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Social Media's Socio-Cultural Impacts: An Analysis of the 2022 Arab Opinion Index**

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آثار وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي من الناحيتَين الاجتماعية والثقافية: قراءة في نتائج المؤشر العربي 2022

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Abstract: This article examines the socio-cultural impacts of social media in Arab public opinion. The analysis is based on the results of the eighth Arab Index survey, conducted in 2022 by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies in 14 Arab countries. The survey revealed that over two-thirds of respondents consider social media to have a positive societal and cultural impact, albeit to varying degrees. Positive sentiments were more prevalent in the Nile Valley and the Levant, while the Maghreb and the Arab Gulf exhibited more scepticism, placing them in the middle of the opinion spectrum. However, the responses also reflected a nuanced contradiction. While respondents acknowledged the importance of these platforms in various areas, they simultaneously recognized their negative impact.

Keywords: Arab Public Opinion; Arab Opinion Index; Social Media; Socio-Cultural Impact; Arab Countries.

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ملخص: تهدفُ هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل اتجاهات الرأي العام في المنطقة العربية نحو الآثار الاجتماعية والثقافية لوسائل التواصل الاجتماعي، استنادًا إلى نتائج الاستطلاع الثامن للمؤشر العربي الذي نفّذه المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات ميدانيًا في 14 بلدًا عربيًا عام 2022. ويبيّن الاستطلاع أنّ أكثر من ثلثي المستجيبين العرب يرون أنّ وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي تؤثّر إيجابيًا في المستوى الثقافي والاجتماعي بدرجاتٍ متفاوتة، مع ارتفاع النسبة لدى المستجيبين في إقليمَي وادي النيل والمشرق العربي مقارنةً بالمغرب العربي المتشكك في هذا التأثير والخليج العربي الذي يتوسط الترتيب، من دون أن يعني ذلك غياب الآثار السلبية، إذ تكشف إجابات المستجيبين عمّا قد يبدو تناقضًا مركّبًا بالجمع بين تأكيد أهمية هذه الوسائل في جوانب متعددة، وتأكيد آثارها السلبية أيضًا.

كلمات مفتاحية: الرأي العام العربي؛ المؤشر العربي؛ وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي؛ الآثار الاجتماعية والثقافية؛ البلدان العربية.

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Introduction

There has been much research on the effects of social media on society, including Arab societies. According to the DataReportal Index, five Arab countries (the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, Lebanon, and Oman) ranked among the top ten globally in social media usage rates in 2023.[1] However, social media engagement varies among Arab countries, reflecting a "digital gap" shaped by disparities in access to digital technology, particularly between countries with plentiful economic and technological resources, and those plagued with weak infrastructure or political unrest.[2]

How does Arab public opinion trends reflect social media's impact on society? To explore this issue, I draw on the findings of the eighth Arab Opinion Index survey, conducted by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies across 14 Arab countries between May and December 2022. With a sample of 33,300 respondents, this survey provides a comprehensive and diverse representation of public opinion in the region, while also accounting for the sociocultural and economic disparities among various countries.[3]

Public Opinion on Social Media's Impact on Society: Social Determinants

"Do you believe that social media's impact on society is very positive, somewhat positive, very negative, or somewhat negative?" The 2022 Arab Index findings show that over two-thirds of respondents considered social media's impact on their societies as positive in varying degrees. Nearly 17% (approximately one-fifth) viewed its impact as very positive, while half of respondents viewed it as somewhat positive. In contrast, those who viewed its impact as very negative or somewhat negative made up no more than one-third of the respondents, thus indicating an overall welcoming response to the impact of social media in public opinion.

