Identity Construction and Social Capital: A Qualitative Study of the Use of Facebook by Saudi Women

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is concerned with the formation of online identity and relationships on Facebook. It seeks to make a contribution to knowledge by examining the way that women in Saudi Arabia negotiate a complex terrain of expectations and possibilities as they engage in social networking activities on this site. The thesis reveals the strategies used in constructing and managing their identities, the issues they discuss and share with their audiences and the forms of social capital that their interactions produce. The thesis utilises a mix of qualitative methods of research. It is based on online/offline interviews and observations of the participants’ self-performances and activities on Facebook. The conceptual language of the thesis is informed by Goffman’s dramaturgical approach and Bourdieu’s concept of social capital. The analysis is positioned within a critical engagement with studies of identity construction, online deliberation, and social capital in social media environments.

The findings reveal different aspects of identity formation and management of self and others on the site, suggesting that these are overshadowed by a high awareness of the gaze of known and unknown audiences. The study identified participants’ practices of distinguishing self from other, judging the self, and imagining being judged by others. Their identities were found to be constructed, gendered, and tightly managed as they addressed multiple audiences, with networks being formed in a way that has relatively narrowly defined boundaries. By examining the ways that cultural expectations shape participants’ online self-presentation and social activities, the thesis explores the continuities between their online and offline worlds.

This thesis extends Goffman’s dramaturgical approach to consider more complex settings where the self is monitored and regulated, contexts “collapse,” and the audience is physically absent. This thesis also contributes to understandings of the blurring of the public/private distinction online and proposes extending the scope of ‘online deliberation’ beyond public political spheres to other, more private networked publics. The exploration of the connections made by participants between their online identities, expressions, and relationships and their offline lives, enables the study to consider how participants' Facebook use relates to their wider contexts of interaction.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE THESIS

1.1 Identity and Audience in the Social Media

This thesis takes as its focus the formation of identity and relationships within contemporary social media environments of the Internet. Social networking sites (SNSs) have brought a substantial change to the way people socialise and interact with each other (Ellison et al., 2007; Urista et al., 2009; Steinfield et al., 2008), opening up opportunities for identity formation and interaction that are different to those available to individuals in offline environments. Within these environments users can make use of “[…] features similar to both traditional public discourse like newspapers, being broadcasted to a large audience” whilst also engaging in “[…] activities and issues that traditionally have belonged to more private spheres and means of communication” (Bromseth, 2002:35). It is from this complexity that the opportunities and challenges of these sites can be seen to emerge.

The non-anonymity of many social media profiles brings the personal more directly into the online sphere than was the case of the anonymous, asynchronous interactions of early computer-mediated communication (CMC). Whilst chat rooms and MUDs enabled people to present the self through conversational behaviour in addition to opening up the possibility for role-playing (“gender-swapping”) and deception (“present oneself as other than the one is in real life”) (Turkle, 1995:212-228), SNSs such as MySpace and Facebook have broadened the modality by which the self is presented and increased the amount of personal content that individuals share. Scholars have suggested that online self-presentation is useful for identity creation and exploration (Hughes, 2012) and that users enjoy self-presentation on such networks (Tufekci, 2008). Users are able to create their own profiles, present their desired identities, and have the opportunity to idealise and promote the self (e.g. Manago, Graham, Greenfield and Salimkhan, 2008). Devoid of nonverbal cues, SNSs have also been seen to facilitate self-censorship (Ellison, Heino and Gibbs, 2006) and selective self-presentation (Walther, Heide, Hamel, Shulman, 2009). This performance of identity takes place within bounded systems that have shared but also distinct features and norms which present different resources for this identity work. While there are certain primary features that are
consistent across different social networking sites, the cultures that have emerged around each are unique (boyd and Ellison, 2008).

Scholars have suggested that the use of these sites may be a source of mutual benefits with regard to the formation of social relationships. SNSs allow users to expand and maintain their relationships (e.g. Ellison et al., 2014), build new ones (e.g. Ellison et al., 2007) and re-establish old ones (e.g. Lampe et al., 2006). They make the distant closer and strangers a part of a user’s “friend” list (boyd and Ellison, 2008). In some contexts, SNSs create the opportunity for users to do what it is not acceptable to do offline, such as establishing cross-gender relationships (e.g. Al-Saggaf, 2004). Scholars have found in social networking sites activities that form communities, strengthen relationships and increase sociability, offline activities that have moved online with the emergence of the Internet (Putnam, 2000). Among them, Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe (2006, 2007, 2008, and 2011) have started to examine the social capital outcomes of using social networking sites.

Others have drawn attention to the use of these sites for political purposes. boyd (2011:39) describes social networking sites as “networked publics” because they not only allow people to socialise but also to meet for social, cultural, and civic engagements and goals. Tschirhart (2014) argues that online social networks are well structured to facilitate the establishment of collective movements and calls for social change by allowing users to protest (e.g. Tufekci and Wilson, 2012), vote (e.g. Williams and Gulati, 2007) and engage in political discussions (e.g. Halpern and Gibbs, 2013; Gustafsson, 2012; Kushin and Kitchener, 2009; and Valenzuela et al., 2009). As social media facilitates movement and discussions, some have argued that it also serves to empower women. It has been suggested that SNSs provide women with a space to demand equality (e.g. Moradabadi, Gharahshiranb, and Amraic, 2012, in Iran), to call for social change (see Caroline Criado-Perez’s blog, 2015, in the UK), to exert freedom of expression (e.g. Tamimi, 2010; and Al-Saggaf, 2011, in Saudi Arabia), and to find more about themselves (e.g. Roy, 2012, in India), and that it has enabled them to open up to the public after decades of being relegated to the domestic (private) sphere (Harcourt, 1999).

Yet, as well as presenting opportunities, SNSs are not devoid of challenges. These environments have generated privacy concerns among some of their users or potential users, who then work to manage and control the information revealed about themselves. Scholars such as Nosko et al. (2010) have discussed the risk of revealing sensitive
information on sites that present different layers of privacy (boyd & Ellison, 2008). Whilst some research has suggested that Internet users are confused about the status and visibility of their online activity (LaRose and Rifon, 2006), others have focused on the close attention that users give to their audience and the information that they share within SNS environments. Tufekci (2008), for example, argues that users tend to release their personal information, manage it and control the visibility of their profiles, by, for example, using nicknames so that they are not recognised by others. Other users who are more anxious about public scrutiny make an effort to control who can view their activities and information by adjusting their privacy settings (boyd and Ellison, 2008:222; Joinson, 2008). Thus, they monitor (observe and control) their expressive behaviour (e.g. Strano and Queen, 2012) based on their audience’s textual feedback and/or their sense of their audience’s perception of them (Marwick and boyd, 2010). This task is made more difficult because of the way that these sites “collapse” different contexts (ibid, 2010:122) forcing users to perform to, and manage, multiple audiences – audiences who may have very different expectations about what is appropriate behaviour – in a single environment. As I will discuss in Chapter 4, social networking studies on identity have demonstrated users’ awareness of their audience in venues where multiple audiences are brought together in one setting and have examined users’ strategies for dealing with this complexity.

On public platforms such as Facebook, users from different backgrounds may also face difficulties adhering to their offline norms online, especially in conservative societies with strict expectations of women’s behavior. Users might thus take the opportunity to break away from offline norms and gender expectations which restrict their freedom of expressions and self-presentation. In a recent study, Roy (2012), for example, demonstrates the complexity of adhering to and/or resisting cultural norms and gender roles on a platform such as Facebook that provides discursive features to freely express and manage the self and the audience. Roy demonstrates how Indian women defy gender expectations and shows their ability to reveal more about themselves on Facebook, thereby re-defining the self to be perceived by others as desirable. While some

1 “Context collapse can be understood as an event, or episodic occurrence, within a specific situation where certain aspects of the setting and identity performance influence its likelihood”- e.g. the existence of an unexpected audience in a setting where an individual is performing with a particular audience in mind (Duguay, 2014:3).
of Roy’s participants challenged the norms, however, were happy to abide by them. It is here that my thesis seeks to make a contribution by examining the way that women in Saudi Arabia negotiate a complex terrain of expectations and possibilities as they engage in social networking activity.

1.2 The Research Problem

As I have described above, social networking sites present opportunities to construct identities, interact with others to form relationships, engage in social, culture, and political discussions, and negotiate cultural constraints. Nevertheless, SNSs also present challenges with regard to the revealing of personal information, the “collapse” of multiple audiences, and the difficulty of adhering to one’s own norms and culture on a public platform. Against this backdrop, this thesis looks at the way that a particular social media platform (Facebook) is taken up by a specific group (women) in a specific cultural context (Saudi Arabia). I am interested in exploring women’s experiences with Facebook in the Saudi context by looking at how their self-presentation strategies, forms of discussion, and types of relationships and outcomes might comprise a unique use of Facebook.

1.2.1 A Study of Facebook Use in Saudi Arabia

Facebook is a social networking site which was originally developed as a student website at Harvard University. Launched in 2004, the site broke into the mainstream when it was opened up to the general public in 2006 (Ellison et al., 2007; Uristra et al., 2009; Patrick, 2010). By 2007, it had acquired 21 million registered account holders and by 2015 its reach had extended to 1,390 million users around the world (Socialbakers, 2015). Today, Facebook is considered one of the most popular social networking sites globally (boyd, 2008; boyd and Ellison, 2008; Alsaggaf and Nielsen, 2014) and is available in 70 different languages (Vasalou et al., 2010).

The site is designed to let people socialise through posts and texts, and present personal profiles, including photos, to different audiences. Profiles on Facebook are by default set to public, unless users choose their privacy through the features available. Facebook has friendship as its model: participants request a friendship and the other
accepts it, thereby being added to a “friends” list. Connections are then able to view the user’s profile according to the privacy settings chosen by him/her. Facebook also has two systems of messaging: private, where people can send personal messages, and public, in which people can post messages on an individual’s personal “wall”, which others can view and share (Valenzuela et al., 2009:881). This posting activity can be “liked”, shared and replied to in the form of comments. Facebook has developed and updated its features over time, introducing the “timeline” feature in 2011, which created a constantly-updated timeline of texts and posts. More recent developments have included more control over privacy settings². These developments have had dramatic impact for users of the site and on the visibility of their posting activity (see Whiteman, 2012).

Facebook’s Arabic version was launched in March 2009 (Sterns, 2010 – CNNworld). Prior to this, Facebook had been available to the Saudi public but only to those who knew English. In moving into the Saudi market, Facebook entered a culture that is defined by expectations regarding behaviour which place certain restrictions on the performance of self across both public and private domains, particularly for women. It is important to state that Saudi culture is not homogenous. These expectations differ depending on where the woman lives, how religious she and/or her family are, and their tribal traditions, all of which have a vital influence on individual and family values. Thus, practices such as veiling, gender segregation and the definition of private and public, as well as cross-gender relationships, might be viewed differently among individuals and families in various Saudi regions and cities (AlMunajid, 1998). However, some norms extend across all regions. The publicly-mandated separation between men and women in public sectors where people work and learn has, for instance, led both to form friendships mainly with individuals of the same gender. Excluding the health sector, women normally only have the opportunity to interact with other women. Interactions between men and women occur, if necessary, through video conferencing in some fields, such as education (Baki, 2004). Here, male lecturers sometimes present lectures to female

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² In 2014, Facebook debuted the ‘privacy dinosaur’ to alert new users that they are sharing their information with an unintended audience. Then came the ‘Anonymous Login’ feature, which enables users to not share their information when they sign in to any application; a ‘privacy checkup tool’, which helps users review and manage the content they share; and the launch of the ‘Facebook Rooms’, an app where users can post photos, videos, and messages under a pseudonym, amongst others (InformationWeek, 2014). In addition, the control over friends’ news updates on users’ newsfeeds came in 2014, new “friends” posting search in 2014, and other features related to videos, e-commerce, applications, etc.. These are all developments related to my study’s interest; there are more other such developments.
students via television, with limited interaction and clarifications occurring through a telephone connection. This separation is expected to extend to online settings.

The limitations imposed on women in education and work settings is due to Wahhabism, the strict belief system that rules the country in which certain verses of the Qur’an are interpreted as proscribing the mixing of the sexes as much as possible (Baki, 2004). According to Baki (2004), the educational system in Saudi Arabia has limited women’s access to many sectors, including much of the labour market, as an extension of gender segregation practices and on account of the belief that some fields are not suitable for women. Historically, women were educated only to be good wives, teachers or nurses (Hamdan, 2005). Thus, traditionally in Saudi Arabia, there have been two distinct spheres in which men and women live their lives. The public sphere (where working, earning a living, and public communication occur) has been a male domain, whilst the private sphere (home, private interaction and communication with other women in their homes) has been the domain of women (Nelson, 1974). Men’s access to the homes of other families is limited; they have no access to women’s private communication and gatherings unless permitted (ibid, 1974). In some non-conservative families non-relatives can be close to the family, allowing talk and relationships between members of the opposite sex to occur. Typically however, in offline settings, a nominally private space where a man is present, who is either unrelated or is related but outside the bounds of immediate family, is no longer considered a private place.

When interacting with the opposite sex outside of the family, general expectations are also placed on the nature of acceptable forms of interaction and personal expression. Speech is expected to be formal, and shyness and silence on the part of women are considered good behaviour (Al-Saggaf, 2004). Women acting in contrast to this might convey a detrimental image about themselves to other individuals in the society. Recently, a Saudi art student conveyed women’s possibilities for expression across private-public spheres in a piece broadcast on the MSN Arab News (2015). The artwork depicts a traditional, gender-segregated space typical of families in the Hejaz region, where Jeddah city is located. The artist, Wejdan Reda, suggested that:

3 (i.e., fathers, brothers, uncles, or others with whom a woman can communicate informally and in whose presence she can remove her veil (see Quran, Surat An-Nur [24:31] for more explanation)).
The space that is off-limits to men is where you can see emotions that women prefer to express to other women in a setting that is private and reserved exclusively for them […] Such unfiltered emotions can safely be expressed in the closed female area, in an atmosphere of tolerance and acceptance but would not normally be seen outside in public. (Ibid, 2015:1)

Such separation affects both the nature of interaction and understanding between the genders from an early age (Alsaggaf, 2004). Within the private sphere, women can express love, care, joy, sadness, or any other emotion, freely, in the form of, for example, laughter, hugs, or crying, whereas the expression of emotion is restricted and limited in public spaces. Similarly, even married couples are expected to refrain from public displays of affection. The restrictions and high expectations of women’s actions and decorum in public and amongst men have led them to circumscribe their emotional expressions in public. On the other hand, men are free to express the whole range of emotions publicly so long as the emotion in question is not directed towards a woman.

Women’s changing roles in Saudi Arabia has been the subject of debate since the discovery of oil in the 1930’s, which opened a path for them in education. The presence of American families beginning in 1979 with the establishment of ARAMCO, an Arab American oil company, as well as political events, such as the first Gulf war, when Iraq attacked Kuwait in 1990, and the second, when the USA invaded Iraq, increased the presence of foreigners in the Kingdom, which affected women’s status in the country (Hamdan, 2005). Within their Western-style compounds, Western women practiced what Saudi women are not allowed to do, such as driving cars and going out in public unveiled. This exposure to the free American lifestyle motivated some Saudi women to start fighting for their rights in a way that is compatible with their religion (ibid, 2005). Through print media, men and women alike started calling for women to participate within the public sphere (ibid, 2005).

Yet despite these developments, commentators such as Tamimi (2010:II) have argued that Saudi women today have “no clear voice in mainstream media and women journalists are chained by male guardianship and segregation rules which make their work difficult, unbalanced and incomplete”. Although they have attained positions and become leaders in the educational and health sectors, and more recently in the consultative council and in the market sector, at “every level of competence and leadership there will be a place for them that is inferior and subordinate to the positions
of men” (Smith, 1987:34, cited in Hamdan, 2005). Baki (2004) gives the example of a male professor being required to review the grades a female professor awarded her students. Such systems are in place in many fields at various levels, but political engagement has been regarded as one of the most important arenas in which women’s voices are limited and minimized compared with men’s voices (Alsaggaf, 2011).

In this context, the use of Facebook has been controversial in some quarters. It has been regarded as an online space in which activities raise concerns about marital relationships and the nature of the friendships that women start with others; a number of negative news stories have been reported about it (Popa, 2008; Was, 2010). On the other hand, the news has also reported positive aspects of its use. Users’ interests on Facebook have revolved around cultural and general issues; i.e., sports and music among men and shopping, fashion, music, and movies among women (Al-Khaddaf, 2010). Hammad commented that Facebook has become part of many Saudi women’s daily routine; it provides them with information about topics that interest them, regular access to friends’ updated news, and enables them to join group discussions and activities (2010). In further evidence reported in the news media, Al-Harbi has stated that Saudi women use Facebook to connect with friends, share ideas, hobbies and feelings, sell products, and create groups to express their thoughts on some social issues (2010). It has also been regarded as a platform for Saudi women to call for their rights, for example when Manal Al-Sharif, a Saudi woman, famously called on other women to protest the ban on driving on a specific date by going out and driving (SaudiWomen’s Weblog, 2011). Many such public Facebook profiles were established calling for social change and have been created by both women and men. However, as the government in Saudi Arabia exercises censorship over Internet content as well as limiting freedom of expression offline and controlling local media (Alsaggaf, 2011), any individual engaging in activities that encompass pornographic or anti-Islamic material or criticism of local politics, is subject to punishment (Al-Saggaf, 2011; see Black, 2015). This control is less imposed on Facebook, although punishment could be administered if any of these activities has been verified. This was applied to Manal Al-Sharif, who was arrested for incitement to break the law.

From a personal perspective, my first, early response to Facebook was one of caution. I first heard about Facebook in 2007 through a member of my family who was introducing it to my sister. I must admit that I was not eager to know much about it at
that point. My hesitancy about the site related to the fact that it was open to the public: I had no idea at that time that I could have control over my account. I remember thinking that even if I decided to create a profile, my husband would not approve, as I considered both him and myself conservatives, like many other people in the country. But when the Internet and social media became widely used in Arab societies, things that were previously taken for granted came to be viewed with a different lens. I was also not interested in the idea of sending cookies, birthday wishes and playing games; the sorts of activities that I remember my sister telling us about enthusiastically. Two years later, the release of the Arabic version of Facebook in 2009 led to an increase in membership. Facebook gradually became a familiar part of daily life, and by 2014, Facebook was considered the most popular social networking site in Saudi Arabia, with 6.3 million users (Statista: The Statistics Portal, 2014).

It was not until 2010, while I was doing my Master’s degree, that I created my Facebook profile. I had started to become interested in the nature of social media environments and was intrigued as to how, in a society such as Saudi Arabia, with its cultural and gender expectations, a site like Facebook was used. I also wanted to experience first-hand what others were doing. The first thing I did was set my profile to private to restrict the public audience, particularly males, from being able to access it. I chose a drop of water on a leaf as a profile picture, as I thought this represents me: calm, pure and loving nature. I then started filling in my front page. I concealed my private information, such as my email address and phone number. I carefully selected my favourite music, books, and movies. Within my private account, I decided not to open it to everybody; rather, I carefully chose who could join my network and I limited it to very close female friends, old school relationships and family. I rejected all requests from male cousins, relatives, family relations and strangers. I also rarely post on my profile. When I do post, I carefully choose my posts, which are mostly about health and religious education, as I believe that these reflect my personality. Friends’ likes and comments encourage me to post more. When I don’t receive “likes”, I think about what might be a better topic to share in the next post.

By presenting my Facebook personal experience, i.e., my initial performance, my high control over the privacy settings, my choice of relationships, and the brief snapshot of the culture, I intended to show where my scholarly interest lies. The intention of the thesis is to examine other women’s experiences of using Facebook and to explore their
use of the site and the role of culture in this regard. How do cultural norms and expectations inform their performance of identity and relationships and how they deal with notions of offline private/public on Facebook? To what extent do women adhere to or challenge these norms and what are the implications of the general cultural expectations about what constitutes “good behaviour” and the production of “good”, what is acceptable and what is not, for their online activity?

1.2.2 Positioning My Study

In studying how Facebook is used in Saudi culture, this thesis contributes to the literature that has examined the use of new media technologies and – more specifically – social networking sites, in the Arab contexts. Since the Internet became accessible to the Arab world from the early 1990s, it has become a tool of communication with diversity of use across the region (Warf and Vincent, 2007). Some Arab countries, such as Kuwait, Bahrain, Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, and Lebanon, take a relatively liberal approach to Internet use (ibid, 2007) and with the increased use of the Internet, scholars have become interested in understanding the role of social norms on such technological innovation (Loch, Straud, and Kamell, 2003), patterns of use (e.g. Simsim, 2011, in the Saudi context), and its impact on other traditional media use (e.g. Miliany, 2014). There is also an interest in exploring the role of the Internet, as a tool, for health (e.g. Alghamdi, 2009), education (e.g. Alwabil and AlShawi, 2013) and political engagement (see Newsom and Lengel (2012) study of the patterns of women’s political practices during the “Arab Spring” on Twitter and Facebook). Whilst Twitter has become a site of particular interest to scholars (Alim, Shahzad and Alwagait, 2014), other scholars have looked at the discourse of Internet bulletin boards that represent tribes and communities in Saudi Arabia (e.g. Samin, 2008), while others have examined the role of social media tools in online news websites in the Saudi context (e.g. Akhtar and Parvez, 2014).

Over the past few years a small body of literature has accumulated which looks at the use of Facebook in the Arab world. Studies carried out outside of the West have argued that Facebook can be a kind of political sphere in which users practice their gendered identities. There have been a range of studies on activism on Facebook, concerning, for example, the Arab spring movements (e.g. Al-Ezzi, et al., 2008), while other work demonstrates that Facebook represents a turning point for women’s political,
social, and civic position in the Arab world (e.g. Abadi, 2014, in Morocco; Abdel-Fadil, 2014, in Egypt; Albrecht, 2006 and Alshejni, 1999, in Yemen; Al-Harbi, 2010, in Saudi Arabia; El Issawi, 2014, in Libya; Khamis, 2014; Tschirhart, 2014; and Wagner, 2011 in Saudi Arabia). Those scholars examined how Arab women across the globe have exploited social media to agitate for their rights, equality, social status, and to overcome their cultural constraints. In addition, studies have asserted the gendering of women’s identities when communicating on Facebook: the way that, for example, Moroccan women use online communication platforms and have been able to form collective identities as a strategy to portray their culture within their activities and practices (Abadi, 2014).

In line with these trends, the political and gendered nature of Facebook use has been illuminated in Saudi studies of social media. They demonstrate how the online environment is changing the definition of the traditional public and private. Tschirhart (2014) argues that the increased use of blogs and social networks has enabled Saudi women to break through the cultural barriers imposed on them (e.g. gender segregation, relative voicelessness, traditional oppression in a male dominated society) and deliberate publicly. Women have moved from segregated society to a more open sphere where they can express their needs and feelings, claim their rights (e.g. Tamimi, 2010), and have more freedom from obligations and family/social traditions and rules (e.g. Al Omoush, Yaseen, and Alma’aithah, 2012). Cross-gender relationships have been a particular focus of many Saudi studies looking at online communication on social media. Al-Saggaf (2004) argued that Saudi women and men, for example, were able to mutually understand and appreciate the other gender online.

Existing studies of Facebook use in the Saudi context have a number of limitations for those interested in identity formation within this sites. Firstly, it is notable that, to date, studies of Facebook in the Saudi context have limited their inquiries to its general use, with only a superficial focus on identity. Al-Saggaf’s (2011) is one of three academic studies that has examined Facebook use among Saudi women. He discusses self-disclosure (photo posting) in relation to privacy and trust, in addition to examining political engagement (as an aspect of use) as freedom of expression in looking at users’ experiences on the site from different perspectives. However, he does not explicitly focus on identity. Binsahl and Shanton (2012) examine the experience of using Facebook, including posting photos, and Facebook’s potential for educational use, but do not
present a detailed account of identity formation within this use. A recent study conducted by Al-Saggaf and Nielsen (2014) explores the relationship between self-disclosure on the Facebook profiles of 616 females with public profiles in relation to their feelings of loneliness. However, the amount of information revealed about different aspects of personal life (in relation to the Facebook attributes: “status description and the fields of age, ‘about’, gender, city, relationship status, number of friends, likes and photos and interests” etc.) was statistically measured (p:463). Therefore, it focuses on the type of information disclosed rather than ways that identity are constructed. Two other studies examining Facebook use among male and female university students are by Aljasir, Woodcock, and Harrison (2012, 2013). The former explores the reasons why male and female Saudi university students do not use Facebook, whereas the latter investigates where and how university students like to access Facebook, whom they hide their profiles from, and how many friends they have. The latter revealed the existence of multiple profiles when students reported via survey the number and type of friends on each profile. A recent paper by Guta and Karolak (2015) looked at how Saudi women construct their identities on Facebook. They examine identity formation on social media including Facebook, and explore the different tactics used by female students to construct their identities (e.g. the use of nicknames, the creation of multiple identities, and concealing their Facebook profiles from family and friends). They consider how their participants negotiate cultural rules and norms, and found that social media is a space in which to redefine the self. Guta’s and Karolak’s (2015) exploration of the formation of identity on social media demonstrates that there is growing interest in this topic, which is still very under-researched.

Second, the majority of studies of Internet use in Saudi Arabia have been based on the method of a survey or the use of a single qualitative method. Thus, there is a need for a mixed methodological approach to examining Facebook use. Al-Salem (2005) and Al-Saggaf (2004), for example, adopted qualitative methods (email interviews) to explore the impact of Internet use on Saudi women’s self-image and social attitude and to examine (via MSN messenger interviews) the impact of Internet use on online and offline communities among Saudi women and men, respectively. Both Al-Salem and Al-Saggaf opted for online rather than face-to-face interviews. Although there are some Saudi studies about Facebook that used a qualitative approach (e.g. Al-Saggaf, 2011 (ethnographic techniques); Binsahl and Shanton, 2012; and Guta and Karolak, 2015
(interviews)), they either relied solely on what the participants themselves reported or appeared limited because the female participants were hesitant to be interviewed by a male researcher (I will return to this in Chapter 3).

Here, an additional issue emerges: the need for more studies to be conducted by a female researcher in order to overcome the cultural barriers when examining the site’s use among women. Al-Saggaf’s (2011) examination of females’ experiences on Facebook is not as deep as it could have been due to his position as a male interviewing and observing the private Facebook profiles of women (see Chapter 3). His study, as well as Al-Saggaf (2004), and Al-Salem (2005) provide examples of how cultural obstacles can limit the design of research. Gender clearly has an impact on the type of method that is suitable to the context of the study and the degree to which participants will open up to the researcher. Yet being of the same gender does not remove all the challenges of doing such work, as I will discuss later in the thesis.

1.3 Research Questions

Having identified the limitations of previous literature on Facebook, the current study can be considered one of the first attempts to focus on Saudi women’s construction of their identities on Facebook by an insider (a Saudi woman) and the first to offer a rich exploration of self-presentation and the strategies used to manage the self and the audience. This study has three central research questions:

**RQ1:** What strategies do Saudi women use for constructing and managing their identities on Facebook?

**RQ2:** To what extent do they use the site as a platform for online “deliberation?”

**RQ3:** What role does Facebook play in the production of social capital?

As I will discuss in Chapter 3, methodologically, this study is based on observational and interview data collected across online and offline spaces with the ten Saudi female participants from the multicultural city of Jeddah. The analysis presented is therefore based on both self-reported interview data and the actual use of Facebook by
studying practices taken directly from profile pages and/or accounts of their experiences. As I am interested in asking these research questions in a way that does not merely look at one-off snapshots of activity, I have chosen a longitudinal methodological approach which involves looking at the use of Facebook over a ten month period. The adoption of multiple qualitative methods of research is designed to yield a rich and nuanced explanation of how these women negotiate cultural expectations and norms that inform their performance of identity and relationship management in offline contexts, in online spaces. Theoretically, this is achieved by drawing on ideas from Goffman’s work on self-presentation and impression management and Bourdieu’s work on social capital. The study also draws on studies of online deliberation to explore the nature of discussions on Facebook. In so doing, this thesis contributes to the existing literature of the role of social media in forming relationships and how users negotiate the construction of desirable identities online.

1.4 Thesis Organisation

This thesis is divided into seven chapters. In Chapter 2 I lay out my main theoretical framework for the study. The chapter is divided into two parts. The first part deals with identity. I start with a consideration of the concept of identity and its relationship to notions of gender. I then draw on Goffman’s work on self-presentation and impression management in face-to-face encounters in order to frame my thinking about the presentation of the self on Facebook. The second part sets out how my approach to social relationships has been informed by Bourdieu’s concept of social capital (1986) and Putnam’s (2002) description of social capital. Throughout the chapter I also trace how other scholars have recruited these concepts in antecedent studies of social networking.

The methodological design of this research is presented in Chapter 3. This chapter outlines my research design and reflects on a number of key issues relating to the conduct of the study. It lays out the sampling and methods, and outlines the procedures for recruiting participants, data collection, and analysis. It discusses my role as a researcher and my position as an “insider” in the Saudi context, the challenges I faced, and my reflections on the research “journey.”
Chapter 4 is the first of three analysis chapters. The chapter examines my participants’ strategies of self-presentation: the decisions made in the construction of their profile, and strategies used to manage and control the collapse of multiple audiences. The chapter emphasises the participants’ high awareness of their audience and their impressions and self-monitoring to meet the audience’s expectations and avoid negative judgments.

Chapter 5 considers whether my participants’ online interactions could be considered a form of online deliberation. The chapter introduces existing work on online deliberation as well as literature that has explored the production of cultural identity and ‘othering’ in online and offline forms of interaction. This frames my analysis of how participants use Facebook as a space for the discussion of political, religious, and social issues and how they use the site to promote moral values.

Chapter 6, the final analysis chapter, considers the role of Facebook use in facilitating the formation of different kinds of relationships, the benefits gained from information exchange, and my participants’ perceptions of the impact of such relationships on their social lives. It asks whether participants’ Facebook use contributes to the production of social capital in the Saudi context, arguing that the positive outcomes of social capital on Facebook outweigh the negative impact of Facebook use on some of my participants’ relationships.

Finally, Chapter 7 concludes this thesis by summarising the research findings in relation to the questions I set out to answer. I point out the theoretical and empirical achievements of the research by addressing each of my research questions and highlighting significant issues emerging from the discussion. This chapter reiterates the contributions of the thesis. I draw the thesis to a close by reflecting on some of the limitations of the research as well as discussing possible ways for further research to be carried out in the future.

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4 It is worth noting that each of the analysis chapters situates the project in relation to previous literature in order to establish the way I am building on, and extending, prior research.
CHAPTER 2: KEY CONCEPTS

2.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I outlined my interest in exploring the construction of identity and the formation of social relationships on Facebook by Saudi women. By “identity” I am concerned with the actions by which participants present the self in this site. In respect of “social relationships” my interest is in the establishment and maintenance of relationships on Facebook and how these inform the construction of my participants’ online identities. In this chapter, I set out the main theoretical frameworks that underpin my study: Goffman’s (1959) work on self-presentation and impression management and Bourdieu’s (1986) conceptualisation of social capital. The aspects of Goffman’s theory I have recruited concern the performance of the self and management of this performance, particularly the management of audience impressions. These aspects of Goffman’s work focus on the different roles performed by individuals to different audiences within everyday interactions and how these are shaped by the different settings within which these performances take place. Bourdieu’s concept of social capital has also guided my research, informing my examination of the relationships that are formed on Facebook, and the outcomes that are produced from them.

The chapter begins with a consideration of the concept of identity, engaging with theories relating to the construction of identity that have shaped my understanding of this concept. This section also considers the relationship between identity, gender and culture; a relationship which is significant to my project given the empirical focus of my study. I then present a brief introduction to Goffman, focusing on the four aspects of his work that are most central to my analysis in this thesis: impression management, idealising the self, maintenance of expressive control, and his thinking on audience segregation. I then examine how these ideas have been adopted and transformed by other scholars within the field of media and communications. In the second half of the chapter I consider how my analysis of the use of Facebook to establish and maintain social relationships draws on Bourdieu’s concept of social capital. Here, as in my discussion of Goffman’s work, I situate my consideration of this concept within a critical discussion of how this concept has been taken up and extended by other scholars interested in social
I conclude by considering how previous Facebook studies have described the relationship between identity (self-presentation) and social capital (relationships). I finish by attempting to bring the two ideas of self-presentation and relationship formation together. In doing so, I seek to address the marginalisation of identity in social capital studies and the neglect of the concept of social capital in identity studies (studies that have tended to apply uses and gratification theory when examining Facebook use; (e.g. Joinson, 2008; Patrick, 2010; Sheldon, 2008; and Urista, Dong, and Day, 2009).

PART 1: IDENTITY

2.2 The Concept of Identity

In this section I give an account of the shift in the conception of “identity” from an essentialised perspective towards a focus on the construction of identity, a view of the way that identity is produced. The concept of identity has changed over time, becoming increasingly unstable (Hall, 1992) and open to different interpretations (Lawler, 2008:2). Hall (1992:597) has distinguished between three different generalised conceptions of identity. First, the central, unified “enlightenment” subject in which the essential “inner core” or “the real me” is the individual’s identity from birth. Secondly, the “sociological” subject which is configured through interaction between (a still essentialised) self and society. Here, the subject still has an inner core, but identity is understood to be shaped by cultural values and meanings. Thirdly, the “postmodern subject” which involves a fragmentation of essentialised conceptualisations of identity. The latter suggests that identity is changeable and a “social product” affected by the surrounding environment (Zhao et al., 2008:1817). As Hall put it:

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5 Although the value of Goffman’s metaphor of self-presentation in face-to-face encounter for understanding social networking has been challenged (Hogan, 2012; Zarghooni, 2007), the ideas presented in his work (including self performance, impression management, idealising the self, maintenance of expressive control) have been recruited by a number of scholars interested in online identity (e.g. Dijck, 2013, Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs, 2006; Lambert, 2013; Strano, 2008; Siibak, 2009; and Strano and Queen, 2012). Bourdieu’s concept of social capital has similarly been adopted by scholars interested in the shaping of online relationships, and recruited by those exploring Facebook use (Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe, 2006; 2007, 2008; Ellison, Lampe and others, 2014; Lambert, 2013, and Valenzuela, et al., 2009).
“Identities are never unified, and in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular, but multiple, constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions” (1996:4).

This de-essentialised approach, which allows for the emergence of multiple identities and the possibility of their construction, is the one which has informed my research. Rather than the “singular” self presented by essentialised approaches to identity, this thesis ascribes neither a single nor a real nor an accurate self to my participants.6 Instead, I emphasise the emergence of idealised and multiple identities, including anonymised or semi-anonymised identities (see details in Chapter 4). In doing so, I follow other social media studies that have taken a de-essentialised approach to identity (e.g. DiMicco and Millen, 2007; Mitra, 2009; and Roy, 2012) and challenge those social media studies that have taken an essentialised perspective on identity (e.g. Back et al., 2010; Walther, Heide, Hamel, and Shulman, 2009; Zarghooni, 2007; Dijck, 2013; and Farquhar, 2009) - I will return to this in more detail later in the chapter.

My own focus is on social constructionist approaches that reject essentialism and the description of identity as fixed (Cerulo, 1997:387). Social constructionist approaches to identity emerged as a result of researchers moving away from the essentialised conceptualisation of this idea and placing more emphasis on the social aspects of interaction (Andrews, 2012). Such an approach takes a critical view of the traditional perspectives of psychology and social psychology, wherein cognition is the core motivator of the self in social contexts. It considers, instead, the constructed context and the meanings that people develop and use to construct their social identities (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). Burr (1995:5) argued, “the way people think, the very categories and concepts [used by people in their culture] that provide a framework of meaning for them, are provided by the language that they use.” Besides words, this language is also embedded in signals and gestures which can convey aspects of identity (Mead, 1934:6).

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6 In Chapter 4, I will explain how I approach the naming of the profiles in order to move away from a sense of an “essential” or a “real” online identity.
In the context of social media, the textual discourse of online interactions can be regarded as such signals and gestures, the silent cues which deliver meaning and contribute to the construction of online identity (see Antheunis and Schouten, 2011; and Tong et al., 2008). In my analysis, such textual discourse includes the information and photos disclosed on Facebook profiles, the posts and messages written or displayed on the bulletin board (Facebook wall), and the behaviour of identity management and presentation.

As my study looks specifically at women, gender is an important part of my analysis of identity. The concept of gender, like other aspects of identity, “can shift and change in different contexts and at different times” (Gauntlett, 2002:150). In thinking about this aspect of my study, I have drawn on work on gender and identity, especially that of Judith Butler, who rejects the essentialised conception of identity and gender. For instance, in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler challenged aspects of feminist thought that invoked both biological and culturally fixed ideas of gender. In that, she critiqued approaches underpinned by the idea that there are significant differences between genders, and that articulated a primary natural sexual division and dismissed all chances for an individual to form his/her own identity beyond that gender binary. She raised concerns about this (essentialising) approach to women which treated them as a single homogenous group with common attributes and interests (Butler, 1990). She also critiqued cultural-patriarchal accounts of identity which regarded gender (masculine and feminine) as a fixed attribute shaped by culture (ibid, 1990). In doing so, Butler rejected feminist thinking which gives no room for differences or resistance within a single culture (ibid, 1990). To Butler, identity and gender are both social and cultural inventions. She argues “there is no identity behind the expression of gender… identity is performativity constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler, 1990:25). She examined gender as a “performance” and distinguishes between two conceptions: gender as “performed” and gender as “performative". The former means that we perform roles that are crucial to the gender we are or sought to present while the latter is about “a set of repeated acts ... to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (1990:33).

Although I am not using Butler’s concept of performative in my analysis, my thinking has been informed by the idea that someone’s behaviour constitutes who he/she is, and that the way someone presents the self informs the construction of his/her identity.
I also found useful the ideas that Butler raises about how gender “is culturally formed but [...] also a domain of agency and freedom” (Butler, 2011) and her suggestion that gender practices imposed by cultural ideal norms could be disrupted and resisted (ibid). This has contributed to my thinking about women’s behaviour that is culturally informed, but perhaps does not conform to the ideal norms of a specific cultural context. To Butler, repeated acts confirm someone’s gender, whether a man or a woman, and these could encompass resistant behaviour to the ideal cultural norms. I am not looking at the repeated acts of gender, nor am I concerned about the “natural” source of being. However, in focusing on the construction of identity I am examining how ideas about what it is to be a “woman” (from a particular context) are articulated within the presentation of online and offline self.

Studies of social media use have demonstrated how such environments might be used as spaces to resist normative expectations about gender. Leurst and Ponzanesi’s (2011), for example, build on Butler’s work in their study of online performances. They focus on the performativity of self by immigrant Morrocan-Dutch girls on digital media. Leurst and Ponzanes refer to performative performances as the expressions of culture that lie behind these girls’ acts in instant messaging (IM) which include “sending short messages, exchanged by users to express themselves, using a full range of variants from the speech community - formal, informal, and highly vernacular” (p:4). Despite family restrictions on female members’ leisure which limit it to female-only and family-only gatherings, as well as Western stereotyping of Muslim women as an “unemancipated other” at risk of persecution, the girls were able to actively (re)position themselves amidst racist and sexist discourses and cultural constraints (p:2). They regarded IM as a safe, private arena in which to initiate romantic relationships and construct multiple identities as well as a space to perform gender away from cultural constraints. In my own study, Butler’s ideas might be used to frame my participants’ different privacy choices, relationships, their different techniques and concerns when representing themselves to others, their varying degrees of awareness of their audience, and the variances in adhering to and resisting their cultural norms (see Chapters 4-6).

In this thesis, as well as arguing that identity is gendered within the discursive performance of the self on Facebook, I also explore the performance of cultural identity by my participants; the ways that identity is formed in relation to social norms and practices (Clarke, 2008:514). The focus of “anti-essentialist” constructionist approaches
to cultural identity has been on the production of shared/collective identity associated with social movements and political activities dealing with issues such as gender and sexuality, class, and race and ethnicity (Cerulo, 1997:386). Two particular ways of thinking about cultural identity have influenced my thinking in respect of this aspect of my work. The first is the concept of *othering*, the processes by which an individuals’ sense of self might be shaped in opposition to what they are *not*. The second is the concept of the “interaction order”; the cultural/gender norms and audience expectations that might be seen to govern participants’ performances and interactions. I will return to the concept of the interaction order when I discuss Goffman’s work, here my focus is on cultural identity and othering.

Said’s (1985) classic text on othering and cultural identity, *Orientalism*, presents a critical view of the West’s othering of the East (see also Mellor, 2007)\(^7\). His work argues that there is a historical, homogenised Western depiction of the Eastern world as “other.” Such othering can be seen in the negative role of orientalism in the Palestinian encounter with Zionism, as well as in the portrayal of Arabs in the public realm in the USA and elsewhere. Drawing from Said’s ideas, Tekin (2010:211) examined a French political discourse that rejected the idea that Turkey should obtain EU membership and how this established a hierarchy of “Europeans.” Within this discourse, Turkey was constituted as other/non-European due to negative stereotyping that was based on cultural, religious, and geographical differences. Turkey was configured as dangerous and threatening, as illustrated by the use of metaphors of aggressiveness and war. In this case, the self (French European identity) was attributed a positive representation (and with this, power), while the other (Turkey) was positioned as negative and antithetical (Tekin, 2010:214). Tekin also distinguishes between the Turkish “other” and other French “others” (French immigrants) based on how they vary in distance from a pure sense of French identity. Said’s work on West versus East and Tekin’s hierarchy of othering have informed my analysis of the way that my participants construct their cultural identities. In Chapter 5 I examine a hierarchy of cultural “othering” within their Facebook activity. I argue that this operates in the reverse of Said’s notion of “otherness”, where the West is central to an ‘Eastern’ other. My participants not only establish West-

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\(^7\) Mellor’s work demonstrates the misrepresentation of Arabs by the Western media which portray Arab news media as a unified “other” defined as “Muslims” (p: 92).
versus-East distinctions but also recruit aspects of ethnicity and religion as they establish distinctions both between but also within Arab and non-Arab, Muslim and non-Muslim audiences. Such distinctions are based upon the distance that participants put between different audiences and themselves.

In this section I have characterised my thinking of identity as de-essentialised, introduced the paradigm of social constructionism, which places great emphasis on the performance of identity and gender and how the use of language constructs identities (Andrews, 2012). I have also introduced the meaning of identity construction in this thesis and considered the place of gender and culture in my thinking. These ideas raise important questions about the role that various technologies, such as the social networking site Facebook, play in the formation of women’s online identities. How are their identities gendered? What norms are relevant? The discussion above also raises the issues of how women present themselves in relation to their audience (the other) and how in distinguishing themselves from others on Facebook they construct a sense of self.

2.3 Goffman: Interaction and Identity

In this section I consider the contribution of Goffman’s dramaturgical approach to identity to my study. Goffman’s work draws attention to some significant aspects of the construction of identity: the social structure of identity, expectations of risks and failure, the role of the audience, and, of course, the micro details of face-to-face interaction. His work has helped me to understand the construction of my participants’ identities: defining women’s self-presentation in relation to their online settings, their behaviour and their relation to the audience. In thinking about Goffman’s work here I start by considering the concept of interaction order. Goffman was always interested in the nuances of social expectations and norms (Williams, 1986:351) and has provided a way of thinking about the constraints on identity that lead individuals to accentuate or conceal certain aspects of themselves in their performances. In the *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) he referred to this process as “mystification”:
Failure to regulate the information acquired by audience involves possible disruption of the projected definition of the situation; failure to regulate contact involves possible ritual contamination of the performer (1959:74).

