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Fatwa and the internet: a study of the influence of Muslim religious scholars on internet diffusion in Saudi Arabia

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This study uses diffusion of innovations theory to examine the influence of Muslim religious scholars on internet diffusion in Saudi Arabia. It applies content analysis to the fatwa, the religious edicts that Muslim religious scholars issue, to explore fatwa decisions relating to the internet since its launch in Saudi Arabia in 1999. There are 34 fatwa in total, 11 with approving decisions, 11 with disapproving ones, and 12 with conditionally approving decisions. Those who issue approving fatwa argue that it helps to spread the word of Allah and that if Muslims do not exploit the opportunities provided by the internet, then non-Muslims and non-believers will use it for evil. To explain their disapproving fatwa, other scholars argue that the internet corrupts people. The study discusses the impact of religion and religious scholars on the dissemination of communication technologies in Saudi society. It also predicts a pattern of opinions that scholars may be expected to adopt on the introduction of any new communication technology that is culturally controversial.

Introduction

The literature that examines the intersection between religion and the diffusion of innovations is scant. A research study relating to this topic is important when dealing with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the custodian of Islam's holiest shrines, Mecca and Medina, where Islam 'determines the Arabs' conscious and unconscious reaction to their world' (Almaney and Alwan, 1982, p.35). Religious scholars in Saudi Arabia play an influential role in the Kingdom. Their influence stems from their historical alliance with the Al Saud royal family and from their ability to issue fatwa, religious edicts which guide Muslims in their actions and behavior. These fatwa may hinder or facilitate the adoption of innovation. Azam *et al.* (2011) find that religiosity affects the diffusion process as people obey the religious instructions and *prohibitions*.

During the early stages of large-scale diffusion of new media technologies that brought about the transformation of Saudi society, the overall pattern of attitudes manifested by religious scholars was conservative, negative, and rejectionist. Religious scholars have been very critical of the diffusion of culturally controversial communication technologies that introduce new and foreign ideas to society. Many Saudi religious scholars have been suspicious of the internet. They 'have frequently denounced the internet as a mode of Western cultural imperialism that will eventually transport negative values to the Saudi society' (Al-Shohaib *et al*., 2009, p.22).

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The present study provides an insight into why opposition to diffusion occurs. Another pattern of attitudes conditionally approves these technologies (Boyd, 1999). In a third stance, during recent years some Saudi religious scholars have embraced new communication technologies for spreading the word of Allah (Schanzer and Miller, 2012). Schanzer and Miller (2012, p.62) mention that new communication technologies in the Arab world are becoming 'the clerics' preferred outlets …. This phenomenon contradicts the religious establishment's historical opposition to 'corrupting' modern technology'.

This study has several objectives. First, it applies content analysis to fatwa that Saudi religious scholars have issued relating to the internet since 1999. Analyzing fatwa makes it possible to explore the patterns of attitudes of the scholars toward the internet since its inception. The fatwa are explored over time to see if they change. Second, this study looks at the rhetoric, justifications, and reasons that the scholars provide in order to explain their fatwa decisions. This study then discusses the findings in relation to the impact of Islam and religious scholars on the diffusion of innovation in Saudi Arabia. Finally, it identifies a pattern that the religious scholars may adopt in the future if and when a new, culturally-controversial communication technology emerges in Saudi society.

The following paragraphs provide background information about Saudi Arabia, its people, and location. This paper then discusses the pillars of Islam, Sharia (Islamic rule), and the importance of Islam in the lives of Muslims. Next, it examines the role of religious scholars as opinion leaders in Saudi society and their probable role in facilitating or impeding the diffusion of innovation through fatwa. This role is discussed in the light of some historical and recent accounts of their attitudes toward modern communication technologies. The paper then defines fatwa and the main factors influencing the issue of different sorts of internet fatwa. Factors include perceptions of religious scholars of the internet, type of use of the internet, and time of fatwa issuance. The discussion section presents a pattern of opinions that scholars may adopt on the introduction of new, culturally-controversial communication technologies.

Literature review

Saudi Arabia, Islam, and Saudi Muslim religious scholars

Rogers (2003) sees the diffusion of innovation as the perspective that examines how and why innovations spread in a society through various communication channels within a given timeframe. Peres *et al.* (2010) discuss the diffusion of new technologies as 'the process of the market penetration of new products and services that is driven by social influences, which include all interdependencies among consumers that affect various market players with or without their explicit knowledge'. Eveland (1986) argues that 'Technology is information, and exists only to the degree that people can put it into practice and use it to achieve value'. Researchers basically agree on the main concepts driving this theory, such as the importance of the social setting, the innovation's attributes, the timeframe of the diffusion, and channels of communication used to convince others to adopt.

The social setting and culture form the milieu where diffusion processes occur. Researchers such as Ormrod (1990) suggest that successful diffusion is linked to the suitability of the innovation in relation to social and cultural variables, such as values, language, religion, habits, and so on. Sommers and Napier (1993) find that the

cultural beliefs of the Amish toward land and soil affect their adoption of sustainable agricultural habits. Rogers (2003) argues that social norms play an influential role in the diffusion of innovation.

