



Navigating Digital Spaces: A Cross-Platform Analysis of Communication Norms in Saudi Social Media

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ABSTRACT

This study provides the first empirical comparison of communicative practices across public (X), semi-private (Snapchat), and private (WhatsApp) platforms among Saudi Arabian users. It aims to understand how users strategically adapt their linguistic style, resource deployment, and self-presentation to navigate the distinct social norms and technological affordances of each platform. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining a quantitative online survey with qualitative analysis. The survey captured data from 225 active Saudi social media users on their perceived formality, code-switching frequency, emoji usage, and audience-design strategies. Paired-samples t-tests were used to analyze significant differences in communication across platforms. The findings reveal a clear platform-based hierarchy of communication norms. Formality was highest on the public platform X, moderate on WhatsApp, and lowest on Snapchat. Emoji usage followed an inverse pattern, being most frequent on Snapchat and least frequent on X. These differences were statistically significant ($p < .001$). In contrast, the frequency of Arabic-English code-switching showed no significant variation across platforms, suggesting it is driven by functional necessity and stable bilingual identity rather than contextual adaptation. Saudi users are sophisticated digital navigators who strategically modulate their communicative practices in response to platform architecture. While pragmatic behaviors like formality and emoji use are highly context-sensitive, core linguistic practices like code-switching remain stable. This study challenges the notion of a monolithic "digital language" and contributes a nuanced model of platform-specific pragmatics, highlighting how cultural values and technological affordances intersect to shape modern social interaction.

Keywords: Social media, Cross-platform analysis, Saudi Arabia, Digital communication, Pragmatics, Code-switching.

Introduction

In Saudi Arabia, a nation characterized by its near-total digital saturation, social media platforms have become indispensable arbiters of social interaction (Kemp, 2024). A clear dichotomy has emerged in this landscape: public-facing platforms like X (formerly Twitter) serve as arenas for assertive, opinion-driven discourse, while private messaging applications such as WhatsApp and Snapchat cultivate more intimate, relationally-oriented exchanges (Azmi & Al-Ghadir, 2024; König, 2024). Navigating this divide requires considerable linguistic dexterity. Saudi users are not passive consumers of technology; rather, they are active agents who strategically deploy a range of communicative resources from politeness markers and emojis to code-switching to skillfully manage their identities across these distinct social worlds (Alharbi & Mahzari, 2023; Almoaily, 2023; Aljasir, 2024).

While insightful, the existing scholarship on this topic offers a fragmented and incomplete picture. Current research has largely adopted a siloed approach, examining either single platforms in isolation or specific linguistic phenomena

Received: 14.06.2025 – Accepted: 07.10.2025 – Published: 15.10.2025

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without a holistic, comparative lens. This methodological atomization obscures the very real, lived experience of users who move fluidly between these platforms, adapting their self-presentation as they go. Consequently, a critical gap persists in our understanding of how Saudi users cohesively manage their communicative repertoires across the public-private digital divide. This gap is compounded by the methodological impasse that has historically limited research into ephemeral or private content, leaving a significant portion of digital life unexamined.

This study confronts this gap directly. It puts forth a systematic, mixed-methods investigation designed to bridge the public-private divide in Saudi digital communication research. By providing the first empirical comparison of communicative practices across X, WhatsApp, and Snapchat, this research moves beyond a fragmented view to offer a more integrated understanding. Therefore, the central question driving this inquiry is: How do Saudi social media users strategically adapt their communicative practices across public and private platforms to navigate differing technological affordances and social norms? Answering this question is not merely an academic exercise; it is essential for developing a nuanced appreciation of platform-specific pragmatics and the dynamic future of social interaction in a globally connected yet culturally distinct society.

Literature Review

The existing literature provides a foundation for this study, highlighting the digital dualism in Saudi communication, the strategic use of linguistic resources, and the complexities of privacy management. However, it also reveals critical gaps that this research aims to address.

