OPEN GOVERNMENT IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA AGE?

THE ROLE OF TWITTER IN THE POLICYMAKING PROCESS IN THE SHURA

COUNCIL OF SAUDI ARABIA

This thesis is submitted to Cardiff University in fulfilment of the requirement for the Degree

of Doctor of Philosophy

By

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ABSTRACT

This research examined the role of Twitter in the policymaking process of the Shura Council of Saudi Arabia. The research investigated government use of social media and how it is utilised in a non-western, non-democratic country. Therefore, this study explored whether social media can enhance engagement between citizens and policymakers in a political context where this engagement does not take place through democratic elections.

This research investigated how Council members perceive the socio-political use of Twitter and the impact their perceptions have on the policymaking process. It also considers how Twitter enhances public interventions in a legislative/parliamentary process, has changed the views of the legislators/decision makers in the Council, has influenced the agenda setting of the Council during the policy-making process, and has affected the workings of the Council during that process. Using interviews and a survey amongst Council members, and interpretive content analysis of Council members' Twitter posts, the research explored how Twitter has influenced Council members during the policy-making process.

The empirical finding of this research is that in Saudi Arabia, Twitter has opened government to the public, as the appointed Council members have a positive view of using Twitter within decision- and policymaking at the Shura Council. Council members use Twitter to engage in conversations with the public and learn about public concerns. Applying key concepts from both social media and policy studies shows how Twitter has facilitated public engagement.

The research found Twitter has facilitated public engagement, but communication is often top-down in nature. Also, only a few Council members found that Twitter affected their decision-making process; Council members see Twitter as a useful public platform, but their primary motivation for using social media is to send out statements and for self-promotion rather than to actively communicate with the public.

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SIGNED DECLARATION

DEDICATION

This thesis is in memory of my late grandfather Abdulrahman Bin Abdullah Alwehibi, and my late cousin Abdullah Alwehibi, and may Allah have mercy on them.

Also, this thesis is dedicated to everyone who supported me in accomplishing this academic journey. First, I dedicate this work to my mother Sarah and my father Mohammed, and my grandmother Helah, for whom, whatsoever I may do, I could never provide what they really deserve. May Allah keep them in the best state of health and faith.

In addition, I would like to dedicate this work to my great uncle Ibrahim Alajlan, my uncle Abdullah Alwehibi, my elder brother Bander, my brothers and my sister, my nephews, my niece, my brother-in-law, and my sister-in-law in gratitude for their love and support during my studies. Furthermore, this work would be dedicated to the families of Bin Shalhoub and Batten for their unconditional supports, prayers and thoughts.

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In closing, this work is dedicated to the victims of Covid-19; their loved ones, and the frontline workers, who risked their lives during the pandemic.

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Finally, my thanks also go to all the members and officials of the Shura Council during its seventh term, who gave of their valuable time to participate in this research.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BBC	*Bulletin Board Systems*
CERL	*Computer-based Education Research Laboratory*
CV	*Curriculum Vitae*
FISA	*Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act.*
GCC	*Graphical User Interface*
GUI	*Gulf Cooperation Council*
HTTP	*Hyper Text Transfer Protocol*
ICTs	*Information and Communications Technologies*
ILO	*International Labour Organisation*
IP	*Internet Protocol*
IPU	*The Inter-Parliamentary Union*
IRC	*Internet Relay Chat*
MENA	*Middle East and North Africa*
OS	*Operating System*
PLATO	*Programmed Logic for Automated Teaching Operations*
UGC	*User-Generated Content*
URL	*Uniform Resource Locator*
G20	*The Group of Twenty*

GLOSSARY

Amir   *An Arabic name meaning a Prince*

Arabian Peninsula   *A peninsula of Western Asia situated northeast of Africa on the Arabian plate*

Bureau of Experts   *A Saudi body connected to the Saudi Council of Ministers, which has the leadership of Saudi internal regulations, laws, and politics*

Fatwa   *An Islamic legal interpretation or an opinion on Islamic doctrine by a Mufti*

Hijaz   *A region of western Saudi Arabia*

Holy Qur'an   *The Holy Book of Islam, which was revealed by Allah to the Prophet Mohammed through the Angel Gabriel*

House of Al-Saud   *The Saudi Royal Family*

Ijma   *Islamic legal consensus*

Islamic Shariah   *Islamic law*

Majlis   *An Arabic word referring to a sitting room, a council, or an assembly*

Majlis al-Shura   *The Name of the Parliament (The Shura Council) of Saudi Arabia*

Mufti   *A religious jurist who is qualified to issue fatwa, or to interpret the Islamic law*

Petitions   *A formal written request made to an authority or organized body*

Shura   *Consultation*

Sunnah   *A source of Islam based on the Prophet's tradition. Also, it is known as Hadith*

Ulama   *Scholars or jurists*

Hijri   *The Islamic calendar*

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Researchers such as Gainous and Wagner (2014), Parmelee and Bichard (2012), and Woolley and Howard (2019) have argued that social media, particularly Twitter, has changed the political landscape in Western countries. According to Parmelee and Bichard (2012), Twitter has enhanced the relationship between political leaders and the public. Bosch (2016), Bosch and Mutsvairo (2017), and Penney (2016) studied Twitter's influences on politics and argued that it ensures participatory citizenship, as it supports the public's participation. In addition, Shapiro and Hemphill (2017) and Burnap and Williams (2015) researched politicians and the policy agenda in the US Congress, and they found that Twitter has a significant influence on policy and decision making.

However, Twitter's influence on the politics of non-democratic regimes is yet to be explored. Therefore, this research investigates how policymakers respond to public interventions, leading to social media mediating a legislative/parliamentary process not based on public elections. The study is based on two broad normative/practical principles: (1) it is important to understand the role of Twitter in a non-democratic political realm, such as Saudi Arabia, and more specifically, the policy-making process, by considering the political environment in which it operates; and (2) it is important to examine whether the growth of Twitter usage has led to greater public participation in the decision- and policy-making process in the kingdom. Therefore, this study aims to analyse the effect of social media on the policy action, deliberation, and making in a specific political system not based on public elections. It also seeks to explore whether the utilisation of social media platforms – specifically Twitter – has helped change the traditional methods of decision-making. It does this through using three qualitative and quantitative primary research methods carried out on 150 members of the Shura Council in Saudi Arabia; these methods are a questionnaire survey,

semi-structured interviews, and interpretative content analysis of Twitter accounts. The study therefore has the following objectives.

RO1: to critically and empirically explore how the Shura Council members perceive Twitter in terms of political intervention.

RO2: to assess the role of Twitter in changing the views of the legislative body/decision-makers.

RO3: to examine the extent to which Twitter usage has influenced the political policies and agendas in the Shura Council.

RO4: to consider whether Twitter enables Shura Council members to find out about and engage with public concerns and therefore helps place these concerns on the public agenda.

RO5: to explore whether Twitter can enhance public interventions in a legislative/parliamentary process not based on public elections.

Following this, I will set out the research questions followed by a brief review of the political regime in Saudi Arabia. Then, the motivation for and importance of the research will be explained, after which I will give details of the structure of the research.

1.2 Research Questions

The essential questions raised to fulfil the research objectives are as follows.

Q1. How has Twitter use informed the views of the legislative body/decision-makers in the Shura Council regarding public concerns and policy?

Q2. To what extent have interactions with the public on Twitter influenced the agenda setting of the Shura Council during the policy making process?

Q3. What impact do interactions with members of the public on Twitter have on the workings of the Shura Council during the policy-making process?

Q4. In what way can Twitter use enhance engagement with the public in a legislative/parliamentary process not based on public elections?

1.3 Brief Background

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has a distinguished system of government; it has a non-democratic, absolute monarchy with Islamist laws, where the king is the head of both state and government (Benjamin 2016; Chai 2006). The king has the power "to enact, amend, and repeal legislation by Royal Orders, without any consultation or any legislative proposition from either the Council of Ministers or the Shura Council, he only abides by the basic doctrine of the Sharia law" (Alnahdi 2014, p. 12). The Council of Ministers established in 1953 – which used to have both executive and legislative roles – is the second political power in Saudi Arabia. The Shura Council was first established in 1924, but due to the establishment of the Council of Ministers in 1953, the Shura Council was ignored for 40 years until the late King Fahad renewed its law in 1992, an act that was considered a step towards democracy at that time (Khalaf and Luciani 2006).

The Shura Council comprises 150 members chosen from the country's most important groups of constituents, both conservative and liberal, including religious bodies, government, law, and business. Therefore, the Council draws together eminent personalities from elite groups rather than different sections of the population. Its mandate includes expressing opinions on the general policies of the state referred to it by the king; discussing the general plan for economic and social development; studying international laws, regulations, treaties, and agreements; proposing appropriate provisions; and interpreting regulations and discussing annual reports submitted by ministries and government agencies. As such, it is more of an advisory than a legislative council.

In 2014, a social media department was established in the Shura Council, and accounts were created on Twitter and YouTube to communicate with the public to improve the image and the reputation of the Council through publishing relevant news and information. Saudi politicians and most of the Shura Council members created accounts on Twitter to facilitate public engagement and social networking. Since scholars such as Shapiro and Hemphill (2017) and Burnap and Williams (2015) have argued that Twitter influences the decision-making process, this study aims to explore the role of Twitter in the policy decision-making process in the Saudi Shura Council.

1.4 Rationale for the Study

In the Western democratic system, politicians, government representatives, and members of parliament (MPs) are elected, and political parties and civil society organisations ideally work freely in an open and liberal environment. As such, social media platforms are widely used for communication and interaction with policymakers, along with being an indicator for political liability (Anderson, 2018). In addition, parliaments around the world have applied different types of innovations to promote communication between themselves, the citizens, and the public in general. For example, New Zealand adopted Televote, which gives the citizens the ability to communicate swiftly with MPs, vote for government decisions, and lodge complaints (Gauja 2016). The Netherlands created the teledemocracy system, an innovation that allows voters to discuss specific government projects with MPs (Rose 2002; Michels 2006). Also, Greece activated Project Pericles, which is similar to the televote system in New Zealand (Rakopoulos 2015).

The Shura Council members, unlike the members of parliaments in democratic states, are not elected by the public but are appointed by the king. Within such a political structure, peoples' participation and communication take a different path compared to in other democratic countries. To align itself more with democratic forms of governance, the Shura Council adopted a form of communication called 'petitions' by which the public can address the members of the Shura

Council to express their opinions, lodge complaints, or make suggestions. Due to the desire of the Shura Council to provide an opportunity for the public to deliver their opinions, demands, and needs to the Council and its members, the Shura Council provides the right of petition as a formal channel for the public to communicate with the Council. Those petitions can be submitted online through the Council's website or be posted to the Council (Al-Harbi 2014; The Shura Council 2015b, 2018a). It is rare for Council members to set up meetings with the public either inside or outside the Shura Council, although the public can attend the regular sessions to listen to the members' discussions, and the public can attend the committees' meetings if the members of any committee so wish (The Shura Council 2015a).

Thus, the right of petition is the official means the public can use to ensure that their voice can be heard and will reach the Council members. However, the public is not satisfied with this approach, and many academics from the media, communication, and politics studies such as (Al-Harbi 2014; Alghamdy 2014; Alnassar 2014; Alshahrani 2017; Alsudairy 2017; Alsudairy and Alshareif 2016; and Altayash 2014a, 2014b) believe the Council needs to provide other channels to improve its communication and relationship with the public especially in the era of social media (see Chapter 4). Al-Muhanna (2005, pp. 121/173) stated that the right of petition is an important tool in the relationship between the Council and the public and has specific function in the Council's oversight role, while Al-Harbi (2014, p. 198) stated that the right of petition is a method of practising democracy in Saudi Arabia because it works the same way that the right of petition works in Western countries.

This practice is stated in Article 43 of The Basic Law of Governance of Saudi Arabia 1992: Councils held by the King and the Crown Prince shall be open for all citizens and anyone else who may have a complaint or a grievance. A citizen shall be entitled to address public authorities and discuss any matters of concern to him (Basic Law of Governance of Saudi Arabia 1992). Accordingly, it is a traditional Arab practice that goes back to the Prophet Mohammed where the

tribal and elite leaders used to meet with their followers and discuss and exchange opinions and ideas about different issues (Al-Saud 2000 p. 143). Essentially, the Shura Council is an advisory body that has the power to propose legislation to both the king and the Council of Ministers. However, it has no executive authority and so cannot enforce laws (Gardner 2013, p. 1).

Given the distinctive governance system in Saudi Arabia, both traditional and electronic media are controlled by the government. Through the application of censorship and surveillance systems, the Saudi monarchy restricts the information and services available to the public via both media formats (Freedom House, 2019). However, Twitter is not tightly regulated (Jones 2019), which may explain why Twitter has experienced a surge in Saudi Arabia since it became a popular means of holding political discussions (Al-Jenaibi 2016, p. 2). Lama (2019) observed that 43% of active internet users in Saudi Arabia prefer Twitter over other social media platforms as a means of expressing their views and making their voices heard. Unlike other social media platforms, Twitter is used by the population to comment on the country's affairs, including domestic issues, such as women's rights, and state-elite relationships (Foley 2019). Indeed, Saudi society has undergone a profound change, with most of the population now using social media to share information on various issues, which has resulted in an increased awareness of current affairs amongst the public (Alasem 2015; Al-Jenaibi 2016). However, it is apparent that the older age groups in Saudi Arabia are less familiar with social media than are the younger age groups. According to GMI (2020), of all the social media users in Saudi Arabia, only 1.8% are females aged 45 and over and only 5.4% are males of the same age. By way of contrast, 28.2% of Saudi social media users are females aged between 13 and 44 and 64.4% are males in this age range (GMI, 2020). These statistics show that most Saudi social media users are under the age of 45 years.

Although, across the world, technology has opened a new space for both the public and the decision-makers to participate in the democratic process, it may vary from one country to another.

This raises the following question: What is the likely impact of social media use on a fairly closed political system?

I was motivated by the aforementioned question to carry out this study and examine the influence of social media, specifically Twitter, on the Shura Council members in Saudi Arabia.

1.5 The Motivation of the Study

Initially, my personal knowledge and experiences of working in the Shura Council in Saudi Arabia raised essential questions about the effect of social media, especially Twitter, on the policy decision-making process in the kingdom. I have worked in the Public Relations and Media Department at the Shura Council since 2005, based in the Public Relations and Media Departments. My position gave me the opportunity to get close to the Council members and understand the way that both the Council and the members communicate with the public and the media outlets. My position gave me privileged access to the problems that the Council and the members face regarding their communication with outsiders especially after the emergence of social media platforms, more specifically, Twitter. In addition, my observation of the growing usage of social media by both citizens and policymakers in Saudi Arabia and the interaction between the public and the politicians and decision makers on Twitter raised further questions, which motivated me to examine the impact of the policymakers' engagement in the discussion of various discourses on Twitter and whether such an engagement has taken Saudi politics in a different direction, that is, towards a participatory government and a policy-making strategy shaped by the public's participation. Finally, the gap in the scientific knowledge, particularly the role of Twitter in the decision-making process in Saudi Arabia, prompted me to contribute to filling it.

Considering the benefits of social networks, the Saudi government authorities and the members of the Shura Council have been using Twitter largely for public engagement as well as for social

networking (Alasem 2015; Al-Jenaibi 2016). However, there is still a clear gap in the scientific knowledge, as previous studies focused only on Twitter but not its impact on decision-making. Thus, although substantial research has been carried out on the connection between Twitter and politics in different countries, the existing studies on Saudi Arabia are limited to that of Chaudhry (2014) on the Arab revolutions and the influence of Twitter in Saudi social progress, Albalawi and Sixsmith (2017) on the influence of Twitter on health promotion in Saudi Arabia, Al-Saggaf and Chutikulrungsee (2015) on Twitter usage in Australia and Saudi Arabia and its influence on culture, and Al-Khalifa (2011) on the political activities in the Saudi Twitterverse. However, an analysis of these studies revealed that none of them examined the role of Twitter in the policy-making process in the Shura Council of Saudi Arabia.

1.6 The Significance of the Study

Although Saudi Arabia has one of the highest rates of social media usage in the world (Clement 2020; Hamid 2019; Krane 2019), few studies have considered the role and impact of social media on the decision makers and policymakers within their work context. To date, there has not been enough evidence that the Saudi Arabian Shura Council incorporates into its decision making the information posted by the public on Twitter. Consequently, the extent to which social media has the power to dominate the political landscape of Saudi Arabia, especially regarding the legislative process, remains unclear. Evidently, there is a gap in the knowledge regarding the role of Twitter in the decision-making process in Saudi Arabia; this work attempts to address this by filling this research gap. The study employs critical theories and concepts pertaining to the political prospect of social media to illustrate their effectiveness in highlighting the role of social media within a closed political system and non-democratic setting (see Chapters 2 and 3). This research was undertaken to provide new insights into the impact of social media, specifically Twitter, on the decision-making process of the Shura Council of Saudi Arabia. These findings will indicate how

the legislative institution can be improved at a time when the Saudi government is implementing political and social reforms to achieve Vision 2030.

The methodology of this research is based on both qualitative and quantitative approaches to data collection and uses inductive and deductive approaches to data analysis. As I was working for the Shura Council at the time this research was being conducted, I got to know many of the Council members well. Therefore, by working for the Council, I had access to and personal insights into how the body worked, something that gave me a unique perspective in this area of research. Three different methods were used to gather the data for this project: a survey that targeted all 150 members in the seventh term of the Shura Council, semi-structured interviews with 20 members, and an interpretative content analysis of 58 Twitter accounts of members of the Council of the seventh term that lasted from December 2016 to November 2020.

The quantitative data from the survey of the members of the Shura Council helps in illuminating the context in which the participants' perceptions were formed and in establishing a generalised view of the situation based on which the explanatory relationships between variables can be examined using the quantitative data and analysed using the deductive approach. Furthermore, the interviews conducted with members of the Shura Council enabled me to collect in-depth data on the perception and role of social media and the working processes within the Shura Council as perceived by its members. The main finding of this research showed that Twitter usage had a positive effect on Shura Council members, as it opened up the Saudi government to public scrutiny because the platform appeared to facilitate democratic practices amongst Council members. These democratic practices are the means by which citizens work together, even if they disagree, to address shared problems (Kettering Foundation 2021). Twitter provides an exceptional socio-political dimension for many Council members and acts as a public domain for social engagement. Also, the research shows that Twitter has improved the communication between Council members and the public without changing the form of communication (top-down model). This is because

Council members use Twitter to inform members of the public rather than actively communicate with them. Only a few Council members were affected by this experience as regards their decision-making process.

The scope of this study is limited to Twitter because of the increasing use of Twitter amongst ministers, the Shura Council's members, and almost all organisations in Saudi Arabia. In her article in the Times News, Bager (2015) indicated that senior government officials, including King Salman, have turned to Twitter as means of addressing the nation. King Salman is the first Saudi King to have an official Twitter account, indicating the overall affiliation for the use of Twitter to forward political movements. In addition, in terms of the survey samples, this study includes only policymakers who were serving as a member of the Shura Council in the seventh term and had a Twitter account. The Shura Council members who did not have a Twitter account were excluded from this research. In addition, the survey was conducted considering the relevant ethical concerns, such as obtaining the participants' consent to use their data in this study, permitting their withdrawal from the study at any time, and guaranteeing the confidentiality of the collected data.

1.7 The Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is structured as follows. After the introductory chapter, Chapters 2 to 4 discuss the available relevant secondary literature on this topic and then Chapter 5 discusses the methodology, as detailed below.

Chapter 2 'Social Media and the Digital Public' examines the role of social media in general, considering the concept of social media, the types of social media platforms available, the emergence of user-generated content (UGC) and digital politics, the disadvantages of social media, and the impact of social media on trust. The literature explores the relationship between social media and political actions, such as the Arab Spring. Also, this chapter looks at Twitter in particular and relates social media to public sphere theory and online public sphere theory.

Chapter 3 'Policy Change and Public Involvement' explores the relevant theory on this topic. First, this chapter defines policy, the policy cycle, and policy change; then it considers the multiple streams, punctuated equilibrium, and power elite theories. In addition, this chapter explores theories concerning public involvement in political change and stakeholders of political change, such as NGOs, think tanks, and online channels, regarding e-democracy and e-governance.

Chapter 4 'Politics and Social Media in Saudi Arabia' explores both politics and social media with particular reference to the situation in Saudi Arabia. First, this chapter looks at the Saudi Arabian political structure, focusing on the structure and role of the Shura Council. It then explores the current challenges faced by the Council and considers how the Saudi Arabian government and the Shura Council in particular have adopted and interacted with social media. In addition, this chapter looks at what factors affect government-citizen communication.

Chapter 5 'Research Methodology' presents the methodology used to complete the research. This chapter first introduces and reiterates the research aim, objectives, and questions. Then the chapter looks at the research design, exploring the methods used to complete the primary research, such as surveys, interviews, and interpretative content analysis. In this section, the practical considerations involved in completing the research are also considered including the scope of the study, the study sample, permission for data collection, ethical considerations, and the validity and reliability of the data.

Then, Chapters 6 to 9 offer the findings of the interpretive content analysis, surveys, and interviews. Chapter 6 'Members of the Council and Public Engagement on Twitter' presents the results of the interpretive content analysis and the findings and results of this part of the research to understand and evaluate how the Shura Council members use Twitter for public engagement and what viewpoints and perspectives their accounts present to the wider public. Next, Chapter 7 'The Shura Council Members' Attitude toward using Twitter' analyses the results of the

questionnaires, and Chapter 8 'The Influence of Twitter in the Work of Council Members' analyses the interview results. Following that, Chapter 9 summarises the key findings of the content analysis, surveys, and interviews and discusses these results in detail in relation to the research questions. Finally, Chapter 10 presents the overall conclusions, contribution to knowledge, limitations, and future considerations generated as a result of this study.

CHAPTER TWO: SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE DIGITAL PUBLIC

2.1 Introduction

Since their inception, social media platforms have fascinated billions of users, many of whom have incorporated these sites into their daily lives. Most platforms sustain pre-existing social networks and help strangers connect based on shared interests, political views, or activities. Moreover, some sites target a range of users, whilst others focus on people with a common language or shared interests. These platforms also vary in the extent to which they incorporate new information and communication tools. Given the rapid development of social media platforms, it is unlikely there will be agreement on one concept of social media. Indeed, many scholars have adopted different definitions and concepts of what social media is. Therefore, this chapter addresses this debate.

The first part of this chapter provides a conceptual, historical, and scholarly context to what is meant by the term 'social media' and explores its types and features in light of the available resources. The second part covers the content-generation features of social media, the third section presents the applications of the Twitter platform, and the final part discusses social media as an online version of Habermas' theory of the public sphere.

2.2 The Concept of Social Media

The term 'social networking' was first used by the English anthropologist John Arundel Barnes in 1954 to explain configurations of collective communication in a small Norwegian town (Barnes 1954; Herring 2015). Online social networks started with the establishment of the 'Programmed Logic for Automated Teaching Operations (PLATO)' introduced in 1960 at the Urbana campus of the University of Illinois. This was an early computer network designed to aid student learning through greater interaction between 'instructor' and student (Ferster 2014). Although the aim of the PLATO system was to deliver computer-based education and a time-sharing system, for

Woolley (2016), the system's most continuing legacy has been the online community shaped by its communication features from which today's social media has emerged. In 1972, PLATO effected a radical change in the system with a modification to a new generation of mainframes that would eventually support about 1,000 users simultaneously (Woolley 2016). Researchers such as Crumlish and Malone (2009), Madej (2016), and Malloy (2016) commented that in August 1973, PLATO introduced its first message forum application called TERM-talk and an instant messaging feature called Talkomatic. In 1979, Tom Truscott and Jim Ellis, two students at Duke University, invented a system called Usenet, which helped users to "read and post messages for public viewing to various categories known as newsgroups" (Herring 2015, p. 17). From the 1980s to 1990s, operating systems with a graphical user interface (GUI), such as Windows and Mac (OS), brought about a creative change in social media platforms (Sandoval 2014). These were then co-opted by another significant new creation, the World Wide Web, which was developed by Tim Berners-Lee in 1991 (Van Dijck 2013). Moreover, researchers such as Kurylo and Dumova (2016), Robinson et al. (2014), and Shrivastava (2013) stated that Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) and Internet Relay Chat (IRC) were introduced between 1980s and 1990s; these are still a popular form of social media.

According to Boyd and Ellison (2008), SixDegrees.com, which emerged in 1998, was the first fully functioning social networking site; it permitted users to construct personal profiles, list their friends, and surf the 'Friends' list. However, the 2000s can be considered the most prominent era of the history of social media, as this decade saw the launch of various platforms with MySpace, LinkedIn, and Hi5 in 2003; Facebook, Flicker, and Orkut in 2004; YouTube and Ning in 2005; Twitter in 2006; and Instagram in 2010 (Dennen 2012; Boyd and Ellison 2008; Miller et al. 2016). Social media may generally be understood as a Web 2.0 internet-based application serving as a platform used to facilitate social interactions (Obar and Wildman 2015). However, the definition of social media has developed over time, gaining additional features and implications.

Whiting and Williams' typology approach depends on the purposes of usages. They argued that different media types have different usages, some of which allow individuals to create videos, audio, or text shared on blog, wiki, or video hosting sites for exchanging opinions, experiences, insights, and perspectives with each other. They outlined seven priorities for social media usage: "social interactions; information seeking; pass time; entertainment; relaxation; communicatory utility; and convenience utility" (2013, p. 364).

This development can be traced in the huge number of definitions generated by scholars over the years to identify the expansion in the implications and characteristics of social media. For example, Shirky (2008) noted the ability of social media to facilitate sharing and cooperation between people and to enhance their ability to take collective action outside the formal and traditional institutions and organisations. On the other hand, Boyd and Ellison (2008, p. 211) suggested wider implications: web-based services allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. Van Dijck (2013, p.11) defined it as follows: "Social media can be seen as online facilitators or enhancers of *human* networks—webs of people that promote connectedness as a social value." Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 61) highlighted a further implication relevant to the creation of UGC and defined it as "a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technical foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content". Standage (2013, p. 3) viewed it as an environment in which to exchange information between individuals in a social manner to "create a distributed discussion or community". Meanwhile, Sandoval's (2014, p. 144) definition focused on the rapid "social interaction, collaboration, sharing, and participation" obtained from social media. Moreover, Herring (2015, p. 10) focused on the relationships created by social media between people ranging from casual relationships to strong family bonds. The recent view of Miller et al. on the characteristics and implications of

social media suggest that social media has created a middle space of communication "between traditional broadcast and private dyadic communication, providing people with a scale of group size and degrees of privacy that we have termed scalable sociality" (2016, p. 9).

The above definitions suggest that social media relies on UGC, and it is through such content that online interactions are possible (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010; Boyd and Ellison 2008). On their part, Boyd and Ellison (2008) indicated that social media facilitates social interactions, as different users connect their profiles either as individuals or as groups. Meanwhile, Buyer (2013) also introduced a new term that has been used by other authors: 'real-time content'. Buettner (2016) explained that apart from users generating the content on social media, this content actually takes place in real-time because this is the time that can easily be edited by users. Thus, social media can be regarded as an interactive web unlike other traditional websites where users only get to read content generated by the hosts of the site without the opportunity to interact with the websites in any way.

2.2.1 Types of Social Media Platforms

According to Datareportal (2021a) at the beginning of 2021, there were 4.33 billion users of social media platforms globally. As of January 2021, the most popular social networking sites worldwide ranked by number of active users are Facebook (2,740 million), YouTube (2,291 million), WhatsApp (2,000 million), Facebook Messenger (1,300 million), Instagram (1,221 million), Weixin/WeChat (1,213 million), TikTok (689 million), QQ (617 million), Douyin (600 million), Sina Weibo (511 million), Telegram (500 million), Snapchat (498 million), Kuaishou (481 million), Pinterest (442 million), Reddit (430 million), Twitter (353 million), and Quora (300 million) (Tankovska, 2021). See Figure 2.1:

Figure 2.1: Most Popular Social Media Platforms Worldwide as of January 2021, ranked by number of active users (in millions)

Most popular social networks worldwide as of January 2021, ranked by number of active users (in millions)

Platform	Users
Facebook	2 740
YouTube	2 291
WhatsApp	2 000
Facebook Messenger*	1 300
Instagram	1 221
Weixin / WeChat	1 213
TikTok	689
QQ	617
Douyin	600
Sina Weibo	511
Telegram	500
Snapchat	498
Kuaishou	481
Pinterest	442
Reddit*	430
Twitter	353
Quora*	300

Number of active users in millions

Sources
We Are Social; Various sources (Company data);
Hootsuite; DataReportal
© Statista 2021

Additional Information:
Worldwide; Various sources (Company data); DataReportal; January, 2021; social networks and messenger/chat app/voip
not include Douyin

(Source: Tankovska, 2021).

Van Dijck (2013) stated that social media platforms are communal and user centric, as they expand networks and emphasise connection as a social value. Scoble (2007) described the technology as an internet media with the ability to interact with people in some way. On the other hand, Schejter and Tirosh (2015) viewed social media as a complex platform, believing that as people continue to use and experience the technology, innovative technologies emerge that provide new communication services for users. They cited Twitter, Foursquare, and Yelp, which are micro-blogging sites, location-based services, and consumer review platforms respectively, working together to provide a new media experience through mobile devices.

2.3 Understanding Twitter

Twitter, which was developed in 2006 by Jack Dorsey, is an online US social networking company located in San Francisco, California, the US. It is a microblog medium that allows users to share

their information, knowledge, and views on different topics and issues. Alkarni (2018) stated the following:

> Twitter is a kind of social communication technology which allows users to post short messages via Internet (microblogging). Twitter has become a medium for discussing politics, sociology, journalism, books, environmental issues, organising collective actions, and showing support for, or critique of, an endless number of topics. (p. 46)

Twitter can be understood as a web-based communication platform that combines instant messaging and SMS to enable subscribers to its service to send out brief status updates to others in order to inform them what they are doing in that moment (Murthy 2018; Burgess and Baym 2020). Therefore, initially, users on Twitter could post any topic within the restriction of 140 characters; however, on November 7, 2017, Twitter increased the tweet limit to 280 characters: "The character increase was designed to help Twitter users spend less time condensing their thoughts and more time talking" (MacArthur 2019, no pagination). Twitter has minimised communication challenges by making it possible to complete several communication tasks including posting updates and monitoring feeds from various 3G mobile devices and Tweet decks at once by using a broad range of delivery mechanisms (Jackson and Lilleker 2011).

For the purposes of this study, Twitter has been studied in three forms: first, as an indicator of public opinion; second, as an impression management tool; and third, as a means to formulate alliances among politicians and policymakers. Different researchers have explained how Twitter is applicable as a public opinion indicator. For instance, Del Valle (2015) showed that this technology gives people the ability to forecasting electronic outcomes as well as determining the implications or movements of the individuals utilising Twitter during online campaigns. The above explanation shows that social media plays a vital role during political contests since it enables the contestants and the community at large to gather the details necessary to determine whether a given

leader is competent (Del Valle 2015). However, a report from House of Commons (2019) indicated that parliamentarians in the UK had embraced social media to the extent of using it to investigate the members of the public who support their ideas as well as identifying those opposing them. This passage reveals that social media sites like Twitter help to analyse the mindset of a society. Buduk (2010) also stated that leaders have abandoned the traditional media sources, such as newspapers, radio, and television, and have started to use online platforms instead since they help them to predict voting trends as well as making suitable preparation to retain their positions.

Furthermore, other researchers have indicated how Twitter is useful in portraying the perceptions of both politicians and the entire society. To be specific, Berry (2012) claimed that the application of social media by political parties and politicians is currently relying on public opinion. The above statement partly shows why politicians prefer to hire both quantitative analysts and social media strategists capable of portraying public opinion during campaigns (Berry 2012). Similarly, Miller and Ko (2015) demonstrated that Twitter acts as a contemporary tool for discussing general issues. To illustrate this, these authors showed that politicians use tweets containing a URL link to a specific media platform, hence enabling people to offer their perceptions and facts about political matters or elections (Miller and Ko 2015). These practices are useful in investigating public ideas and thus in facilitating the process of predicting the outcomes of elections or campaigns.

In terms of utilising Twitter as an impression management tool, several authors have shown how it is applicable for bringing about a positive impression, including Bolino et al. (2008). It is notable that celebrities on Twitter are often hired to tweet about brands to increase consumer confidence in and willingness to buy the brand in question (Jin and Phua 2014). Similar trends have been identified in politics with an increasing number of politicians taking to Twitter and other forms of social media to facilitate public relations (Frame and Brachotte 2015). Other researchers have also shown how Twitter is applicable as an impression-management tool. In the political sphere, according to Larsson and Moe (2012), Twitter revolts are present in dictatorial as well as

totalitarian nations, but the community appears to dispute the exact effects and contents of these uprisings.

Noman et al. (2015) argued that in the Twitter sphere or 'Twitterverse' (Al-Khalifa 2011), the number of political issues discussed online is much higher in societies like Saudi Arabia that lack a free and high-quality press in comparison to those that enjoy freedom of speech and a healthy traditional media. In view of the use of Twitter during the 2009 Iranian elections, the utilisation of #IranElection had attracted significant attention from members of the public. At this point, this online platform provided the protestors with the ability to combine their efforts and thoughts in one voice, hence forcing the government to pay attention to their demands (Larsson and Moe 2012).

In addition, Kalsnes (2016) showed that social media provides a platform for fighting for the rights of political journalists since it offers valuable political devices and facilitates access to certain information that can affect members of the public. Similarly, the above technology blurs the link between the personal and the professional by coming up with engaging content on the online platform and so managing to offer an important impression about objectivity and balance (Kalsnes 2016). Indeed, Twitter enables commentators and the community to obtain feedback and ideas from citizens and political actors. Likewise, Bouchet and Kariithi (2003) indicated that social media has influenced communication and enabled the editors, proprietors, and management to provide more sustained and close attention to the process of law making. As a result, this aspect has a positive effect on public governance and service.

Regarding the role of Twitter in formulating political alliances, Twitter provides similar functionalities for political users, and the functionality between the users appears to vary across different nations. Such differences may be used to illustrate the differences between political cooperation within countries (Newkirk, 2016). The aspect of retweeting and mentions in Twitter

between national legislators contributed 21% of the total Twitter activities of politicians. Poland revealed the highest proportion of Twitter activities between parliamentarians, while Iceland provided the lowest figures (Conover et al. 2011). Furthermore, the use of Twitter in establishing alliances during political campaigns has been effectively reviewed in past studies (Kruikemeier 2014). Twitter mentions of other parliamentarians appear to be more frequently used as opposed to retweeting. There are, however, various differences between the nations, with Greek and Canadian members of parliament having more retweets than mentions (Ferree et al. 2002). On the other hand, while communicating with members outside the political sphere, the parliamentarians on Twitter retweeted such comments rather than mentioning the individuals. They postulated that the structures within power distribution, which represent the democratic systems of a nation, may encourage various attitudes of polarization or may provide cooperation amongst dissimilar political parties (Feroz et al. 2014). From the above considerations, it can be stated that proportional systems result in enhanced cooperation (Barberá and Rivero 2015).

By utilizing the Twitter parliamentary database framework, retweets between politicians can be viewed as endorsements, which reveal the political alliance of systems within the nation (Hwang 2013). In this respect, the retweets may be considered as edges within a network, whereas structures portray the real coalitions as well as divisions within members of the legislative arms of government. Parliamentarians who retweet information from members of other parties can be assumed to have friendly party relations as opposed to nations in which parties retweet internally. The study revealed that nations with majoritarian systems evidenced lower proportions of external retweets when compared with nations that exhibited proportional representation systems (PR) (Vliet et al. 2020).

Nations with PR systems revealed higher averages of external retweets, as the nations with higher proportions of external retweets are all based on the PR systems. Furthermore, focusing on Twitter discourse provides insights into the alliances espoused by the politicians. The use of Twitter 'lingo'

is clear given that one party may refer to social reforms while the other claims its social relief. The use of the different labels may serve as an indicator for how we view the issues at hand (Golbeck et al. 2010). Various labels may be used to promote political divides, where each group identifies and describes their own issues in a specific way, which renders it difficult to develop conversations along political divides. The analysis of discourse may be used to illustrate the political affiliations of politicians in respect to their parties of affiliation (Ferree et al. 2002).

2.4 User-Generated Content (UGC): The Emergence of Digital Publics

One area or feature of social media that is of particular importance is its ability to generate user content to service the 'publics,' that is, groups of individual people (Reddi, 2019). It is more than just groups of individual people but includes, for example, 'digital communities' and the more disaggregated and atomised 'publics' as Papacharissi (2010) defines the online public sphere. In the literature of technology, this feature is widely discussed under the theme of UGC, which stands for the ability of users of social media to generate their own media content in many different forms (Aichner and Jacob 2015). This is user-led content creation, known as 'produsage,' which blurs the line between active production and passive consumption (Bruns 2007; Bruns and Schmidt 2011). Moreover, Agichtein et al. (2008) emphasised that the media content generated by the public varies and can be classified under the categories of text, audio, pictures, and video. Schejter and Tirosh (2015) stressed that much of the importance, relevance, and popularity of social media today is due to UGC, as in the forms of text, images, audio, and video, it allows activities such as advertisements, gossip, research, news, and problem processing to take place on social media. Kaplan (2012) noted that in contemporary terms, a closely emerging component of most social media sites that can also be attributed to UGC is the ability to undertake live chats on social media platforms using either text, audio, or video exchanges. Therefore, social media sites make it possible not only for UGC to be exchanged but for the content to be exchanged in real-time terms.

It is notable that social media interactions are heavily dependent on UGC, such as user profiles, which allow individuals to gain control in the area of social media (Boyd and Elison 2008; Schejter and Tirosh 2015). Here, control refers to a situation where a user now has the opportunity to post their own content in the forms of text, audio, images, or video onto a particular social media site. Consequently, without a user profile, it is virtually impossible for a person to be part of the UGC experience of social media (Diamond 2010).

In addition to the above, UGC has also led to a new era of citizen journalism. That is, social media presents a significant opportunity for citizens or subscribers to inform, educate, and entertain others and generally share their views on trending news items or information, thereby contributing to the dynamics of citizen journalism (Allan and Thorson, 2009). Citizen journalism is not just about commenting on news items but also about reporting on events and, in some cases, doing actual investigative journalism (Luo and Harrison, 2019). In recent years, whilst Allan and Thorson (2009) have had a mainly positive view about citizen journalism, they have also acknowledged that via UGC, citizen journalism is sometimes thought to have hijacked traditional reporting methods and, in some cases, has done more harm than good. While citizen journalism is non-professional, it often has social, cultural, and political relevance. However, it is important to differentiate this from what Allan calls 'citizen witnessing,' which is a kind of first-person reporting that occurs at moments of crisis and not as a form of permanent non-professional commentary (Allan, 2013). Resultantly, being subscribers to the various social media platforms allows the public to participate effectively in the discussion of critical issues affecting society. Although it is not necessary for the people to share their views and offer professional or expert information, the fact that they are allowed to share their views on a topic is of significance (Pavlik and MacIntoch 2015).

However, there are limitations to UGC in that although the use of UGC continues to be the most popular basis for using social media sites, the term has also been criticised in a number of studies.

Kietzmann and Hermkens (2011) examined the attitude of people towards the use of social media sites; the majority of respondents in their study described their social media usage as rare because they could not trust the content, they saw on social media sites. Some of these doubts extended to cover other media content, such as audio, images, and video. Furthermore, Obar and Wildman (2015) and Boyd and Ellison (2008) pointed out the problem of copyright issues about the use of UGC, highlighting the possibility of legal issues. In addition, the ever-increasing concern regarding UGC is the spread of online misinformation and disinformation. The limitations to UGC are discussed in the following sections.

2.5 Aspects and Capacities of Social Media: Online Misinformation and Disinformation

Although social media can enhance the interaction between politicians and members of the public, it has also increased the capacity for online misinformation and disinformation. This is because social media technology can contribute to the dissemination of misinformation, disinformation, and the spread of rumours. Chapin (2016) defined online misinformation as any false information or stories that have unusual power in a culture and are consumed by millions of people. Such disinformation is often successful in its intention because it exploits real grievances in society (Khosravinik 2018). Examples of such practices include the Trump presidency and the Brexit vote (Khosravinik 2018). According to Anheier and Toepler (2009), the distribution of misinformation and disinformation via various forms of broadcast media has been occurring since Johann Gutenberg's printing press was introduced in 1439. Indeed, the first publication of fake news was in 1898, when the Spanish government was linked to an explosion that destroyed the US battleship Maine in Cuba, which resulted in a battle between Spain and the US.

Notably, Reilly (2020, p. 179) implied that fake news is "one of the most popular misnomers of the 21st century." While the term is most frequently used to refer to intentionally and provably false news articles, it is also used by politicians to discredit and delegitimise media outlets that are

critical of their conduct in office. One example of this practice is the accusations of 'fake news' made by President Donald Trump to cast doubts on the credibility of the mainstream news media (Reilly 2020). Trump presumably made these accusations in response to unfavourable coverage of him in the run-up to the 2016 United States Presidential election (Reilly 2020). However, in fact, three times as many fake news items were published in support of Trump than were published supporting the candidacy of his rival, Hilary Clinton (Reilly 2020). This example indicated that accusations of 'fake news' can be applied to legitimate news items to cast doubt on their validity.

Both Allcott and Gentzkow (2014) and Reilly (2020) claimed that online platforms have a higher chance of spreading online misinformation and disinformation since some individuals may overstate the actual exposure. For example, Allcott and Gentzkow's (2014) post-election research demonstrated that fifteen respondents had encountered fourteen pieces of fake news during the pre-election while other people had come across placebo articles and misleading headlines. It has been suggested by Spierings et al. (2019) that politicians often use Twitter as a tool to exclude people from accessing certain partisan information directly and quickly. This assertion indicates that politicians can use social media to manipulate society by offering inaccurate details. Excluding people from information leads to the manipulation of society as disinformation sows doubts in people's minds, leading them to come to the wrong conclusions about what is going on in the world or the correct course of action (Morgan, 2018).

However, Reilly (2020) observed that apart from the UK EU Referendum in 2016, there is little evidence to date to suggest that misinformation or disinformation has influenced voting decisions. Therefore, while social media is a useful tool for politicians to spread their opinions and perspectives on public affairs, there is little evidence that it can change the trajectory of elections.

Similarly, other researchers have portrayed the difficulties of using social media as a tool for spreading political messages. For instance, Flinders and Kelso (2011) claimed that the absence of

trust in politics can create a scenario where the public may fail to obtain actual and valid information. In this case, the community members will be unable or unwilling to believe and appreciate that the political systems can offer high-quality services transparently. However, more recent research by Vaccari and Chadwick (2020) indicated that 'deepfakes' created and distributed online through artificial intelligence (AI) are more likely to create uncertainty than a sense of being misled. As such, it can be suggested that disinformation serves to both confuse and actively mislead internet users. Similarly, O'Neill (2010) commented that politicians sometimes use small and medium associations with a strategic intention to spread incorrect messages. Likewise, some members of society may make online posts that can have adverse effects on MPs, such as when bloggers put mainstream news in the public domain (O'Neill 2010). Accordingly, social media can act as a barrier that can prevent access to balanced opinions on critical situations and issues. In addition, by studying the false information released during the 2018 US midterm election, Jones-Jang et al. (2020) found that the electorate's use of social media as a source of news led to widespread political cynicism following the election. This indicates that the use of social media to spread false or misleading political messages leads to uncertainty over what is true.

In conclusion, researchers have shown that social media influences political activities. Moreover, online platforms such as Twitter play a vital role in connecting politicians and members of the public, which facilitates the involvement of all people in the decision-making process. Still, Twitter enables the society to communicate with government leaders as well as forcing these officials to respond to questions that their followers ask them, hence enhancing accountability and trust (Haman 2020; Parmelee and Bichard 2012). Likewise, politicians use online sites to gather the information that helps to make a future prediction about voting or election outcomes (Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan 2014). On the other hand, social media can support the spread of online misinformation and disinformation as well as making it hard for the community to communicate

with their leaders effectively. To explore this assertion further, the following sections look at the impact of social media on political trust and transparency and its role in the Arab Spring.

2.5.1 The Impact of Social Media on Political Trust and Transparency

Several researchers have indicated how social media contributes to political trust and accountability. For instance, Graham and Avery (2013, p. 5) described transparency as "the availability of information on matters of public concerns, the ability of citizens to participate in political decision-making, and the accountability of government to public opinion". Mattozzi and Merlo (2007) argued that transparency involves the rights and means to examine the process of decision-making, holding public officials accountable, opening government meetings to the press, allowing citizens to review public budgets, and opening up laws and decisions for discussion.

Meanwhile, Bertot et al. (2012) claimed that social media platforms have improved the capacity for transparency. In addition, Kinninmont (2013) claimed that social media has been shown to be an appropriate tool that can be employed by government agencies and politicians to enhance candidness and transparency, improve the understanding of public sentiments, encourage the idea of e-participation, and offer the public a voice and so facilitate interaction with a large population at a low price (Jafarkarimi et al. 2014; Alotaibi 2019). E-participation is the ICT-supported participation of citizens in government or e-government (Jafarkarimi et al. 2014; Alotaibi 2019). Giraldo-Luque et al. (2017) indicated that Twitter is the most applicable social media platform to present debates on chambers in ten countries in the north and south of America and Europe. Similarly, O'Neill (2010) indicated that Twitter sometimes promotes accountability since the intention of the sender may be transparent, which helps to enhance trust as well as cultivate a feeling of honesty and openness concerning politicians. For instance, Ausserhofer and Maireder (2013) emphasised that Twitter enhances the "political system" in some Western countries such as the U.S., Australia, and Canada (p. 293).

Also, Veer (2013) stated that the increasing application of social media can lead to fairness between individuals participating in elections. However, whilst earlier research pointed to the positive role of social media in advancing fairness between political candidates, more recently, academic attention has turned to the spread of misinformation and the possible manipulation of political debate via social media. For example, Anspach and Carlson (2020) found that when political information is distributed via social media posts on Twitter or Facebook, they are often linked to a misinformative political commentary and are thus perpetuating and spreading misinformation rather than more accurate, nuanced political information.

The activity of gathering information from social media assures the viewers that they have the power to select the information that they want to process (O'Neill 2010). Besides, Schmiemann (2015) showed that social media helps to promote transparency and boost trust since they pave the way for the citizens to contribute their views during the process of making political decisions. Indeed, the above factors make the government consider public opinion whilst establishing policies as well as rules and regulations.

2.5.2 Social Media and Arab Spring

When it enhances the online engagement of the public even though there are some obstacles to usage of the internet and online usage. Alghamdy (2011) and Salem and Mourtada (2011) argued that since social media was used to facilitate communication and interaction during the Arab Spring in 2010-2012, it played a significant role in these events. Howard and Hussain (2013) as part of the Project on Information Technology and Political Islam, as well as O'Donnell (2011) found that numerous messages posted on social media about freedom and democracy across the Middle East and North Africa helped raised expectations regarding a successful political uprising in the region.

During the Arab Spring, protestors used social media to mobilise, organise demonstrations, spread information about their activities, and increase local and global awareness of what was going on (Stepanova 2011; Salem and Mourtada 2011). This was because social media users within the Arab populations involved in the Arab Spring had access to social media at that time (OECD 2013). However, there has been a significant amount of controversy in the literature about how relevant social media actually was for the Arab Spring and what the role of 'digital protest' actually is. This is because many authors believe that the role of social media in the protests was overstated, especially when such protests are termed 'social media revolutions' (Wolfsfeld et al. 2013; Faris 2012, p. 99). However, others, like Howard and Hussain (2013), have argued that patterns in technology use rather than its use explained why some regimes in the Arab region fell and others endured following the uprisings.

Since the Arab Spring, citizens in many Arab and Middle Eastern countries have successfully used social media platforms, mainly Facebook, as both a political channel and a public sphere, albeit most of the Arab countries are non-democratic countries where governments have tried to control and limit internet access (Al-saggaf 2006, p. 312). Even though the Shura Council is a conservative body that rarely consults the public whilst making decisions, Almukhilif and Deng (2017) claimed that the Saudi government had incorporated online platforms to ensure a transparent decision-making process. Essentially, according to them, transparency in the decision-making process is the foundation of public sphere theory. For instance, in 2016, Saudi Arabia developed the 2030 action plan, the Saudi Vision, which was announced in 2016 and made accessible to the public (Almukhilif and Deng 2017, p. 1338; Rashad 2016).

Further, Safeenna and Kammani (2013) argued that most governments now incorporate ICT systems to deliver services at a location convenient to the citizens. Accordingly, the Shura Council has incorporated Twitter in the e-government programme to obtain the public's opinion on important matters affecting the Saudi people. This action was regarded as a step towards

democracy in Saudi Arabia and, therefore, towards giving citizens a chance to contribute to fundamental aspects of the government. They added that this enhances the democratic values of the public since social media has transformed society, as it has opened a new medium of communication (Safeenna and Kammani 2013, p. 67).

Chaudhry (2014) explained that since the 2011 Arab Spring, Twitter has proven to be a useful tool for mobilising citizens, as it helps to connect people using hashtags (Chaudhry 2014, p. 944). In September 2017, the ban on women driving was lifted in Saudi Arabia, and this debatable issue had been discussed extensively on Twitter. In this case, although public participation was not direct, the Saudi government still considered their situation, finally allowing women to drive, as it had become a necessity rather than a luxury for many households (Al-khamir 2018). This started with the #women2drive in 2011 where most women posted their pictures online whilst driving in Riyadh, which also attracted substantial scrutiny from the public (Al-khamir 2018).

These instances relate to public sphere theory (see section 2.7), which is an important part of a democratic and civil culture where the plights of the citizens are considered. For example, on November 4, 2017, prominent members of the Saudi Arabia royal family, ministers, businessmen, and others were arrested on the grounds of corruption. This decision was applauded, which enhanced the reputation of Saudi Arabia (Kalin and Paul 2017). Additionally, King Salman Bin Abdulaziz and Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman decided to break the decade-long ban on mixed male and female entertainment so as to increase the number of tourists in the country (Kalin and Paul 2017). Notably, in as much as the people are not directly involved in making decisions, it is evident that their problems are considered. For instance, after the 2011 Arab Spring, most people used Twitter to highlight the atrocities of their governments. Ultimately, this prompted changes in government policies (Kalin and Paul 2017).

2.6 Political Campaigning and Government-Citizen Communication

The elaboration of the concept of social media and identifying its types and content leads to an exploration of how social media platforms work within a citizen-policymaker communication setting. This involves looking at the relationship between social media platforms and political behaviour on the one hand and the platforms' relationship with public engagement on the other.

Boulianne (2009) defined political communication as a subfield of political science and communication that is concerned with how information spreads and influences policymakers, the media, citizens, and politics at large, while Negrine and Stanyer (2007, p. 1) defined political communication as "communication between social actors on political matters—interpersonal and mediated". Accordingly, political communication is an interactive process concerned mainly with the transfer of information among politicians, the news media, and the public. Characteristically, political communication involves a range of institutions, organisations, and interest groups.

The social media age has reinvented the political process, as these networking sites pose a variety of challenges and opportunities for political parties (Kenterelidou 2005). Political communication in the social media age refers to the connection between the general public and parties as well as their representatives, transforming with the portrayal of new types of technologies for motivating interaction. Therefore, it transpires that controversy, irrespective of the organisations, has changed drastically because of the new means of communication emanating from the increasing use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the internet (Del Valle 2015). In view of the developments in the contemporary world, social media has significant implications for the public sphere since many individuals opt to communicate their ideas on online platforms (see section 2.7.2). However, research has also shown that social media is mostly applicable in the political context, where individuals hold that social network sites can increase the potential of public participation.

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In light of the above, government–citizen communication takes place on social media platforms on various occasions and through different means, for example, an official website or social media accounts such as Twitter. Moreover, political communication literature has been conceptualising technology forms primarily in terms of how they offer distribution technologies for political communication. The literature conceptualises social media platforms as interactive channels that political campaigners and actors use to communicate with their public (Chadwick 2013).

Furthermore, social media companies are oriented towards facilitating digital political advertising. Additionally, they play an active role in shaping how a political candidate uses social media platforms to communicate with voters (Kreiss 2012; Rossini et al. 2018; Ohme 2019). In the process, they play an active role in shaping the ways political campaigns use social networking sites to represent and sell their candidates.

Social media companies not only provide platforms for political communication but are also heavily involved in the strategic process of creating political communication itself. Stromer-Galley (2014) argued that social media companies, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google, have created a political communication unit that specifically deals with how the companies can derive revenue from political activities. As a result, they not only provide politicians and campaigners with a platform to reach and interact with voters, but they also participate in the strategic planning and policy-making process in the political sphere. For example, Kreiss (2016) argued that social media firms have created structures that correspond to the institutional functionalities of the political field, revealing that there is a behind-the-scenes collaboration between political campaign managers and technology firms. The staff of the social networking sites work closely with political campaigns to track political conversations on the site and structure communication messages for the politicians based on the tracked conversations.

In the US, from Barak Obama's presidential election campaign in 2008 to President Donald Trump's political communication over Twitter in 2016, the significance of social media in US politics is confirmed (Pain and Chen 2019; Stolee and Caton 2018). Lapowsky (2016) offered an example of Trump's campaign in 2016, which compensated for its small size by leveraging the staff, skills, and expertise of the social media forms. The process helped Trump's team to identify his supporters on social media, persuade voters, and target different demographic groups online. Similarly, researchers such as Casteltrione and Pieczka (2018) and Ohme (2019) have asserted that social media plays a consequential role in UK politics.

In short, the knowledge of experts from social media firms can help political campaigns in several ways. First, the teams help create adverts that achieve results. Second, they provide campaigns to optimise their social media platforms to create more engagement with the voters. Third, they help the political campaigns to expand the audience for their political messages. Notably, recent examples of political campaigning via bots as a means of political advertising suggest that social media plays an integral role in shaping political opinions and voting decisions amongst the general population. During political campaigns, bots are increasingly used on social media to monitor user activity. This can be useful and beneficial in terms of examining user response time or what categories users search for (Boichak et al. 2018). However, bots can also be harmful or even nefarious; political groups have made use of bots to manipulate and fabricate public opinion, as they produce spam with the goal of persuading, smearing, or deceiving people (Boichak et al. 2018). Most significantly, in the 2016 US presidential elections, bots had a disruptive influence on the information arena, with one-fifth of all political discussion in the US presidential election driven by bots, which affected public discussion in negative ways (Boichak et al. 2018).

The use of bots in the US presidential election was also highlighted by the Cambridge Analytica scandal. In March 2018, it was revealed that Cambridge Analytica had inappropriately obtained data from Facebook to build voter profiles with the aim of creating material to encourage them to

vote a certain way (Confessore 2018). This example thus shows how social media is used in modern political advertising to sway the opinion of individual voters in masse.

A similar example is how studies into the use of hashtags in political campaigns indicate that they are used by elite political operatives to influence the masses and can result in a significant public backlash. For example, Vicari et al. (2020) observed that political hashtag publics are initiated by elite, professional users to communicate ideas and concepts to the public at large. But the critical stance of such tweets leads to the public questioning their message over time. One example is the backlash against the Italian health ministry campaign #fertilityday designed to combat Italy's low fertility rate, which was accused of delivering sexist and racist messages (Vicari et al. 2020). This research indicated that hashtags often originate from the top down and can provoke a reactionary rather than a positive response from the general public.

The relationship between social media and public engagement is evident in the literature. Politics and the media have always been closely interconnected. Consequently, researchers such as Chadwick (2013), Stromer-Galley (2014), Nahon (2015), Oates (2008), and Wright et al. (2016) have asserted that the media plays a significant role in politics especially in public relations, elections, war, terrorism, democracy, and protest, which are dramatically taken over by the internet, especially social media. According to Nahon (2015), where there is social media, there is politics. For Wright et al. (2016), everyday political talks take place on social media, including agenda setting (Flores-Yeffal et al. 2019; Skogerbo et al. 2016), public engagement, and political participation (Gil de Zuniga et al. 2012; Loader et al. 2014; Vaccari et al. 2015; Bode 2016).

The increased influence of social media, particularly Twitter, on communication to focus more attention on the law-making process raises the question of whether Twitter can serve as a public sphere. A previous study by Eijaz (2013) analysed the current use of Twitter as a public sphere by the decision-makers in Pakistan to communicate and engage with the citizens. Moreover, Edgerly

et al. (2009) carried out a study in 2008 on the ability of YouTube to serve as an online public sphere. As such, they examined a large sample of video comments using the California Proposition 8 debate as an example. Kellner (2000) explicated the concept of the public sphere and pointed out the constant influence of Habermas' critical deliberation over political life in the present time. Likewise, Sen and Bolumu-Elazıg's (2012) article '*The Social Media as a Public Sphere: The Rise of Social Opposition*' discusses the implications of Habermas' public sphere on social media. Online media allows debate between policymakers and active citizens and creates a realm where public dialogue can take place and public opinion can be shaped. Poulakidakos and Veneti (2016) supported the argument that social media, especially Twitter, provides space for people to participate in the public sphere, and they stated, "Social media already serve as a new place for the development of a digital 'public sphere' hence the exchange of argumentation on issues of public interest. More specifically, Twitter has been rather frequently used by politicians and parties in their attempt to establish a new way of communicating with the electorate"' (p. 119).

Social media's influence can also be seen to make a greater governmental change in a weak and controlled public sphere (Howard and Hussain 2013). Sen and Bolumu-Elazıg (2012, p. 491) argued that online media complies with these three preconditions to some extent. Accordingly, individuals can access social media networks through virtual identities akin to their real ones. Indeed, anyone who has the economic means and basic skills of technology can have access to the internet. They further pointed out the norms of a general public sphere: "inclusive communication; free from state and corporate interests; equal communicatively; sincere (as far as possible), respectful (putting oneself in the position of the other); reasoned (framing arguments in terms of why particular claims ought to be accepted) and reflexive (identity re-constitution)" (Sen and Bolumu-Elazıg 2012, p. 492). Therefore, when it comes to the 'public sphere,' no argument is complete without bearing in mind the theories of Jürgen Habermas. For this reason, Habermas'

'*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*' (1989) is adopted to obtain an in-depth conceptual and theoretical understanding of the public sphere (see section 2.7.1).

A study on the role of political information in the political agenda-setting in Malaysia revealed that social media plays an important role in shaping public opinion on important political matters, which significantly affects the agenda-setting in the country (Salman et al. 2016). Similarly, Cruces (2017) studied political agenda-setting in a new democracy through social media in Mexico and revealed that social media campaigns revealed similar results. The same, according to de los Ángeles Flores et al. (2019), was applied in the inter-public agenda-setting in the 2004 US presidential election. In addition, a study by Gavin (2018) revealed that the media plays a significant role in UK politics, including Brexit, immigration, climate change, and beyond.

Evidence of the connection between social media and public engagement can be seen in a study by Fromm et al. (2017) on the role of social media; they focused on 6,099 Twitter communications during the 2016 US primaries, when Donald Trump won the Republican nomination and subsequently beat Hilary Clinton in the presidential election. They found that most tweets by the candidates were not about policy but about parties, other politicians, and the media. A second example provided by Sahly et al. (2019) in a case study on the 2016 US presidential election revealed that both candidates, Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton, utilised social media platforms – mainly Twitter and Facebook – in the process of the campaigns to increase public engagement. Moreover, researchers (Alderman and Inwood 2019; Bobadilla 2018; Allen and VandeHei 2019) revealed that US President Donald Trump's social media obsession, especially with Twitter, increased his public engagement with different contemporary issues. Similarly, in the 2019 UK general election, two major candidates, Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn, used social media to communicate their manifestos and updates as a part of public engagement (Spring and D'Urso 2019).

Like in many Western countries, the effect of social media on Saudi society as well as on Saudi politics is enormous (Kuppuswamy and Rekha 2015; Harb 2011; Samin 2012). Notably, when they explored whether political participation via social media encouraged increased traditional political participation among young people, Beaunier and Veneti (2020) found that having a prior interest and knowledge of politics is a key determinant of whether young people were likely to participate in traditional acts of political participation. Therefore, this research suggested that increased political participation via social media is likely to increase political participation. However, "Little is known about the role of social media as a source of political information" according to Bode (2016, p. 1), and the extent to which social media influences the decision-making process in Saudi Arabia is still being researched. A study by Alshahrani (2017) aimed to examine the extent to which members of the Shura Council use the new media outlets to consider some issues of Saudi society; the research showed that the Council members were using social media platforms as a similar alternative approach to traditional media regarding gaining knowledge about some of society's issues. In addition, the results indicated that the citizens offer the most important types of topics to members of the Shura Council through social media on health service policies and try to raise the quality of the health services.

Within the political context, digital communication takes two forms: user feedback, to allow the government to inform the public of its policies and plans, and bottom-up pressure, to take individual or collective action towards accountability. Top-down communication is generally defined as communication processes that are "characterized by a powerful, hierarchical state where a political elite devises policy that is then implemented through a strict, sequential, and stable chain of command via bureaucrats and service providers" (Donovan 2007, p. 971). Conversely, the bottom-up communication process is used as pressure to achieve accountability through individual or collective action. It refers to "community participation, grassroots movements and local decision-making" (Nikkah, and Redzuan, 2009 p. 171). However, the impact of this type of

communication is conditioned by the strength of institutions, both formal and informal. When institutions are strong and have prior willingness to improve accountability, digital communication can have positive results. On the other hand, when institutions are not empowered, digital communication can become another tool for control by an elite and can even lead to negative consequences in some situations (GPSA Brown Bag Lunch Report 2015).

Institutions in Saudi Arabia are centralised and lack the strength and the authority to make decisions on their own; all decisions should be made by the King or approved by him. For instance, Saudi women have been fighting for their rights since the 1990s, and in 2016, millions of women rode a 'Twitter Wave' of activism, hoping that it would lead to the abolition of the legal guardianship system that gives men authority over women's lives. In 2017, a Royal Decree lifted the ban on women driving, coming into effect by 2018. The same applies to the Royal Decree allowing women to participate in physical activities in schools and the reduced power of the religious police (Ford 2018). Nevertheless, it can be construed that the ban on women driving has been eased not as a consequence of digital communication but because of a decision taken by the king to avoid the possibility of sanctions being imposed on the country, even though the Saudi government and decision-makers confirm that all these decisions and reforms are self-initiated and based on the Saudi Vision 2030.[1]

2.6.1 Twitter as a Tool for Citizen–Policymaker Communication

To date, Twitter has been largely used for political application, and different authors and researchers have provided detailed information about the way Twitter is applied in civic affairs.

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[1] Saudi vision 2030 is a plan by Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman to reduce Saudi Arabia's dependence on oil, diversify its economy, and develop public service sectors such as health, education, infrastructure, recreation and tourism. Goals include reinforcing economic and investment activities, increasing non-oil industry trade between countries through goods and consumer products. It also consists of increasing government spending on the military, manufacturing equipment and ammunition. The first details were announced on 25 April 2016.

For instance, the House of Commons (2019) stated that social media is presently evolving as a platform for informal social and political exchange and hence is operating as an influential device for targeting specific individuals. Currently, politicians are utilising the above mass communication channels to deliver their messages and set agendas as well as restructuring their campaigns' outcomes (House of Commons 2019, p. 58). Del Valle (2015) showed that micro-blogging sites like social media act as the ideal tool for self-promotion since they provide politicians with the capability to interact with the community and inform them about their opinions and activities. Considering Del Valle's statement (2015), Twitter is paving the way for online users to conduct political debates and share information with their colleagues and friends during voting, thereby easing the process of updating, influencing, and engaging with each other on different topics concerning the government operations.

Social media, especially Twitter, has enormous impacts on politics, as many journalists, public relations professionals, politicians, and political activists have chosen Twitter for news sharing, self-presentation, and discussion amongst people with an interest in domestic politics (Maireder and Ausserhofer 2014; Ross et al. 2019; Valenzuela et al. 2018). Ausserhofer and Maireder (2013, p. 293) pointed out that politicians and political institutions prefer to use Twitter to inform the public, to spread information, and to communicate with users and engage in conversations with them. The findings are synonymous with those of Poulakidakos and Veneti (2016), who indicated that most politicians in Greece use Twitter more to inform the public than to interact with them. Meanwhile, Ott (2016) found that the rationale for Twitter being used for popular discourse is because it facilitates simple, spontaneous, and informal discussion.

Spierings et al. (2019) demonstrated how politicians use Twitter in their operations. To be specific, they showed that many politicians are incorporating tweeting technology in their campaigns since they use Twitter accounts to communicate with the target community. Thus, these researchers revealed that the politicians use social media to exchange ideas with members of the public, adding

that this technology has connected both voters and politicians, making it easy for these two groups to interact effectively (Spierings et al. 2019). While these are examples of top-down communication by politicians, there are also instances of politicians listening to the public via social media. One recent example is social media campaigning by parents in the UK to persuade the UK government to continue to provide free school meals to impoverished school children during half-term at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. By posting photographs of food parcels received in lieu of school meals, parents were able to lobby the government to offer vouchers rather than food parcels to guarantee that children from impoverished backgrounds did not go hungry (BBC 2021). Therefore, Twitter makes a dialogue between the members of society easier because it creates a channel for responding to important issues.

Similarly, D'heer and Verdegem (2014) also agreed with Spierings et al. (2019) that politicians sometimes use Twitter in their partisan practices. These scholars held that internet users tend to carry out content analysis on the online platform and so manage to instigate elections and campaigns effectively. Moreover, several scholars have provided information concerning the way MPs use Twitter in political matters. Biswas et al. (2014) demonstrated that apart from campaigning, the elected leaders use social media to communicate with their society back in their constituency. In particular, MPs in the UK have been using Twitter since 2007 to communicate with members of the public. On the same note, Haro-de-Rosario et al. (2018) revealed that regarding the levels of engagement by every local government official using Twitter, leaders are capable of interacting with their target groups through social media.

Similarly, Stieglitz et al. (2012) showed that MPs in the German parliament tend to use Twitter to disseminate a specific message. For example, these officials link the above platforms with their blog posts and news articles to inform and update society about their daily activities; therefore, they use Twitter as a tool for self-promotion. In addition, Stieglitz et al. (2012) stated that Twitter enhances direct communication between the citizens and members of Congress. Accordingly, MPs

are employing social media to interact with the community members during campaigns as well as updating them about the ongoing practices. Also, López-Rabadán, and Mellado (2019, p. 4) agreed with Stieglitz et al. (2012) when they emphasised that Twitter and other social media platforms have been used as a direct communication tool amongst politicians and citizens.

Larsson (2015) argued that the political applications of social media at the expense of constituents can influence the level at which MPs utilise sites such as Twitter in their daily schedules. This is because social media gives citizens the ability to engage with politicians online, helping the latter to determine effective tactics they can use whilst interacting with society, hence devising and presenting solutions for the issues affecting voters (Larsson 2015).

2.7 Social Media and the Revival of the Public Sphere

The utilisation of social media in politics relates to public sphere theory, which provides space to enhance the relationship between the state and civil societies (Sousa et al. 2013, p. 9). Notably, Deacon et al. (2021) observed that Twitter is a public social media forum, which makes it a public sphere. Whilst public sphere theory is usually applied to the participation of citizens in public affairs, in this instance, it is useful to understand how politicians act when thrust into that sphere. In this section, public sphere theory is reviewed to provide indicators for later discussions. It is essential to explain that I have selected the online public sphere theme in particular not to seek to evaluate the extent to which the Saudi online public sphere is consistent with and equivalent to the Habermas public sphere seeing that it has its advantages and disadvantages. Instead, this concept enables me to examine the extent to which social media has facilitated discussion, information exchange, and citizen-decision-maker communication in the online public sphere in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, to place the research within the scope of my PhD's aim and objectives, I will demonstrate the main components of the former public sphere theory and then discuss the debate over the emergence of the online public sphere including its potentials and limitations.

2.7.1 The Traditional Public Sphere Theory

The philosopher Habermas devised this theory and identified the notion of the public sphere in his book '*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*'. He imagined the public sphere as a metaphorical '18th century coffee house' where different social issues were discussed and debated. The following figure displays Habermas' (1962) public sphere theory.

Figure 2.2: Public Sphere Theory
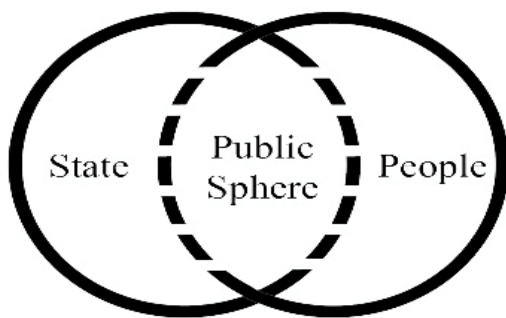
Source: Habermas (1962, p. 13)

Habermas defined the concept of the public sphere as "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed" (Habermas 2010, pp. 73/74). Therefore, the public sphere is referred to "as a virtual or imaginary community, which does not necessarily exist in any identifiable space" (Habermas 1991, p. 167) where the whole community can engage in "public debate". A variety of advanced perspectives concerning how the public sphere engages in online activity have emerged from the public sphere theory. Dahlberg (2004) and Schafer (2015) theorised the online public sphere along the lines of 'deliberative theory', which is in some ways 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. According to this perspective, the public sphere is perceived as a 'communicative space' in which people who share the same

concerns can discuss common issues in a way that tends to create a set of ambitious normative principles.

The 'institutional criteria' proposed by Habermas (1989) examine how public discourse emerges in new public spheres through the 'disregard of status', 'domain of common concern', and 'inclusivity' (Habermas 1989, pp. 36/37; McQuail 2010). 'Disregard of status' is when ranks are disregarded, so the argument against the hierarchy asserts the homogeny of 'common humanity'. 'Domain of common concern' indicates the state's and the church's full control of philosophy, literature, and art before the emergence of the public sphere. This control continued even after the development of capitalism when particular public spheres adhered to logical thinking. Consequently, the capitalism of the eighteenth-century supported the development of the public sphere, whereby the private sphere and the public sphere were separated. The development of capitalism saw the state and the church lose their monopoly over literature and artworks, which then became a commodity available to private citizens. Hence, cultural commodities and information became the common concern of private individuals, leading to more issues being determined as common concerns and topics of debate (Habermas 1989, p. 36).

Habermas (2006) believed that the public sphere should be free from any kind of control whether from the government or through private censorship. Furthermore, Habermas (2006) argued that public sphere theory is dependent on mass democracy and a healthy media space that provides information and communication capacities to all citizens. Therefore, the media plays an important role in maintaining the public sphere. In addition, there are five actors that work in the public sphere: lobbyists, advocates, experts, moral entrepreneurs, and intellectuals (Habermas, 2006).

However, many scholars and researchers have criticised Habermas' traditional public sphere theory. For instance, Papacharissi (2008) pointed out that Habermas' idea of the public sphere 'presents a domain of social life in which public opinion is expressed by means of rational public

discourse and debate. The ultimate goal of the public sphere is public accord and decision-making, although these goals may not necessarily be achieved' (Papacharissi 2008, p. 232). Adut (2012) argued that the public sphere theory is ideal for egalitarian participation in that the community should be involved in making decisions that affect their lives within the society and that for this theory to work, the public should know about the topic in order to make viable contributions (Adut 2012, p. 240). In addition, whilst Alghandy (2011) claimed that the idea of Habermas' public sphere indicates that only well-educated and wealthy people would have access to any debate, Ryan (1992) pointed out that Habermas' idea also ignored women whether as individuals or groups. This was addressed by Nancy Fraser, who noted that deliberative democracy is a better way of understanding the public sphere as it focuses on the inequalities of deliberation (Fraser, 1990; Mansbridge, 2017). In Rethinking the Public Sphere, Fraser claims that the bourgeois public sphere excluded women and other historically marginalized groups. She explained that these networks of clubs and arenas were anything but open to everyone. They were more a power base of male bourgeois who viewed themselves as a '"universal class' and preparing to assert their fitness to govern" (Fraser 1990, p. 60). Thus, she assumed a hegemonic inclination of the male bourgeois public sphere, which dominated at the cost of alternative publics (for example, by gender, social status, ethnicity and property ownership), thereby disenabling other groups from expressing their concerns.

In short, Fuchs (2014) summarised the main criticisms of the public sphere theory in three points: (1) 'the working class critique', since Habermas' idea of the working-class focused on 'the bourgeois public sphere' and ignored other categories of classes with two main problems, 'the limitation of freedom of speech and public opinion' and 'the limitation of freedom of association and assembly'; (2) 'the postmodern critique', which states that only 'educated, rich men' can fit in his idea, and (3) 'the cultural imperialism critique', in which Fuchs argued that Habermas supported the idea of Western countries and societies controlling other cultures and forcing them

to follow the Western system (Fuchs 2014, pp. 62/63/64). He stated, "The cultural imperialism critique stresses that the public sphere is a Western enlightenment concept that Western societies use for trying to impose their political, economic and social systems on other countries" (2014, p. 65).

Moreover, because mass media deals with social topics, it is influenced by political economic factors (Habermas 1989); thus, traditional social media is regarded as offering methods that may support the government in strengthening its power and control to serve its political and long-term interests. In such a case, it would increase the strength of the powerful institutions and actors whilst weakening the already powerless actors like small civil organisations, non-institutionalised parties, and marginalised groups. This would effectively weaken democracy and the public sphere.

Perhaps the most significant criticism is the one presented by Habermas himself of his own theory, as he realised that the criteria of the traditional public sphere are not completely achieved in modern societies (Habermas 1989). Definitely, Habermas's criticism of the role of traditional media in the public sphere has echoed loudly amongst academics and has even gathered huge importance and led to significant debate after the emergence of the digital media and its growing role in making citizens' interaction in the digital public sphere much easier (Rauchfleisch and Kovic 2016).

The limitations of traditional mass media in the public sphere as professed by Habermas and other scholars led to them exploring the impact of online social media in political interaction and refreshing the public sphere. This resulted in an academic debate about how social media affects the public sphere. As such, sociologists like Loader and Mercea (2011) gave an overview of this discussion, arguing that social media offers increasing opportunities for political communication and provides democratic capacities for political discussion within the virtual public sphere. The effect would be that citizens could challenge governments' and corporations' political and

economic power. Additionally, new forms of political participation and information sources for the users emerged with the internet, which can be used, for example, in online campaigns (Loader and Mercea 201).

Figure 2.3: The Revised Public Sphere Theory for this Study
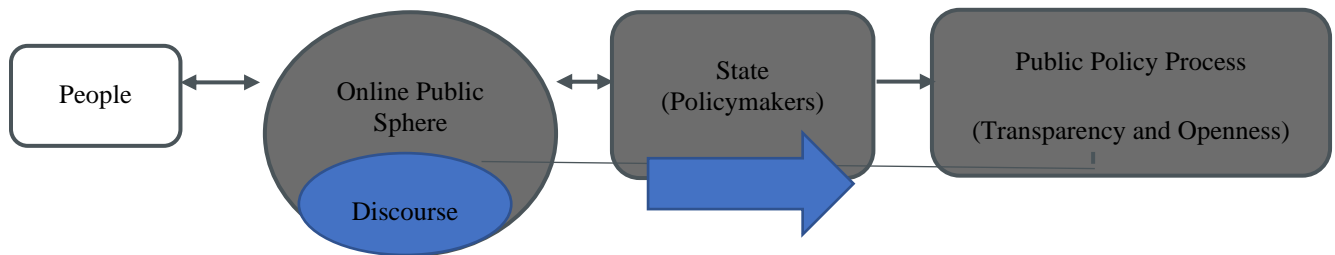
Developed by the researcher (2019)

2.7.2 Online Public Sphere

One area this thesis focuses on is how social media can enhance public interventions in a legislative/parliamentary process not based on public elections. Therefore, it would be helpful to highlight the potential advantages and disadvantages of the online public sphere and conceptualise the available scholarly discussions regarding the emergence of the online public sphere. Papacharissi (2002; 2010) suggested that, ideally, the online public sphere should allow all parties involved to participate freely in discussing all kinds of issues, and members of the debate should show mutual respect, should be honest and open, and should make an earnest effort to reach a common conclusion.

The online public sphere is defined as a communicative space provided by the internet through social media platforms where users can explicitly and freely participate and can communicate issues of common concern and where all activities are predominantly visible to everyone (Dahlberg 2001; Cammaerts 2005; Poor 2005; Al-Saggaf 2006; Schafer 2015). It has been envisaged as a supplement or even an alternative to the 'old' public sphere (Rauchfleisch and Kovic 2016), which is largely considered a fundamental element of modern democracies.

Researchers' perceptions of the public sphere differ in terms of what sort of communication they believe is advisable (Ferree et al. 2002; Wessler 2008; Wahl Jorgensen 2019). For example, proponents of a participatory public sphere support civil, rational, and consensus-oriented deliberation. On the other hand, liberal theorists support "a communication whose structures represent the relative power of societal stakeholders" (Schafer 2015, p. 1). This can be identified, for example, by elections. In addition, constructivism theorists advocate for emotional, narrative, and confrontational types of communication that would be more empowering for specific social groups (Gerhards and Schafer 2010; Schafer 2015).

2.7.2.1 Advantages and Disadvantages of the Online Public Sphere

With the unprecedented richness of online information and the increasing number of online users, scholars have argued that social media may have an enormous potential to facilitate political participation and change the manner of engagement with public issues, which would lead to the public sphere being revived. Different studies have examined the contradictory potentials 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) leading to the emergence of two main viewpoints: optimistic and pessimistic accounts and accounts that consider the political context in which the situation occurs.

First, Wolfsfeld et al. (2013) argued that it is impossible to understand the role any kind of media plays in collective action without considering the political context in which it is operating. For example, protests are always informed by some kind of political grievance, and if this aspect of protests is ignored, this leads to there being only a limited and problematic view of these events (Wolfsfeld et al. 2013). Consequently, when looking at how social media facilitates political participation, it is important to take the situation at hand into account.

Techno-optimistic internet scholars have thought highly of the advantages the online public sphere brought to people. Examples of these advantages can be seen in the open space social media platforms create for all users to communicate freely, whenever they wish, to share issues of common interest and to raise their concerns in proceedings observable to everyone (Dahlberg 2001; Cammaerts 2005; Poor 2005; Al-Saggaf 2006; Schafer 2015). Scholars (Brundidge and Rice 2009; Farrell 2012) believe that social media may have a massive potential to ease political public engagement and transform the mode of communication amongst the public, which would refresh the public sphere.

Moreover, online social media has opened the way for a wide range of groups, such as civil society organisations, political institutions, large corporations, NGOs, universities, and places of worship, to obtain information (Brundidge and Rice 2009; Farrell 2012). A huge amount of online content has been made available to users in attractive and interactive ways, which is more likely to produce a participatory attitude amongst users, and therefore, generate debates and public interaction.

Perhaps the most important aspect of social media is allowing users to make their voices heard as individuals who are now free to post content, exchange thoughts and ideas, and enter discussions (Shirky 2011; Bennett and Segerberg 2012). In addition, social media allows horizontal interaction, which is based on a low-scale hierarchy and is less likely to fall under the control of authoritarian regimes. This factor may result in empowering marginalised groups who have always wanted to engage in public discussion but have been excluded (Thorsen and Sreedharan 2019), including citizens against institutions, activists against authoritarian regimes, or specific powerless groups against powerful organisations.

However, these positive perceptions are challenged by many other pessimistic views regarding the possible promises that the online public sphere may hold for the people. For example, pessimistic views argue that notwithstanding the importance of the rich information available on the internet, which would questionably contain more diverse opinions on topics of common concerns than the

traditional media would do, many of the opinions would indeed contain negative features like abnormal behaviours, offensive words, extreme thoughts, provocative posts, and racism. Such disadvantages increase significant concerns regarding the positivity of the online public sphere and its potential impacts on both the users and decision-makers. Moreover, this diversity of opinions amongst users on the online public sphere may force the users who have the chance to participate to become fragmentised into different communities of citizens who share the same opinion (Gerhards and Schafer 2010). Concepts that have emerged to describe this process include the notions of 'echo chambers' and 'filter bubbles' (Flaxman et al. 2016; Reilly 2020). Online misinformation also forms a part of this techno-pessimist perspective (Anderson and Rainie 2017).

In addition, the proliferation of misinformation, disinformation, and rumours may be an important disadvantage of the public sphere. Lorenzano et al. (2018) argued that the quality of engagement in the online public sphere is questionable: "Whilst social media can be used to facilitate exposure to cross-cutting viewpoints ... they can also be used as tools for spreading misinformation to impressionable audiences of likeminded people" (2018, p. 2).

Furthermore, Fuchs (2013) referred to Facebook as an exploitative network run by operators who have the power to manipulate the content generated on the platform. Social media is formed by companies whose main business strategy is the collection and monetisation of user data and behavioural data (Hintz 2017). Also, Van Dijck (2013) believed that because of economic interests the quality of online interactions via social media platforms are affected. This notion relates to Shoshana Zuboff's theory of 'surveillance capitalism,' that is, the idea that reality can be commodified by distorting online information (Zuboff 2014, 2019). Such techniques are used by businesses with an online presence to sell user profiles and concepts rather than create a public sphere.

Amongst the criticism of the online public sphere is the increasing concern regarding the kind of 'topics' that would be raised and discussed (Fuchs 2014). Pessimists are particularly wary about

the growing economic influences in this regard, arguing that economic interests lead to the commoditisation of digital communication, resulting in their 'depoliticisation' and consumerisation. This criticism also resonates well with Habermas' argument regarding the economic influence on online media.

Given the freedom to showcase content as per individual perceptions and inclinations towards a specific political party, issue, race, country, or such other entities, this could influence large groups in a click. Subsequently, Fuchs (2014) argued that "social media has a potential to be a public sphere and lifeworld of communicative action, but that this sphere is limited by the steering media of political powers and money so that corporations own and control and the state monitors users' data on social media" (2014, p. 89). Also, Mahlouly (2013) emphasised that the online public sphere faces the same limitation that the traditional public sphere due to the class of economic levels in societies. That is "bourgeois public sphere" led "these virtual environments tend to be more elitist and thus less democratic." (p.17). Likewise, even though Papacharissi (2008) claimed that social media has made the political environment more permeable, she believed in the limitation of those platforms, as they do not make any significant additions to the public sphere. She elaborated, "This online user and citizen is interested in challenging what is defined as private and what is defined as public. Priorities here lie in broadening and overlapping private and public agendas, not reviving the public sphere" (Papacharissi 2008, p. 239). Furthermore, the high level of participation offered by social media platforms does not inevitably influence the decision-making in the internet public sphere, at least in a non-democratic context. For example, Joseph (2012, p. 174) asserted 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".

Finally, and perhaps, most vital to the findings of this research is the fact that critics of the online public sphere confirm that the settings of dialogues amongst online public sphere users may lead

to a certain style of uncomfortable communication. Factors like true identities, proper behaviour, individual responsibility, and social commitments exist in face-to-face communications, whereas they are quite absent from the online public sphere, and so, productive and authentic debates are unlikely to happen (Zhuo 2010).

The limitation of public sphere theory is that it fails to consider that different states are governed differently. One exception is the work of Rauchfleisch and Schafer (2015) concerning the potential of online public spheres for China's non-democratic governance. Another is Asmoah's (2020) research into the interactions between the non-democratic government and media in Ghana, which has led to considerable corruption and the dissemination of misleading information. Also, Shirokanova (2015) argued that digital public sphere is strategically manipulated to impose the government's agenda and for political gain in non-democratic regimes such as Russia and Belarus. For example, Saudi Arabia is under an absolute monarchy, which means that the public are rarely consulted, and there is no guarantee that the Shura Council would implement the policies focusing on the public's tweets. In addition, despite the advantages provided by social media for political and social activists, non-democratic states can also benefit from these advantages. They adapt high advanced technologies to filter and sensor online activities. Moreover, a closed political system and non-democratic states are aware that these technologies can be used to create an oppositional political sphere (Hachigian 2002; Shirky 2011). These criticisms suggest that it is important to place public spheres into context, as suggested and explored by Wolfsfeld et al. (2013).

2.8 Conclusion

This chapter concludes that the concept of social media involves a wide range of characteristics and implications. Rapid social interaction, collaboration, sharing, participation, and exchange of information are the main characteristics of social media. As such, important concepts and trends have been introduced by the literature of technology. First, the term 'user-generated content' (UGC) refers to the ability of users to generate their own media content in many different forms.

Second, the term 'real-time content' means that UGC is being exchanged in real-time terms. Third, 'citizen journalism' is where users can inform, educate, and entertain others and generally share their views about the trending news or information.

To investigate the extent to which social media has assisted debate, engagement, and open discussions in the online public sphere in Saudi Arabia, public sphere theory was reviewed, and the advantages and disadvantages thereof were discussed in line with two main viewpoints that emerged from the available literature. The techno-optimistic scholars recognised that social media brought to people by the online public sphere has facilitated free and open communication amongst users and empowered marginalised and excluded groups. On the other hand, techno-pessimists were more concerned about the negative features, offensive behaviours, provocative posts, and misinformation and disinformation. Such disadvantages increase the grave concerns regarding the positivity of the online public sphere and its potential impacts on both the users and the decision-makers.

Finally, the main limitation to public sphere theory is that it fails to consider that different states are governed differently. In other words, despite the advantages provided by social media for political and social activists, a closed political system and non-democratic regimes can also benefit from these advantages by adapting highly advanced technologies to filter and censor online activities. In light of this research, a deeper understanding of the uses of Twitter in politics has been useful. Also, appreciating the ways in which Twitter and other forms of social media can be used to spread disinformation and the public reaction to this is beneficial and relevant to the future research. These issues will be further explored in the discussion chapter.

CHAPTER THREE: POLICY CHANGE AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

3.1 Introduction

The rapidly increasing influence of social media platforms, specifically Twitter, has been found to play a significant role in achieving policy change. This chapter seeks to examine how social media platforms can influence policy changes, which requires exploration of the theoretical framework of policy change models and examination of how social media supports public involvement in the policy change process.

The first section aims to offer a thorough understanding of the concepts of policy and policy change and to highlight the policy change cycle. The second section provides a theoretical framework of policy change models focusing on the concepts of multiple streams model, the punctuated equilibrium framework, and the power elite's theory to understand policy- and decision-making within political and legislative bodies. The third section covers public involvement in policy change focusing on the role of Twitter in policy change.

3.2 A Definition of Policy

Dunn (2015) defined policy as a set of ideas or plans developed to act as a basis for decision-making, particularly in relation to economics, business, and politics. Moreover, Hill and Varone (2016) understood policy as the action pursued by a government, a ruler of the state, or a political party. Policies can target different groups or different interests. For example, social policy aims at meeting the needs of individuals across societies, with issues such as security, education, well-being, and health forming the central aspects of interest when discussing social policy.

From these definitions of the term 'policy', it is understandable that public policy is an initiative developed by the authorities of states that can help in the decision-making of issues affecting the public (de la Porte and Heins 2016). The definition of policy also helps to comprehend the meaning of public policy, as it highlights the initiatives that are in the best interests of the public (Ehrenberg

and Smith 2016). Moreover, defining policy also helps in understanding the core parties involved in the development of policies, that is, both the drafters and the recipients (Head and Alford 2015). The foundations for public policies can also stem from the understanding of the definition of social policy, in that through relating the two, individuals can easily recognise the value of developing policies in the community.

3.2.1 Policy Cycle

According to Harold Lasswell (1971), the policy cycle contains seven stages. The first is the 'preparation' stage in which the framework for policy implementation is identified, the overarching goals of the policy are defined, and a timeline for the entire policy process is created. The second stage is 'issue identification' in which the issues related to opportunities and constraints are highlighted. At this stage, emerging policy concerns are identified, which the government and other organisational stakeholders might ignore (Lasswell, 1971). The third stage is 'formulation', in which the policy interventions indispensable for addressing the objectives corresponding to the priorities related to the policy are decided. Here, organisational stakeholders play a key role in influencing the choice of priorities related to the areas of policy under debate, which involves expressing their concerns and advocating for the incorporation of their suggestions during policy formulation. Next, 'adoption' is the fourth stage, in which the final policy to be implemented is adopted via various forms like statement, decree, or law. In this stage, organisational stakeholders should be involved in simplifying the policy documents and disseminating them in a user-friendly format. They also take part in awareness-raising events and advocacy initiatives during the adoption of the policy. The fifth stage is 'action planning', where the policy is implemented; the organisation provides its necessary inputs so as to ensure that the programme that has been undertaken and the budget decision that has been made reflect the agreed upon views during the policy formulation (Lasswell 1971). The sixth stage is 'implementation', when the policy vision and corresponding action plan are executed. During this stage, the

organisation should play a major role in coordinating and implementing the policy by building a culture of accountability about the implementation process. The last stage is 'monitoring and evaluation', in which the results of the policy's action plan are measured and evaluated, and future requirements are analysed. During this final stage, the policy's effectiveness is evaluated to find out if its original aims are successfully met and if there are any unintended outcomes from both positive and negative angles (Lasswell 1971).

Bevir (2008, p. 152) indicated that the policy cycle "consists of the many constituent phases of a policy's existence. The phases are cyclical because the final phase is not necessarily the end of the matter, but rather an analysis of the policy to provide information that can be used in the first phase of a subsequent cycle".

3.2.2 Policy Change

An understanding of policy change is important in this context, as the aim of the research is to explore the role of social media in this process. The term 'policy change' refers to a shift in the existing policies or leadership structure (Wilson, 2000). This concept relates to the research topic as it explores the role of social media in the policymaking process, which can effect change. According to Grover et al. (2019, p. 438), policy change is one of the most researched topics in both political science and public policy. As such, policy change involves the adoption of new policies by political actors or a shift in political leadership. Cerna (2013, p. 493) supported the definition proposed by Bennett and Howlett (1992), which views policy change as additive adjustments or alterations to the current structures or the implementation of innovative and new policies. De Lovinfosse (2008, p. 21) argued that a good understanding of policy change processes necessitates identifying the characteristics and degrees of the changes. Some of the policy change methods normally applied during the decision-making process, such as punctuated equilibrium, policy-learning, path-dependency, and incrementalism, are distinguished based on the size of the practical changes (de Lovinfosse 2008, p. 22).

Improvements in the public sphere can improve and democratize the political process, although there are cases where this effect does not take place. Public sphere theory in relation to policy change theory emphasizes the popular view is that media freedom, pluralism, and competition help to tackle political corruption (Asomah, 2020). However, in his analysis of Ghana's private media, Asomah (2020) has found that the nation's media actively contributes to political corruption through biased reporting and active corruption. This example highlights how Livingstone and Lunt (1994) observe that mass media now plays a critical role in mediating the relationships between laity and established power in the political sphere. Thus, when the media changes its relation to the political process, these changes affect the relationship between ordinary people and elite representatives of power (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994).

The observations made by Livingstone and Lunt (1994) are highlighted by the advent of the internet as a platform for public debate, as this new actor has made the public sphere even more complex (Rasmussen, 2014). Significantly, the internet is an important development in political communication between the public and the establishment as 'talk amongst citizens is the catalyst for civic culture' (Dahlgren, 2005, p.160). It can therefore be suggested that the public sphere theory and policy change theory should both inform the research as recent changes to the public sphere caused by the introduction of social media as likely to impact, either positively or negatively, on politics in a non-democratic entity like Saudi Arabia. Asomah (2020) notes that, in general, it is acknowledged that it is necessary for democratic freedoms like civil and political liberties to be present in order for the private media to act as a check on political corruption. However, it could be suggested that the introduction of social media challenges this assertion as it gives the public power to publicly challenge policy decisions, even in a non-democratic society. The combination of these two theories particularly informs the second and third research questions.

3.3 Conceptual Framework of Policy Change: Multiple Streams Model, Punctuated Equilibrium, and the Power Elites Theories

Various conceptual frameworks have been involved in elucidating the determinants of policy change and stability. For the purposes of this study, the concepts of multiple streams model, the punctuated equilibrium, and the power elites' theories were selected to explore the potential for policy reform in the Shura Council towards ensuring a larger inclusion of the public in the policymaking and agenda-setting process. Each of them cconsiders policy and its role in change in a variety of ways. The multiple streams method considers the intersection of problems, policies, and politics on occasions where policy change takes place; policy entrepreneurs serve as vehicles of change in this method (Kingdon 1984). The punctuated equilibrium framework focuses on the decision-making process at the individual and collective levels; it looks at the development of issues from the policy subsystems to the macro-political agenda where policy images have a chief role in promoting change (Barzelay 2001). The power elite's theory proposes that the most critical factors in the whole nation are decided by a single elite group in the society, while minor issues are handled by those in the middle and lower levels of society (Lenski 2013).

3.3.1 Multiple Streams Model

In his book '*Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies'*, Kingdon (1995) introduced his policy streams approach. The construction of this approach can be viewed as the result of the flow of three 'streams' and how they interact with each other. The three streams are problem, policy, and politics. When these are combined, a policy window opens to facilitate policy change. Although these three streams are independent and formed by their own structure and dynamics, the most efficient policy changes necessitate the convergence of the three factors at the same time (Kingdon 1995, p. 15). The multiple streams model is displayed in the following figure.

Figure 3.1: Multiple Streams Model
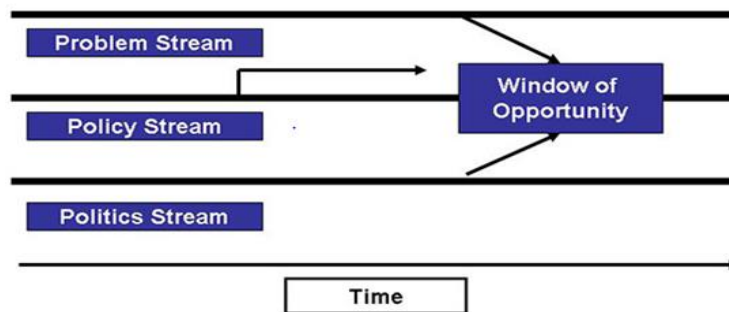
(Source: Policy NL n.d.)

3.3.1.1 Problem Stream

The first step in using the multiple streams approach involves identifying the issues affecting the public. Problems usually depend on the values and views that each community has on a particular policy. The large public focus on important events or specific problems often drives governments and policymakers to formulate plans and responses that would alleviate the citizens' concerns. According to Teodorović (2008, p. 25), a social situation becomes a problem only when the voters consider it a problem and deem it amenable to government interventions. This is essential because different groups of people have different interpretations of the most important issues. Kingdon (2014, p. 91) suggested that governments and policy entrepreneurs can also identify problems that require policy changes using different indicators to determine the size of the existing problems.

3.3.1.2 Policy Stream

The policy streams model focuses on the importance of the timing and flow of policy actions (Kingdon, 2014). Kingdon argued that effective implementation of policy change can happen only when a problem demands an instant solution. As far as the problem streams are concerned, he asserted that for a policy change to occur, there must be issues with the existing policy that require correction. For instance, if the current policy is incapable of addressing an emerging social issue,

different actors with the relevant expertise, such as analysts, experts, and intellectuals, could take part in determining appropriate solutions based on a thorough evaluation of the impact of policy changes on their policy implementation. These actors usually handle these issues independently from political influences, such as politicians' electorates or executive changes following elections (Kingdon 2014, p. 117). Despite their independence, the successful formulation and execution of policies requires collaboration from the different groups affected by the introduced policies.

Commonly, within the public policymaking context, problems recognised from public dialogue shape the government agendas; hence, to tackle such issues properly, it is essential to identify workable and politically precise solutions during the decision-making process. However, factors that characterise the political system, such as changing conditions, fluid participation, uncertainties in alliances, time constraints, and unclear policy goals, limit entrepreneurs' activities. The multiple streams model responds to such factors by conceptualising 'non-incremental policy changes' and the policymaking process as dynamic interactions between the creativity and human agency that operate within institutional structures (Sætren 2016, p. 72). Kingdon's model maintains that public policymaking happens when policy entrepreneurs identify problems, propose solutions, and obtain a political agreement to create the windows of opportunity required to effect policy changes (Teodorović 2008, p. 23). Most significantly, the three streams remain independent, have a non-linear relationship, and merge only when suitable political conditions open policy windows (Béland and Howlett 2016, p. 222).

However, Cairney and Zahariadis (2016) criticised Kingdon's multiple stream model, arguing that Kingdon used the combination of three separate 'streams' to refer to the gap resulting from policymakers not paying attention to a problem and therefore, did not produce a meaningful solution. In their view, he discarded the possibility of a direct process that takes a different order; a policymaker recognises there is a problem to be solved, identifies a range of potential solutions provided by the administration, and chooses the best solution. This suggests the three acts should

be considered as separate streams that can happen in any order. Particularly, solutions might have to be provided in expectation of the policymaker devoting attention to a problem, as attention usually shifts to another problem before there is time to look at options in depth.

Moreover, Kingdon's model proposes that for a window of opportunity to open, the three streams must occur simultaneously, the public must be paying significant attention to a problem, a workable solution must exist, and policymakers are ready to choose it. Cairney and Zahariadis (2016) claimed that this outcome is not necessarily inevitable because attention may move dramatically to a different problem before policymakers have the time to solve the first one. Therefore, in many cases, windows of opportunity for enormous policy change open, but most of them close before policymakers have the chance to implement the change. Cairney and Zahariadis concluded that Kingdon's multiple streams model exemplifies the "exciting world of short term, unstable, high profile agenda setting is tempered by long term, continuous processes going on behind the scenes" (2016, p. 1). The shifts of attention by citizens, the media, and policymakers to a fresh problem can be impressive, but policies may only change effectively when policymakers have the willingness and aptitude to solve them.

Creating an opportunity 'policy window' to support the policy change is not limited to the interventions of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and unexpected incidents, or crises would be included, too (Hintz and Brown, 2017). Consequently, regardless of how change takes place, it is important to take full advantage of the situation through positive action. Hintz and Brown (2017) also pointed out the windows shaped by these interventions can influence the actor's policy monopoly: "Policy monopolies – stable configurations of policy actors – may be weakened or broken up as political constellations change and the balance of power shifts" (2017, p. 784). Policy monopoly refers to institutional arrangements, as Baumgartner and Jones (1993, p. 7) argued that policy monopolies are institutional structures that are responsible for policymaking, placing limits on the policymaking process, and supporting its evolution and development.

Policy monopolies have a significant influence on a country's political sphere due to the stable configuration of policy forces and institutions. But, over time, it can be a struggle to implement change in the country's social and economic-related policies. This is because according to Kirby (2008), the existence of strong policy monopolies weakens the already established economic, political, and social institutions; policy monopolies use their influential position to prevent the implementation of changes that may threaten their current position. Shockley (2007) referred to policy monopolies as a severe threat to the social order as well as the policy change implementation and improvement, whilst Baumgartner and Jones (1993, p. 6) understood policy monopolies to be the "monopoly on political understandings," that is, the ability of certain groups to present their understanding as the conceptualisation of the problem itself. In their view, the control and influence of policy monopolies can only be decreased through a change in the current coalitions and the power of the country's leadership. Dismantling existing policy monopolies within a government can be impossible unless there are collaborative efforts amongst independent government institutions, such as the legislature, the executive, or the judiciary.

3.3.1.3 Politics Stream

The politics stream focuses on the factors and problems that affect public dialogue, such as advocacy campaigns, legislative or administrative shifts, and changes in public opinion (Kingdon 2014, p. 145). In the politics stream, the issues affecting the public are identified and debated by the different policy groups, like policy entrepreneurs, campaigners, members of the public, politicians, and the media, who need to agree on the appropriate solutions. The politics stream is fundamental because the successful execution of policy changes depends on political factors, such as the interests of the political elite and the governments' aptitude to make such changes (Teodorović 2008, p. 30). Furthermore, Kingdon pointed out that for the new policy to be implemented effectively, there must be sufficient resources available to achieve the desired impact (Figueroa et al. 2018, p. 401). On the other hand, Greer (2015, p. 421) argued that legislators in

the politics stream, most of the time, approve broad agendas and undertake issues beyond their capacity, which could result in disappointment regarding how they deal with the political problems to hand.

3.3.1.4 Agenda Setting

The three streams directly affect agenda setting, which refers to the study of public, media, and government attention to policy issues (Cairney 2019). Agenda setting is concerned with three major factors. The first factor involves the level of attention the public, the media, and the government pay to a specific problem, as each group may understand different problems in varying ways or the top of the agenda might be occupied by different issues in different areas. The consequences and effects of the policy agenda are more noticeable at both local and international levels if it is divided into smaller components (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, p. 107).

The second factor denotes that some urgent policy issues, such as natural disasters, require more attention and immediate decisions than other long-standing issues, like unemployment or tax. Since there are numerous issues, and the attention span of the audience is limited, the importance of each problem is subject to discussion, analysis, and competition. In addition, since the public combine knowledge and emotions to analyse information, less important issues could be perceived as significant to attract concerns.

The third factor is the power of actors to select one issue over another. Agenda setting involves continuous competition to attract the attention of the media experts, the audiences, and the policy elites so they focus on specific essentials for the purpose of reducing ambiguity and uncertainty (Cairney 2019). This attention influences the government agenda in terms of what problems decision makers pay attention to at a certain time and the issues they select for a dynamic solution (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, pp. 11/12).

In short, agenda setting can be summarised as belonging to two main categories. First, the issues that may reach the top of the agenda are numerous. However, only a small minority of these issues achieve this, whilst the vast majority do not. Second, although the number of suggested solutions could be enormous, only a few of them will be taken into consideration (Cairney 2019).

Cairney (2019, p. 189) argued that the multiple streams model seeks to explain the basic relationships between the supply and reception of the data gathered to address specific policy problems. The model underlines the importance of making use of the 'windows of opportunity' that occur from the interactions of interdependent and independent variables throughout the agenda-setting (Béland and Howlett 2016, p. 222). Policy windows are typically underpinned by a mix of political, evidence-based, and private momentum (Bachtler and Mendez 2016). When formulating his streaming model, Kingdon (2014) affirmed that the problem and politics streams are the most essential components influencing the policy stream; thus, they should be carefully considered during the formulation of effective public policies.

Most significantly, the multiple streams model draws attention to the change in the actors' attitudes, interests, and thoughts that may arise under different circumstances. As a result, policy entrepreneurs must be capable of identifying and utilising available opportunities whenever they occur.

Policy entrepreneurs are major actors who bring in and promote their ideas in many different ways and spend time and effort to increase the opportunities for an idea to be included in the agenda of the decision-makers (Kingdon 2010). Principally, policy windows do not open frequently, and even when they do, they might not stay open for long. Therefore, policy entrepreneurs must act swiftly before the opportunity disappears; otherwise, they will need to wait for the next opportunity to arrive. Furthermore, the need for practical methods in decision-making involves creating solutions before problems arise and attaching such solutions to the most fitting political conditions

(Saikaly 2009, p. 2). These can take the form of practical or preventative approaches to preserve the limited resources available to governments and political leaders and reduce the impact of adverse measures (DeLeo 2015, p. 3).

3.3.2 The Punctuated Equilibrium Theory

Punctuated equilibrium theory (PET) indicates that stability and a belief in gradual, positive change defines the political process. The theory was developed by Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones between 1993 to 2009 (Kuhlmann and Heijden 2018, p. 327). PET theory proposes that policy is affected by rapid change over a short period of time (Boushey 2012). This has a negative impact on political stability indicating that stability rather than other factors is the main factor that affects the political process.

The main strength of the theory lies in its ability to encompass both stability and change in its analysis of the policy process, as most policies focus only on either change or stability and not on the two of them together (Boushey 2012). Boushey (2012) also noted that PET provides a framework of unification that further assists in the conceptualisation of the diffusion of innovations regarding policymaking, which is brought about by three mechanisms: gradual policy diffusion, which is primarily driven by incremental policy; near imitate policy, which has the responses by the state to a common exogenous shock as its driver; and rapid state-to-state diffusion, which has the mimicking and imitation of policies as its driving force.

Baumgartner et al. (2014), on the other hand, argued that PET theory has two sides, namely, periods where it is in near equilibrium, and periods where it is in disequilibrium, which normally occurs when an issue is taken into the macro-political agenda. The authors further commented that when an issue lies in the macro-political agenda, there is a possibility that small changes in the circumstances of the objectives will lead to huge changes that will affect the policy of interest. The authors highlighted that when such an issue occurs, a positive feedback process is going through

the system. Concerning negative feedback, Baumgartner et al. (2014) pointed out that there are issues that assist in the maintenance of stability in a system.

Baumgartner et al. (2014) discussed the aspect of policy image and explained how it relates to the theory. They first explained that policy images refer to how an issue is understood and discussed as a policy problem and that such images are a mixture of emotive appeals and empirical information that play a major role in influencing decision-making processes and the policy developments. For instance, they highlighted that when a high number of policymakers accept a certain image that generally supports the policy, there is a significant possibility that the action will be associated with a successful monopoly of the policy. On many occasions when people disagree regarding a particular policy, the proponents of the policy will focus on a particular image as a foundation for their argument in support of the policy, whilst the opponents will use a set of different images to counter those arguments (Baumgartner et al. 2014). Thus, policy images play a significant role in the policymaking process in that when the opponents publish images to counter a particular policy, the monopolistic nature of the policy starts to diminish.

In their study, Hegelich et al. (2015) highlighted the theory's changing dynamics, underlining that during its development, PET assisted in the understanding of the magnitude of policy changes in the subsystems. However, in the recent past, its functionalities have seen an extension to a generalised formulation of punctuated changes in the policymaking process. PET is also a characteristic of national budgeting in most countries, including those in the Middle East, because of the generalised responsibilities that it currently possesses (Hegelich et al. 2015). Thus, understanding the characteristics of the policy can be helpful in the analysis of the decision-making process of politicians in the Middle East, particularly the policymakers in Saudi Arabia. However, the policy theory does not say much about the possibility of shifts in attitude regarding specific social issues, such as the influence of social interactions in decision-making, and this underlines its weakness regarding the subject of this research. In conclusion, PET seeks to highlight a simple

observation that stability and incrementalism are the main elements that characterise political processes.

PET tells a story of complex systems that are stable and dynamic. Most policymaking exhibits long periods of stability, but with the ever-present potential for sudden instability; thus, while most policies stay the same for long periods, some change very quickly and dramatically. Policy change in a particular area may be incremental for decades, followed by profound change, which sets an entirely new policy direction.

3.3.3 Power Elite Theory

Power elite theory is a concept developed by sociologist C. Wright Mills in 1956 to explain the structural changes he saw in the US community regarding political power flows (Lenski 2013). The theory proposes that a single elite group in the society and not the municipality of the competing groups is what decides the most critical factors in the whole nation, and it leaves the common and the mid-level people in the society to handle the minor issues. Mills (1956, p. 3) defined power-elite theory as being "composed of men whose positions enable them to transcend the ordinary environments of ordinary men and women; they are in positions to make decisions having major consequences."

As per the research by Gilens and Page (2014), power elite theory has two major characteristics. First is the fact that the members of the elite group are individuals holding high command posts in the country, which further gives the holders enormous authority over the majority of the systems in the society, such as the government, financial institutions, educational institutions, and cultural institutions. The second characteristic of the theory is that the members of the elite group share the same beliefs and attitudes. Furthermore, even though the members of the elite group usually wrangle over certain issues in policy development, they do have a common worldview that overshadows the background disagreements. Some of the economic principles that the power elite

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agree on include profits, unequal and concentrated wealth distribution, and the sanctity of private economics.

Whitt (2014) presented how members of the power elite exercise their powers in the political arena, focusing on how public policies assume a similar structure to that of a tree with its trunk and its branches whereby some actions support others. Considering such a structure, the trunk decisions represent the basic choices made by an individual or a group of individuals in regard to specific issues. The trunk decisions are similar to the resolutions that move the society and make the community function. According to Whitt (2014), the power elite decide trunk decisions that affect the core part of the society; even if they do not make the decisions by themselves, they have a major influence in determining the direction taken regarding such decisions. The middle levels of the government, comprising the Congress, states, and the courts, worry only about developing the ways of best implementing those decisions. Finally, Whitt (2014) noted that the power elite have an inner circle that comprises individuals who move from one powerful position to the next in a manner resembling a revolving door. As such, they can go between economic, political, and military positions over the course of their career.

Through understanding the issues concerning the influence of the power elite in the decision-making process, it is clear that they are influential figures in the development of major decisions regarding particular issues in the society. This can be helpful in the realisation of the key influences that might affect the policymaking process. Thus, the strength of the theory towards the development of this study is that it helps identify the main points to be examined whilst analysing the influencers of the decision-making process regarding a policy. The weakness of the theory, on the other hand, is that it focuses on the issues affecting US society, as it addresses no issue regarding states outside of the US; in other words, it fails to address the core issues regarding the subject of interest to this study. Finally, regarding power elite theory, some people in the society hold influential positions in the community and are responsible for making the trunk decisions

affecting the community. In Saudi Arabia, Almashaly (2013) determined that the Shura Council members fit into the category of legislative elites, while Alshlhoub (2013) identified the members of the Shura Council as the advisory elites in Saudi Arabia.

3.4 Public Involvement and Policy Change

This section examines the techniques used by the public to affect policy changes. It covers advocacy for policy change and the entrepreneurs or key actors of policy change.

3.4.1 Advocacy for Policy Change

Policy advocacy is a strategy used to effect policy changes. It is defined as a form of policy practice that seeks to help a wide range of groups within society including women, the poor, children, LGBTQ people, racial minorities, and people with disabilities (Jansson 2010). Gen and Wright (2012) argued that "policy advocacy activities are initiated by private individuals and groups" (p. 4). This refers to any advocacy campaign as a tactical plan of action with a proper approach to start, direct, or stop a policy change.

Policy advocacy has always influenced the actions of decision-makers. The aim is to influence the actual decision-makers; sometimes, advocates of policy might approach such decision-makers directly and sometimes through pressure on secondary audiences. Policy advocacy is a process of persuasive communication. The advocates feel the urgency for policy change and, using a full range of activities or communication tools, they try and influence the decision-makers (Williamson 1994). Thus, policy advocacy almost always requires momentum building and a good support system to make the policy change idea stand. However, any kind of change in making policy is slow; there is almost always ongoing engagement and negotiation or persuasion. The ultimate aim of policy advocacy in building ownership and success advocacy for political change does not just bring about political change, but it also addresses the ethical dilemmas that result from the law-

making process. This process basically aims at encouraging citizens to introduce moral and ethical insights into the process of making and revising laws and policies (Stimell 2010). So, in more simplified terms, advocacy is a set of activities used all around the world by non-governmental entities, activists, and policymakers to influence and reform policy implementation and enforcement. The strategies connected to advocacy include lobbying, protest, participation in policy forums, and online campaigns. Thus, whilst on the one hand, policy can be defined as a plan, a course of action, or a set of regulations that the government, an institution, or a business adopts for the purpose of influencing and determining decisions or procedures, advocacy aims to address the problems related to the policy aims to highlight such problems and then demand they be solved by the non-governmental actors through specific strategies.

The fundamental steps by which policy advocacy is implemented include adopting strategies to influence those who make the policies, followed by deliberating advocacy strategies, and finally, influencing the choices and actions of the policymakers so that they revamp or remodel their policies while keeping in mind the well-being of the majority of the population (Sprechmann and Pelton 2001).

3.4.2 Stakeholders of Policy Change

Policy change can be devised by various major actors, such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), advocacy groups, advocacy coalitions, civil society, trade unions, think tanks, social movements, and political activists.

3.4.2.1 Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)

NGOs are amongst the major stakeholders in the policy process and the drivers of policy advocacy. Hintz and Milan (2009, p. 1) argued that NGOs "serve as proxy for including civil society's voices". In this context, it needs to be elucidated that due to the impact of globalisation, world

politics has undergone a radical transformation resulting in the development of increasing numbers and types of stakeholders that have an interest in the policy process. Such stakeholders can include organised interest groups or NGOs. These non-governmental actors influence policy implementation and policy change in almost every aspect of policymaking and international relations at the local, national, and global levels. However, the role of NGOs is especially significant in advocacy activities for human rights, peace, and the environment. Thus, NGOS play a principal role as policy stakeholders and advocates by questioning the effectiveness, accountability, and legitimacy of the policies formulated and implemented by the government as well as private sector organisations (Tortajada 2016).

Today, NGOs determine policy reform by working towards maintaining wellness, which is often overlooked by for-profit organisations. These non-governmental actors have also been successful in policy advocacy, for instance, the formation of NGOs to protect the environment, which succeeded in forcing the US Congress to pass the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) in 1969 and the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, p. 38).

NGOs include advocacy groups who work towards bringing about necessary reforms in government or business policies. They influence policy change by establishing connections amongst public groups and communities and distribute information to them on specific issues to create awareness and influence the targeted social change. Additionally, they work towards improving the standards of living of the masses in developing nations by helping citizens set up education programmes. They provide and implement new technologies and/or create new jobs in areas such as environmental remediation and sustainable agriculture and manufacturing processes to enable these people to achieve financial independence (Hodel et al. 2018).

Trade unions are another noteworthy non-governmental player essential in the advocacy of policy reform. The role of the trade union as a crucial socio-political agent for impeding economic reforms has also been recognised. Usually, trade unions use their collective status to scuttle, or take-out compensations needed for several reforms so they have a positive impact on industrial production processes and employment relations. Amongst the most common advocacy of policy reform undertaken, the trade union works towards the wage increment of the labour force. In some cases, trade unions also undertake activities to reform existing labour policies thus leading to the reorganisation of the entire labour market with an eventual rise in employment, gains in real wages, and an increasing level of labour rights (Mahmood 2016).

The general public is considered a vital non-government stakeholder that determines the advocacy of policy reform. Thus, public opinion strongly influences how a policy is made or viewed. The main feature of public protest and the role of the public in policy advocacy is that salience enhances the impact of public opinion. This is because public opinion has a particularly significant role to play in policy reform that surpasses the influence of social elites and political organisations (Burstein, 2003).

An apt instance of the role of the public as an advocate of policy reform can be explained from the public demonstration in the UK on February 15, 2003, to protest against the UK's involvement in the imminent invasion of Iraq. The scale of this demonstration was so strong that it soon became a worldwide phenomenon. Even though this public protest failed to change the UK government's policy, it was successful in influencing the decision of the Canadian government to keep Canadian troops out of the Iraq conflict (Hobley 2012). Also, in February and March 2011, peaceful mass protests in Bahrain to demand political reform to replace the existing regime of the Sunni monarchy with that of a democratic republic were followed by brutal repression (International Crisis Group 2011).

3.4.2.2 Think Tanks

Think tanks are non-governmental and non-profit groups and researchers in independent centres that produce opinions and ideas to affect and support the policymaking process (Rich 2004). Weaver (1989) defined think tanks as "the non-profit public policy research industry" (p. 563). To be accepted by policymakers, think tanks must undertake credible work in their area of expertise (Burstein 2003). Think tanks are required to come up with research that is relevant and credible, as their findings will influence multiple stakeholders in wider and deeper discussions. There have been many instances where researchers have used the windows of opportunity to further their work to inform multiple stakeholders before taking (even immediate) decisions (Hassan 2016). These gaps, often associated with economic and social prompts, could offer researchers a chance to generate and discuss appropriate investigations and evidence, which would otherwise be ignored.

Think tanks explore and communicate issues that are not part of the governmental agenda. Subject to their individual and combined mission and vision, the think tanks could engage quite actively in promoting or even supporting the citizens' campaigns and support for their rights-based citizenship and demand-led political agendas.

Some research organisations have shown that working with other actors (such as contributors and attached and partly attached offices) is a critical pathway to share and endorse findings. Because of government conditions on giving subsidies in specific settings/areas, contributors can play an essential role in pushing for institutional, authoritative, and/or asset distribution changes. Lastly, think tanks often use alternative sources of research and information regardless of whether it prompts change. A specific course or approach that works in one circumstance, part, or setting will not work in another. Regardless of how key a think tank's correspondence and engagement exercises are, change frequently happens when a blend of elements (i.e., political, proof-based, and individual) meet up to constitute an arrangement window or opportunity (Williamson 1994).

At a most fundamental level, the presence of any gaps in an existing strategy prompts inquiries about the strategy being used. Hence, it is believed that there are different drivers and beginnings for exploring change (Aaker et al. 2010).

3.5 Online Public Involvement towards Policy Change

The phenomena of e-democracy and e-governance, (see section 3.5.2). influence policy reformation through the process of collaborative law making. Rossini and de Oliveira (2016) took the example of the House of Representatives' Portal E-Democracia of the Brazilian government. A further study by Michels and Graaf (2010) on the topic revealed that the system of e-democracy encourages active participation and knowledge sharing by the public in discussion forums that focus on political agendas undertaken by the ruling government. As e-government platforms further empower the public by means of active political participation and civic engagement, it establishes an easily accessible bridge between the citizens and the elected representatives. In addition, this digitised political platform facilitates political transparency by providing citizens with information regarding elected representatives and electoral candidates, and it often seeks public opinion on public matters. Eventually, the process enables an exchange of views and opinions to take place amongst citizens about the possible outcome of such a political phenomenon and the public's value in supporting public welfare. They are thus given the liberty to decide if a policy is beneficial for them and to work towards reforming it if it is not found to be in their favour. These issues are discussed further in sections 3.5.1 and 3.52.

3.5.1 Activism for Policy Change via Twitter

The social media platform considered in this study is Twitter, which was chosen based on Clement's (2020) report in Statista that placed Saudi Arabia in the top position in the MENA region for Twitter users and the fifth in the world with about 15 million active users in 2019 (Hamid 2019) after the US in first place with 64.2 million, Japan second with 48.45 million, then Russia

in third place with 23.55 million; the UK was fourth with 17.75 million (Clement 2020). Even though Saudi Arabia's population in 2019 was 34,218,169 of whom 20,768,627 were Saudi nationals (Unified National Platform GOV.SA 2020), the number of active Twitter users in Saudi Arabia was higher than in some countries with a bigger population, such as Brazil, Turkey, India, Indonesia, Mexico, France, Spain, Canada, and Egypt (Clement 2020).

Whilst activism refers to the action taken on behalf of a cause, action, or policy that goes beyond the conventional routine, the practice of featuring social media in political decision-making is supported by the concept of online activism. According to Obar and Wildman (2015), online activism refers to employing different means of sharing information on the internet to propagate and promote or influence economic, political, and social change in the society. According to Hintz (2017) and Vicari (2013), social media has become a main tool for social and political change. Moreover, Paniagua and Sapena (2014) identified social media platforms, electronic mail, podcasts, and blocking technology as being representative of an evolution in technology and serving as a vital tool for subscribers to transform society.

According to Wolfsfeld et al. (2013, p. 117), Twitter was recognised as a tool for protest and revolution in Iran in June 2009 in what is often called the 'Twitter Revolution'. Similarly, the impact of social media platforms increased during the Arab Spring in 2011. The discourses on social media, including Twitter, took place against a background of oppressive regimes and a low standard of living, thereby triggering anti-government protests, uprisings, and armed rebellions in Tunisia in the early 2010s, eventually instigating the Arab Spring (Anderson 2011; Charrad and Reith 2019; Fraihat 2016; Halverson et al. 2013; Willis 2012). (See Chapter 2).

Although there were no dramatic protests in Saudi Arabia, the impact of social media on Saudi society was radical. During the Arab Spring in 2011, the use of social media platforms increased by 300% (Chaudhary 2016). Indeed, Dick Costolo, the former CEO of Twitter, claimed that Saudi

Arabia reached the world's highest increase in Twitter usage in 2012 and 2013 (Chaudhary 2016; Altoaimy 2018).

The way people in the affected countries used social media networks during the Arab Spring seems to have encouraged Saudis to push the 'red line boundaries' which, in the Saudi Arabian context, refers to issues customarily considered by the public as forbidden or sensitive (e.g., Alothman 2013; Al-Jenaibi 2016; Erayja 2016). For instance, Ibrahim (2017) pointed out that social media advocacy, as well as activism, is an important tool for empowering women, where the intention is for women to express themselves and to strengthen their positions, particularly in developing societies. Notably, in June 2016, Saudi women commenced a campaign to bring an end to the male guardianship system; to achieve this, they used Twitter to facilitate dialogue, to foster engagement for social change, and to empower women in general.

3.5.2 E-Democracy and E-Governance

E-democracy and e-governance refer to the use of ICT in the democratic process and political administration respectively. Spirakis et al. (2010) explain that the phenomena of e-democracy and e-governance (the use of ICT in the democratic process and political administration respectively) influence policy reformation through the process of collaborative law making. Digital democracy is the process which facilitates participation democracy through providing a platform of information and technology (Simon et al. 2017). Digital democracy or e-democracy, as it is commonly called, has brought about a significant transformation of contemporary lives and is another means through which citizens can participate in the political process (Rahman 2010; Khosrow-Pour 2018). Digital democracy is the process which facilitates participation democracy through providing a platform of information and technology (Simon et al. 2017). Whilst, in the initial phases, a digital democracy indicated the system of online voting, over time, the process has become more refined. Hence, today, digital democracy also encourages and empowers people's

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greater participation in democratic processes like proposing, developing, and creating laws (Jafarkarimi et al. 2014). Thus, the aim of digital democracy is to create a politically aware society that always remains responsive to the challenges of the increasingly complex world (Soulas 2017). Digital government is about management and administration (top-down) whereas e-democracy is more about public participation (bottom up).

Prasad (2012) confirmed that e-governance is a crucial element of the administrative process that promotes capacity building of the public so that they can take an active part in reforming the agenda of policies that they might find are not beneficial for them.

E-democracy has been idealised as an innovative platform that heralds a new era of mass involvement in unmediated political discussions, direct participation, and representation in political processes in addition to establishing greater transparency and accountability between public and government processes through political openness. The new form of the government citizenship relationship has been established through the system of e-government, which also influences policy change and reform (Freeman and Quirke 2013).

In 2013, Freeman and Quirke conducted research to ascertain how e-democracy affects the process of policy reform. Basically, e-democracy is a mechanism to improve citizen-state communication by influencing political processes like determining political mobilisation and campaigns, amplifying political polarisation, changing the tools of government, and threatening the survival of authoritarian regimes. Their research revealed that as e-democracy is highly influenced by digital technology, it has a significant impact on the manner in which the democracy of a country works by making citizens highly responsive and encouraging them to take an active role in various political processes.

Kreiss' (2015) research on the implication of e-democracy in policy change and reform found that this advanced political platform aspires to develop independent, rational, and general-interest

citizens. E-democracy also encourages various political activities under the umbrella term of 'e-governance' in the form of online deliberation, open government, and civic technology, through which it aims to engage the public in solving and reforming 'public problems'. Therefore, in this format, citizens get to see themselves as active participants who can influence various public processes; hence, the concept of e-democracy plays a vital role in reforming and redefining policy changes.

However, through this research, Kreiss (2016) recommended further scope for future studies in this topic by stating that to make e-democracy take an active role in reforming and revamping policy changes, there should be a collaborative and deliberative environment between the public and political parties as well as the partisans who are major stakeholders in policy-making processes. If such an environment is not present, public opinions expressed through the e-democracy platform will never be able to influence the policies made by the key political stakeholders. A study on the same topic by Rossini and de Oliveira (2016) found that recently, the majority of democratic governments is increasingly adopting the internet to foster political participation. Internet platform encourages aggressive political activities of the public via e-consultation, e-deliberation, and e-participation initiatives. Hence, this platform is effective in reforming policies and political processes.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter discussed and elaborated upon the concept of policy to provide a better understanding of the rational outcomes of the decisions made by decision-makers and whether they might produce unintended or counterintuitive results. The term 'policy change' was identified as indicating a shift in the existing policies or leadership structure, and the policy cycle stages were discussed, namely, preparation, identification, formulation, adoption, action planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.

The conceptual framework was demonstrated focusing on the concepts of multiple streams model, the punctuated equilibrium, and the power elite theories. The multiple streams method highlights the intersection of problems, policies, and politics wherever conditions are conducive to policy change, and the punctuated equilibrium framework provides insight into the promotion of change at the individual and collective levels. Meanwhile, the power elite theory supports policy change in cases where the most critical factors are decided by a single elite group in the society, such as the Shura Council.

The public involvement in policy change indicates that stakeholders such as non-governmental organisations, advocacy groups, trade unions, think tanks, political activists, and the public have played a significant role in the promotion of policy change. In addition, online activism via Twitter has been shown to play a role alongside international pressure for instigating policy change in different parts of the world.

CHAPTER FOUR: POLITICS AND SOCIAL MEDIA IN SAUDI ARABIA

4.1 Introduction

After the previous two chapters discussed social media and the digital public, and policy change and public involvement, this chapter focuses on the political structure in Saudi Arabia – mostly the establishment and development of the Shura Council and its relationship with social media – and describes and discusses the decision-making process and the factors that influence these decisions. In addition, the use of social media among the Shura Council and Saudi citizens will be discussed in this chapter.

4.2 The Political Structure in Saudi Arabia

Since its establishment in 1932, Saudi Arabia has been a dynastic monarchical state where almost all the power is in the King's hands. Article 1 of the constitution emphasises that "the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a fully sovereign Arab Islamic State. Its religion shall be Islam and its constitution shall be the Book of God and the *Sunnah* (Traditions) of His Messenger. The king shares this power with the Council of Ministers and the Shura Council". In addition, according to Article 44 in the Basic Law of Governance (1992):

> The Authorities of the State consist of the Judicial Authority, the Executive Authority, and the Regulatory Authority. These authorities will cooperate in the performance of their functions, according to this law or other laws'. The Basic Law recognises the King being the highest authority over all the country's organs which include the legislative authority. The Head of State and Head of the Cabinet is the King, who has the authority to enact, amend, and repeal legislation by Royal Order, without any consultation or any legislative proposition from either the Council of Ministers or the Shura Council, he only abides by the basic doctrine of the Sharia law. (Alnahdi 2014, p. 12)

4.2.1 The King

Saudi Arabia is a dynastic monarchy. The King, in accordance with the Basic Law of Governance, the Council of Ministers, and the Law of Provinces, has many major functions and wide-ranging powers, including choosing the Crown Prince and, if necessary, dismissing him. The king also has the power to appoint the Mufti and the Islamic scholars (Ulama) as well as the presidency of the Council of Ministers and has the power to dismiss the Vice-Presidents of the Council of Ministers, the Ministers, and Deputy Ministers. In addition, he oversees the Council of Ministers and other government agencies. The King is also the Commander in Chief of all the Armed Forces. He appoints the Speaker of the Shura Council as well as the Deputy, the Assistant Speaker, the Secretary General of the Council, and the members of the Council. He also appoints the Princes of the Provinces and judges. Furthermore, the king has the power to dissolve the Council of Ministers and the Shura Council.[2]

Alnashmi (2007) argued that the king in Saudi Arabia has limited power despite having power over all the authorities, as detailed above. The conditions imposed by the Shariah, Saudi tradition, the ruling family, and the Ulama restrict the absolute power of the King (Alnashmi 2007). Nonetheless, the king remains the supreme authority of the judicial, executive, and regulatory authorities of the state. Dekmejian (1998) concluded that:

> the effectiveness of the Majlis will depend on whether the king wishes to make it a useful
> mechanism, particularly in its legislative and mediational roles, as well as on the ability of

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[2]Articles 52, 55, 56, 57, 58, and 60 in the Basic Law of Governance give details of the role of the king in Saudi Arabia, (1992).

the Majlis leadership to expand the scope of the organisation's influence and responsibilities within the political system. (p. 217)

4.2.2 The Council of Ministers

The second political power in Saudi Arabia is the Council of Ministers, which was first established in 1953 by the founder King Abdulaziz; however, it was not actually functioning until 1954 in the reign of King Saud. Since then, the Council has become the most powerful part of the Saudi government because it is headed by the King, who is also the Prime Minister. According to the Law of the Council of Ministers, the Crown Prince is the Deputy Prime Minister. The Council of Ministers played both executive and legislative roles until early in the 1990s when King Fahad reintroduced a Majlis al-Shura (The Shura Council) that would gradually take over a part of the legislative powers (Khalaf and Luciani 2006, p. 221; Al-Zahrani 2002).

A Bureau of Experts was established by the Council of Ministers to carry out many tasks including reviewing and studying case files referred by the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister, and the Council of Ministers and its sub-committees; their duties were preparing draft laws and conducted the required research; reviewing and proposing amendments to current laws; studying agreements; drafting appropriate forms for high orders, royal decrees, and Council of Ministers' resolutions; and reviewing issues brought before the Supreme Authority, the Council of Ministers, or other supreme councils (Al-Fadhel 2012, p. 104; Bureau of Experts 2011).

On 29 January 2015, King Salman, the seventh and indeed the current king of Saudi Arabia, decided to establish two councils within the Council of Ministers, namely, the Council of Political and Security Affairs and the Council of Economic and Development Affairs, both of which are headed by the Crown Prince. These two councils link with the Council of Ministers to improve the work and hasten its completion. They also aim to raise the efficiency of the performance of the Council of Ministers and the level of coordination and to avoid duplication of the work (Al-Watan

Newspaper 2015). This decision was also taken to improve the quality of the decision-making process in the Council of Ministers and to avoid unnecessary bureaucracy (Al-Saud 2015, p. 4).

In addition, in June 2016, King Salman established the Decision-Making Support Centre in the Council of Ministers, the role of which is to support the governmental decision-making process. It has the following responsibilities: monitor and analyse the impact of, and suggest ways to address, events, developments, changes, trends, and issues, at the domestic, regional, and international levels; prepare forecasts in different fields as well as devise plans to deal with different hypotheses; prepare studies on impediments to proper development and suggest plans to address those impediments; assist in the provision of information to the Council of Ministers, the Committee for Political and Security Affairs, and the Committee for Economic and Development Affairs; conduct research on any assigned matters; and assist in educating the public about governmental decisions (Mahayni 2016).

4.2.3 The Shura Council

The third power is the Shura Council. The Shura – as defined in the Holy Quran and by the actions of the Prophet Mohammed and his companions – is the exchange of opinion amongst advisors to extract the right opinion and the most effective solutions and decisions. Shura (consultation) is an Islamic word mentioned in the Holy Quran: "And consult them in the affairs" (3: 159). Chapter 42 of the Holy Quran is called 'Al-Shura' (Thompson 2014, p. 27), and it supports this aim, saying, "The Qur'an stipulates that ash-shura should be applied in both the political and personal lives of Muslims".

4.2.3.1 Role

The Shura functions as the state's legislative authority, or as many Islamic scholars prefer to term it, the 'regulatory authority', because they believe legislative means Shariah, and Islamic Shariah

comes from the Holy Qur'an (Al-Turaiqi 2008). Al-Fadhel (2012) clarified that use of the term 'regulatory authority' and not 'legislative authority' is attributed to the Basic Law of Governance where the term 'regulatory authority' was used to refer to Saudi Arabia's legislative authority. This authority is entitled to lay down statutory laws and regulations. In Islamic Shariah law, only God can legislate. It is fair, therefore, to assert that the word 'legislation', which represents secular law, is not used in Saudi Arabia (Al-Fadhel 2012, p. 97). As mentioned earlier, the law in Saudi Arabia is based on the Islamic Shariah, and the Shura is one of the Shariah's sources. Shura is a fundamental concept in Islam and in Muslims' lives, and the founder of Saudi Arabia applied Shariah Law consistently in all the country's affairs. Consequently, the concepts of consensus (ijma) and consultation (Shura) still constitute the heart of this system (Thompson 2014, p. 27).

Essentially, Al-Muhanna describes the term 'Shura' as "the most important principle that an Islamic state should be built upon" (Al-Muhanna 2005, p. 1), and Al-Harbi (2014) argued that Shura in Islam equates to Western democracy as the practice of the former is through deliberation, so those involved in the Shura Council represent the various parts of society. Thus, by including all strata of society, the two key requirements of democracy are met, specifically, the will of the people, and deliberation (Al-Harbi 2014). Notably, the former chairman of the Shura Council in Saudi Arabia, Dr Salah bin Abdullah bin Humaid, compared Shura principles to democratic ones (Al-Harbi 2014). This is because, in Shura, public rights and freedoms are the same as the religious and social obligations referred to in Sharia law. These then serve to find a balance between individual interests and those of society as a whole (Al-Harbi 2014).

4.2.3.2 History

Historically, the Shura Council in Saudi Arabia has been through many developmental stages. It was first established by King Abdulaziz in 1924: "This *Majlis al-Shura* was the very first officially created institution. It was composed of a dozen members, all natives of Hijaz province. It had

certain legislative powers, whilst the king was the sole holder of executive power" (Khalaf and Luciani 2006, p. 221). A first stage of reforms was undertaken from 1924 to 1992 followed by a second stage of reforms from 1993 until the present. Furthermore, Al-Shalhoub (1999) argued that the Shura Council in the period of 1924 to 1953 had played a significant role in the history of Saudi.

It is worth noting that due to the establishment of the Council of Ministers in 1953, the Shura Council was ignored for almost 40 years (1953 to 1993). Additionally, the authority of the Shura Council was transferred to the Council of Ministers and other governmental sectors and agencies, which took over most of the Shura Council's jurisdiction and subsequently embodied the legislative and executive authorities (The Shura Council 2015a). As a result, some members of the Shura Council were transferred to other government departments, and others were removed without being replaced.

Nevertheless, efforts to update the law of the Shura Council (Consultative Council) were made by King Fahad during the 1980s. Shortly after accession to the throne in 1982, King Fahad promised to draft a constitution and even sought to demonstrate the seriousness of his pledge by constructing a National Assembly forum in 1984 (Aba-Namay 1993, p. 298), a promise that took him 12 years to fulfil. Al-Nassar (2010, p. 56) considered that the increasing population and economic development were behind that decision.

The first term of the modern Shura Council started on 20 August 1993; it had 60 members, and membership was for a term of four years appointed by the King. The Speaker of the Council, the Vice-President, the General Secretary, and the members were selected by the king. In the second term, which started in 1997, the number of members was increased from 60 to 90. In the third term, in 2001, the number of members went up to 120, and in the fourth term, in 2005, the number of members rose even further to 150. Since then, the number of members has been the same in the

fifth and the sixth terms, which started in 2009 and 2013 respectively, and in the current seventh term. Dekmejian (1998) argued that the Council plays an important representational role, as it is the only Saudi institution that encompasses different segments of Saudi people. He added that the Council carries out a co-operative function, as the members appointed by the king are carefully chosen to represent different groups of the Saudi community.

From the first term until the end of the fifth one, only men could be members of the Shura Council. It was not until the sixth term that the late King Abdullah announced in 2013 that 20% of the Shura Council seats should be allocated to women (30 seats). Furthermore, in October 2020, King Salman gave women more power in the Shura Council when he appointed a female, Dr Hanan Akahmadi, as the Speaker's Assistant; this is the first high position for women in the Shura Council's history. However, it is worth noting that in the fourth term, the previous chairman of the Council, Sheikh Salah bin Abdullah bin Humaid appointed six women as part-time advisors but not as full Shura Council members. The number of women advisors increased in the fifth term, when the current president of the Council, Sheikh Abdullah bin Mohammed bin Ibrahim Al-Sheikh, appointed 12 women as part-time advisors.

4.2.3.3 Composition

The Shura Council is a government institution that shares the legislative authority, that is, the 'regulatory authority', with the Council of Ministers according to Article 67 of the Saudi constitution (Saudi Arabia's Constitution 1992). The Council is located in Riyadh, the capital city of Saudi Arabia. According to Article 2 of the Council's law, the Council consists of the President and 150 members; 30 members are women chosen by the king (The Shura Council 2018b).

The Council has full independence in terms of taking decisions, oversight, functions, works, and financial affairs. According to the Council's law, it has its own budget approved by the king along with an organisational structure that meets its duties and objectives. According to the Council's

internal regulations, the Council has more than 13 general departments run by employees in charge of all the administrative and advisory tasks and works (The Shura Council 2015b). According to Article 21 of the Council law, the Council has the General Panel led by the Speaker; this consists of the Vice-Speaker, the Assistant-Speaker, the heads of the Council's specialised committees, and the General Secretary, who should attend the meetings. The General Panel has regular meetings, and its responsibilities include preparing the general plan of the Council, setting the agenda of the Council's regular weekly session, and studying all the objections raised during the sessions of the Council and its committees; they can issue any rules and decisions that would regulate the Council's function and work (The Shura Council 2015b). Initially, the Council had two weekly regular sessions; however, because of the demands of the work's requirements, the Council now has three regular sessions every two weeks, which must be open to the public unless decided otherwise for reasons of public interest.

Article 15 of the law of the Shura Council sets the mandates of the current Council members: to express an opinion on the general policies of the state referred to it by the king; to discuss the general plan for economic and social development; to study international laws, regulations, treaties, and agreements; to propose appropriate provisions; to interpret regulations; and to discuss annual reports submitted by ministries and government agencies. The Shura Council has 14 specialised committees and 10 parliamentary friendship committees with supervisory and legislative roles. It also has the power to summon and question ministers (The Shura Council 2018a) in addition to reviewing the yearly report by all government sectors and organisations.

Article 3 of the Shura Council law sets the framework of the Council rules, stating that members, 20% of whom are women, are appointed by the king. As membership is considered to be a full-time job, members cannot hold any governmental or private management positions unless the king allows them to do so (The Shura Council 2018b). The formula of the members of the Council as Al-Harbi described it is as follows: "Members of the *Al-Shura* Council were chosen from the

country's most important groups of constituents, both conservative and liberal, including religious bodies, government, law, and business. Most could be described as experts in their field" (Al-Harbi 2014, p. 133). Moreover, Al-Nassar (2010) confirmed that the members of the Council are well-educated; 66% of the members in the first three terms had doctoral degrees.

Regarding the relations amongst the Council and its members, the members are independent, as the president of the Council has no administrative authority over the members except for leading the regular weekly sessions and the general panel. Articles 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 of the Council law determine the rights and duties of the Council; only the King or the committee can question a member if he/she fails to perform his/her duties (The Shura Council 2018b). The Council members must attend the regular weekly sessions and specialised committees' meetings or the special and temporary committees unless they have permission not to attend for any reason. In addition, members have the option to join one of the ten parliamentary friendship committees. Each member of the Council has his/her own personal secretary, and each specialised committee has assistant staff to do all the administrative tasks or anything that the members require. However, the members can also carry out some of the administrative work and functions if they agree to the request made by the senior officials on the board of the Council (The Shura Council 2015b). On the international level, the Council is a full member of different international parliamentary unions as well as the regional parliamentary forums, and most importantly, it gained membership of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) in 2003 and the G20 international Group (The Shura Council 2015b; Al-Nassar 2010, p. 20).

In 2003, the late King Fahad made a further amendment to the Shura Council law to give the Shura Council more power. The new amendments on articles 17 and 23[3] give the Council the right to

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[3]Article 17:

The Shura Council's resolutions shall be submitted to the king who decides what resolutions to be referred to Cabinet.
- If views of both the Shura Council and the Cabinet agree, the resolutions are issued after the king has given approval.

propose regulations without the king's prior permission. Moreover, they give the king the right to refer the proposal to the Council of Ministers if he chooses to do so. This particular amendment denotes that if there is not an agreement on a specific issue amongst the Council of Ministers and the Shura Council fails to reach an agreement on the issue, the Shura Council has the right to study it again and send it directly to the king. Such an amendment was considered an advantage for the Shura Council, as it gets the power to practise a legislative role (Al-Muhanna 2005, p. 73; Al-Nassar 2010, p. 18; Al-Harbi 2014, pp. 182/183).

In light of the above, since the members of the Council are selected by the king and not elected by the citizens, the debate emerges about whether the Council counts as a legislative body and whether the members can be counted as representing the citizens. In 2003, a petition was signed by 104 academics, businessmen, religious leaders, and professionals representing various political and religious affiliations. They called for political reform including providing the Consultative Council with legislative and control powers in a step towards making it an elected institution (Kapiszewski 2006, p. 92).

The alleged legislative role of the Shura Council caused disagreement amongst Saudi authors. Opponents such as Al-Nassar (2010, p. 24), Alnahdi (2014, p. 13), Al-Muhanna (2005, p. 95), and Al-Rashed (2013) believed that the Shura Council should play an advisory rather than a regulatory (legislative) role. Further, Al-Saud argued: "It has no legislative powers other than those of recommendation. The Council of Ministers remains the legislative body in the Kingdom' (Al-Saud 2000, p. 164). Al-Harbi supported the term 'recommendations' because 'the views of the Council

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- If views of both councils vary, the issue shall be returned back to the Shura Council to decide whatever it deems appropriate and send the new resolution to the king who takes the final decisions.

Article 23:

The Shura Council shall have the jurisdiction to propose a draft of a new law or an amendment of an enacted law and study them within the Shura Council. The Speaker shall submit the Shura Council's resolution of the new or amended law to the king. https://www.shura.gov.sa/img/en/books/LawofShuraCouncilEn.pdf

can be seen as recommendations only" (Al-Harbi 2014, p. 134). On the other hand, proponents like Al-Fadhel (2012) argued:

> the Shura Council in Saudi Arabia enjoys the same powers as Western parliaments. It enacts laws, oversees the functions of governmental agencies and investigates public cases. Members of the Shura Council can initiate legislation and review domestic and foreign policies of the government. Any government action not approved by the Council will have to be referred back to the king. (Al-Fadhel 2012, p. 113)

Meanwhile, Aba-Namay (1998) asserted that the Shura Council gives the country many benefits, such as opening up government policy, allowing Saudi citizens the opportunity to discuss the political debates and changes, while the Council is also a good symbol of the relationship between the governor and the governed. An analysis by Al-Nassar (2010) of a survey carried out by the Saudi newspaper *Al-Watan* in 2001 about the Shura Council and its functions showed that there was a misunderstanding amongst the 855 citizens who participated in the survey about the Council's position and role. However, all the participants wanted the Council to improve its functions and roles.

Thompson (2014) believed that elections in the Shura Council would change the political culture in Saudi Arabia as it would facilitate political evolution and development over a long period of time. Meanwhile, Al-Harbi (2014, p. 134) mentioned that academics had signed a petition demanding the reform of the Shura Council, and the most important demand was to have an elected Council with full power to play a regulatory (legislative) role. On the other hand, Al-Ja'afary (2001) alleged that although the Council members are not selected by election, they represent a wide range of qualified, educational, scientific, cultural, and religious sectors, and can express people's interests, concerns, and hopes, as they are not alienated from the society.

Al-Muhanna (2005) elaborated upon the quality of the Council members, arguing that according to Islam, all Muslims have the right to be consulted; however, other scholars believed that only certain individuals qualified to be advisors should be consulted. For example, the law of the Council gives the members full freedom to state their opinions on any topic and issue they want, and both Al-Saud (2000) and Al-Rashed (2013) believed that there would not be the same quality and diversity amongst the members of the Council if they were elected instead of selected. Indeed, Al-Rashed (2013) claimed, "Of course, I would like it if half the Shura Council seats were up for election despite my conviction that the elected members will not be more competent than the appointed ones". He also talked specifically about having female members in the Council: "If there had been public elections, perhaps not a single Saudi woman would have won" (Al-Rashed, 2013, no pagination).

The Council has full independence; indeed, the law of the Council ensures its independence in taking decisions and gives the members freedom both in expressing their opinion and in voting. In addition, the Council is independent in scheduling its sessions. Therefore, offers citizens a way to attend the sessions and gives them the opportunity to have their voice heard through submitting petitions, which is the link between the Council and the public as part of the open Majlis (the desert democracy) policy (Sukkar 2010, p. 31). This is the key means of communication between the public and the Shura Council. As such, these councils play a country-wide role in allowing citizens to express local opinion, although they do not appear to be connected to any movement in favour of political reform (Cordesman 2003). Citizens can send their suggestions, views, and opinions about different issues and topics that they want to share with the Council: "The Council's specialised committees study these petitions carefully and take resolutions in light of the Council's law and regulations" (The Shura Council 2015a, p. 30). The Media and New Media Department at the Shura Council deals with the petitions submitted online to the Council by citizens. (see section 1.4). As discussed earlier, in Saudi Arabia, 'petition' refers to a traditional practice whereby

the public can address the public authorities and discuss matters of concern (Law of Governance 1992). Article 43 of the Basic Law states that

> Councils held by the King and the Crown Prince shall be open for all citizens and anyone else who may have a complaint or a grievance. A citizen shall be entitled to address public authorities and discuss any matters of concern to him. (Al-Saud 2000, p. 143).

As mentioned earlier, the right of petition is a traditional Arab practice. Sukkar (2010) disputed the notion that open Majlis is a policy that encourages petitioning and pleading instead of political development as it "brings back to the memory old traditions, customs, and bygone democracy" (p. 32). He argued that the Majlis will not lead the country to the state of democracy it is looking for; instead, he suggested,

> The only way for the Saudi regime to articulate optimum socio-political development and participate in controversial debates is by promoting traditional political practices such as the open Majlis or the desert democracy, whilst preserving the regime's power and avoiding genuine public participation and individual decision-making. (Sukkar 2010, p. 33).

4.2.3.4 The Challenges

Various studies (Al-Harbi 2014; Alghamdy 2014; Alnassar 2014; Al-Saud 2002; Alsudairy 2017; Alsudairy and Alshareif 2016; Alshahrani 2017; Altayash 2014a, 2014b) have highlighted the shortcomings of the Shura Council. For instance, Al-Saud (2002) focused on the limitations in the Council's duties and jurisdictions, its financial and administrative weakness, the narrow scope of information and support services, the lack of interaction with the wider society, the weak participation by some members, and the plurality of the relationship between the Council and the government and the style of its deliberations and decision-making. Meanwhile, Al-Harbi (2014)

believed that the method of representation, the lack of transparency, and the limited legislative power are the main obstacles that the Council faces. In their studies, Alsudairy (2017) and Alsudairy and Alshareif (2016) identified the main challenges that the Council members faced as being the Council's limited powers, its inadequate media presence and public relations, its weakness in certain capabilities, the dissatisfaction with the communication channels between the Council and the society, the length of the decision-making process, and the performance of the Council's supporting departments. Furthermore, other researchers (Alghamdy 2014; Alnassar 2014; Alsudairy and Alshareif 2016; Altayash 2014a, 2014b) found out in their studies that the Council suffered from an inadequate media and communications policy.

Despite the debate about the effectiveness of the role of the Council, the responsibilities and duties of the Council and its members are similar to those of other parliaments. The Council and the individual members have the right and the freedom to discuss all issues and topics. From the studies cited above, it can be clearly seen that the Shura Council – since it was renewed in 1993 – has played a critical role in the regulatory authority in the country and has an equal authority and power to the Council of Ministers, even though the Council of Ministers is headed by the King, because both need the king's approval for all their decisions. The main difference between the Shura Council and other elected members of Parliament is that Shura Council members cannot be held accountable by the public, and they are only accountable before the king.

Those scholars recommended that to improve and enhance the Council, it would be necessary to expand the Council's jurisdictions and responsibilities (Al-Harbi 2014; Al-Saud 2002), develop its committees, and upgrade its executive and administrative system (Al-Saud, 2002; Alsudairy 2017), thus increasing its transparency and its oversight and legislative powers (Al-Harbi 2014; Alsudairy 2016). Altayash, (2014a, 2014b) recommended that the Council establish new channels for interaction with citizens to mitigate the formal institutional nature of the Council when dealing with the public by bringing them closer to its activities, as the public's interaction with the Council

is linked to the extent of their ability to reach the Council. Given the need to interact with the public via social media platforms (Alghamdy 2014), the Council needs to work on training the Council members in skills required when dealing with social media platforms and in computer skills (Alshahrani 2017). Finally, Alnassar (2014) suggested that the Council should increase the transparency of its media messages especially the television coverage.

4.3 Saudi Arabia and Social Media

Regarding social media, Saudi Arabia has the topmost position in the MENA region, with around 15 million active Twitter users (Clement 2020; Hamid 2019). In January 2021, it was reported that around 79.3 percent of the total Saudi Arabia population used social media (Datareportal 2021b). Also, Krane (2019) indicated that Saudi nationals are amongst the top users of Twitter globally. Unlike other social media platforms, the surge Twitter has experienced in the kingdom has made it the most popular method of conducting political discussions (see Chapter 1). Twitter is used by the population to comment on the country's affairs, including domestic issues through hashtag activism and direct messages to political leaders, and via messages posted publicly on the forum. Twitter has, therefore, established a collective and participatory sphere, making it harder for authoritarian states to censor public opinion and hide critical information from the public. Accordingly, this digital public sphere has been largely used to disseminate critical issues related to, for example, human rights and corruption.

Within the Saudi Arabian socio-political ideological sphere, discussions are based on Islamic doctrines, and the traditional media is controlled by the government. With the increasing use of social media, people have turned to online media for different purposes, such as news, information, and entertainment, because the government could not completely control the online sources; therefore, the participants were able to publish and contribute to the content, thus giving them the

opportunity to discuss and debate issues that are important to them in the online public sphere. (see sections 1.5, 2.4.2, and 4.3.2).

Alasem's (2015) study found that a significant majority of the government officials have Twitter accounts in addition to there being a large amount of Twitter usage by government officials. Notably, it was discovered that Twitter accounts were used by government officials to post announcements and news updates and to share links between offices (Alasem 2015). According to Dimitrios and Violettas (2014), Saudis' use of social media platforms is affected by the low level of trust in the community. These findings were deduced from the surveys and interviews undertaken by the researchers. It also became apparent that those who opt to use social media platforms prefer not to reveal their identity (Dimitrios and Violettas 2014). As such, these findings are key towards understanding the use of the social media platform by Saudis.

Nina (2016) researched the use of Twitter in Saudi Arabia and explored how it is being used to effect change in the country. The study noted that although the country has been strict regarding some laws and regulations and how people should conduct themselves whilst in the country, there seems to have been little effort to stop Twitter usage (Nina 2016). One would assume that the closed and non-democratic political system in Saudi Arabia would result in Twitter being silenced in the region (Alwagait et al. 2015). However, Twitter has proven to be a very viable voice compared to street protests. Therefore, many are taking to it to voice their political dissent and express their opinions.

4.3.1 The Shura Council and Social Media

In 2014, the Shura Council's administration established the Media and Social Media Department and created accounts on Twitter and YouTube. The primary goal of creating the Twitter account (@ShuraCouncil_SA) was to improve the image and reputation of the Shura Council through publishing relevant and correct news and information. The account does not follow any other

accounts, retweet other posts, or comment on any news or issues. According to the Speaker of the Shura Council, His Excellency Dr Abdullah Al-Sheikh, in an interview with *Al-Riyadh Newspaper,* the Shura Council is keen to enhance its communication with all sectors of society, and during the last two terms, it was able to build bridges for communication and convergence with the citizens, the community institutions, and the relevant authorities by adopting a strategy for communication whose aim is to convey the Council's message and responsibilities and to clarify the role of the citizens in activating that message. His Excellency Dr Abdullah Al-Sheikh believes that there has been a qualitative leap in this regard as represented in several ways. The first is the unprecedented number of e-mails or other means of communication that the Council receives daily from citizens (Al-Riyadh Newspaper 2020). According to an interview with the Speaker of the Shura Council published in *Al-Riyadh Newspaper*, these emails are rich in valuable ideas, opinions, and notes; they are studied, and some of them are adopted at the level of the Council's decisions and recommendations, and committees. Dr Al-Sheikh indicated, "Social media, or the so-called new media, has become a rich and spacious channel for communicating with society and the media, and the Council has acquired its dynamic tools and is followed by large numbers" (Al-Riyadh Newspaper, 2020). Furthermore, the account does not represent any member of the Shura Council or his/her opinions on any issues. Dr Al-Sheikh revealed the reason behind the Shura Council's keenness to distinguish between the official views of the Council and the views of individual members in the media and social media, pointing out that the process of the Council is to reach decisions through collective work and views; so, when using the social media, every member is required to point out that it is his/her own views and, as such, do not represent the official views of the Council (Al-Riyadh Newspaper, 2020). Furthermore, the primary goal of creating the YouTube channel was just to screen the proceedings of the regular sessions; it does not allow the addition of comments (Alghamdy 2014). The Twitter account is run by the Media Department's employees, but the YouTube channel is not yet active.

In an attempt to engage with the public on social media, the Shura Council hosted some activities on social media on November 1, 2016, to enable a group of citizens to attend the Council's regular weekly meetings. The citizens had a meeting with the Speaker of the Shura Council and the assistant to the Speaker of the Council. However, according to Adel Al-Harbi (2016), the former director of the Media Department in the Shura Council, the New Media Department was one of the outputs and results of the media policy and strategy of the Shura Council as the Council has looked to improve its media strategy. However, the department is still new, and its vision and direction are not yet clear; indeed, it has already gone through some changes. He emphasised that for them, the primary objective of creating a Twitter account was only to use it as a channel to inform the public about the Council's works and activities, but the best ways of managing the account have not been decided. According to Al-Harbi (2016), the account on social media requires technical and content support, but the Shura Council's account has no content management experience to manage the account and provide help if necessary. In addition, there is a problem with the content, as there are no specialists in graphic design.

The former director of the New Media Department, Faisal Al-Sheddi (2017), stated that the account is run by two employees: the first is responsible for writing the content, and the other is responsible for publishing it; if anything, unusual happens, he/she should report back to the director of the Media Department. Furthermore, there is no content support from the high command and the senior officials of the Council in running the account; they just want it to be active and effective and to fulfil its task of delivering accurate information about the Council and its activities. The employees are not allowed to correct misunderstandings or clarify confusing portrayals about the Shura Council. However, the employees who oversee the account are supposed to monitor the hashtags on Twitter, especially those referring to issues relevant to the Council. This information is reported to the high command and the senior officials of the Shura Council to keep them up to date. Moreover, there is no power or permission to participate in

hashtags or even respond to accounts that mention the Shura's account. Sometimes, the Shura Council posts awareness hashtags about the legislative authority using the hashtag 'Education of Shura'. Currently, the content of the Twitter account is available only in Arabic; however, consideration is being given to publishing some content in the English language.

Moreover, to improve the Council's transparency and rehabilitation, the Council administration has proceedings, discussions, and deliberations of the regular session broadcasted on television. As these issues relate to transparency, the methods used for television may be suitable for social media. However, Alnassar (2014) conducted a study on the content of the television coverage of the Council's regular sessions in which six random regular sessions of the second year of the sixth term of the Council in a three-month period in 2013 were analysed. The results showed that the severe brevity of the members' interventions, the removal of some of the Council's deliberations from appearing on television, and the conservative rules used by Council affected the television content of the Council and its image amongst the audience. The study suggested that the Council review its dealings with television coverage, change the criteria that regulate it, present a more realistic picture of its work, and mitigate the extremely conservative approach in producing the real content of its regular sessions for the public (Alnassar 2014).

4.4 Factors Affecting Government–Citizen Communication in Saudi Arabia

To prove or disprove that social media plays a role in the decision-making process in Saudi Arabia, it is crucial that the literature be analysed to explore the factors that affect the government–citizen relationship. Saudi Arabia has many cultural, religious, political, economic, and social factors with the power to affect the role of social media in the decision-making process of the kingdom. The main factors are discussed in the following sections.

4.4.1 Media Regulation and Civil Liberties

The unique political context of Saudi Arabia is that of a monarchy where the king has all the power, and all distinctive and major decisions of the Council of Ministers and the Shura Council are controlled, restricted, and approved by him, as was stated earlier in this chapter. As such, the political factor is the most important, as it restricts social media from making noticeable changes in the decision-making process in the kingdom. The internet was officially introduced to the kingdom in 1997 by a ministerial decree, but the public were not allowed access to it until 1999. Since then, online communication has been put under government censorship and surveillance. In December 2000, the number of internet users in the kingdom was about 200,000. This number had increased to 16 million by 2013 (Internet in Saudi Arabia 2018). According to General Authority of Statistics in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (2018), the population of the country is about 32,552,336. Based on Kemp's (2018) report, conducted over a one-year period from January 2017 to January 2018, approximately 91% of the Saudi population were using the internet, which is about 30.25 million people, and 75% were active on social media, which is about 25 million (Kemp 2018). In the report, Saudi Arabia was ranked 16th in the world in hours spent on the internet with an average of 2 hours and 34 minutes per day.

Social networking in Saudi Arabia lacks the freedom regularly associated with social media across the world (Freedom House 2020). Cottle (2011) reported that governments who want to repress communication can use high digital technique censorship and monitoring methods and "engage in cyber-attacks and the targeting of media activists and dissidents – and have done so for some time" (Cottle 2011, p. 653). Furthermore, when repressive regimes are challenged, censorship, surveillance, and internet blocking campaigns are instantly launched through their controlled media whether through the press, television, or radio. Hajirnis (2015) described surveillance as a process that seeks to prevent unacceptable behaviours in individuals or groups by gathering, storing, processing, accessing, and using data to control the unacceptable behaviours. Similarly,

Nielsen (2012) referred to surveillance as the process of collecting and processing information to shape, control, manage, supervise, and regulate behaviour. The definitions suggest that surveillance deals with monitoring the media activities of individuals on social media platforms so that actual or potential violence can be wielded against them. Thus, criticism of the Saudi government has always been prohibited. Human rights activists who blog or post on Twitter are aware that there is a high price to pay for advocating for rights and freedoms or for criticising the government. There are still harsh laws in places like Saudi Arabia for activities like libel if someone is thought to have insulted a person of authority. Even arrest can be a consequence. As a result, many women activists who have been demanding basic rights for decades, such as driving cars, have ended up in prison.

Nevertheless, after the Arab uprisings in early 2011, even in a conservative state like Saudi Arabia, social media opened a new window into the society and changed the social order. Saudis began logging on to Twitter in rapidly growing numbers to express their frustrations, "offering a new window into an opaque and profoundly conservative country" (Worth 2012, no pagination). For example, the government tried to restrict the use of Twitter for public discourse by creating a new law and punishments for cyber-related crimes, and the law imposed a fine of three million Saudi Riyals or even a five-year prison sentence on people who use social media to harm public order or religious values; however, there was an immediate outcry through social media expressing shock and anger over the new law. Under the hashtags #3million fine for spreading harm and #5 years in prison for tweeting (translated from Arabic), thousands of people either protested against or made fun of the law. Additional issues being discussed involved more rights for women, racism in Saudi society, and how the society does not differentiate between religion and culture (Aljenaibi 2016).

Moreover, restricted laws and regulations are some of the major elements influencing social networking in the country. For instance, in 2012, the Shura Council stated that they were in the process of drafting a law that would punish individuals taking advantage of social media to attack

Islam, with Facebook, Twitter, and blogs being the targeted areas (Sadek 2012). As a result, from 2014 to 2016, the percentage of Twitter users dropped; it was 53% in 2014, and 47% in 2015, while by 2016, the number had dropped to 40% (Report of Individuals and Households in Saudi Arabia 2014, 2015 and 2016).

In contrast to the above, some have argued that the government of Saudi Arabia does not restrict Saudi citizens from accessing the internet and social media but only prevents access to some of the content as a way of protecting its citizens from the harm that might be present in social media (Salem 2017). Even though outsiders might view Saudi Arabia's censorship of internet content as a violation of the freedom of Saudi citizens, a deeper look into the matter shows how social media has the potential to change the way citizens access and engage with information. Indeed, the potential of uncensored access to social media may drastically change how citizens access information because it is less censored. Furthermore, in the study about the online political efficacy amongst internet users in five Arab countries – Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Tunisia, Lebanon, and Qatar – from 2013 to 2015, Saudi Arabia was found to have the highest online political efficacy compared to these other countries (Martin et al. 2018). It has been suggested that Saudi citizens emulate the high standards set by their society, as they contribute hundreds of suggestions to the Internet Services Unit for censorship review (AlJabre 2013).

Even though the Saudi Arabian government has the power to censor the internet content, little effort goes into censoring social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, which allows conversations to take place that would not be permissible in conventional media outlets (Wentrup et al. 2017). However, although the Saudi government does not actively censor citizens activity on Facebook and Twitter, it has been accused of using human trolls and online 'bots' to undermine its critics on social media sites and has imprisoned and fined individuals found to criticise the government on social media (Benner et al. 2018).

In this regard, Amos (2011) argued that the social media revolution in Saudi Arabia also makes it difficult for the government to regulate the content accessed on the internet, as it is harder to blackout international news in a similar fashion to domestic news especially when factoring in the aspect of constant updates in newsfeeds from Twitter and other outlets. However, the censorship law employed by the government in 2012 seems to represent a step forward by the authorities towards controlling international news to protect the interests of the nation.

Information filtering is a common aspect of media use in Saudi Arabia, with the supporting evidence being on the activities of the Internet Security Unit's server (Murray 2016). Some of the content blocked by this body includes sexually explicit content and other materials not compatible with Islamic beliefs. The filtering service in the country is overseen by three major bodies, which include internet service providers, data service providers and the Communication and Information Technology Commission. Cybercrime is a common issue affecting operations on the internet, and the Saudi Arabia government established an anti-cybercrime law in 2007 as a way of dealing with the issues presented by cybercrime (Alqahtani 2016). Some of the common cybercrimes committed by Saudis on the internet include blackmail, embezzlement of funds, defamation, and hacking of accounts. The anti-cybercrime law aims at guaranteeing safe data exchange, protecting the rights of users, and upholding public interests and morals. Some of the penalties for those who break the law include a five-year imprisonment term or a fine not exceeding $800,000, and recently included public naming and shaming of the offenders (Wilkinson 2015).

Apart from technical filtering, the country has also introduced other internet restrictions; these include the requirement for all internet cafes to install hidden cameras, to close by midnight, and to not allow access to people under 18 years (Europarl 2015; Internet.sa 2004; OpenNet Initiative 2004). Other restrictions include the requirement that citizens interested in blogging need to first acquire a license from the government before commencing their blogging activities, with the government having the power to revoke the license at their pleasure (Alarabiya 2018). The

government's move to impose more restrictions regarding the use of the internet is a way of ensuring that there is no rise in social destabilisation that might easily erupt from social media as happened in Tunisia. According to Green and Karolides (2014), the censorship initiatives established by the Saudi Arabian government act to suppress and control the freedom of its citizens.

According to the report by the European Parliament cited by Reporters without Borders (RSF), censorship amounts to a human rights violation as well as a violation of freedom of expression and the right to privacy (RSF 2016). The internet restrictions imposed by the Ministry of Culture and Information in Saudi Arabia have led to concerns being raised by groups such as Freedom House which have been vocal in condemning such actions (Freedom House 2019, 2020). However, the Saudi government has become more relaxed regarding their internet restriction initiatives. For instance, the government recently lifted their ban on internet calls as a way of promoting economic growth (BBC News 2018). This move by government can also be seen as an indication that they are aware that human rights are moving more online (Reuters 2017). Apart from the Communications and Information Technology Commission and the Ministry of Culture and Information, other government bodies responsible for restricting the use of the internet in Saudi Arabia include King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology, which concerns itself with science and technology concerns within Saudi Arabia (PoKempner 2017).

4.4.2 The Cultural Influences

Hofstede (2011) identified six cultural dimensions, namely, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, long-term versus short-term, and orientation indulgence versus restraint to understand different national cultures. Based on Hofstede's cultural dimensions, the Arab culture, according to Obeidat et al. (2012), has high power distance and low uncertainty avoidance, is highly collective, has more masculinity than

femininity, and demonstrates a more short-term than long-term orientation. According to Obeidat et al. (2012), an average of the Arab countries scored 80 out of 104 and ranked seventh amongst 50 countries in power distance, scored low in uncertainty avoidance, scored 38 out of 100 in collectivism, and scored 53 out of 100 in masculinity.

Since Arabs live in a high-power distance culture, people enjoy privileges according to their social class and are tolerated by others without questions being asked; they have to adopt the traditional ethical standards, tend not to question decisions taken by the authorities, and have a significant and justified fear of being executed if they say or write something that goes against their religion, country, or culture. These elements shape their social media communication and journalism. Maintaining peace and harmony in the society is particularly important. However, they live in a high context culture where whatever they say or do would have to be interpreted based on the situation or context. As such, it is harder to understand a culture like this where the laws and documents are not written with any degree of precision. Consequently, Arabs personal communication over other forms of communication, but compared to individuals living in the West, they can develop relationships much more quickly and are more emotional, though to Westerners, their emotions might seem an expression of anger (Davies and Bentahila, 2012). Even when liberal decisions are taken for the interest of excluded groups like women, the long deep-rooted traditions in society view these decisions as unusual and as having no basis in the national culture.

Moreover, Arabs live mostly in a collectivist society where no one is free from social pressure and has to conform to the rules of the society. In addition, they have deep social bonds; relationships, friendships, and intimacy are very important to them. Religion has a great influence in deciding what is and is not accepted in society and what rules must be followed; their religious sentiments are easily offended, which means immense care should be taken and sensitivity shown even when posting on social media. Moreover, social networking sites are becoming particularly useful for

Arabs to increase interaction and cultural communication to achieve political and social goals (Markham 2014; Al-Omoush et al. 2012).

Another factor that should be taken into consideration regarding the Arab culture is religion, as discussed earlier in this chapter. The role of religion in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia can be seen as having a religio-political orientation due to its adherence to Sharia law and the religious authority exercised by the Ulama (Kechichian, 1986). King Abdulaziz, the founder of the kingdom, led the country under the rule of Islamic Shariah. Al-Saud (2000, p. 3) commented, "This approach means that the King's power is limited by Islam. The King must also observe Saudi traditions and maintain the support of the religious leaders: the *Ulama"*.

A clear example of the power of religion occurred in November 1990, when 12 Saudi women were caught driving cars, and the Ulama delivered a fatwa that prevented women from doing so. Moreover, Aba-Namay (1993) went further, stating that the power the Ulama wield is sometimes greater than the power of the government (Sukkar 2010). On the other hand, some scholars prefer to focus on the positive side of the Ulama's role in the kingdom, as they play a significant role in managing the relationship between the government and the public. Alhargan (2012) stated,

> The official religious establishment (as well as some non-governmentally affiliated clerics) plays a significant role within Saudi society, especially as the ruling Al Saud family rely on the official religious establishment for their political legitimacy. Indeed, because the religious establishment enjoys such great respect, it also plays a role in legitimating government policies. (Alhargan 2012, p. 127).

Furthermore, the Ulama are an important aspect of the regulatory authority in Saudi Arabia, as "the Board of the Senior Ulama has been a participant in the legislative process responsible for enacting statutory laws" (Ansary 2008, p. 7). The power of the Ulama in Saudi Arabia, and especially the Board of Senior Ulama, plays an important role in the legislative field. This

regulatory authority operates when the King, the Shura Council, or the Council of Ministers face complicated problems or new issues that require accurate Shariah views. They have to seek the opinion of the Board of Senior Ulama or the Mufti of the Kingdom before passing laws and regulations on such issues (Al-Muhanna 2005, pp. 73/74). For instance, in the 1950s, when Prince Faisal and King Saud disagreed, the Ulama took one of the most significant decisions in Saudi history and released a fatwa that gave Prince Faisal the full power of the king (Al-Nassar 2010, p. 22).

In Saudi culture, social media is changing public discourse and the tools people use to communicate and also their way of conveying and understanding things. According to Flew (2016), due to globalisation, social media is an effective medium through which cultures spread around the world. Because of social media, cultural diversity is also diminishing. The thoughts, ideas, and perceptions of one culture influence other cultures. Cultural characteristics strongly influence Saudi society, particularly women's life. Until 2019, women were oppressed in Saudi society due to the male guardianship system. This system was influenced by a fundamentalist interpretation of Shariah law and has long been criticised by Saudi women themselves, by international organizations, and by human rights groups because the system deprived women of the basic right to make decisions about their own lives. In effect, the system mandated those adult women be treated as minors. For example, Saudi women were required to obtain approval from a male relative to apply for a passport, travel outside the country, travel with their children, study abroad on a government scholarship, or get married. Posting pictures of themselves on social media is also frowned upon and considered to be an illicit activity (Bourdeloie et al. 2017). Furthermore, when dealing with the government or municipalities (e.g., to apply for a job or seek education), women had to be accompanied by their male guardians (Martin 2019).

For many years, women activists in Saudi Arabia have been demanding social change and equality. They have used social media to facilitate social change by engaging in open and honest discussions

through social media using the hashtag #SaudiWomenRevolution (translated from Arabic) to demand equality in the kingdom. The individuals campaigning for Saudi women's rights on Twitter and other forms of social media have also created a page for their discussions on Facebook. Some of the demands are to end the requirement that women must have the permission of a male guardian to receive education, travel, have medical surgery, or open a bank account. The campaigners also want an end to the violence against women with much stronger punishments for any men who abuse them. Further, these campaigners want a ban on the marriage of women under the age of 18, for women to be allowed to drive, and for women to have more political rights (Jadaliyya Reports 2011).

The movement mobilised Saudi women to be active participants in the society as opposed to remaining powerless subjects. On August 2, 2019, a Royal Decree was issued to improve the social standing of women in Saudi Arabia. The Royal Decree allows any citizen to apply for a passport and states that no person above the age of 21 needs permission to travel. In addition, the decree grants adult women more control over family matters; they are now allowed to register a marriage, a divorce, or a child's birth, and to obtain the official family documents necessary when applying for a national identity card and enrolling their children in school. Moreover, women are now also allowed to be the legal guardians of their children (Martin 2019).

Erayja argued that "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). Nevertheless, the response to these demands was part of Vision 2030 launched by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who had long said the guardianship issue was one for Islamic scholars to study and who had been noncommittal about changing the guardianship laws despite his public focus on empowering women and modernizing the kingdom. This might indicate that these improvements are more likely to have been made due to pressure from the international community rather than being a real response to public demands.

Along with religious power in the Arabian Peninsula, most of which belongs to Saudi Arabia, one crucial factor we cannot ignore when talking about Saudi Arabia is tribalism and how it helped and still helps the House of Al-Saud to build the country. Metz asserted that "although the country owed its prominence to modern economic realities, Saudis tended to view life in more traditional terms, the state in 1992 remained organised largely along tribal lines" (Metz 1993, p. 3). Similarly, Al-Sheikh argued that even though the government seeks to enhance the national identity amongst all Saudi provinces, each province still has its own tribal culture and, in some provinces, beliefs, "as the period of time since Saudi Arabia was established has not been long enough to dissolve regionalism's differences to achieve unity and national cohesion" (Asharq Alawsat Newspaper 2005). Moreover, Al-Saud pointed out how important tribalism is in Saudi Arabia and in the Gulf States as well: "The analytical presentation provided here shows that Islam and tribalism are important to understanding the politics of the Gulf dynasties. The balance between the two has been changing in favour of the general public" (Al-Saud 2000, p. 51). Indeed, Sukkar (2010) considered religion and tribalism to be essential elements of Saudi culture: "The creation of the contemporary Saudi state was in part an outcome of a traditional religious-tribal alliance" (Sukkar 2010, p. 5). Further, Al-Saud believed that tribalism plays a significant role in the historical legitimacy of the Saudi political system, stating, "The Saudi dynasty is defined by its adherence to the immutable characteristics of Islam and tribalism" (Al-Saud 2000, p. 94).

The tribal system has given rise to a strict family structure, and it is this that has had the most impact on women's rights. For example, many families and tribes, especially in the centre and south of Saudi Arabia, consider it shameful for women to be working in health centres or hospitals. The reason stems not from the true spirit of Islam but from the fact that their ancestors did not allow the women in their family to work in front of unrelated men, even though health work is vital for humanity and so is not prohibited by Islam. Moreover, one of the biggest problems in Saudi Arabia is that the line between the legal and the customary is extremely ambiguous. This

unseen boundary exists because of the monarchical government structure of Saudi Arabia. The words of the King have the effect of a law that has to be enforced and obeyed by the citizens, and this is recognised through custom. Therefore, the line between customary action and the actual law appears to be invisible. Shariah dictates traditional customs, which have been converted to laws due to the amount of time during which these customs have been upheld (Alharbi 2015).

4.4.3 Saudi Arabia in the Global Context

Any discussion of Saudi Arabia must consider the issue of oil, as Saudi is the largest oil producer in the world. Oil was discovered in Saudi Arabia in 1932, and from then until the present day, it has been the source of the country's income (Metz 1993, p. 3). However, being an oil-producing country does not mean that Saudi Arabia is free from economic problems. Like many developing countries, Saudi Arabia suffers from an underdeveloped internet and technology infrastructure. This issue affects the connection with social media networks and delays communications. Besides, CNN reported that a recent issue, which became the 16th most addressed discussion in the world on Twitter; specifically, there was criticism against the Saudi government regarding people living in poverty in this wealthy country. Many people were shocked by this campaign about poverty (Almazroui 2012). Nonetheless, poverty represents a major factor that affects the use of social media platforms for engaging with the government via members of the Shura Council.

Perhaps the influence of social media on decision-making can best be seen in issues related to the economy. Unlike political and cultural concerns, the economy is a safe field for citizen-policymaker interaction. For example, in 2016, Professor Dalal Al-Harbi, a former member of the Shura Council, adopted a case from Twitter and supported it until the Shura Council had voted positively in this regard. This occurred after the former King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz issued the Royal Order (121 / A) to create 52,000 educational jobs for graduates who had qualified for teaching. However, the Ministry of Civil Service had announced only 41,000 educational jobs,

that is, 28,000 for women and 13,000 for men, in addition to modifying 11,000 jobs from educational to administrative jobs as 'assistant staff'. After a week of communication through their accounts on the same hashtag, and via their comments on Twitter, she managed to deliver their complaints to the committee (Sabq Online Newspaper 2016). This case is an excellent example of the power of social media platforms on the decision-making process in the parliament of Saudi Arabia. Al-Harbi (2018) described it as an instrument for allowing the voices of Saudi citizens to be heard. Such a case indicates that Twitter is more likely to have a stronger influence on economic issues than on other issues related to politics, civil rights, and freedoms, in particular, freedom of speech.

The Middle East is a global political hotspot; there are some international challenges that have affected not only Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries but the whole world, such as the Arab-Israeli War; the Iraqi-Iranian War, which is known as the first Gulf War; the Iraqi-Kuwaiti War, which is known as the Second Gulf War; the war against terrorism on the aftermath of Al-Qaida's attack of 11 September; the US wars in Afghanistan in 2001 and in Iraq 2003; the Arab Spring 2010; and the current conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Therefore, it is important to understand the factors and features that can affect the decision-making before discussing the decision-making process.

Ocasio et al. (2018) emphasised that changes in communication technology alter people's interests and behavioural patterns, and transform the meaning of symbols, which ultimately affects all cultures. In the past, face-to-face communication was the dominant form of communication across the globe, but it has been replaced by texting and talking over the phone, and via social media. Physical cues are absent in this type of communication, and digital expression is more important in online social interaction. Saudi Arabia has seen a rapid growth in the use of social networks as well as micro-blogging sites such as Twitter (Al-Khalifa 2012). Al-Khalifa indicated that there is

a strong inclination to use Twitter for the discussion and dissemination of political matters in the country.

4.5 Conclusion

From the above comprehensive discussion of the literature, some variables with significant impacts on the use of social media in non-democratic countries, such as Saudi Arabia, have been identified. Saudi Arabia is a dynastic monarchical state where almost all the power is in the hands of the King. Whilst the Shura Council is the regulatory authority, it has limited power due to its advisory role. The usage of Twitter and other social media platforms in Saudi Arabia has been increasing particularly the inclination to use Twitter including by the top administration in the government, which makes it a strategic mode of communication. However, certain factors may restrict citizen–policymaker channels of communications. Firstly, the advisory role of the Shura Council members restricts them from including public concerns in their policy agenda. Secondly, the cultural characteristics, such as high-power distance, masculine society, high collectivism, and short-term orientation, should be considered when examining the role of social media in the policymaking process. Thirdly, censorship and surveillance, tribalism, and the use of social media for self-promotion are additional factors that prevent social media from influencing the policymaking process.

CHAPTER FIVE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

5.1 Introduction

This chapter first specifies the research aim, objectives, and research problem. Second, it identifies the sampling plan along with the methods of data collection. Finally, it introduces the data analysis procedure employed to meet the research objectives as well as the tools used to ensure the validity and reliability of this study, which are also detailed.

5.2 Research Aim, Objectives, and Questions

5.2.1 Research Aim

The aim of this research study is to analyse how Twitter affects policymaking, policy action, and deliberation in a specific system not based on public election.

5.2.2 Research Objectives

This study has the following five research objectives (RO):

RO1: to critically and empirically explore how the Shura Council members perceive Twitter in terms of political intervention.

RO2: to assess the role of Twitter in changing the views of the legislative body/decision-makers.

RO3: to examine the extent to which Twitter usage has influenced the political policies and agendas in the Shura Council.

RO4: to consider whether Twitter enables Shura Council members to find out about and engage with public concerns and therefore helps place these concerns on the public agenda.

RO5: to explore whether Twitter can enhance public interventions in a legislative/parliamentary process not based on public elections.

5.2.3 The Research Questions

The research questions (RQ) of the study are as follows:

RQ1. How has Twitter use informed the views of the legislative body/decision-makers in the Shura Council regarding public concerns and policy?

RQ2. To what extent have interactions with the public on Twitter influenced the agenda setting of the Shura Council during the policy making process?

RQ3. What impact do interactions with members of the public on Twitter have on the workings of the Shura Council during the policy-making process?

RQ4. In what way can Twitter use enhance engagement with the public in a legislative/parliamentary process not based on public elections?

5.3 Research Design

From the wide variety of data collection tools, I chose three different methods to gather the data for this research project: surveys, semi-structured interviews, and interpretative content analysis. This mixed methods approach was applied to understand the social world in question (in this case, the relationship between the Shura Council and social media) from multiple viewpoints and perspectives (Creswell 2011). In this sense, the interpretive content analysis of tweets provided data on understanding how members of the Shura Council use Twitter for public engagement. The surveys offered insights into participants' social media practices and perceptions to understand how their perceptions of the usage of social media were formed, whilst the interviews allowed me to explore in-depth data on the perception and role of social media on the working processes of the Shura Council as perceived by its members.

The research design involved using both qualitative and quantitative approaches to data collection and inductive and deductive approaches to data analysis (Gray 2013; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004; Saunders et al. 2009). The quantitative approach refers to understanding the phenomenon from a numerical perspective using statistical and scientific models, whilst the qualitative approach is primarily exploratory in nature, providing insights into the problem through understanding the underlying opinions, attitudes, and motivations (Castellan 2010; Creswell 2003; Muijs 2010; Rao and Woolcock 2003).

5.3.1 Survey Method

Isaac and Michael (1997, p. 136) defined the purpose of survey research as being:

> to answer questions that have been raised, to solve problems that have been posed or observed, to assess the needs and set goals, to determine whether specific objectives have been met, to establish baselines against which future comparisons can be made, to analyse trends across time, and generally, to describe what exists, in what amount, and in what context.

Pinsonneault and Kraemer (1993, pp. 2/3) identified three unique elements of survey research. First, survey research is used to illustrate quantitatively precise features of a given population through exploring the relationships amongst variables. Second, the data necessary for survey research are collected from respondents, meaning the data are subjective in nature. Third, survey research can be used as it investigates a chosen segment of the population from which the conclusions can be generalised to the population. This research addresses these points first by considering the relationship between the members of the Shura Council and social media, particularly Twitter. In regard to the second and third elements of survey research, this research collected data from the current members of the Shura Council to explore how these actors viewed the role of Twitter in the policymaking process.

Gunter (2000, p. 23) emphasised that questionnaires are an important tool to collect data; as he stated, they are "one of the measurement devices frequently used by researchers who need reliable quantitative data about audiences on a large scale in a systematic way". For the survey method, I prepared a questionnaire to gather information about the usage of social media, especially Twitter, in the decision-making process in the Shura Council of Saudi Arabia. The questionnaire therefore addressed the first, second, and third, research questions. Two types of closed-ended questions were used in the questionnaire. First, Likert scale responses were used in most items to rate on a 5-point Likert-type scale the extent to which members agreed or disagreed with each item statement in the questionnaire. Second, the questions of the survey were articulated based on the content analysis of the 58 accounts that were studied, as observations of the members' Twitter accounts helped me create questions for the survey.

The questionnaire comprised three sections. The first section aimed to explore Council members' demographic profile and general background; the second section considered the nature of their Twitter usage; and, finally, the last section focused on the aspects of their Twitter's usage as a Council member. The first section comprised questions related to gender, age, education, education major, background career experience, length of time involved in decision-making, and the tenure of members in the Council. Questions in the second section were related to whether the respondents had a social media account, their preferences regarding social media, the length of time they had been using Twitter, information they had included in their Twitter profile accounts, and what language they used. The third section included primarily the use of Twitter, the purposes of the time the individuals' spent using Twitter, how often they used Twitter and how much time daily they spent on Twitter as part of their job as members of the Council, and if they had followed posts on the Council's Twitter account. In addition, this section had four questions which used a 5-point Likert scale to assess the purpose of using Twitter as a member of the Council; the advantages, or disadvantages of using Twitter; and the impact of Twitter on their views and

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opinions in topics and issues; whilst in the last one, respondents were asked to evaluate the role of Twitter in enhancing their relationship with the public (see Appendix A).

5.3.2 Interview Method

For the interviews, I developed a semi-structured interview form to collect in-depth data on the perception and role of social media and working processes within the parliament as perceived by its members. This method covers all the RQs from 1 to 4. The semi-structured interview is the most appropriate method for this research because it is a more flexible version of the structured interview (Edwards and Holland 2013). It facilitates the use of in-depth questioning whilst allowing the interviewer to keep the interview within the boundaries delineated by the research aims. The order in which the various topics are dealt with, and the wording of the questions are left to the interviewer's discretion (Gubrium and Holstein 2002). I felt that the other two types of interviews – structured and open-ended - would not serve the purpose of this study. The structured interview has a set of predetermined direct questions that require immediate and mostly 'yes' or 'no' type responses, which leaves the interviewees little freedom for discussion and communication, and the open-ended interview is an open process that gives both the interviewers and interviewees more flexibility and liberty in terms of developing, implementing, and organising the interview content and questions (Berg 2007), which means it may take longer than planned. It may also not be as systematic and organised for the comparison of results. The interview form contained open ended and semi-structured questions to obtain maximum information from the respondents. DeMarrais and Lapan (2004, p. 52) pointed out that the interview is the best method when the researchers are looking for "in-depth knowledge from participants about particular phenomena, experiences, or sets of experiences."

The interview form contained 27 questions divided into 4 sections to gather data on specific issues relevant to the objectives of this study. These sections are the demographic characteristics of the

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interview population, aspects of social media usage, the role of Twitter in enhancing citizen decision-maker interaction, and the impact of Twitter on the members' profession (see Appendix D).

The interviews were related to the survey, as the survey formed the basis for what was asked in the interviews. In this sense, the interviews served as a means of exploring further the issues addressed in the survey that I wanted further clarification about and served to put the findings of the survey data into context by comprehensively exploring the members of the Shura Council's relationship with social media and what they believed the role of social media to be. The interviews were carried out in order to expand and further elaborate on the survey results as well as to seek out any unique insights the members' may have had about the research topic, a well-known advantage of carrying out semi structured interviews (Cramb and Purcell, 2001). Interviews therefore yield highly personalised data and provide opportunities for probing (Gray, 2004). Furthermore, both the survey and interviews allowed me to discover direct information about the research topic at hand that was not available in secondary literature on this or similar topics (Kumar 2008).

The data collected from the interviews included not only the perceptions of the participants but also my observations on the attitude and body language of the participants and on the environment in which the interview was conducted to check if these factors influenced the responses in any way (Ormston et al. 2013). The face-to-face mode of data collection through personal interview has many advantages, such as accurate screening of the participants; checking any possible falsifications by the participants regarding information related to their demography or professional functioning; capturing verbal and non-verbal cues, namely, body language and reactions to specific questions; keeping track of the interview by ensuring the interviewee remained focused; and most importantly, capturing the participants' emotions and behaviours (DeLyser 2010; Phellas et al.

1999). Another advantage of interviews is that they allow participants to get involved and discuss their views. In addition, the interviewees can discuss their perceptions and interpretations of a given situation. Here, my role was to ask the questions that would elicit a valid response from the respondents.

Furthermore, I motivated the respondents to give full and precise replies whilst avoiding any biases stemming from social desirability, conformity, or other constructs of disinterest. Qualitative researchers usually provide comprehensive descriptions of individuals and events in their natural surroundings, and interviewing has 'usually' been considered a key factor in a qualitative research design. Kvale (1996) pointed out that as such events are not often straightforwardly observable, conversation with respondents can be one of the most successful tools for accomplishing and investigating such constructs. Moreover, as interviews are interactive, interviewers can push for absolute, comprehensible answers and can investigate any emerging topics. Hence, interviewing is expected to broaden the scope of understanding investigated phenomena, as it is a more naturalistic and less planned data collection tool.

Interviews were used to collect data after I had assessed the advantages of the approach. McGrath et al. (2019) showed that this approach is effective because it allows the researcher significant flexibility to explore any given subject in depth. The approach is linked to a qualitative and naturalistic paradigm based on its characteristics. Similarly, the option to use interviews was appealing due to the variety of approaches the method affords, such as conducting individual or group interviews. Furthermore, DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019) showed that semi-structured interviews allow for follow-up questions and open dialogue between the respondent and the interviewer. This basis was used to select the approach in preference to other methods.

To analyse the interview data, I manually coded the themes that emerged. To do so, I followed an analytical approach as endorsed by Attride-Stirling (2001). Following this, I created a structure for

analysing the interviews by coding these themes. I began the process by coding individual statements, and I then compared similar issues. This approach allowed me to organise the data into larger groups by identifying concepts shared by them (basic themes). I then created a smaller number of larger thematic issues that served as organising themes.

After the data had been collected and recorded, the themes were manually coded. Saldana (2013) described a code as a phrase used to represent a portion of language-based or visual data. The number of words represented by a phase could range from a single word to a whole paragraph. The coding could adopt the first cycle or second cycle coding. Onwuegbuzie et al. (2016) described first cycle coding as the use of a word or short phrase to symbolically assign a summative attribute to a portion of the work ranging from a single word to a whole page. Second cycle coding utilises the same strategy but also involves a re-examination of the codes created earlier. Both first coding and second coding cycles were used for the study.

The approach suggested by Attride-Stirling (2001) was considered the most suitable approach for the study. As such, the process involved classifying the themes identified into basic themes, organising themes, and a global theme. Basic themes are the lowest-order themes retrieved from textual data. Attride-Stirling (2001) described basic themes as a statement of belief anchored around a central notion contributing to a super-ordinate theme. They are simple premises. An organising theme is a middle-order theme, and it helps to organise basic themes into a cluster of significations. Furthermore, global themes are super-ordinate and encompass the principal metaphors in the data.

Several coding styles could be adopted for a given analysis. Both Hesse-Biber (2010) and Medelyan (2019) illustrated that either deductive or inductive coding can be used. Deductive coding starts with predetermined themes and categories, and the themes are suggested by the literature review. The approach is effective, as it helps to guide the research process, and a

researcher is limited to a given category. Inductive coding develops themes from the data collected. The inductive approach is iterative, and the researcher is expected to break down and analyse codes several times as they go over the data collected.

Therefore, based on the published research on the coding process, the following procedure was adopted for the study. First, the interview data were gathered and then transcribed. Second, the coding process was initiated. A combination of the deductive and inductive approaches to coding was adopted. In essence, themes had been established earlier through the research questions. Other themes were also identified by reviewing the data collected. The identified themes were recorded in the following table under the headings 'codes', 'basic themes,' 'organising themes', and 'global themes.' See Appendix E.

5.3.3 Interpretive Content Analysis Method

Regarding the content, analysis was carried out on 4,886 tweets collected from 58 accounts of both male and female current members of the Council, from December 13, 2016 to November 11, 2018. Interpretive content analysis addresses RQs2, 3 and 4. The selected accounts represent a cross-section of Council members. The collected posts were analysed based on a systematic approach with the assistance of specialised coders. Accordingly, 15 variables were extracted to cover basic information on the demographic characteristics of the account holders, aspects of usage, forms of communication, major topics of interest, and major hashtags. The interpretive content analysis method was applied to evaluate and understand how exactly Twitter was used by Council members for public engagement and to explore what viewpoints and perspectives the accounts' content covered. The codes used to analyse the content of Council members' Twitter accounts are found in Appendix B. These codes include gender, the term the account holder started out as a Council member, the duration of their social media use, the language the Twitter account was in, whether the account allowed direct messaging or not, and whether the account was officially verified.

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Content analysis of such data was then used to understand and appreciate the reasoning and motivation behind Shura Council members' social media use.

Content analysis gives researchers a systematic method to make repeatable and valid inferences through coding text. Stemler (2001, p. 1) pointed out that content analysis is "a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding". Krippendorff (1989, p. 403) defined it as "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data for their context". Six questions must be addressed in every content analysis: which data are analysed, how they are defined, what population they are drawn from, the context relative to which the data are analysed, the boundaries of the analysis, and the target of the inferences (Krippendorff 1989, p. 403).

Definitions of content analysis then inform the discipline of interpretative content analysis, which must therefore be undertaken with such probabilities in mind. Drisko and Maschi (2016, p. 79) noted that "Interpretive content analysis expands on basic content analysis by allowing more researcher exploration of latent meaning and the context of communications." Interpretive content analysis is the contextual analysis of texts, which makes interpretative content analysis different from other methods of social media inquiry (Elo et al. 2014). Stemler (2015) argued that social media content, whether on Twitter, Facebook, or any other online or offline platform, frequently contains media texts open to diverse interpretations depending on the reader's motive and the content developer's intentions.

Based on these facts, interpretative analysis is considered to lack objectivity (Elo et al. 2014; Stemler 2015). However, unlike basic content analysis, which has been deemed restrictive, interpretative content analysis is more fluid and allows the researcher to experiment with both qualitative and quantitative factors that are indicative of a user's likelihood to initiate social impact (Storlie and Woo 2021). Adherents of interpretative content analysis have since identified various

factors that influence how a target audience interprets certain texts and the likely effects of such interpretations. For example, Vicari et al. (2020) used visual content analysis to analyse the contents of Tweets, and this method could also be utilised to aid this research.

Understanding the data helps identify the proper usage and the patterns of social networking content. Accordingly, various metrics can be used to measure tweets, impressions, and engagements as well as clicks to provide additional insights into the resonance of the analysis with the target audience. Understanding the proper analysis of Twitter data helps the researcher keep the user well informed regarding social networking data.

The qualitative data were analysed inductively to reflect the context in which the participants' perception was formed and to establish a generalised view of the situation based on which the explanatory relationships between variables could be examined using the quantitative data and analysed using the deductive approach. This made it possible to establish a concrete observation of the processes of public policy decision-making shaped by social media trends and activities (Pearl 2014). The interpretative content analysis of the accounts was performed for data collection, as Cho and Lee (2014) observed that whether a researcher chooses interpretative content analysis or basic analysis, the content analyst should always be obliged to perceive the data outcomes therein as representations of facts beyond mere physical events. Moreover, interpretative content analysis helped me attain a more in-depth examination and consideration of the issue at hand.

The effectiveness of a coding strategy is often undermined by how an individual learned it. Elliott (2018) asserted that it is common to conceptualise coding as a decision-making process, which raises problems. Therefore, care was taken to assign short and precise codes that represented the information. Similarly, it was essential not to create categories but rather to classify themes using codes.

5.3.4 The Scope of the Study

Members of the Shura Council were chosen for this study because they have a voice in the legislature, in public opinion, and in communication between the parliament and the public. Furthermore, the Council has created a new media department that focuses on media strategies, and this research seeks to investigate whether social media, particularly Twitter, has influenced the traditional decision-making methods in the Council.

5.3.5 Positionality

I am Saudi and an employee of the Shura Council, and I will continue working there after I have finished this research. This had an impact on my research in the sense that I could never be entirely objective or neutral. However, I do have the advantage of having excellent first-hand insights into and access to Council members, which makes my research unique. It gave me access to the Shura Council and its members, and if I were not an employee, of course, I would not have this deep access that helps me to reach the members of the Shura Council and get the high number of respondents for the survey and for the interviews. In addition, the respondents were more open with me, given that they knew me in my role as an employee, whereas they may have been more cautious with an external researcher. Had I not been an employee and had this level of access as an insider, I would not have been able to do this research, or at least, I could not have had the high number of respondents. An external researcher would not have had that many of respondents to the survey and achieved access to interview the Shura Council members.

On the negative side, I am aware that being an employee has some disadvantages and continuing to work there might have an effect on my ability to critically examine the issues involved. This could lead to certain obstacles, and most importantly, could affect my ability to criticize what the members do and affect my recommendations, because I know I will have to deal with these people

in the future. Therefore, my future work with them has implications with regard to what I can write in the thesis.

Despite the possible issues due to my employment status, I felt relevantly free and independent as a researcher, and I felt encouraged to critically examine what the participants said and what was going on. Thus, I believe that my analysis is a critical examination of what is happening, as the Council members and high officials of the Council encouraged me to be both open and critical. Also, I was not given any instructions to not address certain topics, and I felt free to approach female members and discuss the issues that I asked them about such as women driving.

Nonetheless, I still needed to balance this insight with the need to look at the situation from the outside, in my role as researcher. Thus, to gain more objectivity in this research, I excluded the high officials of the Council from the study (the vice-president and the assistant of the Speaker) even though they count as members of the Shura Council. Being a male researcher did not affect the participants and interviewees, as they are elites, and they are well respected people whether they are male or female members. To gain maximum insight into the experience of Shura Council, I began my research in September 2016, as the 7th term started in December 2016 and ended in November 2020. Significantly, at the beginning of each term, 70% of the members are changed. Also, I chose to use three methods for this research in order for the research to be as objective as much as possible, and I frequently went back to check the data whilst I was writing the result chapters to avoid any potential bias.

5.4 Study Sample

This research used the heterogeneous purposive sampling technique, as it consists of samples from the groups of members serving between 2016 and 2020. This sampling technique was selected due to the variation in the types of members of the Shura Council, as it provides a wide range of

information on a particular phenomenon. Moreover, a sampling technique measures the extent to which the chosen sample size represents the characteristics of the entire population with the highest precision (Pandey and Pandey 2015). Usually, the main types of sampling techniques for choosing the sample are probability and non-probability. A probability sampling technique mostly employs random selection to choose a sample from an entire population (Shao 2002), providing all units in the sample with an equal chance of selection; non-probability sampling does not give an equal probability of being selected to all individual units and is concerned mainly with the author's critical skills (Tayyar 2014). Accordingly, probability and non-probability sampling techniques can also be divided into sub-types of sampling techniques.

For the purpose of the survey research, the selected population was all members of the seventh term of the Shura Council and not just a group sample. The 150 members (30 females and 120 males, including the Vice President and the Speaker's Assistant of the Council) were targeted to ensure the highest level of representation. I chose the members of the seventh term, which started on December 12, 2016, and ended on October 19, 2020. This approach is comprehensive, as it targets all members of a particular team, and it gave me the opportunity to receive actual responses from them. However, since the tenure of the present members started from 2016, creating a gap of one and a half years for former members, most of the former members had either moved to other departments or had retired or resigned, making it difficult to find them and ask them if they would be available for the present study. Thus, only current members were considered for the present study.

For the content analysis, 4,886 tweets were collected manually from 58 accounts of both male and female current members of the Council, from December 13, 2016 to November 11, 2018. My sampling strategy was to search for all the possible members' accounts on Twitter and gather all the findings. I selected every third tweet utilising random sampling. As some members had posted

thousands of posts during the study period, I was unable to catalogue all the posts during the study period. To mitigate this, key words were searched for and identified in these accounts. The study was commenced on December 13 due to the Council's yearly break, which takes place around the end of the year and lasts from 40 to 50 days.

After the data of the content analysis had been collected, one account holder[4] deleted his account on the Twitter platform, and three other account holders[5] deleted tweets exchanged amongst them regarding their work within the Council; however, these tweets had been already featured and saved, and some of them have been added to the appendices of this study (see Appendix F).

There are ethical issues attached to analysing deleted content, as the actions of the account holder indicate that they do not wish the content to be seen. However, Meeks (2018) suggested that it is acceptable to analyse politicians' deleted and archived Tweets on the basis that these artefacts reveal a significant amount about the political process. Similarly, Deacon et al. (2021) emphasised that materials posted by a public account on a public social media platform such as Twitter are acceptable research material, as unlike messages posted on closed platforms, such as WhatsApp or Snapchat, they are publicly accessible material. The selected accounts represent a range of Council members in order to present a cross-section and variation of views and political stances. The collected posts were analysed based on a systematic approach with the assistance of specialised coders. I collected data from Twitter manually, as almost all the posts were in Arabic, and therefore, I could not find an appropriate programme to analyse them.

Ultimately, I collected 120 questionnaires from the total of 150 questionnaires that were distributed amongst all the current 150 members of the Council. Only 120 were collected because 30 members

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[4] Dr Musaed Alfrayan (@Musaedalfrayan),

[5] Eng. Nabih Albrahim (@NabihAlibrahim), Dr Asmaa Alzahrani (@alzahrani_asmaa), and Dr Eqbal Darandri (@Eqbal_Darandari)

did not respond or return the survey to me. For the interviews, out of the 150 members, I approached a sample of 20 members of the seventh term of the Council. My sampling criteria were to ensure that half the sample was male and half female. I also made sure that interviewees had started serving as members of the Shura Council during different terms (2009, 2013, and 2016). As well as this, I ensured diversity in age, professional background, the term they started serving as members, Twitter activity, viewpoints, and types of engagement with the public, whilst taking gender equality into account (10 males and 10 females). According to Baker and Edwards (2012), for a study involving qualitative research like personal interviews, the sample size should be relatively smaller than that in quantitative research for the sake of gaining in-depth observations or for understanding the meaning behind a particular phenomenon (here, the role of Twitter on the policy-making process in the Shura Council). As such, the qualitative study aims to create categories from the data and analysis of their inter-relationships whilst making sense of the participants' life experiences (Dworkin 2012).

Furthermore, since the present study involved a heterogeneous population, comprising the current Shura Council members of both genders, a population of 20 was suitable in terms of the time spent gathering and compiling the data, maintaining the validity through triangulation, and budgetary constraints. There is no universally accepted sample size for qualitative research, but around 12 to 50 participants are generally the required number dependent on the homogeneity and heterogeneity of the population (Creswell and Miller 2000; Dworkin 2012).

5.5 Permission for Data Collection and Ethical Considerations

I obtained two ethical approvals for the research field study. The first approval was from my supervisor about the qualitative and quantitative questionnaires, and the second was from the university. Two additional permits were needed before starting the data collection: one from the Saudi Arabian Cultural Bureau in London, UK (UKSACB), and one from the Shura Council in

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. To get the approval from UKSACB, I needed a copy of the final quantitative questionnaires, a letter of support from my supervisor, a letter from the Shura Council, and other necessary letters, which I sent to UKSACB. Subsequently, I sent the survey to the Strategic and Development Department at the Council, which oversees giving permission to researchers who study and examine the Council or its members. I had a meeting with the General Director of the Strategic and Development Department in the Council to check the final version of the survey before starting to distribute it amongst the members. Then, I had a brief meeting with the Speaker of the Shura Council, His Excellency Dr Abdullah Al-Sheikh, to obtain his approval to distribute the survey amongst the members. In addition, I had a meeting with His Excellency, the Speaker's Assistant of the Council, and a cover letter from the General Director of the Research Studies Centre at the Council was resultantly linked to the hard copy of the survey. Another stage I went through was to get a letter from His Excellency the Secretary General of the Council. These steps were necessary because my research involved getting exceptional access to an elite group of policy makers.

There were ethical concerns connected to dealing with male and female members of the Shura Council. For the male Council members, I had to personally follow up each of them and their secretaries as each member in the Council has his/her own secretary. However, for the female members, Ms Hoda Al Helaissi, a member of the Council, helped in contacting her colleagues and asking them to complete the questionnaire. In addition, I had to contact Princess Reem Al-Saud, the General Director of the Protocol and Public Relations (Women's Department), to follow up the female members and their secretaries.

5.5.1 Data Collection Procedure

Since I am an employee of the Shura Council, I was able to distribute the questionnaire personally to other parliamentary members. It was expected that it would take 15-20 minutes to complete the

questionnaire. I explained the study aims and purpose to the administrative officials and the personal assistants of the members and then requested their permission to distribute the questionnaire. The survey was then undertaken between November 2018 and January 2019.

To collect interview data, I conducted the interviews with the 20 members in person (face to face) but first spoke to each interviewee on the phone to set up a time and a date for the interview. Prior appointments were made based on the free time the members had available. All the interviews were held in Arabic and took place in the Council building during the week of the ongoing session. The interviews were completed between December 2018 and February 2019. The Council has its regular sessions on three days – Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday – on a weekly basis, so the interviews were scheduled on the days when the Council had regular sessions. Meetings with male Council members took place in person in their offices in the Council, whereas interviews with the female Council members took place in person in the meeting room located near the Women's Department at the Council.

I described the goal, the purposes, and the objective of the research to the interviewees as well as stating the approximate amount of time the interview would take. The interviews were estimated to last from 30 minutes to an hour based on the semi-structured interview guide, exploring the Shura Council members' views more systematically and comprehensively. The interviewees were not promised any financial reimbursement; this was to circumvent any possible tampering with the answers or influencing of the report to achieve specific results. Further, the participants were ensured privacy and confidentiality, as all the questionnaires were anonymous and coded, with hard paper copies of the data stored securely. The names of the interviewees were kept anonymous at their request and because of the sensitivity of the research subject; this allowed them to speak freely and to provide significant examples and information. For this reason, I coded the interviews with numbers from 1 to 20.

I used two techniques in the interviews: audio recording and note taking. Only 1 interviewee of the 20 did not agree to the audio recording; therefore, I had to take notes during that interview. I transcribed all 20 interviews in Arabic then translated them into English in order to analyse the data synchronously, as these interviews were conducted at the same time the questionnaires were distributed amongst the members of the Council.

For the interpretive content analysis, I spent months reading and following the members' accounts on Twitter, which gave me a better understanding of the members' activities on Twitter. The interpretive content analysis was undertaken between March 2018 and November 2018. Going through the accounts one by one allowed me to read every single tweet, retweet, like, and comment in the time period of the study. This enabled me to understand how members have used and relied on Twitter in their work as members of the Council on a large scale, which was useful to create and design a systematic approach sheet to analyse the content. In addition, informal interviews with employees in the Media Department at the Shura Council and former and current members of the Council helped me to enhance the validity of the analysis.

I created the systematic approach sheet to help me code the data in a systematic technique that facilitates analysing the data and achieving reliability. This is considered an inductive approach, and it involves one of two basic techniques for creating a coding system for content analysis. As Thomas (2006, p. 238) pointed out, 'The inductive approach is a systematic procedure for analysing qualitative data in which the analysis is likely to be guided by specific evaluation objectives'. This systematic approach was useful in organising the tweets and guiding me and coders towards achieving the task.

Intercoder reliability measures were used to complete the research. Three well-educated and experienced coders who held master's degrees in Communication and Journalism were asked to support me in this study. Two of them had significant experience in the Shura Council law and

process, as they had been employed by the Council for more than 15 years. The third coder was a PhD student in Journalism Studies, who was well-experienced in content analysis, as he had used the content analysis method in his master's dissertation. Hence, the content analysis model I created would give a clear analysis of the members' content and patterns. Use of this model would not only support understanding of how members of the Council use and rely on Twitter in their activities and how this affects the decision-making process, but it also gave me the ability to identify what to include and what to exclude.

5.6 Validity and Reliability of Data

After the data had been collected and a plan had been made for the data analysis procedure, the questionnaire and the collected data needed to be checked for validity and reliability; this is important to confirm the dependability of the research findings whilst conducting a study. Moreover, the validity of data is the degree to which data collected for the study accurately measure what the study intends to measure, and it relates to the ability of the thesis to examine what it intends to research (Mohamed et al. 2013). In studies, validity is applied to the plan and method of the study including data collection methods to ensure that the study accurately represents the outcomes for which the study was designed. In this research, three testing tools were applied to check the validity and reliability of the survey: a pilot study, the Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS), and Cronbach's alpha (α) (see Chapter 7).

After receiving permission to conduct the research, I asked Bader Alhudaithy, who is the private translator of the Speaker of the Council and fluent in both English and Arabic, to translate the qualitative and quantitative questionnaires from English to Arabic and to check the spelling and the grammar. After that, I sent the Arabic version to a professional bilingual translator to retranslate the qualitative and quantitative questionnaires from Arabic to English. Then, I checked and compared the two English versions that I had to make sure they looked similar and so ensure that

the Arabic version was correct. These steps were necessary since the research is about members of the Shura Council of Saudi Arabia, and the official language is Arabic.

The questionnaire and then the semi-structured interview were first written in English. To ensure the utmost accuracy of their meaning in both English and Arabic, I used the back-translation technique, which involves translating the target language back to the original source. Aifan (2015, p. 113) defined back-translation as "the process of translating a document or survey items that have already been translated into a foreign language (e.g., Arabic) back to the original language (e.g., English)". Chen and Boore (2009, p. 235) mentioned that back-translation is useful for both comparative and operational research. They discussed the difficulty of translation because it involves translating not only a language but also a culture: "The researcher aims to render a translation that is as close as possible in structure and format to the original language, carefully considering the cultural nuances attending the use of the translation". These steps were taken to ensure that the meaning remained the same and that the participants would not get confused about the exact meaning of the questions.

It is worth mentioning that regarding Twitter content, the issue of reliability is always difficult to ascertain. This outcome often complicates the researcher's task. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the researcher to be extremely attentive when carrying out the analysis to fully identify and articulate the underlying study patterns whilst relating them to the data. The most popular ascertainment of reliability is mainly through the type of content that the interpretative content analysis was focused on, that is, either latent or manifest content. Kleinheksel et al. (2020, p. 128) defined manifest content as "describing what is occurring on the surface, what is and literally present, and as 'staying close to the text'". In contrast, they defined latent content as "interpreting what is hidden deep within the text" (Kleinheksel et al. 2020, p. 129).

The nature of social media use is that some users can delete their posts or edit the same as time progresses or as they change their opinions on certain issues (Vaismoradi et al. 2016). Consequently, whatever the research uses might not be available for reference soon after the output has been published. In addition, Stemler (2015) estimated that over 70% of active politicians normally use social media assistants to update their various platforms. Therefore, although social media posts might appear on a particular platform under a parliamentarian's name, it does not necessarily mean that those are their personal sentiments. Such challenges are likely to affect research outcomes in the case of interpretive content analysis outcomes.

5.6.1 Pilot Study

For the pilot study, I piloted only the questionnaire but not the interview schedule or content analysis. In October 2018, and before I distributed the questionnaire amongst the members, I tested the questionnaire on 30 current members of the Council twice in a period of two weeks. I established preliminary contact with them and asked them about their views on the role of Twitter in the policy-making process in the Shura Council, as the questionnaire was based on my background, informal interviews with some of the Council, and the observation of the members' Twitter accounts. The final version was developed based on the members' comments.

5.7 Conclusion

A combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods was employed, including the questionnaire, the interpretative content analysis of the Twitter accounts, and semi-structured interviews. To ensure the highest level of representation, the survey sample targeted all members of the Shura Council and not just a group. The limitations and the difficulties facing data collection were also displayed. Firstly, interviewing the Shura Council members required several levels of screening and permissions not usually needed to conduct such research. Secondly, because the first and official language of members of the Shura Council is Arabic, the questionnaire and interview

questions were subjected to a long process of translation and back-translation to ensure that the meaning remained the same. Thirdly, the 4,886 tweets were collected manually by going through the members' accounts one by one because most of the tweets and posts were in Arabic, thus making it difficult to use any program or software to collect the tweets and posts. In the next chapter, the interpretive content analysis will be discussed in detail.

CHAPTER SIX: MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT ON TWITTER: INTERPRETIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

6.1 Introduction

The interpretive content analysis method was applied to evaluate and understand exactly how Twitter was used by Council members for public engagement and to explore what viewpoints and perspectives the accounts' content covered. This section therefore addresses the second, third, and fourth research questions. This chapter presents the outcome of the 4,886 analysed tweets collected from 58 members between December 13, 2016, and November 11, 2018. This period comprises two years, that is, half of the full period of the seventh term of the Shura Council of Saudi Arabia.

This chapter contains five sections: the first part covers the characteristics of members' Twitter accounts. The second then focuses on managing Twitter accounts. The third one goes on to illustrate the forms of members' engagement with the public. The fourth part presents the most important topics of interest. Then, the final section presents the hashtags the Council members engaged in.

6.2 Characteristics of Members' Accounts on Twitter

This section provides general statistics about the account holders' genders, the term they started serving as a Council member, the duration of usage, and the language they used in their Twitter accounts.

6.2.1 Gender

The first table (Table 6.1) shows that out of the 58 members' studied Twitter accounts, the significant majority (67.2%) belonged to male Council members and 32.8 % to female members.

Table 6.1: Distribution of the Content Analysis Population: Gender

Scales	Frequency	Percentage
Male	39	67.2
Female	19	32.8
Total	58	100.0

6.2.2 Started Serving as a Council Member

Table 6.2 below shows that the majority (62.1%) started serving in the seventh term, whilst 29.3% started serving in the sixth term and 8.6% in the fifth term. Female members became official Council members in the sixth term, which started in 2013. This means that all five members who started serving in the fifth term, which started in 2009, were male.

Table 6.2: Distribution of the Content Analysis Population: Started Serving as a Member in the Shura Council

Scales	Frequency	Percentage
Seventh term (started 2016)	36	62.1
Sixth term (started 2013)	17	29.3
Fifth term (started 2009)	5	8.6
Total	58	100.0

6.2.3 Duration of Usage

Table 6.3 shows that the majority had been using Twitter for eight, seven, and six years (2011, 2012 and 2013) with the percentage of 29.3%, 22.4% and 12.1% respectively. Meanwhile, 10.3% of the members had been using their Twitter accounts for four years (2015), whilst all the members who had been using Twitter for ten, nine, and two years (2009, 2010 and 2016) had the same

percentage (6.9%) for each year. The years 2008 and 2014 saw the lowest percentage of members creating their Twitter accounts with a percentage of 1.7% and 3.4% respectively. These results show that majority of the Council members were not entirely new to Twitter, and they were well experienced in using the platform.

Table 6.3: Distribution of the Content Analysis Population: Date Users Opened Twitter Accounts

Scales	Frequency	Percentage
2011	17	29.3
2012	13	22.4
2013	7	12.1
2015	6	10.3
2009	4	6.9
2010	4	6.9
2016	4	6.9
2014	2	3.4
2008	1	1.7
Total	58	100

6.2.4 Language Used on Twitter Accounts

Table 6.4 below shows that 87.9% of the members used Arabic to write their Twitter IDs and biographies, whilst 12.1% preferred to use English. The results of the survey and the interviews support this finding as Arabic is the official language of Saudi Arabia and its citizens (see Chapters 7 and 8).

Table 6.4: Distribution of the Content Analysis Population: Language Used on Twitter Accounts

Scales	Frequency	Percentage
Account in Arabic	51	87.9
Account in English	7	12.1
Total	58	100.0

6.3 Managing Twitter Accounts

This section includes items relevant to IDs and biographies (bio), such as allowing direct messages, verifying their accounts, whether they mentioned their position as a Council member on their bios, and the number of followers they had.

6.3.1 Allowing Direct Messages

Table 6.5 indicates that the majority of the accounts (87.9%) allowed direct messages from everyone, whilst 12.1% did not. This indicates that most account holders are open to receiving direct messages from all users including non-followers.

Table 6.5: Distribution of the Content Analysis Population: Managing Direct Messages

Scales	Frequency	Percentage
Open to direct message	51	87.9
Not open	7	12.1
Total	58	100.0

6.3.2 Verified Accounts

The table below (Table 6.6) shows that 27.6% of the account holders had verified Twitter accounts, whilst 72.4% did not. Verified accounts give the followers more confidence about the authenticity and credibility of the account holder.

Table 6.6: Distribution of the Content Analysis Population: Verified Accounts

Scales	Frequency	Percentage
Not verified	42	72.4
Verified the account	16	27.6
Total	58	100.0

6.3.3 Profile Information

This difference in the results can be due to 15.5% of the content analysis sample being inactive members (see Table 6.8).

Table 6.7: Distribution of the Content Analysis Population: Profile Information

Scales	Frequency	Percentage
Mention their Position	45	77.6
Do Not Mention	13	22.4
Total	58	100.0

6.3.4 Active and Inactive Accounts

The table below (Table 6.8) shows that the majority (85.5%) of the members with Twitter accounts were active on Twitter, whilst 15.5% were inactive. This indicates that the majority of the account

holders were interested in expressing their views and interacting with others on Twitter, though, to different degrees as shown in the next section.

Table 6.8: Distribution of the Content Analysis Population: Active and Inactive Accounts

Scales	Frequency	Percentage
Active	50	85.5
Inactive	8	15.5
Total	58	100.0

6.3.5 Level of Activity

The active members were divided into two categories with the first being fairly active members who had fewer than 5,000 posts on their account, and these accounted for 65.5%. The second category comprised highly active members on Twitter with over 5,000 posts, that is, 34.6% of the total studied accounts (see Table 6.9). These results reinforced the findings from the questionnaire which showed 27.7% of the respondents used their Twitter accounts several times a day (see Chapter 7).

Table 6.9: Distribution of the Content Analysis Population: Level of Activity

Scales	Frequency	Percentage
0 to fewer than 4,999	38	65.5
5,000 to over 20,000	20	34.6
Total	58	100.0

6.3.6 Number of Followers

As seen in Table 6.10 below, 51.7% of the sample of accounts had fewer than 5,000 followers; 29.3% had from 1000 to 4,999 followers, whilst 22.4% had fewer than 1000 followers. Members

who had from 5,000 to 9,999 followers, 10,000 to 19,999, and 20,000 to 49,999 accounted for 10.3%, 19%, and 8.6% respectively. Meanwhile, 1.7% of members had 50,000 to 99,999 followers and 5.2% had 100,000 to 199,999 followers; however, only two members (3.5%) had more than 200,000 followers. The number of posts also depends on when an account is open, so those who are considered as 'highly active' might have simply been on Twitter for longer, but it can give the researcher insight into the levels of activity of the population of Council members who are Twitter users as to how frequently they use the social media site.

Members who have more than 200,000 followers are human rights and political activists. For example, Dr Latifah Alshaalan is the most highly active female member (serving since 2013), with 119,000 followers. She belongs to a powerful tribe and was highly active even before becoming a Council member; she is known for defending women's rights, particularly driving, and she is always determined to challenge her colleagues and government agencies and institutions regarding this issue. Additionally, both Dr Abdullah Alfozan, a highly active male Council member on Twitter (serving since 2016) with 441.900 followers, and Ms. Kawther Alarbash, a highly active female Council member on Twitter (serving since 2016) with 371,200 followers, were Saudi figures and elites even before becoming Council members. Furthermore, Dr Obeid Alabdali, a highly active male Council member on Twitter (serving since 2016), with 106,000 followers, was one of the first Saudis to join Twitter and a well-known specialist in the marketing field.

Table 6.10: Distribution of the Content Analysis Population: Number of Followers

Scales	Frequency	Percentage
1,000 to 4,999	17	29.3
Less than 999	13	22.4
10,000 to 19,999	11	19.0
5,000 to 9,999	6	10.3

Scales	Frequency	Percentage
1,000 to 4,999	17	29.3
Less than 999	13	22.4
20,000 to 49,999	5	8.6
100,000 to 199,999	3	5.2
More than 200,000	2	3.5
50,000 to 99,999	1	1.7
Total	58	100.0

6.3.7 Usage Purposes

Table 6.11 below shows that the majority of the members (56.8%) used their Twitter accounts for professional and personal purposes, 34.5% used them for personal purposes, and only 8.6% for professional purposes only. A distinction was made between personal and professional use by analysing the information on their bios and the content of their accounts.

Table 6.11: Distribution of the Content Analysis Tweets: Personal and Professional Use

Scales	Frequency	Percentage
Both	33	56.9
Personal	20	34.4
Professional	5	8.6
Total	58	100.0

6.4 Members' Engagement with the Public

Various aspects of members' engagement with the public on Twitter were systematically divided into two forms of participation: one-way communication (informing) and two-way communication

(interacting). To do this, I examined the use of @ replies to identify 'interactive' tweets and also considered @ mentions as interactive instances. Each category is analysed systematically to present the main issues of concern to the members of the Council. Different analytical and descriptive examples will be provided to understand the members' activities on Twitter and what they indicate. It is worth reminding that the 4886 analysed tweets in this section were collected from the 50 active members' accounts as eight members were inactive (see Table 6.8).

6.4.1 Types of Communication

The table below (Table 6.12) indicates that the majority (63%) of the analysed tweets took the form of one-way communication, as they involved informing the public about a specific issue without getting engaged in a debate or a discussion, whilst 37% involved responding to the public questions and inquires or interacting with other members or two-way communication.

Table 6.12: Distribution of the Accounts Tweets: Nature of Activities

Scales	Frequency	Percentage
One-way Communication (Informing)	3,077	63.0
Two-way Communication (Interacting)	1,809	37.0
Total	4,886	100.0

6.4.2 Main Purposes of One-Way Communication

As seen in Table 6.13 below, the first topic was highlighting the government's decisions with 22.1%, whilst updating the Council activities came second with 16.8%. Promoting their work and their colleagues' work came third and fourth with 14.2% and 12.8% respectively. Finally, information about the progress of proposed legislation had the lowest percentage with 6.1%.

The majority of the interviewed members were clear that when the government announced major decisions, they preferred to participate on Twitter to explain, describe, and comment on such government decisions and rules (see Chapter 8). This also supports the survey results, as the statement 'fast access to government decisions' scored third as 66 of the participants (70.2%), agreed and strongly agreed to it, whilst 'tweeting their thoughts and opinions on general topics and issues' came fourth, as 54 participants (57.5%) agreed and strongly agreed with this statement (see Chapter 7). These results suggest that the Council members used Twitter to provide information to the public about government decisions.

Table 6.13: Distribution of the Tweets: One-Way of Communication

Scales	Frequency	Percentage
Highlight the government decisions	745	22.1
Update about the Council activities	566	16.8
Promoting their work	481	14.2
Promoting their Colleagues work	431	12.8
Inform about the progress of proposed legislation	208	6.1
Total	3,077	100.0

6.4.2.1 Highlight the Government Decisions

The results (which include 'personal' tweets) show that 22.1% (745 out of 3,077) tweets were posted to provide information about government decisions. This was expected, as the government announced substantial external and internal decisions during the period the content analysis data was collected. On June 5, 2017, the kingdom severed diplomatic relations with Qatar in the aftermath of a diplomatic crisis. Furthermore, on April 25, 2016, the government of Saudi Arabia released the Vision 2030 reform plan. Accordingly, the government took vital internal decisions

regarding lifting the ban on women driving, fighting corruption, the anti-harassment law, and ending tax-free living (see Chapter 4). Therefore, it is understandable that the members were more active on social media, especially Twitter, during that time more than during other previous studies around the topic.

The figures in Table 6.14 below show that lifting the ban on women driving had the highest percentage with 50.1% of the tweets. The anti-corruption measures came second with 30.1%, whilst the anti-harassment law was third with 14.8%. In addition, the table shows that end tax-free living and government budget has lowest percentage with 2.1% and 2.9% respectively.

Table 6.14: Distribution of the Tweets: Major Government Decisions Discussed on Twitter Accounts

Scales	Frequency	Percentage
Women driving	373	50.1
Anti-corruption	224	30.1
Anti-harassment law	110	14.8
Government budget	22	2.9
End tax-free living	16	2.1
Total	745	100.0

This result supports the interview results where the majority of the interviewed members felt it was important for them to explain, describe, and comment on big government decisions and rules (see Chapter 8). In addition, the Council members were clear that they were more active on Twitter at times when the government announced major decisions, even though many of them did not post tweets and they were only retweeting posts from official government, media, and their colleagues'

Twitter accounts. This also supports the questionnaire results when the members agreed that Twitter allows public discussion and commentary on new policies and decision (see Chapter 7).

On September 26, 2017, the King took a decision to lift the ban on women driving (to be enforced on June 24, 2018). The issue of women driving sparked a significant amount of interaction at the local and external levels. Therefore, the Council members interacted and engaged with this news, tweeting and retweeting posts on different hashtags. In total, 38 members, of whom 15 were females, engaged with the decision and followed the updates about the topic. In addition, 14 members, of whom 13 were males, only engaged with the decisions when announced but did not follow the updates, whilst 14 of the Council members who had Twitter accounts never interacted with the decision through their Twitter accounts. It was also observed that one female member and one male member were the most active in this topic in the Council and on social and traditional media even before the decision was made.

There were about nine months between the King's announcement of the decision to lift the ban on women driving and the date the decision came into force. During this time, those 38 members were involved in updates about women driving, such as preparing the government sectors for the event; the obstacles women faced, like excessive costs and appointments at driving schools; and news articles, newspaper columns, and television programs about the topic. Two members reacted to the decision based on their specialties; the first highlighted the impact of the decision on the economy, and the second expressed his views as a media and communications expert.

Sometimes members used Twitter to adopt a normative stance in commenting on the decisions in order to either support or criticise the government. For example, a fairly active female member on Twitter (serving since 2013), tweeted three posts on August 30, 2018, after passing the driving theory test, giving her observations about the instructing centres and the Traffic Law[6]. She posted

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[6] See (translated from Arabic to English): https://twitter.com/Dr_NoraM/status/1035213384436854786?s=20

in a normative manner to highlight how she felt, that is, that it was ridiculous that she had to undertake theoretical training without practical experience due to Saudi Arabian strictures on women drivers. She was able to perceive this, as she had already been driving for three years whilst living in the United States. Her post generated three retweets by other members. On June 24, 2018, another fairly active female member (serving since 2013), posted a photo of her driving license. Her post had also engaged five other members. Next, on June 1, 2018, a photo of the first female to obtain a driving license posted on Twitter got four tweets by members of the Council.

Another example of normative engagement occurred on November 4, 2017; the King released the decision on the creation of the anti-corruption committee to combat corruption in the kingdom. As a result, several prominent Saudi Arabian princes, government ministers, and businessmen were arrested in Saudi Arabia. This decision sparked a significant amount of interaction on Twitter, including the Council members, as 224 tweets were observed on this topic. On the same day, 40 members retweeted the posts from government officials, official media outlet accounts, and the Council's official Twitter account. A female member commented on a post by a media channel on the arrest of those famous individuals stating that there was no place for corruption in the new Saudi Arabia. Another female member tweeted two posts on November 5. The first claimed that e-government would limit corruption, and the second claimed that giving the Council more power is important to enhance transparency and achieve sustainable development. Her post engaged other

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Today thankfully I finished the theoretical training at driving school in Tabouk. Despite that I know how to drive and I have driven for three years in Ohio. I have noticed that traffic law needs major changes such as:

https://twitter.com/Dr_NoraM/status/1035215427197173760?s=20

1 the absence of skill level tests before registration which will ensure not to waste professional driver time and allow the beginners the sufficient training.

2 the training is exclusively within the driving school walls which is not a real world.

https://twitter.com/Dr_NoraM/status/1035218538997403648?s=20

Granting the trainee, a driving licence means that driving school certifies that she is capable and responsible of operating a motor vehicle. That is a dangerous act if not done properly

members and generated three retweets. Furthermore, a male member posted an old column that he had written in 2011 about the prevalence of corruption and the lack of accountability. This was followed by 45 posts by other members in support of these reforms. However, due to the legal and ethical sensitivity of the anti-corruption topic as it was under ongoing investigation, 40 members were cautious about discussing it on Twitter. Moreover, 21 Council members engaged and interacted with the issue and followed the updates about it, whilst 28 members engaged only with the decisions when announced, and the other 12 Council members never interacted with the decision through their Twitter accounts.

These examples show that the majority of the account holders were highly active in supporting the government decisions that met the demands of a large portion of the society, even though a small minority were inactive about these decisions. On the other hand, this finding indicates that major decisions are always made by the King and not enacted by the Council. These examples thus suggest that sometimes Council members use Twitter to explain where they stood on certain policy issues.

6.4.2.2 Update about Council Activities

It was observed that 39 members posted 566 tweets to update the public about Council activities; 187 of these tweets were concerned with the failure of a proposed recommendation submitted by three members suggesting that the Council should address the relevant ministries and institutions for empowering Saudi women to have senior positions in Saudi embassies and consulates as well as international organisations and bodies overseas. These tweets started with a tweet by a highly active female member on November 28, 2017, stating, 'Today, a recommendation failed by only one vote to empower Saudi women to lead the embassies, consulates, and attachés of the Kingdom and support them for senior positions in international organisations'. This post is one of many

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posts that led this member to exchange posts with another female member about empowering women.

The findings show that the vast majority of the accounts (39 out of 50 active accounts) were used to inform the public about specific activities as well as to share the Council's posts about the general activities of the Council. In the interviews chapter, the majority of the interviewed members emphasised that members discussing legislative decisions is a sensitive action, arguing that Council members should not use their Twitter accounts to discuss Council decisions because it would harm and embarrass the Council and its members (see Chapter 8). These findings show that many of these tweets focus on a few highly prominent cases. That may indicate that Council members do not regularly inform the public about Council activities but tend to focus their Twitter activities on a few specific cases.

6.4.2.3 Promoting Their Work

It was found that 481 out of the 3,077 tweets involved informing the public about members' work in the Council. That number represents the total of one-way communication (informing) identified during data collection. See Table 6.12 for further details. For example, 18 tweets were posted by one fairly active member (serving since 2016) about the proposal of the draft law to protect whistle-blowers, witnesses, and experts on financial and administrative corruption stressing that he and another colleague were the ones who submitted to the Council. On July 9, 2017, he retweeted a post by an online local newspaper about this proposal. On July 15, 2017, he retweeted a post from another online newspaper about the proposal. Also, on September 21, 2017, he retweeted two posts from two newspaper accounts regarding the proposal. On November 20, 2017, he retweeted a post from *Okaz Newspaper*, which published a report about the issues the Council would discuss regarding this proposal. In addition, this member retweeted two posts from the Council's Twitter account regarding the proposal and its aims and retweeted a post from a Council member

supporting the proposal. On November 27, 2017, he retweeted a post by the Council announcing the approval of the proposed draft law, and on November 29, he tweeted a link to a television program where he discussed the proposal. On March 12, 2018, he retweeted a post by the Council updating the public about the proposal. He continued updating the public about the process until the proposal was passed on November 6, 2018. Three more tweets were posted afterwards: an interview video of himself discussing the new law and two retweets from the public praising the law.

A similar practice was performed by 18 other account holders to provide information about their work in the Council and update the public about a draft law they had suggested to the Council and the stages the draft law had been through in the Council and the specialised committee from the day it was submitted to the day the Council passed the law. It was also observed that the majority of members were keen to retweet the Council's posts, particularly, briefs of what had happened in the weekly sessions, their interventions in discussing the government agencies' annual reports, their committees or their specialties, and their revisions to draft laws and regulations.

The findings show that 19 accounts were used as a direct communication tool to deliver information regarding the members' work without going into debate or discussions either with their colleagues or with the Council. It also shows that most of the information delivered to the public involved the legislative process of the proposals and the recommendations suggested by the account holders. This links with the results of the questionnaire, as a large number of the respondents had no strong opinions about using Twitter for 'informing citizens about their work' (see Chapter 7). These results are recorded in sections 7.3.1 and Table 7.15, which record that the respondents were more neutral about the view that informing citizens about their work was an appropriate purpose of Twitter usage. In the interviews, 80% of the interviewees used Twitter to read what was posted on the platform, and 50% of the respondents mentioned that they used Twitter to reach the public. Furthermore, the interviewed members agreed with the idea of using

Twitter accounts to update the public about their work in the Council without being involved in any online exchange of views (see Chapter 8).

6.4.2.4 Promoting Their Colleagues Work

It was observed that the Council members' engagement on Twitter was positive towards their colleagues as they supported, defended, and congratulated one another. There were 431 tweets on promoting their colleagues and praising each other; for example, three tweets were relevant to a tweet by a female member congratulating her colleagues for passing a recommendation submitted by her and one of her male colleagues on the retirement scheme for the workers appointed in the official function as teachers. Two other members engaged with this post, praising their colleagues' efforts.

Moreover, 30 members were concerned about retweeting certain activities and news of their colleagues, such as participating in seminars, workshops, conferences, events, achievements, and other personal news. For example, two male and one female account holders who were also members at King Abdulaziz Centre for National Dialogue consistently retweeted each other's posts about the Centre. Similarly, the three members who represented the Council in the Arab Parliament were active in retweeting each other's activities. In total, 35 of the account holders were active in supporting and highlighting other members' work in the Council.

6.4.2.5 Explaining the Legislation Process

The findings show that 208 out of the 3,077 analysed tweets involved explaining the legislation process. Thirty members used their Twitter accounts to improve transparency amongst the public regarding national affairs. The members who explained the technical process and work of the Council provided written parliamentary tips and advice tweets about the Council. For example, on February 22, 2018, a member created a hashtag about the Council for the purposes of delivering

the correct information about the Shura Council to avoid any misleading information being disseminated. This hashtag had 28 posts made by three members of the Council and other regular participants. Most of these posts explained the law of the Council and the legislation process.

Furthermore, 108 tweets were posted by one member explaining the process of studying the proposal of the draft law on the protection of whistle-blowers, witnesses, and experts on financial and administrative corruption until it was passed by the Council. On November 8, 2017, a female member posted 17 tweets explaining the discussions on the amendments in the anti-bribery law that she and two other Council members had submitted in the sixth term of the Council (from 2013 to 2016). She stated that those amendments were important in conjunction with the King's decision to combat and eliminate corruption. Another member also posted 180 tweets on the progress of the studying process of the amendments until the law was passed on November 29, 2017. She also retweeted two posts from the Council's account stating that the amendments to the anti-bribery law had been passed by the Council.

It is apparent that there is a gap in understanding between the Shura Council and the general public due to the lack of information about the Council's working processes. This has triggered a debate between former and current members of the Shura Council. For this reason, the members of the Council had always blamed the traditional media for not explaining this issue to the public. The above examples demonstrate that 30 account holders used their accounts to explain the legislation process and update them about the progress of the proposed pieces of legislations. Yet, the majority were more active on Twitter (writing their own posts, retweets, or comments on other users' posts) when major decisions were made or when informing about the legislations they contributed to.

This indicates that the Twitter platform can be used by members of the Shura Council to inform members of the general public and promote their own views. The lack of personal gain from

explaining the legislation process explains why it is of the lowest interest amongst the account holders.

6. 4.3 Main Purposes of Two-Way Communication

The Table 6.15 below indicates that answering the public's questions and queries was the most common method of interaction on Twitter (51%), whilst defending themselves was second with 23.2%. Defending their colleagues came third (15.4%), and finally, with 4%, was asking the public about their suggestions and opinions.

Table 6.15: Distribution of the Study's Tweets: Two-Way Communication

Scales	Frequency	Percentage
Answering the Public Questions and Queries	922	51
Defending Themselves	420	23.2
Defending Their Colleagues	279	15.4
Asking about Suggestions and Opinions from the Public	188	10.4
Total	1809	100.0

6.4.3.1 Answering the Public Questions and Queries

Twelve members engaged with the public in different ways. Four of them hosted Q&A sessions to respond to public questions and demands. One of these four dedicated a specific hour for the public to send direct messages once every couple of months. Another one specified one hour every month for receiving and answering questions from the public. A highly active male member (serving since 2013) engaged in hashtags created by the public to answer their questions. However, he rarely updated the public about his work in the Council.

Another highly active male member (serving since 2009) engaged in a discussion with a member of the public to explain why the proposal he had submitted to support forestation inside cities in Saudi Arabia had failed. This result matches the results of the questionnaire, as the survey participants viewed the statement 'Raise awareness for issues and inspire social policy reform' as the most important advantage for Twitter regarding the enhancing relationship between the members, as 69.2% of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed with the statement whilst 4.3% disagreed and strongly disagreed with it (see Chapter 7). The findings show that around half of them were interested in playing a supportive role in raising awareness and explaining these decisions or commenting on them.

The above examples show that about half of the account holders were interested in interacting with the public, especially, when it came to issues of high concern. However, ten of the members who had Twitter accounts never engaged with the public. This finding supports the results of both the questionnaires and the interviews. In the survey, 61 of the participants (64.9%) strongly agreed that conveying public complaints they see on the platform helps the members to take notice of what matters to the people and is one of the advantages of using Twitter in their work. The findings from the interviews also show that 50% of the respondents mentioned that they used Twitter to interact with the public as members of the Council.

6.4.3.2 Defending Themselves

During the data collection period, it was observed that nine members posted 420 tweets to defend themselves or clarify their views on a controversial issue. The amendment of the Nationality Law was the subject that had the highest number of tweets. The amendments involved allowing Saudi women who were married to a non-Saudi to pass on their Saudi nationality to their children. The majority of the members (63) supported the recommendation, and the Security Committee passed it to the Council to for discussion (@ShuraCouncil_SA, February 6, 2018). Two of the members

who were against these amendments were attacked by the traditional media. Both members spent months posting tweets to clarify their perspectives on that matter, commenting on the traditional media coverage, and debating with the public including journalists. One of them, on February 11, 2018, posted eight tweets to elaborate on his view claiming that the information was taken out of context and not portrayed accurately by the media, as the issue was still being discussed in the Council. He also stated that those opposing the law, including himself, did so in the interests of the nation and its citizens. The second member expressed his views as an academic and legal expert. Another incident regarding self-defence took place on September 05, 2018, when a highly active female member posted six tweets to comment on a female journalist who had attacked her on Twitter and had accused her of working for her own interests and not for the benefit of the public.

The case of amending the Nationality Law was one of the biggest issues that involved not only the Council members but also the traditional media, former Council members, and the public, as there were supporters of and opponents to allowing Saudi women who are married to non-Saudis being able to pass their nationality on to their children. Given that the Council members are appointed by the King, it is understandable for members to use social media to defend themselves to maintain a good image and avoid getting attacked or criticised by the public and the traditional media. A clean record increases their opportunities of being reselected in future terms. This finding supports the questionnaire results, which show that building their image was one of the purposes for which the Council members used their Twitter accounts (see Chapter 7). Furthermore, a minority of the interviewed members claimed that Twitter not only gives the members the opportunity to deliver opinions and actions directly to the public but also clarifies their point of view on the Council's decisions (see Chapter 8).

Interestingly, it was observed that 21 members of the Council posted 50 tweets criticising the Twitter platform for being an unreliable source of information. The tweets warned about online

bullying and provided advice about how to deal with the platform. A highly active male member (serving since 2016), on January 30, 2018, retweeted a post from *Alwatan Newspaper* informing that the Human Rights Committee had reviewed a draft law about anti-bullying on social media. This finding supports the finding from the interviews; 55% of the interviewees pointed out that trust in the Twitter platform is not absolute, has poor credibility, and is not a source of confidence at all, whilst 30% stated that credibility depends on the source of information (see Chapter 8).

6.4.3.3 Defending their Colleagues

From the analysed tweets, it was noticed that the account holders have resorted to these platforms not only for self-defence but also to support their colleagues and create alliances. Nine members posted 279 tweets defending their colleagues in three cases observed in the research period. The first took place on March 9, 10, and 11, 2018, when a female member was criticised on Twitter by one of her followers. Three of her colleagues posted supporting tweets. The second was on February 12, 2018, when an inaccurate article went viral on social networking sites related to another female Council member who did not have a Twitter account. Twelve members quickly posted tweets denying any relation of this article to their colleague. The last case was on December 24, 2017, when an appalling video related to a third female member (serving since 2016) went viral on social networking sites; 15 members posted tweets to show their support for their colleague and deny her involvement in that video.

On the other hand, Twitter accounts were used by members against other members. For example, on September 23, 2017, Dr Latifah Alshaalan, a female member (serving since 2013), and Mr Attaa Alsubaity created an alliance on Twitter against the Council's spokesperson, Dr Mohammed Almuhanna, after a clash between them on a tweet posted on the Council's Twitter account. The tweet informed that the agenda of the Council session on Monday, September 25, 2017 had included an additional recommendation submitted by three members including Dr Alshaalan and

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Mr Alsubaity. They used their Twitter accounts to respond and post photographs of the agenda that was distributed to the members. Dr Alshaalan attacked the spokesperson of the Council, and Mr Alsubaity posted three aggressive tweets against them.

Since Saudi Arabia does not allow the establishment of political parties, Council members represent only themselves and their own views when it comes to discussions and voting in both the specialised committees and the Council's regular sessions. With the emergence of social media platforms, especially Twitter, many Council members have resorted to these platforms either to improve their public image or to create alliances with other colleagues. However, the example of Dr Alshaalan and Mr Alsubaity was considered offensive by many of the interviewed members (see Chapter 8). The majority of the survey participants thought that 'addressing accusations or complaints seen on Twitter' was the most important advantage of Twitter, as 69 respondents (73.4%) agreed and strongly agreed with the statement, whilst only 7 of them (7.5%) disagreed and strongly disagreed. (See Chapter 7).

6.4.3.4 Asking for Suggestions and Opinions from the Public

In terms of asking for suggestions and options, 188 out of 1,809 tweets were posted by 12 members on this issue. The analysed tweets provided several methods for how these 12 account holders engaged the public directly in the decision-making process. For example, on July 25, 2017, a fairly active male member on Twitter (serving since 2016) posted two opinion polls on his account. The first aimed to get the public's opinion on what they knew about the Tax-Free Living draft law. The second aimed to assess public opinion on how ending tax-free living would affect their purchasing behaviours. Another example, on July 16, 2018, was of a highly active male member (serving since 2013), who engaged with hashtags created by the public to express what they expected from the services sector and some government departments. Moreover, on May 22, 2018, a fairly active male member posted a tweet stating that the Minister of Housing would be attending the Council's

session on May 30 and asking the users to provide him with suggestions. He emphasised that he considered the public's needs to be his top priority. This tweet got 500 comments, 360 retweets, and 170 likes. On May 27, he tweeted again to inform the public that he had received all their suggestions and comments and would present them before the Minister of Housing.

These examples show that a small minority of the account holders were interested in involving the public in the decision-making process, especially when a piece of legislation was under discussion. The tweet about the Minister of Housing's visit to the Council and asking the public for suggestions and the large response to it show that is possible for the Council members to pick up topics from Twitter for their agendas. This indicates that interaction between the Council members and the citizens on Twitter could enhance the decision-making process. Similarly, the finding from the interviews shows that 25% of the interviewees agreed that the public could set the agendas for the decision-makers based on social media platforms.

6.5 Main Issues

Table 6.16 shows that around half (47.3%) of the tweets focused on women's empowerment. The second topic was jobs and unemployment with 20.8%, whilst housing, education, and transportation issues accounted for 11.6%, 10.9%, and 9.4% respectively.

Table 6.16: Distribution of the Tweets: Main Issues

Scales	Frequency	Percentage
Women's empowerment issues	1250	47.3
Jobs and unemployment issues	550	20.8
Housing issues	307	11.6
Education issues	288	10.9
Transportation issues	250	9.4

Scales	Frequency	Percentage
Women's empowerment issues	1250	47.3
Jobs and unemployment issues	550	20.8
Housing issues	307	11.6
Total	2645	100.0

6.5.1 Women's Empowerment Issues

Women's empowerment was one of the top main concerns for the account holders. This result was expected, as this issue is one of the most important and is amongst the current projects that the government is working on. About 22 members - most of them females - posted 1,250 tweets on women's empowerment. For example, one highly active female member on Twitter (serving since 2013) focused strongly on women's empowerment and posted 90 tweets on her Twitter account to advocate for this issue. Her tweets were about empathising with women, as she announced that women's rights were her priority including women's right to drive. She criticised some of her colleagues who were trying to avoid using the phrase 'women's empowerment'. She proposed a review of all anti-women laws, especially the male guardianship law, and she attacked the Council and some of her colleagues for not supporting women's empowerment the same way they supported the government's decisions on other issues. She informed the public about the acceptance of Saudi Arabia in the UN Commission on the Status of Women stressing that this initiative is a step towards empowering Saudi females and suggesting appointing women in the Saudi Council of Economic and Development Affairs.

6.5.2 Jobs and Unemployment Issues

Unemployment and the minimum wage were the second main issue of concern for the account holders, as 550 tweets involved this issue. Approximately 57 of these tweets were concerned with

the recommendations submitted to the Council by one member to review the labour law. Six of these tweets were posted by a fairly active male member on Twitter (serving since 2016) to criticise the Ministry of Energy, Industry, and Mineral Resources for hiring foreign engineers whilst there were many unemployed and well-educated Saudi engineers. In one of the posts, he mentioned the Minister of Energy, Industry, and Mineral Resources, whilst there were 25 tweets criticising the Ministry of Labour and Social Development because foreign workers had obtained leadership positions in projects rather than Saudi citizens.

This example showed an important aspect of using Twitter by policy and decision-makers in Saudi Arabia. This evidence was supported by the interview results when many of the interviewed members believed that Twitter supports their work, as it allows them to deliver their thoughts directly to the concerned officers (see Chapter 8).

6.5.3 Transportation Issues

It was observed that 250 tweets were posted by five members on the transportation issue. For example, on July 16 and 19, 2018 and April 1–2, 2018, one male member addressed the Ministry of Transport about delays that caused the disruption of projects like the development of the road that links two cities – Najran and Jazan. Furthermore, on January 15, 2018, he posted a tweet emphasising his legislative role when discussing the disruption of projects of the Ministry of Transport.

6.5.4 Most Used Hashtags

Table 6.17 below indicates that the hashtags most used by the members were hashtags about women's right to drive (58%), whilst 19.8% of the tweets were tagged with hashtags about anticorruption. Hashtags about movement, 15th September, unemployment, and the Shura Council accounted for 8%, 7.5, and 6.7% respectively.

Table 6.17: Distribution of the Tweets: Most Used Hashtags

Scales	Frequency	Percentage
Hashtags about women driving	261	58.0
Hashtags about anti-corruption	89	19.8
Hashtag about movement on September 15	36	8
Hashtags about unemployment	34	7.5
Hashtags about the Shura Council	30	6.7
Total	450	100.0

It is understandable that hashtags about women driving had the highest percentage, as the findings above show that women's empowerment and women's right to drive were the topics of most concern for the majority of the Council members. It was observed that 38 members tweeted and retweeted posts using different hashtags about women driving, such as #Women_Drive_The_Car, #The_King_supports_Women_Driving, #Saudi_Women_Drive, and #Saudi_Women_Drive_The_Car (translated from Arabic). Furthermore, 29 Council members participated in the most known hashtag about anti-corruption, #The_King_Fights_Corruption (translated from Arabic).

On the other hand, 17 members of the Council interacted with the public on September 13, 14, and 15, 2017, through participating in a hashtag trending on Twitter (#Movement_on_September_15) (translated from Arabic). This hashtag was about galvanising Saudi citizens to go out on September 15 to protest against the government. The Council members tweeted, retweeted 36 posts, commented on the hashtag's posts, and praised the reaction of those citizens who supported their government and stood up to those advocating sabotage.

It was interesting to find that most of the Council members avoided being involved in hashtags about the Shura Council. The hashtag that was created by one of the members will be discussed in more detail in the following section. The total number of tweets that were tagged using hashtags was low since a highly active female member (serving since 2016), on May 14, 2018, posted a tweet to criticise hashtags on Twitter because according to her, they are not reliable nor credible even if they become trends. This supports the findings in the interview chapters when 90% of the interviewees declared that hashtags have many disadvantages that make them inappropriate for citizen–decision-maker interaction; in contrast, 10% of the interviewees viewed hashtags positively and felt they should not be ignored because policymakers can get various benefits from following hashtags (see Chapter 8).

6.6 Conclusion

A combination of quantitative and qualitative content analysis was used to analyse 4,448 posts from Twitter accounts of 58 members in the period of two parliamentary years from December 13, 2016, to November 11, 2018. The interpretive content analysis method was applied to evaluate and understand exactly how Twitter was used by Council members for public engagement and to explore what viewpoints and perspectives the accounts' content covered. Moreover, even though most of the Council members had the idea to involve the public in the discussions and debates, the majority of the account holders avoided engaging with the public in debates on Twitter and focused on informing them about the work of the Council and the special committees.

In terms of the viewpoints and perspectives covered by the members' accounts, it was interesting to find that twelve of the account holders were active in involving the public in the decision-making process either through Q&A sessions or by asking for suggestions and opinions, especially when a piece of legislation was under discussion. This means that Twitter can play a role in enhancing the relationship between the Council members and the citizens, which may lead to a large

involvement of the public in the agenda-setting. This finding is supported by 25% of the interviewees, who thought that the public could set the agendas for the decision-makers based on social media platforms. But this potential has yet to be realised, as it was found that only a few Council members used Twitter in this manner.

In the next chapter, the questionnaire results will be analysed to understand the Council members' attitudes toward Twitter. The statistical results in the questionnaires will focus on other important factors relevant to Twitter's role in decision-making in Saudi Arabia.

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE SHURA COUNCIL MEMBERS' VIEWS TOWARD USING TWITTER: 'THE QUESTIONNAIRE ANALYSIS'

7.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a statistical analysis of the questionnaires completed by 120 members out of 150 members of the seventh term of the Shura Council between November 2018 and January 2019. The purpose of the questionnaires was to create a profile of how and why the Shura Council members use social media. This relates to RQ 1, 2, and 3. The first section demonstrates the demographic characteristics of the survey population, whilst the second section provides information about the nature of Twitter's usage. The third section illustrates the aspects of the respondents' Twitter usage as a member of the Council.

7.2 Demographic Characteristics of the Study Population

This section covers the survey population's gender, age, level of education, background career experience, the time served in decision-making within the government, and the time they started serving as an MP in the Council.

7.2.1 Gender

The table below shows that the majority (76.7%, n= 92) of the respondents were males, whilst 23.3% (n=28) were females, which indicates that female members of the Shura Council were particularly interested in the study, as the total number of females in the Shura Council is 30 members. This large portion of female members responding to the survey indicates that female members were highly interested in taking part in a survey related to their work in the Shura Council.

Table 7.1: Demographics of the Survey Population: Gender

Scales	Frequency	Percentage
Male	92	76.7
Female	28	23.3
Total	120	100.0

7.2.2 Age

Table 7.2 below shows that around half of the participants (52.5%) were aged between 50 to 59 years old, 23.3% were aged 60 years old and above, 19.2% were aged 40 to 49 years old, and 3.3% were aged from 30 to 39 years old. This means that the vast majority (75.8%) of the members were over 50 years old, which explains why a small portion of members were not familiar with social media techniques, and therefore, not active on Twitter. These results are supported by data from the GMI (2020), (see chapter 1).

Table 7.2: Demographics of the Survey Population: Age

Scales	Frequency	Percentage
50 under 60 years	63	52.5
60+ years	28	23.3
40 under 50 years	23	19.2
30 under 40 years	4	3.3
Total	118	98.3
Missing	2	1.7
Total	120	100.0

7.2.3 Level of Education

Regarding their educational level, 64.2% of the study population had a PhD degree, whilst master's degree, bachelor's degree, and professional qualification accounted for 20.0%, 12.5%, and 2.5% respectively. These figures indicate that the Council members have a high standard of education and reflect the level of educational development amongst the policy and decision-makers in Saudi Arabia.

Table 7.3: Demographics of the Survey Population: Education Level

Scales	Frequency	Percentage
PhD degree	77	64.2
Master's degree	24	20.0
Bachelor's degree	15	12.5
Professors	3	2.5
Total	119	99.2
Missing	1	.8
Total	120	100.0

In terms of the major of their degrees, 15.0% had studied education, and 12.5% had studied law and administration. The other 21 majors ranged between, economic, engineering, Islamic studies, military, medical, finance, media and communication, social studies, politics, information technology, human studies, literary criticism, science and statistics, marketing, computer science, history, accounting, and philosophy. However, the percentage of the remaining majors was between 0.8% and 10.8%.

7.2.4 Background Career Experience

According to the research, 76.7% of the participants had background career experience in the government sector, whilst 8.3% had experience in the private sector as the table below (7.4) shows. It is worth noting that the demographics of this study align with previous research regarding members' ages, levels of education, and background career experiences. In his research about the Saudi Shura Council, Almuhanna (2005) found similar results regarding members' backgrounds, as approximately 74% of the participants in this research were aged 50 and above, the majority (66%) of the respondents held doctoral degrees, and 48% worked in government agencies.

Table 7.4: Demographics of the Survey Population: Background Career Experience

Scales	Frequency	Percentage
Government sector	92	76.7
Private sector	10	8.3
Total	102	85.0
Missing	18	15.0
Total	120	100.0

7.2.5 Involvement in the Government's Decision-Making

Table 7.5 below shows that 30.0% of members had been involved in decision-making within government sectors for less than four years and 30.0% for more than 16 years. The respondents who had been involved in decision-making within the government sectors for 4 to 7 years, 8 to 10 years, and 11 to 14 years accounted for 15%, 10.8%, and 11.7% respectively. Having this large number of members with a background career in the public sector, of which 67.5% had been involved in the decision- making with the government for more than eight years, indicates that the council is a government-affiliated body that does not reflect the diversity in the political and social

fabric of the kingdom. However, this is because they are all appointed by the King and not elected by the public.

Table 7.5: Demographics of the Survey Population: Involved in the Government's Decision-Making

Scales	Frequency	Percentage
Less than 4 years	36	30.0
16+ years	36	30.0
4 years to less than 8 years	18	15.0
11 years to less than 15 years	14	11.7
8 years to less than 11 years	13	10.8
Total	117	97.5
Missing	3	2.5
Total	120	100.0

7.2.6 Started Serving as a member in the Shura Council

Regarding which term they started serving as Shura Council members, the table shows that 58.3% had started serving for the seventh term, whilst 27.5% had started serving in the sixth term, and 14.2% had started in the fifth term. Since this survey targeted the current seventh term members, this means that the majority (58.3 %) were new members.

Table 7.6: Demographics of the Survey Population: Started Serving as a Member in the Shura Council

Scales	Frequency	Percentage
7th	70	58.3

6th	33	27.5
5th	17	14.2
Total	120	100.0

To summarise the results above, the majority of the study's population (76.7%) were males: 52.5% were aged between 50 to 60 years old, and 58.3% had been appointed as members of the Council in the seventh term, which started on December 13, 2016. Most of the survey population (64.2%) had a PhD degree, and 15.0% of them had education as their field of study specialisation. The level of education amongst the survey members showed that the Council has a high standard of education and reflects the level of educational development amongst the policy and decision-makers in Saudi Arabia.

Regarding their background career experience, 76.7% of the study population had worked in the government sector. Furthermore, the study shows that those who had been associated with the government's decision-making for more than 16 years and those who had been associated for less than 4 years were each 30.0% respectively of the total population. Also, the majority of the participants (58.3%) started serving for the seventh term, which is the current term that started on December 13, 2016.

7.3 The Nature of Social Media Usage

This section covers data relevant to creating social media accounts, reasons for not having social media accounts, preferred social media platforms, Twitter platform usage, the information included in the Twitter profile, the language used in their Twitter accounts, managing the Twitter account, following posts from the Council's account on Twitter, personal and professional use, and whether professional usage was affected by personal usage.

7.3.1 Creating Social Media Accounts

The chart below shows that the vast majority of the survey respondents (78.3%) had accounts on social media platforms, whilst 21.7% did not use social media platforms.

Chart 7.1: Distribution of the Survey Population: Creating Social Media Accounts
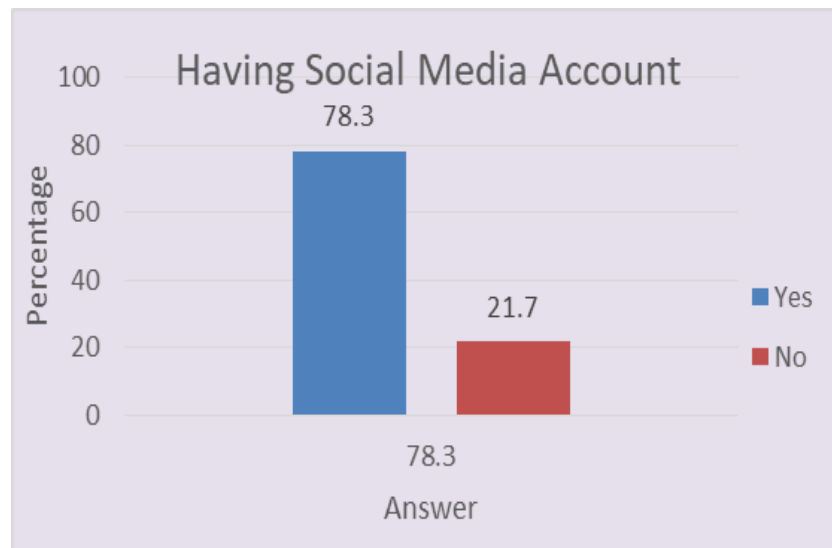
7.3.2 Reasons for Not Having Social Media Accounts

As seen in the table below, half of the survey respondents who did not have social media accounts felt that social media lacks reliability and creditability, whilst 30.8% of the participants were not interested in joining social media, and a smaller percentage of participants (26.9%) were sceptical about social media because of its lack of privacy. However, 15.4% of these respondents used to have accounts on social media, but they had closed their accounts. This finding supports the finding in the interviews where most of the interviewed members claimed that social media platforms, especially Twitter, are not a reliable source and have poor credibility for the members of the Council.

Table 7.7: Distribution of the Survey Population: Reasons for Not Having Social Media Accounts

Scales	Frequency	Percentage
Social media platforms have no reliability and creditability	13	50.0
I am not interested in joining social media platforms	8	30.8
No privacy	7	26.9
I joined once, but I did not like it	4	15.4

7.3.3 Social Media Platforms Preference

Out of the 94 members who answered that they had social media accounts, most survey participants (97.9%) preferred WhatsApp, followed by Twitter (95.7%), whilst 34% of respondents had a Facebook account and the same proportion had a Snapchat account. A total of 27.7% of the respondents had an Instagram account. Therefore, WhatsApp and Twitter were the most commonly used platforms by members, and this result supports the findings from interviews where the interviewees emphasised that WhatsApp and Twitter groups were the most preferred social media platforms they used to engage with the public. Approximately 93% of the interviewees who had social media accounts cited Twitter as their favoured platform (see Chapter 8).

Table 7.8: Distribution of the Survey Population: Social Media Platforms Preference

Scales	Frequency	Percentage
WhatsApp	92	97.9
Twitter	90	95.7
Facebook	32	34.0
Snapchat	32	34.0

Scales	Frequency	Percentage
WhatsApp	92	97.9
Twitter	90	95.7
Instagram	26	27.7

7.3.4 Twitter Platform Usage

The table below shows that most of the respondents (34.0%) had been using Twitter for five to seven years, whilst 29.8% had been using Twitter for three to four years, 18.1% for more than eight years and 14.9% for less than three years. This result that shows that the majority (52.1%) of the respondents had been using Twitter for five to eight years; this aligns with the findings of the interpretive content analysis, which showed 63.8% of the studied members had Twitter accounts for six to eight years (see Chapter 6). These results show that the majority of the respondents were not entirely new to Twitter; they had been using it for several years, and they were well experienced in using the platform.

Table 7.9: Distribution of the Survey Population: Twitter Platform Usage

Scales	Frequency	Percentage
5 to less than 8 years	32	34.0
3 to less than 5 years	28	29.8
8+ years	17	18.1
Less than 3 years	14	14.9
Total	91	96.8
Missing	3	3.2
Total	94	100.0

7.3.5 Information Included on Twitter Profile

In the table below, the vast majority (79.8%) of the survey respondents included their real name whilst 47.9% included a real picture of themselves, 45.7% included their professional position, and 40.4% included their location. The same percentage (34%) of respondents included their email address and their interests. Some interviewees explained that they preferred to hide their personal information to 'avoid getting into useless arguments and discussions', to 'prevent embarrassment', or 'to avoid getting mentioned and contacted via direct messages by the users' (see Chapter 8).

The majority (79.8%) of the sample reported that they had included their real name in their Twitter accounts, while the minority (20.2%) of respondents preferred to use Twitter anonymously. A similar result came from the interviews where the minority of the interviewed members mentioned that they had created anonymous accounts on Twitter to 'spare themselves the damage done to other colleagues', as interviewee 15 explained (see Chapter 8). Furthermore, the table shows that 47.9% of respondents had included a real picture of themselves. This means that more than half of the survey participants had not included a real picture of themselves. This is an expected result, as 23.3% of the survey sample were female members who preferred not to share their real pictures publicly for either religious or cultural reasons. In total, 19 out of the 58 accounts analysed were for female members of the Shura Council, and more than 15 of these did not share a picture of themselves on their Twitter profile. There is no law against women in Saudi Arabia publishing personal pictures showing a human form, but some members of the Muslim community consider taking such photographs to be an illicit activity (Bourdeloie et al. 2017), which may influence the decision of many female Shura Council members to use a picture that does not depict themselves.

Table 7.10: Distribution of the Study Population: Information Included on Twitter Profile

Scales	Frequency	Percentage
Real name	75	79.8
Real Picture of self	45	47.9
Professional position	43	45.7
Place of employment	38	40.4
Email address	32	34.0
Interests	32	34.0

7.3.6 Language Used on Their Twitter Accounts

The figures seen in the chart below indicate that the majority (60.6%) of the respondents used the Arabic language only, whilst 30.9% used both Arabic and English. The respondents who used Arabic, English, and French, and who used only the English language accounted for only 3.2% and 2.1% respectively. The results in the chart below matched the findings of the interpretive content analysis where 87.9% of the studied members' accounts used Arabic to write their Twitter IDs and biographies, whilst 12.1% preferred to use English (see Chapter 6). This was an expected result, as most of the members wanted to reach the Saudi citizens, who mostly speak Arabic.

Chart 7.2: Distribution of the Study Population: Language Used on Their Twitter Accounts
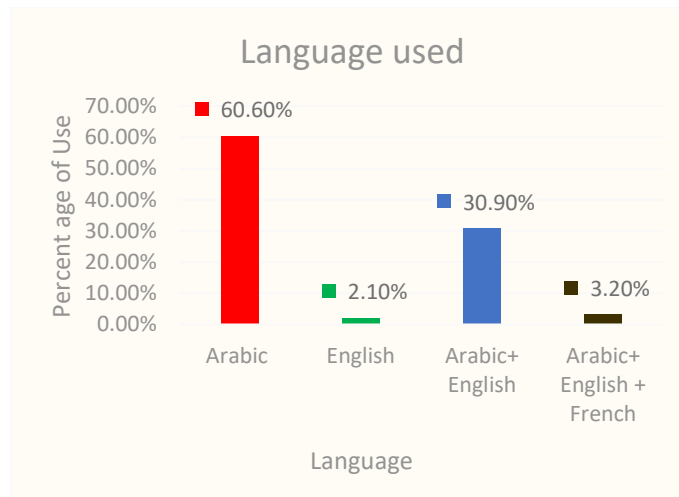
7.3.7 Following the Shura Council's Account on Twitter

The chart below shows that nearly all respondents (90.4%) followed posts from the Council's Twitter account, whilst only 7.4% did not. However, during data collection, it was observed that the Council's official Twitter account had never interacted with the members on Twitter (see Chapter 6). This indicates that members following the Council's official Twitter account does not lead to effective interaction between the members and the Council on Twitter.

Chart 7.3: Distribution of the Study Population: Following the Shura Council's Account on Twitter
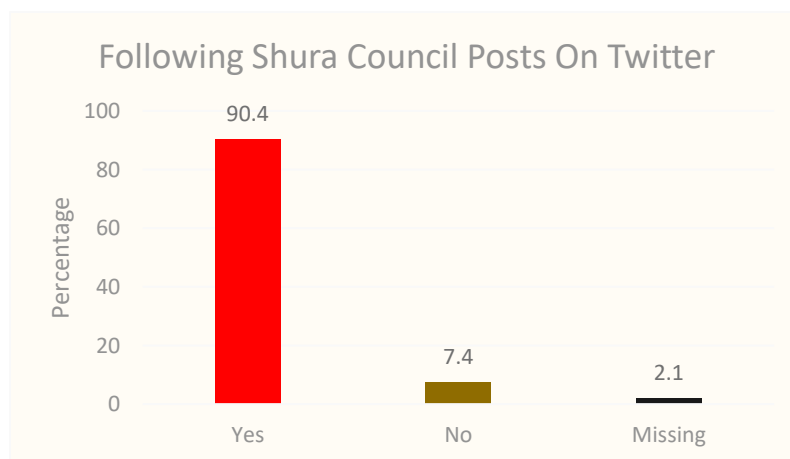
7.3.8 Frequent Use of Twitter

The chart below shows that 27.7% of the respondents claimed that they used their Twitter accounts several times a day, whilst 19.1% of the respondents used their Twitter account a few times a week. However, an equal proportion of the respondents (12.8%) claim that they used Twitter a few times a month or for national events several times a year. The respondents who used Twitter either once a week, once a month, and/or for special events accounted for 8.5%, 7.4%, and 2.1% respectively. This result emphasises that a significant number of the members claimed that they used their Twitter accounts daily as seen in the chart below. The respondents who claimed that they used Twitter either once a week, once a month, and/or for national events accounted for 8.5%, 7.4%, and 2.1% respectively. These results reinforce the findings from the content analysis where 35% of the studied sample were highly active with over 5,000 posts, 65.5% were fairly active members with fewer than 5,000 posts, and 84.5% were active (see Chapter 6).

Table 7.11: Distribution of the Study Population: Frequent Use of Twitter

Scales	Frequency	Percentage
Several times a day	26	27.7
Few times a week	18	19.1
National events	12	12.8
Few times a month	12	12.8
Once a week	8	8.5
Once a month	7	7.4
Special events	2	2.1
Total	85	90.4
Missing	9	9.6

175

Scales	Frequency	Percentage
Several times a day	26	27.7
Few times a week	18	19.1
National events	12	12.8
Total	94	100.0

7.3.9 Time Spent Each Day

Table 7.11 showed that 27.70% of the survey population claimed that they used their Twitter accounts daily. Table 7.12 below gives more detail on the amount of time spent per day, and it shows that 30.8% claimed they used their Twitter accounts for less than 30 minutes daily as part of their jobs as Council members, and the same percentage used their accounts for from 30 minutes to 1 hour a day. Meanwhile, 26.9% of the respondents claimed they used their Twitter accounts for 1 hour to 1 hour 29 minutes, 7.7% claimed they used their accounts for 1 hour 30 minutes to 1 hour 59 minutes, and 3.8% of the respondents claimed they used their Twitter accounts for 2 hours and more. As the table shows, the majority (88.5%) of members who claimed they used their Twitter accounts for their work within the Council daily spent about 30 minutes to 1 hour 29 minutes. This means that most members were keen to spend time every day on Twitter for work purposes.

Table 7.12: Distribution of the Study Population: Time Spent Each Day

Scales	Frequency	Percentage
Less than 30 minutes	8	30.8
30 minutes to 59 a day	8	30.8
1 hour to 1 hour 29 minutes a day	7	26.9
1 and 30 minutes to 1 hour 59 minutes a day	2	7.7
2 hours and more a day	1	3.8
Total	26	100.0

7.3.10 Personal and Professional Use

As seen in the table (Table 7.13) below, the majority (45.7%) of the survey respondents used their Twitter accounts for both personal and professional communication. It was found that 39.4% of the respondents used their Twitter account for personal communication only, whilst 12.8% of the respondents used their Twitter account for professional communication only. The results of the interviews showed that 80% of the interviewees used Twitter to read what the public was posting, while 50% of the interviewees mentioned that they used Twitter to reach the public and communicate with them as members of the Council.

Table 7.13: Distribution of the Study Population: Personal and Professional Use

Scales	Frequency	Percentage
Personal communication only	37	39.4
Professional communication (as member) only	12	12.8
Personal and professional communication	43	45.7
Missing	2	2.1

Scales	Frequency	Percentage
Personal communication only	37	39.4
Professional communication (as member) only	12	12.8
Total	94	100.0

7.3.10.1 Influence of Personal Usage on Professional Usage

The figures in Table 7.14 below show that the vast majority (79.8%) of the survey respondents claimed that their personal usage of Twitter did not affect their usage of Twitter as a Council member. The percentage of the respondents who claimed that their personal usage did affect their usage as a Shura Council member was 8.5%.

Table 7.14: Distribution of the Study Population: Influence of Personal Usage on Professional Usage

Scales	Frequency	Percentage
No	75	79.8
Yes	8	8.5
Total	83	88.3
Missing	11	11.7
Total	94	100.0

7.4 Aspects of Twitter Usages as a Member of the Shura Council

This section aims to analyse the Council members' purposes of using Twitter, and the consumption and nature of their usage of Twitter in their work on the Council to understand the members' attitudes toward using social media. This includes the reasons for using social media, the advantages and disadvantages faced by the Shura Council members using Twitter in their work

on the Council, topics of concern on Twitter, and Twitter enhances members' relationship with the public. Before going into the details of each subsection of this section, it is important to elaborate on how the results were tested.

The questionnaire data analysis procedures and the results obtained using the SPSS and then Pearson's Correlation were used in this study to calculate the coefficient of correlation between each section of the questionnaire and the overall degree of the domains to which the sections belong; the results are as shown in the table below. The correlation between the statements of the study instrument axis is statistically significant at level 0.01 for all the domains.

Table 7.15: Pearson Correlation Coefficient for Questionnaire Statements with Total Degree

First Domain		Second Domain		Third Domain		Fourth Domain	
NO	Pearson's Correlation	NO	Pearson's Correlation	NO	Pearson's Correlation	NO	Pearson's Correlation
1	.454**	1	.767**	1	.648**	1	.773**
2	.504**	2	.673**	2	.682**	2	.535**
3	.534**	3	.554**	3	.703**	3	.784**
4	.465**	4	.551**	4	.661**	4	.741**
5	.628**	5	.636**			5	.607**
6	.639**	6	.620**			6	.777**
7	.501**	7	.682**			7	.828**
8	.695**	8	.650**			8	.642**
9	.802**	9	.543**			9	.721**
10	.754**	10	.584**				
11	.524**	11	.500**				
		12	.495**				
		13	.415**				
		14	.384**				
		15	.229*				

In addition, after the data had been coded and entered into the computer, to determine the length of the cells of the 5-point scale (minimum and upper limits), the range (5-1 = 4) was calculated and then divided by the number of cells of the scale to obtain the correct cell length (4/5 = 0.80). This value was then added to the lowest value in the scale (or beginning of the scale, the correct one) to determine the upper limit of this cell; thus, the length of cells was as follows for each statement: from 1 to 1.80 (strongly disagree), 1.81 to 2.60 (disagree), 2.61 to 3.40 (neutral), 3.41 to 4.20 (agree), and 4.21 to 5.00 (strongly agree).

The purpose of the domains is to help answering the first, second, and third research questions of this study, so the mean of the four domains in the questionnaire were first, the reasons for using Twitter as a member of the Council; the overall mean of the axis indicates that most of the respondents generally agreed to some extent (see Table 7.15). The general mean of all the statements (M = 3.35) is the average in the third category of the 5-point scale (M = 2.61 to 3.40), which is neutral. Second is the advantages and disadvantages faced by the Shura Council members using Twitter, where the overall mean of the axis indicates that most of the respondents generally agreed to some extent. The general mean of all the statements (M = 3.33) is the average in the third category of the five-point scale (M = 2.61 to 3.40), which is neutral.

Third, in the topics that Twitter affects in terms of respondents' thoughts and opinions as members of the Council, the general mean of the axis indicates that most of the participants generally agreed. The arithmetic average of all the sections (3.28) is the average in the third category of the 5-point scale (M = 2.61 to 3.40), which is neutral. Fourth and finally, regarding Twitter's enhancement of the members' relationship with the public, the general mean of the axis indicates that most of the participants agreed. The general arithmetic average of all the paragraphs (M = 3.36) is the average in the third category of the 5-point scale (M = 2.61 to 3.40), which is neutral. The details of the four domains in the questionnaire will be discussed in following the subsections.

Furthermore, to measure the stability of the study total, the equation (Cronbach's alpha (α)) was used having been calculated for four dimensions: the reasons for using Twitter as a member of the Council, advantages and disadvantages faced by the Shura Council members using Twitter, the topics that Twitter affects in terms of participants' thoughts and opinions as members of the Council, and how Twitter enhances the members' relationship with the public.

The consistency of the data and the reliability of the questionnaire were measured using Cronbach's coefficient alpha, which shows that the stability coefficient of the study instrument ranged between 0.832 and 0.921, whilst the general stability coefficient (0.951) indicates that the study instrument has a high degree of stability that can be relied upon in the field application of the study, as there is precision in how sense is made from the raw data; so, high reliability exists in the thesis. RQs1, 2 and 3 proposed in this study were answered with the analysis. The results are shown in the following table.

Table 7.16: Cronbach's Alpha to Measure the Stability of Axis

Domains	Number of statements	Reliability of domain
First domain	11	.832
Second domain	15	.860
Third domain	4	.921
Fourth domain	9	.881
General domain	51	.951

7.4.1 Reasons for Using Social Media

The 11 statements in the table below were designed to explore the reasons for members' use of Twitter in their work. These statements asked the participants to rate their degree of agreement by responding to 11 items to determine their attitudes. Members' responses were measured using a 5-

point Likert-type scale: 1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Neutral, 4= Agree, and 5= Strongly Agree.

Table 7.15 below displays the reasons for using Twitter based on their importance to most of the survey participants. The most important reason was 'access to the breaking news', as 80 participants (85.1%) agreed and strongly agreed with this statement. The second most important reason was 'reading about and understanding citizens' concerns', as 74 participants (78.7%) agreed and strongly agreed with the statement. 'Fast access to government decisions' scored third, as 66 participates (70.2%) agreed and strongly agreed with this statement, followed by 'tweeting their thoughts and opinions on general topics and issues', as 54 participants (57.5%) agreed and strongly agreed with this statement. The statement 'inform themselves on issues that are discussed in the Council' came next, as 52 of the participants (55.3%) agreed and strongly agreed, whilst 22 (23.4%) claimed that they disagreed and strongly disagreed. Then, 49 of the survey respondents (52.1%) agreed and strongly agreed with the statement 'build your image' whilst 20 of the participants (21.3%) disagreed and strongly disagreed. To the last statement 'interacting with and responding to citizens', 47 respondents (50.0%) agreed and strongly agreed with the statement whilst 18 of them (19.2%) disagreed and strongly disagreed.

The data show that a large number of the respondents were more neutral about using Twitter for 'informing citizens about their work' and 'influencing the decision-makers'. In addition, the table shows that the statements 'connect with government officials' and 'contact with other members in the Council' were the less important reasons for using their Twitter accounts; 47 of the respondents (50.0%) disagreed and strongly disagreed and 14 participants (14.9%) agreed and strongly agreed with the first, whilst 45 of the participants (47.9%) disagreed and strongly disagreed with the second statement, and 24 (28.6%) agreed and strongly agreed with that statement.

To summarise, access to breaking news and understanding citizens' concerns were the most important reasons for using Twitter by the survey members. This finding strongly supports the conclusion that Twitter has opened up the Saudi government to the public. It is also possible that participants might have replied in this way to appear appreciative of concerns raised by members of the public. Furthermore, half of the respondents did not agree that one of the reasons they had created their Twitter accounts was for connecting with government officials or contacting other members of the Council. They were neutral about 'influencing the decisions-makers' and 'connecting with government officials'. Furthermore, these results confirm the finding from the content analysis that although a large number of the survey participants followed the Council's account, no interaction between the Council and the members was observed (see Chapter 6).

Table 7.17: Reasons for Using Twitter Platform as the Shura Council Member

Statements		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean	Std. Deviation	Ranking
Fast access to breaking news	F	1	4	6	37	43	4.29	0.86	
	%	1.1	4.3	6.4	39.4	45.7			1
7. Read about and understand citizens' concerns	F	1	6	10	42	32	4.08	0.91	
	%	1.1	6.4	10.6	44.7	34.0			2
2. Fast access to government decisions	F	1	8	16	33	33	3.98	1	
	%	1.1	8.5	17.0	35.1	33.1			3
3. Tweet your thoughts and opinions on general topics and issues	F	6	12	18	28	26	3.62	1.22	
	%	6.4	12.8	19.1	29.8	27.7			4
8. Interact with and respond to citizens	F	4	14	26	28	18	3.47	1.11	
	%	4.3	14.9	27.7	30.9	19.1			5
4. Inform yourself on issues that are discussed in the Council	F	6	16	17	36	16	3.44	1.17	
	%	6.4	17.0	18.1	38.3	17.0			6
11. Build your image	F	9	11	23	39	10	3.33	1.13	7

							Mean	SD	Rank
	%	9.6	11.7	24.5	41.5	10.6			
9. Inform citizens about your work	F	16	19	27	20	7	2.81	1.2	
	%	17.0	20.2	28.7	21.3	7.4			8
10. Influence decision makers	F	17	18	31	20	4	2.73	1.14	
	%	18.1	19.1	33.0	21.3	4.3			9
5. Connect with other Shura Council members	F	16	29	20	20	4	2.63	1.15	
	%	17.0	30.9	21.3	21.3	4.3			10
6. Connect with government officials	F	20	27	29	9	5	2.47	1.11	
	%	21.3	28.7	30.9	9.6	5.3			11
Mean							**3.35**		

7.4.2 Advantages and Disadvantages Faced by the Shura Council Members Using Twitter:

In this question, 15 statements were designed to explore the members' views on the advantages and disadvantages of using Twitter in their work in the Council. They were asked to rate their degree of agreement by responding to 11 items to determine their attitudes. Members' responses were measured using a 5-point Likert-type scale: 1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Neutral, 4= Agree, 5= Strongly Agree.

The majority of the survey participants thought that 'addressing accusations or complaints seen on Twitter', was the most important advantage of Twitter, as 69 respondents (73.4%) agreed and strongly agreed with the statement, whilst only seven of them (7.5%) disagreed and strongly disagreed with it. The second most important advantage was 'help the members of the Council to take notice of what matters to the people they serve', as 61 of the survey respondents (64.9%) agreed and strongly agreed with this statement, and 10 of them 10.6% disagreed and strongly disagreed. This finding also indicates that Twitter has opened up the Saudi government to the general public, as it facilitates communication of the wishes and desires of the general public to members of the Shura Council. The third most important advantage was 'knowledge of the target

audience about specific issues', as 56 of the participants (59.6%) agreed and strongly agreed with it, and only eight respondents (8.5%) disagreed and strongly disagreed. In addition, 55 of the respondents (58.5%) agreed and strongly agreed with the statement 'assess public approval of the Shura Council's decisions', whilst 14 of them (14.9%) disagreed and strongly disagreed with it, which makes it the fourth most important advantage. In fifth place was 'motivated to take action from the issues and complaints seen on Twitter', as 52 of the survey participants (55.3%) agreed and strongly agreed with it, and 10 of the respondents (10.6%) disagreed and strongly disagreed with that statement.

The results show that the majority of the members who participated in the survey were concerned about online misinformation on Twitter, as 60 of the participants (63.8%) agreed and strongly agreed with the statement, 'Twitter increases the spread of online disinformation, misinformation or rumours', whilst 12 of them (12.7%) disagreed and strongly disagreed with it. 'Twitter gives undue space to policy amateurs and people who lack the appropriate knowledge to assess policy debates' was the second most important disadvantage, as 59 of the participants (62.8%) agreed and strongly agreed with this statement, whilst 17 of the respondents (18.1%) disagreed and strongly disagreed with it. Moreover, 50 of the participants (53.1%) disagreed and strongly disagreed with the statement 'Twitter causes the member's role as an expert and representative to be undermined' as indicating a disadvantage of using Twitter, whilst 12 of the respondents (12.7%) agreed and strongly agreed with that statement as indicating a drawback of using Twitter. This supports the other finding in this table, where 43 of the participants (45.8%) disagreed and strongly disagreed with the statement 'Twitter does not support the work of the Shura Council' whilst 16 of the survey respondents (15.9%) agreed and strongly agreed with the statement.

The results in this question show that the majority of the participants were neutral about the advantages or disadvantages of using Twitter: exploring the information and figures from the challenges seen on Twitter, faster communication between parliamentarians and citizens, assessing

the efficacy of the laws (support tweets) and the side effects (negative tweets) in developing policy. Twitter forcing the parliamentarians to improve transparency, starting a dialogue between concerned citizens and policymakers, and forcing parliamentarians to act more quickly were not the main priority for Council members.

To summarise, the findings indicate that 'access to public approval of the Shura Council decisions' is more important for the majority of the survey participants than 'exploring the information and figures from the challenges seen on Twitter', and 'faster communication between parliamentarians and citizens'. Furthermore, the data show that most participants disagreed with the statement that Twitter undermines the member's role as an expert and representative, even though they thought that Twitter gives undue space to policy amateurs and people who lack the appropriate knowledge to assess policy debates, which makes it one of the biggest disadvantages for members of the Council to use Twitter.

Table 7.18: Advantages and Disadvantages Faced by the Shura Council Members Using Twitter

Statements		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	strongly agree	Mean	Std. Deviation	Ranking
1. Address accusations or complaints seen on Twitter.	F	1	6	15	48	21	3.9	0.87	1
	%	1.1	6.4	16.0	51.1	22.3			
14. Twitter increases the spread of online disinformation, misinformation, or rumours.	F	2	10	19	39	21	3.74	1.01	2
	%	2.1	10.6	20.2	41.5	22.3			
15. Twitter gives undue space to policy amateurs and people who lack the appropriate knowledge to assess policy debates.	F	3	14	16	33	6	3.71	1.13	3
	%	3.2	14.9	17.0	35.1	27.7			
7. Help the members of the Shura Council to take	F	2	8	20	46	15	3.7	0.92	4
	%	2.1	8.5	21.3	48.9	16.0			

notice of what matters to the people they serve.								
5. Knowledge of the target audience about specific issues.	**F**	2	6	26	52	4	3.56	0.78	5
	%	2.1	6.4	27.7	55.3	4.3			
4. Assess public approval of the Shura Council's decisions.	**F**	1	13	22	47	8	3.53	0.89	6
	%	1.1	13.8	23.4	50.0	8.5			
2. Motivated to take action from the issues and complaints seen on Twitter.	**F**	3	7	29	44	8	3.52	0.89	7
	%	3.2	7.4	30.9	46.8	8.5			
3. Explore the information and figures from the challenges seen on Twitter.	**F**	2	12	35	34	8	3.37	0.9	8
	%	2.1	12.8	37.2	36.2	8.5			
6. Faster communication between the Shura Council members and citizens.	**F**	4	13	33	31	10	3.33	1	9
	%	4.3	13.8	35.1	33.0	10.6			
9. Assess the efficacy of the laws (support tweets) and the side effects (negative tweets) in developing policy.	**F**	1	15	38	33	4	3.26	0.83	10
	%	1.1	16.0	40.4	35.1	4.3			
11. Twitter forces the parliamentarians to improve transparency.	**F**	4	17	30	36	5	3.23	0.96	11
	%	4.3	18.1	31.9	38.3	5.3			
8. Start a dialogue between concerned citizens and policymakers.	**F**	3	19	30	34	5	3.21	0.95	12
	%	3.2	20.2	31.9	36.2	5.3			
10. Twitter forces the Shura Council members to act more quickly.	**F**	11	31	26	21	3	2.72	1.05	13
	%	11.7	33.0	27.1	22.3	3.2			
12. Twitter does not support work of the Shura Council.	**F**	5	38	32	10	5	2.69	0.94	14
	%	5.3	40.4	34.0	10.6	5.3			
13. Twitter causes the member's role as an expert and representative to be undermined.	**F**	7	43	29	10	2	2.53	0.87	15
	%	7.4	45.7	30.9	10.6	2.1			
Mean							**3.33**		

7.4.3 Topics of Concern on Twitter

The table below is regarding topics that discuss whether Twitter affects their thoughts and opinions as members of the Council. It was interesting to find that the participants thought that Twitter affected their opinions and views regarding the housing issue more than anti-corruption, women's empowerment, and ending tax-free living issues as seen in the table below. However, this may be due to the attendance of the Saudi Minister of Housing in one of the regular weekly meetings of the Council to answer the members' questions which had taken place a few months before the distribution of the survey questionnaire amongst the Council Members on May 30, 2018. The findings from the content analysis support this explanation, as 307 tweets were about the housing issue (see Chapter 6).

Table 7.19: Topics of Concern on Twitter

Topics		strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	strongly agree	Mean	Std. Deviation	Ranking
4. Housing	**F**	6	16	21	37	10	3.32	1.10	1
	%	6.4	17.0	22.3	39.4	10.6			
1. Anti-corruption	**F**	5	19	24	32	11	2.86	0.92	2
	%	5.3	20.2	25.5	34.0	11.7			
3. Women's empowerment	**F**	6	16	27	35	6	3.21	1.03	3
	%	6.4	17.0	28.7	37.2	6.4			
2. End tax-free living	**F**	7	22	40	19	2	3.32	1.10	4
	%	7.4	23.4	42.6	20.2	2.1			
Mean							**3.28**		

Regarding the topics other than the four issues mentioned in the table above in which participants believed that Twitter affected their views and thoughts, it was found that health and medical issues scored 5.3% and unemployment issues, 4.3%, whilst the percentage of the rest of the added cases ranged from 3.2% to 1.1% as can be seen in Table 7.20.

Table 7.20: Other Topics of Concern on Twitter

Topics and Issues	Frequency	Percentage
Health and Medical Issues	5	5.3
Unemployment Issues	4	4.3
Environmental Issues	3	3.2
Education Issues	3	3.2
Jobs Issues	3	3.2
Attacking the members of the Council, (Bullying)	3	3.2
Sports Affairs and Events	2	2.1
Special Needs and Disabilities Issues	2	2.1
History and Antiquities Issues	1	1.1
Traffic and Traffic Safety Issues	1	1.1
General Entertainment Authority programs and events, and citizens' opinion about them	1	1.1
Human Rights Issues	1	1.1
Domestic Violence and Abuse Issues	1	1.1
Fake and False Degree Certificate	1	1.1
Social Intelligence Issues	1	1.1
Arranging Advisory Opinions and Courts	1	1.1
Development Programmes	1	1.1
Civil Service Issues	1	1.1
Underage Girls' Marriages Issues	1	1.1
Social Issues	1	1.1
Trade Issues	1	1.1
Media Issues	1	1.1
Labour Issues	1	1.1
Past Issues	1	1.1

7.4.4 Twitter Enhances the Shura Council Members' Relationship with the Public

This question contains nine statements. It was devised to explore the members' opinions about the role of Twitter in enhancing their relationship with the public. They were asked to rate their degree of agreement by responding to 11 items to determine their attitudes. Members' responses were

measured using a 5-point Likert-type scale: 1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Neutral, 4= Agree, 5= Strongly Agree.

The majority (69.2%) of the survey participants agreed and strongly agreed with the statement 'raise awareness of issues and inspire social policy reform', whilst 4.3% disagreed and strongly disagreed with it. This makes it the most important advantage for Twitter regarding enhancing the relationship between the members and the public. 'Twitter allows public discussion and commentary on new public policy and decisions' was the second most important advantage, as 68.1% of the survey participants agreed and strongly agreed with this statement, while 12.8% disagreed and strongly disagreed. The third most important advantage was that 'Twitter improves communication between the Shura Council and its members with the public', as 55.4% of the survey participants agreed and strongly agreed with it, while 12.8% disagreed and strongly disagreed with the statement.

Furthermore, the statement 'Twitter motivates the public to engage with and be informed about policy and decision-making' became the fourth most important advantage, as 53.1% of the survey participants agreed and strongly agreed with it, while 10.6% disagreed and strongly disagreed. It was followed by 'Using Twitter allows the public to review upcoming policies and decisions', as 52.1% of the survey respondents agreed and strongly agreed with this statement, while 18.1% disagreed and strongly disagreed. The statement 'Twitter allows the formal registering of petitions prior to implementing public policies of the Council' scored sixth, as 51.1% of the participants agreed and strongly agreed with it, while 17.1% disagreed and strongly disagreed.

The results of this question show that most of survey respondents were neutral to the following two statements: 'Twitter allows citizens to participate in the policy-making process by providing information and opinions to parliamentarians', and 'The citizenry has become the main force of public opinion on policy and decisions via Twitter'. Regarding the statement 'Debates on Twitter

give the public the opportunity to set the agenda for decision and policymakers', 39.4% of the participants disagreed and strongly disagreed, the same percentage (39.4%) were neutral, and 17.1% agreed and strongly agreed.

Table 7.21: Twitter Enhances the Shura Council members' Relationship with the Public

Sentences		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean	Std. Deviation	Ranking
9. Twitter raises awareness of issues and inspires social policy reform.	F	1	3	22	48	17	3.85	0.8	1
	%	1.1	3.2	23.4	51.1	18.1			
3. Twitter allows public discussion and commentary on new public policy and decisions.	F	4	8	15	55	9	3.63	0.94	2
	%	4.3	8.5	16.0	58. 5	9.6			
8. Twitter improves communication between the Shura Council and its members with the public.	F	1	11	27	40	12	3.56	0.91	3
	%	1.1	11.7	28.7	42. 6	12.8			
7. Twitter motivates the public to engage with and be informed about policy- and decision-making.	F	5	5	31	43	7	3.46	0.92	4
	%	5.3	5.3	33.0	45. 7	7.4			
1. Using Twitter allows the public to review upcoming policies and decisions.	F	2	15	25	42	7	3.41	0.93	5
	%	2.1	16.0	26.6	44.7	7.4			
4. Twitter allows the formal registering of petitions prior to implementing public policies of the Council.	F	4	12	26	44	4	3.36	0.93	6
	%	4.3	12.8	27.7	46. 8	4.3			
6. Twitter allows citizens to participate in the policymaking process by providing information and opinions to parliamentarians.	F	5	8	40	32	6	3.29	0.92	7
	%	5.3	8.5	42.6	34. 0	6.4			
5. The citizenry has become the main force of public opinion on policy and decisions via Twitter.	F	7	16	46	17	5	2.97	0.95	8
	%	7.4	17.0	48.9	18. 1	5.3			

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2. Debates on Twitter give the public the opportunity to set the agenda for decision and policymakers.	F	7	30	37	15	1			
	%	7.4	31.9	39.4	16. 0	1.1	2.7	0.88	9
Mean								**3.36**	

7.5 Conclusion

Overall, the majority of the Shura Council preferred Twitter over other platforms for both personal and professional communication. It was interesting to find that a small minority did not display their real names on their Twitter profile, and almost half of them chose not to display a real picture of themselves, which aligns with the finding from the content analysis. Interacting with the public was not the main concern of the survey population, as accessing breaking news and reading about citizens' concerns were the most important purposes that led them to create their Twitter accounts. This finding has strong implications for the research questions put forward by this study. This supports the results from the interviewees where the majority of the interviewed members mentioned that they used Twitter to read what was posted on the platform.

Regarding the advantages and disadvantages of Twitter, the survey participants considered addressing accusations or complaints seen on Twitter and helping the members of the Council to take notice of what matters to the people to be the most important advantage. Furthermore, raising awareness was viewed as more important than informing and engaging the public in policy decision-making. The spread of online misinformation on Twitter was viewed as the most concerning disadvantage of the Twitter platform.

It was surprising to find that the majority of the survey participants did not think that engaging in debates over Twitter allows the public to set the agenda for policymakers. In fact, most of the interviewed members claimed that public opinion does not dominate the members' agenda setting but rather draws attention to the topics under discussion. It was also surprising to find that the participants weighed up access to public approval of the Shura Council decisions higher than

improving transparency and starting a dialogue between concerned citizens and policymakers. Moreover, it is clear that Twitter had affected the participants' views and opinions on the housing issue more than anti-corruption, women's empowerment, and ending tax-free living issues. In the next chapter, the results of the interviews will be analysed and presented.

CHAPTER EIGHT: THE INFLUENCE OF TWITTER IN THE WORK OF COUNCIL MEMBERS: 'THE INTERVIEW ANALYSIS'

8.1 Introduction

This chapter reports the findings of the semi-structured interviews conducted with 20 members of the seventh term of the Council members between December 2018 and February 2019. It comprises three sections. The purpose of the interviews was to glean in-depth information about how and why Shura Council members use Twitter. The interview questions addressed RQs 1 to 4. The first section presents the demographic characteristics of the interview population. The second section covers the role of Twitter in enhancing citizen–decision-maker interaction. Then, the last section discusses the impact of Twitter on the Council members' profession.

8.2 The Demographic Characteristics of the Interview Population

The data obtained from Table 8.1 below covers the interviewees' gender, age, level of education, specialty, and the time they started serving in the Council. The interview sample involved 20 members of the Council half of whom were males, and the other half were females to ensure gender equality. Furthermore, the vast majority of the interviewees were aged between 40 and 60 years old, whilst 5% were aged over 60 years old. This result supports the finding from the survey where 71.7% were aged between 40 and 60 years old.

The data shows that the majority (65%) of the interviewees held a PhD degree, 20% held a master's degree, and 15% had a bachelor's degree. These figures are similar to the ones in the survey, 64.2% as of the survey population had a PhD degree, 20.0% had a master's degree, and 12.5% held a bachelor's degree. Regarding the specialty of their studies, there were 14 majors, of which 15% held a degree in law, 10% held a degree in media and journalism, engineering, education, and accounting, whilst the rest of the interviewees held nine different majors, namely, Arab literature,

French language, business, marketing, computer and information science, statistics and evaluation, biology, health administration, and management. The survey results show that the highest specialties were education with 15.0% and law and administration with 12.5% (see Chapter 7).

Most interviewees (60%) had started their membership within the Council in the seventh term, which started in 2016; 30% had started in the sixth term, which started in 2013; and 10% had started serving in the Council in the fifth term, which started in 2009. Furthermore, the respondents represented a mixture of members who started serving in different terms, as 12 started in 2016; whilst 8 members were in their second term, having started in 2013; and only 2 members were in their third term, having started serving as members in 2009. Similarly, the results in the survey show that most (58.3%) of the survey population had started serving in the seventh term, 27.5% had started serving in the sixth term, and 14.2% had started in the fifth term (see Chapter 7). This confirms that most of the interviewed members were new to the decision-making profession.

Table 8.1: The Demographic of the Interviewees of the Study

Interviewees	Gender	Age	Started serving in the Council	Qualification degree	Specialty
Interviewee (1)	Male	58 years old	2016	PhD	Media
Interviewee (2)	Male	63 years old	2016	Master	Engineering
Interviewee (3)	Female	44 years old	2016	PhD	Arab literature
Interviewee (4)	Female	59 years old	2013	Master	French Language
Interviewee (5)	Female	46 years old	2016	Bachelor	Business
Interviewee (6)	Female	47 years old	2013	PhD	Education
Interviewee (7)	Female	52 years old	2016	Master	Accounting
Interviewee (8)	Female	46 years old	2016	Bachelor	College of Education
Interviewee (9)	Male	56 years old	2009	PhD	Law
Interviewee (10)	Male	57 years old	2013	PhD	Journalism
Interviewee (11)	Male	57 years old	2016	PhD	Marketing
Interviewee (12)	Male	56 years old	2018	Bachelor	Engineering

Interviewee (13)	Male	57 years old	2013	PhD	Computer & Information Science
Interviewee (14)	Male	43 years old	2016	PhD	Accounting
Interviewee (15)	Female	52 years old	2013	Professor	Management
Interviewee (16)	Female	54 years old	2016	PhD	Statistics & Evaluation
Interviewee (17)	Female	53 years old	2016	PhD	Biology
Interviewee (18)	Male	53 years old	2009	PhD	Law
Interviewee (19)	Female	55 years old	2013	PhD	Health Administration
Interviewee (20)	Male	59 years old	2016	Master	Islamic Law (Comparative Jurisprudence)

8.3 Aspects of Social Media Usage

This section covers the data relevant to creating social media accounts, reasons for not having social media accounts, social media preferences, the purposes of creating accounts on Twitter, other methods used to interact with the public, and personal and professional usage.

8.3.1 Creating Social Media Accounts

The interviews showed that 90% of the interviewees had accounts on social media platforms, while two members (10%) had not created accounts on social media.

8.3.2 Reasons for Not Having Social Media Accounts

In response to the question 'Are you keen to create accounts on social media platforms?', one of the two interviewees who did not have accounts on social media said that he found it inappropriate to enter into these platforms because it was incompatible with his way of life (Interviewee 18), whilst the other claimed that social networking platforms are often biased (Interviewee 20). The findings in the survey support these views, as members elected not to have social media accounts because they felt these platforms lacked reliability and credibility (50%), or they lacked interest in

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joining social media (30.8%), or they were concerned about the lack of privacy (26.9%). According to Interviewee 18:

> *At the beginning of the emergence of social media platforms, I had created accounts in some platforms, but then I found it inappropriate to be present and got into social media platforms. Because I found that the atmosphere does not help to attend at the time, because the participation in the platforms was experiencing a kind of rush in language and style, and so I preferred to stay away and not to enter and to wait until the atmosphere had been assessed, and I still do not have accounts on social media, especially Twitter, but I may be back soon and reopen my Twitter account.*

8.3.3 Social Media Platforms Preference

The majority (70%) of the interviewees pointed out that they used social media platforms such as Twitter, WhatsApp groups, Snapchat, and Instagram. Approximately 93% cited Twitter as the most favoured platform to engage with the public. Interviewee 20 stated

> *No, I don't care about that, because it is often directed, but I take advantage of the groups that I join on WhatsApp and also by what I am seeing on Twitter. Also, I do not have an account on Twitter, but I try to follow what is published on the platform and see what is going on in the community and what concerns most categories of society and their aspirations and the topics that they want to be addressed by the Council and all within the framework of the rules and regulations of the Council.*

8.3.4 Other Methods for Interacting with the Public

Although a large number of the interviewees considered social media an important platform to reach the public, 55% of them preferred to engage with the public through social events, such as seminars, conferences and university workshops, personal contacts, and family events more than

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social media. Traditional media, including television, newspapers, written columns, shows and events, and email communication, followed next with 30%. The special means provided by the Council, such as delegation visits, meetings, visiting remote provinces, domestic and internal visits of the Council's delegations within the kingdom, petitions, the official telephone communication, and direct communication with the relevant government, and private and civil sectors also scored 30%. Interaction through civil society organisations, such as the National Society for Human Rights, the specialised associations to support certain groups in society, women's society, literary clubs, and charity organisations, ranked third with 20%.

These results indicate that despite the increased use of social media amongst the Shura Council members, more than half of the interviewees favoured traditional methods of interaction. For instance, Interviewee 15 stated, *"I believe in face-to-face meetings because they are more effective and positive than online communication".* By saying this, she meant that face-to-face meetings is the main method that the Council members should follow, and social media is a good method to a certain extent, but any written or indirect debate is insufficient and cannot be compared with face-to-face meetings. Similarly, Interviewee 4, who was over 50 years of age, observed that:

> *As I am one of those people who still believe in face-to-face communication, whenever I have a debate with colleagues about the reliability and credibility of using social media especially Twitter to deal with issues and problems, I find that all the female and male colleagues who oppose me are from a younger generation. So, I think the difference of age is an important factor in trusting social media platforms and involving them in the work.*

8.3.5 The Purposes for Creating Accounts on Twitter

Even though the interviewed members mentioned that they had different purposes for having Twitter accounts, 80% of the interviewees used Twitter to read what was posted on the platform, 50% of the respondents mentioned that they used Twitter to interact with the public as members

of the Council, whilst 25% mentioned that the Twitter account supported their work as a member of the Shura Council. A small percentage (20%) stated that they had created Twitter accounts to express their views and expertise.

8.3.6 Personal and Professional Use

Most interviewees claimed that they used Twitter for both personal and professional purposes. A small minority (20%) stated that they had created Twitter accounts for professional purposes only, and 10% pointed out that they used Twitter as informal users and avoided using the platform in their professional lives. Different motivations emerged regarding the professional use of social media. Most of those who used Twitter for professional goals claimed that the platform allowed them to reach directly both the public and the government officials. Two female interviewees emphasised that using technologies like Twitter for delivering their opinions directly had been a successful approach. For example, Interviewee 16 said that she used Twitter for "*explaining the process of action and work in the Council,*" adding that *"social networking platforms, especially Twitter, are new channels of communication and expression of opinions"*. On the other hand, Interviewee 6 used the platform to obtain information and news quickly, whilst Interviewee 5 used it to draw attention to his presence. Moreover, a small minority of the interviewed members explained that they used the platform for other professional purposes like *"communicating with elites in the society before becoming a member of the Council"* (Interviewee 19). These responses indicate that Shura Council members use Twitter for a wide variety of purposes. Some use Twitter as a means of interacting with and understanding the wishes of the wider public, whilst others use Twitter to obtain information, to draw attention to themselves, or to interact with elite individuals to gain their esteem and approval.

Whilst most members supported using Twitter for professional purposes, a significant minority were against using Twitter accounts for professional purposes because of the sensitivity of the

laws, systems, and processes within the Council, which make using the platform as an individual inappropriate. For example, Interviewee 18 expressed that delivering members' opinions and actions directly to the public must be done in a formal manner and through the Council's official account on Twitter and not on the members' personal account. He believed that members must distinguish between what involves their work and what involves their personal participation on social networking platforms; otherwise, *"The opinion of a member will be interpreted as the opinion of the Council, and this may confuse the public and would not serve the Council's work"*. Yet, the interviewees who believed that Twitter was a useful method for members to deliver their opinions and work directly with the public indicated that Twitter should be used cautiously by members when deciding whether to involve Twitter directly in their work within the Council. This disagreement can be due to a declaration by the Council stating that the opinions of any member whether expressed during the sessions, in special committee meetings, or to the media are his/her own and do not reflect the Council's official stance.

As seen in the survey results, respondents used their Twitter accounts for both personal and professional communication, for personal communication only, or for professional communication only (see Chapter 7). The different goals provided by the interviewed members match the findings in the survey. Moreover, the survey findings show that more than half of the survey respondents did not include their professional position on their Twitter profile (see Chapter 7). The interviewees provided different explanations for such practice. For example, Interviewee 11 emphasised, "*I do not introduce myself as a member of the Shura Council in order to prevent embarrassment*." Interviewee 15 stated, "*I hid my information, as I don't want to waste my time in useless arguments and discussions.*" Interviewee 8 said that she wanted to spare herself the pressure her colleague suffered from on Twitter after the public came to know that she was a Council member.

Despite the members' disagreement on using their Twitter accounts to talk about the details of decision-making in the Council, most of them stated that Twitter was important when the

government wishes to introduce major decisions and regulations. A common view amongst most of the interviewees was to contribute to these decisions on Twitter, even if the nature of their contribution might be deferred. Most of them were interested in playing a supportive role in raising awareness and explaining these decisions or commenting on them. Others showed more interest in reaching the group affected by the decision. For example, Interviewee 16 pointed out, *"For me, I make sure that I reach the group that benefited from the decision."* Likewise, Interviewee 18 mentioned that *"It is important to follow up closely on important decisions to measure the reaction of public opinion".*

On the other hand, whilst Interviewee 19 considered herself a selective person and chose to interact with decisions and issues relevant to her specialisation and interests, *"so as not to lose my credibility as a member of the Council",* Interviewee 4 did not see the importance of commenting on the government's decisions. She stated, "*Dealing with the subjects and discussing the decisions on Twitter after they had been made was useless because it would not affect the decision-making."* She suggested that if a member wished to comment regarding issues and topics, it would be better to go on Twitter to see what was being discussed by the public before the decisions were made.

To sum up, most of the interviewed members who used their accounts for professional purposes emphasised that Twitter was a useful tool for the Council members to deliver opinions and views to the public regarding their work within the Council. Whilst most of the interviewees were more open-minded about using their Twitter accounts to support the government's decisions, a small minority chose to interact with the decisions relevant to their specialties, and a small minority suggested interacting with the decisions before they were made and introduced to the public. The results from the interviews show that members were more active on Twitter after the introduction of big decisions, which matches the results from the content analysis where 373 out of 745 tweets relevant to government decisions involved lifting the ban on women driving, and 224 tweets involved the decision on anti-corruption law (see Chapter 6).

8.4 The Role of Twitter in Enhancing Citizen-Decision-Maker Interaction

This section covers involvement in debates on Twitter, hashtags as a tool for interaction, and whether Twitter can play the same role as petitions in addressing the Council members.

8.4.1 Involvement in Debates on Twitter

The findings of the interviews show that half of the interviewees who had Twitter accounts were positive about public engagement and half were negative. A significant minority claimed that they engaged in debates as citizens and not as a member of the Council. In terms of the characteristics of the citizens, most interviewees mentioned that they would pay attention to "*the person who writes his/her real name and has official verified accounts*' [blue ticked]. '*Who attracts me with a good idea, content and display*' came next. A small minority of the interviewees would pay attention '*to media professionals and senior writers and to official sites and accounts*', and a small proportion of the interviewees said they would pay attention to '*People who have special problems that touch and benefit a large number of the public*' or would pay attention to someone '*who formats his/her tweets professionally*'. This suggests that whilst Council members claimed to use Twitter to listen to the public, this finding indicates that they only listened to a small, elite section of the public.

The majority of the interviewed members believed that as selected members, they were under pressure to respond to public queries because appointed members strive to prove themselves in front of the King, and they have their own ways and methods of investigating the demands and needs of the public. Half of the interviewed members who were positive about public engagement claimed that they would pay attention only to users who revealed their identities, intellectuals and professionals, or users with special needs, which leaves other less educated users out. 'Less educated users' is a phrase used to refer to anonymous users or to those users who are using Twitter to 'troll' others. This indicates that the sample would generally focus their attention on which

suggestions they perceive to be the most credible. Also, these findings indicate that there is a drive by the Shura Council members against anonymity on Twitter for ethical reasons.

Furthermore, despite their involvement in debates on Twitter, the majority (16) of the interviewees agreed that although Twitter was valuable for reaching the public, it was not their primary means of engaging with the public. Interviewee 7 pointed out that *"The Twitter platform gives me space, but it did not add much to me as a legislator and decision-maker."* Also, Interviewee 11 agreed with Interviewee 13, when he emphasised, *"I do not see it as beneficial because you have to distinguish between your work as member in the Council and your accounts on social media platforms."* Interviewee 14 was against the idea of being involved in debates and discussion on Twitter; he indicated, *"I don't see it as a right action. Members of the Shura Council must not talk about their sensitive work under the dome of the Council outside the Council especially on Twitter or other means."* This interviewee claimed that the processes of the policy at the Council and the information and content on the laws and papers of the subjects that are studied at the Council are sensitive, indicating that Shura Council members needed to consider their work private and not up for public debate. Interviewees 17 and 18 believed that debate on Twitter it is not an effective opportunity and does not serve the Council and its members, Interviewee 17 emphasised,

> *I think this is a controversial and sensitive issue with regard to the Council's law because when a decision comes out from the Council or a recommendation whether it fails or succeeds, then the Council as a whole is accused or the Council as a whole is praised whether members were opposed to the topic and idea or supported it. Therefore, the community does not separate the member and the Council, even if the Council and the members try to do so.*

On the other hand, a small proportion of the interviewees disagreed with this view; for example, Interviewee 12 believed the interactions with the public on Twitter helped him in his decision-

making profession. Meanwhile, Interviewee 10 believed, *"The mobility on Twitter gives me immunity to help me make decisions."* He suggested that the ideas and opinions of people that support the Shura Council members' ideas and opinions were valued. He tried to say that, if a member believes or thinks about something and he or she finds that users on Twitter believe the same thing, *"This can help the members to know they are right."* In addition, Interviewee 3 supported the idea of being involved in debates on Twitter, as she stated,

> *I believe that awareness has been raised among citizens and the public about the mechanism of the Council and its members. Also, the members of the Council who interact on their Twitter accounts have a role to play in spreading this awareness and enhancing public confidence in the Council.*

Furthermore, Interviewee 16 thought that debate on Twitter provides an opportunity for Shura Council members to engage and interact with the public; she pointed out,

> *Yes, I do that daily, I have been in discussions with citizens and the public on Twitter. This gives us a unique and useful experience, as the advantage of the debate on Twitter is the equalization of opportunities between me and the public because even in public debates in symposia and conferences, the discussion is disproportionate and unequal.*

It can be seen from the findings above that involvement in debates with the public on Twitter is a matter of disagreement: whilst half of the interviewed members supported the idea of interacting with the public as decision makers, half of them did not. Similarly, most of the survey participants were neutral about the statement 'starting a dialogue between concerned citizens and policymakers' as one of Twitter's advantages (see Chapter 7). This suggests that whilst some members favour the idea of interaction with and participation by Saudi citizens in the political process, others wish for Saudi Arabia to remain a closed, non-democratic system.

8.4.2 Hashtags as a Tool for Citizen-Decision-Maker Interaction

In response to the question of whether hashtags are a good tool for citizen–decision-maker engagement, almost all the interviewees (18) declared that hashtags have many disadvantages which make them inappropriate for that purpose. The technical ease of creating and trending hashtags raises a question about the importance, strength, and seriousness of what is raised and discussed on the Twitter platform. This finding shows that this 'listening' is much more restrictive than it appeared to be in the survey results. This, then, creates an interesting tension between the survey and interview results.

For instance, Interviewee 1 confirmed that what occurs on the Twitter platform, especially hashtags, has no effect *"because of the lack the elements of accuracy, objectivity, and credibility"* and emphasised that *"Hashtags are not a clear and balanced measure of public opinion"*. Interviewee 7 emphasised that hashtags represent the opinion of a large number of people but do not represent the entire public opinion. Interviewees 5, 8 and 9 stated that hashtags are very temporary, and Interviewee 9 said they were *"often created based on an emotional attitude that lacks objectivity."* This response indicates that some members of the Shura Council view the use of hashtags as an emotional response rather than one that encourages or facilitates political debate and exchange. Interviewee 4 also criticised hashtags; she commented,

> *I follow a lot of trend hashtags in order to know what is going on and how people are thinking and how they are dealing with events and cases. But regarding hashtags, there are many members of the public who are committing great abuses and because of that, hashtags are losing much their its value and importance.*

Furthermore, Interviewee 11 was against hashtags, as not only can they be controlled and directed but they can also be used with certain agenda; he indicated,

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For hashtags, unfortunately, many users adopt the loud and high view and voice without verifying the validity of what it is or what is being conveyed, so I do not think that hashtags are an appropriate means of measuring public opinion and its composition.

Rather than elaborating on the use of hashtags for a particular purpose, this interviewee referred to the use of hashtags in general and provided no examples. Only two (10%) of the interviewees viewed hashtags positively and felt they should not be ignored because policymakers can get various benefits from following hashtags. They stated that hashtags have changed some concepts and sent important messages to decision-makers at the highest levels, and some hashtags have launched movements and encouraged brainstorming around some issues. Interviewee 3 indicated that through her Twitter account, she was keen to explain her views regarding the process of the Council and its policy. She stated, *"Recently, I tweeted a post on a hashtag about unemployed female graduates from Colleges of Education. Every time they raised the hashtag, I was keen to participate and update them about what the Council has done for their cause."* Also, Interviewee 2 was positive about hashtags; he commented, *"I follow some hashtags, but I do not see that it reaches the stage of forming public opinion, and as I mentioned, I may follow some hashtags from time to time."*

In sum, despite that a small percentage of the interviewees being positive about the importance of hashtags in interacting with the public, the results from the survey and the interviews demonstrate that while Twitter can be a useful tool for gathering information about public needs and demands, it cannot be used in isolation due to concerns about reliability and the informal nature of social media, mainly Twitter. Furthermore, the findings of the interpretive content analysis showed that 450 tweets were posted on Twitter hashtags of which 58.0% were on hashtags about women driving, 18.8%, about anti-corruption, and 7.5%, about unemployment (see Chapters 6 and 7).

8.4.3 Twitter as a Public Petition Platform

Petition in Saudi Arabia is a practice through which the public can address decision makers regarding a personal or public issue or concern (see Chapter 4). The participants were asked whether Twitter can play the same role as petitions to address the Council and its members to explore to what extent the Council members are open to enhance the way the public can address the Council and its members.

In response to this question, two different viewpoints emerged from the interviews. The majority (55%) of the interviewees strongly opposed the idea of Twitter replicating petitions, 40% agreed with the idea, whilst one interviewee (5%) was sceptical. Those who disagreed with the idea provided three reasons: Twitter lacks credibility because it makes it possible to hide the identity and personal information of the user, the petitions process has to be approved by the Council in accordance with certain specific actions and should go through the official format with specific proceedings that are not available on Twitter, and Twitter lacks privacy. Interviewee 15 pointed out, *"The petitions provide and ensure privacy, and this cannot be provided and ensured in an open platform such as Twitter."*

On the other hand, proponents of the idea viewed Twitter as an important channel between the Council and its members and the public, and therefore, they agreed that Twitter could replicate the petition's technique or support it. For example, Interviewee 14 stated, *"The platform opens the door to important topics and issues that deserve to be adopted and for attention to be paid to them."* Those members believed that Twitter offers unique prospects to be used as a new tool for petitions and claimed that the Council and members should use its benefits. Interviewee 6 mentioned an incident where Twitter actually played the role of a petition. She explained that in the aftermath of amending Article 77 of the Labour Law, a huge number of workers were arbitrarily dismissed from their work. They submitted formal petitions calling upon the Council to

reconsider this amendment. In addition, a campaign was launched on Twitter by the affected workers and their families and friends. She stated,

> *I was one of the members who suggested meeting with a group of them to discuss their demands. The Speaker of the Council agreed to meet with them in the presence of the media, and afterwards, the issue was transferred to the specialised committee.* (Interviewee 6).

The findings from the survey show that 51.1% agreed and strongly agreed with the statement 'Twitter allows the public to formally register petitions prior to implementing the decisions of the Council' and 27.2% were neutral, whilst 17.1% disagreed and strongly disagreed. This finding indicates that most members were opened to being addressed by the public through Twitter (see Chapter 7). This is interesting, as other findings indicated there was a divide between how the Shura Council members used Twitter, with some wanting to be involved in public debate and others resenting this feature of the social media platform.

8.5 The Impact of Twitter on the Members' Profession

This section focuses on the influence of Twitter on the Council members' profession. The findings of the interviews are grouped into four themes: the impact of Twitter on setting the agenda for the Council and its members; the impact of Twitter on trust, openness, and agenda setting; the trustworthiness of the platform; and the impact of Twitter on changing members' behaviours.

8.5.1 The Impact of Twitter on the Agenda Setting of the Shura Council Members

Even though the majority (15) of the interviewed members claimed that citizens always had a role in decision-making even before Twitter and social media, discussions on Twitter had not given the public the ability to affect decision-making or to initially set the agendas for the members of the Council. They further believed that issues and topics are discussed according to the agreed criteria

in the Council, where each topic is discussed according to its level of importance. As such, the opinion of the public does not prioritise the members' agenda setting but rather highlights the topics and draws attention to them.

For example, Interviewee 6 thought that the opinion of the public is only general support and assists members in their process because each member sets the priorities of his/her agenda and attempts to bring the topic to the Council's attention. Interviewee 5 observed that not all the issues raised on Twitter are worthwhile. In addition, interviewee 20 believed that the public does not influence the agendas of the members of the Council because it is the member's responsibility to do so.

Nevertheless, a significant minority of the members believed that the Council and its members were in charge of selecting topics for further consideration and ultimately making decisions that affect the whole nation and that this role could not be altered by Twitter or other social media platforms. They further claimed that citizens' needs, and demands were always on the members' agenda. Although some members did not readily see the influence of the public in their work, a small number of the interviewed participants claimed that citizens had always played a role in the decision-making process and public involvement was not a new occurrence due to social networking platforms. Interviewee 13 pointed out, *"The platform has given them a strong role in the community as a virtual platform; however, the decision-making process has a certain process."*

On the other hand, one quarter of the interviewees argued that the public was able to set the agendas for the decision makers due to social media platforms. Interviewee 3 revealed that the *"The Twitter platform has played a big role in prioritising agenda setting for some members."* whilst Interviewee 9 agreed with his colleague above, and he added, *"The issues of interest to the citizens are first and foremost our priorities as decision and policy-makers."*

To summarise, the wide range of views presented by the interviewees indicates that setting the agenda is the member's responsibility; public opinion assists and supports the Council members but does not prioritise the agenda; topics are discussed according to the level of importance; not all the issues raised on Twitter are worthwhile; and Twitter can actually influence the Council's agenda. The findings of the survey show similar results where most respondents did not agree that the debates on the platform gave the public the opportunity to set the agenda for the decision- and policymakers, nor did the citizenry become the main force of public opinion on policy and directions via Twitter. However, a small minority felt that Twitter has an influence on the members' agenda (see Chapter 7).

On the other hand, when asked about whether they were motivated to act from the issues and complaints seen on Twitter to the specialised committees and the regular sessions of the Council, the majority of the interviewed members were positive about the idea. They asserted that it is important to use Twitter to pick up an issue or topic that arises on Twitter and present it to the specialised committees and the regular sessions of the Council. This viewpoint approves the statement that Twitter has influenced members of the Council in their work. Interviewee 9 believed that Twitter was a successful platform that displays the issues and problems of the citizens: *"Twitter is shared and used by millions of people cannot be ignored, and it is very important for the members of the Council to see that it as an important platform and an index to attract attention."* A female interviewee claimed that members paying attention to what is happening on Twitter would improve the relationship between the Council and its members with the public (Interviewee 5). On the other hand, a quarter of the interviewees were against the idea, claiming that members should not get involved on Twitter regarding Council processes because this causes frequent and disturbing pressure, which is disproportionate to the nature of the work in the Council (Interviewee 19).

Interestingly, one quarter of the interviewed members gave some typical examples of cases, opinions, and ideas that they had picked up from Twitter. For example, Interviewee 3 picked up two cases through the platform. She stated,

> *First was the impact on the public by the real estate development fund decision 83. In this issue, I had submitted a proposal, and it was approved by the Council. For me, I had no idea about this issue until the hashtag they made on Twitter grabbed my attention, and it was the reason I adopted it. In addition, unemployment rates of females college graduates in the field of education was another issue that I had picked up from Twitter to the Council.*

Likewise, Interviewee 18 pointed out that he had submitted some topics to the Council's specialised committees that had been extensively discussed on Twitter. He said,

> *I submitted proposals of issues that had been discussed on Twitter over several years to the committees, such as underage marriages of young women. Also, I submitted National Unity to the Council nine years ago, and I was a proponent of women being eligible to vote and elected into government. Those topics were passed and approved by the Council.*

This indicates that the interviewed members were more positive about highlighting a topic from Twitter to the specialised committees and the regular sessions of the Council than including in the members' agenda a topic that had arisen on the platform. Twitter is a successful and important platform for displaying public issues. Paying attention to what is posted on the platform improves the relationship between the Council and its members and the public. However, members should not be extremely involved on Twitter in relation to issues relevant to the Council processes and works. This was indicated by the response of Interviewee 1, who stated that the use of Twitter is

> *in general, to communicate and make contact with the public and citizens, because sometimes communication with the member via Twitter has a lot of defects because I think*

that members use their accounts to talk about the issues of the Council for useless thrilling,

and sometimes for bickering. So, many of the public find that if they are not satisfied with

some of the decisions made by the Council, they have the opportunity to go to members on

Twitter and attack them as if they were the Council or as if they the ones who made the

decisions.

8.5.2 The Impact of Twitter on Trust

The focus in this section was on examining what impact Twitter had on dynamics of the members and the Council and how Twitter affected the agenda-setting capacity of the Council and its members. Different viewpoints emerged from the interviews regarding the level of transparency and trust in the Council and whether members can use Twitter to improve transparency.

The majority (60%) of the interviewees admitted that the Council and its members suffered from the lack of transparency, but they further believed that this issue cannot be solved by Twitter. Interviewee 15 stated, *"This is a dilemma that needs to be solved through education in schools to include the study of the legislative, executive and judicial systems, especially the Shura Council system."* Interviewee 10 emphasised that the image of the Council amongst the public is poor; however, Interviewee 19 claimed that people's opinion of their work in the Council does not matter because as members, they work to satisfy their consciences and not to satisfy the citizens. This interviewee appeared to feel that he would be wasting his time as a Council member if he were constantly searching for public opinion on Council matters. Instead, he appeared to feel that as a Shura Council member, he had a right to make the decisions he believed would benefit the public without public input.

On the other hand, a significant proportion of the interviewed members emphasised that the Council has sufficient transparency and that there is no need to use Twitter or other tools of communication to improve the transparency and trust amongst the public because of the nature of

the Council as a legislative institution. Interviewee 20 said, *"Transparency in the Council exists because the regular sessions are attended by media professionals and transmitted by television and on the Twitter Council's account, except for private session."*. Whilst some interviewees were looking at how Twitter does or does not improve the Council's transparency, Interviewee 18 considered how Twitter could help to improve public transparency so that instead of Twitter being a tool for the public, it should be a tool for members.

To sum up, there was no agreement amongst the interviewees regarding the impact of Twitter on trust and transparency. whilst the majority recognised that the Council lacks transparency and that the image of the Council amongst the public is poor, a minority believed that the Council has sufficient transparency. Others claimed that people's opinions of members' works in the Council do not matter. The findings in the survey indicate that the respondents thought that Twitter did not encourage them to act more quickly or did not improve the level of transparency with the public (see Chapter 7).

8.5.3 The Trustworthiness of Twitter

Regarding whether Twitter is a credible source for information that has an effect on decision makers, the responses were nuanced; 30% of the interviewees agreed with the statement that 'trust in the Twitter platform is not absolute', 30% agreed that 'credibility depends on the source of information in terms of trust, not about the Twitter platform', 25% agreed that the Twitter platform has poor credibility, and 15% confirmed that 'Twitter is not a source of confidence at all.' Moreover, half of the interviewees agreed with the statement that social media, especially Twitter, is a source for online disinformation, misinformation, and rumours. Indeed, 30% thought that *'The Twitter platform has its negative and positive aspects, and these are the negative aspects of Twitter'* (Interviewee 18). Also, Interviewee 19 made a strong statement against the credibility of Twitter when she said,

My policy of managing my account on Twitter has changed completely from about two or three years ago specifically with the beginning of the seventh session of the Council in December 2016 because, in the last two years, there have been external "fingers" that manipulate the hashtags, so information on Twitter, especially hashtags, must be treated with extreme caution.

These external 'fingers' (figures) are governments, organisations, or people from outside Saudi Arabia who have used Twitter to attack Saudis and Saudi Arabia on Twitter and on social media in general and to spread fake news and stories using either regular posts or hashtags. In addition, Interviewee 1 supported Interviewee 19 when he believed that social media, specifically Twitter, has lost its trustworthiness; he pointed out that,

Many countries are now putting many restrictions and legislative regulations on the issue of regulating social media platforms because those platforms have become full of rumours, misinformation, so I think the role of the Shura Council and its members is important in this aspect by making strict legislation for social media platforms.

Interviewee 2 emphasised that Twitter cannot be a source of trust; he elaborated, *"The credibility of the Twitter platform is questionable, as it is open to everyone, and they can talk about anything anytime. For that reason, misinformation, rumours, and lies are unfortunately abundant on Twitter and other social media platforms".*

On the other hand, Interviewee 10 denied that Twitter spread online disinformation, rumours, and misinformation and believed that the platform demonstrating public behaviours and actions: *"It helps in revealing to communities their reality."* Interviewee 15 pointed out that her trust in what is on Twitter depends on the confidence she has in some users on the platform and whether she can trust them or not; she said,

For me, if I want to know the view of the elite of intellectuals here, I make sure to know certain names and know they have a high degree of integrity, credibility, and appropriate scientific knowledge on this subject. But, if I want to know public opinion, what generally happens here is I search through the hashtags and what has been raised in them.

Interviewee 16 supported Interviewee 15's statement when she commented,

Twitter is only a platform, so the trust depends on the characters on the platform; so, for me, the information I get is credible and trustworthy because I establish the criteria for the items of information on the platform that I want to access.

On the other hand, most of the participants thought that Twitter supports their work more than it harms it, whilst a small minority thought that it both supports and harms their work, and a slight proportion thought that Twitter does not harm their work, and two felt that it harms their work more than it supports it. The results from the surveys show that 60 of the participants (63.8%) agreed and strongly agreed with the statement, 'Twitter increases the spread of online disinformation, misinformation or rumours', whilst 12 of them (12.7%) disagreed and strongly disagreed with it (see Chapter 7). This implies a discrepancy between the response of the survey participants who felt that Twitter increases the spread of online disinformation whilst the majority of the interviewees felt that Twitter supported their work more than it harmed it. On the other hand, there is also a considerable difference between the use of Twitter to spread fake news and the use of Twitter to directly interact with members of the public, which may explain how both statements can be true.

Many interviewed members claimed that the solution to the dissemination of misinformation and disinformation is to study, research, and check the subject: *"To refer to other sources to ascertain the validity of the subject before accepting, adopting and supporting it"* (Interviewee 1). In addition, Interviewee 4 supported this idea when she indicated,

I don't trust what is on Twitter in general, I put everything I see and read on the platform under a circle of doubt, and when I find the topic grabs my attention, then I look for the subject somewhere else more confident for me, to make sure it is true or not.

Similarly*,* Interviewee 5 pointed out that *"Time can reveal all that is rumour and false."* In addition, Interviewee 7 believed that the members of the Council can deal with the disadvantages of the platform and said, *"The members of the Council have sufficient experience and the ability to distinguish what is fake."* In addition, Interviewee 16 gave the example of herself regarding how to appeal against the misinformation and disinformation on Twitter, when she indicated,

I am making a big effort in getting into many hashtags and trying to correct mistakes and false and untrue information about the Council. I think that I greatly contribute to the correct image of the Council through my account on Twitter, and I am just one person, so the impact is going to be greater if all members, as well as the Council, make this effort so that the results will be remarkable and distinctive.

Although the interviewees blamed the platform for spreading falsities or unreliable information, most of them were optimistic about using Twitter. It was surprising to find that in general, even though most of the decision- and policymakers had doubts about the use of social media, mainly Twitter, in their work because of the credibility, validity, and reliability of the platform, many members of the Council had positive attitudes towards using Twitter.

8.5.4 The Impact of Twitter on the Shura Council Members' Behaviours

The findings on changes in members' behaviours due to their engagement on Twitter was extracted from the qualitative data to get a deeper understanding of whether there had been a change in the members' behaviours as a consequence of using Twitter for debating and interacting with the public.

Two distinct perceptions emerged from the interviews. Most of the interviewees strongly believed there was no change in their behaviours as decision-makers because of the usage of Twitter. For example, Interviewee 20 emphasised, *"The Twitter platform cannot make a difference amongst the members of the Council because decisions are usually based on the Council members' capabilities and knowledge."* On the other hand, a minority claimed that Twitter has changed both the members' decision-making activities and their attitudes in the Council. They claimed that the use of Twitter as a means of exerting pressure has significantly influenced the attitudes of many state officials, including members of the Council. A small minority referred to a negative change in the members' activity on the Twitter platform which caused harm to the members of the Legislative Council.

Regarding the attitude of less active members towards highly active members, most of them believed that being extremely active on the platform and using it in their work could have a negative impact on the Council, their colleagues, and the active members themselves. Two (10%) of the interviewees warned of the damage that can be caused by some active members on Twitter. For instance, Interviewee 19 expressed, *"There has been a negative change in the members' activity on the Twitter platform, such as non-objectivity, glory, and personal accomplishment at the expense of the group, which loses credibility as a member of the Legislative Council."* She continued, *"It bothers me that some members have inflamed public opinion against the Council and their other colleagues."* Interviewee 5 supported this statement and stated, *"Some members act like they are the only ones working in the Council, and this does not reflect the reality of how the Shura Council works."*

Similarly, Interviewee 7 observed:

> *Honestly, I noticed there is a high percentage. I do not follow all the members on Twitter, but the active members of both genders on Twitter are mostly just recording competitions,*

as some of them said that 'I did so and so', and 'I am the initiator of this subject and that', more and more for personal purposes and goals. Some colleagues may be excused in this way, i.e., interacting in this way in order to clarify and demonstrate the effort and work that they did in the Council. But I do not see it as a correct way from my own point of view, though my view here is not necessarily correct. Also, I do not think that it is good for members to focus on individual rivalries at the expense of the organisation.

Another similar observation was made by Interviewee 13 who noted:

The Council's law prohibits publishing documents. Some male and female colleagues who have a lot of followers on Twitter, they pay great attention to their Twitter accounts while posting draft resolutions, regulations, and recommendations on Twitter. Thus, this method constitutes a means of pressure, and this will not cause a problem if the law of the Council allowed this, but the Council bans it. My comment provoked a general attack on me because of this criticism, but unfortunately, a large number of members have faced offences and violent attacks because of their positions and opinions on some of the recommendations put forward in the Council. This practice negatively affects the performance of members and their work.

However, most of the Council members focused on the advantages of the platform, for example, Interviewee 4 indicated, *"Twitter has drawn my attention to subjects about which I have no information. Also, it helps me know the pulse of the public and what is going on."* By referring to the public, the interviewee was referring to 'Saudis on Twitter' rather than the entire population of Saudi Arabia. Likewise, Interviewee 1 confirmed that *"The Twitter platform gives the opportunity to highlight the voice of a category of the public that was previously silent, and this category might be the majority."* Furthermore, Interviewee 6 asserted, *"It helps monitor events and public opinion. Also, it helps in following up the regional issues."* Similarly, Interviewee 2 believed that *"Twitter*

can be an effective media and communication tool to convey and deliver views, thoughts, and opinions."

Interviewees 15 and 16 focused on the advantages of Twitter for active members on the platform. Interviewee 15 claimed, *"The members who are more active on the Twitter platform are more aware of the reality than inactive members."* Moreover, most of the interviewed members emphasised that Twitter supports their work if the platform is used cautiously. For instance, Interviewee 16 stated, *'Twitter does not harm work when the members have a clear policy and strategy in dealing with the platform.'*

However, a minority of the interviewed members focused on the disadvantages of Twitter. Interviewee 13 pointed out, *"It has an impact on members who discuss a subject that is not related to their specialty because of their lack of knowledge and their incomplete understanding of the subject."* In addition, Interviewee 18 revealed another disadvantage of the influence of Twitter, claiming, *"The platform is very effective, though we saw some emotional responses by some active members on Twitter, which we warned against, and we do not want it to affect our legislative discussions."*

As seen earlier in this section, most of the interviewees claimed that their attitudes had not been changed by Twitter, as decisions are usually based on the Council members' capabilities and knowledge, whilst the minority noted that Twitter had changed both the activities and attitudes of the Council members. Most of the interviewees recognised the positive effect of Twitter on their attitudes, such as paying more attention to vulnerable groups, monitoring major events, and conveying views and opinions whenever necessary. However, most members who claimed that Twitter did not affect their attitudes in the decision-making emphasised that Twitter supported their work if the platform was used carefully. Some interviewees referred to a negative change in the members' activity on the Twitter platform, such as non-objectivity, glory-seeking, and

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promoting personal accomplishment. This indicates that even though half of the interviewees counted Twitter as a useful and beneficial tool, the findings of this chapter suggest that balance was the main key to their success in using Twitter.

8.6 Conclusion

Members of the Shura Council claimed that the Council's agenda was not influenced by the debates on Twitter, as most of the interviewed members claimed that discussions on Twitter did not affect their decision-making. Nonetheless, at the same time, Council members clearly read what members of the public wrote on Twitter. Therefore, public opinion does not prioritise the agenda setting but rather highlights the issues of interest and draws attention to them. However, although most of the interviewed members claimed that topics are discussed according to the agreed criteria in the Council, and each topic is discussed according to its level of importance, a minority provided examples of topics picked up from hashtags on Twitter and submitted to the specialised committees and the regular sessions of the Council. This indicates that a minority of Council members were keen to put forward topics discussed on Twitter to the specialised committees and the regular sessions by including in the members' agenda a topic that had arisen on the platform. It was also surprising to find that most interviewees believed that interacting with the public as decision makers is the most important advantage of the platform, whereas the survey results in this question show that the participants were neutral about starting a dialogue between concerned citizens and policymakers.

Although the majority of the interviewees strongly opposed the idea of Twitter playing the role of petitions, a significant minority were opened to being addressed by the public through Twitter. The results of the survey show similar results, as a significant minority of the participants agreed that Twitter allows formal registering of petitions prior to public policies of the Council being implemented. Moreover, although most of the interviewees believed that Twitter is not a reliable

source of information and could increase the spread of online disinformation, misinformation and rumours, a minority thought that credibility depends on the source of the information, as Twitter has its negative and positive aspects. Finally, it was found that the interviewees thought that the Council lacks transparency, so the Council and the members should take the responsibility to improve the level of transparency through making better use of Twitter in this matter. In the next chapter, the key findings of the results will be discussed in order to understand the influence of Twitter in the Council members' work within the Council.

CHAPTER NINE: DISCUSSION

9.1 Introduction

The aim of this thesis was to analyse how social media, especially Twitter, affects policymaking and policy action and deliberation in a system that is not based on public elections. This chapter will discuss the findings of the empirical data and their implications to provide insights for the academic community on the influence of social media on the decision-making process, such as in the Shura Council in Saudi Arabia. The results from the interpretive content analysis, the survey, and the interviews presented in Chapters 6, 7, and 8 will be cross examined.

In addition, the wide range of the interviewees' perceptions and views will be contextualised in light of the literature review in Chapters 2, 3 and 4 to clarify the impact of social media, particularly Twitter, on the members of the Shura Council during the legislative process. This discussion is structured according to the five themes extracted from the information and the topics that emerged from the data analysis and which were then identified during my research. These are Twitter and the emergence of a participatory communication channel; the influence of public involvement on the decision-making process in the Shura Council; attitudinal changes as a result of using the Twitter platform; agenda setting, that is, policy window vs. policy monopoly; and how members of the Council send out information via Twitter.

9.2 Social Media and the Emergence of an Additional Participatory Means

This section examines the relationship between the use of Twitter by Shura Council members and public engagement. This addresses RQ1. Significantly, the majority of the survey population and the interviewees claimed that social media platforms had enriched their political intervention. Notably, despite many of the participants expressing scepticism about the use of Twitter as a platform for public communication, 93% of the interviewees and 95.7% of the survey sample cited

Twitter as their preferred method for engaging with the public. On the other hand, only a few of them felt they had been affected by this experience in their decision-making process. To explore the relationship between the use of Twitter by Shura Council members and public engagement, the features of social media usage by the Council members, the purposes of use, and members' perceptions of social media use will be discussed to assess the impact of their perception on the policymaking process.

9.2.1 Features of Social Media Usage by the Council Members

The data analysis shows that the vast majority of the survey and interview participants had created accounts on a social media platform. Although 70% of the interviewees pointed out that they used different social media platforms such as Twitter, WhatsApp groups, Snapchat, and Instagram, 93% of the interviewees and 95.7% of the survey sample cited Twitter as their preference for engaging with the public. Similar results were found in a study by Alasem (2015) on the scale of Twitter usage by Saudi authorities. The study concluded that a significant majority of the government officials had Twitter accounts in addition to significant Twitter usage by government officials (Alasem, 2015). These findings suggest that Twitter is the form of social media preferred by Saudi government officials.

However, it was found that a slight majority of the interviewees preferred to engage with the public through social events, such as seminars, conferences, and workshops, rather than using social media. This shows that social media has not replaced other forms of engagement, although it is significant that almost half of the sample preferred to engage with the public through this medium. This result may be explained in light of two factors: age and culture. As shown in the data collection results, the vast majority of the interviewees were aged between 40 to 60 years old, whilst 52.5% of the survey participants were aged between 50 to 59 years old, 23.3% were aged 60 years old and above, and 19.2% were aged 40 to 49 years old. Similarly, Almuhanna's 2005

study found that approximately 74% of the Saudi Shura Council were aged 50 years old and above. The fact that most Council members were older may explain the slight sway in favour of face-to-face rather than social media-based interaction, as this may be due to members' unfamiliarity with advanced technology techniques, as revealed in the interviews (see Chapter 8). It is notable that just 1.8% of social media users in Saudi Arabia are females aged 45 and over and 5.4% are males of the same age (GMI, 2020). This suggests that most social media uptake is amongst members of the Saudi population under the age of 45.

Another explanation is that, as a culture, Saudis prefer face-to-face interaction. Hofstede's (2011) six cultural dimensions support this statement, indicating that the Saudi culture values face-to-face communication as a sign of friendship and intimacy, with Interviewee 15 explaining that they valued face-to-face meetings over online communications.

Furthermore, it was interesting to find that 10% of the interviewees and 20.2% of the survey sample reported that they had not included their real name in their Twitter accounts and preferred to use Twitter anonymously. The interviewees explained that they preferred to hide their personal information to avoid futile discussions and arguments, to avoid embarrassment, or to avoid mentions and direct messaging from other users (see Chapter 8).

It was also apparent that a significant proportion of respondents avoided posting real pictures of themselves or information about their role in the Council in their Twitter profile. Less than half of the survey respondents (47.9%) stated that they had included a real picture of themselves, which is understandable within the Saudi context, as 23.3% of the survey sample were female members, who, the findings in the interpretive content analysis chapter assumed, did not share a picture of themselves for religious or cultural reasons. Whilst most of the account holders had included their position as a Council member in their profiles, 45.7% of the survey participants claimed that they had included their profession as members of the Council in their bios on Twitter. This difference

in the results could be because 15.5% of the interpretive content analysis accounts were inactive accounts. These results indicate that a significant minority of Council members actively avoided drawing attention to themselves or their position in public life on their social media profiles.

Critics of the online public sphere argue that the settings of dialogues amongst online public sphere users may lead to impassioned public discussion, something legislators may wish to avoid (Zhuo 2010; Fuchs 2014). Factors that exist in face-to-face communications that inevitably involve real people rather than having the potential to be fraudulent or misleading require individual responsibility and social commitment. However, the advantage of communication via online public sphere settings is that the dissociation from the individual's actual identity can be liberating and, in fact, can improve the quality and honesty of the debate (Babcock et al. 2020).

Nevertheless, these findings indicate that the majority of the study sample had a public user profile on social media. The user profile is used to create social interactions between users within the context of content-generated features of social media (Boyd and Elision 2008). Creating profiles is the first step in gaining control in the social media realm to allow individuals the opportunity to post their own content in various forms (Schejter and Tirosh 2015). The fact that many Council members preferred to use Twitter anonymously using stock images for their profiles indicates that they wished to separate their social media persona from their public one albeit informed by their professional credentials as members of the Shura Council.

In conclusion, the increasing involvement of members of the Shura Council in social media platforms could be interpreted as a step towards public engagement and towards opening up a fairly insulated body of policymaking. This argument is supported by findings from the current literature. For example, Habermas (2010) believed that the creation of social media accounts by policymakers for a wide range of purposes has created a space for the public to get engaged in a 'public debate' and in a public sphere that links civil society and the state on the path to democracy.

9.2.2 Perceptions of Social Media Applications

It was found that the vast majority of the interviewees perceived social media applications, particularly Twitter, positively in terms of creating links of communication amongst themselves and with the Council's Twitter account. Most of them showed acceptance towards using technology in the Council process, valuing Twitter as a new channel for communication and a means of expressing opinions. The majority asserted that using social media gave them the opportunity to reach relevant people and explain ideas directly to the public, as well as providing a channel to reach government officials directly. They also emphasised that using technologies like Twitter accounts for delivering their opinions directly could be a successful approach. They added that social media, especially the Twitter platform, had opened the way to discuss social and religious issues that previously were not discussed in public. In this sense, the respondents were keen to relay these issues to the public and, in some instances, convey their individual stance on them rather than encourage public debate. Indeed, the questionnaire responses indicate that 50% of Council members interviewed claimed they would rely on Twitter for engaging with the general public, suggesting that social media mediates the divisions that exist between the government elite and the wider public in Saudi Arabia.

Furthermore, the study population provided various motivations for creating Twitter accounts. It was interesting to find out that accessing breaking news was the most important motivation for the survey population. Though 50% of the interviewees mentioned interacting with the public as members of the Council was one of their top purposes, the majority (80%) of the interviewees claimed that reading what was posted on the platform was the main purpose of creating a social media account. Council members appeared to use Twitter mainly for reading rather than for engaging in discussion with the public. Reading people's posts and hearing about their grievances may play a part in communicating with the public, which is interesting and relevant, but Council members were less keen on interacting with the public. Therefore, it was found that Twitter was a

useful tool for the Council members to deliver opinions and views to the public. This finding shows that this 'listening' is much more restrictive than it appeared to be in the survey results. This suggests that the Council members use Twitter to create an appearance of listening and take notice of the public concerns, demands, and needs rather than actually listening to or interacting with the general public. This, then, creates an interesting tension between the interpretive content analysis, survey and interview results as the former indicates that the members of the Shura Council 'listen' more to public concerns than they actually do (according to the interview data) on Twitter. This suggests that the interview results have given a fuller picture of the situation at hand than would be accessible through quantitative questionnaire and content analysis data alone. This example also underlines the usefulness of combining different research methods.

The findings presented above were confirmed by Alasem's (2015) study, which found that Twitter accounts were used by the government officials to post announcements and news updates and to share links between offices. The idea that Shura Council members read Twitter to learn about the issues facing society was also highlighted in a study by Alshahrani (2017), which aimed to examine the extent to which members of the Shura Council use new media outlets to consider some issues of Saudi society. This study concluded that the Council members were using social media platforms as a similar alternative approach to traditional media regarding knowing about some of society's issues. Alshahrani's study pointed out that the most important topics the citizens mentioned to members of the Shura Council involved improving the quality of the health services as well as all the different local issues that affect the lives of citizens.

In other words, social media facilitates communication and information-sharing between members of the Shura Council and the wider public, although Council members may not have joined Twitter or may not have been using social media for this purpose. The results of this research thus suggest three things: first, that Twitter makes it possible for more citizens' opinions to come to the attention

of decision-makers; second, that decision-makers are sceptical about much of what they read; and third, that decision-makers communicate with citizens in only extremely limited ways.

The findings of this research show an increased involvement by the members of the Shura Council in social media platforms, which is as a step towards public engagement and towards opening up a relatively insular body of policymaking. Saudi Arabia is a non-democratic country where the monarchy limits and controls internet access (Al-saggaf 2006; Freedom House 2019; 2020). Despite this, an unintended consequence incorporating online platforms into Saudi government institutions, such as the Shura Council, has been to increase the transparency of the decision-making process (Almukhilif and Deng 2017). These findings indicate that this such transparency is now taking place.

The majority of the research population had created proper profiles that enabled them to carry out social interaction with the public as a first step towards acknowledging the public complaints they see on the platform and take notice of what matters to the people. Moreover, it was found that the vast majority of the research population held positive perceptions of social media applications, although some were cautious about adopting social media due to a preference for face-to-face interaction or concerns about the security of social media platforms. Cautious positivity had encouraged the emergence of an online public sphere or communicative space Council members freely participated in and where they discussed issues of common concern with the public in a largely visible way.

9.3 Members' Reflections on Possible Changes Due to Usage of the Twitter Platform

This section aims to explore whether Twitter can change the views of the legislative body/decision-makers on the Shura Council. This section thus addresses RQs 1, 2, and 3. The findings on the attitudinal changes of the Council members as a result of Twitter usage were extracted from the interviews only. Most of the interviewees strongly believed that Twitter usage had not resulted in

any change to their attitudes as decision-makers. Instead, it serves as a form of impression management, a means of appearing to listen to the wider public in order to manage public perception of the Shura Council (Bolino et al. 2008). Examples include comments by Interviewees 4 and 20, which indicate that Twitter had made them more aware of public opinion and alternative facts. On the other hand, a minority acknowledged that Twitter had changed both the members' decision-making and their activities on the Council. They further affirmed that Twitter, as a means of exerting pressure, had become an essential influence on the attitudes of many state officials, including members of the Council. For example, Interviewee 4 observed that Twitter had allowed them to gain information about new subjects and to become aware of public opinion.

In addition, Interviewee 15 noted that members who were active on Twitter were more aware of public opinion and reality than those who were not. In fact, the content analysis identified a connection between high activity and public engagement. It was found that the account holders who were more engaged with the public were all highly active members (over 5,000 posts). Furthermore, 25% of the interviewees who had a positive attitude towards interacting with the public were all highly active members (Interviewees 2, 5, 8, 9, and 13), which indicates that a high level of activity enhances public involvement in the decision-making process.

However, a few interviewees had noted a negative attitude regarding their colleagues' high level of activity, such as non-objectivity, glory-seeking, and self-interest at the expense of the group, which caused harm to the members of the Legislative Council. For example, Interviewee 7 felt that Council members' engagement on Twitter was more about self-promotion than presenting an accurate picture of the activities of the Shura Council. In this regard, a disagreement was found amongst the study population on whether to use their Twitter accounts for professional purposes.

The majority of the interviewees claimed that they used Twitter for both personal and professional purposes; 20% stated that they had created Twitter accounts for professional purposes only, and

10% pointed out that they used Twitter as informal users (see Chapter 8). Yet, most of them were cautious about deciding whether to involve Twitter directly in their work within the Council. They argued that delivering members' opinions and actions directly to the public must be done in a formal manner and that rather than using Council members using their personal accounts, the Council's official Twitter account should be used. In general, the majority of the interviewees were strongly against using Twitter for the Council's work, except in an official capacity and under certain conditions. These views were reflected in the interpretive content analysis, as 56.8% of the account holders used their Twitter accounts for professional and personal purposes, whilst 34.5% used their Twitter accounts for personal purposes, and only 8.6% used Twitter for professional purposes only (see Chapter 6). The results of the survey show similar results, as 45.7% of the respondents claimed that they used their Twitter account for both personal and professional purposes, whilst 39.4% used their Twitter account for personal purposes only, and 12.8% used their Twitter account for professional purposes only (see Chapter 7).

Because of this disharmony, the Council members were uncertain about how to use their accounts and where to draw the line between what is personal and what is professional. This finding supports the argument by Kalsnes (2016) that social media blurs the link between the personal and the professional through coming up with engaging content on the online platform and hence managing to offer important views about objectivity and balance.

As a result, each member used his/her Twitter account according to his/her own discretion, and this has affected the image of the members and caused confusion amongst the public about the precise nature of the Council members' responsibilities and duties. This knowledge was gained from the interviewees and from an interview with the Speaker of the Shura Council published in Al-Riyadh Newspaper (2020). This may be due to the tense relationship with the Council's administration. As soon as the Council's official Twitter account was created in 2014, it was made clear that members' accounts do not represent the Council on any issue, but rather, they represent

the opinion of the members themselves. This tension was noted in studies by Al-Saud (2002), Alsudairy (2017), and Alsudairy and Alshareif (2016), which attributed the negative aspects of the Council to its weakness as a governing body and to the weakness in its information and support services.

To conclude, these findings show that the majority of the Shura Council members had positive views towards using the Twitter platform in their personal and professional work for various purposes. However, this positive attitude was not clearly reflected in the policy-making process. Most of the interviewees strongly believed that Twitter usage had not resulted in any change to their attitudes as decision-makers. However, despite denying any change in their attitudes as a result of social media usage, the outcomes marked a wide range of perceptions. Most importantly, the findings show a serious degree of scepticism towards Twitter and, at the same time, a recognition of how it changes Council members' knowledge and understanding about the influence of social media in the policymaking process. Such recognition and understanding can be interpreted as a change in the actors' attitudes, interests, and thoughts (Kingdon 2010). Therefore, even though most Council members denied there had been any change in their attitudes as a result of social media usage, Council members' knowledge and understanding of the influence of social media in policymaking had, to a certain extent, changed. This meant that they now had a better understanding of how social media could play a role in policymaking, although most denied that Twitter exchanges had influenced their own decision-making process.

9.4 Agenda Setting: Policy Window vs. Policy Monopoly

This section considers whether Twitter has increased public involvement in the agenda-setting and political decision-making process in the Shura Council. This analysis includes three sections: the influence of public interventions via Twitter on the agenda-setting of the Council, whether Twitter

can play the role of petitioner in addressing the Council and its members, and whether the Council members pick up topics from hashtags to add to the agenda. Also, this section addresses RQ 2.

9.4.1 The Influence of Public Interventions via Twitter on the Agenda-Setting of the Shura Council

Analysis of the findings suggests that Twitter has had a limited effect on the agenda setting of the Shura Council. The majority (75%) of the interviewed members claimed that discussions on Twitter had not given the public the ability to initially set the agendas for the members of the Council. They further believed that issues and topics are discussed according to the agreed criteria in the Council, where each topic is discussed according to its level of importance. As such, the opinion of the public does not prioritise the members' agenda setting but rather highlights the topics and draws attention to them, as suggested by the response of Interviewee 7 (see Chapter 8). This suggests that public opinion does not change the agenda of the Shura Council but does draw its attention to issues that are of public interest.

Furthermore, whilst some of the interviewees thought that public opinion is only a general support that assists members in their process because each member sets the priorities of his/her agenda and attempts to bring the topic to the Council's attention, others believed that not all the issues raised on Twitter were worthwhile. A few argued that the public do not influence the agendas of the members of the Council because it is each member's responsibility to do so, whereas 20% believed that the Council and its members were in charge of selecting topics for further consideration and ultimately making the decisions that affect the whole nation, and this role could not be altered by Twitter or other social media platforms. They further claimed that citizens' needs and demands were always on each member's agenda.

Even though the majority did not readily see the influence of the public in their work, 15% of those interviewed recognised a limited role by citizens in the decision-making process stating that public

involvement was not a new occurrence due to social networking platforms. Indeed, as Interviewee 13 pointed out, Twitter cannot override the formal decision-making process. On the other hand, 25% of the interviewees argued that the public were able to set the agendas for the decision makers due to social media platforms. Notably, Interviewees 3 and 9 agreed that the advent of Twitter had led Council members to prioritise the wishes of the public during the decision- and policy-making process. This suggests that a significant minority of Council members is interested in reading tweets to glean public opinion, which is likely to influence their position in the policymaking process in some way.

9.4.2 Twitter as a Public Petition Platform

Regarding whether Twitter can play the same role as petitions to address the Council and its members, it was found that 55% of the interviewees strongly opposed the idea, 40% agreed, whilst one interviewee (5%) was sceptical. On the other hand, proponents of the idea viewed Twitter as an important channel of communication between the Council and its members and the public, and therefore, they agreed that Twitter could play the role of the petition or support it, as noted by Interviewee 14. Furthermore, Interviewee 6 related an incident where Twitter had actually played the role of a petition. The findings from the survey show that 51.1% agreed and strongly agreed with the statement 'Twitter allows the public to participate in the formal registering of petitions prior to implementing the decisions of the Council', whilst 17.1% disagreed and strongly disagreed, and 27.7% were neutral, which indicates that most of the survey members were opened to being addressed by the public through Twitter. These findings suggest that Twitter does highlight public opinions, and this draws them to the attention of members of the Shura Council, although the body claims that these opinions have no direct influence on decision-making.

9.4.3 Hashtags and Agenda Setting

Similarly, 90% of the interviewed members declared that hashtags cannot measure public opinion on any topic. They argued that the technical ease of creating, and trending hashtags raises a question about the importance, strength, and seriousness of what is raised and discussed on the Twitter platform, as observed by Interviewee 1. On the other hand, 10% of the interviewed members showed an acceptance of using hashtags because they thought that some hashtags had changed some concepts and sent important messages to decision-makers at the highest levels, and because hashtags are useful in responding to and updating the public about their complaints. Interviewee 3 found hashtags particularly useful when raising awareness about unemployed female graduates from colleges of education. Also, the interpretive content analysis showed that Council members were cautious about participating in hashtags, and few of them of them created hashtags; for example, one member had used the hashtag that he had created as top-down communication to elucidate the law of the Shura Council and its processes.

To sum up, these findings show that the Council members disagreed regarding the influence of Twitter on agenda setting. Whilst the majority were against the idea that public intervention via Twitter has influenced their work as decision makers, a minority supported this idea, and a few members provided examples of how Twitter had played the role of petitions and of how members had selected a topic from Twitter to add to the agenda. Hence, it can be presumed from the above aspects that a policy monopoly has been practised by both the government and the Shura Council. Monopolies are usually formed when there is a mutual understanding between the citizens and policymakers. The two important characteristics of policy monopolies apply to the Shura Council. First, it is a "definable institutional structure responsible for policymaking and this structure limits its access to the policy process", and second, it has a "powerful supporting idea associated with the institution" (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, p. 7).

The vast majority of members were proponents of a certain policy image denoting that public opinion is not officially recognised as an important force, and citizens' interventions via Twitter do not form part of the Council's work in any official capacity. That being the case, the analysis indicates that there is a high possibility that the members' action is associated with a successful monopoly of the policy process (Baumgartner et al. 2014). On the other hand, the 20% of the interviewees who supported the idea that Twitter had influenced the agenda setting brought out a different image to counter this monopoly. As a result, there is a possibility for this monopoly to decrease, perhaps through the listening process facilitated by Twitter (Baumgartner et al. 2014).

However, Cairney and Zahariadis (2016) argued that the opportunity for change is not feasible unless there is a major reform from within; members of the Council should lead this reform. Policies will only change effectively when policymakers have the willingness and aptitude to revise them. A more efficient process offered by Cairney and Zahariadis (2016), is one where a problem is seen by a policymaker and a range of potential solutions are provided by the administration. Then the policymaker can select the optimal solution.

Moreover, most policymaking exhibits long periods of stability but with the ever-present potential for sudden instability. Policy change in a particular area may be incremental for decades followed by profound change which sets an entirely new policy direction (Hegelich et al. 2015). The Shura Council is a complex system that has been through substantial stages of stability and dynamicity since its establishment (see Chapter 4). The recent social and political relaxations that have been implemented by the Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman within Vision 2030 may present a potential for sudden change.

The research findings show that even though the Council members denied that public interventions via Twitter influence the agenda of the Council, they did follow what the public say and want, and they seemed to be influenced by what the public posts. Therefore, it can be concluded that Twitter

can affect members' understanding of social problems, and so enhance the debate in the Council by giving them the ability and confidence to cite public opinion and knowledge of such issues to support decision-making. In other words, Twitter suggests a different kind of agenda setting where public interventions via Twitter cannot affect the official agenda but rather can allow for public interventions to influence the members' perceptions and insert public opinion in subtle and indirect ways, even though the Council members denied that. This finding is supported by Baumgartner et al.'s (2014) argument that when an issue is in the sphere of the macro-political agenda, there is a possibility that small changes in the circumstances will lead to significant changes in the agenda-setting policy. When such an issue occurs, a positive feedback process goes through the system.

9.5 The Dilemma of Agenda Setting

This section aims to assess the notion that Council members' engagement with the public on Twitter increases the agenda-setting capacity with regard to the public face of the Shura Council. This section thus addresses RQ 3.

9.5.1 Responding to the Needs of the Public

The majority of the interviewees in the interviews (70%) believed that being appointed members did not make them less pressured to respond to the public than elected members would be. They asserted that the appointed member strives to prove themselves to the King and that Council members have their own research styles and methods to know the requirements and needs of society and the public. On the other hand, 30% of the interviewed members agreed that being appointed made them less pressured to respond to the public. This result indicates that as long as the members are appointed by the King and not elected by the public, their sense of accountability remains confined to the King. Section 6.3.3.2 concerns the Council's social media reaction on the amendment of the Nationality Law contains relevant examples. Overall, though, the results

contradict this assertion, as they indicate that the Council members acknowledge the opinions of the general public and that these opinions do sometimes influence the policymaking process.

This lack of a sense of responsibility towards the public displayed by the majority of the interviewees can be attributed to their tribal ranks, high level of education, and influential qualities. It is apparent that Saudi Arabia is still organised along tribal lines with tribalism legitimising the political system (Metz 1993; Al-Saud 2000). The Council members are more likely to use their influential position to prevent the implementation of changes that may threaten their current political position (Kirby, 2008). Such aspects make them fit with the first major characteristics of power elite theory. The first characteristic states that the members of the elite group are individuals holding high command posts in the country, which gives the holders immense authority over the majority of the systems in the society. As stated previously, the survey findings show that 64.2% of the participants had a PhD, 20.0% a master's degree, 12.5% a bachelor's degree, and 2.5% a professional qualification. Likewise, the majority (65%) of the interviewees held a PhD, 20% held a master's degree, whilst 15% had a bachelor's degree. The second characteristic suggests that the members of the elite group shared the same beliefs and attitudes. This can also be inferred from the strong commonality in their answers to specific questions such as *'I used the platform to communicate with elites in the society before becoming a member of the Council', 'I hid my information, as I don't want to waste my time in useless arguments and discussion', 'The Twitter platform gives me space, but it did not add much to me as a legislator and decision-maker', 'People's opinion does not matter because, as a member, I work to satisfy my conscience and not to satisfy the citizens', 'I pay attention to who formulates his/her tweets professionally',* and *'I would pay attention to media professionals and senior writers'.*

Hence, even though members of the elite group usually argue over certain issues in the development of policy, they do have a common worldview that overshadows the background disagreements. This may explain their confidence in having their own research styles and methods

to know the requirements and needs of the public without consulting them. The theory proposes that a single elite group in the society and not the municipality of the competing groups is the one that decides the most critical factors in the whole nation and leaves the common and the mid-level people in the society to handle the minor issues.

Yet, the findings from the interpretive content analyses prove that Twitter had given the public the chance to hold the members to account in two incidents. The first of these occurred when a female member was questioned on Twitter by one of her followers, and the second took place when the two members who were against the amendments to the Nationality Law were attacked by the public and the traditional media. Both members spent months posting tweets to defend themselves and clarify their views on that issue, commenting on the traditional media coverage and challenging journalists. These examples show that social media can contribute to political accountability (see Chapter 6). This finding is supported by O'Neill (2010), who argued that Twitter sometimes promotes accountability since the intention of the sender may be transparent, which helps to enhance trust as well as cultivate a feeling of honesty and openness concerning the politicians. Likewise, Schmiemann (2015) explained that social media helps to promote transparency and boost trust since they pave the way for the citizens to contribute their views during the process of making political decisions. However, in some cases, social media can act as a barrier for balancing the opinions on critical situations and issues. The public may make online posts that contribute to having adverse effects on MPs as happens when the bloggers put mainstream news in the public domain (O'Neill 2010).

In addition, even though most of the interviewees claimed that the Council members have full independence in taking decisions and expressing their opinion, voting, and scheduling their sessions, like any other Western parliament, the research findings show that this independence does not make them feel accountable towards the public. The literature provided different options to enhance the Council's performance. To improve the Shura Council, it would be necessary to

expand the Council's jurisdictions and responsibilities, develop committees, and upgrade its executive and administrative system (Al-Saud 2002; Alsudairy 2017; and Alsudairy and Alshareif 2016). Dekmejian pointed out that the effectiveness of the Council depends on the King's wish to make it a useful method and on the aptitude of the Council members to expand the scope of the organisation's influence within the political system (Dekmejian 1998). Others found the solution to this dilemma in public elections. An elected Council would change the political culture in Saudi Arabia and might support longer-term political evolution (Thompson 2014, p. 11) since the increasing application of social media can lead to fairness between individuals participating in elections (Graham and Avery 2013). Hopefully, the increasing demands to have an elected Council may open up the political process in the years to come (see Chapter 4), as set out in the literature on this topic.

9.5.2 Transparency

Different viewpoints were expressed by the interviewees regarding creating openness and determining what information should be kept classified. To start with, the responses of the interviewed members indicate that they had diverse perceptions of the term 'transparency'. Some thought that public openness in the Council exists because the regular sessions are attended by media professionals and are transmitted on television and via the Council's Twitter account, except for private sessions. Nevertheless, a study by Alnassar (2014) pointed out that the severe abbreviation of the members' interventions, the removal of some of the Council's deliberations from appearing on television, and the conservative rules used by the Council had affected the television content of the Council and its image before the receiving audience. The study suggested that the Council review its dealings with television coverage, change the criteria that regulate it, present the most realistic picture of its work, and so mitigate the extremely conservative approach taken in producing the real content of its regular sessions for the public.

Moreover, a few believed that the mediator (the media) between the Council and the public must be removed whereby openness will be increased, whereas others claimed that the Shura Council is one of the most transparent and open of all the government bodies and institutions. Furthermore, a significant minority of the respondents believed that the Council's Media Department should be responsible for using Twitter to explain the process to the public and to respond to their demands because this is a big issue that cannot be solved only by the members. This supported the findings of other researchers (Alghamdy, 2014; Alnassar 2014; Alsudairy and Alshareif 2016; and Altayash 2014a, 2014b), who claimed in their studies that the media and communication policy of the Council has to be improved in order to increase its transparency via the regulation of the use of social media by Council members. On the other hand, a slight minority opined that the Council has enough openness, and there is no need to use Twitter or other forms of communication to improve the openness and trust amongst the public because of the legislative nature of the Council.

In terms of determining what information should remain classified, the members' responses varied. Some interviewees in the interviews mentioned that all things are managed by systems that control and regulate this information. Others said that the 'bar for confidentiality is set too high, and transparency must be increased', whereas others just concluded that 'what is confidential should remain this way' and, at the same time, suggested issuing a law to regulate issues of transparency and the right to access information. Interviewee 6 suggested leaving the matter to the individual's own discretion: *"The member of the Council needs to balance his/her activities on Twitter between what is permissible and what is prohibited."* Interviewee 13 reported that members frequently post draft resolutions, regulations, and recommendations on Twitter, which might be illegal but can be effective. However, such practices can negatively affect the performance of members and their work.

This wide spectrum of responses indicates that openness and confidentiality are grey areas. The lack of clear regulations and rules that govern and control this issue has left the field open to

interpretation. The literature asserts that social media has created a new model of political practice that is based on transparent governance, accountability, cooperation, economic freedom, and full access to public data. Giraldo-Luque et al. (2017) claimed that social media platforms have improved the capacity for transparency. On the other hand, Kinninmont (2013) and Alotaibi (2019) showed that social media enhanced candidness and transparency amongst politicians and government agencies. Also, Ausserhofer and Maireder (2013) believed that Twitter improves the transparency of the political structure in some Western Countries. Meanwhile, Spierings et al. (2014) stated that politicians tend to use Twitter as a tool that enables them to exclude people from accessing certain partisan information directly and quickly. Also, the quest for a free flow of information and transparency is an indicator that the use of Twitter does not support democratisation (Biswas et al. 20214).

Moreover, Almukhilif and Deng (2017) claimed that the Saudi government had established online platforms to ensure that there would be a transparent decision-making process. Essentially, according to them, transparency in the decision-making process is the foundation of the public sphere. For instance, in 2012, Saudi Arabia developed the 2030 action plan and made it accessible to the public. Surprisingly, this form of action was perceived as 'transparent' by scholars in Saudi Arabia. They ignored the fact that transparency entails engaging the public in the action plan of the 2030 process and not just making it accessible to the public online. The incorporation of the online platform is not enough to ensure transparency, as transparency is about "the availability of information on matters of public concerns, the ability of citizens to participate in political decision making, and the accountability of government to public opinion" (Graham and Avery 2013, p. 5). It involves the rights and the means to examine the process of decision making, holding public officials accountable, opening government meetings to the press, allowing citizens to review the public budgets, and opening laws and decisions for discussions (Mattozzi and Merlo 2007). Twitter does allow for some degree of public accountability concerning the debate of political and social

issues, but this does not mean that citizens are able to review the documentation and the decisions made by governments as would be possible in a democratic system.

9.5.3 Trustworthiness

A wide range of details and nuances was found in terms of the credibility of the Twitter platform, regarding content and users, as 30% of the interviewees in the interviews pointed out that 'trust in the Twitter platform is not absolute', 30% stated that 'credibility depends on the source of information', 25% said that the Twitter platform has poor credibility, and 15% confirmed that 'Twitter is not a source of confidence at all'. Moreover, half of the interviewees believed that social media, especially Twitter, is a source of misinformation and rumours, as Interviewees 1, 2 and 19 pointed out in their comments that Twitter is inherently unreliable. Findings concerning the perceptions of Shura Council members toward Twitter are supported by the argument of Lorenzano et al. (2018), as they emphasised that misinformation and disinformation are spread on social media, which means the quality of online engagement is poor and of dubious validity. In relation to this point, the interpretive content analysis shows that 21 account holders posted 50 tweets criticising the Twitter platform for being an unreliable source of information. The tweets warned of online bullying and provided advice about how to deal with the platform. On the other hand, one interviewee denied that Twitter spreads rumours and misinformation and instead believed that the platform shows public behaviours and actions. Indeed, most of the interviewees (60%) thought that Twitter supports their work more that it harms it, whilst only 20% thought that it supports and harms their work at the same time due to its inherent unreliability. Alshahrani's (2017) study found that Council members were motivated to use social media platforms as a means to fight the rumours affecting the security and stability of the country and citizens. In this sense, the members of the Shura Council had taken to Twitter to increase the reliability of the information present on social media platforms.

To conclude, the findings show that Twitter had given the public the voice to hold the Council members accountable even though they believe that they are accountable only before the King and even though they think that their rank, qualifications, and influential qualities empower them to know the requirements and needs of society and the public without consulting them. Such accountability then may increase the trustworthiness of the Shura Council in the eyes of the public. Therefore, the influence of Twitter on the Shura Council members has been made evident in this study in terms of the few yet significant examples of positive interaction and political engagement. However, social media, including Twitter, has not yet created a new model of political practice that is based on reliable governance, accountability, and full access to public data in Saudi Arabia. Flinders and Kelso (2011) argued that the absence of trust in politics can create a scenario where the public may fail to obtain actual and valid information, which serves to make governing bodies unreliable. However, these findings indicate that Twitter is a platform that can potentially help to facilitate greater access to information about the Shura Council and its decision-making process, therefore, ultimately, increasing its reliability in the eyes of the wider public.

9.6 The Influence of Public Involvement in the Decision-Making Process in a Non-Democratic Political Systems

This section aims to explore whether Twitter can enhance public interventions on the decision-making process in the Shura Council. Therefore, it is essential first to discuss the modes of communication between the Council members and the citizens before determining whether social media can enhance public interventions in a legislative/parliamentary process that is not based on public elections. RQ 4 was addressed in this section.

9.6.1 The Shura Council Members-Citizens Modes of Communication

The interpretive content analysis shows that the account holders' experiences in using the Twitter platform mainly involved informing and highlighting policy concerns to members of the public,

with interacting with the public being less important. The examination of these applications indicates that Twitter is more likely to be used for a top-down rather than bottom-up mode of communication. The patterns of these two modes are explained in the following sections.

This research shows that it is important to distinguish between sending out information to citizens, recognising the concerns of some citizens, and engaging in debates with citizens. From this research it is clear that Twitter is frequently used to send out information to citizens, whilst addressing citizens' concerns happens infrequently. Furthermore, Shura Council members rarely engage in debates with citizens. It could also be suggested that social media undermines the importance of expertise in this context.

The literature also suggests that the Saudi Arabian government recognises the potential of Twitter as a form of communication between those in power and the public, as it does not put much effort into censoring social networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter (Wentrup et al. 2017). This finding strongly supports the conclusion that Twitter has opened up the Saudi government to the general public through facilitating communication and debate between members of the public and the Shura Council. Twitter also allows for faster communication between parliamentarians and citizens. Furthermore, the data show that most participants disagree with the statement that Twitter undermines a Council member's role as an expert and representative, even though they think that Twitter gives undue space to policy amateurs and people who lack the appropriate knowledge to assess policy debates as one of the biggest disadvantages for Council members' use of Twitter. This finding has strong implications for the research questions put forward by this study.

9.6.1.1 Top-Down Modes of Communication

The interpretive content analysis shows that 63% of the analysed tweets involved addressing the public about a specific issue without the account holder engaging in a debate or a discussion. Out of 58 account holders, 39 had posted 566 tweets to update the public about Council activities, 19

account holders had posted 481 tweets to provide information about their work in the Council and update the public about a draft law they had suggested to the Council, 30 account holders had posted 431 tweets on promoting their colleagues and praising each other, and 30 account holders had posted 208 tweets explaining the legislation process.

The patterns extracted from these figures indicate most of the analysed tweets related to public relations, self-promotion, and the creation of alliances instead of interacting with the public or winning their support. Examples of using Twitter accounts for self-promotion can be seen in the content analysis where 481 out of 3,077 tweets were for building the account holder's public image. Self-promotion can be seen in the interviews, as 25% of the interviewees mentioned that their Twitter account supported their work as a member of the Council, and 20% stated that they had created Twitter accounts as a means of self-promotion. This finding is supported by Del Valle's argument (2015) that social media acts as the ideal tool for self-promotion since it gives politicians the capability to be in touch with the public and to deliver their opinions and activities. However, the findings also reflected arguments made by Ausserhofer and Maireder (2013) and Poulakidakos and Veneti (2016) that politicians have used Twitter to inform the public more than to engage with them via the platform.

Evidence of Council members using Twitter for public relations is clear in the analysis of the tweets that members had posted to support, defend, and congratulate one another and retweets of the personal activities of and news about their colleagues, such as participating in seminars, workshops, conferences, events, achievements, and other personal news. Other account holders focused on their interests and specialties without talking about their work in the Council. Furthermore, the analyses show that many account holders posted tweets to praise other members' work or to support and highlight other members in the Council and its committees.

Public relations usage may also apply to using Twitter accounts to support the decisions and initiatives of the government. Within the time period explored in this study, the government took two major decisions. The first was on June 5, 2017, after a diplomatic crisis between Saudi Arabia and several other Arab countries on the one hand and Qatar on the other. The second was on November 4, 2017, after the King's decision to establish the anti-corruption committee to fight corruption (see Chapter 4).

Due to these incidents, the interviewees, most notably Interviewee 19, explained that they used their accounts to support the government so as to express their support for the policies of the Shura Council and emphasise their credibility as Council representatives. Moreover, most interviewees mentioned that they engaged with posts from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or posted their own tweets that supported the decisions, whilst others retweeted the tweets from official accounts and government entities on Twitter that were directly related to the resolution. Most of them clarified that it is important to explain, describe, and comment on decisions and rules and play a supportive and encouraging role in raising awareness about these decisions through the Twitter platform. The survey results show that almost three-quarters of survey respondents highlighted 'fast access to government decisions'.

Their tendency to support government decisions can be attributed to the background experience of the members. Analysis of the survey data shows that 76.7% of the survey participants had worked in the government sector, and 67.5% had been involved in decision-making with the government for more than eight years though in Almuhanna (2005), 48% of the members worked in government agencies. This finding indicates an increased tendency to select members who worked in the government sector and who had been involved in decision making with the government.

Yet, analysis of the interview data suggests that the two female interviewees expressed different views regarding this issue. Interviewee 19 considered herself a selective person who chose to

interact with decisions and issues relevant to her specialisation and interests, whilst the second (Interviewee 4) was against commenting on these decisions after they have been made. She explained that it was better to use Twitter to identify what decisions were to be made rather than those that had already been made if the user wanted to use social media channels to have an impact on decision-making. These findings are supported by observations by Kingdon (2014), who emphasised that governments and policy entrepreneurs may use various tools to identify policy problems that require change.

In addition to that, the Council members used Twitter as top-down communication to send their messages to the public; from the interpretive content analysis, Twitter was used by the Council members to create some forms of alliances, although most of the respondents in the questionnaire claimed that connecting with other Council members was one of the least important purposes for them to create their Twitter accounts (see Chapters 6 and 7). However, this research was conducted to show that the Council members used Twitter when forming alliances with other members carrying similar views, when trying to form a public opinion regarding any issue, and when supporting and defending their peers.

Most importantly, ideological alliances were found when two female members tweeted regarding 'women's empowerment' (feminist). Those members, who were sharing tweets, retweets, and comments on this topic, were supporting each other and were criticising the Council's approach to dealing with this issue. They were also united in demanding reform of the Council's voting system to reveal the names of voters on decisions voted upon in the regular sessions. The second ideological alliance created on Twitter occurred between male and female members against the Council's Spokesperson in response to dismissing an additional recommendation on combining the Institution of the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (i.e., religious police) with the Ministry of Islamic Affairs from the regular session agenda by the Spokesperson (liberalist)

(see sections 6.3.2.2 and 6.3.3.3). The findings support Kruikemeier (2014), who indicated that using Twitter to create alliances during the political campaigns was an effective behaviour.

However, since the Saudi Shura Council does not have political parties and each member represents him/herself, so some Council members' use of Twitter to create alliances does not have a positive role amongst and or have a positive impact on the Council members and their relations with each other and with the public. This could suggest that Twitter may create alliances between members for negative rather than positive reasons.

On the other hand, Barberá and Rivero (2015) and Feroz et al. (2014) emphasised that parliamentarians' use of Twitter would improve and enhance the cooperation amongst different political parties, and this also supports the argument of Hwang (2013) that the formation of alliances on Twitter by parliamentarians can both support and hurt their relations with their colleagues because whilst it may create coalitions amongst the members of the politicians, it could also divide them. This matches with the perspectives of most of the interviewees when they criticised their colleagues for using their Twitter accounts to discuss the undertaken works and decisions made by them or by other members, as they believed that such an action would cause misunderstandings with the public and lead to the Council and other members having to face problems because of this action, which they felt was unnecessary (see Chapter 8).

9.6.1.2 Bottom-Up Modes of Communication

In total, 80% of the interviewees claimed that Twitter was not their primary means of engaging with the public, and most of the survey participants were neutral about the statement 'starting a dialogue between concerned citizens and policymakers' as being one of Twitter's advantages. This suggests that communication with the public is only one motivation behind Council members' involvement with social media. Nevertheless, 87.9% of the account holders allowed direct messages to everyone, which indicates that the majority of the account holders were open to

receiving direct messages from all users including non-followers. This suggests that Council members' Twitter accounts were created partly as a means of encouraging dialogue between Council members and the general public (see section 6.3.3.1). However, some members showed a preference for using Twitter for self-promotion and making statements whilst avoiding interactions with members of the general public, which indicates that they remain unenthusiastic about directly communicating with members of the public.

Twelve of the account holders engaged with the public in different ways. Interestingly, seven of these accounts belonged to female members. Since women in Saudi Arabia are not allowed to engage in discussions with men who are not family members, social media seems to have given female members a way to safely interact with the public. In terms of the patterns of communication, 2 of these 12 account holders hosted Q&A sessions, 5 responded to public inquiries, and 10 became engaged in hashtags created by the public. One account holder posted two opinion polls to get the public opinion on the Tax-Free Living draft law and on how ending tax-free living would affect their purchasing behaviours. Moreover, one account holder posted a tweet that received a lot of attention when he asked the users for suggestions he could deliver to the Minister of Housing, who was intending to attend the Council session. In addition, one of the account holders created a hashtag to interact with the public on issues involving the legislative process and to deliver correct information about the Shura Council and so correct any misleading information.

The findings from the interviews show that 50% of the interviewees were interested in explaining decisions or commenting on them, with Interviewee 16 stating that she used Twitter to explain the actions and work of the Shura Council. Therefore, there is very limited evidence to agree with the argument made by Del Valle (2015) that Twitter is paving the way for online users to carry out political debates and share information with their colleagues and friends during voting, hence easing the process of updating, influencing, and engaging with each other on different topics concerning government operations.

To sum up, the findings show that the members of the Shura Council used their Twitter accounts for both modes of communications, though they did so unequally. Their focus was on the top-down type of communication through self-promotion, public relations, creating alliances, informing the public about their work, or updating the public on the Council's process and activities regarding legislation. However, around one third of the analysed tweets showed that 12 account holders were engaged with the public either through hosting Q&A sessions, engaging in or creating hashtags, posting opinion polls, or asking for suggestions. This finding suggests that a small but significant group amongst the members of the Shura Council were incorporating tweeting technology in their work since they were using Twitter accounts to communicate with the larger community (Spierings et al. 2019). Yet, these findings show that public involvement was being practised at the minimum level. These findings raised the question of whether social media can facilitate reliable and effective political participation in a non-democratic country.

9.6.1.3 The Influence of Social Media in a Political System that is not Based on Public Elections

As mentioned earlier, Stieglitz et al. (2012) found that members of the German parliament tend to use Twitter to disseminate a particular message. Larsson (2015) also indicated that politicians have embarked on online platforms whilst dealing with matters affecting society, whilst several scholars have provided information concerning the way MPs use Twitter regarding political issues (Jackson and Lilleker 2011; D'heer and Verdegem 2014). In the case of the members of the Shura Council, it was found that the majority of the Council members used the Twitter platform in a top-down approach.

> The impact of this communication is conditioned by strength of institutions, both formal and informal. When institutions are strong and have prior willingness to improve accountability, digital communication can have positive results. On the other hand, when

institutions are not empowered, digital communication can become another tool for elite control, and can even lead to negative consequences in some situations. (GPSA Brown Bag Lunch Report 2015)**.**

Based on these views, the socio-political application of social media engagement would, to a great extent, fulfil its role in a democratic environment where institutions, organisations, and interest groups work freely with minimum restrictions. In most democratic states, people have several ways to engage with political issues that touch their lives. In contrast, in an authoritarian country, social media participation does not have these precedents.

The results of the interviews presented in Chapter 8 show that the involvement of the public was not reflected in the members' practices, as the bulk of their interactions did not show a range of stakeholder involvement in debates or effective discussions. In addition, although the use of Twitter has enhanced communication between the members of the Council and the public, socio-political involvement had the lowest level of interest amongst the Council members. Most of the survey participants did not agree with the statement 'discussion on Twitter about issues, for instance, lifting the ban on women driving, the creation of an anti-corruption committee, and affordable housing and others, affected their thought or decisions in their work within the Council' (see Chapter 7) even though they posted 745 out of 3,077 tweets in support of the government's decisions on these issues (see Chapter 6).

This can be attributed to the fact that formal institutions in Saudi Arabia are centralised and powerless, as they lack the authorisation to make decisions independently. All decisions are made by the King or must be approved by him. Healthy and independent civil society organisations like NGOs, trade unions, and think tanks are restricted in Saudi Arabia except for charitable or Islamic education purposes, and policy advocacy is limited, as political activists are silenced, arrested, or subjected to surveillance and control.

Moreover, the results of this research indicate that with very minimal use, the Council members' use of the Twitter platform had created a space for the public to engage in a 'public debate' and be involved in a public sphere that links civil society and the state on the path to democracy (Habermas, 2010), since one of the advantages of the public sphere theory is that it leads to a more democratic state and the plights of the citizens are considered (Kalin and Paul, 2017). However, authorities tend to shrink the size of the public sphere, control the flow of information, and hinder the capacity of Saudi citizens to seek change by spreading false excuses. Their ubiquitous response to whenever the people move to make a change has been to claim that 'society is not yet ready for change'. The extensive lack of knowledge and confusion about some political, cultural, and religious matters were clear in many cases, for instance, the widespread debates over lifting the ban on women driving in Saudi Arabia as discussed in the literature review chapter (see Chapter 4).

Safeenna and Kammani (2013, p. 67) argued that the Shura Council incorporated Twitter in the e-government program to access public opinion on important matters the Saudi citizens. This action was regarded as a step towards democracy in Saudi Arabia, and therefore, toward giving citizens a chance to contribute to fundamental aspects of the government. The authors emphasised that "this enhances the democratic values of the public since social media has adamantly transformed the society as it has opened a new medium of communication" (Safeenna and Kammani 2013, p. 67). However, such a conclusion is at odds with the fact that democracy involves themes greater than incorporating Twitter into the e-government program to obtain the public's opinion on important matters affecting the Saudi people, such as free and fair elections and citizens' ability to participate in this electoral process, and such themes are not part of the political system of Saudi Arabia. Also, this conclusion disagrees with the findings of this research in both the survey and the interviews where it was found that the incorporation of Twitter into the e-government program

had not been reflected in setting the agenda of the Shura Council, as the majority of the Council members had not raised the topics from Twitter before the Council (see Chapter 8).

One would assume that the absolute monarchy nature of the leadership in Saudi Arabia would lead to Twitter being silenced in the region (Alwagait et al. 2015). Apparently, Twitter has proven to be a very viable voice compared to the street protests. As such, many are taking to the platform to voice their political opinion and dissent. According to Larsson and Moe (2012), Twitter revolts are present in a closed political system as well as non-democratic nations, but the community appears to dispute the exact effects and contents of these uprisings. Government restrictions did not stop millions of activists from conducting several 'Twitter Waves' hoping for a policy change regarding the ban on women driving and for the abolition of the legal guardianship system, and to demonstrate against the draft of a code penalising individuals who use social media to attack Islam. This is because, according to Wolfsfeld et al. (2013), political action is influenced by the context in which it occurs. This is the case, despite the different strategies non-democratic states use to control social media use.

The empirical investigations in this research have revealed that social media has in general resulted in an exceptional socio-political experience for the members of the Shura Council. The majority of the survey respondents and interviewees claimed that social media platforms had enriched their political intervention; however, only a few of them felt they had been affected by this experience in their decision-making process. This is significant as it suggests that whilst exposure to public opinion on Twitter had informed the ways in which members of the Council responded on a political level, it did not inform how and why they made political decisions. Alternatively, it might mean that Council members were unaware of the influence that Twitter had on their decision-making. The findings of this research agree with Joseph (2012), who revealed that the extensive participation offered by social media platforms does not inevitably influence the decision making in public, at least in a non-democratic context; he claimed 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" (Joseph 2012, p. 174).

9.7 Conclusion

The discussion in this chapter suggests that the outcomes of this research indicate that the positive perception of Twitter amongst the majority of the Shura Council members had increased their minimal interaction with the public in different ways. The results show a connection between high activity and the level and nature of the interaction with citizens, which could be interpreted as a step towards public engagement and towards opening up a fairly insulated body of policymaking.

The findings from the interpretive content analysis indicate that 63% of the communication activities between the citizens and the Council members took the top-down approach towards self-promotion, public relations, and creating alliances, which also links to the findings in the interviews and the survey. But the findings from the interpretive content analysis show that 12 account holders were engaged with the public through hosting Q&A sessions, posting opinion polls, asking for suggestions, and engaging in hashtags. These findings show social media has in general brought about an exceptional socio-political experience for the majority of the Council members and managed to create a public sphere for social engagement, though only a few of them were affected by this experience in their decision-making process. Therefore, it could be concluded that interactions on social media, especially Twitter, regarding the legislative process led to increasing hopes of democratisation even though it might only be limited.

A small minority of the interviewees recognised that Twitter, as a means of exerting pressure, has become an essential influence in the attitudes of many state officials, including members of the Council. A few of the interviewees referred to the advantage that active members have. The data analysis shows that the members who were interacting with the public more were all highly active members. Although most of the interviewed members and the survey sample denied that Twitter

had made any changes in their attitudes as decision-makers, the findings show that Twitter had in fact changed the Council members' knowledge and understanding through the influence of social media in the policymaking process due to their increased access to public opinion and public concerns.

It is apparent that a significant proportion of Shura Council members are interested in reading what the public has to say on Twitter. This recognition suggests a different kind of agenda setting where public interventions via Twitter do not affect the official agenda but rather affect members' understanding of social problems, and therefore, enhance the debate in the Council in subtle ways even though members deny this.

It was found that for the majority of the interviewees, their sense of accountability was confined to the king, not to the public, since they are appointed by him. Yet, the findings from the interpretive content analysis show that Twitter has given the public the voice to hold the members accountable in two incidents, which indicates that Twitter has, to a limited extent, had an impact on the accountability, of the Shura Council during the policy-making process. In addition, the interviewees provided a diverse range of views of the term 'transparency', as the lack of regulations and rules that govern this issue had left the way open to different interpretations.

Members of the Shura Council on Twitter also expressed interest in features of the medium that do not involve listening to members of the public. Notably, only 45% of the interview sample cited social media as their preferred way of communicating and interacting with the general public, and 20.2% preferred to use Twitter on an anonymous basis. Instead, many Shura Council members wanted to use Twitter to communicate policy to the general public rather than have the public communicate perspectives and issues to them. Nevertheless, 50% of the sample did recognise the value of engaging with the public when using Twitter. However, 80% of the sample claimed that reading what was presented on Twitter was the main reason they opened a social media account.

Essentially, for members of the Shura Council, Twitter is a top-down mode of communication reflecting the trajectory of Arab society identified by Hofstede (2011). These findings indicate that public interest is not the primary motivation for Council members' social media use. Alasem (2015) and Alshahrani (2017) supported this argument, suggesting that for Shura Council members, Twitter is a way of keeping up with news and current affairs rather than interacting with the public.

To conclude, the findings indicate that Council members have a complex attitude toward Twitter, with most using it to communicate in a top-down fashion, and a minority recognising the power of interactive communication with members of the public on policy issues. It is apparent that Twitter has influenced the members of the Shura Council through their interaction with the citizens in Q&A sessions, hashtags, and opinion polls, and the public have been given the opportunity to have their voices heard. This can be considered a small step towards e-democracy (Simon et al. 2017), which would encourage and empower greater participation of people in democratic processes like proposing, developing, and creating laws (Jafarkarimi et al. 2014), since a digital democracy aims to create a society that is politically aware and that is able to respond to the challenges posed by an increasingly complex world (Jafarkarimi et al. 2014). Therefore, it can be concluded that Twitter has, to some extent, enhanced public interventions in a legislative/parliamentary process that is not based on popular elections. Twitter has given hope about the possibility of democratising the work of the Council and has allowed the public to contribute their views to a certain extent, even though this is happening in a rather restricted and limited way. Whilst members of the Council appear to believe that the public does not influence the decision-making process, they do hear and listen to public concerns when these are brought up on Twitter. Hence, the fact they are now aware of these concerns (although they may not always be motivated to act on them) appears to lead toward a limited democratising process.

The next chapter, which is the final one, includes the key findings of this research and what they mean for the wider field. Then, some suggestions for future research are given.

CHAPTER TEN: THE CONCLUSION

10.1 Introduction

This thesis aimed to analyse how social media, especially Twitter, affects policymaking and policy action and deliberation in a specific political system that is not based on public elections. According to Habermas (2010), the creation of social media accounts by policymakers for a wide range of purposes creates a space for the public to become engaged in a 'public debate' and in a public sphere that links civil society and the state on the path to democracy.

To answer these questions, this thesis applied a combination of three data collection methods to broaden the range of insights gleaned from this study: a survey, semi-structured interviews, and interpretative content analysis. The distinctiveness of this study design is that to maintain the highest level of representation, the survey targeted all 150 members of the seventh term and not just a group sample. The quantitative data collected from 120 members helped reflect the context in which the participants' perception was formed, whilst the qualitative data collected from 20 interviewees and the interpretive content analysis of 58 Twitter accounts added in-depth perceptions on the role of social media in the decision-making process as perceived by Council members. In addition, different methods were used to ensure the research validity and reliability as displayed in Chapter 5. The various views put forward by the research sample through Twitter, the survey, and the interview data were then used to form the findings and outline conclusions.

10.2 Conceptual Framework

This study employed various critical concepts pertaining to the political aspect of social media in increasing public involvement in the policy-making process within a non-democratic setting. The concept of social media was explained in Chapter 2 to provide an understanding of the various applications of social media within a political context. An example of this is government-citizen

communication settings. The literature observed that social media has created an online public sphere of a communicative space in which users can explicitly and freely participate and can communicate issues of common concern and where all activities are predominantly visible to all (Dahlberg 2001; Cammaerts 2005; Poor 2005; Al-Saggaf 2006; Schafer 2015). Moreover, it was noted that social media may have a massive potential to facilitate political public engagement and transform the mode of communication amongst the public, which would refresh the public sphere (Brundidge and Rice 2009; Farrell 2012). It is important to explore the increasing use of social media for political public engagement, as it targets parliamentarians in the Shura Council.

Chapter 3 applied a conceptual framework of three policy change models to explore the potential for policy reform in the Shura Council towards a larger inclusion of the public in the policymaking and agenda-setting process. The multiple streams model helped in identifying the intersection of problems, policies, and politics and in determining the positive conditions for policy change (Kingdon 1984). The punctuated equilibrium framework explored the decision-making process at the individual and collective levels and considered the development of the macro-political agenda where policy images play a significant role in promoting change (Barzelay 2001). The power elites theory helped in determining how change can be made when major decisions are taken by a group of elites who share the same beliefs and attitudes and hold high command posts that further give them an enormous authority over the majority of the systems in the society (Lenski 2013).

It was observed that social media in Saudi Arabia lacks the freedom that is regularly associated with social media across the world (Freedom House 2020). The characteristics of high-power distance, low uncertainty avoidance, high collectivism, a patriarchal society, and more short-term than long-term orientation are cultural aspects that affect political communication (Obeidat et al. 2012). Tribalism means Saudis tend to view life in more traditional terms, as the state has remained organised largely along tribal lines (Metz 1993, p. 3). These factors may explain why members of

the Shura Council view Twitter more as an opportunity for broadcasting information than interacting with the public.

10.3 Key Findings

This section explores the key findings of this research in relation to the research objectives and questions.

10.3.1 The Influence of Twitter on the Shura Council Members' Perceptions

It is apparent that Twitter has influenced the political perceptions of Council members but that this is not why they chose to engage with social media. The main reason they engage with social media is to put forward the policy of the Council or their normative response to it.

The findings also suggest that Twitter has enhanced the possibility of interaction between citizens and Council members, although not all Council members recognise this aspect of Twitter's potential. The majority of the study sample had created proper profiles to post their own contents. This finding recognises that profiling is connected to creating social interactions (Boyd and Elision 2008) as the first step in gaining control in the realm of Twitter (Schejter and Tirosh 2015). Moreover, the results also show that the vast majority of the research population held positive perceptions of social media applications. Such positivity had encouraged a communicative space where Council members participated in debates about and communicated issues of common concern with the public in a largely visible way, such as women being allowed to drive and concerns about political transparency. Yet, the findings show that socio-political involvement had the lowest level of interest amongst the Council members. Even though the majority of the study population claimed that social media platforms had enriched their political intervention, discussion of political issues was avoided. It was found from the interpretive content analysis that the majority of the analysed tweets involved public relations, self-promotion, and creating alliances. These

officials link the social media platforms with their blog posts and news articles and hence, manage to inform and update the society about their daily activities; therefore, they use Twitter as a tool for self-promotion. However, it was also found that a small minority of the study population had engaged with the public through hosting Q&A sessions.

Therefore, Twitter has, in general, resulted in an exceptional socio-political experience for the majority of the Council members and has managed to create a public sphere for social engagement (Brundidge and Rice 2009; Habermas 2010; Farrell 2012). Deacon et al. (2021) observed that Twitter is a public social media forum where information is posted publicly and exchanged openly. These factors make it a public sphere, although the make-up of such sphere inherently complex. The Council members have also used Twitter to engage with the general public and hear their opinions on policy matters, although most claim that these opinions do not inform the decision-making process. However, only a few of them were affected by this experience as regards their decision-making process. Citizens can express their thoughts and opinions, though to a limited extent, and sensible debate to achieve public accord and decision making is not always possible due to the government's high level of restrictions and surveillance. These findings thus suggest that Council members like Twitter, as it does not pose a threat to the status quo, including policymaking. Therefore, although Twitter appears to encourage citizen engagement, it does so in a way that does not affect the workings of state institutions, as it does not directly influence decision-making at the governmental level but only commentates on it.

10.3.2 Public Interventions via Social Media and the Question of Democracy

Given the political and cultural factors presented in Chapter 4, the Shura Council members are appointed by the King and not elected by the public. Therefore, the findings show that the majority of the Shura Council believed that they only "need to prove themselves to the King". Consequently, whilst they are clearly aware of and interested in public opinion as expressed on

Twitter, they are not bound to adopt or follow it. For instance, members were held accountable on Twitter by the public when the Nationality Laws was amended (see section 6.3.3.2), indicating that the Council members are aware of the ways in which public opinion is expressed on Twitter.

The findings of this research show that public involvement had been practised at the minimum level even though half of the interviewees and more than half of the survey participants claimed that they used the Twitter platform to interact with the public. Moreover, the results of the interpretive content analysis did not show a range of stakeholder involvement in debates or effective discussions. The literature indicates that political communication is conditioned by the strength of institutions and a healthy media environment. Otherwise, digital communication can become another tool for elite control and can even lead to negative consequences in some situations. The available literature indicates that government institutions in Saudi Arabia are centralised and powerless, as they lack the authority to make decisions independently. Healthy and independent civil society organisations are controlled, and political activists are silenced, arrested, or subjected to surveillance and control. This research therefore indicates that policy is rarely subject to public debate in Saudi Arabia, an integral characteristic of non-democratic political status quo.

Kalin and Paul (2017) argued that one of the advantages of public engagement is that it leads to a more democratic state, and the plights of the citizens are considered. However, the findings of this research show that Twitter had not led to more democracy, but to some extent, it had raised hopes regarding a more democratic legislative process by interaction with the Council members via social media, especially Twitter due to interview and survey data suggesting that members do listen to public concerns expressed on Twitter although they may not take them into account during the decision-making process. It is apparent that Twitter has a democratising effect by enhancing state-citizen interactions and by bringing public voices into the spaces of decision-making. Furthermore, Thorsen and Sreedharan (2019) argued that social media allows horizontal interaction, which is

based on a low scale hierarchy and is less likely to fall under the control of non-democratic regimes.

This finding agrees with Joseph (2012) and Chapin (2016) that the large size of participation offered by social media platforms does not inevitably influence the decision making in the Internet public sphere, at least in a non-democratic context; for example, it has been found that social media increases public participation in political and social affairs although increased participation does not necessary lead to a more democratic system. This, instead, depends on the values underlying increased public participation (Joseph 2012). In this regard, it is necessary to keep in mind that the utilisation of online platforms is indivisible from the context (democratic or non-democratic), and any research must investigate the impact of social and political aspects for a specific country, as the contextual state of affairs should be taken into consideration first and foremost.

10.3.3 Attitudinal Changes as an Indicator for Policy Change

The findings show that the majority of the Shura Council members had positive attitudes towards using the Twitter platform in their personal and professional work for various purposes. However, this positive attitude was not clearly reflected in the policy-making process. Most of the interviewees strongly believed that Twitter usage had not changed their attitudes as decision-makers. Nevertheless, despite them denying any change in their attitudes as a result of social media usage, the outcomes of this research noted a wide range of attitudes amongst the participants. Most importantly, it marked a recognition of how public involvement changes Council members' knowledge and understanding of the influence of social media in the policy-making process even though most Council members deny that. Such recognition suggests a change in the actors' attitudes, interests, and thoughts (Kingdon 2010), which may lead to a greater change. This finding of this research agrees that the influence of social media can bring public opinions and concerns

to the attention of the government, even in a controlled and weak public sphere (Howard and Hussain 2013).

From my personal experience, I can say that this argument is plausible. During my work in the Shura Council in Saudi Arabia as a public relations and protocol officer, I have witnessed a range of perceptions and attitudes amongst the members of the Shura Council on the Twitter platform through my interaction with political subjects. I have also observed positive reactions in the way the Council members have dealt with critical subjects. Yet, it is difficult to validate whether these reactions are linked to the discussions arising on the internet or if they are due to the recent reforms taking place in Saudi Arabia.

10.3.4 The Influence of Social Media on the Agenda Setting in the Shura Council

The findings of this research show rich details and nuances regarding the influence of Twitter on the agenda setting in the Council. The vast majority of the research participants claimed that discussions on Twitter had not given the public the ability to initially set the agendas for the members of the Council. They believed that issues and topics are discussed according to the agreed criteria in the Council, where each topic is discussed according to its level of importance. As such, the Council members do not prioritise public opinion, but rather they highlight policy and draw attention to it. Nonetheless, even though the majority did not readily see the influence of the public in their work, a significant minority recognised the limited role of citizens in the decision-making process. This finding confirms that Twitter participation by people living in a hostile social and political environment can increase communication between citizens and the government regarding the decision-making process. A number of studies cited in the literature review suggested that social media platforms have been successful in many socio-political incidents all over the world. Still, they should not be regarded as an alternative sphere to traditional political engagement but

rather should be viewed as a powerful apparatus to access information, raise awareness, share news, and organise events (Shirky 2011).

The findings indicate that the Shura Council maintains a policy monopoly rather than expanding it. This means that it is the status quo rather than a managed and practising institution. The effect of this is that change cannot take place (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). Instead, policymakers use their influential position to weaken the already established economic, political, and social institutions (Kirby, 2008). To diminish this monopoly, it is recommended that Cairney and Zahariadis's (2016) approach may fit better in the Saudi context than Kingdon's multiple stream model, which takes no account of how policies may be changed effectively only when policymakers have the willingness and aptitude to change them. They argued that the opportunity for change is not feasible unless there is major reform from within. Therefore, they suggested a direct process that takes a different order: a policymaker recognises a problem that needs to be solved, a range of potential solutions are provided by the administration, and the policymaker chooses the best solution (Cairney and Zahariadis 2016).

The research findings show that even though the Council members denied that public interventions via Twitter influence the agenda of the Council, they do follow what the public say and want as long as members of the public are expressing their opinions on social media, and they seem to be influenced by the public's posts. Besides, a minority recognised the role of the Twitter platform in influencing the Council's agenda setting. Therefore, rather than affecting the official agenda, Twitter suggests a different kind of agenda setting whereby public interventions via Twitter can allow for public interventions to influence the members' perceptions and insert public opinion in subtle and indirect ways, even though members deny that. Baumgartner et al. (2014) asserted that when an issue lies in the macro-political agenda, there is a possibility that small changes in the circumstances will lead to significant changes in the agenda-setting policy.

Significantly, the findings suggest that Shura Council members are open to using Twitter to communicate with the wider public, but their primary purpose in using Twitter is to keep up with news and current affairs or communicate policy to the wider public.

10.3.5 Agenda Setting, Responding to the Needs of the Public, Transparency, and Trustworthiness

O'Neill (2010) argued that Twitter sometimes promotes the response to the public's needs. Likewise, Schmiemann (2015) demonstrated that social media helps to promote openness and boost trust since they pave the way for citizens to contribute their views during the process of making political decisions. The findings of this research show that the Council members' sense of responsibility towards the public had been ambiguous. However, it was evident that in the past, members of the Council reported to the King only, but after the widespread use of social media, mainly Twitter, they found themselves reporting to the public also and inquiring about their needs and hopes. This is because the major characteristics of power elite theory apply to the Council members. They are individuals who share the same beliefs and attitudes, and they hold high command posts in the country, which gives them an enormous authority over the majority of social systems. This finding is supported by Almashaly (2013), who determined the Shura Council members' fit into the legislative elite's category, and by Alshlhoub (2013), who identified the members of the Shura Council as the advisory elite in Saudi Arabia.

In conclusion, the influence of Twitter on the Shura Council members has been made evident in this study in terms of positive interaction and political engagement. However, social media, including Twitter, has yet to create a new model of political practice that is based on transparent governance, openness, and full access to public data in Saudi Arabia.

Moreover, the findings display different viewpoints regarding creating transparency and determining what information should be kept classified. Most importantly, it was found that the

Council members had diverse perceptions of the term 'transparency'. The definitions of openness and confidentiality vary from one person to another, and the lack of precise laws has contributed significantly to this ambiguity. Flinders and Kelso (2011) argued that the absence of trust in politics can create a scenario where the public may fail to obtain actual and valid information.

Both Jafarkarimi et al. (2014) and Alotaibi (2019) asserted that social media has created a new model of political practice that is based on transparent governance, response to the public, cooperation, economic freedom, and full access to public data. It has also been claimed that social media platforms, particularly Twitter, have improved the capacity for transparency (Giraldo-Luque et al. 2017), Similarly, Ausserhofer and Maireder (2013) indicated that Twitter increases the transparency of the political system in some Western Countries. However, within the context of the Shura Council, the research findings agree with Spierings et al. (2014) that politicians tend to use Twitter as a tool that enables them to exclude people from accessing certain partisan sentiments directly and quickly. Also, the research findings agree with Biswas et al. (2014) that the ongoing campaign for a free flow of information and transparency on social media is an indicator that the use of Twitter does not support democratisation, although social media platforms do support and enhance other aspects of the democratisation process.

The research findings do not support the conclusions of Almukhilif and Deng (2017), who claimed that the incorporation of online platforms by the Saudi government ensures an open decision-making process. On the other hand, the research findings do agree that transparency is about "the availability of information on matters of public concerns, the ability of citizens to participate in political decision-making, and the accountability of government to public opinion" (Graham and Avery 2013, p. 5). Openness involves the rights and the means to examine the process of decision making, holding public officials responsible, opening government meetings to the press, allowing citizens to review the public budgets, and opening laws and decisions to discussions (Mattozzi and Merlo 2007).

The findings show that the participants were sceptical about the credibility of the Twitter platform. Their responses ranged from the sense that trust in the Twitter platform is not absolute, credibility depends on the source of information, the Twitter platform has poor credibility, and Twitter is not a source of confidence at all. Moreover, the research findings agreed with Lorenzano et al. (2018), who believed misinformation and disinformation has damaged the quality of social media. In turn, this phenomenon may have affected the perceptions of Council members. Indeed, the findings of this study show that most of the Council members believed that social media, especially the Twitter platform, is a source of misinformation and rumours. This finding is supported by Alshahrani's (2017) study, which found that Council members were motivated to use social media platforms as a means to fight the rumours affecting the security and stability of the country and citizens. Similarly, Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) claimed that online platforms have higher chances of spreading online misinformation and disinformation since some individuals may overstate the actual exposure.

The results of this study make it clear that members of the Shura Council are aware that social media can be used to create an oppositional public sphere that balances the differences between parties in conflict with one another (Hachigian 2002; Shirky 2011; Livingstone and Lunt 1994). The results of this study demonstrate that members of the Shura Council used Twitter to comment on emerging political issues and to put their own view forward, most probably to counter these opposition movements by expressing their awareness of public opinion and willingness to interact with and communicate these issues to the wider public despite the closed political system and non-democratic nature of Saudi Arabia. In general, on a political level, Twitter is also used to discuss women's rights and state-elite relationships (Foley 2019). Regarding the former point, this study showed that although most members of the Shura Council objected to the campaign on Twitter for women's right to drive, Interviewee 3, a female Council member, did appreciate the use of hashtags when raising awareness of female education graduates' lack of employment following graduation.

This suggests that Twitter has been used by some members of the Shura Council to either raise awareness of or to debate women's rights issues related to Saudi Arabia.

10.4 Contribution to Knowledge

Most recent studies of political activity on social media in the Arab world have focused on popular protest actions such as Arab Spring; however, this study explores the use of Twitter from the legislator's elites' perspective Saudi Arabia. This research is of particular significance in this field of scholarship due to my personal access to Council members and my experience of how the Council used public relations. This research studies how Council members perceive the role of Twitter regarding political intervention and how this perception affects their decision-making practice and commitment to political agenda-setting and enhances public interventions in a legislative process not based on public elections. So, the empirical findings of this research have conceptual implications leading to new insights regarding how theories can illuminate the role of Twitter amongst Saudi legislators in the Shura Council of Saudi Arabia. The concepts of the public sphere and the online public sphere, the multiple streams model, the punctuated equilibrium framework, and the power elite theories are used to explain the role of Twitter in decision-making and in policymakers' actions in a political system not based on public elections.

This research therefore contributes to the field of scholarship by providing interview and questionnaire and interpretive content analysis data that documents how Twitter affects policymaking and policy action and deliberation in a specific system not based on public elections. This thesis suggests that social media can encourage more communication between appointed representatives and the citizenry. In Saudi Arabia, such communication is generally top-down, with representatives using Twitter to express their personal views or the official view on various policy matters and to make representatives more aware of public viewpoints on various matters. As such, social media does not lead to a more participatory form of policymaking although it does

encourage top-down communication. It was noticed that Twitter does not change the communication between the decision-makers' and citizens from being directed from above, but this research found some evidence that Twitter has improved the communication between Council members and the public. Examples include communicating directly on the platform either publicly or through direct messages, understanding and noticing the public's needs and demands, gathering useful information about certain issues, and improving the public image, which shows the public reach the decision-makers in a legislative institution. So, this research emphasised that Twitter and social media in general have improved communication between Council members and the public, and so it supports the demands of some scholars (Alghamdy 2014; Alnassar 2014; Alshahrani 2017; and Altayash 2014a, 2014b) that the Council improve its media and communication policy especially in the era of social media. Although, in the research, Twitter did not change the form of communication between the policymakers at the higher level between Council members and the public, the improved communication between these parties facilitated by Twitter is an important shift because it gives a positive indication that it would lead to a major change regarding the public's role in the decision-making process in the Council.

Another unique finding in this research was that Council members used Twitter accounts to create ideological and supported alliances with some of their colleagues. This behaviour was interesting, although it was explained previously in the literature (see Chapter 4), since political parties are controlled in Saudi Arabia; Council members do not represent political parties or political ideologies. So, in discussions and voting in both the specialised committees and the Council's regular sessions, Council members basically represent themselves and their own views. This political vacuum drives members to form alliances or coalitions to defend and support each other. This finding matches the findings of other scholars (Barberá and Rivero 2015; Feroz et al. 2014; Kruikemeier 2014), who have stated that creating alliances via Twitter has positive effects on political campaigns and enhances the cooperation between political parties. As there are no

political parties in Saudi's Shura Council, the issue is debatable; the population of this research opposed the idea that Council members use Twitter in their work including creating alliances amongst members.

This study concludes that Twitter has enhanced citizen-decision-maker communication in Saudi Arabia between Council members and the public by changing Council members' socio-political landscape. They have been motivated by the emergence of an online public sphere or Twittersphere in Saudi Arabia, as Sousa (2013) argued that social media as a public sphere has given space to improve the relationship between governments and societies. Still, these implications of Council members as the decision-makers using Twitter to communicate with citizens is very limited because whilst Twitter allowed public concerns and public needs to reach the decision-makers, they were dubious about much of the information they received, as claimed by various scholars (Anderson and Rainie 2017; Gerhards and Schafer 2010; Hachigian 2002; Shirky 2011; Lorenzano et al. 2018), who focused on how the online public sphere spreads misinformation, fragmented society, and created an oppositional politics. Nonetheless, the online public sphere cannot be applied, as scholars (e.g., Habermas 2006; Papacharissi 2002, 2010) strongly believed the online sphere should provide equal spaces for all the participants involved in the discussions; it should be free from control by governments or other organisations.

As an absolute monarchy, the Saudi Arabian political system and structure differs from that of Western countries. Hence, the online public sphere has a major obstacle, namely, a lack of freedom of speech when discussing political issues, as there a high level of surveillance and censorship attached to the internet, especially social media. However, even with these obstacles, this research contributes to scholarship by showing that the online public sphere has identified an area of public debate within a non-democratic political system, and it agrees with Howard and Hussain (2013), who stated that social media can bring about governmental change even in a weak and controlled public sphere. This area emerged when Council members chose to talk publicly about their work

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with the Council on Twitter. This finding aligns with Kalin and Paul's (2017) conclusion that public sphere theory can benefit states by making them more democratic. The finding also agrees with some scholars (Eijaz 2013; Ausserhorfer and Maireder 2013; Poulakidakos and Veneti 2016; Sen and Bolumu-Elazıg's 2012), who revealed that politicians and decision-makers use Twitter as a public sphere, and they preferred to use it more in an informative way than for interacting with the public.

Therefore, this research shows how Twitter has challenged the hierarchical nature of the state-elite relationship in Saudi Arabia (as indicated by Hofstede, 2011) by potentially creating an open interaction between state representatives and the citizenry. It shows that some policymakers use Twitter to convey certain messages to the general public, although most Council members do not appear to want to have that interaction. The study results are varied on this point, indicating that Council members use Twitter to enhance their image, comment on specific issues, or explore issues of public interest rather than to offer a coherent message. Power elite theory (Lenski 2013) proposes that decisions for the welfare of entire nations are made by a single elite group, and this observation is confirmed by the nature and structure of Saudi Arabian politics and society. In the interviews, Council members appeared to agree with this notion as it was proposed in the secondary literature; however, a minority (20%) of the interviewees in this research acknowledged that Twitter frequently set the agenda for Council members. Whilst Obeidat et al. (2012) noted that Arab culture has a high-power distance, this study suggests that Twitter levels out the distance between elites and members of the public. Furthermore, whilst Metz (1993) characterised Saudi society as being drawn along tribal lines, Twitter enables its users to challenge such cultural boundaries.

Regarding the Council's functions, although 20% of the interviewees stated that Twitter sets their agenda within their work in the Council, it was noticed that Twitter does not affect the policy of the Council and its members, especially agenda-setting, prioritisation, and speeding up the actions

and decisions. The study reveals that such agenda-setting does not affect the political agenda per se but Council members' positive view by using Twitter particularly to explore public concerns, needs, and demands enhances members' understanding of social problems, thereby influencing the trajectory of debate in Council sessions. Therefore, it was not surprising to find that Twitter failed to affect the policy monopoly in the Council and its members, as in Saudi Arabia's legislative body, policy change or reform occurs when members acknowledge and decide to fix problems by seeking the possible solutions to those problems. This action supports Cairney and Zahariadis's (2016) approach, which is more appropriate for the Saudi political system than Kingdon's (1984) multiple stream model. The thesis shows that Council members prefer long periods of stability, and any change in policy direction may take a long time, but they will accept sudden instability (as revealed by Hegelich et al. 2015). The findings of this research thus indicate that Council members denied that Twitter can affect the Council and influence its members' decisions. However, the recent social and political changes that the King and Crown Prince have made to meet the goal of Vision 2030 will challenge the Council with its complex system that works in a stable process atmosphere.

On the other hand, this research demonstrates that social media does not lead to increased democratisation, as it indicates that whilst Twitter appears to have enhanced communication between the state and citizens, it has failed to increase democratisation or representation as whilst Council members listen to public concerns expressed on Twitter, they do not act on them. In addition, it reveals that Twitter has a limited role in increasing democratisation amongst politicians in a country such as Saudi Arabia. Nonetheless, some democratic practices were identified, as Twitter has made the Saudi government, specifically Council members, more open to the public; the findings showed most of the decision-makers on the Council have positive views of social media platforms and of being more open to the public via Twitter compared to other methods of communication. Because of Council members' positive view of using Twitter, the research finds

that Twitter has provided a few changes regarding accountability, as some Council members were accountable to the public via Twitter. This shows that they serve the interests of the public rather than the King; in this, they are like representatives in other parliaments in different countries, who represent the citizens and serve their interests. These findings suggest that Twitter can encourage transparency and accountability in the Council because the confidentiality of the process of the Council's works is at the highest level, and Council members as appointed members are accountable only to the King. Whilst this research does not find that Twitter increases transparency amongst Council members in contrast to the findings of some scholars (Alotaibi 2019; Ausserhofer and Maireder 2013; Bertot et al. 2012; Kinninmont 2013), who have argued that Twitter has improved and enhanced transparency amongst politicians and governments, it reveals that Twitter encourages Council members to be more open to the public about their agendas and works within the Council, which gives the hope that Twitter can challenge the appointed representatives and improve the transparency of their works.

Regarding the broader debates about the power of social media in processes of social and political change, the findings of this research are situated within the debates of the past 10 to 15 years regarding social media, for example, the cyber-enthusiastic views that social media leads to political change and constitutes a kind of 'liberation technology' as well as views that were very prominent between 2005 and 2015, especially around the Arab Spring, and the more pessimistic views about it being a platform for misinformation and mass surveillance, which have been more prominent in the past few years. Rather than simply aligning with one of the extreme positions in this debate, the findings explore the nuances and complexities of the practical application of social media and their multiple implications, charting a path between cyber-optimists and cyber-pessimists by considering the democratizing role of social media use as well as its imitations.

To sum up, the research found that Twitter has affected political communication in Saudi Arabia in a way that aligns with the argument by Joseph (2012, p. 174), who claimed that social media

increases public participation without any guarantee of achieving democracy. Yet Twitter and other means of communication can facilitate limited changes or effects amongst the Council and its members. Nonetheless, unless the system of the Council changes and it obtains more power as a legislative institution rather than as an advisory body regarding the Council's decisions and the way of selecting its members, such a change is likely to be significant. This aligns with the findings of researchers (Al-Harbi 2014; Al-Saud 2002; and Alsudairy 2017) who believe that the Council needs to expand its jurisdiction and responsibilities and increase its transparency, oversight, and legislative powers to allow Council members to properly practise their role as representatives of the people.

The study therefore found that the use of Twitter has improved communication between Shura Council members and the Saudi public by creating a new socio-political landscape that has meant that Council members came to inhabit a platform where it was easier for the public to speak with them directly. Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy, meaning that the online public sphere cannot take advantage of freedom of speech when discussing political issues due to the high level of surveillance present online. However, despite these obstacles, the research makes a significant contribution to scholarship by demonstrating that the online public sphere can become a forum for public debate within a non-democratic political system like Saudi Arabia. As such, the research demonstrates how the use and purpose of Twitter as platform for public engagement has interfered with the hierarchal nature of the relationship between the public and the elite in Saudi Arabia by opening up a channel for interaction between the citizenry and state representatives.

However, whilst 20% of interviewees acknowledged that Twitter set the agenda for their work within the Council, some interviewees also stated that Twitter use does not lead directly to more democratized forms of policymaking and governance, as many Council members remain sceptical about interacting with the public on social media and claim that they do not let Twitter use affect their policy decisions. Despite this, from the findings of this research, it was observed that there

were increased interactions, and the research revealed how Council members explore public concerns, demands, and needs. Therefore, Twitter use may increase participants' understanding of public concerns and inform their decisions. The research therefore concludes that the advent of Twitter use has not led to increased democratisation, although it has increased communication between the citizenry and the State. This is because whilst Council members listen to public concerns when they are expressed on Twitter, they do not act on them or allow them to influence policy decisions.

It is apparent that Twitter use does not lead directly to more democratized forms of policymaking and governance as many of the Shura Council members remain skeptical about interacting with the public on social media and claim that they do not let Twitter use affect their policy decisions. But I did observe increased interactions and how the Shura Council members do explore public concerns, and therefore Twitter use may increase their understanding of public concerns and inform their decisions.

10.5 Future Research

This study sought to investigate to what extent social media, particularly Twitter, had influenced the perceptions and attitudes of the Council members towards more public intervention in the decision-making process on the path to democracy. The contribution of this study provides academic research and insight into other states with similar political contexts. However, the results of this study have opened the door to further investigation on the points that have been highlighted throughout this research.

The findings of this research may need to be updated due to the rapid development in this field and the comprehensive social and political reform taking place in light of the 2030 Vision for Saudi Arabia. This means new research developments are likely, which will add to the findings this research has generated. Therefore, there is a need for further research to capture these ongoing

changes in the economic, social, and political fields. Similar studies will also be required on how Saudi people and policymakers engage with these changes online. The key point of future research would be to investigate citizens' use of social media for interventions into government decision-making. Whilst this study has analysed these issues from the perspective of members of the Shura Council, it has also highlighted how the perspective of Saudi citizens is worth exploring.

It may also be suggested that further research is required on this experience by examining the impact of Twitter use by members of the Council on increasing citizens' awareness of general and legislative issues, thereby facilitating political engagement in establishing rational debates on the online public sphere in terms of, for example, increasing liability, transparency, and accountability as well as prioritising the members' agenda setting. Moreover, tribalism and culture appear to play an essential role in all aspects of policymaking and decision making in Saudi Arabia to the extent that the line between what is legal and what is customary is extremely blurred. Further research to draw the line between the legal and the customary in social media interaction is necessary.

Finally, it is worth noting that in a non-democratic, intimidating, and unpredictable environment, conducting research is a particularly challenging mission that requires cautious consideration in each and every stage of the fieldwork. This explains the lack of empirical studies in the available literature about non-democratic contexts. In the Saudi context, for example, in addition to the language barriers by non-Arab speakers carrying out research, issues like selecting the survey population, approaching the targeted group and building trust and confidence with them, ensuring the researcher's safety, and maintaining ethical standards are amongst the most crucial features that determine the success of a research study. Consequently, it is vital for future researchers to understand the context and its potential implications. This would save the time of both the researcher and the participants and ensure the collection of credible and valuable data.

10.6 Limitations

A chief limitation to any research relevant to technology and community is the possibility of a quick change in its results, particularly in a non-democratic context, which usually faces dramatic changes in situations that are not easy to predict. In this regard, I refer to the two unprecedented decisions of lifting the ban on women driving and relaxing the male guardianship code. Accordingly, I have strived to update my findings as much as possible to acknowledge these new social and political changes. In addition, the study used both qualitative and quantitative data analysis though there were no data for a qualitative analysis to identify the expressions and thoughts of the general public regarding the impact of social media on the decision-making process of the Shura Council in Saudi Arabia. By choosing to focus on the Shura Council rather than the general public, I limited the potential sources of information on this topic. However, this decision was justified by putting the study into a particular and unique contextual framework.

In addition, since this study covers activities that took place from December 13, 2016, to November 11, 2018, some members had been extremely active on Twitter, so I could not collect all the data in the whole period. This meant that the volume of Twitter data was too large to use to undertake a comprehensive analysis. I resolved that issue by searching for keywords in these accounts. Also, as all the data of the members' Twitter accounts was in Arabic, I had to collect them manually because I could not find an appropriate programme.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: The English Questionnaire

APPENDIX B: The Content Analysis Coding Sheet

APPENDIX C: Research Information Sheet

APPENDIX D: The Interview Guideline

APPENDIX E: The Interview Analysis Structure (Coding)

APPENDIX F: Some Deleted Tweets

APPENDIX A

The English Questionnaire

QUANTITATIVE QUESTIONNAIRE

H.E. the Member of the Shura Council,

This questionnaire pertains to a research project being conducted by Abdulaziz Mohammed Alajlan in School of Journalism, Media and Culture at Cardiff University in assessing *the Role of Twitter in the Policymaking Process in the Shura Council of Saudi Arabia.* The purpose of this project is to better understand the role of social media, with a focus on Twitter, in making decisions regarding public policies in the Shura Council. The questionnaire will take less than 20 minutes to complete, and all responses will remain strictly confidential. Upon completion of the research, the findings will be published in an academic paper at Cardiff University as part of a PhD project.

If you have any questions about the research, survey questions, or anything else, please email: alajlana@cardiff.ac.uk.

Thank you for your help on this study.

Section A: Demographics & General Background

Gender

☐ Male   ☐ Female

Age

☐ 30 to 39 years   ☐ 40 to 49 years

☐ 50 to 59 years   ☐ 60+ years

Education

☐ High school diploma. ☐ Diploma. ☐ Bachelor's degree. ☐ Master's degree. ☐ PhD degree.
☐ Other, please explain:

Background career experience

☐ Government sector   ☐ Private sector

The focus of your work

☐ Law ☐ Business ☐ Administration ☐ Politics ☐ Diplomat ☐ Military ☐ Islamic ☐ Health
☐ Education ☐ Media & Communication ☐ Finance ☐ Engineering   ☐ Other, please explain: _

How long have you been involved in decision-making within the government?

☐ Less than 4 years   ☐ 4 years to 7 years

☐ 8 years to 11 years   ☐ 12 years to 15 years

☐ 16+ years

In which term did you start serving as an MP in the Council? Council?

☐ 4th term   ☐ 5th term

☐ 6th term   ☐ 7th term

Section B: Social Media Use

Do you have any social media accounts?

☐ Yes   ☐ No

If 'no', why not? Select all that apply.

    ☐ I am not interested in joining social media platforms

    ☐ I joined once, but I did not like it

    ☐ No privacy

    ☐ Social media platforms have no reliability and credibility

    ☐ No benefits of joining social media platforms

    ☐ Other (please explain): _____

If 'yes', which social media platforms do you use? Select all that apply.

☐ Facebook   ☐ Twitter

☐ WhatsApp   ☐ Instagram

☐ Snapchat   ☐ Any other, please explain: _____

If you use Twitter, please indicate for how long.

☐ Less than 3 years   ☐ 3 to 4 years

☐ 5 to 7 years   ☐ 8 years or more

What information do you include on your profile on Twitter?

☐ Email address   ☐ Real name   ☐ Real picture of self   ☐ Professional position
☐ Interests   ☐ Place of Employment   ☐ Other, please explain: _____

What language do you use in your profile?

☐ Arabic   ☐ English   ☐ Other, please explain: _____

Section C: Using Twitter as a Member of the Council

What do you primarily use Twitter for?

☐Personal communication only   ☐Professional communication only
☐Both personal and professional communication   ☐Other (please explain): _____

If you use Twitter for both personal and professional communication, does the personal usage affect your usage of Twitter as a Member of the Council?

☐ Yes   ☐ No

In general, how often do you use Twitter in your role as a Member of the Council?

☐ Several times a day   ☐ Few times a week   ☐ Once a week   ☐ Few times a month
☐ Once a month ☐ Other, please explain: _____

If you use Twitter every day, how much time do you spend on Twitter as part of your work in the Council?

☐ Less than half an hour a day ☐ 30 – 59 minutes a day ☐ an hour to hour and 29 minutes a day ☐ 1 hour and half to 1 hour and 59 minutes a day minutes ☐ 2 hours and more a day ☐ I don't use Twitter daily

Do you follow the Shura Council's account on Twitter?

☐ Yes   ☐ No   ☐ Unsure

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following sentences regarding your reasons for using Twitter as a member of the Council?

1= strongly agree, 2= agree, 3= Neither agree nor disagree, 4= disagree and 5=strongly disagree

Q		1	2	3	4	5
1	Twitter provides fast access to breaking news.					
2	Twitter provides fast access to government decisions.					
3	Twitter lets me tweet my thoughts and opinions on general topics and issues.					
4	Twitter helps me inform myself on issues that are discussed in the Council.					

5	Twitter lets me connect with other Shura Council members.					
6	Twitter lets me connect with government officials.					
7	Twitter lets me read about and understand citizens' concerns.					
8	Twitter lets me interact with and respond to citizens.					
9	Twitter lets me inform citizens about my work					
10	Twitter lets me influence decision makers.					
11	Twitter lets me build my image.					

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following <mark>sentences</mark> regarding the advantages and disadvantages faced by the Shura Council members using Twitter?

1= strongly agree, 2= agree, 3= Neither agree nor disagree, 4= disagree and 5=strongly disagree

Q		1	2	3	4	5
1	Twitter lets council members address accusations or complaints seen on Twitter.					
2	Twitter motivates council members to take action from the issues and complaints they see on Twitter.					
3	Twitter helps council members explore the information and figures about the challenges they see on Twitter.					
4	Assess public approval of the Shura Council's decisions.					
5	Twitter helps council members gain knowledge of the target audience about specific issues.					
6	Twitter provides faster communication between parliamentarians and citizens.					
7	Twitter helps Council members to take notice of what matters to the people they serve.					

8	Twitter helps start a dialogue between concerned citizens and policymakers.					
9	Twitter helps Council members assess the efficacy of the laws (support tweets) and the side effects (negative tweets) in developing policy.					
10	Twitter forces the Shura Council members to act more quickly.					
11	Twitter forces the Shura Council members to improve transparency.					
12	Twitter does not support work in the Shura Council.					
13	Twitter causes the Council member's role as an expert and representative to be undermined.					
14	Twitter increases the spread of online disinformation, misinformation, or rumours.					
15	Twitter gives undue space to policy amateurs and people who lack the appropriate knowledge to assess policy debates.					

To what extent do you agree or disagree that Twitter influences your thoughts and opinions on the following topics as a member of the Council?

1= strongly agree, 2= agree, 3= Neither agree nor disagree, 4= disagree and 5=strongly disagree

Q		1	2	3	4	5
1	Anti-corruption					
2	End tax-free living					
3	Women's empowerment					
4	Housing					

Were there other topics not mentioned above that you believe Twitter influenced?

Please explain: _____

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following <mark>sentences</mark> as to the role <mark>of</mark> Twitter in enhancing <mark>members'</mark> relationship with the public?

1= strongly agree, 2= agree, 3= Neither agree nor disagree, 4= disagree and 5=strongly disagree

Q		1	2	3	4	5
1	Using Twitter allows the public to review upcoming policy and decisions.					
2	Debates on Twitter give the public the opportunity to set the agenda for decision makers and policymakers.					
3	Twitter allows public discussion and commentary on new public policy and decisions.					
4	Twitter allows the formal registering of petitions prior to the implementation of public policies of the Council.					
5	The citizenry has become the main force of public opinion on policy and decisions via Twitter.					
6	Twitter allows citizens to participate in the policy process by providing information and opinions to parliamentarians.					
7	Twitter motivates the public to be engaged and informed in policy and decision-making.					
8	Twitter improves the public's communication with the council and its members.					
9	Twitter raises awareness of issues and inspires social policy reform.					

Any other comments?

_____

Thank you for participating!

APPENDIX B

The Content Analysis Coding Sheet

Twitter Account Name: *Date:*

Content Analysis for the Twitter Accounts of the Members of the Council:

The Gender:

☐ Male

☐ Female

Started Serving as a Council Member:

☐ 4th term

☐ 5th term

☐ 6th term

☐ 7th term (the current one)

The Duration of Usage:

☐ 2006

☐ 2007

☐ 2008

☐ 2009

☐ 2010

☐ 2011

☐ 2012

☐ 2013

☐ 2014

☐ 2015

☐ 2016

☐ 2017

☐ 2018

The Language Used on Twitter Accounts

☐ Arabic

☐ English

☐ Other

Allowing Direct Messages

☐ Yes

☐ No

Verified Accounts

☐ Yes

☐ No

Mentioned Their Position as a Council Member in Their Profiles:

☐ Personal

☐ Professional

The Account:

☐ Active

☐ Inactive

The Account:

☐ Personal

☐ Professional

☐ Both

How Many Tweets They Have:

☐ Less than 999 tweets

☐ 1,000 to 4,999 tweets

☐ 5,000 to 9,999 tweets

☐ 10,000 to 19,999 tweets

☐ More than 20,000 tweets

Number of Followers:

☐ Less than 999 followers

☐ 1,000 to 4,999 followers

☐ 5,000 to 9,999 followers

☐ 10,000 to 19,999 followers

☐ 20,000 to 49,000 followers

☐ 50,000 to 99,999 followers

☐ 100,000 to 199,999 followers

☐ More than 200,000 followers

The Account:

☐ Personal

☐ Professional

☐ Both

Types of Communication:

 ☐ One-way Communication (Informing)

 ☐ Two-way Communication (Interacting)

Main Topics of One-Way Communication:

☐ Highlight the Government Decisions

☐ Update about the Council Decisions and Works

☐ Promoting their Work

☐ Promoting their Colleagues Work

☐ Raising Public Awareness

Main Topics of Two-Way Communication:

☐ Answering the Public Questions and Queries

☐ Defending Themselves

☐ Defending Their Colleagues

☐ Asking about Suggestions and Opinions from the Public

Main Topics and Issues:

☐ Women Empowerment Issues

☐ Jobs and Unemployment Issues

☐ Housing Issues

☐ Education Issues

☐ Transportation Issues

Major Hashtags:

☐ Hashtags about Women Driving

☐ Hashtags about Anti-corruption

☐ Hashtags about Unemployment

☐ Hashtag about Movement on September 15

☐ Hashtags about the Shura Council

APPENDIX C

Research Information Sheet

Research Information Sheet

The Role of Twitter in the Policymaking Process in the Shura Council of Saudi Arabia.

This study is being conducted by Abdulaziz Mohammed Alajlan in School of Journalism, Media and Culture at Cardiff University under the supervision of Dr Arne Hintz who can be contacted via following email address: HintzA@cardiff.ac.uk

As a participant in this research, you volunteer to be part of an interview and to be asked questions about the role of Twitter in the policymaking in the Shura Council of Saudi Arabia. The interview will be run face to face.

Participation in the study is entirely voluntary and participants can withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason. Participants may also ask questions at any time and discuss any concerns with either the researcher (alajlana@cardiff.ac.uk) or the supervisor as listed above.

All information provided during the interview will be held anonymously so that it will not be possible to trace information or comments back to individual contributors. Information will be stored in accordance with the current Data Protection Act.

Participants can request information and feedback about the purpose and results of the study by applying directly to the researcher, Abdulaziz Alajlan.

01/12/2018

Abdulaziz Alajlan

School of Journalism, Media and Culture

Cardiff University

The Interview Guideline

The Interview Guide:

- Outside of social media, what other activities do you perform to stay engaged with the public over issues and current events?

- Are you keen to create accounts on Social Media platforms?

- What is the purpose of creating an account on the Twitter?

- Do you rely on the Twitter to read what the public are posting on twitter as a member of the Shura Council a representative?

- Do you rely on the Twitter to reach the public and communicate with them as a member of the Shura Council?

- Have you noticed any changes in the Members' attitudes due to the use of Twitter in the decision-making process within the Council?

- Some Members of the Council are engaging a lot with the public on Twitter; how does this make Members who are less active on social media feel?

- Have you noticed any difference between Members who engage on Twitter and the members who do not when it comes to discussions in the committee or the regular sessions?

- Bringing a case from Twitter or any other social media platform to the committee or the regular session by some of Members would open a door that would be hard to close. Do you agree? If no, why not? If yes, then why?

- Do you think that hashtags are a good idea and way to measure and shape public opinion on a specific topic?

- Have Members brought opinions or ideas from Twitter to the Council?

- Twitter gives Members the opportunity to deliver opinions and actions directly to the public. The Shura Council always mentions that any opinion by Members do not represent

the opinions of the Council, so does a Member's use of Twitter give him/her the opportunity to discuss and explain their opinions, ideas, and thoughts to the public in a better and more direct way?

- Have you ever been involved in any discussions or debates on Twitter with the public?

- As a policy & decision-maker in the Council, what are the key topics about which you would like to obtain the citizens' opinions?

- Twitter gives the public the power to raise their voice; as a Member of the Shura Council, what are the characteristics of the citizens you are most likely to pay attention to?

- With social media, individuals (public citizens) can have the opportunity to make changes to the decision-making process; for example, trending hashtags on Twitter can draw attention to current events. As a policy and decision-maker, what is your reaction to this?

- Have discussions on Twitter affected the decision-making by giving the public the opportunity to initially set the agenda?

- Most of the public does not understand the process of the Shura Council, so they may put pressure and want immediate responses without knowing what parliamentarians and the Council face. What is your response to this?

- How can the Council create more transparency and balance between the government and the public?

- One-way that public can be involved and for their voices to be heard in the Shura Council is by sending petitions. Do you think social media, especially Twitter, plays the same role? Why or why no?

- Do you think that being an elected Member by the King makes you less pressured to respond to the public? Reasons for disagreement and agreement

- Social media platforms, like Twitter, have created space for you as a policy & decision-maker to reach directly to the public. How do you see that?

- The citizens have the right to know what is happening in the Shura Council; however, the decision-makers and the government have the right to keep some information as classified.

How does the Shura Council determine the balance and create transparency and shared understanding of all Members?

- There are major reforms by the government, such as lifting driving bans for women, anti-corruption, and an end to tax-free living. As a member of the Council, how did you engage on Twitter during this period?

    o *In 2016, the government announced that at the beginning of 2018, they would roll out 5% VAT.*

    o *On the 26th of September 2017, women obtained the right to drive.*

    o *On the 4th of November 2017, a number of prominent Saudi Arabian princes, government ministers, and businesspeople were arrested in Saudi Arabia following the creation of an anti-corruption committee led by Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman.*

    o *Affordable housing is a priority for the public and is commonly discussed on social media.*

- Is Twitter a credible source for information? Why or why not?

- There is currently discussion about the role of social media in regard to online disinformation, misinformation, and rumours. What are your thoughts on this, especially as it relates to Twitter?

- What solutions could help prevent the spread of online disinformation, misinformation, and rumours on Twitter?

- Do you think that Twitter supports or harms your work in the Shura Council? Why or why not?

APPENDIX E

The Interview Analysis Structure (Coding)

Codes	Basic themes	Organizing themes	Global themes
• Yes • No	Creating Social Media Accounts	Aspects of Social Media Usage	
• The social media environment is inappropriate • Social networking platforms are often biased	Reasons for not Having Social Media Accounts		
• Twitter • WhatsApp • Snapchat • Instagram	Social Media Platforms Preference:		
• Seminars • Conferences • Workshops • Universities • Personal contacts • Family events • Television • Newspapers • Written columns • Delegation visits • Meetings and visiting remote provinces • Domestic and internal visits of the Council's delegations within the Kingdom • Petitions • The official phone Communication • Direct communication with the relevant government • Private and civil sectors • Civil society organisations • The National Society for Human Rights • The specialised associations to support certain groups in society • Women's society	Other Method to Interact with the Public		

• Literary clubs • Charity organisations			
• Posted on the platform • To interact with the public as members of the Council • To express their views and expertise • Reading posts on the platform	The Purposes for Creating Accounts on Twitter		
• For professional goals only • Informal users • Personal usage • Avoid using the platform in professional lives • Both • To draw attention to my presence • Obtain information and news quickly • Explanation the Council's work and process • Communicating with elites in the society • Professional usage may confuse the public • It should be used cautiously by members • Play a supportive role in raising awareness and explaining of government decisions • A useful tool for the Council members to deliver opinions and views regarding their work	Personal and Professional Use		
• A useful method • Not a formal manner • A space without adding • Assess thoughts and opinions • The mobility on Twitter gives immunity of decision • formats posts professionally • less pressured as an appointed member • Not a primary means of engaging with the public • An aid for legislators • An open space • Engagement with official accounts • Professionalism	Involvement in debates on Twitter	The Role of Twitter in Enhancing Citizen-Decision Maker Interaction	The Influence of Twitter in the Work of the Council Members

• Benefited groups and categories • Identity • An informal way and process • verified account • a good idea, content, and display			
• Inappropriate method • Technical manipulation • The technical ease • Lack of the elements of accuracy, objectivity, and credibility • Limited representation • The technical ease • Temporarily • Unbalanced measure • Based on an emotional attitude • Lacks objectivity • Changing concepts • Highlighting • Access to decisionmakers • Important messages • Sample of public opinion measurement • Worthy to study	Hashtags as a Tool for Citizen-Decision Maker Interaction		
• An inspiration platform • An important channel • Similarity • Restriction • An open Platform • The credibility • Identity • formal process • An official format with specific proceedings • Privacy	Whether Twitter Can Play the Same Role as Petitions in Addressing the Council Members		
• Members' obligations • The criteria in the Council • The members' agenda	The Impact of Twitter on the Agenda Setting of the Council Members		

• Draw attention • No ability to impact decision-making • Not prioritize the members' agenda-setting • Raising unworthy issues • Given the public a strong role in the community • A virtual platform • Played a big role in prioritizing agenda setting for some members • The nation's concerns are first • Relying on the Twitter • The members' ideologies • The popularity of Twitter • A mirror for reality • Attention • Crystallize ideas • Ideally platform • Legislative steps and stages • Ties with public • Pressure level		The Impact of Twitter on the Members' Profession	
• Necessary to illustrate • Suffered from a lack of transparency • The Council's responsibility • Cannot be solved by Twitter • The image of the Council is weak. • The Council's dilemma • Not a matter for the member • Enough transparency • No need to improve the transparency • Media policy of the Council	The Impact of Twitter Towards Trust and Transparency		
• Trust not absolute • The source of information • A poor credibility • Not a confidence source • Spread for online disinformation, misinformation and rumours	The Reliability of Twitter		

|			
• Positive aspects • Negative aspects • Neutral • Social reflection • The reality of community • Validity • Members' abilities • The level of awareness • Time • The experience			
• The basic principles • An effective media and communication tool • The attitudes' impact • Unfair representation • To attract fame and attention • Non-objectivity • An essential influence on the members' decision-making activities • Draw attention • highlighting the voice of a silent category • A negative reaction • The level of experiences • Sense of belonging • The sources of pressure • Inconclusive discourse • Members' images and professionalism • Impact on non-specialists • The pulse of public opinion • Caused harm to the members of the Legislative Council • Aware of the reality • The members' ideologies • Members' background • The degree of variation	The Impact of Twitter on the Members' Behaviours		

APPENDIX F

Some Deleted Tweets

Tweet No. 1: Dr Musaed Alfrayan tweets about his wife and daughter get driver licenses and started driving (in Arabic, June 24, 2018).

Tweet No. 2: Dr Musaed Alfrayan tweets about corruption 1 (in Arabic, November 10, 2017).
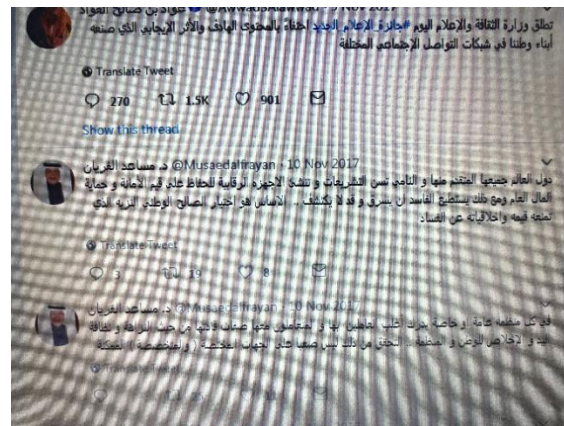
Tweet No. 3: Dr Musaed Alfrayan tweets about corruption 2 (in Arabic, November 04, 2017).

Tweet No. 4: The conversation between Eng. Nabih Albrahim, Dr Eqbal Darandri, and Dr Asmaa Alzahrani about the Shura Council decision regarding workers 'teachers' on item 105 (1) (in Arabic, October 09, 2018).
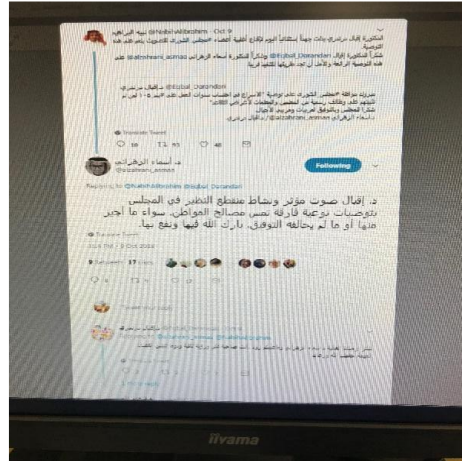
Tweet No. 5: The conversation between Eng. Nabih Albrahim, Dr Eqbal Darandri, and Dr Asmaa Alzahrani about the Shura Council decision regarding workers 'teachers' on item 105 (2) (in Arabic, October 09, 2018).
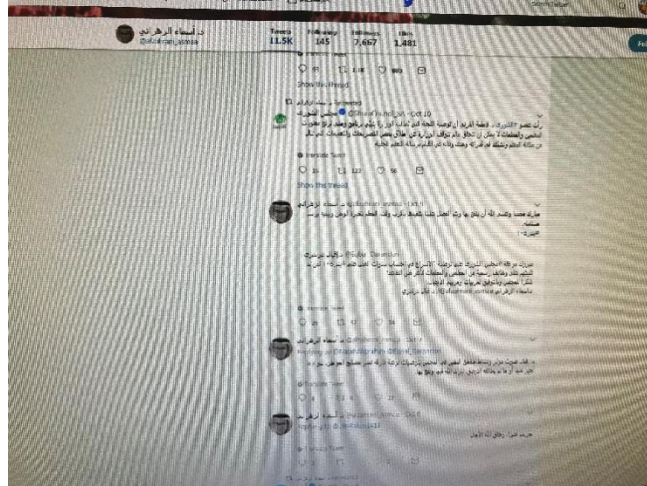

Tweet No. 6: The conversation between Eng. Nabih Albrahim, Dr Eqbal Darandri, and Dr Asmaa Alzahrani about the Shura Council decision regarding workers 'teachers' on item 105 (3), (in Arabic, October 09, 2018).

Tweet No. 7: The conversation between Eng. Nabih Albrahim, Dr Eqbal Darandri, and Dr Asmaa Alzahrani about the Shura Council decision regarding workers 'teachers' on item 105 (4), (in Arabic, October 09, 2018).

Tweet No. 8: The conversation between Eng. Nabih Albrahim, Dr Eqbal Darandri, and Dr Asmaa Alzahrani about the Shura Council decision regarding workers 'teachers' on item 105 (5), (in Arabic, October 09, 2018).
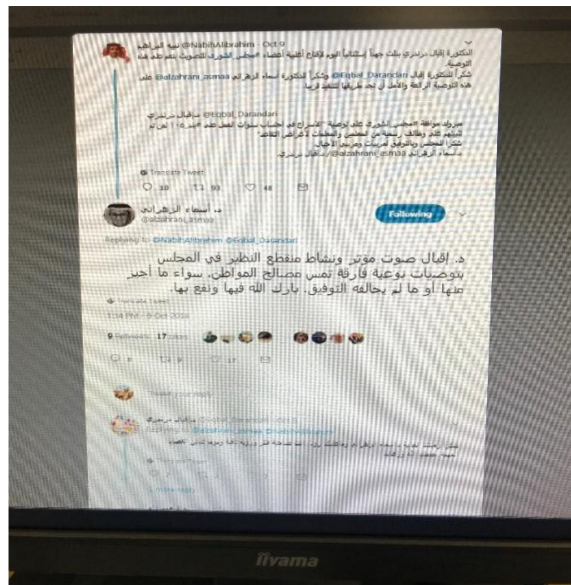
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