

## **Facebook Across Cultures: A Cross-Cultural Content Analysis of Egyptian, Qatari, and American Student Facebook Pages**

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**Abstract**

This study comparatively analyzed college student Facebook pages in Egypt, Qatar, and the U.S. to determine the similarities and differences in how students representing different cultures use Facebook to stay connected with their various groups of ‘friends,’ and engage in identity construction. A total 246 Facebook pages were analyzed, and results generally supported the notion that self-disclosure varied by culture. For example, Facebook profiles of Middle Eastern students in Qatar and Egypt reflect the more conservative norms in those two countries. Student Facebook pages in Egypt were much more politically oriented, while American pages focused more on social life and personal activities.

**Keywords:** Facebook, Middle East, Egypt, Qatar, cross-cultural communication, social media, self-disclosure, online identity.

**Introduction**

The relatively new ‘social media,’ such as Facebook, provide a one-to-many communication environment for people to communicate with close friends as well as with increasingly larger circles of acquaintances and relative strangers. Through wall posts, status updates, pictures, liking others’ posts and links, users can reconnect and stay in touch with people they have known for years, project an identity to people they hope to meet, and self-disclose to relative strangers. How individuals use Facebook is highly individual, but also based on larger cultural norms.

The purpose of the current study is to comparatively analyze college student Facebook pages in the U.S., Egypt, and Qatar to determine the similarities and differences in how students use Facebook to stay connected with their various groups of ‘friends,’ and engage in identity construction. East-west cross-cultural comparisons commonly include the United States, which is seen both as a cultural trendsetter and as actively exporting American cultural products via media technologies (see Hedley, 1998; Mowlana, 1995; Schiller, 1991, 1989; Tomlinson, 1991; and others). Egypt and Qatar are two logical launching points for understanding Arab-Middle Eastern youth cultures and Internet usage habits. Both countries have taken leadership roles in the Arab region and are seen as major players in global affairs. Also, because of their religious conservatism, Qatar and Egypt serve as useful units of comparison with American secular liberalism. Moreover, Qatar and Egypt differ in meaningful ways, making comparisons between the two nations useful. For instance, Egypt is the largest of the Arab speaking countries and the Arab region’s media center, and has high poverty and illiteracy rates, while Qatar is a much smaller, more cosmopolitan, and wealthier nation. The nation is home to the Al-Jazeera network,

is populated both by Qataris and a significant expatriate Arab population, and houses several American universities in Education City, Doha, the country's capital city.

Middle Eastern cultures tend to be more socially conservative than many western cultures (Norris & Inglehart, 2012), but it is unclear how social media usage might affect, or be affected by, dominant social norms in Egypt and Qatar. It is hoped that this research might shed light on how cultural differences may affect what, how, and to whom these students choose to reveal personal information about themselves via Facebook, and also how students in different parts of the world choose to construct their online identities.

### **Review of the Literature**

#### *Social Media and Facebook*

Since its inception in 2004, Facebook has grown to more than one billion global users, and reaches one out of seven people worldwide (Smith, Segall & Cowley, 2011). If it were a country, Facebook would be the third most populous country in the world (*The Economist*, 2010), and, by November 2013, there were more than 1 billion Facebook users worldwide (Smith, 2013). Facebook originated in the United States, and in June 2013, Americans still represented 18% of Facebook's daily active users worldwide (Heine, 2013). Facebook is very popular in both Egypt and Qatar as well. According to a 2013 survey conducted by Northwestern University in Qatar, 94% of Egyptians and 88% of people in Qatar use Facebook. By contrast, only 27% of Egyptians and 43% of Qatar residents use Twitter, and 30% of Egyptians and 10% of Qatari residents using Google+ (Dennis, Martin, & Wood, 2013).

People use the Internet in general, and Facebook and other social media in particular, for a variety of reasons, from self-promotion to group affiliation (e.g., Auter & El Kaharili, 2012;

Roy, 2008), to pass the time and feel less lonely (Sheldon, 2008), and, key to this study, to define and project a certain identity (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). Although Facebook's communicative platform is structured such that communication on the site is conditioned to conform to a dominant social order, the site offers emancipatory potential because it gives users the chance to express themselves relatively freely (Valtysson, 2012). Social media provide a one-to-many platform for communication that, unlike face-to-face communication, can be a bit more anonymous. Anonymity, of course, depends in part on how much one discloses about oneself on their social media site (Watt, Lea, & Speaers, 2002).

