Account and Financial Management Journal e-ISSN: 2456-3374
Volume 10 Issue 05 May 2025, Page No.-3559-3562
DOI: 10.47191/afmj/v10i5.01, Impact Factor: 8.167

Social Media's Role in Shaping Jazan Region's Economy in Saudi Arabia: Education, Culture, and Business Perspectives

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ABSTRACT: Social media penetration in Saudi Arabia has surged to 94.3% in 2024, transforming economic and social dynamics. This study examines how social media influences education, cultural engagement, career decisions, and business marketing in Jazan City, aligning with Vision 2030's goals of economic diversification and digital transformation. Using a quantitative cross-sectional survey of 147 participants and a Discrete Choice Model (DCM), the study compares social media's impact to traditional methods across four domains. Results show social media is preferred for learning (84.4% probability), cultural content (78.2%), career exploration (72.1%), and marketing (62%) over traditional alternatives, driven by higher gratification and lower effort. However, algorithmic biases favoring pop culture and potential distractions pose challenges. Findings suggest social media supports Vision 2030 by enhancing access to opportunities, but strategic interventions are needed to align content with cultural and educational priorities. Recommendations include optimizing algorithms and expanding longitudinal research.

KEYWORDS: social media marketing, economic growth and development, Digital transformation, Discrete Choice Model

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media has reshaped global economies, with Saudi Arabia experiencing a rise in penetration from 29% in 2015 to 94.3% in 2024. In Jazan City, a developing region within the Vision 2030 framework, social media's role in driving economic growth through education, cultural engagement, career opportunities, and business marketing is underexplored. Vision 2030 aims to diversify Saudi Arabia's economy, promote tourism, and foster digital entrepreneurship, making social media a critical tool (Saudi Embassy, 2023). However, its impact is paradoxical: while it enhances connectivity and innovation, excessive use may lead to distractions or cultural overshadowing (Oxford University Press, 2024).

The impact of social media on society has become a divisive topic, with strong opinions on both sides. Some argue that social media has negatively influenced younger generations, causing what was named Oxford Word of the Year for 2024: "brain rot." On the other hand, many highlight the positive impacts of social media. They credit it with helping individuals find and secure jobs, often in digital sectors, and enabling companies, brands, governments, and charities to reach a broader audience. Social media has become an essential tool for connecting people, fostering economic opportunities, and innovation. Despite these opposing views, both groups rely heavily on social media in their daily lives, revealing a paradox in society's dependence on this technology. This research seeks to explore where this reliance on social media may lead, particularly in Saudi Arabia, and how its use can be optimized to align with the country's Vision 2030 objectives (Vision 2030, The Embassy of The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, n.d.)

The uses and gratifications theory (U&G) is one of the oldest and most influential theories in the field of communication and media research (Roy, 2008). Katz (1959) pointed out that the focus of communication studies at that time had shifted from "what do media do with the people" to "what do people do with the media" to reflect audience agency (Syed Idid, 2012). The core assumptions of U&G are: the audience is active and chooses media based on their needs; media consumption is goal-oriented and fulfills both personal and social needs. Additionally, media compete with other sources of satisfaction, and individuals are assumed to be aware of their media use. This theory explains why individuals rely on social media for job opportunities, entrepreneurship, and economic decision-making. The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), developed by Fred Davis, is a theory that explains how users accept and adopt new technology(Davis, 1989). Discrete Choice Models (DCM) describe, explain, and predict choices between two or more discrete alternatives. It shows people multiple options that they have to compare and pick between, thereby measuring which ones they like most by tracking their decisions across a series of choices.

This study applies the Uses and Gratifications Theory (U&G), Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), and Discrete Choice Model (DCM) to understand why and how individuals engage with social media (KATZ et al., 1973); (Davis, 1989); (DellaVigna, 2009)). U&G explains user motivations (e.g., social interaction, information seeking), TAM highlights perceived usefulness and ease of use, and DCM quantifies preferences between social media and traditional methods. Despite global research on social media's economic impacts, localized studies in Saudi Arabia are scarce, particularly in Jazan, where economic development and digital connectivity are accelerating (Saudi Arabia - Digital Economy, 2024).

By reviewing existing literature and comparing findings to data specific to Jazan City, this study aims to illuminate the interplay between social media and the region's economic and social fabric. Through this analysis, we hope to uncover both the opportunities and challenges presented by the growing reliance on digital platforms. So this research aims:

1.1. To analyze challenges posed by social media, such as distractions or misinformation, in educational contexts.

1.2. To examine how social media platforms influence the preservation or transformation of cultural traditions.

1.3. To evaluate the extent to which social media shapes societal norms and values that affect major life decisions.

1.4. To examine how social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok) are utilized by businesses in Jazan to promote products and services.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study involved 147 participants from Jazan City, aged 18–55, including students, professionals, and others, selected via convenience sampling through online platforms (e.g., WhatsApp, Instagram). No identifying information was collected to ensure anonymity. Two surveys (long and short versions) were designed using Google Forms, based on the DCM, targeting four domains: education, culture, career decisions, and business marketing.

- The influence of social media on education (e.g., enhanced learning vs. distractions).
- The impact of social media on cultural traditions (e.g., amplification or overshadowing).
- The role of social media in major life decisions (e.g., career choice, lifestyle).
- The strategies businesses use on social media during economic challenges (e.g., promotions, audience engagement).

Each domain included questions on gratification (G), effort (E), and external triggers (T), rated on a 0–5 Likert scale. The long survey had 36 questions, while the short version had 22, ensuring accessibility for time-constrained participants. A quantitative cross-sectional design was employed, collecting data from March 25 to April 10, 2025. The following Discrete Choice Model formula was applied to calculate preference probabilities:

$$P(j) = \frac{exp\ (G_j\ -\ E_j\ +\ T_J)}{\Sigma\ exp\ (G_k\ -\ E_k\ +\ T_k)}$$

Where:

- P(j) is the probability that a participant will choose option j from a set of available alternatives.
- j and k are two competing options (e.g., social media vs. traditional methods)
- G = Gratification, E = Effort, T = External Triggers
- exp is short for exponential, a mathematical function that raises the constant (approximately 2.71828) to the power of the argument inside the parentheses. The exp function plays a crucial role in the model by converting the linear differences in the variables (Gratification, Effort, and External Triggers) into nonlinear probabilities, which makes the model more sensitive to variations in participant preferences. This transformation amplifies the impact of higher values of gratification and lower values of effort, reflecting the real-world decision-making process more accurately.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Education

Table 1 of the DCM analysis shows that 84.4% of participants preferred learning via social media, compared to 15.6% for traditional methods. This preference reflects higher enjoyment, lower effort, and stronger external influence linked to social media as a learning tool. Although traditional methods still showed high **gratification** (77%), most reported only moderate enjoyment. Social media matched this gratification level (77%) but with more participants expressing strong enjoyment, contributing to its greater appeal. **Effort-wise**, learning through social media was seen as easier, with 77.1% stating that educational content appears through algorithms without active searching. Regarding **external triggers**, 62.7% said they would learn something new if peers were interested, though algorithm-driven exposure appears to have a stronger effect.

Table 1: DCM analysis of Education domain				
	Gratification (G)	Effort (E)	External Triggers (T)	Probability
Social Media Learning	3.57	1.79	3.48	84.4%
Traditional Learning	3.08	2.49	2.98	15.6%
Source: Author's compilation from Google survey responses				

3.2. Culture

The DCM analysis (Table 2) shows 78.2% of participants preferred cultural content, while 21.7% favored pop culture. Despite this, YouTube's algorithm prioritizes viral content based on views and engagement speed, often promoting pop culture over cultural material—misaligning with user preferences. **Gratification** data supports this: 76.3% enjoyed cultural content (54.5% strongly), compared to 46.4% for pop culture (27.3% strongly). This gap may stem from the limited availability of cultural content versus the normalized abundance of pop culture. On **effort/accessibility**, 77% found cultural content accessible (36.7% extremely), while 84.6% said the same for pop culture (45% extremely), suggesting algorithms make pop content easier to find during casual browsing. For **external triggers**, responses to online trends were mixed. Half were open to engaging with cultural trends, while the other half were not. In contrast, 61.8% rejected participation in pop culture trends, with 25% stating they "absolutely would not."

Table 2: DCM analysis of Culture domain				
	Gratification (G)	Effort (E)	External Triggers (T)	Probability
Cultural content	3.43	1.4	2.42	78.2%
Pop culture content	2.39	1.14	1.95	21.7%
Source: Author's compilation from Google survey responses				

3.3. Career Decisions

The DCM analysis in Table 3 shows 72.1% of participants viewed social media as a more effective tool for job opportunities, while 27.9% favored personal connections. This suggests social media is increasingly seen as accessible and personally rewarding for career growth. In terms of **effort**, 70% found traditional job-hunting difficult, compared to 57.8% for social media—indicating both are challenging, but digital platforms slightly less so. For **external triggers**, responses were nearly even: 52% reported being influenced by social media in career choices, while 50.9% cited influence from friends or family. This points to the equal impact of online and offline networks. On **gratification**, 81.8% found social media useful for job searches (with ~33% strongly agreeing), while 75.5% valued job-hunting via personal networks—though most of this group expressed only moderate agreement.

Table 3: DCM analysis of Career Decisions domain				
	Gratification (G)	Effort (E)	External Triggers (T)	Probability
Social media pathway	3.62	2.66	2.44	72.1%
Friends and family pathway	3.13	3.08	2.40	27.9%
Source: Author's compilation from Google survey responses				

3.4. Business Marketing

The DCM analysis in Table 4 shows that 62% of participants were more influenced by social media marketing, compared to 37.9% for traditional marketing. While social media has a stronger overall effect, the difference is not drastic, suggesting both methods are perceived as similarly effortful and exposed to external stimuli. For the **Gratification** variable, 70% found social media discounts persuasive, while 59% were influenced by in-store cashier promotions—though many in the latter group chose neutral agreement levels. This may be due to social media's repeated exposure allowing more reflection, unlike rushed in-store decisions. In terms of **Effort**, 60% said they research products on social media before buying, mostly at neutral effort levels. For traditional marketing, 61% valued trying products physically, indicating a preference for direct experience. The effort is similar across both channels, but its nature differs—digital research vs. physical interaction. Under **Triggers**, 37% were influenced by traditional ads, especially among 18–34-year-olds, challenging the idea that only older adults respond to offline marketing. For social media, 38.6% admitted buying trendy products, and 14.7% strongly agreed they were influenced by trends. Interestingly, 17.3% of participants who claimed they wouldn't buy based on trends later admitted to purchasing a trending item. Most of these individuals reported high daily social media use (6 to 10+ hours). This suggests that passive exposure, even among skeptics, can lead to subconscious influence due to frequent, algorithm-driven content.

Table 4: DCM analysis of Business Marketing domain				
	Gratification (G)	Effort (E)	External Triggers (T)	Probability
Social Media marketing	3.11	2.8	1.96	62%
Traditional marketing	2.67	2.95	2.06	37.9%
Source: Author's compilation from Google survey responses				

This study confirms social media's pivotal role in Jazan's economic growth, supporting Vision 2030's objectives. In education, social media's accessibility and low effort align with U&G's cognitive needs and TAM's ease of use, though distractions remain unaddressed (Whiting & Williams, 2013); (Davis, 1989). Culturally, preference for local content (78.2%) reflects U&G's social integrative needs, but algorithmic biases favoring pop culture challenge heritage preservation, necessitating strategic interventions (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). In career decisions, social media's effectiveness (72.1%) supports Vision 2030's job creation goals, particularly for youth, aligning with eWOM's (electronic word-of-mouth) influence (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Marketing findings (62% preference) highlight social media's persuasive power, driven by influencers and repeated exposure, though traditional methods retain relevance (Anderson, 1998). Limitations include the sample's limited diversity, self-report biases (e.g., trend purchase contradictions), and Jazan-specific focus, which may not generalize. The mini survey's brevity reduced depth, and distraction effects were overlooked. Future research should explore algorithmic impacts, conduct longitudinal studies, compare regions, and analyze platform-specific effects. To maximize social media's benefits, policymakers should align algorithms with cultural and educational priorities, businesses should leverage influencer marketing, and educators should integrate social media into curricula. These strategies can enhance Vision 2030's goals of digital transformation and economic diversification.

4. CONCLUSION

Social media is a transformative force in Jazan's socio-economic landscape, enhancing learning, cultural engagement, employment pathways, and marketing effectiveness. Although social media aligns well with Vision 2030 by promoting access and innovation, notable gaps remain between user preferences and algorithmic content delivery. Encouragingly, the Ministry of Culture's digital outreach shows that well-aligned strategies can effectively engage the public. However, limitations such as sample size, regional focus, self-report bias, and unmeasured distraction effects suggest the need for broader, deeper investigations. Future research should examine algorithmic influence, track behavioral changes over time, compare different regions in Saudi Arabia, and explore platform-specific impacts to better understand and leverage social media's evolving role in economic development.

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