

Unveiling Saudi Digital Spaces: A Walkthrough of X, Instagram and Snapchat

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Abstract:

This study investigates Saudi digital spaces through a systematic walkthrough of X (previously Twitter), Instagram and Snapchat, aiming to understand how social media platforms intersect with local cultural norms of privacy, modesty, and communal reputation. Studies shows that Saudi users practices are influenced by the Islamic norms of privacy and lyres. They negotiate their uses of social media to accommodate these norms. As many research studied these negotiated uses, limited research have been conducted to analyses the platforms'. This research focuses on analyzing the platforms interface and compare it to the Saudi usages that previous studies found. The research applies the walkthrough methodology to analyze each platform's environment of expected use—vision, operating model as well as technical walkthroughs of registration, everyday use, and discontinuation. The methodology is an ethnographical observation of user flows and feature interactions across the three platforms : X, Instagram and Snapchat. The study finds that platform's structure and design influence the social roles to each app: X as a public space and a professional application; Instagram as a semi-public space emphasizing curated aesthetic and reputational management; Snapchat as a private space that aligns with cultural norms of privacy through ephemeral content, closed networks, and screenshot alerts. These findings demonstrate that platform's design and affordances plays a significant role in shaping user's behavior on the platforms. The study contributes to platform studies by extending the walkthrough method to a non-Western context. It also contributes to the research on privacy and digital culture by revealing how technical architectures interact with local values, producing a segregated spaces of Saudi digital spaces.

Keywords: Unveiling , Saudi Arabia, Walkthrough Method, Digital Space, Instagram, Snapchat, X

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Introduction

The rise of social media has increasingly blurred the boundaries between public and private life, transforming how individuals perform identity, negotiate cultural values, and experience mediated governance (Abidin, 2021; boyd, 2011; Drozdova, 2020; Ford, 2011; Gal, 2002). These platforms have produced what Baym and boyd (2012) term *socially mediated publicness*, where visibility and intimacy are co-constituted through technological affordances and cultural expectations. While much of the scholarship on these dynamics has focused on Western contexts (Lange, 2008; Marwick & boyd, 2014; Raynes-Goldie, 2010), research on non-Western settings remains limited.

Saudi Arabia provides a particularly revealing case for re-examining digital privacy as a *contextual and collective practice* rather than an individual right. Within the collectivist cultures like Saudi Arabia, privacy is not built on personal autonomy but on moral and communal values rooted in family honor and trust (Lubis & Kartiwi, 2013). Social media platforms, therefore, operate not simply as channels of communication but as *cultural interfaces* where users negotiate visibility, respectability, and belonging within overlapping moral orders. In the Saudi context, the Islamic privacy values and norms shape the digital privacy behavior as many studies show (Abokhodair, 2017). Earlier studies of Saudi digital practices show that users manage these negotiations through strategies such as pseudonymity, selective friending, and maintaining multiple accounts to separate private from semi-public audiences (Abokhodair & Hodges, 2019; Aljasir, 2013; Alsaggaf, 2019; Alruwaili & Ku, 2020). However, recent evidence suggests a shift from *multi-account management* toward *platform segregation*: Snapchat increasingly serves as a space for intimate and authentic communication, whereas X (previously Twitter) and Instagram are used for professional or semi-public self-presentation (Abokhodair, 2017, Aljuwaiser, 2018, Bahabri, 2024). This differentiation across platforms highlights the importance of examining platform agency where the platform's structure and design frameworks participate in the variation of user's behavior.

This article applies the *walkthrough methodology* (Light, Burgess & Duguay, 2018) to three major platforms—X, Instagram and Snapchat—in the lenses of Saudi privacy behavior. Unlike interview-based approaches, the walkthrough method foregrounds the apps themselves—their *environments of expected use*, design affordances, and governance architectures—to illuminate how platform imaginaries interact with local cultural norms.

This study makes two primary contributions. First, it extends the walkthrough method into a non-Western, religiously inflected context, demonstrating how digital affordances align or oppose with locally specific perspective of privacy. Second, it reconceptualizes Saudi users' practices of platform segregation not simply as acts of user agency but also a result of platform design, structure. The analysis reveals how technological structures, governance mechanisms, and cultural norms intersect to shape a distinct ecology of Saudi digital participation—one in which privacy, modesty, and visibility are dynamically renegotiated rather than oppositional.

