

Use of Social Media in the United Arab Emirates: An Initial Study

By Badreya Nasser Abdullah Al Jenaibi*

United Arab Emirates University

Much attention has been paid to the way protestors of the “Arab Spring” employed social media to elicit change, and in some cases, revolution (IPL2- News and Information, 2011). As the Western media chronicle the momentous changes in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, it is also beginning to take note of unrest other places like Yemen, Syria, Jordan and Morocco (*Technology Review*, 2011). Suggestions have been raised about how media might have been as a catalyst for a region-wide uprising. To many Western observers, the political, social, and economic transformations in the Middle East and North Africa appear to have arrived suddenly and dramatically. However, these uprisings speak to a set of underlying changes that were occurring in the Arab World at least since the previous decade (Byman & Wise, 2002; Fawcett, 2009). Deep social, political, and economic problems clearly underlie the unrest. Protesters in these countries have demanded that issues such as corruption and income disparities within their societies be addressed through various means (*Washington Post*, 2011; Hunter, 2011; Neumann, 2011). But how has social media served as a vehicle for advancing social transformation?

Extensive literature exists detailing the myriad ups and downs associated with social media across the globe (Feenberg, 2002). As far as the Arab world is concerned, to the surprise of many in the West, social media usage has been extensive. Yet there is no current, comprehensive and accurate accounting of social media use in the UAE although some estimates and data are available. One source ranked UAE users fifth among Middle East countries in usage, after Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel and Syria (Internet Usage Statistics, 2011). With 3,777,900 Internet users out of a population estimated by the UAE federal government as 8.4 million as of June 10, 2011, nearly 76% of the population has access to the Internet, one of the highest penetrations in the world, according to International Communication Union. The World Bank, using population

* Badreya Al-Jenaibi is assistant professor in mass communication at the United Arab Emirates University. Her research interests include international communication, public relations, and mass media effects. She holds a Ph.D. in International Communication and Public Relations (2008) from the University of North Dakota in the USA. E-mail: aljenaibi@uaeu.ac.ae.

figures lower than up-to-the-minute, official UAE census data, estimates Internet penetration at 82.2%, which is higher than in the United States.

An in-depth social media study by the market research firm Grafdom (2011) gauged the UAE's top 100 most influential corporate brands, individuals and events through measuring their presence on three top new media sites: Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Because of the study's aggregated scores based on the number of followers or subscribers of their social media profile, it serves indirectly as a measure of new media usage itself. Of the three, it found Facebook by far the most popular choice (72%). Twitter usage was significant (27 %) though about a third of Facebook's. Between 2009 and 2010 Twitter usage in the Arab region was estimated to around 5.5 million users (Arab Crunch, 2010), an impressive 136.5% annual growth rate. About 40% of that growth came from the UAE. By comparison, YouTube usage was minimal at 1%, but this may be explained by the typical non-commercial/entertainment emphasis on YouTube.

The potential political impact of social media has been discussed for some time (Nelson, Clawson & Oxley, 1997; *TBS Journal*, 2005). In terms of communication, social media has been recognized as having deeply altered "the information landscape" (Berenger, 2004; Bvuma, 2011). "Social media is increasingly recognized as a key tool for outreach and information for a wide range of public and private organizations and institutions in the UAE" (U.S. Embassy Abu-Dhabi, 2011). Studies have revealed that new technology has granted the inhabitants of the Arab world access to novel sources of information (Dewey, 2011). Ironically, to a large extent the rapid growth rate for social media in this region of the world has been fuelled by increasing censorship and government regulation of popular sites like Facebook and *Orkut* (Media Me, 2010). Although Arabs have rapidly adapted new technologies to their needs, online privacy concerns are highly sensitive issues in the Middle East, and in some cases protective actions have been taken (Borenstein, 2008).

In the recent uprisings in both Tunisia and Egypt, the tools of social media played a crucial role in mobilization. In Tunisia, demonstrators used Facebook as a prime source of information, as a way to organize protests, and as a means of tracking the activities of protesters who were hundreds, or even thousands of kilometers away (Wright, 2011). It also turned out to be a crucial resource for tracking the minute-by-minute progress of state actors. In Egypt, users of a fashion Website known as Polyvore posted icons with political slogans like, "My spirit is with the people of Egypt" (*Technology Review*, 2011, Para, 2). In Libya, the government periodically cut off public access to the internet, a move which has been seen in part as a technique for stifling communication between demonstrators and other parts of the world (Scola, 2011). Efforts by Egypt and Tunisia to block the usage of the social media during protests largely failed (Berry, 2011). The government in Egypt, in an extraordinary move, shut down the Internet and cellular services indefinitely (IPL2- News and Information, 2011; Azam, 2011; Nguyen, 2011). Yet social media like e-mail, Twitter, blogs and many others turned out to be vital tools for

organizing and amplifying the cause of demonstrators (Sánchez, 2011). Although the Internet was shut down by the government, the Tweets kept coming (Reich, 2011).

Clearly, social media has significantly contributed to the crafting of strong bonds across the Arab world (Satti & Mohamed-Nour, 2005). At a basic level, social media serves as means of communication and exchange of ideas (Luna, 2011), and it can facilitate political dialogue (Ghazi, 2011). Some researchers claim that social media has promoted a more open ideology across the Arab world that supports sincerity and intelligibility in state formation (Gitelman & Pingree, 2003). Yet a number of observers of social media across the world argue that the role of social media has been exaggerated. Scholars like Murphy and Zweiri (2011) argue that long-standing social forces must be the focus for analyzing the protests in Tunisia and Egypt, not just anecdotal evidence that social media use created the tipping point toward demands for regime change. Still, many agree that social media played an integral role in the uprisings of the Arab Spring. The impact of social media has its supporters and detractors (Compassioninpolitics.wordpress.com, 2008).

Little is still known at the most basic levels about new media use in the UAE. While the leading events of the Arab Spring have garnered the greatest attention, the mix of social transformation, potential political upheaval, and technology in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has been relatively absent from the literature. With a total population estimated by the government of 8.2 million, the UAE is located in the southeastern part of the Arabian Peninsula and is bordered by Oman and Yemen to the south, Saudi Arabia to the West, and the Arabian Gulf on the East including the strategic, narrow Strait of Hormuz. It is a quasi-federation of monarchies ruled by emirs, and consists of the emirates Abu Dhabi (the capital), Ajman, Dubai, Fujairah, Ras al-Khaimah, Sharjah and Umm al-Quwain. Islam is the official religion, and Arabic is the official language. Only about 12% of its population is ethnically Emirati; the remainder consisting of permanent residents of the Indian Subcontinent, Chinese, Filipino, Thai, Iranian, and Western residents. It has one of the world's highest net immigration rates, which has contributed to a 75% growth in population over the past five years. It also has one of the highest per capital incomes in the Middle East, comparable to many Western countries. Nearly three-fourths of the residents regularly use the Internet, one of the highest penetrations in the world.