Figure (1): Social Media's Impact on Society (%)
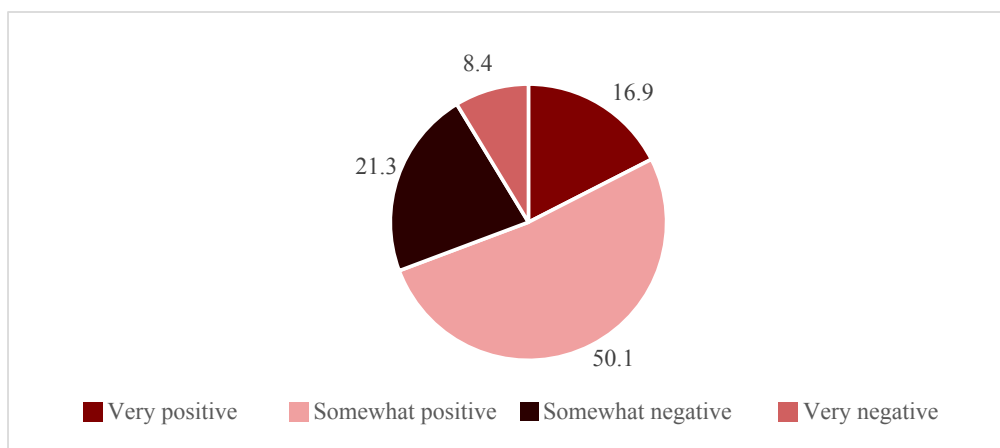
At the country level (Figure 2), Mauritania, Egypt, Kuwait, and Palestine registered the highest percentages of positive responses of social media's impact, reflecting a clear sense of optimism in these societies. In contrast, Tunisia, Algeria, Lebanon, Morocco, and Libya exhibited the lowest levels of optimism, highlighting a clear disparity in Arab public opinion. This disparity is particularly pronounced between populations of different subregions: the Nile Valley (Egypt and Sudan) and the Levant (Iraq, Jordan,

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1   "Digital 2023: Global Overview Report," *Report*, We Are Social & Meltwater, 2023, p. 169, accessed on 21/8/2024, at: https://t.ly/On82e

2   Hicham Raïq, "The Digital Divide and Political Apathy: A Multivariate Logistic Regression Analysis of a Sample of Arab Opinion Index Data," *Al-Muntaqa*, vol. 5, no. 2 (September/October 2022), p. 110.

3   To view the Arab Index reports and data, see: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Arab Index 2022, accessed on 10/8/2023, at: http://tinyurl.com/2p8zwtny

Palestine, and Lebanon) appeared more optimistic about the impact of social media; the Gulf region (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar) fell in the middle of the ranking; and the Maghreb (Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria) expressed greater scepticism (with the exception of Mauritania, which registered a more positive attitude, as indicated above). Notably, three of the four countries with the most negative perceptions of social media's impacts (Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and Lebanon) belong to the Maghreb, suggesting that public opinion trends are not solely shaped by country-specific factors, but also by regional dynamics.

The explanation for this trend lies in the complex social and political experiences that countries in the region underwent during the Arab Spring of 2011, when social media played a dual role.[4] On the one hand, it served as a powerful tool for self-expression and mobilization against ruling regimes. On the other, it became a vehicle for spreading rumours and misinformation, contributing to political and social instability in the affected countries.[5] This instability, in turn, exacerbated economic problems, such as rising unemployment and living costs, prominent themes on social media platforms, thus fuelling pessimism and frustration among the region's populations.[6] Nevertheless, even in countries like Tunisia, where scepticism toward social media was most pronounced, the overall attitude toward social media remained predominantly positive. Thus, despite regional disparities, nearly all Arab countries (except Libya) continue to maintain a relatively favourable perception of social media and its growing role as well as its societal impact.