Research Problem

In Saudi Arabia, privacy is influenced by collective, religious, and moral norms that emphasize family honor, modesty, and trust (Abokhodair & Vieweg, 2016; Aljasir, 2013). Earlier research documented that Saudi users negotiated these norms and social boundaries through multi-account strategies on semi-public platforms such as Facebook, X, and Instagram (Abokhodair & Hodges, 2019; Binsahl, Chang, & Bosua, 2015). Saudi user's maintaining separate accounts for distinct audiences—pseudonymous for strangers and restricted for kin—to mediate cultural expectations of visibility and discretion. More recent evidence, however, suggests a shift from multi-account management toward platform segregation, whereby users allocate distinct social roles to different applications. Snapchat has become the preferred space for private and authentic interaction, while X and Instagram serve professional or semi-public functions (Bahabri, 2024).

This shifting landscape highlights a key research problem: What is the influence of the platform's structure and design on user's behavior, and how is the embedded values of Western privacy could affect users negotiate of platform affordances. Despite Saudi Arabia's centrality to regional digital transformation, systematic analyses of how platform design, affordances, and governance aligns with Saudi cultural understandings of privacy remain limited. Addressing this gap is essential for reconceptualizing the platform agency in non-Western contexts.

Research Questions

To address this gap, the study asks:

- 1. What is the publicness aspects in the design, interface structure and affordances of X, Instagram and Snapchat?**
- 2. To what extend the platform's design aligns or oppose to the Saudi understandings of privacy, modesty, and collective reputation?**

By answering these questions, the study contributes to platform studies by extending

the walkthrough method (Light, Burgess, & Duguay, 2018) to a non-Western cultural context, and to privacy scholarship by showing how affordances are interpreted through culturally specific logics of public and private life.

Study Background

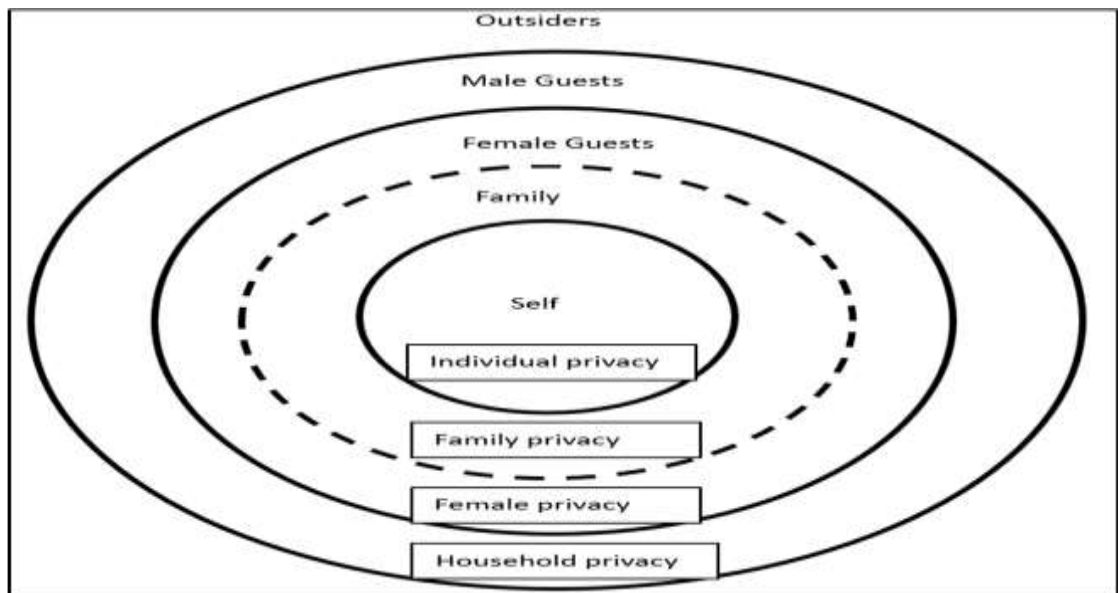
Social media public and private spaces in the Saudi context

Saudi Arabia, which encompasses nearly four-fifths of the Arabian Peninsula, remains the largest and most influential state in the region (Britannica, 2025). As a predominantly Sunni Muslim nation, its social order, moral frameworks, and cultural practices are deeply anchored in Islamic thought. Religion operates simultaneously as a theological foundation and a sociocultural system that orders kinship, gender relations, and patterns of everyday interaction (Abokhodair, 2017). Within this framework, privacy emerges as a collective practice rather than an individual entitlement. In contrast to Western liberal paradigms that equate privacy with personal autonomy, the Saudi conceptualization situates it within communal ethics grounded in Islamic law, where safeguarding family dignity and social honor represents an ethical and spiritual obligation (Abokhodair, 2017).