### *Self-disclosure*

Self-disclosure has been defined as the process of making oneself known to others in an intentional way, to manage the impressions one projects, in light of one's best interests (e.g., Goffman, 1959; Jourard & Lasakow, 1958; Pearce & Sharp, 1973). Self-disclosure, and reciprocating responses, can provide a form of social validation, and enhanced feeling of belonging to a group (Morton, 1978). Self-disclosure can differ based on age, gender, religion sub-culture, and the circumstances within which an opportunity to self-disclose presents itself; Women seem to disclose more than men (Dindia & Allen, 1992; Croucher, Faulkner, Oommen, & Long, 2010) while any dyad including a woman will result in more disclosure than dyads consisting only of men (Janofsky, 1971). Janofsky also found that status plays a role, with men disclosing more to higher-status interlocutors while women disclose more to lower-status interlocutors.

Numerous studies over the years have also shown that people from different cultures have varying self-disclosure patterns. For example, Chen (1995) found that Americans generally

disclose more information, across a variety of topics, to diverse audiences, than Chinese people. A study conducted in India showed that Hindus disclosed more than Muslims (Croucher, et al, 2010). Wolfson & Pearce, 1983). More conservative cultures, which are characterized by low tolerance for change, an emphasis on group harmony, hierarchy, family security, self-discipline and self-image (Hofstede, 1980) tend to disclose lower stakes information and less information overall while more liberal cultures tend to disclose quite a bit more information and information that is more personal.

### *Online Identity Formation*

Social contexts in which relationships can be formed and dissolved with relative ease tend to lend themselves toward greater self-disclosure (Schug, Yuki, & Maddux, 2010), which may explain the culture of self-disclosure which seems to dominate social media.

Early research on anonymous chat rooms had found that users were free to engage in role-playing desired identities, or to act out socially deviant impulses (e.g. Turkle, 1995). In early studies of computer mediated communication, self-disclosure was found to be higher, partly as a result of the anonymity of the predominantly text-based services -- which also allowed for false representation of the self (Watt, Lea, & Speaers, 2002). Subsequent studies of anonymous online dating sites (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006; Yurchisin, Watchraves-ringkan, & McCabe, 2005), however, suggested that anonymous users differed from anonymous chat room participants in that they created online identities resembling idealized versions of their real life identities, by exaggerating socially desirable qualities and deemphasizing or hiding undesirable qualities. Given that the purpose of online dating sites is to follow-up online interaction with face-to-face interaction, users' identities tend to depart *less*

from their physically embodied identities than in fully anonymous, disembodied online chat rooms.

Zhao, et. al (2008) found that Facebook users create online identities that represent their “hoped for” selves, rather than their “true” or hidden selves. Users accomplished this by projecting socially desirable character traits like popularity, well-roundedness, and thoughtfulness. Facebook users in this study also de-emphasized certain characteristics, such as negative personality traits, academics, and religious affiliation. Facebook allows both explicit modes of identity communication, such as the “About Me” section, in which users can describe themselves through demographics and preferences, as well as implicit modes such as posting photographs and links. The authors found that users preferred implicit modes over explicit modes, and that the explicit modes were the least elaborated.

Zho and Jiang (2011) discovered that members of different cultures use different means of visually presenting themselves by way of their profile images. Members of more conservative cultures tend to post very neutral photos of themselves, or no photo of themselves at all, while members of less conservative cultures are more likely to post less discrete imagery.

Other research suggests that cultural norms governed by individual nations can dictate how people engage in online identity construction. For example, Roy’s (2012) study comparatively examined Facebook pages of Indians living in India and Indians living in the United States. Results suggested that Facebook pages of both Indians in diaspora and Indians living in India took care to carefully construct their online identities. Indians in the United States, however, were less likely to update their Facebook pages, which were more politically and ideologically detached and ‘westernized’ than the India-based pages.