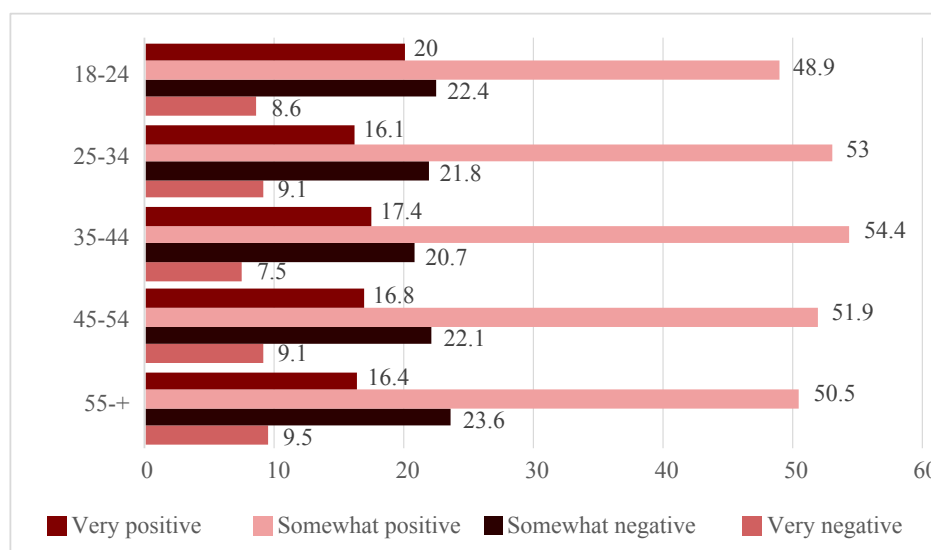**Figure (2): Social Media's Impact on Society by Country (%)**
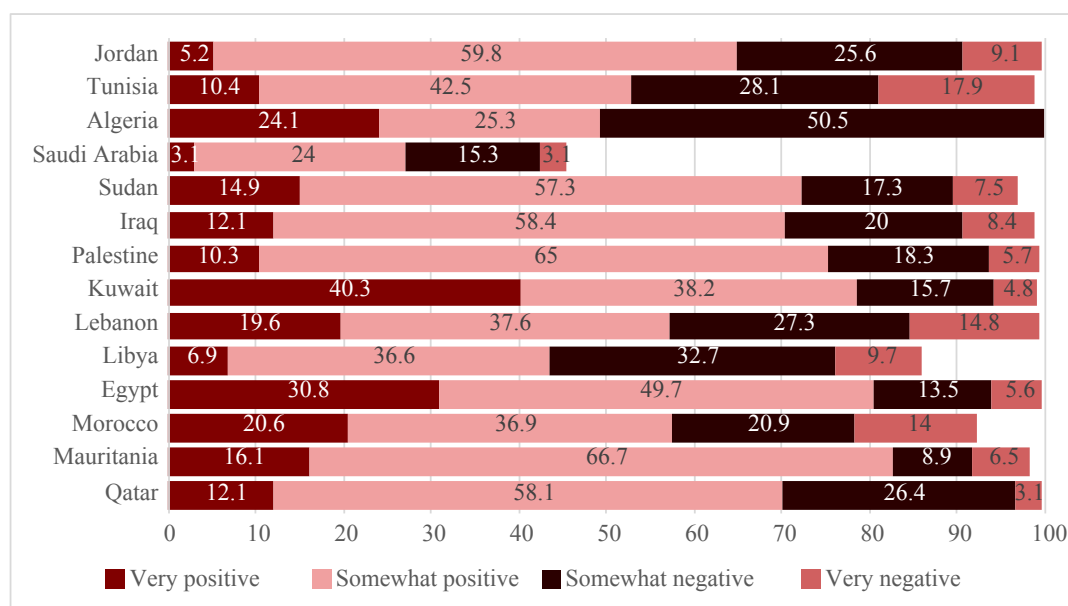
An analysis of the Arab Index results (Figure 3) shows no significant correlation between age and opinion on the impact of social media, as the percentages remain nearly identical across age groups. This challenges the common assumption that older individuals,[7] particularly the elderly, tend to view modern technology and social media as harmful to younger generations and something to be avoided. On the contrary, the proportion of respondents over 55 who held a positive view of social media's impact differed from that of younger age groups by a mere five percentage points.

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[4] Julius Kalaine Larama, "The Influence of Social Media on Conflict: The Case of the Maghreb Countries in North Africa," Master's Thesis, University of Nairobi, Kenya, 2014, pp. 61-63.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Aly Reham & César A. Alfonso, "Self-Immolation in the Arab World after the Arab Spring," in: César A. Alfonso, Prabha S. Chandra & Thomas G. Schulze (eds.), *Suicide by Self-Immolation: Biopsychosocial and Transcultural Aspects* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2021), pp. 122-124.

[7] Comunello Francesca et al., "'Youngsplaining' and Moralistic Judgements: Exploring Ageism through the Lens of Digital 'Media Ideologies'," *Ageing & Society*, vol. 42, no. 4 (2022), pp. 946-948.
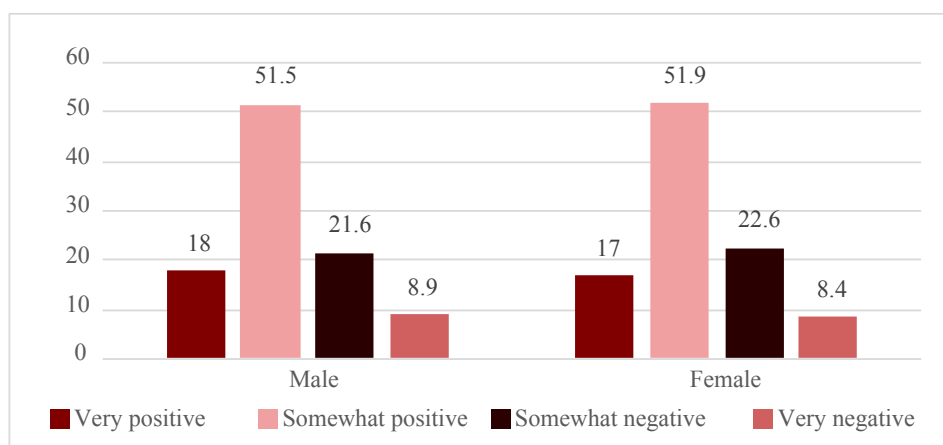
Figure (3): Public Opinion on Social Media's Impact on Society by Age in Arab Countries (%)

Similar to the age variable, public opinion on social media's impact on society showed no notable differences based on educational level (Figure 4). Perceptions among individuals with secondary education closely mirrored those of individuals without an education. The differences between these two groups have not exceeded three percentage points, in contrast with differences of up to five percentage points observed in some age groups. Although educational level plays an important role in areas such as how to participate in the electoral process,[8] it had no palpable impact on people's assessments of the influence of social media. This suggests that opinions on social media's impact are not explicitly affected by individuals' educational level.

Figure (4): Popular Assessment of Social Media's Impact on Society According to Educational Level (%)
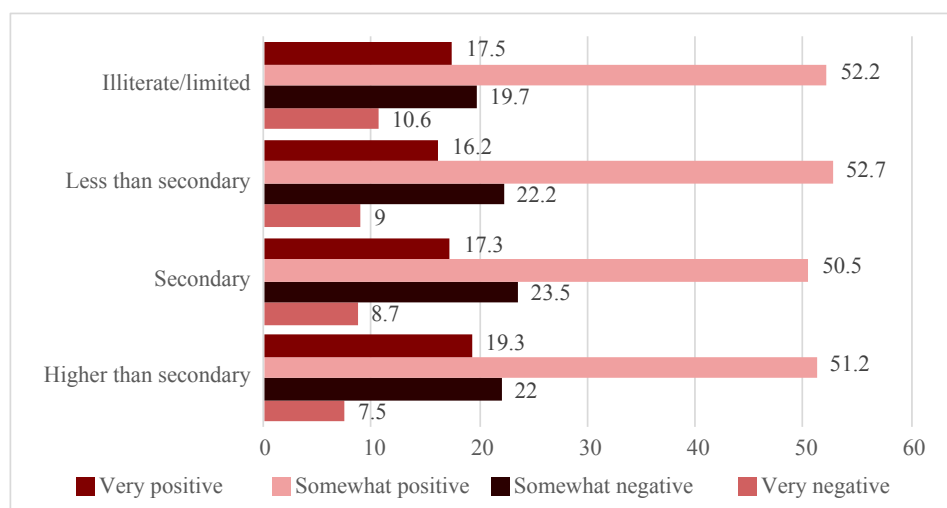
When looking at gender (Figure 5), the difference between male and female views of social media's impact on society appear minimal and sociologically insignificant. Men were more likely to see social media's impact as positive (69.5%) than women (68.9%), by less than one percentage point. Similarly, under the "somewhat negative" category, the gap between the two groups was just one percentage point, reinforcing the notion that gender plays a negligible role in shaping opinions on social media's influence.

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8   Kien Le & My Nguyen, "Education and Political Engagement," *International Journal of Educational Development*, vol. 85 (2021).

Figure (5): Popular Assessment of Social Media's Impact on Society According to Gender (%)

Public Opinion on Social Media's Positive Impact on Society: Various Dimensions

This section explores the various dimensions of positive views regarding social media's effect on society. The selection of these dimensions is primarily based on the questions posed in the eighth Arab Opinion Index, whether directly or indirectly.

In response to the question, To what extent do you agree with the statement: "Social media posts offer users beneficial knowledge and cultural input"?, knowledge and cultural information emerged as key positive dimensions of social media, as identified by respondents. Beyond the survey, this claim finds support in real-world observations, particularly on platforms like X (formerly Twitter). However, due to character limits, posts on X tend to be concise and fragmented. In contrast, Facebook's vast numbers of pages and groups provide richer and more comprehensive information across various fields, from the natural sciences to the social sciences and humanities.

In most cases across social media platforms, however, the reliability of such posts remains a critical concern, often lacking proper sources and references. While wide circulation can amplify the reach of information, it does not necessarily equate to credibility or value. For example, during the Covid-19 pandemic, fallacies and rumours about the vaccine spread on social media.

Nevertheless, despite these shortcomings, over 60% of respondents in most Arab countries (with the exception of Morocco and Saudi Arabia)[9] affirmed that social media provides valuable knowledge and cultural input. In some countries, such as Qatar, Libya, and Iraq, agreement with this statement exceeded 80%. Even in the countries with the lowest percentage of agreement, most respondents were inclined to agree. This reinforces the assertion that Arab respondents generally see social media platforms as a valuable source of knowledge and cultural input.

Table (1): Agreement with the Statement "Social Media Posts Offer Users Beneficial Knowledge and Cultural Input" (%)

Country	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
Jordan	21.6	50.5	17.0	9.4
Tunisia	26.1	36.8	15.2	15.9
Algeria	28.4	45.7	19.3	1.5

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9 This high percentage does not necessarily mean that the individuals who made up the sample ignored the misinformation and fallacies one finds on social media, as will be clear in the next section on negative dimensions.

Saudi Arabia	15.6	34.9	10.8	8.5
Sudan	30.2	36.9	13.9	9.1
Iraq	41.8	40.3	11.3	6.6
Palestine	13.6	57.6	20.8	4.9
Kuwait	21.0	46.3	21.5	9.3
Lebanon	28.4	41.5	18.3	8.4
Libya	50.5	32.7	6.7	4.0
Egypt	30.9	46.3	15.9	5.4
Morocco	21.8	34.1	22.9	15.1
Mauritania	15.4	62.7	18.4	2.8
Qatar	24.5	60.7	11.1	1.8
Total	**26.8**	**45.9**	**16.2**	**7.4**

The high percentage of respondents who agreed that social media has brought people in Arab countries closer together aligns with the overall positive views of its societal impact. Over two-thirds of respondents felt that social media has successfully bridged people across the Arab region, effectively transforming the Arab world into a "small village". Obviously, this is not exclusive to the Arab world, but what is unique to Arabs is the presence of a shared single language across the entire region, its diverse dialects notwithstanding, as well as common cultural foundations, including religion, a shared history, and shared societal values.

Figure (6): Agreement with the Statement "Social Media Has Brought People in Arab Countries Closer Together" (%)

■ Strongly agree   ■ Agree to some extent   ■ Disagree to some extent   ■ Strongly disagree
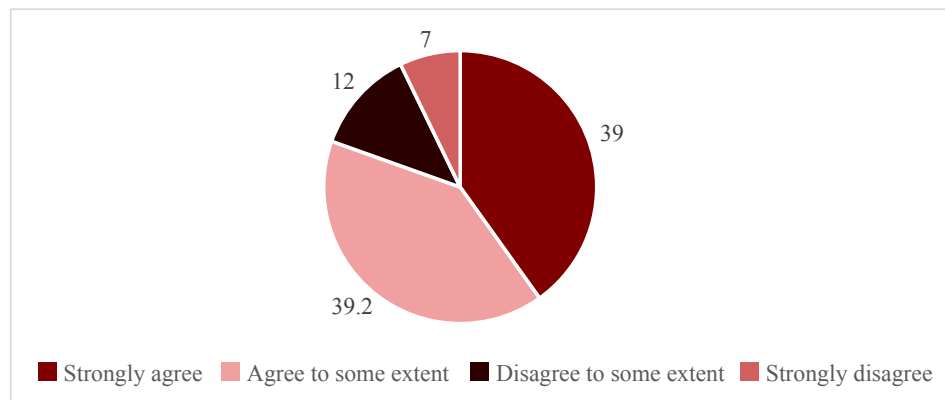
Regardless of the overall nature of social media content, many people view these platforms positively because they provide them with a space to express their opinions on their countries' public affairs. Similar to the previous question, which received over two-thirds agreement, this question also garnered widespread approval, reflecting the general Arab confidence in social media's positive impact. These findings align with studies on the role of social media during the Arab Spring, which emphasized its effectiveness in enabling people to protest against the repressive authorities and in facilitating popular mobilization. This role was clearly visible in the spread of hashtags such as #Tunisia, #Sidi Bouzid, and #Tahrir Square, along with the circulation of videos of Mohamed Bouazizi, and many others.[10]

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[10] Mareike Transfeld & Isabelle Werenfels, *#HashtagSolidarities: Twitter Debates and Networks in the MENA Region* (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik-SWP-Deutsches, 2016), pp. 5-9.

During the Arab Spring, social media was still finding its feet in the Arab region, suggesting that its reach and effectiveness have expanded significantly since then. This development can be attributed to several factors, particularly to the major improvement in internet accessibility over the years. At the time, many Arab countries, particularly those with limited incomes, had weak internet coverage, and the cost of smart devices and internet subscriptions was high.[11] Additionally, government censorship was (and in many cases, remains) intense, imposing tight restrictions on the online content available and making free access to social media platforms often challenging and risky, carrying potential legal consequences.[12] Despite these obstacles, social media plays a pivotal role today, even if expression of opinions on public affairs remains limited, hence its growing impact on public life in the Arab region.[13]

Figure (7): Agreement with the Statement "Regardless of the Overall Nature of Social Media Posts, These Platforms Are Good Because They Allow People to Express Their Opinions on Public Affairs in Their Countries" (%)
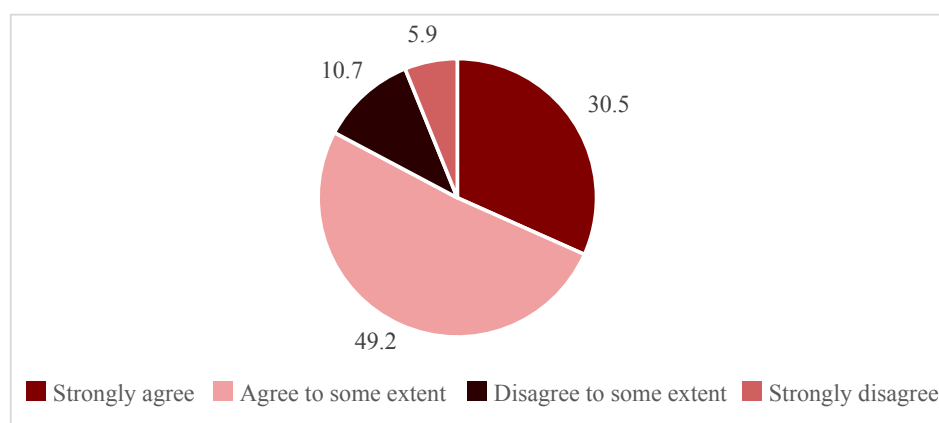
Public Opinion on Social Media's Negative Impact on Society: Various Dimensions

This section examines public opinion on the negative impacts of social media, as reflected in the eighth round Arab Index survey. These impacts manifest in three areas. The first is the danger social media may pose to cultural values and local traditions, raising fears of cultural identity erosion due to the exposure to content that may clash with societal values and hierarchies. This is supported by Idris al-Ghazwani in his analysis based on the conceptual and theoretical framework of renowned sociologist Manuel Castells. al-Ghazwani notes that social media can "undermine hierarchical social relations and traditional class categories, as the culture of multimedia and the internet has become the alphabet of our contemporary world".[14] The second is its impact on children, who are at a critical stage of growth, and may be exposed to inappropriate content that could negatively affect their psychological and social development. Lastly is its role in disseminating false and misleading rumours and reports on a broad scale, which may sow chaos and destabilize societies.[15]

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[11] Ghareeb Edmund, "New Media and the Information Revolution in the Arab World: An Assessment," *The Middle East Journal*, vol. 54, no. 3 (2000), pp. 415-416.

[12] Repressive authorities in the Arab world have acquired a new and diverse arsenal of censorship and prosecution tools, as well as armies of social and AT bots which cooperate with various platforms to block content that may pose a threat to them.

[13] Noha Fathy, "Freedom of Expression in the Digital Age: Enhanced or Undermined? The Case of Egypt," *Journal of Cyber Policy*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2018), pp. 102-111.

[14] Idris al-Ghazwani, "Manuel Castells wa Mafhūm Mujtamaʿ al-Shabakāt min al-Mujtamaʿ ilā al-Shabaka: Naḥw Muqāraba Taʾwīliyya li-l-Hawiyya wa-l-Sulṭa fī ʿAṣr al-Maʿlūmat," *Omran*, vol. 9, no. 33 (2020), p. 161.

[15] Fox Jo, "'Fake News' -- the Perfect Storm: Historical Perspectives," *Historical Research*, vol. 93, no. 259 (2020), pp. 172-177.

Figure (8): Agreement with the Statement "The Culture of Our Country Is Being Undermined by Social Media Posts" (%)
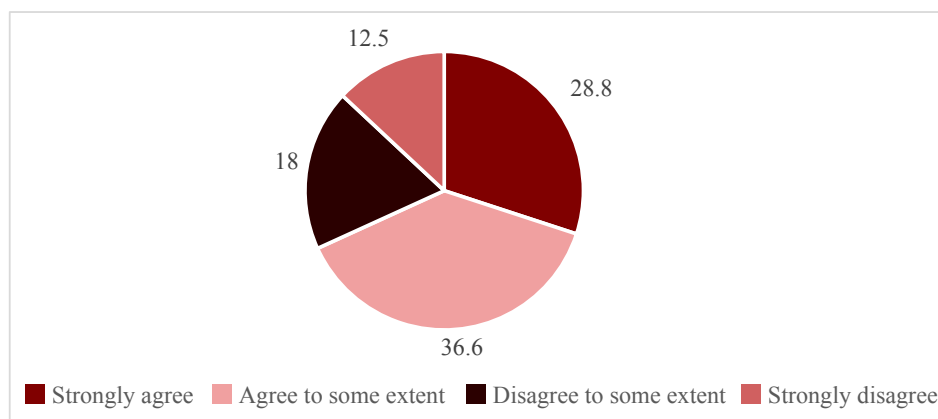
While social media can help enrich users' knowledge and culture, nearly 70% of respondents viewed social media as a threat to culture due to its potential impact on local customs and traditions. Therefore, respondents believe that social media helps to educate but could also lead to the loss of cultural identity. This pessimistic outlook stems from the exposure to content that differs from users' traditional culture.[16]

About 90% of respondents agreed that social media poses a danger to children and adolescents, approaching 100% in some countries, such as Jordan, Qatar, Tunisia, and Libya. As shown in Table 2, in six out of 14 surveyed countries, the percentage exceeded 90%, while in five countries, the percentage was below 85%. However, with the exception of Saudi Arabia and Morocco, these differences were relatively minor. This concern can be attributed to the vulnerability and impressionability of children. In worse-case scenarios, this danger may go beyond cultural influence to include children's physical, moral, and psychological well-being and safety. Therefore, many countries have imposed monetary penalties on social media companies that fail to implement adequate safeguards for child protection to shield them from harmful content and "unethical" practices.[17]

Table (2): Agreement with the Statement "Social Media Has Come to Pose a Danger to Children And Adolescents" (%)

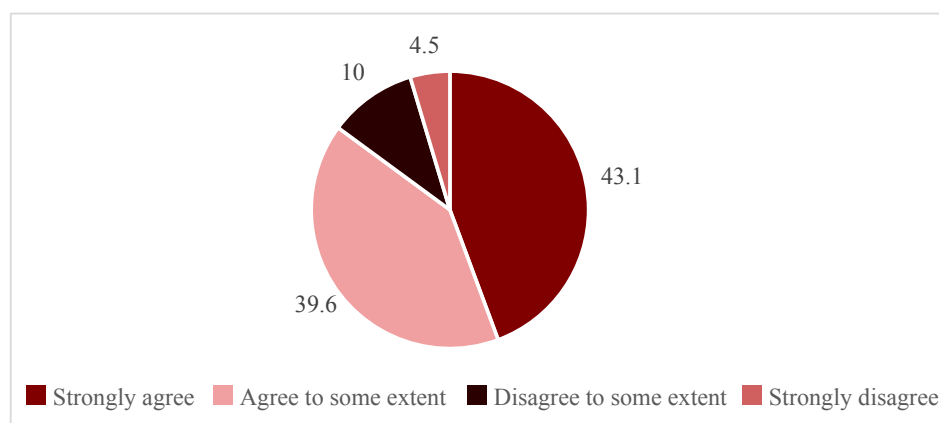| Country	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
Jordan	78.2	17.5	2.8	1.0
Tunisia	82.1	11.4	1.7	3.2
Algeria	67.2	29.0	-	-
Saudi Arabia	34.2	23.7	8.5	6.1
Sudan	45.2	30.8	6.9	8.1
Iraq	74.9	18.4	3.1	3.4
Palestine	74.2	18.9	3.4	1.4
Kuwait	43.5	26.3	16.9	12.2
Lebanon	66.9	22.2	6.8	2.9
Libya	81.2	12.4	1.2	1.7
Egypt	50.3	29.2	11.1	8.2

[16]   Abdullah bin Ali bin Muhammad al-Farisi & Fatima bint Musa al-Ballushi, "Darajat Taʾthīr Wasāʾil al-Tawāṣul al-Ijtimāʿī ʿalā al-Huwiyya al-Thaqāfiyya Ladhā Ṭalabat Muʾassasāt al-Taʿlīm al-ʿĀlī wa Subul al-Wiqāya min Taʾthīrihā Ladayhim," *al-Majalla al-Arabiyya li-l-Ulum al-Tarbawiyya wa-l-Nafsiyya*, vol. 8, no. 38 (2024), pp. 511-516.

[17]   Samantha Murphy Kelly, "Outside the US, Teens' Social Media Experiences Are More Tightly Controlled," *CNN*, 13/2/2024, accessed on 21/8/2024, at: https://rb.gy/8mtd7n

Morocco	31.4	32.6	18.6	12.8
Mauritania	32.9	53.8	11.2	1.9
Qatar	71.3	23.0	4.9	0.8
Total	**61.2**	**24.2**	**7.4**	**4.8**

The matter of fake news and misinformation received wide attention in academic spheres when Republican candidate Donald Trump entered the presidential race and was accused of spreading false news.[18] However, fake news and rumours are a problem not confined to the US; 85% of respondents agreed that social media has become a source of rumours and a means for promoting fake news. Although respondents recognized the important role social media plays in amplifying their voices, they also expressed widespread concern about its potential to spread rumours and misinformation in various areas. At first glance, such news may appear harmless. However, it can fuel tensions and exacerbate political instability, particularly in Arab countries already grappling with political or economic instability.[19] Even in more advanced and relatively stable countries, fake news has serious repercussions, as in the UK, where fake news claimed that an illegal Muslim immigrant was involved in a stabbing incident, triggering an escalation in hate speech, riots, and acts of violence against places and people connected, even remotely, to Islam.[20]

Figure (9): Agreement with the Statement "Even Though Social Media Allows People to Express Their Opinions on Public Affairs, It Has Become a Source of Rumours and Fake News" (%)

Legend: Strongly agree | Agree to some extent | Disagree to some extent | Strongly disagree

Values shown: 43.1, 39.6, 10, 4.5

Conclusion

Although the majority of Arab respondents across various social groups share a positive view of social media, this view is complex and nuanced. On the one hand, social media is seen as a means for expanding knowledge, fostering cultural interaction, and bridging distances across the Arab region. On the other hand, there are concerns about its negative impact on cultural identity and fears of the spread of rumours and misinformation. An analysis of Arab public opinion trends reveals a multidimensional reality wherein users benefit from these platforms, yet remain cautious about their potential negative influence on societal values and daily lives.

Additionally, the 2022 Arab Index was followed by the 2023-2024 Gaza War, which has generated discussions about the censorship and restriction of pro-Palestine content on various social media platforms.

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18 Allcott Hunt & Matthew Gentzkow, "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election," *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol. 31, no. 2 (2017), pp. 211-213.

19 Abdeljabbar Boutamin, "al-Akhbār al-Zāʾifa ʿAbr al-Fīsbūk Athnāʾ al-Ḥirāk al-Shaʿbī fī al-Jazāʾir," PhD Dissertation, University of Constantine 3 - Saleh Boubnider, Faculty of Media, and Audiovisual Communication Sciences, Algeria, 2023, p. 86.

20 "Southport Stabbing: What Led to the Spread of Disinformation," *Al Jazeera*, 2/8/2024, accessed on 14/8/2024, at: https://rb.gy/f7zlfl

As a result, supporters of the Palestinian cause have been forced to look for loopholes within these platforms by, for example, avoiding certain expressions, using symbolic representations, or integrating Palestinian content into other unrelated content such as songs.[21] Such developments may have reflections on the results of the next round of the Arab Index for two reasons: the inability of social media to bring about palpable change despite its role in spreading the truth; and the controversy surrounding the role of social media in light of accusations that Meta is shadow banning and fixing the algorithms of pro-Palestinian content, while promoting the Israeli narrative. X has also been subject to scrutiny in light of Elon Musk's amplification of far right voices since purchasing the platform. These factors deepen users' doubts and fears concerning the impact of social media on their reality and identity, particularly after its failure to meet the challenge posed by the Palestinian cause that so profoundly resonates with Arab peoples.

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