The Islamic understanding of privacy consists of several dimensions. First, private space carries a sacred status, protected by injunctions against gossip and intrusion and by the principle that matters are private by default unless demonstrably public (Kadivar, 2003; Lubis & Kartiwi, 2013). Second, gendered boundaries organize visibility and interaction through the categories of *mahram* and *non-mahram*, delineating socially permissible encounters and reinforcing modesty as a moral and spatial norm (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2001; Abokhodair et al., 2017). Third, the virtue of *haya*—modesty in comportment and embodiment—governs dress, demeanor, and spatial conduct, where practices such as veiling serve as instruments of moral protection and social discretion (Kadivar, 2003). Finally, privacy is architecturally encoded within domestic design: the layered structure of Saudi homes—from inner family quarters to men's reception spaces and exterior walls—embodies graduated forms of visibility and access (Bahammam, 1987). These spatial logics extend into digital domains, where users reproduce comparable boundaries of exposure and concealment (Abokhodair et al., 2017).

Figure 1

Hierarchy of Home Privacy in Islam (Bahammam, 1987)



Empirical research further demonstrates that Saudi users transpose these moral and spatial hierarchies into their online engagements, curating visibility to preserve *‘ird* (honor) and collective dignity rather than asserting individual self-expression (Abokhodair & Vieweg, 2016; Qutub, 2021). Practices such as operating multiple profiles or using pseudonyms represent ethical strategies for maintaining modesty and protecting familial reputation (Abokhodair, 2017). Building on this research, this study examines how the structural and affordance-based features of social media platforms either align with or challenge these cultural logics, and how such alignments shape the distinctive patterns of digital participation observed among Saudi users.

Platform’s analysis

Understanding the ways in which social media platforms configure user experience necessitates an examination of their design logics, structural organization, and affordances. Foundational work in Human–Computer Interaction (HCI) and User Experience (UX) research offers the conceptual scaffolding for analyzing how individuals engage with digital interfaces (Hassenzahl & Tractinsky, 2006). Within this framework, UX can be understood as the dynamic interplay between user attributes—such as motivations, expectations, and emotional states—system properties—including usability, complexity, and functionality—and the broader interactional context shaped by social and organizational conditions. Together, these dimensions determine how digital systems are perceived, navigated, and enhanced

through iterative design processes.

Traditional UX research (UXR) has largely emphasized usability testing and user feedback, a focus that, while valuable, often overlooks the interpretive and structural aspects of platform design (Karahasanović & Obrist, 2010). To address this limitation, the walkthrough method proposed by Light et al. (2018) introduces an ethnographically informed approach in which researchers actively engage with digital environments as users. This immersive process enables the identification of underlying design assumptions, governance signals, and culturally embedded values encoded in interface architecture. Accordingly, the present study employs the walkthrough methodology to investigate the technical and structural affordances that shape user interaction across major social media platforms.

Affordances serve as a pivotal analytic construct for elucidating how interface design mediates engagement and participation. Originally introduced by Gibson (1979) and later refined by Norman (1988), the concept refers to the perceived action possibilities that technological environments present to users. Within digital communication scholarship, affordances are increasingly conceptualized as relational—emerging through the interactions among users, technological systems, and sociocultural contexts (Burgess et al., 2017; Evans et al., 2017; Treem & Leonardi, 2011). Ronzhyn et al. (2023) define social media affordances as the “perceived or imagined properties of platforms that both enable and constrain specific uses,” emphasizing their dual capacity to open and delimit communicative possibilities.

Scholars further differentiate between *low-level* affordances—concrete technical functionalities—and *high-level* affordances, which describe broader structural qualities such as persistence, visibility, searchability, scalability, and anonymity (boyd, 2011; Cho, 2018; Evans et al., 2017). Extending this framework, Nagy and Neff (2015) propose the notion of *imagined affordances*, capturing the interpretive expectations and subjective perceptions users bring to their encounters with technology. Such an approach underscores that affordances are not fixed properties but lived experiences situated within social and cultural meaning systems.

Recent literature has increasingly turned to the tension between public and private affordances. Cho (2018) observes that most social-media architectures are predisposed toward *default publicness*, where interface configurations and algorithmic cues subtly promote visibility and traceability. Conversely, research on private or semi-private spaces foregrounds affordances such as anonymity, bounded visibility, personalization, and synchronicity—features that sustain intimacy and continuous exchange (Ma et al., 2016; Malhotra, 2023). These contrasting affordances illustrate how platform architecture mediates the dialectic of privacy and publicity in networked

communication.

