

New Communication Technologies and Social Change:

Cell Phone Effects on the Saudi Family

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### **Abstract**

In today's information and technology era, new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have prompted fundamental social changes in almost all civilized societies. Communication technologies such as cell phones, television, the Internet, and all its derivatives have directly affected people of all age groups, and have impacted the way in which groups communicate. This research study focuses on the influence of ICTs on the Saudi family, in particular, the effects of cell phone use on Saudi family members and social relations. The study presents the results of research about cell phone uses, concerns, and these implications on twelve Saudi individuals of different ages, as well as the way cell phones have played a role in forming family and social relations. The research findings about cell phone effects are divided into three categories: first, effects on family that found that the cell phone has assisted Saudis in promoting parental obedience, sharing responsibilities, and providing assurance to family members. Second, effects on social relations that reveal that cell phone calls and text messages promoted social isolation, reduced in-person visitations, and helped maintain far relationships. Third, effects on youth in which the cell phone has become an integrated device in young people's lives that is essential for maintaining social status among peers, and has dramatically influenced their oral expression abilities. The lack of awareness about the consequences of cell phone use, along with the extensive use of cell phones among youngsters, leads to misuse that is not acceptable within educational and social cultures.

*Keywords:* cell phone, effects, Saudi Arabia, family, youth

## New Communication Technologies and Social Change: Cell Phone Effects on the Saudi Family

The world has witnessed tremendous changes among various aspects related to people's lives. Communication is one of the areas that has undergone a transformational shift; new media has been developing rapidly throughout the end of the twentieth- and the early twenty-first centuries. Since communication is one of the basic social human activities, the inventions of new media have a great influence on mankind.

One of the basic definitions of communication is the interpersonal contact, social interaction, and association between people (Oxford dictionary, 2009). Humans are social creatures by nature; they need to interact, socialize and communicate with each other and among groups. Therefore, new media, and developed communication technologies have directly influenced people's communication at all levels especially personal and social.

Zimam (2009) defines communication as the process of which people exchange thoughtful images through codes and channels. It is a process of sharing thoughts, ideas, information, stands, and orientations through media that allow the flow of those communicated elements within individuals, groups, or society. In fact, its importance stems from its contribution in creating coherent social composition in modern and civilized societies.

Abdulbari (2009) explains that new communication technologies are agents of change that have social, economic, cultural, educational, and political dimensions. He mentions that a change starts on the individual level and grows in a social format producing *social change*. Social change is a transformation in people's values, customs, beliefs, traditions, and their clothing, eating, and way of living. According to Alnashry (2009), social change can be divided into two categories based on its manner. The first manner is the sudden change that happens rapidly and hardly monitored, it occurs in developed industrial societies. The second

manner is the gradual developing change that assimilates within people's nature life and leads to gradual development within societies. Gradual change encounters fewer conflicts than rapid change and occurs in developing countries.

Saudi Arabia is one of the most vital countries in the Middle East. Its geographic location in the Arabian Peninsula, its religious city of Mecca, and its rich land with crude oil makes it one of the most rapidly developing countries in the region. The emergence of communication technologies in Saudi Arabia has also played a role in inducing gradual changes, the second type of social change, at different levels—individual, social, corporate, and government. Starting with printing, telephone, radio, and television were all introduced in the middle of the twentieth-century, fully developing to satellite, cell phone, and Internet usage that appeared in the last decade of the twentieth-century.

As technology is becoming part of the country's structure, Saudi Arabia is moving towards technology-based interactions, by implementing an electronic governmental system to address the needs of its citizens. The Saudi government has established an electronic directory for all governmental agencies in which people can perform transactions electronically. Interactions through electronic government systems have become the norm among Saudi people, and this has extended to other forms of interactions. For example, according to a national study on online banking, 67% of Saudi people accept electronic bank transactions through cell phones, especially after smart phones have been introduced for public use (Riyadh, 2009).

In the 1930s, King Abdulaziz AlSaud noticed the importance of telecommunication, and he established the first telegram, post office, and phone office that linked remote cities in the Kingdom. Then, ten years later, wireless centers were installed to improve communication services around the Kingdom. By 1953 there were 22 wireless stations for telegraphs, and 850 manual landlines distributed to link major cities in Saudi Arabia. In the

1980s, the government was able to efficiently operate all the cable networks that were installed around the country (Ministry of Communication and Information Technology [MCIT], 2009).

During the 1980s, automobile phones were first used for the Saudi Arabian public, but they were bulky, and very expensive. Automobile phones were not very popular, because its service was based on the first generation of mobile phones that were only installed for vehicles. There were only 12,000 subscribers around the Kingdom, although it was capable of maintaining 20,000 lines (Anonymous, 2001).

In 1995, the second generation of digital cell phone networks that provided improved services and enabled handy phones was based on the Global System for Mobile (GSM) communications network was operating in Saudi Arabia. GSM is the operating network that runs in all the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC<sup>1</sup>) countries. GCC mobile network systems are considered one of the leading ones, because they possess the most advanced communication networks in the Middle East (Badwelan, 1424). At this time in Saudi Arabia, subscriptions to cell phone services were very expensive, but with passing time and a growing demand, the price went down and the number of subscribers reached 1 million by the end of year 2000. In 2004, the number of cell phone subscribers steeply increased to 11.9 million subscribers (Anonymous, 2001).

In 2005, the third generation operator entered the market. This generation enabled Internet, multimedia transmission, video calls, and television stream services (Badwelan, 1424). In 2005, the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology enabled Telecom companies in the Saudi market. Beside Saudi Telecom Company (STC), Mobily, and Zain are Arab network operators that are based in Emirates and Jordan. The emergence

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<sup>1</sup> GCC are the countries of the Arabian Peninsula that are on the Persian Gulf these countries are: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab of Emirates, and Oman.

of these companies in the Saudi market that compete with STC drove these operators to provide better services and decrease their cost (Riyadh, 2005). According to a recent study conducted by an Information and Communication Technology Consultant at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the number of cell phone subscribers exceeds 40 million users by 2009 (Ahmed, 2010).

Lately with advanced telecom services, smart phones have strongly entered the Saudi market. Advanced communication services provided via cell phone caused a dramatic increase in the number of users not only for business, but also for personal use especially among youngsters. In fact, the number of users who access the Internet through cell phones has increased to 9 million with the presence of Smart phones (Alzoman & Albagami, 2010). In 2009, the number of Blackberry® users has increased 700%, with sales of more than 90 thousand phones in the last quarter of the year (Kibi, 2010). Blackberry® has been widely used among business users; however, it has also become a trend for regular users. The wide spread of Blackberry® use among Saudi people has caused social changes among youngsters.

By all it means, communication is very essential to Saudi culture as it maintains kinship and family ties, and reflects respect, compassion, and love. Telecommunication facilitated the way in which people communicate and cell phones made it possible anytime at any place through many means. Examining the influence of ICTs focusing on cell phone on the communication patterns in the Saudi society and the Saudi family, the researcher based her study on qualitative in-depth interviews and analyzed the data through literature related to technology and the cell phone's effect on family, society, and youth.

This research paper examines the effect of technologies on social change in Saudi Arabia. It also explains the uses and implications of the cell phone in Saudi families and society. The study helps sociologists, public policy makers, and educators understand some of the changes that these technologies have brought into the Saudi community and will also

help them in learning ways to overcome the associated complications. Moreover, it assists parents in seeing clearly the negative effects of the cell phone so that they can be aware and overcome these effects.

### **Literature Review**

The invention of new technologies has led scientists and scholars from different fields to devote a great portion of their time to studying the outcome of technology on end users. The literature about communications technology — the cell phone in particular — and social change has been widely discussed. This literature review focuses on the technology and cell phone's effects on three main areas: family, society, and youth.

Cell phone devices facilitate communication between people. Leysia Palen and Amanda Hughes (2007) illustrate the social influence of the cell phone's development as a means of information communication technology (ICT) on shaping family behaviors, parenting in particular, from four distinct dimensions. The first perspective addresses gender and the cell phone. Cell phones were first used in a business world that was primarily male, whereas landlines were more used by females, including stay-at-home mothers. However, the current situation shows cell phone usage as characteristic of both genders.

