

## **Constructing Identities Online- An Exploratory Study of Saudi Youths' Strategies**

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### **Abstract**

Language is used not only for communication but also for enacting multiple identities to reveal information about oneself such as who we are, where we come from, who we believe in etc. This is done by means of using a tribe, gender, region or a country specific dialect, accent, sociolect, vocabulary or phrase to identify oneself with a specific tribe, gender, social class or ethnic group, a region or a nation. Greetings such as-‘Assalamualeikum’ (‘peace be with you’), ‘God bless’, ‘Shalom’ (‘peace’) are used by people to identify oneself with a particular faith (Muslim, Christian and Jewish respectively). Thus, language use serves here as a means of constructing religious identity. Region and tribe specific dialects, accents and sociolects are also used to construct regional, social class, ethnic or tribal identities. This process of identity construction occurs both in the real world as well as in a virtual reality on-line, where people can either take their real identity with them or construct an on-line identity that can be as divergent as they wish. As on-line communication gains significance in everyone’s life, research on the nature of this communication is required to uncover various underlying issues governing this type of communication. In this respect, the present study aimed to explore the strategies and ways in which language and other means were used by Saudi Arabian youths to construct and enact their various identities such as gender, social class, tribal, regional, religious etc. To this end, a social networking website was designed and Saudi youths (aged between 18 to 30 years) were invited to participate by posting and chatting online on the website. Of such posts, around 300 comments were selected for the content analysis. The analysis of these comments posted by 71 Saudi females and 85 males over two months revealed that Saudi youths used their language on-line to construct and enact their gender, tribal, regional, religious identities. Participants were seen to be using their tribe, region, gender, religion and Arab culture related words and phrases to construct and reveal their tribal, regional, gender, religious and cultural identities consciously and unconsciously.

**Keywords:** Identity construction, on-line communication, linguistic strategies, Saudi youths, regional identity, tribal identity

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## 1. Introduction:

In the past few years, there has been a growing interest in identity construction, particularly within the areas of sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, discourse analysis, social psychology and other behavioural sciences. In this respect, Bucholtz and Hall (2004) assert that a 'study of linguistic anthropology is the study of language and identity' (P: 369). The term 'identity' has been defined in multiple ways, and according to Norton (1997), identity is a way "people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space and how people understand their possibilities for the future" (P: 417). It can also be understood as what Goffman (1959) sums as the presentation of self. Accordingly, Joseph (2004) suggests language and identity are inseparable, and through the utilisation of language, a person can construct 'multiple identities or 'identity repertoires' Blommaert (2004), that is, one may be black, African, Muslim and female all at the same time. Gawne and Vaughan (2011) argue that such language strategies used by participants let them 'construct complex identity' (P: 97). However, Maalouf (2000) argues identity cannot be classified and divided into separate fragments, and that an individual does not have multiple identities, but rather, has a single identity constructed from multiple components combining to create a unique identity. As on-line social media are increasingly dominating contemporary societies, people, particularly those under thirty, are spending more time in on-line interactions and social media, particularly those offering on-line chatting facilities (Almakrami, 2015). The researchers wish therefore, through this research project, to understand further how on-line users populate these digital spaces and how, through the on-line provision of written texts and visual images, they construct their virtual identities.

The phenomenon of identity has been studied extensively particularly in areas such as sociology, psychology, anthropology, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, cultural and communication studies. However, these researchers (Labov, 1966; Trudgill, 1974; Milroy & Milroy, 1978; Milroy, 1980; Mendoza-Denton, 2002; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Gonzales, 2009; Burnett (2017); Mora, 2017; Rosendal, 2017; Gündüz, 2017) who have studied this phenomenon in these fields suggest that the construction of identity through communication needs a separate investigation through the contemporary lens applied for the digital era. Therefore, this research focuses particularly on the strategies employed for constructing different identities such as regional, gender, tribal, religious through communication. Thus, an attempt is done to investigate critically how the recruited on-line users represented their self, gender, place of dwelling, ethnicity, tribal affiliations, and their educational and religious background through their on-line communication. It is suggested that the study of such construction and/or deconstruction of linguistic identities through on-line communication has significance as it can elucidate how individuals portray themselves and their various socio-cultural, regional aspects within virtual communications. The study is significant as reports the strategies used by the Saudi Arabian youth's for construction of various identities which has not been covered so far in any significant study. Thus, the study would familiarise the global academic and research fraternity about the ways Saudi Arabian youths communicate and how they use their language to show their gender identity, regional identity as well as their tribal and religious backgrounds. The findings of the study would be significant for a number of non-Saudi people and firms, interested in Saudi Arabia, about learning, understanding and communicate appropriately with people of different genders, different tribes and from different regions.

## 2. Review of the Related Literature

### 2.1 Language and Identity

The term 'identity' according to Goffman (1959) refers to the presentation of self. It also implies identifying oneself with a specific group of people belonging to a specific gender or tribe or region or religion. Joseph (2004) believes that language and identity are inseparable as language is used by a person to show his/her multiple identities. In other words, language of an individual may reveal whether s/he is white/black, Asian/African, male/female etc.

Identity has been viewed from different perspectives by different scholars like Mendoza-Denton, (2002); Bucholtz & Hall, (2005); Burnett, (2017); Mora, (2017); Rosendal, (2017); Gündüz, (2017). Norton (1997) discusses when a person speaks, in an attempt to construct his/her, he/she does not only exchange information with his/her interlocutors; but also organises and reorganises a sense of who he/she is and how he/she relates to the social world. Tabouret-Keller (1997: 315) sums this concept up by suggesting that 'language acts are acts of identity'. An individual's identity is created through culture or cultures and their corresponding languages and communication forms, and can empower an individual through various and multiple meanings, for example, an individual can identify as a woman, a Briton, Afro-Caribbean, a Muslim and a feminist (Harrison, 1998). A Poststructuralist definition of identity is as a "socially constructed, a self-conscious, ongoing narrative an individual performs, interprets and projects in dress, bodily movements, actions and language" (Block, 2006: 39). All of which transpires in social settings which contemporarily is either face to face or through a digital system of communication. An individual can share "multiple facets of beliefs and motives and activities and practices" (Block, 2006:39) and therefore construct a personal identity for that setting and at that time.

Ochs (1993:291) views identity as a "social construct that is both inferred and interactionally achieved" and which is formed through the multiple forms of interaction in which an individual engages. Identity can, therefore, be described as being constructed through people's communicative engagements and actions and is an outcome of the multiple forms of language, communication and action utilised. Bucholtz and Hall (2005:586) describe identity as "relational and sociocultural phenomenon that emerges and circulates in local discourse contexts of interaction", while De Fina, Schiffrin, and Bamberg (2006:03) expand on the notion by suggesting "identity is performed, enacted and embodied through a variety of linguistic and non-linguistic means". Thus, people use language and action to construct their sense of self in relation to others, whether this be in physical reality or in an On-line environment. A man standing in a demonstration with a far-right political placard, shaven-headed and wearing military style clothing is communicating much about his personal identity, the young woman in casual clothing facing him and engaging him in a discussion likewise. This research, therefore, views identity construction as a self-conscious and spontaneous project of an individual agency, created and maintained by someone wishing to portray themselves in a particular way, which has been informed particularly by Block (2006), Ochs (1993) and Bucholtz and Hall (2005). Lindgren & Wahlin (2001) argue that this social constructionist perspective which examines the way identities are constructed is crucial 'to our understanding of the complexity of the identity phenomenon'. (P: 357)

### 2.2 Types of Identities

The various theorists and researchers that this research has been informed by generally defer to a poststructuralist approach to identity, and include social variables such as ethnicity, tribe,

gender, race, social class and region/nationality as key components of an individual's identity repertoires. Block's (2006) list of different individual/collective identity types have been utilised within the table below (Table 1), along with research informed additions such as tribal identity and regional identity for more relevance to the current study.

**Table 1: Individual/collective identity types (Block, 2006: 37)**

Sr. No	Ascription/affiliation	Based on
1	Ethnic	A sense of a shared history, descent, belief systems, practices, language and religion, all associated with a cultural group
2	Racial	Biological/genetic make-up, i.e. racial phenotype (NB often conflated with ethnicity)
3	Tribal	A sense of shared history, descent, belief systems, practices, language all associated with a specific tribe
4	National	A sense of a shared history, descent, belief systems, practices, language and religion associated with a nation state
5	Regional	A sense of a shared history, descent, belief systems, practices, language, religion, tribe all associated with a specific geographical region in a nation
6	Gendered	Nature and degree of conformity to socially constructed notions of femininities and masculinities
7	Social Class	Associated with income level, occupation, education and symbolic behaviour
8	Language	The relationship between one's sense of self and different means of communication: language, a dialect or sociolect.

Although identities have been tabulated in this way in table above, they cannot stand independent of one another in the larger general identity of a person (Block, 2006). Block (2006, 2007) also believes that it is difficult to discuss one type of identity without mentioning others while discussing social variables such as race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, social class and language. Thus, identities are complex, variable, elastic and subject to manipulation (Maalouf2000). Suleiman (2003) also argues that collective identities are anchored in relation to such variables as genealogy, age, gender, sexuality, class, occupation, locality, tribe, clan, religion,

confession or sect, ethnicity, nationality or state citizenship. Some of these important identity types are briefed below.

## 2.3 Identity Construction through Language

### 2.3.1 *Constructing Ethnic Identity through language*

Ethnic identity refers “a speaker’s construction of a sense of self within her/his social world that pertains to ethnic group membership” (Noels, 2014: 89). Elaborating on this, people always carry their ethnic identities with them no matter where they go. That is why one’s language use makes others say one is an Arab or an Asian or African or Black or Hispanic or an American. An extensive body of research (Bucholtz, 2010; Bucholtz&Lopez, 2011) is also available on language and ethnicity aspect. Language and social identity has also be widely researched (Turner &Brown 1978) and it has been argued that an individual is encouraged to maintain a distinct and positive social identity. It is an individual’s definition of self “in terms of some social group membership with the associated value connotations and emotional significance” (Turner 1999: 8) To put it in the words of Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985: 181), an individual “creates for himself the patterns of his linguistic behaviour so as to resemble those of the group or groups with which from time to time he wishes to be identified, or so as to be unlike those from whom he wishes to be distinguished”. In the Malaysian context, Adnan (2013) reported that Ethnic Malay undergraduate students chose to interact with each other in English as a linguistic strategy to show their distinct identity. (P: 107). In their study, Childs & Mallinson (2006) also concluded that youngsters of different ethnic communities in Texana, North Carolina use different lexical items to ‘assert and negotiate their ethnic identity’. (P: 1). A study by Andersen (2017) also found that online identities of Saudi Shia Twitter activists were complex and manifold. The online Twitter users’ context (online) and the nature of online identities allowed them to express different aspects of their ethnic Shia identity. Sometimes they identified themselves as Shia, sometimes Saudis and sometimes Saudi Shias using different linguistic strategies.

### 2.3.2 *Constructing Regional Identity through language:*

People also try to identify themselves with a particular geographical region to which they belong by using specific accent or dialect or just few different words or phrases which may be identical among the inhabitants of that region. These people who belong to a specific geographic region are generally able not only to identify the overt referential meanings coded in linguistic utterances but also to identify other meanings implicit in linguistic utterances. (Burbano-Elizondo (2006). That is why Johnstone (2004) argues that regions have come to be seen as meaningful places, which individuals construct, as well as select, as reference points. Thus, people attempt to self-categorise themselves to different regional, social, tribal groups to present their identical self with other members of the same group and distinguish themselves from other groups who are not the members of their group. Kelly (2016) and Desquens (2003) detail on how Catalan language is considered the cornerstone of the Catalan region's identity by the Catalonians. Childs & Mallinson (2006) also report that Texana residents maintain their regional identity by maintaining their ‘regional speech patterns’ (P: 1). In the case of Saudi Arabia, a participant in Montagu’s (2015) study stated that ‘people in Jouf are not like the Nejdis’ (P: 24), a clear reference to regionality aspect in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia based on the dialect spoken in different regions.

### 2.3.3 *Constructing Gender Identity through language*

While elaborating on language and gender identity, one needs to mention feminists and their arguments for separate language for women. These feminists scholars like Frank and Treichler (1989); Lakoff(1975); Miller and Swift (1977); Pauwels (1998); Söylemez, (2010); Prado-Castro& Graham(2017)perceived existing linguistic norms as “a privileging of male linguistic norms and a devaluing of women’s linguistic practices” (Bucholtz, 2014: 26). Lakoff’s (1975) work on the language of women, as different from that of men, has been monumental since then in this field. She described some of the features of women’s language such as the use of hedges and tag questions and advocated that a woman must speak her language to differentiate herself, to show her distinct gender identity. Similar views are expressed by Judith Baxter (2010) in the recent research on the topic stating that women must constantly monitor their language. Not only women’s identity is reflected through their distinctive language use, but transgender and queer identities are also indexed by discursive practices that challenge binary gender. Wagner (2010); Van Borselet al (2013); Levon and Mendes (2016) also discuss different linguistic features of discourse of Lesbians. In the case of Saudi females, along with the distinctive use of language, Aloufi (2017) argues that ‘three influential institutions: government, religion, and society’ (P: 32) also play very important role in the process of constructing and enacting female gender identity as the language they use to speak, the topic they choose to speak are largely influenced by these three institutions. In the context on online gender identity construction, Bryant (2008) has elaborated on the way gender identity is presented online by females. To sum up, it has been agreed fact now that men, women, people belonging to transgender and queer categories use language differently to show their different gender identities.

### 2.3.4 *Constructing Social Class Identity through language*

Grouping people together based on factors such as-education, income, wealth, neighbourhood, occupation in a social hierarchy are the determining factors for social class and language is used by the members of each social group to identify and present themselves consciously and unconsciously. Gee, Allen and Clinton (2001) investigated how teenagers from two different social classes in the United States used language to fashion themselves as different kinds of people. Their study found out that teens belonging to working class and upper middle class used language in different ways to construct their social class identities. The upper middle class teens used the abstract language of rational argumentation whereas the working class teens used personalized narrative language. Thus, language is used by individuals to show consciously or unconsciously their class consciousness.

### 2.3.5 *Constructing Religious Identity through language*

Religion plays a very important role in differentiating a group from an “other” (Chandra 2009, 390–392). That is why Werbner (2010) rightfully asserts that religious identity is ‘a discourse of boundaries, relatedness and otherness’. (P: 233) Using different strategies and distinctive markers, individuals always reproduce, renegotiate, and maintain their ethnic and religious identities (Brubaker et al. 2006; Goode and Stroup 2015).Burrows (2015) critically discusses how El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz or *Malcolm X* created his religious identity through the use of language. In the case of Facebook users’ creation of their religious identity online, Bobkowski’s (2008) study details on how a group of students attending a university with a

religious affiliation used different linguistic strategies to present their self. (Bryant, 2008, p. 3) asserted that online users use different ways to create and show their religious affiliation.

The role Arabic language plays today in representing Islam is known to everyone. Speaking Arabic is synonymous with being a Muslim or representing Muslim religious identity Jaspal and Coyle (2010) though Christians and Jews in Middle East and North Africa also speak Arabic as their first language or L1 and Muslims out of MENA region do not speak Arabic as their first language. Not only a language but certain words or greetings phrases and symbols are used consciously to construct one's religious identity. For example, the greeting- 'Assalamualeikum' meaning 'peace be with you' is used to construct Muslim identity, 'God bless' to construct Christian identity, and 'Shalom' meaning 'peace' to construct Jewish identity. One should note that individuals are very conscious about their religious identity construction and construct their religious identity whenever they interact with members of their religious communality to identify themselves with each other and to distinguish themselves from others in terms of their religious identity. Even the symbols such as holy cross or church or synagogue or masjid all come to reflect the religious identity of individuals of that faith. Alhazmi & Nyland, 2013; Mead, 2000; Ward (2016) have reported on how Saudi Arabian students create and maintain their religious identity even when they are in Western countries for studies through constant use of words such as '*halal*' permitted and '*haram*' prohibited.

### 2.3.6 Constructing Tribal Identity through language

Scholars like Pool (1979) believe that members of each group, be it social or tribal, attempt to use a language which is peculiar to that group only as a mark of their social or tribal identity. (P: 06). Tribes have always played very important roles in the formation of states in the Middle East and North Africa. In this respect, Khoury and Kostiner (1990) argue that Tribes cannot be relegated to the background in a proper historical picture of the Middle East. While focusing on the tribes, it is experienced that the members of different tribes in the Middle East use specific and distinctive language, often consciously, to show their social affiliation and belonging with a particular tribal group with whom they identify themselves. That is why, Diwan (2016) rightfully asserts that most of the Gulf States have been structured politically on the basis of tribe (P: 1). Alshawi and Gardner (2013) also conclude that 'tribes and tribalism remain meaningful social facts in contemporary Qatar' (P: 57) and their identities have been constructed through different means. Maisel (2014) believes that tribe in Saudi context refer to 'a social network of kinship, loyalty and identity'. (P: 103). Akers (2001) also stresses that 'Qaba'il' concept in Saudi Arabia is 'exhibited through tribal markers and behaviours' (P: 168) and the use of language as tribal marker is one of them. The resurgence of tribalism in Saudi Arabia in recent time is such that Maisel (2015) claims that 'the section on tribal literature is the second largest in the kingdom's biggest bookstores' (P: 06) which shows the drive of the Saudis to preserve and show their tribal identity.

Oppose to America's imposing of English on native Indian tribes and their systematic and conscious attempts to preserve and teach their languages to their next generations as a mark of their distinct identity is an example of this. Similar is a situation in Canada, Australia and New Zealand where language is used as a symbol of tribal identity by various native Indian tribes. Even in Arab countries, though Arabic is L1, every tribe has a different variety of Arab which they use consciously to construct their tribal identity and to distinguish themselves from other Arab tribes. In a book, Thiek (2013) details on how different languages are used by different tribes in North East

India as a mark of their distinct tribal identity. For example, the Hmar people in Mizoram use Lushai language as their tribal identity marker.

### 2.3.7 *Constructing National Identity through language*

Language plays very crucial role in building a nation. (Garri2016, P: 13). It is considered as a significant element 'in the identification of national identity' (Alsohaibani, 2016, P: 16). For centuries language has been unifying factor for individuals and nations. Nations are built around common language and language has been a symbol of national identity for individuals. In case of Arab nations, it was Arabic that made them revolt against Ottoman Empire who represented for them others. Till today, Arabs take pride in their national identity and call all others (non-Arabs) as Ajamees (literally meaning dumbs). An example is the Arab League, representing nations where Arabic is spoken as L1, where language is used as a national symbol where everyone identifies himself/herself as Arab first. Alsohaibani (2016) asserts that most of the Arabs see Arabic language as 'a powerful symbol that reflects their national identity' (P: 19). However, this nationalism of Arabs, which united them against the Ottomans, further made them take pride in other types of nationalism which revolved around borders such as Egyptian Arab Nationalism or Syrian Arab nationalism. Thus, according to Weston, F. (1987) 'national identity in the Arab world is a tenuous concept, often intertwined with and overshadowed by social and cultural allegiances' (P: 81). That's is why, commenting on such type of nationalism, Diwan (2016) states that Gulf States have been organized politically on the basis of tribe, or religious sect, and mobilized along Islamic and Arab identity. However, these states, according to her are undertaking different steps in the recent years to 'promote national identity and inculcate a stronger sense of national belonging that ties citizens to the state' (P: 01). That is why Suleiman (2003) believes that there is some intimate connection between the language spoken and the identity of a person as belonging to a nation. Blattberg (2013) argues that language has played an important role in the politics around Canadian identity. Other examples such as British English or American English or Australian English are example of language representing a country or an individual constructing his/her national identity through the use of distinct language spoken in a particular country.

Thus, to sum up, language is used by people to show who they are, where they come from, where they belong and what their beliefs are. Where same is done by On-line interlocutors is a question that needs an investigation to understand this phenomenon of identity construction in better ways. Therefore this paper explores the ways Saudi Arabian youths construct their various identities in their On-line communication on a social networking website and what strategies they use for the same. While doing so, it attempts to seek answers to the research questions such as-

1. How do Saudi Arabian youngsters construct their various identities in On-line communication on a social networking website?
2. What strategies do they use to construct these identities On-line?

### 3. Methodology

The study was exploratory in nature. An exploratory research design is used in the contexts where there are few or no earlier studies to refer to or depend upon to predict an outcome. (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). It aimed to explore various strategies employed by Saudi Arabian youths to construct their various identities such as regional identity, tribal identity, social identity and religious identity.

### *3.1 Participants of the study*

A total of 156 Saudi youths formed the study participants. They were both male (85) and females (71). Their ages ranged between 18-30 years. They were chosen randomly through an electronic announcement to join the social networking website ([www.ksayouth.net](http://www.ksayouth.net)) created for the data collection process in this study. They came from all the regions of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. As the study aimed at investigating the linguistic and non-linguistic strategies used by the Saudi Youths online, a social networking website was created for the data collection purpose. The participants were informed about the nature of the research and privacy related issues of the data collection.

### *3.2 Data collection techniques*

Around 300 comments to different topics posted on the social networking website–Saudi Youths formed the data of this study. As a part of the data collection procedures, different topics were posted on the wall of the social networking website-[www.ksayouth.net](http://www.ksayouth.net) and the participants were asked to comment on those topics. Some of the posted topics included- a) Generation gap has impact on our language use: Your Views, b) Saudi Arabian youths more becoming impolite on Social media: Your views, Do people of differed tribes and from different regions in Saudi Arabia speak only one language or different languages? etc. The participants commented to these topics. These comments of the participants were selected for analysis in this study and they formed the data of this research.

### *3.3. Data collection procedures*

In order to collect the research data, a social networking website ([www.ksayouth.net](http://www.ksayouth.net)) was created. Existing popular social networking websites like Facebook were not selected due to privacy concerns of the participants' data as the data is stored by such sites and that may breach the privacy of the participants. Therefore, a Facebook-like social networking website was created for the purpose of collecting the research related data. After the website was created, the Saudi youths aged between 18-30 years, were invited to participate in different on-line discussions of this site. The participants were provided with Facebook like profile pages wherein they could login and create their person profiles as well as post and comment to different topics posted by others. After the website was created and most of the participants joined and created their own profile pages on the social networking site, one of the researchers posted different topics on this website to which the participated users commented their views and opinions. The web pages of such comments were downloaded, and the comments were organised in order to explore how the participants showed their different identities through the language in these comments. That is, the comments were studied focusing on language to find out how the participants revealed whether they were male or female, where they came from, which tribe they belonged to, what their educational and religious background was through their language use on-line in those comments. After collecting the required study data, the website was deleted to assure the privacy of the participants.

## **4. Data Analysis and the Findings**

Around 300 comments by Saudi Arabian youngsters to different topics posted on the social networking website were analysed using content analysis approach. Content analysis, as a research

tool, is used to determine the presence of certain words or concepts within a given texts (Weber, 1985). Researchers use this tool to quantify and analyse the presence of certain words or concepts and then make appropriate inferences about the related data. The focus in the study was on finding the region, tribe, gender, social class, religion specific words used by specific group of online users. So, the content analysis approach was used to analyse the data as this method suited best for this purpose. The findings of the content analysis are reported in the form of the following diagram.

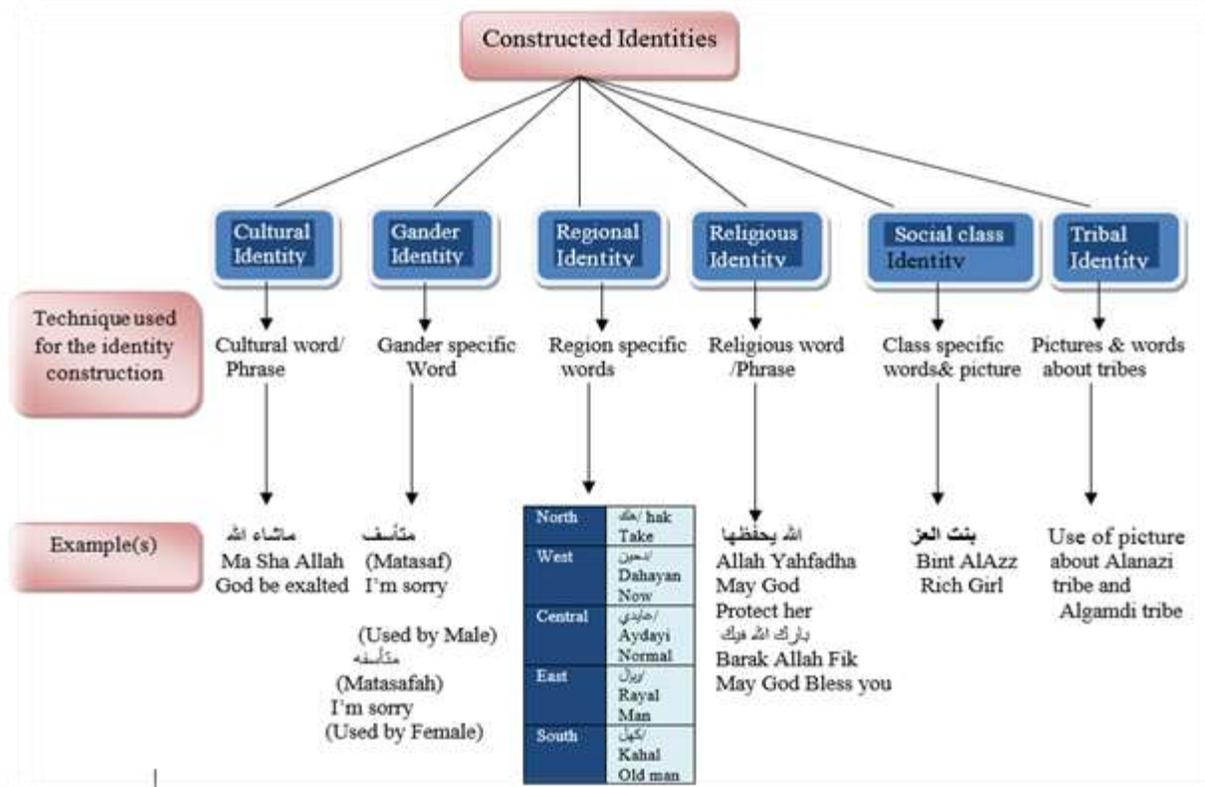


Figure 1: Different identities constructed by participants along with techniques used and examples of some identities

**Discussion of the findings:-**

As reported in the literature above, people use language to enact various identities (Gee, 2014). Language is also used to show who they are, where they come from and where they belong to. Thus, the language of a person is his or her identity which he/she always carries around to present his/her self. Whether similar phenomenon is also observed in on-line communication was the research question investigated in this study. It also explored what strategies the Saudi Arabian youngsters used to construct their various identities in their on-line communication on the social networking website. The content analysis revealed that they constructed their various identities such as religious, cultural, socio-economic, gender, tribal, regional identities through their use of language. Various strategies and techniques were also used to construct these identities.

#### 4.1 Language and Religious Identity Construction by the Participants

The findings reveal that the participants used religion, culture specific words and expressions. The comments of the participants were always marked with the use of words and expressions such as- *ماشاء الله* (Masha Allah, exclamation used to complement upon seeing something very beautiful in Arab culture), *الله يحفظها* (Allah YahFadha, May God protect her), *بارك الله فيك* (Barak AllahuFik, May God Bless you) etc. The use of such words and expressions is indicative of religious identity of the participants as these expressions are representatives of Arab Muslim culture and reveal that the users are from the Arab nation. Bryant (2008) had reported that online users used different strategies to create and show their religious affiliation. The findings of this study are also in line with this view.

#### 4.2 Language and Gender, Social Class Identity Construction by the Participants

It was also revealed that the participants, mostly females, used gender specific words and expressions to construct their gender identity. The most common strategy was to use the gender specific nicknames such as- *نور* (noor/light), *الورده* (Alwradah/ flower), *مهالورده* (Mahaalwradah/ Maha flower)-very common and very famous nicknames among females in Saudi Arabia. The use of words such as *جواله* (meaning 'his phone') was also noted by the male participants to show their masculine identity. Again the words such as- *اسفه* (meaning 'sorry' used by males) and *اسفه* (meaning 'Sorry' but used by females), *انتى* (meaning 'you' used by females), *بنت* (meaning 'girl' were used by the participants to show their male and female genders. These findings are quite similar to those of by Bryant's (2008) study in which female participants constructed their gender identity online in similar ways.

The participants also used different linguistic strategies such as using the profile name such- *بنت العز* (Bint AlAzz/Rich Girl)-reflective of upper social class, the use of English words such as 'sorry' in the Arabic conversations was also intended at showing the social class of the participants. Gee, Allen and Clinton (2001) had also reported similar findings stating that teens belonging to upper middle class used language in different ways to construct their social class identity.

#### 4.3 Language and Tribal Identity Construction by the Participants

Participants used different linguistics and non-linguistic strategies to show their distinct tribal identities. Expressions such as *مريسل الورع* (MarisalAlWara- common among the Arab Beduwins) were used to show tribal identity on-line by the participants. Along with such lexical markers, participants also used tribe indicating last names such as- Al-enzi, Al-zahrani, Al-otaiby, Al-shammari, Al-dossari, Al-gahtani, Al-hazmai, Al-rwaily, Al-sharany etc. in their profile pictures to show their tribal belonging. Participants also used different pictures associated to specific tribes and depicting their living to show the tribe they belonged to.



Figure 2 Photos of people representing different tribes (Source: Participants' Data)

Akers' (2001) view that 'Qaba'il' concept in Saudi Arabia is 'exhibited through tribal markers' (P: 168) seem quite right here when applied to these findings. The youths in Saudi Arabia are quite conscious of their tribal belonging. In this case, Maisel's (2015) claims, that tribal association is resurgent among Saudis, are reflected in these findings.

#### 4.4 Language and Regional Identity Construction by the Participants

The findings also reveal that the participants used different region specific words/ dialect as an attempt to show their regional identity. The choice of region specific words such as- *ذا* (*this*) to represent Middle region, *الهوايش* (*crawling creatures*), *الجنوبي* (*southern*) to imply South region, *وش* (*what*), *اللحين* (*now*) to show North region, *صح* (*really*) to show East region and *دا* (*this*) *هدا* (*this*) to show west region were clear indicative of attempts on the part of the participants to show their regional identity through the use of such words. Similar findings were reported by Childs & Mallinson (2006) about Texana residents who maintained their regional speech patterns in their communication.

Thus, the use of linguistic forms such as specific vocabulary, phrase as well as use of distinct dialect were used to construct different identities by the participants. In addition to linguistic forms, extra linguistic symbols such as use of picture, community/tribal symbols were also used to show who the participants were and where they came from or where they belonged to. Thus, participants used language and other means to present what Goffman (1959) calls as the self. This choice of specific word or vocabulary or phrase or dialect was in order to, what Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985) believe, resemble with similar group that is same gender or same tribe or same region and at the same time to distinguish oneself from others.

### 5. Discussion of the Findings

Harrison (1998) asserts that an individual can have an identity as a woman, a Briton, a Black, a Muslim. The similar finding was noticed in the language of the participants as well. The participants were Saudi, female, religious altogether reflecting different identities through different linguistic and non-linguistic means. A similar is the approach of the poststructuralists towards language construction who see identity construction process as self-conscious, which is projected

by an individual not only through language but also through other means such as dress, bodily movements and actions. Similar argument is also presented by De Fina, Schiffrin, and Bamberg (2006) when they state that identity is enacted through a variety of linguistic and non-linguistic means which was true in the case of the present study as the participants used linguistic and non-linguistic means to present and enact their various identities.

According to Johnstone (2004: 69), regions are meaningful places, which people construct and select as their reference points. Looking at findings of the study, it was noticed and reported that the Saudi youths from different regions in Saudi Arabia tried to reflect their regionality by using their region specific dialect of Arabic. The findings of the study are also in line with the views of feminist scholars like- Frank and Treichler(1989); Lakoff (1975); Miller and Swift (1977); and Pauwels (1998) as the Saudi Arabian females used different vocabulary and language to indicate that they are females and different from males through language.

## 6. Conclusion

The study aimed to investigate different strategies used by the Saudi Arabian youths to construct their different identities such as tribal, regional, gender identity etc. Based on the analysis of the research data and the findings obtained, it can be concluded that identity construction is an intentional process which is done using language and other means. These other means used for constructing different identities include use of specific dress, symbols etc. The linguistic strategies used for identity construction included using specific words, phrase, dialect and non-linguistic strategies included use of specific dressing, symbol, picture etc. These strategies of identity construction can be noticed not only in day to day face to face communication but also in on-line communication on virtual places such as social networking sites. As the technology becomes a part of our day to day life and influences almost every aspect of our life, aspects such as identity construction and strategies used for the same in on-line communication should be investigated to understand how the technology is affecting the way we present ourselves through communication.

The limitations of the study include limited participants, the data from only one social networking website which was created for this research purpose only. Thus, more studies are needed with more participants from different regions and tribes in Saudi Arabia. More social networking sites like Facebook, Tweeter etc. may provide more enriched data to draw more reliable findings. However, this study can be highly significant in this respect as this is the first study in this area and will be a guiding point for future researchers in this direction.

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