Conducting Qualitative Fieldwork with Ageing Saudis: A Visual Diary

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Abstract

This pictorial offers a visual diary of our qualitative fieldwork to understand ageing people's experiences in Saudi Arabia. It provides insights gained through conducting qualitative fieldwork with ageing Saudis. We present a range of cultural considerations that shaped the design of the fieldwork and highlight opportunities, challenges, and issues that we faced when conducting interviews and deploying research probes. In particular, we highlight the power and effectiveness of using probes to elicit participants' values, views and desires when working within the sociocultural norms of Saudi Arabia.

Authors Keywords

Methods; interviews; probes; ageing; Saudi Arabia; HCI; cultural considerations; privacy; gender; social media.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

Cross-Cultural HCI Research

While HCI has in recent years extended its western-centric focus through efforts such as cross-cultural design and HCI for Development (HCI4D) [1-3], current HCI research methods are not culturally universal [4]. Researchers have highlighted the need to adopt, tune and even develop new methods when conducting qualitative fieldwork in different cultural context [5]. Ways to explore, interact and design technologies with people who live in non-Western contexts require a degree of translation that must consider local culture, gender, religion, education, politics and environment. Despite the various efforts to adopt and develop new research methods across the globe, we found very little guidance as to how to conduct HCI research in countries such as Saudi Arabia, where its religion and particular cultural values have heavily shaped the sociocultural practices and norms of people's everyday lives, activities and practices [6].

Conducting Qualitative Fieldwork in Saudi

This pictorial presents a collection of the visual elements, designed to offer glimpses into our experiences of

[A]

[A] Jeddah, Saudi Arabia
This photo captures the heritage buildings in the old part of Jeddah (Al-Balad), the city where we conducted most of our fieldwork. Jeddah is the 2nd largest city in Saudi Arabia.

Traditional homes in the Gulf Arab Countries *"are typically designed with an inward-facing center to protect the family from the public eye. The idea is to maintain the sanctity of the home, which is considered sacred and pure, which must be guarded from the gaze or intrusion of non-family members."* [Sobh & Belk, 2011 cited in 9, p674].

conducting qualitative fieldwork with ageing people in Saudi Arabia. The aim is to provide insights gained when conducting interviews with older Saudis and deploying research probes for them to use. We present a range of the cultural considerations that shaped how we approached and designed the fieldwork, and highlight opportunities, challenges, and issues that we faced when conducting the fieldwork. In particular, we highlight the usefulness of probes in helping us to traverse some of the cultural boundaries we encountered during our fieldwork in Saudi.

Challenges to Conducting Qualitative Fieldwork in Saudi Arabia

Our search and review of research literature revealed a lack of resources about culturally sensitive methods and tools that can be used when conducting qualitative research in Saudi Arabia. From the limited available resources, we realised that conducting qualitative research in Saudi

Arabia can be problematic to researchers [7. 8]. This is mainly due to challenges associated with issues of privacy and cross-gender communications.

To Saudis, privacy is associated with honour. It extends beyond personal boundaries to one's family and community. This means that one is protective not only of one's personal privacy but of others within the community. This includes preventing or limiting discussions of personal life and views with 'strangers' [8, 9]. This maintenance of privacy is further heightened when communication is conducted with a non-familial individual, especially of a different gender [8]. Cross-gender communications - male-to-female conversations (and vice versa) - are often mediated through a proxy, i.e. a chaperon/guardian [10, 11]. Traditionally, this chaperon/guardian is a male relative who is tasked with the role of maintaining this privacy. This heightened privacy concerns impacts significantly on the recruitment of participants for interviews. Although researchers have reported the challenges associated with privacy, surprisingly little have been discussed as to how we could mitigate them.

The Fieldwork (The Background)
This fieldwork is the first part of a larger ongoing research project that seeks to design ICTs to support older people in Saudi Arabia to age-well. The aim of this fieldwork is to develop local (and culturally situated) understandings of ageing in Saudi. This is because current ageing research has been developed primarily through work conducted in the West [11]. In addition, the fieldwork seeks to explore how ageing Saudis use digital technologies in their everyday lives to support their experiences of ageing. It is hoped that the insights gained could offer inspirations into how technology could be designed in culturally appropriate and meaningful ways to support the aspirations of ageing Saudis. This pictorial only reports on the methods and tools used in the fieldwork as well as the methodological challenges and issues encountered conducting fieldwork with older Saudis.