The second dimension involves family schedules and the chronological regulation of interaction. This angle includes family's responsibilities, activities, and social attendances such as arrangements held by parents (Palen & Hughes, 2007).

The third dimension that Palen and Hughes (2007) discuss is the social influence of the mobile phone in terms of a family's activity stress and children's age. Children's age is a factor that defines the amount of stress parents encounter in arranging the family's activities. The younger the age of the children, the more stress parents experience in their daily schedules, which often determines the mobile phone use of the parents.

The fourth, and final, dimension is the communication technology found within the

home. This refers to the installation of communication technologies at home such as infrastructure, physical, or technical designs. It also incorporates the family members' needs of technology and the many solutions available to meet these needs (2007).

Palen and Hughes (2007) summarize the findings of their research into four different aspects:

1. Parents' attachment to the cell phone depends on the presence, or absence, of their children. Parents become physically attached to their cell phone when they are away from their children, whereas this attachment loosens in the presence of their children.

2. Female usage of the cell phone has expanded from business uses to domestic ones. Working mothers often make business calls while taking care of their children, and conversely, they make child care plans while at work.

3. Parents view the cell phone as an essential connection to their children, because it helps with monitoring family members, providing reminders for coordination tasks, and sharing emotions. Home-based activities become more dynamic through mobile phone use.

4. Children's age determines the way in which parents monitor them. For example, the parents' need for interaction with various institutions, such as the school, increases the importance of the cell phone for coordinating such activities. On the other hand, it becomes a means of active communication between family members when the children are grown up.

As parents worry about their children, they develop habits related to parenting as *tethering*. Palen and Hughes explain that tethering occurs when parents keep checking their cell phone that does not often ring. Tethering reflects the mothering action by way of the cell phone. The cell phone also subjects family members "remotely" to home rules and regulations (2007). Hence, family members feel obligated to follow home norms when they are monitored by phone.

Furthermore, parents want to be directly available for their children if problems arise,

and when children are adults and independent, cell phones allow for remote parenting within the extended bounds of home (Palen & Hughes, 2007). Cell phone use improves parental scope, access, and responsibility. In short, the cell phone is the hotline that keeps family members connected and helps enhance the balance between home and work.

Although cell phones has widened the scope of communication and connectivity among individuals, the increased usage of technology among youth and its obvious impact alarmed families enough to take actions to restrict the youths' use of the technology. Sun Sun Lim and Yen Ling Tan (2004) analyze the parent's role in controlling new communication technology usage among children in Singapore. Families are acquiring new ICTs such as cell phones and computers, which are rapidly growing in popularity in Singapore. Parents are finding it difficult to stay updated with the increasingly advanced technologies and have little control over their children's usage of media technologies (Lim & Tan, 2004).

Even though parents possess limited knowledge on media technologies, Lim and Tan (2004) note that parents understand the vital role of ICTs in their children's life. This encourages parents to provide their children with the most advanced and updated devices. Families understand that the use of these technologies has become a functional necessity that requires social and personal control. Parents are highly respected in the Singaporean culture, and children are expected to obey their parents. However, the strong role of parents as teachers, guardians, and decision makers has been confused by the introduction of technologies, which parents do not fully understand (Lim & Tan, 2004)

Although parents are sometimes apathetic about technology, their children were able to participate in advancing the parents' technological knowledge. Lim and Tan (2004) claim that ICTs have played a role in bringing family members together from the following three points of view:

1. ICTs have improved interaction between children and parents, as parents need their

children to teach them how to use the new devices. It also did not affect the usual time children spend with their parents.

2. These technologies have made home a place for leisure time; especially with the existence of these devices in the bedrooms “bedroom culture”. Children are urged to spend more time at home chatting online, playing games, or surfing the net for entertainment.

3. They enabled parents to control the period and amount of time children spend using these devices.

According to Lin and Tan (2004), parents are able to have more control over computer and Internet usage, despite its negative effects of causing isolation, neglect of personal responsibilities, and addiction. However, parents have less control over their children’s use of cell phones as it interrupts interactions among family members. However, it actually fosters family relations because it enables family members to stay in touch all the time especially in the case of separated parents (Lin & Tan, 2004). On the other hand, television has traditionally monopolized the family’s attention in their living room. The authors say it replaced the constant conversation and the exchange of ideas between family members and altered the nature of the family’s gatherings in living rooms.

As technology became a social instrument, the scholars mention that technologies at home forced parents to improve their technical skills in order to be able to have control over their children’s usage of ICTs (Lim & Tan, 2004). In many situations, parents rely on their children to operate and fix their own machines and some children take advantage of their parent’s technical illiteracy by claiming to be working on academic studies when they are in fact playing games or socializing with their peers. According to Lim and Tan (2004), the cell phone and computers or the Internet differs than fixed line phone and television that they are two way interactive devices. In contrast, older devices are straightforward and less complex.

Lin and Tan (2004) conclude that children would always be more advanced in terms

of technological knowledge in comparison with their parents. Therefore, managing media usage will remain a challenge for parents as they try to keep track and maintain control over the ongoing advanced media and their children's use of it (Lim & Tan, 2004). This may be true especially given that most middle-age parents have been apathetic towards learning and understanding the complexity of ICTs.

Information communication technologies actively promoted family interactions across countries. Nitin Sawhney and Herve Gomes (2000) conduct an ethnographic study among immigrants' families to understand the communication patterns in such communities. They believe that families encounter difficulty in managing daily communication with their family members who are in different areas.

Sawhney and Gomes further explain the importance of communication in the designs of smart homes that incorporate technologies within its structure. However, these do not meet the cognitive demands and critical social relationships for such communities (2000). The introduction of new technologies in the smart home has influenced the social setting of family activities that occur on a daily basis. However, good parents were found to have control over media technologies and also be able to organize social settings (Sawhney & Gomes, 2000). For example, TV is considered to be an anti-social device, which should not be turned on when guests are visiting.

Moreover, Sawhney and Gomes (2000) argue that the cell phone is an essential device in social and family communication. People communicate more through cell phone, especially with the improvement of cellular services, growing number of its users, and its reasonable cost. The cell phone helped people maintain social relations at home and work with less effort. The scholars define social awareness as the consideration of others' actions that create a comprehensive context with individuals' actions (2000). The cell phone has increased social awareness among family members and social relations.

In addition to social impact of cell phone, Sawhney and Gomes (2000) also describe domestic relationships and the communication patterns within families. They differentiate between the family and the household members by kinship relation so that households or domestic groups do not necessarily formulate family (2000). Research reveals that the quality of conversation is more important than quantity of conversations. In fact, communication among domestic groups can be about attitude, authority, responsibilities, emotional expressions, and disagreements (Sawhney & Gomes, 2000). The cell phone has also played a role in assuring families about the whereabouts of their children. Therefore, parents are encouraged to provide their children with cell phones. However, scholars say that caregivers should understand that youth need some privacy and that children should be allowed to not answer all calls. Instead, exchanging text messages could be useful in these cases.

Sawhney and Gomes (2000) also found that communication patterns in domestic groups in extended social communities is based on the role of mothers and wives. Mothers of immigrants are not only the source of emotional and parental support, but they are also the source of information and updated news about the extended family. Siblings also provide a similar type of support. On the other hand, wives are in constant contact with their husbands so they can learn about their children and their home's daily routine through the cell phone. A wife is also considered the hub that plays the role linking social ties with their families back home.

On the other hand, Sawhney and Gomes (2000) note that new communication technologies have diminished old ones. For example, e-mails and phone calls have replaced writing letters as they became available and affordable. However, older people still find that emails are not enough to satisfy their communication needs and styles; voice conversation is still essential in their communication.

Additionally, English-Lueck (1998) discusses the effects of technology on family and

community at the level of daily routines. He believes that technology has altered the nature of work and the home and has created a new overarching context for work, home, and school environments. According to Lueck, technology has impacted the relationship between home and work. Most people think they do not take work home, but in fact, working on the computer and reading work-related magazines in one's own room is a way of bringing work home (1998).

