



# **Social Media Influencers in Public Affairs: Framing the Saudi Vision 2030 in the Middle Eastern Context**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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July 2021

### **Declaration**

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Musaab Alharbi

2 July 2021

## Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to give my sincere gratitude to the God (*Allah*) for his blessing in completing this thesis. Secondly, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my senior supervisor Dr. Xiufang (Leah) Li for the continuous support of my PhD research and for her patience, motivation, and distinctive knowledge. Her guidance helped me in all the time of research and writing of this thesis. Besides that, I would like to express my warm thanks to my secondary supervisor Dr. Jenny Robinson for her support, guidance and invaluable advice during my research in School of Media and Communication at RMIT University.

My deep appreciation goes out to all my family. Words cannot express how grateful and extremely indebted I am to my father, my mother, my wife, brothers and sisters for their prayers, patience, support and caring during my research journey. I would acknowledge and thank Denise Taylor for the final light editing of my thesis. I would also like to extend my deepest gratitude to my friends and colleagues in the same field for their helpful advice and suggestions that helped me improved my thesis.

Last but not least, I would like to express my appreciation to the King Abdulaziz University in Saudi Arabia and Saudi Cultural Mission in Australia for the support, encouragement and mentoring during my scholarship.

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## List of Abbreviations

CEGSM	Citizen Engagement through Government Social Media
CIs	Citizen Influencers
CITC	Communications and Information Technology Commission
FSMI	Female Social Media Influencers
GCAM	Saudi General Commission for Audio-visual Media
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GSMA	Global System for Mobile Communications
KACND	King Abdul-Aziz Center for National Dialogue
KSA	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MSMI	Male Social Media Influencers
SMEs	Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
SMI's	Social Media Influencers
STC	Saudi Telecom Company
IT	Information Technology

## **Abstract**

The rise of social media in recent years has provided a new platform for Influencers to share ideas, develop narratives, and influence the public opinion. This study analyses the networked narratives created by the Saudi social media influencers on Twitter with specific reference to the Vision 2030. It investigates how the Saudi social media influencers frame the Vision 2030 and how this framing drives public engagement. Drawing upon the theory of framing, the content of the tweets shared by the officially verified Saudi SMIs to the hashtag #Saudi\_vision\_2030 has been studied and followed by semi-structured in-depth interviews with SMIs with the attempt to address the following four questions: (1) How do SMIs frame the government to their followers when tweeting about Vision 2030, (2) What framing devices are useful in generating engagement with their followers (3) What is the profile insight of SMIs and the motivations driving them to engage with Vision 2030 (4) What are the implications of these framing approaches, and these motivations of SMIs, for an understanding of the nature of social media interactions pertaining to government initiatives in Saudi Arabia. The results show that Saudi social media influencers framed their discourse around Vision 2030 across a variety of themes, whereby the narratives that include national identity and religious elements and those focused around political and economic elements are widespread. The discourse is framed mostly in terms of approval of the government's plans, often expressed with the help of religious emotions—although, dissenting, negatively framed messages are present as well. Furthermore, a Saudi social media influencer's popularity increases the likelihood of expressing religious emotions in tweets (in the form of supplications), highlighting the importance of religious discourse in the Saudi culture. This study discloses the central role of religious discourse in the Saudi culture and the extent to which Saudi social media influencers choose to use their leverage to provide an echo-chamber for the government's voice. It therefore provides an insight into how social media influencers who operate in the Middle East media environment frame their online discourse relating to public affairs, and what elements of this discourse are likely to drive the public engagement.



# **Chapter 1. Introduction**

## **1.1. Introduction**

Social media is considered one of the most powerful communication tools for informing, educating and influencing the public. The importance of social media in the Middle Eastern context has been highlighted by various researchers, including Radcliffe and Abuhamid (2020), Miladi and Mellor (2020), Castells (2015), Blanchard (2018), Mellor (2014) and Lotan et al. (2011), who claim that it has provided an opportunity for Arab citizens to engage with others and express opinions about issues. Similarly, it has also provided governments with opportunities to engage with citizens and win their support for national causes (Criado et al. 2020; Falco et al. 2018; Fatany 2012).

The mainstream media in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA, or the kingdom) is regulated by the media policy, which censors coverage on controversial topics related to the kingdom (Alotaibi 2019; Alsahafi 2019). However, this gap can to some extent be filled by social media, which offers users the opportunity to engage in dialogue on different local, national and international issues (Blanchard 2018; Fatany 2012). As such, social media usage – especially on Twitter – has increased widely in the KSA, and the kingdom now constitutes the fifth largest Twitter market in the world (Radcliffe & Abuhamid 2020).

In most countries in which they are present, including the KSA, social media influencers (SMIs) play significant roles in debating local, national and international issues and use their verified accounts to interact with their followers (Albalawi & Sixsmith 2017; Shmargad 2018). Saudi SMIs are considered highly influential in moulding public opinion about the KSA government (Abidin et al. 2020; Click, Lee & Holloday 2013).

This research study assesses Saudi SMIs' roles in public affairs, and whether they alter their followers' views of the Saudi government while discussing Saudi Vision 2030 on Twitter. For the purposes of the current

study, 'public affairs' is defined as the management skill that internalizes the effects of the environment in which an organisation operates and externalizes actions to influence that environment'(by managing the interactions and exchanges between an organisation and its operational context(encompassing social, cultural and political factors) (McGrath, Moss & Harris 2010, p. 337).

## **1.2. Background**

### ***1.2.1. Saudi Vision 2030***

Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman shared Vision 2030 (Vision) with the Saudi people on 25 April 2016. This ambitious plan aims to restructure KSA economically, socially and culturally. The plan is founded on three pillars, each one pertaining to a particular national characteristic: a vibrant society, a thriving economy, and an ambitious nation (Saudi Vision 2030 2016). The intent of presenting this plan was to decrease government dependency on oil, diversification of economy and increase life quality in the kingdom (Rachman, 2019).

The plan was motivated by the Saudi government's assessment of challenges facing its populace and society as a result of changes in the broader world (Alateyah et al. 2013; Freer 2016). In the past, the government faced many challenges regarding many issues from its own citizens, living either in the Kingdom or abroad (Hassan 2015). The country has offered to grant its citizens the opportunity to participate in the KSA's decision-making processes, which have largely been secretive affairs. The Saudi people have also been granted from their government to vote in municipal elections, to increase citizen participation in the decision-making processes (Al-Matter 2017; Alsahafi 2019; Al-Zaidi 2015).

Previous governments have enacted several initiatives to increase citizen participation in public affairs and provide them with a platform for free speech, including the promulgation of the Basic Law of Governance, the Law of the Consultative Council, and the Law of Provinces introduced by King Fahd in March 1992. These

laws gave constitutional and administrative structure to the Kingdom and its provinces, with clear demarcations of power and duties for different offices. Furthermore, the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue was founded in 2003 so experts could gather to critically address the Kingdom's major issues. The government also established the National Society for Human Rights (NSHR) in 2004 to implement international human rights charters signed by the Saudi government.

Despite the attempted reforms, problematic issues facing the people of the Kingdom increased over time. The economy shrank, youth unemployment rates increased, the country came increasingly to be viewed as conservative by other nations. (Albrithen 2018; Khalil & Storie 2020; Thorsen & Sreedharan 2019). Additionally, quality of administration and management, as well as a lack of transparency and accountability in some public services sectors, created further worry among the Saudi people (Zerban 2015).

The Kingdom required major reforms to convince the people of its plan and win citizen support. Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman unveiled the government's mega plan – Vision 2030 – on 25 April 2016 with the view of putting KSA on the right economic track by introducing major changes in various private and government sectors. The goal was to revolutionise the whole society – structurally, financially and administratively.

Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman declared that his reforms would impact different sectors in the kingdom. He maintained that a vibrant society could be achieved by following the principles of Islam. While the relationship between religion and politics is further explored in Chapter 2, it is important to consider the role of religion in developing the national identity of KSA in this overview. National identity would be promoted by preserving cultural and Islamic sites, expanding the Great Mosque of Makkah (Al-Masjid al-Haram) and the Prophet's Mosque (Al-Masjid an-Nabawi) in the city of Medina, initiating e-visa services to foreigners, promoting meaningful entertainment and culture initiatives in the Kingdom, expanding sports facilities, further developing

the Kingdom's infrastructure, and by providing a freehold house to each Saudi. Another goal outlined in the plan was raising the average Saudi life expectancy to 80 years (Saudi Vision 2030 2016).

While the notion of 'national identity' is not explicitly defined in the Vision, for the purposes of this study, the term is defined as 'the extent to which a given culture recognizes and identifies with a set of focal elements that set it apart from other cultures by exhibiting greater variations in the institutions of those aspects than others' (Le, Nguyen & Van Nguyen 2013). This definition is chosen on the basis of its alignment with the presuppositions indicated by the Vision's own treatment of the topic. For example, the official website states: 'We will endeavor to strengthen, preserve and highlight our national identity so that it can guide the lives of future generations. We will do so by keeping true to our national values and principles, as well as by encouraging social development and upholding the Arabic language' (Saudi Vision 2030 2016). This description indicates that the idea of national identity, which the Vision is focused on, connects to the cultural, religious and linguistic roots of the public, and values and principles associated with these.

Regarding a thriving economy, the Crown Prince indicated that it could be achieved by revisiting the national curriculum and teacher training programs to ensure quality education; taking initiatives to strengthen small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to promote entrepreneurship, privatisation and investment; creating job opportunities for Saudis in public and private sectors; enhancing and utilising the talent of Saudi women to contribute to the society and economy; localising the production of 50 percent of military equipment; developing the infrastructure of telecommunications and information technology (IT) by providing high-speed broadband, expanding its coverage and capacity within and around cities; and by developing road and railway networks to interconnect with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Saudi Vision 2030 2016).

To create an ambitious nation, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman resolved to ensure transparency and accountability in the government with zero tolerance for corruption. He introduced the concept of e-

government, which would accelerate digital communication channels between public, government and private sectors; waive taxes on income, health services and basic goods; expand online services to provide information about health care and education in the Kingdom; and enact measures to make non-profit and charitable foundations more effective by supporting projects carrying greater social impact (Saudi Vision 2030 2016).

### *The Role of Saudi SMIs in Disseminating Information about Vision 2030*

Vision 2030 demonstrates a willingness on the part of the monarchy to allow a degree of participation by citizens. Saudi citizens have been rightly recognised as part of the nation's political system and have been provided a space to share their feedback about it. The government informed its citizens that it was aware of their issues and employed various measures to ensure better lives for them. Besides empowering women, the Saudi government also expressed its intentions to be more open and accommodating of the multiple social and cultural lives of both its own citizens and foreigners (Kinninmont 2017).

Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman's announcement of Vision 2030 came as a surprise to many in the KSA because they did not expect it; it generated many debates among Saudi citizens in several forms, including on social media. To better engage with its citizens, the government created the hashtag #Saudi\_Vision\_2030 on Twitter, a highly popular platform among the people of Saudi Arabia.

The rise of social media use globally has been noticed by Papacharissi (2015), who claims it has provided a new platform for citizens to share ideas, develop narratives, and influence public opinion. According to Khamis et al. (2018), among these citizens are SMIs with unmatched opportunities to stir public discussion and influence their followers to accept specific views. SMIs are now widespread and encompass people who are popular online. They have thousands of followers on their social media accounts, and debate different social and cultural issues to inform and influence their followers (Balabanis & Chatzopoulou 2019; Fraser & Brown 2012;

Jin & Phua 2014; Nisbett & DeWalt 2016).

Solis & Webber (2012, p. 8) stress that SMIs have ‘a substantial or concentrated following in social networks, notable stature or authority within a community, and loyalty of an audience’. They further claim that their fame is not confined to a specific country (Solis & Webber 2012).

The need for SMIs in the public sphere has also been identified by Albalawi and Sixsmith (2017), who claim that their presence is particularly important in countries like Saudi Arabia where the government influences, traditional news media. Many scholars, including Bennet (2014), Frazer and Brown (2012), and John et al. (2019), suggest that the SMIs’ approach has the potential to be unbiased and investigative. While they may perpetuate government narratives by creating echo chambers, they may also offer alternative ways of examining current issues.

Saleh (2012) also claims that the rise in popularity of SMIs among the general public is rooted in the desire for truthful information about KSA’s affairs, which tends to be absent in traditional media. This led Albalawi and Sixsmith (2017) to suggest that SMIs have the ability to spread powerful messages about social, political and economic issues.

The discussions above are critically important in exploring the roles played by Saudi SMIs in engaging with public affairs surrounding Vision 2030. Such discourse further explored in Chapter 2, will help social media researchers understand the personal views, framing, engagements and motivations of SMIs.

### **1.3. Aims and Questions**

The aim of the current research project is to investigate the role played by Saudi SMIs in engaging with public affairs, specifically about Vision 2030. In the interest of achieving this goal, this study investigates the

following research questions:

- RQ1. How do SMIs frame the government to their followers when tweeting about Vision 2030?
- RQ2. What framing devices are useful in generating engagement with their followers?
- RQ3. What is the profile insight of SMIs and the motivations driving them to engage with Vision 2030?
- RQ4. What are the implications of these framing approaches, and these motivations of SMIs, for an understanding of the nature of social media interactions pertaining to government initiatives in Saudi Arabia?

#### **1.4. The Theoretical Framework of the Research**

The findings of this research study are informed by Framing Theory, which was put forth by Goffman in 1974 and later adopted in communications studies. Frames have been approached by different scholars in different ways. Gitlin (2003) claims that frames are built through selection, emphasis and exclusion. This view has been supported by Entman, who maintains the following:

Frames select and call attention to particular aspects of the reality described, which logically means that frames simultaneously direct attention away from other aspects. Most frames are defined by what they omit as well as include, and the omissions of potential problem definitions, explanations, evaluations, and recommendations may be as critical as the inclusions in guiding the audience. (Entman 1993: 54) According to Reese (2001: 11), frames, being part of the symbolic universe, allow researchers to ‘meaningfully structure the social world’. This research explores how Saudi SMIs have framed Vision 2030 to their followers. It will reveal which framing devices are utilised by SMIs in generating engagement with their followers. Additionally, it will also elucidate the impact of SMI popularity on the emphasis and valence dimensions that are drawn on.

To better understand the motivations of SMIs in engaging with Vision 2030, I examine the concepts of engagement and motivation. This examination will also elucidate SMI engagement levels to analyse them more effectively and help explore the backgrounds of SMIs, as well as the tweets they share. The implications of how the cultural and personal backgrounds of SMIs influence the content of their tweets will also be analysed.

### **1.5. The Research Methods Used in This Study**

The researcher initially employed content analysis as a research method to study tweets. The aim was to answer the first two research questions of this study by including the framing of Vision 2030 by SMIs and assessing the usefulness of framing devices in generating follower engagement.

For content analysis of tweets related to Saudi Vision 2030, the data was collected through a coding sheet designed by the researcher in Arabic. As the selected sample of tweets was in Arabic, it was more feasible for the researcher to design the coding sheet in Arabic and then collect data from it. A sample of the coding sheet applied in this research study has been translated into English. A total of 4200 tweets were analysed in this way. The researcher decided to consider only those tweets for study that are issued by the Saudi SMIs from their officially verified Twitter accounts, and also those directly addressed to the hashtag issued by the Saudi government (#Saudi\_vision\_2030) in the period 25 April 2016 to 26 June 2016. The collected tweets were analysed using a qualitative content analysis approach.

To build and expand on arguments about the findings collected through content analysis, the researcher conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with twelve Saudi SMIs – nine males and three females – based in Saudi Arabia. The SMIs selected for interview had more than 10,000 followers for each on their verified Twitter accounts and actively contributed to the #Saudi\_Vision\_2030 hashtag, drawing significant engagement from followers in terms of likes and retweets.



The purpose of conducting the interviews was to understand the selected SMIs' personal views and motivations for discussing Vision 2030. In the research process, the researcher followed the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007)* and RMIT University's guidelines on ethics.

The tweets of Saudi SMIs sent between 25 April 2016 and 26 June 2016 were studied. This two-month range was selected to avoid missing any relevant discussions. Vision 2030 was launched by the Saudi government on 25 April 2016. The data demonstrates that over time, the number of tweets made by Saudi SMIs about Vision 2030 on the official hashtag gradually decreased. The sample size of tweets studied in this project is 2,386.

## **1.6. The Significance of the Study**

The current study has a range of academic and practical significances. From an academic perspective, its significance lies in its extension of framing theory to the relatively novel context of social media, and specifically the role of social media in the mass communications of governmental and public bodies. Framing theory was derived from, and has predominantly been applied to, mass media contexts, but social media is becoming increasingly important as a channel of mass communication in contemporary societies. There is, therefore, an urgent need for governments, public bodies and citizens to understand how it can be used to promote public messaging most effectively.

By considering the role of social media and SMIs in communicating the Saudi government's Saudi Vision 2030 initiative, the current case study sheds light on this understudied context of communication via the public-private nexus represented by private SMIs disseminating public information on social media. In this way, it is of significance in enhancing the academic understanding of the applicability of framing theory to such contexts, the way such contexts affect and influence frames, and a range of related considerations. Given the specific national context of the study, it is also of significance in shedding light on socio-cultural determinants of framing in social media communications.

The study's practical significance arises from the way in which such findings have the potential to inform and influence the communication strategies of public bodies seeking to make better use of social media to engage and influence the public. The unveiling of Vision 2030 was a major event in the lives of Saudi people, as hardly anyone in the kingdom imagined that the KSA would embrace the proposed changes. The plan sought to revolutionise Saudi society by giving the KSA a new image in the international landscape. The government recognised the importance of women in the country and their contributions to the economy. They also decided to explore multiple resources such as tourism, entertainment, entrepreneurship and public-private partnerships to contribute to the economy and the overall development of the country. The government also resolved to be more transparent and accountable to its people.

The Twitter coverage of Vision 2030 represents a valuable means of exploring the role of social media and SMIs in public communications for a number of reasons. Saudi Arabia is a major market for Twitter and many SMIs have massive followings on their verified Twitter accounts; as such, they play a vital role in shaping public opinion about the government in the discussion of national issues. On the one hand, they explain issues to their followers by expressing their opinions about them – on the other hand, they also motivate others to become part of discussions. Their pivotal role as a bridge between citizens and national issues have amplified their significance in a country like Saudi Arabia, where traditional media is regulated by ministry of media law.

The current study thereby helps to clarify the priorities of SMIs in communicating government-related news and information. This is a relatively under-researched area, especially in the context of promoting engagement in discussions of national issues and programs in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The findings of this research study are thus significant in a range of ways. They demonstrate the applicability of framing theory to the relatively novel context of SMIs, as private individuals, engaging the wider public in public issues such as government-announced policy initiatives. The emergence of social media has created the unusual situation whereby the public and private realms interact and blend in diverse ways in

such contexts, calling for research to understand what factors affect credibility, engagement, buy-in, and related aspects. In a country such as Saudi Arabia, where public discourse has been limited for a long time, this represents a significant departure from the norms. The current study therefore sheds valuable light on the dynamics of SMIs' participation, and their followers' engagement, with government initiatives via social media. The findings also shed light on the specificity of the use of social media in Saudi Arabia from a sociocultural perspective, helping to develop the literature in this respect. The study additionally outlines a model for future research related to SMIs debating national issues and promoting engagement in public affairs.

## **1.7. The Structure of this Thesis**

This thesis has been divided into the following seven parts: (1) Introduction; (2) Social Media Influencers and Citizen Engagement in Public Affairs; (3) Framing Theory and its Use in Constructing Narrative; (4) Methodology; (5) Analysis of the Findings; (6) Personal Views of SMIs and their Engagement with Vision 2030; and (7) Discussion and Conclusion.

This first chapter provides a brief introduction of the topic, a description of Vision 2030, the background of the study, and a justification of the research project. It also outlines the study's research questions, research objectives, theoretical framework and research methods. The chapter also explains the significance of the study and presents a framework for the whole thesis by providing brief descriptions of each of the following chapters, as outlined below.

The second chapter, 'Social Media Influencers and Citizen Engagement in Public Affairs', explores the state of new media in Saudi Arabia. It also explores the internet era in Saudi Arabia and discusses the influence of religion in political communication and media policy along with the role of social media in the context of the Middle East and Saudi Arabia specifically. General discussion about online activism, particularly in the context of social media, is also included in this chapter. This segment is followed by an examination of SMIs including celebrities and micro-celebrities. To enrich the discussion, the researcher also debates SMI engagement and influence on social media in Saudi Arabia, followed by a discussion about their measurable influence on Twitter specifically. Apart from a brief section explaining Vision 2030, this chapter also highlights relevant research studies conducted by different researchers from multiple perspectives. The contributions of the current research to the existing literature are also discussed in detail.

The third chapter, 'Framing Theory and its Use in Constructing Narrative', highlights the origin of framing studies along with the definitions and debates surrounding 'the frame' and other associated terminologies, including the model of the frame, frame modelling and framing. The inductive and deductive

methods of the frame's identification are explained in detail alongside the correlation between media and audience framing in the context of dependent and independent variables. A scholastic discussion surrounding framing theory and the associated concept of agenda setting is included in the chapter, followed by sections about selective social media research employing framing theory as a theoretical framework. Lastly, the chapter justifies the use of framing theory in this research study by connecting it to discussions in earlier parts of the chapter.

The fourth chapter, 'Methodology', defines and justifies the research methods utilised in this research study followed by a debate on the research sample of tweets and interviewees. It makes arguments for the data collection tools applied in the research project and outlines the various tests carried out in this regard. Data analysis is also discussed in this chapter alongside linguistic and ethical considerations, as well as the operational definitions of different variables.

The fifth chapter, 'Analysis of the Findings', discusses the results of content analysis in detail. It compares the tweets tweeted by male and female SMIs, as well as the number of followers following SMIs who tweeted about Vision 2030. The data about the sharing of tweets in different weeks is also discussed alongside follower engagement with SMIs. A discussion about emphasis dimensions and valence dimensions is also included in this chapter. The association between the number of followers and emphasis dimensions, as well as valence dimensions, is also outlined. The impacts of both emphasis and valence dimensions on the number of likes and retweets related to Vision 2030 is assessed. The frames discerned in the SMIs' treatment of Saudi Vision 2030 are enumerated and interpreted.

The sixth chapter, 'Personal Views of SMIs and their Engagement with Vision 2030', lays a foundation for the interview findings and is followed by the personal views of the SMIs. It includes discussion about the opinions held by the SMIs about Vision 2030 and the incentives behind them. Furthermore, the chapter

discusses the most engaging dimensions (frames) for SMIs while talking about Vision 2030 on Twitter, besides wanting to share inclusive messages with their followers. The last section of the chapter highlights the motivations for SMIs to interact with their followers about Vision 2030.

The last chapter, 'Discussion and Conclusion', focuses on the present research's major findings and its contributions to the existing literature and theoretical framework. The chapter also discusses the challenges faced by the researcher while working on this project. Suggestions for future research are also incorporated in this chapter.

## **1.8. Summary**

This introductory chapter established the research topic by presenting its background. The chapter then explained the significance of this study and communicated details about the related research objectives and research questions. A brief discussion of the theoretical framework employed in the study, as well as the research methods involved, was also included. In the last section, the structure of the thesis was highlighted by providing a brief introduction of all seven thesis chapters.

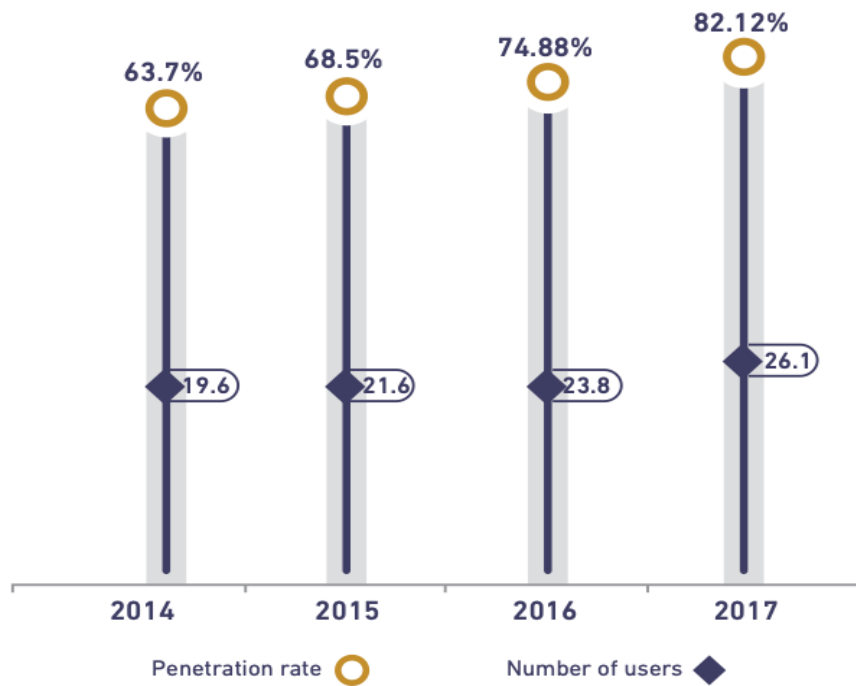
## **Chapter 2. Social Media Influencers and Citizen Engagement in Public Affairs**

### **2.1. Introduction**

The previous chapter introduced the current study. This chapter provides a review of the literature, as a means of establishing the context of the extant research of relevance to the topic. The literature review focuses on the research on social media to clarify the existing situation of these different media outlets operating in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and to assess the current environment in which they operate. The chapter is divided into four parts. The first part provides an introduction. The second part considers the introduction of the internet in order to clarify the context in which social media emerged in the country, and thereby clarify the salient socio-political factors influencing its use in this context. It also explores social media from a basic to advanced level by linking it to the Middle East and Saudi Arabia. The third section examines the role of social media in the context of communication by considering online engagement in public affairs and the emergence of celebrities, micro-celebrities and social media influencers (SMIs). It further reflects on the role of SMIs in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, as well as discussing and measuring engagement and influence on Twitter.

### **2.2. The Emergence of Social Media in the Middle East, specific to Saudi Arabia**

The internet is the most recent of the information technologies to pose a challenge to the state's control over information. Saudi Arabia first connected to the internet in 1994, but it was three years before King Fahd permitted nationwide use of these services. The number of internet users grew over time, and to meet the needs of the Saudi people, the kingdom gave approval to forty private internet service providers (ISPs) in November 1998 (Al-Qarni 2004; Alshahrani 2016; Alshehri and Meziane 2017).



**Figure 1: Total Number of Internet Users in Saudi Arabia (In millions) (CITC 2017)**

In January 1999, the general public were given access to the internet by these providers, though access was limited, and monitoring was implemented to prevent people from accessing content deemed undesirable (Al-Hajery 2004; Al-Tawil 2001; Noman, Faris & Kelly 2015). This general model of control and monitoring has persisted until the present. There are three main levels of internet in the kingdom: ISPs; Saudi Telecom Company (STC – the National Backbone); and the International Link (operated by the Internet Service Unit [ISU]). This ensures that access can only be obtained through registration and subscription with the commercially licensed ISPs (Al-Qarni 2004; Alshahrani 2016; Alshehri and Meziane 2017), which ensures control over what content is accessible. This rule applies to everyone, including organisations, individuals and government agencies, with universities being the only spaces exempt from it.

There are a number of reasons for the delay in the spread of the internet, foremost of which was that the national telecommunication infrastructure needed considerable modifications to meet the technical requirements of the internet (Al-Hajery 2004; Al-Tawil 2001). Al-Saggaf (2004) suggests that another important factor was the need to put control mechanisms in place, as the government wanted to ensure that Islamic beliefs and cultural values were not threatened by the misuse of the internet.



The spread of the internet has influenced Saudi society in many ways. It has facilitated Saudi citizens' access to information about the rest of the world, which has increased their knowledge and affected their choices and decision-making processes (Alshahrani 2016; Cite 2017). Nevertheless, the centralised control and censorship of the medium remains a cause for disquiet (Al-Hajery 2004; Al-Tawil 2001). Zysman and Newman (2006) argue that the primary reason for this control is to limit access to perspectives contrary to the prevailing religious as a means of forestalling social and cultural dissent and thus averting forms of protest. The internet is seen as a platform with extensive scope for expression and information sharing (Albalawi & Sixsmith 2017; Aljabre 2013; Anderson 2005; Noman, Faris & Kelly 2015; Papacharissi 2002). Consequently, activists - including those complaining against the traditional way of life - may use it to express their disapproval against rules and regulations (Al-Rikaf 2012; Khalil and Story 2020).

Saudi women have also found the internet to be a vital source of information and communication within the country and the outside world. Although Saudi women situation are getting better, they are able to understand and compare their situation with the status of women in other countries through the internet, and explore ways to attain greater freedom (El-Nawawy & Khamis 2016; Hofheinz 2005; Khalil and Storie 2020). Such socio-political potentials of the internet are perhaps most evident in the emergence of social media and its unique ability to disseminate information, mobilize ideas between people, and establish solidarity among groups (Gillan and Pickerill 2008; Shirky 2011, Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira 2012; Mellor 2014; Tufekci 2017).

Social media platforms focus on facilitating the rapid transfer of information (in the form of text, image, and audio-visual content) between individuals and groups of people without the intervention of formal social or institutional frameworks (Shirky 2008, p. 20f). This basic mode of information transmission facilitates a wide range of activity, include the ease with which individuals may communicate, cooperate, and perform collective action, without the need for centralised planning or delegation of authority to a centralised body (Boyd 2009; Fuchs 2014; Foster 2015; Greijdanus et al. 2020; Shirky 2008). Van Dijck (2013, p. 11) explained

that if the word ‘social’ is connected with media it ‘implies that platforms are user centred and that they facilitate communal activities, just as the term “participatory” emphasizes human collaboration. Indeed, social media can be seen as online facilitators or enhancers of human networks – webs of people that promote connectedness as a social value’. The above definitions open the debate about which media platforms should be considered ‘social’.

Fuchs (2014) argues that there are several types of sociality. The term encompasses information, communication, community and collaboration. Fuchs defines communication as a reciprocal process of exchanging symbols between at least two human beings, in the process of which the ‘interaction partners’ give meaning to these symbols. He further elaborates that if we agree that a ‘social activity’ should be based on the principle of ‘communication or symbolic interaction’, then ‘it is not social if you write a document alone, but it is social to send an email or chat with a friend on *Facebook*’ (Fuchs 2014, p. 5).

Community is another form of sociality. One can claim that communication has developed into the social phenomenon of community when people interacting with each other develop ‘feelings of belonging together or friendship’ (Fuchs 2014, p. 5). A good example of this would be the communities of personal friends or social activists on *Facebook* – although online communities existed long before *Facebook*, as early as the late 1980s and early 1990s, such as *salon.com* and *theglobe.com*. Brzozowski, Sandholm & Hogg (2009); Vale and Fernandes (2018); Chen and Lin (2019) claim that a significant aspect of the motivation to participate in social media is the sense of community that they provide to their users.

The last form of sociality is collaboration and co-operative work, which means that users help each other. *Wikipedia* is a good example of such collaborative and co-operative work, with multiple contributors for the same project assisting in the ‘reconstruction of expertise’ (Majchrzak, Wagner & Yates 2013). *GitHub* is another such platform that has recently emerged, which is dedicated to the sharing of code for software-based innovations (Longo & Kelley 2016). Developers make their code publicly available on *GitHub*, in return for

assistance with coding, proofreading, troubleshooting, and other forms of assistance. A significant motivation for the provision of such labour for free on the part of community members appears to be prestige and status, as well as the prospect of reaping such assistance themselves in future (Hu et al. 2016; Celińska 2018).

Scholars suggest that it is important to figure out which aspect of sociality is being focused on when discussing social media, given this multi-layered meaning associated with the form. Fuchs (2014, p.5) elucidates the concept by giving the example of *Facebook*, which he claims, ‘contains a lot of content (information) and is a tool for communication and for the maintenance creation of communities’, which ‘is only to a minor degree a tool for collaborative work, but involves at least three types of sociality: cognition, communication and community’. *Twitter*, the micro-blogging website, could be characterised in a similar way.

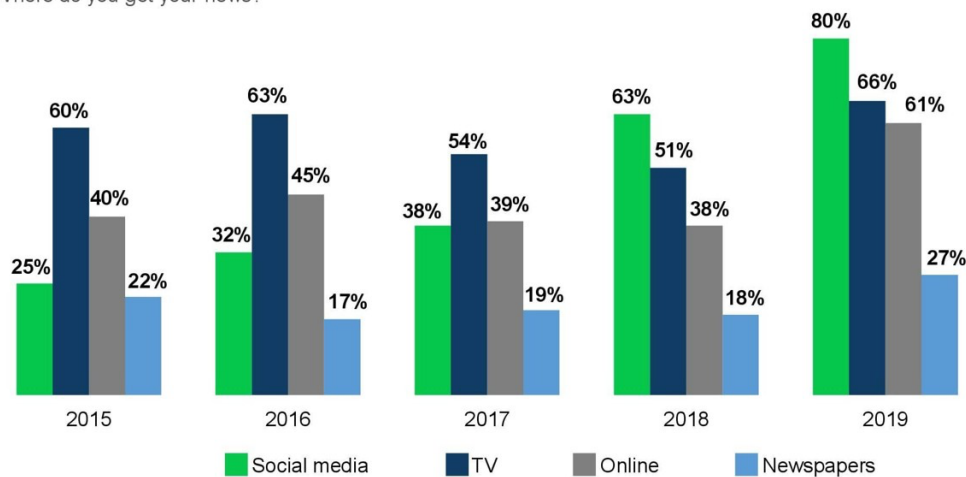
Social networking sites have accelerated human interaction, and the extent of connectivity that is possible to individuals by significant degrees (Boyd and Ellison 2007; Housley et al. 2018). These applications, coupled with smartphones and rapid internet, have provided a good basis for people to share their ideas or to find support for their causes. Thus, they have become increasingly popular in the Middle East and other developing countries too, enabling people from different walks of life to get together and share their feelings.

The number of users of social media in Middle East has grown rapidly in recent years, including *Facebook*, *Facebook Messenger*, *WhatsApp*, *Twitter*, *Snapchat* and *Instagram*. The Global System for Mobile Communications (GSM) findings from 2019 reveal that mobile social media penetration increased from 19% in 2014 to 44% in 2018 in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region (Bahia & Suardi 2019). Similarly, a survey of Arab youths conducted by ASDA’A and BCW revealed that in 2019, 80% of Arab youths got their news online through social media (*Facebook* and *Twitter*) – compared to 25% in 2015.

It further claims that 60% of Arab youths trust the news or information they get through social media, while 55% trust traditional media (Arab Youth Survey 2019).



Where do you get your news?



**Figure 2: News source among Arab youths (Arab Youth Survey 2019)**

Similarly, a survey of nationals of seven Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia, conducted by Northwestern University in Qatar in 2019 reveals that social media penetration varies from country to country. For example, six in ten Saudis use Twitter, while nine in ten Egyptians use Facebook (Dennis 2019). While Radcliffe and Abuhamid (2020) claim that there has been a significant drop in the use of Twitter among Arab nationals, KSA remains one of the top ten leading countries in terms of Twitter users around the world. It has more than 10 million active Twitter users, accounting for 38% of the total population.

The significance of social media to the region is demonstrated by its popularity as a platform for Arab people during the socio-political upheavals of the last decade. The most evident example is that of Arab Spring (Khondker 2011; Mellor 2016; Tufekci 2018). Castells (2015, p. 58) shows the importance of the role played by social media in the 'Egyptian revolution'. By giving people a platform to share events related to the protests recorded on their mobile phones, or even livestreaming these, platforms such as Facebook and YouTube played a role in informing people both within the country and around the world. The user-generated nature of these platforms is crucial in facilitating these kinds of social movement, insofar as it provides a medium outside the control of centralised authorities whereby groups of people can deliberate, coordinate, and share information (Farhan and Varghese 2018; Grosser, Hase and Wintterlin 2019).

This interpretation is supported by the findings of Lotan et al. (2011, p. 1401), who researched information flow during the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions by studying large data public tweets in Tahrir Square over a period of six days. They found that activists and journalists were the most influential tweet originators, rather than the organisations present there. This would suggest that *Twitter* provided a good platform for multiple individuals to contribute to and shape the directions of sentiment and action that cumulatively contributed to the revolution. Nevertheless, as Castells (2015, p. 62) points out, social media platforms are not in and of themselves outside the scope of centralised control and censorship. For example, the Mubarak regime imposed absolute suppression by simply shutting the internet down in the country, as is a common practice in countries seeking to suppress dissent, including Iran, Ethiopia, Algeria, Kenya, and India (Vargas-Leon 2016).

In contrast, there is a body of research that insists that the role of technology in bringing about revolution in society has been highly exaggerated. Wolfsfeld, Segev & Sheafer (2013, p. 117) categorize interpretations of the impact of technology on people and their protests into ‘cyber enthusiasts’ and ‘cyber-skeptics’: ‘cyber enthusiasts’ have faith in new media to empower people, while ‘cyber-skeptics’ believe, on the contrary, that the internet gives people a false sense of participation and therefore keeps them away from actual protest on the ground. For example, Wolfsfeld, Segev & Sheafer (2013, p. 217) are sceptical of the designation of the riots in Iran in June 2009 as the ‘*Twitter* Revolution’. They assert that this framing of the events was largely a result of hype created by Western media, when in fact, in the material realities on the ground, *Twitter* hardly played any significant role at all. Schectman (2009), for example, shows that there were less than nine thousand Iranian people registered on *Twitter* at the time of the protests, indicating the limitations of the coverage provided by the medium, and argues that the majority of organisation was carried out via word of mouth and cellular phone text message.

A consideration that would appear to contradict this argument is that, social media inspired and

provided a model for the protests in Algeria, Lebanon, Jordan, Mauritania, Sudan, Yemen, Bahrain, Libya, Morocco and Syria for different reasons (Castells 2015, pp. 95-96). Ruijgrok (2017) confirms that the majority of the populations of these countries were under the age of 30, and were relatively well educated, digitally literate, and active online, but generally unemployed or underemployed. A factor to consider in this context is the question of why some of these movements succeeded while others failed. Castells (2015, p. 62) argues that it is difficult for any government to sustain repression of any movement that is supported by communication networks, unless there is a unified government supported by influential powers.

It is, however, important to recognize the significant achievements that have been attained through the application of social media to social protest. Castells (2015, p. 107), for example, cites many examples from the near past in which digital engagement in public affairs has succeeded in a range of ways, including the easing of Egypt's siege on Gaza, and the public uprising that brought an end to Mubarak and Ben Ali's decades-long dictatorship.

Social media has played a key role in raising public awareness about civic issues among the younger population in Saudi Arabia, and increasing interest and participation in these (Alwagait, Shahzad and Alim 2015; Al-Matter 2017; Khalil & Storie 2020). It acts as an effective channel for communication between the population in general and the government (Al-Saggaf & Simmons 2015; Basahel & Yamin 2017; Fatany 2012). Recent studies have revealed that Saudis are very active social media users. The country's Internet penetration rate is now at 91%. equalling approximately 30 million internet users, and more than 14 million active *Twitter* users (Hovorka 2018; Kemp 2020; Radcliffe & Abuhamid 2019).

Saudi Arabia is a conformist and traditional country and is seen as the custodian of certain Islamic Holy locations. To understand the political communication arena in Saudi Arabia, it is important to shed the light on the relationship between the politics and religion rooted in the history of the country. Saudi Arabia's political

communication arena, similar to other countries, is a shape that demonstrate the country's , society, politics and culture (Awwad, 2010). Saudi Arabia's media policy is based on the country's religious constitution and cultural norms (Hamidaddin, 2019). As a result, the content of media is impacted by religious ideology and religious leaders (Coman A&Coman, 2017). The engagement between citizens and public relations therefore are shaped religious values.

According to Wilson and Graham (1994), The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia follows a theocratic system, with minimal separation between religion and politics, which in turn influences media to adopt religion roles. As the country's constitution follows Sharia, or Islamic law, the rulers make sure all political decrees are in accordance to religious terms. Similarly, Al-Atawneh (2009) and Hamidaddin (2019) assert that Saudi Arabia is considered as a religious country and positions its mission as a religious one, with the state's past and present involved in religion.

One of the most important events of the Saudi political communication history was the siege of Makkah (Awwad, 2010). The holy mosque in Makkah has been attacked by a group of extremists led by Juhaiman alotaibi on November 20, 1979. In order to employ force to break the siege, the Saudi authorities enlisted the help of the Ulama (religious intellectuals). The Ulama approved to collaborate with the government (Quandt, 1981). According to AlKheraigi (1992), the siege of Makkah had an impact on media policies as well as the government's national security. Prior to the 1979 event, women and men were sharing their opinion freely on different media outlet in regard to women participation in public life in the kingdom (Hamdan, 2005). However, after 1979 the media outlet stopped publishing or broadcasting content related to women's freedom and liberal lifestyle (Hamdan, 2005).

Another factor that influences Saudi political communication is the social opposition because of the influence of religious ideology. According to Rugh (2004) due to conservative society's opposition to television

service, the Saudi government did not establish a television service until 1965. The conservative nature of Saudi society and the alliance between the government and religious scholars has impacted government's approach to media (Awwad, 2010; Hamidaddin, 2019). However, the religious principle has not stopped Saudi from feeling the effects of social media (Howard, Agarwal & Hussain 2011; Samin 2012). Although Aissa (2012) claims that the Arab Spring did not affect Saudi Arabia directly, other researchers claim that it certainly influenced the role of social media in the country (Al-Matter 2017; Al-Jenaibi 2016; Al-Rakaf, 2013). These researchers insist that social media has become a powerful tool among the young Saudi activists (Gunter, Elareshi & Al-Jaber 2016; Pan and Siegel 2020; Samin 2012). This platform has enabled them to raise their voices on national issues and societal concerns, providing them with an opportunity to share information, and thereby helping them to become active and informed members of their society (Alsahafi 2019; Gunter, Elareshi & Al-Jaber 2016; Park, Kee & Valenzuela 2009).

Fatany (2012) has elaborated how the increasing number of activists across the many social media platforms such as *Twitter*, *Facebook* and *YouTube* indicate that younger generations are more interested in public issues and are likely to play an increased role in them. Jha and Sarangi (2017) similarly argue that social media activists have often highlighted such issues as corruption and other anti-social practices and have encouraged the government to address them.

In light of this increasing awareness and engagement in public affairs, it is not surprising that the state considers social media as a breeding ground for rumors. Kinnimont (2013) confirms that the Saudi government considers *Twitter* as a channel to the fake news, and has assigned religious authorities to disperse the rebellious, social, religious and political views and information shared by activists. Saudi Arabia's foremost legal and religious expert, Grand Mufti AbdulAziz ben Abdullah AlSheikh, has said that Twitter is a forum where falsehoods and false charges are often made (Chaudhry 2014). He further charges that *Twitter* is a hub of corruption, deceit and illegal activities, and characterizes those who participate on the platform as fools who are



devoid of faith and modesty (Chaudhry 2014).

In line with such an attitude, there has been a consistent pattern of following of Twitter users in Saudi Arabia. Posting comments critical of the religious system on Twitter is not allowed. Al-rakaf, (2012) claims that this demonstrate the lack of tolerance of the Saudi government for social media users' expression of negative opinions that do not align with the state religious beliefs.

Ghannam (2011) argues that the Saudi government is endlessly pursuing improved methods of controlling social media, in particular to combat the threat of radicals, such as the extremist group Islamic State, which uses *Twitter*, *Facebook* and *YouTube* to broadcast their campaigns and beliefs (Keatinge 2019; Lee 2014; Melki & Jabado 2016). Historically, the kingdom has taken a tough position against those who disseminate the rumours, and has even prevented the possibility of anonymous use of *Twitter* by ensuring that only verified, registered people can post on the site (Ghannam 2011; Shea 2013). The requirement is implemented by *Twitter* itself and supports the view that social media companies are willing to adjust their models to accommodate the demands of authorities in various countries (Diamond & Plattner 2012; Shaw 2020). In the case of Saudi Arabia, this move was aimed to protect the kingdom and its affairs from misleading and unjust tweets, as labelled by a Grand Mufti, Saudi Arabia's most senior cleric (Shea 2013; Abrahams & Leber 2021). Such monitoring of Twitter and its users is justified by claims about security, Islamic beliefs and cultural values and the approach is entirely in line with the systematic censorship of all information media in Saudi Arabia.

Among all the various information media discussed, the internet has had perhaps the most profound influence on the culture of the Saudi people, contributing to their religious and cultural freedom (Samin 2008; Yamani 2010; Al-Jenaibi 2016). It has enabled the Saudi people to become more aware of the world around them, and support a change in their lifestyle, to modernise their outlooks to stand on equal footing with the international community (Altwayjiri 2017). Furthermore, social media has provided a platform of free speech,

enabling citizens to access even censored information (Abokhodair 2015; Alnajrani et al. 2018; Al-Jenaibi 2020). Hence, social media becomes a potential tool for any type of public engagement.

This section has discussed the role of social media in Saudi Arabia and a range of issues associated with it, to clarify the role of social media in the communication environment, the relationship between religious and cultural values in KSA and how it underpins media the regulatory environment of the country which now flows onto the social media too. The following section discusses the potential of social media to act as a vehicle for online engagement in public affairs. It also investigates the role of SMIs in spreading information, while exploring the connection between engagement and influence.

## **2.3. Social Media Engagement, Empowerment, and Public Affairs**

### **2.3.1. *Government and Citizens***

This section discusses the phenomenon of online activity in relation to public affairs and then elaborates it in the context of social media with reference to the previous research on the topic. A range of related concepts, including celebrities, micro-celebrities and SMIs, are also explained through the literature, followed by discussion of SMIs in Saudi Arabia. Questions regarding the measurement of engagement and influence on *Twitter* are considered.

According to Gil de Zúñiga, Jung & Valenzuela (2014), engagement refers to citizens participating in public affairs of the society. Warren, Sulaiman & Jaafar (2014) claim that social media networks allow individuals to engage in social activities through debate and cooperation. Social media engagement improves citizens' participation in public affairs, which can promote good government (Bertot, Jaeger & Hansen 2012; Haro-de-Rosario, Sáez-Martín & del Carmen Caba-Pérez 2018b).

Many mass media researchers including Lee et al. (2014) and Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux & Zheng (2014); Wang et al. (2017) claim that the basic characteristics of social media include participation, openness, conversation, engagement, and connectedness. These characteristics make it potentially of great value in establishing engagement of citizens in government, and there is evidence that this is already happening. Freeman (2016), for example, suggests that social media is contributing to the social sphere's structure by altering the ideas and practices associated with national involvement and involvement. Hofmann et al. (2013) also claim that the government is using social media channels to overcome the communication barriers in the public sector. Many other researchers claim that the use of social media by the government could increase citizen communication and engagement as well as transparency (Arshad & Khurram 2020; Bonsón, Royo & Ratkai 2015; Picazo-Vela, Gutiérrez-Martínez & Luna-Reyes 2012).

Stanger, Alnaghaimshi & Pearson (2017) state that engagement in public affairs is dependent on the level of challenges the public face. In Saudi Arabia, the flood in 2009 made most people rush to social media to engage in debates, while sharing videos of what events had occurred. The flood left 116 people dead and most properties were destroyed; many people were left homeless. Social media engagement stirred government attention after they expressed their feelings and opinions (Al-Sagaff 2012; Elsamni 2018). Social media platforms are used to gain access to collective behaviour (Al-Sagaff & Simmons 2015). The response actions on the posts or videos establish that social media engagement is triggered by the need to take collective action..

Social networking has offered many people an opportunity to communicate and interact in Saudi Arabia (Gunter, Elareshi & Al-Jaber 2016). Involving citizens in public affairs helps the government direct resources and influence in the most relevant areas (Gil de Zúñiga, Diehl & Ardévol-Abreu 2017). However, in Saudi Arabia, there are still challenges. Most matters are presented by citizen representatives. There are two levels of citizens representation in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. At the national level, the National Consultative Council reviews and advises on matters of public interest (Albassam 2012). At the sub-national level, municipal councils play a role in the formulating local policy and responding to local issues (Quamar 2016).

However, many such representatives may act on the basis of their individual interests and forget the need to embrace public issues. Technological constraints play a role in preventing access on the part of many people to participate in government activities. Most illiterate and older people lack an opportunity to present their opinion (Obasi & Lekorwe 2014). The majority of social media platforms are dominated by youths, who may not understand the needs of the entire country.

Nevertheless, Stanger, Alnaghaimshi & Pearson (2017) showed that Saudi Arabia is improving in the use of information and technology to help make significant decisions. The country is among the top ten nations that have high growth in the use of social media. The study found that internet use increased from 13% in 2005 to 64% in 2014 (Stanger, Alnaghaimshi & Pearson 2017). The government can, therefore, access citizens from social media platforms. The Arab Spring, even in 2011, is seen as a contributor to the use of social media in the country (Al-Saggaf & Simmons 2015; Al-Jenaibi 2016; Alsahafi 2019). The event showed how citizens could use social media to self-organize socio-political movements using innovative methods facilitated by new technologies. In line with this, Stanger, Alnaghaimshi & Pearson (2017) called for the Saudi government to create more platforms where citizens can help make policies independently. It is through such groups that the government can access most citizens for input into public affairs.

For many people, social media is their only opportunity to engage in public affairs. Online communities allow all citizens to present their opinions on the available platforms. Social media gains the attention of most government officials and reaches the top government officials. Many people use social media to overcome barriers to communication between government officials and the public. *Internet* forums were the leading online community used in Saudi Arabia (Al-Saggaf & Simmons 2015). Most of citizens and officials use the platform to draw on public opinion pertaining to various public affairs. Several articles are posted, after which citizens are invited to reply based on their views (Al-Saggaf & Simmons 2015).

Highlighting the importance of citizen engagement in political and social affairs, many scholars including Arshad and Khurram (2020), and Bonsón, Royo & Ratkai (2015) assert that social media provides the government with the opportunity to increase the confidence of its citizens. Therefore, the personnel who operate the government social media accounts (GSMAs) should be trained to increase the participation of the general public by sharing relevant information (Darwish 2017; Khan, Yoon & Park 2014). Song and Lee (2016) also support this perspective by stating that the public sphere's bidirectional character and potential for social media gives a significant opportunity to the government and citizens to act constructively by generating new ideas and content. Haro-de-Rosario, Sáez-Martín & del Carmen Caba-Pérez (2018b) endorse that social media provides citizens with an opportunity to engage with the government in different initiatives and come up with new creative ideas that contribute to the progress of the country.

Such a perspective is supported by a wide range of research into the potential role of social media in citizen engagement in governance initiatives. Social media is considered by many researchers to be a technology that has shaped the public service delivery of governments (Abdelsalam et al. 2013; Alateyah, Crowder & Wills 2013; Bonsón, Royo & Ratkai 2015; Haro-de-Rosario, Sáez-Martín & del Carmen Caba-Pérez 2018b). Social media has enabled governments to establish an interactive and collaborative environment for citizens (Liu and Kim 2018, McNutt 2014). For example, Gintova (2019), while conducting research on the use of *Facebook* and *Twitter* by the Canadian government to interact with followers on issues pertaining to immigration, refugees and citizenship, found that Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) used their social media accounts as a customary service tool for informing the general public and also responding to their queries (Kagarise & Zavattaro 2017). However, the findings revealed that they failed to generate engagement among the followers on policymaking and public service delivery. Instead, social media primarily functioned as a source of information that could not be obtained from any other sources. In addition, users could get replies to their queries if they posted on *Twitter*. They also asked about non-controversial programs or services.

Additionally, the research conducted by Gintova (2019) found that the IRCC failed to involve its citizens in policy development initiatives or public service delivery. They also did not train the social media users in necessary skills for initiating meaningful dialogue. Therefore, the initiative to some extent compelled the migrant social media users to interact with each other on social media rather than with the government.

According to Mergel (2013b) and Hofmann et al. (2013) different governments are using social media for one-way communication – rather than utilising the platform for two-way communication to increase citizen engagement. Filer and Fredheim (2016) claim that among social media platforms, *Twitter* is often perceived as one that grants more freedom of expressions. Other researchers claim that tweeps are less worried about their privacy because they experience lower levels of perceived ‘co-veillance’ – or peer-surveillance – due to the fact that *Twitter* followers are typically weak ties, which is a more differentiated audience that often does not include family and close friends, but rather is comprised predominantly of unidentified followers (Comunello, Mulargia & Parisi 2016; Valenzuela, Correa & Gil de Zuniga 2018).

As mentioned above, *Twitter* has seen great success in Saudi Arabia. When it was first introduced, the growth in the use of the medium in Saudi Arabia was among the highest anywhere in the world, indicating the rapid recognition among the populace of the value it had the potential to provide. Reasons provided for this attitude included the greater freedoms of expression that users perceived the medium to offer them, despite the fact that *Twitter* in Saudi Arabia remains subject to surveillance, and people have received severe penalties for perceived infractions of laws on the platform (Chaudhry 2014). The fact that this has not limited the popularity of *Twitter* is indicated by the fact that almost 60% of the online population in the country uses the medium (Global Media Insight 2018), a greater proportion than any other country in the region.

The popularity of *Twitter* in the kingdom also appears to have driven a change in the government’s approach to the medium. To begin with, it adopted an approach similar to that used in other traditional media

such as print, radio and television, seeking to censor expression and control information through Anti-Cyber Crime Law and the application of stringent penalties for the contravention of censorship laws (Winder 2014; Al-Jenaibi 2016). However, perhaps to some extent, as a result of the recognition that the platform made such censorship and surveillance impossible, the government switched to a policy of seeking to stimulate more engagement of the populace in government processes and policies (Winder 2014). This has led to the implementation of initiatives that actively call for the contributions of citizens' opinions and perspectives on social issues the government is facing, and the attempt to use social media to create a more inclusive public sphere (Winder 2014).

Social media provides a common ground to people for sharing their everyday life experiences and also giving users a platform to utilize it for 'chitchat' and online help (Donath & Boyd 2004; Patulny & Seaman 2016). Johnson and Yang (2009) also claim that people use social media – especially *Twitter* – for a wide range of purposes, including seeking and sharing advice, gathering or sharing information, and socialising. Another social media researcher, Chen (2011) claims that *Twitter* helps users to gratify their 'intrinsic' need by establishing relationships with other tweeps by sending direct messages, tweets and retweets, and by following people and gaining followers. Alternately, Brannen (2010), while doing research on the 'motivational use of *Twitter*', found that many people use *Twitter* to surf, research or hop. But, surprisingly, not many people shared that they use *Twitter* to communicate with their fellow users.

It is interesting to acknowledge that there is a difference between social media usage and social media engagement (Smith & Gallicano 2015; Smith & Taylor 2017; Skoric et al. 2016). Social media usage obviously refers to the practical use of social media tools such as *Facebook*, *Twitter* etc., but social media engagement refers to the 'cognitive and emotional immersion' in the use of social media platforms, and 'the creation of experiences that allow ... deeper, more meaningful and sustainable interactions' between individuals and organisations (Sashi 2012, p. 256). Therefore, social media can satisfy the human need for personal interaction

and engagement with like-minded people, or just provide a means of obtaining information.

Johnson and Yang (2009), while examining the motives of Twitter users, claimed that ‘social motives’ came before ‘information motives.’ It is important to note that social motives include having fun, relaxing, finding out what others are up to, killing time, connecting with friends and family, and communicating easily with many people at the same time. On the other hand, information motives include getting and sharing information, sharing or receiving advice, and informing oneself about interesting happenings (Johnson & Yang 2009).

Khan (2017) researched the motivations for *YouTube* users for liking, disliking, commenting, sharing or uploading videos, and the results confirmed that an information-seeking motive was a significant positive predictor for liking, disliking and commenting on *YouTube* videos. Similarly, the motive of providing information was the strongest positive relationship with sharing videos, while social interaction motives were the main reasons for commenting. Also, while exploring motivations for viewing *YouTube* videos and reading comments, Khan’s findings revealed that motivations were positively connected with information exchange, self-presentation, and meditation music. Furthermore, to understand the participation of users on *YouTube*, Khan verified that it was very likely that the more the person visited a site, the more the person would comment and like the video (Khan 2016, p. 242).

There are a range of factors that influence the engagement of social media users. Rahim et al. (2019) claim that governments can strategically increase the engagement of followers on their *Twitter* account by focusing on their content and subject. Stone and Can (2020) argue that emotive language, in either a positive or negative tone, can impact engagement among the followers. Stone and Can (2020) and Heiss, Schmuck and Matthes (2019) found that engagement is boosted by heightened emotional expression.



Kim and Yang (2017) claim that text-only messages on social media are useful for conveying short ideas clearly, but the inclusion of non-text content such videos, images and external links are better for promoting engagement among followers. Haro-de-Rosario et al. (2018a) claim that account specific features such as biography, image, number of followers, and the reputation and trustworthiness of SMIs also play a vital role in accelerating engagement among followers. That is, engagement is bolstered by a detailed and specific biography and recognizable photo. Number of followers is also taken to be an index of reliability, which in turn promotes greater engagement. Bonsón, Perea & Bednárová (2019) and Stone & Can (2020) also argue that engagement depends on the behaviour of the account of SMIs. They claim that more frequent posts from a *Twitter* account would result in less engagement. Ma (2013) has argued that this counter intuitive finding could be explained by the idea that, in smaller communities, individuals feel their voice and contribution matters more, which leads to higher engagement.

Governments need to set up social media accounts that give opportunities for users to communicate with a government department by sending a direct message or even allowing guest posts to ensure better engagement and communication with the social media influencers. Bonsón & Ratkai (2013) are of the view that transparent organisations generate trust and confidence among citizens, which gives rise to effective dialogue between the government and its citizens, which results in greater participation and engagement in public affairs. Guo et al. (2020) claim that users would feel more connected if they communicated directly with the government on accessible social media platforms where information is readily available. Researchers including Bonsón, Perea & Bednárová (2019), Mergel (2013b) and Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux & Zheng (2014) claim that Citizens should be encouraged to engage in public issues by government officials. As they would be able to participate in decision-making and offer solutions to the government's issues. But such objectives could only be achieved if the public administrators provide the opportunity to the citizens by identifying the problems to them.

Haro-de-Rasario et al. (2018b) found while conducting research on the use of *Facebook* and *Twitter* by

Spanish citizens to assist with increased engagement with the Spanish local government, that *Facebook* was more successful in achieving higher levels of engagement than *Twitter*. The findings also revealed that the citizens' moods also affected engagement: the more negative the users' moods, the higher their engagement. The researchers also found a positive relation between transparency and engagement, stressing that in those municipalities where the local government is highly transparent, citizen engagement is stronger. Their findings also supported a positive relationship between activity on social media and engagement. In other words, the more the local government posted, the higher the engagement it resulted in, contradicting the findings of Bonsón, Perea & Bednárová (2019) and Stone & Can (2020).

A research study conducted by Bridgman et al. (2020) exploring the public health communication and engagement of followers on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic, revealed that while the Canadian government shared more posts on *Twitter* than on *Facebook*, on average the *Facebook* posts received more engagement. The authors do not seek to explain this variation, but it appears possible that it may be due to the greater interactivity functions provided by *Facebook*. The findings confirmed that the *Facebook* posts received 4.9 million likes, while *Twitter* received 2.9 million likes and retweets. The data also confirmed that the inclusion of attachments with the post decreased the level of engagement among followers, with hyperlinks resulting in a decreased engagement of 39%, and videos resulting in a decreased engagement of 26%. It further revealed that the more the Canadian government increased the number of daily tweets to inform followers, the less the engagement. However, this trend was not observed on *Facebook*. The researchers do not provide an explanation for this observation, but the trend supports the findings from research carried out by Bonsón, Perea & Bednárová (2019) and Stone & Can (2020), and may similarly be explicable on the basis of Ma's (2013) idea that a greater volume of tweets produces a perception on the part of individuals that their own contribution is of less relevance, leading to less engagement. Thus, it becomes important for the influencers to be more calculated and focused to generate engagement among followers.

The findings also revealed that the person who posts a tweet is more important to the followers than what is posted. For example, tweets from political leader such as prime minister generated more engagement than a large city government's account. This may be explained on the basis of other findings, that the recognizability and distinctiveness of the account promotes engagement (Haro-de-Rosario, Sáez-Martín & del Carmen Caba-Pérez 2018b): the prime minister is a recognizable individual to whom users can relate, whereas an organisational identity for the account presents a faceless bureaucracy, which is less likely to encourage engagement. The researchers further revealed that high engagement tactics also include the use of simple text coupled with an infographic or high-quality media content. Regarding the content of the message, it was revealed that a message should be concise and clear to generate engagement (Stone & Can 2020; Haro-de-Rosario, Sáez-Martín & del Carmen Caba-Pérez 2018b).

### ***2.3.2. The Drivers and Measurement***

To understand the possibilities of engagement by social media followers, it is necessary to explore the strategies that may trigger it. To this end, studies have investigated how politicians have leveraged social media to engage voters. The findings reveal that the use of an 'everyday style of speech' is more effective in generating engagement than an 'institutionalised' style of speech, as the former enables a more personable connection between politicians and citizens (Zamora-Medina & Zurutuza-Munoz 2014). That is, it is preferable to avoid jargon and technical terminology, complicated syntactical arrangements, and meta-discursive devices, all of which are common in formal written communication, in favour of colloquial, direct and concise forms of speech.

Going deeper into the content shared by politicians on *Twitter*, Johnson (2012) claims that use of rhetoric is one of such tools employed for the purpose of persuasion. He draws on Aristotle's ideas about rhetoric to analyse how politicians use language to achieve engagement and influence. Aristotle (1984) defines rhetoric as the ability to persuade an audience about a topic by choosing the appropriate verbal techniques for the topic. Using Aristotle's (1984) categories, Johnson (2012) asserts that politicians influence their *Twitter*

followers by sharing tweets aimed at establishing credibility (ethos), expressing their political views (logos), and building an emotional connection with their audiences (pathos).

Studies conducted by other researchers also demonstrate the positive correlation between the increase of potential to influence voters on *Twitter* and the politicians' increasing connection with citizens by mobilising, helping, and consulting them (Graham et al. 2013). Waters & Williams (2011) also suggest that encouraging a two-way symmetrical conversation between participants, in which all are likely to influence each other to change their opinions and make decisions beneficial for all, may be a valid strategy to enhance engagement and influence.

Researchers claim that other strategies used to encourage engagement among followers include the use of tweets incorporating hashtags, URLs, and user-mentions (DiGrazia et al. 2013; Moran, Muzellec & Johnson, 2019; Manzanaro, Valor & Paredes-Gázquez 2018; Park, Reber & Chon 2016). Some studies suggest that these elements of a tweet increase the amount of information provided and therefore increase the likelihood that the tweet will be retweeted (Boyd, Golder & Lotan 2010; Giglietto & Lee 2017; Pang & Law 2017; Park, Reber & Chon 2016; Yang & Counts 2010b). However, research also suggests that this initial finding needs further confirmation (Bhattacharya, Srinivasan & Polgreen 2014). Importantly, research has revealed that sentiment in tweets from government agencies, either positive or negative, is not associated with retweeting (Bhattacharya, Srinivasan & Polgreen 2014), which would indicate that users' responses to content is moderated by their perception of the nature of the poster.

Engagement and influence are linked. Social influence in the context of social media can be defined as the ability for an agent to change the attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of others within a network through communication (Brown & Fiorella 2013; Jackson 2008; Murdough 2009; Sánchez, Cortijo & Javed 2014). Influence in social psychology has been described as the 'salience of influencers' (Latane cited in Zhao, Zhan & Liu 2018, p. 550). Similarly, the structural theory of social influence also stresses that influence is established

by the receivers' repeated responses (comments) to the influential person (source) (Friedkin 2006).

The structural theory of social influence understands it to function via structural social bases of interlinked activity and the establishment of unanimity in complex communities that incorporate diverse heterogeneity. In this way, it is able to account for how the process of social influence can coordinate opinion, belief and behaviour across such divergent and dispersed networks (Friedkin 2006). Similarly, Cialdini & Goldstein (2004) also insist that to achieve social influence, it is necessary for the communicator to provide accurate descriptions of social situations, extend opportunities to the general public to maintain meaningful social relationships, and also to promote the public's positive self-concept. According to Austin, Liu & Jin (2012), the influence of bloggers on followers is both direct and indirect. The direct influence is the result of the influencer's communicative behaviour, and also selectively sharing the first-hand information. Indirect influence, in contrast, is the result of interpretation of media content from some other source by the influential person to her/his followers (Zhao, Zhan & Wong 2018).

There are six forms of social media that can be measured: blogs, content communities, virtual game worlds, collaborative projects, social networks, and virtual social worlds (Al-Sagaff 2012). Measuring the number of followers in each of the above tools can give ideas on the number of social media citizens. The devices can guide marketers and other government officials on the number of citizens who use social media. However, many people are silent followers on social media, as they do not comment on, or like, content. This poses a challenge to the measurement of the level of participation.

Many scholars have attempted to study the information flow on *Twitter*. Most of the researchers claim that one of the indicators when measuring influence is the number of 'followers' – a well-known popularity indicator (Dubois & Gaffney 2014; Romero et al. 2011; De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders 2017; Hemsley 2019). However, disagreements emerge, as other researchers do not unanimously accept the assumption of a

correlation between popularity and influence. Some, in fact, suggest that influence is a more nuanced process that should be measured through engagement rather than relying upon the number of followers (Luqiu, Schmierbach & Ng 2019; Quercia et al. 2011).

To measure engagement, researchers claim that the most popular tools applied are studying retweets, replies and mentions (Arora et al. 2019; Wang et al. 2017; Boyd, Golder & Lotan 2010). To be more specific, retweets are intended as reposting of original tweets. Replies are tweets written in response to an original tweet, while mentions are defined as the reposting of a tweet by including the *Twitter* handle or account name associated with the original tweet (*Twitter.com*, accessed: 12/12/2018). Stanger, Alnaghaimshi & Pearson (2017) show that social media engagement can be measured using visible patterns in user activities. Such practices include retweets, favourites, follows, likes, shares and comments. However, some patterns of social media activities are more difficult to measure. An example of such activities is browsing history. Stanger, Alnaghaimshi & Pearson (2017) state that to capture the right social media engagement, measurement capability requires going beyond such visible patterns and measuring silent engagement issues. Opinions, beliefs, religion and values used in social media should be assessed.

Bonsón, Perea & Bednárová (2019) claim that the aim of the Andalusian local governments has changed over time, and that communications strategies now seek to make use of the informality and spontaneity of social media platforms for Communication that is open and honest, as well as engagement with the broader public. Thus, it has given rise to the phenomenon of Citizen Engagement through Government Social Media (CEGSM) (Chen et al. 2020). Bonsón & Ratkai (2013) argued that a reliable social media engagement index includes the combination of ‘popularity, commitment and virality’, which can be measured by the number of likes, followers, shares, reposts and total posts. Similarly, researchers such as Brubaker & Wilson (2018), Kim & Yang (2017) and Wang et al. (2017) relied on comments, likes and shares to gauge citizen engagement. On the other hand, Jiang & Beaudoin (2016), insist that citizen engagement is the sum of likes,

shares and comments.

Researchers have also debated the impact of emotional valence (positive or negative emotions in a communication) on citizens' engagement. Many researchers claim that government-shared posts containing positive emotions are more likely to engage the public (Ji et al. 2019; Tang et al. 2019; Trilling, Tolochko & Burscher 2017; Zavattaro, French & Mohanty 2015).

When looking at the role of social media as a tool for engagement in public affairs, research has explored how *Twitter* is used as a vehicle to spread political information (Bode & Dalrymple 2016; Yaqub et al. 2017), and how the shape of the network can influence the circulation of information (Highfield 2017).

In response to the potential of social media platforms such as *Twitter* to influence public opinion and encourage political participation, research has implemented a variety of techniques to identify and measure patterns of influence (Albalawi & Sixsmith 2017; Hwong et al. 2017; Valente & Pumpuang 2007; Zhao, Zhan & Liu 2018; Zhang & Dong 2009). Many scholars claim that there is a high correlation between popularity and the ability to influence others (Xu et al. 2014; De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders 2017; Garcia, Mavrodiev et al. 2017; Simon 2019), while others suggest the value of connection power and interaction ability as ways to measure influence (Sun et al. 2009). For example, Cha et al. (2010) show that the number of followers an influencer has is not the most important determiner of direct influence (retweets and mentions), but rather that the specific identity and perceived focus of the account plays a role in this, indicating that engagement through a recognised identity is more important than general popularity. The ideas of connection power and interaction ability proposed by Sun et al. (2009) imply a similar perspective.

When gender is taken into account, the association between popularity and social acceptance is significantly stronger for males than for females; and the longitudinal data suggest that the two forms of high

status remain positively correlated across development for boys, while for girls with the passage of time it either disappears or gets modestly negative (Duffy et al. 2017).

Mergel (2013a) mentioned that citizen engagement on the part of government agencies could be evaluated on three grounds: transparency, participation and collaboration. Among these factors, collaboration is given too much importance. The researcher further claims that use of social media enables the government to understand the citizens' knowledge and their understanding and opinions about different issues, and thus it makes the government's process more effective and efficient. Haro-de-Rosario et al. (2018b) also support this view that engagement on social media accounts enables the government to understand the existing feelings of citizens about certain issues. Garcia-Tabuyo, Sáez-Martín & Caba-Pérez (2016) also claim that new styles of governance – based on citizen engagement – have the potential to re-establish public confidence in governments. Bertot, Jaeger & Grimes (2010) and Mergel (2013b) also claim that it would ensure transparency on the part of the government by integrating the voices of their citizens, shared through social media, in policymaking. This would represent a step beyond simple engagement to something more active and substantial, which could be characterised as empowerment.

Social media empowerment occurs when social media is used to facilitate forms of engagement in public affairs to empower voiceless citizens to express their views and agitate for change. It places individuals at the centre of a vast network, where they get an opportunity to present their demands and expectations (Leong et al. 2019). Social media groups are formed by providing personalised content in social media. There are times when many people get actively involved in social media issues while, at times, there is minimal participation (Darma & Aliyu 2018). Empowerment ensures that citizens do not face limitations in expressing their opinions, which often include religious and cultural issues.

According to Leong et al. (2019), empowering citizens is beneficial to the entire economy. Empowered



citizens can air their views on the unequal distribution of resources, which improves accountability by government officials. Social media is less costly as a means of facilitating this than any previous form, and minimal technical knowledge is required. The government should therefore seek to create empowering posts by forming social media movements that encourage citizens to participate. Empowered citizens can create collectivist groups, which in turn promotes better policy-making, accountability, community participation, and civic literacy in society (Leong et al. 2019).

Empowerment happens through the use of socio-political techniques such as participation, influence, and control (Leong et al. 2019). According to Leong et al. (2019), such techniques can eliminate barriers or promote social media participation by citizens. The pre-conditions include having citizens who are willing to participate in social media issues. Traditional socio-political participation means becoming involved in mass gatherings. With social media, citizens could be willing to participate in government processes to present their ideas. It is only through having societal problems at heart that people can participate fully in social media. However, resources also play a role in determining the level of social media engagement (Darma & Aliyu 2018). Social media can be used as a vehicle to provide a stronger connection between government and citizens. Many social media researchers claim that in numerous instances, social media platforms have become the favoured medium among citizens for engagement in government public affairs (Comunello, Mulargia, & Parisi 2016). There has been considerable research among media scholars emphasising the role of community managers and administrators in fostering citizens' online engagement and participation via social media, and also determining a more active involvement in social, economic and political issues (Del Mar Gálvez-Rodríguez et al. 2018). Social media platforms can be used as a tool by the government to connect with its citizens through means such as online polling, communication and interaction initiatives. It also acts as a platform where citizens can gather information that is otherwise unavailable (Ekman 2018; Papacharissi 2015; Tai 2015). In this context, social media users explore the affordances and constraints of different social media platforms and use them accordingly for sharing their activity (Lee 2018). Frequently, users understand that online engagement in public affairs is a

tool for empowerment (Breuer & Groshek 2014; Filer & Fredheim 2016). In short, social media offers a platform to share opinion (Comunello, Mulargia & Parisi 2016).

The salience of the idea of influence in the creation of engagement and empowerment in social media raises the question of who is able to exert such influence, and why and how they are able to do so. This is a question that has received extensive attention in the literature since the advent of social media, and the specific models of influence it makes possible. One of the prominent ways in which it has been understood is with reference to the phenomenon of celebrity.

## **2.4. Social Media Influencers within the Context of Saudi Arabia**

The term ‘celebrity’ has been defined in different ways in the literature on Social Media. Traditionally, a celebrity is defined as any personality who is well recognised among the populace. A person is generally regarded as a celebrity if s/he has done something noteworthy in her/his particular field of work (Abidin 2018; Khamis, Ang & Welling 2017; Marwick & Boyd 2011). VIPs, royalty, film stars, sportsmen/women are all examples of traditional celebrities.

Gabler (2001, p. 4) claims that celebrities are individuals who motivate people to follow their ‘stories’. He defines celebrities as ‘human entertainment’ (Gabler 2000). Gabler further claims that celebrity is the product of a process that includes a performer, an authentic personal life, a narrative of that life, publicity of that narrative, and fans who appreciate that narrative (Gabler 2001, p. 10). Rojek (2001, p. 10) claims that celebrity is the result of certain qualities attributed by media to certain individuals, such as charisma, authenticity, or inspiration.

Turner (2014, p.10) agrees that the ‘manufacture’ of celebrities is a ‘commercial strategy’ of media organisations. He reinforces the idea that media outlets have demonstrated their strength by producing

celebrities without any need to demonstrate the ‘individual’s ability, skill or extraordinariness as the precondition for public attention.’ Reality TV shows are the best examples of this process. Turner (2014) is of the view that the celebrity is actually a commodity – produced, traded and marketed by either media or publicity industries – and the main motive behind this is commercial and promotional. Abidin (2018, p. 5) similarly claims that it is the privilege of media outlets to groom any individual as a celebrity. She claims that such power of media is not limited to extraordinary people, but even ordinary people can be groomed irrespective of their achievements, skills or prominent positions in a society. These definitions of celebrity show that it is not a result of some quality inherently in the individual to whom it is attached, but rather arises from dynamic interactions between influential actors in an information network. In this sense, celebrity is structurally analogous to the idea of influence promoted by the structural theory of influence discussed above.

There is, however, evidence that a different model of celebrity has emerged as a result of social media. Senft (2008), after carrying out research on bedroom webcamming behaviour of camgirls and their audiences between 2000 and 2004, first used the term ‘micro-celebrity’. The camgirls were broadcasting themselves to the public to gather fame. They were relying on the digital media technologies to express themselves to the audience and get their attachment through emotional tactics. But these micro-celebrities were different from the traditional media (or entertainment) celebrities in many ways. The traditional celebrities usually keep a distance from their fans, but the micro-celebrities employ techniques of connection and interactive responses with their followers. The traditional celebrities are known for their skills or performance, but micro-celebrities demonstrated themselves as ‘real’ people having ‘real’ issues. Furthermore, micro-celebrities showed compulsion to their viewers, unlike traditional celebrities (Senft 2008).

Marwick & Boyd (2008) argue that micro-celebrity is a mindset and a set of practices including performed intimacy, authenticity and access, in which the audience is viewed as a fan base, and the micro-celebrity tries to maintain his or her popularity through careful presentation of self to the fans. Social media

influencers (SMIs), on the other hand, according to Abidin (2018, p. 1), 'are the epitome of internet celebrities, given that they make a living from being celebrities native to and on the internet'. She claims that SMIs are the 'product of performance and perception' (Abidin 2018, p. 19), and argues that the emergence of various influencers on the internet is the result of various dynamics, including popular social practices, cultural and social norms, and the structure of the technologies they utilize to mobilize their messages (Abidin 2018, p. 2).

Abidin also argues that digital technologies and social media platforms have provided opportunities to celebrities, celebrity-wannabes, and even audiences, to share their content with their followers by bypassing traditional media's structure of 'manufacturing fame and celebrity' (Abidin 2018, p. 9). Thus, it helped the users to share their experiences and expertise with their followers on *YouTube* etc., in a phenomenon that Turner (2014) calls 'DIY [Do It Yourself] celebrity'.

Highlighting elements that drive the interest of followers, whether positive or negative, through SMIs, according to Abidin (2018, p. 19), includes exclusivity, everydayness, exoticism, and exceptionalism. Freberg et al. (2011) similarly argue that, with the advent of social media, a new cadre of SMIs has emerged, and it includes people who are able to gather a large number of online followers.

The primary distinction being made in these discussions is between 'traditional celebrities', who have a substantial number of online followers due to their offline fame, and SMIs, who became famous by creating and sharing online content that resonates with sizeable audiences (Hearn & Schoenhoff 2017; Marwick & Boyd 2011). Click, Lee & Holladay (2013) claim that in order to be a SMI, it is mandatory to have several thousand followers or fans on one's social media account. However, as discussed above, the matter of influence results not merely from attracting followers, but also from influencing public opinion through blogs, tweets, and other social media outlets. There are various reasons for the success of SMIs.

Van Dijck (2013), while exploring various social media environments, clarified that SMIs fall into various categories and share varied content, including entertainment, education or even content that aims to influence their followers. Lipschultz (2017) observed that SMIs rely on their abilities to influence large numbers of people on social media through interactive and thought-provoking statements.

Mass media researchers are continually exploring the reasons why different SMIs post content online (Hearn & Schoenhoff 2016; Ingleton 2014; Kane 2010; Marwick & Boyd 2011). Khamis, Ang & Welling (2017) revealed that most SMIs actively use social media accounts for the purposes of self-promotion (Marshall 2010). This means that many SMIs hire social media specialists and ghost writers, who share content on their behalf in order to show their presence among the people they wish to influence and increase their popularity. Marwick & Boyd (2011) opine that celebrities who have pre-existing offline fame often use social media as an effective platform to promote their upcoming projects and encourage followers to support them. Other researchers claim that in some cases, SMIs use social media to contest the claims of their counterparts, and such posts often lead to direct confrontations (Albalawi & Sixsmith 2017). Shirky (2011) claims that these disputes are attention-seeking tricks employed by celebrities, having offline fame, to gain more attention and following, rather than arguing genuine social or political disputes over substantive issues.

While most SMIs share content that relates to their field of knowledge and status, others use their influential power to encourage their followers to support or rebel against specific issues that may be social, philanthropic, political or economic (Bennett 2014). Their motivations for doing this are to further social, political and economic ends they consider desirable (Bennett 2014), or to increase their own fame and celebrity (Shirky 2011).

Kaplan & Haenlein (2012) highlighted the role played by British celebrities in shaping public opinion through social media posts. Renowned British celebrities such as J.K. Rowling and Piers Morgan have been

using social media effectively to influence their audiences regarding their views on different social and political issues. Also, Lady Gaga has increasingly used social media to mobilize her followers by promoting philanthropic and activist causes (Bennett 2014; Jeffreys & Xu 2017).

The potential of SMIs to influence their followers emerges from a variety of sources. For instance, Fraser & Brown (2012) claim that the presence of influencers on social media platforms often acts as a motivator for people to create an account in order to follow them. Similarly, Chan & Zhang (2017) pointed out that more than 50% of new social media users follow their favourite influencers. Overall, researchers agree that SMIs, as well as traditional celebrities who use social media, have the ability to influence those who identify closely with their mediated images (Bennett 2014). Importantly, research also emphasizes that young voters use 'aspirational identification' and attachment to an influencer to negotiate their political messages, suggesting that influence is a complex process that depends on the perceived relationship between individual follower and influencer (Nisbett & DeWalt 2016).

Orellana-Rodriguez & Keane (2018) explain that social media represents a primary source of news and information, enabling information to travel in real time through large networks. Due to their influential power over a large number of followers, celebrities and SMIs have a greater responsibility when sharing online content (Bennett 2014). For instance, they could contribute to developing and spreading a preferential view of their own or other countries within and beyond national boundaries (Duvall & Heckemeyer 2018). This portrayal could be neutral or biased; it could be truthful or false. Its power, however, does not always depend upon its neutrality and truthfulness as, for instance, regimes such as Iran and Syria have used social media influence as a tool to spread negative propaganda against other states (Al-Saggaf & Simmons 2015).

Saudi Arabia has established itself as a significant market for social media, with the largest number of users of *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Instagram* and *Snapchat* in the entire Middle Eastern region. Researchers claim that

the majority of SMIs in Saudi Arabia are religious clerics, whose narratives are grounded on the conservative and religious history and culture of the country. This emphasizes and confirms the role of religion, and particularly Islam, in influencing the Saudi population in all aspects of life (Albalawi & Sixsmith 2017; Propkop 2003).

For instance, Dr Ayed Alqarni, a religious preacher, scholar, author and poet, has more than 19 million followers on *Twitter*, and is very popular among Muslims worldwide. He is best known for his popular self-help book, titled *Don't Be Sad*. His preaching of Islam on both radio and television made him a popular figure among Saudis and attracted many followers. Several other Saudi SMIs also belong to the religious realm, or have been identified as politicians, members of the Saudi royal family, and traditional celebrities from sports, entertainment, mass media and social media (Albalawi & Sixsmith 2017).

Research carried out by Ramsay & Fatany (2016) showed that the majority of Saudi SMIs use social media in a responsible way, respectful of their country's religious and cultural values. These SMIs, like their Middle Eastern counterparts, have made significant contributions in building a positive, realistic and authentic image of Saudi Arabia (Fatany 2012). They apply different strategies to draw the attention of their followers, such as appealing to patriotism and religious affiliations, a sense of community and values, humour and emotions, which includes entertaining their followers by posting satirical posts. These posts not only educate the local population, but in return also perpetuate a softer image of the Saudi kingdom across the globe.

According to Ramsay & Fatany (2016), Ahmad AlShugairi, a Saudi media figure and one of the most prominent Saudi SMIs, has revolutionised the notions of nationalism within the country. He is best known for hosting a program called *Khawatir* (meaning 'thoughts') between 2005 and 2015, which was a critical and commercial success within Saudi Arabia. The aim of the program was to transform Saudi Arabia by helping its different sectors – especially education – implement innovative ideas. The program was looking for an

appropriate way to stand against the corruption that the Arabic world is suffering from. It further helped the Saudi youth reform themselves to play a better role in developing their country. Researchers claim that AlShugairi is still breaking negative stereotypes about Saudi Arabia (Ramsay & Fatany 2016). He currently has over 18 million followers on *Twitter*, placing his feed within the top 100 most-followed accounts in the world.

There are other social media researchers who endorse the idea that Saudi SMIs are significantly promoting a positive image of the kingdom, as well as promoting social development within the country. Muna AbuSulayman, Saudi activist and entrepreneur, is one such influencer. She has been consistently named one of the 500 Most Influential Muslims in the world since 2009 for recognition of her work in various fields, including media development, empowerment of women, promoting leadership skills and education, and as an iconic Arab media personality. Janmohamed (2016) emphasizes that AbuSulayman is one of the many young Saudi SMIs who are actively involved in creating a positive image of the Saudi government, while publicising philanthropic activities. Saudi citizens also consider her a credible source of information.

Female SMIs have also benefited from social media platforms, and have transformed their image among followers. They have utilised these platforms to voice their opinions and concerns online (Agarwal, Lim, & Wigand 2012; Guta & Karolak 2015; Khalil & Storie 2020). For example, Nawal Al-Eid is an academic by profession, and her PhD thesis titled 'Women's Rights in the Light of the Prophet's Sunnah' won the Prince Naif International Prize for the Prophet's Sunnah in 2006 (Arshaid & Nour 2016). With nearly five million followers on *Twitter* alone, Al-Eid has been in the limelight for being vocal on several issues relating to politics and religion. In her unique way, she has contributed to the softer image of Saudi Arabia as a country in which women are increasingly able to voice their views. It can therefore be concluded, that in recent times, many Saudi SMIs are contributing to a more positive image of the country.

It appears that one feature that Saudi SMIs have in common is a strong focus on social issues. Social



researchers have argued that the huge success and popularity of *Twitter* in Saudi Arabia is due to the way it has provided a new space for public discussion, which was missing before (Winder 2014). The most influential SMIs tend to support this view, as they all use their platforms for discussing social, moral and religious topics, engaging with an audience that appears eager to participate in discussion about their society and how it is governed and structured. Followers appear to be engaged by content that responds to their situation and that gives them an opportunity to think about and discuss issues about their society. Given that Saudi Arabia is a very religious society, much of this kind of content is about religion, and religious content creates strong engagement on social media in the country.

The motivations of such SMIs therefore appear to have the potential to have a positive effect on the society. Saudi SMIs, in line with the argument put forward by Winder (2014), a political analyst focusing on Gulf countries, use their platforms for specific socio-political issues. In Saudi Arabia the SMIs with the most followers are clerics, royalty, socio-political advocates, and similar figures rather than celebrities like musicians or sports stars (Althiabi, 2017). The reason of this distinction is Saudi SMIs adhere to obedience to leaders, a general practice (*ta'at wali al-amr*) followed in Muslim society explains their positive content regards the government and the socio-political deliberation in Saudi Arabia (Sulaib, 2020). Therefore, religion is one of the factors that plays a crucial role in shaping Saudi SMIs personality and it also reflects the conservative nature of Saudi society as discussed earlier in the beginning of this chapter. However, Alotaibi (2019) argues that Saudi social media users including SMIs avoid discussing public affairs in a critical way on social media due to the media policy censorship which result in self-censorship as discussed earlier in Section 2.2. Hence, I believe that the Saudi SMIs cultural norms that stem from the religion values contributing to the positive tone in regard to socio-political issues.

SMIs are considered third-party endorsers who influence audience attitudes through tweets or posts on *Facebook* (Xu & Pratt 2018). The key characteristics, expertise, trustworthiness, likeability, similarity and familiarity make them relatable with their audience (Martensen, Brockenhuus- Schack & Zahid 2018). Freberg

et al. (2011) studied public perceptions of the personalities of SMIs and found that SMIs are considered smart, ambitious, productive and candid. According to Schaefer (2012), 'social proof' plays a vital role in making a person a legitimate expert in the field of social media. He insists that such social proof comes from the number of followers and likes, and conveys the authority and persuasive nature of SMIs. Likeability, on the other hand, refers to the receiver's affection for a SMI because of the SMI's social value, which is not limited to, but includes physical attractiveness, personality, behaviour, and social status. (Antil, Burton & Robinson 2012).

Balabanis & Chatzopoulou (2019) insist that physical attractiveness is important in the context of social media, as attractive bloggers have more likeability among their followers and have a more positive impact on attitude change. Similarity is perceived resemblance between the SMIs and their followers, and it results in trust and understanding, which ultimately results in persuasion (Lou & Yuan 2019). Familiarity refers to the knowledge of SMIs about a given subject through experience, which makes their followers more comfortable with the SMIs and thus results in persuasion.

A research study conducted by Freberg, Graham, Mcgaughey & Freberg (2010) revealed that SMIs were more trusted by their followers than traditional media. The study does not offer an explanation as to why this is the case. It also confirmed that the more the SMIs posted personal comments, the more seriously they were taken by their followers. In contrast, if their messages lacked personal content, then they were perceived as 'fake' and 'staged'. In this study, these five characteristics, expertise, trustworthiness, likeability, similarity and familiarity of SMIs are regarded to be important dimensions that help the SMIs to connect with their audience.

## **2.5. Summary**

In summary, this chapter has provided a review of the literature of relevance to the current study of SMIs and citizenship engagement in public affairs. After an introduction to the chapter, the history of state

management of media in the KSA was explained to clarify the relevant context of social media in the country's information ecosystem. Thereafter, the dynamics of social media in the Middle East region generally, and in Saudi Arabia specifically, were explored, with an emphasis on the role of social media in citizen engagement in public affairs in these contexts. Next, the literature on the topics of social media engagement, empowerment, and public affairs was reviewed. Finally, the literature on celebrities, micro- celebrities and SMIs was reviewed. The following chapter discusses the theoretical framework for the current study.

## **Chapter 3. Framing Theory & its Use in Constructing Narrative**

### **3.1. Introduction**

This study explores the framing of Saudi Vision 2030 by Saudi SMIs to their followers, in order to assess how they framed their social media discourse around Vision 2030. It further connects the SMIs and the framing of the discourse by evaluating the impact of the popularity of SMIs on the content. The study investigated what framing devices Saudi SMIs used to influence their followers about the role of the Saudi government in Vision 2030, and also sought to understand the SMIs' motivations for sharing the content. One specific focus was on identifying which framing devices of the discourse succeeded in drawing more engagement from followers on social media. Given this focus, this study employs Framing Theory as a theoretical framework to better understand the findings and develop the discussion of them.

This theoretical framework chapter is divided into seven sections. The introduction opens the discussion about the chapter and also informs the readers about the Framing Theory that has been employed in this research study. It also provides information about the structure of the chapter. The second section explains the origin of framing studies, explores the history of the theorisation, considers its connection to agenda-setting and priming, and finally provides a discussion on the concept of the frame and other associated terminologies. The next section considers the typology of frames, including media frame, individual frame and strong frame. The fourth section highlights the deductive and inductive methods of the frame's identification. The fifth section deliberates on the media and audience frames in the context of dependent and independent variables. The next section focuses on the different social media research in which Framing Theory has been employed as a theoretical framework. The seventh section justifies Framing Theory as a relevant theoretical framework for this research study – before concluding the chapter.

## 3.2. Framing Theory: Origin, Definitions and Debate

### 3.2.1. *Origin and Development of Framing Studies*

The idea of framing, as applied in this study, was first used by Bateson (1955; 1972), with reference to general principles of information processing. Bateson's (1972) insight was that any message is placed within interpretative frames to make sense of it. Such frames provide the receiver of the message 'instructions or aids in his attempt to understand the messages included within the frame' (Bateson 1972, p. 188). In Bateson's (1972) idea, the frame clarifies the message's scope of reference, guiding the receiver as to how it is to be understood. He elaborates the concept of the frame by using the analogy of a picture frame. Like a picture frame, an interpretative frame tries to organize people's perception of the content by influencing people as to what to include and what to exclude from their frame of reference when approaching a message. The frame has been approached in a similar way by Gitlin (1980), who insisted that frames are established through selection, emphasis and exclusion. Repeating Goffman's emphasis on the role of exclusion in framing, Entman argues that:

Frames select and call attention to particular aspects of the reality described, which logically means that frames simultaneously direct attention away from other aspects. Most frames are defined by what they omit as well as include, and the omissions of potential problem definitions, explanations, evaluations, and recommendations may be as critical as the inclusions in guiding the audience (1993, p.54).

In 1974, Erving Goffman elaborated Bateson's insight into a more widely applicable theoretical approach in the field of interpretive sociology. In Goffman's work, Framing Theory was an important component of a constructivist vision whereby people's interpretation of reality depends on their interactions with, and definitions of, the situations they face, which are in turn dependent on framing (Neuman et al. 1992). Goffman's idea of frame analysis has been widely applied by sociologists to investigate a broad range of topics, including social movements, poverty, education, and small group conversation (Wood et al. 2018, p. 249). It was also later adopted by mass communication researchers, with significant development in this area of

application in the 1990s (Ytreberg 2002). The application of the concept to studies of mass communication led to consideration of the links between Framing Theory and Agenda-setting Theory, and subsequently, fruitful methodological and conceptual unification of the two constructs (Ardevol-Abreu 2015, p. 428-9).

Given that the current study seeks to apply a theory developed in the context of mass media to the relatively novel context of social media, one of the contributions it will make is to explore the relevance and applicability of Framing Theory to the influence exercised, and engagement generated, by SMIs.

### ***3.2.2. Framing Theory: A Scholastic Discussion***

Any communication content that aims to inform or influence others needs to be produced in narrative or quasi-narrative form (Ardevol-Abreu 2015, p. 424). Tuchman (1978) argues that news from the mass media is like a window that limits the perception of reality of audience or readers by emphasising certain frames and ignoring others. Similarly, Reese (2001, p. 11) claims that frames, being part of the symbolic universe, allow researchers to ‘meaningfully structure the social world’. Given that the idea as applied in the current study derives from the mass media context, a significant proportion of its theorisation has focused on journalists and news media as central agents. Ardevol-Abreu (2015, p. 424) claims that the process of framing is always functional in the minds of journalists – who are trying to show the part of reality to their target audience by highlighting certain frames at the expense of others. It follows the decoding process on the part of the audience to understand the news report and the reality to which it refers. According to Entman (1993, p. 53), the purpose of a frame is ‘[to] highlight some bits of information about an item that is the subject of communication, thereby elevating them in salience ... An increase in salience enhances the probability that receivers will perceive the information, discern meaning and thus process it, and store it in memory’ (Entman 1993, p. 53).

Highlighting the potential of frames, Entman (1993, p. 52) reiterates that frames have the ability to define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments and suggest remedies. He further mentions that it is possible that a single sentence may perform more than one of these four framing functions – but equally it is possible that many sentences may perform none of the mentioned functions. He further testified that frames exist in the four locations including communicator, text, receiver and culture (Entman 1993, p. 52). Entman (1993, p. 57) identifies the relationship between the salient cluster of messages – frames – and the audience's schemata as a topic of great significance.

Despite appreciating the strengths of Framing Theory, Entman (1993) also notes the absence of a unified theory of framing that can explain the construction of frames, the manifestation of text in it, and the influence it leaves on the minds of people. Weaver (2007) also argues that the term 'frame' still lacks a clear conceptualisation, and that it has so far largely been approached via the interpretative schemas of an event, agenda-setting attributes of subjects and objects, and the influence of the message on people's attitudes and behaviour. Borah (2011) similarly notes the frequently contradictory definitions and theorisations of the notion of the frame in this context.

However, other scholars dispute the idea that the heterogeneous nature of framing represents a theoretical weakness. D'Angelo (2010) emphasizes that the variety of approaches to framing via different disciplines and theoretical models proves the complexity of the issue and that it must be regarded from various viewpoints. Reese (2007) similarly defends that the value of Framing Theory does not emerge from the possibility of a unified research paradigm, but rather its potential to foster multidisciplinary and methodologically diverse research, including empirical, interpretative, sociological, psychological, journalistic, academic and professional research.

It is difficult to say that any information emphasised by the communicator in a particular channel will influence the audience. It is also possible that the audience may not remember it, as it may not meet their belief systems and schemas. Ardevol-Abreu (2015, p. 430) claims that the individual's processing of information involves negotiation between his or her attitude, behaviour, ideology, and social skills. However, it does not mean that the importance of framing can be minimised, as Nelson, Clawson & Oxley (1997, p. 569) claim, 'frames influence opinions by stressing specific values, facts, and other considerations, endowing them with greater apparent relevance to the issue than they might appear to have under an alternative frame.' In this sense, Framing Theory appears to have inherent links with Agenda-setting Theory, another prominent theory of the way communication influences audiences. Given that Agenda-setting Theory focuses on the role of the mass media, and this study considers the different contexts of SMIs and social media, it was not considered suitable for the current study. Nevertheless, the importance of the theory in the development of Framing Theory, which this study does use, indicates that some exploration of Agenda-setting Theory is of value in clarifying the theoretical framework adopted in the current study. It is therefore considered briefly in the next section.

### ***3.2.3. Framing Theory and Agenda-setting***

Agenda-setting Theory has traditionally focused on the way the mass media set the agenda for public discourse by selecting and prioritising specific issues to disseminate and amplify (McCombs 2005). Prior to the advent of the internet and social media, mass media were the primary means of mass public communication, which gave them extensive influence in playing such a role, and therefore attracted extensive scholarly attention to the causes and effects of it (McCombs 2005). The general perception in the field had long been that the media set the agenda, and the public took up this direction, but social media appears to have changed these dynamics (Russell-Neuman et al. 2014). This insight into the ways in which social media have changed the role and effect of media agenda setting therefore calls for further attention to what the full range of such effects might be in a



wide range of contexts. This represents one of the theoretical contributions of the current study, which considers the role of Saudi social media in framing the government initiative Saudi Vision 2030.

Many researchers claim that Framing Theory and Agenda-setting Theory are closely tied concepts; both aim to draw the public attention to specific issues (Fairhurst & Sarr 1996), but framing takes the job forward by creating a frame for information. It is considered a conscious decision by any actor, who wants to report an event, incident or issue around the world to anyone. In this case, the actor, who wants to share ideas, acts as a gatekeeper and organizes and shares ideas (Fairhurst & Sarr 1996). Mass media scholars have argued for the equivalency of framing and the Agenda-setting Theory's second level. Indeed, they propose integrating both models (McCombs 2005), or argued that framing is the natural extension of Agenda-setting Theory (Ardevol-Abreu 2015, p. 426).

However, other researchers including Kim, Scheufele & Shanahan (2002) oppose the view of framing as a natural expansion of Agenda-setting Theory, as it would further complicate the loosely defined concepts. They believe that it is not about the prominence of attributes but the terminological and semantic differences that help in the creation of frames. The view has been supported by some other researchers including Price, Tewksbury & Powers (1997), who affirm that framing is beyond presentation and cannot be equated with agenda setting.

Zhou & Moy (2007) affirm that agenda-setting researchers attempt to assess how relevant certain topics that the media covers are compared with the public's perception of their relevance. Likewise, framing researchers draw comparisons between a topic's media framing and the frame that the public uses to interpret it. Ardevol-Abreu (2015, p. 427) also claims that the crux of Agenda-setting Theory is not how a certain issue/event gets reported. Rather, it is how much attention the media give it and the amount of time that people have been exposed to the coverage for. Framing, on the other hand, focuses on the description of events and the interpretive schema (Ardevol-Abreu 2015, p. 427). Scheufele & Tewksbury (2007) declare the conclusion of

the debate about the similarities or potential merger between the theories of agenda-setting and framing. They argue the current need is to construct a solid theory of the media's effects that has contributions from three perspectives: framing, agenda-setting, and priming – as then the researchers would be able to find the relationship between these different concepts.

#### **3.2.4. *Priming***

Psychologically, priming refers to 'a nonconscious process of memory characterised by an enhanced ability to recall or recognize a stimulus that one has previously been exposed to' (Dawson, Hartwig & Brimbal 2015). For example, if a subject was primed with the word 'doctor', then the reader would recognize the word 'nurse' immediately afterwards more quickly than s/he would if the word was 'bread', given that 'doctor' and 'nurse' share associations, so that one would prime the recall of the other (Ramscar 2016).

On other words, priming makes people more likely to interpret a given sign in a certain way if it is associated with any of a cluster of signs that have previously been established to convey some specific meaning, emotional tone, or other property. Priming is therefore the result of repeated exposure to a given stimulus, with this repetition establishing habits of response (Dawson, Hartwig & Brimbal 2015). The effect is theorised to arise from the fact that human thought and memory is organised on the basis of associative networks, with clusters of ideas arranged in webs of interrelated connections (Reisberg & Heuer 2007). In the example mentioned above, 'doctor' and 'nurse' would both be situated within a network connected with medicine, and would therefore be more closely linked, which would make the one prime the other more effectively than they would prime a word not as closely connected.

Applied to media communication and influence, priming refers to the way a given media narrative primes an audience to respond to specific terms or tropes in specific ways. For example, by consistently representing a specific group of people with particular terms or groups of terms, over time the media will prime

the audience to associate this group of people with the qualities associated with these terms (Avdagic & Savage 2019). In this sense, priming can be understood to be an effect of framing: consistent framing of a given issue will prime audiences to automatically interpret issues in specific ways (Moy, Tewksbury & Rinke 2016).

However, there is debate as to the fundamental relationship between framing, agenda setting, and priming. Given that priming refers to a disposition established by long-term, repeated exposure to specific frames and narratives, it is not considered to be appropriate for the current research, which adopted a cross-sectional design. Framing Theory, which considers the effect of individual messages in themselves, is therefore more appropriate.

### **3.3. Definitions of a Frame and Other Associated Terminologies**

Tannen & Wallat (1987, p. 206–7) define a frame as a ‘shared definition of a situation that emerges in concrete social interaction’. This raises the question as to the ontological status of frames: whether they are subjective, existing in the minds of the parties to the communication, or objectively present in the communication itself. Kinder & Sanders (1990, p. 74) argue that the idea of the frame conveys both meanings: initially it refers to the ‘internal structures of the mind that help individuals to order and give meaning’ – but it also refers to the ‘devices embedded in political discourse’ with an aim to achieve ‘favourable interpretation’. This concept was further elaborated by Chong & Druckman (2007, p. 106), who called these associated phenomena, emerging from the frame, as *frames in thought* and *frames in communication*.

Unsurprisingly, given the semiotic basis of the phenomenon, frames have been shown to be affected by a range of socio-cultural factors. For example, the frames that an individual adopts, or will be receptive to, have been shown to be linked to moral boundaries and the personal convictions of actors (Ardevol-Abreu 2015, p. 435), and socio-demographic factors such as social class, political inclination or culture (Edy & Meirick 2007). This insight has led to the development of a sub-category of framing studies focused on this area, termed

‘relational framing theory’ (McLaren et al. 2014).

In this view, framing is a contextually variable phenomenon, demonstrating differences according to linguistic, cultural, socio-political, and other relevant factors. This implies the importance of socio-culturally specific explorations of the phenomenon, such as carried out in the present study of the role of framing in Saudi social media. Consideration of these rhetorical and discursive dimensions of framing gives rise to other concepts related directly to framing and used by the different researchers interchangeably while explaining the process and product of framing. These include the model of frame, frame modelling, framing and frame, as discussed in the following sections.

### ***3.3.1. Frame Modelling and Framing***

Frame modelling can be described as developing a plan or a skill, while framing can be defined as the execution of this plan or skill (Wood et al. 2018, p. 251). It is also important to note that both frame modelling and framing fall in the category of the process of framing. Wood et al. (2018) argue that research on framing can investigate issues such as what the actors want to achieve with their frames, or how they assemble various frames. Similarly, they also argue that while exploring frame modelling, a researcher can investigate the creation of a model of a frame by various actors – besides understanding the factors influencing this process of framing (Wood et al. 2018, p. 254).

### ***3.3.2. Model of the Frame and the Frame***

The model of the frame is the knowledge or ability of an actor to compose or describe the frame (Entman 1993). It can be constructed deliberately (consciously) or even automatically (unconsciously) (Entman 1993). The deliberative model of a frame is the result of group discussion (Wood et al. 2018, p. 250). The deliberative model of a frame is evident in any coordinated and explicitly strategic approach to mass

communication, such as in contemporary public relations for business or political parties. It is significant to note that both the model of frame and the frame are the products of the process of framing.

Frames, on the other hand, ‘are the carefully crafted sets of beliefs and meanings facilitating collective action by bringing together individuals and organisations who share congruent or complementary beliefs and meanings’ (Snow et al. 1986, cited in Wood et al. 2018, p. 251). The above definition demonstrates that a frame is a passive object that aims to attract a large number of like-minded people. It means that a frame is like a banner held up by the organizer to ensure that most of the people have an understanding of it (Wood et al. 2018, p. 251). Questions of ongoing theoretical interest in this area include the reactions of different people to different kinds of frames, the model that can best explain the observed frame effects, and also the utilisation of different models by actors to produce a particular frame (Wood et al. 2018, p. 254). The current study seeks to contribute to these areas of inquiry.

### **3.4. Typology of Frames**

Mass media researchers have further classified framing into media and audience frames, and have also investigated the relations between them. The following are the different types of frames explored in the literature of framing.

#### **3.4.1. Media Frames**

Scheufele & Tewksbury (2007) use the term ‘macro-constructs’ for the frames that the media uses. Their intention with this is to reduce the complexity of issues and make them relevant to the audience’s needs. Ardevol-Abreu (2015) claims that media frames are the products of the utilisation of the media’s own resources, including audio, visual, or in written form. The basic aim is to organize the narrative of a story in a way that it highlights the ‘definition of the problem, an interpretation of the causes, a moral assessment and a

recommended treatment' (Entman 1993). Likewise, Gamson & Modigliani (1987, p. 143) define a media frame as a storyline that provides meaning to events, and informs readers generally about the issue. Gitlin (1980, p. 7) claims that media frames enable journalists to identify and classify the news quickly and then dispatch it to its readers via different channels. Gamson (1989) further claims that the media frame also includes the intent of the sender – although the motives of the sender can be hidden.

### ***3.4.2. Individual Frames***

Individual frames are based on the interpretation of reality. They can influence people's behaviours and attitudes significantly via a psychological process that sociological factors like culture influence in turn (Ardevol-Abreu 2015, p. 431). According to Entman (1993, p. 53), individual frames are 'mentally stored clusters of ideas that guide individuals' processing of information'.

### ***3.4.3. Strong Frames***

Chong & Druckman (2007) claim that frames differ in terms of their strength and influence. Ardevol-Abreu(2015, p. 431) claims that strength of frame can be assessed on the basis of its appeal for the individual or general public along with its persuasive power. Strength of frame is a qualitatively distinct property from individual frames and media frames: where the latter refers to the origin of the frame (whether from the media or the individual), the strength of the frame refers to its effectiveness for a specific actor or group. Therefore, both individual and media frames can be either strong or weak.

Researchers further claim that various factors contribute to a frame's strength, including frequency, accessibility and relevance. The first is defined as how often a certain frame is repeated: the more often, the greater its force. Accessibility is how much access the general public has to the frame's content, while relevance means that when the frame's content focuses on the issue's core, it is regarded as stronger than

contents covering peripheral issues (Chong & Druckman 2007).

### **3.5. Deductive and Inductive Methods of a Frame's Identification**

Communication researchers have mostly relied on deductive and inductive methods for the identification of frames in content. In deductive methods, the frames are predefined or derived from prior research. Many researchers claim that this is the best method to use in content analysis (Famulari 2020; Han, Sun & Lu 2017; Semetko & Valkenburg 2000). The other advantage of the deductive method is that it can be applied to large datasets.

The inductive approach, on the other hand, insists that data needs to be thoroughly studied and then frames should be extracted from it. Thus, it does not rely on the previously identified frames. The laborious and time-consuming nature of inductive identification of frames means that many scholars claim that it can be only applied to small datasets (D'Angelo & Kuypers 2010) as the detection process is very tiresome and also difficult to replicate (Ardevol-Abreu 2015, p. 433).

Van Gorp (2007) provides a number of recommendations for researchers seeking to implement inductive frame identification. The recommendations include the identification of framing devices or reasoning devices in the text, which include terms, metaphors, examples, descriptions, arguments and images, both explicit and implicit. Thus, both content analysis and discourse analysis research methods can be applied to it.

### **3.6. Media and Audience Frames: Dependent and Independent Variables**

Scheufele (1999) sought to address the theoretical fragmentation he identified as a problem in the area of framing studies. In addition to classifying studies into audience and media frames, researchers have further classified studies into those which use framing as an independent or dependent variable, and have examined the

different factors influencing it. On the part of the media, journalists' framing of an issue can be influenced by the various factors including social, organisational, individual or ideological factors (Shoemaker & Reese 1996; Tuchman 1978). Studies in which frames serve as an independent variable tend to investigate the effects of framing (Scheufele 1999, p. 107).

After examining media and audience frames as dependent and independent variables, Scheufele (1999) devised a four-cell typology comprising: 1) media frames as the dependent variable; 2) media frames as the independent variable; 3) individual frames as the dependent variable; 4) individual frames as the independent variable. Different prevalent focuses and approaches were identified in each of these areas.

For example, in type 1 studies, Shoemaker & Reese (1996) and Tuchman (1978) investigated the external and internal factors influencing journalists to frame particular news stories, finding that these include social norms and values, organisational pressures, pressure of an interest group, ideological or political inclination, and journalistic routines.

Type 2 and 3 studies investigated the correlation between media frames (as the independent variable) and audience frames (as the dependent variable) (Entman 1993; Delshad & Raymond 2013; Huang 2010; Pan & Kosicki 1993). These are characterised by largely theoretical statements, with relatively limited empirical data. Studies that focus on the correlation between individual frames as the dependent variable and media frames as the independent variable make valuable contributions to classic media studies Agenda-setting Theory, clarifying how mass media framing impacts individual framing (Gamson 1992; Iyengar 1987, 1989, 1991; Price Price, Tewksbury & Powers 1995).

Type 4 studies, in which individual frames are the independent variable, clarify how individual frames influence individual perception of issues. Snow & Benford (1992), Klanderman (1992), and Entman & Rojecki



(1993), and Klanderman (2004) have attempted to explain the relationship between the individual frames as the independent variable and media frames as the dependent variable.

One aim of the current study is to explore the extent to which such a typology and associated findings are applicable to SMIs. The majority of theorising of Framing Theory has focused on mass media, rather than social media. Given the increasing prominence of SMIs in public communication and coordination, some research is emerging to explore the applicability of these constructs in the novel context of social media, but much work remains to be done to clarify where the differences and similarities lie. This is one of the intended theoretical contributions of the current study.

### **3.7. Framing Theory and its Relevance to this Research**

A number of studies have demonstrated the applicability of Framing Theory to the analysis of social media-based communication, and the way it promotes engagement and influence via these channels. Significantly, however, it has also been found that frames appear to function differently in social media and traditional media, implying the need for further research to clarify the basis of these differences and how they affect communication in these various media. Also, as noted above, the socio-culturally specific nature of framing implies the need for studies that delimit specific socio-cultural contexts in considering the nature of the phenomenon in these varying contexts, as this study does.

Previous research, therefore, has established both the applicability of Framing Theory as a means of analysing the data gathered in this research, and also the way in which the study can make a theoretical contribution by developing an understanding of the role of frames in social media communication at the interface between public and private spheres in the context of Saudi Arabia.

Wasike (2013) researched the framing of news by the print and television social media editors (SMEs) on

*Twitter*, employing Content Analysis as a research method and deriving guidance from Framing Theory. The findings revealed that TV SMEs, in their interactions with their audience on *Twitter*, were more personal than print SMEs. The findings also demonstrate that although both print and TV SMEs emphasised technology and human interest frames, they downplayed the conflict and economic impact frames. The researcher suggests that the findings go against the established norms set by previous research studies that show mainstream news media as always emphasising conflict and economic frames.

Wasike (2011) also examined the top-ranked news articles posted on Reddit and Digg – social news sites – which also allow users to republish and vote on the news articles that they consider fit for reading. The researcher utilised Content Analysis as a research method and employed Framing Theory as a theoretical guide in this study. A total of 454 news articles were studied, and generic and issue-specific frames along with the most debated frames were collected from the data. The findings reveal that the human interest frame was the most common generic and debated frame, while science and technology was the most common issue-specific frame. It is also important to note that entertainment was the most commonly debated issue-specific frame.

Muralidharan et al. (2011) studied the *Facebook* posts and tweets of media and non-profit organisations during the earthquake relief efforts in Haiti. They employed the Content Analysis method in their research study to collect data, and utilised Framing Theory for guidance regarding the analysis of the data. The findings revealed that both media organisations and non-profit organisations were instrumental in disseminating information, but failed to utilize social media for two-way communication, which is fundamental to the efficacy of information sharing and engagement promotion efforts.

Valenzuela, Pina & Ramirez (2017) researched the behavioural effects of framing on social media users on *Facebook* and *Twitter*. They initially carried out Content Analysis of articles published in six Chilean outlets, and then undertook in-depth interviews with the digital journalists. The findings, guided by Framing Theory, revealed that across the platforms a morality frame increased news sharing, while a conflict frame decreased it.

Interestingly, the human interest frame had no significant impact on sharing, but economic consequences decreased sharing only on *Facebook*. The findings further confirm that news frames can have behavioural consequences, and that there are important differences between journalists and social media users in terms of preferred news frames.

Moscato (2016), while doing research on Canada's #IdleNoMore – a form of public affairs engagement originating from *Twitter* – in the traditional Canadian Press, utilised Qualitative Framing Analysis as a research method to identify the frames in the coverage, and Framing Theory as an analytical guide. The findings revealed that although one publication legitimised the role of social media by embracing the hashtag activism in one of its dimensions, the findings also revealed that the issue received mixed coverage, highlighting historical grievances, future challenges and opportunities for Canada's First Nation communities.

Hon (2015) researched the use of social media by the activist group Million Hoodies, utilising Textual Analysis and Framing Theory to study their *Facebook* posts. The findings revealed that the organisation mobilised social media users by using a diagnostic frame of justice, and identified racism as the root cause of the problem. The organisation further suggested the prognostic frames of solidarity among people. Million Hoodies also insisted, in its *Facebook* posts, that gun control can act as a remedy.

Such studies demonstrate the nascent application of Framing Theory to the analysis of public- influence communication via social media. However, as Russell-Neuman (2014) indicates, significant differences can be discerned in the way framing functions in differing media ecologies. Additionally, given the socio-cultural specificity of framing as an interpretative and semiotic phenomenon, the significant differences in the way framing functions in differing media ecologies calls for investigation with reference to the contexts established by specific communities of communicators (McLaren et al. 2014).

The researcher believes that Framing Theory is extremely relevant to the findings of this research study – investigating the framing of *Vision 2030* by Saudi SMIs – for many reasons. This research study identifies the frames in tweets of the Saudi SMIs. It also evaluates the correlation among SMIs, tweets and different tweeps. Framing Theory is identified as being of relevance due to eight specific reasons (all of which are touched on in the proceeding discussion).

First, Framing Theory provides a diverse and heterogenous approach, which has accommodated a range of relevant concepts that directly contribute to this research study. Second, the ability of the idea of ‘frame’ to account for both subjective and objective aspects of communication is also of value. That is, ‘frame’ has a double meaning, including the internal structure of a mind helping the individual/actor to order and give meaning, and also devices embedded in social discourse. The researcher also wants to approach the idea of frame according to the double focus mentioned in the previous sentence by focusing both on the intentions of the SMIs, and also the content of their tweets. This provides a means of assessing both frame in thought, and frame in communication.

Third, previous researchers have called for research on the purposes actors seek to achieve with the frames they employ. The researcher also wants to explore the same question by understanding the aims or objectives that Saudi SMIs want to achieve by tweeting about *Vision 2030*, which makes Framing Theory suitable theory for this study. This research study, similarly seeks to gauge the influence of the popularity of SMIs on the framing of the discourse.

Fifth, it has previously been debated that the frame is a passive object that attracts a large number of like-minded people. This research study by exploring tweets will also reveal the strength of different frames and the engagement they create on the part of followers of SMIs.

Sixth, researchers have previously debated whether media frames provide meaning to recent events and if they inform audiences about the intentions of the sender (actor). This research study, focusing on the tweets of the SMIs, will provide information about their priorities regarding *Vision 2030* and will also determine their motives in the findings of interviews.

Seventh, scholars have claimed that strong frames are those with greater strength and influence. They also endorse that idea that strong frames have a high frequency of repetition, accessibility and relevance. This research study – based on tweets – will provide information about the strong frames that motivated audience engagement.

### **3.8. Summary**

In summary, this chapter initially highlights the origin of framing studies along with the definitions and debates surrounding the frame and other associated terminologies including the model of the frame -- the frame modelling and framing. Further on, the typology of frames including media frame, individual frame and strong frame have been debated. Also, the inductive and deductive methods of a frame's identification have been elaborated in detail, along with the correlation between media and audience framing in the context of dependent and independent variables.

A scholastic discussion surrounding Framing Theory and its associated concepts – agenda-setting and priming – has been included in the chapter along with the selected social media research employing Framing Theory as a theoretical framework. The last section justifies the applicability of Framing Theory to this research study by connecting the theory to the discussion in the earlier parts of the chapter. The following chapter discusses the methodology to be adopted in the current study, on the basis of the research gap identified as a result of this review of the literature, and the methodological considerations raised by the topic and focus.

## **Chapter 4. Methodology**

### **4.1. Introduction**

This chapter presents the methods, sampling techniques, timeframes, data collection tools, and all other phenomena used in this research study for the collection and analysis of data. The chapter broadly follows a bipartite structure according to the multi-methods approach used: content analysis and in-depth interviews. This introduction outlines the scope, relevance and justification of the research methods utilised in this research study, and it also presents the research questions that the study will answer.

The second section considers the content analysis research method, debating its benefits and drawbacks while arguing its validity for investigating the research questions. This section will also consider how the tweets were collected, including the timeframe and unit of analysis, offering justifications for each. Finally, this section will consider how the tweets were analysed, including the categorisation of tweets, detailing the analysis methods and exploring the trustworthiness of the analysis. The third section of this methodology chapter will cover the in-depth interview research method. It will examine the use of interviews for investigating the research questions, in particular how useful they are in complementing the content analysis. The section will also consider the selection of participants, and then discuss the analysis of responses, including linguistic and ethical considerations. The chapter will conclude with an overview of the research methodology.

This research project aims to explore how the Saudi social media influencers (SMIs) framed their discourse around Saudi Vision 2030. It studies tweets published by twelve officially verified Saudi SMIs between 25 April 2016 and 26 June 2016, following up with interviews of the Saudi SMIs to gauge their motivations. In particular, this research study will explore the Saudi SMIs' coverage of Vision 2030 on Twitter from a thematic perspective, and identify the most prominent frames they adopted in discussing it on social media. Given the desire to obtain in-depth insights into the complex

linguistic and social phenomena involved, a qualitative approach was favoured. Qualitative content analysis is suitable when the research seeks to discover patterns in the content, rather than predict them (Neuendorf & Kumar 2016). It is also better suited than quantitative content analysis to explore and understand the effect of socio-cultural factors on the phenomena being considered (Neuendorf & Kumar 2016). Given that one of the intended contributions of the current study is to assess the applicability of framing theory in a novel socio-cultural context (that of KSA), this was assessed to be an important element, and weighed heavily in the decision to adopt a qualitative approach.

A multi-methods design has been utilised in this research project to answer all the questions raised in this study. It includes content analysis and semi-structured in-depth interviews. Multi-methods refer to the use of two or more methods from the same tradition (quantitative or qualitative) to address a research topic (Ary et al. 2018). Multi-methods approaches are suitable when the research is exploring a complex social phenomenon, which requires a diversity of approaches and techniques to fully grasp the richness of its manifestation (Gil-Garcia & Pardo 2006). Human language and communication are such complex social phenomena that they cannot be reduced to any single, schematised approach without crucial nuances of significance being lost (Binder & Smith 2013). As the research sought to explore the linguistic and communicative framing of Saudi Vision 2030 by SMIs on social media, a multi-methods approach that allowed for the consideration of a range of different aspects of the phenomena was judged to be appropriate. The specific methods adopted included content analysis and semi-structured interviews to facilitate the consideration of both the manifest and latent content of the social media engagements with Saudi Vision 2030 (through the content analysis), and also the perceptions, beliefs, values and opinions of the SMIs that informed these (through the semi-structured interviews).

The multi-methods design was therefore chosen for the way the various components of the design made it possible to address the topics of interest in the study: social media content engagement (content analysis) and

the perceptions, beliefs, values and opinions of the SMIs that informed these semi-structured interviews. The remainder of this chapter provides the rationale and justification for these methodological decisions in greater detail.

A study's methodology is designed to enable it to answer the research questions it intends to address (Bryman 2016). Due to the exploratory nature of this study, I chose more open-ended research questions, which allowed for more unexpected findings to be analysed (Treadwell 2015). The following are the four main research questions of this study:

- RQ1. How do the SMIs frame the Saudi government to their followers when tweeting about Vision 2030?
- RQ2. What framing devices are useful in generating engagement with the SMIs' followers?
- RQ3. What are the profile insights of the SMIs and their motivations for engaging with Vision 2030?
- RQ4. What are the implications of these framing approaches, and these motivations of SMIs, for an understanding of the nature of social media interactions pertaining to government initiatives in Saudi Arabia?

The methodology of the study was therefore designed to provide forms of data, and analysis of this data, that would enable me to answer these questions, and in this way to address the research gaps identified in the previous chapter. A multi-method approach was adopted, involving qualitative content analysis and in-depth interviews. The content analysis provided answers to RQ1 and RQ2, the interviews answered RQ3, and RQ4 was answered by both the content analysis and the interviews. The following section discusses the first of these, the qualitative content analysis.



## **4.2. Content Analysis Research Methods**

### ***4.2.1. The Use of Content Analysis in Investigating the Research Questions***

Content analysis is an established method for the analysis of large sets of linguistic data for the purpose of classifying them in terms of meaning, content, sentiment, and other characteristics. Content analysis can take either quantitative or qualitative forms. Quantitative content analysis is suitable when the research has predefined categories and dimensions, and it seeks to identify the prevalence of these in a given set of data (Creswell & Plano Clarke 2017). To do this, it applies a procedure involving “systematic counting and recording procedures to produce a quantitative description of the symbolic content in a text” (Neuman 2003, p. 311). Quantitative content analysis is therefore of value for providing a quantitative picture of the expression and prevalence of specific trends in a set of linguistic data, “delineating trends, patterns and absences” (Deacon et al. 2007, p. 119). However, as noted above, the research in this study needs to postulate specific dimensions or categories beforehand, and then analyse the data to assess the prevalence of these (Creswell & Clark 2007). This means that quantitative content analysis cannot be used for exploratory, interpretative, inductive analysis of the content (Creswell & Clark 2017). It provides a quantitative analysis of the expression of the predefined variables in the dataset (Deacon et al. 2007).

One of the greatest strengths of quantitative content analysis is its ability to manage large sets of data. The approach is amenable to computerisation, which significantly reduces the time and labour involved on the part of researchers in analysing the contents of the dataset (Stroobant 2019). Recent developments in information technology have produced software that is to some extent capable of carrying out qualitative analysis of linguistic and symbolic data. However, the reliability and accuracy of such programs remains questionable (Peters & Wester 2007), and for the inductive, interpretative kind of approach needed for the current study, which sought to identify latent meanings in a large body of linguistic data, human interpretation was judged a more reliable approach.

Computerisation means that very large sets of data can be analysed using quantitative content analysis. However, this aspect of the method is also the basis of one of its most significant limitations, which is that, “[b]y looking at aggregated meaning-making across texts, the method tends to skate over complex and varied processes of meaning-making within texts” (Deacon et al. 2007). This again renders the quantitative content analysis approach inappropriate in situations where the significance of specific details cannot be defined in advance, but needs to be established through inductive, interpretative approaches (Deacon et al. 2007).

In contrast, qualitative content analysis is appropriate when the research is exploratory, requiring an inductive, interpretative approach to establish which specific dimensions, categories, and other such characteristics are of significance, rather than identifying these beforehand, and setting out to identify their prevalence in the data (Schreier 2012). This makes qualitative content analysis a suitable approach for exploring an area of inquiry that has not been considered extensively in prior research, and which has a high likelihood of producing unexpected or surprising results (Bilić 2015; Lee 2012).

The current study seeks to apply such content analysis with framing theory to the social media data produced in response to Saudi Vision 2030 by Saudi SMIs. While this type of analysis has been conducted quite extensively in Western socio-cultural contexts, one of the primary areas of interest in the current study is whether the findings from those socio-cultural contexts are applicable in different contexts, such as that represented by Saudi Arabia. Therefore, this represents a new area of inquiry, for which it cannot simply be taken for granted that previous findings will be applicable. In light of this, a qualitative content analysis approach is judged to be more effective, in respect of its greater ability to adapt inductively to the nature of the data collected, rather than simply imposing pre-established frames on the data (Schreier 2012).

This focus of the study provides further justification for the methodological choices in other ways too. Qualitative content analysis is sometimes referred to as “ethnographic content analysis”, to refer to the deep

inductive engagement the approach makes possible with linguistic and symbolic data (Altheide & Schneider 2012). For this reason, qualitative content analysis is increasingly being adopted in the literature to analyse socio-cultural semiotic discourses, such as political content (Neuendorf & Kumar 2016). The distinguishing characteristics of qualitative content analysis are that it is inductive and interpretative, deriving analytical schemes from the data itself, rather than establishing these in advance (Scheier 2012). It is also situational and reflexive: it pays attention to context and the specificity of the symbolic apparatuses within these, and in this way recursively refines its own predicates and approach (Scheier 2012). This gives the approach emergent flexibility, insofar as it is able to adjust in response to insights derived in the course of the analysis (Neuendorf & Kumar 2016). All such characteristics proved of value in the context of the current study, as will be demonstrated in the analysis of the findings of the current study.

Qualitative content analysis proceeds by analysing a body of linguistic or other symbolic data and identifying prevalent dimensions present in the data (Schreier 2012). The dimensions are therefore derived inductively from the data itself, through close analysis of its lexicology, tropes, rhetorical devices, and other significant linguistic characteristics (Neuendorf & Kumar 2016). This is in contrast to quantitative content analysis approaches, which define coding categories beforehand, and then analyse the dataset to assess the relative prevalence of these categories in it. A useful characterisation is that qualitative content analysis proceeds via “subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying dimensions or patterns” (Hsieh & Shannon 2005, p. 1278). The relation between “subjective interpretation” and “systematic classification” identified here is central to qualitative content analysis. Being exploratory, it cannot avoid the need for subjective interpretation of data that is likely to represent novelties and unforeseen characteristics in a range of ways (Neuendorf & Kumar 2016). However, the use of systematic classification, and associated techniques, helps support the general trustworthiness of the approach generally (Schreier 2012). Matters relating to trustworthiness are discussed in the following section.

#### **4.2.2. *Trustworthiness and Reliability in Research***

Methodological theory has raised doubts regarding the value of applying criteria such as reliability and validity to qualitative research (Gergen 2014). The criteria of reliability and validity are ultimately derived from quantitative frameworks, where exact replicability of the research is possible (Gergen 2014). However, in a qualitative study such as this, which makes use of subjective interpretation, the exact replicability of the study will always necessarily be limited (Tracy 2012). Different individuals will respond to the same linguistic and symbolic data in slightly differing ways, place slightly differing emphases on various aspects of the data, and diverge in other subtle ways (Tracy 2012). Standard methodological measures associated with sampling and analysis go some way towards mitigating the potential threats posed by subjective bias. Nevertheless, they do not go so far as to ensure the claims of reliability and validity that quantitative methods would consider necessary (Tracy 2012). Given that inductive qualitative interpretative research is necessary in a range of contexts (as discussed above), methodological theorists have proposed an alternative set of criteria whereby such research can be evaluated: credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and authenticity (Yilmaz 2013). These are intended to provide qualitative equivalents for the criteria of validity, reliability, generalizability, and objectivity, which are applicable in the context of quantitative research (Yilmaz 2013).

Credibility is the ultimate goal of qualitative research, whereby the design of the study ensures that the results obtained provide a realistic picture of the phenomena under investigation. Credibility has been defined as “the confidence that can be placed in the truth of the research findings” (Macnee & McCabe 2008). Unlike quantitative research, where methodological choices are replicable, in subjective, interpretative, inductive research, analyses depend on the specific individuals carrying out the analysis. Therefore, credibility depends on the transferability, dependability and confirmability of the analysis.

Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings of the study can be transferred to other contexts (Fassinger & Morrow 2013). Transferability can therefore be seen to be roughly equivalent to the criterion of

generalisability as applied in quantitative research contexts (Yilmaz 2013). As with generalizability, transferability is often impacted by the sampling and other aspects of the research. For example, if the entire sample for a study is extensively homogenous in important ways, it is unlikely to be generalizable or transferable to other contexts that do not represent this kind of homogeneity. Such concerns do not undermine the credibility of the study, as long as the researcher does not seek to generalise or transfer findings to other such contexts, but instead acknowledges that limitation (Fassinger & Morrow 2013).

Confirmability refers to “the extent to which the findings of a study reflect the respondents’ opinions and experiences rather than the researchers’ biases, motivations, or interests” (Kyngäs, Kääriäinen & Elo 2020). It is therefore related to the extent to which the researcher’s subjective interpretation reflects the subjective meaning-phenomena being analysed, as these represent themselves to the participants themselves (Kyngäs, Kääriäinen & Elo 2020). Confirmability can therefore be seen to be a qualitative equivalent of the criterion of objectivity as applied in quantitative research (Yilmaz 2013). Of course, in a method that relies fundamentally on subjective interpretation, the criterion of objectivity is inapplicable. Therefore, qualitative content analysis seeks to adhere to the criterion of confirmability rather than objectivity (Yilmaz 2013).

Dependability refers to the reliability of the processes of data collection and analysis (Elo et al. 2014). Important considerations in this respect are the measures taken to minimize bias, the degree of reflexivity demonstrated by the researcher in reflecting on her/his own decisions, and the extent to which methodological decisions are made transparent and explicit in the writing up of the research (Kyngäs, Kääriäinen & Elo 2020). As Finley and Sheppard (2017) put it, “Dependability is defined as minimizing inconsistencies that can arise during data collection, largely related to the [researcher’s] skill and [methodological choices].” Dependability can therefore be seen as the qualitative equivalent of the criterion of reliability as applied in quantitative studies (Yilmaz 2013). Like reliability, it is concerned with ensuring that the procedures used for the execution of the study exclude the possibility of distortion of the results by bias, error and instability (Kyngäs, Kääriäinen & Elo 2020).

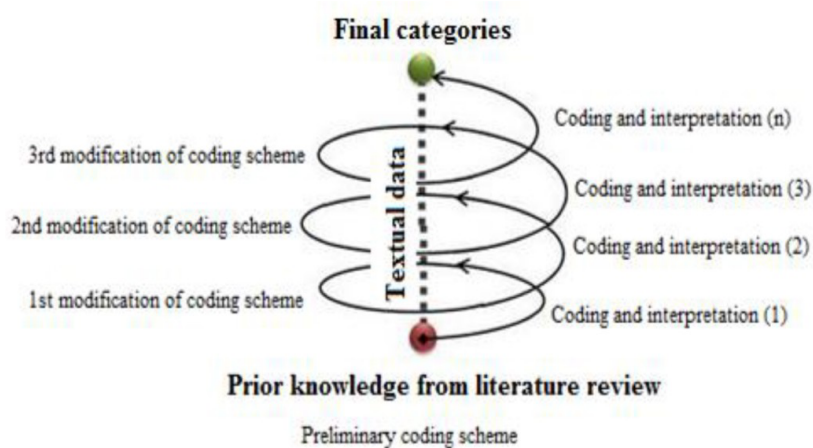
As Neuendorf and Kumar (2016) point out, qualitative and quantitative approaches need to be considered complementary, rather than mutually exclusive. Therefore, in the development of the methodology for this study, I drew on both categories of trustworthiness criteria discussed above: those primarily pertaining to quantitative studies, such as reliability and validity; and those with greater applicability to qualitative studies, such as dependability and confirmability. In the remainder of this methodology chapter, I use whichever set of criteria is more applicable to the specific methodological decision being discussed in the given context. Where notions of reliability and validity are more applicable, they are employed. In contrast, where the criteria are more applicable to certain specific qualitative inquiry contexts, then these are drawn on instead.

#### ***4.2.3. Measures to Ensure Trustworthiness and Reliability***

Given the differences in the aims and approaches of quantitative and qualitative content analysis discussed above, there are important differences in the methods they respectively adopt for sampling. Quantitative content analysis tends to adopt probability sampling approaches, for the sake of ensuring external validity (Neuendorf & Kumar 2016). In contrast, qualitative content analysis approaches can employ purposive sampling procedures that seek data that is most likely to cast light on the topics under investigation (Neuendorf & Kumar 2016).

In addition, the interpretative and inductive nature of qualitative content analysis implies the need for a more reflexive, recursive, evolving process of data analysis (Neuendorf & Kumar 2016). Inductive interpretation of the kind carried out in qualitative content analysis follows the hermeneutic dialectic, whereby analysis of the actual data informs the theoretical scheme through which it is approached. The influence on this theoretical scheme in turn shapes how the researcher approaches the actual data (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz 2017). This establishes what is referred to as the “hermeneutic spiral” (Error! Reference source not found. 3 below), and creates a situation of constant reflection between close analysis of the data and the overarching theoretical

scheme, whereby each recursively informs and refines the other (McKemmish et al.2012). A similar approach is used in hybrid quantitative–qualitative content analysis, which similarly applies a recursive refinement of the relationship between the overarching dimensions and the underpinning data in order to enhance the coding in an iterative manner (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane 2006). In practice, this implies the need for a recursive process of analysis: the thematic analysis of the data needs to be carried out in a series of stages, with inductive reflection on the data itself shaping thematic schemata, and these thematic schemata then informing subsequent approaches to the data again (McKemmish et al. 2012).



**Figure 3: Hermeneutic spiral for qualitative content analysis (Nair 2018).**

A process such as this implies that the validity and reliability of a qualitative content analysis approach is dependent on the researcher (Neuendorf & Kumar 2016). As noted above, the presence of a certain degree of subjective interpretation is unavoidable in such a manual, inductive interpretative process (Schreier 2012). Adherence to the hermeneutic circle, and its employment in a recursive way, helps to mitigate the threat such subjectivity can pose to the trustworthiness of the research (McKemmish et al. 2012). The researcher’s subjective response to the specificities of the data leads to the construction of an overarching thematic view, and the validity and reliability of the thematic view can then be evaluated by considering it in relation to the specific data again (Nair 2018). Doing this repeatedly allows for the steady refinement of the interpretation (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane 2006; Nair 2018).

The involvement of other individuals in the interpretative process can also make use of intercoder reliability as a means of assessing and establishing the reliability of the analysis (Bergman 2010). For example, the raw data can be analysed by two separate individuals, and their respective interpretations can be compared and contrasted to identify where large divergences occur, as these would be likely to be areas disproportionately affected by subjective idiosyncrasy (Cascio et al. 2019). Where discussion of such divergences is unable to resolve them, the use of a third coder can help identify ways in which consistency can be ensured (Cascio et al. 2019). The recursive nature of the hermeneutic process means that such intercoder reliability can be drawn on at a number of stages of the analysis (Bergman 2010). Recursive use of intercoder reliability, and especially the use of different coders at different stages, increasingly mitigates any threats to trustworthiness and dependability posed by the subjective nature of the interpretation carried out (Cascio et al. 2019).

Intercoder agreement is achieved in different ways in inductive qualitative content analysis than it is in deductive and quantitative content analysis (Cascio et al. 2019). In the latter, as the codes are established prior to the analysis of the data, intercoder agreement depends on whether the various coders are applying the established codes in a consistent way (Cascio et al. 2019). However, in the former, the codes themselves are generated in the process of the iterative analysis itself, meaning that such a model of intercoder agreement is inapplicable (Cascio et al. 2019). Instead, intercoder agreement in such inductive qualitative content analysis depends on discussion between independent coders to identify areas of potential divergence, investigate reasons for them, and adjust interpretations to account for these (Cascio et al. 2019). The iterative, reflexive, recursive nature of inductive qualitative content analysis means that such discussion can be carried out at a series of stages in the course of the analysis of the data, and by several different individuals, providing scope for relatively extensive use of this form of intercoder agreement to enhance the trustworthiness of the data (Cascio et al. 2019).



Explicit detailing of the steps taken in the process of data analysis makes it possible for independent parties to carry out their own interpretation of the data, and confirm for themselves the extent to which the reported findings will represent the trends sought in the data itself (Farrelly & Linse 2019; Hasson & Keeney 2011). Credibility can be ensured by asking participants to check the final findings to confirm whether they accurately represent their views (van Zoonen & van der Meer 2015). Pilot studies help prevent the possibility of unforeseen errors or omissions in the study design that may undermine the trustworthiness of the data collection or analysis (Hazi & Maldoan 2015). All such applicable measures were taken in the course of the current study, helping ensure that the results are trustworthy. These are discussed in detail in the following sections, beginning with sampling.

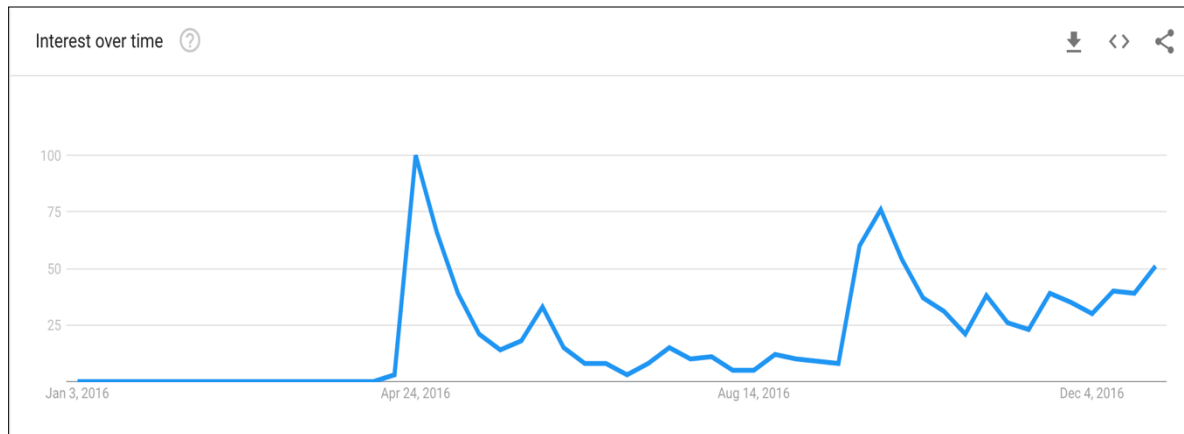
#### ***4.2.4. Data Collection: Collecting the Research Sample of Tweets***

In this research study, a purposive sampling was conducted. A purposive sample, which is often dubbed a ‘judgemental’ or ‘expert’ sample, aims to produce a sample that is logically representative of the population; it is a type of non-probability sample. Purposive sampling relies on applying expert knowledge to select a representative cross-section of the population in a non-random manner. It is particularly useful for acquiring information-rich cases in instances where resources may be limited (Patton 2014). Twitter is particularly suited to purposive sampling for its ability to facilitate screening, which allows researchers to quickly and easily identify respondents who participate in the particular area of study (Sibona et al. 2020). Krippendorff (2018, p. 119) also notes that purposive sampling is particularly suited for selecting all textual units relevant to the question at hand, and that by following a conceptual hierarchy it is possible to systematically lower the number of units considered for analysis. Given that the data collected was all in the public domain, and it was judged not to present any specific risk to any individuals, it was not deemed necessary to take any specific ethical measures in its collection, handling or discussion (Stevens, O’Donnell & Williams 2015).

For content analysis of tweets related to Saudi Vision 2030, the data was collected through a Coding Sheet I designed in Arabic. As the selected sample of tweets was in Arabic, it was more feasible to design the codingsheet in Arabic and then collect data on the basis of it.

This study conducted the purposive sampling through the identification and selection of tweets of the Saudi SMIs under set criteria. Only tweets that were issued by the Saudi SMIs from their officially verified Twitter accounts were considered for this study, and also those directly addressed to the hashtag issued by the Saudi government [#Saudi\_vision\_2030] in the period 25 April 2016 to 26 June 2016. Hansen et al. (1998, p. 101) and Hansen and Machin (2018, p. 102) claim that, while doing content analysis, the time period of event-specific coverage is often self-defined or “naturally” defined by the events themselves, and this is the case with this study. Likewise, Wimmer and Dominick (2014, p. 166) claim that the time period to be examined should be sufficiently long so that the phenomenon under study has ample chance to occur, and that the sampling will be sufficiently representative of the population.

The basic reason for choosing this period was that it was a peak time for the hashtag #Saudi\_vision\_2030 as it engaged more tweeps and Saudi SMIs. It is also significant to mention that the Saudi government first announced details about the Vision 2030 with the public on 25 April 2016. Thus, it is necessary to consider the responses of Saudi SMIs to #Saudi\_vision\_2030 from the day it was officially launched, and then study it for the consecutive two months, until 26 June 2016, using the purposive sampling approach. The aim of studying it for two consecutive months was not to miss any important discussion surrounding Vision 2030. A snapshot of Google trends also validates that the first two months were highly engaging months for users. It can be seen below.



**Figure 4: Snapshot of Google Trends.**

It was further decided to select only those tweets that debate the role of government in Saudi Vision 2030. Wimmer and Dominick (2014) and Hansen and Machin (2018, p. 103) confirm that the specification of the topic area should be logically consistent with the research question, and should be related to the goalsof the study.

The hashtag #Saudi\_vision\_2030 was chosen considering it was announced by the Saudi government from their official account @Saudivision2030, created in 2016 and dedicated to promoting Vision 2030. Since then, many tweeps have been tweeting heavily about Vision 2030, including Saudi SMIs. Only tweetsshared by Saudi SMIs to the hashtag #Saudi\_vision\_2030 were selected, scrutinised and analysed in this research study. The general public and SMIs in other parts of the world – including other countries in MiddleEast –contributing to the hashtag #Saudi\_vision\_2030 were excluded from the study. If the Saudi SMIs contributed to the Vision 2030 with another hashtag, then they were also excluded from the study. Furthermore, only those tweets that were relevant to the Saudi Vision 2030 were selected for this study.

I initially extracted tweets by using the Twitter API, which is a popular research tool for excerpting tweets from Twitter (Gaffney & Puschmann 2014). Surprisingly, this attempt did not yield a high enough number of tweets indexed with #Saudi\_vision\_2030. It was revealed that the 2016 tweets had been moved to

Twitter's archives. Twitter, in its policy statement, confirmed that the archive is available only for tweets that were posted within the week.

Following the recommendations of several social media researchers (Alkhawaja, Ibrahim & Jaradat 2020; Chahal & Kapur 2018; Khan & Thakur 2018), I enlisted the assistance of Podargos Technologies Inc., a Canadian-based data mining company. After providing Podargos with the pertinent user attributes discussed above (such as "text", "created\_at", "retweet\_count", "favorite\_count"), approximately 4,200 tweets matched with the given set of criteria.

After the search of tweets identified 4,200 tweets that met the inclusion criterion of being written by official Saudi SMIs in the mentioned period, the tweets were further scrutinised, and 1,814 tweets were excluded from the study for not being relevant to Vision 2030. Thus, only 2,386 tweets met the criteria for study. Further, it is important to mention that all of the 2,386 tweets were written in Arabic and were shared by the 719 SMIs (this translation is discussed in a subsequent section). Error! Reference source not found. below shows the top fourteen SMIs to use the hashtag #Saudi\_vision\_2030 in the selected period.

**Table 1: Contribution of Saudi SMIs to the #Saudi\_vision\_2030.**

S. No	Name of SMI	Number of Tweets Tweeted	S. No	Name of SMI	Number of Tweets Tweeted
1	Mohammes Alsuwayed @Mo_Alsuwayed	72	8	Ibrahim Basha @ibrahimbasha	23
2	Barjas albarjas @Barjasbh	41	9	Khalid Albabtain @ALBABTAINK	23
3	Bader Mohammed Alrajhi @BANDR_ALRAJHI	40	10	Ali Almaey @aalmaey	23
4	Omar Alnashwan @o_alnashwan	36	11	Khalid Ashaerah @KHALID_ASHAERAH	22
5	Moteb Alawwad @motabalawwd	25	12	Ahmed Alshehri @Mechanic1553	19
6	Hamoud AlShammari @Hamoud_shammari	24	13	Tariq Alnofal @TARIQALNOFAL	19
7	Bander otyf @b_otyf	24	14	Abdullah Alhajri @AbdullahHajri	19

#### **4.2.5. Data Analysis: Analysing the Tweets**

As discussed above, the data collected was analysed in a recursive manner suitable for the inductive, qualitative analysis carried out in this study (Neuendorf & Kumar 2016). The following discussion of the analysis is therefore structured according to the stages of this analysis. The first subsection details the initial stage of analysis, which involved the broad categorisation of the tweets to identify substantive emphasis dimensions dealt with. The second subsection details the subsequent stages of analysis, which refined this initial categorization into the frames ultimately arrived at.

### *Analysis Stage 1: Categorising the Tweets*

For the initial analysis of tweets related to Saudi Vision 2030, the measurable unit of analysis adopted was the “concept unit”, where each tweet was analysed separately and classified into emphasis dimensions according to the ideas it contained. Berger (2018, p. 91) claims that an operational definition guides the researcher in how to measure something, and thus forces the researcher to explain how they understand or interpret a concept. While collecting the data from 2,386 tweets, the following terms were used in the coding sheet and were operationally defined by the researcher. An effort was made to give a clear definition of all the variables utilised in this research study to avoid ambiguity or contradiction.

As noted above, the content analysis proceeded via an inductive approach, whereby codes were derived from the data, and assessed via intercoder agreement. The process of this categorisation produced seventeen emphasis dimensions present in the data: Supplications; Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman and the Monarchy; the Economy; Employment; Oil; Tourism; Investment; Development; Policy; Housing; Education; Entertainment and Culture; Empowering Women; Transparency; Youth; Media; and International Relations. Subsequent refinement of this categorisation subsumed the Investment and Development categories beneath the ‘Economy’ category, producing fifteen emphasis dimensions. These are provided in **Table 2** below.

**Table 2: Emphasis dimensions associated with Vision 2030**

Dimension	Description
Supplications	These include tweets asking for help from God/Allah in the form of supplications.
Education	Tweets related to education (included the terms education, schools or students, either independently or integrated into other subjects).
Youth	Tweets dealing with youth as an age group and not as a stage of life for individual persons.
Empowering Women	Tweets dealing with women's rights and liberties, particularly concerning employment, education and driving.
Housing	Tweets dealing with terms such as real estate, housing, rent or cities.
Entertainment and Culture	Tweets related to entertainment or culture (terms included movie, theatre, museum).
Economy	Tweets that dealt with aspects related to the Saudi economy generally or any economic sector-related aspect, and not as a description of a person or place.
I. Oil	Tweets about oil or Aramco, a Saudi Arabian national petroleum and natural gas company, with significant contributions to the Saudi economy.
II. Employment	Tweets tackling issues about employment (unemployment and the unemployed, or employment opportunities).
III. Tourism	Tweets that included the terms 'tourism' or 'archaeological place in the kingdom' in addition to the mention of Hajj or Umrah, since these are two religious events that attract a significant number of pilgrims in the region.
Development	Tweets that mentioned development and improving the Saudi production in different sectors across the country.
Transparency	Tweets that stressed the need to apply the accountability, demanded clarity and transparency in the behaviour of government members, or demanded accountability of the officials in some matters.
Policy	Tweets dealing with issues about the role of the government, the senior leaders of the country, or the king and his deputies in achieving the Vision.
Media	Tweets mentioning the media coverage (TV, international or national newspapers, radio) of the Vision events, criticism of the media for under-coverage of certain issues, and suggestions that the media should cover more.
International Relations	Tweets mentioning the impact of Saudi Vision 2030 on Saudi foreign policy and international affairs.

The data were also categorised according to engagement (likes and retweets) and valence (positive, negative and neutral). Engagement was assessed on the basis of the number of likes and retweets. Valence was judged qualitatively on the basis of the manifest or latent emotional tone of the content. Following Gasparet al. (2016), entire tweets were considered, rather than only specific terms, to ensure that the full complexity of a given tweet was taken into account. Manual sentiment analysis was preferred over automated sentiment analysis given the higher reliability of the former (Borromeo & Toyama 2015). King's (2013) typology of negative and positive emotions was used to guide classification. Tweets that expressed optimism, or the desire for positive outcomes, for Saudi Vision 2030; positive affiliations with Saudi identity and the Saudi nation; commendations regarding the Vision or those involved in it; and other tweets with positive content and tone, were judged to be positively valenced. Tweets that expressed scepticism regarding the potential of Saudi Vision 2030 to achieve its goals; criticism of current or past states of affairs or people; dissatisfaction, anger, disappointment; and other tweets with negative content or tone were judged to be negatively valenced.

Tweets that conveyed information without any clear emotionally inflected assessment of them were judged to be neutrally valenced. Intercoder discussion of these assessments allowed for initial consensus on this analysis to be achieved, and it was further refined in the subsequent iterations of analysis (see Coding Scheme 2 in Error! Reference source not found.3 below). Moreover, to test intercoder reliability of the coding sheet applied in this research study, I requested two trained coders who performed the coding independently of each other. Both of them were fluent in Arabic and had a journalism background. Intercoder reliability, as measured by Cohen's kappa, was high, and ranged from .83 to .90 (equal to 83% to 90%). Differences between coders were resolved through discussion.



**Table 3: Coding Scheme 2.**

<b>Coding Scheme 2</b>			
<b>Type of account</b>	Male / female		Verified (Y / N)
<b>Engagement</b>	Likes	Retweets	No. of followers
<b>Sentiment</b>	Positive	Negative	Neutral

*Analysis Stage 2: Identifying Frames*

With the conceptual categories of the tweets having been established in the first stage of the analysis, alongwith valences and engagement metrics, the second stage of the analysis manually set about identifying the different frames employed in the SMIs' discussion of these conceptual categories. The second stage involved a deeper interpretation of the latent content, which would provide insight into the frames being adopted. To achieve this, the analysis sought to identify and explore linguistic and symbolic resources that provided information on the latent content at work in the data being explored. For example, I considered tropes, metaphors, rhetorical devices, and terms bearing specific significant connotations, noteworthy or frequently repeated syntactical and grammatical structures, and other characteristics of this type to discern the way in which the SMIs were framing the manifest content about which they were tweeting.

Part of a broader recursive process, this second stage of the analysis itself followed an internally adopted recursive process, involving the contribution of individuals in addition to myself. I formulated a series of frames, and these were then considered, with reference to the data being analysed, by the supervisors of the current study, two academics working in related fields. Through an iterative process of refinement of the frames, followed by reflection and feedback on these frames by the two independent academics, the theoretical articulation of the superordinate category of the frames discerned in the data analysis was recursively developed to an increasing level of dependability and confirmability.

This approach drew on the idea of the recursive process discussed above (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane 2006; McKemmish et al. 2012), as well as making use of multiple coders to mitigate the threats of subjective bias, idiosyncrasy, partiality, and related threats that could arise. This involved an application of the hermeneutic approach, whereby the raw data itself was considered in respect of superordinate theoretical frames, which were then in turn evaluated with recursive reference to the raw data, and so on and so forth, until multiple individuals felt sufficiently confident that the theoretical accounts provided an accurate picture of the data being accounted for (McKemmish et al. 2012). This helped enhance the trustworthiness of the findings by allowing for a systematic refinement of the analysis of the data being provided. The additional application of multiple analysts in this process further mitigated the risk of bias and subjective idiosyncrasy, thus enhancing the trustworthiness of the study (Cascio et al. 2019). The result of the second stage of analysis was a set of seven frames that were judged to represent the most prominent and important ways in which the SMIs framed Saudi Vision 2030 to their followers.

### **4.3. In-Depth Interview Research Methods**

For the purpose of further building an argument on the data, collected from the content analysis of 2,386 tweets, I decided to conduct semi-structured in-depth interviews with Saudi SMIs. For conducting these interviews, the tool of data collection was a questionnaire that I designed. It contained ten questions, including three close-ended (multiple choice) questions and seven open-ended questions. It is significant to mention that the questions provided below were asked of each interviewee (SMI) interviewed in this research study.

#### **4.3.1. Interview guide**

*What framing strategies do social media influencers use to influence how their followers view the role of the Saudi government in Vision 2030?*

1. What was your personal opinion of Vision 2030 when it was announced in 2016?
2. Which of the following words best describe your personal opinion of Vision 2030?
  - Approval
  - Disapproval
  - Scepticism
  - Curiosity
  - Neutral opinion
  - None of these
3. How strong was your opinion about Vision 2030?
  - Not strong at all
  - Moderately strong
  - Very strong
4. What aspect (or dimension) of Vision 2030 did you find the most engaging, or important?
5. Overall, what message did you want to convey to your followers about Vision 2030?
6. Were there any particular aspects (or dimensions) of Vision 2030 that you wanted to draw attention to/emphasize in your tweets? If yes, which aspects (or dimensions)?
7. Overall, what kind of opinion did you mean to express to your followers about Saudi Vision 2030?
  - Approval
  - Disapproval
  - Scepticism
  - Curiosity
  - Neutral opinion
  - None of these

*What are the motivators that drive social media influencers to frame the government to their followers when tweeting about #Saudi\_Vision\_2030?*

1. What motivated you to express your opinion about Saudi Vision 2030?
2. Why do you think it's important for influencers like you to tweet about Saudi Vision 2030?
3. What were you hoping to achieve by tweeting about Saudi Vision 2030?

#### ***4.3.2. The Use of Interviews in Investigating RQ3***

While content analysis was a reliable method for obtaining the information needed to answer RQ1 and RQ2, it was not suitable for providing insight into SMIs' beliefs, opinions and intentions, which was needed to answer RQ3 and RQ4. Hansen and Machin (2018, pp. 229–300) note that for understanding the reasons behind beliefs, attitudes and behaviour contained within media, it is necessary to support an approach such as content analysis with a qualitative approach, such as interviews. Thus, the interview represents the best tool to gauge the personal opinions of Saudi SMIs. According to Brennen (2017), an interview is a “focused, purposeful conversation” held face-to-face, online, or via telephone between one interviewer and one or several interviewees (or respondents) with the intention of gaining information that can help answer research questions. Boyce and Neale (2006, p. 3) define the in-depth research interview as “a qualitative research technique that involves conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on a particular idea, program, or situation.”

Interviews have several advantages. Wimmer and Dominick (2014, p. 142) suggest that the most significant advantage of the interview as a companion to other forms of content analysis is the considerable amount of detail that it provides. Other benefits according to Berger (2018, p. 162) are that interviews can be recorded and allow details to be analysed at length; they provide information on thoughts and perspectives that cannot be gained any other way, such as by observation; and they can ask probing questions and obtain information that an informant may not believe is of value and so might consequently be excluded from a

survey. It is widely claimed that interviews, as a research tool, help researchers to understand the data better by getting closer to it to understand the reasons for coverage (Berger 2018). In an interview situation, the interviewer can “probe in a nonthreatening manner” to “reveal buried emotions”, which is particularly useful in analysing Twitter communication where characters are limited, and emotion and true opinion are not necessarily expressed openly (Lindlof & Taylor 2017, ch. 7). It is also an established fact that interviews are usually preferred and conducted by researchers when they have preliminary findings in hand (Gill et al. 2008).

The same holds true in this research study. Initially I studied the content of tweets by applying content analysis. Once the data was collected through a coding sheet, and the preliminary results were compiled, questions for interviews with SMIs were designed to better understand the findings. Thus, the interviews in this research project will reinforce and cement the dimensions and meanings that emerged in the first phase of the analysis. This is a suitable method because, as Lindlof and Taylor (2017) explain, interviews can verify, validate or comment on data that has been obtained from other sources, and they are able to help achieve efficiency in data collection. Importantly, however, in-depth interviews are also able to provide greater freedom to explore particular issues and produce information in greater detail; they are, as Hansen and Machin (2018, p. 58) write, “very good at throwing up unexpected or unforeseen issues” and consequently a good complement to content analysis.

#### ***4.3.3. Data Collection: Selecting the Participants/Sample of Interviewees (SMIs)***

As Hansen and Machin (2018, pp. 32-35) explain, it is essential for academic research to be transparent and ethical, to follow an institutional or professional code of practice, and being subject to review by the relevant ethics committee. This process should consider “consent, confidentiality, privacy, coercion/freedom, deception or harm to individuals”. Accordingly, during the conduct of this research study, The RMIT University’s guideline on ethics guided the researcher. Furthermore, before the data-gathering process, formal approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of RMIT University.

It was ensured that the participants of the study voluntarily agreed with the terms and conditions, and they were also informed that they could freely withdraw at any point during the data collection process. Given that the scope of the study is concerned with the SMIs and their tweets during the Saudi government initiative announcement. Before conducting the interview, I told the participants about the focus of the study and its questions. Most of the interviewees were named by using pseudonyms and codes. Additionally, all the participants signed the Consent Form and Participant Information Sheet before the start of interviews. The data were stored in a protected closet and will be destroyed after the completion of the study.

While there are no ‘a priori’ rules for determining a sample size (Lindlof & Taylor 2017, pp. 151-2), scholars claim that interviews should be conducted with enough participants so that it can enable researchers to place a strong and valid opinion on the data. While theoretical saturation is a commonly used justification for a stated sample size (Saunders et al. 2018; Emmel 2013), wherein sample sizes are increased until no new understanding can be gained, it is important to consider what can be done with the available resources and time (Patton 2014). Sandelowski (1995, p. 183) suggests that the sample size of qualitative interviews should be large enough to unearth “new and richly textured understanding” about an issue under investigation, but equally small enough so that the “deep, case-oriented analysis” of qualitative data is not impeded. Wimmer and Dominick (2014, p. 151) also confirm that while conducting in-depth interviews, a smaller sample is generally used. There are other researchers who claim that those carrying out interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) should have clear guidelines to include a sample of between three and sixteen participants in a single research study, where the lower limit is reserved for undergraduate projects and the upper limit for large-scale funded projects (Smith & Flowers 2009). As is evident, I am not solely relying on interviews in this research project. It was decided to interview the twelve Saudi SMIs so that the findings provided by the content analysis can be substantiated, expanded upon, and inform more reliable and detailed conclusions.

The sampling strategy implemented in this research study is based on ‘Convenience Sampling’. This is when respondents are selected according to their relevance to the research questions and objectives, on the basis of their availability, and on their willingness to be interviewed (Hansen & Machin 2018). Robinson (2014, p. 32) claims that when a researcher locates potential participants to interview in the research project, and they are not randomly selected from the universe, their selection will typically follow a first-come-first-serve basis until the sample size is completed.

The ‘universe’ of this research study is the Saudi SMIs who are settled in Saudi Arabia and have contributed to the official hashtag #Saudi\_vision\_2030. But researchers claim that in order to define a universe of study, strict inclusion or exclusion criteria, or both, should be established (Robinson 2014; Luborsky & Rubinstein 1995). Therefore, in the first step, I decided which Saudi SMIs should be approached for interviews. The criteria were the following: those who hold officially verified Twitter accounts, have more than 10,000 followers on their account, and who were also active in contributing to the hashtag #Saudi\_vision\_2030. It was revealed that 719 Saudi SMIs qualify for these criteria to be included in the sample of interviews. In order to further scrutinize the sample, I decided to pick the top 25 Saudi SMIs to interview out of the 719 SMIs, which is based on their engagement – having a greater number of liked tweets and retweeted tweets in the specified period of this study.

It is important to mention that there may be some SMIs in the sample of 719 who may have tweeted more about #Saudi\_vision\_2030, but they have not been included in the sample of universe. Furthermore, there could be some SMIs in Saudi Arabia who may have a greater following than the ones interviewed in this research study, but it is a fact that they did not contribute to #Saudi\_vision\_2030 in the selected period, so they were also excluded from the universe. Such influencers who were not considered relevant for interviews in this research study included Mohammed Moshaya, followed by 83,000 followers; Tariq Alharbi, followed by 345,000 followers; and Rajeh Alharthi, followed by more than 424,00 followers. I then sent requests for

interviews in separate correspondence to all the selected 25 Saudi SMIs. Sixteen of them responded positively by agreeing to participate in the interviews.

In the end, I was able to conduct interviews with twelve Saudi SMIs, including nine males and three females. Four of the initial sixteen, who at first agreed, changed their minds. All the interviews were conducted in Saudi Arabia during a field visit in 2019-2020. The timeline for interviews is provided below. The interviews were conducted in the Arabic, as the SMIs felt comfortable in expressing themselves better this way and most of them do not speak English.

**Table 4: Timeline of Interviews**

S. No	Interviewee	Date of Interview	S. No	Interviewee	Date of Interview
1	MSMI1	7/11/2019	7	MSMI 6	5/12/2019
2	MSMI2	8/11/2019	8	MSMI 7	6/12/2019
3	MSMI3	10/11/2019	9	FSMI 2	14/12/2019
4	FSMI 1	15/11/2019	10	MSMI 8	26/12/2019
5	MSMI 4	20/11/2019	11	MSMI 9	7/1/2020
6	MSMI 5	24/11/2019	12	FSMI 3	17/1/2020

#### **4.3.4. Analysing the Responses from the SMIs**

Once the content analysis had been carried out, the findings were used as a basis to formulate interview questions. The questions focused on obtaining deeper information into areas of interest indicated by the content analysis, and expanding the focus of the content analysis to include more detailed consideration of the SMIs' motivations for engaging with Saudi Vision 2030 on Twitter, and their opinions, beliefs and attitudes relating to this. Thus, the interviews in this research project deepened and expanded the dimensions and meanings that emerged in the first phase of the analysis. This is a suitable method because, as Lindlof and Taylor (2017) explain, interviews can verify, validate or comment on data that has been obtained from other sources, and they are able to help achieve efficiency in data collection.



This study used the thematic analysis method. According to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 79), “thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (dimensions) within data. It minimally organizes and describes a data set in rich detail”. By allowing the researcher the opportunity to examine the qualitative data in such detail, he/she can create nuanced dimensions. These dimensions are able to reflect a very high level of understanding of the data that are tailored to the research questions, and from which emerges a description of the experiences of the user in the form of a narrative.

When carrying out a thematic analysis, researchers follow six steps: “familiarizing [themselves with] the data; generating initial codes; searching for dimensions; reviewing dimensions; defining and naming dimensions; and producing the report” (Braun & Clarke 2006, pp. 87-93). In utilising these systematic steps I established concepts, from which it was possible to determine and create categories that form the basis for creating a profile insight of each of the study’s SMIs to be able to understand the motivations driving them to engage with Vision 2030 (RQ3).

Many other researchers, including Rubin and Rubin (2011, p. 226), have confirmed the utility of thematic analysis by claiming, “[In thematic analysis] you discover dimensions and concepts embedded throughout your interviews”. Keeping this in mind, thematic analysis has been employed in the major sections of this chapter where I felt that it would give substantial and clear findings for discussion. But, in some sections I relied on the individual responses of SMIs to extract better meaning from the data. Please note that all interviewees (SMIs) requested anonymity before agreeing to give interviews; therefore, all the analysis has been carried out with pseudonyms “MSMI” (male SMIs) and “FSMI” for female SMIs; for example, (MSMI 1), (MSMI 2), (MSMI 3) and (FSMI 1), (FSMI 2), (FSMI 3), etc.

As mentioned earlier, I conducted twelve semi-structured in-depth interviews with the Saudi SMIs. These included nine males and three females. The interviews with the SMIs were conducted in Arabic and were audio recorded. All twelve interviews were first transferred to a folder on a personal computer and then the process of transcription started. The interviews were initially transcribed in Arabic followed by idiomatic translation into English. It is important to mention that the analysis of interviews was carried out manually by identifying the prominent dimensions in them, and then carrying out member checking with the interviewees (SMIs) to confirm that the interpretation aligned with their ideas. The discussion of findings, collected from the selected interviewees, has been carried out following the thematic analysis.

This research study was conducted in Saudi Arabia and was originally written in the Arabic language. The results of the study were later translated into the English language. Some errors may have occurred during the translation process. When Arabic language text is translated into English, it can become confusing and vague. Reasons for this include the presence of jargons, idiomatic expressions, contextual and cultural bearing of linguistic manner and organisation it was being presented (Akan, Karim & Chowdhury 2019). To address this linguistic challenge, back-translation was used throughout the study. A back-translation method means translating the monolingual data into the source language. The translation is typically performed by a translator who has not seen the original text nor has prior knowledge of the particular context or objectives (Vaismoradi et al. 2016). Afterwards, the output of the back-translation is compared with the original texts to determine equivalence and inconsistencies. This is an important step in achieving reliability. Back-translation is typically adopted in social-sciences-related research and preferred over single-translation approaches (Liamputtong 2010). It is conducted to reduce errors in the translation process and to enhance concurrence of original and target language. This method is considered to be a validation tool to test the quality of translated research instruments, such as questionnaires and interview guides (Tyupa 2011).

The data from the interviews was therefore collected and analysed in Arabic before the findings were translated into English. To check the accuracy of the translation, the translation was back-translated into Arabic

again, and the back-translation was compared with the original to identify any potential problems. Such a use of back-translation draws on the notion of conceptual equivalence, which emphasizes the equivalence of the concepts at the level of the sentence rather than word for word, and which focuses on translation of meaning rather than verbatim (Hilton & Skrutkowski 2002).

#### **4.4. Summary**

This chapter initially defines and justifies the research methods utilised in this research study, followed by explanation and discussion of the actual methodological decisions adopted at the various stages of the study. It also argues for the data collection tools applied in the research project and discusses the various relevant tests carried out in this regard. The data analysis is also discussed along with linguistic and ethical considerations, together with the operational definitions of different variables.

## **Chapter 5. Analysis of the Findings**

### **5.1. Introduction**

This chapter will focus on analysing the framing of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 by the Social Media Influencers (SMIs) selected for this study. Furthermore, the dimensions that drove engagement in terms of a greater number of likes and retweets are also discussed. It is significant to note that the profile insights of the SMIs, which include their backgrounds and personal views, along with their motivations for framing the Vision 2030, are discussed in Chapter 6 of this thesis.

The findings of the study answer the key research questions: "How do SMIs frame the government to their followers when tweeting about Vision 2030?" and "What framing devices are useful in generating engagement with their followers?" The findings informed me about the level of engagement initiated by the SMIs among their followers with regard to Vision 2030. The findings also highlighted the association between the number of followers and the emphasis and valence dimensions, and the impact of emphasis and valence dimensions on engagement.

The chapter begins with a descriptive frequency analysis of SMI-specific factors, such as the preponderance of tweets written by male and female SMIs and the categorisation of tweets by SMIs according to number of followers. The analysis then considers the distribution of tweets in time, the frequency of retweets and likes, and the emphasis and valence dimensions adopted by SMIs. With this descriptive basis having established a broad overview of the data, the remainder of the chapter discusses in greater detail the findings regarding the framing of Saudi Vision 2030 in the tweets by the SMIs chosen for this study.

## 5.2. Descriptive Analysis

### 5.2.1. Tweets Written by Male and Female Social Media Influencers

This research study analysed the 2,386 tweets from multiple perspectives. It is important to note that the majority of these tweets were written by male SMIs. The results can be seen below in **Table 5**

**Table 5: Tweets Shared by Male and Female Social Media Influencers**

Tweets shared by		Total
Male SMI	Female SMI	
2,334	52	2,386
97.8%	2.179%	100%

The findings demonstrated that, overall, the majority of tweets (n=2334) were written by the nine male SMIs, compared to the 52 tweets by the three female SMIs. This may be attributed to Saudi Arabian culture, in which females are accustomed not to disclosing their thoughts or feelings. In particular, the empowerment of women in Saudi society and the acknowledgement of their role in public life is quite a recent development (Varshney 2019; Al-Ahmadi 2009).

While most of the tweets were shared by the male SMIs, female SMIs benefited from social media platforms and have transformed their image among their followers. They have utilised this platform to voice their opinions, views and concerns online (Agarwal, Lim & Wigand 2012; Guta & Karolak 2015; Khalil & Storie 2020). It must be noted that due to the limited representation of women in the sample, data from the two genders were analysed together.

### 5.2.2. *Categorisation of Number of Followers of Social Media Influencers*

To understand more about the range of followers on their verified Twitter accounts, the twelve SMIs were categorised according to number of followers. This guided my understanding of the engagement of their followers in relation to Vision 2030. Furthermore, it helped me understand the connection between the popularity of SMIs and emphasis and valence dimensions. For clarity, the number of followers of the SMIs were broadly divided into five categories. The findings can be seen in Table 6.

**Table 6: Categorisation of Number of Followers of SMIs**

<b>Categories of Followers</b>	<b>Number of SMIs (%)</b>
1–100k	526 (73%)
100k–1m	175 (24.4%)
1m–5m	14 (2%)
5m–10m	2 (0.3%)
>10m	2 (0.3%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>719</b> <b>100%</b>

Overall, the findings showed that 719 SMIs contributed the 2,386 tweets studied in this research study. The majority of the SMIs, almost three-quarters of all, were followed by 100k or fewer followers. Additionally, nearly a quarter of the SMIs were followed by 100k to 1m (one million) followers. Thus, it shows that most of the SMIs studied in this research study (97.4%) had between one and one million followers. Only 2.6% of the SMIs had more than one million followers.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the question of whether an individual is a micro-celebrity is not so much determined by the number of followers s/he has, as it is about the way in which s/he gains those followers and

interacts with them. However, following the definition provided by Click, Lee and Holloday (2013), all the figures considered here easily fit the criteria required to be considered SMIs. Two profile screenshots (Figures 5 and 6) below show the number of followers to demonstrate the segregation of SMIs into different categories.



**Figure 5. Categorised as a SMI having more than ten million followers**



**Figure 6. Categorised as an SMI having between one and five million followers**

The findings revealed that fourteen SMIs had between one and five million followers, while only two SMIs had between five and ten million followers, and a further two SMIs had a following of over ten million. Most SMIs, unlike traditional celebrities, become famous by creating and sharing online content, gaining the attention of sizeable audiences (Abidin 2018; Hearn & Schoenhoff 2016; Boyd & Marwick 2011; Senft 2008). Furthermore, Click, Lee and Holloday (2013) argue that to be a SMI, it is mandatory to have several thousand

followers or fans on social media accounts. However, the number of followers is intrinsically a direct proxy for an SMI's influence (Dhanesh & Duthler 2019). The same holds true for this study's Saudi SMIs, who had enough followers on their verified Twitter accounts to hold such a status. Further investigations showed that the SMIs who were selected for this study and have a large number of followers, tended to be religious figures, and the ones having a smaller number of followers were those who espoused specific causes and agendas from a non-religious stance. This aligns with the findings discussed later in this chapter regarding the centrality of religion to the social media content analysed in this thesis, and to national life in the KSA in general.

The data about the number of followers of the selected Saudi SMIs suggested that only a few SMIs had a huge following on their verified Twitter accounts and the rest had a relatively nominal following. This indicated that most of the SMIs who tweeted about the Vision 2030 on the officially launched hashtag were not very popular among the SMIs. It would be useful to see how their followers responded to their tweets.

### ***5.2.3. Tweets Tweeted in Different Weeks***

Understanding the frequency of tweets shared by the SMIs in different weeks was equally important. It helped me recognize the most engaging time for the SMIs in the selected two-month period. For a better understanding of the results, the tweets shared in different weeks were combined. The results can be seen below in Table 7.

***Table 7: Tweets Tweeted in Different Weeks of 2016***

<b>Week 1 (25/4– 1/5)</b>	<b>Week 2 (2/5– 8/5)</b>	<b>Week 3 (9/5– 15/5)</b>	<b>Week 4 (16/5– 22/5)</b>	<b>Week 5 (23/5– 29/5)</b>	<b>Week 6 (30/5– 5/6)</b>	<b>Week 7 (6/6– 12/6)</b>	<b>Week 8 (13/6– 19/6)</b>	<b>Week 9 (20/6– 26/6)</b>	<b>Total</b>
1883	214	61	38	22	44	59	35	30	2386
79%	9%	2.5%	1.6%	1%	1.8%	2.4%	1.4%	1.2%	100%



The above findings demonstrate that the greatest number of tweets were shared in the first week of Vision 2030, with a total of 79% of overall tweets. Therefore, most of the SMIs tried to engage their followers in the first week rather than the weeks after. The data showed that there was a drop in activity on the part of the SMIs in engaging their followers about the different aspects of Vision 2030 soon after the first week. The data also demonstrated that there was a gradual decrease in the sharing of tweets by the SMIs. Error! Reference source not found. shown above, validates my decision in selecting the right period for the study of Vision 2030, as I aimed to not miss the busy period for studying these tweets.

#### ***5.2.4. Frequency of Retweets and Likes***

Engagement was calculated on the basis of the combination of retweets and likes. The frequency of retweets refers to the number of times a tweet published by a selected Saudi SMI was shared (or forwarded) by his/her followers (Sandeep & Sindhura 2015). Frequency of retweets demonstrates the interest of the followers in the message shared by their SMI, and provided insight into their level of engagement. Many researchers, including Bonsón and Ratkai (2013), argued that social media engagement can be measured by the number of likes, followers, shares, reposts and total posts. Likewise, Brubaker and Wilson (2018) and Kim and Yang (2017) relied on the comments, likes and shares to gauge citizen engagement. Jiang and Beaudoin (2016) also claimed that citizen engagement can be calculated on the basis of the sum of likes, shares, and comments. Comments can be understood as the highest level of engagement, insofar as they require a higher level of personal input on the part of the responder, whereas likes and shares are a lower level of engagement (Agrawal, Gupta & Yousaf 2018).

Given that the study focused on framings by the selected SMIs and their motivations for these, it only considered likes and shares, not comments. Likes and shares were judged to be sufficient to indicate levels of engagement by followers, with more in-depth analysis than focusing on the SMIs' own content, rather than

comments made by followers. Low-level engagement was judged sufficient to represent some form of engagement, and it was felt that higher-level engagement did not need to be factored in.

For clarity, measurement of the engagement of followers of SMIs is discussed in two parts in this section. First, I discuss the frequency of retweets, and then I discuss the frequency of likes. I calculated the frequency of retweets and likes by counting how many times a given tweet was retweeted or liked. The frequency of retweets was reproduced in seven different bands in order to derive a meaningful result. In determining the bands adopted in Table 8, I identified the upper and lower limits, and established ranges between these that would allow for the representation of the distribution of the data in an optimally clear and concise way. The findings can be seen below in Table 8.

**Table 8: Frequency of Liked and Retweeted Tweets**

	>51	51–100	101–200	201–400	401–800	801–1600	>1601	Total
<b>Retweets</b>	2001 (83.9%)	170 (7.1%)	106 (4.4%)	62 (2.6%)	32 (1.3%)	11 (0.5%)	4 (0.2%)	2386 (100%)
<b>Likes</b>	2224 (93.2%)	89 (3.7%)	42 (1.8%)	15 (0.6%)	8 (0.3%)	4 (0.2%)	4 (0.2%)	2386 (100%)

The findings demonstrated that the vast majority of tweets were retweeted 50 times or less, 83.9% (n=2,001), while only 7.1% of tweets (n=170) were retweeted between 51 and 100 times. More significantly, less than 1% (n=4) of the tweets were retweeted more than 1,600 times. This indicates a limited interaction between the SMIs and their followers. Below are screenshots of tweets of three SMIs, randomly selected from the data and showing a smaller number of retweets despite their higher number of followers.

<Image removed due to copyright restrictions introduced by Saudi authority for Intellectual Property in 2021>

**Figure 7. Translation:** “Entertainment and culture are the most important... #Saudi\_Vision\_2030” (2016).

It could be argued, based on the frequency of retweets, that these SMIs did not intensely engage their followers while discussing Vision 2030 on the official hashtag launched by the Saudi government on Twitter. Earlier, it was mentioned that the SMIs have large numbers of followers on their Twitter accounts. Even though 526 SMIs had between one and 100k followers, 193 SMIs had a following of between 100k and ten million. Despite having a huge number of followers, the smaller number of retweeted tweets demonstrated that followers were less enthusiastic about the messages shared by the SMIs regarding Vision 2030.

There are many potential reasons for the poor engagement with the SMIs on Twitter. The dominant one appears to be that the announcement of Vision 2030 came as a surprise, and the people (followers) were not mentally ready for it; thus they were less engaged. In the interviews, many of the SMIs indicated that they did not have any prior information about the Saudi government's mega plan, and they were trying to get this information to then share with their followers (see further discussions in Chapter 6). The same holds true for their followers, who were relying on the SMIs for updated and verified information about Vision 2030. Therefore, the usefulness of strategies and techniques employed by the SMIs in engaging their followers could be questioned.

Based upon the above findings relating to the low frequency of retweeted tweets, it indicates that SMIs did not engage closely enough with their followers on the official hashtag launched by the Saudi government, #Saudi\_Vision\_2030. These findings regarding the level of engagement are explored in further detail by analysing levels of likes and retweets of the tweets considered. Each tweet is analysed individually, in respect of likes and retweets. I did not try to aggregate engagement for each SMI across all of their various tweets, but instead analysed each individual tweet as a unitary entity. In this section, I first discuss likes, and then discuss retweets.

The frequency of liked tweets refers to the number of followers liking a tweet by giving a heart to it on

Twitter. As noted above, I calculated the frequency of retweets and likes by counting the number of times a tweet was retweeted or liked. This shows the interest of followers in the tweet shared by the SMI and provides a picture of the level of engagement based on opinion or information related to any issue. In the case of Vision 2030, the level of engagement of followers with the tweets – based on the frequency of likes – can be seen above in Table 8.

The findings demonstrated that less than 7% of all the tweets received 51 or more likes, and the remaining 93% of tweets received 50 or less likes. Interestingly, only four tweets out of 2,386 (equal to 0.2%) were liked by between 801 and 1,600 followers. Surprisingly, less than 1% of tweets (n=4) received more than 1,601 likes. Below are screenshots of tweets sent by four male SMIs randomly selected from the data that show a smaller number of likes, despite the SMIs' large following.

<Image removed due to copyright restrictions introduced by Saudi authority for Intellectual Property in 2021>

**Figure 8. Translation:** “May Allah make good for the country and for the citizens, and solve all our affairs  
#Saudi\_Vision\_2030” (2016).

<Image removed due to copyright restrictions introduced by Saudi authority for Intellectual Property in 2021>

**Figure 9. Translation:** “#Saudi\_Vision\_2030: A high ambition will be realised by the youth’s drive” (2016).  
**Translation:** “#Saudi\_Vision\_2030: A comprehensive renaissance for a bright tomorrow that awakens patriotism and pride in the glorious present and the ancient past” (2016).

The screenshot below presents a tweet shared by one of the SMIs, who has more than 1.4 million followers, but failed to get a significant number of likes.

<Image removed due to copyright restrictions introduced by Saudi authority for Intellectual Property in 2021>

**Figure 10. Translation:** “#Saudi\_Vision\_2030: I ask God to benefit Saudi Arabia and its sons” (2016).

These samples show that the number of followers did not have a direct impact on engagement, and the SMIs failed to actively engage their followers. It demonstrated that these SMIs lacked a proper social media campaign strategy for involving their followers in the mega project announced by the government. The lack of enthusiasm in Vision 2030 is another issue. It can be traced to the poor performance of the previous developmental plans from different Ministries due to lack of the evaluation and follow-up mechanism (Alamri 2019; Alfawzan 2014; Horschig 2016). It appears that the promises of the new government plan were overshadowed by the poor implementation of past developmental plans (Horschig 2016). Below is an example of tweet, which criticised the bureaucracy and corruption that impeded the full success of the implementation of previous development plans.

<Image removed due to copyright restrictions introduced by Saudi authority for Intellectual Property in 2021>

**Figure 11. Translation:** “#Royal Decrees: I hope that disease, like inspectors in the ministries will be eliminated, which is #bureaucracy and #corruption that hinders #Saudi\_Vision2030” (2016).

Mohammad Bin Salman is a visionary leader, unveiling the change he wanted in the KSA. Therefore, the minimal engagement with SMIs tweets on the official hashtag remains an issue, calling for clarification, as it was an important announcement, and many people have waited years for it. Bonsón Perea and Bednárová (2019) claimed that many governments have tried to utilize social media platforms for transparent communication and public engagement. The same initiative was taken by the Saudi government through the launch of the official Twitter hashtag in order to inform and engage more followers. Other social media commentators have also claimed that posts containing positive emotions, shared by the government, have more capacity for public engagement (Zavattaro, French & Mohanty 2015; Tang, Li, Gu & Tan 2019; Ji, Chen, Tao & Li 2019; Trilling, Tolochko & Burscher 2017). The fact that, despite the presence of all these factors, engagement with SMIs tweets on the official hashtag remained low should be a concern for the SMIs.

### 5.3. Social Media Influencers and Emphasis Dimensions

After analysing the level of engagement of followers with the tweets of the SMIs, it was important to analyse the content of these tweets in order to understand the emphasis dimensions within them. As discussed in the methodology chapter, this represented the first iteration of the recursive hermeneutic interpretive process. This first stage of the analysis and interpretation provided a set of emphasis dimensions that identified topics of the most salient interest to the SMIs under consideration. The findings clarified what aspect of Vision 2030 was the main focus of the SMIs, and what was less emphasised. As noted in the methodology chapter, however, these represent only the first stage in the inductive qualitative analysis of the data; subsequent stages of analysis refined and developed these frames further on.

In seeking to give an accurate and faithful description of the analysis carried out, I therefore first discuss the initial dimensions identified here in section 5.2, before moving on to discuss the later developments that led to the ultimate framing of the data in section 5.3. In other words, this discussion of the content analysis seeks to remain true to the content analysis as it was actually carried out.

Chong and Druckman (2007) claim that frames differ in terms of their strength and influence, and that the strength of a frame depends on different factors including competitive environment, motivation and frequency; i.e., the number of times a frame is repeated. The more frequent the repetition of a frame, the greater the influence it has (Chong & Druckman 2007). The strength of different frames in this research study was also ascertained by the frequency of its discussion; i.e., the more frequently and extensively it was discussed, the stronger the frame.

The identification of frames in the selected sample of tweets was carried out through the inductive approach, which means the researcher begins with the raw data, and derives generalisations from it (Van Gorp 2007). This is in contrast to a deductive approach, in which data are analysed from the perspective of frameworks that are defined in advance, either by the researcher or derived from previous research (Semetko & Valkenburg 2000).

Data was thoroughly studied first, and then frames were extracted from it using an inductive approach. After I had studied the selected tweets, relevant dimensions were then derived from it for data analysis (as discussed in the methodology chapter. See Chapter 5). The findings can be seen below in Table 9.

***Table 9: Social Media Influencers and Emphasis Dimensions***

	Economy	Policy*	Transparency*	Media*	Supplications*	Youth*	Culture	Ent. and	Education*	Housing*	Emp. Women	Int. Relations	Total
<b>Freq.</b>	885	641	521	505	255	149	123 (4%)	113	130	45 (1%)	30 (1%)		
<b>(%)</b>	(26%)	(19%)	(15%)	(15%)	(7.5%)	(4%)		(3%)	(4%)				
<b>Positive</b>	54%	57%	84%	39%	70%	70%	50%	43%	79%	49%	70%		60.45%
<b>Negative</b>	6%	2%	5%	5%	0%	5%	11%	12%	6%	11%	3%		6%
<b>Neutral</b>	40%	41%	11%	56%	30%	26%	39%	45%	15%	40%	27%		33.63%

\* denotes dimensions where distribution of positively versus negatively versus neutral-dimensioned tweets significantly deviated from the average across all other dimensions (based on Chi-square tests).

The findings demonstrated that the SMIs debated the different emphasis dimensions relating to Vision 2030 in a relatively scattered and heterogenous way. While there was no strong focus on any specific emphasis dimension, the most dominant ones discussed included Economy, Policy, Transparency and Media, which comprised 75% of the overall discussion of emphasis dimensions. Alternatively, the least discussed emphasis dimensions included International Relations, Female Empowerment, Housing and Education, which collectively accounted for 9% of the overall dimensions discussed.

### 5.3.1. Vision 2030 and Valence Dimensions

The data about the emphasis dimensions guided me on the different dimensions discussed in different frequencies. It is important to go deeper into these dimensions and assess the tone of the coverage, and to evaluate whether these different dimensions have been discussed in positive, negative, or neutral ways. The findings can be seen above in Error! Reference source not found.. These findings showed that 60% of all tweets were framed in a positive manner, while 6% were framed in a negative manner, and 33% in a neutral manner (i.e., neither positive nor negative), indicating that the tone of the discourse around Vision 2030 was overwhelmingly positive in nature. This pattern remained somewhat stable across the individual Vision 2030



dimensions, with a few notable exceptions.

A series of Chi-square tests indicated that certain dimensions significantly deviated from the average across all other dimensions. Transparency ( $\chi = 279.51$ ,  $p < .001$ ), Housing ( $\chi = 41.89$ ,  $p < .001$ ), Youth ( $\chi = 18.87$ ,  $p < .001$ ), Policy ( $\chi = 26.69$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and Supplicating ( $\chi = 42.01$ ,  $p < .001$ ) had a significantly higher percentage of positive tweets (and/or a significantly lower percentage of negative tweets) than the rest, while Education ( $\chi = 7.67$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and Media ( $\chi = 57.60$ ,  $p < .001$ ) had a significantly higher percentage of negative tweets (and/or a significantly lower percentage of positive tweets) than the rest. This suggests a proportionately more positive sentiment around the dimensions of Transparency (which had the highest proportion of positive tweets, 84%), Housing, and Youth, and proportionately more negative sentiment around Education and Media (with the latter having the lowest proportion of positive tweets, 39%). Possible reasons for this variation are discussed in Section 5.4, and in the following “Discussion” chapter.

It is noteworthy that the dimensions less frequently discussed by the SMIs (such as Female Empowerment, Education, and Entertainment and Culture) were more negatively framed by the SMIs (Error! Reference source not found.). This table similarly makes clear that the dimensions more frequently discussed by the SMIs were more positively framed by them. The findings also demonstrated that the SMIs were less hopeful that the government would introduce reforms in these selected areas.

These results suggest that the majority of the Saudi SMIs in the study supported and agreed with the government’s message around Vision 2030. As discussed below in sections 5.4.6 and 5.4.7, the SMIs emphasised Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman in the announcement of Saudi Vision 2030, and most de-emphasised the role of the government itself.

A further analysis showed that tweets often directly cited and praised the prince's and other officials' words, serving as a vehicle for transmitting and reinforcing ideas to the public. The tone generally ranged from neutral fact-relaying to outright optimism, with a distinct undertone of religious sentiment serving as a means of approval for Vision 2030. Below are the examples of the tweets demonstrating such approval of Mohammad Bin Salman and supplication for the success of Vision 2030 (further analysis and explanation of this finding is provided in section 5.4.2.). Nevertheless, the presence of the 6% of negatively framed tweets suggests that the nature of the discourse is not completely uniform, and that dissenting or sceptical views with regard to the government's message do find their way, albeit to a small extent, through Saudi influencers' public communications.

<Image removed due to copyright restrictions introduced by Saudi authority for Intellectual Property in 2021>

**Figure 12. Translation:** "I heard in #Mohammed\_Bin\_Salman speech, the frankness, clarity, realism and ambition. God give him the success #Saudi\_Vision\_2030" (2016).

<Image removed due to copyright restrictions introduced by Saudi authority for Intellectual Property in 2021>

**Figure 13. Translation:** "Oh Allah, make # Saudi\_Vision\_2030 Glory and goodness to the kingdom Blessings and goodness for our people in every country and place. And preserve us, and accept our supplication, and succeed us, help us" (2016).

Alshaikh (2019) claimed that Saudi print media was less critical of the ruling government when examining the response of print and social media to Saudi Vision 2030. However, ordinary Twitter users were critical of the state's narratives. In contrast, the findings of this research study showed that the SMIs predominantly covered Vision 2030 in positive way, though the presence of critical voices was also apparent. Many scholars have claimed that traditional and social media are not avenues for expression in the KSA due to government pressures (Alsahafi 2019; Albalawi & Sixsmith 2017; Aljabre 2013; Alrakaf 2012; Anderson 2011). Alarfaj (2013) argued that the biggest barrier to the free dissemination of information in Saudi news and social

media was the lack of regulations rules.

The descriptive frequency analysis therefore provides a general overview of the broad contours of the demographics, valence, emphasis, and other salient aspects of the response to Saudi Vision 2030 on Twitter. This makes possible the description of some traits characterising this response, and a degree of insight into the dynamics of the use of Twitter in connection with public affairs in Saudi Arabia. The following section develops from this descriptive basis to explore the social media content in more detail, with a focus on the frames adopted in engaging with Saudi Vision 2030.

#### **5.4. Frames Embedded in the Narrative Created by SMIs**

Content analysis of the social media data identified eight predominant frames adopted in the engagements with Saudi Vision 2030 on Twitter: Supplicating, Building National Identity, Appealing to Rights and Duties, Promoting Economic Development, Appealing to the Youth, Empowering Women, and Promoting Transparency and Communication. The method whereby these frames were derived is explained in some detail in the methodology chapter. Restating that discussion briefly, the social media data were analysed using a thematic content analysis approach, whereby the various emphasis dimensions were assessed to explore prominent tropes, concepts, lexemes, perspectives, and rhetorical devices frequently employed in their discussion. This made possible the identification of frames adopted in relation to the various specific emphasis dimensions, and a consideration of the way in which they related to each other.

Specific trends were discerned in the logic of the application of these various frames according to the socio-political nature of the content being discussed. For example, Building National Identity and Supplicating tended to be adopted when engaging with dimensions for which there is broad-based support in the kingdom, on the basis of the perception of national unity on the topic in question. In contrast, the frame of Appealing to Rights and Duties was drawn on when engaging with more divisive issues, on which the SMIs appeared likely

to expect less unanimity amongst the audience in their response to it. This trend, and factors such as its motivations and implications, are explored in more detail in the following sections. I begin with an exploration of the frame of Supplicating.

#### ***5.4.1. The Frame of Supplication***

The tweets that evidence the frame of Supplicating do not represent the expression of a specific opinion about the content of Saudi Vision 2030, or a direct appeal to followers. Instead, they can be understood as a performative expression of affiliation with, and commitment to, some social entity – one’s nation, one’s religion, one’s community, and sometimes a number of these all at once. For example, @HatoonKadi tweeted, “Oh Allah protect our country, oh Allah give success to our leader and give them your mercy. We are optimistic,” while @dr\_alimaki tweeted, “Oh Allah make good for the country and for the people. Give Blessings for our country and make it secure and stable.” As these two tweets demonstrate, Supplicating does not focus on the content of the relevant policies in any detail, but instead expresses a desire for positive outcomes in general terms.

These two tweets similarly demonstrate a related factor often observed in Supplicating: the framing of such desires for positive outcomes in religious terms, via appeals to Allah. (‘Allah’ is the Islamic term for ‘God’ (Clark 2019).) This kind of framing underscores the expression of affiliation and commitment that is identified as the basis of the tweet. Given that Saudi Arabia is an explicitly Muslim nation, the expression of such religious sentiment signals alignment of the SMI with this fundamental component of national identity. In all these ways, Supplicating can be seen to function as a way of expressing and strengthening sentiments relating to national identity.

<Image removed due to copyright restrictions introduced by Saudi authority for Intellectual Property in 2021>

**Figure 14. Translation:** “Oh Allah protect our country ♥♥, oh Allah give success to our leader and give them your mercy

🇸🇦. We are optimistic” (2016).

<Image removed due to copyright restrictions introduced by Saudi authority for Intellectual Property in 2021>

**Figure 15. Translation:** “Oh Allah make good for the country and for the people. Give blessings for our country and make it secure and stable” (2016).

The supplications identified tended to comprise expressions of goodwill towards the nation, Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, the Saudi populace, or other such parties. Supplicating involved the expression of the hope and expectation of the future benefits of Saudi Vision 2030 for the country, such as “Oh Allah, make #Saudi\_Vision\_2030 Glory and goodness to the kingdom. Blessings and goodness for our people in every country and place, and preserve us, and accept our supplication, and succeed us, help us” (Alarefe 2016). These involve a generalised appeal for the beneficial outcome of the initiative for the nation as a whole, in a manner that explicitly makes the tweet a means of aligning the tweeter with the nation conceived of as a collective project. There is therefore a performative dimension to this frame, whereby the explicit content serves to demonstrate specific social, cultural and political affiliations.

The findings show that Supplicating made up a large proportion of all the tweets considered (being the fifth most prevalent emphasis dimension). They were also associated with the SMIs who had the larger number of followers. This may be taken to indicate that, while Supplicating does not promote direct engagement, it does serve to establish the credibility of the SMI within the community of Saudi Twitter users more broadly. It is not possible, on the basis of the data collected, to make any inferences about the causal direction of this relation between the SMIs’ popularity and the rate at which they promoted Supplicating. Nevertheless, the connection is

intriguing in terms of the wider context of the findings relating to the way Twitter functions in Saudi Arabia. As the next subsection discusses, Building National Identity is a prominent factor in the Twitter activity in response to Saudi Vision 2030. Therefore, Supplicating can be seen as a significant way in which building national identity is appealed to in these rhetorical strategies.

The effectiveness of this rhetorical strategy is demonstrated by the fact that the six tweets that generated the highest levels of engagement (calculated as the sum of retweets and likes) were all Supplicating. These were all also from SMIs with between nine and twenty million followers, which indicates they arose from accounts that had a large base of followers to draw on, but it was not the case that higher numbers of followers correlated with higher levels of engagement. The three tweets generating the highest levels of engagement in this respect were from SMIs with relatively lower numbers of followers. Such factors, taken together, have significant implications for the understanding of the socio-cultural role of Twitter in Saudi Arabia. The prevalence of Supplicating and appeals to national and religious identity in the data, and the high levels of engagement such frames generate, provide support for the importance of demonstrations of commitment to Building National Identity and patriotism in the dynamics animating social media activity focused on social and public issues in the kingdom.

#### ***5.4.2. The Frame of Building National Identity***

Content analysis of the social media data collected for the study clarified the prevalence of the frame of Building National Identity in the SMIs' responses to the official hashtag of Saudi Vision 2030. National identity refers to "the extent to which a given culture recognizes and identifies with a set of focal elements that set it apart from other cultures" (Le, Nguyen & Van Nguyen 2013, p. 767). Many of the Building National Identity framings overlapped with Supplication framings. The forms taken by such uses of supplications as part of the expression of the national identity of the KSA are determined by the nature of the Saudi state.

Saudi Arabia is a theocratic monarchy, in which Islam is a central aspect of the national identity, and the monarchy is the ruling authority and, to some extent, the embodiment of the state itself. Therefore, tweets that connect with national identity also frequently connect with the religion of Islam; and with the monarchy generally, or specifically with Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, the heir to the throne. (As discussed in further detail later in this section, Mohammed Bin Salman occupied an important place in the discourse relating to Saudi Vision 2030 on Twitter.)

The SMIs' adoption of the Building National Identity frame therefore frequently drew on more than one of these categories in their engagement with Saudi Vision 2030. This was a means of establishing their credentials as members of the socio-political community and to express their emotional investment in it. The following tweets are good examples of this: “#Saudi \_vision\_2030, O Allah, make it a successful vision, an opening for good and a blessing things, support our government for what you love and satisfy and help them for what is good and good for this country” (Kaffary 2016) and “I am optimistic about what I heard from # Prince Muhammad\_Ben\_Salman # Crown Prince about vision, God save our country and make the outcome of our affairs for the better #Saudi\_Vision\_2030” (Zahrany 2016). As these tweets demonstrate, a significant portion of SMIs' responses to Saudi Vision 2030 consisted not so much in any substantive engagement with the content of the policies, as in this kind of expression of support, identity and affiliation.

Such performance of affiliation can be understood with reference to the dynamics of celebrity and influence that inform all the SMIs' activity to some extent or another. Influence is necessarily a social function: one exercises influence over other individuals by virtue of one's standing in a given social context, and influence is inextricable from these social arrangements (Zhao, Zhan & Liu 2018). In this respect, it is unsurprising that the more popular SMIs tended to engage such strategies of social affiliation and alignment more extensively. I interpret these tweets as functioning to establish the position and credibility of the SMIs in the socio-cultural community to which they are tweeting: they signal the tweeters' affiliation with the Saudi nation and people,

and do so in ways that mark the tweeter's awareness of and respect for the foundational aspects of Saudi national identity, such as religion and monarchy. While the adoption of such frames shows no clear benefit in respect of engagement with individual tweets, the trend may suggest that it serves to promote the number of followers an SMI has, and thus to enhance influence and engagement in indirect ways.

There were, however, a number of emphasis dimensions for which Building National Identity was a prominent frame, one of which was Tourism. The study's SMIs often linked the emphasis dimension of Tourism to matters relating to ideas about cultural heritage. For example, @mohalwber tweeted "I think one of the most important points in #Saudi\_vision\_2030 is the establishment of an Islamic museum and investment in the historical tourism heritage." This illustrates the emphasis on historical heritage as a focus of tourism promotion, as well as the linking of tourism with cultural initiatives such as museums. These connections appear likely to arise from the current importance of historical heritage to Saudi Arabia's tourism. KSA is the home of many of the most significant locations of Islam, such as Makkah, the birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad, and Medina, where the Prophet Muhammad built the Masjid al-Nabawi, or 'Prophet's Mosque'. Therefore, large proportions of KSA's current tourism are related to these factors, with religious pilgrims to such holy sites representing the most visible contribution to the country's tourism. This would explain the perceived link between tourism and cultural heritage initiatives such as museums.

Additionally, this demonstrable link between tourism and cultural heritage indicates the extent to which considerations of national identity shape and inform the SMIs' approaches to Saudi Vision 2030 on social media. Cultural heritage is a material or immaterial trace of the continuity of the nation over time. The SMIs' emphasis on cultural heritage, therefore, similarly draws on practices that are central to the formulation of this national identity. In contrast with a framing of tourism as a form of leisure and/or luxury consumption, as is prevalent in other socio-cultural contexts (Sundbo & Dixit 2020), a significant proportion of the discussions of tourism in the data analysed explicitly link it to Saudi nation's cultural heritage. This is to some extent



illuminated by a related concern that is raised in connection with tourism: the potential for tourism to have harmful effects on the Saudi nation itself.

A number of tweets about tourism mentioned the importance of exercising some form of control over which tourists are allowed to enter the country. For example, a phrase repeated a number of times by different SMIs encouraged the practice of ensuring that tourists who were allowed into the country had similar values and beliefs: @IssaAlghaith (2016) tweeted, “Do you support opening the door to tourism for foreigners while adhering to Sharia controls? #Saudi\_Vision\_2030 #Daily Polls” (Algaith 2016).

The orientation and attitude implicitly underpinning such perceptions is that foreign visitors have the potential to harm the Saudi nation through the introduction of values, beliefs and practices that are at odds with those taken to characterize traditional Saudi culture. A view such as this can be explained by the high levels of regulation and control that have been exercised over Saudi cultural expression for the last several decades. Such regulation is justified and legitimated on the basis of the need to maintain the morality of the national culture. Foreign parties, and especially non-Muslim ones, are viewed as having the potential to harm the Saudi nation. Therefore, while the economic benefits of expanded tourism are mentioned, the moral concerns associated with it are even more prominent. This is presumably also connected to the fact that very high levels of Saudi Arabia’s current tourism derive from explicitly religious purposes, such as those connected to the pilgrimages mandated in the religion of Islam. In light of this, it is likely that large proportions of the Saudi population associate tourism with such religious purposes. Therefore, the idea of tourism for leisure or economic purposes seems to clash with the religious-moral nature of tourism for the purposes of pilgrimage.

**<Image removed due to copyright restrictions introduced by Saudi authority for Intellectual Property in 2021>**

**Figure 16. Translation:** “I think one of the most important points in #Saudi\_vision\_2030 is the establishment of an Islamic museum and investment in the historical tourism heritage” (2016).

A similar connection may explain the link expressed between the emphasis dimension of Development and religious concerns. For example, @IssaAlgaith tweeted, “More than 50 royal decrees for developing but there is still nothing for the religious sector.” Such a view indicates the centrality of Saudi religious matters and religious identity to all aspects of Saudi Arabian society. In a secular society where the separation between state and religious affairs is established by law (Scherer 2015), this kind of view would be unusual. The phenomenon therefore supports this study’s general argument regarding the importance of socio-cultural context to the dynamics of engagement on social media. In the context of the KSA, religion is central to all aspects of social life, as all of the tweets considered in this content analysis demonstrate, including economics and politics. This has implications for the ways social media engagement is achieved in these contexts (as is discussed in more detail in the later “discussion” chapter).

**<Image removed due to copyright restrictions introduced by Saudi authority for Intellectual Property in 2021>**

**Figure 17. Translation:** “Development started with #saudi\_vision\_2030. More than 50 royal decrees for developing but there still nothing for religious sector” (2016).

The final emphasis dimension identified in the frequency analysis was International Relations, which was relatively limited in terms of the number of tweets associated with it, and did not attract high levels of engagement. One noteworthy tweet linked to this frame was that, “The planners of the kingdom’s renaissance must put in their priorities the improvement of the nation’s reputation internationally and convince the world of our credibility against extremists.” In this framing, the significance of national identity is again observable, with the SMI concerned about “the nation’s reputation internationally”. The final reference to “our credibility against extremists” may allude to Muslim identity, and the stereotyped perception of Islam as a religion of extremism.

<Image removed due to copyright restrictions introduced by Saudi authority for Intellectual Property in 2021>

**Figure 18. Translation:** “The planners of the Kingdom's renaissance must put in their priorities the improvement of the nation's reputation internationally and convince the world of our credibility against extremists” (2016).

Another way in which the frame of Building National Identity was utilised was by focusing on the monarchy as a force for good (in contrast, and even in opposition, to the state), and especially on the person of Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman. The study's SMIs frequently framed problems of public accountability and transparency as occurring in the public realm, while proposing that the monarchy represents the solution to this. For example, “Some officials in the government believe that they are still above the law ... I wish them to reflect on the direct statements of the Crown Prince and his intention to eradicate corruption. #Saudi\_Vision\_2030” (Hubian 2016), and “...#Mohammed\_Bin\_Salman: We will work to privatize government sectors and we will make the people the ones who monitor corruption...” (Alrabbashi 2016).

This framing enables the tweeter to maintain a stance that emphasizes patriotic commitment to the nation, while being able to criticize other aspects of the nation by separating them out from this collective. For example, in Alrabbashi's (2016) tweet just quoted, the tweeter frames the solution to corruption as an alliance between the monarchy, in the person of Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, and “the people”, working together to oversee “government”.

Another tweet relevant in this respect is that of @alikarni, who tweeted, “Restructuring state institutions is the core of generous royal decisions to achieve #Saudi\_Vision\_2030, it remains now for the

ministers to show their competence in public.” One noteworthy aspect of the framing adopted here is how it distinguishes the monarchy from the state: the SMI credits the “generous royal decisions” with “[r]estructuring state institutions”, implying the separability of these two functions. Of course, in a monarchy such as in the KSA, the difference between the state and the monarchy is not always clear. Therefore, the framing here shows how different parts of the state have different levels of credibility and trust.

Other tweets indicate how trust in Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman is high, even when trust in the some ministers is low, and this tweet again shows how the monarchy is framed as a trustworthy actor in comparison to the government and the state. The final sentence underscores this: “It remains now for the ministers to show their competence in public.”

**<Image removed due to copyright restrictions introduced by Saudi authority for Intellectual Property in 2021>**

**Figure 19. Translation:** “Restructuring state institutions is the core of generous royal decisions to achieve #Saudi\_Vision\_2030. It remains now for the ministers to show their competence in public” (2016).

#### ***5.4.3. The Frame of Appealing to Rights and Duties***

In light of the prevalence and performative significance of the role of supplications in the SMIs’ responses to Saudi Vision 2030, the very limited use of supplications in connection to the dimension of empowerment of Saudi women is noteworthy. Only a single tweet engaging with empowerment of women is phrased in the form of a supplication – “Do not be an obstacle for the woman, help her to seize opportunities. The next is more beautiful, God willing, #Saudi\_Vision\_2030 #National Transformation 2030” (Albabbtain 2016). Significantly, this is addressed to the general population, rather than to Allah, as is the case with most other supplications.

The limited adoption of the form of supplication in connection with women's empowerment may arise from Saudi women's reluctance to be perceived as being overly vocal in their support of policies intended to redress gender imbalances in the society, given their continuing position of subordination in a number of ways. Another explanation would derive from the connection between Supplicating and Building National Identity. As noted above, supplications frequently appear to function as a performative invocation of national identity as a means of positioning the SMI within a specific socio-cultural context.

In the case of Empowering Women, this is complicated by the fact that the nation includes groups with significantly diverging views relating to the appropriate place and role of women in society, and therefore diverging opinions on the value of the initiatives announced in this regard in Saudi Vision 2030. Where the SMIs can assume relatively high degrees of coherence on the part of their audience with respect to dimensions such as religious and national identity, the question of gender is a much more conflicted and contradictory one. This may therefore explain why the performative mode of supplications, and the attendant invocation of national identity, is adopted to a much more limited extent in connection with this focus.

Among those tweets that engage with the empowerment of women in an explicitly positive, optimistic way, the focus is on greater rights for women in the kingdom. A number of tweets explicitly mention that Saudi women should be allowed to drive, which is mentioned in the Vision, but others do not mention this right specifically, instead they refer to women's rights in a general sense. Examples of this include: "Increasing women's job opportunities in # Saudi\_Vision2030 is an increase in women's empowerment, and in this important sign for a more promising future for #Women's Rights" (Sonosi 2016); and "#Women's\_driving If we drive #Saudi\_Vision2030 It is my right to drive" (Meriam 2016).

In these respects, again, the treatment of Saudi Vision 2030 by the SMIs represents a divergence from the emphasis on national religious identity, which is salient in other categories. The terminology of "rights" is

derived from a secular, legalistic Western discourse, rather than the traditional theocratic model that characterizes Saudi Arabia (Duderija 2013). The fact that agitation for greater rights for women encounters resistance from theocratic justifications presumably accounts for this trait. The limitations on women's rights in Saudi Arabia has historically been legitimated on the basis of Islamic scripture and the traditional social models associated with Saudi Arabia's theocratic state, in which certain inequalities between the sexes are explicitly enshrined (Duderija 2013). In the context of a theocratic nation such as Saudi Arabia, individuals agitating to overturn such arrangements therefore need to offer alternative justifications for the changes they are proposing (Duderija 2013). The emphasis on a discourse of rights in the discussion of empowerment of Saudi women means that the SMIs are drawing on a secular, legal model that argues for equality of all individuals regardless of sex, class, race, or other demographic characteristics.

Analysis showed that the adoption of the frame of Appealing to Rights and Duties generally occurred in other contexts where polarities of opinion amongst the Saudi audience could be expected. As with the dimension of women's rights, with regard to which the social media data analysed demonstrates responses both strongly in favour and strongly opposed, the frame of Appealing to Rights and Duties was adopted in other areas where such heterogeneity was apparent. One prominent example was the emphasis dimension of Transparency.

Transparency, and its implicitly associated focus on corruption and failures in service delivery on the part of public servants, implies a position critical of certain segments of the Saudi population. A position such as this, therefore, calls for reconciliation with the strongly patriotic approach that characterizes so much of Saudi Twitter activity (as demonstrated in the Supplicating and Building National Identity frames). The frame of Appealing to Rights and Duties was one way in which this was achieved, as is explored in the following section.

The discourse of rights and duties is also apparent in the area of trust in public institutions, where the composite national identity of monarchical theocracy fractures. In the tweets focusing on the emphasis dimension of transparency, the SMIs occasionally used a discourse of rights and duties to articulate criticism of the public institutions. For example, “Development of education and unemployment solutions, and the rights and duties of the ministry, the teacher and the student” (Ashaerah 2016). Framing of this kind suggests the need to step outside of the frame of Building National Identity in order to pose such forms of criticism. If an important component of national identity is a patriotic commitment to the nation as a coherent community, SMIs may feel that voicing criticism or dissatisfaction with the public institutions may be understood in negative terms by followers, and they will therefore seek to avoid this, or to phrase it in ways that softens the impact. This would account for why the observed frame of Appealing to Rights and Duties is adopted in these contexts: it can be seen as a way of framing such criticism in terms that downplay the question of national identity, and instead emphasize the abstract socio-political values of right and duties.

Framing of responses to the emphasis dimension of Housing provided further evidence of the trends whereby dissatisfaction and criticism were predominantly framed in terms associated with a discourse focusing on abstract rights and duties. A good example of this is the tweet “The citizen has the right to education, health, housing and work, security and stability, freedom and justice, leisure, a decent and happy life, etc #Saudi\_vision\_2030” (Algaith 2016). The reference to housing as a right can be viewed as being one of the most direct and outspoken of all emphasis dimensions. In connection with this, it is noteworthy that a specific government department, the Department of Housing, was occasionally singled out for criticism, such as in “A question for media professionals and elites: Is what is happening in the Ministry of Housing consistent with #Saudi\_Vision2030?” (Askar 2016). Such a framing again demonstrates the tendency to restrict criticism and expressions of dissatisfaction to one specifically designated actor, rather than directing them at the state or the government generally.

In this context again, the previously proposed interpretations of these differences would seem to be applicable. The SMIs in this study appeared to feel the need to ensure that criticism was framed in a manner that did not imply they opposed the Saudi collective, but instead aimed their dissatisfaction at one specific agent. Such an analysis is again supported by the consistent opposition, in such contexts, between the bad actor against whom dissatisfaction is directed (e.g., the Department of Housing, corrupt officials), and the ‘true’ representatives of the Saudi collective, who are framed as having the power to remedy the cause of the dissatisfaction (e.g. the monarchy, the people). This is demonstrated by the links that were drawn between corruption and the frame of Housing, with @saaddousari tweeting, “If the outputs will focus on moving corrupt files towards reform, then the unemployment and housing crises can be swallowed up #Saudi\_vision\_2030.” An approach such as this frames the concerns pertaining to the emphasis dimension of Housing as a function of corruption and poor governance, and which can therefore be resolved by addressing these concerns. (The framing of corruption and failures of governance are discussed in more detail in section 5.3.7.)

<Image removed due to copyright restrictions introduced by Saudi authority for Intellectual Property in 2021>

**Figure 20. Translation:** “If the outputs will focus on moving corrupt files towards reform, then the unemployment and housing crises can be swallowed up #Saudi\_vision\_2030” (2016).

#### **5.4.4. *The Frame of Promoting Economic Development***

Economy was the broadest emphasis dimension coded in this research study. It included the discussion surrounding financial matters, investment, employment, development, oil and tourism. The economy is the primary focus of Vision 2030, and the discussion put forward by the SMIs indicated their realisation of its importance. As discussed earlier, the Saudi government plans to revolutionize its economy by minimising its dependence on oil exports. Thus, the SMIs have claimed that this would help decrease the unemployment ratio in the country, which is currently very high.



Two screenshots of tweets discussing the economy and its impact on unemployment and opportunities have been presented below.

<Image removed due to copyright restrictions introduced by Saudi authority for Intellectual Property in 2021>

**Figure 21. Translation:** “#Saudi\_Vision\_2030: A prosperous economy, fruitful opportunities, reducing the unemployment rate and raising women’s participation” (2016).

<Image removed due to copyright restrictions introduced by Saudi authority for Intellectual Property in 2021>

**Figure 22. Translation:** “The most prominent thing that will be announced in #Saudi\_Vision\_2030 Reducing the unemployment rate from 11.6% to 7% by expanding and diversifying the activity of small enterprises and the entry of foreign investments” (2016).

Furthermore, most of the SMIs also agreed that investment opportunities in the kingdom would boost the economy and promote local tourism. The findings demonstrate that the SMIs were more attracted to openly debating financial matters in the kingdom with their followers.

<Image removed due to copyright restrictions introduced by Saudi authority for Intellectual Property in 2021>

**Figure 23. Translation:** “Open tourism for people from outside will blow up a wealth of tourism in all areas of services and tourism #Saudi\_Vision\_2030” (2016).

As the frequency analysis showed, Promoting Economic Development was a prominent and important frame in the SMIs’ responses to Saudi Vision 2030, and the topic of oil featured prominently in their responses. It is a well-known fact that the economy of Saudi Arabia is heavily dependent on oil exports, which poses challenges to development and makes the country very vulnerable to shifts in the market (Sarant, 2016).

Therefore, there has long been a desire to create a more diversified Saudi economy. Such diversification has the potential to cause resistance, as changes to the structure of the economy will almost certainly affect individuals' livelihoods and ways of life. However, content analysis of the tweets in response to Saudi Vision 2030 indicates support for this focus.

**<Image removed due to copyright restrictions introduced by Saudi authority for Intellectual Property in 2021>**

**Figure 24. Translation:** "#Saudi\_vision\_2030 Reliance on oil as a source of income should not be a sacred belief. Rather, finding and diversifying other sources of income is better than oil" (2016).

**<Image removed due to copyright restrictions introduced by Saudi authority for Intellectual Property in 2021>**

**Figure 25. Translation:** "I liked this statement ... Aramco privatisation 'Post-oil era'" (2016).

Almost all of the tweets that engaged with the role of oil in the economy expressed positive response to the prospect of diversifying the Saudi economy away from its excessive reliance on petroleum exports. For example, @tariqaljaser tweeted "Reliance on oil as a source of income should not be a sacred belief. Rather, finding and diversifying other sources of income is better than oil," which indicates acceptance and promotion of the need for such economic diversification, and which is an opinion held by most of the SMIs in this study; another example is this tweet by @mutaiwee, who expressed support for the idea promoted by Saudi Vision 2030 of moving to a "post-oil era". Indeed, one SMI claimed: "We have an oil addiction in Saudi Arabia, which has negatively affected the development of country" (AlSehman 2016). The strength of the sentiment is expressed here by using the medicalised idea of "addiction" to characterize the effect of Saudi Arabia's dependence on oil on its development.

Given the centrality of oil to the Saudi economy, and therefore its significance in any initiative such as Saudi Vision 2030, which seeks to intervene in this respect, the broadly positive framing of the issue by the SMIs indicates that the alignment between the public and private spheres in this regard was managed

successfully. This represents a potentially valuable area of future inquiry, given the global need to divest from fossil-fuel-based economic practices, and the frequent opposition such needs give rise to (Mangat, Dably & Paterson 2018). Much of this opposition arises from fears associated with employment and economic wellbeing. In the tweets analysed, a common connection established was between oil dependence and limited levels of employment (Mangat, Dalby & Paterson 2018).

Saudi Vision 2030 explains the need for economic diversification as being connected to the need to address the high rates of unemployment in the country. In this sub-dimension again, content analysis of tweets by the SMIs demonstrates high levels of support for, and engagement with, the government's proposals. For example, @shujaa\_albogmi expressed in his tweet (below) the perception that Saudi Vision 2030's focus on youth unemployment represents a "true paradigm shift", while @gorolmalbeshe wrote in his tweet (below) that, as one of Saudi Vision 2030's "main concerns is youth unemployment ... [t]he future is bright." It is noteworthy that the governmental actor identified as the focus of both of these tweets is Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, rather than the government as an institution, for example, or specific ministers. In the first tweet, the prince is tagged before Saudi Vision 2030, and in the second tweet, he is referred to as "the prince of youth", indicating the SMI's belief that the outcomes of the initiative that are expected to be beneficial to this group are fundamentally connected to Prince Mohammed Bin Salman. This connection is explored in more detail below in connection with the frame of Promoting Transparency, and especially in that of Appealing to the Youth, which is discussed next.

**<Image removed due to copyright restrictions introduced by Saudi authority for Intellectual Property in 2021>**

**Figure 26. Translation:** "#Prince\_mohammed\_bin\_salman: Our ambition will swallow up housing and unemployment Problems. You got it. #Saudi\_vision\_2030 is a true paradigm shift" (2016).

<Image removed due to copyright restrictions introduced by Saudi authority for Intellectual Property in 2021>

**Figure 27. Translation:** “Within #Saudi\_vision\_2030 and with the prince of youth, do not give up. One of his main concerns is youthunemployment. The future is bright” (2016).

#### 5.4.5. *The Frame of Appealing to the Youth*

The tweets quoted above in connection with the emphasis dimension of Employment emphasised the importance of Saudi Vision 2030 in addressing issues of specific relevance to the youth. Prince Mohammed Bin Salman was called the “prince of youth”, which emphasised the way unemployment disproportionately affects the KSA youth. A similar trend can be observed in the emphasis dimension of Education. For example, @ZiadAldreess tweeted: “You cannot complete a model for a new country with an old citizen’s thinking mechanism. Education is the first engine in the expected transformation.” The idea expressed here aligns Saudi Vision 2030 with the beliefs and attitudes of the youth, implying the need to move away from the thinking of the “old citizens” to achieve the national goals. The emphasis dimension of Education was also frequently framed with reference to this opposition between Saudi youth and its older citizens, with the SMI arguing that, “Education is the first engine in the expected transformation”, whereby these new, youthful orientations will be achieved.

<Image removed due to copyright restrictions introduced by Saudi authority for Intellectual Property in 2021>

**Figure 28. Translation:** “You cannot complete a model for a new country with an old citizen’s thinking mechanism. Education is the first engine in the expected transformation, God willing #Saudi\_vision\_2030” (2016).

It is this broad orientation in the reception and response of the SMIs to Saudi Vision 2030, and how this influenced their treatments of it on social media, that resulted in the identification of “Appealing to the Youth” as a frame of the frequency analysis. The tweet from @Talhabeeb presented below is a good example of the extent to which the frame of Appealing to the Youth was treated as central to the purpose of Saudi Vision 2030

as a whole. @Talhabeeb wrote: “#Saudi\_vision\_2030 and Prince #Mohammed\_bin\_salman, we focused on youth in terms of successful upcoming stage, and I think the youth are confident of success. The coming days will prove this.” This tweet, like those discussed previously, seeks to emphasize youth in a range of ways. It identifies the emphasis dimension of youth as central to Saudi Vision 2030; it positions the youth of KSA as supporters of the Vision (“the youth are confident of success”); and it positions Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman as a supporter of the youth. A similar tweet by @MASQurashi reads: “I followed #saudi\_vision\_2030 meticulously. It strengthened my belief that the youth are the future of this nation, and those who strive to implement the vision are the young people chosen by the firm King Salman.”

**<Image removed due to copyright restrictions introduced by Saudi authority for Intellectual Property in 2021>**

**Figure 29. Translation:** #Saudi\_vision\_2030 and Prince #Mohammed\_bin\_salman, we focused on youth in terms of successful upcoming stage, and I think the youth are confident of success. The coming days will prove this” (2016).

**<Image removed due to copyright restrictions introduced by Saudi authority for Intellectual Property in 2021>**

**Figure 30. Translation:** "I followed #saudi\_vision\_2030 meticulously. It strengthened my belief that the youth are the future of this nation, and those who strive to implement the vision are the young people chosen by the firm King Salman" (2016).

This emphasis may be due to the demographics of Twitter use in the KSA. Almost 90% of social media users in the kingdom are younger than 35, which indicates that the audience for such tweets would predominantly be comprised of younger people (Saqib 2020). The medium of social media is also a new, young medium, associated with innovation and development, which may influence the dimensions emphasised and the way they are framed. Additionally, a number of the areas focused on by the policies connected with Saudi Vision 2030 also focus on dimensions that predominantly affect the younger generations of the KSA, and which are therefore of main interest to them. For example, in 2017, almost 40% of under-40s were unemployed, compared to 3% of those older than 40, making issues relating to unemployment, diversification of the

economy, and education especially relevant to the Saudi youth. This may also play a role in how and why Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman is framed in the ways observed here, as promoting the cause of the youth.

#### **5.4.6. *The Frame of Empowering Women***

As noted above, rates of engagement relating to empowerment of Saudi women were relatively low. One explanation relates to the norms governing the role of women in Saudi society, which have historically excluded them from public discussions. Women may therefore have felt reluctant to express their opinions about such a topic on a public medium such as Twitter. Certain responses by male SMIs to the frame of Empowering Women also indicate the presence of critical and unfavourable attitudes on Saudi Arabian Twitter to the idea of empowerment of women. For example, Altwaiher (2016) tweeted, “He talked about avision and ambitions that exceed their ambitions, and their thinking is focused on a woman’s leadership andwomen’s driving rights”, implying the SMI’s perception of the inapplicability of concerns with women’s rights in the context of an initiative focused on national development and renewal. There were nevertheless certain favourable responses by male SMIs to the frame of Empowering Women. These focused on both thebenefits of such developments to Saudi society more broadly, such as promoting economic development; andthe rights associated with women’s empowerment, such as the right to drive. These aspects are demonstratedin the tweets provided below.

**<Image removed due to copyright restrictions introduced by Saudi authority for Intellectual Property in 2021>**

**Figure 31. Translation:** “Until now there is no mention about allowing women to drive, Although, many Saudis speculated that recently ☺” (2016).

<Image removed due to copyright restrictions introduced by Saudi authority for Intellectual Property in 2021>

**Figure 32. Translation:** “Breaking: #Saudi\_vision\_2030 Increasing the percentage of women's participation in the labour market from(22%) to (30%)” (2016).

Tweets relating to the empowerment of Saudi women are notable for their emotionally restrained tone, and the limiting of comments to the repetition of facts and figures already stated in the announcement of the Vision itself. In this respect they are very different from the emotional tone that characterizes the tweets that are framed with Supplicating, as discussed above. Where supplications are characterised by emotional and rhetorical intensification, through the invocation of religious identity, use of an emotionally charged lexicon, and adoption of optimistic, forward-looking orientations, tweets related to the empowerment of women tend to avoid all of these devices. Most tweets (55%) simply report the Vision’s stated objective of increasing participation of women in the labour force from 22% to 30%, and addressing the current levels of gendered employment inequality, where male unemployment is at 6% while female unemployment is at 33%, without offering any opinion or explicit perspective. Some 30% of the tweets express optimism or other explicit positive evaluations of the frame of Empowering Women in the Vision, while 15% are specifically critical of this aspect.

This divergence in perceptions and attitudes explains why, as discussed above, the frame of Empowering Women overlaps to as great an extent as it does with the frame of Appealing to Rights and Duties. As has been argued earlier in this chapter, the frame of Appealing to Rights and Duties tends to be adopted for emphasis dimensions that can be expected to demonstrate high degrees of polarisation amongst the audience to which the tweets are directed. The use of the more abstract discourse of rights and duties, derived from an internationalist point of view, is therefore judged a safer rhetorical device than one that invokes notions of

national identity and the Saudi collective, which tend to be used in less contested contexts, where the SMI can expect the sentiment being expressed not to provoke disagreement or controversy. The high prevalence of the use of the frame of Appealing to Rights and Duties in tweets discussing the empowerment of women, and the very low prevalence of supplications and the frame of Building National Identity, would therefore indicate the SMIs' awareness of the fraught and contested nature of this emphasis dimension in the context of Saudi social media.

#### ***5.4.7. The Frame of Promoting Transparency and Communication***

Transparency was the third most widely discussed emphasis dimension among the SMIs regarding Vision 2030. It shows that the SMIs were criticize the lack of transparency and accountability to the people about official matters. It is an open secret that many government ministers in the past were involved in kickbacks and accumulated illegal wealth, but the announcement from the crown prince about the indiscriminate accountability of government officials and ministers in the kingdom possibly motivated the SMIs to openly discuss and support the narratives of the Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman. For example, the following SMI supporting the current government for its vision and efforts.

**<Image removed due to copyright restrictions introduced by Saudi authority for Intellectual Property in 2021>**

**Figure 33. Translation:** “#Mohammed\_bin\_salman: We are working to be one of the lowest in the world in terms of corruption. Yes, YourHighness, achieving this goal is the most important thing, #Saudi\_Vision\_2030” (2016).

As discussed above, the dimension of transparency was frequently framed via the discourse of rights and duties. As with other dimensions framed in this way, the logic of the framing appears to derive from the need to make reference to some trans-national framework in establishing legitimacy and credibility for the position adopted. Given the strongly collectivist, patriotic framing that characterizes so much of the social media



discourse on Saudi Vision 2030, dimensions for which collective unanimity breaks down therefore require a framing that sidesteps the invocation of national identity as the grounding legitimization. In the context of a discussion of transparency, there is an implicit criticism of some portions of the Saudi state in relation to public servants being criticised for failures. The use of the frame of Appealing to Rights and Duties therefore provides a framework and perspective from outside that of national identity from which to articulate this criticism without appearing to be diverge from the collective identity.

Public trust in government institutions is an important predictor of the degree to which they are able to achieve engagement and influence on social media (Bonsón & Ratkai 2013). Therefore, the frame of Promoting Transparency and Communication is a potentially important indicator of how SMIs represented the trustworthiness of the government in presenting Saudi Vision 2030. This importance is strengthened by the fact that one of the goals of Saudi Vision is to reduce corruption in public sectors and make these sectors more accountable. One significant tweet responding to this frame read: “Acknowledging the mistakes is the first step to success. #Mohammed\_bin\_salman talked to the people with transparency and responsibility” (@kdrali, 2016). This tweet demonstrates an attempt to promote trust in the government by indicating that the acknowledgement of the presence of problems about transparency and accountability is the first step to addressing these problems. It is noteworthy that Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman is tagged first in this tweet, and Saudi Vision 2030 only at the end; also, “transparency and responsibility” are attributed to him, rather than the government or the Vision.

**<Image removed due to copyright restrictions introduced by Saudi authority for Intellectual Property in 2021>**

**Figure 34. Translation:** “Acknowledging the mistakes is the first step to success. #Mohammed\_bin\_salman talked to the people with transparency and responsibility. #Saudi\_Vision\_2030” (2016).

A second noteworthy tweet in this frame identified the link between trust, transparency and communication even more directly. @Almatrafi tweeted, “A new discourse in its own language, based on transparency and equality. #Saudi\_vision\_2030.” It is interesting to note that he did not emphasize a new system, or a new set of laws, for example, to eradicate corruption, but instead, the tweet focused on the changes he could observe in the language that the government was using to discuss these dimensions: “A new discourse in its own language”. This may suggest a way in which social media communication can overcome problems of trust through the use of specific discursive strategies. A number of tweets in this category emphasised the value of such media and social media-based signalling, treating the press conference in which the initiative was announced as if it itself was a form of transparency that marked the kind of change that was desired. For example, Zabin (2016) tweeted, “In this video: #Mohamed\_Ben\_Salman confidently, a ruler who speaks with transparency and clarity #Saudi\_Vision\_2030.” The framing conflates the transparency of public institutions with media and social media messaging: the willingness of a public figure (in this case, Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman) to engage in accessible forms of public communication is itself taken to represent a form of accountability and transparency at the level of policy and service delivery. The historical and social contexts of Saudi Arabia, whereby traditional media has for a long time been controlled and censored, play a role in this perception.

**<Image removed due to copyright restrictions introduced by Saudi authority for Intellectual Property in 2021>**

**Figure 35. Translation:** “A new discourse in its own language, based on transparency and equality. #Saudi\_vision\_2030” (2016).

**<Image removed due to copyright restrictions introduced by Saudi authority for Intellectual Property in 2021>**

**Figure 36. Translation:** “The new policy puts us, government and people, within the framework of societal responsibility to fight corruption ... economic advancement ... and change for the better #Saudi\_vision\_2030” (2016).

An emphasis dimension that was characterised by relatively high levels of negative valence was the

tweets that focused on the media. For example, @agbalawi emphasised the deficiencies of the current Saudi media, while @HALbdrani's tweet noted the "superficial coverage" characteristic of the Saudi media. Such framing is a valuable way for SMIs to imply and underscore the value of the information they themselves are providing, as an alternative to traditional media providers. It is again noteworthy that Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman is posited in this tweet as a positive contrast to a negative institutional framework, with the implication that the "superficial" media is unable to do justice to the prince's "deep" and "remarkable" speech.

<Image removed due to copyright restrictions introduced by Saudi authority for Intellectual Property in 2021>

**Figure 37. Translation:** "One of the elements of achieving #Saudi\_vision\_2030 is active and observer professional media.

Unfortunately,our media needs a lot and suffers from a lot #Saudi\_press" (2016).

<Image removed due to copyright restrictions introduced by Saudi authority for Intellectual Property in 2021>

**Figure 38. Translation:** "Hope the media goes beyond their superficial coverage of #saudi\_vision\_2030. It needs to provide a deep analysis that is in line with Prince Mohammed Bin Salman's remarkable speech" (Tweet11, 2016).

A framing of this type demonstrates, again, the way in which the SMIs' criticisms made use of a bifurcation between relevant actors. As discussed in the literature review (Albalawi & Sixsmith 2017; Anderson 2016; Aljabre 2013; Fernandez 2018), the Saudi media landscape has been characterised by a censorship.. This has limited its freedom in reporting on the public institutions and range of other areas. In light of such a situation, it is perhaps not surprising that Saudi citizens express scepticism and doubt regarding the reliability and transparency of the media. As noted previously, the emphasis dimension of Media was marked by the highest percentage of negatively valanced tweets. This high proportion of negative responses to the emphasis dimension of Media can be interpreted as reflecting the SMIs' opinion of the unreliability of the

media in this respect. Criticism of the media also serves to pose the SMIs themselves as reliable authorities and alternative sources of information: emphasis on the unreliability of the traditional media implicitly emphasizes the value of non-traditional media, such as social media.

It seems likely that the history of media censorship in the state plays a role in this framing. As discussed previously, the SMIs appear to self-censor their criticism of the public institutions in their social media content. As shown in the sections above, criticisms of the public institutions and its policies tend to be deflected onto specific agents and parties in order to frame the criticism as pertaining not to the public institutions as a whole but only to individual actors. the framing directs the criticism at the media itself, and poses the state and its representatives as a means whereby such problems can be overcome. It is also possible that such framing is determined by the desire on the part of SMIs, discussed above, not to be seen as being overly critical of the Saudi nation, in order to maintain an appearance of patriotism and commitment to national identity.

## **5.5. Summary**

This chapter investigated the framing of Vision 2030 by the Saudi SMIs, and evaluated the usefulness of framing devices in generating engagement with followers. The findings indicated that most of the tweets about Vision 2030 were shared by male SMIs rather than female SMIs. It also demonstrated that three-quarters of the SMIs had a following of up to 100,000, while nearly a quarter of SMIs had followings of up to one million. The data on the sharing of tweets in different weeks showed that the majority of the tweets were shared in the first two weeks after the announcement of Vision 2030; 79% of the tweets were shared in the first week. The findings also indicate that the SMIs failed to engage their followers to a great extent; most of their tweets were liked and/or retweeted by less than 50 followers.

In response to the first research question of this study (“How do the SMIs frame the Saudi government to their followers when tweeting about Vision 2030?”), among the most significant findings was that framing

appears to bifurcate according to the content being discussed in the tweet in question. Where the content was uncontroversial and a topic on which a high degree of unanimity could be expected among the audience, the SMIs made extensive use of the frames of Building National Identity and Supplication. These frames explicitly allude to and draw on notions of Saudi collectivism and group belonging, in this way situating the SMI in question within the moral collective. In contrast, for dimensions about which there are high degrees of disagreement and contestation in the country, the SMIs make greater use of frames such as Appealing to Rights and Duties, Transparency, and Appealing to the Youths. The rationale of this approach appears to be based on the management of divisiveness among the audience as a means of confronting contested dimensions while avoiding representing oneself as being in any way opposed to the national collective.

In response to the second research question of this thesis (“What framing devices are useful in generating engagement with their followers?”), the findings revealed that the frames of Promoting Economic Development, Promoting Transparency and Communication, and Supplication were highly emphasised frames in discussion on Vision 2030, while those of Empowering Women, Appealing to the Youth, and Appealing to Rights and Duties were debated less.

The tweets that achieved the highest levels of engagement adopted Supplication and Building National Identity frames, but as a whole these frames did not demonstrate levels of engagement significantly higher than average. The frame of Appealing to Rights and Duties was generally associated with lower levels of engagement, presumably due to the concerns discussed above whereby the use of this frame tended to be associated with controversial and potentially divisive dimensions.

It is also important to note that as far as the tone of the coverage is concerned, most of the coverage was positive, followed by neutral and then negative. All such factors indicate that the dynamics of engagement on social media in Saudi Arabia differ in significant ways from those that have been identified in other socio-

political contexts. Stated broadly, social media engagements in the Saudi context explored in this study indicate a performative dimension, whereby affiliation with, and support of, the national collective plays a much more important role than has generally been discerned elsewhere.

Relevant aspects of Saudi Arabia's history and its current social and cultural arrangements have been adduced in this chapter to explain the findings. These topics are explored in more detail in the following 'discussion' chapter, which will investigate the motivations that drive the framing of Vision 2030 in response to the third research question of this thesis ("What is the profile insight of the SMIs and the motivations driving them to engage with Vision 2030?").

## **Chapter 6. Personal Views of the SMIs & their Engagement with Vision 2030**

### **6.1. Introduction**

The previous chapter presented the findings from the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the tweets related to the official hashtag of Saudi Vision 2030. This chapter presents the findings of the analysis of interviews conducted by the researcher with the Saudi social media influencers (SMIs) chosen for this research study based on their significant follower engagement with Vision 2030 and number of associated likes and retweets. A total of twelve semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with these SMIs, who are based in Riyadh and Jeddah. The detailed justification of the interview sample, its size and sampling strategy, has been presented in Chapter 4.

This chapter discusses the core findings collected from the interviewees arising from the content analysis method (discussed in Chapter 5) by addressing the third research question of this thesis:

### **6.1.1. Research Question 3: What are the profiles of the SMIs and their motivations that drive them to engage with Vision 2030?**

To generate a better understanding of this research question, the researcher has developed a total of ten interview questions in Chapter 4. Furthermore, to achieve consistency and accuracy, a back-translation approach was adopted, while producing the interview-based findings chapter. As the interviews were originally conducted in Arabic, they were transcribed and then translated into English. A colleague, who had no prior knowledge of this project, was asked to translate the transcribed material. Thus, it was compared with the original text and further equivalency and consistency was ensured.

This chapter has been broadly divided in two sections. The first section looks at the profile insight of SMIs, coupled with their background, and then followed by in-depth analysis. Findings about personal views – based on six interview questions – are attached in chapter 4. There is also discussion on the most engaging frames at the end. The second section looks at *Vision 2030* and the SMIs' motivations. It has been further divided into three sub-sections.

## **6.2. Profiles of the SMIs**

This section presents the profiles of the twelve SMIs interviewed by the researcher in this research project. It highlights the background of these SMIs including their age, gender, number of followers, and their professional background. The researcher attempted to ascertain whether their backgrounds influenced their views about *Vision 2030*, and if so, how this had an impact on the ways in which they framed *Vision 2030*.

### **6.2.1. Profile Backgrounds of the SMIs**

This section presents the profile backgrounds of the twelve SMIs interviewed by the researcher, which includes their age, gender, number of followers, and professions. This information is an indicator of their

personal, familial and professional outlooks, which will help explain their attitudes and personal views about *Vision 2030*, including their framing of it. Indeed, Twitter has become one of the most popular mediums of communication among the Saudi population, and prominent people from different walks of life have started using it to propagate their ideas and information to the larger segment of society to rally support for their causes.

### **6.3. Insights into the SMIs' Profiles and Personal Views**

The findings in Chapter 5 demonstrated that although some of the SMIs had a huge following on Twitter, they could not intensely engage their followers while tweeting about *Vision 2030*. The majority of the tweets were liked and retweeted by 50 or fewer followers.

One of the dominant reasons for the poor engagement from the SMIs' perspective is the fact that, according to the findings, only a quarter of the SMIs approved *Vision 2030*, and the rest either just showed curiosity or held a neutral opinion about it. Therefore, the majority of SMIs were not assured about the accurate details of *Vision 2030*, and as a result, found it difficult to utilize proper social media campaign strategy to produce posts convincing their followers to engage with it. Again, one can deduce different reasons for this, but the dominant one could be that the Saudi government's plan came as a breakthrough for the SMIs, and thus they were struggling to understand it and come up with a definite opinion on it. It appeared that the majority of the SMIs interviewed for this study were trying to figure out details related to *Vision 2030*, which were not initially shared with them. The findings in Chapter 5 also revealed that the SMIs were busier publishing tweets in the first two weeks after *Vision 2030* was officially announced, and their interest in publishing tweets decreased over time.

The above findings have revealed that the SMIs who supported *Vision 2030* (voicing approval or showing curiosity towards *Vision 2030*) trusted the Saudi government, and especially its Crown Prince



Mohammad bin Salman. However, those who did not have a positive view of the vision tended to give more neutral views about the concept.

The Saudi government usually sharing such mega project plans with its people. nevertheless, Media outlets operating in the kingdom also remain cautious of debating the government's decisions due to strict rules and regulations for the media. Indeed, *Vision 2030* (aiming to revolutionize Saudi Arabia) was big news for the people living in the kingdom.

The findings also demonstrated that although most of the SMIs had a critical view of *Vision 2030*, they were mostly supportive of the Saudi government and its plan. Many of them were waiting for the official word on the project and the details related to it. Indeed, it is a big project and, if executed successfully, would open new opportunities for the people of Saudi Arabia, in addition to changing the structure of its economy and affairs. So, it was hard for them to stay disconnected.

The findings, based on the responses of the twelve SMIs, also demonstrated that the inclusive opinions of the majority of the SMIs were positive. Therefore, they were hopeful that *Vision 2030* would bring positive changes. On the other hand, there was some level of reluctance among the SMIs about the government's flagship project; five SMIs interviewed in this study expressed neutral opinions about it. These findings supported the earlier results of valence framing (as mentioned in Chapter 5), where most of the tweets were positively framed and then followed by neutral framing.

Furthermore, the twelve Saudi SMIs interviewed by the researcher expressed mixed levels of confidence in their personal opinions about *Vision 2030*. The findings revealed that five of the SMIs were moderately confident in their opinions, while another four were very confident in their opinions. It is also significant to note that three were neutral in their opinions about *Vision 2030*. This demonstrates that many of

the SMIs were relatively confident of the stand they took on *Vision 2030*.

It also noted that none of the FSMIs had a ‘very strong’ opinion about *Vision 2030*. Initially, two of the three female SMIs showed indifferent responses to *Vision 2030*. In contrast, the male SMIs were more confident of their stand on *Vision 2030*; four of them held ‘very strong’ positions, while three others held ‘moderately strong’ opinions. Thus, it demonstrates that most of the MSMIs were very confident of their expressed views while the FSMIs were comparatively less confident of their expressed views overall.

The SMIs, who are based in Saudi Arabia and were interviewed in this research project, were asked to share the inclusive message that they wanted to communicate to their followers while tweeting about *Vision 2030*. The aim of this exercise was to understand the purpose of using their respective Twitter accounts to debate *Vision 2030*. The findings demonstrated that the inclusive message, shared by most of the SMIs, was based on hope for the future of Saudi Arabia. There was some level of support for the government among the SMIs, as they welcomed the initiative and wanted their followers to support the initiative and government as well. However, some of the SMIs were curious and insisted on checking whether the government entities would fulfil the programs proposed, or whether it will face obstacles, like previous plans.

The findings suggest that the personality of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman also left an impression on SMIs. For example, FSMI 1 indicated her surprise at the forcefulness with which he emphasised the importance in the changes relating to women’s rights (such as the right to drive), suggesting that this represented a significant factor in shifting her attitude toward the government. She stated, “Honestly, I first doubted the government’s desire that they would work for improving the conditions of women in the country but my thinking changed [as a result of the prince’s intervention...]. Thus, it changed my mind about attitude of the Saudi government and their sincerity to work for the empowerment of women.” Expressing similar views with respect to the interventions focused on corruption, MSMI 2 stated, “I was mostly interested to know that how Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman would fight corruption, as he himself confessed that Saudi Arabia has

suffered a lot due to corruption. [...]. I am sure, these measures will ensure transparency and accountability among the different government departments.” Stating the matter more generally, MSMI6 said, “I had high hopes from the Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman that he would change the country,” and MSMI 8 said, “I had trust in the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman.”

The SMIs were also asked to comment on whether there were any aspects or dimensions embedded in *Vision 2030* that they wanted to emphasize, and the reason(s) behind their decision(s). The findings revealed that the most interesting dimensions for the SMIs included female and youth empowerment, transparency and accountability, tourism and entertainment, unemployment, and economic issues. This demonstrates that the kingdom was passing through a critical stage in which all these different issues were prevailing. While the SMIs had been noticing this silently, when the government announced the mega plan, it encouraged the SMIs to speak their mind.

The findings also confirmed that the personal views of the SMIs did not vary with their age, gender or religion. The FSMIs took more interest in female-related issues, while the MSMIs highlighted the youth or more general issues faced by the Saudi people. This can be verified from the quotes of the SMIs interviewed by the researcher. For example, FSMI 1 shared:

The vision seems very fascinating as the government wants to change everything in the kingdom upside down. But I am still thinking how the conditions of women will be improve in the kingdom. (FSMI 1 2019).

Similarly, FMSI 2, also taking a keen interest in female-related issues in the kingdom, reiterated:

I cherish the Vision 2030 but I am still thinking that will the things change for us in the Saudi Arabia. I believe that Saudi government will delivers its promises as they made with us (FSMI 2 2019).

The MSMIs, on the other hand, focused on the economy, youth unemployment, transparency and accountability, entertainment, and tourism. MSMI 3, in an interview with the researcher, shared:

I wanted to emphasize the transparency and accountability – besides debating the diversification of economy that would result in the creation of more job opportunities for youth in the country (MSMI3 2019).

Likewise, MSMI 8 stressed:

Besides showing my support to the Crown Prince, I also took keen interest in the youth empowerment dimension of Vision 2030. As we know that youth share the biggest proportion of Saudi population and their empowerment would ensure achieving the desired goals in Vision 2030 (MSMI 8 2019).

Despite these similarities, the researcher found that the subject matter of the personal views of almost half of the SMIs interviewed by the researcher (FSMI3, MSMI 1, MSMI 2, MSMI 4, MSMI 6 and MSMI 7) differed from their professional field of expertise. While they had expertise in one field, the dimensions they wanted to emphasize to their followers belonged to another field. This can be best understood in the personal views of FSMI 3, who is a fashion influencer promoting designer products and fashion. She stressed in an interview with the researcher that she wanted to highlight the female-related issues in her tweets. She claimed:

Being a woman, I was mostly tweeting about the women-empowerment-related issues. All I wanted was that rules related to the women in the country should be change. In Saudi Arabia, we have now many educated women graduated from US and UK, and they have the ability to take on any leadership positions in public sector institutions and contribute to achieve the desired goals in the Vision 2030. I feel that segregation of women in public places such as restaurants etc should be ended. We are all equal (FSMI 3 2020).

These glimpses of variance from their professional background can be also seen in the male social media influencers. MSMI 1, who is one of the most popular fine artists in Saudi Arabia, and promotes artwork on his Twitter account, claimed, ‘I was focusing on the economic-related dimensions in the Vision 2030’ (MSMI 1).

Similarly, MSMI 2, who is an entrepreneur by profession and mostly shares about financial matters, claimed, ‘I was mostly emphasising on entertainment, tourism and national unity. I was trying to share national music and pictures with my tweets to support the Vision 2030’ (MSMI 2 2020).

In like manner, MSMI 6, who is an artist and mostly shows interest in fine art and painting, claimed, ‘I was trying to emphasize youth empowerment, and was trying my level best to guide the youth to participate in social initiatives offered by the government through many ministries’ (MSMI 6 2020).

These findings clearly demonstrated that half of the SMIs deviated from their expertise, and shared tweets about *Vision 2030* that did not match their professional background. Indeed, these Saudi SMIs are popular on Twitter due to their relevant expertise in a particular field. However, this deviation in content by the interviewed SMIs clearly indicates that it could be one of the dominant reasons behind their failure to engage their followers on dimensions around *Vision 2030*.

Furthermore, if these findings are compared with the results in Chapter 5 regarding the impact of emphasis framing on driving engagement, then it shows that economy and youth are the only two frames (dimensions) emphasised by the SMIs with the potential to drive engagement. All the other dimensions emphasised by the SMIs have had a negative impact on engagement. The more they debated these dimensions in their tweets, the less their followers engaged.

It is difficult to criticize the SMIs for choosing the ‘wrong’ dimensions or topics related to *Vision 2030*, as they rightly selected the real issues facing the Saudi citizens and debated them. Since this research study only focuses on the content of the tweets and the interviews of these twelve SMIs, it is difficult to predict anything on the part of the followers of SMIs.

### 6.3.1. *The SMIs' Preferred Aspects/ Dimensions of Vision 2030 to Engage Their Followers*

The selected SMIs were asked to share the frames of *Vision 2030* that interested them the most, and the reasons behind their choices. The purpose of this was to understand the SMIs' priorities when they engaged with the launch of *Vision 2030*.

These findings, on one hand, informed the researcher about the preferences of the SMIs, and on the other hand, provided the opportunity to compare them against the data of emphasis framing and valence framing as discussed in Chapter 5.

The SMIs were given the opportunity to share multiple *Vision 2030* dimensions. Thus, some of them shared one or two, while others shared many. All the dimensions were reproduced and are discussed in this section in order of their dominance.

**I. Female Empowerment** is one of the major issues debated by the patriarchal, culturally conservative Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and highlighted by many in, and even outside, the Kingdom by both men and women. Female empowerment in the context of Saudi Arabia means enabling equality for Saudi women in every aspect of their lives.

It is true that women in the kingdom have always struggled for equal rights, including rights of representation at different societal levels, driving rights, business and social rights, and even an improved social position. The 34.7 million population of Saudi Arabia includes 14.5 million women, approximately 42% of the overall population.

The three FSMIs interviewed in this research study placed great importance on female empowerment, and highlighted the issue from their own perspectives. Unsurprisingly, the female SMIs focused more on this dimension than the MSMIs. Most of the female SMIs had not expected that Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman would touch on female empowerment in his speech unveiling *Vision 2030*. FSMI 1, a SMI from Riyadh, shared:

I didn't expect the Crown Prince or even government to talk about the women empowerment – especially their driving rights! It all came as a surprise. In past, women in Saudi Arabia were not allowed to drive their own cars but, Crown Prince, in his speech, shared that it is not a religious issue

– but the issue that is directly related to a community, who should either accept it or reject it. When The royal decree issued in September 2017 allowed the women to drive their own cars. I respected that how the government is sincere to work for the women empowerment. Since the announcement, I am tweeting about the women empowerment and wish that the government should promote women, especially those who are well-educated and well-qualified, in higher positions (FSMI 1 2019).

FSMI2, also based in Riyadh, shared that she was looking forward about the future of women in the kingdom, as most of the religious scholars and some educated people shared discourse, based on religion, against female empowerment. She insisted that Islam does not prohibit women from working, participating and contributing to the community. She claimed,

I was happier to see that Crown Prince talked about the women empowerment and you can now see that the government has finally issued the travelled documents to women and they can now travel without permission or intervention of their male guardian. There is no more guardianship and no more *fatwa* [a legal decree handed down by a religious scholar] (FSMI 2 2019).

FSMI 3, hailing from Jeddah, supported the viewpoint of other influencers by stressing that women – especially the new generations living in the kingdom – want equal status with men. She asserted, 'some issues are resolved now, like travel without guardians and permission to drive cars by women' (FSMI 3 2020).

**II. Youth Employment:** As discussed earlier, the population of Saudi Arabia is 34.7 million with a median age of 31.8 years (Worldometer 2020). It is significant that 45% of the Saudi population are under the age of 24, about 47% are between 25 and 54, and only 3.2% are older than 65 (Thompson 2019: 1). Furthermore, 84% of the Saudi population live in the urban areas (World Bank 2019). Given the circumstances, the young people living in the Kingdom are hitted by unemployment. The unemployment ratio in the country in 2020 was 5.92%, at its highest in a decade (Plecher 2020).

Therefore, unemployment among the Saudi youth is one of the major issues that Saudi government looking to solve. There are many young Saudis who have recently graduated from university and are having many difficulties finding good jobs. Thus, youth employment was mentioned as a major issue by most SMIs when interviewed by the researcher, highlighted by three MSMIs.

MSMI 4, based in Jeddah, was of the opinion that the youth unemployment ratio was critical. It appeared interesting to him when the Crown Prince highlighted the plan to increase employment opportunities for Saudi youths (MSMI 4 2019).

MSMI5, also hailing from Jeddah, confirmed that among the many important aspects of *Vision 2030*, he believed that the most important is Saudi youth unemployment. He questioned how the ministry of labour would tackle the issue. He emphasised,

I felt disappointed during the last ten years as many good jobs were offered to foreign citizens – but, Saudi youth, who got graduated from American, British and Australian universities did not find such opportunities in the kingdom. Now, I see the government is sincere in resolving this issue, they need to come up with a plan through the ministry of labour with a clear set of rules that addresses the labour market. They need to deliberate this issue with private companies too to create perfect jobs for qualified Saudi youth (MSMI 5 2019).

Similarly, MSMI8, a SMI based in Riyadh, insisted that youth employment would bring huge benefits to the society and country.

**III. Transparency, Accountability and Good Governance** are also major concerns of the people in Saudi Arabia. In the context of the Kingdom, this means rooting out corruption, ending the unnecessary delays in work (bureaucratic hurdles), and making institutions more answerable and transparent to the government of Saudi Arabia.

Perhaps as a result of all these reasons, three MSMIs detailed the issues of transparency, accountability and good governance. MSMI 1, based in Riyadh, highlighted that transparency, good governance and fighting corruption were the dimensions that most engaged him. He claimed that in the past, 'it was difficult to raise voices against corruption and nepotism in government jobs' (MSMI 1 2019).



MSMI 2, hailing from Riyadh, also insisted that fighting corruption, bringing transparency into public sectors systems, and promoting good governance were the most engaging dimensions. In his opinion, the claim from the Crown Prince that the country had suffered a lot due to corruption was a major statement. He claimed that the idea of ‘an online dashboard showing the goals of each ministry with monthly key performance indicators will be a good practice to ensure transparency and accountability. Such initiatives will ensure good performance across the country’ (MSMI 2 2019).

The issue was so important that it also drew the interest of MSMI 3, based in Riyadh. He was confident that the Saudi government was sincere in its fight against corruption and other evil practices that defined the kingdom in the past. He asserted,

I hope the transparency [and accountability], claimed by the government, will continue till 2030 as I can see a shift. I remember what happened in 2017 when government established anti-corruption committee and detained several high-profile persons associated with the Saudi government. On my Twitter account, many of my followers could not believe that this has happened in our country. This is a huge step toward a new mechanism of transparency [and accountability] in government. In the past, Many ministers were served a long term – pursuing their vested personal interests. But, in Vision 2030, no one can skip accountability (MSMI 3 2019).

**IV. Culture, Tourism and Entertainment** are important areas for promoting a positive image of any country, and helping these governments generate good revenue in return. Saudi Arabia, considered as a conservative country by many, has always struggled with its image in the region, as well as in the wider world. People living in the Kingdom have also complained about the lack of cultural and entertainment activities. One can find many reasons for the poor image of the country, because it includes the lack of interest in building the tourism and entertainment industry.

It was the vision of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, who decided to open the country more culturally to the rest of the world in order to promote a softer image and also to provide better entertainment opportunities for its citizens. He decided to arrange cultural events in the kingdom via private or international partners to provide quality entertainment for its citizens. Furthermore, he also directed the authorities to issue e-visas to pilgrims and tourists. All these initiatives would indeed help the economy of Saudi Arabia, as well as promote the rich culture of Saudi Arabia, which is deeply rooted in Islam.

Three male Saudi SMIs highlighted the importance of culture, tourism and entertainment in their interviews. MSMI 2, a SMI based in Riyadh, believed that it was one of the most engaging aspects of *Vision 2030*. He emphasised that by working on these aspects, the government could transform the kingdom into a highly attractive destination. He claimed,

Vision 2030 claimed that there are many unexplored spots in the kingdom and working on it could attract the foreign tourists. Therefore, the government has started issuing visas at airports to attract tourists – besides hosting many activities that changed the perception of people in the world about the kingdom (MSMI 2 2019).

MSMI 6, another SMI based in Jeddah, claimed that the notion of enhancing citizen participation in cultural and entertainment activities increased his interest in *Vision 2030*. He complained about the lack of museums, galleries and theatres in the kingdom; places where families could spend time, other than in coffee shops or malls. He maintained that as a SMI, he used to share his travel pictures with his followers, who expressed their wish to have the same experiences and opportunities in Saudi Arabia. He claimed that there was a large majority of Saudis supporting openness and entertainment in the kingdom.

The culture, tourism and entertainment aspect of *Vision 2030* was equally liked by MSMI 9. Living in Riyadh, he claimed that if the Saudi government decided to promote its heritage and culture, it would enhance its economy without showing dependency on oil. Furthermore, he claimed that the government could prove its presence in the world in a more positive way. Reiterating his personal experience, he shared,

I am travel influencer and I have visited more than 112 countries. I have attended many cultural and entertainment events in those countries. Surprisingly, most of these countries do not have oil or any other resources that we do have in our country – but they succeeded boosting their economy through exporting their culture and exhibiting their identity to the people around the world (MSMI 9 2020).

**V. Saudi Housing:** Housing remains one of the major issues for people living in the Kingdom. Many have complained about the previous housing policies of ministry of housing. Mohammad bin Salman, Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, promised in *Vision 2030* that he would reform land laws and change the landscape of real estate business in the country. It was decided that the ministry of housing would provide good, affordable accommodation to its people, increasing the ownership of homes to 70% by 2030.

Similarly, the male SMIs in this study took an interest in the issue, highlighting it during the interviews. MSMI 1, from Riyadh, was also inspired by the government's planned reformation of the housing sector. He appreciated the government's plans to extend taxes on underdeveloped land (White lands), and to maintain the market price to help local citizens buy their own houses.

MSMI 2 supported the idea that while the previous ministry of housing policies did not show a plan to deal with this issue clearly, Vision 2030 very clearly elaborated it. He claimed,

You know that most of the Saudis are living in the rented housing, and don't own their houses – but on the part of government we are seeing a real change in their policies. The recent news of 321,000 housing units constructed by the ministry of housing is the evident example of such change in policies (MSMI 2 2019).

**VI. Diversifying the Saudi Economy:** By ending the KSA's sole dependency on oil resources, other resources can be explored and the economy diversified, potentially ensuring more revenue in return. This includes promoting tourism, public-private partnerships (PPPs) and the entertainment economy. This issue was only identified by one SMI.

MSMI 8, based in Riyadh, liked the idea of transforming the whole country and diversifying the economy of Saudi Arabia by showing less dependency on income from oil. He claimed,

the revenue-generating model in almost all the countries has been transformed – but it never changed in the Saudi Arabia. I am happy that the present government has felt the need of it and want to explore the multiple sources to boost our economy. We can't take risk to show dependency on our oil resources only (MSMI 8 2019).

The above findings demonstrate that the most engaging dimensions, as shared by the SMIs in their interviews, include the empowering of women; youth empowerment/ employment; transparency, accountability and good governance; and culture, tourism and entertainment. Each of these dimensions was regularly

mentioned by three of the SMIs. In contrast, the dimension relating to the housing sector was only mentioned by two SMIs, and diversifying the economy was mentioned by one SMI.

These findings mostly correlate with the findings presented in the sections of emphasis framing and valence framing in Chapter 5, except for the debate surrounding female empowerment and the media. The data collected through the content analysis method, discussed in Chapter 5, revealed that female empowerment was the least discussed dimension, and that media was the most widely discussed dimension. However, the findings here demonstrate that the dimension of media was not discussed by any SMI, and female empowerment was included in the more highly discussed dimensions. Furthermore, the positive tone adopted by the SMIs in these interviews indicated similar findings to the content analysis method as mentioned in the section on valence framing.

## **6.4. Motivations for Social Media Engagement with Vision 2030**

This section investigates the motivations behind the Saudi SMIs' framing of the Saudi government to their followers in relation to *Vision 2030*. For clarity, this has been divided into three different sub-sections. The first sub-section explores why the SMIs considered it important or worthwhile to tweet content relating the government. The second sub-section explores what they felt SMIs would be able to contribute in connection with *Vision 2030*. The last sub-section explores what the SMIs wanted to achieve while discussing *Vision 2030*. These three sub-sections are therefore closely related, but differ in perspective: the first focuses on why they engaged with governmental matters, the second on what they felt SMIs were able to contribute in doing so, and the third on what outcomes they were hoping to achieve. The three sections therefore explore the extrinsic, intrinsic, and instrumental motivations of the SMIs for engaging with Vision 2030 on Twitter.

### **6.4.1. *The SMIs' Motivations for Expressing Opinions About the Government***

There are varying motivations for framing the government by the SMIs on Twitter to their followers. The researcher accumulated the major dimensions that emerged from the responses of the SMIs, rather than discussing the individual responses of the SMIs. The dimensions discussed below have been ordered according to the frequency that they are mentioned by the SMIs. Therefore, dimensions mentioned by most of the SMIs have been discussed first, followed by the others. The findings can be seen below.

## **I. Commitment to a national responsibility**

The majority of the Saudi SMIs interviewed in this project insisted that it was contributing to the national cause that motivated their discussion of *Vision 2030* on Twitter. For example, MSMI 2 disclosed that he believed it was his national responsibility to share information and broadcast honest views, especially as he attended the Crown Prince's press conference himself.

This view was supported by MSMI 4, who claimed that he was tweeting about *Vision 2030* because he wanted to inform his followers and Saudi citizens that he was standing firmly in support of national issues. He claimed,

Similarly, MSMI 6 revealed that he wanted to let everyone know that he was supporting the plan introduced by the government and was trying to motivate others to trust *Vision 2030* in order to convert it into a successful venture.

MSMI 8 also believed that it was his love for his country that motivated him to support the plan on Twitter. MSMI 9 also agreed that it was his national responsibility to frame the Saudi *Vision 2030* in a positive way.

## **II. Commitment to their followers:**

The majority of the SMIs interviewed by the researcher disclosed that one of the basic motives for sharing information and opinions on Twitter was their commitment to their followers. They wanted to update them about the government's plan. For example, FSMI 3 tweeted about *Vision 2030* because she knew that if she didn't, she would have been questioned by her followers for ignoring such an important issue at such a peak time.

The idea has been seconded by other SMIs. MSMI 1 reiterated that being popular among his followers as a young promising entrepreneur, he felt that it was his responsibility to guide his followers about the economic plan of the Saudi government. He confessed that by being one of the analysts of the government's policies related to economic and financial plans, his followers were eager to see if he had changed his mind after *Vision 2030* was unveiled.

Likewise, MSMI 3 confirmed that it was his commitment to his followers that motivated him to share updated information and views about *Vision 2030*. He claimed that it equally showed his love for his country and enthusiasm about the government's plan.

### **III. Sharing information without a clear motive:**

There were two SMIs interviewed in this research project who did not show a clear motivation for sharing *Vision 2030* information with their followers. FSMI 1 revealed that she shared general information about the new developmental strategies with her followers without any strong motives.

Similarly, MSMI 7 disclosed that he didn't intend to express his opinions about *Vision 2030* with his followers, but he was trying to figure out the ultimate goals of this plan, including learning more about the economic initiatives related to *Vision 2030*.

#### **IV. The clear message from Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman:**

MSMI 5 believed that it was the 'transparency' of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman and his strong and clear stance on corruption that encouraged him to share his opinions regarding *Vision 2030* with his followers.

#### **V. Taking advantage of the *Vision 2030* hashtag:**

FSMI 2 revealed that she shared information and her views regarding *Vision 2030* with her followers to get retweeted by many of her over 200k followers. She argued that *Vision 2030* was an engaging hashtag, so she decided to utilize it.

The above findings demonstrate that serving the national cause was one of the dominant reasons for Saudi SMIs engaging with *Vision 2030* on Twitter; they considered it their social responsibility. This can be interpreted in three ways: it may reflect a level of maturity and their sense of patriotism; it may be that they saw it as a successful means of self-promotion; or it might be a combination of these two factors.

#### **6.4.2. *Personal Perspectives on the Value and Importance of SMIs Sharing About Vision 2030***

The SMIs were asked to share their views about why it was important for SMIs like them to tweet about *Vision 2030*. The findings revealed that the SMIs indicated multiple reasons, including sharing accurate and updated information about *Vision 2030*, which is a mega government project; countering propaganda coming from fake accounts on Twitter; and the temptation of having a huge following on Twitter. The responses of each SMI are presented below.

**FSMI 1** revealed that it she felt it was important for her to tweet about *Vision 2030* as she wanted to reflect current, lived realities of those living in the Kingdom. She stated that Saudi SMIs tweeting about *Vision*

2030 did not request to promote the government's initiative

**FSMI 2** shared that she tweeted about *Vision 2030* because she believed she is one of the most 'trusted' SMIs in the Kingdom. She declared that 'influence' was not related to the number of followers, but directly linked the relevant background of SMIs to the issues they debated. She disclosed that she had received a good education and relevant experience in national affairs, which prompted her tweets about *Vision 2030*

**FSMI 3** revealed that having a huge number of followers on Twitter, and also being a woman, meant that she was more attracted to the women-related issues, and that is why she tweeted about *Vision 2030*.

**MSMI 1** shared that he tweeted about *Vision 2030* as he considered it the 'future' of Saudi Arabia. He indicated that being a member of the community meant it was important to share his thoughts with Saudi citizens and the government.

**MSMI 2** maintained that he tweeted about *Vision 2030* to counter disinformation in the form of fake news coming from fake Twitter accounts citing fake sources, which would interfere with the positive development of the country.

**MSMI 3** expressed that he had a significant number of followers on Twitter with whom he regularly shared views on important issues. As *Vision 2030* was a big announcement from the government, if he had remained silent, his followers might have questioned his view of the initiative.

**MSMI 4** revealed that he tweeted to connect with his community of followers by promoting opportunities for them. He claimed that he never forgot his Saudi identity and commitment to the people and the 'great' nation of Saudi Arabia when sharing his thoughts on Twitter.



**MSMI 5** maintained that it was a sense of social responsibility that motivated him to tweet about the national affairs of the country, particularly *Vision 2030*.

**MSMI 6** claimed that he tweeted about *Vision 2030* to counter the propaganda and fake news originating from international media. He believed that every citizen of Saudi Arabia (including SMIs) should put their efforts into promoting a positive image of the kingdom.

**MSMI 7** shared that, as people trusted SMIs, then educated SMIs, who have sufficient information and understand the government's national plans, should aim to promote them fairly.

**MSMI 8** claimed that it is the duty of SMIs with a significant following on Twitter, to support the government and its plans.

**MSMI 9** reiterated that it becomes important for SMIs who have a huge following on Twitter to share information and opinions on different issues with their followers to help guide them. He further elaborated that many government departments in the Kingdom rely on the SMIs rather than on traditional media for promoting their activities.

The SMIs interviewed by this researcher shared multiple reasons why they considered themselves important in sharing information about *Vision 2030*. Many of the SMIs insisted that they tweeted because they knew that they had accurate and verified information about the government's mega plan. Many also shared that they wanted to counter the propaganda coming from fake accounts, as previously noted.

The other dominant reason shared by most SMIs in this study is the significant following on their Twitter accounts, indicating a sense of professional duty. Some SMIs indicated that it was their social and

national responsibility that made it important for them to interact with their followers, along with exploring the lived reality and experiences of their followers.

#### **6.4.3. Objectives That the SMIs Wanted to Achieve While Discussing Vision 2030**

The SMIs were asked to share what they were planning to achieve by tweeting about *Vision 2030*. The responses from the SMIs have been discussed in the broader dimensions derived from the data following the thematic analysis approach. The different purposes for tweeting are presented below and have been ordered with the most dominant purpose discussed first.

##### **I. Sharing updated information with their followers:**

The majority of the SMIs interviewed by this researcher claimed that they had no other objectives in mind aside from updating followers about *Vision 2030*.

FSMI 1 revealed that her purpose for tweeting was to give the impression to her followers that she had updated information about the government's plan, as well as understanding the feedback from followers. She claimed,

I was not hoping to achieve anything special except demonstrating to my followers that I have updated information about the Vision 2030 as they showed great interest in my opinion about the new government's plan (FSMI 1 2019).

MSMI 1 also confirmed that he wanted to inform and educate his followers about the new plan – especially the economic aspect of it. The same purpose for sharing tweets about *Vision 2030* was also mentioned by MSMI 5, who claimed that he intended to increase the knowledge of his followers by sharing relevant information about the government's plan and national issues. Similarly, MSMI 8 confirmed that he wanted to share information about *Vision 2030* and how it could transform the kingdom. MSMI 9 shared that the purpose

of tweeting about *Vision 2030* was to inform the general public about the government's plan in a simpler way, and to promote positive attitudes about *Vision 2030*.

## **II. Sharing accurate information with their followers:**

The SMIs in this study also expressed that one of the main purposes for tweeting about *Vision 2030* was to persuade their followers that they had accurate and verified information about the government's plan. They did so mainly by trying to provide accurate information, and providing information early, before it had been shared via social and traditional media.

MSMI 3 tweeted to inform his followers that he was the 'trusted' person for providing updated and verified information related to *Vision 2030*. He claimed, 'I wanted to show it to my followers that I am aware of the developments related to the Vision 2030 and I am the trusted person to be followed for updates' (MSMI 3 2019).

Likewise, MSMI 6 confirmed that he too aimed to share accurate information about *Vision 2030* from the government's official website with his followers. MSMI 9 noted that he wanted to project himself as an 'authentic' influencer. He claimed, 'I wanted to achieve several things. It includes, promoting my good feelings about the Vision 2030; informing my followers in the simpler way; and increasing my fame on social media as authentic influencer' (MSMI 9 2020).

## **III. Increasing awareness about *Vision 2030*:**

The third reason for the SMIs tweeting about *Vision 2030* was to increase awareness among their followers. FSMI 3 revealed that she wanted to increase awareness in the Saudi community of the need for gender equality in Saudi Arabia.

MSMI 4 claimed that he wanted to increase awareness that the success of *Vision 2030* could result in

more jobs, better education and improved work skills.

#### **IV. Convincing their followers about the new government:**

MSMI 2 maintained that he aimed to persuade his followers that the new government was working hard to run the country in a better way. Similarly, MSMI9 also claimed that he wanted to convey an impression of patriotism to his followers by supporting the plan.

#### **V. Seeking to develop an online identity:**

FSMI 2 shared that, as a philanthropist, she wanted to develop her own identity in the Saudi community as a social activist.

#### **VI. Seeking to gain information from other SMIs:**

MSMI 7 shared that his sole aim for tweeting about *Vision 2030* was to gain information from other SMIs with a background in economics or those who had attended the press conference of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman.

The findings of this research study have revealed that the dominant goal for Saudi SMIs tweeting about *Vision 2030* was to inform and educate their followers about the government's plan, and explore the current issues faced by the kingdom. Some of the SMIs indicated that they wanted to convince their followers about the new government's commitment to improving the lives of its citizens, and to persuade their followers that they could trust the tweeted information. Some of the SMIs interviewed by this researcher also shared that they wanted to achieve personal goals by building up their online identity, in addition to gaining further information.

### **6.5. Summary**

This chapter initially set the groundwork for the analysis of interview data, highlighting the clear structure of the chapter. The profile insights of the SMIs interviewed in this study was discussed along with their personal views. The findings revealed that most of the SMIs showed a positive perception of *Vision 2030* and confidence in their opinions about it. The SMIs demonstrated a variety of reasons for their different opinions about *Vision 2030*. Most of them indicated that they were waiting for more information about the government's plan, while others supported the new government. The findings also demonstrated correlations between the age, gender and religious background of SMIs and the dimensions they wanted to emphasize.

According to the findings, the most common dimensions for the SMIs to tweet about during their engagement with *Vision 2030* were female and youth empowerment, ministerial transparency, accountability and good governance, culture and tourism, and the economy. The inclusive message shared by most of the SMIs was based on hope and support for the new Saudi government. It is significant that most of the SMIs were positive about *Vision 2030*, hoping that it would bring drastic changes in their lives if implemented successfully.

The last section of this chapter focused on the SMIs' motivations when interacting with their followers. The findings demonstrated that serving the national cause remained a dominant motivator for the SMIs – along with commitment to their followers – when tweeting about *Vision 2030*. The SMIs shared their views for tweeting about *Vision 2030*, including: sharing accurate information and countering propaganda, honouring their social and national responsibility, and having an increasing number of followers.

## **Chapter 7. Discussion and Conclusion**

### **7.1. Introduction**

Given the popularity and the extent of the uptake of social media in the region of the Middle East, social media influencers (SMIs) have the potential to play significant roles in promoting, prioritising, disseminating and facilitating debate on a wide range of social, political and cultural issues, both local and non-local; and in using their verified accounts to interact with their followers regarding such issues. SMIs are considered highly influential in moulding public opinion about the government and government-implemented policies (Abidin et al. 2020; Abdulmajeed & El-Ibiary 2020; Dhanesh, G.S. & Duthler 2019; Freberg et al. 2011). This research assessed Saudi SMIs, and how SMIs participate in public affairs in specific relation to how they frame Saudi Vision 2030, under the hashtag #Saudi\_Vision\_2030. It investigated how the SMIs promoted the government's initiative with specific reference to the Vision 2030 plan, and the extent and type of engagement this promotion was able to generate among its followers.

The thesis was based on qualitative content analysis and in-depth interviews as guided approaches to examine the attitudes of Saudi SMIs towards tweets and information regarding the Saudi Vision 2030. The results clarify a range of factors, including which dimensions from Saudi Vision 2030 achieved the highest levels of engagement on social media, and the valence (positive/negative) of that engagement; SMIs' motivations for promoting such content on social media; the ways in which such content was framed by SMIs; and the effect of such framing devices on engagement with and responses to the content on social media.

The research answered the following main research questions:

- RQ1: How do SMIs frame the government to their followers when tweeting about Vision 2030?
- RQ2: What framing devices are useful in generating engagement with their followers?

- RQ3: What are the motivations driving SMIs to engage with Vision 2030 in relation to their profile insights?
- RQ4: What are the implications of these framing approaches, and these motivations of SMIs, for an understanding of the nature of social media interactions pertaining to government initiatives in Saudi Arabia?

By answering these research questions, the research outcome contributes to an enhanced understanding of the role and efficacy of social media in communicating the government initiative, Saudi Vision 2030, among the general population in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). This was achieved by considering, in particular, the influence of SMIs registered in KSA in disseminating information about the KSA government's initiative. In addition to examining the overall profile of social media use in the KSA in the context of a rapidly changing news information ecosphere in the country, this thesis also sought to understand some of the elements that might underpin the role of SMIs by interviewing some of the influencers whose tweets were included in the quantitative analysis of social media engagement and influence. Elements considered in this respect included individual users' personal views, perceptions and motivations for discussing the Saudi Vision 2030, and their own personal characteristics that may have influenced or played a role in this.

Thereby, the research aimed to investigate the role of SMIs in participating in and communicating public affairs to the public through a case study of Saudi Vision 2030. It sought to understand how information regarding Saudi Vision 2030 was tweeted and framed in the KSA, and SMIs' decisions regarding what information to tweet, and what aspects to emphasize when tweeting. Although not representative of all SMIs in the KSA, let alone users in general in the region, the SMIs investigated and interviewed here did provide an important subgroup within the population (discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6). Given their high number of followers, these highly influential individuals are seen as key influencers in the country to engage with the local community and promote specific causes or concerns. These SMIs are, therefore, seen as a potentially valuable link in the chain of information transmission to help the government promote Saudi Vision 2030 and convince

the broader population of the value of the initiative, and the various issues addressed within its scope. They are already taking the lead in the virtual environment of social media, as demonstrated by their influence over their followers (Albalawi & Sixsmith 2017; Zhao, Zhan & Liu 2018).

This chapter provides in-depth discussion of the findings obtained during the collection and analysis of the data for this research, with reference to the previous results from the literature in the area, to provide detailed responses to the research questions. The discussion is structured into sections that focus on the main topics identified in the analysis of the data collected: level of engagement; silent frames and internal governance; empowerment of women; and religion and social conservatism. Therefore, the discussion turns to considering the broad findings with reference to the theoretical framework adopted, the findings of the previous literature on the relationships between government and social media influencers, and the SMIs' motivations for framing Saudi Vision 2030. This allows for a development from the specific topics and findings to the general conclusions the study arrives at, before summarising the theoretical contribution and practical implications. Finally, the limitations of the study and directions for future research are discussed, before the study is concluded.

In this research, views and opinions of SMIs about their use of Twitter to promote the government initiative Saudi Vision 2030, their perceptions of the dimension, and their motivations for engaging with the dimension and the public are discussed with reference to similar studies. Emphasis here is placed on studies from other countries in the GCC region, given the social, cultural similarities between these countries, and the fact that the media are affecting these countries in similar ways.

Because this thesis is concerned principally with aiming to understand the roles and impact of SMIs via their Twitter accounts on framing their tweets and motives with the local community in the KSA, it was judged relevant to examine prior studies and research on social media perceptions, promotions, media frames and motivations, and, in particular, about the roles and impact of Saudi SMIs on the public affairs regarding Saudi



Vision 2030. In addition to this, however, this research combined other variables to reach better results and more comprehensive outcomes, such as examining the Saudi SMIs' personal views and motivations.

## **7.2. Findings and Implications: Framing #Saudi\_Vision\_2030**

In response to the research questions presented at the beginning of this study, it is now possible to summarise and discuss the main findings. In light of the intended contribution of this study, two findings were judged to be of fundamental importance: the levels of engagement generally; and the numerous dimensions of Saudi Vision 2030 that attracted almost no response and engagement. The discussion of the findings and their implications therefore focuses, first, on the potential causes of the levels of engagement generally, with attention to the silent frames, which are those frames that attracted very limited responses.

### ***7.2.1. Saudi SMIs and the Difficulty of Engaging Followers***

It was found that Saudi SMIs had mixed views about Vision 2030 when it was officially launched. Most SMIs had neutral views about it, followed by curiosity, and then approval. The findings, based on the interviews with SMIs, revealed that they had no prior knowledge or information about Vision 2030; they themselves were waiting for further details along with their followers. Once SMIs began receiving details from official news, they made sense out of them and informed their followers. This was a dominant reason for SMIs to remain neutral about the government's plan, indicating that most of them were not fully involved about Vision 2030 when it was officially announced, and therefore they faced difficulty in involving their followers about it.

The findings also reflect that most of the male SMIs found the issue of youth empowerment more engaging than other dimensions because they believed that youth empowerment could support the real progress of the country and its citizens. It is natural for SMIs to think about youth empowerment, as 45% of the Saudi population is under the age of 24 (World Population Review 2020). Furthermore, the current unemployment

rate in the country is 5.92% (Hanson 2021). Therefore, most SMIs had fears that foreigners were enjoying more benefits from the Saudi market in the kingdom than Saudi citizens. Even though they trust the new set-up of government, they also criticize the Ministry of Labour for its poor performance.

Culture, tourism, and entertainment also stood as engaging dimensions and concerns for SMIs. This shows the concerns of SMIs that they are disconnected from the world. They believed that the best way they could identify themselves with the world was by working on the cultural and heritage issues that face the KSA. The SMIs were also confident that being wealthy did not guarantee acceptance, and that demonstrating one's identity was more important. The SMIs were also concerned about the lack of entertainment in the kingdom. Their desire for entertainment and a healthy social life demonstrates the exposure of Saudi SMIs in the world, and also showed they looking for more improvement with their quality of life. Investment in culture, tourism and entertainment was seen as a way of ensuring a good image of the country, as well as generating revenue. As the Saudi government has been thinking about diversifying the economy, this sector seems the most important one for investment.

It was found that the inclusive message shared by SMIs in the interviews were mostly based on hope. The findings demonstrated that there was high level of support for the government among them, despite criticism from a few. It shows that most SMIs were hopeful about change and the promises in regards to the initiative, but they had difficulty accepting it due to low performance of some previous public sectors and ministries. These doubts left an impact on the support level of SMIs, who were trying to convince their followers about Vision 2030.

The findings reflect that the inclusive opinion shared by SMIs with their followers was a mixed bag. The majority were positive about the government's plan, but some also showed reluctance by expressing neutral opinions about it. It shows that there was a low level of discussion about some dimensions of the initiative

among SMIs, as reflected in the frames of Promoting Transparency and Communication, and Appealing to Rights and Duties. Most of the SMIs interviewed stressed that they wanted to emphasize unemployment, empowerment of women and youth, transparency and accountability, tourism and entertainment, and economic issues. If these findings are compared with the results relating to the impact of emphasis framing on driving engagement (in Chapter 5), then it shows that only the economy and youth issues were emphasised by the SMIs in the interviews as they believed that these two dimensions could drive more engagement in terms of likes and retweets. All the other dimensions emphasised by SMIs had a negative impact on engagement. This means that the more they discussed these dimensions in their tweets, the less impact it had on the followers by engaging them. This indicates that the followers of SMIs did not take much interest in the discussion related to unemployment, transparency and accountability, and tourism and entertainment dimensions. All these seem genuine issues faced by Saudi Arabia, which are debated by the SMIs on the official hashtag, which demonstrates that the priorities of followers of SMIs were different than the SMIs themselves. The question however, remains: How did they discuss these issues with their followers? Which aspects of the issues were discussed?

The prior research in this area is of value in helping to clarify these questions. The relationship between SMIs and their followers has been debated by Schaefer (2012), who claims that ‘social proof’ plays a vital role in making SMIs legitimate experts in the field of social media. He insists that it comes from the volume of followers and number of likes, which convey authority and the persuasive nature of SMIs. ‘Similarity’ is a perceived resemblance between the SMIs and their followers, which results in trust, understanding, and ultimately, persuasion, while ‘familiarity’ refers to the knowledge of SMIs about the subject through experience (Mitteness et al. 2016). These factors strengthen SMIs’ influence, encouraging followers to be more comfortable with the SMIs, thus resulting in greater engagement and persuasion. As the subsequent discussion demonstrates, similarity and familiarity, with an emphasis on shared Saudi identity, and the patriotic sentiments arising from this, appeared to play a key role in the way Saudi SMIs engaged in public affairs.

### ***7.2.2. Reasons for the Lack of Social Media Engagement with SMIs Tweets***

Examining the data on Saudi SMIs' perceptions and framing of the government initiative of the #Saudi\_Vision\_2030 (discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5) suggests that, to some extent, Saudi SMIs shared a common interest in providing some context and information about #Saudi\_Vision\_2030. Such a motivation to share details regarding current events and policy changes is a common motivation among SMIs, and has been confirmed by several studies across the Arab and non-Arab worlds (Holton et al. 2014; Kaur 2015; Okuah, Scholtz & Snow 2019). It has been found to arise from a desire to appear to be engaged with contemporary social and political developments, and in this way to promote an appearance of being engaged with current developments (Lee & Ma 2012; Valenzuela, Pina & Ramirez 2017). This demonstrates that SMIs have an innate motivation for disseminating information about government initiatives and policy announcements, which can be used by governments to provide alternative avenues of sharing information with the populace and framing specific issues in particular ways.

Among the benefits of this research is that it confirms what is already known about the role of social media platforms (e.g. Twitter) in promoting initiatives and ideas for change, such as #Saudi\_Vision\_2030 (our case), #BahrainEconomicVision2030 in Bahrain, #KuwaitVision2035 "New Kuwait" in Kuwait, #UAEVision2030 in UAE, #OmanVision2040 in Oman (Alsharekh 2016). However, due to the research's methodology (content analysis and in-depth interviews), and specific attributes of Saudi culture, my findings may be explained slightly differently.

I found that most of the tweets related to the Vision 2030 were shared by SMIs in the first week of its launch. In fact, there were more tweets in the initial week than in the next seven weeks combined. This vibrant social media activity indicates that the launch of Vision 2030 initiated high levels of interest and enthusiasm among Saudi SMIs, but that this interest also declined fairly quickly. This decline in enthusiasm suggests that

some SMIs did not have sustained social media strategies in debating the vision on Twitter or discussing it with their followers. In fact, such behaviour also appears to confirm the findings, discussed above, that SMIs engage with current government policies and initiatives as a means of promoting their appearance of being engaged with contemporary social developments. The high levels of activity immediately in response to the announcement of Saudi Vision 2030 could similarly be explained on this basis, with SMIs sharing content perceived to be topical, rather than due to some core interest in the topics covered by it. Of course, these are not necessarily mutually exclusive. However, an account of and explanation for the temporal distribution of the data that clarifies SMIs' motivations is judged to be useful. The dip in enthusiasm after the first week could be explained by the poor response shown by followers of SMIs, as they too showed less engagement.

The various Saudi government ministers, including the ministers of education, health, economics, human resources, and social development and industry, do have verified Twitter accounts, and were also only moderately involved in the Vision 2030 discussion online. On average, they posted three tweets per minister in the first two months of the Vision 2030 launch. This shows a clear lack of strategies in some of the top-tier circle who have twitter account to inform and engage its people on Twitter. Had they become more involved on Twitter, debating it from different angles, enthusiasm on the part of SMIs to engage in discussion of Vision 2030 might have been greatly increased. There is general consensus among social media scholars that the person who posts a tweet is of greater interest than what is posted (Teichmann et al. 2015; Haro-de-Rosario, Sáez-Martín & del Carmen Caba-Pérez 2018b). This seems significant here, as Saudi SMIs were largely occupied with interpreting Vision 2030 for their followers, as well as discussing the benefits of it.

In addition, Previous research has demonstrated, however, that the question of quantity of tweets in terms of engaging audiences is not a straightforward one, especially with official accounts. For example, some studies have found that fewer tweets generate greater engagement with official accounts, perhaps due to a perception of quality rather than quantity (Bonsón, Perea & Bednárová 2019; Ma 2013; Stone & Can 2020).

Most of the actual tweets sent by such government figures adopted the frames of Supplications or Building National Identity, consisting of expressions of hope and positive wishes for the future of the kingdom, conveying generally optimistic attitudes and demonstrating patriotic commitment. They do, however, show a lack in specific information for citizens about what they were planning to implement in their ministry/sector through the Vision programs.

It is not clear whether more information would have been inherently helpful. On the one hand, it may have clarified issues that needed development to convince the public. On the other, given pre-existing low performance of some ministers, it may have been met with scepticism. Whatever the case, the ministers' tweets would almost certainly have been more engaging if they adopted strategies such as including hyperlinks, images, videos and infographics, as extensive evidence has demonstrated that such approaches promote engagement (DiGrazia et al. 2013; Lovejoy, Waters & Saxton 2012; Moran, Muzellec & Johnson 2019). For example, the Minister of Health could use a hyperlink in his tweet to inform citizens about a proposed plan for developing the health sector, rather than using a text-only tweet.

The findings also revealed that a significant number of tweets regarding Vision 2030 were retweeted by 50 followers or less. This demonstrates that the followers of SMIs showed little attention to the messages regarding the initiative on the official hashtag. These low engagement numbers could be linked to the poor communication strategy utilised by SMIs to promote the initiative.

Practices that improve follower engagements include using clear and simple language, and utilising supporting features such as URLs, pictures or even graphs to emphasize the importance of shared material that has clear and interesting post content in order to generate engagement among followers on social media (Li & Xie 2020; Rahim et al. 2019; Pang & Law 2017). Other important variables include tone of language used in tweets (Barcelos, Dantas & Sénécal 2018; Stone & Can 2020); inclusion of non-text content such as videos,

images, and external links (Kim & Yang 2017); and the reputation of SMIs among their followers (Haro-de-Rosario, Sáez-Martín & del Carmen Caba-Pérez 2018). This demonstrates that SMIs did not utilize the said tools in their communication to enhance the engagement of their followers. A related topic of interest would be the extent to which SMIs' tweets on #Saudi\_Vision\_2030 conformed with, or diverged from, the styles, approaches and techniques they adopted for content connected to other topics. This was not something considered in the present study, but would provide a valuable direction for future studies.

Another factor that may have stemmed the flow of excitement for discussing the project could be lack of hopefulness of SMIs and their followers towards some of the public sectors, due to a track record of low performance in the past (Alkarni 2018). Saudi citizens have witnessed many promises of change and development from different Saudi public sectors, while some of the projects have been appreciated, there are others not have been achieved to the point of satisfying and convincing the local Saudi citizens (Alamri 2019; Alfawzan 2014; Horschig 2016).

There is, however, an important distinction in the data that helps clarify this issue. The data showed that corruption was a dimension that aroused some of the more strongly emotional responses. Where the Saudi Vision 2030 focus on corruption was framed with reference to the government institutions generally (such as in the frame of Promoting Transparency and Communication), it tended to be met with Shock and impress. Where it was framed through reference to Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman (such as in the frames of Supplications and Building National Identity), in contrast, it was frequently met with optimism and enthusiasm. Two implications can be inferred from this. First, this finding may also be interpreted as corroborating previous findings that identifiable individuals are more engaging and influential than generic positions or organisations (Haro-de-Rosario, Sáez-Martín & del Carmen Caba-Pérez 2018b); and that the individual who tweets is in some ways more important than what is tweeted (Haro-de-Rosario, Sáez-Martín & del Carmen Caba-Pérez 2018b; Teichmann et al. 2015).

Second, where citizen optimism in a specific public body is low, this could affect communications from or associated with this body (Men & Tsai 2013; Williams, Valero & Kim 2018). In this case, as there is a widespread perception of some public institution's corruption (as the interviews indicate), communications from, or associated with, the government about rooting out corruption are themselves undermined by the lack of optimism they are seeking to address. In contrast, as the interviews and analysed tweets indicate, Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman, representing the face of a new and promising political administration, is not associated with this lack of optimism and trust, and can therefore plausibly be associated with initiatives to address the root causes of it. An implication of this would be that communications regarding policies or initiatives intended to address citizens' lack of optimism in public bodies need to appear to be coming from identities sufficiently distinct from the bodies in question so as not to be implicated by the lack of optimism. In the case of Saudi Vision 2030, framing the policies with an emphasis on their origination with Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman helped distinguish their invention from the public bodies they are intended to improve.

The unexpected announcement of the Vision 2030 news on Twitter might be another contributor to the poor engagement of followers of SMIs. Given the suddenness of the announcement, they may not have been mentally ready for such a big announcement from the government. Further, given the previously discussed issues of optimism in some of the public institution performance, the announcement of such significant changes in the kingdom through unilateral decisions by the top-tier Saudi government, without a prelude or prior knowledge of the public, may have compounded the concerns, but in some way it has increased the optimism of citizens (Kinninmont 2017). The importance of social media in public service delivery has been emphasised by many scholars (Bonsón et al. 2019; Haro-de-Rosario, Sáez-Martín & del Carmen Caba-Pérez 2018b; Mergel 2013b), but they also argue that the government should utilize the platform in a useful way by generating healthy discussion among its citizens to generate positive and valuable feedback (Mergel 2013a; McNutt 2014), and should consider the suggestions forwarded by the public as, in return, this motivates them to engage in the



government's initiative and own such initiatives (Benkler 2006; Reddick, Chatfield & Ojo 2017). Additionally, Bertot, Jaeger and Hansen (2012), Bonsón, Royo and Ratkai (2015) and Arshad and Khurram (2020) claim that social media provides the government with the opportunity to increase its citizens' confidence in its political and public affairs. The approach adopted in Saudi Vision 2030, in contrast, involved the government formulating a set of policies, and seeking to convince the public of them. A more collaborative approach, involving discussion between the Saudi government executives and the public, may have given citizens a feeling of greater personal investment in the initiative, which would have created greater engagement.

A related factor that may have played a role in the limited engagement of SMI followers in the government's initiative are the censorship policies of the kingdom (see the discussion in Section 2.2 in Chapter 2). Even if citizens on Twitter would have liked to openly discuss Vision 2030 they may restrict themselves from doing so due to the media censorship policies. This implies that a degree of social liberalisation is necessary for social media users to function to full potential in facilitating interactions and communication between the public and government. In addition to, as highlighted in Section 2.2, religion values and cultural norms also play a significant role in Saudi's self-censorship on social media. Therefore, this resistance to openly criticise or discuss government policies is unsurprising. Saudi citizens as Muslims hold on to their beliefs regarding their obedience to Muslim leaders' (*ta'at wali al-amr*) which means that they should believe in government decisions (Alotaibi, 2019; Sulaib, 2020). When people believe they can express their opinions and beliefs freely without any influence from the religion and systematic censorship and have a direct say in the initiatives that are created to serve them, they will demonstrate greater levels of engagement (Alsaahafi, 2019; Mahony & Stephansen 2016). The Saudi government should therefore seek to establish higher levels of two-way interaction between itself and its citizens on social media in order give the public the feeling that they are involved in the processes of deliberation and discussion that lead to the formulation of initiatives.

### ***7.2.3. Silent Frames and Social Media Voices***

I found that, although there was no strong focus on any particular dimension by SMIs in tweets regarding Vision 2030, three-quarters of the dimensions discussed by SMIs on official hashtags revolved around the economy, policy, transparency, and media. Less-discussed dimensions included international relations, women's empowerment, housing, and education. These findings support that most SMIs agreed with the narratives of the government, that Vision 2030 could boost the economy of the country through a diversification of policy, decreasing dependency on oil export revenue, increasing investment in the country, and promoting tourism. Indeed, all these strategies would address the issue of unemployment, which affects a large percentage of the population of Saudi Arabia (Alrasheedy 2019; Harvard Kennedy School 2019). The economy is the backbone of the development of any country, which is probably why SMIs were keen to discuss it while using the official Vision 2030 official hashtag on Twitter.

The second most discussed dimension was policy, which mainly involved comments on government strategies to achieve desired goals, while transparency was the third most discussed dimension. SMIs clearly wanted more transparency and clarity in the official matters of the country. As discussed above, low performance in the past and a lack of accountability in the kingdom have reflected negatively on the citizen's views (Alamri 2019). However, many SMIs shared during the interview with me that the words of Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman motivated them to talk about these issues on Twitter and to support his plans for ensuring good governance, transparency, and accountability. This aspect is also demonstrated by the frame of Supplication. In contrast, when transparency was framed with reference to the public institutions generally, it generated negatively valenced responses, indicating the pre-existing dissatisfaction and lack of optimism about this issue, with the frames of Appealing to Rights and Duties and Promoting Transparency and Communication also illustrating elements of this aspect. Low discussion about housing and education also indicates that SMIs considered these problems minor compared to the economy in general.

The findings also revealed that the vast majority of tweets shared by SMIs on official hashtags were of a positive tone, some were neutral, and few were negative. Vision 2030 was mostly discussed in a positive way, although there were tweets exploring the different dimensions in a negative way: the frames of Supplications and Appealing to National Identity provided good examples of the former; and those of Appealing to Rights and Duties and Promoting Transparency and Communication a good example of the latter. The initiative did not, therefore, go completely unchecked. SMIs were both supportive and critical while framing the news to their followers. These findings demonstrate that SMIs, to some extent, highlighted the weaknesses in the existing systems of public information and culture that affected peoples' lives. For example, among the negative responses, a substantial proportion had to do with corruption and transparency. These indicate a willingness on the part of the SMIs to raise challenging topics and seek to hold some public sectors to be accounted by the government. It is to be noted that negative engagement is not a negative outcome for the government in the context of the current discussion. For example, negative comments about a dimension such as corruption can represent an opportunity to engage with the negative attitudes related to the topic, and in this way influence public perceptions (Rim & Song 2016). Research has shown that responses to such negative comments that acknowledge the cause of the dissatisfaction and initiate a dialogue are most effective at preventing the harmful effects that can result from them (Rim & Song 2016).

There are dimensions that seem to align well with SMIs and Twitter, which also go along with the localising of the Vision 2030 goals. Specifically, there are clear areas where SMIs perceive themselves to have the scope to voice explicit criticism or negative opinions, and the government is evidently aware of this. The findings suggest that the dimensions highly debated in a positive way included transparency, housing, youth and policy, as evidenced by the frames Appealing to the Youth and Promoting Economic Development. This study demonstrates that SMIs and their followers welcomed the government's new policies and decisions related to the above fields; conversations discussing these areas were hopeful. However, empowering women, education,

media, entertainment and culture dimensions were more likely to be debated in an opposite way, as discussion of the frames of Empowering Women and Promoting Transparency and Communication illustrated in Chapter 5.

SMIs are clearly less hopeful of reforms in the areas of women's empowerment, education, media, entertainment and culture, and remain critical of these fields. These concerns can be traced back to the conservative background of Saudi Arabia; strict Islamic laws have been followed by the country and its citizens since the founding of the kingdom (Althiabi 2017; Alzahrani 2016; Kabha 2009). Past conservative administration implemented strict rules and regulations in different times, which limited the public space given to people – especially women – in their social and cultural lives (Özev 2017). The way this tension continues to influence conversations about government initiatives is evidenced by the fact that male and female co-education (in which students of both genders attend school together) remains a forbidden subject in the Saudi Arabia. The frame of Empowering Women captures these tensions well, illustrating the expression of the desire for greater rights on the part of women in KSA. Furthermore, before the announcement of Vision 2030 by Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman, the possibility of attending musical concerts and cinema culture would have been unthinkable to Saudi citizens. While the period since the announcement of Saudi Vision 2030 has seen significant developments in this regard, with concerts and music festivals having been held in the kingdom and restrictions on cinema having been relaxed, at the time of announcement, the strict pre-existing rules on such matters fostered wonder among the populace in the government's initiatives to revolutionize these areas or introduce reforms.

The voicing of opinions by SMIs on the official hashtag of Vision 2030 also indicates that they practiced some level of expression. Research studies, including Fernandez (2018), Albalawi and Sixsmith (2017), Aljabre (2013), Anderson (2011), and Alarfaj (2013), demonstrated that both traditional media and social media are regulated. However, these findings suggest that SMIs have utilised the Twitter platform to discuss criticisms of the public sectors policies, by practicing some level of expression. The frame of Promoting

Transparency and Communication captures this well, with explicit discussions of social media frequently figuring it as an inherently liberatory realm with the potential to achieve greater equality and accountability within the kingdom. Nevertheless, the cautious approach actually adopted by the Saudi SMIs in discussing potentially controversial dimensions indicates that they are aware of their limits on social media platforms – especially Twitter. This leads me to believe that Saudi SMIs are well aware of their Saudi identity and their social and cultural setting before initiating their discussion on Twitter. I therefore infer that this also makes the Saudi SMIs different from others (Kaplan & Haenlein 2012; Esarey & Xiao 2011). The data also validated that although both positively valenced tweets and negatively valenced tweets had a strong impact on the number of likes, the positively valenced tweets were still more impactful. This means that when there was a supportive discussion about Vision 2030, there was more engagement compared to the critical coverage. This indicates that there was no followers' bias about the Saudi government or its initiatives, and the followers welcomed the positive content.

The fact that positively valenced tweets were the most impactful clearly demonstrates that positively valenced tweets were more shared than negatively valenced tweets. It shows that followers of SMIs stayed supportive while engaging with the SMIs on the official hashtag. Apparently, it seems that SMI followers avoided challenging the established narratives. There are many reasons for this calculated approach, including homogenous coverage of issues in the kingdom, and a fear of repercussions from the prevailing conservative voices. The frames of Supplications and Building National Identity also demonstrate the ways in which participation in social media in KSA involves an extensively performative dimension, whereby expressions of support for and affiliation with social collective identities appear as important as transmission of information or critical engagement with matters of public concern. This characteristic of Saudi social media similarly promotes a high level of positively valenced content, in contrast to the prevailing trends in other socio-cultural contexts.

#### ***7.2.4. Discussion of the Empowerment of Saudi Women in Social Media***

As illustrated in the frame of Empowering Women, SMIs did not frequently discuss women's empowerment while exploring Vision 2030 with their followers. Male SMIs, who produced more tweets about Vision 2030 than their female counterparts, did not consider women or their liberation as a key part of the solution to Saudi Arabia's problems. Indeed, the inclusion of female empowerment as a policy, along with economic transformation, appeared to confuse some male SMIs, who appeared to consider the two to be incompatible. For example, Altwaiher (2016) expressed confusion at the conflation of economic ambition with greater freedoms for women in the country, stating '[Saudi Vision 2030] talked about a vision and ambitions that exceed their ambitions, and their thinking is focused on a woman's leadership and women driving rights.' Nevertheless, women make up a large portion of the Saudi population, and their empowerment can ensure a smooth transition to development (Saqib et al. 2016), so convincing the populace of the importance of this issue is a vital part of Saudi Vision 2030.

As is perhaps to be expected, the dimension of empowering women attracted more discussion and engagement among female SMIs than among male SMIs. There can be different reasons for female SMIs debating the women's empowerment issues more than their male counterparts or even any other issues. If one keeps in mind the traditional patriarchal set-up of Saudi society, then this seems understandable, as women are confident that if they do not express their social issues, no one else will. One can therefore interpret female SMIs' participation in dimensions related to public affairs as representing a means whereby women in the nation can become more involved in public affairs. Female SMIs are also motivated to help achieve equal status for Saudi women (Elyas et al. 2020), which similarly represents potential for progress towards greater involvement of women in public affairs in KSA. These findings support previous findings that social media facilitates a space in which citizens can achieve greater liberty and gender equality, and in turn, social justice (Althiabi 2017; Bajnaied 2016; Elareshi et al. 2020; Thorsen & Sreedharan 2019).

Nevertheless, more broadly, evidence emerging from this research as well as comparative analysis drawn from past research clearly indicates that in terms of social media use (via the content analysis), most tweets came from male SMIs, with females making a relatively limited contribution. This result is extensively supported and explained by the cultural roles and perceptions of gender in the GCC region. On one hand, women may not feel comfortable disclosing their opinions about some issues via social media and other online platforms, especially those issues that could affect their wellbeing within the patriarchal Saudi society (Thorsen & Sreedharan 2019; Bajnaid 2016; Balfaqeeh 2017). On the other hand, in reality, there have been recent developments in which Saudi women have been found to be more active in the online environment, especially in campaigns about their rights and views (Jamjoom and Smith-spark 2013; Sreberny 2015; Jarbou 2018; Thorsen & Sreedharan 2019). The findings of this study pertaining to the role played by Saudi SMIs in engaging Saudi women with public affairs are therefore mixed, and call for careful assessment.

This is an indication that social media use increases users' awareness regardless of their gender and opinions about public issues and interests (Shirky 2011; Reuter & Szakonyi 2015; Akram & Kumar 2017). These findings supported earlier research regarding the promotion of information and news across different nations and cultural settings (Oidine 2013; Madini & de Nooy 2016). For example, in Saudi society, women have lived under restrictions and male guardianship for decades and are now enjoying space in the digital world, thereby engaging more in public affairs. Although it might take time before their voices have a significant impact on local and non-local affairs, they are present in social and political conversations on different social media platforms regarding different matters, which is a form of engagement in public affairs (Dashti et al. 2015; Alsharekh 2016; Elareshi et al. 2020).

#### ***7.2.5. Preserving Saudi Conservatism and Religious Culture Through Social Media***

Saudi Arabia is a conformist, traditionalist country, considered the custodian of certain Holy Islamic locations (Mouline & Rundell 2014), and often characterised as a socially and politically conservative nation.

Conservatism in this sense comprises a resistance to change; an emphasis on the role of socio-political authorities in maintaining public morality; and a general distrust of innovation and changes to the status quo (Middendorp 2019). Research has established links between political conservatism and subjective perceptions of threat – the higher perception of threat predisposing toward higher propensity to see the need to guard against threat (Nilsson & Jost 2020). Lack of enthusiasm to change appears to arise from the way a conservative perspective presents an increasing likelihood of the potential threats of a given change being emphasised, rather than the potential benefits (Nilsson & Jost 2020), which helps account for why change might be resisted.

Choma et al. (2013) define political conservatism ‘as comprising two core components: preference for tradition rather than support for social change, and acceptance versus unwill of equality.’ Both of these characteristics could be apparent in the KSA. Regarding the first, innovations such as the cinema have long been banned in the country, out of fear of the moral harm they might cause (Kinninmont 2017); and changes to social conditions, such as the rights of women to drive, took a long time to be implemented compared to other countries (Gause 2014; Khalil & Storie 2020). Regarding the second, the KSA is a monarchy, and therefore Saudi culture shows a high power-distance index (Cassell & Blake 2012). These are the factors that lead me to describe the relevant aspects of Saudi culture and society discussed here as ‘conservative’.

Such social conservatism poses a range of challenges to citizens engaging in public affairs. As such, conservatism implies acceptance of high levels of inequality, and there is not a strong cultural expectation that all levels of society should have a say in the governing of society, but instead the bias toward inequality promotes social stratification (Nilsson & Jost 2020, Kahne, Middaugh & Allen 2015). Moreover, the preference for tradition that defines such conservatism establishes a resistance to the changes that would be required to create greater citizen engagement, as this represents a departure from the traditional centralised organisation of power and governance in KSA (Thompson 2014). There are thus inherent challenges to engagement presented by the KSA’s social, political and religious culture.



However, this has not prevented Saudi Arabia from feeling the effects of social media (Alsahafi 2019; Blanchard 2018; Samin 2012). Al-Matter (2017) claims that although the Arab Spring did not directly influence the politics in Saudi Arabia, it certainly indirectly influenced the role of social media. Researchers claim that social media platforms enabled Saudi citizens to raise their voices on national issues and societal concerns, providing them with an opportunity to share information and thereby become active and informed members of their society, which promoted engagement in public affairs (Park, Kee & Valenzuela 2009; Samin 2012; Thorsen & Sreedharan 2019; Khalil & Storie 2020). The same holds true in this case, when most of the Saudi SMIs had tried to utilize Twitter for a noble cause: to serve the country, empower the community, and support the government, all of which connect to forms of engagement in public affairs. Therefore, the conservatism identified as an important component of Saudi society does not necessarily preclude engagement in public affairs, as might be expected, but there is in fact a connection between such conservatism and forms of engagement in public affairs generated by SMIs and social media.

One way of understanding this connection is through the role of conservative Islam that is embedded in the sense of identity of citizens of Islamic countries. The tweets analysed in this study are notable for the number of positive patriotic sentiments they express (as captured vividly in the frames of Supplications and Appealing to National Identity). For example, many tweets explicitly wish the nation and the king well, expressing hope for a prosperous future and for the country to develop. Additionally, this study found that one of the dominant reasons for Saudi SMIs to engage on Twitter was to serve the national cause.

Saudi SMIs consider it their social responsibility to interact with their followers, and to express their opinions, which reflect their deep sense of being citizens of the country. This shows a close identification with the nation, which has previously been proposed as a basis for engagement in the public affairs of the nation (Fatany 2012; Ramsay & Fatany 2016). Such forms of expression indicate a close identification with the nation as an imagined community from which individuals derive their sense of identity and meaning (Cui, Rui & Su

2016). Cui, Rui and Su (2016) derive their understanding of the imagined community from Anderson's (2006) theorisation of the idea. In such situations, people do not have a merely instrumental relationship with the state, evaluating its performance in a rationalistic way. Instead, the sense of belonging imparts an emotional investment to the citizens' relationship to the state, which gives them an incentive to desire the nation's success regardless of their personal wellbeing (Hoggett 2015).

This kind of attitude is discernible in the frames of Supplications and Appealing to National Identity, in which the SMIs used #Saudi\_Vision\_2030 as an opportunity to express patriotic sentiments, with limited specific focus on the actual content of the policies proposed. The limited engagement with the actual content of the public affairs under discussion would perhaps contradict the earlier findings that such patriotic sentiment provides a basis for engagement in public affairs (Fatany 2012; Ramsay & Fatany 2016). Instead, it shows that even when public affairs are apparently engaged with in a patriotic way, what looks like engagement in fact demonstrates little real engagement with the public affairs. Such findings are of deep significance in response to research question 4, "What are the implications of these framing approaches, and these motivations of SMIs, for an understanding of the nature of social media interactions pertaining to government initiatives in Saudi Arabia?"

The data analysed in the course of this study indicates that significant portions of the social media activity in relation to Saudi Vision 2030 represented these kinds of performative demonstrations of national affiliation and invocations of shared structures of identity. Social media activity pertaining to government interventions in Saudi Arabia is therefore deeply informed by these phenomena, and the ways in which they shape individuals' expressions of approval and disapproval of initiatives, as well as the types of content that promotes engagement. If citizens have such an emotional investment in the idea of the nation as a source of the meaning of their own identity, the state can use such an attitude to consolidate conservative policies and social orientations. If the state is explicitly positioned as a Muslim entity, and the populace is largely homogenously

Muslim, messaging can emphasize the centrality of Muslim identity to the construction of national identity, and in this way make the two discursively inseparable. In this way, religiously conservative policies can be framed as fundamental to the creation of the meaning of the nation and, in turn, the lives of its citizens.

It is noteworthy that such an approach is to some extent already adopted in Saudi Vision 2030. For example, the very first objective stated on the official website of the Vision is to ‘Strengthen Islamic and National identity’. Further, in the ‘Society’ dimension (one of the three basic dimensions of the Vision), the salience of Islam to national identity is repeated numerous times, claiming that the Vision seeks to ‘emphasize moderate Islam, national pride, Saudi heritage and Islamic culture,’ and argues that ‘Islamic faith’ is a primary component of what makes the nation exceptional. This emphasis is reiterated in one of the specific sub-programs of the Vision, The National Character Enrichment Program of Saudi Vision 2030, the purpose of which is stated as being to ‘enrich the Saudi national character by fostering a set of values rooted in the kingdom’s legacy and Islamic heritage, through a comprehensive portfolio of initiatives aimed at strengthening the sense of national belonging’ and ‘expanding Saudi Arabia’s intellectual, human and social legacy in line with the kingdom’s leading role and ambitions at the heart of the Arab and Islamic worlds’ (Saudi Vision 2030 2016).

The emphasis in this program on traditional cultural values as an extension of Muslim precepts therefore underscores the centrality of Islam to Saudi national identity, and in this way represents a potentially valuable way of appealing to the identities and personal meanings of the populace of the nation. This indicates a successful way in which the Saudi government has used conservative Muslim identity to promote positive engagement with Saudi Vision 2030 on social media. The tweets that were analysed showed some prevalence of the use of these tropes to connect the followers, demonstrating the value of such approaches in this context. The analysed tweets, and the interviews with SMIs, indicate that the government believes that appealing to such identities represents a positive means of engaging the public with public affairs (in this instance, those incorporated within Saudi Vision 2030).

However, this traditionalist perspective is importantly counterbalanced by the frame of Appealing to the Youth. As the content analysis demonstrated, a prominent framing of Saudi vision 2030 by the SMI's focused on issues of specific relevance to the youth of the country, even going so far as to characterise the vision itself as an initiative in some ways intrinsically connected to the youth. This kind of framing frequently marked a distinction between tradition and the future, between established ways of doing things and the innovations being ushered in through Saudi Vision 2030. The characterisation of the Mohammed Bin Salman as "the Prince of youth" was one particularly striking way in which the vision, its founder (Mohammed Bin Salman), and its purposes were all linked to a focus of the youth of the country. As noted before, the demographics of social media use in Saudi Arabia presumably play a role in this, with the vast majority of social media users in the country being younger than 40 years old. This leads to an implicit link between social media and the values of the youth, which is occasionally contrasted with the older tradition. Importantly, this does not represent a conflict with the forms of Saudi identity emphasised in the frames of Supplication and Building National Identity, but rather the articulation of a subgroup in this identity, as a means of advocating for their rights.

#### ***7.2.6. SMIs' Effectiveness in Influencing Followers***

SMIs derive their influence and persuasiveness from their authenticity (Davies & Hobbs 2020; Audrezet, Kerviler & Moulard 2018; Marwick & Boyd 2011). Studies conducted by Freberg et al. (2011) and Hudders et al. (2020) revealed that SMIs were more trusted by their followers than any other sources. However, it also confirmed that the more SMIs posted their personal comments, the more seriously they were taken by their followers. If the comments lacked the SMIs' personal views, then they were perceived as 'fake' and 'staged'. This indicates that there are issues of similarity and familiarity among the Saudi SMIs and their followers. It is also possible that the SMIs posted mostly the general information related to Vision 2030 in their tweets and avoided including their personal commentary and opinions.

Therefore, followers are influenced by SMIs whom they perceive to be authentic, expressing points of view uncontrolled by exterior influence and thus able to represent issues in a genuine and trustworthy way (Davies & Hobbs 2020; Audrezet et al. 2018; Marwick & Boyd 2008). A number of SMIs insisted that the dominant reason for their engagement on Twitter about Vision 2030 was their commitment to their followers. As the findings show, these SMIs were of the view that, as they had thousands of followers on Twitter who were always keen to know their choices and opinions, they should share their thoughts and information related to Vision 2030. This can perhaps be attributed to the fact that SMIs value their followers and the strong bond that links them. This impression of Saudi SMIs has been supported by many researchers, including Ramsay and Fatany (2012), who claim that the way Saudi SMIs used social media could be considered responsible and respectful of their country's religious and cultural values. Fatany (2012) also claims that these SMIs have made significant contributions in building a positive, realistic, and authentic image of Saudi Arabia. Overall, the findings reflect that most SMIs interviewed in this study had mostly the right intentions in using Twitter purposefully and publishing tweets on the official hashtag of Vision 2030. These purposes include serving the country, the online community, and Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman.

This study also found that SMIs shared different reasons for tweeting about Vision 2030 using official hashtags. Reasons included having access to accurate and verified information; countering propaganda coming from fake accounts on Twitter; having a huge number of followers on Twitter; and exploring the issue with their followers. Highlighting the importance of social media, other researchers, including Bandari Asur and Huberman (2012), claim that social media represents a primary source of news and information, as news travels in real time, through large networks. Due to the influential power of SMIs over large numbers of followers, they have a greater responsibility when sharing online content (Bennett 2014). For instance, they could contribute to developing and spreading a preferential view of their own or other countries within and beyond national boundaries (Duvall & Heckemeyer 2018). Keeping in view the above discussion, it is understood that

most of the Saudi SMIs interviewed in this research were clear on their positions and the platforms they were utilising to reach their target audience.

Reflecting on the purpose of sharing tweets on official hashtags, I found that the dominant reasons included informing and educating followers about the government's plan and debating different issues the kingdom was facing. This demonstrates that the SMIs wanted to connect with their followers to update and educate them about Vision 2030 and related issues. The interviews revealed that some SMIs wanted to convince their followers about the new initiative and the importance of certain issues in the kingdom, besides persuading them that they were receiving trusted information. Marwick and Boyd (2011) also opine that influencers often use social media as an effective platform to promote upcoming projects and encourage followers to support them. Some SMIs interviewed also shared that they wanted to achieve personal goals by building up their own identity, as well as gaining more information. This view has been supported by Khamis et al. (2017), who claim that most SMIs actively use social media accounts for the purpose of self-promotion.

### **7.3. Theoretical Contribution**

In addition to the study's contribution regarding the role of SMIs in public affairs in Saudi Arabia, it also makes a range of general theoretical contributions that centre on the phenomena of engagement and influence with respect to the Saudi SMIs' activity in connection with Saudi public affairs. The study approached engagement and influence via the framework of framing theory. As previous research has noted, framing is a semiotic process linked to language and interpretative schemata, which means that it is deeply influenced by socio-cultural contexts in which it occurs (Bateson 1972; McLaren et al. 2014). This implies the need to consider framing processes in the context of the language, culture and the society in which they occur in order to get a detailed picture of how engagement and influence arise from, and interact with, the value schemes pertaining to these areas (Hopkins & Mummolo 2017; Li & Chitty 2009).

The first theoretical contribution this study makes arises primarily from a response to considerations of this type. For example, the study demonstrates that Saudi Arabian social media content focuses on patriotism and nationalism, and appeals to the public good were common in social media messaging focused on public affairs. That is, tweets that were positive about Saudi Vision 2030 generated more engagement than those critical of it, implying specific audience responses to valence framing, which appear to differ significantly from those observed elsewhere (Parrott et al. 2019). On the face of it, this would seem to suggest cultural specificities in the manifestation of engagement and influence generated by SMIs when sharing content related to public affairs in Saudi Arabia. Such a finding indicates the need for a nuanced, context-dependent approach to the generation of engagement and influence in public affairs by SMIs. As socio-cultural factors were shown to impact on these phenomena, it indicates the need to take them into account when researching them, which implies the need for context-dependent approaches.

For example, the findings of the current study emphasize a sense of freedom and constraint of self-expression by Saudi citizens and social media users, which comprises the second theoretical contribution. A wide range of topics and forms of expression are censored in Saudi Arabia, and the popularity and success of social media in the country has frequently been attributed to the way in which it gives users access to a sphere in which such constraints on expression are lessened (Hossain et al. 2018; Winder 2014). However, as the findings of this study demonstrate, the official public censorship appears to continue to exercise its effects even in nominally uncontrolled spaces such as Twitter through the self-censoring that Saudi social media users carry out in terms of what topics they engage with and how they engage with them. This indicates that the role and effects of such censorship regimes, and the ways they control what can and cannot be said, are diffuse and often embedded within individuals' own communication processes, rather than being applied solely from the outside through material forms of control. This again underscores the importance of understanding specific socio-cultural factors such as censorship, self-censorship, taboos, and accepted forms of social expression in considering the role of SMIs in public affairs.

This is supported by the third theoretical contribution. Findings showed that general emphasised dimensions of SMIs did not result in engagement of followers. This demonstrates that priorities of SMIs were different from their followers, and provides a theoretical insight that general frames that are applied in social media to engage and influence audiences are different in Saudi Arabia. This indicates the need for a variegated approach to the concept of the frame and its application in communication and media studies, given the differences that arise in its expression and reception in differing contexts (Li & Chitty 2009). This finding provides insight into the nature of framing for public bodies seeking to generate engagement with their communications via social media, most especially in countries that have characteristics in common with Saudi Arabia.

The results of the study establish that in Saudi context religious rhetorical performatives are integral to national affiliation and invocations of shared structures of identity for its citizens. The prevalence of Supplicating and appeals to national and religious identity in the data, and the high levels of engagement such devices generate support for the commitment to Building National Identity and patriotism in the dynamics animating social media activity focused on social and public issues in the kingdom. Hamidaddin (2019) argued that Saudi Arabia should not be regarded as religious state but rather ambivalently religious because the social media users do not show any religious affiliations in their online behaviour. However, this study establishes that religion has great influence among the social media users who engage with government or government-related communication.

A fourth theoretical contribution that this study generates is the application of framing theory to social media messaging and SMIs to understand engagement and influence regarding public affairs. Framing theory arose from considerations of mass media communications, and has therefore largely focused on situations of mass media communication. Previous research has, however, found important differences in the ways in which frames are applied, and the effects they have, between the mass media and social media contexts (Borah 2016;



Cacciatore et al. 2016; Wasike 2013).

Such findings therefore indicate the need for research into the role and effect of frames in social media contexts. Framing theory has been utilised by different mass media researchers in the context of social media by investigating the different relevant phenomenon. It includes framing of news by the print and television social media editors (SMEs) on Twitter (Wasike 2013); studying Facebook posts and tweets of media and non-profit organisations during earthquake relief efforts (Muralidharan et al. 2011); examining the top- ranked news articles posted on social news sites – Reddit and Digg (Wasike 2011); understanding the behavioural effects of framing on social media users on Facebook and Twitter (Valenzuela, et al. 2017); and the use of social media by activist groups (Hon 2015). However, this study is among the first to use framing theory to understand the role of SMIs in promoting engagement and influence in public affairs among their followers on Twitter. Very few studies have considered the role of SMIs in generating engagement and influence in public affairs using the perspective of framing theory, and this study enhances this by helping to account for the role of Saudi SMIs in public affairs.

Finally, the study provided insights into the nature of the relationships between the government, SMIs, and the social media audience in a conservative state such as Saudi Arabia, with these configurations having implications for understanding the role of SMIs in public affairs. It has been observed that the use of social media can represent a risk for public bodies, given the lower level of control compared to traditional mass media (Picazo-Vela et al. 2012). Framing theory has been proposed as a means of managing such risks (Glenny 2020). Of course, these risks cannot be completely controlled, given the previously discussed aspect of the way SMIs derive legitimacy and authority from a position of independence from the government (see section 3.6). This therefore calls for risk management and mitigation approaches.

Social media is an unavoidable part of the contemporary information ecosystem, with inherent

opportunities and risks for public affairs (Picazo-Vela, Gutiérrez-Martínez & Luna-Reyes 2012). Whether governments want this or not, public affairs will be mediated to some extent through social media and SMIs. Therefore, it seems sensible for them to adopt strategies to manage and mitigate the risks presented by this situation, while maximising benefits (Picazo-Vela, Gutiérrez-Martínez & Luna-Reyes 2012). By demonstrating what types of frames generate positive engagement on social media, and how the relationships between public bodies, SMIs and audiences can be managed and facilitated through the skilful use of framing, this study furthers the understanding of how such risk management and mitigation can be achieved.

Social media is becoming an increasingly important medium of mass communication in the contemporary world, with SMIs able to reach huge audiences, establish high levels of trust and credibility, and build dialogue, engagement and influence quickly and directly. For example, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the potential role of SMIs in encouraging compliance with preventative measures and fighting disinformation has been emphasised (Archer, Wolf & Nalloor 2020). Such capacities represent significant strengths in public bodies' strategies, and if harnessed appropriately, have the potential to strengthen their communication strategies a great deal. Previous research has however shown that the framing effects arising in such contexts are complex. For example, public bodies themselves are unable to generate the engagement and influence on social media that SMIs are, but SMIs' messaging is necessarily less amenable to direct control compared with public bodies. This increasing complexity of the communication media system implies the need for a development of theories to help account for the effects generated by the changing relations and structures of power, engagement and influence that social media is bringing about in this context. The current study sheds light on some crucial aspects of this, thereby helping to develop framing theory in the ways discussed above. In this way, it provides a crucial insight into the role of SMIs in public affairs, helping to advance understanding of this increasingly important area of information dissemination.

#### **7.4. The Practical Implications of This Study**

Saudi Vision 2030 was a mega plan announced by Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman, and the Saudi government heavily publicised it via all forms of media, including social media. Their aim in doing so was to inform and educate the people about the plan and win their support. They launched an official hashtag on Twitter and shared news and information about the plan from an official Twitter account dedicated to Vision 2030. Nevertheless, a degree of some of low level of participation remains, and measures need to be taken to address them. One way to manage this unpredictability would be, as discussed above, to carry out, for example, surveys and focus groups prior to the official announcement of policies to seek to anticipate likely responses and take actions to address these. A second crucial measure would be to enhance government communication office's work, as even negative responses can represent an opportunity to clarify misunderstandings, amplify positive messaging, adjust perceptions, or influence the populace in a variety of other ways. The enhancement of government communication office with trained personnel would facilitate a coordinated and clear response to social media activity relating to the government's performance. As the earlier analysis demonstrated, this may was one area in which the KSA government's performance could enhance numerous opportunities in the weeks following the announcement. A more extensive and organised government communication approach could have amplified the organic activity generated by the SMIs by sharing and responding to it more extensively, as well as responding to specific areas in which scepticism and negative responses were expressed.

This study demonstrates the significance of SMIs in framing public affairs in Saudi Arabia. However, these findings reflect that SMIs did not motivate and engage the followers to any great degree, despite publicising the Vision 2030 on Twitter. This indicates that Saudi SMIs did not achieve high levels of engagement in public affairs through their framing of Saudi Vision 2030 on social media. One possible explanation of this is the potential lack of social media strategy on the part of the SMIs.

The findings of this study point to the practical contribution of this thesis. SMIs communicating about public affairs on social media represent a situation where public and private meet in a new way. Engagement of

the populace in public affairs via this media therefore calls for specific management of the way in which the public and private interact in this context. To achieve greater engagement in public affairs, the public bodies would benefit from the creation of social media and a public relations team composed of researchers that could help them in formulating clear strategies to achieve their desired goals and objectives. As the data from this study demonstrates, clear understanding of what the public considers important has great potential to promote greater engagement in public affairs.

In addition, these findings are highly significant in the context of Saudi Arabia, as it is considered one of the biggest Twitter markets in the world. Several studies, including Asda'a and BCW (2019), Arab Youth Survey (2019), Northwestern University in Qatar (2019), and Radcliffe and Abuhamid (2020) confirm this, and claim that the Saudi population looks for and trusts news on social media. The findings of this study revealed that citizens were reserved in their discussion of this government initiative, which could be questionable from the perspective of both Saudi SMIs and the Saudi government, who are keen in observing transparency. It is difficult to see any government initiative flourish without providing opportunity for those impacted by the initiative to share their inputs and own the changes. This clearly indicates gaps in the strategies of SMIs when approaching the goal of informing and engaging its people through Twitter followers. A robust strategy from the top government officials of Saudi Arabia, including posting frequently and in a meaningful way about Vision 2030 or the social and economic problems within the country, would probably have ensured that the situation turned out very differently.

Indeed, the Saudi government chose the right platform to engage its citizens in Twitter as they did launch a hashtag, as identified by Bonsón et al. (2019), who claimed that most governments now rely on the phenomenon called 'citizen engagement through government social media (CEGSM)'. Many studies, including Zavattaro et al. (2015), Tang et al. (2019), Ji et al. (2019), and Trilling et al. (2017), support the idea that positive messages shared by the government online have more capacity to attract more followers. However,

low engagement of followers on Twitter should be a concern for the Saudi government. Merely choosing the right platform to communicate with citizens online does not guarantee engagement; one needs to have the right strategy to involve social media users about any program. The government failed, in this instance, to follow through with their plan to engage Twitter users. The seemingly low participation of some top-tier officials made the conversation less engaging for the Saudi people, despite Vision 2030 being a game changer for the country.

One further aspect of the significance of the current research arises from the changes in the information media context within the KSA as a result of recent developments in innovation technologies. As a monarchy governed according to a conservative socio-political system, Saudi Arabia has long had in place media regulation law. These have included centralised regulations of information media (newspaper, radio, TV, etc.), and laws regarding acceptable forms of expression and content that can legally be expressed. In this respect, it is very similar to most of its neighbours in the region. Like them, the advent of the internet, and the challenges it has presented to centralised control of information, has presented these established systems with the need to adapt, adjust, or formulate new techniques.

One specific way in which this increasing liberalisation of access to information has affected the KSA and its government and citizens is the greater ease of access it has provided to information about other countries, and therefore of opportunities for citizens to compare conditions within the KSA to those in other countries. Penetration of the KSA media by information from other countries has sparked debates about the future of media in the kingdom. The influence of social media platforms has captured the attention of Saudi citizens and has proven to be especially popular among the majority of Saudis (Elareshi et al. 2014; Abokhodair 2015; Stanger et al. 2017). It is therefore important for the Saudi government to understand how it can use the novel opportunities presented by social media to convince its citizens of the value of the initiatives it is undertaking, and to inspire loyalty, belief and confidence. The findings from the current study are intended to serve such a

purpose, clarifying how the government can use social media to retain citizens' interest and loyalty; whether it needs to make any changes to its approach; and the extent to which it can rely on social media platforms and SMIs to promote initiatives and visions such as those presented by Saudi Vision 2030.

## **7.5. Research Limitations of this Study**

This study's research faced a number of limitations. These are discussed in the following sections.

**Social Media Data.** I initially planned to look at all the coverage related to Saudi Vision 2030 on Twitter, but not all data could be accessed as it was archived by the platform and not freely open access to the researcher (Hino & Fahey 2019; Chahal & Kapur 2018; Khan & Thakur 2018). Therefore, I focused on the official hashtag launched by the Saudi government to inform and engage its citizens. Furthermore, I also tried to look at the general tweets of Saudi SMIs on Vision 2030 that did not use the official hashtag, but again it was not possible, as the tweets requested from the Twitter archive through a third-party company would have been prohibitively expensive.

A second limitation has to do with the nature of social media data, and the implications of this for research methodologies and connected considerations. Previous research has identified a number of limitations pertaining to how social media data is obtained, verified, sampled, sorted and analysed (Li & Juan 2021; Marti et al. 2019). As this study did not seek primarily to make a methodological contribution, but rather to use the available methodologies to understand the phenomenon itself, it was unable to overcome these limitations pertaining to the use of social media data.

A third limitation of this study is that the quantitative data may not be representative of Saudi Twitter users as it is based on particular type and limited number of participants. The scope of the study is indicative and provides insightfulness as a case study to the social media influencers operating in Saudi Arabia.

**Shortage of Time.** I collected the tweets of SMIs on the official hashtag launched by the Saudi government from 25 April to 26 June 2016, and was also interested in studying the responses (of the followers of SMIs) to the Vision 2030 on official hashtag. However, due to lack of data and shortage of time, the second aspect of this, the responses of followers, could not be explored in great detail. Furthermore, this limitation of time meant that the followers of SMIs could not be interviewed or surveyed to understand their engagement with official hashtags on the tweets.

**Availability of Interviewees.** It was initially planned to conduct interviews with many other SMIs (besides the 12 already interviewed in this project), but this could not be accomplished as they changed their minds when I contacted them during the data collection phase. Furthermore, during a field visit to Saudi Arabia, I also tried to interview the relevant media officials to get their opinions about the use of social media and involvement of SMIs in the promotion of Vision 2030 on Twitter. Unfortunately, none of them were available to interviews.

## **7.6. Suggestions for Future Studies of Saudi Social Media**

Future research could replicate the same model used in this study to explore the coverage of any major projects or prominent issues shared by the Saudi government on their official hashtags, or even generally. However, if there is an interest in examining the coverage of Vision 2030, then it is possible to extend the existing timeframe of coverage from two months to three or four months, and explore the responses of Saudi SMIs. Furthermore, the researchers could also explore the responses of the public or investigate the general responses of the Saudi SMIs, apart from those tweets shared on the official hashtag. Also, these findings could be further expanded upon by interviewing relevant government officials or the public to better understand the findings laid down in this study.

Future research could also seek to address the limitations posed by the nature of social media data, as discussed above. First, a similar study that draws on a wider body of social media data, including that

pertaining to followers' responses to the SMIs' framing of Saudi public affairs, would help expand the focus of the current study, and therefore clarify the dynamics of social media and SMIs in generating engagement of the public in public affairs. Interviews with important followers could also supplement such analysis to provide in-depth insight into the issue.

Second, methodological studies are needed to develop the methodologies available in research using social media data. Future methodological studies can help establish how social media data could be used in quantitative and qualitative research in a reliable and trustworthy way, to lay the foundation for future research in this area.

Finally, future research could carry out a comparative study, considering the period from the announcement of the vision until 2030, to track its progress over the coming years. Such a study could consider the ways in which the government keeps updating citizens about the vision from time to time. This could clarify how the government's use of social media in relation to Saudi Vision 2030 changes over time, and also how SMIs' responses and engagements develop in response to this. For example, Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman appeared in a televised interview in April 2021 to discuss the achievements of the vision five years since its launch, which demonstrates the ongoing, evolving nature of the engagement associated with it.

## **7.7. Summary**

This thesis investigated the role played by Saudi SMIs in engaging with public affairs, specifically about Saudi Vision 2030, by analysing their Twitter activity related to the official hashtag of the initiative, and conducting interviews to further understand their motivations and beliefs connected to this Twitter activity. Through the use of framing theory as a theoretical framework, the research investigated how SMIs framed the government to their followers when tweeting about Vision 2030; what framing devices were useful in generating engagement with their followers; the profile insight of SMIs and the motivations driving them to



engage with Vision 2030; and the implications of these framing approaches, and these motivations of SMIs, for an understanding of the nature of social media interactions pertaining to government policy in Saudi Arabia.

The findings from the analysis of the Twitter activity indicated generally low levels of engagement with public affairs. Engagement with SMIs tweets about Saudi Vision 2030 on Twitter was very short-lived, and in the time during which there was engagement, it did not reach very high levels. The study advances a number of explanations for this, mostly focusing on the socio-political context of Saudi Arabia and its implications for such engagement with public affairs, as well as for the role of social media in the information system of the country.

An important finding was that the high levels of commitment to the nation demonstrated by much of the Twitter activity did not necessarily translate into engagement with public affairs via social media, contradicting previous research on the topic (Haro-de-Rosario et al. 2018b; Liu & Kim 2018; Al-Saggaf & Simmons 2015; Bhargava, 2015). Again, this underscores the importance of considering the role of social, political and cultural contexts in the kinds of relationships considered in this study in order to obtain a full understanding of the connections between them.

The study makes a range of practical and theoretical contributions. It enhances the literature on the role of social media and SMIs in its engagement in public affairs, with a specific focus on the context of Saudi Arabia. In doing so, it clarifies how social media and SMIs might best promote engagement in public affairs. It expands the developing literature on this novel interface between public and private, represented by the use of social media for public affairs, by considering the specific case of Saudi Vision 2030, thereby opening the way for further research in this vein. In these ways, this thesis achieves its intended contribution of clarifying the role and potential of social media and SMIs in facilitating engagement with public affairs Campaigns, through a case study of Saudi Vision 2030.



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# Appendix A: Ethics Approval



College Human Ethics Advisory Network (CHEAN)  
College of Design and Social Context (DSC)  
NHMRC Code: EC00237

## Notice of Approval

Date: 01 May 2019

Project number: CHEAN A/B 22091-03/19

Project title: Social Media Influencer's Role in Branding Government of Saudi Arabia

Risk classification: Low risk

Chief investigator: Dr Leah Li

Status: Approved

Approval period: From: 1 May 2019 To: 2 July 2021

The following documents have been reviewed and approved:

Title	Version	Date
Risk Assessment and Application Form	3	01.05.2019
Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form (English & Arabic versions)	2	18.04.2019
Interview Guide (English & Arabic versions)	1	11.04.2019
Recruitment material	1	18.04.2019

The above application has been approved by the RMIT University CHEAN as it meets the requirements of the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (NHMRC, 2007).

Terms of approval:

- 1. Responsibilities of chief investigator**  
It is the responsibility of the above chief investigator to ensure that all other investigators and staff on a project are aware of the terms of approval and to ensure that the project is conducted as approved by CHEAN. Approval is valid only whilst the chief investigator holds a position at RMIT University.
- 2. Amendments**  
Approval must be sought from CHEAN to amend any aspect of a project. To apply for an amendment, use the request for amendment form, which is available on the HREC website and submitted to the CHEAN secretary. Amendments must not be implemented without first gaining approval from CHEAN.
- 3. Adverse events**  
You should notify the CHEAN immediately (within 24 hours) of any serious or unanticipated adverse effects of their research on participants, and unforeseen events that might affect the ethical acceptability of the project.

**4. Annual reports**

Continued approval of this project is dependent on the submission of an annual report. Annual reports must be submitted by the anniversary of approval of the project for each full year of the project. If the project is of less than 12 months duration, then a final report only is required.

**5. Final report**

A final report must be provided within six months of the end of the project. CHEAN must be notified if the project is discontinued before the expected date of completion.

**6. Monitoring**

Projects may be subject to an audit or any other form of monitoring by the CHEAN at any time.

**7. Retention and storage of data**

The investigator is responsible for the storage and retention of original data according to the requirements of the *Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research* (R22) and relevant RMIT policies.

**8. Special conditions of approval**

Nil.

In any future correspondence please quote the project number and project title above.

**Associate Professor Marsha Berry**  
**Chairperson, College Human Ethics Advisory Network (CHEAN B)**  
**RMIT University**

**Dr Seth Brown**  
**Deputy Chairperson, College Human Ethics Advisory Network (CHEAN A)**  
**RMIT University**

cc: Dr David Blades (CHEAN secretary)  
Mr Musaab Faleh Alharbi (Co-investigator)  
Dr Jenny Robinson (Co-investigator)

## Appendix B: Consent Form

# Informed Consent Form

**Social Media Influencer's Role in Framing Governmental Public Campaign in Saudi Arabia**

**Please initial**

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the participant information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason

3. I understand that all the information I provide will be treated in confidence

4. I understand that I also have the right to change my mind about participating in the study for a short period after the study has concluded

5. I consent to being audio/ video/ interviews being recorded as part of the project.

6. I agree to take part in the research project

Name of participant: .....

Signature of participant: .....

Date: .....

Name of Researcher: .....

Signature of researcher: .....

Date:.....



## Appendix C: Participant Information Sheet

### Participant Information Sheet

**Research Title: Social Media Influencer's Role in Framing Governmental Public Campaign in Saudi Arabia**

**Name of the investigator:** Musaab Alharbi

**Introduction:** You are being invited to participate in a research study. This study is being conducted to fulfil the doctoral degree requirements at RMIT University in Australia. The information in this form is provided to help you decide whether you would like to take part. If you decide to take part, Please sign this information sheet to indicate that you are agree.

**Purpose:** In this study, I aim to evaluate how Saudi social media influencers frame the Saudi Arabian government in the context of vision 2030. I am seeking to fill a current knowledge gap by investigating whether and how Saudi social media influencers use social media to influence their followers in understanding the role of the Saudi government in vision 2030.

**Procedures:** If you agree to participate, you will need to answer questions which will last no longer than One hour. You will be asked about your experience in using microblogging platform “Twitter” about the issues mentioned above. You may refuse to answer any question that you do not want to answer. I will use neither your real name nor identifying information in preparing the study or in possible subsequent manuscripts prepared for publication in scholarly journals.

**Risks of Participation:** Some participants may consider the subject matter to be sensitive.

**Benefits:** There are no immediate benefits to participating in this study. The results of this study will contribute to a better understanding on how Saudi social media influencers represent government’s initiative within social network platforms.

**Confidentiality:** Participants’ information will not be used within the research study and all data will remain confidential. The study may result in published articles, a dissertation and/or presentations at professional conferences. Any reporting that arises from this research study will not identify individuals, places, names or specific events.

**Contacts:** For any enquiry, feel free to contact the researcher, Musaab Alharbi, PhD Researcher, RMIT University

**Participants Rights:** As a participant in this research, you are entitled to know about the nature of the research. You are free to decline participation, and you are free to withdraw from answering the interview's questions or the study at any time. Feel free to request and ask any question at any time about the nature of this research project or the methods I am using. Your suggestions and concerns are important to me.

**Name:**

**Signatures:**