



Designing an Arabic User Experience

Your guide to the Ultimate Arabic User Experience

UXBERT LABS
Experience Innovation

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Uxbert Usability Lab
606 Al Nemer Center Offices 1
Olaya Street, Riyadh Saudi Arabia
Phone: +966114622211
Mobile: +966534556600
Email: hello@uxbert.com

www.uxbert.com

Chapter 1

What, Why & How



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Arab users are online.

Internet penetration is predicted to jump from 37.5% in 2014 to over 55% in 2018 (1).

The number of internet users in the region is projected to reach close to 226 million.

Despite the fact that 60% of Arabic speakers prefer browsing content in Arabic (this number jumps to 97% when you look at Saudi Arabia and Egypt alone, the two largest countries in the region)(2), the rapid rate of online adoption hasn't been matched by a similar increase in Arabic websites and content.

Regardless of the type of organisation or industry you're in, if your target audience are in the Middle East, you need to be online and speaking their language.

Growing competition, tech savvy populations and increasingly affordable access to the digital world means Arab users expect, rather than hope, to be able to find you in the digital world.

But it isn't enough to just have a presence on the web.

Online success requires that you design for good user experience. And when you're designing specifically for Arabic websites and Arab users, you need to apply UX and usability considerations that are specific to users in the region.

Why does having a good user experience matter?

Because it matters to your users.

If your product doesn't provide users with a positive experience, they won't use it.

The user experience is what shapes your organisation's perception in your customer's mind. It's what makes them come back to use your website or app the all important second time.

Users are fickle. If they have a bad experience, they won't come back.

Good UX is the difference between a casual visitor and a paying customer. It leads to increased satisfaction, which leads to increased credibility and trust. And in a region that's still fairly new to digital, trust can make or break your online success.

Good UX is also what sets you apart from your competition. When users have an average experience with you, but a better one with the competition, they'll go to your competition.

The bottom line is, good UX directly affects the bottom line. Investing in designing for user experience increases sales and reduces costs.

How do we design the Arabic User experience?

First off, let's be clear. There is no single, monolithic 'Arabic UX'.

While we're using it as a catch-all phrase to summarise some of the unique characteristics of the experience users have with Arabic websites or apps, it's important you don't think of it as a separate process or that all Arab users behave the same.

Designing a good user experience is the same approach everywhere. It requires implementing a user-centered design process where the end user is at the center of every decision that is made. It requires understanding who your users are as well as their needs, goals and motivations using your products.

So when we talk about designing an Arabic UX, we're really talking about designing a specific experience, in Arabic, for a specific type of user, using a specific type of product, for a specific reason.

The user-centered design process stays the same.

That said, there are certain characteristics and trends unique to Arabic web sites and digital products that need to be taken into account. This is on top of behavior unique to users from the region within the demographic you're targeting.

Differences in mental models

A central tenant of UX design is designing for behavior. We make design decisions based on what users actually do, not what they say they do or what we think they do.

Through scientific HCI and user research, a body of design 'best practices' has developed. And many of these best practices rely on established mental models most users have formed.

A mental model is a "model of what users know (or think they know) about a system such as your website ... [users] base their predictions about the system on their mental models and thus plan their future actions based on how that model predicts the appropriate course." ([Mental Models, NNg](#))

Users create mental models based on their past experiences and interactions with other websites, apps and software. If we accept that users spend most of their time using other products ([Jakob's Law](#), [NNg](#)), by the time they arrive at your site or use your app, they'll expect it to work in the same way as other ones they've used.

The most established examples include things like users expecting global navigation to be located at the top of the page, links to be in blue and underlined, and a site's logo to link back to the home page.

Because internet penetration and online activity started and took off in the West, many of the web design standards we're used to are based on mental models that were developed with Western websites, software and apps (remember, we're not just talking about sites but also popular software, such as Microsoft Office).

There is sometimes a tendency to assume that these mental models carry over smoothly to users in other parts of the world. While that may be true for many examples like the ones mentioned above, it's not always the case.

Users in Arab countries don't always interact with digital products in the same way as their Western counterparts. This can be because of different exposure and availability of technologies; different restrictions or capabilities or even just different motivations and goals.

The point is you need to take care with the assumptions you make about the mental models that users in the Arab world have.

A question of culture

Just as important as understanding differences in mental models exhibited by Arab users is understanding differences in culture between users in Arabic speaking countries and those in the West.

Culture is defined as the collection of shared patterns of behavior of a particular group of people. It can be characterized by everything from language, religion to different social habits and even the food they eat.

The value differences between societies that come about as a result of culture often play a role in differences in behavior.

While neither the West nor the Middle East can be considered monolithic cultures, there are enough significant differences to make considering these cultural influences a good starting point when designing digital products.

We should point out that we're not saying you can always draw direct insights about what makes a usable design just from understanding a culture.

It's more that cultural observations can help guide you in the right direction and, at the very least, make sure you don't make the kind of mistakes that put your users off instantly.

It all boils down to knowing your users

While academic theories about culture and established standards of web design and usability are a good starting point for designing for Arab users, the only way to really create usable products that deliver a great user experience is through user research with real users on the ground.

The biggest mistake designers make is designing for themselves or designing based on what they think users do.

In the next chapter, we'll take a look at some of the practical usability issues that arise when designing Arabic interfaces. We have also included insights from our own experiences carrying out user research with local users in Saudi Arabia

Points to Note

- Rapid rate of internet penetration with Arab users hasn't been met with similar increase in Arabic websites and content
- A good user experience is a competitive necessity if you want your product to stand out from the crowd
- There is no single monolithic "Arabic UX" – instead, we need to apply the same user-centered design process, starting with understanding exactly who your users are
- Most accepted best-practices for web design are based on mental models of users in the West. Not all of those mental models translate directly to users in the Arab world
- Culture plays an influential role in shaping behaviors and attitudes with regards to digital products
- Even with established best practices and standards, the best way to create usable products is by researching your 'real' users.

Chapter 2

Usability & Arabic User Interfaces



Let's talk about Arabic websites.

Actually, not just websites. Let's discuss mobile applications, intranets, and even custom software, basically any interface where the content and copy is in Arabic.

In the first chapter of this book, we spoke about how digital products aimed at Arab users require certain considerations when it comes to designing the user experience. And an important aspect of delivering that user experience is for it to be in Arabic, which in turn brings its own challenges.

In this chapter, we'll run through some of those challenges and the related usability considerations.

The Importance of Language in UI Design

The written word is always going to be the backbone of communication on any interface. Language has a direct impact on the user's perceived usability of any interface.

When users have difficulty understanding the content on your website or application, it leads to user frustration and dissatisfaction.

Whether it's your headlines above the fold, labels in your menu, product descriptions or your button copy, the language you use plays a big role in your user's experience.

Direct translation can oftentimes result in usability fails.

Arabic tends to be a more 'wordy' language than English. Information that can be communicated in just a few words in English, can take a sentence or two in Arabic.

This becomes a usability issue when we consider how users read online. Almost all users scan rather than read content word for word.

Hence, the more content there is for them to have to scan, the greater the likelihood they'll either miss the information they're looking for or be intimidated by the length and leave altogether.

Your users will always prefer content that is concise and straight to the point.

Why? Because they've got something they want to do and they want to get it done fast. Even with websites and apps where consuming written information IS the goal, overly lengthy writing risks users zoning out and leaving.

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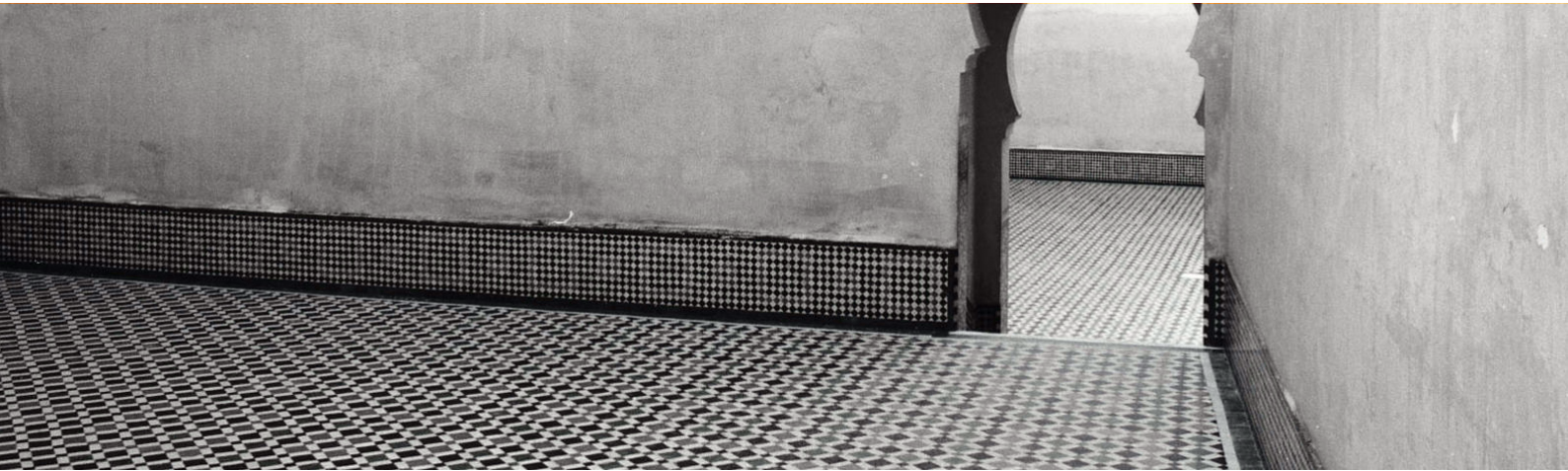
And it's not just about user needs. Lengthy Arabic copy also poses a problem from a visual design perspective.

It's often the case that certain words or phrases in English don't have direct Arabic translations. Instead, they end up being described with longer phrases. This becomes a particular problem when there's limited screen real estate available, for example button copy or copy for a mobile design.

So don't just rely on direct translation from your English content. When creating your Arabic copy, you'll need to make an effort to think about what exactly it is you want to communicate and how best to do it as concisely as possible.



Here the arabic version of the product description is cut off because of the lengthy translation of '4G'. Also notice the differences in copy length for the different buttons.



Keeping in Mind Different Cultural Values

Language is an important aspect of any culture. If the goal is to create a great user experience for Arab users by catering to their local culture, communicating in Arabic has to be the starting point.

But it isn't as simple as mirroring your existing content in Arabic.

Even with the best translators, you need to have a good understanding of different local cultures and societal practices. By not doing so, you risk putting out content that is confusing at best, or is considered offensive at worst.

Arab cultures are (for the most part) traditionally conservative and controversy averse, with many practices and norms revolving around Islamic beliefs and customs. So everyday words or phrases that may be completely acceptable in Western countries, could rub Arab audiences the wrong way.

That said, it's important to remember that there is no single Arab culture. What may be common practice in one Arab country may be completely foreign in another.

Even within a particular culture, it's important not to rely too heavily on what are essentially characteristics drawn from shared group identity. You need to make sure you look at the characteristics and behaviours of your target users, and not those drawn from the general population.

Should You Use Formal or Local Arabic?

As we just mentioned, there is no single Arab culture.

Different countries and, in some cases, even different regions within the respective countries have their own unique and particular customs and habits.

This variation in culture extends to the dialect of Arabic people speak.

Words that have a specific meaning in one Arabic dialect could have a completely different meaning in another one. They could even be words that sound completely foreign to Arabic speakers from another country. Often, certain words or phrases require a contextual understanding of that particular culture in order to know their meaning.

So if your website or application has to be used by and appeal to Arabic speaking users from across the region, how do you accommodate variations in dialect?

The simplest solution is to use what's sometimes referred to as "Modern Standard Arabic" (MSA) or Classical Arabic (fusha in Arabic). MSA is the standard that is most commonly taught in schools, with the majority of Arabic speakers able to read and write in it.

It's often considered a prestigious form of Arabic and tends to be used in academia and other formal circumstances such as in the media.

However, it's important to make the distinction that MSA is NOT a neutral form of Arabic. Arab users do not speak MSA in their daily lives.

If you do end up using MSA, while the majority of users will be able to understand your content, the formal nature may not match your brand or the tone of voice you're going for.

Deciding on the format of Arabic you should use will be influenced by a number of different factors. Are your target users based in a single country or are you targeting the whole region? Do you have the resources and capabilities to have your website cater to the local dialect? What's the tone of voice that you want your website or application to convey?

Again, it's important to fully understand who your target users are and then base your decisions accordingly.

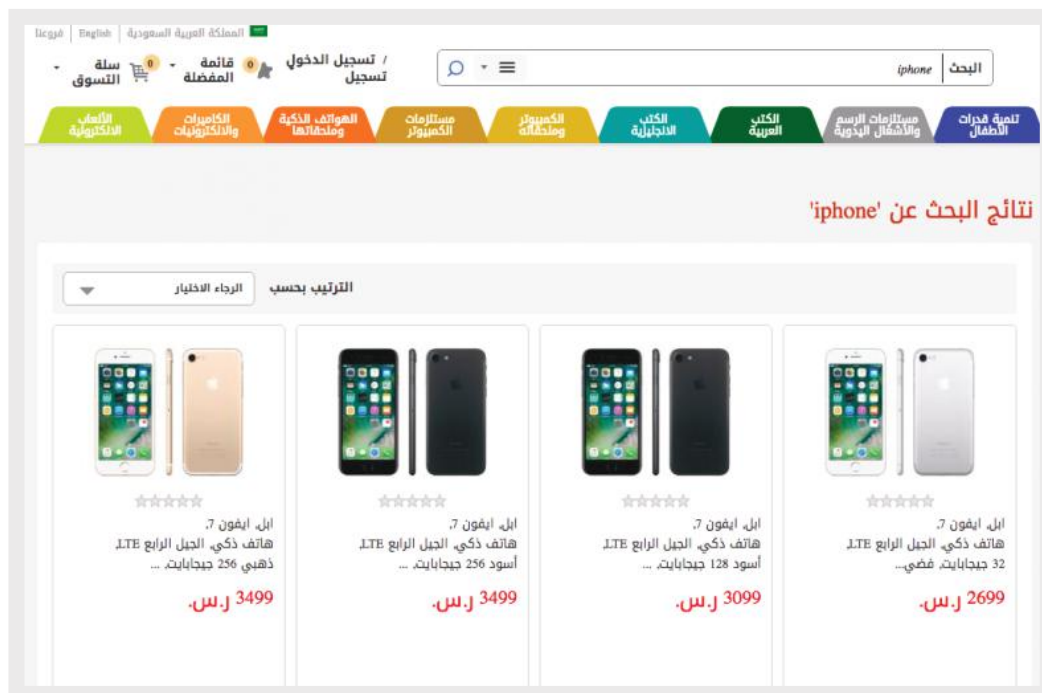
Providing Multilingual Search Functionality

We know that Arab users prefer sites and applications that are in Arabic.

But when it comes to search functionality, incorporating both Arabic and English is often a usability necessity.

Users looking for a specific product on an e-commerce site will use the product name that's most familiar to them. And more often than not, that brand name will be in English.

Similarly, many B2B industries often use specialist terminology or softwares that users only know the English names for, meaning they'll need to search for it in English.



Searching for the english keyword 'iphone' still delivers the correct results in arabic.

Similarly, many B2B industries often use specialist terminology or softwares that users only know the English names for, meaning they'll need to search for it in English.

Depending on your business and the needs of your users, providing multilingual search functionality may be a key aspect of usability for your website or application.

But if you do offer it, keep in mind the usability principle of allowing for user error in the form of misspelled keywords. Users will often make spelling mistakes, either because they're in a rush, they get distracted or simply because they're not sure of the correct spelling.

Make sure your search results accommodate for spelling mistakes. You can do this by either taking into account common spelling mistakes and providing the search results you think users are looking for, suggesting alternate search keywords that could be what they wanted to enter or including predictive text in the search field.

Either way, don't just return 'no search results found'. It's a big usability no-no.

Visual Design in Arabic Interfaces

Arabic language interfaces also bring with them particular challenges in relation to their visual design.

From the obvious issue of the Right to Left (RTL) layout to other usability considerations related to images, icons and type font and size

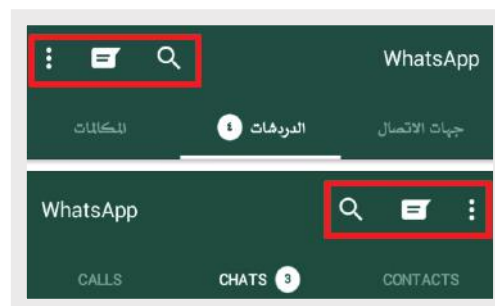
Right to Left (RTL) Layout

Because Arabic is written right to left, Arabic websites and products are designed with the elements of the page aligned to the right hand side.

Research from NNg as well as our own eye-tracking studies at UXBERT have shown us that user behaviour on Arabic sites mirrors the F-shaped reading pattern typical of users on English language websites.

Users on Arabic language sites start from the top right corner of the page, scan across the top and then scan down the right hand side of the content.

Despite the differences in layout, users across the board exhibit the same behavioural patterns regardless of the alignment of the site. They pay more attention to the beginning of the content, scan for headlines and subheadings that match what they're looking for as they scroll down the page and for the most part will be less and less engaged the further down they scroll.



Alignment done right. While the location of the icons are reversed, the alignment remains the same, sticking with user expectations.

Interestingly, we've seen Arab users be able to switch back and forth between Arabic and English language websites with ease, adjusting their scanning and behaviour accordingly with minimal effort.

So even if they've just been using an Arabic language, RTL website, if their next destination online is a Left to Right (LTR) website in English, their scanning behaviour automatically switches to scanning down the left hand side.

However, while user behaviour on RTL websites is a mirror of LTR websites, it doesn't necessarily follow that designing an Arabic language interface is simply a question of mirroring every element of the site.

Logos and icons are a good example of elements that should sometimes keep their LTR alignment on RTL websites. If your users have a degree of familiarity with a particular logo or icon, then it makes sense to keep the same orientation to make recognition easier.

When determining whether the orientation of an icon should be mirrored or kept the same, consider whether there is a user expectation for the icon to look a certain way. Also think about whether changing the icon's alignment has an effect on the metaphor it's communicating.

LTR Text in a RTL Website

Another consideration that often comes up is how you should align LTR text on Arabic websites. This can apply to text labels (in menus or above input fields) as well as when inputting text into forms.

The issue arises when there is no Arabic word for the required label or input. Even if there is a direct translation, users may be more familiar with the English word within the context of the interaction in question. The same thing happens when dealing with numbers, specific names or abbreviations which are written in Latin script meaning they'll also be read LTR.

Using Culturally Appropriate Images

A picture is worth a thousand words.

When it comes to web design, images play an important role in enhancing your user's experience. They can actively work to increase your conversions, promote your branding or simply increase your visual appeal.

But you can't just use any old image and expect it to enhance the user's experience with your product. Eye-tracking research from usability experts NNg has shown that images that have no particular purpose other than to take up space are routinely ignored by users.

“Users pay close attention to photos and other images that contain relevant information but ignore fluffy pictures used to jazz up web pages.”

– Jakob Nielsen

You need to put real thought into the images you choose to use and how your users will perceive them. And if you're targeting Arab users, you need to keep in mind their different cultural and social norms and how these norms affect the perception of images you use.

Images are particularly useful for creating and leveraging emotional appeal. In order to do so effectively, however, your users need to personally relate to the images being used.

The most common way of doing this is to have an image that features a person your user can identify with, i.e. they're able to see themselves in the same position.

For example, if your target users are males in Saudi Arabia, you'd want to use images of men who look like Saudis. This could mean that they're wearing the traditional thawb.

Sounds simple, but it's a great example of how not having the correct cultural understanding could backfire. To the untrained eye, the thawb is something that all Arab men wear; but the reality is each country in the region has their own version of it. So if you want to create the desired effect of your user identifying with the image, you need to make sure that you've got all the details right.

When picking images, it's also important not to fall into using common stereotypes.

The thawb isn't the only thing that Saudi men wear and equally, women don't wear the abaya all day. It's important to bear in mind the context of what your product is conveying and who your actual target users are.

And it's not just in terms of what people are wearing in your images. The Middle East is a colourful and diverse region with a rich history. It really is much more than just the stereotypical deserts, camels and oil. If you're trying to really connect with your users, don't rely on lazy and naive caricatures of what countries here are like.

Font & Text Size

We've already talked about some of the challenges that come with using Arabic as a language for your websites and products.

Along with the issues with translation and localization, there's also a visual element to consider when it comes to using Arabic for your interfaces in the form of Arabic typography.

Typography is a key factor in the usability of any interface. With the majority of information on any website or application being in written language, the type you use will often be amongst the first impressions a user has with your interface.

Arabic characters tend to be shorter and wider than Latin characters. This means that

they take up more space horizontally while not being particularly readable when using the same text size as an English version.

It's common that Arabic type is often set 4 points larger than corresponding English type in order to achieve the same degree of legibility. Therefore, when designing the layout of your interface, you'll have to take into account the necessary space requirements for your copy.

It All Comes Down to Testing With Your Real Users

All of the things we've talked about above cover the basics to get you started if you're new to designing interfaces in Arabic.

And if your target users are Arabs, then you probably don't need us to tell you why your website or application needs to be in Arabic (yes, it sounds obvious, but honestly you'd be surprised). But remember, these insights are just a starting point.

In order to design a truly outstanding user experience, you need to research your actual target users. That means talking to them to really understand their needs and goals as well as testing your designs to uncover usability problems.

When it comes to the user-centred design process, Arab users are no different to American users who are no different to Chinese users, at the end of the day you need to design with your actual users at the centre of the process.

At UXBERT, we've carried out research and usability testing with Arab users from all walks of life. While a lot of our research is for projects that are aimed at Saudi users, we also get to talk to and test users from the large expatriate community here.

Points to Note

- Arabic is a more 'wordy' language than English. You can't just rely on direct translation, make the effort to write Arabic copy that communicates as concisely as possible.
- Arabic copy will often require more words than English and therefore takes up more screen real estate. Keep this in mind when designing layout and UI element pixel size.
- It's important to have a good understanding and appreciation of local culture when choosing the type of language you'll use.
- Different Arab countries use different dialects of Arabic so make sure you're using the right dialect for your target users.

- If your product is aimed at users across the region, you'll need to consider using 'Modern Standard Arabic' (fusha)
- Implement multilingual search functionality to accommodate for when users are more familiar with English keywords rather than their Arabic equivalent.
- Arabic speaking users mirror the F-shaped reading behaviour of English speaking users when using Arabic interfaces.
- Even in RTL websites, certain icons and logos should retain their LTR alignment.
- When using images, make sure that they're culturally appropriate for your target users.
- Arabic type needs to be at least 4 points larger than corresponding English type in order to achieve the same degree of legibility.

Chapter 3

User Research With Arab Users



Design for your users. Not for you.

We've repeated it a few times throughout this book on Arabic UX and Usability.

No amount of experience or familiarity with the region, cultural influences or the language will ever match insights you'll get from testing designs with real users.

At UXBERT we learn something new every time we run usability testing sessions, and we run them a lot. Whether it's websites, mobile apps or intranets, client projects or our own products, usability testing sessions are an essential part of our process. It's the key ingredient to building usable designs.

Usability testing brings us face to face with real users and gives us actionable data to make intelligent design decisions.

Our belief in the value of usability testing combined with being right here on the ground gives us unique insight into conducting user research in general, and usability testing specifically, in Saudi Arabia.

In this final chapter of our Arabic UX & Usability eBook, we're going to cover some of the challenges that come with usability testing in Saudi Arabia. features of conducting user research in Saudi Arabia.

Who Do We Test With?

A better question would probably be 'who don't we test with?'

We're fortunate enough to work with clients from a range of different industries. This gives us the chance to test and research attitudes and behaviours of users from different walks of life, social status and educational backgrounds.

While a big proportion of our testing is with Saudi nationals, the large expat population in the country provides opportunities for testing with Arabs from the broader Middle East as well as expats from Europe, America and the rest of Asia.

Quick Summary of the Research Process

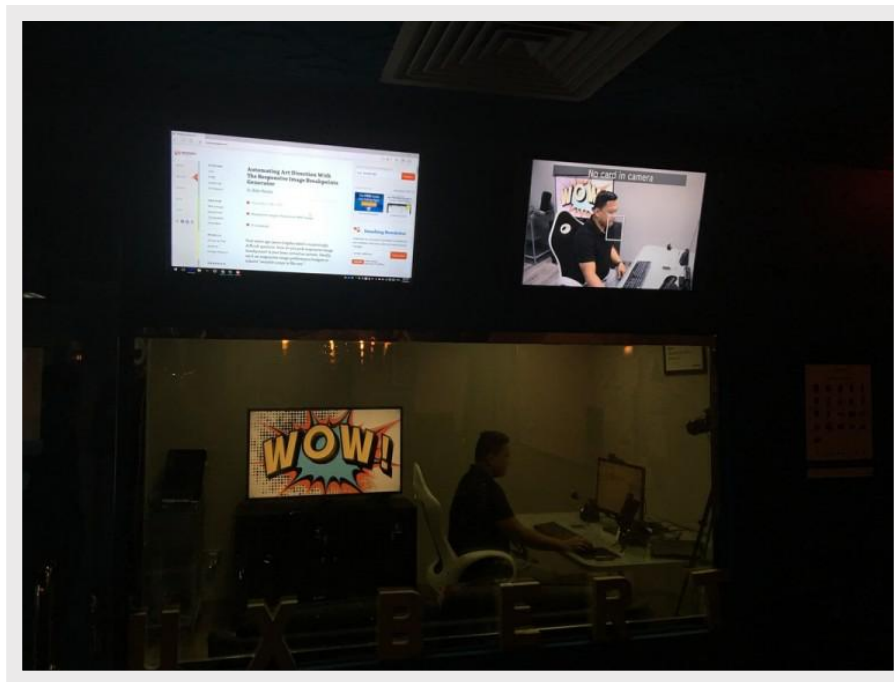
Before we dive into the details, it's useful to provide a summary of our usability testing process for context into these insights.

To begin with, the key is to test with representative users

Although testing with any users is better than no testing, to get real value from usability testing you need to be talking to and testing with people who'll actually end up using your designs.

When recruiting, we make a point of screening any potential participant before we invite them to take part. This consists of going through a series of pre-prepared questions to determine if the potential participant fits the profile of our target user. Screening questionnaires are made up of a combination of demographic, behavioural and attitudinal questions put together with the client.

Once a user is considered eligible, they're booked in for a session. Sessions either take place at our own usability lab or we'll go out to the user. It depends on the needs of the project and the availability of the participant.



Observing a usability testing session at UXBERT's Usability Lab.

Sessions start with an explanation of what we're doing, why we're doing it, and clarifying that it's the product/design that's being tested and not them. It's important to emphasise to participants that there are no right or wrong answers.

So, quick recap out of the way, here are some of the things that we've noticed that are particular to users here in Saudi Arabia

No One Knows What Usability Testing Is. No One Knows What to Expect.

User research in general and usability testing in particular are foreign concepts to both users and businesses here.

People are familiar with certain techniques (surveys, focus groups, etc.) but these are generally associated with marketing efforts, and therefore opinions. The idea of conducting research into behaviour as a part of design efforts is a new one.

This provides challenges in the recruitment process as well as the actual research itself.

When we first get in touch with potential participants and begin to explain to them what we're doing many will immediately assume we're carrying out a survey over the phone.

The go to response then is to tell us they haven't got the time to take part or asking us to just send them our questions in an email, not realising the questions we want to ask aren't actually a part of the research but instead a part of the recruitment process.

Even when we're given time to explain, it usually takes a detailed explanation to communicate exactly what it is that we're doing.

People associate 'research' with market research. But when they hear 'usability testing', it's associated with technical testing. This can be intimidating for non-technical users in particular.

"I don't think I'm the right person for this" is a statement we'll hear regularly. We have to reassure them that they are in fact the right person as long as whatever is being tested is something that they'd use.

"We're testing the product, not you."

This is followed by a run down of what will actually happen during the session. They'll be sat at a desk in front of a computer (or other device) and will be asked to perform a number of tasks. As they're conducting the tasks there'll be a moderator who'll be asking them questions about what they're doing.

Most of the time once we've gone through the process, people seem to have a better understanding and at the very least are now curious about it.

Participants Treat Sessions Like They're The Ones Being Tested

Despite being briefed that the aim of the sessions is to test the design and not them, many participants still approach sessions as if it's them being tested.

They want to make sure that they do the 'right' thing or have the 'best' answers.

Participants often search for confirmation that they were helpful to the study. At the end of sessions, some will express feelings of guilt that they didn't do well, or will ask if they completed tasks correctly.

Alternatively, it does sometimes go to the other end of the spectrum, something we often observe with younger more tech literate users. They'll be highly critical of everything trying to be extra-helpful with their feedback.

Because of this, it's important we emphasise at the beginning of the session as well as throughout the test that there's no such thing as passing or failing in a usability test.

Also helpful is to remind them that we didn't design what's being tested so they shouldn't worry about hurting our feelings. Not only will we not take criticisms personally, we actually want to hear those criticisms.

Now this issue isn't exactly unique to users in Saudi Arabia, it's something that UX Researchers from all over the world will have experienced at some point. But in our experiences, we've encountered it more regularly here than in usability testing sessions we've conducted abroad.

Moderating Usability Test Sessions With the Opposite Gender

Segregation between genders in public is a particular feature of Saudi society. And this can play a role in how we have to approach usability testing.

When the moderator is of the opposite gender, participants sometimes demonstrate more reserved behaviour (for both male and female participants). In some cases, female participants will only be willing to take part in sessions once they've been reassured that the moderator is also female. And in a few instances we've had female users bring in male relative to the session to sit in with them.

As a result, we try to make an extra effort to ensure we have same gender moderators available for each session. Planning and timetabling is important for any usability test project, but even more so here.



Ideally we aim to have female moderators running sessions with female participants and male moderators with male participants.

Another characteristic that's particularly unique to Saudi is that a significant number of females who attend test sessions wear the niqab. The niqab is a veil that covers the face revealing just the eyes.

This makes the moderator's job that little bit more difficult.

Part of the moderator's role when running usability tests is to take notice of the participant's reactions and identify opportunities to ask probing questions not just from what people say but also through their reactions and facial expressions.

The niqab effectively creates a barrier to this type of analysis meaning the moderator needs to make an extra effort to probe intelligently and get reactions while getting the user to 'Think Aloud'.

Participants Can Be Apprehensive About Video Recording

We regularly film usability testing sessions.

It allows the research team to go back and review the session to pick up anything that the moderator may have missed. It also means we can share footage of sessions with team members and clients who didn't attend.

Nothing convinces clients or developers about usability flaws in a product better than seeing and hearing it for themselves. Even if we report back that a user didn't like or had difficulty with something, it'll never have the same impact as them seeing and hearing the user's complaints for themselves.

While we always encourage clients to be present for at least one or two tests themselves, they can't be there for all of them. And if it's a big team, having the recording means we can share highlights of sessions with the whole team.

But not every participant is willing to be filmed.

Participants are already slightly apprehensive about the test sessions because of the newness of it. And when we say we're going to film the session, it can bring an added level of apprehension.

People here value personal privacy highly. If they're being recorded, there's a concern about whom those recordings will be shared with and what they'll be used for.

When we're asking for permission to record sessions, we make a point of assuring participants of the confidentiality of the recording, emphasising that it will never be made public or used for any promotional materials without their permission.

Because having video recordings of sessions is such a benefit, it's important that we conduct every aspect of the session (from recruitment and scheduling through to welcoming them to the session) with professionalism. That's what helps the participant to trust us and take us at our word when we emphasise the confidentiality of any recordings.

While apprehension about being recorded occurs with both genders, it's more prevalent with female respondents. Even when female respondents do agree to being recorded, if they're wearing a niqab we effectively lose out on a lot of the benefit of seeing facial expressions.

Because of the degree of apprehension about video recording and for general ethical reasons, we make sure to obtain the participant's written consent to record.

When there's no specific request for recordings from the client, we'll inform participants about our desire to record and get their consent at the beginning of the session, when we're briefing them on how the test will work. Having them in front of us makes it easier to establish trust and allows us to show them that we're conducting legitimate research.

If they're still not comfortable with filming, we'll carry on with the session without it and make a note of it to report back to the client.

For certain projects though, the client will specifically request video recordings.

In such instances we'll always let our clients know about the common reservations that people have about being recorded. If however they're insistent on filming sessions (which is completely understandable) then it's important that we inform participants and get their consent when they're actually being recruited.

Those participants who refuse to consent to recording are then not recruited for these particular projects.

Older Participants Don't Like To Be Told What To Do

As we mentioned above, the best feedback from testing comes when you test with representative users.

We test with a wide range of users, from different backgrounds, levels of educations, income levels and also of different ages.

In our usability testing sessions, we've often found that older users are generally less self-conscious about sharing their feedback.

However, they also have a habit of deviating from task goals meaning the moderator has to redirect them to complete the task. This is an important concern as constant deviation affects the pace of the interview. We have limited time with users. And because we're usually conducting multiple usability testing sessions in a day, it's important we stick to the timetable.

With older users, this isn't always very easy.

In a society where respect for elders is deeply embedded in most interactions with them, it's sometimes difficult for the moderator to have to continuously interrupt an elderly participant.

The first time, fine. The second time, ok. But when it keeps happening it starts to affect the dynamic between the participant and the moderator.

The moderator starts to feel uncomfortable about having to interrupt. And the elderly participant starts to get annoyed because they're not really used to being told what to do by someone so much younger than them.

Sure they'll still listen, but we've often felt their demeanour change very rapidly.

Usability Testing in Saudi Arabia

If Your Target Users Are In Saudi Arabia, You Need To Test With Them.

The issues we've covered above highlight some of the unique attributes of running usability testing in Saudi Arabia.

Some of them are similar to those faced by UX Researchers from around the world, if only a little bit more amplified. Others are more particular to Saudi Arabia.

Through a combination of flexibility in the approach, planning ahead when scheduling and having moderators who can adapt to the situation, usability tests can provide exceptionally useful insights into your product's designs.

And regardless of the obstacles involved, if your target users are in Saudi Arabia, then you need to be testing your designs with them.

Points to Note

- Nothing can replace testing your designs with real users
- The key to getting the most out of usability testing is to test with the target users of your product
- Usability testing is a new concept to the country. As a result, most participants don't know what to expect making recruitment more difficult
- Participants often act as if they're the one being tested and not the product, resulting in them being too eager to give the 'right' answer rather than an honest one
- Make an effort to ensure that you use moderators of the same gender as the participant to help make them more comfortable
- Not all participants are comfortable with being recorded. Ensure that you obtain their consent beforehand
- When running tests with elderly users, the moderator must be able to ensure that they can keep the participant on-track without offending them

5 Research Insights About E-Commerce User Behaviour in Saudi Arabia



E-commerce is big business all over the world, and it isn't showing any signs of slowing down.

In 2016, e-commerce generated an estimated revenue of **\$4,872 million** in Saudi Arabia. And while not an insignificant number, that figure is staggeringly poor compared to revenues in countries where ecommerce is much more established (China \$581 billion, UK \$157 billion). It's clear that e-commerce in the Kingdom still has a long way to go.

At UXBERT, we regularly run UX research projects with Saudi users about their e-commerce behaviour. In our state-of-the art Usability Lab in Riyadh, we conduct usability tests on live websites, apps and prototypes, eye-tracking research for testing UIs, and ethnographic in-depth interviews for more exploratory research. All of these have helped us gain insights from real users in Saudi Arabia about their attitudes and behaviours with e-commerce.

Below are some of the most common trends we've uncovered from research with Saudi users that point to some of the barriers to growth that e-commerce has in the Kingdom.

Keep in mind though, these are general insights based on research done with a wide range of e-commerce sites selling different types of products and services. While useful as a guiding tool, the only way to know exactly how your users behave is to actually test with them.

1

Lack of Trust Towards Local Brand's E-commerce Capability

Local users have an embedded pessimism towards local e-commerce brands. Right off the bat, people didn't think that local brands were dependable when it came to online payment models and delivery services; two core concepts of successful e-commerce.

Even if a user had had no previous experience with the brand in question, they started from a position of scepticism. In many cases we had users who had had successful off-line experiences with the brand, but were hesitant to trust that the order would be delivered correctly or that their payment would be secure, if they purchased a product or service online.

And while these are issues that apply across the board in e-commerce in Saudi Arabia, it seems that the local brands have a much higher mountain to climb than established international ones.

2

Online Payment Needs to Be Easier

Online payment is clearly still the biggest obstacle for users in Saudi Arabia. 90% of the users we tested and interviewed preferred cash on delivery to online payment.

First of all there is the issue of security, many users still have doubts about the security of online payments, believing that their bank details are not secure when they use them online. Interestingly, for specific products/services (normally flight tickets and hotel bookings) even the most risk-averse user seemed to have no problem using online payment.

In addition to the issue of security, there's also the practical difficulty of having a card that has online payment capabilities. Obtaining a credit card in Saudi Arabia can be a time-consuming and difficult process. And while in most other countries, a debit card is good enough for online payment, many banks in Saudi do not allow for online purchases to be made with debit card.

3

Arranging and Managing Delivery is a Pain

Almost every single user we've come across had at least one story of where they'd been let down by delivery services. Complaints that users had with respect to delivery models were subdivided into two segments of reasoning: the pain involved in getting their delivery done and their lack of trust in the delivery service itself.

While Saudi Arabia has introduced a formal address system, it hasn't yet been widely adopted. So when users are having to manually input their home address, we found that most users don't actually know what their official home address is.

And even when they have the correct address, users often added that "it doesn't really matter if I get the address right, I know that they're going to call me anyway". Having to provide directions to the delivery driver (where language often makes communication harder) even after tediously filling in delivery details is a consistent source of user frustration that pushes potential customers away.

Outside of the pain of arranging delivery details, there's also the inherent lack of trust in the delivery itself being completed in good condition. Many users demonstrated a complete refusal of ordering higher-priced items for delivery with concerns about the condition of the item upon delivery as well as whether they'd get it at all in the first place

The other issue was delivery time. Users without fail specifically searched for the -

estimated delivery time, saying that this would heavily influence their decision to go ahead and buy the product.

4

User Reviews Should Be Localized

User reviews are an established tool for driving conversions. Everyone already knows that.

They go a long way in providing users with an informational social influence (social proof) that convinces them to buy a product and are pretty much an expectation in ecommerce all around the world.

In our research, we found that Saudi users didn't just expect to see user reviews, they wanted to see them written in Arabic and what's more they had a preference for reviews that were written by Saudis.

Such reviews added a sense of authenticity to the review as well as providing the user with reinforcement that the product in question was what they were looking for.

5

Browse on Mobile. Buy on Laptop

Saudi Arabia ranks second highest in screen minutes viewed on smartphones globally and mobile penetration in the Kingdom has seen a 23% increase in the last 3 years with 86% of Saudis currently owning a smartphone.

Yet despite being clearly comfortable with interacting on mobile, most users chose laptop or desktop as their primary method of making a purchase online, particularly for high value transactions. Even if they chose to do their browsing on mobile, the actual purchase and payment would be on their laptop/desktop.

Users reasoned that they would prefer carrying out any high valued transactions on a desktop or in person rather than on their mobile phones simply because "a cell phone did not carry as much information as a desktop". There was an automatic (and sometimes erroneous) assumption that mobile sites had less product information than a desktop.

Moving Forward

None of these obstacles are insurmountable and it seems that Saudi Arabia is moving in the right direction. E-commerce in Saudi Arabia is steadily growing and is estimated to reach **\$10,864m** in 2020.

While mentioned above that online payment methods is a major inhibitor to e-commerce in the Kingdom, it seems that in the past 6 months credit card usage has shot up to **64% and Cash on Delivery dropped to 38.1%**. This statistic is a sign of progress for everyone involved with e-commerce.

In addition, the introduction and now fast growing adoption of the Sadad account is becoming a game changer for the ecommerce industry in Saudi, making it significantly easier for users to purchase online without the need for a credit or debit card.

The ecommerce industry in Saudi Arabia is growing and will keep growing as users become more comfortable and confident with online payments, delivery services become more streamlined and most importantly, as businesses deliver a better user experience.

Just being online and offering e-commerce services isn't enough any more. With increased competition and consumers who know what they want, the experience you deliver to your customers matters.

UXBERT LABS

Experience Innovation



Here at UXBERT Labs, it wouldn't be overstating the case to say we're passionate about innovation and service experience design.

We love how the rise of the app and the ubiquity of mobile devices is empowering users with information while providing a new platform for businesses to engage customers or employees.

Our designers and developers are experts in innovative service design, customer and user experience, usability engineering processes along with mobile engagement and app development. We develop apps that users can't live without for innovative companies who understand they can't live without mobile.

Our vision is to make the world and Saudi Arabia a more user friendly place. We are local and our client projects fund our community projects.

You can check out our community projects by following the links below:

HalaYalla : www.halayalla.com

Sawwagy : www.sawwagy.com

We also run a MeetUp group that gets together monthly to talk about best practices and emerging techniques in UX, watch UX talks, exchange ideas and thoughts.

You can join our MeetUp group and be part of the Saudi Arabian Experience by following this link : <https://www.meetup.com/Us-er-Experience-Design-Riyadh-UX/>

You can reach us online by contacting us through our email, website or our social media pages by following the links below:

🌐 <https://www.uxbert.com>

✉ hello@uxbert.com

f <https://www.facebook.com/uxbert/>

🐦 <https://twitter.com/uxbert>

📷 <https://www.instagram.com/uxbert/>

For those of you who'd like to meet us in person, we'd love to have you over at our office!

Uxbert Usability Lab

606 Al Nemer Center Offices 1

Olaya Street, Riyadh Saudi Arabia

Phone: +966114622211

Mobile: +966534556600

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