

**The Socio-Political Implications of Social Media
Participation and Activism among Young Adults in
Saudi Arabia**

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Abstract

In most democratic countries, citizens have access to several avenues to participate in and engage with political and social issues. However, in Saudi Arabia, there are only a few permissible forms of expressing opinions and venting frustrations. Therefore, unlike most democratic societies, where social media is primarily utilised to foster the traditional, offline means of exerting pressure on state agencies, social media is the principal platform for political participation and activism in Saudi Arabia.

This thesis therefore aims to explore the political and social implications of social media participation and activism within an authoritarian environment. Although there is extensive scholarly agreement that social media has widened the scope of information, enhanced horizontal networks of communication, and expanded the space for freedom of expression, the nature of the socio-political context within an authoritarian environment can critically influence the way in which individuals engage with and participate in social and political issues online. Thus, the political potential of these platforms in a public sphere that is characterised as being extremely authoritarian, religious, and patriarchal requires further empirical investigations. This thesis also investigates, through a case study of the anti-male guardianship hashtag activism, how Saudi women have utilised Twitter's 'hashtag' feature to promote their campaigns and fight for their rights.

Based on 29 semi-structured interviews with activists and non-activists (aged between 20 and 35) and extensive fieldwork, this study will explore how Saudi young

adults perceive the socio-political implications of social media for political participation and activism in Saudi Arabia.

The literature pertaining to the political implications of social media is highly contradictory, with some studies emphasising its potential to serve as a space of autonomy and participation, while others emphasise its depoliticising nature. Making its own original contribution to this debate, my study shows how social media has played an unprecedented role in paving the way for Saudis to participate in socio-political issues, increase the level of transparency and accountability, expose wrongdoing, express opinions, and generate awareness. More critically, the findings introduce a model that demonstrates how the 'socially connective function' of social media can penetrate the dynamic of 'ubiquitous preference falsification' (characterising most societies living under authoritarian regimes) by encouraging the public disclosure of preferences.

The findings also show how the anti-male guardianship hashtag activism functions as an 'alternative space' for geographically dispersed and affected women in Saudi Arabia to mobilise thousands of national and global opinions, frame male-guardianship-related issues, and challenge the patriarchal and victim-blaming discourse dominating the Saudi public sphere.

Finally, I argue that within an authoritarian context, social media can increase socio-political participation, but it does not essentially lead to the democratisation and pluralism of the online public sphere due to two critical reasons: the increasing adoption of sophisticated surveillance technologies by states and online trolls.

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1 Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This research sets out to examine the political implications of social media ‘participation’ and ‘activism’ by young adults in Saudi Arabia within the online public sphere. It aims to explore the participants’ perspectives on the potentials/challenges of the online public sphere as well as the manner in which offline factors (i.e. culture, religion, politics) may influence their engagement with social and political issues online and their adoption of political or social stances. It also seeks, through a case study of the anti-male guardianship online campaign, to explore how the utilisation of the ‘hashtag feature’ (as the only available means of activism available to Saudi people) has helped Saudi women in fighting gendered inequalities and demanding more social and political rights. The study therefore has the following objectives:

- To explore how Saudi young adults perceive and experience social media in terms of political participation and activism, and the role these factors play in socio-political outcomes in the Saudi public sphere.
- To assess the role that hashtag activism plays in enabling Saudi women to fight for their social and political rights.
- To investigate how critical factors/barriers (i.e. culture, religion, politics) may influence the online political participation of young adults in Saudi Arabia.

In the following section, I will first discuss my research questions and the considerations that shape them and then provide a brief review of social media usage

in Saudi Arabia. After this, the research motivation and significance will be examined. Finally, the structure of the thesis will be presented.

1.2 Research Questions

To fulfil the research objectives, and based on a comprehensive theoretical review as well as my personal observations as an insider researcher, the study will ask the following questions, taking the accompanying points into consideration:

Q1: How do young Saudi adults experience and perceive the socio-political implications of social media within the Saudi public sphere?

As will be investigated in greater detail in Chapter Two, the role of social media in bringing about political and social changes has been the subject of much debate in the current literature. However, what should be carefully considered when examining the political implications of social media use is the context in which they operate. Any absolute conclusion or preference of an argument over another, without careful scrutiny of the contextual situation, is likely to lead to premature conclusions.

Moreover, Fuchs argues that one of the most effective ways of understanding the role of social media in political participation and activism is to “conduct based on theoretical models empirical research that asks the activists themselves how they used communication tools” (2012, p.787). I dedicated extensive time and effort during the first and second years of my PhD to seeking interviews with Saudi activists. Despite facing several obstacles, I successfully received acceptances from some of those whom I contacted (See Chapter Four).

Therefore, in my current study, to significantly contribute to the wider understanding of the socio-political implications of social media, particularly within an authoritarian context, I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with ordinary and activist social media users with the aim of listening carefully to their experiences, understandings, and perspectives of the role social media has played in Saudi Arabia and deriving theoretical conclusions from the same.

Q2: How has the utilisation of the ‘hashtag feature’ facilitated Saudi women in fighting gendered inequalities and demanding more social and political rights? And to what degree has it been successful?

The second focus of the present study is to explore the role that social media – the Twitter hashtag feature in particular – has played in socio-political activism in Saudi Arabia. To do so, I have selected one of the most critical activist movements in Saudi Arabia in terms of its scale, longevity, and mobilisation: the #Saudi-women-want-to-abolish-the-guardianship-system campaign. It is important to emphasise here that the ‘hashtag’ is the only available ‘gateway’ in Saudi Arabia through which people can protest. This fact can be used to interpret the current proliferation of hashtag activism in Saudi Arabia.

The recent growing phenomenon of ‘hashtag activism’ has been one of the most interesting developments in the domain of activism studies. Through the literature review, it was observed that notions such as *‘drawing attention’*, *‘raising public awareness’*, *‘framing issue’*, *‘enhancing visibility’*, and *‘publicising issues’* are often associated with the potential roles that the hashtag feature may play in social and political activism. However, this does not mean that hashtag activism is free from limitations and criticisms (See Chapters Two and Six).

Therefore, given the fact that 'hashtag activism' is the only available 'means' of demonstration for Saudis, I am interested in exploring the manner in which the utilisation of such a tool has helped Saudi women fight gendered inequalities and demand more social and political rights.

Q3: To what extent did the emergence of the online public sphere contribute to facilitating dialogue and democratised debate and revive political and social participation in Saudi Arabia? Has it enabled young Saudis to overcome the offline public sphere's restrictions?

The present literature reveals that the distinctive features of social media have facilitated access to a wealth of resources, provided users with tools for political expression and mobilisation, and created new possibilities for political participation and activism. Moreover, individuals who were formerly acting outside of gatekeeping institutions are now pursuing a larger sphere of influence and a greater voice in the online public sphere/s than what hierarchical institutions had previously provided them opportunities for. This change is very evident, particularly in authoritarian countries.

Scholarly works dealing with the emergence of the online public sphere have identified various academic narratives that can explain the contradictory promises of such a sphere. These narratives can be broadly divided into two categories: optimistic and pessimistic accounts (See Chapter Two). Therefore, in my present study, I am interested in examining the potential promises of the emergence of the online public sphere in Saudi Arabia in light of its cultural, religious, and political context.

1.3 Social Media in Saudi Arabia: A Brief Review

Before delving into a discussion on social media use and related statistics in Saudi Arabia, it is important to first define what social media platforms or social networking sites (SNSs) are. Indeed, the term 'social media' has been defined in several ways, and there seems to be confusion among scholars as to what sites/applications this term should encompass (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). While some have focused on the 'technical aspect' of these new applications while defining the term, others have focused more on the 'social aspect' (See e.g. Boyd and Ellison, 2007; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Kietzmann et al., 2011; Howard and Parks, 2012). However, among the most-cited authors in the literature are Boyd and Ellison, who define social media as the following:

Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (2007, p.211).

Kaplan and Haenlein define social media as the following:

A group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content (2010, p.60).

Furthermore, a taxonomy of 'social media' divides the applications/sites subsumed under this broad term into six distinctive categories by characteristics: "Collaborative Projects, Blogs, Content Communities, Social Networking Sites, Virtual Game Worlds, and Virtual Social Worlds" (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p.59).

I have noted that there are often ‘common denominators’ between these varying social media definitions. Among these denominators, for instance, is the idea that social media platforms are sites or web-based applications that **enable** user profile creation and **facilitate** communication, interactions, relationships, conversations, connectivity, visibility, networking, and content generation and sharing. Moreover, suggestions for ‘new’ social media definitions and the ‘updating’ of the old ones continue to be made and they parallel the development of these technologies (Kapoor et al., 2018).

Therefore, the terms ‘social media’ and ‘social networking sites’ are used interchangeably across the chapters in this thesis. They refer to sites such as Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook. This information was also made clear to the research participants to avoid any misunderstanding of the terms.

In Saudi Arabia, the use of social media platforms has witnessed a tremendous growth, especially after the Arab Spring in 2011. Therefore, in this section, I will provide statistics to demonstrate how popular these platforms are among Saudi people.

The latest annual report (2018) produced by the Saudi Communications and Information Technology Commission (CITC) revealed that the number of Internet users in the Kingdom reached 30.26 million in 2018, which represents about 89% of the total Saudi population. The report also revealed that the average daily time Saudis spend on the Internet is 6 hours and 44 minutes.

Regarding social media platforms, the latest statistics show that the total number of active social media users in Saudi Arabia is 23 million. YouTube, WhatsApp,

Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are reported to be among the most popular platforms in Saudi Arabia (We are Social and Hootsuite, 2019). The chart below shows the percentage of users for each platform.

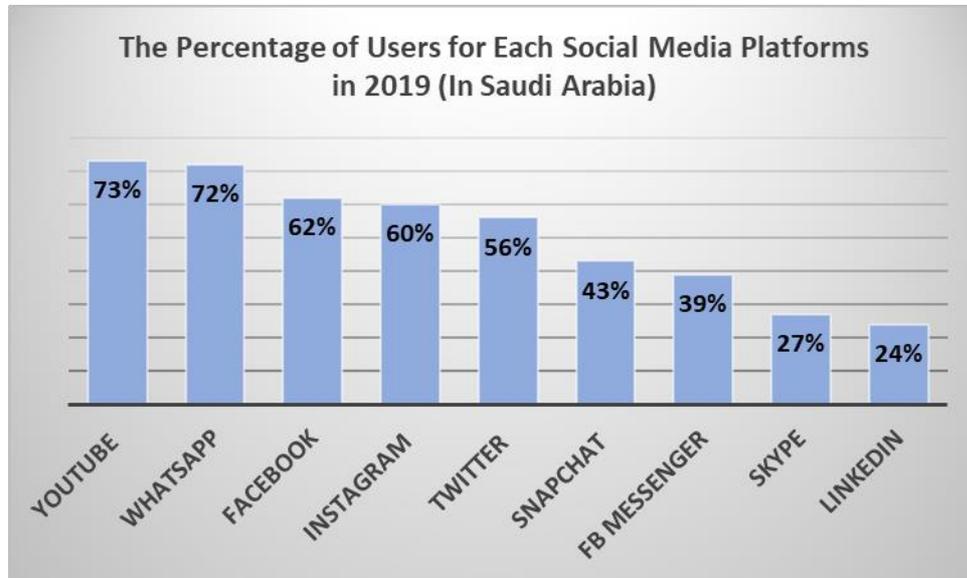


Figure 1:1 The Percentage of Users for Each Social Media Platform in 2019 in Saudi Arabia.

Moreover, Twitter and YouTube, respectively, have been ranked first and second in the top twenty Google search queries in 2018, according to the CITC report. The popularity of these platforms illustrates the extent to which social media platforms have become integrated into the lives of the Saudi people.

Finally, young adults (the sample selected for this study) are the age group with the largest number of people adopting social media in Saudi Arabia (We are Social and Hootsuite, 2019). The chart below provides details pertaining to demographics.

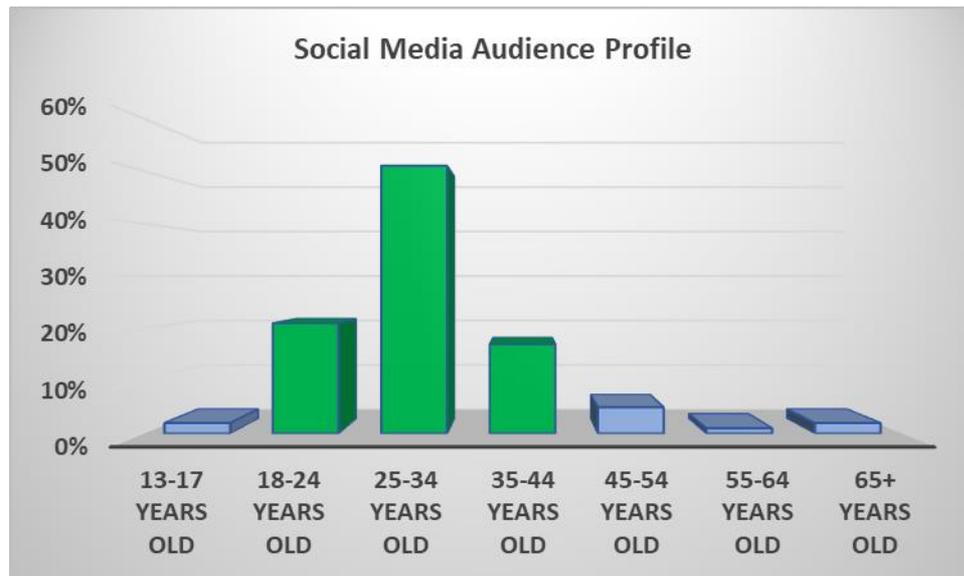


Figure 1:2 Social Media Audience Profile.

These high figures related to the adoption and usage of social media platforms in Saudi Arabia underscore the critical need for further investigation of their socio-political implications (since they are almost the only available means of participation and activism for Saudi people). In relation to this need, the next section will also reflect upon my personal motivations in conducting this research.

1.4 Research Motivation: Why this Topic?

The 2011 Arab Spring and its aftermath were the primary triggers of my interest in conducting this research. This is probably due to the fact that 28th January 2011, or what is commonly known as the 'Friday of Anger', was my third day in Cairo as a tourist before I made my escape to Saudi Arabia the next day. Although I watched what happened that day directly from the balcony of my hotel room overlooking the River Nile (where demonstrators clashed with the police), after I returned to Saudi Arabia, Twitter and Facebook became the main platforms through which I followed

the development of the 'Arab revolutions' spreading through Egypt and other Arab countries.

At that time, compared to the Saudi and indeed all other Arab traditional media, social media for me, and the rest of the Saudi people, I believe, was a platform that provided reliable sources of information and news. Even Al-Jazeera, the only Arab news channel that covered the Arab revolutions extensively, relied heavily on the information published on these platforms during its coverage of the events. Storck, for example, pointed out the following:

Twitter and other SMNs was [sic] used by the mainstream media as a source during the height of the protests. Al-Jazeera in particular relied on reputed bloggers and Twitter users during the uprisings for real-time coverage of events by using Sharek, a citizen's media platform that received and filtered through submissions by citizen journalists (2011, p.27).

Therefore, such technologies have, to a great extent, facilitated activists and users alike in avoiding the control of communication exercised by authoritarian governments and the propaganda disseminated through their traditional media channels. More importantly, the use of social media during the Arab revolutions played a critical role in enabling bloggers, activists, and ordinary users to connect with the rest of the world by reporting on events on the ground in real time.

Additionally, Boyd and Ellison mention a crucial point regarding the distinctive functionalities of social networking sites. They state that "what makes social network sites unique is not that they allow individuals to meet strangers, but rather that they enable users to articulate and make visible their social networks" (2007, p.2011). This

is an extremely interesting and crucial point, especially within the context of conservative Saudi culture. By making 'networks visible', individuals can now not only communicate and engage with different network groups, but they can also engage with or build a community of like-minded people. Such actions can have critical possibilities in terms of raising awareness regarding a particular issue, lobbying for more rights, or even encouraging large-scale collective activism.

Although Saudi Arabia avoided the 2011 Arab Spring, the uprisings as well as the manner in which social media platforms were used by users in the affected countries seem to have opened up unprecedented political opportunities for Saudi people to push 'the red line boundaries¹' for further reforms and rights (See e.g. Pollack et al., 2011; Alothman, 2013; Al-Jenaibi, 2016; Erayja, 2016; Doaiji, 2017; Morsi, 2017). For instance, the number of Internet users in Saudi Arabia grew by 300 percent during the events of the Arab Spring (Chaudhary, 2016). According to Dick Costolo, Twitter's former CEO, Saudi Arabia achieved the world's highest growth in Twitter usage in 2012 and 2013 (Chaudhary, 2016; Altoaimy, 2018). Therefore, such a massive proliferation of social media use underscores the need for empirical investigations in

¹ It is important to note that the 'red lines' in the context of Saudi Arabia refer to any matters that are customarily known among the public as forbidden/sensitive topics. I am saying 'customarily' because there is no written list of these topics, but we have grown up knowing that these are sensitive subjects. Such subjects can be social, religious, political, or even economic ones. Among these, for example, are criticising members of the Royal Family, the King and his Deputy in particular; questioning religious leaders; criticising the manner in which domestic wealth is distributed as well as anything related to the relationships between the sexes. That said, the levels of sensitivity towards these subjects are not fixed; they are subject to changes and status in political, social, and economic situations both internally and externally. For instance, during and after the Arab Spring, subjects such as the criticism of religious leaders, ministers, and economic situations have witnessed unprecedented levels of discussion on Twitter by ordinary users and activists in Saudi Arabia.

the field of social media studies to offer an understanding of the socio-political implications of social media in the context of authoritarianism.

Commenting about the impacts of the 'Arab revolution' on Saudi Arabia, Erayja points out the following:

Before the Arab Spring, online political participation used to be a hazardous and elite based activity. However, after the Arab Spring, the level of public involvement in the political discussion reached its peak. Several political and social red lines were crossed, including those of the King (2016, p.239).

Numerous political hashtag activisms were reported to have gained prominence during the Arab Spring. Among the most powerful of these activisms in terms of scale, longevity, tension, and mobilisation were the Women2Drive, Salary not Enough, Saudi Women Revolution², and the Saudi Women Want to Abolish the Male Guardianship System campaigns, which had started online in 2016.

Alongside these hashtag activisms, there were some attempts at making offline demonstrations, especially in the Eastern province (i.e. Al-Awamiyah and Al-Qatif), where the minority Shia protested being discriminated against. However, these were immediately suppressed by the police. Since then, there have been no known attempts at offline protests and social media platforms remain the only critical and alternative spaces through which Saudi people can raise and discuss political and

² This was a Facebook page and Twitter hashtag initiated in 2011 through which Saudi women were demanding the right to register and vote in municipal elections. The demand led the Saudi authorities to issue a royal decree stating that "women would be appointed to the Shura Council and allowed to vote and run in the 2015 municipal elections" (Doaiji, 2017, p. 6).

social issues that were once impossible to address by means of the traditional Saudi media.

Such increasing online activism has prompted the Saudi authorities to announce a series of political and economic reforms to appease people, including an anti-corruption law, financial allocations amounting to billions of dollars to raise the salaries of Saudi citizens by 15%, provisions of thousands of jobs, and the construction of half a million housing units. Furthermore, King Abdullah announced more rights for women, including the right to be appointed to the Consultative Shura Council and to vote in and contest municipal elections; a first in Saudi history.

Interestingly, I remember that when I began my Ph.D. in October 2015, I made two predictions concerning women's situations in Saudi Arabia: 1) Saudi women will be allowed to drive, and 2) The system of male guardianship will be subject to substantial revision and amendment to guarantee more rights for Saudi women. Both predictions will be realised by 2020.

Indeed, these predictions were based on several important factors among which were the high proportion of youth (68%) in Saudi Arabia's demographics, the mass adoption of social media by Saudi youth – which put unprecedented pressure on the Saudi authorities to listen to people's demands – the appointment of the youngest ever Crown Prince, Mohammed Bin Salman, and later, the announcement of one of the most transformative projects in the history of the country: the Saudi Vision 2030, in which “[developing women's] talents, invest in their productive capabilities and enable them to strengthen their future and contribute to the development of our society and economy” (Anon, 2017, no pagination) is one of the Vision's objectives.

In September 2017, a royal decree was issued allowing women the right to drive. Furthermore, regarding the male guardianship system, in addition to the progress made in allowing women access to government services without them being required to obtain a male guardian's approval and the eased restrictions on gender mixing, on 02 August 2019, as I was carrying out the final revision, a royal decree was issued granting Saudi women above the age of 21 the right to travel without permission as of the end of August 2019 (Rashad and Kalin, 2019). Women are also being given the right to register, marriages, divorces, and births, to be issued official family documents, and be guardians to minors (The BBC News, 2019). The decision was trending on Twitter a few hours after the announcement.

Nonetheless, the system still grants male guardians some power over women. These include women needing permission from their guardians to marry, live independently, or leave prison if they detained. Additionally, women still cannot transmit citizenship to their children and neither they can give their children approval to marry (Rashad and Kalin, 2019).

With that said, I am quite certain that by 2020, much more progress will be made in the sphere of women's rights, especially since the Saudi government (as explained by its Vision 2030) is working to diversify the sources of its economy instead of relying on oil as its main source of income. Such a goal, I believe, cannot be fully achieved if half of the society – women – is still lacking basic rights.

Social media platforms therefore seem to have brought about an unprecedented transformation in the domain of political and social participation and activism in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the great informational openness and pluralism resulting

from the usage of social networking sites have created what Shirky (2011, p.5) refers to as “the dictator’s dilemma” faced by Saudi authorities who have long controlled the flow of information via their strict censorship system and traditional media productions (See Chapters Two and Three). The introduction of new media technologies has subverted such control and has opened up a space for the Saudi public to raise issues and push for further political and social rights.

Based on these potential socio-political implications of social media, the following section will explain the significance of the present study.

1.5 Significance of the Study

I believe that the thesis will make four *significant contributions* to the domain of social media studies for the following reasons:

- Current statistics indicate that Saudi Arabia is witnessing an exponential growth in the number of social media users and activities. However, a review of the literature regarding the political and social implications of social media participation and activism in the Middle East, and Saudi Arabia in particular, suggests an important gap in knowledge. This may be due to two factors: 1) The obstacles of the Arabic language, which prevent non-Arabic scholars from conducting thorough investigations and 2) The hostile political context, which is indeed a critical barrier for researchers of all backgrounds. This thesis will contribute to bridging this gap by deepening the understanding of the socio-political implications of social media participation and activism in a country that discourages civil discourse and implements severe restrictions on offline political activities.

- It has been commonly argued in the present literature that one of the critical roles social media has played in several political and social issues/activisms worldwide is increasing public awareness and improving the visibility of issues. However, in addition to this crucial role, there is a fundamental phenomenon that I have found to have a strong association with the notion of ‘shared awareness’, which remains largely unaddressed in existing social media studies literature: the extent to which the *‘socially connective function’* of social media may impact the dynamic of *‘preference falsification’* that is predominantly practiced by authoritarian regimes (See Chapter Two). Therefore, this study, based on its rich qualitative data, will contribute to bridging this gap by introducing a model (See Chapter Seven) that demonstrates how social media participation and activism may lead to the penetration of the *‘ubiquitous preference falsification’* characterising most societies living under conservative cultures and/or oppressive regimes.
- Women-related issues in Saudi Arabia are some of the most prominent controversial issues in the Saudi online public sphere. Most of these issues have political, social, and religious dimensions. Therefore, by selecting an ongoing and one of the most debated issues in Saudi Arabia – the male guardianship system – the significance of the research is highlighted. The investigation of the manner in which social media has enabled Saudi women to discuss and raise issues that were earlier taboo will help expand the scope of knowledge and awareness. Furthermore, I believe that the case study strategy selected to investigate the male guardianship system will pave the

way for an in-depth analysis of how hashtag activism can play a fundamental role in the development of socio-political issues among less democratic and conservative societies such as Saudi Arabia.

- Finally, my thesis engages with critical theories and concepts (e.g. '*liberation technologies*', '*radical transparency*', '*shared awareness*', '*the dictator's dilemma*', '*the cute cat theory of digital activism*', '*mass self-communication*', '*autonomy*', '*affective networks*', '*phatic communication*', '*social media ties*') concerning the political potential of social media to show how effective they might be in investigating the role of social media within an authoritarian environment (See Chapter Two).

1.6 Structure of the Thesis

Chapter 1: Introduction

The introductory chapter introduces the aim of the research, the research objectives and questions, statistics regarding social media use in Saudi Arabia, and finally, the motivation underlying and the significance of the research.

Chapter 2: The Theoretical Framework: Theorising the Implications of Social Media in Political Participation and Activism

This crucial chapter will provide insight into the diversity of scholarly discussions regarding the political implications of social media participation and activism. The chapter will discuss the ongoing debates over the political implications of social media under the following seven themes:

- Theme One: Authoritarianism, Openness and Information Pluralism, Transparency
- Theme Two: Public Awareness, Widespread Shock, and the Cascade Disclosure of Preferences
- Theme Three: Social Media: Spaces of Outrage and Autonomy
- Theme Four: Online Quasi-Participation and Endless Content Circulation
- Theme Five: Affective Networks, Stuckness, Feedback Loops, and Phatic Communication
- Theme Six: Decentralised Weak-Tie Networks vs Strong Organisational Ties
- Theme Seven: Online Public Sphere: The Debate over Online Participation

Chapter 3: The Context: Saudi Arabia – The Political, Social, Religious, and Media Environment

This chapter will present the Saudi Arabian context from the perspective of the political, cultural, and media environment of political participation and activism. The primary purpose of this chapter is to define and explain the two most significant contextual factors affecting the politics and culture of Saudi Arabia: 1) The authoritarian nature of the political system, and 2) The tremendous power and significance of Islam in all aspects of life. The chapter will also discuss the opportunities available to and limitations faced by Saudis within the context of political participation. Moreover, the chapter will outline the Saudi media system from the emergence of the press to that of new media forces: the Internet and social

networking sites. The conclusion presents an overview of media laws and regulations in Saudi Arabia.

Chapter 4: Research Design, Methodology, and Fieldwork

This chapter will outline the research design, methods, and the fieldwork process, including the consideration of the research paradigm, the sampling strategy, a justification of the adopted research method, and methodology. Moreover, the chapter will provide an overview of the selected case study – the anti-male guardianship hashtag activism – the rationale behind the selection, and the design and approach adopted to explore it. Given the sensitivity of the topic being studied and the hostile political environment in which the fieldwork will be conducted, research ethics are fundamental to this study. Therefore, this chapter will provide a detailed explanation of the procedures and strategies adopted to ensure my safety and that of the research participants. The conclusion entails a discussion of the procedure and tools used to analyse the qualitative data of the research.

Chapter 5: The Empirical Interview Findings: The Participants' Voices on the Potential Socio-Political Implications of Social Media in Saudi Arabia

As the title suggests, this chapter will detail the participants' thoughts, experiences, and perceptions regarding the socio-political implications of social media in Saudi Arabia and the empirical findings derived from the same. The chapter is based on four main themes and several sub-themes. Each theme is supported by detailed quotes and compelling examples from the participants' own experiences. Moreover, although the influence of contextual factors (i.e. politics, religion, culture) on young adults' use of social media will appear in different places across the empirical

chapters as well as other chapters in the thesis, a section has been devoted in this chapter (Theme Four) to examine these factors and their remarkable influences.

The chapter is divided into the following main themes:

- Social Media and the Emergence of a More Participatory Socio-Political Domain;
- Greater Awareness among Saudi Youths;
- Social Media as Novel Platforms for Transparency and Public Accountability;
- The Contextual Factors: Socio-Cultural Factors, Religious Ideology, and Oppressive Political Atmosphere Influencing Saudi Youths During their Online Participation

Chapter 6: The Anti-Male Guardianship Hashtag Activism in Saudi Arabia: A Case Study

The second empirical chapter will discuss the role that ‘hashtag activism’ has played in the anti-male guardianship campaign. The chapter starts with a review of various hashtag activism studies in terms of the efficacy of the hashtag feature in social and political activism. After that, a brief background of the male guardianship system in Saudi Arabia will be presented. Following this, the initial phases of the campaign (phases preceding the proliferation of the hashtag) are discussed in detail. Based on the findings of interviews mainly conducted with Saudi women, including prominent activists in the hashtag campaign and those affected by the system, the final and most critical section of the chapter discusses the role that the ‘hashtag feature’ has played in the anti-male guardianship activism under two identified themes:

- The Affordance of Digital Connectivity, Networked Solidarity, Friendships;

- Hashtag Activism – A Potent Tool for Framing Issues, Establishing Counter-Discourse, and Promoting Policy Change

Chapter 7: Social Media is the only Participatory Space for ‘Hope and Soft Outrage’

This chapter will discuss the critical findings and themes emerging from the scrutiny of the arguments presented in the thesis’ two empirical chapters, Five and Six, in light of both the research questions and the theoretical framework presented in Chapter Two.

Chapter 8: Concluding Remarks

The final chapter will conclude the study and present some personal observations and reflections on research within an authoritarian context, discuss the limitations of the study, and offer suggestions for further research.

2 Chapter Two: The Theoretical Framework: Theorising the Implications of Social Media in Political Participation and Activism

2.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to explore the existing theoretical literature regarding the critical role of social media in socio-political participation and activism using an approach that informs the interests and objectives of this research. As explained in Chapter One, the research focus is on the role of social media in reshaping the landscape of political and social participation and activism in the Saudi Arabian authoritarian context.

When we look to the current literature for ways to theorise the political implications of social media, we come across many different perspectives (Haunss, 2015). The early phase of the arguments produced two camps: the techno-optimistic Internet camp and the techno-pessimistic Internet camp. The former are those who believe that social media has positive impacts on politics because it has established a space in which politics has become more participatory than ever before, leading to the strength of democracy and the public sphere (See e.g. Benkler, 2006; Shirky, 2011; Papacharissi, 2010; Castells, 2015). These views are commonly expressed using metaphors, for example, 'Twitter revolution', 'Facebook revolution', and 'Revolution 2.0' (Sullivan, 2009; Smith, 2011; Ghonim 2012).

On the other hand, the techno-pessimistic Internet camp argues that social media may make a difference, but only at marginal levels, leaving untouched the primary infrastructure of authority and its affiliated institutions through which resources are

allocated and power practiced (See e.g. Dean, 2005, 2010a/b; Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2011).

Recently, a medial perspective (I consider it to be probably more realistic) has emerged. A group of information and communications technology (ICT) scholars reached a consensus that social media may make a difference at the margins of governments, as established public spheres are determined by both a tradition of healthy civil society and the freedom of media (Fung et al., 2013). Social media's impact also lies in bringing about a much greater transformation in terms of governments, especially where public spheres have been weak and subject to strict censorship (Howard and Hussain, 2013). Earl et al. (2010), Gerbaudo (2012), and Torres-Soriano (2013) have also discussed this perspective in great detail.

I find this recent argument, to a great extent, accurate. I say this because I have witnessed it myself in Saudi Arabia through my consistent observation of discussions among social media users which take place over these platforms, Twitter in particular, as well as through my engagement with political and social issues raised among these platforms in addition to the manner in which the Saudi government responds to and handles these issues. However, as has been discussed in Chapters Five, Six, and Seven, it is difficult for anyone to confirm whether the recent unprecedented reforms taking place in Saudi Arabia, almost all of which are some form of response to what is being demanded through social media platforms, have a direct link to the activism emerging online or not.

Therefore, the diversity of opinions and debates among scholars in the literature regarding the political implications of social media suggests that the manner in which

human agency and media technologies are interlinked requires researchers to pay careful attention to investigating the role of social media in political participation and activism. Furthermore, examining the context in such cases is crucial to avoid premature conclusions and to ensure a diversity of ideas (See Curran, 2012; Fuchs, 2012; Wolfsfeld et al., 2013; Porto and Brant, 2015).

Here, in particular, I would like to emphasise upon the 'distinctivity' of the contextual situation of my current case study, Saudi Arabia, and the manner in which the religious ideology (Wahhabism) and the extremely conservative culture of Saudi Arabian society play a central role in the Saudi people's engagement with their daily political and social issues. One of the objectives of my current thesis therefore is to explore how critical barriers (e.g. culture, religion, politics) influence young adults in Saudi Arabia during their online participation and activism in daily political/social issues.

Moreover, according to Fuchs (2012), the only effective way to determine the real role of social media in activism is to conduct research based on theoretical models which asks activists themselves how they utilise these digital platforms. This is why (although I encountered great difficulties in communicating with them and obtaining their approval, with these difficulties continuing throughout the first year of my doctoral degree. See Chapter Four for further details) I have decided to include social media activists in the sample for my current research.

The current chapter therefore includes identifying critical questions at work within the existing literature, which are addressed through radically different approaches undertaken by diverse theorists. In this chapter, I have grouped these debated

questions into seven critical themes that are strongly related to my research aim and objectives. Furthermore, my choice of grouping these controversial questions into themes is based on my belief that this approach will pave the way for me to better reflect the focus of the previous studies in my current research, which will help provide pointers for later discussions as well as identify some gaps in the existing literature.

The chapter proceeds in discussing the following themes:

- **Theme One: Authoritarianism, Openness and Information Pluralism, Transparency**

Under this theme, I will review some of the key theories and concepts regarding the potential implications of social media for authoritarian practices, in particular, the proposition that informational openness and pluralism resulting from the usage of ICTs are frustrating the system of authoritarian regimes that strictly control and censor the flow of information. The review will include highly relevant and critical concepts in the literature such as ‘liberation technologies’ (Diamond, 2010), ‘radical transparency’ (Lim, 2013), and the ‘cute cat theory of digital activism’ (Zuckerman, 2015).

- **Theme Two: Public Awareness, Widespread Shock, and the Cascade Disclosure of Preferences**

The openness and unprecedented flow of information brought about by new media technologies has led to a critical factor: increasing awareness among the public, which in fact poses a major challenge to authoritarian governments (Shirky, 2011).

This explains why highly centralised regimes (e.g. North Korea, Iran, China, Saudi Arabia) are making incredible efforts to limit the flow of information in their states. Therefore, in this theme, I will discuss the role of social media in increasing shared public awareness and the consequence of this for individual preferences in such authoritarian contexts.

- **Theme Three: Social Media: Spaces of Outrage and Autonomy**

Within this theme, I will elaborate upon one of the most debated questions in the literature of digital media: the concern over the extent to which social media can afford a 'space of autonomy' and thus re-empower subordinated individuals. The discussion of the theme will begin with the concept of 'mass self-communication' (Castells, 2015) and the heated debates that this concept has generated, especially the one put forth by Fuchs and other authors. For instance, Fuchs argues that the implications of social media in societies cannot be studied without the contextualisation of other critical factors such as culture, religion, and politics, which could have great influences on individuals' engagement with and participation in the issues of their everyday lives.

- **Theme Four: Online Quasi-Participation and Endless Content Circulation**

A key argument regarding social media as an 'alternative space' for 'political participation' revolves around the capacity of these platforms to facilitate 'political participation' in the form of 'meaningful and engaged debates'. Therefore, in this theme, I will review the arguments made by the two camps. On one hand are those who argue that social media participation can be seen only as the onset of a critical interpassivity in which symbolic action does not enhance genuine engagement but

substitutes it (Zizek, 1998; Dean, 2009). On the other hand are those who argue that social media participation may open up new possibilities for action, enable individuals to develop their political opinions, strengthen public spheres, and stimulate critical debates (Shirky, 2011).

- **Theme Five: Affective Networks, Stuckness, Feedback Loops, and Phatic Communication**

A further critical argument regarding social media as a space for political participation concerns the role of these platforms in encouraging users to disseminate content that has meaningful political implications. The concept of ‘affective networks’ developed by Dean (2010a/b) and ‘phatic communication’ introduced by Miller (2008) are of great importance in this respect. Therefore, in this theme, I will discuss both concepts as well as the corresponding perspectives that argue that both accounts have emphasised the negative side of ‘phatic messages’ and have failed to appreciate the positive potentialities that these kinds of messages may bring to the participants.

- **Theme Six: Decentralised Weak-Tie Networks vs Strong Organisational Ties**

In this theme, I will review the emerging debates regarding whether ‘social media ties’ are strong enough to mobilise activism on a large scale. Important here is Gladwell’s (2010) argument that the ‘transformative potential’ of social media can only be seen as a facilitator of ‘weak ties’ and that social media ties are insufficient in mobilising the ‘strong ties’ required for political purposes. Additionally, I will elaborate upon contrasting views that argue about the potential political impacts of the ‘weak-tie relationships’ between participants.

- **Theme Seven: Contemporary Gender Politics: The Rise of Hashtag Feminism**

This theme was selected to provide an insight into the state of contemporary gender politics in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The relevance of this topic stems from the growing debate on the political instability that the MENA region has witnessed over the past few decades (following the September 11 attacks and the Arab Spring), which has had a profound impact on women and gender relations in the MENA region. In this vein, social media have played a central role in providing a platform for people to promote and discuss a range of contemporary social and political issues. Among the many problems the MENA region has suffered from, the issue of gender inequality is at the forefront.

- **Theme Eight: Online Public Sphere: The Debate over Meaningful/less Online Participation**

It is important to clarify here that I have selected this theme, the online public sphere, in particular, not to seek to evaluate the extent to which the Saudi online public sphere is consistent with and equivalent to the Habermasian public sphere, though his model has its critiques and limitations. The concept of the online public sphere enables me to investigate the extent to which social media has facilitated dialogue, information exchange, and democratic debate in the online public sphere in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, to situate the research within the scope of my Ph.D.'s aims and objectives, in this theme, I will discuss the debate over the emergence of the online public sphere in terms of its perceived limitations and ambivalent promises.

2.2 Authoritarianism, Openness and Information Pluralism, Transparency

One of the most prominent debates among scholars in the literature is the extent to which the use of social media can frustrate the control over content and the flow of information practiced by authoritarian regimes. The mechanics of this, as Morozov (2012) and others argue, are quite diverse and are not consistently in favour of empowering people living under oppressive regimes. States have also empowered themselves by adapting sophisticated technologies through which they can monitor, filter, and control the flow of information on the Internet. However, many researchers have reached a consensus regarding the unprecedented role played by social networking sites in the increased capacity for informational transmission, which arguably subverts the monopoly over traditional media exercised by authoritarian governments (Hachigian, 2002; Al-Jenaibi, 2016).

In authoritarian countries such as Saudi Arabia, where there is no law pertaining to freedom of information that allows the public to have full access to state-held information and where the censorship of traditional media channels (and indeed, educational, religious, and civil institutions) remains repressive (Montagu, 2015), social networking sites threaten to take at least some of the informational power from the State and its affiliated organisations and devolve them into a more difficult-to-manage, individual level of control.

The collective and participatory environment created by social media has made it much more difficult for authoritarian regimes to control public opinions, disseminate messages, and keep critical issues away from the public eye. Consequently, we can find that the common pattern examined and reiterated by several scholars across different contexts (see for instance, Froehling, 1999; Lim, 2003; Kahne et al., 2015)

has been one where the online public sphere has been widely utilised to circulate issues (such as those related to human rights, public concerns, government abuses) to a wider public and to achieve a greater scope.

These issues circulated online often force their way into mainstream news outlets. In Saudi Arabia, for example, the unprecedented informational openness brought about by social networking sites has helped the Saudi people in raising and discussing political and social issues that were once impossible to address by means of traditional media (Noman et al., 2015; Al-Jenaibi, 2016). The considerable pressure that Saudi society has exerted on Saudi officials through their extensive use of social media and the increasing demands for reforms have forced some of the Saudi Arabian traditional media channels to address, though relatively, some of the issues raised on social media.

Furthermore, this informational openness has enabled international media channels to communicate directly with some Saudi activists and even host them to talk about issues concerning the Saudi public. This has been witnessed during prominent political and social online activism campaigns in Saudi Arabia (such as in the case of the previous women to drive campaign, the anti-male guardianship system campaign, and many others), where these international media outlets have played a role, which cannot be ignored, in pressuring the Saudi government. This has been done by hosting Saudi activists and affected Saudi individuals as well as by popularising issues that the Saudi traditional media has been trying for many years to either superficially address or marginalise.

Diamond (2010) argues that cyberspace's ability to circumvent information control and media censorship has enabled the Internet to serve as 'accountability technology' in which individual communication has become more powerful and governments can be held accountable more easily. Diamond argues that mobilisation against authoritarian regimes represents only one potential 'liberating' use of social media. However, before the mobilisation for democracy reaches its peak, these digital platforms can help expand the public sphere, establish a more pluralistic and independent arena of news, and widen the scope for information, commentary, debate, and dissent.

By facilitating individuals in documenting human rights violations within authoritarian states and governmental actions, social media platforms are also a powerful instrument for monitoring and transparency. For instance, Ghannam (2011), in his report titled '*Social Media in the Arab World: Leading up to the Uprisings of 2011*', argues that unlike the role played by traditional media channels in the Arab world, social media acts as a regulatory body for government activities.

However, despite the advantages provided by social media for political and social activists and users, especially those living under oppressive regimes, it is not only people who have been quick to take advantage of the opportunities offered by these technologies, but authoritarian regimes also have responded immediately to these opportunities and are adapting even more advanced technologies to control and filter activities that contradict their policy interests.

This means that undemocratic governments have also taken advantage of these opportunities brought about by the ICTs and have had arguably equal opportunities

with the uses of these technologies (Deibert et al., 2008; Freedom House, 2017a). I will reflect more upon the issue of surveillance and other government techniques in suppressing and monitoring online activities in Chapter Seven with some illustrative cases (i.e. Snowden, Moxie Marlinspike).

A crucial aspect that needs to be highlighted here is that authoritarian regimes know that these networked technologies can simply facilitate an oppositional political sphere, but, at the same time, they are fully aware of the decisive role played by these technologies regarding economic developments in their countries. This argument, which some scholars have addressed in the existing literature (See e.g. Hachigian, 2002; Shirky, 2011), explains the rapid and substantial development of ICT infrastructure in these countries, regardless of the danger that these technologies may pose to their political power and stability.

Furthermore, shutting down the entire Internet service has at present become almost impossible for authoritarian regimes because of several reasons such as business interests and international reputation. Thus, several authoritarian countries, including Saudi Arabia, China, Iran, and others, have sought to develop several legal restrictions as well as impose a direct control over the public usage of the Internet (Kalathil and Boas, 2003; Morozov, 2012; Freedom House, 2017b). Such actions may include the banning of specific communication options. For instance, the North Korean government allows only intra-country communications, some websites are blocked in countries such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and China, and advanced technologies are approached in such a manner that such regimes can serve their own

policy interests, filter content, and identify opponents so as to take advantage of and minimise the challenges posed by social networking sites (Diamond, 2010).

Therefore, there are scholars who argue that the constraints faced by authoritarian regimes when they want to cut off the Internet, in which the conflict with business interests is one of their biggest challenges, is of great opportunity to more people in these countries to engage with the Internet and get connected online, with almost no chance for these regimes to shut off the Internet. However, having said this, Morozov (2012) and others argue that a total reliance on social media as a base for political and social activities is problematic and that it promotes authoritarianism.

This is because information and communication sectors are often controlled in non-democratic states by the governments themselves, and they use the service for their own benefits. This argument is considered in the literature as being fairly correct. However, what I do take issue with is the level of control and censorship as well as the impacts on political and social activism that authoritarian regimes could achieve.

This does not mean that I think that it is impossible for authoritarian countries to monitor or block certain social platforms, as in China and North Korea, or even shut down the entire Internet, as was witnessed during the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011. Nevertheless, the unparalleled flow of information we are witnessing today due to the contribution of millions of social media users has made the control options extremely challenging for these authoritarian states.

Additionally, economic pressure renders the decision to shut off the Internet a very costly action. Hachigian (2002) concurs with the argument mentioned earlier that repressive regimes understand that ICTs facilitate the creation of oppositional

political/social spheres. However, they also understand that ICTs are critical to economic development in their countries.

For instance, the latest annual IT report from the Saudi CITC (2018) demonstrates that Internet penetration has increased at a high rate over the past years, 'rising from 47% in 2011 to about 93% by the end of 2018' (CITC, 2018, p.107). The number of Internet users in Saudi Arabia is estimated at 30.26 million, with a significant increase in the demand for Internet services.

This high percentage of increase in Internet usage is believed to be due to the increased use of social media platforms (CITC, 2018). The very high usage of the Internet in Saudi Arabia plays a crucial role in the economic sector of the country. For example, telecommunications companies 'achieved about 73.3 billion Saudi riyals (about \$19.53 billion) in total direct revenue from their operations in the Kingdom by the end of 2018' (CITC, 2018, p.107). These large figures create a serious pressure on the Saudi government if it attempts to think about cutting off or even curtailing Internet services.

With regard to social media specifically, proponents of the theory of social media revolutions are keen to note that activism is by no means the primary purpose for which social media platforms have been developed. However, they emphasise that the multi-purpose nature and broad use of these platforms make them an effective tool against authoritarianism. Ethan Zuckerman, a senior researcher for Harvard's Berkman Centre for Internet and Society, refers to this as 'The Cute Cat Theory' of digital activism (Zuckerman, 2015, p.132). Zuckerman argues that repressive regimes can shut down platforms that are specifically designed for political dissent with very

little political penalty. On the other hand, they will face serious challenges if they decide to shut down platforms that have been designed for broader purposes (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, YouTube).

The Web 2.0 nature of social media restrains authoritarian governments from blocking political/social activities, as they cannot do so without also cutting off access to light-hearted discussions and pictures of cute cats. These non-political platforms, in essence, may provide greater opportunities for political opposition, because they can avoid being targeted and marginalised; they are usually only associated with superficial issues (Zuckerman, 2008).

Moreover, when such technologies are used for political purposes by some individuals, government interference will only serve to inflate the opposition and signal to the public that there is something wrong occurring, as any actions by the State towards political dissent groups will disturb everyday online communication and attract greater public attention. Further relevant here is a phenomenon popularly known as the 'Streisand effect', in which the attempt to censor, remove, or block a certain piece of information may lead its existence being publicised and advertised more widely (Shirky, 2011; Barrons, 2012). Thus, by considering these possibilities, one can argue that blocking social media could be terribly counterproductive for authoritarian regimes.

What's more, the infrastructure of social media is characterised by the tendency towards promoting "radical transparency", which could serve as a critical means of disseminating discontent and political/social activism even under authoritarian contexts (Lim, 2013, p.642). Social media platforms "provide a space for individuals,

especially the youth, to participate in the act of consumption as well as in the production and distribution of ideas, knowledge and culture” (Lim, 2013. p.640).

Andreas asserts that in contrast to the ‘old’ Internet, Web 2.0 promises “organic content, distributed processing and interaction, and converging media formats” (2007, p.2). Social media has therefore broken the usual pattern of media production and consumption. It is no longer the fact that the Internet is the only media system through which users (as consumers) retrieve content from large, centralised media institutions. Instead, Web 2.0 “operates as an interdependent grassroots community of individuals, organizations, and sites whose relevance and authority are established through interaction and participation” (Andreas, 2007, p.3).

According to Jenkins et al. (2009), this act of participation is called ‘participatory culture’, and it is manifested in several characteristics that are “peer-based, interactive, nonhierarchical, independent of elite-driven institutions, and social – that is, accessible to analysis at the level of the group rather than the individual” (Kahne et al., 2015, p.39). This conceptual framework of ‘participatory culture’ can serve as a foundation that may be borrowed and used by social and political activities and transformed into civic participation. While such transformation is applicable, Lim (2013) argues that it is neither easy nor straightforward.

Drawing on an empirical investigation of activism-related cases from Indonesia, Lim (2013) in her critical article ‘Many Clicks but Little Sticks’ offers a nuanced argument by determining the conditions under which participation in social media is likely to lead to successful political/social activism. She argues that the ‘participatory nature’ of social media is most appropriate for disseminating content that is related to

popular culture. However, while the concept of 'participatory culture' can be borrowed and applied to civic participation and socio-political mobilisation, it is, to some extent, limited in its ability to mobilise socio-political issues of a complex nature.

According to Lim (2013), the limitations of social media in political activism are basically derived from three factors:

First, in social media, the network tends to be enormous, and the production and circulation of content is accelerating dramatically. This kind of network environment is more suitable for "simple and/or simplified narratives than complex/complicated ones" (Lim, 2013, p.653).

Second, social media cannot be considered independent of a large media system. While social media users can generate their own information, when it comes to events and news, they largely depend on and derive information from traditional mainstream media. Although the infrastructure of social media encourages the rise of citizen journalists who produce alternative news, such alternative production is still too immature to challenge the content of mainstream producers. Therefore, the success of social media activism in this regard largely depends on its compatibility with the culture of mainstream media.

The final factor concerns the aspect of access. Social media platforms are linked to their techno-material aspects, namely, the device and distribution of their access, which not only define who has access but also the process through which information is accessed and consumed as well as the type of information that they prefer to consume.

Lim concludes her arguments by saying the following:

Social media activism, thus, are most successful when their narratives, icons and symbolic representations mimic those that dominate the contemporary popular culture. In other words, they have to embrace the principles of contemporary culture of consumption: light package, headline appetite and trailer vision. Beyond that, the activism must neither be associated with high-risk actions nor ideologies that challenge the dominant meta-narratives (such as nationalism and religiosity in Indonesia). Further, it also needs to be uncontested by powerful competing narratives endorsed in mainstream media. As such, social media activism are always in danger of being too fast, too thin and too many. While online activism may see many clicks, these are little sticks – while we may witness many clicks, there are very few causes that make for widespread activism in the vast online social media environment (2013, pp.653–654).

2.3 Public Awareness, Widespread Shock, and the Cascade Disclosure of Preferences

Another relevant and crucial point related to ‘informational openness’ is that of public shared awareness. Shirky’s (2011) emphasis on the great possibility for the ‘shared awareness’ of popular discontent to increase from the extensive use of social media is critical here. The factor of shared awareness among disgruntled members of a society is not only a force in itself, but what this factor might lead to – what Shirky (2011, p.5) refers to as “the dictator’s dilemma” – is also a great challenge faced by authoritarian governments:

The dilemma is created by new media that increase public access to speech or assembly; with the spread of such media, whether

photocopiers or Web browsers, a state accustomed to having a monopoly on public speech finds itself called to account for anomalies between its view of events and the public's. The two responses to the conservative dilemma are censorship and propaganda. But neither of these is as effective a source of control as the enforced silence of the citizens. The state will censor critics or produce propaganda as it needs to, but both of those actions have higher costs than simply not having any critics to silence or reply to in the first place. But if a government were to shut down Internet access or ban cell phones, it would risk radicalizing otherwise pro-regime citizens or harming the economy.