Goffman alluded to these social expectations in his later work, *Interaction Order* (1983), stating that: “The working of interaction order can easily be viewed as the consequences of systems of enabling conventions in the sense of the ground rules of a game” (p.5). To Goffman, in order to understand interaction at the macro-level, we need to understand the micro perspective; to him, everyday interactions form the foundation of social structure. Each setting in which interaction occurs (e.g. personal, contacts, encounters, platform performances, or celebrative social occasions, as classified by Goffman (1983:7)) has its own rules. These rules encompass the expectations that govern the people interacting. Therefore, the interaction order is “a web of normative beliefs that facilitate communication and social interaction” (Goffman, 1953: 353, cited in Ritzer, 2008:51). Such ideas can be applied to women’s construction of cultural identity in this study. Here, the “ground rules” for Facebook interaction are their audience’s expectations, informed by Saudi culture and norms (as described in Chapter 1). As these expectations affect the way a person manages the self, and by managing the self, the person is reproducing the order, any interruption (i.e. a performance which contrasts with those expectations) means that the interaction order is not successful. Therefore, the person either has to repair his presentation or be negatively judged. Whilst Goffman was thinking only of offline settings when he described the interaction ritual frame as the setting in which the local behaviour is performed, studies show that it appears online as well. Kalinowski (2009) argues that although in social networks (dating sites) users influence the culture of the site according to their backgrounds, e.g. offline culture and norms, the presentation of the self online is “differently negotiated due to the differences in communication between the two mediums [offline and online]” (p.28). Therefore, it could be said that people vary in adhering their norms, so some women might give greater consideration to offline norms in online settings, while others, due to the nature of the medium, meet only the minimum expectations and some resist those norms entirely.

I now move from the concept of interaction order to consider how Goffman’s dramaturgical approach conceptualises the performance of identity within face-to-face
interactions. Goffman analysed social interaction in everyday life, believing that people use expressed messages, symbols (e.g. clothing, verbal cues, settings) and gestures (i.e., non-verbal cues such as body language and facial/eye expressions), flow of information and feedback received from others (Smith, 2006: 35-36), to construct their desired identities. His influential dramaturgical metaphor depicted the world as a stage and individuals as actors who play different roles when they interact socially (drawing on the famous Shakespeare quote, ‘All the world’s a stage’). He proposed that individuals construct a performance within their interaction, which is shaped by audience and settings to form a front; the front comprises the given and given off expressions during the performance. Goffman divided the arenas in which a performance is played out into two: frontstage and backstage: the frontstage is the setting where a person encounters his/her audience face to face, and the backstage is hidden from the audience; a place where s/he prepares an effective front to be presented. Through this performance, individuals predict activities of “impression management”, a term Goffman applied to his perception that individuals tend to formulate an idealised version of the self. Within their performance, individuals also engage in different practices to avoid being misunderstood by the audience. Although he was influenced by Mead’s thinking regarding the role of an individual’s gestures and other signals (Smith, 2006), Goffman thought more broadly about the conscious and unconscious presentation of the self. He shifted Mead’s thinking about the self being formed based on social expectations or a demand to perform multiple learned roles according to the response we want from our audience, which itself conveys impressions to others and affects the presentation of the self. In doing so, he revealed the complexity of looking at things from the standpoint of others and taking others’ (supposed) attitudes into consideration when interacting.

Some aspects of Goffman’s work have faced criticism. Blumer, for example, challenged Goffman for circumscribing face-to-face interaction by focusing on the interaction from only one individual’s position, thereby disregarding the actions of the others (as cited in William, 1986:350). Blumer’s critique does not discredit Goffman’s theory for my work, as in this study I am interested in looking at the performance of identity from my participants’ perspective. Goffman’s narrow way of approaching the effective nature of social interaction, limiting it to embarrassment, was also criticised by his student Scheff for the lack of other natural human emotions, such as love (2006). In my analysis, although avoiding embarrassment was a reported feature of women’s self-
presentation strategies, notions of care, love, and anger, also emerged in reference to online social interaction. Despite criticism of his theory, it has greatly influenced the discipline of sociology and provided a framework for analysing social interaction in the field of communications, with interest in his ideas increasing in relation to the digital environment (e.g. Ellison et al., 2006a; Lambert, 2013; Siibak, 2009; Strano, 2008; and Strano and Queen, 2012). It is this literature that I consider in the next section as I explain the key concepts that I have used from Goffman’s work.

2.4 Goffman and Online Self-Presentation

The four of Goffman’s ideas that are particularly important for the way that I have approached identity in this thesis are: (1) Impression management (2) Idealising the self, (3) Maintenance of Expressive Control, and (4) Segregation of Audience. In introducing these ideas below I draw from recent studies that have recruited Goffman’s concepts in the study of online self-presentation. Presenting the self in online environments can be seen to contain, to some extent, the same elements and effects of the interaction that takes place in offline contexts. Although some have suggested that online interactions involve a lack of signals (cues) that would otherwise be established between the sender and the receiver in face-to-face encounters (Walther and D’Addario, 2001), Miller has demonstrated that electronic interaction is an integral part of the “interactive system” (1995:2). Antheunis and Shouten (2011) also emphasise the existence of different cues and draw attention to the ways that identity is communicated in online environments through either “self-generated cues” (e.g., photos or information disclosed by the individual on his or her profile), “other-generated cues” (e.g., friend’s posts on an individual’s wall), or “system-generated cues” (e.g., the number of friends a person has) (see also Tong et al., 2008; and Walther et al., 2009). By extending the notion of cues to take into account such modes of communication, Goffman’s ideas can provide a basis for analysing online interaction on Facebook, in line with other studies of online identity (e.g. Dijck, 2013). Where criticisms have been voiced about the applicability of some of Goffman’s terms to online settings, I have provided my perspective and justification for adopting them.
2.4.1 Impression Management

In everyday life, people manage their settings, their appearance, their words, and their non-verbal behaviour, and in doing so convey a particular image of themselves to their audience. The term ‘performance’ encompasses all such individual activities. Goffman describes the process of performing as self-presentation, and the process of the creating and managing an impression to be perceived by others as impression management. Goffman applied this term to his perception that:

“an individual appears in the presence of others, there will usually be some reason for him to mobilize his activity so that it will convey an impression to others which it is in his interests to convey” (Goffman, 1959:16).

But what if those ‘others’ he mentions are not physically present? In regard to the setting where performance takes place, the obvious difference between offline and online is the latter’s absence of a physically co-present audience. Farquhar (2009) made use of Goffman’s idea of impression management and examined the self-presentation and impression management tactics when he looked at the question, “How do SNS users perform and negotiate their identities online?” (Ibid, 27). His participants altered their performance on Facebook based on their audiences’ reactions. Farquhar argued that users imagine themselves in the place of their audience, anticipate their reactions to potential Facebook activity and perform accordingly. This anticipation is mostly guided by general expectations and norms associated with the use of such impression management techniques (ibid, 2009). Farquhar’s work drew on Mead’s (1934) belief that meanings are created from experiences and consequences and that these consequences are believed to be “true” yet changeable. In this regard, his work contradicts my study’s approach to the construction of the self that looks at identity performances as constructed rather than relating to a “true” self. Similarly, Marwick and boyd (2010:114) examined the social networking site Twitter and claimed that users adopt the imagined audience technique to manage their audience’s impressions. Both studies exemplify the management of impressions when the audience is physically absent. In my own study I explore how my participants manage their audience’s impressions. What kind of tactics do they use? Are
there obvious cues and expressions that indicate to the performer her audience’s impressions? What role do cultural and gendered expectations play in this? Such questions are addressed in Chapter 4.

2.4.2 Idealising the Self

According to Goffman, managing the audience impression during social interaction in order to convey a positive expression leads the performer to idealise the self; by this he refers to how people present a better version of themselves to others. Goffman cites Cooly as an example, “If we never tried to seem a little better than we are, how could we improve or ‘train ourselves from the outside inward’?” (1959:44). People also idealise themselves to meet the expectations and the cultural values of the society in which the performance occurs. As Goffman describes, this could be achieved by concealing activities, facts or motives: “If an individual is to give expression to ideal standards during his performance, then he will have to forgo or conceal action which is inconsistent with these standards [the official values of the society]” (ibid: 50).

Scholars interested in online self-presentation have taken up this idea and examined the ways that users conceal and highlight certain aspects of their selves. Studies of different social networks have concluded that users do, in fact, idealise the self; however, these studies interpret this behaviour in different ways. Manago et al. (2008) argue that users idealise the self by revealing hidden dimensions of their offline identity on MySpace platform with no attempt to present a skeptical or false impression but to cultivate ideal selves. Studies of dating networks have found that users employ various tactics to reflect their ideal self through their profiles. Like Manago et al. (2008), Ellison et al. (2006a) argue that users idealise themselves by stretching the truth (enhancing identity) without presenting an entirely false self. Other researchers have concluded that users idealise the self by presenting their “hope-selves” (Yurchisin, Watchravesringkan & McCabe, 2005), or expressing the ideal self that they ought to become (Manago et al., 2008), while concealing undesirable aspects of the self (Ellison et al., 2006a). They also use purposeful photo selection to portray the desired ideal self (see Siibak, 2009). The different uses of the term and how it was examined by online studies has led me to question what behaviours women practice on Facebook, and
whether it can be considered ‘idealisation’. If so, what strategies do they use to achieve such idealisation?

In exploring these strategies, this thesis challenges online studies that have supported the commonly held assumption that Facebook presents an ‘accurate’ version of the self. Back et al. (2010), for example, use the term “the ideal self” and interpret it as presenting a fictionalised personality/self that could be belied by a friend’s comments on a user’s wall. This perspective of the accurate self or ‘otherwise’ self as fictionalised can be challenged, as “Friends” on Facebook could range from close friends in offline settings to strangers (Fogel and Nehmad, 2008), and this certainly affects the ‘trustworthiness’ of their comments. Therefore, examining self-presentation through Facebook friends’ comments could be dubious. Supporting the existence of an “accurate” self on Facebook, Walther et al. (2009) examined the attractiveness of profile photographs as well as friends’ comments to judge whether a user’s presentation of the self was accurate or idealised. When the comments did not override the user’s self-presentation, it was considered “accurate.” This could also be challenged because observers’ comments might be reflective of their own tastes and opinions, not necessarily describing what Walther et al. claim are their ‘realities’. As I argued against the way the aforementioned studies approached identity as ‘essential’ depending on others’ testimony, I also define idealising the self in a different way. The performance of concealing or highlight part of the identity to give a better version of the self associated with a positive impression that confirms the ideal cultural norms is what I mean by idealising the self among the participants (see Chapter 4).

Moreover, it has been suggested that Facebook use has gone beyond idealising the self to promoting the self, whereby users exploit the features of the site and manage their settings to present particular content to particular audiences. Dijck (2013) has adapted Goffman’s definition of “given” and “given off” expression, arguing that the Facebook platform has changed users’ modes of self-presentation from solely unconscious self-expression of spontaneous emotions and memories to conscious self-promotion of personal data to the public: “a uniform public self” (p:211). To Dijck, self-presentation on Facebook is more analogous to artifacts that remain on a user’s profile than to an active performance on a stage. In contrast, self-promotion or “personal branding” (Marwick and boyd, 2010) refers to how people shape their
identities on Facebook to become popular. For instance by emphasising proficiency and skills through the narrative nature of the Timeline feature in order to attract Facebook contacts. I would argue that self-promotion is a form of constructed self (not a uniform public self, as Dijck’s claims); it can be seen in what proficient users highlight and emphasise about themselves in order to shape observers’ perceptions and attract others. This is then similar to what Goffman said was presenting an idealised version of the self, only it is done now utilising different online practices. My analysis demonstrates the ways that women present an idealised version of the self by concealing part of their identities to meet their audience’s expectations and highlight other parts to convey a positive impression while simultaneously promoting the self by bringing attention to something special about themselves so that others recognise them in a certain way (e.g. talented, professional - see Chapter 4).

2.4.3 Maintenance of Expressive Control

As people idealise themselves according to the expectations of their audience, the audience might misunderstand the meaning the performer is trying to convey. This can happen when the performer unintentionally conveys a front that is contradictory to what she/he is trying to construct. Misunderstanding the performer happen when a disruption occurs within a message exchange between the performer and audience based on unintentional gestures, ultimately putting the performer in a challenging situation. Goffman addressed these gestures thus:

Some of these minor accidents and ‘unmeant gestures’ happened to be so aptly designed to give an impression that contradicts the one fostered by the performer (...). Th[e] difference [between the unmeant gesture and the definition officially projected] forces an acutely embarrassing wedge between the official projection and reality … (Goffman, 1959:60)

In online environments, it is not only about the immediate feeling of embarrassment, but also about what image the audience might construct of the performers based on these “unmeant gestures”. Performers thus manage their expressions
to convey a desired impression to the audience. In analysing this, Goffman proffered the term “Maintenance of expressive control”:

Performance commonly attempt to exert a kind of synecdochic\(^8\) responsibility, making sure that as many as possible of the minor events in the performance, however instrumentally inconsequential these events may be, will occur in such a way as to convey either no impression or an impression that is being fostered. (Goffman, 1959:59)

In online environments non-verbal cues – part of the given off expressions, in Goffman’s terms - are minimised. It has been suggested that this allows the user of social media sites to avoid misunderstanding or negative impressions of the self by giving more attention to the salient remaining cues available (the given expressions, in Goffman’s terms). Therefore, Ellison et al. (2006a:14) suggested that users of online dating sites may give the same importance to the “stylistic aspects of the message” as to the content of the message itself, such as the timing, the length, the grammar, and spelling mistakes. As users try to avoid embarrassment and misjudgement to protect their desired image by managing their audience’s impressions through such practices, they attempt to correct incidents of misunderstanding by following it up with practices such as rewriting a word with its correct spelling, deleting content, etc. On such corrective moves in face-to-face interactions, Goffman says:

We find that preventive practices are constantly employed to avoid these embarrassments and that corrective practices are constantly employed to compensate for discrediting occurrences that have not been successfully avoided. When the individual employs these strategies and tactics to protect his own projections, we may refer to them as ‘defensive practices’. (1959:24)

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\(^8\) Synecdochic is “a figure of speech in which a part is used for the whole or the whole for a part, the special for the general or the general for the special, as in ten sail for ten ships or a Croesus for a rich man.” (Dictionary.com)
Controlling the individual’s given/given off expressions is not constrained solely to managing the impressions of others. Goffman (1959:14) argued that these expressions can be manipulated by the performer in order to intentionally convey misinformation, and referred to how this might be done by “those who dissemble, deceive, and defraud”. I personally prefer Williams’ (1986:66) opinion, who criticised Goffman for his negative view of human behaviour and society. I have found that women on Facebook demonstrate a great tendency to construct the self in different ways (e.g. create anonymous identities with pseudonymous names) but not necessarily as Goffman described (to dissemble, deceive, or defraud). The provision of misinformation by women in my study provides them with a way of negotiating cultural constraints; in other words, they do so to maintain a positive impression in their audience as their behaviour might contradict the audience’s cultural expectations. Al Omoush, Yaseen, and Alma’aitah (2012) for example, emphasised the use of pseudonyms by Saudi Internet users to exercise the freedom of expression and self-presentation.

2.4.4 Audience Segregation

This is the final of Goffman’s concept that I am going to look at. As illustrated above, Goffman’s work suggests that impression management stems from an individual’s desire to present a positive impression to his/her audience. The self-presentation strategies used to present this ideal self are based on the performers’ expectations and values as well as their sense of audience. There are two key ideas by Goffman that are important here. First is the concept of audience, and how it is perceived by the performer. Goffman’s notion of “audience segregation”, suggests that the performer “ensure[s] that those before whom he plays one of his parts will not be the same individuals before whom he plays a different part in another setting” (Goffman, 1959:57). This means that the performance of ideal self could fail if it was prepared for a certain audience but suddenly ‘gatecrashed’ by another, unexpected audience. Such situations would make impression management difficult (Goffman, 1959: 39). Studies of interaction on Facebook (which I will outline below) have demonstrated how members make use of the privacy settings on the site to determine who can see what, and in order to segregate their audience.
The second key idea is that Goffman distinguished between private and public settings and audiences. The public, in Goffman’s theory, is the *frontstage* where the individual tends to idealise the self in front of the audience, compared to the private *backstage* where the performer segregates him/herself from the audience and behaves naturally, for example, smoking, kidding, shouting, etc. (Weintraub and Kumar, 1997:183). Goffman’s view has been critiqued by some scholars when adapted to Facebook (e.g. Hogan, 2010 and Zarghooni, 2007), as will be illustrated shortly. However it is worth recognising that performers in online interaction can not only distinguish their backstage selves from what the front audience sees but can also present themselves differently to multiple audiences in the frontstage based on their choice of privacy settings and their consideration of public and private. The extension of Goffman’s thinking about audience segregation in studies of Internet use has opened new perspectives for understanding how users might blur the meaning of private and public settings online in order to manage their audience. West et al. (2009:615), for example, argue that youth have contributed to blurring this distinction by treating their Facebook public profile as a friendly private space, from which their parents are excluded. This provides them with freedom to construct their desired identities and avoid embarrassment and interference. Thus, in relation to online environments, the concept of audience segregation extends beyond the distinction between front/backstage and needs to take into account the collapse of multiple audiences. I continue the extension of the term in my study of women’s different approaches to segregating their audience on Facebook in Chapters 4-6.

Thus, it is clear how different concepts have been applied to the online realm and how scholars have adapted Goffman’s terms in different ways. Before looking at the critiques of this type of recruitment, it is worth considering the implications of the shift to environments where users can adopt multiple identities. What is notable is the way that the terms introduced above suggest the multiplicity inherent in Goffman’s theories about both identity and audience. For example, the way that idealising the self establishes an identity that seems better than what we actually are, or as Goffman put it: “I want to consider here […] the tendency for performers to offer their observers an impression that is idealised in several different ways” (Goffman, 1959:44). Audience segregation also suggests that multiple versions of the self are portrayed to different audiences in different settings. In this way, Goffman’s work suggests a multiplicity of personas (through various
forms of address) and audiences which make it fit in an interesting way with online identity formation. Goffman’s idea, for example, that “users have various socio-discursive needs – expressive, communicative or promotional – reflecting the need for different personas and necessitating different addresses” (as cited in Dijck, 2013:201, my emphasis). In contrast to Goffman’s work, some of the studies of online identity and Facebook that have drawn from Goffman’s work, can be seen to be based on a more essentialised singular notion of identity than Goffman’s emphasis on multiplicity. Dijck (2013) for example points to the existence of multiple identities across different social networks (Facebook and LinkedIn) but emphasises the uniform format of identity formation on Facebook, while disregarding the possibility of the construction of entirely different identities on the same platform. For example, users could exploit Facebook features (the story of the self established on the Timeline) to express and promote the self, and construct a professional identity on one Facebook profile and a private identity on another. An individual might also construct a named identity on one and an anonymous identity on another profile, both of which practices have been demonstrated in the current study on Saudi women’s construction of their identities (see Chapter 4).

2.5 Critiques of the Applicability of Goffman’s Work to Online Environments

Previous studies that have applied Goffman’s “dramaturgical approach” to explain online performance and digital interactions in social media demonstrate different uses of Goffman’s ideas and terminologies. This diversity of application raises important issues regarding the interpretation of what is meant by setting, audience visibility, and performance.

In relation to the settings of interactions, for instance, in a study of Facebook interactions, Farquhar (2009) argues that Facebook operates mostly as a frontstage, while backstage performance occurs only when a user blocks (through privacy settings) all friends from viewing his/her profile. This limits the setting to the online domain and neglects the offline backstage setting where the user, in fact, prepares his/her online presence. From a different perspective, Hogan (2010) critiques the argument that Facebook is a private backstage as it stores data on its servers. Although that might be the case, the third party (e.g. the server or any party that stores data) here is not part of the user’s audience for which self-presentation should be a concern; rather, they are
marketing corporations focused on business goals. Therefore, Goffman’s sense of *backstage* as a private arena could be seen to neglect third party activities relating to the users’ data which has no effect on their online self-presentation. Zarghooni (2007) however problematises Goffman’s distinction, arguing that, as with the *frontstage* - where people play different roles and perform differently depending on the audience – people might also play roles in the presence of each other *backstage* (among the performance (backstage) team who are part of the stage performance). Both Farquhar (2009) and Zarghooni (2007) emphasised the applicability of Goffman’s front/backstage terms on Facebook setting, yet they interpret them differently. I refer to the Facebook profile as the *frontstage* in which users present their identities through its content. Facebook activities in which users (performers) adjust, edit, delete, etc. (off-screen) actions on their profiles to foster the desired impression, present the ideal self, and avoid misunderstanding, together constitute the *backstage*.

In relation to Goffman’s term of audience segregation, Zarghooni suggests an extension to the theory to fit online settings (2007:16). He argues that Goffman’s concept of segregated audience could exist online when users privately message each other or address different posts on different friends’ walls. However, he argues that Goffman did not take into consideration the observation that might occur backstage by audiences different to the frontstage ones; suggesting what he termed “detached self-presentation”(p:16). As on Facebook, in the off-screen setting (the backstage), the user detaches the self from his/her online audience, those on frontstage (in Goffman’s sense) could simultaneously confront other audiences backstage (audience different from those online) and also detach his/her real image from them. This is the idea that Zarghooni is putting forward for consideration. For example, a performer tries to convey a particular performance online while his real image offline does not convey such performance to the people that are in the offline world. Zarghooni’s thinking raises the question of whether Goffman’s definition of backstage is applicable to online settings due to the emergence of different frontstages in this arena which Goffman considers a relaxing place to prepare for a performance. However, as Zarghooni’s essential perspective of presenting the self (the “real” image presented backstage) on Facebook contradicts my approach, I would suggest narrowing self-presentation to the online audiences with which the user is interacting, as the offline audience that might appear backstage would not have an impact on the presentation of the self online. Thus, a performer in the presence of a backstage
audience (i.e. other people who might be near the Facebook user in the offline setting) can delay, edit, and omit in the online performance, while using other techniques to control the offline performance which is off interest here.

In relation to the nature of performance, Hogan (2010) argues against adopting Goffman’s performance metaphor to online environments (e.g. Facebook). Rather than performance, he suggests that online, individuals engage in the exhibition of self. His approach is premised on the view that people on Facebook are not engaging in performances that are continually observed by a present audience, which allows for impression management (Goffman’s metaphor), but rather that they leave artifacts for their audience that are stored by a third party (Facebook servers) to be available to view at the audience member’s convenience (exhibition approach). What he posits against Goffman’s theory is the component of real-time continual presence which could be challenged because the so-called artifacts in an online exhibition could be subject to editing, deletion, and amendment over time, and thus, impression management could also continue as long as the user monitors audience responses and checks his/her Facebook account. For instance, people exchange their old photos for new ones, they may delete old posts, recent unwanted content or comments, and they may adjust their profiles’ content regularly. Moreover, they can perform actions that are observed by an audience in real-time; the audience may not include all Facebook friends but supposedly some. Although Hogan claims that real-time interaction may not necessarily occur on Facebook, he concedes the emergence of real-time interaction on Facebook. This, in turn, validates the application of Goffman’s metaphor to an online environment (Facebook). Having said that, Hogan’s approach is still significant but provision must be made for the continual amendments that are made by the user and his/her friends. It could be argued, then, that Facebook, to this research, is a space where both performance and artifacts are displayed.

From a different point of view, Lambert (2013), argues that there is a need for textual theories of performance to understand what he calls the “performance of connection” whereby users on Facebook address each other and comment on each other’s content. He believes that Goffman’s dramaturgical metaphor is relevant for social situations where performers play a particular role in relation to a particular situation, providing insight into how they interpret the meaning conveyed to them by their audience and act accordingly, such that the motivation of intimacy between performers and their
audience is understood. However, in a venue such as Facebook, he argues that this motivation of intimacy carrying emotions becomes detached (the meaning conveyed changes due to emotions being sent in the form of texts) which necessitates textual theories instead to be understood and suggested a complementary theory to Goffman’s self-presentation theory. He found in Derrida’s understanding of such performance beyond the moment of speech a useful theoretical explanation to understand participants’ concerns presented in the form of texts; he put it “against the notion of presence, Derrida argues there is always a branch between what is intended and what is conveyed” (Lambert, 2013:45). The claim Lambert raised could be significant, but it could also be challenged. Goffman argues that it is the performers’ aim to ensure they deliver their desired messages to convey positive impressions; thus, the meaning of their message might not differ for being a text, as on Facebook, they have more time to omit and adjust in order to convey the message they want.

PART 2: SOCIAL CAPITAL

2.6 Bourdieu’s Concept of Social Capital

In the previous section, I introduced the concept of identity, the approach I use to analyse my participants’ self-presentation and impression management, and how I build on previous studies that have applied Goffman’s ideas to online settings. In so doing, I illuminated the value of Goffman’s approach as the first theory that informed my data analysis. In this part, I consider Bourdieu’s concept of social capital (1986) as the second key theoretical influence on my work, which has guided my approach to the study of how my participants form, maintain, and manage their relationships on Facebook. “Social capital” is a concept which, like Goffman’s work, places attention on the social nature of identity, but in different ways and through people’s relationships. Throughout this section, I trace how other scholars have recruited this concept in studies of social networking. In linking to Bourdieu’s work on social capital, I do not seek to present an exhaustive account of his work; it is intended rather only to provide an outline for understanding what social capital is and its significance for my study. Social capital is an important concept in my study as it informed my thinking when I approached social relationships, the mutual exchange of resources on Facebook, and the outcomes that are
produced from them in my data. Before I define my use of the concept of social capital in this thesis, I begin with a very brief account of Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of this term. Then, I will turn to the way scholars have understood the concept and how I build on their work.

Social capital is a concept that “falls squarely within the broad and heterogeneous family of resources commonly called capital” (Adler and Kwon, 2002:22). It has sociological roots that can be traced to Pierre Bourdieu (1986:251), who defined it as “…resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition.” Bourdieu perceives social capital as a type of currency possessed by members of a network; it is the production of continual, invested relationships which are created and sustained through material and symbolic exchanges (Bourdieu, 1986). In other words, people build their relations in order to gain benefits from them; these benefits serve as capital to those individuals who are in a position to give them, and they are traded continually to maintain their development (Portes, 1998:2). To him, actors produce various forms of capital (cultural, economic, social, and symbolic capitals) and use these resources to guarantee their position in the social space (Tzanakakis, 2013:3). Bourdieu has been criticised for his view that all types of capital are eventually converted into capital in the economic sense of physical currency (see Tzanakakis, 2013); for example, social capital is rooted in economic capital transformed through specific individuals who spend time, care, and personalise gifts to others. Such social exchanges are endeavours which Bourdieu considered a “solid investment” that will show “monetary” benefits or other forms of benefits in the long run (1986:54). Bourdieu’s description of social capital has also been criticised as “context-specific”, i.e. depending on the capital or power possessed that bring actors together and distance them from other groups in the social structure (Tzanakakis, 2013). Rather than economic consequences and power resources in his approach to social capital, I am interested in social relationships and their social resources and outcomes. I argue that although Bourdieu’s view suggests that the closer the agents are in the type of capital they possess the more significant the relationship is (Bourdieu, 1991:227), this should not marginalise other established relationships across the network. In this study, the resources that people possess within their relationships are the benefits they mutually exchange across their online networks (see also Lambert, 2013) and those
benefits remain as long as the relationships continue, disregarding the shifting dynamic of their exchange (see Hogan, 2010).

2.7 Social Capital: A Broadened Concept

I am now going to move from Bourdieu’s conception of social capital to those scholars that picked up his concept and use it in the study of social structure, economics and politics. Here I will give a brief overview of some different approaches developed on the concept of social capital that relates to my analysis. Coleman (1988) considers social capital with relation to the powerful (Bourdieu’s view) and the powerless social classes (Gauntlett, 2011). He sees social capital is an integral part of the social structure which enables actions between people (Lin, 2001). He explains social capital as “the resources accumulated through the relationships among people” (Ellison et al., 2007:1145). Burt (2000:347) saw two different conceptual perspectives on networking as types of social capital: the social capital of a structural hole and network closure. The former relates to open networks where an individual can be positioned as a broker due to his/her connections with others and ability to spread ideas and information. Making connections between people, in turn, increases his/her chance of new opportunities, benefits (e.g. having early information, being informed by many different sources, or controlling information diffusion within a network), and attractiveness to others, who want to include him/her in their network (Burt, 2000). Network closure relates to a closed network which is a source of social capital that has less risk of a structural whole social capital, eases access to information and allows adaption of norms by the network members, according to Coleman (1988). Coleman argued that network closure fosters trust and norms (i.e., by making it less risky to establish trust between people) in the closed network, thereby generating advantages. Burt stated that advantages derived from managing risks and close networks enhance communication (2000:347). Both structural holes and network closure - as networks that produce social capital - have meanings that might vary depending on the kind of network (ibid). Thinking about the opportunities and advantages that different networks generate raises the question of what types of benefits social networking sites such as Facebook might produce. For example, a famous religious person who has an offline social position and reputation might be considered a “broker” as his/her profile might generate online benefits to those who seek religious
knowledge across the network; nevertheless, on Facebook, private profiles also generate such benefits through friends who circulate and mutually exchange information, knowledge and advice, and share similar concerns which also could be a cause of strengthening a relationship or establishing a new one (see Chapter 6).

Burt’s distinction between structural holes and network closure is also helpful in explaining the difference between public and private profiles on social networking sites like Facebook. I argue that Facebook profiles on these sites determine the users’ position in the social structure (which here is the online social network Facebook), whether private or public, and the ability for more or less connectivity, and thereby the user’s role in social capital production. This study, if considered from Burt’s view, falls into his network closure category because as I will describe in Chapter 4, all of my participants chose to establish and participate within private networks. Burt further stated that “better connected people enjoy higher return” (2000, 348). As an online social network facilitates connectivity and wider sociability than offline networks, users in turn generate greater benefits (see Chapter 6). Acar (2008:77) claims that the size of the online networks is larger than that of offline networks due to the desire for online popularity, the difficulty of deleting unwanted contacts, and the ease of increasing the network by requesting/accepting friendships. These ideas are relevant to the analysis, but they are challenged by the policing of audience and that audience’s access to the participant’s network which was evident in this study (see Chapter 4).

Putnam (2000:22) divided social capital into two concepts: bridging and bonding social capital. An example of bonding social capital is the relationship with close people (e.g. family), which network researchers refer to as “strong ties” in which the more time the people spend with each other, the stronger the tie could be (Granovetter, 1973:1363). An example of bridging social capital is the relationship with neighbours or acquaintances, which network researchers refer to as “weak ties” (Granovetter, 1973:1363). These two concepts attracted scholars examining social capital on social networking sites such as Facebook and have demonstrated the production of social capital and the formation of relationships on the site. In this study, I am particularly interested in this distinction in exploring how women form different types of relationships on Facebook. Before delving into his distinction and how scholars have applied it to the online environment, it is worth highlighting scholars’ perspectives about
the role of the Internet, particularly social networking sites, in developing social capital and procuring advantages out of relationships fostered on them after its decline in offline settings.

In his book, *Bowling Alone*(1995), Putnam found that social capital has declined in the US as a result of diminishing social involvement and activities. Arguing that technology such as television contributed to this phenomenon in the US (Putnam, 1995:9), he suggests that the Internet revolution has contributed to its subsequent rebound. Social network studies, such as Valenzuela et al. (2009), offers support for the commonly held assumption that the information which new media generates (online news and communities, political engagements, etc.) contributes positively to the production of social capital, while activities such as online games and movies contribute negatively to it. Significantly, they blame the negative contribution to social capital on the behaviour of the users and not the technology itself. Other Facebook studies, such as Phulari et al. (2010), argue that the Internet contributes to both increases and decreases in social capital. Ellison et al. (2007) argue that the positive outcomes often outweigh the negative results of interaction among social network users. Other scholars demonstrate that the use of the Internet, especially social networking sites, has contributed to the improvement of social relationships and the realisation of benefits such as self-esteem, life satisfaction, confidence, useful information, exposure to different perspectives, and the ability to share in civic/political engagements which promote online as well as offline relationships (e.g. Ellison, et al. 2006b/2007; Steifield, et al. 2008 and Valenzuela, 2009). Donath and boyd (2004) found that technology such as online social networks provide a cheap and easy way to reinforce weak ties and thus increase social capital (also see Dwyer et al., 2007). In addition, although Putnam argues that it is difficult to build trust among people online, he stated that social networking websites such as Facebook have contributed to maintaining social capital with real offline friends (Bunting, 2007).

In contrast, Nie (2001) attributes the decline in face-to-face social capital to the increasing use of the Internet. With regard to people’s relationships, a number of studies have been carried out on the negative influence of Internet use in general on social relationships, including on family relations (e.g. Al-Saggaf, 2004, 2011 in the Saudi context). Phulari et al. ascribe that to the change in lifestyle which leads to the abandonment of offline networks and thus their loss (see also DiMicco and Millen, 2007).
Adler and Kwon (2002) argue that being part of bonding relationships limits the possible advantages of relationships with outsiders, while Burt (2000) and Coleman (1988), as mentioned previously, saw network closure as a way to manage risk, enhance communication, access information, and foster trust and norms. As I positioned the participants’ profiles within the network closure category and as connectivity and sociability are limited to their internal relationships (Facebook friends), Facebook affordances facilitate benefits from outsiders (through open groups and public profiles). Thus, the risk of diminishing benefits, as posited by Adler and Kwon, is not applicable to private “closed” networks on Facebook, as my data analysis will demonstrate. It seems to me that there is a need here to consider these outcomes in the analysis to determine whether Facebook indeed produces social capital among women in Saudi Arabia. What are the participants’ perceptions of the potential positive and negative impact of Facebook use on their social lives? Are there any aspects that affect their use, such as cultural and gender expectations, which might affect these outcomes? And do positive outcomes outweigh negative ones? (See Chapter 6).

2.8 Social Capital in Social Networking Sites

Having laid out the theoretical perspectives on the concept of social capital and scholars’ perceptions of Internet use - particularly social networking sites - as a source of social capital, I will move now to Facebook studies that have made use of Putnam’s distinction between bridging and bonding social capital. Putnam’s distinction has been of particular interest in new arenas such as online social networks like Facebook. Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe (2006b, 2007), for instance, investigated how the intensity of Facebook use, general Internet use, and other variables, such as demographics, ethnicity, and self-esteem, predict bridging and bonding social capital. They claim that, as users bond and bridge, they rekindle relationships that had been disconnected, for example, with high school friends after losing touch. The renewal of the users’ high school relationships, which they called high school social capital in their 2006 study and maintained social capital in 2007, occurred through the use of names that could be identified by their peers. Although maintaining relationships is a main aspect of Bourdieu’s definition of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986:51) and his original concept might suit long-distance and virtual relationships, he still places more emphasis on the
actor’s position on social structure (class) and capital possessed rather than on the various types that the actors’ positions might form; Gauntlett put it: ‘It’s not what you know, it’s who you know’ (2011:2). Thus, the categories that Putnam divided the concept into have led scholars to conceive of new types of social capital to fit other online relationships, such as those which are physically disconnected (Ellison et al., 2006b, 2007).

Moreover, despite none of the scholars having a background in psychology, Ellison et al. (2006b, 2007) focused solely on the psychological benefits (e.g. self-esteem and life satisfaction) as the benefits that might be obtained from Facebook relationships when examining social capital, neglecting other potential benefits such as the support, knowledge, news/information, and moral guidance that could be exchanged between friends and produce social capital as shown in the analysis chapters. This might be due to the quantitative approach adopted by Ellison et al. (2006b, 2007), which limited their investigation solely to fixed questions, preventing an examination of the strategies that users might employ to manage these relationships and which might also have an effect on them and on the production of social capital. However, taking a broader view in their latest work, Ellison et al. (2011) explore the relationship between social capital and specific communication practices on Facebook, which they term “connection strategies.” Although their study is considered to be one of the first studies to examine communicational practices and their relationship to social capital, it lacks thorough scrutiny of the various strategies that the user might employ on Facebook which could contribute to the production of social capital. This limitation could also be due to the survey method Ellison et al. (2011) utilised, and their attempts to examine strategies have been scrutinised in previous literature on identity. Similarly, Ellison, et al. (2014), shifted attention to the sociotechnical affordances available on Facebook, such as respond to friends’ requests and birthday wishes, the use of which they regarded as maintenance behaviour. Although they argue that social capital is not produced by the mere existence of relationships on the network but through users’ management, grooming and maintenance of their own content, the survey method likely restricted their findings. This means that this area of research needs more exploration to scrutinise the various benefits of Facebook relationships through a rich methodological approach.

Scholars who are interested in online networks in relation to social capital have predicted that social networking sites, such as Facebook, would prove to have the potential for building social connections, social trust, civic and political engagement, and
life satisfaction, which could enhance social capital by facilitating mutual benefits. As mentioned, Putnam (1995) argued that the decline in social capital in the US over the years is associated with the generational decline in social trust. Since then, Valenzuela et al. (2009:877) have identified the creation of the norms of trust that are associated with the increase of social capital in the use of social networking websites. In addition, Putnam (1995:1) stated that there is “a wide range of empirical evidence that the quality of public life and the performance of social institutions (and not only in America) are indeed powerfully influenced by norms and networks of civic engagement”. Valenzuela et al. (2009:1) found that the social network Facebook provides young people with the opportunity to get involved in civic and political engagements that could, in turn, have an influence on social capital as well. These studies opened up a path to investigate political uses of Facebook and link that to social capital. By also looking at studies on women’s empowerment through social networking sites in the Arab region, as indicated in Chapter 1, I raise the issue of whether politically-themed interactions established by women on Facebook contribute to the production of social capital (see Chapter 5).

Rather than using the three types of social capital - bridging, bonding, and maintaining social capital - Valenzuela et al. adapted Scheufele and Shah’s (2002) theoretical framework (cited in 2009:877). The latter study found “the construct of social capital too broad to be useful as a scientific concept”, so the researchers integrated different aspects of social capital to create a solid theoretical framework, postulating that there are three dimensions of social capital: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and behavioural domains. The first domain relates to individuals’ life satisfaction, which was measured by means of a psychological scale; the second has to do with trust between individuals; and the third focuses on individuals’ civic and political participation. Valenzuela et al. use these three domains of social capital to examine the intensity of Facebook use focusing on group applications. As in Chapter 5, the examination of users’ relationships with other group members outside of their private network (not Facebook friendships) does not mean that civic and political discussions do not take place in users’ private networks and create social capital. Valenzuela et al. also highlight the role of ethnicity among all other demographic variables considered in their study (e.g. gender, age, hometown, and parental education) in affecting the relationships between Facebook use and each of the three dimensions of the above social capital. Their work guided my data analysis when it came to the significance of ethnicity, and such related factors as
religion, region, and language, in informing the sense of self in relation to others in political interactions on Facebook. I would also argue that this effect is not limited to users’ interactions with groups but also includes their own private network. The above ideas also form a basis on which to answer the question posed in this thesis: To what extent can women’s discussions with friends on Facebook be regarded as online “deliberation”?

2.9 Considering Identity in Social Capital Studies

In looking at Facebook studies on social capital, as described above, I noticed a lack of interest in exploring the role of identity in the production of social capital. This struck me as a limitation of this work as I believe that identity is an essential part of establishing Facebook relationships and producing positive outcomes, and therefore should not be marginalised. Below, I will discuss these studies and identify that lack which my study addresses.

Ellison et al.’s (2006b) study has only described the presentation of the self on a Facebook profile as a tool to socialise and form relationships. Their indication of some aspects of presenting the self on Facebook, such as users being able to join groups based on their common interest, learn each other’s hobbies, music preferences, relationship status, and location through what they reveal about themselves on their profiles, fails to address the aspects in a nuanced manner. They concentrated solely on the production of social capital, which they linked to the availability of such identity information as a reason for using Facebook. None of the above identity elements were examined to measure social capital in their study. Similarly, Lampe et al. (2006) examined the various uses of Facebook by students, identifying two key uses: social search and social browsing. As they made a distinction between these two concepts, arguing that students use Facebook to maintain offline connections and search for old offline friends (social searching), rather than for establishing new friendships, online contacts, or to connect with people who do not provide any emotional support (social browsing), they examined users’ opinions on constructing their identities through their profiles. They do so utilising a survey method to measure participants’ belief in the accuracy of profile portrayals, and found that users highly supported the representation of themselves on their profile and the positive aspects of it.
Ellison et al. (2011) gave more emphasis to aspects of presenting the self and examined different types of communication behaviours, which they termed “connection strategies”, on Facebook, namely, information-seeking behaviour, commenting for emotional support, and friendship requests, in relation to social capital outcomes. They argue that the more friends a user has on their profile, the more responses and emotional support he or she is likely to receive. Although this might be true, these researchers did not extensively examine strategies related to identity (e.g. the notions of judgement, impression management, the management of content and audience, or any other strategies that are related to audience and self-presentation), which, as my analysis will suggest has a strong association with the production of social capital. Their study revealed a single connection that relates the practice of seeking identity information on people’s profiles to establish offline relationships. Some of these examples could appear on Facebook and warrant more attention. A Facebook user who aims to be perceived as professional might construct a network that contains more professional contacts and might delete any relationship that could affect this image. Moreover, an individual might segregate audiences and group them to satisfy each group’s norms and expectations in order to maintain their relationships. Furthermore, engagements on social networks could involve agreeing or disagreeing with others’ personal opinions, which in turn might affect the relationships between people (see analysis chapters). This could be explored qualitatively; since most social capital studies took a quantitative approach and focused more on relationships than on the identity aspects, their results reflected this.

Lambert’s recent study (2013:57-58), however, examined social capital in relation to self-presentation using ethnographic and grounded theory methods. He utilised Bourdieu’s social capital theory and Goffman’s theory of presentation of the self in order to examine intimacy negotiation among Facebook relationships. His study looks at the intimacy of interactions, considering commenting as an act of exchange, a “performance of connection.” Thereby, the users create norms that facilitate dialogues and emotional exchanges. However, he shifted the focus away from an important aspect of self-presentation on Facbook – what he termed “inert” content (e.g. personal information on the Facebook front page) - and how it might play a role in the intimacy relationship. In the Saudi context, a user might refer to such content (front page information) in addition to the dynamic content of the profile as the basis of personality.
judgement (see Chapters 4) and the determination of emotional attachment (see Chapters 5).

As my study does, Lambert (2013) criticised previous social capital studies on Facebook for the lack of theorising concerning the role of social capital in Facebook everyday activities and for the lack of scrutiny of how these social interactions are performed when users post on each other’s walls and comment on each other’s posts. Because they tend to focus on consequences: “something crucial is ignored, namely the actual exchange of resources… those studies define social capital in terms of … type of connections (bridging/bonding) and consequences (self-esteem).” (ibid, 49). His study, on the other hand, looked at social capital in a more nuanced manner than previous, quantitative social capital studies. Furthermore, his approach to self-presentation also includes what social capital studies have failed to examine, but still, he focused solely on intimacy negotiation in Facebook relationships. In these studies concerning social capital, the aspect of constructing the self has emerged in different ways, yet there has been a limited examination of its role in producing social capital. The strategies that are related to self-presentation and audience, as I mentioned above, are examples of such missing elements. As these elements appear within Facebook content in my study, it is essential to give them more weight when addressing social capital.

2.10 The Absence of Social Capital Theories

Above, I have reviewed studies that – as I have argued - have provided only limited consideration to identity construction. In the following, I review those studies which have examined relationships and identity construction on Facebook but neglected social capital theories. DiMicco and Millen (2007), examined Facebook users’ management of their personal identities during the transition from the college to the work environment to maintain school relationships and bridging social capital in the workplace. By analysing 68 Facebook profiles, the study revealed the difficulty of constructing multiple identities to pursue two networks (the professional and non-professional) simultaneously on Facebook. I would argue that the need to deal differently with two groups of audiences (maybe for personal or cultural reasons) may drive users to create multiple Facebook profiles in order to maintain their different relationships. As my study will demonstrate, the user might construct entirely different identities, and not
necessarily merely professional and non-professional ones. Since their study was published (in 2007), Facebook has improved privacy settings which enables users to carefully manage their profiles, group their audiences and segregate them to manage their self-presentation. This development creates an opportunity to establish multiple identities within a single Facebook profile in order to maintain relationships as desired.

