

# **SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE AND FEMALE EMPOWERMENT IN SAUDI ARABIA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Social media has played a major role in women's growth and empowerment across the globe. Academic literature also has documented numerous studies which highlight the linkage between media and female empowerment. The study appreciates the significance of the social media and discusses various ways in which social media supported the female empowerment. Related academic literature was reviewed and many remarkable associations of the social media with female empowerment were discovered. It was observed that using social media channels, any women who face discriminations and disempowerment can voice her concern to the world on various issues. However Saudi women participation on social media platform was found to be low. The purpose of the present study is to identify the causes of low participation of Saudi women on social media platforms and to propose effective strategies that can enhance female empowerment in Saudi Arabia.*

**Keywords:** Social Media, Women Empowerment, Female Empowerment, Social Reforms, Social and Cultural Issues, Effective Media Strategies.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Social media can be defined as interactive technology that enabled users to share and exchange information, ideas and experiences. Social Media is computer-based technology that involves building of virtual networks and communities. It is internet based, Due to the developed technology and sharing information effectively, it helps the women users to address their issues and challenges. It helps to build relationships and generates awareness in a very short duration of time. It provides a social platform for women to raise their voice and deliver their perception, experiences and feedback towards the current systems of the nation, government policies and challenges. Social media platforms offer women new ways to communicate and interact through enhancement of knowledge and abilities in women. Female empowerment included women's viewpoints, opinions, on various social and cultural issues that helped in raising their current or social status. Women who went through some unfair and challenging situations in their life approached the social media channels in order to draw the attention of people towards their needs, expectations, and challenges. Through proper social media channels women expressed themselves freely without having limitations to the global context. The expansion of the internet, social media development and improvement of communication technologies opened the eyes of the world towards the challenges of female empowerment. However, in Saudi Arabia women do not address their personal issues due to the lesser power or fear of embarrassment.

Hence the objective of the present study is to identify the causes of low participation of women in Saudi Arabia on social media platforms in comparison to Men of Saudi Arabia and other women across the globe in western countries and also to discuss effective social media

strategies that can increase women participation in social media to accelerate the process of female empowerment.

### **Research Objectives**

1. To investigate through critical literature review analysis whether social media had the potential to improve the lives of women and empower them to accomplish gender equality.
2. To identify the causes of low participation of women as compared to Men in Saudi Arabia in social media platforms such as Instagram Facebook, Snapchat, LinkedIn, Twitter through secondary data available.
3. To suggest effective strategies that can improve women participation and engagement in mass media and social networking platforms in Saudi Arabia to accelerate the process of female empowerment.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Concept of Women Empowerment**

Odine (2013) defined women empowerment as the process of empowering women by creation of social space to express their opinions and expectations.

### **Influence of Social Media on Female Empowerment**

Several studies around the world have explored the numerous opportunities for women empowerment and engagement provided by social media and innovative digital communication tools. Women in developing countries utilize information communication technologies and social media tools to start a dialogue in their society to change gender codes that govern behaviors and to demand gender equality. In Southern Africa, social media is fostering women's participatory communication and assisting greatly in achieving the goals of the gender movement. Online spaces, such as blogging, are means of self-expression that allow women to provide a voice of their own that is also visible to others, which leads to psychological empowerment of women bloggers and enhances their sense of community. Wanjiru (2013) conducted an in-depth analysis of the role media played in increasing women's political participation in Kenya. The findings of this study showed that, the media played a role in influencing some of their decisions which are gender related; however the financial resources were major challenges. Shailashree & Shailashree (2013) conducted a study on the impact of media in political empowerment of rural women in Kolar district of Karnataka State. The study concluded that social awareness programs brought social change. Problems in developing countries such as India, Pakistan, North Korea, and African countries have expressed their considerations for female empowerment with the development of social media and mass media. The women in Saudi Arabia used fewer social media channels to express their problems and challenges. Khan (2015) stated that the issues and challenges relating to women empowerment can be well expressed with the positive use of the components of the media. Padmaja (2017) study showed that, women's empowerment aims to help them take charge of their lives, set their own goals, develop skills, gain trust, participate in decision-making and in problem solving. Bala (2017) stated that Internet, web sites and social media platforms had broken the media barriers and everyone was able to share their opinions, ideas, and thoughts in the public space. Bala (2017) discussed the role of media in women empowerment. The study concluded that Media is a platform to accelerate women empowerment. Eriksen (2017) analyzed how women are portrayed in the media; the study found that several of the dominating female protagonists underwent