Furthermore, technology has enabled people to manage and execute their work remotely, says Lueck (1998). Telecommunications devices enable various daily activities to be coordinated and allow plans to be set, changed, and arranged in a matter of minutes. Cell phones have also played a role in increasing the feeling of street safety for all family members, as it is a way to moderate parental concern. He also says that the cell phone has played a role in fostering relations with distant relatives, even more so than with immediate family (Lueck, 1998).

Another vital usage that cell phone has been handled for is that it encourages family's duties. Lueck states that ICTs have enabled the easy coordination of children's activities with school, work responsibilities, and social events. He mentions that the American mainstream claims that males are the technical experts at home and usually any technical issues will be left for men to solve; while women only show interest as users. As Lueck (1998) explains, mothers were able to set rules and regulations for technology usage at home, but these rules usually face resistance from other family members.

Lueck says that ICTs have different impacts on different families. He describes three types of family impacts that are caused by technology:

1. Telecommunication technologies set families apart, by allowing individual interaction only with, and through, technical devices.
2. Technology can tighten relations and interactions among extended family and

community. Some families use devices in an arrangement that encourages various interactions.

3. Technology can cause divisions within big families, because of the different interest groups within the family.

Lueck adds that technology has been encouraged for school students, as it is used to advance the learning process (Lueck, 1998). Schools also try to incorporate technology in other ways that enhance their services and productivity, as well as improve students' performance.

Lueck (1998) concludes that telecommunication devices have had several implications on family cultures and communities. First, technology today has become an ecosystem of technology in that no one single device can meet the individual's or family's needs. Second, the use of technology has become very essential in people's daily life and it boosts social and cultural activities for family members (Lueck, 1998). For example, playing video games has become a family activity that gathers people and increases technical knowledge. Third, technology allows family to interact within the technical context. Fourth, technology has not only determined the financial status of people and communities, it also implies discipline of media production within family. Finally, technology plays an essential role in transferring work from the workplace to home by widely available technical means (Lueck, 1998).

Moreover, Masahiro Toda and Satoko Ezoë (2008) investigated the relationship between dependence on the cell phone and parenting attitudes among female students. They studied compulsive cell phone use as a kind of *technostress*. Toda and Ezoë (2008) differentiate between "high and low protection" groups. The high protection group includes the individual that is highly attached to their family that is overprotecting, whereas, the low protection group contains those who received limited parental care in their childhood. The

researchers found that the high protection group has a higher rate of cell phone dependence than the low protection group (2008). They also found that females experiencing technostress are more likely to be in constant contact with the same-sex parent. However, some studies revealed that males are more likely to have mental issues such as depression, related to parenting care. Toda and Ezoë (2008) suggest that low parental care is associated with depression and an unhealthy lifestyle.

In contrast to low parental attention, Toda and Ezoë state that the high protection group also reports high scores for loneliness and vulnerability. This is due to a high attachment to their mothers during their childhood. Loneliness is strongly attached to cell phone dependence, which explains habitual communication and the increase of interpersonal relationships. High care groups use e-mail services more than low protection groups. Toda and Ezoë learned that females tend to use e-mail and keep connected with their families, and use additional cell phone services, such as Internet and games, in an attempt to reduce lonely feelings (2008). The scholars admitted that their study has many limitations relating to different factors, such as the demographics of the selected segment for the research. The study focused only on female students from nursing school (Tod & Ezoë, 2008).

The mobile phone has had a direct impact on the society, especially on youth who are impulsive and impressionable. Abdulwahab Jawda (2008) conducted a field study on the cell phone practices of youth in Arab countries to understand and interpret the reciprocal relation of the cell phone and Arab socio-cultural structure, individual behavior and practice, and to offer guidance for its rational use. Jawda (2008) articulated the effects of cell phone practices on social structure among college students from three dimensions. These dimensions included: the usage and practices of mobile phones, their social effects, and their academic influence.

According to Jawda (2008), Arab youth engagement with the cell phone is featured in

two bases. (a) Ensure up-to-date cell phone services, models, and accessories regularly; and (b) alter social intercommunication methods through calls, text messages, and multimedia messages. These two factors lead to the formation of a new textual culture among individuals (Jawda, 2008). The motive for mobile phone engagement stems from the desire to stay connected with family and friends, keep memos, help organize tasks, entertain and fill leisure time, to boast and brag, and follow news. Jawda (2008) indicated that negative motives and worthless practices are dominant in the use of cell phone by youth.

In the second dimension, Jawda (2008) examined the social impacts of cell phones on Arab social structure, which he said was a mixture of positive and negative effects. The positive implications included: remaining connected with family, tracking children when they are away from home and making sure they are all right (especially female), and gaining social control. On the other hand, the negative implications included: enabling uncontrolled communication with opposite sex without the family's supervision, spreading lies and rumors, creating suspicion, and telling family secrets. All together these negative effects lead to strained family relations (Jawda, 2008).

In addition, Jawda (2008) mentions that cell phones increased the phenomenon of social isolation of Arab youth, because young individuals spend a long time on their mobile, away from real social activities. Youth start to interact only with their friends who have their cell phone numbers, and this minimized their face-to-face social interaction and personal conversations with other friends and family members (2008). It also has minimized the important role of social settings within the family and society, loosening the meaning of sociability.

In Arab countries, Jawda says that capitalism has brought new insight related to value; it emphasizes individualism, privatization, fast profit, showiness, consumption, luxury, ostentation, and debt. As a result, Jawda argued that there is a declining value of rationalism

(2008). Such negative life patterns lead to spreading deviant behaviors, such as lying and seeking one's benefit, both of which are not socially accepted in Arab culture (2008).

However, Jawda also pointed to positive effects. Cell phones have helped individuals who live across oceans keep connected (2008). For example, students who study abroad feel that they are very close to their family; they can reach them anytime and anywhere (Jawda, 2008). It has removed the feelings of homesickness and loneliness, when students are away for studies or on long trips.

Academic influence is the third dimension Jawda used to analyze the cell phone's impact on Arab social structure (2008). The cell phone has had positive effects on the academic system. It enables students to communicate with each other, the administration, and faculty. However, the cell phone has also had a negative influence on students' behavior in the classroom. Students isolate themselves with their cell phones during lectures and disrespect classroom rules. They exchange text messages and jokes, and some chat, using their mobiles during lectures. Such behavior is reflected in lowered academic scores (Jawda, 2008). It has also helped invent new ways of cheating while taking exams.

Jawda (2008) recommended establishing social and educational research units to closely track socio-cultural changes, leading to problems that stem from advanced technologies. These units may present solutions for overcoming social problems as they surface. The author also recommended holding conferences and seminars to discuss the impact of technical development on the Arab social structure and to help determine guidelines for maintaining ethical standards for social values (Jawda, 2008). These guidelines may help create a positive culture for cell phone usage that strengthens social interaction, while minimizing its negative social repercussions.

Tracing technology is considered an addictive behavior. The ongoing modernization of technology and ineffectuality of old ones impacts people's financial status, especially with

the consumer culture trend nowadays. Safaa Ashri (2008) articulates the effects of obtaining diverse communication devices in families and how it effects the financial management within Saudi families. She conducts research about the constructive and destructive effects of using communication devices such as the landline phone, the mobile phone, the computer, and the Internet. She also cites the relationship between these effects and the family's keenness to acquire and use such machines (2008). Ashri (2008) studied families from different social and economic statuses who live in the Eastern region of Saudi Arabia.

In her research, Ashri (2008) emphasizes the importance of financial management within Saudi families, especially the consumption characteristic of the economic systems that are dominant nowadays. Financial management will help families distribute their financial resources in a balanced manner that meets their needs and saves disposable income. Communication technologies have become essential equipment in people's lives as they bring the world together in the palm of one's hand at a time of globalization in the new millennium (Ashri, 2008). These new technologies have influenced people's behaviors, thoughts, social, and personal relations.

Ashri (2008) documents the relationship between the family's acquisition of communication devices and its financial management based on aspects such as, the income, profession, family size, housing, level of education, duration of marriage, age of spouses, and employment status of wives. She tracks the number of communication devices per family member, and the value of bills based on the daily use of these devices (2008).

Youth usually encourage their parents to purchase new technological devices. Ashri (2008) notes that young people are the greatest users of advanced communication technologies such as computers and the Internet. They use these devices for entertaining themselves for long periods of time playing games, listening to music, and chatting with new acquaintances. Therefore, these devices have a negative influence by reducing social

activities with their families and friends, says Ashri. However, parents desire to provide the members of the family with latest technologies because they facilitate and ease life by conveying information in a convenient way (2008). Ashri indicates that the presence of communication devices increases the family's expenditure budget allocated for technical devices and accessories. Modern societies are forced to keep track of and cope with advanced technologies that are rapidly and constantly developing (Ashri, 2008). She claims that this race with technology development has caused difficulties for people to track the technical evolution and its effects. Purchasing new devices adds monetary obligation that impacts the ability of families to obtain other important items the family needs.

Ashri (2008) found that there is a positive correlation between the number of hours spent on communication devices and the income level of the family. She found a positive relationship between the effects of cell phones, computers, and the Internet and maintaining family's income. However, she found no correlation between the negative effects of communication devices and financial management of a family. Ashri recommends conducting simultaneous studies to track the development of communication technologies and its negative and positive correlative effects. She also suggests that families should follow rational expenditure for communicative devices so they do not affect the family's budget for other important items (2008). The author believes that raising awareness among family members for the usability of communication equipment will help reduce the negative effects from the use of these technologies. She suggests establishing programs to assist Saudi families to choose suitable communication devices that are appropriate for the family's needs (Ashri, 2008).

Youth are the most essential segment of the social fabric. Being able to understand and interpret their behaviors and problems helps in dealing with and treating social issues at early stages. Majed Salawi (2007) conducted research on the nature of cell phone use and its

social effects on Saudi youth. He believed that understanding the influence of new technology on youth helps determine the basic personal features of this vital social segment. His research covered male Saudi youth from different ages, educational, financial, and social levels who live in Jeddah, the largest coastal city in the western region of Saudi Arabia. He found that the majority of young Saudi men use mobile phones for entertainment and emotional purposes (Salawi, 2007).

Moreover, he identified three factors that influence cell phone use among Saudi youth. The first factor Salawi noticed was the effect of cell phones on individuals; cell phones helped people adopt new behaviors that did not exist before cell phone usage such as, making emotional-social calls on a regular basis. It also helped liberate domestic locations *trans-culture* in less time; people are now able to communicate instantly from different locations all over the world (Salawi, 2007). The cell phone enables people to communicate conveniently with their relatives and friends while they are abroad, and it eliminates lonely feelings while being away. Salawi (2007) mentioned that cell phone use has also helped individuals be less stressed, due to the ability to distribute and delegate responsibilities in a timely manner and more efficiently.

The second factor that played a role in influencing Saudi youth is personal interaction (Salawi, 2007). In fact, mobile phones substituted for face-to-face formal conversations, hence strengthening and widening the circle of acquaintances with a simple means of communication. Text messaging is considered a limited way to initiate conversation with minimal interference. It also has added flexibility to people's schedules; for example amending, canceling, and setting up appointments. The cell phone has also helped people foster and maintain relationships, anywhere at anytime (Salawi, 2007).

Sawali stated that the third factor of cell phone effects on Saudi youth was its influence on face-to-face gatherings (2007). Cell phones cause unexpected interruptions that

often disturb meetings. Receiving unexpected calls redirects the receiver's attention to the cell phone, rather than the people he/she is with. In addition, cell phones have enabled people to be available in different locations at the same time (Salawi, 2007). For example, receiving mobile calls at work makes the person available, physically in one place and virtually in another; this enables giving advice, taking consultations, and making decisions in a short time.

People worldwide use cell phones for four reasons, Salawi (2007) describes:

1. The cell phone is a small, light, convenient, and user-friendly device. Subscriptions and minute costs are affordable and reasonable in comparison to landline calls. It enables people to reach others for assistance during emergencies, such as, traffic accidents.
2. Cell phones enable people to be reassured about their loved ones, anywhere they are and at anytime. Therefore, it reduces worry and anxiety, especially for parents toward their children.
3. Cell phones help carry out immediate work and professional tasks, such as, organizing meetings and interviews. They also enable executing assignments and following up on projects from a distance.
4. Cell phones help people communicate with others, whether family, friends, or strangers. In fact, mobile phones have helped foster existing social relationships but have not established new ones.

Prominently, Salawi stated that cell phones have created private networks for youth that parents cannot monitor or control (2007). This may be a negative case for youth who have secretive, romantic, and social engagements with the opposite sex, which is an unacceptable behavior in the Saudi culture.

The use of communication means is a key to interaction between people. The importance of communication is emphasized in the religious and cultural dimensions in

people's lives as an essential natural action in humanity. Islam, the dominant religion in Saudi Arabia, is based on values that teach people to have strong kinship ties. "A'ishah<sup>2</sup>, May Allah be pleased with her<sup>3</sup>, reported: Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him<sup>4</sup>) said: The tie of kinship is suspended to the Throne and says: He who unites me Allah will unite him and he who severs me Allah will sever him." (Kinship hadith<sup>5</sup>, n.d.). Kinship in Islam does not mean immediate family members, but also extended family that is blood related. In Saudi Arabia, family is not limited to the household; it comprises from the members of the extended family that includes uncles, aunts, cousins, and second cousins from both parents' side.

Frequent communications and visits, are ways in which people keep ties and maintain relations. Kinship extends even further to include friends and neighbors. "Al-Nu'man bin Bashir, may Allah be pleased with him, reported: Allah's Messenger (PBUH) said: The similitude of believers in regard to mutual love, affection, fellow-feeling is that of one body; when any limb of it aches, the whole body aches, because of sleeplessness and fever." (The one body hadith, n.d.). These Islamic lessons emphasize relationships between people; not only family and relatives, but also other Muslims. Feeling responsible and related should reach people from outside the circle of acquaintances to demonstrate the Muslim unity, as Islam calls for.

Strengthening the bonds between people is a basic obligation for the relationship

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<sup>2</sup> Every hadith starts with the narrator name to differentiate between different types of

<sup>3</sup> Islamic lessons dictates that after mentioning a name of Prophet Mohammed's companion, we should follow with may Allah be pleased with.

<sup>4</sup> Mentioning prophet Mohammed must be followed by peace be upon him (PBUH).

<sup>5</sup> Hadith is the culture and talks of Prophet Mohammed (PBUH), the messenger of Islam.

between Muslims. Kinship ties become more important among relatives, by asking about them and helping them. In fact, charitable work is one of the actions encouraged by the Islamic religion. Relatives and people with blood bonds come first in charitable giving. Cutting off relations is abhorrent in Islam; it reflects badly on people. Stopping communicating on purpose is a way of severance that leads to deprivation of Allah's blessings in the individual's life. The severance of kinship ties is a sin that is frowned upon. "Jubair bin Mut'im, may Allah be pleased with him, reported: Allah's Messenger (PBUH) said: The severer of the tie of kinship shall not enter Paradise." (Hadith of severe of kinship, n.d.). Maintaining kinship is very valued in the Islamic dogma to the extent that kinship severance may prevent one from going to heaven. More importantly, strengthening ties and communicating with immediate family and parents is a religious obligation.

In addition, obedience to one's parents is one of the essential obligations for Muslims. In the Holy Qur'an, Allah almighty said, "Thy Lord hath decreed that ye worship none but Him, and that ye be kind to parents. Whether one or both of them attain old age in thy life, say not to them a word of contempt, nor repel them, but address them in terms of honor (23)" (Qur'an: 17). Muslims ought to obey their parents, treat them kindly, and take care of them when they become old. Obedience to one's parents is an indicator of being well raised. Kind communication and immediate answers to the parents' calls reflects the person's goodness.

### **Methodology**

This research study relies on primary data that has been collected through qualitative techniques, in particular, by conducting in-depth interviews. The research was conducted among members of Saudi families from the middle and upper classes. The average family size was seven members per family, and they used a number of communication technical devices. The qualitative study emphasizes the in-depth nature of the interviews, aiming to provide insight and understanding into the family's usage of technologies and the cell phone.

## **Research Type**

According to Alan Shao and Kevin Zhou (2007), in-depth interviews are unstructured, one-on-one dialogues between an expert interviewer and a member of a target population. Their purpose is to collect original data that serves for the study. In-depth interviews help in exploring an individual's thoughts and recording their attitudes and behaviors away from a group's influence.

In-depth interviews have a number of advantages that characterize them from other qualitative research techniques. First, in-depth interviews have a detailed nature; the interviewer is able to probe deeply and investigate further during the interview as needed. Therefore, the interviewer has control over the data being collected. Second, it enables the interviewer to discuss complex, personal, and sensitive topics. She can simplify, clarify, or rephrase statements in a way that interviewees are more comfortable with. Third, interviews add flexibility, and it enables interviewers to reach and schedule interviews at the interviewee's convenience, unlike focus groups where it is difficult to schedule a number of people at the same time. Finally, interviews enable interviewees to speak on personal and sensitive topics that they might not be comfortable discussing with a group (Shao & Zhou, 2007). In addition, in-depth interviews enable a distant interviewer to conduct research among populations in various locations via advanced communication technologies.

On the other hand, in-depth interviews have a number of shortcomings. First, a lack of interaction with others may stifle thinking and producing ideas and opinions. Second, one-on-one interviews usually cost a very high amount, especially with specialized individuals and those with expertise. The third limitation is related to the interviewer's unreliability and inconsistency between different interviews — in terms of approach, style, appearance, and impression. These variations influence respondents' behaviors and attitudes towards the

topic. Interviewer bias is one the most important disadvantages that interviewers try to overcome while interviewing. Another shortcoming related to the interviewers is that their energy level decreases rapidly. Due to conducting interviews about the same topic over a short period of time, this may affect their recording or interpretation abilities. Finally, Shao and Zhou mentioned that the unstructured feature of in-depth interviews does not allow for scientific and statistical projections. Interviews are analyzed and verifiable after the interviews, but they are not statistically valid (2007).

### **Research Sample**

The research sample is based on judgment sampling that is non-probable. This method bases the research sample on the researcher's judgment for the characteristics and qualifications needed for the study. The research sample consists of six parents and six youth who live in Riyadh, Jeddah, and Khobar, the major cities in the Kingdom. Two of the interviewees are studying overseas. The parent sample consists of (3 women, 3 men,  $M_{age} = 41.5$  years), whereas the youth sample is (2 women, 4 men,  $M_{age} = 22$ ). Two of the parents are divorced, and have their children's custody. All fathers are working in private or semi-governmental sectors, whereas the mothers' occupations are more diverse — one is working, another is pursuing higher education, and the other is a housewife. All of the youth are students, ranging from high school to graduate level, except for one who is working as an officer.

The 12 interviewees voluntarily participated in this research study. Nine of the 12 interviewees were recruited through Facebook®, whereas the other three participants were of the researcher's convenient sampling. The interviews were conducted through telephone and Skype calls over the course of two weeks. Each interview session lasted for at least an hour and a half — with some interviewees, it reached two hours. Notes of each interview were taken.

All participants live with their biological families, except for one of the students abroad who lives alone. Five of the interviewees live in villa and seven of them live in apartments. All participants come from a medium to large family size, which is the most common household size in Saudi Arabia. The median number of siblings is five per participant, and the average number of children of each of the six parents is five.

All data was collected from Saudi citizens who use multiple information communication technologies on a daily basis. All members of the sample possess a cell phone and use communication devices for personal, professional, social, and education purposes.

### **Research Tool**

The interview format collected various types of information through three different parts. The first part collected demographic data such as age, gender, marital status, occupation, housing type, and family size. The second part of the interview collected information related to the communication technologies the individual owns. This part included questions such as: What type of communication technologies do you use? How much time do you spend each day using technology? At what times do you use ICTs? Do you control technology usability or control the family's use of technology? What influences do these technologies have on your life? These are just samples, and I asked many more questions related to communication technology usage.

The third part of the interview inquired about cell phone usage and its influence on the people's lives. This part collected information relating to the personal, professional, and social uses of mobile phones. The interviewer asked questions such as: Do you receive/make patrolling phone calls (calls to know the whereabouts of your family)? Do you communicate with your household often during the day? Do cell phones substitute for social visitations?

How attached do you feel to your cell phone? Does your workplace/school impose regulations on cell phone use? How reasonable is your average monthly bill? The in-depth nature of the interview allowed the researcher to collect as much data as possible. The interviewer was able to ask for elaboration and further explanation for every question and was also able to record the attitudes and feelings of the subjects, as the live, vocal interviews reflect the interviewees' honest reactions.

The researcher conducted seven of the interviews through the Skype voice utility, and five were conducted via landline telephone calls. The interviewer's script was printed out as a guide, and the researcher was able to record information manually onto it. The interviewer was able to analyze respondents' consistent answers, and she was also able to reveal contradicting responses.

### **Results**

The research findings about the influence of technologies, and cell phones in particular, on the Saudi family reveal that Saudis are aware of both the positive and negative effects of ICTs on their lives. They also believe that it has impacted their privacy, and their family gatherings. Saudi parents tend to monitor and control ICTs usage at home. This research also explores the reasons for obtaining cell phones, their different uses, the consequences, and the personal attachments to them for families in Saudi Arabia. In addition, the findings study some of the social implications of the cell phone such as its role in reducing in-person interactions between Saudi family members. Finally, the research results investigate Blackberry® practices among Saudis and the regulations imposed in the workplace and in schools regarding cell phone use.

Technologies bring benefits to people, but sometimes result in harmful aspects, as well. The interviews show that ICTs have both positive and negative effects. The advantages of communication technologies are easy access to information, a fast and easy means of

communication, an expanding circle of international acquaintances, deepening connections with family members living overseas, freedom to communicate wherever you are at any time, open access to multiple global news resources from all over the world, a means of entertainment and enjoyment at home, allow multi tasking and working while mobile the mobility of the technology, having full-time access, aids in researching, and a convenient means and robust set of tools for organizing one's time.

“I feel connected all the time, I don't need to go out unless there is a necessity, or when I go visiting” (Parent 1).

“My pocket PC keeps me connected to various technologies through one device, and I use my mobile phone only when I am mobile” (Parent 4).

On the other hand, the perceived disadvantages the interviewees mentioned are: wasted time, reduced real sociability, addictive, make people dependent and lazy, increased potential of bad utilization such as hacking, isolated individuals from the real world, limited understanding of the depth of their children's education, increased financial burden, endanger information and identity security, invades privacy, and increases violence and tension among youth.

“Technology can drag people to hell when used without awareness ... there must be education, awareness and supervision especially when allowing children ... I cannot condemn the tool, I condemn the users” (Parent 4).

Most ICTs are for individual use. They allow personal preferences and modification. According to the findings, nine of the twelve interviewees agree that technology has increased their private space. One interviewee mentions that he keeps secrets in his computers, writes diaries, and customizes it to his personal preferences.

“I gather and save whatever I like in my cell-phone memory ... I have a collection of jokes, pictures, videos that I am able to retrieve whenever I want

from one place” (Parent 3).

On the other hand, some of the sample research indicated that technology increased the exposure of people’s daily life in social networks and smart phones that take personal privacy away.

“Updating my status on Facebook® and Blackberry® make me feel involved in people’s life, although I feel it takes my privacy away since I cannot control who from my friends list can see my published status” (Youth 5).

The presence of a number of ICTs in people’s lives increases their dependence on these tools on a daily basis. Interviewees point out that they use various communication technologies during their day. The average number of hours they spend on computers and the Internet is five hours per day; five hours a day on cell phones, and two hours a day watching TV. The total number of hours that family members spend using different types of technologies is twelve hours per day. The research findings show that Saudi family members spend their free time reading, surfing the Internet, playing video games, watching TV, visiting, participating in sports activities, and socializing with friends.

