

How the Middle East used Social Media in 2024

Damian Radcliffe and Haopeng Yuan, with Nishtha Yadav



**Published by the University of Oregon-UNESCO Crossings Institute for
Conflict-Sensitive Reporting and Intercultural Dialogue**



About this Report

Since 2012, this annual report series has been a vital resource for understanding the evolving role of social media in the Middle East.

The latest edition, authored by Damian Radcliffe and Haopeng Yuan, is once again published by the [University of Oregon-UNESCO Crossings Institute for Conflict-Sensitive Reporting and Intercultural Dialogue](#). This report highlights the critical trends shaping social media in the region.

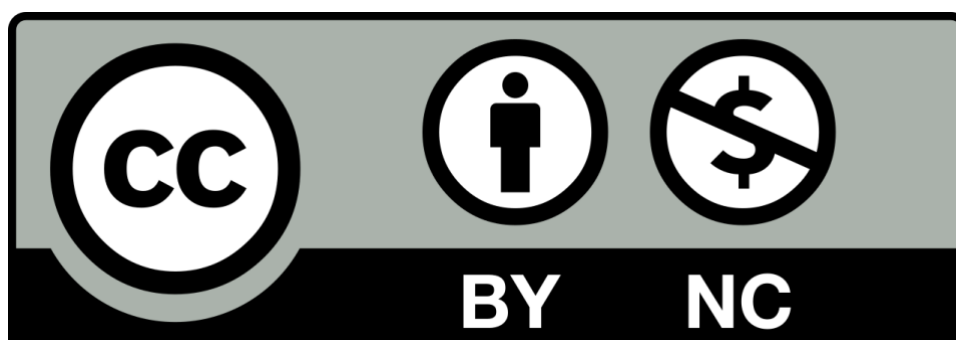
In doing this, we examine areas such as how social platforms influence news consumption, advertising, cultural exchange, and freedom of expression in the Middle East. The report features in-depth analysis, case studies, and data-driven insights, doing so around key platforms, including TikTok, Meta, and Telegram. It also dives into the growing role of influencers and emerging technologies like generative AI.

Lastly, the report also examines critical issues such as misinformation, censorship, and the impact of a number of regional conflicts on digital discourse.

Designed for academics, media professionals, and policymakers, this comprehensive resource provides actionable insights into the intersection of technology, culture, and society in one of the world's most dynamic digital markets.

View previous annual reports at: <https://unesco.uoregon.edu/middle-east/>

Front cover image generated by Grok, on X.



This report is made available using a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International](#) (CC BY-NC 4.0) license. This allows users to copy, distribute, remix, and build upon a work for non-commercial purposes only, provided they give appropriate credit to the creator.

For more information [visit this page](#) on the Creative Commons website.

Methodology

The 2024 edition covers the period from January to December 2024, with some references to late 2023 developments where directly relevant to 2024 trends, usually because of time-lags which meant that this data was not published until 2024.

The report draws on a wide range of secondary sources, including:

- **Industry reports and data** from sources such as DataReportal, Statista, Mordor Intelligence, Kearney, Nielsen, and We Are Social, among others;
- **News reporting and analysis** from regional and international outlets including Arab News, Campaign Middle East, The National, Wired Middle East, Reuters, Bloomberg, and the BBC;
- **Academic and policy research** from organizations including the Arab Barometer, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Article 19, and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace;
- **Platform-published data and blog posts** from Meta, TikTok, Snapchat, YouTube, X, and Telegram, cited with the caveat that platform-supplied data should be read critically.

A note on sources at time of access: Where data is drawn from live or regularly updated sources - such as Statista dashboards or DataReportal country profiles - the figures cited reflect the state of those sources at the time of research. A note to this effect appears in relevant chart captions throughout the report, as these charts may have been updated with more recent data and therefore no longer reflect the numbers that we share. Research for this report was first conducted in Q4 of 2024 and Q1 of 2025, with further edits and proofreading in Q1 2026, prior to publication. Readers seeking current data are encouraged to consult the original sources directly, which are footnoted throughout the report.

A note on the Israel–Hamas war and the situation in Gaza: This report does not substantively cover social media developments related to the conflict in Gaza and the wider Israel–Hamas war. This is a deliberate editorial decision, not an oversight. The conflict has generated an enormous and rapidly evolving body of social media activity - around content moderation, disinformation, digital rights, and platform accountability - that warrants dedicated, in-depth treatment. We did not have the time or space to do this complex subject justice within the scope of this annual report, and we did not want to risk treating it superficially. We encourage readers seeking analysis of social media's role in the conflict to consult the growing body of specialist research and reporting on this topic.

A note on the geography covered in this study: The geographic scope of this report predominantly centers on the Arabis speaking parts of the Middle East and North Africa, although – as with previous studies - it also includes Turkey, Iran, and Israel where appropriate, given that they play an important part in the life and culture of the wider region.

The report does not aim to be exhaustive; rather, it seeks to identify the most significant trends, platforms, and case studies that shaped MENA's social media landscape in 2024. As you can see, there is plenty to say! We hope you find it as interesting to dive into these trends as we did.

About the Authors

Damian Radcliffe is a journalist, researcher, and professor at the University of Oregon. He holds the Chambers Chair in Journalism and is a Professor of Practice, an affiliate faculty member of the Department for Middle East and North Africa Studies (MENA) and the Agora Journalism Center, and a Research Associate of the Center for Science Communication Research.

He is an expert on digital trends, social media, technology, the business of media, the evolution of present-day journalistic practice and the role played by social media and technology in the Middle East.



Haopeng Yuan is a PhD student in Communication and Media Studies at School of Journalism and Communication of University of Oregon. Haopeng received his Bachelor's in Marketing at University of Nebraska-Lincoln and Master's in Economics at Texas A&M University.

Prior to pursuing his PhD, he worked for a top-tier crypto exchange in Asia. Haopeng studies social media platforms, social media influencers and emerging media (e.g., blockchain, metaverse, and AI).



Nishtha Yadav is a PhD candidate at the School of Journalism and Communication, University of Oregon. As an interdisciplinary scholar of global media, social movements, and cultural studies, she examines the transnational intersections of race in the United States and caste in India.

She received her M.A. from Emerson College in Boston and a Post Graduate Diploma in Journalism from the Asian College of Journalism in India. She also served as a 2020-21 Princeton in Africa Fellow.



Executive Summary

Market Context

The Middle East and North Africa have become one of the world's most dynamic digital markets.

The region's media and entertainment sector is projected to grow from \$41.13 billion in 2024 to \$59.10 billion by 2029 (CAGR: 9.41%). This is driven by surging demand for local Arabic content, rapid smartphone adoption, and the rise of subscription video-on-demand services. Digital advertising spend is expected to reach \$4.1 billion by 2025, attracting a wave of international brands developing culturally tailored campaigns - often with social media at their core.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE continue to lead the region's digital transformation. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 is reshaping the entertainment and media landscape, while the UAE Media Council issued 230 social media advertising licenses and approved 339 film screenings in the first half of 2024 alone - a 7% year-on-year increase.

Platform Landscape

YouTube dominates online video in MENA, **with the UAE (94.2%), Israel (93.6%), and Saudi Arabia (89.7%) ranking among the top five countries globally for YouTube penetration.** Connected TV (CTV) viewership is growing rapidly and can be a key channel for YouTube consumption. By May 2024, CTV audiences exceeded 2.5 million in the UAE, 12 million in Saudi Arabia, and 600,000 in Qatar.

TikTok records the highest advertising reach globally in eight of the ten top MENA markets, **while Snapchat reaches over 90% of 13–34 year olds in Saudi Arabia**, where users open the app more than 50 times per day. WhatsApp and Telegram remain the dominant messaging platforms, with Telegram attracting \$75 million investments each from Mubadala and Abu Dhabi Catalyst Partners, reflecting the region's strategic importance to the platform's growth.

On X (formerly Twitter), Turkey and Saudi Arabia are the only MENA countries in the global top 10 by user count, ranked 7th (19.74 million) and 9th (16.28 million) respectively, reflecting their more sizable populations. X remains a critical arena for political discourse, disinformation campaigns, and state-sponsored influence operations across the region.

Influencers and the Creator Economy

The influencer economy is maturing rapidly, but unevenly across the region. **In Lebanon, 58% of social media users engage with influencer content, though only 18% go on to try endorsed products - reflecting high engagement but cautious conversion.** Influencer culture mirrors domestic norms: in Saudi Arabia, most prominent influencers are male and concentrated in gaming, while female creators dominate beauty, travel, and food content in much of the wider region.

The sector faces emerging threats. Scammers have been exploiting Meta's Rights Manager tool to extort influencers and businesses across the region, with estimated earnings from these schemes

reaching \$1 million. The murder of Iraqi TikTok influencer Um Fahad - the third such killing in Iraq - underscores the physical dangers faced by creators whose content can often challenge conservative societal norms.

Freedom of Expression and Digital Rights

Freedom of expression online remains severely constrained across much of the region. **In 2024, a Saudi teacher was sentenced to 20 years in prison for social media posts critical of the government; Egypt renewed the detention of satirical cartoonist Ashraf Omar Hamdi for a fourth time; and Turkey arrested a woman for publicly criticizing the government's block on Instagram - a block that lasted nine days and affected c.50 million users.**

LGBTQ+ individuals may face acute digital persecution. Research involving over 5,200 participants found that nearly half had their devices seized by police to verify their queerness, with entrapment via apps like WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger reported by 23% of participants. Campaigns such as 'Secure Our Socials', led by Human Rights Watch and partner organizations, are pressing Meta for greater transparency and accountability in this space.

Fake News and Online Misinformation

Disinformation ranks as the top global risk over the next two years, according to the World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report 2024 - and the MENA region provides stark illustrations of why. Social media platforms were weaponized during the Hamas–Israel conflict, with seven influential X accounts - dubbed 'new elites' - generating over 1.6 billion views in the first three days alone, often through emotionally charged content with minimal sourcing.

Platform responses to these wider challenges have been mixed. YouTube removed over 117,000 videos globally in Q1 2024 - a 67% year-on-year increase - using a combination of generative AI and human oversight. Meta's Oversight Board intervened in a case involving an Instagram post showing a 14-year-old girl being prepared for marriage in Iran, recommending that Meta explicitly classify child marriage as a form of forced marriage. However, critics argue these responses remain reactive and inconsistent.

Emerging Trends

Generative AI is already reshaping social media in the MENA region across multiple dimensions: as a tool for content moderation, as a new category of AI influencer, and as a disruptive force in newsrooms and workplaces. Cybersecurity investment across the region is expected to surpass \$6.5 billion, reflecting growing recognition of digital vulnerabilities - illustrated by the arrest of Telegram CEO Pavel Durov in France over allegations of insufficient moderation, and a global spyware campaign targeting the fintech sector via Telegram.

Saudi Arabia's gaming sector stands out as a bellwether for the region's digital ambitions. With \$38 billion committed through the Public Investment Fund and a target of creating 39,000 jobs by 2030, the Kingdom is positioning itself as a global hub for gaming and esports - an industry where social media and content creation are deeply integrated into this field of competitive play.

Table of Contents

<i>How the Middle East used Social Media in 2024</i>	1
About this Report	2
Methodology	3
About the Authors	4
Executive Summary	5
Market Context.....	5
Platform Landscape.....	5
Influencers and the Creator Economy	5
Freedom of Expression and Digital Rights	6
Fake News and Online Misinformation	6
Emerging Trends.....	6
Chapter 1: Market Context	8
Media Habits and Trends	8
Social Media Take-Up and Usage	10
Drivers For Social Media Usage.....	12
Chapter 2: Meta (Facebook and Instagram)	14
Facebook.....	14
Instagram	16
Other issues and developments	19
Chapter 3: TikTok	23
Take up in the Middle East	23
What works on TikTok in MENA?.....	23
TikTok for Businesses and Brands.....	25
Chapter 4: Snapchat	29
Chapter 5: YouTube and Online Video	35
Chapter 6: Messaging apps	42
WhatsApp	42
Telegram	43
Chapter 7: X (formerly Twitter)	46
Chapter 8: Influencers	53
Chapter 9: Freedom of Expression	62
Imprisonment and ban of individuals	63
Activism and advocacy	64

Chapter 1: Market Context

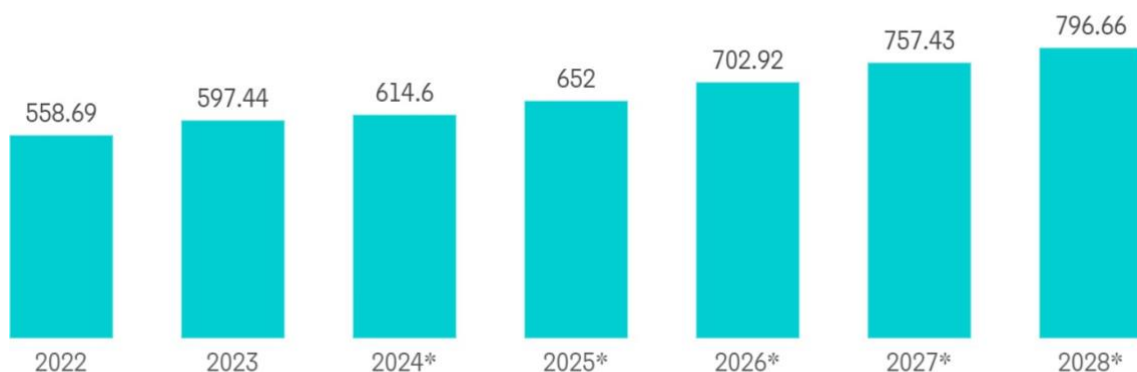
In this opening chapter we set the scene by exploring some of the wider media habits of people in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and the role that social networks play in that mix.

Media Habits and Trends

The Middle East has become a lucrative market for global brands and marketing agencies, driven by its young, digitally savvy population and increasing economic diversification. Led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, the region's advertising market is expected to grow significantly, with digital ad spending projected to reach \$4.1 billion by 2025. This has led to a "gold rush"¹ as companies seek to capture consumers via innovative advertising and marketing strategies – often with a strong social media focus - tailored to local cultures and preferences.

More widely, the Middle East's media and entertainment market is projected to grow from \$41.13 billion in 2024 to \$59.10 billion by 2029, with a CAGR of 9.41%, a [report by Mordor Intelligence](#)² suggests. This growth is driven by cultural shifts such as increased demand for local Arabic content, continued smartphone adoption and strong growth for digital streaming and other on-demand services.

Estimated Number of Smartphone Subscriptions, in Million, MENA, 2022-2028



Source: Ericsson



Data from GlobalWebIndex, and [published by EMARKETER](#),³ shows that people in the Middle East and Africa (MEA) spend more time with media on mobile each day (4 hours 31 mins) than any other region. They also spend the second highest amount of time on social media, averaging just over three hours a day.

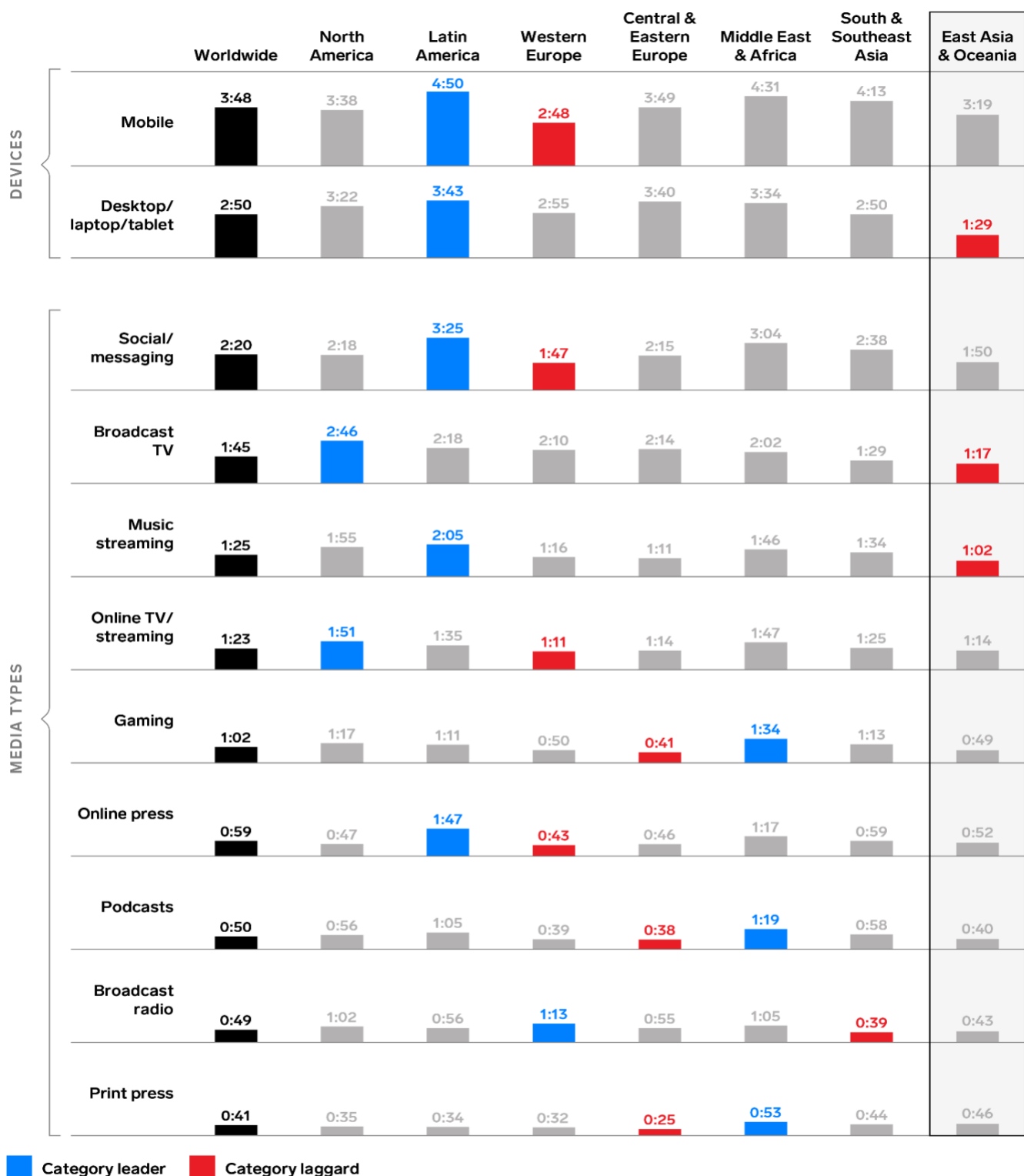
¹ [How the Middle East Became the Latest 'Gold Rush' in Marketing - WSJ](#)

² [Middle East Media and Entertainment Market Size & Share Analysis - Growth Trends & Forecasts \(2024 - 2029\)](#)

³ [The Global Media Intelligence Report 2024, EMARKETER](#)

How the World Spends Its Time With Media

hrs:mins spent per day among internet users worldwide, by region, 2024



Note: Q: "Roughly how many hours do you spend on a given media activity during a typical day?"; respondents selected a period of time (ranging from less than 30 minutes up to 10 hours), with GWI then averaging these figures; averages also include those who selected "do not use"

Source: GWI, Aug 2024

351648

EM | EMARKETER

Image: via: [EMARKETER](#)⁴

⁴ [EMARKETER](#)

Social Media Take-Up and Usage

Social media users in the Middle East dominate rankings for the most socially networked nations in the world. Data published in January 2024⁵ revealed that of the 10 countries in the world with the highest adoption, seven are in the Middle East. Five members of the GCC, the Gulf Cooperation Council, hold the top five spots. Social media penetration in UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and Saudi Arabia exceeds 94%.