Other studies focusing on Facebook use have presented Facebook as a venue to share identities (Joinson, 2008), and identified the possibility of re-defining the self as a motive for using the site, besides forming relationships (Patrick, 2010). Patrick’s (2010) research added the notion of “identity construction” as a new aspect in this area (Patrick, 2010:25; see also Lampe et al., 2006). In Patrick’s study, users are seen to judge others’ identities based on their profiles; not having a Facebook profile was also a source of judgement. Patrick also argues that presenting the self on Facebook provides the users with opportunities to idealise the self. Sheldon (2008) claims that Facebook users look at photos and profiles to enjoy themselves when socialising, specifically among female users. These studies focused on the motives for Facebook use by exploring the different uses that satisfy account holders’ needs and gratify their desires.

Whilst Ellison et al. (2006b/2011), Lambert (2013), and Lampe et al. (2006), in the previous section adopted social capital theories, Joinson, Partick, and Sheldon adopted uses and gratification theory in exploring Facebook use. During the examination of social capital on Facebook in the previous section, demonstrated that relationships on Facebook are intertwined with identity construction. This is consistent with Bourdieu’s view that relationships start by the self being perceived and in Goffman’s terms, presented when encountering others. These studies utilising uses and gratifications have produced results different from the studies that adopted social capital theories, revealing the different motives of why individuals use Facebooks. In this study, the uses and gratification theory is not adopted in order to examine the questions under consideration. The reason for this is that my focus is not only why Saudi women use Facebook but how they use it. While the uses and gratification theory might reveal results that answered the why question (why individuals use a particular social media) it would approach media use from a more psychological perspective (Urista et al., 2009:218). In contrast, this study is not interested in the gratifications participants seek but rather in the nature of their practices and their perceptions of these. This study seeks to glean a stronger connection between the why and the how.
It is my argument that Bourdieu’s view of social capital can productively complement Goffman’s analysis of self-presentation. The strategies people use (the given and given off in Goffman’s terms) are the starting points for establishing relationships. The acts of forming, sustaining and reinforcing these relationships are based on the exchange of mutual and relatively ‘continual’ (online) benefits. Bourdieu supported such thinking when he said that “to exist socially means also to be perceived” (1991) as well as by his claim that people’s behaviours plays a role in gaining profits from others (1991). From this perspective, users’ self-presentation on their Facebook profiles can be related to the production of social capital in Bourdieu’s sense. On Facebook, these benefits start with becoming a “friend” and may subsequently generate other advantages related to users’ performance and interactions on the site. This illuminates the strong connection between the two perspectives, as the construction of relationships is based on the construction of identity. The paucity of research linking the two theories together to examine Facebook use makes it a crucial area to explore. My study explicitly addresses this area through its consideration of how women, through the construction of their identities on Facebook profiles and through their interactions with friends on the site, produce social capital. What strategies are used to manage self-presentation and relationships that could have an impact on social capital? What are the benefits gained from the Facebook content, relationships, and discussions that contribute to the production of social capital? These questions are addressed in this study.

2.11 Conclusion

This chapter has laid out the conceptual framework for my study of Saudi women’s Facebook use. This study rejects essentialised conceptualisations of identity, focusing instead on social aspects of interaction and thus taking an anti-essentialised approach to the construction of identity on Facebook. In this chapter, I delved into the notion of gender in order to frame my understanding of the practices of Saudi women on Facebook. I also considered the cultural expectations that govern their interactions might be framed in relation to concepts of cultural identity and othering. This has led me to explore ‘othering’ not solely in terms of the West versus the East, with the West being the centre, but also the other way round. I also described how Tekin’s study of hierarchy of othering has inspired my analysis of participants’ internalised othering in my data: i.e.,
how Saudi women constitute both Western and Eastern ‘others’ within their online activity.

Goffman’s (1959) work on self-presentation and impression management and Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of social capital are the main two theories that I have drawn from in framing my project. These address the nature and the construction of identity in interesting and distinctive ways. Goffman’s work draws attention to the nuanced aspects of interaction and self-presentation in everyday settings. His interest in the roles that individuals perform and his awareness of the audience when thinking about self-presentation, that is to say, the micro-level of identity development, drew me to adopt his approach in studying the online environment. In relation to social capital I have examined how previous studies have conceptualised social capital in different ways, and explained how this thinking – in taking up and extending Bourdieu’s ideas - has informed my study. I finished the chapter by linking these theories together to highlight the distinctiveness of my approach to Saudi women’s identities and relationships on Facebook. In the next chapter I move on to outline the methodological basis of my work. This is followed by the analysis chapters in which I will return to the ideas examined in this chapter; Chapter 4 on strategies of identity construction; Chapter 5 on othering and online deliberation; and Chapter 6 on relationship formation and social capital. Together these demonstrate the way that I am bringing together the concepts of identity and social capital in this work.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out my research design and considers my use of qualitative methods in the study. It outlines the procedures used for recruiting participants, data collection, and analysis. It also includes a consideration of my role as a researcher and how this was informed by my position as a woman and as an “insider” in the Saudi context. Whilst this gave me access to my participants’ lives, it also presented some challenges, which I will discuss. I will start by giving an overview of the importance of this research methodology in the Saudi context and a justification for using qualitative approaches as a research design. This chapter concludes with the ethical issues I have needed to address.

3.2 Research Design: A Qualitative Approach to the Study of Facebook Use in Saudi Arabia

In the previous chapter, I indicated the lack of qualitative richness in the existing Facebook research that is closest in focus to my own work. As I described, there is a preponderance of quantitative studies concerned with Facebook use in the West and its relation to social capital. Within the Saudi context, there is also a tendency among scholars to rely on quantitative methods to study media use. Studies that include Saudi women or are mainly concerned with their Internet use have generally been carried out by men (Al-Kahtani, Ryan and Jefferson, 2006; Al-Saggaf, 2004, 2011; and Al-Salem, 2005). Finally, it is also notable that whilst observational methods have been used in offline domestic settings (see Soraya, 1994, on Saudi family relationships), the use of such methods are considered a new approach in the Saudi context in relation to Facebook use.

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9 Notable exceptions include Al-Saggaf’s study of the use of Facebook among Saudi women (Al-Saggaf, 2011), Binsahl and Shanton (2012) and Guta and Karolak, (2015) on the use of Facebook among five and seven Saudi women respectively; however, these can be regarded as methodologically limited because they have relied on self-reported behaviour rather than profile analysis (Binsahl and Shanton, 2012) and (Guta and Karolak, 2015) or involved constrained observation of profiles (Al-Saggaf, 2011).
The methodological limitations of existing qualitative research on this topic are apparent in the qualitative study that is closest to my own work, Al-Saggaf (2011). This was presented as using ethnographic techniques to explore how 15 female Saudi students demonstrate self-presentation and express their feelings on Facebook. The empirical basis of this study was limited, however: only three participants’ profiles were observed, and for only one hour. These observations were requested from the participants in the lobby of the university immediately after they had been interviewed. They were undertaken under the surveillance of the participants and were instantaneous, as the researcher had to take notes and was not given the chance to look over the profiles after the interviews. The other 12 participants refused to allow their profiles to be viewed by the (male) researcher. This study provides an example of how cultural obstacles can limit the design of research.

My own study is therefore distinctive because it is based on a combination of qualitative data collection methods across online and offline settings and over a sustained period of time (ten months). As I will outline below, these included observation of the online Facebook activity of ten Saudi women, observation of their use of Facebook in their domestic settings, and two stages of interviews with each participant, carried out at their homes, at the beginning and end of the research period. This combination of qualitative methods was designed in order to illuminate the different aspects of my participants’ use of Facebook and their experiences using this site in relation to their cultural norms.

Against the broader field of literature I have described, my use of qualitative methods can be seen to have a political dimension: as Williams and Heikes (1993:280) explained, proponents of qualitative methods have argued that they can “give a voice to women whose life experiences have been silenced or ignored by more standardized survey research technique”. Yet there are, of course, other reasons for adopting a qualitative approach in this study. Qualitative methods of research are valuable when researchers seek to examine phenomena “about which little is yet known” (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, 19) and focus attention on “how social experiences are created and given meanings” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005:10). In designing this project I wanted to avoid the structuring of data evident in quantitative studies of Facebook use in favour of more flexible interviews and observations, which give participants the chance to talk about
their experiences and opinions with some freedom and space (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005:12). Although findings from the quantitative approach may be more generalisable, the qualitative approach I am taking is “committed to an emic, ideographic, case-based position that directs attention to the specifics of particular cases” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005:12).

In designing my project I was inspired by studies of other social networking sites that have used mixed qualitative methods in the study of online activities. These included Ringrose’s (2010:1-17) and boyd’s (2008) studies, which both analysed the construction of their participants’ identities online. Ringrose examined young people’s engagement with the social networking site Bebo while boyd attempted to investigate the role of the social networking site MySpace in teens’ lives. The integration of the methods used in Ringrose’s study was inspiring: thirteen girls and ten boys were interviewed, online data were analysed, and a case study was included about the issues a young girl faced in online and offline communities. Boyd’s ethnographic method and the study of participants’ offline social lives in relation to online use were also appealing. Both studies moved between online and offline, looking at the use of language, practices, utilisation of the site’s features and the connection between online social challenges and the participants’ offline lives, as well as offline challenges to their online use. This type of research, where all of these factors are examined together, simply has not yet been done in a Saudi study of Facebook. To avoid “the false dichotomy between the virtual world and the actual real world”, Sade-Beck (2004) maintained that the use of integrated methodologies, such as data-gathering both online and offline, is essential, and argues that there is a “need to redefine fieldwork so as to mediate between the two worlds” (p: 13). It could be said that the use of sound, integrated methods (a mixed approach of qualitative methods) is not about implementing multiple methods in the research but about the connection between these methods and how the smooth shift between online and offline, as well as the exploration of both, is established (this connection is explained in more detail in Chapter 6).
3.3 Sampling: The Selection and Recruitment of Participants

At the heart of this study are my participants: ten female Facebook users aged between 19 and 60 living in the city of Jeddah. Given the requirements that I knew my project would place on these women (a willingness to share their Facebook profiles with me, and to welcome me into their homes), my participants were recruited through snowball sampling. This method is preferable when “some degree of trust is required to initiate contact” (Atkinson and Flint, 2001:2). Using my own network of contacts enabled me to find willing participants (Miller and Bell, 2012: 63) and I relied initially on relatives and friends to introduce second or third degree friends to identify potential participants. Although my aim was not to generalise but understand complex issues in human behaviour (Marshall, 1996:523), in using the snowball technique I tried to shape my sample by purposefully recruiting women with different demographic backgrounds, including varying ages, educational levels, marital and working status, and differing degrees of exposure to the Facebook site. This was done because I was interested in exploring a variety of activities and behaviour on Facebook that might be influenced by the differences in such backgrounds.

Prior to the commencement of fieldwork, I contacted, by phone and phone chatting, a number of relatives and close friends to ask them to serve as intermediaries and help me find women who would agree to be part of the study. I gave them an idea about the aims and the methods. Each suggested a number of friends who use Facebook and promised to ask and get back to me. I gathered information about the suggested

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10 The use of a relatively small sample of participants might be open to criticism, but is common in qualitative research. Many other studies have been conducted on small samples and yet have yielded valuable results, such as Al-Saggaf (2004) (15 participants); Al-Saggaf (2011) (11 participants); Al-Salem (2005) (9 participants); Guta and Karolak (2015) (7 participants); Binsahl and Shanton (2012) (5 participants); Roy (2012) (12 participants); Lambert (2013) (6 participants); Livingstone, S. (2008) (16 participants); Zhao et al. (2013) (13 participants); Wirastuti (2012) (5 participants); Yurchisin, et al. (2005) (11 participants). Therefore, a small number of cases does not, by itself, preclude the credibility of the study. I would argue that I have addressed this limitation by applying a mix of qualitative research methods; in this my focus has been on richness of data rather than on the desire to produce generalisable claims. Payne and Williams (2005:295) stated that “In qualitative research, generalizing claims are less explicit. Indeed, some (…) minimize the relevance of generalization or even deny any intention toward generalisation in qualitative research”.

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participants, who numbered more than ten. I then prepared an initial list of participants who met my criteria. I received three agreements before travelling to Jeddah, and those were the first to be interviewed; the remaining participants were confirmed during fieldwork. Table 3.1 provides a summary of my participants (see also Vignettes in the Appendices).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Order</th>
<th>Initials</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Work status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First</td>
<td>AZ</td>
<td>Mid 50s</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second</td>
<td>AY</td>
<td>Mid 30s</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third</td>
<td>LY</td>
<td>Early 60s</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Secondary school</td>
<td>Retired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth</td>
<td>HL</td>
<td>Early 30s</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Secondary school</td>
<td>Not working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifth</td>
<td>BS</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Secondary school</td>
<td>Not working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sixth</td>
<td>HN</td>
<td>Early 40s</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Not employed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seventh</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>Early 30s</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Master’s degree</td>
<td>Working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eight</td>
<td>HW</td>
<td>Mid 20s</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ninth</td>
<td>EL</td>
<td>Mid 20s</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Master’s degree</td>
<td>Working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenth</td>
<td>RM</td>
<td>Mid 30s</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Secondary school</td>
<td>Not working</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 3.1** Table of participants

At the start of the fieldwork period, I called each participant to arrange the first interview at her convenience and took her home address. Most of the selected participants were interviewed as planned; however, I exploited the opportunity to meet and interview other potential participants; for example, BS was suggested by one of the interviewees (HL), since I had not yet obtained consent from one of those selected. It was a bit embarrassing during the phone calls when two participants proactively suggested having the interviews in a public place before I could explain to them that visiting them at their own homes was necessary, as observing their domestic setting was part of the study’s design.

### 3.4 Data Collection

Figure 3.2 summarises the three phases of my research project. In the first phase (March-May 2012) I carried out an initial meeting with each participant to discuss the project, and obtain their consent to participate in the study. I also carried out observations
within their homes and the first interview. From May to November 2012, online observation continued, in addition to the transcription of the first interviews and offline field notes, and online interviews when I had follow up questions about their posting activity. The final phase (November to December 2012) involved a second visit, a second interview and face-to-face observation. As I will describe later, these second interviews were informed by my observation of their posting activity. The shifts between online and offline spaces, and between reported and observed behaviour, were designed to enable me to “distinguish between ‘what people say they do’ and ‘what people actually do’” (Dirksen, Huizing and Smit, 2010:1049) whilst also providing a sense of “the context in light of which informants’ stories [are] understood” (ibid).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Research procedure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First</td>
<td>March-May 2012</td>
<td>First trip to Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>First visit; face-to-face observation and Interview 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3 months)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Online observation begins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second</td>
<td>June-October</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>Online observation, transcription of interview 1 and field notes from visit 1, online interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third</td>
<td>November-December 2012</td>
<td>Second trip to Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>Second visit: face-to-face observation and Interview 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2 months)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Online observation ends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-month period; total of:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 visits per participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 face-to-face interviews per participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Online observation of Facebook activity on a weekly basis (with online interviews where necessary)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3-2 Data collection schedule

Before the first interview I asked each participant to fill out answers to a number of questions (in Arabic) in order to gather basic information about them. This form contained questions about the previously mentioned key variables (age, marital and work status, and educational level), which I assumed some of the women might be reluctant to talk about and might prefer to just tell me in writing. At this point I also requested that participants provide their email addresses so that I could contact them throughout the
year (if needed) as well as their Facebook user identification in order to add them to my personal network.

### 3.4.1 INTERVIEWS

#### 3.4.1.1 Offline Interviews

Each participant was interviewed face-to-face twice: a total of 20 interviews. I met all of the participants at their homes for the first interviews. For the second, I met two of them at a café\(^1\) and I met BS at HL’s home, as suggested by BS\(^2\). I met the other seven participants at their own homes.

During the first interview, I asked participants to introduce me to their Facebook accounts in the setting in which they normally use the Internet. This was followed by a semi-structured interview. Whilst each interview covered similar issues – including access, privacy settings, the effects on their lives and online/offline relationships, and privacy concerns (issues that had been identified from my review of literature relating to the topic) – I also followed up on points raised by the participants in order to give them the chance to talk freely about their experiences (Rapley, 2004:18). The duration of these interviews varied; three took around 30 minutes, while the other seven interviews were about 40 to 45 minutes, and one lasted an hour and a half, excluding any time when the recording was paused for hosting, introductions, and interruptions. The length of the first interviews appeared to depend partly on the participant’s experience with Facebook and how attached she was to the site. Some participants were talkative and expounded enthusiastically on their experiences with Facebook, while others had little to say and gave only short answers. I will return to this challenge shortly.

Carrying out the first interviews in the participants’ homes appeared to make them relaxed enough to share personal information about their private settings and relationships. For example, one participant mentioned that her husband was obsessed with football games, spending most of his time in the bedroom, leaving her alone, and

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\(^1\) One because her husband was at home and the other because she preferred to meet outside her house.

\(^2\) HL told me that BS, the youngest participant and HL’s relative, who I met when I first interviewed HL, told her that she preferred to meet me in HL’s house instead of her own. I surmised that she was shy about having me in her own at home as the first interview was in HL’s company; HL welcomed us.
that this solitude increased her Facebook use. Another participant revealed that she suffers from a controlling husband, who continually creates problems for her in every aspect of her life, relationships, socialisation, and other activities, such as using the Internet or Facebook. Another participant described her nightly routine where she and her husband, at the end of the day, lie in bed, each with their own laptop, and log into Facebook. Moreover, interviewing participants with their computers or devices at hand made it easier for them to explain their reported online behaviours, as they could reference their actual profiles (e.g. when they said “let me show you” and we looked at their profiles together).

The second interviews were slightly different because they were informed by the online observations I carried out from June to October, and also followed up on the first interviews. Therefore, I asked the participants more specific and formulated questions related to an actual observed use. Some general questions were posed to all interviewees, namely, those which related to their change in use over the ten-month period of the study, for example, intense use after a pause or a stop after being active. For those who were active, I asked them about some of their behavior (e.g. in relation to their privacy), posts, and the reason for being interested in particular issues. On the other hand, I asked those with little activity on their profiles about the reasons they were not active for a period of time or if they were doing activities that I could not observe (e.g. reading, group discussions, and surfing other profiles). I also asked questions about policing audiences, as this behaviour was evident at the first interviews, so I followed up on it. Although some questions were similar across participants to allow comparison in the analysis stage, the majority varied depending on the participants’ use and experiences during the year.

The second interviews were more informal than the first ones since by that time, I had become acquainted with the participants and had developed relationships with some of them through online interviews. Three of the participants asked me about my experience observing them in the second interview. They were eager to know how I perceived them on Facebook. Therefore, I mentioned some identity aspects I observed about them but did not elaborate much and settled on telling them that I will show them a copy of my thesis later, if they want. During the second interview a number of changes to my participants’ lives were revealed. During my meeting with EL, for example, she informed me that her use of Facebook had decreased recently because she had got
engaged. This led us to talk about who she had got engaged to, and discuss the planning for the event, etc. Therefore, this meeting took two hours, an hour and 20 minutes of which yielded data directly related to the study.

**Challenges**

As I noted above, during the first interviews I faced some difficulty keeping the conversation going. Some interviews were difficult to manage because some participants, such as EL, gave only short answers, which caused me to resort to techniques to encourage her to talk about her usage and experiences. One of these was simplifying the questions or giving another participant’s experience as an example:

**R (researcher):** Has Facebook affected any of your relationships negatively? For example, you had a harsh chat with someone?

**EL:** No.

**R:** For example, have you judged someone from her posts and that might have affected the relationship or your view?

**EL:** No.

**R:** One told me about her friend. She said that she loves everything pink, posts about pink and when she met her outside, the conversation was about Hello Kitty and how she loves the pink colour. So, she told me that ‘I felt that she is so silly and that has affected my relationship with her’. She was narrating that to me.

**EL:** No.

**R:** Ok, another said that her friend posts inappropriate photos.

**EL:** Yes, this may have happened.

**R:** And she said that she doesn’t know this part of her personality.

**EL:** Yes, this happened to me. One has photos which are over... Even her profile picture, for example, girls laying down... do you know .. it is too much ...and her comments are ... you know ... people are viewing my
profile. She is free but if people view her photos through my profile .. you know...

**R:** Describe what you mean please.

This extract shows my attempt to encourage (EL) to speak about her experiences (the interview was very different from our second meeting, described previously), as well as giving short answers, this extract suggests (in the repetition of “you know”) that EL expected me to understand that her friend’s behaviour is not acceptable (an issue to which I will return later in the chapter). Another strategy that I used was inspired by Dwyer and Buckle (2009), who suggest that in order to encourage interaction during interviews, researchers might “bring their personal role into the research relationship by answering participants’ questions, sharing knowledge and experience, and giving support when asked” (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009:62). For example, I shared the following personal experience with EL: “I like to surf other’s profiles. When I first created my account, I didn’t do anything except that.”

Although most of my interviews went relatively smoothly, I experienced particular difficulty in creating a rapport with two of the participants, HL (the fourth interviewee) and LY (the second interviewee). In the case of HL, she was rather unresponsive and could not find much to say about her use, except on some aspects of it. I also ran out of questions to ask and ways to encourage her to speak, which I had not experienced with my three previous interviewees, because she did not often post on Facebook or update her profile. I might have tried other questions relating to her opinion of how other people use Facebook, for example, but that did not occur to me during the interview. This was less challenging in the second interview, since by then, I had observed her Facebook wall and had specific questions to ask when she paused. It was also interesting that this same participant was quite open when answering the questions I asked her during online interviews (through Facebook private messaging) after the first interview.

In contrast, LY, a 62 year old participant, was extremely talkative, to the extent that I had difficulty keeping the conversation from getting side-tracked. On some occasions, while discussing her posts (a news post, for example), she digressed to talk
about the event itself. Also, her answers were sometimes different from what she had been asked, but most of the time, they still revolved around the same idea. For example:

\textbf{R:} It seems like Facebook gives you information and you are entertained, am I right? It really sounds entertaining.

\textbf{LY:} Yes, yes, when I get bored, I use Facebook and I feel myself with people.

(She then jumped and talked about the Google Earth application and how it is different in Saudi Arabia from the one in London and that she received it from her friend by email.)

(She then excused me to pray. When she finished, she opened her Facebook profile and I resumed the conversation.)

In both cases, the reason for the difficulties might have been my own lack of experience in managing such a conversation (as this was my first experience of carrying out interviews). I also might have emphasised things that I do on the site in sharing my personal experience, as suggested by Dwyer and Buckle, above. As I will discuss, it may also be linked to my position as an insider within the Saudi culture.

3.4.1.2 Online Interviews

During the second and third stages of my data collection (online observation and data analysis), online interviews were carried out on an ongoing, as-needed basis, in an informal way though Facebook private messaging\textsuperscript{13}. During these interactions I sought clarification on points that arose during the analysis and which had not been discussed in the interviews and/or explored issues that arose in relation to my participants’ Facebook activity. In some cases, conversations were instigated by questions that I had been asked by my supervisor about my data (e.g., questions about whether a participant had given

\textsuperscript{13} Initially, I had planned to use my academic email for these interviews, but decided that this was not the best option for gaining the trust of the participants (and for achieving informality), as argued by Orgad (2005:62). I also used Facebook private messages to arrange the second face-to-face interviews.
the reason for a particular post or use). For example, I asked EL and ND about their sudden absence from Facebook, and I asked AY and ND to elaborate several times on written posts on their wall and what the meant by them. Participants who frequently use Facebook responded on the same day. However, those who had seemed less attached to Facebook during our first meeting tended not respond quickly, and RM did not respond at all, so I asked her the questions I had later, in the second interview.

3.4.2 OBSERVATION

3.4.2.1 Offline Observation

As described above, the study involved three periods of observation. Observation of the participants in offline settings (homes and cafes) was done after they consented to be part of this study, and it was explained that I would like to visit them in the setting where they use the Internet (Facebook in particular) the most. Two visits were arranged with each participant during the fieldwork period, with the visits taking place at their homes or outside, as in the case of two of the second face-to-face observations. This did not hinder the offline observation; rather, it gave me an additional perception of the participant’s outgoing lifestyle, as meetings outside the home are normally with relatives and friends and, for some women, need arrangement and permission. In that way, they also reflected those participants’ way of life.

By carrying out this offline observation I hoped to gain an understanding of the private, domestic contexts in which my participants make use of Facebook. Studies of television in the home have emphasised the value of understanding the “embedded practices of the audience in the domestic setting” (Silverstone, 1998, 253). In 1994, Silverstone stated that “Television has become embedded in the complex cultures of our own domesticity” and that “Television and other media are part of home — part of its idealisation, part of its reality” (Silverstone, 1992: 24, 29). Whilst I was interested in Facebook users rather than television audiences, this notion of how Internet media technology becomes embedded within a family context/local dynamics was also of interest to me in my desire to gain an understanding of the nature of these women’s lives and the place of the Internet/Facebook within them. The visits enabled me to observe the actual use of Facebook and the settings in which it occurs. (Eight use Facebook primarily
in their homes. AY and HL gave me a tour to show me where their devices are and who uses them and when. I also observed BS’s and LY’s bedrooms since they use the technology there; HN and ND also indicated their use of Facebook in their bedroom at night or when needed).

These visits provided a number of valuable insights not least those relating to issues of access. During our first meeting, for instance, RM had a problem accessing the Internet, as her Internet service shut down every weekend, and she stated that this often affected her use. Alongside such technical restrictions on use, offline observation also provided me with an understanding of my participants’ domestic atmosphere and the extent to which it was conservative, i.e., limiting family members’ Internet access at home, or more liberal, allowing for behaviours that contradict the norms. It also suggested how open-minded the family are in the use of communication and information technologies, such as owning computers, phones, or iPads to access the Internet and be open to the world. While concerns about Internet use are great with children and debates about privacy or monitoring of the child’s access in the West are ongoing (e.g. see Valcke, et al., 2011 and Mathiesen, 2012), studies have demonstrated that restrictions are especially placed on women’s use of technology, mainly in Western and non-Western settings (see Brandes & Levin, 2013, on parental supervision of teen girls’ use in Israel; and Kumar, 2014, on parental restrictions on daughters’ use of technology in India). A number of my participants faced similar restrictions: BS, the youngest of my participants, was not able to create a Facebook profile until she had explained to her father what Facebook is and received permission to join the site. In contrast, however, AY’s home was full of communications technologies (e.g. each of her children had an iPad, her and her husband each had laptops and an office with a desktop PC, as well as many electronic games).

My observation was restricted in some ways, however. Not all of the participants allowed me to observe the settings where they use Facebook. ND and EL restricted my

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\[9^{14}\] AY gave the impression that she is less conservative compared to the other participants, as it is acceptable to her and her family to be in a mixed-gender environment in a domestic setting with people who are not related. This was when she asked me to meet her brother because he was visiting her from Turkey and she could not isolate him in a room for me.

\[9^{15}\] Some people in Saudi society worry that a woman might be at risk or exposed to prohibited behaviour, and thus restrict her use.
observation by inviting me only into the reception room. This was overcome by asking more questions about the participants’ use of communications technology and access, the kinds and locations of devices used at home, and who uses them, when, and their family rules regarding such use. More broadly, I was only able to observe each of the participants for a couple of hours total. Having the chance to stay more would have given me a fuller understanding of their lives.

Although I had the opportunity to enter my participants’ domestic settings, and observe relationships between some of the participants and their children, it was difficult to glean an overview of the dynamic of the whole family together. The Saudi norms that segregate genders prevented me from observing their normal family settings, in addition to the traditions that prohibit interruptions when having a guest. It was important for each participant to have free time and to arrange my visit at a time when her husband or male family members were not at home. Even if other family members were home, it was difficult to meet them due to Saudi traditions, especially as I was neither a relative nor a close friend. During one visit I was given the opportunity to meet the brother of one of the participants (AY), but I declined to chat with him and AY and I took seats away from the dining room he was sitting in, as I also follow the tradition of my family. Talking to him during the interview could potentially have illuminated more details about AY’s Facebook use in relation to his experience. Therefore, the norms and traditions that both my participants’ and myself follow precluded an observation of the whole family during the interview, which might have been relevant to aspects of the analysis.

3.4.2.2 Online Observation

Online observation of each participant’s Facebook profile took place on a weekly basis throughout the ten months. To be able to access the participants’ Facebook profiles, I took permission from each participant during the first interview. I then added them as Facebook friends to my personal network. I only faced an initial refusal from HN, as our friend X, who introduced us, is on my Facebook friend list but not on hers. HN did not want X as a Facebook friend, and so, because X would recognise her from my wall as soon as I added her, she refused. As my study’s mission would not be completed unless she agreed to be added to my network, I suggested that I delete the status update that
shows me becoming friends with her, which normally appears automatically. She then accepted.

I planned to check each profile once a week, viewing perhaps one profile on one day, two on another day or maybe five in one day, depending on whether I was able to do so and/or depending on the participants’ being active that day. After each participant’s first and the second interviews, I intentionally reviewed her profile in order to consider any insight that could be taken from the interview. However, the online observation changed over the course of the study, particularly in the late stage of the analysis. In this stage, I reviewed the participants’ profiles intensely, as the analysis required. On the other hand, the six months of online observation of the profiles after the first interviews influenced the questions that were asked during the second interviews (for example, regarding any interesting issues that were observed on participants’ profiles), in addition to establishing links with the offline observation.

I had intended to archive data from the participants’ profiles on a weekly basis by taking screen shots and saving them in text files. However, the new feature (timeline), which was launched by Facebook in 2011, led me to decide, before I began my online observation, to rely solely on Facebook instead. This feature allows me to browse the participant’s profile since its creation and see all the posts, information and comments which have been shared with others. Still, coming across certain particularly interesting shared information or posts motivated me to archive some data for future use. These were dated as they exist on the profiles to ease reference to them at any future time. I took notes about what I saw on each participant’s profile, copying some posts to these notes, and labelling them in order to compare the participants’ posts and interests in a later stage. I also went back to some participants’ profiles where I remembered viewing a post that I wanted to refer to in my analysis. In my observation, I followed links to other web pages that participants linked to, such as a personal blog that was posted on ND’s wall. I also played posted audios/videos to know their content.

3.5 Transcription and Translation of Data

After each interview I spent time transcribing and translating the interview accounts from Arabic into English. As body movement contributed to the understanding of the culture
in relation to online use, gestures and expressions during the interviews gave more meaning to participants’ interview reports and were also taken into consideration.\(^\text{16}\) During transcription of the records, I used some letters to refer to certain acts, such as *hahaha* for laughter, *aaaa* for pausing, and *AHHH* for breathing deeply. In these cases, the number of letters that were used varies, so sometimes the extract shows *aaa* as a pause, while *aaaaaaa* indicates as a longer pause, which could vary depending on how the participant performed during the interview.

It was also necessary to translate most of the participants’ Facebook posts and comments, as they were mainly written in Arabic. Any content written in English was used in the analysis in its original form. In translating the interview/Facebook data I endeavoured to ensure that I kept the original phrasing in order to convey the closest meaning. Temple and Young (2004:164) argue that “translators […] also form part of the process of knowledge production”, which means that my effort in translating those phrases might influence the meaning conveyed, to some extent. Thus, I cannot ignore the influence I might have had on the data translated. However, as these authors argue, this can be overcome. I made an effort to avoid posts that might not clearly convey the exact meaning in translation. For example, old, informal Arabic sayings/proverbs that are popular in some Arabic societies and describe particular events or situations might not make sense if literally translated into English. I purposely avoided including such extracts in the study as they might lead to dubious reliability, while I included others with slight changes to the words in order to convey the exact meaning. The variety of posts on the same topics allowed me to choose the ones whose meaning was easiest to convey. This issue is common among studies carried out in Arabic contexts; Al-Saggaf, in his 2004 study, conducted interviews in Arabic, whereas in his study in 2011, he interviewed participants in English, which, as he stated, was “to avoid issues that could arise from translating the text” (p: 7). Carrying out the data collection in Arabic made participation in the study easier for the participants, especially those who were not proficient in

\(^{16}\) During the meetings, I focused on making notes. When I later transcribed my interviews, I tried to incorporate these field notes with the ones taken during the conversations into my interview data by describing some of the participant’s movements. For example, when one participant talked about a device, I commented next to it (pointing at her laptop or she opened her laptop). Or when a participant attempted to show something on her profile during the conversation, I commented next to her speech that she was looking at her profile on her device.
English. Studies that have conducted interviews in English to avoid translation issues (Al-Saggaf, 2011) can be seen to exclude or alienate potential participants.

3.6 ANALYSIS

The analysis involved close reading of the data followed by numerous attempts to refine them. I approached the interviews, the participants’ profiles, and the online data as texts. Therefore, I utilised textual analysis. Several other techniques, such as the constant comparison method, were also used to look for patterns in similar ways, both within a single interview and between all of the interviews, profiles, and online data. In this section, I will describe my approach to analysing the interview data, presenting the manual process of coding, categorising and comparing data. I will then move on to profile analysis, where I present the methods used for analysing the Facebook front page and bulletin board (wall).

My focus in the analysis of both interview data and observations was on the discursive formation of identity and discerning patterns. As Jorgensen & Phillips (2002) argue:

… the purpose of research is not (…) to find out what people really mean when they say this or that, or to discover the reality behind the discourse. The starting point is that reality can never be reached outside discourses and so it is discourse itself that has become the object of analysis. (…) the analyst has to work with what has actually been said or written, exploring patterns in and across the statements and identifying the social consequences of different discursive representations of reality (p:21).

From a constructionist point of view, one of the main aspects of this study is the examination of how identity is constructed on the Facebook profile. To that end, the analysis targeted the content related to the question “who would I like to be?”, thinking about the self and how it is presented, managed, and constructed, without necessarily determining whether users present a true (real) or a false self, as this question is beyond the scope of the study. Through particular theories, I have attempted to understand what
the Saudi women say about themselves and how they behave to convey that. Goffman’s theories about self-presentation shaped my understanding of their behaviour, which might include, for example, concealing and/or highlighting certain aspects of their identities, adhering to cultural expectations to give a positive impression and show a desirable self, and carefully controlling and managing the content of their profiles to avoid negative judgements from their audiences, all of which exemplify an idealised presentation of the self (see Chapter 4). An attempt is also made to examine the different ways demonstrated by the participants to promote the self on Facebook. As interactions took place on the profile which illuminated identity and relationship aspects, the analysis gave significance to the content of some interactions and the strategies and tactics used by the participant in order to answer why and how the Saudi women use Facebook (see Chapter 5 and 6).

My understanding, knowledge and position have affected me as a translator as well as an analyst, as “each of us brings to the analysis of data our biases, assumptions, patterns of thinking, and knowledge gained from experience and reading” (Strauss and Corbin, 1990:95). However, implementing certain qualitative research techniques from the Grounded Theory method, such as the analysis of a word, phrase, or sentence and the use of questioning, especially for the online data, as well as that of the constant comparison method, helped me to make sense of the data and uncover specific insights (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). I also attempt to distance myself from what might be taken for granted, especially on account of my status as an insider (I will expand on my position at the end of the chapter), but my analysis yielded a different reality of the participants’ identities. Jorgensen & Phillips (2002) also argue that “the researcher always takes a position in relation to the field of study, and that position plays a part in the determination of what he or she can see and can present as results” (p:22). I will discuss the validity of my contribution to this study later in the chapter.

3.6.1 The Process of Analysis

The early stages of analysis included a careful examination of my interview transcripts, participants’ Facebook profiles and online data. Manual coding was carried out on all interview transcripts, and both the first and the second and sub-themes were identified. Some of the data were assigned to and fit under more than one sub-theme: For
example, the code “self-presentation” encompassed the ideas of self-promotion, presenting the self anonymously, and multiple identities (see Chapter 4). The impression management sub-theme contained the sub-themes of “audience management” and “profile management.”

Categorising and refining the data was an ongoing process during the study since I interviewed each participant twice, in addition to continually observing them online and asking for clarification or additional information as the need arose. Initial categories emerged from the data. Some of the categories were created based on Goffman’s and Bourdieu’s ideas, which have informed the data analysis. This can be seen in Chapter 4, for example, where I have used various terms from Goffman’s work (e.g. “self-presentation”, “impression management”, and “idealise the self”), and in Chapter 6, where I discuss my application of Bourdieu’s concept of “social capital” and attempt to operationalise Putman’s categories of “bridging” and “bonding”, both of which I then interweave into my analysis. In Chapter 5, my engagement with data exposed different issues that the participants discussed on Facebook as well as various strategies to maintain relationships, as presented in Chapter 6. This means that the identification of themes and categories was an inductive process, as they emerged from the data, and a deductive process, as some were imposed to some extent to frame the analysis (Dye et al., 2000).

An initial Facebook profile analysis was carried out after consent was obtained and following the first interview. I looked at all sections of the participants’ profiles: the public face (username and profile picture) and the way it was managed; the “about” information on each participant’s profile (work, educational status and history, residence, a statement that expresses something about the user, basic information such as age, gender, relationships interested in, relationship status and religious views, the e-mail address, IM screen name, mobile/phone number, if provided as contact information, and favourite quote), and the content of the profile. I also looked at the participants’ list of friends, and favourites, such as music, videos, photos, books, and groups. A particular focus of my analysis was on their dynamic activities, and mainly those which appear on their profiles’ front page and bulletin boards (their walls). I excluded the audiences’

17 “Audience management” is when the participants control access to their profiles, police their audience’s activities, and manage their impressions, whereas “profile management” means managing the information and the content of the profile.
individual activities on participants’ walls; the only thing about audience that I took into consideration was their commentary on participants’ posts, as this is interwoven with the participants’ self-presentation and online behaviour. This was done for research purposes, as my research is on self-presentation and not on other activities by the audience, as mentioned in the previous chapter, as well as for ethical issues. I analysed all of the above information manually.

For all of the above, a constant comparative method of analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) was adopted. In this study, the constant comparative method involved “constant data monitoring”: “(a) comparing collected data with incoming data being coded into categories to elucidate the properties of categories; (b) integrating categories and their properties to identify patterns” (Powers and Knapp, 2010:28). Subsequent interviews, which were conducted at the end of the study, were also analysed in light of the first interviews and linked to the understanding of the data generated from them as well as to the insights gleaned from online data and interviews.

As with the interviews, I approached my participants’ online posts and expressions as texts that generate meaning with regard to participants’ identities, culture, and audience (McKee, 2003). Regarding my considering as text all online data, including text, audio posts, and images, McKee (2003:4) argued that “the word ‘text’ has post-structuralist implications about the production of meaning” and could refer to a book, a TV programme, film, magazine, T-shirt, or anything that anyone derives meaning from. Textual analysis, therefore, “is a way for researchers to gather information about how other human beings make sense of the world” (McKee, 2003, 1). As Mckee indicated, this method is adopted by researchers “who want to understand the way in which members of various cultures and subcultures make sense of who they are and how they fit into the world in which they live” (ibid, p:1). That is why, based on the epistemological concern of this research and the definition of text above, the textual analysis approach was used. This technique illuminated how Saudi women use the Facebook website and make sense of themselves and the world around them. Such an approach is also consistent with the goals of discourse analysis in looking at the context of a discourse, but not at the relationship between the discourse and the society or vice versa, nor how it is ideologically shaped by the elite or by power, which defines critical discourse analysis (Lahlali, 2011:119-120).
Online textual analysis in this study was concerned with the written language, the selection of word(s) for the text, the intended meaning of the text as a whole or of its textual components, and the tone used within the text. On various occasions, one post in particular or a group of posts, across all participants or only a certain one, or those that have the same voice and context, or perhaps an established dialogue (in the form of written posts and comments from friends on the Facebook wall) could be used to demonstrate or illustrate a certain theme. I also looked at the texts and the context in which they were written, and, in some instances I looked at the date of the text posted and how it might be significant in observing participants’ activities on the site in relation to offline events, i.e. how participants responded to particular offline events on their profiles and for how long they continued posting about the topic (see Chapter 5). Despite including some dialogues as extracts in my online analysis, I have not focused on the structure of the sentences, their grammar, or on the repetition of the words (as a discourse analysis study does, e.g. Mitra, 2009) but rather on the meaning the participants generate from their engagement with the site and their activities utilising its affordances. That is what constitute textual analysis in this study.

3.7 The Position of the Researcher

Being Saudi and female positions me as an “insider” researcher (Murchison, 2010). However, the distinction between insider and outsider is not fixed, and taking on the role of researcher involves a distancing that can place the researcher in an uncomfortably liminal position. As Dwyer and Buckle (2009) argue:

There are complexities inherent in occupying the space between [insider and outsider]… We may be closer to the insider position or closer to the outsider position, but because our perspective is shaped by our position as a researcher, we cannot fully occupy one or the other of those positions (pp: 60-61).

There are both advantages and disadvantages to being positioned as an insider in this study. Already being part of the culture, there was no need to establish a basic knowledge about it; I already have an “emic” understanding of Saudi culture and an awareness of the “principles that represent and account for the way in which [the
researched domain] is organised or structured in the mental life of that informant” (Harris, 1976:331). My position also gave me access to my participants’ online and offline lives in a way that other researchers (males or foreigners) would have been denied. I was able to avoid the limitations on data collection that Al-Saggaf (2011) faced (being refused access to the personal profiles of most of his participants, and carrying out formal meetings in public areas). Soraya (1994), who studied domestic relationships between men and women in Saudi families, said:

> In the case of the study of domestic relations in Arab society, such paradigms [A sociological myth] are the consequences of the limited access of male ethnographers to relevant data. I believe that under these conditions, only female researchers can possibly have easy access to the data needed. More specifically, I would argue that female indigenous researchers will have a particular advantage in this aspect, although I am prepared to admit the possibility that a foreign female anthropologist might […] But this would be at the expense of spending much time in the effort (p:66).

Being a “female indigenous researcher” eased many aspects of this study. I was granted access to participants’ domestic and private settings and their personal profiles. I gained the trust of the participants and was able to collect data about their private relationships (with husbands and members of the opposite sex). Williams and Heikes (1993:287) argued that “the shared and developed understanding between the interviewer and the participant is gendered in which the same-sex assume they have gone through similar experiences”, which might explain why these women were willing to share such intimate knowledge with me. Besides, having friends and relatives who ‘mediated’ also helped in terms of trust.

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18 Female scholars have faced similar restrictions: in her ethnographic study of Saudi Arabia, Soraya noted that she was unable to have as much contact with male participants of the same age as her as she had with the women (Soraya, 1994).
Nevertheless, my status as an insider negatively affected some aspects of the research. Reflecting on the interviews, I felt that I had narrowed some of my questioning because of my familiarity with the culture, thus unnaturally limiting the interaction, which might have been more open if the questions were posed more generally (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009:60). For example, I asked ND, “Do you have any restrictions in using the Internet from your husband, for example?” and ND replied, “For sure, no”. Here, I asked the participants if their husbands imposed any constraints on their Facebook use instead of formulating the question more openly by not specifying the suspected source of the restriction. Here an outsider might have kept the question more open.

Being part of the culture may also have caused me to overlook certain details that I have learnt to take for granted, which an outsider might have noticed. I also faced the expectation of participants that I would inherently understand their experience or the meaning of their words without explanation. For example, they sometimes said “you know what I mean” or “you know”, expecting me to answer “yes” without further clarification from them (e.g. EL). At such times, I would respond by asking them to explain, saying: “what do you mean by that”, “describe what you mean, please”, or by giving them an explanation as an opinion for them to agree or disagree with regarding what they were trying to convey. As Williams and Heikes (1993:289) maintained above, that “the process of constructing a shared understanding during the interview is itself ‘gendered’”, I would further argue that coming from a shared culture, as well as being of the same gender, is also significant where a mutual understanding of general cultural norms and traditions is extended to include the understanding of rules, boundaries, and expectations. I felt I should lay out these negative aspects and challenges which I have tried to manage in order not to put my research at risk of bias.

In order to try and avoid these issues, I tried to distance myself as an insider for the purpose of analysis and in the analysis chapters that follow. I intentionally attempted to position myself as an outsider when talking about a participant’s culture, society, or social norms by referring to these aspects as “their” culture, “their” social norms or “their” country. By using “they”, “them”, and “their” instead of “we”, “us” or “our”, I distinguished my position from that of the participant and avoid giving the impression of fully understanding the culture and society. I also dealt with this issue during interviews
by asking extended questions to those participants who assumed my understanding, as mentioned above.

My development as a researcher in influencing the meaning of the texts, actions, or behaviours from an “insider” perspective also helped to create the distance needed when analysing online data. Although this was challenging at times during the first stage of textual analysis, it was, I hope, eventually accomplished with the help of different outsiders’ views (i.e. those of my supervisors). I would, for example, go beyond the meaning of an extract and explain the participants’ potential intention in saying something. With their help, I distanced myself from the data and focused on how the participants were constructing their identities, notwithstanding what I might infer or understand about the norms and culture. However, Edwards, Ashmore and Potter (1995) argued that, from a psychological perspective, it is impossible to completely suspend the self from one’s own culture and completely avoid the influence of the researcher on the analysis, whether by judging, criticising or getting involved in discussion (cited in Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). Based on that, it could be said that there is an acceptable level of insider contribution to the analysis that is not detrimental. Although being an insider might be positive as well as constitute a limitation, it gave me the opportunity to reveal aspects that would not have been revealed if the researcher was a male or an outsider female.

### 3.8 Ethical Issues

Ethical consideration was part of the design of this study, with the project receiving ethics approval from both the University of Leicester in UK and of King Abdul Aziz University in Saudi Arabia. While planning my project I gave particular thought to issues of access and informed consent. I was also aware that ethical issues might unexpectedly arise during the study. This meant that ethical issues were not just considered in planning my research, but were an ongoing concern throughout the research process.

Prior to my first visit, participants were informed of the purpose and the aim of the study in addition to the benefits and risks. They were provided with information about the duration of the interview and the observation period, the fact that the interviews would be recorded, and how their anonymity would be protected in the collection of data.
and in the writing up of the research. Miller and Bell (2012:69) suggested that in longitudinal studies, “access [...] needs to be renegotiated prior to each interview.” Therefore, I obtained written consent for the first interviews and oral consent for the second ones to make sure that the participant was still willing to continue participating in the study and that this would not cause them any problems (see below). I also stated that their participation was voluntarily and they always had the option not to continue the interview or participate in this research; I stated that anyone could withdraw at any time if they felt the need to do so. Although I anticipated that some participants might be unwilling to formally sign a paper copy of the consent form, this was not the case. All participants gave permission for the interviews to be recorded, although I noted that the younger participants and the more educated ones were less hesitant about being recorded than those who were older and less educated.

Some unexpected issues did arise during the conduct of the research: during one of the interviews, for instance, a participant stated that my visit had created a problem for her because her husband is so strict. To insure that my research did not cause any harm to come to her, I immediately asked her if my visit would cause any further problems, reminding her that she could of course withdraw at any time. She stated that this had no relation to me personally or to the interview and declared that this is her husband’s normal behaviour in every aspect of her life and she coped with that by ignoring his actions. From her statement and the fact that her second interview was arranged smoothly, I felt confident that no harm came to her because of my project.

Whilst dealing with ethical issues relating to my face-to-face interactions with my primary participants proved relatively straightforward, the online observation of their Facebook profiles introduced other important ethical issues. Recent research controversies have drawn attention to the ethical complexities of Facebook research (as seen in recent news reports of unannounced Facebook “experiments” (Arthurd, 2014)). Zimmer (2010) has argued that in approaching Facebook research, particular attention need to be paid to issues of consent, anonymity, and the managing of users’ expectations of privacy. Whilst I had consent from my participants, an important issue related to this

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19 In order to ensure the anonymity of participants during the process of translation, names (of friends, husbands and groups, etc.) were omitted from the transcripts, and replaced with X, Y, or other letters. It was also made clear to participants that I would not be using personal photos from their profiles in the thesis – images that might reveal their identities.
for my project concerns my observation of comments by participants’ friends, who might not have been aware of my presence on the site. Whilst it is not a stretch to regard comments published on Facebook posts as being intended and even desired to be seen by people across the friend’s network, these “secondary” participants might not have expected to be the focus of academic study.

In order to minimise any potential harm to these individuals throughout the study I have focused on my primary participants, limiting the amount of data that I present relating to their friends. These friends are discussed in general terms, and I have not provided any personal information about them. Where the thesis contains examples of interactions between my participants and their Facebook friends, I have not gone beyond their comments within specific interactions. The translation of most of these comments from Arabic to English also reduced the risk of the research practices being perceived as unethical. I have also been sensitive in determining the extent to which friends’ data (comments) could be used in the study, taking into account my participants’ cultural norms of behaviour. Such an idea was also put forward by Garcia, et a. (2009), who argued that “[researchers] can increase their chances of making the right choice about how to gain access to archived data and online data by learning the norms of behaviour in a specific environment they are studying” (p. 75).

Whilst taking into account these issues, my study also raised distinctive ethical concerns in respect of collecting and using Facebook data. One such ethical issue that is important to acknowledge is that the nature of data in some aspects of this study is sensitive, as in Chapter 5, where my participants talk about political issues. As I indicated in Chapter 1, dealing with such a topic as a researcher or as a citizen (participants’ side) is sensitive due to restrictions imposed on freedom of speech. As a researcher, I was cautious from the beginning of this research to avoid such issue so as not to put my participants or myself in harm’s way. However, during the analysis, I did not, in fact, find in my data any information that would potentially be harmful for them to share or for me to disclose as a researcher. Their contributions were broad and the opinions they voiced on political news or issues that were presented on local Television stayed away from specific posts or comments about more sensitive topics (such as any criticism of Saudi law, government, or politics). Therefore I believe that rather than being risky, presenting issues such as the ones discussed in Chapter 5 rather shows a positive aspect of Facebook use which is that it provides a platform for the participants to air their
concerns about some Arab and Muslims news. Another sensitive issue is the cross-gender relationships established anonymously by some of the participants, as indicated in Chapters 4-6. Similar to political engagements, the relationships were either formal or for fun. Although it might be considered unacceptable to many people in Saudi society, the participants did not show any concern about revealing such information in this study, and neither do I.

Ethical issues might also be raised concerning how my own knowledge of Saudi culture might have influenced the people who are being observed offline, or restricted my understanding of their interviews and interactions, as discussed previously. With this in mind, I attempted to position myself as an outsider, distancing myself from thinking about what I know culturally, and encouraging the participants to explain what they meant by their words. The differences in behavioural norms among the participants, as indicated in Chapter 1 (see also Shami, 1994), also helped distance me from the participants and revealed the need for me to develop an understanding of each participant’s culture. Distancing myself from being an insider and the acceptance of harmless, limited contributions to the data were solutions.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter described the mixed qualitative methods used in this study and highlighted the significance of their use. The chapter explained the design of the study, the procedure and the limitations, as well as the difficulties of the selected methods. In addition, it addressed the positive and negative aspects of being an insider and addressed the relevant ethical issues. This chapter demonstrated the usefulness of integrated qualitative methods, which here comprise techniques that give a comprehensive and complementary approach to women’s use of Facebook in the Saudi context. The significance of using them together in order to cover the deficiencies of each alone was also explained.

As I described in the introduction to this chapter, in designing this project I was hoping to collect rich data through a combination of methods that involved moving across online and offline spaces in order to give me a rounded sense of my participants’ lives and the place of Facebook within them. The move back and forth between online and offline during the study enabled me to avoid the bias of relying solely on one particular
method. It also made it easier for me to consider the extent to which the impressions that participants gave off in offline settings matched my sense of their online practices. For example, when AY invited me to meet her brother during my visit, I got the sense that she was less conservative than some of my other participants (a mixed-gender environment is unacceptable to many in Saudi society, and separation is normally understood as part of the traditions and norms). There was consistency here between her openness to mixed-gendered interactions and the fact that she posts images of herself without a headscarf on her profile and has male friends who are not relatives (students) in her online network.

The third phase of interviews after a period of online observation allowed the movement back to offline settings to gather more data that would provide additional information about the activities that had been observed online, in addition to those that were not visible to me online, but which the informants were practicing, such as surfing others’ profiles and chatting. The online interviews through Facebook messages also created a closer relationship between me and some of the participants and clarified certain aspects observed online. Seeing the connection between what was observed and experienced both offline and online, and what the interviews revealed, gave meaning to the broader context, in line with Hine (2015), who argues that moving across different channels allows Internet researchers to overcome the challenges they face and enables them to explore how events in one place are made meaningful in another. In the analysis chapters that follow, I attempt to draw connections between what participants reported on their strategies of self-presentation and the identity construction that I observed online. In addition, I discuss how the disclosure of the self is, to some extent, informed by the offline culture.
CHAPTER 4: THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY ON FACEBOOK

“Goffman’s world is a brutal world where face-work (the avoidance of embarrassment and discreditation and the maintenance of a credible front) can be seen as an arena of contest and combat, not just acceptance and mutual consideration.”

Hancock and Garner (2009: 120)

4.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses the first of my three research questions, by exploring how participants construct their online identities on their Facebook profiles. Drawing on Goffman’s work *Self-Presentation and Impression Management* (1959), the chapter examines the social nature of online identity construction, focusing particularly on the relationship between the performers and their audience and the strategies by which participants try to convey desirable impressions whilst avoiding “minor accidents” and “unmeant gestures” (Goffman, 1959: 60). Existing literature on self-presentation in social media has suggested that people construct and manage the self and that in some contexts (such as online dating; see Ellison et al., 2006a; Manago et al., 2008, Siibak, 2009 and Yuechisin et al., 2005) participants are hyper aware in their efforts to present an ideal, desirable identity. Participants’ construction of self in my study is ‘strategic’ in a general sense, in line with the above studies. However, my project is distinctive as it is looking at the creation and self-regulation of identities in a context where participants are not just being strategic in the construction of their profiles and audiences as a social nicety but also as a necessity due to cultural norms and expectations that impose particularly tight restrictions on aspects of their online actions. As the chapter will demonstrate, participants explicitly acknowledge this dimension of their Facebook use and the attention that they give both to their online actions and the defensive moves within these. In exploring these moves both in online data and in their accounts of their identity practices, the chapter can therefore be seen to consider the extent to which
Facebook is, for my participants, “an arena of contest and combat”. As I will suggest, the nature of the environment and the surveillance, self-regulation, and self-monitoring that goes on within this context places further complexity to Goffman’s notion of self-presentation and impression management.

The chapter is organised into four sections, which look at different empirical activities. I will begin with the activity of building a profile. Here I am looking at how, in setting up profiles, participants negotiate the different expressive resources that Facebook provides (profile images, naming, and personal information). This section examines what my participants’ profiles (the face) look like and suggests that these profiles are not stable but instead constant works in progress. I then move to the participants’ activity of constructing an audience and consider what might be termed ‘audience work’: the openness of profiles, and strategies that participants use for creating and managing their Facebook audience(s). Here I make a distinction between privately open profiles and privately closed profiles and look at the management of audience in both. I then shift my empirical focus to how participants strategically present the self, how they want to be seen and recognised, and how they work to convey this ideal sense of self. The chapter ends by considering the role of judgement (of self and others) in my participants’ Facebook use. Here I extend work on imagined audience in social media (for example, Marwick’s and boyd’s (2010) work on Twitter and Farquhar’s (2009) work on Facebook) by relating my participants online actions to other contexts in which surveillance by friends and authorities play a role. The first two sections of the chapter might be considered as concerning the setting up and managing the ‘stage’ while the second half focuses on the ‘front’: the (desired) nature of the performance itself and how this is informed by both notions of (idealised) self (how ideal self is interpreted concerning Saudi culture and gender) and the other of the actual/imagined audience.

4.2 THE PRESENTATION OF SELF: A SOCIAL ACTIVITY

As discussed in Chapter 2, Goffman’s (1959) work on self-presentation and impression management draws attention to the efforts of performers to manage their settings, their appearance, their words, and their audience’s impressions in order to so convey a particular image of themselves to this audience. This emphasises the social nature of identity construction and places attention on the way that the audience informs
specific performances of self. A useful distinction between given and given off expressions is made in this work. Given expressions are the controlled and managed information/content that Goffman suggests are intentionally delivered as messages to the audience and indicative of the way the performer wants to be perceived while given off expressions are those messages that are less controlled and might be delivered to the audience unintentionally. Before turning to my data I want to think about this distinction and the idea of controlling the expectations of ‘audiences’ in relation to online environments like Facebook.

While Goffman was considering offline situations, the distinction between given/given off expressions has been recruited by researchers interested in the use of impression management in online environments. Most scholars agree on what constitute given expressions online but interpret the given off differently. For Strano (2008: 2), given expressions are “like that which might be offered on a Facebook user’s ‘info’ page, whereas given off expressions refer to ‘implicit expressions given off through visual appearance’”. Here, as for other scholars (Siibk, 2010; Strano and Queen, 2012), the focus is on the image and use of photographs on social media sites as the source of potential ‘leakage’ of unanticipated and unwanted expression. Others have similarly emphasised the precarious nature of language use (such as the way that tone and language might identify authors’ gender in online communication, (Donath, 1999; Ellison et al, 2006a). In contrast, Dijck (2013) configures this distinction in a notably different way, defining given expressions as Facebook users’ own profiles and given off as the activities on the profile of which the user is unaware; those that are transformed into algorithms and monitored by the owners of the platforms for advertising and marketing goals. Despite these differences, what is common to many of these studies is the existence of the leakage of given off expressions and users’ efforts are to avoid this. Studies such as Strano and Queen (2012) and Ellison et al. (2006a) have emphasised the efforts made by social media users to control given off cues. Strano and Queen (2012), for example, argue that Facebook users tend to avoid posting content that may harm their images and also seek to control content posted by others by deleting, untagging, or asking friends to remove it from the Internet. In their study of online dating, Ellison et al. (2006a) highlight the importance of small given off cues, such as spelling mistakes, date last active on the
site, and mention of sexuality, and how these are carefully controlled by users in order to receive the desired assessment from the audience. 20

Controlling these cues is made perhaps more difficult in social media than in the offline spaces that Goffman was interested in due to what Marwick and boyd (2010: 114) have termed “context collapse” – the fact that Internet users often address multiple audiences simultaneously. Here the audience emerges as something that is imagined by users. Marwick and boyd argue that Twitter users disclose and conceal information based on who they imagine is viewing their tweets. This imagining of audiences is based on the culture, identity, and interests of followers, who are monitored by users through their tweets and feedbacks. Other techniques have also been identified by which multiple audiences might be managed by users: granting/denying access (see Lang, 2008, on YouTube); redefine the self (see Duguay, 2014); using multiple identities or accounts to target different audiences (Dijck, 2013); and addressing multiple audiences through a single account (see Marwick and boyd, 2010). Duguay (2014) extended Marwick and boyd’s study to discuss how the context collapse of audience on Facebook causes users to intentionally redefine their identity across different audiences and to manage self-presentation using tactics such as audience segregation.

In this study I define the given as the content of profiles, the photos/images/words disclosed by participants to create their front. The given off expressions are those that leak unintentionally from this content and might generate a negative or unpleasant impression that contradicts their desired front. This distinction is useful as it provides a way of framing my participants’ awareness of their presence and their audience; it enables me to distinguish between the different expressive resources the participants recruit and the strategies they apply to manage both given expressions and the impressions that given off expressions might convey. My analysis suggests that my participants attempt to control both types of expression and that they explicitly focus on minimising given off expressions. It extends the literature cited above by examining the ‘defensive practices’ (Goffman, 1959: 24) that my participants engage in in their use of

20 Not all studies emphasise the role of the audience in shaping online identity. Brake (2009:3) documents “unanticipated lack of engagement with audiences” in the construction of identity by web bloggers. His study suggests that bloggers avoid thinking about their audience as this might hinder the joy while practicing their activities on the blog. They also ignore whether the audience might regard the information they reveal on the blog as sensitive.
Facebook: the way that they omit and attempt to conceal socially unacceptable behaviour/activities whilst emphasising other aspects of the self in a process of ‘mystification’ that surrounds many performances (Goffman, 1959: 74). Throughout, my consideration is how these practices are informed by a sense of audience that is both ‘real’ and imagined. Goffman’s earlier dramaturgical work which focused on the staging of identity provides a workable theoretical framework to assemble these issues but the nature of online and offline environments that my participants inhabit adds further complexity to the issues of self-presentation, and management of audience. This complexity arises from the absence of a physically co-present audience but also the cultural norms that overshadow participants’ self-presentation activity; as my analysis will suggest these can be seen to heighten the need to maintain “face”. The analysis presented in this chapter looks at the strategies women deploy in order to manage impressions and protect themselves, but also how, in the interview accounts, they also convey the sense of their face-work as work on the site (its aims and how it is regulated by self/other). The analysis also looks at the variation of the construction of the self across online and offline spaces and draw attention to different aspects of this construction and efforts to control it as well as the precarious nature of this work. In doing so it considers how users manage “tensions between public and private, insider and outsider, and frontstage and backstage” (Marwick and boyd, 2010, 130).

4.3 Building a Profile

A key issue explored in this section relates to the different ways that participants assert control over their online profiles. When setting the ‘stage’ (the Facebook profile), participants are very careful about controlling their public presence, managing their

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21 This study add complexity to his 1959 work on self-presentation and impression management. It is worth mentioning that Goffman also looked at different contexts later on that are more complex than his earlier work. For example, Goffman’s essay “On the Characteristics of Total institutions”, published in 1961 in Asylums, considered a different and complex context, specifically, a residential community (inmates) in a hospital (i.e. a single space where all of their activities occurred) who interacted with a large group of others under the “bureaucratic rules” of the staff that regulated, controlled, and challenged those inmates. This led them to instate and redefine their identities after feeling the loss of their social identities which they had possessed at home before they joined this environment.

22 It is worth noting that one of my participants (RM) relied on her sister to make independent decisions when setting up the profile. Her sister has control over her profile as she lacked basic Internet skills. Her sister was responsible for creating her profile, inserting and altering the information, and accepting friends on her behalf. Her sister has her profile password, manages her account, and uses it to play games.
networks (who is accepted into the network and who is not), managing their audience’s access (who is allowed to view the content and who is restricted), and policing their audience (for example, deleting contacts or hiding their shares). All of these activities are behaviours that indicate participants’ awareness of the audience. In this section, my focus is on the decisions made in constructing their profiles.

I start by thinking about the naming of the profiles. First, it is crucial to mention my approach in defining these constructed profiles and the choices of naming by my participants in accordance with the constructionist approach I adopt in this thesis. In Chapter 2, I looked at studies that assert the presentation of the self on Facebook is in some sense ‘real’, referring to it as ‘accurate’ personalities. In this thesis, I move away from the notion of real/false identities and focus on the construction of the identity; this construction involves choices regarding the naming of profiles as well as the extent to which these can be connected to my participants’ offline identities. Gatson (2011: 232) examines self-naming practices online and discusses them with regard to the matching of online/offline identities and demonstrates that “In such contexts, self-presentation has the potential to be more explicitly multifaceted. At the same time, the converse may be [accurate], as people fight to keep their segmented places/selves”.

Looking at their practices it is possible to make a number of distinctions regarding different types of naming practices. First are profiles in which participants use their actual given names in order to be identified by others outside their network; for example, Rania Alsaggaf (my name). Second are the profiles in which the participants use pseudonyms. These pseudonyms take different forms: (1) a short name (initials or partly named) of their actual names, for example, Ran Alsaggaf, Rania Alsa or Ran Alsa, (2) a nickname such as “shining stars” or “the soft Pillow”, (3) a created name – any random selected name but not their names or related to these names (the chosen name here could coincidently and accidently match an existing actual name). Figure 4-1 shows that four of the ten participants use pseudonyms: two of the participants use nicknames (e.g. LY and HN) and two use shortened names (e.g. EL and AZ), while the other six used their ‘actual’ full names. These varied naming choices establish different levels of identification in relation to offline identities: whether they are identifiable (actual names), anonymous, or semi-anonymous (short names). When I asked LY whether she adds her old friends to her network, for instance, she explained that her friends would
never find her profile nor recognise it because she uses a nickname and her profile is represented anonymously to the public:

Yes, I do accept old friends but only if it is someone I know and trust… anyway, no one will recognise me by looking at my profile public face.

While HN commented:

…no one knows who I am; no name or age appears on my profile. They don’t know anything except that I am a female. They don’t even surely know whether I am a female, maybe a male.

A distinction can also be made here regarding whether these levels of identification relate to Facebook public audience, or to a closer circle of Facebook ‘friends.’ Two participants who had second profiles (BS and HN) used these to anonymise themselves from the public audience as well as from their Facebook friends; as I will describe later this enabled them to contradict the norms and expectations. The rest of the participants identified themselves to their Facebook “friends” as well as to the Facebook public audience, except EL and AZ, who used semi-anonymised profiles (with shortened names), and LY who anonymised herself by using a nickname.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th># of profiles</th>
<th>Nature of profile to Facebook public audience</th>
<th>Naming</th>
<th>Profile image</th>
<th>Nature of profile to Facebook “friends”</th>
<th>Information disclosed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BS</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>First profile: Identified</td>
<td>Actual name</td>
<td>Personal Photo (Static)</td>
<td>First profile: Identified</td>
<td>First Profile: All basic information-Blackberry (BS) pin number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Second profile: Anonymous</td>
<td>Pseudonym: Created name</td>
<td>Not personal (Static)</td>
<td>Second profile: Anonymous</td>
<td>Second profile: Nothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HN</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Both profiles: Anonymous</td>
<td>Both profiles use pseudonyms Nicknames</td>
<td>Not personal (Static)</td>
<td>First profile: Identified</td>
<td>First profile: All basic information except phone number and address</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Second profile: Anonymous</td>
<td>Second profile: Gender, living area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LY</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Anonymous</td>
<td>Pseudonym: Nickname</td>
<td>Not personal (Static)</td>
<td>Identified</td>
<td>All basic information except phone number and address</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EL</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Semi-anonymous</td>
<td>Pseudonym: Short name</td>
<td>Not personal (Static)</td>
<td>Identified</td>
<td>All basic information-phone number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AZ</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Semi-anonymous</td>
<td>Pseudonym: Short name</td>
<td>Not personal (Static)</td>
<td>Identified</td>
<td>Nothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AY</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Identified</td>
<td>Actual name</td>
<td>Personal photo (Changeable)</td>
<td>Identified</td>
<td>All basic information except phone number and address</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ND</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Identified</td>
<td>Actual name</td>
<td>Personal photo (Static)</td>
<td>Identified</td>
<td>All basic information except phone number and address</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RM</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Identified</td>
<td>Actual name</td>
<td>Not personal (Static)</td>
<td>Identified</td>
<td>All basic information except phone number and address</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HL</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Identified</td>
<td>Actual name</td>
<td>Not personal (Static)</td>
<td>Identified</td>
<td>All basic information except phone number and address</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HW</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Identified</td>
<td>Actual name</td>
<td>Not personal (Static)</td>
<td>Identified</td>
<td>All basic information except phone number and address</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 4-1** Participants’ public face and profile information
Participants also made different choices regarding their selection of profile pictures. Seven participants do not use personal photos as their profile pictures; rather, they selected images such as posters (friendship or personality statement, religious greetings, and those used in religious events), parts of the body (an image of an eye and eyebrow), their children or relatives’ photos, or no image (the default setting). Some also selected photographs that match their chosen nickname (e.g. LY) or a specific event (e.g. AY). For example, the nickname “shining star” matches a sky and stars profile picture and the death of a relative is marked by a profile picture of mourning. A number of participants also regularly changed their profile photos depending on their mood (e.g. AY) or life events (e.g. EL). For example, when EL got engaged she changed her profile picture to a photo of her engagement ring and flower. Thus, the use of images as a profile picture, among those who often change their profile photos, could be an online performance of the self or could reinforce an offline status/event. In line with this, Manago et al. (2008) argue that images disclosed on social network profiles are subject to change and might have a relation to an offline event. Others prefer to keep their offline life private and limit their self-presentation to the public; therefore, they rarely or never change their profile pictures.

As I suggested above, two participants - BS, a 19-year-old unmarried woman, and HN, a 46-year-old married woman - have more than one Facebook profile, and construct their identities differently on each profile. Their identities in their first profiles are identified to their Facebook ‘friends’ while in the second are anonymous. BS presents her ‘actual’ name and personal photo as her public profile picture in her first profile, while she uses a pseudonym (created name) with a cartoon image in the second. HN, who also has two profiles, presents her identified identity to her Facebook ‘friends’ on the first using a pseudonym (nickname) with a profile picture that matches that nickname (as in the shining star example), and presents a different nickname and image of an eye on her second anonymous account. (I will return to this use of multiple and anonymous profiles later in this chapter).

Controlling personal information was not limited to the design of profile images and usernames but also included variance in the personal information that participants share on their profiles (such as date of birth, education, and contact details (phone, address, and email)). As in the use of names and images, participants approached this in different ways. Most participants, apart from AZ, disclose all their basic information on
their identified profiles except for information they consider too private (such as their phone numbers and home addresses – only BS and EL shared this information). This was due to the nature of their profiles; private and open only to their friends. As shown in Fig. 4.1, in her anonymous profile BS limited the information shared, as did HN. An interesting issue arose relating to whether married participants named their husbands on the site. Of the seven married participants in the sample, five mention their marital status on their profile; of these, only four have added their husbands’ names and profiles. However, during the online observation period, two of the four participants (ND and HW) removed their husbands’ names and profiles after having disclosed them for a period, so that their profiles now only declared their marital status. When I queried this in the interviews they said this was due to a desire to protect their private information, i.e., they considered their husband’s name and profile to be part of their private life although they disclose other basic information about themselves on the profile front page. ND, for example, described how she had removed her husband’s name from her profile because she had many strangers on her network who should not know such private information about her: “I have 700 contacts; literally 50% of them I don’t know who they are”. However, HW explained that she had removed her husband’s name and profile from her page because she felt that some members of her audience had become overly interested in information relating to her husband, and this made her feel jealous. HW commented:

The girls [who are part of her Facebook network] are big noses. Since I got engaged they started saying we heard that you have been engaged to a handsome man… I don’t know those people very well… I don’t like this...

During the interview, she also explained to me how she concealed her husband’s name and profile. While pointing at her profile, she said:

Look, I have added here that I am married. My husband’s name just appears to me; ‘Married to’ status is disclosed to other contacts without his name.

The jealousy that HW alludes to has been described as part of the rituals of social networking sites (Mod, 2010), with scholars arguing that the features and design of such
sites may play a role in generating such feelings and might negatively affect romantic relationships (*ibid*). By removing their husbands’ names, ND considered Facebook as her public space that should not contain any private information and HW indicated a desire to limit the feeling of jealousy created by their audience concerning their marital relationships and this led them to protect their privacy by controlling related information.

### 4.4 Construction an Audience

I now move from constructing the profile and discussing the choices made by the participants concerning building their public faces and profiles’ front pages to how they construct their audience and the decision related to the viewing of the content of these profiles. This section focuses on decisions about granting access, segregating ‘friends’ access to different content, and restricting/deleting misbehaving contacts. I also distinguish between participants’ type of profiles. In looking at the handling of audience I look first at access and then how the audience, once accepted, is managed and policed.

#### 4.4.1 Giving Access

Alongside the choices they make about the content of their profiles, the day-to-day management of who has access to these is a key way the participants manage their ‘front’ self in the Facebook environment. Participants use different strategies to control their profiles. The offline interviews and analysis of the profiles indicate that the participants manage the visibility of their profiles and control the information/content revealed in different ways. They also vary in the extent to which they restrict their personal information from being viewed by their audience as well as in the level of concern they have about others viewing their personal information. Managing the participants’ audiences’ access to their profiles is typically a kind of control that entails allowing/not allowing an individual to be part of the network.

All the participants practice complete control over their profiles by setting their accounts to ‘private’. Within these ‘private’ profiles, decisions are made on who can be a Facebook ‘friend.’ As indicated in Chapter 2, this can be seen as participants blurring the distinction between public and private in line with West et al. (2009:615) (*I will return to this in Chapter 5*). Based on Landes’ (2003: 35) claim that the terms ‘private’ and
‘public’ could be interpreted as closed and open in ordinary speech, I use these terms to distinguish between two ways that participants manage access to their private profiles. First: those who open their private profiles to a wide (known and unknown) public audience (such as HN, ND, and RM), which I call *privately open profiles*. Second: those who limit access to their profiles to their private audience of family and friends (such as BS, LY, EL, AZ, AY, HL, and HW), which I call *privately closed profiles*. The latter group is comprised of those who restrict their profiles to well-known friends and perhaps people they know.

Managing the audiences starts by managing who can be a Facebook ‘friend’. The decision whether to add a contact to their profile is taken very seriously: HW, for example, described how she surfs a prospective contact’s profile looking at their photos to ensure that she can identify the person before accepting the request. If she does not recognise the person she only accepts those with at least 11 or more mutual friends. Unknown contacts emerged as a source of potential threat to those with *privately closed profiles* (e.g. BS, LY, EL, AZ, AY, HL, and HW) and participants’ greatest concern was adding strangers to their profiles. In contrast, for participants with *privately open profiles* (e.g. HN, ND) strangers’ online behaviour was their greatest concern. Here are some of the participants’ responses when I asked if they add strangers to their Facebook accounts:

**EL:** If I know the person, it’s OK [to add him/her to the network]. I sometimes talk about things on Facebook… no, no way [to add a stranger]… there are things I write and I don’t want anyone to view them.

**AY:** No, no way [would I add strangers]. I don’t want to have problems.

**HL:** I have to know who she is first. I don’t create new friendships though Facebook.

**HN:** I do add strangers who I don’t know. I add them but when I view any response that is not suitable, a comment for example, I immediately log in to the account, block this person, remove the like, and write a comment under his comment that this person has been blocked for his bad behaviour.
Such statements can be seen to contradict Cohen and Shade’s finding (2008) that the source of Facebook users’ concerns come from friends such as teachers, parents, government, and possible employers but not from strangers.

As the final quotation above suggests, giving/denying access to others is not the end of my participants’ audience-work on the site. Once a contact has been accepted, participants might impose different restrictions on what this contact can actually see: a process of ‘audience segregation’. In Goffman’s terms this relates to the efforts of the performer to “ensure [...] that those before whom he plays one of his parts will not be the same individuals before whom he plays a different part in another setting” (1959: 57). Here, and as indicated in Chapter 2, an extension of Goffman’s term of ‘audience segregation’ is needed in the context of Facebook. This is due to the complexity of managing multiple audiences within a specific context, as discussed previously. Therefore, it is notable that those who have *privately open profiles* placed greater emphasis on the management of their different audience both in terms of what they present and to whom (e.g. ND). Similarly, some other participants who have *privately closed profiles* also managed such multiplicity of audience in order to provide more control over the content of their profiles (e.g. AY, LY, HW, and EL). In so doing, participants use the technique of categorising their audience into identified/named groups to limit their access to certain personal information and shared posts, approaching this in different ways. For instance, ND established a group called “‘limited’ for her male co-workers who are limited from viewing certain shares. Another group called “‘not for pictures’” is for “‘friends’” that she prevents from viewing her shares/photos. After surfing a prospective contact’s profile in order to decide whether to accept her/his friend request, she then decides which group best suits her/him. Similarly, AY – a teacher – has a special group for her students and restricts them from viewing her personal photos. LY also segregates her audience by grouping those foreign strangers on her network whom she adds solely to support her while playing games and EL limits people she does not know very well from accessing and viewing her profile’s photos.

By controlling the audience on the network and sorting them into groups in this way, participants start managing how their audiences view their personal information, their posts, and their photos. In relation to the earlier discussion about online
identification, from the beginning, participants decided whether their posts and shares should be identified or anonymised by the Facebook ‘friends’. Those who chose to be identified by their Facebook ‘friends’ decided that their shares/posts should also be identified, while those with second Facebook profiles share anonymous posts within an open audience within their private domain. Lang (2008) has identified two types of users’ behaviour to manage the audience’s access to their content on the website YouTube: the first behaviour, in which the shared video is identified by the video maker while the content of the video is privately accessed by an identified audience (identified video to private audience), and the second behaviour, in which the shared video is anonymously published but available to a large audience (anonymised video to public audience). This behavioural distinction is similar to participants’ choice of audience accessing their shares and posts, which is mainly based on the visibility of their identities to the audience. The former behaviour seems to be used by all participants, since all shares/posts are within their profiles and identified by their private audience. Only one participant, HN, who has an anonymous *privately open profile*, used the latter behaviour by remaining anonymous to her audience (her audience cannot identify who she is), but her shares/posts are well known among her open audience (which also includes strangers) by her nickname.

In general, the level of concern among participants regarding others viewing their personal information and posts was presented as a motivator of their actions (strategies of friending and sub-division). Differences can be identified between the participants who have *privately open profiles* and those who have *privately closed profiles*. In relation to my above discussion about friending, among participants with widely open networks worries about content and personal information were voiced less by those with privately closed profiles who specifically restrict their profiles to a close/well-known audience. They described being more comfortable adding any post, photo, and personal information without any restrictions or hesitation. A key idea here was that because the audience ‘knows’ them better they would be less likely to misjudge them. Here is an example in which EL explains that she only accepts close friends to feel the comfort she desires when interacting and sharing:
… There are things I write and I don’t want just anyone to view them. So I don’t add just anybody on Facebook but only those close friends and people who I know very well because they will be able to view things [such as] photos and comments. I may also be annoyed and write a comment, and I don’t want anyone to know that I’m annoyed… I mean when I am annoyed and write a comment or a prayer, my contacts will ask ‘what’s wrong with you EL?’ and they will understand. So, I will not add anybody… only my friends, family, cousins, and so on.

Similarly, BS described herself as being more comfortable disclosing personal details about herself because her network is closed. When I asked BS if she adds her mobile phone on her front page, she replied, “Yes because all I have on my profile are my friends and family members”.

On the other hand, those who have opened their networks to strangers are more concerned about what is revealed about them, whether through the information they disclose or what image the audience might construct of them from their online actions. These participants impose more control over their profiles. Here, ND – a participant with a privately opened profile – voiced concern about what the information on her profile reveals:

… Because I opened [my Facebook account], I have a lot [of followers] who I don’t know. Definitely, I will not do what I simply do on my Blackberry, such as saying, ‘I am in this particular restaurant’, ‘I am eating with X person’, ‘I had lunch with my husband’, etc. I definitely will not do that on Facebook…

Whilst ND’s focus here could be seen to emphasise the risks of given expressions (focusing on statements that she might make), she also voices concerns about the given off impression that their Facebook activity might convey:

**ND:** Do you know that I don’t post anything bad about the university that my husband works at. I used to be careful when I posted about
politics because my dad used to get mad at me. If I wrote everything that comes across my mind, I would now be with those people, such as X and Y [people who have been convicted of illegal posts], ha ha ha [laughter], so I take care of my posts.

**R:** Do you mean that your dad is worried about you getting in trouble?

**ND:** Yes. I always keep this in my mind when I post. Now, for example, even if my husband did not ask me to stop writing about things, I think twice before I criticise the university he works at. Even though I have a lot to say against this university, I will not write it because, if I do, people will pick on me saying ‘your husband is working at that university’.

As participants’ concerns lead them to limit access to their shares and posts through the control of ‘friending’, sub-dividing their audience enables them to not place such great concern on disclosing their personal photos. ND, for example, who opened her account to strangers, has no concern about posting her personal photos since she is able to manage her audience’s access to these photos and albums. On the other hand, some of those with *privately closed profiles* either were comfortable posting personal photos exactly as their personal information by grouping their audience, as in the case of AY and EL, or were careful not to post any, even to their closed audience (e.g. HW). AY has a closed profile, i.e., including only family and friends (well-known and new offline friends, plus her students who she grouped as mentioned earlier) and although she had bad experiences in the past (to which I will return shortly), she stated that she was very comfortable posting her own photos as her profile picture. She said, “I post my photo everywhere, it doesn’t matter.”. HW, in contrast, ardently avoids disclosing any personal photos on her profile for fear of having them stolen or saved by any of her profile contacts (who are only well-known friends and family). In short, it seems that the wider the audience is the more cautious my participants are in managing their audience’s access to their personal content. This excludes those, like HW, who are not willing to disclose personal information/photos at all, regardless of the closeness or openness of their profiles.
4.4.2 Policing Audience Activity

As described above, once a contact has been accepted as a ‘friend’, participants set different limits on what they can access/view. Beyond this, they also engage in policing the contributions that these friends make to their pages and in some cases revoke their access to their pages. In examining how participants engage in this form of control over their audience in this section, I am going to look at a number of participants (HN, LY, AZ, and EL) who described different reasons for the deleting, blocking, and disciplining of friends.

HN described how she had blocked one stranger for writing silly mock comments on her wall and others for copying her writings and posting them under their names in different Facebook groups. She also described an event in which a contact had annoyed her by making a comment on her wall that implied (but did not explicitly state) that she might be in love or in an illicit romantic relationship (based on the Saudi context mentioned in Chapter 1, being in a romantic relationship without marriage is regarded as unacceptable behaviour). She said:

When he verbally attacked me, he did not declare [to the audience] that I am in a relationship or I am writing in love because I am suffering a romantic relationship. Instead, he attempted to convey that indirectly to my friends [through his comments].

Similarly, in a reaction to one of the contact’s behaviour, who is not so close, EL decided to delete a contact who posts culturally inappropriate content (including a picture of a partly naked girl) and uses some as her profile pictures. She explained the reasons for this:

23 Such as “are you awake?! What are you doing?! Why didn’t you go to your job?!?”
24 There are different categories when it comes to Arabic “writing”. Posts can befall in to informal writings, or highly poetic, or anything and in between, such as which is deeply thoughtful writing, which that may sometimes fall into the poetic category. The latter category is the one that I refer to throughout this study.
EL: ... [She] has photos which are over... Even her profile picture, for example, girls laying down\textsuperscript{25}... do you know.. it is too much ...and her comments are ... you know ... people are viewing my profile. She is free but if people view her photos through my profile .. you know...

R: Describe what you mean please.

EL: For example, it is OK for her to have a photo of someone who is wearing a bikini.

R: So it is not her photo, it is a poster?

E: Yes, not her. She chose it. And in my account, I have my aunties and old people.

R: So they would be saying ‘what is that?!’

EL: So, I deleted her.

Deleting this contact was presented as important because she has on her friend list some elderly contacts, such as her aunts, who have more traditional mentalities and adhere strictly to the norms of the culture and therefore might assess her negatively on account of her contacts. She further commented:

I don’t judge people as if they have something wrong. As I told you, the girl posts photos; she does whatever she wants, it is not my matter. I just want to draw limits and not to affect my other relationships, so I deleted her.

In these examples, HN and EL’s actions are attributed to the nature of the posting activity engaged in by others: in each case these might reflect badly on them, either directly (in the inferences being made about HN by an apparently male stranger) and indirectly (being friends with someone who posts indecent images). Their ‘preventive

\textsuperscript{25}There are some unacceptable behaviours that women should avoid in public, especially in the presence of men, and one of these which is laying down.
practice’ is to avoid damage to their own image (see also Strano et al. (2008)) on the policing of audience by untagging photos and deleting contacts to avoid damaging image of the self) or to prevent being misjudged by the audience. Accepting a friend whose behaviour opposes the norms of the society, might, for example, affect EL’s reputation in Saudi society (Al-Saggaf, 2004).

Others voiced more pragmatic and taste-based concerns about the *amount and quality* of activity that specific friends engaged in. Rather than blocking these contacts, participants limited their interactions with them in different ways. LY, for example, described how she had hidden the posts of a very active contact from her online behaviour. This contact posted over 50 times a day, which, as she described, prevents her from following others, so she chose to hide all of her posts and simply visit her wall when she felt she wanted to. Similarly, AZ deleted a friend who annoyed her with many posts and prevented her from enjoying her other friends’ interactions. A number of participants also noted that they regard the posting of detailed accounts of daily activities as ridiculous and annoying behaviour. Therefore, some participants, such as HW, limited their interactions with individuals who do this by commenting less on their profiles or limiting the ‘likes’ that they press on their posts.

Despite knowing that it is their right to delete unwanted audience members, others, such as ND, become annoyed when contacts display such behaviour, but still keep them on their networks because they are offline as well as online friends. One of the participants shared a particularly striking experience. AY described how, five years ago, one of her students stole her profile picture and opened a Facebook account that used her photo and name. The student added AY, his dad, some of his family members, and some other teachers at the same school in which she used to work. As AY stated in recounting this experience: “I was surprised, he impersonated my personality”. This experience of a stolen profile picture and creation of an imposter profile demonstrates the existence of fake accounts on Facebook (see Laurcen, 2009), an act that is called ‘identity clone’ in some studies (see Bhumiratana, 2011; Jin et al., 2011) and referred as ‘Sybil/bogus identities’ in others (see Wei Wei et al., 2012). AY later discovered his identity from other members with the same family name and she identified that he was “a kid”. She spoke to him sharply and asked him to delete the account or face consequences; he deleted it the same day. This, to her, was a bad experience rather than a privacy issue:
I don’t know how this kid was communicating with others [on this account]. He added many of the teachers at school, males and females, some who I don’t know and others who I worked with and already have them in my list. But when he communicated with teachers as if he was me, I have no idea what type of conversations or dialogues he would establish... this could be bad!

Yet, despite his unacceptable behaviour, she stated that she had kept him as a contact once he apologised because of his young age. Her role as a teacher seemed to play a part in this decision.

4.5 Self-Presentation, Self-Promotion and the Ideal Self

Until this point, I have focused on participants’ efforts to construct the ‘stage’ and control/manage their profiles and audiences: how they manage their profiles’ public presentation, who they allow to view the content or specific content on their profiles and who cannot, and who should and should not be part of their networks. In this section, I shift to focus on how participants construct their desired identities to different audience, promote the self, and how this is informed by both notions of (idealised) self and the other of the actual/imagined audience. Goffman argued:

[The performer] has as many different social selves as there are distinct groups of persons about whose opinion he cares. He generally shows a different side of himself to each of these different groups… We do not show ourselves to our own masters and employers as to our intimate friends.” (P: 57).

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26 This is a well-known quotation attributed to Goffman by William James.
Within this, I make a distinction between ‘presenting’ and ‘promoting’ the self. I also explore how participants exploit Facebook’s structure and features to idealise the self. I will then examine participants’ recruitment of different expressive resources to present the self in a desired way; this in turn raises issues regarding the way that they variant and fragment the self.

4.5.1 Presenting the Self: Multiple Roles

The examples in this section show participants’ attempts to construct their desirable identities in different ways. Participants tend to separate their public persona from their private self in an attempt to conceal parts of their offline identities. They also anonymise the self to practice online what is not acceptable offline. Studies on dating websites demonstrate how users conceal undesirable personal characteristics from their profiles/photos and portray qualities of the self that they intend to enhance and develop in an attempt to idealise the self in order to find their matching partner (Ellison et al., 2006). Similarly, but for different purpose, participants in this study conceal part of their identities based on the desired identity they want to construct online and to whom this identity is addressed.