Despite the proliferation of affordance-oriented scholarship, systematic investigations of platforms operating in non-Western or rapidly evolving contexts remain comparatively scarce (Ronzhyn et al., 2022). Given the fluidity of interface design and the cultural specificity of user practices, this study adopts the walkthrough approach to re-examine both structural and public/private affordances across multiple digital platforms.

Beyond individual affordances, the architectural composition of platforms plays a critical role in shaping how users construct meaning and participate in digital environments. A platform's architecture—comprising its visual layout, algorithmic operations, onboarding processes, and default visibility settings—functions as an implicit framework that channels attention and defines normative modes of engagement. Elements such as notification systems, feed algorithms, and design defaults embed particular social expectations and assumptions about communicative behavior (Light et al., 2018). The walkthrough methodology facilitates a multilayered analysis of these dynamics by situating platform design within three interrelated domains: vision (the ideological and governance narratives guiding platform identity), operating model (the economic and data logics underpinning sustainability), and interface design (the material and aesthetic cues structuring user interaction). Through this lens, the walkthrough reveals how design and affordances intersect to naturalize certain behaviors—such as continuous sharing or selective visibility—and how these embedded orientations interact with, or at times contest, local cultural norms and user expectations.

Methodology

This study employs the walkthrough methodology developed by Light, Burgess, and Duguay (2018) to interrogate how X, Instagram, and Snapchat organize user participation and privacy practices within the Saudi sociocultural context. The walkthrough methodology deliberately slows the pace of interaction to illuminate how interface design, feature architecture, and governance systems orient, delimit, and frame user behavior. The process begins by examining each platform's environment of expected use, including its vision (stated purpose, intended user base, and normative scenarios of use), operating model (monetization and data-extraction strategies), and governance framework (community policies, moderation procedures, and enforcement mechanisms). Following this contextual analysis, the study conducts a structured, technical walkthrough that traces the user journey through key stages—registration and everyday engagement to show how design cues and affordances shape patterns of visibility and interaction. Throughout the walkthroughs, extensive field notes were

maintained to capture both the functional elements of the interface (menus, icons, navigational flows) and the cultural-discursive components (language, imagery, and identity cues embedded in the user experience).

Data were derived from three complementary sources. First, platform-produced materials published (between 2019 and December 2020) including app-store descriptions, terms of service, corporate blogs, and press releases were analyzed to map each platform's articulated vision, governance discourse, and regulatory stance. These documents were coded thematically and organized prior to interface observation. Second, systematic walkthrough fieldwork produced screen-level documentation of onboarding flows, feed architecture, interaction mechanisms, and account management processes. Multiple research-only profiles were created (e.g., asb.research.au@gmail.com, n.asb.researcher@gmail.com) to avoid direct interaction with real users while examining network relations and feature interdependencies. Interface exploration focused on five principal components registration, profile, network, home, and posting pages while recognizing that peripheral functions lay beyond the scope of this study. Multiple iterative walkthroughs were conducted across platforms to ensure analytical saturation, with field notes compiled into a detailed thick description (Geertz, 1973) capturing how platform architectures construct, mediate, and differentiate between public and private digital spaces.

Results, Interpretation, and Discussion

X

X constructs itself as the primary arena for instantaneous, globally networked conversation a self-proclaimed: "town square of the digital age." Both its design architecture and promotional discourse privilege immediacy, trending participation, and high visibility, positioning the platform as an infrastructure for collective deliberation rather than intimate exchange. In its history, however, X promoted a markedly different philosophy. The original prompt, "*What are you doing?*", encouraged users to share mundane, personal updates within relatively bounded social circles, cultivating a semi-private atmosphere centered on interpersonal connection and self-expression. Over time, this orientation gave way to a more expansive vision that redefined the platform as a real-time information hub and site of public conversation. The platform's current slogan, "*Join the conversation,*" prominently displayed across its interfaces and marketing materials (X, 2021b, 2021c), encapsulates this ideological shift toward networked publicity. Platform features such as hashtags and threaded posts operationalize this public logic by aggregating discourse, amplifying visibility, and enabling extended, topic-based interaction (Lyons, 2020; Peters, 2020). Today, X defines itself through a commitment to