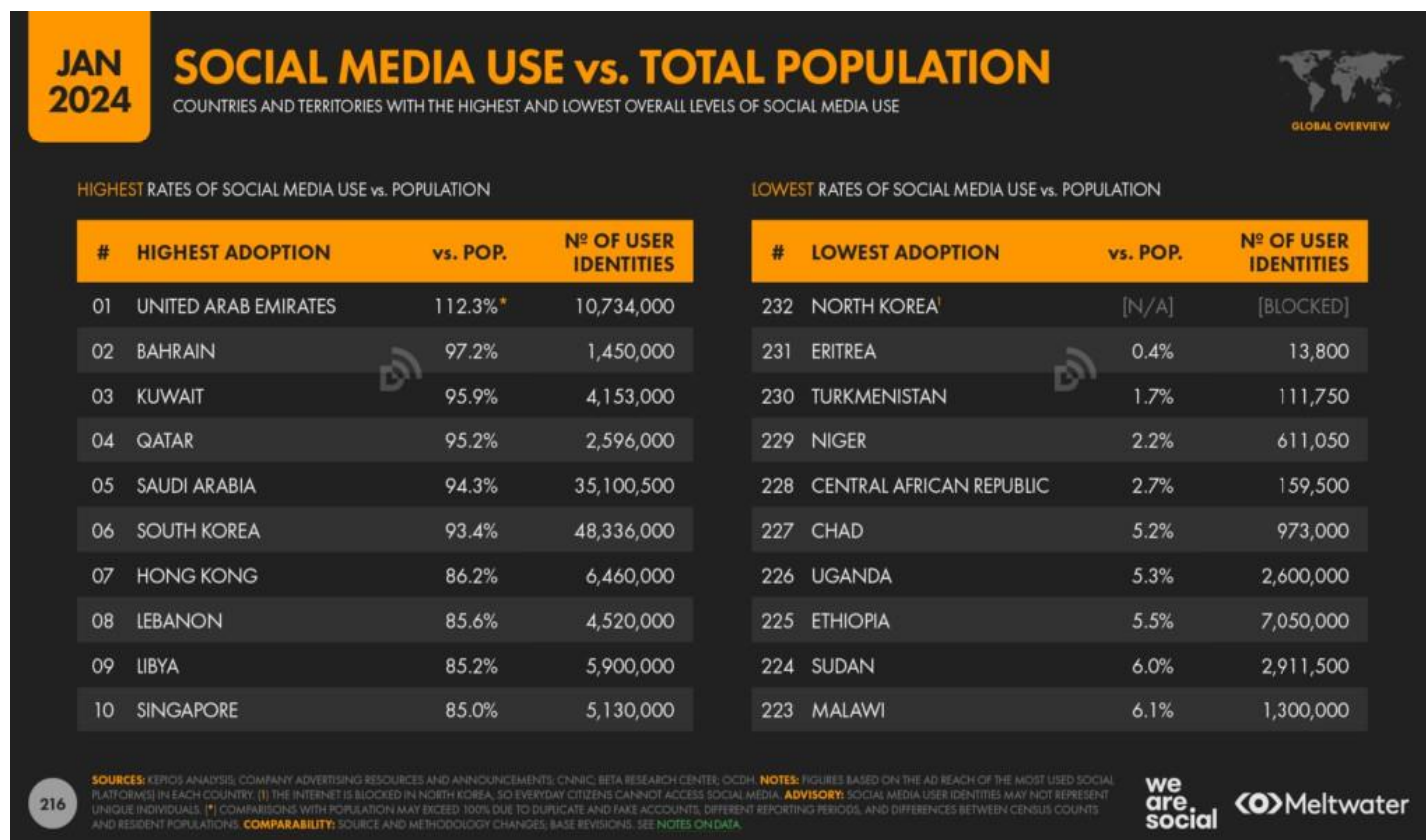


Image: Social media use vs Total Population. Source: [WeAreSocialUSA](#)⁶

Users across multiple MENA nations are among the most active on social media. Data from⁷ April 2024 pointed to six MENA countries where users spend more time on social media than the global average.

Country	Time spent per day on social (h:m)
United Arab Emirates AE	2:57
Saudi Arabia SA	2:51
Egypt EG	2:38
Turkey TR	2:36
Morocco MA	2:34
Israel IL	2:31
Global Average 🌐	2:20

⁵ Digital 2024: 5 billion social media users – [We Are Social](#)

⁶ [WeAreSocialUSA](#)

⁷ Digital 2024 April Global Statshot Report – [DataReportal](#)

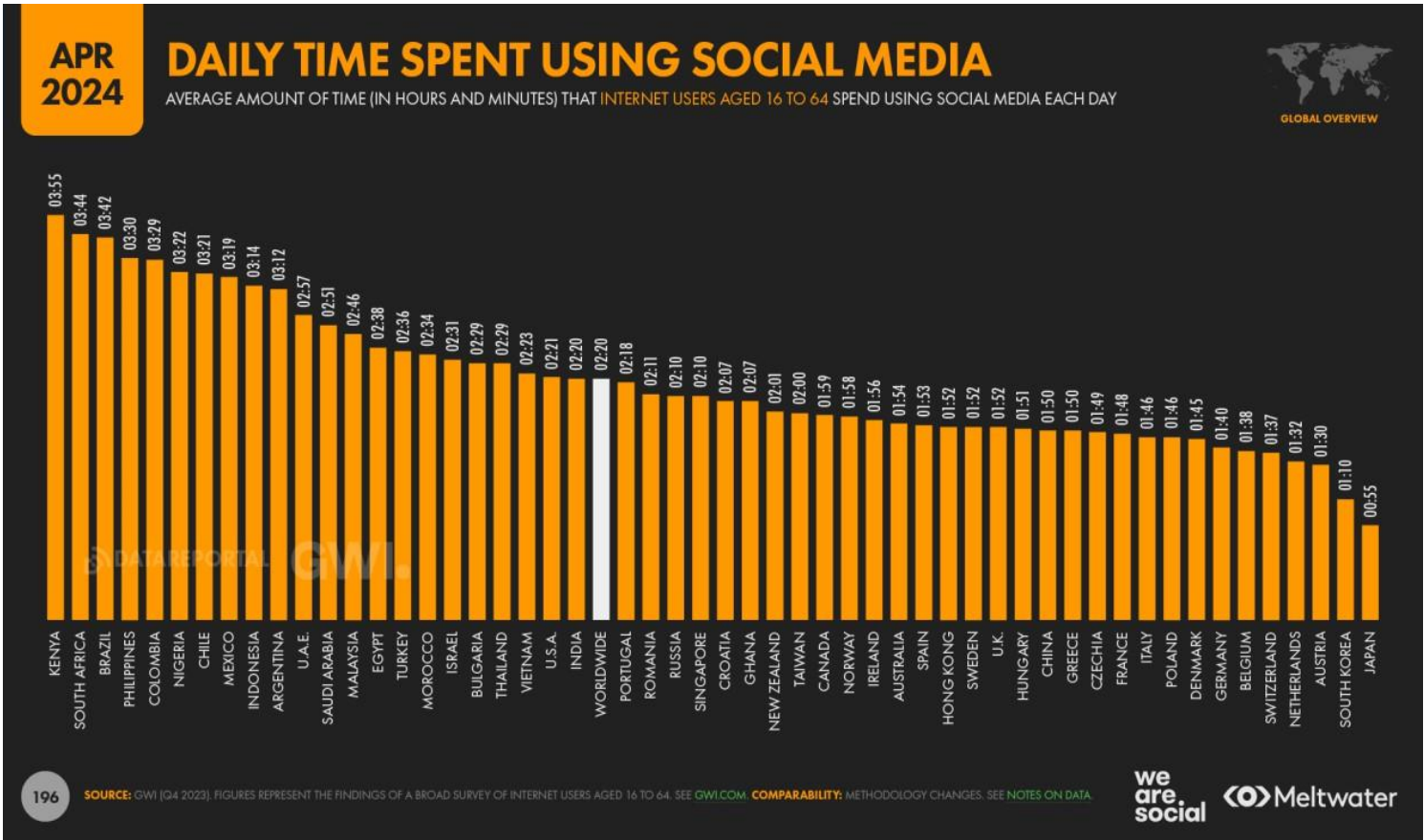
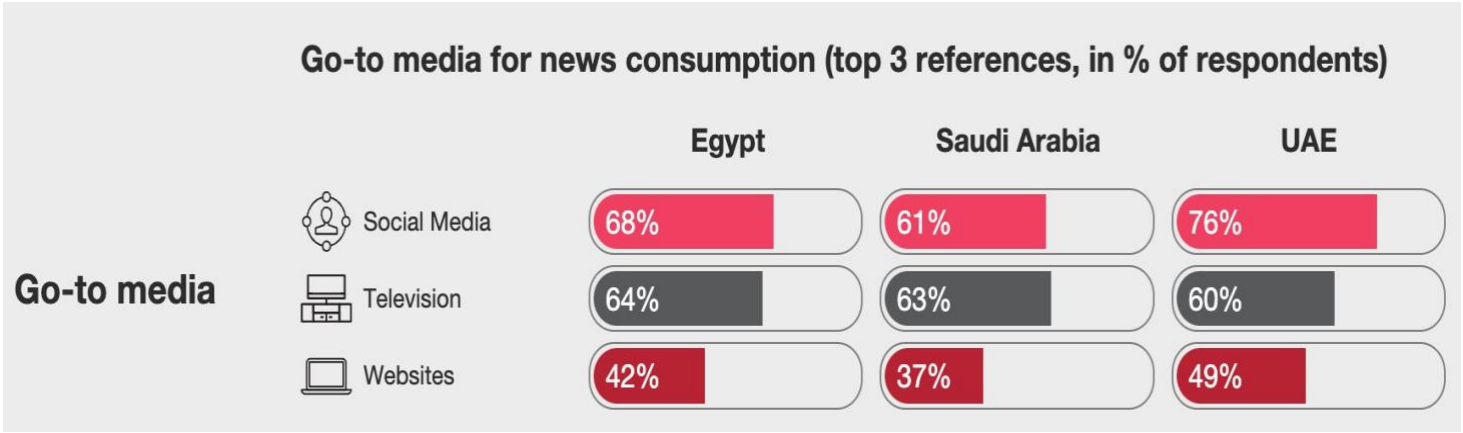


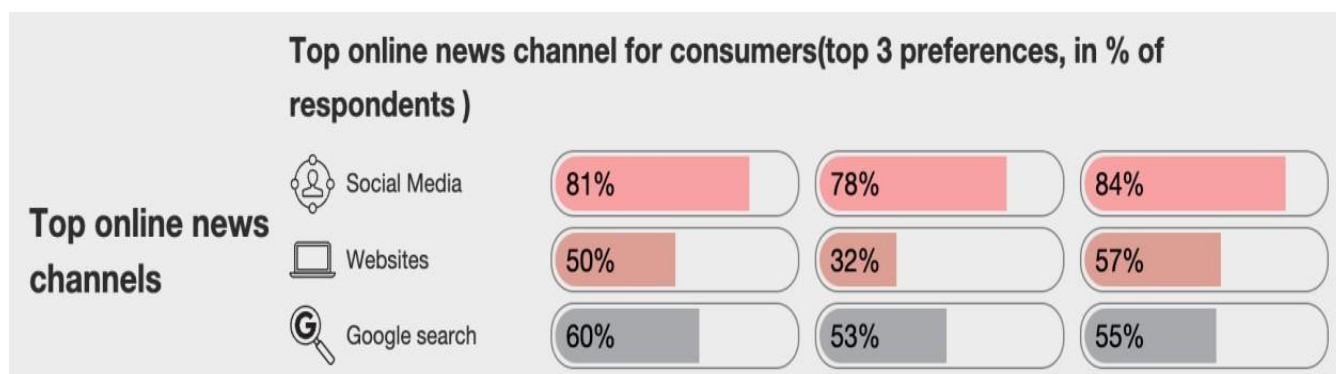
Image: Dailyspentusing social media. Source: [DataReportal](#)⁸

Separately, in a February 2024 report from Strategy& and Google, focused on [Building a vibrant news industry in the Middle East and North Africa](#),⁹ social media was identified the “go to” media in two out of three of MENA’s most populous nations, and the leading source for news.



The data, based on research conducted by YouGov in 2022, also found that social was the preferred means to access the news in these markets, and also highlighted the popularity of video over text, and content that could be consumed via mobile.

⁹ [Building a vibrant news industry in the Middle East and North Africa](#)

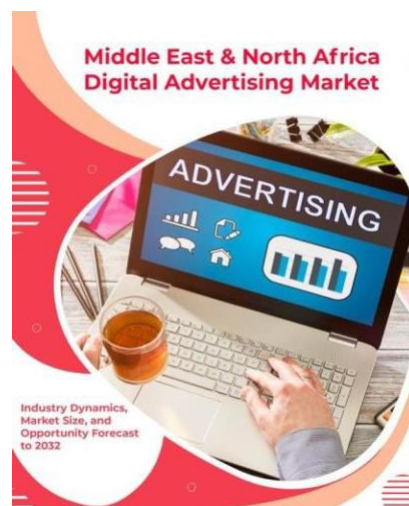


Images [via](#) Strategy& and Google

Drivers For Social Media Usage

There are a number of long-standing factors that are contributing to the take-up and use of social media in the MENA region. These include:

1. **Young Population:** A [2022 report](#)¹⁰ from the OECD pointed out that “young people (aged under 30) constitute more than half (55%) of the population across MENA, compared with 36% of the population across OECD countries.”
2. **Investment on digital infrastructure:** According to the International Data Corporation (IDC), [annual spending on ICT](#)¹¹ in the Middle East, Turkey, and Africa will reach \$238 billion in 2024.
3. **Online Advertising and Marketing spend:** Social networks are a popular channel for brands and businesses. The digital advertising market in MENA is set to exceed \$12 billion in 2024, Astute Analytica [reports](#),¹² up from \$9.2 billion in 2021. Meanwhile, online advertising expenditure is expected to rise by 20% by 2024. At the same time newspaper ad spend in the region will decline by 13%.



Other key data shared by Astute Analytica includes:

- **More than three-quarters of shoppers (78%) in the region use social media to inspire purchases, a figure considerably higher than the global average of 37%.**
- **Social media advertising spend is projected to reach \$268 billion globally in 2023.** Within that, social video ad spend is predicted to grow by 21.2%. (NB: 2023 projections published in 2024.)
- Across the region, **social media is now the largest segment of digital advertising expenditure**, having overtaken online search and display ads.

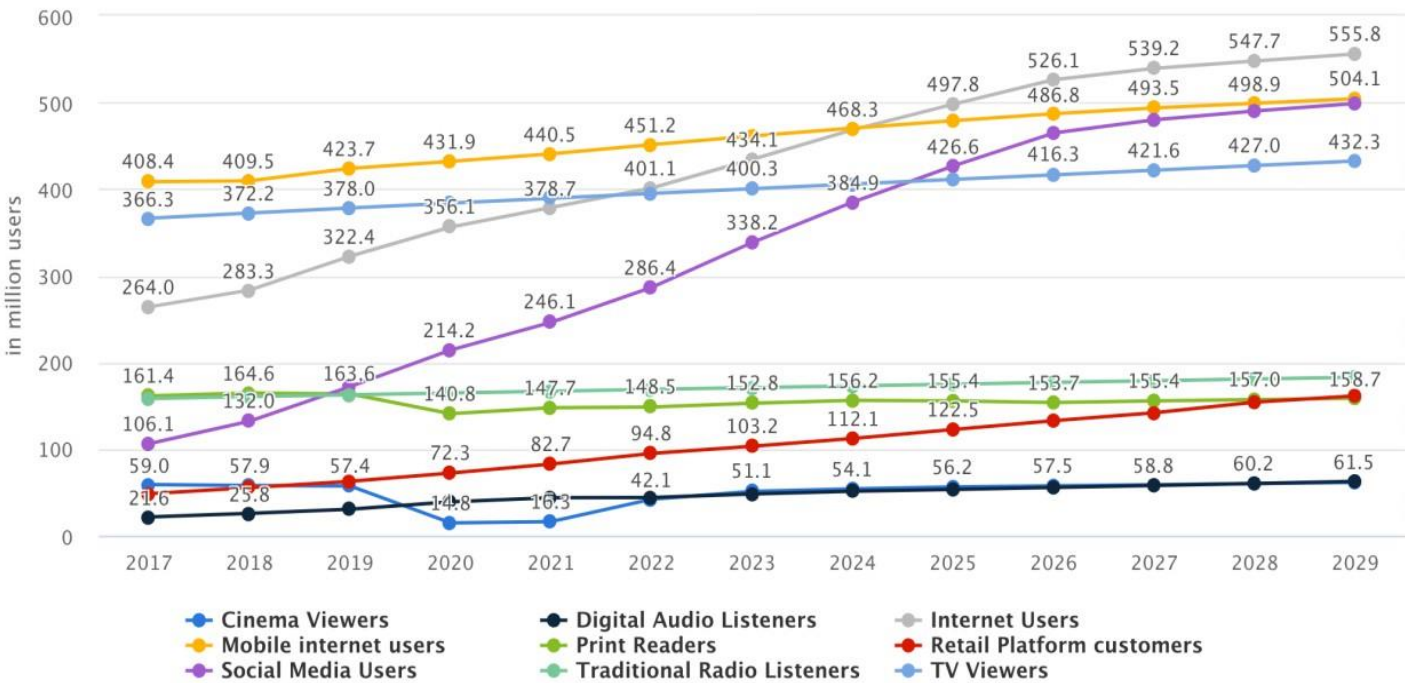
¹⁰ [Youth at the Centre of Government Action: A Review of the Middle East and North Africa](#)

¹¹ [IDC Predicts that Annual Spending on ICT in the Middle East, Türkiye, and Africa Will Top \\$238 Billion in 2024](#)

¹² [Middle East and North Africa Digital Advertising Market to Surpass Valuation of USD 44,827.0 Million by 2032 - Astute Analytica](#)

Continued growth: By the end of the decade, it is [anticipated](#)¹³ that there will be more than 500 million social media users in MENA.

REACH



Most recent update: Oct 2024

Source: Statista Market Insights

Image: Chart [via Statista](#)

Note: The link directs to the source's current, live data and may not reflect the specific historical figures cited in this report.

¹³ [Advertising – MENA - Statista](#)

Chapter 2: Meta (Facebook and Instagram)

Meta remains a social media powerhouse in the Middle East and beyond. In this section we dive into two of its biggest brands and platforms: Facebook and Instagram.

Facebook

Globally, Facebook now [reaches more than 3 billion users a month](#).¹⁴ Within this, the social network has: **46.6 million users in Egypt** (the 10th largest market in the world for the platform) and **34.35 million in Turkey (ranking it 15th)**. Facebook use in Egypt grew by more than 10% in the past year, up from 42 million users.

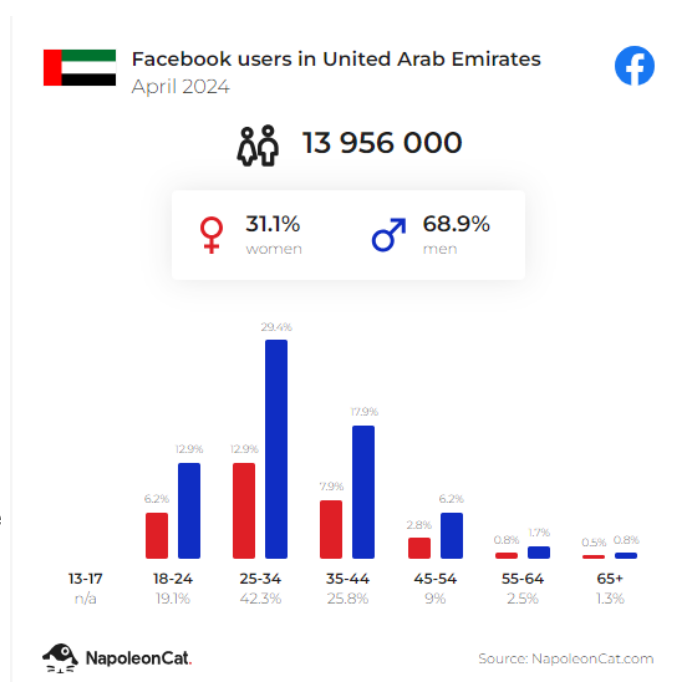
Meanwhile, **the nation with the highest Facebook reach globally is Libya**, and the United Arab Emirates is ranked sixth.¹⁵

As of April 2024, the United Arab Emirates had nearly 14 million Facebook users.¹⁶ The largest user group, comprising 5.9 million users, are those aged 25 to 34, totaling 5,900,000. Within this age group, there was a significant gender disparity, with men outnumbering women by 4.1 million.

Partly because of its age and maturity as a platform, Facebook and other long-established social media platforms have evolved to resemble traditional mainstream media, such as The New York Times, argues [Dr. Ramzy Baroud](#), editor of Palestine Chronicle and a Senior Research Fellow at Center for Islam and Global Affairs (CIGA).

“Social media platforms are replicating the old mainstream media behavior that controlled the flow of information since the invention of the printed press sometime in the 15th century,” Baroud [wrote](#)¹⁷ in an op-ed published by [Middle East Monitor](#). “They are highly politicized, business-driven and even ideological.”

Although the social network [celebrated its 20th birthday in 2024](#),¹⁸ adoption continues to grow. In Q1 2024, for example, Facebook was only just behind TikTok in terms of the [number of app downloads in](#)



¹⁴ [Facebook users by country 2024 | Statista](#)

¹⁵ See: [Digital 2024 October Global Statshot Report - DataReportal](#) – slide 333 and 334.

¹⁶ [Facebook users in United Arab Emirates - April 2024 | NapoleonCat](#)

¹⁷ [Breaking the mould': How Facebook became the NYT of the digital age – Middle East Monitor](#)

¹⁸ [Facebook launches – History.com](#)

the region.¹⁹ That said, in markets such as Saudi Arabia, the number of users is [projected to drop](#)²⁰ in the coming years, as audiences migrate to newer platforms.

