternatively also encourage more individualistic societies as opposed to more collective and cohesive ones.[29].

3. Twitter and Social Participation in Gulf
In addition to helping youth and society voice their opinions during Arab Uprisings, Twitter is also shaping the way youth communicates and participates in the developments in the society. As a powerful Internet tool, it can be seen as a "place to intervene on society or take a stance on social issues"[30]. In Qatar, Twitter accounts such as Qatari Feminist, The Social QA, I'm Half Qatari and many others generate debate on issues concerning the society. The Social QA account discusses social issues of interests specific to Qatari society. These issues range from

22   Bahrainrights.org. 2011. IPS: No Unplugging This Revolution | Bahrain Center for Human Rights. [online] Available at: http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/node/4662

23   State, Society and Social Media in the Gulf. Chatham House, 2017.

24   State, Society and Social Media in the Gulf, pg. 3

25   State, Society and Social Media in the Gulf, pg. 5

26   Ibid

27   Ibid

28   Ibid

29   Beissinger, Mark R. "" Conventional" and" Virtual" Civil Societies in Autocratic Regimes." Comparative Politics 49.3 (2017): 351-371

30   Assaf, pg. 31

gender inequality, economic participation, lifestyle, marriages, education and more. In addition to this many young Qatari girls and boys use their personal accounts to voice their opinion, initiate a debate and discussion on latest developments within the country. This has created a sense of virtual civil society for the youth that previously could not discuss these issues openly. They have found social media an empowering tool. An example of this is Qatari Feminist, this account a more rebellious one, as it discusses issues of gender equality in Qatar with reference to local incidences. The account spark controversy and discussion over women's status in Qatar. The account invites great criticism from local twitter users but generates strong debates, which has far reaching results. Qatari Feminist account claims that its purpose is to "build a better future with social justice"[31]. It is a first of its kind account in Qatar and brings forth real life issues related to gender equality that were previously ignored.

The importance of such accounts is that there is no limit to their impact. Twitter is a popular social media platform within leadership and Minsters. The tweets are visible to government officials and policy makers "social media is a medium allowing citizens to interact with officials who influence policy making"[32]. A young Emirati girl commented "Through social media, the government provides that space to its people and they also listen to concerns and do their best to help people out and ease their processes," said Emirati Deema Al Shamsi, 22." [33]

Hence, the impact of tweeting on social issues can be seen as the new form of social participation in Qatar and Gulf countries in general.

In addition to discussing social issues, Twitter is also used to discuss political events both on a regional and international level. An example of this is the recent GCC crisis over the hacking of Qatar's news agency. The event itself was related to social media as the account on twitter was hacked and used to post fake statements on behalf of the Emir. As a response to the event, a hashtag was initiated on Twitter explaining the outrage and opinion of Qatari society and youth in particular[34]. The hashtag started a media war between the residents of Gulf countries, supporting and criticizing the incident that had taken place. Twitter was the medium where information and content was created that effected real life politics, perceptions and actions. Many twitter users used hash tags such as #Gulfcrisis and other similar hash tags in Arabic to comment on latest developments in the crisis[35]

. As a result, blockade may not have been discussed officially on negotiation tables but it was indeed discussed by citizens, residents, academics, analysts and journalists on social media. After a year of blockade in 2018 BBC news commented on the prominent trends of the blockade "A year-long political conflict between the tiny, wealthy state of Qatar and its larger neighbors - including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates - has been fought with a new arsenal of weapons: bots, fake news and hacking."[36] The concept of fake news was further highlighted in through this political row between the Gulf States. Social media has proven thus to be a double-edged sword, just how citizens can use twitter to voice their opinions and views in political and social issues, state institutions can use fake accounts and news to present counter-narrative to spread propaganda that may serve their political motives

4. Social Media and Identity in Gulf

Furthermore, social media platforms are not only used for social participation but also for creating a sense of new national identity. The new national identity is seemingly participatory in nature and engages youth on the concept of what it means to be a national in the modern Arab Gulf States. Laura Assaf presents an example of a website called "Emiratweet", an initiative started by an Emirati woman. She calls this project a 'virtual majlis' the website "uses Social Media platforms to maintain and preserve the National Identity by providing information, facts, and news about Emirati individuals and society"[37]. Another initiative is 'ThinkUp GCC" founded by a young Emirati man, in order to promote businesses, events and initiatives organized by GCC citizens.

Social media has also challenged the common narrative on identity what it means to be local or a citizen in the Gulf States. The youth is exposed to various cultural influences available at hands through social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and more. One cannot predict the amount and intensity of influences the global ideas can have on the youth. A look at the twitter accounts of some of the young Qataris will provide a clear insight to the multiplicity of influences on the identity of these youths. They are unapologetic in their views and confident in their opinions. (**See appendix1).** They have a clear understanding of global cultures, concepts and use social media to contextualize these ideas into their own realities.

Social Media can also be used to promote religious and political identities. This was the case in Bahrain following the 2011 protests. Bahrain has a majority population of Shia Muslims, they have historically faced disagreements

31   قطريات نسويات" ,نسويات ,قطريات   (@QatariFeminists)." *Twitter*. Twitter, 31 Jan. 2017. Web. 03 June 2017.

32   Abdul Ghaffar, pg. 67

33   Reporter, Jumana Khamis Staff. "Social media is a tool for change, say Emirati youth." GulfNews. Gulfnews, 16 Nov. 2016. Web. 03 June 2017.

34   قطر_امير_تصريحات#- Twitter Search." *Twitter*. Twitter, 03 June 2017. Web. 03 June 2017.

35   News, 7D. "#Qatarcrisis Hashtag on Twitter." *Twitter*, Twitter, 18 Aug. 2019, https://twitter.com/hashtag/qatarcrisis?lang=en.

36   Pinnell, Owen. "The Online War between Qatar and Saudi Arabia." *BBC News*, BBC, 3 June 2018, https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-44294826.

37   Assaf, pg. 31

with the government over matters of governance, opportunities and more. After the famous protests of '*The Bahrain Day of Rage, The Bahrain Revolution and Alliance of February 14 revolution*" social media was used in "negotiating, constructing and strengthening a transnational Shi'a identity"[38]. Social media played a key role in creating a collective Shi'a identity across borders by '"invoking historical narratives of the suffering Iman Hussain and his companions in Karabala" and comparing persecution of the Bahraini to the "suffering and martyrdom of Karabala"[39]. The social media websites are used by the Shi'a community to form "support groups" for Shias in Bahrain. Karolak and Guta explain the social support element of social media is rooted in two characteristics 1) "it helps people to transcend geographical boundaries, thus creating a unity around a common cause, purpose or affiliation" 2) "it makes more information available to a greater number of people, more easily and from a wide array of sources than any instrument of information and communication in history"[40].

Furthermore, social media is being utilized by youth to overcome cultural difference and to promote cultural integration within their respective societies. This is a particularly significant trend, as previously the Gulf societies were much reserved and closed to sharing culture with foreigners within their own countries. In Qatar, initiatives like Embracedoha and Seemyculture are using Instagram, Twitter and YouTube to engage audience in understanding and appreciating the local Qatari culture. These initiatives have changed the traditional notion of a fixed and closed concept of culture and identity and created a participatory and engaging one or at least as presented by some citizens. Social media has allowed citizens and residents to present their own views and discourses on what the Qatari culture is and provide an insight to the diversity of narratives that exist within one culture. A prime example of this is, IloveQatar.net[41]. This online initiative uses social media as a platform to spread awareness about Qatar culture, lifestyle, trends and serves as a guide for local events. Twitter usage has also given rise to the concept of influencers/social media personalities who highlight social, societal and political issues. The level of tweet engagement and the number followers measures the influence and fame of social media personalities. In Qatar some of these famous twitter personalities include Tahani Al-Hajri[42] , Shaima Al-Sultan[43] , they use their accounts as a platform to discuss sensitive and controversial issues relating to public interest and have sometimes come under criticism from more conservative voices within twitter (Appendix1, figure 1 and 2). Others including academics like Dr. Nayef bin Nahar is famous for his intellectual discussions on national and regional politics as well as commentary and analysis of societal issues from a philosophical and academic perspective. All of these discussions impact the national conscious and debates around identity in Qatar and region as a whole. Dr. Nayef's tweets[44] (Appendix, figure 3) discuss issues such as freedom of opinion and power structures, society, identity and Islamic identity in both academic and constructive manner, as he engages in conversations on these issues with his followers. Dr. Jassim Al Sultan, a well-known thinker, philosopher uses twitter to discuss issues relating to culture, identity and values. Dr. Jassim's tweets[45] (Appendix, figure 4) highlight the importance of human values and revival of Islamic identity and values in connection to modern day life and State identity. These interactions on twitter by well-known public figures can be explained through Goffman's theory of "presentation of self in everyday life" whereby individuals present themselves in a particular way to others in order to convey a message, in this case as intellectual figures, academics and social activists who have a role and influence over their audience. They also arguably view 'others' as an end "being-with" much like Habermas "communicative action". Similarly, these engagements also create a sense of "virtual society" as explained by Beissinger. Whether or not this virtual civil society is an illusion or a real alternate of civil society remains an on-going debate.

Another emerging trend of social media has been the use of platforms like Twitter, Youtube and Facebook during conflicts. The recent blockade of Qatar by its neighboring States highlighted the importance of social media in the present day world and how it can challenge historical and traditional narratives on culture, history, identity and politics. Since the start of the Gulf Crisis, Twitter played an instrumental role in uniting people, in defying propagandas of blockading states and in spreading hatred through fake accounts by those who wanted to stir rebellion amongst Qatari citizens and residents. It was observed that twitter was used for direct and indirect attacks on Qatar by UAE, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain both by officials and citizens. In response many official media personalities as well as citizens engaged with response to false accusations and debates relating blockade in Qatar. Through these responses and twitter war, sense of separate national identities emerged for all Gulf States;

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38   Karolak, Magdalena, and Hala Asmina Guta. "Social Media and the Forging of a Transnational Shi'a Identity: the Case of the Kingdom of Bahrain." *State and Society Relations in the Arab Gulf States*. N.p.: Gerlach Press, n.d. 37-60. Print.

39   Karolak, pg. 56

40   Karolak, pg. 57

41   "Qatar's Biggest Guide for Events, Culture, and More!" *ILQ*, https://www.iloveqatar.net/.

42   account تهاني الهاجري Verified. " تهاني الهاجري (@Tahani_alhajri)." *Twitter*, Twitter, 14 Aug. 2019, https://twitter.com/Tahani_alhajri.

43   شيماء السلطان (@ShaimaJS)." *Twitter*, Twitter, 28 July 2016, https://twitter.com/ShaimaJS.

44   account د. نايف بن نهار Verified. "د. نايف بن نهار (@binnahar85)." *Twitter*, Twitter, 15 July 2017, https://twitter.com/binnahar85.

45   السلطان جاسمد" جاسمد السلطان (@DrJassimSultan)." *Twitter*, Twitter, 8 Sept. 2019, https://twitter.com/DrJassimSultan.

previously the citizens would highlight the common "khaleeji" identity under the slogan of "khaleejna wahid"[46] (Gulf is one and united). In this case, twitter is being used by individuals used social media as means to an end, to highlight their political stance with their governments denying the precious unity with other Gulf citizens based on shared history and culture.

5. Social Media and Communication Trends in the Gulf

Internet and social media have transformed the way youth communicates and connects with others within their own society and to a global audience. Social media allows youth to engage with news and developments worldwide "Being able to comment on everything stimulates youths' minds, making them want to read and learn more about opposing views, different cultures and new ideas. As our generation reads newspapers a lot less, and prefers to check social media on a daily basis"[47].

The changed trends in communications are inter-linked with changing identities in the Gulf. Amongst the youth, social networking sites have impacted the language within Gulf. The Arabic language used in chat mediums and on social media is usually transliterated and numbers makeup for the missing letters. Many young users prefer to type in English as it makes it easier to use social media.[48] This has an impact on the way youth formulates their ideas, communicate and expresses themselves. The impact on the language is linked to the impact on identity as well. The use of social media creates a generation unlike the generations before with a "certain number of codes, which transform widely throughout time and are dependent on new trends, can only be understood and practiced by experienced users of these technologies"[49].

The norms and codes created by social media connects the youth in Gulf with youth globally, the limitation of time and space are no longer an obstacle between societies. This has empowered youth in ways unknown before. It means that youth can now reshape traditions, defy norms and codes and are not bound by any limitations that existed before. Laura Assaf provides an example of this from her fieldwork in Abu Dhabi. A young Emirati girl, liked to watch Japanese animation films and read about them, a hobby disliked by her family. Sara found an alternative way to pursue her interests, she participated in online websites that provided her tools to draw and connect with members of international community who shared similar interests[50]. Another young girl used social media to chat with friends and stay connected even when she was not physically allowed to host those friends at her home[51]. Social media has defied the traditional boundaries of communication, even when the young girl could not invite her friends at her home, she still could stay connected to them via social media platforms. Caline Malek contextualizes these growing changes in the norms of expression in the Arab world including the Gulf region. She explains "Social media offer opportunities for creative expression and interaction, which were not previously possible. This takes place within a cultural framework shaped by the traditional and conservative values of many countries."[52] People now communicate with each other, through social platforms on issues relating to religion, comedy, daily news, politics and culture. A prime example of these changes in personal expressions is an Instagram account called "majlis_qatar"[53], the account aims to provide people a platform for everyone in the Gulf States to discuss any personal or social issues and ask for solutions by engaging in discussions with the followers of the account. The identity of sender of messages is kept as anonymous to protect their privacy. It is common to see followers sending their queries on issues related to marriage, children, work and social life. The details expressed in some of the messages indicate that users find the platform both useful and trustworthy to seek advice and discussions on personal matters. In addition to this there is the growing trend of using Twitter personal self-expression whether through asking general questions, twitter polls or uploading pictures of daily activities. A prime example of this form of personal expression is account of a twitter user Hind (appendix, figure 5). Hind uses her twitter account to discusses issues of self-empowerment, share her personal experiences and outlook on life. She also posts photos of her daily engagements making her account more interactive and create a sense of virtual community via social media platform. This kind of personal expression reaches a wider audience both regionally and internationally. It allows youth to break certain taboos on previously sensitive topics, as they highlight both individual and social issues and engage on dialogue and debate alternate perspectives and solutions to some of these issues. It is also common to see that increasingly the younger generation tweets in English rather than in Arabic, sometimes creating

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46   ''' الخليج أونلاين "توبتر 'أقلام يلهب 'فرحاً.'' خليجنا واحد https://alkhaleejonline.net/أقلام-يلهب-واحد-خليجنا/سياسة.

47   Reporter, Jumana Khamis Staff. "Social media is a tool for change, say Emirati youth." *GulfNews*. Gulfnews, 16 Nov. 2016. Web. 03 June 2017.

48   Assaf, pg. 28

49   Assaf, pg. 29

50   Assaf, pg. 26

51   Ibid

52   "Social Media Shaping Norms of Expression in the Arab World: Caline Malek." *AW*, https://thearabweekly.com/social-media-shaping-norms-expression-arab-world.

53   "مجلس وفضفضه الجميع (@majls_qatar) • Instagram Photos and Videos." *Instagram*, https://www.instagram.com/majls_qatar/?hl=en.

communication gaps between generations and at others leading to criticism by more conservative groups of the society.

6. Individual Choices and use of Social Media

It is therefore, clear to see that Internet and social media have allowed the youth in Gulf to make more individualistic choices. Everyone can use social media platforms for a use considered important to them personally "Everyone's Internet experience reflects a series of choices and selections from accessible social worlds, depending on what is put forward and valued by individuals."[54] The use of social media has expanded in the past two decades, youth has been using social media to communicate, connect with like-minded people, make themselves heard and also find new ways of being economically independent. A recent trend has been to establish a run a business through social mediums such as Instagram and Facebook. Assaf mentions a young Emirati man who started his business through online network marketing to support his family.[55] Such online businesses are common within Qatar and other Gulf countries as well, as they require minimum resources, higher freedom and a wider audience. Online businesses are famous amongst women, as they provide them option of working from home and gaining financial independence. Some of the most common online businesses in Qatar are in the field of fashion, food and services. Internet and social media offer the youth with opportunities to "bypass constraints imposed on them according to their economic status, national origin, gender, or family duties"[56].

In addition to the above, a new trend of fashionistas popular through 'Snapchat' and Instagram has changed the entire concept of private and public sphere. The young women in Gulf mostly from Kuwait and UAE are using social media to share details of their life throughout the day. The share and promote personal style and fashion. They have revolutionized the concept of beauty in the Gulf and normalized many taboos related to fashion and beauty. They discuss topic of cosmetic surgery, superficial beauty trends, and new dressing styles in a way that these become more acceptable and common amongst the youth. The influence these fashionistas and beauty bloggers have on the youth in not measured until now. However, a look at the social media accounts of these social figures will give an understanding of how much of private life has become available for public as a method of socialization, marketing, business and communication purpose.[57] These bloggers over share their life and hence make it a business strategy and blur the lines between private and public sphere.

Conclusion

In conclusion, social media has created new norms and codes for youth in the Gulf. Social media sites and applications like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and YouTube has allowed the youth to overcome traditional boundaries of communication and create new ways of information and idea sharing and connecting with likeminded people. Social media has also created a sense of virtual society which is argued to be replacing the lack of presence of a real civil city in most of the Gulf States. In this way, social media has defied traditional norms and boundaries of communication. Websites like Twitter are used to engage in social participation both by youth, society and leadership alike, connecting them in ways that were not available before. Social media played a central role in progressing protests and political agenda in Bahrain Uprisings in 2011, it promoted a sense of Shia solidarity across borders. Twitter was instrumental in Qatar Crisis, the 2017 blockade. Fake news and hacked account is what led to the official start of the blockade and throughout the developments of crisis, news, information and debates were communicated via social media.

Social media has also contributed towards creating new identities that are based on individual choices and personal preferences. It is common to see famous pubic figures including academic, activists and analysts to use social media specifically twitter as a platform to engage on debates around identity, nationalism and social changes within their specific countries. These are influenced by a huge plethora of ideas and cultural exchange available through content online. Although social media has created many benefits in terms of information sharing and creating new ideas, it has also had negative influence in merging the private sphere with public and normalizing trends previously considered taboo or inappropriate for youth. The effects of social media are continuously shaped by fast changing technological advances, developments in these platforms and changes in political and social fabric of Gulf States. Social media is merely a tool that is used by humans and shaped by their attitudes and developments in their relevant societies. In conclusion then, many questions need to be asked, will these platforms bring a positive change in the society? Can social media and online participation really make up for a lack of civil society? Is it social media that shapes the contemporary society in the Gulf or is it vice versa?

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56   Ibid

57   "Fouz (@therealfouz) • Instagram photos and videos." *Instagram*. N.p., n.d. Web. 04 June 2017.

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Appendix
Twitter accounts based in Qatar

تَماضر . تَماضر" (@Tmathir)." *Twitter*, Twitter, 21 May 2016, https://twitter.com/tmathir.
Haya. "Haya (@Hayabntalwaleed)." *Twitter*, Twitter, 6 July 2017, https://twitter.com/hayabntalwaleed.

Figure 1

In the tweet below Tahani Al Hajri talks about the relationship citizenship and nation. She argues that every person should have the right to express him or herself independently and directly and that State laws should not discriminate between citizens
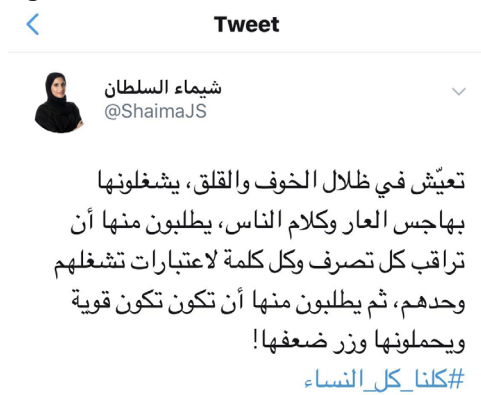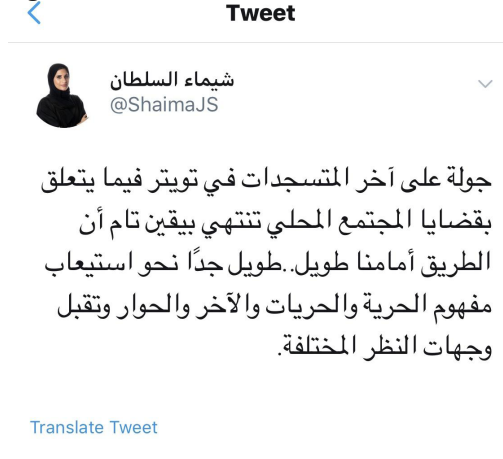

Source:

account الهاجري تهاني Verified. "الهاجري تهاني" (@Tahani_alhajri)." *Twitter*, Twitter, 14 Aug. 2019,

https://twitter.com/Tahani_alhajri.

Figure 2a

Figure 2b

Tweet

شيماء السلطان
@ShaimaJS

جولة على آخر المتسجدات في تويتر فيما يتعلق
بقضايا المجتمع المحلي تنتهي بيقين تام أن
الطريق أمامنا طويل. طويل جدًا نحو استيعاب
مفهوم الحرية والحريات والآخر والحوار وتقبل
وجهات النظر المختلفة.

Translate Tweet

Source:

شيماء السلطان "شيماء السلطان (@ShaimaJS)." *Twitter*, Twitter, 28 July 2016, https://twitter.com/ShaimaJS.

In Figure 2a, Shaima Al Sultan talks about society's double standards in dealing with women's issues, asking her to be obedience and follow the burden of society's rules and still treating her as weaker human. In figure 2b she talks the need for a better understanding of freedom of speech and expecting other people perspectives.

Figure 3a

Tweet

د. نايف بن نهار
@binnahar85

هناك هروب جماعي من الهوية الإسلامية على
وجه التحديد، يخجلون حتى من ذكر كلمة
إسلام. لكن الحمدلله أنه هروب رسمي وليس
شعبيًا، ولذلك تجد شعوب الخليج هي من يبادر
في الدفاع عن الهوية الإسلامية، أما الحكومات
فليت الإسلام يسلم منها.

Translate Tweet

عبدالله ب... abdullah baabood · 26/04/2019
في #الخليج هناك محاولة جادة لمحو الهوية الإسلامية
والهوية العربية والان حتى الهوية الخليجية وإذا استمر
الوضع هكذا حتى الهوية الوطنية ربما تكون هي الأخرى
في طريقها للإضمحلال وسيبقى الناس بلا هوية وربما لن
تظل الا هوية الضياع والشتات!

In the tweet above, Dr. Nayef bin Nahar discusses the Islamic Identity in relation to national identity in the Gulf States and a tendency to escape or even deny this identity. Dr. bin Nahar comments on another tweet, which discusses the broader issues of national identity in the Gulf States.

Figure 3b

Thread

د. نايف بن نهار ✔
@binnahar85

ثمة عدة نقاط بحاجة لتوضيح:
أولاً: يجب أن نفرق بين فكرتين مختلفتين:
هناك "حرية رأي"
وهناك "دعم رأي"
وظيفة السلطة أن تكفل حرية الآراء مهما
اختلفت، لكن لا يصح تقديم دعم للآراء المضادة
لهوية المجتمع، لأن السلطة وفقًا للدستور تعبر
عن هوية المجتمع وقيمه.
فهناك فرق بين "السماح" و الدعم"

Translate Tweet
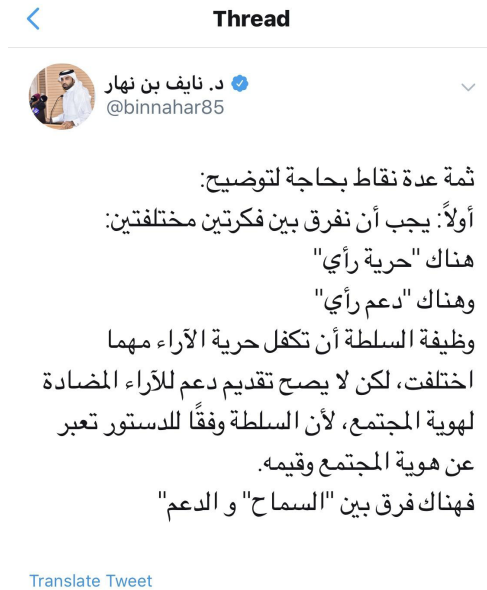
In the tweet above, Dr. bin Nahar engage in a more philosophical discussion on the issue of "freedom of opinion" vs. the "supporting opinion" and whether or not the opinions harmful to the society should be openly endorsed.

Figure 3c

Tweet

د. نايف بن نهار ✔
@binnahar85

أكبر إساءة قدمناها للعلم حين ربطناه بالوظائف
والترقيات، الطلبة عبثوا بالعلم؛ لأنهم لا يريدونه
إلا للوظيفة، يرمون الكتب بعد الامتحان،
ويشترون أبحاثهم من المكتبات. والأساتذة
يكتبون أبحاثًا أي كلام؛ لأنهم لا يريدون منها
سوى الترقية، وبذلك أفسدنا العلم والأخلاق.

Translate Tweet

Source:

account نايف بن نهار "Verified. د. نايف بن نهار" (@binnahar85)." *Twitter*, Twitter, 15 July 2017,

https://twitter.com/binnahar85.

In the tweet above, Dr. bin Nahar discusses another societal issues relating the superficiality of educational credentials. He explains that most students attain education merely as means to employment. In addition to this, there is an increasing trend by students buying their research through ghost writing and many academics produce superficial research just for the sake of promotion.

Figure 4

< **Tweet**

د.جاسم السلطان
@DrJassimSultan

لا تنهار الدول الا اذا تقلصت النخبة المؤمنة
بأهمية الوطن...فهناك نصاب بقاء لابد من وجوده
ليستمر اي وطن #نهضة

Translate Tweet

2:50 pm · 26/08/2019 · Twitter for iPhone

13 Retweets 56 Likes

Source:

السلطان د.جاسم. "د.جاسم السلطان (@DrJassimSultan)." *Twitter*, Twitter, 8 Sept. 2019,

https://twitter.com/DrJassimSultan.

In the tweet above, Dr. Jassim makes a statement about how the collapse of the States is linked to the ignorance of the intellectual elite of the importance of nation. He often tweets using the hashtag (The renaissance), which is also his larger intellectual, cultural project in Qatar.

Figure 5a

< **Thread**

هند
@whatthehend

10:39 pm · 31/08/2019 · Twitter for iPhone

3 Likes

Figure 5b

< **Thread**

هند
@whatthehend

What is one thing you will do to make
your own life easier for yourself today?

10:20 am · 27/08/2019 · Twitter for iPhone

2 Retweets **1** Like

Source:

هند" . هند (@Whatthehend)." *Twitter*, Twitter, 5 Mar. 2016, https://twitter.com/whatthehend.