

Effects of Various Social Media on Users' Intercultural Communication Competence in Saudi Arabia

دور وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي في تعزيز كفاءة التفاعل والتواصل بين الثقافات لدى المستخدمين في المملكة العربية السعودية

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المستخلص:

في السنوات الأخيرة، حدث الكثير من التغيير في الاتصال بين الثقافات ويرجع ذلك إلى حد كبير لانتشار تطبيقات وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي حيث أصبح بإمكان الأفراد من مختلف البلدان والثقافات حول العالم أن يتواصلوا مع بعضهم البعض بواسطتها بكل سهولة وقد أصبحت جزءاً لا يتجزأ من حياة الناس اليومية حول العالم. وبالتالي، فإن آثار استخدام وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي على كفاءة التواصل بين الثقافات قد جذبت انتباه العديد من الباحثين. تبحث هذه الدراسة عن مدى تأثير تطبيقات الوسائط الاجتماعية المختلفة على كفاءة التواصل بين الثقافات لدى المستخدمين في المملكة العربية السعودية من خلال استكشاف تصورات المشاركين حول تأثيرات هذه التطبيقات على كفاءة التواصل بين الثقافات لديهم. وتستند هذه الدراسة إلى طرق البحث الكمي. شارك في هذه الدراسة 267 مشاركاً من خلال الإجابة على استبيان إلكتروني عبر الإنترنت مع مراعاة العوامل الديموغرافية المختلفة لدى المشاركين مثل العمر والجنس والمستوى التعليمي لدى كل مشارك. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تبحث الدراسة عن تطبيقات الوسائط الاجتماعية الأكثر شيوعاً في المملكة العربية السعودية والتي لها التأثير الأكبر على كفاءة التواصل بين الثقافات للمستخدمين. أظهرت الدراسة أنه في حين أن تطبيق واتس آب هو التطبيق الأكثر استخداماً في المملكة العربية السعودية إلى أن تطبيق تويتر هو الأكثر تأثيراً على كفاءة التواصل بين الثقافات لدى المستخدمين.

الكلمات المفتاحية: كفاءة التواصل بين الثقافات، وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي، واتساب، تويتر.

Abstract:

Intercultural communications have been transformed in recent years, largely due to the proliferation of social media applications. People from different countries and diverse cultures are now able to communicate with each other digitally, using multiple web-based communication platforms that have rapidly become an integral part of people's daily lives. Thus, the effects of social media use on the intercultural communication competence (ICC) of individuals has attracted the attention of many scholars. This study examines, in a Saudi Arabian context, the extent to which different social media applications affect users' ICC. The study is based on quantitative research methods, namely an online questionnaire to which 267 users responded. The study aims to explore participants' perceptions of the effects of different social media applications on their own ICC, taking into account various demographic factors such as the age, gender, and level of education attained by each participant. In addition, the study investigates which social media applications are most common in Saudi Arabia, and which have the greatest influence on users' ICC. The study's findings show that while WhatsApp is the most commonly used social media application in Saudi Arabia, Twitter is perceived to have the greatest effect on users' ICC.

Keywords: Intercultural Communications Competence, Social Media, WhatsApp, Twitter.

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Introduction

Thanks to the development of social media, people around the globe are now able to communicate with one another unrestricted by time or location (Sawyer & Chen, 2012). The rapid growth of the Internet, and Internet-based communications, have contributed to the multicultural and highly-globalized nature of the world we now live in. Web-based technologies allow people around the world to exchange messages quickly and easily, and social media applications, in particular, are an important way in which people – who may be separated by vast distances – can stay in touch with each other and feel connected to a range of social groups (Noels, Yashima, & Zhang, 2012, p. 52). Social media applications have been rapidly increasing in popularity around the world and, as more and more people begin to use them (Nayar & Raheja, 2015, p. 79), people in many countries have found that they can become connected to individuals beyond their own local community, and that they can build relationships with people who may be in diverse locations but with whom they share common knowledge, attitudes or ways of life (Sawyer & Chen, 2012).

Traditionally, divergent societies around the globe have cherished their own, often unique, cultural norms, religious beliefs, and social traditions. Web-based technologies, however, mean that people from different countries and societies are now interacting with each other regardless of geographical distance and cultural difference (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). This means that the potential for intercultural contact is now at an all-time high (Sawyer & Chen, 2012). In fact, the increase in the accessibility and use of social media networks has facilitated people's daily contact with citizens from different nations (Ali, 2011). To be able to function successfully in this new globalized world, where interaction with people from different societies is rapidly becoming routine and expected, people need to possess a sufficient degree of intercultural communication competence (Wright, 2013). In practical terms, this means they need a respectful understanding of the multiple and varying attitudes, values and customs held and practiced by citizens of

countries and/or communities other than their own (Wang & Zhang, 2012).