Awareness about technologies’ effects on one’s life requires maintaining self-control, or sometimes requires the family’s intervention to impose control of their usage. Most of the research interviewees claim to control their own usage of technology. Some of the parents mentioned that they monitor their child’s use of technology. For example, some parents enforce restrictions on the use of technologies at night, during exams, usage duration during the day, or use it as a reward/punishment merit/tool for good or bad behavior, or performance at school. One interviewee does not allow technology in his child’s bedroom.

I used to use my laptop all the time, like literary twenty-four-seven ... Then Mom took my laptop for a month ... anything happens, my parents take the laptop ... They made me use it less ... Now I have control over myself, it took

me time to establish self control (Youth 3).

Because family members spend long periods of time using technologies, examining their impact on family relations is a prominent aspect. Some technologies such as television, chats, emails, and video games help to bring family members together. However, the majority of my research sample reported that technologies distract, isolate, and individualized family members. Conversations and family dialogue have expanded to include texting.

“They don’t communicate with each other much, in the bedroom or the living room everyone is using his/her own laptop or cell phone ... we rarely gather and watch a movie together” (Parent 1).

One way in which family members communicate about technologies is by seeking assistance to understand how some technologies function. Ten participants in the research seek help from family members regarding technology. Some of the youth declared that explaining technology to older people requires patience and a lot of simplification. Older people forget instruction easy and some are apathetic toward technology.

The rapid diffusion of cell phone use in Saudi Arabia varies with the length of cell phone ownership among family members. The average number of years this research sample has owned a cell phone is 10 years. Nevertheless, all youth obtained a cell phone during their early teenage years. The initial reason for getting a cell phone is to be accessible to family; but for some interviewees it is to chase technology and to showoff and increase their social status amongst friends.

I wanted it, I needed it, all my friends at school had cell phones, and I have to have one too. Mom made many restrictions that I agreed on. Mom’s rules were to not to talk to guys, use it only on weekends, and she used to take it at night (Youth 2).

Cell phone usage differs based on age, profession, and needs. Interviews reveal that

cell phone uses among Saudi people is generally: reassurance about family, chatting with friends and family, making business related phone calls, directing and managing home remotely, contact drivers, solve problems, getting direction, following up, asking for commodities on the way home, sending/receiving instant messages, searching online, making services such as paying bills, whereabouts updates, checking on people, and chatting through messengers. On the other hand, many rely on cell phone accessories such as alarm, camera, memo-pad, clock, organizer, calendar, calculator, games, and address book. In fact, the majority of interviewees are heavily dependent on the address book. They rarely memorize new numbers. Only few interviewees remember the phone number of their immediate family numbers.

More than half of the participants stated that they feel attached to their cell phone. It is a part of people's daily life that is linked to family, work, and social life. It has to be available all the time. Other people expect to reach the person and there is no excuse for not being reachable. One interviewee mentioned that it is no problem to go out for a couple of hours without her cell phone, but if she stays out for longer periods of time, she will make sure she has it with her. More than half of the interviewees mentioned that the cell phone is too personal and that they would not allow anyone to explore the contents of their phones. Others believe that it is a device that should not contain private information, but would prefer to be present when others examine their cell phone.

Because I believe it is my own private thing and I am responsible for any abusive use of my phone, I do not allow others to use it... I have private stuff such as family pictures that I do not want anyone to see. If it got lost or I have an accident, people should not explore my phone. I should limit private things.

(Youth 4)

Almost all of the research sample participants mentioned that they make and receive

phone calls in front of their family unless the call requires quiet surroundings. Only one interviewee mentioned that it is rude to make phone calls in front of his parents and if it is an important call, he will leave the room to make it. All respondents make and receive business related calls when at home and also take personal calls when at work. One interviewee stated that she turns off her cell phone at 10 PM to stop receiving work related calls.

More than half of the respondents indicated that they never had to lie to their family about their cell phone usage. However, four participants mentioned that they would provide false information to avoid family worries. Most youth understand the importance of being reachable to their family especially when they are outside the house. One of the interviewees stated that her son provides her with his friends' cell phone numbers when his phone is out of service or is in roaming mode.

The majority of participants declared that they exchange text or email messages with their family members, but exchange even more with friends. The content of these messages vary from jokes, religious quotes, information/updates, explanations when not picking up, good wishes, "cheer up" or other emotional expressions. Short Message Service (SMS) message are short, fast, and inexpensive.

"I call my brothers on their cell phone. They are still young. I don't trust they will see text messages" (Youth 2).

The cell phone has also increased caller's anxiety due to unanswered calls. One respondent mentioned that she sees her students who do not have cell phone are less stressed out than the ones who keep on checking on their phone all the time. People without cell phones stick to their word, and expect the same from others. To them, a change of plans is unacceptable. They hold people who do not own cell phones to the same standards of reliability and ability to respond instantly as their cell phone-owning counterparts.

My worry increases when they do not pick up [the call] unless I know where

they are. My kids are still young and they do not drive. I have to reach them in order to send the driver to pick them up (Parent 1).

Some behaviors regarding cell phone usage create suspicion among family members. For example, long late night calls, speaking in a foreign language, leaving the room to answer a call, clamming not being able to talk at the moment, making calls in an isolated room, avoiding declaring the identity of callers, holding the phone in a weird way, and covering the phone while speaking in a low tone make others think that a person is talking about them, having affairs, or hiding something.

When he talks in a low voice and says he's not able to talk at the moment, leaves the room, or does not pick up calls in front of us. ... I know it could be a business call, but I don't know ... I feel it is another woman (Parent 2).

"This girl was standing by the window and had her phone positioned towards us, I was worried she was taking photos of my friends and I" (Youth 6).

Interviewees expressed that their families, in particular mothers, tend to track them via cell phone. Most patrolling calls are made when someone is late, sick, on a road trip, or away for a longtime in a remote location. Seven interviewees declared that going out with their cell phone increased their feeling of safety, especially when going to new places, or travelling; it enables reaching help when in emergencies such as a broken car or in accidents.

Nine of the participants in the research think that their cell phone does not play a role in strengthening their family relations. It helped in being connected with friends and far away relatives much more than with their direct family. In addition, it enabled simple and more frequent communication on the spot, but that did not foster relationships. In fact, people used to visit each other, but with cell phones, once strong relations have become weaker. The other three interviewees indicated that their cell phone helped strengthen family relations because it made individuals accessible and connected. They also believed that cell phones allow family

to stay in touch all the time, especially when travelling. Family members would communicate with each other for news updates, cheering up, complaining or venting, seeking advice, or just chatting.

The cell phone has become broadly used and has minimized the need for face-to-face meetings. More than half of the interviewees stated that they express their emotions face-to-face better than on phone calls or via SMS. Few of them mentioned that there is no difference between phone and face-to-face. However, some declared that it is easier for them to express negative emotions because it allows them to relay them distantly and isolated from the receiving party's reaction. A text message allows typing and editing expressive messages in a nicer format.

“I usually prefer face-to-face because it is better, but in some situations such as confrontation with friends I'd rather take phone calls” (Youth 1).

According to more than half of the research interviewees, the cell phone has reduced social visits. Calling people has been accepted and is considered enough. One of the interviewees stated that the bigger and the more crowded the city has become, the less motivated people are to visit, so calling is becoming satisfying enough. However, visiting old, sick, and immediate close relatives is still very important. Another participant mentioned that the growing number of family member makes him visit only important people. He meets the rest of the people in big gatherings such as Eid.

“Calling to say hello has become enough. People are busy and visiting regularly makes people feel uneasy. Placing regular calls to check on people and catch up on news is enough” (Parent 1).

Four interviewees mentioned that the cell phone does not affect social visitations. One mentioned that she tries to visit when she has time because she prefers social interaction and that visiting family is mandatory. Another interviewee said that their cell phone increased

social interactions and visitations because it facilitated communications in making more arrangements for going out.