In the present study, cultural differences between Egypt, Qatar, and the United States could influence different Facebook usage patterns. Research into these three nations suggests cultural differences, particularly between American culture and the two Arab cultures under study.

Edward T. Hall (1976) argued that Arab cultures are “high-context” cultures, meaning they rely more on understood cultural distinctions to communicate messages to members of in-groups, and not as much on explicit word descriptions. According to Hall (1976), western, including American, culture is “low-context,” emphasizing more explicit and precise language in communication.

Also, in his work on cultural dimensions, Hofstede (1980) noted that Arab cultures are characterized by both higher levels of collectivism and a greater degree of social distance between leaders and followers. American culture, meanwhile, is both more masculine – with society requiring men to be more aggressive and assertive – and individualistic than Arab culture. American culture also emphasizes assertiveness and task completion (Hofstede, 1980).

Research into Qatari and Egyptian culture suggests that both cultures are highly socially conservative and religious. In Qatar, Islam plays a major role in social life, and, to a significant extent, structures social relations and public morality (Al-Hamar et al, 2010). Also, in Qatar women play less of a role in the public sphere than men (Haber & Getz, 2011). In Egypt, “religion, whether it be Islam or Christianity, has a pervasive role” and “can affect all aspects of... daily life” (Parnell & Hatem, 2002, p. 404). Given that Muslims represent about 90% of Egyptians, Islam, in particular, is dominant in Egyptian society. In general, and in spite of some deeply religious tendencies, American culture tends to be more socially liberal and secular than Arab culture (Hashemi, 2009; Lewis, 2002).

Egyptian culture is complex and varied, and has been influenced both by Islam and its “long history and strategic location” (Parnell & Hatem, 2002, p. 404). Family, friendship, and loyalty are essential to modern Egyptian culture, perhaps partially explaining why nepotism is commonplace (Parnell & Hatem, 2002).

Egypt’s culture has also been more politicized since the 2011 uprising against Hosni Mubarak (Beck, 2013), with unlikely actors, including youth soccer fans (Woltering, 2013) and ultraconservative Salafist Muslims (Taylor & Mendelsohn, 2013) becoming political. More broadly, the Arab region, including Qatar, has also been politicized in the aftermath of the Arab Spring (Valbjorn, 2012). In general, American political knowledge and involvement are low compared with similar nations (Somin, 2013), and American young adults are especially lacking in political awareness and involvement (Harvard Institute of Politics).

### **General Expectations**

The purpose of this study is, through content analysis, to examine typical Facebook usage patterns of Egyptian, Qatari, and American students and gain a better idea of how online identities are constructed at each cultural site.

Based on the literature reviewed here, it is generally expected that content self-disclosed on Facebook will vary by culture. It is expected that Arab students will be more conservative than American students. Specifically, it is expected that Arab students will be less likely to self-disclose personal information — about their relationship status, real names, and real profile pictures — than American students. It is also expected that Arab student Facebook posts will be more political and explicitly religious than American student posts. In addition, differences between Egypt and Qatar are expected. As is sometimes forgotten in the West, ‘The Arab World’

is not a monolithic, homogeneous culture, but a wide variety of individual sub-cultures with both group-wide commonalities as well as regionally defined uniqueness. So, it would not be surprising, as well, to find that Egyptian Facebook posts are more political, less conservative, and less explicitly religious than Qatari posts.

### **Method**

In order to assess the differences and similarities in Facebook content amongst university students in Qatar, the United States, and Egypt, a content analysis of Facebook pages was carried out. Content analysis is a quantitative media research method designed to examine communication messages according to specified rules and procedures and statistical measures (Riffe et al. 2005).

The researchers selected one large university in each of the studied locations. Qatar University (QU), located in Doha, Qatar, the University of Louisiana at Lafayette (ULL), located in Lafayette, Louisiana, and the American University in Cairo, situated in Cairo, Egypt, were chosen. Qatar University was founded in 1973, has seven colleges, is the only government-run university in Qatar, and has a student body of more than 8,000 students (Moini et al, 2009). The University of Louisiana at Lafayette (ULL) is a public university founded and was founded in 1898. It has an enrollment exceeding 17,000, and offers 115 undergraduate degree programs and 28 masters degree programs (University of Louisiana at Lafayette). The American University in Cairo (AUC) is a private university and was founded in 1919. The university houses 30 undergraduate programs and 15 graduate programs. Enrollment exceeds 6,000 students (American University in Cairo). These three universities served as starting points for identifying university student Facebook pages in the three countries under examination.

