



*Social networking in higher education: academics' attitudes, uses, motivations and concerns*

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**Social Networking in Higher Education:  
Academics' Attitudes, Uses, Motivations and Concerns**

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## **Abstract**

The main objective of this thesis is to investigate and understand faculty members' attitudes towards, motivations for and concerns about using social networking sites (SNSs), as well as uses thereof, for educational purposes, particularly in the gender-segregated educational setting of Saudi Arabian universities. This study identifies faculty members' perspectives on SNSs and the ways in which academics in Saudi Arabia employ these social networks as educational tools to improve teaching methods and learning styles. Interviews were conducted with 32 faculty members at King Abdul-Aziz University and King Saud University in Saudi Arabia. These particular universities were selected because of their location, size, diversity and academic standing. Those participants were chosen to form the research sample and to represent equally the two universities, the two genders and different degree subjects.

Growing use of SNSs has motivated academics and researchers to study social networks and their connection to other fields of study. Several studies have examined integration of SNSs in education. However, a review of previous research in this domain has revealed that further research is required. This thesis, therefore, aims to develop the existing literature through its close focus on qualitative accounts of academics' usage in Saudi Arabia, particularly since the Saudi government has led several initiatives which have been considered essential interventions and developments in politics, society, education, and various other aspects.

Most of the academics involved in this study (91%) use SNSs — particularly WhatsApp (88%), Twitter (84%), Facebook (78%), and YouTube (63%) — for educational purposes. These academics see SNSs as supportive and useful tools and, importantly, methods for facilitating learning, teaching and communication. Motivations for using SNSs include: overcoming social restrictions (e.g. gender segregation), enhancing collaboration and exchanging experiences, generating and improving content, and developing a more critical and reflective thinking. On the other hand, many faculty members (62%) have different concerns about employing these platforms in the academic setting. Cultural and social concerns, protecting academics' image online, and privacy worries have been identified as the three greatest challenges facing the implementation of SNSs in the higher educational institutions. Many existing studies of privacy and other concerns are written from a Western perspective and its view of privacy — this research expands that discussion by analysing these issues from a non-Western, conservative nation.

This thesis explores how cultural and social traditions are both challenged and enhanced by SNSs; for example, it shows that online interactions in gender-segregated societies can provide more information and expand understanding about the opposite gender more than do offline settings. Although these online interactions break the norm of gender segregation, the majority of Saudi users do not completely challenge their cultural and social traditions, and the impact of their social values and principles is clearly apparent in their perspectives and behaviours when using these platforms. Therefore, these findings can advance the understanding of integrating SNSs educationally in the context of a conservative society, and contribute to expanding the current literature on this topic.

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# **Chapter 1 : Introduction**

## **1.1. Background to the Research**

Among Islamic and Arab countries, Saudi Arabia is considered the one with the most ingrained Islamic culture, in which religious values and cultural principles are so interconnected that it would be difficult to differentiate between the two (Al-Lily, 2011). Due to religious and societal considerations, there are interactive and communicative restrictions between men and women in Saudi Arabia. Women are expected to avoid unnecessary conversations with men who are not their relatives. This is a general rule in most aspects of life, including education, business and in public (e.g. public transport). As a consequence of these restrictions, gender segregation is applied and has a great impact on all aspects of daily life in Saudi Arabia (Alebaikan, 2010; Alhazmi, 2010; Almalki, 2011). Therefore, education is gender-segregated at all levels.

Social networking sites (SNSs), such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, have become very popular and are being used in many aspects of everyday life. They can be defined as web-based communities which provide an ideal platform for individuals and organisations to create content, share information, ideas and interests, and interact socially by connecting with other users (Tess, 2013; Ellison and boyd, 2007). At the present time, many people, especially adults, use SNSs to communicate with their friends, colleagues, family members, and others (Lenhart et al., 2010). This increasing use has motivated scholars and researchers to study SNSs and their relationship with other fields of study. In addition, experts who are interested in developing educational strategies are encouraging instructors to take advantage of these new technological tools in their instruction and teaching.

In Saudi Arabia, the use of social networking sites is rapidly increasing. There are more than 6 million active Facebook users in Saudi Arabia, where over 90 million videos are watched daily on YouTube (more than any other country worldwide) (Al-Khalifa and Garcia, 2013). In addition, roughly 3 million Saudi Arabians are active Twitter users — almost half (47%) of all tweets in the Arab world have been produced by Saudi Arabians (Arab Social Media Report, 2013). Recently, the Dubai School of Government released

a study on social media in the Arab world. According to this report, Saudi Arabians are the most active social media users in the Arab world. The findings clearly demonstrate a high level of agreement among participants on the benefits of using SNSs in education. Most importantly, more than 80% of participants stated that educational institutions in their countries should promote the use of interactive technology to increase communication between teachers and students (Arab Social Media Report, 2013).

In Saudi higher education institutions, there are insufficient numbers of female faculty members. To overcome this challenge, male lecturers teach classes of female students through a one-way video conferencing system (Almalki, 2011). Integrating SNSs in higher education can increase the university's ability to offer enhanced courses and resources online, regardless of the student's location (Alebaikan and Troudi, 2010; Almalki, 2011). In the case of Saudi Arabia, utilising these social platforms in education is helpful and can provide an opportunity for both academics and students to communicate and interact with one another, particularly with the opposite gender. In a gender-segregated society, open communication channels among lecturers and their students allow students to benefit from the additional teaching methods made available through online teaching.

Recently, there have been significant changes in Saudi society, despite it being characterised as a conservative community. The Saudi government has led several essential initiatives and developments in politics, society, education, and various other aspects of Saudi Arabia. These initiatives, in addition to the revolution in communication and information technology, particularly SNSs, have had major influences on how society interprets various societal and cultural matters, leading to a paradigm shift of many preconceived ideas, one of which is the issue of gender segregation and its implications for education, work and other aspects of their daily life. These influences will be reflected not only on individuals but also on society as a whole.

Saudi universities are in the initial stages of recognising the educational benefits of SNSs, while the Saudi government is currently undertaking a developmental campaign



aimed at all levels of education in an attempt to enhance student learning and improve the teaching methods of educators. This study will contribute to current research by identifying faculty members' perspectives on SNSs and their ability to enhance teaching methods and learning styles. Furthermore, various aspects of this subject will be considered in this investigation, including how Saudi academic society will deal with the mixing of genders online, culture and technology, and formal social boundaries.

## **1.2. Justification for the Research**

Some investigations have examined the useful integration of social networking in education (e.g. Bogdanov et al., 2012; Chelly and Mataillet, 2012). However, a review of previous research on this domain has revealed that a large percentage of faculty members of universities (up to 80% in some studies) either do not utilise these tools in education or are not enthusiastic about doing so (Roblyer et al., 2010; Chen and Bryer, 2012). Although many studies confirm that academics have a positive attitude towards the use of social networking in education, as these applications have the capability to improve teaching methods, enhance students' learning, and expand interaction with their academics and peers, some researchers indicate that few instructors choose to utilise them in the classroom (Bynum, 2011; Tess, 2013; Prescott, 2014). Therefore, it is important to understand why faculty members are not interested in using these interactive tools, as they usually seek to provide the most up-to-date teaching methods to help educators impart knowledge to their students in the easiest, most effective ways.

To be more specific, is this variance between faculty members' attitudes and practices present because they are not completely certain about the benefits of employing this method on the practical level? Do they have concerns regarding its use and effectiveness? Or, is it due to their lack of familiarity with technological tools? Do demographic factors, such as age, gender, academic degree, or years of experience, play a role in the use of SNSs or are there other reasons to consider? There are no convincing answers to these inquiries yet. Certainly, a number of investigations conducted in this area have provided valuable results. However, many researchers have called for further studies to expand our understanding of the impact of social

networking tools and the potential of its effectiveness in education. As such, these topics are yet to be fully understood (Hung and Yuen, 2010; Powers et al., 2012; Al-Rahmi et al., 2014). Other studies point out that further research is required to investigate the influence of culture on utilising SNSs (Aljasir, 2015; Almalki, 2011; Ellison and boyd, 2007). Furthermore, Chen and Bryer, who studied the use of SNSs among public administration faculty in the United States, concluded that “the use of SNSs in higher education teaching is an emergent area for study” (2012, p. 100). They have indicated that future research should focus on other subject areas and include faculty from other countries.

Although the educational utilisation of SNSs has been investigated around the world and continuous remarks have been made asserting the importance of studying the topic in different countries, this area of study has received very little attention, particularly with regard to Saudi Arabia (Al-Khalifa and Garcia, 2013). Moreover, conducting a study on a theme such as this within an environment that has a particular culture within a Saudi Arabian context necessitates taking the most relevant cultural and societal factors into consideration. Furthermore, the literature reveals that different challenges can prevent or minimise the usage of SNSs in educational settings. These difficulties relate to various aspects, including: educational, communicational, technical, legal and ethical. However, it can be seen that there are few studies concerned with cultural or societal considerations (Almalki, 2011; Ellison and boyd, 2007). Therefore, this study will contribute to filling the gap in the literature by focussing on how cultural and social concerns or challenges could have an impact on academics’ attitude towards and usage of SNSs for educational purposes, particularly in non-Western, conservative societies, taking Saudi society as an example.

In the case of Saudi society, this investigation claims that online interactions with the opposite gender in gender-segregated societies can offer a greater opportunity to participate and get involved than is the case with its offline counterpart. Therefore, this study will contribute to the discussion in the literature regarding the richness of information that can be provided by using computer-mediated communication in online settings. Analysing and discussing findings emerging from this research, as well

as addressing cultural and social matters in the context of conservative societies, will contribute to the body of knowledge.

### **1.3. Research Aim and Objectives**

The current study aims to investigate and understand faculty members' attitudes towards, motivations for and concerns about using social networking sites (SNSs), as well as uses thereof, for educational purposes, particularly in the gender-segregated educational setting of Saudi Arabian universities. To achieve the previous aim of this research, I formulated the following objectives.

1. Explore faculty members' attitudes towards using social networks for educational purposes in Saudi Arabian universities.
2. Identify the ways in which faculty members in Saudi Arabia use social networks as educational tools, if they use them.
3. Identify the major motivations for and the greatest concerns about using social networks amongst faculty members in higher education in Saudi Arabia.
4. Determine how demographic factors (e.g. age, gender, academic degree, and years of experience) affect faculty members' attitudes towards using social networks in an educational setting.

### **1.4. Research Questions**

The present research seeks to answer the following key questions, which have been established to achieve the specific aim and objectives mentioned above.

1. What attitudes do faculty members in Saudi Arabia have towards using SNSs as educational tools?
2. Do faculty members at Saudi universities use SNSs for educational purposes? If so, in what ways do they use them?
3. What are the major motivations for and greatest concerns about the use of SNSs in higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia?
4. How do demographic factors (e.g. age, gender, academic degree, and years of experience) affect participants' attitudes towards using SNSs in an educational context?

### **1.5. Social Restrictions and Initiatives in the Saudi Context**

Nations and societies apply their religious values and cultural norms differently, even if they follow the same religion and culture. As indicated, Saudi Arabia, among Islamic and Arab countries, is considered the country with the most Islamic culture, in which religious values and cultural principles are so interconnected that it would be difficult to distinguish between these two aspects (Al-Lily, 2011). Furthermore, Yamani (2010) provided some explanations as to why Saudi Arabia has a solid interconnection between its culture and religion. Firstly, it is the birthplace of Islam where the two holy cities, Makkah and Madinah, are located, and millions of Muslims around the world direct towards Makkah to pray five times a day. Secondly, besides its religious significance, Saudi Arabia is located in the centre of the Arabic region. Therefore, these two essential aspects have resulted in giving Saudi Arabia such a significant status, which has reflected their cultural norms and religious beliefs, as Yamani affirmed. In this regard, Madini (2012) considered that the combination has contributed to forming the majority of Saudi identities, attitudes and behaviours.

Despite Saudi society being characterised as a conservative community, social and cultural issues develop over time in a slow manner. Of course, matters related to developing societies need much more time and Saudi society is no exception. In this regard, Al-Lily (2011) revealed that, despite resistance from conservatives, many Saudi norms have been relaxed as a result of various factors. The three most influential factors, as he illustrated, are the social movement from a tribal to a modern society, the appearance of a new generation of educated Saudi men and women alike, and the increasingly growing implications of the Internet and social networks, particularly in Saudi society.

In the last few years, there have been essential changes in Saudi society. In general, most women attempt to hold jobs that do not necessitate mixing with men directly, such as teachers or lecturers in separate educational environments, different professions in separate sections at general or private institutions, banking or other business organisations; this is opposed to working at hospitals as doctors, nurses or administrators, because jobs in medical institutions are considered necessary for both

genders. Recently, however, the perception of male–female interaction has been re-examined, with women working in isolation from men. Many boundaries between genders have not faded; rather, they have changed and no longer offer the same sensitivity and significance.

King Abdallah and his government (2005–2015) have led several essential interventions and developments in politics, society, education, and various other aspects in Saudi Arabia. They have launched a number of initiatives and enacted several laws and regulations in this regard. In 2005, King Abdallah launched the “King Abdallah Scholarship Program” to hundreds of high-ranking universities in more than 32 countries — most of them in the USA and Europe — to study various specialties in different fields. This programme included more than 250,000 male and female Saudi students; about 30% were females (Ministry of Education, 2015).

In addition, in 2009, the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) was established to embrace hundreds of international students from around the world. The educational system at that university is not gender-segregated, as with all educational Saudi institutions; it is co-educational. That is, both genders study together, as in other international universities (Kaust.edu.sa, 2015). To illustrate, it is a private, but exceptional, university founded as a Saudi initiative to provide innovative research facilities for postgraduate students in science and technology in particular. While other public and private educational institutions apply the educational policy in Saudi Arabia, this particular university has its own policy. I do not think that other universities are likely to follow KAUST in mixing genders, as none of them have changed anything in their systems since 2009. However, this advanced step, along with other factors, might have contributed to changing how some Saudis look at this matter.

Moreover, in 2009, King Abdallah created a new cabinet-level position within his office, the Deputy Minister of Education, and selected the first woman for that ministerial position (Alarabiya.net, 2015). Furthermore, in 2013, the woman became a member of the Shura Council (Parliament) for the first time in the history of Saudi Arabia. That year, King Abdallah issued a royal decree by appointing 30 Saudi women to be members

in the Shura Council, equal to 20% of the total number of council members (150 members) (Shura.gov.sa, 2015).

In fact, the King Abdallah Scholarship Program, King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), and appointing women in the Shura Council and in ministerial positions were unprecedented decisions in Saudi Arabia. These initiatives have made qualitative and essential shifts in Saudi Arabian societal norms that were long seen as immovable. Their implications are expected to affect not only education; they are likely to impinge on society in general and on the governmental and private sector institutions at political, social and educational levels in the country. Of course, changes at cultural and social levels can take many years to be seen in society. However, I believe that the Saudi government has taken significant steps to dramatically change some cultural and societal traditions.

These initiatives, in addition to the revolution in communication and information technology, particularly SNSs, have had major influences on how society looks at the issue of gender segregation and its implications. As I am interested in studying such matters, I realise that these highlighted factors have played a major role in the social changes that have recently begun forming in Saudi society. Yet, we must deal with these initiatives and changes carefully due to the nature of Saudi society, which is an extremely conservative community. People there have great respect and appreciation for their societal considerations and cultural values. Therefore, investigating the most important aspects relevant to this topic will contribute to interrogating these social and cultural complexities and provide an in-depth understanding of these matters being studied.

## **1.6. Thesis Outline**

The thesis is composed of seven chapters, as follows:

The first chapter is the Introduction, which starts by presenting a background of the research and providing a justification for conducting the research. In addition, it presents the research aim, objectives and the key questions. As the research is about integrating SNSs in Saudi universities, the chapter provides an essential section about

social restrictions and initiatives in the Saudi context. Lastly, it ends with presenting an outline of the thesis.

Chapter Two provides a review of the existing literature on this topic and presents a theoretical framework that can assist in understanding and explaining the findings. It starts with an overview of what kinds of attitudes academics have towards employing these networks for educational purposes, and how these platforms in general are being used in the context of educational institutions. Moreover, it presents a set of different opportunities and challenges that might be encountered while attempting to integrate SNSs into the academic field. Since there are interactive and communicative restrictions between men and women in Saudi society, and, accordingly, the gender-segregated educational system is applied at all levels, including universities, this chapter provides a key section about social networking sites and society to shed light on the essential cultural and social concerns, societal and gender restrictions in the Saudi context, and privacy issues between the views of Western and Saudi society. It ends with the theoretical framework, which is a synthesis of the following four theories: Community of Practice, Hyper-personal Communication, Constructivism, and Connectivism.

Chapter Three outlines the methodological approach adopted and the research design utilised in this study, as well as providing a discussion about the rationale for selecting such methods and procedures used. In addition, it provides some key information about interviewing, as this is the main data collection technique used in this study. Furthermore, all of the data collection procedures, including the pilot study, have been detailed with an explanation of all of their practical steps in order to give the reader a clear picture about the methods employed in this research. Lastly, a special focus is given towards data analysis techniques and ethical considerations, due to their importance in the research.

Following the chapters on the literature review and methodology, Chapter Four, Chapter Five, and Chapter Six answer the research questions in regards to investigating and acquiring an in-depth understanding of the Saudi faculty members' attitudes towards, motivations for and concerns about integrating SNSs, as well as uses thereof,

into education. The analysis of and discussion about the findings emerging from this investigation are addressed and discussed in light of the theoretical framework in order to underpin the current research and provide a better understanding of its findings, with comparisons and contrasts being made to literature where relevant. Throughout these three chapters there are some indications towards the demographic characteristics between participating faculty members in relation to their perspectives and practices of SNSs in the academic settings.

Chapter Four presents faculty members' attitudes towards integrating social networking sites for educational purposes into Saudi Arabian universities. It starts by drawing a general picture of connection and disconnection while illustrating which social networking platforms are mainly utilised by academics participating in this study. Furthermore, it sheds light on academics' profiles and identities on SNSs to examine how they build their profiles and to look at the relationship between the usage of these platforms and their identities. It also provides an in-depth discussion about building professional networking with other academics and the digital skills required to obtain an effective integration of SNSs into education. The last section of the chapter concludes with analysing participants' concerns about time and effort spent on SNSs, as well as employing them as an additional workload to their regular academic work.

Through a detailed discussion, Chapter Five contributes to answering the research questions regarding the major motivations — from the aspect of teaching practices — that have inspired faculty members at Saudi universities to utilise SNSs in academia, and also the greatest concerns that academics have in this regard. It also sheds light on the nature of lecturer–student relationships on SNSs and the factors that can contribute to shaping the academic relationship between faculty members and their students, particularly in a conservative culture such as Saudi society.

Chapter Six provides an in-depth analysis of and discussion about interviewees' perspectives regarding utilisation of SNSs in education, but with regard to the matter of gender and technology in Saudi academic society. Additionally, it provides an illustration of cultural and societal barriers and how integrating these social platforms can be an effective solution in this regard.



The last three chapters presented the main findings of this research. They have contributed to answering the key questions of this investigation and have provided an in-depth perception of the research phenomenon. However, Chapter Seven discusses these findings with reference to the previous literature review and theoretical perspectives.

Chapter Eight is the conclusion of the research. This final chapter aims to summarise the main findings of the research and examine them against the research aim and objectives. It ends with presenting the research's contributions to the body of knowledge, as well as its limitations and recommendations for future research.

## **Chapter 2 : Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1. Introduction**

This study aims to investigate and acquire an in-depth understanding of the Saudi faculty members' attitudes towards, motivations for and concerns about integrating SNSs, as well as uses thereof, into education. This chapter provides a review of the existing literature on this topic and presents a theoretical framework that can assist in understanding and explaining the findings. It starts with an overview of what kinds of attitudes academics have towards employing these networks for educational purposes, and how these platforms in general are being used in the context of educational institutions. Moreover, it presents a set of different opportunities and challenges that might be encountered while attempting to integrate SNSs into the academic field. Since there are interactive and communicative restrictions between men and women in Saudi society, and, accordingly, the gender-segregated educational system is applied at all levels, including universities, this chapter provides a key section about social networking sites and society to shed light on the essential cultural and social concerns, societal and gender restrictions in the Saudi context, and privacy issues between the views of Western and Saudi society. The third section of this chapter is about the theoretical framework, which is a synthesis of the following four theories: Community of Practice, Hyper-personal Communication, Constructivism, and Connectivism. These core theories have been chosen based on the perceptions that have emerged from the data in order to underpin the current research and provide a better understanding of its findings.

### **2.2. Social Networking Sites in Higher Education**

#### **2.2.1. Academics' Attitudes towards Integrating Social Networking into Education**

Most studies exploring faculty members' attitudes towards employing SNSs into education confirm that academics have a positive perception. In addition, there are strong indicators of their intention to use Web 2.0 tools in their higher education

institutions (Ajjan and Hartshorne, 2008; Albalawi, 2007). Bynum (2011) argues that educators must make the most of these technological tools and find new techniques to incorporate them into the classroom. He believes that they will be more capable of connecting with students, providing they spend significant time on these platforms and interact with friends daily. Web 2.0 applications can facilitate educational approaches such as active, social and engaging learning by promoting interaction with content, as well as faculty–student and student–student communication. Such applications can assist students in becoming active learners and allow them to better create and share knowledge (Maloney, 2007; Ferdig, 2007).

However, some research highlights that there is a lack of compatibility between what academics believe and what they practise. To be more specific, Ajjan and Hartshorne (2008) revealed that “while some faculty members feel that some Web 2.0 technologies could improve students' learning, their interaction with faculty and with other peers, their writing abilities, and their satisfaction with the course, few choose to use them in the classroom” (p. 71).

However, faculty members might have valid reasons for their general indifference to the implementation of SNSs in their practical teaching activities. The existing literature illustrates that many academics call for support from academic institutions by holding training courses, for example, and, most importantly, assist them in achieving a purposeful integration of SNSs in academia. Findings of Prescott's (2014) study indicated that most faculty members (85%) had not received any training for using SNSs within an educational environment, whereas 33% would like to receive more support in this regard. The researcher concluded that teaching staff need support and training to understand the ways in which these technologies can potentially be used to increase learning and engagement. Moreover, Bynum (2011) reveals that most teachers are concerned about their lack of experience, leading some teachers into trouble by letting students transgress the student–teacher relationship boundary. Tess (2013) confirms that “many scholars argue for the purposeful integration of social media as an educational tool. Empirical evidence, however, has lagged in supporting the claim” (p. A60).

In accordance with influential reasons reported by some studies, Prescott (2014) indicated that participants suggest a clear distinction between academic and social lives which should be considered when employing SNSs in the academic setting. For that reason, the study showed a demographic difference with regard to gender; it was a view supported by the male staff but, on the other hand, the responses of female faculty members did not reflect that such boundaries between professional and personal lives were needed. Furthermore, findings of Bynum's (2011) study showed that the need to develop an integrated plan and a policy that outlines the boundaries for students and teachers were the most common suggestions provided by many professionals participating in his research. Respondents believe that these frameworks will help to protect teachers, students, and school administrations from inappropriate behaviours, legal concerns and ethical issues. In this regard, unprofessional behaviour conducted online as well as concerns about online and offline identities have a remarkable impact on the faculty members' attitudes towards integrating these social platforms in teaching and learning activities (Prescott, 2014).

It seems that teaching styles (teacher-centred and learner-centred) of academics have an influence on their attitudes towards utilising SNSs educationally, as some research pointed to this perspective. Prescott (2014) demonstrated that respondents who used a learner-centred approach to teaching valued the advantages of employing SNSs in universities and agreed that users (educators and students) should be accountable for unprofessional behaviour online, while those with a teacher-centred teaching style considered what happens on SNSs to be external to the university's remit of authority. He concluded that these results, therefore, suggest that teaching style impacts upon attitudes towards SNSs.

In the same vein, because the student-learning style has changed from listening, receiving, observation and imitation to active participation in the industry of knowledge, Bynum (2011) claims that the teaching styles and curricula need to be changed and developed to keep up with the demand of increasingly knowledgeable students. Furthermore, Duffy (2007) believes that employing Web 2.0 technologies in education would contribute to a significant evolution of pedagogical methods and

programmes within education. He illustrated that the crucial implication here is a possible shift from the basic, traditional learning of today (lecture notes, printed material, PowerPoint) towards user-centric learning: user-generated content and user-guided experience. Similarly, Male and Burden (2014) contend that the increasing developments in technologies have contributed to making a fundamental change to learning. These tools support and facilitate a shift from the passive acquisition of knowledge and ideas provided by others to active learning experiences. As they demonstrate, this approach enables learners to enquire, critique, generate, collaborate and enhance their understanding and problem-solving skills. To support the active role of students in academia, Prescott (2014) claims that increasing ways in which to encourage students and get them engaged in learning outside of the classroom atmosphere is valuable to students and faculty members alike. Encouraging academic members to take part in employing SNSs effectively in academia is highly recommended, as Jabr (2011) affirms. According to Jabr, such a practice would result in establishing academic communication groups, which can assist students and facilitate their more productive usage of SNSs in both academic and social aspects.

In summary, it is clear that teaching staff at higher education institutions have varying attitudes towards integrating social networking into their teaching and learning methods. Most studies confirm that academics have a positive perception of the use of SNSs in education. There are strong indicators of lecturers' intention to use Web 2.0 tools in their higher education institutions. However, some research highlights that there is disconnect between what academics believe and what they practise. Some studies reveal that educators feel that SNSs could enhance students' learning, expand their interaction with academics and other peers, improve their writing skills, and acquire their satisfaction with courses; few, though, choose to utilise them in the classroom. Most faculty members have not received any training for using SNSs within an educational environment, whereas numerous academics would like to receive more support in this regard. Many academics argue for the purposeful integration of SNSs as teaching and learning methods, while a number of the faculty members suggest a clear distinction between academic and social lives and call for a plan and a policy that outlines the boundaries for students and teachers in order to protect their online and

offline identities. Although these studies have provided some good results and insights, the researchers recommended that much more research needs to be done in this area (Bynum, 2011; Tess, 2013; Prescott, 2014).

### **2.2.2. The Usage of Social Networking in Saudi Arabia**

In my home country of Saudi Arabia, the use of social networking sites is rapidly increasing. There are more than 6 million active Facebook users in Saudi Arabia, with over 90 million YouTube videos being viewed daily — more than any other country worldwide (Al-Khalifa and Garcia, 2013). In addition, roughly 3 million Saudi Arabians are active Twitter users, with almost half (47%) of all tweets in the Arab world generated by Saudi Arabians (Arab Social Media Report, 2013). Recently, the Dubai School of Government released a study on social media in the Arab world. According to this report, Saudi Arabians are the most active social media users in the Arab world. The findings clearly demonstrate a high level of agreement among participants on the benefits of using SNSs in education. Most importantly, more than 80% of participants stated that educational institutions in their countries should promote the use of interactive technology to increase communication between teachers and students (Arab Social Media Report, 2013).

After researching existing studies, it appears that there are some studies that have investigated the use of SNSs or web-based instruction at Saudi Arabian universities. Al-Khalifa and Garcia (2013) investigated the role of social media in higher education and its usage in universities. They highlighted the state of social media in the country's top universities, not by performing a practical study, but by analysing previous studies and university websites. They concluded that the use of social media in education is very promising, and could potentially be an effective teaching and learning tool. The majority of the studies have focussed mainly on factors affecting the use and effectiveness of web-based instruction, as well as the faculty's professional development needs. The surveyed participants were from different settings within higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia. Either a questionnaire was used or data was collected from the linked Web 2.0 profiles on the university's website, with the studies almost unanimously agreeing on the importance and effectiveness of integrating social media in student

interaction and learning (Al-Hojailan, 2012; Al-Khalifa, 2008; Alnujaidi, 2008; Aqil et al., 2013; Al Saif, 2005; Kamal, 2013). Almalki (2011) explored the experiences of instructors and students at Umm Al-Qura University, focussing on the use of instructor websites to complement lectures. This study employed a mixed-methods approach of both interviews and questionnaires. Almalki (2011) concluded that blended learning has a great impact on the quality and efficiency of a university's performance. Most importantly, female students reported that the websites had a major impact on their learning and level of interaction. I agree with the researcher's explanation that this may be because of gender segregation, which is standard in Saudi Arabian educational institutions.

Past studies have not critically approached the topic — they have not explicitly asked faculty members about their social media usage. This research includes the attitudes, uses, motivations and concerns of Saudi Arabian faculty members regarding utilising SNSs in education. The direct interaction and communication with faculty members will provide empirical evidence, and expand the current understanding of social media usage in education. The study findings will help both educational policymakers and faculty members to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the attitudes, motivations and concerns that exist surrounding the integration and development of social networks in the field of education.

### **2.2.3. Educational Practices: Opportunities and Challenges**

#### **2.2.3.1. Opportunities of Employing Social Networking in Education**

During the last few years, SNSs have significantly influenced people's lives, especially adult generations (Arquero and Romero-Frias, 2013; Eren, 2012). It is generally acknowledged that SNSs such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have been widely used by students in higher education institutions (Roblyer et al., 2010). In addition, it is widely recognised that "social media are increasingly visible in higher education settings as instructors look to technology to mediate and enhance their instruction as well as promote active learning for students" (Tess, 2013, p. A60). After conducting several research projects on the use of social media in education, Al-Khalifa and Garcia (2013)

asserted that “social media platforms are designed not only for entertainment, but also for an exchange of information, collaboration, teaching, and learning” (p. 65). On social networking platforms, people generally interact with their friends to exchange knowledge, brainstorm ideas, search for new friends and news, and share everyday information. In the academic environment, more investments have been introduced to link those technological tools to learning, teaching and researching (Jabr, 2011). Therefore, this section provides different opportunities of educational practices that have been discussed in the literature as valuable advantages of integrating SNSs into academic settings.

#### **2.2.3.1.1. Accessibility**

Accessibility as a feature of employing social platforms in education has encouraged both lecturers and students to engage in the online academic community in order to benefit from the learning and teaching activities provided. This advantage, in particular, has been appreciated by different researchers. As Akbari et al. (2012) and Almalki (2011) revealed, instructors and students value the accessibility of these social networking sites to be in immediate and continuous engagement with knowledge or people, regardless of wherever they are. According to what has been written in the literature, accessibility can be discussed from two aspects, as follows:

##### **2.2.3.1.1.1. Accessibility of Knowledge**

Learning and teaching are no longer limited to face-to-face communication within the class time limits. Currently, the Internet, and SNSs in particular, offers students a range of learning and communication implications and great opportunities to access universal knowledge (Jabr, 2011). Powers et al. (2012) illustrated that the feature of attending digital lectures whenever and wherever can provide learners with an opportunity of unlimited access to extensive resources of knowledge. These features have made it easy for both lecturers and students at educational institutions to reach plenty of information resources in any particular field of knowledge. In this regard, Arquero and Romero-Frias (2013) conducted a practical study to investigate the use of social networks to enhance student involvement with academic subjects and to improve basic



skills. They found that the majority of participants (close to 83%) thought that SNSs were useful to keep their professional knowledge up to date.

#### **2.2.3.1.1.2. Accessibility of People**

Several studies have demonstrated that SNSs can be a highly effective tool to connect with people throughout the world. They have confirmed that being globally connected is important, especially in practical specialisations such as linguistics, library and information sciences, and media and communications (Akbari et al., 2012; Tella et al., 2013). Okoro (2012), from Howard University, Washington, has described Web 2.0 as an effective tool for teaching and learning. A critical feature of social networking, as Okoro mentions, is the capability to establish and encourage immediate and constant engagement and interaction among people, academic institutions, and business organisations located in different and distant parts of the world.

The results of Arquero and Romero-Frias' (2013) study revealed that the vast majority of participants indicated that SNSs were a convenient way in which to communicate and be closer to teaching staff. Similarly, the results obtained by Al-Rahmi et al. (2014) illustrated that "social media affects positively and significantly collaborative learning with interaction with peers, interaction with supervisor, engagement, perceived ease of use, and perceived usefulness" (p. 210). From my academic experience as a lecturer in communication studies and from my practical experience of studying English abroad as a second language, I agree that these social networks could be a beneficial way to maintain communication with native speakers of other languages, regardless of where you and they are. Through SNSs, you could practise communicational theories and engage in discussions with experts in different fields. Furthermore, SNSs provide their users with wonderful opportunities to visit libraries and learning centres around the world and to take advantage of these huge information resources online anytime and from anywhere.

#### **2.2.3.1.2. Flexibility**

Callaghan and Bower (2012) conducted a comparative case study to examine factors that could be affecting behaviour and learning on social networking sites. The study

findings showed that SNSs helped in enabling self-directed learning and could facilitate positive educational environments that enhanced overall student engagement and learning. SNSs promoted motivation and engagement. It was observed that 85% of students overall remained on task during each lesson.

Sharing knowledge and developing content are considered advantages of using social media as an effective tool in teaching and learning activities. A number of academics emphasised that the content on SNSs is usually produced and shared by students who work cooperatively to improve it, which results in obtaining the best content and reinforces peer-to-peer learning (Powers et al., 2012). One of the significant features of integrating SNSs in education, as highlighted by Lofstrom and Nevgi (2007), is the ability to share subject material.

Wheeler considers integrating social media into teaching and learning activities to be “bringing together informal learning in a loosely structured way” (Powers et al., 2012, p. 243). This informality of learning through these social platforms gives the users an advantage of learning in a flexible manner. In this aspect, Arquero and Romero-Frias (2013) confirmed that flexibility was particularly appreciated by respondents: 93% agreed that the use of SNSs allowed them to manage their time better to study for the subject.

#### **2.2.3.1.3. Improving Academic Performance**

A number of studies have concluded that SNSs have the potential to improve universities’ performance, as measured through quality and efficiency. They found that these channels have the ability to improve the quality of education and encourage active engagement in students (Okoro, 2012; Almalki, 2011). Likewise, many researchers who have studied the integration of SNSs in educational environments consider SNSs to be a way in which to enhance learning and improve teaching (Akbari et al., 2012; Okoro, 2012; Almalki, 2011). As Powers et al. (2012) indicated, SNSs allow students to challenge instructors’ knowledge. Therefore, they confirmed that faculty members must continue to develop the use of these collaborative tools, and to extend their technical and academic knowledge to ensure that what is being taught is relevant

to students and can be applied in the real world. Additionally, Duffy (2007) claimed that SNSs can be utilised for the evaluation, critical assessment and personalisation of information. He emphasised that these Web 2.0 technologies provide educators with many possibilities to get students involved in appropriate experiences and practices such as collaborative content creation and peer assessment.

Heatley and Lattimer (2013) stressed the importance of bringing social media into the classroom, and they think that many teachers could take advantage of these technological spaces to enhance learning and teaching activities. In addition, they confirmed that teachers can make their lessons interesting by using YouTube and Facebook. For example, teachers can create a playlist of videos on their own YouTube channel. Furthermore, teachers can set up a Facebook page that can host live discussions, be updated with assignments, display relevant classroom material, and share classroom information. Arquero and Romero-Frias (2013) investigated the relationships between academic performance and the usage of SNSs. They found that “students with a more intensive use of the site showed a significantly better performance than students with a low usage profile” (p. 238).

To improve and enhance regular educational courses, Hung and Yuen (2010) pointed out that social networking technology can be utilised to supplement face-to-face courses as a method of enhancing students’ sense of community and, consequently, to promote classroom communities of practice in the context of academic institutions. Furthermore, as Cardon and Okoro (2010) indicated, social networking sites should not be used as a substitute for interpersonal communication activities. Rather, they should be utilised to complement face-to-face lectures and discussions.

As a final point in this section, the impact of social networking tools and the potential of advanced technology in education are yet to be fully understood and further research is required, as several researchers indicated (Hung and Yuen, 2010; Powers et al., 2012; Al-Rahmi et al., 2014).

#### **2.2.3.1.4. Involvement in Collaboration and Team Working**

In respect of team working and collaborative learning, SNSs appear to be useful learning tools. The main results of Arquero and Romero-Frias' (2013) study showed that the majority of respondents (about 80%) thought that SNSs provide helpful tools to facilitate teamwork. Additionally, 84% of respondents stated that SNSs help students to learn from other students' points of view. More than 88% of the participants demonstrated that using SNSs as a learning tool motivated them to get more actively involved in subjects than did traditional pedagogy. By effectively employing SNSs in educational environments, a new learning ecology exists where these platforms can be employed for collaborative and co-creative purposes, as Duffy (2007) describes. In this regard, Lofstrom and Nevgi (2007), researchers at the Centre for Research and Development of Higher Education at the University of Helsinki, highlighted two important features of SNS usage in teaching: sharing subject material and collaborating on learning opportunities. The results obtained by Al-Rahmi et al. (2014) illustrated that "social media affects positively and significantly collaborative learning with interaction with peers, interaction with supervisor, engagement, perceived ease of use, and perceived usefulness" (p. 210).

#### **2.2.3.1.5. Online Learning Climate as an Inspiration**

Increasing students' motivation for learning is considered one of the key advantages of integrating SNSs in education, which leads to more successful learning experiences (Akbari et al., 2012; Almalki, 2011). In addition, Callaghan and Bower (2012) found that employing SNSs in education promoted social relationships between students, which facilitated the creation of a positive online learning climate within the classroom. In this regard, Duffy (2007) concluded that these social applications increase the motivation of students through innovative use of social media, which can be used in the development of reliable learning tasks and enhance the learning experience.

To enhance classroom discussions, several researchers recommend that faculty members prepare themselves and encourage their students to engage with their peers and teachers through social networking sites. By doing this, many insights and opinions

will come up and be discussed in more detail. In doing so, most students, especially those who feel shy in front of their classmates and teachers, will get involved in these online discussions (Powers et al., 2012). Furthermore, Heatley and Lattimer (2013) believe that shy students who may be hesitant to speak out in class would be encouraged to contribute and express their ideas freely on such platforms. Erin Olson, an English teacher in Sioux Rapids, Iowa, states: “When you are standing in front of the class and you ask the students if they have any questions, often there is just silence. But when you engage with them through social media, it is amazing the insight that you can get” (Gabriel, 2011, p. 8).

Social networking sites seem very supportive in building academic groups to obtain better academic teaching, learning and communication (Jabr, 2011). As Parboosingh (2002) emphasised, integrating social networking technology into learning settings will create academic team-gathering environments and help students to learn from experiences and also from one another; in particular, students at advanced levels can help beginners. The results obtained by Hung and Yuen (2010) demonstrated that, as a supplementary learning tool, social networking platforms have the potential of enhancing students’ sense of classroom community, which contributes to their classroom being a community of practice in and out of the class. Researchers believe that SNSs extend the opportunity for class members to interact beyond the formal sessions in the classroom, which can lead to additional learning opportunities or enhance participation in face-to-face learning activities.

#### **2.2.3.1.6. Developing Interpersonal Communication Skills**

Integrating SNSs in academia can be an influential factor to increase and enrich face-to-face communication, which can be reflected subsequently to develop excellent interpersonal communication skills, as the findings of Okoro’s (2012) study demonstrated. According to these prior results, enhancing these interpersonal relations between students themselves on one side and with their instructors on the other can promote maximum productivity. In this particular aspect, Rennie and Morrison (2013) highlighted that obtaining effective communication between students and their faculty members is essential and significant in educational settings.

In addition, Callaghan and Bower (2012) illustrated that SNSs promote social relationships between students, which facilitates a climate of positive and respected discussions and debates within the classroom. Recently, the results obtained by Al-Rahmi et al. (2014) illustrated that “social media affects positively and significantly collaborative learning with interaction with peers, interaction with supervisor, engagement, perceived ease of use, and perceived usefulness” (p. 210).

These positive relationships in formal university surroundings are what most students in Saudi Arabia need. The main style of relationship between faculty members and their students is that of an official relationship. However, on social media it can be seen that there are currently a number of academics who participate, comment, do a ‘like’, and chat with their students in a friendly and informal manner regarding relevant and irrelevant topics. These different kinds of relationships will be investigated with participating academics in this study.

#### **2.2.3.1.7. Successful Implementation Strategies and the Critical Academics’ Role**

Before employing SNSs in educational environments, successful implementation strategies should be established and learner characteristics should be taken into careful consideration, as Hung and Yuen (2010) recommended. In the same vein, Duffy (2007) argues that it is unsatisfactory to use these Web 2.0 technologies simply for the delivery of content to learners. A new learning ecology exists where these platforms can be employed for collaborative and co-creative purposes, as he describes. Callaghan and Bower (2012) revealed that different implementations of the same SNS can lead to different learning outcomes. Therefore, they placed much focus on the lecturers’ role in employing SNSs in the academic setting. In this regard, they illustrated that teachers can have a critical role in influencing behaviour and learning. The lack of online presence of teachers may have indicated to students that their work would not be checked and, therefore, it was not necessary to complete. For instance, Burke and Shonna (2008) assumed that skilled educators take advantage of YouTube as the most widely used application of Internet-based video resources, and profit from its interactive nature in the delivery of videos as well as post-viewing and follow-up activities. They confirmed

that the potential power and utility of this new technology — YouTube — in both face-to-face and online classrooms is promising, particularly when it can be managed by a keen instructor who is sufficiently experienced in its application. Therefore, they stress the teaching faculty's effective use of SNSs in order to maintain the quality of teaching methods and develop further skills in education.

To sum up, students' active engagement, collaboration and participation in a sense of community have been considered key functions where students can become involved and benefit from SNSs. These are great opportunities, which could offer useful pedagogical tools and make wonderful teaching and learning environments. In spite of that, the following questions can be raised: While SNSs are considered effective tools for teaching, learning and communication, to what extent do faculty members actually use them? To what extent do faculty members benefit from Web 2.0 tools, and do they have any concerns about utilising them in education? These queries and others will be the subject of the interview questions intended to achieve the aims of this investigation.

#### **2.2.3.2. Challenges of Employing Social Networking in Education**

On the other hand, a number of researchers have identified certain obstacles and potential challenges in the implementation of SNSs in education. In this section, I will review a variety of issues related to what challenges higher education institutions might encounter when they develop their teaching and learning methods to include social networking sites integrated in education.

##### **2.2.3.2.1. Student Productivity and Time Management Skills**

Although Arquero and Romero-Frias (2013) stated that students who extensively use Web 2.0 tools showed a notably better performance than students with low usage, it can be seen that many studies have concerns about the intensive use of SNSs and its negative impact on students' GPA (Falahah and Rosmalab, 2012; Lofstrom and Nevgi, 2007). Moreover, Falahah and Rosmalab (2012) affirmed that there is a debate surrounding SNSs' negative impact on student productivity. Still, they acknowledged that the ability to rapidly disseminate information, and the high capacity of communication among users, is valued by most participants.

It seems that the factor of time management is influential in how students control their usage of SNSs. Some investigations pointed out this concern in particular. According to Lofstrom and Nevgi (2007), the participants illustrated that the main problem with SNS usage that they encountered was students' lack of time management skills. Similarly, the results of Hung and Yuen's (2010) study identified some challenges in integrating SNSs in the educational setting, one of which was time management.

#### **2.2.3.2.2. Interpersonal Skills and Oral Presentation**

Although Okoro (2012) considered that integrating SNSs in education would challenge students' ability to manage their time effectively and to work independently and collaboratively with integrity, he expressed some concerns regarding the extensive use of social media in teaching. Specifically, Okoro anticipates that students will not be adequately prepared for the workplace, where interpersonal skills and oral presentation are critically important. As useful as social networking tools have been, students should be reminded that they are the most important focus in a communication context. In the same way, Nie (2001) shares the concern that extensive use of the Internet or electronic media in teaching minimises the critical role of face-to-face interactions with students in educational discussions and sessions.

#### **2.2.3.2.3. Lack of Training**

To obtain effective implementation of social networking tools in education, a number of studies found that instructors should have some workshops and training courses to instruct as to how to effectively employ SNSs in education and to avoid some potential concerns and challenges. After steering several research projects on the use of social networking in education, Al-Khalifa and Garcia (2013) declared that social media platforms are designed not only for entertainment, but also for the exchange of information, collaboration, teaching and learning. However, they indicated that some educators are hesitant towards embracing social media and remain uncertain about the practicality of integration of social media in educational environments. They recommended that the appropriate delivery of information to university educators about the benefits of social media in teaching would be one effective solution,



particularly for those educators who may be unenthusiastic about utilising SNSs. Conducting seminars and workshops would be helpful to direct them on the proper usage and behaviour when using this kind of technology.

On the other hand, Lofstrom and Nevgi (2007) researched the training available to teachers in using SNSs, and found that training availability was satisfactory. They clarified, however, that the actual difficulty was teachers' lack of time to attend and participate in these training sessions. In the same vein, Alharbi (2013) and Almalki (2011) confirmed that most faculty members do not have adequate time to learn how to use and apply SNSs to their teaching style in a reliable way.

#### **2.2.3.2.4. Time-consuming and Overabundance of Information Shared**

Although Hung and Yuen (2010) posit that social networking tools are beneficial in enhancing students' sense of community and, therefore, in promoting the classroom as a community of practice, they affirmed that "using social networking to supplement face-to-face courses can become time-intensive, and class members may find themselves overloaded with an overabundance of information shared within the community" (p. 713). As a result, they advised faculty members to develop a strategic plan in order to manage and maintain the community of practice in class social networks; otherwise, the use of a social network may not be effective. Moreover, they recommend the development of a structured mechanism for interaction and information sharing to maximise the benefits of social media and for avoiding obstacles in social networking for learning.

Although Okoro (2012) highlighted the importance of effective and beneficial use of social networking sites by teaching staff during instruction and in monitoring collaborative student activities, he thought that these responsibilities were laborious and time-consuming, which would affect content mastery and intellectual performance. With regard to faculty members' ability to monitor or supervise social network activities, it is very difficult for them, particularly with large groups of students. In the context of Saudi universities, many faculty members teach different groups of students with a high number of students. Moreover, some academics teach students from both

genders in a gender-segregated society, which might make it time-consuming to be in contact with them and monitor their online activities. All of these challenges will be discussed in more detail with participating academics in this research.

#### **2.2.3.2.5. Language, Communicational and Technical Challenges**

Reviewing the current literature on this topic shows that language, communication and technical challenges are considered significant obstacles when integrating SNSs effectively in teaching and learning activities. Bynum (2011) conducted a study involving interviews with 10 professionals in the field of education in California. The results of that study revealed that some of the problems associated with social media identified by teachers include spelling difficulties, students taking comments out of context, a lack of understanding, and a lack of body language, which are vital to the dynamics of communication between people. Moreover, it is important that children be visually oriented by teachers and parents, which may lead to their more improved interaction in an online environment, as respondents demonstrated.

Although Heatley and Lattimer (2013) believe that shy students who may be hesitant to speak out in class would be motivated to contribute and express their ideas freely on such platforms, Lofstrom and Nevgi (2007) illustrated that the central concerns in SNS usage, according to participants, are student isolation and loneliness, both of which can create major obstacles to learning.

From the technical aspect, some investigations revealed that there is a lack of commitment towards providing appropriate Information Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure, resources, and professional technical support at some of the higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia (Alharbi, 2013; Almalki, 2011). Moreover, Jones et al. (2011) illustrated that 25% of academics interviewed were worried about their own technical ability to integrate social networks into education in an effective manner.

In another study, Hung and Yuen (2010) asserted that technical problems and language barriers were identified as major challenges when applying SNSs in academia. By taking these challenges into consideration, it is possible that learner characteristics play a role

in student perceptions of challenges associated with the implementation of social networking in learning and teaching environments, as researchers have long thought.

#### **2.2.3.2.6. Legal and Ethical Concerns**

Some investigations revealed that there are legitimate concerns that could significantly prevent users from employing these tools in the education field, including privacy, cyber-bullying, fraud, sexual harassment, and spreading spam (Bhardwaj, 2014; Tella et al., 2013). Therefore, they suggest that before officially integrating SNSs into instruction and learning practices, these legitimate issues should have more research to ensure how to avoid its negative implications.

The results concluded by Jones et al. (2011) affirmed that the posting of inappropriate comments leading to users' information disclosure and defamation or harassment were highlighted as major causes of concern. Furthermore, there was a concern related to how "personal information disclosed on the faculty member's SNS profile may contradict their teaching personality and impact upon credibility or student expectation" (p. 216).

Based on their practical experiences, Hung and Yuen (2010) think that some educators are concerned about the threat of spam and phishing attacks. According to their perspectives, employing private social networking accounts for the purposes of learning and teaching appears to be one of the solutions suggested to resolve these issues of privacy and information security. All of these matters related to privacy will be discussed later in this chapter.

To summarise, the literature reveals that different challenges can prevent or minimise the usage of SNSs in educational settings. These difficulties relate to various aspects, including: educational, communicational, technical, legal and ethical. However, it can be seen that there are few studies concerned with cultural or societal considerations (Ellison and boyd, 2007; Almalki, 2011). Therefore, this study will contribute to filling this gap in the literature by focussing on how cultural and social concerns or challenges could have an impact on academics' attitude towards and usage of SNSs for educational

purposes, particularly in non-Western, conservative societies, taking Saudi society as an example.

#### **2.2.4. Lecturer–Student Online and Offline Relationships**

Establishing and enhancing friendships on SNSs is one of the main purposes of using these social platforms, whether with existing friends in offline settings or new friends who have similar interests and who have met for the first time. Various investigations have affirmed that keeping in contact with existing offline friends is considered the most common reason for the use of social networks (Lampe et al., 2008). From a similar perspective, Beer (2008) said: “We cannot think of friendship on social network sites as entirely different and disconnected from our actual friends and notions of friendship, particularly as young people grow up and are informed by the connections they make on social networks” (p. 520). In contrast, Ellison and boyd (2007) debated that online friends on social networking sites are not the same as offline friends in traditional settings.

However, constructing a friendship between faculty members and their students can be a debatable matter among academics in educational institutions. In this context, Jones et al. (2011) claimed that the term ‘friend’ is particularly significant when it comes to possible interaction between faculty members and students via social networks. They illustrated that it does not describe the essence of the relationship between them. Hewitt and Forte (2006) studied student–lecturer relationships and found that some students, mainly females, were not eager to be engaged with their lecturers via social networks. As the key findings of the study showed, the students’ concerns included the fear of being monitored and the ‘erosion’ of the academic lecturer–student relationship. Additionally, there are similar viewpoints from the academic side. As Jones et al. (2011) indicated, some participating academics revealed that they care for their students but they want to maintain the boundaries between their personal and professional aspects. Of course, ‘friending’ students on their personal accounts can be a controversial issue in the academic field in general. However, in Saudi society it is unacceptable for many society members to make a friendship between male lecturers

and their female students due to gender segregation and its effects on individuals and society as a whole.

According to existing literature, there is a general sense that use of social networks would enhance the student–lecturer relationship. Jones et al. (2011) conducted a study to explore the use of social networks for student–faculty communication from a lecturer’s viewpoint. Their findings revealed that faculty members have mixed opinions regarding the impact that social network usage may have on the academic–student relationship. To clarify, academics teaching professional programmes such as education or accounting appeared to maintain a strict relationship offline; they sought to maintain the boundaries between lecturers and students both online and offline, too. Thus, it seems that the nature of their offline relationship has influenced their usage of SNSs with regard to how they communicate with their students. On the other hand, the lecturers who taught media, art, computing or games already had a friendship-based relationship in offline settings; they were more accepting of utilising SNSs as tools to enhance lecturer–student communication online. They illustrated that they communicate with their students for social matters, which can be reflected positively on their educational matters. Therefore, it is clear that academics’ familiarity with social networking sites and their offline relationships with students could be reflected in their relationships on these online social networks, and can be considered essential factors contributing to eliciting these different faculty members’ viewpoints.

Developing relationships between lecturers and students will not only play a positive role in connectivity, but also contribute to increasing the level of productivity. Okoro (2012) demonstrated that for maximum productivity, it is important to use these social sites in order to increase and enrich face-to-face communication and, subsequently, to develop excellent interpersonal communication skills. Furthermore, Rennie and Morrison (2013) highlighted that obtaining effective communication between students and their faculty members is essential and significant in educational settings. To enhance classroom discussions and get shy students particularly engaged, several researchers suggested that faculty members should prepare themselves and encourage their students to participate with their peers and lecturers through social networking

sites. In doing so, many insights and opinions would come up and be discussed in more detail among all participating students and academics. These educational strategies could then contribute to encouraging the majority of students, especially those who feel shy in front of their classmates and teachers, to get involved in these online discussions (Akbari et al., 2012).

It has been claimed that instructors and learners will have a stronger relationship when they communicate and exchange knowledge and experiences for the sake of enhancing teaching, learning and communicative activities (Boud, 1994; Mayer, 1996). When utilising Web 2.0 applications in higher education, learners principally become involved with instructor interactions through these tools in order to seek synchronous and non-synchronous feedback, knowledge and motivation (Al-hojailan, 2013). With respect to the teacher–student relationship on social networking platforms and its implications for teaching and learning practices, Powers et al. (2012) believe that there has been an increasing and dramatic shift in the teacher–student relationship: “We are also seeing a shift in the teacher student relationship — teachers are increasingly serving as facilitators of the courses and students are often taking the initiative and leading the learning process. Teachers provide the information, but students are going off and learning more on their own.” (p. 243)

Investigating these online relationships between academics and students from both genders who used to teach and learn in a gender-segregated environment will contribute to current literature. It will be interesting, which is what I am planning, to study how lecturers from these specific settings look at the style of relationship that should be followed when interacting with students (whether formality or informality). Furthermore, the question about the implications of social norms in conservative societies, such as Saudi Arabia, on these online communications will be discussed in the current study. Therefore, conducting face-to-face interviews with Saudi faculty members, who have experienced these patterns of relationships in online and offline settings, will assist in providing a rich discussion about these complicated issues from the academic perspective.

### **2.2.5. Faculty Members' Online Identity**

As we have seen in the previous section, academics are very different in their relationships with students on these social platforms. Similarly, they are unlike in how they perceive their online identity, as well as to what extent their character should be protected. Some lecturers are anxious about this matter, whereas other academics do not see a concern with regard to this subject; they deal with friends, colleagues, students and other users in online settings as they do with them in offline settings. In the same way, some faculty members have sufficient knowledge of how to protect their identities in these digital spaces, while others need some guidance and instruction in this regard. Grahame (2008) has noticed that users of social networking sites have “a particular discomfort in achieving a balance between one’s work identity and a more personal identity within social spaces such as Facebook. Participants need to understand how to protect their identities within these spaces and generally need a source of advice and guidance on managing personal data within Web spaces” (p. 128).

Levin and Abril (2008) conducted a study at Ryerson University in Canada and at the University of Miami in Florida to investigate insights into online socialising and perceptions of privacy, security issues and risks associated with their identities, given such activity. The findings showed that respondents have a passion for disclosure. However, they are aware of the risks involved in online socialisation and value the ability to protect their multiple social personalities and communicate only with intended audiences. When respondents encounter a threat to privacy, they consider that their reputation, dignity, personality or online identity is in danger. Participants in that study acknowledge the probability of damage to their reputation and dignity on social networking sites. Damage to their reputation was repeatedly identified as a primary concern. Respondents also demanded the ability to create separate personalities to sustain firewalls between social, work and family groups. Few believed that they could take suitable steps to control what is posted about them, and almost half reported feeling unable to protect their character on such publicly accessible forums.

As some current literature shows, cultural and social backgrounds can play a major role in affecting academics' perspectives towards protecting their online identities and,

accordingly, their practices on SNSs. Gunawardena et al. (2009) confirm that on social networking platforms, “consideration must be given to the cultural backgrounds of the members and the level of comfort with self-disclosure and expression of identity” (p. 18). Therefore, it is essential to have a general understanding of cultural and societal backgrounds, to what extent participants could disclose their identity, and what kinds of concerns they may have. From another aspect, some research has shown that lecturers have a tendency to establish boundaries between personal connections and professional responsibilities. Additionally, due to their concerns about their online identity, lecturers want to structure their participation in a certain way and maintain appropriate and meaningful connections (Veletsianos and Kimmons, 2013; Zaidieh, 2012).

Furthermore, Prescott (2014) and Bynum (2011) affirmed the prior perspective with reference to the significance of setting boundaries between professional and personal lives of academics on these online social networks. The findings emerged from Prescott’s (2014) study, which reported that an obvious division between academic and social lives should be considered when employing SNSs in the academic setting. Additionally, the outcomes of that study revealed that the concern about online and offline identities has a remarkable influence on the faculty members’ approaches to employing these social platforms in teaching and learning activities. Likewise, Bynum (2011) indicated that the most common suggestion provided by participating professionals was the need to develop an effective policy that outlines the boundaries for students and teachers. Respondents believe that this framework will help to protect teachers, students, and school administrations from any inappropriate or unethical behaviours that could cause crucial damage to participants’ identities.

Certainly, there have been several legal and ethical concerns related to protecting academics’ online identity that might have affected the use of SNSs at higher education institutions. In this regard, Jones et al. (2011) illustrated that there are issues raised by lecturers, including the potential for defamation of character and harassment — this is a significant concern for academics and educational administrators debating the merits of SNSs. Although information disclosure and sharing can be considered fundamental



practices to have successful participation on social media platforms, such information can range from very limited disclosure of personal data, such as the user's name, to extensive exposure of private information, as Chen and Sharma (2013) demonstrated. Of course, social networking sites encourage users to present a high level of self-disclosure to others and become engaged with friends, who may, in turn, attract interest from other audiences. However, such activities may cause negative consequences for users due to potential risks that result from certain types of confidential information provided on SNSs, including cyber-stalking, cyber-bullying, and identity theft (Pike et al., 2009; Stutzman et al., 2013). I think that these concerns should receive greater focus and be discussed with the study's participants.

Some existing literature, in an attempt to protect the user's identity, warns about private information disclosure on these social platforms, particularly with the remarkable development in tricks and styles of hacking. Gross and Acquisti (2005) found that 89% of social network users give their real names, and 61% use their photograph on their accounts, which makes it easier to identify the users. They also found that profile pictures and disclosed information on different types of SNSs can be matched for easier identification. Of course, information disclosure to a large audience can be a genuine concern, especially if it includes personal and confidential information, such as a date of birth and address, besides a real name and photo. Moreover, some hackers can make a comparison between information exposed on multiple sites of SNSs to predict the user's real identity, as the researchers warned. Therefore, it is an important issue that must be taken into consideration, particularly in Saudi society due to the highly sensitive nature of these issues.

### **2.3. Social Networking Sites and Society**

The integration of social networking sites in education is difficult to investigate without taking society and culture into consideration. Studying these aspects will give the researcher the opportunity to have comprehensive vision and discuss the issue from all related dimensions. In this section, I will discuss a variety of matters related to social media and society. The first issue will be the cultural and social concerns and challenges that utilising SNSs might encounter in a conservative society, taking Saudi society as an

example. Furthermore, I will clarify the most prevalent privacy concerns and societal and gender restrictions according to their importance, particularly in the context of Saudi society.

### **2.3.1. Cultural and Social Concerns**

Cultural and societal dimensions are significant and should be considered when investigating topics that discuss subjects related to media, education, gender and privacy issues, as these aspects have the potential to contribute to forming how individuals and society as a whole deal with these matters. Certainly, a number of investigations conducted in this area have provided valuable results. Ellison and boyd (2007) indicated that only a few studies have been carried out to investigate the impact of culture on utilising SNSs. However, the majority of researchers have called for further studies to expand our understanding of these social and cultural matters, especially in societies that have a particular culture such as that of Saudi Arabia (e.g. Almalki, 2011; Aljasir, 2015).

The concepts of individualism and collectivism can be considered the main basic dimensions to characterise any culture, which can be essentially reflected on forming personal identity and social identity for individuals who belong to that culture (Rosen et al., 2010; Merker, 1982). Individualism can be defined as the tendency of individuals to put their own needs above the needs of the groups to which they belong or within which they work (Merker, 1982). Other researchers have described individualism as a multidimensional concept that has key features such as the tendency towards self-promotion, competition, independence, and emotional distance from in-groups, whereas they characterise collectivism as a complex concept but one which concerns closeness to the group, the family, and sociability, and giving greater priority to the group than to each of its members (Hui and Triandis, 1986; Triandis, 2001). Spears and Lea (1992) differentiate between personal identity and social identity. Personal identity, as they define it, is an individual's comprehensive understanding of herself or himself, whereas social identity of a person is derived from people's presentation of their identity as a group, or the social role that can be taken within the interaction.

Findings emerged from a research led by Jones et al. (2011) which indicated that people from certain ethnic groups or specific cultural backgrounds were more likely to use specific sites than those from others. Therefore, they confirmed that cultural diversity in these kinds of studies should not be underestimated, particularly in countries where higher education institutions have international students from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Rosen et al. (2010) illustrated that there are cultural differences in self-presentation performance and how individuals communicate in both online and offline settings. Furthermore, they suggested that there are different behaviours related to gender-based choices as to how to present themselves in both online and offline situations. Nevertheless, Rosen et al. (2010) and Green et al. (2005) emphasised that it is not accurate to conceptualise all participants as similar in their culture, even if they live in the same country and belong to a specific society. They highlighted that there is a cultural variation within the country that should be taken into consideration, as each nation is made up of people who belong to diverse national backgrounds.

Paying attention to the differences in cultures is significant in communication and interaction with others, particularly on social platforms where most social cues don't exist to support verbal language. Welzer and Ward (2010) asserted that the users of these social platforms, when they get involved in collaborative communities, have to be aware of the differences in language and culture as they chat, write and communicate with other users who might be coming from very different cultural communities. In the same context, Welzer et al. (2011) illustrated that different programmes and methods were developed to support the users of social networks in overcoming their differences in language, such as translation tools. However, they claim that fewer supporting efforts were given to the needs of users regarding their cultural differences. Furthermore, they thought that language barriers in understanding others can be bridged by using a common language such as English, but as they debate, there is no common or general culture that can be utilised to comprehend others on SNSs, as these online gatherings bring people from different cultural backgrounds.

On the social change aspect, Joinson (2003) described how critical social networking tools particularly change people's thinking and perceptions of the world around them.

He stated: “Tools (SNSs) are more than just something to make a task easier. They change your way of thinking, of approaching a task (and indeed the nature of the task itself), and can reap unimagined wider social changes.” (pp. 2–3)

Despite all of the previous concerns and challenges, these social platforms can contribute to getting people from different cultural backgrounds together and have reciprocal interactions and relationships. In this regard, the findings of Ray’s (2014) study show that social networking sites can help to overcome different cross-cultural barriers that individuals and global organisations might encounter.

Therefore, it is clear that there are mixed viewpoints about integrating SNSs with reference to whether it would be advantageous or disadvantageous for the users to overcome the difficulty of interaction with others coming from different cultural backgrounds. Thus, this research will contribute to the existing discussion about this subject in the literature by presenting the emerging findings in its scope according to participating academics’ perspectives.

### **2.3.2. Privacy Issues on Social Networking Sites**

Privacy is considered one of the most crucial issues, especially during a time of rapid technological and communicative revolution, whether on social networking platforms or websites. Alhomod and Shafi (2013) argued that privacy has received the most attention internationally. Therefore, it too should be given considerable attention in research. At the University of Worcester, United Kingdom, Dr Joanne Kuzma revealed that online users have expressed worries about their personal confidentiality protection, and, recently, several news articles have exposed many privacy breaches and unannounced changes to privacy policies on different social network platforms, revisions that could negatively affect data protection and users’ trust (Kuzma, 2011).

Therefore, it is a matter of concern that necessitates an in-depth discussion while taking all relevant aspects into consideration, particularly in conservative societies. For that reason, this study will shed light on this issue in the context of Saudi society from different dimensions; specifically, the following aspects will be discussed in light of current literature.

### **2.3.2.1. Privacy Issues as a Social Concern**

In general, online social platforms are promising to protect privacy through privacy agreements; however, Kafali et al. (2014) claimed that it can be seen that many cases of privacy leakages are taking place daily on these sites. Ideally, they suppose that these online social networking applications should be able to manage and preserve their agreements of privacy protection through well-founded procedures. However, they think that the dynamic nature of these online networks can make it difficult for them to protect users' private information and keep them under their control. One of the main reasons, as they illustrate, is that relations between users and the implications that can be realised among the shared content make it possible for third parties to become aware of such information that is, in fact, private. That could happen even if the social networks themselves do not share their users' confidential information with other networks or parties. As an example, the user's location can be recognised from some geographic information attached to the images that they upload. Furthermore, as another concern, Fernandez (2009) indicated that some social networks, such as Facebook, may provide sufficient privacy policy to protect their users' information. However, users can create other applications which could disclose users' information due to these linked applications not, perhaps, having a substantial privacy setting, as do other popular online social networks.

As an indication that they are aware of the seriousness of the matter, Kuzma (2011) revealed that some countries have enacted specific privacy laws to protect their citizens from such violations in digital space, even though these initiatives are not globally universal. However, with all of these actions, the findings emerging from his investigation illustrated that many of these popular social platforms contain a variety of serious privacy elements that can put users' private information at risk. In a broad sense, Kuzma (2011) provided a comprehensive description of privacy protection: "Privacy protection is not merely a technical problem, but should be considered a multi-dimensional approach where industry standards, legislation, management processes and procedures, training and technology all play a role in enhancing consumer trust in online commercial sites." (p. 83)

From another angle, Levin and Abril (2008) tried to clarify and differentiate between offline and online privacy and what expectations and experiences users have in this regard. They illustrated that online social users seem to transfer offline expectations of privacy to their online social experiences. Offline, individuals have many social networks and present different personalities in different contexts, but they can share personal information selectively between online networks. Levin and Abril confirm that the information shared within a social network is no longer private, and it is nearly impossible to control it once released online.

A study led by Dwyer et al. (2007) to investigate trust and privacy concerns on social networking sites, particularly Facebook and Myspace, was examined. They found that perspectives of trust and concerns of privacy were similar to the users of both platforms. Nevertheless, an interesting result of their research revealed that young adult users were still willing to use these networks and build their online relationships with others even if they realised that procedures employed for privacy protection were weak. Furthermore, Kuzma (2011) conducted an empirical study of privacy issues among social networking sites (SNSs) with the purpose of determining the level of privacy protection gaps for worldwide users of SNSs. In this study, the researcher analysed 60 worldwide social networking sites and found that even with some local laws and standards that protect privacy and users' data to some extent, there are still serious problems with social networking sites collecting personal data through a variety of technical mechanisms. This could result in potential problems with users' trust and lead to abandoning the use of a specific site as long as users have several alternative platforms of social networking. At the end of the study, the researcher recommended and advised site owners to realise that and to employ a multi-dimensional technical, administrative and training approach to address online privacy and provide their users with higher levels of private and secure data protection. Similarly, in Levin and Abril's (2008) study, the researchers advised social networking sites to support online privacy as much as, if not more than, traditional measures of control over personal information. They highlighted that stronger privacy protection must be provided through the use of privacy protection tools and procedures. They also argue that if SNSs are not able to

protect themselves and their users, governments could develop possible regulatory measures to shield people against privacy breaches.

By looking at the methods that can be provided by some social networking sites to adjust privacy settings, the findings of Aljasir's (2015) study show that a number of participants considered these adjustable privacy settings to be a convenient way in which to bring Facebook, as an example, in line with Saudi cultural principles to be utilised in their everyday lives. They explained that these privacy settings have assisted them in hiding part of their private profile information that would not be appropriate to expose in public, which makes their Facebook use compatible with their cultural and societal values.

In another investigation carried out in the context of Saudi society, Aljasir et al. (2013) studied some aspects of the usage of Facebook by Saudi university students and found that there is a remarkable gender difference regarding the privacy issue. Female students take more privacy in matters of precaution than their male counterparts. For instance, when female students use their real names on their Facebook accounts, they try not to access their Facebook accounts in locations where other users can see both them and their profile names. That can reflect to what extent Saudi society members, especially women, look at privacy issues.

In some societies, the privacy matter may be dealt with as an individual issue. However, in Saudi society, the privacy issue is not considered only a personal matter for the user, but rather a social concern. In a broad sense, any influential action, be it positive or negative, conducted by individuals will reflect not only on the individuals but also on their families. The whole family will be proud or ashamed of what their members achieved or committed. These kinds of social concerns among Saudi society members will be discussed with the academics involved in this investigation.

#### **2.3.2.2. Privacy Issues between the Views of Western and Saudi Society**

There is a major debate about the revolution of information and communication technology and how this technology could affect the privacy of individuals and societies. In other words, a number of relevant matters can influence or be influenced by these

increasing developmental relations between privacy and information technologies, such as culture, society, religion, etc. Of course, societies and people differ greatly in how they look at these issues and also in the nature of the relationship between their cultures and religions. In this section, all of these complexities will be discussed in light of a comparison between Western and Saudi societies regarding opinions about privacy and technology.

From a historical perspective, Cannataci (2009) thinks that privacy, as a phenomenon, has become much more complicated than it was a few decades ago. The main reason, as he believes, is that societal changes have been greatly influenced by information technologies. However, he posed a question: does religion have a role to play in the discussion about the relationship between technology and privacy matters? I think that it is a simple question but with complex answers, at least in some societies. To clarify, he illustrated that the debate on the relationships between information technologies and privacy issues has been carried out largely from a Western viewpoint for several decades. However, it has been thought that attention has arisen recently to examining whether or not other cultures, such as Chinese and Muslim societies, have a similar concern about these issues, as he demonstrated.

Undoubtedly, some societies apply their religious values and cultural norms more than others, even if they follow the same religion and culture. Among Islamic and Arab countries, Saudi Arabia can be considered the country with the most Islamic culture, in which religious values and cultural principles are so interconnected that it would be difficult to differentiate between the two (Al-Lily, 2011). Furthermore, Yamani (2010) provided some explanations as to why Saudi Arabia has a solid interconnection between its culture and religion. Firstly, it is the birthplace of Islam where the two holy cities, Makkah and Madinah, are located, and millions of Muslims around the world direct towards Makkah to pray five times a day. Secondly, besides its religious significance, Saudi Arabia is located in the centre of the Arabic region. Therefore, these two essential aspects have resulted in giving Saudi Arabia such a significant status, which has reflected their cultural norms and religious beliefs, as Yamani affirmed. In this regard, Madini (2012) considered that the combination has contributed to forming the majority of



Saudi identities, attitudes and behaviours. Unlike Islamic nations, particularly Saudi society, Cannataci (2009) believed that Western societies, particularly Christian, have witnessed an increasing separation between the Church and state in the last three centuries — more than in other cultures.

After the earlier theoretical comparison between Western and Islamic societies, the following sections will focus on empirical comparisons between the implications of these two cultural perspectives; these can influence individuals' attitudes regarding to what extent they use social networking platforms in light of their concerns about privacy.

There are a number of investigations conducted with participants of different cultural backgrounds, e.g. a study carried out with 50 university students from the USA (Govani and Pashley, 2005) and another study conducted with 343 Canadian university students in Canada (Christofides et al., 2009). Those studies revealed that while respondents reported awareness of some of the privacy matters associated with using SNSs, e.g. Facebook, they disclosed a high level of private information on their profiles. On the other hand, investigations concerned with Islamic participants illustrated that students with the greatest level of privacy concerns exposed the lowest level of information. For instance, studies led by Osman and Rahim (2011) with 30 university students in Malaysia and by Mohamed (2010) with 325 users from Egypt and the United Arab Emirates reported a negative relationship between disclosure of personal information and online privacy concerns. It is important to clarify that such cases of information disclosure can be affected by different factors, not just religious, cultural or societal considerations. However, this can give an indication that the majority of people in Islamic societies pay more attention to this concern due to its significant sensitivity.

Regarding differences between genders in online self-disclosure, the literature shows that there are a number of studies, conducted among Canadian participants, which have revealed no significant gender differences in terms of self-disclosure among SNS users (e.g. Christofides et al., 2009; Nosko et al., 2010). However, some studies conducted in the USA have shown that there is a gender difference between Facebook users regarding their level of information disclosure (e.g. Sheldon, 2013; Bond, 2009). On the

other hand, regarding self-disclosure among participants from Islamic backgrounds, a study directed by Mohamed (2010) among Egyptian and Emirati users indicated that female participants had more concerns about their privacy, paid more attention to protecting their online privacy, and exposed less personal information than male participants. Furthermore, the findings of a study led by Aljasir et al. (2013) to examine some aspects of Facebook usage by Saudi university students reveal that there is a remarkable difference between male and female users regarding privacy concerns. Female students take more precautions for the sake of privacy than do male students. These outcomes can be viewed as compatible with expected practices in Islamic and Arab countries that are much influenced by cultural and societal considerations, as they pay greater attention to the privacy of women, in both offline and online settings. That gives another indication of the contribution that can be made by the cultural norms and social values of individuals involved in these online gatherings.

Despite Saudi society being characterised as a conservative community, people and societies usually develop over time slowly. Of course, matters related to developing societies need much more time and Saudi society is no exception. In this regard, Al-Lily (2011) revealed that, despite resistance from conservatives, many Saudi norms have recently been relaxed as a result of various factors. The three most influential factors, as he illustrated, are the social movement from a tribal to a modern society, the appearance of a new generation of educated Saudi men and women alike, and the increasingly growing implications of the Internet and social networks, particularly in Saudi society. This perspective has been confirmed by the findings emerging from Aljasir's (2015) study, in which the researcher revealed that the majority of participants (university students from both genders) thought that using Facebook is compatible with maintaining their social norms because they want to live in a contemporary society, which is more open to other opinions, modern in its means, and willing to accept and benefit from all new technologies according to their needs. Furthermore, Coleman (2011) demonstrated that social networking platforms, in general, have been welcomed by Saudi society, having been utilised not only by the new generation but also by Saudi clerics. Evidently, it can be seen that the majority of Saudi users who have large

numbers of followers on Twitter and friends on Facebook, for example, are well-known religious figures in Saudi society.

Therefore, it can be seen that although Saudis, particularly women, are concerned about their privacy on these online networks, the increasing openness to other cultures has encouraged them to get involved in such online social communities. Yet, I think that there is still resistance to employing SNSs without setting boundaries between what are and what are not socially and culturally acceptable practices. This aspect will be discussed with the participants involved in this study to see how these matters would influence the users of SNSs in the context of Saudi society.

Despite the focus of previous research on privacy issues on social networking sites, most of these platforms clarify that they are committed to preserving users' rights in their digital spaces. Moreover, they might advise certain behaviours on these sites based on their own experiences when new users set up accounts on SNSs; most of them require users to confirm that they have read the privacy policy and conditions of documents before submitting their requests and becoming fully registered. Facebook, for example, offers a range of privacy options to its users. Users can make all of their communications visible to everyone, or they can keep all of these communications private. Moreover, users can control specific connections. In addition, users can choose whether or not to be searchable by other users, decide which parts of their profile are public, and determine exactly who can see their activities. Furthermore, there is a message feature, which closely resembles email, for those who wish to use private communication on Facebook (Rubinstein and Good, 2013; Mulligan and King, 2011). It can be perceived that these social networks have different ways in which to secure users' profiles and to advise individuals on what they should do from their side to ensure being in a safe environment. Therefore, the question is as follows: to what extent could users' practices be considered the most important factor in protecting or exposing their privacy? All of these matters will be major topics of discussion with participants in this study.

From my viewpoint, I think that these challenges are worth considering and should attract attention from higher education institutions, administrators, teaching staff, and

researchers. In addition, I believe that privacy does not have a specific definition or standards for all people or communities around the world. Each culture has certain criteria in this regard. What are considered critical privacy issues in Western countries, for example, are not necessarily shared by those in other countries. Therefore, in this study I argue that many things that have been written about online privacy are not sufficiently sensitive to culture, as they are written from a Western perspective of privacy. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia is regarded as a conservative country and, thus, protecting privacy is a very critical issue, particularly on SNSs. They also strongly respect their societal considerations and cultural values. Thus, how to steer an acceptable middle course with SNSs in a conservative society will be one of the essential points of the discussion in this study.

Ultimately, after I presented and discussed the existing literature that is more connected or related to different aspects of this subject, I looked at the theoretical approaches that can provide an illustration, and expand our understanding, of emerging outcomes of this research. Therefore, the next main section of this chapter will provide an in-depth discussion about the theoretical framework of the current research. In particular, it will illustrate what theoretical perspectives were chosen, what the rationale behind selecting those specific theories was, and how they are synthesised in a way that can contribute to making a comprehensive perception of the research findings.

## **2.4. Theoretical Framework**

Although selecting relevant conceptual models and theoretical perspectives can provide a sound background for research, doing so may also be delayed until the data have been collected and analysed. That is what I did in this study because the aim of this approach is to explore the perceptions that emerge from the data. The concepts or themes that come out of the study will then be supported by evidence from the literature (Robinson, 2002). Thus, the nature of the research and the study strategies determined have led me to think about collecting data before choosing a theoretical approach. After undertaking the fieldwork of the study, collecting the data, and analysing the respondents' attitudes and ideas suggested regarding the study

questions, I can say that there are several theoretical perspectives that can be applied, particularly those which identify how teaching and learning approaches could take place in a social context. Therefore, I considered establishing a multi-dimensional theoretical framework based on the following four theories: Community of Practice, Hyper-personal Communication, Constructivism, and Connectivism.

The preferred theoretical approaches have been chosen due to their appropriateness to the research subject and, most importantly, because of the strong relationship between their assumptions and the findings that emerged in the current investigation. The first two theories describe the nature of interaction and engagement occurring on social networking sites between users and how both genders in gender-segregated societies communicate with each other. The latter two theories are concerned with explaining the learning and teaching practices taking place on these social platforms. The rationale for selecting each of these theoretical perspectives, the previous studies that adopted them, and also their applicability to the Saudi context of integrating social networking into education will be discussed later in this chapter.

Before reviewing these four theories in detail, it is important to illustrate that I considered other theories applied in various feminist and cultural studies. One of these theories is the Feminist Theory, which attempts to understand inequality between genders and examine women's roles in their social life. It also aims to analyse feminist politics in different fields such as sociology, anthropology, economics, education, and others (Chodorow, 1989). Furthermore, Social Role Theory of Gender Differences is widely employed in studies that are interested in investigating gender differences and gender as a social construct (Ashmore and Sewell, 1998). The main argument of this theory is that gender differences are mostly due to the adoption of social roles that determine behaviours and practices suitable for men and women in a particular society. It claims that each community has a stereotypical image in terms of gender roles, as those societies have shared expectations of men's and women's behaviours and characteristics, which are adopted and largely dominated by their social norms (Eagly, 1987).

In looking at theories that are relevant to media, society and culture, the Public Sphere is one of these perspectives. According to Habermas (1991), the public sphere consists of participations, debates, and shared knowledge and practices of people who have a common interest in discussing their society's political, economic, social and cultural issues. With the purpose of encouraging individuals to get engaged in participating in the public sphere, equality and the right of freedom of expression must be ensured. Therefore, the public sphere is an area of social participation where people can come together to interact and discuss their societal concerns. Through that discussion they have an opportunity to suggest practical solutions and share their experiences.

Ultimately, I found those specific theoretical approaches applicable and helpful to expand our understanding of some particular matters raised in this study. However, I decided not to apply them for several reasons. One of these reasons is that those perspectives are general in their assumptions while the findings of this research present particular gender, social and cultural concerns in specific conservative societies. Furthermore, the findings that have emerged of the current investigation, particularly those relevant to gender and social issues, can be more clearly illustrated in light of the community of practice and hyper-personal communication theories. In addition, other researchers investigating other aspects of this topic in a similar way could apply these approaches to underpin and illustrate their findings and also to enrich their discussions about such matters. All of these selected theories that contribute to establishing the theoretical framework for the current research will be the subject of discussion in the following sections.

#### **2.4.1. A Community of Practice (CoP): Lave and Wenger (1991)**

The first use of the term 'Community of Practice' was in 1991 by theorists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger. Lave and Wenger (1991) indicate that "because the place of knowledge is within a community of practice, questions of learning must be addressed within the developmental cycles of that community" (p. 100). In 1998, Wenger extended the concept, applied it to other domains, and developed it as the basis of a social theory of learning. He defines CoP simply as groups of people who have a common interest in a particular subject of knowledge or experience and who regularly

interact to learn how to do it better by sharing ideas, strategies and solutions. Furthermore, he theorises that there are three required components of CoP theory: a domain of knowledge, community, and practice (Wenger, 1998), which will be discussed later.

Community of practice is a theory of learning and it can also be a part of knowledge management. Lave and Wenger described how learning can occur through practice within social participation. They named this process 'situated learning' (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Wenger has focussed in his more recent work primarily on learning as social involvement, with the individuals as participants who contribute actively in the communities of practice, and in the construction of their identity through these social communities (Wenger et al., 2002). Eckert (2006) revealed that communities of practice emerge in response to a common interest or position among a group of people, and they play a significant role in forming and developing the participation of community members in, and orientating towards, the world around them. Thus, it offers an accountable link, as Eckert described, between the individual, the group, and the place in the wider social order, and provides a setting in which practice appears as a function of that link.

All of the three structural elements identified above can be applied to social networking environments as well as to face-to-face interactions within communities of practice. Wenger et al. (2002) observed that when these three elements work well together, the members of any community of practice can create, develop and share their own knowledge. A community of practice (CoP), therefore, is a process of social learning. Learning, be it planned or accidental, mostly takes place through social participation. Therefore, the teaching and learning practices conducted through SNSs can be seen as an apparent pattern of a CoP.

#### **2.4.1.1. A Domain of Knowledge**

The domain of knowledge, as a fundamental part of the community of practice, can be defined as the specific subject or topic of knowledge or experience in question about which most members in the community of practice are interested to learn,

understanding all of its relevant aspects and being engaged in shared activities to discover it in depth (Wenger et al., 2002). Gunawardena et al. (2009) demonstrated that social networking technologies present an opportunity and digital environment for discussion and interaction. The domain represents a common ground where participants can share their ideas, knowledge and experience. As participants engage in the domain, a shared understanding of knowledge can develop; in the best case, a domain generates personal meaning and strategic relevance (Wenger et al., 2002).

#### **2.4.1.2. A Community**

Wenger (1998) described the community from the community of practice (CoP) theoretical perspective as a group of people who learn, interact together, and build relationships that result in a feeling of belonging and common commitment. “The community creates the social fabric of learning” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 28). Gunawardena et al. (2009) stated that social constructionist theory can be applied to analyse the use of social networking tools for community building. Social constructionists believe that the world in general, and the community in particular, is formed by the exchange of ideas and conversations that the members have with one another. They explain that social networking platforms can help to build a community through dialogue and conversation. According to Gunawardena et al. (2009), users, together, make sense of their past and present experiences, and create structures and images of what they anticipate in the future. Furthermore, they observed that online social networking can lead to the development of culture in its own right; often the boundaries between the real and virtual worlds are not apparent.

#### **2.4.1.3. A Practice**

While the domain indicates the topic on which the community focuses, the practice is the specific knowledge which the community develops, shares and maintains (Wenger et al., 2002). As Eckert (2006) mentioned, participants in a community of practice collaborate in setting themselves as a group with respect to the world around them. That would take into account the common interpretation of other communities and the personal practice conducted by other members belonging to different communities.



Gunawardena et al. (2009) clarified that social networking technologies offer various ways in which to participate in interactive technological environments and different methods to obtain knowledge and experience through practice. Therefore, these interactive tools used widely in very different fields of knowledge will change how users think, how they learn, and how they interact with one another in these online communities.

#### **2.4.1.4. The Major Factors of an Effective Community of Practice**

A number of studies have illustrated that many factors can play a key role in making successful and effective communities of practice. According to these investigations, the following four elements can be considered the essential ones in this regard.

##### **2.4.1.4.1. Members of Communities of Practice**

According to Duguid (2005), getting involved in these communities of practice gives individuals the opportunity to convert knowledge and theoretical ideas into practical actions. Therefore, collaboration and exchanging experiences occurring between members of these online communities can contribute to bridging the gap between the question of what and the question of how (Duguid, 2005). Moreover, he argued that participation in communities of practice provides the content and context to aspiring members joining these communities, who need not only the knowledge but also the identity of being a community member.

In these communities of practice, individuals can open unlimited discussions and freely brainstorm sessions about a particular subject they are talking about or a project upon which they are working (Dalkir, 2013). Through these discussions, participants share valuable information and practical experiences carried out to solve a specific problem. Based on exchanging this mutual knowledge, other members can learn from these informal gatherings and gain practical skills to avoid potential mistakes in handling things in similar situations with which they may be faced. Thus, the role of the members of communities of practice is crucial as to whether to make these informal meetings successful or unsuccessful, depending on how active they are and what matters they discussed and solutions they offered to help others to make the right decisions when

they experience similar positions. Additionally, the climate of discussion that they create in these online gatherings is essential.

#### **2.4.1.4.2. Social Presence**

Social presence is a human need for all participants, not only within their face-to-face communities, but also in online settings. Social presence can be defined as “the feeling that others are involved in the communication process” (Whiteman, 2002, p. 6). Garrison (1997) defines social presence as the degree to which the participants are able to present themselves effectively within the community. Generally, the main goal of creating social presence in any learning community, be it offline or online, is to construct a level of ease in which participants feel comfortable about engaging with the instructor and the other members (Aragon, 2003). A number of researches on social presence within communities of practice emphasise that more responsibility should be placed on the participants to socially and effectively introduce themselves in communities of practice, as an indication of their social presence, especially in online environments (Rourke et al., 2007).

#### **2.4.1.4.3. Motivations**

By creating online teams of mutually motivated peers, participants are able to develop the interpersonal structures required to support and learn from one another. The virtual communities on social networking sites represent an important part of how we actively learn and engage with the world as social beings (Charlton, 2013). Different motivations can contribute to prompting the members of communities of practice to share knowledge and take part in discussions carried out in these informal gatherings. When the members of communities of practice consider knowledge to be a public good owned by a community, they become inspired to share knowledge as a moral obligation and community interest. On the other hand, participants find themselves reluctant to share and exchange knowledge with others within organisational communities when they realise that organisations deal with knowledge as a private good, maintained by these particular organisations or by the organisational members (Wasko and Faraj, 2000).

#### **2.4.1.4.4. Barriers**

Administration of a community of practice is not a simple task, but often encounters many barriers that limit or can prevent individuals from engaging in exchanging knowledge through these communities (Tu, 2002). Some studies reveal that there are rational reasons that prevent some members of these informal communities from not being an active participant. These barriers include egos, personal attacks from others or if the members of the communities feel uncomfortable with the level of their expertise. Additionally, most of the members will not be enthusiastic about participating when they find it difficult to deal with large communities or find that participation is very time-consuming (Tu, 2002; Wasko and Faraj, 2000).

#### **2.4.1.5. Development of the Theory**

Over the last 10 years, the theory of CoP has been further developed to include several forms. In 2005, Dubé and others suggested a “virtual community of practice” (VCoP) when community members collaborate online, as there is no need for participants of CoPs to be co-located (Dubé et al., 2005). More recently, in 2013, Kietzmann and others introduced a “mobile community of practice” (MCoP) when community members conduct work and communicate together via mobile phones for a purpose related to the work. In an MCoP, members participate in community work on the go (Kietzmann et al., 2013). As they illustrated, participation in an MCoP takes place where actual work is carried out with mobile workers who collaborate from different client sites, remote structures, and even while moving.

Even though this theoretical approach has been developed in different ways, it is considered that there is a need for more research to investigate and acquire an in-depth understanding of factors that could influence members positively or negatively to participate in these communities of practice (Charlton, 2013; Smith, 2011). Moreover, studying issues such as learning and teaching through social platforms must be done while taking the most relevant cultural and societal aspects into consideration. The reason for this is that what may be viewed as a significant issue in a particular culture will not necessarily be regarded in the same way in other cultures or societies.

From a social perspective, the motivations for and concerns about participating online in virtual communities such as SNSs can potentially have an influence on users' attitudes towards working collaboratively as a community of practice. As a consequence, this research argues that cultural and societal considerations can be considered an essential factor in constructing and functioning these online communities of practice on these social platforms. This argument, therefore, will be discussed in more detail later in light of the participating academics' perspectives in this research, which, in turn, will provide a comprehensive understanding of how these cultural and social views could affect this kind of online learning and teaching practice. Investigating these factors can advance the understanding of applying these theories in the context of a conservative society and contribute to expanding the current literature on this topic.

Learning in a practical manner within social participation could be beneficial and appropriate, especially in the context of Saudi Arabia due to the case of segregation between genders. Students used to learn formally in face-to-face educational sessions. However, engaging in informal participation to exchange knowledge between one another through these social platforms can give both genders a great opportunity to learn from each other and overcome their social barriers. In addition, learning, in practice, is an instructional method that most Saudi educational institutions need to apply. Learning via practice will assist learners in obtaining knowledge without making more of an effort to memorise it, as the majority of traditional teaching methods employed by teachers in Saudi Arabia are used in delivering educational content.

#### **2.4.1.6. Critique**

A number of researchers are now realising that social networks are more complex than communities. Within these huge networks, members are not necessarily holding collaborative relationships. It seems as though there is a fundamental shift from the bounded community, as helpful groups in a mutual context engage in massive networks to the benefit of particular organisations or individuals with weak ties and a simple identity (Cox, 2004; Wellman, 1997).

Looking at new organisations' nature and employment situation, Cox (2004) and Eraut (2002) debate that there are several conditions limiting the appropriation of applying communities of practice as an approach to sustaining mutual engagement; the following are some examples:

1. Institutions frequently carry out reorganisation partially or completely. Therefore, engagement between individuals will not be sustained.
2. Applying the policy of employment of temporary or part-time employees does not lead to building strong personal or professional relationships between staff.
3. Administering very competitive environments can prevent collaboration to some extent between workplaces and between workers themselves.
4. There is a lack of time to develop professional and collective understanding among the members of communities of practice, especially in large organisations.

From another viewpoint, integrating these communities of practice in the case of organisations does not provide much help in enhancing and developing relationships between participants, as interaction in many workplaces is likely to be managed by achieving particular tasks in a formal manner (Vann and Bowker, 2001).

I think that all of these perspectives regarding employing the approach of communities of practice in the context of huge organisations are sensible to some extent. However, in the context of using this method in educational institutions for educational purposes, I believe that the matter is different. Participants such as students or researchers join these communities to construct and maintain relationships, enhance their knowledge and experience, and benefit from what can be offered in these informal gatherings of valuable information and practical skills, particularly when we know that many experts and specialists are involved in these online groups and, most importantly, these communities are not controlled by universities or any other formal entity. Moreover, in the case of Saudi Arabia, the majority of teachers in general education and lecturers in higher education are familiar with utilising the traditional lecturing/teaching method. Therefore, employing such collective and informal teaching and learning ways in which to be in contact with their instructors, peers, and also with other participants from outside the educational institution itself will inspire students to engage in such teaching

and teaching activities. For these reasons, this investigation will contribute to the current discussion around this theory by taking into consideration the role of the cultural and social principles that can be employed when integrating social networking sites into education in a gender-segregated setting of Saudi Arabian universities.

#### **2.4.2. Hyper-personal Communication Theory: Walther (1996)**

Unlike theories that focus on interaction via offline settings, the hyper-personal theory has been considered an approach to investigating communication in online contexts, which can explain why this particular theory has been used to form the theoretical framework for this current study. According to Jiang et al. (2011), the hyper-personal theory has made a significant shift in the literature relevant to computer-mediated communication (CMC). Due to the lack of social and physical cues, scholars' attention was focussed towards the limitation of online interaction. However, the hyper-personal theory has contributed to making a remarkable change to these previous perspectives to consider the effectiveness of online technological tools to enhance contact between users and promote relationships in the context of online communication.

Hyper-personal communication theory is considered a development credited to Walther in 1996 after extensive research conducted on computer-mediated communication. The theory investigated online interaction compared to face-to-face communication, as well as how relationships can be developed through these two parallel methods. It has expanded the discussion on how these relations and interactions take place through the main four elements of the communication process: the sender, the receiver, the channel, and feedback (Walther, 1996).

The theory emphasises two features of computer-mediated communication: the lack of social cues and non-synchronisation in mutual interaction. Due to the lack of physical cues, senders pay more attention to presenting themselves in a more selective and attractive manner. Thus, they attempt to improve the message that they create to optimise the impression generated by receivers. The feature of asynchronous communication can enhance this process by giving both the sender and the receiver plenty of time to reflect on the messages sent and received. Therefore, hyper-personal

theory suggests that relationships can be developed through computer-mediated communication more than normal personal interaction (Walther, 1996). Moreover, the hyper-personal theory suggests that anonymity in computer-mediated communication can result in greater independence for members to get them engaged without feeling any pressure from high-status members. Furthermore, the participants can have a more democratic atmosphere in computer-mediated communication than what can occur in offline interactions (Walther, 1996).

The hyper-personal theory has been tested and applied in different studies. Gonzales and Hancock (2011) studied the potential effects of exposure to Facebook on self-esteem. They used the hyper-personal theory from computer-mediated communication to investigate its function as to whether Facebook would decrease or increase self-esteem. Participants who updated their profiles by selecting what can be seen by the public, and viewed their own profiles regularly, reported greater self-esteem, which provides additional support for, and confirms the function of, the hyper-personal theory. These findings highlight that selective self-presentation in social media can contribute to forming and strengthening relationships, and also positively influence impressions of the participants themselves.

Based on the hyper-personal communication theory and other traditional models of interpersonal relationship development, Andersen and Emmers-Sommer (2006) conducted a study to examine the level of satisfaction for participants to establish and get involved in online romantic relationships. The study found that intimacy, trust and communication satisfaction were considered the strongest predictors of relationship satisfaction for participants involved in these online romantic relationships. In the same vein, Walther's (1997) study emphasised the effect of computer-mediated communication on international collaboration. The results revealed that international relationships were enhanced better in computer-mediated settings in comparison to other face-to-face channels. Moreover, the study affirmed the function of the hyper-personal theory in strengthening online communication between participants to get involved in such collaborations.

On the other hand, this theory has been criticised by some researchers. For instance, Lamerichs and Te Molder (2003) evaluated computer-mediated interactions in general and then argued that identity construction and participants' everyday understanding regarding utilising media and media attributes are ignored to a large degree from different traditional perspectives of computer-mediated communication. By looking at the Deindividuation Model in particular as one of the CMC models, they claimed that identity construction is totally disregarded in daily communication activities. Generally, the results of that study illustrated that participants' online identities do not reflect their inner worlds. In another study, conducted by Utz (2000), which focussed on the development of friendships in online settings, the findings show a high level of scepticism towards the capability of computer-mediated communication with regard to developing friendships between participants in the virtual world.

Despite the previous critiques, the majority of the earlier studies presented confirmed the assumptions developed by the hyper-personal communication theory in enhancing relationships that occurred via online interactions. As the hyper-personal theory suggests, computer-mediated communication provides the sender with a greater capability than face-to-face interactions to develop his or her self-presentation. These features can contribute to enabling individuals, especially women, in conservative societies to achieve a selective and optimised presentation of themselves to others in a way that doesn't conflict with their cultural and societal principles.

Considering the case of Saudi society, this investigation claims that online interactions with the opposite gender in gender-segregated societies can offer a greater opportunity to participate and get involved in discussions between both genders than do offline settings. Therefore, this study will contribute to the discussion in the literature regarding the richness of information that can be provided by using computer-mediated communication in online settings. Analysing and discussing findings emerging from this research, as well as addressing cultural and social matters in the context of conservative societies, will contribute to the body of knowledge.



### **2.4.3. Learning and eLearning Theories**

Different theoretical frameworks can describe the learning process and assist in understanding and analysing the outcomes of employing such learning practices in reality. However, behaviourism, cognitivism and constructivism have been widely utilised as learning approaches in many studies. All of these perspectives have contributed to providing a variety of insights, concepts and models to be used in the context of learning and teaching activities. Yet, the constructivism theory is significantly involved in learning approaches, particularly in teaching higher-level thinking that supports personal knowledge, along with situated and contextual learning (Ertmer and Newby, 1993).

Furthermore, a number of researchers and authors have advanced these and other theories to provide new theoretical frameworks that can be employed to explain learning that takes place in online learning settings. One of the most popular approaches in this regard is the Connectivism Theory introduced by Siemens in 2004. It combines relevant, essential elements of different learning theories, social structures, and technology to generate a powerful theoretical paradigm for learning occurring in the digital age (Siemens, 2014). In this digital age, Aldhafeeri and Male (2015) argue that models of learning that are designed based on behaviourist and cognitive perspectives are overtaken by the connectivist approach. According to this theory, learning is considered a continuing process that takes place in different settings: personal networks, communities of practice, and workplaces, with a greater focus on the actual student than traditional teaching methods.

Therefore, integrating the constructivism and connectivism theories in the theoretical framework established for this research is considered essential to enable the researcher to explain and reflect on learning and teaching activities taking place on SNSs from an educational aspect. For that reason, constructivism and connectivism theories will be discussed in the following sections to provide a better theoretical support for the current investigation.

### **2.4.3.1. The Constructivism Theory**

Constructivism is a leading approach in its field and widely used as a learning theory which claims that learners have an active role in the construction of new knowledge based on their prior experiences, not as merely knowledge being taught by others (Garrison, 2015; Jonassen et al., 1995). This popular epistemology emerged during the 1980s and 1990s (Liu and Matthews, 2005). In this regard, Ali (2003) demonstrated that, even though constructivism is not an entirely new conceptualisation of the learning theory and how the learner processes new knowledge, constructivist perspectives on learning have become increasingly influential in the past 20 years and can be considered a paradigm representing a major shift in epistemology and learning theories. It has grown over time to become largely elaborated and now integrated into a number of sub-theories, as he described.

Constructivist theorists claim that learners perceive information provided and the world according to their personal reality learned by observation, processing and interpretation, and then customise the information as personal knowledge and experience (Cooper, 1993; Wilson, 1997). Furthermore, Ally (2008) confirmed that learners learn best when they can place what they learn in the context of immediate application and personal meaning.

This particular learning theory heavily relies on the work of Piaget, Bruner and Vygotsky (Jonassen et al., 1995). Their perspectives and experiments have placed a large emphasis on prior knowledge (experience), which enhances critical thinking and plays a significant role in the learning process. Furthermore, they highlighted the importance of peer interaction in a collaborative manner between learning groups as fundamental requirements in the construction of individual knowledge. Additionally, Vygotsky moved on to suggest that learners can achieve higher levels of understanding when they work collaboratively than when they work individually (Piaget and Inhelder, 1969; Vygotsky, 1978; Charlton, 2013).

Regarding the role of the instructor and students, Ullrich et al. (2008) illustrated their functions in light of this theory by saying: "In constructivism, the control over the learning process shifts from the teacher to student, with the learner playing an active

role in the learning process. Learning takes place in context and in collaboration and provides opportunities to solve realistic and meaningful problems” (p. 706). On the same aspect, Kreijns et al. (2003) clarified that learners move from a passive role as observers to be active learners by interacting with others and integrating new knowledge with past experience. Moreover, knowledge, according to constructivists’ vision, is not received from the outside or someone else; rather, learners individually interpret and process what is received through their senses to construct knowledge in an active manner (Ally, 2008). On the other hand, the teacher, in this school of thought, is seen as a facilitator who provides guidance and assistance to their learners. The aim of teaching methods is to help learners create new knowledge to be constructed upon their prior experiences and perceptions (Ali, 2003). Similarly, Cunningham and Duffy (1996) illustrated that instructors play an advising and facilitating role, which should enable learners to construct knowledge and be at the centre of the learning, rather than being given knowledge through practices of teaching.

Constructivism has been developed into several various forms. According to Von Glasersfeld (1995), there are many forms of constructivism theory as there are various researchers who deal with this approach in different ways. In his publication entitled ‘A journey into constructivism’, Dougiamas (1998) discusses different kinds of constructivism, including trivial, radical, critical, social, cultural and constructionist. Although the various forms of constructivism have some common features, each of them has its particular emphases. By focussing on the learner as an individual and factors that can influence the learning process, social constructivism, compared to other forms, does not ignore the ways in which social interactions can impact upon the processes by which knowledge is gained and constructed. This is the main reason to consider social constructivism in this study rather than other forms.

The social constructivist perspective emphasises how the cultural and social contexts can influence the learning process (Honebein et al., 1993). Taking the social construction of knowledge into consideration suggests a particular pedagogical emphasis on discussion, negotiation, collaboration, and sharing knowledge between learners (Ernest, 1995). As knowledge is constructed through social negotiation, integrating discussion with other individuals into the content can be a fundamental instructional method for

achieving active learning in which learners actively engage in the learning process (Ali, 2003).

Collaborative learning is another pedagogical approach that can provide a great opportunity to generate and structure learning. It can be defined as “a learner-centered instructional process in which small, intentionally selected groups of 3-5 students work interdependently on a well-defined learning task; individual students are held accountable for their own performance and the instructor serves as a facilitator/consultant in the group-learning process” (Cuseo, 1992, p. 5). Moreover, collaborative learning can contribute to creating communities of inquiry which provide and facilitate learning environments that can reflect upon encouraging critical dialogue and enhance understanding between learners (Vygotsky, 1978; Cuseo, 1992; Ali, 2003).

All prior theoretical approaches, as suggested by constructivism and social constructivism theories, can contribute to structuring online learning activities and designing the most appropriate web-based teaching activities. In this regard, Cassidy (2004) reported that a variety of learning strategies should be incorporated into online teaching activities to be compatible with individual differences and learning styles. According to Ally (2008), a learning style can be defined as how the learner perceives, interacts with, and responds to the surrounding learning settings; it measures individual differences. Furthermore, a number of researchers suggested that online learning and teaching materials should include various activities for different styles, enabling learners to select the most appropriate activities based on their preferred learning style (Cassidy, 2004; Ally, 2008).

Integrating discussion into education as an instructional methodology is significant in the knowledge acquisition process. Moreover, employing this approach can enable educators to take into account the individual differences among learners and their learning styles. Boud (1994) stressed the importance of having a discussion between learners to enhance their critical thinking skills. He stated: “It is only through give and take with others that critical reflection can be promoted” (p. 53). The dominant style of teaching in Saudi Arabia is the lecturing method, in which the student mostly has no role to play, except to listen to and memorise what the teacher provides. The possibility of giving students an opportunity to discuss and share opinions with the whole class is

very limited due to the school curriculum, the high number of students in the class, the lecture time, and also the lack of training in teaching methods (Almalki, 2011; Aljasir, 2015). Therefore, this investigation argues that integrating SNSs into teaching and learning activities will increase opportunities for students to practise these educational actions beyond formal, temporal and spatial boundaries with their colleagues, lecturers, friends, and other users of these social platforms.

As a final point, the literature shows that a number of researchers have criticised the theory of constructivism, contending it being focussed only on learners as individuals. Nevertheless, it can be seen that this critique was during the early stages of its development, as studies indicated. More recently, the theory, as mentioned above, has been adapted in a wide range of studies and recognised as an approach that does not ignore the social perspective, particularly collaborative and interactive activities between peers and groups in learning settings (McLoughlin and Oliver, 1998; Kim, 2001).

#### **2.4.3.2. Connectivism: A Learning Theory for the Digital Age: Siemens (2004)**

In 2004, Siemens published his paper entitled ‘Connectivism: A Learning Theory for the Digital Age’, in which he launched the theory of connectivism based on his critique of previous main learning theories: behaviourism, cognitivism and constructivism. According to Siemens, even though the latter development of the constructivism theory, named “social constructivism”, seemed to be a possible theoretical support for e-learning practices, these previous learning theories could not provide an adequate theoretical framework to the instances brought by the new learning approaches. For that reason, Siemens introduced the connectivism theory, as a learning theory for the digital age, which has contributed to filling this gap in the literature of knowledge (Siemens, 2014; Pettenati and Cigognini, 2007).

According to Pettenati and Cigognini (2007), the lack of theoretical approaches to analysing learning practices in the digital age has urged Siemens to create the connectivism theory. As Siemens believes, traditional learning theories are inconsistent with the current digital age. Therefore, the integration of modern information and communication technologies into education requires developmental theoretical

frameworks to describe how the learning process occurs via these networks, where students are keen to be easily connected with their peers, teachers and the content. This perspective was clearly addressed in his following argument: “Research in traditional learning theories comes from an era when networking technologies were not yet prominent. How does learning change when knowledge growth is overwhelming and technology replaces many basic tasks we have previously performed?” (Siemens, cited in Pettenati and Cigognini, 2007, p. 4) These increasing developments have contributed to making a change in the learning pattern, as he thought: “Knowing and learning are today defined by connections... Connectivism is a theory describing how learning happens in a digital age. Connectivism is the assertion that learning is primarily a network forming process” (ibid.).

As stated by Siemens (2014), “the pipe is more important than the content within the pipe” (p. 6). To clarify, Pettenati and Cigognini (2007) illustrated that the intended meaning of the pipe is the network itself, which is very significant in delivering the content and can be considered the basis of the learning process. As they claim, if the knowledge society requires people to continuously gain and update their knowledge, this cannot take place as a process of progressive knowledge accumulation. Instead, this can happen through maintaining our connections with the various acquaintance resources and people from whom the individual can become learned. Therefore, it can be seen that Siemens gives grounds for this perspective by demonstrating that access to what is needed of knowledge and experience is more critical than what the learner currently owns, as knowledge continues to evolve and grow in a dramatic manner during this revolution of information and communication.

In light of what has been conceptualised by Siemens and proposed in Wenger’s community of practice vision (Wenger et al., 2002), Pettenati and Cigognini (2007) illustrate that learning is perceived as a primarily social activity. In this perception, the actual challenge for a lifelong learner, as they thought, would be the ability to stay connected with the knowledge society and belong to the digital communities through which expertise and benefits can be regularly shared. As they argued, possessing given information is less important than understanding where and how to retrieve it.

The connectivism theory is constructed on eight principles (Siemens, 2014), but the following aspects can be considered the more relevant ones to the current study:

1. Learning is a network of connecting information sources or specialised nodes.
2. Learning and knowledge are facilitated by technology as non-human appliances.
3. Capacity to enhance and increase knowledge is more significant than knowledge itself.
4. Maintaining connections is required to support ongoing learning.
5. Ability to recognise connections and patterns between fields, ideas, and concepts is a fundamental skill for individuals.
6. Obtaining accurate and up-to-date knowledge is the essential purpose of all connectivist learning activities.

By looking at the principles mentioned earlier, it can be seen that the connectivism theory gives priority to the individual and his or her personal knowledge. As Siemens (2014) reported, personal knowledge is made up of a network, which feeds into institutions and organisations, which, in turn, feed back into the network, and then continues to provide knowledge to the individual. Therefore, it is a successive cycle of knowledge development, starting with the person, to the network, to the organisation, and then back to the person. This ongoing process allows learners to remain up to date in their field of knowledge through these connections that they have formed, as he expects. Furthermore, Siemens posits (cited in Pettenati and Cigognini, 2007):

Connectivism is the integration of principles explored by chaos, network, complexity, and self-organisation theories. Knowledge and learning are processes that occur within nebulous environments of shifting core elements—not entirely under the control of the individual. Learning, defined as knowledge patterns on which we can act, can reside outside of ourselves (within an organisation or a database), is focused on connecting specialised information sets (p. 5).

On this aspect, Aldhafeeri and Male (2015) claim that learning in this digital age is an ongoing process, and the fundamental role should be played by learners themselves,

rather than by educators. They believe that the role of the instructor has changed from delivering lectures and presenting educational materials to assisting learners in collaborating, creating and sharing knowledge by using emerging technologies.

Several researchers have discussed this theoretical perspective from different aspects. There are some studies that consider connectivism to be a theory that developed previous pedagogical perspectives and models, particularly in its technological implications (Downes, 2012; Ally, 2008). On the other hand, a number of researchers have criticised this theory, as it ignores some crucial concepts in the learning process, such as error detection and correction, reflection, and inquiry (Chatti, 2010). In addition, some researchers do not accept the connectivism theory as a new theory in the education field; rather, it is a developmental perspective based on prior theories such as activity theory and social learning theory (Verhagen, 2006; Kop and Hill, 2008).

After having a detailed discussion about current educational theories and a critical analysis of the connectivism theory, Kop and Hill (2008) indicated that the connectivism perspective does not seem to be a separate learning theory. However, it has played a significant role in the development of new pedagogies as an approach to learning and teaching for the 21st century. Moreover, they placed more emphasis on the educators who can take advantage of the emerging technologies in their instruction methods. Integrating these technological tools effectively in education can contribute to making solid connections with information resources and knowledgeable people, which can enrich learners' perceptions and their communities.

In the same vein, Downes (2012) illustrates that connectivism is a theory that assumes that knowledge is spread throughout a network of connections. According to that assumption, the learning process depends mainly on learners' ability to construct and be connected with those networks of knowledge. Furthermore, Ally (2008) indicated that the world has become more networked since several remarkable changes occurred. Therefore, prior learning theories, which have been developed in a different era, are less relevant to these global changes. However, he debates that what is really needed is not a new learning theory for this digital age, but rather a model that can integrate different theoretical learning approaches to guide planning and designing of online learning materials.



In general, it is a theoretical perspective that has significantly focussed on how technology can influence the learning process, particularly in this digital age. In addition, it pays more attention to the importance of making continued connections with information resources and the knowledge of society as a whole. These assumptions can contribute to enlightening learners and educators alike, as well as enhance their perceptions regarding maintaining a solid connection with the knowledge, as it is more important than obtaining the knowledge itself. Ultimately, these perspectives are compatible with academics' opinions in this current study, which can be seen as theoretical support for the findings that have emerged from the data collected.

#### **2.4.4. Synthesising the Theoretical Framework**

In most cases, there is no single theory that can entirely illustrate all of the aspects related to the phenomenon investigated. Instead, researchers apply multiple theories that can be grounded and linked together to provide different assumptions about the research subject and to explain the emerging findings of that study, considering their particular strengths and limitations (Bruce, 2010). As Durham and Kellner (2009) point out, adopting multiple theoretical approaches within a single research investigation can assist in understanding various dimensions of the issue examined and provide a comprehensive perception of the subject under investigation. Therefore, this study argues that synthesising the previous four theories provides a comprehensive understanding of Saudi academics' attitudes towards, motivations for and concerns about integrating social networking, as well as uses thereof, in higher education, as these theories help in explaining findings that have emerged from the data collected.

The main assumption of the community of practice theory is that the group members, who have a common interest in a particular subject of knowledge or experience, regularly interact, discuss, and learn from each other, as well as share their ideas, strategies, concerns and solutions. As social networking platforms have the potential of enhancing students' senses of classroom community, researchers believe that SNSs extend the opportunity for class members to interact beyond the formal sessions in the classroom, which can lead to additional learning opportunities or enhance participation in face-to-face learning activities.

Therefore, this particular perspective places more emphasis on the learning process as social involvement, which can essentially reflect the individuals as participants who contribute actively in the communities of practice, as well as the construction of their identity through these social communities (Wenger et al., 2002). One of the significant features of learning through these communities of practice is to learn in interactive settings through practice. Gunawardena et al. (2009) indicated that social networking platforms offer various ways in which to participate in interactive technological environments and different methods to obtain knowledge and experiences through practice.

From the social aspect, one of the major factors of having an effective community of practice is to obtain a social presence, which is a human need for all participants, not only within their face-to-face communities, but also in online settings. In the Saudi context, SNSs contribute to providing this need, particularly for women, as face-to-face settings do not enable them to effectively take part in the majority of social participation. Accordingly, these theoretical aspects can support the empirical findings of this research and provide a better understanding of their interpretations. For that reason, the community of practice theory has been chosen as one of the main theoretical perspectives in this study.

As the hyper-personal communication theory assumes, computer-mediated communication provides participants with a greater capability than face-to-face interactions to develop his or her self-presentation, and also to enhance relationships that occurred via online interactions. Moreover, the hyper-personal theory suggests that anonymity in computer-mediated communication can result in greater independence for members to get them engaged without feeling any pressure from high-status members. These features can contribute to enabling individuals, especially women, in conservative societies to achieve a selective and optimised presentation of themselves to others in a way that doesn't conflict with their cultural and societal principles.

Combining these two theories (the community of practice theory and the hyper-personal communication theory) can assist in understanding how both genders in conservative communities interact through these online gatherings and what kinds of

practices are offered by SNSs to their users. Considering the case of Saudi society, this investigation claims that online interactions in gender-segregated societies can provide more information and expand understanding about the opposite gender more than do offline settings.

Adding constructivism, as a leading approach in learning theories, and connectivism, as a learning theory for the digital age, is fundamental in establishing a comprehensive theoretical framework that provides an obvious explanation for different online teaching and learning activities on these digital platforms. It also enables the researcher and the reader alike to realise growing connections between learners and educators on one side, and how they interact with knowledge itself on the other side. Therefore, these two theoretical perspectives can contribute to underpinning the educational findings that have emerged from this research, and also expand our understanding regarding participants' viewpoints.

To further clarify, the constructivism theory claims that learners have an active role in the construction of new knowledge based on their prior experience, not as merely knowledge being taught by others. Furthermore, Ally (2008) confirmed that learners learn best when they can place what they learn in the context of immediate application and personal meaning. In the same regard, constructivist theorists highlighted the importance of peer interaction in a collaborative manner between learning groups as fundamental requirements in the construction of individual knowledge. Additionally, they moved on to suggest that learners can achieve higher levels of understanding when they work collaboratively than when they work individually (Piaget and Inhelder, 1969; Vygotsky, 1978; Charlton, 2013).

The connectivism theory combines relevant, essential elements of different learning theories, social structures, and technology to generate a powerful theoretical paradigm for learning occurring in the digital age. According to this theory, learning is a network of connecting information sources, whereas technology is a fundamental facilitator of acquiring knowledge. Therefore, maintaining connections is required to support ongoing learning, while capacity to enhance and increase knowledge is more significant than knowledge itself. In light of the connectivism theory, Pettenati and Cigognini (2007) highlighted the importance of being connected with the knowledge society and

belonging to the digital communities through which expertise and benefits can be frequently shared. They considered the ability to maintain these continued relations with knowledge resources to be an actual challenge for a lifelong learner. Therefore, this investigation claims that integrating social networking platforms into learning and teaching practices can play a major role in achieving this relation with the knowledge society and can make a robust contact with its key resources.

These four theoretical perspectives were consolidated to construct an effective theoretical framework for the current research that can contribute to explaining the findings that have emerged and enhance our understanding of their interpretations. Integrating this diverse set of theoretical approaches into one framework enables the researcher to comprehensively discuss and interpret participants' attitudes towards and practices of using social networking platforms in education. As this study is conducted at Saudi universities, where the gender-segregated system is applied, it is crucial to investigate the research questions in a way that can provide in-depth answers, and then use methods that can assist in analysing these qualitative responses. For that reason, I have established the theoretical position for this research to be based on the prior four theories; which is broadly based on the interpretivist approach.

## **2.5. Summary of the Chapter**

This chapter has provided a comprehensive review of current literature concerning the integration of social networking sites into education, and presented a set of theories that have formed the theoretical approach of this study. In the literature review, it has specifically focussed on two main sub-topics.

Firstly, it has reviewed previous studies on using social networking sites in higher education, focussing mainly on the aims of this research and relevant themes emerging from its outcomes, which included: academics' attitudes and usage, educational opportunities, and challenges that might be encountered during these learning and teaching practices through SNSs. Furthermore, lecturer–student online and offline relationships and faculty members' online identity have been discussed in this chapter, as they are major factors that could essentially impact upon academics' perspectives and their practical actions to employ such platforms in academia.

Secondly, as the main objective is to obtain an in-depth understanding of faculty members' attitudes towards, motivations for and concerns about using SNSs, as well as uses thereof, in education, particularly in the gender-segregated educational setting of Saudi Arabian universities, this chapter has presented a fundamental section about social media and society. Conducting a study on a theme such as this within an environment that has a particular culture, such as the Saudi Arabian context, necessitates paying close attention to considering several cultural and societal aspects. Therefore, this chapter has discussed social networks and society from three dimensions: cultural and social concerns, societal and gender restrictions in the Saudi context, and privacy issues as a social concern, providing the biggest similarities and differences between the views of Western and Saudi society in this regard.

As the Community of Practice Theory, the Hyper-personal Communication Theory, and the previous learning and eLearning theories selected could provide an explanation as to academics' attitudes towards, motivations for and concerns about employing SNSs, as well as uses thereof, in education, this chapter has reviewed in detail these theories and assembled them as the theoretical background of this investigation. Even though the community of practice theory has been developed in different ways, this research argues that there is a need for more research to investigate and acquire an in-depth understanding of factors that could influence members positively or negatively to participate in these communities of practice. To clarify, the motivations for and concerns about participating online in virtual communities such as SNSs can potentially have an influence on users' attitudes towards working collaboratively as a community of practice. As a consequence, this research claims that cultural and societal considerations can be considered essential factors in constructing and functioning these online communities of practice on these social platforms. This argument, therefore, will be discussed in more detail later in light of the participating academics' perspectives in this research, which, in turn, will provide a comprehensive understanding of how these cultural and social views could affect this kind of online learning and teaching practice. Investigating these factors can advance the understanding of applying these theories in the context of a conservative society, and contribute to expanding the current literature on this topic.

Ultimately, reviewing the literature has shown that, although these prior studies provided some good results and insights into this topic, there is a lack of academic investigation into this subject, particularly with regard to studying the cultural and societal factors and their potential implications for these matters. Accordingly, many researchers recommended that more research needs to be done in this area of knowledge. Therefore, this study will contribute to filling this gap in the literature by focussing on exploring how cultural and social concerns or challenges could have an impact on academics' attitude towards and usage of SNSs for educational purposes, particularly in non-Western, conservative societies, taking Saudi society as an example. Furthermore, since Saudi Arabia has a gender-segregated educational system, investigating online relationships between academics and students from both genders who used to teach and learn in such very conservative environments will expand the current literature of knowledge and provide empirical results from this particular society. Additionally, conducting face-to-face interviews with Saudi faculty members, who have experienced these patterns of relationships in online and offline settings, will assist in providing a rich discussion about these complicated issues from the academic perspective.

## **Chapter 3 : Methodology**

### **3.1. Introduction**

This chapter outlines the research philosophy, design and methods applied in this study, as well as provides a discussion about the rationale for selecting these methods and procedures. To obtain rich data of responses, a case study strategy was applied as one of the major qualitative investigations. This chapter highlights the study's strategy, including several definitions and types of case studies. It also compares and contrasts the advantages and disadvantages of employing case study research. In addition, it provides some key information about interviewing, as this is the main data collection technique used in this study. It discusses interview types and the advantages and disadvantages for research and for researchers themselves who utilise such a technique. Moreover, the sample selection and demographic characteristics of the participants are addressed. Additionally, all of the data collection procedures, including the pilot study, have been detailed with an explanation of all of their practical steps in order to give the reader a clear picture about the methods employed in this research. The data collection technique employed is that of semi-structured interviews, as such a technique helps researchers to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the case that is being investigated. Furthermore, this chapter discusses the validity and credibility of the research with different illustrative examples, as well as the terms of objectivity and subjectivity. Last but not least, a special focus is given towards data analysis techniques and ethical considerations, due to their importance in the research.

### **3.2. Research Philosophy**

Before discussing the research approach in terms of which methods are considered the most appropriate to be selected and employed in order to assist in providing sufficient answers for the research questions, it is crucial to compare and contrast positivism and interpretivism as research philosophical theories concerned with how knowledge can be gained, and, accordingly, quantitative and qualitative research approaches. That discussion will establish a solid epistemological ground before talking about the particular approach utilised for this research.

### **3.2.1. Positivism and Interpretivism**

Positivism and interpretivism are the two fundamental research approaches that are widely adopted in studying social phenomena. Positivists think that the social world can and should be studied by using the same methods and approaches as those studying the physical world. Therefore, they believe that it is possible to discover relationships between factors that affect societies in the same way that scientists do in investigating the natural sciences. In positivist research, quantitative techniques are used in order to achieve an overview of society as a whole and also to discover the social trends present (Clarke, 2009; Thompson, 2015).

On the other hand, interpretivists or anti-positivists look at the social world differently. They argue that individuals are not physical objects. People do not simply respond to external stimulation, as positivists believe. Rather, it is a more complicated matter that needs to be investigated by understanding social reality and taking all significant factors into consideration. According to interpretivists, the same social reality or behaviour can be understood or analysed by different people in very different ways, all of whom have their own rational reasons for their interpretations. Therefore, they argue that understanding human actions requires looking at them through the eyes of the individuals taking these actions (Thompson, 2015; Weber, 2004). Consequently, the interpretivist approach is much more qualitative, applying techniques such as interviews or observation.

To sum up, positivism is based on the idea that there is an objective world, which we can objectively measure. In contrast, the interpretivist approach is derived from the view that our research does not claim to be objectively measuring an external world. Instead, we are looking at the interpretations that social actors are making of their own world. While positivists treat studying social actions as a science by dealing with them in numbers and experiments, this approach has been criticised by interpretivists. They argue that human activities and behaviours cannot be investigated and explained through a quantitative method. The distinction between these approaches can assist researchers in selecting the appropriate research approach, as they take into



consideration the general aim of the research, the nature of the topic investigated, and the participants involved in the study.

By looking at the current investigation, the general aim of this study is to investigate and obtain an in-depth understanding of faculty members' attitudes towards, motivations for and concerns about using social networking sites, as well as uses thereof, in the context of Saudi higher educational institutions. Moreover, Saudi society has a very conservative culture, which significantly affects most Saudis' social practices and behaviour. Therefore, it is a matter of understanding this particular case as case study research, rather than making a generalisation of the research findings to other settings. Ultimately, as seen in the previous chapter, considering these aspects has contributed to structuring the theoretical framework for this study. All of the four proposed theories upon which the theoretical framework is built are compatible with an interpretivist point of view. The research design will be discussed in more detail after conducting a discussion about quantitative and qualitative research approaches and how objectivity and subjectivity can be seen in light of these strategies.

### **3.2.2. Quantitative and Qualitative Research**

Casebeer and Verhoef (1997) highlighted qualitative and quantitative strategies as core research approaches, which are widely used by researchers in different subjects of knowledge. As they indicated, quantitative research strategy is generally applied when the researcher seeks to uncover patterns or investigate relationships between different variables or facts. In this type of research approach, researchers mostly use data collection techniques that are more structured, such as surveys or structured interviews. Analysing data collected by applying quantitative research strategy generates numerical results, which are derived from a large sample population and can contribute to describing the case being studied and generalising its findings to a wider population (Creswell, 2009).

On the other hand, a qualitative research approach is primarily used to gain an in-depth understanding of a particular research subject. It provides insights into the main factors, challenges or relevant opinions in relation to the research issue being investigated

(Wyse, 2011). Unlike quantitative research, the research sample in this approach is typically small, and participants, in most cases, are carefully selected according to some particular demographic requirements in order to achieve the research aims. Because the primary objective of applying this approach is to obtain a comprehensive perception of the topic being explored, the qualitative data collection techniques are unstructured or semi-structured methods, including: focus groups, individual interviews, or observations (Wyse, 2011; Silverman, 2013).

As stated, the primary aim of this research is to obtain an in-depth understanding of academics' attitudes towards, motivations for and concerns about integrating social networking, as well as uses thereof, into education at Saudi higher educational institutions where a gender-segregated education system is applied. Therefore, the most appropriate research approach to this investigation is that of qualitative conduct in light of the interpretivist viewpoint.

### **3.3. Research Design**

While there are several types of research methodologies, quantitative and qualitative approaches are considered the most used in studies, particularly those conducted in social sciences (Cohen et al., 2007). Furthermore, choosing a particular approach to answering the research questions principally depends on the main objective of that research, whether to compare or generalise findings to a wider population or, on the other hand, just to understand or describe a particular case (Creswell, 2009).

To further clarify the matter, conducting a study on a subject such as this within an environment that has a particular culture, such as the Saudi Arabian context, necessitates paying close attention to considering several cultural and societal aspects. Therefore, the main objective of this study is to investigate and acquire an in-depth understanding of the faculty members' attitudes towards, motivations for and concerns about the use of SNSs in education, as well as their usage, particularly in the gender-segregated educational setting of Saudi Arabian universities. This has led me to conduct this investigation whilst taking the most relevant cultural and societal factors into consideration. For these reasons addressed, the most appropriate type of research

that fits the subject, context and objectives of this study is the qualitative approach, exploring the phenomena as case study research and employing interviews as a data collection strategy to ask in-depth questions in order to obtain more detailed answers. I think that conducting the research by following these methodological processes will contribute to providing satisfactory findings that can achieve the main aims of this study.

I had previously considered taking an action-research approach, which would have involved activities such as creating focus groups and leading workshops with the research participants (faculty members at the Saudi universities). However, I decided to use interviews for several reasons, including the busy schedules of the academics, a lack of enthusiasm among some faculty, and the opportunity to gain the perspectives of those who do not use these technological tools to find out why not. Therefore, it can be concluded that this study was considered qualitative research, conducting interviews as a data collection technique, which assists in asking in-depth questions in order to investigate the subject with all relevant aspects as case study research.

### **3.4. Case Study**

#### **3.4.1. Definitions**

There are different definitions of case study research methodology, but the majority of them are similar. The following three definitions clarify and demonstrate what the case study approach means. Firstly, Stake (1995) illustrated that a case study can be defined as: “The study of the particularity and activity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances” (p. 11). Secondly, Bassey (1999) defines a case study as: “A study of a singularity conducted in depth in natural settings” (p. 47). The third definition has been stated by Cohen et al. (2000) as follows: “A case study provides a unique example of real people in real situations, enabling readers to understand ideas more clearly than simply by presenting them with abstract theories or principles” (p. 181).

Case study research can explore close experiences of people, issues, topics or programmes, and provide researchers with opportunities to get involved in these

examinations (Hays, 2004). According to Yin (1994) and Hays (2004), case study investigations are unlike ethnographic studies. They illustrated that ethnographies tend to observe and explain practices and beliefs, and make cultural interpretations. In most cases, ethnographies try to answer much broader questions in long studies, which may last for a year or longer. On the other hand, case study research seeks to have more detailed answers to concentrated questions by generating in-depth descriptions and interpretations over quite a short period of time, mostly a few weeks to a year. In addition, Hays (2004) explained that case studies are different from biographies and other historical research approaches. Case studies examine contemporary cases with the purpose of understanding and clarifying the investigated case in more detail. Furthermore, Yin (1994) demonstrated that case study investigations, in some instances, are conducted to provide more information for decision making or to discover causal links in situations where cause-and-effect relationships are complicated and not easily recognised, such as school reform or a certain government policy. After presenting these various definitions of a case study approach, there are different types of case studies, which will be discussed in the following.

### **3.4.2. Types of Case Study**

According to Alhazmi (2010), Baxter and Jack (2008), and Yin (1994), there are several classifications of case study approaches. Yin (1994) categorised case study research into three kinds: explanatory, exploratory and descriptive. As he indicated, the explanatory type of case study is used if the researcher seeks to explain some causal links in real life that are too complex to be illustrated by conducting a survey or experimental strategies. In addition, the exploratory type can be used when the researcher wants to explore a new case or discover new interventions which are not clear enough. However, in a descriptive case study, the researcher attempts to describe the situation in more detail and give the reader a clear picture of the case being studied. Furthermore, Baxter and Jack (2008) and Yin (1994) indicated that case study research can be a single-case study or a multiple-case study. When it is possible, a multiple-case study is advised because it gives the researcher more opportunity to explore the similarities and differences between cases.

According to the prior category, this research can be classified as an explanatory, exploratory, descriptive and multiple-case study. Firstly, it seeks to explore the situation itself, meaning how faculty members at universities in Saudi Arabia deal with social networking sites, and what the major motivations and great concerns are regarding the use of SNSs in education. Secondly, it attempts to describe the case and all of the issues that are related. Thirdly, it aims to explain the Saudi context — societal and cultural considerations, and factors beyond that case that can play a role in forming the situation. Fourthly, it is a multiple-case study because it includes the two most important universities in Saudi Arabia — King Abdul-Aziz University and King Saud University — to be studied as a case study approach.

Other categories of case study investigations have been stated by Stake (1995), which he classified into the following three types: intrinsic, instrumental and collective. The intrinsic case study approach can be employed when a researcher has a genuine interest in gaining a better understanding of a particular situation. An instrumental case study can be used to accomplish something other than understanding a particular situation, as the case is of secondary interest but plays a supportive role in facilitating our understanding of something else. Collective-case and multiple-case studies are similar in nature and description, as they include a group of cases to be investigated (Baxter and Jack, 2008).

Given Stake's category, this research can be described as intrinsic and collective. It is collective because two universities are involved. Moreover, it is intrinsic due to the researcher's interest in studying this particular situation and clarifying all of the reasons, consequences and factors that play major roles in forming the case. This is particularly the case, as social networks have been widely used in academic settings and received great attention from both learners and lecturers. They have also gained unlimited support from the Saudi government through several initiatives, as detailed in the literature review chapter.

### **3.4.3. Advantages and Disadvantages of Case Study**

Researchers are aware that every methodological approach and research method has various advantages and disadvantages. Case study research is not exempt. Due to the fact that case study research contributes to a better understanding of the case being studied, Bassey (1999) describes it as a step of action to understand the world of action. Undoubtedly, this is one of the main advantages of the case study approach.

Several researchers, such as Ferreira and Merchant (1992) and Ryan et al. (1992), have confirmed that case study investigations can generate rich data and in-depth perceptions. However, they illustrated that insufficient cooperation from participants in such studies can limit the effectiveness of the data being collected. Inevitably, case study researchers need good cooperation from participants and their institutions to achieve their determined aims. Another disadvantage of the case study approach is that the findings that are produced from a single or even limited number of cases might not be compatible with application in a different context, even if they are similar. Moreover, Yin (1994) declared that the lack of rigour and excessive amount of time that is required are the greatest concerns in case studies.

Furthermore, Mustafa (2008) illustrated that there are some appreciated advantages that can be provided by employing a case study approach. He emphasised that inferences of the entire situation are directly obtained from the study. A case study can be seen as a microscopic description of a real event or situation. He also demonstrated that more accurate data can be generated using this type of methodological approach. On the other hand, Mustafa indicated that there are several disadvantages and limitations when conducting case study research, to which researchers are advised to pay close attention and which they must take into consideration. He was concerned about the lack of objectivity, which can result in a large amount of disorganised data. In addition, he illustrated that there are several errors and misunderstandings in the process of selecting cases and problems in collecting data. With regard to the selection of cases, Mustafa pointed out that the major issues for many studies employing this approach included subjectivity and the fact that there are no clear criteria. Moreover, the researchers face much data, repetitive answers, and useless information in data

collection and analysis. It can be perceived that this technique is extremely costly in both time and money.

It is understood that several researchers are concerned about the fact that the findings of case study research cannot be generalised to the whole study population. Furthermore, in most cases it is challenging to apply these outcomes to other similar situations. However, Hays (2004) illustrated that generalisation is not a goal of case study research. Instead, studying the individuality of each case is the main purpose. She claimed that generalisability is quite possible, in particular, when it is based on several investigations that have been conducted into the same studied phenomenon. Compared to qualitative research, Hays demonstrated that findings from traditional research, such as experiments, are predictable and can be applied to other similar situations and populations. This is because generalisability is the main objective of the majority of such investigations.

### **3.5. Interviewing**

#### **3.5.1. Definitions**

Different definitions of interviews by different researchers can be noted, but the majority are similar. Cohen and Manion (2000) define interviews as a conversation that is initiated by an interviewer with the purpose of extracting information that is relevant to the research questions. It usually takes place between two people: the interviewer and the interviewee. However, the interviewer (researcher) has control and emphasises the content that has been identified by the research objectives in order to describe, predict or explain the phenomena in an organised manner. Ary, Jacobs and Razavich (2002) look at interviewing as a tool for collecting reliable data. In addition, they appreciate that interviews offer the advantage of the interviewer being present to explain the objectives of the research and clarify the meaning of questions more clearly. Alhazmi (2010) also agrees with this advantage and looks at it in contrast to other methods of enquiry, such as questionnaires, in which participants usually have no opportunity to ask or seek clarification about the meaning of what they are being asked.

Hays (2014) confirms that interviews are one of the richest sources of data in case study research. In addition, they are considered the most important approach that can facilitate the process of data collection. By using this method of collecting data, the researcher has the opportunity to obtain direct information and a variety of perspectives of participants involved in the study (Hays, 2004). Yin (1994) stated:

Overall, interviews are an essential source of case study evidence because most case studies are about human affairs. These human affairs should be reported and interpreted through the eyes of specific interviewees, and well informed respondents can provide important insights into a situation. They can provide shortcuts to the prior history of the situation, helping you to identify other relevant sources of evidence. However, the interviews should always be considered verbal reports only. As such, they are subject to the common problems of bias, poor recall, and poor or inaccurate articulation (p. 85).

### **3.5.2. Advantages and Disadvantages of Interviewing**

Similar to other research methods, interviews, as a tool for data collection, have several advantages and disadvantages. Yin (1994) confirms that interviews are considered one of the most important sources of information, particularly in case study research. However, Yin claims that conducting interviews is subject to the common problems of bias, poor recall, and inaccurate expression. Another advantage is that conducting interviews can help researchers to go into greater detail of respondents' information or experience than can other tools used to collect data. Furthermore, interviews are more open and flexible, and have a freedom in practicality (Cohen and Manion, 1980; Alhazmi, 2010).

On the other hand, Sarantakos (1998) believes that interviews are time-consuming and costly. Much time can be spent while carrying out a single interview, doing a transcription and then analysing it to see what relevant information can be extracted. In addition, Alhazmi (2010) asserts that interviews have to be planned and arranged



carefully. She also demonstrates that results can lead to direct recommendations in quantitative analysis. However, in qualitative analysis, the researcher needs to look for reasons for most of the findings. Therefore, a greater amount of reasoning is required for explanation.

The fact that the interviewer is present to explain the objectives of the research and clarify the meaning of questions is one of the main advantages of conducting interviews. This is not available in other methods of enquiry, such as questionnaires (Ary et al., 2002; Alhazmi, 2010). Furthermore, face-to-face communication in interviews gives researchers the opportunity to guide participants towards the key research matters, which are of the researcher's interest for investigation (Cohen et al., 2000). Therefore, I think that direct contact through face-to-face interviews can help to develop personal relationships of respect and confidence between the interviewer and the interviewees. It is likely that this would assist the researcher in obtaining rich data and accurate attitudes towards the issues that are being investigated.

In this regard, Ary, Jacobs and Razavich (2002) expect the interview method to promote a positive climate of truthfulness and cooperation, especially when the interviewer is in a position to show care and attention, and put the interviewee at ease. Furthermore, Alhazmi (2010) thinks that it is important for interviewers to show care and understanding of the potential problems of the interviewee. This helps the interviewees to feel more motivated to disclose good information. "On the whole, people will treat the interviewer seriously if they think that you can change something or if they think that you accept and understand their situations. What can help to secure confidence is to indicate that you have some understanding of the problem that is facing them" (Simon, 1977, p. 17, cited in Alhazmi, 2010).

### **3.5.3. Types of Interviews**

There are several categorisations of interviews. Cohen and Manion (1980) demonstrate that there are four types of interviews that might be conducted as a research technique: structured, unstructured, non-directive and focussed. Meanwhile, Smith et

al. (1995) divide interviews into three main types: structured, semi-structured or unstructured.

In structured interviews, the questions are pre-determined, the content is fixed, and the procedures are organised in advance (Cohen and Manion, 1980). Wallace (1998, cited in Alhazmi, 2010) declares that structured interviews represent an oral version of a questionnaire, comprising well-structured questions that have been carefully prepared in an interview plan.

At the other end of the scale, Cohen and Manion (1980) and Alhazmi (2010) illuminate that unstructured interviews are completely open and flexible, and have a freedom in practice. However, this does not mean that unstructured interviews are unplanned or casual. Indeed, they should be carefully planned. In order to be sure of obtaining the required answers to the research questions, Fielding and Thomas (2001) highlight that in unstructured interviews the interviewer asks the same questions but has the flexibility to change the order of questions or the language and expression.

In between these two extremes, semi-structured interviews are considered the most common method in qualitative research (Alhazmi, 2010). According to Sarantakos (1998), semi-structured interviews hold a place somewhere between unstructured and structured interviews. This is because the features of both types can be found in this kind of interview. Minichiello, Aroni and Hays (2008) described the advantages of semi-structured interviews: "The data are somewhat more systematic and comprehensive than in the informal conversational interview, while the tone of the interview still remains fairly conversational and informal" (p. 52). Conducting semi-structured interviews is the most effective technique when it is done in exploratory studies to investigate not only what participants say, but also what they believe to be true about a certain issue. In a semi-structured interview, additional questions can be asked to gather more specific details and answers (Alharbi, 2013; Frey et al., 2000).

According to Creswell (2008), interviews can be conducted face-to-face, by telephone, by email or in a focus group. Although face-to-face interviews can be time-consuming and expensive, Creswell clarified that this kind of interview has been widely used in

qualitative research. By looking at the importance of this type of interview, particularly in investigating subjects that have different complicated aspects, I utilised face-to-face interviews for this research. This technique has enabled me to ask in-depth questions, thereby obtaining a better understanding and more detailed answers. The following section gives more detail about King Abdul-Aziz University and King Saud University as they are the fieldwork of this research.

### **3.6. King Abdul-Aziz University and King Saud University**

The higher education sector in Saudi Arabia has increased from one college in 1949 to tens of universities and hundreds of academic colleges in 2015. The Islamic Studies College was the first higher educational institution that was established in Saudi Arabia in Makkah 1949. However, King Saud University was the first university established by a royal decree in 1957. Subsequently, it has grown dramatically in its number of students and faculty members. According to academic statistics published by the Ministry of Education, more than 61,700 students were enrolled and 7,614 faculty members were working in various disciplines at the main campus in 2014. Currently, the university consists of 21 faculties leading four fields, which are Science Colleges, Health Colleges, Humanities Colleges and Community Colleges (King Saud University, 2015).

One of the most important contributions of King Saud University in building and developing partnerships with the public and private sectors in the area of knowledge economics is The Riyadh Techno Valley Project. King Saud University has sought to play a major role in achieving the long-term economic strategy, which has been adopted by the government of Saudi Arabia. The University established its project as a science park, with a verity of research tasks and initiatives aiming to meet the demands of the knowledge-based industry and to commercialize its research products to the broader public and private communities. In addition, King Saud University has worked to enrich the research environment and encourage researchers and graduates to take part in their research projects and programmes, which are sponsored by other participating companies (Ksu.edu.sa, 2015).

On the other hand, King Abdul-Aziz University is a public and multi-campus university, committed to providing its academic service to the people living in the western region, particularly, and to other people in the country of Saudi Arabia. The main campus is in Jeddah. There are eight other campuses in Jeddah and other cities (King Abdul-Aziz University, 2013). From a historical view, King Abdul-Aziz University was established as a private university in Jeddah by a group of businessmen in 1967, with the name Jeddah National University. In 1973, it became a public university by a ministerial decree. It has since grown from 97 students, with a single Faculty of Economics, to an enrolment of 177,249 students and 7,889 faculty members in 2014. This makes it the largest university in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Kamal, 2013; E-Portal of the Ministry of Education - Higher Education, 2015).

At the main campus, today, the university consists of 24 faculties, nine independent deanships, 160 academic departments and 120 postgraduate programmes, 23 administrative offices, a central library, a medical research centre and a university hospital. In several recent reports, King Abdul-Aziz University is considered as a pioneer in distance and e-education, offering qualifications (BA and master degrees) and training courses in various disciplines of Sciences. Faculties and departments have already started to employ lots of technological tools in teaching and learning such as social networking, smart classrooms and blackboards. Additionally, the university administration makes great efforts to technologize most of the learning classes and halls, and to make the Wi-Fi networks free and available anywhere on the university campus (Kamal, 2013; Kau.edu.sa, 2015).

### **3.7. The Sample Selection**

The target study population for this investigation consisted of faculty members at King Abdul-Aziz University and King Saud University in Saudi Arabia. As mentioned in the Introduction Chapter, these particular universities were selected because of their size, diversity, and high academic standing. They are the largest universities in Saudi Arabia in terms of the number of faculty members and students, and both have achieved high rankings worldwide. In 2012, King Saud University was ranked first and King Abdul-Aziz University was ranked second among Arab universities (Ranking WEB of Universities,

2012). They are also located in the nation's most important cities: Jeddah and Riyadh, the former being the economic capital of Saudi Arabia and the latter its political capital. For these reasons, I carried out fieldwork at both universities after I had obtained their consent.

In any study, it is important to ensure that the sample is truly representative of the entire target population and meets the study's demographic considerations. Due to the exploratory nature of this investigation and the importance of the demographic characteristics, a non-random sampling approach was applied. Specifically, a purposive sampling technique was used to identify participants, as this helped me to build a well-balanced sample of the study population.

Statistically, 218 academics sent me their consent to take part in this study. From those who agreed to participate, 32 people were carefully chosen to form the research sample, keeping in mind the study aims and all of the demographic considerations (for more details, see participants' demographic information in the next section). I was keen to build a well-balanced sample in order to equally represent the two universities, the two genders, and the four academic degrees. This decision was made to represent all of these categories fairly, as well as to see whether demographic characteristics have any impact on their attitudes and uses. The following figure shows some information about the participants involved in the interviews.

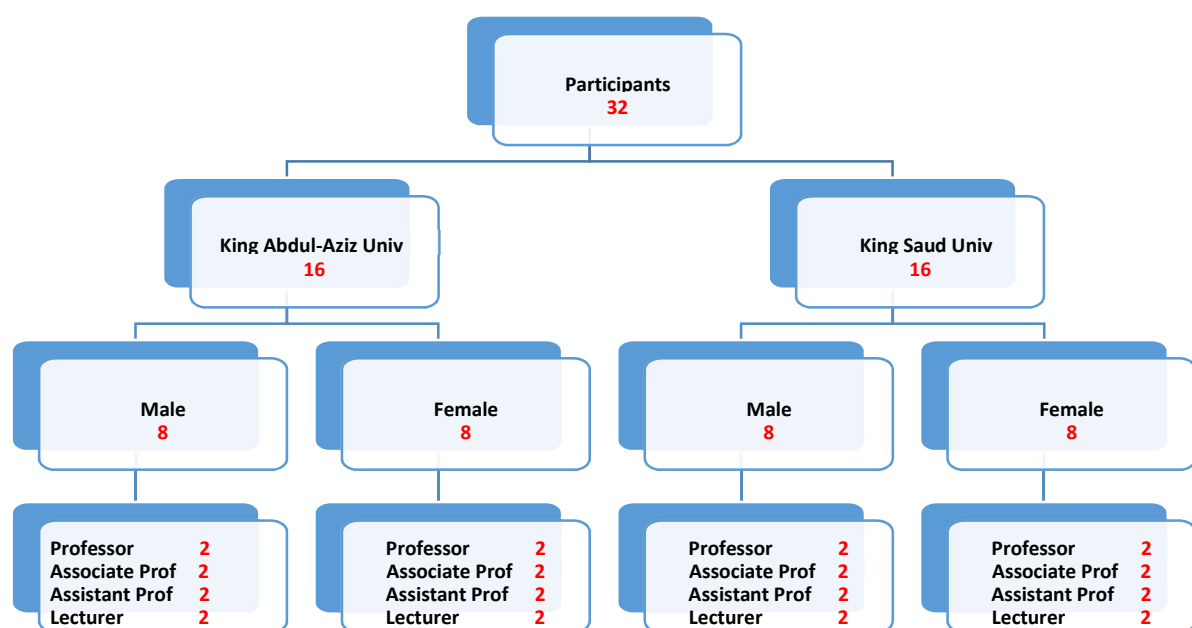
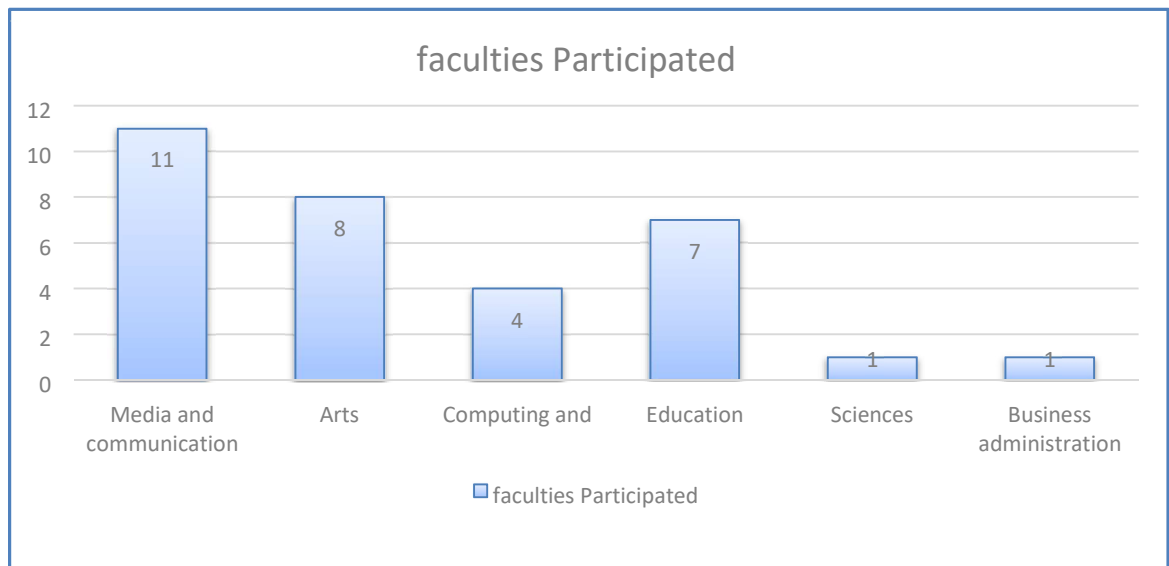


Figure 3.1: Participants

Therefore, the total number of faculty members that were interviewed from the two universities was 32, representing 13 different academic disciplines or departments, as shown in Table 3.1 below:

Universities	Faculties	Academic Departments	Participants	Percentage
King Abdul-Aziz University In Jeddah and King Saud University In Riyadh	Media and Communication	Media	6	19%
		Communication	5	16%
	Arts	Social studies	3	9%
		Information science	3	9%
		Psychology	1	3%
		Linguistics	1	3%
	Computing and Information Technology	Computing science	2	6%
		Information technology	2	6%
	Education	Curriculum and teaching methods	2	6%
		Educational technologies	3	9%
		Education	2	6%
	Sciences	Math	1	3%
	Business Administration	Marketing	1	3%
Two Universities	Six Faculties	13 Academic Departments	32 Participants	100%

Table 3.1: Participants' Demographic Information



*Figure 3.2: Faculties Participated*

Table 3.1 and Figure 3.2 show that the faculty members involved in this study were from 13 academic disciplines, representing six faculties. The highest percentage of participants (35%) were from Media and Communication, followed by Arts (24%), Education (22%), and Computing and Information Technology (13%). Finally, Sciences (3%) and Business Administration (3%) were the least represented in the study. Most of the participants were from the following three faculties: Media and Communication, Arts, and Education. This could have been because the academics from these faculties are interested in these types of subjects and these topics are relevant to their fields of knowledge.

### **3.8. Participants' Demographic Information**

This section presents some details about the demographics of the faculty members, including gender, age, academic degree, and years of teaching experience. The purpose of studying these demographics is to examine whether or not these characteristics have any effect on participants' attitudes towards using SNSs in educational institutions.

### 3.8.1. Gender

Due to the exploratory nature of this investigation and the prior intention to study some demographic factors to see whether or not they have an impact on participants' responses, I applied a non-random sampling approach (particularly purposive sampling) to identify the participants. This helped me to obtain a well-balanced sample of the study population.

Genders	Male	Female
Faculty Members	16	16
Percentage	50%	50%

Table 3.2: Gender

As it can be seen in Table 3.2, there was a balance of respondents between genders: 50% males and 50% females. These percentages were chosen to give both genders the same opportunity to provide their opinions on this subject, as well as to investigate whether the factor of gender has any potential influence on participants' attitudes. Due to the case of segregation between genders in Saudi society, researchers could be faced with some difficulties or obstacles when collecting data from the opposite gender (see Section 3.9.3).

### 3.8.2. Age

Age	Under 30	30–39	40–49	50 and over
Faculty Members	1	10	9	12
Percentage	3%	31%	28%	38%

Table 3.3: Age

As the results represented in Table 3.3 show, the highest percentage (38%) concerned faculty members aged 50+, followed by about 31% of faculty members whose ages were between 30 and 39 years and those whose ages were between 40 and 49 years. Finally, the percentage of participants whose ages were under 30 years was about 3%, which was the least represented in the study. It can be seen that all of the percentages are approximate, except for "Under 30", which had one participant in the study. This was expected, as one of the conditions of taking part in the study was that the participant should be a lecturer or higher as an academic at the university. It is rare for people who



are less than 30 years of age to occupy an academic profession as a lecturer at a university.

### 3.8.3. Academic Degree

Academic Degree	Professor	Associate Professor	Assistant Professor	Lecturer
Faculty Members	8	8	8	8
Percentage	25%	25%	25%	25%

*Table 3.4: Academic Degree*

As it is clearly shown in Table 3.4, there was a well-balanced sample of the study population for the “Academic Degree” factor. Each academic degree was represented at 25%, with the purpose of giving all of the four academic degrees (professions) the same chance in this research.

### 3.8.4. Years of Teaching Experience

Years of Experience	1–5	6–10	11–15	16–20	21–25	26–30	31–35
Faculty Members	5	7	4	7	4	2	3
Percentage	16%	22%	12%	22%	12%	6%	9%

*Table 3.5: Years of Teaching Experience*

Table 3.5 shows that the years of teaching experience for the participants were divided into seven segments or groups. Most importantly, it can be recognised that this investigation included participants from different levels of expertise. The research sample included academics that had experience of 1–35 years of teaching at the university.

## 3.9. Data Collection

### 3.9.1. Interview Design and Content

As mentioned above, the data collection strategy was that of semi-structured interviews with faculty members at King Abdul-Aziz University and King Saud University in Saudi Arabia. The research questions were the basis for the interview questions. I made several drafts of the interview question form and sought the advice of some colleagues and supervisors about the different ways in which to develop and modify

them. The final version of the interview question form was reviewed by three of my research colleagues and checked by my supervisors (see Appendix A).

The interview form consisted of two sections: demographic information and a list of proposed questions. The demographic section included age, gender, academic degree, years of teaching experience, and the name of their university, college and department. The question section addressed all of the research questions, and proposed solutions and other cultural and societal factors related to the topic of the research. However, I was open to changing the questions or setting up other questions during the interviews, provided that they were relevant to the subject of the investigation.

Hays (2014) declares that the research questions must set the focus of the study, but that researchers need to be aware and keep in mind that case study research is an evolving process. She asserts that researchers must be willing and prepared to develop questions or change them completely, and allow new ones to evolve, as long as they are related to the focus of the study. In fact, all of these questions, the way in which they are asked, and other related matters can be revealed in the pilot study before the main research. This allows the researcher to modify or change what is necessary. The pilot study is the subject of the next section.

### **3.9.2. The Pilot Study**

Fraenkel, Wallen and Hyun (1993) demonstrate that the pilot study can be defined as a small-scale study that is carried out before leading the actual investigation, with the purpose of trying to reveal the aspects of faults or weaknesses in the research plan. In addition, the pilot study can be defined as the procedures leading to key research through managing some experimental tests with a miniature version of the study (Polit et al., 2001).

There are several benefits of implementing a pilot study approach before carrying out the main research. Teijlingen and Hundley (2001) indicate that conducting a pilot study is highly important because it can act as a warning device to show whether there are any faults or inappropriateness with the research instruments. Al-Sharif (2014)

demonstrates that other benefits include ensuring that the research procedures are suitable and applicable, drawing a clear picture of the effort required in the major investigation, and improving the quality of the research by assessing its questions and plan. One more important advantage of administrating a pilot study is to familiarise the researcher with the research procedures. All of the benefits of the pilot study help the researcher to be more confident and sure that the instrument measures what it has been designed and intended to measure.

Before the actual implementation, I conducted a pilot study with five academics at the two universities (King Abdul-Aziz University and King Saud University) to ensure that the data collection strategy was appropriate for addressing the research questions. In the pilot study, I met the faculty members who were from different disciplines, genders and academic degrees: men and women, lecturers, assistant professors and professors. This allowed me to identify any potential obstacles in the practical process. Moreover, it enabled me to make any changes required to the questions themselves or to the way in which they are asked. In fact, most of the questions were clear and the participants were familiar with the matters about which they were being asked. However, I made some modifications to the questions and gained a clear visualisation about how long the interview should be and the kinds of questions with which I should start. However, in general, it did not appear that the interviewer or interviewees would struggle with any aspect of the interview process.

During the study fieldwork in Saudi Arabia, the pilot study and the interviews were administrated at both Saudi universities — King Abdul-Aziz University in Jeddah and King Saud University in Riyadh — as planned. Table 3.6 below shows the plan of the pilot study and the fieldwork from August to October 2014.

Month	Duration	Details
<b>August 2014</b>	1 <sup>st</sup> week	Conducting a pilot study at King Abdul-Aziz University
	2 <sup>nd</sup> week	Conducting a pilot study at King Saud University
	3 <sup>rd</sup> week	Transcribing the pilot study interviews and sending them to the supervisors

	4 <sup>th</sup> week	Amending the interview questions (if required)
<b>September 2014</b>	1 <sup>st</sup> week	Contacting participants (respondents) at King Abdul-Aziz University to participate
	2 <sup>nd</sup> week	Conducting the actual interviews with the participants from King Abdul-Aziz University
	3 <sup>rd</sup> week	Conducting the actual interviews with the participants from King Abdul-Aziz University
	4 <sup>th</sup> week	Reviewing my fieldwork at King Abdul-Aziz University
<b>October 2014</b>	1 <sup>st</sup> week	Contacting participants (respondents) at King Saud University to participate
	2 <sup>nd</sup> week	Conducting the actual interviews with the participants from King Saud University
	3 <sup>rd</sup> week	Conducting the actual interviews with the participants from King Saud University
	4 <sup>th</sup> week	Reviewing my fieldwork at King Saud University

*Table 3.6: The Plan of the Pilot Study and the Fieldwork*

Furthermore, the actual procedures of conducting interviews and more relevant explanations are highlighted in the next section.

### **3.9.3. Interview Procedures**

Before carrying out the fieldwork, I obtained all of the formal approvals from all of the relevant institutions. I started with the approval from the Director of Studies at Sheffield Hallam University (Dr Ruth Deller). She allowed me to return to Saudi Arabia to undertake the fieldwork as a major part of the study from August to October 2014 (see Appendix D). With this letter, I obtained authorisation from the Saudi Arabian Cultural Bureau in London. This enabled me to contact the Saudi universities — King Abdul-Aziz University and King Saud University — to obtain their formal consent in order to access and conduct the interviews (see Appendices E and F).

After obtaining the official consent, I sent a formal invitation by email to all of the faculty members through the universities' electronic systems, asking them to take part in the study (see Appendix B). I carefully considered the ways in which to increase the

response rates, as reminders were sent out after a certain period of time. In addition, I asked all of the department heads to encourage their faculty members to participate.

As it has been demonstrated in the sample selection section, I received consent from 218 faculty members at the two universities (the study population) to take part in the study. After that, 32 participants were chosen to be the research sample, with whom the interviews were conducted. It is worth noting that the study sample was selected in a careful manner with the purpose of constructing a well-balanced sample that would hopefully meet the research aims and demographic considerations.

As a result, interviews were conducted with 32 faculty members at the two universities with the purpose of determining the major motivations for and concerns about SNSs, as well as their attitudes towards and methods of using SNSs, in education. By coordinating with the respondents who agreed to participate, I arranged all of the interviews at a suitable location and time. The interviews took place in a work-based atmosphere, such as faculty offices or at any other convenient place, as a way of preparing the appropriate setting for administering interviews. However, I encouraged the participants to 'open up' and asked them to differentiate between their personal perspectives and what they actually do in practice or what their institutions require. Both elements — their general attitudes and actual practices in Saudi Arabian universities — have been discussed separately.

Due to the case of segregation between genders in Saudi society, each university has two separate campuses. Therefore, it is not possible for me as a male researcher to access the women's campus in order to interview female participants. That necessitated me to arrange interviews in public areas, such as the public libraries, where both genders can meet. Some women agreed to meet there, while others preferred to do interviews by phone or Skype. To clarify, a few years ago, researchers were in need of collaboration with their colleagues from the opposite gender to collect data on behalf of them, which is still the case in many universities. Ultimately, all interviews with male participants were done face-to-face (though two of them were conducted by Skype due to travel restrictions). In regards to female participants, nine

of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, while five of the participants preferred to be interviewed by Skype and two by phone.

During the interviews, I informed the participants about the research aims and gave them a chance to look at the research statement and the list of interview questions. I also asked them to sign a consent form to be sure that they had understood all of their rights and every element of the procedures (see Appendix C). After that, I recorded the entire interview and took notes on any important information that arose during the interview. Once I had finished leading the interview, I listened to the recording to be sure that everything had been done properly.

As a researcher hoping to obtain accurate answers and believing in the importance of building a kind relationship between the interviewer and interviewees, I tried to facilitate all interview circumstances and to be friendly with the participants. However, I maintained objectivity in all of the interviews, particularly when I was asking questions, obtaining results and drawing conclusions. Moreover, as Arabic is the native language of the majority of faculty members in Saudi Arabia, I translated the interview questions into Arabic, conducted the interviews in Arabic, and then translated the interview transcripts into English. The translations were reviewed by three of my Arabic friends who are fluent in English.

With regard to the transcription process, I carried out some of them during the fieldwork period, as a review of my work, and completed others later. After I completed all of the transcription work, I sent all of the participants a copy of their interviews and asked them whether there was any inaccuracy in interpreting their attitudes or wording. All of this was carried out to achieve a high level of validity and credibility of the research, which is discussed in more detail in the next section.

### **3.10. Validity and Credibility of the Research**

Utilising a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods helps to obtain more comprehensive results. It also allows the researcher to compare both kinds of findings, which increases the credibility of the research findings. Moreover, I previously intended

to employ two data collection strategies: semi-structured interviews and content analysis. However, the conducted interviews resulted in an enormous amount of data that needed more time to be examined. Thus, due to the limitation of the given time to complete my PhD scholarship, I decided to analyse what I had obtained in depth, instead of applying another tool in order to gain further data. When I completed the transcription and translation of the interviews into English, I organised the summary of interviews in tables so that it would be easier and clearer for me when I compared and contrasted. As a result, I found that the summary consisted of 154 pages and more than 41,000 words.

Furthermore, I worked hard to overcome the challenge of just depending on one research approach. To do this, the research was designed to include a variety of participants with diverse characteristics, as efforts were made for all faculty members to get involved in the study. This resulted in 32 participants, representing two universities, six faculties, 13 different disciplines, both genders, and four academic degrees: lecturers, assistant professors, associate professors and professors. Therefore, I think that this is one of the strengths of this study.