In addition to the role that social media may play in increasing users' level of shared awareness, I have found that there is a fundamental aspect strongly associated with the concept of 'shared awareness' that remains largely unaddressed in existing literature: the extent to which the 'socially connective function' of social media may impact the dynamic of 'preference falsification' (Kuran, 1997) that is largely practiced by authoritarian regimes (Tufekci and Wilson, 2012; Makowsky and Rubin, 2013, Rubin, 2014).

For instance, Kurzban (2004) argues that citizens, especially those living under oppressive governments, tend to not express dissenting opinions and retain 'hidden preferences'. This kind of behaviour is due to their belief that they represent only a small minority; a belief that results from the restrictive nature of their environments, or because of self-censorship that many undertake to avoid sanctions from the regime, thus causing a so-called 'pluralistic ignorance'.

While Shirky's argument emphasises upon the role of social media in dismantling government discourses and the strict control of information, the prominent issue

here may lie in the management of the relationship between the individual, on one hand, and society, on the other hand, in a different sense. Through repressive practices such as censoring, discouraging, punishing, and silencing oppositional voices, authoritarian regimes can reassure dissatisfied individuals that they are in the minority or at least that the rest of society does not have enough willingness to undertake the risk of mobilisation (Faris, 2010; Makowsky and Rubin, 2013; Wedeen, 2015). This idea is indeed very crucial to the current focus of my study, as I will elaborate on later in the empirical chapters.

Faris (2010), in his study of Egyptian digital activism, argues that one of the prominent features of social media is its great contribution in disseminating information to a wider group of recipients in a way that would not have happened otherwise, where large online networks (often classified as weak ties) continue to be updated around a range of information, views, and activities based on default network settings. This rapid dynamism of opinions and information exchange renders social media a potential source of 'cascade effects' in which being exposed to more mutual influences may lead to a shift in individual users' pre-existing preferences.

The discussion regarding the concept of 'preference falsification' and the role that social media may play in influencing users' preferences leads to a crucial and highly related notion emphasised upon by Scott (1990) in his book, *Dominations and the Arts of Resistance*, which is the concept of the 'hidden transcript'.

Scott (1990) argues that even subordinates can still build networks for potential political activism by developing a hidden transcript and acting in confidence among

themselves. Contrary to 'public transcript' in which the process of communication and interaction between leaders and their subordinates is open and public, the concept of 'hidden transcript' is used by Scott to describe discourses (often in the form of criticisms) that are subscribed to by subordinates or dissidents living under authoritarian regimes, which take place offstage and are difficult to be observed by powerholders. The 'hidden transcript' thus consists of "speeches, gestures and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript" (Scott, 1990, pp.4–5), and they emerge in the form of stories, grievances, rumours, gossip, songs, jokes, and artwork, among others.

In authoritarian countries where citizens' views, attitudes, and behaviours must be compatible with their government's orientations, there is an increasing need for an alternative space in which people with divergent opinions can exercise their rights (Lim, 2014). Therefore, subordinate groups require a space alternative to the public sphere that is mainly controlled and occupied by dominant entities. Fraser refers to this as 'subaltern counterpublics', in which such subordinate groups seek to create the following:

Venues in which to undertake communicative processes that were not, as it were, under the supervision of the dominant group ... to articulate and defend their interests ... [and] to expose modes of deliberation that mask domination by absorbing the less powerful into a false 'we' that reflects the more powerful (1990, pp.66-67).

However, given the difficulties faced by people in authoritarian countries, such as in Saudi Arabia that is a part of my current case, where civic organisations rarely exist, where physical spaces are strictly controlled, and where political/social activities are

suppressed, social media may greatly facilitate subordinate groups as well as activists in establishing the 'subaltern counterpublics' that is required to foster and sustain hidden transcripts.

In recent years, there have been several political events through which the role of social media in fostering the narrative of hidden transcripts can be explored. One notable example of a hidden transcript can be found in the case of the anti-corruption activism in Indonesia, known as 'Gecko vs Crocodile', a movement that dates back to 2010 which aims "to support anti-corruption deputies, symbolized by a gecko, in their fight against Indonesia's senior police detective, symbolized by a crocodile" (Lim, 2013, p.636). The narrative of the hidden transcript in this movement was mainly created in and through the use of social media, in the form of visual political humour and satire (e.g. cartoons, songs, digital posters, videos, animations). The central theme of these artworks was inspired by and based on the icon of the 'Gecko vs Crocodile'.

Another example can be also found in 'We are all Khaled Said', a Facebook group dedicated to the Egyptian political victim Khaled Said, who was brutally attacked and killed by police officers. Their aim was to highlight the brutality of the police and the widespread corruption in his country. Through this Facebook group, thousands of Egyptians gathered to discuss and share issues of human rights, the government's corruption, brutality, and oppression, all of which were once considered taboo topics (Barrons, 2012).

One of the arguably distinguishing features of social media is the ability of its users to practice the politics of anonymity, which Scott (1990) considers an aspect of

'infrapolitics', through which the narrative of the hidden transcript is publicly communicated and transmitted. Yet, there is a limit to the ability of the users of these platforms to conceal their identities. Authoritarian regimes are now, with the use of some sophisticated technologies, capable of tracking dissidents as well as cracking down on activism on the Internet. For instance, after the Iranian revolution in 2009, the Iranian government was able to arrest a number of activists who had been active on the Internet. One of them was Sattar Beheshti, a well-known blogger. Despite him not using his real name, the Iranian government was able to track him down and arrest him (Frontline, 2012).

Last but not least, it should be kept in mind that the online space in itself does not generate hidden transcripts. However, this digital space may serve as an alternative space to develop and nurture a hidden transcript when it is difficult to do so in physical spaces such as in authoritarian countries (Lim, 2014).

2.4 Social Media: Spaces of Outrage and Autonomy

One of the most debated and crucial themes regarding the political implications of social media in the current literature is the extent to which it affords a space for autonomy and therefore empowers subordinate groups. Castells (2015) may provide the most prominent perspective here. He has tried to capture the logic of current social network technologies through the notion of 'mass self-communication'. Through this notion, Castells seeks to conceptualise the shifting power of content production and circulation from solely traditional media organisations to more individual levels:

It is mass communication because it processes messages from many to many, with the potential of reaching a multiplicity of receivers, and of connecting to endless networks that transmit digitized information around the neighborhood or around the world. It is self-communication because the production of the message is autonomously decided by the sender, the designation of the receiver is self-directed and the retrieval of messages from the networks of communication is self-selected. [what makes these new network technologies distinctive according to Castells is that they provide] the technological platform for the construction of the autonomy of the social actor, be it individual or collective, vis-à-vis the institutions of society (Castells, 2015, p.6–7).

Castells (2015) therefore argues that social networking technologies provide critical infrastructure for personal autonomy, increasing possibilities of flexible organisation, and they encourage and enable individuals to access global discourse as well as to engage with, reframe, and express their ideas in a space of freedom.

What I have found crucial in Castells' works is that he is not simply arguing about spaces provided by networked technologies where individuals can express themselves outside of the existing restrictions imposed on them by authoritarian governments or corporate mainstream media. Instead, he refers to 'autonomy' using a deeper and often more personal sense. The term 'autonomy' for Castells is more than a space of freedom, it is instead the following:

The capacity of a social actor to become a subject by defining its action around projects constructed independently of the institutions of society, according to the values and interests of the social actor. The transition from individuation to autonomy is

operated through networking, which allows individual actors to build their autonomy in with like-minded people in the networks of their choice (Castells, 2015, p.259).

Furthermore, Castells (2015) conceives of social media sites as a 'free space' through which social networked movements can exercise a counterpower by forming themselves primarily through a process of 'autonomous communication' that is independent from the control of media corporations and those with institutional power.

Having said this, Castells makes it clear that although social media sites offer a great potential for largely unrestricted deliberation and the coordination of actions, this represents only one element of the communicative processes through which social movements are linked to society at large. Therefore, to generate greater impact, social movements should not rely solely on the capacity of 'autonomous communication' provided by social media, but they should also make themselves 'visible' by the occupation of symbolic sites in the urban public places of social life. As the institutional public sphere and the constitutionally defined spaces of deliberation are often dominated by a network of elites and government-affiliated institutions, social movements need to build 'a new public space' by creating free communities that are not only visible in and limited to the 'online space' but are also visible in the symbolic public spaces.

According to Castells (2015, p.11), the critical importance of this "new public space, the networked space between the digital space and the urban space" is that it is the space through which 'autonomous communication' can take place. The 'autonomy factor' of communication is considered to be the soul of social movements because

it initially contributes significantly to the formation of the movement and then facilitates the movement in linking to society at large, beyond powerholders' control over different media platforms. Referring to a number of global social movements, Castells' argument seems broadly convincing about how these different forms of space, digital space and public space, are mutually involved in 'co-dependent relationships', which he considers important to the progress of social movements.

One significant matter that I have discovered through my literature review, which I consider critical to my current study, is the extent to which the collective "construction of meaning in people's minds" (Castells, 2015, p.5) is considered as a vital driver by which 'power' (often embedded in the institutions of society and/or in the government itself, as in the case of Saudi Arabia) can be contested. According to Castells, one of the transformative forces of social media is that it has established free spaces independent of bureaucratic structures through which multiple social actors can come together to develop alternative meanings and challenge the dominant discourses "embedded in the institutions of society for the purpose of claiming representation for their own values and interests" (2015, p.5). See the Case Study of the Anti-Male Guardianship Campaign in Chapter Six.

Therefore, stating that social media platforms have become accessible and autonomous spaces for discussion, debate, and idea-sharing means that authoritarian governments that have long practiced the construction of meaning in individuals' minds through the monopoly of traditional media and the censorship of social institutions are now facing a greater challenge as a result of the transformation in the infrastructure of information technologies, social networking sites in

particular. This has arguably re-empowered individuals vis-à-vis existing power structures, mainstream media, and regimes' affiliated institutions. It is crucial here to emphasise that the power of constructing meaning in people's minds lies in the fact that the "way people think" has a direct and effective role in influencing the "institutions, norms and values on which societies are organized" (Castells, 2015, p.5).

Therefore, one of my thesis' interests is to explore the extent to which the extensive use of social media by young adults in Saudi Arabia has challenged the dominant power in Saudi Arabia, which is held by the government itself and its affiliated institutions. Although the word 'power' is a key concept in political theories, it has been defined in varied ways (Fuchs, 2014). However, through my critical reading of studies pertaining to this theme, for example, Luhmann (2000), Habermas (2006), and Castells (2007, 2011, 2015), it has been noted that power in a society generally concerns the question of who can influence what society looks like, and most importantly, who can control the means that allow such influence.

After an in-depth review of the potential role of social networked technologies in arguably influencing the power structures in society, I feel that in authoritarian governments, Saudi Arabia in my case, social media may be considered one of the key vectors by which dominant power can be challenged. The use of social media in Saudi Arabia not only provides the capacity for those powerless (dominated) group/s to flourish and function in de-centralised and anti-hierarchical ways, but it also gives rise to online collective identities.

It is important to emphasise here that Castells does not only argue about the potential role that ICTs may play in enabling individuals to create 'autonomous projects' for their lives that comprise their hopes, concerns, dreams, and hardships. This can be achieved through the affordance of freer communicative aspects such as freedom of expression, interaction, access, and opportunities, which are considered critical infrastructure for one's autonomous living. He also argues about the role of these networked technologies in enabling powerless individuals to overcome their sense of hopelessness by networking their desires.

Therefore, one of my motivations for selecting the anti-male guardianship hashtag activism as a case study for this research is to investigate, through my interviews, the extent to which social media has re-empowered women in Saudi Arabia and to explore how the use of the hashtag has contributed to the development of this campaign.

What I have found quite compelling in Castells' argument is his idea that social media can greatly help individuals access a wide range of different views and overcome bureaucratic obstacles. All of these may pave the way for them to promote political and social activities and establish personal initiatives in a manner that is much easier than ever before.

Having said that, Castells seems to me overly ambitious in his claims about the promises social media can offer to individuals. Although I agree with him that social media has offered unprecedented advantages to societies (especially those living under authoritarian governments), the promises of these technologies should not be taken for granted.

For example, in a critical article by Fuchs (2012) titled 'Some Reflections on Manuel Castells' Book Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age', Fuchs urges for a more comprehensive approach in understanding the implications of social media for activism than the one advanced by Castells. He argues that the political and social implications of social media for society cannot be studied without taking into consideration the contextual situations (e.g. politics, religion, culture) that could have as much influence on the way individuals engage with activism as social media.

Fuchs makes very clear the fact that it is the contextual situations that largely determine the political and social implications of social media for societies. He argues that any generalising assumptions made about the democratisation or autonomy-related potential of social media without considering/contextualising other critical factors is likely to lead to a very poor reference at the very least.

Fuchs' argument is also supported by several scholars. For instance, in his study titled '*Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the Social Media Moment*', Samin concluded that "the influence of social media should therefore be considered in terms of the underlying social and political dynamics of a given country, and not as an independent driver of change" (2012, no pagination).

Wolfsfeld et al. assert that it is misleading to attempt to examine the role of social media in political and social actions without "taking into account the political environment in which they operate" (2013, p.115). They pointed out that both 'cyber-enthusiasts' and 'cyber-sceptics' have failed to include important political variables in the analysis of the political implications of social media in activism.

Therefore, to bridge this lacuna in the literature, Wolfsfeld et al. suggested a third critical approach that they label 'contextualism'. Similarly, Curran (2012) draws attention to the role of the contextual situation in determining the overall potentials of these technologies in political and social activism.

Therefore, I believe that in an extremely conservative country such as Saudi Arabia, factors such as culture and religion, in particular, play a critical role in the everyday activities of Saudi people, which cannot be ignored when studying the political implications of social media. This is why one of my research objectives is to explore the critical barriers that influence young adults in Saudi Arabia when they participate in political/social issues via social media.

2.5 Online Quasi-Participation and Endless Content Circulation

One of the important arguments regarding social media as an 'alternative space' for 'political participation' revolves around the capacity of these platforms to facilitate 'political participation' in the form of 'meaningful and engaged debates'. It has been argued that social media facilitates horizontal and civil communication: individuals as well as institutions can now effortlessly communicate with each other to exchange information, organise events, provide mutual support, collaborate, mobilise, and promote collective identities. Thereby, these social networking platforms can be seen to promote 'democratic participation' (Benkler, 2006; Noveck, 2009; Shirky, 2011; Castells, 2015). However, the standing question that has generated ongoing controversy among theorists is whether participation facilitated by social media should be considered inadequate in some respects.

The critical argument that has been made is that the 'simplicity' of social media participation has not only rendered it less meaningful but has possibly even depoliticised it (Dean, 2005, 2009; Gladwell, 2010a/b; Morozov, 2011). Furthermore, based on the latter view, even if social media is considered an effective tool/platform through which individuals and activists can coordinate, organise, collaborate, and network, the extent of its 'impact' is far less than what techno-optimists have generally expected (Dean, 2005, 2009).

While the aforementioned criticism seems to apply particularly to democratic civil societies in which online communication seems to not be causing trouble to the status quo but is rather seen as an ideological necessity, there are also those who argue that even in authoritarian societies, online communication – political activism in particular – may function as 'a safety valve' by disseminating political energies in a way that does not lead to social change (Dean, 2009; Gladwell, 2010).

Perhaps one of the most crucial concepts through which the debate over the 'simplicity' of social media participation can be understood is that of 'interpassivity' (Zizek, 1998). Through this concept, Zizek argues that it is not only social media but all forms of media providing users with the sense of 'interactivity'. However, Zizek emphasises that the 'object' is active instead of the 'subject' (the user), who in turn plays the role of 'passivity'. Instead of enabling users to enjoy a genuine engagement, social media barely provides the delusion of participation by allowing action that is largely symbolic at the expense of authentic action.

In this context, Dean, in her striking book *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics*, argues that today, with the extensive use

of networking-communications technologies, “there is a significant disconnect between politics circulating as content and official politics” (2009, p.428). This is because the circulation of content in the endless and intensive digital global networks of social communications exempts influential and high-level actors (e.g. governments, corporates, institutions) from the commitment to respond to issues raised within platforms of loose social networks. Rather than engaging in discussion with the messages being circulated online by dissidents and activists, they counter this circulating flow of content with their own contributions, hoping that an adequate volume (whether in terms of quantity of contributions or quality of contributions) will make their contributions dominant or appealing (Dean, 2009).

Instead of engaged debates, instead of contestations employing common terms, points of reference or demarcated frontiers, we confront a multiplication of resistances and assertions so extensive that it hinders the formation of strong counterhegemonies. The proliferation, distribution, acceleration and intensification of communicative access and opportunity, far from enhancing democratic governance or resistance, results in precisely the opposite – the post-political formation of communicative capitalism (Dean, 2005, p.53).

To justify her argument, Dean (2005) discusses how the tremendous number of anti-war messages circulated “throughout global capitalism’s communications networks” prior to and during the Bush administration’s invasion of Iraq in 2003 were not received and were kept circulating until they were reduced to the medium. She argues that even though mainstream media in the US provided substantial support to the Bush administration in the run-up to the Iraq war, there have been critical assessments of the justifications given by the US government that have been

circulated “throughout global capitalism’s communications networks”. Several media outlets, including alternative media as well as independent, local, and international media, provided well-thought-out reports, insightful commentary, and critical reviews of the US government’s claims of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

For example, a well-known syndicated program, *Democracy Now*, hosted by Amy Goodman, had regularly been critical of Bush’s administration and his approach towards managing national security policies. The most widely read and oldest, continuous, weekly published magazine in the US, *The Nation*, published extensive analyses and critiques of Bush’s justifications for attacking Iraq. In addition to this, a number of anti-war activists provided citizens with the opportunities to make their oppositions known by circulating via email, lists containing the phone and fax numbers of the US congresspeople. Social networking sites were also utilised to circulate petitions, post announcements for protests and training workshops, and call for direct action.

While the Bush administration was preparing for a seemingly inevitable war, anti-war content proliferated extensively as thousands of activists began to comment and update information about each step that the Bush administration proceeded with during the Iraq war. They cited material from different media outlets to support their anti-war positions. Although it is true that the mainstream media failed to cover protests that hit a number of Western countries, for example, the massive protests in London in late 2002 and the Washington rally in the same year when more than 250,000 people surrounded the White House, several alternative, liberal, and critical

left news outlets provided frequent and rich sources of information regarding the action on the ground.

All in all, what Dean (2009, p.401) wants to highlight through her argument is that “a strong anti-war message was there”. However, the issue, as she emphasises, does not lie in the existence of the ‘message’ and its widespread circulation but in that the message “was not received, it circulated, reduced to the medium”. It is common knowledge that when a letter is sent, it will reach its intended destination, so the basic process consists of a sender, a receiver, and then a response/reaction to the message. However, the central question here is the following: What does this mean within the scope of networked communications technologies? Based on Dean’s argument, this means that the message/letter in ‘communicative capitalism’ is not actually sent, because the message has no arrival point. Thus, there will be no response to the message and all that remains is simply a contribution to circulating the message.

In line with Dean, Gladwell (2010) argues in his one of the most-cited articles within the field of digital media studies, ‘Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted’, that participation in social media is not as effective and powerful as the high-risk activism associated, for example, with the participation in sit-in protests and street marches.

Based on his critical argument of ‘high/low risk activism’, Gladwell (2010) explains how effective and impactful traditional activism is when compared to current social media activism. For example, he discusses how thousands of protesters stood up with four black college students in 1960 when they were denied service at a

restaurant in North Carolina, US, because of their race. At first, the four students expressed their anger and refused to leave the restaurant, but, eventually, they moved outside the restaurant and started protesting. The story of these students and their protest started to spread rapidly, and a number of their school colleagues, and, later, people from different states began to join them in sit-ins. Gladwell argues that although some protesters were arrested, more and more participants continued to join the sit-in protest and put themselves at risk in order to demonstrate their strong commitment to change. Gladwell maintains that if this sort of event were to take place on social media, people would be emotionally impacted and willing to help, but they would lack motivation, which is considered by him to be a very critical factor in the success of activism.

Another example that Gladwell discusses to clarify his belief in the powerlessness of current social media activism is the Twitter revolution in Iran and how online activism in Iran did not do as much as the Iranian people expected it to. Gladwell argues that many of the tweets people saw on Twitter were actually in English, which he assumes is an indication that the majority of the commentators were from outside Iran instead of affected people within Iran.

The conclusion that can be drawn from Gladwell's discussion about the 'superficiality of participation' in social media activism is based on two claims. First, he argues that 'high-risk activism' involves what he refers to as the 'strong-tie' phenomena, meaning that individuals will be more motivated and engaged in the activism if they have 'close friends' beside them in the activism. Second, he asserts that social media has several limitations and downsides with regard to activism and it is not as effective

and powerful in causing a radical change. Gladwell asserts that “where activists were once defined by their causes, they are now defined by their tools” (2010, no pagination).

Although he conservatively acknowledges the role of social media networks in movements, especially in their speed and vast reach in spreading information about events, he insists that social media facilitates only participants and activists in doing so, without motivating ‘the hardcore commitment’ that he considers as a crucial factor for activism to achieve its intended objectives or bring about a radical change. He asserts that “social networks are effective at increasing participation—by lessening the level of motivation that participation requires” (no pagination). It is clear that Gladwell associates ‘radical change’ and ‘successful movements’ with activism that is characterised by ‘strong-ties’ between its participants as well as their willingness to take risks. According to the author, social media activism is not that kind of activism, because the connection between people online is based only on ‘weak-ties’.

While the criticism over the ‘interpassivity’ of social media participation should not be entirely denied, it should be kept in mind that online participation in itself for those who were previously marginalised might be deemed extremely profound and meaningful. For instance, Shirky points out that the work of the sociologists Katz and Lazarsfeld suggests that through the daily conversations between individuals – rather than receiving information and opinions from a one-way information medium (as it occurs through television, radio, and newspapers) – individuals’ political opinions are formed (Granovetter, 1973). Consequently, social media “spreads not just media

consumption but media production as well-it allows people to privately and publicly articulate and debate a welter of conflicting views” (Shirky, 2011, p.4).

I feel that this idea is interesting, because it suggests that the increasing number of online discussions over social media platforms that we are witnessing today, which are proliferating with strong opinions and spirited debate (at least, in my case, the online public sphere in Saudi Arabia), even if they are, for example, mixed with some misleading information and the lack of rational reflexivity, could have significant political implications as well as great opportunities for the formulation of opinions.

Therefore, in contrast to Dean, Gladwell, and Morozov, the discussion above suggests that in addition to the high potentiality of increasing ‘shared awareness’ (Shirky, 2011), social media participation can open up new possibilities for action, enhance public spheres as well as encourage critical discussions. Social media can also enable individuals to develop their political opinions, create a decentralised network, and broaden their perceptions of their current situation, all of which are considered to be of critical importance to committed activism.

Although Shirky (2011) admits that the uses of social media are too varied and contradictory and that the empirical record of these uses so far is largely incomplete, he argues that the downsides to social media participation pointed out by Gladwell and others should also be considered while discussing the proliferation of opinion formation. Moreover, the ‘simplicity’ of social media participation may effectively assist in politicising users who have previously been isolated from political issues and activities surrounding them. Therefore, Shirky believes that online political and social

participation can contribute to strengthening communities. This may also prompt authoritarian governments to modify their strategic policies.

2.6 Affective Networks, Stuckness, Feedback Loops, and Phatic Communication

The argument that social networking sites promote autonomous participation and enhance meaningful political activism encounters further challenge from accounts that regard social media as mobilising affective capacities in a manner that impedes individuals' ability to undertake purposeful actions. It is argued that the characteristics of social media incite users to disseminate information as a form of enjoyment, in ways that undermine the vision of some techno-optimistic theorists who argue that social media contributes to the democratisation of the public sphere. With regard to this argument, Dean describe the endless 'enjoyment' of contributing to and disseminating online content as 'affective networks'.

She writes the following:

Blogs, social networks, Twitter, YouTube: they produce and circulate affect as a binding technique. Affect, or *jouissance* in Lacanian terms, is what accrues from reflexive communication, from communication for its own sake, from the endless circular movement of commenting, adding notes and links, bringing in new friends and followers, layering and interconnecting myriad communications platforms and devices. Every little tweet or comment, every forwarded image or petition, accrues a tiny affective nugget, a little surplus enjoyment, a smidgen of attention that attaches to it, making it stand out from the larger flow before it blends back in. We might find ourselves more fearful or seem somehow secure, even if we have no idea what we're looking for or what we've found. Unable to find a given dot,

we feel, in ways that exceed our conscious perception, the movement of multiple colliding dots (2010a, p.21).

It is clear that Dean's pessimistic vision regarding mediated politics is fundamentally based on her assumption that the 'desire of endless enjoyment' that users seek through their multiple and repetitive online participation is indeed insufficient to engender meaningful action, and all it does is simply stick/tie the participants to the online public sphere. "The subject gets stuck doing the same thing over and over again because this doing produces enjoyment. Post. Post. Post. Click. Click. Click" (Dean, 2010, p.21).

In order to support her claim, Dean relies on the following: 1) Terranova's (2004, p.14) description of how 'online messages' can be continuously undermined by the extensive proliferation of signs that have no determined reference, "only statistical patterns of frequency, redundancy and resonance", 2) Berlant (2007) who writes a blog titled '*Faceless Book*' about her feelings towards Facebook after a discussion she had with someone older than her, which was about the purpose of networking among friends:

I sense that Facebook is about calibrating the difficulty of knowing the importance of the ordinary event. People are trying there to eventalize the mood, the inclination, the thing that just happened—the episodic nature of existence. So and so is in a mood right now. So and so likes this kind of thing right now; and just went here and there. This is how they felt about it. It's not in the idiom of the great encounter or the great passion, it's the lightness and play of the poke. There's always a potential but not a demand for more (no pagination).

and finally, 3) Zaitchik's (2009, no pagination) strong critique of "constant-contact media addiction", through which he describes 'social media participation' as distracted and involving many unfocused behaviours. This is the critique that also resonates well with Licoppe and Smoreda's (2006) observation that mediated communication has led to the collapse of the presence and absence of face-to-face communication into what they refer to as 'connected presence'. According to them, networking technologies have made people almost 'continually contactable'. These potential downsides of mediated politics are perceived by some as likely to weaken and demean social media participation.

Based on these criticisms, Dean (2004, 2010a) argues that the success of Bush's administration in systematically manipulating the information environment, especially in the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, was primarily in relying on the 'strategy of distracting' by continually spreading a great deal of information. According to this analysis, social media participation therefore leads to a more vulnerable community rather than a more engaged one.

Another critique of social media as a platform for political participation is that it has become a space progressively dominated by "phatic messages" (Miller, 2008). That is, there is a transition from a more informational and dialogic communication to a more flattened and non-informational one (networked sociality). The term 'phatic communion' was first used by Malinowski (1923) to describe a new type of linguistic use that does not carry, exchange, or inform any meaningful information. Its

objective is a social one: to communicate sociability and maintain connections³. The unprecedented expansion of social networks and the technical means available for users to build boundless relationships and loose/distant friendships have all encouraged communication that maintains 'a general sociability' without encouraging the exchange of ideas and real information. For instance, a growing body of research into 'ubiquitous computing' (see e.g. Vetere et al., 2005) has begun to shift dramatically from systems that "support personal and informational issues (i.e. capturing and communicating information), and towards what are being called 'phatic technologies': technologies which build relationships and sustain social interaction through pervasive (but non-informational) contact and intimacy" (Miller, 2018, p.395).

Licoppe and Smoreda (2005) argue that the 'technological affordance' of 'connected presence' has prompted a rise of condensed expressions of intimate emotion. The central point of their discussion is that non-dialogic means of communication (e.g. voice messages, electronic message systems) signal a demand for attention but do not require an immediate or synchronous response. To put it simply, their findings indicate that there has indeed been an increase of embodied communicative gestures whose objective is not to exchange or share meaningful information but to communicate sociability and preserve social connections.

³ "Are words in Phatic Communion used primarily to convey meaning, the meaning which is symbolically theirs? Certainly not! They fulfil a social function, and that is their principal aim, but they are neither the result of intellectual reflection, nor do they necessarily arouse reflection in the listener. Once again, we may say that language does not function here as a means of transmission of thought" (Malinowski, 1923, p.315).

It is important to emphasise here that these 'phatic communications' are not necessarily 'meaningless'. Indeed, in many respects, they are 'very meaningful' and involve intimacy, recognition, and sociability through which a strong sense of community, security, and belonging is founded. However, it should be kept in mind that although they may not always be 'meaningless', they are often content-less in any purposeful sense. Therefore, it can be argued that in the current age of 'phatic technologies culture', "content is not king, but keeping in touch is" (Miller, 2008, p.395).

One of the most powerful reasons behind the pervasive increase of 'phatic communication' can be attributed to the major cultural shift we are witnessing today, from 'narrative forms' as the main form of cultural expressions in the modern age to the 'database' as the outstanding cultural logic of the computer age (Manovich, 2001). While 'narratives' tell stories that have beginnings and endings that follow a linear path and thematic development as determined by an author, 'databases' as defined by Manovich (2001, p.218) are "structured collections of data [that are] organized for fast search and retrieval by a computer".

For Miller (2008), 'phatic messages' are highly induced by social media due to both technical affordances and the website design of these platforms. For instance, Miller argues that the character limit of Twitter is an attempt to restrict non-phatic communicative capacities. Within this context, Miller's argument may be more convincing with regard to Facebook's platform. Indeed, this can be seen as a part of the culture of 'radical transparency' that Lim (2013) stressed as being one of the prominent characteristics of Facebook's platform. In terms of Facebook's

infrastructural propensity to promote 'radical transparency' and facilitate the dissemination of issues in multiple networks of weak-ties where users' daily habits (e.g. actions, check-ins, games, likes) are communicated to a loose and boundless audience, the opportunity of transforming these actions into 'phatic communication' is extremely high. He comments the following:

Unlike older platforms, such as mailing lists, forums, or even blogs, on Facebook consuming information is not always a voluntary act. In the blogosphere, for example, an interaction between bloggers and their readers requires a voluntary act of reading and commenting. On Facebook, such an act of reading or "glancing" is not always voluntary. When everything is thrown at you on your Facebook wall the possibility of cross-reading, cross-listening and cross-watching, which might lead to cross-communication between strangers (you and your second-degree network), is high (Lim, 2013, p.642).

While I personally believe that both Dean's and Miller's arguments are, to a great extent, persuasive and illustrative of the complex interaction of 'technical affordances' and 'cultural phenomena', I also believe that they have overlooked the 'politicising effects' of social media, which have had impacts on several social movements and revolutionary developments worldwide. One way to look at this is through the assumptions that argue that social media may function in a completely different manner in authoritarian societies than in more democratic and civil societies. Where speech about political, social, or even religious issues in societies that do not enjoy democracy – Saudi Arabia, in my case – is relatively free, social media can be seen as one of the most important tools that may help facilitate oppressed individuals in further diffusing and fragmenting the environment of closed

information. Therefore, one can argue that the use of social media in authoritarian environments can break the closure of the informational environment, open up space for actions, and allow more political discussions that were previously almost impossible.

Moreover, through my reading of both accounts, I feel that they have overemphasised the 'novelty' of the social network technologies by attributing excessive capability to the 'technical affordances' of these technologies in structuring social interactions. Although I generally agree with them, I believe that they have over-simplified the nuanced processes and incredible complexities of such interactions. It is here, in particular, that I would like to emphasise on Miller's (2008) account of 'phatic communication'. I believe that his almost negative outlook of 'phatic communication' has led him to ignore (whether willingly or unwillingly) the broad potentialities that social media platforms may have or bring about for their users. In other words, he places too much emphasis on the negative side of 'phatic communication' and fails to acknowledge the potential advantages of the same.

Tufekci (2010) has argued that this sort of communication (the phatic messages), which, for example, Miller (2008) and Gladwell (2010) among others regard as 'pointless communication', is indeed the bedrock of 'ties formation',

All those Facebook friends that Gladwell and others take turns making fun of? That is exactly where most people can potentially draw stronger ties. Tweets/discussions about lunch and naps and status updates about dates and breakups? Bedrock of sociality and of social networks of stronger and weaker ties. Do we really think that strong communities spend their time discussing the

finer points of flexible specialization in the labor process under post-Fordism? (Tufekci, 2010, no pagination).

Tufekci's argument is backed by some empirical studies (e.g. Haythornthwaite, 2002; Hampton and Wellman, 2003) regarding the impact of social networking technologies on neighbourhood communities, which generally suggest that adding online connectivity to the already existing face-to-face communication (which is often sustained in part by the so-called phatic communication) has high potentialities to increase the level of bonding and facilitate strengthening ties, and this is because the channels of communication are increased.

Therefore, one can argue that these 'phatic messages' between users who share the same affinities and interests in a boundless pool of online social networks may, over time, lead these individuals to build robust networks of stronger ties. This is indeed happening. According to some of my female interviewees (see Chapter Six: The Anti-Male Guardianship Campaign in Saudi Arabia: A Case Study), one of the reasons behind their current strong-tie relationships was initially a Twitter discussion between them and large numbers of other females who were affected by the male guardianship system. They explained to me that their initial online discussions (which could be seen here as weak-tie relationships) had facilitated them in getting to know each other better, which consequently enabled them to build a wider network of relationships with those affected by the system. All of this has resulted in regular offline meetings between them through which they continue their discussions and plan strategies to tackle such a system.

2.7 Decentralised Weak-Tie Networks vs Strong Organisational Ties

Having elaborated on the arguments pertaining to the two critical concepts, 'affective networks' (Dean, 2010a/b) and 'phatic communication' (Miller, 2008), I would like to move on to discuss important and increasing debates on whether ties between social media users are capable of mobilising mass activism on a large scale. It has been argued that social media can only facilitate 'weak ties' and thus online participation does not contribute to mobilising 'strong ties' required for political purposes.

Perhaps, Gladwell (2010) is one of the most prominent critics of the role of social media in terms of its potential ability to promote 'strong ties', which in turn are seen as the basis for the success of political mobilisation. Speaking of social media, he states the following:

Twitter is a way of following (or being followed by) people you may never have met. Facebook is a tool for efficiently managing your acquaintances, for keeping up with the people you would not otherwise be able to stay in touch with. That's why you can have a thousand "friends" on Facebook, as you never could in real life (2010, no pagination).

Gladwell asserts that 'weak-tie relationships' represented between users of social media are inappropriate for tasks that 'require strong-tie relationships' based on a hierarchical organisation, such as organising protests and large-scale uprisings. He acknowledges that 'weak ties' are only useful in finding solutions to problems that can be tackled effortlessly with no risks involved.

Gladwell goes further by accusing the 'evangelists' (as he refers to them) of social media, stating that they still do not understand the distinction between weak and

strong-tie relationships. He argues that participating in social media, as a non-risky action and that which is generally grounded in weak-tie relationships between users, is ineffective in providing the necessary motivation for high-risk activism, and all it does is lower the cost of participation:

Social networks are effective at increasing participation—by lessening the level of motivation that participation requires ... Facebook activism succeeds not by motivating people to make a real sacrifice but by motivating them to do the things that people do when they are not motivated enough to make a real sacrifice.

Speaking in line with Gladwell, Lovink argues that “strong organizational forms, firmly rooted in real life and capable of mobilizing (financial) resources, will eventually overrule weak online commitments” (2012, p.162).

Considering all that Gladwell and Lovink have said, much in their accounts remain highly controversial to this day. Crucially, what I have found interesting to mention here is how the notion of 'strong-tie' itself has been inconsistently approached by different accounts in the relevant literature. This undoubtedly proves that there is no specific and agreed upon criteria by which tie-strength is measured.

For instance, Granovetter (1973) perceives the ‘strength’ of the interpersonal ties as a combination of several factors rather than an inherently binary one (weak or strong tie). These factors consist of the amount of time spent together, emotional intensity, intimacy (mutual trust), and the reciprocal services between the tie-members, all of which characterise the tie.

This definition is highly consistent with the arguments made by Blau (2010) and Tufekci (2010) who argue that ‘social ties’ should not be seen as dichotomous (weak

or strong). Indeed, they do not only fall along a continuum but also complete each other and play overlapping functions:

Social ties are not dichotomously weak or strong; they fall along a continuum. The majority of relationships are in the muddy middle, just beyond strangers, just short of friends. Indeed, all of us start out as strangers and then, as bits of information and history are exchanged, we find ourselves in weak-tie territory—the realm of consequential strangers. ***Weak ties can morph into stronger ones, of course, especially when people come together to fight a common enemy or to advance a common cause.*** But it doesn't matter how far a particular relationship travels toward the strong-tie end of the continuum. ***All social ties have meaning, and some—even the weakest—can motivate us to put our lives on the line*** (Blau, 2010, no pagination, emphasis added).

Blau (2010) argues that while 'strong-ties' play a crucial role in providing activism with more power and momentum, 'weak ties' have a critical role to play in allowing activism to transcend its initial milieu. In line with Blau, Tufekci (2010) asserts that 'weak-ties' are, in effect, critical for the formation of 'strong-ties'.

Therefore, rather than considering social media as a space where only 'weak-ties' are mobilised and sustained and believing that this 'virtual space' does not amount to a vector by which 'strong-ties' may be formulated, the opposite could be true. Commenting on Gladwell's account of weak and strong ties, Tufekci (2010, no pagination) argues that "large pools of weaker ties are crucial to being able to build robust networks of stronger ties – and Internet use is a key to this process". Thus, it can be argued that weak ties are highly effective in providing the basis of support for political activism and organisations.

Based on his ethnographical study of the Global Justice Movement, Juris (2008) argues that social media enabled anti-globalisation activists to produce alternative non-hierarchical networks, facilitate transitional communication and coordination among grassroots participants, and build horizontal ties between autonomous groups. Importantly, the findings of his study demonstrate that the initial relationships (described in the literature as weak and fragmented) between those grassroots and autonomous participants do not necessarily remain weak and that networked participants still develop strong interpersonal ties and friendships that social media facilitated in the first place. Interestingly, the findings of the present study confirm this claim (See the story of Areej and her friends in Chapter Six).

This finding is also consistent with that of Gerbaudo (2012) who highlights the interconnectedness of online and offline friendships between movement participants. The interviewees in his research revealed that their 'Facebook friends' were indeed also their real friends. Thus, these findings are inconsistent with the arguments that state that social media participation can only allow the construction of weak ties.

In this vein, Blau suggested a number of advantages offered by social media platforms that may have significant political and social implications, which I personally believe are highly effective even if we acknowledge the downsides to the potential role of social media in facilitating the development of strong ties among the participants. These are the following:

First, spreading the word: As has been widely argued in the existing literature, in terms of social activism, 'information' is power. Our initial thoughts, which are often

superficial in their meaning, will not necessarily motivate us to make an immediate decision such as engaging in political action. However, there will be no chance for us to make a particular decision unless there are 'initial ideas' being discussed widely and in multiple stages.

Second, chronicling the experience: One advantage of social media is that it has rendered us less isolated and less confined to our narrow surroundings (e.g. family, relatives, colleagues). Now, with the use of social media, we can express our thoughts and share our ordeals with boundless social ties. This is of great importance especially among a conservative culture such as Saudi Arabia that discourages discussions on political and religious issues.

Third, connecting the participants: Social media tools have helped participants keep conversations flowing smoothly regardless of the distance between them. Furthermore, reunions between participants are now easier to organise than at any previous time.

Fourth, keeping the story alive: Indeed, one could argue that this is one of the most prominent features of social media. Previously, members of the public faced great difficulties in first raising issues that affected them and then sustaining the discussions over these issues. This is extremely evident especially in authoritarian nations where traditional media channels are heavily controlled and censored by governments. Thus, we can find that most of what is discussed through these traditional means serves the interests of governments primarily and often neglects popular issues that are contrary to the orientations of States.

Fifth, inspiring new models of participation: It is true that ‘social media participation’, which is constituted by a number of aspects, such as encouraging others to do something or urging them to express their views on a societal issue that affects a group in a society, is not the same as participating in a street protest or joining a picket line. However, as has been said, there are many ways to be valuable to society and to share the burden, albeit with little effort. As St. Clair put it (cited in Blau, 2010, no pagination), “If you can focus the small actions of a ton of people who are otherwise loosely connected, you can have a big impact over time”.

Moreover, existing literature suggests that ‘weak-ties’ are themselves of strong political effectiveness in a number of ways and are seen to be critical in the development of social activism. For example, Granovetter (1974) asserted that even these ‘weak-tie relations’ can be an effective vehicle of mobilisation. Indeed, it is through these weak ties that information can be quickly and extensively transmitted through multiple communities rather than merely within them.

Weak ties also have an initial role to play in building ‘trust’ between the organisers and the supporters of social activism. In relation, there is a suggestion that the effective potency of online sociality may facilitate individuals in overcoming fear through the sense of unity and togetherness, which they can achieve through their online interaction. Although the role of ‘emotion’ in the process of activism mobilisations is one of the critical themes, it has been somehow been neglected or not fully understood in social movement studies (Goodwin et al., 2001) as well as in contemporary social media studies (Ben-Ze`ev, 2004). However, it is my contention that the use of social media, especially in authoritarian countries, may contribute to

helping participants create an atmosphere of consensus, emotion, and togetherness, which would otherwise be almost impossible to achieve.

2.8 Contemporary Gender Politics: The Rise of Hashtag Feminism

After careful consideration of the critical questions thrown up by the current literature on the socio-political potential of social media participation and activism, this theme was selected to provide an insight into the state of contemporary gender politics in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The relevance of this topic stems from the growing debate on the revolution in new communication technologies which has been reinvigorating the public sphere, especially in authoritarian countries.

The political instability that the MENA region has witnessed over the past few decades (following the September 11 attacks and the Arab Spring) has had a profound impact on women and gender relations in the MENA region (See e.g. Al-Ali, 2012, 2013; Akman, 2015; Elsheikh and Lilleker, 2019). In this vein, social media have played a central role in providing a platform for people to promote and discuss a range of contemporary social and political issues. Among the many problems afflicting the MENA region, the issue of gender inequality is at the forefront (Dalacoura, 2019).

Several feminist studies have suggested that with the revolution in media technologies, women in authoritarian societies have been able to find alternative ways to develop a discourse based on a desire for social change, in which they can unite and challenge the patriarchal discourse that has so far dominated the public sphere (Al-Saggaf, 2011; Sasha, 2013; Elsheikh and Lilleker, 2019; Thorsen and

Sreedharan, 2019). By focusing on lifestyle matters that are often addressed only in small private circles, they are able to question some cultural norms and values without provoking the state or security apparatus.

However, before moving on to assess the growing phenomenon of digital feminism, I will first highlight the cultural background of the MENA region, as the contextual situation of any region plays a vital role in shaping the form taken by specific phenomena and how they are perceived.

According to Moghadam (2013), the MENA region is characterized by neo-patriarchal countries, and the region is at the edge of several gender indices. It is believed that the status of women in the MENA region is mainly shaped by Islamic thought and practices and by the very conservative cultural heritage (Moussawi and Koujok, 2019).

The gender gaps in the MENA countries in terms of social, economic and political life reflect the unequal treatment of women compared to men. The MENA region ranks at the bottom of all regions, for instance, on the World Economic Forum Gender Gap Index for 2020. Turkey, for example, was ranked 130th out of 153 countries, Jordan 138th, Morocco 143th, Lebanon 145th, Saudi Arabia 146th, Iran 148th, with little progress being made in narrowing the gender gap (World Economic Forum, 2020).

Table 1 The MENA Region Gender Gap Index Rankings 2020.

Country	Rank	
	Regional	Global
Israel	1	64
United Arab Emirates	2	120
Kuwait	3	122

Tunisia	4	124
Turkey	5	130
Algeria	6	132
Bahrain	7	133
Egypt	8	134
Qatar	9	135
Jordan	10	138
Mauritania	11	141
Morocco	12	143
Oman	13	144
Lebanon	14	145
Saudi Arabia	15	146
Iran	16	148

It has been argued that although many Muslim countries have modernised, they have not come to accept greater equality and rights between genders, as has happened elsewhere (Norris and Inglehart, 2012). Therefore, contrary to most Western countries where a combination of feminist struggle and broader socio-economic shifts have brought about greater equality, most Islamic countries have maintained traditional norms and values.

In these countries, family and tribe rather than the individual represent the fundamental building blocks of society. It could be argued that Islam (as the region's dominant religion) strictly binds all aspects of life, and men and women have distinct, complementary positions and obligations. In describing the critical role family plays in gender relations in the MENA region, Abbott states that "the family and family law reflect and reinforce one another in such a way that women are second-class citizens;

they do not have equal legal rights with men, and privilege and authority in the family is conferred on male kin” (2017, p.11).

That being said, some feminist scholars (e.g. Shaik, 2003; Jones-Pauly and Tuqan ,2011; Mir-Hosseini, 2006, 2013) argue that it is not the Islamic beliefs per se which have caused the difference, but rather it is the way in which Islamic Sharia has been interpreted that has contributed to strengthening social expectations of a separate and subordinate position for women as householders and mothers, with men as family patriarchs and, above all, the primary breadwinners. While the researchers agree that in Muslim countries there are serious barriers to gender equality for women, they challenge the belief that gender justice and women empowerment are incompatible with Islam (Shaikh, 2009). In the view of these authors, therefore, it is not Islam but social and cultural traditions that account for the continued mindset of patriarchy.

This argument is partially accepted in the literature on women’s studies (Tripp, 2015). For example, although both Saudi Arabia and Tunisia (which are considered as most conservative vs the liberal countries in the MENA) adopt Islamic Sharia law as the basic constitution for the state regulations and affairs, it appears that the variation between the two countries in terms of political will, the social dynamics, the interference of other ideological and social influences, and more critically the different approaches implemented in the interpretation of Sharia Law have resulted in two distinct versions of gender politics.

Saudi Arabia, for instance, implements the Sunni interpretation of the Sharia with the adoption of the Wahhabi approach. This has led to the introduction of some strict

laws: the male guardianship system is a prominent example in this regard (see Chapter Three). On the other hand, the Tunisian constitution which is largely influenced by and based on Islamic Sharia law has undergone significant changes since Habib Bourguiba's reign to date (Moussawi and Koujok, 2019), all of which has contributed to a gradualist approach towards greater rights for women. For example, the Tunisian personal status law opposes polygamy, allows women to inherit equally with men and to marry non-Muslim men, and refutes the idea of the male guardianship system, stating that women have the right to decide on all aspects of their lives.

Therefore, while the Islamic Sharia law is the basic constitution of both countries, the implementation/interpretation of the law introduces two exceptional cases concerning women's rights in Islam. This example is consistent with the claims made by several scholars (e.g. Tripp 2015; Karshenas et al. 2016; Abbott, 2017). Abbott, for instance, argues that:

Treating all Muslim countries as identical can lead to misleading conclusions, so can treating all MENA countries as if they are identical, which much of the research to date has done. While the Arab countries may form a distinct cluster when compared with the rest of the world we should not fail to recognise that there are differences between them (2017, p.12).

Given that women in the MENA region have been excluded for decades from participating in the public sphere for political and cultural reasons, the revolution in information and new media technologies seems to provide them with unprecedented opportunities to raise gender issues, generate more awareness, and form public opinion (Skalli, 2006; Elsheikh and Lilleker, 2019). Therefore, the

following is a discussion about digital feminism; the new phenomenon of hashtag feminism, in particular.

In contemporary networked activism, new theoretical approaches have been developed to examine the potential role of social media in political activism. A large and growing body of this literature has argued that most current social and political campaigns are initially formulated, organised, and mobilised through social media.

According to Bennett and Segerberg (2012), we are witnessing the evolution of networked social activism and a paradigm shift from 'collective' to 'connective' action. Moreover, it has commonly been argued that social media technologies have not only enabled activists and organisations to mobilise geographically dispersed individuals (Shirky, 2011) but have also provided networked individuals with a channel through which they can generate content, collaborate, convey messages, engage with each other, and challenge the dominant power (Castells, 2015).

However, there is still a need for an empirical investigation, especially about the extent to which social media tools can facilitate social and political activism in authoritarian contexts. Despite the numerous socio-political challenges in politically restrictive environments, many affected groups (including women) have emerged online to fight for rights, demand greater freedom, and challenge the authorities.

Therefore, my primary interest in selecting the case of anti-male guardianship campaign is to explore the potential role that social media tools (i.e. hashtags) can play in political activism in an authoritarian public sphere, Saudi Arabia, where most forms of social and political activism emerge only online. This consequently gives less importance to the strength of organisations and the availability of resources, and

places greater importance on the role of social media as a driving force for the formation and mobilisation of online activism in an authoritarian environment.

The recent growing phenomenon of 'hashtag activism' has received considerable critical attention in the discipline of digital media studies. For instance, Yang points out the following:

One of the most interesting developments in digital activism in recent years is the rise of hashtag activism, meaning discursive protest on social media united through a hashtagged word, phrase or sentence (2016, p.13).

Various studies have assessed the efficacy of hashtags in political activism. For example, Meraz and Papacharissi reveal that the use of hashtags for an emerging socio-political event can help frame the event's discourse and flow of information as well as facilitate "the creation of ad hoc issue public" (2013, p.144). They argue that the hashtag feature can pave the way for a distributed community to easily gather, self-organise, and collectively contribute to the campaign's information stream.

In addition to the considerable advantages that users can gain through the use of hashtags, such as the simplicity of locating relevant topics within the vast amount of conversations on social media platforms as well as engaging with like-minded people, it has been argued that the use of hashtags by affected individuals has incredibly enhanced the visibility of their movements (Alaimo, 2015; Wang et al., 2016).

Andrews and Caren (2010) argue that prior to the advent of social networking sites, the visibility of political activism was largely dependent on its capability of 'news producing and circulating'. This argument is consistent with many recent hashtag

activism studies. For example, Yang (2016) has demonstrated in his case study of #BlackLivesMatter how the use of the Twitter hashtag in this campaign has played a powerful role in helping the black community improve visibility and generate more awareness and publicity about issues that have been for decades misrepresented and neglected by some national traditional forms of media.

Regarding 'feminist activism' or 'hashtag feminism' in particular, an emerging line of research has focused on the potential role that social media has in feminist activism. For example, the *Journal of Feminist Media Studies* has featured several articles recognising the significance of this critical phenomenon. Some of these studies, for instance, Clark (2014), Horeck (2014), and Meyer (2014), have highlighted the potential role that 'hashtag feminism' has in fighting oppressive discourses (e.g. sexism, racism, and classism) which are produced by some corporate advertisements, forms of journalism, and the entertainment media.