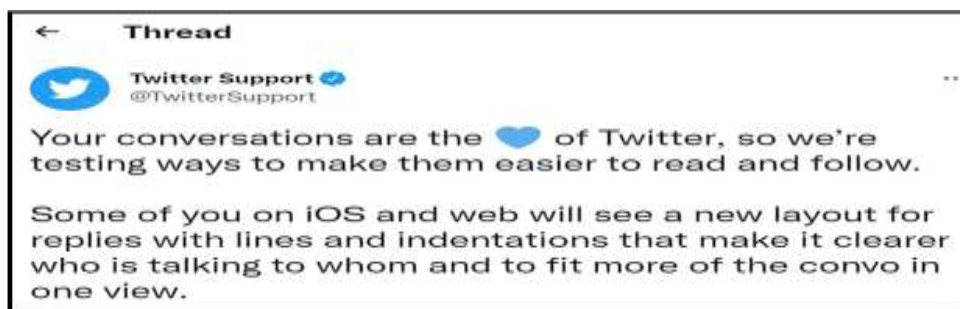
openness, expression, and the facilitation of conversation which is a reflection of Western ideals of free speech, democracy, and public deliberation (X, 2021a). This commitment is evident in the platform's technical and communicative design, which continually evolves to enhance public interaction, such as the ability to delete replies for improved conversational flow. While X prioritizes public visibility and civic engagement, it has also introduced features like direct messages and private groups which was added in 2019 to accommodate private communication (Welch, 2020). Nonetheless, these private elements exist within a broader architecture that privileges participation in a global, visible, and often politicized public sphere, positioning X as both a tool for personal voice and a stage for collective expression.

The operating model depends on advertising and algorithmic amplification, both of which require continuous flows of user-generated content. By rewarding virality and maximizing engagement, X's commercial logic systematically pushes users toward exposure. Governance is articulated through extensive Terms of Service and content-moderation guidelines, but enforcement is reactive and inconsistent. Automated systems, human moderators, and user flagging collectively produce what Duguay et al. (2020) term *patchwork governance*—a regime where uneven enforcement reflects dominant technocultures and commercial priorities more than coherent policy.

Elon Musk's acquisition of X in 2022 constituted a some institutional and operational changes. Following the takeover, Musk initiated a series of extensive structural and policy reforms that reflected his distinct managerial philosophy toward social media governance (Milmo, 2023). These included the reinstatement of previously suspended accounts, the introduction of subscription-based revenue models, and substantial cost-reduction measures through a reported 50% workforce downsizing (Milmo, 2023). However, the structural and design related to the platform's publicity remained unchanged.

Figure 2

Official X account promote its vision



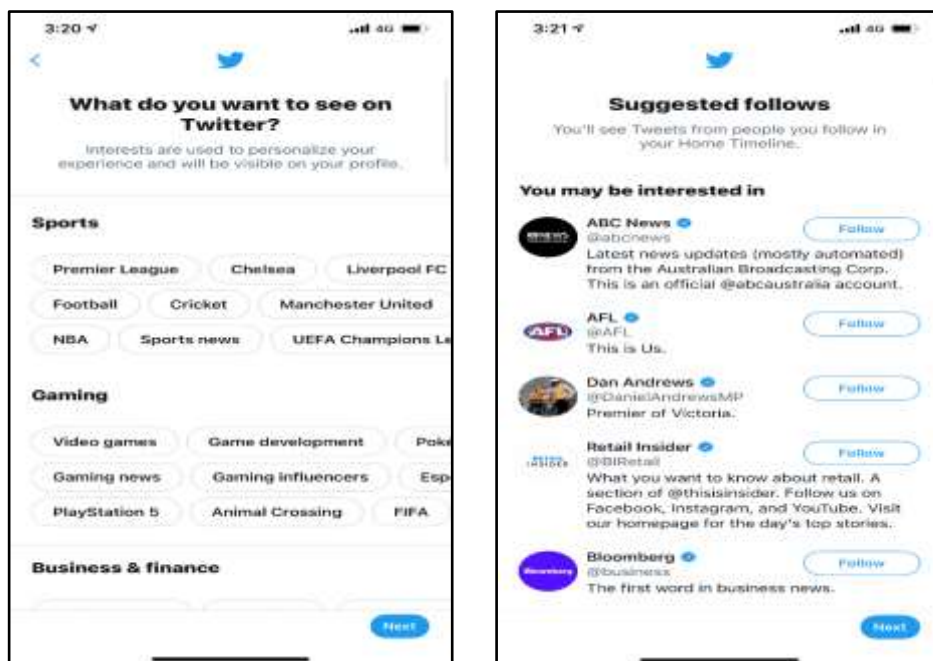
Technical Walkthrough

The registration process immediately signals X's orientation toward publicity. An email or phone number is mandatory, embedding traceability from the outset which is a cue early marker of X's "public-by-design". New users are prompted to provide real names, profile photos, and to sync contact lists, after which the platform recommends celebrities, politicians, and news outlets to follow which is considered a public network. These automated prompts construct a default social environment oriented toward mass visibility rather than close network.

