

Facebook and the Arab Youth Social Activism or Cultural Liberation?

WESSAM FAUAD

Expert in the Field of Social Informatics, Egypt

According to observers studying the activities of young Arabs on the social networking website Facebook, Arab youth use the prominent site to communicate with the opposite sex. Such researchers note that while motivated by sexual desire, this mode of communication is not limited to Arab networks or cyberspace; rather, it transcends national boundaries. However, sex is neither the single reason young Arabs connect on Facebook, nor is it their sole interest. Rather, sex is only one of many manifestations of their cultural presence on the social networking website. Although the interest in sex might be the initial reason one segment of young Arab users joins Facebook, its importance diminishes quickly, giving way to a more complicated and serious interest departing from social relations founded on sexual desire.

In other words, to say young Arabs' use of Facebook is solely dedicated to sex and romance is an extreme abbreviation of the relations they establish on the widely used website. This article builds on the assertion that such interactive websites quickly assume the cultural and social attributes of their users, as each group adds these particular cultural and social contributions. Further, this article explores Arab youth's mode of interaction with Facebook, as well as their cultural and social contributions to the site.

What has Facebook offered for Arab Youth?

Although digital technology should facilitate access to information related to this

subject, available data remains limited. The global technological movement does not effectively gauge the dimensions of human interaction with the Internet. Web statistics often yield conflicting results contravening the concept of digitization, particularly when disparities are too wide to fall within the margin of error. The situation becomes even blurrier in the case of the Arab world, as statistics rarely report accurate information or data. This article attempts to overcome this obstacle by employing established methods used to circumvent inadequate data.

Arab youth's interest in Facebook is primarily motivated by the website's potential for communication, which far exceeds the capabilities of classical Internet applica-

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tions such as the messenger applications, e-mail groups and online forums. Even when at their best, utilizing Web cams and video conferencing, these services do not adequately satisfy users' appetites for communication and interaction. Facebook is a product of the "New Internet" that revolted against the traditional Internet, which resembled a newspaper stand or kiosk. Investment in the "Old Internet" was only open to capitalists, who would build websites and dispatch communication messages at times to recipients of their choosing, while

the common Internet user was deprived of this right. Nonetheless, the Old Internet, known as the World Wide Web or Web, was soon relegated to history, replaced by Web 2.0 and Web 3.0. These two new generations or components of the New Internet eliminated the oligarchy of the Old Internet, making the Internet more democratic. Because the Internet developed in a democratic environment, it reflected the democratic elements in the form of tools to help all people – particularly population segments without significant financial assets – to speak up and have their voices heard. This evolution has led the New Internet to centralize the user, with websites being designed not only for the service of capitalists but also for all, including common users.

The new online democracy first materialized in blogging websites such as Blogger and TIG, followed by multimedia websites such as Picasa and Flickr, and later in websites offering storage spaces. Afterward, the Internet experienced a wave of emerging networking websites such as Hi5 and Orkut that were soon outdone by Facebook, thanks to many exceptional features including its significant networking potential. Online communities have become the most important facet of today's Internet and

therefore must be promoted and granted services to facilitate communication and interaction, as networking has become inseparable from content accumulation and circulation.

Building online communities implies that the present-day Internet has moved on from the functions of its predecessor, i.e. designating limited spaces to e-mail groups, a service from the past that can no longer be considered an effective tool.

In the present day, the concept of interaction has elevated the Internet to the cyber rather than the virtual level, becoming simultaneously a communication tool and a forum. This double feature changes users' perception of networking from a website service per se to one that links all other services. It is this networking space that all applications seek to realize; hence, networking must be clearly highlighted as the essential element infusing all the services offered by the website. Networking enables users to view all ultra- interactive applications available on the Web site without having to disconnect in order to move between services. Within this space, users and the rest of their online communities can surf all the materials available to them, while being simultaneously able to discuss them and use various emotions.

The networking trend of the contemporary New Internet renders introducing users to each other as one of its major features. Consequently, the task of introducing people to each other is no longer restricted to matchmaking Web sites, which have also become history despite existing demand for their services. Applications under this category provide various ways for people to meet - relying on key tools, the chief among which is the Network concept, which prompts those belonging to a certain network (country, school, university and workplace) to connect with each other. Other concepts include: Match, through which singles meet; Group, the least commonly used concept application, which allows activists to meet around a particular issue; Fan, with which people can form a fan club of a personality or a phenomenon; User whereby a certain application user can meet the most active user of that application; and Birthday, through which people born on the same day can connect with each other.

The history of this introduction features shows that networking concepts have broadened. Previously, the concept of e-mail groups was the most widespread, followed by the concept of Match. Today, networks are built specifically for every Internet application, every level of affiliation, and every human or inhuman symbol. When a user invites friends, they automatically become members of that user's community of friends. Users of fourth generation websites may create networking communities as they wish.

A crucial concept in networking Web sites is privacy: the protection of personal

information pertinent to Web site users, their friends and activities. However, what concerns Arab Facebook users more is the website's potential for communication by means of renewable and content-rich forms through the Application Platform, whereby small-size interactive networking applications are built. Facebook does not stop here; it enables users to create their own intuitive interactive networking applications, thanks to the Web site's architecture that seamlessly accommodates new applications. More significantly, the Application Platform enables users to create their own interactive networking applications from one or more patterns of customizable applications.

Users are empowered to create and add a large number of applications on Facebook. Nonetheless, the majority of applications users add or create are ones that can accommodate pictures, and be used to create new limited applications under emotions, gifts, animals, birds, flowers, book covers or foods. Such applications reflect the culture of their creators, as illustrated by the large number of Asian Muslims using Facebook that resulted in a significant increase in the number of applications associated with Asian culture. Furthermore, Application Programming Interface (API)-based Facebook applications that collect news and book reviews from Web sites predefined by their developers have become widespread.

Certainly, the extent of networking on Facebook invokes the question of privacy, which unfolds on three levels. The first is the privacy of applications, as they have access to the user's personal data, meaning that other users or third parties could obtain personal information. Therefore, fourth generation Web sites first and foremost ensure the privacy of users against applications and other users. In this case, the applications gain access to the personal information of users but do not share it with others unless authorized directly by the user in question by clicking the agree box. The second level of privacy is ensuring privacy against members; a user belonging to a "Family" group and a "Friends" group may not want the latter group to know about his/her familial activities, not to mention those who do not even belong to either group. The third level of privacy involves ensuring protection against the economic ambitions of the Web site itself (advertisement). The Web site protects user information against misuse should the user decide to block access to their information for commercial use, particularly for advertising. Yet some advertisers have found a way around this privacy by identifying IP addresses and delivering advertisements directly.

Although somewhat lacking, the high respect exhibited for privacy impresses Arab youth, given the fact that youth privacy is constantly violated on the familial, public and governmental levels in the Arab region. All of the above features describe Facebook and the temptations with which the social networking site attracts Arab youth, but what about Arab youth themselves?

According to statistics, there are 31,638,640 Internet users in the Arab region, of whom 20,115,440 reside in the African region of the Arab world and 11,523,200 live in the Asian region. In terms of actual Internet use, statistics show that Saudi Arabia ranks first among Arab countries, followed by Egypt and Morocco in the second place, then Sudan, Algeria and the United Arab Emirates. In terms of expansion and growth in Internet use, Somalia tops the list, followed by Sudan, Morocco, Syria, Algeria and Saudi Arabia. Those between the ages of 18 and 35 constitute 74 percent of Internet users in the Arab world. The youth group is the most important segment for the majority of Web sites and is virtually the sole segment targeted by the New Internet.

Generally, Arab Facebook members use the site either for social aims or to fulfill physiological needs, i.e. for entertainment and fun, whether sexual or derived from the site's exciting applications.