Other studies conducted by Rodino-Colocino (2014), Williams (2015), Rentschler (2017), Mendes et al., (2018) have demonstrated that prominent feminist hashtags (e.g. #BeenRapedNeverReported #SafetyTipsForWomen, #StopStreetHarassment, #YesAllWomen, #BringBackOurGirls) have had an effective role in exposing gendered violence and abuse. They emphasise that 'hashtag feminism' has shed light on females' everyday encounters with sexual violence and the victim-blaming discourse that promotes such a rape culture.

Social media technologies have provided affected women with visible platforms through which they can report the street harassment and domestic violence they experience to a broader spectrum of audiences. In doing so, they not simply

showcase the pervasiveness of such practices but also critique and educate the public about sexism and offer counter discourses to the popular misogyny (Mendes et al., 2019).

Additionally, the hashtag feature serves as an organisational structure that enables dispersed women to produce and connect with personal stories; this has extensively helped them fill the gap created by traditional media's biased coverage of women's issues (Rentschler, 2017).

Given that the use of hashtags may allow dispersed individuals to promote 'transparency' and raise the 'visibility' of a particular issue, I am interested in exploring how Saudi women have utilised such a tool in their anti-male guardianship campaign to fight gender inequalities and challenge the dominant patriarchal discourse in Saudi Arabia.

Furthermore, as has been suggested by Bennett and Segerberg (2012) that digitally mediated political activism involves a great level of 'personalized collective action', I believe that rather than solely evaluating the extent to which 'a socio-political activism' successfully mobilises resources and achieves its stated objectives (as most of the studies of traditional social movements have tended to do), an alternative and often neglected approach is to assess its capacity to gain 'symbolic power' (Castells, 2007), which can be defined as "the capacity to intervene in the course of events and influence the actions of others by means of the production and transmission of symbolic forms" (Thompson, 2005).

This approach indeed becomes of great importance especially in an authoritarian and patriarchal countries where social networking sites have enabled women to

overcome many political and social challenges, disseminate information beyond geographical boundaries, generate their own content, and undertake connective actions.

That said, however, it is important to draw attention to the fact that although hashtags can be a powerful political tool, they are not without risks and limitations. For example, scholars have pointed out some potential dangers associated with the use of hashtag activism. This includes the problem of oversimplifying complicated issues, the barriers to digital access, the overexposure of vulnerable individuals, online threats and trolls, and the expansion of corporate and state surveillance (Morozov, 2011; Fuchs, 2014; Cole, 2015; Clark, 2016; Hintz et al., 2017; Dencik, 2018).

These potential disadvantages of online activism, particularly trolling Internet comments as well as the state's increasing adoption of sophisticated technologies to engage in covert surveillance of targeted groups, have indeed been reported by some of the participants of this research (See Chapter Five).

Notwithstanding this, Bayat (2010) notes that acts of resistance by women in authoritarian countries often go unnoticed because they don't correspond to 'the Western model' of what defines a social movement. Organisations, strong leadership, procedures of membership, mobilisation strategies, and street marches, which are characteristics of most movements emerging in democratic settings, are indeed privileges that are not accessible to women in religious and patriarchal societies, whose "struggles are often thwarted by the repressive measures of

authoritarian/patriarchal states as well as the unsympathetic attitudes of many ordinary men” (Bayat, 2010, p.97).

Bayat asserts that in authoritarian settings, ordinary practices that women seek to participate in (such as employment or education, divorce, living independently, or running for political office), which in Western and democratic countries are considered normal, are perceived as powerful acts of resistance. This form of resistance, according to Bayat, involves “the power of presence— the ability to assert collective will in spite of all odds, by circumventing constraints, utilizing what exists, and discovering new spaces of freedom to make oneself heard, seen, felt, and realized” (2010, p.112).

2.9 Online Public Sphere: The Debate over Online Participation

Given that my research focus will be on the role of social media in the political participation and activism of young adults in Saudi Arabia within the online public sphere, it is worth exploring the growing debates over the critical role of social media in providing individuals with the ease of participation as well as in reviving the public sphere. It is one of my research questions to investigate the extent to which social media has facilitated dialogue, information exchange, and democratic debate in the online public sphere in Saudi Arabia.

Therefore, a helpful starting point to understand the potential advantages/disadvantages of the online public sphere is to carefully contextualise the existing scholarly debates over the emergence of the ‘online’ public sphere. To do so, I will proceed with my discussion of the online public sphere, after a general

conceptualisation of the term, by addressing the concept in terms of its perceived limitations, ambivalent promises, and some related research findings.

Several concepts have been proposed with regard to the online public sphere, and each of them have been associated with a relatively distinct perception of the phenomenon in question. However, there are a number of common denominators that noticeably exist among these concepts. For example, researchers define the online public sphere as a communicative space provided by the Internet and supported by social media platforms where users can openly and freely participate should they wish to, where issues of common concern can be raised and communicated, and where the proceedings are predominantly visible to all (Dahlberg, 2001; Cammaerts, 2005; Poor, 2005; Al-Saggaf, 2006; Schafer, 2015).

On the other side of these commonalities, the existing scholarly perspectives regarding the public sphere vary theoretically in terms of what sort of communication they deem desirable (Ferree et al., 2002; Wessler, 2008; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). For instance, advocates of a participatory public sphere endorse civil, rational, and consensus-oriented deliberation. In contrast, liberal theorists demand “a communication whose structures represent the relative power of societal stakeholders” (Schafer, 2015, p.322). This can be measured, for instance, by elections. Constructivism theorists also call for emotional, narrative, and confrontational sorts of communication that would be more appropriate and consequently, more empowering to certain social groups (Gerhards and Schafer, 2010; Schafer, 2015).

2.9.1 The Perceived Limitations of the Old Public Sphere

The emergence of the 'online' public sphere has gained considerable scholarly attention in recent years because it has been conceived of as a supplement or even an alternative to the pre-existing 'old' public sphere (Rauchfleisch and Kovic, 2016), which is largely considered a fundamental component of modern democracies.

Although public sphere theory has advanced various perspectives, a majority of studies have theorised the online public sphere along the lines of 'deliberative theory', that is, something similar to the ancient Greek Agora, the New England town meeting in the colonial era, or the salon discussions in Paris, Berlin, and Vienna in previous centuries (Dahlberg, 2004; Schafer, 2015). According to this perspective, the public sphere is perceived as a 'communicative space' in which common public issues and concerns are discussed by those interested and affected individuals in a manner that aims to establish a set of ambitious normative principles.

Discussions among members should consist of clear arguments and should be supported by an appropriate logic through which they can clarify their points of view regarding the case in question. All interested individuals/parties should be allowed to freely participate in and be enabled to discuss all kinds of issues. Furthermore, there should be mutual respect between the members of the debate, and they should also be honest and open, and make a sincere effort to reach a common conclusion (Papacharissi, 2002, 2010).

However, Jurgen Habermas and other thinkers argue that these aforementioned criteria of the 'old' public sphere are not fully achieved in contemporary societies, primarily due to a 'structural transformation of the public sphere' (Habermas, 1992), during which the traditional media has emerged as a large but insufficient forum for

public debates. Habermas's main point of criticism revolves around the concern that the policy underlying mass media, especially the commercial ones, is not based on the principle of advancing deliberation. This is because the ways in which mass media tends to approach selecting and presenting social issues are highly influenced by two factors: political preferences and economic pressures (Habermas, 1992). Consequently, traditional media is considered as a means that potentially contributes to enabling the authority in imposing its power and dominance in a way that serves its political and strategic interests. This, in turn, would help empower institutionalised and powerful actors while excluding powerless ones such as small civil organisations, non-institutionalised parties, and marginalised groups – effectively undermining democracy and the public sphere.

Indeed, Habermas's critique of the role of the traditional media in the public sphere has resonated strongly among scholars since then and has even garnered considerable importance and debate after the revolution of the digital media and the arguably effective role that these new platforms could play in facilitating individual participation in the online public sphere (Rauchfleisch and Kovic, 2016).

Having discussed the limited role of the mass media in the public sphere as perceived by Habermas and other authors, in the next section, I will move on to discuss the heated debate among scholars over the role of social media in facilitating political participation and reviving the public sphere. I consider this section important to my thesis as it will partly pave the way to examine the extent to which social media has facilitated dialogue, information exchange, and democratic debate in the online public sphere in Saudi Arabia.

2.9.2 The Potential Advantages/Disadvantages of Online Public Sphere

Many scholars have regarded the emergence of the online social media network as a 'second structural transformation of the public sphere'. Moreover, with the unprecedented wealth of information online, and with growing online audiences, researchers argue that social media may have a huge potential to fundamentally facilitate political participation and change the societal manner of engagement with public issues, which, in turn, would result in reviving the public sphere. By taking a close look at the literature, scholarly works that have dealt with the development of the online public sphere in particular, one can come across different academic accounts that have, in varied theoretical approaches, examined the contradictory promises of the online public sphere (e.g. Dahlberg, 2001; Papacharissi, 2002; Paulussen, 2004; Cammaerts, 2005; Poor, 2005; Al-Saggaf, 2006; Morozov, 2011; Hänska and Bauchowitz, 2019). These accounts can be broadly divided into two main viewpoints: optimistic and pessimistic accounts.

On one hand, cyber-optimists have emphasised upon the potential advantages that the online public sphere may bring to societies. Three interrelated aspects have been mentioned in this regard:

First, different accounts have pointed to relatively easier, more open, and more accessible means of obtaining data facilitated by social media (Brundidge and Rice, 2009; Farrell, 2012). Consequently, the activities, ambitions, positions, and attitudes of various stakeholders (e.g., civil society organisations, political institutions, large corporations, NGOs, universities, places of worship) can now be studied online with greater ease, with an unprecedented flow of information and massive amount of

content available and accessible to users. This rich source of information, which participants may not otherwise encounter in their everyday lives, and which can be presented to them in extraordinarily distinctive, interactive, and possibly more accessible ways, has also been argued to generate more reflective viewpoints between and among users as well as more rational debates and better public discussions.

Dahlgren (2005, p.152) emphasised that “It is here where the Internet most obviously makes a contribution to the public sphere. There are literally thousands of Web sites having to do with the political realm at the local, national, and global levels; some are partisan, most are not. We can find discussion groups, chat rooms, alternative journalism, civic organizations, NGOs, grass roots issue-advocacy sites ... and voter education sites”. Therefore, based on this, “one can see an expansion in terms of available communicative spaces for politics, as well as ideological breadth, compared to the mass media. Structurally, this pluralization not only extends but also disperses the relatively clustered public sphere of the mass media” (Dahlgren, 2005, p.152).

However, having said this, it is important to stress that although this wealth of information would be available online, which would arguably contain more alternative viewpoints on issues of common concern than mainstream mass media, this abundance and diversity of views available online would indeed not be free of some negative aspects such as deviant behaviours, unpleasant words, racism, extremism, and phenomena such as trolling. All of these raise prevalent concerns

regarding the promises of the online public sphere as well as its potential effects on participants or society on one hand and decision makers on the other.

Second, and more important to the scope of my thesis is that scholars have argued that social media enables individuals to make at least their voices heard in society. Users can easily post content, share opinions, and vent frustrations with less gatekeeping and more facilitated discussion (Shirky, 2011; Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). Furthermore, social media facilitates horizontal communication, which is less dependent on large-scale hierarchy and is also more difficult for authoritarian governments to control. All of this may lead to the 'empowerment' of those who have always sought to participate in public debate but were previously excluded and marginalised by, for example, traditional media or those in power (Thorsen and Sreedharan, 2019). This includes individuals vis-à-vis institutions, activists vis-à-vis authoritarian governments, or certain powerless groups vis-à-vis large powerful organisations.

As Saudi Arabia is traditionally a 'patriarchal society' and therefore as 'women voices' are extremely alienated in the public sphere, I am interested in investigating whether or not the emergence of the online public sphere has begun to change the previous status of Saudi women in the public sphere for the better. To what extent have social media platforms contributed towards giving them a space to draw attention to their social issues?

Third, scholars argue that social media may play an active role in contributing to the production of new types of communication. For instance, some collaborative social networking sites (e.g. Wikis) have been considered as facilitators of the networked,

decentralised production of content and communication (Benkler, 2006). Therefore, since this production targets non-market goods through the use of non-market means, it has been viewed as a highly practical way to bypass the 'commercial logic' that indeed influences the majority of traditional media communication.

However, these enthusiastic views are confronted by many other pessimistic ones regarding the potential promises that the online public sphere may offer to people. The latter have pointed out several aspects concerning the emergence of the online sphere:

First, there are those who question the 'degree' of individuals' participation in the online public sphere, where the problem of multiple digital divides is identified as a critical issue. This includes differences between people in terms of age, social class, race, education, and gender as well as differences between world regions in terms of accessing the Internet and taking advantage of its possibilities (Warf and Vincent, 2007; Van Deursen and Van Dijk, 2014). Therefore, proponents of these claims argue that not everyone has the equal opportunity to participate in the online public sphere, so the possibility of excluding certain classes, groups, or regions may be very high in the online public sphere.

Second, cyber-critics also have argued regarding the 'diversity of debates' among participants in the online public sphere (Gerhards and Schafer, 2010). They asserted that even with regard to those who have the opportunity to participate, there is a concern about the high possibility of fragmentation into different communities of like-minded individuals.

This indeed has a technological aspect. The current sophisticated web-engine algorithms play a critical role in providing users with information that is considered most suitable for them based on additional data derived, for example, from their locations, past research behaviours, and search history. This consequently results in the fact that other information is hidden, leading to what is called 'filter bubbles', which users may not be familiar with (Pariser, 2011). The contemporary rise of social networking sites has given this aspect an inherently social element too. Users of these sites can now decide for themselves whom they want to follow as well as the content they prefer to receive. According to Sunstein (2001; 2009), this phenomenon has been hypothesised to create an 'echo chamber effect' in which "agreements becomes impossible, issues become 'flamed' and decision-making become subjected to the greater polarization of opinion: A political process in which like-minded people talk primarily to one another poses a great danger for the future of a democracy" (Iosifidis and Wheeler, 2015, p.8).

Consequently, there is a high potentiality that individuals will not be exposed to different perspectives and positions, which makes them less motivated to express their views and participate in public dialogue. This, according to Papacharissi (2002, p.17), would give a "false sense of empowerment" to online participants, which would, in turn, misrepresent the real impact of their opinions on decision makers.

Third, among the criticism of the online public sphere is the increasing concern regarding the kind of 'topics' that would be raised and discussed in the online public sphere (Fuchs, 2014). Pessimists are particularly wary about the growing economic influences in this regard. They argue that economic interests lead to the

commodification of digital communication, which will, in turn, result in their depoliticisation and consumerisation. This is a critique that also resonates well with Habermas's argument regarding the economic influence on online media.

Finally, and perhaps, most critical to the findings of my present study (see Chapter Five) is that cyber-critics have emphasised that the conditions of debates among participants in the online public sphere may lead to certain types of undesirable communication (Zhuo, 2010). They claim that in offline face-to-face meetings, conditions such as a clear sense of participants' identities, social obligations, individual commitments, and appropriate behaviour exist, which are relatively absent on the online public sphere, and that therefore engaging in such a rational debate is unlikely to occur.

These perspectives of both the cyber-optimists and cyber-pessimists represent two extremes of a continuum with numerous viewpoints in between. The debate between the two sides of scholars is still ongoing and each of them attempt to refute the arguments of the other. However, it should be noted that because many of the scholarly assumptions are actually empirical, a number of current studies have contributed significantly to resolving or mitigating several disputes between the two sides (optimists and pessimists) regarding the promises of the online public sphere (See e.g. Poor, 2005; Al-Saggaf, 2006; Althiabi, 2017). This ultimately leads us to Papacharissi's (2002, p.21) argument which is that "it is the balance between utopian and dystopian visions that unveils the true nature of the internet as a public sphere".

2.10 Conclusion

This chapter has critically reviewed the broad theme of this research, which is the political implications of social media within an authoritarian context. Based on this central theme as well as the aim and objectives of this research, I have identified seven related sub-themes (see Section 2.1). It is crucial to emphasise that the existing scholarly literature provides insight and context for the arguably efficacious role of social media in political participation and activism.

However, I could not agree more with what Warf and Vincent (2007), Samin (2012), and Fuchs (2012) have identified as key contextual factors influencing individuals when they want to participate in social and political issues. They have asserted that factors such as politics, culture, and religion have considerable impact on individuals' everyday activities. Thus, in studying the political implications of social media, one should seriously take into account these factors in each step of the study process and result analysis. Based on their assertion, the role of social media should therefore be examined in terms of the underlying contextual dynamics of a given society and not as an independent driver of change. I believe that this is becoming increasingly important when it comes to a case such as that of the Saudi Arabian society; a society that cannot even be compared to other Arab societies due to several existing restrictions and cultural norms (see Chapter Three for more details).

This chapter has also reflected upon critical concepts and arguments surrounding the political implications of social media, which will hopefully enable me to better address my research aim and objectives. Some of the arguments are worth briefly responding to here, as I believe that this will partly demonstrate how the situation in Saudi Arabia is distinctive.

An example of these arguments is the following:

- Scholars (e.g. Gladwell, 2010) claim that social media participants do not put themselves at risk and that social media participation is all about tasks that require low-risk activism.

I believe that this may be the case in countries that are more democratic and civil, but it is definitely not the case in Saudi Arabia. There are countless individuals (especially those figures with high number of followers) who have been detained solely for participating in online activism (e.g. the previous women to drive campaign or the still ongoing anti-male guardianship campaign) or expressing controversial views that are contrary to the political and religious orientations of the government. Therefore, I disagree with the broad argument that social media participation does not involve a level of risk.

- Another critical argument is that social media platforms cannot be characterised as a source of information. For instance, Fuchs argues that “in 2009, only 7% of the top Twitter trend topics were political topics and 38% were entertainment-oriented topics. In 2010, only 3% were about politics, 28% about entertainment and 40% about hashtags (#)” (2014, p.190).

Although I partially agree with the first part of the argument that social media is not a source of information (though this is what has made these platforms such novel and multi-purpose tools), I believe that Fuchs’ argument does not apply to Saudi Arabia. For example, a relatively recent study by Noman et al. (2015) found that religion, football, and politics are the topics that people are most interested in, which draw the most debates and attention in the Saudi Arabian Twittersphere.

Additionally, it is crucial here to bear in mind that it is becoming quite difficult to differentiate between politics and entertainment, particularly with the increasing use of satire, especially in authoritarian countries, to bypass cultural and political restrictions.

For example, a recent study by Althiabi (2017) suggests that entertainment should not be perceived as discouragement to the more serious matters in public communication. For instance, his study found that the use of satire has become one of the prominent means for Saudi people to approach sensitive political subjects and social taboos. Althiabi concludes that “satire functions as a very important stepping-stone in creating a public sphere in Saudi Arabia. It has enabled conversations to emerge and topics previously deemed taboo to be discussed” (2017, p.142).

It seems that the political, cultural, and religious contexts are dynamic factors in several aspects of social media participation and activism in undemocratic countries. Therefore, the next chapter will shed light on Saudi Arabia in terms of its political, social, and religious context, social media usage, its online communities, and the impacts of the rapid growth in social media usage. A political/social perspective will consequently be examined.

3 Chapter Three: The Context: Saudi Arabia – The Political, Social, Religious, and Media Environment

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will introduce the research context – Saudi Arabia – from the aspect of the political, cultural, and media environment of political participation. The primary purpose of this chapter is to define and explain the two most significant contextual factors affecting the political and cultural lives of Saudi Arabia: the oppressive and authoritarian nature of the political system and the tremendous significance and power of the Islamic religion over all aspects of life. The absolute monarchy system of Saudi and its influential institutions, especially the religious ones, the legal system, and traditional media outlets are the main and historical forces in the hands of the Saudi authorities used to control any political and social activities. This chapter will therefore reflect upon these forces in detail.

After establishing the role that political and socio-religious institutions have played in shaping the identity of Saudi Arabia as well as the opportunities and limitations faced by Saudis within the context of political participation, I will discuss Vision 2030, one of the largest and most important transformation projects in the modern history of the Kingdom which sets the country's long-term economic, social, and political goals and expectations. This project is highly relevant to the interest of the present study, as the goals that the project seeks to achieve are now among the interests of the young people who constitute the most dominant age group in Saudi Arabia.

Finally, the chapter will discuss the Saudi media environment, from the emergence of the press to the new media forces i.e. the Internet and social networking sites. This will be followed by an overview of the media law and regulation in Saudi Arabia.

3.2 Saudi Arabia: A Country Profile

3.2.1 Geography

Saudi Arabia is located at the centre of the Middle East region. It occupies a total area of 2,149,690 km², making it one of the largest countries in the Arabian Peninsula and also among the Gulf states (Wynbrandt, 2010). The Kingdom enjoys a central and strategic location between Asia, Africa, and Europe, with access to the Arabian Sea, the Arabian Gulf, and the Red Sea. Saudi Arabia is surrounded by multiple provinces – the Arabian Gulf, the States of Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman to the east, the Red Sea to the west, Kuwait, Jordan, and Iraq to the north, and the Republic of Yemen to the south (Al-Farsy, 2009). The major cities in the country are Riyadh (the capital), Jeddah (the commercial capital), and Dammam (the eastern province).

Moreover, Saudi Arabia derives its status from its religious significance to all Muslims around the world as the land where Islam began and where Islam's most holy cities – Mecca, where Kaaba and the Grand Mosque are located, and Medina, where the graves of prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and the first two Caliphs of Islam, Abu Bakr and Umar (may Allah be pleased with them) are located – have their home (Long, 2010; Wynbrandt, 2010).

Therefore, its geographical and economic status as the world's largest oil exporter as well as its religious significance for Muslims has given it an enduring status and made it one of the most influential countries in the world.



Picture 3:1 Saudi Arabia Map.

3.2.2 History

In the history of the Arabian Peninsula, the Al-Saud family ruled for three non-consecutive periods – the first Saudi state (1744–1818), the second Saudi state (1824–1891), and the third Saudi state (1932–present). However, only the third state, or what is sometimes referred to as the ‘modern Saudi state’, is in the interest of the present study with regard to the forthcoming review of the political, social, and religious aspects of Saudi Arabia (Al-Farsy, 2009).

The modern Saudi state emerged in 1932 with the unification of the Najd and Hejaz provinces by King Abdulaziz Al-Saud (Vassiliev, 2000). Before the unification, Saudi Arabia existed as a group of self-directed tribes and large families settled in several regions across the Arabian Peninsula. Therefore, prior to 1932, there was no sense

of a state or Saudi identity, and though Islam was a common link between these tribes and families, there were many conflicts and wars between them (Long, 2010).

According to Vassiliev (2000), before the formation of Saudi Arabia, the Arabian Peninsula was in a state of socio-economic instability and political chaos. However, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which derives its name from the ruling family (Al-Saud), came into existence when King Abdul Aziz Al-Saud (the founder of the modern Saudi state) united the country and was able to maintain order in the land by the end of 1932 (Al-Farsy, 2009).

Because there were many tribes with different traditions, customs, and backgrounds, the first task undertaken by King Abdul Aziz Al-Saud was to unite these tribes, each with its own unique customs and traditions, to form a unified state and a common identity. Since Islam was the only common factor among these tribes, King Abdul Aziz adopted it as a fundamental policy in uniting these competing tribes into one cohesive state and identity. Therefore, Islam was a critical factor through which King Abdul Aziz, with the help of the Islamic scholar Muhammed bin Abdul Wahab, was able to hold together a range of tribes and cities through one identity, i.e. the Saudi identity (Al-Farsy, 2009; Long, 2010).

This of course does not mean that the Saudi identity has overshadowed the Islamic identity, but Islam served as the primary factor used by King Abdul Aziz in the unification of the country and the formation of the modern Saudi Kingdom (Vassiliev, 2000). This Islamic identity has been and continues to be the most prominent common factor among individuals in Saudi Arabia as well as the backbone of both

the society and the state (I will reflect upon the role of Islam in everyday life and culture of the Saudis later in this chapter).

Unlike most other Arab countries, the modern Saudi Arabia emerged independent of Western control. This autonomy was achieved largely as a result of the mobilisation of a well-organised military by King Abdul Aziz and Muhammed bin Abdul Wahab, the Islamic scholar affiliated with him. Furthermore, King Abdul Aziz was able to gather a diverse and committed political coalition capable of maintaining a delicate political balance between the Islamic religion (Wahhabi form) and modernisation (Al-Farsy, 2009).

Although Saudi Arabia faced severe economic constriction due to the global depression eight years after it became an official state in 1932, King Abdul Aziz was able to establish a strong economic and political foundation, particularly through the discovery of something that proved to be one of the most critical sources of economy in Saudi Arabia's history – enormous and easy-to-access deposits of oil. There is no doubt that the discovery of this natural resource has contributed significantly to the establishment of Saudi Arabia's strong economic base as well as socio-political stability (Library of Congress, 2006).

King Abdul Aziz ruled the country from 1932 until his death in 1953, and during this period, he established the foundations of the modern Saudi state. Saudi Arabia witnessed some important achievements during the reign of King Abdul Aziz, which facilitated the succession of his sons in the government (Al-Farsy, 2009).

The following is a table showing the succession of King Abdul Aziz's sons to power after his death and their most important achievements, beginning with King Saud,

who was the first son to succeed his father in power, up until King Salman, the current ruler of the country, and the Deputy Crown Prince Muhammed bin Salman (his son).

King's Name	Period of Reign	Achievements
Saud	1953 – 1964	The reign of King Saud did not enjoy an economic renaissance. During his rule, the country suffered an administrative and financial crisis that caused public discontent, which led to his dismissal from office by the ruling family and the appointment of his half-brother Faisal (Al-Rasheed, 2010).
Faisal	1964 – 1957	Although the Middle East witnessed increasing diplomatic complexity both within the Arab world and outside (especially during the 1973 Arab-Israeli conflict) during the reign of King Faisal, King Faisal took substantive financial and administrative measures that contributed significantly to the stability of the economic and political situation in the Kingdom. Additionally, he increased opportunities for education (he ordered the opening of schools for women's education in the Kingdom, despite strong opposition from the conservatives of that period), guaranteed free health insurance and education to Saudi citizens, introduced Western technology, and pursued more modernisation (Vassiliev, 2000). In 1975, King Faisal fell victim to an assassination plot carried out by one of his nephews.
Khalid	1979 – 1982	The reign of King Khalid was characterised by socio-economic prosperity. He continued the developmental policy adopted by his brother Faisal by reinforcing more social, economic, and political stability (Vassiliev, 2000).
Fahd	1982 – 2005	King Fahd was a pioneer in a number of areas; he introduced a regional administration, a consultant council, and spearheaded the expansion of the two holy mosques to accommodate more than one million people each (Al-Farsy, 2009). Moreover, he initiated a massive program of internal development to bring health, housing, communications, and education to all citizens.
Abdullah	2005 – 2015	King Abdullah is remembered for his many unprecedented social and economic achievements. For instance, during his reign, women were (to some extent) politically and socially empowered. He, for the first time in Saudi history, allowed women to become members of the Shura Council as well as to vote and contest municipal elections. Furthermore, he also supported the establishment of more than 17 universities in different cities in the Kingdom, the launch of the King Abdullah Foreign Scholarship Program, and the launch of smart and economic cities (Al-Rasheed, 2010).
Salman	2015 – Present	King Salman's reign has witnessed many rapid and unprecedented social changes at the political and economic level. Politically, he amended the historical succession system that states that the oldest descendants of King Abdul Aziz must sit on the throne after him by appointing his young son Muhammed as a Crown Prince in 2017 (The BBC, 2017). Many attributed this decision to the generational shift currently taking place in the Kingdom, wherein the majority of the population is under 35 years old. Additionally, women have obtained some of their basic rights such as the lifting of the ban on driving and access to some governmental services without a guardian's approval (Guidoni, 2018). Economically, the announcement of the Saudi 2030 Vision – an ambitious project supervised by the Crown Prince Muhammed aiming to reduce Saudi Arabia's heavy dependence on oil by diversifying its economy and developing public service sectors (Anon, 2017) – is of significance. I will discuss this plan in more detail in a separate section later in this chapter.

3.2.3 Demography

In 2019, the population of Saudi Arabia stands at 33,413,660 according to the Central Department of Statistics and Information in Saudi Arabia (CDSI). This translates to a yearly growth rate of 1.75% from 2018 (World Population Review, 2019⁴). This population is represented by 57.40% males and 42.60% females.

While Saudi nationals constitute 20768627 people, non-Saudis make up the remaining third, which is equivalent to 12645033 people (CDSI). The number of Saudi citizens under the age of 35 years represents about 68% of the total Saudi population (This is an important reason for which I selected this age group as a sample of my present study; See Chapter Four for more details).

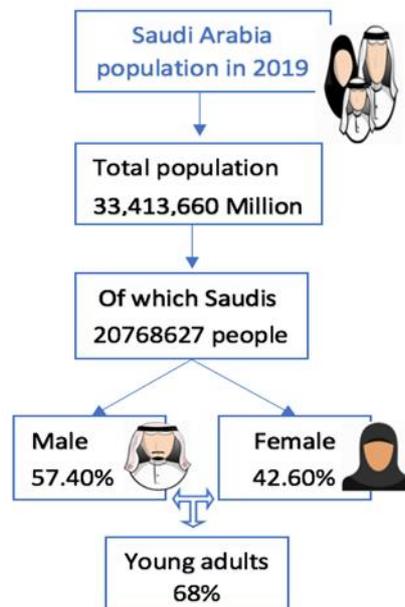


Figure 3:1 Saudi Arabia Population in 2019.

⁴ <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/saudi-arabia-population/>

Moreover, there is a significant decline in the population belonging to the age groups 50+, indicating a generational shift in Saudi demographics, a fact reinforced by the figures pertaining to the age group 0–9 (over 4 million), which now represents the majority of the population. According to Worldometers⁵, the median age in 2019 in Saudi Arabia is 30.2 years.

Therefore, it can be said that one of the key drivers that has led to the very high consumption of social media platforms in Saudi Arabia is the fact that a high proportion of the Saudi population is under the age of 35 years. Such age groups, I believe, fall within what Prensky (2001) referred to as ‘digital natives’ in that they have grown up solely knowing the Internet and, thus, social media is second nature to them. I will undertake further discussions about the media landscape in Saudi Arabia later in this chapter.

3.3 Complex Authoritarianism: The Political and Socio-religious Background

This section will discuss the Saudi Arabian political system and the role that Islam has played in Saudi culture. This is crucial to my overall thesis, as developing an insightful understanding of the politics, culture, and religion of Saudi Arabia is critical in examining the socio-political implications of social media participation and activism, especially as these factors are never abandoned at the login screen when people access their social media (See Chapter Five).

3.3.1 The Political System: Institutions, Strategies of Control, and Decision-Making

⁵ <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/saudi-arabia-population/>

The system of government in Saudi Arabia is considered as an absolute monarchy with Islam being its fundamental religion (Al-Farsy, 2009). The basic rule of the Kingdom is that the country must be led and governed by sons and grandsons of King Abdul Aziz (the founder). Perhaps this is one of the primary reasons for slow reforms and the creation of a closed political and cultural society (Aarts and Meijer, 2012).

The King of Saudi Arabia is both head of the state and government and has complete control over decision-making. He has full power to appoint/dismiss state ministers, provincial governors, ambassadors, and senior government officers (Montagu, 2015). He is also the commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces and the Court of Final Appeal, and he also holds the power of amnesty. (Mellahi and Wood, 2001). All other important political positions are occupied by the members of the Royal Family. Thus, challenging the authorities' political power and commitments will be met with no tolerance whatsoever.

The modern Kingdom, since its founding in 1932 to date, has had no written constitution. However, the Islamic Sharia Law, which is primary derived from the Holy Book of Quran, and Sunnah serve as the only constitution upon which the system of Saudi government as well as the administration of political and social affairs is based (Long, 2010).

Although King Fahd introduced a bylaw in 1992 called 'The Basic System of Governance', which basically defines the political, social, and economic aspects of the relationship between the state and its citizens (Al-Fahad, 2005), this system has faced some criticism from those who belong to the Wahhabi Islamic school due to concerns regarding the legitimacy of man-made constitutions. Therefore, to avoid giving

Wahabi scholars the power to question the legitimacy of the Royal Family in ruling an Islamic State and to enhance its stability, the Saudi authorities always tend to officially declare with every decision they make that the Quran and Sunnah are the only constitution of the Kingdom and the basis on which any decision is made.

Independent political parties and civic organisations are not allowed to be formed in Saudi Arabia (Montagu, 2015). However, the only kind of consultative body that can be seen as a relative representation of the parliaments existing in democratic countries is Majlis Al-Shura (The Consultative Council of Saudi Arabia). Majlis Al-Shura is a governmental advisory body responsible for providing the King with new proposals for laws, suggestions, and public concerns. It has no power to implement or enforce laws. Historically, the Al-Shura Council has undergone several reforms in terms of its structure and rules from its early establishment by the founder of the Kingdom in 1932 until the present.

For example, in 1992, King Fahd (the fifth King of the Kingdom) introduced a series of reforms to develop the framework and function of the Council (Al-Fahad, 2005). Increasing the number of the Council's members from 90 to 120 and giving the Council the right to propose a new system or to suggest an amendment to an existing one were part of these reforms. However, an unprecedented change in Council history came in 2013 when King Abdullah issued two royal decrees – first, to increase the number of Council seats to 150, and, second, to allow women, for the first time, to comprise 20% of these seats, which incidentally caused widespread controversy among conservatives (The BBC News, 2013). Therefore, the Council currently consists of 150 members selected by the King for a renewable four-year term.

That being said, despite the fact that the members of the Al-Shura Council are responsible for discussing and evaluating the performance of governmental agencies and then making a recommendation to the King based on their assessments as well as the general concerns raised by public, their interest and credibility in properly communicating citizens' needs and voices to the King have always been of public concern (Aarts and Meijer, 2012). People's concerns basically revolve around the fact that the members of the Al-Shura Council are directly appointed by the King and that the positions come with high financial incentives and huge social status. Therefore, they argue that many avoid highlighting issues that the government considers sensitive for fear of losing their seats.

Indeed, the actual effect and role of the Al-Shura Council have recently come under increasing fire on social media as many people are demanding that the Council members be elected by the public to better represent the country in all its regions and social classes (Fanack, 2017). Therefore, as the discussions in Chapter Five will show, the interviewees of this study argued that social media, Twitter in particular, functions as a parliament in Saudi Arabia as a variety of public issues that the Al-Shura Council has failed to credibly address or even bring to the table are raised and discussed on this platform. They also argue that the influence of the Al-Shura Council over the decision makers is very limited and does not match the aspirations of young adults in Saudi Arabia due to the way the Council's members are appointed. Interestingly, the issue referred to by the participants in this study is consistent with

the argument put forward by Madawi Al-Rasheed⁶. She claims that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is governed by individuals rather than institutions since all critical decisions are made by a few influential individuals within the Royal Family (Al-Rasheed, 2008).

However, it is important to emphasise that the Saudi government is not immune to the internal and external pressures that undoubtedly influence its political and social decisions. Internally, the Wahabi ulama enjoy significant social and political influence due to their religious knowledge and large number of followers (Kechichian, 1986; Obaid, 1999). The ulama also dominate many high positions in most non-political institutions (Bligh, 1985). Therefore, although they do not have direct influence on political authority, their influence is largely exercised indirectly through public opinion (Niblock, 2006), and this public opinion is extensively influenced by religion due to the conservative nature of the Saudi society (I will further discuss the role that Islam plays in Saudi culture in the next section).

The ulama in Saudi Arabia have a very high social status and are highly respected by the public, a fact that has led the Saudi authority to affiliate with them and exploit their social significance to implement some sensitive and potentially controversial political and social decisions (Niblock, 2006). The recent royal decree allowing women to drive is an explicit example of how the government has relied on religious support to avoid any possible social controversy (The Economist, 2017). The Saudi authority emphasised that the ban on women driving was lifted after the decision was

⁶ A Saudi Arabian professor of social anthropology at the Middle East Centre at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

approved by senior religious scholars belonging to the Council of Senior Ulama (the Kingdom's highest religious body).

Another relatively recent example that shows the critical role of the ulama in influencing the Saudi public was when the Council of Senior Ulama issued an edict during the 2011 Arab Spring upheaval prohibiting demonstrations and attempts to overthrow the government (Schanzer, 2012). The edict also coincided with numerous famous religious scholars urging people on television and through their personal Twitter accounts to not attempt street demonstrations as such acts are opposed to Islam. However, although it is difficult to confirm whether the ulama prevented a revolution in Saudi Arabia, it can be said that they played a vital role in assisting the Saudi government prevent revolution by pacifying the public.

Externally, human rights organisations and some Western governments, the US especially, constitute an external front that indeed has political influence on some of the government's decisions. This was particularly evident after the 9/11 attack when the US authorities and media accused the curriculum of the Saudi Ministry of Education of inciting hatred and violence (Al-Nafjan, 2012). Such increasing pressures have prompted the Saudi government to replace the senior leadership with non-Islamist figures. The current education minister is considered liberal by Islamists.

3.3.2 Identity and Everyday Culture: The Role of Islam in Saudi Arabia

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has embraced the Islamic vision from the Salafist tradition, which corresponds to the period of Prophet Muhammed (Peace be upon him). The primary function of the Islamic religion in Saudi Arabia, through the Quran and Hadith, is to organise all the moral and physical needs of humanity (Rice and Al-

Mossawi, 2002). Saudi Arabia can therefore be defined as a representative of religious fundamentalism due to the religious law enforcement in economic, social, and political matters (Hickson and Pugh, 1995).

The specific Islamic ideology espoused by Saudi Arabia is often referred to as Wahhabism. It is a rigid form of Salafism that is derived from the name of the Muslim scholar Muhammed bin Abdul Wahab. According to Aarts and Meijer, Wahhabism emphasises “the unity of God (tawhid), not just in the sense of believing in one God but also that he alone should be the focus of worship and rituals and is totally unique in every way” (2012, p.4). Wahhabism attempts to emulate Islam’s first three generations as a guide to the behaviour of Muslims. Muhammed bin Abdul Wahab called on Saudi Arabia’s Muslims to return to the pure practices and traditions that Prophet Muhammed had taught the first Muslim generations.

In the Saudi Arabian context, Wahhabis also call themselves ‘Salafis’, meaning that all their religious practices are based on Prophet Muhammed’s companions (Gause, 2011). The Saudi ulama describes Wahhabism as a system of governance regulating social, political, and moral Islamic legislation. Such a concept shows the magnitude of the cultural and regulatory power of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia (Alsaif, 2013).

Saudi Arabia is distinguished by its religious significance as it is home to some of Islam’s holiest locations (Mecca and Medina). In addition, Saudi Arabia has a wealth of natural resources, and despite many regional disputes, it enjoys high political, social, and economic stability compared to other Arab countries. Islam is the primary factor that shapes the Saudi identity as it also reflects the Saudi society’s traditions, values, and practices. For example, in public domains such as schools, workplaces,

the government, and private sectors, with the exception of markets and hospitals, Saudi society is strictly segregated by gender. Islam also plays an important role in defining privileges, responsibilities, traditions, habits, norms, and practices.

The primary reason for the Islamic influence in all aspects of Saudi Arabia's life has been the strong integration between the Saudi rulers and Islamic leaders since the establishment of the country. In Saudi Arabia, Islam is perceived as a comprehensive guide to all aspects of life and has a huge effect on people's lives. For instance, during prayer time, five times a day, all public sites and shops such as malls, restaurants, cafes, grocery stores, and petrol stations must be closed⁷. Therefore, it can be said that Islam is 'an essential component' in the identity of Saudi culture.

Moreover, the culture of Saudi Arabia is described as conservative and, thus, change-resistant. It is extremely religious, with rich values and beliefs that are often incomprehensible to outsiders, and it is a culture that is even distinct from its neighbouring Arab countries due to its many contradictions and views. Saudi Arabia's creed is based on Islam and clothing uniformity as males wear the white 'thobe' and females wear the black 'abaya'; this demonstrates unity and ensures a uniformity in appearance.

The Saudi social organisation/structure largely depends on a tribal system. Each tribe has a recognised leader who is highly respected by the individuals belonging to the

⁷ On 16 July 2019, while I was working on the final revisions of my current study, the Council of Ministers approved a measure to allow shops to remain open for 24 hours upon the payment of a fee. However, the decision is vague in terms of whether stores will be allowed to remain open during prayer time. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-07-16/saudi-ends-prayer-time-shop-closures-as-another-barrier-falls>

tribe. One of the important traditions of the tribe in Saudi Arabia is that individuals should consult their tribe whenever a decisive decision (e.g. a decision that may affect the tribe's reputation and status within the community) is going to be made and that the individuals belonging to the tribe should be loyal to the tribal leader and not deviate from what is agreed upon by the majority of the tribal members.

Such a practice is argued to create difficulties for individuals and is indeed against the values of modern democracy. This is confirmed by Maisel's (2014) anthropological study, *The New Rise of Tribalism in Saudi Arabia*. He claims that the tribal system in the developing nation of Saudi Arabia has created obstacles for modern democratic principles. Despite efforts to exclude tribal values from the nation-building process, they are still evident in various aspects of public life (Maisel, 2014). Interestingly, in this vein, one of the activists interviewed in this study has described the tribe in Saudi Arabia as 'a political entity' with great authority over its members (See Chapter Five). Therefore, along with Islam as the primary component of Saudi culture, tribal traditions also play a vital role not only in Saudi culture but also in the way individuals belonging to the tribe should behave.

Furthermore, some traditions of the tribe, for instance, various aspects of women's life are seen as very strict. It privileges men with more authority and dominance in decision-making over women. For instance, many Saudi tribes prevent women from marrying a person outside their tribe or a person from a tribe that is considered inferior.

An example of this unjustifiable sense of tribal incompatibility can be seen in the unfortunate case in 2005 when a court in the Northern part of Saudi Arabia ordered

a Fatima (mother of two) to divorce her husband despite the couple's objection to the verdict – they stated that they were happily married and that her father (who was deceased at that time) had approved the marriage beforehand (Staal, 2009). The divorce had been initiated by the wife's half-brother who had relied on his power as her male guardian after their father passed away; he claimed that his sister's husband was from a tribe of a rather low status compared to theirs and that he had also failed to disclose this when he first came to ask for her hand from their father (Karam, 2010). It is believed that there are many cases in Saudi Arabia similar to Fatima's case which have not received media attention.

Additionally, one of the main directives of the tribal system is that a woman should stay in the house, serving her husband and taking care of her children. This was a dominant practice in the past and it continues in some regions of Saudi Arabia to this day, especially rural ones.

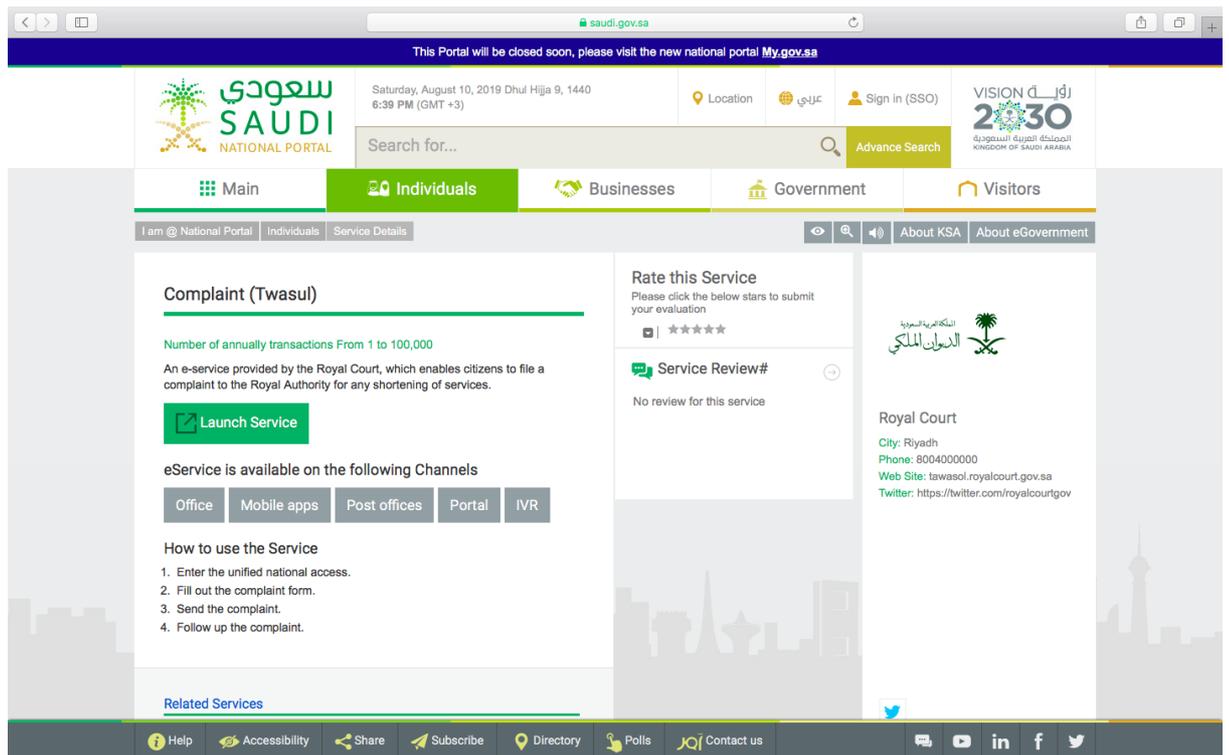
It is important to stress that tribal traditions in Saudi Arabia do not simply affect the lifestyle of Saudi society but also the way Islam is interpreted. Such interpretations have generated extensive debates that are still continuing in the Saudi online public sphere. As a consequence, individuals in Saudi Arabia are exposed to varying, often conflicting views, making it hard for some to differentiate between traditions and Islamic doctrines since Islam is interpreted according to their traditions and concerns. The previous debates over the rights of women to drive as well as the current ones over the male guardianship system (See Chapter Six) are explicit examples of how tribal traditions and the strict Wahhabi interpretations of Islam have created several challenges for women, in particular, and men in Saudi Arabia.

Having elaborated on the Saudi political system and the role of Islam and tribes in shaping the culture and identity of Saudi people, the following section will discuss the opportunities and limitations faced by the Saudi public within the context of political participation.

3.4 Political Participation: Opportunities and Limitations

In general, people in Saudi Arabia have no formal means of influencing policymakers. Political parties, human rights organisations, independent civic associations, trade unions, and political demonstrations are extremely prohibited (Montagu, 2015). However, since communication between the public and the authorities is deemed crucial for any government to address people's general needs and demands, the Saudi authority has allowed only two traditional and non-controversial forms of communication – confidential petitions (written and online) and direct contact with officials (Alnahdi, 2014).

Saudi Arabia has 13 provinces. Each province has a governor (usually a member of the Royal Family), a deputy governor, and a provincial council (Library of Congress, 2006). One of the responsibilities of the provincial governors is to address public concerns. They hold a weekly meeting where citizens have the right to attend and petition for the redress of grievances or personal favours (Doumato, 2010). However, this is not the only way that citizens can follow up to express grievances; they can also petition the King directly through the Royal Court or online via a website that was recently designed for this purpose.



Picture 3:2 A Screenshot of the Tawasul Webpage.

The site, called Tawasul (Communication) in Arabic, was launched in 2014 as per the orders of King Abdullah to provide Saudi citizens with a platform through which they can confidentially lodge complaints and suggest ideas and reforms (The BBC News, 2014). Nonetheless, such communication methods leave individuals feeling that they are still in high need for the Royal Family as their only saviours, as any action taken by the King or provincial governors is final.

Therefore, with the extensive prohibition on the establishment of political parties and independent civic institutions as well as the harsh reaction to any offline political demonstrations and meetings, petitions seem to be the only allowed and accessible form of communication in Saudi Arabia between the authorities and the members of the public including elites, reformers, and ordinary individuals.

Petitions can highlight personal, public, social, or political issues. Personal petitions usually revolve around needs such as jobs, accommodation, medical support, money, and so on (Montagu, 2015). These can be traditionally (in a written format) handed to a local governor, the King (via the Royal Court), or to influential members of the Royal Family (Long, 2010). From 2014 onward, a provision has been made for the petitions to be sent online via the website mentioned above.

As for public petitions, they are written for two purposes – social and political reform (Alnahdi, 2014). Social petitions are created to tackle local issues such as neighbourhood problems, municipal services problems, and family and tribal conflicts. Both the local governor and the Royal Court can receive these petitions. However, most of these kinds of issues are solved at the local government level. Political petitions follow the same approach as social ones, but they seek to address delicate political cases (Al-Guwaifli, 2013).

Historically, private and publicly declared political petitions are the primary method/channel of communication between Saudi elites of all categories (e.g. religious scholars, traders, intellectuals, reformers) and the Saudi authorities. For instance, political elites commonly create their petitions confidentially in small circles and then present them to prospective followers/supporters to register it (Erayja, 2016). Since political petitions are deemed sensitive in the Saudi Arabian context, the King and his deputy are often the target of such petitions. Therefore, letters are officially presented to the Royal Court and, sometimes, a private meeting with the King is requested to deliver the petition personally.

That said, many social and political reformers have claimed that petitions are not always effective (Alnahdi, 2014). Additionally, public petitions are not welcomed by the Saudi authorities and are often seen as calls for sedition and chaos. Thus, though many confidential petitions are handed to the King, there is no record of any of them since they are confidential. However, reformers argue that, recently, many public petitions have coincided with external events such as the Arab Spring in 2011 and have been advanced by the Internet and social media in particular. A few examples are some of the most prominent petitions filed – ‘Towards the State of Rights and Institutions’, ‘Hunayn Revolution’, ‘Saudi Women Revolution’, ‘Women2Drive Campaign’, and ‘February 14 Youth Coalition’ (Davies, 2011; Ottaway, 2012; Chaudhry, 2014; Montagu, 2015).

The primary demands of these petitions are social justice, an elected parliament, an independent judiciary, respect for human rights, freedom of speech, and more rights for women. What is distinctive about online public petitions is that they enable all public Internet users to see and register the petition, making them more widespread and subject to media reports.

This is indeed true at least with regard to the case examined in the present study – the anti-male guardianship campaign. The initial petition of the campaign, which was created in early 2012 by Aziza Al-Yusuf and other women activists, was signed only by 25 women. However, in 2016, when the anti-male guardianship hashtag activism evolved on Twitter, the same petition that was delivered confidentially during that time to three governmental bodies including the Royal Court was uploaded online under the hashtag. Within a few days of uploading, the petition was signed by more

than 14,000 people⁸ (Sidahmed, 2016). Additionally, the petition gained extensive national and international media attention. (See Chapter Six, Part 6.3; Setting the Stage for the Anti-Male Guardianship Campaign).

It can therefore be said that some petitions have reported success, especially those that coincided with major internal and external political events, in pushing forward reforms and changes (Al-Guwaifli, 2013). For example, after the Second Gulf War in 1992/1993, King Fahd issued three important decrees in response to demands made by Saudi elites for greater governmental accountability. These decrees are the Basic Law of Government, the Consultative Council Statute, and the Regions Statute (Ibrahim, 1992, The BBC News, 2018a). Additionally, later on, in 2005, following the Al-Qaeda's deadly Jihadist attacks on the petrochemical site in Yanbu, the Khobar oil company, and the US consulate in Jeddah in 2004, the Saudi government announced its first-ever nationwide municipal elections (Ménoret, 2005).

However, reforms following external events, the 2011 Arab Spring in particular, are considered by some Saudi people as significant compared to those prior to the Arab Spring and social media revolution. For example, in 2011, King Abdullah announced more rights for women. These include the right to be appointed to the Consultative Council, for the first time in the Saudi history, and the right to vote and contest municipal elections (The BBC News, 2018a). Additionally, in 2017, women were finally

⁸ According to Aziza Al-Yusuf, the petition has indeed been signed by more than 30000 people. However, they (Aziza and the other petitioners responsible) excluded any signatures that lacked the petitioners' personal details. For example, she stated that they excluded those who used their Twitter account names to sign the petition instead of their real names. This, according to her, led to the exclusion of more than 15000 signatures (An interview with Al-Yusuf and Al-Sada in Rotana Khalijia, 2016).

allowed to drive after the Saudi government lifted the ban on women driving. This decree came after one of the most prominent online women campaigns, #Women2Drive, which coincided with Arab Spring in 2011 and lasted until 2017 (Chulov, 2018).

These are some of the important political reforms that occurred in Saudi Arabia, most of which seem to be a kind of response to internal and external events. The following section will discuss one of the most comprehensive reforms in terms of its political, social, and economic aspects in modern Saudi history (if successful).

3.5 Saudi Vision 2030: The Most Comprehensive Reform in Saudi Arabia's History

In April 2016, Saudi Arabia announced 'Vision 2030', which encompasses cultural, political, and economic aspects of Saudi society (Manzlawiy, 2018). The Vision is considered one of the most significant national projects and is directly supervised by the Crown Prince Muhammed bin Salman. The project outlines ambitious goals that must be achieved by the relevant governmental and private departments within a specified timeline (Vision 2030 Book).

According to the Vision 2030 Book (no pagination), 'Vision 2030' has three primary themes that are quantified through subcategories: (1) "A Vibrant Society (with strong roots, fulfilling lives, and strong foundations), (2) a Thriving Economy (entailing rewarding opportunities, investing for the long-term, open for business, and leveraging its unique position), (3) an Ambitious Nation (effectively governed and responsibly enabled)".

The following are the Crown Prince Muhammed's words:

Our ambition is for the long term. It goes beyond replenishing sources of income that have weakened or preserving what we have already achieved. We are determined to build a thriving country in which all citizens can fulfill their dreams, hopes and ambitions. Therefore, we will not rest until our nation is a leader in providing opportunities for all through education and training, and high-quality services such as employment initiatives, health, housing, and entertainment. ***We commit ourselves to providing world-class government services which effectively and efficiently meet the needs of our citizens.*** Together we will continue building a better country, fulfilling our dream of prosperity and unlocking the talent, potential, ***and dedication of our young men and women.*** We will not allow our country ever to be at the mercy of a commodity price volatility or external markets (Vision 2030 Book, no pagination, emphasis added).

What makes this project unique is that, for the first time, a model concerning the strategy and policy of the country has been made public. This has prompted extensive local and global media debates about the feasibility of the project in light of the political, social, and economic challenges the Kingdom is facing both internally and externally (Alkarni, 2018; Nuruzzaman, 2018). For example, internally, a hashtag (#SaudiArabia2030Vision) was active where Saudi people enthusiastically discussed how great this plan would be if all its promises were successfully kept⁹ (Westall and McDowall, 2016).

⁹ See Alkarni's (2018) insightful PhD thesis: Twitter Response to Vision 2030: A Case Study on Current Perceptions of Normative Disorder within Saudi Social Media, for more details about the mixed Saudi public response on Twitter toward the Saudi Vision 2030.

Indeed, this plan is the first of its kind that tries to enshrine the notion of transparency, which was, in fact, completely absent from most political decisions taken by the Saudi government in the past. It also attempts to increase citizens' confidence about the rationale behind any governmental decisions that may affect their lives. For instance, to increase public confidence in the credibility of its implementation, many of the 'Vision 2030' statements focus on the methodology and tools using which the Vision's performance will be measured (Al Arabiya, 2017).

Furthermore, Crown Prince Muhammed has given several TV interviews regarding the 'Vision 2030'. In all the interviews, he provided a breakdown of the procedures and steps involved in implementing Vision 2030, which extends in several stages until 2030. He also emphasised that he is working directly with ministers and decision makers to accomplish all the tasks on time and that senior officers are now more liable to be dismissed if they fail to perform accordingly (Al Arabiya, 2017).

'Vision 2030' was announced while I was conducting my present research, and I was interested in the timing of the announcement of this historic vision, especially as it led to intensive debates on social media, Twitter in particular. However, given the fact that Prince Muhammed bin Salman is in his early thirties, I think that the emergence of this Vision is not coincidental – younger age groups are now predominant in Saudi society's demographics and, as a result, more reforms are needed. More critically, 'transparency' has become an integral feature of new media technologies because of the simple fact that social networking sites make personal views more public and do so on a larger scale.

Could the unprecedented ‘openness’ and ‘visibility’ brought about by new media technologies, coupled with increased demands for reforms, have influenced decision makers in the Saudi government and thus the advent of the ‘Vision 2030’? Although there is no way to prove this, I believe that politics and culture do not exist in a vacuum and that the rapid development we are witnessing today in communications is slowly permeating all aspects of our lives.

Vision 2030 may not explicitly mention ‘political reform’ and definitely not democracy, yet it prominently features promises of accountability and transparency, which the Saudi government had lacked in most of its previous political decisions/reforms. For example, given below are some of the promises that I have directly quoted from the third theme of the Vision – An Ambitious Nation (effectively governed):

We are updating our governance and administrative practices to international standards, ***ensuring high levels of transparency and accountability***. Our goals, plans and performance indicators are now being published so that progress and delivery can be publicly monitored. By expanding our online services, we will become a global leader in e-government ... ***Channels of communications between government agencies, citizens*** and the private sector are already expanding to ensure everyone can share their views ... We will continue in this policy direction to ***ensure each ministry functions to the highest standard*** (Vision 2030 Book, no pagination, emphasis added).

Within the scope of my thesis, I would argue that in a very closed political system such as Saudi Arabia, where there is no means for people to participate in socio-political issues, social media platforms serve as the only available means through

which people can share opinions and vent their frustrations. I therefore see the emergence of this Vision and other recent reforms such as the lifting of the ban on women driving partly as being a response to the intensive debates and demands of reforms taking place in the Saudi online public sphere. I say 'partly' because I believe that there is some external pressure on the Saudi authorities from Western countries as well as some civic and human rights organisations whose influence on the Saudi government cannot be denied.

This indeed may lead to a critical debate in the present literature, which is that even in closed social and political environments, social media platforms may pave the way for the 'public sphere/s' to emerge (See e.g. Poor, 2005; Al-Saggaf, 2006; Althiabi, 2017). However, I believe that in order to arrive at a mature conclusion, any public sphere must be examined in terms of the social and political contexts in which it is formed. Saudi Arabia, for example, is characterised as a religiously and politically restricted environment, and these are thus the factors that define people's actions and behaviours.

3.6 The Media Environment in Saudi Arabia: From Old to New Forces

The perceptions and experiences of Saudi young adults regarding the socio-political implications of social media use in Saudi Arabia are the basis of the present study. It is thus crucial to identify the place that social media occupies in the Saudi media system. This section will therefore begin with a brief discussion of the traditional media in Saudi Arabia, starting with the emergence of newspapers, then radio, television, satellite television (DHS), and the Internet, respectively. After this, I will present some important laws that media professionals such as journalists as well as

media organisations in Saudi Arabia must abide by in order to maintain their presence.

Newspapers, as indeed is the case in most nations, heralded the beginning of other media in Saudi Arabia (Alotaibi, 2016). For instance, among the first and leading newspapers established during and after the unification of modern Saudi Arabia are Umm Al-Qura in 1924, Al-Bilad in 1932, Al Madina in 1937, and Okaz in 1960. Currently, there are around sixteen privately owned newspapers and one official government newspaper in Saudi Arabia. Fourteen newspapers are printed within the Saudi territory (two of them are published in English) and two are printed in London (Erayja, 2016; Morsi, 2017).

Despite the fact that most of these newspapers are privately owned, the Saudi government has a huge influence on the appointment and dismissal of editors and journalists. Additionally, the production of the domestic mass media in Saudi Arabia is controlled by the government and all content must pass through censors before it goes on air or comes out in print (Kraidy, 2006; Freedom House, 2016).

The radio was introduced to Saudi Arabia in 1949 (Al-Garni, 2000). Radio broadcast at that time mostly consisted of religious programs that were based on Islamic teachings and Arabic history. Such programs helped ease Saudi religious scholars' fears – at that time, they believed that the radio may distract people from acts of worship and thus negatively impact Islamic values (Alotaibi, 2016) – and have absorbed objections to the new medium.

Television was introduced in the Kingdom in the early 1960s following the government recognition of the audio-visual power of the TV above the previous two

media – newspapers and radio (Kraidy, 2006; Al-Rasheed, 2008). Despite the fact that it was seen as a propagandist instrument, television also acted as a substitute for cinema, which was outlawed until 2018, as they thought that television would provide more ‘innocent entertainment’ to the population (The BBC News, 2018b).

In the early 1990s, satellite television was introduced in Saudi Arabia (Al-Garni, 2000). This marked a milestone in the development of communication technologies in the extremely conservative and religious Saudi Arabian society (Marghalani et al., 1998). At the time, the emergence of such a medium was a major challenge for the Saudi authorities as they had almost complete control over all other media platforms preceding satellite TV. Additionally, as with all previous media, religious scholars made great efforts to warn people about the dangers that this new medium would pose to Islamic values and traditions. They also exerted some pressure on the government to impose regulations on direct-to-home satellite.

It is worth emphasising here that in Saudi Arabia, the emergence of any new technology is likely to face enormous resistance from religious leaders, especially at first. This has happened with the introduction of all types of media – radio, television, satellite TV, fax, and later with mobile phones, particularly those with Bluetooth and camera features. Commenting about religious figures’ harsh reactions to the emergence of satellite TV, Almaghlooth states the following:

Its emergence [the satellite TV] in the country faced extreme hostility from religious leaders, who warned that it would ruin Saudi society and weaken the faith of Muslims. In the early 1990s, many houses which had satellite dishes on their roofs came under gunfire in an expression of anger and in an attempt to intimidate the owners

into removing them. Many others had leaflets delivered to their houses by hand, warning them that these devices were evil and dangerous to the unity of the country and its religion (2013, p.33).

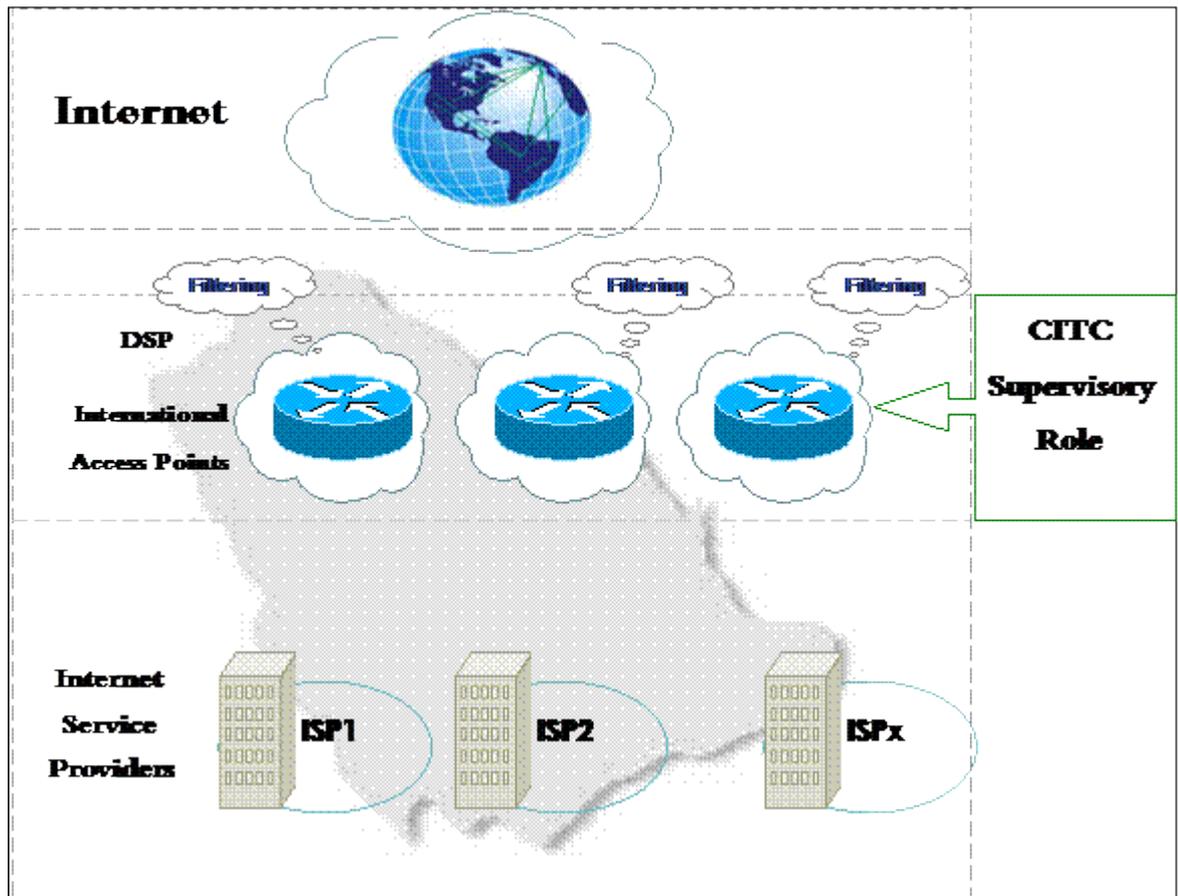
However, despite all these efforts, by 2000, dishes filled the roofs of most houses in Saudi Arabia (Morsi, 2017).

Contrary to the contention and violence that greeted the entry of the radio, television, and satellite TV in Saudi Arabia, the introduction of the Internet in 1994 elicited less concern from Islamic leaders (Alghamdy, 2011). Although the Internet was introduced to the country in 1994, it was restricted to health and educational research institutions and other government bodies. Ordinary citizens in Saudi Arabia were only allowed access to the Internet service in 1999. Since then, the number of subscribers has increased dramatically from only 2 million in 2004 (Al-Saggaf and Weckert, 2004) to more than 30 million users in 2019, representing more than 89 percent of the total population (We are Social and Hootsuite, 2019).

However, access to the Internet in Saudi Arabia is subject to strict censorship and sophisticated filtering systems developed by the CITC. Thus, the CITC has the responsibility of monitoring and developing Internet filtering measures and requirements. A regular database of websites that the CITC wants blocked is submitted to Internet service providers (ISPs) in Saudi Arabia who provide technical filtering solutions in accordance with the CITC's policies and requirements.

Previously, all global Internet traffic from all Internet users travelled through one International Access Point to the Internet, which was the King Abdul Aziz City for Science and Technology (KACST). However, with developments in Internet usage in

the Kingdom and the growing volume of information processed, a new infrastructure hierarchy was developed. According to the CITC, the current structure enables greater flexibility in the existence of more than one International Internet Access Point and also offers a more dynamic environment that contributes to increasing the standard of service and performance. The new infrastructure is illustrated below.



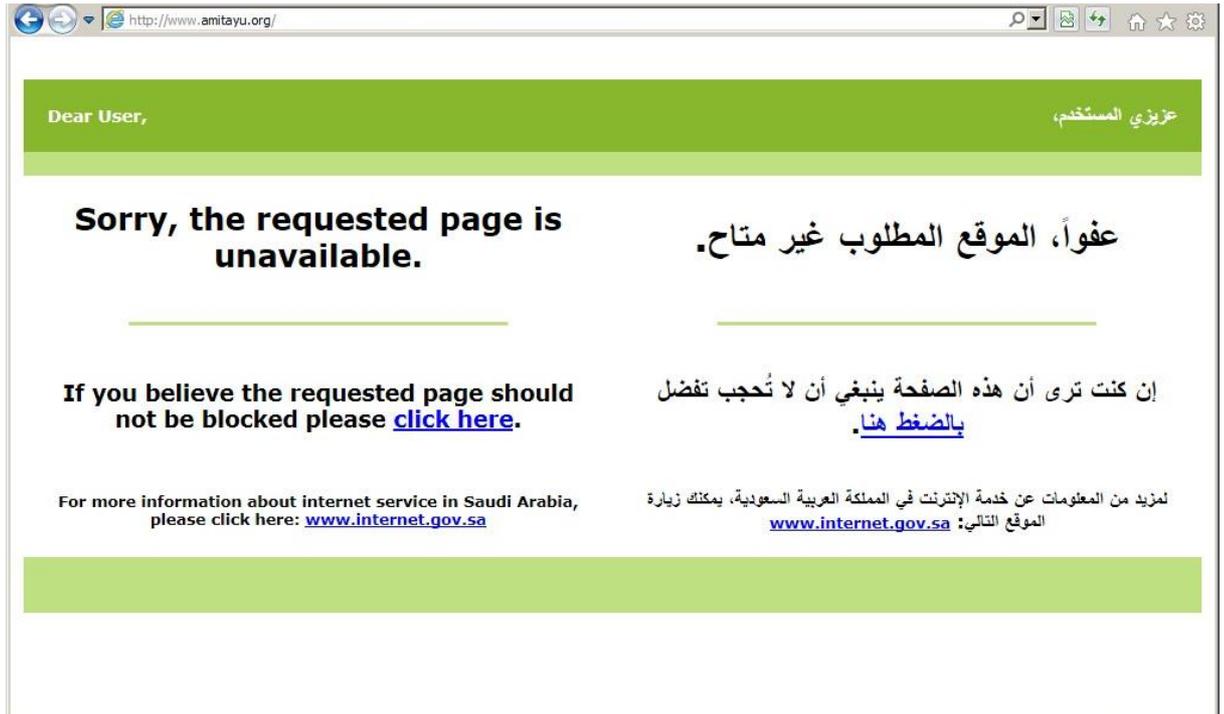
Picture 3:3 The Internet and Filtering Service Infrastructure in Saudi Arabia¹⁰.

Moreover, the Saudi government has established stringent conditions that Internet users must follow in order to not be held accountable. According to Gazzaz, some of these conditions are the following:

¹⁰ CITC, General Information on Filtering Service. Accessed on 11 July 2019.
<https://web1.internet.sa/en/general-information-on-filtering-service/>

All Internet users in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia shall refrain from publishing or accessing data containing anything contravening a fundamental principle or legislation, or infringing the sanctity of Islam or breaching public decency ... anything contrary to the state or its system; reports or news damaging to the Saudi Arabian armed forces without the approval of the competent authorities; publication of official state laws, agreements or statements before they are officially made public ... anything damaging to the dignity of heads of states or heads of accredited diplomatic missions in the Kingdom, or harms relations with those countries ... [finally], Internet users are prohibited from propagating, through the Internet, subversive ideas or the disruption of public order or disputes among citizens (2006, p.12–13).

Therefore, the Internet in Saudi Arabia is closely monitored, with access to some websites being completely denied. Furthermore, users who attempt to access a blocked website will be redirected to a page displaying the following message: 'Sorry, the requested page is unavailable' (an example of this is provided below). However, in the event that users want to access a blocked website for important reasons (e.g. education, health), they can fill in an online application form, which appears on most blocked sites, and then send it for consideration.



Picture 3:4 Redirected Page for Blocked Website.

Officially, sites that are assessed to be containing 'anti-Islamic', 'offensive', 'violent', and 'illegal' content (e.g. pornography, gambling, and drugs) are regularly blocked. Additionally, criticism of the Royal Family and senior religious imams is not tolerated. For example, in 2016, the website of the London-based Al-Araby Al-Jadeed was blocked due to the increased support shown to the Muslim Brotherhood Group, which the Saudi government had designated a terrorist organisation (Freedom House, 2018).

While the Internet is reported to be among the most filtered and censored technologies in Saudi Arabia, the introduction of social media platforms (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) as well as mobile smartphones has led to a massive diversification of online content, offering Saudi people unprecedented access to a variety of perspectives beyond state-controlled media. Ordinary citizens and human

rights activists used these instruments to increase public awareness of problems concerning political reform, poverty, gender inequality, sexual harassment, and corruption (Al-Khalifa, 2012; Al-Saggaf and Simmons, 2014; Noman et al., 2015). Consequently, social media platforms in Saudi Arabia have become a highly contested space, and growing activities in the online public sphere are of great concern to Saudi authorities.

In recognition of these threats, the Saudi government is working hard to shape and constrain increasing public discourse and criticism in the online public sphere. However, for the Saudi authorities, regulating such extremely popular social networking sites that fall beyond their jurisdiction entails one of the biggest dilemmas the government has faced since the emergence of traditional media. For example, in 2013, the minister of the CITC said that the ministry and other government agencies follow activities on Twitter but admitted that monitoring social media activities were a nightmare due to the massive number of users in Saudi Arabia (Al-Watan, 2013).

Therefore, although the Saudi government has successfully controlled traditional media platforms where there is no freedom to criticise authorities, raise issues, and express alternative views, the emergence of social networking sites has largely bridged this gap. Social media has thereby become an open and unfiltered world for Saudi citizens.

In a study analysing activities on the Saudi Twittersphere, Noman et al. concluded the following:

We tested local access to all of the Twitter account pages from within the Saudi Twittersphere map that have ***political dissident***

content as well as various accounts that have sensitive content and found no evidence that any of the pages are blocked. Given that many websites affiliated with the Twitter accounts are blocked in Saudi Arabia, ***it is likely that the censors in Saudi Arabia do not have the capability in their current filtering infrastructure to block access to specific Twitter account pages without blocking Twitter entirely*** (2015, p.4, emphasis added).

That being said, these ‘new forces’ have not stopped Saudi authorities’ efforts to limit sensitive political and social content. The government continues to limit the spread of such content by other means. For instance, if identified by the authorities, individuals participating in offensive online activities may be subject to arrest and prosecution, as such action is supported by ‘a restrictive regulatory framework’.

The new antiterrorism law introduced in November 2017 is a good illustration of this (HRW, 2017). The law outlines terrorism using a vague definition. Indeed, the definition includes a wide array of non-violent acts including those that ‘disturb the public order’, ‘undermine public security’, or ‘destabilise the state or endanger its national unity’ (Alkarama, 2017). Additionally, the new law specifies five to ten years of imprisonment for “portraying the King or Crown Prince, directly or indirectly, in a manner that brings religion or justice into disrepute; and a 15-year prison sentence for those using their social status or media influence to promote terrorism” (Freedom House, 2018, no pagination).

Nonetheless, such strict laws and aggressive government reactions towards online political activities can make individuals cautious about what they post. There is no doubt that social media has created a new force that is difficult for authoritarian governments to control because of the massive number of users as well as the fact

that such platforms fall beyond their jurisdiction. People in Saudi Arabia, the youth in particular, have increasingly taken to online participation and activism to express popular concerns and vent frustrations over the last few years.

The following section discusses the six media laws through which the Ministry of Media regulates the press, radio, and television in Saudi Arabia.

3.6.1 Media Regulations in Saudi Arabia

The Ministry of Media is responsible for all media affairs in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, it plays a key role in organising and monitoring the press, radio, and television. According to the Ministry of Media, the media market in Saudi Arabia is regulated by five media laws (Ministry of Media, 2019). These are as follows:

- **Media Policy**

It consists of thirty articles that were developed based on four perspectives – Islamic values, the principles of Arab culture, the Saudi political system, and nationalistic ideology. The primary focus of the policy is on the duties and responsibilities of the media. It states that media organisations must play a crucial role in informing society and promoting literacy, knowledge, and entertainment, all of which should build a good, Islamic-based community (Alotaibi, 2016; Alzahrani, 2016).

- **Printed Materials and Publication Law**

This law was originally issued in 1928 and has been updated five times since then, most recently in April 2011 (during the Arab Spring). The latest update to the law was formulated in forty-nine articles (Alriyadh, 2011). These new articles are seen as an attempt to adapt to the changes in communication brought about by the rapid

development of new media technologies. Therefore, given the fact that a large proportion of the Saudi population spends a lot of time online, I expect the updates to this law to become more frequent in the coming years.

The updates also seem to be an attempt to respond to the power of globalisation, which has made it more challenging for the Saudi authorities to implement governmental censorship on media and communications at the level they previously used to (Almaghlooth, 2013; Alotaibi, 2016).

Finally, Dr Khoja, the former minister of the Ministry of Media, stated that the updated 2011 law of Printed Materials and Publication aims to protect media professionals (e.g. journalists and reporters) so that they can report on some political and social issues in order to assist Saudi authorities in responding accordingly to dynamic social changes and evolution (Alzahrani, 2016). Although this does not mean that they have full freedom to report whatever they want (there are still red lines that must not be crossed), journalists and media producers in general are now able to criticise and reflect upon issues that were previously too difficult to be addressed (Althiabi, 2017). This may include, for instance, reporting on the shortage of government service institutions and criticising the performance of ministers and senior officials.

The latter was considered (prior to the 2011 Arab Spring) among red line matters. This is particularly important to the overall aim of my current research because it demonstrates the progressive relaxation of media regulations and laws to embrace the unprecedented patterns of expression that are articulated online, particularly on social media platforms.

- **Executive Regulations of Printed Materials and Publication Law**

This law has seven primary parts and ninety-nine articles. The law explains the requirements and conditions for obtaining media licenses, which are essential for all mass media activities. The law also consists of articles related to the organisation of media in terms of practices, procedures, production, and publication. This covers all regulations for printing materials and publication operations. Finally, the law offers some details regarding journalistic affairs, duties, and norms (Ministry of Media, 2019).

- **Press Establishments Law**

This is one of the media laws that controls and directly deals with newspaper institutions (Alotaibi, 2016). It consists of six parts and thirty articles, all of which were considered and agreed upon by the Bureau of Experts¹¹ in the Council of Ministers. The primary aim of the law is to protect original and derivative works (Ministry of Media, 2019).

- **Copyright Law**

This is one of the more recently established laws related to media affairs. It was introduced in 2003 and consists of seven chapters and twenty-eight articles (Ministry of Media, 2019).

- **Executive Regulations of Electronic Publishing**

¹¹ The Bureau of Experts is the legislative arm of the Council of Ministers.

<https://www.boe.gov.sa/en/About/Pages/Mission.aspx>

In 2011, the Ministry of Media announced the implementation of new regulations for web publications called the 'Executive Regulations of electronic Publishing' to organise and manage online media publications (Ministry of Media, 2019). The law is deemed important as it outlines specific regulations in response to the chaos of online news sites that have dominated the Saudi media market. For example, when issuing the new law, the Ministry of Media estimated that there were about 2000 online news sites in Saudi Arabia. However, according to Alkhatrawi (The Director of Electronic Publishing at the Ministry of Media), only 750 of them are licensed (Al-Bairas, 2015).

The new law consists of seventeen articles dealing with all kinds of electronic publishing. It declares that all electronically circulated news and commentary requires a press license from the Ministry of Media and that any unlicensed media will be subjected to fines and a ban (Ministry of Media, 2019).

The new electronic regulations do not simply control online news platforms but also regulate all other online means/applications that are related to personal and social activities such as blogs, forums, chat rooms, visual and audio sites, personal sites, electronic databases, and electronic advertising.

It can be argued that, in practice, this kind of law makes the idea of controlling online activities a nightmare for the Saudi authorities. That said, in terms of its influence on top online newspaper sites, the law has achieved some success, as the coverage of some subjects by the same newspapers prior to and after licensing is clearly different (Almaghlooth, 2013; Erayja, 2016).

According to the Human Rights Watch (HRW), some of the legislations that the Electronic Publishing Law requires all online publishing outlets to follow are the following:

To call to the religion of Islam ... not to violate the Islamic Sharia rulings, compromise the country security, its public order or serve foreign interests that clash national interests, compromise the economic ... situation in the country, or offend individuals pride and freedom” (2011, no pagination).

Consequently, in the event of publishing news or disseminating content that violates these regulations, publishers will face legal consequences and their Internet services will be blocked.

However, I believe that such regulations may have several negative implications for both the Saudi authorities and ordinary Saudi citizens. For example, these rigid regulations could increase the likelihood of public access to data from unreliable sources, especially those relating to political matters. This actually contradicts the primary goal for which this law and other media laws were implemented. Furthermore, such restrictions can explain the massive online activities found in the Saudi online public sphere. Difficult-to-regulate channels such as Twitter have encouraged ordinary users and activists in Saudi Arabia to migrate to unrestrictive and unfiltered online spaces to find sensitive information and engage in collective dialogue.

These six laws are the most prominent media legislations developed by the government to ensure its control over media productions as well as media professionals. There are also laws established by the government in accordance with

developments in the field of media and changes in the region: the aforementioned antiterrorism law is an example of the Saudi authorities' regular updating of laws to cope with the challenges of new media technologies.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter examined the research context, Saudi Arabia, from the perspective of the political, cultural, and media environment of political participation. A profile of the country (i.e. geography, history, and demography) was also presented.

The discussion in this chapter has shown that the total control of power in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is in the hands of the King and a few individuals, usually those within the Royal Family. A fact that is consistent with the argument put forward by Madawi Al-Rasheed and pointed out by some of the participants in this study as well is that Saudi Arabia is governed by individuals rather than institutions. For instance, the King in Saudi Arabia is the country's primary authority in making numerous critical and noncritical decisions ranging from selecting the next King to appointing judges or provincial governors.

Islam serves as the main source of public and official ideology in Saudi Arabia as it has enormous power and influence in the country and as the Saudi government often employs such power to approve critical decisions, control public opinions, insist on its legitimacy, and ensure social and political stability. Therefore, religious leaders are placed second in the hierarchy of powerholders in Saudi society. Moreover, tribal traditions play another critical role in the way individuals belonging to the tribe should behave and conduct their daily activities. Thus, based on, first, the discussion and arguments this chapter has presented, second, my interviews with the

participants in this research and, finally, my background as a Saudi citizen, I can say that the hierarchy of powerholders in Saudi society is as follows:

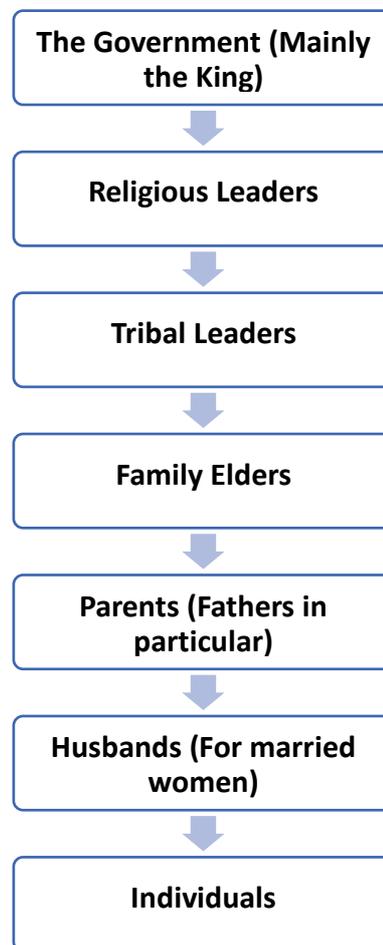


Diagram 3:1 The Hierarchy of Powerholders in Saudi Society.

As the above hierarchy shows, for the Saudi government, Islamic and tribal leaders have been a great means of social control since the establishment of modern Saudi Arabia. These authorities tend to exert the social power they possess to ensure social stability, especially at a time of crisis and instability. The Saudi government offers huge social and financial privileges to ensure that such an influential segment of society remains under their rule.

The media system is another important sector that Saudi authorities have long controlled to channel public opinions and further their political agenda. Additionally, many regulations have been developed by the Saudi government to ensure its control over media productions in order to limit any potential risks.

With the blanket ban on any type of public political organisation and independent civic association, petitions (preferably confidential) in Saudi Arabia are the only official and permitted means of communication between the Saudi government and elites, reformers, and ordinary individuals. Although the record of the petition history in Saudi Arabia shows that the Saudi authorities have reacted positively to petitions on occasion, especially during times coinciding with internal or external political instability, the ambitions of political reformers and activists seem greater than what the government of Saudi Arabia has managed to address so far.

However, with the rapid expansion of the ICT infrastructure, it appears that the Saudi authorities are struggling more than ever to control these tools that fall outside their purview. Thus, the increased use of social media platforms in Saudi Arabia for political and social purposes, along with a high percentage of young people, has been a major force confronting Saudi authorities.

Therefore, to examine the political implications of social media in an authoritarian environment such as Saudi Arabia from the young adults' perspectives, the next chapter will lay out the research design and methodology, which have been carefully selected (after a consideration of both the sensitivity of the topic for Saudi people and the complex context of the fieldwork) to reach the most credible conclusion possible regarding the socio-political role of these platforms.

4 Chapter Four: Research Design, Methodology, and Fieldwork

4.1 Introduction

This chapter establishes the framework for the current research, i.e. its aim, questions, design, methods, the fieldwork journey, and the ethical issues that were required to be addressed. This includes a consideration of the research paradigm, the sampling strategy – which refers to the selection of participants and the recruitment procedure – a justification for the adopted research method, and the methodology. Moreover, it provides an overview of the selected case study – the anti-male guardianship hashtag activism, the rationale behind my selection of this particular case, and the design and approach adopted to explore it. The chapter concludes with a description of the procedure and tools used to analyse the qualitative data of the research.

4.2 The Research Background and Questions

This research sets out to examine the political implications of social media ‘participation’ and ‘activism’ by young adults in Saudi Arabia within the online public sphere. It aims to explore the participants’ perspectives on the potentials/challenges of the online public sphere as well as how offline factors (i.e. culture, religion, politics) can influence people’s engagement with social and political issues online and their adoption of political or social stances. It also seeks, through a case study on anti-male guardianship online campaign, to explore how the utilisation of the ‘hashtag feature’ has facilitated Saudi women in fighting gendered inequalities and demanding more social and political rights.

To fully mediate between comprehending the aim and objectives of my study and the data collection process, I have prepared three research questions:

1. How do young Saudi adults experience and perceive the socio-political implications of social media within the Saudi public sphere?
2. How has the utilisation of the 'hashtag feature' facilitated Saudi women in fighting gendered inequalities and demanding more social and political rights? And to what degree has it been successful?
3. To what extent did the emergence of the online public sphere contribute to facilitating dialogue and democratised debate and revive political and social participation in Saudi Arabia? Has it enabled young Saudis to overcome the offline public sphere's restrictions?

4.3 Research Paradigm: Rationale for Qualitative Ethnographic Research

In contrast to the statistics-based quantitative approach, qualitative research was employed in this study. According to Bryman (2012), qualitative research methods allow researchers to formulate simple and flexible research questions that can be further developed at any time during the research process. Because the emphasis of this research is on the political potentials/limitations of social media within an authoritarian context as well as the experiences of young adults in online spaces, data is best gathered through a methodology that gives the participants greater flexibility in expressing themselves, so as to best explain the different aspects of the issue under focus.

While designing this study, I wanted to move beyond the standard structuring of statistics evident in quantitative studies on social media use in favour of more flexible ethnographic interviews and online observation, which would 1) give me a great opportunity to engage and work with participants in order to understand their experiences and motivations and 2) give participants the chance to talk about their opinions and experiences with some space and freedom (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Creswell and Poth, 2017).

Although results obtained from quantitative methods can be more generalisable, the qualitative method I pursued in this study is “committed to an emic, ideographic, case-based position that directs attention to the specifics of particular cases” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p.12). The present study therefore deems the participants’ experiences and reflections critical to obtain an insightful understanding of how they perceive the challenges and novelties of social media for political participation and activism.

For the sake of access to participants and data collection, I incorporated two ethnographic methods into my research: online participants’ observation and semi-structured interviews, with the latter being the primary research method for my data collection. My methodological approach to the socio-political use of social media was inspired by several studies on society and networking technologies (See, for e.g. Miller and Slater, 2000; Boyd, 2006, 2007, 2008a, b; Ringrose, 2010; Schull, 2012; Wootton, 2016). However, Boyd’s (2008b), Ringrose’s (2010), and Wootton’s (2016) methodologies were among the central ones that my present research method and

methodology were based on because of the richness of their insights into participants' experiences and thoughts.

Wootton (2016), for instance, in his study, *Seeing Each Other for the First Time: Politics and Social Media in Middle-Class Cairo*, examines the political impacts of social media use on middle-class Cairo residents during a time of upheaval surrounding the 2011 Egyptian revolution. His study was based on extended fieldwork (twelve months) in Cairo and includes in-depth interviews and observations of participants.

Since I am a Saudi citizen who shares cultural references and experiences with the research participants, there was no need to conduct such an extended ethnographic fieldwork for this research. However, it seems very reasonable in Wootton's case as he is a British national and therefore needed longer time to engage with and understand the culture and situations his research participants operated in. The primary method adopted in this study – semi-structured interviews – enabled Wootton to explore his participants' experiences and feelings about the political use of social media in a way that cannot be achieved by other methods. Therefore, given the similarity between my study's aim and that of Wootton's study, the selection of semi-structured interviews as the main research method seems reliable in order to arrive at insightful and valid findings.

Boyd's (2008b) and Ringrose's (2010) studies analysed how users' identities are constructed through online networking. While Boyd tried to examine the implications of participation in the social networking site 'Myspace' for the daily lives of the youth,

Ringrose explored young British students' engagement with the social networking site 'Bebo'.

The methodological approaches they followed were very appealing to me, especially in terms of participants' engagement and recruitment (I will reflect upon this further in the sampling and recruitment sections). Both studies moved between online and offline worlds, identifying potential participants, observing the use of language and the use of the sites' features, surfing participants' social network site profiles, and reading their comments. They also tried to identify the impacts of offline social challenges on users' online participation as well as online challenges on users' offline lives.

Referring to the value of incorporating offline and online ethnographic information, ethnographers (e.g. Hine, 2000; Miller and Slater, 2000) noted that although social networking sites made the process of identifying participants online and reaching out to them directly much more effective and efficient than traditional recruiting methods, engaging with participants face-to-face would offer depth and context to their mediated practices. Boyd (2015), for instance, in several of her projects on adult early adopters of social networking sites concluded that "social media certainly make it much easier to peek into people's lives, but it is also quite easy to misinterpret online traces" (p.82).

Boyd (2008b) and Ringrose (2010) offer important insights about the value of ethnographic study, especially when participants' experiences, practices, and reflections on a particular matter are sought. Therefore, although the focus of my present study is different from that of Boyd's and Ringrose's studies, the principles

and objectives of the research are, to some extent, similar. In the current study, I have attempted to tailor their methodological approaches to one that fits my research purpose and context.

4.4 Sampling Strategy

The notion of ‘purposeful sampling’ is critical in qualitative research. This means that the researcher should select individuals and sites for their study carefully according to how “they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (Creswell and Poth, 2017, p.158). Therefore, depending on my study’s aim, the sensitivity of the research topic, the specificities of Saudi society and culture as well as the issue of gaining access to participants, the sampling strategy followed two steps: first, the selection of study participants, and, second, the participant recruitment procedure.

4.4.1 The Selection of Participants

As stated in the study’s aim, ‘young Saudi adults’ are the age group selected for the present study. While terms such as ‘youth’, ‘childhood’, and ‘young adult’ are vague, culturally varying, and a more fluid category than a fixed age group (Boyd, 2008b), the young adult category in my study refers to those whose ages range from 20 to 35. This is consistent with some of the findings of a survey conducted in the UK and other European countries that asked people about when they thought youth ended and old age began. In the UK, for example, the average Briton believes that people stop being ‘young’ when they reach the age of 35 (Alleyne, 2010).

In addition to the fact that 68% of the Saudi population is under the age of 35 (CDSI¹², 2018) as well as the fact that I fall within this category myself, my reasons for selecting this age group are twofold:

- First, young people have been identified as early adopters and heavy users of social networking sites (Krueger, 2002; Mossberger et al., 2008). Additionally, they rely on social media for political information and participation much more than the older generations (Kohut, 2008). In Saudi Arabia, for instance, a recent report published by 'We are Social and Hootsuite'¹³ (2019) showed that the 18–34 age group was adopting social media platforms at the highest rates.
- Second, young people are often 'voracious communicators' and among 'everyday innovators' who devote considerable time and effort to using digital tools to achieve their communication goals (Green and Brady, 2013, p.461). Therefore, I believe that it makes sense to select this age group as a sample for the current study.

Based on this study's objective, the selection of participants followed two classifications: everyday social media users (ordinary people) and prominent activists. The second category was selected because although activists in Saudi Arabia are under the microscope of the Saudi authorities and are often arrested and subjected to severe punishment, they have made and continue to make great sacrifices in highlighting a number of political and social issues. Indeed, they are pioneers who

¹² Central Department of Statistics and Information in Saudi Arabia.

¹³ <https://www.slideshare.net/DataReportal/digital-2019-saudi-arabia-january-2019-v01>

initiate the actions that in many cases capture public attention regarding several political and social issues. I therefore believe that their experiences and perceptions regarding the social and political implications of social media in Saudi Arabia are worth considering and will enrich the outcomes of the present study.

The criteria was that all participants had to be residents of Saudi Arabia. This is because Saudi citizens living abroad may enjoy greater freedom and better conditions to engage with sensitive political and social issues than those living in Saudi Arabia. Thus, their uses, perceptions, and experiences of social media within the context of political participation and activism might be different from those living in Saudi Arabia, and this would risk distorting the conclusions of the study.

Targeted participants had to be active social media users who engage with social and political issues in order to be considered potential participants in the present study. Furthermore, the second participant category (the activists) had to include prominent and dynamic activists addressing political and social issues including political reform, human rights, gender inequality, employment, and freedom of speech issues.

Last, but not least, in recruiting females, I paid special attention to those who have knowledge of and interest in and actively engage with the issue of the male guardianship system in Saudi Arabia – the anti-male guardianship hashtag activism in particular. This is not simply because women's issues in Saudi Arabia constitute a large part of the socio-political matters discussed online but because, by doing so, I will be able to thoroughly examine the role of 'hashtag activism' in the anti-male guardianship campaign (further discussion about the case study will be presented later in this chapter).

These are the main conditions that a participant had to meet to be considered a potential participant in the present study.

4.4.2 The Participant Recruitment Procedure

Given the sensitivity of the topic for Saudi people and the reality of the context (a politically restrictive environment and gendered segregation) where the fieldwork was to be conducted, accessibility, trust, and credibility were very crucial factors to be considered during the process of participant recruitment. Therefore, to find potential participants and then assure them of the credibility and the aim of my research as well as to build a good rapport with them and win their trust, I adopted, after going through the literature on sampling methods (including probability and non-probability sampling), the snowball sampling method (Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2018).

The snowball sampling strategy is “a sampling technique in which the researcher samples initially a sample group of people relevant to the research questions, and these sampled participants propose other participants who have had the experience or characteristics relevant to the research” (Bryman, 2012, p.424). Such a technique is particularly applicable in situations where it is difficult to reach the target population because of, for example, the sensitivity of the research subject or a lack of access (Creswell, 2018). In my case, both the sensitivity of my study’s queries and gender segregation were the main challenges to overcome.

Therefore, the snowball sampling method was deemed appropriate for my study as it enabled me to overcome the difficulties mentioned above. After reaching a small number of potential participants who met my research’s eligibility criteria, I was able

to ask them to use their networks to suggest other participants who could contribute to my study (Miller and Salkind, 2002; Creswell and Poth, 2017).

Additionally, what makes the snowball sampling method the most appropriate sampling strategy for the present study is the fact that some research groups in authoritarian countries, especially those existing in a challenging social and political order, are under constant surveillance and are subjected to threats and intimidation. This consequently promotes the phenomenon of hidden and hard-to-reach populations. A critical point to be made here is about the factors of fear and mistrust, which are common problems researchers may face during sample recruitment, particularly in politically restrictive environments.

To identify participants suitable for the research and also to meet the sampling conditions mentioned in Section 4.4.1, I used social media platforms, Twitter in particular, as an initial medium. I spent countless hours surfing the profiles of prominent social and political activists and ordinary users, observing their online activities and reading their comments.

My decision to use Twitter as a tool to identify potential participants is due to the fact that in Saudi Arabia, Twitter serves as the main platform where most, if not all, social and political issues emerge, are discussed, and are developed. Prominent campaigns, for example, salaries are not sufficient¹⁴, Women2Drive, and the anti-male

¹⁴ One of the most prominent hashtag campaigns launched in 2013 in Saudi Arabia. People were expressing outrage over their salaries, which were not sufficient enough to meet their needs. The campaign took the Twittersphere by storm, with more than 17 million tweets within two weeks of the campaign. This made the hashtag the 16th most popular Twitter trend in the world, with an average of 1.3 million tweets a day (Altuwajiri, 2013).

guardianship campaigns, all started with online activism on Twitter. Further, as of 2018, there are more than 17.29 million (52% of the total population) active Saudi users on Twitter, of which 62% are young adults (Global Media Insight, 2018).

Moreover, from the technical perspective, unlike other social networking platforms, Twitter has a relatively open policy with its data, which makes accessing user profiles, monitoring real-time activities, and tracing users easier than on other social media platforms (Ackland, 2013). Thus, there were abundant opportunities to find participants suitable for the purpose of the present study.

Another critical reason for which I approached Twitter for participant recruitment is the strict offline gender segregation in Saudi Arabia. Such a situation made research access to the opposite sex (females in my case) very challenging. Thus, given the reality of the situation, online recruitment can be considered one of the most appropriate and effective ways to identify participants and contact the opposite gender in Saudi Arabia.

After six months of observing a number of Twitter profiles, which included that of prominent activists as well as ordinary users, I identified 7 social and political activists (4 males and 3 females) and 12 ordinary users (6 males and 6 females) whom I wanted to contact to participate in my study. Admittedly, I was not very concerned about recruiting ordinary users since I have large personal and academic networks (offline and online) through which I could recruit enough participants for my research.

However, what worried me the most even when I began of my online observation was the matter of obtaining these activists' (male and female) consent to participate in my study. I had some concerns about whether they would respond to my request

or not. Since activists in Saudi Arabia face significant challenges and oppression due to their activities, they are cautious about disclosing their identities or openly engaging with people they do not trust.

After identifying the potential participants, I prepared an initial list of their names, Twitter accounts, and available contact details. I also wrote a short letter containing the following details:

- Introduction about myself;
- My reason for contacting them;
- The central purpose of my study and the procedures that will be used in data collection;
- An assurance of confidentiality;
- My personal and official contact details, which includes my official webpage address on the Jeddah University website, my social media account IDs, email ID, and phone number;
- The email ID and webpage address of my director of study, Prof Olga Bailey, and my Second Supervisor, Prof Martin O'Shaughnessy (This was added to enhance trust and assure potential participants of the credibility of my research).

After completing all these important pre-contact steps, I was unsure about how to go about contacting the potential participants – about whether I should be formal and contact them via email or adopt a more friendly approach and contact them on Twitter via direct messaging. I believed both ways could work well. Since the former

is more official, there was a possibility that the level of trust and credibility would increase. However, at the same time, this approach could provoke some fears, especially since the research topic is politically sensitive. Although the latter method seemed more friendly and direct, it would perhaps not look professional or serious, which might result in participants ignoring my request.

Therefore, after a short discussion with my supervising team regarding this issue, I decided to contact those whose email IDs I had access to via email and those whose email IDs I did not have access to via Twitter direct message.

Surprisingly, while none of those whom I contacted by email (7 in total) responded, 6 (12 in total) of those whom I contacted via Twitter direct message responded. I then re-contacted those who did not respond to my emails through Twitter. My second Twitter attempt resulted in three responses.

In total, I had 9 responses at hand, which are divided as follows:

- 6 ordinary users (3 males and 3 females)
- 3 activists (1 male and 2 females)

They all expressed their interest in working with me and assured me of their assistance. It is indeed these 9 participants who have formed the basis of my research sample, through whom I was able to recruit other individuals until I reached a point of saturation and information confidence. After a month of regular contact with these 9 participants, I was able to recruit 21 ordinary participants and 8 activists even before my fieldwork trip to Saudi Arabia.

Although all the participants of this research gave their consent to be identified by their real first names, I used pseudonyms instead for ethical purposes. All the participants' names – with the exception of one female activist, Mariam Alotaibi – that appear in this thesis are therefore not their actual names. Mariam Alotaibi's name has been retained since she uses her full name and personal photo on her Twitter profile and also since she is someone who became a well-known activist in Saudi Arabia after her case (a family dispute and her subsequent imprisonment) received considerable public and media attention nationally and internationally (See Chapter Six). Thus, it does not make sense to use a pseudonym instead of her real name, especially since some contextual parts in Chapter Six require an explicit definition of her case.

A list of the research participants is provided below.

Table 2 List of Interviewees (Ordinary Users).

Name	Gender	Type of Interview	Minutes
Tariq	Male	Face to face	120
Ayman	Male	Face to face	176
Nabil	Male	Face to Face	90
Nawal	Female	Skype	85
Ameerah	Female	Phone	60
Zaid	Male	Face to face	56
Abdullah	Male	Face to face	120

Manal	Female	Face to face	80
Ahmed	Male	Face to face	70
Enas	Female	WhatsApp chat	80
Roaa	Female	Face to face	95
Sarah	Female	Phone	60
Mansour	Male	Face to face	110
Saad	Male	Face to face	120
Hoor	Female	Face to face	90
Mshari	Male	Face to face	100
Noreen	Female	Phone	50
Ali	Male	Face to face	65
Waad	Female	Face to face	77
Faris	Male	Phone	65
Manahel	Female	Phone	46

Table 3 List of Interviewees (Activists).

Name	Gender	Type of Interview	Minutes
Areej	Female	Face to face	151
Walaa	Female	Face to face	120
Mohammed	Male	Face to face	130

Mariam	Female	Phone and Twitter direct message	56/several times Twitter messages
Waleed	Male	Face to face	90
Ali	Male	Phone	63
Layla	Female	Phone and WhatsApp	67/Several times WhatsApp chat
Aziza Al-Yusuf ¹⁵	Female	WhatsApp and Twitter direct message	Several times over the period of late 2016 – early 2017

4.5 Fieldwork, Data Collection Tool, and Setting

The data collection trips to Saudi Arabia began in July 2017 and ended in November 2017. Twenty-eight semi-structured interviews were conducted over the course of the fieldwork. Although my initial aim was to conduct face-to-face interviews – since I wanted to get an in-depth understanding and a decent picture of my participants – other interview methods, such as Skype, WhatsApp voice chat, phone conversation, and Twitter direct message were also employed. The particular modes of communication were based on the interviewees’ preferences.

The interviews were conducted in four major cities in Saudi Arabia – Riyadh, Jeddah, Makkah, and Al-Madinah – where the study participants live.

¹⁵ Aziza al-Yousef is a Saudi Arabian women's rights activist and academic. She does not fall within the age sample – young adults – selected for the present study. However, I contacted her because she has been one of the leading activists in Saudi Arabia since the 1990s and she was also among the few activists who confidentially held some meetings concerning the issue of the male guardianship system over the period of 2011 to 2015. My purpose for contacting her was to obtain some information about these initial attempts as there is a scarcity of original sources of information about these private meetings.

4.5.1 Semi-Structured Interview

There is a diverse range of qualitative research methods, such as content analysis, discourse analysis, narrative analysis, and observations (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). This study used the interview method for data collection. This method is considered one of the most widely employed methods in qualitative research. Unlike other techniques of data gathering, interviews enable researchers to discover richer information and gain a deeper understanding of the topic under exploration (Bryman, 2012). Additionally, it allows insight into how individuals understand and narrate aspects of their lives (Creswell and Poth, 2017).

According to Brinkmann and Kvale (2015), an interview is where “knowledge is constructed in the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee” (p.4). They further defined it as “attempts to understand the world from the subjects’ point of view, to unfold the meaning of their experience, to uncover their lived world” (p.3).

For me, a key reason for engaging in interviews was understanding the interviewees’ ways of making sense of social media-based political and social activities and “get[ting] at their personal logic” (Boyd, 2015, p.11), which involved understanding their experiences and perceptions of the social and political implications of these platforms within an authoritarian context.

More importantly, in order for researchers to identify the method(s) most appropriate for their studies, they must pay close attention to the nature of the context in which the study will be conducted. For example, in his study of surveillance in Greece (as a post-authoritarian country), Samatas (2005) explains how qualitative interviews can contribute to solving the contextual issue of mistrust, which is

associated with “the gap between words and behaviour (between what people say they do and how they actually behave)” that prominently exists in authoritarian contexts (p.191).

A similar issue indeed exists in the case of Saudi individuals’ online and offline participation behaviours. This is due to the various contextual constraints related to culture, politics, and religion (See Chapters Three and Five), which have created a behavioural gap between how the same people behave online and offline. Therefore, interviews can be a critical method to reduce the sensitivity created by the authoritarian context and assist researchers in examining in-depth details about various hidden issues that cannot otherwise be obtained without direct talks and engagement with the participants (Malthaner, 2014).

According to Bryman (2012), interviews can have different forms – they can be structured, unstructured, and semi-structured. Given the nature of my research objectives as well as my objective to gain a comprehensive view of the participants’ experiences, semi-structured interviews were the method chosen for this study, as they refrain from a structured Q&A approach. Gubrium et al. (2012) stated that semi-structured interviews focus primarily on a detailed picture of the participants’ perceptions, experiences, beliefs, and feelings about a given subject.

Semi-structured interviews are characterised by flexible and open-ended questions; so researchers do not need to stick to predetermined questions and themes but can follow up with interesting topics that may arise during discussions with participants. Probing is another advantage of semi-structured interviews. Probing involves asking respondents follow-up questions in order to help them expand, focus, or explain their

answers (Berg, 2011). Thus, by adopting the semi-structured interview method, the researcher can explore participants' hidden perceptions and attitudes about the subject being studied by probing their responses for reasons and more clarifications.

That being said, while interviews can provide researchers with a unique insight into how participants perceive and experience the situation under exploration, it should be kept in mind that the information obtained by interviews is individualistic and often subjective and, therefore, may not be considered as a reliable account of objective circumstances (Berg, 2011; Creswell and Poth, 2017).

However, in the present study, I believe that these 'subjective perceptions' are essential to thoroughly understand the participants' experiences of social media in terms of socio-political participation and activism, especially since these experiences are highly dependent on and influenced by the cultural, political, and religious contexts.

Given the sensitivity of my research topic as well as some cultural and religious factors that could create some difficulties during fieldwork, such as gender segregation, the setting for the interviews was a vital element that needed to be carefully managed. Under such conditions, considerations of privacy, possible threats, comfort, and the venue's accessibility for the participants are critical. Therefore, the set and setting of the interviews will be discussed and explained in the next section.

4.5.2 Interviews: The Set and Setting

Interviewing is principally about the set and setting. In order to get the most out of the research participants, researchers need to identify suitable places where

conversing feels natural while working to establish an atmosphere in which participants feel comfortable about sharing their opinions and experiences (Gubrium et al., 2012). There is no ideal setting for interviewing, therefore, it is important for researchers to be able to adapt to the situation. For example, I would have preferred to have all my interviews face-to-face, but due to the strict gendered segregation in Saudi Arabia and, in some cases, due to my participants' preferences, I was not able to conduct face-to-face interviews with all participants (6 out of 14 female participants and 12 out of 14 male participants were interviewed face-to-face).

All face-to-face interviews were conducted in places and times most convenient for the participants. The former included cafes, malls, and university campuses.

The interviews I conducted were semi-structured and ethnographic in nature. This means that though I maintained a protocol for my interviews, I sought to obtain a sense of each participant's personal life, perspectives, attitudes, and values. These aspects are critical, especially in places such as Saudi Arabia where individuals' daily practices are highly influenced by their cultural and religious environments. Therefore, many individuals seek to maintain behaviours and actions that are compatible with Islamic teachings and cultural norms (even if they are unconvinced of them) so that they do not become outcasts where they live. Such aspects can have direct effects on the participants' experiences and perceptions of social media political participation and activism.

Being from Saudi and the fact that I shared their culture facilitated many aspects of this study. For example, I was granted access to participants' domestic settings in addition to gaining their confidence to interview them. My position also paved way

for me to access my participants' offline lives in areas where other researchers (such as foreigners) are likely to face greater difficulties or be denied, especially given the sensitivity of the subject.

However, the gender and position (insider or outsider) of a researcher may work in two ways – in favour of or against the researcher. For example, while Al-Saggaf (2011), during his study on Saudi females' Facebook experience, was largely denied access to his participants' Facebook profiles although this was a part of his methodology to get a sense of participants' activities on Facebook, Al-Saggaf¹⁶ (2015), during her study on Saudi female identity construction and relationship with Facebook, was granted access to participants' Facebook profiles. This may be attributed to the fact that Al-Saggaf (2015) shared a gender with her participants as well as the fact that she was an insider researcher; therefore, the participants were more confident about allowing her to look at their Facebook profiles and observe their online activities.

Nevertheless, being part of the culture (an insider) may also cause a researcher to overlook certain details that they have learnt to take for granted, details that an outsider researcher might notice. Such an issue occurs when the research participants do not provide in-depth explanations of their experiences, assuming that the researcher will be familiar with the situation since they are also from the same culture. For example, I noticed that throughout my interviews, some of the participants (males and females) expected me to inherently understand their

¹⁶ Though both researchers have the same surname, Al-Saggaf (2011) is male and not a Saudi citizen while Al-Saggaf (2015) is female and a Saudi citizen.

experiences and perceptions without explanation. For instance, they kept making statements like ‘you get what I mean’ or ‘you know that’, expecting me to say ‘yes’ without asking them for further explanation. Such assumptions by the participants may lead to researchers overlooking some important details about their experiences and attitudes.

This is what makes the idea of ‘reflexivity’ critical in qualitative research. It has been commonly argued that researchers should be reflexive during their data gathering practices as well as during the later stages of analyses and interpretations (Seidman, 2019; Creswell and Poth, 2017; King et al., 2018). They must be aware of the biases, experiences, and values that they bring to qualitative research and how their relationship with the research process might influence what they can perceive.

Yet, the position of reflexivity in qualitative studies is often precarious and difficult for many researchers to ideally maintain and manage (Creswell and Poth, 2017). Personally, in addition to being a process that frames the way I think during my research data collection and analysis, reflexivity is a goal I strive for. Although it is impossible, as a human, to be completely neutral and non-judgmental when conducting research, I work very hard to manage my own biases and the impacts that I may have on the research setting. For example, during the interviews, I tried to make sure that every question I asked did not have a hidden assumption behind it. I also gave participants ample time to fully explain their views by listening attentively without trying to interrupt them (King et al., 2018).

4.5.3 Procedures Followed During the Interview

One of the most important elements while collecting data through interviewing is the ability of the researcher to develop a relationship (*rapport*) with the participants. King et al. (2018) suggested that in qualitative research, developing a relationship with the participants will contribute to enhancing the researcher's access to their lives. One way to develop a good relationship with participants is by making the interview a two-way process that encourages imparting and receiving information between the researcher and the participants (Seidman, 2019). Such a process can help the researcher build 'a trusting connection' with participants and prompt the participants to share their experiences.

In this study, the process of building 'a trusting connection' with my participants began from the early stages of recruitment. I committed myself to providing participants with sufficient information about me as a researcher, the nature of my research, and aim. I reassured participants about the confidentiality of their participation in the study and that the information they gave me would be used for academic purposes only. Furthermore, all the participants were contacted via phone and over WhatsApp (two to three phone conversations and WhatsApp chats) before meeting them for face-to-face interviews. In fact, I was in regular contact with some of the participants I recruited early on for over four months prior to my fieldwork trip to Saudi Arabia. All of this has been carried out to build a good *rapport* with them.

At the beginning of my meeting with the interviewees, I did not rush to start interviewing them. I first tried to socialise with them by engaging in some general discussions. The purpose of this general talk was to create a friendly atmosphere and encourage participants to speak with greater confidence later on during the

interviews. According to Seidman (2019), the more comfortable interviewees are, the more likely they are to disclose information and reveal their experiences.

After I got the feeling that the interviewees were more comfortable and engaged, I started introducing them to my research by briefly recounting the topic and objectives of the study. Although all the participants were provided with sufficient information about my study when I first contacted them, by reintroducing the purpose of my research, I hoped to clarify any points that may not have been sufficiently clear before. Additionally, such a strategy can reassure researchers that their participants are aware about the study while giving them the space to ask questions or seek more clarifications about the topic under investigation (Seidman, 2019; King et al., 2018).

Since an audio recorder is a valuable tool to improve the researcher's ability to retrieve information collected during interviews (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015), I asked for permission to record the interviews. According to Bryman (2012), the use of a recording device during interviews can help the researcher focus more on the process of interviewing as well as react emotionally with the interviewees, giving the participants a sense that the interviewer is fully engaged with them. Although Grinnell and Unrau (2008, p.234) stated that the use of an audio recorder can be "intrusive and barrier to full disclosure", it was not the case in my interviews since I had assured my participants, from the early stages of recruitment, that the collected data would be treated with the utmost confidentiality and used for academic purposes alone.

After getting the participants' consent to record the interviews, I started interviewing them typically with general research questions. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) pointed

out that asking mundane research questions during the early part of the interview will make participants feel comfortable enough to reveal their experiences and thoughts gradually during the interview process.

During the interviews, I worked simultaneously to make the participants feel comfortable and create enough spaces for them to share their perceptions. In some cases, I prompted them to speak more by asking follow-up questions, such as “what do you mean by that?”, “why do you think that?”, “could you tell me some more about that?”, or by giving them my own perception about what they were trying to convey and then seeing if they agreed or disagreed.

By the end of the interviews and before concluding, I asked the interviewees if they had anything more to say. The statement that I commonly used at the end of each interview was “I have no further questions. Is there anything else you would like to bring up, or ask about, before we finish the interview?” (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015, p.155). I found that doing so often opened up relevant new avenues to explore and gave the participants an additional opportunity to elaborate on points that they had mentioned early in the interviews. I felt that this question also functioned as a polite sign to the participants that the interviewer was ready to conclude the interview.

Finally, and importantly, after each interview, I set aside a few minutes to reflect on what had been learnt or what stood out from my discussions with the participants. I found that these immediate impressions provided a valuable context for my later analyses of the transcripts.

4.6 A Qualitative Case Study: The Anti-Male Guardianship Hashtag Activism

In July 2016, a hashtag known as #togetherToEndMaleGuardianship emerged on Twitter, which triggered one of the most remarkable campaigns in Saudi Arabia which was aimed at ending the male guardianship system in Saudi Arabia. The system, which is referred to in Saudi Arabia as Wali or Mahram, requires all women, regardless of their age and social status, to legally have a guardian, usually their father, grandfather, husband, brother, or son, throughout their lives (HRW, 2016).

This system grants men unlimited authority over women and gives male guardians the right to allow or prevent a woman from accessing several basic rights such as education, work, travel, and marriage¹⁷. Al-Lily (2011) stated that “since [the guardianship] mechanism is embedded in the [Saudi] national culture”, officials “may ask women for their guardian’s consent even where no law or guideline requires such consent” (p.120).

4.6.1 Rationale Behind the Selection

As stated in this study’s aim, this research seeks to examine the role of social media in both the political ‘participation’ and ‘activism’ of Saudi youth in the digital public sphere. Therefore, and based on the study’s aim, a prominent activism campaign – the anti-male guardianship campaign – has been selected for the same. My reason for choosing this female-based activism in particular includes several important facts, which are as follows:

¹⁷ There have been recent amendments to this system (See Chapter One).

First, the anti-male guardianship campaign is considered one of the most prominent campaigns in Saudi Arabia as it has garnered unprecedented attention and prompted debate nationally and internationally.

Second, Saudi women's issues constitute the bulk of online discussions, particularly in the Saudi Twittersphere. For example, the most prominent campaigns in Saudi Arabia in terms of longevity, tension, mobilisation, and scale have been women's issues, such as the previous Women2Drive campaign, which started in 2011 and ended in 2017, and the anti-male guardianship campaign, which started in July 2016 and ended by a royal decree on 01 August, 2019 (two weeks prior to the submission of the current study). Though there were some other prominent online social movements such as #the_salary_not_enough and #The_dismissal_of_the_Minister_of_Housing_demand_of_the_people¹⁸, these did not gain as much momentum as the ones related to women's issues.

Third, this prominent activism campaign will pave the way for me to critically answer my second research question – how has the utilisation of the 'hashtag feature' facilitated Saudi women in fighting gendered inequalities and demanding more social and political rights?

Fourth, the male guardianship system is a complicated issue with social, political, and religious dimensions. Therefore, in addition to the opportunity that I will have to investigate the potential political implications of hashtag activism in this campaign, I

¹⁸ A campaign criticising the performance of the Minister of Housing for not finding solutions to the continued housing crisis in the Kingdom. People demonstrated their outrage by demanding the dismissal of the housing minister.

will also be able to identify, through the examination of this case, more socio-religious and political challenges that influence Saudi youths during their online activism, which also happens to be one of my research objectives.

Lastly, there is a lack of studies investigating the anti-male guardianship campaign. For example, my bibliographical searches have found only one (very recent) study (Thorsen and Sreedharan, 2019) that has considered this prominent online campaign. Thorsen and Sreedharan's (2019) study examines the role Twitter has played in facilitating cross-gendered communication in Saudi Arabia over the issue of the male guardianship system. Although this study has provided many insights, I believe that the method adopted to conduct this study has some disadvantages.

A qualitative and quantitative analysis of a total of 2,850,245 tweets was the method utilised in the study. Such a method, I believe, lacks the advantages of having real engagement with responsible people. Therefore, to obtain a full picture of the socio-political implications of social media, especially within societies such as Saudi Arabia, I believe that engaging with people, for instance by interviewing them, will likely lead to better and more insightful conclusions. Considering the contextual situations in Saudi Arabia, individuals' mediated practices cannot be solely understood through content analysis.

These are the main motives behind my selection of this particular campaign. The following sections will briefly discuss the anti-male guardianship hashtag campaign and the design of, and approach taken in the case study.

4.6.2 Anti-Male Guardianship Campaign: Design and Approach

Creswell (2018) defines a case study approach as a methodology that guides researchers to “[explore] in depth a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals. The case(s) are bounded by time and activity, and researchers collect detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures over a sustained period of time” (p.287).

According to Baxter and Jack (2008), a qualitative case study methodology “provides tools for researchers **to study complex phenomena within their context**” (p.544, emphasis added). Moreover, Yin (2018) suggested that a case study design should be adopted when: (a) the researcher seeks to answer ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions; (b) the behaviours of those involved in the study cannot be controlled; (c) the researcher wants to consider the contextual conditions because they are relevant to the phenomenon under examination; (d) the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clear.

Based on the aforementioned critical remarks on the case study, the anti-male guardianship campaign is considered in this study as a complex phenomenon given its political, social, and religious dimensions as well as the context – an authoritarian society – in which the campaign originated. Therefore, there is a need to first establish an understanding of the contextual conditions relevant to the system before exploring the role the hashtag feature has played in this campaign. Moreover, the case study design will enable me to closely examine the anti-male guardianship campaign in terms of its activities and time boundary, especially as it involved confidential offline activities before the online hashtag activism gained traction.

As mentioned early in this chapter, semi-structured interviews are the primary method used in this study. However, since I learnt of some light hidden offline activities (confidential meetings and workshops concerning the issue of the male guardianship system held by prominent female activists; See Chapter Six) prior to the trigger of this online campaign in 2016, I identified a need to trace and analyse the development of these activities as well. I believed that doing so would provide a clearer picture of the campaign while paving the way for me to thoroughly examine how ‘hashtag activism’ has contributed to this campaign from the perspectives of those engaged in this campaign: the activists and non-activists.

Therefore, in addition to using the interview as the primary research method, I started conducting research regarding information that can contribute to my examination of the campaign’s initial developmental phases (from 2011 to 2016). Given the fact that the campaign’s initial activities were confidential as well as on a narrow individual scale, there is a scarcity of information on these phases.

One YouTube clip¹⁹, 11 newspaper articles, and three reports were the materials that I found relating to the ‘initial stages’ of the campaign, with the clip being the most comprehensive source in terms of describing the very initial phases of the campaign.

Video Clip	Newspaper Articles	Reports	Total

¹⁹ The YouTube clip was one of the episodes from the weekly talk show known as ‘Trends’, which was produced by Rotana, a Saudi Arabian private TV channel. The show in this episode, which was produced on 30 October 2016 and lasted 1:16:55 minutes, hosted Aziza Al-Yousef and Nasema Al-Sada. Both are prominent Saudi women activists. In this episode, Aziza and Nasema revealed some important details about the campaign’s initial confidential activities, which started in 2011. The link to the video is provided here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zHWEGWsl1w&t=646s>

1	11	3	15
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Table 4 Secondary Data Materials.

These are the materials collected and analysed to explore the campaign’s initial activities.

4.7 Research Ethics: Procedures and Practices

The primary source of information in the present study is the data obtained from the interviews with participants. Therefore, ethics has personal and official significance in this research. Moreover, given both the sensitivity of the topic in Saudi society and the restrictive socio-political environment where the fieldwork was conducted, I took additional care to ensure the safety of participants, and myself, during this research. The discussion below will illustrate all the steps and procedures that were followed to ensure my safety and the safety of the participants involved in this research, from the pre-fieldwork trip to Saudi Arabia to the data storage location.

Prior to the trip to Saudi Arabia for data collection, ethics approval was obtained by submitting my fieldwork proposal to the Research Ethics Committee at both Nottingham Trent University in the UK and Jeddah University (my scholarship sponsor) in Saudi Arabia. I consider this step very important, especially since I needed to move between several Saudi cities to collect data. Therefore, obtaining an official approval, particularly from my scholarship sponsor, to collect data was meant not only to ease possible issues with travel and access to the sites but also guarantee the participants’ and my own safety in the event of an unexpected circumstance.

Due to the sensitivity of the research topic in Saudi Arabia, I have been very keen, from the early stages of recruiting participants up to the actual interview meetings, to explicitly inform the participants that all data obtained will be treated with confidentiality (Bryman, 2012). For example, while explaining the confidentiality process to my participants, I told them that I would never use their real names or any personal information that might identify them directly, such as their phone numbers, addresses, and interview locations. After each interview, I asked the participant to choose a pseudonym to replace their real name. I also informed them that I would only use the pseudonyms they had chosen to indicate their arguments and discussions in my study (Berg, 2011).

Furthermore, participants were informed during the recruitment stage as well as at the beginning of each interview about their right to withdraw from the research at any stage and at any time without having to state their reasons for doing so (Seidman, 2019). They could also opt to not answer any question that I asked during the interviews or even quit the interview at any time. All of this, I think, helped reassure the participants that my intentions for conducting this study were honourable.

According to the Nottingham Trent Research Ethics Committee's recommendations, when the research involves human subjects, consent forms should be handed to all participants at the start of the interviews. Although I was slightly apprehensive about the unwillingness of some participants to formally sign the consent form as well as the possibility that this action may raise some concerns among the participants due to the sensitivity of the topic, this was not an issue. All participants interviewed face-

to-face signed the consent form (See the Appendix). In addition, those interviewed online offered verbal and written approval.

After the fieldwork, all research data were digitally transferred and stored in a safe location (Nottingham Trent University OneDrive) that is accessible only to the researcher. These fieldwork materials will be destroyed immediately after the research requirements are complete and after the degree is obtained.

Considering the sensitivity of the topic, the ethics challenges that may crop up are not only related to the fieldwork but also to the process of transcribing and analysing the rich and large amount of data that have been collected. Therefore, as I will explain in the next section, handling such a large amount of sensitive data requires considerable attention and a clear approach to prevent the research from deviating from its objectives and theoretical framework.

4.8 Data Analysis

Data analysis techniques and approaches are fundamental to reliable qualitative research. Moreover, researchers, especially in qualitative-based studies, are often described as the research instrument, as their ability to understand and conceptualise experiences and perceptions is critical in uncovering meaning in specific circumstances and contexts.

Therefore, to ensure a decent analysis of this study as well as to make the most of the collected data, the process of analysing the data began during the fieldwork. For example, a personal diary was used during the fieldwork to note down my reflections and thoughts immediately after each interview. This technique helped me focus on

my study's theoretical framework and avoid negative diversions. Additionally, it contributed to increasing the credibility and quality of the data collected during the fieldwork, as I paid more attention to emerging themes that were frequently mentioned by the interviewees but not primarily included in the interview questions. All of this helped me derive the most of both the fieldwork experiences and the interviews.

The post-fieldwork process of data analysis began with the transcription of the recorded interviews. I listened carefully to every word in the interviews, usually more than once. Further, during the process of listening and transcribing, I made notes in the margins, especially when what had been said captured something interesting about my personal reflections during the fieldwork or ideas that repeatedly occurred across interviews.

Although I am familiar with data analysis computer software such as NVIVO, I have only used it extensively to organise my literature reviews and build the research's theoretical framework; the data analysis in this research was carried out manually without software assistance. There is no doubt that qualitative computer software has nowadays become very helpful in computerising the process of data analysis and organising files. However, I chose a manual analysis as I wanted to engage with the data personally.

Since qualitative analysis involves personal biases, researchers must be careful during the process of their analysis and work systematically to put aside their own beliefs and remain open to the data as it is revealed. A great advantage of the present study is that it has been supervised by two supervisors who are from different backgrounds

– Brazilian and British. The extensive discussions I had with them during data analysis drew my attention to important points within the data that I had either ignored or not addressed adequately. I believe this was a crucial part of the process of reflexivity because it helped me uncover hidden meanings, which led to further reflections and interpretations that undoubtedly enriched the findings of the current study.

For the purpose of this research, ‘a thematic analysis method’ was adopted. It is one of the most common methods used for qualitative analysis (Bryman, 2012). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organises and describes your data set in (rich) detail. However, frequently, it goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic” (p.79).

Through this method, researchers aim to identify themes in the data that are interesting or important. These identified themes should serve to address the research questions or say something critical about the issues being studied. It is important to emphasise here that this method is more than just summarising the data set – a credible thematic analysis must make the most of the raw data by organising, analysing, describing, interpreting, and making good sense of it.

In reviewing the literature on qualitative methods, I found different ways to approach ‘thematic analysis’ (See, for e.g. Boyatzis, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2006; Alhojailan, 2012; Javadi and Zarea, 2016). In this study, however, I followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase framework. This is because this framework, as one of the most commonly used techniques in social science, provides a clear step-by-step guide to conduct a thematic analysis.

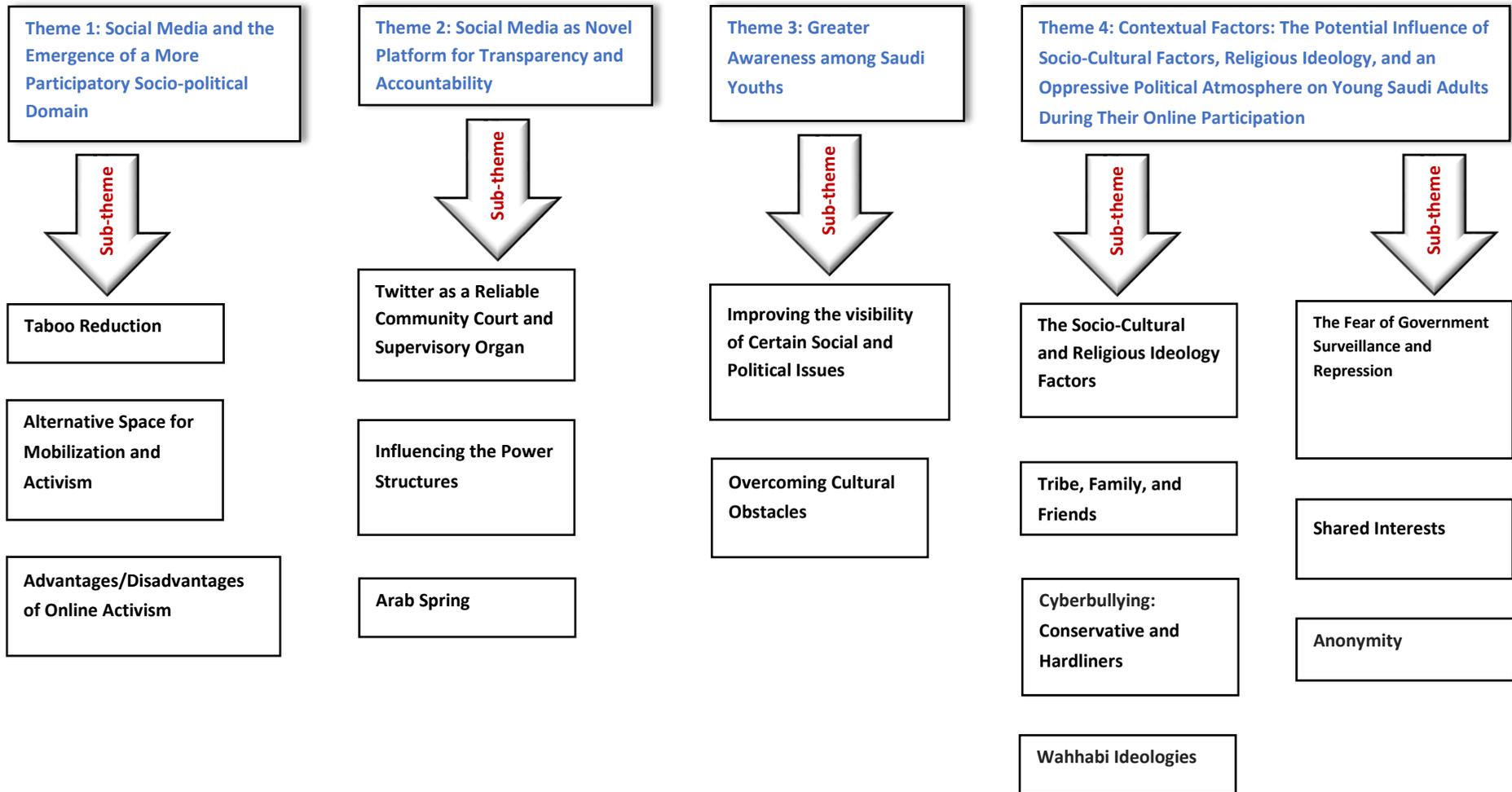
According to Braun and Clarke (2006), these six phases are as follows: (1) “familiarizing yourself with your data”, a process that involves an intensive reading of the data to generate initial ideas. During this phase, researchers are advised to make notes and jot down early impressions; (2) “generating initial codes” by arranging the data in a meaningful and systematic way; (3) “searching for themes” by organising the collected codes into potential themes; (4) “reviewing the themes” to ensure that they work systematically with the extracted codes, as in phase one, with the entire data set, and as in phase two, to produce a thematic map of the analysis. During this phase, it is useful if researchers have compiled all the relevant data for each theme together; (5) “defining and naming themes” to pin down more precisely what each theme is about as well as describe the general story the analysis expresses; (6) “producing the report”, which is the final phase, to select rich and compelling examples and relate them to the research questions and theoretical framework (p.87).

Therefore, in applying Braun and Clarke’s thematic analysis model to my primary data, I have been able to identify, analyse, and generate related themes. Based on my research aim and questions, the present research study’s empirical chapters have been divided into two chapters (Chapter Five and Six).

In Chapter Five, I have discussed the participants’ thoughts, experiences, and perceptions of the socio-political implications of social media in Saudi Arabia. The chapter is built on four main themes and several sub-themes. Each theme is supported by rich quotes and compelling examples from the participants’ own experiences. Moreover, although the influence of the contextual factors (i.e. politics,

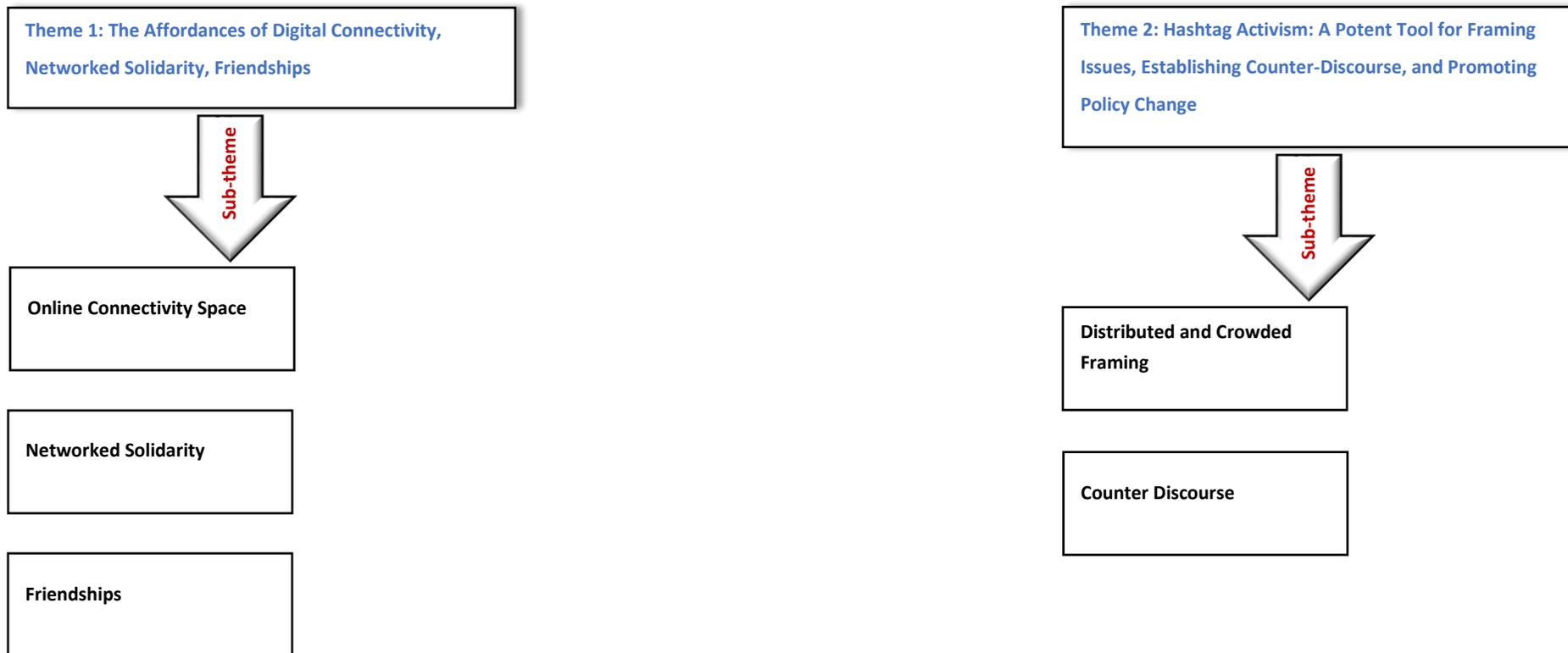
religion, culture) on young adults' use of social media will appear where relevant across the empirical chapters, a section has been devoted in the same chapter (Theme Four) to these factors and their remarkable influence.

The diagram below shows the themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews.



In Chapter Six, I have explored the role that the 'hashtag feature' has played in the anti-male guardianship activism under two identified themes: (1) the affordance of digital connectivity, networked solidarity, friendships; (2) hashtag activism – a potent tool for framing issues, establishing counter-discourse, and promoting policy change.

The diagram below shows the themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews



4.9 Conclusion

Conducting research that involves fieldwork in a politically and culturally restricted environment requires careful practical, theoretical, and ethical consideration in light of the research design, data collection method, sampling strategy, and access.

Given the research aim and questions, a semi-structured interview method seemed to be the most effective and appropriate method to conduct this research. It provides very rich and reliable data, especially in studies such as this one, which seeks to explore young adults' experiences and perceptions of the political implications of social media participation and activism. This is a phenomenon that is hard to fully explore using other qualitative methods such as online participant observation, material data analysis, or even quantitative methods.

While commenting on the value of interacting directly with the research participants, especially in research studies conducted in hostile cultural and political settings, Malthaner (2014) stated the following:

Research based on personal interactions with research subjects in their own environment is particularly useful and important (inter alia) in situations where populations are marginalized or repressed, to study internal dynamics of groups, or under circumstances where actors have reasons to hide their beliefs and perceptions ... [therefore] going "into the field" to observe, interview actors, and collect documents may indeed be the best—and some times the only—way to obtain valid information in these settings (p.173).

Conducting interviews in an environment such as Saudi Arabia can be very challenging in many respects. For instance, the safety of both the researcher and the participants

can be at stake, and there could be difficulties in obtaining access to fieldwork and participants. However, this method has proved its reliability in providing rich data to answer the research questions and contribute to the field of study.

Furthermore, the sampling strategy is another important aspect that was carefully considered while selecting participants suitable for the aim and objectives of this research. Therefore, to be considered potential participants in this research, participants had to meet the research sampling requirements mentioned in Section 4.4. in this chapter (Sampling Strategy).

The snowball sampling method appeared to be the most suitable technique to recruit participants for this study because of the sensitivity of the research topic and the challenges of the political and cultural contexts in which the fieldwork was conducted. Additionally, since social media users, especially prominent activists, are under the government's surveillance and face related pressures, trust was a critical factor during the research participant recruitment and data collection. Therefore, I found the snowball sampling strategy to be the most appropriate method to both reach the target populations and overcome the issue of trust.

Moreover, due to the sensitivity of the data collected for this research, the recommendations made by the Ethics Committee at Nottingham Trent University and Jeddah University were carefully adhered to, and the data was treated with caution both during the collection and analysis phases to ensure the safety of the participants.

The following chapter lays down the empirical findings derived from the participants' experiences and perceptions about the socio-political implications of social media participation in Saudi Arabia.

5 Chapter Five: The Empirical Interview Findings: The Participants' Voices on the Potential Socio-Political Implications of Social Media in Saudi Arabia

5.1 Introduction

In most developed countries, citizens have access to many avenues to participate in socio-political issues and activism. In Saudi Arabia, however, there are very limited outlets through which the public can express their dissent and engage in activism. Therefore, the objective of these interviews corresponds broadly with the aim of the current research study, which is *to examine the role of social media platforms in political participation and activism by young adults in Saudi Arabia within the online public sphere*. In doing so, I have taken into consideration, in designing the interview questions, the crucial themes obtained from my literature review and those which have been discussed extensively in Chapter Two.

Four different themes emerged from my thematic analysis of the interview transcriptions, which are the following:

1. Social Media and the Emergence of a More Participatory Socio-Political Domain;
2. Greater Awareness among Saudi Youths;
3. Social Media as Novel Platforms for Transparency and Public Accountability;
4. Contextual Factors: Socio-Cultural Factors, Religious Ideology, and an Oppressive Political Atmosphere Influencing Saudi Youths During their Online Participation

them spoke passionately about their personal experiences of social media and the manner in which the 'online public sphere' has served as a venue for them to express opinions, generate awareness, and engage with political and social issues. They argued that social media platforms have established 'a new forum' for political participation and activism that was absent from the traditional Saudi political sphere.

The interviewees added that social media platforms were not limited to the role of creating a space to discuss public affairs, and they also serve as tools to facilitate discussions regarding many political and social issues that are considered taboo in Saudi culture, such as gender issues. They credited social media with assisting them in improving the visibility of grievances and increasing the level of transparency.

Furthermore, the findings of this research indicate that although social media platforms are not without drawbacks, they have, to a great extent, paved the way for people in Saudi Arabia to pursue a greater scope of communication and power in terms of raising issues related to public concerns, accessing information, and exchanging ideas.

There was a general consensus among the participants, among the women particularly, that social media has made a substantial difference to their experiences of socio-political participation and activism. This is probably due to the fact that women, unlike men in Saudi Arabia, have very limited access to the public sphere as well as far fewer opportunities to hold political or social positions. Such a serious issue has prompted women in all MENA countries, as discussed in Chapter Two, to find a space of refuge in social media platforms where the right to free expression is less

inhibited, where there is a plurality of thoughts and opinions as well as a more participatory capacity to exchange and benefit from previously unknown views.

Conducting an in-depth examination of the factors driving young Saudis to use social media platforms within the context of political and social purposes, Table 5:1 demonstrates that all interviewees used social media to seek information and news, participate in ongoing political and social issues in the region, and expand the space for freedom of expression (escaping social and political restrictions). Factors such as seeking information and news, awareness and knowledge, participation, and expressing opinions were among the main motives of social media use.

Table 5 Drivers of Social Media Use Among Young Saudis.

Drivers	Interviewees	*References
Information and news seeking	28	160
Awareness and knowledge	28	155
Participation	28	121
Expressing opinions	26	132
Freedom	25	149
Information sharing	24	152
Advancing public issues (Hashtag activism)	24	143

* Number of times the item was found (i.e. coded) in the interview transcripts.

Social networking sites therefore expand the scope of political activities by offering new forms of political participation and activism, such as posting content on YouTube, expressing political opinions on Twitter, and participating in online activism.

Shirky (2011, p.1) argues that for those political activities that used to be practiced in the public realm, social media platforms have now provided the networked population with a realm that has “greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action”.

Papacharissi (2010, p.21) puts forth an approach that is comparable to the one proposed by Shirky, in which she argues that conventional political activities that were previously undertaken in the public sphere are currently being pursued in the private sphere “with greater autonomy, flexibility, and potential for expression”. Furthermore, she argues that social media platforms would make the private sphere “a sphere of connection and not isolation, as it serves primarily to connect the personal to the political and the self to the polity and society” (p.164).

The aforementioned arguments by Papacharissi and Shirky are similar to points made by most of the interviewees in this research. For instance, Saad (34, male) argued the following:

Social media platforms have opened many horizons for people in Saudi Arabia. We are now witnessing a radical shift in information accessibility that we had never fathomed could be achieved. Today, we enjoy a high level of freedom in discussing our public affairs and social issues.

He continued by stressing the following:

Information regarding political and social issues before the emergence of social media was controlled by the local and state-owned media channels, but now, Saudis of all backgrounds have become the ones who raise political and social issues affecting them and engage in a collective discussion.

Similarly, Walaa (33, female), an activist, greatly appreciated the role social media has played in enabling Saudi Arabian society to collectively participate in raising issues and discuss them in more flexible manners:

We, as a Saudi society, were very closed and were considered one of the most conservative societies, but now with the use of social media, Saudis have become more open than before. Social media makes it easier for us to debate with a high level of freedom ... I believe that people in Saudi Arabia are now feeling more comfortable in discussing political and social issues on social media than in any other space.

Both Saad and Walaa emphasised the role of social media in providing Saudi people with a space that is larger and more comprehensive than what the Saudi public sphere and traditional media had provided them with. They argued that the emergence of these platforms has contributed extensively to the communication between a large group within the Saudi Arabian community regardless of their educational and social classes. According to their arguments, social media has therefore created a free space where plural and alternative voices can be articulated and heard publicly at a time when Saudi authorities are working hard to update and implement new measures to control the flow of information and challenge pluralism.

The interviewees in this research also added that social media platforms were not simply restricted to the role of establishing a space to express opinions and discuss public affairs, but they also function as tools facilitating discussions regarding several political and social topics that were formerly considered taboo in Saudi culture, for example, gender issues.

Nawal (26, female), for instance, argued that there were some sensitive political and social issues that the traditional media avoided talking about or avoided hosting related people to talk about, but now, we can see that these topics are extensively discussed on social media platforms:

In the past, we were afraid of discussing some social and political issues in public, but with the revolution in new media technologies, people became more open, and social media has enabled them to debate more about many social issues than they did before. For example, the issues that affected women were avoided by traditional media and most Saudi people tended to not talk about these issues in public for fear of going against the customs and traditions of the very conservative Saudi Arabian society.

Nawal's argument points to an important issue that has long influenced Saudi society, especially women: the reluctance of the Saudi people to engage in critical social issues that most of them may be aware of, because of their fear of crossing cultural and political barriers. However, this, as Nawal mentioned, seems to no longer be the case after people discovered social media. People are now more emboldened to bring up very sensitive issues, such as stories of violence against women, which traditional media has never dared to identify as issues affecting society.

Furthermore, the activists interviewed in this study claimed that social media has contributed significantly to revealing the other side to the issues that the Saudi authorities had, over the past few decades, strived to either hide or marginalise the importance of through their official media channels. Layla (33, female), a women's rights activist, argued the following:

Social media has helped us obtain information quickly and without barriers. In the past, we could not obtain information except through traditional media, which in the first place, served the interests and the agenda of the government. Moreover, there was a lack of effective dialogue or real interaction between the Saudi government officials and citizens.

Furthermore, participants in this research argue that Saudi individuals have suffered because Saudi authorities have ignored many important political and social issues. The authorities have also been in conflict with those who have tried to bring such matters to the attention of Saudi society, which has made matters worse. However, they assert that now with the introduction of social media, the Saudi public is becoming more powerful in terms of raising issues, obtaining information, and exchanging their views. This is illustrated in the following excerpt by Mariam (32, female), a prominent women's rights activist:

The absence of public means in Saudi Arabia through which individuals can discuss issues and express opinions has made social media platforms the only option through which the Saudi public can communicate with others and discuss issues in an easy and affordable way ... Former marginalised individuals are now able to at least convey their voices by highlighting a certain idea or issue using social media platforms.

In Saudi Arabia, a country where political parties are banned from officially sanctioned avenues, civic social organisations have remained largely underdeveloped. Laws restrict any funding of civil society organisations and in addition, administrative measures taken by the Saudi government strictly prohibit any independent civic or political activities. In the face of this, social media platforms are, as revealed by the

interviewees, offering an alternative space for political expression and mobilisation. The interviewees were highly appreciative of the role that social media platforms have played in facilitating socio-political participation and activism.

For instance, Manal (22, female) highlighted how social media's utility has taken campaigns to new heights:

Many massive online campaigns such as the previous Women2Drive campaign as well as the current ongoing anti-male guardianship campaign have been mainly formulated, sustained, and mobilised through social media. If you take for example the Women2Drive campaign on Twitter, you will see how the campaigners have amazingly utilised the hashtag feature to boost their demands. It is true that the campaign has received considerable backlash and criticism from some of the conservative and religious groups in Saudi Arabia, which has even led to the arrest of some prominent women activists such as Manal Al-Sharif and Loujain Alhathloul. However, no one can deny the unprecedented role played by Twitter in providing the campaigners with tools that enabled them to communicate their demands in a way that would not have been possible without social media.

In this example, Manal highlighted the critical role of the hashtag feature, as the only available means of activism in Saudi Arabia, in the formation of many prominent campaigns in Saudi Arabia. Such a tool has functioned as a space for Saudis to organise campaigns and generate more attention for issues that otherwise would have no other means to exist. This underscores the need for a further exploration of the role of the hashtag feature in activism in Saudi Arabia.

In a similar vein, Nabil (32, male) pointed out the interactive nature of social media in paving the way for Saudi people to organise and co-operate more freely and openly.

He asserted the following:

Social media has made political and social activism more organised. For example, the trend feature in Twitter has contributed to the organisation and follow-up of live topics in a smooth and orderly manner. It has also helped people find those who share the same interests and experiences as them.

These remarks made by Nabil highlight two critical factors that the hashtag feature in activism may facilitate: the ease of live follow-up to the development of the activism and the high possibility for participants to find those who share their interests. I believe the latter is very important, especially for individuals living under authoritarian rule, because the fear of acting alone, which often prevents individuals from disclosing their true preferences due to several factors (e.g. colliding with the traditions, political oppression), is predominant in such contexts. Therefore, I will reflect upon the social and political implications that the fear of acting alone may have on individuals and how social media participation and activism, as revealed by the participants, has greatly enabled them to overcome it (See Chapter Six and Seven).

Although Saudi authorities have recently tried to monitor the Internet, activism and calls for reforms and changes still seem to be proliferating in the virtual space. What can be controlled and censored in the physical space is thriving in the online world. Online discussions and meetings are growing in number and size with current political and social topics being selected by the participants, and this continues to change regularly. The use of social media has not only provided the Saudi public with

autonomy and power but has also facilitated the sharing of materials regarding political and social issues.

From the revelations above, there was a general agreement among the interviewees that social media platforms have brought a radical change to the experience of Saudi Arabian individuals in the domain of socio-political participation and activism. The invention of extremely interactive features within social networking sites has paved the way for them to pursue greater visibility and more extensive powers in the political and social realm as compared to what they were previously provided with by the traditional public sphere, which is described as the religious and patriarchal sphere, and state-owned media channels.

However, it is interesting to note the contradictions among the interviewees when they were asked about the role of social media in shaping online activism in Saudi Arabia as well as whether they thought social networking sites had advantages in formulating the objectives of online campaigns.

Some participants such as Hoor (29, female) believe that social media, Twitter particularly, has played a critical role in shaping many online campaigns in Saudi Arabia.

Twitter has contributed significantly to the formation and dissemination of many campaigns in Saudi Arabia. Believe me, campaigns such as Women2Drive and the current anti-male guardianship campaign would not have had the reputation and glamour that we are witnessing now if they had occurred before the invention of Twitter.

Likewise, Mohammed (23, male), an activist, argued that Twitter plays an effective role in the formation of online campaigns, especially if we consider the fact that there are no other ways in Saudi Arabia to form campaigns other than to utilise the tools of social media platforms:

It is a big role. Social media is the basis of many campaigns in Saudi Arabia, and I believe that without social media platforms, we would not see any kind of activism or campaigns. I am saying this because we do not have a real parliament and we cannot have street demonstrations. But through the Twitter hashtag, we have been able to make many political and social demonstrations.

It is clear that Hoor and Mohammed attribute significance to social media in enabling people in Saudi Arabia to form and organise political and social campaigns. Mohammed, for instance, pointed out that as offline demonstrations in Saudi Arabia are strictly prohibited, hashtags function as the only means through which Saudis can demonstrate. The interviewees also highlighted that without these platforms, there would be no political and social campaigns in Saudi Arabia.

Conversely, there were some interviewees who contradicted the aforementioned views. They were specifically doubtful about the advantages of social media use in such online campaigns and were also sceptical about the change that it may bring to Saudi society. For instance, Mansour (34, male) considered the following:

Social networking sites are a double-edged sword, especially when they are utilised in online campaigns. They are available to all, used by good people to deliver the right words and good opinions to the decision makers, and are used also by people of falsehood – each of them tries to channel the discussion to suit their own agenda

and to divert and neutralise the subject according to their orientations. I believe that most existing online campaigns have a large proportion of foreign interventions. For example, a large group of the participants in #Saudi-women-want-to-abolish-the-guardianship-system are not from Saudi Arabia. This is supported by the fact (as I see) that many participants are tweeting in languages other than Arabic. Additionally, if you take a close look at the tweets under the hashtag 'I-am-my-own-guardian' on Twitter, you will find some accounts that tweet about this hashtag more than fifty times in a day to make this hashtag trending ... I have seen this myself!

Although Mansour was neutral in his assessment of the role of social media in activism as he emphasised that these platforms are available for all and used by both good and evil people for different purposes, he highlighted a controversial aspect regarding the online public sphere – its disorderly and undisciplined nature. Based on this, he argued that such an open and unorganised nature may adversely affect the value and the outcome of online activism. Mansour's view is in fact consistent with some of the arguments raised by scholars and discussed in Chapter Two regarding the limitations of the online public sphere. I will return to this critical issue about the reliability of the hashtag activism with more discussions in Chapter Seven.

Likewise, Ayman (32, male) maintained that although social media has played a great role in formulating and organising several online campaigns in Saudi Arabia and that no one can ignore its effectiveness in empowering and paving the way for Saudis to participate in more autonomous spaces, the use of social media in online campaigns has had a few disadvantages for Saudi society:

First of all, we must recognise that all the campaigns that came out on social media are a legitimate right and a healthy phenomenon, but unfortunately, some of these campaigns have been exploited by other parties, whether they are internal or external agents. The internal agents include those who call themselves Saudi liberals, who in my opinion are not liberal in the full and real sense, but only specialists in women's issues. They feed and support only the hashtags on women's issues. Additionally, there are external individuals who are recruited by some foreign intelligence agencies only to instigate some controversial issues in Saudi Arabia. But as I said at the beginning, it is a very legitimate right and has a big impact on lawmakers in Saudi Arabia.

Ayman pointed to what is perhaps one of the most critical problems associated with hashtag activism: the 'free riders' who tend to exploit the open nature of hashtag participation whether by furthering some political agenda or by trying to derail the campaign from its specific goals, for example, by spreading rumours and misleading information. Therefore, the 'open nature of social media participation' should not always be considered an advantage since it may adversely affect the values of online campaigns.

Abdullah (33, male) seemed to agree with the aforementioned views. He argued that he had no doubt that social media has facilitated participation in political and social issues and activism. However, in his view, when it comes to whether social media platforms have advantages in online campaigns, society must bear in mind several aspects. For example, he commented the following:

If one considers the 'the anti-male guardianship campaign', there are many inaccuracies that are put forward and discussed under the hashtag of this campaign. It is striking and noteworthy that most of

these fallacies originate from outside Saudi Arabia and are expressed in several languages. This leaves room for doubt about the effectiveness of social media in the formulation of online campaigns in a manner that is appropriate to the objectives of the campaigners.

From the arguments presented above, it is clear that Mansour, Ayman, and Abdullah appreciate the role of social media in creating online campaigns in general in Saudi Arabia. However, they questioned the reliability of online activism in appropriately serving the actual goals of the campaigners. It is clear that their primary concern stems from the fact that campaigns created on these platforms cannot be managed and controlled due to the horizontal and open nature of participation offered by these platforms to all users. This gateless space allows everyone regardless of their purpose to intervene in any online campaigns, whether positively or negatively.

What should be emphasised here is that I noticed an important gender awareness gap in Saudi Arabia regarding the phenomenon of hashtag activism, especially such activism as is related to gender issues. While female participants were very enthusiastic about the political and social potential that the growing hashtag activism may bring to the Saudi society, male participants expressed quite conservative views. One possible reason for that can be attributed to the fear of some men that women through the use of these inclusive and free platforms may, over time, challenge their superiority and power over women, as family patriarchs.

In conclusion, the participants in this research see social media platforms as a new forum for social and political participation and activism which was absent from the traditional political sphere in Saudi Arabia. Social networking sites have served as a

venue for Saudis to express their opinions and engage with political and social issues. Furthermore, the interviewees have highlighted the fact that the effective mechanisms of social media have broadened the scope of public discourse and have increased Saudi people's participation in debate and information sharing. As discussed above, there were some concerns regarding the ability of social media to appropriately shape the objectives of online campaigns in Saudi Arabia.

5.3 Social Media as Novel Platforms for Transparency and Public Accountability

Another important theme that emerged from these interviews is the ability of social media to increase transparency and hold the Saudi government and powerful institutions more accountable. Participants not only hoped for social media platforms to enable them to share their views and participate in discussing political and social issues affecting them but also for platforms that would provide them with a high level of transparency. Social media has made it possible to highlight some issues that were not being discussed by the conventional Saudi media with full transparency. Abdullah (33, male) said the following:

Traditional media in Saudi Arabia is subject to strict censorship by the state, and therefore, we see that all the issues covered by the traditional media are superficially addressed and often lack factual information as well as transparency. For instance, through my follow-up on issues raised on Twitter particularly, I believe that the unprecedented transparency brought about by this very popular platform has contributed significantly to enabling ordinary Saudi citizens to follow and discuss their political and social issues in more transparent and credible manners. I personally believe that Twitter in Saudi Arabia is now the only suitable means through

which Saudi citizens can highlight their cases and pressure the decision makers.

The participants in this research credited social media with assisting Saudis in improving the visibility of grievances, such as their rights to participate in political and social issues as well as their right to demand that the Saudi government take further action on these issues. For example, Manahel (26, female) asserted the following:

Before social media, we did not have any platforms available through which we could claim our most basic rights, and it was very rare to have our voices and issues heard. To be honest, I do not only blame our conservative culture which often deems 'women as the property of men', but I also hold our traditional media accountable because they have been and continue to marginalise so many women's issues. However, we, Saudi women, are now more aware, stronger, and bolder in demanding our rights than before.

When I asked Manahel on what basis she claims that women in Saudi Arabia are now much stronger than ever before, she gave the following answer:

Look, around fifteen years ago or so, the issues affecting Saudi women were far from people's minds. It was very rare to hear about Saudi women's abuse and violation in our gatherings or in traditional media. However, now the situation has changed completely. The mass use of smartphones by people in Saudi Arabia has enabled Saudi women to report their social issues and abuses immediately without waiting for other media outlets to do so. Our voices and issues are now heard not only domestically but even globally.

Manahel's remarks show that Saudi women have found refuge in social media through which they can raise their marginalised voices and report issues affecting them. Social media therefore has not simply facilitated Saudi women in addressing their limitations and disadvantages, but it also has made their voices heard nationally and globally. It is believed that issues related, for instance, to the system of male guardianship will not receive global media attention if they are not circulated extensively on social media during the anti-male guardianship campaign.

This view was echoed by another respondent who stated that social media facilitates more flexible and transparent discussions among citizens in authoritarian countries:

Social media has become a key platform for delivering citizens' voices in authoritarian countries. After the emergence of social media technologies, the voices of Saudi citizens have become more significant than in the past ... social media platforms have not only contributed to the visibility of past issues but have also reinforced the visibility of new political and social issues. I mean, for example, in the past, we heard about issues only in private (salons) and between friends, or they were superficially addressed by some elites on television. However, social media has helped us raise the level of visibility for these previously ignored issues (Tariq, 29, male).

Another participant, Layla (33, female), a women's rights activist, argued the following:

There is no doubt that social media has provided us with incredible opportunities to transparently see and discuss the issues that were once upon a time difficult to address on non-social media platforms. As a Saudi woman, I remember sadly how Saudi

women's issues were dealt with by our traditional biased media and how the situation has changed now that Saudi women are largely able to share their problems and difficulties through social media. We have recently seen how Saudi women have used Twitter to express their problems transparently to others by writing or downloading some pictures and videos that convey the message that there are problems that need to be solved ... Just go and look under the hashtag 'anti_male_guardianship_campaign', and you will be amazed by the women's issues and stories of abuses that Saudi women are sharing under this hashtag. Do you think that you would see these kinds of stories anywhere other than on social media? I do not think so.

What is important to consider here is that the interviewees regard social media not only as a powerful instrument for transparency and visibility but also a powerful instrument for accountability. The participants emphasised that by shining more light on the Saudi regulatory process, government officials can be held accountable more readily. The current informational openness, enabled by the evolution of social media technologies, is frustrating the regimes that have regulated for many years the flow of information via strict censorship and other means. For example, Mariam (32, female), a prominent women's rights activist, stated the following:

Formerly, demands for changes and reforms in Saudi Arabia were almost forbidden, but now, with the extensive use of social media by youths, we can clearly see that youths in Saudi Arabia are demanding change and expressing their opinions more freely.

Another participant named Nawal (26, female) had the same opinion as Mariam:

Social media has given us the opportunity to negotiate about issues that have been difficult to address on non-social networking

platforms. We have witnessed the demands for political and social reforms, which have been raised through our discussions over different social media platforms, being taken very seriously by government officials. Additionally, the presence of influential people in the community – such as political activists – on social networking platforms has helped influence the decision makers in the state.

Interestingly, the respondents interviewed in this research strongly believed that social media platforms in Saudi Arabia, particularly Twitter, have become '**a reliable community court**' that works as an alternative to the official courts in Saudi Arabia. 'A community court' is where the investigators and the plaintiffs are all members of the community itself, and all that remains for the authority to do is to make the final decision. For example, one activist, Mohammed (23, male), stated the following:

Social media has become the only platform to raise issues or to claim a particular provision. Saudi people are no longer going to the official courts to raise a particular case and this is due to the difficulty of the process of raising applications through these courts. Thus you find that the majority of people now just approach one of these social media platforms and write their cases or attach a video or image to clarify a certain issue that they encounter, and within a short time, one can find unbelievable levels of responses and interactions with their cases, not only from the ordinary users and activists but also from the officials in the state.

It is worth mentioning here that Saudi authorities seem to acknowledge how widespread Twitter use is in the Kingdom. For example, most of the country's ministers and prominent political and social officials have acquired Twitter accounts and they have been regularly reported to respond directly to the citizens whenever

any issue is raised online that falls under the responsibility of their ministry (Noman et al., 2015).

The participants in this research argued that social networking sites have brought about unprecedented changes in the performance of many government institutions. They have become afraid of this authority, fearing this 'community court', and have also begun taking precautions. A critical comment made by Abdullah (male, 33) in this regard is worth mentioning:

Social media platforms are a court, albeit informal. They prompt concern and fear in many officials or service institutions, both governmental and private. In fact, we have never heard any claims to hold a minister or an official accountable in our traditional media outlets. Indeed, those with high social status are placed above criticism. This is because traditional media channels in Saudi Arabia are heavily censored and controlled by the government itself.

However, Abdullah continued his argument by emphasising on the following:

Social media has contributed greatly to helping us overcome many of these state-imposed controls. Nowadays, a networked individual can present their opinion even if this opinion demands accountability from officials. I can say that many of the reformative decisions that have recently been made by the Saudi government are partly due to the extensive pressures and demands made by Saudi people using social media platforms.

One of the most interesting comments made by the participants about how Twitter in Saudi Arabia has become '*the supervisory organ*' run by the people themselves to

monitor state agencies and services is one by Khalid (male, 34). He considers Twitter in Saudi Arabia an 'independent ministry':

Twitter in Saudi Arabia has become an independent ministry. This ministry is not managed and controlled by a single minister, but every user of this platform is a minister. One of the main objectives of this ministry is to monitor the performance of the government and its services.

In this example, Khalid explained the horizontal mode of power social media users enjoy during their participation. These platforms enable them to report on issues ignored by traditional media and hold business and Saudi authorities accountable to the public.

The interviewees argue that the reality imposed by social media, by enabling users to report and share events and abuse that were previously committed away from the eyes of people, has forced Saudi authorities to abandon their traditional methods of dealing with the mistakes made by some officials. When I asked the participants if they had examples for their claims, a majority of them cited how online public criticism and outcries have led directly to some officials and ministers losing their positions.

One of the examples they commonly cited is the sacking of the Health minister Ahmed Al-Khatib after a short video was leaked showing him having a heated argument with a group of citizens – the video showed him shouting loudly at the citizens and making some angry gestures. The video was extensively circulated on Twitter under a hashtag that, according to some sources, generated more than 15,000 tweets by outraged

citizens demanding that the Saudi authorities dismiss the minister (Abdullah, 2015).

The minister was sacked after a few days (Al Arabiya, 2015).



Picture 5:1 The Leaked Video Showing the Minister of Health Arguing with a Group of Citizens.

A majority of the participants argue that the unacceptable actions of officials led to the removal of some of them from their positions (e.g. the Health minister and many others) in a way that was not usual in Saudi Arabia and that this would not have been possible under the dominance of traditional official media. It is my belief that social media platforms have become effective tools in shaping and mobilising public opinion in Saudi Arabia.

One significant aspect that caught my attention during the discussions with the participants was the way they considered the potential role of social media technologies in influencing the power structures in Saudi society. They argued that

their use of social media has enabled them, to a great extent, to challenge the dominant powers in Saudi Arabia, which include ministries as well as other politicians, intellectuals, and religious leaders who only serve the interests and the orientations of the government. Moreover, they pointed out that the use of social media in Saudi Arabia not only provides the capacity for other counter-powers to flourish and function in a de-centralised and anti-hierarchical way but also gives rise to online collective identities which arm them as ordinary citizens to challenge the Saudi decision makers.

One of the participants, Abdullah (33, male), asserted the following:

I personally believe that social media has incredibly influenced the power structures in Saudi Arabia. Social media platforms have become, in my point of view, the fourth estate in the nation. Over the past decade, we have seen very clearly that most of the changes and decisions that have taken place in the country have been driven initially by a debate on one of the social media platforms, such as Twitter.

He also mentioned the following:

In the past, it was impossible to hear someone criticise a senior officer, for example, a minister or a prince, through traditional media channels. This is primarily due to the fact that traditional media channels in Saudi Arabia are run by the state itself and are heavily censored. Therefore, all that you found in these channels were those who just praised the Saudi government and any decisions that they made, whether these decisions were good or bad for the Saudi citizens. But with the use of social media, ordinary citizens and activists have overcome many of these

previous obstacles and have been able to put forward their views, even if their views required the accountability of an official.

Another participant called Mshari (25, male) believes that the 'Arab Spring' and the arguable role played by social media platforms in this revolution has had a major impact on the Saudi government:

I think that after the Arab Spring, social media platforms have demonstrated their ability to influence authoritarian regimes and their ability to openly disseminate political and social issues that greatly influence decision makers.

He continued:

Therefore, we noticed that the Saudi government, especially after the events of the 'Arab Spring', began to seriously take into account the claims that were talked about through social networking sites. The use of new media technologies, especially in societies that do not enjoy democracy, represents a force that cannot be ignored in influencing the decision makers. This is what we youths in Saudi Arabia are witnessing through the recent decisions that have been made after receiving considerable pressure from Twitter. One of these decisions is the recent permission for Saudi women to drive.

Although I fully agree with the argument above that the Arab Spring, along with the unprecedented openness, transparency, and the rich sources of information facilitated by social media tools, has certainly had some implications for political power in Saudi Arabia, surprisingly, only a few interviewees in this study (two) mentioned the potential impact that the Arab Spring may have had on power structures in Saudi Arabia.

Moreover, the interviewees argued that it is time for Saudi authorities to understand that social media in Saudi Arabia functions as a watchdog to their activities, and therefore, they should be more open to their citizens. The potential role of social media in increasing transparency mentioned by the interviewees is in line with the argument made by Bertot et al. (2010, p.265) that “ICTs can reduce corruption by promoting good governance, strengthening reform-oriented initiatives, reducing potential for corrupt behaviours, enhancing relationships between government employees and citizens, allowing for citizen tracking of activities, and by monitoring and controlling behaviours of government employees”.

Together, these perspectives provide an important insight into how young adults in Saudi Arabia have utilised social media to increase transparency and hold the Saudi authorities more accountable. The participants on the whole demonstrated that traditional media’s extended monopoly over information in the Kingdom has finally been broken due to the mass adoption of social media by Saudi youths. They argue that the unprecedented transparency brought about by social media has not only given them an unparalleled opportunity to introduce and discuss their daily issues in a more credible and visible manner, but it has also provided them with the perfect tools to closely monitor the behaviours of several official bodies in the Kingdom.

5.4 Greater Awareness among Saudi Youths

The third crucial theme that emerged from the discussions with the interviewees is the manner in which the use of social media has contributed significantly to the users’ awareness and knowledge of socio-political events. With the revolution in informational technologies, authoritarian regimes are no longer able to discourage,

cancel, or marginalise political and social issues as they previously did (Kahne et al., 2015). In Saudi Arabia, for example, social media has greatly enabled and given agency to ordinary citizens and activists to discuss socio-political issues outside the purview of government-set boundaries. Informational openness is not only about sharing facts or otherwise shocking information about the government, it is also information about and shared among the citizens themselves.

Numerous recent issues, for instance, the male guardianship system, which will be a case study in my current research (See Chapter Six), have become the focus of debate on Twitter. For instance, activists interviewed in this research revealed that the issue of the male guardianship system has been privately discussed for a long time. However, they asserted that the issue of the male guardianship system sparked an incredible reaction after a hashtag on Twitter was established. People, especially women, began to share and discuss their individual experiences regarding the issue. Moreover, they emphasised that the discussion of this issue over Twitter has resulted in an increased awareness among Saudi people, as it has spoken of how this system, in some ways, unfairly affects Saudi women.

The findings of this research demonstrate that social media platforms have, as most of the participants revealed, played an unprecedented role in raising the level of awareness among the Saudi Arabian public. For instance, one of the participants, Nabil (32, male), explained the following:

[...] for me personally, I benefited greatly from my participation on Twitter. I became more aware and open to the ideas of others. This is due to the presence of a large section of society – comprising both intellectuals and the general public – on these social media

platforms. The presence of people from various fields as well as the existence of several views and discussions on political and social issues all contributed to my personality. The favourable environment provided by social media platforms contributed to the creation of a discussion not only on these platforms but even in the daily meetings between friends. For example, there was almost no day that I did not discuss hot topics raised on Twitter with my friends when we met every night.

Similarly, Layla (33, female) emphasised that as a women's rights activist and one of those who struggled in bringing down the 'male guardianship system', she witnessed a significant change in Saudi Arabian society in terms of handling the issue of the 'male guardianship system'. She particularly noticed that at the beginning of this online campaign, they faced great opposition from some members of Saudi society. However, after almost a year, they saw a substantial change not only among those who were previously against them but also in the way Saudi people dealt with and discussed the issue of the male guardianship system. She expressed the following view:

The anti-male guardianship activism has generated a great awareness among Saudi society regarding the status of Saudi women and some of the persecutions they have faced. This campaign fascinates Saudi women because it is impacting religious discourse in Saudi Arabia that was earlier masculine and served the interests of males.

This view was echoed by another respondent:

Saudi youths have currently, with the use of social media, become more aware of and familiar with the issues affecting their daily

lives. This can be seen clearly from their discussions and debates over social media platforms (Enas, 27, female).

It is clear from the above remarks that both social media activist and ordinary users have a common consensus that social media has played an important role in increasing the level of awareness among the Saudi public. Both emphasized that the growing adoption of these platforms, along with the pervasive thoughts and opinions resulting from the discussions between online users have led to the disclosure of many hidden issues among Saudi society.

Furthermore, the results of this research show that social media has truly influenced even the styles and patterns of youths' offline discussions with parents and friends. The interviewees disclosed that the revolution in social media technologies has largely changed the trajectories and themes of people's discussions. The diversity of opinions and ideas found on social media has prompted Saudi youths' awareness. For instance, Ayman (32, male) stated the following:

In fact, the extensive use of social networking sites especially among youths in Saudi Arabia has to some extent contributed to the acceptance of other people's opinions and beliefs. These diversities in users' social classes, ages, and backgrounds cannot be found in the Saudi traditional media which has for many years adopted views that are consistent with the orientations of the Saudi government. Even leaders of thought and elites hosted by state-owned channels deal only with the issues dictated by the political office in the state. Therefore, they cannot discuss the important issues that have affected the Saudi public.

The respondents interviewed in this research also strongly argued that their participation in different social media platforms has paved the way for them to learn

a great deal from their interactions and sharing of experiences with each other. The features inherent in new media technologies, particularly interactivity and visibility, have encouraged Saudi youths to overcome, to a great extent, the existing hierarchy in the Saudi society, which is partly imposed by the practices of the Saudi government and partly due to the very conservative nature of Saudi culture (See Chapter Three).

This traditional hierarchy in Saudi society limits the challenging of views and ideas and compels the members of Saudi society to follow the dominant views held primarily by the Saudi government as well as conservative habits dictated by elders. Some respondents revealed that their participation in social media has enabled them to challenge ideas, listen to both sides of the argument, and respect other people's differences and opinions (though there are some drawbacks to social media participation stressed by some interviewees which I will address in several places across the empirical chapters). The ongoing online interactions between Saudi youths and people of diverse backgrounds have enabled Saudi youths to come across different people's views and beliefs, all of which have contributed significantly to nurturing their awareness and acceptance of differences.

One of the participants, Nabil (32, male), shared his experience of when he was sent abroad to study in the USA. He spoke about how his personality changed after he lived, studied, and spent time in America, and how American culture influenced his former outlook, which was opposed to a debate on social and political issues. He admitted that the lifestyle and culture that supported and encouraged different views and debates on issues, both politically and socially, along with his recent active presence on Twitter, have contributed positively in helping him change his

perspective on concepts that he previously considered correct. Additionally, he asserted that rational and effective discussions play a major role in the development of societies as well as individuals' awareness.

I really see it as a very nice thing to have an open discussion, because discussions are the key factor in educating and developing any community. For example, I witnessed during my studies in America a lot of discussions and debates among the American communities, and this was both online and offline. People were participating and voicing opinions regarding all social issues without any difficulties and very comfortably, and they respected all views. At first, I did not accept the debates, especially those on social issues, and I was also one of the fiercest opponents to have a debate on social or political issues with. But after the period I spent in the United States as well as my extensive participation on Twitter, I have become more receptive to other people's opinions.

Another participant, Wala (33, female), a social media activist, had the same comment. Her words reflected the manner in which social media has enabled Saudi youths to overcome some of their former cultural obstacles and open up to other people's perspectives:

Social media has helped us exchange ideas. It has given us a chance to think, especially about differences. If we come across a different person, we engage with this difference and try to discuss it with people. For example, I used to reject some people's views and beliefs. My rejection of other people's opinions was mainly due to the conservative culture and social customs that I grew up with. But with my active presence on Twitter, I became convinced that it was freedom and personal ideas ... why am I not accepting them?

Interestingly, the findings of this research show that most of the participants (i.e. male/females, social media activist and ordinary users) agreed that social media has proven to be a fundamental factor in raising Saudi women's awareness in particular. They argued that due to several social obstacles embedded in the very conservative Saudi culture and norms, Saudi women are largely excluded from full participation in political and social affairs.

The limited positions they hold in the higher echelons of the government have deprived them of access to decision-making for issues that concern them. Saudi women lacked a tool that enabled them to articulate issues affecting them until they discovered social media. With the introduction of several social media platforms – including Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube – as female participants have argued, it has become easier for them to exchange ideas quickly, raise awareness, and launch campaigns in order to demand that their rights be recognised.

The respondents argued that the #Women2Drive campaign on Twitter is an outstanding example of how Saudi women have made an incredible effort to highlight their need and basic right to drive. The online campaign, which began in 2011 and ended in September 2017 when a royal decree was issued allowing women to drive, demonstrated how the online activism of Saudi women has generated awareness and interest in the status of Saudi Arabian women both locally and globally.

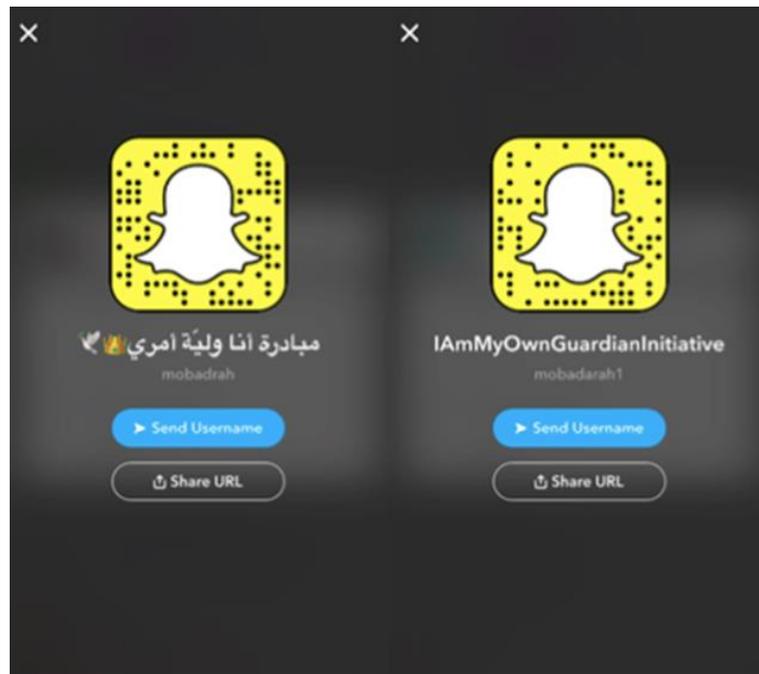
Although it has commonly been said that the Saudi government mostly permits online debates on socio-political issues as a way to let the Saudi public vent their dissatisfaction and frustration, women's reliance on social media platforms to raise awareness about their current social conditions has presumably had far-reaching

consequences than what the Saudi government initially imagined. The participants argued that the online world has become a space of choice for Saudi women to experience a lifestyle that is largely free from both state-set boundaries as well as the constraints of the conservative Saudi culture and traditions.

According to Manahel (26, female), for Saudi women, taking into consideration the conservative traditions and customs of the Saudi society, which have greatly influenced women's effectiveness in activism and their proper participation in society, social media seems like an ideal platform for them to join forces, address issues concerning them that were formerly marginalised, and thereby raise awareness. One of the most common difficulties Saudi women face is immobility, as it is almost impossible for Saudi women in the different regions of such a huge country to meet in a place to discuss their issues and rights. However, as Walaa (33, female), a women's rights advocator, argued, "Social media has paved the way for us and displaced many of the difficulties that we once faced".

Walaa explained how she and her friend, Areej, also a women rights activist, have utilised the Snapchat platform to generate awareness about issues affecting women in Saudi Arabia. Soon after Areej created an account on Snapchat, known in Arabic as مبادرة أنا ولية أمري and translated into English as 'I am my own guardian initiative', she created another account of the same name, but in English. She mentioned that through these two accounts, they uploaded videos translated in Arabic as well as English, and shared real-life stories of Saudi women that demonstrated their difficulties and problems, most of which were shared by the followers of the two accounts. She and Areej were amazed to see how these two accounts had raised

awareness among followers. They asserted that they had witnessed extensive interactions between the followers, and even some opposing followers had soon become more understanding of Saudi women’s status along with the challenges, injustice, and violations they face.



Picture 5:2 The Two Snapchat Accounts of the Anti-Male Guardianship System Campaign.

One of the important points emphasised by the respondents is the great effort that social media activists have put into supporting marginalised people and generating awareness about issues affecting them. For example, Manal (22, female) appreciated the great work done by social media activists in Saudi Arabia and said that she believed that “they have the merit of spotlighting issues and facts that ordinary Saudi people were unaware of”.

Similarly, Manahel (26, female) stated that in the past, Saudi women could not claim even their most basic rights, but after social media activists raised awareness about

and contributed towards remedying many social and political issues, Saudi women have become more aware and more involved in discussing their issues compared to before.

The arguments made by Manal and Manahel regarding the critical role social media activists have played in raising many issues in Saudi Arabia can be proved true by empirical evidence. In fact, they act like pioneers who initiate the actions that in many cases capture public attention regarding several political and social issues. For example, when Manal Al-Sharif, a women's rights activist, tweeted a video of herself driving in the streets of Khobar in late 2011, the public quickly took notice, and the Women2Drive campaign began, which astounded many in Saudi Arabia and received unprecedented international media attention.

Together, these results provide important insights into how social media can critically function as a tool to raise awareness and improve the visibility of certain socio-political issues. The role of social media in raising awareness becomes more obvious in an authoritarian context where the abuse of power, government corruption, and social issues are often misrepresented by traditional media. This is indeed why social media platforms may play a tremendous role in facilitating communication, decentralising the spread of information, and empowering affected individuals to bring issues neglected by the conventional media to light.

5.5 Contextual Factors: The Potential Influence of Socio-Cultural Factors, Religious Ideology, and an Oppressive Political Atmosphere on Young Saudi Adults During Their Online Participation

One of the main objectives of the research is to explore how contextual factors (i.e. politics, culture, religion) influence young adults in Saudi Arabia during their online

participation in socio-political issues. The initial purpose of this research is to examine the extent to which social media platforms have established a more democratic online environment in Saudi Arabia as well as to investigate how Saudi Arabian young adults perceive the tools of social media in facilitating their online participation in socio-political issues, which will be discussed in-depth later, in the discussion and conclusion chapter (Chapter Seven).

There is no doubt that the distinctive features of social media have facilitated access to a wealth of resources, provided users with tools for political expression and mobilisation, and created new possibilities for political participation and activism (Kahne et al., 2015). Moreover, it can be argued that individuals who were formerly acting outside of gatekeeping institutions are now pursuing larger influence and a greater voice in the public sphere than what hierarchical institutions had previously provided them opportunities for.

However, there are critical offline factors that are indeed not abandoned at the login screen, which influence individuals' decisions to participate in and engage with socio-political issues and which should not be overlooked when assessing the political implications of social media in an authoritarian context.

In Saudi Arabia, factors such as culture and religion play a vital role in shaping individuals' lifestyles, attitudes, and behaviours. However, what makes assessing such factors more complex is that in Saudi Arabia, cultural values are tightly interwoven with Islamic ideology (Wahhabism in particular) in such a way that it is sometimes hard to separate them. Al-Saggaf (2004, p.1,4) writes the following:

Saudi Arabia's culture is in its very nature, religious. That is, Islam plays a central role in defining the culture, and acts as a major force in determining the social norms, patterns, traditions, obligations, privileges and practices of society. This is especially so since Islam is not only a religious ideology, but a comprehensive system which embraces detailed prescriptions for the entire way of life. ... Religion and culture in Saudi Arabia not only shape people's attitudes, practices, and behaviours, but also shape the construction of their reality about their lives.

Therefore, I believe that in order to gain a deeper understanding of how Saudi young adults experience and approach social media tools within the context of political participation and activism, we need to consider, besides the challenges posed by the oppressive political context (which indeed have now been arguably reduced with the extensive reliance of Saudi youth on social media), the cultural and religious contexts. Moreover, to the best of my knowledge, the influence of religious and cultural contexts on how individuals use social media platforms, especially in an authoritarian context, is still relatively underexamined.

Although as mentioned earlier that the very conservative Saudi culture and ideology of Wahhabism are difficult to untangle, a small proportion of the participants have emphasised upon these two influential factors separately. For example, some of the interviewees have argued that the male guardianship system (which will be a case study in this research, See Chapter Six) is a system built on a wrong interpretation of some verses in the Quran and Prophetic Hadeeth. However, a majority of them have argued that although the system is basically based on interpretations of Wahhabism, our conservative culture has enhanced such a system.

Therefore, in the next section, in addition to the fear of government surveillance and the factor of repression identified by some participants, I will address the cultural and religious factors together, with an emphasis on each factor should the context require it, because I believe that the influence of culture and religion on the Saudi public identity as well as the manner in which these factors shape individuals' online participation cannot be assessed independently. Indeed, they are deeply intertwined factors, affecting each other in a continuous loop. Furthermore, I would like to emphasise that these contextual factors will appear in several places across the thesis' chapters.

5.5.1 The Socio-Cultural and Religious Ideology Factors

Saudi Arabian society is one of the most conservative and religious societies in the Arab world. In Saudi Arabia, culture and religion play central roles in shaping people's behaviours and attitudes, and in defining their values, norms, and activities. Therefore, Saudi people's daily practices are heavily influenced by these established cultural rules as well as some Islamic teachings. One example of this is the way the collectivism of Saudi society is reflected in the belief that individuals (males or females) represent not only themselves but the entire family and the extended family.

The behaviour of an individual greatly affects the perception and reputation of their family and in some cases, also the tribe to which they belong. Thus, if any actions by the individuals are deemed inappropriate, they will bring shame (dishonour) to their entire family.

Tradition's hold over Saudi Arabian society is strong and there are many practices in Saudi Arabia that are not necessarily derived from Islam but rather old customs inherited by generations over the years. The hierarchy in Saudi society is mainly the result of tribal traditions. In daily life and during social events and family gatherings, older people or those with higher statuses are often the ones who dominate and control the discussions. Younger members of the family, in order to respect the senior members of their tribes, do not usually speak but continue listening. This culture that they grew up in has made it difficult for people, and especially for women, to voice their opinions explicitly. This, as the interviewees indicated, is not just the case in the offline world but has also been a problem in the online world sometimes.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the participants in this study believe that culture and religion in Saudi society are some of the biggest challenges that can be faced by individuals in their daily lives and activities. For example, Layla (33, female), a women's rights activist, revealed that her tribe is one of the biggest obstacles she faced as a social media activist. She argued that because she belongs to a well-known tribe in Saudi Arabia, she often felt reluctant to delve into some of the controversial social issues of Saudi society:

As a personal experience, the biggest challenge I faced was the tribe. The tribe is a political entity. It is never enough to be a liberal and understanding family. There is a tribe and its traditional habits stand. The members of the tribe see themselves as responsible for those who belong to their tribe.

Another participant named Walaa (33, female), a prominent activist in the campaign against the male guardianship system, had a similar comment about how culture can

put the Saudis in a serious dilemma when it comes to participating in socio-political issues. She said the following:

Many of my relatives and family members have spoken to my father several times and asked him to stop my activities regarding the social issues that I tend to talk about through my Twitter account.

She argued that in a society that has been closed off for years, it is difficult to speak out about social and political issues that most people see as sensitive and contrary to their customs and traditions.

Layla and Walaa's remarks showed how tribes and family can challenge the freedom of their individual members. Within this context, women in Saudi society in particular bear greater responsibility in matters of honour than men. There is an Arabic saying: "honour rides on the skirts of women" (Shoup, 2009, p.177). Consequently, losing honour or reputation is considered to be a major setback among Saudi individuals and they try to avoid this at all costs.

Likewise, Nabil (32, male) also argued that parents and friends have a very strong influence on the actions and attitudes of individuals in Saudi society. He supposed that many Saudi youths often try to avoid discussions on some public issues in an attempt to please their families and friends, even if it is in contrast to what they believe in.

Parents and friends may also be a barrier because, for example, if individuals have parents or a majority of friends who hold a certain belief or opinion, it is difficult for them to break away from or disagree with this belief or opinion.

Furthermore, the findings of this study show that social media users face harsh reactions and threats from some conservatives and hardliners in Saudi society because they address social issues – this is another major barrier that prevents participants from engaging with contentious social issues. For example, one of the participants called Ameerah (25, female) mentioned that because she is an active participant on Twitter, especially for women’s issues, she has been subjected to a lot of cyberbullying.

Similarly, Mohammed (23, male) stated that the fear of the very harsh social reactions such as slander, defamation, and intimidation that they may face from the conservatives in Saudi society, most of whom are present frequently on social media platforms, is one of the major social obstacles that makes many youths afraid to delve into issues, especially when many members of the society see such activism as detrimental to Saudi social customs.

Walaa’s personal experience is a good example of this:

As a women’s rights activist, once I write a tweet that, for example, discusses a certain social issue, I start to receive several unacceptable responses, including ones that are hurtful to me and my family and some insulting words that cannot be said in real life.

She further explained a recent insult that she received:

A few days ago, I was discussing a women’s rights issue on Twitter, and all of a sudden during the discussion with my Twitter followers, one of the observers tweeted that Walaa belongs to the Shia community and it is better for her to go and discuss the issue of the ‘Mutah marriage’ [the pleasure marriage] that her Shia community believes in, instead of discussing our issues.

Such unpleasant reactions pointed out by Walaa and other interviewees show how sometimes engaging in socio-political issues in a very religious and conservative culture can lead to harsh reactions that could greatly impact individuals' decisions to participate. It also shows the influential role of Saudi tribes in the behaviours of their members. A tribe in Saudi society forms a social and political unit whose members cannot go beyond traditions and customs in a way that could affect its reputation and status.

Regarding the influence of the ideology of Wahhabism, particularly in the day-to-day activities of Saudi people, Nabil (32) revealed a crucial point. He stated that the confusion experienced by a large section of Saudi society regarding some of the Islamic teachings is, in fact, not because of the Islamic religion itself, but because of some of the Wahhabi imams who have unfortunately established in the minds of people some concepts that have nothing to do with the Islamic religion. He stated the following:

The issue of women driving in Saudi Arabia has caused great controversy among Saudi citizens, and this is because of the views of those Wahhabi imams on this issue, which have no relation at all to the Islamic religion. These fatwa in fact, have created great confusion among people in Saudi Arabia between what the teachings of Islam are and what the customs and traditions are. For example, I personally heard many imams saying that women driving is a religious issue and it is considered as being against Islamic teachings. I once even heard a sheikh saying that whoever would let his wife or daughter drive a car should be deemed a 'dayyooth' [an Arabic word referring to men who do not have

‘protective jealousy’ over their wives, daughters, and immediate women relatives].

He further insisted the following:

As Saudi people are known to be one of the most conservative and religious societies, the sheikhs have a great role in influencing them in terms of dealing with their daily issues.

Similarly, Mohammed (23, male), a social media activist, said the following:

If you look at the lifestyle of Saudi society, you can see that many people try to make most of their decisions in a manner that does not contradict the teachings of Islam. Therefore, we find that a large section of Saudi society is very hesitant to engage in the debates of any political or social issues so as to avoid falling into what is believed to be contrary to the Sharia laws.

These remarks by Nabil and Mohammed showed the great influence Wahhabi imams in Saudi Arabia have on the way Saudi society thinks about and deals with its daily affairs. Therefore, although the interviewees indicate that social networking sites have facilitated the participation in socio-political issues as well as helped them overcome many of the previous tribal traditions and religious obstacles such as gender segregation, there are some cultural and ideology-related habits that are impossible to overcome on non-social media platforms and which still have some influence over their behaviour even on social media platforms.

For instance, Ayman (32, male) argued the following:

There is no doubt that social media has contributed significantly to helping us as Saudis participate in political and social issues and raise awareness among Saudi individuals, but we have to admit

that due to decades of the government's control over religious institutions, along with the great influence of tribal customs, the people's perception of political and social affairs is largely affected and framed in a manner that serves the interests of the Saudi authorities ... I think that this indeed has greatly contributed to creating a serious challenge for people in Saudi Arabia when they seek to introduce alternative and reformative beliefs or values that the majority of the public is not familiar with, or which are traditionally perceived as harmful to the religion and culture.

Having said that, a majority of the participants of all study sample categories (i.e. male/female, social media activist and ordinary users) were very pleased about what social networking sites have enabled them to achieve. They emphasised that changes in the customs and traditions of a closed society such as Saudi Arabia take time, and what we are now witnessing, especially through the recent official decisions such as the royal decree allowing women to drive and the announcement of the 2030 vision (See Chapter Three for more details), is a positive trend towards a freer future for youth in Saudi Arabia. What the Saudi youth should do now is work to get rid of some unjustifiable habits, raise their level of awareness, and accept the differences among them.

5.5.2 The Fear of Government Surveillance and Repression

The second factor that could be responsible for affecting Saudi people's online participation in socio-political issues, as some of the interviewees in this study have argued, is the government's intensive surveillance both on the dissenters as well as on any content or activities that contradict its orientations.

It is important to emphasise that the word 'politics' is a 'hot' and controversial topic to the Saudi people, and it has indeed become a prominent feature of Saudi Arabian life. In fact, I have found that most of the interviewees consider politics their favourite and most important topic of discussion and this is possibly because of the fact that the region itself is politically motivated. Interestingly, this is consistent with the findings of a mixed methods study conducted by Noman et al. (2015) who found that politics is one of the most prominent topics that the Saudi people are interested in; it draws the most debates and attention in the Saudi Arabian Twittersphere.

In the offline community, for instance, when people visit their relatives and friends, or during social functions such as marriages or religious festivals, they often discuss their public affairs and political issues, but with some caution to not cross the red line (Al-Saggaf and Weckert, 2004). Similarly, online forums – social media platforms particularly – are said to be largely used as sites where Saudi people get together for the purpose of expressing their opinions, exchanging different ideas, exposing injustice, sharing with each other what they think, and trying to make sense of what is going on in their country. For example, one of the participants, Tariq (29, male), stated the following:

I see that as a Saudi society, we love to participate in political and social discussions, and we like to express our opinions on every single issue. For example, I have lived for more than five years in America and I have many American friends, but I found that the majority of them have no interest, as we here in Saudi Arabia have, in political topics. I do not mean that they do not speak about their politics and public affairs, but I feel that they do not have the strong desire to discuss political issues, as is the case here in Saudi

society. [Here, I asked him – Why do you think that we Saudis like to talk about politics more?] Well, I think that one of the reasons is that in Saudi Arabia, we have for many years lacked the platform through which we could widely discuss our public affairs and share our thoughts.

This view was echoed by another respondent:

What I have really noticed about us as Saudi youths is that we always want to discuss our political and social issues. For instance, in our weekly meetings, my friends and I often talk about political and social issues. Moreover, the discussion between us about these issues does not stop after our physical meeting is over, but it continues sometimes over Twitter and WhatsApp (Nawal, 26, female).

But then, the critical question is – is everything that can be said truly expressed when it comes to political matters in Saudi Arabia? Considering the fact that offline political activities continue to have red lines and elicit aggressive reactions from the authorities as explained in Chapter Three, I am interested in assessing the extent to which social media platforms have contributed to limiting the level of political repression. In other words, is social media, as Morozov (2011) argues, a repressive tool in the hands of authoritarian governments, through which they can expand their control over people, or is it, as Diamond (2010) argues, a ‘Liberation Technology’ that offers a space in which networked individuals can escape a harsh political environment?

While most of the interviewees indicated that the potential factor of political repression plays a considerable role in their decisions of engagement with sensitive socio-political issues, some argued that social media platforms have greatly limited such fear of repression. They believe that although Saudi authorities have succeeded

in controlling offline political activities, they have been struggling to control such large-scale online activities and information flows. Moreover, some participants asserted that the nature of new communication technologies has made the exercise of repression a difficult goal for the Saudi authorities to achieve.

It has commonly been argued that individuals with shared interests are now linked through modern networked technologies and no longer feel that they alone or isolated, as these technologies have largely helped bridge geographical and social distances. This has led some interviewees in this research to argue that the relatively protective nature of social media has made online surveillance challenging for the Saudi authorities to implement. Nawal (26, female) has highlighted this by saying the following:

Of course, in the past, the fear of Saudi authorities was very great. So, it was very rare to find someone who talked about political matters in front of people they did not know or trust. You may notice that for example, sometimes when someone talks about sensitive political issues or criticises the ruling family during our large public gatherings, some will jump in and say to that person, 'Please stop or be careful with your language, we want to live in peace!' However, I believe that now with the new media communications, the situation has completely changed. Individuals in Saudi Arabia are getting bolder and stronger than they were earlier.

Here, I asked Nawal – Can you explain how social media has, as you said, helped affected individuals or those who are just interested in politics overcome the fear that had previously prevented them from engaging with sensitive political issues?

This was her response:

From my point of view, I believe that the discovery of ‘shared interests and common experiences’ on social media has greatly helped individuals overcome their fear.

Nawal continued her argument by revealing her personal experience:

I was often reluctant to engage in feminist issues for fear of several things, but after finding large groups of affected women on Twitter sharing the same issues and concerns, I started overcoming this fear.

I became very motivated and excited to share my views with them.

It seems that the shared-interest-driven factor that social media can facilitate for affected or isolated individuals plays a considerable role in helping individuals, especially those living in authoritarian contexts, overcome the fear of political repression. For instance, Mohammed (23, male), a social media activist, agreed with

Nawal’s argument:

Social networking sites have helped Saudi youths overcome many of the previous obstacles by helping them find those who share the same concerns as them. This has made affected individuals feel that they are not alone and that there are many members of the community with whom they can share their interests and issues.

Moreover, according to some interviewees, in addition to the role of the ‘shared interest factor’ discussed above, the ‘anonymity feature’ inherent in some social media platforms, where users can conceal their personal identity, has greatly helped them overcome the fear of repression and has encouraged them to freely speak up and exercise their freedom of speech, even if the subject is politically sensitive. For example, one respondent argued the following:

Social media is a valuable gift to us in Saudi Arabia. It has unexpectedly helped us overcome several political and social barriers. Anyone can now open an account on Twitter, hide their identity, and then start talking about whatever they want. No one can identify who you are. I personally see countless anonymous accounts on Twitter which participate in very sensitive political issues with ease, because it is difficult for the Saudi authorities to follow millions of users (Nabil, 32, male).

Similarly, Walaa argued the following:

No one can deny that the fear of political repression in such a religious authoritarian country is a big concern for anyone who wants to express and share their political views. But I believe that the communicative features of social networking sites have greatly limited such fears, as users can now easily conceal their identities and enjoy a high level of political freedom.

Therefore, it is clear from the aforementioned discussions that those interviewees who argued that social media platforms have reduced the level of the fear of political repression to only offline political activities have based their arguments on two critical points:

- First, social media works as a connector for individuals with shared interests in a way that would have been almost impossible in Saudi Arabia without these platform tools due to several obstacles (e.g. the harsh political restrictions on public gatherings, the lack of Saudi women's mobility, geographical and safety challenges). They argued that in such a harsh political environment, social media can help disconnected individuals find those who share the same

interests as them. This consequently would help those physically isolated individuals build online networks based on common interests.

Crucial here is that the high potentiality of 'solidarity' and 'close friendships' that could be built among those individuals during their online interactions may lead them to overcome the fear of political repression to a great extent.

As some of the interviewees argued, this is due to the positive feeling that they are now not alone and that there are many out there who share the same interests and hopes as them. Interestingly, as has been discussed in the theoretical framework (See Chapter Two), this is considered to be a vital point in the process of the 'weak and strong ties' formation (Blau, 2010; Tufekci, 2010).

- Second, they argued that the 'anonymity' inherent in the online medium has limited such fears of repression. They pointed out that although Saudi authorities have largely succeeded in controlling offline activities, they face great challenges in censoring the online ones. However, the critical issue that I want to highlight here is that although the anonymity feature provided by social media was instrumental in enabling Saudi youths to overcome socio-cultural barriers and fears of repression and giving them an opportunity to express themselves freely, some discussants have frequently mentioned that anonymity has encouraged some users to be rude and offensive towards those who disagree with them.

That being said, there are a few interviewees who disagree with the aforementioned views that social media has limited such fears of repression. They argued that there is no doubt that social media platforms have opened up a suitable space for the Saudi

youths to engage in political and social discourse. However, users should bear in mind during their online activities the fact that this space is shaped by legal measures regulating objectionable content. Furthermore, they emphasised that what complicates the situation even more is that in Saudi Arabia, both the security forces as well as the judicial system are highly influenced by the Saudi Royal Family, the King in particular. Thus, the extensive power given to the state rulers, and the lack of justice and security have all made the risk of political repression higher and more unpredictable.

Therefore, they asserted that Saudi youths should be cautious with what they say, especially when it comes to sensitive political issues in Saudi Arabia. However, according to them, the government is not in favour of people expressing themselves politically, whether offline or online. These pressures and barriers enforced by the government have made Saudi youths sometimes reluctant to involve themselves in some sensitive political discussions. For example, Mansour (34, male) pointed out that social networking platforms allowed him to effectively follow and understand the latest political and social news in the area. However, he often avoided expressing opinions that were contrary to the government's orientation because of the fear of arrest or accountability:

In general, I do not explicitly express my views on social media, but I follow and familiarise myself with the political and social events in the region. The reason is that I have some fear of talking about political issues. Detectives are planted on social media platforms. This can lead to considerable fear of being held to account, especially if oppositional opinions are expressed.

Mansour's view was echoed by another respondent:

Social media sites are very useful platforms to follow the latest news. These platforms give us exposure to the different views of different age groups or classes in Saudi Arabia. But at the same time, I think that we sometimes cannot overcome the fear of expressing opinions, especially about issues related to the political system in the country. There are the so-called electronic police, who monitor social media platforms and extensively check the views that do not agree with the general directions of the state (Manal, 22, female).

Moreover, the participants argued that even those who take political stands that are considered controversial within Saudi society usually choose to do so using pseudonyms. For example, Walaa (33, female), an activist, asserted that she has always noticed that the majority of those engaged in controversial political issues at the level of the government and who voice their opinions explicitly tend to use pseudonyms for the fear of being prosecuted, but in return, she also finds that most of the accounts that use real names (especially those accounts with a large number of followers) assume personal responsibility for what is written or expressed about the political issues.

One interesting finding is that some participants looked at the fear of political repression from another angle. They argued that the Saudi authorities can be more tolerant with criticism, demands, and low-cost activism that pose no direct threat to the government's power and stability (e.g. criticism of public services, women's rights activism, calls for reforms, and so on). However, for example, demands for constitutional monarchy, criticism of the Royal Family, or calls for offline activism are regarded by the Saudi authorities as direct threats to their security and sovereignty,

and therefore, such activities cannot be negotiated with or tolerated, and they will be dealt with very harshly.

I would say that throughout my years of social media observation, particularly Twitter, and in terms of the issues raised on this platform, I consider the above argument highly accurate, especially after the Arab Spring. It seems to me that although Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries have escaped such a revolution, this external factor (the Arab Spring) has played two roles. First, it taught Saudi authorities a lesson about the power of social media tools in speedily mobilising people in favour of their own ideas and demands as well as providing them with a space in which they can easily share and spread information. Indeed, the impact of the Arab Spring on the Saudi authorities was evident during and after the sparks of the revolution. They spent billions of riyals in order to pacify people as well as to avoid any potential calls for demonstrations. Second, I believe that in addition to the role that the Arab Spring has played in helping Saudi youths relatively overcome the fears of political repression, it has sped up public demands for more political reforms and rights.

In summary, the discussion regarding the fear of government surveillance and repression has produced two camps. On one hand are those who argue that social media has greatly limited such fears of repression due to two factors (shared awareness and anonymity). On the other hand, a few participants asserted that although social media platforms have provided them with a great space to participate in socio-political issues in addition to enabling marginalised groups to find their voices online, the Saudi government still has the ability to crack down on activists as well as monitor objectionable content.

Furthermore, there was a general agreement among the interviewees that the fear of repression is at a higher level for those who use their real identities and much less for the those who use pseudonyms, especially for those with a large number of followers (i.e. social and political activists).

5.6 Conclusion

In the present chapter, as the title suggests, my focus was primarily on investigating the dimensions of the political implications of social media within the authoritarian context, Saudi Arabia, through the participants' voices. In doing so, I have extracted four key themes from my thematic analysis of the interview transcripts. These themes, as listed in the introduction of this chapter, are the following: new social media and the emergence of a more participatory socio-political domain; greater awareness among Saudi youths; social media as novel platforms for transparency and public accountability; and the contextual factors: the potential influence of socio-culture factors, religious ideology, and an oppressive political atmosphere on young Saudi adults during their online participation.

One of the prominent points highlighted by the respondents in the first theme is how social media platforms have created great opportunities for them, through their facilitating tools, to participate in political and social issues. Social networking sites have expanded the scope of civic activities in Saudi Arabia by offering new forms of political and social participation. Furthermore, the individuals who were previously marginalised by state media channels have now acquired a greater influence and voice in the socio-political realm than they were provided with by conventional media. The radical shift in informational accessibility brought about by new media

technologies has paved the way for Saudi youths to enjoy a high level of freedom in discussing their public affairs and social issues in an environment that they had never dreamed of. For decades, the Saudi traditional media exerted all control over public information. It highlighted only what was in line with the government's policy and limited everything that would contradict the Saudi state's orientations. Social media has enabled Saudi individuals, regardless of their educational and social classes, to engage with and discuss the issues affecting their political and social affairs.

The interviewees not only credited social media with establishing a space for them to voice their opinions and engage in discussions but also lauded it as a great tool that has facilitated discussions of several political and social topics that were considered taboo in Saudi Arabian culture. Given the scarcity of channels for civic participation in Saudi Arabia outside of officially sanctioned avenues, social media platforms have provided the Saudi youth with an alternative space for political expression, mobilisation, collaboration, and organisation.

There were some contradictions among the respondents regarding the role of social media in shaping online campaigns in Saudi Arabia. While some participants believe that social media has played a fundamental role in formulating and mobilising online campaigns in Saudi Arabia, others had some doubts and fears regarding how Saudi society could benefit from the use of these platforms in online campaigns.

It is worth noting how the participants in this research not only regarded social media platforms as powerful instruments for transparency and visibility but also powerful instruments for accountability. For example, some participants went as far as to describe Twitter in Saudi Arabia as a 'community court' that is an alternative to the

official courts. Additionally, social media platforms have been credited by the participants for assisting them in improving the visibility of grievances, such as their rights to participate in political and social issues, and their right to demand that the Saudi government take further action on these issues.

The unprecedented informational openness enjoyed by the Saudi people as a result of their use of social media platforms has, as discussed in theme two, played a fundamental role in raising their level of awareness. The participants in this research emphasised that social media platforms have paved the way for them to learn a great deal from their interactions and sharing of experiences with each other. Moreover, the participation of Saudi youths in social media platforms has enabled them, to some extent, to challenge different social and political ideas.

Interestingly, there was a strong agreement among the participants in this study that social media has proven to be a fundamental factor in raising awareness, particularly among Saudi women. They have argued this is mainly due to the fact that the vast majority of them do not have official political or social positions in the state due to some customs and traditions that have deprived them of their rights. However, with the use of social media, formerly marginalised groups, including Saudi women, are now enjoying greater power and influence. For instance, among Saudi women, online activism has now generated awareness about their issues not only locally but also globally.

Finally, there were two critical factors that influenced Saudi youths during their online participation. As argued by the interviewees above, under Theme Four, these factors

are socio-cultural and religious ideology, and the fear of government surveillance and repression.

Having discussed the political implications of social media in such an authoritarian context, in the next chapter, I will examine the role that 'hashtag activism' has played in the anti-male guardianship campaign. The analysis of this online campaign together with the findings of the current chapter will provide a deep understanding of the potential role of social media in political activism in a religious authoritarian country.

6 Chapter Six: The Anti-Male Guardianship Hashtag Activism in Saudi Arabia: A Case Study

6.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to explore the significance of hashtag activism in Saudi Arabia through a critical case study of the #Anti_Male_Guardianship_System. This online campaign is believed to be one of the most noteworthy women's rights campaigns in Saudi Arabia in terms of its scale, longevity, and mobilisation. Indeed, the anti-male guardianship campaign has even transcended local and regional borders, resonated globally, and put the challenges faced by Saudi women onto the local and international agenda.

The chapter begins with a brief review of the male guardianship system in Saudi Arabia: its general concept and dimensions, the controversy surrounding it, and those affected by it. Following this, the initial phases of the campaign (phases preceding the triggering of the hashtag) are discussed in detail. After that the chapter will explore the role that the 'hashtag feature' has played in the anti-male guardianship campaign. The final section of the chapter will evaluate the extent of the success of the anti-male guardianship campaign.

6.2 The Male Guardianship System in Saudi Arabia: A Brief Review

"Saudi women are stuck in permanent childhood" (Al-Lily, 2011, p.120).

As per Saudi Arabian law and customs, all females, regardless of their age, background, and socio-economic status, must have a male guardian; this guardian is known in Arabic as *Wali* or *Mahram* (Doaiji, 2017). At birth, guardianship is granted

to her father. After she marries, guardianship is given to her husband. When she divorces, or when her husband dies, a new guardian is appointed, and this is generally the next-oldest mahram, for example, her son, brother, or uncle (Montagu, 2015). However, as mentioned in the Introduction Chapter, there have been recent amendments to this system.

These guardians have duties towards, and rights over, women in almost all aspects of their civic lives. Therefore, it is mandatory that Saudi women first seek their guardian's permission and consent for marriage and divorce, education, driving, travel within the country or abroad, employment, elective surgery as well as some basic actions such as opening a bank account (Al-Nafjan, 2011). The enforcement of the male guardianship system has therefore created many challenges for women in Saudi Arabia.

While some of the legal restrictions imposed on Saudi women are executed by government decrees, such as the driving ban on women, which, as previously noted, ended in September 2017, many are believed to be based on both the Wahhabi interpretations of the Sharia law as well as the extremely conservative culture of Saudi society. Ertürk (2009, p.10) states the following:

Mahram, or legal guardianship of women by a male is practised in varying degrees and encompasses major aspects of women's lives. The system is said to emanate from social conventions, including the importance of protecting women, and from religious precepts on travel and marriage, although these requirements were arguably confined to particular situations.

In reinforcing the validity of the male guardianship system, some religious scholars rely on the idea that males and females are biologically different and that men, in general, are superior to women both physically and mentally (Tønnessen, 2016). In other words, they believe that women are generally very emotional when it comes to decision-making and that they lack the mental and physical capacity to cope with life's difficulties and make the right decisions. These beliefs are thought to be derived from the Quran's verse²⁰ (34) of Surah²¹ An-Nisa, where the word 'qawwamun' is used to describe men. Some Saudi religious scholars have interpreted this word as meaning 'male guardian', which has given men the authority over women not only within the family but in all aspects of their public life.

However, the interpretation of this verse is controversial and varies from one religious scholar to another. For instance, some religious scholars have interpreted the word 'qawwamun' as 'breadwinner', which completely changes the word's previous meanings and interpretations (Tønnessen, 2016). Therefore, many women in Saudi Arabia believe that the male guardianship system was adopted on the basis of misinterpretations of the original verse, which gave men effective control over all women's affairs.

It has commonly been argued that what makes the situation for Saudi women even worse is that most official transactions and complaints initiated by them are often ignored by the officials, thus leading a large group of women to believe that it is very difficult for their complaints to be taken into consideration (HRW, 2016). It is also

²⁰ One of the sentences/paragraphs of a different length that constitutes the chapters (surah) of the Quran and is marked by a number. The total number of verses in all chapters is 6,236.

²¹ Surah means a chapter. There are 114 Surahs (Chapters) in the Quran.

possible for officials to ask the woman filing the complaint to present her guardian first, before considering her grievance. These conditions render complaints against the guardians themselves quite challenging.

According to Doumato (2010), the male guardianship system happens to be the biggest obstacle that Saudi women face, not only in terms of exercising their freedom and their rights to work, movement, education, and actively participate in society but also in terms of the implementation of a strict law against domestic violence (Tønnessen, 2016). Saudi women are generally very hesitant to highlight the domestic violence perpetuated by their male guardians. The reason for this is that “an abused woman is more likely to be charged with disobeying her male guardian than her guardian is likely to be charged for abuse” (Tønnessen, 2016, p.16).

Consequently, by granting men unlimited authority over women as well as depriving women of their most basic rights, such as representing themselves and making their own decisions, the male guardianship system becomes “the most significant impediment to realizing women’s rights in the country, effectively rendering adult women legal minors who cannot make key decisions for themselves” (HRW, 2016, p.1).

Having defined what is meant by the male guardianship system in Saudi Arabia and the controversies that this system has generated among the Saudi Arabian public, in the following section, I will carefully present the phases that have preceded the advent of the hashtag activism campaign, #together_to_end_male_guardianship.

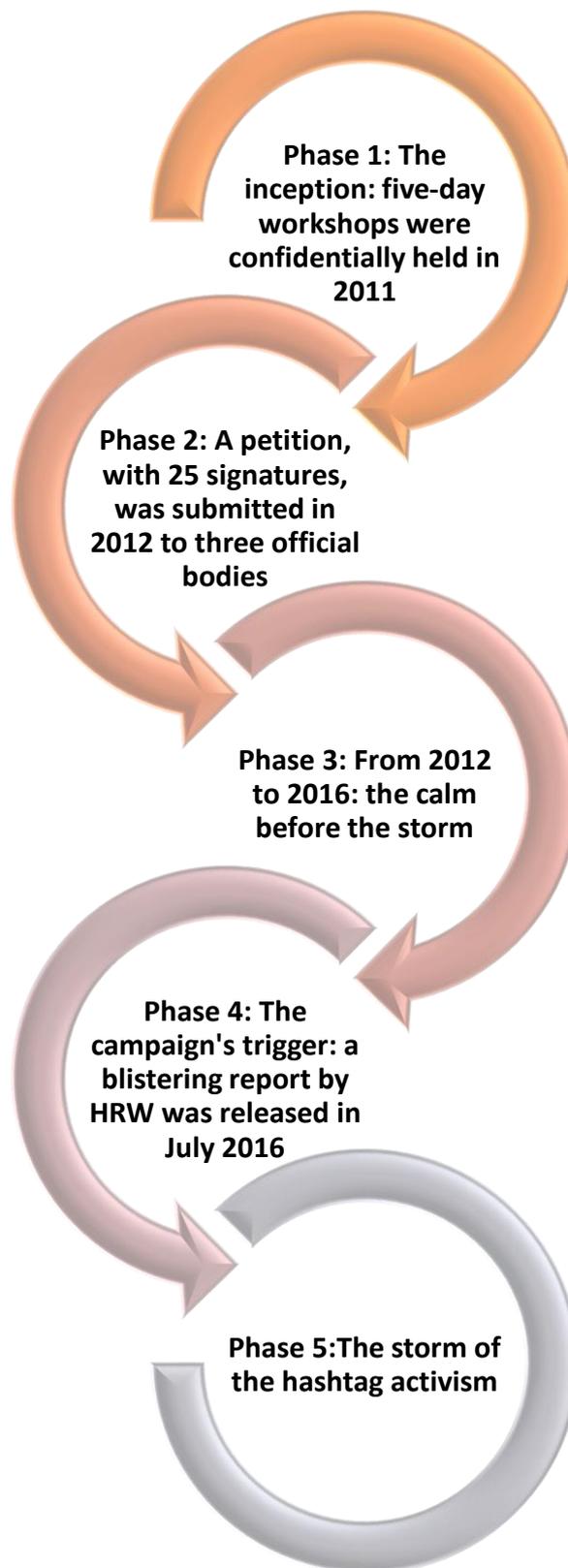
Although the specific objective of this chapter is to explore the role of social media (the hashtag feature particularly) in the anti-male guardianship campaign, I believe

that providing an analysis of the initial phases of the anti-male guardianship activism (the stages prior to the development of the hashtag activism) will fundamentally deepen our understanding of the potential role that the ‘hashtag feature’ has in socio-political activism within such a tough political and conservative environment.

6.3 Setting the Stage for the Anti-Male Guardianship Activism

This section will list the campaign phases preceding the trigger of the anti-male guardianship hashtag activism. Each of these phases will then be discussed. Before proceeding to the diagram, I want to draw attention to the fact that this analysis of the campaign’s developmental phases is based on the following: first, personal effort, in which I conducted interviews with activists in Saudi Arabia over the period of 2016 – 2017 to obtain more details about the initial phases of this campaign. Second, an extensive reading of some available secondary sources (See Chapter Four, Section 4.6.2). This two-method approach has been adopted due to the scarcity of reliable data through which the ‘initial phases’ of the campaign can be traced.

Diagram 6:1: The Campaign's Development Phases.



Phase 1: The inception: five-day workshops were confidentially held in 2011

The anti-male guardianship campaign's initial phase dates back to late 2011, just a few months after the Women2Drive Twitter campaign. According to Aziza Al-Yusuf, a women's rights activist, Dr Aisha Al-Mana²², is the person to be credited for her tremendous efforts in the early establishment of the campaign. After the massive Women2Drive campaign on social media led by the well-known activist Manal Al-Sharif in 2011, Dr Al-Mana confidentially coordinated workshops in three cities in Saudi Arabia (i.e. Dammam, Riyadh, and Jeddah). These workshops lasted for five days and were attended by a group of women of different ages and social classes. Al-Yusuf revealed that the primary aim of these workshops was to discuss the religious validity of the male guardianship system as well as to plan for further action.

Following these five-day workshops, Dr Al-Mana and Al-Yusuf contacted a law office in Saudi Arabia to conduct a study about the religious validity of the male guardianship system. Al-Yusuf pointed out that by undertaking this study, they simply wanted to verify whether the system is based on Sharia law or whether it is a result of a strict culture and conservative religious discourses.

The study, Al-Yusuf confirmed, revealed that there are no links between the male guardianship system and Islamic law, except in the case of marriage.

Phase 2: A petition, with 25 signatures, was submitted in 2012 to three official bodies

²² She is one of the most prominent Saudi women activists, with her feminist activities dating back to the 1990s.

Following the study conducted by the law office, Al-Yusuf, Al-Mana, and other activists decided to approach official channels to convey the message that this system severely restricts women's freedom and has no direct connection to Sharia law. They submitted a petition at the beginning of 2012, signed by 25 women, to three official bodies. These were the following:

- Al-Shura Council: The consultative assembly of Saudi Arabia
- The Council of Senior Scholars: Saudi Arabia's highest religious body
- The Royal Diwan (Court): The primary executive office of the King in Saudi Arabia

However, unfortunately, they received no response except two replies from two female members of the Al-Shura Council stating that the Council contains several committees each specialising in a specific task and that they should therefore address this petition to the appropriate committee.

Although the petition, as Al-Yusuf explained, was sent to all the 150 members of the Al-Shura Council, they did not receive any answers from the rest of the 148 members. She mentioned that after these great efforts that they had made in order to convey the extent of the suffering that Saudi women are subjected to because of this system, they became quite frustrated by the lack of response as well as by the manner in which their issue was conveniently ignored (An interview with Al-Yusuf and Al-Sada in Rotana Khalijia, 2016).

Following this 'overwhelmed phase' involving frustration, the campaign's activities underwent a period of recession and light activity, as explained in the following phase.

Phase 3: From late 2012 to 2016: the calm before the storm

I have described this phase, from 2012 to 2016, as the stage of the calm preceding the campaign's storm in late 2016. According to Al-Yusuf, after the extremely frustrating response they received from the three official bodies in 2012 regarding their petition, the campaign's activities went through a quiet, long period of recession and very light online activity. Additionally, they revealed that the campaign did not receive much support and momentum during that period among the networked community in Saudi Arabia.

One possible reason for this could be that the initial organisers of the anti-male guardianship campaign made no recognised efforts to promote their campaign via social media as Manal Al-Sharif and others had done during the Women2Drive Campaign on Twitter and YouTube.

What followed the long calm was the initial trigger for the campaign, as demonstrated in the next stage.

Phase 4: The campaign's trigger: a blistering report by HRW was released in July 2016

On July 17, 2016, the HRW issued a detailed 109-page report discussing the male guardianship system in Saudi Arabia (HRW, 2016). The report was also promoted on the same day by the HRW's Twitter account using the hashtag [#TogetherToEndMaleGuardianship](#) (Perez, 2016). Under the hashtag, HRW tweeted that "when you give #Saudi men control over women, you make women more

vulnerable to abuse”. A short cartoon video clip (42 seconds) was also attached to this tweet²³.



Figure 6:1 A Cartoon Clip by HRW about the System of Male Guardianship in Saudi Arabia.

The clip consists of five main scenes. It also expresses its message through actions rather than words. The overall message of the clip explains some of the challenges that the male guardianship system has created for Saudi women.

Given below is an analysis of the scenes with a screenshot showing the message in each scene:

²³The link to the HRW's tweet where the video clip is also attached.
<https://twitter.com/hrw/status/754762790741520385?s=20>

Scene One: The first scene depicts a husband severely beating his wife until her face bleeds.



The wife then goes with one of her children (an infant) to the social protection unit, the Saudi version of a women's shelter.



Scene Two: Sadly, instead of helping and protecting her from her abusive husband, the social protection unit tells her that the best thing she can do is to reconcile with her husband. It is important to note that ironically, women who enter the Saudi social protection unit cannot leave it without their guardian's permission. The social protection unit also does not allow women to use cell phones or bring their adolescent children with them to the shelter (HRW, 2016). Therefore, such a policy makes the situation even worse for women thinking of escaping their husbands' or

fathers' houses. Moreover, it has been increasingly reported that many women have been abused by some shelter workers (HRW, 2016).



Scene Three: The wife eventually accepts returning to her husband's home because she seems to be missing her older child who, according to the policy, is not allowed to stay with her in the shelter. The husband takes his wife from the shelter after signing a pledge not to assault her again.



Scene Four: This scene denounces the male guardianship system as it grants male guardians unlimited power over women. The question it shows below is “Does it make sense to allow an abusive husband to act as guardian over his wife?”



Scene Five: The final scene is a message encouraging Saudi women to stand together to end the male guardianship system.



These are the main scenes the clip has depicted. Although the clip was too short to capture all the challenges that the male guardianship system has caused to Saudi women, I found it very emotional. Furthermore, it has demonstrated well at least one critical problem: the absolute male authority over women this system has granted to men regardless their eligibility.

The report published by HRW was undertaken based on the following:

Interviews conducted with 61 Saudi individuals, including 54 women and seven men. A Human Rights Watch researcher conducted eight interviews in person with individuals based outside Saudi Arabia and 43 interviews by phone, Skype, or other electronic communication between September 2015 and June 2016. (HRW, 2016, p.11).

Additionally, Hala Aldosari, a Saudi human rights activist and researcher in women's health at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, played the major mediating role in the preparation of this report (Sidahmed, 2016).

The report offers insightful details about Saudi women's lived experiences of the guardianship system in terms of the several challenges it has created for them (HRW, 2016). This report, as the next phase will explain, gave birth to the anti-male guardianship campaign.

Before proceeding to the next phase, there are two crucial points that I have noticed through my analysis, which are worth emphasising here:

- From phase one up until the current stage, the campaign has had prominent leaders, namely Dr Aisha Al-Mana, Hala Aldosari, Aziza Al-Yusuf, and Hessa Al-Sheikh. They are the main organisers and individuals that the campaign was largely under the control of.
- In conveying the campaign's message, they relied on traditional media platforms. For example, they appeared in different media channels such as BBC and CNN as well as in some newspapers. They made no recognised attempts to promote their campaign's demands through social media platforms.

Phase 5: The storm of the hashtag activism

As mentioned in phase four, along with the report, the HRW launched a hashtag on Twitter (#together_to_end_male_guardianship) through which the report's outcomes were extensively promoted (Doaiji, 2017). The use of this hashtag marked

the beginning of one of the most powerful hashtag activism campaigns in Saudi Arabia where affected women began tweeting and uploading videos and images demanding the end of the guardianship system (Mangla, 2016; Ford, 2018).

According to Al-Yusuf, after the hashtag was created, the campaign, rather than remaining under the influence of a few well-known activists, turned into a much more expansive form of activism that was able to mobilise diverse groups of women and men alike within a short period of time.

This unprecedented online activity was rhetorically marked by the change in the hashtag from #together_to_end_male_guardianship, first created by HRW, to #Saudi_women_want_to_abolish_the-guardianship_system, with an added digit at the end of the hashtag that represented each day of the campaign (Doaiji, 2017). This hashtag, which was created in late 2016, is still, even while I am writing this thesis, being updated every day by simply changing the digit at the end of the hashtag. The screenshot below is taken from my Twitter account and shows the last updated number of the hashtag (marked as 'no. 1116'). This was in August 2019.



Figure 6:2 A Screenshot Showing the Last Updated Number of the Anti-male Guardianship Hashtag Activism.

I want to point out that the campaign witnessed a period of stagnation, especially after the royal decree in May 2017 ordering all government agencies to allow women to access government services (Zatat, 2017). This decree coincided with day 302 of the campaign and was celebrated extensively online by women as a positive response to their campaign. Another possible reason for the decline in campaign activities could be attributed to the September 2017 decree allowing women to drive.

However, the hashtag trended occasionally until August 2019, when one of the most advanced women rights reforms was announced. On 02 August 2019, a royal decree was issued granting Saudi women above the age of 21 the right to travel without permission as of the end of August 2019 (Rashad and Kalin, 2019). Women are also being given the right to register births, marriages, and divorces, to be issued official family documents, and to be guardians to minors (The BBC News, 2019).

In summary, this section has attempted to discuss the development of the anti-male guardianship campaign from its initial phase to the phase of unprecedented hashtag activism in Saudi Arabia's online public sphere.

The next section provides a critical discussion regarding the role that 'hashtag activism' has played in the anti-male guardianship campaign from the research participants' perspectives and experiences.

6.4 Online Defence: Saudi Women Resist the Male Guardianship System with Hashtag Activism

One hundred thousand voices reverberating in the streets would surely be powerful, but, in the age of social media, they would be no less powerful if they were to rumble through the Twittersphere (Clark, 2016, p.788).

Through my thematic analysis of the interviews with women, mainly, I have been able to identify two critical themes that demonstrate the role that the 'hashtag feature' has played in the anti-male guardianship campaign. These are the following:

1. The Affordances of Digital Connectivity, Networked Solidarity, Friendships

2. Hashtag Activism: A Potent Tool for Framing Issues, Establishing Counter-Discourse, and Promoting Policy Change

6.4.1 The Affordances of Digital Connectivity, Networked Solidarity, Friendships

It has been argued that the rapid expansion of the Internet in general and the emergence of dedicated social networking platforms in particular (e.g. Twitter, Facebook) have greatly promoted mobility, autonomy, and social connectivity (Shirky, 2011; Castells, 2015). According to Tufekci and Wilson “In the span of a decade, societies in which it had long been difficult to access information were transformed into massive social experiments fuelled by an explosion in channels of information” (2012, p.365). This unprecedented development in the ICT infrastructure has encouraged a huge number of individuals with a variety of desires, interests, and hopes to migrate to more difficult-to-control online platforms, to seek spaces with more freedom.

Therefore, social media platforms, especially in politically restrictive environments, can serve as a vehicle for geographically dispersed individuals to come together online without the need for costly physical efforts such as travelling from one region to another in order to attend meetings and participate in activities. Another important yet often neglected point related to physical meetings is the issue of safety in public gatherings, which is in fact a critical concern for all dissenters living under an authoritarian regime.

Regarding the role of the hashtag in the anti-male guardianship campaign, the ‘online connectivity space’ appears to be the initial critical attribute that has been extensively exploited by affected women and activists alike in Saudi Arabia to raise their voices,

highlight stories of abuse and hardships, and challenge the long-standing and prevalent religious discourse in ways that seem impossible using any other form of public communication.

The use of the Twitter hashtag in this campaign has emerged as an effective tool to disseminate information, mobilise thousands of national and global opinions, and spur action pertaining to a specific demographic – Saudi women – that has been politically marginalised for many years by its nation. Moreover, the hashtag has functioned as a vehicle enabling isolated women in Saudi Arabia to attract an unprecedented level of attention to their issues when the traditional mainstream media has long failed to highlight their concerns and the abuses they have faced.

An activist commented on this topic by saying the following:

The use of the hashtag has enabled us in Saudi Arabia to build a customised environment. Through this online environment, we can easily find thousands of people who share the same interests and experiences as us. I think this would not have been possible offline, especially for women in Saudi Arabia, because of the lack of mobility, and security issues. However, now with my use of Twitter, I have been able to connect with activists and affected women, many of whom have become my friends (Areej, 32, female).

Speaking generally about Twitter as an ‘alternative space’ for political expression and specifically about the use of the hashtag as an ‘attention mobiliser’ for the anti-male guardianship campaign, Manahel (26, female) commented the following:

I think that Twitter remains a powerful platform that has largely enabled marginalised women in Saudi Arabia to create a community, develop networks, and raise issues. Our utilisation of the Twitter

hashtag has not only helped us increase the virality of our campaign's messages but has also enabled us to mobilise public attention and create more visibility for our issue.

According to Doaiji (2017), anti-male guardianship activism has engaged various social and political actors including civil rights activists, international civil groups and organisations, prominent women activists from the earlier Women2Drive campaign, and elites. However, what is unique about this campaign, as revealed by most interviewees, is the ability of vast numbers of affected women, who were previously acting outside of gatekeeping institutions, to share their struggles and participate in the activism's discourse evolving online with the support of the hashtag feature.

Noreen (26, female) reflected on this:

I think that Saudi women's voices are some of the voices that have been silenced and marginalised during the last decades. This is due to several reasons, such as our strict socio-religious barriers, the non-existence of civil rights organisations in Saudi Arabia, and the lack of means through which we could raise our voices and express our feelings and attitudes.

However, she also said the following:

Social media has great merit in helping us overcome many difficulties. Now we have convenient avenues to make our voices heard ... It is only by tweeting or participating in a hashtag that your voice can reach millions of users in a single hour. I see this as an amazing advantage especially for us in Saudi Arabia, because we are now capable of finding the ones who share the same concerns as us, no matter how far apart. We do not feel that we are alone anymore, as we are now acting in a collective manner.

The aforementioned discussion leads to a crucial theme in the literature regarding the political potential of the 'online space' in contemporary activism – the extent to which such spaces can enhance individual autonomy (See Chapter Two). Perhaps the most outstanding perspective regarding the notion of 'individual agency and autonomy' has been provided by Castells (2015) who emphasises the revolution in new media technologies as material support for 'mass self-communication', a concept that seeks to capture the sense of what can be today regarded as a profound shift in the mediation between self and society.

Moreover, Castells (2015) argues that the Internet not only holds the potential to enhance the horizontal networks of communication and socio-political participation among grassroots users but also "can contribute to enhance the autonomy of citizens to organize and mobilize around issues that are not properly processed in the institutional system" (Castells, 2010, p.417).

Although some voices have argued that 'online spaces' cannot be considered 'completely autonomous' since they always exist in a complex relationship with business and state power (e.g. Morozov, 2011; Fuchs, 2014), the findings of this study suggest that the existence of these spaces, especially in authoritarian countries, can offer at least a basis for the oppositional political sphere to emerge. Such spaces can promote the autonomy of individuals to mobilise and organise around socio-political issues that are misrepresented or ignored by traditional media (Andreas, 2007; Shirky, 2011).

Another potential implication of the 'online connectivity space' is the development of a collective identity and solidarity among active individuals with shared interests.

This is considered to be a crucial point in the formation of activism, especially in politically restrictive contexts in which the 'feeling of community and togetherness' is greatly required for affected and isolated groups to overcome the fear of political repression. Here is also where the extensive debate in the literature about the role of social media in the process of forming 'weak and strong ties' fits in (See Chapter Two).

The interviewees in this research argued that the 'stage of solidarity' they reached led many of them to overcome the fears that they had felt previously and enabled them, to a great extent, to engage effectively with each other in discussing their concerns. They pointed out that their active participation in the anti-male guardianship campaign as well as the great support they witnessed among the participants of the hashtag played a vital role in the process of liberating them from the previous rooted fear of acting alone.

For example, one of the participants, Manahel (26, female), revealed the following:

All of us were afraid, but as we started to engage with one hashtag through which we met other like-minded people, we started to gradually overcome our fears. I believe that the sense of 'community spirit' we found through our participation mitigated the fear we felt previously.

Similarly, Nawal (26, female) explained how the use of the Twitter hashtag in the anti-male guardianship activism campaign has encouraged isolated women to speak out:

Saudi women had previously avoided speaking in public about their rights issues, including abuses. I am sure that there are many victims out there, but they unfortunately cannot share their stories with others or lodge complaints against their male guardians. This is due to their fear of the social consequences, which they may face by

highlighting issues that the conservative Saudi society considers taboo. However, I believe that after the development of the anti-male guardianship campaign on Twitter, we have witnessed Saudi women starting to speak out ... I think this is because they have encountered large groups who share the same concerns as them.

The above comments demonstrate how hashtag activism has become an 'alternative space' for affected women in Saudi Arabia who seek a platform to expose human rights abuses. The comments also show how the use of the hashtag has uniquely contributed to the collective feeling among like-minded networks. By linking together numerous voices, hashtag activism can greatly enable affected individuals overcome the feeling of acting alone.

Interestingly, this is in line with Castells' (2015, p.2) argument:

By sharing sorrow and hope in the free public space of the internet, by connecting to each other, and by envisioning projects from multiple sources of being, individuals formed networks, regardless of their personal views or organizational attachments. They came together. And their togetherness helped them to overcome fear.

One assumption that can be made based on Castells' argument is that hashtags can function as a space of 'outrage and hope'. Through this space, 'fear', which is a major obstacle to societies living under authoritarian regimes, can be overcome when a considerable number of affected and isolated individuals with a shared concern come together in one place to 'vent their outrage and cultivate hope' for future change.

In other words, the use of the hashtag, especially in a politically restrictive environment, can facilitate a sense of 'togetherness' among enthusiastic networked

individuals. This togetherness then works as a starting point for the development of a community as well as a source of empowerment.

The interesting point about 'shared interest' and 'togetherness' are that these critical factors do not only contribute to mitigating the 'fear' among affected individuals, but they also increase the likelihood of 'trust and friendships' online and offline.

Moreover, the research data indicates that these 'nonmaterial resources' (e.g. shared interests, togetherness, awareness, faith/trust, friendships) have as much capacity as 'material resources' (e.g. money, organisations, concrete benefits) to mobilise more people and sustain a campaign.

Indeed, five of the interviewees mentioned that their current friendships with other like-minded individuals were initially started through multiple discussions that they had during their active participation in the anti-male guardianship hashtag activism. Areej's interesting story shows how the 'shared interest' factor among activism participants, which is facilitated by the hashtag feature, can strengthen weak ties and boost the possibility of friendships:

When I started tweeting using '#Together_to_end_male_guardianship', I did not know anyone from those massive numbers of active participants in the hashtag. But after some of my comments were liked and retweeted, I had a quick look at the profiles of those who liked my tweets. Then, I followed them, and they followed me back. From that moment, we started talking to each other, sometimes privately through Twitter's 'direct message', and sometimes through commenting on, liking, or retweeting each other's tweets. Later, one of my Twitter friends, Walaa, suggested — why don't we meet in a café and get to know each other more? I liked her idea, especially

since we were based in [anonymised city name]. We agreed to meet, and that was not the first and last meeting we had. We started meeting regularly, sometimes every weekend.

Areej's story demonstrates that one of the positive outcomes of social media is that these platforms do not only enable individuals with shared interests to connect online but also facilitate offline connections as well.

Most important here is not only the fact that the potential development of friendships between activism participants is a kind of 'informal friendship' but also that it has some further effects on the campaign's strategic plans and actions. For instance, after Areej, Walaa, and their friends had several meetings, they decided to open two Snapchat accounts: one in Arabic and one in English, to promote more media activism related to the anti-male guardianship campaign (See Chapter Five, Theme Four: Greater Awareness among Saudi Youths).

Returning to the critical discussions in Chapter Two regarding the debates over weak and strong ties associated with political activism, Gladwell (2010) makes a comparison between students who risked their lives and safety to achieve justice and peace during the Black-American movements of the 1960s, and the current low-risk/cost social media activism. He maintains that 'weak-tie relationships' existing between users online are inadequate for tasks that require 'strong-tie relationships' such as large-scale uprisings. Therefore, it is unlikely that these networked relationships will achieve goals or transition into offline activities (Gladwell, 2011).

I have no doubt that 'strong-tie relationships' have greater influence than weak ones in encouraging individuals to participate in movements. However, I believe that social

networking sites' ability to connect dispersed individuals in such a tough socio-political environment, regardless of how potent the 'ties' between networked individuals are, is critical for the formation of groups when on-ground work and the formation of organisations are considered risky. For example, one activist mentioned "Of course, social media has a vital role. Without Twitter, I would not be able to communicate with the rest of the activists. Our first interaction was through Twitter, and then we planned to meet offline" (Areej, 32, female).

Moreover, the data proves how such 'shared interest' and 'weak-tie' factors, which are facilitated by social media, can pave the way for affected individuals to build up their initial networked community in the early stages of activism, and it also proves how high the possibility is for these online weak-tie relationships to transform into strong offline ones, as was the case with Areej, Walaa, and the rest of their friends.

Therefore, rather than social media being considered a space where only 'weak-ties' are mobilised and sustained, and the belief that this 'online connectivity space' does not amount to a factor by which 'strong ties' may be formulated, the opposite can be true. Furthermore, the findings of this study are consistent with that of Blau (2010) and Tufekci (2010), who argue that 'social ties' should not be considered a dichotomous phenomenon (strong or weak). Indeed, they do not only fall along a continuum but also have overlapping functions.

Thus, the 'online connectivity space' does not only have the advantage of connecting isolated individuals to raise issues and discuss forbidden subjects as Shirky (2011) argued, but it also has, to a great extent, enabled those living in a conservative society and under a repressive regime to eliminate the sense of loneliness and fear that

previously prevented them from openly raising their concerns and engaging more in socio-political dialogues.

In summary, the discussions in this section provide important insights into how the emergence of an 'online connectivity space' in an authoritarian context can facilitate affected and isolated individuals in escaping the harsh offline political environment as well as some cultural barriers. The use of the 'hashtag feature' in the anti-male guardianship campaign has been noted for its instrumental role in disseminating information, publicising the system's issues, mobilising national and global attention, and ultimately helping networked activism gain great virality.

Importantly, the findings in this study illustrate how an 'online space' in a politically restrictive environment can boost the possibility of the development of a 'collective identity and solidarity' among like-minded individuals. This is a phenomenon that is considered in the literature as being crucial to the process of assisting affected groups overcome the 'fear' of acting alone. Furthermore, Areej's story exemplifies the fact that solidarity and feelings of togetherness do not only contribute to reducing 'fear', but they are also critical in building trust and friendships between networked individuals.

6.4.2 Hashtag Activism: A Potent Tool for Framing Issues, Establishing Counter-Discourse, and Promoting Policy Change

As I have demonstrated across this thesis, in Saudi's offline sphere, it is rare to find someone who talks about culturally or politically 'forbidden topics' because of the severe consequences. Although individuals are safe to cross the red line and discuss sensitive topics (e.g. gender issues, criticising the Royal Family) with relatives and

friends mainly behind closed doors, it is extremely difficult to do so in large-scale gatherings. Additionally, in an authoritarian context, disaffected people may find it too dangerous to speak publicly on behalf of a silent majority.

Such an environment has made affected individuals reluctant to speak out or promote alternative discourses that challenge the prevailing narratives of the government and traditional media. Saudi women particularly, as most of the interviewees revealed, find it challenging to openly express their demands and achieve equal rights in a culture where the 'dominant discourse' is strongly categorised as patriarchal and religious.

However, in contemporary times, many previously isolated and marginalised groups have seized the opportunity of 'networked spaces' to challenge dominant narratives around socio-political issues and bridge social, religious, and political boundaries.

Whereas the research on online activism has focused more on the efficacy of online organisation, mobilisation, and leadership (See e.g. Gerbaudo, 2012), the findings of this research highlight a very critical yet relatively less-addressed phenomenon in the studies of online activism, which is the hashtag's discursive power. Based on my research findings, I argue that the utilisation of the Twitter hashtag tool, especially in authoritarian countries, can enable social and political activism to build and sustain its preferred narrative, and this is through its ability to link individuals' stories and experiences together.

Therefore, the findings of the present study reveal that the 'hashtag feature' in this campaign can be examined in terms of two interwoven factors:

- First, it has enabled affected women to define ‘a frame’ that they consider appropriate to describe issues surrounding the male guardianship system in Saudi Arabia. I refer to this important phenomenon as a ‘distributed and crowded framing’ because the hashtag facilitates the ‘dispersed crowd’ to collectively contribute to the activism’s frame without exclusively relying on prominent individuals or a particular organisation.
- Second, the emergence of this ‘distributed frame’ has developed a ‘counter-discourse’ through which the ‘dominant discourse’ has been challenged. A critical role of this ‘hashtag-enabled counter-discourse’ is to demonstrate injustice, challenge the prevalent religious narratives in the Saudi public sphere, redefine patriarchal gender roles, and highlight those who are actually discriminated against.

Therefore, this section sheds light on the aforementioned factors and contributes to an in-depth understanding of the ‘hashtag’s discursive power’ in an authoritarian environment. This is a gap that is still relatively underexamined in the literature of digital activism.

It has been suggested that ‘hashtags’ contribute systematically to the formation of conversations and the flow of information on Twitter, giving more attention and publicity to marginalised issues, especially in situations where access to media is extremely restricted (Hamdy, 2010). A key critical aspect of the ‘hashtag’ is that it functions as an ‘indexing/filing system’, making the process of collecting, searching, and storing information easy. In this sense, therefore, the ‘hashtag’ can provide a fast ‘retrieval system’ for anyone looking for constant updates on an unfolding event. According to Bonilla and Rosa (2015),

Hashtags simultaneously function semiotically by marking the intended significance of an utterance. Similar to the coding systems employed by anthropologists, hashtags allow users to not simply “file” their comments **but to performatively frame what these comments are “really about,”** thereby enabling users to indicate a meaning that might not be otherwise apparent (p.5, emphasis added).

Therefore, the utilisation of the ‘hashtag’ in campaigns can not only enable a shared understanding/awareness about a problematic social condition but also pave the way for dispersed groups to be involved in the process of issue framing. This is a stage that is considered vital in the development of the activism, as the discussion in this section will show.

To thoroughly understand the role of the ‘hashtag’ in the process of ‘networked issue framing’, I will first provide a definition of the concept of ‘framing’ and its four-element function. Researchers in the field of media studies have devoted considerable attention to the concept of frames. However, one of the most-cited definitions comes from Entman (1993), who states the following:

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described (p.52).

Another important method that I have found helpful to understand ‘frames’ is to look at whether they perform the following functions: a) defining an issue or a problem, b) assessing possible reasons for the problem, c) making some evaluations, d) and then

suggesting some actions that could lead to solving the problem (Gamson, 1992; Entman, 1993).

Therefore, based on the framing functions above, the use of the 'hashtag feature' in activism may serve as an organic, ad hoc frame and bottom-up classification system that can develop a collective understanding of a social and political issue and provide greater visibility to a problem that the public may not be fully aware of or exposed to regularly.

This is indeed what I have found through my interviews with the participants. According to many of them, the extensive use of the 'hashtag' in the anti-male guardianship campaign has enabled affected women to frame and share their diverse experiences of gendered violence, abuse, and inequality caused by the guardianship system.

For example, Mariam²⁴, a women's rights activist, explained how 'hashtag activism' has helped her share her story of abuse:

Look, up to 2016, when I was still living with my family, I had been subjected to extensive abuse and physical harm from my father and brother. No one had heard about my horrible life. Even the police did not help me when I filed a complaint. However, in late 2016, when the '#Saudi-women-want-to-abolish-the-guardianship-system' began, I decided to tweet my story under the hashtag without my family's knowledge. I was very lucky because my story

²⁴ Mariam Alotaibi is now a well-known activist in Saudi Arabia. She achieved prominence during her participation in the anti-male guardianship campaign and has become a prominent figure after her arrest. I had the opportunity to interview her by phone prior to her arrest in April 2017 and I was also lucky to interview her again in September 2017, two months after her detention. See the method chapter (Chapter Four) for more details.

picked up steam quickly and became a public opinion issue. Even though my Twitter activities led to my detention by the police after my father filed a legal claim against me based on the ‘uquq law’ [parental disobedience law]²⁵, many people on Twitter kept pressuring the authorities by circulating my story of abuse on Twitter. ***I think this collective pressure would not have happened if I had not documented my abuse using the hashtag*** (emphasis added).

It is important to mention here that Mariam’s case of abuse received significant attention and support from the Saudi public, especially during her three-month detention. For instance, a hashtag (كلنا_مريم_العتيبي) translated into English as ‘we_are_all_Mariam_Alotaibi’ was established, which also coincided later with another English hashtag (#IStandWithMariam). These two hashtags, which were trending within the ‘#Saudi-women-want-to-abolish-the-guardianship-system’ served as a vehicle through which Mariam’s supporters circulated her story and demanded her release.

²⁵ Uquq or parental disobedience is a judicial law in Saudi Arabia that allows a guardian to file a complaint against his son/daughter if they disobey him (HRW, 2016).



Picture 6:1 A Random Selection of the ‘We_are_all_Mariam_Alotaibi’ and ‘IStandWithMariam’ which were Trending During Mariam’s Detention from April to July 2017.

Mariam’s tragic experience of domestic violence as well as her subsequent activities on Twitter are a clear example of how the use of ‘hashtag’ can politicise an issue by enabling victims to frame the injustice they face through the act of personalised storytelling. Mariam, in my second interview with her, was glad that she had finally been able to move to a new house and live independently. She said the following:

I wish I had begun using Twitter to share my suffering much earlier ... oh god, I cannot believe that my tweets have helped me get rid of my past miserable life.

Another victim of family abuse, Sarah (31, female), stated that the hashtag of the anti-male guardianship campaign has served as ‘a discursive arena’ where affected women

have been able to collectively expose gendered violence and share their struggles. She said the following:

I visualise the hashtag of the anti-male guardianship campaign as ‘a large arena’ where a considerable number of abused women gather to share their stories, discuss guardianship-related issues, and try to pressure the authorities to abolish the system. Although many women are still exposed to violence, many others have survived their circumstances.

An important point to be highlighted is how ‘framing via a hashtag’ can make certain aspects of social or political phenomena salient. This may become notable particularly among societies such as Saudi Arabia, where socio-religious and political barriers have kept the community oblivious of some hidden social problems for decades. For example, abuse and domestic violence in Saudi Arabia, which the system of male guardianship is believed to be a cause of, has not been heard about before as we are witnessing today in the era of social media.

Therefore, one advantage of ‘hashtag activism’ is its role in helping affected individuals create a community of like-minded people through which they can sustain their conversation of activism and develop a collective/societal understanding of the problem they face.

For example, Tariq (29, male) explained how he was shocked by the number of stories of women’s abuse in Saudi Arabia that were shared by affected women under the anti-male guardianship hashtag. He commented the following:

It is unbelievable how online activism in Saudi Arabia has highlighted a number of social issues that we have never heard of before. Stories

related to domestic abuse were rarely covered in the state-owned traditional media. But now we see thousands of affected women on Twitter sharing their family issues and asking for help ... I think Twitter has helped those suffering women bring these normally hidden issues into the public sphere, making them more visible to our society.

Tariq's remarks emphasise the key role hashtags may play in facilitating affected and marginalised groups in bringing usually hidden issues to the surface. This has an important political and social impact on a society such as Saudi Arabia in terms of raising public awareness about serious issues (e.g. domestic abuse against women) that are rarely heard or addressed in public sphere. According to Stephan, the emergence of online public sphere in the Arab world has enabled women "to advance a political cause that is difficult to advance offline ... to create intellectually and emotionally compelling digital artifacts that tell stories of injustice, interpret history, and advocate for particular political outcomes" (2013, p.1).

While Maglione (2016) suggests that presenting women as victims would not empower them or change their status for the better, the findings of this study indicate that presenting women's stories of victimisation, especially in a conservative and patriarchal society such as Saudi Arabia, is essential in subverting the prevalent discourse claiming that women are socially and politically restricted to ensure more protections and rights for them. This is a discourse that is always put forward by the Saudi authorities and religious leaders in every issue raised about women rights in Saudi Arabia.

Furthermore, some interviewees argued that the anti-male guardianship activism has not simply raised awareness about the status of some oppressed women in Saudi

Arabia but has also contributed to promoting women's awareness of their rights. This is exemplified in the words of one activist:

I consider what has been achieved so far amazing. We have at least been able to increase awareness among Saudi society about some of the practices of violence and persecution against some Saudi women. The campaign has also played a vital role in increasing women's level of awareness about their rights ... I think Saudi women are now more daring than ever in expressing their opinions and demanding more rights (Walaa, 33, female).

For activism within an authoritarian context, it is relevant to refer to Fraser's concept of 'subaltern counterpublics'. That is, 'alternative discourse arenas' "where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (Fraser, 1990, p.67). In the situation where 'offline spaces' are restricted, as in the case of Saudi Arabia, social media is the only way for subordinate groups to create 'subaltern counterpublics', which are needed to nurture and develop 'hidden transcripts' (See Chapter Two, Theme One).

Therefore, it can be argued that the use of the 'hashtag feature' in the anti-male guardianship campaign has provided affected and isolated women with 'a new layer of space' where they can challenge patriarchal and religious discourses dominating the Saudi traditional public sphere.

For example, Layla (33, female), a women's rights activist, argued that the adoption of the hashtag feature in the anti-male guardianship campaign has helped affected

women design and propagate a counter-discourse campaign that challenges many Wahabi interpretations of women's rights in Islam. She commented the following:

We used to have one public sphere dominated mainly by imams and those in power. Such a sphere has made Saudi women struggle for many years to constitute identities in the face of a patriarchal and conservative society that seeks to impose a particular conception upon them. But now, Twitter has offered us 'an alternative space' where we can promote messages, develop ideas, and challenge some of the Wahhabi interpretations of women's rights.

Layla's argument is consistent with that of Shaw (2012). Through a case study of 'Hoyden about Town and the Triple J Hottest 100', Shaw explains how the 'Australian feminist blogosphere' has served as 'a powerful discursive arena' for women in Australia to challenge the persistent attempts made by the music industry to erase female artists from the history of alternative rock music. For example, in 2009, a radio station named Triple J ran a poll on its website ranking the 'best rock artists of all time'. While this poll was an annual event, it was different in 2009 because it was an 'all time' list rather than being just a list related to the previous year. What was disappointing about this poll was that it featured no female artists.

The exclusion of women by Triple J was a stimulus for women to exploit different networking platforms not only to counter this exclusion by developing their own music canons but also to promote an alternative discourse and call more attention to the systematic erasure of female artists in the rock music industry. This 'networked action' led the Triple J station to respond to these criticisms by modifying its poll to include female artists. Based on this, Shaw concludes her case study by arguing that 'online

discourse' is a 'mode of activism' that is potent enough to trigger social and political change without offline collective action.

Yet despite the potential role of social media to empower repressed and isolated groups by providing them with an alternative space, many scholars are sceptical about the effectiveness of online activism in creating offline impacts or bring about social and political changes. Newsom and Lengel, for example, asserted that "agency in these online spaces is temporally situated in the sites and defined from and within the spaces themselves. This type of power is restricted to the gendered space created specifically for that type of power to operate" (2012, p.38).

Morozov (2012) likewise argues that the 'technological advance' with which social and political campaigns can be easily established using social media platforms may undermine the campaign's values, generating a meaningless activism, or slacktivism.

However, contradictory perspectives on the efficacy of the so-called 'slacktivist activities' remain evident in the current literature. For instance, Christensen (2011) in his critical article 'Political activities on the Internet: slacktivism or political participation by other means?' rebuts the use of the 'slacktivism' concept, indicating that it is poorly used to downplay activities that do not reflect a strong political commitment.

He examines two important aspects of online campaigns: a) the efficacy of online activism in influencing offline political decisions, and b) the extent to which online activism substitutes the offline one. His study demonstrates that although it is difficult to determine the positive impacts of online campaigns on offline decisions, current literature suggests that online political participation and activism have a 'weak-

positive relationship' with the offline mode and that there is no clear negative relationship with offline political engagement.

While stressing the need for further research to assess the impact of online activism, Christensen concludes his argument by saying the following:

The effortless Internet activities are at worst harmless fun (or an annoyance, but nonetheless harmless) without any effect on real-life politics. At best, they may help **raise awareness about political issues and even mobilize citizens** to take other forms of action outside the virtual world. Even if sending chain letters and joining Facebook groups do little more than raise awareness, they do at least that. (2011, no pagination, emphasis added).

Based on the research findings, I feel that Christensen's argument is fairly true, especially if we consider the impact of online activism in a hostile socio-political context. It is difficult to dismiss the political potential of online activist communities since there is no clear evidence that social media cannot, or never will, provide an effective alternative space for political activism.

In the same vein, Castells emphasises that perceiving political and social movements in terms of precise and concrete outcomes reinforces "capitalist logic [and] self-defeating perspective" (2015, p.164), which neglects the gradual process of change as well as the manner in which these online-based activities can challenge and reinterpret cultural meanings.

Therefore, I believe that critics who have branded 'online activism' as being slacktivist activities have ignored many aspects of the 'transformative discursive power' of social media, especially in an authoritarian context. Furthermore, as I have demonstrated

across this chapter particularly and in Chapter Five, the 'cumulative nature' of hashtag activism makes this phenomenon a movement where networked individuals do not simply share opinions and document issues but also build recognisable communities of engagement and friendship, as the anti-male guardianship campaign has proved.

Additionally, those who argue that online political activism must make a connection between its online and offline activities to achieve its desired objectives (e.g. Gladwell, 2011; Valenzuela, 2013) have overlooked the fact that it is the powerless and affected communities (e.g. women, black people, ethnic minorities), who are often socially and politically marginalised as well as misrepresented in traditional media, who turn to social networking sites to find and build a community of like-minded people and draw more public attention.

Last but not least, the discursive power of hashtag activism does not simply promote awareness about the status of Saudi Arabian women but is also an effective tool that enables disadvantaged women to overcome several constraints that have long confined their voices to the private sphere. The use of the hashtag in the anti-male guardianship campaign serves as a space for Saudi women to transcend gender boundaries, generate public attention, and participate in discursive arguments and ideological struggles to reinterpret the regulations that have restricted their lives.

Taken together, the discussions in this section suggest that the 'hashtag's discursive power' lies in its ability to enable marginalised groups to develop their activism's preferred narrative as well as challenge dominant discourses through its ability to produce and connect individuals' diverse beliefs and experiences. Mariam's story of family abuse is a clear example of how hashtag activism can expose gendered

violence, create space for affected women to frame issues and challenge a dominant discourse, and promote awareness and gender solidarity. That being said, online activism and participation should not be taken for granted, as they are not without their limitations (See Chapter Seven).

6.5 The Anti-Male Guardianship Campaign: An Evaluation of Its Success

Starting from a position of limited access to the public domain, a lack of mobility, and several social and political restrictions, anti-male guardianship advocates have used social media, mainly the Twitter hashtag, to promote a critical space where people can challenge the system and fight for more rights.

According to the activists and non-activists interviewed, the campaign's goals are threefold. The first was to promote public awareness about the challenges that the system has created for women in Saudi Arabia. This, as the female participants revealed, was done by encouraging each other to frame and share their personal experiences regarding the male guardianship system under the hashtag. The second aim was to mobilise affected and silenced women in Saudi Arabia to join the campaign. The final and more critical aim was to pressure the Saudi authorities to abolish the system.