significant empowerment during the development of the narrative. Results revealed that media supported female empowerment. Jukariya & Premlat (2018) stated that the needs of achieving a higher knowledge, skills development and competencies development can be addressed with the proper use of media channels by women in any nation. Abdelmogeth & Mossad (2018) added that, social media play an important part in broadcasting content that can be used to influence individual perceptions. Dasgupta (2019) found a strong positive effect of exposure to social media on women's status. The study concluded that social media considerably contributed to women empowerment by offering information and education. A study based on in depth, personal interviews with more than twenty young Arab women journalists, bloggers, and activists from Arab countries that faced political unrest during the so-called Arab Spring. They concluded that networked social media gave Arab women new tools to express their identities, participate in the public sphere, and gain more visibility with their own voice. With reference to above study it was found that social media provide a space where women can contest and challenge unfair cultural norms and values. The main question for such studies was about the effects of the social media on female users, and whether social media had the potential to improve the lives of women and empower them to accomplish gender equality. Arab women empowerment has been recently tackled in the context of such emerging new media.

### **Factors Affecting Women Participation in Social Media**

The culture and religion of Saudi Arabia influence the life and behavior of people. There are cultural pressures acting on users on social media platforms in non-Western settings. Growing social network popularity is due not only to network and technology factors, but also to users' social desires. Social factors and affective factors (relating to moods, feelings, and attitudes) explain how people use social networking services. The way people use social network is influenced by their cultural background, media environment and user-generated content. Odine (2013) stated that the people tend to express their issues more when the media freedom and openness improved. The findings of his study stated that the openness of mass media has increased due to the positive development of the information age. However, it is arguable that the use of social media in this region operates within some interesting cultural constraints that are worthy of further analysis.

### **Research Problem**

Data from the Middle East confirm that social networking platforms and applications are more popular among males as compared to females. Mourtada & Salem (2012) reported that over half of the 135 million Internet users in the Arab region in 2013 used social networking services. Nearly two-thirds of these social media users were male, and nearly half were under the age of 25 (GO-Gulf, 2013). This raises questions as to what drives such a significant gender imbalance with between Men and Women in Saudi Arabia on Social Media Platforms. Why are Arab women not present on the most popular social media services in the Arabic world? From the review of literature it was revealed that there has been significant studies conducted in the United States, Europe, and Asia to explain the association of mass media and women empowerment but there have been few studies on the impact of social media use or even information technology use with context to women in the Middle Eastern context, and much of the recent research in this region has focused on its political and activist elements rather than on impact of media on women empowerment. This article therefore investigates how young Saudi

Arabian women can be motivated on various social media platforms to participate in various social and economic reforms to accelerate the process of women empowerment in Saudi Arabia.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study critically examined the empirical and theoretical literature on role of social media in women empowerment. The purpose of the present study is to identify the causes of low participation of Saudi Women on social media platforms and to propose effective strategies that can enhance female empowerment in Saudi Arabia. The data available from KSA Social Media Statistics 2020 was used to identify the women participation in Social Media platforms in Saudi Arabia. It is an attempt to utilize the pertinent studies to contribute to the development of effective media strategies to increase women participation on social platforms.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

No	Particulars	Figures	Facts	Analysis
1.	The number of Internet users in the Kingdom	32.23 million Internet users	Total Population in 2020 34.54 million	Active Internet users are 93.31% of total population.
2.	Average daily time Saudis spend on the Internet	466 minutes online daily Saudis spend on internet.	Saudi users spent 7 hours 46 minutes daily on internet.	Average daily time spent by Saudis on social media is 3 hours 02 minutes.
3	Total number of active social media users in Saudi Arabia	25 million	72.38% of total population are active media users in Saudi Arabia.	Social media users in Saudi Arabia increased by eight percent between 2020-2021.
4.	Which Age and Gender are more active on social media?	25 to 34 years old spent more time on internet in Saudi Arabia. Out of which 16.6 percent are females and 38.1 percent are males.	Male were two third and Female were one third users.	Men were more active on social Media platforms as compared to women in Saudi Arabia.
4	Most popular social media platforms in Saudi Arabia	YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter	Facebook-91% Youtube-60% Google-70% Twitter-57% LinkedIn-37% Instagram-22%	Facebook was the most popular social networking service in the Arab region.