X's homepage interface, the timeline, merges followed accounts with algorithmic recommendations in the "For You" feed. The *space construction*, curates visibility and defines what counts as relevant. Trending hashtags and engagement prompts are presented as tools of participation but are experienced by Saudi users as mechanisms of involuntary exposure to strangers and contentious topics. Recommendation systems extend this exposure, urging users to engage beyond their chosen networks. Interaction features—retweets, likes, and quote tweets—further dissolve audience boundaries, forcing content across networks regardless of intent. Although privacy settings exist, they are buried beneath defaults that normalize publicness.

Figure 3

X registration settings



The walkthrough demonstrates how X's architecture constructs an environment of *structural publicity* that both enables and unsettles Saudi users. Bahabri (2024) found that participants consistently identified X as the most public platform that is appropriate for professional visibility, news consumption, and civic discourse, yet unsuitable for intimate or personal expression. Algorithmic curation and trending hashtags situate users within expansive, impersonal publics where visibility is difficult to avoid. Many described feeling "watched by everyone" including family, colleagues, and broader society which producing a climate of self-monitoring akin to digital surveillance.

Within the Saudi context, where privacy is intertwined with modesty, reputation, and family honor, X's affordances demand careful negotiation. Many studies reported that maintaining modesty and social propriety required adopting strategies of self-censorship, coded language, or professionalized tone (Abokhodair et al., 2017, Abokhodair et al., 2017, Altuwayjiri, 2018, Bahabri, 2024). Users respond through strategic silence, indirect communication, and selective participation, balancing the cultural imperative of discretion against the platform's structural publicity. In this sense, the platform thus becomes a site where technological design and cultural values intersect, compelling users to re-engineer participation practices to preserve dignity and control within an inherently public medium.

Instagram

Instagram frames itself as a platform for visual storytelling and aspirational self-expression, positioning users as curators of lifestyle rather than participants in fleeting conversations. Its vision emphasizes authenticity and inspiration, but within highly visual, performative templates that encourage polished representation. The operating model has shifted from simple photo sharing to an integrated ecosystem of advertising, influencer marketing, and shopping, which monetizes visibility and aesthetic labor. Instagram's governance framework is articulated through community guidelines that restrict "inappropriate" content, but enforcement has been shown to be inconsistent and unevenly applied (see Duguay et al., 2020). For Saudi users, as Bahabri (2024) finds that Instagram is perceived as a semi-public platform: not as open as X, but not as private as Snapchat, occupying a middle ground in which curated presentation is necessary and intimacy is constrained.

Technical Walkthrough

The registration process requires an email or phone number and strongly encourages linking to a Facebook account, signaling cross-platform data integration. Users are prompted to upload a profile picture, provide their real name, and connect contacts through their phonebook or Facebook friends which is a public space practice. From the outset, Instagram constructs its environment through suggestions of accounts to follow, often emphasizing celebrities, influencers, and public figures. For Saudi participants, this reinforced Instagram as a site for visibility among known and semi-known audiences, where friends, colleagues, and relatives could easily discover one's profile. Thus the registration process situates users within a broader network of social exposure, rather than the closed circles offered by closed networks such as Snapchat.

Instagram's central feed is constructed algorithmically, blending posts from followed accounts with recommended content. Features such as the Explore page, Stories, and Reels extend discoverability beyond immediate networks, continuously nudging users toward broader publics. The recommendation regularly suggests accounts or videos outside users intended circle, creating both opportunities for inspiration and risks of unwanted public connection. The posting interface privileges high-quality, aesthetically curated photos or videos, reinforcing norms of polished presentation. Interaction features such as likes, comments, and story views create metrics of attention, which could create social pressure, particularly when family or professional contacts monitored their activity. While privacy settings allow for account restriction, the default orientation leans toward openness, with discoverability built into hashtags, location tags, and algorithmic recommendations. Studies shows Participants remained cautious about visibility to relatives and colleagues (Basabain et al, 2021, Bahabri,2024). This distinction highlights Instagram's semi-public character: neither fully open like X nor fully intimate like Snapchat. In this context, Saudi users strategically curated their posts, avoiding controversial topics and tailoring aesthetics to family and community expectations.