The main objective of the study presented here is to investigate whether social media applications have an impact on the intercultural communication competence (ICC) of their users, as assessed from the perspective of those users via their own perceptions. The study also aims to analyze the various demographic factors that may influence these perceptions. In addition, this study investigates which of Saudi Arabia's most commonly-used social media applications – namely Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, WhatsApp and YouTube – is or are most likely to affect users' ICC.

Literature Review

Social Media

Social media applications were first used in Saudi Arabia in 2007 (Cummins, 2015). Since then, the use of social media – both formal (for example, the use of social media platforms by Saudi officials and ministries) and informal (i.e. the day-to-day use of social media by people from all walks of life, throughout the country) – has continued to increase (Kutbi, 2015). As the number of people using the Internet has risen globally, so the use of social media has become increasingly embedded into people's daily routines, and in becoming so has normalized and promoted a sense of connection between users in diverse cultural groups (Sawyer & Chen, 2012). There are several reasons why people use social media applications. Firstly, social media applications are a way in which people can talk to and socialize with each other, without having to meet in person. Secondly, people can use social media to increase their knowledge of certain topics and to gain an awareness and/or understanding of the different ways in which other people view topical issues and events. Thirdly, people use social media to help fulfil a need for connectedness (Sawyer & Chen, 2012). According to Chayko (2014), the increase in the use of digital communication technologies comes from the need of the people to enhance the level of interconnectedness and interaction with other societies. Chayko (2014) emphasizes

that individuals can satisfy their various emotional, social, and other needs by strengthening their feeling of belonging, making new acquaintances, and engaging themselves in different social circles.

The current study will explore the effects of six social media applications – Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, WhatsApp, Twitter, and YouTube – on Saudi Arabia-based social media users' perceptions of their own ICC. The following few paragraphs describe the main features of each of those social media applications and the number of users in Saudi Arabia (Global Media Insight, 2019).

Facebook: This is a free-to-use social networking site that enables registered users to create personal profiles. Once users have created their profiles, they can post messages, photographs, and videos, and generally communicate with a wide circle of associates, friends, and relatives. It is estimated that there are more than 20.99 million users of Facebook in Saudi Arabia.

Twitter: This social networking site takes the form of a microblogging forum. Twitter allows users to post – or “tweet” – messages of 280 characters, or fewer, to their followers. It is used by many members of the public to share news articles, post hyperlinks and broadcast views. Twitter has about 18.96 million users in Saudi Arabia.

Instagram: This is an image-based social networking application that allows users to share photographs and video from their mobile devices. Global Media Insights data states that in 2019, more than 20.31 million people in Saudi Arabia were users of Instagram.

Snapchat: This is a video and picture sharing application for use with mobile devices. Its key purpose is to allow users to send contacts a photograph or video clip that, once sent and opened, only remains visible for up to 10 seconds before it is automatically deleted. It cannot then be re-opened or downloaded. There is also a second feature, the “Snapchat Story,” which enables the user to post a series of 10-second videos and/or images that remain visible and available for 24 hours. Most commonly, Snapchat users send their images to people on their contacts list, but they also have an option to restrict viewing to specific friends or expand viewing to make the images public. Since its launch in 2011, Snapchat has become

increasingly popular in Saudi Arabia, and now boasts more than 14.56 million active daily users in the country.

YouTube: This website was originally created for users to post original video clips; at the time this fulfilled a common need, as video files are often too large to send by email and there were, back then, few alternatives. Nowadays, YouTube is now also used by companies who wish to post clips to market their products, and the site is also regarded as a *de facto* archive for historic media content. Viewers can rate and comment on YouTube clips, and share them. For example, viewers who want to share videos hosted on YouTube can do so by sending a URL link to their contacts, each URL being, in effect, the address of the page on which the shared video is published. There are more than 24.71 million users of YouTube in Saudi Arabia.

WhatsApp: This is an instant messaging application for mobile devices. It allows users to send private messages to their contacts, without charge. In this way, it offers users a free alternative to sending SMS messaging services, which are often chargeable. WhatsApp also allows users to send data of various types, such as audio and video files, images, real-time location information, lists, and profiles of contacts. It was launched in 2009 and has achieved massive popularity worldwide, now having 24.37 million daily users in Saudi Arabia alone.

Intercultural communication competence (ICC)

ICC concept has elicited a lot of attention due to the continuous employment of this concept, and within a diversified environment (Cushner, 2012). However, it is widely acknowledged that defining, teaching, researching, and assessing ICC is fraught with several challenges that constitute an obstacle to an intelligible understanding of this concept (Chi & Suthers, 2015). These include challenges in defining cultural competence, in establishing individual characteristics and behaviors, in teaching people to negotiate cultural differences, in acculturating social contexts, as well as in evaluating intercultural interactions (Chi & Suthers, 2015). Defining cultural competence is one of the main issues that can be manifested in the disagreements among scholars about the two terms meaning and applicability. According to Vevea (2011), researchers defined ICC

differently based on their own definition of the word "competency". Some used the term "intercultural communication competence", while others used different terminologies, such as "global communication", "development communication", "cross-cultural awareness", "cross-cultural adjustment", "multiculturalism", and others (Vevea, 2011). Regardless of these differences, the term "intercultural competence" is noted to be the most frequently used term in the research literature (Perry & Southwell, 2011). According to Xue (2014), ICC is built on a tripartite relationship that involves the interaction of culture, communication, and language. It is generally referred to as the ability of people to communicate in an effective and appropriate way, while being aware of different cultural norms and recognizing the different identities possessed by those with whom they are communicating (Yueqin, 2013). Yueqin (2013) explains that ICC involves multi types of competencies related to the linguistic skills as well as the ability to perceive, comprehend and cope with sociocultural events and interactions. More specifically, ICC is made up of three strands, which comprise ideas that other researchers see as a single, albeit broad concept, and generally refer to it as "intercultural communication competence" (Chen and Starosta, 2000, as cited in Dollah et al., 2017). The first strand is intercultural sensitivity, which is the affective aspect of intercultural communication competence and is defined as people's ability to understand and appreciate cultural differences. The second is intercultural awareness, which is the cognitive aspect of intercultural competence and is defined as people's understanding of the cultural conventions that influence how people think and act. The third strand is intercultural adroitness, or the behavioral aspect, which is defined as the abilities people require to act effectively in multicultural interactions.

It is clear from the literature that intercultural communication competence does not clearly and unambiguously refer to a single set of skills and can instead be defined in many different ways (Izmaylova, 2017). Nevertheless, the literature reveals that researchers do incorporate certain common features in their definitions of ICC. One such common feature arises from the fact that a number of scholars – such as Bennett and Hammer, (2011), Fantini (2012), Paige and

Stallman Madden (2013), and Kecskes (2015) – see ICC as a continuum rather than as a single, discrete entity. In addition, scholars – such as Fantini (2012), Barrett et al., (2014), and Schwartz (2012) – highlight the importance of people being aware of their own cultural norms and values. Finally, several researchers – such as Barrett et al., (2014), Dai and Chen (2015), and Yueqin (2013) – emphasize how intercultural communication competence is a multi-faceted and complex notion.

The researchers above, who claim that intercultural communication competence is an evolving process, suggest that it is best represented as a continuum. According to Bennett and Hammer, (2011), developing cross-cultural sensitivity through one's ability to construct a reality that fits the cultural norms of others, necessitates progression through many phases. This can be noted in Fantini (2012), who emphasized about the continuing process of developing linguistic skills, which are major aspects in developing intercultural communicative competence. Evidence of ICC being a continuum process is also noted in the changes of individual behaviors, specifically, the responsibility of changing one's behavior to adopt with the different cultural contexts (Sam & Berry, 2010). Moreover, Barrett et al., (2014) perceive learning about other cultures as an ongoing process that involves the subject's thought processes, actions and emotions. Paige et al (2013) build on this argument with the claim that intercultural development refers to someone moving from a position of only being comfortable in his or her own cultural environment, to a position whereby they are able to function effectively within different cultural environments. Or, to put it more succinctly, shifting from being a monocultural to an intercultural citizen.

Another common strand running through the research is that if one is to understand others' cultural norms, one first needs to realize - and be able to analyze - one's own cultural point of view. According to Fantini (2012), Barrett et al., (2014), and Schwartz (2012), the ability to compare different cultures, including one's own, is key to intercultural communication competence. Baker (2012) argues that intercultural communication competence

comprise the ability to transfer awareness of one's own culture to that of different groups of society. Similarly, Fantini (2012) posits that intercultural communication competence stems from being able to communicate competently in one's own native culture.

The claim that intercultural communication competence is a complex and multi-faceted skill is made by several researchers. According to Barrett et al., (2014), an individual needs to possess a variety of complex skills so that he or she can communicate appropriately and effectively with people who speak a different language and/or live within a different culture. Similarly, Yueqin (2013) explains that ICC engages different components that interacts with one another at multiple levels, resulting in an extremely complex system of intellectual abilities.

Previous Studies

As social media applications become an increasingly important component of people's daily lives, they are also becoming a key forum for intercultural communication. This means, however, that social media users need to be aware of the cultural differences between themselves and their fellow users. Studies by authors such as Liu (2014), Wu and Marek (2018), and Gibson et al. (2015) have all concluded that for effective communication to take place, and for potential misunderstandings to be avoided, social media users must be aware of the differences between diverse cultures' norms, practices and values. In other words, social media users need to develop ICC.

Studies thus far have mostly focused on how communicating via social media has helped users to develop their ICC. In addition, such studies have mainly drawn their conclusions based on the use of social networking in an educational setting. For example, Studies conducted by Wu and Marek (2018), Ngai et al. (2020), Peng and Wu (2016), and Sousa et al., (2019) have all concluded that second-language learners were able to use social media to interact with people in different countries and with different cultures in a genuine and valuable way. Wu and Marek (2018) explored the reactions to American cultural videos among Taiwan and South African students. The study noted a progress in both, the English language and the

Intercultural competency, among students who engaged in cross-cultural contact via social media (Wu and Marek, 2018). Despite the fact that the interaction was across international borders, Wu and Marek (2018) noted that students were able to comprehend intercultural communication challenges through examining Sub-cultural groups in their country. Another study by Ngai et al. (2020) among Japanese students in US exploring the effectiveness of social media applications in enhancing intercultural skills among foreign students studying at the tertiary level. The study found that highest levels of intercultural competency among those who reported benefits of social media applications in connecting with others, as well as those with higher levels of interaction using these platforms (Ngai et al., 2020). Moreover, a study among Chinese college students reported maintaining intercultural contact through social media applications to be a factor the improve intercultural competence among student, and recommended their employment in educational programs for international students (Peng & Wu, 2016). A recent study by Sousa et al., (2019) has also explored the effect of intercultural contact, and emphasized that it can be considered as a predictor for cultural intelligence, however, it might vary depending gender and the educational level of participants. Furthermore, using social media in the classroom has also been shown to help students to be more in control of their learning and knowledge acquisition (Stevenson and Liu, 2010), to have a greater sense of connectedness (Lomicka and Lord, 2012), and to have a higher degree of intercultural awareness (Blattner and Fiori, 2011).

More research, however, is needed to investigate how the different types of social media affect the development of users' ICC. In light of this, the present study's main objective is to find out which social media application has the most effect on the development of ICC amongst users in Saudi Arabia.

Materials and Methods

They key topic of interest, upon which this study is focused, concerns users' perceptions regarding their use of different social media applications in Saudi Arabia, and how these affect their ICC. Previous research in this area has failed to

differentiate between the various types of social media application, and how each one affects the development of its users' ICC. This research aims to investigate which social media application has the greatest effect on the ICC of people in Saudi Arabia.

The main research questions posed in this study are:

- Q1. What are the effects of Social Media applications on the user's Intercultural Communication Competence in Saudi Arabia?
- Q2. Is there a difference in the effects of different social media applications on the efficiency of Intercultural Communication Competency for users?
- Q3. Does the differences in demographic characteristics influence and affect the perception of social media applications among users?

In this research study, the different types of social media represent independent variables, while the participants' ages, genders, levels of education, and degrees of ICC all represent dependent variables.

Several research hypotheses were developed, based on the variables outlined above.

- The first research hypothesis is that the most common app used in Saudi Arabia is WhatsApp
- The second research hypothesis is that social media in general has had an impact on the development of ICC among those people in Saudi Arabia who have used social media over the past five years.
- The third research hypothesis is that there will be a difference between social media applications in terms of how much each application has influenced the development of ICC among people in Saudi Arabia
- The last research hypothesis is that user's personal characteristics affect the extent to which their ICC is influenced by the social media.

To check these hypotheses, the author developed a questionnaire for distribution to participants. The questionnaire included three questions about respondents' general demographic characteristics, as well as three questions about

their social media use and five questions about their perceptions concerning the way(s) in which they felt their social media use had affected their ICC – if, indeed, they felt it had done so at all.

Before being distributed, the questionnaire was piloted and validated. The appendix to this paper shows the questionnaire in its final form.

The questionnaire was distributed online via Whatsapp, due to the popularity of this application in Saudi Arabia and its accessibility. Members of the first group to which the questionnaire was sent were asked to distribute the questionnaire to their own contacts, in order to reach the maximum number of participants within the time frame of the research and to ensure a diverse demography.

A statistical analysis of the collected data was conducted, and the results of the analysis presented graphically in the form of pie charts. All values were presented as percentages, representing the share of respondents with a specific characteristic. The statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS statistical software and Microsoft Excel.

The internal consistency reliability of the questionnaire was tested by Cronbach's α test. The chi-square test of contingency was performed to assess the effect of respondents' gender, age, level of education, and their perception of the effect of social media on their ICC. The P-value and Pearson's contingency coefficient were also calculated. The results for the respondents' main characteristics were visualized and presented in a pie chart.

Statistical Analysis

Cronbach's α test, which is suitable to analyze the internal consistency reliability of a questionnaire, was used for questions that required answers chosen from options on a Likert scale (Q7, Q8, Q9 and Q10). The potential answers were ranked as follows: strongly disagree = 1, disagree = 2, neutral = 3, agree = 4 and strongly agree = 5.

The chi-square test of contingency was performed to assess the influence of respondents' gender, age, level of education, and frequency of social media use on their perceptions of the effect(s) of that social media use on their own intercultural communication competence. The chi-square test values and statistical significance (at $P \leq 0.05$ and $P \leq 0.01$) were calculated, along with chi-square P-values

and values of a contingency coefficient. Results of the analysis were graphically presented as a pie chart, with all values as percentages.

Verification of the internal consistency of the questionnaire

As described above, the internal consistency (and thus, reliability) of the questionnaire in this study was assessed using Cronbach's α . For the four questions that required answers on a Likert scale (Q7, Q8, Q9 and Q10) a Cronbach's α test was applied. The obtained α value was 0.87, therefore the internal consistency and reliability of these questions is deemed acceptable.

Results and discussion

Demographic characteristics of survey respondents

A total of 267 respondents participated in the study, of whom 56.55% were male and 43.45% were female. The largest contingent of respondents were in the age group of 41 to 50 years old (28.84%), followed by the group aged between 31 and 40 years old (28.09%). Turning to respondents' educational level achieved, most of them had a bachelor's degree (52.63%), followed by those with a high school diploma (15.79%). Most respondents stated that they use social media daily (91.01%). Figure 1 shows the respondents' demographic characteristics in more detail.

When asked whether they communicated with people from different cultures on their social media accounts, 58.80% of respondents answered positively, while 41.20% answered negatively. However, most respondents (53.93%) agreed that using social media helped them to learn about different cultures worldwide. These findings are visualized in Figure 1.

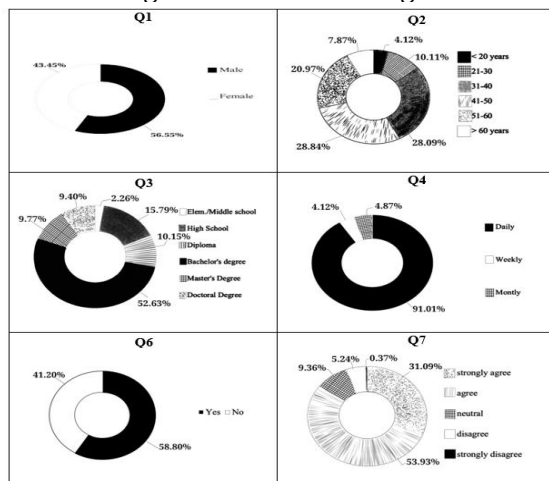


Figure 1: Demographic characteristics and their distribution among questionnaire respondents (n=267).

This figure shows respondents' gender (Q1), age (Q2), educational level (Q3), frequency of social media use (Q4), communication with people from different cultures (Q6) and perceptions of their learning about different cultures around the world (Q7).

According to their responses to questions 8, 9, and 10, which are presented in Figure 2, most respondents agreed (52.43%) or strongly agreed (31.46%) that their use of social media increased their cultural awareness and understanding of cultural differences. Furthermore, 47.57% of respondents agreed with the statement that social media has helped them become better equipped to communicate with people from other cultures. Most respondents (52.06%) also asserted that social media helped most of them with the process of adaptation to other cultures.

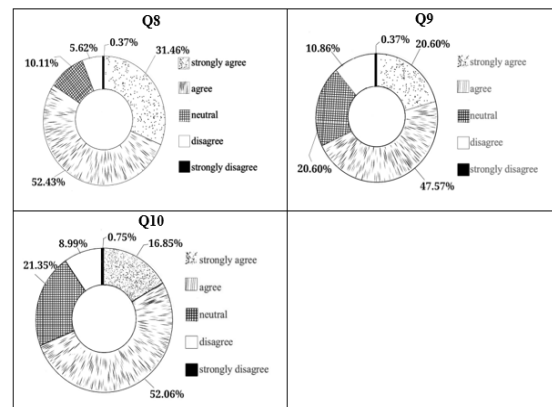


Figure 2. The extent to which respondents perceived that their social media use had influenced their cultural awareness and understanding of cultural differences (Q8), increased ability to communicate with people from other cultures (Q9) and helped them to adapt to other cultures (Q10).

The popularity and use of various social media applications in Saudi Arabia

The study explored which social media application(s) is/are the most commonly used in Saudi Arabia. According to the results, most respondents use WhatsApp (56.18%), followed by Twitter (17.60%) and Snapchat (11.24%). Smaller percentages of respondents use Instagram (9.74%), YouTube (3.37%) and

Facebook (1.87%). The results are presented in Figure 3.

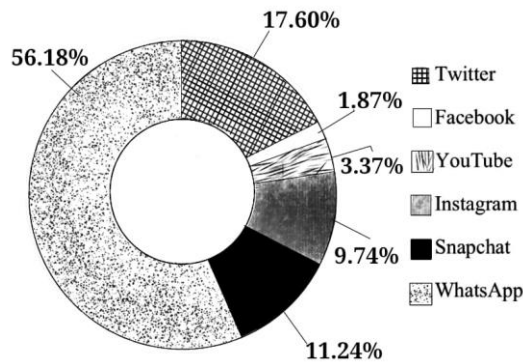


Figure 3. The social media applications most used in Saudi Arabia

According to the responses to this study, WhatsApp is the most used social media application in Saudi Arabia. This is not surprising, because a number of research studies have already highlighted the prevalence of WhatsApp in Saudi Arabia, particularly in the country's education settings (Alsalem, 2013; Fattah, 2015; Almekhlafy and Alzubi, 2016).

The use of social media and its effect on people's intercultural communication competence in Saudi Arabia

Respondents were also asked which social media application has the greatest impact on their own ICC. The results, which are presented in Figure 4, indicate that respondents believe Twitter (21.35%) has the greatest impact on their intercultural communication competence, at least according to those respondents' own perceptions.

In terms of influencing intercultural communication competence, Twitter is followed by WhatsApp, which was cited by 19.85% of respondents. It is notable also that a substantial proportion of respondents (16.10%) stated that all of the social media applications presented as options in this study have the ability to make a significant impact on their intercultural communication competence. In particular, respondents specified LinkedIn and TikTok as channels able to shape their ICC.

Although WhatsApp was found to be the most used social media application in Saudi Arabia, WhatsApp was not the application perceived to have the greatest effect on users' ICC. This is,

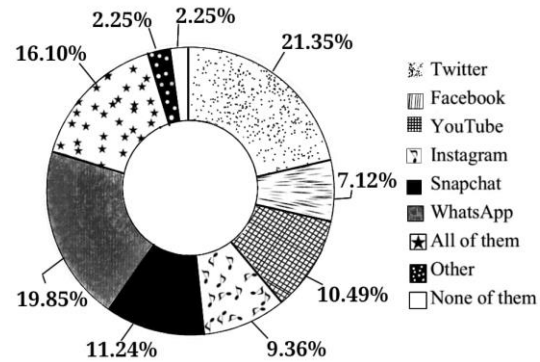


Figure 4. The social media application(s) having the greatest impact on users' intercultural communication competence in Saudi Arabia

perhaps, due to the technical aspects of WhatsApp. It is fundamentally a messaging service that allows users to share content with people in their contacts list. It seems reasonable to assume, therefore, that WhatsApp is frequently used by people communicating with friends and family, and that it is likely to be used primarily for private messages. In contrast, Twitter – a microblogging service that is used to convey public messages – was perceived by the Saudi Arabia-based social-media using respondents to this survey as having the greatest impact on those users' ICC. Twitter offers a different type of social media connectivity. It is less personal than WhatsApp (and some other social media applications) and allows users to connect with, or "follow", people around the world, as well as making it easy for them to track topical issues trending within their own region and beyond.

The effects of personal characteristics (gender, age, and education) on respondents' intercultural communication competence as exercised through social media applications

One of the questions raised in this research was whether the diverse personal characteristics of the survey respondents, such as their gender, age and educational attainment level, can have an impact on the intercultural communication competence of respondents. Turning first to respondents' gender (Table 1), the results indicate that this factor influenced the attitude toward the most frequently used social media ($P < 0.0001$), communication with people from different cultures ($P < 0.01$), and the attitude toward the application exerting the greatest

impact on respondents' intercultural communication competence.

Question / Statement	Chi-Square Test Statistics	P-value	Contingency Coefficient
How often do you use social media?	1.8609 ^{ns}	0.3944	0.0832
Which of the following social media websites do you use most frequently?	37.4296 ^{**}	<0.0001	0.3506
Do you communicate with people from different cultures on your social media accounts?	12.7051 ^{**}	0.0004	0.2131
Using social media helped me to learn about different cultures from around the world.	4.9141 ^{ns}	0.2962	0.1344
Using social media increased my cultural awareness and understanding of cultural differences.	4.8498 ^{ns}	0.3031	0.1336
Social media has helped me to be more equipped to communicate with people from other cultures.	4.6425 ^{ns}	0.3260	0.1307
Social media helped me in the adaptation process to other culture.	8.6229 ^{ns}	0.0712	0.1769
Which social media application has the greatest impact on your intercultural communication competence?	36.0957 ^{**}	<0.0001	0.3451

Table 1. The chi-square test of contingency for the evaluation of impact of the respondents' gender (Male or Female) on their intercultural communication competence.

Note: ns = statistically not significant; * = statistically significant at $P \leq 0.05$; ** = statistically significant at $P \leq 0.01$.

Notably, male respondents used Facebook more frequently (3.31%) than YouTube (2.65%) while none of the 116 female respondents claimed to use Facebook frequently, and 4.31% of female respondents used YouTube. A substantial majority of the male respondents claimed that they communicate with people from different cultures on their social media accounts (68.21%) while most of the female respondents (53.45%) claimed that they do not communicate across cultures in this way. Analysis of the respondents' perceptions of social media application and which of these had the greatest impact on their own intercultural communication competence, Twitter was the service most frequently cited by male respondents (25.17%), while most of the female respondents identified WhatsApp

(22.41%) as the social media application having the greatest impact upon their ICC.

It is noteworthy that WhatsApp, the private messaging service that was identified by female respondents as having the greatest impact on their intercultural communication, as opposed to the more public-facing applications such as Twitter and Facebook, which offer a more broadly visible form of social networking. This may be due to the conservative cultural norms that apply to women in Saudi Arabia. In Saudi Arabia's conservative society, it is not yet seen as normal for women to be excessively visible on social media or to interact freely with strangers online. It is perhaps for this reason that most female respondents to the questionnaire stated that they do not interact with people from other cultures on social media, and that WhatsApp had the greatest effect on their ICC. The highest contingency coefficient was obtained in the most frequently used social media (0.3506), and this indicated that, in this research study, the gender of respondent is closely related to the frequency of social media use.

Turning to consider the respondents' ages, Table 2 presents the study findings relevant to this and it is apparent that age has no impact on the respondents' perceptions of the effects of social media use on their intercultural communication competence. In other words, this research has found there is no statistically significant difference when it comes to the age of social media users in Saudi Arabia, regarding their patterns of social media use and the impact of the upon their intercultural communication competence.

This aspect of the study also reflects the known prevalence of social media access in Saudi Arabia. The country currently ranks third in the world for the number of people using smartphones (Al-Sharif, 2014), with 80 per cent of under-35s having a smartphone, and 50 per cent of the population being under 35 (El Mourad, 2014). This, together with the fact that in Saudi Arabia access to the Internet is relatively cheap and straightforward, means that many Saudis are able to access social media applications at any time and in any location. In addition, many official organizations – from schools to government departments – also use social media applications for their official communications (Kutbi, 2015).

