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Agency, Expression, and the Virtual Sphere: Social Media in Saudi Arabia

Fiona Hayman^[1]

Abstract

This paper seeks to address the question of why so many Saudi Arabians use social media. Prior literature investigating social media usage in the Saudi Arabia is either too broad or too narrow. This necessitates academic inquiry that addresses the “middle ground”. Saudi Arabians' markedly high rates of social media usage appear incongruous with the traditional, highly restrictive nature of Saudi Arabian society. Given social media's status as a relatively new phenomenon, and its recognized ability to engender civil engagement and political participation, its foothold in a conservative, undemocratic society appears unusual. Thus, this paper investigates the motivations behind Saudi Arabians' social media usage. Qualitative and quantitative data from NGO reports, statistical databases, case studies, news articles, and social media accounts demonstrate a causal link between state repression and social media usage. The evidence indicates that Saudi Arabians use social media to circumvent societal restrictions.

Keywords

Social media, Saudi Arabia, society, civil society, repression

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1. Introduction

In this paper, I seek to determine why so many Saudi Arabians use social media. I argue that Saudi Arabians use social media to circumvent societal restrictions. In developing my argument, I categorize Saudis' social media usage according to the type of repression it seeks to circumvent: political or social. Using qualitative and quantitative data collected from NGO reports, statistical databases, case studies, news articles, and social media accounts, I demonstrate a causal link between state repression and social media usage.

1.1. Research Question and its Motivations

This question is worthy of investigation because Saudi Arabians' markedly high rates of social media usage appear, on the surface, to be incompatible with the traditional, restrictive nature of Saudi Arabian society. Compared with nations around the globe, Saudi Arabia stands out in terms of its social media usage. In 2013, Saudi Arabia ranked first in the world for Twitter penetration, meaning that the highest percentage of the country's total Internet users were active on Twitter (Almashabi and Nereim, 2015). Two years later, nearly half of Saudi Internet users had become members of Instagram, while the global average trailed at only 23% (ibid). When compared with nations in the region, Saudi Arabia's social media usage stands out as significantly higher. Twitter users in Saudi Arabia alone generate 40% of tweets from the Middle East and North Africa, and Saudi Arabia has consistently been home to the highest number of Facebook users in the Middle East (Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government, 2014: 36, 23).

Given social media's status as a relatively new phenomenon, and its

recognized ability to "encompass civic engagement, political participation, entrepreneurial efforts, and social change" (Mourtada and Salem, 2012), its strong foothold in a conservative, undemocratic society seems unusual. Saudi Arabia, to which Freedom House recently bestowed a score of "least free" in the criteria of political rights, civil liberties, and overall freedom rating (Freedom House, 2016), hardly seems a welcome host for social media platforms full of potential for political, cultural, and social transformation. An absolute monarchy influenced by the conservative Wahhabi sect of Islam, the Saudi government operates under Islamic (sharia) law—which, according to critics, is used to justify widespread abuses and denial of human rights (Taylor, 2015). In one dimension, it restricts its citizens' capacity to participate in the political process and limits access to freedoms of speech, press, expression, religion, and fair trial. In another, it exercises tight control over societal structures and interactions, especially through subjecting women to a strict set of rules regarding their behavior, lifestyle, and appearance.

Investigating the motivations behind Saudis' use of social media and the purposes for which it is used may shed light on important developments in Saudi Arabian society. Such investigation can reveal the implications widespread use of social media holds for Saudi Arabian society and its political, social, and cultural evolution. Insights gleaned from the case of Saudi Arabia, in turn, may help scholars investigate how social media usage can impact other societies. In an age when technology continues to transform political, social, and cultural life across the globe, it is important that the role of social media is examined, and its role in transformative processes understood. Focusing on the case of Saudi Arabia in particular can contribute

to our understanding of how social media can facilitate social and political change in countries that limit civil discourse and exercise censorship over the conventional media.

1.2. Paper Outline

In this paper, I first provide a review of prior literature, discussing contributions, limitations, and areas where further research is needed. The literature review shows that prior scholarship has made significant contributions in discussing the role of social media's predecessors—satellite TV and the Internet—as disruptive technologies with the potential for transforming social and political landscapes in the Middle East, the role of social media in mobilizing collective action during the Arab Spring, and social media's role in specific contexts within Saudi Arabia, such as its use during a 2009 natural disaster. The literature, however, is either too broad and outdated, or too narrow to adequately address my question. These shortcomings result in the need for middle ground to be covered: for new academic inquiry that is broad enough to illuminate the motivations behind Saudis' social media usage on a country-wide scale, but narrow enough to investigate the reasons for usage that are specific to the unique social and political conditions in Saudi Arabia.

Next, I build the argument, identifying the independent variable, dependent variable, and causal mechanism that links the two variables. I argue that societal restrictions impact social media usage in Saudi Arabia, due to Saudi Arabians' desire to circumvent these restrictions. I assert that Saudis use social media in response to two distinct forms of repression: social and political. Based upon my findings in the Saudi Arabian case, I predict that across countries with internet and smartphone penetration rates of over

60%, a positive correlation exists between levels of state-imposed repression and social media usage. I then present evidence that supports my argument. I draw upon both quantitative and qualitative data from case studies, think tank and watchdog reports, datasets, news articles, and primary sources, such as Saudi Facebook pages and Instagram accounts. These sources highlight Saudi Arabians' motivations for using social media to circumvent political and social repression.

I conclude with a summary of findings. I discuss the limitations of the argument, its theoretical implications, and its broader application to cases beyond Saudi Arabia. Lastly, I provide suggestions for further research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

In this section, I review literature relevant to answering the question I have posed. There is a limited body of literature surrounding my question, due in part to social media being a fairly recent phenomenon. Most relevant literature was produced within the past decade. Earlier literature on emergent information technologies such as satellite television and the internet can be useful in setting the stage for further proliferation of technology, yet the projections and predictions common throughout this body of work stray far from the reality of the present day. Therefore, I have chosen relatively recent literature, mostly from the last decade, so that these texts can provide relevant and accurate context for my question of study.

I have divided the literature into three groups: 1. Usage of New Media in the Middle East, 2. Usage of Social Media in the Arab Spring, and 3. Usage of Social Media

in Saudi Arabia. These groups, descending in order of specificity, fall short of solving the puzzle of why so many Saudi Arabians use social media. Group 1 discusses the interactions of mass digital communications with Middle Eastern social, cultural, and political life, but the literature is too broad and outdated. Group 2 discusses the use of social media as an activist tool during the Arab Spring uprisings, but the literature focuses on a limited revolutionary context where many events and developments were not applicable to Saudi Arabia. Group 3 analyzes social media usage in Saudi Arabia, but this body of literature—a collection of scattered case studies—fails to comparatively analyze why so many Saudis, as opposed to members of other societies, use social media. While the literature as a whole provides valuable context as to how communication technologies and social networks have shaped the region, it is either too broad—as in the case of Group 1—or too limited to certain cases, as in Groups 2 and 3. Therefore, I recommend synthesizing the existing literature to both form a comprehensive image of Saudis' motivations and purposes for using social media in their unique national context, and to investigate the comparative aspect of why so many Saudi Arabians, compared to citizens of other countries, use social media. Achieving this, however, first necessitates a review of the literature.

Group 1: Usage of New Media in the Middle East

The literature in Group 1 introduces forms of 'new media' such as satellite networks, transnational news outlets, and online communities as potentially revolutionary tools to enable cross-cultural communication, support the free flow of information, and shape political and social life in the Middle East. By discussing ways

in which new forms of media have played a role in shaping the region, this literature provides context for how Saudi Arabians might interact with and use the new tools of social media. This body of literature, however, discusses general regional developments without delving into the specific case of Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, its discussion of the impact of new media predates the emergence of social media as a phenomenon distinct from 'new' Internet or TV media. For these reasons, Group 1 fails to answer the question of why so many Saudi Arabians use social media.

Ghareeb assesses the role of new media—such as pan-Arab newspapers, satellite networks, and the Internet—in shaping information flows and political discourse in the Arab world (Ghareeb, 2000). He concludes that such new communications technologies, “ideally suited for the spread of political and social ideas” (p.398) could be used to promote cross-cultural discourse, pan-Arab unity, forums of free expression, and a more involved citizenry. Ghareeb's work, which discusses the Arab world on a large scale without delving much into particular country cases, is too broad to adequately address the question. Furthermore, his analysis of media forms that were new in 2000 is now outdated and not especially relevant to recent social media platforms. Beyond this, his concluding predictions, which have since proven inaccurate—for instance, that “technical infrastructure problems will constrain the ability of the Internet (and even satellite TV) to reach the majority of the Arabs” (p.416)—disproved by today's high internet and mobile penetration rates across the Middle East (Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government, 2014)—cannot serve as a solid foundation for further research.

Seib (2007) examines how new media, such as that communicated through

the Internet and cellphones, impacts democratization in the Middle East (Seib, 2007). He finds these media to be “potent tools in fostering political transformation” (p.1) that “are affecting democratization within the Middle East, particularly in terms of their transnational impact” (ibid). Seib’s work, like Ghareeb’s, concerns too broad of an area to generate valuable insights into the case of Saudi Arabia. Though more recent than Ghareeb’s, his work is also too outdated to be applicable to the uses of social media, as it differs profoundly in nature from internet or TV media predecessors. Technologies such as the Internet and satellite television increased the accessibility of information and speed of communication in the early 2000s, and they generally involved a binary relationship, such as that between TV news outlet and viewer, in which the audience occupied a passive position. The expansive interpersonal networks introduced by social media, on the other hand, enable audiences to create and share their own content, creating new potential for interaction, collaboration, and mobilization.

Along these lines, Eickelman and Anderson (2003) argue that new media “refigure audiences as communities” (p.9), transforming top-down patterns of communication into community-oriented communication flows and, in the process, creating space for the emergence of a public sphere. Eickelman and Anderson view new media as tools for the cultivation of civil society under repressive regimes (ibid). Like the prior two works mentioned, Eickelman and Anderson’s book provides breadth but not depth, and fails to provide useful insight specific to Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, the two authors’ work, published in 2003, faces the same limitation of being outdated, since the usage of ‘new’ media discussed refers primarily to TV, Internet, and cell usage, not social media usage. While the authors do

anticipate the potential of such media to transform civil society, their analysis falls short, as they only consider the physical vehicles—television, web browsers, and cell phones—that enable social media, rather than social media itself, with its distinct capacity to form communities and interactive networks.

Group 2: Usage of Social Media in the Arab Spring

The literature in Group 2 analyzes the use of social media to engender social and political change during the Arab Spring revolutions of 2011. While this body of literature is successful in investigating the purposes for which social media was used throughout the Middle East during the Arab Spring, its focus on the limited context of these revolutions prevents it from developing a more comprehensive analysis of social media usage beyond this context. Furthermore, given the minimal effect the Arab Spring had on Saudi Arabia’s social and political landscape (McCullagh, 2012), this literature—focused on the activism and collective action associated with the movement—cannot be meaningfully applied in explanation of why so many Saudi Arabians use social media in an everyday setting.

Howard and Hussain (2013) assert that digital media transmitted through social networks is a force contributing to a “fourth wave of democratization.” As evidenced in the case of the Arab Spring, civil society actors have “learned to leverage social media” while “digital media use by multiple political actors and interests continue to shape emerging Arab media systems” (p.4). Howard and Hussein’s focus on the Arab Spring limits their analysis of social media usage to the specific context of the revolutionary movement, thus limiting any broader implications for social media usage.

Additionally, the authors draw from cases of countries most affected by the Arab Spring, such as Tunisia and Egypt, therefore neglecting Saudi Arabia in their analysis. For these reasons, Howard and Hussein's work does not adequately address the question of why so many Saudi Arabians use social media.

Miladi explores the role that platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube played in the Arab Spring revolutions, as well as "the extent to which their availability served in a complex manner the democratic transition that Tunisia has been undergoing and the political turmoil that Egypt is witnessing" (Miladi, 2016: 36). Basing her argument upon these insights, Miladi asserts that the new forms of communication created by social media enable the emergence of vibrant, online spaces for political mobilization and social empowerment (ibid). Miladi's argument is largely descriptive, and it investigates the use of social media only as it applies to the Arab Spring revolutions—thus limiting the applicability of her findings to other cases. Additionally, Miladi mainly discusses countries most impacted by the Arab Spring, like Egypt and Tunisia—leaving out Saudi Arabia, where only "minor protests...had little impact" (Howard, 2011: 9).

Wolfsfeld et al. (2013) theorize that politics serve as a primary factor, both analytically and chronologically speaking, in determining social media's impact on collective action. The authors then apply the case of the Arab Spring to show that political factors drive the use of social media for collective action, not vice versa. Due to the Arab Spring being a relatively unique phenomenon, the findings of Wolfsfeld's work cannot easily be applied to other cases. Indeed, the lack of effect the Arab Spring demonstrated on the Saudi Arabian population may make it unlikely that the

same factors that motivated social media activism during the Arab Spring would drive social media usage in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, the authors' focus on countries such as Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt, instead of Saudi Arabia, renders them unable to directly answer the question of why so many Saudi Arabians use social media.

Group 3: Usage of Social Media in Saudi Arabia

The literature in Group 3 consists mainly of case studies regarding the use of social media during particular events or movements in Saudi Arabia. While each work offers insight into how social media was used in the context discussed, most works of this literature are too narrow in scope to adequately address the question of why so many Saudi Arabians use social media. Additionally, none of the works in Group 3 offer comparative analyses that would shed light on why so many Saudis, as compared to members of other societies, use social media.

In their article, Agarwal et al. (2012) utilize the case of women's right-to-drive campaigns in Saudi Arabia to study the interactions between social media and collective action. The authors found that social media was used to help the campaign gain transnational support, as "individual sentiment diffuses within the [social] network, shapes into collective sentiment, and transforms into collective action" (p.106). These findings, however, apply to such a specific case; thirteen to seventeen thousand people's use of social media to support the right-to-drive campaign—not all of them Saudis—is not representative of the rest of the Saudi Arabian population's social media usage. Additionally, Agarwal et al.'s work contains no comparative elements that would illuminate why so many Saudi

Arabians, versus citizens of other countries, use social media.

Al-Saggaf and Simmons (2015) investigate how and why Saudis' usage of social media spiked after devastating floods in 2009. The authors conclude that social media allowed users to discuss the extent of the damage inflicted; rationally process the events that transpired, and who could be held responsible; express qualms against the government and demand that remedial action be taken; and commiserate over the loss of life in a unifying fashion (ibid). As is the case with Agarwal et al.'s work, Al-Saggaf and Simmons' article is so narrowly constrained in scope—analyzing social media usage surrounding one natural disaster—that it is hard to justify applying the authors' findings more broadly. Furthermore, the article lacks theoretical implications, rendering its conclusions of little use in application to other contexts. Like Agarwal's, it also lacks a comparative analysis that would place Saudi Arabia's social media usage, and the motivations behind it, side by side with that of other countries.

Askool (2013) explores “the use of social media among individuals in Saudi Arabia...the effect of cultural restrictions on individual's motivation, users' attitude, intention behavior and their actual use” (p.201) and finds that social media, used more for socializing than any other purpose, appears to be catalyzing a cultural shift that may lead to social change and new business opportunities for Saudis. While Askool's work includes thorough quantitative analysis producing insights on Saudis' motivations, attitudes, and behaviors regarding social media use, it does not investigate the question of why so many Saudi Arabians use social media—thus neglecting the comparative element between countries that would be imperative in solving the puzzle.

Bahkali et al.'s work explores the use of social media as a platform upon which to promote women's health education in Saudi Arabia. The authors found that Saudi Twitter members used the platform to seek health information from accounts promoting women's health, and that followers of these accounts showed greater health awareness than non-followers—findings that show “social media has the potential to improve women's health in developing countries through health education and promotion” (Bahkali et al., 2015: 259). The narrow scope of Bahkali et al.'s case study is problematic for its application to other cases—the motivations driving the 3,449 followers of the Twitter health promotion account to engage with social media (personal health concerns for young and middle-aged women) are not common across the entirety of the Saudi population (ibid). As in the other works included in Group 3, Bahkali et al.'s work also lacks a comparative aspect.

2.2 Conclusion & Recommendations

I have presented a review of the literature relevant to answering the question of why so many Saudi Arabians use social media, and I have explained the limitations that have prevented this body of literature from providing a complete answer to this question. I divided this literature review into three groupings: 1. Usage of New Media in the Middle East, 2. Usage of Social Media in the Arab Spring, and 3. Usage of Social Media in Saudi Arabia. Group 1 explores how the ‘new’ media, as it was conceived in the early-to-mid 2000s, interacted with social, cultural, and political life in the Middle East. Group 2 analyzes the social and political use of social media during the Arab Spring revolutions of 2011. Group 3 draws upon various case studies to explore

why and how social media is used in Saudi Arabia.

As a whole, the literature demonstrates modest progress towards answering my research question. The literature in Group 1 may be valuable in providing historical context as a backdrop for the present political, social, and technological conditions with which social media interacts. The theoretical framework offered by some works in Groups 1 and 2 may be helpful in guiding approaches to answering the question. The cases studied in Group 2 may help guide thinking by differentiating social media usage in Saudi Arabia from that of countries where the Arab Spring spurred heavily activist usage. The cases studied in Group 3 touch more directly upon the question, providing incomplete answers that could be synthesized in a more complete analysis.

Despite these strengths, the literature leaves major gaps that result in the question having been left unanswered. The literature provides both broad theories about the topic as well as narrow case studies. Middle ground that addresses the question without being too broad or narrow in scope is lacking. An additional challenge arises with the fact that social media is a relatively new and rapidly changing phenomenon in academia, so any work produced more than a decade ago may not be particularly relevant to the topic. The literature included in Group 1 is too broad and outdated, while Group 2's literature is limited to the context of specific events/movements that don't relate much to Saudi Arabia. The works included in Group 3, while more applicable to the Saudi population, are also limited in scope, and lack a comparative aspect evaluating social media usage between Saudi Arabia and other countries.

To fill these gaps, I recommend synthesizing the existing literature to develop a complete, multidimensional

understanding of Saudis' motivations and purposes for using social media, taking into account Saudi Arabia's distinct cultural, social and political contexts. This research should constitute a step towards answering why Saudi Arabians use social media. I also propose using existing data to compare social media use and surrounding motivations, attitudes, and behaviors between Saudi Arabia and other countries. Investigating this element of the topic should be an endeavor in answering why so many Saudi Arabians use social media, when compared to social media users in other countries. Addressing both dimensions of the question is imperative for developing a complete answer to the question. I attribute the lack of a comprehensive answer to the relatively recent emergence of social media as a socially, culturally, and politically salient phenomenon warranting academic study. As I have stated, the increasingly rapid transformation of media over the past few decades has made it so past academic work on media and communications technologies can become less relevant over time. This reality, however, cannot hinder the production of meaningful academic work on such developments. This type of work seeks to provide understanding of the ongoing rapid transformations that characterize life in the 21st century.

Prior literature offers contributions that are relevant to my question, but as a whole fails to adequately address it. I have divided the literature into three groups, descending in order of specificity: 1. Usage of New Media in the Middle East, 2. Usage of Social Media in the Arab Spring, and 3. Usage of Social Media in Saudi Arabia. Group 1 discusses the interactions of mass digital communications with Middle Eastern social, cultural, and political life, but the literature is too broad and outdated. Group 2 discusses the use of social media as an activist tool during the Arab Spring

uprisings, but the literature focuses on a limited revolutionary context where many events and developments were not applicable to Saudi Arabia. Group 3 analyzes social media usage in Saudi Arabia, but this body of literature fails to comparatively analyze why so many Saudis, as opposed to members of other societies, use social media. While the literature as a whole provides valuable context as to how communication technologies and social networks have shaped the region, it is either too broad—as in the case of Group 1—or too limited to certain cases, as in Groups 2 and 3. Therefore, I recommend synthesizing the existing literature to both form a comprehensive image of Saudis' motivations and purposes for using social media in their unique national context, and to investigate the comparative aspect of why so many Saudi Arabians, compared to citizens of other countries, use social media.

3. Argument

3.1 Introduction

I argue that Saudi Arabians use social media to circumvent restrictions in their country, driven by a desire for more agency and freedom in everyday life. In the argument, I categorize Saudi Arabians' social media usage into two groups, each responding to a distinct type of state repression: political and social. Based on my findings in the case of Saudi Arabia, I then predict that in countries with internet and smartphone penetration rates of over 60%, a positive correlation will exist between levels of state repression and social media usage.

The argument addresses the gaps left by prior literature. All prior literature is either too broad and outdated, or too narrow to sufficiently address the question of why so many Saudi Arabians use social media.

Thus, the need emerges for work that covers middle ground: work that explores the current use of social media among Saudis, in a way that can elicit broader conclusions about its use across the Saudi Arabian population as a whole. There also exists a need for comparison between the technological, social, and political conditions of Saudi Arabia versus other countries, in order to comparatively analyze the high rates of social media usage in Saudi Arabia when put aside those of other countries. In the argument, I synthesize the conclusions drawn from prior literature with those developed through my own research to form a comprehensive answer to the question. I also compare levels of social and political repression between Saudi Arabia and other countries, exploring the influence of such repression on social media usage across populations.

3.2 Definitions

Social media use is defined as active, consistent engagement with one or more of the five largest global social networks: Facebook, Whatsapp, Tumblr, Instagram, and Twitter (Kemp, 2016). State repression is defined as state-imposed restrictions on citizens' political rights and civil liberties. Political rights enable free and meaningful participation in the political process, including the right to vote in free, legitimate elections with distinct choices, to contend for public office, to join political parties and organizations, and to elect accountable representatives that are empowered to impact public policy (Freedom House, 2012). Civil liberties “allow for the freedoms of expression and belief, associational and organizational rights, rule of law, and personal autonomy without interference from the state” (ibid). Political repression involves limiting or forbidding citizens' ability to engage in a society's

political sphere. It may include restricting access to freedoms, such as speech, press, expression, and religion. Social repression refers to “the act of controlling, subduing or suppressing people, groups, and larger social aggregations by interpersonal means” (Psychology Dictionary, 2016). Methods of maintaining social repression may include information control, eradication of movements for reform, and manipulation of local leaders (ibid).

3.3 Argument

I argue that Saudi Arabians use social media to circumvent restrictions in their country. I hypothesize that such social media usage is driven by Saudis’ desire for more agency and freedom in everyday life. I assert that, beyond a certain threshold of internet and smartphone penetration, a positive correlation exists between state repression and social media usage.

In my argument, I categorize Saudi Arabians’ social media usage into two groups, each responding to a distinct type of state repression: political and social. To understand this argument, it is important to have prior knowledge of Saudi Arabia’s current social and political circumstances. The Saudi monarchy has long been characterized by its neglect to provide citizens with political rights and civil liberties, and it is notorious for subjecting peaceful dissidents and human rights activists to imprisonment, corporal punishment, and/or capital punishment (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Public protests are banned countrywide, traditional media are government-owned directly or by proxy, and any press “blaspheming” Islam or the monarchy is forbidden (ibid). The state’s refusal to register political or human rights organizations further leads to an absence of civil society (ibid). Saudi Arabian women are subject to a male

guardianship system, which forbids them from obtaining a passport, marrying, traveling, pursuing higher education, or undergoing medical procedures without a male relative’s approval (ibid). Women are also banned from driving, starting a business without a male sponsor, or interacting with unrelated men for more than brief time periods (The Week, 2016). These conditions provide for a repressed society in which relatively little freedom is left to the citizen.

I argue that, in order to circumvent political restrictions, Saudis use social media to create their own public sphere, which serves as a virtual forum for expression of political opinions, exposure of corruption, and engagement in civil discourse. Social media proves instrumental in the formation of an online civil society that is both a challenge to, and a result of, the state preventing civil society from forming in legitimate channels. Through these new, relatively safe spaces for discussion and dissent, Saudi Arabians exercise their ability to voice their opinions, criticize the government, and hold officials accountable.

I also argue that Saudis use social media to both protest and virtually circumvent social restrictions, especially those imposed on women. Women use social media to engage comfortably in an online public sphere, despite strict gender segregation and limited freedom of mobility in public. They use networks to advocate for their rights, sometimes reaching international audiences, and to obtain access to information and business opportunities that would not be as accessible otherwise.

3.4 Logic

I argue that social media use, the outcome of interest, is affected by state repression, the explanatory variable of interest. I assert that Saudi Arabians’ desire to circumvent state-imposed restrictions, in

order to gain more freedom in daily life, serves as the causal mechanism by which state repression influences social media use. I hypothesize that this desire for greater agency—freedom from state repression—is the driving force that motivates and characterizes Saudi Arabian social media usage.

Other possible explanatory factors include internet and smartphone penetration rates or physical and cultural geographical factors. However, the evidence illustrates, beyond a certain point, high internet and smartphone penetration rates do not directly correlate with high rates of social media usage. In fact, many countries with penetration rates higher than those of Saudi Arabia show lower rates of social media usage. The evidence will also indicate that social media usage varies greatly within and across regions, ruling out geography as an independent variable.

After eliminating other potential explanatory variables, it becomes evident that state repression impacts social media usage. The data shows that beyond a threshold of 60%, social media usage no longer increases in clear correlation with increasing penetration rates. When comparing levels of state repression across countries with penetration rates above 60%, a positive correlation is apparent between levels of state repression and social media usage, with the chosen case of analysis—Saudi Arabia—exemplifying this trend. Based on this conclusion, I predict that beyond a threshold of 60% internet and smartphone penetration, a positive correlation exists between levels of state repression and rates of social media usage.

4. Evidence

To support my argument, I draw upon both quantitative and qualitative data from case studies, think tank and watchdog reports, statistical datasets, news articles, and social media accounts. Evidence from these sources supports the argument that Saudi Arabians use social media out of a desire to circumvent state repression, as well as my prediction that state repression and social media usage positively correlate in a country with over 60% penetration. I present the evidence and explain how it supports the claims I make in this paper. I begin by introducing evidence of how Saudi Arabians use social media to circumvent political repression. I proceed to present evidence regarding Saudis' use of social media to circumvent social repression. I then provide aggregate data that rules out other possible explanatory factors influencing social media usage. Finally, I provide evidence supporting my prediction that, across countries over a certain threshold of internet and smartphone penetration, a positive correlation between state repression and social media usage exists.

4.1 Political Repression

A major instance in which Saudi Arabians used social media to react to and circumvent political repression took place following the 2009 floods of the city of Jeddah. Following the floods, a Facebook page entitled “Popular Campaign to Save the City of Jeddah” was created to express public outrage over the lack of infrastructure that had enabled the floods to inflict heavy damage (Murphy, 2009). With 11,000 followers, the page attracted significant internet attention even beyond the group; one post telling the story of Farman Ali Khan, a Pakistani expat who saved 14 people from drowning, only to drown himself in an attempt to save a 15th person, was picked up by the Sydney Morning

Herald and then carried into subsequent global circulation, drawing international attention to the floods (Al-Saggaf and Simmons, 2015: 5). Facebook, in this instance, served as a conduit through which Saudis could make their voices heard internationally—a process of amplification often denied to the population, as the Saudi government pressures foreign journalists to self-censor and otherwise complicates the candid reporting of news (Freedom House, 2013).

Saudis also took advantage of social media as a safe, relatively anonymous space to criticize the government and demand accountability. One Facebook post regarding the floods read, “It is very clear that negligence and corrupt officials are responsible for this, because for more than 20 years they started the water drainage projects and till now a flood like this is happening which means all these projects are not functioning” (Al-Saggaf and Simmons, 2015: 6). Another declared “This is the result of corruption and nepotism, first the big thieves should be brought to justice then the small ones” (p.7). More posts called for the impeachment of Jeddah’s mayor and demanded that the government make amends for the loss of life and property (ibid). In light of the lack of legitimate channels to express dissent or disagreement with the government, Saudi Arabians were able to transform social networks into virtual public squares where free speech could be expressed and government officials called to answer for their actions.

Another case in which Saudi Arabians used social media to circumvent political restrictions surrounded a government official’s threat to sue a Twitter user who had compared the Saudi legal system’s death sentence to an ISIS execution (Ilsley, 2015). Over 110,000 Twitter users jumped to their fellow tweeter’s defense, developing the hashtag #SueMeSaudi as a

defiant taunt to the Saudi state and its antiquated legal system (ibid). One tweet read, “Saudi Arabia says it’ll sue people saying its justice “system” is like #ISIS’s. Beheading folk for apostasy etc means it is. So #SueMeSaudi!” (Marten, 2015). Although the original subject of protest—a Palestinian poet that was executed for apostasy—suffered fatal consequences for his free expression, social media provided the #SueMeSaudi tweeters with a space for to exercise relatively free speech and expression, and to protest the restrictions and legal threats constraining such freedom in the physical world.

4.2 Social Repression

The online discourse surrounding the 2009 Jeddah floods served the additional purpose of providing women with a space for meaningful participation in the public sphere. A Saudi woman’s comment on a Facebook video read, “What do you mean by [Nice View]!!!...people are losing their families and the only thing you think of is yourself.....I am really sorry for you:(you are missing lots of things in your life:(.....**I am a saudi and a muslim girl, and I am proud of it:).” (Al-Saggaf and Simmons, 2015:5). In this comment, the female speaker proudly asserts her religious, national, and gender identities and expresses her views in an open, confrontational fashion—with no regard for the gender of the Facebook user she addresses. Women such as this speaker were able to engage confidently and openly in the virtual public sphere that proliferated after the floods despite the gender segregation and lack of freedom they faced in public life.

Saudi women have been active in using social media to further the cause of women’s right to drive. In 2011, after a woman protested the anti-driving law by posting a video online of herself behind the

wheel, the Twitter hashtag #Women2Drive emerged as the rallying slogan for subsequent women's right-to-drive campaigns (Agarwal et al., 2012: 953). Facebook served as another platform that consolidated support; the "Saudi Women Spring" Facebook page, named after the 2011 Arab Spring revolutions, gained over 7,000 followers and called for solidarity with the issue of women's rights (Facebook, 2016). Another Facebook page entitled "Saudi Women to Drive" has 36,000 followers to date, and its timeline boasts a bold graphic declaring plans to establish an NGO in New York City (ibid). The caption below the graphic announces an ongoing search for fiscal sponsors of the NGO, and contains a link to a crowdsourcing site (ibid). The women's right-to-drive campaign illustrates Saudi women's development of a reform movement, existing in an online dimension, which has attracted international attention, breaking the historical barrier that state-sponsored media had put up between Saudis and the outside world.

Saudi women additionally use social media to circumvent restrictions relating to business and finance. Recent years have seen a proliferation of social media-based businesses run by women who seek to generate their own source of income while circumventing the male sponsorship necessary to formally start a business (Almashabi and Nereim, 2015). Rozana al-Daini, for instance, runs @accessories_ar, an Instagram account with 129,000 followers that she uses to market and sell clothing and accessories (al-Daini, 2016). Rozana, who handles over 25 orders per day, appreciates being able to "solve any problems or difficulties, financial or otherwise, without interference of family members" (Almashabi and Nereim, 2015). Nouf al-Mazrou, the founder of a barbecue catering business advertised on Instagram as @bbq_time (al-Mazrou, 2016), started

using the network because she "wanted to be her own boss" (Amos, 2015). Al-Mazrou states that because of her work, "I'm free, and no man has to take responsibility for me" (ibid). The two women both express a desire to escape from rigid, socially dictated control over women's lives as a motivating factor in starting their businesses over social media.

4.3 Possible Alternative Causes

While internet and smartphone penetration rates and geographical factors may appear to be potential independent variables, the evidence indicates otherwise. While it is logical to assume that social media usage increases with penetration rates, the evidence shows that this is only the case up until a threshold of 60% penetration (Kemp, 2016). A number of countries demonstrate higher penetration rates, yet lower social media usage rates when compared to Saudi Arabia—including the United States, United Kingdom, South Korea, Australia, and Spain. Korea, for instance, has 89.9% Internet and 88% smartphone penetration (Kissonergis, 2016), compared to Saudi Arabia's 69.6% for Internet (World Bank, 2015) and 72.8% for smartphones (Omics International, 2013). While 60% and 65% of Saudi Arabian Internet users use Twitter and Facebook, respectively, only 25% of South Korean Internet users are on Twitter, and 48% on Facebook (Chaffey, 2016). Over half of Saudi Arabian Internet users use Instagram, and the average Saudi Arabian Internet user has nine active social media accounts; in South Korea, Instagram usage comprises only 7% of total social media usage (Kemp, 2016) and the average Internet user has four active social media accounts (Global Web Index, 2016). Furthermore, while Saudi Arabians spend an average of 2 hours 56 minutes using social media per day, South

Koreans only use networks for 1 hour 6 minutes each day (Kemp, 2016). Figure 1 illustrates a similar pattern across additional countries when compared to Saudi Arabia.

Variation in social media usage within and across regions rules out geography as a possible independent variable. Only 26% of the population in the Middle East holds active accounts on the world's largest social networks, compared to 59% in North America, 47% in Europe, 11% in Africa, 50% in South America, 40% in Asia, and 45% in Oceania (ibid). This is due in part to variation in Internet penetration rates within and across regions—while Africa has the lowest Internet penetration rates across the board, the countries in Asia and the Middle East vary widely in their levels of penetration (ibid).

The elimination of the two aforementioned potential independent variables points to state repression as the applicable independent variable in the puzzle. Having established state repression as the main explanatory variable, I predict a positive correlation between state repression and social media usage when penetration rates exceed 60%. When comparing levels of state-imposed repression between countries with penetration rates of over 60%, it appears that higher levels of repression correlate with higher social media usage, with Saudi Arabia exemplifying this correlation. This relationship is evident in Figure 2.

Using Freedom House rankings and the CATO Human Freedom Index to measure levels of state repression, Figure 2 examines the relationship between state repression and social media usage at the high and low ends of the spectrum of state repression, across six countries with Internet and smartphone penetration at or above 60%. Australia, South Korea, Spain, the U.S., and the U.K. demonstrate relatively low levels of state repression, and were

selected to control for geography as a possible alternate cause, since each country is in a different region. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Jordan are examined because they are the few countries with Internet and smartphone penetration at or above 60%, Freedom House and CATO rankings below average, and information available on social media usage. The selection of these six countries provides for comparison of the high and low ends of the state repression spectrum, which can be generalized to other countries along the spectrum with penetration rates over 60%.

The three countries with low levels of state repression demonstrate lower rates of Twitter usage and Facebook usage, lower average social media usage per day, and fewer average numbers of social media accounts per Internet user when compared to the three countries with relatively high levels of state repression. This suggests a positive correlation between state repression and social media usage, once the threshold of 60% penetration has been reached.

4.4 Summary of Key Findings

The evidence presented supports the argument that Saudi Arabians use social media with the goal of circumventing and protesting state repression. Primarily qualitative data from a number of case studies illustrate the ways in which Saudi Arabians use social media to circumvent both political and social restrictions. Quantitative aggregate data supports state repression as the explanatory factor causing higher rates of social media usage and rules out other possible independent variables. Additional aggregate data, as well as think tank indices, support the prediction that a positive correlation exists between state repression and social media usage if a country has over 60% Internet and cellphone penetration.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Summary

In this paper I have argued that Saudi Arabians use social media to bypass state restrictions imposed in political and social dimensions. First, I introduced my question and its motivations. I described the apparent abnormality of high social media usage rates in a deeply conservative society, as well as the need to understand of how social media can foster political and social transformations in countries that restrict political rights and civil liberties.

After introducing the research question and its motivations, I provided a literature review to highlight the contributions and limitations of prior literature. I discussed how existing literature is either too broad and outdated, or too specific to adequately address my question—leaving room for middle ground to be covered that is sufficiently narrow to investigate Saudi-specific reasons for social media usage, but sufficiently broad to produce findings that can be generalized to the whole country. I expressed the need for synthesis of the existing literature to form a comprehensive idea of why so many Saudi Arabians use social media, as well as comparative analysis of why so many Saudis, compared to members of other societies, use social media.

I then constructed an argument that fills the gaps in the existing literature. I presented my argument that Saudi Arabians use social media in an effort to bypass social and political restrictions out of a desire to obtain more freedom and agency in their everyday lives. I predicted that in countries with penetration rates exceeding 60%, levels of state repression and social media usage will positively correlate. I operationalized

key terms as they are used in the context of my argument. I then provided background on the socially and politically repressive conditions in present-day Saudi Arabia.

Afterwards, I described the political and social dimensions of my argument. I argued that politically, Saudi Arabians use social media to create a safer, virtual civil society. Government suppression of legitimate channels for civil society necessitates and motivates the formation of civil society over social media. These new online spaces are then used as forums to express dissent, voice opinions without fear of punishment, and hold government officials accountable. I argued that socially, Saudi Arabians use social media to both protest and virtually bypass restrictions on society—especially those to which women are subject. The online public sphere provides Saudi women with a space to engage comfortably—one they are not afforded in their physical existence. Social media also provides women with unique opportunities to access information and explore business ventures. I proceeded to present both quantitative and qualitative data to support my argument and my predictions. Finally, I conclude by discussing the limitations of my argument, as well as possibilities for future research.

5.2 Criticisms and Limitations of the Argument

The argument is limited in that it assumes the existence of only one independent variable—state repression—when in reality, political, social, and technological phenomena are complex and may be interwoven with many other causal factors. By limiting my argument to a single independent variable, I may oversimplify, or altogether misunderstand, numerous causal relationships at work. Focusing on one

possible causal factor may come at the cost of ignoring the rest.

A lack of available data further limits the argument. In the cross-country analysis, complete information on social media usage was not uniformly available; thus, the conclusions may not be steadfast. Additionally, lack of information on some countries led to the selection of certain countries over others to include in my analysis. This skewed case selection may result in the conclusions misrepresenting the reality of social media usage across countries. Since the conclusions are based only on countries with available data, they cannot be generalized with certainty to countries where data simply was not available. The lack of information on usage of all of the largest five global networks—which led me to include only the 2-3 networks on which data was most available—makes my analysis less accurate and complete than it would be if I had used more extensive data.

Lastly, my study is limited by my being outside of Saudi Arabia. My geographic location limits the methods of data collection and analysis to that which can be done remotely, excluding any research on the ground. Through the inability to gather data on the ground in Saudi Arabia, I miss out on potentially richer, more accurate insights related to my research question. In Saudi Arabia, it could be possible to administer surveys and conduct interviews in-person with social media users to gain further understanding of reasons for usage. Additionally, observation of day-to-day life in Saudi Arabia, as well as survey and interview data on the country's social and political conditions, could provide insight into the social and political landscape in which social media usage takes place.

5.3 Suggestions for Further Research

Additional research conducted to answer my question would benefit from access to more complete data on social media usage across countries. More comprehensive data, including penetration rates of each major social media platform, and average number of hours spent per day on social media, would provide for a more accurate understanding of social media usage across countries, and how exactly Saudi Arabia measures up to other countries. Having complete, foundational information would provide for a more thorough and accurate analysis.

Further research aimed at addressing my question would benefit from interaction with Saudi Arabian society itself. Determining the motivations and different aspects of Saudi Arabians' social media usage may be best achieved through inquiry, observation, and measurement in their home country. Engaging with Saudi Arabian culture, society, and political life could yield a deeper, more complete understanding of why so many Saudi Arabians use social media. Collecting opinion data on social media and the country's social, cultural, and political conditions, as well as more extensive information on usage of social media platforms, including purposes for use and time spent online, could help generate a clearer idea of how and why social media is used in the distinct socio-political context of Saudi Arabia.

Exploration of cultural factors influencing social media usage across countries could also generate interesting and valuable insights on patterns of usage, and how they may be expected to change or stay the same in light of distinct cultural contexts. Do societies that value the family unit discourage social media usage, or encourage it? What about more individualistic societies? Where does culture remain static despite the constantly shifting

role of social media, and where does it become transformed?

This study furthers understanding of how social media is used in different social and political contexts, beyond its fundamental purpose of connecting people and ideas. In particular, it sheds light on how social media can help create virtual public spheres, enable political involvement, and generate new opportunities for the disempowered in countries where citizens are denied certain rights and freedoms, and

real-life civil society is nonexistent. The power of social media must be understood, as a tool for political and social transformation in societies like Saudi Arabia, before it can be harnessed as such.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Appendix

Figure 1

	Internet/Smartphone Penetration (% of population)	Twitter usage (% of Internet users)	Facebook usage (% of Internet users)	Avg. time spent on social media/day (hours)	Avg. number of active social media accounts per Internet user
Saudi Arabia	69.6/72.8	60	65	2h 56m	9
Australia	84.6/77	22	62	1h 09m	4.5
South Korea	89.9/88	25	48	1h 06m	4
U.K.	92.0/62.2	30	63	1h 29m	4.5

Figure 1: Examining relationship between penetration rates and social media usage. Sources: *World Bank*, *Kissonergis*, *Omics International*, *Chaffey*, *Kemp*, *Global Web Index*.

Figure 2

	Freedom House ranking (100- free, 0- not free)	CATO Human Freedom Index (152 countries ranked)	Twitter usage (% of Internet users)	Facebook usage (% of Internet users)	Avg. time spent on social media/day (hours)	Avg. # of active social media accounts per Internet user
Australia	98-Free	7	22	62	1h 09m	4.5
South Korea	83-Free	9	25	48	1h 06m	4
U.K.	95-Free	31	30	63	1h 29m	4.5
Saudi Arabia	10-Not Free	144	60	65	2h 56m	9
United Arab Emirates	20-Not Free	117	43	82	2h 40m	9
Jordan	36-Not Free	78	Data Unavailable	Data Unavailable	2h 20m	Data Unavailable

Figure 2: Examining relationship between state repression and social media usage at the high and low ends of the repression spectrum, among countries with above 60% penetration. Sources: *Freedom House*, *CATO Institute*, *Chaffey*, *Kemp*, *Global Web Index*, *eMarketer*.