Source: KSA Social Media Statistics 2020

### Interpretation

The latest annual report (2020) produced by the KSA Social Media Statistics revealed that the number of Internet users in the Kingdom reached 32.23 million in 2020, which represents about 93% of the total Saudi population. The report also revealed that the average daily time Saudis spend on the Internet is 7 hours and 46 minutes. Regarding social media platforms, the latest statistics show that the total number of active social media users in Saudi Arabia is 25 million. YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are reported to be among the most popular platforms in Saudi Arabia (Table 1).

**Table 2**  
**THE PERCENTAGE OF USERS FOR EACH SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM IN 2020 IN SAUDI ARABIA**

S. No	Social Media Platform	Total Users	Total Percentage of Users for Each Social Media Platform in 2020 in Saudi Arabia
1	You tube	26.25 million	76%
2	Face book	21.41 million	62%
3	Instagram	22.45 million	65%
4	Twitter	20.03 million	58%
5	LinkedIn	9.33 million	27%
6.	Pinterest	7.94 million	23%
7.	Tumblr	4.84 million	14%
S. No	Popular Messenger Apps	Total users	Percentage of total population
1.	Whatsapp	26.25 million	71%
2.	Snapchat	15.54 million	45%
3.	FB Messenger	14.16 million	41%
4.	Tik Tok	10.71 million	31%
5.	Skype	7.94 million	23%
6.	Line	6.91 million	20%
7.	Wechat	6.56 million	19%

Source: Arab Social Media Report

**Table 3**  
**SOCIAL MEDIA USERS PROFILE BY AGE AND GENDER IN KSA**

S. No	Age Group	Male Users: 70%	Female Users: 30%
1	13-17 years	1.10%	0.80%
2.	18-24 years	12.80%	6.20%
3.	25-34 years	38.10%	16.60%
4.	35-44 years	12.40%	4.60%
5.	45-54 years	3.60%	1.00%
6.	55-64 years	1.10%	0.30%
7.	Above 65 years old	0.70%	0.50%

### Interpretation of Data

**Table 4**  
**CAUSES OF WOMEN REPRESENTATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS IN SAUDI ARABIA**

S. No	Reason of participation in social media	%
1	To gain Knowledge, information and advice on various issues.	89%
2	To socialize with family/friends and like-minded individuals	81%
3	For fun/ entertainment.	76%
4	To share personal views/opinions on various issues.	70%
5	To contribute to community/activist/ political activity	60%
6	For professional purposes/job finding	49%
7	Communicating: social media makes it easier for Arab women to express themselves	85%
8	Civic Participation: social media can enhance Arab women's participation in civil society	83%
9	Social change: social media can empower Arab women to be role model for social change	80%
10	Women's Rights: social media can advance women's rights	76%
11	Political Empowerment: social media supports gender equality in the Arab political landscape	62%
12	Economic Empowerment: social media provides Arab women with economic or entrepreneurial opportunities	66%

Source: Arab Social Media Report

The causes of low participation of women in social media platforms in Saudi Arabia as compared to men revealed that women in Saudi Arabia is hesitant to raise their voice to be heard by everyone towards any unpleasant incidence due to social, cultural, religious constraints and collectivist culture of Saudi Arabia. It was identified that factors such as communication style of women, attitude to communicating online, fear of social disapproval, educational and family background, type of personality, social desire, and awareness about various social network and technology factors influenced the degree of women participation in social media platforms in Saudi Arabia. They were therefore cautious about creating a relationship with anyone they did not know, and always took the consequences of self-disclosure seriously on social media platforms. Gender Segregation was also one of the significant factors affecting women representation on social media platforms (Tables 2-5).

<b>S.No</b>	<b>Causes of low participation in Arab Women</b>	<b>Percent</b>
1	Social and Cultural Constraints	26%
2	Low confidence on online privacy and security.	15%
3	Women are not as ICT literate as men	12%
4	Access to ICT: Women have less access to internet/ computers/ phones	12%
5	Women have less Confidence on Social Media platforms as a communication forum.	10%
6	Women have lower levels of education than men	10%
7	There is not enough content designed to serve Arab women's needs	8%
8	Collectivist culture of Saudi Arabia	7%
9	Fear of social disapproval: Women think they can be held accountable by authorities for their views	26%
10	Ineffective communication style of women: attitude to communicating online,	12%
11	Lack of awareness about various social network and technology factors	23%
12	Consequences of self-disclosure: cautious about creating a relationship with anyone they did not know	20%
13	Gender Segregation	25%
14	Personality factors such as type of personality, desire to socialize with unknown people.	15%
15	Education and family background	14%

Source: Arab Social Media Report: Men users are 70% and Women users are 30 % of total Population.

## CONCLUSION

The total population of Saudi Arabia in 2021 is 34.54 million. Of that population, 25 million or 72.38% are active social media users. According to reports from Hoot Suite and We are Social, Saudis are the largest group of active users on Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat in the region. The average time a Saudi spends on social media via any device is 3 hours and 02 mins daily. Social media users in Saudi Arabia increased by eight percent between 2020-2021. Currently, there are 27.80 million social media users in Saudi Arabia. The most popular social media platform in Saudi Arabia is Facebook. It has total of fifteen million monthly active users. Instagram is ranked as the second most popular social media platform with a rate of thirteen million active monthly users. Statistics from Arab Social Media Report revealed that women in the Arab world use social media less than men. Men users are 70% and Women users are 30 % of total Population. Women users on Social Media Platform in Saudi Arabia agreed that participating in social media helps them gain Knowledge, information on various issues. They like to socialize with family, friends and like-minded individuals through social media, to share

personal views/opinions on various issues or for fun and entertainment. Communicating through social media makes it easier for Arab women to express themselves. Some of women participate to contribute to community as activist or engaging in any political activity. Some women join for professional purposes or for finding job. Social media can enhance Arab women's participation in civil society, bring social change, and empower them politically by making them aware about their legal and economic rights. The reports revealed that the causes of low participation in Arab Women are Social and Cultural Constraints, less trust in levels of online privacy and security. Lack of awareness of Information and Communication Technology, less access to internet/computers phones, less Confidence in social media as a communication forum, Personality factors such as type of personality, desire to socialize with unknown people, Education and family background, lower levels of education than men. Some women thought that there is not enough content designed to serve Arab women's needs, there exist Collectivist culture of Saudi Arabia and Fear of social disapproval: Women think they can be held accountable by authorities for their views. Some women felt they have ineffective communication style, attitude to communicating online. Some major factors that affected women participation on social platforms in Saudi Arabia included lack of awareness about various social network and technology factors, consequences of self-disclosure and Gender Segregation.

### **Suggestions**

To improve women participation in mass media in Saudi Arabia following mass media strategies can be adopted:

- a. Creating awareness and building competencies in women through various social awareness programs. Although many nations have internal political considerations that demand the controlling of media usage, yet it can be seen that it is limiting in the modern context.
- b. The cultural openness should be encouraged. The openness of mass media should be supportive to the creation of the global voice accordingly by encouraging more women to participate through social media platforms.
- c. The media and social media platform developers should be unbiased to assess the problems and challenges of the women. Television, radio and newspapers may have biased opinions since they are managed under certain perspectives of the management and government but women participation through social media platform is a solution to address the challenges of women empowerment.
- d. The women must have the proper medium to deliver their messages to the society or public through mass media. Saudi Arabian women should be encouraged to share their thoughts, opinions, expectations and challenges through proper mass media channels. The modern mass media must be open for discussion and various feedback delivery and feedback gathering.
- e. The social media developers must understand the need, behavior, communication style and type of online women engagement.
- f. The media platforms should be able to provide protection or privacy to the personal information shared by women on social media, there must be strict policies to punish the people who misuse any personal information shared by women.
- g. In the Saudi community, where religion and culture have historically influenced the women participation on social media platforms, the media should highlight the area where further development is needed to increase the attention of the government towards various women issues.

### **Scope of Further Research**

Comparative analysis between developing and developed countries can be undertaken on participation of women in social media platforms. Moreover, effective ways can be identified where mass media can help in female empowerment while ensuring the creation of a better future for women across the globe.

## Limitations of Research

1. The content analysis was done with the help of available secondary data only.
2. Causes of low participation of Saudi Women in social media platforms are explored. Women of other developing county are not part of this research.

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