When designing our fieldwork, we drew what we could from these limited sources. More importantly, we relied upon the

[B] Research Timeline

Day #1 — 1 — Initial Interview

Day #1 — 2 — Probes

Day #8 — Pickup Probe

Day #10 — 3 — Follow up Interview

first author's understanding of the local culture. Soud was born and raised in Saudi Arabia. He spent the first 18 years of his life in Saudi before moving to Australia to pursue further studies. Soud is bilingual and is accustomed to the traditions of everyday life in Saudi. Having lived away from Saudi for the past 8 years, except for occasional short visits, has given Soud some 'distance' and sense of being a 'familiar outsider' when he returned to Saudi to conduct this fieldwork.

Participants and Recruitment
We recruited 14 Saudi individuals (6 females, aged from 55 to 71). We conducted the study mainly in the Western region of Saudi where gender segregation laws are more relaxed [8]. We were particularly interested in participants who were literate, because the probes used in this fieldwork involve some reading and writing. Likewise, we recruited individuals living at home because generally, older Saudis live with their families in the same household and prefer informal home care [12, 13].

Just like [8, 14], snowballing sampling method was used to recruit participants, starting from our own social circle of friends. This form of personal referral helps generate a sense of trust in participants because this referral somehow provides a personal vouch for the researcher. Furthermore, this form of chain referrals also grants the investigator "insider or group member" access [15].

During recruitment, we did not initiate any direct contact with potential female participants. Instead, we relied on their kin to mediate negotiations. This is because Saudi males are socially responsible to provide for and to 'protect' their female family members [16]. As noted earlier, protection can include mediating non-familial cross-gender negotiations. After the initial interview, we exchanged contact information with the participants so that they could communicate directly with us (during research period).

Research Timeline
For each participant, the research spanned over 10 days. Figure [B] highlights the overall research timeline starting with the initial interview, where we get to know the participant, introduce the research, get them to sign the consent forms, conduct the interview and present the probe kit. Throughout the research period, we maintained periodic contact with our participants through social media applications.

Interviews
We conducted face-to-face semi-structured interviews, which lasted between about 40 – 90 minutes. The open-ended questions sought to elicit a range of information, including the participants' background, their everyday activities, their state of health and if they receive any care. We were also interested in their social lives, their social participation, their sense of self and identity, and their use of technology. Finally, most interviews were conducted at participants' homes to learn more about their domestic settings and particular circumstances.

We were aware of various cultural factors that may impact face-to-face communications. Non-familial cross-gender communication is considered culturally inappropriate and thus male-to-female conversations are often mediated through a chaperon who is an immediate male relative [16]. Consequently, participants may behave differently or offer answers that are not necessarily of their own volition [10]. Therefore, we used probes to supplement our interviews.

Probes
Probes allow a desirable minimal external influence on participants' action compared to different research methods [17, 18]. While probes have been previously used to elicit older people's views and perception (e.g. [19, 20]), we have not found any reports of its deployment in Saudi Arabia.

We designed our probe pack (see Figures C & D) so that participants have a number of tasks to complete over the span of seven days. The probe kit consisted of a diary, a map and a set of postcards. The diary contains "how to use" instructions on the front cover and the contact details of the researcher at the back cover. The postcards contained printed instructions for participants to complete different tasks for seven days. They included activities whereby participants had to take photos, for example, of something they value the most; use stickers to map places of interests, such as places that they like, e.g. socialize. Other activities included drawing a family tree and naming any technologies they have used during the day.