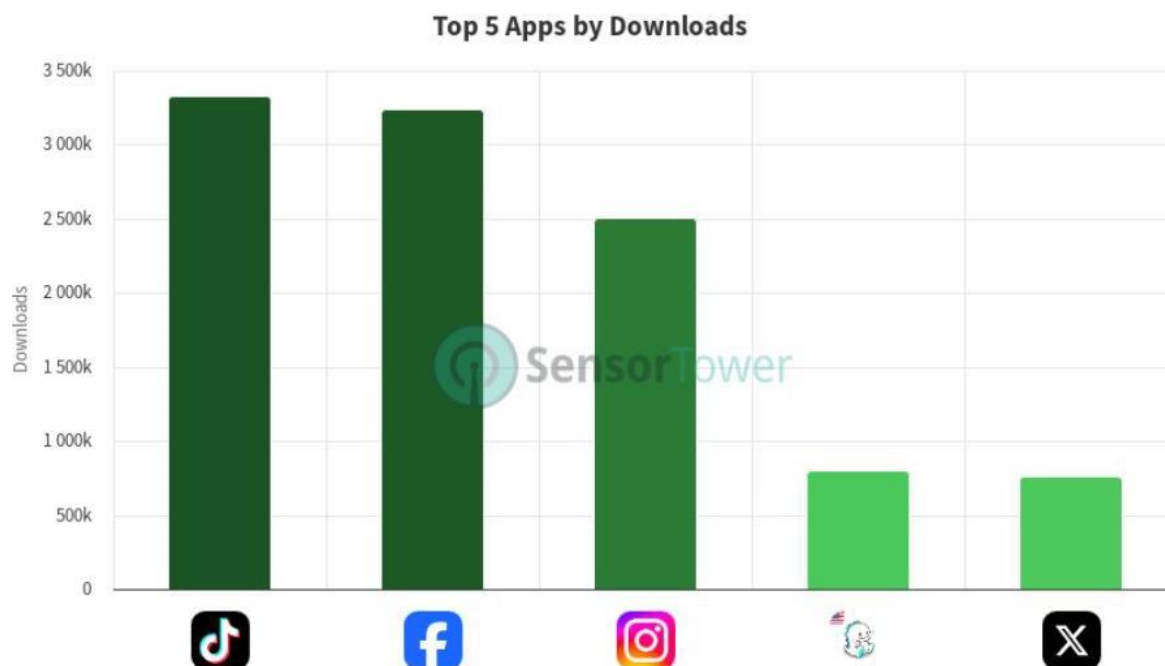
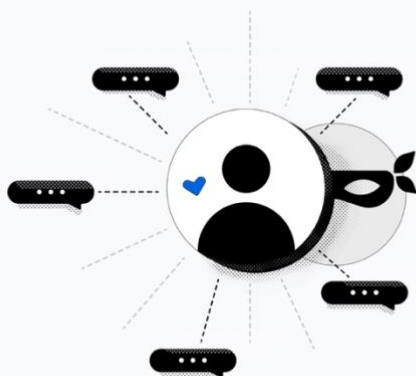


Image [via](#) SensorTower



In a report from Meta in May 2024, **the company announced the take-down of a network of over 500 Facebook accounts and 32 Instagram accounts**, linked to an Israeli firm. “The accounts posed as U.S. and Canadian locals, including Jewish students and African-Americans, but were actually fake or compromised,” The Wall Street Journal [reported](#).²¹

Image [via](#) Facebook

Separately, in November, Meta [shared](#)²² that they had “taken down over two million accounts linked to scam centers in Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, the United Arab Emirates and the Philippines,” during the past year.

¹⁹ [Top 5 Social Apps Performance in the Middle East Q1 2024 - SensorTower](#)

²⁰ [Facebook usage penetration in Saudi Arabia from 2022 to 2028 - Statista](#)

²¹ [Meta Takes Down ‘Inauthentic’ Accounts on Facebook, Instagram Linked to Israeli Firm- WSJ](#)

²² [Cracking Down On Organized Crime Behind Scam Centers- Facebook](#)

Instagram

As of April 2024, **Bahrain has the highest Instagram audience reach of any nation in the world**, with 95.6% of its population using the platform.

Other highly ranked MENA nations include the United Arab Emirates and Turkey, where over 85% of the population utilized the photo and video sharing platform (with Kuwait just behind).²⁰

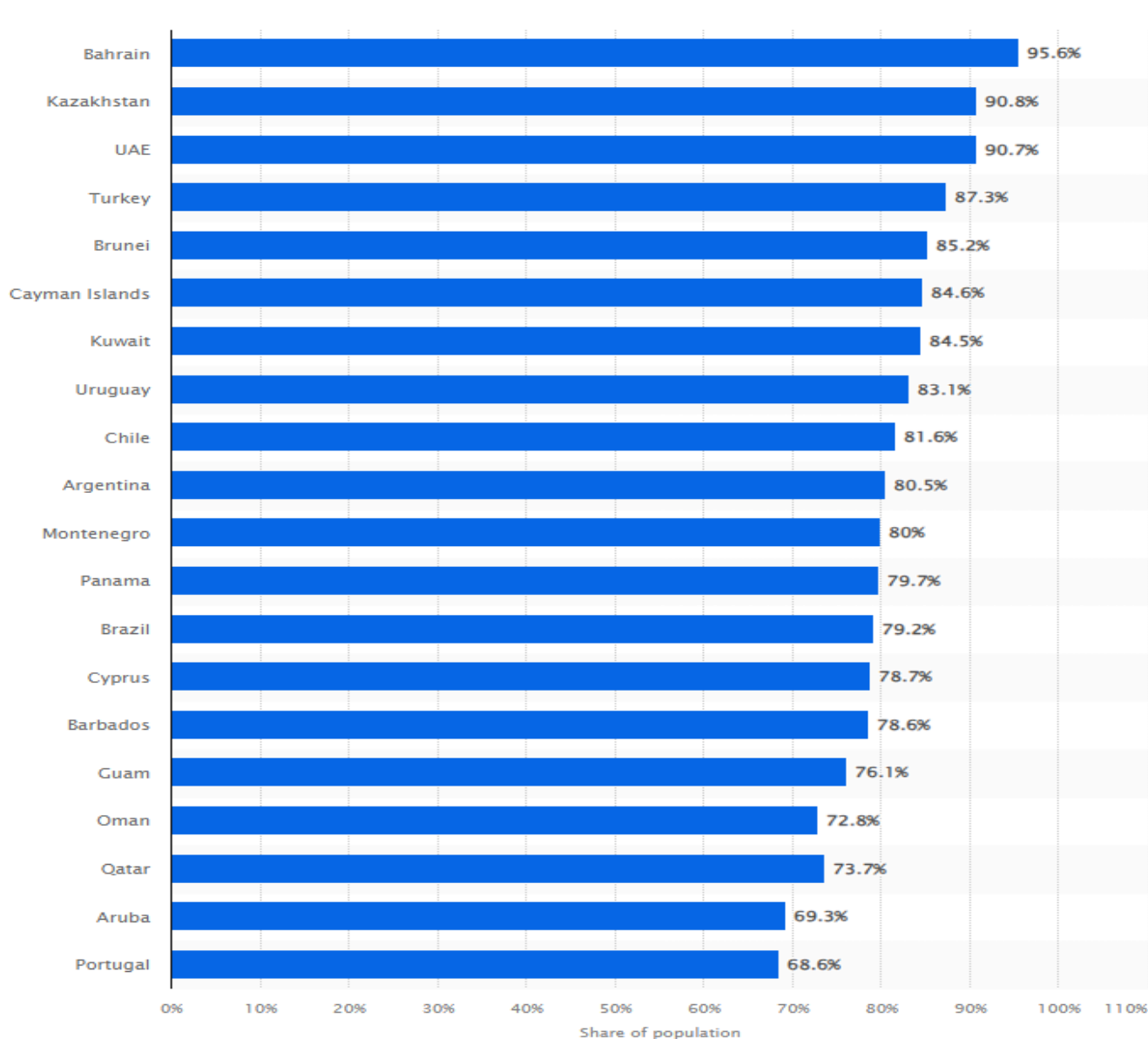


Image: Ranking of Instagram audience reach as of April 2024, source: [Statista](#)²³

Note: The link directs to the source's current, live data and may not reflect the specific historical figures cited in this report.

²³ [Instagram: countries with the highest audience reach 2024](#)



One of the most popular online fitness brands on Instagram, Gymshark²⁴, [announced plans](#)²⁵ to open a store in Dubai's Mall of the Emirates, part of the world's largest shopping complex. The Mall of the Emirates is undergoing further expansion, Forbes reports, to accommodate 240 more retailers as the 12-million-sq.ft. Dubai Mall continues to expand.

Gymshark's new store will be part of this growth, reflecting the brand's strategy to increase its global presence and capitalize on the high foot traffic and luxury appeal of the mall. As [Grazia notes](#),²⁶ Gymshark also released a limited 25 piece UAE collection last year.

Image: Gymshark's T-shirt with an Arabic logo. Source: [GRAZIA](#)

Instagram's "Made by Africa, Loved by the World" campaign²⁷ was launched to celebrate Africa Day on May 25, 2024. This year's campaign focused on women of impact, highlighting four influential women from Africa and the diaspora: Eniola Aluko from Nigeria, Bontle Modiselle from South Africa, Victoria Kimani from Kenya, and Tasneem Elaidy from Egypt.

Each woman featured in a short film showcasing their achievements in sports, entertainment, and music. The films are created by rising African filmmakers Haya Khair at, Michael Rodrigues, Nyasha Kadandara, and Aaliyah McKay. The campaign also includes a community challenge, #ShareYourAfrica, encouraging content creators to celebrate African identity, in a move designed to amplify African women's voices and influence on the global stage.



Instagram campaign "Made by Africa, Loved by the World". Source: [Meta](#)

²⁴ [Instagram's Favorite Workout Brand Has Officially Launched In The UAE](#)

²⁵ [Gymshark To Open In World's Largest Mall, Which Is Getting Even Bigger](#)

²⁶ [Instagram's favorite Workout Brand Has Officially Launched In The UAE – Grazia](#)

²⁷ [Celebrating Women of Impact in the 'Made by Africa, Loved by the World' Campaign | Meta](#)

Another campaign, "Secure Our Socials," was [launched](#)²⁸ in collaboration with different NGOs, with the aim of addressing the digital targeting of LGBT people in MENA on social networks like Facebook and Instagram.

The initiative, which is led by [Human Rights Watch](#), [Social Media Exchange \(SMEX\)](#), [INSM Foundation for Digital Rights](#), [Helem](#), and [Damj Association](#), urges Meta to enhance transparency and accountability in content moderation to protect LGBT users from online harassment, doxxing, and entrapment by state actors and private individuals.

This new campaign follows a February 2023, [report](#)²⁹ by Human Rights Watch on the digital targeting, and its offline consequences, LGBT people in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Tunisia. The new campaign calls for Meta to improve its safety practices and engage with civil society to better safeguard LGBT rights on its platforms.



Image: Secure Our Socials campaign by Human Rights Watch. Source: [Human Rights Watch](#)

In a story which [garnered considerable attention](#)³⁰ in the past year, **Sheikha Mahra bint Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, a Dubai princess, announced her divorce from Sheikh Mana on Instagram.** In doing this, the princess, used the practice of triple talaq, a custom that allows a Muslim man to divorce his wife by saying the Arabic word for divorce three times.

²⁸ [Questions and Answers: Facebook, Instagram, and Digital Targeting of LGBT People in MENA | Human Rights Watch](#)

²⁹ ["All This Terror Because of a Photo" – Human Rights Watch](#)

³⁰ See, for example, [this Google search](#).

The announcement drew [significant public attention](#)³¹ and media coverage, and sparked discussions about the use of social media for personal matters by members of royal families, raising a question of using social media to perform rituals and norms that are embedded in cultural tradition.

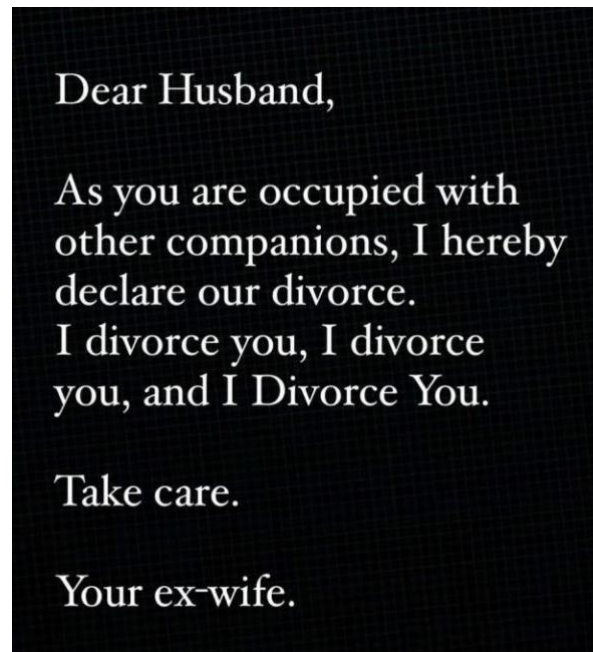


Image: Instagram screenshot [via](#) the New York Post

Other issues and developments

The first Metaverse Academy was launched in the MENA region in 2024. Based in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, Wired noted³² that the Academy “will support the development of the metaverse ecosystem in the region by offering extended reality training programmes.”

Meta has also partnered with Dubai Future Foundation and Startupbootcamp MENA to promote AI adoption in the MENA region,³³ working with startups in the UAE.



³¹ [‘I Divorce You’: Dubai princess’s Instagram declaration defies custom](#)

³² [Meta launches Metaverse Academy to train top regional talent | WIRED Middle East](#)

³³ [Meta and Dubai Future Foundation Launch AI Accelerator to Boost Innovation in MENA Region - TechAfrica News](#), [Meta Partners with Startupbootcamp MENA to Drive AI Innovation in the Region](#)

In June, the **Meta Oversight Board** review ed a case involving an Instagram post that showed a **beautician in Iran preparing a 14-year-old girl for her wedding**. The board agreed with Meta's decision to remove the post, but disagreed with the reasoning behind the removal, Arab News [explains](#).³⁴

Child marriage is allowed in Iran, Arab News wrote, “with legal ages set at 13 for girls and 15 for boys, although in some cases marriage is permitted even before children reach the set ages.” They also observed that the United Nations defines child marriage as “any marriage where at least one of the parties is under 18 years of age” and it is considered a form of forced marriage, both of which are human rights violations.

Image (right): Meta and Dubai Future Foundation launch Llama Design Drive.

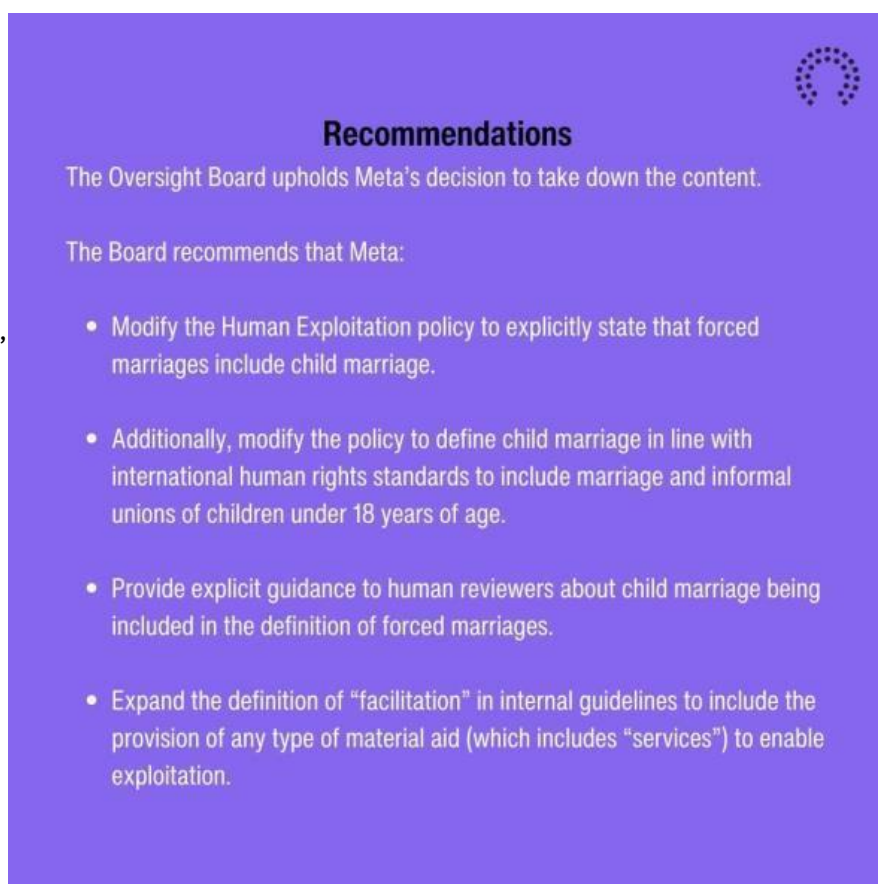
Source: [TechAfrica News](#)

In a call for public comments, the Oversight Board [stated](#)³⁵ that the content was viewed around 10.9 million times, and that it had received about 200,000 reactions and 20,000 comments .

It was shared less than 1,000 times and was reported by 203 users. Meta’s HERO system, which seeks to identify potentially violating content, also flagged it. But, after human review the content was kept up, before by flagged for further review after which it was removed.

In response to this case, the Oversight Board recommended (see image [via their Facebook page](#)) that Meta update its human exploitation policy to explicitly include child marriage as a form of forced marriage and align its definitions with international human rights standards. Additionally, it advised Meta to broaden its definition of "facilitation" to encompass any material aid or services that enable exploitation.

Meta [announced](#)³⁶ **the temporary shutdown of its social media platform Threads in Turkey at the end of April**, to ensure compliance with an interim order from the Turkish Competition Authority (TCA). The TCA issued the order in March 2024 prohibiting data sharing between Instagram and Threads citing concerns over Meta's dominant market position and lack of user consent for cross-platform data sharing.



³⁴ [Oversight Board urges Meta to strengthen rules on child marriage-related content | Arab News](#)

³⁵ [New Case Involves Video From Iran for a Child Marriage – Oversight Board](#)

³⁶ [We Will Temporarily Shut Down Threads in Türkiye – Meta](#)

Meta disagreed with the ruling but stated it would comply while appealing the decision.



Threads will no longer be available in Türkiye ✕ due to a regulatory decision

Following a decision by the Turkish Competition Authority, Threads will no longer be available in Türkiye starting from 29 April 2024. Your profile will be deactivated, but you'll be able to download your information and delete your profile at any time. We value the Threads community in Türkiye and hope to be back soon.

Image [via](#) NetBlocks on X

Other Meta platforms like Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp remained unaffected in Turkey at the time. Users of Threads in Turkey could deactivate or delete their profiles, with the option to restore their accounts if Threads [returns to the country](#).³⁷

In December, Reuters [reported](#)³⁸ that the TCA probe had ended and that “as part of the commitments Meta sent to the authority, both existing Threads users and new users will be able to use the platform by opening a Threads profile without requiring an Instagram account, when the app is reinstated for access in Turkey.”

Instagram was also [blocked](#) in Turkey during August 2024, with the government accusing the platform of ignoring demands to [remove certain posts](#).³⁹

With c. 50 million users in Turkey, [following talks](#)⁴⁰ between the Government and Instagram, and **after nine days, the block was lifted**. The decision [followed negotiations](#)⁴¹ and assurances from the platform regarding content management and compliance with Turkish regulations.

A Turkish woman was arrested for criticizing the government's decision to block Instagram, Reuters [reported](#).⁴² “In an interview posted on YouTube channel last week, when the app was still blocked, the woman was one of several passers-by who were asked what they thought about the ban,” they wrote. The incident underscores the broader concerns about freedom of expression and government control over digital platforms in the country.⁴³

³⁷ [Meta to temporarily shut down social media platform Threads in Türkiye – Middle East Monitor](#)

³⁸ [Turkish antitrust authority ends Meta probe over Threads data-sharing – Reuters](#)

³⁹ [Turkey blocks Instagram for 2nd day, amid censorship accusations - The New Arab](#)

⁴⁰ [Turkey to hold talks with Instagram officials after access ban, minister says - Al Arabiya English](#)

⁴¹ [Turkey unblocks Instagram after nine days - Al Arabiya English](#)

⁴² [Turkish woman arrested for criticizing Instagram ban, media says | Reuters](#)

⁴³ See, for example: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/turkey/freedom-net/2024> and <https://www.article19.org/resources/un-turkiye-must-respect-freedom-of-expression-online/>

Scammers in the Middle East have been exploiting Meta's Rights Manager tool to extort influencers and businesses by falsely flagging their content for copyright violations, Bloomberg [revealed](#).⁴⁴

Victims, such as Iraqi influencer Esaa Ahmed-Adnan, were asked to pay up to \$3,000 to restore their content or face continuous attacks, with some influencers losing significant revenue. The scam affected a wide range of individuals and businesses, with estimates suggesting the extortionists have made up to \$1 million.