Saudi Arabia is the social setting for this study. Saudi Arabia is an Arab and Muslim country with a conservative culture. The political system in the Kingdom is a monarchy led by the Al Saud royal family. The country is the largest in the Arabian Peninsula and is bordered by the Arabian Gulf in the east, the Red Sea in the west, and by eight other Arab countries. The country is the world's largest oil and gas producer and possesses about 20% of the world's oil reserves, the single largest national oil reserve. The estimated population of the country is 26 million. All Saudi nationals are Muslims (Central Intelligence Agency, 2012).

The Kingdom is the homeland of Islam, where approximately 1400 years ago the Prophet Muhammad started to spread Islam. Sharia (Islamic rule) is the major source of many laws in the country, including the laws relating to adultery, libel and intoxication, marriage, divorce, and inheritance. Islamic laws stem from the Koran, Sunnah, and Ijtehad. The Koran is the word of Allah to the Prophet Muhammad and consists of instructions about rules for society, the economy, war, politics, and so on. The Sunnah contains the deeds of the Prophet and sayings to his companions who asked him for further clarification on various issues that the Koran did not elucidate. The Ijtehad consists of the fatwa or opinions of Muslim clerics about new occurrences. These opinions are based on their understanding of the Koran and Sunnah.

Samovar *et al.* (2013) argue that religion influences the latent aspects of any culture, including attitudes and world views, and determines many social and business manners. In their examination of the role of Islam in the lives of Muslims, Al-Kandari and Gaither (2011, p.271) write:

> The words of Allah and Muhammad, without exaggeration, perhaps represent, for Muslim Arabs, the most trusted and credible sources on earth for information and the interpretation of historical and even future events. Arabs probably will rank whatever Allah and Muhammad say as more trustworthy than whatever parents, friends, sheiks, media or others would say.

Nydell (2005, p.81) argues that, 'Religious affiliation is essential for every person in Arab society. There is no place for an atheist or an agnostic'. It is hardly surprising that Islam and Islamic outlooks play a dominant role in the diffusion of innovation in such a religiously conservative country as Saudi Arabia.

Opinion leaders have an influential role in persuading followers to adopt innovation because they are respected, are role models for followers, have extended social connections, and are more aware of issues and details than followers (Watts and Dodds, 2007). Rogers (2003) states that opinion leaders have the greatest impact on followers at the evaluation stage of the innovation decision process. Before adopting an innovation, followers seek the opinions of leaders. Similarly, religious figures enjoy high status in Arab societies and are highly revered by almost all Muslims. The Koran says, 'You believers, listen to Allah, listen to his Prophet, and your leaders'. Religious interpretations say that 'leaders' are political rulers as well as religious figures and establishments. The Prophet Muhammad himself said, 'Religious scholars are the inheritors of the Prophets'. The influence of these scholars also comes from acting as role models for a truly Muslim personality. They represent a credible source of Islamic teachings and knowledge; they speak on behalf of Allah

on earth and convey religious instructions using verses from the Koran and the Prophet Muhammad's sayings. Accordingly, Muslim clerics are considered opinion leaders who can accelerate or decelerate the diffusion of innovation.

Many Muslims obey religious figures because they provide fatwa, religious edicts. People usually enquire about events, actions, and behaviors and want to know what religion says about them. Sometimes these fatwa are issued by a group of Islamic experts and at other times religious scholars, individually, issue fatwa based on their Ijtehad. Accordingly, people ask religious scholars to tell them if what they are doing or want to do is religiously Haram (forbidden) or Halal (permissible). Fatwa provide guidance on what Allah accepts or rejects as an action. If the action is religiously Haram, a Muslim will probably refrain from doing it. When providing a fatwa of approval or disapproval, religious scholars give justification for their decision. This justification consists of quotes from the Koran, Sunnah or the Ijtehad of other religious scholars.

Describing the penetration of fatwa into Muslim cultures via satellite television and the internet, Echchaibi (2008, p.205) claims that Islam has turned into 'a hyper form of religiosity that seeks to turn every facet of social, cultural and economic life into a religious issue in need of a fatwa or decree'. He also states, 'The proliferation of fatwas in the Muslim world and in the diaspora is an unprecedented phenomenon in modern history'. Even though Muslims do not need fatwa all the time to know what is right or wrong, they do seek fatwa on new practices. The internet is a new innovation in society and many people may want fatwa to decide whether to adopt it. Also, being religiously more conservative is another reason for seeking fatwa. Usually very conservative people seek more instructions and fatwa on what to do.

Muslim religious scholars can influence internet adopters because they interact with Muslims in the form of a network of people sharing similar values and interests. Chaves (1996) finds that being part of a religious network increases adoption of the ordination of women. Clerics can influence the network of followers to reject the adoption of a technology or make them very suspicious of it. Rogers (2003, p.27) states that, 'Any system may have both innovative opinion leaders and also leaders who oppose change'. Meyer (2004) argues that the research on the role of opinion leaders has focused on their role as accelerators of the diffusion process. Haider and Kreps (2004) claim that opinion leaders can decelerate the pace of adoption if they convince people that an innovation has undesirable and negative consequences. A Muslim religious scholar can issue a fatwa arguing that the internet or its applications are religiously Haram because their content arouses Allah's fury.

Factors influencing the issuance of fatwa about the internet

Various factors influence religious scholars issuing fatwa that approve, disapprove or conditionally approve of the adoption of the internet and its various applications in Saudi Arabia. These factors include the religious scholars' perceptions of the internet, the way that people use the internet, and whether the fatwa is issued in the introductory stage of diffusion or later. The following review discusses these factors.