The separation between the public (online) self and the private (offline) self is illustrated in ND’s construction of her Facebook identity. ND highlights her professional personality through the information, photo, and content disclosed in her profile and conceals her private life. She concealed her husband’s name and profile from her profile page (as previously described) as she decided that those parts should not be publicly revealed. Her interview account suggested a sense of splitting of self:

It [her Facebook profile] represents the outside picture of me. The closest people, friends, my family, husband, and sisters know another part of me that is not on Facebook. On Facebook is the public look that I want to represent to others… Facebook is not so personal to me… nothing private. You can see that I am only writing my thoughts, something I am thinking about, something about society, or an issue I want to raise, etc.
The extract demonstrates ND’s awareness of herself as context-dependent, where she represents different selves depending on the context. On Facebook, she represents a public ‘outside image of the self’ where the ‘private’ is hidden and seen by specific people offline. Different roles seem to be played in different contexts and to different audiences across the online and offline worlds. However, her presentation of a professionalised identity on Facebook (to which I will return shortly) shows a consistency between her (professional) offline and online identity.

AZ also described herself as playing roles based on the context and the audience; she is a doctor in the Sociology department at one of the universities and conversely has constructed an identity on her profile that is far removed from her professional identity at work:

… I have a different personality on Facebook: I write, joke, laugh, post songs, comment on each other… I don’t add any co-workers on my account except those who are close friends to me… and work with me. I have my own personality at work, which I don’t want to shake. My close friends know me so they reply with informal comments and I accept that from them, but in front of others I don’t show this personality. I treat close friends and family with an informal personality but not with co-workers. For example, my secretary wants me to add her but I didn’t. Many other secretaries in the Mmaagement department want to add me but I refused”.

AZ presents herself informally on Facebook in contrast to her professional offline role, which she limits to the work place. Unlike ND where there was a consistency in presenting the desired self between the online and offline worlds, the extract above suggests that AZ considers Facebook as a respite in which she separates her offline formal self and plays the informal desired role online.

As separating the public/online persona from the private/offline self is a strategy used to present the desirable self on Facebook, the use of anonymous profiles to conceal the self from specific audience provides another way of maintaining a desirable identity.
boyd (2008) attributes the desire to create anonymous profiles to wanting to escape from family, social, and legal policies imposed on teens that constrain them from real engagement in public life. In my data, the desire to establish correspondences with males on Facebook have played a major role in my two participants’ decisions to create multiple, anonymous profiles. The creation of multiple identities here emerges as a way of escaping the cultural restrictions imposed upon participants by close contact. For HN, the use of an anonymous profile allowed her to engage in creative acts (writing is a valued hobby for her) disproved of by her relatives and friends. It also provides an opportunity to talk with male contacts and an audience who appreciate and values her writings:

... In my first account, they [her friends] wanted me to always joke, always music [listen to their music posts and post music], and ha ha ha [she laughs], but I also have male contacts who are doctors and writers and I cannot always just ha ha ha [she laughs again]. I want to be presented in a proper way and reflect my personality.

HN described how she had been criticised by her husband and community for the profile she first created. This had profile included examples of her writing feedback from friends (including males) on work that explored culturally sensitive issues (for example, homosexuality) and the expression of feelings of love (in the form of poetry). Such activity was regarded as inappropriate behavior by her husband. Therefore, HN transferred all of her male friends to her anonymous Facebook account to prevent further judgement for overstepping the dominant values of an interaction order. By concealing herself, she attempted to maintain an idealised image of herself among her critics whilst not having to sacrifice her writing interests.

Like HN, the youngest participant BS uses a second anonymous Facebook profile to circumvent cultural norms and gender expectations surrounding cross-gender relationships. Unlike HN, however, who was the sole ‘author’ of her anonymous account, BS’s profile was created and maintained by more than one individual. BS created the account for herself and four other friends by choosing a created name for the profile and
a cartoon picture for her profile picture with no private information that might disclose their identities. The name and profile image chosen were continually changed depending on the circumstances, as BS stated in the interview. Any of the five friends could log in to the account and chat anonymously. Chatting on Facebook messenger to find the perfect match and to start an ordinary or romantic relationship is the only activity maintained on this profile, as reported in her second interview. Wirastuti (2012) and Farquhar (2009) demonstrate that such romantic/intimate relationships could be formed through Facebook interactions. As an example of establishing romantic relationships through Facebook, BS revealed that she is the only one who discloses her name to the male who she likes as a friend and started talking to, in contrast to the others who only use different created names when active on this profile.27

Whilst anonymous accounts provided a sense of escape from constraints, they were not without problems. During the first interview, RM describes the tensions of sustaining an anonymous profile. RM had created a second profile to express her political interests due to the interference of family and close friends but she deactivated the account, because writing under a pseudonym instead of her ‘actual’ full name gave her the feeling of not being herself:

I did not find myself in that account. I was like ‘no way, I cannot’. I felt like my opinions are not mine. I was like ‘no, I want the account under my name’ ha ha ha [laughter expression].

27 The first time they did so was when one of her friends disguised herself to discover whether her friend’s fiancé was loyal to their friend or not. Her friend entirely changed the information on the profile to meet the fiancé’s girlfriend’s expectations. As BS put it, “She was trying to lure him to see if he would accept talking to another girl or be loyal to my friend […] she sent him a poke and they kept sending each other messages. This took her a really long time but she was so patient. In the end, he took her number and they started talking on WhatsApp and BBM. By this time, he requested to meet her. So, her friend broke up with him. They found out that he is not loyal”.
The different constructed performances (roles) of identities described in these examples and the case of a shared profile used by multiple individuals challenge the notion that Facebook profiles represent coherent individual identities, as claimed by Dijck (2013), Farquhar (2009), and Zhao (2008). In addition, the desire to construct an identity without affecting the public image of the self (behaving inconsistently with the norms of the culture) has led a number of participants to do so anonymously. By apparently adhering, among their close audience, to the normative beliefs and values, they are representing an ideal version of themselves.

4.5.2 Promoting the Self

Some of my participants went beyond concealing aspects of their identities in order to conform to cultural norms by emphasising their use of Facebook to promote aspects of their selves. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Dijck (2013) has argued that Facebook allows users to promote themselves through the ‘Timeline’ feature to tell a story about the self and enable users to promote the self, while Marwick and boyd (2010) have suggested that self-presentation on Twitter be considered as a form of personal branding. In this study, I am interested in how my participants marked something special about the self to others through the process of self-presentation, aiming for this to be acknowledged or distinguished as something unique. Whilst self-presentation can be regarded as being led by the individual’s goal of influencing “perceptions of his/her image” (Dwyer, 2007:2) – focusing on how they are seen, the promotion of the self is the act in which participants show how skilful and talented they are through their self-presentation, that is, emphasising how they are recognised (Manago et al., 2008). Self-promoting then is an integral part of presenting the self but more focused in its goal orientation.

I am going to explore these strategies of self-promotion by looking at the profiles of two participants, ND and HN. In her profile, ND promotes herself by posting a link to her personal blog on her Facebook wall. This can be seen as an example of what Marwick and boyd (2010) call “self-conscious commodification” (119). In her first interview, she stated that she had intentionally posted a link to her blog on Facebook to

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28 This professional blog contains eight long articles that she had published previously in a well-known newspaper.
attract Facebook friends, as these exceed 700 and include people who she does not personally know. Through Facebook, the number of visitors to her blog has increased significantly, with Facebook viewers representing 80-85% of her blog visitors. During my online observation of her profile, she used this strategy (posting links to her blog on her Facebook wall) three times. She explained the reason for doing so in the second interview: “Because people are more around Facebook... They don’t visit the blog unless you send them a link”. Figure 4-2 below shows her posted link to her personal blog and support is shown from her friend in the form of a comment.

Figure 4-2 A post linking to the participant’s professional blog

HN promotes her writing talent though her anonymous profile, which encompasses 700 Facebook ‘friends’ who do not actually know who she is and are writers, journalists, doctors, and potters. Creating a professional writer account was well reasoned: “I was so eager to let others know what this has (pointing at her head) and deal with it”.

ND and HN use their Facebook profiles to present themselves as professional writers. ND promotes her writing skills through the announcement of her personal and professional blog on her wall, which allows friends to visit and recognise her skills. Similarly, HN promotes her writing talent among people who value such a skill. Their stated aim and concern here is not to solely be perceived by their audience but also to
have their proficiency and skills acknowledged and they attempt to promote themselves through their Facebook profiles. The idea that has led HN to create another profile to promote her talent reinforces the distinction I have adopted in this argument.

4.5.3 Conveying the ‘Ideal’ Self

Before looking at how the judgement of audiences (real and imagined) is experienced by my participants, here I explore the sense of ‘ideal self’ that participants emphasise in talking about their online activity and how the values they emphasise relate to notions of femininity and professional identity. Goffman (1959) observed a “tendency for performers to offer their observers an impression that is idealised in several different ways” (44). The analysis of the idealised expressions offered by the participants are different from those argued in previous literature presented in Chapter 2 (Ellison et al., 2006; Gibbs et al., 2006; Manago et al., 2008; Yuechisin et al., 2005). Studies of social dating networks have emphasised that users employ tactics to reflect the ideal self through their profiles (see Ellison, et al., 2006a; Manago et al., 2008; Yuechisin et al., 2005) and use photo selection to reflect the desirable ideal self (see Siibak, 2009). My analysis looks at idealised self in the way that is analogous to participants’ cultural and gender norms and by which audience expectations is shaped; it looks at how it is presented in respect to the Saudi context and the other of the actual and imagined audience. Here are some examples of different ways that participants sought to idealise the self in their profiles:

- Being ‘Professional’: As previously mentioned, ND exhibited several strategies to maintain a professional impression. For example, each element of her profile reinforces her construction of a professional identity: starting with the background photo of her profile (her profile photo is a photo of herself at work standing at the entrance where the logo is located; she is wearing her scarf and appears smart). The content of her profile promotes her writing blog that contains her newspaper articles. She discloses nothing about her private life on that profile. She raises issues about the basic principles of any healthy society and criticises the actions of individuals and segments of the society, in addition to voicing her thoughts and posting her writings about social issues, such as education (see
Chapter 5). All these aspects, which she emphasised on her profile, when put together, can be seen to convey a professional impression.

- Being ‘Well mannered’: All of my participants can be seen to behave respectfully and react politely to their audience’s comments. However, one of my participants, HN, emphasised the importance of behaving in a respectful way in her interactions with contacts on Facebook (especially male contacts). She described how when she receives a comment from her audience, she replies carefully and in a respectful way. During the first interview, she said, “I would show you my way of replying to men. I [set limits] in a very polite way.” For example, she responds in a reserved way to men compared to how she interacts with women. Her well-mannered behaviour was praised by some of her male contacts, and she became well known for it:

  **HN:** X, a journalist, through the inbox, was seeking a love relationship... He wrote to me, ‘after God, you were the woman I was looking for. This is the mentality I was looking for…’ I wrote replying, ‘I am a married woman and have children, but I cannot write this on my profile’.

  **R:** So he was attracted to your personality from your posts and comments?

  **HN:** Yes, from the posts and comments. He wrote to me, ‘you are a girl from this country. From your way, what you post, and how you comment, I know that you are a girl from this country. Either from (X city) or (Y city), there is no doubt. You are a respectable woman’.

According to Kapidzic and Herring (2011), this online style of behaviour could be considered a form of gender stereotyping: being polite and a good listener (reactive). ND here is emphasising the significance of this politeness for her sense of self online.

- Being a ‘Good Housewife’: EL and HN attempted to portray the good housewife image to their audience. EL, sometimes, posts some of her cooking achievements
and exchange recipes with her friends. Similarly, HN when she had the opportunity to represent a good housewife during Ramadan, when wives normally play a significant role at home preparing *iftar* (the meal to break the fast), she posted, for the first time, a private photo of her dining table full of food and a well-presented table in her professional profile (see Figure 4-3).

These examples illustrate the ways that certain values are assigned significance in the construction of identity and, in doing so, an aspect of the self is crystallised to the audience (Rosenberg and Egbert, 2011: 2).

### 4.6 Being Judged

In the final part of this chapter, I look at how participants configure the judgement of audiences in their accounts and how they present this as informing their use of the site. Farquhar (2009) has argued that performers on Facebook imagine their audience and anticipate their reactions to potential actions (performances) on their profiles and act accordingly; suggesting that this anticipation is mostly guided by general expectations and norms associated with the use of Facebook. In this study, when participants imagine their audience’s impressions and how they might judge them, the accounts demonstrate that the audience is felt in different ways – that some understanding of what the audience will think are imagined based on their own experiences/expectations and some are based...
on actual experiences of being criticised by contacts. In the former, the judgement is internalised; in the latter, it is presented as coming from the outside.

Regarding the internalised judgement, which is here a self-defined preventive corrective practice; participants expect that they may portray a bad image of themselves if their content contains any spelling mistakes. It is ‘good practice’ to write things correctly and so this presents the self in a better way. HW and LY, for example, imagine the audience judging their behaviour; as they want to present themselves perfectly on Facebook, they avoid any spelling mistakes that could affect their audiences’ judgements. LY described how if she made a spelling mistake, she would delete her post and rewrite it again if she had the chance to do so. HW described her fear of posting a status that contains any spelling mistakes in the following way:

**R:** Do you take time to post a status?

**HW:** You mean to think about it? A lot and I become afraid if it was posted… ha ha ha [laughter expression].

**R:** Ha ha ha, tell me about it?

**HW:** I am afraid that I write something wrong. I read twice. I don’t like to have spelling mistakes since I opened the account. I get mad if the spelling is wrong when I type an (n) instead of an (a) by mistake because I care what people say. Ha ha ha. And this is not a Blackberry where you can type a star and change it. A lot now have spelling mistakes so it has become normal now.

**R:** So you take your time, taking care of what people will say about you.

**HW:** Until now, if I write to someone “happy birthday” and want to write something after I concentrate so much when I write.

**R:** Is that because it can be viewed my many?

29 People’s reaction to their spelling mistakes when they chat is to write a star followed by the word spelled correctly, for example, *(the word written with the correct spelling).*
HW: Yes, around 500 people. But a lot know that this letter is written by mistake. It is obvious and a lot have letter mistakes, and not just me, so people know now.

R: But you still take your time?

HW: I love to do that; I like everything perfect. I take my time. A lot of people, half of their writings on Facebook are with spelling mistakes. My husband is one of them because he comments so fast and is so confident of himself, so you find two or more letter mistakes, but he doesn’t care.

This exchange suggests HW is less than confident when presenting herself online. Although she described this as producing ‘perfect’ content, her hesitation, the time she spends, and her fear demonstrate her care to protect her image amongst her audience. Another internalised judgement is based on participants’ values and how these values inform their own practice. Some participants imagine their audience’s given off impressions in the same way they form impressions of others and this consequently influences the given expressions they chose to present about themselves on the site. For example, HW regards the behaviour of those who write about their daily activities in detail on their walls as ‘ridiculous’ and suggested that posting about daily activities, such as travelling, is a form of showing off:

HW: … I still don’t like that much. I travelled to Malaysia a year ago and Egypt with my husband but I didn’t post anything. […] I feel like I am showing off and I don’t like to show off. […]

R: So you consider that to be showing off?

H: Yes, I do, exactly. I don’t like to do that. Some people do show off even in their training period at work. A girl, for example, wrote that she is at work, she is so important, and posted her office picture. I had very good jobs, for example, I worked at J Bank which is a good bank, then at P Company, which is a very good company, and a lot of people would like to work as a lawyer there, but I have never done this…
post or write that I am a lawyer [...] When I am still in the process I don’t like to post. I don’t know why. I know I am not supporting myself, I know it is wrong. But this is my personality. I don’t like to show off, I don’t know.

She then anticipated that her audience might think about her in the same way, saying, “as if I am new rich/upstart”; thus, she never posts anything about her daily activities, job positions, or even her travels.

The previous examples demonstrate participants’ attempts to manage their given off expressions to present proficiency based on personal expectations and personal evaluation. The following examples show participants managing their presence based on cultural expectations and rules. Because behaviours and activities on Facebook are influenced by the participants’ norms and culture, the fear some participants have of being misjudged by their online community has a role in shaping their Facebook use as well and shapes their imagination of being judged. They tend to show what is acceptable and not to accept what could be considered crossing the limits. Goffman (1959: 44) states that performance is “modified to fit into the understanding and the expectations of the society in which it is presented” and that by which the participants’ behaviour is shaped.

For my participants, the judgement of others, including an awareness of the surveillance gaze of authorities, can be seen to explicitly press upon their actions. The interview transcripts contain references to multiple incidents in which others have been judged online by their audience, with the suggestion that these cases have affected some participants’ use of Facebook. One participant (ND) stated that she had started to imagine the audience judging her online because this had become a frightening aspect of the society. She noted that she had started to take greater care when she posts something and that her posting time has increased significantly as well. Before, a specific kind of people was using Facebook but now all people do:

[...] “We can see what’s happening to people on Facebook and Twitter. Have you heard about X person? …People can talk about you and involve you in things you are not aware of …because they can access
your life through Facebook and Twitter …Do you know X person? I know him personally the topic [he writes about] doesn’t deserve that much attention and this person doesn’t deserve what happened to him”.

This case that ND indicated, regarding an individual who was paralysed for his online political contribution, led her to review all her posts in case she wrote something that might carry multiple meanings or hold a meaning for which she could be held accountable by the authorities (political or religious). Since online written comments (given expressions) could be subject to some monitoring by authorities in the Arab world (Al-Saggaf, 2006), she commented:

Do you know that I viewed my whole profile again and read all what I have written to make sure every sentence I have written does not carry multiple meanings or hold meaning that could be held against me. In fact, I didn’t find but I had this intention to change any word that might position me in a box, as is happening with some people. I will not allow anyone to put me in a box, I am not conservative or liberal or... I’m not any of those; I am just [her name]. And if anything on Facebook could be held against me, I will think many times before posting.

The above extract, suggests that self-regulation when presenting the self online is enabled by Facebook’s affordances (the ability to re-review published posts). ND’s imagining of a negative given off impression that her political messages might give led her to tightly control the written content on her Facebook profile to ensure that she was not misjudged on account of unintended gestures. This situation exemplifies another challenge to the performer (Goffman, 1959: 60) and, here, it might position her as a political contributor, an online action that might result in reprimand (Al-Saggaf, 2011). This type of interaction, according to Saudi rules, is not allowed to be practiced online or offline (ibid). These rules are the expectations that govern political interactions in Saudi society and unsuccessfully adhering to such expectations means breaking the ‘interaction order’ and would lead to negative judgement.
Similarly, HW gives great consideration to how others might judge her negatively if she added male contacts to her contact list, as interacting with men in a gender-segregated society is governed by restrictive social norms and regulations (Al-Saggaf, 2004). Based on these expectations, she defers to the pre-judgement of her audience and does not add male contacts to her Facebook account (except those who are relatives or considered as brothers – those who she was raised with because of the closeness of their families):

When I see my friends having a lot of males on their accounts, I wonder what has happened to them and why they have become loose [in accepting such relationships]. So, I don’t want anyone to think this way about me… no one will ever know that this person might be considered as my brother. Who will know?

However, she added a male friend because she imagined him judging her behaviour as impolite if she refused to accept him as a Facebook friend, as he would likely consider himself as a brother.

I added (M) and because he invited me I accepted his invitation. I got embarrassed not to accept. Imagine if I did not accept, this wouldn’t be a nice personality.

This behaviour illustrates this participant’s complex negotiation of cultural norms about gender on Facebook. The *unmeant gestures* that this male might have perceived from her behaviour and which might have been the reason for her feeling of embarrassment were avoided by HW accepting his request to join her network. By doing so, she is fostering the polite representation of herself, despite the tensions this provokes. I notice among the examples that the participants might see others’ actions, such as expressing political opinions, having male friends, or posting whatever photo they want to represent themselves, as unproblematic in their own right but they become
problematic due to cultural expectations and who is viewing them. Therefore, they have to manage their audience’s impression to foster their ideal self-presentation on the profile.

Thus far, I have been focusing on how participants imagine the response of a viewing audience to their posts. A number of participants described events in which their audience had passed judgement on their actions. These examples are connected to cultural expectations and rules forming the audience’s expectations about which behaviours are acceptable and which are not. BS, HN, RM, and AY had all been criticised by their audiences for online behaviour. BS experienced this when she first started using Facebook. She used to post whatever she did or whatever she thought about but she faced criticism from her friends, one of whom said, “What silly things you write […] why are you writing such silly things? […] Stop writing in this way.” This has increased her attention to the given and given off expressions on her profile. Therefore, she started altering her posting behaviour and carefully managed her posts so that they comprised only meaningful things such as music, videos about Islam, designers, and relationship posters. RM, as a participant interested in politics, and AY, who is interested in politics and religions, are further examples of participants who have been criticised and judged by their audience for becoming involved in such issues. In this regard, BS and ND have been also criticised for exceeding their audience’s cultural expectations. BS has received criticism from a family member for disclosing a personal photo without a headscarf as her profile picture and HN, as previously mentioned, was criticised for having many male contacts on her profile and establishing engagements on sensitive topics. Having male friends raised concern among many of ND’s female offline friends, who worried about their comments and shares being viewed by those male friends while establishing engagements on sensitive topics was not always welcomed by those friends and relatives who witness a different identity offline. This led her to stop posting such topics, to create a second anonymous profile, and to transfer all her male contacts to that profile.

Consequently, HN and BS, from being negatively misjudged, changed their online behaviour and managed self-presentation to avoid the stigmatised damaging image their practices that might be caused by contradicting expectations. On the other hand, AY demonstrates less care about the given off expressions that her activities might generate. During the period of online observation, AY once posted:
“WHO ARE YOU TO JUDGE ME???” (AY: 18 Nov)

**Friend 1:** God knows we aren't perfect: so let no one judge you

**Friend 2:** People judge and it sucks, just stay strong and ignore them... chances are they’re jealous of you anyway

**Friend 3:** Judge dread: D

**Friend 4:** “who are you to judge me
And the life that I live?
I know that I’m not perfect
And that I don’t claim to be.
So before you point your fingers,
Be sure your hands are clean”. BOB MARLEY - JUDGE NOT LYRICS

**AY:** Thank you for the nice words.

**Friend 5:** Seems [a bad word] did! Ask me! They’re a lot, & unfortunately ‘they appear everywhere’ he he he [laughter expression].

**Friend 6:** Supper [sic] like and in addition… Mind your own dam [sic] business.

The extract both implies AY’s friends’ support and emphasises that people are judgemental in her society: “they’re a lot, & unfortunately ‘they appear everywhere’”. This reinforces the actual negative judgment HN and BS experienced, described above. AY’s second interview also shows that she had been judged by some of her friends and family members; the focus here being her online political and religious activities:

Sometimes I don’t mind giving my opinion but some people don’t accept it and there is a taboo ‘don’t talk about religion ... don’t talk about nationality... don’t talk about origins .. ’ I don’t care. I mean, it doesn’t matter to me at all.
Although AY is less concerned about her *given off* expressions, as shown in the above example, the next two chapters will demonstrate this participant’s high level of control and management of the content of her interactions as well as her audience. This section demonstrates that the participants’ imagination of their audience has played a role on their self-presentation, particularly by leading them to control and regulate their given and given off expressions and protect their image from negative judgement. It demonstrates the way that judgement (both their own and others) and surveillance by friends and authorities play a key role in my participants’ Facebook use.

### 4.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I have examined the ‘strategic’ construction of users’ identities as well as their management of audiences. My description of the use of names and presentation of profile information provided an institute into how participants’ set the ‘stage’, and manage their *fronts* on Facebook. I have also examined the ‘audience-work’ that my participants engage in and how they are challenged by the collapse of multiple audiences that Facebook presents to its users. My analysis has emphasised the users’ awareness of their audience and highlighted the different forms to self-monitoring and control that they place over both their *given* and *given off* expressions on their Facebook profiles. In describing their online actions my participants reported both real and imagined judgements of their content and interactions, which led most of them to carefully manage their self-presentation and strategically use ‘defensive practices’. In this vein, Facebook could be seen as a goal-oriented space: participants focus on concealing or crystallising aspects of their self and are highly conscious and aware of their self presentation, knowing that their actions were likely to be scrutinized by their imagined audiences.

This chapter has also demonstrated participants’ awareness of the gaze of authorities on online activities. This demonstrates that – in this context - maintaining an appropriate face has heightened legal as well as cultural/gendered implications for these women. It also demonstrates other multiple regulations that are not stated directly but are based upon expectations regarding gender norms. This was shown particularly in the
number of dilemmas faced by the participants, for example, whether to add a ‘male’ friend or refer to their husband’s name or activities on their profiles. Despite all existing limitations that are related to gender/cultural norms, audience expectations, and the imagination of audience’s impressions that affect participants’ self-presentation in the ways I have described, Facebook emerges as a unique space for them to construct their selves and deflect various constraints that are imposed on them in real life.

My analysis has also suggested a more explicit gendering of behavior and identity on the site. Participants tend to address gender performances when using Facebook as a space which enables them to negotiate cultural norms and gender expectations. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Leurs and Ponzanesi (2011) argue how online space such as online instant messaging (IM) provides an opportunity for females (Moroccan-Dutch girls) to empower the self through identity expressions and negotiate issues related to their gender. My participants were similarly able to strategically construct their gendered identities through their use of Facebook and in doing so, expand their social life. At the same time, gender expectations hinder some from entirely achieving that and lead them to monitor, regulate, and control the self and audience. Although it seems that there is a great deal of fluidity in terms of the multiplicity of identities the participants reveal on their profile, but not in the way they are constrained by such norms. They all seem ‘conservative’ (I will return to this in Chapter 6) in building their profiles and managing their audience, and their online behaviour shows efforts to keep the image of the self consistent with the gender and cultural expectations. This, in turn, goes beyond Goffman’s relatively simpler dramaturgical approach, as participants use Facebook to present the self and interact with their absent, multiple audience. Thus, the relationship between the two online and offline worlds seems to overlap in some aspects while remaining distinct in others.

To my participants, Facebook therefore seems to be a ‘potentially brutal world’ but the strategies described in the chapter provide ways of succeeding within it, with anonymity appearing to provide a way of providing connection and forms of ‘free’ expression that is not possible otherwise. The strategies of managing and controlling audience are not confined to participants’ presentation of self to others but also informed the nature of their interactions with others; this idea is elaborated in the next chapter which examines their discussion of political and social issues.
CHAPTER 5: ONLINE DELIBERATION?

5.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on participants’ online engagement and examines the way participants address public/private audiences within their private domains. The chapter introduces existing work on online deliberation to answer the question whether the participants’ online interactions could be considered a form of online deliberation. It also draws on literature that has explored the production of cultural identity and ‘othering’ in online and offline forms of interaction to examine how participants use Facebook as a space for the discussion of political, religious, and social issues and to promote moral values.

boyd (2011:39) has argued that sites such as Facebook present possibilities for new forms of interaction and public space that distinguish them from traditional conceptions of the public sphere (e.g. Habermas’ public sphere model30). She referred to social networking sites as “networked publics” and maintained that they could be used not just for socialising but also for social, cultural, and civic activities and goals, and offer opportunities for engaging in what has been termed “online deliberation” (Albrecht, 2006; Coleman and Moss, 2012; Davies and Chandler, 2011; Halpern and Gibbs, 2013; Thorseth, 2011; Price, 2009; Price and Cappella, 2002; Wisniewski, 2013; Wright, 2012; and Lawrence, Sides and Farrel, 2010). In this study, I have adopted boyd’s perspective on social networking sites in considering Facebook a “networked publics” in which the discussion of political, religious, and social concerns becomes – for some users – a key part of how they construct identities (as in Chapter 4) and relationships (as in Chapter 6) and empower themselves. The participants have also shown that they use Facebook in ways that might be seen to extend boyd’s theory. They use their ‘private’ Facebook profiles publicly (as some content is exposed to strangers, and users ‘like’ Facebook pages and join Facebook groups, and thus, different opinions are gathered) as well as privately (for friends and family members, and by practicing privacy management and profile/content control, through which similar opinions are gathered). For the above reasons, I also argue that Facebook operates as a multiple sphere; blurring the distinction

30Habermas, in his public sphere model, argues that a public sphere brings isolated opinions into the decision-making process (Dijck, 2012); he also suggested that private spheres, on the other hand, are places for intimacy, domesticity, and family (Landes, 2003).
between the public and private. As in the previous chapter, their discussion can be seen to address different audiences and shows participants negotiating public and private domains simultaneously.

Three aspects of my participants’ online discussion are examined in this chapter. Firstly, I explore the construction of cultural identity and addressing the “other” in Facebook activity. This chapter looks at how the distinction between “other” (such as Western media, countries, governments, and citizens) and “us” (those with the same background, language, origins, religion, and/or values as the participants) is established in the profile data and interviews, and the expression of feelings, anger, or negativity that are addressed to a wider, unreachable, non-Arab and non-Muslim audience. The broader “us” (such as the Arab countries and media) also was addressed by the participants. The activities here involve the cultural othering that is the reverse of Said’s notion of ‘otherness’, where the West is central to an ‘Eastern’ other, as indicated in Chapter 2. My analysis examines how the participants can also be seen to distinguish between their Facebook friends: the “us” (Arabs/Muslims) and another “us” (those who are Arabs and Muslims, but participants distance themselves from due to their practices). The other distinctions are hierarchies that the participants operate within their discussions, in line with Tekin (2010), as discussed in Chapter 2. In my analysis of how they establish these distinctions, I also consider how the use of different languages by my participants (Arabic and English) enables them to create distinctions between these audiences.

Secondly, the chapter looks at how users deal with their friends’ contributions and carefully control and manage their friends’ posts. The way that participants control the discussion of political, religious and moral issues by closing down conflicting or contradictory positions can be seen as an extension of the strategies by which they manage their profiles and audience, which is a key part of identity construction on Facebook (as examined in Chapter 4) and might be seen to undermine claims that they are engaging in considered political deliberation31.

Finally I am interested in how the participants raise social issues that concern them and, in doing so, promote moral values on their Facebook walls. This is also quite

31 In Chapter 4, for example, I described how ND refused to participate in political writings on her wall so that she wouldn’t be positioned by her audience as a politician. She also reviewed her profile’s content so as not to fall into trouble with the government, which restricts the airing of such opinions.
similar to which values the participants deem to be “good” (see the previous chapter), but different in their explicitness. In the case described in the previous chapter, EL talked about what she personally felt was appropriate to present on a profile. In this chapter, examples are given which similarly reveal cultural and religious principles which the participants advocate, but here, the focus is on principles which promote ideal social behaviour rather than on personal taste and judgment.

As not all of my participants engaged in the explicit discussion of political and religious issues on Facebook, the analysis that I present in this chapter focuses on two participants in particular. AY and RM were the two participants who were most interested in using Facebook for the discussion of politics and religion. However, their uses of the site differed: whilst AY shared her opinions/ideas on her wall, RM shared her opinions and engaged in discussions as a member of a number of Facebook groups. As RM’s group contributions did not appear on her wall, I was unable to view these and they are therefore not included in the analysis. Instead I focus on her accounts of these activities during our conversations. My analysis of AY’s activity examines the Facebook wall content in which she reveals different interests and can be seen to promote moral values. The chapter also refers to other participants (BS, EL, ND, AZ and LY) whose Facebook activity was generally less ‘political’ but who occasionally touched on different issues. The chapter therefore draws on both the interview and online observational data.

The chapter is organised into four sections. I begin by situating my analysis within the existing work on “online deliberation.” Because my analysis examines how self/other distinctions are configured in participants’ online activity and accounts of this, this section is followed by a consideration of literature that has explored the production of cultural identity and ‘othering’ in online and offline forms of interaction. I then turn to my data to explore the discussion of political issues by my participants and their accounts of the use of language, tone, and behaviour as well as their engagement with different offline news/events and how these discussions serve to construct distinctions between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Having concentrated on the political aspect of the way in which the participants construct the “other”, I then observe them engaging in othering through their political and religious posts addressing different audiences. In the final part of the chapter, I turn to my participants’ social and moral engagements on Facebook and data
which suggest that ideas/opinions/experiences might contribute to behavioural changes among Facebook friends.

5.2 LITERATURE BACKGROUND

5.2.1 Online Deliberation

The Internet has become a site for political participation (Wang, 2007) across cultures (e.g. Calend and Mosca 2007) and even among youth (e.g. Bakker and Vreese, 2011). Social media are increasingly used for political purposes (Hong and Nadler, 2011; and Wattal, Schuff, Mandviwalla, and Williams, 2010), not only recreational ones (Kushin and Kitchener, 2009). For example, through Facebook pages and groups, political discussions are carried out, and through Twitter, political opinions are exposed to the public (Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan, 2013). Studies in this area have referred to this kind of communication and discussions as online/digital deliberation or e-deliberation. According to Coleman and Moss (2012:4), the concept of “e-deliberation” arose in relation to the exploitation of the Internet by citizens for the purpose of creating their own forums and constructing their own debates, free from the influence of rulers, who in general provide citizens with fewer opportunities to contribute to the process of decision-making. Therefore, citizens form empowering deliberative spaces to assure more democratic engagements; “e-democracy entails e-deliberation” (ibid, 2012:4). Researchers using the concept of online, digital or e-deliberation have tended to use the term when discussing political and democratic deliberation (see Davies and Chandler, 2011; Halpern and Gibbs, 2013; Price, 2009; Price and Cappella, 2002; Thorseth, 2011; Wisniewiski, 2013; Wright, 2012; and Wright and Street, 2007). In these studies, online deliberation refers to public engagements regarding political issues, election campaigns and voting, online political conversations, or civic engagement (sometimes called deliberative e-democracy (Thorseth, 2011)), and the activity relates to the discussion of particular, ‘serious’ topics.

Scholars have also linked the concept of deliberation to a particular quality of discussion. A number of studies have shown partiality towards formal forms of online talk, arguing that informal online talk does not meet the requisites of deliberation. Such talk is referred to as “uncivil” or “self-expression and monologue” (Coleman and Moss,
Thorseth (2011:2), for instance, defines deliberation as “thoughtful, careful, or lengthy consideration,” presenting a broad definition which includes multiple forms of transferring messages electronically through different mediums, including smart phones, teleconferencing, broadcasting, and any other electronic tools used in face-to-face meetings. Although some of these mediums are used daily as communicative channels, the types of communication examined by these scholars are still formal. On the other hand, a body of work describes informal daily talk/dialogue and political talk in non-political forums as deliberative and fundamental to underpinning deliberative democracy (e.g. see Jackson, Scullion, and Molesworth 2013; Graham, 2012; and Kim and Kim, 2008). Despite the existence of such studies, most research looks at online deliberation as constituting formal, open discussions about points of disagreement, thereby enhancing public life and democratic decision-making, with the natural exception of the everyday talk that tends to occur among people with similar opinions (Min, 2009:9-10).

However, Wilhelm (1998) argues that deliberation on cyberspace forums comprises opinions shared by the gathered people, who construct collective identities, thus lacking the requisite of considerable deliberation that signals issues that need to be addressed by government. Similarly, Winsvold (2013), whose analytic focus extended the deliberative democratic theory to a broader framework, argues that debates on online forums (debates that are away from elite/gatekeepers’ control) are not particularly deliberative but merely the expression of opinions. His analysis of two Norwegian newspaper-hosted forums focuses on local politics and demonstrates that around 50 percent of the discussions foster mutual understanding, but are not necessarily lengthy, fixed opinions, and such “participatory ideal” discussions function as practice for formal discussions in political spheres elsewhere.

Even though studies of Facebook have demonstrated that it enables formal deliberation (such as Halpern and Gibbs, 2013; Gustafsson, 2012; Kushin and Kitchener, 2009; and Valenzuela et al., 2009), there has been little interest in informal political and online talk, such as the daily broadcasting of opinions on private Facebook accounts and whether this might be considered a form of online deliberation. This kind of routine talk could be essential and meaningful even though it may only involve people with similar opinions. It also raises the question of whether those with private Facebook accounts allow their friends to voice opposing views on their walls. After all, studies on politics have argued that the Internet supports diversity but that people interested in politics tend
to seek out and interact with those with similar beliefs (Lawrence, Sides, and Farrell, 2010). Moreover, Coleman and Moss maintain that informal deliberation has the potential to be constructed. In other words, the researchers could not identify a clear line between what talk is considered deliberation and what is not (e.g. chatter), due to the lack of an explicit conceptual definition of the concept. This lack of consensus among scholars allows the question of whether Facebook engagements between private account holders are a form of constructed online deliberation to be posed.

In this chapter I take “online deliberation” to denote the day-to-day discussion of political and religious concerns and issues shared on participants’ Facebook walls. This does not necessarily involve the setting up of formalised debates - even though I observed this within some profiles - but could still be considered constructed informal discussions and expressions that do not entail political actions or movements (e.g. as above, Wilhelm, 1998; and Winsvold, 2013). As well as looking at the discussion of political and religious issues, my analysis in this chapter also encompasses my participants’ online talk regarding broader concerns that have to do with society and people’s behaviour within this society. I am interested in examining the moral positions that are taken by the users in order to refine behaviours and direct their audiences to social enhancement. This moral dimension in political discussions and democratic expression is rarely highlighted in the previous literature. Winsvold’s (2013) study on anonymous online forums, however, found people taking moral positions on “good” political procedures and democratic principles. In my study, I am looking at how the participants establish moral positions in their online discussion and in their accounts of the use of Facebook, not only in terms of values the participants deem to be “good”, but also define what is acceptable/unacceptable. Based on the above discussion and in line with both Wilhelm (1998) and Winsvold (2013), I suggest widening the strict view of online deliberation as meaning political discussion to include informal meaningful talk on social and moral as well as political and religious issues.

32For example, one participant posted about the lack of the use of the official New Norwegian language among pupils, saying that it should be addressed by the government. A friend of hers replied: “Hundreds of thousands of people worldwide are dying, and all you think about is this public monument” (Winsvold, 2013:13).
5.2.2 Cultural Identity and Othering

As mentioned initially, in looking at my participants’ online discussion of political and religious issues I am interested in how – via their engagement in this activity – they can be seen to construct a sense of cultural identity vis-à-vis distant others. Defining cultural identity is challenging as a result of the difficulty of defining each term separately (Dervin, 2011). It can refer to “the notion of difference” (Clarke, 2008: 510), with the process of identifying the self from the other termed “othering” (Palfreyman, 2005). The latter term refers to “the ways in which the discourse of a particular group [or individual] defines other groups in opposition to itself” (ibid: 213). For the purposes of this study, cultural identity is defined loosely as how people differentiate themselves from others with regard to nationality, religion, and ethnicity, while othering in this context occurs with Arabs/Muslims being “us” and non-Arabs/non-Muslims are the “other”. This view is essentially the opposite of the form of knowledge and representations that Said (1985) identified in his work on Orientalism, which highlighted the idea of the West defining itself in contrast to the East (see Said (1985) for a critical view of Western scholars’ othering of the East, i.e. the Arabic and Islamic worlds33).

Many previous studies have examined the construction of the self in relation to others (see e.g. Cameron and Maslen, 2013). Some studies on othering have taken a psychological approach in examining the construction of cultural differences, for example, the way that Muslims are popularly imagined as threatening others (see again e.g. Cameron, Maslen and Todd 2013), with other studies have taken feminist perspectives in examining the cultural construction of othering through the construction of Muslim women as powerless in contrast to Western women (see e.g. Scharff, 201134). In my review of the literature on online political discussions, I have not come across any study that explicitly addresses the issue of “othering” in online deliberation but rather only in offline deliberation (e.g. Tekin, 2010:211). In online deliberation studies, they either address the issue implicitly in online environments such as Facebook (e.g. see

33 Said’s (1985, pp: 93, 94, 97) critical view of the West’s othering of the East in Orientalism narrates the Western attack on Islam (p.97), the guilt of Orientalism in the Palestinian encounter with Zionism, and portrayals of Arabs in the public realm in the USA and elsewhere (p.98)).

34 In Scharff’s (2011) study, the popular portrayal in the West of Muslim women as “passive victims of patriarchal oppression” has led Western women to believe that they are progressive and liberal, while Muslim women are powerless, voiceless, and oppressed.
Halpern and Gribs, 2013; and Postmes, Spear, and Lea, 2002), or address the social/collective identity instead (see also Halpern and Gribs, 2013; and Hartz-Karp, Anderson, Gasti, & Felicetti 2010). These studies have examined how people interact socially and form a social/collective identity in anonymous online environments. For example, in studying online deliberation on YouTube and Facebook, Halpern and Gribs (2013) argue that collective social identity as constructed on the anonymous social network YouTube leads to deindividuation (the adapting of another social group’s norms/identity and belonging the self to that in-group). This, in turn, leads to stereotyping of the out-group by using pronouns such as “us” and “them.” The study’s description of the use of these terms by YouTube viewers constitutes an indirect reference to the notion of othering. Similarly, Postmes, Spear, and Lea (2002) argued that through online interaction and in depersonalised settings (where individual identities are concealed), people recognise which social group they would belong to and exhibit stereotyping of other groups. This in itself is an example of othering, although again, it is not explicitly identified as such in the study. One exception to this lack of explicit consideration of othering within studies of deliberation is a recent work on the use of Facebook by Israeli teenage girls (Brandes & Levin 2013:8). The participants reported in their focus group interviews that they were unwilling to accept an Arab Israeli as a friend on their social network as they considered them “dangerous individuals” (ibid:8).

In my analysis I seek to extend previous work on othering by examining how my participants form cultural boundaries to construct the “other” and simultaneously situate their own belonging to an “us” (Arabs/Muslims). Secondly, I look at how they distinguish between the “other”, wider audience and the closer, “us” audience within their online engagements. It is to this analysis that I now turn.

5.3 Political Deliberation on Facebook

This section examines the political engagement of the participants. I first provide an overview of participants’ accounts of Facebook use for political expression (the language, tone, behaviour and topics of concern) and demonstrate how participants address different audiences and generating support (likes and concurrence) from Facebook friends. The examples presented in this section illuminate how and why participants express their opinions and ideas about offline political news or events on
their Facebook wall, and how ‘self and other’ distinctions are established in their posting activity. The examples come mainly from one participant in the study, AY. I will then turn to the practice of othering in participants’ political discussions with a close focus on how they address and distance different audiences in their posts.

5.3.1 Facebook as a Site for Political Expression

Of all the participants in this study, AY appeared to value Facebook the most as a space for freedom of expression and communication and an opportunity to informally discuss political topics. AY uses Facebook intensively; she updated her account daily, changed her profile picture regularly and usually posted at least four status updates a day relating to political topics during the period of observation (as I will discuss in the next chapter, there were also times when she paused her political engagement to focus on maintaining her relationships). Her network comprises a variety people who hold different nationalities and religious backgrounds, including a lot of non-Arabs (300 out of 700 friends). Her Facebook profile and interviews reveal an interest in both local and global political and religious issues; she often talked about controversial topics, such as ongoing revolutions and protests in the Arab world, wars and crimes against humanity, wars against Arabs and Muslims (e.g. the Israeli war with Palestinians), and religious sectarianism.

One of the most distinctive aspects of AY’s use of Facebook to discuss political issues was her use of different semiotic resources to convey her political concerns, especially the use of visual content. Here are two (translated) examples from her posting activity:
Ay’s status: “Why are you doing this Egypt?” (29 May 2012)

**Figure 5-1** Protests during the Egyptian revolution

AY shared: “A photo of a father giving the last kiss to his son” (25 Aug. 2012).