Snapchat Walkthrough

Snapchat presents itself as a platform for ephemeral, authentic, and intimate communication, contrasting with the polished, permanent sharing associated with Instagram and X. Its vision emphasizes "real friends" and everyday moments, aligning with a rhetoric of authenticity and immediacy. The operating model is sustained through advertising, partnerships with media outlets via Discover, and branded filters, but these revenue streams are embedded within a user experience designed around casual, fleeting exchanges. Unlike X or Instagram, where visibility is structured as a default, Snapchat's design centers privacy by in its structure, embedding values and affordances. This structural design align with Saudi cultural logics of modesty and

communal privacy has made Snapchat the preferred platform for intimate self-expression.

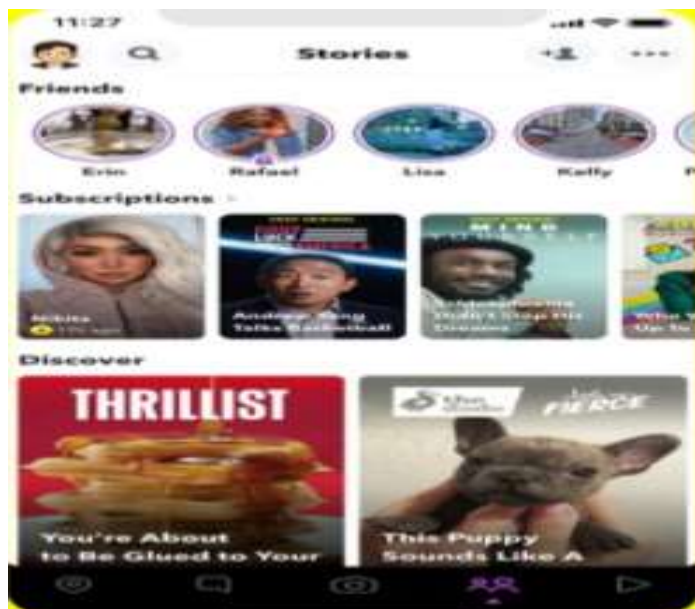
Technical Walkthrough

Snapchat's sign-up process requires a phone number or email, but it encourages minimal disclosure: users can choose nicknames or pseudonyms, and real names are not strictly enforced. Unlike X or Instagram, which emphasize connecting contacts and following public figures, Snapchat's onboarding directs users to add friends via phone contacts or Snapcodes, producing a closed network structure. Adding other users' is limited to having the name or Qr code.

Suggestions are limited to mutual contacts, reinforcing intimacy over exposure. Structurally, Snapchat organizes user interaction across three interconnected spaces: the Friends' Stories section, which functions as the most private sphere for close ties such as family and friends; the Subscriptions section, which allows engagement with selected creators while maintaining separation from one's intimate network; and the Discover feed, which presents algorithmically curated influencer content in a semi-public format. This architect aligns with the structural Islamic privacy cercles that was presented in Bahammam's study (See figure 1) (Bahammam, 1987)

Figure 4

Snapchat Space homepage construction according to public and private network



Alongside these, direct messaging and video calls provide channels for personal communication, reinforcing the platform's focus on intimate, ephemeral exchange. By

spatially separating personal and algorithmic content while maintaining their proximity on the same homepage, Snapchat creates a user experience that balances privacy, immediacy, and discovery. Within the timeframe of this study, the platform remained oriented toward strong-tie communication rather than self-promotion, positioning it closer to a private messaging service than a public social network. Screenshot notifications further reinforce cultural expectations of discretion, as users are alerted when their content is captured. The Discover tab introduces a semi-public dimension, offering curated media and influencer content, but participants described avoiding this space, focusing instead on the private exchanges that the platform privileges. Algorithmic suggestions exist, but they are oriented toward entertainment rather than expanding one's social network, limiting the risk of exposure to strangers. Interaction features such as streaks (ongoing daily exchanges) reinforce intimacy, with participants describing them as symbolic of close relationships.

