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MIDDLE EAST

# Young Saudis, Bound by Conservative Strictures, Find Freedom on Their Phones

By BEN HUBBARD MAY 22, 2015

RIYADH, Saudi Arabia — Life for many young Saudis is an ecosystem of apps.

Lacking free speech, they debate on Twitter. Since they cannot flirt at the mall, they do it on WhatsApp and Snapchat.

Young women who cannot find jobs sell food or jewelry through Instagram. Since they are banned from driving, they get rides from car services like Uber and Careem. And in a country where shops close for five daily Muslim prayers, there are apps that issue a call to prayer from your pocket and calculate whether you can reach, say, the nearest Dunkin' Donuts before it shuts.

Confronted with an austere version of Islam and strict social codes that place sharp restrictions on public life, young Saudis are increasingly relying on social media to express and entertain themselves, earn money and meet friends and potential mates.

That reliance on technology — to circumvent the religious police, and the prying eyes of relatives and neighbors — has accelerated since it first began with the spread of satellite television in the 1990s. Saudis in their 30s (and older) recall the days of unsanctioned courtship via BlackBerry Messenger.

But the scale of today's social media boom is staggering, with many of the country's 18 million citizens wielding multiple smartphones and spending hours online each day. Digital has not replaced face-to-face interaction, but it has opened the door to much more direct and robust communication, especially in a society that sharply segregates men and women who are not related.

The spread of mobile technology is driving nothing short of a social revolution in the lives of young people. In this rich but conservative kingdom that bans movie theaters, YouTube and Internet streaming have provided an escape from the censors and a window to the outside world. A young Shariah judge, for example, confided that he had watched all five seasons of “Breaking Bad.”

“I got addicted,” he said.

Saudi Arabia has ideal conditions for a social media boom: speedy Internet, disposable income and a youthful population with few social options. Unlike China and Iran, Saudi Arabia has not blocked sites like Facebook and Twitter, although it occasionally prosecutes those seen as insulting public figures or Islam. The Saudi monarchy appears to have decided that the benefits of social media as an outlet for young people outweigh the risk that it will be used to mobilize political opposition, which it is quick to punish, harshly.

There are economic benefits, too.

“A lot of people are stuck to their phones — and really bored,” said Ali Kalthami, the head of content for Telfaz11, which produces comedy videos for YouTube.

The company now employs more than 30 people and has branched out into commercials, games and talent management for its actors, who are often swarmed on the street by young Saudis seeking selfies with them. It has lampooned the ban on women driving and stereotypes of Saudis abroad, but its members know their limits.

“The regular taboos: sex, politics and religion,” said Alaa Yoosef, the managing director of C3 Films, the parent company of Telfaz11.

While social media has spread across groups, its effects have been the greatest among the Saudis who are under age 30 — more than half the population.

“Everything to do with technology is a window to the outside world, and there is nothing out there that our young people don’t know about,” said Hoda Abdulrahman al-Helaissi, a female member of the kingdom’s Shura Council, an advisory body appointed by the king.

Being increasingly wired, however, will not necessarily bring Western-style liberalization. Religious conservatives use social media as adeptly as liberals, and many young Saudis remain committed to and proud of their culture. Even those who want change say it must come gradually.

Many have used the new technologies in uniquely Saudi ways.

Working from home with only a smartphone and a sense of humor, a

22-year-old university student known as Amy Roko has gained nearly a half-million followers on Instagram for short videos that show her imitating the Colombian diva Shakira, using karate on an unwanted suitor and riding a skateboard since she cannot drive.

That she performs covered in a traditional black gown and full face veil clearly adds to the novelty.

Ms. Roko arrived for an interview at the office of her newly acquired agent dressed from head to ankle in black, with a digital watch, two bracelets and a pair of flower-patterned Adidas sneakers.

She began making videos “out of boredom,” she said, and was surprised to see her following expand. Some followers have honored her with fan art; others have threatened to call the police.

“They are like, ‘Why are you doing this? You are going to ruin our reputation,’” she said. “I think people just like hating.”

Ms. Roko refused to disclose her real name for fear it would complicate her personal life, but allowed that she is a pre-med student who likes Jimmy Kimmel and “Game of Thrones.” She always wears a face veil in public.

When asked what changes she would like to see in Saudi Arabia, she paused.

“We need movies, like, cinemas,” she said. “I think if we could just achieve that, I mean, that’s all we need.”

The power of social media to effect change remains limited in a society lacking political rights. A few officials have been fired after being caught on video behaving badly, but the country is still ruled by an absolute monarch, the 79-year-old King Salman. And powerful clerics run the justice system and oppose social change.

Swiping through the apps on her smartphone, Haya al-Fahad, 27, described how she quit her first job after university because one-third of her pay went to the driver she used to get to and from work.

She now works from home, making bracelets she sells on Instagram. That gives her more time to manage her three Facebook pages, three Instagram accounts and two Twitter feeds, where she likes to pick fights with people whose political and religious views she dislikes.

“This is my identity,” she said, waving her phone. “I don’t know how people survived 10 years ago without it.”

But she uses her real name on just one private account, she said, because she

feels she can speak freely only when anonymous.

“There are lots of Saudis who would like to talk, but they won’t because they have no protection,” she said.

For Raqad Alabdali, a conservative 22-year-old from a Riyadh suburb, romance began when a man she did not know responded to her melancholy posts on Twitter with a private message. They were soon messaging constantly.

“He kept checking on me to make sure I wasn’t sad anymore, and then we tweeted with each other daily,” she said.

They exchanged phone numbers for an occasional call, and she eventually sent him a photo of herself unveiled, in a white dress with bare shoulders and eye makeup on her uncovered face.

He said he wanted to marry her. His mother called hers.

The couple is planning a family meeting to make their engagement formal, Ms. Alabdali said. It will be their first time in the same room.

“I don’t have any doubt that he’ll marry me or is serious about me,” Ms. Alabdali said.

Why so sure? Her older brother and his wife met on Facebook. Sheikha Aldosary contributed reporting.

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