



The Use of Twitter/X in Saudi Sports Journalism: Newsgathering, Newsroom Hierarchies, Identity and Audience Power

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the use of Twitter/X in Saudi sports journalism, exploring how the platform is reshaping professional practices, editorial routines, and public engagement within a hybrid media system. Set against the backdrop of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 reforms and enduring institutional controls, the study examines how sports journalists negotiate the affordances and constraints of Twitter/X in their daily work.

Through qualitative semi-structured interviews with 40 Saudi sports journalists, the research identifies five interrelated areas of transformation: news gathering, audience interaction, editorial decision-making, newsroom hierarchies, and professional identity. The findings reveal that Twitter/X serves both as a tool of empowerment and a site of constraint. Journalists leverage the platform for real-time reporting, branding, and bypassing traditional gatekeeping structures, while simultaneously navigating censorship, reputational risk, and digital harassment. Female sports journalists, in particular, are shown to leverage Twitter/X as a space for asserting professional legitimacy and negotiating gender-based barriers in a traditionally male-dominated field.

The study also highlights the transformation of journalistic routines, where Twitter/X reshapes traditional news-gathering practices, compressing timelines and altering editorial workflows. It reveals how audience interaction is central to participatory journalism, though it also introduces challenges related to audience pressure and abuse. The research examines how Twitter/X disrupts editorial decision-making and gatekeeping practices, as journalists navigate the tensions between audience expectations and institutional control. Journalists' professional identity is increasingly shaped by their personal branding on Twitter/X, with gender-specific challenges especially prevalent for female journalists striving for visibility in a male-dominated profession.

The thesis contributes to platform studies and gatekeeping theory by demonstrating how platform affordances are locally reinterpreted in semi-authoritarian contexts. It challenges deterministic models of digital disruption, emphasising the negotiated nature of journalistic adaptation in the Global South. Methodologically, the study provides rare empirical insight into sports journalism within a politically regulated and under-researched national setting.

By centring the lived experiences of Saudi journalists, this research expands the geographical and conceptual scope of journalism studies. It offers a Global South perspective on the intersection of digital innovation, institutional constraint, and sociocultural norms, contributing to wider debates on professional identity, gender visibility, and the evolution of journalism in transitional societies.

Keywords: Sports journalism, Twitter/X, Saudi Arabia, Vision 2030, digital transformation, professional identity, gender, gatekeeping, platformisation.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Over the past two decades, journalism has experienced a profound transformation driven by the rise of digital technologies. These changes have redefined how information is gathered, produced, distributed, and consumed challenging, traditional news routines and opening new avenues for engagement and visibility. Central to this transformation is the platformisation of media, where digital platforms increasingly shape the norms, values, and technical infrastructure of journalism (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). These shifts affect not only the logistics of news work but also the professional identities and institutional roles of journalists in both liberal and constrained media systems.

Among the most influential platforms is Twitter/X, which has evolved from a microblogging site into a powerful tool for real-time reporting, sourcing, audience engagement, and personal branding (Asad & Parker, 2025; Kuria, 2025). Twitter/X's design based on brevity, hashtags, and direct interaction, supports a participatory media environment in which journalists no longer serve merely as gatekeepers, but as negotiators of public visibility and curators of live discourse (Oluoch, 2023). Scholars argue that Twitter/X functions less as a passive distribution channel and more as a dynamic space where journalists construct professional identities, engage in branding, and respond to unfolding news events in real time (Molyneux & McGregor, 2022; Sanseverino, 2023). This shift is particularly pronounced in sports journalism, a domain characterised by immediacy, emotion, and highly engaged audiences. The live, event-driven nature of sport makes it especially compatible with Twitter/X's affordances. Journalists use the platform to report scores, share clips, interact with fans, quote athletes, manage controversies, and extend coverage through post-game

commentary (Hutchins, 2011; Pather, 2021; Perreault & Bell, 2022). McEnnis (2023) argues that Twitter/X has enabled sports journalists, such as Fabrizio Romano, to reshape journalistic authority by providing trusted, direct updates that often bypass traditional media filters.

In contrast, Oelrichs (2023) notes that adoption in Germany is more limited, highlighting how organisational routines and cultural perceptions affect platform uptake. These patterns align with Rogers' (2003) diffusion-of-innovations framework, which explains variation in uptake by perceived relative advantage, compatibility with existing routines, complexity (ease of use), trialability, and observability (English, 2016). Twitter/X also plays a role in agenda-setting and framing. Ramon and Rojas-Torrijos (2022) show how institutions like the BBC continue to reinforce dominant narratives, especially around men's football despite appearing more inclusive. Similarly, Puertas (2022, p.56) identifies distinct uses of Twitter/X in Spanish televised journalism: "social TV" during events and "transmedia storytelling" after broadcasts. These formats prioritise audience interaction but also pose challenges to editorial independence, particularly as journalists become more reliant on platform metrics and trends. Scholars like Boots (2021) and Cranmer et al. (2023) argue that sports journalism increasingly operates within a hybridised model, where fans, influencers, and athletes shape discourse alongside traditional media, destabilising normative boundaries of professional authority.

Yet, the influence of Twitter/X on journalism is not experienced uniformly across global contexts. Broersma and Graham (2013) caution that the globalisation of platform norms obscures local asymmetries. In many non-Western and semi-authoritarian contexts, the platform's affordances are mediated by structural constraints such as state regulation, institutional conservatism, and varying levels of press freedom. As Kapidzic et al. (2022) and Hernández-Fuentes and Monnier (2022) note, journalists increasingly use tweets as primary source material, accelerating the flow

of news but also reducing opportunities for editorial scrutiny. These dynamics are particularly evident in hybrid media systems, where older and newer media logics interact, compete, and adapt over time. Thus, Twitter/X is one of the most influential and widely used digital platforms in Saudi Arabia, providing a strong justification for making it the central focus of this study. Saudi Arabia has historically always been known for having one of the highest Twitter/X penetration rates globally, with approximately 16 million active users, representing over 45% of the national population (DataReportal, 2025; Statista, 2024), and making it one of the platform's largest and most engaged markets worldwide (DataReportal, 2025).

In comparison, other major social media platforms in Saudi Arabia record higher overall user numbers but fulfil different communicative roles. TikTok has the largest estimated reach, with over 35 million user identities, followed by Snapchat with approximately 24–25 million users, Instagram with around 17–18 million users, and Facebook with approximately 16–17 million users (DataReportal, 2025; Statista, 2024). Twitter/X, while smaller in scale, nonetheless maintains a substantial audience of approximately 16.8 million users, representing over 40% of the population. These platforms are predominantly visual and entertainment-orientated, prioritising lifestyle, influencer culture, and short-form video content, whereas Twitter/X functions primarily as a space for news dissemination, public debate, and real-time commentary, particularly in relation to politics and sport.

Globally, Twitter/X also remains a significant platform, with an estimated 335 million monthly active users in 2024, despite indications that a gradual decline is occurring (Hootsuite, 2025). Unlike visual-based platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok, which primarily offer entertainment, lifestyle, and influencer-driven content, Twitter/X offers Saudi citizens a key arena for public debate, news consumption, political discussion, and real-time sports commentary (Khan,

Sohail & Ishrat, 2021; Mohammed & Ferraris, 2021). Its rapid, text-driven communication style and strong culture of live interaction have attracted sports journalists, also enabling direct engagement with audiences, athletes, and institutions. This combination of a high national penetration rate, cultural relevance, and journalistic utility positions Twitter/X as the most appropriate and meaningful platform to choose to examine how sports journalism is evolving within the Kingdom's rapidly transforming media landscape.

Chadwick's (2017) concept of the hybrid media system is especially relevant here. He argues that contemporary media environments are not divided between old and new media, but are characterised by co-evolution and strategic interaction. In such systems, journalists, institutions, and audiences draw upon traditional and digital practices to navigate changing power relations. This hybridity is evident in the blending of live coverage, professional branding, institutional authority, and audience engagement all of which unfold in real time on platforms like Twitter/X. In the Saudi context, this interaction is even more layered, as journalists operate within a tightly regulated media system while simultaneously embracing platform tools that reward visibility and immediacy. Saudi Arabia represents a particularly compelling case. The country is undergoing ambitious socio-political reform under Vision 2030, which aims to diversify the economy, modernise social norms, and enhance civic participation (Abedalrhman & Alzaydi, 2024). Sport has become central to this vision, with large-scale investments in infrastructure, the hosting of international events, and targeted efforts to promote women's involvement in both athletics and journalism (Ettinger, 2023). These developments position sports journalism as a relatively flexible space within an otherwise constrained media environment, less politically sensitive than other genres, yet rich with cultural and institutional significance (Chadwick & Widdop, 2022; AlAshry, 2024).

Despite these openings, the Saudi media landscape remains state-dominated, with limited tolerance for dissent and deeply rooted institutional hierarchies (Uniacke, 2021). Within this environment, Twitter/X operates as a double-edged platform. On one hand, it enables journalists to connect directly with audiences, bypass editorial bottlenecks, and develop individual voice and credibility. On the other hand, it introduces new forms of scrutiny, surveillance, and reputational risk (Mubarak, 2019). Journalists must carefully navigate legal boundaries, cultural expectations, and organisational norms especially as digital traces are increasingly subject to institutional oversight.

The hybrid nature of Saudi journalism becomes visible in this space of negotiation. Mellor (2022) describes how Saudi journalists adopt platform practices like live tweeting while maintaining deference to editorial hierarchies and self-censorship. In this model, the newsroom is not replaced by the platform but reorientated through it creating a layered professional terrain where journalists operate simultaneously as reporters, influencers, and institutional actors. Gender further complicates this hybridity. Female sports journalists in Saudi Arabia occupy a symbolically powerful but precarious position, navigating patriarchal norms and limited representation within a male-dominated field (Alhayan et al., 2024). Twitter/X offers them visibility, reach, and participation—but also exposes them to harassment, surveillance, and reputational harm. Demir and Ayhan (2022) document similar experiences among Turkish journalists, showing that digital platforms amplify both empowerment and vulnerability. These gendered dynamics intersect with broader professional risks, reinforcing the importance of analysing Twitter/X not simply as a neutral tool, but as a socio-technical space shaped by power, identity, and context. In addition to shifting newsroom practices, Twitter/X has become a site of cultural and ideological contestation. Humayun (2023) illustrates how journalists in India and Pakistan use the platform during major sports events to perform nationalism and engage in symbolic boundary-making. Similar dynamics

can be observed in the Saudi case, where sports coverage often intersects with national pride, political messaging, and identity politics. As such, Twitter/X is not only a medium of reporting, but also a site where the state, journalists, and publics negotiate meaning, legitimacy, and representation.

By examining these tensions in the Saudi context, this study addresses important gaps in current scholarship. Most research on digital journalism still focuses on Western, liberal democracies with strong traditions of press freedom. Far less is known about how journalists in semi-authoritarian or transitional settings engage with platforms like Twitter/X how they integrate them into daily routines, respond to institutional constraints, and use them to build (or resist) professional identity. This is especially true for sports journalism, which is both culturally significant and under-researched within Arab media studies.

This research therefore investigates how Saudi sports journalists incorporate Twitter/X into their news work, focusing on news gathering, audience engagement, editorial influence, and identity construction. It explores the tensions between innovation and control, analysing how journalists use the platform to negotiate visibility, authority, and agency. The study also engages with broader theoretical debates on platformisation, hybrid media systems, and negotiated agency (Chander & Krishnamurthy, 2018; Joyce et al., 2023; Shin et al., 2025). Rather than treating Twitter/X as a deterministic force, it adopts a relational perspective that foregrounds the strategic choices journalists make in specific cultural and political contexts.

Finally, while Twitter/X was rebranded as “X” in 2023 (Kimbrough, 2024), this thesis continues to use the term “Twitter/X” to reflect its cultural significance and the terminology used by participants at the time of data collection.

1.2 Research Gap

Much of the existing research on Twitter/X and journalism is situated within the Global North, particularly in liberal democracies such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Western Europe (Jamil, 2023). These settings are typically characterised by strong institutional independence, high levels of press freedom, and broad digital infrastructure. As a result, scholars in these contexts have focused on how Twitter/X alters journalistic authority, encourages real-time interactivity, and reshapes storytelling practices (Esa et al., 2022; Fincham, 2023). Journalists in such environments often have the flexibility to experiment with audience engagement, professional identity, and content production without facing significant political or organisational repercussions (Trappel & Tomaz, 2021).

In contrast, media systems in the Middle East especially in semi-authoritarian states, such as Saudi Arabia, are less frequently studied through the lens of platform-based journalism. When examined, social media in these contexts is often approached in a tool for surveillance: either as a space for empowerment and civic expression or as a tool for surveillance and control (Althiabi, 2017; Alajlan, 2021). While these dualities are important, they leave out the everyday experiences of professional journalists navigating constrained environments. Moreover, most studies have focused on political communication, leaving fields like sports journalism underexplored.

Within the Saudi context, this gap becomes more pronounced. Vision 2030 has introduced a range of reforms to diversify the economy, enhance cultural participation, and promote gender inclusion (Young, 2024; Mihoubi, 2025). These reforms have positioned sport as a central domain for national identity and international visibility. Yet, the implications of these shifts for journalistic practice particularly within sports reporting remain understudied. Few empirical studies examine

how sports journalists in Saudi Arabia respond to evolving institutional expectations, audience dynamics, or digital platform affordances (AlAshry, 2023). Existing literature also pays limited attention to the impact of digital platforms on newsroom culture, editorial hierarchy, and daily routines in semi-authoritarian systems. While Twitter/X allows for rapid communication and audience interaction, it also introduces risks such as reputational backlash, surveillance, and algorithmic pressure which are magnified in controlled environments. These tensions are not just organisational; they are personal, particularly for female journalists who must constantly balance visibility with vulnerability. The negotiation of gender roles in digital public spaces remains insufficiently examined in the context of Saudi sports media. This study fills these critical gaps by focusing on how Saudi sports journalists use Twitter/X in their professional routines and relational practices. It examines how they balance editorial power, institutional control, and audience engagement, and how gendered expectations influence their experiences. The study also investigates how platform affordances such as hashtags, mentions, and real-time interaction are adopted, resisted, or reinterpreted by journalists within Saudi Arabia's unique media landscape. It further explores how these adaptations shape journalists' professional identities and their public-facing roles in a society undergoing rapid but uneven transformation.

By examining these dynamics through qualitative interviews with Saudi sports journalists, this research contributes new insight into how digital platforms are reconfiguring journalism in non-Western, state-regulated contexts. It also challenges technologically deterministic narratives by showing how platform use is shaped by local norms, institutional logics, and cultural constraints.

1.3 Research Motivation

This study is motivated by the growing need to understand how digital technologies are reshaping journalistic practice in semi-authoritarian and culturally specific media environments. The case of Saudi Arabia is particularly significant in this regard. As the country undergoes wide-reaching reforms under Vision 2030, including initiatives to modernise the media sector and increase participation in sports, journalists are facing new pressures and possibilities. Twitter/X, as a widely adopted platform in the Kingdom, plays a central role in these developments. It offers journalists tools for live reporting, audience engagement, and personal branding, yet also exposes them to reputational risks, surveillance, and institutional scrutiny.

Sports journalism stands out as a strategic site for exploring these dynamics. It is often perceived as less politically sensitive than hard news or political commentary, allowing for a relatively wider scope of professional experimentation. At the same time, the rise of sports as a tool of nation-building and soft power in Saudi Arabia means that coverage can carry symbolic weight. This places journalists in a complex position, particularly as they engage with audiences in real time and navigate expectations around professionalism, representation, and national identity.

A further motivation for this research is the lack of empirical studies focusing on journalists' lived experiences in the Gulf region. Much of the existing scholarship on digital journalism is based in liberal democracies with strong traditions of press freedom and institutional autonomy. There is comparatively little knowledge about how journalists working in constrained environments adapt to platform technologies. The Saudi case, with its combination of rapid reform, media control, and high Twitter/X usage, offers valuable insight into this underexplored terrain.

Gender adds another critical layer of relevance. While reforms have created space for women's participation in sports journalism, deeply embedded patriarchal norms continue to shape their visibility and vulnerability. Understanding how female journalists manage these tensions on digital platforms contributes not only to media studies but also to broader debates around gender, digital labour, and professional identity in conservative societies.

Via situating the study at the intersection of platformisation, hybrid media systems, and gendered media labour, this research seeks to contribute new empirical knowledge and theoretical insight into how journalism is evolving in the Global South.

1.4 Rationale and Significance of the Study

This study is situated at the intersection of journalism studies, digital media research, and Middle East communication scholarship. It is driven by the need to understand how journalists operate within complex, evolving, and often contradictory media environments. Saudi Arabia provides a particularly compelling context due to its ongoing socio-political transformation under Vision 2030, which has introduced new spaces for public discourse while maintaining long-standing institutional constraints on media freedom. Within this transitional landscape, sports journalism has emerged as a strategically important and relatively flexible domain through which to examine broader patterns of change, resistance, and negotiation in journalistic practice. The rationale for this study rests on two interrelated dynamics. First, digital platforms such as Twitter/X have introduced new affordances for journalistic production, distribution, and engagement. These tools allow for real-time reporting, audience interaction, and the cultivation of personal journalistic identities. However, these same affordances also introduce challenges such as algorithmic pressures, reputational risks, and institutional tensions which are particularly acute in semi-

authoritarian and highly gendered media systems. Second, while global scholarship has extensively examined the impact of platforms on journalism in liberal democratic contexts, far less is known about how journalists in controlled or transitional systems, like Saudi Arabia's, navigate these affordances within their everyday routines. This study is significant in offering one of the first in-depth, empirical accounts of how sports journalists in Saudi Arabia are using Twitter/X to mediate their professional identities, negotiate institutional hierarchies, and engage with publics in real time. By focusing on sports journalism, a field often overlooked in favour of political reporting this research expands the scope of digital journalism studies to include areas of media practice that are symbolically powerful but structurally different from conventional news reporting.

The study also contributes to the growing body of work on platformisation and hybrid media systems. Rather than treating digital technologies as deterministic or inherently liberating, this research adopts a relational approach that considers how journalists strategically reinterpret platform tools in light of institutional norms, cultural expectations, and personal risk. By applying Chadwick's (2017) concept of the hybrid media system to the Saudi context, the study demonstrates how traditional and digital media logics coexist, compete, and evolve together reshaping journalistic authority and visibility in the process. Importantly, this research brings gender into the analysis in a way that is often missing from studies of sports journalism and digital media in the Global South. By examining the experiences of both male and female sports journalists, the study highlights how gendered power relations shape access, participation, and professional recognition on platforms like Twitter/X. It offers insight into how female journalists navigate the tensions between visibility and vulnerability, and how their presence in digital public spaces contributes to broader debates on gender, professionalism, and digital empowerment in Saudi Arabia. In methodological terms, this study also fills a gap by providing a qualitative,

interview-based investigation grounded in the voices and perspectives of Saudi journalists themselves. It contributes empirical depth to existing theoretical discussions and provides a context-specific understanding of platform use that goes beyond abstract models.

Taken together, this research offers a timely and original contribution to media studies by illuminating how digital tools are reconfiguring journalistic practice in a region undergoing both political control and structural reform. It provides a critical lens on media change in the Global South, challenges normative assumptions rooted in Western contexts, and highlights the diverse ways in which journalists adapt to, resist, and reshape the media systems in which they operate.

1.5 Research Aim and Objectives

This study aims to explore how Saudi sports journalists use Twitter/X to navigate institutional constraints, engage with audiences, and construct professional identities within a hybrid media system shaped by digital affordances and socio-political reform.

To achieve this aim, the study pursues the following objectives:

- 1- To examine how Saudi sports journalists incorporate Twitter/X into their daily journalistic routines and professional practices.
- 2- To analyse how Twitter/X's platform features shape journalistic identity, authority, and audience interaction within the context of sports journalism.
- 3- To investigate how institutional norms, media regulation, and organisational hierarchies influence journalists' use of Twitter/X.

4- To explore how gender dynamics impact male and female journalists' engagement with Twitter/X in the Saudi sports journalism field.

5- To interpret how Saudi sports journalists experience and negotiate the tensions between opportunity and constraint in a hybrid media system.

1.6 Research Questions

Based on these objectives, the following research questions (RQs) guide the thesis and are addressed across subsequent chapters. These RQs are proposed to address the arguments that transpired from the literature review that is developed throughout the following literature chapters.

RQ1: How do Saudi sports journalists utilise Twitter/X for the newsgathering practices involved in story production, including the identification of sources, the verification of details, and the compiling of stories?

RQ2: How does Twitter/X shape the ways in which Saudi sports journalists construct their professional identities and engage with their audience?

RQ3: How has the adoption of Twitter/X influenced the editorial decisions, news judgement, and gatekeeping by Saudi sports editors and journalists?

RQ4: To what extent has the adoption of Twitter/X disrupted the routines, workflows, and hierarchies within Saudi sports newsrooms?

RQ5: How do Saudi sports journalists navigate the shifts in their professional identity amidst the disruptive influence of Twitter/X on the roles and norms of the traditional newsroom?

These research questions provide a comprehensive framework for exploring the technological, institutional, and cultural dynamics shaping the evolution of digital sports journalism in Saudi Arabia. By focusing on both newsroom structures and individual journalistic practices, the study is able to uncover how platform technologies like Twitter/X are not only integrated into daily routines but are also negotiated within the boundaries of local norms, state expectations, and professional ethics. Furthermore, the questions allow the research to engage critically with wider debates surrounding platform journalism, including how social media technologies are reconfiguring traditional journalistic roles and challenging established hierarchies. In doing so, this study contributes to the literature on media transformation in authoritarian and hybrid regimes, where digital tools may offer new opportunities for engagement, but also operate within tightly regulated environments.

1.7 Structure of the Thesis

The structure of this thesis is designed to systematically explore the complex intersections between digital technology, journalistic practice, and socio-political transformation in Saudi Arabia, with a particular focus on how Twitter/X is shaping the norms, routines, and professional identities of sports journalists. The thesis is organised into seven chapters, each contributing to a layered understanding of the research problem and culminating in a discussion of theoretical, methodological, and practical implications.

Chapter One introduces the study by outlining its background, research problem, and significance. It situates the research within the context of Saudi Arabia's evolving media landscape, with a focus on the role of Twitter/X in reshaping sports journalism. The chapter defines the study's aim and objectives and presents the central research questions. It also explains the

rationale for the research, outlines its theoretical and practical contributions, and concludes with an overview of the thesis structure.

Chapter Two explores the historical and regulatory development of journalism in Saudi Arabia, with particular attention to sports journalism. It begins by tracing the institutional evolution of the Saudi press and its regulation, highlighting how political, religious, and economic factors have shaped journalistic practice. The chapter then focuses on the specific trajectory of sports journalism, examining how it has developed within a state-influenced media system. It discusses key legal and organisational mechanisms, content restrictions, and media ownership patterns, and how these affect sports journalists in particular. A final section analyses the integration of online platforms and social media especially Twitter/X into Saudi sports journalism, considering how these technologies have reshaped reporting practices, journalist audience relationships, and the visibility of sports in public discourse.

Chapter Three presents the literature review and lays the theoretical foundation of the thesis. The chapter begins by reviewing key developments in global sports journalism, including the shift from traditional print reporting to multimedia and interactive digital storytelling. The review then narrows its focus to digital journalism practices and the specific influence of social media platforms on journalistic routines, audience engagement, and newsroom dynamics. Twitter/X is critically examined as a transformative tool for journalism, enabling direct communication, real-time updates, and participatory content creation. The chapter engages with several theoretical frameworks, including gatekeeping theory, and the concept of platformisation. Special attention is given to literature on journalism in non-Western and semi-authoritarian contexts, highlighting the unique challenges faced by journalists in the Arab world. The chapter concludes by identifying

key gaps in existing research, particularly the lack of empirical studies focusing on sports journalists in Saudi Arabia and their use of Twitter/X within regulated media environments.

Chapter Four outlines the methodology used to conduct the research. It begins by explaining the philosophical underpinnings of the study, which adopts a qualitative, interpretivist approach suited to exploring the lived experiences and perceptions of journalists. The chapter details the rationale for using semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection, and it describes the participant selection process, which involved purposive sampling of 40 Saudi sports journalists across various media outlets and platforms. Ethical considerations are discussed, including informed consent, participant confidentiality, and the researcher's positionality. The chapter also outlines the process of data analysis, which employed thematic coding to identify recurring patterns, themes, and insights across the interview transcripts. The reliability and validity of the research are addressed.

Chapter Five presents the findings of the research, structured around the core themes that emerged from the interviews. It explores the transformative influence of Twitter/X on sports journalism practices, focusing on how the platform is reshaping newsgathering and sourcing, storytelling, and content creation. These include the use of Twitter/X for sourcing and verifying information, the platform's role in facilitating audience interaction and participatory journalism, and its influence on editorial decision-making and newsroom hierarchies. The chapter also explores how journalists use Twitter/X to build and maintain professional identities, often negotiating tensions between self-expression and institutional constraints. Notably, the findings reveal the complexities of working within a regulated media environment, where journalists must balance personal branding and audience engagement with adherence to editorial policies and cultural norms. Specific

attention is given to gender dynamics, especially the experiences of female sports journalists who navigate both digital platforms and traditional barriers within the industry.

Chapter Six provides a critical discussion of the findings in relation to the theoretical frameworks introduced in Chapter Three. It examines how the Saudi context complicates conventional understandings of gatekeeping, role negotiation, and professional autonomy. The chapter argues that Twitter/X functions both as a tool of empowerment and a site of surveillance, where journalists are simultaneously enabled and constrained by the platform's affordances and the state's regulatory frameworks. The discussion highlights the dual pressures journalists face from audience expectations and institutional mandates, and it explores how digital metrics such as likes, shares, and retweets increasingly shape editorial strategies. This chapter also reflects on the implications of Vision 2030 for the future of journalism in the Kingdom, considering whether state-led modernisation efforts genuinely foster greater journalistic freedom or merely reframe existing controls within a digital logic.

Chapter Seven concludes the thesis by summarising the key findings and outlining the study's contributions. It highlights how Saudi sports journalists use Twitter/X in their professional routines and audience engagement. The chapter identifies practical recommendations for journalism education, newsroom policies, and media regulation particularly in relation to digital literacy, ethical practice, and gender inclusion. It also discusses the main challenges faced during the research process, including access to participants and institutional sensitivities. The limitations of the study are acknowledged, such as its focus on a single country, a specific media genre, and a particular platform. Future research directions are suggested, including comparative studies across Gulf countries and longitudinal analyses of platform use in journalism. Appendices include interview guides, ethics approvals, and coding frameworks.

Chapter 2: Media landscape in Saudi Arabia

2.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the Saudi Arabian media landscape, tracing its evolution from the early 20th century to the present day. Over the past hundred years, Saudi media has undergone a profound transformation, shifting from small, family-owned newspapers to a complex, state-regulated ecosystem that encompasses print, broadcast, and digital platforms. Today, the Kingdom's media environment is shaped not only by its historical legacy, but also by the rapid expansion of digital technologies and the rise of social media platforms, such as Twitter/X. In order to establish a clear and coherent understanding of this landscape, the chapter unfolds chronologically and thematically. It begins by mapping the historical development of Saudi journalism, distinguishing between three broad eras often used in the literature: the 'individual journalism' period (1924–1964), when family-owned newspapers operated with minimal professional standards and limited reach; the 'institutional journalism' era (1964–2000); and the contemporary digital/technological era (2001–present), which is marked by increasing state intervention, the formalisation of media institutions, and systematic regulation.

Within this framework, the chapter also addresses the critical challenges that Saudi journalists have faced throughout history and continue to encounter today. Issues such as stringent government oversight, persistent censorship, and restrictions on freedom of expression are examined in detail. Special attention is given to the evolving role of gender in Saudi journalism, highlighting both the historical exclusion of women from the profession and the recent, reform-driven shift towards greater inclusion and visibility, an important theme in the context of the country's Vision 2030 agenda. The narrative then moves to the contemporary crisis confronting the Saudi media sector, exploring how the digital transformation, economic pressures, and

changing patterns of news consumption have destabilised the traditional print media, whilst simultaneously enabling new forms of journalism and public engagement via electronic and digital platforms.

A dedicated section focuses on the rapid adoption of the internet and social networking in Saudi Arabia, with particular emphasis on the rise of Twitter/X as a crucial platform for news dissemination, public discourse, and sports journalism, an innovation that has redefined both journalistic practice and the everyday experience of the media in Saudi society. By interweaving these historical and contemporary threads, the chapter provides an essential context for the thesis as a whole. It reveals not only the continuities and turning points that have shaped the Saudi media, but also the ongoing tensions between state authority, professional autonomy, and technological change. The resulting narrative is designed to directly inform and support the empirical analysis presented in later chapters, foregrounding the key themes of media freedom, gender, and digital transformation at every stage.

2.2 Saudi Media History

The history of the media in Saudi Arabia is deeply intertwined with the broader currents of political, economic, and social change that have swept the Kingdom over the past hundred years. From its fragmented beginnings in the early 1900s to the digital transformations of the 21st century, the Saudi media has served as both a mirror of national identity and as a tool for statecraft. The earliest Saudi newspapers emerged during a period of national consolidation. The publication of *Al-Hijaz* in 1908 marked the region's first step towards a modern press, but it was the launch of *Umm Al-Qura* in 1924, shortly after the unification of the Kingdom, that established a foundation for the Saudi media. As the official government gazette, *Umm Al-Qura* played a crucial role in disseminating royal decrees and religious edicts, reinforcing state legitimacy, and providing a

platform for official communication. In the subsequent decades, private newspapers, such as *Al-Bilad* and *Al-Madina*, appeared, yet their existence was often precarious, as they depended on government advertising or patronage and faced significant financial instability (Al-Kheraiji, 1992; Rugh, 2004).

Even in these formative years, the Saudi media was shaped by both domestic and external forces. In the mid-20th century, Lebanese journalists, who were valued for their professional expertise and alignment with Saudi interests, were recruited to work in Saudi newsrooms, and helped to steer editorial policies and to shape the evolving Saudi media landscape (Rugh, 2004). This collaboration demonstrated the Kingdom's early understanding of media as a means of regional influence. In addition, the 1950s and 1960s marked a period of significant centralisation. The creation of the General Direction of Press and Publishing in 1955 gave the state a more formal role in regulating media output (Saudi Ministry of Media, 2018). The subsequent oil boom of the 1960s fuelled massive investment in the communication infrastructure, transforming the sector from its amateur origins into a professionalised, institutionalised field. Meanwhile, the government established the Ministry of Information, issued press licences, and established major publishing houses, such as *Al-Riyadh* and *Okaz*, consolidating state oversight further.

Technological advances accompanied these regulatory shifts. Radio was introduced in 1949, initially broadcasting Quranic recitations and later public service announcements (Al-Riyadh Online, 2005). Television arrived in 1965, despite some resistance from religious conservatives, and quickly became an important tool for education, public health, and nation-building (Boyd, 1982). Both radio and television were subject to strict central control, with their content curated carefully to align with religious values and state policy (Rugh, 2004).

Saudi Arabia's role as a regional media power expanded further in the 1970s and beyond. As a founding member of ArabSat in 1976, the Kingdom gained a new platform for projecting influence across the Arab world (Kraidy, 2011). The 1990s and 2000s witnessed the rise of the Saudi-affiliated satellite networks MBC, ART, and Rotana, often led by members of the royal family. These 'private' ventures extended Saudi soft power, shaping the region's cultural landscape and, at times, providing space for a limited plurality of viewpoints (Hammond, 2008; Mellor, 2008; Kraidy, 2011; Rinnawi, 2012). Within the Kingdom, the Saudi Press Agency (SPA) was established by royal decree in 1970 to centralise the dissemination of news. The SPA quickly became the state's central source of official information, responsible for collecting and distributing news domestically and internationally (Al-Jaber and Elareshi, 2020).

Throughout the modern era, media regulation has remained strict. The Press and Publications Law, which was last revised in 2003, formalised existing restrictions and reinforced state authority over licensing and editorial appointments (Alghasha'ami, 2006). These frameworks have long determined the boundaries with regard to what can be reported, and prohibit criticism of the monarchy, top officials, or religious leaders, and ensure that the media supports national unity and state legitimacy.

Moreover, for much of the 20th century, Saudi journalism was almost exclusively male. Social and legal barriers largely excluded women from newsrooms until recent years (Almoualed, 2021; Alharbi, 2022). However, the ambitious Vision 2030 reforms have begun to offer new opportunities for female journalists, marking a notable shift in newsroom culture and professional identity. The 21st century has brought further transformations: digital innovation and the rise of

artificial intelligence are reshaping not only how news is produced and distributed, but also the expectations and daily routines of Saudi journalists (Almakaty, 2024).

Scholars now commonly divide the evolution of Saudi journalism into three main eras: the Individual Press Era (1924–1963), when newspapers were privately owned and subject to minimal oversight; the Institutional Press Era (1964–2000), which is defined by centralisation and state control; and the Digital and Technological Era (2001–present), marked by the proliferation of satellite channels, online news, and social media (Al-Shebeili, 2000; Radi, 2015; Almakaty, 2024). Each period reflects distinct shifts in ownership, regulation, and technology, with profound implications for both the role and content of Saudi journalism. As the Kingdom continues to modernise, the media sector stands at a crossroads, negotiating the tension between tradition and innovation, authority and autonomy, and a rapidly evolving digital future.

As noted above, throughout most of the 20th century, the profession was almost exclusively male, as women were effectively excluded from mainstream newsrooms, due to strict social norms, legal constraints, and the absence of professional networks for female journalists (Almoualed, 2021). Opportunities for women to study journalism or to work in the media were scarce, and when women did appear in the press, it was typically in segregated spaces or under highly circumscribed roles. This meant that not only were women's voices largely absent from the Saudi media, but issues relevant to female audiences also received little attention in the national discourse. Significant change began in the 2000s, and accelerated with the launch of Vision 2030, which prioritised women's empowerment and public participation. Recent years have witnessed a substantial increase in female journalists entering newsrooms, hosting media programmes, and even leading new female-focused media outlets (Almoualed, 2021). In addition, education reforms

have expanded training opportunities, and digital platforms now offer female alternative routes into journalism, often bypassing certain traditional barriers (Almoualed, 2021). These changes have contributed to more diverse content and have raised the visibility of women in public life. However, challenges remain and female journalists continue to face limitations in covering certain topics, and advancement to editorial or management positions is still relatively rare. Nevertheless, gender has become an increasingly prominent theme in the Saudi media, with reforms continuing to reshape professional expectations and the public image of women in journalism (Alharbi, 2022; Vision 2030, 2023).

2.2.1 Censorship and Media Regulation in Saudi Arabia

Regulation and censorship have been defining features of the Saudi Arabian media landscape from the earliest days of print journalism to the present digital era. Since its inception, the Saudi press has functioned not merely as a conduit for information, but also as an instrument of statecraft, tasked with advancing official narratives, promoting social cohesion, and protecting the interests of the ruling establishment (Rugh, 2004; Al-Qarni, 2006). This dual function has shaped every aspect of journalistic practice, influencing both what is reported and how journalists perceive their own professional responsibilities.

The Press and Publications Law, most notably revised in 2003, institutionalised strict boundaries for coverage, explicitly prohibiting criticism of the monarchy, senior officials, and religious authorities (Alghasha'ami, 2006; Awad, 2010). The Ministry of Media (formerly the Ministry of Information) oversees licensing, appoints key editorial positions, and retains ultimate authority over publishing permits. Editors often anticipate government 'red lines', removing or adjusting content preemptively to avoid punitive action. For instance, Hashim Abdu Hashim and Turki Al-

Sedeiri held long-standing positions as editors-in-chief at the publishing houses *Okaz* and *Al-Riyadh*, not only because of their journalistic skill, but also due to their deep alignment with government expectations, a common feature in Saudi Arabia's traditionally state-influenced media landscape. Conversely, editors who misjudged the boundaries, such as Mohammed Al-Fal, removed from his post in 2002 after his paper criticised the Islamic courts, faced swift repercussions (Rugh, 2004). Journalists have also reported that, in some cases, editorial officials enforced stricter standards than the Ministry itself, further entrenching a cautious approach to contentious issues (Awad, 2010).

Over time, the limits of permissible coverage have shifted in response to political, religious, and social priorities. Yet, even in these less sensitive areas, criticism is generally tolerated only when it does not challenge core state institutions or the legitimacy of the ruling elite (Duffy, 2014; Almoualed, 2021). Surveillance technologies and new regulations allow the authorities to monitor digital spaces and enforce compliance, ensuring that the move to new platforms does not translate into a loss of control. Survey data consistently shows that more than 70% of Saudi journalists feel constrained by these regulatory frameworks, and that self-censorship remains the norm (Almakaty, 2025). Consequently, censorship and self-censorship routinise day-to-day practice (Alnajrani et al., 2018). At the same time, the spread of social platforms, especially Twitter/X, has opened limited venues for public discussion and sharing of experiences, though the extent and durability of these openings remain under-researched (Noman et al., 2015; Althiabi, 2017). Indeed, international indices, such as those produced by Reporters Without Borders (2022) and Freedom House (2023) continue to rank Saudi Arabia among the most restrictive media environments, globally. Despite government rhetoric about modernisation and reform, the fundamental structures of media control remain intact, even as the methods and platforms of journalism evolve.

Nevertheless, these boundaries are not entirely static. Recent years have seen the government tolerate a limited degree of critical reporting, particularly when it aligns with state priorities, such as the Vision 2030 reforms, or efforts to address bureaucratic inefficiency (Alfahad, 2015; Almoualed, 2021).

Ultimately, censorship and regulatory control are not only constraints, but are also key factors that shape Saudi journalistic culture, affecting everything from newsroom routines to the self-conception of journalists as professionals. The ongoing negotiation between control and adaptation remains central to understanding the contemporary Saudi media environment, a field defined as much by its limits as by its capacity for evolution and change.

2.2.2 The Saudi Press in Crisis

Saudi Arabia is a critical actor in the media landscape of the Middle East and controls a number of widely distributed regional media networks (Zayani, 2012). The country's near-monopoly over its domestic media system is shaped by what can be described as a 'security imperative' that is driven by internal political dynamics, concerns about national stability, and regional competition. The Saudi government employs a dual strategy: on one hand, it maintains strict regulation of the domestic media in order to manage public discourse and to prevent the spread of messages that are deemed undesirable; on the other, it invests heavily in decentralised, outward-facing transnational media networks that are designed to promote Saudi interests, advance foreign policy, and uphold the Kingdom's religious and cultural values abroad. This combination of tight internal control and international outreach has created both strengths and vulnerabilities in the Saudi press system.

The crisis currently affecting the Saudi press is both profound and multi-layered, reflecting not only national developments, but also broader global trends. As noted by Dahlgren (2016),

journalism worldwide is facing a structural crisis that is rooted in technological innovation, the disruption of traditional business models, and changing patterns of news consumption. Audience migration to digital platforms, declining revenues, and the rise of citizen media have undermined the stability of print journalism across many countries. In Saudi Arabia, these challenges are compounded by economic pressures, regulatory controls, and the rapid adoption of digital technologies (Salem, 2015; Alghamdi and Alzahrani, 2021). A series of studies have documented how these forces have converged to threaten the survival of many Saudi newspapers: according to Salem (2015), the Saudi press has experienced a dramatic decline in advertising revenue and readership as audiences increasingly turn to online and social media platforms, while Al-Suwaid (2015) highlighted that young Saudis are now far more likely to consume news via Twitter/X, Snapchat, or other digital-only outlets rather than in print. This shift has placed increasing strain on the business model of legacy newspapers.

Consequently, major dailies, such as *Al-Hayat*, *Shams*, and *Al-Sharq*, have closed, as increasing numbers of press outlets transition to digital-only formats, while others have reduced their publication frequency, laid off staff, or faced significant financial distress (Arab News, 2020; Almakaty, 2025). The severity of the crisis has engendered a lively public debate among journalists, policymakers, and industry leaders. This has also been observed: “the crisis of journalism is both economic and professional, forcing media organisations to adapt to new realities or risk obsolescence” (Dahlgren, 2016, p. 247). In Saudi Arabia, issues relating to press freedom and the future of journalism are now widely debated across both mainstream and professional forums. A notable example came from Khaled Al-Malik, editor-in-chief of *Al-Jazirah* newspaper, who publicly appealed to the Saudi government to reinstate financial support for journalistic institutions. He warned that, after six decades of remarkable achievement, legacy newspapers must

not be disregarded or allowed to vanish from the national media landscape (Al-Jazirah Newspaper, 2021). His plea underscored the existential threat faced by traditional media outlets and reignited discussions around the responsibilities of the state in preserving journalistic institutions. However, not all voices within the media and political establishment share this view. Former Minister of Information Abdulaziz Khoja sparked controversy by arguing that the era of printed newspapers is over. He called for the closure of what he described as ‘worn-out’ press institutions, asserting that they had fulfilled their historic purpose and must now give way to modern, privately owned digital ventures, including outlets operating through radio, cinema, and online media. When confronted with calls from senior editors for renewed state subsidies, Khoja argued that print newspapers had reached the end of their viability and that the sector should shift to digital ventures (Elaph Newspaper, 2021).

Taken together, these debates illustrate the acute and highly contested nature of the Saudi press crisis. While some call for robust state intervention to preserve and support traditional journalism, others argue that the industry must embrace digital transformation and market-led innovation to survive. The future of the Saudi press remains uncertain, caught between a legacy of state-led institutional development and the disruptive forces of the digital age. Notably, the digital transformation of journalism in Saudi Arabia has also brought both opportunities and new barriers for female journalists. As legacy print outlets continue to contract, online platforms have opened up new pathways for female reporters, commentators, and social media personalities to gain visibility and shape public discourse often bypassing traditional institutional barriers to newsroom participation (Almoualed, 2021; Alharbi, 2022). However, longstanding structural and cultural challenges remain. Despite increased digital participation, gender equity in Saudi journalism

remains a work in progress, particularly as the sector struggles to adapt to evolving technological, regulatory, and economic pressures.

2.2.3 Electronic Journalism in Saudi Arabia

The term ‘electronic journalism’ refers to the production and dissemination of news content via electronic platforms, including radio, television, and, more recently, internet-based media, such as news websites and social media channels. In much of the international academic literature, the terms ‘digital journalism’ or ‘online journalism’ are now used more commonly to describe news practices that rely on digital technologies, especially the internet (Deuze, 2003). However, in the Saudi context, ‘electronic journalism’ is still used widely in both policy and public discourse to refer to the shift from traditional print and broadcast media to internet-based news outlets (Alghamdi & Alzahrani, 2021). This shift has accelerated since the early 2000s, transforming how news is produced, distributed, and consumed across the Kingdom.

Saudi Arabia maintains a robust technological infrastructure that has accelerated its digital transition. In recent years, in partnership with the private sector, the Saudi government expanded its fibre-optic network coverage to more than 3.5 million homes, doubled internet traffic during the COVID-19 pandemic, and increased average internet speeds from 9 Mbps in 2017 to 109 Mbps in 2020, improving digital service delivery greatly across the Kingdom (National Platform GOV, 2025). These advancements placed Saudi Arabia among the world’s most digitally developed nations, with the country named the G20’s ‘Top Digital Riser’, in recognition of its national commitment to digital transformation under the Vision 2030. Furthermore, the country’s telecommunications services now reach nearly 576,000 households in remote areas, and the rollout of Saudi Arabia’s 5G network is considered a critical step towards economic modernisation.

The widespread expansion of digital infrastructure has shaped the Saudi press market profoundly. As discussed previously, the development of Saudi journalism has traditionally been described in three phases: the individual press era, the institutional press era, and the digital/technological era. However, as online access has become more universal, scholars now argue that a fourth phase has emerged: the era of independent, online-only newspapers (Al-khatrawi, 2015). Unlike traditional news websites, run by legacy newspapers, these new platforms are developed and operated exclusively online, often with private ownership, and serve audiences who consume news almost entirely via digital channels. By the mid-2010s, more than 2,000 online news publications operated in Saudi Arabia, with around 750 officially licensed (Al-khatrawi, 2015). Among these, the electronic newspaper *Sabq* has become especially prominent, earning the trust of many Saudis for its rapid dissemination of breaking news via social media and SMS.

The growth of digital and mobile technology has fundamentally changed news consumption habits in Saudi Arabia, with most people now accessing news and updates via their smartphones. As Westlund (2014) observed, mobile devices provide diverse ways to publish and consume news, and in Saudi Arabia they have become essential tools not only for audiences, but also for journalists. The rise of mobile journalism, with reporters using smartphones as portable newsrooms, has enabled more immediate, flexible, and innovative reporting (Global Media Insight, 2018). Consequently, the proliferation of smartphones, Wi-Fi, and other digital technologies, continues to reshape traditional journalism, making mobile devices indispensable for both reading and producing news in the Kingdom.

The rapid evolution of electronic journalism in Saudi Arabia has not only redefined how news is produced and consumed, but has also broadened participation within the media sector. Digital and

social media platforms have lowered entry barriers for new voices significantly, enabling young journalists and women who were previously under-represented in traditional newsrooms to create spaces for professional expression and influence (Almoualed, 2021; Alharbi, 2022). These changes reflect a generational shift: whereas earlier forms of journalism in the Kingdom were predominantly male-dominated and tightly structured, the digital era is characterised by greater diversity, flexibility, and audience engagement.

Independent online outlets, social media channels, and mobile journalism practices have become especially attractive to younger Saudis, offering innovative avenues for storytelling, activism, and public debate. However, these opportunities also bring new challenges, ranging from issues of accuracy and verification to evolving ethical standards and the pressures of real-time reporting. As Saudi journalism continues to adapt to digital transformation, the profession is becoming more dynamic, but also more complex, with both longstanding and emerging actors negotiating the boundaries of media practice in an era of rapid change (Almoualed, 2021; Alharbi, 2022).

2.3 Arab Journalism Culture

The journalism culture of the Arab world is as diverse and multifaceted as the region itself. While Arab societies are bound by shared religious, linguistic, and historical ties, the nature and practice of journalism has been shaped by widely varying political, social, and institutional environments (Richter and Kozman, 2021; Kozman and Liu, 2024). The concept of ‘journalism culture’ encompasses the shared values, ethical principles, professional norms, and newsroom routines that guide journalists’ work and their perceived role in society (Mellor, 2005; Hanitzsch, 2007). In the Arab context, these cultural elements are influenced not only by national traditions and Islam, but

also by the legacy of colonialism, postcolonial nation-building, and the ongoing struggles between state authority and the demands for public accountability.

In his work, Rugh (2004) famously outlined four typologies of the Arab press that are still referenced widely by scholars today: the ‘Mobiliser Press’, the ‘Loyalist Press’, the ‘Diverse Press’, and the ‘Transitional Press’. In countries such as Syria, Iraq, Sudan, and Libya, the ‘Mobiliser Press’ is characterised by direct government control over content, the appointment of editors, and a press role defined by supporting regime objectives, mobilising public opinion for national unity, and suppressing dissent. In such contexts, professional autonomy is minimal, and journalists often see themselves primarily as agents of the state. The ‘Loyalist Press’ model that is prevalent in most Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia, Oman, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, and Bahrain, features a press system that is aligned closely with the ruling authority. Here, overt government intervention is less visible, but the expectation of loyalty to the leadership, and avoidance of sensitive topics, shapes editorial decisions. Ownership is often in the hands of individuals who are close to the ruling elite, and indirect forms of control, such as licensing, legal red lines, and informal pressures, are common. For example, Saudi journalists are expected to support national development, promote stability, and uphold cultural values, with critical reporting of the royal family or top officials extremely rare (Rugh, 2004; Sakr, 2013). The Saudi case is explored in greater depth in the next section. In contrast, countries such as Lebanon, Morocco, Kuwait, and Yemen exhibit the ‘Diverse Press’ model, in which pluralism, competitive news markets, and relative editorial freedom are more common. Journalists in these countries often see themselves as watchdogs or agents of change, engaging in investigative reporting and openly debating politics and government performance. This model has fostered a stronger professional identity and a more public service-orientated press, even as political instability and economic

pressures challenge media independence (Mellor, 2011; Sakr, 2013). Finally, the ‘Transitional Press’ model, present in Algeria, Jordan, Tunisia, and Egypt, reflects systems in flux, in which the boundaries of press freedom, professional norms, and state intervention are negotiated constantly. For example, Tunisian journalists experienced a rapid transformation after the 2011 revolution, with new legal frameworks and greater openness, while in Egypt, hopes for pluralism have at times been rolled back by renewed state control (Richter & Kozman, 2021).

Beyond these models, Arab journalism culture is influenced deeply by Islamic values and the expectations of community service, truth-telling, and moderation. In their work, Richter and Kozman (2021) identified four key normative principles within Islamic journalistic thought: truth and truthfulness (*sidq*), teaching and informing the public (*tabligh*), pursuing the public interest (*maslaha*), and the principle of moderation (*wasatiyyah*). These values are often emphasised in codes of ethics and are invoked by journalists when discussing their responsibilities. However, the practical application of these principles is filtered through each society’s political realities. In Qatar, Oman, and the UAE, journalists are often seen as collaborators in state-led national development projects, and are expected to promote economic growth, social stability, and religious values (Galal, 2016). In Lebanon, Morocco, and Kuwait, journalists are more likely to engage in critical debate, to investigate corruption, or to report on opposition parties, although market pressures and partisan affiliations remain significant constraints. Journalistic identity in the Arab world is also shaped by broader social dynamics, including gender, generational change, and digital transformation.

The rise of satellite TV in the 1990s, especially the launch of *Al Jazeera*, marked a turning point in the Arab media, creating new spaces for critical discourse and cross-border exchange (Mellor,

2011). Digital platforms, social media, and citizen journalism have altered the landscape further, enabling new voices and movements, but also intensifying government efforts at surveillance and regulation (Sakr, 2013). Meanwhile, women's participation in journalism, while historically limited, has increased in several Arab countries, engendering new debates concerning gender, representation, and newsroom culture (Byerly, 2013).

Despite these developments, the limits of press freedom and the persistence of self-censorship remain key features of the region. As Diab (2010) noted, many Arab governments justify control of the media on the grounds of protecting national security, religious morality, or social harmony. In authoritarian contexts, journalists who push the boundaries may face legal, professional, or even physical risks. Nevertheless, throughout the Arab world, there are numerous examples of journalists who have challenged these constraints, sometimes affecting social or political change, more often working within the boundaries to inform, educate, and serve their public as best they can. Arab journalism culture is far from monolithic. It is a field of contestation and negotiation, shaped by competing political, religious, and professional forces. While Saudi Arabia provides a clear example of the 'Loyalist Press' model, the diversity of journalism cultures across the Arab region reflects the richness and complexity of the societies themselves. The next section examines the specific case of Saudi journalism in greater depth, highlighting both its unique features and its ongoing evolution.

2.4 Saudi Journalism Culture

The culture of journalism in Saudi Arabia is distinct within the Arab world, shaped by a unique combination of political structure, religious tradition, economic transformation, and technological change. At its core, Saudi journalism is defined by its close alignment with state interests, Islamic

values, and the broader social context of the Kingdom (Kareem, 2000; Rugh, 2004; Alhomoud, 2013). This alignment manifests in the priorities, routines, and self-conceptions of Saudi journalists, as well as in the institutional frameworks that govern the media industry.

Religion plays a central role in shaping Saudi journalism. Editorial decisions, language, and the selection of the topics covered are influenced by Islamic principles and the imperative to uphold moral standards. For instance, explicit content, critical coverage of religious matters, or challenges to the prevailing interpretations of Islam are avoided or are handled with extreme caution (Mellor, 2008). Social values, including tribal affiliation, family honour, and deference to elders, impact reporting practices further, especially concerning sensitive issues, such as gender relations, political dissent, and social change (Al-Shebeili, 2000; Awad, 2010).

Concurrently however, Saudi journalism is not static. The launch of Vision 2030, an ambitious government initiative intended to diversify the economy and to modernise Saudi society, has introduced new expectations for the media sector (Imawan et al., 2024). News organisations are encouraged to support national transformation, to promote positive stories about economic development and social progress, and to project a modern, globally competitive image of the country. The government has invested in training, technology, and the expansion of digital platforms, aiming to reach younger, highly connected audiences. This digital transformation has changed how news is produced, distributed, and consumed: nearly all major Saudi newspapers now have robust online operations, and journalists are expected to master social media, mobile reporting, and multimedia storytelling (Al Nassar, 2011; Almakaty, 2025). Despite these advances, the boundaries of acceptable journalism remain largely intact. While it is now possible to discuss topics, such as education reform, women's employment, or cultural events, criticism of core

political and religious institutions remains tightly restricted (Awad, 2010). Some newspapers, such as *Al-Watan* and *Okaz*, have occasionally tested these limits by raising controversial social issues or highlighting bureaucratic inefficiency, but such efforts are exceptional and often provoke a backlash.

A notable feature of Saudi journalism culture is its adaptive capacity. Journalists and editors are skilled at navigating complex and sometimes contradictory expectations, balancing loyalty to the state, religious values, and limited but evolving spaces for social debate. For example, as the Vision 2030 encourages the greater participation of women in the workforce, the Saudi media has increased its coverage of women's achievements and challenges, although often within a framework that affirms traditional values and state policy (Almoualeed, 2021). Similarly, while digital tools promote greater engagement with the public, newsroom routines and editorial oversight remain centralised and hierarchical. Meanwhile, professional identity in Saudi journalism reflects both pride in serving the public and an acute awareness of the limits imposed by authority. Many journalists express a commitment to informing society, educating the public, and promoting national development, seeing themselves as contributors to the Kingdom's progress, rather than adversarial watchdogs (Kareem, 2000; Alhomoud, 2013). Concurrently, they are aware of the risks of overstepping boundaries, whether legal, professional, or social, and have developed mechanisms for negotiating these risks. The interplay between regulation, tradition, and adaptation gives Saudi journalism its distinctive character.

The following sections examine how the internet reshaped Saudi public communication and how the state uses digital platforms.

2.5 Internet and Social Networking in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia's path to widespread internet adoption was shaped by both cultural caution and state oversight. Although the Kingdom had the technical and financial means to develop a digital infrastructure at an early stage, policymakers delayed public access due to concerns regarding the potential effects of the internet on the population's religious and social values (Alshahrani, 2016). Initial access was therefore limited to academic and research institutions, with public rollout only conducted following careful planning, in order to manage the content and to address security concerns (Al-Tawil, 2001). Once the internet became available widely in 1999, uptake accelerated rapidly, and digital communication quickly became integrated into daily life for millions of Saudis (Simsim, 2011). By the late 2000s, internet penetration had soared, with broadband and mobile networks making online access ubiquitous. Government initiatives and investment played a significant role in expanding digital connectivity, causing one of the highest internet adoption rates in the region (Communication and Information Technology Commission, 2014). The state prioritised the digitalisation of public services, aiming to streamline governance and increase public engagement (Basamh et al., 2015).

The popularity of these platforms has reshaped the media environment, engendered new forms of journalistic practice and public engagement, and contributed to shifts in the flow of information and societal debate.

In the Kingdom, an initiative known as the Centre for Government Communication (CGC) was launched in January 2018 under the direction of the Saudi Ministry of Media (2018). According to the CGC, the Centre was established to provide media coordination and complementarity between government organisations by providing assistance to improve their mediated operations

via the media (Saudi Ministry of Media, 2018.) As of early 2023, Twitter/X was one of the most popular social media platforms in Saudi Arabia, with an estimated 16.84 million active users aged 13+ (DataReportal, 2023). Saudi government organisations are among the most active governmental users of Twitter/X in the Middle East, with official accounts generating a substantial proportion of regional governmental activity on the platform (CGCSaudi, 2018). The CGC identified Twitter/X as a crucial channel for three main reasons. First, the platform's real-time format enables the rapid and efficient dissemination of official information to citizens from a range of social and economic backgrounds. Second, compared to other popular platforms, Twitter/X is one of the most influential platforms for shaping public debate and news agendas in Saudi Arabia. This influence stems from its role as the preferred platform for journalists, officials, and opinion leaders to share breaking news, discuss current events, and to engage directly with the public; consequently, conversations and trends on Twitter/X often drive wider media coverage and shape national discourse (DataReportal, 2023). Third, with a national median age of around 30, Twitter/X is particularly effective for reaching younger, digitally engaged Saudis an age group that is often elusive via traditional media, but highly active on social platforms.

2.5.1 Twitter/X in Saudi Arabia

As discussed in the previous section (2.5), Twitter/X is among the Kingdom's most-used platforms and a leading channel for news, discussion, and official communication. This places Saudi Arabia among the highest-penetration markets in the MENA region, making it one of the platform's most active markets globally. Available estimates indicate a substantial user base confirming the platform's central role in the Kingdom's digital culture, news dissemination, and public discourse.

Twitter/X has grown in popularity in Saudi Arabia as a central platform for news, discussion, and direct communication, especially in sectors such as sports, in which official accounts run by organisations, clubs, and media figures attract large followings. This prominence has made Saudi Arabia a major hub for Twitter/X users in the Middle East. According to the Communications, Space and Technology Commission (CST, 2014), more than 99% of internet users in Saudi Arabia access social media via mobile devices, a proportion that is significantly higher than in many European countries, where a greater share of users still prefers to use personal computers for access (Global Media Insight, 2024). Moreover, recent research demonstrated that Twitter/X continues to play a crucial role in how Saudi youth access news and engage with public debate. According to the CST (2014), more than 80% of Saudi internet users aged 18–34 are active on Twitter/X, making it the most popular microblogging platform among younger Saudis. The platform is used widely for following sports, staying informed about current affairs, and interacting with both media organisations and government entities (Global Media Insight, 2024). Engagement on official accounts, such as those run by leading sports clubs, prominent journalists, and government agencies, remains particularly high. The personal account of King Salman, for example, ranks consistently among the most followed and engaged-with in the region, reflecting both the centrality of Twitter/X in Saudi digital culture and the high level of public interest in official communication.

As recent studies showed, the platform enables Saudis, particularly those who use identifiable accounts, to discuss politics, share cultural opinions, and even to criticise government decisions in ways that were not previously possible (Karatzogianni et al., 2017). This new openness marks a significant departure from the past, when conventional media operated under strict editorial control, leaving little room for public scrutiny of officials or state institutions (AlJabre, 2013). While anonymous accounts often avoid sensitive topics or direct confrontation, users posting under

their real names have played a visible role in prompting policy changes, initiating online campaigns (Alahmed, 2014; Althiabi, 2017). The rise of Twitter/X has thus created an notable opening, even as certain red lines and risks remain for those who overstep accepted boundaries (Almaglooth, 2013).

Criticism of ministries, officials, and other public figures is now increasingly visible online, and often mobilised through the use of hashtags. In the Saudi context, hashtag campaigns have become a powerful form of public participation, enabling large groups of users to highlight cases of perceived wrongdoing or unpopular decisions. These people-led campaigns can quickly go viral, sometimes causing reputational damage or even the loss of position for those targeted. The phenomenon, known locally as ‘hashtag activism’, illustrates how digital platforms have reshaped the landscape of accountability and public debate in the Kingdom.

Meanwhile, in the sports forum, Twitter/X has become a major platform for Saudi football fans to engage with live events, to follow athletes, and to access real-time highlights and discussion. Research found that social media, and Twitter/X in particular, plays a central role in sports fandom and information consumption among Saudis (Alyousef, 2023). Football is the most popular sport in Saudi Arabia and plays a central role in online social conversations. For example, during the 2019–2020 Saudi Professional League (SPL), Twitter/X activity around matches was exceptionally high, with millions of tweets reflecting fan engagement and real-time discussion (Arab News, 2020). Such activity underscores the significance of Twitter/X as a platform for sports culture in the Kingdom. In his study, Al-Qarawi (2020) found that the Twitter/X platform made it simpler for Saudi sports fans to find information about sporting events, match results, and other news of interest. Additionally, the platform allowed users to comment and express their opinions

while other fans of clubs and sports teams were present, which increased the demand for information about sports further. Additionally, Saudis reported in recent studies that engaging with sports topics on social media platforms provides a form of leisure and social connection, helping them to escape temporarily from their everyday pressures (Al-Qarawi, 2020). According to Al-Yousif (2023), Twitter/X is used by a number of accountable Saudi organisations, including the Ministry of Sports, which established its own dedicated account, and other Saudi sports federations, including the Saudi Arabian Football Federation, the Saudi Olympic Committee, the sports federations for the various games, and also Saudi clubs, which have become users of the platform for publishing sports content, whether news or video and photo reports.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter examined the Saudi media landscape, including the dynamics of Saudi media ownership, distribution, and output. It also addressed the development and history of the Saudi print media, which has undergone a number of stages since its inception, including both the official and the unofficial press, as well as journalism conducted by individuals and by institutions. The focus of the discussion concerned how Saudi journalists have faced the historical restrictions and crises that have shaped Saudi journalism since the establishment of print journalism in the Kingdom. The chapter also offered a summary of the transformation of paper newspapers into electronic outlets with the advent of the internet. It then proceeded to examine the history of Saudi and Arab journalistic cultures, before providing an overview of the evolution of internet adoption in the Kingdom, together with a discussion of the significance of Twitter/X in Saudi Arabia, including the nature of its use and its limitations in the Saudi context. These conditions shape how Saudi sports journalists work on Twitter/X, an issue that anchors the research questions and analyses in Chapters 3–5.

Chapter 3: Literature review

3.1 Introduction

Sports journalism has witnessed significant changes in the past two decades, and scholars in the field have highlighted three interrelated phenomena that have shaped the sector over this period, namely digitalisation, continuous coverage cycles, and increased specialisation needs (Dowling, 2022; Lee Ludvigsen & Petersen-Wagner, 2022; Xiao, 2022; Alhayan et al., 2024). Previous research illustrated how the growth of online and mobile technologies has affected both production and consumption, producing a form of sports journalism that can be accessed and viewed instantly (Denmark, 2022; Zumoff & Negin, 2022). This digitalisation has also allowed journalists to engage in a 24-hour cycle, whereby they provide updates and news while events are occurring (Perreault & Bélair-Gagnon, 2022; Rojas Torrijos & Garrote Fuentes, 2025). Concurrently, audiences' diverse interests have caused sports journalists to specialise in niche sports, leagues, or teams, in order to meet the changing demands of sports news consumers (Monteiro Da Silva et al., 2022; Hertog, 2024; Imawan et al., 2024; Manoli et al., 2025).

In this landscape, Twitter/X has been notable since 2006 for its use and influence in the field of sports journalism. Previous studies demonstrated how the real-time nature of Twitter/X has allowed journalists to break news and deliver updates more quickly than traditional forms of media (Ferrucci, 2020; McEnnis, 2023). This immediacy has democratised information flows, as non-traditional voices like bloggers are now able to publish their own sports analysis alongside professional journalists (Aldaihani & Shin, 2022; Nielsen & Ganter, 2022). This democratisation has created both opportunities and challenges for traditional newsrooms (Liu et al., 2022; Kearns et al., 2023). This sits within a long-standing paradox of sports journalism, namely the commercially central, yet often derided 'soft' news, a tension that is intensified by digital

disruption (Boyle, 2017). The platform of Twitter/X has also enabled direct engagement between journalists and their audience or fans. New reading habits on Twitter/X, for example, have created ‘snackable’ forms of sports news consumption, in the form of short and easily consumable sports updates (Dambo et al., 2022; Laor, 2022).

Beyond the adoption of Twitter/X as a technological tool, the extant literature also shows how its rise has raised questions about sports journalism practice, journalism institutions, and the identity of sports journalists. Previous research suggested that the integration of Twitter/X into journalism practice involves a negotiation between verification and accuracy on the one hand and the need for speed and immediacy on the platform on the other (Bruce, 2016). It also involves the traditional gatekeeping role of journalists, along with the democratised flows of information (Schultz & Sheffer, 2010; Nielsen & Ganter, 2022). Moreover, the incorporation of Twitter/X into journalism practice has necessitated new ways of understanding contemporary professional identity forms, and how they balance journalists’ need for professional authority and audiences’ desire for participation in media conversations (Bruce, 2016; Adá Lameiras & Rodríguez-Castro, 2021).

These questions concerning balance possess a unique form in a restrictive media environment, such as Saudi Arabia, and some studies demonstrated that the country has a relatively restrictive media environment that has both opportunities and challenges for digital journalism (Long, 2005; Ahmad, 2010). For instance, Althiabi (2017) argued that the increasing adoption of social media has enabled Saudi nationals to participate in public discourse beyond traditional geographic and regulatory boundaries. The study found that this has also connected Saudi sports journalists to their global peers and has impacted their practice, although the country’s conservative culture and regulatory environment have also created parameters that shape how digital journalism develops (Althiabi, 2017).

This chapter reviews the literature concerning the use and role of Twitter/X in sports journalism practice, in order to build a context for the empirical study of the platform's integration into journalism in a restrictive media environment, namely that of Saudi Arabia. As it focuses on key dimensions of professional practice, the chapter synthesises the current scholarship concerning the use and role of Twitter/X in the field of sports journalism. Rather than simply surveying the influence of Twitter/X, the literature review considers how existing research can contribute to an understanding of the tensions and negotiations that characterise the integration of Twitter/X into sports journalism practice. The chapter thus examines the previous research regarding the influences of Twitter/X on core aspects of sports journalism, including newsgathering and verification processes, audience relationships, and professional journalists' identity. The chapter also considers how these changes have played out across different journalistic contexts, and particularly in countries with varying degrees of media regulation and control. In so doing, the chapter sets the conceptual stage for examining how Saudi sports journalists experience and make sense of Twitter/X's uptake in their work. The literature review provides a grounding in the range of factors that previous scholarship has demonstrated shapes the digital platform integration of sports journalism. Concurrently, it highlights the current gaps in knowledge concerning gender and harassment, along with journalistic practice and social media use in restrictive media environments. These gaps highlight the importance of contextually-informed research that can inform how global digital transformations are received and adapted in local contexts with their own media cultures and regulatory parameters.

3.2 Twitter/X Introduction into sports journalism practice

3.2.1 Sourcing and Story Production

The spread of digital technologies has created new landscapes for news production and storytelling (Pegrum, 2009; Sykes & Gachago, 2018). In this new media environment, the delivery of engaging and timely content is crucial to enable journalists to connect with audiences and to stand out among their peers. Relevant engagement has become a core success metric for digital reporters, as audiences increasingly expect real-time feedback loops and swift content updates as markers of a news outlet's responsiveness (Koohang et al., 2023); these are now seen as markers of success for contemporary news reporters. This demand has become crucial for sports journalists, because the real-time nature of Twitter/X means that it is an extremely useful platform on which to cover breaking sports news and live events (Aloufi & Saddik, 2022; Humayun, 2023). Moreover, the short tweet format is ideally suited for delivering key updates from games, press conferences, and competitions as they unfold (McEnnis, 2023), and sports journalists can use Twitter/X to provide fans with insider views of behind-the-scenes action at venues (Harvey et al., 2020). Twitter/X also enables valuable crowdsourcing of insights and perspectives from fans and observers, in order to incorporate new angles into stories (Aloufi & Saddik, 2022). Additionally, it is a useful distribution channel for reaching much wider audiences and for gaining greater exposure for sports reporting (Taylor, 2022). However, despite the notable influence of Twitter/X on sports journalism, simply adopting a new technology does not inherently transform journalism practice. Previous research demonstrated that many core journalistic norms and values persist on Twitter/X, despite the fact that it facilitates increased speed, networking opportunities, and reader engagement (Sanderson & Hambrick, 2012; McGregor & Molyneux, 2020).

Sourcing, which describes the process of gathering information from people, documents, data, and other sources, is a fundamental part of journalism across all news beats. These sourcing shifts unfold alongside tighter access regimes, in which public relations (PR) handlers and rights-holding organisations broker interviews, while pay-tv revenues financially underwrite elite sport and shape coverage priorities (Boyle, 2006). As Twitter/X grew into a massively popular platform, it emerged as an increasingly important sourcing tool for reporters in many domains, including sports journalism. Multiple previous studies reported that Twitter/X provides journalists with an easily accessible network for discovering story leads and with diverse sources to interview or reference (Broersma & Graham, 2012; Vis, 2013; Moon & Hadley, 2014). Consequently, Twitter/X has become an emergent sourcing tool, rather than simply a distribution or illustrative platform.

In their study, Broersma and Graham (2012) outlined a typology where ‘newsworthy’ tweets serve as triggers for further reporting or as illustrations of broader narratives. Building on this, Nölleke et al. (2017) found that, in sports journalism at least, social media and professional reporting are complementary as, for example, athletes’ self-communication during major events provides direct insider access that circumvents traditional PR channels; however, that access remains negotiated by journalists who balance immediacy against verification and concerns regarding representativeness. Furthermore, the ambient nature of Twitter/X exacerbates sourcing pressures, and Hermida (2010, p. 297) described Twitter/X as an “awareness system”, in which the collective presentation of micro-updates forms a working mental model of unfolding events and consistently flags potential sources. In addition, Vis (2013) built on this by demonstrating how, in breaking situations, these fragmented signals gradually become knowledge, compelling journalists to develop emergent routines in order to integrate and validate them. Vis (2013, p. 28) noted the

advice that “unless you can see it happening, don’t tweet it”, reflecting the need for verification to be embedded in real time.

However, the adoption of Twitter/X for sourcing has not been conducted at an equal rate across different contexts over the past decade. For example, Oelrichs (2023) reported that the adoption of Twitter/X as a source in sports journalism was slower in Europe than in the United States (US), because European sports journalists tended to use Twitter/X more passively at an early stage, mainly employing it as a platform for monitoring news, rather than for actively sourcing content. Consequently, it took more time for European sports journalists to actively integrate the use of the platform for sourcing into their daily routines, compared with sports journalists in places like the US, where this active use became normalised far earlier (Oelrichs, 2023).

Moreover, the rate of using Twitter/X as a source also differed across different news spheres. According to Moon and Hadley (2014), television utilised Twitter/X as an exclusive or primary input in around 68.4% of cases, in contrast to around 23.4% cases for print, with soft news by far the most frequent type of Twitter/X citation, accounting for approximately 57.8% in print format and 60.5% in television. Most notably, the “popularity of Twitter/X accounts... did not contribute to attracting more attention from journalists” (Moon & Hadley, 2014, p. 300). In a more recent study, Kapidzic et al. (2022) demonstrated that source type also shapes patterns of use. For example, the study found that tabloids and broadcasters are more likely to embed tweets in soft or human-interest stories, while quality outlets prefer to focus on verification and official voices.

Meanwhile, Nölleke et al. (2017) observed that athletes’ direct communication via their Twitter/X profiles created unprecedented access to insider perspectives during major competitive events, and professional athletes’ increased use of Twitter/X provided journalists and fans with increased

direct access to them, as their personal Twitter/X accounts were easily located. At the time of the study, this was a new development, as previously athletes were only accessible through official news releases or via their agents and PR staff, especially during Olympic events (Nölleke et al., 2017).

This rapid expansion of direct access to sources by journalists and fans alike means that journalists must consider the ethical aspects of using information from Twitter/X as a source (Roberts & Emmons, 2016). In their study, Roberts and Emmons (2016) explored the ways in which professional journalists evaluate the information on Twitter/X, arguing that such journalists still use their professional judgement to validate sourced information in the same way they would any other information source. Meanwhile, Hertzum (2022) and Trattner et al. (2022) found the issues of credibility and verification in journalists' use of Twitter/X as a source explains why they are increasingly hesitant to use it as a source for their stories. These studies, along with those by Lipschultz (2021) and Balci et al. (2022) and Duncan (2023) highlighted the ethical issues involved in sourcing and story production using Twitter/X content as a news source, in particular those of transparency, privacy, and integrity. In addition, Kapidzic et al. (2022) conducted an analysis of German media that demonstrated differences between publication types in terms of their use of Twitter/X as a story source, with the tabloids and broadcasters frequently incorporating Twitter/X sources for soft news coverage, while the prestigious newspapers used it primarily for official statements and elite interviews. The study showed that the different newspapers navigated this ethical grey area in contrasting ways, as institutional prestige and audience expectations continued to influence sourcing strategies within digital environments, demonstrating that the influence of Twitter/X on journalism can vary, according to the established media hierarchies and professional cultures (Kapidzic et al., 2022).

The arrival of Twitter/X into sports journalism practice has raised questions regarding the balance between traditional professional standards and the operating of the digital platform. The study by Tandoc (2019) evidenced the struggle of journalists with the competing pressures of editorial decisions and the pressure to attain ever-higher audience metrics, highlighting cases in which over-reliance on analytics when assessing stories can ultimately conflict with established news values. This tension can manifest differently across regional contexts, as demonstrated by previous comparative studies from Latin America. The analysis conducted by Weiss (2015) of Mexican and Peruvian journalism found that Twitter/X has become a vital platform for news gathering, yet the subsequent study by Saldaña et al. (2017) demonstrated that, despite this, verification challenges remain a central debate in journalism, particularly because of journalists' continued scepticism when utilising information from political sources. These findings evidenced the fact that digital tools do not simply replace traditional practices, rather they create new layers of professional decision-making.

The Saudi context provides additional evidence of this complexity. The survey conducted by Al-Harethi (2020) provided evidence that sports journalists are beginning to recognise the value of Twitter/X as an information source, and the Gulf-wide study conducted by Ismail (2019) found that 98.4% of the population followed social media 'always' or 'very often' and 80.3% identified Twitter/X as their primary source of information, yet only 23.8% 'highly trust' the opinion-leader tweets, underscoring individuals' heavy reliance on the platform, coupled with a persistent verification caution. Consequently, despite this growing adoption of usage of the platform, Saudi journalists continue to approach Twitter/X-sourced content with a critical eye toward accuracy verification (Almaglooth, 2013).

The analysis conducted by Pegrum (2009) anticipated these challenges before the rise of Twitter/X as a news source, arguing that digital media landscapes will require journalists to balance technological capabilities with their established professional principles. Collectively, the extant research suggested that the integration of Twitter/X into sports journalism involves an ongoing negotiation between platform logics and professional norms, rather than simply a technological adoption.

This section examined the utilisation of Twitter/X for sourcing and creating sports stories, along with the associated challenges of fact-checking. As little research has been conducted to date concerning this topic in Saudi Arabia, the present study considered how the Saudi context can help to inform the extant literature regarding the limitations and barriers to digital journalism within a highly conservative and hierarchical environment that is undergoing rapid policy transformation. This current gap engendered the development of the following research question (RQ):

RQ1: How do Saudi sports journalists utilise Twitter/X for the newsgathering practices involved in story production, including the identification of sources, the verification of details, and the compiling of stories?

3.2.2 Research and networking

The influence of Twitter/X on research and networking in sports journalism highlights a number of tensions. Sports journalism in the digital age is characterised by the need for faster information availability and professional networking. The accessibility of Twitter/X in particular is conducive to expanding the professional and academic knowledge of sports journalists, because the platform can be used to directly contact athletes, coaches, and other sports professionals who express their views and reactions on this social network (Hagay & Bernstein, 2021; Matsiola et al., 2022).

Moreover, Twitter/X can be used by journalists to access information and to connect with members of the journalism and sports industry, creating networks of individuals, regardless of their institutional affiliation (Esa et al., 2022). Indeed, Kantola and Harju (2023) argued that Twitter/X has blurred the boundaries between internal newsroom networks and external expertise fields, enabling the formation of ‘hybrid knowledge networks’ that connect reporters with academics, fans, advocacy groups, and rival journalists. For journalists, this flattening of the access structure lessens their dependency on traditional and institutionally bounded access to information, and allows them to monitor and follow-up alternative viewpoints.

In addition to its value in following sports discourse, Hagay and Bernstein (2021) noted that this type of networking activity can provide access to ‘unofficial voices’ that can be of high utility in sports coverage, in which journalists’ access to players is often limited. In support of this notion, Matsiola et al. (2022) found that in interviews using Twitter/X as a continuous background channel to monitor fellow journalists and identify emerging angles. However, the opportunity to conduct professional networking in this way is not without the potential for distortion by Twitter/X’s structural algorithms. For instance, Lamirán-Palomares et al. (2019) noted that on Twitter/X, the visibility of information is often due to amplification on the platform via engagement in the form of likes and retweets, not merely the intrinsic quality or value of the information shared. In a study of tweets sent during the Olympics in 2016, they demonstrated that high-visibility (high-engagement) accounts, like those of celebrities or influencers, would drown out less engaging accounts that shared more accurate or relevant information.

In addition, journalists also use the networking capacity of Twitter/X for professional research. For example, Kozman and Liu (2024) found that sports journalists in the Arab world are increasingly reliant on social media, and Twitter/X in particular, as a tool for contextualising

stories, tracking narratives, and identifying emerging issues. In a study that utilised a comparative survey of 508 journalists across five Arab countries, they found that over 60% of the respondents used Twitter/X daily for story development purposes, indicating the platform's use for tracking "public sentiment" and "identifying expert commentary beyond traditional sources" (p. 13). Such patterns highlighted both the reactive and proactive uses of the platform: in addition to monitoring breaking news and live updates from the teams, athletes, and officials, journalists can also track trending hashtags and digital traces that can map an emerging storyline.

However, the characteristics of the Twitter/X platform bring the same professional challenges in terms of the accuracy of the information posted as the research and networking processes within the sports journalism industry as Twitter/X can involve the same information quality issues. Moreover, influence on the Twitter/X platform is partially based on metrics, such as activity, authority, and popularity during sports events (Lamirán-Palomares et al., 2019). The network amplification effect and the existence of social media super spreaders can make Twitter/X vulnerable to the spread of misinformation, as these social media amplifiers aid in news manipulation (Alqurashi et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2023). The phenomenon, dubbed 'network amplification', occurs when influential accounts repeatedly share similar false or misleading messaging, artificially inflating its reach (Zhang et al., 2023). This allows dominant voices to control narratives and to drown out dissenting views. Furthermore, some research suggested that conservative influencers engage in more network amplification of politicised misinformation than their liberal counterparts (Zhang et al., 2023). Therefore, the fundamental question here is: Can sports journalists make the most of Twitter/X's potential as a network and research tool, while also critically assessing information on the platform when both research and network building on Twitter/X are efficient, but the network is also susceptible to misinformation?

3.2.3 *Breaking Sports Stories*

When discussing the breaking of stories, Hermida (2010, p. 297) argued that Twitter/X, and other forms of social media, have engendered “ambient journalism”, a term that describes always-on communication systems that help people to maintain an awareness of news and events. He argued that while individual tweets may lack depth, their combined effect enables citizens to retain a “mental model” (Hermida (2010, p. 298) of the information landscape. Moreover, Hermida (2010, p. 298) suggested that Twitter/X represents an “awareness system” and collective intelligence network that provides new opportunities for journalists. In this context, sports journalists can use Twitter/X as an ambient journalism platform to share breaking news and updates rapidly (Hermida, 2010; Stamper, 2020). The real-time, ubiquitous nature of Twitter/X allows reporters to disseminate information as live events occur, creating awareness and giving fans immediate access to sports coverage (Abisaid & Li, 2020; McEnnis, 2023). However, Hermida (2010) warned that the brevity of tweets can oversimplify complex news stories that require appropriate explanation for consumers to understand well. He thus posited that with responsible use, sports journalists can capitalise on Twitter/X to effectively share breaking news rapidly, whilst also maintaining the principles of quality journalism. Moreover, Hermida (2010) argued that micro-updates cumulatively provide a ‘temporary’ narrative of an evolving story, thus suggesting that breaking news does not only involve reporting on the past, but also involves the sensing, signalling, and constructing of narratives. This framing captures the core tension that sports journalists face, namely being first, without sacrificing credibility.

Other studies revealed mixed perceptions among sports journalists regarding the suitability of Twitter/X for breaking news. For example, Sheffer and Schultz (2010) combined a content analysis with interviews of sports journalists to document a gap between the self-reported use of Twitter/X

to break news and the practices evident in actual output, much of which they found to be commentary- or opinion-orientated, with the consequence that what is circulated may lack the depth or corroboration traditionally expected in reporting. Regarding news flows, several previous studies examined how Twitter/X enables news to spread rapidly between social media and traditional media outlets. For instance, Haddow and Haddow (2013), Lin et al. (2014), and Burgess and Baym (2022) explored the ways in which a story can be released, amplified, and then re-echoed between social media and legacy media in loops that boost partial or false narratives. In contrast, the use of live blogs, namely the running of accounts of breaking news as it unfolds in real-time, have become an integral part of sports coverage, due to the immediacy offered by Twitter/X (Thurman, 2014). Sports media outlets thus use Twitter/X to deliver bite-sized updates via live blogs of matches, competitions, trades, and other breaking events, in order to meet audience expectations for rapid news on social media platforms (Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2018). This integrated live blogging style provides a unique first-hand view of sports developments as they occur (Schultz & Sheffer, 2010). Additionally, the conversational tone of live tweeting offers a different voice from traditional reporting structures. However, some studies suggested that live blogging intensifies pressures for speed over accuracy and thoughtful analysis (Molyneux & McGregor, 2022).

Twitter/X has therefore transformed breaking sports news by decreasing the distance between events and coverage, and by embedding stories in media circulation systems, which intensifies the tension between speed and accuracy. Formats such as live blogs embody these shifts, institutionalising immediacy while straining verification processes, and the performative impetus to ‘break’ news can dilute the overall rigour of journalism. It is arguably necessary to explore further the ways in which these tensions are negotiated in restrictive or hierarchical media

environments like Saudi Arabia, where additional editorial constraints, sensitivities, and cultural expectations can shape how sports journalists balance rapid reporting with news credibility.

In this context, the study by Alqurashi et al. (2021) argued that the COVID-19 pandemic witnessed the way in which influential ‘super spreader’ accounts played an outsized role in propagating conspiracy theories and fake news on Twitter/X before their confirmation. The study’s findings showed that both Saudi and Egyptian Twitter/X users were exposed to a high volume of misinformation during the early pandemic phase, with limited effective intervention by journalists. Consequently, sports journalists in these countries face increasing pressure to heed unverified super spreader accounts, even if they are highly visible, and to deploy additional care when attempting to retweet, as fact-checking and corroborating information remains essential. This is especially important because recent research demonstrated that misinformation can spread rapidly through Twitter/X networks, and that false information propagates via specific network structures when even only a small number of users genuinely believe the content. For example, Zhang et al. (2023) argued that journalists must adopt ‘network-aware’ verification strategies, in order to identify not only whether content is false, but also where it originated and how it circulated. Meanwhile, other studies reported that fake news websites often become popular sources in the presence of trending topics, while dedicated misinformation accounts can gain significant reach in the absence of authority figures actively combating false information (Ahmad et al., 2020). Such findings evidence the challenges that journalists face in this new digital media environment, given how rapidly unverified content can circulate through professional networks. For sports journalists in Saudi Arabia, where journalism operates within strict regulatory and normative boundaries, these trade-offs may be even more pronounced. Understanding how they must navigate these

tensions is essential to contextualising the role of Twitter/X in journalistic routines beyond Western liberal models.

3.3 The Journalist-Audience Relationship and Engagement

3.3.1 Sports Journalists and Their Audience

The traditional model of sports journalism involved a clear separation between journalists and their audience: media outlets functioned as gatekeepers for news that delivered information via one-way communication channels (Pederson, 2014; McGuire & Murray, 2016). This hierarchical approach made sports journalists authoritative voices in their field, while audiences were seen as passive recipients of carefully curated news content. However, the emergence of social media platforms like Twitter/X changed this environment and shifted its boundaries, as it created major opportunities for direct interaction between sports journalists and their audience. Social media spaces like Twitter/X also provided alternative spaces for sports news production, distribution, and consumption, where new ways of engaging with news sources, audiences, editors, and advertisers evolved (Kassing & Sanderson, 2012). Sports journalists in different contexts have appropriated platforms such as Facebook, Twitter/X, YouTube, Instagram, and WhatsApp to use in their everyday news-making practices, as they monitor the news sources, engage audiences, measure story reach, and construct personal brands, all at the tip of their fingers, and with increased ease (Ncube et al., 2023). This integration represents more than just a technological adoption; it is a fundamental restructuring of journalistic practice, in which the tools and techniques of sports reporting have evolved to enable content production and distribution ‘on the go’ (Mare, 2014).

Consequently, sports journalists and audience relationships have advanced beyond mere one-way communication to what is called ‘reciprocal journalism’, in which all of the parties involved both

give and receive through mutually favourable or profitable transactions (Lewis et al., 2014). Reciprocity in sports journalism can adopt direct forms, including journalists' responses to users' questions and message boards where journalists make themselves available to the community, in stark contrast to the old journalistic school of thought in which the journalist remained at 'arm's length' from the audience (Ferrucci, 2020). When sports journalists engage in the online community through active response to users' enquiries and conversation, journalists can grant users the opportunity to be heard, whilst also perhaps receiving tips for future stories. However, this enhanced connectivity has generated significant challenges in relation to user rudeness, along with the gradual degradation of discourse quality. As Bonaut et al. (2024) observed, the inherent characteristics of sports journalism, such as emotion, polarisation, spectacularising, and interactivity, all create fertile ground for uncivil conversations, in which the sensational and confrontational tone adopted by many sports publications, characterised by exaggerated headlines and qualifying adjectives designed to generate controversy and debate, encourages polarised responses from audiences. This approach saturates comment sections with team bashing or unconditional support for favourite clubs that results in an attitude of arrogance, contempt, and ridicule for rival teams that turns into name-calling and personal attacks. The comment sections of sports publications have thus become spaces where emotional responses dominate civil discourse (Bonaut et al., 2024). These interactions often extend beyond sports-specific discussions to encompass political references and nationalist sentiments, which can be seen in contexts where sports rivalries have an intersection with existing cultural and political divisions.

In under-resourced newsrooms, sports journalists can face unique challenges. With few news outlets supplying laptops, smartphones, or data bundles, reporters must source their own devices, or draft stories offline and post later when they secure a connection (Ncube et al., 2023). In order

to overcome these gaps, many lean on the very platforms they cover. For instance, most sports institutions maintain social-media pages on Twitter/X and beyond where they post interviews with players, coaches, and administrators, giving reporters regular story leads. Journalists also monitor athletes' accounts; for instance, posts by Marshal Munetsi or Tino Kadewere about Zimbabwe's FIFA suspension are immediately flagged for coverage (Ncube et al., 2023). Moreover, many outlets have employed numerous WhatsApp groups to discuss issues and to crowdsource programme feedback tools that reporters use to gather tips and to distribute breaking updates (Ncube et al., 2023). This has huge implications for their success, or lack thereof, in building digital relationships with their fans.

One major reason why engaged journalism is defined by its successful relationships is the fact that most digital users are accustomed to being able to access the internet and the information available thereon, as well as the social circle they want, 24/7. It is easy to access such digital users in developed societies with higher economic classes, but it is more of a challenge to do so in media institutions that do not have any resources to engage properly in digital relationships. The term 'engaged journalism' is used to describe the way in which successful sports media organisations have navigated these challenges by creating sustainable relationships with their audience. The sports media website Rivals.com embodies this approach via its ability to foster relationships and to build community, which serve as key metrics by which users evaluate the platform's overall value (Stamm & Whiteside, 2024). Rivals.com has successfully maintained a sustainable relationship with both reporters and its users in two ways: the service has been able to provide some form of relationship between its users and the reporters of the teams they support, but also between its users themselves (Stamm & Whiteside, 2024). In a way, this dual-relationship model dismantles the traditional barriers between the reporters and their audience, while creating

opportunities for the website's users to develop a sense of belonging within passionate communities.

The message boards that form the cornerstone of these sites constitute forums that connect reporters and audiences. In addition, there is a sense of reciprocal journalism in the user experience, in which the members of a platform feel like they are being heard and feel that the site is a place where they can build a sense of belonging (Stamm & Whiteside, 2024). Moreover, they also feel that they can give reporters tips from their own engaged community. Meanwhile, readers can also witness the co-production of sports news in these spaces, where they are neither formal journalists nor passive recipients, but rather are active contributors who help to establish and maintain the platform's credibility via their participation and verification activities (Nelson, 2018). This study also argued that by supplying a local context, flagging errors, and drafting mini-reports, these in-betweeners become de facto members, helping journalists to refine angles, speed up verification, and deepen readers' sense of ownership over the news. Successful sports media architecture thus creates a place for 'in-betweeners', namely individuals who occupy positions between formal journalism and passive news consumption, to emerge and build their reputation in these communities (Ahva, 2017). This research also emphasised the fact that within participatory sports communities, certain 'in-betweeners' organically assume quasi-editorial roles, flagging errors, corroborating facts, and guiding discussions, thereby supplementing traditional gatekeeping functions. This is important because community members can adopt important gatekeeping roles to verify information from both other fans and reporters (Stamm & Whiteside, 2024). This level of participation is used as a way to supplement formal reporting and to provide an overall sense of credibility to the platform. Such users ultimately become a factor in the perceived legitimacy of the site, as successful platforms require not only reporters with unique access who provide

exclusive content, but also communities that are capable of contributing to and verifying the accuracy of the daily sports news.

These changes to sports journalism may indicate larger changes in media consumption and audience needs. The old guard model of one-way, top-down sports reporting does not exist in the same form today (Ncube et al., 2023; Stamm & Whiteside, 2024). The new space is more collaborative and more community-based, and the value proposition is a more complex interaction between journalism consumers and producers, rather than a simple one-way transfer of information. These points suggest that sustainability in sports journalism may come less from defining professional lines and more from building authentic reciprocal relationships with invested audiences.

On a more technical level, Twitter/X has historically enabled two-way engagement between sports journalists and audiences, and facilitates more immersive conversations than the traditional media form of media engagement with fans, namely through newspapers alone (Luttrell, 2018). The platform's interactive features, like polls, tweets, and hashtags, all contribute to creating real-time participation, in which users can like, retweet, comment, and share (Hamzah & Esa, 2020). Complementing these patterns of resource-driven workarounds and stylistic variation, the study by Hamzah and Esa, 2020 identified three critical factors that influence sports journalists' Twitter/X adoption: newsroom institutional readiness (editorial support and training); a technology acceptance gap (perceived ease of use); and individual self-efficacy, derived from prior social media experience, demonstrating that both organisational backing and personal confidence shape when and how reporters pivot from broadcasting to genuine audience engagement. This provides sports reporters with powerful new tools to interact with readers, in a situation in which they can also build online communities by responding to comments and participating in Twitter/X

discussions around sporting events, athletes, teams, and debates (Naraine et al., 2021). Journalists take advantage of this to strengthen their engagement and relationship with their readers. However, previous research found that there are variations in how reporters utilise these capabilities, with some interacting actively with fans to boost their profile and gain feedback from their followers, while others maintaining a more detached and informational style in their engagement to ensure that their principles, such as their objectivity, are maintained, hence choosing not to be influenced by the fans (Nuernbergk, 2016; Russell et al., 2023).

In Saudi Arabia, some sports journalists have modified their stance, based on audience reaction, in order to maintain their popularity (Alhomoud, 2013). The interviews conducted in this study revealed the existence of a broader cultural shift in Saudi sports journalism as six of the 12 respondents highlighted the fact that user-generated feedback, in the form of questions, criticisms, and suggestions, has become central to story selection and professional practice. The study reported that growing audience size compels journalists to craft more balanced coverage for a diverse readership and that interactive platforms accelerate both the speed and perceived professionalism of their reporting. Additionally, the emergence of women's sports content online has marked a new dimension of gender inclusive coverage that nonetheless adheres to cultural and ethical norms (Alhomoud, 2013). These insights illustrated how local social values and norms have mediated the global push towards reciprocal journalism, shaping how Saudi sports reporters engage with audiences in digital-era newsrooms.

According to Jahng and Littau (2016), journalists' decisions regarding the way they interact on Twitter/X can affect how others see them, as journalists who engage often with their audience have a stronger outreach and build a greater degree of trust than those who employ Twitter/X only to share information and news stories. The experimental study conducted by Jahng and Littau, 2016

with 156 participants demonstrated that increased interactivity boosts perceived credibility significantly, and they found no reliable differences based on the journalist's gender. Similarly, Pather (2021) examined how the adoption of Twitter/X affected sports journalism and viewer interaction. The study found that sports journalists and media outlets that covered sports used Twitter/X to share breaking news and sports alerts with their audience who watched their broadcast of the English Premier league (EPL). The findings demonstrated that the audience's interaction was transformed as it was possible for them to like, retweet, share, or re-share, in addition to commenting on a tweet posted by a journalist. These actions were considered useful forms of interaction that expand a journalist's standing among his/her audience (Pather, 2021).

Despite the opportunities engendered by the use of Twitter/X in sports journalism, it has also introduced ethical challenges, including online harassment and the spread of inaccurate information. This leads to the second RQ of this thesis:

RQ2: How does Twitter/X shape the ways in which Saudi sports journalists construct their professional identities and engage with their audience?

3.3.2 Gender Dynamics and Online Harassment

The entry of sports journalism into the realm of social media on platforms such as Twitter/X has shifted the gendered patterns of discrimination by both preserving existing modes of prejudice and also by facilitating new forms of gender-based exclusion or discrimination. Previous research concerning female journalists' experiences on Twitter/X demonstrated that visibility has brought

professional opportunities for them, as well as heightened exposure to gendered harassment. Social media platform logics reward social media presence and responsiveness, while simultaneously enabling targeted abuse, with consequences for identity performance, wellbeing, and career trajectories. The social media practices of female Saudi sports journalists are shaped by these global platform dynamics and are also affected by local norms, regulatory frameworks, and organisational policies (Demir & Ayhan, 2022).

Recent studies reported that despite the growth of female participation in sports journalism and social media, the industry has not been fully transformed with respect to gender diversity (Lapchick, 2021). This is especially true of female representation in news organisations where recent data showed that over 90% of sports editors and over 85% of sports columnists and reporters globally are male (Lapchick et al., 2021). This helps to contextualise the experience of online harassment among female sports journalists, as it presents digital abuse as a systematic attempt to silence those who hold less power (Relly, 2021). Although both male and female sports journalists experience harassment online, female sports journalists are more likely to be the recipients of sexist language and degrading comments. Recent research that analysed nearly 350,000 mentions over a 12-year period found that while toxic posts directed at both female and male sports reporters appeared to be statistically equivalent at approximately 2.4% of all mentions, the content of this harassment differed noticeably along gender lines (Johnson et al., 2024). Moreover, the harassment against men was typically structured around sports-related themes, such as coaching decisions, game analysis, or team performance, in which fans challenged their professional competence, while the toxic posts directed towards women was more likely to contain discussions of gender and sex, and included various forms of sexual insult, as word cloud analyses of these comments

highlighted the frequent usage of terms like ‘sex’, ‘sexual’, ‘assault’, and ‘rapist’, alongside references to specific cases of sexual misconduct in professional sports (Johnson et al., 2024).

The harassment pattern discussed above is an example of what experts and scholars call ‘gendered abuse online’, which is harassment directed at women that “usually leverages historic discrimination, safety gaps and double standards to amplify disparate impact on women” (Chemaly, 2016, p. 4). The language of toxicity reported in previous studies in this field demonstrates that female reporters are also frequently targeted with infantilising terms, such as ‘girl’, and with the use of words such as ‘ladies’ and ‘women’, while no equivalents for males were found in the harassment against male reporters (Johnson et al., 2024). Moreover, the female sports journalists interviewed in the study by Everbach (2018) shared the fact that the personal attacks they had experienced on social media were meant to ‘intimidate’ women and label them as ‘inferior’, particularly when women “cross over into spaces in which they can begin to challenge men’s power and control” (p. 135)

The harassment of female sports journalists is consistent with what Massanari (2017) described as “toxic technoculture” (p. 330), namely the spread of misogyny via targeted online attacks against female social media actors by organised and mobilised ‘communities’ of harassers who share tactics and targets, rather than by disorganised individual actors. This is enabled by platform affordances that expose female sports journalists to forms of harassment they might not otherwise experience (Massanari, 2017; O’Hallarn et al., 2023; Johnson et al., 2024). Algorithms that reward engagement, for example, are easily “gamed” as “trigger comments” that “contain controversial or provocative terms” (Almerekhi et al., 2019, p. 292), and are more likely to be made visible due to stronger engagement metrics (Massanari, 2017; O’Hallarn et al., 2023).

In 2016, a campaign was created to stage the experience of female sports journalists in receipt of harassing tweets by having men read them aloud (Johnson et al., 2024). The #MoreThanMean campaign went viral, gained mainstream news coverage, and was viewed over 3.7 million times, a success that can be explained by its re-packaging in non-explicitly feminist terms, which meant that rather than centring the experiences of the women receiving the tweets, it was the faces of the men being visibly moved, disappointed, and troubled that appeared to win viral engagement (Antunovic, 2019). As Toffoletti (2016) explained, in post-feminist media culture, feminist messages are not fully absorbed, rather they are constrained and re-packaged in order to avoid disrupting the existing hierarchies. The study thereby exposed the fact that mainstream media coverage consistently prioritises men's discomfort with reading harassment aloud over women's experience of receiving it, creating what feminist critics identify as a pattern whereby women's accounts of abuse require male validation before they gain credibility, a notable part of the issue of gender imbalance in the media (Toffoletti, 2016).

Digital harassment campaigns are an example of what Kim et al. (2022) call "mob mentality" (p. 474) formation, in which exposure to incivility in online communities increases the likelihood that users will engage in similar uncivil behaviour. This creates what Papacharissi (2015, p. 48) termed "affective publics", which are connections that use intense feelings, homophily, and commonalities to help movements spread as contagion on digital platforms. Female sports journalists become a target for these affect-driven communities when discussing controversial topics, and these communities form toxic networks in order to harass women. The aforementioned studies explain the way in which toxic users congregate around posts published by women and form these affect-driven communities who particularly target female sports journalists when they write about controversial and sensitive issues, such as sexual assault and racial matters.

The institutional response to online harassment can be seen as a continuation of the operation of discriminatory practices that force women out of journalism. According to Everbach (2018, (p.145), online harassment essentially “drives some women away from the profession”, and women are forced to adopt strategies to cope with harassment, often through a range of organisations or ad hoc online communities of female sports journalists. It also remains an individual problem for women to manage, as is so often the case for women in other professions who are expected to adapt to misogynistic hostility, rather than organisations taking responsibility for structural issues at the institutional level. The studies highlighted in this section suggested that while social media platforms facilitate new opportunities for women to reach audiences and build careers, a group of sports fans exist who continue to harass using these online technologies, in order to keep women out of sports journalism using a digital version of the intimidation and harassment that occurs beyond the reach of traditional institutional oversight mechanisms (Johnson et al., 2024).

3.4 How Twitter/X has Changed Newsroom Routines and Culture

The adoption of Twitter/X has impacted routines and workflows in sports newsrooms significantly. As an always-on platform for instant updates, Twitter/X has become deeply embedded in key news processes, from breaking stories to live event coverage (Jukes, 2019; Balci et al., 2022). The study by Alzahrani (2016) provided early evidence from Saudi newsrooms of documented convergence workflows and the embedding of social-media routines alongside legacy processes. Journalists described juggling speed with verification as social media posts, live updates, and website push alerts were folded into daily cycles, without replacing traditional forms of gatekeeping (Alzahrani,

2016). Sports journalists now monitor Twitter/X constantly alongside traditional newsgathering, relying on tweets and reactions for the real-time insights that fans crave during live games or matches (Hull & Lewis, 2014; Neuberger et al., 2019). Previous journalism studies that focused on newsrooms discussed the ways in which journalists at different levels of the profession, working on different types of news media, use Twitter/X. For example, Canter and Brookes (2016) conducted an observation in a newsroom and reported that the sports journalists primarily used Twitter/X as a tool for rapid reporting and for breaking news alerts, treating the platform as a real-time communication tool, rather than as a traffic-driving mechanism. In contrast, their analysis showed that the newsroom managers and editors approached Twitter/X more strategically, employing it to promote published articles, to build brand awareness, and to direct audiences to their main websites, essentially treating the platform as a marketing tool, rather than as a primary reporting tool.

The traditional distinction between broadcast and print media's digital adoption has largely dissolved, with contemporary news organisations across all formats embracing 'digital-first' strategies that prioritise online publication before traditional broadcast or print distribution (Hull & Lewis, 2014). This is not specific to Twitter/X, rather it encompasses the entire networked media environment from news websites and apps to all forms of social media, and has greatly transformed newsroom production routines and rhythms. In their research, Neuberger et al. (2019) observed the transformation of sports journalists' work, specifically the way in which continuous producing has replaced the typical phases of production cycles in the daily newspaper and the broadcast medium. The driver behind these changes is changing audience expectations. In terms of how normative pressure is re-shaped, Hull and Lewis (2014) suggested that Twitter/X has replaced broadcast logic not simply in terms of speed, but also in terms of interactivity, social relationships,

and the private-public sphere, requiring journalists to maintain a balance between speed, emotional impact, and contextualisation.

At the organisational level, digital integration depends on the clarity of the strategic reasoning behind its use and the internal capacity of the organisation to embrace it. In innovative learning culture (ILC) terms, uptake strengthens when enabling leadership, open communication, mutual trust, shared goals, appreciation, and training and development are present; when these are weak, Twitter/X work remains ad hoc and risk-averse (Porcu, 2020).

According to Neuberger et al. (2019), social media, including Twitter/X, is now a multichannel/complex element of news work. While newsrooms with well-planned social media strategies generally embed consistent feedback loops and iterative publishing cycles in their workflows, others choose to (dis)integrate it more reactively or ad hoc, as the ‘always-on’ expectation has reconfigured editorial processes by translating the monitoring and iteration processes as routines, although they were formerly more sequential, thus multiplying the load on the organisation and breaking the boundaries between reporting, editing, and distribution (Jukes, 2019). However, the differences in adoption are also deepened by social learning and organisational signalling. This aligns with Porcu’s (2020) distinction between professional learning culture, namely shared standards, peer learning, and training, and explorative innovation culture, namely autonomy, experimentation, flexibility, which together shape how Twitter/X is normalised in daily newsroom routines. For example, by applying a diffusion-of-innovation approach, Oelrichs (2020) segmented sports journalists into non-users, occasional information seekers, and regular active users, and found that the levels of uptake are predicated less by platform superiority and more by compatibility with existing routines, peer behaviour, and encouragement from managers within the organisation. When journalists are supported by positive institutional

signalling, they are more likely to incorporate Twitter/X into their daily workflows. However, other journalists remain on the periphery, or are resistant, and the cultural variation in the interpretation of ‘always-on’ and what it entails remains under discussion.

Notwithstanding the rapid nature of such transformations, previous research demonstrated that the adoption of Twitter/X varies according to demographic and institutional factors. Consequently, studying integration patterns can provide insights into how the platform transforms reporting. For example, Oelrichs (2023) observed a degree of reluctance among German sports journalists to adopt Twitter/X, due to its compatibility with their established journalistic norms and newsroom culture, reflecting professional culture as a core influence that impacts the likelihood of agencies to adopt the platform as a tool for news dissemination. Meanwhile, a survey of Saudi journalists found that there was more openness to Twitter/X for expanding reach, but also that there remained a generational gap in the adoption of digital tools (Al-Harethi, 2020), with younger journalists more willing to experiment with digital reporting practices while older journalists tended to remain cautious and attached to traditional routines (*ibid*). This generational divide underscores how the adoption of social media in journalism is uneven, reflecting not only differences in technical familiarity but also broader questions of professional identity and trust in new platforms. Interestingly, this reflected the earlier findings of Schultz and Sheffer (2010), who reported that in the early days of social media, younger, digitally native reporters were more likely to employ Twitter/X in their journalistic routines than their veteran peers, a finding echoed by more recent studies, such as that by Brandtzaeg and Domínguez (2018). Moreover, adaptation can depend on journalistic role; specifically, sports journalists tend to use Twitter/X conversationally, while managers tend to focus more on utilising it to promote the brand and image of the newspaper (Canter & Brookes, 2016).

This sub-section discussed the fact that Twitter/X has been found to impact sports newsroom routines and culture in terms of role differentiation and representation, albeit with generational and local nuances, and with diffusion, depending on different forms of leadership, and in terms of ambient journalism. It is important to understand how these dynamics play out in a constrained and/or hierarchical media context, such as Saudi Arabia, where editorial supervision, reputation, and culturally embedded expectations regarding authority may also shape journalists' day-to-day sense-making about speed, credibility, and identity. Although a robust body of research exists regarding the practice of Twitter/X in sports journalism in different countries, a better understanding is currently required of the ways in which its adoption has transformed the routines and practices of journalists and newsrooms in developing world contexts. This is necessary not only to better comprehend the extent to which the specific practices that have emerged in sports journalism in recent years are transferable, but also to examine how they are transformed across different sociocultural settings. With these topics in mind, and in particular the extent to which Twitter/X adoption has impacted editorial decision-making, as well as the extent to which Twitter/X adoption may disrupt organisational routines and structures, the present study developed the following two interrelated RQs:

RQ3: How has the adoption of Twitter/X influenced the editorial decisions, news judgement, and gatekeeping by Saudi sports editors and journalists?

RQ4: To what extent has the adoption of Twitter/X disrupted the routines, workflows, and hierarchies within Saudi sports newsrooms?

While the studies discussed above highlight how Twitter/X has reshaped newsroom routines, workflows, and role related expectations in the domain of sports journalism, these transformations

have not occurred in isolation from the wider political and structural conditions in which journalists operate. In contexts such as Saudi Arabia, where media institutions function within a regulated and hierarchical environment, the adoption of digital tools is shaped not only by organisational culture and professional norms, but also by the broader dynamics of political authority, surveillance, and state-led digital governance. Understanding how technology intersects with these power structures is considered crucial for situating newsroom change within the realities of the Saudi media system. The following subsection examines this intersection more closely by exploring how political contexts and digital control mechanisms inform journalists' use of Twitter/X, as well as the associated implications for sports journalism in the Kingdom.

3.4.1 Technology, Politics, and Digital Control in Saudi Arabia

The relationship between technology and politics has increasingly become an important dimension within scholarship on digital governance and journalism, especially in contexts where media systems operate under varying degrees of state influence. While digital platforms are frequently framed as democratising tools, research increasingly shows emerging technologies can also reinforce political hierarchies by enabling new forms of oversight, influence, and institutional control. Recent work on artificial intelligence (AI) in relation to government use, demonstrates that technological adoption is shaped not only by technical capacity but also by political agendas, governance arrangements, and the risks perceived to be associated with automation by various power structures (Medaglia, Gil-Garcia & Pardo, 2023). Similarly, studies investigating the notion of responsible AI highlight the potential for emerging technologies to produce unintended or harmful consequences when deployed without adequate regulatory oversight or ethical safeguards. This can be especially problematic within contexts where government accountability to the public and expectations of transparency are obscure (Mikalef et al., 2022). Insights offered by

commentators to date align with a broader view that a form of networked authoritarianism is in play, wherein governments actively promote digital engagement while retaining the capacity to monitor, regulate, and intervene in online communications (Howard & Hussain, 2013; Tufekci, 2017). These dynamics are particularly salient in the Gulf region, where states have integrated digital technologies within broader strategies of governance and public-sector reform. The Saudi Arabian context offers a clear illustration of this, as Saudi Vision 2030 has placed digital transformation at the centre of national modernisation efforts, prompting large-scale investments in digital government infrastructure, smart services, and data-driven decision-making. However, recent research indicates that there are important implications when such transformations unfold within political structures that centralise authority and consciously seek to shape public-sector technology adoption. For example, systematic reviews of e-government adoption factors in Saudi Arabia show institutional culture, leadership priorities, regulatory frameworks, and citizen trust all inform and direct the scale and nature of the uptake of digital systems (Aleisa, 2024). Similarly, cyber-resilience scholarship emphasises that as governments adopt sophisticated digital infrastructures, they must also simultaneously manage higher levels of risk, surveillance capacity, and vulnerability mitigation, which all carry significant political implications in settings where there is strong state control (Tzavara & Vassiliadis, 2024).

Twitter/X occupies a significant position within the broader ecosystem of digital governance. Its widespread use in Saudi Arabia grants the platform substantial cultural and political influence, enabling the rapid mobilisation of opinion and circulation of state-aligned narratives. However, such affordances also result in increased risk for journalists, especially when online visibility can trigger public harassment, damage reputations, or prompt institutional scrutiny. Although sports journalism is known to be less politically sensitive than political reporting, it remains embedded

within the broader themes of national identity, prestige, and soft power, whereas misalignment with dominant narratives conveys consequences. Studies of smart-government adoption further highlight that digital participation, whether by citizens or journalists, is shaped not simply by personal preference, but by an additional complex set of institutional incentives, organisational norms, and perceived risks (Chohan & Hu, 2020). This dynamic helps to explain why journalists in Saudi Arabia approach Twitter/X not merely as a technological tool for information exchange, but also as a space in which professional norms intersect with political expectations.

The intersection of technology and politics has consequently become a crucial lens through which to understand journalistic practice in Saudi Arabia. Twitter/X offers sports journalists opportunities for real-time reporting, audience interaction, and personal visibility, although these opportunities unfold within a digital environment shaped by governance decisions, algorithmic curation, cyber-resilience considerations, and the implicit presence of political authority. Recognising this interplay is vital to comprehend how journalists navigate Twitter/X, not simply as a medium for communication but as a socio-political environment that both enables and constrains professional agency.

3.5 Influence of Twitter/X on Professional Identity and Personal Branding

This section discusses journalistic identity as an ongoing work of identity shaped jointly by platform affordances and organisational constraints. On Twitter/X, personal branding and professional norms intersect, producing tensions between individual self-presentation and institutional expectations. In this context, identity is performed via voice, tone, disclosure, and audience engagement, but also through boundary work, what is kept off the timeline, how criticism is handled, and where journalists draw lines between fandom, commentary, and reporting. Because

activity on Twitter/X collapses contexts and amplifies reputational risk, identity work is not merely stylistic, but is also a strategic, routinised part of sports reporting. In the Saudi context, these dynamics are sharpened by the policy environment around sport and by newsroom guidelines, which together shape how reporters calibrate their presence, manage access, and protect credibility. These platform pressures destabilise institutional allegiance and the ‘primary definer’ role of journalism, nudging reporters towards hybrid identities that juggle personal branding with organisational constraints (Boyle, 2017). This tension is well documented in the sports-media literature (Rowe, 2015; Boyle, 2017) and provides a foundation for analysing identity work among Saudi sports journalists on Twitter/X. The significance of Twitter/X in professional identity construction lies in the shift in communication that the platform has brought, which transforms journalists from gatekeepers into ‘gatewatchers’ and intermediaries who use the observing, selecting, and aggregating of content previously published in some other location to produce their news product (Bruns, 2012; Hanusch & Bruns, 2017; Bruns, 2023). In the Saudi context, investment-driven gains in fan experience amplify these identity pressures, as journalists feel stronger incentives to cultivate public visibility and branding on Twitter/X (Elshaer, 2023).

In other words, Twitter/X has forced a shift of professional identity for media professionals, pressurising them to engage in identity performance, with an eye to both professional and personal brand formation across stakeholder groups. The influence of Twitter/X on professional identity manifests through what emerges as a hybrid branding strategy, in which journalists simultaneously communicate organisational, professional, and personal identities via their profile construction and content curation (Ottovordemgentschenfelde, 2017), which is a result of the platform’s positioning as both a professional and personal mode of communication. In the aforementioned study, professional identity is described as a means to communicate occupational expertise and

educational credentials, and as a means of adherence to journalistic standards via the explicit mention of university degrees, previous employment, and professional projects. However, in the extant literature, unpredictability is described as one of the greatest challenges facing human brands, as there is misalignment between the professional and the brand, as core brand characteristics must remain consistent with the personality traits revealed, in order to maintain credibility (Ottovordemgentschenfelde, 2017). On Twitter/X, especially, the real-time, interpersonal nature of the platform can present challenges for the ability of human brands to convey authentic, coherent, and consistent identities, due to this unpredictability (Minor-Cooley & Parks-Yancy, 2020), since the need to present oneself as genuine, whilst also meeting expectations on a professional or institutional level, can cause identity tensions. These tensions take on new forms on Twitter/X, which facilitates direct and unmediated (by editorial or other institutional processes) responses that can reveal the personal opinions, political positions, or professional biases of journalists. Indeed, the challenge of balancing personal authenticity with institutional rules is evident in the way in which professionals struggle with the uneasy space between staying true to themselves and conforming to wider institutional rules or social norms (Sulistioyuwono, 2025).

In his work, Chadwick (2017, p. 89) described new “media logics” in the digital media landscapes, in which journalists are now required to adopt non-traditional media spaces, such as Twitter/X, into their daily practice, where technical competency in using social media platforms has become not only a professional requirement but also a marker of legitimacy, as it demonstrates an acknowledgment of the ‘collective intelligence’ value of audience participation on Twitter/X. Consequently, Twitter/X has redefined the relationship between journalist and their institution via the personal branding issue. Traditional journalism once revolved primarily around an

institutional, rather than an individual identity, but Twitter/X has placed the individual identity element (and the branding attached to it) at the centre of the content creation. Human brands can be more difficult to manage than product brands, and are more prone to false branding that might harm their reputations (Shepherd, 2005; Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019). As a result, journalists are required to develop strategies for self-presentation whilst also maintaining professional credibility and demonstrating institutional loyalty.

The ease of access involved in Twitter/X has resulted in ‘citizen journalism’ that is encroaching onto the traditional professional sphere. Here, Twitter/X users are conceptualised as “parajournalists threatening the jurisdictional claims of news professionals by fulfilling some of the functions of publishing, filtering, and sharing information” (Lewis, 2012, p. 850). Consequently, journalists now engage in an active process of personal branding to counter this new environment, via the use of signals such as typewriters, notepads, and government buildings as symbolic imagery to indicate professional membership. In contrast, the branding processes associated with Twitter/X, hold several challenges, including branding fatigue, institutional inertia, cultural fit, and the absence of validated measures (Sulistioyuwono, 2025). Certain branding challenges can be seen to work against the professional goals of journalists by necessitating the investment of time and resources in building and managing a personal brand, potentially at the expense of time and attention to their core activities as journalists. Moreover, the platform’s focus on metrics and virality also incentivises sensationalism or partisan stances that can conflict with the journalistic ideals of impartiality and balance.

Twitter/X remains a large-scale platform and a powerful space for personal branding, including for sports journalists seeking to build their reputation and to connect with audiences (Joshi, 2022). A journalist’s Twitter/X brand encompasses their content, engagement style, personality, and

overall image as projected on the platform (Ottovordemgentschenfelde, 2017). The careful cultivating of a unique personal brand can help sports reporters to stand out, display their expertise, boost their profiles, and attract loyal followers (Chadwick et al., 2021). By responding to questions and participating in discussions, reporters can showcase their expertise and develop strong connections with their followers (Naraine et al., 2021). Twitter/X also allows journalists to drive traffic to their articles and other platforms, expanding their visibility (Burgess & Hurcombe, 2019). Previous research identified several key traits of a strong Twitter/X brand for journalists. First, consistency across tweets, personal profile, and audience engagement (Park et al., 2020). Second, authenticity and genuineness that are aligned with the user's true personality and values (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Third, journalists can position themselves as knowledgeable in their field, in order to build authority (Hu et al., 2020). Fourth, engaging actively with the community via the use of comments, polls, and the sharing of others' content (Varol & Ulluturk, 2020). Fifth, maintaining professionalism, ethics, and decorum, even on a casual platform like Twitter/X (Kemp, 2022). Finally, showcasing a unique voice and persona, in order to be relatable, yet distinctive (Gill, 2021).

Journalists' identities are being redefined in complex and sometimes contradictory ways on Twitter/X. The study by Roberts and Emmons (2016) demonstrated that sports journalists who engage in the practice of live-tweeting during sporting events transition from fact-based communicators to subjective journalists, which leads to them reshaping their roles from conventional reporters to possessing a strong and defined public voice and an individual brand identity, although sometimes at the expense of their professional legitimacy, which can ultimately mean sacrificing their professional identity for the sake of personal branding. In contrast, Ottovordemgentschenfelde (2017) argued that the architecture of Twitter/X makes it difficult for

journalists to uphold a distinct and bounded identity, while Mellado and Alfaro (2020) found that while some journalists have adopted the features of Twitter/X and transformed their identity into a more conversational style, with direct communication with their audience and the expression of personal opinions as part of their output, other journalists have resisted adopting the open nature of Twitter/X to avoid creating a division between their personal and professional opinions. Meanwhile, in the Saudi Arabian context, the study by Al-Harethi (2020) identified the presence of a form of hybrid identity change among Saudi sports journalists, in which the study's participants had transitioned from viewing themselves as mere informers to individuals who were relatable, with a distinct personality. The research by Mellado and Hermida (2021) offered a more critical take on this transformation, as they explained that journalists who lean into platform-commercial logics adopted promoter, celebrity, and joker roles on Twitter/X, blurring the boundaries between PR and influencer practices and complicating their professional identity. Therefore, the licensing and regulatory frameworks governing Saudi sports journalism play a critical role in shaping professional identity. By requiring journalists to register annually with the Sports Media Federation and by circumscribing the boundaries of permissible reporting, the state effectively narrows the occupational mandate of sports journalists. Research shows that Saudi journalists are highly aware of the legal and ethical responsibilities attached to social media use, but institutional ambiguities and regulatory pressures limit the scope for independent practice (Safari, 2018; Alenizi, 2024). Instead of positioning themselves as autonomous investigators capable of holding powerful actors to account, journalists are compelled to adopt identities aligned with state priorities, emphasising promotion, celebration, and image management over scrutiny or critique. The inability to conduct hard-hitting investigations therefore becomes not only a limitation on practice but also a defining feature of professional self-conception (Ahmed et al.,

2017). Within this context, sports journalists negotiate their role as mediators between state-sanctioned narratives, sporting institutions, and audiences, reinforcing a professional identity more closely aligned with national pride and soft power projection than with adversarial reporting traditions (Alenizi, 2024).

Further research into specific identity management strategies, such as boundary-setting practices and audience segmentation techniques, has the potential to determine the ways in which Saudi sports journalists navigate the traditional professional norms versus the demands of digital branding. The present study therefore examined the ways in which such journalists maintain their core professional values, such as objectivity and independence, within the participatory environment of Twitter/X that challenges these boundaries. This engendered the fifth RQ, as follows:

RQ5: How do Saudi sports journalists navigate the shifts in their professional identity amidst the disruptive influence of Twitter/X on the roles and norms of the traditional newsroom?

3.6 Contemporary Sports Journalism in Saudi Arabia

3.6.1 Media Regulations and Islamic Culture

This section discusses how Saudi media regulation and sports policy logics govern Twitter/X practices in the country, using the extant literature to explain the mechanisms that shape the routines, roles, and identity employed by Saudi journalists and to describe the context. Saudi Arabia's contemporary sports strategy exists in the context of the broader soft-power and economic-diversification project articulated by the Vision 2030 (Kraidy, 2011). State-linked investment and event acquisition have repositioned elite sport as a vehicle for international projection and domestic transformation (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018). For journalism, this

reconfiguration has altered the information environment, expanded the volume and pace of news, while also concentrated ownership, access, and PR infrastructures. In the digital platform era, these shifts have met the logistics of Twitter/X acceleration, visibility, and direct athlete-audience communication, intensifying role negotiations for sports reporters between access and scrutiny, proximity and independence, and speed and verification (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012; Boyle, 2017). While conventions like focusing such as a focus on Saudi clubs and leagues typically dominate national sports coverage in Saudi Arabia the country (Al-Shalhoub, 2015), however, the restrictive media policies have arguably fostered limited analytical depth, and instead have contributed to propagating narratives aligned with government interests (Abdulrazzaq et al., 2016). This complex balance of practices, regulations, and shifting degrees of freedom defines the contemporary Saudi sports journalism landscape as of now.

Historically, Saudi Arabia developed an extensive internet filtering system that was built on creating three bottlenecks, in which all incoming and outgoing internet data (traffic flow) would pass, allowing the Saudi Internet Services Unit to block over 200,000 websites by 2001, as well as enabling it to control and monitor websites that contained information and materials that were inconsistent with Islamic religion and national systems (Ostrum, 2011). The sudden rise of Twitter/X in Saudi Arabia posed a serious challenge to this well-established regulatory regime. With 1.9 million active Saudi Twitter/X users by 2013, and 47% of all tweets coming from the Arab region, posted by Saudis (Chaudhry, 2014), open profiles and hashtags enabled what Castells (2015, p. 6) called “mass self-communication” that transcended the “permission” systems of the traditional media. Saudi Arabia consequently established robust press rules for cyberspace, with licenses issued to bloggers that required them to meet age, education, and criminal record criteria, and that explicitly banned the “criticism of Islam” or the “publication of material that offends

public order” (Ostrum, 2011, p. 5; Chaudhry, 2014, p. 953). By 2014, Saudi media laws required that journalists “observe objective and constructive criticism that aims at public interest” (Duffy, 2014, p. 24), which created provisions that were broad enough to criminalise virtually any critical reporting of the state.

This is an illustration of the “network power” theorised by Castells (2015, p. 9), in which the Saudi government can be seen as a ‘programmers’ via its Internet Services Unit, while the religious clerics on Twitter/X can be viewed as ‘switchers’ who help to connect networks and replicate the discourses of governmental power by virtue of their social authority (Chaudhry, 2014). The resulting hybrid control system operates via both technical infrastructure and social pressure, demonstrating the fact that Twitter/X’s democratising effect depends not on technical features alone, but also on the broader regulatory environment. Despite the recent reforms introduced via Vision 2030, recent studies found that the old regulatory structures linger, regardless of the democratising influences of Twitter/X, as although the platform has allowed Saudi departments and religious councils to engage more strongly with the public, they retain the old, top-down style of communication (Alajlan, 2021). Even now, the Saudi journalism arena remains heavily regulated. As Almaglooth (2013) observed, despite the openness of Twitter/X, gatekeeping attitudes remain strong within Saudi Arabian sports journalism. Laws still tightly control news dissemination (Burggraaff & Trilling, 2020), despite the disruption caused by the immediacy of Twitter/X that transcends both free and controlled media environments. The advent of digital media and the rise of platforms like Twitter/X, Snapchat, and TikTok have not loosened these constraints; rather, oversight now extends explicitly to online outlets and social platforms, with the same legal and cultural red lines applied (Essa & Harvey, 2022). Consequently, the limitations faced by Saudi journalists have pushed them further towards platforms like Twitter/X, as most

believe that online media has granted them greater freedom in reporting, including sports reporting (Alshadookhy, 2021).

Nevertheless, in addition to governmental barriers, cultural debate remains that is integral to explaining the reality in Saudi Arabia. As noted above, topics related to Islam are naturally considered taboo, and this shapes the framing of coverage in order that it does not impede sensitive religious discourse (Alamri, 2023). Moreover, Islamic tradition also has a noticeable impact on how the sports landscape is shaped and regulated. For instance, the scheduling of matches typically avoids conflict with prayer times in the country, a parameter that non-Saudi sports journalists may find unfamiliar. Moreover, Saudi journalism also encounters prohibitions on promoting alcohol consumption, which is not typically witnessed in western contexts (Abdulrazzaq et al., 2016). Some scholars argue that strict religious oversight limits the analysis of issues such as women's inclusion and reforms (Faqihi, 2022). In addition, heightened nationalism pervades Saudi sports journalism, and reporters highlight the achievements of domestic clubs and Saudi athletes with a strong sense of national pride (Al-Youssef, 2023). Internationally, the sport media complex is driven by rights markets and vertically integrated media groups, which conditions newsroom agendas and access, a dynamic that permeates local contexts like Saudi Arabia (Boyle & Haynes, 2009).

3.6.2 Between Press Freedom and National Pride

This section addresses how the dynamics outlined above impact the Twitter/X practice angles, tone, risk management, and access of Saudi sports desks. As discussed previously, despite the fact that Saudi Arabia's print media is predominantly private-owned, the country's sports journalism landscape has been shaped by the government's tight control over all media production and distribution. The analysis of Okaz's coverage of Vision 2030 by Alzahrani and Salaman, (2021)

found that the systematic agenda-setting and celebratory framing involved was consistent with the state-aligned narratives. This took the form of privileging development and modernisation themes, highlighting flagship projects and elite sources, and assigning high prominence and a positive tone to policy milestones. Critical or oppositional perspectives appeared far less frequently, indicating that news selection and framing collectively reinforced the programme's legitimacy (Alzahrani & Salaman, 2021).

The Ministry of Media oversees sports reporting, filtering content to ensure alignment with state-sanctioned perspectives (Safari, 2018). Within this system, sports journalists are positioned less as independent watchdogs and more as quasi-civil servants, expected to reproduce official narratives and required to obtain annual licenses from the Sports Media Federation (Alenizi, 2024). Such regulatory mechanisms limit the scope for hard-hitting investigative work, with implications not only for press freedom but also for professional self-conception. As discussed further in the identity section, these structural constraints reconfigure the role of Saudi sports journalists, shifting it away from autonomous inquiry and towards the mediation and management of state agendas. This system has fostered a form of coverage that is focused on praising national teams and achievements, rather than reporting on macro issues that impact Saudi sports. For example, the analysis by Al-Shalhoub (2015) found that the sports sections of Saudi newspapers deviated notably from the coverage of sports and topical issues focused on specific sports, and instead tended towards debate that focus on glorifying state achievements in the field. Moreover, stories concerning controversial issues like women's inclusion in sports are often avoided or given limited coverage (Faqihi, 2022).

Nowadays, Saudi sports journalism exists in a delicate balance between government control on one hand, and its ambitions for social progress on the other. Many state restrictions regarding press

freedoms remain firmly in place, influencing reporting angles and coverage decisions (Abdulrazzaq et al., 2016). However, increasing public access to information, particularly through social media, makes enforcing top-down narratives increasingly difficult (Noman et al., 2015). This tension requires sports journalists to negotiate their roles carefully. For example, growth in Saudi Twitter/X usage has increased pressure for more balanced and inclusive coverage that is aligned with user interests, rather than merely state messaging (Al-Youssef, 2023). However, there remains the societal and state expectation for journalists to be voices for unity and order, and advocates for peace (Alqahtani, 2023), in which they are key actors in strengthening the public's connection with their nation by promoting its achievements. Although national pride is not necessarily a negative impactor on the sports environment per se, its prominence nonetheless propagates narratives that are aligned with government-led initiatives aimed at showcasing Saudi progress, modernisation, and unity (Alamri, 2023). For example, Vision 2030 development goals receive extensive positive coverage on social media and beyond (Alsaaidi, 2020).

Furthermore, sensationalised coverage risks inflaming aggressive fan behaviour, especially considering the fact that Saudi Arabia is a youthful nation (Al-Nassar, 2015; Gastat Report 2020). By seeking 'clicks' on their social media posts, some journalists may be drawn to inject inflammatory language that may contribute to hooliganism. However, others argue that tighter regulation, rather than advocacy, is required from Saudi media (Safari, 2018; Alenizi, 2024). Indeed, political, religious, and cultural factors have shaped Saudi journalism, requiring a nuanced study of the tensions between advocacy, oversight, and professional principles within this rapidly developing apparatus.

As Saudi Arabia's media environment is under the full control of the state and public opinion can only be represented by state-sanctioned voices, due to censorship the debate concerning the Saudi

state's vast financial investment in football is minimal in the Kingdom (Agerschou-Madsen, 2025). Meanwhile, the international press often criticises Saudi Arabia's strategic investment in football as 'sportswashing' (Ganji, 2023). Similarly, since the state tightly controls civil society and freedom of speech within the Kingdom, this creates a particularly interesting dynamic on social media, in which Saudi followers appear to celebrate every move by football icons like Cristiano Ronaldo, either due to genuine support, or because no space exists for dissent (Berman, 2023), while international audiences operating outside these constraints freely express scepticism about the Kingdom's sports investments. Here, Saudi Arabia's ability to monopolise its representation in the media has allowed it to co-opt expressions of national pride through football. After Saudi Arabia's 2022 World Cup win over Argentina, the Saudi Minister of Sports, Prince Abdulaziz bin Turki Al-Faisal, quickly interpreted it as a "victory for the entire Arab and Muslim world", positioning the Kingdom as a regional leader, and elevating Arab status globally (Saifi, 2022). This exemplifies the symbolic power the state exercises by monopolising the representation of the country, and the way in which sports can be used as a projection of leadership and its self-image of success. Visual communication complements this, with images of state leaders carried around by elated Saudi Arabian players at the moment of victory, which connects the sporting event directly to political leadership, and creates a sporting success that legitimises the leadership further. Celebrations of victory and pride in national sport are therefore not simply natural occurrences, but instead are state-led expressions of national pride, in which the leadership presents itself as the architect of national celebration (Agerschou-Madsen, 2025).

The Saudi state's encouragement of entertainment and leisure is thus balanced with its media restrictions via this national pride approach, demonstrating the fact that national pride is not simply an emotional state, but is also a political tool. As Agerschou-Madsen (2025) explained, in addition

to monopolising the official expression of national pride, the state also credits its own leadership through its control of the media. Consequently, national pride emerges from football and thus becomes an expression of the state's political will, which requires the celebration of the leadership and its vision of national progress, while maintaining strict control over media narratives.

3.6.3 Globalisation, Soft Power and Saudi Sports

The matters discussed above have implications for the Twitter/X practices surrounding mega-events, from verification and framing to dependency concerning rights-holder feeds. Globalisation has played a pivotal role in redefining the role of sports as a tool for nations to exert influence and to project soft power. Saudi Arabia's use of sports mega-events is a prime example of this new dynamic, wherein the game has become a form of diplomacy and image-crafting, rather than just a competitive spectacle (Awad, 2022). The notion of 'soft power' through sport has been reimagined from a concept of cultural exchange to a nuanced strategy for state-led image transformation (Crantz, 2024). This includes nation branding and influence-building via strategic partnerships and the hosting of major competitions (Nye, 2004; Burton & Naraine, 2023). This shift has occurred within the setting of the Saudi media landscape, in which sports journalism is increasingly becoming a part of political narratives that transcend scores and statistics to reflect a more positive image of the nation globally. Recent survey evidence indicated that the hosting of mega-events has improved Saudi Arabia's external image among international sports journalists. For instance, a study of 51 journalists from 35 countries found that more than 80% reported a positive effect (Awad, 2022). The study also identified the Spanish Super Cup, which was hosted by Saudi Arabia, as the most closely followed event among the journalists surveyed, indicating the fact that high-profile rights-holder partnerships delivered the greatest visibility among the foreign

sports desks (Awad, 2022). In addition, Awad (2022) argued that reputational gains hinge on sustained engagement with international media, from accreditation and briefing to supplying ready-to-use content that showcases the Saudis' dense sporting calendar.

Sports mega-events are becoming key tools that academics argue are new soft power instruments. International competitions, such as F1 races and football matches, provide what Brannagan and Giulianotti (2018) described as opportunities for states to showcase cultural progress, while simultaneously diverting attention from political issues. In Saudi Arabia, F1 began in 2021, with the Saudi Royal Family recognising the power of the global platform to bring recognition to the country and a positive image to its citizens. Despite regional tensions and human rights concerns, the continued presence of F1 in the Kingdom aligns with its soft power goals over and above its traditional diplomatic value (Crantz, 2024). Consequently, the relationship between sports diplomacy and journalism has grown increasingly complex as Saudi Arabia pursues its Vision 2030 objectives. According to Almakaty (2025), the coverage in the Saudi media focuses on promoting the economic and political change in the country and the launch of different projects as part of the initiative. In contrast, the media in Western countries focuses on the absence of substantial political change in Saudi Arabia, with the reform remaining only a pretext. In other words, the media in different parts of the world holds different viewpoints in its sports reporting, according to the political relationship between Saudi Arabia and the country concerned (Almakaty, 2025).

As new platforms and social media channels emerge, they offer fresh venues for narrative control and contestation. In this arena, official Saudi narratives, activist campaigns, and critical journalism compete for attention and influence. Indeed, Meier et al. (2021) highlighted a pattern in which political criticism is often side-lined during major sports events themselves, as evidenced by their

analysis of Twitter/X discourse during the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia. This situation may find parallels with Saudi events, in which the introduction to a sporting event can be permeated with controversy, while the event coverage can pivot towards the sport itself. Meanwhile, the financial infrastructure that supports Saudi investment in sports demonstrates the way in which economic and political ambitions intertwine within the sports arena. For instance, the valuation of Saudi Arabia's F1 has seen a significant rise from an estimated \$600 million per year in 2014 to \$926 million by 2022 (Crantz, 2024). These economic underpinnings engender dependencies that can subtly steer media coverage, creating the challenge that Rowe (2017) highlighted, in which sports journalism struggles to maintain a critical distance when its economic model relies on access to, and coverage of, commercially lucrative events.

Saudi Arabia's heavy involvement in global sports therefore creates pressure for journalists to produce balanced domestic sports coverage that appeals to the international sports community. The Kingdom has invested extensively in hosting major international competitions and building relations with foreign leagues and sports bodies, which has created risks for the country, due to the absence of Western-style objective local reporting (Edmondson, 2022). A good example of these investments was the acquisition of the hosting rights for the Spanish Super Cup, which subsequently invited criticism of the Kingdom's infrastructure readiness and concerns about its ability to meet the large expenditure required (Berman, 2023). This contention was highlighted by Burton and Naraine (2023) who argued that sophisticated modern 'soft power' strategies must be supplemented with multidimensional sports journalism reporting structures that exceed mere boosterism. Therefore, Saudi outlets now face pressure to cover events insightfully and to contest questionable practices, in order to be credible in the eyes of Western media and consumers. However, when faced with reality, the old restrictive structures still dominate the media scene.

Although Alsaaidi's (2020) analysis of Vision 2030 branding on Twitter/X showed that there is overwhelming positivity among journalists regarding the expansion of journalistic freedoms, other surveys indicated that most Saudi sports journalists still avoid questioning state authorities or major initiatives (Abdulrazzaq et al., 2016). Therefore, recent sports expansionism is testing the independence of Saudi journalism within these restrictive systems. Overall, the heavy involvement of Saudi Arabia in global sports has increased pressure for more balanced domestic sports journalism, as the Kingdom spends billions on foreign partnerships, marketing campaigns, and hosting international events (Edmondson, 2022). Complementing these soft-power accounts, Saudi-based survey evidence shows that investment in the sports sector is associated with improved football fans' quality of life (Elshaer, 2023). These audience-side effects matter for journalism: heightened enthusiasm and visibility raise demand for real-time updates, transfer explanations and behind-the-scenes access, pressures that increasingly play out on Twitter/X and shape reporting routines and tone in Saudi outlets.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodology used to examine how Twitter/X has transformed Saudi sports journalism. The study investigates changes in how journalists gather news, interact with audiences, and navigate their professional roles in this emerging digital landscape. To understand these transformations, I conducted 40 in-depth interviews with Saudi sports journalists from newspapers, television, radio, and digital platforms across five regions of the Kingdom. This qualitative approach was chosen to capture journalists' lived experiences and perspectives on how they adapt to Twitter/X's demands within Saudi Arabia's unique media environment.

The chapter is organised as follows: First, I outline the five research questions that guided this study and explain why an interpretivist approach was best suited for this study. Second, I detail the semi-structured interview method, including how questions were developed from the literature review as well as how participants were recruited through the Saudi Sports Media Federation. Third, I describe the thematic analysis process used to identify patterns across the interview data. Finally, I address ethical considerations, particularly important given Saudi Arabia's media regulations, and the measures taken to ensure research validity and protection of participant anonymity. Throughout the chapter, I explain how methodological decisions were shaped by the study's objectives and the practicalities of researching journalism in Saudi Arabia, where verification practices, gender norms, and state–media relationships create a distinctive context for digital transformation.

4.2 Research Questions

The research questions were developed based on the arguments identified and discussed in the preceding literature review chapters. This study uses semi-structured interviews with 40 Saudi sports journalists to look at how Twitter/X is used in sports journalism. This project asks the following research questions:

RQ1: How do Saudi sports journalists utilise Twitter/X for the newsgathering practices involved in story production, including the identification of sources, the verification of details, and the compiling of stories?

RQ2: How does Twitter/X shape the ways in which Saudi sports journalists construct their professional identities and engage with their audience?

RQ3: How has the adoption of Twitter/X influenced the editorial decisions, news judgement, and gatekeeping by Saudi sports editors and journalists?

RQ4: To what extent has the adoption of Twitter/X disrupted the routines, workflows, and hierarchies within Saudi sports newsrooms?

RQ5: How do Saudi sports journalists navigate the shifts in their professional identity amidst the disruptive influence of Twitter/X on the roles and norms of the traditional newsroom?

This chapter presents the methods that were chosen to answer these questions and explains the data collection and analysis process. One of the core tasks in social science research is choosing a methodology that best suits the project and its research questions. The theoretical frameworks guiding this study were introduced and critically examined in the literature review. These

frameworks helped shape both the research questions and the interpretive design of the study. Rather than treating theory as a background element, this study draws actively on a range of conceptual perspectives to frame the investigation of journalistic transformation in the context of Saudi sports media.

The hierarchy of influences model (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013) provides a structural lens to explore how journalistic behaviour is shaped by multiple levels of influence—from individual routines to newsroom culture and broader institutional and political forces. This model informed the design of questions related to newsroom hierarchies, editorial processes, and structural constraints (RQ1, RQ3, RQ4). Gatekeeping theory (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009) is used to understand how decisions about content selection and prioritisation are made within the digital media environment. Journalists' shift from gatekeepers to gatewatchers (Bruns, 2008) informed questions about how editorial authority and content selection operate in digital environments where journalists aggregate and curate content rather than solely control information flows (RQ3, RQ4). Ambient journalism (Hermida, 2010, p. 298) frames how Twitter/X transforms journalistic routines through its role as an “awareness system”, while later work extends this framework to contemporary platform practices (Hermida, 2013). This concept directly shaped questions about sourcing, verification, and the temporal pressures of breaking news (RQ1).

Participatory journalism guided the investigation into how Saudi journalists use Twitter/X to interact with audiences and facilitate participation. Here, Reciprocal journalism (Lewis et al., 2014) and engaged journalism (Stamm & Whiteside, 2024) guided the investigation into how Saudi journalists navigate two-way interactions with audiences, moving from broadcasting to dialogue (RQ2). Finally, professional identity theory (Deuze, 2005; Molyneux, 2015) was applied

to explore how journalists—particularly women—negotiate visibility, personal branding, and institutional expectations in the digital age. Questions about professional identity construction drew from Ottovordemgentschenfelde (2017) around hybrid branding on Twitter/X and the tensions between personal and institutional personas that Minor-Cooley and Parks-Yancy (2020) identify as well (RQ5). For female journalists, the literature on gendered online harassment (Johnson et al., 2024; Everbach, 2018) and the challenges women face in sports media shaped questions about visibility and safety. These frameworks informed both the design of interview questions and the thematic coding strategy for analysing how identity is reshaped by Twitter/X's affordances and cultural constraints (see section 4.3.2 for a full breakdown on how each RQ was developed into interview questions).

4.3 Research Design and Approach

This dissertation adopts an interpretivist philosophical approach to examine the influence of Twitter/X on Saudi sports journalism. Interpretivism is particularly suited to this research because it acknowledges that social reality is subjectively constructed through individuals' meanings and experiences. Rather than seeking absolute truths or measurable data, this approach enables me to explore the rich, nuanced ways Saudi sports journalists perceive, interpret, and navigate their changing professional practices in the context of social media adoption. Through semi-structured interviews with 40 sports journalists, I gathered qualitative data on their lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of Twitter/X's influence on their routines, professional identities, and audience relationships. This interpretivist approach aligns with the study's aim of understanding how Twitter/X is used in Saudi sports journalism, recognising that journalistic practices are shaped by cultural, organisational, and political contexts that cannot be captured through quantitative measures alone. In qualitative research, honesty and conscientiousness

support the credibility of findings, while the quality of data collection and analysis is monitored through supervisory oversight (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The research data were obtained using qualitative research methods including interviews with sports journalists in the KSA. With these aims in mind, a qualitative research design was more appropriate than a quantitative one. The term “qualitative” research comes from the root word quality, which means ‘of what kind?’ (Berger, 2016). Qualitative research examines the properties and characteristics of subjects through careful assessment and evaluation (Berger, 2016). As the aim of qualitative research is to analyse the data collected and to describe the content, rather than quantifying it (Bryman, 2016), the research frame tends to make use of open-ended rather than close-ended questions (Creswell & Poth, 2014). Qualitative research emphasises words and meanings and the relationship between theory and practice, rather than numbers (Creswell & Poth, 2014; Vaismoradi et al., 2016). In addition, the methodological choices for this project were considered according to the nature of the research questions addressed. The selection of research methods should be guided by the research aims rather than a fixed preference for particular techniques (Bryman 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2014; David and Sutton, 2011; Hansen and Machin, 2018). Qualitative research has become increasingly prominent in journalism and media studies, particularly in response to the growing complexity of digital news production, audience participation, and media convergence. This trend reflects a broader epistemological shift toward understanding journalism not merely as content but as a dynamic cultural and institutional process. I have employed qualitative methods to capture the richness of journalistic routines, identities, and audience interactions, especially within the context of participatory journalism. Studies on participatory culture within news organisations frequently utilise qualitative methodologies to analyse media production and highlight the key factors shaping this evolving form of journalism (Atton, 2009). Additionally, this research approach offers a means

to explore news as a cultural process—examining its creation, content, and distribution (Bird, 2009).

In recent years, there has been a notable increase in ethnographic and interview-based studies in journalism research, often focusing on how digital technologies reshape professional routines, editorial decisions, and newsroom dynamics (Cottle, 2007; Domingo and Paterson, 2011). Qualitative methods are particularly well suited to this study, as they allow for an in-depth exploration of journalists' experiences, interpretations, and professional practices in response to Twitter/X. This approach is widely used in journalism studies examining digital transformation and newsroom change (Deuze, 2005; Domingo & Paterson, 2011). Importantly, qualitative methods have also gained traction in research on journalism in the Global South, including Arab media contexts, where researchers seek to understand the socio-political specificities and institutional constraints shaping media practices (Figenschou, 2013; Mellor, 2007). Qualitative studies enable scholars to engage with the lived experiences of journalists under varying degrees of censorship, political pressure, or cultural negotiation, offering insights that are often inaccessible through quantitative approaches. This methodological approach is especially valuable in authoritarian or transitional societies where formal media metrics may be unreliable or distorted by state influence (Skjerdal, 2012).

For this study examining the influence of Twitter/X on Saudi sports journalism, qualitative methods represent the optimal methodological approach for several compelling reasons. The research questions focus on understanding how journalists experience, interpret, and negotiate changes in news production, professional identity, and audience relationships—processes that are inherently subjective and context-dependent. Such dynamics cannot be adequately captured

through quantitative measures alone. In-depth interviews allow journalists to articulate their lived experiences, reveal tacit newsroom practices, and explain how platform pressures such as speed, visibility, and audience interaction shape their daily work. Qualitative methods are particularly well suited to exploring sensitive issues central to this study, including editorial autonomy, verification challenges, gendered online harassment, and the negotiation of professional boundaries in a highly regulated media environment. Moreover, given the limited empirical research on Saudi sports journalism and the evolving nature of Twitter/X, a qualitative approach enables the identification of emerging patterns and meanings without imposing predefined assumptions, ensuring a grounded and context-sensitive understanding of digital transformation in Saudi journalism.

4.3.1 Research Strategy

A research strategy serves as a framework for addressing research questions, as described by Saunders et al. (2009). It integrates the research method, philosophical approach, data collection, and analytical processes to support researchers in achieving their goals (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The choice of a research strategy is influenced by the philosophy, methodologies, and approaches adopted in answering the research question. Additionally, research strategies are shaped by the knowledge researchers gain from literature reviews.

4.3.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

This study employs semi-structured interviews to explore the opinions and experiences of Saudi Arabian sports journalists. Hansen and Machin (2018, p. 50) state that an "in-depth interview" is when you talk to people to find out what they think and how they feel about something. Like Berger (2016), I view an interview as a discussion between a researcher seeking knowledge and a participant with relevant experience. In this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted

using a predefined set of questions to ensure that all key topics were addressed. The researcher followed up with additional questions and sought clarification based on participants' responses. Open-ended questions enabled respondents to express their answers in a manner most comfortable to them, facilitating a more natural and comprehensive discussion (Brinkmann, 2014). Many participants elaborated on their responses freely, providing deeper insights into their perceptions and lived experiences (Roulston & Shelton, 2015). To support in-depth discussion, interviews were conducted in person. This style has the potential to boost respondent confidence. As an example, Berger (2016) highlights the significance of facial expression in establishing a warm rapport. He also stresses the importance of attending to non-verbal communication, such as eye contact and facial expression, to maintain control of the interview.

All interviews were conducted in person and in Arabic. While the majority lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, a few were slightly shorter or longer, depending on the interviewee's responsiveness, availability, and depth of engagement with the questions. The interviews were held in settings that balanced accessibility and comfort with privacy and confidentiality. Specifically, some interviews took place in participants' offices within press organisations, where participants felt the most comfortable. While others were conducted in relatively quiet public venues, such as cafés, based on the participants' preferences and convenience. Efforts were made to ensure that these environments allowed for open discussion while maintaining ethical research standards.

To minimise the risk of technical issues, each interview was recorded using two separate devices, with prior consent obtained from all participants. Before the interviews began, participants were given an information sheet outlining the study's purpose and the reasons for their selection. They were then asked to complete a participant agreement form. Both documents were made available

in English and Arabic to ensure accessibility and compliance with the ethical guidelines established by Bournemouth University (ID 48842). The consent to be recorded and the participant agreement form are provided in Appendixes E and F.

Interview bias can be a problem for a study if the person conducting the interview does not understand what the research participants are saying, understands them but writes them down wrongly, or writes down the respondent's silence as an answer. This can lead to bias in the interactions between the interviewer and respondent, as well as in the structure, sequencing, and organisation of the questions (Gubrium et al., 2012). In order to prevent these kinds of biases, I took detailed notes of what was said to complement the recorded transcripts of the interviews.

According to Babbie (2010), the interviewer uses the interview schedule as a guide to determine the topics covered throughout the interview. This study used semi-structured interviews, which do not adhere to a strict question-and-answer format, to gain insight into the participants' opinions. In addition, a researcher conducting a semi-structured interview doesn't have to stick to one line of questioning. Instead, he or she can follow any leads that come up in the conversation.

Despite the strengths of interview-based research for this study, several methodological limitations must be acknowledged. The interview process presented significant resource challenges, requiring extensive preparation, scheduling coordination across five Saudi regions, and individual administration for each of the 40 participants, a considerable investment of time that necessarily limited the sample size compared to quantitative approaches (Hussey & Hussey, 1997; Bradford & Cullen, 2012). Additionally, the face-to-face interview dynamic introduced potential response biases, as participants may have moderated their answers due to social desirability effects or concerns about professional repercussions, particularly when discussing sensitive topics such as

editorial independence or government influence (Oppenheim, 1992; Gubrium et al., 2012). While these interviews provided invaluable depth and nuance regarding journalists' experiences with Twitter/X, it's important to recognise that the findings reflect subjective perceptions rather than objectively measured behaviours (King & Horrocks, 2010). This is particularly relevant when participants discussed their verification practices or audience engagement strategies, where their self-reported approaches might differ from their actual behaviours in practice (Bryman, 2016). These limitations, while not undermining the value of the rich data collected, highlight the complementary role that mixed-methods approaches might play in future research on digital transformation in Saudi journalism.

4.3.3 Developing Interview Questions

The interview guide was constructed to reflect the study's five research questions, each of which was grounded in relevant theoretical frameworks, as outlined earlier in the research questions section. Concepts such as ambient journalism, gatekeeping theory, participatory journalism, the hierarchy of influences, and professional identity theory informed the thematic focus of the interviews. These theories were translated into open-ended, exploratory questions covering areas such as sourcing practices, verification processes, audience interaction, digital newsroom routines, and evolving journalistic identities. This approach ensured that while the interviews remained semi-structured and flexible, they were also analytically anchored and aligned with the conceptual foundation of the study. The complete set of interview questions is provided in Appendix C: Interview Schedule (p. 294).

The interview guide was constructed based on the literature review, with each question crafted to unpack the principal themes identified within scholarly debates. The initial step involved aligning

the five research questions with the corresponding domains of academic debate discussed in Chapter 3: Literature Review. For RQ1, interview questions were informed by Hermida's (2010, p. 297) concept of "ambient journalism", later extended to platform-based news awareness systems (Hermida, 2013). Both of these concepts in the literature review indicated that Twitter/X has revolutionised journalists' approaches to monitoring breaking news and sourcing information. Another set of questions (within RQ1) focused on verification challenges highlighted by Hertzum (2022) and Roberts and Emmons (2016), who both argued that journalists on Twitter/X struggle with the platform's rapid pace and the desire to adhere to traditional verification practices, while ensuring speed and relevance. For RQ2 (audience interaction and participation), the interview guide was shaped by the literature review's discussion on reciprocal journalism (Lewis et al., 2014) and engaged journalism (Stamm & Whiteside, 2024). Questions were tailored to probe how Saudi journalists manage the shift from one-way broadcasting to participatory dialogue, including how they navigate online harassment (Everbach, 2018; Johnson et al., 2024).

RQ3 and RQ4 (newsroom dynamics and editorial decisions) were constructed by exploring debates about changing routines and workflows that were anchored in the literature by Neuberger et al. (2019) on continuous production cycles and the study by Canter and Brookes (2016) on the differential adoption of Twitter/X across newsroom roles. Generational divides in newsrooms mentioned by Schultz and Sheffer (2010) and Oelrichs (2023) in the literature review informed questions about hierarchical changes. For RQ5 (professional identity), questions were crafted by unpacking Ottovordemgentschenfelde's (2017) observations about how journalists craft hybrid identities on Twitter/X, and Bruns's (2012) analysis of the shift that journalists underwent from being "gatekeepers" to "gatewatchers" of news. The tension between personal branding and professional credibility identified by Minor-Cooley and Parks-Yancy (2020) further shaped the

question about boundary management in online journalism. Finally, throughout the interview guide, the contextual background of the Saudi context discussed in Section 3.4 - including media regulations (Almaglooth, 2013), cultural constraints (Faqihi, 2022), and Vision 2030's influence (Alsaaidi, 2020) - ensured questions were tailored to the specific challenges facing Saudi sports journalists operating within a restrictive media environment.

The interviews were organised into five distinct parts, beginning with background questions to establish rapport and understand the participants' journalistic careers before exploring five key research categories. Throughout the interview, participants were encouraged to speak freely while the interviewer maintained a natural dialogue with minimal interruption, using probing questions like "Could you expand on that?" or "Do you have any examples?" to elicit richer responses. The process emphasised active listening, nonverbal encouragement, and confidentiality assurance, with the interviewer taking notes on key points to revisit later. These theoretically informed interview categories were not only practical for guiding the semi-structured conversations, but they also ensured the data collected were directly responsive to the conceptual concerns outlined in Chapter 2. In particular, the interplay between ambient journalism and gatekeeping theory was foundational in exploring how speed and editorial control manifest in Saudi Twitter/X practices, while professional identity theory and feminist media theory provided the lens to explore gender, branding, and public visibility. Thus, the design of the interview schedule served as both an operational and theoretical bridge between the literature and empirical findings.

4.3.4 The Study Sample

According to Saunders et al. (2009), sampling plays a crucial role in data collection and analysis. It enables researchers to gather information from a select group of participants, allowing for a more

efficient data collection process compared to interviewing an entire population. As Dawson (2009) suggests, the chosen sample should be relevant to the nature of the research being conducted. Additionally, the sample size must be practical, ensuring that researchers can manage and analyse the data effectively without excessive constraints on time and resources.

As this study examines Twitter/X use in Saudi sports journalism, the sample comprises sports journalists working across Saudi news outlets who actively use the platform. My study sampled sports journalists across various media platforms, including newspapers, radio, and television, to ensure a diverse representation of perspectives.

While newspapers provide a more structured and archival form of journalism, radio and television offer real-time, audience-driven dynamics that shape sports reporting differently. The study exclusively employed a snowball sampling method, initiated through contacts at the Saudi Sports Media Federation. Snowball sampling, also known as chain-referral sampling, is particularly effective when studying professional networks and specialised communities (Noy, 2008). The use of snowball sampling in this context aligns with Tracy's (2013) observation that this method is particularly useful in studies where professional expertise and insider knowledge are crucial to understanding the phenomenon under investigation. Additionally, as Browne (2005) argues, snowball sampling can help researchers access participants who possess specific professional experiences and insights that are central to the research questions.

The approach was especially appropriate for accessing Saudi sports journalists, as it allowed for the navigation of professional networks while building trust through referrals from respected colleagues (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). In the context of this study, I took steps to mitigate some of these limitations. While snowball sampling did lead to clusters of participants from similar

media organisations or professional networks, I was mindful to seek referrals across diverse regions, outlets, and job roles. This helped include both high-profile and lesser-known journalists. However, I acknowledge that journalists without strong social connections, particularly freelancers or those new to the profession, may have been under-represented.

The Saudi Sports Media Federation (SSMF), established in 2017 is an independent sports entity with legal personality. It aims to represent Saudi sports media internationally, regulate and develop it, and promote professional sports journalism. The federation comprises various bodies, including the general assembly, the board of directors, working members (full-time sports media professionals with privileges like voting and nomination), and affiliated members (part-time sports media professionals). However, the federation's organisational structure includes working and affiliated members, indicating a diverse membership base.

Data from the Saudi Sports Media Federation (2020) indicates that there were 700 sports journalists employed (male and female) across a variety of prominent Saudi newspapers at that time. These publications include well-known names such as *Alriyadiah*, *Al-Riyadh*, *Al-Jazeera*, *Okaz*, *Al-Watan*, *Al-Youm*, *Al-Madina*, *Makkah*, *Al-Eqtisadiya*, *Al-Riyadiah*, and *Asharq Al-Awsat*. In addition, radio, TV, online newspapers, and independent journalists.

Major newspapers like *Al-Riyadh*, *Al-Jazeera*, *Okaz*, *Al-Watan*, and others typically have dedicated sports sections. While Saudi sports journalism has historically been dominated by male journalists, many of whom specialise in covering both local and international events, recent years have seen the emergence of female sports journalists playing increasingly visible roles in this space. Male journalists frequently report on domestic leagues such as the Saudi Pro League (SPL) and international tournaments, but female journalists are also contributing to coverage, particularly

on digital platforms and through Twitter/X, where social media has lowered traditional barriers to entry.

Public interest in football and other growing sports in the Kingdom drives a prominent place for sports journalism in Saudi media. The number of sports reporters may have increased in recent years due to the increasing investments in sports by the Saudi government and the global attention it is receiving as a result of hosting major sports events such as Asian Cup in 2027, Asian Olympics in 2034 and World Cup 2034 as well.

As the researcher, I am a member of the Saudi Sports Media Federation. This affiliation has facilitated access to valuable resources and networks within the Saudi sports media community, enhancing the depth and authenticity of this study.

The initial contacts at the Saudi Sports Media Federation provided referrals to potential participants, who then suggested other colleagues who met the study criteria, such as who worked as professional sports journalists in Saudi Arabia, had at least five years of experience in the field, and actively used Twitter/X as part of their journalistic practice. This process continued until reaching 40 participants representing various roles within Saudi sports journalism, from senior-level editors to early-career journalists. The decision to conduct 40 interviews was guided by methodological considerations to achieve data saturation and ensure a comprehensive understanding of the research topic. In qualitative research, data saturation occurs when additional interviews no longer yield new insights. Based on the study's scope and the diversity of perspectives sought, 40 interviews were deemed sufficient to capture the complexity of sports journalism practices across various media platforms in Saudi Arabia. This sample size aligns with qualitative research standards, balancing depth of insight with practical feasibility.

The study participants were selected to capture diverse viewpoints from sports journalists with varying levels of experience. All participants had between 5-40 years in professional sports journalism, allowing researchers to examine Twitter/X's influence across different career stages. Those with at least 5 years of experience were included to ensure adequate industry knowledge, professional training, and familiarity with both traditional and digital journalism practices. This minimum threshold guaranteed participants had witnessed and adapted to evolving media consumption trends, particularly social media's rise in sports reporting.

To ensure clarity and transparency in participant selection, the following inclusion criteria were applied. The 40-year maximum experience threshold incorporated senior journalists who began their careers in the pre-digital era and subsequently adopted social media platforms. This inclusion enabled intergenerational analysis of sports journalism's evolution alongside Twitter/X's emergence. Participants were required to be affiliated with recognised media organisations (newspapers, television, radio, digital sports platforms, or sports journalists freelance) to ensure professionally grounded insights. Active Twitter/X engagement—measured through posting frequency, audience interaction, and content creation—was also considered when evaluating candidates' platform utilisation.

The snowballed participants represented a range of Saudi press organisations, as shown in Table 1, and consistently demonstrated high levels of engagement with Twitter/X. The inclusion of journalists from both television and newspapers is grounded in the unique role these media play in Saudi Arabia's sports journalism landscape. Television offers real-time reporting and expert analysis, while newspapers provide in-depth coverage and editorial commentary. Both formats have established sports sections and remain influential in shaping public sports discourse. The

study's sampling strategy ensured that journalists from these outlets were included to capture the full spectrum of sports media practices in the Kingdom. Many participants reported spending several hours per day on Twitter/X for professional purposes, including news gathering, audience interaction, and content distribution. While usage varied, participants consistently emphasised Twitter/X's centrality to their journalistic routines. The following Table presents the distribution of participants across five key regions (Central, West, East, North, South) of Saudi Arabia, detailing the number of journalists, their gender composition, and the titles or organisations they are affiliated with. These regions, with central region being the biggest, were selected due to their distinct socio-political, economic, and media landscapes, which influence journalistic practices and access to information. By incorporating diverse regions, the study ensures additional understanding of how regional contexts shape media representation and professional experiences. Additionally, the Table outlines the professional experience levels of the participants, providing insights into the diversity of perspectives in the study.

4.3.4.1 *Participant Distribution by Region, Gender, and Employer*

Region	Number of Participants	Gender Distribution	Titles/Organisations
Central	15	9 men, 6 women	Al-Riyadiah newspaper, Al Jazeera newspaper, Al-Riyadiah newspaper, UFM Radio, Media centre of the, Ministry of Sports, Asharq Al-Awsat newspaper Aleqtisadiah newspaper, Saudi Was Agency MBC Channel, Elsharq Channel, Saudi Sports Channels, and SSC Sports Channels
West	10	7 men, 3 women	Okaz newspaper, Al-Madina newspaper, Maccha newspaper, Albiladdaily newspaper, and Saudi Sports Channels.

East	6	All men	Al-Yaum newspaper, MBC Channel, Al-Riyadiah newspaper, Sports journalists freelance, and SSC Sports Channels.
North	5	All men	Local sports platforms, Sports journalists freelance Saudi Sports Channels, and SSC Sports Channels
South	4	All men	Regional media outlets, Sports journalists freelance, and Al-Watan newspaper

Table 4.1: Participant Demographics by Region

4.3.4.2 List of Participants

Interview	Gender	Organisation	Sports/News Covered	Participants (age range with a period of 10 years each)	Experience (Years)
1	Male	Al-Jazirah newspaper and UFM radio	Football	20-30	10
2	Female	Al-Riyadiah newspaper	General sports	20-30	9
3	Male	Al-Youm newspaper	Football	30-40	12
4	Male	Al-Jazirah newspaper	Football	40-50	26
5	Male	Al-Jazirah newspaper	Football	30-40	21
6	Male	Al-Riyadiah newspaper	General sports	40-50	21
7	Male	Al-Riyadiah newspaper	Football	30-40	16

8	Female	Riyadiya newspaper	Football	30-40	8
9	Male	Al-Riyadiah newspaper	Football	30-40	21
10	Male	Al-Riyadiah newspaper	General sports	40-50	22
11	Male	Okaz newspaper	Football	40-50	18
12	Male	Saudi Press Agency	General sports	40-50	20
13	Male	Saudi Press Agency	General sports	40-50	17
14	Female	MBC Channel	Football	30-40	11
15	Male	Al-Jazirah newspaper	Football	50-60	30
16	Male	Okaz newspaper	General sports	40-50	21
17	Male	SSC Sports Channels	Football	30-40	12
18	Male	Saudi Press Agency (SPA)	General sports	40-50	17
19	Male	Media centre of the Ministry of Sports	Football	40-50	22
20	Male	Al-Riyadh newspaper	Football	30-40	16
21	Female	Al-Riyadiah newspaper	Football	30-40	11
22	Female	Saudi Sports Channel	Football	30-40	11
23	Male	Al Riyadh newspaper	Football	40-50	22
24	Male	Al-Riyadh newspaper	General sports	30-40	13

25	Male	Al-Riyadh newspaper	General sports	40-50	26
26	Male	Sports journalists freelance	General sports	30-40	16
27	Female	Albiladdaily newspaper	Football	40-50	10
28	Male	Al-Weeam newspaper and Sports journalists freelance	General sports	30-40	15
29	Male	Asharq Al-Awsat newspaper	Football	30-40	15
30	Female	Al-Watan newspaper	General sports	20-30	9
31	Male	Media centre of the Ministry of Sports	General sports	30-40	15
32	Female	Maccha newspaper	Football	40-50	17
33	Female	MBC Channel	Football	20-30	9
34	Male	Al-Watan newspaper	Football	30-40	15
35	Male	Saudi Press Agency (SPA)	General sports	30-40	13
36	Male	Aleqtisadiah newspaper	General sports	30-40	15
37	Male	Al-Watan newspaper	Football	20-30	11
38	Male	Aleqtisadiah newspaper	Football	30-40	15
39	Male	Elsharq Channel	Football	30-40	14
40	Female	Al-Madina newspaper	General sports	30-40	13

Table 4.2: Participant demographics and interview synopsis

Regarding gender representation, the study primarily included male journalists, reflecting the broader gender composition of the sports journalism industry in Saudi Arabia. Data from the Saudi Sports Media Federation (2020) indicates that female sports journalists constitute a small percentage of the total sports journalism workforce, making their perspectives crucial yet underrepresented in previous research. While the study aimed to be inclusive, the sample reflects industry realities, with women comprising approximately 25% of participants. This proportion aligns with broader trends in Saudi sports media, where male journalists dominate the field, particularly in football coverage (Arab News, 2023; Al Jazeera Media Institute, 2023). The inclusion of female journalists provides valuable insights into the unique challenges they face, their professional trajectories, and their role in shaping sports media discourse in a traditionally male-dominated industry.

The predominance of football reporters among the participants corresponds with football's overwhelming popularity in Saudi Arabia. Football is by far the most followed sport in the country, attracting the most media attention, sponsorship deals, and government investment. Journalists covering football tend to have the most significant professional influence and highest engagement on platforms like Twitter/X, making their inclusion in this study particularly relevant. The study's sample composition, therefore, is not incidental but rather a reflection of the broader media system and sports culture in Saudi Arabia, ensuring that the findings are representative of the key dynamics shaping sports journalism in the country.

4.3.5 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Twitter/X Use

This study investigates how Twitter/X influences journalistic routines, decision-making, and professional identity; thus, it was found to be methodologically necessary to include only

journalists who actively use the platform as a tool within their professional practice. This aligns with the principles of purposive sampling in qualitative research, whereby participants are selected according to their ability to provide rich and relevant insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Yin, 2015). Journalists who do not use Twitter/X would have been unable to contribute meaningfully to answering the research questions, as they do not engage with the platform in a manner that relates to newsroom routines, audience interaction, or gatekeeping practices. Including these would therefore risk generating data unrelated to the core analytical focus of the study, potentially weakening the coherence of the findings. This exclusion does not imply non-use is analytically unimportant, but rather that it falls outside the specific scope of the current research design. To ensure alignment with the research aims, a brief pre-interview screening process was employed as one of the recruitment aims. When contacting potential participants via email or WhatsApp, they were asked three preliminary questions to determine their platform use:

- whether they use Twitter/X for journalistic purposes;
- how frequently they use it (e.g., daily, weekly, rarely); and whether they consider Twitter/X part of their reporting, newsgathering, or audience-engagement routine.

Only journalists who confirmed both an active and professional use of Twitter/X, with expectation of daily or near-daily engagement, were invited to participate.

The type of pre-interview screening employed here is commonplace in qualitative studies involving technology-use behaviours, as it ensures that only participants who meet the inclusion criteria, and can meaningfully inform the researcher about the phenomenon being explored are

recruited (Silverman, 2020). Journalists who stated that they did not use Twitter/X, or who used it only for personal reasons, were excluded from the study, but were later thanked for their willingness to participate. Although this exclusion was necessary for the coherence of the research design, certain implications must be acknowledged. By including only Twitter/X users, the findings reflect the perspectives of journalists whose prior engagement with the platform suggests they may be more open to digital experimentation. This means, the study does not capture the experiences of journalists who resist or avoid using Twitter/X, whether due to generational differences, organisational caution, or concerns regarding the nature of political visibility in the Saudi media environment. Previous research demonstrates non-use may be shaped by factors such as professional culture, institutional expectations, and perceived risk (Brandtzaeg & Domínguez, 2018; Aleisa, 2024). These participants' absence from the sample is considered to present some limitations, although it is wholly consistent with the purposive sampling logic adopted here.

Although the exclusion of non-users is appropriate given the research questions, which focus specifically on the implications of using Twitter/X in professional practice, future research could usefully explore both users and non-users to deliver a more comprehensive understanding of digital adoption patterns within Saudi sports journalism.

4.4 Data Analysis

Interviews are particularly well suited to examining how newsroom routines have transformed, altering editorial decision-making practices. They provide access to tacit knowledge, interpretive reasoning, and experiential aspects of journalistic work, which would not be visible through documents or quantitative indicators. Recent research in journalism and media studies underscores this value, and longitudinal interview-based studies have revealed how journalists' practices have

evolved in response to wider shifts in the media ecosystem (Meyers, 2025), although other interview-driven inquiries reveal the mechanisms by which digital innovation are reshaping editorial culture, workflow patterns, and professional identity within news organisations (Das & Upadhyay, 2024). Similarly, mixed-method studies employing guided interviews demonstrate how newsroom decisions, such as reliance on news-agency material, are shaped by internal routines and organisational pressures through in-depth conversations with practitioners (Vogler et al., 2024). Qualitative media-methods scholarship further argues that interviews provide a unique lens into aspects such as institutional culture, managerial influence, and evolving work practices, thereby offering insights that would not be captured through observation or content analysis alone (Gaddefors, 2024). Additionally, interview-based research in journalism has shown the method may uncover hidden power dynamics and managerial rationales, significantly shaping newsroom environments (Kempton, 2025). Collectively, such studies demonstrate that interviews are an effective and appropriate method for capturing the subtle, practice-based transformations that define contemporary digital journalism. Consequently, they are especially beneficial when exploring how platforms such as Twitter/X intersect with newsroom decision-making and organisational routines as articulated, interpreted, and rationalised by the journalists themselves.

4.4.1 Preparing the Interview Transcripts for Analysis

In order to analyse the interviews, I first transcribed and translated 40 interviews from Arabic into English. The decision to translate the interviews from Arabic to English was informed by multiple factors. Having previously conducted and translated semi-structured interviews from Arabic to English during my Master's degree research, I possessed the necessary experience and expertise to ensure accurate translations. To further guarantee translation quality and maintain the integrity of the participants' responses, an Arabic-to-English expert was enlisted to verify the accuracy of all

translations. This rigorous approach to translation helped preserve the nuanced meanings and cultural context of the participants' responses while making the research accessible to a broader academic audience.

The study utilises an inductive research strategy, focusing on identifying patterns within the data. The collected interview data were transcribed, coded, and subsequently grouped based on recurring themes identified among participants. The data were analysed to explore similarities and differences both within and across the collected information. Following this, relationships between the codes were examined, leading to the development of a framework for interpreting the findings.

4.4.2 Thematic Analysis

The interview data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach, which provides a systematic yet flexible method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data. Following an inductive approach, which allows themes to emerge from the data rather than fitting data into pre-existing coding frames (Thomas, 2006), the analysis process began without predetermined themes or categories. Inductive analysis is particularly valuable in qualitative research as it allows findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant patterns inherent in the raw data, without the constraints imposed by structured methodologies (Corbin & Strauss, 2014).

The generated codes were analysed for patterns and relationships, allowing themes to emerge organically from the data rather than being predetermined by the literature review. As Saldaña (2021) notes, this process of moving from codes to themes requires careful analysis of how different codes may combine to form overarching themes. The emerging themes were repeatedly reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the patterns in the data and

meaningfully addressed the research questions. For instance, in this study, one emerging theme from the interviews was the growing reliance on Twitter/X as a tool for breaking news and shaping real-time sports narratives. Several participants described Twitter/X as a faster and more flexible alternative to traditional news outlets. Another example is the influence of media type on audience engagement, where participants expressed a preference for digital platforms over traditional print media due to their interactive and real-time nature.

NVivo 12 software was utilised to facilitate this analytical process, helping to organise and manage the large volume of qualitative data. NVivo supported the systematic coding process and enabled the visualisation of relationships between codes and themes through its mapping features (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019). This software was particularly useful in maintaining a clear audit trail of the analytical process, enhancing the transparency and trustworthiness of the findings.

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process: familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report; which is detailed below.

4.4.2.1 Familiarisation

The initial familiarisation stage was crucial in ensuring a deep understanding of the data before proceeding to the more detailed stages of analysis. Scholars like Creswell and Poth (2014) emphasise the importance of this step, where the researcher becomes thoroughly immersed in the data by reading through the interview transcripts multiple times. In this research, each interview transcript was carefully reviewed, with key sections highlighted using NVivo, based on their relevance or immediate interest. As noted by Clarke and Braun (2013), this process helps in identifying early patterns and potential codes.

During familiarisation, it was essential to document any emerging ideas or notable phrases and sentences, particularly those that appeared to align with possible coding categories. Some of the keywords and phrases that were noted during this stage included: Speed; Influence; Adaptation; Diversity, Transformation, and Accuracy. In total, 33 keywords were identified that appeared multiple times across all interviews. This phase laid the groundwork for the subsequent coding and theme generation steps, with the data eventually being grouped according to identified codes into thematic categories. By the end of this stage, a comprehensive understanding of the data had been established, ensuring a solid foundation for the detailed analysis that followed.

4.4.2.2 Coding

The second phase of thematic analysis focused on the coding process, which is an essential method for organising qualitative data into meaningful categories. Coding entails identifying sections of the text, such as phrases or sentences, and assigning them shorthand labels or codes that encapsulate their meaning. See Appendix A for a Table of the 33 codes, or keywords, that were identified. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), coding is not just a mechanical exercise but a crucial interpretative act where researchers must make sense of the data and its relation to the research questions. Miles et al., (2014) also highlight the iterative nature of coding, where codes evolve and new ones emerge as data analysis progresses. In this research, the coding process was systematically carried out by reviewing each transcript and marking sections that corresponded to specific concepts or phenomena. It allowed for the data to be categorised into smaller, more manageable chunks that could later be reassembled during the theme development stage. For example, in this study, more than 100 initial codes were identified and systematically refined through an iterative process, ultimately on the above-mentioned symbols. For instance, emotional responses as one code were an assimilation of various other initial codes that were related to

diverse emotions when reporting, as well as any coping strategy used to control them. The merging and reduction of codes was critical in ensuring that the final set was both conceptually robust and representative of the core patterns emerging from the data. This process of distillation not only enhanced the analytical clarity but also provided a solid foundation for the subsequent stages of theme generation, ensuring the themes were grounded in the most salient aspects of the dataset.

4.4.2.3 Generating Themes

Once the coding process was completed, the next step was generating themes, a critical phase where patterns across the codes were identified and synthesised. To begin the thematic generation, I first grouped similar codes together. The grouping process enabled the development of a concise overview, highlighting the central themes and commonalities that permeated the dataset (Guest et al., 2013). See Figure 4.1 for a visual representation of all the themes that emerged from the data.

Codes that shared a common focus were grouped together to form broader themes, which typically encompass several codes. Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasise that themes represent significant features of the data in relation to the research questions and go beyond individual codes by capturing overarching patterns. Themes are wider in scope, representing larger ideas or concepts that span across multiple data points (Clarke & Braun, 2013). In this stage, the researcher examined the codes, looking for relationships or shared meanings that could be organised into coherent themes. For instance, codes related to participants' experiences of stress and coping mechanisms might be grouped under a broader theme such as "Emotional Responses." This process required careful reflection and constant comparison between the codes and the broader patterns within the dataset, ensuring that the themes accurately represented the data. Another example is "Negotiating Gender and Visibility". This theme captures how female sports journalists navigate both increasing

visibility and persistent structural barriers within the male-dominated Saudi sports media landscape. It also illustrates how platforms like Twitter/X create new opportunities for engagement while simultaneously exposing women to scrutiny and resistance.

4.4.2.4 Reviewing Potential Themes

Examining the possible themes to make sure they were accurate and significant depictions of the data was the next stage. Because some of the original themes overlapped and others required additional development to fully capture the range of participant viewpoints, this stage was especially difficult. For instance, I first categorised responses regarding strategies and institutional support as distinct themes in my early coding process. But after looking over the data, I discovered that a lot of participants said that institutional support was an important part of their own plans. I combined these into a more general theme, "overcoming obstacles with both institutional and individual strategies"—in order to more accurately represent this relationship.

I went back over the interview transcripts several times to make sure the themes accurately reflected the participants' stories in order to maintain consistency. In certain instances, I discovered that a theme lacked sufficient evidence to support it. For example, an early theme I examined focused on Saudi Arabian women sports journalists. Instead of keeping it as a stand-alone theme, I incorporated its pertinent elements into other themes, like the one about handling audience abuse. By following Braun and Clarke's (2006) suggestions for thematic analysis, this iterative refinement process makes sure that themes are solidly backed and significantly address the research questions.

In order to depict the interrelated themes that arose from the analysis, a visual mind map was made (see Figure 4.1). From a central node, the map branches out into multiple major thematic areas, each of which is represented by a different colour. These branches show how the original codes

were categorised into more general themes and subthemes, forming a hierarchical structure that shows the connections between various facets of Saudi sports journalists' Twitter/X experiences. Dotted lines show cross-cutting relationships between themes, and color-coded branches aid in differentiating between various thematic clusters. A clear illustration of the intricate connections revealed by the thematic analysis process, this visualisation assisted in highlighting the connections between various aspects of journalists' Twitter/X use, professional practices, and evolving roles. The mind map shows the relationships and influences between various facets of Saudi sports journalism on Twitter/X and functions as both an analytical tool and a visual depiction of the study's findings. The penultimate step of the analytical process, where I define and label the final themes chosen for the study, is presented in the section that follows.

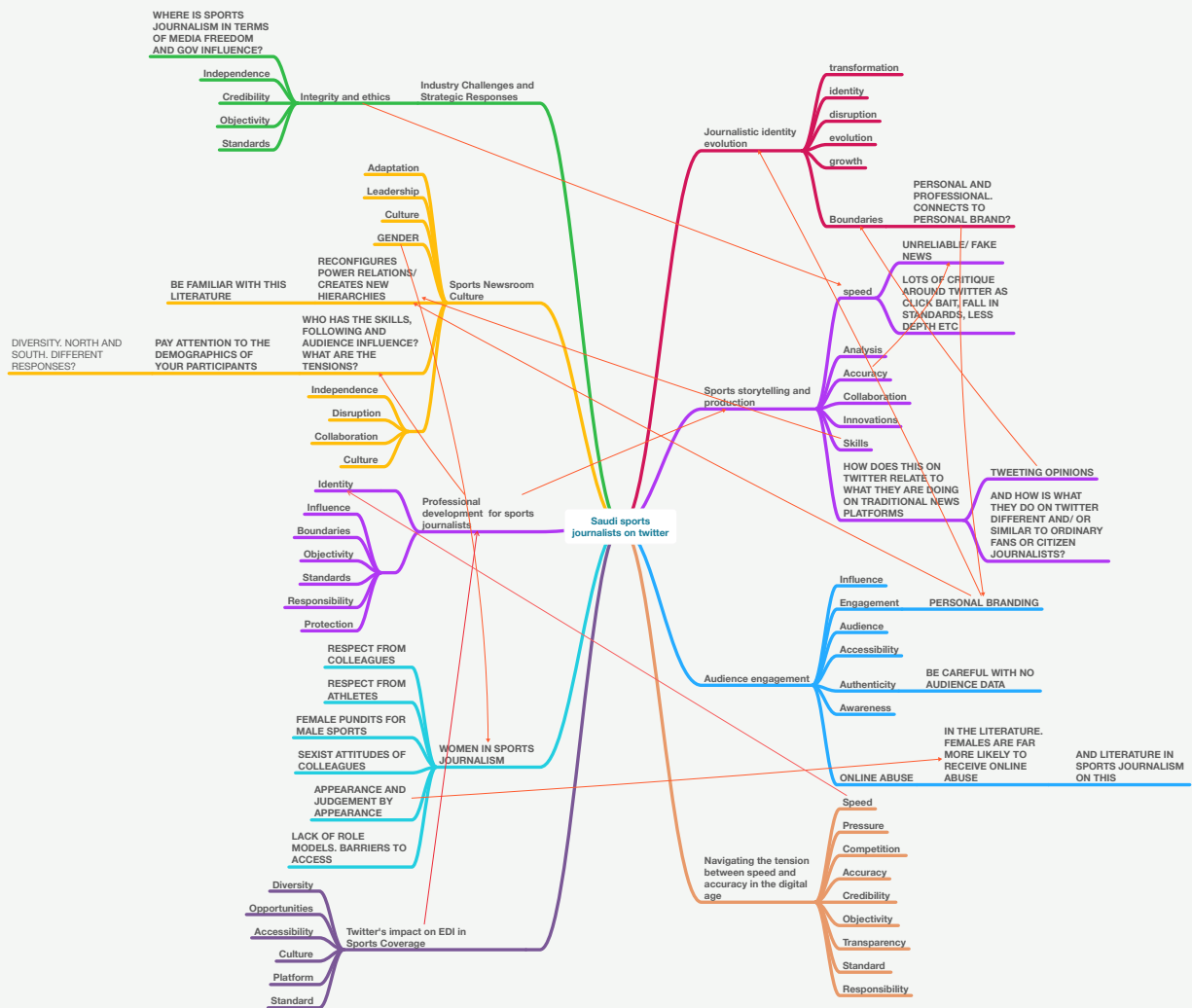


Figure 4.1: Relationship Between Codes and Themes: A Mind Map

4.4.2.5 Defining and Labelling Themes

The next step was to define and give the themes suitable names after they had been reviewed and finalised. The themes were defined by providing detailed explanations of their content and scope and by clarifying how each theme addressed the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This step is essential for elucidating the significance of each chosen theme and guaranteeing that it is supported by the data. In order to make sure the definitions are accurate and representative of the

data, this step also entails finalising and analysing each theme. This analytical process produced a clear set of themes that encapsulate Twitter/X's multifaceted influence on the industry.

“Newsroom dynamics”, “Audience engagement and participatory journalism”, “Professional identity on Twitter/X”, “Speed versus accuracy in reporting”, “Newsgathering and storytelling techniques”, and “Equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in sports coverage” were the six final themes. These themes mirror and expand upon the conceptual concerns outlined in the literature, particularly the tensions identified by Hermida (2010) and Deuze (2005) regarding digital transformation, identity, and representation.

To show the interrelated themes that surfaced during the thematic analysis process, a visual mind map was created (see Figure 4.1). The six final themes found in the study are graphically represented by the diagram, which radiates outward from a central node. A structured, hierarchical format that illustrates how early codes were gradually improved into more comprehensive conceptual frameworks is created by designating each thematic branch with a distinct colour and accompanying it with related sub-themes, such as storytelling and content creation, audience engagement, professional identity on Twitter/X, journalistic integrity and ethics, newsroom culture and collaboration, and platform influence. Orange directional arrows indicate cross-cutting relationships between themes, highlighting how shifts in one area, such as content production can influence others, like audience interaction or personal branding. This visualisation supported the analytical process by mapping out how journalists’ practices, identities, and ethical considerations are shaped within the social and technological environment of the X platform. The mind map thus serves both as a conceptual framework and an interpretive tool, illustrating the intricate, interdependent dynamics shaping Saudi sports journalism in the digital era.

4.4.2.6 *Reporting*

The themes were arranged and presented in this last phase in a way that directly addressed the main research questions of the study while also capturing the diversity of participant experiences. This stage was approached reflexively, giving priority to analytical storytelling that synthesised data extracts with critical interpretation, rather than providing a general summary of the six phases of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes that surfaced, from audience interaction and professional identity to sourcing and content creation, were interpreted through the lens of Saudi Arabia's distinctive media environment. This interpretive move, rather than claiming a definitive explanation, provides a grounded, context-sensitive reading that foregrounds the political, institutional, and cultural realities shaping journalistic practice in the Kingdom.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

As a keystone of any academic research, the implications of research ethics were considered in the present research and great care was taken at each step in the data handling. Sloan and Quan-Haase (2022) emphasise that ethical considerations are unavoidable and prevalent throughout the entire social research process, encompassing research design, participant selection, data collection, analysis, and result reporting. In this qualitative study, ethical considerations were upheld throughout all phases of data collection and participant engagement. Participation was entirely voluntary, and all interviewees were explicitly informed that they were under no obligation to participate and could withdraw from the study at any stage, including after the interviews had been conducted. Prior to data collection, each participant was provided with comprehensive information about the purpose of the study, the nature of their involvement, and the intended use of their responses. Informed consent was obtained in writing, and particular attention was paid to ensuring participant anonymity and confidentiality. Identities were protected, and all data was securely

stored and handled with discretion. These procedures were guided by the ethical principles outlined by Brennen (2021), who emphasises transparency, informed consent, voluntary participation, and the protection of participants' privacy in qualitative research.

The data collection for this study was carried out in accordance with the ethical research regulations of Bournemouth University (BU) and ethical approval was granted prior to collecting the data. Human outcomes, values, morals, and practices must be considered when conducting social research in an attempt to avoid any misunderstanding, offence, and undesired conversations (David & Sutton, 2011; Hugman, 2012; Jackson, 2001). This is due to the multiple understandings of morality, whereby researchers tend to rely on their own principles, whereas these should be in accordance with those of the population of the study (Christians, 2008). Furthermore, the concept of 'do no harm' is one of the most essential cornerstones of ethical social scientific research (Lune & Berg, 2017) and one of the fundamental tenets of this research. Indeed, given that I am from the same country as the focus of this present study and where the data were gathered, I was able to acknowledge a complete understanding of sensitive topics, which were deliberately minimised during the interview process to avoid placing undue pressures on participants regarding these topics and allow them to talk about their technical experiences more openly without candid statements that may contaminate the data.

In the context of interviewing Saudi journalists, sensitivity is defined as any topic that could put participants at risk of government retaliation, including discussions of censorship, political dissent, media restrictions, or personal safety concerns. Given that Saudi Arabia ranks among the most restrictive environments for journalists, with independent media being non-existent and heavy

government surveillance a daily reality (Reporters Without Borders, 2022), the ethical stakes in this research were particularly high.

To navigate these challenges, I took extensive precautions to ensure participants' anonymity and security. No identifying information was recorded or stored, and interviews were conducted in a manner that minimised risks, including the use of encrypted communication where necessary. Additionally, I was mindful of the questions asked, ensuring that no participant was placed in a position where they might feel compelled to disclose information that could endanger them. While this approach meant avoiding certain politically sensitive topics, it was necessary to uphold ethical standards and prioritise participant safety over data comprehensiveness. Recognising that government surveillance overshadows every aspect of journalistic work in Saudi Arabia, the ethical considerations of this study were not an afterthought but a central guiding principle throughout the research process.

In addition, the interviewees were informed of the project aims and objectives and given an information sheet outlining how their words would be used and their rights as participants and to get their consent. Further, although the majority of the interviewees were happy to share their names, I have anonymised each participant in writing up the results and their role has been treated as confidential. This decision ensures the confidentiality and ethical integrity of the study, protecting participants' identities and allowing them to share their experiences freely without fear of repercussions. Anonymisation also aligns with ethical research guidelines and enhances the reliability of the findings by minimising potential biases linked to participants' identities. In addition, there is no reference to their actual position in this study or to any information that could lead to any interviewee being identified. Finally, all interview recordings were stored in a

password-locked personal computer and will remain confidential, not be disclosed to any third party, and be securely disposed of upon the project's completion.

4.6 Reliability and Validity

Several measures were implemented to ensure the reliability and validity of this research. Following Lincoln (1985) criteria for trustworthiness in qualitative research, the study employed multiple strategies to enhance credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

To ensure credibility, member-checking was conducted by distributing the reconstructed, Arabic interview transcripts to the participants for validation. This process allowed interviewees to verify the accuracy of their statements, with them providing other necessary clarifications or corrections, thus enhancing the internal validity of the data (Birt et al., 2016). The translation process also incorporated validation measures, with an Arabic-to-English expert verifying all translations to maintain accuracy and cultural context. A colleague from the Faculty of Languages at my university in Saudi Arabia and Translation reviewed the translated transcripts to verify that they accurately retained the original meanings from Arabic, ensuring clarity, accuracy, and fidelity. Involving a professional translator also helped protect participants' confidentiality, maintained the integrity of their responses, enhanced objectivity, and reduced the risk of unintended biases or misinterpretations.

The study's reliability was strengthened through detailed documentation of the research process, including the maintenance of an audit trail in NVivo 12 that tracked coding decisions and theme development (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019). The use of two audio recorders during interviews and detailed field notes provided technical redundancy and contextual documentation, enhancing the

dependability of the data collection process. See Appendix B for a sample of one interview transcript.

Diversification of sample was achieved through multiple means: collecting data from journalists across different regions of Saudi Arabia, including participants with varying levels of experience, and incorporating both male and female perspectives. This diversity in the sample helped ensure a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study (Patton, 2014).

The systematic application of Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework provided a rigorous and transparent analytical process. Regular consultations with supervisors during the coding and theme development phases helped minimise researcher bias and enhance the confirmability of the findings. Additionally, the clear documentation of the sampling strategy, data collection procedures, and analytical methods supports the potential transferability of the research findings to similar contexts (Tracy, 2010). Finally, the use of NVivo 12 software facilitated systematic data organisation and analysis, providing a reliable platform for managing the complex coding process and maintaining consistency in theme development across all interview transcripts (Zamawe, 2015).

4.7 Summary of Analysis and Findings

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the key concepts, themes, and patterns that emerged from the interview data, I conducted a thorough keyword analysis of the interviews. This process involved examining the interview transcripts to identify the most frequently mentioned and thematically significant keywords. The analysis not only considered the literal occurrence of these keywords but also took into account the context in which they were used and their relevance to the research questions. The keyword analysis matrix (see Appendix A: Keyword Analysis Matrix)

presents a structured overview of the identified keywords, their frequency, and their thematic implications. Each keyword is assigned a unique code (e.g., K1, K2) to facilitate easy citation and identification during the subsequent qualitative analysis. The matrix also distinguishes between “Keywords” and “Main Keywords” (MK). Main Keywords are those that play a central role in the interview discourse, transcending the majority of discussions across interviews, whether mentioned explicitly or not. While they can be considered as Themes, they do not convey a complete narrative on their own but rather serve as core components of the narratives emerging from the interviews. The matrix below thus provides a comprehensive breakdown of each keyword, including the number of times it was mentioned, both statistically and uniquely, as well as its linked words and variations. To further contextualise the significance of each keyword, the matrix identifies the proponent interviews that most strongly emphasise the theme and provides a sample quote that captures the essence of the keyword in the context of the study.

Following the keyword analysis, the interview data were thematically analysed against 15 thematic areas that reflect the multifaceted influence of Twitter/X on sports journalism practices. These 15 themes were subsequently grouped under overarching narratives that transcend the data and discuss deeper and more underlying realities that underpin each individual issue/theme. 5 main narratives came out of this process: (1) The transformative influence of Twitter/X on sports journalism practices, (2) Navigating the tension between speed and accuracy in the digital age, (3) The evolution of newsroom dynamics and hierarchies, (4) Ethical challenges and professional boundaries, and (5) Twitter/X's influence on sports coverage and diversity. Each of these themes reflects a major aspect of the relationship between Twitter/X and sports journalism in the Saudi context. The first narrative looks at the sweeping changes in how sports journalists’ source, write, distribute and garner feedback about their work and generate professional recognition on Twitter.

The second narrative delves into the inherent tension between the relentless pressure to generate news as quickly as possible on Twitter/X and the need to get things right before breaking news, and how sports journalists build strategies to mitigate this tension. The third narrative investigates how Twitter/X has transformed the structure of newsrooms, the distribution of power within news organisations and the relationships between journalists and their sources through decentralisation, informalisation, remediatisation and democratisation. The fourth narrative examines some of the ethical and professional norms that sports journalists have to juggle on a daily basis in the era of Twitter/X, such as objectivity, online harassment and maintaining the distinction between the private self and the public persona. The fifth and final narrative discusses the potential of Twitter/X to promote diversity, amplify marginal voices and engage the public in cross-cultural conversations about sport, while also analysing its epistemic shortcomings and challenges as a platform for these ambitions.

This analysis would then be followed by a discussion that speculates about the future of sports journalism and sports media in Saudi Arabia more broadly, exploring the opportunities and challenges that Twitter/X and other digital technologies pose to its adaptation, innovation and sustainability. In the following chapter, each of the narratives and their themes will be unpacked and explored in depth, drawing on the insights from the keyword analysis table and the following thematic analysis (see Thematic Tables under each section), which serve as a visual representation of the rigorous analytical process that was undertaken to identify, categorise, and interpret the key themes and themes emerging from the interview data. In providing a visual and structured overview of the keywords, their thematic significance, and their relation to the main themes, the tables offer a transparent and systematic account of the analysis, enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

The in-depth discussion of each theme and narrative in the following sections will further contextualise and elaborate on these findings, shedding light on the complex and multifaceted ways in which Twitter/X is transforming sports journalism practices in Saudi Arabia.

Chapter 5: Findings

5.1 Introduction

Digital technologies continue to play a growing role in shaping sports journalism. This chapter explores the role of Twitter/X (as a representative digital platform) in transforming sports journalism practices, professional identities and the overall dynamics of the industry in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). Drawing on in-depth interviews with 40 Saudi sports journalists, the chapter examines how Twitter/X affects their interactions with sources, colleagues, and audiences. The chapter thus presents a comprehensive analysis of the qualitative data collected through the interviews with the journalists. The primary aim of this study was to investigate the role and usage of Twitter/X in Saudi Arabian sports journalism, focusing on its direct and indirect impacts on content creation and journalistic practices. Importantly, Saudi Arabia presents a unique context for examining the intersection of social media and sports journalism. The country's media landscape has undergone significant changes in recent years, with a growing emphasis on digital platforms and a gradual loosening of traditional restrictions (Althiabi, 2017). Moreover, Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 initiative has placed sports at the forefront of the nation's development agenda, leading to increased investment and attention in the sports sector (Alsaaidi, 2020). Against this background, Twitter/X has emerged as a vital platform for sports journalists to break news, engage with audiences, and build their professional brands.

As such, this chapter details the findings of the study within the specific context of the five overarching narratives that emerged from the data analysis. These narratives encapsulate the main ways in which Twitter/X is transforming sports journalism practice in Saudi Arabia. Section 5.1 explores the transformative influence of Twitter/X on sports journalism practices, focusing on how

the platform is reshaping newsgathering and sourcing, storytelling, and content creation. Section 5.2 focused on audience engagement and participatory journalism, highlighting the role of audiences as news sources and addressing the issue of audience abuse. Section 5.3 examines professional identity on Twitter/X, focusing on personal image, objectivity, impartiality, and boundary management. Section 5.4 delves into the challenges of navigating the tension between speed and accuracy in the digital age, examining the contemporary market demands, the importance of ensuring strategies for verification, and the broader ethical implications of these changes. Section 5.5 analyses the evolution of newsroom dynamics, looking at the flattening of traditional hierarchies and the shift from gatekeeping to collaborative cultures. Section 5.6 investigates Twitter/X's impact on stands for equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in sports coverage, exploring how the platform is amplifying diverse voices, Twitter/X as a facilitator of globalisation, and the commercialisation of EDI.

5.2 The Influence of Twitter/X on Sports Journalism Practices in Saudi Arabia

Theme topics	Newsgathering, sourcing and content
Prominent Keywords	Platforms (K10), Analysis (K11), Credibility (K3), Objectivity (K4), Engagement (K5), Audience (K6), Skills (K25)
Description	Examines how Twitter/X has transformed how Saudi sports journalists discover, verify, and access their sources, including the platform's role in enabling direct access to athletes and officials while creating new verification challenges, and how this has impacted content creation in-general.
Consolidation	Participants discussed how Twitter/X is used to identify sources, collect data/content, and build stories.
Sample quote	“X contributes effectively to news gathering and sourcing operations. Journalists take advantage of the official accounts of clubs and government agencies to capture breaking news and important statements, which underscores the growing importance of this platform as an editorial tool and not just as a primary source.” (P18)

Table 5.1: The Thematic Tables for Newsgathering, Sourcing and Content

The results of this study reveal how Twitter/X has changed the process, practices, routines, and norms of sports journalists in the kingdom, from newsgathering and sourcing to story and content production. Twitter/X has reshaped conventional models of sports journalism and introduced new forms of digital-networked media production. As such, the interviews offer interesting insights into the use of Twitter/X as a key tool for accessing, verifying, and distributing news on sports events in real-time. The data highlights how journalists on Twitter/X have to constantly monitor for breaking stories, try to identify and approach additional sources, evaluate multimedia content that may complement the reporting, and verify information on the fly—taking into account the high flow of information and spread of misinformation. The following sections will further explore how these transformations open opportunities and pose challenges to the future of sports journalism in the kingdom and how journalists and organisations will need to adapt, innovate, and reflect on their roles and responsibilities in the digital age and the new media environment.

5.2.1 Newsgathering and Sourcing

The rise of Twitter/X has changed the way that journalists access their sources for news in the Saudi media. The immediacy of Twitter/X and its massive user base have made it an invaluable tool for any reporter trying to stay competitive. Participants have consistently emphasised the role of Twitter/X as a complementary tool in their newsgathering practices, rather than a replacement for traditional methods such as field reporting and use of official documents. On this matter, P1 argued that:

“Twitter/X has become one of the sources we rely on as sports journalists, and it is a good source for news [...] there may be news that spreads like wildfire through the Twitter/X platform, but you have a profession as a journalist to disseminate news through formal

channels nonetheless. This includes verifying and investigating this news on Twitter/X. And look at it from other angles.”

Moreover, the interviews suggest that while some journalists have networks of sources that can provide exclusive access information (that cannot be found on Twitter/X), this has been constrained by how clubs maintain control over their media narratives and content. As such, traditional sourcing practices, which depended on exclusive information from clubs, are becoming less effective as clubs prioritise their own platforms for breaking news (rather than disseminate through newspapers).

“In the past, we as journalists who went to the club, attended training, and took the club president’s permission to speak to the players. Nowadays, we cannot enter the club. This protected the clubs and preserved their secrecy in their view. It greatly affected even the field journalist. We became confined to attending the match or relying on existing sources within the clubs.” (P3)

The interviews thus show that there is somewhat of a ‘hierarchy’ when it comes to source verification (especially when news breaks first on social media); First, the primary source remains the journalists’ direct club sources, for example, P2 says; “We search for the source, not from Twitter/X.” Second, official club accounts only serve as secondary verification channels for breaking news, for example, P9 says; “We cannot, in any way, depend on individuals. As a journalist, it is not possible for us, no matter what the information is, to rely [solely] on a club tweet, an association tweet, a ministry tweet...etc.” Finally, Journalists’ networks of other journalists are seen as primary verification mechanisms for sourced information. P1 describes this approach as; “There is great cooperation between us, as colleagues in the press [...] Cooperation where we complement each other. For example, it might be, there is players that we are required

to have a meeting with, you don't have any relationship with him, but another teammate has a relationship with him.”

However, interviews also highlight that this secrecy by clubs has led to the erosion of traditional sourcing practices. This created what P3 describes as a paradoxical situation where journalists are expected to maintain independent sourcing despite their dependency on official club channels. P21 describes this situation saying that:

“Sports clubs and relevant parties in Saudi Arabia have begun to compete with us journalists in publishing their news through their platforms, which has made the tasks of us as journalists difficult [...] we sports journalists face great difficulties in making exclusive statements or interviews with players after the emergence of social media platforms, as clubs are keen to have all their players' media content exclusively through their platforms in order to increase the number of their followers.”

This tension is also captured by P40's observation that despite the social media era, they “prefer to rely on news agencies, sports newspapers, or special materials from reporters to produce accurate sports news,” and this shows that, due to absence of validation mechanisms for ‘news’ on Twitter/X, journalists believe that traditional sourcing hierarchies should persist even as platforms evolve.

This becomes more relevant as we consider the contextual factors in Saudi Arabia. The media system in the Kingdom is still primarily dominated by television and print media, although there is a growing presence of digital platforms (Alnajrani et al., 2018). Typically, ‘traditional sources’ in this context refer to official statements from sports clubs, interviews with athletes and coaches, and reports from other journalists and media outlets. Despite the increasing importance of

Twitter/X as a newsgathering tool, Saudi sports journalists still rely on these traditional sources to ensure the accuracy and credibility of their reporting. Interviews for this study show how sports journalists use Twitter/X consistently to find possible sources, identify initial leads, and build narratives – with P24 (13 years' experience) stating that “we journalists identify our sources by following sports media accounts and relevant personalities on X, and they are also constantly aware of the updates of these sources to obtain the latest information.” The proactive approaches to sourcing that were highlighted here by interviews were posited as an essential measure for journalists to remain at the forefront of breaking news and emerging stories, which, as they argued that it is important to maintain competitive advantage in their reporting (P10; P16; P17; P18). However, the apparent ease of access to information on Twitter/X belies the complex challenges journalists must navigate in verifying the credibility of sources.

On the other hand, interviewees such as P33 revert back to the critical importance of verification as it holds critical importance to what they are permitted to source, talk about and publish. P33 thus states, “we must verify the credibility of the source of the information, review the sender's user profile to confirm their identity and login date, and carefully analyses the texts and content sent, trying to understand the context and details of the message.” (P33). Adopting a multi-pronged approach to source verification from contrasting sources of information was highlighted strongly when it comes to using ‘tweets’ as news sources, and this becomes especially important for journalists in KSA as they will need to maintain adherence to the strict codes of practice in the Kingdom. Due to its decentralised structure, Twitter/X (as a news platform) plays by the rules of democratisation when it comes to sourcing news, however, this ‘democratic’ nature of information exchange also opens up the possibility of spreading misinformation. The immediacy of the content also demands a reframing of old practices of journalism as Hermida (2013) views Twitter/X 's role

as an “ambient” source of news that needs to adhere to higher degrees of verification and transparency. To mitigate these risks, P38 explained that they “I evaluate the credibility of the sources by analysing their record and credibility in reporting previous news, and I verify the accuracy of the details mentioned in the news before publishing it on X by verifying the numbers and information received to ensure the authenticity of the news.” As such, despite challenges to source validity posed by Twitter/X, this emphasis on source-checking reflects a strong normative commitment to professional standards of veracity and integrity in the Kingdom, even within the high-pace and unfiltered information flow enabled by the platform. But the level of proliferation of these practices is still not entirely clear, as many participants emphasised the presence of unethical sourcing practices due to organisational pressure or resource constraints. This is important because P9 pointed out that “we can see how platform reveals many journalists who take news from unknown and incorrect sources through their followers.” While some journalists adhere to rigorous verification processes, others may succumb to the pressure of breaking news quickly, potentially compromising accuracy (see section 5.4). Moreover, given the political context of Saudi Arabia, where media is subject to state control and self-censorship (Almaglooth, 2013), sports journalists may face additional challenges in their reporting, as they navigate the boundaries of permissible content and the expectations of their employers (such as criticising the government, which is considered taboo). For instance, some journalists noted that criticism of major clubs with public investment fund (PIF) patronage, such as Al-Hilal or Al-Nassr, is typically avoided, as it may lead to backlash or professional repercussions (P4; P13).

As such, it is important to situate such findings in the larger context of Saudi Arabia’s distinctive media terrain – especially, where there is a high degree of state control and self-censorship, which can constrain the range of permissible journalistic inquiry and expression (Almaglooth, 2013;

Alnajrani et al., 2018). Although the interviewees did not explicitly address state control and self-censorship, some of their responses hinted at the limitations they face in navigating the Saudi media landscape. As some interviewees explained that “Government support is crucial for us, as it ensures the protection of journalists and helps us maintain our careers.” (P15, P17), while a third described it as a form of “institutional endorsement that shields them from professional risk” (P18).

Along these lines, P29 noted that “we have a great weakness in this aspect [newsgathering], as we, as journalists, collect their news from government sources or entities with whom we have prior dealings, and not through social media platforms,” suggesting that some journalists are often still limited to conventional newsgathering approaches where conforming to certain narratives by authorities is key to maintaining their careers and standing. Moreover, the abundance of information on Twitter/X also presents challenges in terms of discerning signal from noise and maintaining a critical distance from the echo chambers that can emerge on the platform. While some participants, like P23, argued that “X is not a source of news, but only a means to spread the news,” the majority of interviewees acknowledged Twitter/X's role as a valuable source of information. For example, P6 mentioned that Twitter/X has “profoundly impacted the scope and depth of sports coverage in Saudi Arabia, expanding the scope and immediacy of news dissemination,” while P20 mentions that “X is part of our daily work as sports journalists in Saudi Arabia, as we use it as a quick source to gather news and break stories, as well as to identify reliable sources and verify the validity of information”. This suggests that Twitter/X is not merely a distribution channel but also a platform where journalists can gather newsworthy information, such as breaking news, player updates, and fan reactions.

“This platform is no longer just a channel for transmitting news, but we now see it as a vital space for direct interaction with athletes, coaches, and sports organisations, providing us unprecedented access to breaking information and instant analysis.” (P23)

5.2.2 *Storytelling and Content Creation*

Notwithstanding its role in providing greater access to information, however, Twitter/X has fundamentally changed the parameters and dynamics of storytelling and modes of content production for Saudi sports journalists. This is because the interactivity of Twitter/X and its speed of dissemination have forced journalists to develop their style of language and storytelling to better suit the preferences and expectations of the digitally-raised generation of their readers, viewers and listeners. P13 says: “A journalist must pay attention to social media constantly and find creative ways to cover events.” The participant’s comment captures the growing urgency for journalists to produce not only timely but also engaging content, but also to make that content engaging and easy to digest as part of the attention economy which they are increasingly competing in. The interviews suggest there is emergence of new practices for framing stories and controlling the means of sports narration in response to Twitter/X modality. P21 goes on to say that “traditional newspapers began to view X as a barometer of what was newsworthy, curating their daily news feeds based on the narratives unfolding on the platform.” This erosion of traditional gatekeeping roles (blurring the lines between producers and consumers of content) has challenged journalists to find new ways of asserting their authority and expertise in an increasingly crowded media landscape. In response to this, an important tactic highlighted in interviews centres on more intensive reporting live and as it is happening – real-time reporting and live-tweeting – to engage their audiences in a more intensive and participatory manner. P7 summarised it like this: “journalists can now produce comprehensive news articles independently and quickly,” thanks to

the platform's immediacy and ease of use. As real-time reporting and live-tweeting gather momentum, the content supposedly reflects new demands by editors and audiences interested in immediacy and dynamics. Live sports coverage has shifted from receiving summary reports, newspaper articles and expert analysis after a game, to commentary about the event while it is happening (P26, P33).

However, P9 conversely highlights that there are “mounting obstacles” such as access restrictions and coverage costs that have ultimately forced newspapers to introduce fundamental changes in how Saudi sports journalism operates: “We as field reporters face mounting obstacles attending events in person—from restrictions on access to costs of continuous on-location live coverage. This strains our budgets and pushes us to rely more on second-hand tweets rather than original, on-the-ground journalism.”

“In my view, it is necessary for Saudi newsrooms to embrace technological advancement, especially those offered by platforms such as X, to enhance news dissemination operations [...] newsrooms can explore innovative storytelling techniques on X, such as topics and live Tweet events, to keep their audiences engaged and informed.” (P26)

On the other hand, P26 elaborates on how strongly journalists can sometimes lean towards becoming voices for clubs due to their close relationships with them, saying, “My independence can be affected by various factors, including the potential reach of a story, its relevance to current trends. Sometimes we give up independence for the purpose of pleasing some parties in the clubs in order to have a new source in publishing exclusive news.” By “independence”, the participant here is referring to their free writing and independent investigation, where, instead, they can simply take packaged stories from clubs to maintain their association. P34 also nodded at this problem, saying that “we Saudi sports journalists work to build strong relationships with decision-makers

within the sports field, which allows us to access reliable sources and obtain exclusive information.” This access is essential for getting relevant and up-to-date information, but it can also make reporting and PR seem interchangeable or contingent on one-another. Mauro (2023) encapsulates this issue by arguing that the real challenge in preparing the next generation of sports reporters is essentially tied to practical skills and equipping them with the proper critical lens to report truthfully. Others journalists, meanwhile, explained why journalists tend to stick to the sources they know, as P9 argued that:

“We field reporters face mounting obstacles attending events in person - from restrictions on access to costs of continuous on-location live coverage. This strains budgets and encourages reliance on second-hand tweets rather than original boots-on-the-ground journalism. Financial strains shrink newsrooms further. But there are no substitutes for in-the-room authority.”

This was reinforced by P25 who argued that “clubs do not allow we journalists free access to their workplaces, resulting in a reliance on available sources.” As such, journalists in-general will ultimately require the right knowledge and critical lens to deal with situations like these to protect sports coverage’s credibility in a media that is becoming more contested. As the interviews show, while some journalists seem to prioritise access and connections to unique or exclusive sources, others have brought much greater emphasis to impartiality and independence.

5.3 Audience Engagement and Participatory Journalism

Theme topics	Engagement with fans and adapting storytelling to their needs
Prominent Keywords	Engagement (K5), Audience (K6), Platforms (K10), Collaboration (K24), Protection (K17), Responsibility (K19), Standards (K9)

Description	Explores how Twitter/X has fundamentally shifted the journalist-audience relationship from a one-way broadcast model to an interactive dialogue where audiences participate in news creation, while creating new challenges in managing these relationships.
Consolidation	Participants discussed strategies for interacting with fans, building rapport, fostering a sense of community on Twitter/X, and dealing with negativity and abuse from them.
Sample quote	“Fans have also become sources of exclusive news in part because of X strong relationships some have with club management and players. This has democratised the dissemination of information, allowing fans to be more than just passive consumers of news.” (P7)

Table 5.2: The Thematic Tables for Audience Engagement and Participatory Journalism

The rise of Twitter/X has transformed audience interaction in Saudi sports journalism from the traditional one-way reporting to a more dynamic and participatory exchange. Journalists now engage with audiences not only as consumers but also as active contributors, with users often serving as sources of news through eyewitness accounts, opinions, and real-time updates. However, this increased interaction also brings challenges, such as managing online abuse, maintaining professional boundaries, and navigating the fine line between personal and public engagement. This theme explores how Saudi sports journalists balance these opportunities and challenges, focusing on sub-themes such as audiences as sources of news and dealing with audience abuse to understand how participatory journalism shapes their professional practices and online presence.

5.3.1 Audiences as Sources of News

The results of the interviews showed that Twitter/X has been a significant influence in sports journalism in regard to community engagement, although necessitating regulation of such engagement. Journalist–audience interaction was largely two-way and provided successful feedback. The vast majority of interviewees described Twitter/X as a fundamental shift that moved journalist-audience relationships away from a broadcast model to a two-way conversational model where the audience’s voice received more attention and an online community around sports

journalism began to form. Interviewees P21, P19, and P3 all highlighted the role of Twitter/X in creating shared online spaces where journalists and fans can engage on a deeper level. P21 stated:

“I use X to understand the interests of my followers through direct interaction, whether through opinion polls or asking questions to collect followers’ opinions on specific topics [...] X built a strong relationship between sports journalists and [football] sports fans, as it facilitated communication between them through the spaces created [by X]. Through the platform, journalists can engage the public more in sports discussions, and get immediate feedback on the reports and analyses they provide.” As P21 noted, “fans sometimes correct them or accuse them of bias, but even this helps reveal which storylines resonate most with the audience. For this journalist, X is not just a promotional tool but a space for co-creating narratives with fans, effectively blurring the line between reporter and public participant.”

Similarly, P19 noted:

“X has enabled us, as the relationship between sports journalists and fans, by providing space for sports dialogue and the exchange of opinions between them. Instead of one-sided communication that used to be limited to publishing news in print newspapers, the platform now allows two-way interaction, leading to rich discussions and information exchange. [However], I often prefer not to dive into spaces led by biased audiences as fans of Saudi Arabia’s major clubs, where it is difficult to communicate an objective opinion.”

Interviews clearly highlight the influence of Twitter/X in terms of the audience’s greater participation and achievements in facilitating a more participatory reporting environment. Participants have reflected on how Twitter/X has reduced the boundaries between sports journalists and their public, which, in turn, offered them an opportunity to move towards more

participatory forms of sports journalism. Moreover, another narrative emerging from this theme revolves around the centrality of measuring impact of audience engagement strategies on Twitter/X, as participants recognised the value of audiences as sources of news.

“Audiences can have relationships with players. They have relationships with the club presidents as well. They then started tweeting before the media outlet itself. They so began transforming into independent journalists. People can be influential, or rather activists, they can even influence me as a journalist.” (P3)

However, this has extended beyond simple information collection, and is now influencing club decisions and media narratives. P3 admitted that “On Twitter/X, the audience are the ones who lead. Club management fears public outcry” and further argues that audience members have gained significant power beyond their initial role as information brokers, and are now influencers on club communications and decisions. This is important because, as Interview 25 notes, even “officials within the clubs” are affected by this new dynamic of audience-driven information flow. This interview indicates that journalists are almost forced into this new dynamic of audience-as-sources. P25’s account suggests that journalists are not only adapting to audiences as sources but are also often compelled to follow their lead, as public sentiment increasingly shapes reporting priorities and club messaging. In such a system, where editorial independence is already constrained, this shift further complicates journalistic autonomy by introducing a new, populist layer of influence that clubs and media professionals can no longer ignore.

When it comes to benchmarking such engagements, which is key for evaluating and sourcing information from fans, P18 and P28 both emphasised the need to rely on key performance indicators, such as interaction rates and reach, to assess the impact of their engagement efforts. P20 said: “I use specialised software to analyse my followers’ interactions and comments on the

reports I publish, which helps me understand their interests and preferences more accurately.” As seen here, individual journalists, rather than news organisations, are primarily responsible for monitoring and evaluating their audience engagement on Twitter/X.

Although participants strongly argue that Twitter/X has brought journalists and fans closer, it has also elevated the fans and put them in a position of influence over journalists – something that is challenging for reporters trying to maintain a professional demeanour and avoid taking sides. As P5 explains, “X has changed the dynamics between athletes, journalists and fans in the Saudi sports community, where traditional media previously dominated, while in the X era communication has become more direct and personal.” This becomes even more problematic because, as P26 argues, “if a sports journalist publishes a [social media story] that is not well received by his followers, backlash may lead to it [post] being retracted or edited based on audience reaction [...].”

However, the participants clarified that this refers not to formal news articles but rather to comments, reactions, or opinions posted on Twitter/X. These social-media posts are more spontaneous and as a result are less filtered than newsroom-produced content, which makes them more vulnerable to misinterpretation and strong fan responses. In practice, the journalists described deleting tweets, rewriting them, or issuing a clarification when fan backlash became aggressive or when a post was taken out of context. For example, several journalists recounted situations in which they commented on a contentious referee decision, a player’s performance, or a speculation about a transfer, only to later face intense criticism from rival fan groups. In such instances, they reported occasionally choosing to remove or adjust the tweet to prevent escalation.

They emphasised that, in their view, formal news reports published through their organisations would not be retracted due to audience pressure, as such content is subject to editorial oversight and institutional verification. Rather, it is their social-media commentary, where professional and

personal voices intersect, that can become a space of negotiation with fan expectations and reactions voiced. This aligns with prior research illustrating that journalists frequently revise or delete their posts on social media when they encounter online aggression or audience hostility, particularly in highly polarised sports communities (Peña-Fernández et al., 2025). This shift has raised questions about the balance of power.” Despite some participants like P17 arguing that it would not be sensible to assume that “audiences have become more powerful than journalists”, many others have argued that the current environment that Twitter/X created has raised concerns regarding ‘balance of power’ between journalists and their audiences (P3, P23, P26), and vice-versa, where “The power of a journalist is now measured by his ability to influence and attract attention, not just by his impartiality.” (P16) This shift has forced journalists to navigate the demands of a more vocal and influential fan base, as illustrated by P2’s experience:

“Ninety percent of sports journalism today [consists of] journalists seeking followers and exposure [by appeasing fans]. Among them are big names. We used to see editors-in-chief who were objective or neutral, working on a clear and frank path, and now they have come down. Twitter/X has changed their dynamism and changed their values. Even their convictions changed.” What remains unclear and potentially revealing is who these followers are. While the participant does not specify, this raises important questions about whether journalists are primarily engaging with a Saudi national audience or with a broader transnational Arab or global fanbase. Given the global reach of platforms like X, journalists may be navigating competing pressures, appealing to local club loyalties while also shaping a public persona that resonates beyond national borders. Exploring where followers are based could offer valuable insight into the evolving nature of journalistic performance and credibility in Saudi sports media.

In interviews P5, P12 and P28, Saudi journalists shared their strategies for audience-interactive use of Twitter/X, where the keys are facilitating constructive dialogue, objective reporting, and measuring performance. P28 said: “I can utilise X to interact with sports readers and build relationships in multiple ways. X can also be utilised to exchange ideas and opinions about sporting events, enhancing interaction with readers.” Similarly, P12 mentioned, “I use X to understand the audience's interests, preferences, and reactions through their interaction with the reports I publish.” Nevertheless, the interviews also made apparent the risks that journalists face when engaging in fan communities on Twitter/X. As seen in a number of interviews, journalists who often cover controversial topics or express unpopular opinions typically face backlash from fans on Twitter/X, while others embrace this environment as a way to gain popularity. For example:

“Journalists who practice intolerance are found to dominate the media scene, enjoy millions of followers on X, and make good profits from the platform.” (P27)

“Some of them try to maintain their credibility by upholding ethical journalistic standards, while others drift towards achieving quick fame through provocative and biased tweets.”
(P19)

P37 also explained, “A journalist who is objective and impartial must not participate in such discussions that raise fanaticism and increase tension among the masses.” Women comprise 20% of the sample. Their accounts do not show a uniform pattern, but several described more cautious, selective engagement on X (e.g., avoiding informal fan-led Spaces and contentious threads), while some men reported more combative exchanges with fans. Participants also cautioned that pandering to passionate fan bases threatens credibility and objectivity (P9, P27). As there are no clear divisions between professional sports reporters and fans or supporters of individual clubs (especially when blue ticks on X have become subscription-based), as argued by interviewees, this

has affected the impartiality of sports journalism. If they are not journalists, and they clearly favour certain clubs or players by posing as journalists on social media, that can cause the news to be faked and lead to a lack of confidence in the profession. These cases point to how certain Saudi sports journalists struggle to be trusted and competent at a time when the boundaries between journalists and non-journalists are blurring. Scholars have shown how social media platforms like Twitter/X have transformed journalism globally by accelerating news production, eroding editorial gatekeeping, and blurring boundaries between professional and personal identities (Jarrar et al., 2024; Ottovordemgentschenfelde, 2017; Kantola and Harju, 2023). However, in Saudi Arabia, these transformations are filtered through a distinct cultural and institutional environment. Unlike journalists in more liberal systems who often embrace Twitter/X as a disruptive tool, Saudi sports journalists operate under strong state regulation and deeply rooted social norms that prioritise collective reputation, professional modesty, and alignment with national goals (Almakaty, 2025; Al-Jaber, 2020). As a result, journalists in this study described adopting cautious strategies: relying on institutional sources rather than user-generated content, avoiding direct political commentary, and curating professional personas that emphasise neutrality and deference to official narratives (Alhayan et al., 2024; Ottovordemgentschenfelde, 2017). For example, several participants noted that they refrain from live engagement during contentious matches or controversial news because of potential legal or social backlash. These behaviours reflect a form of selective adaptation where Twitter/X is used for amplification and visibility, but not for challenge or disruption. This demonstrates how the affordances of global platforms are negotiated locally and challenges universalist assumptions about digital transformation by revealing how Saudi journalists reconfigure platform use in ways that maintain institutional legitimacy and cultural credibility.

5.3.2 *Dealing with Audience Abuse*

In addition to the opportunities for greater reach and engagement provided by Twitter/X as a platform for sports journalism, it has also become a space for negativity, trolling and harassment of sports journalists. Many of the Saudi sports journalists' interview participants had faced abusive or even hostile messages from anonymous users.

“Sometimes the best response is to ignore them because time is not on your side.

Sometimes you don't have time to engage with such matters” (P4).

Here, the respondent clearly implicates the emotional labour involved in dealing with trolling comments, whereas the ‘time is not your side’ quotation earlier hinted at how the very nature of trolling can also deplete journalists’ time. Another respondent echoes the point: “I don't respond, I take the positive side of it and continue it for myself. [If you answer, do you lose them?] You lose some of them” (P2).

Negative comments and online harassment, along with the time required to manage a presence on Twitter/X, are among the biggest challenges for sports journalists. They are huge anchors in this equation, however, as the participant below states, they make their presence on Twitter/X a ‘must’ despite the prevalence of negative comments: “Now, a journalist must maintain objectivity, credibility, and relationship with the public, and he must maintain his presence on Twitter/X in order to gain followers, and such and such” (P1). Although interviews were conducted in a neutral manner and the sample included both men and women, participants typically did not specify the content of the “negative comments”. Accordingly, I cannot determine whether they align with Western patterns reported in the literature. One interviewee (P27) described a coping approach: “The strategy I use to address negative comments is to ignore them because no matter how much the fans respond to them and try to convince them, they will not be convinced.” For context, prior

studies indicate that women journalists are disproportionately targeted online (Alhayan et al., 2024).

Indeed, Blanco et al., (2022) found that 89.6% of Spanish female sports journalists experienced hate speech and harassment online and in the workplace. The primary targets of this harassment were typically female journalists, with criticism falling into two main categories: professional competence and personal appearance. This parallels accounts from female participants in this study, which, although not explicitly stated, seems to insinuate that they choose disengagement to avoid attacks on their character, highlighting the prevalence of gendered inequality in sports journalism. The psychological and professional toll of this abuse cannot be understated because it can also lead to self-censorship and prevent female journalists from executing their duties effectively (Bernstein, 2024). Therefore, tackling online bullying and targeted comments against women sports journalists is essential to building a more diverse and equitable media.

In this regard, many participants further elaborated on their personal coping strategies to deal with this, like not reading the comments column or blocking the users. One journalist stated, “I don't reply” (P13), while another noted, “I don't need to respond to them. I mean, I always take it as feedback, it gives me an indication, a specific point to analyse, correct my errors” (P3). As seen throughout the majority of interviews, journalists often choose to ignore negative comments or use them as constructive feedback to improve their work, however, dismiss personal attacks as ideological sentiments. But negative comments and online harassment take an emotional and psychological toll too. One journalist explained it this way: “They may sometimes involve you in something because of certain trends. Being with big names may hurt you sometimes” (P3).

The issue of gendered attacks on social media, especially for female sports journalists, has been strongly emphasised in extant literature, with scholars reporting how female reporters can face

unique attacks that their male counterparts do not see, like contempt, profanity, insult, sexual desire, pruriency, physical threat, misogyny (Demir and Ayhan, 2022). This is reinforced in interviews where female journalists described an environment where female journalists tend avoid direct interaction with sports fans (predominantly males) to circumvent chances of such discussions escalating into personal attacks, which may have more hurtful implications for female reporters.

“To be honest, I had not previously interacted with comments on my sports reports on X”
(P22)

“I do not participate because I do not prefer to engage in endless discussions with the masses” (P40)

Compared with extant literature, the insights of this study both confirm what is happening internationally (in other countries) on the role of Twitter/X in audience engagement and participatory journalism in the Saudi context. While the insights of this research confirm the role of Twitter/X in fostering more inclusive and interactive forms of journalism, as previously highlighted by López-Rabadán and Mellado (2019) and Zayani (2021), the interviews also reveal that the challenges faced by sports journalists worldwide are reflected in the Saudi context. However, in Saudi Arabia, the platform’s participatory nature is shaped by significant constraints, including the constant need for journalists to carefully manage what they publish due to the country’s conservative media landscape, cultural sensitivities, and legal risks. As Almaglooth (2013) notes, the Saudi media environment encourages self-censorship, and in more recent years, both journalists and citizens have faced arrest or punishment for social media content that crosses political or cultural red lines. These conditions significantly impact how journalists engage with platforms like Twitter/X, often blurring the line between interactivity and risk management work.

“Personally, I tend to avoid diving into these discussions on the platform and although I may discuss these topics on the radio or in informal meetings, I prefer not to participate in discussions on X [...] To be honest, I had not previously interacted with comments on my sports reports on X [...] Fans have the luxury of time to discuss and delve into topics. This is why you will see more interaction with sports content on X” (P22)

Along these lines, P21 also stated, “I do not participate in sports discussions or hashtags. But most of the sports journalists who have left work in press institutions do. ‘Sports journalists who still belong to press organisations deal with hashtags launched by fans with caution.’ Consequently, Saudi sports journalists approach audience engagement through hashtags and public discussions, as institutionally-affiliated and independent journalists seem to operate differently on Twitter/X. As seen in some of the mentioned quotes across this theme, this appears to be driven by their institutions’ pressures and professional reputations, where journalists working for established outlets mentioned that they carefully weigh engagement and balance it against their institution’s standards. (P17, P21)

“The open access cuts both ways. Twitter/X democratises fans' interactions with reporters - enabling invaluable feedback but also harassment. Credibility hinges on fair balanced coverage not chasing controversy. When fans detect favouritism, they'll levy accusations of bias which erodes journalistic standing over time. I support journalists remaining neutrally aligned with their affiliated publications rather than crafting personal brands.” (P9)

From these interviews it is clear that participants feel compelled to carefully consider the tone and content of their interactions on Twitter/X to avoid potentially inflammatory or inappropriate exchanges, which could have more severe consequences in the Kingdom's conservative cultural

context. Also, female journalists in this study say they just steer clear of directly interacting with mainly male sports fans to avoid the difficulties of discussions turning to personal confrontations with potentially more serious consequences for female reporters, as P14 warns: “Blending private and professional spheres on Twitter/X risks problems. Angry followers may harass you...” and P22 admitted, “To be honest, I had not previously interacted with comments on my sports reports on X.” Here, female journalists implicitly reinforce that there remains strong presence of gendered speech, where fan comments can take on a more gender-specific tone/format, which detracts from the inclusivity of the online space that females expect to operate effectively within, and as such, they often resort to disengagement and distancing themselves from such spaces to avoid mental pressures. This adds an additional layer of complexity that conservative values and gender dynamics add to the already challenging task of balancing audience engagement with journalistic integrity in Saudi Arabia. P33 reinforces this by noting that “if the context indicates that the discussion may be unconstructive or negative in nature, it may be better to avoid participation to avoid escalating the discussion.” Although this may be true for other contexts, the drives behind such actions by Saudi journalists are different. The conservative dynamics that permeate public discourse can often prioritise silence and disengagement over structured conversations due to fear of embarrassment or shame that female journalists (especially) may feel if they become subjects to inappropriate conversations (Alraies, 2019).

Finally, some participants also acknowledged that the support available to journalists in dealing with online harassment may be limited. “I did not have sufficient support from my colleagues and superiors in dealing with this changing landscape” (P35). These experiences resonate with the findings of numerous studies about online harassment and negativity against journalists. Online harassment and abuse directed at journalists is a growing problem, with female journalists

particularly vulnerable to gendered attacks and threats (Lewis et al., 2020). On an institutional level, some bodies have stood for journalists and advocated for their protection and welfare. For instance, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) is a multinational trade union federation of journalists' trade unions that works to defend and advance the rights and interests of journalists worldwide. The IFJ has also organised campaigns against online harassment and abuse of journalists, including the “End Impunity” campaign demanding more protection for journalists and an end to the impunity system in which attackers of journalists are unpunished. Yet, even for organisations such as the IFJ, the experience of those interviewed in this study shows that there is still much institutional work to do to assist journalists with online harassment and abuse.

5.4 Professional Identity on Twitter/X

Theme topics	Professional identity and how it is managed in the Twitter/X space
Prominent Keywords	Influence (MK2), Opportunities (K8), Identity (K15), Boundaries (K21), Objectivity (K4), Standards (K9), Responsibility (K19), Protection (K17)
Description	Analyses how Saudi sports journalists understand and perform their professional role and responsibilities in the Twitter/X era, including how they maintain professional boundaries and navigate institutional pressures.
Consolidation	Participants shared their experiences of managing the clash between their professional identities, personal profiles, and institutions' pressures on Twitter/X, and how this clash impacted their careers.
Sample quote	“My account on X reflects my professional identity. I am careful to keep the content of my account centred around sports news and analysis.” (P20)

Table 5.3: The Thematic Tables for Professional Identity and Boundaries

The use of Twitter/X has influenced how Saudi sports journalists construct and maintain their professional identity in the digital age. The platform serves as both a professional tool for reporting and a space for personal expression, blurring the boundaries between journalists' public and private personas. This theme examines how journalists navigate their online identity, balance their

professional credibility with their personal image, and manage audience perceptions. Key aspects include identity and personal image, exploring how journalists curate their online presence to reflect authority and relatability; objectivity and impartiality, analysing the challenges of maintaining neutrality in an opinion-driven digital space; and boundary management, investigating how journalists separate or integrate—their professional and personal lives on Twitter/X. Together, these sub-themes highlight the complexities of sustaining a credible and engaging professional identity in an interactive and often challenging online environment.

5.4.1 Identity and Personal Image

The findings reveal that Saudi sports journalists face complexity in balancing identity and engagement, while trying to navigate both the opportunities for self-promotion and the challenges of maintaining traditional journalistic principles. Majority of the interviewees recognised the transformative influence of Twitter/X on their professional identities and the way they perceive themselves. P1 captured the essence of this transformation, stating, “Twitter/X allowed us to build our unique character.” This is consistent with the findings of Brems et al. (2017) that Twitter/X is increasingly central to journalists’ identities and thought-leadership aspirations. How participants constructed their personal brands on Twitter/X, along with how this shaped their careers, emerged as an important thread in many of the interviews. P24 shared their success story: “By interacting with followers and participating in relevant discussions I was able to establish myself as a thought leader in sports journalism and this opened doors to collaboration, speaking opportunities and career advancement.” It has been argued previously that journalists who actively engage with their audiences and share their expertise on Twitter/X are more likely to experience career growth and recognition (Naraine et al., 2021). One prominent Saudi example is Battal Algoos, a celebrity sports journalist and broadcaster in his Filmarma sports on Al Arabiya channel as well as editor-

in-Chief of Ariyadiah Newspaper in Saudi, has over 5.6 million followers on Twitter/X, which he built through engagement with his audience and sharing his expertise on Saudi football.

Moreover, there is a narrative across interviews on managing boundaries between journalists and fans, which picks off where the issue of negative comments leave, because there is a strong nexus between the likelihood of personal attacks and the level-to-which journalists decide to remove barriers between their personal and professional personas online (P14). Interviews show that journalists are pressured to balance competing demands around neutrality, objectivity and impartiality on the one hand, and personal reflection and source/audience cultivation on the other (P7, P8, P16, P23, P25, P29, P32). This poses an even greater challenge for Saudi sports journalists – and for those who work in the kingdom’s state media, especially. This blurring of boundaries, as Ottovordemgentschenfelde (2017) argues, is facilitated by Twitter/X's design, which emphasises informality and personal expression. The Saudi sports journalists interviewed here show just how different the expectations of their employers and audience in Saudi Arabia are:

“Sometimes a journalist's newspaper helps, but he should not represent it negatively. The journalist must, for example, when publishing news from his newspaper on Twitter/X, he must post the link of the story as well.” (P4)

As such, there seems to be a mix of expectations between how journalists must not only be credible and objective but also need to engage with their followers on Twitter/X. The first was that journalists are obligated to portray their companies well and drive traffic to their newspaper’s website by publishing links to their content. Conversely, they are also pressured to create their own brand and interact more casually with their followers. Another participant emphasised how it is often difficult to weigh these competing demands:

“Having a profile on X can greatly impact our professional identity for us Saudi sports journalists. It provides a platform to build credibility and create a professional brand while at the same time imposing constraints to adhere to the ethical standards expected of a journalistic organisation representative [...] Balancing traditional journalistic principles with new opportunities for self-promotion [and fan engagement] on X can lead to dilemmas. We increasingly face the challenge of maintaining objectivity and avoiding partisanship to build a following, which can sometimes conflict with the personal nature of X.” (P21)

Interviewees also detailed that they developed clear lines between their private and professional contacts on Twitter/X to maintain their identity as professionals. For example, P24 pointed out that they set strong boundaries between personal and professional life on Twitter/X. Another interviewee added how he approaches this by “keeping the content of my account centred around sports news and analysis.” (P20) This is important because sharing biased opinions and personal convictions on Twitter/X could retract from the credibility and professional image of journalists as a neutral conduit of the truth (Brems et al., 2017). But it is worth noting that we cannot assume that what works in the west in terms of brand-building would necessarily work in places like Saudi Arabia, where media landscapes are influenced by the country’s unique cultural and societal context. Participants have thus emphasised that “journalists may be affected by the standards of the press institutions in which they work, as well as by the social and legal norms prevailing in Saudi Arabia.” (P17) Hasaan et al. (2024) argues that because Saudi society is so conservative and media content is tightly screened, sportswriters may have to interpret brand-building in ways that their counterparts in the west may not be familiar with, as the concept of a “role-model” is understood in contrasting ways between these two parts of the world. In this context, Saudi sports journalists are required to be particularly mindful of the content they share and the way they present

themselves on Twitter/X to avoid running afoul of cultural norms and expectations, and by extension, giving false impressions of what the dominant narratives are in Saudi society about a certain matter.

“We should also not forget the legal and cultural considerations in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, as is the case in many countries. There may be legal and cultural considerations that affect what can be reported [...] Many news organisations also have social media guidelines that journalists are expected to follow, which can dictate the content you can share [...] There is a collective understanding that our reporting should not cross certain lines, avoiding unfounded accusations or spreading misinformation.” (P22)

In their interview, P20 went on to provide greater insight into how they negotiated their professional integrity in the face of the situational demands of Twitter/X and the constraints of their marketplace: “I always strive to maintain a balance between principles and appeal for readers. But I have had challenges communicating more concisely, especially presenting information quickly and clearly.” Here, P20 seemingly worked through a conscious balancing act to fulfil their projected professional duties – in this case, what can be considered normative professional values such as objectivity and integrity – while still accommodating the situational demands of Twitter/X and other casual consumers.

But to be clear, in a unique context like Saudi Arabia, where traditional hierarchies and cultural norms still hold significant influence, journalists still need to navigate the complexities of how these structures interact with the concept of professional identity and how this may or may not contrast with the idea of self-promotion. The extent of engagement that journalists adopt thus varies based on individual preferences, organisational policies, and the cultural context (Brems et al., 2017), especially when considering how much Saudi public discourse is regulated, and how it

is in turn influenced by dominant societal narratives around a certain topic. Here, some journalists actively embrace Twitter/X's potential for self-promotion and audience engagement, however, as P20 argues, "the responsibility will ultimately fall on us as journalists to balance between fame and standards." On the other hand, there are others who remain hesitant, particularly when looking at how biased statements in controversial discussions could affect their credibility. In the Saudi sports media landscape, some journalists may be more hesitant to embrace the full potential of Twitter/X for personal branding. Along these lines, Molyneux (2015) argues that sharing personal views on Twitter/X risks undermining journalists' impartiality and this is very relevant in Saudi Arabia where cultural and religious sensitivities can sometimes make certain topics taboo. (P1) As such, P20 argues that "We believe that the convergence of personal and professional identities on Twitter/X can create complex ethical challenges unique to the Saudi context, and we acknowledge that there are no easy answers to navigate these dilemmas." P3 also comments on the difficulty of balancing between professional standards and Twitter/X's more personal, interactive nature; he says:

"When you first come, you have your own identity, you must be respectable, and be a respectable journalist. There are people who work in places that respect their profession as a journalist. But now, this is started to fade, as journalists are acting like the fans, looking for popularity."

On a different level, the interview data shows that there are some generational differences in how Saudi sports journalists approach personal branding on Twitter. Younger journalists with 10-15 years of experience (e.g., P1, P22, P24) say, "We view Twitter/X as integral to our professional identity development and build our professional presence".

“The platform has also allowed me to showcase my professional skills, including the ability to quickly produce concise, impactful content and enhance it with multimedia elements.”

(P5)

Older journalists, particularly those who have more than 20 years of experience (ex; P10, P15) show more reservations about personal branding on Twitter/X. P10's admission that they “don't use Twitter/X extensively” is one of many examples of hesitance of veteran journalists to engage in digital self-promotion. Although this can be attributed to the level to-which they value traditional journalistic practices/systems that emphasise institutional identity over personal branding, this can also be attributed to lack of the digital skills needed to effectively utilise Twitter/X's potential.

Although not explicitly stated, the interviews suggest that older journalists are aware of the younger generation's social media prowess and its influence on their professional identities. For example, P6 unpacks this by saying:

“Sports journalists are dealing with a redefined professional identity that accommodates the immediate and public nature of X. This platform has created a new generation of media professionals who may not have traditional journalistic training. The presence of a personal profile on X has the potential to confine Saudi sports journalists within certain boundaries of public expectations and professional behavior.”

Here, they refer to how Saudi journalists are expected to carefully balance their desire to build a personal image and the professional standards of journalism in Saudi Arabia, which older journalists still cherish strongly. This is particularly evident in how journalists discuss engagement with audiences and maintaining professional distance while doing so. Younger journalists appear

to be more adept at managing their social media presence under these conditions. But overall, this generational divide in self-promotion and identity-building shows how transformations in Saudi sports journalism have created competition between traditional notions of professional authority and digital influence.

5.4.2 Objectivity and Impartiality

Interviewees argue that the pressure to acquire fans and profit from advertising has driven some journalists to sometimes compromise objectivity and ethics in that pursuit, which raises questions about how boundaries between journalists (and their professional standards) and fans (along with the profit their engagement generates) are established and consolidated. The incentive of visibility and revenue sometimes causes journalists to be more sensationalistic or partisan in their reporting, or to prioritise their own brand over their job. In Saudi Arabia, this dynamic is shaped by additional netpressures related to institutional loyalty, political sensitivity, and the influence of football club fandom. As discussed before, interviews illustrate how journalists may engage in provocative commentary to gain followers, especially around high-profile clubs like Al-Hilal or Al-Nassr, even if it risks their ethics as journalists. These are just a few examples of the particular way in which Saudi sports journalists have to deal with conflicting professional and personal identities on social media platforms such as Twitter/X. But, on the other hand, the literature has highlighted the more widespread problem of online harassment and the loss of boundaries between work and personal life for reporters, but here, the Saudi sports journalist experience ultimately shows the particular cultural and institutional challenges that they encounter in managing these competing demands. Such include the conservative nature of Saudi society where it is seen as distasteful to give the general public insight into one's own private affairs, but also, the keenness of people to know more

about their journalists in order to validate their trustworthiness (Saudi society often relies on vetting to determine if a person is ‘known’ to be honest and integral) (Alyahya, 2011).

As such, the ethical problems this conflation of personal and professional spheres causes can be clearly discerned in the conversation with Saudi sports journalists, struggling to form a public persona on Twitter/X that keeps their accounts and contact lists distinct from employer-imposed duties:

“Simply separating our personal accounts as journalists from official newsroom handles enables that balance. Individual freedom thrives privately without jeopardising institutional reputations or fuelling public confusion over affiliations. Staying in my lane keeps credibility cruising smoothly.” (P9).

The expectation of neutrality and mediation is also underscored in how interviewed journalists have essentially created separate personal and professional accounts and are becoming more transparent about their affiliations, and this reflects findings in literature where Brems et al. (2017) found that Flemish journalists use similar strategies to manage their online identities, suggesting that these approaches are common across different contexts. However, as Hanusch and Bruns (2017) argue, these strategies may not always be effective, and may even contribute to a sense of fragmentation or inauthenticity. This fragmentation is evident in the experiences of Saudi sports journalists, who struggle to maintain consistency and authenticity across their personal and professional identities on Twitter/X.

“When you first come, you have your own identity, you must be respectable, and be a respectable journalist. There are people who work in places that respect their profession as

a journalist. But now, this is started to fade, as journalists are acting like the fans, looking for popularity.” (P3)

This is especially important because the literature also suggests that the pressure to maintain separate identities on social media has grown due to the proliferation of subjective reporting, particularly for journalists who seek to build relationships with sources and audiences. As Molyneux (2015) notes, the emphasis on informality and personal expression on Twitter/X can make it difficult for journalists to maintain a clear separation between their personal and professional identities, a challenge that is particularly acute for sports journalists who often rely on personal relationships and access to sources. As such, the interviews with Saudi sports journalists reveal that navigating this challenge requires a delicate balance between transparency and discretion, as well as a clear understanding of the potential risks and benefits of engaging in personal expression on Twitter/X.

This challenge has also contributed to the slow erosion of professionalism and brought rise to aspiring journalists with no qualifications or training.

“It is true that the journalistic arena is definitely affected by this aspect. It affects credibility and reporting the news because many are claiming to be “journalists” when they are not.” (P2)

“The truth is that you are dealing with a simple reader. I mean, the simple reader is sometimes ignorant of journalistic techniques or media restrictions. This means that he believes that everything that is presented on Twitter/X must be presented by the media, and this is wrong.” (P3)

Thus, the lack of media literacy among some readers, combined with the proliferation of unqualified individuals claiming to be journalists on social media has arguably led to confusion and mistrust of professional journalists and media outlets. Another participant talked about how much of a challenge this can be for sports journalists:

“Newspapers, for example, have specific news, but Twitter/X has become [a platform] for everyone, not just the media. Everyone can write something... Everyone now acts like journalists. Twitter/X has turned [ordinary] people into journalists.” (P9)

Having a personal brand on Twitter/X, which involves commenting and engaging regularly with tweets does not come without cost. P1 “emphasised that Twitter/X became a tool for fast news but never a tool for professional journalism”. Exactly the same concerns were raised by Molyneux (2015), who argues that the need to build and promote a Twitter/X following and engage with it might – to some extent – lead journalists to shift away from their responsibility to provide news and comment in an objective and professional way. Thus, balancing self-promotion with journalistic professionalism emerged as a central theme during the majority of interviews.

“Balancing traditional journalistic principles with new opportunities for self-promotion on X can lead to dilemmas. We journalists increasingly face the challenge of maintaining objectivity and avoiding partisanship to build a following, which can sometimes conflict with the personal nature of X.” (P21)

Twitter/X has made it difficult for journalists to justify and maintain objectivity and neutrality in both their reporting and engagement with the sports community, and made it more difficult for sports journalism as a whole to maintain the authority of the profession under the circumstances created by Twitter/X’s open nature, where there is pressure to express opinions, take sides, and

engage in partisan debates. For example, a journalist said that “On Twitter/X, you should not represent yourself, but operate under the newspaper,” (P1) although the blurring of personal and professional identities on Twitter/X can make it difficult for journalists to maintain strict objectivity (Bradshaw, 2021), especially when pressure to attract followers and generate engagement can lead some to express controversial opinions or take partisan stances (English, 2016). However, the temptation to express personal views and engage in heated discussions on the platform is strong.

“Establishing boundaries between private life and professional identity on X is crucial. Even with a personal account, a journalist must maintain professional decorum, as the lines can blur between personal views and professional responsibilities, with every tweet likely to reflect back on his or the media organisation.” (P21)

The interviews indicate that this does indeed pose a significant challenge, especially against the backdrop of Saudi power and the politics of public opinion where there is a strong sense of nationalism and loyalty to local clubs and athletes.

“Following the public's passion does not earn you any [popularity], and neither will that distinguish you or your organisation. I mean, regardless of whether the public will be pleased or angered by the topic you report, you should report it nonetheless” (P1).

But these pressures are not sufficient to force Saudi sports journalists out of an objective and neutral reporting strategy.

“We must take care before publishing, as I told you a while ago, the most important thing is credibility [...] Twitter/X has become a platform for publishing articles and news that

the newspaper rejects from a fanatical principle, the principle of objectivity, lack of credibility, credibility, etc.” (P1).

These responses are some of many where participants report that “they actively look for ways of counteracting the obstacles that social media poses by maintaining credibility and building a relationship of trust with their audience.” (P7, P18, P23, P28), and, as Sherwood and Nicholson (2017) argue, journalistic objectivity, in social media at least, can be performed partly through demonstrating that the journalist is building trust with their audiences, which involves transparency and interactivity with them. But, on the other hand, maintaining some level of objectivity and impartiality in journalistic practice by focusing on the newsgathering capacity of Twitter/X rather than expressing personal opinions also emerged. Molyneux (2015) similarly found that the job performance of journalists improved when newsgathering, information-sharing use of Twitter/X was separated from self-expression. However, the interviews also reveal that the line between professional and personal identity on Twitter/X can be blurred, making it difficult for journalists to maintain strict objectivity. “Twitter/X revealed examples of good journalists, journalists who act as fans, fanatics, and lawyers of certain clubs” (P3).

“I faced challenges in maintaining journalistic principles while striving to strengthen my digital presence. We must be careful that self-promotion does not affect the objectivity and impartiality of our sports reports and news [...] I cannot bring my private life into my professional life in any way, because I am affiliated with X as a sports journalist. I also use the platform as a tool for professional communication and the exchange of sports information, while avoiding publishing personal details that might affect my professional position.” (P18)

The potential effects of these challenges on the credibility and trustworthiness of sports journalism is significant. As one journalist noted, “The fanatics, or those who mean to control the public's affection, have many followers, it is true. You lose with them temporarily, but in the long run you win the public with their confidence and trust” (P1). Ultimately, as the interviews and literature show, amid Saudi Arabia’s tough climate for journalists, which traditionally emphasises adherence to strict guidelines, this new digital environment for news is a critical challenge for sport journalists. As platforms such as Twitter/X force journalists to express opinions, take sides and embark on partisan polemics, the credibility and trustworthiness of sports reporting might be undermined, while personal and professional boundaries continue to be blurred as journalists lose their impassive personas on the platform. P19 similarly commented that “some of them try to maintain their credibility by upholding ethical journalistic standards, while others drift towards achieving quick fame through provocative and biased tweets.” In this environment, the credibility and trustworthiness of sports reporting are increasingly fragile. The traditional impassive journalistic persona once central to professional identity in the Saudi press is now often undermined by a digital culture that rewards visibility, engagement, and controversy, even at the expense of impartiality. However, if journalists stress these three aspects of newsgathering, factchecking official sources and building audience trust, the obstacles they face in their reporting on Twitter/X is likely to be mitigated as the interviewees argued. Section 5.4 explores these issues in more detail, highlights how journalists are adapting to this environment, and showcases the strategies they use to maintain their professional authority.

5.5 Navigating The Tension Between Speed and Accuracy in The Digital Age

Theme topic	The pressure to break news on Twitter/X and the challenges of ensuring accuracy
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Prominent Keywords	Speed (MK1), Pressure (K33), Competition (K14), Accuracy (K1), Credibility (K3), Objectivity (K4), Transparency (K31), Standards (K9), Responsibility (K19)
Description	Investigates the central tension Saudi sports journalists face between breaking news quickly on Twitter/X and maintaining professional standards of accuracy and verification.
Consolidation	Participants described the sense of urgency and competition they feel to be the first to report on a story, and the risks this poses regarding misinformation.
Sample quote	“Time is of the essence, and news published elsewhere ten minutes ago is outdated by today's standards.” (P15) “In short, X has become an indispensable tool in sports journalism, providing quick access to information and expanding the scope of coverage. However, it also requires critical evaluation and verification of information to maintain journalistic integrity and accuracy.” (P7)

Table 5.4: The Thematic Tables for The Pressure to Break News on Twitter/X

In the fast-paced world of digital sports journalism, Twitter/X has become a vital platform for breaking news and delivering real-time updates. However, the pressure to report quickly often clashes with the fundamental journalistic principle of accuracy, creating a persistent tension for sports journalists. This theme explores how Saudi sports journalists navigate this challenge, balancing the demand for immediacy with the responsibility to verify information and maintain credibility. Key sub-themes include contemporary market demands, which investigates how audience expectations, competition among media outlets, and platform algorithms drive the race for speed and engagement; strategies for verification, which examines the tools and techniques journalists use to authenticate information before sharing it with their audience; and ethical implications, which delve into the moral dilemmas journalists face when balancing speed, accuracy, and transparency. These aspects shed light on how journalists adapt their practices to uphold trust and professionalism in an era dominated by instant communication.

5.5.1 Contemporary Market Demands

The interviews collectively highlight a significant shift in the dynamics of reporting, particularly in relation to speed of reporting, where the rise of Twitter/X has placed intense pressure on

reporters to break news quickly at a relatively high pace, as sports journalists confessed in interviews that this change had not only altered the speed at which news is disseminated but has also reshaped the very nature of sports reporting in the digital age. The overwhelming majority of the interviews talk about a fundamental transformation in the way that news is reported, especially in the sense of how fast news is being made and disseminated, with Twitter making it all the more urgent for journalists to publish first on Twitter/X and very fast. Here, sports journalists said in interviews that this had not only transformed the rate at which news was shared, but reshaped the way in which sports reporting today is presented (P29, P33).

This technological tool gave us journalists unprecedented speed in transmitting news, which shortened many administrative steps and, at the same time, put pressure on press institutions to improve marketing and adapt to the challenges of digital publishing.” (P19)

“The language and thinking process must evolve to keep pace with this transformation, as reports about average professional players from three seasons ago [does not compete with] news about big stars like Cristiano Ronaldo or Neymar.” (P22). For example, all news of high-profile transfers originates from official sources. Arriyadiyah newspaper, widely regarded as the number one sports publication in Saudi Arabia, was the first to break the news of Cristiano Ronaldo’s move to Al-Nassr, Karim Benzema’s transfer to Al-Ittihad, and Neymar’s signing with Al-Hilal on its page on Twitter/X. Its privileged position stems from strong ties with the Public Investment Fund (PIF), which plays a central role in the ownership and financial backing of many major Saudi clubs. These institutional connections give Arriyadiyah unique early access to breaking developments, allowing it to act as both a traditional news authority and a leading digital player on Twitter/X. P25 reflected more broadly on the speed-driven evolution of reporting, explaining that

“freedom to report directly from a smartphone has disrupted traditional journalistic practices. ... speed often trumps the more deliberate, traditional approach to news reporting.” freedom to report directly from a smartphone has disrupted traditional journalistic practices. Speed and immediacy have become important, sometimes at the expense of depth and accuracy. P19 added that the shift had also “shortened many administrative steps” within press institutions and pushed them to become more responsive to the dynamics of digital publishing.

This sense of urgency to be the first to report is not limited to a specific medium, as it affects journalists across various platforms, including newspapers, television, and radio. For example, P15 is a long-time journalist, with 30 years of experience, and has covered news in print, television and radio, and he called out the role of Twitter/X in the news cycle, saying that “time is of the essence, and news published elsewhere ten minutes ago is outdated by today's standards,” showing the intense pressure journalists face to be the first to break stories on Twitter/X, regardless of their primary medium, which as P15 argues, has transcended the industry due to the high demand for speed that this new environment requires. Interviewed journalists described being dominated by the urge to break news on Twitter/X first, quickly trying to get the information to their editors and their fans. One of the themes that emerged from this overarching narrative describes the way the immediacy of Twitter/X has affected traditional journalistic norms and practices. (P15) said that “The speed offered by platforms like Twitter/X has sometimes overshadowed these traditional methods. It democratises news dissemination and challenges in maintaining journalistic integrity and accuracy.” Several other interviewees said that “the imperative to deliver news first via Twitter/X almost superseded the need to balance it with verifying the story fully and

contextualising it for readers." (P8, P21, P27). The aim of being first has become the dominant logic for sports journalism in the Twitter/X age.

The drivers of these trends are complex, involving a mixture of audience demands, organisational pressures, and the endless clock of the 24/7 news cycle. Either explicitly or implicitly, every respondent pointed to public appetites for real-time updates as a major force behind this shift, with one stating, "news scoops are now measured in minutes, if not seconds. This shift has created new challenges for us sports journalists, such as the need to quickly verify news and rumours that spread at lightning speed, and the need to balance speed and accuracy." (P20), as demands by sports fans for immediate information – amplified by the 24/7 availability of digital devices and social media – have made speed a focus for all sports journalists. Moreover, the interviews also revealed that media outlets themselves have come to rely heavily on Twitter/X as a primary distribution channel and measure of audience engagement.

"We get a lot of website visitors from Twitter/X, that's why we always publish the link on the Tweet. The high interaction gives us a certain measure, which gives us a certain reading, and it tells us where are we heading in our coverage and impact" (P3).

At the heart of the discussions on how Twitter/X altered the dynamics of news gathering and engagement lies the fundamental question of how the increasing pressure to break news quickly on Twitter/X affects the core values and principles of journalism itself.

"Twitter/X essentially operates like an ever-updating resume showcasing our journalistic capabilities to new audiences. It certainly expands reach exponentially if leveraged responsibly. However, we as independent journalists could be lacking institutional resources and face far more ethical landmine risks in my view." (P9)

Tandoc (2019) states that social media's emergence as a dominant source of news for established and nascent journalists alike has blurred the lines between speed and accuracy, objectivity and engagement, and professional and personal identities. These fundamental tensions are played out vocally among Saudi sports journalists, who find themselves grappling with the competing demands of a digital news landscape that prizes immediacy and virality over the more deliberative processes of verification and contextualisation.

“The emergence of X has brought challenges and opportunities for us as Saudi sports journalists. While it pressures us to adapt and develop our professional identities and practices, it also provides a platform to enhance our skills, reach a wider audience, and develop our personal brand. However, maintaining a balance between the ethics of traditional journalism and the dynamics of digital platforms remains a major challenge.”

(P7)

The dangers of speed over accuracy are clearly demonstrated by the extent of misinformation and rumour on Twitter/X. One journalist mentioned that: “Twitter/X has many challenges, the most important of which is that it opens the way for many people to publish news without verification, and this blurs the line between professional and non-professional journalists” (P16). This becomes more prevalent as the responses of many participants speak to the slippery ethical landscape of sports journalism where unverified claims are reported at the speed of thought, as they said (P26, P30).

Moreover, the pressure to engage with audiences in real-time on Twitter/X can create a feedback loop that distorts news judgement and editorial decision-making. Several interviewees described how the pursuit of likes, retweets, and followers could lead journalists to sensationalise or oversimplify stories, prioritising clickbait over nuance and depth.

“My personal belief is that 70 percent of journalists who use Twitter/X aren't looking for credibility, they're looking for a number of followers and excitement [...] You need popularity as a means. In order to create popularity and create people for yourself, you must follow [certain accounts] and see the extent of people's [interest]. What do they want from you? What don't they want from you? That leads [our] editorial planning.” (P10)

5.5.2 Strategies for Verification

The interviews revealed that most participants struggled with the difficulty of verifying information and maintaining accuracy when working under the intense time constraints imposed by Twitter/X's fast-paced environment. As seen across these interviews, Twitter/X appears to have deep influence on the core principles of sports journalism that are being carried out by reporters, as participants returned insistently to the pressure to spread misinformation in the race to be the first post on Twitter/X, as two journalists said that reporting culture has changed because of Twitter/X, where the “news has become very short” (P4) and that “this hastiness in reporting has led to mistakes and a drop in accuracy.” (P22). More generally, the increased significance of Twitter/X in reporting sports has made the whole sport-media nexus a bit problematic, posing serious questions about the role and responsibility of the media in the digital age. Hermida (2017) builds on earlier work on ambient journalism by showing how digital platforms blur the boundaries between news production and consumption, challenging traditional gatekeeping and editorial control. “In our experience, within the Saudi context, where press freedoms have historically been constrained, we have found that the relative openness of Twitter/X has created new opportunities for public discourse and debate. However, it has also exposed us to greater scrutiny and potential backlash.” (P14, P36)

The interviews also highlighted the particular obstacles that Saudi sports journalists face in trying to fact-check information from Twitter/X, where one of the participants “mentioned the prevalence of rumours and unsubstantiated claims circulating on the platform, which can easily be mistaken for legitimate news due to the absence of strict measures or censorship of fake news.” (P27)

“[journalists] are independent and have accounts on X, their followers do not hold them accountable or criticise them for misinformation because they share the same tendencies [...] X concealed objectivity and neutrality, athletes in Saudi Arabia are in search of followers, pleasing the largest fan bases.” (P21)

It is important to note that the traditional relationship between athletes and journalists changed as a result of Twitter/X as athletes became much more disengaged with journalists as they are able to communicate directly with fans without needing an intermediary (P18, P23, P24).

Moreover:

“we sports journalists struggled with the sheer amount and speed of new information coming in on Twitter/X, which can make it difficult to trace the roots of a story and determine its accuracy; the temptation emerges to publish quickly without full vetting in order to appease followers and lead coverage. However, fact-checking remains mandatory to provide authentic value rather than misinformation. Editorial impatience risks credibility and thus long-term loyalty. We must allow truth-finding processes to operate parallel to platform pressures.” (P10).

The challenges of ensuring accuracy and verification on Twitter/X are thus compounded by the platform's unique features and dynamics. For example, “the shortness of tweets can lead to oversimplification and a lack of context, making it harder for journalists to convey the full

complexity of a story. Additionally, the pressure to engage with audiences in real-time can divert attention away from the vital work of fact-checking.” (P32). The experiences of Saudi sports journalists struggling accuracy and verification on Twitter/X reflect broader trends in the industry of sports journalism. Scholars have noted the risks posed by the platform's lack of traditional editorial oversight and the potential for misinformation to spread rapidly (Aldaihani and Shin, 2022). In a global context where trust in media is already fragile, the stakes are high for journalists seeking to maintain their credibility while also keeping pace with the speed of Twitter/X. Finally, the interviews also suggest that “more needs to be done to support sports journalists in navigating the challenges of accuracy and verification on Twitter/X”. Participants expressed a need for greater training and resources to help them develop the skills and best practices required to maintain high standards of reporting in the digital age. As one journalist put it, “Improving the use of Twitter/X necessitates continuous updating of our knowledge and skills to match the rapid changes in the world of technology.” (P20). This call to action highlights the growing need for media organisations, educational institutions, and professional associations to support the ongoing professional development of sports journalists, particularly in helping them balance the demands of real-time news delivery with the journalistic standards of verification and integrity. While there is little evidence of structured institutional training, many journalists interviewed described how they have developed their own methods to uphold accuracy under pressure. For example:

“I add additional information and verify before publishing. This requires maintaining contact with sources and updating information to obtain the latest developments before publishing reports” (P34).

Numerous other journalists reiterated the importance of fact-checking in-face of this new high-pace environment, with many interviewees emphasising the need to prioritise accuracy over speed

when reporting on Twitter/X. The interviews also suggest that “there is an important role for ‘official’ and ‘well-established’ sources that journalists use for reporting, which requires building a network of trusted contacts, such as athletes, officials, and club representatives, who can provide quick and reliable information.” (P18, P19, P20). However, this reliance on close relationships with teams and athletes can pose a risk to journalistic integrity, as becoming too close to teams and athletes can lead to journalists becoming their “voice” rather than objective reporters (Mauro, 2023).

“Some of the journalists take the positive news about his club and hide the negative news about their clubs without any responsibility or even objectivity in reporting, and unfortunately this is the winning market on X.” (P27)

Moreover, in addition to sources, interviews highlighted the importance of verification tools and techniques that are designed for the fast-paced environment of Twitter/X. Many participants described using methods such as cross-referencing multiple sources, checking for inconsistencies or red flags, and leveraging technology to authenticate images and videos. As one journalist noted, “We may sometimes spend ten minutes searching for the origin and the truth of some news to maintain our credibility” (P39). Nonetheless, the key to coping with the challenges of maintaining accuracy, as argued by interviews P21, P38 and P39 was digital media literacy and the need for constant training in this area. The approaches that Saudi sports journalists have reportedly used seems to allow them a relative balance between speed and accuracy, as their practices serve as a microcosm of broader changes within the journalistic industry. As research has shown, the necessity of being first on social media sites such as Twitter/X has led to challenges for traditional journalistic norms and practices, one overarching one being the need for new approaches to verification and fact-checking (Hertzum, 2022; Tandoc, 2019). In the Saudi context, where

Twitter/X is an essential site for consumption of sports news, the need for a viable solution is more pressing than ever. Here, the literature shows the key role that organisational support and resources play in helping journalists stay in control when the pressure in Twitter/X generates the possibility to do sloppy work. As such, it is ultimately up to media organisations to help journalists maintain responsible reporting in the digital age by investing in structural solutions, like verification tools, and creating an ethical framework and a newsroom culture that stresses accuracy over competition (Molyneux and McGregor, 2020).

5.6 The Evolution of Newsroom Dynamics

Theme	Decentralisation of decision-making and reliance on collaborative networks
Prominent Keywords	Leadership (K12), Disruption (K16), Independence (K2), Collaboration (K24), Culture (K13)
Description	Shows how Twitter/X has transformed traditional newsroom hierarchies and decision-making processes in Saudi sports media, creating more decentralised and collaborative work environments.
Consolidation	Participants described how they can now publish stories and engage with audiences directly on Twitter/X, without going through traditional hierarchies.
Sample quote	“The old bureaucracy is over.” (P3)

Table 5.5: decentralisation of decision-making and collaborative networks

This theme examines these transformations through two key sub-themes: flattening traditional hierarchies and investigating how decision-making power has become more distributed among journalists and editors, reducing rigid top-down structures, and the second point will focus on the transition from gatekeeping to collaborative cultures. Therefore, the shift from journalists acting as sole gatekeepers of information to more collaborative relationships with their audiences in shaping content will be explored. Together, these sub-themes reveal how Twitter/X has not only influenced reporting styles but also redefined the organisational culture of Saudi sports newsrooms.

5.6.1 Flattening Traditional Hierarchies

Twitter/X has become such an important tool for sports journalists that it has fundamentally altered the workings of Saudi sports newsrooms. As frequently discussed in interviews, hierarchies have been flattened where individual editors and publishers have less influence over dissemination, and at all levels have greater freedom to cover the stories they feel best resonates with fans. Significantly, the interviews clearly show how, as a result of Twitter/X, mainstream sports journalists no longer have to go through an editor when they want to publish a story, or deal with traditional gatekeeping processes (P3, P11, P37). This represents a process of decentralisation, nicely illustrated by further comments from interviewees who spoke of their ability to make editorial choices. For instance, P3 said that, “If I receive 100% verified news, I can publish it without needing approval from senior editors first. But with print journalism, stories required authoritative sign-off before publication.” Similarly, P11 noted, “We take as journalists now make unilateral moves rather than await institutional approval, as the fast-paced environment necessitates reduction of red-tape procedures. Twitter/X essentially broke editorial hierarchies and allowed us to decide for ourselves, regardless of the size or reach of our media organisation.”

“We have observed that X has greatly influenced the traditional hierarchy between editors and journalists within Saudi sports newsrooms. Previously, the editorial process was clearly defined, with each story moving up the ladder from reporters to department heads and even the editor-in-chief for approval. However, with real-time reporting, we can now publish news without the need for multiple levels of editorial control.” (P21)

This breakdown of hierarchical editorial workflows is part of a broader global trend in digital journalism, where speed and visibility increasingly shape newsroom decisions. However, in the Saudi context, this shift is especially significant due to the state-linked structure of many media

outlets and the prevalence of editorial oversight tied to political and cultural sensitivities. The erosion of traditional gatekeeping, while seemingly empowering, places journalists in a precarious position: they must balance the immediacy and informality of Twitter/X with the risks of publishing unvetted content in an environment where missteps can have serious professional or legal consequences. Unlike in many Western contexts, where decentralisation may foster greater independence, in Saudi Arabia, it often increases vulnerability, as journalists take on greater responsibility for both speed and compliance with unwritten red lines.

Generally, interviewees express the freer way in which Twitter/X has provided individual Saudi sports reporters, be they from major newspapers or small radio networks, the freedom to evade institutional or more traditional editorial processes and put their followers first, who love having a chance to hear from journalists on a personal level. This change is hugely consequential for the distribution of power in newsrooms and the role of editors in the news agenda. And as such, interviewee sentiments describe a more open environment where Twitter/X has given individual Saudi sports journalists autonomy to bypass institutional or traditional editorial processes and prioritise their followers, who appreciate the opportunity to connect with reporters on a more personal level.

But on the other hand, the lack of centralised decision-making causes concerns about uniformity of editorial standards and direction of the sports coverage. Individual journalists empowered to make their own decisions on what to cover, and how to cover it, can potentially lead to dissemination of contrasting (and sometimes contradictory) narratives about a certain event, and at different platforms. P17 said:

“X brought about noticeable changes in the hierarchy between editors and journalists in Saudi sports newsrooms, which reduced the role of editors as gatekeepers of information and led to the flattening of the traditional hierarchy.”

The real-time reporting demanded by Twitter/X leaves less scope for editorial control and quality checks, potentially diluting the importance of editors in setting the agenda for sports coverage. While most interviewees stressed that the role of editors as guides and enforcers of professional standards was still highly relevant (P4, P13, P34), others argued that the advent of Twitter/X had fundamentally altered their role (P3, P16, P37).

Further, the literature also highlights similar trends in this regard, with scholars like Schultz and Sheffer (2010) noting that the disruptive influence of Twitter/X on traditional newsroom hierarchies and practices have been significant, where the platform has enabled younger, digitally native reporters to integrate Twitter/X more wholly into their routines compared to veteran journalists who may cling to established norms. Additionally, the decentralisation of decision making in Saudi sports journalism can also be seen as a small microcosm of the larger tension between modernising pressures and conservative beliefs characteristic of the Kingdom today. As such, online spaces like Twitter/X have increased press autonomy and allowed journalists to explore previously taboo topics, indicating a gradual shift in norms (Awad, 2010). However, the interview data reveals that self-censorship and deference to authority still persist among some reporters (P14, P27, P38), where individual agency and institutional constraints in Saudi media are still not well balanced. But, ultimately, the question of how this decentralisation will advance in the future and how it will shape the prospects of sports journalism in Saudi Arabia is one that the Kingdom must grapple with as it continues to sift through the tensions between modernity and tradition.

5.6.2 From Gatekeeping to Collaborative Cultures

As Twitter/X presents a new forum through which journalists can talk directly to audiences without going through journalistic intermediaries (P5, P16, P25), it ultimately challenged the authority and influence of sports journalists, and by extension, the traditional culture of news-making in Saudi Arabia. Participants thus highlighted how Twitter/X has weakened traditional gatekeeping mechanisms. For example, P21 stated that:

“The integration of X into the journalism [sphere] has influenced the editorial landscape, especially among sports journalists. This social media platform has facilitated a shift from traditional gatekeeping to a more participatory model of news dissemination. Editors and journalists who were once the sole [arbiters] of what constitutes news content, now [engage] with audiences whose voices on Twitter/X can amplify or counter journalism narratives.”

But more importantly:

“Twitter/X has transformed the traditional scoop culture in journalism by accelerating the news cycle. The platform has become an instant publishing tool, challenging we journalists to adapt to the speed of information flow and the transformation of the landscape of news coverage in Saudi Arabia.” (P22)

The consequences of the dissolution of gatekeeping are thus ambiguous. On the one hand, it could lead to the democratisation of sports journalism, as well as the inclusion of a wider range of voices and storytelling in the public sphere (see section 5.6). Other participants find that “Twitter/X has brought previously ignored marginalised groups and diverse sports into the public eye.” (P6, P17, P33)

This could be seen as a positive development as tweets expose entrenched hierarchies in sports journalism and policymaking, and make audiences more discerning by broadening their representation. But the loss of gatekeeping also brings significant risks and challenges for the sports journalism field. Without the gatekeeping function of editors, there is a greater likelihood of misinformation, rumours, and unverified content spreading rapidly on Twitter/X.

“The classic newsroom model has faded fast alongside Twitter/X's rise. Instead of physical dedicated spaces, modern “newsrooms” convene virtually across digital platforms. Networked mobile journalists now individually write, edit and publish content directly from the field in real-time reaction. The centralised gatekeeping model has dissolved.”
(P12)

Moreover, the erosion of gatekeeping has implications for the authority and influence of sports journalists themselves. As athletes, fans, and other stakeholders gain the ability to communicate directly with audiences on Twitter/X, journalists may find themselves competing for attention and relevance in an increasingly crowded media space because it “effectively flattening traditional hierarchies within Saudi sports newsrooms.” (P5)

But, in addition to eroding old hierarchies and rendering gatekeeping roles less effective in Saudi sports journalism, Twitter/X contrastingly facilitated the emergence of new collaborative relationships among journalists, both within and across media organisations (P7, P23, P32), which has contributed to more inclusive and well-triangulated news stories.

“The adoption of X has led to increased collaboration and direct interaction between members of the journalistic team, positive changes can be seen in the relationships between editors and journalists, as they have become more cooperative and interactive.” (P35)

Participants thus described a range of norms of collaboration facilitated through Twitter/X that included casual information-sharing but also more organised forms of collaboration. Participant (P7) also described how they used Twitter/X to “exchange ideas and contribute to draughting sports stories.” Thus, Twitter/X allows for “positive interaction with editors and other journalists to achieve the best possible quality of journalistic work” (P23). Furthermore, Twitter/X has promoted new forms of media collaboration, as interviews report that journalists from different organisations can now collaborate to cover live sporting events (P32). These collaborative relationships have substantive benefits for sports journalism and can lead to journalistically richer stories that incorporate a wider variety of perspectives and knowledge. As (P28) said, “We engage in robust discussions on various sports issues and often continue our dialogue beyond events to capture evolving narratives” (P28). These collaborations can also make it easier for us journalists to deter and call out unethical behaviour since they can share and spread best practices.

Moreover, these collaborations were more prominently seen within the context of football, specifically regarding access to sources. P1 mentioned collaborating with colleagues to secure interviews with players:

“I mean, for example, it might be that there is a player that we are required to have a meeting with, you don't have any relationship with him, but another teammate has a relationship with him, and he connects you with that player [...] There are [also people at] newspapers that are connected to ministries, giving them access to [information] without [need for] their editorial department”

Collaborations can be particularly useful when journalists need to access high-profile sources. However, interviews did not provide detailed examples of where these collaborations can be made most effective (whether a particular sport or region), which is an area ripe for further exploration

in future research. On the other hand, managing these collaborative relationships in a competitive and fast-paced media environment also presents significant challenges. With the pressure to break news quickly and attract audiences, some journalists may be reluctant to share information or collaborate with rivals. As P27 said;

“There is great cooperation in everything that serves the profession, but I will certainly not cooperate with my fellow journalist in providing my sources or the exclusive news that I publish. There is competition between us as journalists, and everyone accepts that.”

This tension between collaboration and competition is a recurring theme in the interview data. In addition, findings from the literature review emphasise the featured risks and rewards relating to newsroom collaborations on sports journalism. Scholars such as Zayani (2021) have affirmed that social media platforms like Twitter/X can also enable new forms of participatory journalism, in which journalists work more closely with their audiences to co-create content and shape public discourse. This approach, while not without its challenges, could potentially lead to a more inclusive and democratic form of sports journalism that better reflects the diverse interests and experiences of fans and communities.

5.7 Twitter/X's Influence on EDI in Sports Coverage

Theme	Inclusion of diverse groups, sports, and global perspectives
Prominent Keywords	Diversity (MK4), Opportunities (K8), Accessibility (K22), Culture (K13), Platforms (K10), Standards (K9)
Description	Examines how Twitter/X enables broader and more diverse sports coverage in Saudi Arabia, while also highlighting the platform's limitations in achieving genuine representation.
Consolidation	Participants described how they use Twitter/X to discover and report on stories from diverse communities, niche sports, or grassroots initiative, both nationally and internationally, and the challenges they face in doing this.

Sample quote	“X has profoundly impacted the scope and depth of sports coverage in Saudi Arabia, expanding the scope and immediacy of news dissemination.” (P6)
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Table 5.6: Inclusion of diverse groups, sports, and global perspectives

Twitter/X's core characteristics of real-time communication, broad accessibility, and interactive engagement have changed both news production and consumption patterns while crucially opening new avenues for historically under-represented voices to contribute to and shape sports narratives. This analysis examines three key dimensions of Twitter/X's influence on equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in sports journalism. The first focuses on Twitter's role as an amplification platform, where diverse voices—particularly those of women, minority athletes, and marginalised communities—can directly share their experiences and viewpoints with global audiences, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers. The second dimension explores Twitter/X's function as a globalisation catalyst, examining how the platform dissolves geographic and cultural boundaries to enable international dialogue about both sports and broader social issues. The third dimension investigates the commercialisation of EDI initiatives, analysing how commercial entities strategically utilise Twitter/X's reach to promote inclusive messaging.

5.7.1 Amplifying Diverse Voices

Having access to grassroots sports, marginalised voices or sportswomen in niche sports – which are not typically covered in traditional media – became easier with a click of a button on Twitter/X. Some of these marginalised voices include Paralympic sports, where athletes with disabilities have often been overlooked in mainstream coverage. Twitter/X has enabled these athletes to share their stories, raise awareness of their sports, and challenge stereotypes about disability in athletics (Al Harthy et al., 2024). In addition, youth and school sports initiatives, such as school tournaments and youth leagues, have traditionally received limited media attention. Twitter/X has empowered local communities, schools, and young athletes to showcase their talents, share updates, and build

dedicated followings (Albuhlul, 2022). Lastly, niche sports like cycling, boxing, and martial arts, which have historically been overshadowed by more popular disciplines like football, have found a platform on Twitter/X where enthusiasts and practitioners can connect, share content, and promote their activities to broader audiences (Al Harthy et al., 2024).

This was prevalent in the interviews as journalists stressed on how they used Twitter/X as an avenue to discover their subjects and report stories that mostly suffer from lack of mainstream media coverage. This finding aligns with the literature that emphasises the democratising influence of social media on sports journalism, whereby Twitter/X afforded greater agenda diversity or coverage of under-covered disciplines, sportswomen and disabled athletes (Rojas-Torrijos and Ramon, 2021). Several participants (P6, P17, P33, P39) mentioned that “Twitter/X had enabled sports reporting to cover a far wider range of issues and stories as a result of the platform’s ability to enable media outlets, journalists and audiences to communicate and engage with one another more directly. According to them, the platform has allowed journalists to cover subjects and issues that traditional media and especially the mainstream media would not typically cover.” In the context of Saudi Arabia, where the media has historically been tightly controlled by the state and heavily dependent on elite-based sports for reporting (Alnajrani et al., 2018; Aljuaid, 2020), the role of Twitter/X in democratising sports reporting cannot be underestimated.

“At first only football gained attention. But now boxing, basketball and other sports earn devoted audiences.” (P14)

“Previously, our focus was mainly on football, but today you notice a clear change as all sports are given support and media coverage. The great support that all sports receive from the government plays an important role in developing the sports field and encouraging us as journalists to attend and cover various sporting events in the Kingdom.” (P34)

Although Twitter/X has given individual journalists greater agency to highlight under-represented sports, that agency remains shaped by broader political and cultural priorities. The state's promotion of sport as part of Vision 2030, including investment in international events, support for women's sports, and the rebranding of national identity through athletics, has made it not only permissible but strategically advantageous to expand sports coverage beyond football. However, the interviews also revealed challenges and limitations of relying solely on Twitter/X for diverse sports coverage. Some participants cautioned against the potential decline in the depth and quality of reporting when journalists heavily rely on pre-packaged content from official sources such as club media centres, as said (P17). Journalists interviewed also mentioned that "Twitter/X is a significant way of connecting with marginalised communities and reporting on grassroots initiatives". They described novel types of participatory journalism, for example, monitoring and republishing video clips from sporting events that triggered interaction on social media, (P6) and highlighting issues that "may not receive sufficient coverage in traditional media." (P32). "There has been a greater focus on diversity and inclusion, with greater coverage of women's sports and grassroots initiatives." (P38)

These practices demonstrate how Twitter/X, in the right hands, can help to make sports journalism more representative of currently marginalised voices and communities. However, while Twitter/X has the potential to disrupt status quo prejudices, gender inequalities still feature in coverage on social media (Bruce, 2016), and as with print, journalists are expected to go the extra mile to ensure these contexts are appropriately inclusive, especially in-light of Saudi Arabia's 2030 liberalisation reforms. But, overall, the interviews show that Twitter/X could be used as a means to democratise sporting media coverage and has enabled journalists to discover and report on diverse sports stories. Although the potential of Twitter/X to challenge traditional biases in sporting coverage

and a media landscape which mostly favours the dominant and establishment has started to become clear, journalists seem to realise that they need to further work hard to uphold the standards of fairness, depth and equity impartiality in reporting.

As Saudi female sports journalists have played a pivotal role in diversifying sports reporting by focusing on narratives that highlight women's participation and grassroots initiatives. One participant emphasised this contribution by noting,

“The role that women play in sports journalism in Saudi Arabia cannot be overlooked, as they have become an effective and influential presence in this field that was considered the exclusive domain for men in the past.” (P38)

Despite navigating cultural and societal constraints, Saudi female journalists have actively challenged these norms by extending their coverage beyond traditionally male-dominated sports. This pursuit broadens the scope of media content and shifts focus toward female athletes and inclusive initiatives, thereby supporting Vision 2030’s ambition to foster gender equality and empower women across multiple fields. According to (P17), "the increasing presence and influence of women in sports journalism in Saudi Arabia is a notable development in a field that was previously considered an exclusive domain for men." Similarly, P38, "the shift in focus to diversity, inclusion, women’s movements, and representation all managed to gain more attention within media, which was driven by Saudi Arabia’s cultural and institutional transformations introduced through Vision2030.". However, female sports journalists in the Kingdom still face significant challenges related to cultural norms, organisational structures, and the influence of new technologies. One of the primary challenges stems from the legacy of conservative cultural and societal norms that have historically restricted women's personal and professional development in Saudi Arabia (Almoualed, 2021). Although the Vision 2030 reforms aim to transform Saudi

society into a more moderate Islamic culture, female journalists continue to navigate gender-based expectations and stereotypes. As Almoualeed (2021) argues in her study of Female Saudi Sports Journalists, the older generation of female Saudi journalists struggled to gain family acceptance and prove themselves in a male-dominated field, paving the way for younger generations who face fewer societal barriers but still contend with lingering biases.

5.7.2 Twitter/X as a Facilitator of Globalisation

From a global perspective, interviews emphasised that Twitter/X is now a key tool for intercultural exchange and understanding of global sport (in all its facets). Some of the Saudi sports journalists' narratives underlined to what extent "they used Twitter/X to reach out and interact with athletes and fans in other countries and cultures, which they said enriched their reporting. As we observed, it opened a modern global 'backstage' to sports journalism and allowed for intercultural and inter-societal conversations and collaboration among sports journalists all over the world." (P29). As P18 mentioned:

“Saudi Vision 2030 had a significant impact in accelerating this transformation, which prompts us to work continuously to develop journalistic institutions to keep pace with these changes and enhance the status of sports journalism at the international level.” (P18)

“The platform serves as a vital tool for obtaining immediate information and following developments in major sporting events worldwide.” (P35)

Although the communications revolution preceded the proliferation of Twitter/X, it is the traction that Twitter/X got that gradually built it into an essential component of the everyday life of people, and this brought shifts to the expectations of people from those who disseminate knowledge and made Twitter/X the highly useful platform it is today.

P12 shared that "we, as sports journalists, use Twitter/X to connect with athletes and fans from different contexts to enrich journalistic content with multiple perspectives and in-depth information.". Similarly, P19 described that " Twitter/X allowed them to follow industry trends and build a network with colleagues and other professionals where we can benefit from learning and knowledge-sharing opportunities." These experiences highlight the value of Twitter/X in facilitating cross-cultural exchanges and partnerships that can elevate the quality and depth of sports journalism in Saudi Arabia. This finding has been evidenced by scholars who have noted how social media makes it easier for journalists to interact with new sources all over the world (Barlybayeva and Mukanova, 2018). In the context of Saudi Arabia, the media landscape has been historically insular and focused on domestic sports (Alnajrani et al., 2018), for example, according to P11 and P18, "Twitter/X provides a platform for journalists to expand their horizons and incorporate international perspectives into their reporting. The insular nature of Saudi Sports Journalism gradually shifted during the early 2010s when Twitter/X became more popular with Saudis, as 2016 witnesses a notable rise in the number of Saudis using the platform. Nevertheless, some Journalists report that language barriers and cultural differences can sometimes hinder effective communication and understanding between journalists from different backgrounds." While these difficulties are evident, discussion in these interviews indicates that Twitter/X holds tremendous potential for using global conversations to generate greater understanding and collaboration in sports journalism. P12 said:

“In past eras news was inherently limited by the restrictive formats of printed newspapers and confined broadcast segments. Today’s social media landscape enables us journalists to enrich that content depth while also expanding reach. Stories often break first and fastest on Twitter/X from scene witnesses rather than wait for editors. Any news can promptly

gain global digital visibility rather than rely on antiquated modes. The playing field stretches as wide as our visions.”

Even when there are difficulties due to bias, language barriers and cultures, the potential of Twitter/X in inculcating cross-cultural communication and improving the quality and depth of sports journalism in Saudi Arabia is great. This is especially important, considering Saudi Arabia is embracing globalisation by opening up to the outside world, both socially and politically. According to the interviews, Saudi sports writers are already adapting to – and finding ways to overcome – the growing influence and expectations of fans on Twitter/X during the nation’s globalisation phase (brought by Vision 2030). One presenter discussed how you must be able to adapt to new technologies and platforms in order to speak to people:

“To keep up with new trends and technologies in the field of sports journalism, I find that our commitment as journalists to constantly innovate and update our tools is indispensable.” (P20)

Here, we see that reporters are using Twitter/X to build conversation between different cultures and backgrounds, which increases the quality and depth of their sports reporting. And there are also journalists who look to Twitter/X to present Saudi Arabia’s sporting achievements and innovations to a world public; “Twitter/X enables easier access to both global and Arab world happenings that inform planning,” (P11) where reporters are using Twitter/X to talk about Saudi sports and reach out to global audiences as part of the wider efforts of the kingdom to open itself up and share itself with the rest of the world.

5.7.3 Commercialisation of EDI

While Twitter/X has been celebrated for its potential to promote diversity and inclusivity in sports journalism, the interviews with Saudi sports journalists revealed several challenges and limitations associated with relying on the platform to achieve these goals. These findings align with the literature on the digital divide, language barriers, and the risk of tokenism in social media-driven journalism (Al-Saggaf, 2017; Alnajrani et al., 2018). The main challenge discussed by the participants was the risk of superficial or tokenistic representation of underrepresented people or sports on Twitter/X. P23 noted that “some clubs focus on entertainment news and “patter” to attract an audience and market their accounts, while others focus on more serious and sophisticated content,” as popularity can sometimes trump diversity. Such surface-level representation is widely critiqued within the literature – with Sherwood et al (2019) arguing that true diversity in sports journalism requires a fundamental shift in organisational culture and editorial priorities, beyond mere surface-level representation. Another limitation identified by was the persistence of prejudices and stereotypes on Twitter/X, despite its opening up possibilities and giving a voice to those without one before. P3 observed that “Twitter/X journalists that act as fans, as the platform can sometimes reinforce existing prejudices and loyalties rather than challenging them, and where gender biases in sports coverage persist on social media”, with differences in how female athletes are portrayed compared to males (Bruce, 2016).

“As real-time reporting and live-tweeting gather momentum, I observed that the content increasingly reflects new demands by audiences interested in immediacy and dynamics. He noted that live sports coverage has shifted from conventional, in-depth, and extensive unpacking of events to short, snappy, and condensed live commentary about what is happening as fans watch (P26).”

P27 and P2 thus strongly suggest that “journalists prioritise both profits and outreach on Twitter/X over adhering to journalistic principles.” The participant's observation that some journalists have abandoned principles like “validity” and “integrity” in pursuit of money and popularity really adds to the risks of relying too heavily on unsubstantiated tweets (from fans) as a news source, particularly when the pressure to break stories quickly can lead to the spread of misinformation.”

“Twitter/X indicates a large number of journalists that get their news from unknown and erroneous sources through followers. For example, there is a media professional [in KSA] whose followers decreased from 100,000 followers to 3,000 followers due to publishing some incorrect news from the fan clubs.” (P27)

As such, the interviews appear to indicate a push for journalists and newsrooms to go beyond Twitter/X, and engage in expanding and deepening initiatives to diversify their sources, stories, and voices. P17 noted that “X has expanded the scope of sports coverage, but at the same time it has affected the quality of press news,” suggesting that an overreliance on Twitter can compromise the depth and nuance of sports journalism. As such, despite Twitter/X’s capacity to serve as a force for amplifying previously absent voices and for diversifying sports journalism, the interviews with Saudi sport journalists reflect challenges and limitations associated with relying solely on the platform to achieve these goals. The possibility of tokenism, the presence of prejudices and the need for wider institutional engagement with diversity all suggest that Saudi sports journalists must work harder to achieve an approach to inclusivity that moves beyond performative statements.

5.8 Digital Sports Journalism Adaptation in Saudi Arabia

Analysis of the interview data yielded some key findings. First, most of the participants viewed Twitter/X as quite a useful tool for sports journalism, particularly with regard to breaking news,

increased audience engagement and access to a wider variety of sources. However, concerns about trustworthiness, impartiality, and the erosion of traditional journalistic practices were also prominent. Most interviewees insisted that journalists must make a concerted effort to navigate the digital age while maintaining professional standards and ethics. Secondly, the data highlights the transformative influence of Twitter/X on the dynamics between athletes, journalists, and audiences in Saudi Arabia. As seen in interviews, the popularity of Twitter/X and other digital outlets propelled sports media reporting towards new frontiers, reconfiguring the structure of sports newsrooms, their hierarchies and practices, as illustrated by the findings. Such changes are likely to have significant implications for the future of sports media and the viability of the mainstream Saudi media establishment. The most notable transformation related to Twitter/X was the decentralisation of decision-making, the downfall of gatekeepers and the flattening of traditional hierarchies in a large segment of organisations (P3), with journalists now able to publish stories and engage with audiences directly on Twitter/X, bypassing the traditional editorial chain of command. But the democratisation of information structures has also undermined the authority and relevance of editors and news organisations. The changing power dynamics within newsrooms raise important questions about the future viability of traditional media outlets in an increasingly digital and decentralised media ecosystem. As P25 observed, “The digital transformation of press institutions in Saudi Arabia is not an option, but rather a necessity,” which necessitates innovation and adaptation for journalism’s survival in the digital age (Porcu, 2020). Nevertheless, Saudi media outlets have yet to break free from their outdated business models and organisational structures that rely on traditional reporting and dissemination approaches, as well as absence of will for operationalising the digital tools available to them, and this hindered their ability to compete effectively in a rapidly evolving market as “Only a few newspapers successfully kept up

with the trends and capitalised early on the changes that were inevitably coming” (P4). As many interviewees argue, the old model which relies on strict protocols, processes and red tapes, is ill-suited for this current time and the increasing demand of fans for immediate news updates, and agencies that refused to change their model have ended up either closing or losing its base.

As such, resistance to change poses significant risks to the long-term sustainability of traditional media outlets, as audiences increasingly turn to digital platforms for their sports news and analysis (Nielsen and Ganter, 2022). In order to stay relevant and compete with other media in the international market, Saudi sports media institutions need to implement creative business models and establish new organisational strategies that emphasise the production of digital content, enhancing audience engagement, and diversifying revenue streams (Zayani, 2021), which have notably grown by 50% between 2018 and 2020 (in football specifically), indicating that the sports scene in the country is seeing more financial growth as a result of its growing fan base, and this shift stabilised, bringing in a revenue of \$2.29m in 2022, as the sector’s revenue is growing by 10% annually (Statista, 2022). Such fundamental shifts need to be sustained through a strategic mindset and a willingness to experiment with new approaches to journalism and media management.

“Press institutions must fix their situation and embrace the digital transformation by establishing a digital department [department for regulating online news dissemination] that follows up and publishes news as soon as possible.” (P21)

Removing barriers that have prevented people (like women) to compete in this field and also amplifying marginalised voices can give digital platforms the potential to challenge the dominance of established media outlets and create space for alternative perspectives and narratives (Rojas-Torrijos and Ramon, 2021). This links with a noted transformative scenario around how Twitter/X

and other digital platforms will catalyse a more diverse, pluralistic and representative media system in Saudi Arabia, as interviews have suggested. For example:

“The value of X in sports journalism lies in its immediacy and the diverse range of voices it hosts. It provides an unfiltered conduit for athlete viewpoints, organisational announcements, and fan reactions, all of which contribute to a more accurate, multi-faceted narrative.” (P22)

But achieving these potential demands affirmative action to ending the digital divide and to all members of society having access to the skills, resources and opportunities to participate in the digital public sphere. “It is necessary to provide continuous training to journalists on how to use X effectively, with a focus on enhancing their skills in social media management and rapid interaction. It is also preferable to invest in data analysis to measure the performance of tweets, understand the needs of the audience” (P33). The findings of this study also point to a pressing obligation for sports journalists and news organisations to update their professional norms and values in light of the structural realities of the digital era, where “Twitter/X became tools for fast news, but it was never a source for professional journalism” (P1). Here, challenges such as speed vs. accuracy, objectivity vs. engagement, and personal branding vs. public service is at the heart of the ethical challenges facing sports journalists in the era of Twitter/X (Molyneux, 2015; Bradshaw, 2021).

“In terms of challenges, X imposes on us journalists the necessity of brevity and accuracy in conveying information. A journalist who possesses valuable information may find it difficult to formulate it in a way that suits X. We journalists need to develop our news writing skills to match new social media standards, and this requires us to constantly update our knowledge and techniques.” (P22)

5.9 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how Twitter/X has fundamentally transformed sports journalism practices and newsroom dynamics in Saudi Arabia. Through analysis of 40 in-depth interviews with Saudi sports journalists, the research reveals a shift from traditional hierarchical newsgathering to a more distributed, participatory model. While Twitter/X has enhanced direct access to sources, real-time audience engagement, and collaborative opportunities, it has also intensified pressures around speed, accuracy, and ethical considerations. The findings highlight the need for Saudi media organisations to develop new skillsets and strategies, particularly in digital literacy, multimedia reporting, and audience engagement. However, challenges persist as many organisations remain tied to conventional structures and practices. The study contributes to understanding journalism's digital transformation in Saudi Arabia's unique cultural context while noting shared challenges with global sports journalism. It emphasises the importance of developing sustainable digital journalism models that balance innovation with professional standards, supported by comprehensive journalism education that combines technical skills with ethical reasoning and cultural competence.

Chapter 6: Discussion and Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a critical interpretation of the findings in Chapter 5 and positions the empirical results within the context of the broader literature on sports journalism in Saudi Arabia and studies examining the influence of Twitter/X on journalistic practices. It contextualises key findings within relevant scholarly debates and highlights points of synergy and divergence to demonstrate the study's contributions to knowledge. The chapter is thematically structured to address the research questions and to allow for exploration of cross-cutting narratives emerging from the data. Across these themes, several critical debates emerge regarding the relationship between traditional journalistic values and the demands of digital media environments, especially in a context like Saudi Arabia. This discussion chapter interrogates underlying synergies, points of contrast, and broader implications seen between the findings and extant literature. It examines how Saudi sports journalists' experiences with Twitter/X reflect, challenge, or advance existing scholarly debates around journalism in digital environments, acknowledging the unique cultural, political, and institutional context of Saudi Arabia. The discussion pays particular attention to areas where participants' accounts reveal inconsistencies or contradictions, especially concerning issues of media freedom, professional autonomy, and audience relationships.

The purpose of this study is to answer five research questions about the transformative influence of Twitter/X on Saudi sports journalism:

RQ1: How do Saudi sports journalists utilise Twitter/X for the newsgathering practices involved in story production, including the identification of sources, the verification of details, and the compiling of stories?

RQ2: How does Twitter/X shape the ways in which Saudi sports journalists construct their professional identities and engage with their audience?

RQ3: How has the adoption of Twitter/X influenced the editorial decisions, news judgement, and gatekeeping by Saudi sports editors and journalists?

RQ4: To what extent has the adoption of Twitter/X disrupted the routines, workflows, and hierarchies within Saudi sports newsrooms?

RQ5: How do Saudi sports journalists navigate the shifts in their professional identity amidst the disruptive influence of Twitter/X on the roles and norms of the traditional newsroom?

Based on analysis of 40 in-depth interviews, it was found that the integration of Twitter/X into Saudi sports journalism extends well beyond technological adoption, creating negotiations between established professional practices and demands of the digital platform. These findings respond to the research questions through six areas that formed the intersection between the main themes that came out of the analysis and a comprehensive synthesis of the literature on the key issues each theme presented. Firstly, verification and trust dynamics emerged as central to RQ1 and RQ3, revealing how Saudi journalists maintain hierarchical verification systems while adapting to Twitter/X's speed demands. Gender-specific challenges primarily address RQ2 and RQ4, showing how female journalists navigate audience engagement differently than male colleagues due to cultural constraints. Generational divides span all five research questions, indicating different approaches to Twitter/X adoption across journalists' career stages. State-media relations particularly speak to RQ3 and RQ5, revealing how institutional control manifests in digital environments and how professional identity is shaped within such contexts. Finally, Vision 2030's influence cuts across all research questions, and talks about reshaping journalism education,

ethics, and economic models, while debates on regional media dynamics helped contextualise findings within broader MENA journalism patterns. Taken together, these topics show that Twitter/X has not simply disrupted Saudi sports journalism, but rather created spaces for ongoing negotiation between professional values, cultural norms, and affordances of the digital platform which is all mediated by Saudi Arabia's particular political, economic, and social transformations within Vision 2030.

The findings of this research contribute significantly to the body of knowledge on sports journalism, particularly by highlighting Twitter/X's role in reshaping professional practices in Saudi Arabia. This research introduced original contributions to academic fields in digital journalism studies and Middle Eastern media research and sports communication. The research examined Twitter/X's transformative effects on Saudi sports journalism through a culturally-informed perspective to provide unique insights that expand current theoretical debates around journalism in developing contexts while questioning the Western-centric beliefs about digital media adoption and practices in those regions and beyond.

6.2 Verification and Trust: Cultural Dimensions and The Erosion of Professional Boundaries

Twitter/X's rise as a high-demand digital media platform has reshaped sports journalism in Saudi Arabia by creating complex verification and trust challenges beyond the simple technological advancements that it offers. The sociocultural setting of Saudi Arabia gives significance to conventional legitimacy standards which make misinformation repercussions harsher than in Western democracies (Awad, 2010). The findings illustrate a complex interaction between traditional journalistic standards and Twitter/X's operational requirements, indicating increased complexity rather than clear disruption.

Saudi sports journalists had mixed feelings about Twitter/X in their work. While they see how Twitter helps them find stories and connect with readers, they often doubt its reliability as a good source of information, which is largely driven by how Twitter/X pushes journalists to trade in some of their established principles to meet the rapid nature of the platform (Althiabi, 2019). Several journalists noted concerns about the platform's role in spreading false information, with many concerned about some of their colleagues sharing content from unreliable sources without checking facts first. In-line with this, Hertzum (2022) discusses a basic conflict in digital verification practices which arises when journalists' need for accurate reporting meets the platforms' urgent requirements for quick information delivery. Despite this challenge, traditional verification approaches remain resilient even as Twitter/X offers more democratic models for journalism. Results show that sports journalists in Saudi Arabia largely still follow a systematic verification approach which gives institutional sources precedence over user-generated material. As outlined in this study, Saudi sports journalists follow a three-tiered system in their verification processes where direct club sources are primary sources followed by official club accounts which serve as secondary verification channels and networks of fellow journalists who act as tertiary confirmation mechanisms. On the other hand, Western research shows that Twitter/X had altered traditional sourcing methods (Hertzum, 2022; McEnnis, 2023), compared to Saudi journalists who claim that they are using Twitter/X to maintain or supplement their existing professional standards. The process of selective adaptation highlighted by participants reflects broader trends in literature on the persistent gatekeeping attitudes in Saudi journalism which remain unchanged even with technological advancements (Almaglooth, 2013). The emphasis by multiple journalists on formal verification processes and institutional sources shows not just professional conservatism but also highlights that they operate in a cultural environment where authority and verification have always

been centralised (see section 6.5). This culturally engrained system guides Saudi journalists through the "compressed timeframes" of digital reporting as Althiabi (2017) explains (supported by a majority of participants) because they are required to balance demand for quick publication with standards for accuracy and authority which appear to be culturally engrained. While traditional journalism considers facts to be based on "information and quotes from official sources," ambient journalism (which is what we are seeing here in the participants' narratives) values information by considering the "combined effect of the communication" rather than each individual component, which is insignificant on its own or of limited validity (Hermida 2010, p. 5). The change in how information is valued expands on why Saudi journalists continue to use strict verification systems despite the open nature of Twitter/X as they seem to maintain an instinctive "prudence" to embrace sources and media that sit outside their conventional networks. As such, Saudi journalists maintain traditional verification methods while using Twitter/X only as an awareness platform which demonstrates their culturally unique adaptation to the "broad, asynchronous, lightweight and always-on communication systems" that define modern journalism according to Hermida (2013).

On the other hand, many participants have said that professional boundaries are eroding faster due to Twitter/X's time constraints. The emergence of actors who blend journalism and fandom has led to a gradual mistrust of sports media outlets on their platforms (Almesfer, 2023), as multiple participants recognise that speed has fostered deviations from professional practice. The erosion of professional boundaries becomes more complex as Khalil et al. (2023) argue that specific content-sharing behaviours among Saudi social media users emerge due to strong influences from religiosity and social conformity which shape their decision to share content and affect verification behaviours. This is also reiterated across other studies where these changes bring fresh verification

challenges for journalists who must authenticate information from conventional sources and deal with audience contributions that might validate or dispute their work (Althiabi, 2019), as the study shows audiences have changed from just reading news to actively taking part in it where they now give feedback, point out mistakes, and sometimes even provide news tips. This new relationship between journalists and audiences is one of the biggest changes in digital media (Stamper, 2020).

But overall, the way adaptation to online journalism was seen to be culturally-sensitive, views of participants seem to reject the notion of “digital disruption” as they showed how local contexts determine and carry out their technological adaptation strategies. As participants articulated concerns about the rise of unverified information and its potential consequences, they were not simply expressing professional conservatism but responding to specific cultural and political realities. In Saudi Arabia's highly regulated media environment, where journalists can face legal prosecution for social media content and misinformation, and where these can also carry social consequences, the stakes of verification are fundamentally higher than in Western democracies (Awad, 2010). These increased consequences ranging from legal penalties to damage to family reputation in a collectivist society, help explain why, despite Twitter/X's global reach, Saudi journalists maintain more conservative verification practices compared to their counterparts in less restrictive media environments. However, when considering fandom and journalists’ responses to popular demand, professional boundaries seem to be notably affected. This study found that the real-time characteristics of Twitter/X have dramatically transformed how Saudi sports journalists engage with their audiences and manage their professional identities. Participants reported that their audiences have become increasingly engaged and vocal and that their needs are now far more important. Some journalists noted that they felt pressured to balance attracting viewers while remaining professional, which led to them having to act more like entertainers than reporters. As

a result, Saudi sports journalists had adopted specific professional identity management strategies that differed from those employed by their peers in more open media environments where similar levels of care are not required. As such, Saudi sports journalists are required to practice unique professional identity management methods (tailored to online reporting) which stand apart from the techniques used by journalists in more open media environments.

The study largely suggests that journalists in Saudi Arabia keep distinct boundaries between their online personal and professional identities, which Almesfer (2023) attributes to the rise of anonymous or biased accounts that threaten media trustworthiness, as journalists need to distinguish themselves from other online accounts as being sources of valid news. As such, Saudi journalists cautiously manage their identity when using Twitter/X's features (selectively) and while maintaining cultural standards of authority and institutional legitimacy. The findings thus indicate that strategic adaptation defines what they perceive as the “right” response to this new environment instead of completely transforming their traditional standards and approaches. Here, they balance Twitter/X's disruptive potential by embedding it within established professional frameworks while trying to uphold the values of verification and trust. As such, the study's findings on verification practices demonstrate how professional boundaries become more complex in digital spaces in Saudi Arabia's media context. Interview data revealed that Saudi journalists handle the conflict between Twitter/X's speed demands and traditional verification standards through culturally-informed strategies that prioritise institutional authority. This occurs within a context where the consequences of publishing unverified information can include legal action, loss of accreditation, or social censure (Reporters Without Borders, 2025). This restrictive environment can ultimately shape how journalists adapt to digital platforms, and this thus demonstrates that technological adoption is fundamentally mediated by local political and cultural constraints.

6.3 Digital Negotiation of Gender in Saudi Sports Journalism

In an environment where Saudi women have historically “veiled” their online identity by hiding their images and first names (Guta and Karolak, 2015), the use of Twitter/X has had a notable impact on gender dynamics in Saudi sports journalism by bringing in new opportunities for increased visibility for female journalists; however, it also presents significant risks and challenges for female journalists due to deep-seated cultural norms and the absence of effective support mechanisms. Literature highlights that women now challenge historical barriers in sports media but face ongoing resistance and many complex challenges associated with cultural perceptions and structures (Alruwaili, 2020). The shift in Saudi sports journalism has been part of wide societal changes under Vision 2030 which advocates for women's involvement in various sectors like sports (see section 6.6). However, the digital environment that Saudi Arabian female sports journalists have to navigate sharply contrasts with that of their male colleagues. The results reveal that female journalists frequently disengage from audience interactions, which are almost entirely driven by male fans. It was evident in this study that female journalists tend to abstain from direct interaction as a way to handle negative comments. The decision to disengage reflects how female journalists collectively resist gendered power dynamics in online environments and confirms its strong presence despite modernisation reforms. Journalists in different countries use similar avoidance strategies, which have been documented by previous studies. For example, as discussed in section 5.2.2, a study by Blanco et al. (2022) showed that most of the female sports journalists in Spain encountered online harassment and thus created protective strategies to circumvent situations where they may be subjected to gendered speech.

However, siloed strategies have not proven to be effective means of supporting female journalists in addressing and coping with online abuse and alternatively suggest peer and emotional

engagement as effective approaches in building a sense of belonging, trust and empowerment by providing “opportunities for emotional bonding, connection and venting of feelings that help negotiate the effects of harassment” (Kantola and Harju, 2023). Moreover, what makes the Saudi context distinctive is how these universal challenges intersect with specific cultural and religious considerations regarding appropriate female visibility and interaction. Alhayan et al. (2024) investigated the dynamics of online hate speech against women in sports within Arabic social media environments. They identified three common forms of such speech: "gender-based derogatory comments, general misogyny, and appearance-related discrimination" (Alhayan et al., 2024). As such, women in sports journalism face distinct professional obstacles that differ from those of men, which alter their methods of engaging with audiences on social media platforms such as Twitter/X, leading to the siloed strategies highlighted by female participants.

Cultural norms add another layer of complexity to this issue. According to Alyahya (2011), women in Saudi society face significant expectations regarding personal reputation and the proper behaviour they need to demonstrate in a public domain. Moreover, Tripathi and Ben Said (2024) note that journalism has not traditionally been considered "a prestigious job" in GCC countries, especially for women. As such, female journalists working in public-facing positions face extra challenges because they must simultaneously maintain their professional presence (as part of their job as journalists) while also adhering to cultural expectations. The requirement for maintaining this balance creates substantial – and undue – emotional pressure that their male colleagues usually do not have to deal with. Nonetheless, Twitter/X remains a key platform through which female journalists can confront and reshape traditional gender norms within Saudi sports media despite existing industry and societal challenges. Through this platform they have the chance to create their professional identities outside of traditional hierarchies that have typically preferred male

perspectives. Female journalists establish stronger "negotiated visibility" by strategically controlling their online profiles to enhance their career prospects.

This push in Saudi Arabia has been part of Vision 2030 initiatives that focused more on soft power, which are now pushing for social and legal reforms that support women's sports participation (Imawan et al., 2024). The reform agenda has arguably broadened athletic opportunities for women and enabled sports coverage to feature women's perspectives. As such, the findings become even more critical as the lack of progress in institutional support systems (targeted at protecting females from online harassment) can produce fissures between intended policies and real-world outcomes (Muyidi, 2020). But Twitter/X has also helped create gender-neutral professional spaces in a historically gender-segregated society (Faqihi, 2022) where journalists share values that occasionally overcome traditional boundaries, making Twitter/X a double-edged sword for gender empowerment, as it can both push traditional boundaries and simultaneously provide a safe space for bigotry that hides behind online handles. On another note, research indicates that male and female journalists have significant agreement with respect to central professional methods while using Twitter/X, which largely mirrors what the data has reported. Verification remains a priority for both groups, who also balance speed and accuracy while keeping professional boundaries intact. This common professional view among journalists reflects what Porcu (2020) says about the professionalisation of digital journalism practices across demographic categories, where despite shifts in how journalism works, professional standards are still seen as the foundation of the profession.

Overall, statements made by Saudi female sports journalists in this study provide alternative perspectives that challenge Western models and perceptions of digital empowerment. Twitter/X

has opened up new platforms for female voices but these openings bring specific challenges that are deeply rooted in the cultural conditions of Saudi Arabia. Saudi female journalists maintain a clear boundary between their professional duties and personal lives, and this can be partially attributed to cultural notions of legitimacy and trust, which were highlighted in section 5.3.2. The platform also enables women to gain visibility and participate both as sports journalists and enthusiastic fans (Ahmad and Thorpe, 2020), where Vision 2030 allowed digital spaces to emerge as platforms where women can now professionally interact with sports content in ways previously unimaginable a decade ago; however, they still face a high risk of online abuse due to absent mechanisms for combating such practices (Dashti and Mesbah, 2016).

6.4 Digital Divides and Generational Transitions

The findings show that there are persistent digital divides in Saudi sports journalism, primarily in relation to generational differences in Twitter/X adoption and integration. As documented in section 5.3.1, younger journalists with 10-15 years of experience generally view Twitter/X as an integral element of their professional identity and practice, however, older journalists with more than 20 years of experience are often more critical and distant from emerging technologies and platforms. These generational differences manifested not only in technology use but in power structures within newsrooms, where younger journalists expressed frustration with editors who tend to dismiss social media insights, while veteran journalists expressed concern about declining editorial standards. This pattern aligns with key debates in Schultz and Sheffer (2010) around how age and career stage significantly influence journalists' adaptation to digital platforms, also encompasses broader scholarly understanding of generational divides in journalism (Mellado and Alfaro, 2020; Deuze, 2017), where research on newsroom sociology demonstrates that technological adoption frequently becomes a site of professional boundary-making, where

different generations use technology competence to assert or challenge editorial authority (Lewis, 2012).

Recent studies emphasise that effective participatory journalism requires journalists to develop new skills in community management and content curation (Severijnen and de Haan, 2024; Dralega, 2023; Reyes-de-Cózar et al., 2022), which are skills that traditional journalism education has not typically emphasised. What this study contributes to these debates is evidence of how restrictive media environments amplify generational tensions around digital practice. Unlike contexts studied in Western democracies, Saudi journalists described how generational differences in Twitter/X use intersected on multiple levels around regulatory risk, with younger journalists being more willing to engage audiences directly and while older journalists expressed greater caution about content that might attract scrutiny. This regulatory dimension adds complexity to existing theories about generational adaptation, suggesting that political context can mediate how age-related technological preferences manifest in practice. The implications for Saudi newsrooms are significant given the country's demographic profile, with around 63% of Saudi citizens under 30 (General Authority for Statistics, 2023). Research by Porcu (2020) emphasises the importance of organisational learning and knowledge transfer in bridging digital divides. However, this study's findings suggest that in regulated environments, mentoring programs must address risk management and compliance alongside technological skills, which is a consideration that is not extensively examined in existing newsroom management literature.

These generational transitions are particularly significant in the Saudi context given the country's distinctive demographic profile. As such, this research identifies also notable implications on the need for organisations to enhance digital literacy and journalism education to support the future development of Saudi sports journalism. Multiple participants said that their learning curve on

Twitter/X involved mainly trial and error rather than receiving formal training, which suggests that there are gaps in systematic preparation for digital sports reporting. Twitter/X skills depend on constant learning and keeping up with new developments to meet digital needs (McEnnis, 2023). The study thus highlights gaps in journalism training and shows the need for better education that combines technical skills with ethics needed to effectively navigate the age gaps of online journalism, and the impediments they create to true progress. These educational needs intersect with broader workforce development priorities under Vision 2030 (see section 6.6), where the reform program emphasises building human capital through education and training that is aligned with the Kingdom's economic diversification goals. Overall, the findings suggest that developing specialised journalism education programs, particularly those focused on digital sports media could serve both industry needs for qualified professionals and national priorities for Saudi Arabia's knowledge economy development.

6.5 Balancing Institutional Control, State Narratives and Individual Agency in Saudi Sports Media

In more authoritarian environments, journalists often struggle to manage tensions between state and media interests. However, the case of Saudi sports journalism as presented in the narratives of interviewees instead highlight a unique set of dynamics stemming from the intersection of Vision 2030's modernisation discourse, the state's substantial investment in sports, and Twitter/X's open engagement model. In contrast to traditional top-down control mechanisms, Saudi journalists in this study described working within a system where regulatory boundaries are not only imposed but are instead internalised as a part of their profession. Multiple participants described working within the industry as one where following the state's guidelines is seen as a matter of credibility and career preservation, not an external limitation.

This internalisation reflects a perceived convergence between professional obligations and the national agenda— of the vision’s agenda for sport being legitimate journalism, not simply state control. Multiple journalists described their job as aiding the Kingdom’s sports victories as part of their job, suggesting that the boundaries have been successfully integrated into their professional self-conception rather than perceived as external censorship (see section 6.2).

Saudi Arabia’s media gatekeeping framework reveals the complex reality of how journalism operates within a highly centralised system. As Almaglooth (2013) notes, traditional gatekeeping in the Kingdom reflects longstanding institutional mechanisms of control, where editorial decisions are tightly regulated. However, this model has not remained static. In recent years, scholars such as Al Sultan (2022) argue that gatekeeping in Saudi media has evolved into a reconfigured system of authoritarian control, now shaped not only by state directives but also by sociocultural norms and institutional loyalties. This shift is particularly visible in digital spaces, where journalists must balance public engagement on platforms like Twitter/X with implicit expectations of political alignment and cultural conformity. Thus, gatekeeping today operates through both formal editorial hierarchies and informal pressures related to reputation, audience sensitivity, and state legitimacy a dual structure that complicates the exercise of independent journalism in the digital age.

Multiple participants describe regulatory awareness not as an external constraint but as a system of internalised professional values. Understanding this distinction reveals how control systems changed from direct commands to internalised professional practices in Saudi Arabia. Vision 2030 has become a key force transforming this environment into a seemingly contradictory scenario where the reform programme has broadened media coverage opportunities but in return has set up much stricter standards for developmental journalism, with a strong emphasis on the Kingdom’s

narrative around change and modernisation. As such, in this new environment, journalists in Saudi sports media operate in a unique professional landscape where organisational freedom and state imperatives can clash in ways unfamiliar to Western reporters. Multiple interviewees asserted that celebrating Saudi sports success and promoting Vision 2030 projects do not constitute abandonment of journalistic professionalism, but rather reflect their own values. They stated that coverage of the Pro League's international signings or women's sports efforts are not mandated by the government, but rather compelling news topics of public interest. As such, when Western ideas of professional journalism are transplanted into Saudi Arabia, a journalistic culture emerges where creating quality content for a public audience that also happens to benefit state initiatives does not equate to compromised professionalism.

Regarding institutional power dynamics between journalists and the state, global power shifts in sports journalism was highlighted by Mauro (2023) where he described how this dynamic transformed the genre into an asset for media companies, especially those that are heavily influenced by their states. In that sense, they have become a key player in moral, political, financial and cultural debates that are of key value to the public, and often deviate from the intended purpose of sport journalism. A number of this current study's participants confirmed that official bodies can dictate information distribution, creating dependency relationships that extend beyond traditional sourcing challenges. This becomes especially important considering that KSA's Kingdom Holding Company's (KHC) has made \$1.89 billion investment in Twitter/X (Arab News, 2022), which adds another layer of control on Saudi journalists on Twitter/X. Saudi Prince Alwaleed bin Talal's holding company, KHC became one of Twitter/X's largest shareholders before Elon Musk's acquisition and maintained significant stake afterward (Reuters, 2022). While causation remains difficult to establish, the Saudi Arabia Freedom on the Net 2023 Country Report

documented a sharp increase in content removal requests from Saudi authorities to Twitter/X between 2020-2022, which suggests that there may potentially be an increase in Twitter/X's responsiveness to Saudi state demands following the investment.

As such, sport's status as a non-serious medium in comparison to political reporting can provide a space for national development messaging, yet this research has demonstrated that sports reporting has become a focal point of Saudi Arabia's political and economic transformations under Vision 2030. Literature has identified how journalists are subject to restrictions that force them to gather information through official sources (Awad, 2010), however the participants indicated how these restrictions specifically applied in sports reporting. A number of the participants mentioned how football clubs now avoid the media through direct communication on Twitter/X, which has fundamentally changed the role of journalists from to information contextualises to information contextualised. Participants stated that clubs now announce transfer news directly on Twitter/X, shifting journalists' roles from information brokers to content interpreters. Almakaty (2025) and Awad (2010) argue that Saudi media development was led within frameworks of state supervision that created institutional protocols that continue to influence contemporary journalistic practices today. A comparison between such observations show that Saudi publications initially served as state communication tools, however, today's sports journalists operate in spaces where the relationship between state narrative and journalistic practice has become more fluid, if no less significant. While there have been changes over time, the legacy of state influence continues to shape how journalists work to a significant extent. This study thus expands the debate on state influence by showing how Saudi sports journalists perform a specific "balancing act" that differs from traditional state-media dynamics. Awad (2010) described the Saudi press as facing contradictory pressures where there are forces pushing for greater openness versus while others

still demand state control to persist. This, in a sense, helps explain the balancing act seen in today's sports journalists perform on Twitter/X in Saudi Arabia, which is seen in how sports journalists have developed strategies that carefully calibrate their coverage to highlight Saudi sports achievements while avoiding controversial topics, using engagement metrics to justify editorial decisions, and framing critical reporting within development narratives.

For contrast, analysis of Saudi sports journalism through comparison with other systems highlights points that help explain the inconsistency seen in the narrative on whether state control has been a force for good or bad. Bernstein (2024) conducted an international study of sports journalism that showed major differences in journalists' roles as agents for change in different contexts. The Nordic model gives strong institutional backing to journalists and empower them to have greater influence over key national debates. This contrasts significantly with Iran's strict controls for example, while sports journalism in the UAE retains strong ties to government objectives and tourism promotion despite the technological advancements that have occurred (Bernstein, 2024). This shows that the impact of journalists in different contexts is shaped by political, economic, and cultural factors within those contexts, and that mainstream understanding of the role of sports journalism as a conduit of positive societal change is not always correct, as they can often be conditioned into a system of state-run narratives. Although none of the study participants discussed state control explicitly, elements of state control were seen when they highlighted the importance of conforming to government regulation as a means to “maintain [their] careers”. The findings of the study thus present a complex narrative that goes beyond a simple dichotomy between control and freedom. Interviewed journalists showed that they practice strategic navigation of the complex media landscape of Saudi Arabia through their Twitter/X activities. The data suggests that their role extends beyond being governmental spokespeople despite being short of complete

independence as they operate within an adaptive media system and actively seek opportunities for expression in tandem with their role in promoting social and political transformations. Nonetheless, rather than dismantling existing power structures, Twitter/X has created digital spaces where Saudi sports journalists negotiate institutional authority, which speaks to debates on journalist agency in restrictive environments (Almaglooth, 2013). This study reveals that participants reject the binary categorisation of journalists as either "compliant agents" or "resistant voices" and instead, they described developing hybrid practices that use Twitter/X's unique elements while respecting regulatory boundaries. For example, journalists reported using Twitter/X polls to gauge public opinion on controversial sports decisions, live-tweeting events to build audience engagement, and creating personal brand identities that emphasise expertise over institutional affiliation, which are all practices that expand their professional influence without directly challenging state authority. These demonstrate how digital platforms enables 'strategic professional expansion' where journalists increase their influence, audience reach, and professional autonomy through platform-specific strategies that work within rather than against regulatory frameworks. This challenges existing literature that tends to frame journalist-state relations in oppositional terms, revealing instead how modernising authoritarian states create spaces for controlled professional evolution.

This research thus demonstrated that although Twitter/X generates spaces that facilitate continuous negotiation of existing power structures (instead of merely disrupting them), findings also show that there is a notable shift from direct regulatory control to self-regulated professional conduct where journalists integrate regulatory understanding into their professional ethics as part of their identity complex. This finding thus challenges the more basic interpretations of social media's role in democratisation by illustrating how the interaction between digital platforms and authoritarian

endurance can actually promote stronger limitations that are embedded in the personas of journalists. On that same topic, fresh perspectives about the transformation of sports journalism education, ethics and professional practices in Saudi Arabia through Vision 2030 are also widely emphasised throughout analysis and discussion. Relatedly, the analysis highlights how Vision 2030 is transforming sports journalism education, ethics, and professional practice in Saudi Arabia. The research looked at the main conflict between modernisation initiatives and traditional principles in sports media following documentation of how national reform policies expanded media coverage options but at the same time, implemented tighter developmental journalism standards. The study thus enhances comprehension of the relations between national development strategies and media systems by providing a framework to analyses similar phenomena in rapidly evolving societies.

6.6 The Impact of Vision 2030 on Sports Journalism Education, Ethics and Practices

Vision 2030 has catalysed significant transformations in Saudi sports journalism, discussed in this section. Since its inception in 2016 the Saudi national strategy extended beyond economic diversification and sought transformation of Saudi social dynamics and its overall worldwide standing. Although the initiative does not focus solely on journalism, its objectives and targeted sports investments had major impact on sports journalism operations (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). It was established with the goal of building a "vibrant society" through enhanced private sector alliances, and as such, part of that vision included positioning the Kingdom as a leading host for international sporting events to boost global recognition (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016; Alshehri et al., 2023). The Kingdom's national strategy guides how media development occurs alongside state-media interactions in sports. Investment in sports by entities such as the Public Investment Fund (PIF) requires media reporting that supports the story of the nation's

advancement and achievements (Alshehri et al., 2023). This national agenda helped reshape journalistic norms, which might lead to media coverage that emphasises the positive outcomes of sports development and major events within the Kingdom. The promotion of sports supports the vision's strategic objectives, including those that shape state-media interactions where media platforms (together with sports journalism) played a key role in projecting a modernising image both within the country and abroad. Under this framework sport is seen as a fundamental pillar that serves as a tool for constructing national identity and improving public health while boosting Saudi Arabia's international soft power (Imawan et al., 2024; Skey, 2023). As a result, the work environment for Saudi sports journalists underwent major changes in-line with the new national priorities. The changing context created both new possibilities and unique challenges (around education, ethics and state relation) in their relationship with Twitter/X as the next sub-topics will highlight:

6.6.1 Education

Despite Saudi Arabia's investment in modernisation efforts, journalism education still suffers greatly, which has been highlighted strongly in interviews. From a scholarly perspective, Tripathi and Ben Said (2024) argue that journalism programmes throughout the Gulf region have notably expanded over the last fifteen years; however, they tend to focus mainly on technical training rather than specialised journalism fields such as sports journalism. Interviews revealed a consistent educational gap; they reported facing difficulties connecting their formal education learning outcomes to the daily requirements of Twitter/X. There exists a clear division because traditional education focused on theoretical aspects, whereas Twitter/X demands direct practical abilities in digital storytelling along with audience interaction and quick verification.

Sports journalists who gained digital skills through practical experience relied less on formal training modules, which reiterates what has been said in literature about lack of specialised training for journalists (Hedman and Djerf-Pierre, 2013). As Vision 2030 in Saudi Arabia seeks to establish human capital for the knowledge economy (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016), this research shows that there is a substantial gap between this goal and how sports journalists receive professional training. This is especially true when considering the gaps that currently exist in science literacy in GCC countries, which was argued to be the result of absence of science journalism studies and disparities in treating and articulating science news in media (Tripathi and Ben Said, 2024).

6.6.2 Ethics and Digital Practices

Ethics in sports journalism are an important topic for understanding the impact (or lack of) fostered by Vision 2030. Journalists across the study described a number of daily ethical dilemmas, for example: What strategies allow journalists to maintain professional neutrality alongside their personal branding efforts? At what point does audience engagement become pandering? Which verification guidelines need to be established for reporting breaking news on Twitter/X? These challenges go beyond personal issues and rather address wider conflicts generated by Vision 2030's drive for digital transformation. Tripathi and Ben Said (2024) describe this as contextual restriction, where technological progress has notably outpaced ethical standard development. Several journalists pointed to a troubling trend: Twitter/X's commercial incentives at times sacrifice accuracy and integrity for profit. Vision 2030's digital focus has accelerated Twitter/X adoption among Saudi sports journalists. Along those lines argued strongly that 'digital adaptation' was not really optional but rather a fundamental prerequisite to professional survival in the Kingdom, which was emphasised by Tripathi and Ben Said (2024) where they argued that technology adoption directly links to economic development goals, and this adaptation was

strongly felt on the daily practice of journalists. Some journalists highlighted that Twitter/X has expanded their reach, while others worried about the tension between Twitter/X's demand for speed and traditional verification standards. Skey (2023) argues that the Saudi government's strategic sports investments translated ultimately into significant increase media activity, with Twitter/X serving as a primary channel for announcements and promotions related to Vision 2030 and sports initiatives under its remit.

6.6.3 State-Media Relationship

Vision 2030 has established a strategic positioning framework which Almakaty (2024) argued is a mechanism that redirects media resources to support national development goals instead of simply exercising control over them. Within this system, journalists take on an active role in national development goals under a transformative agenda which emerges from this framework, where they show their strategic positioning through how they align themselves with national priorities (Young, 2024). Journalists, more broadly, do not simply implement state policies but actively engage in a field where their professional standards sometimes support and sometimes oppose national agendas. The function of this relationship stands out because it operates differently than Western media models. Saudi sports journalists adopt the "development journalism" model described by (Guaaybess, 2019) because their reporting drives social and economic advancement rather than functioning as adversarial watchdogs (see section 5.7). These shifts fit Vision 2030's goals for economic diversification and cultural progression.

Vision 2030 presents new challenges for journalists as they face new centralised control mechanisms and criticism on social media (Hertog, 2024). International coverage generally lacks recognition of the complex situation that journalists face in this context. According to Almakaty (2024), Western media usually presents Saudi media as either fully controlled or seeking Western-

style independence. The findings, however, show a reality that contains many complex layers where journalists discussed how they manage professional standards alongside national narratives which shows this negotiation as a structural feature of how Saudi sports journalism functions under Vision 2030. As such, the real experiences of Saudi sports journalists handling this changing relationship remain beyond the scope of western perspectives as the literature (as demonstrated in Chapter 3) grounds how it defines good journalism within Western ideals of neutrality, independence, and challenging the status quo. However, such definitions do not take into account the cultural complexities that may shape how journalists are seen by society. In the case of Saudi Arabia, the data clearly shows that journalists are more than just seekers of truth or gatekeepers of news, but are rather important societal figures that are expected to contribute to societal harmony and national pride.

6.6.4 Negotiating Tradition

The most compelling characteristic of Saudi sports journalism under Vision 2030 lies in its role as a battleground where traditional practices confront modern transformations and where there is ongoing negotiation between traditional values and transformative pressures. Journalists act as a bridge between traditional practices and modern innovations through active negotiation between continuity and change, which generates hybrid forms of journalism reflecting both global and local cultural elements. This negotiation happens daily across multiple dimensions (technological, ethical, professional, and cultural), as some participants in this study emphasised the necessity of introducing institutional adaptation strategies to meet digital demands (see section 5.8). It also occurs against what Almakaty (2024) identifies as "internal cultural resistance to rapid liberal reforms," where changes in media practices must be balanced against established cultural norms. International media can often misinterpret this process as global coverage tends to evaluate Saudi

reforms against Western benchmarks rather than understanding them on their own terms (Almakaty, 2024). The narratives in outlets like The Washington Post and The Financial Times frequently question the authenticity and depth of Saudi reforms (el-Baghdadi, 2018), viewing them primarily through political rather than cultural lenses. In reality, Saudi sports journalists operate as active agents in this negotiation space between the old and new, where they critique, modify and inform their implementation of Vision 2030.

6.7 Transforming Economic Models of Sports Journalism in Saudi Arabia

The economic transformations in Saudi sports journalism that occurred after the modernisation reforms go beyond influencing technological evolution because they demand news organisations fundamentally rethink their value creation and capture strategies (Boyle, 2017). The shift of audiences to online platforms led to the breakdown of traditional revenue models that were once based on print subscriptions and broadcast rights, as the rate of transformation in Saudi Arabia stands out despite similar shifts elsewhere (Ncube et al., 2023; Alsaaidi, 2020). In this new environment, digital platforms have become crucial components of the sports economy (Chadwick, 2017).

Jarrar et al. (2024) argue that sports organisations along with clubs and athletes, have shifted to social media for their event marketing and sponsorship acquisition processes. News organisations now face pressure to establish themselves within the digital ecosystem (as economic competitors) in order to build advertising and sponsorship revenue beyond their traditional content creation profits (Chadwick, 2017). When it comes to numbers, The Oxford Business Group reported in 2016 that Saudi print sales plummeted while major newspapers experienced reduced revenues despite holding steady market share (Noman et al., 2015; Althiabi, 2017). This extended beyond digital disruption as younger Saudis demonstrated a strong preference for digital platforms over

traditional print and television media. As such, sports journalists faced growing competition for reader attention within the congested digital media landscape (Nelson, 2018). The response of study participants to current challenges shows that there are both innovative approaches and areas of weakness that they are actively looking into. Twitter/X's distinct business model also adds additional complexity to this equation. The platform's reward system pushes journalists toward producing fast, engaging content instead of conducting detailed investigations or analysis (reported by a majority of participants). Breaking news available on Twitter/X reduces the value of exclusive newspaper stories, which leads to significant changes in economic motivations (McEnnis, 2023). Overall, journalistic revenue models are undergoing recalibration as social media metrics begin to challenge traditional journalistic authority standards, including editorial independence and investigative depth.

This raises fundamental questions about journalism's future in Saudi Arabia: Is it possible for journalism to keep providing essential functions if economic survival becomes more dependent on engagement metrics than serving the public interest? Journalists must not only transition to new platforms but also maintain their core principles while creating effective financial models. The way sports journalism handles the digital transformation challenges in Saudi Arabia will determine future media development throughout the region. This study thus advances knowledge about the economic changes affecting sports journalism during the digital era. The research findings show that Twitter/X's disruption of traditional revenue models has forced journalists to build personal brands, which then revealed wider conflicts between economic needs and professional ethics (Roberts & Emmons, 2016; Ottovordemgentschenfelde, 2017). The study shows that digital platforms now play a fundamental role in the sports economy, shifting journalism from content production toward audience engagement and this provides important information about the

changing business strategies of sports journalism in new media arenas (Lewis et al., 2014; Stamm & Whiteside, 2024).

6.8 Regional Dimensions: Saudi Sports Journalism in Gulf and MENA Media Ecosystems

To fully understand the dynamics that Saudi sports journalism operates within, it is essential to place it within the larger media and political landscapes of both the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the MENA region. Using only Western models for comparison restricts understanding because these models overlook the unique regional dynamics, shared cultural contexts and intra-regional competitions that shape media practices in the Arab context. A comparative analysis of Saudi sports journalism with KSA's neighbouring countries such as Qatar, the UAE, Kuwait, and Egypt offers a Global South lens that recognises unique development pathways and power dynamics.

Multiple Gulf states heavily invest in sports within frameworks similar to Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 which results in a regional competitive environment (Babar & Lynch, 2023; Abuamer & Nassar, 2023). The rivalry among nations includes both media representation and national image building through sports events. Kozman and Liu's (2024) research on sports news from Egypt, Kuwait, Lebanon, Qatar, and UAE shows that the "loyal-facilitator" or "cheerleader" role throughout the region indicates that sports journalism's alignment with national sentiments and institutional interests is not exclusive to Saudi Arabia but represents a wider feature in Arab sports media that is shaped by similar political conditions. Although Saudi Arabia was not included in this study's sample, the analysis highlights a regional journalistic trend that benchmarks Saudi sports media's adherence to state narratives. This present study on the other hand suggests that

Saudi sports journalism's alignment with national narratives (see section 6.5) is similar to what is seen in neighbouring countries (although there may be regional differences).

As such, the influence of social media on sports engagement extends beyond Saudi Arabia and affects the entire region (Jarrar et al., 2024). Twitter/X and similar platforms function as transnational arenas for regional sports events and fan interactions which occasionally face interference from governmental actors (Jones, 2023). Media consumption patterns move across MENA borders due to shared linguistic and cultural elements, which allows Saudi sports media trends to both influence and be influenced by media patterns in Egypt and the UAE for example. These cross-border influences demonstrate that Saudi sports journalism operates within broader Arabic-language media conversations while maintaining local regulatory constraints. The media scene in the Gulf region is thus underpinned by "the spécialisation, exploitation and reification of a familiar element of state-qua-state interaction" (Murray, 2013). Saudi Arabia, alongside Qatar, UAE, and other Gulf states, increasingly leverages sports to enhance diplomatic relations and project national identity. This creates a regional ecosystem where sports journalism extends beyond athletic reporting to become "one of the means to the ends" of foreign policy objectives (Murray, 2013) where governments "have long been drawn toward sports and sporting festivals" due to their "reach and power" as the "opiate of the masses" particularly resonates in the Gulf context, turning the sports scene into "a testing ground for the nation or for a political 'system.'" (p 12)

Finally, Murray's analysis describes how governments have sought to "tap in" to sports' expanding influence because digital spaces break down traditional barriers between Gulf nations, as sports journalism becomes a "lingua franca" that supports regional dialogue and national interests simultaneously. This regional perspective highlights the underlying conflicts present in sports

journalism. Participants of this study treat the sporting realm with a high degree of respect which leads to resistance whenever politics leaks into this space. This is a key finding because Gulf media landscapes show clear tension between journalistic standards and the "mixing of sports, diplomacy and politics" that Murray says is "part of the milieu of international relations."

Through analysis of Saudi sports journalism in the context of Gulf and MENA media systems, the study provided regional highlights that take a different perspective to that of Western approach to digital journalism. The analysis shows that Saudi Arabia's patterns when it comes to investments in sports and sports journalism are somewhat representative of broader regional trends are not isolated, because sports journalism's connection with national narratives is more of a regional attribute developed under the specific political circumstances of the Gulf. This contributed theoretical knowledge about digital journalism's function across different regional settings with common cultural attributes as Saudi Arabia's interaction with sports, although highly similar to other countries in the region, was characterised by increased complexity due to the larger disparity between its stronger cultural norms and wider reform programme.

6.9 Diplomacy, Politics, and the External Context of Saudi Sports Journalism

Saudi Arabia's rapid expansion of sports initiatives, most notably in football, motorsport, boxing, and e-sports, has become a central pillar of its foreign policy and soft-power strategy. As highlighted in the literature (Al-Sheikh, 2023; Reiche & Omari, 2024), sport now operates as a form of public diplomacy, intended to reshape global perceptions of the Kingdom, diversify its international partnerships, and signal a new cultural openness. This broader political and diplomatic context is fundamentally shaping the environment in which Saudi sports journalists are operating, influencing not only what stories attain prominence, but also how journalists frame athletes, events, and institutional ambitions. Unlike countries where sport is not deeply embedded

in foreign policy, such as Norway, Japan, or South Korea, where soft power relies more on cultural industries, innovation, or diplomacy, Saudi Arabia connects engagement in sport directly to national branding and geopolitical positioning. This means Saudi sports journalists work within a media ecosystem in which the coverage of major sporting events (e.g., the Saudi Pro League, Formula One, international boxing bouts) carries implications that extend beyond entertainment or national pride. Their reporting intersects with questions of international legitimacy, foreign investment, regional competition, and global image-building. Consequently, journalists may feel a heightened sense of responsibility when framing issues with the potential to affect diplomatic relationships or national reputations. This is particularly relevant on platforms such as Twitter/X, which are known to prompt commentary that circulates globally and instantaneously.

This external context understandably influences the boundaries of critique and commentary. As Detchenique and Grolleau (2024) have noted, the sportswashing debates, international scrutiny, and human-rights criticisms that accompany Saudi mega-sports projects create an environment in which journalists must navigate between professional autonomy, national expectations, and global narratives. The participants in this study described being acutely aware that their reporting may be interpreted both domestically and internationally, shaping perceptions of both Saudi policy and social transformation. For this reason, some journalists adopt a more cautious or strategic communication practice when posting on Twitter/X, avoiding commentary that may inadvertently conflict with broader diplomatic messaging or perhaps be amplified by international audiences.

In contrast, journalists in countries where sport does not function as a geopolitical tool may experience fewer constraints, issuing reports that prioritises performance, fandom, and commercial spectacle without the need to consider corresponding elements of state strategy or nation-branding (Merkel, 2016). When considering how Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia, use sport as a key

instrument of soft power and international diplomacy (Grix & Houlihan, 2014; Reiche, 2015; Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018), creating a politically charged sports ecosystem, we can better perceive why Saudi sports journalists experience Twitter/X as both a professional resource and a site of risk. It is acknowledged to be a platform where national narratives, political expectations, and global visibility can converge. This reinforces the study's broader finding that digital technologies are reshaping sports journalism differently dependent on local sociopolitical contexts. In Saudi Arabia, sport journalists engage with Twitter/X not merely as a tool for disseminating news, but as part of a wider ecosystem of soft-power communication and international image management.

This comparison demonstrates how the political significance of sport fundamentally reconfigures professional boundaries, risk calculations, and communicative strategies among sports journalists, suggesting sports journalism cannot be understood independently of foreign policy context. By demonstrating how foreign policy priorities shape journalistic norms, risk calculations, and platform use, this study extends existing scholarship on sports journalism beyond liberal-democratic media systems and highlights the need to situate digital sports reporting within its geopolitical context.

6.10 Conclusion

This thesis outlined the evolution of Saudi sports journalism during the current digital era through the examination of the interactions between technological advancements and professional standards, which takes stock of the cultural backgrounds and institutional limitations that shape the trajectory of the media landscape in the Saudi setting. Twitter/X's integration into sports journalism brought about core changes that transformed the profession in Saudi Arabia, and went

beyond simple technological advancements to impacting the overall dynamics of journalistic practice. The results show that the media environment in the Kingdom has effectively undergone fundamental transformation where established journalism standards were challenged by new digital methods, tools and approaches that generated both potential advantages and points of friction.

As such, this study has shown that Twitter/X has changed Saudi sports journalism processes around newsgathering and verification as well as content creation and audience engagement. The platform was agreed to be an essential instrument for journalists who need to find sources and track breaking news while distributing live content. However, even though Twitter/X now plays an instrumental role in modern journalistic practices it has not replaced the established methods of journalism in the country but instead operates in a supplementary manner to those professional norms (as the data illustrates). Accounts from participants show that Saudi sports journalism is underpinned by a hierarchical verification system that prioritises direct club sources as primary information channels, and then uses official club accounts and their journalist networks as secondary and tertiary sources respectively. This system reflects selective adaptation in its transition to digital journalism and demonstrated very nuanced ways in how professional conservatism can merge with a cultural system that has historically placed authority and verification in centralised structures.

The research synthesised findings from 40 interviews with sports journalists (at varying positions and levels of experience) with contemporary literature on the challenges of modern-day journalism, and discussed many intricate dynamics of Saudi sports journalism. The analysis shows how digital platforms like Twitter/X have altered professional identities, verification procedures and gender relations in the field by giving journalists stronger voices to challenge the status quo

(Awad, 2010; Khalil et al., 2023; Muyidi, 2020). Moreover, it found that institutional controls and state narratives maintain their influence over the profession as a whole thus generating an ongoing dynamic of tension between elements of empowerment and agency granted by new technologies and journalists' need to operate within censorship and regulatory structures (Awad, 2010; Almakaty, 2025). On the other hand, Vision 2030, as argued in extant literature, was a pivotal element in this equation as it led the transformation of journalistic structures, dynamics and the overall arena of journalism, as it increased investment in sports and sports journalism, which contributed to media narratives being steered toward national development goals (Vision 2030, 2016; Alshehri et al., 2023). The financial structures that support sports journalism was also greatly impacted because digital platforms are creating disruptions in traditional revenue models and driving the need for sustainable digital business strategies (Jarrar et al., 2024). Finally, the regional Gulf and MENA perspective on Saudi sports journalism highlights patterns like the "loyal-facilitator" role and cross-border social media impacts which demonstrate why Western-centric models fall short in understanding the complex dynamics of Saudi media and journalism (Kozman & Liu, 2024; Babar & Lynch, 2023). Analysing Saudi sports journalism through this regional framework also highlights the complexity of these dynamics. The study's comparative analysis highlights larger regional trends where a range of Gulf nations have made large investments in sports through frameworks parallel to Vision 2030 and created a competitive space where media portrayal is being as a tool for national image enhancement and soft power.

Results suggest that Twitter/X's democratising potential clashes with established professional standards of sports media in Saudi Arabia, which raises larger questions around how digital journalism operates in authoritarian contexts. The platform opens up new opportunities for direct engagement between journalists, athletes and audiences, but the research has shown that these new

connections occur within established parameters of control that journalists themselves see as increasingly out of sync with the new digital environment. Journalists argue that these regulations were drawn from print journalism, and struggle to accommodate live coverage and two-way interaction, such as rules requiring pre-publication approval that conflict with live-tweeting expectations, or guidelines about official sourcing that don't account for athlete's direct social media communication. More importantly, this study suggests that the press community has accepted these regulatory constraints so deeply that they are no longer even seen as possible points of critique. Rather, respondents overwhelmingly described these regulations as necessary standards rather than barriers to successful journalism. This finding suggests that the Saudi press community has not considered the way legacy regulations could potentially restrict their effectiveness in new media, and the finding that they accept them without considering whether they are still relevant represents a major gap in their professional thinking, especially given the Vision 2030 plan to promote digital innovation at the same time as maintaining tight controls over content. Separately, this tension with regulation intersects with a fundamental change in journalist–audience relations that Twitter/X facilitates. This study shows a change from a broadcasting model to a ‘live’ model where audiences are no longer passive consumers but instead news generators, a shift where audiences often spread news before official outlets, influence club decisions via social media and correct journalists in real-time. This challenge to journalistic authority creates significant questions about how journalists can continue to maintain professional credibility and to perform gatekeeping roles when their audiences have access to independent information sources and have considerable power over news events.

As such, the democratisation of sports discourse through enhanced participation still presents journalists with challenges and the task of managing the tension between their professional

standards and keeping audience engagement up. The digital environment also presents unique challenges for female sports journalists working in Saudi Arabia because although Vision 2030 promoted better female participation, female journalists still face an arena that operates differently than that of their male peers. The study shows that female journalists frequently use disengagement techniques to handle adverse interactions with male fans which demonstrates their shared resistance to enduring gender power dynamics, even after the modernisation changes. The Saudi context stands out in this regard because it is where universal professional challenges intersect with particular cultural and religious norms about women's visibility and social engagement, where both have not been actively negotiated like in other countries, leaving the situation in a limbo between strict cultural conservatism and strongly-pushed liberalisation reforms. Nonetheless, the study showed that Twitter/X offered female journalists the chance to increase their "negotiated visibility" through strategic profile management however, it subjects them to increased expectations from society and risk of harassment.

Moreover, the research looked at generational differences in both Twitter/X adoption and integration processes where journalists who are in their 10–15-year career stage tend to see Twitter/X as a central part of their professional identity but journalists with two decades or more of experience remain sceptical of and detached from the platform. As such, media organisations are now required to prioritise bridging generational gaps to effectively engage younger audiences because these divides represent more than merely internal challenges and extend to involve systemic issues with adaptation to online spaces. The results thus highlight the immediate need to develop journalism training programs that combine technical skills with digital skills, and supplement those with appropriate ethical thinking, cultural understanding and business knowledge. This is important because the transformations caused by online journalism have had

significant economic impact on the old print media business model, as Twitter/X has changed traditional revenue streams from print subscriptions and broadcast rights, and ultimately forced news organisations to rethink their methods for generating and securing value to their customers. This economic shift raises many questions about the future of journalism in Saudi Arabia: Will journalism remain capable of performing its fundamental roles when its financial stability relies more on engagement metrics than public service objectives?

Ultimately, Twitter/X functions as a paradoxical platform within Saudi sports journalism, simultaneously enabling participation while reinforcing existing constraints. Journalists reported that they actively negotiate complex professional, cultural, and institutional terrains through their engagement with technology, and do not simply passively accept it, but rather actively interrogate it, which they painted as strategic adaptation of Twitter/X rather than completely overhauling traditional standards and methods. As such, Saudi sports journalism's evolution on Twitter/X illustrates the wider societal negotiation between traditional values and modern advancements where the dual focus of Vision 2030 on digital transformation and social reform has produced an environment in-which sports journalism becomes a contested space for different values and priorities. Journalists act as mediators between conventional methods and modern advancements to produce journalism that combines global impacts with local traditions. However, the media landscape in the Kingdom remains in constant flux due to these daily negotiations that moves between technological, ethical, professional, and cultural dimensions. The research thus extends beyond its immediate Twitter/X and sports journalism focus to reveal how digital media can help sustain authoritarian rule and stringent regulation. In that regard, fully realising Twitter/X's potential for sports journalism in the Kingdom necessitates persistent renegotiation of power structures as it functions under a system where the state maintains its influence through less

obvious methods where it has moved from explicit direct control to a more subtle control model that is consolidated in the minds and professional behaviours of journalists, linking adherence to duty and national pride (for example, see Hargreaves, 2014).

Further, the study shows that technological adoption in journalism extends beyond technical processes and is deeply influenced by cultural, institutional and social contexts. The story of Saudi sports journalism's adoption of Twitter/X is a uniquely cultural adaptation process rather than a standard digital disruption narrative. The findings indicate that journalists are not experiencing complete transformation or superficial modifications but instead, they are gradually adjusting their practices to meet new technological, economic, and social conditions, although the extent to-which they have been able to achieve that is still unclear. As such, the continuation of Saudi sports journalism will require improving its uptake of technology in its reporting and news dissemination in tandem with newly developed professional standards, financial/monetisation strategies, and training systems that meet the new demands of the digital age of journalism and its consumers, who are rapidly steering away from print news to social media outlets.

Finally, despite the comprehensive nature of this study, there are significant gaps that still remain in the literature. The field still requires further empirical investigation into how Saudi sports journalists manage verification and trust online while considering the "hierarchy of trust" concept discussed in section 6.2. There is arguably a deficit of detailed case studies that investigate how female journalists use Twitter/X to empower themselves against the distinct limitations they experience. A modern examination of how media rules influence sports journalism together with practical outcomes of state-owned investments in social media platforms needs to be investigated in future studies because it is important to examine how Vision 2030 has transformed sports journalism and the monetisation techniques used by Saudi sports media outlets in the digital era.

And lastly, the regional media landscape will benefit from comprehensive comparative research that examines journalistic practices and ethical standards alongside economic factors across Gulf/MENA countries. This research offers what is arguably the first full-scale empirical study that analyses Twitter/X's transformative effects on sports journalism in Saudi Arabia from a purely sociocultural lens, and addresses the knowledge gap around digital journalism practices across non-Western regions. Existing studies tend to focus on digital journalism transformations in Western democracies but this research presents a culturally focused investigation that demonstrates how Saudi Arabia's sociocultural, political and institutional contexts shape technology adoption instead of the other way around. In doing so, the research examined how Saudi sports journalists integrate Twitter/X into existing professional structures, which opposes the conventional "digital disruption" narratives constantly highlighted in literature and shows that technological adaptation depends greatly on specific local environments (McEnnis, 2021; Pavlik, 2021; Zhao, 2025).

6.11 Challenges and Limitations

Despite its contributions, this research acknowledges several challenges and limitations. Primarily, the study's qualitative design, which involved in-depth interviews with 40 Saudi sports journalists, provided rich insights but also limited generalisability. The findings might not be fully representative of the broader population of sports journalists, particularly those working outside major urban areas or those less active on social media platforms. The specific focus on Twitter/X as a representative of digital media also limits generalisability across other emerging digital platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, or TikTok, each of which presents unique affordances and constraints for journalistic practice (Mellado & Alfaro, 2020). Future research could address this gap through comparative analysis across multiple platforms to offer a more comprehensive picture

of digital media's role in Saudi sports journalism. Another critical limitation of this research arises from methodological constraints inherent in qualitative interviewing. Despite in-depth interviews providing rich insights into personal practices and perspectives, they also rely heavily on self-reporting, potentially subject to social desirability bias or retrospective sense-making. Participants may have been inclined to overstate their adherence to ethical standards and downplay instances of compromised professional practices, especially given Saudi Arabia's tightly regulated media environment (Almaglooth, 2013). Future research could benefit from mixed-method designs combining qualitative interviews with quantitative analysis of actual Twitter/X content or ethnographic observation of journalists' practices to validate self-reported behaviours.

Moreover, this research is constrained by temporal limitations. Given the rapid pace at which digital technologies and social media practices evolve, findings presented here may have temporal limitations. Twitter/X, like other digital platforms, frequently updates features, policies, and affordances, continuously reshaping how journalists engage with the platform (Ferucci, 2022). Therefore, longitudinal research designs that track changes over time could further clarify ongoing impacts and transformations, providing richer understandings of digital journalism's evolution within the Saudi context. The research also confronts inherent methodological limitations related to qualitative analysis. At the same time, qualitative interviews enabled deep exploration of journalists' lived experiences, the absence of quantitative analysis or mixed-method approaches restricts broader claims about prevalence, frequency, or comparative practices across larger samples. Employing a mixed-method approach integrating surveys, content analysis, or network analysis, could complement qualitative findings and triangulate insights, providing stronger methodological rigor (Hermida, 2013; McGregor & Molyneux, 2020). Furthermore, cultural and contextual limitations represent another significant constraint of the current study. Whilst

providing important insights into Saudi sports journalism specifically, the study's highly context-specific findings may have limited applicability beyond Saudi Arabia or similar conservative, highly regulated media environments. Distinct cultural factors such as gender norms, media regulation, and organisational hierarchy significantly shape Saudi sports journalists' experiences with Twitter/X, differing substantially from Western contexts extensively covered in existing scholarship (Elsayed & Emam, 2021; Almaglooth, 2013). Comparative studies involving other Middle Eastern countries or contexts with similarly restrictive media environments could reveal broader patterns or unique divergences that further enrich scholarship in this area.

Overall, at the same time, this research makes significant scholarly contributions regarding the transformative impacts of digital platforms like Twitter/X on sports journalism in Saudi Arabia, it also acknowledges methodological, cultural, and contextual limitations. Addressing these limitations through diverse research methodologies, comparative studies, and longitudinal analyses will further deepen scholarly understanding of digital journalism's complexities, especially in culturally distinct, non-Western contexts.

6.12 Recommendations

Some immediate practice-based suggestions emerge from this study, starting with the immediate newsroom-based responses to the problems highlighted by the participants. Newsrooms should provide extensive training in Twitter/X that would combine technical skills with a basic understanding of the culture and law. Since the participants reported having learned about Twitter/X through experience rather than structured training, training programs in verification techniques, engagement strategies, and platform-specific regulations would be highly useful. While Twitter/X was the most referenced platform in interviews, several journalists also acknowledged using other social media channels like Snapchat, YouTube, and TikTok to reach

broader or younger audiences. As such, any training initiative should consider the broader social media ecosystem, ensuring that journalists are equipped with platform-appropriate skills. This should be complemented by reverse mentoring models, where older journalists share institutional knowledge and younger journalists support their peers' digital fluency. The study found there are deficits in both directions (young journalists should learn the ins and outs of the news organisation while the older journalists need to learn digital operation), and so structured exchange of knowledge would fill the gaps while resolving the inconsistencies in practices reported by the participants. More importantly, this program should also create protective measures for female journalists, such as a reporting mechanism for harassment, peer-to-peer networks, and other alternative ways of engagement, since female participants consistently reported that they chose to disengage from Twitter/X due to hostile interactions. Newsrooms should integrate these measures with the training programs to form comprehensive programs that will help develop the journalists. In the education field, journalism schools should develop specialised courses that include digital sports journalism in the Saudi context. Participants repeatedly reported discrepancies between what they learned in journalism schools and what is needed in Twitter/X's reality, which points to the need for a curriculum that teaches technical skills, ethical rules, and an understanding of the culture. This training should include specific modules about the verification problems in real-time reporting in the digital space, especially balancing speed with accuracy in a rule-based context. These training initiatives will better prepare future journalists and continue to train current journalists. Change across the industry requires the creation of updated ethics code for digital sports journalism that takes into account the platform's specificities while recognising the culture and the law. The law, as reported by the participants, is currently not in line with the digital reality and needs to be updated to serve digital journalism. This effort should also enable a dialogue

between journalists and the law enforcement on updating oversight standards to reflect digital journalism (especially real-time reporting and audience engagement).

Finally, the media organisations need to reinvent their business model and create new sources of revenue that are long-lasting and sustainable, balancing the engagement figures with public service journalism. Participants reported that commercialisation on Twitter/X compromises their commitment to journalism, and that is an organisational challenge that should be resolved. The initiatives should include partnering with Gulf and MENA media organisations to exchange practices and set standards for digital sports journalism in the region, since the study found evidence of transnational influences. These suggestions address the specific problems uncovered in this study while taking into account the Saudi context of media transformation in Vision 2030.

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List of Appendix

Appendix A: Keyword Analysis Matrix for participants

<i>K</i>	<i>Keyword</i>	<i>Number of statistical mentions</i>	<i>Number of unique mentions</i>	<i>Linked Words</i>	<i>Proponent Interviews</i>	<i>Sample Quote</i>
<i>MK1</i>	Speed	128	42	pace, acceleration, immediacy	All interviews	"X has disrupted traditional journalistic standards and practices by accelerating the editorial process to keep pace with rapidly developing events."
<i>MK2</i>	Influence	105	26	impact, effect, sway	All interviews	"X has become a front for reporters and a tool for publishing."
<i>MK3</i>	Adaptation	56	24	adjustment, flexibility, change	All interviews	"Saudi sports journalists are adapting to significant changes in their identities and professional practices due to the disruptive impact of the technologies, shifting how stories are sourced, verified, and presented."
<i>MK4</i>	Diversity	40	19	variety, range, multiformity	All interviews	"X has expanded the scope of sports coverage in Saudi Arabia, allowing for more diversity in the types of sports covered and the voices represented."
<i>MK5</i>	Transformation	90	18	change, shift, evolution	All interviews	"The digital transformation of press institutions in Saudi Arabia is not an option, but rather a necessity."
<i>K1</i>	Accuracy	201	63	precise, truthful, factual, verified, valid	10,13, 33	"Saudi sports journalists follow precise steps, as they communicate directly with sources and verify information through more than one source."
<i>K2</i>	Independence	129	54	autonomy, freedom	3,6,19,22,30	"Complete independence in editorial policies [...] We have complete independence in electronic publishing."
<i>K3</i>	Credibility	133	47	legitimacy, integrity, trustworthiness	12,14,16	"Previously, reporters made their names through the merit of the stories that bear their bylines."
<i>K4</i>	Objectivity	90	43	impartiality, neutrality, fairness, verification	5, 29,31	"Objectivity and impartiality in reporting [...] fact checking is essential, requiring verification of claims through multiple primary sources or independent verification entities."

K5	Engagement	135	38	interaction, involvement, participation	15, 23,28	"Constructive interaction cultivates trust gradually over time through consistency and persistence."
K6	Audience	343	36	public, followers, readers	11,18	"Through direct communication and interaction between them, which contributes to the exchange of opinions and information."
K7	Challenges	75	33	difficulties, struggles, issues	1,5,24	"The challenge lies in their willingness to adapt and embrace change. Despite attempts to launch digital initiatives, many have not fully seized the potential of these new platforms."
K8	Opportunities	137	31	prospects, potential	23	"X presented a new personal branding opportunity for sports journalists. Through effective use of the platform, I was able to expand my reach beyond traditional sports reporting."
K9	Standards	112	29	principles, policies, guidelines	6,15,32	"There may be general management directives or existing editorial policies at the newspaper or news agency that may play a role in guiding how the platform is generally used."
K10	Platforms	370	27	media, channels, tools	3,5, 28	"By leveraging traditional and digital media platforms, especially X, Saudi sports journalists have integrated X to enable covering live events with unparalleled speed and immediacy."
K11	Analysis	160	25	interpretation, evaluation	13, 25, 30	"By collecting information from various sources and perspectives, journalists can provide in-depth interpretation and analysis."
K12	Leadership	13	25	management, governance	4,8, 38	"Editors provide guidance and direction while journalists have the independence to put forward ideas and contribute to the decision-making process."
K13	Culture	54	24	environment, values, norms	2, 21, 26	"Cultures within newsrooms can already influence how journalists use Twitter, as Saudi Arabia's traditional news reporting system may conflict with the more immediate, less filtered communication style of X."
K14	Competition	24	23	rivalry	5,7,24	"Now, news coverage is expected to be continuous, adapting to a 24-hour cycle divided into morning, evening and night shifts"
K15	Identity	53	22	brand, persona	28, 40	"Having a profile can help expand a journalist's reach, allowing them to establish a distinct voice and brand."
K16	Disruption	88	21	disturbance, interference	9,20,22	"X disrupted the traditional foundations of sports newsrooms in Saudi Arabia, as it played a major role in dismantling the daily routine and the usual hierarchy."

K17	Protection	7	20	privacy, security, safety	10, 33	"Blurring personal life and reporting complicates matters massively. Oversharing diary-like details erodes audience trust and professional distance."
K18	Evolution	34	20	development, progress, growth	9,11, 40	"The media field moves with technological progress, as tools advance, journalism capacities also expand."
K19	Responsibility	57	18	accountability, liability, duty	5,15, 27	"I believe responding to negativity with more negativity benefits no one. Accountability through thoughtful dialogue works best."
K20	Training	24	17	education, learning	20, 36	"It is essential that newsrooms invest in proper training for journalists to use the platform not only as a platform for disseminating news, but as a tool for direct communication with the audience and analyzing their reactions and preferences."
K21	Boundaries	32	16	limits, restrictions	23,34, 37	"When it comes to setting boundaries between private life and professional presence on X, it is a personal choice."
K22	Accessibility	8	16	availability, openness	13,24, 25	"Unlike traditional media, where feedback mechanisms were slow, Twitter/X allows fans to respond instantly from their mobile devices, creating a more dynamic and engaging experience."
K23	Authenticity	19	15	legitimacy, validity	1,12, 18	"The key is establishing two-way constant communication. Through polls, I solicit fans' takes on developing stories, making them feel part of the community."
K24	Collaboration	34	15	cooperation, teamwork	3, 24, 35	"Interaction with editors and fellow journalists in the newsroom is collaborative and dynamic."
K25	Skills	73	15	abilities, capabilities	5, 19, 22	"X has expanded the professional horizons of journalists into areas beyond traditional sports reporting."
K26	Innovation	18	14	creativity, modernization	6,20, 26	"To keep up with trends and technologies, I find that our commitment as journalists to constantly innovate and update our tools is indispensable."
K27	Strategy	71	13	approach, methodology	4, 16, 24	"Newsrooms can adopt integrated strategies that focus on creating original content while remaining verified and reliable."
K28	Growth	12	12	development, progress	11, 21	"I noticed remarkable growth in the field, with increased freedom of opinion and diversity in journalistic styles and techniques."
K29	Awareness	18	12	consciousness, realization	16, 39	"X changed a lot of concepts by making journalists closer to the public and more influential in society. Journalists use Twitter/X to

						spread awareness and highlight important issues affecting society, strengthening their role as pillars of information."
K30	Support	90	11	assistance, backing	4,14, 38	"There is sufficient support from the newspaper. Sometimes a journalist's newspaper helps, but he should not represent it negatively."
K31	Transparency	15	10	openness, clarity, honesty	6, 27,31	"X can also be used to exchange ideas and opinions about sporting events, enhancing interaction with readers and promoting transparency."
K32	Integrity	26	8	morality, ethics, principles	10, 31, 38	"I strive to maintain integrity, objectivity and ethical standards in my reporting, ensuring that self-promotion does not compromise the quality or credibility of my work."
K33	Pressure	28	8	stress, demand, expectation	9, 33, 36	"The constant presence of fans on X means that they are always available to receive sports content and participate in discussions and comments, putting pressure on journalists."

Matrix Column Key

1. K: The letter "K" followed by a number (e.g. K1, K2) is used to assign a unique code to each keyword. This allows for easy citation and identification of keywords during qualitative analysis.
2. MK: Letters "MK" refer to "Main Keywords". These keywords are distinguished due to the central role they play in interview discourse. Main keywords, although may not have been mentioned as frequently as other keywords, often transcend the majority of discussions in a single interview and across all interviews whether mentioned explicitly or not. Although can be considered as "sub-themes", they do not convey a narrative or story, rather a core component of narratives across interviews. These keywords are treated as key variables during thematic analysis, but do not constitute themes.
3. Keyword: This column lists the keywords extracted from the interview transcripts. Keywords represent frequently discussed high-level themes and concepts. These keywords also represent umbrella terms that engulf different iterations that hold the same meaning.
4. Number of statistical mentions: This column quantifies how many times the main keywords were directly mentioned in the interview transcripts. It captures the frequency of literal keywords occurrences regardless of context. This is purely for statistical purposes and does not reflect the importance of the keyword itself.
5. Number of unique mentions: Whereas statistical mentions count multiple usages, unique mentions record each keyword only once per discussion. A discussion is determined based on the continuity of arguments and where they stop and move to a different thematic discourse. This distinguishes keyword prevalence across different transcripts.

6. **Linked Words:** This column lists related words and variations in how keywords were referenced. For example "truthful" and "factual" are linked under the keyword "accuracy". As such, the main keyword's "unique count" records unique mentions of the main keyword and its associated terms that hold the same meaning. It is worth noting that some keywords are mentioned statistically less than their unique mentions, this is because the unique mentions also calculate linked word count.
7. **Proponent Interviews:** Two interview numbers are shown where the keyword was emphasized more substantially than others. This highlights transcripts with greater focus on each theme. This is done purely to establish two interviews where a certain keyword is represented more strongly. It does not suggest that the two interviews are the only interviews where the keyword is emphasized, rather, the two interviews which "embody" this keyword the most.
8. **Sample Quote:** A representative quote from the interviews is provided to showcase keyword usage in context. These are short excerpts that are either shortened, summarized, or paraphrased to illustrate the keyword in context. Full quotes can be found in the Interview Transcripts Master Document.

Appendix B: Interview Schedule

GUIDE TO SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS WITH SPORTS JOURNALISTS IN KSA Bournemouth University/The use of Twitter/X on sports Journalism in Saudi Arabia Project

Indicative aims

This interview schedule aims to provide insight into the experiences of sports journalists in Saudi Arabia whom have agreed to participate in this project. As such, the interviews will be focusing on the following themes:

- How do sports journalists characterize their experience adopting and integrating Twitter/X within their professional practice?
- How do sports journalists employ Twitter/X to facilitate the dissemination of their stories?
- How has Twitter/X impacted the relationship dynamics between sports journalists and their readers?
- How do sports journalists utilize Twitter/X as a platform for breaking news?
- To what extent has Twitter/X been incorporated into the routines and workflows of Saudi sports newsrooms?

Interview process

Each interview would take around -but not limited to- 45 minutes, and may proceed conversationally. The interviews will allow participants to speak beyond the 45-minute timeframe if they wish to elaborate further. Conversely, some participants may have less experience with this topic and may speak for under 45 minutes. Moreover, due to the flexible nature of semi-structured interviews, it is possible that subsequent questions may be addressed in responses to earlier questions. In these cases, the interviewer may opt to skip questions that had been already covered in a previous reply.

General tips

- Maintain a focused yet natural dialogue.
- Let the interviewee respond freely with minimal interruption.
- Actively listen and take notes on key points to return to later.
- Ask probing questions to elicit richer, more detailed responses (e.g. “Could you expand on that?”, “Do you have any examples?”, or “What else?”)
- Pose open-ended questions to gather multiple viewpoints.
- Use nonverbal cues like eye contact to encourage thorough responses.
- Reassure confidentiality if interviewees show hesitancy in responding.
- Avoid phrasing questions in ways that may prompt defensive reactions.
- Rephrase questions to match speech patterns but without altering the meaning.

**AUDIO RECORDING AND AUTO-TRANSCRIPTION WILL BE SWITCHED ON AFTER
OBTAINING CONSENT FROM PARTICIPANT**

OPENING STATEMENT

This interview consists of four parts that look into your experiences with Twitter/X as a sports journalist. This includes questions on the role of Twitter/X in the production of news stories, how Twitter/X impacts the relationship between sports journalists and their audience, the tools and support you have received for reporting on events and breaking news, and how Twitter/X is routinely used in the newsroom. Please speak freely about these experiences. All data will be anonymized.

PART 1: Saudi sports journalists' experiences adopting Twitter/X

1. Tell me about your role as a sports journalist. How long have you been in this profession?

- If you are still active, how would you compare reporting using print media versus social platforms like Twitter/X?
- Do you have a personal Twitter/X account? If so, how often do you tweet, and is it mainly as a journalist or private citizen?
- Describe your overall experience using Twitter/X and how much time you spend on it daily.
- Approximately how many sports stories do you produce per day? And are they typically written for Twitter/X or print outlets?
- Do you feel you have more autonomy publishing sports news on Twitter/X versus in the newspaper? Why?
- What does your employer's policy say about having a Twitter/X presence?

2. In your view, are Saudi press organisations shifting towards digital platforms, or still utilizing traditional approaches? What could be done to modernise sports journalism?

- Which publishing platform do you think is more influential now, Twitter/X or print sports media? Why?
- Have you received any training on mobile journalism? What skills did you learn?
- Share any examples of mobile journalism stories you have reported. How prominent are they among sports fans?
- Do you believe reporting a news story via mobile platforms or Twitter/X is more impactful than posting on a newspaper website?

3. Has Twitter/X-based reporting changed you as a sports journalist?

- If so, how have you changed, and is it for better or worse? What new capabilities has it enabled?

PART 2: How Saudi sports journalists use Twitter/X for news gathering and story production

[RQ1]: How do Saudi sports journalists utilise Twitter/X for news gathering practices involved in story production, including identifying sources, verifying details, and compiling stories?

- What steps do you take to corroborate information and confirm source credibility when reporting sports stories using Twitter/X?

- Walk me through your process for identifying and vetting sources on Twitter/X during news gathering.
- Beyond accuracy, how do you ensure your reporting is impartial and objective when utilising Twitter/X as a reporting tool?
- Have you developed any best practices around news gathering on Twitter/X to uphold standards of quality sports journalism?
- How does Twitter/X enable you to access unique sources and exclusive information for your sports stories?
- In what ways has having direct access to athletes and sports organisations on Twitter/X impacted your reporting?
- How do you leverage Twitter/X lists to stay on top of latest news from key sources in the sports world?
- What are some challenges you've encountered using Twitter/X for news gathering, and how have you overcome them?
- How do you think Twitter/X has impacted the depth and breadth of sports coverage in Saudi Arabia?
- Do you employ different standards when using Twitter/X as a source versus traditional media outlets?
- How confident are you in your ability to produce accurate sports stories using Twitter/X for news gathering?

PART 3: How Twitter/X enables Saudi sports journalists to interact with and engage audiences

[RQ2]: How does Twitter/X enable Saudi sports journalists to interact with audiences and facilitate participatory?

- In what ways do you leverage Twitter/X to actively engage with your audience as a sports journalist?
- Have you ever reconsidered posting certain tweets that could potentially upset some followers or cause loss of followers? Why or why not?
- Can you share examples of successful Twitter/X initiatives or campaigns you've conducted to boost audience engagement?
- How has Twitter/X helped you better understand the interests and preferences of your readership?
- How do you measure or assess the effectiveness of your audience engagement strategies on Twitter/X?
- How do you respond to negative feedback or criticism on Twitter/X, and what strategies do you use to address such comments?
- In your view, how has Twitter/X impacted the relationship between sports journalists and audiences in Saudi Arabia?
- How do you utilise Twitter/X to build a loyal following and increase your influence as a sports journalist?
- Do audiences act as gatekeepers on Twitter/X? Please provide an example if applicable.
- Why do you think fans are more likely to interact with sports content published on Twitter/X versus newspapers?
- Are sports hashtags launched by fans on Twitter/X an effective engagement tool? Do you participate in them as a journalist?

- Do you believe Saudi sports clubs' Twitter/X accounts have become key sources for journalists?
- Has Twitter/X clarified the role of sports journalists in breaking news scoops?
- How do you think Twitter/X has transformed the dynamics between athletes, journalists, and audiences?

PART 4: How Twitter/X has influenced editorial decisions, news judgement, and gatekeeping
[RQ3] How has the adoption of Twitter/X influenced editorial decisions, news judgement and gatekeeping by Saudi sports editors and journalists?

A. Reporting breaking news on Twitter/X:

- How do you typically react on Twitter/X when encountering breaking news in sports?
- What is your process for validating breaking sports news on Twitter/X before publishing?
- Do you think journalists should verify a credible source before posting breaking news on Twitter/X? Why or why not?
- How has Twitter/X transformed the way you gather and report breaking news in sports?
- On Twitter/X, how do you balance the need for accuracy with the pressure to publish breaking news quickly during live events?
- In your view, which platform tends to deliver breaking sports news better - Twitter/X or print media? Why?

B. Covering live sports events:

- Do you think Twitter/X's real-time coverage of international sports events in Saudi Arabia has made print media less critical?
- How do you leverage multimedia like photos and videos on Twitter/X to enhance your live reporting during sporting events?
- How do you monitor and track fan, player, and journalist conversations and reactions on Twitter/X during major sports events?
- What role does Twitter/X play in your editorial planning and coverage decisions around major sporting events?
- How much autonomy do you have in determining what sports stories to pursue and cover on Twitter/X?

PART 5: How Twitter/X has disrupted Saudi sports newsroom routines, workflows, and hierarchies

[RQ4]: To what extent has the adoption of Twitter/X disrupted routines, workflows and hierarchies within Saudi sports newsrooms?

- What does the current managerial structure and newsroom setup look like in Saudi newspaper organisations?
- How do the digital and online departments in Saudi newspapers operate?
- In what ways has the rise of digital technology impacted Saudi newsrooms, and how have newspapers adapted to these changes?
- How does the political and cultural context in Saudi Arabia influence the production and dissemination of news across traditional and digital platforms?
- Have any new forms of gatekeeping emerged on Twitter/X? If so, who seems to be implementing them?

- How has Twitter/X transformed the way news is reported and produced in Saudi newsrooms?
- How has Saudi journalists' adoption of Twitter/X altered their traditional roles and responsibilities in newsrooms?
- What new challenges and opportunities has Twitter/X introduced for journalists in Saudi newsrooms?
- What role does Twitter/X play in Saudi journalists' information gathering and decision-making processes?
- How do existing newsroom cultures shape how journalists use Twitter/X in Saudi Arabia?
- In your view, how could newsrooms in Saudi Arabia improve their utilisation of Twitter/X?

PART 6: How Saudi sports journalists navigate professional/journalistic identity shifts

[RQ5]: How are Saudi sports journalists navigating shifts in their professional identities and practices amidst Twitter/X's disruptive impacts on traditional newsroom roles and norms?

- In what ways has the rise of Twitter/X disrupted traditional practices and roles for sports journalists in Saudi Arabia?
- How has having a direct public platform through Twitter/X impacted your professional identity as a Saudi sports journalist?
- What new opportunities has Twitter/X introduced for you to build your personal brand and reputation as a journalist?
- Have you faced any dilemmas balancing traditional journalistic principles with new opportunities for self-promotion on Twitter/X?
- How do you determine boundaries between your private and professional lives on Twitter/X?
- Do you believe Twitter/X has shifted public perceptions of sports journalists' societal role and influence in Saudi Arabia?
- How has Twitter/X enabled you to diversify your professional skills and expand beyond traditional sports reporting?
- In what ways has audience engagement on Twitter/X changed your approach to developing and presenting sports content?
- How has adopting Twitter/X impacted your relationship with editors, veteran journalists, and traditional newsroom hierarchies?
- Do you feel adequately supported in navigating this shifting landscape brought on by Twitter/X? Why or why not?

CLOSING STATEMENT

This concludes our interview. Thank you very much for your time and your very helpful insight.

Would you like to add something before we formally end the interview?

Appendix C: The First Suggestion of Interview Timetable

This is a list of participants for interviewing journalists that is as high as 40 who have great experience in field sports journalism and Twitter/X. In addition, they are able to answer the interview in an accurate manner; the interview was scheduled at their desire.

No	Name of the participant	Interview Date	Interview Time
1-	Participant 1	20/08/2023	10:00
2-	Participant 2	20/08/2023	20:00
3-	Participant 3	22/08/2023	10:00
4-	Participant 4	23/08/2023	20:00
5-	Participant 5	25/08/2023	10:00
6-	Participant 6	27/08/2023	20:00
7-	Participant 7	29/08/2023	10:00
8-	Participant 8	31/08/2023	20:00
9-	Participant 9	02/09/2023	10:00
10-	Participant 10	04/09/2023	20:00
11-	Participant 11	06/09/2023	10:00
12-	Participant 12	08/09/2023	20:00
13-	Participant 13	10/09/2023	10:00
14-	Participant 14	12/09/2023	20:00
15-	Participant 15	14/09/2023	14:00
16-	Participant 16	16/09/2023	10.00
17	Participant 17	18/09/2023	17.00
18	Participant 18	20/09/2023	12.00
19	Participant 19	22/09/2023	14.00
20	Participant 20	24/09/2023	19.00
21	Participant 21	26/09/2023	20:00
22	Participant 22	28/09/2023	18:00
23	Participant 23	30/09/2023	22:00
24	Participant 24	02/10/2023	22:00

25	Participant 25	04/10/2023	20:00
26	Participant 26	06/10/2023	23:00
27	Participant 27	08/10/2023	12:00
28	Participant 28	10/10/2023	13:00
29	Participant 29	12/10/2023	19:00
30	Participant 30	14/10/2023	11:00
31	Participant 31	16/10/2023	12:00
32	Participant 32	18/10/2023	20:00
33	Participant 33	20/10/2023	21:00
34	Participant 34	22/10/2023	12:00
35	Participant 35	24/10/2023	10:00
36	Participant 36	26/10/2023	15:00
37	Participant 37	28/10/2023	19:00
38	Participant 38	30/10/2023	10:00
39	Participant 39	05/11/2023	12:00
40	Participant 40	10/11/2023	21:00

Appendix D: Participant Agreement Form



Participant Agreement Form

Full title of project: The Use Twitter/X in Sports Journalism in Saudi Arabia

Name, position and contact details of the project lead: Zaid Alsubaie,

s5438775@bournemouth.ac.uk,

Insert your supervisor's name and contact details: Dr Dan Jackson, jacksond@bournemouth.ac.uk

To be completed prior to data collection activity

Agreement to participate in the study

You should only agree to participate in the study if you agree with all of the statements in this table and accept that participating will involve the listed activities.

I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet (TwInt v1) and have been given access to the BU Research Participant Privacy Notice which sets out how we collect and use personal information.	
I have had an opportunity to ask questions.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary. I can stop participating in research activities at any time without giving a reason and I am free to decline to answer any particular question(s).	
I understand that taking part in the research will include the following activities as part of the research: taking part in an interview being recorded during the interview my words may be quoted in publications, presentations, reports, web pages and other research outputs without using my real name. I will follow up interviews	
I understand that, if I withdraw from the study, I will also be able to withdraw my data from further use in the study except where my data has been anonymised (as I cannot be identified) or it will be harmful to the project to have my data removed.	
I understand that my data may be included in an anonymised form within a dataset to be archived at BU's Online Research Data Repository.	
I understand that my data may be used in an anonymised form by the research team to support other research projects in the future, including future publications, reports or presentations.	
	Initial box to agree

I consent to take part in the project on the basis set out above	
--	--

_____ Name of participant (BLOCK CAPITALS)	_____ Date (dd/mm/yyyy)	_____ Signature
--	-------------------------------	--------------------

_____ Name of researcher (BLOCK CAPITALS)	_____ Date (dd/mm/yyyy)	_____ Signature
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Once a Participant has signed, please sign 1 copy and take 2 photocopies:
 Original kept in the local investigator's file
 1 copy to be kept by the participant (including a copy of PI Sheet)

Appendix E: Participant Information Sheet



Participant Information Sheet – interviews only

The title of the research project

The use of Twitter/X in sports journalism in Saudi Arabia.

Invitation to take part

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Who is organising/funding the research?

This is Funded by Saudi Arabia Cultural Bureau (SACB) in the London. This is study is conducted by Zaid Alsubaie as a part of his PhD research at Bournemouth university.

What is the purpose of the project?

The main aim of this research is to explore the direct and indirect effects of the Saudi sports journalism adaptation of Twitter/X and the impact of the sociocultural transition on its content and journalism practices. Moreover, this project will try to emphasise the filtration process of Saudi sports journalism and the procedure of creating Twitter/X content throughout the posting of sport-related materials.

Why have I been invited?

You have been invited because of your role as a sports journalist with experience in sports journalism and Twitter/X over the last 8 years. I would like to recruit 40 participants.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a participant agreement form. We want you to understand what participation involves, before you make a decision on whether to participate. If you or any family member have an on-going relationship with BU or the research team, e.g., as a member of staff, as student or other service user, your decision on whether to take part (or continue to take part) will not affect this relationship in any way.

Can I change my mind about taking part?

Yes, you can stop participating in study activities at any time and without giving a reason.

If I change my mind, what happens to my information?

After you decide to withdraw from the study, we will not collect any further information from or about you.

As regards information we have already collected before this point, your rights to access, change or move that information are limited. This is because we need to manage your information in specific ways in order for the research to be reliable and accurate. Further explanation about this is in the Personal Information section below.

What would taking part involve?

The interviews will be conducted in Saudi Arabia and take place between August and October 2023.

Participation involves individual, in-depth discussion for approximately 45 minutes, or the interview can be divided into two stages, each lasting 20 minutes, according to your preference. You might be asked to take part in a follow-up interview.

What are the advantages and possible disadvantages or risks of taking part?

This study's main future benefit for participants will be that it will help them advance in the digital field.

We do not believe that participation in this study will incur risk or harm (physical or psychological) to you or your colleagues or family. Anonymity will be maintained for both you and your place of work.

What type of information will be sought from me and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research project's objectives?

Interviews will centre on your experiences on Twitter/X and in sports journalism. To provide a comprehensive understanding of the use of Twitter/X in Saudi sport journalism and to identify ways in which the platform can be used to improve the quality of sports

journalism, such as how journalists use Twitter/X in the production of stories, determining the extent to which Saudi sports journalists use Twitter/X for reporting on events and breaking news, assessing the effectiveness of Twitter/X as a tool for Saudi sports journalists to engage with their audience, and exploring changes on Twitter/X, are routines in the newsroom.

Will I be recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?

The interview will be conducted in person and recorded. The audio recordings of your activities made during this research will be used only for analysis and the transcription of the recording(s) for illustration in conference presentations and research publications. No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings.

How will my information be managed?

Bournemouth University (BU) is the organisation with overall responsibility for this study and the Data Controller of your personal information, which means that we are responsible for looking after your information and using it appropriately. Research is a task that we perform in the public interest, as part of our core function as a university.

Undertaking this research study involves collecting and/or generating information about you. We manage research data strictly in accordance with:

- Ethical requirements; and Current data protection laws
These control the use of information about identifiable individuals but do not apply to anonymous research data: "Anonymous" means that we have either removed or not collected any pieces of data or links to other data that identify a specific person as the subject or source of a research result.

BU's [Research Participant Privacy Notice](#) sets out more information about how we fulfil our responsibilities as a data controller and about your rights as an individual under the data protection legislation. We ask that you read this Notice so that you can fully understand the basis on which we will process your personal information.

Research data will be used only for the purposes of the study or related uses identified in the Privacy Notice or this Information Sheet. To safeguard your rights in relation to your personal information, we will use the minimum personally identifiable information possible and control access to that data as described below.

Publication

You will not be able to be identified in any external reports or publications about the research without your specific consent. Otherwise, your information will only be included in these materials in an anonymous form, i.e., you will not be identifiable.

Research results will be published in academic journals and stakeholder thesis.

Security and access controls

I will hold the information I collect about you in hard copy in a secure location and on a BU password-protected secure network where it is held electronically.

Personal information which has not been anonymised will be accessed and used only by appropriate, authorised individuals and when this is necessary for the purposes of the research or another purpose identified in the Privacy Notice. This may include giving access to BU staff or others responsible for monitoring and/or audit of the study, who need to ensure that the research is complying with applicable regulations.

Sharing your personal information with third parties

As well as BU staff working on the research project, we may also need to share personal information in non-anonymised form with transcription services. From the point of transcription your data will be in anonymised format.

Further use of your information

The information collected about you may be used in an anonymous form to support other research projects in the future and access to it in this form will not be restricted. It will not be possible for you to be identified from this data. To enable this use, anonymised data will be added to BU's online Research [Data Repository: this is](#) a central location where data is stored, which is accessible to the public.

Keeping your information if you withdraw from the study

If you withdraw from active participation in the study, we will keep information which we have already collected from or about you, if this has on-going relevance or value to the study. This will not include your personal identifiable information. As explained above, your legal rights to access, change, delete or move this information are limited as we need to manage your information in specific ways in order for the research to be reliable and accurate. However, if you have concerns about how this will affect you personally, you can raise these with the researcher when you withdraw from the study.

You can find out more about your rights in relation to your data and how to raise queries or complaints in our Privacy Notice.

Retention of research data

Project governance documentation, including copies of signed participant **agreements**: we keep this documentation for a long period after completion of the research, so that we have records of how we conducted the research and who took part. The only personal information in this documentation will be your name and signature, and we will not be able to link this to any anonymised research results.

As described above, during the course of the study we will anonymise the information we have collected about you as an individual. This means that we will not hold your personal information in identifiable form after we have completed the research activities.

You can find more specific information about retention periods for personal information in our Privacy Notice.

We keep anonymised research data indefinitely, so that it can be used for another research as described above.

Contact for further information

If you have any questions or would like further information, Zaid Alsubaie at zalsubaie@bournemouth.ac.uk or contact Prof. Dan Jackson (JacksonD@bournemouth.ac.uk).

In case of complaints

Any concerns about the study should be directed to Professor Scott Wright, Deputy Dean for Research & Professional Practice, Faculty of Media & Communication, Bournemouth University by email to researchgovernance@bournemouth.ac.uk.

Finally

If you decide to take part, you will be given a copy of the information sheet and a signed participant agreement form to keep.

Thank you for considering taking part in this research project.

Appendix F: Ethical Approval



Research Ethics Checklist

About Your Checklist	
Ethics ID	48842
Date Created	06/03/2023 00:05:36
Status	Approved
Date Approved	15/08/2023 10:59:42
Risk	High

Researcher Details	
Name	Zaid Alsubaie
Faculty	Faculty of Media & Communication
Status	Postgraduate Research (MRes, MPhil, PhD, DProf, EngD, EdD)
Course	Postgraduate Research - FMC
Have you received funding to support this research project?	No

Project Details	
Title	The use of Twitter on sports journalism in Saudi Arabia.
Start Date of Project	20/07/2023
End Date of Project	20/10/2023
Proposed Start Date of Data Collection	25/07/2023
Original Supervisor	Dan Jackson
Approver	Research Ethics Panel
Summary - no more than 600 words (including detail on background methodology, sample, outcomes, etc.)	
This research focuses on investigating the use of Twitter in sports journalism in Saudi Arabia. The study aims to explore the direct and indirect effects of Twitter adoption in Saudi sports journalism, emphasising content curation and journalistic practises related to sport on the platform. The literature review covered four main areas related to the use of Twitter in sports journalism. However, there were some potential knowledge gaps that the review did not address and that the research questions are meant to fill: first, the non-existence of any study that deals with this subject directly in Saudi Arabia. Second, there are no studies about the digital transformation of Saudi sports newsrooms as a result of news producers' transition from print to digital worlds. Finally, there are no studies about how journalists in Saudi Arabia use Twitter to report on breaking news and events or their relationship with the audience. The primary method used will be semi-structured interviews with 40 Saudi sports journalists (male and female) who have experience in sports journalism and Twitter over the last 8 years. We aim to invite journalists genders to participate in the study to ensure a diverse and inclusive representation of perspectives. We will make efforts to reach out to both male and female journalists, making sure the selection	