“No cell phone in fact made me in more touch with people; I talk to some people every day. I don’t visit them every day, but we talk to each other very often” (Youth 4).

SMS or text messages have caused a revolution in cell phone communications. The great majority of interviewees send texts on social occasions such as Eid, Ramadan, and Fridays. SMS is a convenient, fast, and affordable way to greet a large number of people with the least effort. In fact, the public perception is considers sending SMS enough for friends and business related people, but it did not replace phone calls or visits. Visits are more appreciated and visiting closer people and family members shows respect and is never compensated by SMS or calls. Extended families usually gather in occasions that limited visitation to old people, who are not always present in such gatherings.

It is annoying how we are dealing with letters and texts, I was able to know people more when we used to meet more. Work has caused drifting in people’s lives and changed their time frame, that exchanging messages has become appreciated (Parent 1).

However, more than half of interviewees said that they would congratulate for weddings and newborn babies through SMS, but will supplement additionally with a call. And, if the occasion is in the same town, attending the event becomes an obligation. People would care to meet and gather with people they are close to. Sending messages is considered cold and rigid, it does not convey feelings, but it brings down the duty and the least a person can do for social duties.

“Calling is more polite. If I am not in the same town, I want him to hear happiness in my voice since he cannot see it on my face” (Youth 5).

All interviewees agreed that consolation should never be through SMS. In person presence to give solace to the family of the dead is very important during the three days of condolence. Not being available in town will enforce calling for showing consolation during these three days, but also it is still mandatory to be present in person when being available in town.

Some workplaces and schools impose rules on cell phone use. Findings show that all work places do not impose any rules and regulations regarding the usage of cell phone. However, it is not courteous to receive calls while with people at work. One interviewee mentioned that in some meeting rooms, cell phones are not allowed because of information security reasons. Schools impose strict rules for cell phone usage and students are not allowed to receive and make calls in classrooms. Some teachers force students to keep their cell phones shut off and out away or they will confiscate, keep the phone, and report it. During exams, cell phones should be kept in bags outside the exam rooms. On the other hand, many students reported that they send text messages during boring classes; and all of them have declared that they have cheated at least once through their cell phone. Only one of them was caught.

Although cell phones have been used in a constructive way, some of the participants in the research indicate that they have misused cell phones. Misuse of cell phones could be by calling random numbers, chasing girls, and coordinating dates. One participant mentioned that she had contributed to the misuse of other's cell phones and will not use her own because it is her personal number and that she does not want to be bothered.

Smart phones have been the recent trend in personal communication technologies. Eight of the twelve people in the research sample have Blackberry® phones and two other respondents indicated that all their children have Blackberries. The friends of almost all of the youth participating in the research have Blackberries® and also enjoy broadcasting jokes,

news, or plans to gather people together, chat regularly, and learn about their friends' news status updates. One interviewee mentioned that he tries to convince others to buy Blackberries® so he gives his phone to anyone to explore its features. Some respondents mentioned that it introduced them to some new extended family members and helped establish relationships. Texting on Blackberries® reduced calls. Almost all Blackberry® users keep on checking their Blackberry® Messenger (BBM) application every now and then. Only two Blackberry® users said that they check it only at night or every two days.

“I was able to convince six people to get Blackberries® ... I pressured my friends to get it” (Youth 3).

“BBM enabled me to chat with my brother who is studying overseas all the time, anywhere I go and for free” (Youth 6).

Most Blackberry® users pointed out that it is addictive and distracting and that some switch it off or keep it silent when they do not want to be distracted. Only one interviewee stated that she is not a Blackberry® fan because she thinks that chat should be for a specific time only. It bothers her when people chat together on the Blackberry® when they are in the same room.

Instant messaging on the Blackberry® has influenced verbal conversation such as using abbreviated words and terms in face-to-face conversations. It has also increased the generation gap because youth prefer to talk through devices, they become friends with machines and they shy away from reality (Parent 1).

The cost of cell phone usage per minute has dramatically decreased after the entrance of competitors to the Saudi telecom market. Cell phone bills depend on the person's usage of the device. The average cell phone bill for all respondents is SR 550 (\$146 U.S.). Only one of the youths pays only SR 30 (\$8 U.S.) for Blackberry® services, whereas the rest of students participating in this research sample depend on their fathers to pay their bills. None of the

interviewees investigated the bill's details unless it is above the regular amount. Parent five mentioned that cell phones doubled the expenditure on telecom as every member in his family has his/her own cell phone, which is an additional financial burden.

The collection of data in the in-depth interviews created rich material for analyzing technologies and cell phone influence on the Saudi people. This data has allowed for a deeper exploration and examination between the differences and similarities of personal perceptions of technologies and cell phone usages, benefits and risks; and their implications on the Saudi family and society.

### **Discussion**

The analysis of data collected in this research reveals that the cell phone and other communication technologies have both positive and negative impact on people in Saudi Arabia. According to the research findings, the advantages of technologies are limited to the specific uses of technology that fulfill individuals' needs. Whereas the disadvantages of these technologies have an effect not only on individuals, but also widely affects the family and the society. Technologies such as laptops and cell phones that only require a single user in a single room to interact with other people in other places, prevents the interaction with the people physically present in the same room as the cell phone or laptop user (Lueck, 1998). This is commonly reported in the research findings and is described as isolation that causes limitations of real interaction. Salawi (2007) mentioned that cell phone calls break off actual face-to-face conversations and meetings and cause individuals to converse with others virtually. This created a private world for individuals that isolate them from his/her physical surroundings (Salawi, 2007). Because these devices create the ability for privacy in personal communications with other people, a person could spend much of his/her time using these technologies without noticing that they are neglecting their personal relationships with those in their direct households and those who reside in their actual physical reality. Having control

over the usage of technology helps to limit this effect on youth, however it fails to implement control on cell phone and BlackBerry®, this emphasizes Jawda's theory that cell phones enable young individuals to have private relations via cell phone without their family's awareness (2008).

The research reveals that people spend a great deal of their daytime utilizing different communication technologies whether watching T.V, using computers, or on their cell phone. This affirms Lim and Tan's theory that technology takes that family members do not interact with each other as much with technology's presence (2004). The relatively high number of hours consumed with the use of these technologies has an impact on the family interpersonal relation between people.

### **Effects on Family Relations**

The introduction of the cell phone has effected how the Saudi family communicates. The research found that adult individuals tend to communicate on a daily basis with their mothers via cell phone. Parents tend to call their children several times a day based on their needs or for reassurance. The difference between the two types of communication is that the first situation conveys respect and concern; while the second situation reflects the daily monitoring that is needed for upbringing.

Jawda (2008) stated that the cell phone enabled youth to communicate more with their family. In fact, the cell phone played a role in creating a stable reach and constant communication between parents and their children. This communication increased positive personal feelings of demonstrating parents' obedience, especially for a married son who lives in a separate home. It helps parents to be content and satisfied because of their son's constant contact. Before cell phones, sons used to visit their parents shortly on a daily basis. Whereas, with cell phones constant calls keep both parties informed and updated. Actual visits happen only when needed and on a regular weekly basis. Despite the reduction of visiting, cell phone

communication maintains the connection and the ability to reach each other anytime and be present when needed.

On the other hand, cell phones have helped Saudi parents to delegate some responsibilities to unmarried youth who still live with their parents. The cell phone has been used in distributing responsibilities and monitoring family members inside and outside the house (Sawhney & Gomes, 2000; Palen & Hughes, 2007). Parents are able to reach their sons when they are not home in order to retrieve something on their way home, or to do work for the home, such as paying bills or picking up laundry while they are outside. Parents are able to reach all the youth who are not at home and ask whichever child is not busy take the responsibility. In addition, when parents are not at home, they can reach their children at home and ask them to execute chores around the house. Some of these responsibilities were not part of the children's lives before the cell phone.

