Social Media and Its Impact on Promoting the National Identity of University Students in Saudi Arabia

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This study aims to identify the use of social media in university students and examine the extent to which social media strengthens their national identity. It also explores gender and academic level-based differences in social media's impact on strengthening national identity. Data were collected from 283 university students (53.71% males), and (46.28% female), (M age = 21.7 years; SD age = 3.27) years. We have prepared and applied a questionnaire to examine the impact of social media on students' national identity. The findings revealed that 97.17% use social media every day, while 2.47% use social media poorly. Furthermore, the results indicated a significant impact on the use of social media in strengthening the national identity of students.

Keyword: social media, national identity, university students, Saudi Arabia

INTRODUCTION

Today, the world is going through a period of technological and cognitive development, driven by concurrent revolutions in computing, communications, and information, one result of which is the creation and rapid rise in the use of so-called "social media" (Liu et al., 2017). Examples of social media include Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and Tik Tok (Fuchs, 2021). In contrast to traditional media, social media platforms constitute a two-way communication mechanism, characterized by giving users the ability to share, spread, and comment on content in an interactive manner while providing for movement and flexibility, media integration, storage, and preservation. Social media has significant international and local implications (Chan-Olmsted et al., 2013; Fuchs, 2021), has brought about profound changes in how people communicate, and has dramatically altered the behavior of many individuals (Bennett, 2012). It has also played an important and effective role in bringing about changes in the system of values, traditions, and customs within all societies (Fuchs, 2021; Gündüz, 2017).

Richter and Riemer (2009) have pointed out that new sites called social networks began to appear on the Internet in the mid-1990s, with a focus on facilitating communication between friends and acquaintances within a particular institution. These social networks later became public, open to all, and indispensable, in the sense that they became an integral part of the lives of a large number of individuals, particularly young people (Bennett, 2012). In Arabic-speaking countries, these influences have impacted the system of social and cultural values, increasing openness and the sharing of news and comment on what

is happening in the West, resulting in a tyranny of customs and traditions and the emergence of new behaviors and manifestations among students in terms of the phrases and words they use (Gündüz, 2017). For instance, in many posts students will use numbers to shorten Arabic words, while in others they will utilize words from other languages. Such practices run counter to the history and cultural identity of our country – Saudi Arabia – and demonstrate how each individual lives in their own world on these sites, rather than in culture and practices that define their home country. This shift has been observed, in various guises, across many studies (Dalton & Crosby, 2013; Dhillon & Chowdhuri, 2013; Gündüz, 2017; Kimmons, 2014; Rambe, 2013).

On the other hand, many studies have indicated that social media can have many positive effects in various aspects of life, contributing to the delivery of civil and governmental work, effective communication (Akram & Kumar, 2017), the exchange of opinions and ideas, a melting of geographical boundaries, and to fostering greater understanding of and across different cultures (Allen et al., 2014; Siddiqui & Singh, 2016). As educational standards have fallen in response to increased student numbers and greater class density, social media has also fulfilled an important role by serving as an important tool for professional development (Zaheer, 2018). This educational role was particularly important and pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Hammad & Alqarni, 2021).

While social media has many positives, arguably its most negative feature is that it has the potential to irreversibly blur the identities of developing countries (Akram & Kumar, 2017). This was confirmed in a study by Heidari and Shavardi (2013), who pointed out that, of the many factors that threaten national identity, social media is the most significant. It is so, they contended, because it is capable of destroying national identity by acting as a conduit for the dissemination and spread of ideas that encourage the reproduction of national identity from the perspective of urbanization, by representing behaviors that are incompatible with national identity. Another end to which social media can be put is to sarcastically and comically disparage national identity and, therefore, to push younger generations to abandon their national identity through a sense of shame or embarrassment, In addition, it can also be used to propagate extremist ideas that feed hatred and disrespect towards people – including those of the same nationality (Erbschloe, 2018; Franks et al., 2008).

National identity has been the subject of extensive debate and research among educators in general, but especially among social psychologists (Yuen & Mok, 2014). National identity is a human passion that binds the individual to his or her homeland, something which can provoke the finest feelings of man towards his homeland (Huntington & Dunn, 2004). i Berdún and Guibernau (2007) see national identity as a constant, essential, and shared destiny of features that distinguish a nation's civilization from other civilizations, and which make a nation and the character of its people distinct from that of other nations and their people. A sense of national identity gives the individual a sense of loyalty to the political system, thereby legitimizing it and helping it to survive (Nanes, 2008). It also positively contributes to the ability of a given society to overcome any crises and difficulties it faces, to accept the decisions taken by the respective political authority, and to have an awareness of the rights and duties necessary for effective citizenship (Murti & Ratriyana, 2021; Nanes, 2008).

It is important to recognize that identity is not only the focus of local attention, but something of global concern that has been the subject of much investigation and debate in the intellectual, philosophical, and scientific spheres (i Berdún & Guibernau, 2007; Kimmons, 2014). However, the emergence of social media, the spread of modern communication technology, as well as the spread of the phenomenon of globalization, have combined to infuse with subject of national identity with fresh momentum, and it is currently the subject of intense scholarly interest (Bennett, 2012; Gündüz, 2017). This is why, for instance, the Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells felt compelled to state that we are now living between two forces for the liberation of the world and our lives – identity and globalization – because social media technology, innovations in communication, and the transformations brought about through capitalism have created new patterns of society (Castells, 2016).

Members of Saudi society, and the Saudi youth in particular, are exposed to the influence of social media. This has influenced them to adopt not only the fashions of other cultures – with an attendant reluctance to wear traditional Saudi dress – but also to adopt a number of strange and foreign behaviors,

with both tendencies combining to have a negative effect on Saudi national identity (Al-shahrani & Hammad, 2020; Alsharkh, 2012; Stanger et al., 2017). The younger generation is the group that uses new media most, possibly out of a sense of adventure, excitement, and curiosity. Significantly, it is also the group that seeks to rebel against society and societal norms, adopting new things or trying to adapt existing norms based on their exposure to outside influences (Alsharkh, 2012; Maamari & Zein, 2014). Thus, their frequent use of social media has led to a sense of isolation, with the young living in another virtual world, a social media world that is far from the real world in which they live, which can be called identity disorder (Chestnut, 2022).

Statistics from January 2021 show that the number of Internet users across the globe reached 4.66 billion people, with up to 4.2 billion people active on social networks and 4.15 billion people using their phones to surf social networks. Saudi Arabia, for its part, ranked 17th in the world for internet penetration rate, with 33.58 million active Internet users (out of a total population of 35.08 million). Of these, 27.8 million were active social media users, with the most frequented sites being YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. The numbers indicate that Saudi Arabia is at the forefront of Arab countries in terms of active users of social networking sites (Kemp, 2021).

This growing demand for internet use and participation in social media means we cannot lose sight of the appeal the platforms hold and the positive functions they fulfil. However, we also cannot ignore the risks that they present as conduits for ideas, trends, beliefs, and cultures that are alien to our society. The Saudi youth have the potential to be particularly affected by this, resulting in a so-called alienation of identity, and thus weakness in their national identity.

Saudi Arabia is exposed to many attempts to undermine its national identity and raise doubts about the effectiveness of its cultural rewards. Therefore, the preservation of Saudi national identity has become one of the major and most urgent challenges we face today, in light of the developments brought about by social media and the impact these are having on the younger generations within our society. The shift is leading to the emergence of new concepts in society, including the youth's adoption of a new vocabulary that is alien to our authentic Arabic language. Thus, the negative impact of social media presents a material danger to Saudi national and cultural identity, in the same way that other studies have shown it is to that of Arab societies in general (see, for instance, Al-tkhayneh, 2018; Aljehani, 2019; Guta & Karolak, 2015; Jamali, 2014; Matar, 2018; Stanger et al., 2017).

Based on the above, the problem of this study can be formulated in the following main question: What impact does social media use have on the national and cultural identity of the Saudi youth?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Two hundred and eighty-three students from the University of Najran, aged between 19 and 24, participated in this study. The sample group was comprised of university regulars for the 2021/2022 academic year who were enrolled on bachelor's degree courses. Individual participants were randomly selected using simple random samples to provide an equal and independent opportunity for sample selection.

Variables	Categories	N	%
Gender	Male	152	53.71%
	Female	131	46.28%
Academic level	First year	96	24.38%
	Second year	65	22.96%
	Third year	71	25.08%
	Fourth year	78	27.56%

Procedures

The quantitative method (social survey) was appropriate for the nature of this study. In this case, the researchers obtained the approval of the Institutional Ethics Committee from the Deanship of Scientific Research at the University of Najran before applying the study tools. All participants also completed the voluntary approval section of the questionnaire and confirmed confidentiality. Researchers posted a questionnaire online and on social media pages on student sites from April 1 to 14, 2022, which included commonly used social and demographic questions. Thus, the participants in the sample voluntarily filled out the questionnaire without any pressure, while ensuring the confidentiality of the information. Three hundred and fifty individuals responded to the initial questionnaire, which, after verification, was then reduced to 283 students affiliated to the University of Najran, with an average age of 21.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire to collect key data was designed by researchers after a review of the relevant literature. The questionnaire was comprised of two main parts. The first included questions on general information, including the student's gender, level of study, and the degree of their use of social media. The second part consisted of 21 statements that measured the impact of social media usage on each student's national identity. The 5-point Likert scale was used (very large–large–medium–weak–very weak), with grades ranging from 5 to 1 (with 1 being "very weak" and 5 being "very large"). The questionnaire was tested in terms of face, content, and validity by a jury of five experts in the fields of psychology and mental health. Content health ratio (CVR) and content health index (CVI) measurements were also used quantitatively. The reliability of the tool was also carried out using the Alpha Cronbach laboratory test for the four dimensions and the overall score of the questionnaire. This indicated high reliability of the overall score of the questionnaire ($r = 0.89$).

Data Analysis

The researchers applied descriptive and deductive statistics to analyze the data, using SPSS Statistics V21. Participants' response to each element of the questionnaire was analyzed through repetition, percentage, average, and standard deviation. In addition, the following criterion was used to judge the extent to which social media affects the national identity of deaf and hearing-impaired students by determining the length of pentagram cells, calculating the range (5-1=4) and then dividing it by the greatest value in the scale to obtain cell length (4/5 = 0.80), after which this value was added to the lowest value in the scale (the beginning of the scale – 1) to determine the upper limit of this cell, and then the averages were determined. Results were weighted as follows: 4.2 to 5 was deemed to constitute a very large approval score, between 3.4 and 4.19 a large approval score, from 2.60 to 3.39 an average approval score, from 1.80 to 2.59 a weak approval score, and from 1 to 1.79 a very weak approval score.

RESULTS

To answer the first question, regarding the degree of social media use among Najran University students, a number of iterations and percentages were extracted.

TABLE 2
PERCENTAGES AND REPEATS OF THE RATE OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE AMONG NAJRAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Rate of use of social media	Repetitions	%
Every day	275	97.17
More than once a week	7	2.47
Once every two weeks	1	0.35
Less than once every two weeks	0	0
Total	**283**	**100**

Table 2 shows that 97.17% of students admitted to using social media every day, while 2.47% stated that they used social media less frequently. These results, therefore, show that Najran University students use social media very heavily and have a great connection to these means.

To answer the second question, regarding the impact of social media on the strength of national identity among Najran University students, weighted arithmetic averages, standard deviation, degrees of approval, and ranking were calculated, as shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3
SAMPLE RESPONSES TO THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON STRENGTHENING THE NATIONAL IDENTITY OF NAJRAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS.

	Items (Social role)	M	SD	%	Rank
1	Social media develops awareness of the importance of the national identity of members of society.	3.69	1.22	73.8	13
2	Social media helps people express their opinions and ideas.	3.59	1.11	71.8	20
3	Social media emphasizes belonging and cohesion among members of the community.	3.71	1.25	74.2	11
4	Social media motivates members of the community, especially young people, to stick to their authentic Arabic language	3.82	1.20	76.4	5
5	Social media protects national identity from the negative effects of globalization.	3.57	1.14	71.4	21
6	Social media plays an important role in respecting national culture.	3.73	1.02	74.6	9
7	Social media offers a lot of content that illustrates the authenticity of the past and the bright future of the nation.	3.63	1.16	72.6	17
8	Social media reinforces the individual's sense of being an essential part of this country.	3.85	1.06	77	2
9	Social media reinforces an individual's sense of responsibility towards their homeland.	3.7	0.89	74	12

10	Social media plays a major role in consolidating adherence to national identity.	3.64	1.14	72.8	16
11	Social media contributes to community members sticking to their religion and their right beliefs.	3.8	1.24	76	6
12	Social media contributes to maintaining the nation's constants.	3.84	1.15	76.8	3
13	Social media contributes to the strengthening of authentic Arab culture.	3.77	1.02	75.4	7
14	Social media supports the concepts of national identity among members of society.	3.62	1.21	72.4	18
15	Social media contributes to highlighting the importance of national heritage.	3.67	1.05	73.4	14
16	Social media contributes to adherence to and pride in community customs and traditions.	3.83	1.04	76.6	4
17	Social media raises awareness of the importance of preserving state property and public money.	3.75	1.12	75	8
18	Social media promotes the principles of defending the homeland and maintaining its security.	3.86	1.09	77.2	1
19	Social media promotes equal rights and duties for citizens.	3.65	1.18	73	15
20	Social media promotes basic concepts of national belonging.	3.6	1.13	72	19
21	Social media promotes the instilling of a spirit of giving and unity among the individual community.	3.64	1.24	72.8	10
Total		**3.53**	**1.16**	**70.78**	

The results presented in Table 3 indicate that the average response of students to the questionnaire as a whole was 3.53. Statement 18 ("Social media promotes the principles of defending the homeland and maintaining its security") had the highest average score of 3.86, while statement 5 ("Social media protects national identity from the negative effects of globalization") ranked last, with an average score of 3.57. It is clear, however, that all statements received a significant positive response, indicating that social media has a positive impact on promoting the national identity of students.

TABLE 4
RESULTS OF A TEST TO REVEAL THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE RESPONSES OF THE STUDY SAMPLE ON THE EXTENT TO WHICH SOCIAL MEDIA AFFECTS THE STRENGTHENING OF NATIONAL IDENTITY ACCORDING TO THE GENDER VARIABLE

Questionnaire	Gender	M	SD	T	Sig
Social media impact questionnaire on the strengthening of national identity	Male (152)	3.21	0.91	1.46	0.76
	Female (131)	3.19	0.88		

From Table 4, we note that – with a value of 1.46 – there was no statistically significant difference in regard to the average student response to the extent to which social media affects national identity across genders.

TABLE 5
ONE-WAY CONTRAST ANALYSIS TEST TO REVEAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SAMPLE RESPONSES TO SOCIAL MEDIA'S IMPACT ON STRENGTHENING NATIONAL IDENTITY ACCORDING TO THE ACADEMIC LEVEL VARIABLE

Dependent variable	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig
Between Group	1398.968	5	284.963		
Within Group	64396.215	277	243.265	**1.211**	**0.331**
Total	**65795.183**	**282**			

Table 5 indicates that there were no statistically significant differences between average student responses according to school level change, indicating that university students' responses to the extent to which social media affects the strength of their national identity, and there is no impact on their different levels of study on their views.

DISCUSSION

The results of the study indicate that more than 97% of Najran University students use social media daily. This shows that students, like other members of the community, have a passion for using social media, and may even be addicted to it (Stanger et al., 2017). This has potentially been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has transformed most universities into distance-learning institutions and forced students to use social media to attend their lessons and submit assignments (Doğan & Gülbahar, 2018). In a similar vein, global events such as the pandemic and a series of ongoing wars and revolutions may have helped to drive social media usage by fostering a desire to keep up to date with ever-changing news (Doğan & Gülbahar, 2018; Fuchs, 2021; Hauer & Sood, 2020; Henaku, 2020).

The results of the study also indicate that the use of social media has had a significant positive impact on the promotion of Saudi national identity among Najran University students, with their frequent use of social media serving to strengthen their sense of national identity. In this sense, social media appears to have played a central role in promoting students' intellectual construction and raising awareness, directly conveying their reality and aspirations, constituting an intellectual asset that has contributed to building citizenship behavior by monitoring young people's expectations and trends (Freberg, 2021).

The influence of social media in shaping the national identity of young people comes in strengthening, intellectual, cultural, legislative, educational, and work to establish high levels of confidence in the competence and capacity of young people (Ohiagu & Okorie, 2014). Thus, the institutions of the Saudi State are now seeking to build awareness and education through social media, in order to motivate the country's children to celebrate and preserve the country's achievements, to appreciate and cherish Saudi practices, and to carry the message of the Saudi citizenship's calls for peace, harmony, friendship, and dialogue. In addition, the goal is to ensure the Saudi youth know how to exercise their national roles in compliance with the rules, foundations, morals, and methodologies of taste, to take care of the credibility of the word and the accuracy of information (Al-Harbi, 2019), and to fully understand the range of responsibilities, duties, and rights they have as Saudis. Even more than this, it is to ensure they understand that there is a correct way to communicate with decision-makers and institutions and that the legal system governs the acceptable forms of expression, including on Twitter and Facebook. This will engender a deep understanding of national responsibilities, and an investment in the aspect of privacy, flexibility, and diversity in the way national content is addressed, in the form that specific words and phrases are abbreviated, and a presentation of experiences, initiatives, drawings, shapes, images and videos through YouTube channels and others (Al-Shuaili, 2021). This would enhance the Saudi youth's standing in the face of those who try to diminish or distort the image of his homeland, allowing them to bear witness to the

greatness of this country and present evidence to prove that point (Al-Harbi, 2019; Al-Shuaili, 2021; Alammar et al., 2016; Azeem & Akhtar, 2014; Elamin & Tlaiss, 2015).

Saudi Arabia's youth, and indeed its citizens in general, interact with their peers in society through the rights and duties bestowed by the Governing Council of the Kingdom, which promotes cultural integration between the different components of society and strengths peace and intimacy among the country's people (Al-Harbi, 2019). It also consolidates and supports the values of national identity by encouraging citizens to develop a sense of belonging and identity, as well as to participate in the service of society in accordance with their rights and duties. Social media contributes to promoting the values of good citizenship through continual dissemination of national values, as it is how many citizens now derive their information. Social media platforms can thus be used to strengthen and instill the messages carried in national and religious ceremonies and rituals that promote national identity in students and citizens, as well as to develop the values of loyalty, belonging, tolerance, fraternity, justice, and equality (Al-Shuaili, 2021).

The results of this study also indicate that there were no differences between males and females in the average student responses to the impact of social media on national identity. This may be because females use social media at the same level as males – a trend which has possibly been driven by the aforementioned shift to remote learning, meaning the females who participated in this study have been exposed to the same influences as the males (Al-Harbi, 2019; Al-Shuaili, 2021) The results of the study also indicate that there were no differences between the average responses of students attributable to the variable level of study, a finding which indicates that the responses of university students to the extent to which social media affects the strengthening of their national identity, and that the different level of study does not significantly affect the impact of these means on the strengthening of their national identity. These results support the findings of a study conducted in 2019 (Al-Harbi, 2019)

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The main objective of this study was to examine the extent to which young Saudis use social media and identify the impact of social media use on the strength of their national and cultural identities. Its findings demonstrate that a very large proportion of young Saudis use social media on a daily basis. The results also indicate that the use of social media has had a significant positive impact on the national identity of the Saudi youth. The results also confirmed that there were no differences between males and females in the average student responses to the impact of social media on national identity. In addition, there are no differences in the impact of social media on the national identity between the study samples according to academic level. Accordingly, it is recommended that students be trained in the procs and cons of social media in regard to national identity, and in how to identify and critically analyze the intellectual and political ideas they come across through social media. It is also recommended that students be directed to social media sites that are credible in addressing issues and problems related to identity, belonging, and citizenship. In addition, faculty members are encouraged to establish electronic scientific and cultural forums and encourage students' participation in them.

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