The validity of interview data is based on the procedural processes for gathering the data and the collection of the instrument's design (Brenner, 2006; Minichiello et al., 2008). The form of the interview questions was reviewed by three of my research colleagues and checked by my supervisors, as mentioned above. As an extra measure and to ensure that the data collection strategy was appropriate for addressing the research questions, I carried out a pilot study with five lecturers at the two universities before actual implementation. This allowed me to identify any potential obstacles, and make any changes that were required to be sure that the instrument measured what it was designed and intended to measure. This also allowed me to familiarise myself with the research procedures.

I believe that I was very careful and responsible in the practical data collection fieldwork. I paid close attention to preparing appropriate environments for interviewing the participants. This is an essential factor in providing data that are both accurate and relevant to the research goals. After they had agreed to take part in this

project, I let the participants select where and when we could meet to conduct the interview. Most of the interviews took place at the university in their offices, at the library or anywhere that they preferred. At the beginning of each face-to-face interview, I gave the participants more time to look at the research statement, which explained the interview that was involved in this project. I informed them about all of the details related to the project and the interviews that were being conducted. I also gave them the opportunity to ask if they had any concerns or if any part of the process was not clear enough. Moreover, all of the participants who engaged in this research were told that the data provided would only be used for research purposes, and that they had the right to withdraw from participating in the interview at any time. In addition, they were informed that all of the interviewees would have numbers, instead of their names, to achieve a high level of confidentiality. This also made them feel more confident about addressing their attitudes and sharing their ideas without any concerns.

All of the previous procedural steps were completed before asking the participants to sign the consent form and giving me their permission for the interviews to be audiotaped (see Appendix C). I carefully carried out all of these processes to be sure that the participants understood all of their rights and every element of the procedures. After that, I recorded the entire interview and took notes on any important information that arose during the interview. Furthermore, I started asking them the general questions before delving into our topic questions.

For the sake of making the participants feel comfortable and able to freely express their ideas and opinions, I worked to facilitate interview settings and show participants care and understanding. I believe that once respectful relationships are developed and the participants feel at ease, they will disclose and share their attitudes at liberty without restriction. As noted, due to the fact that Arabic is the native language of the majority of faculty members in Saudi Arabia, I translated the interview questions into Arabic, conducted the interviews in Arabic, and then translated the interview transcripts into English. The translations were reviewed by three of my Arabic friends who speak English fluently. Furthermore, before translation, I provided all of the participants with



copies of the transcription to review their responses, and asked them, “Is that exactly what you mean in your responses?”. This verified the accuracy of their detailed answers, which helps to increase the validity and credibility of the research. All of the data that were gathered in the semi-structured interviews were recorded, transcribed and reviewed to ensure their validity and credibility.

While obtaining validity and credibility is essential in the data collection stage of research, the data analysis stage is equally crucial. Practically, researchers must have systematic rules or logical steps to follow during the time of analysis. The next section offers further explanations concerning this significant matter.

### **3.11. Data Analysis Technique**

The data analysis phase is crucial in obtaining accurate results from the collected data. There are several programs, such as CAQDAS, NVivo and others, that can be utilised to help the analysis of an interview; however, “good quality analysis still relies on good analytic work by a careful human researcher” (Gibbs, 2002, p. 13). According to Minichiello, Aroni and Hays (2008), data analysis can be defined as “a process of systematically arranging and presenting information in order to search for ideas” (p. 258).

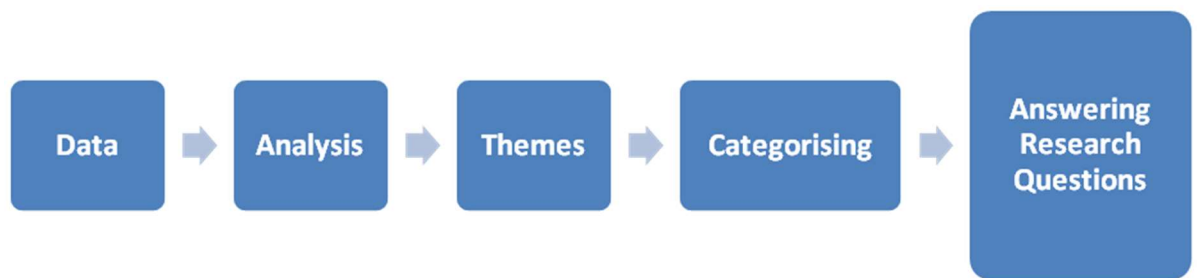
Furthermore, Minichiello et al. (2008) illustrate that thematic analysis is employed in situations where the researcher can identify themes that emerge from the analysis of the interview transcripts. After transcribing the interviews, the first step in analysing data using this approach is coding. This means carefully reading the interview transcripts to find common ideas and key points in order to organise them and then generate themes. These common themes are categorised in a way that addresses the research questions. Bryman and Burgess (2002) explain that coding can be defined as the process of sorting and categorising data through systematic analysis of the interview transcripts to gain meaningful categories.

Keeping the research questions in the researcher’s mind during the data analysis stage is highly significant. This can help to sort and organise data to find the right categories

of themes to answer the research questions. Hays (2014) demonstrates that a researcher will find a lot of interesting and exciting data that do not have any relationship with the research questions in any way. Such data must be set aside while the researcher focuses on the research questions. She emphasises that the primary purpose of the case study approach is not to provide a complete picture of the situation, but to answer the research questions. In addition, analysing data with the purpose of trying to sort, focus, organise and reorganise data enables the researcher to obtain accurate findings and to draw compatible conclusions. Hays declares that all of these practical processes of sorting, resorting, organising and reorganising data should result in a collection of categories that answer the research questions in a meaningful explanation.

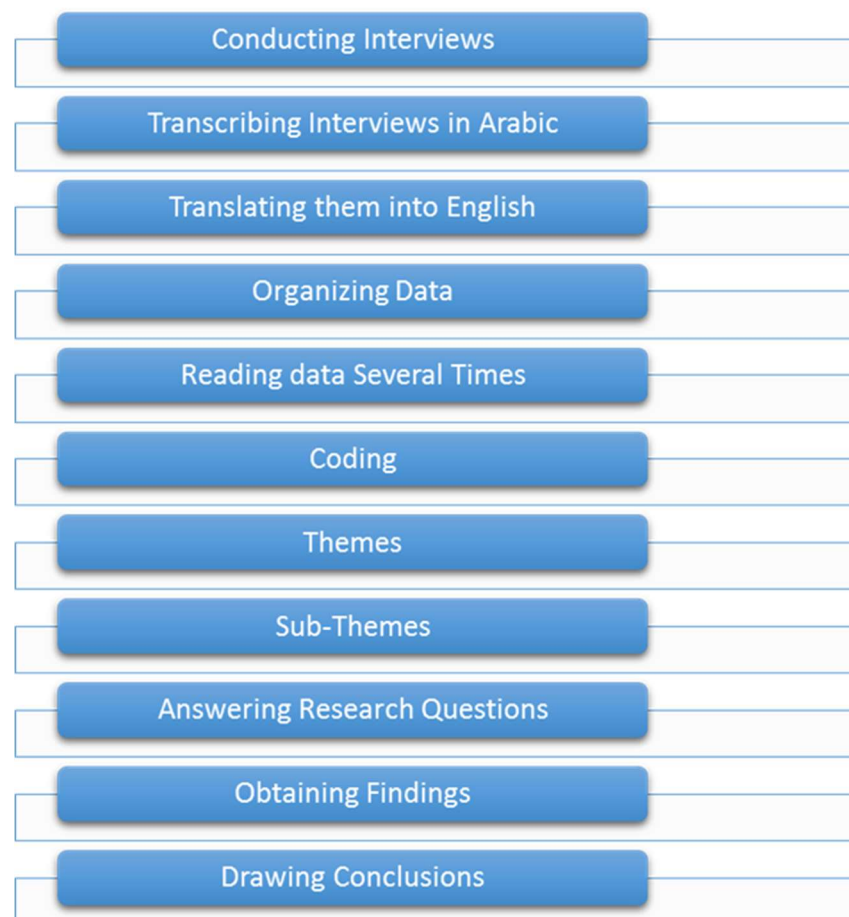
Moreover, Babbie (2013) confirms that coding is an essential operation in analysing qualitative content to transform these kinds of data into a standardised form. Furthermore, coding is "the heart and soul" of content analysis (Ryan and Bernard, 2000). According to Ryan and Bernard, a researcher can apply a set of codes to a set of qualitative data. Other researchers claim that qualitative methods concentrate on the quality and latent content of texts, and that this assists in the understanding of the context of the material that is being researched (e.g. Stefan et al., 2000). In a practical sense, content analysis transforms qualitative information into manageable units or categories of data — words, phrases, sentences or themes — and then examines the data using thematic analysis, relational analysis or both, if required (Kohlbacher, 2006).

Most qualitative investigations that focus on exploring, describing and evaluating attitudes utilise a grounded theory approach, as Figure 3.3 illustrates. This general methodology provides a way of thinking about data more deeply, enabling researchers to move back and forth within data analysis to provide further explanations regarding any correlations between repeated concepts (Alharbi, 2013; Scott, 2009). More specifically, all of that has been completed to uncover the best answers to the research questions and draw final conclusions that are well matched to the findings acquired.



*Figure 3.3: Grounded Theory Process*

In fact, I benefitted from all previous endeavours in data analysis techniques. However, I attempted to develop my own approach to analysing collected data, as it can be shown in the next figure.



*Figure 3.4: Data Analysis Framework*

On a practical level, during and after data collection, I generated initial codes and established categories and subcategories for the gathered data. Reading the interview

transcripts several times allowed me to familiarise with the data collected and also to find key topics and common points, which I organised to identify a variety of themes. Although applying this technique resulted in generating a lot of interesting data, I only focussed on the data that were most relevant to the research questions. The next figure shows the fundamental themes emerged from the interview transcripts. Moreover, it illustrates how these themes are linked to the main objectives of this study, interview questions, and the sections in the three findings chapters.

Main Themes	Main Objectives	Interview Questions	Findings Chapters
Connection and disconnection	1	1 / 4 / 6	Section 4.2
Academics' relationships with students	3	9 / 12	5.3
Academics' profiles	2 / 3	8 / 11	4.4
Academics' identities	2 / 3	8 / 11	4.4
Building professional networking	2	4 / 10	4.5
Privacy issues	3	8 / 11	6.2.4
Personal usage	2	5 / 6 / 7	4.4
Professional usage	2	5 / 6 / 7	4.4
Platforms used	2	5	4.3
Advantages of social networking	3	10	5.2 / 5.5
Essential aspects of practice	2	4 / 10	5.4
Practical methods of employing SNSs	2	4 / 10	5.4.6
Gender segregation	3	15	4.4 / 5.4 / 6.2
Overcoming social restrictions	3	10 / 15	6.3
Respecting societal considerations	1 / 3	14 / 17	6.2
The role of university administration	3	16	4.4 / 4.6 / 4.7
Culture and technology	1 / 2 / 3	14 / 17	Ch 6
The mixing of genders online	3	15 / 17	6.2.3
Formal social boundaries	3	17	5.4 / 6.2
Societal changes	3	9 / 17	5.2 / 6.3
Cultural and social concerns	3	11 / 17	6.2
Managing profiles and groups	3	11 / 12	5.5.2.2
Visual communication	3	11 / 12	5.5.2.1
Time and effort spent on SNSs	3	11 / 14	4.7
Additional workload	3	11 / 12	4.7
Digital skills	1 / 2 / 3	11 / 12 / 17	4.6

*Figure 3.5: The Main Themes that Emerged from the Data*

As stated in the Introduction Chapter, the current study aims to investigate and acquire an in-depth understanding of Saudi faculty members' attitudes towards, motivations for and concerns about integrating social networking, as well as uses thereof, into

education, particularly in the gender-segregated educational setting of Saudi Arabian universities. Therefore, by taking into consideration all of the relationships between the themes presented earlier, I paid more attention to analysing themes that are essentially related to the research questions. For the purpose of clarification, faculty members' attitudes towards, motivations for and concerns about using social networking, as well as uses thereof, in education are the main four themes that can assist in expanding our understanding of how these platforms are used in the context of Saudi higher educational institutions, and will provide more explanation as to all of the influential factors related to the employment of these online tools in conservative societies, particularly from cultural and social aspects.

Importantly, the categorisation procedure in qualitative research must be reliable in terms of being consistent. This means that different examiners should code the same material in the same way (Weber, 1990). Developing rules for coding textual material is significant in the extraction process. It is worth mentioning that all of the collected data from the interviews were carefully recorded, translated, transcribed (documented) and reviewed to ensure their validity and reliability. I asked two of my research colleagues to review the data and interpretations to provide a peer review of my work.

### **3.12. Ethical Considerations**

I committed to achieving the highest ethical standards possible. I attended a research ethics session at Sheffield Hallam University, which was led by Prof Alison Adam, to improve and refine my knowledge on this topic. Before this training session, I also took a course on ethical issues during my master's work in Saudi Arabia. I think that the most important point is that this study involves human participants but that no vulnerable adult was included.

In a general sense, it is important to note that the central ethical issues have been considered with the highest level of respect and appreciation, including integrity, informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, data storage, accurate representation of the research study to the participants, and achieving objectivity in obtaining the results (Sheffield Hallam University, 2009). All of the essential information has been provided

to respondents with a clear understanding of the nature of the research that was being undertaken. The participants were informed that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time and that their data would only be used for research purposes (see Appendices B and C).

As noted, the study population consisted of two universities: King Abdul-Aziz University in Jeddah and King Saud University in Riyadh. However, to maintain a high level of anonymity, I labelled them as follows: University No. 1 and University No. 2. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, the total number of participants that were interviewed from the two universities is that of 32 faculty members. I also numbered them from 1 to 32 (e.g. Interview No. 1, Interview No. 2, and so on). All of the participants were told about this method in order to give them more confidence to address their attitudes and share their ideas without being concerned about their confidentiality.

### **3.13. Objectivity and Subjectivity in the Research**

These two concepts are significant in academic life, particularly in the field of research. To obtain objectivity in social studies, Payne and Payne (2004) assert that, as far as possible, researchers should remain at a distance from what they are examining. Therefore, results and conclusions depend on the nature of what has been investigated, rather than on the beliefs, values or personality of the researcher. More specifically, Eisner (1992) clarifies that objectivity means being fair in most situations and open to all sides of the matter that is being discussed. In doing so, bias is eliminated or at least diminished to a very low level. He illustrates that to have an objective view is to see things as they are. Thus, it is crucial to set your ideas, opinions and beliefs aside when you judge or examine any subject in an objective and critical manner.

It can be argued that social sciences and most qualitative research are not as solid in their objectivity as quantitative research. To some extent, I believe that this is true. In my opinion, this can happen because qualitative researchers deal with attitudes, behaviours and viewpoints, while quantitative researchers deal with numbers and statistics. However, a high level of objectivity can be achieved using both approaches

(Payne and Payne, 2004; Eisner, 1992). In my own view, it depends on how the researcher can control his or her role and adjust any planned and applied work. Additionally, it can be subject to the extent to which they set rules and follow them step by step.

From another viewpoint, Phillips (1990) believes that there are various degrees in obtaining objectivity or subjectivity. He describes objectivity and subjectivity as the edges of the scale. Studies that have been conducted with great care and responsiveness to criticism are stamped as “objective” — they are at one end of the scale. Meanwhile, investigations that have not been sufficiently open to the light of reasoning and criticism are stamped as “subjective” — they are at the other end of the scale. As a result, he concluded that most human inquiries are probably situated somewhere near the middle. However, he highlighted that the aim should be to move in the direction of objectivity.

With regard to the practicality of this research, I believe that, to a great extent, I distanced myself from being for or against what participants delivered during their interviews. I did not express my viewpoints on all of the issues that have been discussed in the research, either explicitly or implicitly. I think that, where possible, I maintained my role as a neutral interviewer. This is because I was aware that many participants can be affected by other people’s opinions. To be more specific, when some participants asked me about the meaning of some of the questions, I tried to explain their exact meaning without talking about my academic experience or indicating my personal opinion in any way. This is because I did not want to direct their attitudes towards either side. Moreover, I asked them to distinguish between their personal perceptions and what they actually do in practice or what their institutions require, in order to discuss each of these points separately. I can say that I was unbiased to a great extent in conducting interviews, as well as in analysing the data.

### **3.14. Summary of the Chapter**

This chapter summarised the methodological approach and the method used for this study. The research design has been described, including how the sample was chosen

and how the data was collected and analysed. To obtain data-rich responses, a qualitative research approach was employed, conducting semi-structured interviews as a data collection technique. This helped me to obtain a comprehensive understanding of faculty members' attitudes towards, motivations for and concerns about using social networking sites in higher education in Saudi Arabia, as well as their actual use. I worked to prepare appropriate environments for the interviewing participants, as this provided data that were accurate and relevant to the research goals. In addition, I highlighted the essential ethical matters that were considered in this research. Furthermore, analysis of the data and discussion of the findings have been illustrated with the purpose of exploring faculty members' attitudes and experiences in answering the research questions.



## Chapter 4 : Academics' Approaches towards the Usage of Social Networking

### 4.1. Introduction

This chapter explores faculty members' attitudes towards integrating social networking sites for educational purposes into Saudi Arabian universities. It starts by drawing a general picture of connection and disconnection, and illustrating which social networking platforms are mainly utilised by academics participating in this study. Furthermore, it sheds light on academics' profiles and identities on SNSs to examine how they build their profiles, and looks at the relationship between the usage of these platforms and their identities. The chapter compares and contrasts social networking that is open to the public and platforms that facilitate creating private groups or closed pages on SNSs. It also provides an in-depth discussion about building professional networking with other academics and digital skills required to obtain effective integration of SNSs into education. The last section of the chapter concludes by analysing participants' concerns about time and effort spent on SNSs, and also employing them as an additional workload to their regular academic responsibilities. All of these themes will be addressed in light of Community of Practice Theory, Hyper-personal Communication Theory, and Connectivism Theory.

### 4.2. Connection versus Disconnection

As one of its objectives, this study has sought to assess the actual use of social networking platforms for academic purposes in Saudi higher educational institutions. The following table (4.1) summarises how many academic participants in this study at King Abdul-Aziz University and King Saud University in Saudi Arabia use social networking sites for educational purposes, and how many of them do not utilise these platforms in an educational setting.

Using SNSs in Academia	Faculty Members	Percentage
They use SNSs for educational purposes	29	91%
They don't use SNSs for educational purposes	3	9%

*Table 4.1: Using SNSs for Academic Purposes*

Table 4.1 shows that 91% of the participating faculty members use social networking sites (SNSs) for educational purposes. This indicates that a significant proportion of the faculty members integrate SNSs into their communicational and instructional relationships. Roblyer et al. (2010) found that, as yet, SNSs are not sufficiently integrated into university settings to assess whether or not they have any real impact. However, the current study revealed that SNSs are significantly employed in Saudi higher education institutions. This suggests that, since the time of the study conducted by Roblyer et al. (2010), there has been a rapid change in the utilisation of SNSs in relation to higher education activities. A period of five years is not insignificant in terms of the remarkable developments in social networks and their usage. It could explain why the Ministry of Education and most of the higher educational institutions in Saudi Arabia pay considerable attention to improving learning and teaching opportunities and to developing their educational systems and instructive methods by employing different strategies, one of which is integrating technology into education.

Throughout these three chapters of findings, I will present an in-depth discussion about why and how Saudi faculty members use these social platforms in their academic field. Furthermore, what motivates lecturers to integrate SNSs into education, and what kinds of concerns they have, will be addressed during this detailed discussion. In this section, it is important to briefly introduce the main factors which have encouraged faculty members to be connected with their students, colleagues and other users on these social platforms. I will also discuss the major elements that have prevented some academics from integrating SNSs into their teaching and communicating methods. However, all of these motivations and concerns will be discussed in more detail throughout these chapters of findings.

According to the majority of respondents, this increasing usage of SNSs in education was due to several motivating factors. They appreciated the significant benefits of these platforms as a means of communication, learning and teaching. The majority of respondents considered students' active engagement with subjects discussed and collaboration with their peers and teaching staff to help students to develop critical and reflective thinking. Many discussed how teaching and learning opportunities have been expanded through these platforms. For instance, Respondent (F28) said:

One of the objectives having driven me to focus on using SNSs in academia is to give students the opportunity to collaborate in learning with one another and working to achieve their projects. Through these platforms, they exchange text messages, audio and video clips about how to select the idea or the topic of research and to conduct it in an effective manner, for example.

Moreover, Respondent (M7) claimed that utilising SNSs in higher education can encourage competition among students, which motivates them to search and discuss. According to his own experience, he further asserted that using SNSs helps in improving teaching methods, as academics have a diversity of tools that can be integrated to enrich topics discussed in lectures. Respondent (M22) started utilising SNSs in education with postgraduate students. As he mentioned, these social networking sites are helpful for lecturers and students alike, giving them an opportunity to get involved with the academic community on these platforms and take part in discussing issues of interest with friends, colleagues, and other society members.

The advantages enhanced by utilising social networking for educational purposes can be seen as empirical evidence of the significant role that can be played by integrating these technological tools into the academic field. In this regard, the connectivism theory gives priority to maintaining connections with information sources and the society of knowledge, and looks at this particular aspect as an essential requirement to support ongoing learning in this digital age. However, this theoretical perspective affirms that obtaining knowledge is largely facilitated and improved by technology.

By looking at previous literature, these perspectives provided by participants are identical to findings that emerged from studies such as Tess (2013) and Jabr (2011), in which instructors looked at using social media in education as a method to enhance their teaching strategies and to support active learning among learners. Furthermore, Respondents (M7) and (M22) noticed that there was a remarkable change in how their students thought critically about subjects discussed and other opinions after using SNSs for a while. From this standpoint, they recommended that faculty members take advantage of applications such as these in academic settings and support their students to promote critical thinking about subjects, ideas and perspectives provided on SNSs.

Another reason as to why respondents used social media was to overcome social restrictions in the case of Saudi Arabian society. Integrating technology to overcome gender segregation in Saudi society has been considered an essential motivation for the majority of participating academics to engage with their students and colleagues from both genders. Respondent (M8), for example, illustrated this perspective:

Integrating SNSs into our educational institutions is really helpful, particularly for female students who are being taught by male lecturers. In a gender-segregated society, opening communicative channels between academics and their students allows students to benefit from the additional teaching methods made available through these platforms. These initial steps of employing SNSs in the academic field will expand the opportunity for learning and teaching, and also work to break most of the temporal and spatial boundaries.

As presented in Table 4.1, the vast majority of participating academics use social networking sites for educational purposes; on the other hand, it is also important to examine the reasons as to why those three participants do not use SNSs for educational purposes. Moreover, to have an accurate view regarding the matter of not using SNSs in the academic field, it is essential to know whether those academics have not used these platforms before or whether they have used them and experienced ill consequences of such usage. Distinguishing between these two different groups of academics can assist in illustrating and discussing these concerns raised in the study's interviews.

Respondent (M20) is a social media user but on a personal level, not an educational one. He was worried about the lack of accuracy and reliability of knowledge on SNSs, and also expressed concerns about privacy issues:

I believe that integrating SNSs into an educational setting will be useful to some extent. However, there are accompanying concerns about such usage, particularly when teaching to large numbers of students. Loads of unverified information was sent over SNSs. This issue specifically necessitates that we must seek the accuracy of the right

resources before sharing. Also, there are other worries such as privacy issues, especially in our society. Having lots of anonymous users is annoying.

He added: “For peace of mind, I just depend on regular face-to-face teaching and keep in touch with students by email. Further, our university has equipped its websites to upload and update all information that may be of interest to students or researchers.” Although Respondent (F26) thought that SNSs could assist in enhancing students’ knowledge and experience, she does not use them for educational purposes due to her busyness. She stated: “In fact, I am really busy. I have academic lectures, administrative responsibilities, and my research projects. That is why I just use email and my personal website on the university portal, instead of these wide spaces.”

On the other hand, Respondent (M21) had stopped using Twitter and Facebook after several bad experiences related to privacy issues and the inability to determine the identity of these sites’ users:

Curiously, lots of anonymous users could access our discussion on Twitter or Facebook and cause annoyance. Impersonation, hacking, penetration, insulting and anonymity are just a few examples of what can be seen on these platforms. Several colleagues faced events such as these, which caused a kind of embarrassment in front of the public. Once you are a user of these platforms, you are exposed to different and anonymous arrows by standing up on stage in front of everyone. Personally, I cannot accept it.

He concluded: “Using means and tools designed for education and controlled by university, like Blackboard, is better than these open spaces.”

It can be seen that those three faculty members, who have a disconnected relationship with SNSs, are a mixture of academics that have used SNSs before and academics who have not. Therefore, faculty members who have not integrated these tools into their teaching methods and communication methods were having particular concerns about what they had heard or read, not confirmed by their own experience. However, fears or

worries provided by academics who have personally experienced social networking in their own life or in academia for a while and then decided not to use it any further can be considered a reflection of their actual usage. Besides, for these justifications provided by academics who do not use SNSs in educational settings, there are several concerns emerging from the interviews, which will be addressed in more detail through these chapters of findings. I think that it is important to clarify that these worries have not stopped the vast majority of faculty members from utilising SNSs in education, albeit in a cautious manner. The next section will shed light on the social networking sites utilised by academics participating in this study.

### 4.3. Social Networking Platforms Used by Faculty Members

In this section, the study answers the question concerning which social networking platforms are mainly integrated in the academic setting by participants, and how many of them use each one of these SNSs. These results, which are presented in the following table, can provide a more detailed picture of the participating faculty members' usage.

SNSs	WhatsApp	Twitter	Facebook	YouTube	LinkedIn	Instagram	Skype	Google+
Academics	28	27	25	20	5	4	2	2
Percentage	88%	84%	78%	63%	16%	13%	6%	6%

*Table 4.2: Social Networking Platforms Used*

Instead of having a discussion about each platform in a separate section, I decided to briefly present some particular advantages of these platforms used in this section as a general introduction. However, in all other sections, I will refer to some specific examples where possible.

As the results show, 88% of faculty members participating in this research use WhatsApp as a social network platform for educational purposes. Similarly, 84% of participants also utilise Twitter to support learning and teaching opportunities. Respondent (M23) indicated that he uses Twitter and WhatsApp more than the other platforms, stating that he has “found great benefits with students and colleagues”. He further suggested that these particular networks had made it “faster and easier to communicate, to learn, to teach, as well as, among faculty members, to accomplish a lot of academic services”.

Moreover, the participants consider that WhatsApp provides a safe environment in terms of respecting the privacy of users, which is an important consideration when communicating in the virtual world, particularly in the case of Saudi society. Considering its characteristics, Respondents (M3) and (F12) described WhatsApp as a perfect platform, as it is easy to use, especially when communicating with separate groups and individuals, has a diversity of options for information sending and material dissemination, and, most importantly, affords a high level of privacy protection.

These advantages facilitated by employing WhatsApp in academia may help in understanding why this platform has been identified as the main social network utilised by participating academics in this research more than any other platform. These findings are similar to those presented in the studies of Amry (2014) and Conradie et al. (2013), which both indicated that using WhatsApp in education improves the effectiveness of learning and teaching methods. Amry concluded that mobile learning technology helped students to create a learning community and to share knowledge with other members of the WhatsApp group through instant messaging.

Respondents (F9) and (M22) use Twitter to view tweets from experts when they are relevant to their own fields of interest. As a virtual communication method, those respondents confirmed that they usually keep in contact with their students, friends and colleagues at national and international universities through this SNS. Through Twitter, they send their students links, articles, video clips, texts, and share ideas related to their educational topics. These findings correspond to those of Waters (2012). In respect of the benefits of using Twitter in education, Waters declared that Twitter is beneficial for maintaining connections with other users as part of a global community that will help learners to improve their education through communication with other students and content experts.

It is also clearly apparent from the results presented in Table 4.2 that, in addition to WhatsApp and Twitter, the two other social platforms that attracted significant usage among the academic respondents were Facebook (78%) and YouTube (63%). As a teaching method, Respondent (M24) engages in educational groups on Facebook with his students. He illustrated that students usually suggest a research issue each week. He

further explained that he divides students into several groups. Each group selects a research topic, and then they hold a discussion to view different opinions, agreements, disagreements, and present criticism. Respondent (M24) described their discussions as “brilliant educational dialogues”, and argued that this has led students to become more confident, proud of their contribution, and less inhibited when engaging with the discussion process.

As an attractive platform, YouTube was positively described by several academics involved in this research. Respondents (M4) and (F15) illustrated that they create a playlist of some selected videos that can contribute to clarifying the subjects and matters being studied, and also enhancing students’ understanding. As they demonstrated, YouTube, besides being an attractive application, is highly useful in teaching and learning practices. These findings contribute to the outcome of the research led by Duffy (2007), in which he concluded that employing videos in teaching methods can be a powerful educational and motivational tool. In this regard, Respondent (F10) stated:

I used SNSs in education in different ways, one of which is selecting a set of videos that connect to the topic and adding them to the own channel for the course. It is very beneficial for students to watch different materials related to the subject being studied. Also, I realised that this generation of students love watching clips of videos that support the delivered information more than only listening to the information itself.

In addition to WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, the findings confirmed that four other social networking sites have been utilised, but to a much lesser extent, in Saudi higher educational institutions by the interview participants. As presented in Table 4.2, these are LinkedIn (16%), Instagram (13%), Skype (6%), and Google+ (6%).

LinkedIn is one of the widespread professional networking platforms that provides users with a great opportunity to be in contact with colleagues and experts from different areas of knowledge. As the findings of this investigation uncover, 16% of participants utilise this professional platform for different reasons. The majority of them asserted



that the main reason for using LinkedIn is to keep in contact with experts in their field and be informed about seminars, workshops and conferences relevant to their interest. Also, they have indicated that most academic users of this professional network are expected to seek new opportunities, be in contact with experts in their specialisation from other organisations, and maintain communication with their current colleagues. Respondent (M4) said: "I used LinkedIn for a while and found it helpful to be in touch with other colleagues and experts in our particular field of knowledge. This is the main reason for joining this social network but professional platform."

Reviewing interviewees' responses apparently shows that there is a limited use of Instagram among faculty members who participated in this investigation (Table 4.2). Respondents (F12) and (F16) reported that they use Instagram only for personal purposes. However, for her academic work, Respondent (F15) illustrated that the main objective of using Instagram in the educational setting is to show some pictures and videos during lectures.

Noticeably, Table 4.2 confirms that Skype and Google+ are the least used platforms among faculty members involved in this research, with only two respondents using these SNSs. Respondent (M18) demonstrated that he conducts virtual classes via Skype groups, and also attends various webinars via Skype with a specialist group in media in the USA. Moreover, the main objective of using Skype, as he mentioned, is to keep in contact with experts in his field or friends from other universities, locally or globally. As a lecturer in the Education Technologies Department, Respondent (F15) uses Skype for some workshops and conferences to facilitate inviting academics or experts in their field to join when they could not be present at the events.

Respondent (M5) mentioned that Google+ provides different ways for academics to keep in contact with their students. He commented that Google+ was useful, especially for teamwork, as it allows users to work in open or closed groups. Faculty members can upload several documents or materials related to their courses and make them available for whole groups of students or specific learners. Additionally, he confirmed that students can start chatting with their classmates or academics and discuss particular topics or matters of interest. Respondent (M8) employs this platform in education,

particularly for creating circles for some courses, to share class announcements or updates, and to send students important links, be it individually or as a group.

It is worth noting that all of these activities conducted through social networking can contribute to enhancing learning and communication between faculty members and their students in a collaborative manner. Furthermore, it can be realised that academics concentrate on how to connect students with one another as a community, with regard to topics being studied, to discuss, learn, and participate with other members. This is what the community of practice theory suggests as practical involvement performed during these online gatherings. Furthermore, in light of connectivism theory, Pettenati and Cigognini (2007) highlighted the importance of being connected with the society of knowledge and belonging to digital communities, through which a lot of experience and knowledge can be frequently shared.

From another aspect, the findings show that academics use different SNSs for different reasons. For example, Respondent (M4) clarified that he uses Twitter to enrich course topics. Furthermore, he uses Facebook and WhatsApp mainly to create groups and open spaces in which students can participate, and also for assignments and research purposes. Furthermore, he uses LinkedIn to keep in contact with professionals in his own field of specialisation. In contrast, while Respondent (M5) confirmed that he integrates SNSs in his academic setting, he also indicated that his usage of these sites was “limited to postgraduate students and for the purposes of scientific research”. Due to SNSs not being alike in their features and functions, participants are different in building their profiles, presenting their personalities, and employing these social networking sites in education. Therefore, the next section will focus on academics’ profiles and identities on SNSs to examine how they build their profiles and to look at the relationship between the usage of these platforms and their identities.

#### **4.4. Academics’ Profiles and Identities**

This section is divided into three parts. Firstly, it will study the relationship between personal usage and professional usage of these social platforms. Moreover, it will take all of these differences between academics into consideration to discuss the movement between these two usage modes. Secondly, it will shed light on how participating

academics differentiate between using platforms that are open to the public, such as Twitter and Facebook, and other platforms that can be described as private, such as WhatsApp. Finally, protecting academics' online identities will be discussed in light of all of these differences between academics in the employment of SNSs in academic settings.

#### **4.4.1. Profile Building: Personal Usage and Professional Usage**

In theory, it seems that there is a relationship between personal usage and professional usage of SNSs. Therefore, during the interviews conducted for this study, this theme has been discussed with participants. Analysing interviewees' responses shows that participating academics involved in this study were different in their perspectives regarding the relation between personal usage and academic usage of SNSs. Two perspectives can be extracted from the majority of participants' viewpoints.

Firstly, 66% of faculty members thought that personal usage would have a positive influence on their professional usage. Respondent (F13) confirmed that personal usage will affect academic usage positively in encouraging faculty members to integrate these tools in the academic field. As long as they have already used them on a personal level, it will inform them about how they are being employed in teaching and learning practices. Likewise, Respondent (M24) claimed that there is a strong relationship between personal and academic usage of SNSs. Their personal usage will give them enough expertise to integrate these social networks into the academic setting. They will be aware of their advantages and disadvantages and how they can be utilised in an effective manner. However, Respondent (M22) thought that personal usage would affect academic and administrative work positively and negatively in some cases. He stated:

In my opinion, I believe that personal usage of these platforms can have both a positive and negative influence on professional usage. I will explain how: personal usage would affect professional usage positively in making users skilled in how to get the most out of different features of SNSs. In contrast, I think that excessive personal usage will be at the expense of academic or administrative duties, and

that personal usage would affect professional usage, but, unfortunately, in a negative way.

Secondly, 34% of participants considered that the relation between personal usage and professional usage of SNSs predominantly depends on the users themselves. In general, those faculty members emphasised that a balance between personal and professional usage is required. Respondent (F14) argued that using SNSs is not only a skill but also a habit and lifestyle. She believed that faculty members who use SNSs effectively and creatively in their own lives would most likely employ them in their academic work in a skilful way. On the other hand, she illustrated that a number of academics use SNSs personally but do not want to employ them in academia. They have their own personal, professional or social reasons. Thus, she concluded that it is difficult to say that there is a relation between these two usages that can be applied in most cases. In addition, Respondents (M23) and (F27) agreed that personal usage may affect academic usage, but they asserted that it is really important to strike a balance between these two usages. Consequently, how academics achieve that balance and move between these two modes will be the subject of discussion in the following section.

#### **4.4.2. Users' Movements between Personal and Professional Usage Modes**

Social networking platforms are different in their features. Accordingly, users are different in how they utilise these networks and for what reasons. The two popular types of usage are public accounts and private online groups. These two aspects will be discussed later in this chapter (see Section 4.4.2); however, in this section, which is meant to discuss users' movement between personal and professional usage, it is essential to clarify that discussion of this theme will only shed light on profiles that are open to the public, such as Twitter, Facebook, and any other similar platforms.

Thirty-four per cent of participants involved in this study claimed that moving between personal and professional usage modes is an easy task. Those academics illustrated that they only have one account for these two modes; they interact with their students and colleagues as an academic community and through these accounts they communicate with their friends and family members as personal contact. Respondent (F12) clarified

that it is easy to move between personal and academic usage on one account. As she demonstrated:

I only have one account on Twitter and one on Facebook. I use these two accounts for personal contact with my friends and also use them as an academic space with my students and colleagues at the university. All of what I disseminate through these social networking sites is general information but informative for all users; some information is related to my courses to enrich my students' knowledge, while other participation can be considered a contribution to spreading knowledge among society members. However, the main way to be in contact privately with my students as a group regarding their assignments, questions and any discussion related to our courses is through WhatsApp.

Similarly, Respondent (F27) agreed upon the ease of moving between personal and professional usage. She recommended that users be aware of the content and the language of their participation on these social platforms, considering their followers or friends and the variety of their backgrounds. That can be true to some extent and applied on platforms that are open to the public, such as Twitter and Facebook. Through WhatsApp, as an example of private social networking, users deal separately with other users, be it as individuals or in groups.

In contrast, 41% of academics advised users to have two separate profiles on SNSs: one to communicate personally and the other for professional communication. Respondent (M18) debated that it is not easy to move between these two modes on one account. He clarified that words, the style of language and the context of talking with academic community members are not like those with friends on their own personal accounts on SNSs. According to him, these essential elements can be facilitators or barriers in understanding the content shared and, consequently, interacting with it. As many respondents indicated, they separate their usage on some platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, by using their real names on professional accounts and nicknames or pseudonyms on their personal profiles.

Similarly, Respondent (M1) recommended that academics have separate accounts: official pages or accounts for academic work, and private accounts for their family members and close friends. He suggested that this sort of separation between academic and private profiles allows faculty members to participate on their social environment pages freely without any link to their academic profession, such as being a professor in a specific department or university. Another feature of separating these accounts was, as he indicated, to select the appropriate style and language of expression used to suit audiences, which is most likely to be different in academic and private accounts. In the same vein, Respondent (M5) said:

It is advisable to keep your personal and professional accounts separate. From my own perspective, when you are using a personal account with your friends, your mood and psychological readiness will be in accordance. On the other hand, when you communicate with your students, colleagues or other scholars as a professor, you should be dealing with them in an academic spirit. Therefore, for that reason, it is hard to reconcile these communicational behaviours in one account in different situations.

From another viewpoint, 25% of participants argued that it depends on users' abilities and skills. As an illustrative example, Respondent (F15) believed that moving between these two usages depends on the effectiveness of users' knowledge, ability and experience when using these tools. Furthermore, Respondent (F30) stated:

I have not faced any difficulty in this respect. There are different features on Facebook, for example, that give users the ability to control their participation. It is easy to share posts on a specific course only with students, while other posts can be shared and seen by the public. Of course, many users do not know how to participate in a safe environment on these social platforms. Many Saudi users, particularly women, are concerned about their privacy on these social networking sites. Thus, having this kind of digital knowledge and practical skill is

significant to protect our identity and also to allow us to deal with our audiences, taking into account their different cultural backgrounds.

With regard to personal and academic usage, taking these perspectives provided by participants into consideration will help to understand how they interact with their students, whether through private or public social networking, which will be the subject of discussion in the following section.

#### **4.4.3. Profile Building: Personal versus Public Accounts**

There are two methods to get involved with other users on SNSs. The first way is to engage with them through public accounts that can be reached by any user of these social networks, while the second way is to communicate with some specific users via private or closed groups such as WhatsApp, Facebook and Google+. There are many factors which can play a role in determining which one of these aspects would be the best to interact with other users on these online platforms. The objective of engaging on SNSs, the nature of the participation, personal preferences, and also the cultural and social considerations for some societies can be considered essential factors in this regard, as several participants indicated.

Apparently, there are different advantages and disadvantages of each of these two aspects. Public accounts allow the user to get involved in a wider community to discuss, take part, and share content. Through these open discussions with a lot of interested users from different backgrounds, users can become motivated to accomplish what they have already initiated. Also, they would become inspired by new ideas to start a new project. Furthermore, a number of participants revealed that receiving a comment or response from an expert or specialist in a particular field of knowledge is valuable feedback for the user after participating through these accounts that are publicly viewable.

On these social networking platforms, taking part in discussions and sharing thoughts about various academic issues with experts from different departments and universities can be easily conducted, as Respondent (M19) suggested. He claimed that participants can broadly enrich discussed matters from various perspectives in the academic

community, especially when they give and take with open-minded academic figures. Furthermore, Respondent (F11) claimed that these interactive technologies are really helpful for faculty members to hold regular virtual discussions — synchronised and non-synchronised — about academic or research issues, and to be in contact with other local and global experts, regardless of where they are and what time it is. Respondent (F32) stated:

Getting involved in academic accounts that are open to the public is a great opportunity to share your ideas and gain valuable feedback from the right people. From my own experience, a number of postgraduate students were inspired by amazing ideas to develop their research projects after engaging in academic online communities such as these.

On the other hand, private online groups on these social platforms can help participating members to maintain their privacy, particularly in conservative societies which pay more attention to this type of matter. In addition, members will still have an opportunity to receive support from their friends, colleagues, and participating users. These types of online participation would be the ideal option for those who have private or particular matters to discuss. Additionally, it is a secure environment in which lecturers and students can ask, discuss and share their perspectives with their closed educational groups. Specific academic matters can be discussed through these protected online gatherings.

Working with others as a close team can be developed through these private and secure groups, as participants clearly illustrated. In relation to which types of SNSs support these private groups, WhatsApp and Facebook are the two most popular applications used by participating academics at Saudi universities for this particular purpose, as the findings of this research demonstrate. For instance, Respondent (F14) clarified that she frequently used WhatsApp and Facebook in most of her university courses. Moreover, she explained why these specific networks have been employed more than other social networking sites:

Some social networks, particularly WhatsApp and Facebook, have the advantage of supporting private groups and closed pages. Through



these closed gatherings, students can ask questions and obtain answers from their academics, and discuss with them the course topics that have been delivered in face-to-face classes in a secure setting. In the case of Saudi society, it is more convenient for both lecturers and students, especially for women who are more concerned about their identity and privacy on these social platforms.

In the same vein, Respondent (F32) stated:

Although participating in accounts that are open to the public is a beneficial opportunity to be in contact with other users who have similar interests, I think that many Saudi users of these social networks prefer to use closed groups to participate only with the group members. Of course, that is useful to some extent, especially if the nature of participation has a sort of individuality or sensitiveness.

In this regard, Respondent (F11) uncovered that the majority of Saudi women do not accept identifying their personalities online as a social and cultural consideration. For that reason, she thought that using closed groups on some social platforms, such as WhatsApp, Facebook or Google+, is more appropriate and useful, especially for female lecturers and students, as respect to Saudi society (see Sections 4.4.3 and 5.4.6 for more details).

Therefore, many participants differentiated between using Twitter or Facebook as public platforms as opposed to private applications such as WhatsApp or closed groups on Facebook or Google+. Analysing interviewees' responses in this study displays that these private online communities were preferable and being used more than other public social networking platforms. From a societal aspect, this result can be understood in the Saudi case of segregation between genders as a general rule in most aspects of life in Saudi Arabia. One of the main reasons behind that, as they illustrated, is to protect their online identity, which will be the subject of discussion in the following section.

#### **4.4.4. Protecting Academics' Online Identities**

The matter of taking control to protect their image, identity and reputation was one of the issues about which academics were really concerned on SNSs. With the recent developments in programs and applications, it has become easier to play with photos or information on SNSs. Photos can be re-produced in other contexts. Similarly, reputations can be damaged by disseminating some false information. Reputation is extremely significant, particularly in a conservative society such as Saudi Arabia. As expected, this investigation shows that the majority of participating academics (59%) were concerned about their image, identity and reputation on these social platforms, and were dealing cautiously with these online communities. As long as this percentage of participating academics worry about protecting their online image, it is worth considering how they present themselves in online settings. It is also essential to study if there is any gap between the online and offline images of academics, and what to do if that is the case. Analysing interviewees' responses displays that all of these aspects regarding the concern about protecting faculty members' image online have been discussed in depth with interviewees in this study.

As for how faculty members present themselves on social networking sites, data collected shows that there is a broad difference between academics in how to present themselves on these social platforms. In order to create a precise and accurate picture of who they really are, 44% of the participants (representing 75% of the male and only 13% of the female academics) introduce themselves online as they do in offline settings. They use their real names and photos on their profiles so that they can be recognised by academic community members. Furthermore, they provide a concise definition of their identities and academic or research professions on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. It is worth mentioning that 37% of female participants use their real names on social networking accounts, but they do not use their photos on their profiles due to the sensitivity of this matter in Saudi society.

In addition, intending to present themselves online in an effective manner, maintaining their identity and reputation, 63% of participating faculty members seek to manage and be selective in what should be displayed on these platforms to their audiences. As the hyper-personal theory suggests, computer-mediated communication (CMC) provides

the sender with a greater ability, compared to face-to-face interactions, to develop his or her self-presentation (Walther, 1996). These features contribute to enabling academics, who are concerned about their online images on SNSs, to achieve a selective and optimised presentation of themselves to others. Respondent (M19) confirmed that perspective:

SNSs provide great opportunities for us in various aspects. We, as academics, should take advantage of platforms such as these in teaching and communication. However, we have to use them properly in contact with others so as not to provide private or sensitive information. I don't believe in excessive use, as do many students, and I do not agree with using fake names for the accounts, as do many Saudi women. I am all for setting up genuine accounts with real names and participating once we have free time, and our circumstances allow us to do so. When faculty members have accounts on these platforms using their true names and are recognised by others, the majority of users will trust and follow them to benefit from what can be broadcasted through these sites. Recently, I have noticed that most people avoid dealing with unknown accounts.

Respondent (M7) has the same viewpoints in this regard. Moreover, he clarified that there are a high number of academics concerned about their online identity. He stated:

For that reason, being concerned about their identity, many academics try carefully to participate, act like others, and select their favourites that will most likely be accepted by the majority of society members so as not to be criticised. I cannot say that they work under the pressure of society or audiences, but I believe that they take all of that into consideration. Protecting their image on these platforms can be considered a priority for many of them.

That can reflect to what extent protecting reputation is significant to Saudis. In Saudi society, any influential action, whether positive or negative, conducted by individuals will be reflected not only on the individuals but also on their families. The whole family

will be proud or ashamed of what their members achieved or committed. Realising this, a particular connection was evident in some interviewees' responses. For instance, Respondent (M3) said:

As you know, in our society many people maintain their reputation because they realise that their families will be affected by their actions. The strong ties between people inside the family make them think about their family as much as themselves, particularly on the aspect of their reputation. Accordingly, respecting the reputation of their family is something significant for all members.

Furthermore, some participants indicated this particular point when they talked about privacy issues as a social concern in Saudi society more than being an individual matter (see Section 6.2.4).

On the other hand, with regard to online and offline identity, 38% of faculty members involved in this study (representing 50% of the female and 25% of the male participants) prefer to have a different online identity from their real-world identity. Analysing data collected shows that those participants use pseudonyms, particularly on Facebook and Twitter, among other social networking sites. So far, Twitter has no preference as to what kinds of names are used, be they authentic or fake names. Facebook, on the other hand, has an authentic-name policy and is committed to applying that rule. As Facebook confirms, their policy will help to protect their users from inappropriate or even dangerous interactions that, in most situations, are conducted by anonymous names. Although this policy can enhance responsibility and accountability for what users say, and assist in placing Facebook community members in a safer online environment, Facebook administration indicated that users had difficulty in confirming their authentic names for various reasons, one of which was the process of verification (Osofsky, 2015).

As a consequence, Facebook has made some improvements to its real-name policy. Now, Facebook users are not required to show legal documents to verify their names; instead, they can confirm their names by providing a piece of mail, a library card, a magazine subscription, or any document that includes their real name (Facebook.com, 2016). As the Facebook authentic-name policy illustrates, an authentic name is not

necessarily a legal name, but rather is the name used by the user in real life, which is easily known by other friends (Osofsky, 2015). To clarify, in Saudi Arabia, these types of documents can be easily issued under common names without showing legal documents. Moreover, some users, especially in the Arabic language, choose their name on Facebook in a careful manner: they sound like typical names but are, in fact, pseudonyms. Therefore, there are several ways in which users can avoid setting up their Facebook profile with legal names. I think that the most important point here is why they choose to do so.

The general reason that lies behind that, according to most of the academics involved in this study, was to protect their privacy and avoid the influence of pressure of their academic and societal status when they comment or share. As they illustrated, they want to place boundaries between their academic and personal lives. Respondent (M5) clarified that it is essential to distinguish between the lecturer's personality in academic life and his or her personality in private life. He stated:

In the real setting at university, I represent my personality in a specific community. On the other hand, on social networking sites, I should represent myself, not my university or academic discipline. Therefore, people can argue, judge and criticise me only on what I write, without having any connection to my academic identity. Therefore, they do not need to know my professional identity or at which academic faculty I work.

Respondent (M17) pointed to a similar idea to what Respondent (M5) addressed. To avoid the influence of being a professor in a particular academic department, he claimed that it is useful to distinguish between your academic identity and your own personality in the virtual world. Furthermore, he argued that when opinions are given on SNSs, debaters should express their viewpoints and criticise others' depending on the message's content, which is the best way to develop ideas. Moreover, Respondent (F11) uncovered that the majority of Saudi women do not like to identify their personalities online due to social and cultural considerations. She said:

In my opinion, I understand and respect this private case for women and agree that exposing their real names and personal photos is a real, sensitive issue for many women in Saudi society. Therefore, some social platforms, such as WhatsApp, and closed groups on Facebook or Google+ are more convenient and useful, especially for female lecturers and students. Personally, I only use my real name on my academic social networking profiles to keep in contact with my students and colleagues, but I do not share any private photos of myself or other women.

Analysing the findings demonstrates that academic women at Saudi universities prefer, to a greater degree than men, to have a different online identity on SNSs from what they actually have in offline settings. To be more specific, two thirds of women versus one third of men support this perspective, as analysing participants' responses illustrates. Furthermore, by looking at the findings presented above, the total percentage of female participants who do not use their photos on their social networking profiles is 87%. From a cultural aspect, this result can be understood in the case of Saudi gender segregation as a general rule in most aspects of life in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, in Saudi society, particularly among women, it is considered that all information that can lead to identifying a woman's personality must not be displayed online.

To clarify, women in Islam are obligated to cover their hair and all attractive parts of their body. Some religious doctrines in Islam prevent women from uncovering their faces, while it is allowed in some other doctrines. Moreover, it is largely thought that revealing a woman's face is not compatible with Arab culture's principles, especially in Saudi society, except where it is necessary, such as for medical conditions (Koolmees, 2004). As Al-Lily (2011) indicated, Saudi Arabia, among Islamic and Arab countries, is considered the country with the most Islamic culture, in which religious values and cultural principles are so interconnected that it would be difficult to distinguish between these two aspects. Therefore, that may assist in explaining why a high percentage of women in this study do not use their personal photos on their profiles and prefer to have a different identity on these social platforms.

For that reason, a number of participants differentiate between using Twitter or Facebook as public platforms as opposed to private applications such WhatsApp or closed groups on Facebook or Google+. Thus, these private online communities are preferred and used more than other public social networking platforms. For instance, Respondent (F14) clarified that she often used WhatsApp and Facebook in most of her courses. Moreover, she explained why these specific networks have been employed more than other social networking sites, saying that these particular platforms have the advantage of providing private pages and closed groups. Through these closed gatherings, the lecturer can discuss with students and respond to their questions about some of the course topics that have been presented in face-to-face lectures without any concern about their online identity (see Section 4.4.2).

From previous interviewees' perspectives, it can be seen that having a different identity in online settings, which was a favourable option to some participants, can give the academics more freedom to participate on SNSs. The hyper-personal theory suggests that anonymity in computer-mediated communication (CMC) can result in more independence for members to get them engaged without feeling any pressure from high-status members. Furthermore, group members can have a more democratic atmosphere in computer-mediated communication (CMC) than what can occur in face-to-face interactions (FTF) (Walther, 1996).

From another aspect, some academics indicated that the nature of lecturer–student relationships could have an influence on academics' online reputation, whether this relationship is conducted in a formal or informal manner. Academics' relationships with students will be discussed in more detail later (see Section 5.3); however, it is appropriate to briefly mention its correlation with academics' online identity. To keep their image protected, a number of participants claimed that a formal relationship and the right academic distance must be obtained between lecturers and their students in the academic setting, whether in face-to-face educational sessions or on social networking platforms. Others think that dealing with students in informal ways does not negatively affect lecturers' academic status, identity or reputation at all; rather, it will contribute to providing academics' personalities with more respect and appreciation. In general, a number of factors can contribute to forming the relationship between

academics and their students. However, a relation built on reciprocal respect and trust is a vital element in constructing and developing interpersonal communications between the lecturer and the student, be it inside or outside of the classroom. Yet, the lecturer's personality is essential in determining the pattern of this relationship on these social networking sites.

To illustrate, Saudi universities do not have specific policies or guidelines on how to deal with students through social media applications, as these interactions between academics and their students on SNSs are not yet formally required as an academic responsibility. University administrations advise academic departments and faculty members to take advantage of social networking to be in contact with students and to facilitate providing them with the academic and administrative services that they need. All of that is still on the basis of individual initiatives and voluntary work. On this particular aspect, Tess (2013), having conducted a number of investigations about the role of social networking platforms in higher education, indicated that the integration of these social tools in education generally is a choice made by instructors, rather than a decision made on the institutional level.

To sum up, it can be concluded that there was a high percentage of lecturers (59%) who were worried about their image and identity in online settings. As Prescott (2014) claimed, the current study confirms that having a concern about online and offline identities could impact on faculty members' attitudes towards integrating these social platforms in teaching and learning activities. Some of the participants in this investigation indicated that they select their participation and comments in a careful manner, and try to do their best in order to manage how their images can be seen by audiences. Furthermore, many lecturers preferred to have a different online identity from their real-world identity to be free in their participation without having a link to their real professional or social status. As they illustrated, they want to place boundaries between their academic and personal lives. In this regard, Grahame (2008) has noticed that users of social networking sites have "a particular discomfort in achieving a balance between one's work identity and a more personal identity within social spaces such as Facebook. Participants need to understand how to protect their identities within these



spaces and generally need a source of advice and guidance on managing personal data within Web spaces” (p. 128).

Furthermore, as the participating academics indicate, there are several criteria that can play a major role for a lecturer in making a decision on whether or not to have the same identity of their real personality on these social networks. As reported, the pattern of the lecturer–student relationship, the nature of their participation, the level of disclosure on their profiles, and to what extent they are concerned about their online image and reputation are major factors in making that choice. However, which types of practices can be considered commonly acceptable by the educational community and society as a whole is substantial in this regard.

#### **4.5. Building Professional Networking with Other Academics**

SNSs have assisted the lecturers that I interviewed in building wider professional networks and disseminating research. Fifty-three per cent of respondents considered SNSs to be a means of communicating with specialists and experts in the field, which help users to build professional networking. Those respondents believe that using SNSs is a useful opportunity to maintain contact and develop academic relationships with their fellow professionals. Through these platforms, faculty members can join specialist online communities and be informed about the latest publications and conferences in their field. Respondent (M18) illustrated:

Being an active member of a professional community on SNSs will assist you, as a lecturer, in taking a step forward in updating your professional knowledge. Educational and communicational activities will be continuous and dynamic with your colleagues and experts in your field of knowledge.

Similarly, Respondent (M22) reported that one of the main ways in which he has benefitted from using SNSs in the academic field was to keep in contact with specialists and experts from other national and international universities, with whom several sessions of discussions have been conducted. These results confirm the findings of the study conducted by Jabr (2011), in which he reported that social networking sites seem very supportive in building academic groups to obtain better academic teaching,

learning and communication. On these social networking platforms, holding discussions and sharing ideas about academic issues with experts from different departments and universities can be easily done, as Respondent (M19) suggested. He claimed that debaters can broadly enrich discussed matters from various perspectives in the academic community, especially when they give and take with open-minded academic figures.

Many social platforms can achieve this goal, that of building networks with other academics and maintaining good, regular contact with them, to be informed of their shared matters. However, LinkedIn is one of the common professional networking platforms and gives the user a great opportunity to be in contact with colleagues and experts, particularly specialisations of knowledge. The findings of this investigation uncovered that 16% of participants utilise this professional platform for different reasons. The majority of them asserted that the main reason for using LinkedIn is to keep in contact with experts in their field and be informed about relative seminars, workshops and conferences. However, participants having used this platform have illustrated that LinkedIn is not widely used in Saudi Arabia, unlike Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp or YouTube. Moreover, they have indicated that most Saudi users of this professional network are expected to be professionals and specialists from various governmental and private sector institutions who seek new opportunities, being in contact with experts in their specialisation from other organisations, and staying in communication with their current colleagues. Respondent (M4) said:

I used LinkedIn for a while and found it helpful to be in touch with other colleagues and experts in our particular field of knowledge. This is the main reason for joining this social network but professional platform. Also, it is important to be informed about seminars or conferences held about subjects related to my specialisation or interests. But I think LinkedIn is not generally used in Saudi Arabia, unlike Twitter, WhatsApp or YouTube.

Similarly, Respondent (F27) illustrated that the key objective of the majority of users of LinkedIn is to look for new opportunities or careers and to be in contact with others who have the same interest, whether employers or employees. She stated:

In Saudi Arabia, [LinkedIn] is not as commonly used as other social networking sites such as Twitter or Facebook. I think that most users of this platform are faculty members at universities, maybe engineers, and perhaps doctors or similar professions. But, in my own opinion, LinkedIn gives users an open platform on which to introduce themselves, their professional experiences, and skills in front of institutions.

With regard to demographic classifications, the results of this study show that male academics use LinkedIn more than female academics. Only one woman out of the five participating faculty members used LinkedIn to communicate with professionals and experts in their particular field of interest. Therefore, although the number of academics using LinkedIn is not large (five participants, which represents 16% of the interviewees), it can be seen that there is an indication of the gender factor impacting on employing SNSs in terms of communicating with experts; using LinkedIn is an example. This result may be explained by knowing that women use Instagram more than men. Thus, it is a question of preferred application.

Furthermore, the impact of the academic degree factor can be seen here when using SNSs to communicate with professionals and experts in the field. Analysing findings which have emerged from interviews displays that LinkedIn is used by Professors and Associate Professors (4) more than Assistant Professors (1), but is not used at all by Lecturers. In fact, I do not have any specific explanation for this demographic difference other than Professors and Associate Professors mostly having a tendency to attend conferences, seminars and intellectual sessions more than Assistant Professors and Lecturers, at least from my own experience at Saudi universities. Therefore, they may be interested in seeking to look at other experts' and professionals' accounts on LinkedIn in their field of knowledge to take advantage of what can be discussed on these professional pages.

In addition to LinkedIn, WhatsApp is another effective application that has facilitated constructing groups or networks of people interested in being in constant interaction with specialists in a particular discipline. In a similar way to how several applications operate, the findings of this study indicated that WhatsApp enables users to build their

groups and allows them to deal with different groups and individuals at the same time. Respondent (F32) said:

In our department, we have a group on WhatsApp only for academic staff to have discussions about any relevant topics and to keep in contact with one another as a community. In fact, there is great interaction among this academic gathering of lecturers. From another aspect, it saves time when we want to circulate any matter among the whole group, instead of contacting one another individually.

Joining specialist groups or professional networks for learning or enhancing their knowledge further about particular subjects through SNSs can be considered an essential advantage of using these social platforms in Saudi universities, as participants indicated. Respondent (F9) reported that through these social platforms, the user can be a participant in various events organised by different academic or business institutions as a member of these organisations. Also, they can receive immediate feedback from them, no matter where they are and where the event is being held. In this regard, Respondents (M3) and (F27) pointed out that these social applications are effective and simultaneously convenient in learning and interacting, which can contribute to building relationships with other users from different locations around the world.

Several studies have demonstrated that SNSs can be a highly effective tool to connect with people throughout the world. A critical feature of social networking, as they mentioned, is the capability to establish and encourage immediate and constant engagement and interaction among people, academic institutions, and business organisations located in different and distant parts of the world. They have confirmed that being globally connected is highly beneficial, especially in practical specialisations such as linguistics, library and information sciences, and media and communications (Akbari et al., 2012; Okoro, 2012; Tella et al., 2013).

In this regard, Downes (2012) and Ally (2008) indicated that the world, since these remarkable changes took place as a result of the information and communication technology revolution, has become more networked and maintaining connections with

the wider society of knowledge is essential. To illustrate, this feature provided by integrating social networking in most aspects of our daily lives is one of the main principles of the connectivism theory. According to this theory, learning is a network of connecting information sources, whereas technology is a fundamental facilitator in acquiring knowledge.

From another aspect, SNSs have facilitated working together in different academic matters, and sharing their best experiences among academic community members. Respondent (F11) claimed that these interactive technologies are really helpful for faculty members to hold regular virtual discussions — synchronised and non-synchronised — about academic or research issues, and to be in contact with other local and global experts, regardless of where they are and what time it is. Moreover, they extend the value of their online meetings to who is not attending by recording what has been discussed in these gatherings or at least sharing the main points in their closed groups on WhatsApp or Facebook. When Respondent (M4) was asked about the way in which academics in their network usually participate with other members, he said:

There are several ways to be in contact with other members. We create different groups on specific research topics on WhatsApp or Facebook. Another useful method is making hashtags on Twitter to make it easier for other members to follow, while we have particular pages on Twitter. We use closed groups on WhatsApp and Facebook when the matter we are discussing has a kind of particularity, but we have found that Twitter is more beneficial to be in contact with the wider community and to interact with specialists in a particular field from all over the world. Therefore, different ways can achieve the goal of the network established.

To summarise, analysing participants' responses illustrated that building a professional network on SNSs can contribute to achieving two major objectives. Firstly, it will help group members to work as an online learning community. The members of this online learning community are homogeneous in terms of their interests, and seek to obtain shared goals. They discuss issues that interest them to gain a greater understanding, discover how to develop these matters, and solve difficulties or barriers that may be

faced in their plans for the future. On the educational level, constructing professional networking will assist group members in becoming familiar with one another and, most importantly, having an opportunity to practise their learning and teaching activities as a community. Therefore, it can be seen that these actions of learning and communicating through these online groups on SNSs represent an apparent pattern related to the community of practice (CoP) theory (Wenger, 1998). Wenger (1998) defined a CoP simply as groups of people who have a common interest in a particular subject of knowledge or experience and interact regularly to learn how to do it better by sharing ideas, strategies and solutions. He identified three required components of CoP theory: a domain of knowledge, community, and practice. Thus, this theory can be viewed as a process of social learning, either planned or accidental, which mostly takes place through social participation.

Secondly, all of the members of these professional gatherings on SNSs will benefit from group-oriented communication, instead of individual communication, which was considered by participants to be an essential feature of integrating SNSs into education. Respondent (F27) illustrated that one of the main reasons for using SNSs personally and academically is to keep in contact with colleagues and professional societies, and to know more about research, seminars and conferences. Moreover, she believed that SNSs have expanded opportunities for group-oriented communication. Similarly, Respondent (F30) stated that “SNSs give an opportunity for mass communication, instead of individual communication, and there is the possibility of having individual communication when it is needed”.

#### **4.6. Digital Skills**

With the increasing integration of SNSs in higher education, faculty members are facing a challenge concerning how to transfer their traditional teaching methods in such a way that they can be applied to these digital platforms but in a more developed pattern. Thus, concentrating on their academic expertise in how to deliver educational material is not adequate. In fact, they need to acquire essential digital skills as well as employing their instructive proficiency. Palloff and Pratt (1999) affirmed that the lecturer must be

sufficiently trained not only to utilise the technology in education, but also to shift and develop the way in which they can organise and deliver material effectively.

As a consequence, having these skills that enable faculty members to integrate SNSs into educational settings successfully will lead to obtaining the required level of quality in online teaching and learning activities. For that reason, faculty members must prepare themselves to have skills that support them in achieving the quality of what they deliver in online settings. On this aspect, Yang and Cornelious (2005) emphasised that instructors need to realise students' learning preferences, incorporate technological tools, employ appropriate educational techniques, and create the most suitable method for particular groups or individuals.

Reviewing respondents' answers reveals that 34% of participants in this study highlighted the importance of training faculty members and providing them with the required skills to use SNSs effectively in education. They explained that the lack of training can be a key reason for making some lecturers reluctant towards and unenthusiastic about employing SNSs in the academic setting. Respondents (M7) and (M24) asserted that employing SNSs in the educational environment has complicated the tasks of lecturers. They explained that transforming traditional instruction to be compatible with these digital platforms does need a skilful lecturer. Therefore, they concluded that administrative support is crucial to motivate and qualify faculty members to progress in these developmental steps, particularly older academics. In a similar view, Respondent (F12) stated:

If we look forward to having excellent teaching and improving learning strategies, machines cannot act as a substitute for teachers to achieve this function. Furthermore, SNS settings are beneficial for learners but cannot be used as replacements of face-to-face classes. Therefore, training lecturers is very important in achieving that goal.

She continued: "The nature of teaching after many teachers have adopted SNSs in educational settings will change." Of course, it could be a difficult adjustment for faculty members who are used to teaching traditional classes with regular educational methods. Yet, it is an opportunity for them to integrate these attractive tools into their

methods of teaching as a way of improving and developing. According to Respondent (F25), many lecturers have positive experience in how to utilise these digital platforms properly. However, she illustrated that some academics, especially those older than 50 years, will clearly need some sort of training to be aware of the advantages and disadvantages of SNSs and to clarify their expected roles in facilitating learning and teaching processes. She went on to explain that knowing the best methods to protect their online privacy and potential risks in this regard is an initial, but significant, step to encourage lecturers to make the most of these networks in education, as some of them are concerned socially and educationally about these issues, particularly in our society.

It can be perceived that previous perspectives are in line with the findings of Al-Khalifa and Garcia's (2013) study regarding the importance of providing faculty members with the knowledge they need in order to be aware of the advantages and challenges of using social networking in teaching practices. As they suggested, conducting seminars and workshops would be helpful to direct academics on the proper usage and behaviour when using this kind of technology, particularly those educators who may be unenthusiastic or uncertain about the practicality of its integration in educational environments.

Therefore, it can be concluded that some lecturers need administrative assistance to enhance their skills and expertise. Accordingly, these training sessions can contribute to achieving two essential objectives. The first is to make lecturers informed about the appropriate strategies and techniques in order to integrate these tools into education effectively, while the second is to make them aware of their drawbacks and how to avoid them, especially in conservative societies. Providing both faculty members and students with good knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of utilising social networking platforms in higher education is essential on both social and educational levels. Thus, it is assumed that university administration must undertake the role of updating their lecturers' knowledge and providing them with the required skills to deal with these digital spaces in a more effective manner.



#### **4.7. Concerns about Time, Energy and Workload**

Analysing interviewees' responses illustrates that some participating academics are concerned about their time and effort spent on SNSs. They think that engaging on SNSs requires being an active member of these online communities, which will take plenty of time and energy. Furthermore, a number of them were concerned about employing SNSs as additional workload to their regular academic responsibilities.

With regard to time and disruption, 41% of academics who participated in this research confirmed that one of the essential factors preventing some faculty members from participating in and utilising SNSs in education, or diminishing their involvement, is time. Considering their educational, social, administrative and own responsibilities, they claimed that academics do not have enough time to participate. Respondent (F26) said: "I am aware of their benefits and importance but do not have enough time to use them due to my academic, administrative and research responsibilities." In a similar manner, Respondent (F32) acknowledged that her usage of SNSs is limited due to academic lectures required, PhD study, her family, and other duties. In this regard, Respondents (M5) and (M19) claimed that SNSs consume much of the time that faculty members have to check, read and respond. As Okoro's (2012) study and the research led by Hung and Yuen (2010) indicated, the participating academics in this study asserted that monitoring collaborative student activities can be time-consuming.

From another aspect, 34% of interviewees demonstrated that they teach a large number of students in face-to-face lectures, which would consume a great deal of time when looking at their participation on SNSs and responding to their questions or comments on these platforms. Respondent (F27) suggested that large numbers of students and academic, administrative and research responsibilities for some faculty members have contributed to reducing their willingness to get involved actively in online educational interactions. Likewise, Respondent (F11) believed that dealing with large numbers of students on these networks is not an easy task, which can cause disruption for lecturers and consume their time. Therefore, she illustrated:

Some courses at my university have a large number of students (up to 50–70 students). I tried to utilise SNSs with them as creating a group

for each course. However, I found it really difficult to follow their comments or questions. Now, I use SNSs in the courses that have a reasonable number of students.

Furthermore, Respondents (M19) and (F32) clarified that it is difficult for faculty members to manage and follow up on what is disseminated or sent to their accounts, particularly when they have hundreds of friends, colleagues and students. On the other hand, a number of lecturers explained that the most important thing when dealing with these platforms effectively is to set clear rules and have good time management skills. When Respondent (F25) was asked about this point, she said:

Yes, I know that dealing with huge numbers of students, friends and colleagues on SNSs can be time-consuming. However, all social networking users need to do is get time management skills. Personally, I make it clear to my students that the questions related to the courses must be sent to me through WhatsApp (either one-to-one or in the group). Also, I was clear that their participation on Twitter must include specific hashtags agreed upon in advance. All of these rules are set to make it easier for me and for students to get involved and see others' involvement. Thus, I have not found it difficult to manage my accounts and involvement on SNSs and reply to the most important messages, tweets or posts.

From another aspect, 28% of lecturers are concerned about the potential to create additional workload to their academic responsibilities. Most of them advised that using SNSs in educational activities should be part of their academic work, not an extra workload. Respondent (M21) believed that there are a number of faculty members unwilling to add an additional burden to their academic, administrative and research duties. He claimed that universities must establish well-developed strategies to obtain a balance between integrating SNSs in education and considering lecturers' various academic and administrative functions. By the same token, Respondent (F29) stated:

I know some academics in our department who are not keen to employ these social networks in their courses as extra academic work, even

though they are convinced about their benefits. Universities should find a way to make these hours spent on SNSs for educational purposes as part of lecturers' work.

Respondent (F14) demonstrated that there is an overall sense among universities and faculty members that utilising SNSs in academic settings will improve the learning environment and also increase students' engagement. However, she has a fear of not distinguishing between those lecturers who work sincerely to develop their educational methods by utilising such social networks in education and those who do not. She anticipated: "If universities ask lecturers to employ SNSs in education as an additional effort, not as an alternative of some academic work, that would contribute to increasing their academic workload, which would most likely result in lecturers' dissatisfaction." Therefore, a number of participating academics are not willing to utilise SNSs in education as an extra function in what they do, not as part of their current academic duties. In this regard, university administration must consider how to gradually integrate SNSs into academia and motivate lecturers to do so while maintaining their privacy concerns and solving the matter of the extra academic workload.

For the purpose of clarification, faculty members at Saudi universities and other educational institutions are not being forced to use social networking by their institutions, but rather encouraged to do so. They are completely free to employ SNSs in teaching and communicating with students, colleagues and institutions or not to do so. However, a number of participating academics uncovered that there is a kind of social pressure to use these platforms, particularly when they find that SNSs are widely used at their university. Respondent (F31) stated:

I expect most faculty members to integrate SNSs into academia and the vast majority of students, if not all, to be social networking users. Therefore, lecturers and students who do not use SNSs may feel a sort of social pressure to keep pace with their colleagues and institutions in this regard. Also, that theory may be applied to other Saudi users of SNSs in general.

To conclude, it can be recognised that previous concerns have an impact on academics' perspectives concerning integrating SNSs in their personal and academic lives. Higher educational institutions could play a major role in how to provide effective solutions to these matters related to the high number of students in classes, time spent on SNSs while answering questions relevant to their subjects, and considering this energy consumed to be part of their academic work.

#### **4.8. The Main Outcomes of the Chapter**

The following three subjects are the main aspects discussed in this chapter:

##### **Uses:**

The most of participating faculty members (91%) use social networking sites for educational purposes. The main social platforms that attracted significant usage among academics: were WhatsApp (88%), Twitter (84%), Facebook (78%), and YouTube (63%). The outcomes indicated that there are many factors which can play a role in determining which one of these online platforms would be the best to utilise and also in which way they interact, whether privately or publicly, with other users on these social networks. The objective of engaging on SNSs, the nature of the participation, personal preferences, and also the cultural and social considerations for some societies can be considered essential factors in this regard, as several participants indicated.

##### **Academics' Attitudes:**

The vast majority of academics participated in this research have a positive attitude towards employing SNSs into their interactions with their colleagues and students. They see SNSs as supportive and useful tools that can be integrated into education to improve learning and teaching practices, as well as to facilitate communication between lecturers and students.

## **Concerns:**

Even though academics have a positive attitude towards integrating SNSs into their academic settings, they indicated that they were concerned about different aspects, including:

1. Protecting academics' online identities
2. Time and effort spent on these social platforms
3. Employing social networking as an additional workload to their regular academic responsibilities.

Ultimately, these are the main outcomes presented in this chapter. However, it is worth mentioning that all of these aspects will be combined with other findings summarised in the following two chapters to construct the conceptual framework (see Section 6.5.).

## **4.9. Summary of the Chapter**

This discussion has shown that the participating faculty members have a positive attitude towards using social networking sites for educational purposes. The vast majority of participants (91%) integrate SNSs in academic settings. Although a number of social networking sites were used, as Table 4.2 shows, the social platforms that attracted significant usage among academic respondents were WhatsApp (88%), Twitter (84%), Facebook (78%), and YouTube (63%). Analysing interviewees' responses in this study displayed that private online communities such as WhatsApp and closed groups on Facebook were preferable and used more than other public social networking platforms.

In light of the Community of Practice Theory, Hyper-personal Communication Theory, and Connectivism Theory, the chapter has provided an in-depth discussion about academics' profiles and identities on SNSs to examine how they build their profiles and to look at the relationship between the usage of these platforms and their identities. The results presented in this chapter illustrated that there was a high percentage of lecturers (59%) who were worried about their image and identity in online settings. Therefore, intending to present themselves online in an effective manner and maintain

their identity and reputation, the majority of them sought to manage and be selective in what should be displayed on these platforms to their audiences.

Academic respondents confirmed that using these tools could be applied in educational settings to facilitate and achieve various opportunities for learning, teaching and communication. Building professional networking with other academics and getting involved in effective activities within these specialist groups were positively valued by participating faculty members and considered an online community of practice. However, some of the faculty members interviewed also indicated that there were different areas of concern related to the employment of these social networking sites in the education field, which included time and effort spent on SNSs, and also employing them as an additional workload to their regular academic responsibilities. The following chapter will be concerned with the academic relationship between faculty members and their students and how these social platforms are practically integrated into teaching practices.

## **Chapter 5 : Using Social Networking with Students**

### **5.1. Introduction**

The previous chapter has illustrated that a high percentage of faculty members (91%) participating in this research have integrated social networking sites into the academic setting for educational purposes. One of the essential aims of this investigation is to explore the most important motivations that have inspired faculty members at Saudi universities to utilise these platforms in academia, and also to investigate the major concerns that academics have in this regard. In a detailed discussion, this chapter contributes to answering these questions by identifying the major motivations and the greatest concerns related to teaching practices that have been conducted by academics in the Saudi universities. It also sheds light on the nature of lecturer–student relationships on SNSs, and the factors that can contribute to shaping the academic relationship between faculty members and their students, particularly in a conservative culture such as Saudi society. The analysis of and discussion about the data that emerged from interviews will be presented in light of the Community of Practice Theory, Constructivism and Connectivism, as well as relevant literature, in order to underpin the current research and provide a better understanding of its findings.

### **5.2. Reasons Why Students Are Already on Social Networking Sites**

One of the questions that has been raised throughout the conduct of this investigation concerns what has inspired students to use social networks in different aspects of their lives and, in particular, in their learning practices. Analysing participants' answers shows that the following advantages were considered the major motivating reasons:

- Accessibility and availability on smartphones
- Flexibility in learning and communication
- Interactive and attractive applications

All of these reasons will be discussed in more detail in the following sections, supported by participating academics' perspectives and examples.

### **5.2.1. Accessibility and Availability on Smartphones**

The findings of this research demonstrated that accessibility was one of the advantages that contributed to making SNSs highly popular and widely used. Participating academics indicated that these platforms are easy to join, and make it easy to participate, share content, and be notified when others interact with your material or send new content. Furthermore, the feature of being available on mobile devices has made them more accessible and more convenient. Conradie et al. (2013) reported that mobile devices have a positive impact on learner motivation, engagement and enjoyment. Moreover, they suggested that mobile devices could help in improving the consistency of learning material, and the convenience and flexibility of learning. In this investigation, participants confirmed that these features have motivated students and lecturers alike to integrate SNSs into their learning and teaching methods in order to obtain most of the benefits provided by such platforms.

Respondent (F10) stated: “The fact that these platforms are available on mobile devices is one of the main factors that have contributed to making them commonly used.” In the same vein, Respondent (F27) added that mobile devices have facilitated learning and communicating with others. She continued: “SNSs now are just apps on our smartphones. Thus, they give users a simple way of accessibility and a convenient opportunity to learn from and chat with other learners or lecturers at a convenient time.”

### **5.2.2. Flexibility in Learning and Communication**

According to participating academics, the feature of flexibility in learning and interaction with others was one of the major motivations encouraging students to use SNSs in different aspects of their lives. Respondents (F8) and (M17) appreciate that SNSs are supportive in overcoming the temporal and spatial limitations to interact with other users. Respondent (F8) said: “SNSs give users the flexibility to communicate with others at any time and from anywhere.” Similarly, Respondent (M17) stated:

It is undeniable that social platforms are widespread and commonly used in Saudi society, particularly among young people. These



networks can contribute to overcoming classroom or university limitations; they can be accessible outside of the place and time of the formal education process. In fact, no temporal or spatial constraints can limit their usage.

As a practical example of learning and communicating opportunities facilitated by SNSs, Respondent (M7) illustrated that many students have joined specialist groups to learn English as a second language, including learners from different countries, through these social networks. Thus, they can practise their particular knowledge of interest in a social, friendly and informal environment, which can help them to improve their learning in that way, thus enhancing their language skills. According to Wenger (1998), learning is effectively developed when it is situated in a social pattern, where learners become engaged in learning groups and communities. Social networking sites can support this type of learning, as they enable learners to take part in communities such as these, be in contact with other users, and develop their content according to the feedback gained from their groups' members (Mason and Rennie, 2008). Therefore, it can be seen that getting involved in a discussion or exchanging experiences with other users from different cultures and countries who have the same interest was valued by interviewees in this study as an advantage provided by joining these platforms to construct a professional network of relationships.

### **5.2.3. Interactive and Attractive Applications**

In addition to what has been said of the advantages of SNSs, participating academics valued SNS characteristics such as being interactive and attractive tools. Reviewing data collected reveals that 59% of the participants involved in this research recognise that SNSs have the ability to elicit a great deal of attention, especially from young users. Respondent (F10) stated: "It cannot be denied that social networking sites are attractive and enjoyable, particularly for young users." Respondent (M6) said:

Students spend much time on SNSs while interacting with their friends and peers. The content on these platforms is appealing. Therefore, I think that one of the main reasons that has inspired students to exist

on these networks is that they are wonderful in interaction and have different types of attractive materials.

A number of faculty members who engaged in this research agreed upon the ability of social networking applications to attract users and, accordingly, encourage academics and their universities to implement most of these characteristics in academia. Respondent (M2) confirmed that SNSs have received great attention from a large percentage of students. For that reason, he stated: “Higher educational institutions should maximise their efforts, integrate them in education, and think how to use them in an effective manner.” Respondent (M20) stated that “SNSs are attractive spaces and widely used by youths in particular. Thus, it is a good idea to invest our endeavours in this regard to make the most of these features in teaching and learning activities.”

To conclude, it can be seen that there is a general agreement among academics that these social networks have the ability to elicit a great deal of attention, as students spend much time interacting with friends and colleagues on these platforms. As they illustrated, these social platforms are interactive, attractive and flexible applications in communication, as well as being available on smartphones. A number of participants indicated that the fact that there are students on SNSs is a motivation for academics to employ them in education and invest their features in teaching and learning practices. Before investigating how SNSs are practically integrated into teaching activities at Saudi universities, it is important to explore how academics interact with students on these networks, whether as friends or students, and what kinds of relationships they have, particularly in gender-segregated settings.

### **5.3. Academics’ Relationships with Students**

It cannot be denied that many of the faculty members and their students are currently engaged together on social networking sites, whether for educational or non-educational purposes. In this regard, one can ask whether the relationship between academics and students on these social platforms can become more informal or maintain the formality as present in the classroom. However, before having a discussion on the formality and informality of lecturer–student relationships on SNSs, one of the

main points discussed on this subject concerns 'Friending' students on their personal accounts on SNSs.

The participating faculty members were differentiating between dealing with students online in a friendly manner for educational purposes and making a friendship between lecturers and students on their personal accounts. Of course, 'Friending' students on their personal accounts can be a controversial issue in the academic field in general. However, in Saudi society it is unacceptable for many society members to make a friendship between academics and their students from the opposite gender due to the rule of gender segregation and its effects on individuals and society as a whole. Respondents (F9) and (M22) illustrated that creating an educational group or a closed page for students on SNSs is different from making a friendship with them on their own accounts on SNSs. Moreover, they claimed that there is a major discussion in Saudi society about the nature of relationships between men and women on these platforms for educational purposes. However, they stressed respecting the particularity of Saudi culture on the segregation between genders in offline educational settings and its continued implications for online learning gatherings. As they mentioned, it is usually inappropriate for lecturers to make a friendship with students of the opposite gender on social networking sites. According to them, that can be clearly seen on academics' profiles on Facebook in particular. It does not apply to other social networking sites such as Twitter or WhatsApp. In this regard, Respondent (M22) clarified this matter:

From what I have seen, it does not matter who follows you on Twitter because it is not considered a friendship, like on Facebook. Also, users on WhatsApp interact with one another through closed groups, which are not open to the public. Therefore, I can say that following other lecturers or students of the opposite gender on Twitter is not seen in Saudi society as making a friendship with them on Facebook.

In general, the form of relationship between faculty members and their students in online settings is one of the issues raised and discussed with the participating academics in this research. Analysing interviews to explore the nature of lecturer–student relationships on these social platforms has revealed that three different viewpoints can be extracted from interviewees' responses.

A number of participating academics (28%) believe that the relationship between lecturers and students should be formal, even if it takes place in an online setting. To keep their image protected, they claimed that the right academic or professional distance must be obtained between the two parties in the educational process, whether in an academic setting, in a café or on social networking platforms. Respondent (M2) thinks that changing the formal lecturer–student relationship to a personal relationship on SNSs is considered a communicational concern by many academics at her university. She further believes that the relationships between lecturers and their students must have a sort of formality in both offline and online settings. Moreover, Respondent (F9) stated:

It is advisable that lecturers have reasonable space between them and their students in academic classrooms or at any other informal gathering, even if that takes place at a café, for instance, in order to allow students to learn from their lecturers while obtaining a level of protecting their image and respecting their academic status.

As discussed earlier in this section and previously in Section 4.4.2, it can be seen that those faculty members think that the formality of relationships between them and their students can contribute to protecting their image on these social networking platforms. They considered that their reputation is a priority which should be maintained in these open spaces. Most importantly, all of those academics who support the formality of relationships on SNSs are older than 40 years and two thirds of them are older than 50 years. Therefore, it can be said that the demographic factor of age has clearly impacted on this result. The other demographic factors — gender, academic degree, and years of experience — do not have any essential impact on supporting the formality of relationships between faculty members and their students on SNSs.

On the other hand, a second opinion on this matter can be totally different from what has been mentioned earlier. There are some interviewees (25%) who argued that the relationship between lecturers and students on social platforms should be more informal than in the real academic environment. They believe that these platforms are basically designed for social interactions. They, therefore, debated that when lecturers want to be in contact with students on these sites, they should be aware of the common

university climate of the lecturer–student relationship and deal with users as friends, not as students. Respondent (M7) claimed: “There is no contradiction between being a professor to your students in the academic lecture halls in the real university setting and being a friend to them in these online gatherings.” He asserted that dealing with students in informal ways does not negatively affect lecturers’ academic status, identity or reputation at all; rather, it will contribute to providing academics’ personalities with more respect and appreciation. As he indicated, there are many active academic figures who treat students as friends on these social platforms. As an advantage of this informality in interactions, they could greatly employ various extracurricular activities that had taken place on these platforms within their actual curriculum areas. Concerning the features of the unofficial style of how academics’ relations on SNSs should be, Respondent (F28) has similar thoughts to what Respondent (M7) provided earlier. She added:

Students appreciate and respect faculty members who listen to them, support their participation, and are closer to them. In other words, I suggest that academics should be living their students’ reality in order to be able to understand their goals and ambitions, know their expectations, and develop their knowledge and experience.

As a consequence, those who supported this viewpoint were taking into consideration how to utilise SNSs as a way of delivering academic knowledge in a pattern of informal chats on these platforms. In fact, these perceptions provided by interviewees can contribute to developing more informal and respectful relationships between lecturers and students on SNSs.

The third group of participating faculty members (47%) consider the idea of how to combine and maintain a balance between being assistive and friendly with students and being serious as a lecturer with his or her students. Respondent (F13) demonstrated:

From my own perspective, the most significant criterion that we should take into consideration is how to understand our students and, accordingly, how to treat them. I think that it depends on several factors, one of which is students’ level in university studies. For

example, I personally differentiate between graduate and postgraduate students in terms of how I deal with them in actual academic classrooms and in our online gatherings on social platforms.

Furthermore, she expected most students to value the seriousness of their academics in the teaching process, beside the informal methods in interaction and communication. This approach, as she explained, can help both lecturers to protect their reputation and students to gain knowledge and experience in a friendly environment.

According to the discussion with participating interviewees, several factors can play a key role in determining the pattern of lecturer–student relationships in face-to-face educational meetings and also in online settings. Respondent (M22) stated:

Once you, as a lecturer, gain your students' respect and appreciation, most likely you will succeed in constructing respectful relations with them, regardless of whether you are formal or informal when interacting with them. Therefore, try to understand their demands and expectations from a particular course at the initial meetings in the semester and be highly clear about the nature of your teaching methods with them in both face-to-face classes and online activities. Set up the general determinants and the type of relationship with them in interaction and communication via these tools. In the end, try to reconcile between all that and your own definition of protecting identity or reputation as a lecturer.

Moreover, Respondent (F11) said:

It is essential for academics to consider what can be socially and educationally acceptable and what cannot in order to protect their image and reputation, be it offline or online. According to that, they will be able to determine the appropriate methods for dealing with them, whether formal, informal or somewhere in between these two ways.

In a broad sense, some participants indicated that relations between academics and students can be considered representative examples of what can be observed on these

platforms among all society members. One of the terms that should be considered is netiquette (net etiquette), which is related to how people should deal with others on the Internet or SNSs. It involves the protocol or rules of conduct that users should follow when he or she communicates with other users on these social platforms, such as respecting others' privacy and avoiding doing anything that can be annoying to other users (Ohler, 2010). Respondent (M3) stated:

From what I have seen, the majority of students respect their lecturers in regular face-to-face classes and also in online activities on SNSs. But because communicating with students through these social networking sites has not been seen yet as regular teaching, some students may consider that to be voluntary or friendly participation. Therefore, the lecturer, who is the leader of these online learning communities, should set clear rules to be followed by all of the participating members engaged in these online gatherings.

In the same regard, Respondent (F12) illustrated that there are no guidelines or policies that academics and students need to follow regarding how they should deal with one another on SNSs, as in regular university classes. Universities have not yet issued policies such as these. Furthermore, she indicated that “not all students are the same; they live in different places and have different backgrounds”. Therefore, as Shimanoff (1988) claimed, respondents' earlier perspectives support the perception of providing participants with the rules and instructions that should be followed, and which can overcome different cultural backgrounds for participants and structure the communication methods between them.

It can be concluded that most of the preceding perspectives pointed out that formality and informality in the lecturer–student relationship can be conducted depending on several factors, such as the lecturer's personality, students' level at the educational stages, and also to what extent these relations can be considered formal or informal, and acceptable or not acceptable, in a specific culture. Certainly, all of these elements can contribute to shaping the relationship between lecturers and their students, particularly in a conservative culture such as Saudi society.

#### **5.4. Integration of Social Networking Platforms in Teaching**

At Saudi higher education institutions, there are three formal ways of teaching: face-to-face lecturing, one-way video conferencing for students of the opposite gender, and through Blackboard for distance-learning students. However, using SNSs in an academic setting has played a major role in improving teaching methods, providing extra educational activities, and enhancing communication between lecturers and students after formal sessions to ask questions and get involved in discussions related to their subjects.

As one of its objectives, this investigation attempts to explore the actual usage of social networking platforms for academic purposes by faculty members at Saudi higher educational institutions. It has been previously indicated that 91% of the participating academics employ SNSs for educational purposes. It means that the vast majority of teaching staff at King Abdul-Aziz University and King Saud University in Saudi Arabia integrate these social platforms in teaching, learning and communicating with academic community members. To examine how SNSs have been utilised in teaching practices at the Saudi universities, analysing interviews shows that the following aspects are essential practices:

- In-class teaching: teaching where SNSs are a core component (e.g. YouTube)
- Extra materials or discussion spaces to supplement in-class teaching
- Distance-learning students
- Teaching students studying at another campus
- Providing extracurricular activities

To illustrate, data collected revealed that academics are different in how they utilise these networks and for what reason(s). Some academics use SNSs in face-to-face educational sessions as a key element in teaching, while others use them only to provide extra materials, whether related to their curriculum or as an extracurricular activity, in order to enhance students' learning opportunities. Furthermore, social platforms are different in their features and functions. YouTube can be utilised in offline-teaching practices, while WhatsApp, for instance, can be utilised with distance-learning students



to discuss their topics as a group. The following sections will discuss the four essential practices mentioned above and provide some illustrative examples of interviews.

#### **5.4.1. In-class Teaching**

The participating academics in this research confirmed that regular face-to-face teaching is the dominant method at Saudi universities. However, they illustrated that integrating SNSs into education has contributed to improving teaching methods and expanding learning opportunities. One of the methods of employing SNSs in teaching is using them as helping applications during face-to-face lectures to enhance students' understanding and give the topics studied more explanation. According to some participants, that can result in attracting learners' attention and improving teaching methods. Respondent (F12) revealed that many faculty members employ SNSs as assistant tools during teaching, such as downloading a clip from YouTube or looking at some posts or tweets supporting what they are discussing. Concerning the level of equipping universities' study halls, Respondent (F15) stated:

Our university has developed the classrooms greatly by adding smart boards, computers and the Internet. By using a variety of attractive tools, teaching has become really interesting for faculty members and students alike. Now, I can open YouTube or any other SNS to show students online academic materials during the lecture. That greatly inspires educators and learners and positively influences the knowledge presented.

From her perspective, Respondent (F27) confirmed that YouTube, besides its role in expanding and improving learning chances, is undoubtedly helpful in teaching. She commented: "Instead of giving my students, for instance, a psychological theory as a standard way of teaching, I can open YouTube and see different episodes presenting and explaining what I want to provide in more detail." In terms of educational benefits, she suggested that using videos and images in teaching is more attractive and motivating than providing plain text, and is considered an approach that many young people prefer. Furthermore, she declared that YouTube is an application that the majority of teachers seek to utilise to support delivered information or an experience by integrating videos

or images into their educational methods. In this regard, Respondent (F10) clearly stated that integrating YouTube into education is a beneficial and inspiring educational strategy to support and clarify knowledge in practice, and to teach new things. She said: “Today, you can watch some complex medical or chemical experiments on YouTube and see all of the details, instead of doing them in labs.”

It can be seen from interviews that the platform most commonly used in class teaching is YouTube. However, some academics demonstrated that they use Twitter, Facebook and Instagram during lectures to present some illustrative information and enrich their content. For instance, Respondent (F15) stated:

I use SNSs for both purposes: personal and educational. In academic work, for example, I bring different posts and tweets that support or challenge a particular matter to the class. These provided texts open the door for a discussion between students, which is a great method to enrich our subjects and enhance students’ understanding. Also, I use Instagram in the educational setting to show pictures and videos during lectures.

A number of participants think that teaching through SNSs can be developed to be done completely via these platforms. A combination of these applications can be used to contribute to delivering lectures. Video or audio clips backed up by explanatory texts can be uploaded and shared with students through their private groups on WhatsApp or closed groups on Facebook or Google+, as a number of participants demonstrated. For instance, Respondent (M19) illustrated:

There is an increasing tendency to integrate these social networking sites into teaching sessions. To be specific, various types of SNSs can be utilised to expand instruction and learning opportunities. In my experience, I think that YouTube and WhatsApp have been used more than others by a number of academics in our department. In fact, they play a great role in delivering knowledge, particularly if lecturers employ more than one tool at the same time, because each of them has specific features that may not be available or easily accessible on

the others. Therefore, by doing so, that will be more advantageous in teaching methods.

Integrating SNSs into teaching to deliver courses completely through these platforms was limited and conducted by only a few lecturers as personal efforts in teaching distance-learning students (see the section on distance-learning students later). However, the most popular way of integrating SNSs into education that was widely used by academics, as participants illustrated, was to provide and share materials related to the subjects taught in regular teaching sessions, which will be discussed in the next section.

#### **5.4.2. Extra Materials or Discussion Spaces to Supplement In-class Teaching**

Integrating SNSs into education has given lecturers the opportunity to improve their teaching methods and attract students' attention by utilising these applications in lecturing. Yet, the main reason for utilising SNSs in teaching methods is to provide extra educational practices and to elicit lecturer–student and student–student discussions on these platforms after they have completed regular face-to-face lecturing. Participants in this study revealed that faculty members have used SNSs for the purpose of giving students the opportunity to direct questions towards academics and interact with peers in discussing relevant topics on these platforms.

Respondent (M22) stated: “Employing SNSs has given faculty members and students alike a wide opportunity to be in ongoing contact, and to engage in more detailed discussions about their relevant topics.” Likewise, Respondent (M1) confirmed that he has used social networking sites to give students the opportunity to ask questions, discuss, and participate with lecturers and classmates. He said:

Opening a space in which students can engage with their lecturers and peers, particularly to ask questions about what is unclear to them and participate in discussion on these platforms, was the main reason to employ SNSs in my courses. I would like to emphasise that face-to-face teaching is the regular, basic method, but I think that these social

networking tools have played a positive role in teaching, learning and keeping in contact with lecturers and students.

Respondents (M17) and (F28) asserted that preparing an environment in which students can discuss with one another what they have studied is an effective way of understanding subjects and clarifying any unclear parts of lessons. In some cases, students learn more from their peers than from their teachers. After utilising SNSs for a while, Respondent (F30) described using these platforms in education as a very beneficial and useful teaching method. She stated:

After realising their benefits in improving teaching methods and expanding learning opportunities, I do not think that I can teach my students without utilising any platform of SNSs, as there are many ways in which to enrich my knowledge and students' information. I used to send my students links to some related materials before and after delivering lectures. Our discussions on private WhatsApp groups are highly beneficial.

She moved on to state: "These links to other knowledge can be considered an extra educational activity that I usually ask my students to visit; from another aspect, it will expand their understanding of the subject being studied."

From another angle, Respondent (F31) demonstrated that lecture time is not always adequate to cover all relevant points that the tutor wants to discuss. After conducting their regular lectures, academics have the opportunity to enrich their topics through these platforms by providing detailed information online or links to other knowledge sources related to the discussed subject, as she explained. Similarly, Respondent (F29) revealed that she utilises SNSs to hold discussions, answer questions, share course materials, and send links to other related information about various relevant topics. The next section will explain how faculty members use these networks with distance-learning students.

### **5.4.3. Distance-Learning Students**

As indicated, the main method of teaching distance-learning students at Saudi higher educational institutions is that of Blackboard, which is a program designed mainly for this category of students. However, as a number of participants from University (1) indicated, some faculty members integrate SNSs into teaching distance-learning students. Respondent (M6) said:

At my faculty, a lot of academics integrate SNSs into education in different ways. However, when teaching completely via SNSs, I have seen few lecturers do that, particularly with students on distance-learning courses. But the majority of lecturers teach distance-learning students by utilising Blackboard, which is the regular method on these types of courses.

Similarly, Respondent (F13) stated: "In the distance-learning department, academics teach their students through Blackboard but, recently, some of them have started to deliver their courses to distant students via SNSs. These platforms have greatly assisted and expanded teaching methods."

### **5.4.4. Teaching Students Studying at Another Campus**

Analysing data collected pointed out that a number of academics use SNSs with learners of the opposite gender due to segregation between genders in Saudi society. As indicated earlier, there are an insufficient number of women as faculty members at Saudi universities. Therefore, male academics teach classes of female students through a one-way video conferencing system as a basic method to overcome the lack of female academics. However, it has been noticed recently that a number of lecturers have begun to depend on SNSs to deliver their courses to students of the opposite gender, who basically study at another campus. Respondent (F15) stated:

The main teaching method with the opposite gender in our university is using a video conferencing system. But some faculty members have started to deliver their lectures through closed groups on Facebook or WhatsApp, instead of using the video conferencing system in some

lectures. Practically, in the lecture the lecturer sends students a set of short videos, audio clips, and texts to deliver the main themes of the lecture, and then gives students the opportunity to ask questions, comment, and discuss any material related to the subject.

Moreover, a number of academics believe that communication between both genders will be facilitated more by using SNSs educationally in an effective and organised manner, as gender segregation prevails in Saudi society. Respondent (M8) said:

I have utilised SNSs to open a wide space for contact in order to break all temporal, spatial and social boundaries and to facilitate learning and teaching methods. Due to the segregation between genders in the Saudi educational system, I think that female students, in particular, need more channels through which to ask questions to their male teachers and to discuss studied subjects with them. Therefore, these closed groups on Facebook or WhatsApp can be a great method for both lecturers and students to have mutual discussions related to aspects of their courses.

#### **5.4.5. Providing Extracurricular Activities**

In the last section, it can be perceived that teaching students completely through SNSs was limited to certain categories of students: distance-learning students and learners of the opposite gender. However, one of the main practices is providing extracurricular activities to expand learning settings and deepen students' understanding of particular areas of knowledge and experience. Unlike providing extra materials to supplement the content of courses, sharing things that students might find interesting but that do not directly relate to their module materials could be perceived as an extracurricular activity. Learning through these attractive applications can be described as the 'learning through entertainment' strategy, as some participants demonstrated. Respondent (F11) stated:

Providing different extracurricular activities is really important in enhancing students' skills and experience. Moreover, it is a kind of learning through entertainment, which has become essential to a

successful educational process. During this type of education, the student is encouraged to use various mental abilities in an attractive manner. I employ this teaching method with my students and have realised its benefits. Now, you can see many apps on SNSs, e.g. interactive games, which could help students to learn in an exciting setting, practise cooperation and teamwork, and challenge their knowledge.

Respondent (F27) said:

As you know, students have different learning styles. I think that providing extracurricular activities will help to overcome these differences between learners, particularly when lecturers select different learning materials that could be appropriate for their students. Different criteria should be taken into consideration when selecting these materials, such as specialisation, stage, age, and others.

As a practical example, Respondent (M4) illustrated:

I think that giving students some successful experiments and thoughts via these activities that are not related to their classes can contribute to opening wide areas of thinking, creativity, and gaining new skills. I still remember when I sent my students a video clip about transforming some creative ideas into reality; three students came to my office to discuss a new, creative idea, which later won the first award in the closing ceremony of the university activities.

It can be concluded that the key objective of integrating SNSs into education at Saudi universities, as participants illustrated, was to improve teaching methods and expand learning settings for students. The main methods to achieve that objective were to use these platforms during teaching strategies to provide extra materials related to their subjects and also extracurricular activities in motivating and attractive ways. In addition, when faculty members employ these social platforms in teaching, learning and

communicating in an effective and organised manner, they prepare a good setting for active learning in attractive and interactive methods.

#### **5.4.6. Practical Ways of Using Social Networking for Teaching Purposes**

Reviewing data collected revealed that some faculty members use different types of SNSs for multiple reasons, whereas others use only one platform for a particular purpose. However, the main practical ways of integrating SNSs into the academic setting at Saudi universities, as participants illustrated, included: creating groups, creating a playlist of videos on their own YouTube channel, setting up Facebook pages, and setting up academic accounts on Twitter for particular courses. More details about these practical methods and some illustrative examples of what participants think about integrating SNSs into education are presented in the following sections.

##### **5.4.6.1. Creating Educational Groups on Social Networking Sites**

On the practical level, creating private groups on WhatsApp or closed groups on Facebook or Google+ for educational purposes was one of the main methods used and supported by 59% of the participants. Respondent (F12) reported that she initiated online educational groups on SNSs to be in contact with students and also to provide a space in which students themselves can discuss, which, in her view, seemed really beneficial. As was the case with other respondents, she also illustrated that the reason for using groups was related to the insufficiency of lecture times, particularly with postgraduate students. In these SNS groups, students discussed issues together and gained advice about research and matters related to subjects, which can help them and add value to their academic work. Respondent (F16) also argued that, because lecture time is limited, and there are large numbers of students, SNSs are a more appropriate and beneficial way to communicate with groups than is the case with one-to-one contact. In this regard, assigning a student leader to each group was suggested by some participants, as those leaders will help faculty members to save time and effort. In addition, Respondents (F28) and (F29) reported that students themselves enrich these educational groups, pages or accounts through various participation, discussions, questions and comments.



From a social perspective, Respondent (F11) uncovered that the majority of Saudi women do not accept identifying their personalities online as a social and cultural consideration. For that reason, she thought that using closed groups on some social platforms, such as WhatsApp, Facebook or Google+, is more convenient and useful, especially for female lecturers and students, as respect to Saudi society. Additionally, she considered that postgraduate students benefit a lot from research discussion groups more than other students. Similarly, Respondent (M8) said:

I have utilised SNSs to open a wide space for contact in order to break all temporal and spatial boundaries and to facilitate learning and teaching methods. Due to the segregation between genders in the Saudi educational system, I think that female students, in particular, need more channels through which to ask questions to their male teachers and to discuss studied subjects with them. Therefore, these closed groups on Facebook or WhatsApp can be a great method for both lecturers and students to have mutual discussions related to course matters.

To explain why these specific social networking sites have been employed more than other social platforms, Respondent (F14) clarified that she frequently used WhatsApp and Facebook on most of her courses more than other social networking sites by saying that these particular platforms have the advantage of providing private pages and closed groups. Through these closed gatherings, the lecturer can discuss with students and respond to their questions concerning some of the course topics that have been presented in face-to-face lectures without any concern about their online identity. I think what Respondent (F14) has just addressed can be considered one of the main reasons for academics having been driven to utilise WhatsApp and Facebook in particular. It can illustrate why WhatsApp was No. 1 (88%) and Facebook was No. 3 (78%) among SNSs that have been used by participating academics in this research (see Table 4.2).

From another aspect, some participants pointed out the possibility of gaining indirect feedback from their students about subjects being studied. For instance, Respondent (F11) said:

Another advantage of creating groups on these social networking sites is to see to what extent students have understood the subjects that have been delivered by the lecturer. Therefore, the participants provide observational feedback through these online groups. If it were not clearly understood, you, as a lecturer, could use an alternative teaching method to clarify.

Therefore, getting involved in groups on SNSs can help lecturers to observe their students' practices, which can give them an indicator as to whether or not the students have fully understood the delivered knowledge, and to assess the appropriateness of the teaching methods used. Moreover, creating these educational groups on SNSs can contribute to creating a learning community. Through these online gatherings, the lecturers and students practise what they have studied, and seek advice about their learning difficulties or academic obstacles from faculty members and also their classmates. They exchange their experiences in their particular field. It is realised that all three factors that play a major role in constructing the community of practice theory (a domain of knowledge, community, and practice, as Wenger (1998) illustrates) exist and are applied. Therefore, the members of these closed educational groups on SNSs have a common interest in a particular subject of knowledge or experience, and interact regularly to learn how to do it better by sharing ideas, strategies and solutions, which is how Wenger (1998) defines the community of practice theory.

#### **5.4.6.2. Creating a Playlist of Videos on their Own YouTube Channels**

The findings that have emerged from this investigation confirm that 63% of the faculty members who participated in the interviews have integrated YouTube into their educational strategies. This result is consistent with some previous studies. For instance, Duffy (2007) reported that YouTube is increasingly used in educational settings by educators and learners in different ways. It can be integrated into the overall learning experience in order to maximise learning opportunities and encourage active viewing.

Besides integrating YouTube in classes to improve teaching methods, as discussed earlier, a number of participating academics pointed out another way of using this application in education. As they revealed, they create a playlist of videos on their own

YouTube channels. Respondents (M4) and (F15) illustrated that they create a playlist of some selected videos that contribute to clarifying their subjects and shedding light on issues being studied. They demonstrated that it is required that their students watch them regularly — some of them before and some after attending face-to-face sessions, which assist in enhancing their understanding. Of course, watching and listening at the same time is really important in assimilating knowledge, especially when it is presented in an attractive and organised manner. In this regard, Respondent (F10) stated:

I used SNSs in education in different ways, one of which is selecting a set of videos that connect to the topic and adding them to the own channel for the course. It is very beneficial for students to watch different materials related to the subject being studied. Also, I realised that this generation of students love watching clips of videos that support the delivered information more than only listening to the information itself.

As an informative and attractive platform, YouTube was positively described by several academics who participated in this research. Respondent (F32) said: “Honestly, I feel that YouTube is a very rich resource: lectures, information, video, and audio clips.” She explained that after students have presented their final projects at the end of the semester, they upload their video and audio clips on YouTube in order to highlight their efforts, encourage their classmates, and spread knowledge by participating in generating new content on these social platforms. These responses provided by interviewees confirm what Burke and Shonna (2008) and Duffy (2007) considered to be a valuable feature of integrating YouTube, particularly into education. They found that YouTube, in particular, can be seen as an advantageous instructional resource to provide relevant and targeted knowledge, supplement course content, and create a sense of a classroom community.

Finally, a number of respondents, e.g. (M4) and (F27), expect big changes in terms of teaching methods and learning opportunities. They believe that integrating these social networking sites into learning and teaching will contribute to creating new models of instructing and learning activities in the academic field.

#### **5.4.6.3. Creating Open Pages on Facebook for Particular Courses**

The findings indicated that Facebook was the third-highest platform used by academics at King Abdul-Aziz University and King Saud University in Saudi Arabia. A total of 25 participants (78%) use Facebook to communicate with students and to develop their methods of teaching. In relation to employing Facebook at higher education institutions, setting up an open page on Facebook is another practical way of integrating this particular platform into education. Unlike closed groups on Facebook, this page is not only open to students studying that course, but also accessible by the public. It could host a live discussion with a wider community. In theory, all information posted on these pages should relate to the course subjects, including: extracurricular activities, questions, links to other material on other SNSs, and similar information. As several participants indicated, the objective is to educate students, expand their understanding, let them interact with other users who are interested, and spread knowledge outside of the virtual classroom walls.

Respondent (M7) revealed that some faculty members set up a separate page on Facebook for each course at the beginning of each semester and then delete it at the end of the semester. Although he described the academic relationship between students predominantly with regard to many faculty members in Saudi Arabia, it is still considered a formal educational approach, a face-to-face teaching method; he thought that integrating SNSs into education would develop this relation to be more open, friendly, and have an informal tendency:

Since utilising SNSs in teaching and learning activities, the relationship between educators and learners in Saudi universities has increasingly changed. At least, this is what I have seen at our university. The teaching method was, and still is, that of face-to-face meetings, but now we can see that a number of academics have set up an open page on Facebook to be in contact with their students and to enable them to have a live chat with their classmates and with other users from outside the class. On these platforms, faculty members deal with

students as friends in an informal manner. I think that this kind of relationship should be in these online gatherings.

In a similar way, Respondent (M24) illustrated that he has set up a page on Facebook only for new research articles and papers related to their specialisation in mathematics. Moreover, he revealed that they have a weekly research subject. He described the discussions among those postgraduate students and with other Facebook users as “brilliant educational dialogues”. He, therefore, appreciated how these online discussion sessions contributed to raising students’ confidence, and made debaters proud of their personalities, and concluded that SNSs in general are ideal tools for academic learning, teaching and communication. In his opinion, it is necessary for SNSs to be employed effectively in the educational environment and supervised by academics themselves. He stated:

Around 10 years ago, most lecturers were not using emails to be in contact with their students. However, today it is an essential way to keep in touch with the academic community. Most assignments and questions are sent by emails. Accordingly, I expect SNSs to soon be the most used channels in educational communication. I want to say that it is confirmed by experience; these discussions on educational accounts are really beneficial for students themselves and for all academic community members.

Respondent (F28) supported the view of the integration of SNSs in learning and teaching activities, particularly in the latter higher education stages, and also creating locked and unlocked groups on platforms such as Facebook. Through these groups, students share posts on a specific course only with students studying that course, while other posts on open pages can be shared and seen by the public to reach a wider community. However, she allows student groups’ members to take entire responsibility for managing and supervising themselves, while the lecturer is only a member. Students discuss their research projects, assignments, and other related subjects in these groups. She said: “I am not an active participant with them due to my many responsibilities. And I believe that the idea of having groups managed by students themselves is better for them. They

discuss and participate freely and informally.” She confirmed that they have lots of academic discussions, and mutual experiences in answering questions on the formal department's accounts and pages on SNSs, on which she usually participates with other faculty members.

Therefore, it can be seen that a high percentage of faculty members at these two Saudi universities from various academic departments have integrated Facebook, particularly in teaching, learning and communicating with their students. Different practical methods have been employed to maximise taking advantage of such platforms in the academic setting. Although a number of lecturers have some concerns related to applying these social platforms in a conservative society, they have been in contact with students using these networking sites, and their relations with learners have been developed to become friendly and unofficial in nature. Evidently, this can reflect to what extent academics at Saudi universities realise the importance of integrating entertainment into learning strategies and of actively participating with students outside of the academic context, particularly on these social platforms during an era of revolution in information and communication.

#### **5.4.6.4. Creating Academic Accounts on Twitter for Particular Courses**

In a similar way to open pages on Facebook, the results of this investigation show that participating faculty members have utilised Twitter to support learning and communicating through different practical methods, one of which has been initiating academic accounts for particular courses. Eighty-four per cent of faculty members employ this platform to support learning opportunities and teaching methods in the higher education environment.

Twitter does not give users the ability to have private groups, unlike WhatsApp, or closed groups, e.g. Facebook and Google+. Therefore, these academic accounts on Twitter can easily be reached by the public. As a number of participants mentioned, the reason behind having this type of account is to link students together on an open platform to discuss, participate, and disseminate knowledge to the public. Additionally, a number of experts in these particular fields, and who are interested in taking part in open discussions such as these, will be engaged to enrich the content of these online

educational gatherings. Having these online discussions open to the public makes the users eager and encourages them to select their words carefully, whether on the level of choosing accurate information or providing their own perspectives.

Respondents (M22) and (F29) asserted that there are various advantages of integrating Twitter into academia, one of which is to be in contact with students and faculty members. Moreover, they asserted that Twitter is a rich resource and a beneficial platform for educational purposes and for many different fields in general. It can be used to view various tweets from experts and specialists when they are relevant to their own field of knowledge. As a virtual communication method, these respondents confirmed that they usually keep in contact with their students, friends and colleagues at national and international universities via this social platform. Through Twitter, they send their students links, articles, video clips, texts, and share ideas related to their educational topics. These findings are identical to those of Waters (2012). In respect of the benefits of using Twitter in education, Waters declared that Twitter is beneficial for maintaining connections with other users as part of a global community that will help learners to improve their learning through communication with other students and experts in their fields.

In the current research, Respondent (F29) declared that she set up a Twitter account for each course to initiate discussions related to the course subjects, answer questions, send links to other relevant materials, and tweet about various topics. Also, she uses Twitter to remind students about their exams, research projects, assignments or any changes to a time or place. She commented: "In fact, students add wonderful information to the issues discussed and enrich our thoughts through their amazing participation."

### **5.5. Strengths and Limitations of Using Social Networking in Teaching**

Two aspects will be discussed in this section: the factors that have encouraged faculty members to incorporate SNSs into teaching practices, and the reasons that could limit the integration of these social networks in the educational setting.

### **5.5.1. Motivations for Academics to Use Social Networking in Teaching**

Reviewing data collected shows that there are a number of motivations that inspired teaching staff at Saudi universities to employ SNSs in their teaching and learning activities. According to the participating academics in this study, the following points are considered the essential motivations.

#### **5.5.1.1. Expand Peer Support and Collaborative Learning Method**

About half of the faculty members (47%) involved in this investigation considered that integrating SNSs into education can expand collaboration among users and give them an opportunity to exchange their thoughts and experiences through these platforms. Respondent (F28) claimed that collaboration is significant in producing creative ideas and projects. She said:

One of the objectives that has driven me to focus on using SNSs in academia is to give students the opportunity to collaborate in learning with one another and working to achieve their projects. Through these platforms, they exchange text messages, audio and video clips about how to select the idea or the topic of research and conduct it in an effective manner, for example.

Respondents (M3) and (F12) noticed in their educational practices on SNSs that students learn from one another and take advantage of their classmates' knowledge and expertise. In a reciprocal manner, they request assistance and offer suggestions to others on the subject of shared ideas. These opinions and attitudes provided by participating faculty members confirm what Parboosingh (2002) emphasised. He asserted that integrating social networking technologies into learning settings will create academic team-gathering environments and help students to learn from experiences and also from one another; in particular, students at advanced levels can help beginners. Furthermore, Respondent (F14) stated:

I pay more attention to exchanging success stories between students. That is one of the main motivations for students, I think. I could describe it as a fuel for them to progress towards creativity.



Hardworking students can encourage their classmates' enthusiasm towards creativity and excellence.

By looking at previous respondents' perspectives, it can be seen that collaboration is considered one of the main advantages that can be obtained among students through SNSs. Collaboration is an effective method that can contribute to knowledge acquisition. From the constructivist perspective, theorists such as Vygotsky claimed that learners can achieve higher levels of understanding when they work collaboratively than when they work individually. Therefore, they highlighted the importance of peer interaction in a collaborative manner between learning groups as a fundamental requirement in the construction of individual knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978; Charlton, 2013). In view of that, it is crucial for instructors to provide a diversity of interactive activities, develop challenging, but exciting, learning materials, and encourage learners to work collaboratively with their peers to achieve such tasks, as "cognitive apprenticeships stress the collaborative efforts of groups of learners as sources of learning" (Ullrich et al., 2008, p. 706).

It is beneficial for students to support one another and get involved in such collaborative learning settings under their lecturers' supervision. At the same time, it is more productive for all participating students to engage in sharing knowledge and experience. Both categories of participating students — students acting as a teacher and learning students — will benefit from such engagement in these teaching and learning activities. This confirms how significant it is to use active learning as a method of instruction, which primarily focuses on the learners themselves being responsible for their learning (Bonwell and Eison, 1991). From an educational aspect, it is essential for educators to encourage students to do more than just listen to what the teachers are saying; they are advised to read, write, discuss, and engage with their peers in solving problems. It can be seen from what previous respondents said that all of these educational practices have been achieved in one way or another through SNSs. These social platforms highly contribute to promoting active learning methods among learners if students are motivated by their lecturers to do so in a practical manner, as respondents indicated above.

Moreover, learners must be involved in advanced tasks such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation, which require a higher level of thinking (Renkl et al., 2002; Bonwell and Eison, 1991). To enable students to learn in an active manner, it is significant to prepare attractive and interactive environments — Web 2.0 applications, for example — that allow learners to engage with their classmates in such educational positions, and participate with them through these communicating platforms.

In respect of teamwork and collaborative learning, Arquero and Romero-Frias (2013) found that SNSs appear to be useful learning tools and the majority of respondents thought that these social platforms provide helpful tools to facilitate teamwork. Additionally, respondents involved in that study illustrated that SNSs help students to learn from other students' points of view. Therefore, findings emerging from the current investigation confirmed the previous results and asserted that integrating SNSs in the academic setting — gaining more encouragement and supervision of instructors — can facilitate teamwork among students and enhance collaborative learning settings. Moreover, co-creative activities can be achieved through these platforms when lecturers concentrate on how to connect students to relevant topics, and keep them focussed on ideas as a community to practise, learn and participate with other members. This is what the community of practice theory describes as practical actions performed in such online gatherings.

Respondent (F30) stated:

I have met many students who have amazing ideas that can be developed into creative projects. They need some help and guidance from their lecturers and peers. Working in groups on these creative ideas through these social platforms is helpful for them and can contribute to transforming them into successful projects. Social platforms have facilitated holding such meetings between members from anywhere without the need to be present in the same place.

According to a number of participants, peer assessment is another useful way for students to learn from their mistakes and their classmates. Those participating academics illustrated that they experienced this teaching method and found it beneficial

for students; it enables learners to practise their critical thinking skills. Respondent (M4), as an example, indicated this feature provided by SNSs by saying:

In our Facebook and WhatsApp groups, I let students assess their classmates' work. I believe that this is a great opportunity for students to learn from one another by correcting their mistakes after receiving their classmates' comments. Recently, the majority of my students' participation has received many comments from students themselves before I have given them my perspective. I usually encourage my students to have a critical eye when they look at any participation disseminated in our groups.

Furthermore, at the end of the semester, he used to ask students to provide their opinions — through one of their closed groups — about his teaching methods, the course material, and his performance in general to benefit from their insight, seeking to improve all of these parts of the educational process. In the same vein, Respondent (F27) argued that students, particularly postgraduates, can be considered the best assessors, who can give you, as a lecturer, valuable feedback as they work with you closely throughout the semester. She went on to say: "They have witnessed your knowledge and expertise and received the educational service, if we can describe it as a service. Then you have to seek to achieve your customers' satisfaction." At some prestigious universities around the world, academics' success can be assessed through their students' performance. In the last two years, one of the criteria for faculty members at some Saudi universities has been to look at the average of their students' performance, as Respondent (M3) mentioned. He continued:

Therefore, I can confirm that student engagement and performance through SNSs have increased in different academic departments at our university. Such involvement has contributed to diversifying teaching and learning methods in the academic field.

During this time of information and communication revolution, the teacher's role has been changed, and teaching methods are no longer the same as traditional ones. Technology and social networks have dramatically influenced teaching and learning

activities. According to Vygotsky's vision, which concentrates on what kind of role can be played by the social setting in the learning process, knowledge is perceived as a social construct and teachers act as co-collaborators with their students, rather than taskmasters (Vygotsky and Wollock, 1997). All of these developments have challenged teachers to adopt these technologies and to interact with them in an effective way. The modern teacher should no longer be acting as they were before, but instead should be a supervisor for his or her students, an observer of what is disseminated on their accounts or pages on SNSs by their students, and a facilitator of students receiving the right knowledge from credible and verified resources.

Respondents (M8) and (M24) illustrated that the growing popularity of social networking platforms has enabled many academics at universities to enhance their teaching methods, deliver knowledge and expertise in innovative ways, and encourage their students to get involved in and benefit the most from such interactive and attractive tools. Therefore, they stressed the teacher's role: selecting what is appropriate for the educational context and what is compatible with the teacher's message to be shown or disseminated concerning educational and cultural dimensions. Moreover, they emphasised the necessity to have skilled lecturers who will be able to identify potential challenges in these online academic communities and deal with them properly, particularly when they relate to private and professional boundaries, ensuring that these boundaries are maintained. Finally, they recommended that faculty members not only integrate SNSs into education but also employ them in a professional way.

Respondent (F15) reported that there are many positive practices conducted by academics on these social networks, especially when exchanging experiences with students and generating content by giving them an opportunity to participate. She stated:

I have seen some outstanding lecturers who have participated with their students in online discussion sessions on the subject of how to deal with challenges that may face collaboration among learners on these networks. Students provided lecturers with amazing and effective solutions on this aspect. This is a practical example of collaboration and sharing experiences.

On the other hand, she illustrated that there are some faculty members who do not utilise SNSs in the educational setting for one reason or another. Moreover, there are some academics who use these social networks for basic purposes, such as reminding students about changing lecture times and test or assignment requirements, or providing them with additional information. Duffy (2007) argued that it is not satisfactory to use these Web 2.0 technologies simply for the delivery of content to learners. Furthermore, he illustrated that a new learning ecology exists where these platforms can be employed for collaborative and co-creative purposes. On this aspect, Respondent (F28) said:

I would like to say for reluctant or non-enthusiastic lecturers that students are already there. They have built their peer networks on these platforms and been in contact with others who have a similar interest, not only on a local basis, but also on a global basis. SNSs are an excellent environment for learning and exchanging experience with others in a collaborative manner.

She continued: "From my experience of using SNSs for a while, I can confirm that students do a good job in sharing information and assisting in generating content on their accounts on SNSs for public participation and for their closed group members."

These outcomes that emerged from interviewees' responses match what Bansal and Joshi (2014) found in their study concerning students' experience of mobile learning, particularly WhatsApp. The findings of that study illustrated that students found learning through WhatsApp to be very interesting and educationally useful. Moreover, they found that WhatsApp is helpful in increasing their social interactivity with their peers and teachers. Moreover, the majority of participants involved in that research agreed that learning through WhatsApp is considered a collaborative learning experience. Therefore, it has been realised that collaboration can be enhanced among students and experience can be exchanged through these academic online environments between educators and learners. These features have motivated academics to integrate these SNSs in their educational sessions in different ways.

### **5.5.1.2. Access to Various Sources**

Learning and teaching are no longer limited to face-to-face communication within class time limits, as Jabr (2011) confirmed. Therefore, the question here is what advantages and opportunities can be facilitated and offered by utilising SNSs in the education field in order to expand learning and teaching activities. Social networking can facilitate interconnection between different sources (e.g. sharing links, videos, audio, discussions, etc.) all within one space. This feature was a motivation that inspired 41% of participating academics to employ SNSs in education.

On this particular aspect, several participants demonstrated that providing links to other resources and offering additional information about subjects discussed in class were useful methods for students, enabling them to visit various sources to search for specific information or to learn a particular skill in any field of knowledge. Furthermore, they indicated that these social platforms can change the role of students from being a receiver of knowledge to being an active participant in making and sharing educational content, which would contribute to promoting lifelong learning among students.

Respondent (F31) highlighted that connecting students to other sources of knowledge and teaching them how to rely mainly on themselves to search for the required information are the best ways to encourage them towards lifelong learning. From this aspect, she stated that “being involved actively in their [students’] learning process can assist them in having a lifelong learning habit”. Respondents (F28) and (F29) reported that plenty of private and national libraries have engaged with users on these social platforms and enabled them to read free content and share with their friends. As they indicated, researchers and students can build a relationship with these libraries. Maintaining connections with the knowledge society is required to support ongoing learning, as the connectivism theory suggests. In this regard, Pettenati and Cigognini (2007) emphasised that possessing particular information is less important than understanding where and how to retrieve it.

As a result of accessing different sources of knowledge through these platforms, students can have a participatory role with their lecturers in expanding discussed subjects, from which academics can benefit to develop some teaching methods

appropriate to their students' new acquaintance. From their experiences on SNSs, some respondents declared that students themselves enriched the educational groups, pages or accounts made for a particular course through various participation, discussions, questions and comments. For example, Respondent (F29) revealed that she utilises SNSs to hold discussions, answer questions, send links to other related materials, and tweet about various relevant topics. She said: "In fact, students add useful information to my knowledge and enrich our discussions through their keen observations."

Respondents (M3) and (F27) demonstrated that there has been a remarkable development in diversifying knowledge resources and communication methods. Respondent (M3) stated:

I have been teaching for a long time. In the past, the teacher was the only resource for seeking knowledge, but now there are many resources. The Internet and, in particular, SNSs can be described as vast resources through which to search for any topic or to be in contact with different experts in a particular field of knowledge through these social networks.

Therefore, it can be seen that integrating SNSs into educational activities can help students to access different resources and depend on themselves to access the required information, comparing and discussing with who is interested in particular knowledge via these social platforms. These actions give students an opportunity to develop their learning methods and expand their choices to learn from outside of their close circles: classmates or teachers.

### **5.5.1.3. Generating and Improving Content by Students**

Nearly half of the participating faculty members (41%) noticed that SNSs have supported students and given them an opportunity to participate in generating content on these platforms. As they confirmed, that was a motivation for them to utilise these platforms in teaching and learning activities. Practising a knowledge or skill in action is an advanced level of learning. Therefore, it is essential for lecturers to encourage their students to practise what they have learned in different patterns. On this aspect, SNSs allow users to generate, contribute and develop any content of knowledge. Moreover, Web 2.0

technologies, in general, give students more opportunities to disseminate knowledge, gain feedback from their colleagues, friends or anyone interested, and, accordingly, develop their participation. Through these various networks, it has become easier for users to post, tweet, record a clip, create a video, and disseminate to a specific group or the public. This diversity of content types enables students to take part in generating or developing content on these platforms.

Respondent (F11) said: “SNSs have facilitated generating and developing content for students. A user doesn’t need to be skilful to participate on these sites. Anyone can join, contribute and share with his or her friends or other users.” Therefore, it is a great opportunity for students, in particular, to show their knowledge and abilities in analysis, critique, and offer presentations to their classmates and academics. As she experienced, “students are no longer regarded as receivers of the knowledge but participants in the industry of the knowledge alongside lecturers”. In the constructivism theory, it is believed that the role of students has changed from passively receiving knowledge to actively participating in retrieving knowledge. Ullrich et al. (2008) illustrated the function of learners in light of this theory: “In constructivism, the control over the learning process shifts from the teacher to student, with the learner playing an active role in the learning process. Learning takes place in context and in collaboration and provides opportunities to solve realistic and meaningful problems” (p. 706).

Respondent (F25) stated:

On several occasions, I have worked with my postgraduate students on the social studies course to take some excerpts disseminated on SNSs, such as a short extract from a film, a broadcast, or a piece of writing regarding a particular subject, to analyse from a societal perspective. It is a useful method for them to participate in analysing and improving content, relevant to their interests, on these platforms.

In addition, Respondent (M17) illustrated that in the media department at their university, it is mostly required that postgraduates collaborate in small groups to conduct some joint research or produce some audio and video clips on some specific media courses. After they have done it, their lecturers ask them to disseminate their



work to a broader community as closed groups of students on SNSs or to the public to gain feedback from other colleagues. Commenting on that, both Respondents (M17) and (F25) declared that learning how students work together in analysing, generating and developing content on SNSs is an experience. In this regard, Powers et al. (2012) emphasised that the content on SNSs is usually produced and shared by students who work cooperatively to improve it, which results in getting the best content and reinforces peer-to-peer learning.

For more clarification, a number of academics who participated in this research have described some specific platforms as attractive and informative, particularly in generating content. Respondent (F32) valued integrating YouTube in education, particularly in spreading knowledge by participating in generating new content on this platform. With her students, she has been involved in producing and sharing video and audio clips related to course subjects. Likewise, Respondent (M22) asserted that there are various advantages of employing Twitter in academia. As he demonstrated, Twitter helps students to contribute to generating and sharing content of knowledge with their friends, academics, and those who may have an interest from the wider community or the public. Besides that, students have the ability to view and comment on plenty of tweets from experts and specialists when they relate to their own field of knowledge.

#### **5.5.1.4. Developing More Critical and Reflective Thinking**

Holding directed discussions on SNSs about relevant issues to any subject being studied by students is a very beneficial way to develop critical and reflective thinking among them, as 34% of participating academics claimed, especially if these sessions of the debate, or at least many of them, are supervised by faculty members. They thought that online gatherings such as these would be productive for students to learn how to provide reasonable arguments with strong evidence and, at the same time, to defend opposing views. Respondent (M2) demonstrated that he has given his students several face-to-face sessions of training about argumentative debates. Furthermore, he illustrated that students hold discussions on a daily basis through their course groups on SNSs. He added that students have been encouraged to conduct these online gatherings in a climate of respect towards the opinions of others. Following these advisable

instructions enabled debaters to learn and practise basic critical thinking skills, and, simultaneously, provided them with a real, practical example of directed debating.

In this regard, Arquero and Romero-Frias (2013) thought that SNSs have facilitated interaction and communication between students. They claimed that access to different perspectives could widen and enrich students' knowledge on these platforms' content by developing a more critical attitude towards different opinions. Respondent (M24) affirmed these viewpoints and added:

If faculty members at universities were able to monitor and supervise these online meetings of student discussions, it could assist in spreading a culture of respectful debating and promote a more critical and reflective attitude towards other perspectives among students. I conducted numerous sessions of debating between students on different topics; some of them were related to our courses and others were about general events taking place in society.

Similarly, Respondents (F12) and (F31) considered the advantage of developing critical and reflective thinking that could be facilitated and improved through SNSs as one of the core motivations for them to utilise these social platforms in academia. They argued that it is essential to give learners an opportunity to perform in a practical way what they have learned in terms of knowledge and skills. Furthermore, they thought that critical thinking could be promoted to advanced levels, such as analysing, synthesising and recognising more complicated relationships, by conducting some training courses for learners. As the constructivism theory suggests, a higher stage of analysis enables one to combine their experience with prior knowledge to develop new knowledge, experience or more understanding of information gained previously (Al-hojailan, 2013). Furthermore, social constructivism theory, as a developed form of the constructivism theory, implies that positive and effective learning occurs within social participation in which the learner has positive characteristics, shows appropriate behaviour, and becomes involved in a supportive environment (Tu, 2000). The learning process taking place through the educational groups on these social platforms can be considered a model of what the theory describes, which can be achieved when the educator and learner meet the previously required conditions.

In Saudi Arabia, the dominant style of teaching in schools and universities is the lecturing method, in which the student has no role to play, except to listen to and memorise what the teacher provides. The possibility of giving students an opportunity to discuss and share opinions with the whole class is very limited due to the school curriculum, the high number of students in class, the lecture time, and also the lack of training in teaching methods. Boud (1994) stressed the importance of having a discussion between learners to enhance their critical thinking skills. He stated: "It is only through give and take with others that critical reflection can be promoted" (p. 53). Therefore, integrating social networking into education has increased opportunities for students to practise these educational actions beyond the formal, temporal and spatial boundaries with their colleagues, lecturers, friends, and other users of these social platforms, as participants indicated. In this regard, Respondents (M7) and (M22) claimed that the practical involvement of SNSs in higher education has encouraged them and their students to engage in a more active role by asking questions, discussing, analysing others' opinions, and establishing their own perspectives. As Respondent (M22) described, "it is a remarkable change in how learners think critically about matters discussed and other opinions after spending time using SNSs".

It can be perceived that the academic participants think that teaching and learning via SNSs can encourage learners to learn and think critically because users have a great opportunity to hear different opinions about a particular topic. In the end, they can make a comparison and contrast between what has been discussed on these networks. Furthermore, academics can create an atmosphere of competition and challenge among students, which can help them to gain critical thinking skills from what they see and practise. That depends on the approach and methodology used by faculty members or by students themselves. In this vein, Respondents (M6) and (F23) reported that they used to teach students through a problem-solving strategy in face-to-face classes. They both agreed upon its importance in learning by giving the learner an opportunity to live in a very similar setting to what could occur in real life. Also, they indicated that they started the integration of this strategy in their online gatherings.

Moreover, teaching and learning in a collaborative scenario or by employing a problem-solving approach is crucial to allow learners to get involved critically and deeply in

obtaining knowledge and enhancing experience. In their experimental study, Ronteltap and Eureling (2002) revealed that when learners study using a problem-based, practical method, more interaction among students occurs, which gives them an opportunity to learn in more active practice. Furthermore, Yang and Cornelious (2005) believe that promoting students' deep learning through online educational settings is a significant element for instructors to take into consideration. Therefore, based on what has been addressed above, it has been asserted that designing a collaborative approach and problem-based projects under the supervision of academics is an essential method that will give students a chance to engage and think critically, actively and deeply.

#### **5.5.1.5. Providing Up-to-date Knowledge**

Some participating academics (31%) considered social networking sites to be valuable tools for providing up-to-date knowledge, news, and current events. Spreading knowledge has not been easier and quicker than it is during these times of communication and information revolution. It cannot be denied that SNSs have offered value in delivering up-to-date knowledge to users on different aspects, as participating faculty members indicated. Thus, there is a similarity between what has emerged from this investigation and other research conducted recently in this area of study. For instance, in a practical study led by Arquero and Romero-Frias (2013) to investigate the use of social networks to enhance student involvement with academic subjects, the majority of respondents thought that SNSs were useful for keeping their professional knowledge up to date. Likewise, in this current research, retrieving up-to-date knowledge was a motivation for those participating academics to integrate these platforms in education in order to remain informed about any event that occurs in their department, university or in society as a whole. Respondents (M8) and (M23) illustrated that SNS users will be able to look at the latest content released by individuals or institutions who follow or have a connection with them.

In addition, maintaining an immediate and constant connection with students to answer their questions and participate in any related knowledge with group members on SNSs was appreciated by respondents. Respondents (M4) and (F12) think that using SNSs in academia enables students to be in communication with their classmates, teachers and

their academic departments to receive up-to-date knowledge that they need. Most importantly, they reported that many students, particularly postgraduates, after using SNSs for a while, have realised how important it is to pay attention to from whom they should acquire knowledge or information. According to those participants, students have become proficient at seeking reliable resources to obtain accurate information. They do not trust any account on these social networks, even if they demonstrate that they belong to particular institutions, before going to the official accounts for these authorities.

Furthermore, Respondent (F32) revealed that at the beginning of creating educational groups, students were circulating material from unreliable sources in the groups. However, she claimed that, recently, there has been an increasing awareness among academic communities of the importance of obtaining up-to-date knowledge, but it has been taken into consideration that the most important factor is the need to be verified and by a trustworthy source. As she reported, a number of faculty members at her university stressed the importance of verification before disseminating any digital content on academic accounts, pages or groups on these social platforms. It can be realised that these perceptions are compatible with those suggested by Siemens (2004) in the connectivism theory. As one of the main principles upon which the connectivism theory is constructed, obtaining accurate and up-to-date knowledge is the essential purpose of all learning activities taking place on these digital platforms.

It is apparent that many universities, faculties and departments have utilised SNSs, alongside their official websites, to provide up-to-date instructions or any information related to academic and administrative affairs to their teaching staff and students. Respondents (M3) and (F9) illustrated that many educational institutions in Saudi Arabia have created official accounts on SNSs to deliver updated information about which activities or events have just been conducted or are expected to happen in the future, and also to keep in contact with their community members. Therefore, using these platforms in an academic setting can help to ensure that the students and workforce are connected with their institutions to receive the latest news, follow their instructions, and participate in forthcoming events.

#### **5.5.1.6. Enhancing Students' Communication Skills**

The findings revealed that 37% of the participants considered that enhancing students' skills and developing their abilities in communication as an advantage facilitated by SNSs were motivating factors for them to employ these social networks in learning and teaching practices. Those participating academics indicated that utilising SNSs could support shy and hesitant students in contributing and expressing their ideas freely. Moreover, these social platforms have the ability to extend the opportunity for class members to interact beyond formal sessions. Therefore, this percentage of interviewees considered that integrating SNSs into learning and teaching sessions can contribute to developing the relationship between lecturers and students in formal and informal ways, and also enhance underperforming students in communication to be closer to their colleagues and teaching staff.

Respondent (M6) noticed that shy students who might have been hesitant towards speaking out in class had wonderful participation on SNSs. Through these platforms, they were encouraged to freely contribute and express their opinions. Therefore, Respondent (M6) recommended that teaching staff take advantage of these social gatherings to be in communication with students in an informal manner, which would assist students in being closer to their faculty members. As a consequence, these informal relationships between lecturers and their students will be reflected positively on teaching and learning activities.

According to Respondent (M24), these social platforms have assisted student users in building new personal, social and educational relationships. From his experience, he considered these social networking sites to be significant in terms of skill enhancement and development, particularly in helping underperforming students to participate and interact with other classmates, friends and lecturers. He also considered that SNSs have uncovered creative student skills and abilities. In his view, while some students were surprisingly good in their designs, organisation and writing on SNSs, they found it difficult to participate in explaining their ideas or talking about them in regular classes. Respondent (F29) supported this view of employing SNSs in learning and teaching: "I noticed that several students, who do not participate in face-to-face lectures, have

brilliant participation on SNSs.” That can refer to several reasons, one of which is the limitation of participating in class due to the large number of students and the lecture time, as discussed earlier (4.7 and 5.5.1). Furthermore, shyness is another explanation for this case, which can prevent some students from being actively participatory in class.

These previous opinions provided by participants confirm Rennie and Morrison’s (2013) argument that obtaining informal communication between students and their faculty members is essential and significant in enhancing classroom discussions and getting shy students particularly engaged. In addition, these perspectives are identical to Akbari et al.’s (2012) viewpoint that faculty members should prepare themselves and encourage their students to participate with their peers and lecturers through social networking sites. By doing so, most students, especially those who feel shy in front of their classmates and teachers, will get involved in these online discussions.

Developing relationships between lecturers and students is seen as not only playing a positive role in connectivity, but also increasing student productivity. Respondent (F12) claimed that integrating social networking platforms in academia can allow lecturers to be closer to their students, which, in turn, can contribute to promoting educational methods and enhancing students’ academic performance. To achieve educational goals and maximise the benefits of students’ experience at the university, Respondent (M19) considered it important to prepare an attractive environment and a friendly relationship in these spaces to keep students and lecturers associated, along with their studies, and let them engage in different aspects of academic life in formal and informal settings. In this regard, the perception of Respondents (F12) and (M19) towards social networking sites enhancing student productivity echoes Okoro’s (2012) argument that the development of interpersonal communication skills on social networking sites can enhance student engagement. From interviewees’ responses, it can be seen that having a friendly relationship with students can positively influence their academic performance and achievements.

In the same vein, it has been claimed that relationships will be stronger when instructors and learners communicate and exchange knowledge and experience for the sake of enhancing teaching, learning and communicative activities (Boud, 1994; Mayer, 1996).

In this regard, Respondent (M2) acknowledged that utilising SNSs in higher education has contributed to developing student–student and student–lecturer relationships. He stated:

Educators should be allowed to build a relationship with their students as friends on these social platforms to be closer to one another. Through these informal online sessions, they can discuss relevant subjects to their courses and interact with them with the purpose of assisting them in assimilating knowledge, not to give them the knowledge directly without making any effort to get it. From what I have seen, integrating SNSs in education has assisted in developing informal communication between students themselves and with their faculty members.

Therefore, it can be perceived that those participating academics have put an emphasis on the importance of developing a friendly relationship with students on these social platforms to support teaching and learning practices. They highlighted the matter of discovering students' talents and abilities through their participation on SNSs, which might not have been uncovered through regular educational sessions for some reasons. Moreover, their practical involvement on SNSs has contributed to enhancing students' communication skills and developing their abilities, particularly underperforming students. The subjects of having a friendship with students and boundaries that some Saudi academics consider placing around their interactions with students on SNSs have been discussed in more detail in Section 5.3.

### **5.5.2. Limitations of Employing Social Networking in Teaching**

Analysing interviews illustrates that there are a number of limitations that could influence faculty members at Saudi universities to employ SNSs in their teaching and communication methods. According to the participating academics in this investigation, the following aspects are considered essential.



### 5.5.2.1. Visual Communication

Looking at the nature of online interaction on social networking sites as opposed to face-to-face communication, 28% of participating faculty members in this research considered that teaching and learning via these virtual settings involve a lack of visual communication. They believe that observing and perceiving facial expressions, body language, and reactions during a lecture are essential to both the faculty member and the student, as they are significant factors in teaching and learning practices. Respondent (F10) said:

Although integrating SNSs into education is useful for lecturers and students on different levels, there is a concern related to not gaining direct feedback from both parties: lecturers and learners. Also, body language is not present in this type of connection as compared to face-to-face interaction, which is very important in communication, especially in specialisations like ours: media and communication studies.

The majority of them recommended that lecturers support their text messages through other attractive forms such as images, videos and graphical messages. Respondent (M18) illustrated: "Because we cannot see facial and body expressions in virtual environments, we probably miss a major part of the educational interaction." He added:

In my experience, the most common type of message disseminated on Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp among lecturers and their students in our department is the text message. It is really difficult to depend on these text or voice messages in interaction with others, particularly in educational sessions. Thus, it is advisable to use videos or images to clarify the meaning of what you want to send.

In a similar vein, Respondent (F9) clarified that it is difficult to be in contact with others and not to receive their direct feedback: verbal responses, body expressions, and reactions, especially in teaching and learning activities. It makes it difficult for both the sender and the receiver to deliver and understand the message in plain text, as she illustrated.

Interestingly, it can be seen that there are some concerns raised by participating academics about not being able to see students and recognise their body language via these virtual interactions on SNSs, which can help in understanding their reciprocal messages. Yet, this is also one of the advantages given of employing these platforms in education, due to the gender segregation issue. To interrogate these complexities, the majority of participants in this investigation consider that integrating SNSs into education is the best available solution to dealing with the issue of gender segregation while not disrespecting their cultural and social considerations. In the case of teaching the opposite gender in Saudi Arabia, even if in regular teaching methods, visual communication is completely missed due to these social restrictions. However, they have mentioned these matters, that is, not being able to see facial and body expressions, when comparing between offline and online communication with the same gender in terms of teaching methods.

Other academics have not considered this particular matter to be a concern. They illustrated that many accredited programmes, courses and training sessions have been officially conducted online at graduate and postgraduate levels by various authorised educational institutions. Respondent (F14) indicated that thousands of students around the world have benefitted from such educational programmes and achieved their qualifications by applying to these institutions and choosing the educational route of distance learning. She continued:

Of course, obtaining learners' feedback is really important for instructors to examine to what extent their delivered messages have been received. However, a higher level of education, such as graduate and postgraduate studies, is not as significant as lower levels of education.

Therefore, it can be perceived that participating academics acknowledge that teaching and learning via these social platforms involve a lack of social cues, which are considered an essential aspect of the communication and interaction taking place between lecturers and their students. However, they illustrated that backing up written texts with images, videos and graphics can help to overcome this barrier of employing SNSs in education.

### **5.5.2.2. Issues in Managing Profiles and Groups**

The information and communication technology revolution has changed many aspects on the levels of individuals, organisations and societies. One aspect that has been positively affected is freedom of expression, in which social networking sites have played a great role, particularly in the Arab world. SNSs have provided several means and widened the opportunity for people to express their opinions freely and disseminate unlimited ideas. However, it can be seen that a number of participating academics in this study are concerned about some negative aspects regarding how they are being utilised and for what purposes. One of these significant worries is the difficulty in controlling or managing SNSs. Forty-four per cent of academics involved in this study perceived a lack of control over the usage of these sites. Respondent (M7) demonstrated that these platforms necessitate some regulations being controlled, to some extent, and secure for users. But as he asserted, “these regulations must not affect the opportunity of freedom of expression, which is enhanced by these social networks”. Respondent (M18) mentioned:

Saudi Arabia was one of the first Arab countries to put in place legislations to adjust and control, to some extent, the digital spaces, particularly the Internet and SNSs. Of course, they want to keep a space for freedom of expression but be taken under their governments’ control. However, I do not expect these networks to be governed by such trials in the current age of information and communication revolution.

A number of participants (34%) explained that students or other users generating undesirable content is annoying. Reviewing interviewees’ responses reveals that unwanted content can be generated in different forms. One of the annoying activities on SNSs is the large quantity received of duplicate or repeated content, as described. Respondents (M6) and (F27) illustrated that most academics express their dissatisfaction with receiving a large amount of duplicate texts and clips multiple times on these sites. They asserted that, due to the abundance of repeated information on SNSs with little interest, many professors are reluctant to follow up and pay attention to what is disseminated on these platforms. Respondent (M6) stated:

I know a number of academics who have limited their usage of these platforms due to [receiving duplicate content multiple times]. For instance, different students share the same article in the same group. In another form of repeating content, the user receives the same material from different individuals and groups on WhatsApp and Facebook in particular. It is something that is annoying and time-consuming.

From another aspect, 22% of participating academics declared that some students use the groups set up for educational purposes to discuss non-educational topics. Respondent (F10) demonstrated this concern clearly: “One of the main concerns is when academics create educational accounts or groups on SNSs for particular courses — some students discuss irrelevant topics which divert those gatherings from their primary educational objectives.” Similarly, Respondent (M24) stated:

I was flexible with my students at the beginning, allowing them to discuss what they wanted in these groups. However, I noticed that students spent much time discussing sport, politics, and other issues. This kind of communication and debate can improve their skills but, on the other hand, it causes some damage to their relationships, especially when they debate sensitive issues regarding their personalities or families. For example, I have seen some of them become angry when students make a mockery or criticism of their favourite teams.

Therefore, they emphasised that when lecturers use closed groups on Facebook or WhatsApp for educational purposes, they must first set guidelines and instructions to keep these gatherings for what they were originally created. For instance, academics can solve this issue by pointing students towards discussing these non-educational issues privately or in other spaces, rather than in educational groups. Analysing data collected shows that 28% of academics participating in this study indicated the importance of making these rules clear for all members of these educational groups.

Another essential issue that may be unclear to some users, especially in the Arab world (due to the sudden revolution and openness in information and communication technology), is that of distinguishing and determining the border between freedom of expression and insulting others. A total of 19% of participants pointed out that there are some users who do not differentiate between freedom of speech and hurting or insulting others. They highlighted that there is a delicate balance which must prevail between these two concepts in order to protect people from being harmed by disseminating sensitive or false information, and, on the contrary, to maintain a wide space in which people can express themselves freely. Respondents (M3) and (M18) emphasised that users must be able to differentiate between freedom of speech and causing harm to other users. They revealed that there were many posts or tweets on SNSs which could cause damage to other users' reputation or social status. The solution, from their viewpoint, is to start educating society members and constructing a societal culture to guide users on how to deal with these matters appropriately. Respondent (F12) explained:

People have the right to express their views or provide some information about any public concern. However, they must be sure that information provided is true and that opinions shared are not harmful to others or exposing some sensitive or private information about them, especially in a conservative society such as Saudi Arabia.

Furthermore, those previous participants stressed the importance of respecting general morals and societal values, which should be taken into users' consideration, be it in an offline or online setting.

One of the limitations of using SNSs in learning and teaching activities, as 16% of respondents argued, is that SNSs are distracting and not supporting deep reflection and rational discussion, as the technology has accustomed people to be fast in almost everything in their lives. Respondent (M3) stated:

Although conducting courses or extracurricular activities via SNSs can be amazing, especially in attracting students' attention, it may become a distraction. These social networks do not enable learners to have in-

depth discussions, as they usually happen in actual face-to-face meetings under the supervision of faculty members.

Likewise, Respondent (M18) claimed that SNSs do not allow users to reflect deeply and make points rationally. According to his practical experience, he explained that the majority of students are hurried in their responses to others. As he described, quickness in chatting with friends can help in acquiring some skills in writing, but, on the other hand, leads to students not thinking about things in a more critical way.

To conclude, it can be perceived that participating academics look at the previous aspects as factors that could limit the effectiveness of employing social networking in education. As noted, a number of participants have provided some practical solutions to overcoming the potential impact of these obstacles in the academic setting. Yet, the success in dealing with these limitations, as some academics indicated, depends on how good users' knowledge, abilities and experiences are in using these applications.

### **5.5.2.3. Academics' Perception of Young People and their Usage of Social Networking**

Reviewing data collected reveals that a number of participants differentiate between young users and others on SNSs. They complain about various practices conducted by this category of users. Therefore, this section is about academics' perspectives of young users and their usage of SNSs in general. Most of the matters mentioned in this regard are related to the lack of accuracy in dissemination and understanding copyrights. Also, there are some cases of what can be described as misuse and excessive use. Providing some examples of interviewees' opinions will enrich the discussion about these issues, as follows.

Although they value their benefits on different levels, 25% of faculty members involved in this study considered that there is a lack of accuracy, credibility and verification of information on SNSs among young users. Respondents (F28) and (F29) affirmed that the lack of accuracy in disseminating knowledge on these platforms is considered a significant issue. They illustrated that most young users forward what they receive directly without giving emphasis to what is accurate and what is not. Therefore, Respondent (M20) strongly encouraged users to have a sort of verification. He

confirmed: “We must seek accuracy of the right resources before sharing or sending any information on these platforms.”

Respondent (M18) shared the viewpoint of prior respondents that there are many valuable and beneficial benefits of employing SNSs in education. However, he complained about there being many repeated tweets and texts that can bear the inaccuracy of information sent through these platforms. Furthermore, according to participants, there is a general lack of understanding copyrights, rules and regulations for dissemination on SNSs, particularly among young users. Respondent (M7) stated: “It has been perceived that most of what we have seen on SNSs is copied and pasted without any respect to copyrights.”

Looking at the nature of the content on social platforms, a number of faculty members (22%) involved in this investigation were concerned about excessive use and misuse conducted by some young users on these platforms. Respondent (F27) argued that many users, especially younger ones, spend much more time on amusement, news, games and songs than on seeking valuable knowledge. Additionally, there are some negative practices, e.g. inaccuracy in disseminating, and some prejudices against individuals or communities on Twitter in particular, about which she was very concerned. Likewise, Respondent (M18) stated:

Much of the technical stuff has been transformed from necessary to consumptive activities. I met an unemployed, young man carrying two mobiles in his pocket. I talked to him for a while, asking him about his business. Unfortunately, he told me that he is unemployed and only used these mobiles to keep in touch with his friends and to chat with others on SNSs. I am sure that we have many more like him in our society. Imagine the scale of undisciplined communications and excessive use and their impact at individual, familial and societal levels.

Respondents (M23) and (M24) declared that many academics engaging on SNSs have a concern about misuse on these platforms and the lack of maintaining a balance between what is necessary and what is not. Therefore, they acknowledge that, undoubtedly,

these 'bad practices', particularly of young students, on SNSs can affect and limit faculty members' engagement and participation. Enhancing the culture of using SNSs optimally and for beneficial objectives among users is a major challenge that must be negotiated, particularly through higher education and media institutions, as they have suggested.

Respondent (M18) expressed his annoyance of what he had seen on SNSs. He described some users dealing with others on digital platforms as "a mess in the technical arena", especially young or low-educated people. He stressed the importance of working to expand the culture of respecting others' privacy among young users, in particular, and raise their awareness and understanding in this regard to enable them to differentiate between what behaviour is acceptable and what is not. Respondent (F9) shares the opinion that some young users deal with others in an improper manner. She said:

I have been a user of these platforms for years. To be honest with you, most of the users are polite and respectful. But I have seen some users who are not committed to the general culture of respecting others and appreciating their viewpoints when it comes in opposition to their own opinions. Some of their responses are rude and impolite. In my opinion, one of the reasons for their doing so is because their accounts do not have their real names.

Respondent (M18) claimed that "the landmarks of the communicational ecology on these social platforms are unclear". He continued: "In the society of Saudi Arabia, there is a large technological wave that has begun and still forming." Respondent (F29) stated: "I am not surprised by what happens on SNSs. Some negative examples of the usage are expected to be seen, particularly when openness to using technology suddenly takes place in a conservative society."

As an attempt to contribute to solving this issue, Respondent (M19) illustrated that "academics must increase their efforts to spread the culture of how to respect others on these social networks and deal with opposing viewpoints politely on these platforms". Furthermore, Respondent (F27) stated:

Even though there are different negative practices, as mentioned before, I appreciate that there is much positive participation in all



aspects of knowledge, training, and developing society. Moreover, I value the great and respected efforts made by scholars, intellectuals, public figures and academics to offer advice, direct, correct, and raise awareness. Also, I encourage them to take more practical steps in educating young users and raising their awareness of all of these matters.

Nevertheless, they acknowledged that it is not easy to master; more time is needed to educate young users, in particular, and raise a participatory culture among users in general.

## **5.6. The Main Outcomes of the Chapter**

Analysing the data collected has shown that there are several ways of integrating social networking platforms in higher educational institutions, which can be summarised in the following aspects:

- In-class teaching: teaching where SNSs are a core component (e.g. YouTube).
- Providing extra materials or discussion spaces to supplement in-class teaching.
- Teaching distance-learning students.
- Teaching students studying at another campus.
- Providing extracurricular activities.

The practical methods of using social networking for teaching purposes:

- Creating private groups on WhatsApp or closed groups on Facebook or Google+.
- Creating a playlist of videos on their own YouTube channels.
- Setting up an open page on Facebook for particular courses.
- Setting up academic accounts on Twitter for particular courses.

Motivations for using SNSs include:

1. Expanding peer support and collaborative learning methods
2. Access to various sources and providing up-to-date knowledge.
3. Generating and improving content by students

4. Enhancing students' communication skills
5. Developing more critical and reflective thinking
6. Overcoming social restrictions

Concerns about using SNSs:

Even though the faculty members have different motivations to employing SNSs into education, they still have different concerns regarding to the educational aspect. The main concerns that have been discussed in this chapter are related to:

1. Issues in managing profiles and groups.
2. Receiving a large quantity of repeated content.
3. A lack of visual communication and accuracy in dissemination.

All these findings will be summarised and combined with other findings emerged of this investigation to construct the conceptual framework (see Section 6.5.).

## **5.7. Summary of the Chapter**

This chapter was concerned with exploring the nature of the academic relationship between faculty members and their students, and how these social platforms are practically integrated in teaching practices. It has revealed that 28% of participating academics believe that the relationship between lecturers and students should be formal, even if it takes place in an online setting, while 25% argue that the relationship between lecturers and students on social platforms should be more informal than how it is in the real academic environment. The third group of participating faculty members (47%) consider the idea of how to combine and maintain a balance between being assistive and friendly with students to be crucial, and simultaneously being serious as a lecturer with his or her students.

Furthermore, to examine how SNSs have been practically utilised in teaching practices at the Saudi universities, this investigation has found that several teaching activities were employed, including: using one or more of the SNSs as a core component in class teaching, using them to supplement face-to-face teaching by providing extra materials related to their subjects or also extracurricular activities, and teaching distance-learning students or students studying at another campus.

The findings and discussion of interview participants' responses presented in this chapter have indicated that developing learning and teaching activities within the social network environment is likely to lead to the acquisition of different aspects of practical and theoretical knowledge among social networking students and faculty lecturers. The majority of respondents considered that the practical involvement of students contributed to an active engagement with subjects discussed and a deeper collaboration with their peers and teaching staff, which helped students to develop critical and reflective thinking. In relation to the teaching and learning activities on SNSs, the findings emerging from this study indicated that SNSs have expanded teaching and learning opportunities through these platforms. Some of the elements have inspired faculty members to integrate SNSs into teaching, learning and communication activities in academic settings. All of these motivations and practical applications of utilising social networking in educational settings have been presented and discussed in light of the community of practice, constructivism, and connectivism theories, as well as relevant literature, in order to underpin the current research and provide a better understanding of its findings.

On the other hand, the findings presented in this chapter have illustrated that there are a number of limitations and concerns that could influence faculty members' attitudes at Saudi universities towards employing SNSs in their teaching and communication methods. According to the participating academics in this investigation, the lack of visual communication and the large quantity received of duplicate or repeated content on these social networking platforms were considered essential in this regard. Moreover, the inability to differentiate between freedom of speech and hurting or insulting others, particularly of young users, and not paying attention to accuracy in dissemination and copyrights could result in limiting the effectiveness of integrating SNSs into education.

The previous motivations and concerns discussed were mostly relevant to teaching and learning practices. However, conducting an investigation into a theme such as this within an environment that has a culture such as that of Saudi Arabia necessitates paying close attention to the most important cultural and societal considerations. This study has found that there are a number of motivations for and concerns about integrating SNSs

in education, from cultural and social aspects, which will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

## **Chapter 6 : Social Restrictions and Technological Affordances**

### **6.1. Introduction**

The previous chapter has contributed towards answering questions related to the major motivations for and concerns about integrating SNSs into an academic setting, but from the aspect of educational practices managed by participating academics at the Saudi universities. However, this chapter provides an in-depth analysis and discussion of interviewees' perspectives regarding utilisation of SNSs in education, but with regard to the matter of gender and technology in Saudi academic society. It uses both the Community of Practice Theory and the Hyper-personal Communication Theory as bases for explaining the findings that emerged, with a comparison to literature where relevant. Additionally, it provides an illustration of cultural and societal barriers and how integrating these social platforms can be an effective solution in this regard. Throughout this chapter, there are some indications of the demographic characteristics between participating faculty members in relation to their perspectives and practices of SNSs in academic settings.

### **6.2. Cultural and Social Concerns**

It has been seen clearly in the previous chapter that the majority of academics participating in this research have a positive attitude towards employing SNSs in an educational setting. Nevertheless, there are still concerns related to the cultural and societal dimension in Saudi society. According to the findings, cultural and social issues were considered a high concern (62%) among faculty members involved in this investigation. Analysis of interviewees' responses reveals that participating academics were worried about three particular issues in this regard: women's self-presentation, leakage of women's personal information, and consequences of mixing genders online.

#### **6.2.1. Women's Self-presentation**

It has been discussed in the introduction chapter of this study that Saudi Arabia can be described as a conservative society, which has particular cultural and societal considerations. Due to these respects, there are interactive and communicative

restrictions between men and women in Saudi Arabia. As a general rule in most aspects of life, women must avoid unnecessary conversations with men who are not their relatives. Consequently, education is gender-segregated at all levels. The idea of applying segregation between genders in educational and other public or private institutions is to let women learn, work and participate freely in suitable settings, and to give them a wide range of privacy. How this particularity of Saudi society will be dealt with in the virtual world, especially by women, is the essence of the discussion in this section to investigate how they present themselves through social networking platforms.

Unlike face-to-face interactions, in the virtual world, such as on social networking sites, users mostly focus on their profiles and the material presented to succeed in introducing themselves positively and achieving audience expectations. In the case of Saudi Arabia, most women do not use their real names and personal photos in their profiles on SNSs. Instead, they use nicknames or pseudonyms and symbolic pictures to present themselves online, due to the sensitiveness and significance of these issues in Saudi society. According to faculty members who participated in this investigation, Saudi women generally do not like to show their personal photos or any information relating to their general or private lives, including work, hobbies, interests, marital status, and others. In Saudi society, it is considered that all information that can lead to identifying one's personality (mainly in the case of women) must not be displayed online (see Section 4.4.3). Analysing the data collected shows that younger lecturers were not as vocal as older academics in supporting this perspective of not presenting their personal information on these social networks, except in displaying private photos on their profiles. Due to its sensitiveness in Saudi society, this matter has received much attention from the majority of participants, all of whom are of different ages.

The participating academics in this research talked about this particular issue but from different aspects. The majority of interviewees (62%) revealed that they understand and respect this case of privacy and agree that exposing a personal photo of a woman is a sensitive issue in Saudi society from a cultural and social perspective. However, they confirmed that, from their viewpoint, there is no convincing rationale for users to use

pseudonyms on social networking sites (see Section 4.4.3 for more statistical details on how many respondents use real names and photos). Respondent (F11) stated:

Respecting our cultural principles, most Saudi women do not share their personal photos or place them on their profiles. In my personal opinion, that is understood, but what is not understood is why some users — men and women — use nicknames or pseudonyms on their accounts. How can other users trust unknown users and participate with them?

Likewise, when Respondent (F27) was asked about how women present themselves on SNSs in terms of using their personal names and photos, she said:

Of course, using personal photos for women is not acceptable in Saudi society. I do not use my private photos, but I present myself through these platforms by using my real name and some general information about my work as a lecturer at the university. Participating using their real names on SNSs will not affect users' identity or privacy at all, and is not against our culture or society.

In the same vein, Respondent (M17) clearly illustrated that there is no reason for users not to participate by using their real names on social networks. From his standpoint, he claimed that it is not acceptable to use a nickname when one communicates with other users, especially in an educational discussion. In addition, he argued that it is difficult for lecturers to know their students and assess their online participation when they use nicknames.

From a relevant aspect, a large percentage (53%) of faculty members, especially academic women, demonstrated that it is difficult for women in Saudi society to present themselves on social networking platforms in an effective way. Respondent (F29) illustrated that SNSs can provide female users, particularly in conservative societies such as Saudi Arabia, with a new opportunity for self-presentation. However, she wondered "how to present myself if I find it difficult to use my real name, my photo, and some information about my work, family and my personal life". Furthermore, she went on to say that "other users would not trust me, and they would consider me to be an unknown

personality". For the purpose of clarification, Respondent (F29) is one of the few female respondents who use their real name and photo to be recognised by other users of SNSs. It seems that she was not really convinced by some relevant cultural considerations in Saudi society, which were respected by the majority of academics involved in this research. In this regard, a number of female participants in this investigation reported that there is an actual challenge: respecting their cultural and social considerations and, at the same time, having influential self-presentation on social platforms and in online settings.

On the other hand, 25% of participating academics indicated that it is not necessary for users of SNSs to be in mutual contact with a wider community using their real names. For example, Respondent (M6) explained this by saying that there is an opportunity for users to maintain their relationships and communication with a close circle of friends in private groups using their real names and they could, at the same time, keep in touch with other online settings using nicknames to benefit from what these platforms offer to audiences. In a similar view, Respondent (F31) does not look at pseudonyms on SNSs as a matter that we should be concerned about. She said:

In my experience, I had accounts on SNSs but I used pseudonyms for several reasons; one was to participate in these social spaces freely. When I adopted my real name, my contributions dramatically decreased due to privacy issues and other social and cultural considerations.

Furthermore, she explicitly clarified that the major reason for most female users using nicknames or pseudonyms is that they are worried about their privacy and want to participate freely without having any connection to their academic or social status. Veletsianos and Kimmons (2013) highlighted that academics over social networking want to structure their participation in a certain way and maintain appropriate and meaningful connections due to the concern about their online identity. Moreover, Gunawardena et al. (2009) and Zaidieh (2012) confirmed that cultural and social backgrounds can play a major role in affecting academics' perspectives towards protecting their online identities and, accordingly, their practices on SNSs. Respondent (F12) shared the same opinion as (F31). Moreover, she concluded that when we discuss



subjects on these platforms, we should look at the content itself, evaluate the message disseminated, and try not to establish who the author is. To clarify, those participants were talking about this point in general, not in educational or professional usage.

In terms of the way in which users of social networks, who do not use their real names, can present themselves, this category of academics were of the view that paying more attention to the message contributed through SNSs is the best way in which to be in contact with those who have similar interests. As they confirmed, this method can encourage users to take part in online activities while maintaining a high level of privacy and, thus, respecting society's values. It seems that those academics are worried about mixing genders, whether it happens in physical settings (offline) or in virtual environments (online). This point will receive more attention and clarification later in this chapter (see Section 6.2.3).

As a practical attempt to solve this difficulty, many faculty members (59%) involved in this study demonstrated that they used closed groups on WhatsApp, Facebook or Google+ in order to protect students' privacy, especially women, and, at the same time, get them involved in an online learning community. They considered this issue to be a significant matter in a conservative society and believed that closed groups could be a solution to this problem. For instance, Respondent (F14) clarified that she often used WhatsApp and Facebook on most of her courses. Moreover, she explained why these specific networks have been employed more than other social networking sites, saying that these particular platforms have the advantage of providing private pages and closed groups. Through these closed gatherings, the lecturer can discuss with students and respond to their questions about some of their course topics that have been presented in face-to-face lectures. Due to the nature of Saudi society, Respondents (M5) and (F11) confirmed that these private online communities are more convenient and useful, especially for female lecturers and students (for further details on creating groups on SNSs, see Section 5.4).

From a cultural and societal aspect, Rosen et al. (2010) illustrated that there are cultural differences in self-presentation performances, both online and offline. Furthermore, they suggested that there are different behaviours related to gender-based choices as to how to present themselves in both online and offline settings. Therefore, this

diversity of viewpoints among participating interviewees in relation to self-presentation behaviour can be considered a reflection of the cultural difference between communities and individuals.

Furthermore, it can be debated that online gatherings have expanded the opportunity for both genders to communicate with each other more than offline settings in Saudi society and other similar conservative societies. As the hyper-personal communication theory suggests, computer-mediated communication (CMC) provides the sender with a greater ability, compared to face-to-face (FTF) interactions, to develop his or her self-presentation (Walther, 1996). These features can contribute to enabling individuals, especially women, in these conservative societies to achieve a selective and optimised presentation of themselves to others in a way that is not against their cultural and societal principles. For instance, Respondent (F26) stated:

As you know, in Saudi society, there is segregation between genders in education, work, and other institutions. Women find SNSs appropriate platforms on which to communicate and participate on different aspects, whether in personal, social or even cultural subjects. But, I am personally committed to my cultural values (e.g. not chatting with non-relative people without any rational reason and not putting my photo on the profile — these behaviours are not socially accepted offline or online). Therefore, I think that these social networks have given women, in particular, an opportunity to get involved without being against their social and cultural considerations.

Respondent (F32) shared the perspective of Respondent (F26), adding:

Our society has some particular respects in how men and women communicate with the opposite gender. And there is a broad difference between relatives and non-relatives in this regard. SNSs have facilitated how to communicate with others by selecting the material you want to display publicly or privately to specific individuals or groups.

Therefore, prior examples of perspectives and practices reveal that SNSs have given users, particularly women in the case of Saudi Arabia, an opportunity to engage in society. Moreover, these platforms have helped them to select the material presented and to whom it is presented, be it publicly or privately. However, a number of female participants acknowledged that there is an actual challenge: respecting their cultural and social considerations and, at the same time, presenting themselves in an effective manner on these social platforms and in online settings.

### **6.2.2. Leakage of Women's Personal Information**

Leakage of personal information on social networking platforms can be considered a crucial concern among users, whether that happens on the level of individuals or organisations. In a conservative society such as Saudi Arabia, this concern, however, can be viewed as one of the most important issues among individuals and members of the whole community. For more clarification, in general, it is not socially acceptable for women to use a real photo of themselves on their profiles, or to uncover their personal or family information to non-relative users. As indicated, analysing interviewees' answers shows that the majority of faculty members (62%) who participated in this study considered this to be a sensitive issue.

To avoid leakage of users' personal information, participants advise users, particularly women, not to disseminate private photos or confidential information through these open spaces, as the majority of them described. At the same time, they asked SNS providers to develop and improve their security systems to combat penetration and hacking. For instance, Respondent (M2) stated:

I have seen a number of cases involving a leakage of private photos. The main reason behind these situations was that of users' usage. Some of them were not aware of the consequences of doing so, while others sent these private moments to their friends or colleagues, who unintentionally disseminated them to the public. Therefore, this matter must be taken into users' consideration, particularly among female users.

In a similar manner, Respondent (F28) said:

The leakage of private photos or sensitive information on these social networks is a significant issue about which most Saudi users are concerned, as I expect. Both the users themselves and the providers of these services (SNSs) must take responsibility for protecting all private data put on these platforms. Users should have enough knowledge and skills to protect themselves. And SNSs should improve the security of their networks.

Furthermore, Respondents (F14) and (M22) demonstrated that, although SNSs are easy to use, there are a number of users, particularly young users in Saudi society, who are unaware that they can set, check and modify their privacy settings. Therefore, they asserted that the users of SNSs should take care of their personal information. In this regard, Gross and Acquisti (2005) revealed that the majority of users do not check and alter their privacy settings on a regular basis, which allows anonymous users to gain access to their personal information. Respondent (M20) claimed that exposure of sensitive information or private photographs on SNSs is one of the essential issues of which we all should be aware, and realised its potential consequences, whether on individuals or on society as a whole, especially in a conservative society such as Saudi Arabia. He continued: "Due to its sensitiveness and significance in our society, it is not acceptable to put your private photographs or information on SNSs to be seen by all who browse these social networks, whether they are friends, colleagues or unknown users of the public audience." Similarly, Respondent (F25) declared:

Some people post, tweet or share their private moments and give more details about their families. In my opinion, that is inappropriate. Those users may not be aware that they are disseminating very private information in public spaces such as social networking sites. In general, users should secure their accounts and stop publicising their private moments or providing personal information on such platforms.

She concluded: "No one, but you, can take care of your personal information." Respondent (F27) also affirmed that she usually asks her students to deal carefully with

their private information or personal photos uploaded on SNSs, especially those that may lead to identifying private aspects of their personal lives. She stressed that “we have to have special areas for our privacy”. Therefore, previous participants strongly advised users, particularly women, to take responsibility in order to keep personal information secure and protect privacy, as this is a significant issue in Saudi society.

In contrast to those participants (75%) who believe that both users and SNSs share responsibility, 25% of participants considered that SNSs should be taking responsibility for personal information leakage. They claimed that managers and designers of social networks must have secure systems for their data and take information leakage into account. Furthermore, they asked them to be tough when dealing with third parties because there are many unauthorised parties who could take this data and circulate it for commercial purposes.

Respondents (M8) and (F32) declared that, despite the fact that there are lots of efforts made by SNSs to protect users’ privacy and keep their data secure, there is, unfortunately, leaking of information via these platforms, which, in turn, could be something of concern for the users of these sites. Respondent (M8) said: “To be fair, there are great efforts made by SNSs to protect users’ personal data. However, it is recognised that there are a number of individuals and institutions complaining about the leakage of private information to other users.” Respondent (F11) shared her concern with previous participants regarding this matter. In addition, she continued: “This increase in the leakage of users’ information could be an essential factor in changing users’ trust in these social networks, which may, in turn, result in affecting their reputation among users.”

These previous perspectives are compatible with the findings that emerged from the study led by Kuzma (2011). As he reported, even with some local laws and standards that seek to protect privacy and users’ data to some extent, there are serious problems with social networking sites collecting users’ data through a variety of technical mechanisms. According to Kuzma, this could result in potential problems with users’ trust and lead to abandoning the use of a specific site as long as users have several alternative platforms of social networking.

Furthermore, a number of participating academics claimed that some users do not have a sufficient understanding of how to secure their accounts and protect their privacy on these platforms. Moreover, they demonstrated that some updates of these networks revealed that there are technical defects that can result in making it easy for hackers to obtain confidential information of users. Respondent (F12) stated:

Unfortunately, some students do not have an adequate awareness of privacy issues and information security. SNS providers can assist in raising users' knowledge and skills by continually warning them, especially when they see any deficiency in this regard, whether on their sites or on users' profiles regarding providing sensitive information to the public.

Moreover, Respondent (M7) asserted: "SNSs must pay more attention to strengthening their systems with regard to the matter of privacy and data protection. It is their responsibility to make their users safe from potential risk."

Therefore, it can be realised that those participating interviewees agreed that as long as the providers of these social networks acknowledge that they are concerned about their sites' users, they should seriously take these matters into account and pay more attention to safeguarding users' privacy. Furthermore, they confirmed that SNSs must fulfil their responsibility in protecting their security systems from being penetrated by other parties or hackers.

From another viewpoint, some academics, particularly women, think that SNSs seek to collect users' data and use them for marketing purposes or as cooperation with some governmental institutions, such as the police. Therefore, there is an intended disclosure of some confidential information for one reason or another, regardless of whether or not that is a legitimate act. Respondent (F26) believed that there is a sort of mutual cooperation between these social networks and some specific institutions, organisations and countries. As she expected, these institutions attempt to collect data about people and societies to have some indicators and conduct investigations into the level of social, economic, political or security aspects. Therefore, she perceives that it is important to be aware and use them properly while in contact with others and not to

expose sensitive information or private photos. In this regard, Sheehan (1999) found that women were more concerned about information gathering associated with online advertising and marketing practices and its effect on personal privacy. Similarly, Respondent (F27) said:

Of course, these social networking sites have facilitated communication among people in more attractive and interactive ways but, most likely, there are other purposes, one of which is the marketing purpose. SNSs have a high number of users and huge data that can be used to achieve this commercial objective.

By the same token, Respondent (M6) clarified that great endeavours were carried out by SNS service providers to protect users' privacy. However, he anticipates that a number of social networks seek to gather personal data about their users for different reasons, e.g. commercial, economic or security purposes. He suggested that users should be aware of these practices and not reveal their private information on these sites.

To conclude, it can be recognised that the vast majority of participants in this investigation have a concern about personal information leakage on SNSs. As they indicated, both SNSs and users themselves are required to pay more attention to protecting personal information and photos from being leaked, hacked or penetrated by other parties. They appreciate efforts made in this regard but they urge SNSs, in particular, to develop their strategies and procedures to have more secure systems in order to maintain the privacy of users. Moreover, it can be seen that a number of users do not believe in the reliability of these social platforms, especially with regard to privacy issues and protection of users' confidential data.

### **6.2.3. Consequences of the Mixing of Genders Online**

As indicated, segregation between genders is applied in the Saudi educational system at all levels. The purpose is to give women a wide range of privacy to learn, work and participate freely in suitable settings, as they are required to avoid unnecessary conversations with non-relative men in Saudi society. The question here is how mixing genders online can be perceived in the context of Saudi Arabia. Is there a real difference

between mixing genders in physical settings and online settings from Saudi people's perspective? In terms of this research, how do academics look at the mixing of genders online on social networking platforms? This is one of the issues that I have discussed with the faculty members who participated in the interviews of this investigation.

The majority of interviewees (72%) think that mixing genders online can be seen as an inevitable result of the increasing need for both genders to be in contact with each other. They believe that it is more convenient for both genders to have communication via these social networks than via direct face-to-face interaction, due to respecting the norms of their culture and society. However, they stressed that all of these online gatherings must be for legitimate purposes, such as a discussion about some educational, social, economic, medical and other issues. From their point of view, there is no contradiction between these legal meetings and their beliefs or values with regard to the level of their religion, culture or society. Yet, they were concerned about the potential consequences of such online mixing between genders, particularly in a conservative society. Reviewing the demographic characteristics of those participants illustrates that this opinion was supported by academics whose ages are less than 50 years.

With regard to what potential consequences of mixing genders online were observed or expected by many concerned academics, analysing interviewees' responses shows that dating, harassment and blackmail were the main issues mentioned by participating academics in this study. For the purpose of clarification, in Islamic culture, any sort of dating between genders or engaging in a romantic relationship is completely prohibited. The only acceptable kind of romantic relationship between men and women is what can happen after an arranged marriage (a marriage planned and agreed upon by the bride, groom and their families).

Respondent (M2) described the mixing of genders online: "I think that it has become generally acceptable in Saudi society." He continued:

In reality, it is accepted that there are many positives and, on the contrary, there are some behavioural negatives. Thus, the focus must be on the positive aspects in order to take advantage of these social



networks. Furthermore, we must pay more attention to promoting the level of awareness among society members, and educate young people, in particular, about these potential negatives.

Respondents (M6) and (F13) indicated that they have recently seen several instances of blackmail through SNSs, which can be considered a criminal offence; most of them occurred after going on a date with the opposite gender, whom they met online. As a similar concern, Respondent (M24) confirmed that “there are many cases in which women were facing demands, usually money, in return for not revealing confidential information or very private photos of them on SNSs that have been taken during some previous dating meetings.”

Respondent (F9) affirmed that the values derived from their culture and society prevent direct meetings between genders, unless it is strictly necessary. She was worried about the expansion of mixing genders on these digital platforms. She continued: “I am anxious as to whether these gatherings between genders online are the first step towards making actual communication and building relationships between genders, which would encourage young users to break their societal considerations.” Similarly, Respondent (M5) expressed his concern:

I am afraid of developing the idea of mixing genders in education to include non-educational objectives. Allowing genders to meet online for educational purposes and then expanding these meetings to be outside the educational context could contribute to a change in some of our generational behaviours, which may, in turn, lead to changing some values, traditions and morals in society.

Those concerned academics pointed out the difficulty in controlling the mixing of genders on these social platforms or limiting its outcomes. However, a number of them suggested some strategies that could help in this regard. Respondent (M3) stated:

I am not the one who supports controlling SNSs, as it is really difficult, but I am in favour of issuing some legislation to protect the online settings of these offences, such as harassment and blackmail, whether

on SNSs or any online platform. I think that such actions could help in this regard.

Respondent (F10) said: “It is not beneficial to attempt to control the mixing of genders on SNSs during this time of information and communication revolution.” Moreover, Respondent (M24) stated: “No practical way would be effective in limiting these social platforms if we thought to do so.” However, they agreed that raising users’ awareness of the culture and how to deal with these platforms is a significant matter, which can assist them in being aware of these potential consequences.

As a result, it can be seen that those academics are concerned about changing the behaviour of users, particularly young people, which they consider to be one of the most important fears among society as a whole. On the other hand, other participants consider this potential of employing SNSs in the context of conservative societies to be an advantage, rather than a problem (see Section 6.3).

In a nutshell, previous discussion about different viewpoints provided by interviewees suggests that there is tension between wanting to use these social networks to give people more freedom, e.g. women. Yet, participants seem to be saying that they want to do this while maintaining traditional cultural values. Furthermore, it is worth considering that there is a concern about giving male and female students a formal opportunity to meet that may be developed in such a way that it is outside of the educational environment and, thus, becomes a romantic relationship between genders in a conservative society which deals strictly with these practices and prevents this type of friendship from occurring out of the confines of legal marriage.

#### **6.2.4. Privacy Concerns**

The vast majority of participating academics in this investigation (81%) were concerned about privacy issues. They confirmed that privacy protection is extremely significant, especially as, in Saudi society, any influential action, be it positive or negative, conducted by individuals will be reflected not only on the individuals but also on their families. In other words, the whole family will be proud or ashamed of what their members achieved or committed. Therefore, the privacy issue is considered not only a personal matter for the user, but also a social concern. In this section, the matter of privacy will

be generally discussed in the context of Saudi faculty members' perspectives and practices. However, to what extent teaching pages, users' profiles and educational groups are secure will be clarified in light of participating academics' perceptions.

Based on his practical experience, Respondent (M1) illustrated that hacking, impersonating, and other types of privacy issues can occur on SNSs, particularly with some aged and young people who may be unaware of the importance of these matters in online settings. Therefore, he asked cultural and social institutions to play an effective role in educating users and raising their knowledge to create a conscious and aware community of users on these platforms. He stressed the importance of informing users how to secure their accounts on SNSs by selecting strong usernames and passwords. Moreover, Respondent (M5) said:

I believe that many users of these social platforms are concerned about the matter of privacy on two levels: individual and social. However, I assume that some of them do not know how to avoid breakthroughs and theft of information, which can be committed through these sites. These actions can put users and their families at great risk, especially in conservative societies.

In the same vein, Respondents (M6) and (M24) shared with previous participants the concern about privacy issues, and affirmed that this issue must be taken into users' consideration and attention. Respondent (M24) appreciated SNS providers for their efforts made to keep these platforms safe for users, but she was worried about how hackers had recently developed and improved their methods. She stated:

It is true that secure methods of protecting users' privacy have been increased on a number of social networks but, on the other hand, the penetration and hacking styles have been developed more and more. SNS users must be aware of such methods. All of us know how significant this matter is in our society, especially for women.

Analysing demographic data shows that female participants are more concerned about their online privacy than are men. To clarify, those 81% of academics represent 90% of female and 72% of male faculty members. As indicated, the majority of Saudi women do

not like to identify their personalities online as a social and cultural consideration, so they do not show their personal photos or any information relating to their general or private lives that could lead to identifying them. Furthermore, 78% of those faculty members are older than 40 years old. These statistics give an indication that academics aged 40 or below might have good knowledge of dealing with social networking in a proper manner, which might contribute to enabling them to secure their accounts to avoid any action that could negatively affect their personal privacy.

As indicated, analysing participants' responses displays that a number of faculty members suggested that SNS providers must increase their efforts and take several practical steps forward to apply a secure, technical system of privacy and data protection. On the other hand, some faculty members think that it is possible for users to secure their accounts and get rid of all of these privacy violations. Moreover, they think that users of SNSs should be well informed as to how to save themselves and respect others' privacy in these open spaces. Respondent (F13) justified that there are guidelines and instructions provided by SNSs themselves and by others to users in order to boost the security of their SNS accounts. As she suggested, users should select strong passwords and change them on a regular basis. Moreover, users are advised to keep their passwords confidential and not to share them with anyone, whether a friend, colleague or anyone else.

In addition, Respondent (F13) recommended that users be aware when they use untrusted computers of rejecting the feature of remembering passwords. By following these substantial instructions, users can protect their accounts on social networks or at least minimise the potential risk of being hacked or penetrated, as she indicated.

On the other hand, Respondent (M4) believed that the privacy issue in the latest period is no longer as sensitive as it was 3–5 years ago. There are several methods that users can employ to make their accounts on SNSs protected and not exposed to danger. As he demonstrated, users can easily obtain advice regarding this matter by doing a quick search for appropriate information and tips, which are available on the Internet and SNSs. In this regard, Respondent (F31) illustrated that two steps are significant in being aware of what can happen on one's account in order to maintain their privacy and protect their data. She said:

Activating the function of receiving alerts when someone logs into your account is a really important step in protecting your privacy on these networks. This feature allows the user to get a notification at the exact time, which enables them to take the appropriate action immediately. Moreover, reviewing security settings regularly must be taken as one of the most essential processes in this regard.

Based on their interaction with different people of different ages on these platforms, and on what has been written about privacy issues, Respondents (F9) and (M23) expected the majority of users on SNSs to respect the general ethics in society and the privacy of others in offline and online settings alike. However, as Respondent (F9) illustrated, some users cause annoyance to others on these platforms, especially the holders of anonymous accounts. She added: "In fact, I appreciate the function of blocking others. I consider this feature provided by several platforms to be the best way to get rid of annoying strangers or stalkers, particularly for women in Saudi society."

Applying these previous protective procedures can contribute to maintaining academics' privacy with students or as part of their professional practice. Respondent (F16) said:

All faculty members and students are strongly encouraged to do what is necessary and to follow advice provided by SNSs or experts on this aspect to protect their privacy. That can give academics and students alike a secure setting in which to engage with one another on SNSs, whether as personal or professional practice.

By looking at another aspect of the matter of privacy, some faculty members have other opinions in this regard. Respondent (F14) stated:

I think that the privacy issue can be considered a tax that we have to pay in exchange for receiving the service of SNSs and having a high level of freedom of expression in the new media age. Therefore, users are not able to have control on their pages or accounts on these sites of being seen by others. Every single item of what you participate in

will expose a part of your personality, privacy or opinions; this is not desired by some users in our society, especially women.

She explained: “Not only SNSs, who have our information, but third parties, their partners, who have reciprocal interests in these sites. The world today has become greatly exposed. All individuals’ movements, relationships, ideas, attitudes and behaviours have become an open book in front of other users of SNSs.” What is more, Respondent (M18) said:

You will not be surprised when you see that many users are keen to secure their accounts and be careful and selective in their participation or comments on SNSs, especially in our society. However, what is really surprising is when you see that disseminating confidential information or private moments has become voluntary work and social behaviour among some users, who then look forward to having their participation favoured or retweeted.

Gross and Acquisti (2005) found that 89% of users give real names, and 61% use their photograph on SNSs, which makes it easier to identify users. They also found that profile pictures on different types of SNSs can be matched for easier identification. Of course, information disclosure to a large audience can be a genuine concern, especially if it includes confidential information such as a date of birth and address, besides a real name and photo. Moreover, some hackers can make a comparison between information exposed on multiple sites of SNSs to predict users’ real identity. Therefore, it is an important issue that must be taken into consideration, particularly in Saudi society due to sensitivity issues. Not paying close attention to this matter could damage the user’s reputation and put families at potential risk, as a number of previous interviewees indicated.

As a final comment on this issue, it is apparent that online privacy was one of the most significant matters among participants engaged in this research. It can be seen that most of the participating academics were thinking about how to steer an acceptable middle course with SNSs in a society that is conservative. Another challenge that has emerged from their perspectives was how to gain most of the benefits of what was disseminated

on these digital platforms without putting their privacy at potential risk, or relinquishing the identity of their culture and social considerations. After having a deep discussion about issues related to the concern of privacy on these networks in a society such as Saudi Arabia, it can be recognised that each culture has its own definition of privacy. What may be viewed as a significant issue in a particular culture will not necessarily be regarded in the same way in other cultures or societies.

### **6.3. Integrating Social Networking in Education – A Solution to Overcoming Social Restrictions**

Even though the previous two sections have revealed that the participating faculty members still have some concerns related to cultural and societal aspects in Saudi society, besides privacy worries, the majority of those academics (69%) believe that integrating SNSs into the educational setting can be an effective solution in the case of Saudi Arabia to overcoming the spatial segregation between men and women. By utilising SNSs in the university environment, lecturers and students of both genders can be closer to each other in online teaching and learning sessions, despite the gender segregation between men and women in offline settings. Respondent (M1) confirmed that he has used social networking sites to give students an open space in which to ask questions, discuss issues, and participate. Although he emphasised that face-to-face teaching is the regular, basic method, he thought that social networks will play a positive role in courses due to the ease of participation of both genders: students and lecturers, regardless of where they are and what time it is. Respondent (M8) said:

Integrating SNSs into our educational institutions is really helpful, particularly for female students taught by male lecturers. In a gender-segregated society, open communication networks between academics and their students allow students to benefit from additional teaching methods made available through these platforms. These initial steps of employing SNSs in the academic field will expand the opportunity for learning and teaching, and also work to break most of the temporal and spatial boundaries.

Similarly, Respondents (F14) and (M17) illustrated that these social networks are supportive tools in overcoming temporal, spatial and social limitations in interaction and communication with other users. In the educational context, they appreciated how important they were, particularly in the gender-segregated environment, as is the case in the Saudi educational system. They went on to explain that female students have a great opportunity to be in contact with their course instructors and colleagues to get involved in teaching and learning activities.

It has been noticed that the academics who participated in this research respect their particular social considerations and attempt to spread the culture of doing so among users of SNSs, especially young people. They recognise that these specific practices of segregation between genders are part of their culture and social values to protect their generational conduct and morals. Of course, each society has standards of behaviour or beliefs concerning what is and is not acceptable for them to do. On the other hand, they understand that it is important to prepare a respected and safe online environment for their students of both genders to engage in the wider learning community.

Therefore, they seek to take advantage of these social platforms to overcome this particular matter of segregation between men and women without breaking their societal laws. As they explained, SNSs provide them with multiple choices to have an online discussion and receive direct feedback from both genders without being in a real face-to-face setting. As a consequence, it can be seen that participating faculty members attempt to combine integrating SNSs in their educational settings to facilitate learning, teaching and communicating among both genders, and maintaining their traditional cultural values. In general, the majority of them believe that employing SNSs effectively in their academic setting can be a beneficial solution from the practical perspective in the case of Saudi Arabia to overcoming the spatial segregation between men and women.

Most importantly, 56% of participating interviewees, who integrated SNSs into teaching methods in a wide range of educational sessions and offered their assistance to students in this regard, noticed that most students, particularly women, have become familiar with using these social networks effectively after several uses. They have become accustomed to developing their techniques to present themselves and their materials in



more active ways by using various digital contents: texts, photos and videos. Moreover, they have enhanced their strategies and improved their skills to secure their accounts on these platforms. Respondent (F27) illustrated this perspective:

At the beginning of integrating SNSs into education, many female students were reluctant and unprepared to get involved with other students on social sites such as Twitter or Facebook. However, after a while, especially after receiving more tips from colleagues and lecturers on how to set up accounts securely, they became aware of potential risks of these platforms, particularly regarding privacy issues. Accordingly, knowing how to avoid these potential consequences has contributed to making them more active in learning and participating on these platforms.

These comments provided by interviewees who participated in this study reflect what the Community of Practice Theory suggests. To be more specific, academics at Saudi universities have led these communities of practice to raise their academic community's culture and to educate them on how to be aware while on these online platforms of what can be considered potential implementations on students' privacy, whether on personal, educational or societal levels. From another angle, students have become involved with their classmates in collaborative activities to avoid potential risks of being insecure or exposed on SNSs. Taking part in such involvement was a vital contribution to developing educational relationships among students and lecturers, as participating interviewees indicated. Furthermore, participating academics demonstrated that they have benefitted from engaging in a community of practice, not only with their students, but also between lecturers themselves of both genders, to participate and discuss different academic subjects with one another in their universities and also with other faculty members and experts from other national and international universities. It can be seen that members of any community, when they have a real intention to learn a new skill or knowledge, whereby getting involved in practising this new expertise through social participation, can contribute to acquiring that experience and obtaining relevant knowledge. As many advisers say, the more they practise something, the more they can gain practical experience of how to do it better.

## **6.4. The Main Outcomes of the Chapter**

The current chapter has contributed towards answering questions related to the major motivations for and concerns about integrating SNSs into an academic setting, but from the aspect of cultural and social considerations.

Cultural and social concerns:

- ❖ Women's self-presentation
- ❖ Leakage of women's personal information
- ❖ Consequences of mixing genders online.
- ❖ Privacy concerns.

However, the majority of participating academics at Saudi universities, who belong to a conservative society, confirmed that integrating social networking in education can be considered a solution to overcoming social restrictions such as the case of gender segregation.

## **6.5. The Conceptual Framework of the Research**

Chapter 4, Chapter 5, and Chapter 6 answered the research questions in regard to investigating and acquiring an in-depth understanding of the Saudi faculty members' attitudes towards, motivations for, and concerns about integrating SNSs into education, as well as the specific uses of these SNSs. All outcomes are summarised and presented in the following figure, which represents the conceptual framework of the current research.

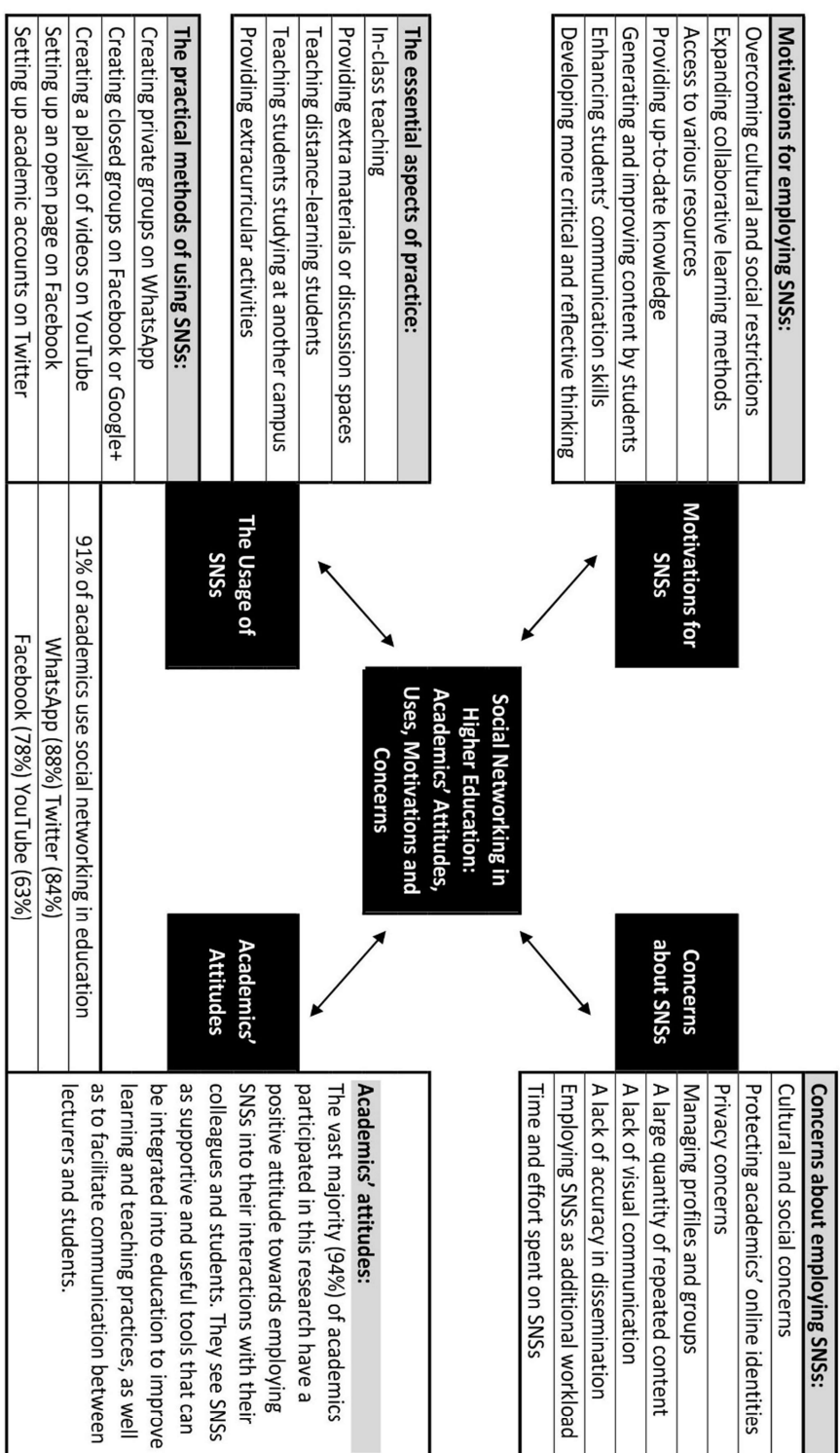


Figure 6.1: The Conceptual Framework

## **6.6. Summary of the Chapter**

This chapter has presented several social and cultural concerns that have emerged from interviewees' responses to the study questions. Conducting an investigation into a topic such as this within an environment that has a particular culture, like that of Saudi Arabia, necessitates paying more attention to these cultural and societal aspects. However, employing technology to overcome social restrictions in the case of Saudi society has been considered the first motivation for the majority of participating academics who believe that incorporating SNSs in the educational setting can be an effective solution in the societal matter. Although these online interactions with members of the opposite gender break the norm of gender segregation, the findings of this study reveal that the majority of Saudi users do not completely challenge their cultural and social traditions. The impact of social values and principles is clearly apparent in their perspectives and behaviours when using these platforms.

As discussed in the chapters featuring the literature review and theoretical framework, although there are a number of studies that have adopted the community of practice theory and investigated its application in collaborative activities, whether in online or offline settings, some researchers recommended that factors that could affect forming communities of practice should receive more attention in the study (Charlton, 2013; Smith, 2011). By looking at previous discussions presented in these chapters, it can be seen that motivation can positively play a major role in encouraging faculty members to utilise SNSs in education and undertake an active role with other community members as practice. Similarly, having some concerns about applying SNSs in education can negatively affect users when integrating platforms such as these into academic settings.

The findings of this investigation illustrate the importance of cultural and social norms in joining and participating in these virtual communities, particularly in conservative societies. Therefore, these social motivations and concerns can have a potential influence on users' attitudes regarding working collaboratively as a community of practice. As a consequence, this research argues that motivations and concerns can be considered essential factors in constructing and using these online communities of practice on social networking sites. These findings can advance the understanding of

applying this theory in the context of a conservative society and contribute to expanding the current literature on this topic.

## **Chapter 7 : Discussion**

### **7.1. Introduction**

The current study aimed to investigate and understand faculty members' attitudes towards, motivations for and concerns about using social networking sites, as well as uses thereof, for educational purposes, particularly in the gender-segregated educational setting of Saudi Arabian universities. Due to the nature of the research subject, context and objectives, applying a qualitative approach was one of the strengths that helped to explore the phenomena as case study research in order to acquire an in-depth understanding of these matters. In addition, employing face-to-face interviews as a data collection strategy has given me an opportunity to ask in-depth questions to obtain more detailed answers and accurate attitudes towards the issues that are being investigated. The Community of Practice Theory, the Hyper-Personal Communication Theory, Constructivism and Connectivism were employed to construct the theoretical framework that assisted in providing a thorough interpretation of the current research and its findings. The last three chapters presented the main findings of this research, while the current chapter will discuss these findings with reference to the previous literature review and theoretical perspectives.

### **7.2. Linking the Literature Review and Findings**

The previous three findings chapters have contributed to answering the key questions of this investigation and have provided an in-depth perception of the research phenomenon. For the purpose of clarification, faculty members' attitudes towards, motivations for, and concerns about using social networking in education, as well as its specific uses, are the main four aspects which were discussed with the academics involved in this study. The aim was to expand our understanding of how these platforms are used in the context of Saudi higher educational institutions. In addition, conducting face-to-face interviews assisted us in providing more detailed explanations of all influential factors related to the employment of these online tools in conservative societies, particularly from cultural, social, and educational perspectives. The following

sections will shed light on linking the main findings of this research to the literature review.

### **7.2.1. The Usage of Social Networking in Education**

The findings emerged of this study have shown that 91% of the participating faculty members use social networking sites for educational purposes. This indicates that a significant proportion of the faculty members integrate SNSs into their communicational and instructional relationships. Roblyer et al. (2010) found that, as yet, social networking platforms are not sufficiently integrated into university settings. However, the current investigation revealed that SNSs are significantly employed in Saudi higher education institutions. This suggests that, since the time of the study conducted by Roblyer et al. (2010), there has been a rapid change in the utilisation of SNSs in relation to higher education activities. A period of five years is not insignificant in terms of the remarkable developments in social networks and their usage. It could explain why the Ministry of Education and most of the higher educational institutions in Saudi Arabia pay considerable attention to improving learning and teaching opportunities and to developing their educational systems and instructive methods by employing different strategies, one of which is integrating technology into education.

Moreover, participating academics in this research indicated that these social platforms are helpful for lecturers and students alike, giving them an opportunity to get involved with the academic community on these platforms and take part in discussing issues of interest with friends, colleagues, and other society members. These advantages enhanced by utilising social networking for educational purposes can be seen as empirical evidence of the significant role that can be played by integrating these technological tools into the academic field. In this regard, the connectivism theory gives priority to maintaining connections with information sources and the society of knowledge, and looks at this particular aspect as an essential requirement to support ongoing learning in this digital age. However, this theoretical perspective affirms that obtaining knowledge is largely facilitated and improved by technology.

By looking at previous literature, these perspectives provided by participants are identical to findings that emerged from studies such as Tess (2013) and Jabr (2011), in

which instructors looked at using social media in education as a method to enhance their teaching strategies and to support active learning among learners.

On the practical level, creating private groups on WhatsApp or closed groups on Facebook or Google+ for educational purposes was one of the main methods used and supported by 59% of the participants. As participating academics illustrated, getting involved in groups on SNSs can help lecturers to observe their students' practices, which can give them an indicator as to whether or not the students have fully understood the delivered knowledge, and to assess the appropriateness of the teaching methods used.

Moreover, creating these educational groups on SNSs can contribute to creating a learning community. Through these online gatherings, the lecturers and students practise what they have studied, and seek advice about their learning difficulties or academic obstacles from faculty members and also their classmates. They exchange their experiences in their particular field. It is realised that all three factors that play a major role in constructing the community of practice theory (a domain of knowledge, community, and practice, as Wenger (1998) illustrates) exist and are applied. Therefore, the members of these closed educational groups on SNSs have a common interest in a particular subject of knowledge or experience, and interact regularly to learn how to do it better by sharing ideas, strategies and solutions, which is how Wenger (1998) defines the community of practice theory.

From another aspect, many respondents demonstrated that they use Twitter to view tweets from experts when they are relevant to their own fields of interest. As a virtual communication method, those respondents confirmed that they usually keep in contact with their students, friends and colleagues at national and international universities through this SNS. Through Twitter, they send their students links, articles, video clips, texts, and share ideas related to their educational topics. These findings correspond to those of Waters (2012). In respect of the benefits of using Twitter in education, Waters declared that Twitter is beneficial for maintaining connections with other users as part of a global community that will help learners to improve their education through communication with other students and content experts.



It is worth noting that all of these activities conducted through social networking can contribute to enhancing learning and communication between faculty members and their students in a collaborative manner. Furthermore, it can be realised that academics concentrate on how to connect students with one another as a community, with regard to topics being studied, to discuss, learn, and participate with other members. This is what the community of practice theory suggests as practical involvement performed during these online gatherings. Furthermore, in light of connectivism theory, Pettenati and Cigognini (2007) highlighted the importance of being connected with the society of knowledge and belonging to digital communities, through which a lot of experience and knowledge can be frequently shared.

### **7.2.2. Faculty Members' Attitudes**

Analysing data collected has shown that the vast majority of academics participated in this research have a positive attitude towards employing SNSs into their interactions with their colleagues and students. They see SNSs as supportive and useful tools that can be integrated into education to improve learning and teaching practices, as well as to facilitate communication between lecturers and students.

It can be perceived that these perspectives are in line with some previous studies. Male and Burden (2014) contend that the increasing developments in technologies have contributed to making a fundamental change to learning. These tools support and facilitate a shift from the passive acquisition of knowledge and ideas provided by others to active learning experiences. As they demonstrate, this approach enables learners to enquire, critique, generate, collaborate and enhance their understanding and problem-solving skills.

To support the active role of students in academia, Prescott (2014) claims that increasing ways in which to encourage students and get them engaged in learning outside of the classroom atmosphere is valuable to students and faculty members alike. Encouraging academic members to take part in employing SNSs effectively in academia is highly recommended, as Jabr (2011) affirms. According to Jabr, such a practice would result in establishing academic communication groups, which can assist students and facilitate their more productive usage of SNSs in both academic and social aspects.

### **7.2.3. The Main Motivations for Employing Social Networking**

Identifying the major motivations for using social networks amongst faculty members in higher education in Saudi Arabia is one of the main objectives of conducting this investigation. The findings emerged of this study uncovered that these social platforms have some particular features related to, or which can be facilitated by, integrating these social networks into education. Additionally, there are other essential motivations that have influenced participants to employ SNSs in academia.

According to participating academics, the feature of flexibility in learning and interaction with others was one of the major motivations encouraging students to use SNSs in different aspects of their lives. As a practical example of learning and communicating opportunities facilitated by SNSs, Respondent (M7) illustrated that many students have joined specialist groups to learn English as a second language, including learners from different countries, through these social networks. Thus, they can practise their particular knowledge of interest in a social, friendly and informal environment, which can help them to improve their learning in that way, thus enhancing their language skills.

In this aspect, Wenger (1998), believes that learning is effectively developed when it is situated in a social pattern, where learners become engaged in learning groups and communities. Social networking sites can support this type of learning, as they enable learners to take part in communities such as these, be in contact with other users, and develop their content according to the feedback gained from their groups' members (Mason and Rennie, 2008). Therefore, it can be seen that getting involved in a discussion or exchanging experiences with other users from different cultures and countries who have the same interest was valued by interviewees in this study as an advantage provided by joining these platforms to construct a professional network of relationships.

By looking at the respondents' perspectives presented in the previous three findings chapters, it can be seen that collaboration is considered one of the main advantages that can be obtained among students through SNSs. Collaboration is an effective method that can contribute to knowledge acquisition. From the constructivist perspective, theorists such as Vygotsky claimed that learners can achieve higher levels of understanding when they work collaboratively than when they work individually.

Therefore, they highlighted the importance of peer interaction in a collaborative manner between learning groups as a fundamental requirement in the construction of individual knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978; Charlton, 2013). In view of that, it is crucial for instructors to provide a diversity of interactive activities, develop challenging, but exciting, learning materials, and encourage learners to work collaboratively with their peers to achieve such tasks, as “cognitive apprenticeships stress the collaborative efforts of groups of learners as sources of learning” (Ullrich et al., 2008, p. 706).

From a relevant aspect, joining specialist groups or professional networks for learning or enhancing their knowledge further about particular subjects through SNSs has been perceived as an essential advantage of using these social platforms in Saudi universities, as many participants illustrated. In this regard, Downes (2012) and Ally (2008) indicated that the world, since these remarkable changes took place as a result of the information and communication technology revolution, has become more networked and maintaining connections with the wider society of knowledge is essential. To illustrate, this feature provided by integrating social networking in most aspects of our daily lives is one of the main principles of the connectivism theory. According to this theory, learning is a network of connecting information sources, whereas technology is a fundamental facilitator in acquiring knowledge.

From another angle, many of the participating faculty members noticed that SNSs have supported students and given them an opportunity to participate in generating and improving content on these platforms. As they confirmed, that was a motivation for them to utilise these platforms in teaching and learning activities. Therefore, it is a great opportunity for students to show their knowledge and abilities in analysis, critique, and offer presentations to their classmates and academics. As interviewees experienced, students are no longer regarded as receivers of the knowledge but participants in the industry of the knowledge alongside lecturers. In the constructivism theory, it is believed that the role of students has changed from passively receiving knowledge to actively participating in retrieving knowledge. Ullrich et al. (2008) illustrated the function of learners in light of this theory: “In constructivism, the control over the learning process shifts from the teacher to student, with the learner playing an active role in the learning

process. Learning takes place in context and in collaboration and provides opportunities to solve realistic and meaningful problems” (p. 706).

Participating academics in this study considered social networking sites to be valuable tools for providing up-to-date knowledge, news, and current events. Spreading knowledge has not been easier and quicker than it is during these times of communication and information revolution. It cannot be denied that SNSs have offered value in delivering up-to-date knowledge to users on different aspects, as participating faculty members indicated. Thus, there is a similarity between what has emerged from this investigation and other research conducted recently in this area of study. For instance, in a practical study led by Arquero and Romero-Frias (2013) to investigate the use of social networks to enhance student involvement with academic subjects, the majority of respondents thought that SNSs were useful for keeping their professional knowledge up to date. Likewise, in this current research, retrieving up-to-date knowledge was a motivation for participating academics to integrate these platforms in education in order to remain informed about any event that occurs in their department, university or in society as a whole.

The findings presented in the previous three chapters show that enhancing students’ skills and developing their abilities in communication as an advantage facilitated by SNSs were motivating factors for academics to employ these social networks in learning and teaching practices. Those participating academics indicated that utilising SNSs can support shy and hesitant students in contributing and expressing their ideas freely. Moreover, these social platforms have the ability to extend the opportunity for class members to interact beyond formal sessions. Therefore, those participants considered that integrating SNSs into learning and teaching sessions can contribute to developing the relationship between lecturers and students in formal and informal ways, and also enhancing underperforming students in communication to be closer to their colleagues and teaching staff.

These previous opinions provided by participants confirm Rennie and Morrison’s (2013) argument that obtaining informal communication between students and their faculty members is essential and significant in enhancing classroom discussions and getting shy students particularly engaged. In addition, these perspectives are identical to Akbari et

al.'s (2012) viewpoint that faculty members should prepare themselves and encourage their students to participate with their peers and lecturers through social networking sites. By doing so, most students, especially those who feel shy in front of their classmates and teachers, will get involved in these online discussions.

Most importantly, analysing data collected illustrated that the participating academics look at these social networks as supportive tools in overcoming temporal, spatial and social limitations in interaction and communication with other users. In the educational context, they appreciated how important these social platforms were, particularly in the gender-segregated environment, as is the case in the Saudi educational system. They went on to explain that female students have a great opportunity to be in contact with their course instructors and colleagues to get involved in teaching and learning activities.

It has been noticed that the academics who participated in this research respect their particular social considerations and attempt to spread the culture of doing so among users of SNSs, especially young people. They recognise that these specific practices of segregation between genders are part of their culture and social values to protect their generational conduct and morals. Of course, each society has standards of behaviour or beliefs concerning what is and is not acceptable for them to do. On the other hand, they understand that it is important to prepare a respected and safe online environment for their students of both genders to engage in the wider learning community.

Therefore, they seek to take advantage of these social networking to overcome this particular matter of segregation between men and women without breaking their societal laws. As they explained, SNSs provide them with multiple choices to have an online discussion and receive direct feedback from both genders without being in a real face-to-face setting. As a consequence, it can be seen that participating faculty members attempt to combine between integrating SNSs in their educational settings to facilitate learning, teaching and communicating among both genders, and maintaining their traditional cultural values. In general, the majority of them (69%) believe that employing SNSs effectively in their academic setting can be a beneficial solution from the practical perspective in the case of Saudi Arabia to overcoming the spatial segregation between men and women.

#### **7.2.4. The Main Concerns about Employing Social Networking**

Even though the majority of academics involved in this research have a positive attitude towards integrating SNSs in education, analysing interviews illustrates that there are a number of concerns and challenges that could influence faculty members at Saudi universities to employ SNSs in their teaching and communication methods. Reviewing respondents' answers revealed that some participants in this study highlighted the importance of training faculty members and providing them with the required skills to use SNSs effectively in education. They explained that the lack of training can be a key reason for making some lecturers reluctant towards and unenthusiastic about employing SNSs in the academic setting. In this regard, Palloff and Pratt (1999) affirmed that the lecturer must be sufficiently trained not only to utilise the technology in education, but also to shift and develop the way in which they can organise and deliver material effectively.

Reputation is extremely significant, particularly in a conservative society such as Saudi Arabia. As expected, this investigation shows that the majority of participating academics (59%) were concerned about their image, identity and reputation on these social platforms, and were dealing cautiously with these online communities. Therefore, intending to present themselves online in an effective manner while maintaining their identity and reputation, 63% of participating faculty members seek to manage and be selective in what should be displayed on these platforms to their audiences. As the hyper-personal theory suggests, computer-mediated communication (CMC) provides the sender with a greater ability, compared to face-to-face interactions, to develop his or her self-presentation (Walther, 1996). These features contribute to enabling academics, who are concerned about their online images on SNSs, to achieve a selective and optimised presentation of themselves to others.

Furthermore, many lecturers preferred to have a different online identity from their real-world identity to be free in their participation without having a link to their real professional or social status. As they illustrated, they want to place boundaries between their academic and personal lives. In this regard, Grahame (2008) has noticed that users of social networking sites have "a particular discomfort in achieving a balance between

one's work identity and a more personal identity within social spaces such as Facebook. Participants need to understand how to protect their identities within these spaces and generally need a source of advice and guidance on managing personal data within Web spaces" (p. 128).

As some interviewees claimed, having a different identity in online settings, which was a favourable option to some participants, can give the academics more freedom to participate on SNSs. The hyper-personal theory suggests that anonymity in computer-mediated communication can result in more independence for members to get them engaged without feeling any pressure from high-status members. Furthermore, group members can have a more democratic atmosphere in computer-mediated communication than what can occur in face-to-face interactions (Walther, 1996).

In the case of Saudi Arabia, most women do not use their real names and personal photos in their profiles on SNSs. Instead, they use nicknames or pseudonyms and symbolic pictures to present themselves online, due to the sensitiveness and significance of these issues in Saudi society. While Gross and Acquisti (2005) found that 89% of users give real names, and 61% use their photograph on SNSs, this investigation revealed that 37% of female participants use their real names on social networking accounts, and only 13% of the female academics use their photos on their profiles. On the other hand, 75% of the male participants introduce themselves online as they do in offline settings. They use their real names and photos on their profiles so that they can be recognised by academic community members. Furthermore, they provide a concise definition of their identities and academic or research professions on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. This can illustrate how this matter is significant for women particularly at Saudi society.

In the same vein, the majority of interviewees (62%) revealed that they understand and respect this case of privacy and agree that exposing a personal photo of a woman is a sensitive issue in Saudi society from a cultural and social perspective. The participants explicitly illustrated that the major reason for most female users using nicknames or pseudonyms is that they are worried about their privacy and want to participate freely without having any connection to their academic or social status. Veletsianos and Kimmons (2013) highlighted that academics over social networking want to structure

their participation in a certain way and maintain appropriate and meaningful connections due to the concern about their online identity. Moreover, Gunawardena et al. (2009) and Zaidieh (2012) confirmed that cultural and social backgrounds can play a major role in affecting academics' perspectives towards protecting their online identities and, accordingly, their practices on SNSs.

The matter of privacy was a major concern for the vast majority of academics involved in this research, as 81% of them expressing worries about their privacy when using SNSs. They confirmed that privacy protection is really significant, particularly in Saudi society, where any influential action, whether positive or negative, conducted by individuals will be reflected not only on the individuals but also on their families. The whole family will be proud or ashamed of what their members achieve or commit. Therefore, the privacy issue is considered not only a personal matter for the user, but also a social concern.

Analysing participants' responses illustrated that a number of faculty members suggested that SNS providers must increase their efforts and take several practical steps forward to apply a secure, technical system of privacy and data protection. On the other hand, some faculty members think that users of SNSs should be well informed as to how to secure their accounts and get rid of all of these privacy violations. They justified that there are guidelines and instructions provided by SNSs themselves and by others to users in order to boost the security of their SNS accounts. By following a number of substantial instructions, users can protect their accounts on social networks or at least minimise the potential risk of being hacked or penetrated, as they indicated. Applying such these protective procedures can contribute to maintaining academics' privacy with students or as part of their professional practice. For example, Respondent (F16) said:

All faculty members and students are strongly encouraged to do what is necessary and to follow advice provided by SNSs or experts on this aspect to protect their privacy. That can give academics and students alike a secure setting in which to engage with one another on SNSs, whether as personal or professional practice.

Furthermore, some academics claimed that exposure of sensitive information or private photographs on SNSs is one of the essential issues of which users should be aware, and



realised its potential consequences, whether on individuals or on society as a whole, especially in a conservative society such as Saudi Arabia. They stressed the importance of working to expand the culture of protecting and respecting privacy on SNSs, particularly among young users, and raise their awareness and understanding in this regard to enable them to differentiate between what behaviour is acceptable and what is not. The findings emerged of a study led by Dwyer et al. (2007) to investigate trust and privacy concerns on social networking sites, particularly Facebook and Myspace, revealed that young adult users were still willing to use these networks and build their online relationships with others even if they realised that procedures employed for privacy protection were weak.

By looking at another aspect of the matter of privacy, some faculty members have other opinions in this regard. For instance, Respondent (F14) stated:

I think that the privacy issue can be considered a tax that we have to pay in exchange for receiving the service of SNSs and having a high level of freedom of expression in the new media age. Therefore, users are not able to have control on their pages or accounts on these sites of being seen by others. Every single item of what you participate in will expose a part of your personality, privacy or opinions; this is not desired by some users in our society, especially women.

In this aspect, Levin and Abril (2008) tried to clarify and differentiate between offline and online privacy and what expectations and experiences users have in this regard. They confirm that the information shared within a social network is no longer private, and it is nearly impossible to control it once released online.

Analysing demographic data demonstrates that female participants are more concerned about their online privacy than are men. To illustrate, those 81% of academics represent 90% of female and 72% of male faculty members. As indicated, the majority of Saudi women do not like to identify their personalities online as a social and cultural consideration, so they do not show their personal photos or any information relating to their general or private lives that could lead to identifying them. Besides that, 78% of those faculty members are older than 40 years old. These statistics give an indication

that academics aged 40 or below might have good knowledge of dealing with social networking in a proper manner, which might contribute to enabling them to secure their accounts to avoid any action that could negatively affect their personal privacy.

It can be realised that the previous outcomes are compatible with the findings that emerged from the study led by Aljasir et al. (2013). They carried out an investigation to study the usage of Facebook by Saudi university students and found that there is a remarkable gender difference regarding the privacy issue. Female students take more privacy in matters of precaution than their male counterparts. For instance, when female students use their real names on their Facebook accounts, they try not to access their Facebook accounts in locations where other users can see both them and their profile names. That can reflect to what extent Saudi society members, especially women, look at privacy issues.

It can be seen that although Saudis, particularly women, are concerned about their privacy on these online networks, the revolution in communication and information technology and the increasing openness to other cultures have encouraged them to get involved in such online social communities. Yet, I think that there is still resistance to employing SNSs without setting boundaries between what are and what are not socially and culturally acceptable practices.

From a relevant aspect, data collected shows that 56% of participating interviewees, who integrated SNSs into teaching methods in a wide range of educational sessions and offered their assistance to students in this regard, noticed that most students, particularly women, have become familiar with using these social networks effectively after several uses. They have become accustomed to developing their techniques to present themselves and their materials in more active ways by using various digital contents: texts, photos and videos. Moreover, they have enhanced their strategies and improved their skills to secure their accounts on these platforms. For instance, Respondent (F27) illustrated this perspective:

At the beginning of integrating SNSs into education, many female students were reluctant and unprepared to get involved with other students on social sites such as Twitter or Facebook. However, after a

while, especially after receiving more tips from colleagues and lecturers on how to set up accounts securely, they became aware of potential risks of these platforms, particularly regarding privacy issues. Accordingly, knowing how to avoid these potential consequences has contributed to making them more active in learning and participating on these platforms.

These comments provided by interviewees who participated in this study reflect what the Community of Practice Theory suggests. To be more specific, academics at Saudi universities have led these communities of practice to raise their academic community's culture and to educate them on how to be aware while on these online platforms of what can be considered potential implementations on students' privacy, whether on personal, educational or societal levels.

It is apparent that online privacy was one of the most significant matters among the academics engaged in this research. It can be perceived that most of the participants were thinking about how to steer an acceptable middle course with SNSs in a society that is conservative. Another challenge that has emerged from their perspectives was how to gain most of the benefits of what was disseminated on these digital platforms without putting their privacy at potential risk, or relinquishing the identity of their culture and social considerations. After having a deep discussion about issues related to the concern of privacy on these social networks in a society such as Saudi Arabia, it can be recognised that each culture has its own definition of privacy. What may be viewed as a significant issue in a particular culture will not necessarily be regarded in the same way in other cultures or societies.

Ultimately, even though analysing data collected have revealed that the participating faculty members still have some concerns related to educational, societal and cultural aspects in Saudi society, besides privacy worries, the majority of those academics (69%) believe that integrating SNSs into the educational setting can be an effective solution in the case of Saudi Arabia to overcoming the spatial segregation between men and women. By utilising SNSs in the university environment, lecturers and students of both genders can be closer to each other in online teaching and learning sessions, despite the gender segregation between men and women in offline settings.

### **7.3. Summary of the chapter**

The existing study has sought to investigate and understand faculty members' attitudes towards, motivations for, and concerns about, using social networking sites, as well as the specific uses of these sites; the main focus was on how these platforms are used for educational purposes, particularly in the gender-segregated educational setting of Saudi Arabian universities. The main findings of this investigation have been presented in the last three chapters. However, the present chapter has discussed these findings with reference to the previously examined literature review and theoretical perspectives. To clarify, faculty members' attitudes towards, motivations for, and concerns about using social networking in education, as well as the specific uses of these sites, were the main four aspects discussed in this chapter. The results can contribute to enhancing our understanding of how these social networks are used in the context of Saudi academic society.

The findings of this research illustrate that the vast majority of academics interviewed have a positive attitude towards integrating SNSs into education, and also towards the practical use of these social platforms in learning, teaching and interacting with their colleagues and students. In line with previous studies, it can be concluded that Saudi faculty members integrate SNSs into the academic field to improve teaching approaches and expand peer support and collaborative learning methods. However, these social platforms also provide Saudi users with an opportunity to overcome social restrictions and cultural barriers to be in communication with the opposite gender. Even though the participating academics raised a number of concerns and challenges related to educational, societal and cultural aspects of Saudi society, the majority of the academics believed that integrating these social networks into the educational setting can serve as an effective solution in the case of Saudi Arabia when it comes to overcoming the spatial segregation between men and women.

As discussed, motivations can play a major and positive role in encouraging faculty members to utilise SNSs in education and undertake an active role with other community members as practice. Likewise, having some concerns about applying SNSs to education can negatively affect users when integrating platforms such as these into

academic settings. Furthermore, the findings of this study illustrated the importance of cultural and social norms in joining and participating in these virtual communities, particularly in conservative societies. It is therefore concluded that motivations and concerns can have a potential influence on users' attitudes regarding working collaboratively as a community of practice. As a consequence, this research argues that motivations and concerns can be considered essential factors in constructing and using these online communities of practice on social networking sites. These findings can advance the general understanding of how to apply this theory in the context of a gender-segregated society and can also contribute to expanding the current literature on this topic.

## **Chapter 8 : Conclusion**

### **8.1. Introduction**

The current study aims to contribute to the literature on the topic of integration of social media in higher education by investigating how and why Saudi academics, who belong to a very conservative culture, use these platforms in gender-segregated settings. The Community of Practice Theory, the Hyper-personal Communication Theory, Constructivism and Connectivism were employed to construct the theoretical framework that assisted in providing a thorough interpretation of the current research and its findings. By applying the qualitative research approach and adopting this theoretical framework, the present investigation successfully answered the key questions of this research and provided an in-depth perception of the research phenomenon. This final chapter aims to summarise the main findings of this research, and examines them against the research aim and objectives. It also presents the research's contributions to the body of knowledge, its limitations, and recommendations for future research.

### **8.2. Research Aim, Objectives and Key Questions**

The current study aimed to investigate and understand faculty members' attitudes towards, motivations for and concerns about using social networking sites (SNSs), as well as uses thereof, for educational purposes, particularly in the gender-segregated educational setting of Saudi Arabian universities. To achieve the previous aim of this research, I formulated the following objectives.

#### **Objectives of this Research:**

1. Explore faculty members' attitudes towards using social networks for educational purposes in Saudi Arabian universities.
2. Identify the ways in which faculty members in Saudi Arabia use social networks as educational tools, if they use them.
3. Identify the major motivations for and the greatest concerns about using social networks amongst faculty members in higher education in Saudi Arabia.

4. Determine how demographic factors (e.g. age, gender, academic degree, and years of experience) affect faculty members' attitudes towards using social networks in an educational setting.

### **Key Questions of this Research**

The present research sought to answer the following key questions, which have been established to achieve the specific aim and objectives mentioned above.

1. What attitudes do faculty members in Saudi Arabia have towards using SNSs as educational tools?
2. Do faculty members at Saudi universities use SNSs for educational purposes? If so, in what ways do they use them?
3. What are the major motivations for and greatest concerns about the use of SNSs in higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia?
4. How do demographic factors (e.g. age, gender, academic degree, and years of experience) affect participants' attitudes towards using SNSs in an educational context?

### **8.3. Strengths of the Research**

This thesis derives its strength from several various attributes. Saudi universities are in the initial stages of recognising the educational benefits of SNSs, as the Saudi government is currently undertaking a developmental campaign aimed at all levels of education in an attempt to enhance student learning and improve teaching methods of educators. This study will contribute to current research by identifying faculty members' perspectives on SNSs and their ability to enhance teaching methods and learning styles. Of course, there is some research conducted in Saudi Arabia to study some social platforms in the context of education. However, past studies have not critically approached the topic — they have not explicitly asked faculty members about their social media usage. This research includes the attitudes, uses, motivations and concerns of Saudi Arabian faculty members concerning utilising SNSs in education. Direct interaction and communication with faculty members have provided empirical evidence with which to expand the current understanding of social media usage in education.

Therefore, this research can be considered the first study to investigate the opinions of Saudi university faculty members of both genders with regard to their thoughts on utilising SNSs, as well as the major motivations for and concerns about employing these platforms in higher education.

According to the literature review, although the educational utilisation of SNSs has been investigated around the world and continuous remarks have been made asserting the importance of studying the topic in different countries, this area of study has received very little attention, particularly with regard to Saudi Arabia. Therefore, this study has contributed to filling this gap. Moreover, this research project has studied the advantages of SNSs to help overcome the challenge of gender segregation in the Saudi educational system. To further clarify the matter, conducting a study on a subject such as this within an environment that has a particular culture, like the Saudi Arabian context, necessitates paying close attention to considering several cultural and societal aspects.

For these reasons addressed, and due to the nature of the research subject, context and objectives, applying a qualitative approach can be regarded as one of the strengths that helped to explore the phenomena as case study research in order to investigate and acquire an in-depth understanding of these matters. In addition, employing face-to-face interviews as a data collection strategy has given me an opportunity to ask in-depth questions in order to obtain more detailed answers and accurate attitudes towards the issues that are being investigated.

Selecting the research sample from particular universities because of their location, size, diversity and high academic standing, and applying a purposive sampling technique to identify participants, helped me to build a well-balanced sample of the study population, which has resulted in representing equally the two universities, the two genders, and different degree subjects. Having participants from a wide range of ages (25–59 years), teaching experiences (1–35 years), six faculties and 13 academic departments can contribute to obtaining a variety of perspectives, based on their practical experience and academic background.



All of these aspects of strengths addressed and methodological procedures followed have contributed to providing findings that can achieve the main aims of this study. The study findings will help both educational policymakers and faculty members to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the attitudes, motivations and concerns that exist surrounding the integration and development of social networks in the field of education. Ultimately, it is my hope that this research study has expanded the current body of knowledge in its field.

#### **8.4. Summary of the Main Findings**

As stated, the general aim of this study was to investigate and obtain an in-depth understanding of faculty members' attitudes towards, motivations for and concerns about using social networking sites, as well as uses thereof, in the context of Saudi higher educational institutions. The main findings of this investigation related to all of these dimensions will be presented in the following sections:

##### **8.4.1. Attitude towards and Usage of Social Networking**

The first objective of this research was to explore faculty members' attitudes towards using social networks for educational purposes in Saudi Arabian universities. The analysis of interview responses revealed that 94% of respondents considered SNSs to be supportive and useful tools that can be integrated into education to improve learning and teaching practices, as well as to facilitate communication between lecturers and students. Academic staff are encouraged to take advantage of these methods in the educational setting, as they indicated.

As the second objective, this research sought to assess the actual use of social networking platforms for academic purposes in Saudi higher educational institutions. Findings that emerged showed that the vast majority of academics involved in this research (91%) use social networking sites for educational purposes. It is also clearly apparent from the results presented in the findings chapters that the main social platforms that attracted significant usage among academic respondents were WhatsApp (88%), Twitter (84%), Facebook (78%), and YouTube (63%). In addition to the earlier social networks utilised by interview participants, the findings confirmed that

four other social networking sites have been integrated for educational purposes, but to a much lesser extent, in Saudi higher educational institutions, which are LinkedIn (16%), Instagram (13%), Skype (6%), and Google+ (6%).

Furthermore, the participants considered that WhatsApp and closed groups on Facebook provide a safe environment in terms of respecting the privacy of users, which is an important consideration when communicating in the virtual world. Analysing interviewees' responses in this study displayed that these private online communities were preferable to using other public social networking platforms. From a societal aspect, this result can be understood in the Saudi case of segregation between genders as a general rule in most aspects of life in Saudi Arabia.

Analysing the data collected has shown that there are several ways of integrating social networking platforms in higher educational institutions, which can be summarised in the following aspects:

- In-class teaching: teaching where SNSs are a core component (e.g. YouTube).
- Providing extra materials or discussion spaces to supplement in-class teaching.
- Teaching distance learning, including the opposite gender studying in another campus.
- Sharing extracurricular activities.

Therefore, it can be realised that the general objective of employing SNSs in teaching was to attract learners' attention, improve teaching methods, enhance students' understanding, and give the topics studied more explanation. Reviewing interviewees' responses showed that the next practical methods can be considered the primary ways of using SNSs for teaching purposes:

- Creating private groups on WhatsApp or closed groups on Facebook or Google+.
- Creating a playlist of videos on their own YouTube channels.
- Setting up an open page on Facebook for particular courses.
- Setting up academic accounts on Twitter for particular courses.

According to the majority of respondents, this increasing usage of SNSs in education was due to several motivating factors, which will be discussed in the following section.

## **8.4.2. Motivations for Integration of Social Networking**

The third objective of this study was related to identifying the major motivations for using social networks amongst faculty members in higher education in Saudi Arabia. The study findings exposed that SNSs have some particular features related to, or which can be facilitated by, using these social networks, such as accessibility, flexibility, and being interactive and attractive tools. Besides, there are other essential motivations that have influenced participants to employ SNSs in academia. These motivations included: expanding peer support and collaborative learning methods, generating and improving content by students, enhancing students' communication skills, developing a more critical and reflective thinking, and, most importantly, overcoming social restrictions (e.g. gender segregation). All of these motivations will be presented briefly in the next sections.

### **8.4.2.1. Expanding Peer Support and Collaborative Learning Methods**

About half of the faculty members (47%) involved in this investigation considered that integrating SNSs into education can expand collaboration among users, particularly learners, and give them an opportunity to exchange their thoughts and experiences through these platforms. That can illustrate the growing shift in the learning process from being centred on the educator to being focussed on the learners themselves, as the constructivist perspective theorises. The role of the instructor has changed from delivering lectures to facilitating learning activities and assisting learners in creating, collaborating, and sharing knowledge through using SNSs and other emerging technologies. Similarly, students are no longer receiving knowledge passively as educational material provided by others, but rather playing an active role in sharing thoughts, interacting with others, and constructing new knowledge upon prior experience.

### **8.4.2.2. Generating and Improving Content by Students**

A total of 41% of participating faculty members noticed that SNSs have supported students and given them an opportunity to participate in generating content on these platforms. That was a motivation for them to utilise these platforms in teaching and

learning activities. Practising a piece of knowledge or skill in action is an advanced level of learning. On this aspect, SNSs allow users to generate, contribute and develop any content of knowledge. Moreover, Web 2.0 technologies, in general, give students more opportunities to disseminate, receive feedback from their colleagues, friends or anyone interested, and, accordingly, develop their participation. Through these various networks, it has become easier for users to post, tweet, record a clip, create a video, and disseminate to a specific group or the public. According to participants in this research, this diversity of content types facilitated by SNSs enabled students to take part in generating and developing content on these platforms.

#### **8.4.2.3. Enhancing Students' Communication Skills**

The findings revealed that 37% of participants considered that enhancing students' skills and developing their abilities in communication were advantages facilitated by SNSs and motivating factors for them in employing these social networks in learning and teaching practices. Those participating academics indicated that utilising SNSs could support shy and hesitant students in contributing and expressing their ideas freely. Moreover, these social platforms have the ability to extend the opportunity for class members to interact beyond formal sessions. Therefore, this percentage of interviewees considered that integrating SNSs into learning and teaching sessions can contribute to developing the relationship between lecturers and students in formal and informal ways, and also enhance underperforming students in communication to be closer to their colleagues and teaching staff.

#### **8.4.2.4. Developing More Critical and Reflective Thinking**

Holding directed discussions on SNSs about relevant issues to any subject being studied by students is an extremely beneficial way to develop critical and reflective thinking among them, as 34% of participating academics claimed, especially if these sessions of the debate are supervised by faculty members. They thought that online gatherings such as educational groups on SNSs would be productive for students to learn how to provide reasonable arguments with strong evidence and, at the same time, to defend opposing views. As interviewees demonstrated, there is a lack of teaching students with skills such as these in regular educational sessions.

#### **8.4.2.5. Overcoming Social Restrictions**

Even though the data collected revealed that participating faculty members still have some concerns related to cultural and societal aspects in Saudi society, besides privacy worries, the majority of those academics (69%) believe that integrating SNSs into the educational setting can be an effective solution in the case of Saudi Arabia to overcoming the spatial segregation between men and women. By utilising SNSs in the university environment, lecturers and students of both genders can be closer to one another in teaching and learning sessions, despite the gender segregation between men and women in reality. For that reason, integrating technology to overcome gender segregation in Saudi society has been considered an essential motivation for the majority of participating academics to engage with students and colleagues of both genders.

#### **8.4.3. Concerns Related to Integration of Social Networking**

On the other hand, many faculty members (62%) have different concerns about employing these platforms in the academic setting. The chapters of findings presented a number of limitations and concerns that have been raised by participants related to managing profiles and groups, such as concerns about time and effort spent on SNSs, receiving a large quantity of repeated content, and the lack of accuracy in dissemination and some students understanding copyrights. According to them, all of these matters could result in limiting the effectiveness of integrating SNSs into education. However, cultural and social concerns, protecting academics' online identities, and privacy worries have been identified as the three greatest challenges facing the implementation of SNSs in Saudi higher educational institutions.

##### **8.4.3.1. Cultural and Social Concerns**

According to the findings, cultural and social issues were considered a high concern (62%) among faculty members involved in this investigation. To clarify, analysis of interviewees' responses revealed that participating academics were worried about three particular issues in this regard: women's self-presentation, leakage of women's personal information, and consequences of mixing genders online.

Due to the interactive and communicative restrictions between men and women in Saudi Arabia in offline settings, a large percentage (53%) of faculty members, especially academic women, revealed that it is difficult for women in Saudi society to present themselves on social networking platforms in an effective way. For more clarification, in general, it is not socially acceptable for women to use a real photo of themselves on their profiles. Moreover, findings illustrated that most women do not use their real names and personal photos on their profiles on SNSs. Instead, they use nicknames or pseudonyms and symbolic pictures to present themselves online.

Leakage of personal information on social networking platforms can be considered a crucial concern among users, whether that happens on the level of individuals or organisations. In a conservative society such as Saudi Arabia, this concern, however, can be viewed as one of the most important issues among individuals and members of the whole community. A total of 47% of faculty members participating in this study considered this to be a sensitive issue and advised users, particularly women, not to disseminate private photos or confidential information through these open spaces.

The way in which academics look at the mixing of genders online on social networking platforms was one of the issues discussed with participants in this investigation. Conducting face-to-face interviews helped to investigate the real differences between mixing genders in physical settings and online settings from Saudi people's perspective. The majority of interviewees (72%) thought that mixing genders online can be seen as an inevitable result of the increasing need for both genders to be in contact with each other. They believed that it is more convenient for both genders to have communication via these social networks than via direct face-to-face interaction, due to respecting the norms of their culture and society.

#### **8.4.3.2. Protecting Academics' Online Identities**

Reputation is extremely significant, particularly in a conservative society such as Saudi Arabia. As expected, this investigation showed that the majority of participating academics (59%) were concerned about their image, identity and reputation on these social platforms, and dealt cautiously with these online communities. Furthermore, analysing the findings that emerged from this investigation demonstrated that 75% of

the male and only 13% of the female academics introduce themselves online as they do in offline settings by using their real names and their own photos on their profiles so that they can be recognised by academic community members. Thirty-seven per cent of female participants only use their real names with no personal photos on their profiles, due to the sensitivity of this matter in Saudi society; instead, they use symbolic photos as profile pictures.

On the other hand, 50% of the female and 25% of the male participants involved in this study prefer to have a different online identity from their real-world identity. Therefore, the percentage of female participants who do not use their photos on social networking profiles is that of 87%. As explained in the chapters of findings, this result can be understood in the case of Saudi gender segregation as a general rule in most aspects of life in Saudi Arabia. Ultimately, 63% of participating faculty members sought to manage and be selective in what should be displayed on these platforms to their audiences in order to present themselves online in an effective manner and maintain their identity and reputation.

#### **8.4.3.3. Privacy Concerns**

The matter of privacy was a major concern for the vast majority of academics involved in this research, as 81% of them were worried about their privacy over social networking. They confirmed that privacy protection is really significant, particularly in Saudi society, where any influential action, whether positive or negative, conducted by individuals will be reflected not only on the individuals but also on their families. The whole family will be proud or ashamed of what their members achieve or commit. Therefore, the privacy issue is considered not only a personal matter for the user, but also a social concern. Many existing studies of privacy and other cultural and social concerns are written from a Western perspective and its view of privacy — this research expanded that discussion by analysing these issues from a non-Western, conservative nation.

#### **8.4.4. The Impact of Demographic Factors**

The last objective of this investigation was to determine how demographic factors (e.g. age, gender, academic degree, and years of experience) affect faculty members' attitudes towards using social networks in an educational setting.

##### **8.4.4.1. Age**

Regarding the impact of the age factor on participants' integration of SNSs, analysing demographic data reveals that there are some differences between academics involved in the research. The examination of interview findings has shown that 80% of academics who were concerned about their online identities were older than 40 years of age. Furthermore, those faculty members thought that the formality of the relationship between them and their students could contribute to protecting their image on these social networking platforms. Most importantly, all of those academics who supported the formality of relationships on SNSs were older than 40 years of age, and two thirds of them were older than 50 years of age. To clarify, the previous result can be considered an indication of the impact of the age factor, but must be taken among this small sample of faculty members at Saudi universities (32 participants).

As indicated, analysing demographic data shows that the vast majority of participating academics in this investigation (81%) were concerned about their privacy on SNSs. Of those faculty members, 78% were older than 40 years of age. These statistics give an indication that academics aged 40 or below might have good knowledge of dealing with social networking in a proper manner, which might contribute to enabling them to secure their accounts to avoid any action that could negatively affect their personal privacy. On the other hand, the findings of this study indicate that older academics need some training sessions regarding the appropriate strategies and techniques of effective integration of SNSs into education. Having these digital skills will assist them in being informed about the advantages of these tools in teaching and learning activities, while also making them aware of their drawbacks and how to avoid them, especially in conservative societies.



As stated in the findings, the majority of interviewees (72%) think that mixing genders online can be seen as an inevitable result of the increasing need for both genders to be in contact with each other. Reviewing the demographic characteristics of those participants illustrates that this opinion was supported by academics whose ages were less than 50 years. Furthermore, analysing the data collected demonstrates that younger lecturers were not as enthusiastic as older academics about supporting the perspective of not presenting personal information on social networks, except for displaying private photos on profiles. Due to its sensitiveness in Saudi society, this matter has received a lot of attention from the majority of participants, all of whom were of different ages.

As a general notice, most motivations for utilising SNSs in education were supported by faculty members whose ages were less than 40 years. In contrast, most concerns about the integration of social networking were supported by faculty members aged 50+. Therefore, it can be said that the demographic factor of age has an impact clearly on faculty members' perceptions and the practices of employing SNSs in an academic setting.

#### **8.4.4.2. Gender**

Although a high percentage of participating academics (81%) were concerned about their privacy on social networking, analysing demographic data shows that female participants were more concerned about their online privacy than were men. To clarify, those academics represent 90% of female and 72% of male faculty members. From another perspective, reviewing interviewees' responses demonstrates that 60% of faculty members who were concerned about their online identities and reputation were women. Moreover, academic women at Saudi universities prefer, to a greater degree than men, to have a different online identity for themselves on SNSs from what they actually have in offline settings. To be more precise, two thirds of women versus one third of men support this approach, as participants' responses illustrated.

As discussed when analysing the findings of this study, the majority of Saudi women do not like to identify their personalities online as a social and cultural consideration. This investigation demonstrated that 87% of female participants do not show their personal

photos and 50% of them do not provide any information relating to their general or private lives, which could lead to identifying them on social networking platforms. In contrast, 75% of male academics involved in this research introduce themselves online as they do in offline settings by using their real names and own photos on their profiles. Furthermore, results indicate that female participants have some fears regarding their data on social networking sites, as they think that these social applications seek to collect their user data and utilise it for marketing purposes or as cooperation with some governmental institutions, such as the police.

On the level of gender differences with respect to the social networking utilised, the findings of this study show that male academics use LinkedIn more than do women. Only one woman out of the five participating faculty members used LinkedIn to communicate with professionals and experts in their particular field of interest. Therefore, although the number of academics using LinkedIn is not large (five participants, which represents 16% of interviewees), it can be seen that there is an indication of the gender factor impacting on employing SNSs in terms of communicating with experts, using LinkedIn as an example. This result may be explained by knowing that women use Instagram more than do men (three women versus only one man). Thus, it is a question of preferred application.

#### **8.4.4.3. Academic Degree**

In relation to the impact of the academic degree factor on participants' responses to the integration of social networking platforms in education, as well as the way in which academics use these sites, there are some differences in this regard. The findings indicate that it is clearly noticeable that most motivations are supported by lecturers more than other faculty members. In contrast, most concerns are supported by professors more than other faculty members.

Furthermore, results of this investigation illustrate that LinkedIn was used by professors and associate professors (4) to communicate with professionals and experts in the field more than by assistant professors (1), but it was not used at all by lecturers. In fact, I do not have any specific explanation for this demographic difference other than professors and associate professors mostly having a tendency to attend conferences, seminars and

intellectual sessions more than assistant professors and lecturers, at least from my own experience at Saudi universities. Therefore, they might be interested in seeking to look at accounts of other experts and professionals on LinkedIn in their field of knowledge to take advantage of what can be discussed on these professional pages. Additionally, findings reveal that Instagram was not used by professors of the four participants using this application for educational purposes.

#### **8.4.4.4. Years of Experience in Teaching**

In terms of examining whether or not 'years of teaching experience' had any effect on participants' attitudes towards using SNSs in educational institutions, the findings did not have a significant impact in this case, although the research sample included academics who had experience of 1–35 years of teaching at the university.

#### **8.4.5. A Final Point**

To conclude this summary of the main findings, this thesis has provided answers to its key questions. All the four dimensions of these research objectives have been investigated: faculty members' attitudes towards, motivations for and concerns about using social networking sites, as well as uses thereof, in academia. Furthermore, this investigation explored how cultural and social traditions are both challenged and enhanced by SNSs; for example, it has been shown that online interactions in gender-segregated societies can provide more information and expand understanding about the opposite gender more than do offline settings. Although these online interactions break the norm of gender segregation, the majority of Saudi users do not completely challenge their cultural and social traditions, and the impact of their social values and principles is clearly apparent in their perspectives and behaviours when using these platforms. Therefore, these findings can advance the understanding of integrating SNSs educationally in the context of a conservative society, and contribute to expanding the current literature on this topic.

## **8.5. Contributions of the Research**

By applying a qualitative research approach and adopting a theoretical framework that consisted of the following theories: Community of Practice, Hyper-personal Communication, Constructivism, and Connectivism, the present study extends the current knowledge of integrating SNSs in education, and takes an important step forward to explore why and how Saudi faculty members utilise these social platforms in the gender-segregated setting, and what kinds of challenges or concerns they have encountered in this regard. The findings that emerged from this research make a contribution to the body of existing literature on the integration of SNSs in education, in general, and on the context of Saudi higher educational institutions in particular. The contribution of this study can be recognised in two aspects: theoretical and empirical contributions.

### **8.5.1. Theoretical Contributions**

From a theoretical viewpoint, the current study has examined the applicability of perspectives and theories proposed in a Western context to Saudi society, where segregation between genders is applied at all levels of education. The findings that emerged from this investigation related to how Saudi academics, from a conservative culture, interact with other users of both genders as a community of practice on SNSs, and to what extent cultural and social factors could influence members positively or negatively to participate in these online communities can be considered an important theoretical contribution to the community of practice theory.

From a social perspective, the motivations for and concerns about participating online in virtual communities such as SNSs can potentially have an influence on users' attitudes towards working collaboratively as a community of practice. As a consequence, this research argues that cultural and societal considerations can be considered an essential factor in constructing and functioning these online communities of practice on these social platforms. As an example, one of the major factors of having an effective community of practice is that of obtaining a social presence, which is a human need for all participants, not only within face-to-face communities, but also in online settings.

Considering the Saudi context, this study revealed that SNSs contribute to providing this need, particularly for women, as face-to-face settings do not enable them to effectively take part in most social participation. As a result, employing technology to overcome social restrictions in the case of Saudi society has been considered the first motivation for the majority of participating academics to engage in such online communities. Therefore, investigating these cultural and social aspects can advance the understanding of applying this theory in the context of a conservative society, and contribute to expanding the current literature of knowledge surrounding this perspective.

The present research also contributes to the theoretical discussion regarding the lack of information provided in online settings. While the hyper-personal communication theory proposed that online communicators pay more attention to presenting themselves in a more selective and attractive manner due to the lack of physical cues, this study revealed that interaction in offline settings with the opposite gender in conservative cultures, such as Saudi Arabia, involves a greater lack of information than in online settings. As the findings of this research confirmed, online interactions in gender-segregated societies can provide more information and expand understanding about the opposite gender more than do face-to-face meetings.

Furthermore, the findings that emerged from this study illustrated that these features suggested by the hyper-personal communication theory have enabled individuals, especially women, in Saudi society to achieve a selective and optimised presentation of themselves to others in a way that doesn't conflict with their cultural and societal principles. Therefore, analysing and discussing these findings that emerged from this research, as well as addressing cultural and social matters in the context of conservative societies, contributes to the body of knowledge, particularly to the discussion in the literature about using computer-mediated communication and the level of information provided in online settings.

### **8.5.2. Empirical Contributions**

As the literature review has shown, there is a lack of academic investigation into this subject, particularly with regard to studying the cultural and societal factors and their

potential implications for these matters (e.g. Chen and Bryer, 2012; Almalki, 2011; Ellison and boyd, 2007). Accordingly, many researchers have recommended that more research needs to be done in this area of knowledge (e.g. Aljasir, 2015; Chen and Bryer, 2012; Almalki, 2011). Therefore, this study empirically contributes to filling this gap in the literature by focussing on exploring how cultural and social concerns or challenges could have an impact on academics' attitude towards and usage of SNSs for educational purposes, particularly in non-Western, conservative societies, taking Saudi society as an example.

To further clarify, while there are some studies that investigate quantitatively the use of social networking at Saudi higher education institutions (Aqil et al., 2013; Al-Hojailan, 2012; Alnujaidi, 2008), the current research conducted face-to-face interviews in order to obtain in-depth answers to the research questions, and then carried out qualitative analysis of Saudi faculty members' attitudes towards and their practical usage of integrating SNSs into education.

Al-Khalifa and Garcia (2013) investigated the role of social media in higher education and its usage in universities. They did this not by performing a practical study, but by analysing previous studies and university websites. However, the present research is an empirical study that was directly conducted with faculty members. It aimed to discover their opinions and practical teaching activities in the educational setting. It also aimed to develop the existing literature through its close focus on qualitative accounts of academics' usage in Saudi Arabia, particularly since the Saudi government led several initiatives that were considered essential interventions and developments in politics, society, education, and various other aspects. From another aspect, Almalki (2011) led a study to explore the experiences of instructors and students at Umm Al-Qura University in Saudi Arabia, focussing on the use of instructor websites to complement lectures. This investigation focussed on exploring faculty members' perspectives on SNSs and the ways in which academics at King Abdul-Aziz University and King Saud University in Saudi Arabia practically employ these social platforms as educational tools to improve teaching methods and learning strategies.

In another investigation carried out in the context of Saudi society, Aljasir (2015) studied some aspects of the usage of Facebook by Saudi university students and found that Facebook enables them to engage with their friends and other users to discuss, document and share personal viewpoints regarding local and global issues. Nevertheless, this investigation has sought to investigate academics' perspectives regarding their motivations for and concerns about integrating social networking into academia in light of their social and cultural considerations. It also discussed online identity and reputation on SNSs with the participating academics. As reported, the findings that emerged from this study illustrated that social networking platforms are very supportive in overcoming cultural restrictions in conservative societies. They are also beneficial in building educational groups to obtain better academic teaching, learning and communication. This was despite the fact that participants were concerned about their image, identity and reputation on these social platforms and were dealing cautiously with these online communities.

Therefore, it can be realised that this study has built upon the existing literature in order to provide as full a picture as possible of how these social applications are used in the context of Saudi Arabia universities. It has placed a particular emphasis on exploring how social and cultural considerations in conservative societies, such as Saudi society, can influence users' attitudes towards and behaviours on these social platforms, and also to what extent individuals respect or challenge their social restrictions. Furthermore, this research has shown how academics at Saudi universities attempt to steer an acceptable middle course with SNSs in a society that is conservative. As the research findings affirmed, the majority of participating faculty members seek to combine integrating SNSs in their educational settings to facilitate learning, teaching and communicating between both genders with maintaining their traditional cultural values.

Past studies in Saudi Arabia have not critically approached the topic — they have not explicitly asked faculty members about their social media usage and have not practically investigated how these social networks can affect teaching and learning activities. However, this research included the attitudes, uses, motivations and concerns of Saudi Arabian faculty members regarding utilising SNSs in education. I think that this investigation has paid more attention to drawing a comprehensive picture of the topic

from all relevant aspects. It has provided a detailed discussion about essential issues such as academics' approaches towards using SNSs, ways to improve teaching methods and learning strategies, cultural and social factors, and protecting academics' online identities. At the same time, it has not ignored small details such as using real names and personal photos on participants' profiles.

Ultimately, this investigation has studied the subject from different aspects. By managing a qualitative research approach, participants' responses provided detailed perspectives regarding their practical usage of, motivations for and concerns about incorporating social networking into academic settings. It also explored how cultural and social considerations could have an impact on academics' attitudes towards and usage of SNSs for educational purposes, particularly in non-Western, conservative societies. Furthermore, the direct interaction and communication with faculty members have contributed to providing empirical evidence, which expands the current understanding of social media usage in education. Hopefully, the study's findings will help both educational policymakers and faculty members to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the attitudes, motivations and concerns that exist surrounding the integration and development of social networks in the field of education.

## **8.6. Implications of the Research for Policy and Practice**

As indicated, Saudi universities are in the initial stages of recognising the educational benefits of social networking; indeed, this is evidenced by the fact that the Saudi government is currently undertaking a developmental campaign aimed at all levels of education in an attempt to enhance student learning and improve the teaching methods of educators. As such, the findings which emerged from this investigation will help both educational policymakers and faculty members to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the attitudes, motivations and concerns that exist surrounding the integration and development of social networks in the field of education.

The study findings have shown that the vast majority of academics involved in this research have a positive attitude towards integrating SNSs into education and that they actually use these social platforms for educational purposes. It is also clear from the



results presented in the findings chapters, that the main social platforms which attracted significant usage among academic respondents were WhatsApp (88%), Twitter (84%), Facebook (78%), and YouTube (63%). Indeed, these findings can contribute to helping Saudi university administrations clarify the overall picture in regard to the percentage of academics utilising social networking sites and which of these social platforms they prefer to use; this will also assist them in making the right decisions when it comes to education development.

Integrating social networking into academic settings in a formal manner will give rise to a fundamental change in teaching methods and learning styles at Saudi universities. As shown by the literature review, the dominant style of teaching in Saudi Arabia is the lecturing method, whereby students, for the most part, have no role to play, except to listen to and memorise what the teacher provides. The possibility of giving students an opportunity to discuss and share opinions with the whole class is very limited due to the school curriculum, the high number of students in the class, the lecture time, and also the lack of training in teaching methods. However, this study confirmed a number of motivating measures, such as expanding peer support and collaborative learning methods, generating and improving content by students, enhancing students' communication skills, and developing a more critical and reflective thinking; indeed, these motivational measures encouraged faculty members to incorporate SNSs into the academic field.

Moreover, this research project has studied the advantages of social networking platforms to help overcome the challenge of gender segregation in the Saudi educational system. The majority of participants believed that integrating SNSs into the educational setting can be an effective solution in the case of Saudi Arabia when it comes to overcoming spatial segregation between men and women. By utilising SNSs in the university environment, lecturers and students of both genders can be closer to each other during online teaching and learning sessions, despite the gender segregation between men and women in offline settings. Therefore, it is important to consider the significance of social and cultural aspects in terms of their influence on academics' perspectives and practices; indeed, this will essentially help educational institutions when they decide to initiate, update or change any educational programme or plan.

In a similar way, obtaining sufficient knowledge about the concerns and challenges that might be encountered when integrating SNSs into education will assist educational policymakers and university administrations in Saudi Arabia to develop their educational policies which will, in turn, allow them to keep up with digital developments and academics' needs. The matter of privacy was one of the major concerns for participants in this study, with 81% of academics involved in this research expressing worries about their privacy when using social networks. As indicated, 78% of those academics were older than 40 years of age. These statistics give an indication that older academics are in particular need of training sessions regarding appropriate strategies and techniques when it comes to the effective integration of SNSs into education. Having these digital skills will assist them in being informed about the advantages of these tools in teaching and learning activities, and will also make them aware of their drawbacks and how to avoid them, especially in conservative societies. As such, it is vital to identify faculty members' motivations for, and concerns about, integrating SNSs into the academic setting; it is also important to explore various practical experiences of how academics effectively apply these social platforms in learning and teaching activities. Indeed, this will contribute to developing Saudi higher education strategies for both aspects: policy and practice.

### **8.7. Limitations of the Research**

This investigation aimed to explore Saudi faculty members' attitudes towards, motivations for and concerns about using social networking sites, as well as uses thereof, in the academic setting. However, its findings must be taken in light of the accompanied limitations. The sample of this study was limited to 32 participants from two universities in Saudi Arabia. Even though the participants represent 13 academic departments and these two universities were carefully selected due to several considerations — e.g. location, size, diversity, and high academic standing — as stated in the chapter of methodology, the findings may not be appropriate for application in other academic settings.

As a further limitation, it should be considered that most of the challenges or concerns that faculty members encountered are related to, or influenced by, the gender-

segregated case in educational settings, which is a Saudi particularity. Therefore, it is expected that samples from other communities, even if from other Islamic or Arabic societies, may provide different results. Moreover, due to the nature of the subject, concerning the integration of SNSs in education, which is relatively new and rapidly evolving, the ways in which academics employ these platforms, the objectives that they intend to achieve, and their perspectives on relevant matters may develop or change in the future. Thus, conducting the same research with samples from the same population at some point in the future may present different thoughts or find that academics use these social platforms in other various ways.

Lastly, it is essential to confirm that the main purpose of conducting this research is not to generalise its findings to other settings, but rather to explore how Saudi academics, who belong to a very conservative culture, integrate these tools in their educational settings and what reasons have inspired them, and concerns they confronted as case study research.

## **8.8. Recommendations for Future Research**

The findings that emerged from this investigation clearly reveal that Saudi academics have certain motivations to utilise these platforms in education, and were concerned about some particular matters. Because there is a lack of research in the area of employing SNSs in education, particularly from cultural and social aspects, it is recommended that future research be conducted in other Islamic and Arabic countries to investigate their perspectives and behaviours on these platforms in light of their cultural considerations.

Additionally, because Saudi Arabia has been experiencing several essential developments in politics, society, education, and other various aspects in Saudi society, led by the Saudi government, these can be considered significant steps towards dramatically changing some cultural and societal traditions. Therefore, future studies with the same sample or a different sample from Saudi universities, could be studied longitudinally to observe changes over time on the subject of using SNSs and all relevant matters. Due to the research approach used in this study, which is a qualitative method,

and the limitation of the number of participants, other studies should investigate the topic quantitatively and include faculty members from different universities or teachers from different educational institutions.

Finally, even though conducting face-to-face interviews in the current study provided an in-depth understanding of faculty members' attitudes towards, motivations for and concerns about the integration of SNSs, as well as uses thereof, in the context of Saudi higher educational institutions, taking an action research approach in future studies is highly recommended, which will assist the researcher in getting involved in activities such as creating focus groups and leading workshops with research participants.

### **8.9. Concluding Remarks**

The existing research has sought to investigate and understand faculty members' attitudes towards, motivations for and concerns about using social networking sites, as well as uses thereof, for educational purposes, particularly in the gender-segregated educational setting of Saudi Arabian universities. The findings of this research illustrated that the vast majority of academics involved in this study use SNSs in learning, teaching and interacting with their colleagues and students. In line with previous studies, it can be concluded that Saudi faculty members integrate SNSs in the academic field to improve teaching approaches and expand peer support and collaborative learning methods. However, these social platforms also provide Saudi users with an opportunity to overcome social restrictions and cultural barriers to be in communication with the opposite gender.

Even though the majority of academics involved in this research have a positive attitude towards employing SNSs in an educational setting, they still have different concerns related to the cultural and societal dimension in Saudi society. Moreover, protecting their online identity and maintaining their privacy in these social spaces were considered challenges facing the implementation of SNSs in higher educational institutions due to the sensitiveness and significance of these issues in Saudi society. Many existing studies of privacy and other concerns are written from a Western perspective and its view of

privacy — this research expands that discussion by analysing these issues from a non-Western, conservative nation.

To conclude, this investigation has explored how cultural and social traditions are both challenged and enhanced by SNSs. To illustrate, it has shown that online interactions in gender-segregated societies can provide more information and expand understanding about the opposite gender more than do offline settings. Although these online interactions break the norm of gender segregation, the majority of Saudi users do not completely challenge their cultural and social traditions, and the impact of their social values and principles is clearly apparent in their perspectives and behaviours when using these platforms. Therefore, these findings can advance the understanding of integrating SNSs educationally in the context of a conservative society, and contribute to expanding the current literature on this topic.

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# Appendices

## **Appendix A: Interview Questions Form**

**Demographic information:**

- Interviewee number: .....
- Name (optional): .....
- Age:     ☐ under 30     ☐ 30–39     ☐ 40–49     ☐ 50 and up
- Gender:   ☐ Male     ☐ Female
- Your university: .....
- Your college: .....
- Your department: .....
- Your academic degree(s): .....
- Years of teaching experience: .....

**List of proposed questions:**

1. How often do you use a computer/ social networking sites (SNSs) in your daily life?
2. Have you taught any classes to students of the opposite gender?
3. Have you taught any classes for distance-learning students?
4. Do you use SNSs for educational purposes? If so, in what ways do you use them?
5. Which type(s) of SNSs do you use personally / educationally?
6. Does personal usage affect use or non-use professionally?
7. How do you see the possibility of users' movements between personal/professional usages modes?
8. What about the privacy of users (academics and students) and related issues?
9. What are the changes that you have noticed—or what changes would you expect to see—in the learning and teaching process due to the use of SNSs in education?
10. What are the major motivations for using SNSs in higher-education institutions in Saudi Arabia?
11. What are the greatest concerns about the use of SNSs in Saudi Arabian universities?
12. In general, what is your attitude toward using SNSs as educational tools?
13. What solutions do you suggest to encourage our faculty members to benefit from SNSs?
14. From your perspective, how does or should our Saudi society deal with these technological tools educationally?
15. As you know, a segregation between sexes is applied in our educational system, do you expect the communication way and the educational style (ex: educational groups) will be different or same through SNSs? And what are the pros and cons in your opinion?
16. Are educational policies and administrations of universities encourage and support this trend? Are they aware of the implications and effects that might happen especially in terms of buildings, curricula, teaching methods, and so on?

17. How would you describe the Saudi academic society with regard to the following issues:

- a) Culture and technology
- b) Mixing of genders online
- c) Formal social boundaries
- d) Social changes in the Saudi context

Thank you so much for your participation. I appreciate your cooperation.

**Kind Regards,**

*Fahd*

**Fahd Alsolamy**

## **Appendix B: Invitation to Participate**

*Invitation to participate in a research project*

---

Dear (Faculty member name),

My name is **Fahd Alsolamy**. I am currently undertaking a PhD research in Sheffield Hallam University-UK. The title of my research is: "Social Networks Sites in Higher Education: Faculty Members' Attitudes, Uses, Motivations and Concerns".

This study aims to:

1. Explore faculty members' attitudes towards using social networks for educational purposes in Saudi Arabian universities.
2. Identify the ways in which faculty members in Saudi Arabia use social networks as educational tools, if they use them.
3. Identify the major motivations for and the greatest concerns about using social networks amongst faculty members in higher education in Saudi Arabia.
4. Determine how demographic factors (e.g., age, gender, academic degree, and years of experience) affect faculty members' attitudes towards using social networks in an educational setting.

I am pleased to invite you to participate in this research. Although your participation is really voluntary, it is essential to the completion of this study. I would like to appreciate about 30 minutes of your time to conduct an interview with you about your own attitude, uses, motivations and concerns towards using social networks sites in education. All data that you provide will be used only for research purposes and will be really confidential. Participants will remain completely anonymous in any future publications from this study. The data will be stored in a safe place as prescribed by Sheffield Hallam University regulations.

If you are in agreement, please sign the attached Consent Form. Should you have any questions about this project, please feel free to contact me:

Fahd Alsolamy  
UK.Mob: 07442324197  
SA.Mob: 0544603331  
E-mail: [falsolamy@hotmail.com](mailto:falsolamy@hotmail.com)

Or contact my supervisor:  
Dr Ruth Deller  
E-mail: [R.A.Deller@shu.ac.uk](mailto:R.A.Deller@shu.ac.uk)

Thank you so much for your participation. I appreciate your cooperation.

Kind Regards,

*Fahd*

Fahd Alsolamy



## **Appendix C: Informed Consent Form**

*Participants' Consent Form*

Participant's Name: .....

The title of the research is: (Social Networks Sites in Higher Education: Faculty Members' Attitudes, Uses, Motivations and Concerns).

It is a PhD research undertaking at Sheffield Hallam University- UK.

The Researcher: **Fahd Alsolamy**.

The Supervisor: **Dr Ruth Deller**.

- 
1. I have received a statement explaining the interview involved in this project.
  2. I consent to participate in the above project and all details of the interviews have been explained to me.
  3. I authorize the researcher to interview me.
  4. I give my permission to be audio taped.
  5. I acknowledge that:
    - a. Having read the Research Statement, I agree to the general purposes, methods and the significance of the study.
    - b. I have been informed that I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time.
    - c. The data provided will only be used for research purposes.
    - d. The privacy of the information I give will be protected and only disclosed where I have consented to the disclosure or as required by law.
    - e. The security of the research data is assured during and after completion of the study.
    - f. The data collected during the study will be confidential. Any information which may be used to identify me will not be used unless I have given my permission.
- 

**Signed by:** ..... **Date:** ---/---/----

(Participant's name)

(Participants should be given a photocopy of this consent form after it has been signed).

## **Appendix D: The Supervisor's Letter**

Tel (direct line): 0114 225 6743  
Fax: 0114 225 6702  
Email: [c3ri@shu.ac.uk](mailto:c3ri@shu.ac.uk)

T +44 (0)114 225 5555  
Email [enquiries@shu.ac.uk](mailto:enquiries@shu.ac.uk)  
[www.shu.ac.uk](http://www.shu.ac.uk)  
Pro-Vice Chancellor Roger Eccleston

23 April 2014

To whom it may concern,

Dear Sirs

**RE: Mr Fahd Alsolamy (Student number - 22048267)**

We confirm that the above-named student is a current student on our Research Degree Programme, within the Faculty of Arts, Computing, Engineering and Sciences, here at Sheffield Hallam University.

The research programme details are as follows:

Subject area:	PhD Direct, in Communications and Media
Mode of Attendance:	Full time
Start Date:	May 2013
Course length:	3 years
Director of Studies:	Dr Ruth Deller
Tuition fee (2013/14):	£11,340, increasing annually
Funding Source:	Scholarship from King Abdul Aziz University, Saudi Arabia.

We are happy for this student to return to Saudi Arabia to undertake fieldwork, as part of his PhD, between August and October 2014.

Yours sincerely



Dr Ruth Deller  
Director of Studies (Main supervisor)

## **Appendix E: King Saud University's Approval**

وفقه الله

سعادة وكيل جامعة الملك سعود للدراسات العليا والبحث العلمي

السلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته

وبعد:

أقدم لكم هذا الطلب والذي أوضح لكم من خلاله بأنني مبتعث من جامعة الملك عبدالعزيز بجدة لدراسة الدكتوراه في تخصص دراسات الاعلام والاتصال بجامعة شيفيلد هالام بالمملكة المتحدة .. وأفيدكم بأن دراسة الدكتوراه التي هي بعنوان: ( دور وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي في التعليم العالي: اتجاهات أعضاء هيئة التدريس واستخداماتهم وأبرز الفرص والتحديات في واقع الجامعات السعودية من وجهة نظرهم لاستخدام تلك الوسائل الحديثة تعليمياً ) ، سوف تتضمن إجراء مقابلات شخصية مع عدد من أعضاء هيئة التدريس بجامعة الملك عبدالعزيز بجدة والملك سعود بالرياض. وقد أرفقت لسعادتكم نسخة من الأسئلة المقترحة للمقابلات الشخصية.

إدراكاً مني كباحث للدور المهم الذي تضطلع به جامعتكم الموقرة في التعاون الدائم والمستمر مع كافة الباحثين إيماناً من القيادات العليا لهذا الصرح العلمي المتميز بأهمية البحث العلمي ودوره في اكتشاف وتطوير الكثير من العلوم والمعارف، فإنني آمل من سعادتكم الموافقة على تطبيق الدراسة بجامعتكم والتوجيه بتسهيل مهمتي في إنجازها ..

مع خالص تحياتي وتقديري لسعادتكم ،،،

مقدم الطلب / فهد عوض الله السلمي

محاضر بقسم الاتصال بجامعة الملك عبدالعزيز بجدة

[falsolamy@hotmail.com](mailto:falsolamy@hotmail.com)



بسمه سعادته  
مع طوفقة  
خالص

## **Appendix F: King Abdul-Aziz University's Approval**

KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA

Ministry of Higher Education

**KING ABDULAZIZ UNIVERSITY**

Vice presidency for Graduate

Studies & Academic Research

Deanship of Graduate Studies



المملكة العربية السعودية  
وزارة التعليم العالي  
جامعة الملك عبد العزيز  
وكالة الجامعة للدراسات العليا والبحث العلمي  
عمادة الدراسات العليا

## إلى من يهمه الامر

تهديكم عمادة الدراسات العليا لسعادتكم أطيب التقدير والاحترام ، ونفيدكم أن المحاضر / فهد عوض الله السلمي مبعث من جامعة الملك عبدالعزيز بجدة لدراسة الدكتوراه في تخصص دراسات الإعلام و الاتصال بجامعة شيفيلد هالام بالمملكة المتحدة ضمن برنامج للدكتوراة في الإتصال والإعلام، ويود المبعث أن يجري مقابلات مع أعضاء هيئة التدريس، وفقاً لأسئلة ومحاور المقابلة المرفقة.

نأمل من سعادتكم التكرم بالنظر في موضوعه وتوجيه ذوي الاختصاص لديكم نحو إكمال اللازم.

وقد أعطيت هذه الإفادة للباحث دون أدنى مسؤولية على الجامعة.

وتقبلوا خالص تحياتي وتقديري !!!

عميد الدراسات العليا

د. عدنان بن سالم الحميدان



صورة للأستاذ/ عمر البلادي.

Encl.: ..... المشفوعات:

Date: ..... التاريخ:

Ref.: ..... الرقم:

ص.ب: ٨٠٢١٧ جدة ٢١٥٨٩ ت: ٦٩٥١٢٦٦ / ٦٤٠٠٠٠٠ - ٦١٣٨٧ فاكس: ٠٢ ٦٩٥٢٨٩٦  
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