In terms of the first and second objectives, the anti-male guardianship campaign was certainly effective in generating awareness not only at a national level but also at the international level. This awareness was raised about some of the women's situations in Saudi Arabia in general and about the male guardianship system in particular. The campaign also mobilised thousands of women to join the campaign. What is quite

difficult to gauge at this stage is the extent to which the third objective of the campaign has been fulfilled.

This is because the campaign, right up to the time during which I am conducting this study, is still relatively active. Although there have recently been some significant reforms (The BBC News, 2019), such as the very recent royal decree allowing women to travel without requiring a male guardian's approval, the lifted ban on women driving, and other light reforms such as eased restrictions on gender mixing, some researchers have portrayed such reforms as being cosmetic rather than significant (Guidoni, 2018). This is because men still have some powers over women.

6.6 Conclusion

The aim of the chapter was to explore the role that the 'hashtag feature' has played in the anti-male guardianship campaign. To do so, I began my chapter by exploring the potential role of the new movement phenomenon – hashtag activism – by reviewing some of the existing studies in the field of digital activism. This was followed by a brief discussion of the said system. In order to achieve an insightful understanding and make an accurate assessment of the role that the 'hashtag feature' has played in the anti-male guardianship campaign, I presented five critical phases that have preceded the #together_to_end_male_guardianship. After discussing the campaign's initial stages, I provided a critical assessment of the role that the 'hashtag feature' has played in the anti-male guardianship campaign.

The findings of this chapter indicate that the 'hashtag feature' can serve as a vehicle for dispersed individuals, especially those living under difficult socio-political conditions, to connect online. The case of the anti-male guardianship campaign

showed how 'hashtag activism' has emerged as a powerful tool for affected women to disseminate information, share their stories of abuse, and draw extraordinary levels of attention to male-guardianship-related issues that have long been misrepresented by traditional media.

Speaking about the 'Twitter hashtag' as an 'effective alternative space', the female interviewees pointed out that the 'hashtag feature' has helped pave the way for them to build 'a community of like-minded people' which has in turn assisted them in developing a connective identity and solidarity. It is important here to emphasise that in such tough socio-political environments, the 'feeling of community and togetherness' is greatly required for marginalised groups to overcome 'the feeling of acting alone' that prevents them from expressing their views and participating in public affairs (Castells, 2015).

Contrary to the argument made by Gladwell (2011) and others that the ties between networked individuals are weak and thus not adequate for tasks that require strong ties of relationships, the data suggests that factors such as the feeling of community and togetherness between like-minded people can greatly help in the development of strong ties and offline friendships.

It is interesting to note that in hashtag activism, users can be seen as proximal observers, who, due to online networks' blurring of the private world with the public sphere of politics, can be greatly involved and mobilised as active audiences. Additionally, the findings suggest that the hashtag, especially when used in harsh political contexts, can greatly assist activism to 'gain more visibility' and the campaign's messages to 'achieve virality'.

Another important finding was that the temporal unfolding of shared comments and stories of abuse enabled by the hashtag has helped affected and dispersed women frame the issues of the male guardianship system and challenge victim-blaming attitudes as well as the religious discourse dominating the Saudi public sphere.

The 'hashtag's discursive power' lies in its ability to function as 'an organic' and 'bottom-up classification' tool that can generate a collective understanding of socio-political issues and give greater visibility to a problem that the public may not be fully aware of or exposed to regularly. A process through which affected groups can achieve symbolic power by intervening in the course of the case and affect the understanding/beliefs of others is by producing alternative discourses that challenge the dominant ones.

All these potential advantages of 'hashtag activism' do not mean that 'online participation and activism' are without risks and limitations. The findings of the current study indicate that although the 'online space' has provided Saudis with a great alternative space for socio-political participation and activism, there are some negative aspects associated with the online space. Some of the common online issues cited by the interviewees were unpleasant words and misogynist trolls and threats.

Moreover, a few of the interviewees have expressed their concerns about the reliability of 'hashtag activism' in promoting 'the intended objectives' of campaigns. They argued that the anti-male guardianship campaign, for example, has deviated from its course after being exploited by some people and organisations (mainly those outside Saudi Arabia) to attack Saudi Arabia and its religious and social systems. I have

reflected upon this issue in Chapter Five and there will be further reflection regarding the same in the next chapter.

7 Chapter Seven: Social Media is the only Participatory Space for 'Hope and Soft Outrage'

7.1 Introduction

The aim of this study was to *examine the role of social media platforms in political participation and activism by young adults in Saudi Arabia within the online public sphere*. The opinions of activist and non-activist social media users from various socio-economic groups were sought for the same. Based on my research objectives, I have divided the study's empirical investigations into two chapters (Chapter Five and Six). In Chapter Five, the initial aim was to develop a clearer understanding of how young adults perceive and experience the socio-political impacts of social media in Saudi Arabia. In Chapter Six, the aim was to explore through interviewees' perspectives, mainly the females', the role that the hashtag feature has played in the anti-male guardianship activism.

The following is a discussion in light of the arguments and findings presented in Chapters Two, Five, and Six and the themes that have emerged from the scrutiny of the arguments.

7.2 Young Saudis' Perception of the Socio-Political Impacts of Social Media

The social media revolution has transformed the nature of communication, with broad consequences for political and civic engagement. Some of the most important features of social media platforms are social media and their associated practices that have facilitated networking, many-to-many communication, and mobile communications; traditional barriers to mobilisation, content production, and

circulation now being reduced; and online networks advocating both structured interactions between users and more open-ended participation in socio-political activities.

These dramatic transformations in the media landscape have played a vital role in communication, especially in those societies that do not enjoy civic freedom and democracies (Kahne et al., 2015). By facilitating access to information and by providing the appropriate tools for political/social expression, social media platforms have created new possibilities for greater political participation. Moreover, those individuals who were previously excluded through state media institutions, whether they were ordinary people, elites, or activists, have now acquired a greater influence and voice in the political realm than what was traditionally provided by the state's media institutions (Bennett, 2008).

However, the above discussions lead to a critical question that has been put forward by several scholars in the current literature: can social media facilitate 'genuine and effective' political participation and activism? (See Chapter Two). While scholars such as Benkler (2006), Noveck (2009), Shirky (2011), Dahlgren (2012), and Castells (2015) seem to greatly appreciate the role of social media in facilitating meaningful political participation, others are very doubtful (e.g. Dean, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2010a/b; Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2012).

For example, I have found that perceptions of 'simplicity and impact' are often cited by accounts that are sceptical of social media to undermine 'the values and powers' of online participation in progressive social and political change. Therefore, below, I

will reflect upon these two perceptions in light of the findings and arguments presented in Chapters Two, Five, and Six.

Dean (2009, 2010b), for instance, asserts that the 'ease' associated with social media participation has not simply made 'online participation' less effective but also politically meaningless. She points out that "people believe that their contribution to circulating content is a kind of communicative action. They believe that they are active, maybe even that they are making a difference simply by clicking on a button, adding their name to a petition or commenting on a blog" (2005, p.60). Dean's argument is primarily built on her assumption that contents circulated online have no arrival point(s). This consequently exempts influential actors such as governments and powerful institutions from being committed to responding to issues raised within these platforms of intensive social networks. The massive contents produced online are kept circulating until they become 'white noise' on the medium.

Echoing Dean's argument, Morozov (2012) comments on the danger that the sheer volume of information circulated on social media – along with its growing availability online and the 24/7 news cycle – can result in the public's short-term interest, where important news is quickly substituted and overshadowed by other new developments elsewhere. By way of illustration, Morozov states that "while many praised Twitter's role in publicizing and promoting political demonstrations in Iran, the death of Michael Jackson on June 25, 2009, quickly overtook the protests as the site's most popular topic" (2012, p.66). Thus, although social media can generate fast and intensive conversations, these conversations often tend to be short-lived, shallow, and quickly displaced by the newest developments (Joseph, 2012).

Furthermore, Morozov highlights the tendency of social media to divert users' attention from important issues. He argues that the Internet is used by few for the purpose of political participation, while it is extensively used for entertainment, watching pornography, or sharing pictures of lolcats. However, there is a contradiction to this argument in the literature. For example, a mixed methods study by Noman et al. (2015) found that politics is one of the most prominent topics of concern to Saudi people; it attracts most of the debates and attention in the Saudi Arabian Twittersphere.

Moreover, I believe that Morozov's generalising assumption about the trivial uses of social media is questionable. Instead, I agree with Samin (2012) and Fuchs (2014) that in order to obtain the most accurate results and mature conclusions about the political potentials of social media, the study of these platforms must take into consideration the contextual factors (e.g. political, social, religious factors) that influence the uses of these platforms (See Chapter Two).

Based on this, I believe that the socio-political implications of social media participation and activism in the West cannot be the same as in authoritarian states. I say this because in most democratic countries, citizens have many avenues to participate in and engage with political issues affecting their lives. However, as the findings of this research demonstrate, this is not the case in authoritarian countries such as Saudi Arabia. Social media platforms have, as most interviewees revealed, functioned as an alternative and only available space for socio-political participation and activism.

Regarding the ‘impact perception’ of social media activism, advocates of the ‘slacktivism hypothesis’ assert that those who engage in low-threshold activities (i.e. online political participation and activism) believe that their online activities are politically impactful. Indeed, these kinds of low-risk activities do not and will not achieve any real effects if they are not combined with effective offline actions (Gladwell, 2010, 2011; Valenzuela, 2013).

However, there is a strong potential exception to this claim: non-democratic states. In many of these states, authorities tend to reduce the size of the public sphere and control the flow of information. Yet, authoritarian governments appear to have greater difficulties in controlling political discussions on the Internet than they do in controlling traditional media platforms such as radio and television. Bimber (2003), for instance, found that the proportion of political matters in relation to all topics discussed online is much higher in societies that lack free and high-quality press compared to those societies that enjoy freedom of expression and a robust traditional media. This finding also corresponds to the observations made regarding the Saudi Twittersphere (Noman et al., 2015).

This does not mean that online participation and activism are free of risks and limitations, as has been explained across Chapters Two, Five, and Six. Nonetheless, it is difficult to completely dismiss the long-term political potentials of social media, especially in authoritarian contexts.

Here, in particular, I want to contribute to the existing literature by highlighting a very critical yet relatively less-addressed phenomenon in the studies of networked activism: the manner in which social media participation may lead to the penetration

of the 'ubiquitous preference falsification' that characterises most societies living under conservative cultures and/or oppressive regimes.

It has been argued that in the face of cultural pressure or brute political power, individuals convey preferences that are actually different from what they want (Kuran, 2011; Makowsky and Rubin, 2013). In his book, *Private Truth, Public Lies*, the social scientist Timur Kuran refers to this as 'preference falsification'. He applies this critical phenomenon to many interesting cases such as the veiling of Muslim women, the collapse of communism, and so on.

Kuran (1997) argues that this phenomenon is ubiquitous and may lead to adverse socio-political consequences. These consequences all rest on the interdependencies between individual decisions, especially in terms of the preferences that people reveal to the public. One considerable social consequence of 'preference falsification' is that the larger public approves of options that are likely to be largely rejected if a vote were to be conducted by secret ballot. Therefore, the danger of this phenomenon lies in the fact that a person who conceals their dissatisfaction about public matters will make it difficult for others to reveal their genuine attitudes.

What I have found central to the scope of my research and findings is the manner in which some authoritarian governments, the Saudi regime in my case, have exploited and worked on this critical social phenomenon to implement their political agendas and to ensure their control over social and political systems.

For example, in terms of falsifying preferences, the Saudi authorities have, for decades, sought to hide knowledge, especially through their religious and educational institutions. In the process, they control the flow of information, suppress any

potential political activities, and restrain the public domain. Such extensive control has made it difficult for individuals to be fully aware of the disadvantages of existing arrangements and the merits of their alternatives.

The findings of this research indicate that 'ubiquitous preference falsification' among Saudi society has resulted in two critical issues:

- First, widespread ignorance/confusion about some political, cultural, and religious matters. This was evidenced in many cases, for instance, the extensive debates over the rights of women to drive in Saudi Arabia as well as the issue of the male guardianship system discussed in Chapter Six. The interviewees expressed their shock regarding the manner in which some religious imams altered their fatwas prior to and after the 2017 royal decree that granted women the right to obtain driver's licenses. Over the last thirty years, the religious authorities in Saudi Arabia have been able to convince the society that women are too vulnerable to drive; being alone in a car would put them at risk of assault. However, after the royal decree, this is no longer the case. Some of them have now switched their fatwas to endorse women's rights to drive. Such a contradiction, as some of the participants pointed out, has raised some doubts among the community that religious institutions might indeed operate according to the interests of the Saudi authorities instead of from an Islamic standpoint.
- Second, it is thought that the long-standing practice of 'preference falsification' carried out by the Saudi authorities and their affiliated institutions has largely hindered the capacity of Saudi society to desire

change. There is a well-known excuse/phrase among Saudi people, which the Saudi authorities have always promoted whenever they are pressured to implement reforms: ‘the society is not yet ready for changes’. But there are questions that remain unanswered: who represents society, why is society not yet ready, and why does it take so long for society to accept any new reforms, such as the right for women to drive and many other changes? Based on my discussions with the interviewees as well as my engagement with issues raised on the Saudi Twittersphere since 2011, I believe that the central answer to the aforementioned questions is twofold – one is the extensive control exercised by the Saudi government over the flow of information and their monopoly over power and media, especially prior to the Internet and the social media revolution. Second is the existent hierarchy in Saudi society, which is imposed by the conservative Saudi culture. This traditional social hierarchy has limited the challenging of ideas and it compels the members of Saudi society to follow the dominant views held by the Saudi government as well as the conservative habits dictated by elders. All of these have significantly contributed to the lack of knowledge as well as to some people’s reluctance to publicly convey their preferences out of fear of either political or social sanctions (I have reflected upon the issue of fear and loneliness and its consequences in Chapters Five and Six).

However, in the age of the Internet and social media in particular, this might not be the case. The findings of this research show how the ‘socially connective function’ of social media has impacted the dynamic of ‘ubiquitous preference falsification’ by encouraging the public disclosure of preferences. The findings also suggest ‘a model’

in which social media participation and activism, especially within the authoritarian context, can trigger cascades of 'preference disclosure'. The process is given below:

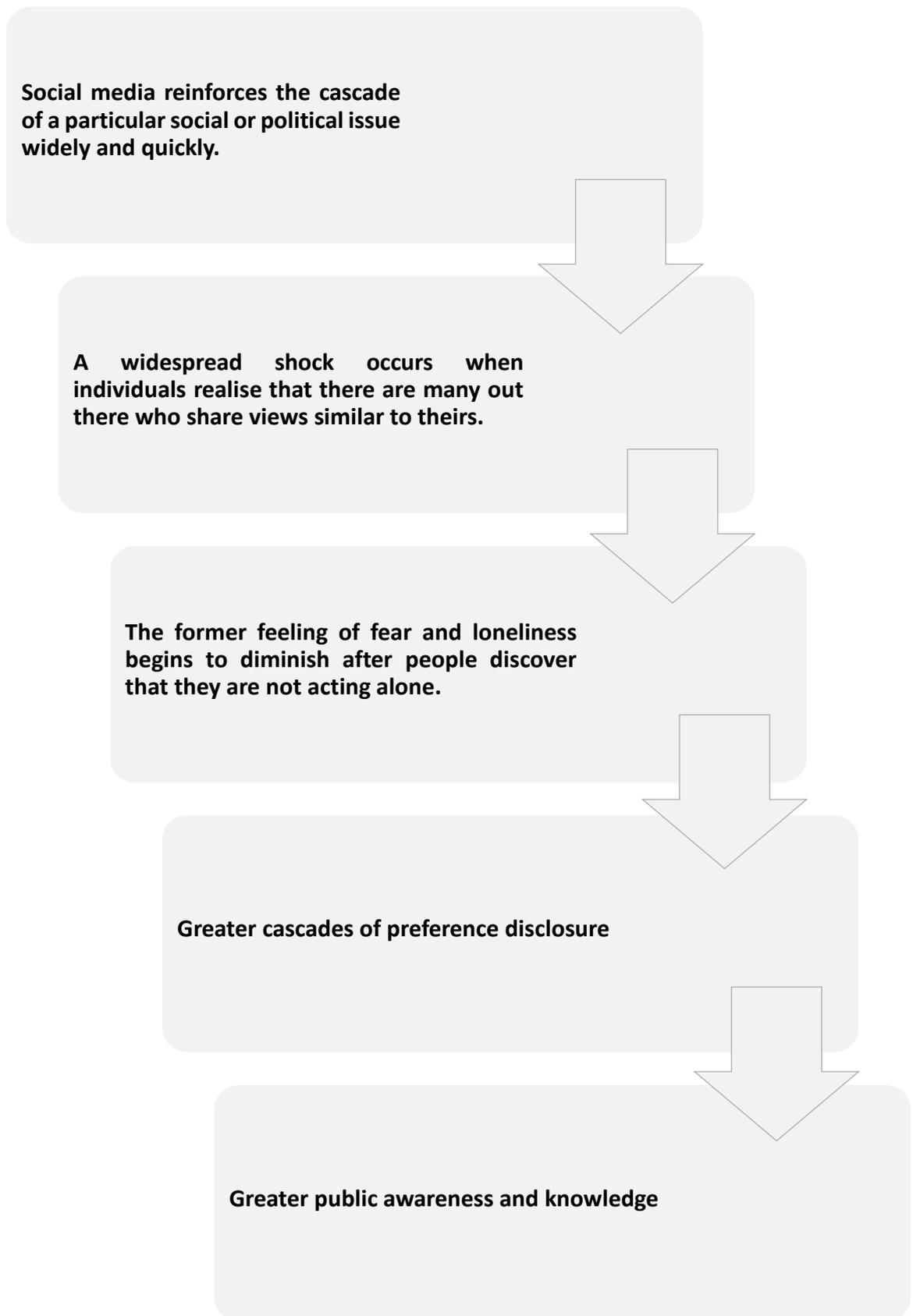


Diagram 7:1 A Model Demonstrates the Process through which Social Media Participation can lead to a Cascade of 'Preference Disclosure'.

Similar to the aforementioned process, Weintraub (2018) comments about the ‘me too movement’ (#metoo)²⁶ in which social media served as a forum for women who had experienced sexual assault to openly discuss ‘a taboo issue’ and share their personal experiences. She pointed out the following:

Social media accelerates and enhances the mechanism of “taboo reduction” by serving as a prominent forum for deconstructing traditional social taboos. Forums like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram encourage individuals to share traditionally private thoughts on formerly taboo topics, subsequently causing a cascade effect by encouraging more and more people to engage in discussions typically considered off-limits (2018, no pagination).

Weintraub argues that social media has greatly contributed to the idea of ‘taboo reduction’ by enabling women who have faced sexual assault to highlight the issue of sexual abuse, taking it from an invisible sphere to a highly public one worldwide.

Weintraub’s argument is in accordance with the findings of my case study about the anti-male guardianship campaign. The interviewees, for instance, argued that the issues related to the male guardianship system, which did not surface until late 2016, were not indeed anything new – rather, they were long-hidden issues that went public after a hashtag was created.

Therefore, I believe that the case of the anti-male guardianship activism campaign, among many other prominent online campaigns, demonstrates the manner in which social media participation and activism can assist the public in overcoming the

²⁶ The #metoo campaign is an online campaign against gender-based harassment and sexual violence, especially in the workplace. The campaign, which started in October 2017, followed sexual-abuse allegations against Harvey Weinstein, a famous American film producer (Brookes, 2018).

phenomenon of 'preference falsification'. By enhancing the speed of communication, decentralising the production of information, accelerating the spreading of news, and more importantly, connecting formerly disconnected individuals, social media can encourage the public to reveal their hidden preferences and engage more with issues affecting them.

7.3 The Emergence of the Online Public Sphere: A Democratisation of Political Participation, an Instrument of Authoritarian Durability, or an Immature Form of Engagement?

The empirical investigations in this research revealed that social media has in general brought about an unprecedented socio-political experience for young adults in Saudi Arabia. A majority of the interviewees revealed that social media platforms have widened the scope of information, eliminated geographical boundaries, established a pluralistic arena of news, offered individuals new ways to communicate and interact, expanded access to evidence of human rights abuses, and facilitated the mobilisation of the regime's opponents.

However, these great contributions offered by social networking sites do not necessarily lead to the democratisation of information in the online public sphere, at least in authoritarian contexts. Joseph (2012), for instance, emphasises that "social media increases participation; but greater participation does not necessarily lead to democracy and pluralism. It depends on the values people bring to the table" (p.174).

The findings of this research indicate two critical factors that may pose some risk to the democratic value of the online public sphere. The risks constitute two categories, both of which pertain to users' privacy.

First, authoritarian regimes do not tend to block social media platforms due to several reasons, such as economic pressure and the possibility of politicising inactive users, but there is substantial evidence to show that they use them as surveillance instruments. As Dencik et al. argue “Social media and big data uses ***form part of a broader shift from ‘reactive’ to ‘proactive’ forms of governance*** in which state bodies engage in analysis to predict, pre-empt and respond in real time to a range of social problems” (2017, p.1433, emphasis added). Therefore, authoritarian and, in a sense, non-authoritarian governments are now capable of infiltrating these platforms to track dissenters and identify their networks.

Dencik’s et al. critical argument is exemplified in the following case. In 2013, the American cyber-security expert Moxie Marlinspike published an email correspondence with an employee of one of the two major telecoms operating in Saudi Arabia: Mobily. They attempted to recruit him to help the telecommunications firm intercept mobile application data, with a specific interest in monitoring applications such as Twitter, Line, Viber, and WhatsApp. They informed Moxie that they were working on a project, believed to be sponsored by the Saudi government, to monitor and block mobile data communication (Marlinspike, 2013).

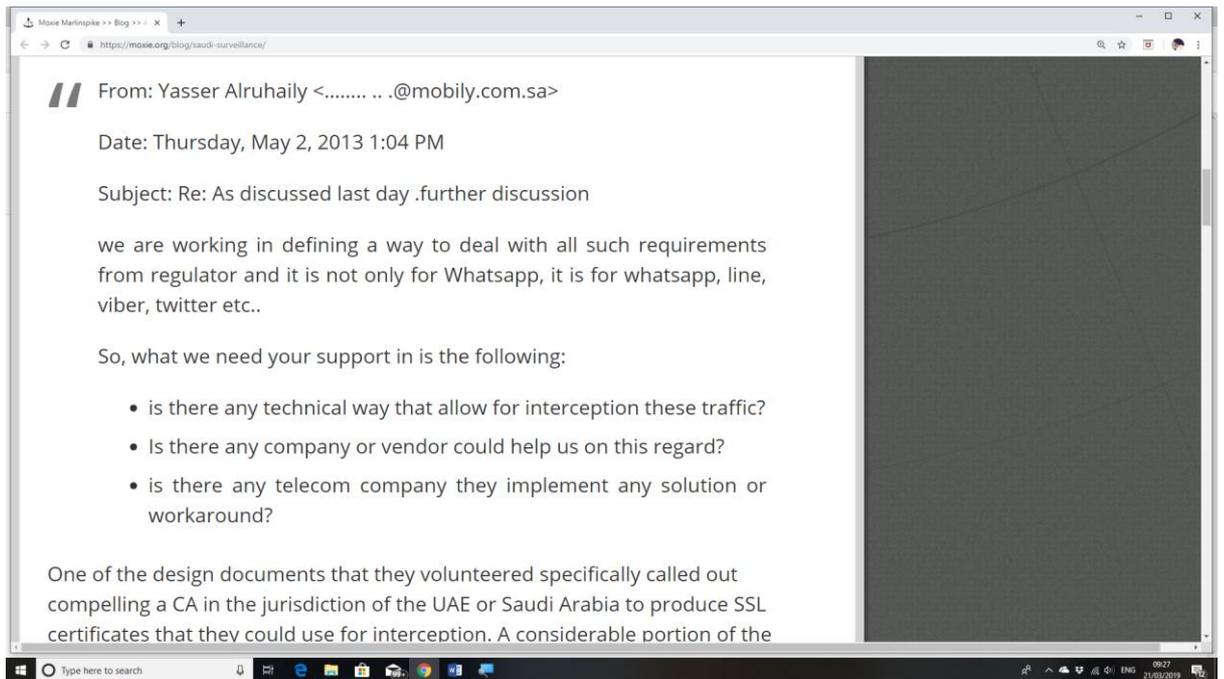


Figure 7:1 A Sample of Several Emails Sent to Moxie, in which Mobily’s Requests are Shown in Three Bullet Points.

This example – and I believe that there are many more cases that have not become public yet – demonstrates how Saudi authorities are continuing efforts to develop a program that will enable them to trace, record, predict, and monitor online political activities. This is a phenomenon that is closely associated with the concept of ‘surveillance capitalism’ (See Zuboff, 2015; Hintz et al., 2017), which examines the growing collaborations and constructive interdependencies between social media companies and state-based surveillance projects.

The case of Edward Snowden is probably one of the most striking examples using which these ever-expanding relationships between state intelligence agencies and high-tech companies can be understood. In 2013, Snowden, a former system administrator for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and a computer programmer at the National Security Agency (NSA), began to reveal highly classified documents

from the NSA regarding some state-corporate surveillance programs (The Guardian, 2013). His disclosure showed sensitive information about numerous worldwide surveillance programs, many operated by the NSA in collaboration with telecommunications companies and some European governments. These unique programs are used to intercept data shared online and hack into computer systems.

Studies conducted on this case (See e.g. Dencik et al., 2016; Dencik and Cable, 2017; Hintz et al., 2017) have demonstrated the unprecedented extent and scale of online mass surveillance practiced by many state agencies with the assistance of information and technology companies²⁷.

While the expansion of state surveillance capabilities and infrastructures may not be a major concern for ordinary people and political activists in democratic countries, it poses a significant threat to those in authoritarian countries, as with the increasing adoption of these sophisticated technologies by states, they can now be easily identified and punished. According to Dencik and Hintz “surveillance fundamentally shifts the power balance between activists and the state (as well as large businesses) by providing the latter with powerful tools to monitor and target potential adversaries” (2017, no pagination).

Lynch (2011) argues that authoritarian governments and their citizens are engaged in a ‘technical struggle’ over the use of the Internet and that social media platforms do not only provide privileges to users but also function as tools that can be used by

²⁷ For extensive discussions on the Snowden case, refer to the project ‘Digital Citizenship and Surveillance Society: UK State-Media-Citizen Relations after the Snowden Leaks’. The project is very comprehensive as it explores the issue of state surveillance based on four critical themes: policy, technology, civil society, and news media. The link to the project homepage: <https://dcssproject.net/>

authoritarian institutions to monitor public attitudes and political activities. Therefore, although the findings of this research indicate that social media platforms have provided young adults with significant advantages, the Saudi government's pervasive surveillance of political and social discourse under the pretence of protecting national security and maintaining social order has posed some threats to the democratic value of the online public sphere. The Saudi authorities are trying hard to take advantage of the latest sophisticated technologies to monitor online information.

Second, social media platforms should not be perceived as completely free public spaces, as many users assume. Rather, they are public spaces managed by private companies. Therefore, through their policy of use, they may intentionally or unintentionally restrain their users' ability to communicate politically sensitive information. This is exemplified in Facebook's removal of the 'We Are All Khaled Said' page created in 2011 by the well-known activist Wael Ghonim to help promote the Egyptian revolution (Saleh and Wahab, 2011). The collaborative surveillance undertaken by the government of China and some social networking sites provides another example of authoritarian governments' ability to intervene in these online public spaces (Joseph, 2012). Zuckerman (2015) refers to this private regulation of social networking sites as 'corporate intermediary censorship'.

Interestingly, some of the activists interviewed in this research, however, added that surveillance is not the only strategy that the Saudi regime employs to control activities on social media. They noted that the government has recently created thousands of fake accounts aimed at countering public opinions online. The activities of these bot

accounts were prominent during the disappearance of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, who was later found to have been killed and dismembered. During this unfortunate incident, Twitter suspended hundreds of suspected accounts that were reported by NBS News as being involved in a coordinated hashtag campaign to defend the Saudi regime's role in Khashoggi's disappearance (Collins and Wodinsky, 2018).

This is consistent with the argument made by Almaghlooth, which is that although hashtag activism has led the Saudi government to take several reform measures, the authority also has exploited this tool by following what he called a 'dumping policy' by which "it has loaded hashtags of which it disapproves with many messages to divert attention and detract from their main message" (2013, p.247).

In a similar vein, King et al. (2017) provide evidence from China. In 2010, the Chinese government hired up to 2 million people to distract the public by introducing enormous numbers of pseudonymous and other deceptive writings into social media platforms to establish these as the true preferences of ordinary people. The Chinese regime thus aimed to prevent anti-government mobilisation through active distraction.

Gunitsky (2015) notes that authoritarian regimes exploit social media to enhance stability and ensure legitimacy, mobilise pro-government supporters, frame discourses, and identify discrepancies between private and public preferences. He comments the following:

Non-democratic regimes have increasingly moved beyond merely suppressing online discourse, and are shifting toward proactively subverting and co-opting social media for their own purposes.

Namely, social media is increasingly being used to undermine the opposition, to shape the contours of public discussion, and to cheaply gather information about falsified public preferences. ***Social media is thus becoming not merely an obstacle to autocratic rule but another potential tool of regime durability*** (2015, p.42, emphasis added)

While the aforementioned threats to democratic values are concerned with the technical aspects of social media, the findings of this research reveal other serious threats concerning individuals' online behaviours. Although it seems that social media has provided the public in Saudi Arabia with easy, open, and accessible means to a wealth of information, which offers far more alternative perspectives on issues of common concern than mainstream mass media, some interviewees reported that they have been exposed to or have encountered deviant behaviours such as trolling, naming, and shaming.

Such unpleasant aspects of online behaviours may result in individuals changing their tweeting habits. For example, some participants said that they were less likely to tweet about sensitive political and social issues after being trolled. Others changed their privacy settings on Twitter so that their online activity would not be seen by the general public. This is an issue that may engender the fragmentation of users into different communities of like-minded, homogenous groups (Gerhards and Schafer, 2010). Consequently, this may lead to individuals missing out on opportunities to deliberate with others who hold different viewpoints (Kim and Pasek, 2016). All of these aspects raise critical concerns regarding the democratic promises of the online public sphere in hostile socio-political contexts.

It can thus be argued that although online anonymity can enhance the social ties, in that it promotes interaction, reduces formal hierarchies, facilitates communication across gender, class, and age, and more importantly, gives users a great opportunity to completely conceal their identities and enjoy a high level of freedom in expressing their views (See Chapter Five), it also entails some negative aspects, especially in the way some anonymised accounts tend to behave badly towards others while utilising the protection of anonymity (Trytko and Wittel, 2017). Therefore, as the findings of this research show, anonymity may sometimes run counter to accountability. This finding raises the need for future studies to consider the question of how the anonymity feature may affect individuals' behaviours online.

Overall, the findings of this research suggest that social media has established alternative channels for young Saudis to participate in politics informally and to express their grievances, priorities, and demands to the government. Meanwhile, these platforms have opened up unofficial channels for the Saudi authorities to identify popular undercurrents and co-opt social resistance. Thus, it can be argued that social media provides a much freer but also a much more disorderly and much less rule-governed public sphere than more traditional models of the public sphere.

Additionally, it should be kept in mind that online participation does not always translate into reflective dialogue and democratic debates. This is not simply because of the fact that in the online public sphere, users are engaged in diverse and multi-layered spaces which, as some argue, reduce the likelihood of individuals' exposure to opposite views, but also due to other factors that can greatly influence the 'democratic value' of the online public sphere, such as state and business intervention

as well as online abuses and trolls. All of these may lead to immature dialogues between social media users.

That being said, the last point that I want to emphasise on is that compared to democratic countries, the existence of the online public sphere in a non-democratic society can be perceived as being of great value and being 'more democratic' in terms of accessibility and inclusion compared to the public sphere without the Internet.

7.4 Hashtag Activism: Effective but not Reliable

The literature on online activism shows that lately, 'hashtags' have been used extensively by individuals and organisations alike for various purposes. While some hashtags, for example, seek to increase awareness about domestic abuse, such as #WhyIStayed and #showsolidarity, promote unity, such as #JeSuisCharlie and #RefugeesWelcome, or aim to raise funds, such as #icebucketchallenge, others may seek to achieve greater goals (Mendes et al., 2019).

The case study of the anti-male guardianship campaign discussed in Chapter Six demonstrates the manner in which the Twitter hashtag has been utilised by women to share their struggles and demand the abolishing of the male guardianship system in Saudi Arabia. The findings suggest that the hashtag has enabled isolated women in Saudi Arabia to attract an unprecedented level of attention in terms of male guardianship-related issues. By linking numerous stories of women's rights abuses, the hashtag has facilitated affected women in challenging the religious and patriarchal discourse that has dominated the Saudi public sphere.

For instance, the female interviewees revealed that because of the several socio-political restrictions they face in Saudi Arabia (e.g. lack of mobility, gender segregation), they have found an alternative space on social media platforms for their mobilisation activities. They added that social media has not simply been an effective tool to improve the visibility of women's issues in Saudi Arabia, but it has also contributed to empowering them to discuss some of the topics that were previously considered taboo in Saudi society, such as gender issues. This is due to the fact that social media participation has allowed for a strong sense of community and togetherness, which women in Saudi Arabia lack in the public sphere.

That being said, some interviewees expressed their concern about the reliability of online activism (See Chapter Five). They argued that because social media platforms are an open space for anyone to join, regardless of their intentions, online activism lacks the organisational and managerial aspects through which a campaign can control and promote its objectives accordingly. They emphasised that although the anti-male guardianship campaign has enabled women to generate unprecedented awareness about their situation in Saudi Arabia as well as exert pressure on Saudi authorities, the campaign has been exploited by others to attack Saudi society and serve their own agendas.

It is worth noting here that the anti-male guardianship campaign caused widespread controversy among the members of Saudi society after the disclosure of suspicious accounts, most of which have been found to be managed from outside Saudi Arabia. What has been initially observed in terms of these Twitter accounts is that they do

not support the objectives of the campaign but rather dedicate their efforts to attacking Saudi religious institutions by fabricating false news (Erem News, 2016).

One of the prominent external Twitter accounts that took advantage of this campaign was that of Isaac Cohen (Erem News, 2016). However, available sources have not said much about who Isaac is or where he lives. All that is known about him is that he is of Jewish origin.

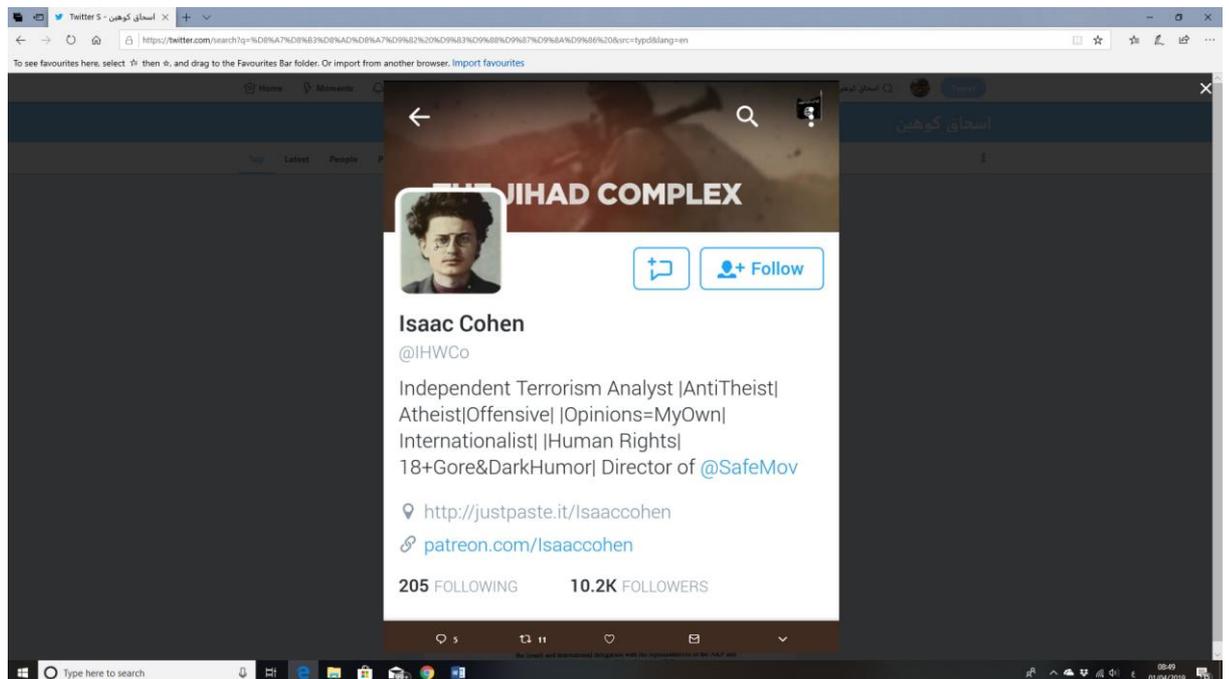


Figure 7:2 Cohen's Twitter Account, which was Later Suspended by Twitter due to its Violation of Rules.

Isaac's account was one of the most active accounts during the anti-male guardianship campaign, especially in the early stage of the campaign. He hacked several girls' Twitter accounts and then forced them to publish tweets that he had originally written (Ajel, 2016). The account was suspended by Twitter after several cases were brought against it.

Consequently, this provoked widespread scepticism among the participants of the campaign regarding the reliability of online activism. For instance, in a newspaper article written by the renowned writer Haila Al-Mashouh, the title of which is translated into English as 'Abolishing the guardian or abolishing...?', she announced her withdrawal from the anti-male guardianship campaign with an emphasis on the fact that she will continue supporting the campaign, but not by tweeting. Haila mentioned that although she was among the active participants in the #Saudi_women_want_to_abolish_the-guardianship_system, she believes that the campaign has deviated from its course and objectives after being exploited by external actors to serve their own agendas (Al-Mashouh, 2016).

A story that is quite similar to this can be found in the case of a blogger known as 'A Gay Girl in Damascus', who was one of the most prominent Syrian bloggers during the beginning of the revolution. This person was later found to be a middle-aged American man residing in Scotland (Young, 2017). Such a situation reminds us of how effortlessly lies can be spread and false identities can be used over the Internet.

Therefore, although the aforementioned discussion is partly in line with the 'here comes everybody' perspective in which Shirky (2008) argues that actors who organise themselves through ICTs are able to accomplish many tasks more effectively, efficiently, and quickly compared to traditional hierarchical organisations, it seems that online activism, due to its loose networks and leaderless nature, can sometimes deviate from its route and be exploited by others to spread false evidence and misleading information.

7.5 Conclusion

This chapter sought to reflect upon the research three question based on the arguments and findings presented in Chapters Two, Five, and Six and the themes that have developed from the scrutiny of the arguments. The following chapter will conclude the study and present some personal observations and reflections on research within an authoritarian context, discuss the limitations of the study, and offer suggestions for further research.

8 Chapter Eight: Concluding Remarks

8.1 Introduction

I want to emphasise that social media participation and activism, especially for those living in a hostile social and political context, can be a very transformative and great experience. Numerous studies have shown that social media platforms have played a crucial role in several political and social issues around the world (e.g. Tufekci and Wilson, 2012; Breuer and Groshek, 2014; Ince et al., 2017; Erayja, 2016; Lokot, 2018; Tsatsou, 2018). I agree with Shirky (2011) that social media should not be considered a substitute 'space' to traditional political participation and activism but rather, an effective tool to access information, spread news, raise awareness, and organise actions.

Furthermore, it should be noted here that the controversy over the positive/negative impacts of media consumption/participation in terms of political engagement is indeed not a new phenomenon. It dates back to early studies on media effects (Kwak et al., 2018). For example, Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948) cautioned against the 'narcotizing dysfunction' of the traditional media in which 'increased media consumption' would result in a disengagement from social, political, and civic life. They argued that traditional media prompts 'a narcotizing dysfunction' by driving individuals to mix up the consumption of information with meaningful political engagement.

While this argument seems to capture the current phenomenon of the 'slacktivism hypothesis' as well as the 'simplicity' associated with social media participation at

face value, I believe that such a comparison between the impacts of social and traditional media on citizens' engagement with political matters is problematic and indeed inapplicable. Unlike the traditional one-to-many medium, social media platforms enable users to access information, create content, disseminate news, participate in political debates, and accomplish much more (Tufekci and Wilson, 2012; Howard and Hussain, 2013). Therefore, networked users are not only information consumers but also producers. Additionally, such activities may have a great impact on users' behaviours and attitudes, especially if we consider the diversity of political views present on these extensive social networks. Furthermore, in terms of the disclosure of preferences that this research has examined, social media participation and activism should be considered significant advantages.

Finally, it should be kept in mind that the socio-political implications of social media are inseparable from its environment (authoritarian or otherwise). Therefore, I agree with both Samin (2012) and Fuchs (2014) that for any study seeking to explore social and political implications for a particular society, the contextual situation should be considered first and foremost. By doing so, the study is likely to achieve the most accurate conclusion.

8.2 Research on an Authoritarian Context: Personal Observations and Reflections

An authoritarian context can best be characterised as a dramatic, unpredictable, and hostile environment; it can render research a very challenging task requiring careful consideration prior, during, and after the fieldwork (See Chapter Four). This also could explain the serious lack of empirical contributions in the current literature about authoritarian environments.

In the Arab context, for instance, besides the language barriers faced by non-Arab researchers, issues such as the research participants' and researchers' safety, accessibility of the fieldwork, reaching the target sample, building trust and confidence with the research participants, and ethical practices are among the most critical factors determining the success or failure of the research. Therefore, understanding the context and its possible implications is crucial for researchers since this would not only save their time and ensure the research participants' safety but also enable them to collect credible and rich data.

Although I am fully aware of the political and social context as a Saudi citizen and do not have any difficulty in terms of language as Arabic is my mother tongue, the aforementioned factors created some challenges for me, especially prior to and during the fieldwork. These challenges were successfully overcome by extensive fieldwork preparation and techniques. Therefore, in order to contribute to the literature, particularly in terms of research methodologies, I have paid considerable attention to explaining these techniques step-by-step, from the early phase of the research to the post-fieldwork phase, in Chapter Four. This will hopefully help researchers aiming to conduct research in the same contextual situation take advantage of the theoretical and practical tools adopted in this study.

Regarding the research target sample, Twitter, in my present study has proved to be an extremely effective tool through which I have been able to identify the initial participants – activists in particular. In fact, I can say that without Twitter, I would not have been able to recruit the activists interviewed in the present study. That said, there are important points that I want to highlight regarding the adoption of Twitter

and other social media platforms as tools to identify and contact the online target sample. These are the following:

- First, many participants revealed to me that after I contacted them to participate in my research, they not only googled my name to see how credible my personal information is, but they also scrolled through my Twitter account activities to gain some confidence and ensure that the researcher is credible and has provided true information. Therefore, the researcher's social media activities may have a great impact on the research participants' decision of accepting or rejecting participating in the study.

For instance, one activist (female) told me that after she found me following some prominent anti-male guardianship campaign activists on Twitter and saw that I liked and commented on some of the campaign-related tweets, she started to gain confidence about my research and my status as a credible researcher. Thus, researchers who want to adopt social media as a tool to recruit their target sample should ensure that their social media activities do not contradict the information that they provide their target participants with. Additionally, researchers should provide their participants with ample personal and research information because sometimes, matters/details that researchers consider unimportant may be crucial to the potential participants' decision of whether to participate in the research or not.

- After identifying the target participants and obtaining their consent to participate in the research, I found that a careful observation of their online activities (prior to the fieldwork) can be of great value for the fieldwork in particular and the overall research in general. For example, employing this

strategy in my study not only helped me understand some of my participants' personalities and ways of engaging with social and political issues, but it also contributed to how I designed my interview questions. Some of their activities helped me come up with questions that I added to my interview questions and, indeed, these were valuable during my fieldwork. An efficient way to observe participants' online activities is by enabling/turning on notifications for their activity.

The final research observation I want to make is that contrary to what I expected before contacting the target research participants – that females would be very difficult to recruit due to the culture of strict gender segregation in the Saudi context – the reality was amazingly different. I found that females were very enthusiastic and willing to participate in my present study.

For instance, I remember that during the early recruitment phase, one of the first females I recruited sent me a WhatsApp message saying that she had spoken with one of her friends about my study and that she had expressed her willingness to participate in my research. Surprisingly, instead of me (as a researcher) sending her a request to participate in my research, within a few hours, I received a WhatsApp message saying “Hi, I am the one that [anonymised name] told you about. I am willing to participate in your research”.

Therefore, such enthusiasm shown by female participants proved my early expectations wrong. This also raised a question in my mind as to why females were excited to participate in my research. One possible answer I found later during my interviews with them is that my research topic evoked their interest, especially since

my research focuses on one of the prominent Saudi women's issues: the male guardianship system. Many of them asked me after the interviews whether I could share my research findings with them after it is complete.

Another observation about the female participants is that they were extremely excited about the potentialities of social media compared to their male counterparts. They spoke with great enthusiasm about their experiences of social media participation and activism. I believe that this great excitement is due to the fact that women in Saudi Arabia have very rare formal political and social positions (compared to men) through which they can highlight their issues and express their opinions. Therefore, social media platforms might be seen by the majority of them as an effective and alternative space enabling them to generate more public attention about issues affecting them.

These are some of the critical personal observations that I believe will be useful to researchers aiming to conduct research in such a context or aiming to adopt social media as a tool to observe and identify participants. The next section will highlight the research limitations and make suggestions for future studies.

8.3 Limitations of the Research

It is crucial to note that this study, like all research, has some limitations. Its key limitation lies in the fact that any research into technology and society must acknowledge and be aware of the possibility of and the rapid pace of change in its findings. This becomes particularly important in an authoritarian context where changes in situations, whether for better or worse, are dramatic and thus difficult to predict. For example, during my work on this research, two unprecedented reforms

in the history of the modern Kingdom occurred. These are the lifting of the ban on women driving and the relaxation of male guardianship laws to allow women to travel without requiring their guardian's permission.

Therefore, in my current study, I tried to update my findings and discussions where possible to consider these new political and social changes. However, I think more studies are needed to follow up on future political and social developments in Saudi Arabia. Based on what I am witnessing now in my country, coupled with the increasing youth population, I am quite certain that over the next five years, there will be dramatic changes to economic, political, and social aspects, which are often of interest to Saudi society. Therefore, plenty of opportunities lie ahead for researchers to contribute to the literature.

Another limitation of this study is the selected age group for the sample, which is young adults (See Chapter Four). Although the selection of this age group has practical and theoretical rationales, as has been explained in this study – and therefore selecting them as the main sample appears reasonable and make sense – including other age groups may lead to richer findings and broader conclusions about the social and political implications of social media participation and activism in Saudi Arabia. This is especially applicable given that other age groups such as the 35+ one are still quite active on social media platforms in Saudi Arabia. This is probably due to the increasing digital literacy in the Kingdom.

Additionally, those over the age of 35 have experienced two eras. The first is before the introduction of the Internet to Saudi Arabia in the 1990s, when there were no public means of political expression available, a scarcity of sources of information,

and no alternative views other than those of traditional media praising the government and advancing religious ideologies. The second is the era of technology and the information revolution where the flow of information has become very challenging for the government to control and where alternative means for political and social participation and activism have increased. Therefore, such people may have richer experiences and perspectives on these dramatic transformations to share.

The final known limitation, which is perhaps better defined as a difficulty, is conducting research in a context where limited literature is available and where there is a serious lack of access to credible sources relevant to the focus of this study. For instance, I faced great challenges in finding independent and reliable data through which hidden social and political activities (activities that preceded the trigger of the anti-male guardianship campaign) can be traced and investigated.

These limitations above can illustrate the need for the present study and other future empirical research. The current study has contributed to the literature in a way that fills a gap in knowledge about Saudi Arabia and points to many areas for further research in the Saudi context in particular and the Middle East in general. The following section will provide more suggestions for future study.

8.4 Future Studies

The current research has been based on the socio-political implications of social media participation and activism among young adults in Saudi Arabia. It sought to respond to three research questions:

1. How do young Saudi adults experience and perceive the socio-political implications of social media within the Saudi public sphere?
2. How has the utilisation of the 'hashtag feature' facilitated Saudi women in fighting gendered inequalities and demanding more social and political rights? And to what degree has it been successful?
3. To what extent did the emergence of the online public sphere contribute to facilitating dialogue and democratised debate and revive political and social participation in Saudi Arabia? Has it enabled young Saudis to overcome the offline public sphere's restrictions?

Therefore, as has been pointed out in the section regarding limitations, the findings may quickly become outdated due to the unprecedented changes and developments that Saudi Arabia is currently experiencing in the economic, political, and social domains. Thus, similar studies will be required to capture these evolving and ongoing transformations in these domains as well as the manner in which Saudis interact online with them in terms of advancing or challenging such reforms and developments.

One of the prominent findings of the present study is that social media participation and activism have enhanced the level of public awareness and led to the disclosure of previously hidden preferences. Therefore, further research should also look into how these critical factors and new experiences have affected the offline lives of Saudi people. This, for instance, could be in terms of the culture of gender segregation or the exposure to ideas and views that are sometimes considered to be against the teachings of Islam and cultural values.

Recently, hashtag activism worldwide has demonstrated its ‘discursive political power’, especially when it is utilised to expose subjectivities and issues that dominant discourses seek to erase from public view (See Chapter Six). However, much more research still needs to be done in the future, particularly within authoritarian contexts, to identify further political and social implications of this new activism phenomenon online and offline.

Finally, Islam appears to play a fundamental role in all aspects of individuals’ lives in Arab-Muslim countries. However, its role and level of influence vary from one country to another. This is because Islam has different forms and sects. For instance, in Saudi Arabia, Wahhabism is the dominant model of Islam, which prescribes some strict teachings/beliefs not followed by other forms of Islam such as those in Egypt, Tunisia, and Oman. Therefore, multi-country comparative study of the roles of different Islamic models in the lives of individuals in these countries will contribute to a broader understanding of the impact of Islam on the behaviours of individuals with respect to their participation in political and social issues online and offline.

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Appendix

Participant Interview Consent Form

Study Title

If you are happy to participate, then please tick and sign this form

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated [.../.../2017/18] and have had the opportunity to ask questions. []

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline. []

3. I understand that my responses will be kept strictly anonymous. I understand that my real name will not be linked to the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the publications that result from the research. []

4. I agree for this interview to be tape-recorded. I understand that the audio recording made of this interview will be used only for analysis and that extracts from the interview. []

5. I agree to participate in this project. [].

Name of participant:

Date:

Signature:

Name of researcher:

Date:

Signature: