Abstract: - It could be easily claimed, that the use of social networks has entered the era of maturity after almost a decade from their birth. The large technology vendors are all the more interested in getting involved in the Social Media game unable to afford the case of being left out of these easy, compact and huge potential markets. Many studies see the light of publicity and they all are somehow associated with this matter. This exploratory and mainly qualitative study of several parts aims to reveal not just some demographics facts related with the usage of the social networks but to delve deeper into the hidden details of this usage and, possibly, shed light into the positive and negatives of this usage both from a users but also from a business’s perspective. In this first part the effect of the personality of the average user on his/her attitude towards the Social Media is investigated. The scope of the whole study is the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia mainly because of its particularities but, also, because of its importance for the Arab world. The results show a general agreement as to the main conclusion of other public surveys in the country pointing to a heavy use of the social networks, at more than 85%. They also suggest that the younger the individual the more likely it is to get involved in the Social Media and in the case of female individuals, though slightly less in population, but seemingly more intense use of them. Education does not seem to affect the frequency of the use as long as the individual has a degree at least higher than a secondary diploma. Likewise income and employment status only indirectly affect this use since they affect the amount of free time one has to get involve with the social networks. Finally, as expected, the more one is connected with the Internet the heavier the use of the Social Media.

Key-Words: Saudi Arabia, Social Media, Personal Attributes

1 Introduction
After a little less than a decade from the birth of the so-called Social Media, i.e. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc. signs point to the suggestion that the eSociety is getting into what could be characterized as the maturity era. One can easily sense this by observing at least two distinct behaviors.

First, everyday a number of research studies and commercial articles are being published with discussions related anyhow with the advent, rapid growth and most recent behaviors in Social Media usage. The need is such that web sites are developed with the aim of monitoring these developments, real time, even in countries that perhaps one would not expect a couple of years ago, like in the Middle East (go-gulf.com, socialbakers.com).

Second, there seems to be a trend to have technology giants get deeply involved, somehow, with the Social Media either acquiring related companies or building their systems with eSociety in mind. For instance, just recently a report revealed that Apple acquired Topsy a small analytics firm focusing in Social Media data analysis [1] obvious having serious plans since, of course, no one invests 2005 million without good reasons in mind. Also, the vast majority of the new applications, either for the PCs and laptops or for the tables and smartphones, but also the web sites are being developed with the provision of sharing information through any of the available social networks mainly Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. Even the new electronic devices, e.g. tablets, smartphones, etc., are designed to provide easy access to these networks to their users. There are studies made on the effect of the social media on their users’ communication quality and other behaviors[2] and suggestions that the trend is to heavily utilize one’s social networking identity and statistical facts even in the process of hiring the individual or promoting a person’s move to higher ranks in an organization [3].

These developments are well followed in the Middle East countries and in the Gulf Council Countries (GCC) despite the possible suggestion of the opposite because of the particularities of these societies. Not only these particularities are not
applied in this case but also it could be easily argued that as far as Social Media usage the region is probably in the forefront making very heavy use of these networks and leading several local societies into transformations with worldwide impact just unthinkable just a few years ago. Indeed, statistics show that about 40% of the population of the Middle East has access to the Internet and of those a very high 88% are using Social Media on a daily basis. Facebook enjoys a very high number of 58 million users in the region with Twitter attracting 6.5 million of them and LinkedIn with 5.8 million users [4].

The discussion on the Social Media usage cannot be any longer addressing questions related to the population of their users, or just their demographics but delve much deeper into the attitudes of the average users and the effect of an individual’s personality into such behavior, the positive feelings but also the worries of such involvements, the reasons that could affect their decision to reveal or not their true identity through the Social Media, their perception of the advantages or disadvantages of the Social Media as mediator in the business and/or marketing process and the opportunities or obstacles they might face when attempting to communicate through them.

This is a comprehensive preliminary study that attempts to address the aforementioned issues and give some suggestions for more formal and, certainly, larger scale research on the issues.

2 Aims and Objectives
The current paper is just the first part of the study and focuses on the effects of the personality of the average Saudi in his attitude towards the use or not of Social Media. It aims to answer the following questions:

- What is the current usage frequency of Social Media in Saudi Arabia?
- How do personal characteristics, i.e. age, gender, education, income, employment status and profession affect this attitude?
- What is the connection between Internet usage and Social Media usage if any?

3 Literature Review
In recent years there has been a rapid growth of social networking technologies having as a direct result the development of electronic communities or else eSocieties for social, academic, educational, entertainment, commercial or other reasons. For example, the latest developments in Cloud computing technologies encouraged the firms to claim an increase in their market share by advertising their products through social media networks [5].

Moreover, the evolution of virtual worlds as new forms of eSocieties could not be anticipated when Tom Truscott and Jim Ellis created in 1979 the Usenet which was a worldwide discussion system permitting Internet users to exchange public messages. But with the proliferation of Internet Communication Technologies contacting people worldwide became easier, convenient and efficient. The growing availability of high speed Internet access gave added value to the existing concept of usage of communicating through social media applications; this fact led to the creation of social networks sites like “My Space” in 2003 and “Facebook” in 2004. This, in turn, introduced the term “Social Media” which is hitherto used and will be used in the future according to current technological conditions [6].

Even if social media technologies came to stay for good, there are some serious concerns on individuals’ personality impact that must be considered and examined. Basically it is suggested that the more the individuals, and especially the youngsters, overuse social media the more increasing is the likelihood they will forget the importance of the real world and the less will their desire be on building a real identity offline [2]. So it is important for social leaders to support the investigation and monitoring of the real social media user profile and try to find ways to improve their mental welfare as well.

Whatever is the profile of a social user and as Kaplan and Haenlein points out, the higher the online social presence the larger the social influence. Constant social online presence seems to be more and more important for social media users and especially to those who want to enjoy commercial benefits [6]. Social media platforms like “Twitter” enable constant social presence and, according to Dunlap and Lowenthal, improve our social interactions, which occur more naturally [7].

More particularly in the Arab world, since 2011 the number of social media users has grown in an exponential rate. Once merely used as a social and entertainment tool now social media has penetrated in almost every aspect of the Arabs daily lives, transforming the way they socialize, do business, communicate with government officials and government agencies and participate in civil movements [8].
GCC are experiencing great acceptance of social media by local communities and Saudi Arabia is the leader in the region in that respect. This is mostly due to its leadership commitment to modernization but also because of its people’s will to engage in socializing through new, more private and easy to use ways without time and distance limits and borders [9].

Especially in Saudi Arabia, “Facebook,” “Twitter,” “YouTube”, “LinkedIn” and “Google+” are the most popular social media used mostly for educational, entertainment, socializing, professional and marketing reasons [10]. Because of this huge success a great debate continues over the valuable uses of this communication medium in education and commerce fields, governmental usage and possible consequences on Saudis life taking as granted the acceptance of social media in Saudi communities [11].

4 Methodology
This first part of this study on Social Media usage in Saudi Arabia is mainly exploratory in nature aiming at investigating the attitude of the average Saudi towards the use of Social Media. Although the whole study is mainly qualitative in nature this first part of it is quantitative. The authors focused on the connection between the extend of usage of the social media in the country and certain demographics attributes of the participants, more specifically gender, age, education, employment status, income, profession and Internet usage. The idea was to describe how the particular character and social environment of the individual participant affects his involvement with Social Media. In other words the idea was to draw the profile of the average Saudi user of Social Media.

At first the research team made some contacts with people of influence in the Saudi society but also other individuals with different ages and educational and/or professional backgrounds trying to extract important information, for economy of time, as to what is the appropriate way to reach people due to distance restrictions or possible gender related obstacles, what is the level of interest in filling questionnaires of this kind, about translation issues to be solved and any kind of suggestions suitable for this survey. This was particularly important given the particular character of the Saudi society and culture.

Then, the study moved to the next phase where a questionnaire was formatted so as to satisfy the objectives of the research. This questionnaire was first tested on a small sample of 20 individuals and valuable information was taken that helped fine-tune its final version eventually used.

A full-scale survey followed and deployed during a period of three months (from March till June of 2013) and 596 individuals agreed to participate in it either offline through personal face-to-face interviews or through an online survey using Google docs. The sample size should be considered as appropriate enough because this is only a part of a larger study that includes more countries of the Golf area as already mentioned earlier.

It is also worth noting that the authors had to follow some “cleaning” of the responses since a very significant number of them were given by people not residing in Saudi Arabia but in other countries of the GCC and, also, in North African countries and even in U.S.A. and E.U. This “cleaning” was important for two reasons. First, it was necessary so as to avoid the distortion of the data that was planned to involve only Saudi Arabia residents for this part of the study. Second, there is the provision that other parts of the study are focusing in other countries of the region and, hence, these data should be included in those samples.

The final goal of this survey was to obtain a categorized set of data formatted in such a way as to be suitable for data analysis through statistical packages that can perform the cross tabulations and statistical calculations necessary. For this purpose SPSS 20 for Mac was used to perform the statistical analysis, mainly cross-tabulations and analysis of variance (ANOVA), and MS Excel 2011 for Mac was used to provide quality charts used to interpret the results.

4.1 The Sample
Although a considerable number of individuals were approached (more than 600) of all ages and walks of life but, eventually, only mainly those under 45 years old accepted to contribute to this research. Indeed, 385 of the participants revealed their age and of those 18 were less than 18 years old (4.6%), 169 were between 18 and 25 (42.9%), some 110 were in the range of 26-35 (27.9%), 59 more were 36-45 (15%), another 24 between 46 and 60 (6.1%) and, finally, 5 were the elders, i.e. older than 60 years old (1.3%). Although this is not a perfect sample as of age but it should be noted that, in general, the population percentage in the country of those being more than 45 years old is far less than those under this age. This provides a feeling of consistency as to the actual average age of the population which might be used to extrapolate whatever results of the study on the particular sample to the country as a whole, although one
should not forget the study is only exploratory and suggestive of general trends in the country.

As to the gender the sample is, actually, quite balanced. 392 of the participants specified if they are male or female and of those 193 were male (49%) and another 199 were female (50%). The majority of the sample (222/386 individuals; 56.3%), as expected, has an undergraduate degree; some 49 more (12.4%) hold a graduate degree and 13/386 (3.3%) are with a Ph.D. Just 1 individual finished the elementary school (0.3%) and only 6 finished the intermediate school (1.5%). A considerable 67/386 of the sample got a secondary school diploma (17%) and 27 more (6.9%) any other type of diploma. There were also 2 persons that did not want to say or could not say (0.5%).

The main part of the sample population included those employed (186/383 responses; 47.2%) closely by the students (138/383; 35%). A small 6.3% (25/383 individuals) are unemployed and a quite similar 6.1% (24/383) declared housewives. Just 10 are retired from work (2.5%). Different types of professions were identified as those of the participants, including medical/nursing, education, technology, linguistics, financial, cultural/religious, management, trade, public services and military. Each of these had a share of between 2% and 4.6% except those in education (probably students included) with a 17.5% and those in management with 8.1%.

Finally, as to the use of Internet in general, 363 individuals accepted to reveal the frequency of their use. The majority 48.5% (191/363) admitted using the Internet always, at all times and everyday. Also, a large 30.5% (120/363) reported using it “a lot” everyday. Just less than 10% (38/363 individuals; 9.6%) use it “often”. Only 2%, 0.3%, 1% and 0.3% use it “a little”, “rarely”, “only for emails” or “never”.

In the next section the results of this first part of the study are reported and analysed.

5 Findings

The basic result of this part of the study is that the vast majority of the sample population is not only connected to the Internet but, furthermore, the vast majority are, also, using the Social Media either “always” (143/368; 36.3%) or “a lot” (135/368; 34.3%) or at least “often” (57/368; 14.5%). Only 6.3% of the participants (25/368) make “little” use of the Social Media and a negligent 1.5% and 0.5% (6/368 and 2/368 respectively) either “rarely” or “never” use them.

These figures confirm the findings of other surveys in the region raising the population of the users of the Social Media to 88% of the total populations (http://www.go-gulf.com/blog/social-media-middle-east/). The most important findings of this study, though, are those related with the connection between the personal profiles of these users.

5.1 The role of gender, education and age

Figure 1 illustrates the role of gender, education and age in the level of Social Media usage in the country. The chart is crystal clear and does not leave much room for subjective interpretations.

As far as gender is concerned, although in both cases of males and females the usage is very high but it looks that female participants overall make slightly more usage of them. Indeed, 89.4% of the male participants use the Social Media “often” (31/180; 17.2%) or “a lot” (67/180; 37.2%) or “always” (63/180; 35%) whereas 90.6% of the females of the sample admitted use “often” (26/190; 13.7%) or “a lot” (67/190; 35.3%) or “always” (79/190; 41.6%).

Anyway, the aforementioned results point that in Saudi Arabia both males and females are making extremely heavy use of the Social Media. Deeper statistical analysis suggest the statistical mean is between “often” and “a lot”, closer to “a lot”, and the standard deviation is pointing to the fact that the sample answers are fluctuating between just a little more than “often” and a little less than “always” both for males and females but a little more intensely in the case of the latter than the former.

The results look quite similar in the case of the role of age in Social Media usage (figure 1). It is not really worth noting the specific statistics for the various ranges of age since they look, to a very large extent, very similar with the case of gender statistics. It is suffice here to say that like in the previous case the average statistical mean is, again, between just a little more than “often” and a little less than “always” the only difference being that now the trend is just very slightly closer to the former rather than the latter moving from younger to older ages and the fluctuation is slightly wider than in the case of gender. (In any case all statistical results are available upon request).

There is no dramatic change in the general results when the role of education of the participants is investigated (figure 1) but it is worth to note the slight but considerable shift of the statistical average mean from 4.8 and 4.7 in the previous cases, i.e. between “often” and “a lot” closer to the latter, to 4.3 in this case, i.e. which is closer to the former.
Also, the standard deviation is slightly higher than in the previous cases, at 1.68 instead of 1.54 (gender) and 1.19 (age) and suggests a slightly wider fluctuation of the general opinions. Other than that the statistics do not point to any significant variations between the individuals with different levels of education especially for those with level higher than the secondary, given than the sample was too small in the cases of those with elementary, intermediate or secondary education.

5.2 The role of income and employment status

Figure 2 illustrates the role of income and employment in Social Media usage in Saudi Arabia.
Figure 2. The role of income and employment status

The main pattern does not change significantly but only slightly towards the use of the Social Media “always” when looking things from the individuals’ employment status viewpoint. Indeed, the statistical average mean of the sample is almost at the “a lot” mark just very slightly to its left towards the “often” mark (4.9).

There are some interesting points to discuss when looking deeper in the statistics. First, in the case of the “unemployed”, although, only 25 identified themselves as such (25/368) but 92% of those admitted making heavy use of the Social Media either “often” (2/25; 8%) or “a lot” (8/25; 32%) or “always” (13/25; 52%). In contrast only a single individual identified as unemployed claimed never making use of the Social Media.
The pattern is almost the same in the case of the students (135 responses identified in the sample) with 91.1% of them (123/135) declaring heavy use of the Social Media either “often” (18/135; 13.3%) or “a lot” (48/135; 35.6%) or “always” (57/135; 42.2%).

In the case of the housewives (sample: 22 responses) 95.4% stated they belonged in the category of making heavy use of the social networks. The only difference with the previous cases, other than the extremely high percentage, is that there is a significant shift towards those using them “a lot” (12/22; 54.5%) not altering, though, the general pattern described just previously. The statistical average mean and the standard deviation is still almost the same as before.

Lastly, the results point to a clear shift of the pattern towards less use of the social media but, once again, not significant change of the previous patterns. From the 176 individuals (out of 368) that are employed 155 declared being involved in the social networks (88.1%) but considerably less (61/176; 34.7%) are always connected, with 35.8% (63/176) using them “a lot” and 17.6% (31/176)
declare “often” using them. The pattern looks very much the same in the case of those “retired” but the sample here is very small, just 10 responses, and, hence, no safe conclusions can be drawn.

The results of the statistical analysis of the responses based on the “income” do not lead to significantly different conclusions than in the previous case of the “employment status”. Even the statistical average mean and the standard deviation are notably similar. All these suggest the thought that although the employment status and income do not directly affect the use of the Social Media but they do so indirectly since the more time one has the more likely it is to spend it in socializing or other activities through the social networks.

5.3 The role of profession and Internet usage
Figure 3 illustrates the role of the Internet usage in using the Social Media and the role of one’s profession in that regard as well.

The statistics, no matter how much expected – and they really are quite so – are still very impressive as far as the Internet use is concerned. The statistical average mean is not so important since it points to the middle of the distance between the “often” and the “a lot” marks with a much smaller standard deviation than in all the previous cases suggesting a seriously smaller fluctuation of the responses. The really important point here is that Saudi Arabian make extremely heavy use of the Internet and that the more use they make of it the more they use the Social Media.

The problem in the statistics is that its results are not safely conclusive as to the effect that one’s profession might have in the use of the social networks. This might well mean either that it has no effect or that the sample is too small for such a statistical analysis to yield significant results.

6 Conclusions
The results of this first part of the study of Social Media in Saudi Arabia are in general agreement as to the main conclusion that the Saudi Arabia residents make very heavy use of the Social Media, more than 85%. The authors assume that the rest of the demographics results, i.e. percentages of male or female, populations in the various countries of GCC as they are reported in the various local sites are also correct.

However, the contribution of this part is to reveal deeper qualitative insight on the general quantitative elements of this usage. Hence, its first result suggests that female individuals make slightly more use of the social networks although males are following very close. This does not mean that more females are using the social media than males (actually it is possible that the opposite is true as it happens in other countries worldwide) but that they use it more as far as the time they spend in it and more intensely i.e. doing more activities than males.

The second outcome of this part points that the younger an individual the more use of Social Media s/he makes. This should be considered as positive news for the growth of the social networks in Saudi Arabia since, it is absolutely certain, that the young people will some time grow older and the new generation will, most likely, follow their habits of socializing through the Social Media much as their parents are doing now. Thus, governments, businesses and even academic or other institutions should keep that in mind.

Another point is that the education does not seem to have any affect on the frequency of the use as long as the individual’s level is higher than the secondary level. The explanation for this is, probably, the need from the part of the individual to have a minimum of education, especially computer and Internet literacy, so as to, at least, be able to follow the other members/friends of his/her social network. Likewise in the case of the income and employment status that do not seem to affect the use of the social networks directly but indirectly since it seems the more time an individual has the more s/he will make use of the Social Media.

Finally, this part of the study reveals that there is a very strong connection between Internet usage and Social Media usage. Indeed, the survey showed that Saudis make heavy use of the Internet and the heavier that use is the more they utilize the Social Media.

This concludes the first part of the study that confirms the demographic elements of the usage of Social Media being very similar with those in the rest of the world and especially in the Arab world and provides some useful insight of the personality characteristics of an individual that influence his/her attitude towards, or away, the use of the social networks.

In the next parts more qualitative elements are investigated, analyzed and discussed

References:


