

**DRIVING OPINIONS ON TWITTER: SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY AND
WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN SAUDI ARABIA**

Ghaliah Almuyidi

Middle Tennessee State University

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Thesis Committee:

Dr. Sally Ann Cruikshank, Chair

Dr. Sanjay Asthana

Dr. Ken Blake

ABSTRACT

Saudi women were not allowed to drive until Sept. 26, 2017, when the Saudi King issued a statement recognizing the right of women driving. This study explored the kingdom's perception on women's rights by examining tweets announcing lifting of the ban on women's driving through the lens of Social Identity Theory. Using textual analysis, ten tweets and their replies (891 in total) were selected. Four were from official government accounts and six were from national news accounts. From the government tweets, positive attitudes represented 48%, while those with negative attitudes represented 22%. From the national media tweets, comments with positive attitudes represented 24%, while those with negative attitudes represented 43%. Overall, most of the negative responses came from male users. Also, according to the results, females represented 64% while males had 30% on their support for women driving.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, Saudi women, women driving, social identity theory, Women2Drive, Twitter, social media.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has recognized the important role of women in building societies. As a result, the Kingdom has been increasing the involvement of women in many fields and industries including politics, commerce, and education. However, women were not allowed to drive until September 26, 2017, when King Salman issued a statement recognizing the right of Saudi women to drive. Licenses were set to be issued to women starting on June 24, 2019. Women's driving was a highly debated issue in Saudi Arabia prior to the king's statement (Specia, 2019).

Meanwhile, rapid advances in information technology have led women in Saudi Arabia to find new ways to express themselves. Social media platforms offer women an alternative place to share their views and discuss their opinions regarding certain policies or social issues that they believe marginalize them. Women's use of Twitter has gained growing recognition in Saudi Arabia in recent years. In Saudi Arabia, Twitter use is most common among people aged between 18 and 24, and its usage is roughly split between men and women (Westall & McDowall 2016). Odin (2013) perceived that social media enables and empowers women in repressive governments. However, in Saudi Arabia, the rules and regulations on the use of the Internet are significant obstacles that prevent women from fully using social media to express their opinions on subjects that are important to them. Anything that violates the law, Islam, public decency or the basic doctrines of government is strictly censored (Odin, 2013).

The ban on women's driving raised a lot of red flags in regard to Saudi Arabia's human rights and democratic governance, especially when it comes to women's rights. There have been repeated calls from international bodies and countries, such as the

United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada, urging the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to improve its human rights record (Human Rights Watch, 2012). The intervention of the UN's Human Rights Council and its resolution calling for human rights organizations to report human rights violations in Saudi Arabia has highlighted the human rights crisis in Saudi Arabia. The government of Saudi Arabia has been accused of unfair trials, unequal rights for women, failure to ratify international human rights treaties, and extrajudicial killings, among other offenses (Human Rights Watch, 2012).

The purpose of the study is to explore Saudis' perception of women's rights through the examination of tweets with the hashtags related to the announcement of lifting the ban on women's driving. As a consequence of the mass media censorship and technological shift, social media is becoming instrumental in sharing information on human rights violations. This study also compares the Twitter responses from official government accounts and those from national news media accounts.

This thesis relies on social identity theory as the theoretical framework for investigating Twitter usage among Saudi Arabians. The central argument of social identity theory is that group members derive self-esteem and self-belonging (a sense of social identity) from their membership in a social group (Tajfel, H., & Turner, 1979; Tajfel, 1978; Trepte, 2006; Reicher, 1984). Twitter facilitates the formation of virtual groups that significantly shape the social identities of group members. Thus, SIT provides meaningful insights into the relationship between the social world of Twitter and the motivations of its users.

The research questions for this study are: How did Saudis' responses to news on women's rights differ between official government accounts and national media accounts on Twitter? How did Twitter users respond to the news of women being allowed to drive?

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN SAUDI SOCIETY

Women are treated as permanent legal minors in Saudi Arabia. Most of their duties revolve around their homes and doing as a man commands. In most communities in the country, women cannot make independent decisions, because they have to be around a male figure (either a father, brother, husband or son) who makes the decisions (Yee, 2020). During their family chores, women are expected to serve men and do everything men command without question. In Saudi Arabia, most societies perceive the body of a woman as awrah (weakness) except for the hands and eyes, thus demand women to wear a hijab (head cover) and an abaya (full black cloak) to avoid distracting men from attending to their daily duties accordingly (Yee, 2020). This proves how Muslim men perceive women as unequal to men, and this has been a natural or normal case for men as it is associated to own cultural beliefs such as how it is written in the Quran (Galloway, 2014).

Since independence, Saudi Arabia leaders have tirelessly fought to retain women's role in society as just "submissive." Men have been controlling women in the country in a move to preserve male dominance in the culture and promote respect for men. Schools were only meant for male children, because male children could be involved in women's lives by making decisions (Yee, 2020).

In restaurants and hotels, women are expected to serve men, and if a hotel or restaurant is serving both men and women, there has to be a barrier dividing the location of men from that of women. Additionally, if a woman required health care services, a male figure had to authorize the process. Only men were permitted to drive, since women could not own any asset, according to the traditions (Yee, 2020).

In 2017, through the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the Saudi Law gave women new rights and freedoms. Women were given the right to drive without a man's permission, attend sporting activities, and travel to any destination of their choosing (Yee, 2020). The move to give women such freedom was a victory for women activists who started advocating for increased awareness of women's rights.

Also, education was a right that women were given under Salman's rule. After the increased public awareness through social media platforms and the national news media, Saudi women's growth in accessing higher learning education increased abruptly (Odine, 2013). Women were able to access universities, both domestic and international, creating a foundation for women to assume future leadership roles.

Women's education is an excellent achievement for society, because they will participate in community building activities at increased rates. Additionally, the right for women to be educated created more room for their accommodation and admission into the country's politics, like Salma bint Hizab al-Oteibi who was an elected council of Madrasah, Mecca (Yee, 2020). Other women took different professions previously populated by men like physicians, lecturers, teachers, and nurses.

Within the modern digital world, women share the same privileges as men in Saudi Arabia. Women have the right to make decisions, sue men in a court of law for any

misconduct or offense, attend schools, be involved in politics, and engage in community-building activities (Yee, 2020).

However, Yee (2020) asserts that not all communities have agreed to the Saudi Law on women, and some rural communities of areas like Riyadh province still have unfavorable conditions for women. Women are not able to make decisions on health care, education, or travel without a man. Also, most of the schools in the rural areas are comprised of male students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Media Landscape in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has a vibrant social media. With more than 32.23 million internet users, to the country's internet penetration rate of 93% (Hootsuite & We Are Social, 2020). Out of these 32 million Saudis with Internet access, more than 25 million are active social media users, amounting to a social media penetration of 72% among Internet users. A Saudi Arabian citizen spends an average time of three hours, two minutes on social media platforms on a daily basis (Digital Media Insight, 2020). About 58% of the Saudi population and 90% of its internet users are active Twitter subscribers – this makes Saudi Arabia the fastest growing Twitter nation in the world (Kemp, 2020). As compared to most developed countries such as the United States, Saudi citizens depend more on social media for news (Arab Social Media Report, 2014).

Saudi Arabia has a geographical and cultural significance in the Middle East region. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was formed in 1932 under the leadership of Abdul-Aziz ibn Saud. Saudi Arabia is the de facto religious capital for Islam – it is the birthplace

for Prophet Muhammad. Its two cities, Mecca and Medina, are some of the holiest sites for Muslims worldwide and attracting millions of pilgrims. The law and constitution of Saudi Arabia are based on Islamic doctrine and traditions - the Sharia law and the Sunna. Because Saudi Arabia is a focal point of over a billion Muslims around the globe, it has a diverse and unique social and political environment. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia is a leader for Arab nations in terms of culture and politics (Al-Makaty, Boyd, & Van Tubergen, 1994).

The Arab Spring, which began in 2011 in several countries in the Middle East and North Africa, has been labeled one of "the most significant events of the new millennium" (Afzal & Harun, 2020, p. 352). The Arab Spring demonstrated the growing impact of the media on social and political reforms. Social media platforms played a significant role during the revolution, with Facebook and Twitter proving indispensable sources for the news of the Arab Spring (Afzal & Harun, 2020). The events of the Arab Spring shed light on the complex relationship between media trust and perceptions of democratic governance in Saudi Arabia (Quamar, 2014).

During the Arab Spring, the citizens of Saudi Arabia demonstrated a keen interest in following political news across the region (Quamar, 2014). The internet emerged as the most trusted source for Saudis in obtaining accurate reports of the political reforms that were taking place. The overreliance on social media platforms during the Arab Spring implies the increasing distrust of the state-censored mass media in Saudi Arabia. For most people in Saudi Arabia, the national media are unreliable for reporting accurate

and impartial news on democratic governance, thus making social media a necessity (Quamar, 2014).

Saudi's Vision 2030

The vibrant social media usage in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia needs to play part in the development and enforcement of the kingdom's Vision 2030. According to "Saudi Vision 2030" (2020), Vision 2030 aims at creating a vibrant society where all citizens can easily fulfill their dreams, ambitions, and hopes in order to succeed a thriving economy. Also, the social media should be used as a platform for discussing Vision 2030 instead of criticizing and trying to diminish women in the kingdom. Vision 2030 aims at the diversification of Saudi Arabia's economy, reduction of its dependence on oil, and development of public service sectors like infrastructure, health, tourism, education, and recreation for all ("Saudi Vision 2030," 2020).

Creating a vibrant society that can embrace the needs and wants of every citizen in the kingdom will be a great step towards accepting and acknowledging the role of women in the economy. In most cases, women in the country have had a desire to own and drive cars; therefore, it is the responsibility of everyone in the kingdom to ensure that a new phase of development has been created. "Saudi Vision 2030" (2020) records that if the social media promotes the culture of an ambitious nation, it will be simple for all to attain a thriving economy which will eventually lead to a vibrant society. Hence, realizing the kingdom's Vision 2030.

National News in Saudi Arabia

A well-functioning democracy requires an informed citizenry, the freedom of speech, difference and diversity in viewpoint, and consensus through regular elections (Bryce, 1888). The state's commitment to eliminate a single pillar of democratic governance in the form of the freedom of speech is a tactic to make the entire democratic process untenable in Saudi Arabia (Al-Makaty and Boyd, 1994). In silencing the voices of dissent and contradicting views, the government of Saudi Arabia is determined to protect its authoritarian grip on the nation's politics (Abdul, 2013).

National news media outlets have a remarkable impact on shaping people's views on issues such as democracy and human rights – Saudi Arabia is no exception (Abdul, 2013; Kraidy, 2013; Hashemi, 2018). The national perception of Saudis on these issues has been significantly affected by the news at their disposal. That being said, the government of Saudi Arabia maintains firm control over the national news media to prevent pro-democracy journalists, scholars, and writers from spoiling the people's minds with the ambitions of democratic governance and human rights (Abdul, 2013). The authorities strive to ensure that all the news briefings on Saudis' mobile phones and television screens are compatible with the rulers' political viewpoints.

Kraidy (2013) explored the historical transformation of the media transformation in Saudi Arabia, including its modern challenges with digitization. For a long period, Saudi Arabia has focused on building a national media that protects its cultural space from the pervasive external influence and promotes national cohesion. The researcher argues that Saudi Arabia has relied on its media to project its power and political

influence outside its borders in the Middle East and the broader Arab world (Kraidy, 2013).

For this reason, Saudi media strive to idealize Islamic doctrine and tradition through keeping its news free from objectionable materials to develop a rapport with other Arab nationals (Kraidy, 2013). The conservative approach has meant that the Saudi media is slow to respond to the inevitable technological and social changes taking place in the rest of the world. For instance, the adoption of television in the 1960s was controversial and encountered fierce opposition from its conservative populace. Since then, the mass media have remained embroiled in an endless cultural, political, and social struggle (Kraidy, 2013).

Mass Media Censorship

Since the Gulf War in 1991, Saudi Arabia has experienced rapid growth allowing its rulers to amass political and economic influence. To protect its political and economic gains in the period, the ruling class has striven to maintain a delicate balance in the media amidst internal and external forces (Mabon, 2012). The strict control of the media space has served the government's interests in promoting national cohesion and statehood. However, the second decade of the Satellite era has threatened the delicate balance in the Saudi media between external and internal forces (Mabon, 2012). It has seen a drastic shift from satellite broadcasting to the digitization and the unprecedented erosion of the once protected boundaries of its national and Pan-Arab spheres with the advancement in globalization. The digital era has brought forth a seamless interconnection between the

Saudi nationals and the rest of the world through social media, upsetting the precarious balance in the media (Kraidy, 2013).

As a result, all the media reforms in the last decade have focused on restoring the balance in the media between internal Saudi factors – the rulers, political activists, and conservative clerics – and between its domestic exigencies and the global world (Hashemi, 2018). The change in approach has seen Saudi Arabia make significant steps towards media liberalization, such as the increase of self-censorship. However, more needs to be done to ensure free media.

People in the Middle East and the Arab world are aware of the government censorship of news that is considered politically sensitive (Al-Tawil, 2001). The public resentment of censorship leads to distrust toward news sources with lower coverage of democratic reforms and human rights; the distrust peaks during protests. As a result, the people turn to alternative news sources that are much more open to freedom of expression and that present information on the protests in a fair and accurate manner. In other words, the more open and reliable the media in covering news on democratic governance, social reforms, and human rights, the more its trustworthiness (Al-Tawil, 2001).

Despite the government's control over the national news media, market liberalization in the media offers diverse alternatives for the citizens. Social media channels have emerged as independent international sources with minimal government interference (Chaudhry, 2014). Within the modern digital world, Saudi citizens will inevitably get exposed to more reliable platforms that accurately report the nation's stance on human rights and democratic government. Besides, social media networks provide

Saudis with opportunities for interaction with foreign nationals with divergent political views. Within the globalized social media world, Saudis can no longer remain isolated from the outside world, which does not approve of their government's practices (Chaudhry, 2014).

Thus, there is a growing realization among Saudis that their government is complicit in human rights violations and suppresses freedom of expression (Freedom House, 2012). Consequently, most Saudi nationals prefer social media to mass media to provide information on either abuse or respect for human rights. Social media offers these citizens some unique advantages that are absent in the Saudi mass media (Abdul, 2013). For one, political activists can share their views on social media while remaining anonymous to protect themselves from government backlash. Furthermore, human rights and political activists can operate from foreign countries while influencing the political ideologies of the Saudis (Abdul, 2013).

The mass media in Saudi Arabia are meant to serve the rulers' priorities and agenda (Hashemi, 2018). Even though most newspapers are under private ownership, the government maintains significant control over news content. The Basic Law stipulates that the central role of the mass media is to promote and inform Saudi citizens on nationalism (Al-Tawil, 2001). Based on these legal requirements, news that inspires national pride and patriotism is encouraged as it serves the state's best interest.

However, some popular grievances on human rights abuses go unreported in the Saudi mass media, because such are considered detrimental to national unity. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia does not condone the questioning of Islamic principles and

criticism of the government and the ruling families. Freedom House (2020) rated the nation's mass media and internet as "Not Free." For the last two decades, the Saudi government has permitted select journalists to write the most critical stories. Self-censorship remains pervasive in Saudi Arabia, with its media outlets censoring themselves according to the sensibilities and preferences of the state (Kraidy & Mourad, 2014).

Recently, government censorship has been decreasing with the shift toward self-censorships (Kraidy, 2013). While Pan-Arab newspapers from other Middle East nations are permitted, they are subject to strict censorship. Through the Saudi Broadcasting Authority, the Saudi government operates all the television broadcasting stations in the country (Kraidy, 2013). With this censorship, the government ensures censorship of all content deemed offensive according to Islamic standards such as alcohol, sex, and other religions (Kraidy & Mourad, 2014).

The Basic Law states that all mass media platforms must adopt a polite language that respects the Saudi values and contributes to citizens' education. Private broadcasting outlets are not permitted in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, Saudi government institutions monitor the internet for offensive materials such as anti-Islamic sentiments, politically charged news, and pornographic content. However, most of the 18 million internet users in Saudi Arabia can access most websites using Virtual Private Networks (Kraidy & Mourad, 2014).

Al-Makaty and Boyd (1994) explored the context of media credibility in Saudi Arabia. The research participants were categorized into two groups: the traditions of

rural-based individuals who have higher trust in the national media, and global oriented individuals living in urban areas. The study revealed that each of these groups has different perceptions on the relative credibility of various sources. The urbanites who had more experience with other cultures relied more on international media such as the internet and international radio for credible information. This group of globally oriented individuals demonstrated more distrust for national media, which consist of the state-censored broadcasting channels (Al-Makaty and Boyd, 1994).

However, the second group, consisting of village-oriented individuals, tended to place more trust in the people or sources familiar to them. For this reason, the group considered the national media more credible than the international media. Al-Makaty and Boyd (1994) imply that the credibility of media sources is relative, depending on the nature of the audience. The differences in perceptions of credibility result from different factors, including the socioeconomic class, level of education, level of exposure to the external world, and geographic location. As such, to determine the popular perception of credibility, researchers need to determine the most dominant group out of all the possible categorizations (Al-Makaty and Boyd, 1994).

The social environment has undergone a drastic change since this research was conducted. However, it can help track the changes in different perceptions of the relative credibility of information across different groups. Over the past two decades, the level of illiteracy has reduced significantly, with more Saudis accessing higher education (Arab Barometer, 2013). With higher levels of education comes exposure to the globalized

world. Besides, rural to urban migration has led to a disproportionate increase in urban areas relative to rural areas.

Moreover, the penetration of smartphones and the internet throughout Saudi Arabia means that even village people now have a global perspective of life. For these reasons, the proportion of globally-oriented Saudis has increased, while the traditional village-based group has shrunk. Because urbanites are now the dominant group in Saudi Arabia, people place a higher degree of trust in the international media than the domestic media (Arab Barometer, 2013).

Social Media Use in Saudi Arabia

Social media have emerged as a disruptive form of international media that allows Saudi nationals to interact not only among themselves but also with the outside world. As such, Al-Makaty and Boyd (1994) imply that social media has a higher credibility rating among Saudi nationals due to social media's dominant urbanite population. Moreover, the current generation can be categorized as either young or old. The younger generation depends more on social media platforms for credible and reliable news. Meanwhile, their older counterparts demonstrate more trust for domestic media platforms for their news, and broadcast media are preferred to print media in both groups (Al-Makaty and Boyd, 1994).

Around the world, social media have proven to be a technological shift. More than 5 billion people own mobile devices, and over half of them own smartphones (Pew Research Center, 2019). With the increased use of smartphones around the globe, penetration of the internet has also increased. More than 95% of the Saudi population

own smartphones, and at least 85% of the population have internet broadband (Globalmediainsights, 2020) As such, Saudi Arabia is a leading nation in terms of social media usage. Most Saudi citizens are active in multiple social media platforms (Globalmediainsights, 2020). As mentioned earlier, more than half of the Saudi Arabia population is involved in Twitter in 2013, making it the fastest-growing Twitter nation (Arab Social Media Report, 2013).

A growing percentage of Saudi nationals are subscribers to different social media applications such as Instagram, a vibrant social media site in the Kingdom. Due to its pervasiveness, social media is proving a potent force for social reforms in the nation (Haciyakupoglu, 2015). The government has recognized the efficacy of using social media platforms to connect with the public and communicate government policies and initiatives. Over the last few years, senior government members have adopted social media to drive reforms across the state. The younger generation of Saudi nationals depends on social media more for news than their older counterparts. However, the Arab Barometer shows that most of the social media users are men (Globalmediainsights, 2020).

According to Haciyakupoglu (2015), social media has emerged as the most dominant news source during political protests. Social media provides a safe but effective environment for online activists, politicians, and marginalized voices that have been denied the chance to engage the public through mass media censorship. Besides, social media platforms have eliminated the borders between Saudi Arabia and the external world. It permits the national Saudis to interact and learn from reformists in other parts of

the globe, which increases its rating for democracy and human rights. People trust social media platforms to present reliable and accurate information on different social and political phenomena regardless of the audience's geographical location (Haciyakupoglu, 2015).

Haciyakupoglu (2015) also revealed that the person behind the information or news significantly contributes to the trust of news and the platform itself. If the person or entity behind the news is considered unreliable, then people will have minimal trust for the news and platform. There is a growing understanding among people living in the Middle East that government censorship makes the mass media unreliable news. In contrast, there is minimal censorship in social media, allowing even the most marginalized commentators to present their arguments to the public. The expansive space for expression in social media increases the people's trust on the platform.

According to Chung and Cho (2013), across the Middle East, there is stringent government censorship for mass media, making them tools for government propaganda rather than tools for political change. Social networking services such as Facebook and Twitter provide people with extensive opportunities for domestic and international collaboration on political reforms. Like other women worldwide, Saudi women also desire equal rights and an end to discrimination against them (Chung & Cho, 2013). This makes social media a powerful and potent tool for ending authoritarian rule and human rights violations in the modern world. Facebook and Twitter enabled the protesters in Middle East countries to consolidate support, draw mass audiences, and offer their fellow citizens real-time updates.

Given the widespread internet penetration in Saudi Arabia, most Saudi nationals received news updates on the Arab Spring through social media (Chung & Cho, 2013). Social media were instrumental to the massive political upheaval during the Arab Spring that several scholars have argued could not have occurred without social networking sites (Barnett, 2011). Other scholars have also questioned whether the political revolution could have spread so fast without social media. With social media, a single post or live stream can reach millions of people in real-time, helping civilians to mobilize public support.

During conflicts and protests, news framing (the angle from which a news story is told) often restricts mainstream media to support or condemn a particular side. As such, the Arab Spring posed significant internal and external challenges for Saudi Arabia (Al-Rasheed, 2013). For one, Saudi Arabia feared a spillover of the political turmoil that was taking place in other Arab countries could jeopardize its national security and stability (Mabon, 2012). Besides, the Arab Spring caused a drastic shift in regional dynamics with a potentially adverse effect on Saudi national interests.

As Quamar (2014) asserted, the Saudi government was determined to manage the situation to promote its external standing in the region and safeguard its domestic stability. Quamar (2014) explored the Saudi response to the Arab Spring in light of several internal and external challenges. Saudi Arabia adopted similar strategies for dealing with the internal and external environment. Within its domestic borders, the Saudi Arabia government became more accommodative to prevent a spillover of the political turmoil in other Arab countries (Al-Rasheed, 2013).

The national media framed the protesters as innocent victims of the authoritarian regime against progress and social reforms. This accommodative approach appealed to the national masses and prevented the spread of protests despite the severe security concerns. However, Saudi Arabia remained assertive during the Arab Spring when pursuing its outside interests in the region. Besides, Saudi Arabia has a pivotal influence on Yemen and Bahrain's political events, which helped it secure its national interests in the region (Al-Rasheed, 2013). Moreover, the political turmoil in Egypt and a similar situation in Syria prevented a radical shift in the regional environment. As a result, Saudi Arabia retained its position as the most influential and powerful state in the Arab world.

Afzal and Harun (2020) dissected the media portrayal of the conflict. The authors explored how the newspapers framed the Arab Spring in their editorials. It focused on the Arab News of Saudi Arabia and The News International (NI) of Pakistan. The sample comprised print media editorials published at the peak of the Arab Spring, a total of 48 editorials (24 NI and 24 AN). The qualitative analysis of the print media editorials revealed that the Arab Spring was framed as an international conflict with widespread sociopolitical impact around the world. The mainstream newspapers in both countries framed the protests in a positive light through their lexical choices.

For example, the authors framed the pro-Arab Spring protestors as people with a desire and will to bring the much-needed social reforms in their respective nations (Afzal & Harun, 2020). However, the mainstream media framed the anti-Arab Spring government leaders as forces resisting long overdue social reforms. With this accommodative approach, the Saudi regime manages to appease its citizens who were

also facing hardships similar to those in other countries – human rights violations, unemployment, corruption, and authoritarian leadership (Dennis & Wood, 2017).

Besides, the approach made the government more popular with its populace, making the populace become well-informed on human rights and democratic governance.

Gameel and Wilkins (2014), compared the news coverage of the events of the Arabian Spring in four countries: United States, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. The research examined how the media news discourses in these countries framed these protests and presented them to the public. From the Western media perspective, the Arab Spring was associated with political demonstrations with the digital revolution. The Arab Spring showcased the emergence of a disruptive force in the Middle East and the North African region with social media proving a vital tool for political reforms. In the United States, some people referred to the events of the Arab Spring as the “Facebook revolution” due to its dependence on social media for sharing information and consolidating protesters (Ghobrial & Wilkins, 2014, p. 130).

Al Riyadh was chosen as the sample paper for this study due to the paper's immense penetration in Saudi Arabia (circulation of about 150,000) and a long historical reputation in the Middle East (Kraidy, 2013). The research established that, unlike its Middle East counterparts, “Al Riyadh” provided more reliable and accurate coverage of the protests. The Saudi newspaper constructed most of the protesters as the peaceful victims of the state machinery rather than perpetrators who masterminded a social upset, with a percentage of 15% of protest coverage. Even though the percentage is small, Saudi Arabia still leads most of its Arab countries in terms of media coverage of the Arab

Spring. Nonetheless, the Saudi media adopted a measured approach in condemning the grave human rights violation during the protests, which is a reflection of its stance on human rights (Gameel, & Wilkins, 2014).

This current research results demonstrated that Saudis are far more informed and progressive than their neighbors in the region. However, the Western media are not convinced that the Saudis' coverage of the Arab Spring represents a shift in its approach to democratic governance and human rights. Instead, it was an attempt to paint itself positively and further its nationalistic agenda (Gameel, & Wilkins, 2014).

Twitter Use and Censorship in Saudi Arabia

Internet censorship is a significant challenge in Saudi Arabia. The dominant conservative socio-cultural climate in Saudi Arabia comprises conservative clerics, politicians, and the ruling class wary of the potentially adverse impact of internet freedom on cultural and religious values and political equilibrium (Tawil, 2001). For these reasons, the Saudi government has established institutions to censor the internet for materials that are politically-charged or offensive to Islamic doctrine and culture. As Tawil (2001) posits, all the international traffic in Saudi Arabia must pass through the central server at the Internet Services Unit, which keeps a record of activities.

The Internet Services Unit (ISU) has a limited internet connection to ISP proxies to ensure that the Saudi government can monitor all internet activities. With this structure in place, the Saudi government can block websites whose content is deemed incompatible with national and religious values. As a result, media freedom over the internet in Saudi Arabia is suffering from a tight chokehold of government restrictions (Tawil, 2001). The

18 million internet users in Saudi Arabia cannot access a wide range of content due to internet censorship.

Chaudhry (2014) examined the efficacy of the social media platform as a driver of social change in Saudi Arabia. The potential reformative power of Twitter in Saudi Arabia cannot be overstated. Studies from the Omnicom Media Group have shown that Saudi Arabia is the fastest growing Twitter market worldwide and leads other countries in Twitter penetration. So far, experiments in other Middle East countries have proven Twitter to be an efficient tool for mobilization and social reforms.

The growing power of Twitter in the region has become a cause of concern for several governments in the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia (Chaudhry, 2014). In response, most of these countries have implemented elaborate internet censoring programs to regulate the use of social media in social reforms. For instance, the Saudi government has passed laws that ban the sharing and reporting of information that promotes foreign interests, contradicts the sharia law, risks national security, or offends religious leaders. Nonetheless, it is not clear whether these controls are meant to police the Saudi citizens or project a political image (Chaudhry, 2014).

Chaudhry (2014) argues that despite the potency of Twitter as an instrument for social reform in Saudi Arabia, the Kingdom has taken significant steps to curtail its effectiveness. The ISU is the department responsible for the control and censorship of the internet (Internet Services Unit, n.d.). However, ISU is operated under the auspices of a scientific government institution committed to scientific research. Perhaps, this is

evidence of the intricate relationship between the government, religion, and science in Saudi Arabia (Internet Services Unit, n.d.).

The ISU's mission statement stipulates that its role entails filtering and blocking websites that are harmful or offensive to the state and contradicts the basic tenets of the Sharia law (Internet Services Unit, n.d.). The ISU was established to fulfill the requirements of Saudi Arabia and falls under the umbrella of the Ministry of the Interior. Besides, the government control over social media extends far beyond the ISU mission statement – sharing information that criticizes the ruling government is liable for punishment. To provide justifications for its internet censorship, the ISU employs a combination of scientific studies and academic materials. A section referred to as “Usefulness of Filtering” alludes to a verse in the Quran that urges people not to give in to others' enticements.

The current research is based on Twitter because of Twitter's outstanding functionalities and its unique online environment. Chaudhry (2014) asserts that Twitter has unique advantages that set it apart from other social media platforms such as Facebook. Most profiles on Twitter are open to other users, allowing for faster sharing of information. Under hashtags, Twitter users have unlimited access to a universal discussion that involves millions of users. The Twitter structure creates a vibrant online environment where vast amounts of information on various topics are at the user's disposal. Unlike on Facebook, people do not need to send a friend request or seek permission to access the news feeds from a particular individual (Chaudhry, 2014).

The power of Twitter was evident in its significant contribution to the Arab Spring. As a result, it has become a contentious issue in Saudi Arabia, with its proponents calling for an open social network space while its opponents want more restrictions. Despite the divided public opinion, famous hashtags such as #Women2Drive have been significant in Saudi Arabia. The hashtag connected all tweets from women's rights activists, organizations, and civilians to the campaign to permit Saudi women to drive (Abdul Ghafour, 2013).

Given the success of these hashtags, Chaudhry (2014) argues that Twitter and social media will remain critical in Saudis' fight for political and social changes. Nonetheless, the 18 million Saudis with internet access must also become more active in mobilizing protests, defending their rights, and holding their government accountable for a successful sociopolitical revolution (Chaudhry, 2014).

The Role of Twitter Hashtags in Women's Rights Movements

As a result of rapid developments in technology, oppressed women in Saudi Arabia have found new ways to express themselves, and this is through the social media platforms. These outlets provide them alternative venues where they can share their ideas, agreements on others' ideas, or disagreement on some policies that tend to belittle or downgrade them (Aljarallah, 2017). Hayman (2017) argues that Saudi Arabian women use social media platforms to avoid restrictions on free speech and assembly in their country. Thus, Twitter is one of the most influential social media platforms used by women in Saudi Arabia. Its hashtag discussions even created a stronger channel for Saudi Arabia to hear about the importance of their women's rights.

Considering that this platform is widely used globally, it carries a certain domination of how people accept the information provided through it. For instance, Aljarallah (2017) found that the efforts of Arab women to express their opinions were recognized globally only if they fit into the narrative norms provided by the Western world. This has also been supported by the study of Newsome and Lengel (2012) stating that Arab women has limited capability to express their opinions because of the particular structure they have to follow, and it involves patriarchal and non-mainstream structures.

In another study, Thorsen and Sreedharan (2018) investigated the online communicative dynamics formed between men and women during the Saudi women's rights campaigns to end male guardianship, which was also the start of seeing the role and value of Twitter in the lives of many Arab women. The researchers analyzed 2.7 million tweets that used a #EndMaleGuardianship hashtag used for approximately seven months by the Twitter users. The researchers aimed to examine the degree to which Twitter models and helps in cross-gender communication and how it helped breed new spaces for expression of disagreement or dissent. Their findings showed that Twitter provided a safe space specifically for the Arab women wherein they can deliver their concerns about male guardianship.

Thorsen and Sreedharan (2018) suggested through this finding that these deliberations established a counter public field of sorts, which helped in how Saudi women gained the legitimacy of the campaign for #EndMaleGuardianship. Another profound example that shows the power and impact of twitter hashtags on women movements is the #Women2Drive campaign, which displayed the masculine structure observed in the nation when, starting in 2011, numerous women began demanding their

right to drive. According to the study, social media played an important task in empowering women to drive and own cars, which was opposed by males in the country to preserve their masculinity (Shumuluvitz, 2011).

Shumuluvitz (2011) argues that introducing the #Women2drive movement at the same time as the Arab Spring movement is about taking advantage of the tactical timing to spread awareness more than aiming for political revolution. Also, he asserts that the movement of #Women2drive was empowered by seeing other Middle Eastern nations speaking up and fighting for their rights (Shumuluvitz, 2011). Manal Alsharif is considered to be the face of the #Women2drive movement because she served 10 days in prison for sharing a video of herself driving in Saudi Arabia. Shumuluvitz (2011) believes that "A woman's right to drive is about more than convenience and practicality. It is about human dignity and agency, which Saudi women began fighting for long before the Arab Spring" (Shumuluvitz, 2011, p. 4).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social identity theory (SIT) refers to an individual's perception of themselves (self-concept) based on their membership in social groups (Tajfel, 1978). Examples of such social groups include occupations, sports teams, religions, sexual orientation, nationalities, and gender. According to Trepte and Loy (2017), social identities are most pivotal when people consider their membership to a particular social group or groups as integral to their self-concept and possess strong emotional ties to the group. Proposed by social psychologists, Henry Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s, social identity theory (SIT) has provided a reliable theoretical framework for explaining intergroup behavior.

Tajfel (1978) defined SIT as, “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (p. 63). SIT argues that an organization, or social group, can transform an individual's behavior if it can affect the part of the individual's self-concept that is drawn from the emotional attachment to the social group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

For this reason, SIT is an ideal theoretical framework for predicting and categorizing intergroup behaviors based on the group characteristics including perceived status differences (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Over recent times, mass communication scholars have adopted SIT for explaining how Twitter and other social networking sites function as virtual groups (Schmalz, Colistra, & Evans, 2015; Spears, Lea, and Lee 1990; Tamburrini et al., 2014). As a theoretical framework for researching social media consumption, SIT presents a wide range of opportunities and applications for this research project.

Before its current applications in social media related studies, SIT was useful for aiding computer-mediated communication (CMC). Spears, Lea, and Lee (1990) adopted sit as the framework for the social identity model of de-individuation. The project used a computer-mediated communication system (CMCs) for examining the impact of de-individuation on group polarization. Earlier research had shown that the de-individuation of group members leads to more salient group identities, while the de-individuation of a single subject causes the opposite effect (Reicher, 1984).

Spears, Lea, and Lee (1990) confirmed these predictions – it shows that the polarization in respect to established norms is profound in the de-individuated group condition and least in de-individuated-individual condition. Researchers developed different techniques for manipulating the social identities of the participants. The research findings demonstrated that people within de-individualized groups tend to conform to the behaviors, values, and beliefs of the group. However, people with more salient identities are less likely to conform to the norms of their social groups (Spears, Lea, & Lee, 1990). The relevance to this research to social research is that it can help predict circumstances under which individuals perceive themselves as group members or individuals.

Tamburrini et al., (2014) explored the social identities of different communities found on Twitter through examining the changes in language usage. The research project underscores the power of social-psychology theories for explaining subtle human behavior on social networks such as Twitter. The theoretical basis for the research is that language usage is a reliable indicator of social identities (Scott, 2007).

For instance, mainstream research studies the convergence of behavior, which is an argument of social identity theory, through language use in social groups. As such, socio-linguistic studies have shown that language is more than a means of communication – language can help observers understand the norms and behavior of social groups (Scott, 2007). In terms of the relevance to this research project, textual analysis of the varieties of languages that are used in tweets and responses can also help explain the social media behavior of Saudis. Tamburrini et al. (2014) provide conclusive evidence of social media behavior on Twitter that is consistent with SIT. The research

findings demonstrate that people are often aware of the social identities of their interlocutors and adjust their language as the condition necessitates.

Tamburrini et al., (2014) showed the extent to which members change their language characteristics is dependent on the isolation of their social group from the rest of the network. Even the interaction within social networks with limited communication network is sufficient for the members to develop and express their social identities (Harwood & Roy, 2005).

The hashtag functionalities of Twitter permit users to express their social identities by participating or responding to events. This allows researchers to adopt social identity theory (SIT) for explaining Twitter usage among different groups of people. Smith and Smith (2012) used the SIT framework to analyze hashtags from the 2012 College World Series of Baseball. The findings of the research show that sports fans form virtual groups on Twitter where they use various hashtags to identify with their teams. The fans used Twitter to support, celebrate, and support their teams or sometimes for mocking the opposition. These findings are relevant to the research at hand; much like sporting events, different controversial issues in Saudi Arabia allow users to express their support or contradicting opinions on Twitter.

As such, SIT is a suitable framework for investigating what tweets and responses reveal about Saudi's perspectives on lifting the ban on driving, accuracy of the information on democratic governance, and attitudes on human rights. Smith and Smith (2012) demonstrated that Twitter hashtags are crucial for developing and expressing social identities, allowing people to identify with a particular group or school of thought.

Another important aspect of SIT and social media behavior is the reactions of group members when their identities are under threat. Schmalz, Colistra, and Evans (2015) investigated the social media behavior of self-identified "Penn Staters" following a scandal involving a former football coach. Another study, Seate et al. (2012), also noted a similar social media behavior among gun owners. Following the fatal shootings at Virginia Tech, gun owners stood together to condemn the media's negative portrayal of gun ownership. The concept of threatened social identity could be relevant to the research on social media usage among Saudi Arabians. The recent debates on women's rights and democratic governance have pitted progressives against conservatives, often threatening social identities and pushing members to support each other.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of the study is to explore Saudis' perception of women's right driving rights through the examination of tweet posts with the hashtags related to the announcement of lifting the ban on women's driving. This research project relies on social identity theory as the theoretical framework for investigating Twitter usage among Saudi Arabians. The central argument underpinning the social identity theory is that group members derive self-esteem and self-belonging (a sense of social identity) from their membership in a social group. Twitter facilitates the formation of virtual groups that significantly shape the social identities of group members. Thus, SIT provides meaningful insights into the relationship between the social world of Twitter and the motivations of its users.

The research questions for this study are:

- RQ1: How did Saudi Twitter user responses to official government account tweets about women's rights differ from Saudi Twitter user responses to national media account tweets about women's rights?
- RQ2: How did Saudi Twitter users respond to the news of Saudi women being allowed to drive?

METHODOLOGY

The data collected for this study focused on Tweets announcing the news of allowing Saudi women to drive, as well as the replies to the original tweets. These tweets were collected from official government accounts and national news accounts. The tweets were chosen from these accounts because these are the official sources for breaking such news to the public. Besides, these tweets attracted a massive response across Twitter users in Saudi Arabia, which provides the researchers with plentiful evidence for the study.

Official Government Accounts

- Ministry of Foreign Affairs: a government account that deals with foreign affairs
- Ministry of Internal Affairs: government account that is responsible for internal affairs
- Ministry of Education: a government account that is responsible for education
- Ministry of Labor: a government sources that is responsible for labor

National News Accounts

- Tawasul News account: a national news account.
- Asharq Al-Awsat Newspaper: a national news account.
- Alekhbariya TV: a national TV station in Saudi Arabia
- Alarabiya News Chanel account: a reputable news channel in Saudi Arabia.
- Shamel News: a national news account.
- Sabq Electronic Newspaper: is the most popular digital journalism platform in KSA

Twitter was chosen for this thesis based on its wide coverage and target audience in Saudi Arabia. Studies from the Omnicom Media Group have demonstrated that Saudi Arabia is the fastest growing Twitter market worldwide and leads the rest of the world in Twitter penetration (Bennett, 2013). Saudi Arabian citizens from different cultural and religious backgrounds, socioeconomic status, levels of education, and age groups are active on Twitter. The wide penetration of Twitter across the demographic and cultural divides makes it a potent tool for gauging attitudes (Chaudhry, 2014).

Twitter is the most suitable social media platform for the research questions of this project. Besides, Twitter has proven its potential as a crucial platform for social change. Twitter has been the platform for some of the most contentious and transformative national debates over the last decade under some famous hashtags such as #Women2Drive (Chaudhry, 2014; Aljarallah, 2017).

Tweets Used for the Study

- I. “Saudi Arabia allows women to drive” from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia account @KSAMOFA with 520 responses. <https://twitter.com/KSAMOFA/status/912754205563117568>

- II. “His Highness the Minister of Interior directs to hold workshops to define the requirements for women driving cars, and to develop procedures for implementing the traffic system and its regulations, and the techniques to support this.” From the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia account @MOISAUDIARABIA with 168 responses. <https://twitter.com/MOISaudiArabia/status/920321212382961664>

- III. “Commenting on #السماح_للمراه_بقيادة_السياره ... the US State Department: A great step in the right direction” from Tawasul News account @twasulnews with 18 responses. <https://twitter.com/twasulnews/status/912765536014041088>

- IV. “Watch the moment of announcing the decision to allow women driving ... and the reactions to it #الملك_ينتصر_لقيادة_المرأة” from Asharq Al-Awsat Newspaper @aawsat_News with 36 responses. https://twitter.com/aawsat_News/status/912824773494919169

- V. “The first announcement of the royal order to allow women to drive is on #Alarabiya screen #الملك_ينتصر_لقيادة_المرأة” from Alarabiya News Chanel account @Alarabiya with 76 responses.
<https://twitter.com/AlArabiya/status/912767951463485441>
- VI. “Minister of Education: A historic day. We are with women for the sake of safe driving” from the Ministry of Education of Kingdom of Saudi Arabia account @MOE_GOV_SA with 59 responses.
https://twitter.com/moe_gov_sa/status/1010828144771829761
- VII. “Urgent | #UnitedNations The decision to allow women to drive describes an important step in the kingdom's contributions to empowering women #الملك_ينتصر_لقيادة_المرأة” from Alekhbariya TV account @alekhbariyatv with 51 responses.
<https://twitter.com/alekhbariyatv/status/912802163725934594>
- VIII. “Witness ... The Minister of Labor’s advisor drives her car to her workplace and talks about her feelings <http://bit.ly/2IvnVI4> #قيادة_المرأة_للسيارة#المرأة_السعودية_تسوق” from News 24 – Saudi Arabia account @Akhbaar24 with 48 responses.
<https://twitter.com/Akhbaar24/status/1011438465899253760>

- IX. “Royal Command: The Senior Scholars Council saw that (allowing women to drive) is one of the permissible matters.” From Shamel News account @liferdefempire with 38 responses.

<https://twitter.com/liferdefempire/status/912757660419837954>

- X. “Al-Ju'id: The decision of women driving is positive ... and it will stop wasting 14 billion on foreign drivers in the Kingdom.” From Sabq Electronic Newspaper account @sabqorg with 199 responses.

<https://twitter.com/sabqorg/status/912802884856827905>

These Twitter posts were collected from three different hashtags, namely:

1. The hashtag #السماح_للمراه_بقيادة_السياره which translates to #WomenAreAllowedToDrive
2. The hashtag #الملك_ينتصر_لقيادة_المرأة which translates to #TheKingStandsForWomenDriving
3. The hashtag #المرأة_لقيادة_السياره which translates to #WomenDrivingCar

Twitter's advanced search option was used to collect the tweets manually. Using advanced search options, the tweets were filtered to be from verified accounts only.

Another filter was applied from the dates of the tweets. Including tweets only from September 26, 2017, to September 27, 2017, to find the most relevant tweets in regard to

announcing the news on women's right to drive. The total number of news tweets analyzed in this study is ten. Some tweets were excluded from the study due to the lack of replies them, or if they had a relatively low number of replies such as five or fewer. Another element for excluding tweets was if they were not from a Twitter verified account even if they were a news source. The total number of responses analyzed is 1,213.

Most of the Tweets were written in Arabic, so the researcher carried out a manual translation. The researcher is fluent in both Arabic and English and can work with tweets and responses from either language. In addition, some phrases in the Tweets were translated by the researcher as accurately as possible so that they still conveyed the same meaning regardless of the cultural and structural differences between the two languages.

It is essential to analyze texts as a whole to obtain meaningful insight into the research questions. According to McKee (2003), the analysis of the text in question must not be within a narrow perspective – the text should be compared with other texts, contexts, and discourses. The researcher examined the selected tweets and responses to determine relationships, patterns, and trends. Text classification will be used to assign categories to the tweet responses enabling the researcher to organize and sort the unstructured data.

Topic analysis entails categorizing the comments based on topics and themes such as human rights, democratic governance, and freedom of expression. Sentiment analysis is an automated process for determining the different attributes of opinion within a text (positive, negative, or neutral) (McKee, 2003). The researcher used aspect-based

sentiment analysis which combines both topic and sentiment analysis. Keyword extraction involved extracting the most relevant words in a tweet or comment to help create tags, mine opinions, and classify text (Salihu, & Latiff, & Ismail, 2016).

The keywords for the research project include human rights, women's driving, and women's rights. The researcher compared the responses to the same news from different sources. Responses to news on the right of women to drive will be compared under the tweets of private news stations and official news stations.

A Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) entails analyzing the communication (text and language) with regards to the underpinning social context. The researcher used CDA to paint a detailed picture of the language used in Saudi Twitter and how it relates to the social situation in the nation. This research project follows a qualitative approach that examines tweets and responses to tweets on Twitter. Critical Discourse Analysis provides a reliable practical framework for analyzing the tweets to attain meaningful insights into women's rights in Saudi Arabia. Despite the vast amounts of digital data available in the modern world, making sense of a vast pool of unstructured information has proven a significant challenge for mainstream research. Manual reading and analysis of the large sums of digital content are no longer feasible, and the results are not reliable, necessitating a new research design (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015).

Textual analysis is a qualitative method that enables researchers to obtain relevant insights from unstructured data from different data collection techniques (McKee, 2003). The researcher employed textual analysis to provide an in-depth understanding of how the language and symbols present within the various tweets and responses communicate

the people's attitudes towards the media, freedom of expression, and democratic governance.

According to Fürsich (2009), textual analysis is a tool that permits researchers to determine not only the meaning but also the implicit assumptions, patterns, trends and relationships within a text. In a nutshell, textual analysis allows researchers to “understand the ways in which members of various cultures and subcultures make sense of who they are, and of how they fit into the world in which they live” (McKee, 2003).

RESULTS

The data used for this study came from a total of 10 news outlet tweets and the 1,213 replies to those tweets. These tweets were from verified governmental and national news Twitter accounts that announced the news of allowing Saudi women to drive. Out of the 10 tweets analyzed, six were national news accounts, and four were official government accounts. In order to include only valid responses, some responses were excluded from the analysis. Thus, the total number of comments analyzed was 891. Only comments with text were included in the analysis, and any comments with only photos, videos, or emojis were considered irrelevant and were excluded.

Also, the comments were analyzed based on the gender of the person tweeting, either male, female, or unknown. To determine gender as a result of the analysis, the names for the different tweets were used. The names were classified as either male, female, or unknown (for those who had names associated with animals or places). Out of the 891 replies analyzed, 230 (26%) were female, 447 (50%) were male, and 214 (24%) were unknown.

The grand total of responses on the four tweets from official government accounts was 491 responses. Of these, 107 comments included negative attitudes or insulting language (22%); 234 comments included positive attitude or supportive language (48%); and 65 comments mentioned pleasing the west (13%). Finally, 85 comments included religious references or mentioned Islam (17%). It is important to note that 69 of the negative / insulting comments came from males (64%), (see Figure 1).

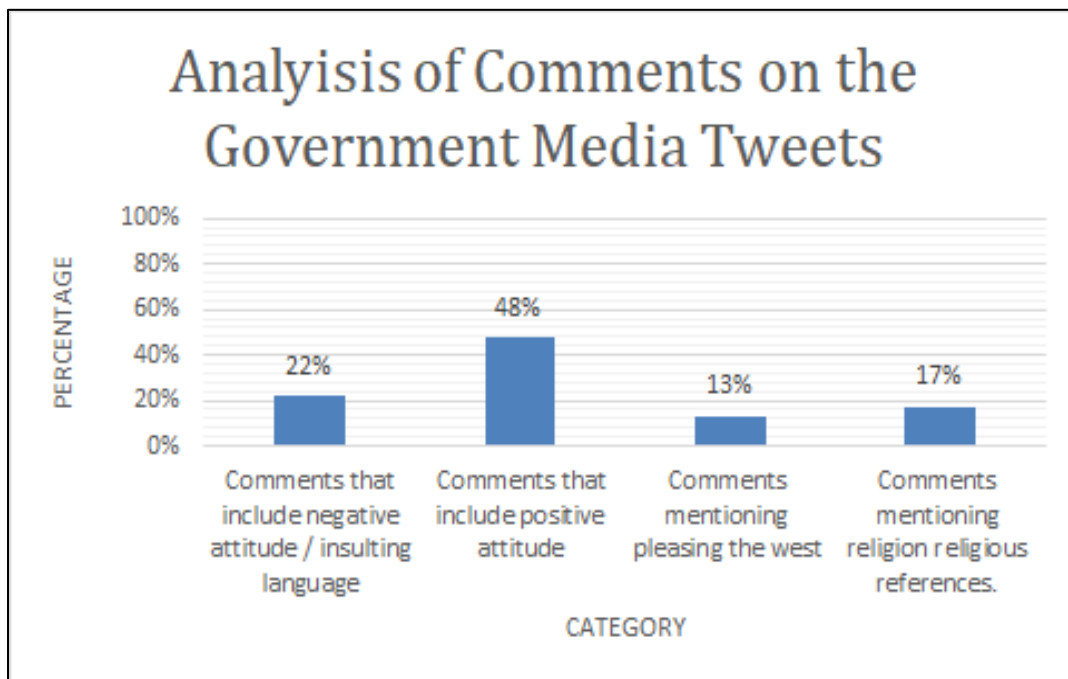


Figure 1. The breakdown of percentages of comments on the government tweets.

The grand total of responses on the six tweets from national media accounts was 400 responses. 170 comments included negative attitude or insulting language (43%). 95 comments included positive attitude or supportive language (24%). 49 comments mentioned pleasing the west (12%). Finally, 86 comments included religious references

or mentioned Islam (22%). It is important to note that 108 of the negative / insulting comments came from males (64%), (see Figure 2).

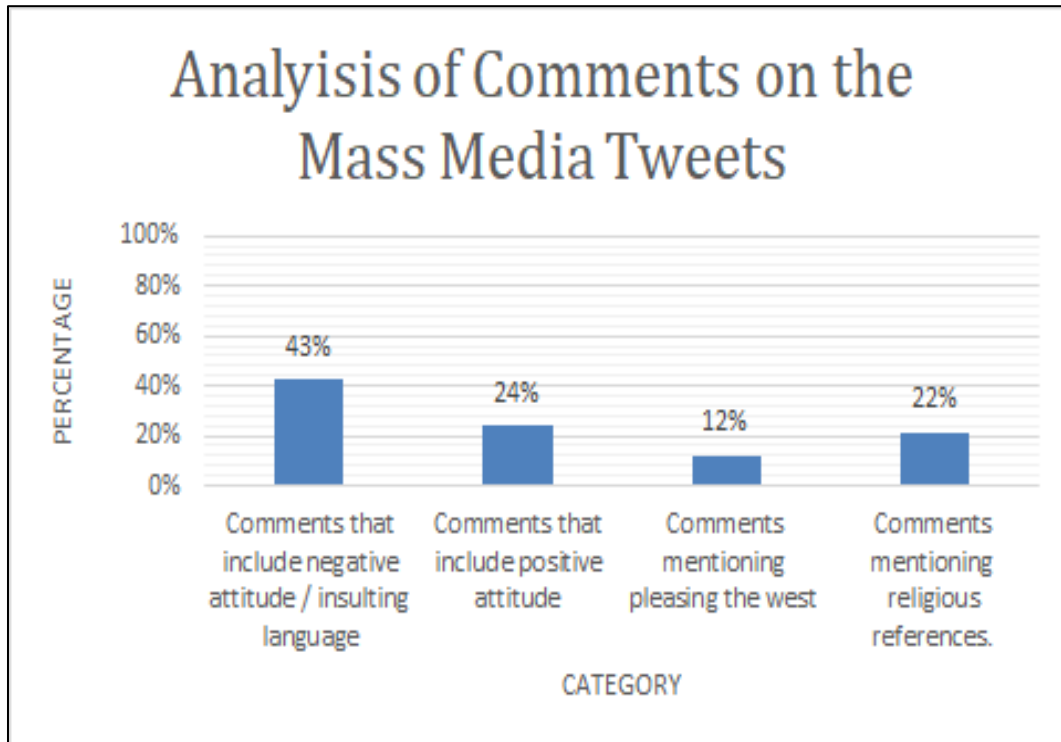


Figure 2. The breakdown of percentages of comments on the national media tweets.

The textual analysis of the tweets and their replies identified four major themes which helped to classify the text into four major categories. The four major themes included: non-support for women driving, support for women driving, religious theme, and imperialism. These four themes provide a framework for understanding the motivation of the tweets or replies and their difference in opinions among the tweeters.

Some of the tweets fall under more than one theme. For example, a tweet from @mtalamri read, "Look at us obeying the rules of Human Rights Watch and the west. I hope your conscious is happy now." The tweet opposes the decision to allow the women to drive and also laments over western influence in the decision. Another response that

has multiple themes is the tweet from @ahmed_a_ksa on the Ministry of Internal Affairs tweet, "The true Saudis are strongly against this decision, only those who are immigrants or infidels support it because they want to ruin and corrupt our country." This tweet opposes the decision of women driving, accuses anyone who supports the decision of not being a true Saudi citizen, and uses a religious reference by mentioning infidels and asserting that the decision is one of their hidden agendas to destroy the country.

Government vs. National Accounts

RQ1 examined how Saudis' response to news on women's rights differed between official government accounts and national media accounts on Twitter. Comments including positive attitude were more frequent on government accounts than media accounts. Out of all of the responses on government accounts, 48% were positive, while only 24% of the responses on national news accounts were positive. In terms of negative responses that include insulting language or negative attitude, 14% were on the national media tweets, and 64% of those negative tweets were from males, while only 22% on the government accounts tweets as shown below.

Also, some of the themes were more present on government tweets more than national media tweets. For example, responses mentioning religious references or religion were more present on national media tweets at 22%, compared to only 17% on government tweets. On the other hand, responses mentioning imperialism or pleasing the west on the national media were relatively smaller than on government tweets, at 13%, as compared to 12% on the national media.

RQ2 examined how Twitter users responded to the news of women being allowed to drive. The news has generated massive coverage on Twitter. One of the most retweeted and commented on tweets regarding the news is the one published from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia account, with 520 responses, 18.7 retweets and 12.8 likes. The news attracted the attention of many women rights' activists.

For instance, Manal Alsharif, who is one of the most famous Saudi female activists, tweeted, "Saudi Arabia will never be the same again. The rain begins with a single drop." It is important to note that Alsharif is the one who started the #women2drive campaign when she posted a YouTube video of herself driving in 2011. Another prominent Saudi women's rights activist by the name of Loujain Alhathloul, tweeted out "Praise be to Allah." Prior to the news of allowing women to drive, Alhathloul was one of the many women who were detained for driving in protest of the law.

The responses from female users to the news varied. Some tweeted about what kind of car they would own. Others focused on the historic nature of the decision and what it would mean for young women in the future. However, the responses of celebration were not universal. Some women felt that there were more important decisions such as equal job opportunities and equal rights. For instance, one female user wrote, "I wish that they had provided opportunities for work or modified universities' rules rather than amending this law."

Nevertheless, many male users celebrated the news, but the majority mocked it by tweeting insulting jokes or memes implying that women would never be good at driving. Others tweeted about how the decision went against Islamic teachings and would corrupt

the societal structure by harming women's manners. One user commented, "May God protect us and our women from this decision."

Moreover, the biggest difference in the responses between government accounts and national news accounts was in the positive or negative attitudes. In terms of comments mentioning religious references or pleasing the west, both had similar amounts of these comments. However, when it comes to comments using insulting language, it was present by more than half in the media account compared to the government accounts. Also, males expressing negative or insulting accounts more often on the national news tweets than the government tweets.

Opposition to Women Driving

The first common theme among the responses is based on the opposition to women driving. These comments feature negative attitude or insulting language that demonstrates the person tweeting is against women's right to drive. Textual analysis of these comments reveals that most of them appealed to the traditional Saudi culture to support their opposition. About 76% of all responses on the national media tweets were opposed to the decision of allowing women to drive.

The opposition in the response was divided into the themes mentioned before: mentioning pleasing the west, mentioning religion, or using insulting language. What all of these comments had in common is that they opposed the decision using different kinds of themes. In addition, the majority of comments opposing women driving came from males. About 86% of all opposing comment were from males, 11% were from females, and 3% were from unknown.

For example, User @hoornaserr commented on the Tawasul News tweet, “Real men won’t allow their women to drive, we refuse this decision, and we will do everything in our power to prevent it.” In this comment, the phrase “real men” is a reference to the traditional patriarchal structure, which treats women as second-class citizens. The Twitter user regards the decision to allow women to drive as a departure from the norm and one which he feels should not be tolerated at all costs – “we will do everything in our power to prevent it.” The same trend is visible in other tweets under this category; they tend to appeal to the male prejudice which is inherent in the conservative Saudi culture. The users with these negative comments are predominantly males with a few female users. Multiple female users have responded with a comment similar to what user @oksh333 wrote, “A new victory for women in the Arab world. Congratulations to Saudi women.” However, a few female users stated clear opposition to women driving. For instance, user @mzain63, a female, commented, “The worst decision in Saudi Arabia is women driving, and in the future, we will regret that a lot.” While user @some3510, who is also a female, wrote, “May God forgive them for this decision. Now countless lives will be wasted.” The statement above means that women are careful drivers than men.

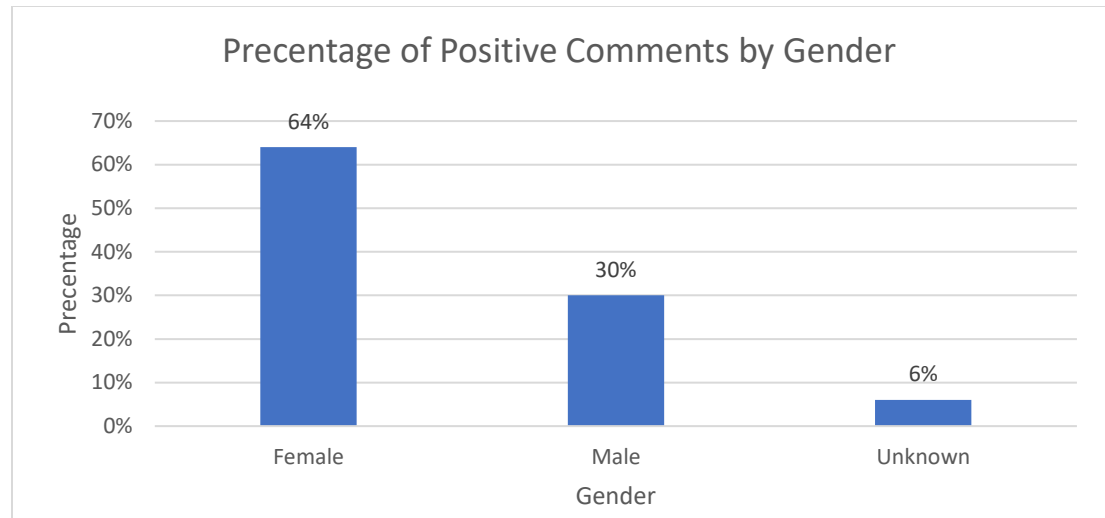
Moreover, several tweets showed strong opposition to women driving by talking about how this decision will corrupt the manners of Saudi women, especially given that women are able to drive across the borders of Saudi Arabia into neighboring countries. Specifically, a few responses mentioned hypothetical situations of women driving to Bahrain, which is a Gulf country boarding the east side of Saudi Arabia. Bahrain is known for its liberalism in terms of its night life. Many Saudis cross the border every weekend to celebrate in night clubs, bars, and drinking alcohol (Alghamdi, 2007). All of

these activities are illegal in Saudi Arabia. Thus, many users panicked that women will be able to travel to Bahrain, where they might recognize their male neighbors who are sitting at the bars (Alghamdi, 2007).

For example, user @VIpQat2022 commented, "80% of those who will drive, will do so for prostitution and degradation of morals." Another user. @alzeer_alzeer, commented, "Be ready for the increase in number of divorces due to this decision. All of those who will allow their women to drive, are men without honor or jealousy."

Support for Women Driving

The second common theme among the response's centers on the idea of supporting women driving. This group includes comments that support, welcome or praise the decision to grant Saudi women the right to drive. These comments are a celebration of the success for women rights to drive in Saudi Arabia. Textual analysis of the tweets and replies reveals positive and supportive language to be characteristic of these comments. Approximately, 72% of all replies on both government and national media account were positive comments, while 24% of the positive and supportive comments were on national media tweets, and 48% were on the government accounts. In terms of gender, 64% of all of the positive and supportive comments on all tweets were from females, 30% of the positive comments were from males, and 6% of comments had unknown gender.



For example, Twitter user @amd2004 comments “Congratulations to all women on this amazing news,” while @joylahoud responded with, “Saudi women deserve this because they waited for so long.” These comments underscore a sense of achievement and satisfaction with the decision to permit women’s right to drive. The users with these positive comments are predominantly female with a few male users.

For instance, a male user, @Maher_Alahmadi1, wrote, “Good luck to our sisters, the daughters of the homeland, you are committed to fastening the seat belt and adhering to traffic regulations for your safety first. Driving is not a game; it is a commitment and good behavior must come first.” This user commented on the Ministry of Internal Affairs tweet, he showed his support to his fellow Saudi female citizens, and he reminded them of following the rules such as fastening the seat belt.

Another male user. @saadzaid88, commented, “The decision was timely. I would like to require any girl who drives her car to install a GPS device in her car that is linked to her father's cell phone number to ensure that he knows her location at all times while

driving just to check on her and make sure that she is ok.” This comment is particularly interesting because it has a supportive message but also it has an underlying message that women shouldn't be trusted to be driving alone.

This issue of trust in women was very common among multiple comments from males. They believe that women driving will result in moral corruption in women's behavior. These comments convey the message that women driving is a much-needed solution; however, males need to be vigilant about the whereabouts of the women when they start driving. Another comment that has the same underlying message is from the male user @ALTOMAN49: “This is a good decision; however, the government needs to implement strict laws prohibiting women from travelling outside of their towns or cities.” Both comments came from males who support the decision but also want to apply restrictions to it.

In addition, several comments that supported the decision of women driving also advocated for implementing strict laws and regulation against sexual harassment. These comments were from male and female users alike. For instance, user @Turkif commented, “We need strict laws against anyone who sexually harasses or photographs any woman who drives.” And the comment of user @FahdAbduljawad read, “I believe this is a great decision; however, it makes more sense to implement laws against sexual harassment first before driving to ensure the safety of our sisters and daughters.” Both comments, along with several others, supported the decision of allowing women to drive yet questioned the efficiency and safety of it without having strict or clear sexual harassment laws in place.

Moreover, several comments mentioned the need for employing female officers on the road for when women start driving. The police and military at the time of the announcement about women's driving rights was strictly for male nationals. With the announcement of allowing women to drive, several users raised the suggestion of having female officers on the streets and as roadside assistants to ensure the comfort and safety of female drivers. For instance, user @yarj_ arcommented, "God bless our king for this wise decision, I believe it is crucial to employ female officers on the streets. Any man with true manners wouldn't be ok with male officers interacting with their daughter or sister when she is driving."

Also, it is important to notice that the examples shown above were all from male users. Female users' comments on the other hand mostly contain approvals on the news and unconditional support, contrary to the male users' comments mostly containing conditions and suggestions for other solutions. For example, a female user, @samira999927, commented, "I will be among the first females to drive. I am so happy to witness this great news." Another female user @3lo18 said, "Anyone against this decision can simply stay at home. No one is forcing anyone to drive."

Imperialism

The third common theme found in the replies is based on imperialism and pleasing the West. Imperialism refers to the influence of the Western world on the politics and culture of Saudi Arabia. For the conservative Saudi citizens, the Western influence on their national culture is like an "invasion" which threatens traditional ideals and morals. Most of the comments in this group frame the decision to allow Saudi

women to drive as a product of imperialism or an influence from the Western world. This theme was apparent among 25% of all comments, with 12% on national media tweets and 13% on government tweets. Eighteen percent of those comments were written by female users, 65% were by male users, and 9% were by unknown users.

Many users suggested things similar to what this user, @3buc98soSWG5qXS, suggested when commenting on the Sabqnews tweet: "God, please keep the American evil away from us." The phrase "American evil" characterizes the decision to allow women to drive as western influence and destructive to the Saudi values. Several other comments criticized the Ministry of Foreign Affairs tweet because it was written in English. Many comments called out the Ministry for tweeting the news in English and accusing it of doing so to please the western culture and the Human Right Watch.

One user, @Roq_xr, commented on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs tweet by saying, "Foreigners want corruption in our country, and you gave them the chance to do so through this decision." Another user, @SAkorANSDM, wrote, "I wish you announced this news in Arabic, or is this just a show to please them (the west)?" Several other users commented similar things to user @ toot_98t's reply: "Enough! I swear to god they (the west) already know about that you are changing and following their orders. Congrats you're up to their (the west) standards now."

Religious Theme

The last common theme found among the comments is based on religion or religious references. Islamic religion is a critical part of Saudi Arabia's identity both as a nation and a culture. For this reason, most Saudi interpret human rights issues, including

the right of women to drive, through the lens of Islamic religion. The comments in this category contain extensive religious references stating that women driving is both unreligious and that it would lead to unreligious manners and sins, such as women not wearing the hijab or having relationships with males. In total, 39% of all comments mentioned religion or religious themes. Twenty-two percent of those responses were on the national media tweets, and 17% of the responses were on the government tweets. In terms of the gender of those users, 19% were comments made by female users, 43% were comments made male users, and 5% were made by unknown users.

For example, user @Fawaz1749 commented on the Ministry of Internal affair tweet, saying, "Never will the Jews or the Christians be satisfied with thee unless thou follow their form of religion." The comment alludes to a passage from the Holy Book of Quran Al-Baqara, 2vs120. The common feature among these tweets is that they frame women rights to drive not as a political, cultural, or human rights issue but as a religious issue. Most of these tweets use the Islamic religious doctrine as their argument for rejecting or opposing women's right to drive.

Another user commented, "May God set the situation right. Our rejection of the decision is not for the sake of the leadership. Rather, what we saw in matters that do not reward its consequences, and the wise person realizes this now, but the ignorant awakens from their negligence after the time has passed."

Moreover, several users commented prayers and Quran verses to prevent the evil and corruption that thought would result from this decision. Other prayed for the safety and protection of women. Multiple users commented, "God is sufficient for us, and there

is no strength except with God, God, do not be angry with us, we are at the end of time.” Which is a common prayer in Islam that is said in times of trouble or struggle. Others wrote, “Do not worry, we ask God to protect all true Muslims especially those who stand against this corrupt decision.” In addition, several comments mentioned Prophet Mohammed and how this decision goes against his teachings and if he were among us, he won't be happy with all of these decisions because they lure women to commit sins and moral exploitation.

DISCUSSION

Government vs national Accounts

The findings of this study showed that there is a difference with how Twitter users respond to the national accounts studied. A higher percentage of positive response to women driving was observed from the Saudi government accounts. In contrast to this, a higher percentage of negative responses or insulting language was found in national media Twitter accounts, displaying an evidence on how social identity plays a significant role as an interpreter of collective action.

Responding to a Twitter hashtag or a Tweet, in this case would be the tweets from Saudi government accounts, displays a similar position to Facebook groups in using the intensity on their willingness to participate in collective actions. These findings are similar to the study of Chan (2014) which aimed to examine the role of individuals' group identification, social identity gratifications (SIG) and Facebook group use intensity on their willingness to participate in collective actions instigated through a Facebook group. The researcher found the use of social network sites can mediate the relationship

between in-group identification as well as collective action. In this case, it may involve how high identifiers to a group are more possible to use social network sites to gratify their need to sustain their social identification with the group. Considering that a government constantly displays a position in the public that aims for the good, it can be concluded that the highest positive percentage of response it gained was an effect of its identity, and the desired identity of the responders in this collective group. This also resonates with how the national media Twitter accounts gained a higher negative attitude or comments due to how it displayed a lesser good position because of the less knowledge of the responders to the character of the person who tweeted, or the tweet may have started the conversation in a negative way unlike the constantly positive tweets published by the Saudi government.

It is also important to notice a common theme in the language used in many of the tweets shown. A lot of male users refer to female driving through describing them as a sister or a daughter. This kind of language is used to send a personalized message to their fellow male users. They are targeting males rather than females in their comments even though the news is about women driving. This kind of language use is embedded into the cultural dynamic of Saudi society due to men feeling superior and in control as part of their self-concept drawn from emotional attachment. The use of such personalized messages in the responses provided by male users demonstrate that individuals are often aware of the social identities of their interlocutors and adjust their language as the condition necessitates. The pointed type of language use and social media behavior is very consistent with social identity theory (Tamburrini et al., 2014).

Opposition to Women Driving

The greatest opposition to women driving was found to come from the majority of the male tweet responders. Most of them highlighted how it will create a conflict against Saudi's traditional culture, with 76% coming from the national media tweets. Opposition to women driving displays how its culture shaped the social identity that the majority of men in Saudi Arabia has long established and embraced. This can also be linked with how Saudi Arabians highly value its long-established family culture that displayed the level of roles provided for every gender. This has also been displayed in the article of Yee (2020). Moreover, Saudi Arabia leaders have also persistently aimed to retain the role of women in society as "submissive" individuals, thus reducing their capacity to decide for themselves. This was also a real display of how the Islamic tradition has shaped the way Saudi Arabians think about the rights of their women. Yee (2020) again proved this by seeing how some rural communities, such as in Riyadh province, still have unfavorable conditions for women.

Similarly, to Yee's (2020) finding, this study found that about 76% of all tweet responses both from government and national Twitter accounts opposed the decision that women should be given the right to drive. The majority of these responses came from men wherein some stated that "real men won't allow women to drive, we refuse this decision, and we will do everything in our power to prevent it." Upon analyzing this sentence, it can be recognized how patriarchy is highly displayed. The phrases "real men" and "in our power" evidently and strongly displays how patriarchy in Saudi Arabia strongly dominates and has already been strongly established thus seeing an opposition with how the long-standing culture or normalcy is aimed to be changed by a policy.

Patriarchy has already created a strong social identity for men, and if women are to be given enough power like them, it would possibly lessen theirs and thereby display a consistent conflict with how gender equality could be affected by individual behavior as part of a persons' self-concept drawn from emotional attachment.

Support for Women Driving

In another theme, the highest percentage of positive or supportive comments from all Twitter accounts came from female responders. However, an interesting result also showed up in which some men responded and also provided support to the women's desire to gain the right to drive. For instance, some men supported them by reminding the Arab women about the dangers of driving. Another response stated that if this policy would be approved, every woman should "install a GPS device" that should be "linked to her father's cellphone number to ensure that he knows her location at all times."

Somehow, these comments display a perspective wherein women are still not fully trusted with regards to driving alone. On the other hand, some response also showed possible genuine response such as how they stated that the Saudi government should also create restrictions or laws that would prevent sexual harassments from happening once Arab women would finally be able to drive. However, what is interesting again is the way that Saudi men addresses the women as "daughters" or "sisters," which sends a personalized message wherein patriarchy or a familiar structure still exists.

These findings display a similar account with how the #EndMaleGuardianship took place (Thorsen and Sreedharan, 2018). It was one of the most noteworthy calls or campaigns of women about their rights in Saudi Arabia. This was followed by the #Women2Drive campaign, which even more strongly displayed the overpowering

patriarchal structure observed in the nation (Shumuluvitz, 2011). Although some men were already trying to support Saudi women about how they should have their own rights, it still displays a sense of how Saudi men still desire to retain their position, which are evident in their choice of words.

Vision 2030

Saudi's Vision 2030 can be realized and achieved through the participation of every individual in the kingdom by any means necessary. For instance, the #Women2Drive campaign is an illustration of people who are in line with the Saudi's Vision 2030. Women should be empowered for the sustainability of the community and the development of the entire kingdom. Vision 2030 aims at reducing the kingdom's dependence on oil, development of public service sectors such as health, education, infrastructure, tourism, among others, and diversifying the economy ("Saudi Vision 2030," 2020). Supporting women to drive will be a great step in the realization of Saudi's Vision 2030. Additionally, "Saudi Vision 2030" (2020) emphasizes that it will give all citizens a chance to fulfill their dreams, ambitions, and hopes to create a thriving economy.

Imperialism

Culture also plays a significant role on how the findings of this study can be analyzed. As mentioned earlier, the majority of the negative response in this study came from men, and one of their reasons why they disagree or why they do not support women to drive is because it is part of the "evil" plan of the United States or of the Western culture. Moreover, many comments also called out the Saudi Government's Twitter

account for tweeting the news in the English language, thus suggesting that the government did it to please the Western culture.

This finding can be associated with what Chaudhry (2014) highlighted. Accordingly, social media channels began to emerge as independent international sources with minimal government interference, hence allowing themselves to be influenced with other social and/or political thinking. The influence created by social media channels changes or evolves their own decisions that were becoming stronger as they gained similar thinking when engaging through social media.

The association of national identity and diversity attitudes was lacking, and it was also the same with the Saudi population considering that another culture aims to create a new identity that would probably damage their own long-established identity.

Religion

The Islamic religion is a critical part of the identity of Saudi Arabia; therefore, it carries a great impact with how the public would recognize the intended change on the policy for the women's individual behaviors on self-concept drawn from their emotional attachments in society. Some of the response gathered in this study, especially from the male responders, stated that letting women drive should be considered as unreligious and/or would lead to unreligious manners and a possible sin. Most of the tweets have also used Islamic religious doctrine, stating that it is a "corrupt decision" or that Prophet Mohammed would disagree with this matter. A particular study showed a contrasting goal from the men responders.

Galloway (2014) aimed to investigate the structures, meanings, and essence of the lived experience of Muslim women through an Islamic theoretical framework. It aimed to

define a detailed description of how Muslim women use Islam to promote gender equality and improve the treatment for them. The findings of this study showed that the majority of the participants believed that Islam has promoted gender equality for Muslim women, adding clarity and information to analyzing the study. Despite this finding, it is still evident that Muslim women are not treated by Muslims as equal to Muslim men, which has been associated to how the Quran delivers it. This leads us to recognizing how social identity may differ depending on how an individual understands every meaning or role of a structure, such as the structure provided for Muslim's take on gender equality and the structure provided for the non-Muslim's take on gender equality. It will evidently provide a more diverse perspective whether it would come from both Muslim individuals or not.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study provided extensive evidence that allowed us to decipher how social media has shaped the people's decision-making and how some have not been fully influenced by the self-concept drawn from the emotional attachments. This has been evident in the diverse population of Saudi Arabia. However, this study also poses some limitations when it comes to providing a more relevant and credible understanding about how the Saudi population responds to Twitter accounts of government and national media accounts. Data collection in Twitter poses several issues as to how several factors show up and has to be thoroughly categorized in order to gather the most precise and significant finding for the study. Moreover, the number of tweets gathered as data for this study is limited, and the researcher suggests that if a larger scope of data would have been gathered, through survey and interviews, it would produce a much greater

perspective on how Saudi Arabian populations perceive the role of women not just in their right to drive but on other social factors like education, employment, safety, and support from the community.

CONCLUSION

The current study aimed to explore the perceptions of Saudi Arabians on women's rights through examining tweet posts from Twitter with the hashtags associated to the announcement of lifting the ban on women's driving. This study also compared the Twitter responses to tweets from official government accounts and those from national news media accounts. The comparison found that the participants showed a significantly different response to each account, suggesting social identity and the desire to join a collective group played a role in the responses. Since government accounts normally provide positive-driven information, the majority of the respondents have shown positive comments or attitudes.

The opposite was found in responses to national media accounts, wherein the majority started the conversation in a negative attitude, thus the respondents also followed the same flow of behavior. This study also found and analyzed the findings through the four themes. First, the theme "non-support for women driving" displayed the evidence on how the majority of men still does not agree with the newly proposed policy, which strongly displayed the existence of patriarchy and gaining social identity from it. The second theme "support for women driving" showed a higher response from the majority of women and some from men.

However, the supportive comments of these men were still found to have been associated with their aim to recognize their identity as the top of the society as to how

they addressed and provided warnings for women about driving. The third theme, "imperialism", showed how diversity in the country is still not highly possible. Lastly, the fourth theme, "religion," showed a differentiation of perspective and acceptance of social identity as the finding was contrasted to another study. Overall, this study concludes that the perception of Saudi on women's rights is still strongly associated with its very culture and tradition, thereby seeing a longstanding conflict between individual behaviors and their effect on emotional attachment to men and women.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Sample of Selected Tweets

TWEET	DESCRIPTION
<p>“Saudi Arabia allows women to drive” from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia account @KSAMOFA with 520 responses. https://twitter.com/KSAMOFA/status/912754205563117568</p>	Ministry of Foreign Affairs is a government account.
<p>“His Highness the Minister of Interior directs to hold workshops to define the requirements for women driving cars, and to develop procedures for implementing the traffic system and its regulations, and the techniques to support this.” From the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia account @MOISAUDIARABIA with 168 responses. https://twitter.com/MOISaudiArabia/status/920321212382961664</p>	Ministry of Internal Affairs is government account.
<p>“Commenting on #السماح_للمراه_بقيادة_السياره ... the US State Department: A great step in the right direction” from Tawasul News account @twasulnews with 18 responses. https://twitter.com/twasulnews/status/912765536014041088</p>	Tawasul News account is a national news account.
<p>“Watch the moment of announcing the decision to allow women driving ... and the reactions to it #الملك_ينتصر_لقيادة_المرأة” from Asharq Al-Awsat Newspaper @aawsat_News with 36 responses. https://twitter.com/aawsat_News/status/912824773494919169</p>	Asharq Al-Awsat Newspaper is a national news account.
<p>“The first announcement of the royal order to allow women to drive is on #Alarabiya screen #الملك_ينتصر_لقيادة_المرأة” from Alarabiya News Chanel account @Alarabiya with 76 responses. https://twitter.com/AlArabiya/status/912767951463485441</p>	Alarabiya News Chanel account is a national news account.
<p>“Minister of Education: A historic day . We are with women for the sake of safe driving” from the Ministry of Education of Kingdom of Saudi Arabia account @MOE_GOV_SA with 59 responses. https://twitter.com/moe_gov_sa/status/1010828144771829761</p>	Ministry of Education is a government account.
<p>“Urgent #UnitedNations The decision to allow women to drive describes an important step in the kingdom's contributions to empowering women #الملك_ينتصر_لقيادة_المرأة” from Alekhbariya TV account @alekhbariyatv with 51 responses. https://twitter.com/alekhbariyatv/status/912802163725934594</p>	Alekhbariya TV is a national news account.
<p>“Witness ... The Minister of Labor’s advisor drives her car to her workplace and talks about her feelings http://bit.ly/2IvnV14 #قيادة_المرأة_للسيارة##المرأة_السعودية_تسوق” from News 24 – Saudi Arabia account @Akhbaar24 with 48 responses. https://twitter.com/Akhbaar24/status/1011438465899253760</p>	Ministry of Labor is a government source.
<p>“Royal Command: The Senior Scholars Council saw that (allowing women to drive) is one of the permissible matters.” From Shamel News account @liferdefempire with 38 responses. https://twitter.com/liferdefempire/status/912757660419837954</p>	Shamel News is a national news account.
<p>“Al-Ju'id: The decision of women driving is positive ... and it will stop wasting 14 billion on foreign drivers in the Kingdom.” From Sabq Electronic Newspaper account @sabqorg with 199 responses. https://twitter.com/sabqorg/status/912802884856827905</p>	Sabq Electronic Newspaper is the most popular digital journalism platform in KSA.

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