The perceptions of religious scholars of the internet. Five attributes of innovations promote adoption (Rogers, 2003). They are: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability. Most research on the diffusion of innovation

has been carried out in business-oriented Western countries, where relative advantage and economic factors have encouraged adoption. Objective, practical, and functional reasons are the main determinants of adoption in Western nations, while subjective, cultural, and religious factors are probably the crucial reasons for adoption in many Arab nations (Al-Shohaib *et al.*, 2009).

The compatibility attribute of the internet is relevant here. Rogers (2003) defines compatibility as 'the degree to which an innovation is perceived as being consistent with the existing values, past experiences, and needs of potential adopters'. Rogers relates the compatibility of an innovation to its rate of adoption. He states that if people perceive an innovation as compatible with their existing values and norms, it is more likely that the rate of its adoption will be faster. Conversely, he states that, 'An innovation's incompatibility with cultural values can block its adoption' (p.224). The English language was the dominant language on the internet, especially during the early 1990s, and this slowed the adoption of the internet in Saudi Arabia (Al-Lehaibi, 2001) and Kuwait (Al-Najran, 1998).

If it is perceived as culturally, socially, and religiously incompatible, internet adoption could be delayed or even stopped. From a Muslim religious viewpoint, the internet's incompatibility stems from internet contents, especially those that are pornographic, or relate to homosexuality, secularism or feminism. Internet content that discredits Allah, his Prophets, and Islamic laws and instructions is also distasteful to religious scholars. Saudi authorities censor some religiously and culturally incompatible internet contents. However, some individuals use proxy servers to access them (Human Rights Watch, 2012). If religious scholars see the Internet as incompatible with Islamic instructions, their fatwa will probably disapprove of internet adoption or approve it only conditionally. Censorship of culturally and religiously offensive contents by the authorities or by families may alleviate the concerns of scholars.

According to Rogers (2003, p.6), 'Diffusion is a kind of social change, defined as the process by which alteration occurs in the structure and function of a social system'. Barakat (1993) argues that conservative Muslim clerics have utilized Islam to legitimize the social and cultural arrangements to resist *bid'a* (inventiveness), and to preserve orthodox values and diminish any *fitna* (opposition to authorities). New ideas and innovations alter the dominant cultural and ideological atmosphere through which some clerics can subjugate individuals to their influence. Al-Kandari and Hasanen (2012) argue that the internet and social media are altering the Arab cultural context as they offer Arabs a wide spectrum of perspectives on such issues as secularism, liberalism, and feminism. They also allow people to compare their own lifestyle, behaviors, and norms with those of other cultures.

The authorities in the Middle East welcome the economic rewards from communication technologies but dread their cultural and political ramifications (Al-Obaidi and Covington, 2010). Many conservative Muslim thinkers believe that new communication technologies expose Arabs to Western and secular content that are incongruent with local cultural and religious principles and damage the morals of young Arabs and Muslims (Azzam, 2002). In a similar vein, Al-Kandari and Gaither (2011) argue that, in the Arab world, diffusion agents need to be careful about disseminating ideas of modernization and Westernization, such as democracy and human rights, because people perceive them as elements of Western cultural imperialism. Arabs want to adopt Western innovations and technologies for development and progress,

but want to minimize their cultural influence because Arabs believe they spoil the moral and religious standards of young people (Nydell, 2005).

Type of internet use. People use the internet for a range of purposes (LaRose and Eastin, 2004). Type of internet use certainly shapes the fatwa of religious scholars. If people use it to inform others about Islam, spread the word of Allah and make others learn about religion, then the fatwa are likely to be approving ones. This is apparent from the extensive employment of satellite television by Islamic organizations and entities. Nowadays, there are more than 50 free Islamic religious television networks available to Arab viewers (Al-Kandari, 2011). Bunt (2003) suggests that many Muslim clerics use the internet to propagate Islam and bring Muslims closer to their religion. Websites that provide religious content include video and audio of religious lectures, religious books, and audio recitations of the Koran. Many websites are especially devoted to fatwa.

On the other hand, Saudis can use the internet for communication with members of the opposite sex, something of which scholars do not approve because it conflicts with the teachings of Islam. Culturally, such relationships 'blacken the face' of the family and bring dishonor (Patai, 2007). Sharif and Al-Kandari (2010) claim that online bulletin boards enable females in the Arab Gulf region to communicate with males. They also reveal that these bulletin boards allow females to ask questions and address issues they do not feel comfortable asking or addressing in normal social surroundings. Also, the use of bulletin boards predicts that the user will endorse equal social gender roles in the Arab Gulf countries (Sharif and Al-Kandari, 2010).

Rogers (2003) categorizes the consequences of the adoption of innovation into desirable and undesirable, direct and indirect, anticipated and unanticipated. Wejnert (2002) provides two categories of consequences: private and public, and benefits and costs. Her private consequences involve small social units and individuals while her public consequences involve collective units, such as a nation, social movements, and large organizations. These public consequences affect the entire well being of a society and may bring change to the social structure. Benefits are usually financial, while costs, though difficult to measure, can be either monetary or social. The social conflict caused by adoption is an example of social cost. Religious scholars are assumed to concentrate on the costs of using the internet when they issue fatwa, thinking that the internet damages the conservative nature of Islamic Saudi Arabia.