Despite complaints, critics say Meta has been slow to address the misuse of its tools, leaving many victims vulnerable and frustrated with the platform's response time.

⁴⁴ [meta-copyright-tool-is-exploited-in-middle-east-by-extortionists | Bloomberg](#)

Chapter 3: TikTok

TikTok continues to be an increasingly influential platform in the MENA region. Nevertheless, despite its continued growth and influence, TikTok has faced criticism - particularly over posts that violate humanitarian norms and security loopholes relating to sensitive political content.

Take up in the Middle East

TikTok ads have the highest reach, globally, in eight of ten markets, data from ByteDance suggests. Although DataReportal [notes](#)⁴⁵ that “we continue to see anomalies in this data – especially in terms of elevated ad reach across the Middle East,” this is the data shared by TikTok’s parent company, and there’s no doubt that the platform has a huge reach in MENA.

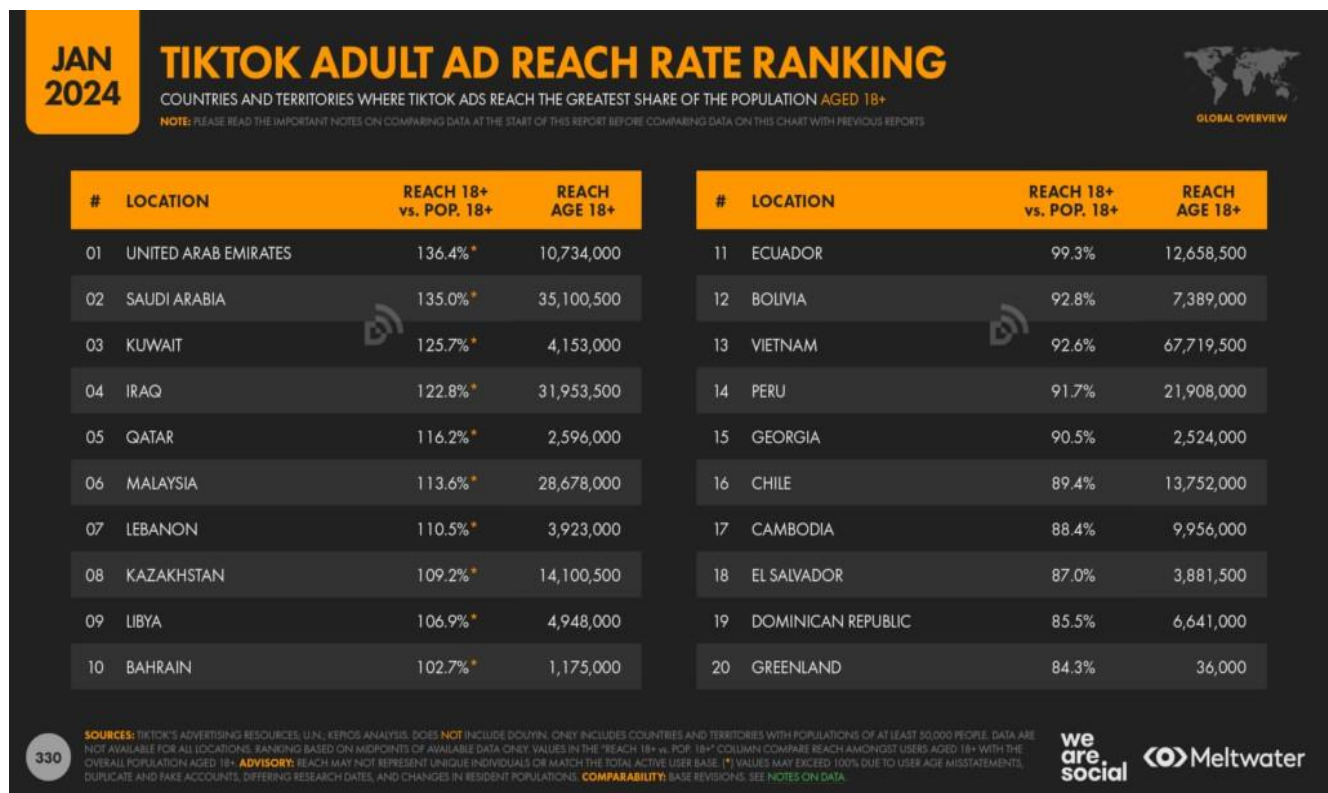


Image: TikTok adult ad reach rate ranking as of January 2024. Source: [DataReportal](#)

What works on TikTok in MENA?

Data shows that TikTok ads in Saudi Arabia and UAE keep users engaged 1.4 times longer,⁴⁶ and brands that embrace these strategies can build stronger trust, loyalty, and alignment with their audiences.

⁴⁵ [Digital 2024: Global Overview Report – DataReportal](#)

⁴⁶ [Upgrading the MENA Market: TikTok's What's Next Report Reveals Key Strategies for Brands](#)

TikTok's "[What's Next Trend Report 2024](#)"⁴⁷ outlined key strategies for brands to engage with users on the platform, emphasizing the concept of "Creative Bravery."

The report identifies three major trends: *Curiosity Peaked*, where users explore diverse perspectives and unknown topics; *Storytelling Unhinged*, which highlights the popularity of multi-layered, fan-driven narratives like the #delulu trend; and *Bridging the Trust Gap*, where consumers seek transparency and societal impact from brands.

In September 2024, [TikTok held its first Creator Summit in the MENA region](#).⁴⁸ Hosted in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, the event aimed to empower regional creators by providing them with insights into content strategy, community building, and emerging trends. Hosted by Saudi actor Faisal Alzahrani, the summit featured panels, workshops, and performances, including a live show by musical artist Eisa Abdulla.

Creators attending the event had the opportunity to explore new content formats and learn about monetization tools. Sessions included discussions with creators like Khalid Al Ameri and Noel Robinson, who shared their experiences in content creation and audience engagement. The summit also highlighted the TikTok Creator Marketplace and TikTok Live, which can help creators turn their passion into sustainable income.



Image: TikTok's Summit in Riyadh. Source: [Eat'n Stays](#)

[Kinda Ibrahim](#), TikTok's Regional General Manager, [said](#)⁴⁹ "Being a content creator today is about so much more than just making videos; creators inspire, connect, and entertain across generations and borders, shaping culture and sparking trends. It's also about enjoying the process and sharing your passions with the world which is why we remain dedicated to making TikTok a platform where creators have the support they need throughout their entire journey, empowering them to succeed in every aspect."

⁴⁷ [TikTok What's Next 2024 Trend Report](#)

⁴⁸ [TikTok's future in Middle East is 'about more than just trends,' says regional general manager | Arab News](#)

⁴⁹ [TikTok's Summit in Riyadh: Empowering Regional Creators to Succeed | Eat'n Stays](#)

TikTok for Businesses and Brands

Data [published](#)⁵⁰ at the start of the year revealed that the **third most popular non-English tag on TikTok is the Arabic #اكسبلور**. This tag is a phonetic transliteration of the English word "explore" rather than a standard Arabic word. Remarkably, this Arabic rendition has surpassed its English counterpart, #explore, by attracting nearly a trillion *more* views.

A sample video on TikTok with the #اكسبلور hashtag. Source: [TikTok](#)

According to the "[TikTok Made Me](#)"⁵¹ report by Ipsos, **TikTok has significant influence on consumer behavior across the MENAT** (Middle East, North Africa and Turkey) region, particularly in the travel, entertainment, food & beverage, and automotive sectors.

The report reveals that 80% of consumers in the region have been influenced to make unplanned, sometimes impulsive, purchases after encountering TikTok content. Users find branded content engaging, relevant, and informative, the report notes, with over half making unplanned purchases after viewing videos or sponsored posts. Specifically, 1 in 2 users (50%) were influenced by travel-related content, 3 in 5 by entertainment videos, and similar numbers took action due to food and beverage, or cooking, related content on TikTok. Meanwhile, more than a third acted within a week, in response to automotive content, seeking reviews, visiting websites, and engaging with dealerships.



#اكسبلور explore #قطر



osamah_sa...

▶ 1.8M



The Saudi Pro League (SPL) has partnered with TikTok⁵² **for the 2024-25 season.** As part of this collaboration, TikTok will launch an SPL Exclusive Hub, providing fans with immersive content from the league's clubs and partners.

Image: Representatives from Saudi Pro League and Tik Tok at the signing. Source: [Campaign Middle East](#)

⁵⁰ [Digital 2024: 5 billion social media users - We Are Social USA](#)

⁵¹ [TikTok marketing: The region's most successful sectors - Campaign Middle East](#)

⁵² [Saudi Pro League, TikTok partner to boost digital fan experience | Campaign Middle East](#)

This partnership offers fans innovative ways to engage with their favorite teams and players. Additionally, **TikTok will feature exclusive behind-the-scenes content**, player interviews, and match-day experiences, while also giving creators access to unique aspects of the league.

With over 44.2 million likes and 2.5 million followers on TikTok, the SPL's digital presence will be further amplified through the hashtag #SaudiLeague. The partnership aligns with SPL's goal of becoming a top global football league by modernizing fan engagement and leveraging TikTok's creative platform to reach a broader audience.⁴⁸

A viral Dubai chocolate bar, originally created by Fix Dessert Chocolatier in Dubai, has become a global sensation thanks to TikTok, with its unique (and delicious!) combination of pistachio filling, kataifi (shredded pastry), and milk chocolate.

This trend has spread internationally, inspiring local bakeries, including those in Metro Detroit, to create their own versions. Shops like Farhat Sweets and House of Chimney Cakes have seen significant sales increases, with Farhat Sweets reporting a 25% boost.



Image: The Dubai chocolate bar. Source: [Today.com](https://www.today.com)



Pizza Hut UAE has launched a promotion called "Pay With Your Trend" in 2024, all owing customers to use TikTok content as currency to purchase its customizable "My Box" meal. This initiative encourages users to create TikTok videos featuring a trending social media concept and a My Box, then post the video publicly while tagging @PizzaHutUAE and using the hashtag #YourTermsYourConditions.

In return, participants receive a promo code for a free My Box. The campaign aims to democratize content creation rewards, traditionally reserved for influencers, by allowing anyone to participate regardless of their follower count. Ahmed Sabri, Marketing Lead at Pizza Hut Middle East & Pakistan, said in a [press release for the campaign](#)⁵³ that the promotion is a way to engage with younger audiences by tapping into their passions and the platforms they use daily.

⁵³ [Pizza Hut UAE turns TikTok content into currency as it launches 'Pay With Your Trend'](#)



Image: PizzaHut's PayWith Your Trend campaign with #YourTermsYourConditions campaign.

Source: [Zawya](#)

Baraa Habab, a 27-year-old Syrian software engineer, discovered a critical security loophole in TikTok that allowed users to manipulate the platform's gift-giving system.⁵⁴

After demonstrating the flaw live, Baraa traveled to Washington to meet with TikTok's support team, who resolved the issue within 72 hours. He was rewarded \$10,000 for his discovery. This is not Baraa's first achievement; he previously uncovered security vulnerabilities in major platforms like Facebook and the websites of Egyptian banks.

Image [via](#) MiddleEastMonitor



In Saudi Arabia, campaigns like Diriyah Season are [utilizing TikTok's Out of Phone \(OOP\) solution](#)⁵⁵ to blend digital content with out-of-home (OOH) advertising. TikTok's Out of Phone initiative extends its platform beyond mobile screens, bringing content to billboards, cinemas, airports, and more, enabling brands to amplify their reach through immersive experiences in physical spaces.

⁵⁴ [Young Syria man finds security loopholes in TikTok – Middle East Monitor](#)

⁵⁵ [The power of innovation and collaboration in Saudi Arabia - Campaign Middle East; Introducing Out of Phone: TikTok Beyond the Mobile Screen; Amr Diab as OPPO's new brand ambassador - Campaign Middle East](#)



Image: Diriyah Season campaign on TikTok. Source: [Campaign Middle East](#)

Mobile phone brand Oppo partnered with Egyptian singer Amr Diab as its new brand ambassador, demonstrating how TikTok is being used to connect regional audiences with influential figures.

TikTok launched the "I learned this on TikTok" campaign in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, partnering with regional agency Kijamii to highlight the platform's role in learning and discovery. The campaign emphasized TikTok as a tool for acquiring practical skills and knowledge. The first phase focused on integrating TikTok into daily life, while the second showcased personalized features.

Two videos, localized for Egyptian and Saudi audiences, depicted a humorous scene where a coach uses TikTok tips to cure hiccups and learn stretches, demonstrating TikTok's educational value through relatable content.

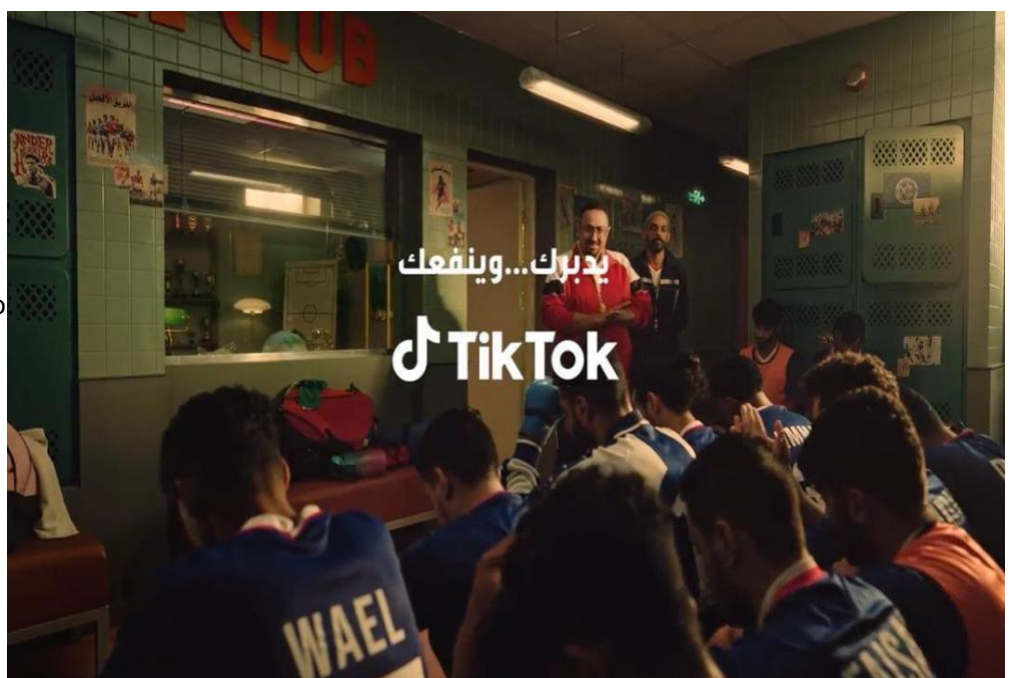


Image: [Campaign Middle East](#)

Chapter 4: Snapchat

Snapchat has a growing presence in the Middle East, particularly in the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) region. Notably, Snapchat has traction among younger demographics, particularly in Saudi Arabia.

[Snapchat has immense popularity in Saudi Arabia](#),⁵⁶ where it reaches over 90% of individuals aged 13 to 34, and has seen a [20% year-on-year increase in daily active users](#).⁵⁷ On average, users open the app more than 50 times per day, slightly higher than the regional average of 45 times per day. and **it boasts a monthly addressable reach of over 22 million users**. Snapchat is also used by 71% of parents in the Kingdom.

The platform's success is attributed to its focus on enhancing relationships between friends and family through visual communication.

To maintain its momentum, Snapchat has integrated AI tools, such as the 'My AI' chatbot powered by OpenAI's Chat GPT and new AR experiences for users. Despite facing competition from platforms like Instagram and TikTok, [Snapchat continues to innovate with AR technology](#)⁵⁸ and plans to expand its presence by opening new offices in Qatar and a creative studio in Saudi Arabia later in 2024.

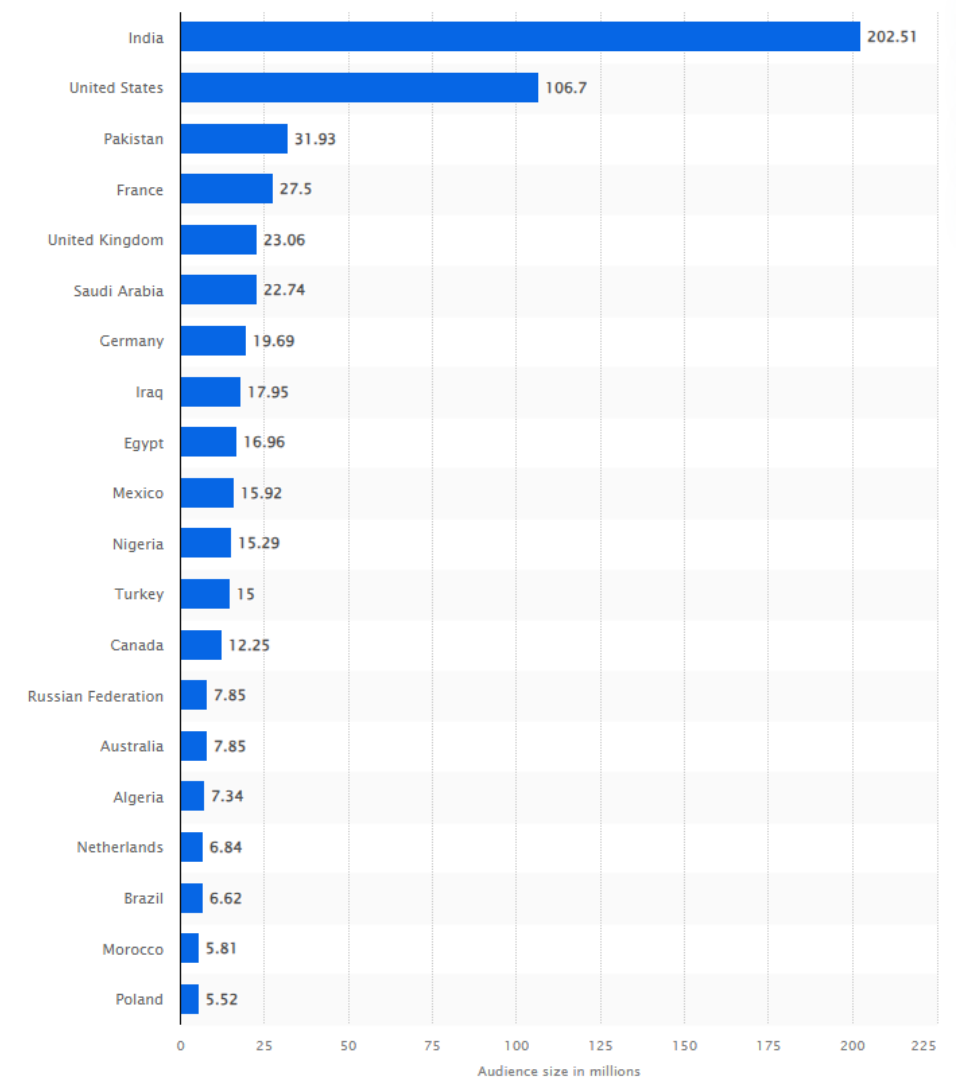


Image: Rankings of Snapchat audience size as of April 2024. Source: [Statista](#)

Note: The link directs to the source's current, live data and may not reflect the specific historical figures cited in this report.