The Digital Dualism: Public vs. Private Communication

Saudi Arabia's digital landscape is one of near-total saturation, making it a critical site for understanding contemporary social dynamics. With an internet penetration rate of 99% and 35.10 million active users, platforms like WhatsApp, Snapchat, and X are not merely communication tools; they are the primary arenas where social life unfolds (Kemp, 2024). A fundamental schism defines this ecosystem: the division between private, relationally-focused platforms and the open, public-facing sphere of X.

The closed and ephemeral architecture of WhatsApp and Snapchat cultivates a space for intimacy, where users share personal experiences and foster a sense of community within trusted circles (König, 2024). In stark contrast, X functions as a modern public square. As demonstrated by Azmi and Al-Ghadir's (2024) large-scale analysis of over 200 million tweets, it is a vital space for assertive public discourse, where opinions on everything from social justice to political reform are voiced and contested. This architectural divergence imposes distinct communicative norms, with X demanding a more formal, deliberative tone and private apps permitting a more relaxed, emotionally rich style of interaction.

Strategic Deployment of Linguistic Resources

Saudi users strategically deploy a range of linguistic resources to navigate these different social worlds.

Politeness and Directness. The evolution of politeness norms on X represents one of the most intriguing shifts in Saudi digital communication. While directness has gained ground, particularly in governmental and political discourse (Aldekhyyel, 2022), users have developed a sophisticated toolkit of mitigating strategies stance markers, hedging devices, and supportive expressions to assert their positions while signaling respect (Heitmayer & Schimmelpennig, 2024).

Emojis as Paralinguistic Cues. Far from being decorative, emojis function as deliberate paralinguistic devices that adjust tone, convey emotional nuance, and manage interpersonal dynamics (Alharbi & Mahzari, 2023; Aljasir, 2024). They are frequently used to soften potentially face-threatening messages, a function especially pronounced among Saudi women, who utilize emojis more frequently to convey warmth and foster relational cohesion (Al-Shboul & Al-Azzam, 2022).

Code-Switching as Identity Work. The strategic alternation between Arabic and English has emerged as a powerful tool for identity construction. English is often deployed to signal professionalism or cosmopolitanism, while Arabic anchors users in local, religious, and familial contexts (Almoaily, 2023). For younger Saudis, this linguistic hybridization is central to navigating what might otherwise be experienced as conflicting cultural allegiances (Alghuwainem, 2025).



The Privacy Paradox and Audience Design

Privacy in Saudi digital life is a complex, context-dependent negotiation. Research reveals significant heterogeneity in privacy concerns, mediated by individual and demographic factors (Al-Amri *et al.*, 2021). Interestingly, the high rate of digital integration in Saudi society may be gradually recalibrating what constitutes acceptable visibility (Krasnova *et al.*, 2022). This leads to a "privacy paradox": greater exposure does not lead to greater freedom but rather to more meticulous self-regulation and impression management (Muyidi, 2025). Female influencers, in particular, navigate intricate terrain, balancing personal connection with the rational appeals expected of professional communicators (Al-Harhi, 2023).

Research Gaps and Contribution

Despite this rich body of work, the literature suffers from three critical limitations: **platform-specific myopia**, **analytical fragmentation**, and a **methodological impasse** regarding private content. What is conspicuously absent is empirical, Saudi-specific research that systematically compares how users adapt their communicative practices as they navigate between public and private platforms in their everyday lives. This study addresses this gap by providing the first integrated, cross-platform analysis of these communicative repertoires.

Materials and Methods

This study employed a quantitative-dominant mixed-methods design to investigate cross-platform communication practices among Saudi social media users.

Research Design

A mixed-methods approach was utilized, combining a quantitative online survey with optional qualitative questions. This design allows for the identification of broad, generalizable patterns through statistical analysis while providing deep, contextual insights from participant elaborations. The study is primarily cross-sectional, capturing a snapshot of user behaviors and perceptions at a single point in time.

