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## Saudi Youth Use Cellphone Savvy To Outwit the Sentries of Romance

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JIDDAH, Saudi Arabia -- Three a.m., two luxury cars side by side on an empty street, slicing through the sticky seaside air at 100 miles per hour.

The girl in the gold Lexus waved at Husam Thobaity. She was in the back seat, covered by a black veil that hid everything but her eyes.

"She had the most beautiful eyes I had ever seen," Thobaity recalled. "So I gave her my number by Bluetooth."

Thobaity, 23, pushed a button on his cellphone and activated Bluetooth, a short-range wireless function that is standard on most new cellphones. Within seconds, the girl's Bluetooth screen name popped up on his cell's glowing display. He laughed: She called herself "Spoiled," which matched the flashy Daddy's Girl car. Excited, flustered, using his left hand to steer, he clicked on her name and sent her a text message with his phone number.

The big Lexus roared off down another road.

It would be a week before Thobaity heard from the girl with those eyes, the woman he loves.

Cellphone technology is changing the way young people meet and date in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, one of the most insular, conservative and religiously strict societies in the world. Calls and texting -- and more recently, Bluetooth -- are breaking down age-old barriers and giving young men and women discreet new ways around the sentries of romance.

Saudi Arabia's zealous religious police can arrest and jail anyone who violates the rules of local culture, a mixture of tradition and the country's ultra-strict Wahhabi Islam that forbids most social contact between men and women who are not related.

Cinemas are banned -- men and women sitting in the same dark place is considered too likely to arouse mischievous hormones. Restaurants and coffeehouses have separate, partitioned areas for "families" -- male and female relatives -- and single men. Security guards stand at the entrances to shopping malls to bar men who are not accompanied by a wife, sister or mother. University classes are segregated by sex. Unrelated men and women riding in the same car (women are not allowed to drive) can be jailed by the religious police, a government agency known formally as the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice.

Before Bluetooth arrived, people here say, a man seeking to circumvent all that might write his phone number on something heavy enough to be thrown -- usually a cassette tape -- and toss it through a woman's car window. He might wait outside a shop or by an ATM and furtively pass a woman a scrap of paper with his number or drop it on the floor to be picked up. He might keep a laminated sign in his car with his number printed on it to hold up to women in other cars.

Cellphones have changed such behavior in a hurry. In the past five years, the number of cellphone users in this country of 27 million people has increased from 1.7 million to 14.5 million, according to industry analysts. Cellphones permit young people to talk discreetly without a parent listening. Bluetooth, which allows high-speed transfer of photos, videos and text messages to others within a range of about 15 yards, enables them to communicate without even knowing each other's phone numbers.

The Saudi government has watched the rise of cell technology with alarm. It banned cellphones equipped with cameras in 2004, decrying them as an assault on women's modesty and privacy after photos of women without their veils, snapped with cellphone cameras, were circulated on the Internet. But officials quickly relented after they realized that nearly all cellphones sold here have cameras.

"This is clearly a way of going over the social barriers, and it is unstoppable," said Alex Shalaby, chief executive of Egypt-based Mobinil, one of the largest cellphone providers in the Middle East. "The tide is just too strong."

### **Desperately Sending Data**

Thobaity talked about Spoiled as he sat with three lifelong buddies in Baguette, a Tex-Mex restaurant in Jiddah, a Red Sea port city of about 2 million people in the far west of Saudi Arabia. Outside, rich young Saudis shopped at Hugo Boss and Bulgari and drank coffee at [Starbucks](#) -- drinking alcohol is strictly forbidden and punishable by public lashings.

They cruised until nearly dawn, wealthy boys and girls eyeing each other from inside the latest Mercedes and BMWs, white Cadillac limousines, pink Porsche SUVs and even a yellow Hummer with Monster Truck tires. In the world's richest oil-producing country, fuel prices are not a worry -- at about 60 cents a gallon, gasoline is cheaper than bottled water.

Just after midnight at Baguette, Thobaity's friend Mashhour Baeshen, 21, who is studying business administration at a local university, finished a big sloppy burger, lit up a cigarette and began that evening's quest for love.

"Anywhere there are girls, I use this," said Baeshen, a round-faced man with curly hair, activating the Bluetooth on his Nokia phone and hitting the "search" button.

Named for a 10th-century Danish king who united warring Danes, Swedes and Norwegians, Bluetooth now unites Saudi men and women who are often sitting within a few feet of each other, separated by walls and tradition. Users can choose to make themselves "visible" to all other Bluetoothers within range, whose screen names often give a hint of whether they are in the mood for flirting, such as "Princess of Roses" and "Night Stories."

Baeshen, whose Arabic Bluetooth screen name translates roughly as "The One Who Makes the Girls Crazy," said the names looked promising tonight: "I Feel Pretty," "Shaymolla" and "Think Pink" had to be the girls he could hear laughing beyond the tall wooden partition that split the restaurant.

On the men's side, about 30 guys sat in a thick haze of smoke, drinking Cokes and coffee. Many fiddled with their phones. Baeshen scrolled through the gallery of images he keeps on his phone, including a Winnie the Pooh in a bed of roses. He selected the message "You are honey," written in flowing Arabic script and oozing drops of golden honey.

He clicked on "Think Pink" and sent her the sweet greeting.

He watched intently as the phone told him: "Sending Data."

Then he groaned when it suddenly read: "Data Not Accepted," which meant Think Pink had rejected his digital advance.

Baeshen tried the same gambit with Shaymolla, but she wasn't buying, either.

That left I Feel Pretty.

Click.

"Sending Data."

"C'mon," Baeshen said, dragging on his cigarette.

"Data Sent."

"Aaaaah!" he said, because that meant I Feel Pretty was at least curious enough to peek at his offering.

Baeshen quickly composed and sent a follow-up text message. "I'll be happy if U would B my girlfriend," he wrote, in English, adding his real-life nickname, Meshu, and his phone number.

He said he had no illusions that love was about to bloom. He has been Bluetoothing for two years, since the technology first hit the market here, and never once has it led to an actual face-to-face meeting with a girl.

"We need this. It's really rare to meet girls here in Saudi Arabia," he said. "And to feel great in this country, you have to be married. We all want to be married. It makes you comfortable, it makes you happy. I want to be in love."

In the next two hours, Baeshen's phone lit up several times. "Nana" sent him an image of a big yellow smiley face, so he immediately responded with "I'll be happy if U would B my girlfriend" and his name and number.

Her only response was a digital photo of Madonna holding up her middle finger.

"Patience is essential," Baeshen said.

### **A Face-to-Face Meeting**

Spoiled called Thobaity a week after he sent his number by Bluetooth.

"I was curious," she said in a telephone interview. The 21-year-old university student had agreed to meet a reporter in person, but at the last minute her father wouldn't let her leave the house -- a typical obstacle to Saudi-style dating.

She said she rarely uses the Bluetooth function on her phone because "guys are usually just playing around with girls when they do that." And driving down the road that night last month, she said, she turned it on because she thought it might stop Thobaity from chasing her at high speed. "I thought if I could convince him I was taking his number I could get rid of him," she said. She told her family's driver that Thobaity was a pest.

But she couldn't get him out of her mind. She liked his persistence, and even though she saw him out her car window for just a few minutes, "there was something about him."

So she called him, and they talked on their cellphones for three hours -- about everything from family to favorite foods. "We talked like we really knew each other," she said. "He was clear and frank and honest, and when you find a guy like that, you really feel comfortable."

Spoiled, who declined to give her name because her parents do not know about her boyfriend, said she had never dated before. Saudi culture demands that families arrange meetings between young men and women -- with the sole goal of marriage. The couples can decline to wed, but they are generally forbidden to seek out partners of their own choosing.

Saudi women are required to dress "modestly" in public, which means at least covering their hair, but most wear a head-to-toe black veil and robe that reveals only their eyes. Men trying to flirt with women often have no idea what they look like, except for eyes that are often elaborately adorned with makeup.

Saudi youths have found ways to date despite the restrictions -- often meeting in out-of-the-way places where they enter pretending to be brother and sister. But Spoiled said many young people are ambivalent about dating because they are deeply influenced by the society's conservative norms. That applies even to people like herself who've lived overseas -- she spent time in the United States -- and been exposed to other customs.

"It's not nice for girls to know too many guys," she said.

Thobaity said he was also conflicted about whether meeting a woman by Bluetooth was morally acceptable. He said he wants to meet someone to love, but he also doesn't want to betray a religion and culture that are important to him. "Deep down inside, I think this is wrong," he said, but then added quickly, "But I am not sure."

Thobaity, who is studying to be a pharmacist, said he has had only one previous relationship with a girl. But he said it fell apart because she found it so hard to get out of the house that he only saw her face-to-face twice in two years. "Her parents are very strict," he said.

Despite such reservations, cellphones and Bluetooth have allowed young people to experiment more freely with flirting and dating, within whatever limits they set for themselves. The Internet is also popular but is not as convenient or intimate as Bluetooth. "This technology has made this whole thing easier," Spoiled said.

After three hours on the phone the first time they spoke, Spoiled and Thobaity decided to take the next step: a face-to-face meeting.

Two days later, they met at a Japanese restaurant atop the Westin Hotel, a quiet and cozy spot overlooking the Red Sea. They arrived separately just after 10 p.m.; she told her family and her driver that she was meeting friends. She entered the restaurant fully veiled. They took pains to make themselves appear casual, like siblings meeting for dinner.

"There is always tension on a first date, so I didn't ask too many personal things," Thobaity said. "I was waiting for her to talk. I didn't want to embarrass her."

After 10 minutes, she let the veil down and he saw her face for the first time.

Thobaity was hooked. He recalled later calling his best friend and shouting, "She's beautiful! She's beautiful!"

"We are perfect for each other," Thobaity said. "We have the same mind. The same thoughts, like soul mates."

Over the next couple of days, they talked on the phone for hours and met twice more: once for a boat ride, once for a few hours driving around in his car.

A week after their first meeting, they were sure of one thing: Somehow they would get engaged.

Thobaity joked that the tough part would be figuring out how to get their mothers to meet and decide on their

own that their children should marry. Spoiled said her mother might understand and support her, but it might be impossible for her father to accept a marriage not arranged by family members.

But somehow, they agreed, they would find a way.

" *Inshallah* ," Spoiled said. God willing.

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