This study seeks to lay the basis for understanding the place of social media in the UAE, and to contribute to the analysis of the issue of social change as a whole for the region. Given the paucity of previous studies in the emirates, the current study must be considered as an initial exploration of the complex dynamics of social media use in the UAE, and a beginning for future research.

This study focused on answering the following research questions:

- Which kind of social media have UAE residents chosen and why?
- What do UAE residents see as the main benefits of using social media?

- What level of trust in social media do UAE residents possess?
- What do UAE residents see as the main drawbacks or challenges that face acceptance of social media in the country?

Theoretical Background

Social media is still too new to have a well-accepted definition, but there is some agreement about its general characteristics. Social media facilitates the pace and quality of interactions via an interwoven web of people, cultures and organizations and /or institutions (Manovich, 2001; Infante, Rancer & Womack, 1997; Scott 2007). Weiner has defined it as media that enables the transformation of enormous amounts of electronic information. It allows any number of users to access, merge, and sequence information according to their preferences and requirements. It therefore can transcend boundaries dictated by a given topic (Weiner, 2006). The pre-history of social media is often traced back to the 1940's ideas of Norbert Wiener (Bush, 1990) and his concept of "cybernetics" (Pfaffenberger, 1990, p. 1). Subsequent incarnations include Ted Nelson's 1965 definition of social media as "a merger or hybrid of the library, the newspaper, and television, implemented on a small computer" (Nelson, 1990), and McLuhan's conceptualization of "hot media" and "cool" media as extensions of humans' five senses (McLuhan, 1967, p. 26). These definitions have variously emphasized aspects such as human-machine interaction, the power of information transfer, and the idea of information as having deep personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences. For the purposes of this paper, social media will be defined as "media for social interaction, using highly accessible and scalable communication techniques, such as the use of web-based, mobile technologies, to turn communication into interactive dialogue."

According to Blumler (1979), an audience utilizes the media to achieve three objectives. The first is to create meaning of the social world. The second is to learn how to act within a society, and the third factor is to derive pleasure or entertainment. But not every person is affected by the media equally because not everyone has the same needs (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976).

Ball-Rokeach and DeFluer (1989) have theorized that society, media, and its audience develop a relationship and that the more the society depends on the media to operate, the more the media have influence on it. The extent of audience reliance then serves as a main variable in forecasting media effects (Ball-Rokeach, Power, Guthrie, & Waring, 1990). Meticulous audience dependence upon media leads to the authority that media has over that particular audience (Auter, 1992). The theory has also been found to be effective in explaining media effects during times of crisis (Donohew, Palmgreen, & Rayburn, 1987), and for illuminating the manner in which government control of the media is utilized to control the society. For example, it was

used during a study to explain the manner in which China utilized its control of the mass media in order to affect the inhabitants (Hearns-Branaman, 2009).

The strength of media system dependency theory has been its explanatory power: it is relatively simple to apply, it provides a basis for describing escalating crises, and it is multidimensional. Given the need to look critically at theory, however, it is worth noting its weaknesses as well (Littlejohn, 1999, pp. 351-354). A notable shortcoming is that media system dependency theory tends to be static, with less power to explain long-term media effects. However, it will serve the current purposes of evaluating links between social media use and UAE residents.

Research Methodology

This study investigated the following categories of social media: *blog* (a Website typically offering material posted by an individual in reverse chronological order); *microblog* (blog consisting of very short posts); *social network service* (online sites focusing on building relationships between people); *video-sharing service* (online service allowing individual uploading, viewing, and downloading of video content); *social bookmarking* (Website facilitating the management of bookmarks referencing online resources); *image-sharing* (online service allowing individual uploading, viewing, and downloading of photo/image content); and *opinion sharing sites* (websites where individuals can post and debate opinions on various topics).

The study used a multi-method approach that combined qualitative and quantitative methods to produce a complementary set of data regarding practices involving a number of variables (Bryman, 1988; Kelle, 2006; Stenbecka, 2001; Strier & Kurman, 2009).

The quantitative component consisted of 556 surveys. Originally, 600 surveys were distributed among a sample of employees, teachers, managers and students across the seven emirates of the United Arab Emirates. The questionnaires used in the tabulation represent 286 males and 270 females. In terms of age, the participants were relatively young, between 20 and 35. This age range was chosen to reflect the dominant age group for social media use in the UAE. The respondents' level of education was relatively high: 366 were university and/ or college graduates, while 190 were high school graduates. More survey participants worked in the public sector (383) than in the private sector (173). The sample included a combination of employed and unemployed persons, as well as workers from both the private and public sectors to better represent a small cross section of UAE society.

To enhance reliability, different worded forms were used to measure the same attribute without changing meaning (Metveev, 2002). Test-retest reliability was measured by having the same respondents complete a survey at two different points in time to assess response stability.

Unrealistic surveys that showed clear contradictions and inconsistencies (such as answers about media about which users denied familiarity) were eliminated.

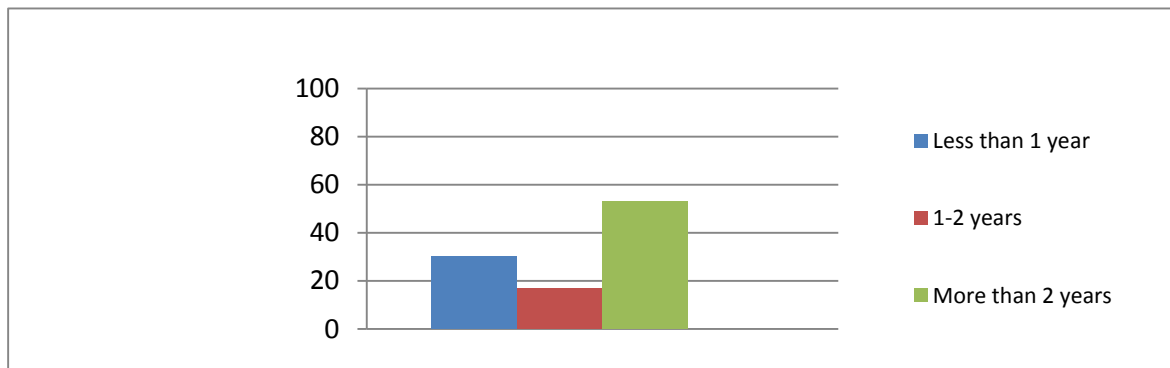
Survey results are provided in graphic form in the following section.