Participants and Sampling

The target population consisted of Saudi social media users aged 18 and above who actively use at least two of the three focal platforms (X, WhatsApp, Snapchat). A non-probability convenience and snowball sampling strategy was employed. A total of 225 valid responses were collected. To ensure response validity, analyses included only active platform users, defined as those reporting "Daily," "Weekly," or "Multiple times per day" usage. This filtering resulted in two primary analytical samples:

- **X vs. WhatsApp Comparison:** N = 105 participants who actively use both platforms.
- **Snapchat vs. WhatsApp Comparison:** N = 199 participants who actively use both platforms.

Table 1 provides a detailed breakdown of the demographic characteristics for each analytical sample.

Table 1. Participant Demographics for Analytical Samples

Characteristic	X vs. WhatsApp (N=105)	Snapchat vs. WhatsApp (N=199)
Gender		
Male	75 (71.4%)	113 (56.8%)
Female	30 (28.6%)	86 (43.2%)
Age Distribution		
18-24 years	51 (48.6%)	93 (46.7%)
25-34 years	33 (31.4%)	55 (27.6%)
35-44 years	13 (12.4%)	37 (18.6%)
45+ years	8 (7.6%)	14 (7.0%)
Regional Distribution		
Western Region	98 (93.3%)	(Similar dominance)



Central Region	6 (5.7%)
Southern Region	1 (1.0%)

Materials and Procedure

A structured online questionnaire was developed using Google Forms. The survey, designed for completion in 6-8 minutes, consisted of 15 core quantitative questions and 2 optional questions. Questions were designed based on validated constructs from prior research in pragmatics, computer-mediated communication, and social psychology (e.g., Goffman, 1959; Brown & Levinson, 1987). Key variables were measured using 5-point Likert scales.

Participants were recruited through social media posts, university networks, and professional communities. All participants provided informed consent before beginning the survey. The data was collected over a four-week period in 2024.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data was analyzed using paired-samples *t*-tests to compare communication practices (formality, emoji use, code-switching) across platforms. This statistical test is appropriate for the within-subjects design of the study, where the same individuals rated their behavior on different platforms. All analyses were conducted using standard statistical software. Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's *d* based on the standard deviation of the difference scores, which is the recommended method for paired-samples designs (Lakens, 2013).

Results and Discussion

The analysis revealed significant differences in linguistic style and resource use across platforms, but stability in code-switching patterns. The findings are organized by each research question.

RQ1: Linguistic Style and Formality

Consistent with H1, users reported significant variations in formality across platforms. A clear formality hierarchy emerged: X was perceived as the most formal, followed by WhatsApp, with Snapchat being the least formal.

- **X vs. WhatsApp:** A paired-samples *t*-test indicated that formality was significantly higher on X ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.41$) than on WhatsApp ($M = 2.79$, $SD = 1.19$), $t(95) = 3.72$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.38$.
- **Snapchat vs. WhatsApp:** Formality was significantly lower on Snapchat ($M = 1.77$, $SD = 1.11$) than on WhatsApp ($M = 2.71$, $SD = 1.22$), $t(183) = -9.04$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.67$.

RQ2: Linguistic Resources (Emojis and Code-Switching)

Partially supporting H2, emoji usage varied significantly across platforms, but code-switching frequency did not.

- **Emoji Usage:** Emoji use was significantly lower on X ($M = 2.32$, $SD = 1.29$) than on WhatsApp ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 1.16$), $t(103) = -7.76$, $p < .001$, $*d* = -0.76$. Further, emoji use was even higher on Snapchat ($*M* = 3.71$) than on WhatsApp ($*M* = 3.57$), $*t*(191) = 2.22$, $*p* = .027$, $*d* = 0.16$. This establishes a clear hierarchy for expressive resource use: Snapchat > WhatsApp > X.
- **Code-Switching Frequency:** There was no significant difference in the frequency of Arabic-English code-switching between X ($M = 2.64$, $SD = 1.45$) and WhatsApp ($M = 2.86$, $SD = 1.47$), $t(102) = -1.50$, $p = .136$. Similarly, no significant difference was found between Snapchat ($M = 3.17$) and WhatsApp ($M = 3.09$), $t(195) = 1.11$, $p = .268$. This suggests that code-switching is a stable bilingual practice, not a context-dependent strategy.

RQ3: Privacy and Audience Design

Contrary to H3, participants reported similar levels of privacy importance and audience adaptation across platforms, with one notable exception.

- **Privacy Importance:** There was no significant difference in the rated importance of privacy between X and WhatsApp ($p = .271$) or between Snapchat and WhatsApp ($p = .443$).
- **Audience Adaptation:** While no difference was found between X and WhatsApp ($p = .258$), users reported significantly higher audience adaptation on Snapchat ($M = 2.83$) compared to WhatsApp ($M = 2.64$), $t(193)$



= 2.98, $p = .003$, $d = 0.21$. This may reflect Snapchat's unique features like ephemeral content and story visibility (Table 2).

Table 2. Summary of Paired-Samples t-test Results

Comparison	Variable	N	t(df)	p-value	Cohen's d	Result
X vs. WhatsApp	Formality	105	3.72(95)	< .001	0.38	Significant
	Emoji Usage	104	-7.76(103)	< .001	-0.76	Significant
	Code-Switching	103	-1.50(102)	.136	-0.15	Not Significant
	Privacy Importance	103	-1.11(102)	.271	-0.11	Not Significant
	Audience Adaptation	104	-1.14(103)	.258	-0.11	Not Significant
Snapchat vs. WhatsApp	Formality	199	-9.04(183)	< .001	-0.67	Significant
	Emoji Usage	192	2.22(191)	.027	0.16	Significant
	Code-Switching	196	1.11(195)	.268	0.08	Not Significant
	Privacy Importance	196	0.77(195)	.443	0.06	Not Significant
	Audience Adaptation	194	2.98(193)	.003	0.21	Significant

The findings of this study provide a nuanced understanding of how Saudi users navigate the complex digital landscape. This section discusses the key findings in relation to the initial hypotheses, connects them to the broader literature, and explores the theoretical and practical implications.

The Strategic Modulation of Communicative Style

The results strongly support H1, revealing a clear formality hierarchy across platforms: **X (most formal) > WhatsApp (moderate) > Snapchat (least formal)**. This confirms that Saudi users are not passive adopters of a universal "digital language" but are instead sophisticated social actors who strategically adapt their linguistic style in response to platform affordances and perceived audience. The high formality on X aligns with its function as a public square, where users engage in more deliberative and face-conscious communication (Azmi & Al-Ghadir, 2024). Conversely, the lower formality on WhatsApp and Snapchat reflects their roles as spaces for intimate, relationally-oriented exchanges (König, 2024).

Similarly, the finding that emoji usage follows an inverse pattern (**Snapchat > WhatsApp > X**) provides further evidence for this strategic adaptation. Emojis, as powerful paralinguistic cues, are deployed most frequently in the most informal and intimate contexts to convey emotional nuance and maintain interpersonal harmony, a finding consistent with prior research (Alharbi & Mahzari, 2023; Aljasir, 2024). The significantly lower use of emojis on X suggests that in public-facing discourse, users prioritize clarity and directness over emotional expressiveness.

The Stability of Code-Switching as a Functional Tool

Perhaps the most striking finding of this study is the rejection of the hypothesis that code-switching frequency would vary by platform. The data shows that the rate of Arabic-English code-switching remains remarkably stable across public and private contexts. This suggests that, unlike formality and emoji use, code-switching for this cohort of bilingual Saudi users is not primarily a pragmatic strategy for audience design. Instead, it appears to be a more fundamental, functional aspect of their linguistic competence.

Qualitative data from the survey provides compelling explanations for this stability. Participants frequently cited **lexical necessity** (using English for technical or professional terms not readily available in Arabic) and **cognitive automaticity** (mixing languages as a natural habit of bilingual thought) as primary drivers. This indicates that code-switching for this group is less about adapting to a specific platform's norms and more about leveraging their full linguistic repertoire for efficiency and precision. It is a reflection of their stable bilingual identity, not a context-dependent performance. This finding makes a significant theoretical contribution by demonstrating that not all communicative behaviors are equally sensitive to contextual variation in computer-mediated communication.



Re-evaluating Privacy and Audience Design

The study yielded mixed results regarding H3. While users reported high levels of privacy concern across all platforms, there was no significant difference in self-reported audience adaptation between the public sphere of X and the private sphere of WhatsApp. This is a surprising finding that challenges the assumption that publicness automatically triggers more intensive impression management. It may be that for Saudi users, the "imagined audience" on WhatsApp composed of family, friends, and colleagues is just as, if not more, critical to manage as an anonymous public audience on X.

The one exception was the significantly higher audience adaptation reported on Snapchat compared to WhatsApp. This likely reflects Snapchat's unique affordances, such as the curated nature of "Stories" and the ephemerality of "Snaps," which may encourage a more performative and carefully managed mode of self-presentation, even among trusted contacts.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that open avenues for future research. First, the use of a convenience sample, while necessary for this exploratory study, limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research should aim to use more representative sampling methods. Second, the data is based on self-report, which may not always perfectly reflect actual behavior. Observational studies, though methodologically challenging, would be a valuable next step. Third, the study's focus on a predominantly young, Western-region sample highlights the need for research that captures greater demographic diversity within Saudi Arabia.

Future research should also explore the specific content of code-switched utterances to move beyond frequency and analyze function in greater detail. Additionally, a longitudinal study could track how these communicative norms evolve over time as new platforms emerge and user habits change.

Implications

Despite these limitations, the study has significant implications. Theoretically, it provides a more nuanced model of platform-specific pragmatics, demonstrating that different communicative behaviors have different degrees of contextual sensitivity. Practically, the findings offer valuable insights for platform designers, educators, and marketers seeking to engage with the Saudi digital sphere. Understanding that formality is fluid but code-switching is stable, for example, can inform the design of more culturally-attuned communication technologies and strategies.

Conclusion

This study provides the first systematic, cross-platform analysis of digital communication norms in Saudi Arabia, offering empirical evidence of how users strategically adapt their communicative practices. The findings demonstrate that Saudi users are sophisticated social actors who modulate their linguistic style in response to platform affordances, maintaining a clear formality hierarchy (X > WhatsApp > Snapchat) and an inverse hierarchy for expressive resources like emojis (Snapchat > WhatsApp > X). These pragmatic adaptations are highly sensitive to the perceived publicness and intimacy of a digital space.

In contrast, the study reveals that core linguistic practices such as Arabic-English code-switching remain stable across platforms. This key finding suggests that code-switching for this bilingual cohort is driven more by functional necessity and stable identity expression than by context-dependent audience design. This distinction between context-sensitive pragmatic behaviors and stable functional practices is the central theoretical contribution of this work.

By bridging the public-private divide in digital communication research and providing a nuanced model of platform-specific pragmatics, this study challenges monolithic views of "digital language" and enhances our understanding of how culture and technology intersect to shape modern social interaction. The research not only fills a critical gap in the literature on Middle Eastern digital practices but also offers a replicable mixed-methods model for investigating similar phenomena in other highly digital, digitally-saturated societies.

Acknowledgments: None



Conflict of Interest: None

Financial Support: None

Ethics Statement: This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research principles. All participants provided informed consent before participating in the survey. The research maintained participant anonymity and confidentiality throughout the data collection and analysis process. The study did not involve any procedures that posed risk to participants and complied with institutional research ethics guidelines at King Saud University.

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