

# #EndMaleGuardianship: Women's rights, social media and the Arab public sphere

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## Abstract

This study examines the online communicative dynamics between women and men during the Saudi women's rights campaign to end male guardianship, which unfolded on Twitter. We analysed 2.7 million tweets with the #EndMaleGuardianship hashtag over a 7-month period quantitatively and 150,245 of these qualitatively to examine the extent to which Twitter shapes and facilitates cross-gender communication, and how this helped engender new spaces for expression of dissent. Our study shows that Twitter provided shared online communicative spaces that had several characteristics commonly associated with public sphere(s). There is also evidence that using these alternatives spaces, women transcended to an extent the gender segregation that exists in traditional public discourses and spaces of Saudi society. The anonymity of Twitter offered women a safe place to deliberate their concerns about male guardianship. We suggest that these deliberations created a counterpublic sphere of sorts, which helped Saudi women legitimise the #EndMaleGuardianship campaign.

## Keywords

Arab online public sphere, Arab women's movement, counterpublics, human rights, Saudi Arabia

# Introduction

In 2016, Saudi women's rights activists began an online campaign which was to become one of the most remarkable movements in Saudi Arabia and contributed to ending the system of male guardianship known as *mahram*. Part of the Saudi culture (Al-Lily, 2011), *mahram* requires women to legally have a guardian throughout their lives, usually husband, father, grandfather, son older than 18, or brother (Al-Saggaf, 2016; Human Rights Watch, 2016). Women need permission from their male guardian (*mahram*) for marriage, travel and study; and her guardian has significant power over her life, including deciding whether she should receive certain types of medical treatment or visit government departments. The male guardian can allow or prevent a woman from accessing work, marriage, healthcare and travel (Al Nahedh and Al Sheikh, 2018). Al-Lily (2011: 120) argued that 'since [the guardianship] mechanism is embedded in the [Saudi] national culture', officials 'may ask women for their guardian's consent even where no law or guideline requires such consent'.

There have been several previous attempts to reform women's status. In 2000, for instance, Saudi Arabia agreed to sign the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). In 2004, the Ministry of Commerce and Investment eased its regulations to allow Saudi women to establish businesses independent of a male guardian. But the status of women did not change, and in 2009, Saudi businesswomen organised a campaign demanding they be given the rights announced by the ministry. Between 2008 and 2016, Human Rights Watch issued several reports arguing that legal guardianship regulation affects women's rights to make their own decisions and that treating them as minors potentially exposes them to the risk of domestic violence due to the authority men have over them.

In 2013, while defying the de facto driving ban on women in Saudi Arabia, women's rights activists Aziza Al-Yousef and Eman Al-Nafjan were arrested and released only after their guardians were called. Al-Yousef began her campaign against male guardianship after this incident, submitting a petition to the Shura Council (the Consultative Assembly of Saudi Arabia). She also began tweeting against male guardianship. Street protests and public expressions of dissent carry severe penalties in Saudi Arabia, but the authorities have historically had a more lenient approach to protest on social media. Social media campaigns, therefore, were a safer way for people to express their support for women's rights, and it was in this space that Saudi female activists developed their campaign with hashtags in Arabic and English. Of these, #EndMaleGuardianship and #IamMyOwnGuardian began trending soon. Although Al-Yousef's campaign was not the first to call for a reform of women's status, it succeeded in drawing much national and international attention. However, it was only in July 2016 that the Twitter hashtag *#أنا ولية أمری (#IamMyOwnGuardian)* gained momentum, after the release of the 2016 Human Rights Watch report.

The campaign against male guardianship encouraged Saudi activist Hala Al-Dosari to petition King Salman. More than 14,000 Saudi women and men signed their names on the petition. Approximately 2500 telegrams were also sent to the king's office (BBC, 2016) in support. #IamMyOwnGuardian continued to trend almost daily for more than a year. After the first day, protesters drew attention to the

length of their campaign by updating the hashtag daily with the cumulative day number. On Day 302 of the campaign (4 May 2017), King Salman issued a royal decree to review male guardianship rules and allowed women to receive all services without permission from a male guardian.

The #EndMaleGuardianship call was one of the two most noteworthy women's rights campaigns Saudi Arabia has seen, the other being the #Women2Drive campaign, which became successful when a royal decree in September 2017 granted women the right to drive. In both these campaigns, Twitter helped mobilise women. Activists prompted users to send the link of the Human Rights Watch report directly to the Saudi king's Twitter account. They also posted videos about the abuse they suffered from their male guardians. Many of these cases gained public attention and were reported on by the traditional media. In some cases, such as when the prince of the Tabuk region forbid the marriage of a 16-year-old girl to a man aged 70 years, the campaign is likely to have contributed to positive responses from authorities. This possibility is also highlighted by Al Nahedh and Al Sheikh (2018), who argue that the 'Twitter wave' strengthened Saudi women's movement. It also helped that the Twitter campaigns coincided with what can be seen as a transformative era for the Saudi society, resulting from the reformative Saudi Vision 2030 overseen by Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman. The timing was particularly important as the crown prince's reforms called for enhanced communication between the government and citizens via Twitter (Al Nahedh and Al Sheikh, 2018).

There is evidence that the Twitter wave also brought about a new form of communicative dynamics between women activists and men. While cross-gender communication itself was not new in Saudi Arabia, it has always been confined to private spaces, both offline and online. The women's rights campaigns, however, saw such communication spilling into a virulently public space, conducted on a platform not just public but internationally so. It is in this context that we seek to examine the online communicative dynamics between women and men during the Saudi women's rights campaign to end male guardianship, posing the following research questions:

- *RQ1.* To what extent did Twitter facilitate cross-gender communication during the #EndMaleGuardianship campaign?
- *RQ2.* In what ways did Twitter engender online communicative spaces for the expression of dissent and the constitution of counterpublics in Saudi Arabia?

These questions will enhance our understanding of the public debate within the online communities in the Arab world and indicate how Twitter discourses in Saudi Arabia supported and potentially contributed to political and social change there.

## **The Arab public sphere**

The idea of public sphere, as posited by Habermas (1989), exists but only in a restricted form in Arab countries. While the Arab world 'has decades of experience with political argumentation at the transnational level' (Lynch, 2003: 59) and has succeeded in creating a less constrained public sphere transnationally, the authoritarian nature of the governments and their rigid controls over the media have constrained the domestic space for debate within these countries considerably. There are limited opportunities for the civil society to formulate opinions and influence the

state through open debates – particularly where those views dissent from established norms. Not only is the traditional public sphere such that it exists gender-restricted to males, there are also restrictive policies on the mass media, which are mainly owned by the state or members of the ruling elite. Political communication is risky in the Middle East, but the possibility of online anonymity provides people with a certain safety from the authorities (Lynch, 2007).

The question then is whether the discussions that Arab citizens conduct in online communicative spaces construct an alternate or counterpublic sphere to counterbalance authoritarianism. Poor (2005) posits four conditions to be satisfied in an online space for it to be considered a public sphere: (a) it should offer a space for discourse; (b) it should allow entry to new or previously excluded discussants; (c) there should be discussion of political nature and (d) ideas should be judged by merit, not by the standing of the discussants. Although online debates are often dominated by questions of religion, these spaces encourage Arab participants to openly discuss common concerns not just locally but globally as well, thus beginning to overcome boundaries of traditional state control (Al-Saggaf, 2006). A major factor in this is the anonymity that blogs, microblogs and online comment forums offered discussants.

In the last decade, Arab bloggers have organised various online campaigns calling for their right to free speech. Prior to the Arab Spring, most Arab bloggers were what Lynch (2007) termed 'bridge bloggers': blogging in English to capture the attention of Western audiences. However, the emergence of social media platforms have changed this trend, with more citizens now engaging online in their own language. Salvatore (2013) notes the significant role that Facebook, YouTube and Twitter played in the 2011 uprisings, and how young Arabs used these platforms to criticise the political regimes and call for change. A significant characteristic of this new space is that, unlike the traditional public sphere, it allows for women's voices to be heard. Al-Saggaf and Simmons (2014), who analysed YouTube, Facebook, Al Arabiya.net and Al-Saha Al-Siyasia during the 2011 flooding disaster in Jeddah, notes this point, even as they highlight that the anonymity of the platforms also lead to disrespectful comments.

## Counterpublics

The notion of a 'counterpublic', as put forward by Fraser (1990), helps elucidate the emerging online public sphere in Arab countries and the ability for women to use this space to campaign. For long, feminist researchers including Eley (1992), Fraser (1990), Benhabib (1992) and Lanes (1998) have pointed out that women's issues are excluded from public debates across the globe. Feminists have argued that this exclusion forces women to find ways to insert themselves into public spheres and become a competing public (Charles and Rohwer, 1991). Fraser (1990) suggested the term 'counterpublic' for this competing public, outlining 'parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs' (Fraser, 1990: 67). Such counterpublics align marginalised groups and mobilise them to gain access to the main public. The relationship between the subaltern publics and mainstream public is competitive, according to Fraser (1990). The counterpublics compete to legitimate sidelined

issues. For example, domestic violence against women was historically seen as a personal matter, not a public concern. However, this topic gained legitimacy in mainstream public spheres after the frequent discussion in counterpublics by feminists.

Counterpublics, according to Toepfl and Piwoni (2017), are of two types: those with ‘inward-oriented goals’ or those with ‘outward-oriented goals’. The inward-oriented debaters mainly focus on creating safe communicative space where people can invent their alternative identity and share their needs and interests. The outward-oriented groups, however, targets the mainstream public sphere by ‘breaking up and shifting ... consensus structures within dominant publics [and] engaging with wider audiences’. The latter groups strive to engage with the ‘mainstream audiences’ (Toepfl and Piwoni, 2017: 4).

The Internet enables people to do online what they cannot do offline. In this context, the online public spaces that have emerged in Arab countries could be seen as examples of counterpublics, where women have been able to articulate political views. Anonymity accords them the opportunity to avoid judgement based on their backgrounds or identities (Poor, 2005), and cyberfeminists use the Internet ‘to advance a political cause that is difficult to advance offline ... to create intellectually and emotionally compelling digital artefacts that tell stories of injustice, interpret history, and advocate for particular political outcomes’ (Stephan, 2013: 1). Such activism features a lack of institutional and cultural norms: it is bodiless, which enable women to choose their identities, to express and write about marginalisation and to challenge the system of patriarchy.

In many Arab societies, women activists are excluded from participating in the offline public sphere for cultural and political reasons. However, Sasha (2013) argued that cyberactivism can overcome such sociocultural obstacles. A 2011 study by the Dubai School of Government reported that 83% of Arab women respondents believed that social media was a suitable platform for expressing themselves (Mourtada and Salem, 2011). All around the world, women are now turning their personal struggles into political matters by sharing their stories on social media (Martin and Valenti, 2012). Radsch (2012) argued that female cyberactivism ignited collective action in the Arab Spring revolution, in which women who participated in citizen journalism covered the assaults, mobilisation and organisation. Since then, Arab women activists have exploited the capability of the Internet to disseminate news and information and assist women in raising issues and forming public opinion. But much of the research on Arab women’s movements on social media has focussed on their roles in the Arab Spring; so far, very few have looked at online women’s rights campaigns.

## Saudi women and online public spheres

Traditionally, in Saudi Arabia, there are three forms of offline public spaces for intellectual conversation: elite salons, cultural clubs and women’s charity commissions. The first two are exclusively for men, leaving the charity commissions as the only places accessible by women. This situation has now changed, with the Internet offering new venues for women to contribute to public discourse, including online forums, blogs and, more recently, social media channels.

Although Saudi women are culturally isolated from the traditional public spheres such that they exist, the Internet has provided those with access to it equal opportunity regardless of status, religious affiliation or ideological background. Social media has amplified the voices of those who were previously silenced and marginalised in Saudi Arabia, such as women and Shiite Muslims (*BBC Trending*, 2016). In addition, Twitter in Saudi Arabia performs the unique function of opening up social and political debate for those whose participation is otherwise heavily restricted (Faris and Noman, 2015). As reported in *The New York Times*, Saudis cross boundaries and discuss delicate issues on Twitter, such as ‘Saudi corruption’, ‘political prisoners’ and women’s issues (Worth, 2012).

According to the Saudi Center for Government Communication, as of 2018 more than 17.29 million Saudis – 52% of the population – use Twitter. Of this, 62% are youth. A 2014 BBC report noted that Twitter gained popularity in Saudi Arabia because ‘people can say what they cannot say in real life’. While this indicates a certain level of freedom of speech online, this freedom stops much short of the freedom enjoyed by Western publics – even in the relatively less-restrictive online space, there are some lines most Saudis will not risk crossing. The 2017 Freedom Report emphasises that despite the online women’s activism of 2017, Saudi Internet remains restricted, pointing to three types of censorship that Saudi women face: online censorship, self-censorship and social censorship. Saudi users are encouraged to participate in the social censorship by reporting any inappropriate content to the Internet Service Unit (Aljabre, 2013; Freedom House, 2017). The 2017 Transparency Report shows that the Saudi government requested account information from Twitter 33 times, and all the requests were classified by Twitter as emergency disclosure requests involving the danger of death or serious physical injury to a person (Twitter, 2018). But relatively, it can be said social media offers Saudis a more open communicative space. The 2017 *Media Use in the Middle East* report, for instance, showed that 47% of Saudis considered online spaces safe for political criticism, and 51% felt comfortable discussing politics on online platforms (Dennis et al., 2016).

For Saudi women, online spaces are particularly important. Platforms such as Twitter allow women to be anonymous or have alter egos, facilitating freer speech and, crucially, communication with their male counterparts (Al-Lily, 2011). Al Nahedh and Al Sheikh (2018: 5) argue that the Saudi Twittersphere ‘has served as a platform to reflect women’s reality by exposing their struggles and needs, including in ways considered risky that did not correspond to social norms’. These may be a normalised part of women’s everyday activities in many other countries, but for Saudi women, it is a new experience. Saudi women activists utilise social media to share common concerns and work to increase awareness about women’s issues, mobilise others and organise campaigns. The popular #Women2Drive and #26thOctober campaigns were led by well-known activists Manal Al-Sharif, Eman Al-Nafjan and Wajeha Al-Huwaider, who used photos, videos, symbols, street protests and English-language posts to promote their causes. Other noteworthy campaigns include ‘I am a lawyer’ (#انا محامية) and ‘women vote’ (#بلدي).

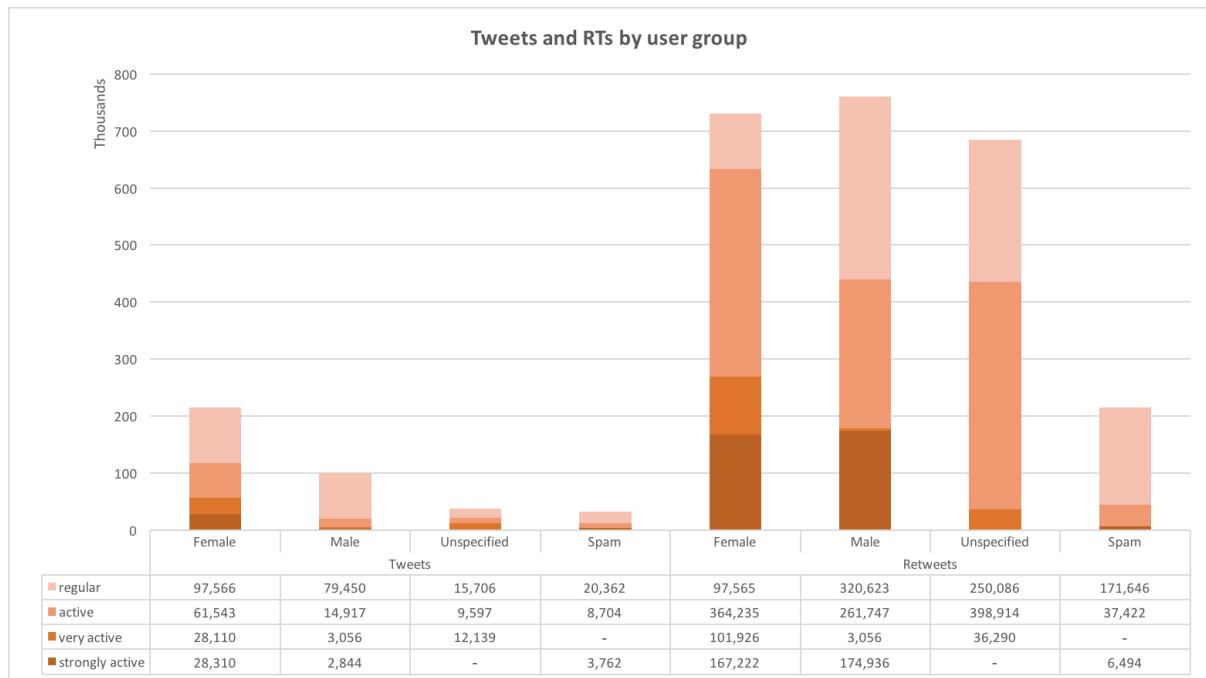
Faris and Noman (2015) found that while many activists created hashtags and posted videos asking for women’s rights, counter-campaigns also emerged. They discovered that counter-hashtags, such as # بنات الوطن ضد القيادة (‘national women against driving’), were always created by anonymous users. However, Almaghooth

(2013) argued that although hashtags may have forced the government to take actions that addressed women's rights, the state also followed a 'dumping policy' by which it 'loaded hashtags of which it disapproves with many messages to divert attention and detract from their main message' (Almaghlooth, 2013: 247).

Furthermore, governments in the Middle East have also adopted surveillance and prosecution to counter activism. During the 2010 Iranian protests, for instance, the government distributed activists' photos collected from online profiles, asking citizens to identify participants. The Arab Spring similarly witnessed state violence and arrests of protesters based on their social media activity (Lee et al., 2015). Given this context of fear activists in other Arab countries faced, anonymity is a prime concern for women activists in Saudi Arabia. This is to protect themselves not only from the potential consequences from those who oppose their campaigns but also from the traditionalists who oppose women's rights as it allows them to target activists without being recognised. It is not surprising then that 50% of Saudis acknowledge they are concerned about surveillance, and 21% of them use a virtual private network (VPN) to conceal their identity online (Dennis et al., 2016).

## Method and data collection

This study analyses the online communicative dynamics surrounding #EndMaleGuardianship (#اسقط\_الوليـة\_سعـوديـات), the Twitter hashtag used as a focal point for the Saudi women's campaign against male guardianship. In so doing, we examine the characteristics of one part of the broader online communicative space in Saudi Arabia and assess the extent to which it provides women a voice on issues that directly affect them. Twitter data were extracted based on the Arabic hashtag #اسقط\_الوليـة and the English #EndMaleGuardianship over 7 months, from 1 December 2016 to 5 July 2017. The sample period was chosen to cover the duration of the campaign before and after the royal decree in May 2017 to review male guardianship rules, as outlined in the introduction. NVivo 11's NCapture was used to extract the real-time data, which was supplemented with historical data extracted using Twitter's own enterprise application program interface (API) platform, Gnip. This resulted in a total corpus of 2,778,228 tweets (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Breakdown of total corpus of 2.7 million tweets.

Usernames were classified into four groups based on the overall number of tweets that used that specific hashtag (see Figure 1): strongly active users (1000 tweets or more), very active (500–1000 tweets); active users (100–500 tweets) and regular users (less than 100 tweets). This classification allowed us to analyse who was dominating campaign hashtags and the relative contributions from other users.

From the total corpus, we filtered out all retweets (2,392,162). We also filtered out all spam tweets. Accounts that followed patterns of automation – identical language, fixed number of tweets and retweets – were considered bots and tweets from such accounts were classified as spam. Accounts that both supported and opposed the campaign fell into this classification. Similarly, tweets with content not related to the campaign (pornography, advertisement, sport news, religious citing from the Quran, etc.) were classified as spam. Furthermore, we excluded all duplicate tweets and identified tweets from accounts where gender was not specified or could not be ascertained. We classified the gender of each user account using a combination of Twitter's Gender API and manual identification from the name and tweets of the account. Arabic is grammatical gendered language, with all singular and plural nouns and adjectives having masculine and feminine versions, and their usage can indicate the gender of the speaker in a given context. While we recognise that determining gender based on profile information and tweets might not always be accurate, and there exists the possibility of impersonation, a segregation on this basis nevertheless provides a reasonable indication of the extent of female–male communication. Furthermore, for our purposes, the gender of communicators as observed by other participating Twitter users and the spectacle of public interaction between genders were also of importance.

Tweets containing original contributions were thus identified from the corpus, as detailed above. This gave us 150,245 tweets for our qualitative content analysis (Table 1). Following an inductive approach, we identified themes by iteratively

building lists of keywords and phrases through close reading. Keywords and phrases identified in this stage were then used to manually code and characterise the full corpus of 150,245 original tweets (Table 1). Tweets were classified into two main clusters: broadly supportive of the #EndMaleGuardianship campaign and in opposition to the campaign.

**Table 1. Distribution and frequency of tweets and retweets based on users types.**

	User accounts	Tweets	Retweets	Total tweets in corpus	Tweets in qualitative content analysis
Female users	19,486	215,529	730,948	946,477	106,387
Male users	22,121	100,267	760,362	860,629	43,858
Unspecified users	4654	37,442	685,290	722,732	—
Spam users	5379	32,828	215,562	248,390	—
Total	51,640	386,066	2,392,162	2,778,228	150,245

Tweets were further coded for the main communicative attribute of the utterance contained within the tweets as either ‘Rational’ (including critical argument, judgement based on reasons and inspiration discourse) or ‘Irrational discourse’ (unreasonable argumentation, including hateful discourse, cursing and threats). Supportive tweets within ‘Rational discourse’ were coded as either ‘Demands women rights’, ‘Criticism for women’s current situation’ or ‘Arousing emotions’. The ‘Demands women rights’ were then coded as either ‘Liberal’, ‘Religious’ or ‘Vision’. ‘Liberal’ included tweets demanding women’s rights as essential human rights. ‘Religion’ included tweets which considered women rights as part of real Islamic regulation. ‘Vision’ included tweets that linked the demands to the reform plan of Saudi Vision 2030 (e.g. age of maturity, not minor and sane، سن رشد، ليست قاصر، اهليه (عاقل)). ‘Criticism for women’s current situation’ blamed the state, culture, opponents or males for the current status of women (low, procedures, state, pearl and bossy male، (اجراءات، الدولة، القانون، دره، الذكر المتسلط)). ‘Arousing emotions’ contained utterances linked with arousal, anger and sadness (we won’t stop, continuing guardianship will fall, till when, slavery and suffering (لن ننصل، مستمرین، ستسقط ، الى متى، رق) . معناة ()).

Oppositional tweets with rational discourse were coded as ‘Critical’, ‘Emotional’ or ‘Accepting’. ‘Critical’ tweets claimed that calling for women’s rights resulted in corruption, applied external agendas or disrupted how Islamic religion was implemented. The keywords for this theme included corruption, Iran, Israel, sedition and westernisation (فساد، ايران، اسرائيل، فتنه، تغريب). ‘Emotional’ included tweets that advocated respect for males and expressed feeling guilt for asking to end guardianship. ‘Acceptance’ included tweets that did not advocate the end of male guardianship but could accept the change because some women are suffering. Examples of keywords and phrases include disobedience to parents, honour the parents, proud of my father and individual case (عوق والدين، افتخر بولي امري، بير، حالات فردية).

The following section will explore the frequency of tweets using the #EndMaleGuardianship hashtags over time, before presenting the findings from the

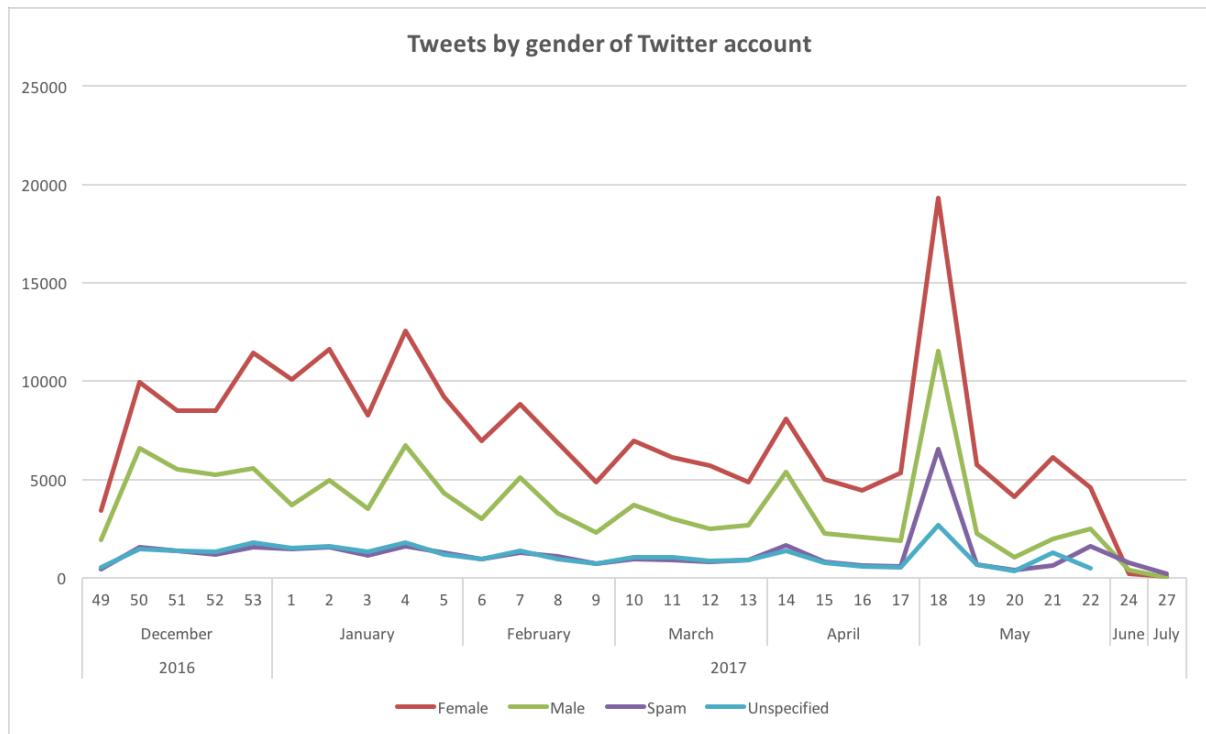
qualitative content analysis of the communicative characteristics of original tweets by women and men.

## Women accessing shared public spaces

Evidence from this study illustrates that women are making use of Twitter to have their voices heard in public and mobilise support for the campaign to end male guardianship. While the characteristics of this public space have the hallmarks of a counterpublic, as will be explored in detail later, it is important to highlight at the outset that this is indeed a *shared* space between men and women. This is significant because in the Saudi society, public spaces are traditionally highly gendered and segregated, as discussed earlier. While the shared space engendered by the mutual use of the #EndMaleGuardianship hashtags incorporated both women and men, women appeared to be more cautious about revealing their identity. Most often activists used only their surname, for example, so as to make it more difficult to determine their personal identity. Despite this, user accounts identified as female were responsible for the majority of tweets containing original content (see Figure 1), while men were slightly more active contributing to the discussion indirectly through retweeting.

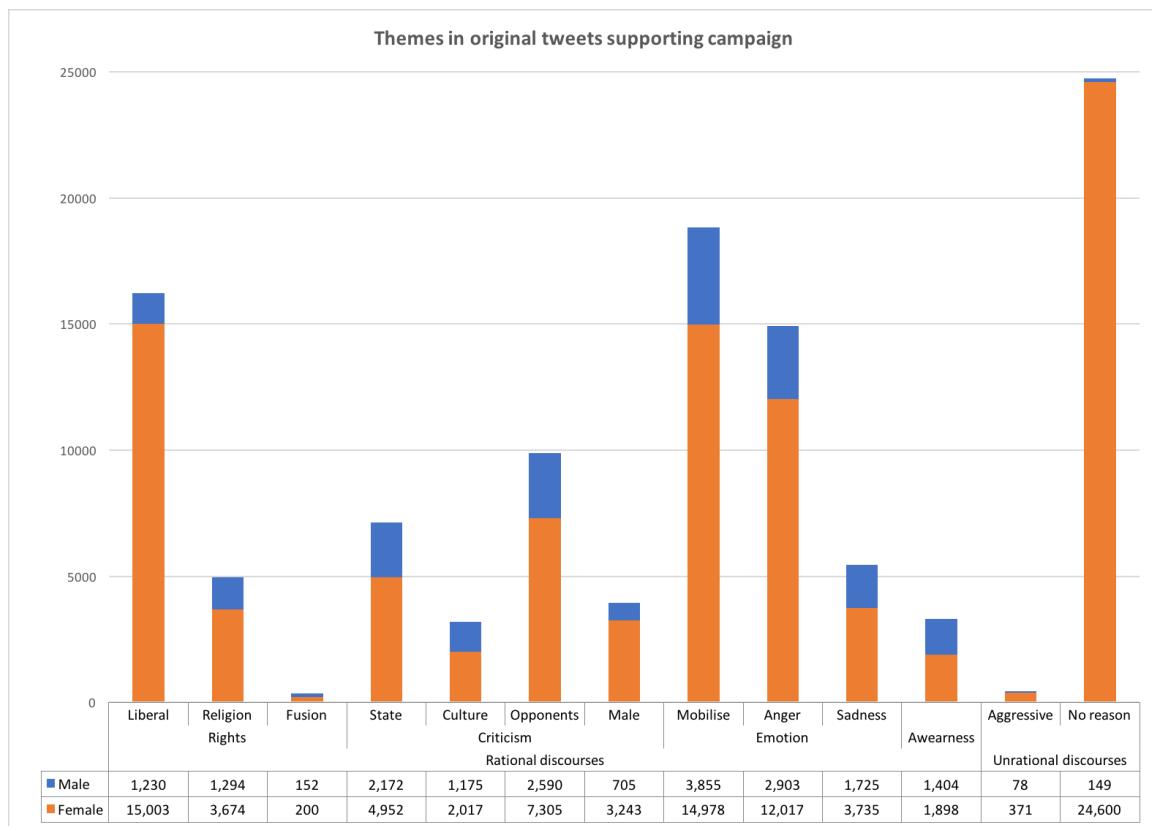
In terms of user types, we found active and regular users contributed the largest volume of content across all categories – including original tweets by women. This indicates that this is not solely a campaign driven by a small number of highly motivated activists. Instead, there appears to be a broad range of Twitter users who contribute to public discussion using the #EndMaleGuardianship hashtags. There were hardly any strongly active male Twitter accounts contributing original tweets using the hashtag, which indicates a reluctance from men to be seen campaigning directly. There was however a large proportion of strongly active male Twitter users who frequently retweeted.

Mapping the frequency of original tweets by women and men across the sample period corroborates this finding. Figure 2 highlights how women dominate across the entire timeline. The volume of original tweets remained high in December and January, averaging between 16,356 and 17,894 tweets per calendar week respectively. This then dips in February (average 12,304 tweets per calendar week), March (10,716) and April (10,340) before a significant increase in May. This spike in frequency coincides with King Salman's royal decree to review male guardianship rules and the relaxation of regulation to enable women to receive all services without a male guardian. Also contributing to the spike was the attention the hashtag attracted from spammers, who hijacked it to promote their various services. There is a small peak in January, which can be explained by an incident involving a female member of the Shura Council. The member tweeted that activists should not be using English tweets to publicise 'a Saudi issue' to an international audience. This attracted protests from Saudi women, resulting in an increased volume of tweets.

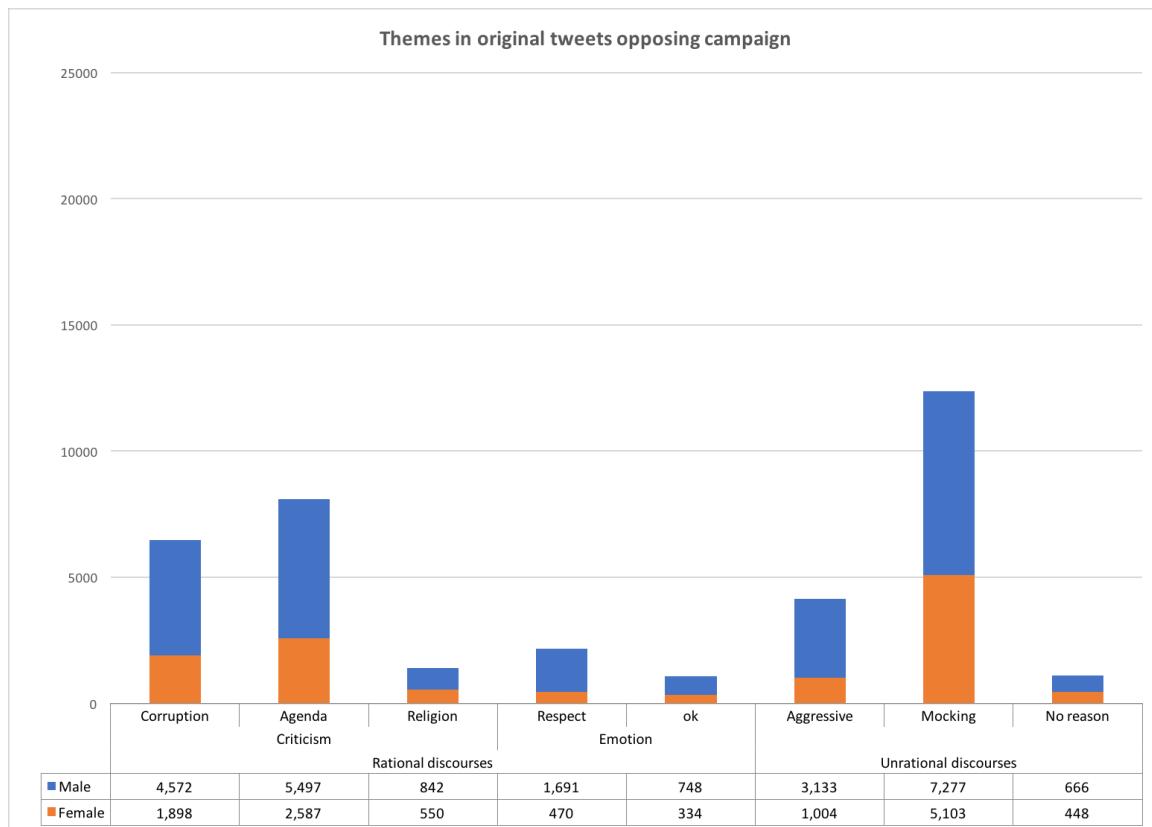


**Figure 2.** Tweets over time (excluding RTs) on corpus of 386k tweets.

Figure 2 makes it evident that women and men were interacting in a shared online space. To understand the qualities of this dialogic interaction – the extent to which women and men were having a meaningful dialogue and the extent to which such an online space could be considered a form of public sphere – we examined the content of the tweets. Figures 3 and 4 demonstrate there was clear gender disparity in terms of support and opposition for the campaign, with supportive tweets overwhelmingly coming from accounts attributed to females (62.6% female support vs. 12.9% male support) and tweets containing some form of opposition to the campaign stemming predominantly from accounts of males (16.3% male opposition vs. 8.2% female opposition). Indeed Figure 4 shows that accounts with male names were responsible for both mocking (4.8% of tweets) and aggressive (2.1% of tweets) messages, indicating a derisory attitude towards the campaign. The aggression towards women and the respect expressed towards *mahram* in the tweets from accounts of males, while a small proportion of the sample overall reflect the power of men over women in the Saudi society.



**Figure 3. Tweets supporting campaign by gender and themes.**



**Figure 4. Tweets opposing campaign by gender and themes.**

Perhaps more surprisingly, we also see a smaller number of female Twitter accounts mocking the campaign in approximately 3.4% of the tweets. This can in part be explained by similar cultural specificities to the male aggression. It is possible that Saudi women are derogatory because the notion of independence from men contravenes the established cultural norms and values of their society or that some or all the accounts responsible for these tweets are trolls (i.e. men masquerading as women). The anger in *supportive* tweets from women's accounts (8% of tweets) could be taken to indicate the suffering caused by the male guardianship system. Some male protesters also expressed anger or frustration at the system that consumed their time and effort (1.9% of tweets), given the level of responsibility associated with it.

While what we have identified is clearly an online space shared by both women and men, it is clear that their communicative acts and public utterances differ significantly. Below, we explore the main characteristics reflected in original tweets where the gender of the Twitter account could be identified.

## *Women tweets: the voiceless gain a voice*

Through the qualitative content analysis, we identified six key themes that demonstrate the ways in which women involved themselves in the #EndMaleGuardianship campaign.

### *Online and offline connection*

First, the campaign incorporated and reflected on individual offline acts. Women tweeted videos of themselves walking and cycling to protest against the driving ban to encourage each other. Although these women protested offline, they did not break the law as they did not gather in groups or congregate on streets. In addition, the online space was affected by the offline events while the hashtag circulated on Twitter. The campaign evolved to incorporate Saudi women's issues that resonated with the original hashtag تحرري \_ من صمتك (#SpeakOut), for example, to encourage women to share their stories of abuse from violence and the difficulties they faced due to male guardianship. As a consequence, several other hashtags emerged, such as #SaveMariam, #SaudiWomenTruth and #KhadejahDied. Each hashtag represented humanitarian cases of women who were oppressed by their male guardian.

The hashtag #SaveMariam, for example, emerged on Twitter as a result of Mariam al-Otaibi being arrested for fleeing her family. As an active campaigner against the guardianship system, she decided to live independently without her father's authorisation. Women fleeing from home without their guardian's permission are considered illegal, regardless of whether the woman is over 18 or 21 years old. However, releasing Mariam from detention required the permission of her father, and Mariam stayed in detention for 104 days. She was only released after the King ordered the system to be modified for prisoners to be released without authorisation from guardians. During this period, campaigners used the hashtag #SaveMariam to advocate for her release.

Although individuals who protested offline by walking unaccompanied did not face any opposition or jail time, a protester named Malak Al Shehri was arrested by religious police for entering a busy road (Al-Tahliya street) without a hijab (abaya) in Riyadh. She crossed a virtual line in challenging the cultural norms of the Saudi society by protesting against religion. Before her arrest, Al Shehri had tweeted she had decided to go out without abaya and smoke a cigarette (Burrows, 2016). Her actions affected the campaign negatively, leading some people to believe that ending male guardianship would corrupt how Islamic religion is implemented. The following tweet from Aldahmi (الدحمي) is illustrative of this sentiment (the number denotes the day of the campaign):

من يطالب باسقاط الولاية هو نفسه من يطالب باسقاط الحجاب ، ومن يسقط الحجاب فسوف يسقط اشياء اخرى ، خطوات #الشيطان #SaudiWomen\_Need\_EqualRights\_#EndMaleGuardianship 286

[Those who demand an end to the male guardianship are the same who demand the removal of the hijab, and whoever drops the hijab will follow the steps of the devil]

Moral corruption, thus, was a major reason for many to be against the campaign. They were concerned that women's independence will cause family disintegration and spread immoral behaviour, including prostitution, and this was the second-most prominent criticism levelled against the campaign by both males and females (as seen in Figure 4).

For their part, activists were able to arouse emotion, including anger, with their tweets, especially when they presented or reacted to cases of domestic violence that occurred offline, or when they expressed their frustration in the advanced stages of the campaign, waiting for decisions on their demands.

## *Mobilising support*

Mobilisation is the primary result that activists hope to achieve through cyberactivism and is a pivotal step for action planning. Figure 3 shows that during the movement, calls to mobilise was very high in women's tweets (10% of total sample) and also in men's tweets relative to their other supportive messages (2.6% of tweets overall, but still the highest category for men's supportive tweets). Protesters actively sought to keep the hashtag trending to attract and sustain both national and international attention. They used different mobilising strategies: tweets that strived to raise awareness (1.3%), tweets from influential people (less than 1%) and tweets aimed to arouse emotion (overall 20.5%). For their part, the counter-campaigners sought to discourage the campaign by creating their own hashtag – #AgainstEndMaleGuardianship – to group protest tweets without inadvertently supporting the main campaign hashtag, but this strategy proved ineffective.

From the beginning, activists focussed on raising awareness about the campaign itself, stressing that the lack of a named leader reflected their shared unity as a social movement. They posted their intention to clarify the truth of the concept of male guardianship in Islam. They explained the important roles of women in society and how freedom will affect women positively (i.e. @noura #SaudiWomen\_Need\_EqualRights\_#EndMaleGuardianship 15 الحرية لا تعنى الفساد، حرية فكر و عقل اتخاذ القرارات بدون تدخل أو تحكم أو #تسلط من أحد). Men's tweets took a slightly different form. They tended to be more

conservative in declaring their support for the campaign, and often advised women protesters to be respectful in how they asked for their rights. Campaigners sought to provide intertextuality between their messages and those of historically famous human rights activists, by tweeting influential or inspirational quotes from the likes of Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi. They also reminded themselves of previous successful women's movements, such as the British suffrage and the work of Emmeline Pankhurst, and encouraged each other to be patient and continue protesting. The strategy, it would appear, was to first sustain motivation of participants and second to gain moral legitimacy by linking to other campaigners who successfully fought oppression, as seen in the following examples:

رانيا العليان @#SaudiWomen\_NetWork\_يتجاهلونك ثم يسخرون منك ثم يحاربونك ثم تنتصر -مهاتما غاندي

[@Rania Al Olayan: #EndMaleGuardianship 187 First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win. – Mahatma Gandhi]

حريه # @SaudiWomen\_NetWork\_يتجاهلونك ثم يسخرون منك ثم يحاربونك ثم تنتصر -مهاتما غاندي

[@Freedom: #EndMaleGuardianship 180 The hottest place in Hell is reserved for those who remain neutral in times of great moral conflict. – Martin Luther King]

### *Drawing international attention to campaigns*

The protesters used 10 languages – representing both attempts to attract international attention and their relative success in doing so. Non-Arabic tweets mentioned Human Rights Watch and foreign press using @hrw @BBC @CNN @UNHumanRights. Although there were only 762 English tweets in total, they gained significant attention. Domestically and internationally, the campaign was reported in newspapers, TV channels and on YouTube. The movement found supporters in many Arab countries, including Kuwait, Tunisia and Egypt. Kuwaiti activists, for example, organised a peaceful solidarity march to support the Saudi women's campaign under the hashtag #walkingforher. As Lee et al. (2015) point out, social media's ability to put national affairs under global scrutiny may result in international pressure on the state to reduce suppression of activism and has the potential to result in increased freedom.

### *Interaction between the protesters and the state*

Due to the open-door policy adopted by the Saudi government in 2016, the King and other state officials interact with citizens through official Twitter accounts. Activists took advantage of this and mentioned the King with @KingSalman in 400 tweets, some of which contained videos and photos of women who were being oppressed by male guardians. Although the campaigners did not receive any online response, there were some action from the government in offline spaces (Alarabiya, 2017). In addition, activists started a petition that attracted signatures from more than 14,700 women, which was sent to the royal office in Riyadh.

The counter-campaigners accused the protesters of cheating and aiming for national instability. In response, the women campaigners tweeted to emphasise their

patriotism and loyalty to Saudi Arabia. They also reposted the campaign goals, stressing their protest was not for social instability but for social change:

الهروف الشمرى#@Saudi\_Lebanese\_193 حب الوطن يجري في دمائنا .. وطنبيون وإن أبي المعارض ونطالب بحقوقنا ولن نرضى بأقل من المواطنة الكاملة

[@Alhanouf Alshehri: Motherland love is running in my blood. We love our country even if the opponents deny that. We will call for our rights and will not stop until we obtain all our rights]

### *Increased freedom of speech*

Rational criticism was present in tweets from the accounts of both women (11.7% of tweets supporting and 3.4% opposing) and men (4.4% tweets supporting and 7.3% opposing). There was criticism directed at the state, cultural norms and the future vision of Saudi Arabia (see Figures 3 and 4). People were more daring in their criticisms and more comfortable to engage in this discourse. To the best of our knowledge, none of the activists supporting the #EndMaleGuardianship campaign were arrested for their tweets during the period of this study. In other words, the campaign demonstrated the ability for women to enforce a greater acceptance for freedom of speech in Saudi Arabia – at least in online communicative spaces, as long as they did not break rules in ‘offline spaces’.

The state was criticised for its judicial and educational systems, which were blamed for discriminating against women and enhancing the power of men over women. The protesters also argued that the system of male guardianship is not compatible with the promise of the Saudi Vision 2030 goals. In addition, during the campaign, Saudi women began embracing the term ‘feminist’ for the first time, a label they had refused so far as it was historically perceived as being anti-Islam and against the Saudi culture.

### *High respect for religion*

The Saudi society is considered conservative and religious, as discussed earlier, and religion in general has immunity against criticism within Saudi Arabia. People appear motivated to respect and protect religion, despite their participation in a campaign calling for social change. As shown in Figures 3 and 4, both supporters (3.3% of tweets) and opponents (0.9% of tweets) showed respect and reverence for Islam in their tweets. Supporters were calling for the application of real Islamic regulations to be adopted instead of the existing regulations, which they argued are anchored in cultural norms. They stressed that *mahram* in the Quran and prophetic hadith have a different meaning from the one emphasised in Saudi Arabia. They contended that the current interpretation came about during the awakening movement of the conservative stronghold and that it has resulted in the derogation of women’s rights.

There was a counter-argument against the campaign too, which was also anchored in religion. These tweets stemmed predominantly from men and advocated an even stricter approach to male guardianship since they were concerned about moral

corruption and violation of the Sharia law. The following section looks at greater detail at the themes emerging from tweets attributable to males.

## *Tweets from men: defending the status quo*

Tweets from male user accounts were less eclectic in their communicative characteristics and can be broadly grouped into four core themes.

### *Attempting to derail the campaign*

The opposers attempted different strategies to derail the campaign, including disseminating rumours, politicising the hashtag and racial abuse. Examples include tweets announcing the arrest of the hashtag founder and another stating that the use of the hashtag is disrespecting the country. This in turn led to further dissemination of the fake news that tweeting with the hashtag had been criminalised by Saudi Anti-Cyber Crime Law. The opposition group relied heavily on conspiracy theories – for example, claiming that the hashtag was a Western, Iranian or Israeli agenda or construct. Those who supported the hashtag were labelled by the counter-campaigners as traitors, liberals and atheists, which became de facto descriptors of all people who demanded an end to male guardianship. Counter-campaigners used quotes from the Quran to support their argument – echoing the high support for religion outlined in the previous section. The counter-campaign blamed women in general and stressed moral corruption would result from ending male guardianship. Women from ethnic minorities in particular were insulted and accused of not being patriotic since their original nationality was not Saudi Arabian.

### *Not daring to advocate*

Men tended to be more reserved in declaring support for the campaign and used loose or ambiguous phrases. Notwithstanding this, as seen in Figure 3, many men *did* support the campaign (12.9% of all tweets). They tweeted to raise awareness and were often seen advising protesters to adopt a strategy that involved asking for their rights in a more respectable manner. This reticence to advocate more openly for women's rights may be in part due to the strength of cultural norms in Saudi Arabia and the fear of stigma that might arise from being associated with the hashtag or social movement.

### *Men's control over women*

While many men appeared not to be against the campaign outright, it was evident from their tweets that they were not comfortable with the demands of the women. A significant number of tweets offered alternative solutions to ending male guardianship. One suggested solution, for example, was that abused women could file lawsuits against their guardian and request changes to her guardianship. Such solutions, from these men's points of view, would empower women, at the same time retaining the patriarchal hierarchy of the Saudi society.

### *Radical demands and self-censorship*

Some tweets sought to exploit the hashtag to propagate (by Saudi Arabian standards) extreme demands, such as demanding a legislative parliament to replace the Shura Council and calling for the removal of the hijab. However, these demands did not find many supporters. Freedom House (2017) reported that Saudi Arabia did not request for Twitter to remove any content during 2012–2015, despite Article 6 of the Anti–Cyber Crime Law clearly stating that ‘producing something that harms public order, religious values, public morals, the sanctity of private life, or authoring, sending, or storing it via an information network’ is a criminal act (Saudi Minister of Communications and Information Technology, 2007). The report indicated the lack of such problematic public content could be due to Saudi Arabians exercising caution through self-gatekeeping or self-censorship when discussing political or religious topics.

## Conclusion

This study has shown that within the Saudi Arabian context, the #EndMaleGuardianship campaign on Twitter engendered an alternative online space where women and men engaged and communicated with each other. In stark contrast to the traditional public sphere(s) in Saudi Arabia, which, informed by cultural norms and politics, isolate women from meaningful participation in political decision-making processes, this online space provided women the opportunity to debate concerns of significance publicly. But while Twitter facilitated a (relative) freedom to do so and fostered cross-gender communication (see also Aljasir, 2015; Bajnaid, 2016), some interactions we identified nevertheless reflected traditional power disparities, with men attempting to assert their dominance over women. Men tweeting aggressive and mocking messages towards women indicate that they still resist how women are increasingly standing up for their rights and demanding that they share the dominant public sphere with their male counterparts. This is a more significant step than it might seem since the Saudi context is very different from that of other Arab nations (where women, for example, played an important role in the Arab uprisings). In other Arab countries, women were much more likely to be respected by men as integral to the social movements that arose there, some of which also focused on enhancing women’s rights.

We nevertheless identified a shared online space that facilitated public expression for women on issues where they have previously been silenced and marginalised. As such, this arguably represents a counterpublic, but as we discussed above, the views expressed and the communicative characteristics are mixed and eclectic. It is, in other words, *not* a public sphere (online or otherwise) in the normative sense imagined by Habermas (1989) and others from a Western perspective. The communicative dynamics nevertheless bears many of the hallmarks of such public sphere(s), including a greater sense of inclusivity and presence of rational and critical debate. In so doing, it meets most of the criteria posited by Poor (2005). The ‘counter’, then, is engendered in part because of the Kingdom’s narrow social and cultural norms, which prohibits not only women’s participation in public debates (or street protests to force their voices to be heard) but also the very existence of shared public discourses and dialogic interaction to help progress social change.

To this end, Saudi women protesters on Twitter form counterpublics with open boundaries inside broad dominant public spaces – what Toepfl and Piwoni

(2017) called counterpublic(s) with ‘outward-oriented goals groups’. These counterpublics target the dominant public(s) by agitating for their ideas not only in public spaces but in shared spaces where mainstream audiences also participate. These types of counterpublics will keep their unity with the main public as emphasised by Fraser (1990) and Fuchs (2014). The mobilisation and awareness-raising which clearly appeared in tweets from women coalescing around the #EndMaleGuardianship hashtag were maintained to keep the communication inside the counterpublic and push women’s rights issues onto the agenda of the main public sphere(s).

It is worth noting that the #EndMaleGuardianship campaign continued for an unusually long period and was a potentially significant factor in influencing the issuance of the royal decree in May 2017, which also coincided with Saudi Arabia’s election to the UN’s Commission on the Status of Women for 2018–2022. Another connected campaign (#Women2Drive) has been even more successful, with King Salman in September 2017 announcing the abolition of the ban on Saudi women driving independently. However, the extent to which these new online discursive spaces will result in a meaningful and permanent long-term change – the end of *mahram*, in other words – remain to be seen. At the time of writing, while there have been changes within several government agencies to allow women to access services without permission from a male guardian, the results of the review ordered by King Salman are yet to be published.

We focussed on Twitter because the nature of the platform affords a public discourse, though it is entirely conceivable that similar dynamics to what we identified exists elsewhere on other online platforms too – or that private or restricted group messaging services are used to facilitate and aid dialogue prior to participation in public debates on Twitter. Further research is therefore needed on other digital platforms, the motivations of citizens and how they go about constructing and negotiating their participation in these spaces.

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