**Figure 5-2** Syrian citizens being killed by government forces

The above examples from May (Figure 5-1) and August 2012 (Figure 5-2) demonstrate her concern about the fate and actions of other Arabs. The question written above (Figure 5-1) betrays a tone of dismay as people protested in Egypt during the Egyptian revolution, which started January 2011, with this post being shared while this revolution was still ongoing. In Figure 5-2, AY shared the photo of a man and his son, who was killed at the beginning of the Syrian civil war, which was shared when Syrian security forces starting killing protestors in March 2011. The above posts received 6 and 3 likes, respectively, and the second received 16 re-shares as well (see Figure 5-2), which
appeared to demonstrate agreement and support on the part of her friends. Whilst these posts responded to specific events, the relationship between Palestine and Israel was of continual concern to AY, appearing on her wall throughout the period of observation; her concerns related to different specific issues in this conflict, such as the protection of children, their suffering and deaths, Gaza protests, and Israeli hegemony and operations.

The example below was posted in November 2012. This post corresponded to the anniversary of the killing of the child shown in Figure 5-3. As she repeatedly questions the silence of Arabs regarding the Palestinian issue in particular, she reflects on the strength she believes she sees among Palestine’s children in facing their enemies:

AY’s status: “There are no men in the homeland; Palestine’s children are the real men” (AY: 8 Nov., translated).

“This coincides with the anniversary of the death of the child who was killed when facing the Zionist tanks with his body.”

**Figure 5-3** Palestinian children defend themselves against enemies

Friend1: You said the truth.. Now is the time when wonderous things happen

Friend2: We are now in the age of Arab Decadence!!!

The above example (Figure 5-3) saw her posting the status “There are no men in the homeland; Palestine’s children are the real men” (AY: 8 Nov). Friends’ comments
show agreement: Friend 1 expressed wonder at the strength and faith of the children who are left with no support to face the weapons, and Friend 2 reiterated AY’s view of the absence of the unity of “us” against the hegemony of the “other”, leaving innocent children to face danger and be killed.

On 16 November, during Israel’s air strikes on Gaza, which began on 14 Nov. 2012 (Kestler-D'Amours, 2013), AY posted the following example (Figure 5-4). This post suggests that she found support from people of a different religion:

AY stated: “God bless him (X)” (AY: 16 Nov).

AY: Where are the Arabs? Where are the Muslims? No one except God will help you Palestine.

Friend: UM thank you!!

**Figure 5-4** Representing the danger of “othering” non-Arabs

This post showed AY’s reaction to the event indicated above. She emphasised the innocence of “us” and the danger of the “other” shown in the voice of a non-Arab protester defending Palestine (“us”, i.e. Arabs) from Israel (a threatening “other”) after the strike. It suggests her disappointment in Arabs and Muslims, the people who she believes should unify and take actions to support the Palestinians but unfortunately remain silent, as she frequently laments (see comments on Figure 5-3 above and Figure 5-7 below).
Three days later, as the violence escalated, AY posted the following status:

AY’s status: “May God destroy you and drive you out of Palestine and hope to see you in diaspora again, God is capable and generous” (translated).

“Israeli soldiers are afraid of the Palestinian resistance missile” (AY: 19 Nov).

Friend1: Amen
Friend2: Amen
Friend3: Winning demands is not through [mere]wishing.

Figure 5-5 Israeli soldiers taking cover from a Palestinian rocket

In the above example, hate is expressed through her words, mainly in her Arabic prayers against the “other”. I can notice a different kind of support from her friends: support has been acknowledged from two friends expressing their wish to God to let her posted prayer happen. Friend3, on the other hand, expressed support for AY’s post from another angle of the issue, by appreciating the strength of “us” instead and insisting that things are achieved through action and determination not just desire.

The above examples demonstrate how AY uses Facebook to react to offline news/events and how these responses constitute a complex us/them distinction. Rejecting the political status quo, criticising the silence of Arabs and wars in the Arab world, expressing the danger of “others” against the innocent “us”, expressing disappointment
at the lack of unity among those like herself, and sharing what supports her claims and opinions, all are examples of her political expression on her Facebook wall. These examples also demonstrate how AY addresses a different audience through the use of language on her wall. For example, she used the Arabic language when she posted about Arab issues (see Figure 5-1 and 5-2) and used the English language when the issue had to do with the Western world (see Figure 5-3 to 5-5). The choice of language suggests that she is intentionally addressing an Arab and a non-Arab audience at different times.

As illustrated above, some of AY’s friends responded to her posts with support for the central message in the form of thanks and concurring comments. The small number of likes and comments that AY’s posts received, compared to the total number of her friends, could be due to women not being interested in such posts, as politics is considered a male domain in Saudi Arabia (Al-Saggaf, 2011), or it could be that the audience members feared that any expression of political views might have negative consequences for them (given the analysis presented in the previous chapter). It might also be due to her being so active on her wall, which might have led her friends to miss a lot of her shares. The use of agreement and likes in the context presented through the examples above (as each figure shows) suggests the similarity of opinions among her friends, as those who commented expressed support for her ideas. Here, the engagement with political issues on Facebook does not take the form of a critical debate or a discussion with Facebook friends or groups, as many previous researchers have argued (see Halpern and Gibbs, 2013; Kushin, M. J., & Kitchener, 2009), or even to support offline political actions and movements (see Gil de Zúñiga, Jung and Valenzuela, 2012; McGoldrick, 2013; and Conroy, Feezell, Guerrero, 2012), but rather sees the reinforcing of particular positions along shared lines of agreement. Being less engaged in debates and discussion in online forums might be an Eastern cultural attribute, as argued by Min (2009); however, Min’s results could not be generalised among all Eastern online deliberators, as his participants were Koreans, and norms between the two cultures are substantially different.

Above, I presented examples of what was shared on AY’s wall. I now want to shift the focus to the reasons that AY gave for her engagement in such activity on Facebook. Here is the conversation that was established with AY about addressing political issues on Facebook:
R: Why are you interested in posting political news?

AY: I like politics; I read a lot about politics and religion. I am interested in divine or non-divine religions. I have friends from different religions, even non-Muslim friends and friends with non-divine religions. There is something interesting in that... wisdom.

R: So you are interested in political and religious kinds of topics.

AY: Yea.

R: Do you only post these kinds of topics or does it depend on your emotional state?

AY: Sometimes these and sometimes others. Sometimes you hear about things that upset you when you watch the news and affect your mood as well.

R: Do you immediately post on Facebook?

AY: No, when I log in to Facebook.

R: Do you feel that Facebook gives you ammmm…? [Pausing]

AY: Relief.

R: Yea.

AY: At least you are writing something.

This conversation suggests that AY uses Facebook as a space to talk about her interests and concerns (the political and religious topics which will be discussed further in the chapter) and as a space to release anger and negativity towards political news (a source of “relief”). Although she has indicated her interest in reading about such topics elsewhere, besides having no online or offline evidence about these sources and topics, the interview account suggests that she has no other option to express her views on them (“At least you are writing something”).

RM, the other participant who is interested in politics but engaged in political discussions through participation in Facebook groups, also suggested in her interview that Facebook use provides a form of relief:
Do you know, I feel like you’re releasing energy. It is better to talk to people who share the same interests, they don’t know me and I don’t know them, instead of talking to those who you know but have a different way of thinking. At least I release my energy. I release my political energy on here [Facebook], so I really don’t need to talk about politics anymore elsewhere. I swear you can find on Facebook whatever you want; just search for it and you will find it.

As well as offering a space for discussions and support, these extracts suggest that Facebook is valued as a space for personal release without perhaps making bigger changes, such as getting involved with or supporting offline political actions. This idea - that Facebook might be used for getting support and to release anger and negativity - stands in contrast to the idea that online political deliberation primarily serves as preparation and practice for offline political action. As in some studies that argue for the democratising potential of the Internet, supporting the “Habermasian idea of deliberation [...] as an extension of, and complement to, political action” (Wisniewski, 2013:1), Wisniewski argues that the Internet provides the chance for individuals to expose their political opinions to diverse viewpoints away from those who have the power to dominate and look after their self-interests (e.g. elites/ gatekeepers). Although a number of studies demonstrate the opposite of what Wisniewski claims, such as studies conducted in the Arab world which emphasise the use of Facebook for political action (see for example, Eltantawy and Wiest (2011), on the Egyptian revolution), AY and RM’s accounts might reinforce Wisniewski’s claim that those who deliberate politically online might not be aiming for political action. This result could be also compatible with what has been argued by Johnson, Zhang, Bichard, and Selter (2011) and by Gustafsson (2012:1123-1124). The former study suggests that political engagement on the site does not reinforce political movement but may increase civic engagement instead, while the latter study argues that acting politically means being a member of a political party or organization. Otherwise, non-bloggers do not find Facebook to be a space for political activity and they even remain passive towards’ their friends content.
This section has focused so far on looking at the visual and interactional content on AY’s profile, and how she and RM account for their use of Facebook. Building on the notion of othering exemplified in some of AY’s posts, the next section will look at how the participants (particularly AY) established other/us distinctions in more detail.

5.3.2 Othering in the Discussion of Political Issues

In this section, I examine the use of Facebook to discuss issues relating to politics, focusing on how some participants construct a cultural identity through addressing non-Arab and Arab audience members when sharing their thoughts on Facebook. In addition, I examine how participants reinforce certain opinions and beliefs about the “other” among their Facebook friends by managing or shutting down their friends’ discussions. In doing so, I make a distinction between the wider, unreachable audiences, who are not part of participants’ Facebook audiences but to which their engagements might be directed: the first is when participants post messages that are directed to a non-Arab, non-Muslim audience. These messages are often critical of the non-Arabs/Muslims actions and express anger and negativity towards perceived Western agendas or politics. The second is when participants post messages to the broader Arab/Muslim audience criticising their passivity. Each can be seen to involve the construction of cultural identity as well as exclusion of the “other.”

5.3.2.1 Political Messages Directed to an Unreachable “other” Audience

In this section, I examine how participants use Facebook to criticise the presumed agenda of Western media and the prejudice that Western countries are perceived to have towards them. AY showed cultural othering in her political engagement by addressing the “other” non-Arab, non-Muslim audience (specifically, Western media and Western governments), who are not part of her network. She directed her speech to them, stating their responsibility for her political concerns and what is happening in the Arab/Muslim world. Particular points of focus in her posts included the “game” that mainstream Western media are supposedly playing on the minds of their audience (in her discussions all Western media are lumped together, perceived as one entity), and the conflicts between religions that lead the “other” to treat Muslims differently in some countries.
Here, for example, is her reaction to the commemoration of September 11th in the Western media:

**AY Posted: 11 September, I feel bored of this topic. I feel nausea** (AY: Sep 11, 2012).

**Friend1:** Ignoooooore

**Friend2:** But do you believe this time it matches Tuesday [the same date, Tuesday, 11 September] hahaha [laughter]

**AY:** O, really. As you said LOL :D

**AY:** And those who are killed here and still being killed and will be killed have no value? Or are Arabs not humans”.

When I asked her later through Facebook private messages to explain what she meant by this post and the comments, she said:

**AY:** I meant that we are all against Sept 11 and the killing of innocent people, but the US makes it sound like they are the only people who suffer in the world, although they are the reason for all the killing that is happening on our side of the world. Their Sept 11 game is just the same as the Holocaust\(^{35}\).

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\(^{35}\) “The Holocaust was the systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of approximately six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators. “Holocaust” is a word of Greek origin meaning "sacrifice by fire." The Nazis, who came to power in Germany in January 1933, believed that Germans were "racially superior" and that the Jews, deemed "inferior," were an alien threat to the so-called German racial community. During the era of the Holocaust, German authorities also targeted other groups because of their perceived "racial inferiority": Roma (Gypsies), the disabled, and some of the Slavic peoples (Poles, Russians, and others). Other groups were persecuted on political, ideological, and behavioural grounds, among them Communists, Socialists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and homosexuals” (Online United State Holocaust Memorial Museum).
R: What about media? Is there anything in your post that relates to their role since you have seen that on TV news?

AY: Yes, the media makes it sound like it is the worst thing that happened in the world, both.

From the examples above, AY conveys to her audience her sense of disapproval and unease about the media reflecting a Western agenda of loss and suffering in relation to the commemoration of September 11, 2001, whereas to AY they are the cause of Arab/Muslim suffering in the East. As a response to AY’s “boredom”, Friend 1 advised AY not to pay attention to the news, while Friend 2, in a cynical way, touched on the sceptical role which media plays and their coincidence in presenting something of truth about this event for the first time, simply because Tuesday is the same day of the week on which the real event happened. AY agreed and responded with a laugh but angrily. Her anger towards media coverage of the event stems from the attitude that Western media present it as the worst event that ever happened in the world, while there are other events in the “us” side of the world that are ignored. This fosters her belief that the “other” (the U.S.) is practicing racism in an indirect way. This was directly asserted when she stated, “Their Sep 11 game is just the same as the Holocaust”, since racism was the central aspect of Hitler’s attempt to exterminate the Jews. The way she regards others as a threat contrasts with the process of othering argued in previous literature, such as in Cameron’s and Maslen’s (2013) study. They argued that Muslims are considered the threat and may be regarded as terrorists. This in turn creates uncertainty among Muslims, which then impacts their social identity, behaviour and attitudes through changing and influencing the dialogical construction of themselves and others. Thus, they start hiding their Islamic identity to cope with their relationships and social lives. Here, however,

36 The word ‘racism’ here is used in the general sense of prejudice/bigotry rather than the specific sense of racial prejudice. These various terms differ could be defined as follows:

- “It's prejudice when Mr. Smith feels unhappy when Mr. Johnson moves in next door because he doesn't like Mr. Johnson's skin colour or ethnic identity.
- It's bigotry when Mr. Smith refuses to invite Mr. Johnson into his home or offer him friendly waves of greeting.
- It's racism when Mr. Smith uses threats and intimidation to attempt to drive Mr. Johnson and his family out of the neighborhood” (Chicago Tribune, 2006).
Facebook has enabled participants to explicitly resist such prejudice and express a critical view of Western media (I will return to this idea shortly).

AY also posted messages about animosity towards the Islamic religion in some Western countries, attacking those who are prejudiced and treat others disrespectfully just for having a different religion. Figure 5-6, for example, shows an exchange from 26 April 2012, which raised the issue of prejudice when France banned women from wearing the Islamic head covering:

Friend 1: That’s a very good point!!

Friend 2: Guys - it depends....if the woman wants to wear it out of her respect for her religion (that is often the point for all of the ladies in the pic) I totally agree. But we all know that there are rules in some countries that don’t give you much of a chance to decide... and that is another point. Despite the fact that none of these religions really tell anyone to cover their heads. Stereotypes unfortunately exist, especially for anything to do with Islam - which is sad - cause it can be beautiful - but many people following Islam do everything possible to give the rest of the world a bad impression....so what exactly do we expect to get back?

AY: Islam is perfect, but Muslims aren't. We agree on that, but on the other hand some countries do not give Muslims the chance to
practice their religion. They all look the same to me Muslims, Christians and Jews "covered from head to toe".

**Figure 5-6** Head coverings in different religions

The image that inspired this interaction suggests that discrimination against Muslim women is unjust since women from different religions wear similar head and body covers, as illustrated in the image. Unlike in the examples from AY’s wall in the previous section, where responses from friends reinforced and supported her statements, responses to this image from AY’s friends on Facebook suggest different positions and both agreement and disagreement with the message that the image conveys. Friend 1 supports AY’s point that Muslim women should not be treated differently or discriminated against in Western countries. Friend 2, however, challenges the straightforward equivalence that Friend 1 seems to accept – that all the women look the same and that Western people are discriminating – suggesting that Muslims’ behaviour should also be considered as a potential source of such prejudice. AY’s response signals some agreement with this criticism, as she states that “Muslims aren’t perfect”, but she remains committed to her view, closing down the discussion of this topic and shifting the blame back to the “other” (i.e. Western countries’ policies). Friend 2 did not respond to this final post. In this way AY reinforces her position about discrimination against Muslims, pointing to the “other” as the problem and not “us”.

Therefore, I suggest that there are two aspects emerging from the examples above. As the participants defend and resist the prejudice of others by representing the other as guilty for holding a stereotypical image about them, AY has asserted herself as being part of the Arab/Muslim group; she constructed on her wall an identity that differentiated her from others, an identity that relates to her ethnicity (religion / being part of the Arab world) just for political purposes. The real prejudice, to her, seems to be what the “other” has stereotyped and thus stigmatised about them, which explains her defensiveness. Dervin (2011: No page No.) has argued, othering leads people towards a widespread tendency to differentiate in-group from out-group and self from other in such a way as to reinforce and protect self”. On the other hand, the post emphasis how the “other” is used among the participants and their friends in such deliberation as they look for agreement and support or, when they do not find it, control and end the deliberation and
reiterate their opinions and ideas against the “other”. This also illustrates the idea that Facebook can be used as a safe place for deliberation that does not challenge the user. The example above raises similar opinions regardless of the slightly different way of explaining the reason that this prejudice happens. For instance, when Friend 2 responded to AY, her comment was mainly supporting the idea of Western prejudice but giving a different explanation for what might help to cause it in the first place. This demonstrates what has been argued by Mutz (2007) that in private social networks, people tend to hold similar opinions based on the trust and friendship selection on the network.

5.3.2.2 Political Messages Directed to an Unreachable “us” Audience

In the previous section, I described how AY showed cultural othering in her political engagement when addressing a non-Arab, non-Muslim audience in reaction to their perceived prejudice and animosity on her Facebook page. I now turn to messages directed to the broader Arab/Muslim audience, "us", which focus on their political passivity. AY, in Figure 5-7 below, questioned the political position of Arabs (as I also indicated earlier in her comments in Figures 5-3 and 5-4. This could clearly be seen on her wall through messages that are similar to the following:

“Where are the Arabs from what’s happening in Palestine?”

(AY: 16 Nov 2012).

![Image showing victims in Palestine](image)

Figure 5-7 Image showing victims in Palestine

She also blamed the Arab media and Arabs generally for giving more attention to events that are less important (in her opinion) than the crimes and suffering occurring in
the Arab world. She posted a message once when the death of a famous Egyptian singer received massive media coverage and people were very sad. She said (AY: 18 May 2012):

“The world is now crying about X [a singer], no problem, her life has ended, but what about the thousands of our children who are killed in every corner of the Arab world, do they not deserve crying?”

In the above examples, AY shared a message with her Facebook audience, who have, in fact, nothing to do with those who are killed in the Arab world. Her words actually carry a message to the Arab governments and to the Arab media. This means that AY is calling for unity and reaction not on the individual level, on which she may have an influence, but also on the national level, which is not likely to even receive her messages. This kind of message might never reach the target audience as long as participants’ networks are private and comprise friends only. This means that sharing this kind of message can be regarded as an opportunity to express emotions and opinions on the site which might or might not create any changes on the macro level.

5.4 Religious Deliberation on Facebook

5.4.1 Messages Directed to the Facebook Audience

In the previous section, participants directed their political messages to an audience outside of their networks. In this section, I turn to participants’ religious messages, which are directed to their Facebook audience (friends). As I continue to consider othering, I will first focus on participants’ reactions to the practices of the “other” with regard to “them”. These messages include attempts to enhance the image of Islam among friends from different ethnicities or religions and to educate those of the same ethnicity or culture. I will then highlight participants’ reactions towards sectarianism among “us”. The “us” here refers to the Arab/Muslim audience; the critical messages directed to Facebook friends are often critical of the actions of another Arabs/Muslims, who the participant distances herself from, calling for behavioural changes and respect.
5.4.1.1 Reactions to the “other’s” Stigmatised Presentation of a Religious Symbol

As argued previously, participants can be seen to blame the “other” for their political concerns and identify them as a threat while simultaneously defending and reinforcing their own views. Here, they continue addressing their cultural identity and reveal their non-political concerns, which are still attributed to the “other”. This section considers participants’ responses to a video produced about the prophet of Islam, which offended their religious sensibilities. Below, I examine participants’ different reactions to this video and explore the ways that they enhance the image of the prophet of Islam by sharing their opinions, defences, and feelings in English, especially with those Facebook friends who are non-Muslims, about Islam, resisting a stereotypical image imposed on “us”. Their reactions also suggest their attempt to educate this “us” (Muslim audience).

Anger towards an insulting video created about the prophet of Islam on 11 September 2012, which sparked criticism from regional media and Muslims, was expressed on AY’s, EL’s, and BS’s profiles. Before looking at the responses, it is interesting to note one aspect that was the same among the participants’ reactions to the video, which is the fact that none of them had seen it. When I asked AY about viewing it, she replied: “I did not; I only heard about it”. Likewise, EL mentioned this in her interview, stating: “I did not open it” (she meant the video link). Their critical reactions to the video were instead based on what was circulated about it on the news and on social media. As reports from the time described, this video “features an actor portraying the Prophet Muhammad, which is forbidden in Islam” (BBC News Middle East, 12 September 2012), and this was the reason that the common response was to not view the video. In addition to that, the video claims that the prophet “was a fraud” and depicts him “as a feeble philanderer who approved of child sexual abuse, among other overtly insulting claims that have caused outrage. Muslims find it offensive to depict Muhammad in any manner, let alone insult the prophet” (NDTV, 2012).

AY’s posts about this video corresponded to its release on television news. I also noticed that her posts about this video on Facebook only lasted for two days after the event (from the 11th to the 13th September), which also supports the argument that her Facebook engagement is an expression of her feelings about offline events. AY reacted on Facebook the same day the video was released and broadcast by Arabic news channels.
“For every action there is a reaction... killing and destruction, conspiracies and the tearing apart of the Arab nation, and now insulting the Prophet, peace be upon him” (translated).

Throughout my online observation of her Facebook profile, AY emphasised the value of freedom of expression:

“Freedom of expression has no meaning if it infringes upon the convictions and beliefs of others” (translated).

So when this freedom of expression encroaches upon other’s beliefs or values, such as insulting the prophet of her religion, she deplored this freedom. AY (13 Sep):

“Respecting others’ beliefs and religion is respect for the self. God destroys whoever defames the Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him, and punishes him in his life before the day of judgement, amen” (translated).

“God burns the tongue of those who encroach on the Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him” (translated).

AY’s choice of words, including “destroys” and “burns” in the two previous examples, illustrates the strong and emotional language she used to express her anger on Facebook towards the creator of the video, whilst also displaying consistency in her stance regarding the limits of freedom of expression. While AY expresses anger and uses emotive language towards the “other” who insulted the Muslim prophet, other participants responded to the same video with their Facebook friends in different ways. On 14 September, for example, EL shared the following:
This example (Figure 5-8) shows a different reaction to that of AY. EL takes a more pedagogic approach. She is more distanced in that she uses online sources (video, biographies) in an apparent attempt to “educate” non-Muslims as well as the Muslim members of her audience. On the same day she also posted an audio recording entitled “The prophet Insult Case-MBC in a week” – again the provision of a resource from which her audience might “learn” about how to respond to those who insulted the prophet in that video (14 Sept. 2012):

“How we can reply practically to those who insulted our prophet, peace be upon him.. SO IMPORTANT.”

“The Prophet Insult case- MBC in a week” (translated).
She also encouraged her audience to stop distributing the negative image of the prophet (16 Sept. 2012):

“Peace be upon him”

“Kill the falsehood by not talking about it” (translated).

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 5-10 How to respond to the video insulting the prophet**

Continuing her use of online resources and her educational stance, EL uses an image of a little girl “shushing” with her finger to her lips. This image might signify politeness when requesting her audience to stop talking about the video, whereas the use of adult’s photo might give the impression of an order. When I asked EL in the second interview about her posts about the video, she repeated her message in Figure 5-10:

EL: … Because people are sharing it [the video] a lot... when something bad like that happens we have to stop posting it and should not distribute it.

R: So you want to send a message to people to ignore it?

EL: Yes, it is not something fun to distribute, you might be irritated but you shouldn’t help by distributing it. If you are so upset, end it by not sharing.

R: So, is this the message you want to send to people?

EL: Many have shared the link to the video, but I wonder why... why? It makes you sad... don’t send it. When they sent it to me, I did not open it.
In contrast to AY’s emotional response and close to EL’s pedagogic approach, BS advised and “educated” her audience through posting an audio clip of famous religious advocates who have an influence on people’s behaviour. BS shared an audio and written status (BS: Oct: 2012):

“Let him win with his morals” (BS: Oct 2012) and a link to a video and article for an Islamic advocate, saying: *it is natural that you get mad for the Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him. Let’s use the negative power that is generated from this madness and enhance his image and let him win by his morals*” (translated).

**Figure 5-11 How to enhance the prophet’s image**

Unlike AY’s textual shares, EL and BS used visual posts to educate their audience about how to deal with the insulting video in order to prevent its dissemination. EL’s interview response, her posts (Figure 5-9 and 5-10) and BS’s above online posts (Figure 5-11) suggested an attempt to shape the behaviour of “us” in reacting to the offensive presentation of a religious symbol.

### 5.4.1.2 Reactions to Sectarianism Practices among “Us”

The previous section focused on responses to the negative opinions of the other and led to a consideration of the way that participants advised their audiences to respond to a controversial and insulting video. Moving away from the stigmatised images drawn by the “other” and cultural “othering” on Facebook, this section focuses on the sectarianism practiced by another “us” which the participants dealt with through messages directed at Arabs and Muslim friends. I build on this by looking at how they try to influence the opinions of their friends.
Alongside her criticism of Western and non-Arab actions and prejudice, AY also uses Facebook to engage with issues concerning Arabs or Muslims generally, for example, how they practice bigotry towards each other in relation to their beliefs. In the Islamic religion people throughout history have created different sects that hold different beliefs and practices. Conflict between these sects has become a controversial issue for political and economic interests at the national level. Oral debates and wars have occurred in areas around the world as a result of this issue; for example, the Syrian civil war is essentially a religious sectarian war (see Melhem, 2014). This conflict also occurs at the individual level over which Islamic sect represents the ‘true’ Islam, and this has led people to treat each other cautiously. For example, a person may be treated differently after the disclosure of his/her sect. It is to such discrimination that AY refers in a post about the existence of bigoted behaviour amongst her friends:

“Why do people insist on knowing what is your religion, sect, and race and judge you whether you are guilty or not guilty based on that. This is extremely shallow!” (AY: 21 April 2012).

Friend 1: The Arab societies are like that. Be patient, despite being educated, their mentalities will remain the same, as it is.

Friend 2: This is not just in the Arab societies but everywhere; when you start living with people, being close and interacting with them on a daily basis, this story will arise.

AY: If you were receiving overseas medical care under the supervision of a Jewish doctor, your different religion may be a cause for that. I experienced that a lot. But in our case it is not a matter of different religions but different sects and this is a disaster.

37 Those friends are her offline friends at work as well as her Facebook friends, as she reported in the interviews. When I asked her why she is interested in writing about religious sects and whether she encounters problems, she replied that the reason might be that she has a lot of people at work from different sects and that she is not the one who experiences that but her friends.
As in the previous example of Westerners’ prejudice towards Muslims, AY also affirms the existence of bigotry among “us”. This led to agreement from the two friends who commented. However, Friend 2 redefined the problem as a global one, not one limited to Arabs and Muslims. AY agreed with Friend 2’s opinion regarding the existence of this kind of bigotry among people with different religions (“I experienced that a lot”). However, she implied that it might be more acceptable, or at least understandable, if this prejudice occurs among people from different religions, but she problematised its existence amongst those of the same religion (“it is a disaster”). AY’s response to Friend 2 ended the exchange, with her voice dominating this interaction. As in Figure 5-6, she concluded the interaction.

Throughout my observation of her profile, AY repeatedly criticised the existence of prejudice amongst Arabs and Muslims, especially that arising from sectarian differences. She called on her Arab and Muslim friends to end such behaviour. Here are a number of examples of exchanges, to show the consistency of her critical approach during the period of observation. AY (6 Sep, via Twitter):

“Your sectarianism is stinky and a sign of ignorance. Religion is behaviour and good manners... Enough.”

**Friend 1:** “Who the hell is being racist AY?! I do get sick of such issues!! Who's driving u mad that much??”

**AY:** “Many people, you log in to Facebook and you feel sick.. and btw it is all in the Arab world.”

**Friend 1:** “Sure, Arabs!”. What is btw?!

**AY:** By the way

**Friend 1:** Hhhhhh!!! I never knew it b4! Now I do.
AY: I am an expert in those acronyms hhhhhh as much as grade 6 were using them in the composition, and I were screaming: that is not chat.

Friend 1: LOL.

In the example above, AY did not identify her Facebook friends’ sectarian behaviour as stemming from their religion. The excerpt also demonstrates that Friend 1 has similarly observed sectarianism and wondered about who led AY to write such a status. Both affirmed the existence of sectarianism in the Arab world but ended the conversation talking about something else that made them laugh. The turning of serious topics into normal ones is an indication that their engagements are just an expression of feelings, rather than being designed to facilitate a serious discussion about these issues, and in this their friends remain supportive. AY also calls on them to respect each other, posting:

“Your beliefs don’t make you a better person... your behaviour does” (AY: 22 Nov).

By criticising her Facebook friends’ behaviour in the above examples, she was advising her audience to stop focusing on people’s beliefs, emphasising instead that behaviour should be the defining aspect when people judge each other. She chided them for relying instead on others’ beliefs. But unfortunately, her attempts to change her audience’s behaviour (who are also part of her offline world, as stated in the interview) ended with disappointment, as she said finally: “because I reject sectarianism, I will stop talking and say God will guide all”.

When I first interviewed AY, she narrated a story about a fight that started on her wall between two Facebook friends who belong to different political parties. Later, I could not find the post she described on her profile, including the friends’ comments, as she had deleted them completely from her wall. In the second interview, I asked her about this, and she replied:
R: Regarding the previous post you told me about in the first interview, I couldn’t find that post when two of your friends had a fight on your wall.

AY: I deleted it.

R: Why did you do that?

AY: Because they started talking in an inappropriate way. I don’t have any problem with conflict in opinions but when they started insulting each other… I know that the atmosphere is so bad… but they have to respect the opinions of each other. Even if one has a backward opinion, the other should respect it.

R: Is that because it happened on your wall?

AY: Yes, why are people insulting each other?!

R: Do you mean that you don’t want to allow people to insult each other on your wall?

AY: Yes, they even don’t know each other. One lives in Syria and the other is a Syrian who lives here, but one wrote a comment and the other replied. I wasn’t even specific in my post, I just wrote a prayer, and they started a fight. You know that my closest friends at work are from different sects… another thing happened as well. What happened is that one wrote a silly comment about one of the sects. I replied firmly and against her on my wall. I told her, please, if you want to write any comment like that don’t write it on my wall.

R: Did she write the comment on your Facebook wall?

AY: Yes. Even if I believe that something is wrong with Christianity and have it on an audio recording, I won’t post it, because I have Christian friends […] Not only because of that, there are things that I don’t believe. And also why should someone
provoke others? Even if we believe that we are the right religion, I will not post any religious debate but email it to you instead.

**R:** Do you know when I post something, sometimes I don’t think about my audience and that might be what happened with some people on your wall. So you manage your wall and delete posts you don’t like.

**AY:** Yes, you also don’t want to create a problem. I want people to understand each other, not to start a fight. That’s why when you are in a place surrounded by different nationalities, you will experience more.

Deleting posts and friends’ comments is a strategy used by AY to reduce the challenges she might face to elaborate her position within a tense discussion, as she sought to bring together perspectives and not to create fights. As the example suggests, she might delete an oppositional comment that she did not agree with, with the justification that this was to avoid an inflamed conflict. AY would prefer to promote her opinion in a more private communicational channel, such as an email, instead of posting something that creates conflict on her wall and provokes people.

The way in which she firmly asked her friend not to behave in the way she did also demonstrates the point that her Facebook wall is not a place for bitter debates or for acting impolitely (talking inappropriately and insulting each other). This also underlines the idea that Facebook engagements frequently reflect accord and similar opinions. As argued in previous literature, impoliteness in political discussions is a behaviour that occurs in an online environment. Halpern and Gibbs (2013), for example, found that people are less polite when they make anonymous contributions, for example, on YouTube, than they are on Facebook, where they are identified. The previous excerpt indicates that Facebook might, however, encourage impoliteness, as the anonymous environments do, when people do not actually know each other but only communicate through a mutual friend’s wall. However, as described in the previous chapter, on their private profiles, participants value politeness within their interactions and friending, especially with male contacts. AY also limited hostile interactions through the managing and controlling of her profile’s content and avoided being impolite to any of her friends.
5.5 Deliberation about Social Issues on Facebook

In this section, I build on the idea of participants’ use of Facebook for the discussion of serious issues that concern them and for reacting to offline politics and religious events. Within these posts, expressions of anger and negativity, as well as cultural “othering”, could be discerned. They targeted different audiences and their attempts were to change the perspective of “others” and the behaviour of “us”. In this section, I move beyond the consideration of political and religious issues to examine the deliberation of social issues on Facebook and the participants’ direct admonishments to their Facebook audience in an attempt to improve their offline social behaviour. The section focuses on ND’s online engagements. ND is a participant who has a professional privately public profile that is open even to strangers, and she often writes on her wall about her concerns that are derived from offline daily life, e.g., criticising social programs/organisations/individuals and giving advice and solutions on social, educational, and gender issues in society. To take one example, ND uses her Facebook wall to raise important social issues by following social programs on television and assessing the topics, presenters, and the way these issues are reported. She criticises the role of the local media in solving social and individual problems. Her voice is clear through the language she uses; she either stands with or against an idea, an opinion, or a social process. She once posted:

“The topics that are discussed in Althamina are to serve the public interest, and are well taught... but, in Dr. D’s [the presenter’s] way, it is a conspiracy seeking to tarnish the image of the country!” (translated).

Here, she is critisising the presenter of a famous social program called Althamina (which means 8 o’clock) that is a recently launched, first-of-its-kind initiative. This program allows citizens to confront the department responsible for the particular situation to discuss the constraints and problems that the citizens face due to this department’s failure to implement regulations. This is done in front of a studio audience. ND takes a position opposing the presenter. In this extract, she criticised him for
promoting a negative image of the country to his audience instead of attempting to solve problems.

ND’s critiques were not restricted to the representation of social problems in the media but also included issues specifically related to women’s roles in society. She indicated to her audience the essential role of women outside as well as inside their homes, encouraging women to speak about their role in supporting their families financially, which is, in Saudi society, entirely the husband’s responsibility. As ND described when I asked her about this post in a private message, the following extract was a reaction to women’s behaviour while she interviewed them for a job. While male candidates where keen to know the salary and benefits of the job, women did not ask for any information about compensation. Regarding this, she posted (ND: 26 Aug 2012):

“I noticed that some women are keen not to let anyone know that they need "money" and work to increase their families’ income and raise their standard of living, as if this weakens their and their families’ social position” (translated).

**FR1:** Or they may do this to be considered spoiled women by the society.

ND calls on women to stop promoting a narrow and limited view of their financial role in supporting their family’s needs and advised them to speak up and be proud of their roles. She received support from her friend, who attributed the silence of women about their financial contributions to the family to their desire to be seen by society as ‘spoiled’38, i.e. well taken care of financially by their husbands. Such a position is generally desired, as Friend1’s comment might suggest.

ND also raises issues about women’s rights in society, such as the issue of whether women should be allowed to drive. She stated in private message that the decision to leave in place the country’s ban on women driving was due to the fact that

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38 In Saudi society, the woman whose husband is capable of covering her expenditures is considered spoiled by him and has a better social position than the woman whose husband is not able to cover her needs.
the regulations were based on what the society values and will accept, and many Saudis oppose it. She posted on 12 June:

“Driving the car in Saudi Arabia is primarily a ‘personal estimate’, what ‘is going on in the street’ has nothing to do with ‘applicable regulations’... never... As well as the rest of the ‘things’! (translated).

Friend 1: We need to think deeply about the meaning of the word driving, either when driving a car, or leading a family or a country. Things unfortunately left without regulations or even self-control. God helps to put the right person in the right place.

Friend 2: When we say driving we have to think deeply about the meaning and not the word itself. I asked myself, why do women not drive cars? I found some illogical answers. Is it because some religious people see men flirting with women for their beauty and attractiveness? All of their excuses make no sense, men could flirt with women at a mall, outside on the street and unfortunately in front of the schools, as is known in our society. I hope they consider the case of women driving because women are men’s creators in the first place, I hope they consider allowing women to drive cars.

Raising the issue of driving led her friends to consider it from different angles. Friend 1 thought about the post in a broader sense and touched on wider social issues. She mentioned the importance of good leadership on the part of the police and their responsibility to direct individuals and their behaviour and reduce chaos, not just in the

39 Driving in Arabic is a word that has multiple meanings: driving and leading. When translating, I will be using both words depends on the meaning used in the post.
streets but in every social aspect. While Friend 1 (a female friend) thought about it in a broader way, Friend 2, who is male, thought about women’s rights and elaborated on the issue of women driving in the country. Such interactions encourage friends to talk about their own concerns as it serves to encourage and support the participants. They, in turn, allow for an exchange of opinions between women and men online, which is one of the benefits the participants gain through Facebook use, as will be discussed in Chapter 6.

Another key topic that has always been an obsession to ND, as stated in her online interview, is the field of education, the idea of knowledge exchange, and how this might be best achieved. In her posts she often, if not most of the time, voiced guidance about how society should act. She posted about her teaching experience:

“The objective of having classrooms is to bring out the best in each individual, and not to determine the level of the students in order to monitor grades from excellent to poor. It follows that we should look at the homeland in a similar way…” (ND, 6 Dec 2012).

ND has a way of voicing her ideas and promoting her thoughts about how people should behave in her society by implying criticism of the status quo in her posts and subsequently suggesting solutions. In the above post, she used a particular educational problem to show how social enhancement starts by building individuals in classrooms in order to positively build a nation, suggesting that they have to invest in individuals first. In her words “it follows that we should look at the homeland in a similar way…”, and in the previous extract, “as well as the rest of the ‘things’!”, she advised people to change their behaviour at the personal level for social betterment. Her continual criticism and advice, as shown in the above examples, exemplify her willingness to contribute to social change in different fields. Her network includes around 700 friends and even strangers. Therefore, I asked her if she feels she has a role in changing things in society. She said:

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ND is not a teacher; however, I found out through her posts that she taught for a period of time ("My university teaching experience was very interesting. The classroom is a cross section of the community in that it contains the person who is looking for an opportunity, another who does not move but just stands still, and those who waste all opportunities!!")
“I hope... I really hope. I can tell you that I surely want to. I am not sure whether I can; I am not so confident as to tell you I did something. But I heard people saying “you have a good profile on Facebook, we open your profile once in a while, and you write things that we like to read”.

By conveying messages through Facebook, and because her audience has expressed support for her efforts and her ideas, ND suggested that she might be able to contribute to the change of people’s social practices and the empowerment of women to speak up about their roles and rights, starting with her Facebook audience. As this last reported extract does not indicate any tangible social action, it seems that her attempts are simply expressions and thoughts that are shared with others on Facebook (as the political and religious expressions discussed previously), with a hope that others will act accordingly.

5.6 Deliberation of Moral Issues on Facebook

In this final section I move from how participants discuss social issues and their attempts to advance social change to how they explicitly talk about morality and the principles that they emphasise in doing so. Morality, in the sense that I use it here, are the values and principles derived from the participants’ religion and negotiated in the form of commentary, advice and experience, which they share with their friends on Facebook. Morality is what, in their opinion, makes an individual a good person, who is well behaved, and how this behaviour and character are sustained through their actions and relationships. My data suggested that the desire of some of the participants for a better society, better social relationships and to be better individuals led them to use the space to promote particular moral positions and educate others. Their posts touched on such issues as the lack of morality among people, how to think and behave in order to be a good person, the qualities of good and bad relationships, and why should we respect others.
As mentioned in the previous section, ND is concerned with social issues related to her daily observations offline, but the data revealed her interest in writing posts about personal ideals based on her own experiences and insights, which would combat the lack of morality among individuals in the society. Sometimes, within her posts she would imply criticism of other people’s behaviour. The following post is a reaction to a person she met, as she stated in a private message, who talked a lot about morality, ethics, and sayings of the Prophet Muhammed, but his behaviour was contrary to what he said. On account of this meeting, she reflected to her readers that morals are an integral part of people’s behaviour and cannot be situational. For example:

“Attention has been drawn!! Morality cannot be awarded to the man through a ‘medical injection’ in the vein!!” (ND: 29 Aug 2012).

Friend 1: What about a pill after each meal? 😊

Friend 1: This morality is a fashion that will soon disappear, exactly as the Charleston :P

ND: I hope the “Charleston” fashion comes again 😊

ND: A pill after each meal! This will give a headache to everyone who is forced to negotiate with the person who is addicted to these “moral pills”… “after each meal!”… Please NO.

Friend 2: Notions are ethics... if their morals disappear… we just kick them out 😊

In this example, ND cynically criticised the lack of morality among people. ND’s friends agreed that there is a lack of morality in society and offered similarly cynical solutions and jokes (“a pill after each meal”). The example shows how an argument on such an important issue can be presented in a humorous way. The use of the smiley faces by Friend 1 suggests the addition of a light-hearted expression to the textual massage (e.g. Huffaker & Calvert, 2005), which was understood by ND who replied in the same manner. Through those jokes however, the argument eventually came to an opinion on which all agreed, as illustrated in ND’s choice of words. “This morality is a fashion”
suggests that it comes and goes, or perhaps is entirely fake, and Friend2’s words (“if their morals disappear”) mean that the disappearance could happen and they will dispose of them if it did.

In relation to the field of work and employment, ND repeatedly posts similar types of personal thoughts that reflect her moral positions regarding people’s behaviour. In her online interview she stated that she had attended a meeting with a man in a high position who was talking about his achievements in a “provocative” way. Others were giving him a round of applause for no reason except his position. Following this event, she posted:

“The belief that you as a person are ‘active’ and ‘productive’ does not come from people around you, it is ‘contentedness’ comes from within and directs you to what you put your effort into, and if it comes from ‘others’, this means it is ‘false’” (ND: 30 Dec 2012).

Friend 1: How difficult it is when you believe that you are productive and active, and suddenly and with no respect, someone tells you that you are zero to the left\(^{41}\) and could be replaced easily. This is a real slap on the face. In fact, everything could normally happen.

ND: When “contentedness” stems from the self and does not depend on others… others’ “opinions” should not cause harm. This means that your [Fr1] productivity should be elsewhere… not everything could normally happen\(\bigsmile\) … everything should be “Ok” \(\bigsmile\).

Friend 1: Your opinion [ND]?? God helps, by letting me go and look for those other places on which to focus my energy.

\(^{41}\) Zero to the left is an Arabic saying which means that someone has been treated with ignorance or less valued.
ND: In fact, I would never bring this up if I did not observe it in others, leave things to God... but don’t ever lose your “contentedness”..

Friend2: “The whole universe is moving, don’t be static and a bump in face of wonderful things”... God protect you, ND.

ND: 100 likes [to Fr4’s comment] 😊.

ND: please allow me to quote this in my wall 😊.

This extract shows that ND’s regularly advises her friends (“your productivity should be elsewhere” and “don’t ever lose your “contentedness””). In the extract, ND used quotation marks to emphasise terms to the reader and highlight her opinion. The use of smiley faces here does not indicate joking, as in the previous extract; it is given to soften the impact of her statement to Friend 1 in providing advice to her, as she often does on her wall. It also seems that her friends are even supportive to each other and offer each other advice, e.g., Friend 2 advised Friend 1 to believe in herself and look for a different place to work to feel her self-value, reiterating ND’s opinion and advice. While Friend 2 offered advice to Friend 1, ND supported Friend’s 2 advice.