⁵⁶ [‘If it’s happening in the Kingdom, chances are it’s on Snapchat’ | Arab News](#)

⁵⁷ [Middle East and North Africa Digital Advertising Market to Surpass Valuation of USD 44,827.0 Million by 2032 | Astute Analytica](#)

⁵⁸ [Can Snapchat’s Middle East momentum continue? | The National](#)

Hussein Freijeh, Snap Inc.'s Vice President for the MENA region, highlighted the platform's importance in bolstering the local creator community, arguing that the latest updates will enhance user engagement and offer fresh opportunities for both creators and brands.⁵⁹ As part of this, Snapchat has invested substantively in localization. [Partnering with OptimizeApp](#),⁶⁰ a Kuwait-based advertising technology startup, **Snap aims to support 8,000 small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the MENA region by offering tailored digital advertising solutions.**

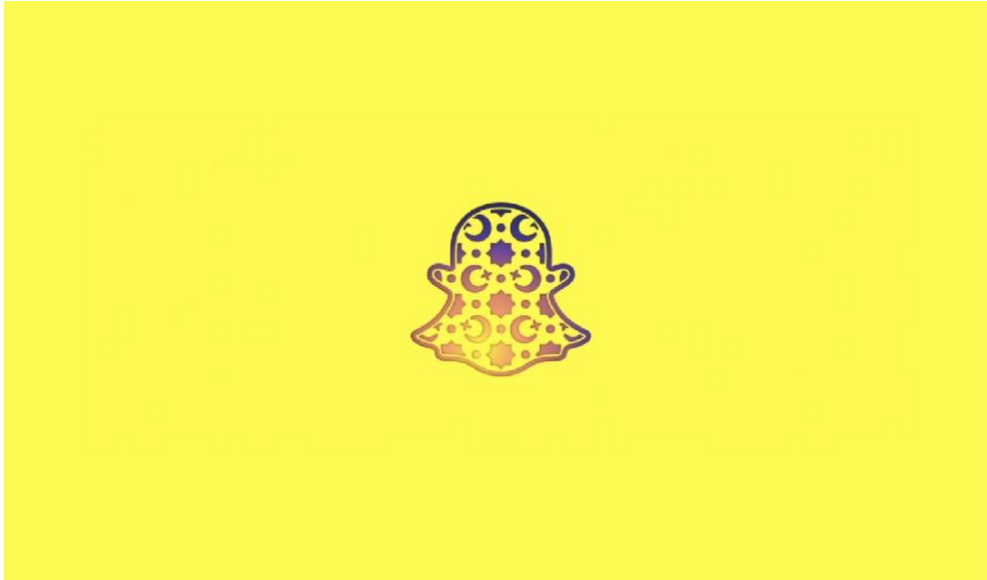


Image: Snapchat's localized logo in MENA. Source: [Campaign Middle East](#)

In May 2024, Snapchat [launched](#)⁶¹ its first Saudi-focused campaign, "Telgana Ala Snap" ("Find us on Snap"), celebrating its role in daily Saudi life. Despite its popularity, many brands have yet to fully utilize Snapchat's capabilities, particularly its augmented reality (AR) features, which have shown to increase conversion rates by 94% in Saudi Arabia. For example, this year during Ramadan Snapchat launched Snap AR Ramadan mall for its third season, offering a digital retail shopping experience for Snapchatters to engage with brands including Givenchy and Toyota.



Image: Telgana Ala Campaign Snapchat. Source: [Arab News](#)

⁵⁹ [Snapchat unveils platform overhaul and new AR features at Snap Partner Summit 2024 - Saudi Gazette](#)

⁶⁰ [Snapchat join forces with OptimizeApp to help SMEs in the region](#)

⁶¹ [Snap launches Saudi-focused film 'Telgana Ala Snap' – Arab News](#)

Successful brand campaigns on Snapchat, such as The Chefz, have seen impressive results, such as an average Lens playtime of 23.82 seconds and a return on ad spend exceeding 20x.⁶² Snapchat's Stories revenue share program and the Snap Star Collab Studio have aided the creator landscape by integrating ads seamlessly and connecting creators with brands, helping them grow their audience and engagement through authentic content. This growth highlights Snapchat's appeal to younger audiences seeking ephemeral and interactive content⁵⁸.



Image: SnapAR: Ramadan Mall. Source: [Campaign ME](#)

At the [Web Summit Qatar](#)⁶³ 2024, Snap showcased how AR is transforming communication, entertainment, and business. With over 85% of MENA daily users interacting with AR lenses, Snap's AR technology is also being adopted by brands in sectors like tourism, telecommunications, and sports, helping them engage with customers in innovative ways.

Snap launched a multi-brand augmented reality (AR) campaign called "Kingdom's Lenscape" to celebrate Saudi Arabia's 94th National Day. The [campaign](#)⁶⁴ featured two AR solutions aimed at connecting users with brands through immersive experiences. The first, "FAKHAR," allows users to explore brands like The Saudi Investment Bank, Laverne, and Alwaleed Philanthropies in dedicated AR environments that showcase their contributions to the Kingdom's progress. The second, "KARAM," focuses on generosity and patriotism, offering exclusive deals and limited-edition products from brands such as Ounass, Huda Beauty, and Spotify in an AR marketplace. This initiative taps into the culture of gifting central to Saudi National Day, with Snap aiming to inspire Saudis with new products and ideas.

⁶² [The Chefz Succeeds With 2023 Founding Day AR Campaign on Snapchat – Snapchat for Business](#)

⁶³ [How Snap is advancing the creator community in the Middle East | Web Summit Qatar, Doha](#)

⁶⁴ [Snap launches multi-brand augmented reality campaign for Saudi National Day - CampaignME](#)



According to a study on [social shopping in the KSA and UAE](#)⁶⁵ by National Research Group, some metrics are given as indicators on consumer behavior of overall Snapchatters:

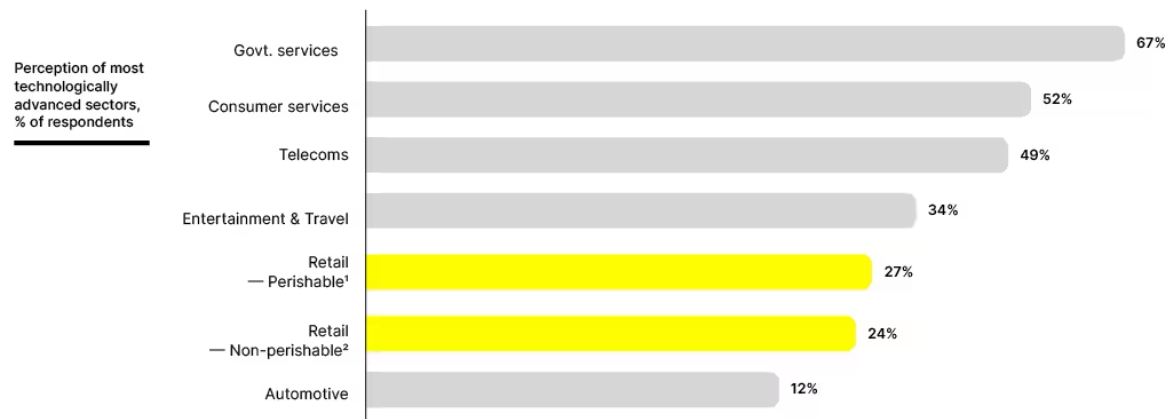
- **High Engagement:** 97% of Snapchatters discover new products via social ads and 93% share posts from brands they care about.
- **Trendsetters:** 92% consider themselves trendsetters in discovering new brand s.
- **Trust and Influence:** 95% trust brands recommended by friends/family (vs. 79% of non-Snapchatters).
- **Increased Spending:** Snapchatters spend **92% higher** on apparel and **26% higher** on household products compared to users on other platforms.

Another report by Kearney⁶² indicates the gap between consumer expectations and re tail innovation in Saudi Arabia, where consumers are rapidly [adopting digital technologies](#),⁶⁶ but retailers are struggling to keep pace.

Despite a high internet penetration rate of 97% and significant mobile usage, less than 30% of consumers perceive the retail sector as technologically advanced. Key areas for improvement are highlighted, including advertising, branding, eCommerce, in-store experience, and supply chain optimization. Retailers face challenges such as underinvestment in digital tools, ineffective use of customer data, and resistance to change. The report suggests that retailers must accelerate their digital transformation to meet consumer demands for omnichannel experiences and personalized engagement. By focusing on areas like data-driven advertising, AR-powered product visualization, and seamless omnichannel operations, retailers can bridge the gap and enhance customer satisfaction.

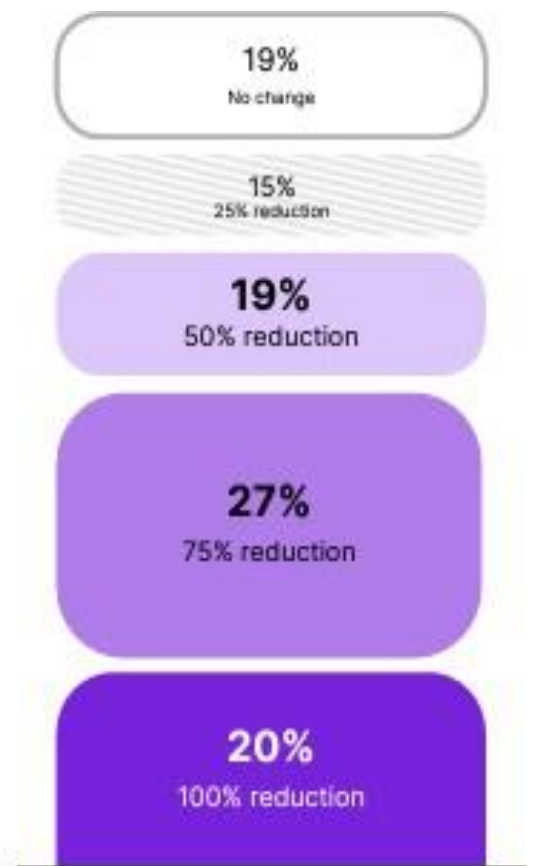
⁶⁵ [See Why Snapchat Is a Top Social Shopping Platform in KSA and UAE](#)

⁶⁶ [KSA Digital Transformation | Snapchat for Business](#)



67

Figure 9: Expected change in number of returned items with use of AR / AI try-on pre-purchase, % of respondents



⁶⁷ Reduction in return by AR/AI try-on in Snapchat. Source: [Snapchat for Business](#)



Chapter 5: YouTube and Online Video

YouTube is the leading online video platform in MENA. Among the top five countries globally for [YouTube penetration](#),⁶⁸ three are in the Middle East: the UAE ranks first with 94.2%, Israel is second with 93.6%, and Saudi Arabia is fourth with 89.7%.



Image: Top 5 countries YouTube penetration rate as of July 2024. Source: [Statista](#)

Note: The link directs to the source's current, live data and may not reflect the specific historical figures cited in this report.

There is a significant shift in viewer behavior in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, where audiences are increasingly watching YouTube on Connected TV (CTV). By May 2024, CTV viewership reached over 2.5 million in the UAE, more than 12 million in Saudi Arabia, and over 600,000 in Qatar. A high percentage of viewers in the UAE and [Saudi Arabia cred it YouTube with influencing their purchase decisions and brand discovery](#).⁶⁹

As shared by [YouTube Youth](#)⁷⁰, **the platform has launched new initiatives to enhance teen wellbeing across the MENA region.** In collaboration with independent experts, **YouTube has introduced additional safeguards on content recommendations for teens**, focusing on limiting repetitive exposure to content that could negatively impact self-esteem, such as videos idealizing certain physical traits or promoting social aggression.

A new "supervised experience" feature allows parents and teens to link accounts through the Family Centre hub, providing shared insights into channel activity and notifications on key actions like uploads or livestreams. This aims to foster responsible content creation while respecting teen autonomy. YouTube is also partnering with organizations like the World Health Organization (WHO) to develop resources on mental health for teens, ensuring that their privacy, safety, and wellbeing remain central to these efforts.

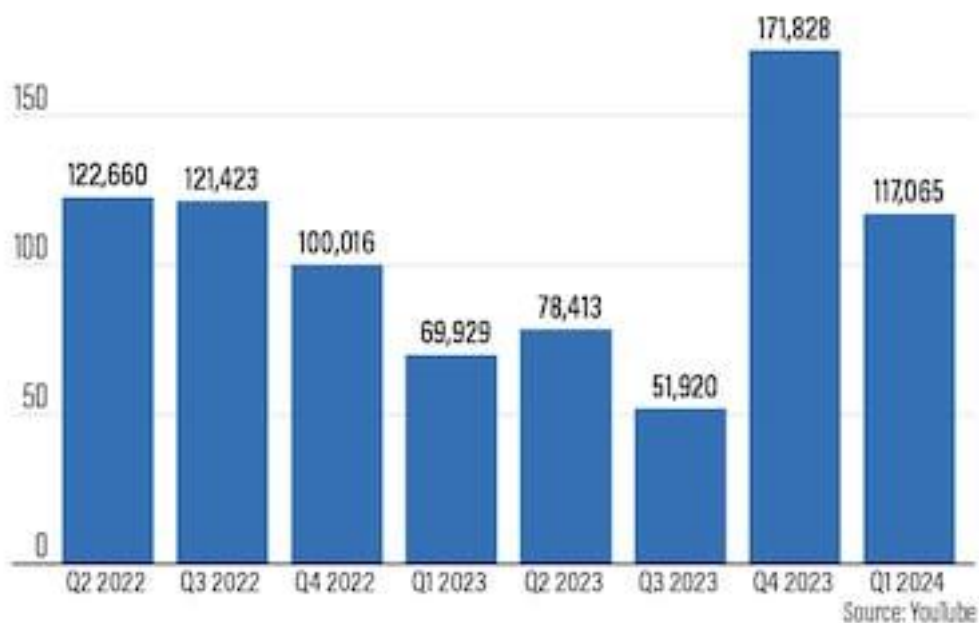
⁶⁸ [UAE has the highest adult reach rate at 94.1% among others](#)

⁶⁹ [UAE, Saudi, Qatar viewers shift to watching YouTube on Connected TV - Campaign Middle East, Viewers in Saudi Arabia and UAE Choose YouTube as Their #1 Platform](#)

⁷⁰ [Expanding our support for teen wellbeing on YouTube across the Middle East and North Africa](#)

YouTube is using generative AI to combat the growing issue of misinformation in the MENA region, including deepfakes, misleading thumbnails, and repurposed content. The platform removed over 117,000 videos globally in the first quarter of 2024, a 67% increase from the previous year. Tarek Amin, YouTube's regional director for the Middle East, Africa, and Turkey, explains that YouTube uses a combination of AI tools and human oversight to detect and remove harmful content.

MISINFORMATION VIDEOS REMOVED BY YOUTUBE GLOBALLY



Generative AI allows YouTube to expand its datasets for faster detection. Additionally, YouTube has introduced guidelines requiring creators to disclose when their content is AI-generated or altered, with penalties for non-compliance. The platform says that it is aiming to balance [preventing misinformation](#)⁷¹ while ensuring legitimate viewpoints are not suppressed⁶⁸.

The oud, a traditional musical instrument central to the Middle East and North Africa's culture, was celebrated through a special "Yoodle" on YouTube. Kuwaiti artist Ahmed El Refaei designed the Yoodle, drawing inspiration from the oud's craftsmanship and its cultural significance across the region.

Two prominent female YouTube creators were featured, Azza Zarour and Esraa Nabil, who shared their personal connections with the instrument. Zarour, a musician with over 3 million subscribers, emphasized her goal of breaking gender barriers in the male-dominated field of oud playing, while Nabil reflected on the nostalgic value of the instrument from her childhood. [A curated playlist was created](#)⁷² that blends traditional and contemporary oud music, featuring educational content, musical performances, and tutorials on playing and crafting the instrument.

⁷¹ [How YouTube Middle East is combating misinformation with generative AI | The National](#)

⁷² [YouTube's ode to the heart & soul of music in the Middle East](#)

[YouTube's official blog](#)⁷³ celebrated the achievements of Arab women content creators breaking into male-dominated spaces, particularly through the YouTube Batala initiative.

Launched in 2017, Batala (meaning "heroine" in Arabic) was created to spotlight women-led channels in the MENA region. Now in its fourth edition, Batala has evolved into a mentorship program for women creators. The post features Rima Alostta, a gaming content creator, who shares her experience of overcoming challenges in a space traditionally dominated by men. She emphasized that her success has paved the way for other Arab women in gaming, and that the support from YouTube and her audience has been crucial. Alostta also expressed her desire to create educational videos to help other Arab women start their own gaming channels.



Image: Rima Alostta at a Batala session. Source: [YouTube](#)

Gaming has emerged as a major genre in the MENA region. Saudi Arabia's interest in the gaming industry is a key part of its broader strategy to diversify its economy away from oil dependence, as outlined in its Vision 2030 plan. The Kingdom has invested heavily in gaming and esports, with initiatives like the \$38 billion investment through the Public [Investment Fund \(PIF\)](#) and the establishment of [Savvy Games Group](#).⁷⁴ **Saudi Arabia aims to become a global hub for gaming by 2030, creating 39,000 jobs and contributing \$13 billion to its GDP.** [The country has also launched various infrastructure projects](#),⁷⁵ such as esports arenas and gaming districts like Qiddiya City, and hosted major global events like the Esports World Cup.

⁷³ [Meet the Arab women creators breaking through male-dominated spaces - YouTube Blog](#)

⁷⁴ [Saudi Arabia unveils \\$120m esports and gaming investment funds at LEAP 2024](#)

⁷⁵ [Gaming Industry: Saudi Arabia Drives a Boom in Global Investment | Leaders; Navigating the Landscape of Esports and Gaming in Saudi Arabia](#)



Image: Signing at LEAP2024. Source: [Esports Insider](#)

The satirical YouTube cartoon Masameer has captured the changing societal and cultural dynamics in Saudi Arabia. Since its debut in 2011, Masameer has gained a cult following for its bold, acerbic humor and biting social commentary, tackling issues such as consumerism, religious fundamentalism, and institutional corruption.

Masameer has faced censorship challenges, especially after its creators pushed boundaries with controversial topics like classism and Islamic extremism.

The series' success led to a Netflix deal in 2020, but the imprisonment of producer Abdul Aziz al-Muzaini highlights the precarious balance between creative freedom and state control in Saudi Arabia's evolving entertainment landscape, Middle East Eye [notes](#).⁷⁶

Abdulaziz Al-Muzaini, a co-creator of the [show](#)⁷⁷, was sentenced to 18 years in prison by Saudi authorities in June 2024 for charges related to "undermining national unity" and "insulting public figures."



Image: A still from Masameer. Source: [Middle East Eye](#)

⁷⁶ [Masameer: How a zany YouTube cartoon captured the pulse of a changing Saudi Arabia | Middle East Eye](#)

⁷⁷ [Netflix Show Earns Its Saudi Creator Plaudits, and a Prison Sentence](#)

Despite YouTube’s dominant status in online video in MENA, highly segmented new platforms have emerged, of which Blinx Studio is one of them. [Blinx](#),⁷⁸ a digital media hub targeting Gen Z and Millennials in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), officially launched on September 14, 2023. The platform is headquartered in Dubai Media City and focuses on delivering authentic storytelling across various genres, including entertainment, news, lifestyle, and climate change. Blinx employs around 150 young professionals from across the MENA region, emphasizing local talent development. The company has received significant investment from Mubadala and Abu Dhabi Catalyst Partners, each contributing \$75 million to support its growth and expansion.



Image: Blinx Studio. Source: [Idea Systems](#)



[Podcast is another trending form on YouTube in Saudi Arabia.](#)⁷⁹

YouTube has launched a new podcast series, **Hekayat YouTube**, focusing on Saudi youth, featuring prominent Saudi creators and public figures discussing topics relevant to Gen-Z in the Kingdom.

The series covers areas like artificial intelligence, wellbeing, the creator economy, and sports, aiming to foster dialogue between decision-makers and young Saudis. The podcast is available on other platforms, including Spotify.

⁷⁸ [Arab Digital Media Startup Blinx Is Grabbing Millions of Gen-Z Eyeballs With ‘Fresh and Playful’ Fare, Says Chief Nakhlé Elhage \(EXCLUSIVE\)](#)

⁷⁹ [YouTube announces new podcast series focusing on Saudi youth - Campaign Middle East;](#)

Cristiano Ronaldo was awarded of a Guinness World Records title for gaining [the most YouTube subscribers in 24 hours](#).⁸⁰

His channel, "UR - Cristiano," amassed an impressive 19,729,827 subscribers within the first day of its launch⁷⁷

Image: Cristiano Ronaldo awarded with Guinness World Records.

Source: [Guinness World Records](#)



[A Saudi podcast episode from the show Fnjan by Thmanyah broke the world record](#)⁸¹ for the most-viewed podcast on YouTube, amassing over 110 million views, where 74% of views came from outside the Kingdom.

The episode, titled "Secrets to Thriving Relationships," featured relationship coach Yasser Al Hazimi and resonated globally due to its relatable content on personal development and relationships. The episode's success was driven by its conversational style, shareable quotes, and international appeal, with 21% of viewers using English subtitles.



Image: Host Abdulrahman Abu Maleh and featured guest Yasser Al Hazimi awarded the Guinness World Record. Source: [Guinness World Records](#)

YouTube has recently implemented significant price hikes for its Premium and Music services in 16 countries, including regions in Europe, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. For example, Norway saw a 42% increase in the cost of an Individual subscription, while the Czech Republic experienced a 44.6% rise for Family plans. [These price increases](#),⁸² effective from November 4, 2024,

⁸⁰ [Cristiano Ronaldo extends social media domination as YouTube channel smashes record](#)

⁸¹ [Saudi podcast episode tops global YouTube charts with over 100 million views | Guinness World Records](#)

⁸² [YouTube Music gets more expensive as users in 16 countries report major price hikes for YouTube Premium](#)

have sparked frustration among users, many of whom feel that the features offered by YouTube Premium do not justify the higher costs⁷⁹.