Early in 2008, Facebook had 90 million registered users, surpassing competitors worldwide such as AOL and MySpace, which have in turn recorded a 10 percent decrease in membership. Unlike other highly transparent websites, Facebook does not provide clear-cut statistics. However, experts estimate that out of approximately 32 million Arab Internet users, roughly 6.4 million are registered with Facebook, 750,000 of whom are in Egypt alone. It is the cultural presence of those 6.4 million Arab Facebook users that the present article attempts to analyze.

Structure of Arab presence on Facebook

The current study does not seek to examine an inclusive survey of all Arabs on Facebook, as the exploration of how 6 million members interact cannot be condensed into one article. Instead, this article presents a study of a representative sample of 1500 Arab members of Facebook. However, before addressing the characteristics of the Arab social and cultural presence on Facebook, this article will address the infrastructure framing this presence, as well as providing relevant statistical background. The infrastructure of Facebook is embodied in its distinctive features, particularly the invaluable Facebook Platform. The Platform is not made available to members upon registration; rather users must build the applications they desire.

Facebook has several features and categories include applications for video, photo, music, events, groups, education, chat, dating, sports, fashion, gaming, politics, messaging, file sharing, travel, food and drink, money and business, just for fun, gifts and emotions.

Examination of 1500 Facebook profiles of Arab members aged 18 to 35 revealed

that video, notes and posted items are the most widely used applications, as 100 percent of the sample profiles utilized them. Just-for-fun applications ranked second with 80 percent, gifts with 70 percent, dating with 57 percent, groups with 35 percent and events and emotions with 30 percent. Music, fashion, money and business, chat, sports and file-sharing applications were almost nonexistent among the sample profiles.

What Arabs do on Facebook

This study is based on a six-month observation of Arab members' use of Facebook, focusing on their interactions with these categories of networking and content applications. The overwhelming presence of the above-mentioned applications did not manifest in actual Arab cultural and social presence. A closer look at the content of video applications contained by the sample profiles indicated that foreign content made up 65 percent of applications, while Arab content did not exceed 35 percent. Furthermore, this 35 percent was constituted mainly of documentary clips or flash files containing text and pictures of a religious or educational nature. The content of photo applications included 50 percent personal photos, 20 percent entertainment pictures including pornographic images, 20 percent images displaying mainly Islamic religious content with a modest presence of Christian content and lastly 10 percent images, most of which can be described as political.

Concerning messaging applications, about 30-35 percent were personal messages, while messages with religious content composed 25 percent, political messages 20 percent, advertising messages 10 percent, and other messages 10 percent. The majority of political and religious content messages were written in Arabic, which limits their impact to only those who can read the language.

It is worth noting that the gift applications carry many cultural symbols. Through such applications, members can send their friends e-cards depicting archeological sites from their countries, local dishes, sports or arts. During the study period, Asian applications built by amateurs rather than expert developers became a significant presence on the social networking site. Photo applications constituted the majority of these Asian applications and served different functions. Some photos depicted popular foods, tourist attractions, local sports such as sumo wrestling, and traditions and costumes from eastern and southern Asian countries, including for example the Japanese Geisha costumes. Other photos depicted people from those countries, predominantly Asian women. Some photos showed complete and partial nudity, while others depicted beauty more conservatively. As indicated earlier, 70 percent of sample profiles contained gift applications; however, additions to these applications by Arab

users were minimal, with Egyptian members creating only one or two applications reflecting their national patriotism. Other Arab members did not contribute to gift applications save for Islamic and Christian social and religious greetings. Arab members' contributions to gift applications amounted to less than 2 percent of the overall number of applications in this category, which is significantly less than their overall representation, 7 percent, among Facebook members. Likewise, all dating applications contained in 80 percent of sample profiles were all Western, despite intensive Arab use. Moreover, without diversifying between those who added these applications and those who actually used them, Arab contributions to purely cultural applications such as book review, education and training applications did not exceed 1 percent of the overall number of their users.