Time of the issuance of fatwa. Within the framework of the diffusion of innovation, time refers to the period an innovation takes to diffuse in a social system. Time of adoption is generally assessed by the length of time required for a certain percentage of individuals in a social system to adopt an innovation. Rogers (2003) suggests that the diffusion of innovation assumes an 'S' shape. Innovation diffuses at a slow pace at the start, then takes off in the middle stage, and finally slows down again in the final stage, when the innovation has saturated the society. Rogers (2003) also links opinion leaders with the rate of adoption. Similarly, there is a correlation between the number of adopters or rate of penetration, and the number of fatwa, increasing in the same direction. Rogers also mentions that the S shape occurs once opinion

leaders inform others about the adoption. Accordingly, approving fatwa will accelerate internet diffusion in Saudi Arabia.

Boyd (1999) describes what happened when King Abdulaziz Al Saud wanted to introduce radio to Saudi Arabia in the 1940s. Because the King knew that scholars would reject its diffusion in the country, he asked an associate to broadcast Koran recitations. After hearing the recitations, the scholars approved radio because they said that the Koran would never come out of a satanic invention. Also, in 1963, religious scholars were angered when they heard women's voices on the radio, and to ease their rage, the government allocated extra religious television programs and imposed more restrictions on media broadcasting. These incidents, and the initial rejection by religious scholars of satellite television in Saudi Arabia (Boyd, 1999) suggest that the historical and initial attitude of scholars toward the introduction of a new communications technology, the internet, would be disapproving and would become even more rigid because of the controversial cultural nature of the internet and the limited role of the state in censoring its content.

In contrast to their historical opposition to new technology and media, religious figures are now using social media networks widely themselves to increase their access to people (Schanzer and Miller, 2012) and to 'fight evil' (Kraidy, 2006). According to Schanzer and Miller (2012, p.5): 'Radical ideas and strong xenophobic currents still exist', but 'The Saudi religious establishment is less overtly radical than in the past'. In the first stage of internet diffusion, many scholars might be expected to issue fatwa that disapprove of the internet because it is seen to affect the cultural and religious *status quo*. Generally, a fatwa is issued after a religious scholar hears about a problem or event from others. Fatwa are based on what others say and not on the scholar's personal experience of the problem or event. Therefore, scholars may reject the internet because of the exaggerations of conservative associates and followers. Over time, the fatwa will change because the worries of scholars about the negative influence of the internet may lessen. Once scholars observe the positive consequences of the internet, they start to accept its adoption. Accordingly, this study tries to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How many fatwa did Saudi religious scholars issue at different stages of internet diffusion? And what is the connection between the rate of internet diffusion and rate of issuing fatwa by Muslim religious scholars?
RQ2: What are the general patterns of internet fatwa decisions that Saudi religious scholars display at different internet diffusion time stages?
RQ3: What is the influence of the type of utilization/purpose of internet usage on fatwa decisions?
RQ4: What patterns of justifications, rhetoric, and reasons do scholars provide to validate their fatwa decisions?

Methodology

Meyer (2004) finds that research on the diffusion of innovation has been predominantly conducted using cross-sectional quantitative methods, such as questionnaires, where data are collected at a certain point in time. The present study uses a qualitative content analysis of fatwa to answer its research questions. Meyer discusses whether researchers can use archival records and secondary data to analyze the diffusion

process qualitatively. These fatwa are widely available on the internet, and even old fatwa are archived online. Meyer also suggests that the use of longitudinal panel studies that examine the diffusion at different points of time help in accounting for trends and changes in attitudes over time. For Meyer, this provides a better look at the process. Considering the advantages Meyer mentions, this study analyzes all the fatwa that Saudi religious scholars have issued since the inception of the internet in 1999 up to 2012. This makes it possible to examine the general patterns of attitudes of scholars and how time has affected them. Meyer (2004) also reports that the literature generally fails to examine why people reject innovation. Analyzing disapproving fatwa provides an insight into why innovations are rejected. This study analyzes the rhetoric, justifications, and reasons presented in fatwa, whatever their overall judgment.

To set an objective standard, the analysis takes into consideration only the fatwa of the 47 well-known Saudi religious scholars who appear on www.Islamway.net. This website includes Islamic lessons, Koran recitations, books, audio, and video. Many of the scholars are officials in the General Presidency of Scholarly Research and Ifta, the highest official religious authority in Saudi Arabia. According to the *Al Riyadh Saudi* newspaper, 'Islamway.net is one of the most popular Islamic websites on the internet which garners more than a million visitors a month [this was in 2001]' (Islamway.net, 2013). The website includes more than 100,000 fatwa and the search engine allows visitors to view fatwa of religious scholars from different countries. Readers of the Islamic lessons alone exceed 700 million and there are about 70 million readers of articles (Islamway.net, 2013).

Coding

This study codes the variety of internet uses. If people want to have fatwa on using the internet to disseminate information, pay money to create Islamic internet projects, and so on, the fatwa were coded 'internet specific usage'. Use was coded as 'business' if people asked for fatwa about opening an internet cafe, working in internet centers, and so on. 'Male–female interaction' use refers to contact over the internet across genders. Fatwa asking about obtaining more knowledge about religion were coded as 'learning about Islam'. Adopting the internet and using it in general and whether this is Haram or Halal was coded as 'internet general usage', and finally the 'propagation of Islam' category relates to using the internet to serve Islam or spread the word of Allah.

To code the nature of decision, approving, disapproving or conditionally approving fatwa, this study considers a fatwa to be approving if the scholar argues that people can adopt it without any concern. Disapproving fatwa are those where the scholar clearly rejects the internet. The third type of fatwa decision, conditionally approving fatwa, was coded as such if the scholar accepts the adoption, but mentions some requirements or conditions that must be implemented by internet users upon adoption.

Analysis

Even though the internet was introduced to Saudis in 1999, the first fatwa the religious scholars officially issued was in 2000. Analysis indicates that the total number of fatwa from 2000 to 2012 is 34. Fatwa issued in 2013 are not considered because this year was incomplete at the time of analysis. The breakdown over the years 2000–2012 is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Internet fatwa issued over time

Year	Number of internet fatwa
2000	2
2001	1
2002	1
2003	1
2004	1
2005	1
2006	2
2007	2
2008	4
2009	5
2010	7
2011	3
2012	4

Source: Internet World Stats (2012).

Table 2 presents a comparison of internet penetration in Saudi Arabia with the number of fatwa issued, and shows that the number of fatwa was limited when internet penetration was small at the initial stage. With the increase in internet penetration came an increase in people seeking fatwa. The table shows that in 2000 the number of users was 200,000 and there were just two fatwa. The number of fatwa was one per year between 2001 and 2005. The rate of internet penetration and fatwa both took off together from 2007. In 2010, the peak year in fatwa issuance, the number of fatwa was seven. The number of fatwa decreased to three in 2011 and four in 2012. The number of fatwa and the penetration rate both follow the S form, though this is more pronounced for internet penetration than for the number of fatwa over the years.

The analysis shows that people sought fatwa about a variety of internet issues. Table 3 reports figures on the number of fatwa at different stages and different types of internet use. The analysis reveals that fatwa about internet general usage are the most common at 24%. People asking about internet specific usage and the use of the internet for the propagation of Islam amount to 41% and 21% respectively. The analysis also shows that five of the seven fatwa for internet specific usage were issued between 2009 and 2012 and that fatwa on its use for the propagation of Islam extend across the whole period. Using the internet for business purposes accounts for 21% of fatwa and these were issued from 2005. Using the internet for male–female interaction generates just three fatwa, all of which were issued between 2006 and 2008. Finally, using the internet for learning purposes produces only two fatwa, both issued between 2010 and 2012. The literature suggests that disapproving fatwa will be the majority at the initial stage of internet diffusion, that conditionally approving ones will dominate during the middle stage, and more approving fatwa will appear in the last stage. Surprisingly, even though approving and conditionally approving fatwa increase in the last two stages, disapproving fatwa increase somewhat during the later years of diffusion, 2009–2010 (Table 3).

There are 11 approving fatwa (33%), 11 disapproving fatwa, and 12 conditionally approving fatwa (35%). All fatwa that ask about the use of the internet for the propagation of Islam and for learning purposes are approving fatwa. Fatwa asking about internet general usage are distributed across all types of fatwa: two are approving,

Table 2. Comparison of internet penetration in Saudi Arabia and fatwa over time

Year	Users in millions	Population in millions	Penetration (%)	Increase change (%)	Number of fatwa in years	Cumulative number of fatwa in years	Increase	Increase change
2000	0.2	21.6	0.9	0.9	(2000) 2	(2000) 2	(2000) 6%	(2000) 6%
2003	1.5	21.7	6.9	6	(2001–03) 3	(2001–03) 5	(2001–03) 15%	(2001—03) 9%
2005	2.5	23.6	10.8	3.9	(2004–05) 2	(2004–05) 7	(2004–05) 21%	(2004–05) 6%
2007	4.7	24.1	19.5	8.7	(2006–07) 4	(2006–07) 11	(2006–07) 32%	(2006–07) 11%
2009	7.7	28.7	27.1	7.6	(2008–09) 9	(2008–09) 20	(2008–09) 59%	(2008–09) 27%
2010	9.8	25.7	38.1	11	(2010) 7	(2010) 27	(2010) 79%	(10) 20%
2012	13	26.5	49.0	10.9	(2011–12) 7	(2011–12) 34 (100%)	(2011–12) 100%	(2011–12) 21%

Source: Internet World Stats (2012).

Table 3. Types of fatwa, years, and decisions

Date	Nature or type of internet utilization	Description of fatwa	Fatwa decision	Reason and justification of fatwa decision
2000	Specific usage	Sabotaging non-Muslim websites	Disapproving	It has undesirable consequences for Muslims in the future
2000	Specific usage	Pay money to Islamic Internet projects	Conditionally approving	Approved if to serve Islam
2001	Propagation	Use of modern technologies like the Internet to inform about Islam	Approving	To spread the word of Allah
2002	General usage	Internet general use	Approving	To serve and benefit humanity and Islam
2003	Propagation	Establishing Islamic sites	Approving	To serve Islam
2004	General usage	Internet general use	Approving	To serve the word of Allah and gain general knowledge
2005	Business	Working in internet related businesses	Conditionally approving	Approved if the work protects the society and disapproved if it spoils it
2006	Male–female interaction	Use the internet to create relationships with the other gender	Disapproving	Corrupts men and women
2006	General usage	Internet general use	Conditionally approving	Approved as long as it does not bring evil
2007	Male–female interaction	Male–female interaction	Conditionally approving	Only brief response to obtain knowledge otherwise not
2007	General usage	Internet general use	Conditionally approving	Approved only if it is used for knowledge and religion otherwise not
2008	Male–female interaction	To make an official marriage through a webcam	Conditionally approving	As long as it is not manipulated
2008	Propagation	Islamic online websites	Approving	To teach about Islam and its pilgrims
2008	Business	Internet as a business	Disapproving	It is religiously forbidden
2008	Business	Internet as a business	Conditionally approving	Depends on the nature of money it brings if Islam allows this money or not
2009	Business	Posting songs on a website	Disapproving	Listening to songs is religiously prohibited
2009	General usage	Internet and satellite TV use	Disapproving	These technologies bring evil
2009	Propagation	Internet use for religious Islamic purposes	Approving	To serve Islam
2009	Business	Internet cafés	Disapproving	They corrupt the youth
2009	General usage	Use of the Internet and new media communication technologies	Conditionally approving	Without regulations the Internet brings dangers to society

(*Continued*)

Table 3. (*Continued*).

Date	Nature or type of internet utilization	Description of fatwa	Fatwa decision	Reason and justification of fatwa decision
2010	Specific usage	Internet subscription	Conditionally approving	Permitted only if negativity can be avoided
2010	General usage	Internet use by family members	Disapproving	Cause tribulations in family
2010	Business	Internet cafés	Disapproving	They bring evil and content that Islam disapproves
2010	Learning	Surfing websites for education	Approving	Helps in obtaining knowledge
2010	Specific usage	Internet chatting and Twitter	Disapproving	They disseminate lies and slander
2010	Specific usage	Use wireless internet connection from neighbours	Disapproving	Private property
2010	Propagation	Establishing Islamic websites	Approving	Islamic sites serve Islam
2011	General usage	Internet general use	Conditionally approving	Approved except if it spreads immorality
2011	Propagation	Establishing websites to bring Muslims closer	Approving	To support Muslim brotherhood
2011	Propagation	Internet general use	Approving	To spread Islamic instructions
2012	Specific usage	Use of internet to disseminate information	Conditionally approving	Disapproved if to spread rumors
2012	Specific usage	Stealing financial information of non-Muslims	Disapproving	It creates abhorrence among people
2012	Business	Online purchasing using credit cards	Conditionally approving	Approved if the credit card is issued by an Islamic bank
2012	Learning	Internet surfing for religious knowledge	Approving	To learn about Islam

two disapproving, and four are conditionally approving fatwa. Neither the internet specific usage nor business and male–female interaction categories produce any approving fatwa. These utilizations either disapproved or conditionally approved (Table 4).

The approving fatwa, issued for the propagation of Islam and learning about Islam, included justifications and rhetoric in line with such purposes. The two main justifying categories were that the internet helped in informing about Islam and spreading the world of Allah, and the second was that Muslims need to exploit the internet as otherwise non-believers will take advantage of it for evil. For the first category, propagation of Islam, the scholars said the internet could serve Islam, spread the word of Allah, teach about Islamic instructions, inform Islamic pilgrims, and support the Muslim brotherhood. In this regard, Abdullah Al Jibreen, who issued an approving fatwa about internet general usage, said that scholars should not prohibit new technologies because they helped ‘humankind to use them in their life and

Table 4. Relationship between fatwa decisions and nature of internet utilization

Type of utilization	Approving	Conditionally approving	Disapproving	Total
Internet general usage	2 (25%)	4 (50%)	2 (25%)	8 (23.5%)
Specific internet usage	0 (0%)	3 (43%)	4 (57%)	7 (20.5%)
Propagation of Islam	7 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	7 (20.5%)
Business	0 (0%)	3 (43%)	4 (57%)	7 (20.5%)
Male-female interaction	0 (0%)	2 (67%)	1 (33%)	3 (10%)
Learning about Islam	2 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (5%)
Total	11 (32.5%)	12 (35%)	11 (32.5%)	34 (100%)

religion'. Khaled Al Musleh said that using Islamic websites did 'a great service through the propagation of Islam'. Mohammad Al Othaimeen said that he himself had established a website to post his fatwa and educate Muslims about their religion. He demanded that other people who established websites that included his personal fatwa should seek his permission before they posted them. Saad Al Sheshri further asked Muslims to use the internet to 'deliver messages to American officials regarding the bloodshed happening to Muslims in Burma' at the time.

For the second justification, that Muslims needed to exploit the internet because otherwise non-Muslims and non-believers would spread evil, Abdullah Al Jibreen, who issued an approving fatwa for the internet general usage, declared that it was:

> … not denied that some of the uses of the internet created evil and immorality and that it could be exploited by infidels to spread their propaganda and spread their false religion. Therefore, it is the responsibility of all Muslims to respond to them using this technology to show the truth and eliminate falsehood.

Al Jibreen also said that Muslims had to 'take advantage of this new technology to spread the truth about Allah and challenge those who use this new media to disseminate wickedness'. He concluded that 'Muslim scholars and Muslims in general need to benefit from this medium to publish articles and information to educate others'. Otherwise those who did not obey Allah would 'disseminate their ideas and deceive those who receive them'. Using the internet would 'minimize the damage'.

The rhetoric in disapproving fatwa decisions fell into two main categories: the corruption the internet brought, and features of the internet that Islam forbids, such as listening to music and contact between males and females. In the first category, the scholars believed that the internet corrupts men and women, disseminates slander, creates problems in families, and that such technology generally brought evil. Saleh Al Fawzan, who disapproves of having the internet and satellite television in homes, said they 'brought evil'. Abdulaziz Al Al-Sheikh, who also disapproved of Twitter and chat sites, insisted they included 'lies and slander' and that 'hypocrisy and dishonesty' were clear in the writings of many people. Abdullah Al Jibreen, who disapproved of internet cafés, proclaimed that it was:

> … the duty of the Internet café owners to maintain them clean from immorality and evil users. No doubt those internet cafés could be used in beneficial ways, but the evil they bring is greater because most of those who patronise them use them to view pornographic images and spread suspicion, and misleading and false information.

In his fatwa disapproving of interaction between males and females on the internet, Abdulkarim Khadir maintained that:

> … it is better for women not to communicate with men in the internet except if they want to discuss religious matters with trusted religious scholars. Internet chats between young men and women are the gates for evil and it is better that women do not fall into the traps of the devil.

The second category covers internet applications and features that are Haram in Islam. For example, Muhammad Al Munajjid, who disapproved of hosting songs on websites, declared 'it is not allowed to put songs because Muslims are prohibited from listening to songs … you are not allowed to hear or read something that is religiously forbidden or help others to do so'. Yousef Shubaily disapproved of using the unencrypted internet wireless service of neighbors without their permission because 'this is religiously forbidden because it is without permission'. Khalid Mushayqih, who disapproved of selling songs downloaded from the internet onto CDs, explained that 'an Islamic principle states that if God forbids something (songs), then its profits are also likely to be forbidden [and will bring] the wrath of Allah'.

Finally, the rhetoric of the conditionally approving fatwa usually approved the use of the internet and its applications but specified an adherence to conditions and requirements. There was one principal category for this condition, that the internet must not damage society. It was fine to use the internet, except if it brought evil, immorality or negativity.

Abdulrahman Al Barrak, who issued a conditionally approving fatwa on internet general usage, warned that the internet should be used carefully. The internet could be used:

> … for different purposes: good and evil … Those who seek goodness can find it in the internet and those who seek evil can also find it in it. Although the internet is one of the greatest means of communication that could spread knowledge and be used for the propagation of Islam, it also could be used to disseminate disbelief, polytheism, heresy, immorality, and falsehood.

Mohammad Al Othaimeen also felt that 'the internet is good and bad. It could be used for religion, knowledge, finding out about sciences, industry and so on and at the same time it has many evils'. Abdulrahman Al Mahmoud, who issued a conditionally approving fatwa about the salary of people working in internet centers, announced:

> If an internet center conducts religiously forbidden activities or businesses that the religion prohibits like listening to music or watching unsuitable pictures and videos, then the work must be left and if it conducts good activities that benefit the society like disseminating useful information, then there is nothing wrong with such kind of work.

On the matter of male–female interaction on the internet, Nasser Alomar felt that females should get 'involved in exchange with men only if it is very essential and brief. It should not be expanded to foreplay'. Abdulmohsen Al Abbad argued that the internet was fine if 'used by knowledgeable and skilled people who can differentiate the good from the bad and can get the benefits and leave the damage'. Muhammad Al-Munajjid approved of making profit from internet cafés as long as café customers 'can be controlled in the store and the owner is capable of preventing surfing unlawful

or religiously unacceptable activities. But if the owner is careless or cannot prevent costumers from accessing sinful sites, then the money he makes is Haram'.

Discussion and conclusion

This study highlights many important issues, including the influence of Islam and religious scholars on internet diffusion in Saudi Arabia. The study discusses future attitudes that Saudi religious scholars may adopt when new communication technology is introduced to Saudi society. Even though the internet was introduced to Saudis in 1999, the first fatwa was not issued until the following year. This is probably because few average Saudis, who are usually more religiously conservative than educated and affluent Saudis, had adopted the internet in its early years. According to Table 1, less than 1% of the population had adopted the internet before 2000.

The analysis reveals that the total number of internet fatwa is 34. The number of approving fatwa is 11, disapproving fatwa 11, and conditionally approving fatwa 12. Other fatwa have been issued elsewhere in the Muslim world, but our analysis was limited to those on www.Islamway.net. There are eight fatwa in the internet general usage category, 14 in the internet specific usage category, and seven concerned with the use of the internet for the propagation of Islam. Using the internet for business purposes produced seven fatwa, for male–female interaction three, and for learning about Islam just two. All fatwa that ask about the use of the internet for the propagation of Islam and for learning about Islam are considered approving fatwa. Fatwa asking about internet general usage are distributed across all types of fatwa decisions. Neither internet specific usage, nor the use of the internet for business and male–female interaction produces any approving fatwa.

The literature suggests there should be more disapproving fatwa in the initial stage of diffusion, that conditionally approving fatwa would increase in the middle stage, and that approving fatwa would dominate the last stage. Our analysis shows that approving and conditionally approving fatwa increase in the last two stages but – unexpectedly – disapproving fatwa also increase in the later years of internet penetration in Saudi Arabia. A possible explanation is that type of fatwa is more important than time in determining fatwa decisions. The fatwa are approving when the use of the internet is for the propagation of Islam or learning about Islam. Another possible explanation is that increase in internet penetration rate causes an increase in the number of fatwa that scholars issue, which in turn provokes more disapproving fatwa. Congruent with the expectations of Rogers (2003), this study finds that both internet diffusion and the number of issued fatwa follow the S form. They both diffuse slowly, and then the pace of diffusion takes off in the middle stage. The number of fatwa has decreased in recent years, probably because of the social saturation of the internet and because there are many previous fatwa that can be used as a reference and therefore people do not need to seek new fatwa.

Overall, Saudi religious scholars have been conservative, negative, and rejectionist, at best conditionally approving in their approach to communication technologies (Boyd, 1999). Religious scholars often see the internet as a form of Western cultural imperialism (Al-Shohaib *et al.*, 2009). Abdullah Al Jibreen recalls particularly rejectionist attitudes:

> The general public has always believed that new media technologies are forbidden by Islam … It has been popularly known that Muslim religious scholars seventy years ago

> condemned the introduction of radio believing it was a witchcraft inspired by the Satan. They prohibited its usage probably due to their ignorance of its facts. Later, others still condemned it because its usage included airing songs and other immoral programs. But when Islamic programs were aired, it was easy to accept it except for the songs. Also, many religious figures denied using microphones and sound systems in mosques and also television in later years.

Our study finds attitudinal patterns to be almost equally divided. One section of scholars issued approving fatwa, another disapproving fatwa, and a third conditionally approving fatwa. This reflects three important ideas in fatwa mechanisms: change, complexity, and practicality. First, this study suggests that the attitudes of scholars toward controversial communication technologies have changed over time (see Boyd, 1999). Some scholars have come to approve the adoption of the internet or conditionally approve it. This situation also reflects the complexity of attitudes. The analysis reveals that type of internet use affects many fatwa decisions. This complexity is reflected in the number of conditionally approving fatwa with decisions neither approving nor disapproving. Finally, the fatwa decisions reflect a certain pragmatism in that scholars nowadays believe that if the internet is beneficial for the propagation of Islam, then Muslims need to exploit it. Bunt (2003) argues that many Muslim clerics use the internet to propagate Islam and to bring Muslims closer to their religion.

Past attitudes toward communication technologies were often rejectionist. The thinking of scholars has changed over the years and future attitudes of scholars toward new communication technologies are likely to be approving or conditionally approving. The influence of the media, globalization and education is definitely playing a role in Saudi society. Saudis are no longer isolated. They, and Arabs generally, are exposed to new communication messages through satellite television, the internet and social media. In all probability, the Arab Spring is a sign of this change. Rogers (2003, p.6) describes diffusion as 'a kind of social change', something that religious scholars would probably prefer to avoid. But on the other hand, scholars know that they must modify their fatwa to reflect changes taking place around them. Since the tide of change runs so strongly against them, scholars need to be more open and practical toward new media technologies. If they are not, they will lose their credibility with Saudis, especially since religious scholars in neighboring Muslim countries with similar cultural and religious traditions are much less cautious about these technologies.

However, this less conservative future will certainly be based on what is moral and ethical in the instructions of Islam. An innovation's compatibility influences its adoption (Rogers, 2003). Therefore, it is unlikely that Muslim religious scholars will unconditionally approve a technology that carries pornography, homosexuality, secularism, and feminism or that discredits Allah, his Prophets, and Islamic laws and instructions. In this study, the disapproving and conditionally approving attitudes reflect this. Conditionally approving fatwa essentially approve internet diffusion as long as it does not contradict the teachings of Islam or corrupt youth and morals. For example, Abdulkarim Khadir insists that 'Internet chats between young men and women are the gates to evil', and Abdulrahman Al Barrak says that the internet can 'disseminate disbelief, polytheism, heresy, immorality, and falsehood'. Accordingly, censoring of these materials by the authorities, or self-censorship by people themselves, will perhaps always be a condition that scholars will impose on the adoption of new communication technologies.

Rogers (2003) states that 'Any system may have both innovative opinion leaders and also leaders who oppose change'. Haider and Kreps (2004) also argue that opinion leaders can impede the adoption of innovation if they convince people not to adopt. This study demonstrates the importance of religious scholars in the diffusion of innovation processes. Religious scholars have strong alliance with the Al Saud royal family. Historically, the royal family has always consulted scholars, sought their endorsement and made them part of important decisions, including those related to fighting terrorism in the Kingdom and allowing the American army to initiate the Second Gulf War from Saudi territory. Saudi authorities would probably have consulted religious scholars before introducing the internet to Saudi society. The censoring of websites in the country is perhaps the result of this consultation.

Islam has a major influence on Muslims (Al-Kandari and Gaither, 2011). Seeking fatwa to use or not to use the internet by average people in itself manifests this influence. Al-Kandari and Gaither (2011) suggest that change agents who want to introduce innovation to Muslim societies should seek the approval and help of religious scholars. Change agents are then able to imply that the change has its roots in Islam and that Allah, his Prophet, and Islamic instructions support this change. They also argue that change agents need to expose religious figures to innovation, if not actually gaining their active assistance in the diffusion of innovation, then at least neutralizing their opposition.

As with many other studies in the social sciences, this study has its limitations. Saudi Arabia is more religiously conservative than other Arab and Muslim nations, such as Egypt and the United Arab Emirates. Therefore, its findings do not necessarily apply elsewhere. In other countries, such as Egypt, fatwa decisions on internet adoption might be less likely to be disapproving. A future study might compare the internet fatwa issued by religious scholars in Saudi Arabia with those issued in other Arab and Muslim nations. Further research might also investigate variations in fatwa decisions between Sunni and other sects of Islam, such as the Shiite, and compare the justifications the scholars of each sect provide.

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