The cell phone has also played a role in increasing feelings of reassurance amongst family members and loved ones (Salawi, 2007) Calls between family members tend to increase when one is not at home with their parents or children. Contentment and knowing the whereabouts releases concerns about the ones that are not present. Parents call their children to make sure they are all right when they go with new friends or go to new places. Children also call their parents to reassure them and inform them of their updated news (Toda, and Ezoë, 2008). The high concern for their children's whereabouts fades away when parents are able to reach their children and are reassured of their safety. Reassurance calls take place mostly when travelling on road trips. However, having bad network coverage or having a dead battery may accelerate worries and can lead to parents worrying. The secure feeling brought on by the ability to reach family members at any time turns to anxiety when channels of communication are temporarily disabled.

### **Effects on Social Relations**

The cell phone, like many other communication technologies, is a single user device that has been widely used among various social and age groups in the Saudi society. The extensive use of the cell phone promoted an individualistic culture among cell phone users not only at home but everywhere (Sawhney, and Gomes, 2000). For example, while waiting for an appointment, people used to talk together in the waiting area, but this dramatically changed with the advent of the cell phone. More people play games, talk on the phone, or just check their cell phone. This culture also exists at home when family members gather, some members focus on their cell phone either playing games, texting, or simply talking. This culture increases one's self-isolation with devices despite the fact that they probably communicate with other people virtually (Lueck, 1998). The Blackberry® has increased such habits, since Blackberry® users tend to use them all the time. It isolates people from their real surroundings and increases their virtual presence on the Blackberry Messenger (BBM).

The simple use of cell phones has encouraged people to interact with each other more over the phone rather than in person. In fact, cell phone use has introduced a new notion of calling before visiting that did not exist before in the Saudi culture. It actually reflects practicality and courtesy, but also reduced the spontaneous visitations that were very essential in the Saudi social life and increased arranged visits. Many Saudi people expect people to visit during the period after lunchtime until evening. Coffee and dates are always prepared on a daily basis for the household and for visitors. Nowadays, people expect others to call before visiting for two reasons: first, for the visitor to make sure that people are at home, and second, for the people at home to be prepared for visitors. Arranged visits make people have additional catering and preparation and make visitors expect certain hosting service. Thus, the simplicity of spontaneous visitation has been reduced. Some would argue that the cell phone enabled people to call from anywhere to make sure that others are at home and that they

could visit spontaneously. In addition, the increased number of working mothers and the busy lifestyle that has been adopted by Saudi people have also discouraged people from visiting each other as much as phone calls suffice. However, neither the cell phone nor any other factors have minimized the regular spontaneous visitation of immediate family members that is commonly expected and accepted without previous notice or call. Such family visits do not usually hold formality.

In fact, SMS has helped maintain social relations with friends and far acquaintances (Salawi, 2007), by sending texts for updated news and on occasions such as Eid, Ramadan, or New Year. For example, a female who just gives birth would send SMS messages to her close friends to inform them about her new born, and many of these informative SMS are forwarded to others. Simplicity, speed, and the low expense of text messages encourage people to keep in touch with a large number of people on a regular basis (Salawi, 2007). People find it acceptable and a convenient way to maintain relations and it improves relationship appreciation. Exchanging SMS during pleasant events has been acceptable and is the least of what a person can do to keep in touch with other people. However, Saudi people find it unacceptable to use SMS during unpleasant life experiences such as in the case of severe health problems or in the death of a family member, when a person's presence is mandatory. Alternatively, an actual phone call would be acceptable if a person is not in town. In fact, during hard times, inappropriate communication would be interpreted and framed as disrespect or carelessness.

### **Effects on Youth**

Most Saudi youth are brought up in an environment that incorporates multiple communication technologies. Youth take technology for granted and it has become an essential part of their lives. It has dramatically influenced their life in many different ways. Saudi youth feel the need for obtaining cell phones, as it has become an important device that

complements their needs and assigns their social status (Jawda, 2008). Peer pressure is one of the catalysts that leads to children demanding that their parents get them a cell phone. As the number of cell phone users has increased, youth in Saudi Arabia enjoy communicating with their friends through cell phone usage on a regular basis, and they have stopped using landlines, despite that they are less costly than cell phones. The extensive use of cell phones is explained as parents do not usually inquire about or question their children's cell phone bills and those bills are an additional financial burden on the family's expenses (Ashri, 2008). The cell phone is an accessory that young people believe is important for their prestige among their friends, and parents provide it and facilitate it for them.

As young Saudis are used to communicating with others through texting media, their abilities to express themselves in person has been affected. Texting enables people to rephrase, amend, or rewrite their messages before sending them. This way a person can formulate a message in the best possible way. This feature increased texting popularity among young people, that they do most of their communication through texting via SMS, Blackberry Messenger, or many other messaging services. Expressing one's self in writing is an excellent skill that people need to learn for school and for work. However, face-to-face verbal communication is much more effective and persuasive. This skill is fading away with the broad use of texting among youth. This raises red flags for the next generation's abilities for expression.

The lack of guidance for cell phone usage among young people in Saudi Arabia leads to inappropriate use of the device (Jawda, 2008). Since the cell phone is a small, light, and easily used device, young people take it everywhere and misuse it in different ways such as calling random numbers, chasing the opposite sex, and passing cell phone numbers for courtship. Such acts were common by youth in Saudi Arabia before the introduction of cell phone; however, the cell phone has increased these behaviors as it has become easy to obtain

a cell phone and even multiple phone numbers. Initiating courtships through cell phones is not an acceptable behavior in Saudi society. According to the conservative Saudi society, opposite-sexes should be introduced to each other through limited channels as acknowledged by families.

Additionally, the cell phone has furthered cheating on exams in schools and universities amongst youngsters. Despite the rules and regulations that schools have for cell phone usage, youth still break rules and find ways to get away with it. Using cell phones during classes has become very common during boring classes (Jawda, 2008). Texting during class time distracts students as some students exchange text messages while they are in the same classroom. Although this behavior shows disrespect and is not acceptable, many students text in ways that the instructor would not notice.

The principal limitation of this study is the small sample size, yet the findings pinpointed different perspectives that are worth further research with a wider research sample. This may include married sons and daughters that live by themselves, and grandparents who use their cell phone in limited range. It may also include the way in which Saudi families depend on the cell phone or other technologies in communicating with their children studying overseas, and may include the way role of cell phone in the workplace. These further studies would help supplementing the proposed research on cell phone effects on the Saudi family and society.

### **Conclusion**

This study reveals some of the effects of technologies and cell phones on three levels as observed by Saudis. First, at the family level, the cell phone has helped promote mutual positive feelings about obedience to one's parents, distributing home responsibilities between household members, and granting reassuring feelings about family members' whereabouts when away. In contrast, at the social level it has created additional social isolation and

promoted individualism as it fosters a personal relationship with the device. It also limits social visitation among extended relationships. On the other hand, SMS contributed in retaining and maintaining distant relationships. The third level at which cell phone have influenced is youth is that youngsters consider the cell phone an essential device that complements their social status. They mostly communicate through cell phone usage and have almost stopped using landlines; especially with the Blackberry® that has become a trend because of its text message capabilities. Young people who have been born and raised in the era of technology are used to expressing themselves behind the barrier of typing or calls more so than face-to-face. This has sharply affected their language, social, and expression skills. In addition, the lack of awareness about the cell phone's consequences has lead to its misuse that is unacceptable to the educational and social culture.

The Saudi family must be aware of the negative implications of cell phone use especially among youngsters and the way in which it effects the relations within the household such as social isolation. Educational and community institutions should keep observing the continuous changes that stem from technology use in Saudi society in order to be able to examine issues and propose solutions to problems as they appear. These institutions should hold informative public seminars to raise public awareness about the negative effects technology has on Saudi society and the ways in which people can limit its impact. Change happens gradually in ways that people hardly notice, and policy makers should take social changes due to technology into consideration in order to locate problems, assess the situation, and create policies that limit the negative impact before they can accelerate and be hard to control.

Further research on ICTs effects on Saudi people, such as the impact of television, Internet, and electronic social networks is crucial in order to study the way in which Saudi families interact via these media. In addition, observing the gradual change in ethics, morals

and behaviors that individuals can hardly notice; of which some of the negative changes that Saudis encounter may threaten the structure of morality and require immediate address and treatment.

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