

## Chapter 55

# Conducting Ethical Research: Reflections on Networked Saudi Society

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### ABSTRACT

*Since the 1960s, social scientists have explored the ethics of conducting research. However, there is little guidance in conducting ethical research in the more conservative societies of the Middle East. The rapid progress of technology has meant that these societies have been become increasingly networked, even the most restrictive ones, with a growing use of mobile devices. The purpose of the chapter is to describe the reflection on the research conducted on mobile consumption practices of female Saudi youth. The conduct of the research is based on both the researcher's formal training and also, intuitively negotiated, in practice, as she navigated this particularly sensitive context. The influence of the interplay between culture and gender emerges as the researcher reflects on the research conducted. The consideration of the ethics of the research continues post research completion.*

### INTRODUCTION

Qualitative and quantitative research on mobile phone use by youth worldwide has been a recurrent theme for social scientists since the early 1990s in the USA, Europe and some parts of Asia. However, very little work is known about this subject contextualized in the often more conservative Arab societies of the Middle East. The chapter will describe the particular issues around conducting research on mobile phone use patterns of a highly educated group of young Saudi Arabian women *vis a vis* privacy. This research was conducted against the backdrop of the controversy in 2010 over

the reluctance of Canadian company, Research in Motion (which provides BlackBerry devices and associated services) to allow governments access to the data on its servers, because of the data privacy issues it raised.

Saudi Arabia is the dominant Arab nation in the Middle East, with the largest and fastest growing economy in the Middle East and North Africa region,. It is a relatively new monarchy established by the Al-Saud family in 1932, with a population of about 24 million people. It is less than 100 years since the nomadic and tribal lifestyle of these people started to be transformed to Western standards. Yet, in the XXIst century

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the bigger cities (e.g. Jeddah, Riyadh, Al Khobar) show a landscape that is urban and technology-enabled, similar to other places around the world. This society culturally still maintains conservative values, especially where interaction between the sexes, both socially and in the conduct of business is concerned. Further, there is unequal participation in decision-making despite the fact that women make up half the population in Saudi Arabia. This brings up an interesting paradox where no face-to-face communication between sexes - except within the extended family - is allowed in this society by religious law, while at the same time the proliferation of modern communication networks and devices makes possible communication between unrelated members of the opposite sex (Barendregt, 2005).

In this chapter, the focus will be on the ethical and related cultural issues in conducting qualitative research on the use of technology *vis a vis* privacy, in an increasingly networked but restrictive society.

## BACKGROUND

Since the 1960s, social scientists have explored ethics in qualitative social research (Bulmer, 1982; Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001; Robley, 1995). Blumberg, Cooper and Schindler (2005, p. 92) define ethics as the 'moral principles, norms or standards of behaviour that guide moral choices about our behaviour and our relationships with others'. Ethics in research relates to how one designs the research, gains access, collects data, processes and stores the data, conduct data analysis and write-up in a moral and responsible way (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2007, p. 178). But the norms of behaviour that guide moral choices can allow for a range of ethical positions (Blumberg et al., 2005). In fact, Saunders et al. (2007) recommend that ethical issues are considered throughout the period of the research. In most universities, the university code of ethics and/or a research ethics committee will guide the conduct of research.

However, such formal guidelines and processes may not exist in universities in the Middle-East.

The following section briefly explains the ethical issues considered at the various stages of the research. The ethical issues that need to be considered during design and the gaining access stage include the nature of participant consent. It could be informed consent, where there is a formal process where consent is asked for. On the other hand, the return of a completed questionnaire by a respondent is taken to have *implied consent* (Saunders et al., 2007, p. 185). The idea of consent is much more complex in Saudi Arabia because of the concept of *mahram* (guardian) for women, as practised in Saudi Arabia. Under Saudi law, all females must have a male guardian (*mahram*), typically a father, brother or husband. Girls and women are forbidden from traveling abroad, conducting official business, or undergoing certain medical procedures without permission from their male guardians. In fact, a recent study showed that "around 64 percent of Saudi women are unaware of their right to travel inside the Kingdom without obtaining the approval of their guardians" (<http://www.arabnews.com/news/592941>; 27 June 2014). Can an individual Saudi female respondent in a study give consent without the authority of her guardian or a higher authority in an educational institution? In terms of data processing and storage, according to Saunders et al. (2007), data should be kept securely and should be adequate for the purpose and not in excess of requirements. During analysis and reporting, the researcher should not misrepresent the collected data neither in terms of being selective about the data nor identifying participants who wish to remain anonymous.

Another literature brings in the role of etiquette as integral to qualitative research (Ruth & Otnes, 2006), where etiquette is defined as 'the forms, manners, and ceremonies established by convention as acceptable or required in social relations, in a profession, or in official life [and] the rules for such forms, manners, and ceremonies' (Webster's, 1988, p. 467). Understanding expectations

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