Meanwhile, YouTube has expanded its [Music and Premium services to Morocco, Libya, and Yemen](#),⁸³ allowing users in these countries access to ad-free music streaming, offline downloads, and background play. This expansion provides users with over 100 million official songs and personalized music recommendations through the YouTube Music app⁸⁰.

Ania Kubow is a popular YouTuber, and host of the channel [Code with Ania Kubow](#). With an enormous subscriber base, she opened a [90s styled cafe in Dubai](#),⁸⁴ [Homebrew](#).

The opening of a brick-and-mortar business by an online influencer has given an exemplary example on implications of extending online influence to offline business for monetization.

Featured Products



Hot and Cold Coffee

An exciting selection of speciality coffee and manual brews in hot and cold.



Locally Sourced Menu

A curated menu of nostalgic Dubai tastes with locally sourced ingredients.



Fresh Juices and Smoothies

A large array of fresh juices, smoothies as well as some old classics.

⁸³ [YouTube Music & Premium expands to Morocco, Libya and Yemen](#)

⁸⁴ [Dubai YouTube sensation Ania Kubow opens '90s-themed café - Caterer Middle East](#)

Chapter 6: Messaging apps

WhatsApp

WhatsApp is widely used in business and daily communication in the MENA region. However, controversies have been surrounded by its potential for undue conduct, such as scams, cyberspying, manipulations, and accusation of censorship by authorities and Meta.

– Political Life and Censorship

WhatsApp is completely banned in Iran and intermittently banned in Syria. Moreover, the features of voice and video calls are disabled in Egypt, Qatar, Jordan, and the UAE.

Meta has taken [action against a cluster of malicious accounts](#)⁸⁵ linked to APT42, an Iranian threat actor, which attempted social engineering attacks via WhatsApp targeting individuals in Israel, Palestine, Iran, the US, and the UK. These attacks focused on political and diplomatic figures, using phishing tactics to steal credentials. The accounts posed as technical support for major tech companies. User reports helped block these activities, and no accounts were compromised.

Meta reported that Iranian hackers targeted the WhatsApp accounts of staffers from both President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump. The attack was initiated by Iranian hackers posed as tech support of big companies, aiming to gather sensitive information and disrupt communications. [Meta detected and blocked the hacking attempts](#),⁸⁶ emphasizing the ongoing threat of cyberattacks against political figures, the vulnerabilities in digital communication platforms, and the persistent efforts by state-sponsored groups to access confidential information.

[WhatsApp messages seen by The Guardian revealed that British mothers detained in the Roj camp in northern Syria](#)⁸⁷ are facing a dire situation, where they fear for their lives due to inadequate medical care and harsh living conditions. These women, including Shamima Begum, are among approximately 60 UK citizens held in the camp, which is known for its poor conditions, including child malnutrition and deaths from treatable illnesses.

Despite international pressure and a UN report urging countries to protect their nationals' right to life, the UK government has been reluctant to repatriate these individuals, citing national security concerns. The detainees' communication is heavily restricted and attempts to contact families pose significant risks due to strict surveillance and punitive measures by camp authorities.

- Scams

⁸⁵ [Taking Action Against Malicious Accounts in Iran | Meta](#)

⁸⁶ [WhatsApp accounts of Biden and Trump staffers targeted by Iranian hackers, Meta says – The Irish Times; Iranian Cyber-Spying Group Posed as Tech Support to Target U.S. Political Officials' WhatsApp Accounts](#)

⁸⁷ [WhatsApp messages reveal UK mothers detained in Syria fear death amid worsening conditions | Arab News](#)

A prevalent [job scam is circulating via WhatsApp in the UAE](#), known as "smishing"⁸⁸ whereby scammers send fraudulent job offers to extract personal information.

Experts highlight several red flags, such as unsolicited messages, requests for personal details, and offers that seem too good to be true. Victims are advised to verify the legitimacy of job offers by contacting companies directly and to avoid sharing sensitive information. Authorities urge increased vigilance and awareness to combat these scams effectively.

[A WhatsApp group in Malawi played a crucial role](#),⁸⁹ serving as a support forum, in rescuing over 50 Malawian women who were trafficked to Oman and forced to work in slave-like conditions, the BBC reported.



These women were lured to Oman with promises of well-paying jobs but found themselves trapped in exploitative situations, often having their passports confiscated and being subjected to abuse.

The WhatsApp group, consisting of concerned Malawians, facilitated communication among the victims, enabling them to share their locations and experiences through video recordings and messages. This collective effort helped raise awareness of this issue and coordinate with authorities, ultimately leading to the successful rescue and repatriation of the trafficked women.

- Business

FedEx improved last-mile delivery services in Saudi Arabia by integrating WhatsApp into their communication strategy. By utilizing WhatsApp, FedEx aims to provide a more efficient and convenient service, enabling customers to track packages, confirm deliveries, and communicate with customer service more effectively. This move is part of [FedEx's broader effort to leverage digital tools](#)⁹⁰ to streamline delivery operations in the region.

Telegram

As of 2024, [Telegram has over 950 million active users globally](#),⁹¹ with the MENA region (Middle East and North Africa) accounting for 8% of its user base. The platform's popularity in the Middle East is underscored by substantial download figures, with countries like Egypt and Saudi Arabia having 14.85 million and 5.88 million downloads, respectively.

Additionally, **Telegram has attracted investment from major Middle Eastern entities such as Mubadala and Abu Dhabi Catalyst Partners, each investing \$75 million in the app, reflecting the**

⁸⁸ [WhatsApp job scam: Experts warn of 'red flags' as UAE residents battle ongoing 'smishing' | Arabian Business](#)

⁸⁹ [How a Malawi WhatsApp group helped save women trafficked to Oman](#)

⁹⁰ [FedEx enhances last-mile delivery in Saudi Arabia with WhatsApp](#)

⁹¹ [Telegram Statistics: Revenue, Users, Demographics 2024; Telegram Revenue and Usage Statistics \(2024\) - Business of Apps;](#)

region's strategic importance to Telegram's growth and expansion efforts. The company is considering listing on the US stock market once it reaches its profitability targets.⁹²

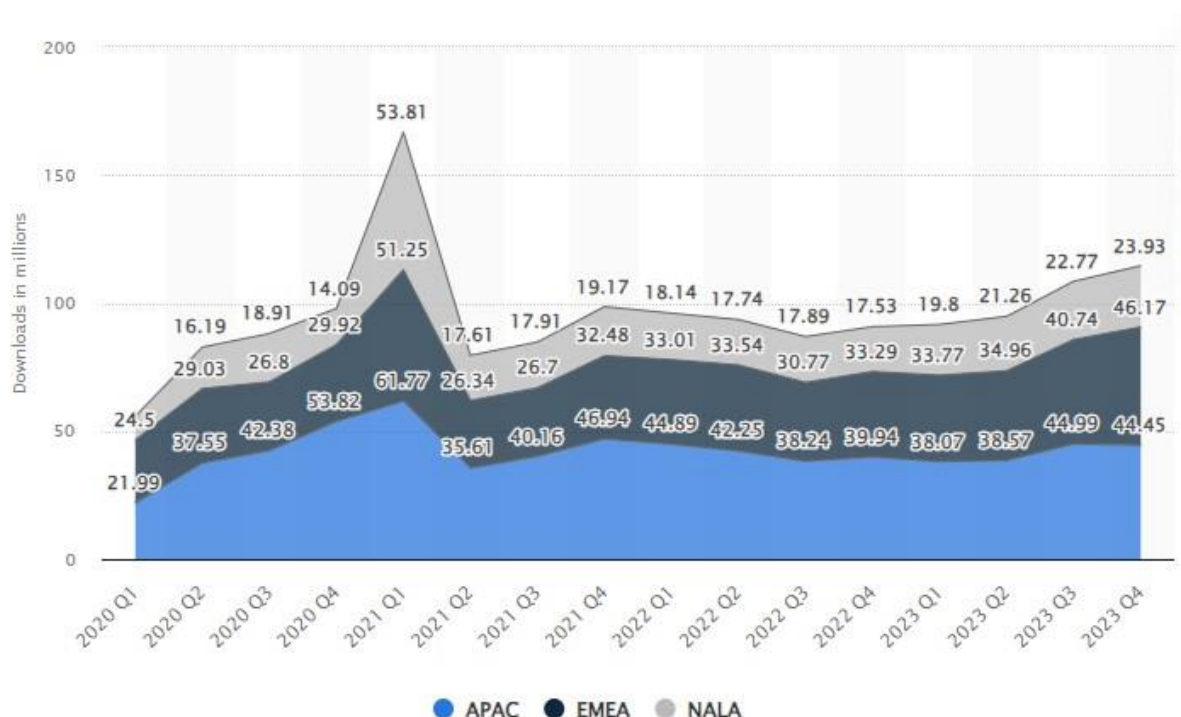


Image: Telegram downloads globally. Source: [Statista](#) > Note: The link directs to the source's current, live data and may not reflect the specific historical figures cited in this report.

[Telegram CEO Pavel Durov received criticism](#)⁹³ of French authorities following his arrest in Paris over allegations of insufficient content moderation on the platform, and faces charges of enabling criminal activity on Telegram, including complicity in spreading child abuse images and drug trafficking.



Durov, originally from Russia and now residing in Dubai, where Telegram is headquartered, was charged with enabling illegal activities such as drug trafficking and the distribution of child sexual abuse images. He described the charges as "misguided" and emphasized that holding him personally accountable for users' actions is unjust, raising a broader debate about accountability: should responsibility lie with users or the platform itself?

[Telegram has since announced it will provide users' IP addresses and phone numbers to authorities](#)⁹⁴ with valid legal requests, such as search warrants. In a statement, Durov stated that **99.999%** of users are not involved in crime.

Critics argue that Telegram has become a hub for misinformation and illegal content, partly due to its

⁹² [Dubai-based Telegram hits 900mIn users, weighs possible IPO - FT](#)

⁹³ [Telegram messaging app CEO Durov arrested in France | Reuters](#)

⁹⁴ [Telegram will now provide some user data to authorities](#)

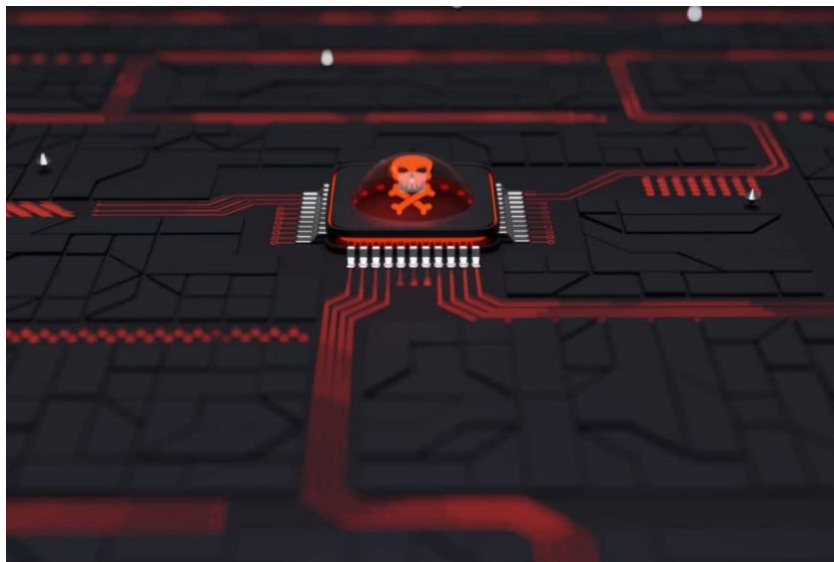
group size limit of 200,000 members, compared to WhatsApp's limit of 1,000. However, for some, the arrest of the 39-year-old CEO has raised concerns about free speech online. Telegram's new policy was met with concerns, especially in regions like Russia, Belarus, and the Middle East, where political dissidents rely on the platform.

A leak of U.S. intelligence documents on Telegram was reported, detailing Israel's potential plans to attack Iran. The documents, shared by the Telegram channel "Middle East Spectator," are claimed to be [highly classified](#)⁹⁵ and analyze Israeli military strategies, though their authenticity has not been verified. The leak occurs amid heightened tensions following Iran's missile attack on Israel in retaliation for the assassination of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah. U.S. officials have not publicly commented on the leak, but it has raised concerns about security breaches within the intelligence community, especially given the sensitive nature of the information and its potential impact on Middle Eastern geopolitical dynamics.

Edge Middle East also reported on [a global spyware campaign targeting the fintech industry](#),⁹⁶ with the attack being delivered through the messaging platform Telegram.

According to Kaspersky, a cybersecurity firm, this campaign has impacted numerous companies worldwide. The spyware is distributed via malicious Telegram messages and is designed to steal sensitive financial data. The report highlights that the fintech sector has been particularly vulnerable to these types of cyberattacks, which have increased in frequency and sophistication.

No specific figures or dates are disclosed, but it is a growing threat posed by cybercriminals using Telegram to infiltrate financial systems.



⁹⁵ [A Telegram group posted what it calls 'highly classified' US documents about Israel's attack plans; Pro-Iranian account leaks alleged U.S. intel on Israel's attack plans](#)

⁹⁶ [Global Spyware Campaign Hits Fintech Industry via Telegram, Kaspersky Reports - Edge Middle East](#)

Chapter 7: X (formerly Twitter)

Among the countries with the highest number of users on X (formerly Twitter) in 2024, only two countries in the MENA region are [on the list](#):⁹⁷ **Turkey is ranked the 7th with 19.74 million users, followed by Saudi Arabia ranked at 9th with 16.28 million users.**

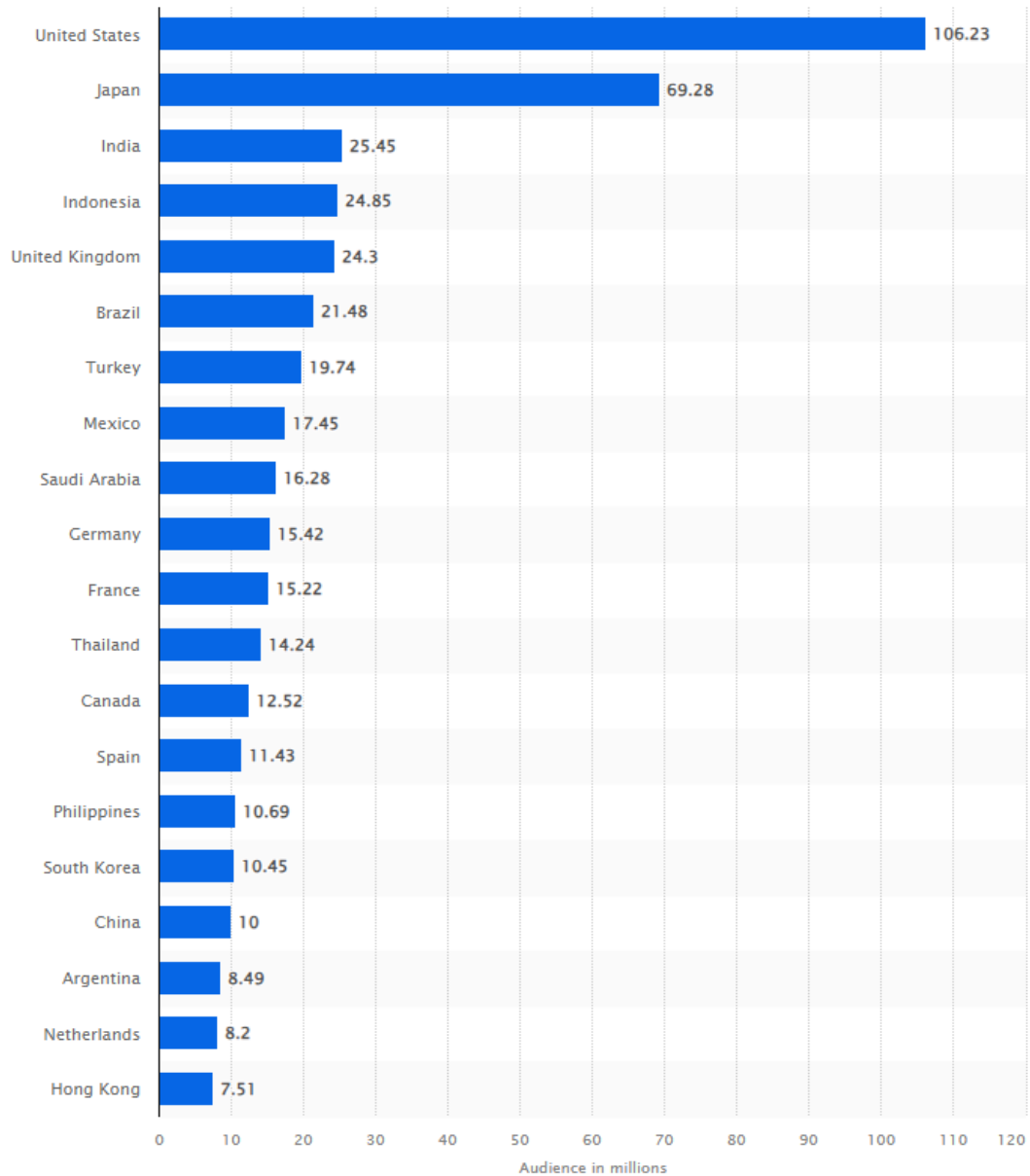


Image: Rankings of X user size as of April 2024. Source: [Statista](#) > Note: The link directs to the source's current, live data and may not reflect the specific historical figures cited in this report.

Within this, **we can also see in a country like Saudi Arabia how take-up has pretty much stalled**, or certainly slowed down considerably, as users focus their energies on other, faster growing, and newer, platforms like TikTok and Snapchat.

⁹⁷ [Rankings of X audience size as of April 2024.](#)

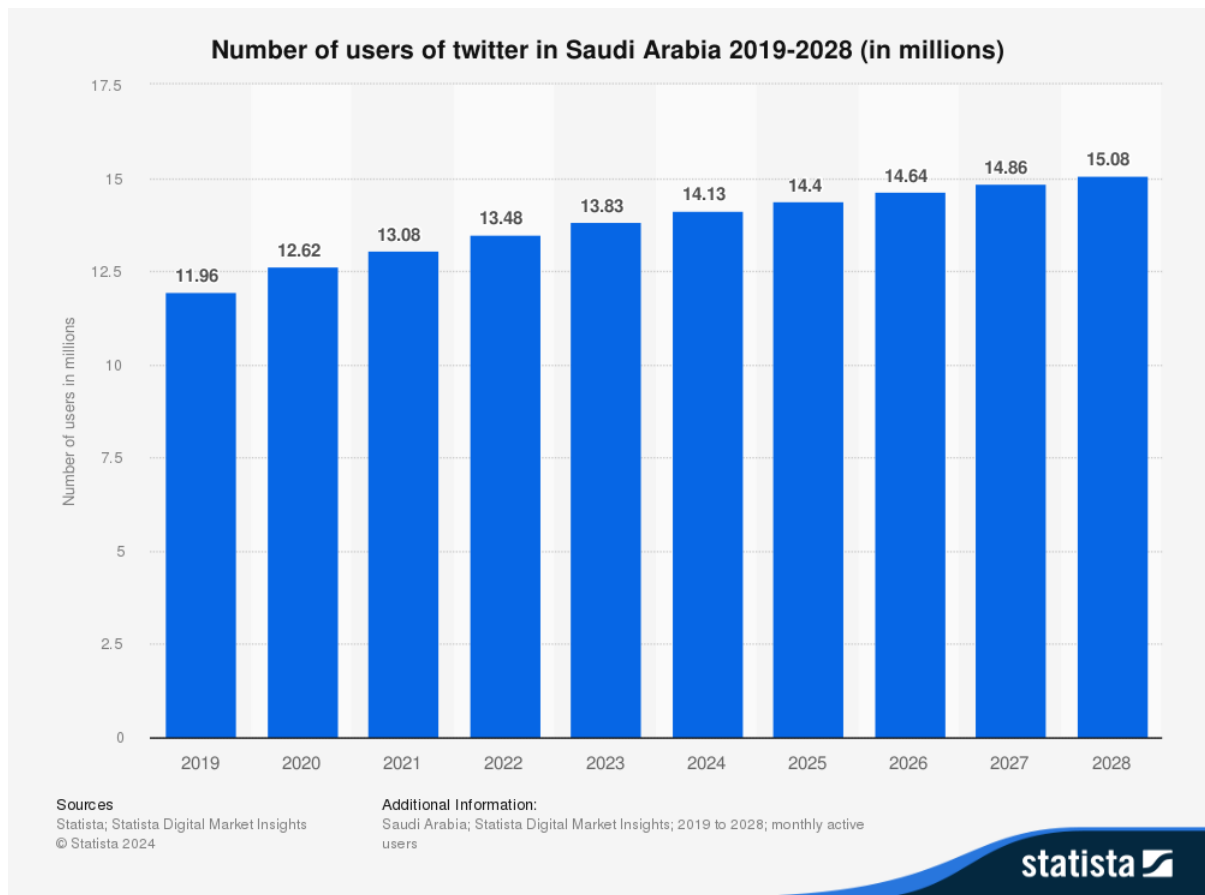


Image: Projection of No. of X users in Saudi Arabia. Source: [Statista](#) > Note: The link directs to the source's current, live data and may not reflect the specific historical figures cited in this report.

Despite attempts to curb disinformation, X remains a key tool for both state actors and grassroots movements in shaping [narratives across MENA](#).⁹⁸

As an example from the past year, an ad on X went viral, implying that U.S. military's Central Command (CENTCOM) has been using unconventional methods, such as advertisements on dating apps like Tinder and Instagram, to recruit informants in Lebanon.

Image: US Military Ad on Tinder.
Source: [The Washington Post](#)



These ads, which offer financial rewards for information, are part of a broader effort to gather intelligence on terrorist activities in the region. The ads target individuals who may have valuable information about

⁹⁸ [Inside the Middle East's epic online propaganda war | Wired](#)

militant groups like Hezbollah and ISIS. However, the use of such methods raises ethical questions about privacy and the potential risks for those who respond to the ads. Tinder has removed this ad for its violation to the content policy regarding politics.

Iran-backed groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and Hashd Al-Shaabi, used coordinated cyber-armies to suppress anti-Iranian voices and amplify their own narratives. These groups use coordinated efforts, aka “cyber armies” to target independent activists by exploiting X’s limited moderation tools.

Tactics include shadow banning, where critics' posts are algorithmically suppressed, and mass reporting, which can lead to account suspensions. This manipulation has been ongoing for years, especially during sensitive periods such as the Lebanon's financial crisis in 2019. Despite efforts by [X to address misinformation](#),⁹⁹ such as suspending accounts linked to terrorist groups, these cyber-armies remain highly adaptive, ensuring that Iran-backed actors maintain significant influence on the platform. Despite efforts to combat this, X continues to struggle with enforcing strict moderation policies.



Image: A tweet reads: “the loss of some is in fact profit and unexpected kindness” from Hassan Nasrallah’s son under #no-regrets on X. Source: [Washington Institute](#)

A research report by the University of Washington’s [Center for an Informed Public \(CIP\)](#) analyzed the most influential accounts¹⁰⁰ on X (formerly Twitter) during the first three days of the Hamas-Israel conflict in October 2023. The report identified seven key accounts, dubbed the “new elites,” that garnered over 1.6 billion views, far surpassing traditional news outlets.¹⁰¹

These accounts were influential due to their use of emotionally charged content, frequent updates

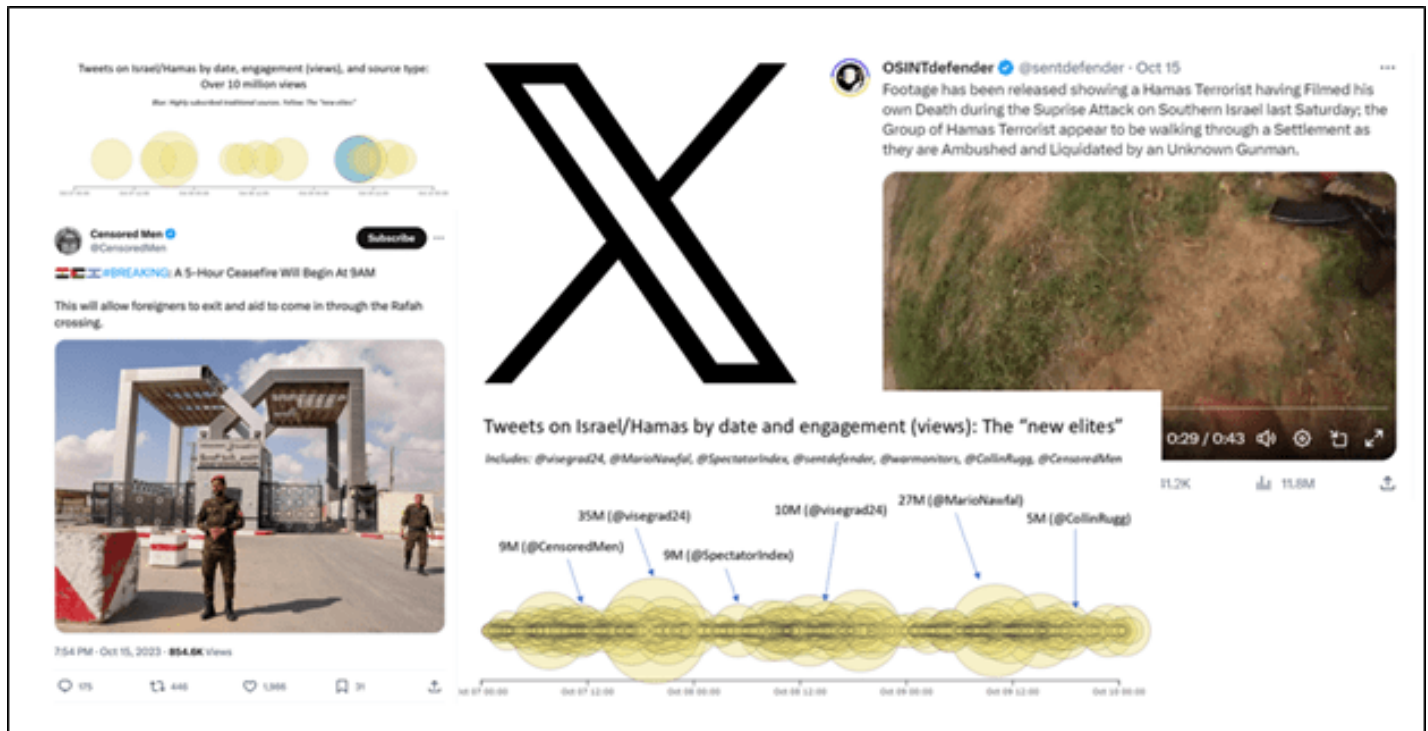
⁹⁹ [How Iran-Backed Groups Control the Arabic Language Sphere on X | The Washington Institute](#)

¹⁰⁰ [Feb. 6: The 'New Elites' of X; CIP researchers discuss examination of ‘new elites’ on Twitter/X engaged in Hamas/Israel discourse during UW Jackson School event](#)

¹⁰¹ Visegrád 24, a news aggregator run by a right-wing Polish social media marketing agency; Mario Nawfal, a Twitter celebrity known for hosting live audio chats focused on cryptocurrency who was the focus of an NBC News investigation; @spectatorindex, an account self-described as “News, media and data from around the globe,” reportedly operated by an Australian-Muslim medical doctor; @CollinRugg, a co-founder of the conservative site Trending Politics; and @CensoredMen, a 10-month-old account that before pivoting to the Israel-Hamas war primarily posted in support of the misogynist internet influencer Andrew Tate. Source: [7 influential accounts are warping Israel-Hamas news on X, researchers find](#)

framed as "breaking news," and minimal sourcing, which made their posts highly engaging but potentially misleading. **Many of these accounts were endorsed by Elon Musk, contributing to their prominence.**

The study highlights how these "news brokers" shaped online discourse without being on the ground or having direct expertise. The article also touches on the challenges researchers face in studying X under Musk's ownership, particularly due to restricted access to data following changes to the platform's API.



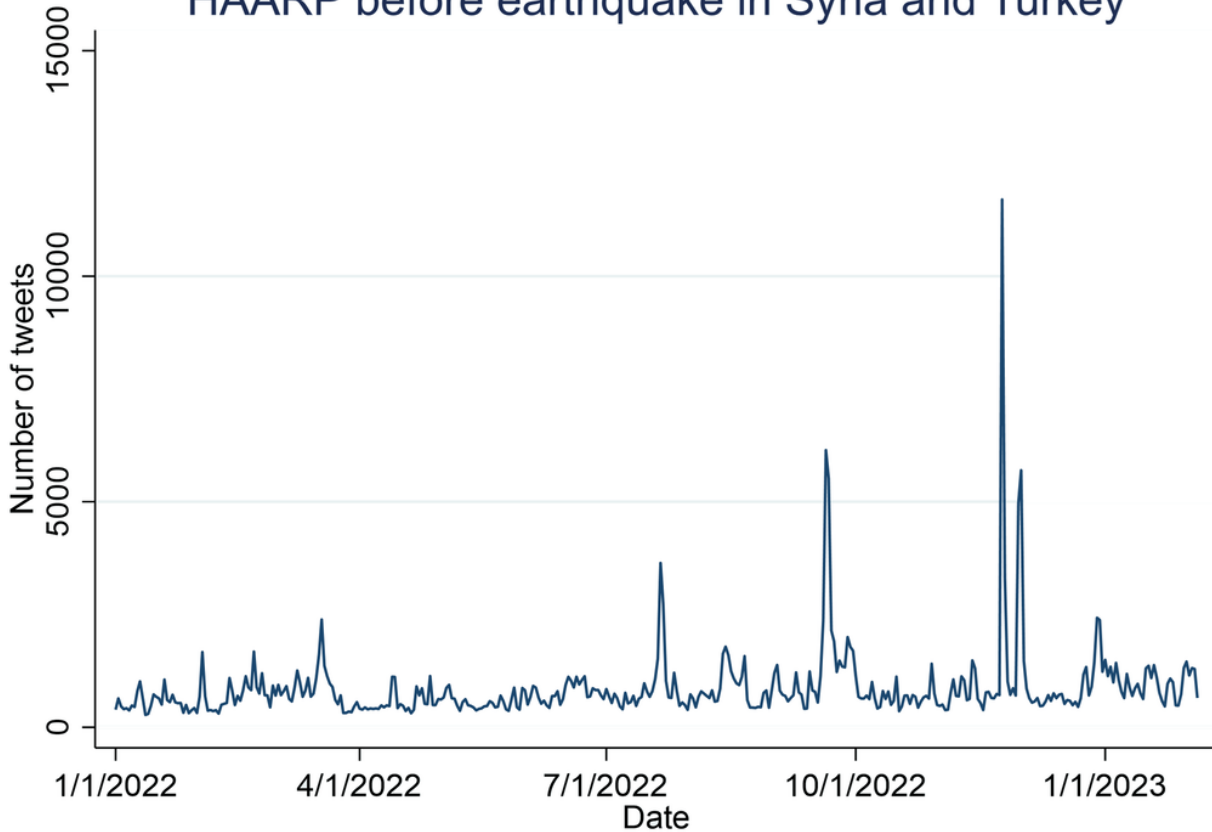
X remains an influential platform for shaping public opinion during crisis events. For example, a study [published in Nature](#) examines the role of conspiracy theories, specifically the **HAARP (High-Frequency Active Auroral Research Program) theory**, in the context of natural disasters, focusing on the February 2023 earthquake in Turkey and Syria.

The study analyses over one million tweets from January 2022 to March 2023, observing how discussions about HAARP surged following the earthquake.

The HAARP conspiracy theory suggests that earthquakes and other natural disasters are caused by secret government programs manipulating weather and seismic activity. The study found a positive correlation between the magnitude of an earthquake and the frequency of HAARP-related tweets, indicating that significant seismic events trigger increased conspiracy discussions. Sentiment analysis revealed that HAARP-related conversations tend to reinforce beliefs in the conspiracy, especially during high-impact events. The research highlights how [X facilitates the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories](#),¹⁰² particularly during crises, influencing public perception and potentially affecting responses to natural disasters.

¹⁰² [Earthquake conspiracy discussion on Twitter | Humanities and Social Sciences Communications](#)

HAARP before earthquake in Syria and Turkey



The Jerusalem Post, [wrote](#)¹⁰³ how the hashtag [#TnxBBfromIran](#) trended on X following Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's remarks addressing the Iranian people.



In his speech, Netanyahu envisioned a future where Iran is free from its current regime, stating that Israel stands with the Iranian people.

The hashtag was used by Iranians to express gratitude and support for Netanyahu's message, with some users sharing images of graffiti in Tehran and others recalling life in Iran before the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Netanyahu predicted that Iran would soon be free and thrive, emphasizing that the current regime is leading the country toward ruin. He expressed hope for future peace between the Jewish and Persian peoples.

Image via:

https://x.com/sedaye_iran/status/1840482719077388764?s=20

¹⁰³ [#TnxBBfromIran: Netanyahu's message of solidarity with Iranians sparks trend on X - The Jerusalem Post](#)

X admitted that it made an error in temporarily reinstating the account of Saud al-Qahtani, a key suspect in the 2018 murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, The Guardian [said](#).¹⁰⁴

Al-Qahtani, a former advisor to Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, had his account permanently suspended in 2019 for violating platform manipulation policies. However, the suspension was briefly lifted before being re-applied.

Experts speculate that this could have been part of Elon Musk's broader effort to reinstate previously banned users or simply a technical glitch. Al-Qahtani was implicated in Khashoggi's assassination by a U.S. investigation, though Saudi prosecutors later cleared him of involvement.

Khashoggi, who had become a critic of the Saudi government, was murdered and dismembered inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in 2018, but his remains were never found.



Image [via](#) The Intercept

Algerian boxer Imane Khelif faced significant online abuse and accusations of being "biologically male" after her victory over Italian opponent Angela Carini at the 2024 Paris Olympics, leading to prominent figures like J.K. Rowling and Donald Trump criticized her participation. The attacks were condemned by Algeria's Olympic Committee and the International Olympic Committee (IOC), which labeled Khelif's disqualification from a previous championship as arbitrary.

[Social media users on X defended Khelif](#),¹⁰⁵ Middle East Eye notes, highlighting the racial and gender biases women of color face when they do not conform to Western standards of femininity. The controversy underscores broader issues of discrimination in sports, particularly against women of color

¹⁰⁴ [X admits 'error' led to reinstatement of key suspect in Jamal Khashoggi murder](#)

¹⁰⁵ ['Pure bigotry': Social media users defend Algerian boxer Imane Khelif against online abuse | Middle East Eye](#)

who deviate from perceived traditional gender norms.



Image: Algeria's Imane Khelif (L) punches Italy's Angela Carini (R) in the women's 66kg preliminaries round of 16 boxing match during the Paris 2024 Olympic Games on 1 August 2024 (Mohd Rasfan/AFP).

Source: [Middle East Eye](#)

Chapter 8: Influencers

The social media influencer landscape in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is a dynamic and rapidly evolving space, reflecting the region's cultural diversity, digital savviness, and growing economic opportunities. Influencers in MENA span various categories, from celebrity influencers with massive followings to micro- and nano-influencers who engage niche audiences with authenticity and high trust levels. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat dominate the space, particularly among younger demographics, while Facebook and X maintain their relevance for broader and professional audiences.

Influencer marketing in MENA is increasingly sophisticated, with brands leveraging localized strategies that align with cultural values and language preferences to maximize engagement. Additionally, **influencers are becoming more socially conscious, with many using their platforms to advocate for causes they care about.** Trends such as short-form video content, live streaming, and collaborations with micro-influencers are reshaping how brands connect with consumers.

As the region continues to embrace digital transformation, influencer marketing remains a powerful tool for reaching tech-savvy audiences and driving meaningful connections between brands and consumers.

According to [Veracontent](#)¹⁰⁶, the Middle East has seen rapid growth in influencer marketing and it has become a significant opportunity for brands. In countries like the UAE (29.3% of people follow influencers), Saudi Arabia (27.1% of people follow influencers), and Egypt (26.7% of people follow influencers), influencers play a key role in shaping consumer behavior, though their effectiveness varies by market. Additionally, many countries, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE, require influencers to obtain licenses to operate legally, with fees around \$4,000, ensuring compliance with local regulations.

A 2024 [InfluAnswer report by Weber Shandwick](#)¹⁰⁴ provided 5 insights on influencers in the MENA region as well as how marketers should deploy their influencer marketing strategy in MENA through interviews with 142 influencers in MENA.

“Themes related to real connections, meaningful partnerships, quality collaborations, authentic content, cultural relevance, enhanced transparency, and positive influence emerged frequently in our analysis. MENA’s influencers have some concerns and some suggestions, but they are also proud of their trade, the growing corporate recognition and impact of their industry, and the potential for the future,”

Ziad Hasbani, Regional CEO, Weber Shandwick MENAT.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ [Social media in the Middle East: Tips for global marketers](#)

¹⁰⁷ <https://news.mepra.org/new-influanswer-arabia-report-shows-rising-activism-among-mena-influencers-with-63->

Highlights from the report include that:

1. Long-Term Relationships Matter
2. Content and Causes Are Intertwined
3. Uncertainty Around AI in Content Creation
4. Success Metrics: Reach and Shares
5. Collaboration Process Is Crucial

More widely, **influencers say Dubai (60%), Riyadh (17%) and Abu Dhabi (6%) as the best cities to start a small business in the region, and influencers rate Dubai (55%) as the region's most instagrammable city, followed by Riyadh (14%) and Cairo (6%).**

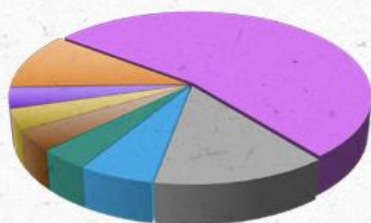
Dubai is also rated as one of the most Instagrammable cities,¹⁰⁸ globally, along with London, Paris, Istanbul and New York.



In 2024, there were over 123 million posts solely on Instagram that highlighted popular hotspots in Dubai such as the Burj Khalifa and the Burj Al Arab.

How are MENA's influencers viewing the region?

MOST INSTAGRAMMABLE CITIES:



55% rate **Dubai** as the region's most instagrammable city, followed by:

14% Riyadh	6% Cairo	4% Abu Dhabi
4% Beirut	4% Jeddah	4% Salalah
11% Other		



[posting-more-about--causes-they-care-about/](#)

¹⁰⁸ [These Are The Most 'Instagrammable' Cities, According To New Report](#)

In April, Radix Media MENA introduced [Mayaseen.R](#), an AI influencer with 157 followers, partnering with the UAE company Brands for Less.

Working with human influencers can involve challenges like managing difficult personalities, and advocates argue that AI influencers eliminate these issues, offering brands a more controlled and cost-effective alternative for engaging audiences. However, in the MENA region, there are [concerns](#)¹⁰⁹ about authenticity and ethical implications, as cultural nuances and genuine engagement are highly valued.

A British fashion magazine, [SheerLuxe](#), faced backlash after introducing an AI "editor" named [Reem](#),¹¹⁰ who has an Arabic name and appearance.

The AI was presented on Instagram with various lifestyle images, sparking criticism over the ethics of using AI in roles that could be filled by underrepresented groups, such as women of color. Critics argued this choice perpetuates harmful beauty standards and takes opportunities away from real people. In response, SheerLuxe issued an apology, stating the AI was meant to experiment with technology, not replace human jobs; the character is merely functioning in presence, but not in opinions, where the opinions are still coming from the human team. They explained Reem's design was created using an AI image tool from the Middle East. However, many found the apology inadequate, criticizing the decision as tone-deaf and questioning the impact on human individuality in journalism.

Meanwhile, [AI generated virtual model Shudu Gram](#),¹¹¹ portrayed as "the princess of South Africa", hit the Vogue cover during the AI Summit hosted by Vogue in 2024.

Virtual influencer Shudu Gram made Vogue cover at AI Summit by Vogue. Source: [The Diigitals](#)



¹⁰⁹ [Why Big Brands Are Starting to Choose AI Influencers over Humans | Esquire Middle East– The Region’s Best Men’s Magazine](#)

¹¹⁰ [SheerLuxe: Fashion magazine sparks backlash after introducing AI ‘Arab’ woman as editor | Middle East Eye](#)

¹¹¹ [Shudu X Vogue CS - AI Summit 2024 - Prague](#)

The Miss AI Beauty Pageant, part of the World AI Creator Awards (WAICA), [crowned Kenza Layli, a Moroccan AI influencer, as the world's first Miss AI in 2024](#).¹¹² Kenza Layli, created by Meriam Bessa of Phoenix AI, emerged victorious from over 1,500 AI-generated models, winning a grand prize of \$20,000.



With over 190,000 Instagram followers, Kenza blends Moroccan culture with cutting-edge technology, advocating for women's empowerment and environmental conservation.

The pageant judged contestants on beauty, social media influence, and technical skill, with Lalina Valina from France and Olivia C from Portugal securing second and third places, respectively.

Image: AI Arab influencer wins Miss AI. Source: [CNN](#)



Image: AI generated influencer Aitana Lopez on Instagram. Source: [@fit_aitana](#)

¹¹² [The first Miss AI has been crowned - and she's a Moroccan lifestyle influencer](#); [The world's first AI beauty pageant points to the future of social media influencers](#)

The [Arab Media Summit 2024](#),¹¹³ organized by the Dubai Press Club, took place from May 27-29, 2024 at the Dubai World Trade Centre, under the patronage of His Highness Sheikh Ahmed bin Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum. The summit also included the 22nd Arab Media Forum, the 23rd Arab Media Award ceremony, and the **fourth Arab Social Media Influencers Award ceremony**, with masterclasses led by global media companies like Meta, TikTok, and YouTube.

Notable winners¹¹⁴ included Egyptian artist Ahmed Helmy for Culture and Arts, Kuwaiti footballer Musaed Al Fawzan for Sports, and Saudi journalist Abdulrahman Abumalih for Audience Engagement. The awards highlight the significant role of social media influencers in shaping cultural and social narratives within the region.



Image: Winners of Arab Social Media Influencers Award honored at 22nd Arab Media Forum.

Source: [Emirates News Agency-WAM](#)

Million, a leading platform for content creators, unveiled the "[Top 200 Celebrities and Influencers in the MENA Region](#)",¹¹⁵ developed in collaboration with Favikon, a globally recognized influencer marketing authority.

The list features influential figures across industries such as music, fashion, lifestyle, and

¹¹³ [Arab Media Summit 2024](#)

¹¹⁴ [Winners of Arab Social Media Influencers Award honored at 22nd Arab Media Forum](#)

¹¹⁵ [Million reveals the top 200 celebrities and influencers in the MENA region](#)

entertainment. Notable names include Nassif Zeytoun, Noor Stars, Bissan Ismail, Ghaith Marwan, Anas El Shayib, and Mohamed Ramadan.

The [New York Times](#) reported¹¹⁶ on the murder of Ghufraan Mahdi Sawadi, known as Om Fahad and Umm Fahad, a popular Iraqi TikTok influencer, who was shot by a masked assassin in Baghdad.



The attack, captured on security footage, occurred swiftly as the assailant approached her parked SUV and fired four shots. Um Fahad had garnered 460,000 followers on TikTok and Instagram with content that sometimes clashed with conservative societal norms in Iraq, leading to her previous detention for a social media post.

Her death marks the third killing of a social media influencer in Iraq amid tightening laws and conservative attitudes, raising concerns about the safety of influencers in the region, especially those who have public speaking or appearance that contradict traditional regional values.

Influencers are reshaping the observance of Ramadan in the Middle East. While some criticize the commercialization of Ramadan, likening it to the consumerist nature of Christmas, others see influencers as bringing positive changes, such as involving more men in domestic roles traditionally associated with women. [Campaigns like "Be Mindful" in Oman](#),¹¹⁷ started in 2023, demonstrate influencers' roles in advocating for social issues, such as reducing food waste during Ramadan¹¹⁶.

¹¹⁶ [TikTok Star Is Killed in Third Death of Social Media Influencer in Iraq - The New York Times](#)

¹¹⁷ [Be mindful campaign and food waste during Ramadan | ISWA](#)

For the second consecutive year, UNEP West Asia launches the #RecipeofChange Sustainable Ramadan campaign!

This Ramadan, halve the #FoodWaste and double the #Blessings, shop wisely, use resources efficiently and adopt a sustainable lifestyle #ForPeopleForPlanet في هذا الشهر الفضيل يطلق برنامج الأمم المتحدة للبيئة غرب آسيا للسنة الثانية على التوالي حملة "خلي #رمضان كريم ومستدام لنعمل من أجل خفض #هدر الطعام إلى النصف، والتسوق بحكمة، واستخدام #الموارد #الكوكب بشكل رشيد، واتباع أسلوب حياة #مستدام من أجل الناس و من أجل

A sample campaign of #FoodWaste during Ramadan featured @chefleylafathall. Source: [UNEP](#)

Joseph and Joshua Lopez, brothers from Ohio, found themselves stranded in Dubai after a night out went awry, as reported by multiple sources, [including WDBJ7](#),¹¹⁸ a CBS-affiliated television station in Virginia, USA.

Joseph, is a former Air Force member turned social media influencer with over 300,000 followers on Instagram and TikTok. He and his brother arrived in Dubai on May 25, 2024. Their troubles began after attending a club and being invited to an "afterparty," where they were presented with an unexpectedly large bill and later believed they were drugged at a yacht party.

Although not formally charged, they face allegations including assault and resisting arrest, leading to a travel ban that prevents them from returning to the U.S., with legal proceedings potentially lasting several months.



Image: Joseph and Joshua Lopez in the news. Source: [WDBJ7.com](#)

¹¹⁸ [Social media influencer, brother stranded in Dubai after they say they were drugged during trip](#)



[Teen Vogue interviewed Shahd Batal](#),¹¹⁹ a Sudanese American beauty and fashion influencer, in June 2024, where she shared her story and impact in the digital space. Shahd discussed her experiences as a content creator, focusing on themes of identity and representation.

With a significant following on platforms such as Instagram and YouTube, she leverages her influence to challenge beauty norms and promote inclusivity. The interview sheds light on her collaborations with major brands and her role in the #YouTubeBlack Voices Creator Class, emphasizing her commitment to authenticity and empowerment¹¹⁸.

Image: Shahd Batal. Source: [Teen Vogue](#)

According to [Caterer Middle East](#),¹²⁰ **82% of people in Dubai rely on social media to make food and beverage choices**, underscoring the significant influence of digital platforms on consumer behavior.

Social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok are particularly influential, with users frequently turning to them for the latest food trends and recommendations. Businesses in the food and beverage industry can leverage this trend by engaging with influencers and creating visually appealing content to attract customers. This reliance on social media for dining decisions reflects a broader trend of digital influence on lifestyle choices in Dubai.

MENA influencers, including figures like Sally Elazab (318,000 Instagram followers) and Abdulla Al-Marzooqi (515,000 followers), **arrived in India on August 26, 2024, for an eight-day tour, with the [aim of challenging negative stereotypes about India](#)**.¹²¹

They visited historical sites in Delhi and the Himalayan region of Leh and Ladakh.

Influencers like Mona Tajarbi (1.6 million Instagram followers) emphasized sharing a personal perspective of India, while others focused on tech and cultural diversity, using platforms like Instagram to share their experiences.

¹¹⁹ [Influencer Shahd Batal on Leaving Social Media, the War in Sudan, and Rediscovering Herself | Teen Vogue](#)

¹²⁰ [82 percent people in Dubai take their cues from social media to make F&B choices](#)

¹²¹ [UAE influencers tour India to reshape its image in Middle East | Arab News](#)



Image: Content creators from the UAE take part in a dinner gala hosted by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs in New Delhi. Source: [Arab News](#)

Chapter 9: Freedom of Expression

LGBTQ+ individuals in the MENA region face severe digital harassment and persecution, as revealed by research led by the [digital rights group Article 19](#).¹²² The study revealed that authorities in countries like Algeria, Egypt, Iran, and Lebanon are using dating, messaging, and social media apps to entrap and persecute LGBTQ+ people.

The research, which involved over 5,200 participants, found that nearly half of those interviewed had their devices seized by police to "verify their queerness," with many subjected to violence to unlock their phones. **Entrapment via apps like WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger is common**, with 23% of participants reporting such incidents. Additionally, all sex workers, trans individuals, and queer refugees reported police abuse. [The report](#)¹²³ calls on tech companies to improve privacy features to protect users from such harassment, as many LGBTQ+ individuals rely on these features for safety.

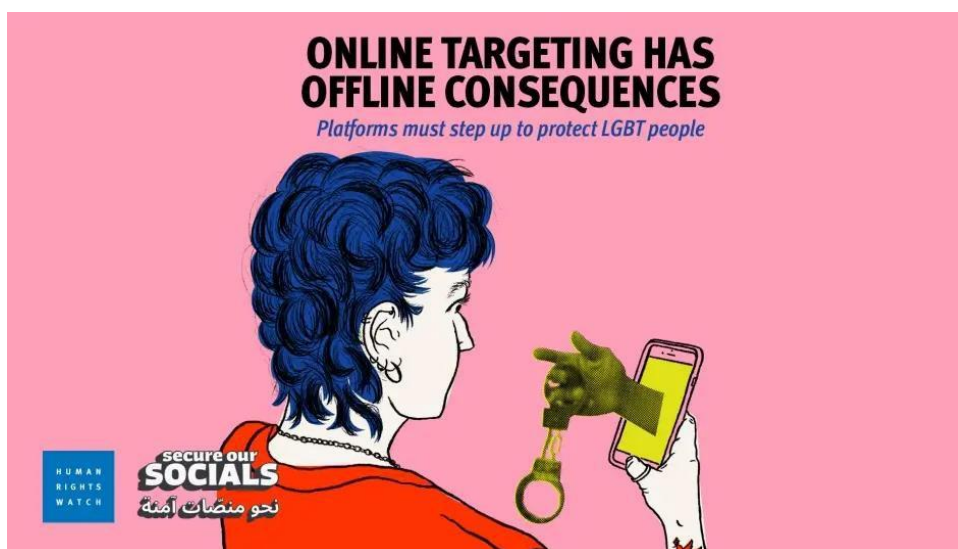


Image: Secure Our Social campaign. Source: [Human Rights Watch](#)

The "[Secure Our Socials](#)"¹²⁴ campaign launched by Human Rights Watch and other organizations, called on Meta (Facebook and Instagram) to improve transparency and accountability in protecting LGBTQ+ people in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region from online targeting.

LGBTQ+ individuals in the region face significant online threats, and these digital attacks often lead to severe offline consequences such as arbitrary arrests, torture, family violence, and extortion.

The campaign urges Meta to disclose data on its content-moderation investments in the MENA region, to improve its moderation practices to protect LGBTQ+ users, and to reduce reliance on automated systems that fail to account for regional and linguistic contexts. It also calls for better safety features,

¹²² [Queer resistance to digital oppression in the Middle East and North Africa - ARTICLE 19](#)

¹²³ [LGBTQ+ people in Middle East and North Africa subject to intense digital oppression, research finds](#)

¹²⁴ [Questions and Answers: Facebook, Instagram, and Digital Targeting of LGBT People in ME NA | Human Rights Watch](#)

such as account locking tools and mechanisms for remotely wiping data.

Imprisonment and ban of individuals

Egyptian authorities renewed the [detention of satirical cartoonist Ashraf Omar Hamdi](#)¹²⁵ for the fourth time. Hamdi, known for his critical cartoons of the government, was arrested in January 2024. He faces charges of spreading false news and misusing social media. His continued detention has drawn criticism from human rights organizations, which argue that it reflects a broader crackdown on freedom of expression in Egypt. These groups are urging the Egyptian government to release Hamdi and respect artistic and journalistic freedoms.



Image: Egyptian cartoonist Ashraf Omar. Source: [Middle East Monitor](#)

[A Saudi teacher, Mohammed Al-Ghamdi, has been sentenced to 20 years in prison](#)¹²⁶ for his social media posts criticizing the Saudi government. Al-Ghamdi was charged with "betraying his religion" and "offending the rulers of the country" through his online activity. His posts, shared on platforms like Twitter and YouTube, included criticism of corruption and human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia. Human rights organizations condemned the harsh sentence, viewing it as part of a broader crackdown on dissent in the Kingdom.

[Omar Boussag](#),¹²⁷ an Algerian human rights lawyer, was prosecuted for "insulting an official body" and "inciting an unarmed gathering for publishing a Facebook post in May 2021 about a peaceful assembly of civil defense personnel. He was sentenced in absentia to six months' imprisonment, with a fine of 500,000 Algerian dinars, in February 2024. He challenged the verdict and was retried on 8 July 2024, when the prosecution requested a three-month prison term. The court ultimately issued a reduced penalty, fining him 50,000 Algerian dinars in July 2024.

¹²⁵ [Egypt renews detention of satirical cartoonist for fourth time – Middle East Monitor](#)

¹²⁶ [Saudi teacher sentenced to 20 years for social media posts](#)

¹²⁷ [Algerian human rights lawyer faces prison time for Facebook post](#) and [Omar Boussag, Sofiane Ouali et Toufik Belala](#)

Activism and advocacy



Image: The Women Life Freedom campaign. Source: [Amnesty](#)

Hashtags like [#MahsaAmini](#)¹²⁸ and [#WomanLifeFreedom](#)¹²⁹ embodied the anti-hijab protests in Iran. UN experts report that the Iranian government has intensified its repression of women and girls. The crackdown includes the enforcement of stricter dress codes, particularly the mandatory hijab, with severe penalties for non-compliance. Authorities have also escalated the use of digital surveillance and physical violence to suppress dissent, further restricting freedom of expression and assembly. Despite international condemnation, the Iranian government continues to target activists, journalists, and human rights defenders, exacerbating the country's human rights crisis.

Two years after Iran's "Woman Life Freedom" uprising, [Amnesty International reports](#)¹³⁰ ongoing impunity for crimes committed by Iranian authorities during the September-December 2022 protests. Despite hundreds of unlawful killings and widespread torture, including the use of sexual violence, no independent investigations have been conducted. In April 2024, the Iranian government launched the "Noor Plan" to further enforce compulsory veiling, leading to incidents like the shooting of 31-year-old Arezou Badri on July 22, 2024, and the violent assault of two 14-year-old girls in August 2024. The authorities have also escalated the use of the death penalty, with 10 men executed since December 2022, and over a dozen others, including activists like Sharifeh Mohammadi, facing execution after unfair trials.

According to [Sada, a Carnegie Middle East Program](#),¹³¹ cyberbullying in Yemen has surged alongside

¹²⁸ [Mahsa Amini - 'Lashed for a social media photo' in Iran](#)

¹²⁹ [Iran intensifying efforts to repress women and girls on second anniversary of nation-wide protests, UN Fact-Finding Mission says | OHCHR](#)

¹³⁰ [Iran: Two years after 'Woman Life Freedom' uprising, impunity for crimes reigns supreme](#)

¹³¹ [Cyberbullying on the Rise in Yemen | Carnegie Endowment](#)

the growth of internet and social media users. Yemeni artists, activists, and media professionals, including figures like Abdel Nasser al-Arasi, have become frequent targets of online harassment, often focused on their appearance, skin color, and opinions.

A March 2022 survey revealed that 69% of women reported experiencing cyberbullying, compared to 32% of men, with women facing heightened risks due to societal expectations and the absence of effective laws to deter such behavior. Despite existing legal provisions under Law No. 12 of 1994, experts like lawyer Ziad Al-Debai argue that these laws are outdated and insufficient to address this growing issue, exposing Yemeni women to more online mistreatment and harassment.

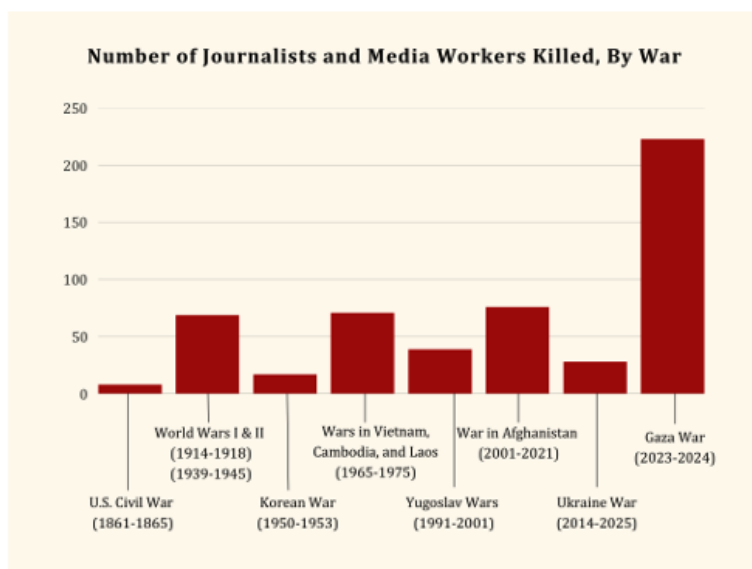
Fake News and Online Misinformation

Misinformation in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has become a pervasive and destabilizing force, fueled by political, social, and technological factors. Social media platforms have amplified disinformation campaigns targeting elections, public health, and conflicts. These campaigns often exploit polarized societies, inciting violence, hate speech, and mistrust in institutions.

The pervasive threat of disinformation in the digital age was also highlighted in a report from the World Economic Forum, with only 40% of people consistently trusting news, as noted in the [Global Risks Report 2024](#),¹³² which ranks disinformation as the top global risk in the next two years and fifth over the next decade.

At the Forum's 54th Annual Meeting, experts like Emma Tucker (Wall Street Journal), Meredith Kopit Levien (New York Times), Věra Jourová (European Commission), and Jeanne Bourgault (Internews) discussed strategies to counter disinformation. Key solutions include fostering media literacy, ensuring independent journalism, leveraging technology to identify credible content, and adopting responsible AI practices.

However, challenges remain, such as the rapid spread of false information compared to slower truth verification and the dangers journalists face in conflict zones, with the Gaza conflict being labeled the deadliest the deadliest conflict for media workers ever recorded, Al Jazeera [notes](#),¹³³ citing a [report](#)¹³⁴



¹³² [Disinformation is a threat to our trust ecosystem. Experts explain how to curb it | World Economic Forum](#)

¹³³ [Israel's war on Gaza deadliest conflict ever for journalists, says report](#)

¹³⁴ Turse, N. (2025). News graveyards: How dangers to war reporters endanger the world. *Watson School for International and Public Affairs, Brown University*

by the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs' Costs of War project.¹³⁵

Governments and political actors frequently manipulate information ecosystems to suppress dissent and control narratives, as seen in Tunisia, where [President Kaïs Saïed's supporters have used disinformation to discredit opposition](#).¹³⁶

Online misinformation has also played a significant role in Lebanon's enduring crises. As part of this, social media has empowered Lebanese citizens to share their perspectives globally, challenging misconceptions about groups like Hezbollah, which is often mistakenly seen as representative of all Lebanese people. An [article](#)¹³⁷ published by Young Australians in International Affairs notes the dual role of social media as a platform for marginalized voices and a vehicle for harmful disinformation, calling for stricter regulation and verification to ensure truthful reporting and support for civilians in crisis zones.

Image: A female protestor in Tyre, Lebanon, holding up her mobile phone.

Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)



Misinformation and disinformation campaigns in Lebanon have increasingly endangered Syrian refugees, fueled by politicians, media, and social platforms. Following the April 9, 2024, murder of Pascal Sleiman, a Lebanese Forces official, false claims blaming Syrians led to violent attacks, with older videos misused online to incite hatred. Politicians like caretaker Interior Minister Bassam Mawlawi and Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah have amplified anti-refugee rhetoric, while media outlets such as MTV aired misleading ads falsely claiming Syrians make up half of Lebanon's population.

Amid Lebanon's economic crisis-where over 80% of citizens live below the poverty line-refugees are scapegoated with baseless claims of luxury living and criminality. Nine out of ten Syrian refugees live in

¹³⁵ Per the report: Here is your cleaned version with double spaces removed: "Media workers" include support personnel without whom journalism wouldn't exist, including translators, drivers, and so-called fixers. Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/longform/2024/12/31/knowtheir-names-the-palestinian-journalists-killed-by-israel-in-gaza>; Committee to Protect Journalists database; Forste, S. (2006, May 31). Iraq journalist deaths match number killed during Vietnam War. Committee to Protect Journalists. <https://cpj.org/2006/05/iraq-journalist-deaths-match-number-killed-during/>; Freedom Forum. Journalists Memorial. <https://www.freedomforum.org/journalists-memorial/>.

¹³⁶ [Expert Q&A – Tunisian President Kaïs Saïed's Digital Army - MEDC](#)

¹³⁷ [Misinformation and Media in Lebanon's Enduring Crisis](#)

extreme poverty, and over 13,772 were forcibly deported in 2023 despite ongoing dangers in Syria. Human rights groups like Amnesty International stress that no area in Syria is safe for return.

Writing for The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP), the journalist Justin Salhani [calls](#)¹³⁸ for urgent countermeasures against disinformation, improved moderation on platforms like Meta and X, and international safeguards to ensure aid to Lebanon respects refugee rights.

Misinformation, and the ability to post content easily across social media, has given birth to a trade of fake relics, fueling looting and illegal excavation in the Middle East.

Many of these items, such as cobalt-blue shabtis (figurines from ancient Egyptian tombs), are sold in Facebook groups, but experts like [Dr. Monica Hanna, an Egyptologist](#), confirm that most are fake.¹³⁹

Despite this, the market encourages treasure hunters to destroy archaeological sites in hopes of finding valuable artifacts. Prof. Maamoun Abdulkarim, former director general of Antiquities and Museums in Syria, warns that this phenomenon is dangerous, especially in war-torn regions where poverty drives people into illegal activities.

Facebook has been criticized for not doing enough to curb this trade, despite its policies prohibiting the sale of antiquities.

While some studies suggest that most items sold are fake, the damage to cultural heritage is significant, **and experts call for more action from Facebook to combat this issue.**



Image: Fake relics traded on Facebook in the Middle East. Source: [The National](#)

¹³⁸ [Targeted: How Misinformation Puts Lebanon's Syrian Refugees in Danger - The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy](#)

¹³⁹ [Fake relics trading in the Middle East on Facebook | The National](#)