






THE ENLIVENMENT OF PUBLIC OPINION IN THE NEW ERA: EXPLORING THE POWER OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN SAUDI ARABIA

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ABSTRACT

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This research aimed to study how social media has changed the culture of communication in Saudi Arabia. The research surveyed 400 Saudis who use social media in order to discover likely relationships between degree of expression, political consciousness, amount of social media use, apparent attitude climate, government censorship and purposes for using social media. A survey questionnaire was used to answer projected hypotheses and research questions, and the data was analyzed using SPSS software. The results found solid connections between different variances, namely the amount of social media practice, degree of expression liberty, and level of political consciousness. Also, a strong and substantial effect was found on the way that people perceive the opinion climate via social media. Furthermore, entertainment was the primary reason why Saudis use social media that prejudiced their expression freedom, political consciousness and perceived opinion climate. The study is applicable to the youth as well as the adult population in Saudi Arabia in relation to opinion and political conscience. Only a few studies have drawn attention to the link between political conscience and use of social media, and this research focuses on the novelty and genuineness of research by using the population from a Kingdom.

Contribution/Originality: This is one of the few studies that have investigated the power of social media on political consciousness in Saudi Arabia when viewed from relationships between the degree of expression, political consciousness, and amount of social media use.

1. INTRODUCTION

In Saudi Arabia, the government controls much of the media (Hammond, 2007), and citizens do not feel free to express themselves in public. This has changed recently with the innovation of social media. Now, people are less restricted when criticizing perceived injustices and expressing general, everyday complaints. This may be moving Saudi Arabia toward being a country in which political change is possible. It is also causing rapid changes in the political systems in the Arab region. This study seeks to understand the relationship between six variables – degree of expression, political consciousness, amount of social media use, perceived opinion climate, government censorship, and purposes for using social media. The ideal situation for a society is where citizens feel free to express their opinions on issues that are personal to them. Also, as citizens become aware of inequity or injustice,

they should have the freedom of expression to speak about any societal problem. This study focuses on how social media is used in Saudi Arabia and the way in which social media has caused Saudis to become more expressive even in a heavily censored society. As well as examining social media use in Saudi Arabia, this study also attempts to discover the extent of openness and freedom of expression in the presence of social media. This study examines how new media have transformed collectivistic societies, such as Saudi Arabia, in the way of expressing opinion and the handling of issues in the framework of the spiral of silence theory. What is the relationship between the social media and freedom of expression? This study strives to examine the effectiveness of the spiral of silence theory where social media use is aggressively monitored, specifically in the case of Saudi Arabia, which is a heavily censored country that has a lot of access to social media. This study examines the tendency of individuals to use new means of communication, such as Twitter and Facebook, to express their opinions which cannot be expressed offline. Therefore, the internet is a safe place to avoid the fear of isolation or fear of having no voice or being unheard. This study examines the spiral of silence theory, which is a leading theory in public opinion. Noelle-Neumann (1974) developed this theory from several research studies conducted in the seventies where she saw that the media played a significant role in guiding and building public opinion (Simpson, 1996). Moreover, the spiral of silence theory takes another form in collective communities, such as Saudi Arabia, where the media are under the control of the government. Traditional media, such as TV, radio and press, avoid real public opinion for sensitive topics. As a result, what is known as the opinion of the counterfeit majority was born (Hijab, 2011). Communication technology inevitably leads to a more democratic society (McLuhan & Zhang, 2013). What is happening today in the Middle East and Saudi Arabia in particular is a birth of new concepts for communication theories.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Traditional Media in Saudi Arabia

The traditional media in Saudi Arabia are television, newspapers and radio. The first newspaper, called the Umm Al-Qura, was established during the reign of King Abdul-Aziz in 1924. After that, radio began broadcasting in 1949 and television in 1965 (Kraidy, 2009). Press in Saudi Arabia passed through various stages: (a) the stage of individual journalism, (b) the stage of integrating the newspapers, and (c) the stage of press organizations. After the issuance of the Umm Al-Qura newspaper, many more newspapers appeared, and now there are 16 newspapers in Saudi Arabia (Al-Saggaf & Simmons, 2015). The first radio system was established particularly to provide King Abdul-Aziz with information centers and cities across the kingdom, and foreign news about current events (Alhaider, 1986). In 1949, King Abdul-Aziz issued a decree to establish radio in Saudi Arabia. Now there are four radio stations belonging to the Saudi government and the Ministry of Information. Official broadcasting for television began during the reign of King Faisal in 1965. Currently, there are nine television stations belonging to the Saudi government and the Ministry of Information (Al-Saggaf & Simmons, 2015).

2.2. New Media in Saudi Arabia

According to Chaudhry (2014), the decree issued by the Saudi monarchy banned the reporting of news that controverts the seven Islamic laws, emasculates national security, promotes the interests of foreigners, or slanders pious leaders during the period when the Arab Spring mutinies were gaining momentum. The Saudi Arabian government has also ensured that private service providers are denied the opportunity to provide internet services by relying on only one public institution as the only service provider (Al-Khalifa & Garcia, 2013). Despite these attempts by the government to filter and regulate the internet, Saudi Arabia is among the nations in the Arab world that are at the forefront with regard to technological transformation. Brewster, Gollan, & Wright (2013) attest to this by averring that social media appear to remain at the front line amidst rapid legislative and social change in the Arab world. Also, social media provides an avenue through which external entities can put pressure on Saudi Arabia to terminate its discriminatory restrictions and adopt policies that advocate equal opportunities for all its citizens

(Oidine, 2013). Furthermore, social media have helped women to emerge and fight the inequalities and discrimination rooted in Saudi societies. Oidine (2013) asserts that women, who have been deprived of the opportunity to voice their predicaments by the media that is under strict control, are now diffusing empowerment messages through social media.

2.3. Degree of Political Expressiveness

According to Winder (2014), Saudi Arabia leads the world in the growth rate of Twitter with more than three million active users. He stated, "While the global average is 300% growth year-on-year, Saudi Arabia grew more than 3,000% from 2011 to 2012, and currently accounts for 50,000,000 tweets per month." Also, "More than 90,000,000 videos are watched daily on YouTube on Saudi Arabian soil, that is more than any daily YouTube video viewership number worldwide." In his paper, Miladi (2012) addressed the role of modern technology in moving the revolution in the Arab world and how mobile phones and social means of communication, such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, played a role in the transfer of news of the revolution under a quotient blackout of traditional media. Alhargan (2012) said that through social media, unaffiliated government clerics and citizens of Saudi Arabia enjoy less restriction on expression and speech, enabling them to address sensitive religious and monarch issues.

2.4. Political Consciousness and Social Media

The Arab Spring revolution took a short time in the transition between Tunisia, Egypt and Libya; Tunisia in December 2010, Egypt in January 2011, and Libya in February 2011. The ease of access to the internet and the use of social media played major roles in stimulating this revolution (Alqudsi, 2012). The exchange of stories created an indirect participation in the revolution, even from people who were not physically present (Halverson, Ruston, & Trethewey, 2013). Sayed (2012) investigated the impact of social media on the Arab revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. The data for this study was collected via surveys on 376 Egyptian activists, and after he analyzed the data, the use of social media for political reasons was assessed and he found that (a) 90.9% use Facebook, (b) 50.6% use YouTube, (c) 15% use comments in electronic newspapers, (d) 12.7% use Twitter, and (e) 7.3% use blogs. The use of 22 different social media platforms for political purposes appeared in a positive way in this study. Also, this movement, which was active in social media, became reality; the entire world saw what happened during the Arab Spring due to the effects of social media.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study measured whether social media help Saudi people to be more expressive than they would be in face-to-face situations. Also, this study showed how Saudis use social media, what social media sites they use to express themselves and the amount of time they spend using social media. The variables which will be measured are the use of social media, the amount of time spent using social media, the degree of expressiveness on social media, and the political consciousness on social media. Social media had a major impact in Northern Africa and the Middle East during the Arab Spring. However, Saudi Arabia was not affected by the Arab Spring even though social media was used in the same way as in other countries. There is currently no study looking at relationship between social media use, expressiveness, and government censorship specifically in Saudi Arabia. This study attempts to understand the relation between increased social media use and increased freedom of expression.

3.1. Sampling Approach

The survey used a five-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. There are five variables being measured and each of the variables has five statements. The survey used a non-probability sample called *snowball sampling*. It is considered a snowball sample because the WhatsApp participants asked to forward the

survey on to other Saudi people they know. Males and females answered the same questions and the survey took approximately five minutes. Some of the Saudi participants live in Saudi Arabia and some live outside of Saudi Arabia. Initially, the first message with the survey was sent to approximately 25 participants via WhatsApp and they were asked to send the survey on to other Saudis that they know. In total, 400 participants took the survey, 70 of whom did not answer the questions related to gender and age. All of the questions were translated from English to Arabic and the questionnaire was reviewed by a translation expert in order to ensure the quality and accuracy of the questions.

3.2. Questionnaire Pre-test

Before conducting the survey study, a pre-test was conducted on a sample of 25 Saudi people, which was designed to check the readability of the survey questionnaire. No errors were found.

3.3. Measured Variables

3.3.1. Purpose of Social Media Use

The purpose of social media use was measured to determine why social media are used in general among Saudi people. This variable needs to be measured because it is important to understand whether Saudi people are using social media for entertainment, business, or political reasons. To measure the purpose of social media use, five statements were used to determine the degree to which people used social media for entertainment, contacting friends and family, conducting business, gathering information, and staying informed of international news coverage on Saudi Arabia.

3.3.2. Amount of Social Media Use

The frequency variable of social media use shows how Saudi participants use social media and for how many hours they use it. For the multiple choice question, the five choices focused on the frequency of social media usage among Saudi people. The choices were: less than one hour per day, two to three hours per day, four to five hours per day, six to seven hours per day, or more than seven hours per day. This variable is important to understand the relationship between the amount of social use and the degree of expression, which is the next variable.

3.3.3. Degree of Political Expressiveness

The freedom of expression is defined as the right to express opinions freely through speech, writing, and other forms of communication (Salmon & Oshagan, 1990). Moreover, this variable is crucial because it represents the heart of this study. This variable has five questions and all of them were designed to determine the measurement of the degree of expression among Saudi social media users. The statements measured how comfortable people feel expressing their opinions and criticisms, whether people perceive social media as a safe place to express opinions on sensitive issues, such as women's rights, and if people are more willing to express themselves on social media than in person.

3.3.4. Political Consciousness

The use of social media for political activity has become a familiar occurrence. It is well known what happened in the Arab Spring and the role social media played. Moreover, political consciousness is very important in this study as a variable that needs to be measured. Also, it is important to find out the extent of Saudi involvement in the political field and the level of their participation on social media. These five questions were designed to measure the political consciousness among Saudis, the level of importance politics plays in the participants' lives, and whether or not the participants fear or criticize the government, as fear of punishment may stop some participants from expressing their political opinions.

3.3.5. Perception of Government Censorship

In the Saudi government, the Ministry of Culture and Information, and the Communications and Information Technology Commission have control of freedom of speech and social media (ALJabre, 2013). Therefore, many people are afraid to express themselves for fear of being punished by the government. The government's laws concerning freedom of speech are ambiguous to Saudi citizens. The five statements were focused on the degree to which Saudis perceive the government censors social media, their perception of censorship on social media, how safe or unsafe Saudi people feel when using social media, and current trends in the perception of censorship. This variable is important to understand the relationship between government censorship and the degree to which people express themselves on social media.

3.3.6. Perceived Opinion Climate

Perceived opinion climate is the state of public opinion on a controversial issue (Schulz & Roessler, 2012). People hear the opinions of others through traditional media. Nowadays, people can search the popular opinion by finding out what is trending on social media. Opinion climate can influence perceptions of an issue, but opinion climate can also be influenced by social media users because trending topics get picked up by traditional media. The five statements focused on how the perceived opinion climate affects people's expression or silence. They measured people's perceptions of how social media affects opinion climate, the degree to which users use social media to understand what the opinion climate is at that moment, and what impact the opinion climate on social media has on the users' perceptions of an issue. This variable is important to understand the relationship between the influence of public opinion and social media users' degrees of expression.

4. RESULTS

This study measured the relationship between the amount of social media use and the degree of expression among Saudi social media users and other variables. Out of the 330 participants who provided an answer for the gender and age questions, 235 were male and 95 were female. Participants in this study were placed into five age categories – 126 participants were aged 18 to 25, 88 participants were aged 26 to 30, 55 participants were aged 31 to 35, 33 participants were aged 36 to 40, and 28 participants were over 40 years old.

Table 1. Correlation matrix of variances.

Variance	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Amount of social media use	--	0.272**	0.090	0.193**	0.013	0.340**	0.167**	0.205**	0.059	0.027
Expression degree		--	0.469**	0.499**	0.092	0.272**	0.157**	0.117**	0.100	0.173**
Political activeness			--	0.402**	0.278**	0.106*	0.149**	-0.082	0.222**	0.246**
Opinion climate				--	0.038	0.234**	0.114*	0.120*	0.177**	0.089
Government censorship purpose of social media use					--	0.022	0.070	-0.026	-0.042	0.098
Entertainment						--	0.249**	0.252**	0.159**	0.154**
Information gathering							--	0.178**	0.394**	0.265**
Contact with family and friends								--	0.125**	0.087
Business									--	0.299**
International news										--

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

H1a predicted that Saudis who perceive government censorship as less positive will exhibit greater political expressiveness. A Pearson correlation analysis was run on perceived government censorship and degree of expression (see Table 1). Hypothesis one was not supported in this study as the result shows no significant correlation between government censorship and degree of expression ($r = .092$, $df = 370$, $p = .076$).

H1b predicted that Saudis who perceive government censorship as less positive will exhibit greater political consciousness. A Pearson correlation was run on government censorship and the level of political consciousness and the results supported H1b in this study. The results show that a strong, significant, positive relationship exists between government censorship and political consciousness. ($r = .278$, $df = 376$, $p < .001$).

RQ1a asked if the frequency of the use of social media has an effect on political expressiveness. A correlation test was run for the frequency of social media use and political expressiveness on social media. The results indicated that there is a strong, significant correlation between the frequency of social media use and the political expressiveness on social media ($r = .272$, $df = 384$, $p < .001$).

RQ1b showed a positive relationship between the frequency of social media use and the degree of expressiveness. Research question one indicated that as the frequency of social media use increases, the degree of expressiveness also increases.

RQ2a asked if the degree of expressiveness has an effect on political consciousness. A correlation test was run on the degree of expressiveness and political consciousness. The results indicated that there is a strong, significant correlation between the degree of expressiveness and political consciousness ($r = .469$, $df = 373$, $p < .001$).

RQ2b showed a positive relationship between the degree of expression and political consciousness. This research question indicated that a higher degree of expression can cause a higher degree of political consciousness.

RQ3a asked if the degree of expressiveness has an effect on the perception of government censorship. A correlation test was run on the degree of expressiveness and government censorship, and the results indicated that there is no relationship between the two variables ($r = .092$, $df = 370$, $p < .076$).

RQ3b showed a non-significant correlation between political expressiveness and the perception of government censorship.

RQ4a asked if the amount of social media use has an effect on the perceived opinion climate. A correlation test was run between the amount of social media use and the perception of opinion climate. The results indicated that there is a significant relationship between the amount of use and the degree of opinion climate ($r = .193$, $df = 387$, $p < .001$).

RQ4b showed a positive relationship between the amount of use and the perceived opinion climate. This research question indicated that higher social media use would cause a more positive perception of opinion climate.

RQ5 asked if Saudis who use social media more are more inclined to use social media for entertainment more than other purposes. A correlation test was run between the amount of social media use and purposes of social media use, including entertainment, information gathering, contact with family and friends, business, and following international news about Saudi Arabia. The results indicated that among the five purposes, a significant relationship only exists between the amount of use and the purpose of entertainment ($r = .340$, $df = 390$, $p < .001$).

RQ6 asked if Saudis who use social media more frequently would be more inclined to exhibit more political consciousness than Saudis who use social media less frequently. The results indicated a non-significant correlation between the amount of social media use and the degree of political consciousness ($r = .090$, $df = 384$, $p = .079$).

5. DISCUSSION

This study was conducted in order to examine how social media has changed the culture of expression in Saudi Arabia. Saudi people now have access to social media networks, whereas, previously, Saudis did not have a place to criticize the government or express their true opinions. This study surveyed Saudis who use social media in order to find correlations with political consciousness, frequency of use, degree of expression, perceived opinion climate, government censorship and purposes for using social media. The methodology used in this study was a snowball survey. SurveyMonkey was used to send out the surveys to Saudi citizens and the survey link was sent via WhatsApp groups. A total of 400 people were surveyed and there was no limit on the demographics, just that the participants should be Saudi Arabian and older than 18 years of age. In the survey, a five-point Likert scale was

employed where 1 = strongly disagree, and 5 = strongly agree. Also included were categorical questions with multiple possible answers.

5.1. Government Censorship and Political Expressiveness

H1a predicted that Saudis who perceive government censorship as less positive would exhibit greater political expressiveness. This hypothesis was not supported by the results; however, the correlation between the two variables was very close to showing significance. The correlation between perceiving government censorship as less positive with a greater degree of political expressiveness showed a nonsignificant relationship. Saudis may not feel comfortable expressing themselves because of the government censorship. Even for this questionnaire the participants may not have wanted to answer questions regarding the government because they are afraid of censorship. It's possible that if the participants had felt more comfortable answering these questions, the relationship may have shown significance. Both government censorship and expression are sensitive topics for Saudis; therefore, consideration must be paid to this sensitivity when analyzing the results of this hypothesis.

5.2. Government Censorship and Political Consciousness

H1b predicted that Saudis who perceive government censorship as less positive would exhibit greater political consciousness, and this hypothesis was supported by the results. Perceived government censorship and political consciousness showed a strong, positive correlation. This may indicate that even though Saudis may view government censorship as negative, they may still be politically active. Due to the revolutions and wars since 2011, Saudis may be becoming more politically active than in the past. According to [Perlov & Guzansky \(2014\)](#), because of strict media censorship by the government in Saudi Arabia, social media sites were the perfect choice for the citizens to be the primary alternative communication instrument. Also, currently the Saudi government is in conflict with a militant group in Yemen. All of these events and news stories have made Saudis more invested in political activities, even with strong government censorship.

5.3. Amount of Use and Degree of Expression

RQ1a examined whether the frequency of social media use has any effect on the degree of expression. This question is central to this study. According to [CITC \(2015\)](#), the use of the internet as a percentage of the population of Saudi Arabia has increased from 5% in 2005 to 55.4% in 2013. The findings of research question one indicated that there is a positive correlation between the use of social media and the degree of expression. People who use social media more will be more politically expressive.

There are no borders with social media; Saudis are able to get information from anywhere and talk to people from many different countries. Also, social media allows Saudis to remain anonymous and to express their opinions without fear of government censorship. [Noelle-Neumann \(1974\)](#) explained that people do not express themselves because of the fear of isolation or punishment.

This theory is known as spiral of silence. However, with social media, people do not show their real identity and can speak about any topic, even if their opinion is in the minority. Therefore, research question one adds new insight to the spiral of silence theory, specifically that the added anonymity provided by social media offers the possibility of freedom without fear and expression without punishment. RQ1b explored the relationship between the amount of social media use and the degree of expressiveness.

The result is a positive, significant correlation. This may indicate that people who use social media more are more expressive about their political views, which may be because social media provides a safe outlet for Saudis to express themselves politically. Also, Saudis can use social media to interact with people from other countries ([Elson, 2012](#)).

5.4. Expressiveness and Political Consciousness

RQ2a investigated whether the degree of political expressiveness yields an effect on political consciousness. The results indicated that there is a positive, significant relationship between the two variables. According to [Sayed \(2012\)](#), social media has had a significant impact on the rapid spread of the social revolution that occurred in 2011, known as the Arab Spring. Therefore, the higher the level of expressiveness someone has, the higher their level of political consciousness. This relationship was the strongest of any two variables in the survey.

Regarding RQ2b, it was shown that more freedom of expression can result in more political consciousness. From research question one, it was shown that more frequent use of social media can bring more freedom of expression. So, those people who use social media more are exposed to more inside and outside information about politics. It is also clear that Saudis now have the ability to express themselves more freely using social media than in the past. Thus, Saudis express themselves on political topics more due to their increased exposure to information. That is what causes more freedom of expression to lead to more political consciousness. According to [Miladi \(2012\)](#), social media and their role in the transfer of political news has helped people to express themselves more.

5.5. Expressiveness and Government Censorship

RQ3a asked if the degree of political expressiveness has an effect on the perception of government censorship. The result of the relationship between the degree of political consciousness and the perception of government censorship is a non-significant correlation.

This may be due to people's fear of the government. The spiral of silence theory appeared here when most respondents did not dare to state the truth and details about their views on the government due to fear of punishment and arrested under the jurisdiction of Ministry of Culture and Information, and the Communications and Information Technology Commission, which is what [Noelle-Neumann \(1974\)](#) suggested in her theory. People do not feel comfortable criticizing the Saudi government, therefore, they may be more likely to choose a neutral position. Non-correlation may not be an accurate representation of Saudi people's true feelings on this subject due to the government censorship that is commonly experienced in Saudi Arabia. RQ3b asked about the relationship between the degree of political expressiveness and the perception of government censorship, and there was no relationship indicated by the survey results.

5.6. Amount of Use and Perceived Opinion Climate

RQ4a asked if the amount of social media use has any effect on perceived opinion climate, and the results indicated a strong, positive correlation between the two. People who use social media more frequently may be able to more easily obtain a clear picture of the opinion climate at that time.

Since most Saudis now have access to the internet, they have the ability to gather knowledge both domestically and abroad. RQ4b asked about the relationship between amount of social media use and perceived opinion climate, and there was a strong correlation between the amount of social media use and perceived opinion climate, which affirms what [Hayes, Matthes, & Eveland \(2011\)](#) suggested – that the opinion climate has become more flexible than ever because of social media.

5.7. Amount of Use and Entertainment

RQ5 asked if Saudis who use social media more frequently are more inclined to use it for the purpose of entertainment more than any other use, and the answer confirmed that entertainment is the main purpose for which Saudis use social media.

The other choices were gathering information, contacting family and friends, business, and following international news about Saudi Arabia.

The access that mobile phone applications now give users makes it very easy to use social media for entertainment purposes wherever they are, not just at home on their computers. As the results showed, the primary purpose for using social is for entertainment. In the social and cultural realms, the Saudi Arabians use social networking for the purpose of social entertainment. Simsim (2011) found the use of social networking sites for entertainment purposes is typical among Saudi youths. However, the lack of entertainment options in Saudi Arabia may be a key reason behind this (Alsanie, 2015).

5.8. Amount of Use and Political Consciousness

RQ6 asked if Saudis who use social media more frequently are more politically active than those who use social media less, and the data obtained did not support this question. There is a non-significant relationship between the amount of social media use and the amount of political consciousness.

Since most users in Saudi Arabia use social media with great frequency, it is difficult to predict more political consciousness on their part. Being politically conscious does not appear to have any causal effect on the amount someone uses social media as it is mostly used for entertainment purposes. Expression may have increased in Saudi Arabia, but this has not caused Saudis to become more political in their use of social media.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study found many strong correlations between the variables of the purposes for using social media – frequency of social media use, the degree of expression, government censorship, opinion climate, and the political consciousness of users. Three limitations are suggested in this current study. The first limitation is the number of participants.

This study only included 400 participants, but future studies could include more participants to represent the twenty-eight million Saudi citizens with twenty million internet users. It only took one month to get 400 participants using SurveyMonkey through WhatsApp. With twenty million internet users in Saudi Arabia, it would be more representative to obtain between eight hundred and one thousand responses to this survey. More participants would increase the amount of data that could be analyzed. The second limitation is that only a Pearson correlation was conducted for this study. In future studies, categorical variables could be included to add more complexity.

If categorical variables are added further tests could be conducted. Open expression and discussions on prohibited topics could lead to change in other areas as well. The areas that could be studied include religious ideas, sexuality issues, and gender rights. These three areas are the most sensitive and are commonly discussed on social media, especially in Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia.

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