Seeing as participants assert moral positions on Facebook, their discussions about relationships often include a moral dimension. LY is another participant who presented her personal (but mostly quoted) ideals on her profile. Rather that her own words, they tended to have been authored and cited by others. For her, Facebook is a space to write about people’s relationships, as inspired by personal experiences or what she might have gleaned from the surrounding world. She emphasised this throughout the following interview exchange:

LY: I might share on Facebook anything I feel… sometimes these ideas don’t relate to me personally but I may hear something from somewhere that annoys me and I have no opportunity to explain and share my thoughts outside with others, such as making a public lecture. So I either write a brief idea about the subject or I may borrow a quote and share online
something related to the subject that was written by others. I write about social issues, how society evaluates relationships, family, the values of the family, and how people value friendships more than families from people's perspective… I have experienced part of that, and if I was asked what I would do if I could turn back time, I [say I] would rather have stayed with my family.

**R:** So you feel that what you write is a kind of advice?

**LY:** It’s possible. Some friends share their opinions in return and some don’t.

LY’s explicit statement in this exchange regarding her interest in writing about relationships was supported by activity that I observed on her Facebook page. She once quoted the writer Galal Gafisha:

“We wish that some people did not drop their masks and wish we did not discover the falsity of their words and promises. We begin now to know them again because all those years that we spent next to them were just a temporary fool... we woke up with remorse and pain and feeling more foolish and naive than we were!”

**Friend 1:** Don’t be mad, dear, life is a field of experiences.

**LY:** This is what Gafisha said. It is not my own words, I just liked what he said. And you are right, life is a field of experiences, I miss you.

This example shows that the participants quote public figures as well when they write about moral values to their friends. Besides, LY’s comment above shows that what she quoted in the post was not based on a personal experience. This might also
demonstrate that she engages with such topics not only to express her own feelings but also to gain support for her opinion and to benefit her friends by reminding them of moral values. She said:

“Not everything I write is an expression of feelings or sensations ... And not all narratives express personal experiences. But they are words that may be needed by many people..!!”

AY, on the other hand, uses Facebook to share her personal relationship experiences on her wall. She has posts such as the following, which distinguish good friends from bad ones:

“People are either gold or eroded metal” (AY: Sep). (translated)

Friend 1: In contrast, most people I know are in between these metals. Silver, iron, nickel, copper, tin. Like 1

Friend 2: AY what’s wrong loooool? Hhhhhhhhhhh Like 1

Friend 2: Who is causing you trouble.. Like 1

Friend 3: What’s wrong dear AY? Like 1

AY: Nothing happened, just a reaction to what I see. Friend 1, silver and iron are much better, but there are many more eroded people.

In the previous example, I suggest that AY was responding to what was happening to her in her real life with her offline friends. Her friends, on the other hand, offered support and showed care by asking her why she was posting her messages. AY agreed with Friend1’s opinion (“[Friend1], silver and iron are much better ...”), but as always, she emphasises her ideas and ends the conversation by reiterating her opinion (“but there are many more eroded people”).
AY often talks about enemies who were trying to break her down, and she uses strong language to defend herself on the site and sends them messages. About this she posted (AY:19 Nov):

Friend 1: (AY’s husband): “That which does not kill me can only make me stronger. I don’t see why everybody feel as though they gotta tell me how to live my life” - Tupac Shakur.

AY: “Well that's why I married u babe.. U r the best thing that ever happened to me..can't stop loving u”.

Figure 5-12 Relationship emotional expressions on Facebook

In the above example (Figure 5-12), AY’s husband offered her support and she admired his contribution, indicating that it was exactly what she needed. In addition, the use of the English language in her post could suggest that AY wanted this message to be read by non-Arab friends or maybe to be understood by those who know English. This could suggest an attempt to direct this message to a particular friend or maybe to a specific audience, as in her political and religious engagements. Furthermore, as
Farquhar (2009) argues, popular culture is used by Facebook members to present the self. The use of public figures, however, is common on AY’s wall (and on other participants’ walls, such as ND and LY), where she posts a quote that conveys the message she wants to deliver, as she did in this example. On the other hand, her husband also uses an American pop star to respond to her post. This might also suggest that this post was directed to an English-speaking audience or at least those who are familiar with non-Arab references.

Participants also try to educate each other about the Islamic religion by sharing stories, videos, prophetic sayings, or prayers intended to build a peaceful and productive individual. These posts might be part of disciplining the self and others. Seven of the ten participants demonstrated interest in conveying religious messages to their audience to spread knowledge and benefit their friends. As EL stated when she posted a video about an Islamic story (EL: 21 Dec. 2012):

“The story of the people of the cave... Amazing”

“God teach us that which benefits us, give us benefits from what we already know, and increase our knowledge”.

She also posted an educational link to an article about Islamic finance:

“Islamic finance” (link to an article)

(EL: 19 Dec 2012).

AY, on the other hand, shares her edifying messages, followed by what she thinks about people. She always used strong language in delivering her messages. For example, she once posted the following prophetic saying:

The Prophet said: “The Muslim is one from whose tongue and hand other people are safe,” then she commented: “Muslims now either kill or have harsh tongues. God help us” (AY: 22 May 2012).
In sum, the participants ND, LY, AY and EL asserted morality positions in their discussions. In some cases, this takes the form of advice that could influence the behaviour of at least some members of the audience, while in others the morality had to do with the freedom of expression on Facebook. Personal experiences featured, in some instances, in these moral engagements. The desire to find support from Facebook friends was also manifested. The participants sometimes ended their interactions by restating their own opinions and keeping it short, and also adapted their language according to the audience they were addressing. The interactions in general took on a light-hearted, humorous tone, which suggests the unserious approach of both the participants and their friends with regard to constructing discussions on serious topics. Moreover, the participants circulated knowledge to educate each other morally through Facebook, which also might have had a positive impact on their friends. In this sense, moral deliberation on Facebook encompasses not only the sharing of ideas, opinions and suggestions, but could also produce social capital through the benefits and support gained from it. This connects what has been argued here to what will be discussed in the next chapter.

**Does my participants’ discussion constitute online deliberation?**

There are several reasons that my participants’ online discussions would not be considered online deliberation according to previous studies. First, as argued by Habermas, political deliberation refers to the discussion of ideas, opinions, concerns, and issues in order to compel the government to take action (Wilhelm, 1998:316). Since participants did not demonstrate any specific political goals in discussing political and religious topics, their posts might not have the main purpose of political deliberation, as conceived by Habermas. Second, according to Wilhelm (1998:319), political discussions involve expressing opinions or concerns, receiving responses and the exchange of ideas; therefore, when the exchange process is incomplete, whether because of not responding to the message posted or just show preference (e.g. press the “like” button), it is less deliberative, as explained by Fishkin in 1995:41 (as cited by Wilhelm, 1998:320). Perhaps this is due to the ease of simply clicking ‘like’ on Facebook to show support and moving on, as well as to the humorous tone of some of their interactions. These indicate the lack of thoughtful deliberation. In AY’s case – and her engagements were a
significant part of the chapter’s argument - the rate at which she posted (at least 4 times a day) could have precluded profound discussions. Therefore, her friends were exposed to a lot of posts with little time to think about each in depth, which is also a requisite of considered deliberation (Thorseth, 2011).

The notion of engaging in considered deliberation was also undermined by the lack of openness and critical scrutiny in the discussions. In other words, it is arguable whether participants’ engagements could be regarded as deliberation because they tended to be short and not in-depth as a result of the control imposed by participants over their friends’ interactions and the management of the content. This suggests that the participants’ serious yet informal, and sometimes brief interactions are merely ideas presented without being open for discussions. Finally, engaging in discussion with like-minded people, with no significant disagreement or even openness to alternative perspectives does not meet the criteria for political deliberation in a public sphere.

5.7 Conclusion

This chapter answers the questions about how participants use Facebook platform for online engagements and how, in doing so, they address different audiences within a private domain. First, the participants’ engagement had to be situated within the previous literature on online deliberation. The question of whether participants’ discussions on Facebook could be regarded as deliberation was also considered, with the data suggesting that participants use Facebook for serious political, religious, social, and moral engagements and expressions that are deliberative and significant. Yet, these did not meet the criteria for online political deliberation as defined in previous literature, and for that reason, I advocate the expansion of this definition and promote a more informal way of thinking about “online deliberation.”

I have challenged the narrowness of the definition of political deliberation for several reasons: (1) Facebook is used as a political space to construct political deliberation; (2) online deliberation could occur among those with similar opinions; and (3) online citizen deliberation could be constructed. Thus, I proposed that engagements in a complex space such as Facebook might still be considered serious, informal, and daily deliberations on the various topics of concern to users. My participants used Facebook to express their opinions and to release their feelings, anger and negativity.
towards surrounding events. Such deliberation constructs meaningful interactions and allows users to find agreement and support from a different type of audience (who mostly hold similar opinions), while presenting their views in a variety of ways (e.g. the “pedagogic” approach taken by EL and AY’s “emotive” approach). The goal was not offline political action but social enhancement and benefit to the individual and society instead.

I would also argue that Facebook is a multiple space that empowers the participants to form their own kind of discussions. As a place where it is safer than having equivalent discussion in offline space, Facebook represents a safe place to address serious topics whose discussion is curtailed offline. It is also a space that allows users to construct different identities and address different audiences. Participants were able to construct their cultural identity based to some extent on othering by addressing different or multiple audiences. The participants distinguished themselves from “other” Westerners, who were the unreachable audience which they positioned as a threat to “us” (Arabs and Muslims). In doing so, Facebook has enabled participants to explicitly resist/defend prejudice towards them on their wall and express a critical view of others. Participants also distinguished between one “us” and another “us” audience to establish a critical internal discussion. Facebook was also shown to be a space to promote social and moral opinions, a source of relief, and a source of social capital production. Thus, I propose to extend the scope of ‘online deliberation’ beyond the public political spheres to “other, more ‘private’” networked publics.
CHAPTER 6: THE SOCIAL BENEFITS OF FACEBOOK: SOCIA L CAPITAL AND NETWORK TIES

6.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the role of Facebook use among Saudi women in facilitating different kinds of relationships (including cross-gender relationships that are difficult to establish offline), considers the perceived social benefits of networking, and describes my participants’ perceptions of the impact of such relationships on their social lives. It looks at whether participants’ Facebook use contributes to the production of social capital, arguing that the positive outcomes of obtaining social capital on this site outweigh the negative impact of Facebook use on some of my participants’ relationships.

Social capital is a reproduction of human communication that focuses on groups and connects them together (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; and Putnam, 2000). The distinction I introduced in Chapter 2 between weak and strong ties (Granovetter, 1973) can be articulated in terms of bridging and bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000). As discussed previously, bonding social capital refers to relationships with family and close friends while bridging social capital refers to relationships with neighbours or acquaintances (Putnam, 2000). Maintained social capital is a concept introduced by Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe (2007) which builds on Putman’s (2000) exploration of whether online websites could generate social capital in the sense of keeping individuals in contact with those whom they are physically disconnected from. As discussed in Chapter 2, existing research has focused on examining the impact of social networking sites on bonding, bridging, and maintaining social capital (Ellison et al., 2014; Lampe et al., 2006), as well as building new relationships (e.g. Ellison et al., 2007). As social media provide a space where relationships overlap and are interwoven, this study looks at the various ties that Facebook helps participants to form and maintain. I will show that establishing some types of relationships is challenging for different reasons.

Moreover, previous researchers have focused on users’ “effort of sociability”, which means how they mutually and consistently exchange the resources available to them on such social networks to maintain their relationships (Bourdieu, 1985: 250). The willingness to socialise and the effort people expend to maintain relationships as a result of increased technology use have created new forms of sociability and benefit exchange.
This contradicts Nie (2001), who claimed that Internet use contributes to the diminishment of an individual’s social capital. On the contrary, social networking sites “provide flexible and personalizable modes of sociability, which allow individuals to sustain strong and weak ties through a variety of online tools and strategies” (Papacharissi and Mendelson, 2010:212). As mentioned in previous chapters, Facebook, through its affordances, provides users with a space to construct identity, present and express the self, as well as a forum for the numerous, meaningful experiences and information/knowledge exchange seen to occur among participants and their friends. In this chapter I suggest that Facebook is not only a site for relationship formation but also one that fulfils users’ social desires and pleasures, and creates memories in order to maintain these social ties (Hart et al., 2008).

The Facebook resources that this study’s participants use to socialise are similar to those discussed in studies of the relationship between Facebook use and social capital in Western contexts (Ahn, 2012; Steinfield et al., 2008; Ellison, et al. 2007; Lampe et al., 2008), including exposure to useful information and the ability to find support and reassurance from friends on the site. However, Baym and boyd (2012) argue that the nature of social media spaces is also shaped by people’s social contexts, identities and practices. In this particular context, relationships, as well as the resources that are utilised, are marked by cultural norms described in previous chapters. These play an important role in the way users manage their networks and relationships, the strategies by which relationships are formed, and even the types of information, advice, and support that are exchanged on that network to foster and maintain relationships as well as, perhaps, to end them. As I described in Chapter 5, participants attempt to impart religious information and guidance, while here, information might be available regarding, for example, the decision to accept a marriage proposal or to provide emotional support to another. This chapter can, therefore, be seen to build on the analysis of discussion activity presented in Chapter 5 and of the content of profiles presented in Chapter 4, by examining important aspects of socialisation and the forming of relationships on Facebook. As in the previous two chapters, these aspects can also be seen to connect my participants’ online and offline worlds.

In this chapter, I also respond to the calls for researchers interested in social networking to find ways to look at the production of social capital vis-à-vis communication practices. Ellison et al. (2011) argue that “researchers interested in social
networking need to develop methods to examine communication practices in respect of
the production of social capital”. This is achieved here by scrutinising my participants’
practices, including both their reported practices when establishing relationships, the
benefits they perceive of Facebook-mediated social relationships, the nature of their
exchanges as I observe them, and the tools they use. I attempt, in doing so, to extend
prior work that relied on self-reported survey data, for example, Ellison et al. (2006b,
2007), who examined the intensity of Facebook use in relation to the establishment of
social relationships and the physiological benefits that might be obtained from these
relationships.

As indicated in Chapter 2, Ellison et al. (2011) also examined communicational
practices and their relationship to social capital, and Ellison, et al. (2014) similarly
adopted a quantitative approach to consider the socio-technical affordances available on
Facebook, such as responding to friend requests and birthday wishes and users’
maintenance behaviour. My mixed method approach shows its significance in this
chapter. Unlike the previous chapters, where the two methods were interwoven, in this
section I found them not to be complementary in support of the argument, which made
it problematic to refer to the data from both simultaneously. Thus, I have based the first
section of the chapter on the interviews and the second on the online observation. Each
method highlights different aspects concerning relationship formation and the production
of social capital. As I will demonstrate, establishing relationships and maintaining them
on Facebook can take different forms (e.g., liking or commenting); the reasons for such
actions and their positive effects could be invisible on the wall but articulated though
interviews.

The chapter is organised into three sections. I start by drawing on my interview
data to examine my participants’ descriptions of how they use Facebook to manage
existing relationships and create new ones. Here I recruit the conceptual distinction
between bonding, maintaining and bridging social capital, which provides a way of
thinking about the different networks of relationships that they form on the site. My
analysis demonstrates how Facebook enables my participants to maintain ties with
dispersed family members, to re-connect with friends and achieve a sense of ‘closeness’
with those thought long lost, whilst also making connections with strangers, and
engaging (to a limited extent) in cross-gender interactions. It is also suggested that
information is one of the key resources “accumulated” through their online relationships (Ellison et al., 2007: 1145).

In the second section I look at the tools that participants use to sustain and manage their Facebook relationships, including the use of “liking” and private messaging. This section also considers the challenges of “observing” the production of social capital in social media environments; as I will describe, some areas of their profiles – specifically the use of private messaging - were hidden from my gaze. I have therefore relied on their accounts in my exploration of their use of these features. The final section examines the extent to which my participants regard the site as having a positive or negative impact on their social lives. This section also examines how Facebook use has unsettled and destabilised a number of participants’ existing relationships.

In a similar way to the usage patterns discussed in previous chapters, where the participants control and manage their self-presentation and discuss political issues but then close down critical debates on their walls, their way of forming and establishing different relationships appears quite reserved and always carefully controlled. They use the site to build different types of relationships, including with males and strangers, but in a way that has relatively narrow, defined boundaries. Facebook is used primarily to reinforce existing relationships while avoiding cross-gender relationships, and for its features (such as personal messaging). I argue that participants form different interpretations of their friends’ personalities and pass judgements on them. They also look at friends’ posts from their friends’ perspectives, thinking about the other’s feelings and behave in the same way that they would like others to treat them when managing and sustaining their relationships, in a way that is reminiscent of how they imagine others will judge them when constructing the self in Chapter 4.

6.2 On Facebook: The Maintenance and Production of Social Ties and Networks

In this section, I examine how participants use Facebook to bond, maintain and bridge existing relationships and how they also create new relationships on the site. I also examine the benefits gained from this activity, which also contributes to the production of social capital. Based on what participants reported in their interviews, it could be said that Facebook has become a vital arena for them to establish and maintain social connections. The data highlighted relationships with different kinds of
acquaintances/contacts, such as friends, who might be close, childhood, new, or geographically distant, family, and professional ties. To all participants, Facebook is valued as a platform for strengthening and increasing their online social networks.

6.2.1 Bonding Social Capital

I start by looking at my participants’ use of Facebook to sustain relationships with close contacts, such as family and close friends. Here, my focus is on bonding social capital, which refers to relationships that can involve the building of “strong ties”, from a network research perspective (Putnam, 2000:22). Previous studies have emphasised the useful role social media networks play in bonding among family and close friends (Dekker and Engbersen, 2014, who looked at emigrants). Large families being common in Saudi Arabia, some participants find Facebook an easy way to connect with their relatives abroad. AY, a participant with multiple family origins (a Saudi father and a Turkish grandmother), has a geographically scattered family. She found Facebook useful for maintaining those ties, saying:

Regarding our family members, I have a lot of family members everywhere in the world: in Saudi Arabia, Brazil, USA, Britain, and Turkey, everywhere, so Facebook is a good way to communicate with my family members. We created a group for our family members named X to communicate all together. If any of us was in a specific country and wanted to contact the family members, they would do so through this group. We post pictures and know about each other. We have family members that we have never met. It is easy to meet those in Turkey but not those in USA and Brazil. There are also members who are not even Saudis. So you feel it’s a good way to communicate.

The dispersed nature of AY’s family as well as her desire to communicate with all of them has led her to use Facebook and utilise its features to keep in touch with them. This particular example suggests that the creation of a Facebook group also provides an
online meeting place to share memories and overcome geographical distance as an alternative to meeting in person.

As the participants maintain their relationships with family by sharing news and photos, it might be inferred that Facebook activity serves as a precursor to physically meeting and helps create stronger and closer relationships over time. For instance, AY continued:

For example when I went to Turkey I got my relatives’ numbers through Facebook and I went and met them... like my father’s cousins, for example, in Istanbul, let me show you.

(AY then showed me photos of them together, which had been posted on the family group page, mentioned above).

This excerpt suggests two ideas: the first is the introduction of a photograph as bonding family on the site. Those who have never met can meet virtually and thereafter have memories to share on the site. The second is that Facebook is used as a tool to find people online for offline encounters; as she said, AY found a family member whom she had never met and organised an in-person offline meeting through Facebook. The latter was widely assumed to be unlikely to happen among participants in Lampe et al.’s (2006) study, who suggested that Facebook users are more likely to social search than social browse (see Chapter 2). In other words, they are more likely to look for people with whom they have an existing connection and/or have met offline than to seek people online for offline connections (as those unmet relatives are not strong ties until they meet online). With regard to the two above examples, Facebook affordances have enabled AY to stay updated and connected with geographically distant family members, which might be difficult without Facebook. (“So you feel it’s a good way to communicate.”) In addition, arranging in-person meetings with unknown family members via Facebook facilitates closeness and contributes to bonding social capital.

Another participant, BS, started her Facebook network by adding mostly relatives and only a few friends. When I asked her about her friends on Facebook, she responded:
“My friends... aaammm [pausing], yes, but most are relatives”. BS’s number of family members/relatives seems to be greater than the number of friends on her friends’ list, which means that she uses Facebook mostly to interact with family. AZ’s friends’ list contains family members, but unlike BS, she tends to be selective about which members of her family are included. When I asked her about who she accepts on her network as friends, she said:

AZ: My friends, those who I can trust, I am sure they will interact with me and they have special personalities; so, not all people.

R: Do you include all family members?

AZ: No. Some of them, not all.

AZ is not particularly interested in adding many relatives and is selective in this regard, having added only her two daughters and no male relatives at all (an issue that I will discuss shortly). During the interview she said that this was because she wanted to be able to share her taste in music and express her ideas and feelings only with those she feels comfortable with: i.e., only the closest people among her family and friends. In a similar vein, participant LY stated in the interview that she does not add family members to her network, as her interest on Facebook is to interact and exchange information and opinions with her friends:

R: Who do you usually add on your Facebook network? Your close friends or family or...?

LY: No, no, just the close friends.

However, she stated later in the interview that she uses Facebook for both family and close friends, saying:

LY: I feel like this Facebook account is just for family and close friends.

She then explained that some of her nieces are on Facebook and she communicates with them through private messages:
LY: I just tell them [her nieces] to send me private messages … if they need anything.

She went on to say that:

LY: … I write to those people who I don’t usually talk to by phone.

I message my sister in America.

The contradiction that appeared in LY’s answers, as she first declared that she only adds close friends to her Facebook network, while at other times during the interview, she mentioned using Facebook to communicate with family members, such as nieces and sisters, might indicate that she uses private messaging to communicate with family members but her Facebook network was essentially created to interact with close friends. In both cases, she is bonding with strong ties. When interacting with friends she aims to establish meaningful dialogues and impart moral principles, as indicated in Chapter 5, and this might suggest that she has only friends on her profile. When it came to her relatives, namely her young nieces, she preferred not to let them intrude her wall (“I just tell them to send me a private message instead if they need anything”), so she can reply to them at her convenience. In this way, Facebook’s different features allow participants to manage their different relationships. Consistent with Ellison et al.’s (2006b and 2007) studies, which conclude that Facebook helps people to strengthen their relationships with family, relatives and close friends, my data extended this to include those who may be geographically dispersed and who had never met but became strong ties after connecting through Facebook. This might be due to the large size of Saudi families, which might also cause them to often include members living outside of Saudi Arabia, as in the case of AY. It also suggests that participants are discerning in their approach to their potential audience of family members. In other words, the data demonstrated that being a family member is not enough to automatically be accepted as a friend, as the participants distinguished between family members generally and those who are really close to them and who they feel comfortable with.

6.2.2 Maintaining Social Capital

The data presented in the previous section can be seen to suggest that participants engage in producing both bonding and maintaining social capital, the former through nurturing
relationships with family and the latter through maintaining physically distant ones. For AY, for example, Facebook is a space to connect with family members as well to maintain relationships with known and unknown relatives living abroad. Maintained social capital refers to the act of keeping individuals connected to those whom they are physically disconnected from. Therefore, maintaining relationships is not limited to bonded ties, as mentioned above, but may also include childhood, high school and geographically distant friends. Lampe et al. (2006) attributed the increasing use of Facebook to connect with high school friends to users’ young average age, suggesting that the results would be different if the sample was older, as “one might expect that older students are less committed to using Facebook as a way to keep track of high school friends” (p:169). This study demonstrates an opposing view, since the participants, who are of different ages, use Facebook to maintain school friendships. HW reported that she became closer to some childhood friends by connecting with them on Facebook:

Through Facebook I got invitations to events. I got one from a girl who I knew in the first grade… we were not close friends, but she invited me to her wedding. It was a Facebook invitation to her wedding… I don’t normally find my relatives around me on Facebook but Facebook has increased my outside relationships, that’s why I like it.

The extract contains the idea of inside and outside relationships. HW prioritized having outside relationships, which makes her value Facebook. AY is another example, having described using Facebook to become closer to some of her old friends who she was not especially close to at school. She told me how she was able to reconnect with a childhood friend after years of no contact:

Sometimes you search for people, those old ones... I found some of my old friends. For example X friend was in my sixth grade class and she was really my best friend. She emigrated to Canada in grade seven and I used to contact her by letters. I found her on Facebook and I met her here in Jeddah after 20 years.
It appears that the rekindling of friendships from early school years is important to both of the participants quoted above. However, the different experiences suggest that the rediscovery of a close friend via Facebook is something important to AY, something which she actively sought out, whereas for HW, it was more chance that she was remembered by an old friend and given an invitation to an event, thereby being added to a new social circle. Participants who actively searched for their old friends on Facebook emphasised the value of certain features, specifically photos, which act as a reminder, in helping them find their friends. As HW described:

I got back my relationships. Also those who were in high school, each went to a different university, for example, one friend called and asked me: do you remember me? She was with me in primary school and suddenly left. I wouldn’t remember her by her name until I saw her photo.

Similarly, EL and ND use Facebook features to contact their friends who are geographically far away from them and at their convenience. ND described Facebook as the only tool that enables her to contact her foreign friends and those who she rarely meets. HW said:

…I hadn’t heard from X since university. She wrote a comment congratulating me and wanted to visit me, it is like this. Facebook has gathered me with a lot of people… It is nice... very nice, especially because they live far away, Facebook makes us closer.

The above examples draw attention to the importance of the maintenance of relationships among the participants, which demonstrates the similarity between what people are doing in Western and non-Western contexts. Ellison et al. (2007) argue that Facebook offers the social capital outcome of facilitating the maintenance of relationships.
with weak ties, i.e. those to whom users lose access as they change jobs or go away to college (see also Bonds-Raacke and Raacke, 2008; Joinson, 2008; and Lampe et al., 2006, for maintaining relationships with old friends). My data suggest that participants are keen to rediscover their early childhood relationships and refresh them again through Facebook.

6.2.3 Bridging Social Capital

As the participants maintain and rekindle their relationships with their old and childhood friends, they are also interested in bridging their relationships. *Bridging social capital* refers to relationships with neighbours or acquaintances (Putnam, 2000:22) and corresponds to what network researchers refer to as “weak ties” (Granovetter, 1973:1363) or “the loose connections between individuals which may provide useful information or new perspectives for one another” (Phulari et al., 2010:94). Ellison et al. (2007) and Steinfeld et al. (2008) posit that bridging social capital is the most salient social currency that is generated by the intense use of Facebook, but what is different from their approach is that this study does not use the intensity of Facebook use to measure bridging social capital, relying on participants’ reported experiences instead. Nevertheless, the data reflect different kinds of bridging relationships among the participants. For example, AZ adds non-close, second-degree friends (friends of friends) to her network; AY adds her students and colleagues; EL adds colleagues; and HW and ND – both of whom consider Facebook to be less private than their mobile phones42 - increase their online network by amassing a large number of friends. Here, I look at their “bridging” actions in more detail.

Some participants, such as AZ, establish relationships with “latent ties” Ellison et al. (2006:29); i.e., those who are present on other networks but have not yet been activated, and on Facebook, their activities can be viewed through their friends’ profiles. In this way, AZ described becoming attracted by their activities and the content they share, so she selected those people to add to her network. Ahn (2012) and Ellison et al. (2011) argue that mixing online interactions with offline relationship formation could

42Both indicated that they might accept a non-close friend on Facebook but not on their phones. This means that the Facebook network is treated as more public to them than phone network, which contains only those who they really want to be in touch with.
result in relationships that are stronger and closer and help bring people with the same interests together. Consistent with the findings of both Ahn (2012) and Ellison et al. (2011), AZ stated that she has something in common to share in offline settings with those relationships (she was referring to the topics they discussed online then being brought up in their offline settings). This, in turn, increased her online interaction and strengthened her offline relationship as well.

The relationships established by the participants tend to have a dual nature. Ahn (2012) argues that Facebook users socialise with close friends while simultaneously being connected to a broader world. As AY maintains relationships with her close friends and relatives, she adds her students to her network, using Facebook as an instant medium of communication for enquiries relating to their studies. Such use corroborates O’Hanlon (2007) and Sturgeon & Walker (2009), who note that what occurs between educators and students on Facebook tends to be informal engagements (as cited in Aydin, 2012), rather than group discussions or learning activities, as argued by many previous studies (see Aydin, 2012, for a discussion of this literature). AY said:

Now, there are more things I use Facebook for. You will find I maybe have 792 contacts now. Some of them are my students, my friends, my family, and co-workers. I divided them. My students can contact me right away on Facebook if there is something about the university, so I check. This, besides using email, but Facebook is faster. Some of the students are those I taught fourteen years ago, it’s really funny when I taught them in grade five and some are in the university now, amm [pause], they are still in touch with me. Some of them got married, it is interesting that I taught them in grade five and now they are adults, so it’s a good way to communicate.

In this extract AY presents Facebook as a mode of communication similar to email, one that she is not using as a space for teaching and learning, but instead as a bridging tool to communicate with students in an informal way. It also shows how Facebook makes AY’s relationships with her students closer as she is able to maintain those relationships
by hearing about their personal news, after initially adding them for educational purposes. The shift in relationships on Facebook over time signifies its multiple uses when it comes to bridging relationships and the various benefits (e.g., relationship maintenance through news updates) that are also developed over time. Similarly, EL bridges relationships only with those she feels are sufficiently close to her in her educational field and at work. She stated: “[I add] all my friends. For example, the academic doctors at the university.” But regarding work relationships, she said:

Only my friends but not my boss or manager, no way would I add them. [The relationship is] professional so you don’t want to add them, Facebook is something private. It would be ok if I am so friendly with them, but otherwise, no. They are still my managers so their status does not allow me to add them.

Taken together, this example and the previous one suggest that ties on Facebook are maintained within the professional hierarchy (existing social context offline). As AY communicates with her students, EL communicates with her teachers and colleagues. EL, due to the nature of her interaction (communicating informally), excluded her managers from those relationships she bridges on Facebook.

Other participants, on the other hand, add nearly everyone they know or meet offline as a friend on Facebook but once accepted, they then segment the audience in different ways, as described in Chapter 4. Acar's (2008:77) study shows that online networks are larger than offline networks mainly due to the awkwardness of deleting unwanted or dormant contacts compared to the ease of increasing the size of the network by requesting and accepting friendships. Although my participants, as indicated in Chapter 4, police and manage their audience, their behaviour does not contradict the finding that the Facebook network is larger than their other networks (e.g. phone). When I asked HW whether she deleted unpleasant Facebook contacts, she said:

“No, but if it’s my Blackberry I would have deleted them because they just take up space, but on Facebook I have no problem adding 500 or 1000” (p.6).
This means that the digital capacities of the different platforms or the ways participants use Facebook has a bearing on the decisions made about adding friends. Thus, HW uses Facebook as a space to increase her online relationships to the extent that they even exceed the number of offline ones. In the same vein, ND also considers her mobile phone much more private than her Facebook profile; both HW and ND use Facebook to expand their social networks by bridging weak ties, unlike other participants, such as AZ and LY, who mainly use Facebook to interact with close friends.

6.2.4 Forming New Relationships on Facebook

Up until now, I have been primarily focusing on how participants engage with existing contacts. However, it is important to note that some participants – HL, ND, and HN – also seek new relationships through Facebook. AY, as mentioned previously, established new relationships with relatives abroad, as did HL, who was able to contact some of her Turkish relatives whom she had never met and add them to her network. HL also added some of her children’s friends’ mothers to her Facebook social network after first meeting them offline at school. When I asked her whether she adds her children’s friends’ parents, she said:

**HL:** Yes

**R:** Are they already your friends or just because they are your children’s friends’ parents?

**HL:** I established a relationship with them. In the first year I added them because they are the mothers of my children’s friends. Then through Facebook we became friends.

Facebook enables these mothers to connect, initially for educational reasons or concerns about their children. Again, over time, Facebook helps create relationships out of non-existent ones and then these friendships move to offline settings. On the other hand, ND and HN described how Facebook had given them the opportunity to establish new relationships with strangers whom they had never met and had no offline connection.
to. ND indicated, for example, that interacting with strangers added on her network creates closer relationships with them. She explained to me, in the second interview, that comments and responses from the same strangers on her posts enable her, over time, to get an idea of their personalities. She said:

...on Facebook ... you start memorising each personality and his/her attitude. There is a character that they show, so you can recognise each one from their words.

This comment emphasised that impressions are conveyed through Facebook activity. As in chapter 4, which saw participants give more consideration to their presentation and impression on others, they likewise construct an image of their audience members through their long-term interactions. In doing so, they can appraise their contacts and establish closer relationships with some new friends in their network.

6.2.5 Mixed-gender relationships on Facebook

For the participants in this study, having male Facebook friends was controversial, as indicated in Chapter 4. Thus, adding men to their networks was an issue for participants, and their behaviour in this regard needs to be addressed. They reported a range of behaviours and opinions when it came to cross-gender friendships on Facebook. When I asked EL whether she adds males to her network, for example, she said:

**EL:** No, just my cousins.

**R:** Just a family member then, but what about males from work?

**EL:** No way, hahaha [laughter]. No way. There are some males from Canada who were studying with me.
EL differentiates between different kinds of male relationships on Facebook. She is comfortable with having male relatives in her network as well as acquaintances who live abroad who she knew for a period of time, but not colleagues who she encounters daily in the workplace. HL similarly bars most males from her network. When I asked her if she adds males, she replied:

**HL:** I am willing to add any male from my family but I don’t really have them on my network. I accept adding them but not requesting their relationships. If they request my friendship, I will accept. For example, I have this cousin from Turkey, I added him. I also have my husband’s brothers.

**R:** Did you add those who are in Turkey to keep in touch with them, am I right?

**HL:** Yes. He asked for that. Also my husband’s brothers, they requested the friendship.

HL seems uncomfortable with connecting to male strangers on Facebook but does not mind adding relatives. The extract suggests a certain passivity in that she does not initiate the online friendships with males, but accepts requests from relatives. Similar to EL and HL, HW also has only male relatives in her network, but she explains that she adds those who are *like* brothers to avoid being embarrassed by rejecting their friend requests (as mentioned in Chapter 4). When I asked her if she adds co-workers, she said:

**HW:** Yes my female friends but not men from work. My account has no males except my brothers, cousins, and my husband’s brothers.

**R:** Why?

**HW:** If he is a family member, that’s ok. For example, a very close dear friend from first grade has a brother (M) who was always with us. So when he requested my friendship, I was embarrassed not to accept the request, at this time I wasn’t married. So, I added him. But
when I got married my husband asked me to delete him. But over time he got to know him, then it was ok with him.

**R:** So your husband doesn’t allow you to add male contacts.

**HW:** No, not only because of that, I respect him. He doesn’t allow and from my side, I don’t do [it] as respect. I have a formal relationship with males at work so I don’t want them to view my life. Actually it is not about allowing, he does not like it, so I respect that. I will not add any male other than a relative.

Not having male friends, according to HW, is a matter of cultural norms. Husbands may not feel comfortable with the idea, and wives, on the other side, avoid interacting with males informally out of a kind of loyalty and respect to their husbands. The reason behind the discomfort is not clear from her comments, nor is it clear what respect the participant is giving her husband. However, previous studies indicate that Facebook may be “responsible for creating jealousy and suspicion in romantic relationships” (Muise, Christofides, and Desmarais, 2009:441) and the freedom it offers might clash with cultural norms; some media outlets have suggested that Facebook use may even be a factor in marital breakdowns, as has been reported in Saudi Arabia (see Was, 2010 - *Al-Watan* online news) as well as in the UK (see *The Telegraph* online news, 2011).

The issue of having male friends was also discussed by other participants who restrict their Facebook network to female friends only. When I asked AZ about adding males and females as friends, she said:

**AZ:** No, all are females.

**R:** What about your sons?

**AZ:** No, I have just added my daughters.

**R:** So you just add those whose opinions you want to have.

**AZ:** To entertain and share with them. I want to express my feelings to them, I want to hear songs with them, you know, I
don’t want ammm [pause]. I use Facebook to be released and not to be tired. So when I open it to males and ammm [pause]. I once joined a group of Arabic songs called “Hejaseyyat”, a female friend invited me to this group, I found that all my wall became comments by males on songs, this situation annoyed me so I pulled myself out from the group.

**R:** So you received a lot of posts from this group.

**AZ:** Yes, posts and comments I am not interested in.

AZ expresses a sense of discomfort about having male friends and relatives observing the particular activities she engages in on the site. As she suggests, having males in her network might make her more conscious about what she posts, especially relating to her tastes and feelings. She also indicates that having male Facebook friends would limit her online interaction so she prefers not to add any.

In general, having male friends depends on the purpose of the participant’s account and thus the type of topics discussed therein. Three participants, HN, ND, and BS, opened their accounts to male strangers but, as discussed in Chapter 4, their Facebook accounts are either anonymous or professional. On the other hand, with all of the participants except those three using Facebook for contact with close friends, having male strangers on their networks is an issue except for a few, while relatives who are well known by the family and/or the husband are welcomed as Facebook friends. Thus, it can be argued that Facebook enables users to form cross-gender relationships that are restricted in their offline lives (with strangers), yet most of this study’s participants choose not to do so.

### 6.3 The Benefits of the Exchanged Resources for Social Relationships

The analysis presented so far suggests that Facebook use produces different kinds of benefits that might be seen to have social capital outcomes. In the previous section, for instance, I described how HL’s online friendships with the mothers of her children’s friends allowed her to establish communications which revolve around school opportunities, problems and support, and have led to the mothers becoming close offline
friends. In addition, ND’s Facebook network increased her blog’s followers, especially after she shared a link to her blog on her Facebook wall. She received support for her writing and more people visited her blog as her Facebook friends became aware of it. I noticed the link on her wall and asked her about it. She said:

It was a link to a newly posted article. Then they view the blog. The blog shows me statistics, where those viewers are from; 80% to 85% are through Facebook.

Moreover, Facebook friendships with close ties also provide my participants with a way of publicly reinforcing their relationships. In the previous chapter, I described how AY’s husband had offered her support by commenting on a post on her page. She responded positively to him, saying, “Well that's why I married u babe. U r the best thing that ever happened to me… can't stop loving u”, which indicates bonding on Facebook.

Looking for information/news and interacting with others across the social network is one of the Facebook features that provides a way for users to get to know new people or strengthen their relationships. ND, for example, searched the network for information about her husband when he first proposed to her. She viewed his profile and accepted his proposal partly based on the information obtained: “I definitely searched on Facebook and viewed his profile. It is the first source of information”. A number of participants emphasised the significance of information as a key resource which is exchanged and obtained through Facebook relationships. As previously mentioned, AZ added latent ties to her Facebook network after viewing their comments/shares through friends on their profiles. This can be linked to Ellison, et al. (2014) suggestion that novel information provided through friend-to-friend networks enhances bridging social capital.

In a similar way, HL and HW indicated that they benefit from the news updates posted to Facebook groups and favourite pages. HL, for example, obtains health information, views products for sale, and receives prayers from religious groups and preachers’ pages. HW seeks new music and products as well as prayers and lectures through Facebook groups. A number of participants also emphasised the role of
Facebook groups. HW reported receiving emotional support and uplift from the content of the groups she is in and pages she has liked. She said:

If you are sad, you will find the right prayer. Whenever I open Facebook, I can find the prayer that suits my emotional state.

As well as from groups, information can also be received from close friends. HL and HW pointed to the rapid spread of information by friends on Facebook, such as public news or current events, or social and family news and events, including marriages, births, illnesses or deaths, as key benefits of the site. This information is the main reason HL uses Facebook, and HW considers it important for her offline social life. LY and AZ described how they benefit from the local and international news posted by their friends and the knowledge circulated through shared information, which is what makes Facebook interesting to them, as they stated. AZ has certain friends who post the latest local and international news as well as episodes of famous local television programmes that she might have missed on TV. LY described how she likes some of her friends’ contributions on the site and stated that she then admires those friends more than she did before. Therefore, the different types of information on Facebook and the support coming from participants’ friends can be considered a form of social capital. The reason for this is that the cooperation and spread of information that occurs could result in the

43 As HL stated: “I now know their news, when they are coming back from vacation so we can meet. Without Facebook, I would never know anything about them or their numbers. They disclose all their information on Facebook and I can view it. A friend is now engaged, so I will congratulate her. Another had a baby. This is the main reason why I use it.”

44 As HW stated: “I suddenly got [my old friends] back and I knew their news, if they got married, had kids, and that is what I like about Facebook. I have a social personality and I like to know people’s news.”

45 As AZ stated: “There are people whose activity I like and the subjects they post about. That’s why I added them and I follow their posts and writings. I look for what she is posting every day because I can see in her posts the social news that I like to follow more than on TV.”

46 As LY stated: “I am eager to see all statuses. I like to see what X, Y, A, M’s writing […] I like F’s topics, she posts nice, rich ones and I also like her writings but she disappears and writes only every once in a while.”
strengthening of current Facebook relationships and/or the creation of new ones with individuals from other groups and favourite pages online as well as offline.

6.4 Observing the Establishment and Maintenance of Relationships on Facebook

Up to this point, I have focused on the ways that participants describe their experience of using Facebook to build and maintain social relationships during their interviews. I now turn to my observational data. It is worth noting the challenges of recognising “social relationships” and ascertaining the “benefits” of these in the activities and online behaviour of my participants on their Facebook pages. The kinds of friendships and the limitations set by the participants in this matter (who to accept and not to accept), the benefits of their favourite pages and other Facebook groups, in addition to the types of information that their friends are circulating, were difficult to observe on participants’ walls in the absence of clarification from them in their interviews. That is because these activities either relate to the participant’s decisions (e.g. to accept someone’s request or not) or take place outside of the observable profile, for example, on a group’s or friend’s page. Nonetheless, online observation provided a valuable counter-point to the self-reporting of participants about their online social relationships. It contributed a level of detail about participants’ actual use. I observed wall activities and highlighted some Facebook features which were used by the participants to help them form and manage their relationships. For example, an increase in the number of friends as well as status updates, such as “X became friends with Y”, could indicate a new friendship. However, as an observer, the difficulty is in determining whether this friend is close or not, a stranger or an acquaintance, and, if the friend is a male, if he is a relative, co-worker, student or stranger.

Rather than using Facebook to establish new relationships, it seems that women’s activities on the site focus mainly on nurturing and rekindling existing relationships. They do so in different ways, which Ellison et al. (2014) describe as Facebook Relationship Maintenance Behaviour (FRMB), which contributes to bridging social capital. The first of these, for example, is sending a birthday wish to a particular friend to maintain a relationship. In this regard, EL said:
Sometimes you don’t talk to a friend, but you send her a wish on her birthday. So she feels that you still remember her... and if you are not communicating with her, you will be communicating that day.

FRMB could also be exhibited through “phatic posts” (Radovanovic and Ragnedda, 2012:11), which include the use of status updates (Sarjanoja., Isomursu & Häkkilä, 2013) and the “like” button by the participants. The strategy of tagging friends in status updates with written emotional expressions was only evident on one participant’s wall, with the youngest participant, BS, often posting direct relationship status updates to maintain her existing relationships. An example of such behaviour is the following:

**LOVE MY BFFS ♥ — (shared with 9 Facebook friends)**

(BS:26 Sep 12)

**FR1:**

I love you mooooore and mooore and I miss all my friends 😊

**FR2:**

AWWW 😄

**FR3:** My heart is your always, I love you a lot, 😊😊 and all the nice faces on blackberry as well hhhhhh [laughter expression]
The above examples are an explicit way of expressing emotions to particular friends on one’s Facebook wall. Being young (19 years old), BS’s use of such language and emotions seems quite childish compared to the other participants, and she references popular culture (by quoting lyrics from a Gotye song), as in Figure 6-2, to express emotions as a way to maintain relationships and strengthen them through the site. Her friends also supported her emotionally in the same way through comments containing texts and emoticons, while she used the “like” feature to acknowledge receipt of their replies and maintain their relationships. The “like” feature is my next focus.