Political activism on Facebook in the context of these Arab countries that do not commit what some Arab Facebook members call "heinous actions" are confined to demanding increased freedoms.

The most widespread cultural applications among Arab users were those listed under events and groups. Although such applications were only contained in 30-35 percent of sample profiles, Arab users interacted considerably with them, with activities related to these applications constituting possibly 50 percent of their overall use of all applications.

Summarizing direct observations and interactions the author had with Arab Facebook members, this study attempts to outline the general characteristics of the Arab presence on the social network. This article presents an opinion formulated with as much objectivity as possible.

Generally, Arab Facebook members use the site either for social aims or to fulfill physiological needs, i.e. for entertainment and fun, whether sexual or derived from the site's exciting applications. Around 60 percent of Arab members use Facebook for entertainment and fun. The remaining 40 percent of Arab users utilize the site socio-politically, engaging with issues related to politics and political reform in the Arab world, religious preaching in cyberspace or promoting charity work and becoming involved with relief and aid efforts.

A segment of Arab entertainment and fun users on Facebook remains conservative in line with Arab values and culture; they neither use pornographic or dating applications nor do they seek to subvert their conservative societies. This segment constitutes 40 percent out of the 60 percent of users who make up the segment of Arabs using Facebook primarily for entertainment and fun. In other words, conservative users make up about 20 percent of the overall number of Arab Facebook users.

The remaining segment of Arab members uses Facebook to communicate with the opposite sex nationally and transnationally beyond the borders of the Arab world. About 25 percent of them consume sexual content as explicitly seen on their profiles.

Through interacting with several Arab youth who use the social networking web site to communicate with the opposite sex, it became clear that a group of them was initially interested in Facebook because of the sexual content provided by its applications. However, this interest faded drastically especially among those whose interactions with the opposite sex were limited to exchanging jokes and everyday social feelings as well as constructing friendships, but whose activities did not reach the level of indulging in virtual sex. On the other hand, around 25 percent of this group continues to use Facebook for virtual sex, with sexual content applications appearing on their profiles.

Facebook exhibits a growing trend of users aiming to employ the social networking site to advance charitable and relief efforts. About 25 percent of Arab users utilize Facebook to realize social aims, working for example to secure winter blankets for needy families, feed the poor and donate blood and raise funds for organizations serving underprivileged segments of the population.

Likewise, a significant segment of Arab users employ Facebook to advance political goals. Those users are concentrated in the central and eastern parts of the Arab region, and are chiefly Egyptians, Saudis, Iraqis, Kuwaitis and Yemenis. This does not imply that users from other Arab countries are not politically engaged or present on Facebook. Arab Facebook members include well-known Arab human rights activists who use the site to mobilize Arab public opinion and encourage Arabs to intellectually criticize the performance and actions of their rulers and politicians. Political activism on Facebook in the context of these Arab countries that do not commit what some Arab Facebook members call “heinous actions” are confined to demanding increased freedoms. On the other hand, Arab Facebook users also include a limited number of government loyalists. The users engaged with political activities on Facebook make up 25 percent of those who employ the site to achieve sociopolitical ends.

Around 20 percent of Arab Facebook users embrace religious slogans to achieve social goals, of whom 95 percent are Muslims and only 5 percent are Christians, which may reflect the population ratio in the Arab world.

The categorization of Arab Facebook users who seek to achieve certain social goals into political, religious and relief groups does not imply that these goals are separate from each other. There is an overlap between political activists and aid activists who embrace Islamic slogans; likewise there are activists who only embrace Islamic slogans. Christian Arab users rarely link religious slogans to their political activism.

However, it is not uncommon for those users to embrace relief slogans.

In light of the aforementioned presentation of the predominant attributes characterizing the presence of Arabs on Facebook, one may conclude that the use of the social networking site as a medium to achieve social goals is likely to increase. This is particularly likely as Arab youth continue to unveil the educational potentials of this website. It is also probable given the fact that technological advancement renders the use of Facebook politically, educationally or simply for fun a pleasurable experience per se. ■