As Snapchat is the platform most culturally aligned with Saudi notions of privacy, modesty, and intimacy, it has been widely adopted within Saudi society and across all age groups (Ferrari, 2023). Studies found that Saudi users consistently described Snapchat as the space for "real self" and authentic expression, contrasted with the curated professionalism of X and Instagram (Bahabri, 2024). The ephemerality of Snaps, combined with screenshot alerts and closed network onboarding, resonated strongly with cultural expectations that private communication should remain within trusted circles. Through the lens of affordances (Peng & Wang, 2021), Snapchat exemplifies how technical features (ephemerality, alerts, closed networks) and cultural norms (family honor, communal privacy) co-constitute a space of intimacy. In the Saudi platform ecology, Snapchat represents not merely a tool but a culturally sanctioned private sphere, illustrating how global platforms can become deeply embedded in local privacy regimes.

This walkthrough analysis of X, Instagram and Snapchat demonstrates how platform architectures and cultural logics co-constitute the boundaries of public and private digital life. By moving sequentially through each platform's environment of expected use and technical features, the study highlights how design decisions and governance mechanisms do not operate in a vacuum but are interpreted through cultural norms. Across the three cases, the platform's structure and affordances was reflected on user's behavior that of previous studies found. X exemplifies the platform of structural publicity, where defaults of openness, trending hashtags, and discoverability situate users in a mass audience. For Saudi participants, this made X the space of professional self-presentation and political discourse but one fraught with reputational risk, requiring strategies of self-censorship or formalized tone (Bahabri, 2024). Snapchat, by contrast, aligns most directly with Saudi cultural logics of modesty and intimacy.

Its ephemeral content, screenshot alerts, and closed network onboarding make it the platform of authentic expression within trusted circles, enabling practices of self-disclosure that would be inappropriate elsewhere. This could explain the high usage of Snapchat across all Saudi age groups (Ferrari, 2023) as its architectural resonance with communal notions of privacy. Instagram sits between these poles, embodying the challenges of negotiating semi-public visibility, where many negotiated practices were documented in previous research (Basabain et al, 2021, Bahabri,2024). Yet its suggestion features and openness to acquaintances heightened anxieties about exposure to family or colleagues.

These findings underscore the importance of examining platforms not only through their corporate logics or technical affordances but also through the lens of cultural-technical alignment.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The walkthrough method foregrounds platform architectures and corporate imaginaries but cannot fully capture the dynamism of everyday user appropriation. While this study incorporated insights from previous studies, future work should combine walkthroughs with ethnographic methods to trace how practices evolve in response to shifting governance and algorithmic changes.

Conclusion and Future Studies

This study demonstrates that Saudi digital life is structured around differentiated platform usage rather than uniform privacy strategies. X and Instagram function as public and semi-public arenas, emphasizing professional self-presentation and aesthetic curation, whereas Snapchat aligns closely with Saudi cultural norms of intimacy and modesty, offering a space for authentic, ephemeral communication. The findings highlight that platform architectures, governance frameworks, and affordances interact dynamically with local cultural values, producing a segregated ecology of digital spaces. Saudi users' strategies of platform segregation are not mere personal innovations but are shaped by the structural affordances and governance models embedded in each app.

The study recommend the following:

1. Platform Designers

The findings shows the importance of aligning platform architecture with culturally embedded notions of privacy. Designers should consider integrating features that accommodate different cultural expectations such as flexible visibility controls, ephemeral content functionalities, and moderation systems attuned to cultural and religious sensitivities.

2. Researchers and Social Scientists

The study highlights the need for scholars to account for the structural and design dimensions of platforms, particularly their affordances and governance logics when interpreting patterns of user behavior. This perspective is especially critical in non-Western contexts, where cultural values and sociotechnical configurations jointly shape how platforms are experienced and used.

Future Research

Building on the findings of this study, several avenues merit further exploration:

1 .Longitudinal Analyses

Future research should trace how patterns of platform use evolve over time as interfaces, monetization models, and feature ecosystems develop, particularly in the case of Snapchat, where rapid design iteration continually reshapes user practices.

2. Ethnographic Integration

Combining the walkthrough method with qualitative approaches such as in-depth interviews or participant observation would provide richer insight into everyday user practices and adaptive strategies in response to algorithmic change and governance shifts.

3. Cross-Cultural Comparison

Comparative studies across non-Western contexts could illuminate how privacy negotiation, platform segregation, and affordance use vary according to differing cultural frameworks and media ecologies.

4. Emerging Platforms

Examining the influence of newer or rapidly evolving platforms such as TikTok would help clarify how emerging platform's affordances reconfigure the boundary between public and private digital life in Saudi Arabia.

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