6.4.1 “Liking”

Although LE used birthday reminders and BS used the tag feature to maintain relationships, all participants used the “like” button to show preference and support for
their friend’s posts (the popularity of this feature among my participants is in line with other studies, such as Brandes & Levin (2013)). The “like” button, as argued by Radovanovic and Ragnedda (2012), is a tactic used to keep in touch with and convey a simple but meaningful message to friends. People may use it to express their preferences and positive reactions (since it is a like and not a dislike button) without getting involved in lengthy conversations as well as avoiding the conflicts and the challenges that a comment might generate, as discussed in Chapter 5 (ibid, 2012). The use of this button on the site can be observed online. In other words, I might view a “like” on a participant’s wall or post but it remains a challenge to determine the reason behind the “like”: Does it indicate (emotional) support, preference, curiosity or relationship maintenance? Here, one of the advantages of using mixed data collection techniques emerges, which is that I was able to underpin my argument with statements from the interviews to provide the participants’ perspectives regarding their reasons for using this tool to maintain their relationships on the site. On HN’s wall, for example, I noticed her regular use of the like feature to reply to friends’ comments. As mentioned in Chapter 4, HN tries to construct a well behaved and professional identity on her anonymous profile, and she responds to each comment either with a like or another comment. It is also obvious in some of the above examples by BS and others, presented in Chapter 5, that the “like” button is used to show mutual support and agreement between the participants and their friends in the context of moral and political discussions.

Yet the interview data reveals another dimension of their use of this feature, suggesting that their level of confidence in interacting with others online plays a role in choosing whether to comment or to use the “like” button. BS, for example, stated that she had less confidence speaking to a public audience (e.g. Facebook groups) and that it was less ‘risky’ to use the like button. She stated:

I feel my opinion is not that important… I am shy about writing things especially when there are people who I don’t know well… In groups, I feel I am shy to write... I don’t know why. I feel I cannot write my opinion to others.
Four other participants similarly said in the interviews that they rarely write comments, and when they do, the status should be interesting, or they use the “like” button.

Although all of the participants use the “like” feature, it is difficult to differentiate between the “like” that is used by the participants as an assessment or in support of their friends’ ideas and the “like” that is used out of courtesy just to maintain a relationship. LY reported using the “like” button in the latter way, to indicate to her friend that she had viewed her post even if she did not actually like it. She noted that her main priority is to keep in touch with her friends:

LY: … sometimes I click the like button out of courtesy. For example, a friend posted a song that I already know, I may not even listen to it but I will click “like”, it means that the song is nice…

R: Just to keep in touch...

LY: Yes, she will feel that someone has viewed her post.

R: Yeah, yeah.

LY: Imagine that you post a topic followed by another topic followed by another and no one looked at it except you, you will not feel the pleasure. But the pleasure is when someone shares with you your thoughts either by adding an idea, or admiring your post and the words you have written.

HN uses this feature in a similar way, to maintain her Facebook friendships by appreciating their efforts, their way of writing or to indicate her online presence to her friend:

…Do you imagine, I have analysed this “like” and wrote something about it. Can you look at what my writings contain, even these simple things and how they have effects. Even sometimes when I don’t like the post, I press the “like” button out of courtesy for the effort that this woman has made
something… Sometimes you press “like” for her manner in writing the post. There are a lot of things that let you press the like button but not the post itself. For example, to show that I am here... I am following you. So, the like here is to show that I am present and following. But I comment when something attracts me a lot.

The above example and the example before suggest that LY behaves on Facebook in the same way that she would like others to treat her. She emphasised that her idea of what gives pleasure is informed by how she treats others. Similarly, HN’s extract indicates the significant effect that receiving “likes” has on herself, leading her to write about it. In addition, to her, liking does not necessarily mean something is worthy of praise (if it is, she comments on it), but again the feelings of the other woman are important. HW went on to note that she does the same, pressing the like button merely for the sake of friendship:

…Because sometimes, a girl gets so excited about something she has done and no one likes her status, so I feel sad for her and click like out of courtesy.

Here, HW also thinks about her friend and her feelings if she did not receive any support from others, which gives the sense that this is informed by the way she likes other to treat her. This, in turn, affects the way she responded to her friend’s share. HW’s and AY’s previous examples suggest their imagination of their friends’ responses (viewing things from their friends’ perspectives) and passing personal judgments that affect the way they behave on Facebook. This kind of imagination is similar to the way they imagine what their audience’s impression will be and the effect this has on their self-presentation, as discussed in Chapter 4. The above comments also suggest that liking out of friendship could be also gendered, as both participants referred to a “she” posting but not a “he”. It could be said that the context in which these participants were interacting, especially those who apply cultural constraints to their profiles and exclude male friends from their network, such as HW, is predominately female.
Commenting, on the other hand, is another way of supporting a friend, and participants’ use of comments suggests that they represent stronger positive support and are used when the contributions are interesting. This also reinforces the deeper meaning generated by commenting vs. liking, as mentioned earlier in the example of AY’s husband’s emotional support where she replied by describing her feelings and appreciation to him publicly. Support in the form of commenting holds meaning and carries a message which might have a great influence on people’s relationships.

On the other hand, in the same way that participants use the like feature to support their friends, liking also plays a reciprocal role in maintaining and strengthening ties, and in this way, participants described it as contributing to their sense of self. In that regard, EL said:

Some people always like and comment on your status and you become interested in seeing what they have, and like and comment sometimes as well.

The “like” button used by friends to support participants’ contributions on Facebook has proven to increase interaction and mutual support. In her first interview, HN mentioned the number of people who “like” her status, the number of likes and comments she usually receives, and that famous people like and comment on her wall (“The minimum likes I get are 20 or 25. This is real... I am not boasting”). She opened the first interview by saying:

I will show you the other Facebook profile and how many contacts I have, it’s unbelievable. The minimum likes I get on my writing are fifty… Look here [pointing at her iPhone to show me her profile in her second account] at the minimum likes I get on something normal you would say before going to bed. Here are 32 likes and 112 comments. Look here, it is 44 likes.
The way she talked about these likes in the interview indicates the importance she ascribes to receiving them from others. In the following example, she describes how the “like” feature affects her and led her to write a ‘thought’ on it:

Do you know that I wrote something on the “like”. Where is it? Can you imagine, I analysed this “like” and wrote something about it. Look how I write about these simple things. How these things have an impact.

Similarly, ND reported the satisfaction she felt about receiving ‘likes’ on Facebook, saying:

…I feel so happy if I have a new person who likes my status plus the group that contains 10-20 contacts who always like it… like from a new person… you feel like AHHHH! [By this expression she meant finally or eventually] expanding... hahaha [laughter].

The above comments demonstrate the significance of the use of the “like” feature as a reciprocal method to maintain relationships and support others as well as be supported by friends. Now I will turn to the use of private messaging, which constitutes another “Facebook Relationship Maintenance Behaviour” (FRMB).

6.4.2 The Use of Private Messaging

Another Facebook feature used by the participants to establish and maintain relationships is the chat programme (or private messaging, as these are together in one programme on Facebook). Unlike ‘liking’, which can be observed online, private chats and messaging cannot be observed or detected by a third party without the use of screen capture software (such as that used by those interested in the linguistic aspects of Facebook identity work and “repair”; see, for example, Meredith and Stokoe, 2014). My online observation was limited to what could be viewed on participants’ walls. However,
during the interviews, the participants reported in detail about their chatting and messaging habits.

Participants described private and instant chat messages as a tool to send messages privately to geographically distant contacts, new contacts, or as an alternative to communicating publicly on friends' walls, especially with family members. Golder et al. (2007) argue that users take advantage of Facebook messaging to communicate mainly with friends who are part of their offline networks but are not close either in terms of physical proximity or emotionally. In line with this finding, EL and ND emphasised the value of private messaging for keep in touch with friends who live far away; EL, for instance, stated that she enjoys being able to send private messages at any time to her friends living abroad because they can be viewed whenever the friends log into their Facebook accounts. Private messaging is also a preferred tool among family members and relatives on Facebook; as mentioned above, LY asked her family members to contact her through Facebook messaging if they needed her. HL noted that she privately chats with her son in order to discipline him and, more generally, to nurture a good relationship with him.

Other studies, such as Bazarova (2012), discuss the use of private messaging for intimacy in romantic relationships. BS uses instant messaging on her anonymous account to establish relationships with male strangers that may develop into friendships over time. As she stated in the second interview:

BS: No, no, it is not like that. Most of my friends who share this [anonymous] account, including me, use it just to write a couple of words... that’s all we do. If anyone likes someone and thinks he is fun, we take it somewhere else, for example, bb [Blackberry messenger] or something else.

R: As if it is the starting point to create a new relationship.

BS: Yes.

Here, the Facebook messaging feature is used as a back channel to circumvent the cultural restrictions that are imposed on interaction between the genders. BS uses
private messages as a starting point from which she can decide if she wants to pursue a closer, potentially romantic relationship with a male she may never have met before. As the relationship develops, different channels of communication, such as text messages via mobile phone, are considered more convenient than the Facebook account she shares with her friends.

Another participant described how she has received and responded to inappropriate private messages on Facebook. HN noted that she had received requests for intimate relationships, to which she replies privately in order to avoid the disclosure of embarrassing communications on her wall. She related her effort to handle an inappropriate approach from a male contact in the following way:

Another person name M opened a private group and added me. He sent me an inbox message, saying: “I am from those who admire your writings but I wasn’t able to comment on it on the forum because I felt that you are so elegant and conservative in your responses.” And I told him, “What if you added me to your group, will you still be conservative?” He told me, “No, I am a poet and I want to have poetry competition [poems revolve around the expression of love] between you and me.” I told him, “I will not write any word in your group.” He said, “Just to respond to each other.” I said, “I don’t do that except on my page and I will delete you if you write me another inbox message.” Then he stopped sending messages to me.

The extract illustrates HN’s continual managing and policing of undesired relationships, as demonstrated also in Chapter 4. Here, however, she draws a boundary for this contact in order to allow him to remain on her network as a friend. Moreover, presenting the incident as a narrative indicates her desire to reveal more detailed information about the way she responds to such requests.

As Facebook messenger has become a communicational tool to maintain relationships, controlling one’s availability for chatting has also helped some of the participants to that end. Instead of appearing ‘online’ to Facebook friends and not
responding, participants prefer to appear ‘offline’ and so be able to view the messages and respond at their convenience. In this way, as in Chapter 4, they are able to control when they answer their friends on Facebook without their friends knowing that their message had already been seen, which helps maintain a positive impression. EL said on this topic:

R: Do you open the chat box?

EL: I haven’t for a period of time.

R: Do you turn it off?

EL: Yes.

R: Why?

EL: I have no time to answer. I just check quickly and log off.

R: And you don’t want anyone to see you.

EL: Yes. If I decide to stay online, I will turn it on. It is not nice if someone has sent you a message and you don’t answer. I don’t like it when someone doesn’t answer me while she is online, so I don’t do that.

EL’s comments also indicate that she remains invisible on messenger to avoid being impolite to her friends due to time constraints, as she expects from them as well. Like LY, HN and HW, EL thinks about the way she likes to be treated, and she tends to treat friends in a particular way after putting herself in their place. Therefore, private messaging is utilised to maintain relationships at the participants’ convenience.

Friends’ lists, birthday wishes, posts explicitly targeting relationships, and the use of tactics such as the like button and comments, are all examples of observable activities, but they occur in addition to private messaging and the management of one’s own appearance, which are other tactics used by the participants to sustain their relationships on the site. This private layer of activity was hidden from my observational data but emerged as a significant function of the site in the interview accounts; enabling...
the management and building of relationships in a secure/hidden space and revealing another dimension to the understanding of audience work in Chapter 4.

6.5 The Impact of Facebook Use on Online/Offline Relationships

As Facebook is a social network created to build relationships, it plays a positive role in users’ offline and online relationships alike while also having the potential to cause detriment to those relationships (see Miller, 2012:4-15 for an example of how Facebook use led to the break-up of a marriage). In this final section of the chapter, I examine how participants’ assess the impact of their Facebook use and whether they regard it as an overall positive or negative influence on their relationships. As argued by Ellison et al. (2007), social capital has various definitions connected to different positive and negative social outcomes, with the positive results of interaction among social networking users appearing to outweigh the negative.

So far I have focused on the positive effects on participants’ social relationships were described above, including the increase in online interaction as well as the strengthening of online relationships, some of which transferred to offline settings. As previously mentioned, the latent ties that AZ found on her friends’ profiles and added to her own network have become close friends offline. AY’s example of her old friend from school illustrates the process of online relationships leading to offline meetings, which supports the findings of prior studies that emphasised this online-to-offline transformation (e.g. Ramirez and Wang, 2008). Similarly, HL describes her online messaging and the comments/likes on her son’s shares as having improved her offline relationship with her son: “…he becomes happy when I post on his wall.” When I asked her if she then does this on purpose, she said, “yes, to make him happy and to strengthen our relationship” (see Mendez et al.’s (2014) family therapy case study about the positive role of Facebook in re-establishing a father-daughter relationship).

My data suggests that such experiences differ from one user to another and play a role in how Facebook use produces social capital. ND, by chance, became acquainted offline with a stranger who had added her through a mutual friend and then recognised her from her profile picture. She said:
I want to tell you a story […]. Suddenly, there was a girl who I
never saw before and she looked at me in the dark and started
saying hahaha [laughter expression]... [the] purple [scarf].. NA.
[her name]... on Facebook... yaaaa I know you... I have you on
Facebook (she remembered my profile picture, I was wearing a
black and purple scarf)… Do you imagine she recognised me in
this situation [trapped in her work building because of a flood and
with no electricity; ND was helping gather people in the building,
and this woman was one of them]. We started a conversation and
now I have her mobile and we talk together. So, I met her after I
added her on Facebook.

This experience suggests the connection between self-presentation on people’s
profiles and their online relationships. ND’s friend had scrutinised the content of friends’
profiles, showing the role of the profile and its content in forming relationships, as this
friend recalled how ND looks on her profile picture when she first met her offline.
Specifically, she remembered what she was wearing (the colour of her scarf), the thing
that attracted her to ND’s profile before meeting her.

On the other hand, my data also suggests that friends’ self-presentation on the
participants’ walls had, in some cases, generated negative impressions and destabilised
existing relationships. Such experiences affected some of the participants’ online
relationships and interactions with some of their contacts. HW’s observation of some of
her friends online affected their relationship offline due to the alternative images they
presented of themselves on Facebook, which led her to judge them negatively and
interact less with them online. In particular, she disapproved of the girls who cover their
hair offline but not online, but she also noticed different behaviour:

**HW**: […] there are some people who appear to be religious but in
reality, they act differently.

**R**: So they present themselves in a picture and you know exactly who
they are.
HW: Yes, I know exactly who they are... there are many who act differently... She shared a post about X [a famous writer] and this kind of stuff. This girl was studying with me at school, so I know her personality really well.

R: What do you mean about posting things about [this famous writer]?

HW: As if she is a wise person. All her posts are about him, Palestine or prayers.

R: So, there are people who present themselves differently on Facebook, which is not really their personality.

HW: Yes, this is not their reality, as if she wears a mask. I know the person very well.

R: Does this affect your relationships with them, especially if you know their personalities?

HW: I may press the like button if I like something, but not always, I just ignore her most of the time.

R: Does she seem to be a liar to you?

HW: Yes.

While HW formed negative impressions of some of her Facebook friends for presenting themselves differently online, the following case had more of an impact than only judging or interacting less online with a friend. She said:

…I discovered some girls’ personalities from Facebook. For example, a girl who is my age, an adult, suddenly posts: everything I like is pink, she posts pink pictures, she writes: I love pink, and she likes cartoons. I like cartoons too but I post something else as well... She is silly.
The above extract portrays how personality is understood by the participants online. HW here assumed that her friend was showing her “true” self online and she passed judgment on her. She described her friends’ childishness, calling her activities and posts “silly”, and stated that they negatively impacted her opinion of this friend, to the extent that it had a detrimental effect on their offline relationship as well. She made sure that her friend’s offline personality connected to her online one:

Even when I once got out with her, the conversation was about Hello Kitty and what she likes... so I got bored... she has no life.. everything is like that... so, this affects me a little... but I didn’t show her.. I am one of those who don’t show things, and I don’t like to embarrass anyone.

Although she dislikes this friend’s personality, which slightly impacted their relationship, she still seems to be thinking about the other’s feelings. For this reason, she kept her as a Facebook friend.

AY had illustrated a significant positive impact of Facebook use. In Chapter 5, for example, I examined how she had posted on behalf of her friend to support her in the face of sectarianism. Support from friends among all of the participants was, in general, a positive outcome of Facebook use that presumably results in strengthened relationships. Having said that, AY also made observations that Facebook had a negative effect on some of her relationships. She said:

AY: It could also affect [the relationship] negatively.

R: How?

AY: I know some people, for example, who commented on a political post and wrote an offensive comment that verbally attacks the Turkish people. As you know, my family roots are originally from Turkey. So you feel like it is not appropriate to comment in this way, it hurts, so you feel like cut off.

R: And did you delete her?
AY: Yes, yes, because it seems like she knows who I am and where my family roots come from. She talks about the political events that are happening and comments about Turkish people negatively. So, thank you very much... and I deleted her.

R: Did you immediately delete her?

AY: No, I told her I cannot deal with this, if this is your attitude I will not discuss [anything with you], so I pulled out myself and deleted her. So things like this happen.

The previous two examples demonstrate how Facebook can unsettle relationships by challenging existing understandings of others’ ‘personalities.’ The first shows that Facebook sometimes reveals that people are wearing a mask when they present their online identities, and this could create a negative impression that consequently affects online interactions, others' opinions of that person, and offline relationships. The latter example demonstrates how criticism can damage a relationship. The negative impressions formed by the participants about their friends might in this case be seen to hinder the development of social capital through social networking sites, but the emphasis in the interviews was predominantly on the advantages of the site.

6.6 Conclusion

The findings in this chapter build on the existing literature that has suggested that Facebook use supports the production of social capital. In this chapter I have explored participants’ use of Facebook to form and establish different types of relationships. Facebook was shown to be used by the participants primarily to reinforce existing relationships, consistent with the findings of Donath and boyd (2004). Facebook helps participants to create relationships where they did not exist before or are impossible offline, to strengthen them, and to move them to other settings. It helps participants to bond with emotionally close but geographically scattered family members, rekindle old childhood relationships, make connections with strangers, and pursue, to a limited extent, cross-gender relationships. However, my analysis has added another dimension to the formation of such relationships on Facebook. Participants seem to base their relationships
on ideas about an essential, “true” self that leads them to negatively judge their “friends”, but judgement also took another form. Their decisions, for example, were rooted in their own norms, which led most of them to limit friendships with men, as well as in their preferences, values, and feelings when it comes to maintaining other relationships. Although they were judging their friends, there is a positive corollary to the potentially negative activity of judging, which led them to keep those they had negative impressions of as friends on their networks. This demonstrates that in this context, establishing and maintaining social relationships on the site took a ‘conservative’ approach.

This chapter shows the usefulness of different Facebook features, such as the “like” button, status updates, birthday reminders, and Facebook messenger, to help participants maintain and strengthen their existing relationships and sustain long-distance relationships. My analysis revealed other uses of such features as well, for example, disciplining their children and controlling what appears on their walls by encouraging contacts to use the messaging feature instead of posts to communicate. In this way, the chapter illuminates the “usability” that Facebook offers (Samsur and Zabed, 2013:40).

In this chapter, I discussed the dearth of data from online observation that could be used to discern the formation of the participants’ relationships, but showed that data about this could be gathered in abundance through the interviews. Except the use of the “like” feature and the posted content on participants’ walls, all other information and activities, such as the type of relationship, private messaging, the reasons behind managing posts and comments and pressing the like button, are difficult to examine through online observation. Additionally, it was difficult to determine the impact of Facebook use on online and offline relationships without having the participants describe it themselves. By drawing from both interview and observational data, the chapter also demonstrates the productivity of the mixed methods approach used in this study, particularly in revealing the hidden aspects of observed social capital. In this way it makes a break with previous research that has relied exclusively on one or the other type of data.

The chapter has suggested that Facebook has two sides, in that it played a role in unsettling and destabilising a number of participants’ existing relationships, while it also had great significance in enabling them to form and maintain their relationships. Through the mutual exchange of resources on Facebook, participants sustained different types of relationships. The positive outcomes and benefits discussed in this chapter assert the
existence of social capital on Facebook and perhaps tip the balance in favour of positive outcomes in this specific context.
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

7.1 Introduction

Producing a thesis is a long personal journey. As a researcher, I have been exposed to a wide range of thoughts, views, and perspectives related directly or indirectly to my study. On the personal level, and since I worked for four years on a Facebook project which included a year of exposure to my participants’ daily activities on their walls, I have enjoyed experiencing the differences between them in the ways they choose to present themselves to others, and looking at different interests and a wide variety of topics and values. I have also become aware of the place Facebook occupies in some Saudi women’s daily lives and, surprisingly, how some live through and appreciate a site that I personally use it just for fun. During the study, I fulfilled on Facebook the role of a researcher. Following this, I will return to my previous role, a mere Facebook user, keeping the participants as my Facebook friends and not as research subjects as I build relationships with them. In this chapter I consider what has been achieved. In Chapter 1, I set out three central research questions: RQ1: What strategies do Saudi women use for constructing and managing their identities on Facebook? RQ2: To what extent do they use the site as a platform for online “deliberation?” RQ3: What role does Facebook play in the production of social capital? Here, I set out the empirical, theoretical and methodological contributions of my work in addressing these questions, before considering the limitations of my study and offering suggestions for future research.

7.2 Empirical Achievements

My findings suggest that Saudi women use Facebook for three main reasons. The first is to construct their identities and present their desirable and ideal selves with an increased awareness of and control over their profiles, audience and audience impressions. Second, they use it as a platform to share their political, religious, and social concerns, to establish moral positions within their activities, and to express feelings, especially negativity, towards offline events. Finally, the participants use Facebook to socialise, obtain benefits, and generate positive social outcomes. In doing so, some participants partly free themselves from the cultural constraints imposed on their offline
self-presentation, self-expression, and on the formation of cross-gender relationships. In their identity construction on the site, I observed that the participants formed multiple identities, presented their desirable, ideal selves, and were able to utilise the site to promote their talents and skills. The construction of a cultural identity emerged in their interactions through different acts of othering.

I observed a great degree of control being exerted not only over expressions intentionally presented on the site (content) but also over what Goffman referred to as the given-off expressions (the less controllable expressions) in order to foster favourable impressions and meet audience expectations. Participants tended to manage their friends’ posts, images and comments (by deleting ones they found unsuitable) as an attempt to control what they thought these expressions might convey to their audience. In Chapter 5, for example, participants were shown to control the opinions discussed by wrapping up discussions and reinforcing their thoughts at the conclusion of exchanges, giving less space for disagreement and oppositional views, and in Chapter 6 they were seen to manage their relationships in a similar way to how they created their profiles and audiences in Chapter 4. Such a high level of control over their online expressions across different audiences goes beyond Goffman’s theories about face-to-face encounters and is highly significant in online interaction, as demonstrated in this study. In this way the study can be seen to extend existing work on how social networking sites allow users considerable control over identity construction and individual manners of self-presentation (see Brandes & Levin, 2013; Heivadi and Khajeheian, 2013; Livingstone, 2008; Manago et al., 2008).

The findings suggest that audiences play a significant role in participants’ Facebook use. They have tremendous influence on participants’ privacy decisions and self-construction practices. Goffman (1959) understood that our performances are prepared before encountering the targeted audience, who in turn provide feedback on how well we have performed our role. When presenting the self on Facebook, participants tend to be greatly aware of their audience, using their gaze and their feedback (comments) to give a positive impression, a process which is aided by imagining their reaction to particular activity. The imagination of the different audiences that social networking sites such as Facebook provide was a salient behaviour among the participants as they constructed their identities and relationships. Self-regulation of the content of their profiles was evident and based on the presumed surveillance of audience
and the authorities. Participants also imagined their friends’ responses and treated them in the way they themselves like to be treated.

Another significant theme is how participants address notions of self and other. Participants tended to present a desirable identity that is informed by their own idealised self, as interpreted through the lens of Saudi culture, gender and the other. In Chapter 5, for example, my analysis demonstrated how participants distinguished themselves from the other and constructed a cultural identity within their political engagements. Here, participants showed a great tendency to differentiate certain audiences from themselves, specifically those who are culturally different as well as those from the same culture but who behave differently. This notion of self and other was also demonstrated alongside the judgment of others – both real and imagined - which played a role on participants’ self-presentation and social relationships. Participants showed the desire to protect the image of the ‘self’ from the gaze of ‘others’ and to avoid their negative judgment. As I discussed in Chapter 4 they also tended to judge others in the same way they imagined themselves being judged.

There was an overwhelming presence of values and principles in participants’ use that stem from their culture and religion - the ‘good’ and ‘bad’, acceptable and unacceptable, as well as the sense of being conservative and reserved. Most of my participants monitored themselves to keep a positive image in accordance with these values; thus, unacceptable performances were anonymised, private information was restricted, and audiences were managed, policed, and segregated. Cultural values played a role in online judgment where participants and their friends were seen to judge each other based on these values. Moreover, in their online deliberation, participants promoted moral positions and advice related to what they deem “good” behaviour, often inspired by religious principles. Religious principles also influenced some types of posts, information, and issues discussed. When maintaining their relationships, participants showed what might be considered a conservative approach in their choices about who could be a friend, remain a friend, and who should be deleted from the friend list to avoid criticism. Gender is also an aspect that partly stems from the culture and norms and was illuminated by participants’ use; i.e., because they are Saudi women, they prefer not to open their profiles to the public, and the majority prefer not to post their personal photos and not to have male strangers as friends. Some chose to anonymise their profiles to spare
themselves the gaze of audiences who are loaded with expectations. On the other hand, they conveyed culturally positive feminine identities (e.g. good housewife).

Such a major influence of culture on participants’ use creates a connection between their online and offline worlds. This is in line with some Eastern studies generally (e.g. Brandes & Levin, 2013) and some Saudi studies specifically (e.g. Al-Saggaf, 2011). Looking at the variation in constructing the self online revealed a connection between the construction of participants’ profiles and their ‘given’ names and identities as explained in Chapter 4. They tended to construct and practice online what is restricted offline (e.g. cross-gender relationships and political deliberation). Different roles seem to be played in different contexts and to different audiences across the online and offline worlds (e.g. concealing or crystallising aspects of identity to specific audiences and excluding others). They also tended to express their opinions and ideas about offline political news or events on their Facebook wall and addressed online the unreachable offline audiences. Finally, participants demonstrated that they use the site as a tool to locate and rekindle previous offline relationships, to manage relationships initiated offline, investigate people they have met/will meet offline, and that some online relationships become offline ones.

My study has also revealed the negative aspects of Facebook use for some of my participants. While participants were able to construct their desirable identities, express/defend/relieve the self, criticise others, socialise with wider audiences, produce social capital, negotiate cultural constraints and exercise control over their use, it was also seen to be a space where users were challenged. The risks presented by the openness of the environment and the possibility of a wide audience viewing the content of the profiles, the collapse of multiple audiences into a single context, the possibility of Facebook contributing to unsettling and weakening ties and producing negative outcomes, and how this is related to their norms and cultural values, were all aspects of Facebook use that challenged the participants at one time or another. As discussed, that identity is performed but also subject to change across different audiences, participants created their own sense of space and constructed their “networked self” (Papacharissi, 2011:317) with their strategies, patterns, and behaviour on Facebook. It can be seen as a refuge for the participants from offline gender and cultural expectations and constraints.
that also arise online. Thus, it is empowering to participants to some extent while also containing backdrops that weaken such possible empowerment.

7.3 Theoretical Achievements

This thesis took a social constructionist approach in examining how identity is constructed through the use of Facebook. In giving examples of the different forms that my participants’ online identities take, my study challenges those who believe that Facebook identity is a uniform and coherent single identity (Ellison et al., 2007; Dijck, 2013), limits the extent to which users can perform different identities (Zhao et al., 2008), or presents an accurate version of the self (Walther et al., 2009). My study affirms the findings of those studies that argue for the idealisation of the self in its various forms (e.g. Back et al., 2010; Manago et al., 2008; and Strano, 2008), but my participants’ activities in this regard turned out mostly to correspond to the cultural and gender norms that shape their audience’s expectations. This distinguishes my study from previous literature.

Goffman’s dramaturgical approach showed its continuing significance in this study in my exploration of online self-presentation and impression management. In using Goffman’s concepts my approach has been in line with a number of other studies (e.g. Dijck, 2013; Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs, 2006; Hogan, 2012; Lambert, 2013; Strano, 2008; Siibak, 2009; and Strano and Queen, 2012). My finding are (to some extent) at odds with those who argued that Goffman’s approach is unsuitable for examining online social networking and promote extension theories, such as Lambert (2013), who sees a need for textual theories to analyse textual interaction on Facebook. Other examples are Zarghooni (2007), who applied a concept of detached self-presentation to analyse self-presentation on Facebook in the backstage (off-screen) setting, and Hogan (2010), who amended Goffman’s dramaturgical approach. In Chapter 4, where I examined the different strategies used to present the self, I looked at self-presentation as a performance (Goffman, 1959), which might then remain as an artefact (Hogan, 2010:377) on the Facebook stage. This runs counter to Hogan’s argument that Facebook only presents artefacts as an “exhibition” and that Goffman’s dramaturgical approach therefore does not fit this context. The way my participants continually edit, delete, and review the content of their profiles, the use of defensive practices, as Goffman called them, and the
continual exchange of information, thoughts, opinions, and advice on the site demonstrate that content on Facebook is not solely an artefact exhibited but also constitute performances that are subject to change.

Goffman suggests that a person might play different roles to different audiences: as my study demonstrates, Facebook settings make doing this more complex than in offline environments. On Facebook, the fact of multiple audiences in one space echoes Marwick and boyd’s (2010:114) notion of the “context collapse”, leading users to exert greater effort in order to deal with audiences and their impressions. As I discussed in Chapter 4, participants constructed different identities for different audiences in their profiles, segregated audiences on the same profile by grouping them to present the desired self to each group, and created multiple profiles across the network (e.g. creating an official profile and another anonymous one). The latter counters Dijck’s (2013) findings, which problematised the multiplicity of identity on the same Facebook profile and emphasised the ‘uniform format’ of Facebook identities. As I discussed in Chapter 4, I agree with the argument that Facebook users become able to promote themselves in their profiles, yet argue against an essential view of this identity.

Alongside Goffman’s work, one of the main concepts from earlier work that I have recruited in this study is Bourdieu’s concept of “social capital.” The reported increase and strengthening of relationships on Facebook and the mutual benefits created through the exchange of information and content are manifestations of the production of social capital in its different forms (bonding, bridging, and maintained). This supports other studies that adapted and appropriated the concept of social capital and examined it in relation to Facebook use. These include Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe (2006, 2007, 2008); Ellison, Lampe and others (2014), Lambert (2013), and Valenzuela, Park, and Kee (2009). My study however, revealed the role of norms and values in shaping these relationships and their outcomes on Facebook. Having said that, I concur with Ellison et al.’s (2007) claim that positive social capital outcomes on Facebook outweigh negative results, as people tend to reduce the negative impact by managing their relationships. My thesis also illuminates a strong connection between Goffman’s and Bourdieu’s perspectives, as the formation of relationships is based on the construction of identity. There is a dearth of research linking these two concepts together to examine Facebook use.
In the particular context of this study, my findings demonstrate a new private/public distinction that is consistent with studies that have found that the online environment has blurred the traditional meaning of private and public (O’Sullivan, 2012). The notion of public/private on Facebook in the context of Saudi culture is dealt with in a different way among the sample of this study than it has been in previous Facebook studies, especially in the way that the identity is presented and controlled (see Chapter 4) and in deliberating privately while addressing a public audience (see Chapter 5). This also yields insight into how the participants, as Middle Eastern women, differentiate between private and public (not in order to generalise but rather to give examples). Such insight explains (to some extent) their privacy choices when using a social networking site, thereby contributing to understanding the distinction between public and private in their offline practices, as argued by Landes (2003).

The findings discussed in Chapter 5 built on boyd’s (2011:39) understanding of social media interaction as “networked publics” and as presenting possibilities for social, cultural, and civic engagements, which seems to resonate with the analysis of online deliberation. My study contributes to existing work on the use of Facebook as a site for socialising (e.g. Ellison, Steinfeld and Lampe, 2006, 2007, 2008, and 2011) and presenting the self (Roy, 2012), but stands at odds with previous work on the role of Facebook in political movements (e.g. Al-Ezzi et al., 2008), or as a turning point for women’s position in the Arab world (e.g. Abadi, 2014, and other studies in Chapter 1). This is because, in my study, Facebook emerges as a multiple sphere used to socialise, present the self, and to express feelings and political concerns, but I did not find evidence of political action or political empowerment. This is in line with Farquhar’s (2009) and Al-Saggaf’s (2011) findings, but my study was able to provide a more in-depth picture of my participants’ various uses of Facebook.

In Chapter 5, for example, I proposed to extend the scope of ‘online deliberation’ beyond the public political spheres to other, more ‘private’ networked publics by including informal yet meaningful talk about social, moral, political and religious issues. Generally, the findings in Chapter 5 seem to make an active contribution to a starting path.
7.4 Methodological Achievements

Through the analysis chapters I have moved between different types of data. These have enabled me to approach my research questions in different ways. While offline observation provided insight into the use of technology and the environment the participants live in, the online observation of Facebook profiles allowed for capturing their real behaviour on and use of the site. Moreover, offline interviews provided insights into off-screen activities and enabled in-depth reporting of usage that cannot be observed online, as described in Chapter 6. The online interviews also allowed for ongoing clarifications when questions or thoughts came later. Lastly, the longitudinal approach of the study allowed for the tracking of changes over time.

Although it has not been a specific focus of my analysis, the notion of time was addressed throughout the data. Change over time was illustrated implicitly within participants’ use. It took the form of interruptions of Facebook use as a consequence of offline events and family interferences (e.g. getting engaged or married, offline criticism from friends about online behaviour, a husband’s restriction of online behaviour on Facebook, and Facebook friends’ engagements in certain topics, such as sectarianism). It was also illustrated in the form of change in presenting the self on the Facebook profile. The regular changing of profile photos among some participants emphasised their continual desire to represent the self differently, and also reflected offline events (e.g. one participant used a photo of engagement flowers as her profile picture when she got engaged).

By the end of the study, some users had also changed the information shared on their front pages as their personal lives had developed (e.g. changing marital status from single to married). Such developments were not limited to personal information presented on the site but also included the way expressions were managed. As discussed in Chapter 4, when they began using Facebook some participants paid less attention to the management of their given off expressions and yet ended up placing more emphasis on both given and given off expressions to avoid judgment (e.g. ND, who started to review her profile to avoid any political engagements). The study also captured changes in participants’ relationships over time. For example, there were participants who created weak online ties with students and strangers, which became stronger through more interaction on the site. Additionally, as described in Chapter 6, online friendships became
offline ones (e.g. HL became friends with the parents of her children’s friends online first, then offline), and latent ties became active relationships through the continual exchange of resources on the site. The longitudinal nature of my involvement with Facebook in this study can therefore be seen to reveal the changes in strategies of self-presentation and relationship management over time and demonstrate that these are ongoing rather than fixed activities.

In sum, the methodological approach I have taken demonstrates how the methodological limitations of previous Saudi Facebook studies might be overcome in order to develop more nuanced qualitative accounts of identity construction and/or social capital in social media use. As I argued in Chapter 3, my position as a female researcher played a significant role in facilitating access to the female participants that previous studies failed to accomplish. This has given me a valuable insider perspective on their online activities. Among Western studies, this study might also encourage research on Facebook to open up more and examine the different strategies of self-presentation that users might employ on Facebook, such as strategies to manage the audience’s impressions and tactics, through a combination of online and offline methods.

### 7.5 Limitations and Recommendations

It is important to recognise the limitations of the research in this thesis. As I stated in chapter 3, my approach to sampling could be problematic as I decided to choose only ten Saudi women in my study, which might limit the variety of use shown. This, however, has a connection to the methods chosen for the study because accessing women’s domestic settings for offline observation is difficult. The findings of the study, therefore, should not be generalised to all Saudi women. Due to their small number, some of the findings were limited to a particular participant’s use; for example, the evidence for wrapping up political discussions on Facebook came from AY’s wall, as she was the participant discussing political issues on her wall and thus behaving in this way. I should also note that cultural constraints impacted the duration of the offline meetings and the possibility for male family members to join. Having more time to observe the participants’ surrounding culture and engaging with other members of the family would have enriched the data gathered and may have enabled other aspects of the cultural context to come to light, a described in Chapter 3. Moreover, conducting the interviews
in English instead of Arabic could have avoided translation bias, if any occurred. If all the profile posts were written by the participants in English, the potential bias in translating the posts could have been avoided. Moreover, my position as an insider might influence the interpretation of the analysed online data and that of participants’ Facebook wall interactions. The design of the interview questions also was a subjective process which involved personal judgments and experiences. Yet such methodological challenges are faced by all researchers and I have been careful to reflect on these issues throughout the project.

The analysis presented has addressed issues such as self-presentation and relationships. Other potentially interesting aspects of use such as gaming\textsuperscript{47}, the intensity of use, and attachment to the site could have been examined. Attention to these might have illuminated other facets of Facebook use. Another limitation is that my study has been primarily concerned with individual posting activities. It would for example be interesting to examine the activities of the Facebook groups that participants are interested in joining on Facebook. Not being able to examine this has limited how, for example, RM’s political interests could be observed online. In addition, I did not consider the sorts of activities the participant liked to view on others’ walls as they reported in their interviews, which could have provided a rich aspect of their Facebook group use. Moreover, linking with group members and favourite pages are forms of social capital that were reported but not extensively examined in this study. For future studies, more qualitative research could be done on Facebook groups and examining users’ interactions within them.

In addition, this study has examined audience impressions from participants’ points of view. It would be interesting for future research to examine audience impressions of users’ activities, which will result in seeing how both interact online and whether the audience’s impressions reflect users’ predictions of those impressions. Shifting focus, a qualitative study of men’s Facebook use in Saudi context, would provide a valuable companion piece to this work. It would also be possible to carry out a comparative study to examine the difference in constructing identities across cultures;

\textsuperscript{47} A number of my participants noted that they enjoyed playing online games on Facebook to pass the time.
this would enable the generation of insights into the cultural dimensions of identity construction among genders and various cultural groups. Finally, future research might conduct more in-depth investigation on the informal yet serious types of daily discussions established on ‘more private’ Facebook accounts and whether to support my decision to view them as a new type of ‘online deliberation’.
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APPENDICES

Vignettes 48

AZ is a 57 year old woman, married with children, but she lives alone with her husband as her children are married and have their own lives. She received her doctorate in sociology in the USA and works at one of the universities in Jeddah. She created her Facebook account in 2010 when she heard about it from friends. She has 24/7 Internet access with no restrictions and uses Facebook on her laptop and iPhone. She uses Facebook every afternoon from 3pm to 5 pm and at dinner time for one hour or remains on Facebook until bedtime if she has nothing to do at night. She doesn’t use it when she is sad as her main reason for using it is to socialise with her friends and for entertainment.

AY is a 35 year old woman, married, with three sons. She is educated, open minded and works as a teacher in one of the international schools in Jeddah city. She has a Bachelor’s degree in business management and a diploma (Certificate for teaching pre k-k). She created her Facebook account in 2007. She has 24/7 access to the Internet and uses Facebook through her laptop, smartphone at home and at her work with no restrictions. She seemed very attached to the Internet in general and Facebook in particular. She uses Facebook 5 to 6 hours a day, during which she keeps logging in to her account and coming and going. She created a family group in order to communicate with all of her family members around the world. She mainly interacts with family, friends, and students on her profile. She is interested in politics and is an active user. She seemed less conservative than the other participants.

LY is a 62 year old woman. She is the oldest participant. She is single and retired. She has only a high school degree. She created her Facebook account in 2010 (one year before retiring) after being referred by a friend. She then requested her friend to create an account for her and then taught herself how to use it. She has 24/7 access to the Internet with no restrictions on use at home. She did not intend to have Internet service on her mobile and owns only a simple one. She seems very attached to Facebook. She finds in

48 The information provided here is based on what they reported in the interviews.
Facebook the social life that she misses while being home taking care of her elderly mother. She uses it most of her time; it reaches 4 to 5 hours during the day. She stays logged in unless she knows that she will leave home for 3 to 4 hours. She uses it mainly with friends and for entertainment.

**HL** is a 30 year old woman, married with four children. She has a high school degree; she quit university after one year. She doesn’t work. She created her account in 2009 after she was referred by a friend. She created the account because all her friends have accounts and she wanted to know what Facebook is. She has a 24/7 access to the Internet. She had been living with her husband’s parents but during the study she and her husband and children moved out. Facebook is not that important to her. She logs in approximately every day; mostly in the morning and when she gets bored or feels sad. She mainly uses it as a source of information and entertainment.

**BS** is a 19 year old girl and the youngest participant. She studies at the university. She is single and lives with her relatives, where she has her own room. She created her Facebook account in 2008 when she heard about it from friends. She has 27/4 access to the Internet with no restrictions and uses it on her laptop and smart phone. She is attached to Facebook and mainly uses it for family and friends. She has two Facebook accounts; one is solely hers while the other is a group account with four friends.

**HN** is a 47 year old woman. She has been married for 31 years and has children who are married. She has a bachelor’s degree in interior decorating. She has two accounts. The first Facebook account was created in 2008 for friends and the new one in 2010 for her writings; she knows about Facebook from a relative. She has 24/7 access to the Internet but her husband restricts the content. She uses Facebook mainly between 12am and 4 am when the house is calm but she checks her two accounts during the day. She reads books the whole day which inspires her to write at night. She accesses Facebook from her laptop, the desktop in her bedroom and on her iPhone. She is very attached to Facebook and mainly uses her new Facebook account.

**ND** is a 33 year old woman. She got married just two weeks before her first interview for the study. She works. She has a bachelor’s degree in computer science and an MBA. She created her Facebook account in May 2007 after being referred by a friend. She has 24/7 access to the Internet with no restrictions. She is very attached to Facebook. She officially logs in to Facebook an hour before bed. She accesses Facebook on her
iPhone anywhere and at all times. She checks Facebook notifications during the day but replies only at night. She uses Facebook when she is in her normal mood. If she is mad or very happy she doesn’t use Facebook that much. She mainly uses Facebook to share her social opinions and socialise.

**HW** is a 25 year old woman, who is married and has two children. She works. She has a bachelor’s degree in law. She created her Facebook account in 2008. She has a 24/7 access to the Internet with no time restrictions on using Facebook. She loves Facebook and feels lost if a day passes and she did not log in. She accesses Facebook all the time from her smart phone. She likes to log in in the morning and before sleeping when she feels that she is clear minded. She uses it at work during breaks and whenever she feels bored. She uses it to socialise with friends.

**EL** is a 25 year old woman. She was single but got married and has a baby during the time of the study. She is a working mother. She has a master’s degree in finance from Canada. She created her Facebook account in 2007 after she was referred by a friend through an email. She has 24/7 access to the Internet with no restrictions. She stays logged in to Facebook for 2-3 hours daily. She uses it in her spare time, but not with family around, so she uses it mostly before sleeping when she is relaxed, calm and has nothing else to do. She accesses Facebook mostly from her laptop and iPhone and when she is with friends.

**RM** is a 35 year old woman. She is married and has 3 children. She does not work and has only a high school degree. She created her Facebook profile in 2009; her sister created the account for her. She is less skilled in using technology than the other participants. She has 24/7 Internet access but also has a lot of problems with the service. She is very attached to Facebook. She normally uses Facebook from morning until midnight and sometimes until the next morning when she is having very interesting discussions. Her only break is when she gets up to pray, as she stated, keeping the page open to receive comments when she gets back. She has a political interest in Facebook but her contribution is mainly to Facebook groups and not in posts that she shares with her friends on her wall.