The researchers created one joint-Facebook account in their names. The account's main page displayed the names and a photograph of the researchers, and the information page included a note about the page's research purpose. The note included a consent statement explaining the anonymous nature of the study.

Student participation was solicited with the help of a hired research assistant, who sent out Facebook 'friend' invitation requests to students at QU, AUC, and ULL. The authors also invited their students – at AUC and ULL, respectively – to join the page, offering extra credit points as incentive.

A total of 339 students joined the page. To keep the study manageable, only 246 profiles were coded. The first 82 profiles from each of the three universities were selected for analysis.

Broadly, the study sought to examine how students at the three universities used Facebook. Specifically, the content analysis coding sheet – consisting of 18 variables – was designed to examine the links (to videos, articles, and other internet pages) users posted to their Facebook accounts, and the nature of users' Facebook status updates. A total of three items asked about links, and three others asked about status updates. Other variables sought information about gender, birth year, relationship status, total number of Facebook friends, religious affiliation, the nature of profile pictures, and employment history. (See the appendix for the full coding sheet.) An examination of user-posted content and personal information can offer key insights into identity construction.

The coding scheme coded the three most recent status updates per user. Some users had fewer than three status updates, however, with some users not having any status updates. In all, six AUC students did not have any status updates on their pages, four students had one status update each, and one student had two status updates. The remaining 71 AUC students all had at

least three status updates on their pages. For QU, a total of three students did not have any status updates on their Facebook pages, and one student had only one status update. The remaining 78 QU students had at least three status updates. Two ULL students did not have any status updates, three had one status update each, while the remaining 77 ULL students had at least three updates. As with status updates, the coding scheme coded for the three most recent links (to videos, articles, or other web content) posted on each profile. While most students posted at least one link, a relatively small number of users did not post any. Sixty-eight of the 82 AUC students posted at least three links, while 11 students did not post any, one student posted only one link, and two students posted just two links. For QU students, two students did not have any link posts, one student had only one, while the remaining 79 QU students had at least three links on their profile. ULL students had only one link each, and two students had just two. A total of 48 ULL students had at least three links posted to their Facebook profile pages.

Two university students from Cairo were hired to serve as coders on the project. The coders were trained on the coding scheme in December 2011, and intercoder reliability was assessed using Scott's Pi in January 2012. Scott's Pi scores ranged from adequate to perfect. All variables except one produced Scott's Pi scores of .833 or higher. One variable – the 7th item on the coding sheet asking whether profile names appeared real or fake – produced a Scott's Pi score of .628. This variable was kept in the study because the percent agreement score (23/25 for 92%) was high, and because Scott's Pi scores of .6 or higher are considered adequate by some media scholars (see Shoemaker, 2003).

## **Results**

Content analysis results show interesting differences in the way Middle Eastern students at AUC and QU use Facebook as compared with their American counterparts at ULL. Findings also reveal inter-cultural differences between AUC and QU students.

One coding scheme variable measured Facebook users' relationship status. Although similar numbers of users at the three schools reported being single (45% at AUC, 45% at QU, and 40% at ULL), ULL students were far more likely to indicate they were "in a relationship." Overall, 32% of ULL students reported being "in a relationship," compared with 10% of AUC students and just 2% of QU students. Moreover, 40% of QU students and 34% of AUC students did not list a relationship status at all, compared with just 18% at ULL. Results for this variable show statistically significant differences and are displayed fully in Table 1.

**Table 1: Relationship Status**

School	Single	In a Relationship	Engaged	Married	Not Listed	Totals
AUC	37 (45%)	8 (10%)	2 (2%)	7 (1%)	28 (34%)	82
QU	37 (45%)	2 (2%)	6 (7%)	4 (5%)	33 (40%)	82
ULL	33 (40%)	26 (32%)	5 (6%)	3 (4%)	15 (18%)	82
TOTALS	107 (44%)	36 (14%)	13 (5%)	14 (6%)	76 (32%)	246

$\chi^2 (8, N = 246) = 36.972, p < .001$

Results on relationship status are perhaps reflective of larger socio-cultural differences between people in many Middle East countries and many people living in the United States. The United States is a relatively more open society than either Egypt or Qatar, and pre-marital romantic relationships are not generally frowned upon. In Egypt and Qatar, both Muslim-majority societies, however, pre-marital romantic relations are seen as culturally and religiously taboo. It is not surprising, then, that only 12 student profiles combined from AUC and QU indicate that account owners are “in a relationship.” The overwhelming majority of students at

the Middle East schools indicated either “single,” “engaged,” “married,” or “not listed” as their relationship status.<sup>1</sup>

A fair number of sampled student Facebook users from QU choose not to use their real names on their Facebook profiles. Whereas 99% of ULL users and 96% of AUC users use their real names, about 20% of QU users use fake names on their Facebook profiles. Results, displayed in Table 2, show statistically significant differences.

**Table 2: Profile Name Disclosure**

School	Displayed Real Name	Did Not Display Real Name	TOTALS
AUC	79 (96%)	3 (4%)	82
QU	66 (80%)	16 (20%)	82
ULL	81 (99%)	1 (1%)	82
TOTALS	226	20	246

$\chi^2 (2, N = 246) = 21.66, p < .001$

Here, again, the differences found may be the product of socio-cultural realities.

Specifically, the relatively closed, private nature of social life in Qatar likely influences some students to choose to remain hidden (from their parents and others) behind fake profile names.

Consistent with findings about relationship status and profile names, many QU student Facebook users also choose to hide their Facebook ‘friends’ lists. Overall, 52% of QU users in

<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting, too, that the overwhelming majority of sampled QU students were women (84%, compared with just 16% men), a reality which could arguably exacerbate the distinctions made above between relatively ‘open’ and relatively more ‘closed’ societies. In Qatar, as is the case in many Muslim-majority countries, men are slightly more active in the public sphere. This could lead more women in these societies to resort to Facebook as a means of expression. These speculations would need to be examined more closely by researchers, particularly in the cases of AUC and QU, where disproportionate numbers of women attend school.

our sample hid their ‘friends’ lists, compared with 15% at AUC and just 6% at ULL. QU users had the least number of friends, on average, with users averaging about 174 friends per profile. QU users’ relatively low friend totals might be a product of Qatar’s comparatively small population. Sampled AUC profiles averaged about 609 friends and the mean for ULL profiles – the group with the largest ‘friend’ totals – was 745. These results are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3: Number of Facebook Friends**

School	# of Students With Fully Displayed Friends Lists	# of Students with Hidden Friends Lists	Average Number of Friends (amongst users who displayed Friends Lists)
AUC	70 (85%)	12 (15%)	609
QU	39 (48%)	43 (52%)	174
ULL	77 (94%)	5 (6%)	745
TOTALS	186 (76%)	60 (24%)	

Findings also suggest cross-cultural differences in how religion is disclosed on Facebook profiles at the three schools under examination. Although the majority of ULL students who listed a religious affiliation indicated “Christian” as their religion, almost half (49%) of ULL users did not list a religious affiliation at all. The situation was similar at AUC. Although the majority of AUC users who listed a religious affiliation indicated being “Muslim,” a relatively large percentage of students (44%) did not list a religious affiliation. QU students were much less likely to avoid listing a religious affiliation. Only 23% of QU students did not list a religion, with

77% indicating “Muslim” as their religious orientation. Results, which show statistically significant differences, are displayed in Table 4.

**Table 4: Religion Disclosure**

School	Muslim	Christian	Jew	Atheist	Other	Not Listed	Total
AUC	43 (52%)	2 (2%)	0	0	1 (1%)	36 (44%)	82
ULL	1 (1%)	31 (38%)	1 (1%)	1 (1%)	8 (10%)	40 (49%)	82
QU	63 (77%)	0	0	0	0	19 (23%)	82
TOTALS	107	33	1	1	9	95	246

$\chi^2 (10, N = 246) = 135.40, p < .001$

The coding scheme also assessed the nature of status updates provided by Facebook users at the three schools under study.<sup>2</sup> Results show key differences in how users at the three universities communicated their statuses to their Facebook friends. At AUC, students were highly political. A total of 27% of studied AUC status updates were political in nature, compared with 11% at QU and just 2% at ULL. These numbers are not surprising, given the tumultuous political situation in Egypt (and in much of the Arab world) in early 2012 when the Facebook pages were studied. These results suggest that Facebook can serve as an online expression of real-world conditions.

Students in the majority-Muslim societies were more likely to write religious status updates than the American students. A total of 21% of QU status updates and 14% of AUC status updates concerned religion, while only about 4% of ULL students were religious in nature. ULL

students were the most likely to use their status bars to communicate personal activities. About 25% of ULL status updates reported on users' personal activities, while just 10% of QU updates and 8% of AUC updates reported on personal activities. Although sampled profiles at all three schools tended to use status updates to talk about "social" events and happenings, the ULL students were also the most likely to use their status updates in this way. A total of 31% of ULL status updates were social in nature, compared with 23% at AUC and 19% at QU.

A relatively high percentage of students at all three universities used status updates to communicate personal states/feelings, with QU students the most likely to use status updates in this manner. About 34% of QU status updates communicated information about personal states/feelings, while 25% of ULL and 23% of AUC status updates communicated such information. Here, again, the results may point to larger socio-cultural phenomena at work, but more research would need to be carried out in order to uncover deeper explanations. A summary of all results related to status updates is presented in Table 5.

**Table 5: Nature of Status Updates**

	AUC	QU	ULL	TOTALS
Political	58 (27%)	26 (11%)	5 (2%)	89 (13%)
Religious	30 (14%)	49 (21%)	9 (4%)	88 (13%)
Sports	7 (3%)	2 (1%)	15 (6%)	24 (3%)
Social	51 (23%)	45 (19%)	73 (31%)	169 (25%)
Comedic	3 (1%)	4 (2%)	6 (3%)	13 (2%)
Personal State/Feeling	50 (23%)	81 (34%)	59 (25%)	190 (28%)
Personal Activity	17 (8%)	23 (10%)	59 (25%)	99 (14%)
Other	2 (1%)	5 (2%)	8 (3%)	15 (2%)
TOTALS	218	235	234	687

In addition to status updates, the study also examined the types of links (to videos, articles, or other Internet content) posted by Facebook users at the three schools.<sup>3</sup> The results are displayed in Table 6.

**Table 6: Nature of Links**

	AUC	QU	ULL	TOTALS
Political	102 (49%)	63 (26%)	15 (10%)	180 (30%)
Religious	9 (4%)	29 (12%)	3 (2%)	41 (7%)
Sports	6 (3%)	0	19 (12%)	25 (4%)
Social	40 (19%)	45 (19%)	45 (29%)	130 (22%)
Comedic	19 (9%)	30 (13%)	16 (10%)	65 (11%)
Entertainment	31 (15%)	52 (9%)	49 (12%)	132 (22%)
Other	2 (1%)	19 (8%)	10 (6%)	31 (5%)
TOTALS	209	238	157	604

Findings from the part of the analysis studying links show patterns similar to those found in the analysis of status updates. AUC and QU students, who were more likely to use links to post content about religion and politics, posted more links overall than students at ULL. Sampled QU students posted a total of 238 links to their profiles, AUC students posted 209, and ULL students just 157 links.

QU students posted more religion-related links than students at the other schools. About 12% of QU links were about religion, whereas only 4% of AUC links and 2% of ULL links were about religion. AUC students, again, appeared to be the most politically concerned. Nearly half

(49%) of their links directed page visitors to political content. QU students were also fairly likely to post links to political content; 26% of all QU links were politics-related. Only about 10% of ULL links were about politics. ULL students were the most likely to use links to post “social” information, but students at all three schools did this quite a bit. In all, 29% of ULL links were “social” in nature, compared with 19% each of AUC and QU links. ULL students sometimes posted links to sports-related content, something which was quite rare at the other schools. About 12% of ULL links were about sports, whereas just 3% of AUC links were about sports. QU students did not post any sports-related links. Students at all three schools used the link option to post comedic and other entertainment content. On the AUC profiles, 9% of links were comedy-related and 15% fell into the “entertainment” category. At QU, 13% of all links directed page visitors to comedic information and 9% to “entertainment.” Ten percent of all ULL links were comedy-related and 12% were about other “entertainment.”

Nearly all sampled ULL profiles used Facebook profile pictures that featured the account owner, either in a solo shot or as part of a group photograph. In all 76 out of 82 ULL profile pictures contained the account owner. QU and AUC students were much more likely to post symbols and other imagery not representing the account owner as profile pictures. A total of 29 AUC profile pictures showed images of someone (or something) other than the account owner, while the majority of QU profile pictures – 59 out of 82 – did not feature the account owner.

These results, displayed in Table 7, once again point to socio-cultural differences. It is likely that many of the QU female account owners are either uncomfortable with – or perhaps prohibited by family from – posting their own pictures on Facebook. In Egypt, such cultural restrictions are likely not as prominent as they are in the more conservative Qatari society. In Egypt’s post-revolution moment, however, images of political realities or political messages are

often posted as profile pictures. For example, after a tragic January 2012 soccer match in Port Said, after which dozens were brutally killed by thugs, many Egyptian Facebook users posted the Arabic word “Hedad” – an expression of mourning – as their profile pictures. QU student profiles also contained the fewest number of images per profile on average. As table 8 shows, AUC students averaged 435 images and photos per profile, ULL students averaged 468, and QU students just 254.

**Table 7: Types of Profile Pictures**

SCHOOL	Solo shot	Group shot	Picture not of account owner	TOTALS
AUC	31	22	29	82
QU	18	5	59	82
ULL	32	44	6	82
TOTALS	81	71	94	246

$\chi^2(4, N = 246) = 81.91, p < .001$

**Table 8: Total Number of Photos and Images**

SCHOOL	Average number of photos per user
AUC	435
QU	254
ULL	468
TOTAL	386

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Results from this cross-cultural content analysis of Facebook profiles suggest that Facebook can be employed as an online manifestation of real-world circumstances and larger socio-cultural and political realities. Facebook profiles of Middle Eastern students at QU and AUC reflect the more conservative norms in Qatar and Egypt, respectively. For instance, most QU and AUC students either did not list relationship statuses at all, or indicated being “single,” while nearly a third of American ULL student profiles opted for the more open “in a relationship” designation. Students in the most socially conservative of the three locations studied here – Qatar – were the most likely to display fake profile names and post profile pictures containing images of something (or someone) other than themselves. Student profiles in the two Muslim-majority societies studied here – Qatar and Egypt – were also the most likely to list a specific religious orientation and to post religious status updates and links.

Sampled AUC student profiles showed that students at that university use Facebook to express their feelings about the ongoing political tumult in Egypt, further evidence that Facebook can serve as a form of political self-expression. Although not as political as AUC profiles, QU students also regularly used their Facebook profiles to express political opinions and post political information.

ULL student profiles suggest a greater concern with social life and personal activities on the part of the studied American students. The relative lack of concern for political conditions by ULL students is somewhat surprising given the ongoing economic crisis in the United States, the Republican Party Primary race, regional elections, and sweeping Occupy Wall Street protests (which dominated the nation's news during the last quarter of 2011, just before this study was carried out). The Americans tended to downplay religion, which corresponds with the findings of Zhao et al 2008.

The diverse range of content and uses found here suggests that students at all three universities appear to be interested in managing and controlling their online identities, although further research is needed to examine the specific motives for usage. At QU, there appears to be a much more concerted effort to both conceal parts of a user's social identity and present a more conservative image. Students at QU often avoided using personal photographs as profile pictures and using their real names, and also hid their 'friends' lists. QU students were also the most likely to present a religious identity and post religious links and status updates. One might think that, by choosing to use a pseudonym and declining to use an identifying profile photo, Qatari students would make FB more like an anonymous social media network, and therefore engage in more socially-deviant posting, or that their FB identities would depart more from their real-life identities, but that does not seem to be the case. Perhaps this is due to the "anchored" nature of

FB, in which they are still connected online to people they know in real life, and therefore cannot depart too far. AUC student Facebook pages suggest a concern with constructing politically informed, socially concerned identities. AUC students were far and away the most likely to post political links and status updates, for example. ULL student pages, meanwhile, suggest a more outgoing identity construction process. ULL pages almost always used the real names of account holders and used images of the account holder as profile pictures. ULL students also displayed their 'friend' lists and frequently used status bars to communicate social and personal information.