Table 2. The chi-square test of contingency for the evaluation of impact of the respondents' ages on their intercultural communication competence

Question / Statement	Chi-Square Test Statistics	P-value	Contingency Coefficient
How often do you use social media?	10.6403 ^{ns}	0.3862	0.1958
Which of the following social media websites do you use most frequently?	28.0888 ^{ns}	0.3038	0.3085
Do you communicate with people from different cultures on your social media accounts?	4.8610 ^{ns}	0.4331	0.1579
Using social media helped me to learn about different cultures from around the world.	27.7932 ^{ns}	0.1144	0.3071
Using social media increased my cultural awareness and understanding of cultural differences.	15.5111 ^{ns}	0.7465	0.2343
Social media has helped me to be more equipped to communicate with people from other cultures.	22.9318 ^{ns}	0.2922	0.2812
Social media helped me in the adaptation process to other culture.	15.5467 ^{ns}	0.7443	0.2346
Which social media application has the greatest impact on your intercultural communication competence?	44.6034 ^{ns}	0.2843	0.3783

Note: ns = statistically not significant; * = statistically significant at $P \leq 0.05$; ** = statistically significant at $P \leq 0.01$. Age: A (< 20 years old), B (from 21 to 30 years old), C (from 31 to 40 years old), D (from 41 to 50 years old), E (from 51-60 years old) and F (> 60 years old).

According to the results shown in Table 3, the educational level achieved by survey respondents has influenced their cultural awareness and understanding of cultural differences ($P < 0.0001$), as well as their ability to communicate with people from other cultures ($P < 0.05$).

Table 3. The chi-square test of contingency for the evaluation of impact of the respondents' educational level on their intercultural communication competence

Question / Statement	Chi-Square Test Statistics	P-value	Contingency Coefficient
How often do you use social media?	7.1527 ^{ns}	0.7110	0.1618
Which of the following social media websites do you use most frequently?	26.1878 ^{ns}	0.3976	0.2989
Do you communicate with people from different cultures on your social media accounts?	2.8698 ^{ns}	0.7201	0.1145
Using social media helped me to learn about different cultures from around the world.	9.1950 ^{ns}	0.9805	0.1825
Using social media increased my cultural awareness and understanding of cultural differences.	53.6585 ^{**}	< 0.0001	0.4091
Social media has helped me to be more equipped to communicate with people from other cultures.	31.7366 [*]	0.0462	0.3259
Social media helped me in the adaptation process to other culture.	18.1140 ^{ns}	0.5799	0.2521
Which social media application has the greatest impact on your intercultural communication competence?	37.5519 ^{ns}	0.5810	0.3511

Note: ns = statistically not significant; * =

statistically significant at $P \leq 0.05$; ** = statistically significant at $P \leq 0.01$.

Educational level: A (elementary or middle school), B (high school), C (diploma), D (bachelor's degree), E (master's degree) and F (doctoral degree).

In line with findings already noted, the highly educated respondents, i.e. those with a master's degree and/or doctorate, were more likely to report that social media had increased their awareness of cultural differences. They were also more likely to perceive that social media had helped them to acquire the skills needed to effectively communicate with people from diverse societies. This could be due to more highly educated people having the language skills required to interact with people from different cultures, and thus being able to exploit the benefits of social media to a greater extent.

Moreover, it was noticed that respondents with bachelor's degree were more neutral toward these questions when compared with other respondents of different educational levels. Ultimately, the respondents' levels of educational attainment were most closely linked with effects on their perceptions of how their social media use had affected/enhanced their own cultural awareness and understanding of cultural differences, as the contingency coefficient obtained of 0.4091 was the highest.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

There were limitations to this study; it did not include a qualitative section where respondents could have explained why they felt social media had influenced their ICC, or why they felt that some social media applications exerted greater influence than others. There is scope for further research in this area – a similar investigation into social media use, but conducted in other countries, could be useful. Users in other countries could be asked whether they feel social media applications have influenced their ICC and the effects of different types of social media on users' ICC around the world could be explored.

Conclusions

People from various and divergent cultures around the world are increasingly coming into contact with each other, thanks largely to digital technologies. Internet applications have made it easy for people to connect and communicate

regardless of differing time zones, geography and societies. The general increase in web-based communication, and social media applications in particular, has brought many people into contact with diverse cultural influences. These developments make it important to analyze the influence of social media on intercultural communication. In this study, quantitative research methods have been used to examine the effect of social media on the development of users' ICC in Saudi Arabia. The results showed that social media was perceived to affect users' ICC in Saudi Arabia. According to respondents, WhatsApp was the most used social media outlet in Saudi Arabia. However, Twitter was the application perceived as exerting the most influence on users' ICC, because of its structure and ability to connect people from around the world. The study also found that while some personal characteristics like sex and education had impact on the extent to which respondents' ICC was influenced by social media use, others-like age did not. Overall, the research hypotheses defined in the beginning of the study were proved to be true.

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