The qualitative component consisted of the use of a focus group session involving nine individuals associated with the Al-Ain educational zone of Abu Dhabi, UAE University and Abu-Dhabi University. Six were graduate students, and three were employees. Their fields of study consisted of: communication (3), information technology (2), education, engineering, and law. The group was made up of five females and four males, and their ages ranged between 25 and 66 years. All participants held a B.A. degree. The session lasted one hour and a half. Participants chose to remain anonymous. Focus group data is analyzed comparatively with survey data (Coomber, 1997) in the Discussion section.

Results

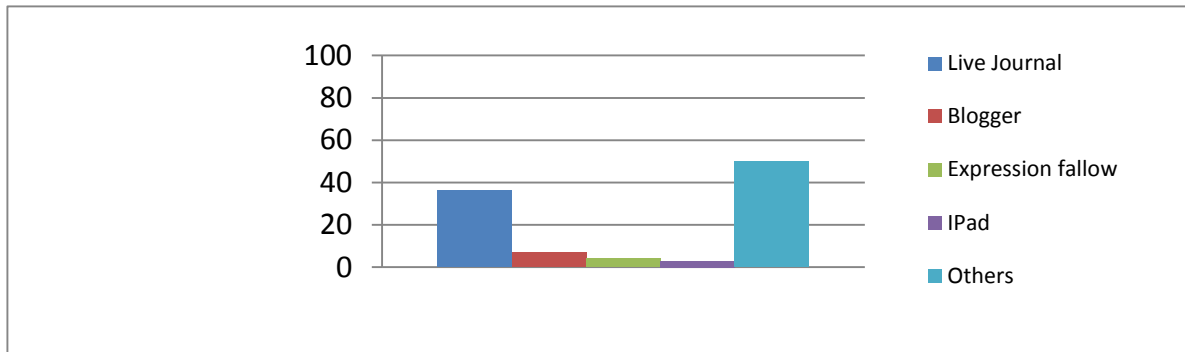
Note: Because users could select more than one choice, figures shown often reflect overlap and do not always total to 100%.

Figure SQ 1: How long have you been using social media sites?



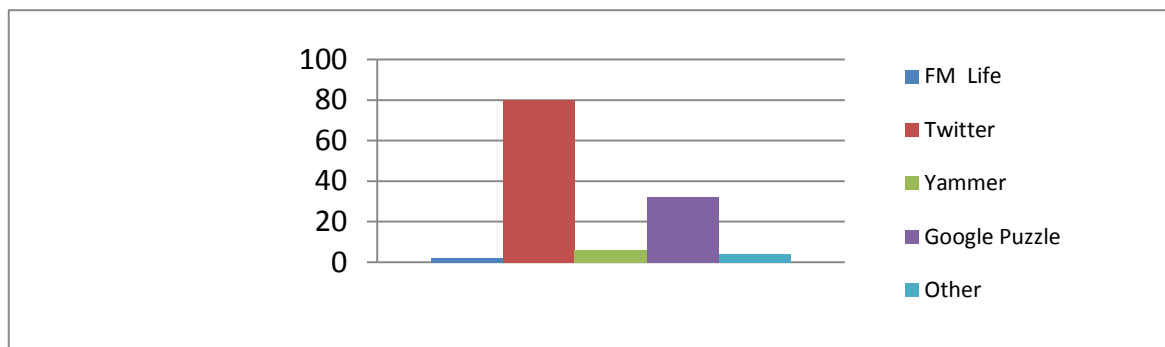
The percentage of respondents who used various blogs/Websites varied significantly. Live Journal was used by most of the respondents. One of the reasons why Live Journal was so popular among the UAE residents is because it has many users around the world. Moreover, it permits the user to post gossip and photos covering, for example, popular Disney studio stars (Live journal, 2011).

Figure SQ2: Which blog site do you visit and make use of regularly?



There are several explanations as to why many people in UAE use Twitter as opposed to other micro-blogging sites. First, Twitter has been embraced by several celebrities. Second, it offers security features like warnings about unauthorized use and “shielding” to selectively enable others to posts (WPRI, 2009).

Figure SQ3: Which micro-blogging site do you use or have a subscription to?



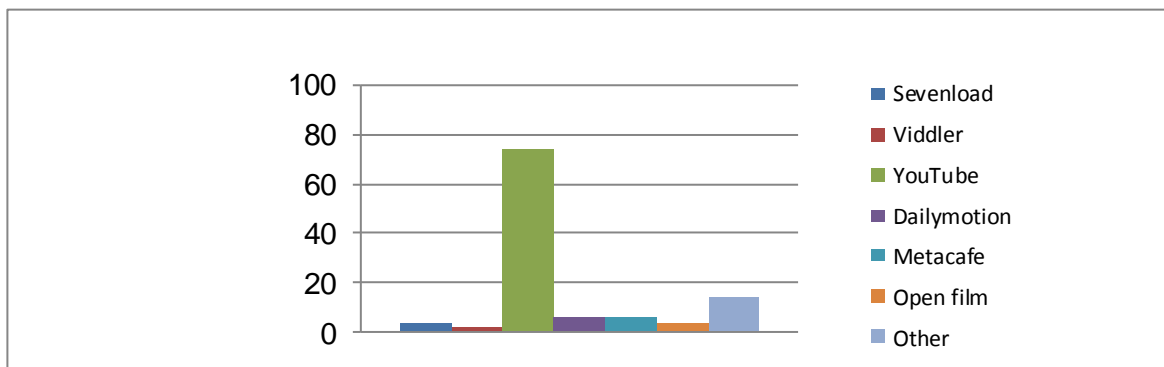
The majority of the respondents stated that they used Facebook since it has many applications as compared to other social networking sites. Such applications include games and tests (Weiner, 2006). Also, it allows its users to send gifts to their friends.

Figure SQ4: Which social networking sites have you subscribed to?



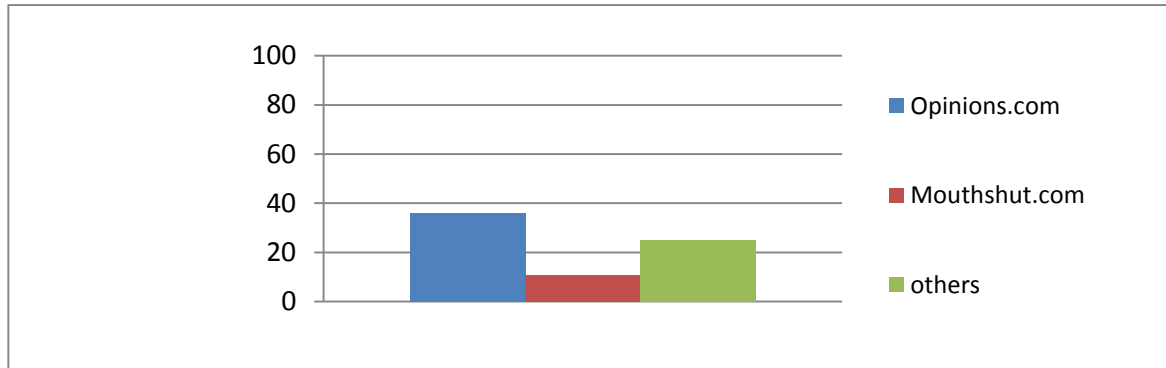
Most of the participants use YouTube to share videos since it is considered to be the primary site for sharing of videos (Compassioninpolitics, 2008). Also, respondents stated that it lets them comment upon and rate videos.