This study had two notable limitations. First, the Facebook usage patterns identified in this paper cannot be said to be representative of all Facebook users – or even all university Facebook users – in the three countries under study. Although it was not possible in the current research context, future researchers would be wise to employ random sampling, if possible. Second, since Facebook users have the ability to hide at least some types of data from their online friends, it is likely that some content was not taken into account. Hidden Facebook content constitutes an unavoidable problem of data authenticity for researchers attempting to examine Facebook content patterns.

Future researchers would also be wise to carry out qualitative assessments designed to unpack the specific reasons why students in different societies use Facebook in the ways they do, what restrictions they perceive, and how real-world conditions translate to social media. In-depth interviews or focus groups could be used to probe further and provide further insights into quantitative data.

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**Appendix**

## CODING SHEET

1. What University affiliation is listed?
  - a. AUC
  - b. ULL
  - c. QU
  - d. Not clear
  - e. Other \_\_\_\_\_
  
2. What is the account owner's nationality?
  - a. Egyptian
  - b. American
  - c. Qatari
  - d. Other \_\_\_\_\_
  - e. Not Listed
  
3. Is the account owner a male or female?
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  
4. Is a birth year mentioned?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  
5. What is the relationship status indicated by the account owner?
  - a. Single
  - b. In a relationship
  - c. Engaged
  - d. Married
  - e. It's complicated
  - f. In an open relationship
  - g. Widowed
  - h. Separated
  - i. Divorced
  - j. Not listed
  
6. Is there an employment history?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  
7. Does the name listed on the profile appear real?
  - a. Yes

- b. No
8. How many friends does the account owner have? \_\_\_\_\_
9. What is the religious affiliation?
- a. Muslim
  - b. Christian
  - c. Jewish
  - d. Bhuddist
  - e. Hindu
  - f. Atheist
  - g. Other
  - h. Not listed
10. What is the nature of the account owner's most recent status update?
- a. Political
  - b. Religious
  - c. Sports related
  - d. Social (info about or directed to friends, social events, or songs)
  - e. Comedic
  - f. Personal state/feeling
  - g. Personal activity
  - h. Other \_\_\_\_\_
  - i. None
11. What is the nature of the account owner's second most recent status update?
- a. Political
  - b. Religious
  - c. Sports related
  - d. Social (info about or directed to friends, social events, or songs)
  - e. Comedic
  - f. Personal state/feeling
  - g. Personal activity
  - h. Other \_\_\_\_\_
  - i. None
12. What is the nature of the account owner's third most recent status update?
- a. Political
  - b. Religious
  - c. Sports related
  - d. Social (info about or directed to friends, social events, or songs)
  - e. Comedic
  - f. Personal state/feeling
  - g. Personal activity

- h. Other \_\_\_\_\_
- i. None

13. What is the nature of the account owner's most recent non-status (video or article link) wall post?

- a. Political
- b. Religious
- c. Sports related
- d. Social
- e. Comedic
- f. Entertainment
- g. Other \_\_\_\_\_
- h. None

14. What is the nature of the account owner's second most recent non-status (video or article link) wall post?

- a. Political
- b. Religious
- c. Sports related
- d. Social
- e. Comedic
- f. Entertainment
- g. Other \_\_\_\_\_
- h. None

15. What is the nature of the account owner's third most recent non-status (video or article link) wall post?

- a. Political
- b. Religious
- c. Sports related
- d. Social
- e. Comedic
- f. Entertainment
- g. Other \_\_\_\_\_
- h. None

16. How many status updates has the person posted in the last 30 days?

\_\_\_\_\_

17. What is the nature of the current profile picture?

- a. Solo shot of what appears to be the account owner
- b. Group shot which appears to include the account owner
- c. Image does not appear to contain the account owner

18. How many photos/images are contained within the account owner's photo albums?

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