[D] We included a mapping activity in our probe

Being culturally aware of Saudi people's heightened concerns about the sanctity of privacy, especially of their own homes [8], we decided not to include a disposable camera in the probe pack. This is because participants may feel that they have limited control over what they capture or inadvertently capture since they cannot review, edit or delete the content. For example, it may not be appropriate to share photographs of adult females who are not fully or partially covered. As an alternative, we encouraged participants to share their daily activities with us through various online social media apps using their smart phones. The use of these chat apps allows participants flexibility in self-reporting and have full control over the content they share.
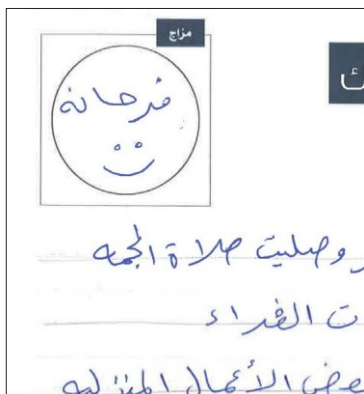
[E] The initial 'Mood Box'

Early in the research process, we piloted our probe kit with potential participants to ensure its cultural appropriateness and to evaluate its effectiveness in eliciting participants' responses. This has led to changes to our design of the probe kit. For example, participants were provided with a printed 'mood box' at the beginning of each diary entry and were instructed to draw a face that describe how they felt most of the day. This was used as a trigger to encourage participants to write about their feelings as well as their daily activities. However, we found that the mood box we used was confusing. For example, one participant initially wrote 'happy' in the mood box and then later drew a smiley face (as show in Figure E). So, we decided to instead use a Likert scale (as shown in Figure F).

[H] The initial design of the cover page

[F] The updated 'Mood Box' with Likert scale

Similarly, we used various icons in the cover page of the diary as triggers to the different activities participants can talk about, such as going to the mosque, eating habits as well as physical activities (Figures H&I). We also included icons that represented people such as family, friends and others to capture social interactions. Public directional signs, e.g. at the local shopping mall (Figure G), prompted us to reflect back on our design and ensure that chosen icons are not revealing in any way and do not, for example, show the female body. Overall, we were mindful of our participants when designing the probes.

[G] A public directional sign

[I] The final printed design of the diary with updated icons

[J] A photo of our interview with a female participant taken by her chaperon

[K] Some of the sweet treats that was served to the guest (the researcher in this case)

Reflections About the Fieldwork

Interviews

Our experiences of interviewing in Saudi homes differed from the interviews we are familiar with in the West. Traditionally, older Saudis live with their family, which often includes children and grandchildren and other extended family member (as well as foreign maids). So, Saudi homes are often very busy and filled with many family members, often present at the same time. Most of our participants preferred interviews to take place during late afternoons, in the evenings, or weekends because they are often busy during the day. However, we discovered that this was also a busy family time, with children and many members of the extended family present. Saudis also often receive visitors over weekends. As a result, our interviews often took place in noisy settings with constant interruptions by various family members or carers.

We found that chaperons or kin were often present, seated with the participants during the interview. As such, our interviews in Saudi homes were hardly ever conducted in private with the participant alone. Conducting interviews in busy Saudi homes meant that besides the presence of chaperons, anyone else could sit and listen to the unfolding interview. Occasionally, two or more chaperons were present at the same time during the interview. Figure J shows an example of interview we conducted with a female participant. In this particular instance, we moved between three rooms in order to find a quieter room to conduct the interview with minimal interruptions. Nonetheless, a chaperon was present at all times, listening in, taking photos (Figure J) and even asking questions.

Furthermore, Day One of the research turned out to be longer than we expected. This is because the researcher was considered a guest and hence, provided hospitality. For example, we were served coffee/tea, sweets (Figure K) and even dined in with the participant and their (male) family members (Figure L). The researcher also attended the daily prayers with the participants at their local mosque

(Figure M). This first meeting is, as [7] noted, a part of developing a participant-researcher relationship, where participants asked about the researchers' origin, studies, work and other personal matters. The researcher did his best to answer the questions freely and openly in order to develop trust and rapport.

[L] Dining in with a participant and his 'male' family members

[M] Walking to the local mosque with a participant to attend the daily evening prayer

Probes
Our participants were generally active in reporting their daily experiences. The following figures (N, O, P, Q & R) show examples of the returned probes we received from our participants.

Our use of probes has led us to explore alternative and maybe more productive means of data collection. We also found that the use of probes allowed us to mitigate some of the challenges we encountered when conducting interviews, e.g. chaperon external influences on participants.
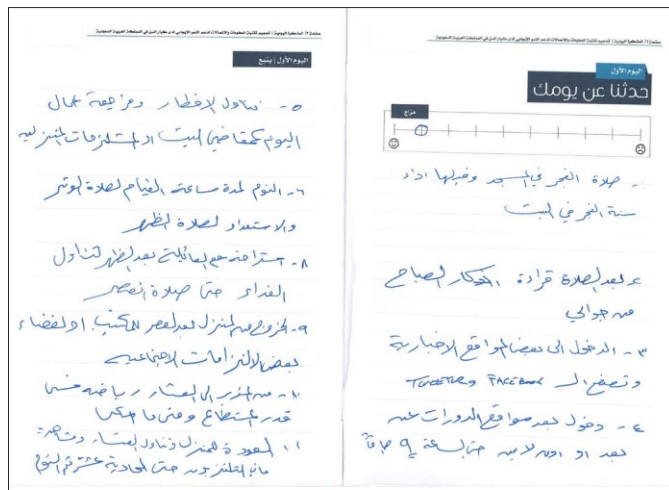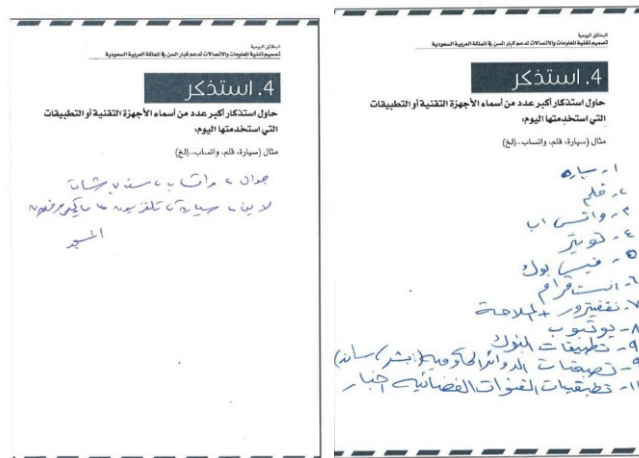
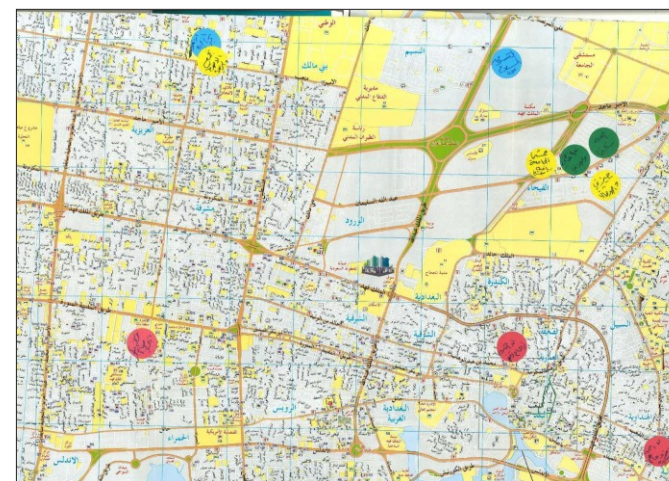[N] A participant's diary entry. The participant appears to lead a very busy and family-oriented life.

[O] The probe kit in setting

[P] A female participant's creative craft of her family tree. The name tags have been covered to maintain anonymity

[Q] A postcard activity whereby participants name any technologies they have used during the day.

[R] A returned map activity highlighting the various areas that our participant enjoys going to, spending time at and even avoiding. Here, the participant marked his local mosque, gym and the beach as places of frequent visit.
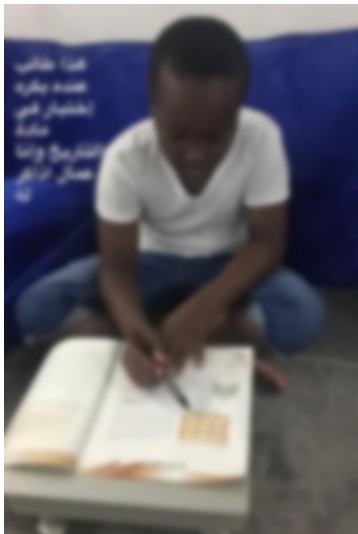
The Use of Social Media

We encouraged participants to share aspects of their everyday lives with us using social media technologies such as WhatsApp. This is because WhatsApp is one of the most popular social media applications in Saudi Arabia. Our participants were very active in sharing their lives with us through this platform, revealing the potentials for using social media technologies when conducting fieldwork in Saudi.

The use of social media in this fieldwork allowed us greater access to domestic spaces beyond the guest room, where interviews were often conducted. This technology offers almost 'live' insights into participants' lives because messages or media are created and captured just before they are sent. The use of WhatsApp, in our research gave us a kind of vicarious snapshots into participants' daily lives as it unfolded often close to real time (Figure T). WhatsApp also allowed us to engage the participants in bursts of ongoing conversations, giving us opportunities inquire further about their current contexts and particular situations (Figure S).

Introducing flexibility of reporting, including drawing and use of social media, have given us deep insights into our participants' lives. For example, we learned more about one participant's hobbies and passion to gift handcrafted items to family friends (see Figure T - Far Right).
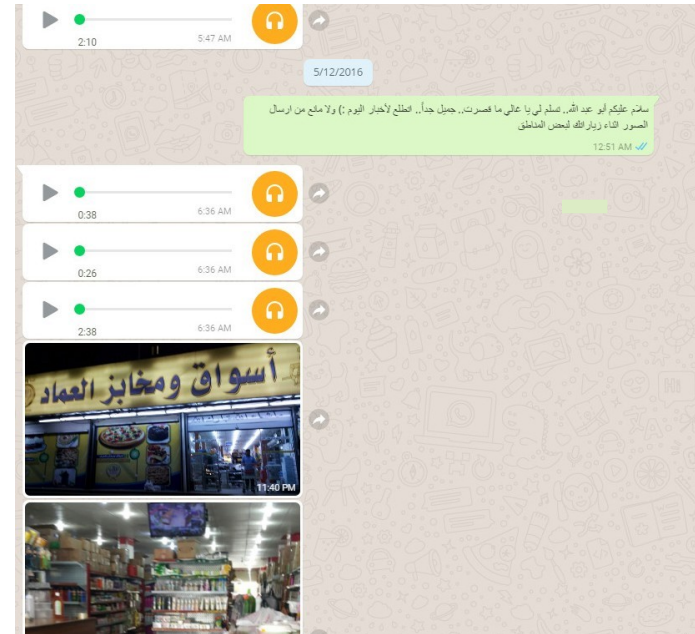
[S] A participant sharing his daily activity through WhatsApp

[T] Participants' use of Social Media platforms to take photos, record videos, add filters and captions as well as emoticon.

[T] Cont.

The following collection of photos provide glimpses into our participants' daily lives. For example, the top row of photos highlights many of our participants passions for handcraft and cooking, while the 2nd and 3rd row show the various domestic activities of our participants' daily lives. This includes spending the evening with family members; watching TV, chatting and having dinner together (2nd&3rd row - left). The photos also provide insights into the roles participants play in their domestic settings. Despite their authoritative roles as elders, our female participants, appear to be heavily involved in carrying out their domestic 'duties'. This is because traditional roles, where by females look after children and the housework, remain strong in Saudi Arabia. A female participant wrote on a photo she shared of the laundry machine (bottom-right) "I have prayed, cooked and cleaned the house. I am now doing the laundry."

[U]

وهذه شنط ولدي ▮▮▮▮▮ عمال اجهزها له لأنه
مسافر 😭

[U] "My son is travelling, and I am currently helping prepare his luggage"

Furthermore, the ability to use emoticons afforded certain participants the ability to express emotion. As seen in Figure U, a participant was sad because her son is travelling overseas to pursue further studies. She shared a photo of her son's luggage and wrote about her son's departure with a 'crying face' emoticon. She also shared a picture of the laundry (Figure W) and annotated how overwhelmed she was with the housework. Just like the use of the mood scale, social media afforded some of our participants opportunities to express emotions and feeling that might have been difficult to surface during interviews.

With our participants, we found that once trust has been established, cross-gender communication and privacy concerns did not become a problem during online conversations. This contrasts strongly with physical face-to-face interviews where there is still a strong barrier during cross-gender communications. The male researcher could contact the female participants directly using WhatsApp without the need for a chaperon to mediate the conversation. In our research, the use of social media was also useful in fostering the ongoing development of researcher-participant rapport.

[W]

وهنا بدأت في نشر الغسيل الله يكون في عون ربات
البيوت وغيرهم 😩😭

[W, X & V] A female participant expressing her emotions via captions and emoticon. She shared photos and videos with us; noting how overwhelmed she was with the housework. She writes in Figure W (after sharing Figure X), "I am now doing the laundry, may God aid the housewives"

[X]

الآن انا اكنس وايغا ارتب البيت وفي نفس الوقت
عندي غسيل ملابس عمال اغسل

[V]

هذا دولا ب
نستخدمه
لوضع
شراشف
الصلاة
والسجاجيد
وفوقه شوية
اكسسوارات
مثل المباخر

Considerations for Future Research
Traversing boundaries through Social Media
The capacity to collect ongoing streams of data through using social media in our research have yielded surprising benefits. This platform allowed us direct access to communicate with participants, without the presence of chaperons/kin or others, such as what we encountered during interviews at homes. Using social media allowed us to have direct access and ongoing conversations, which provided more immediate opportunities to follow up with questions, receive visual/audio media, clarify media that were shared with us, and so on. Once trust has been established, participants, especially females, were able to use social media to communicate directly with us without having to use the chaperon/kin to mediate conversations and to pass on information. In other words, we found that social media was able to help traverse strong boundaries that are particular to cross-gender communications in this qualitative fieldwork. Through the use of social media, female participants in our research were certainly more forthcoming in sharing their thoughts, emotions and experiences with the male researcher. Despite this, we see great possibilities to explore how social media can be used more productively when conducting fieldwork in general in Saudi.

Interviews as an occasion to build trust
Certainly, conducting interviews in busy domestic spaces brought about unexpected and unforeseen challenges. Despite this, we realized, after the initial interview, that this first contact is also as much as an occasion to build trust with the participants, as it is to gather research information. Face-to-face communication, whereby the participants learn more about the research and the researcher and vice-versa, was crucial to establishing direct online communication with our participants. In fact, we found during our research that the opportunities afforded by the use of social media for research purposes is likely to be dependent on the initial meeting and interviews.

Limitation
This study is limited in the range of ageing people we recruited in our research. For example, we were particularly interested in literate participants as the probes involve reading and writing activities. Similarly, we conducted most of our fieldwork in the Western religion of Saudi Arabia where segregation laws are more relaxed. We can imagine that conducting fieldwork beyond this region, where cultural norms and social practices are more strictly observed will pose greater challenges in all aspect of the research. Similarly, we can imagine that face-to-face cross- gender communication might be more problematic for female researchers. This is because female researchers themselves are likely to be expected to have a chaperon with them when conducting interviews with males.

Conclusion
This pictorial seeks to provide visual a dairy of experiences of conducting qualitative research with ageing people in Saudi Arabia. The aim is to provide insights gained about conducting interviews and probes with older Saudis. The pictorial describes some of the challenges and cultural consideration that influenced our approach and research design. More importantly, it highlights the effectiveness of using probes, particularly social media, to elicit users' experiences, values and aspiration. Finally, the experiences of using interviews and probes in conducting qualitative research in Saudi Arabia, including the practical challenges, and methodological considerations have been discussed at length in our earlier work [21]. As HCI expand its boundaries, we hope that this paper contributes to the growing body of cross-cultural research.

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