Figure SQ5: Which video sharing sites do you use regularly?



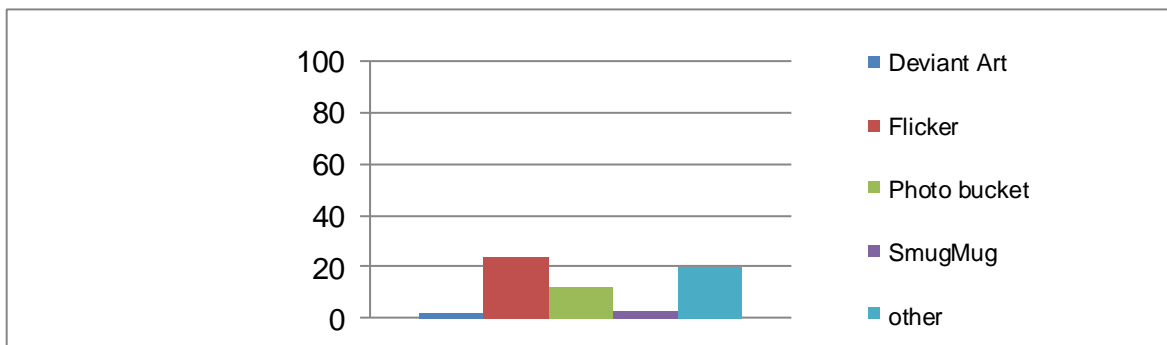
Google Reader is a web-based reader for RSS feeds (C.net, 2007). User noted that Google Reader enabled them to find feeds on interested websites easily view Web content.

Figure SQ6: Which social bookmarking site(s) do you use to manage and view online resources?



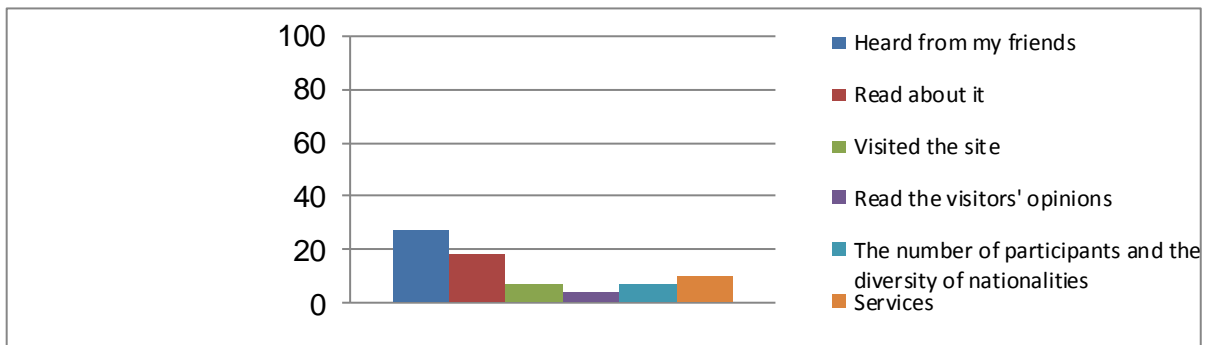
Opinions.com enables users to voice their opinions about firms and products (Killeerstartups, 2007). Respondents who used Opinions.com praised it as a good source of real consumer advice.

Figure SQ7: What do you believe is the most popular image sharing website in this emirate?



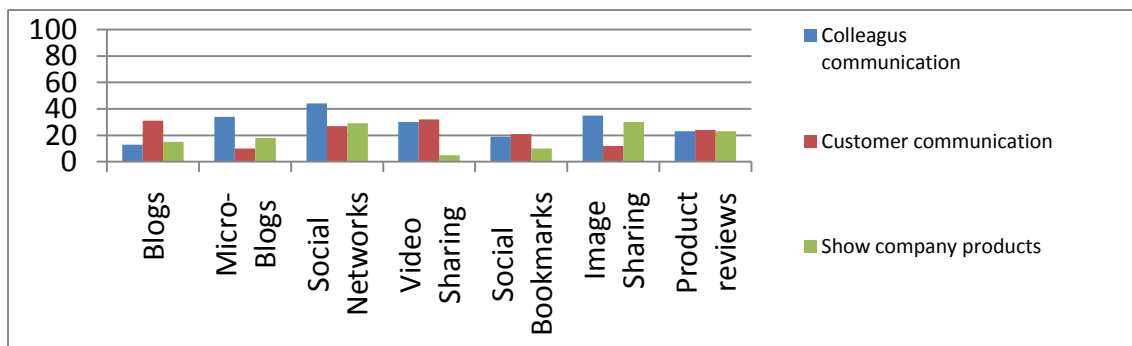
According to Scott (2007), image-sharing Websites like Flickr serve U.S. users as a source of knowledge and motivation. Most respondents preferred Flickr, and noted how it made it easy for a person to discover excellent, lesser-known and reasonably priced photographers.

Figure SQ8: How did you find out about the Website that you use/visit most often, and why did you chose it?



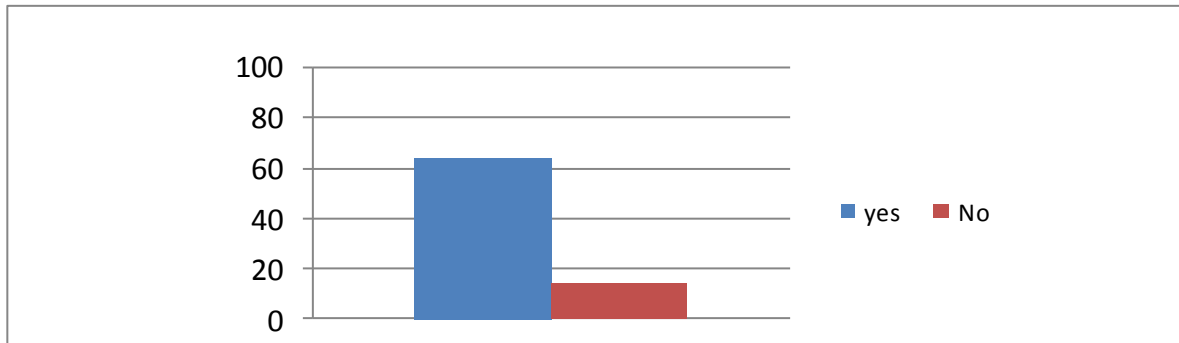
Social media has provided a means for friends to be more open regarding their social life and shared experiences (Al-Shagra, 2010). Of the various sources for learning about a new website provided, the most frequent source for finding a website was by hearing about it from friends.

Figure SQ9: Which type of social media do you think has the capability of relaying the most information to customers/friends/workmates/schoolmates, and why?



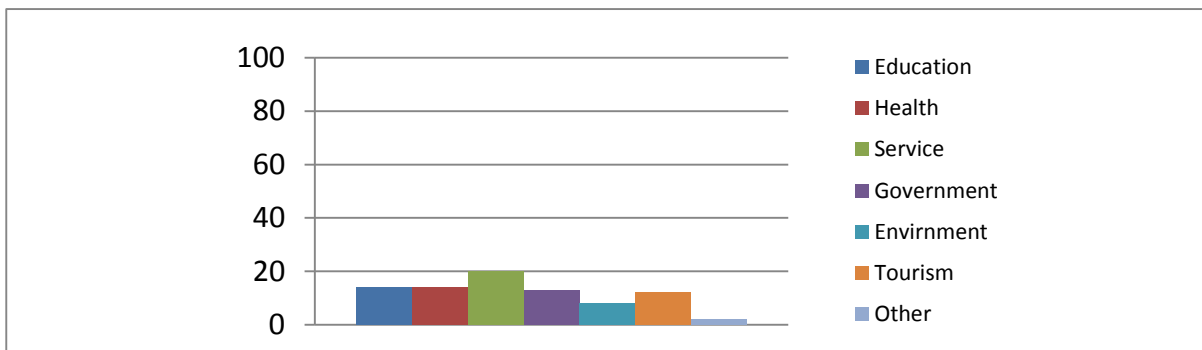
As a source of information, most respondents found social networking sites to offer leads which they could not have access to using other sites. They also agreed with Jain (2010) that blog and micro-blogging sites could give a company an enhanced voice in terms of customer service.

Figure SQ10: Do you trust the social media that you have signed up with and use regularly?



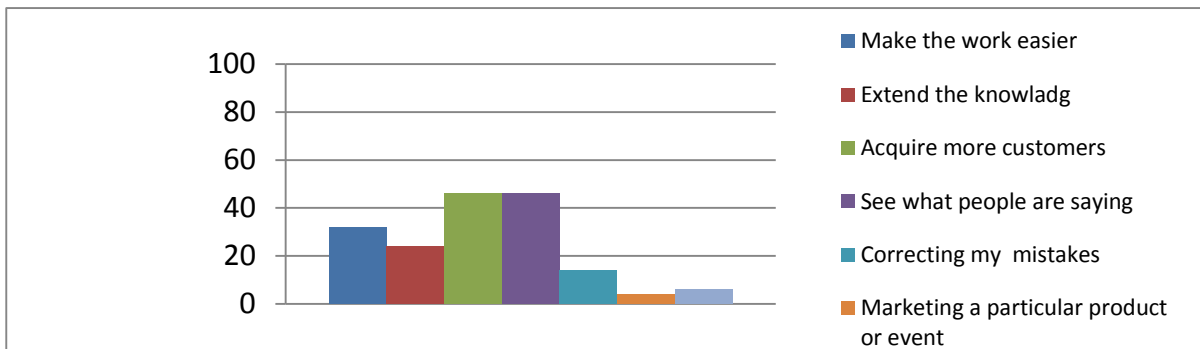
Weiner (2006) has noted that individuals can develop a trust in a social media website to accurately share personal experiences. Most UAE participants responded that they trusted the media they used with their colleagues and friends.

Figure SQ11: Which sectors of the UAE economy do you think utilize social media to reach the general public and persons situated in other countries of the world?



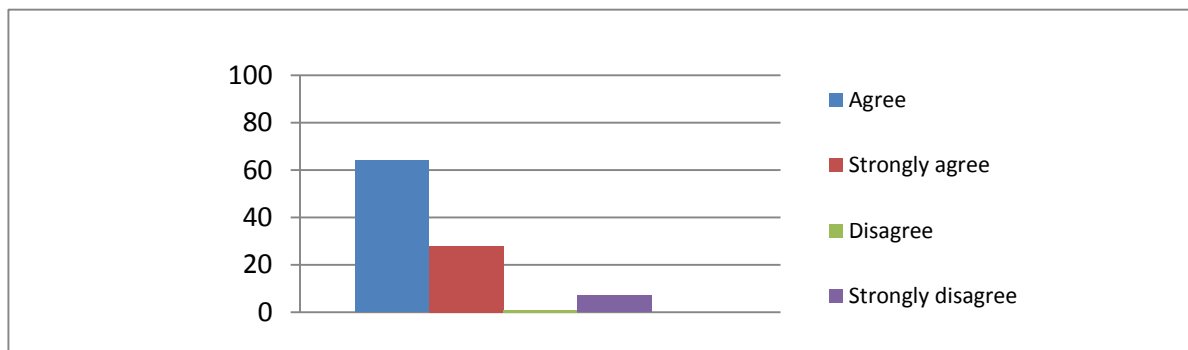
Social media has an unprecedented ability to reach many people at any given time (Menon, 2008). Most participants use social media to attract more customers to their business ventures and meet others.

Figure SQ 12: What are some of the positive and/ or negative impacts of using social media within the organization and/or institution?



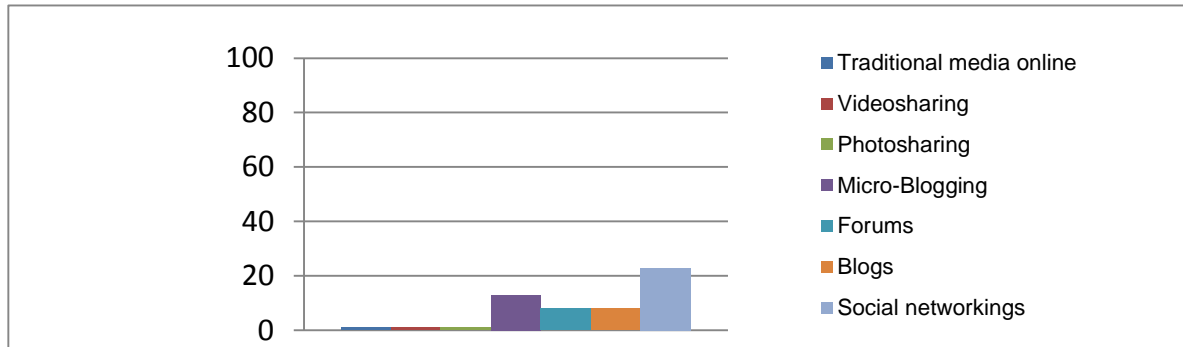
Social media has played a role in promoting the UAE as a “place that’s very connected to the world; a hub for cultures, business and people” (Menon, 2008, par 7). Sherman (2010) even found that social media can help individuals write more precisely. Respondents reported a number of positive impacts for social networking.

Figure SQ13: Do you agree that social media has changed communication habits in society?



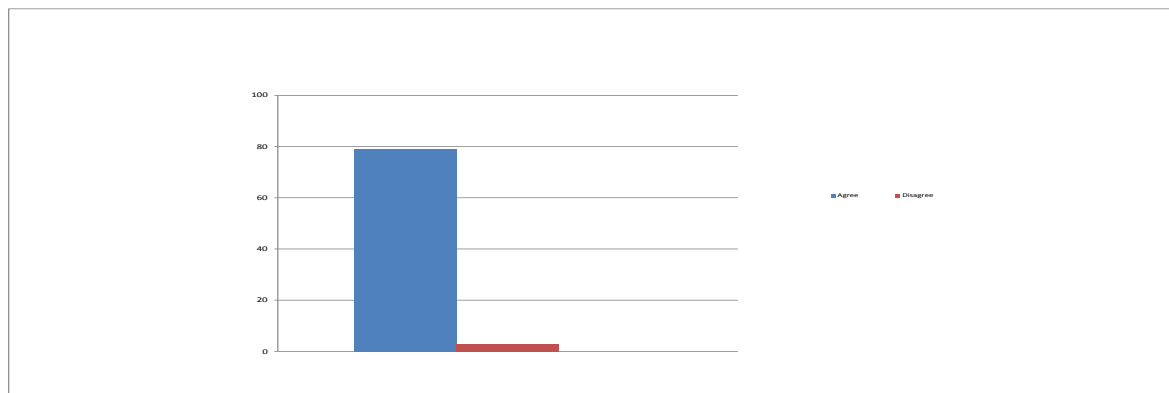
Scholars have noted that social networking can be more effective than traditional forms of communication in terms of rapid response, something that companies can use to advantage to act on a query or complaint immediately (Faraidooni, 2011). Respondents strongly agreed that it has changed communication habits in society.

Figure SQ14: Which type of social media do you use frequently in order to share your ideas?



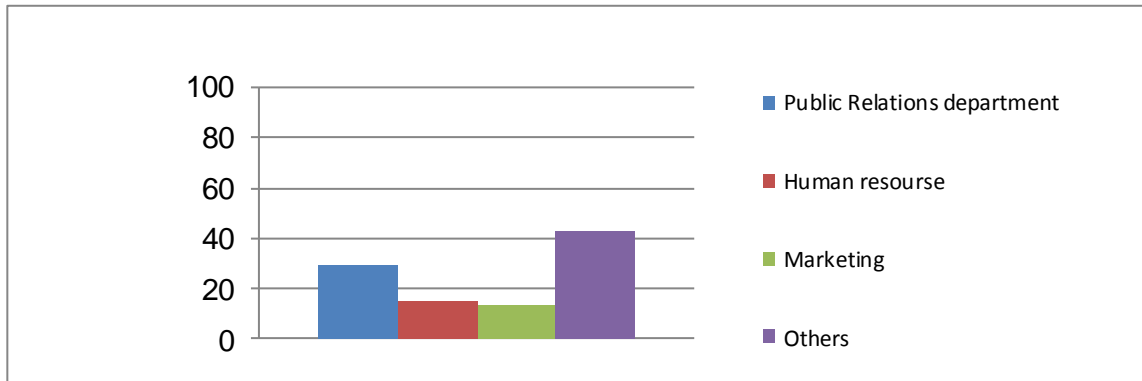
According to the just released second edition of the Arab Social Media Report (ASMR) by the Dubai School of Government (DSG), the UAE has over 2.4 million Facebook users out of a total official population of 8.26 million, resulting in a penetration rate of 29.13% – highest among Gulf countries (Kapur, 2011), if not the Middle East. Thus, it is not surprising that social networking was reported as the most common type of social media used frequently. Those who mentioned that they have been using social media for over two years reported that they used it to look for business information and to seek suggestions and opinions.

Figure SQ15: Do you think that social media has significantly contributed to the development of communication skills among its users?



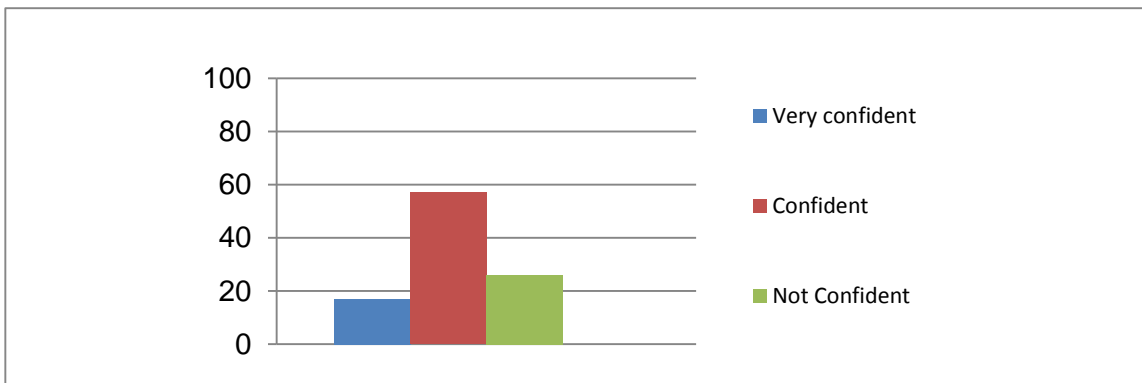
Social media has been found to aid in developing communication skills, such as writing (Bvuma, 2011). There are several reasons that were indicated regarding whether social media may possibly improve communications. These included enabling a person to more precise and allowing a person to exercise his or her vocabulary.

Figure SQ16: If you are working, which department(s) in your organization make(s) the most use of various kinds of social media?



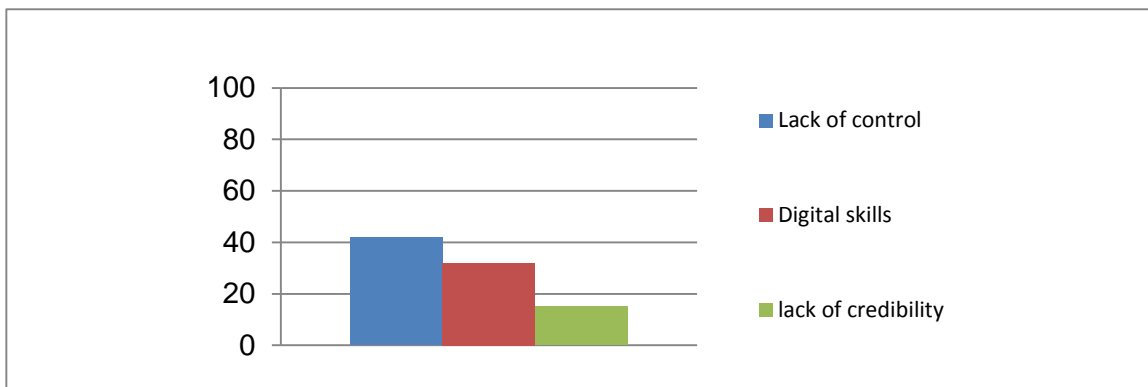
Social media is mostly used for public relations. The usage of the various kinds of social media in PR departments permits genuine brands to be noticeable (Singer, n.d.). In the UAE a survey was conducted by market research firm YouGovSiraj, through their online Omnibus service during February 2010. It covered a sample size of more than 750 people across the Emirates and included multiple income groups, ages, and nationality groups. About 70% of the sample group stated that they would look for online reviews before making a purchase decision, while over 80% of them said that they would look for the Website of the seller. Online reviews and press releases are one of the PR jobs (AME, 2010).

Figure SQ 17: How confident are you that you have enough knowledge about the use of various social media tools?



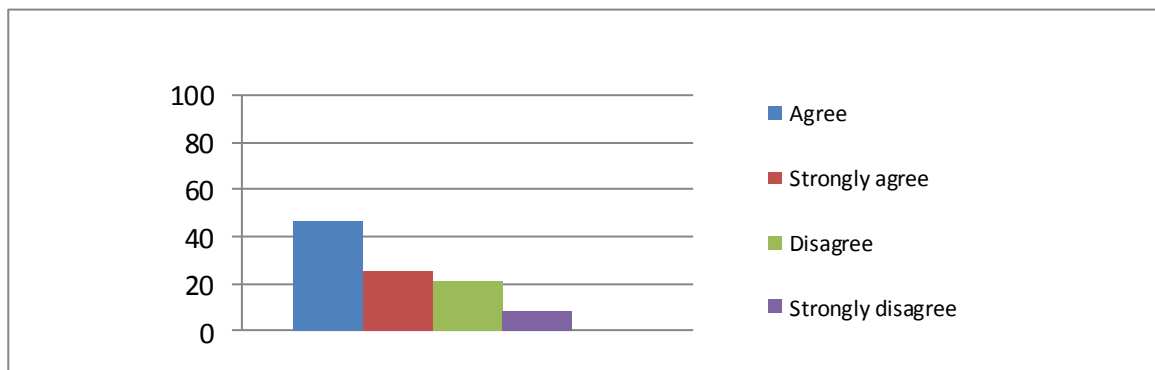
Those who reported that they did not have enough knowledge about the use of social media acknowledged that knowledge about social media tools ought to be coupled with usage (Weiner, 2006).

Figure SQ18: What do you think are some factors that hinder the use of social media among some people/employees?



U.S. scholar Losasso (2011) has stated that language difficulties can delay the access to Websites, blogs and social media in general. Most respondents agreed that language barriers may possibly hinder the use of social media.

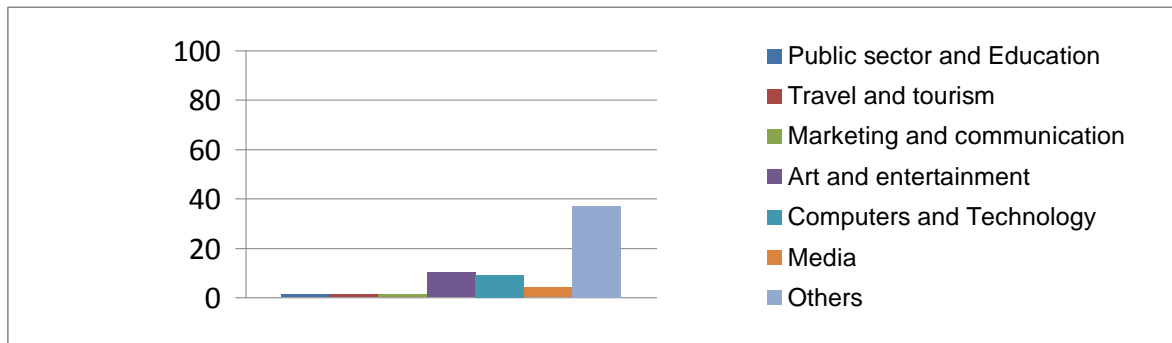
Figure SQ19: Do you think that social media relays accurate and credible information as compared to traditional media?



Social media can help overcome the prohibitive costs of marketing for many firms and respond to requirements for rapid response (Simon Mainwaring, 2009). Respondents who

reported that social media relayed accurate information stated that it permits brands to adapt to consumer buying almost instantaneously.

Figure SQ 20: Which sectors and/ or industries do you think they may be positively influenced by social media?



The UAE public sector normally utilizes social media to collaborate on public service delivery in a creative way (Moore, 2011). Also, they use it in order to engage the inhabitants in government processes. The public sector, along with computers and technology, ranked highest in terms of sectors that could be positively influenced by social media.

Usage of Social Media

A fundamental question that was considered in the study was the frequency of social media use. The question is particularly important given theories regarding the interdependence that occurs once media use becomes substantial.

Both quantitative and qualitative analyses show that social media has a very strong presence in the lives of these UAE participants. The following comments were typical: “Yes, communication through emails, blogs, and Facebook increased in the UAE – I posted my news and photos in my Facebook” and “I prefer emailing, sharing stories, discussing and spending more time on my PC.” Strong usage statistics are exhibited in major categories. When questioned regarding length of use, more than half of the participants (53%) reported using social media for over two years. A significant percentage of newcomers (25%) had begun using social media within the previous year. One way of measuring levels of usage is to ask how confident users are in their ability to use social media Websites. Confident usage suggests substantial familiarity and experience. A strong majority of participants (57%) felt “confident” in the knowledge they possessed about various social media sites, and nearly a fifth (17%) felt “very confident” in their

skills. Attitudes toward social media were also quite positive, suggesting a generally favorable level of interaction with these sites by residents. When queried about the ability of social media sites to credibly and accurately relay information as compared with traditional media, far more either agreed (46%) or strongly agreed (25%), than disagreed (21%) or strongly disagreed (8%) that such sites were reliable in this manner.

In general, UAE respondents favored the same category-leading sites popular in the West and worldwide (Abdel-Azim, 2010). The social network service of choice was Facebook, which was identified as the service of choice by 86% of respondents (followed by LinkedIn at 56% and MySpace 36%). This is consistent with the 2011 Grafdom study, which found that the UAE had the highest Facebook usage of all Arab countries. Twitter usage (40%) was higher than Grafdom found, but this may be due to the relatively high percentage of young and educated participants in this survey's sample. Some 336 survey participants were university and/or college graduates who must frequently conduct online searches and manage search results. The high use of Google Reader surveyed is therefore not surprising.

The video-sharing site YouTube proved dominant (74%) in its category for survey takers. This result was higher than might be predicted from the Grafdom research, which had YouTube lagging far behind Facebook. Many interviewee comments emphasized the use of YouTube for entertainment purposes – to watching videos and post their own videos. The discrepancy in YouTube use with the Grafdom study might be explained by the fact that the Grafdom study leaned more heavily on commercial aspects of video sharing sites rather than its use for exchange among individuals. YouTube also is used for public education. For example, Etisalat Telecommunication Company supplied programming on YouTube that many UAE parents encouraged their kids to watch (DubaiIfaq, 2011).

The response in terms of blog usage was distinctive. While Blogger and WordPress are the most used blog sites in the West, UAE respondents identified LiveJournal most often as their blog of choice (36% for LiveJournal versus 7% for Blogger). Focus group response suggests that the reason for this is the attraction brought by the strong representation of international users in LiveJournal's user base. The relatively no-frills and technically demanding features of LiveJournal (Livejournal, 2011) suggests that respondents possessed a substantial skill set for taking advantage of social media features.

Most participants agreed that the use of social media is on the rise in the current teenage and adult population (Twitter, YouTube, the iPhone, Blackberry, and iPad were mentioned frequently). They had a clear conception of a wide range of uses for it, defining it as useful for contacting others, discussions, searching for information, selling products and logos, making announcements, and distributing surveys. But when surveyed about how they initially came upon a social media site, only 10% specifically mentioned the attraction of features. Some 27%

reported that they subscribed to a given site after being referred by a friend and 18% after hearing about the site, perhaps through advertising or public relations (Dave, 2008; Singer, n.d.).

Perceived Benefits of Social Media

Social media appealed to most participants as both entertainment and for more practical reasons. Survey respondents mentioned that they liked the games, tests, and gift-giving features of Facebook. Their choice of a particular social networking site was based on the perception that it offered leads that competing sites did not offer. For another popular site, YouTube, they liked the ability to comment upon and rate videos. They liked the convenience offered by social bookmarking sites like Delicious for managing and viewing websites. Flickr was mentioned as a means of finding excellent photos of lesser known photographers.

In terms of more practical considerations, when surveyed about the potential benefits of social media to improve a person's communication skills, an overwhelming number (97%) agreed. They mentioned its aid in making communication more precise, in expanding vocabulary, and in developing writing skills. Results also describe the usage and benefits of social media for managers who need to communicate internally and externally. When surveyed about which departments would be most likely to use social media to advantage, the largest share (29%) went to public relations departments, while the second spot was roughly shared equally by public government use (15%) and use by management (11%).

The usefulness of the technology for managers correlates with a study that included more than 3,000 human resources and finance/accounting managers from 13 countries in Europe, South America and the Middle East, which found that 66% of UAE managers indicated that they use social networking sites a minimum of two to three times a week (Half, 2010). This was compared to the global average of 49% of respondents who describe themselves as somewhat-active users. Only respondents from Brazil (75%), Spain (72%) and Ireland (70%) were more likely to identify themselves as more active users than those from the UAE. More than half of those surveyed in the UAE (58%) said they would check the online profile of a candidate when looking to fill an open position" (Half, 2010).

Levels of Trust and Concern about Social Media

Participants expressed both a level of trust and distrust in the social media that they used frequently regardless. Four interviewees were found not to trust social media sources because of the extent to which political and social news would differ significantly from one online source to another. Also, many noted that personal interests are involved in blog entries, Twitter (or other microblog) messages, because any person can post his own opinion. Thus a recognition that

sometimes other social media users cannot distinguish between facts, opinions and news gave them a more guarded approach to what they saw online. In terms of trust, the response to Survey Question 10, which asked directly about trust, along with the often high usage statistics in various media categories, suggests substantial amount of trust exists among users. Overall, users can be said to have a “guarded trust” of the media, especially for media they feel operate correctly and protect their privacy.

As mentioned earlier, the relatively young and well-educated sample expressed much confidence in their own ability to work with social networking sites. However, over a quarter (26%) stated they were “Not Confident” with this medium. Even confident participants conveyed knowledge about the potential drawbacks of social media. Interestingly, the largest hindrance noted to the adoption of social media was a significant feeling of “lack of control” (42%). Reservations regarding skill level (32%) roughly matched with “Not Confident” levels, and about a third of those surveyed mentioned credibility and ethical problems as reasons for questioning social media.

The potential dangers of social media for UAE teenagers came out in focus group discussion. Participants noted threats to teenagers and even children under 10 years of age who are using Blackberries and chatting with older adults who are complete strangers. They mentioned their use of inappropriate pictures. The use of photo-sharing sites among survey participants was surprisingly small (24% used Flickr, 12% used Photobucket). This might be tied to a special sensitivity of the UAE population to issues of privacy.

Aside from morality, they mentioned the waste of time as children used these technologies during school time, against school policy. Participants suggested new legislation to prohibit access to these technologies by children: “Money is not more important than humanity. The USA doesn’t allow children under 18 purchase cigarettes, so we hope to likewise pass laws restricting access to new technologies like social media. YouTube videos, etc.” In describing their caution about social media, one respondent said, “It is like Wikipedia. Any person can create his/her own story and distribute it in the society. Uneducated people are victims of fake news when they cannot distinguish between lies and facts.” A significant number of survey respondents felt that lack of control was an important factor that could hinder the use of social media among employees and the public.

However, all participants agreed that social media is a vital source of news. They recognized their new day-to-day reliance to get fast news updates and acquire new friends. They also noted how people submitted videos and information to news outlets like Al-Jazeera after major media channels were blocked during the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya during the Arab Spring. They recognized the limitations of Arab media in the past, and said that new media has “opened a new world” for them. Part of this seems to include an ability to express interest in shopping and

commerce, as shown by the relatively strong participation in opinion sites like ePinion.com and Mouthshut.com.

Conclusion

The most popular types of social media in the UAE are generally the same as those used in other regions across the Middle East, North Africa, and beyond. These include social networks (Facebook), video-sharing sites (YouTube), and micro-blogging sites (Twitter), among others. UAE respondents were both generally skilled in the use of a variety of social media, and well aware of its potential ethical and practical limitations. It has served as a vital source and vehicle for news, information, business development, opinion sharing, cultural production, and entertainment. But residents were also well aware of its potential as a platform for making business and government practices more transparent, and its usefulness as a mobilizing platform for political change.

Further research is needed to determine the larger impact of social media, particularly on UAE youth and women. Also, further research should be conducted to determine a more complete picture of its benefits, liabilities, and potential in an area that maintains one of world's highest net migration rates.

In the UAE, and perhaps the Gulf region at large, social media has established its place as an integral and interdependent actor in society.

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