

“Islamic Discourse on Social Media in Saudi Arabia”

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Abstract:

This thesis seeks to add to the contemporary debate concerning how clerics employ social media to influence young people and their religious perception of online Islamic doctrine discourse. It identifies neglected elements that have impeded the adoption of the internet and social media, considers the changing coalition of influential political and religious elites since 2011 and explains how social media has had an impact on the direction of Islamic discourse in Saudi Arabia. The research employs a mixed approach, using both a quantitative method (applied to the questionnaire responses of 248 participants) and a qualitative method (with interviews from two clerics and 25 university students who were recruited through quota sampling). In addition, discourse analysis of three clerics' Twitter accounts sheds light on how clerics have embraced the internet, by sharing controversial posts and debating with their followers, to gain an enormous youthful audience. While some young people have a negative perception of clerics who seek to engage in online controversy, other young people enjoy the greater acquaintance and sense of familiarity that arises through two-way communication on social media. The fact that many young people choose to engage with, and tweet responses to, clerics' teaching in real-time illustrates how widely accepted social media has become an educational tool for sharing Islam while providing a new platform for clerics, especially non-official ones, to amass followers. The research is limited by its size (having been based on a small sample drawn from the university population and interviews with only two clerics), its data collection approach (which could not extend to individuals in remote locations) and the way in which government control of media influences respondents' opinions. Future research should embrace a larger population and investigate a wider range of social media platforms. The implication is that moderate clerics can now gain a better insight into how to disseminate religious teachings gauging from young individuals' responses and reduce Islam's stereotypical terrorism association.

Keywords: Twitter, Social media, Islamic discourse, Islamic authority, Clerics, Audience

Chapter 1: Introduction

Social media has taken over the media scene, as a myriad of spiritual leaders uses these platforms. Twitter is one of the most popular and fastest growing platforms of this decade (Al-Khalifa, 2015). The presence of various Islamic preachers and elders is conspicuous due to their large numbers of followers. This research proposes to look deeper into the proliferation of Islamic discourse on social media sites and explore the views of the audiences who follow these religious leaders on social media. The focus will be mainly on Twitter as an example of a social networking site since Twitter is the fastest growing social media platform. Saudi Arabia is one of the largest consumers of the various electronic devices that connect to the Internet, and thus, a large number of its residents use Twitter (Al-Saggaf, 2015).

Saudi preachers frequently arouse controversy on Twitter. In 2016, many Saudis tweeted “#Do you classify Shaykh Mohammed Alarefe as a religious scholar” in a campaign on the most popular preachers on Twitter. A week earlier, the preacher Saad al-Buraik was at the forefront of the trend list in Saudi Arabia because of an argument with the MBC television channel. Therefore, the influence of preachers on Saudi society is not new. Nevertheless, it has taken another form since they began to participate in discussions on Twitter, which they viewed as a platform to issue occasional fatwas, to guide believers, or to confront their opponents.

The Twitter pages of Saudi Shaykhs and religious scholars are among the most followed pages from the Islamic world, and they have the highest rates of response to the tweets which religious scholars share on their pages almost daily. Scholars Mohammed Alarefe, Salman al-Awdah and Aidh Al-Qarnee are the most followed scholars in the kingdom and the rest of the Islamic world. Their pages consistently achieve steady increases in the number of respondents to their tweets according to sites that specialise in following the movements of social media users in Arab countries, such as Tweepar (Almoslim, 2012).

Data from sites that monitor the use of social media platforms, with Twitter at the forefront, indicates the substantial impact of these religious scholars on social networking sites. Religious scholars in the kingdom who participate in social media are mainly concerned with issuing of fatwas to fatwa seekers about religious issues. They began to devote valuable time to discussions with young people by answering their questions about topics that concern them and discussing those topics with them in an open and persuasive manner. Additionally, their pages included tweets relating to matters in other areas of life (Almoslim, 2012).

In 2012, Shaykh Mohammed Alarefe, the most famous Saudi preacher on Twitter, was one of the first Arabs to reach 1 million followers on Twitter, placing him ahead of most celebrities. Currently, Shaykh al-Arefe's account is followed by more than 20 million. Some people believe that Shaykh al-Arefe buys fake followers, but he is very popular and one of the

most influential Arab figures in public life. Outside the virtual world, his books are bestsellers in Saudi Arabia, whether they contain new or repeated information (Ahmed, 2017).

Twitter is one of the most popular social media sites today, especially in the Arabic Gulf in general and Saudi Arabia in particular. The site is considered, to be a battlefield between good and evil, reform and corruption, and reformers and corrupters (Abdulqader, 2014).

Since preachers in Saudi Arabia have begun to realise the importance of social media sites, especially Twitter, and use them in preaching, this research includes a field study, perhaps the first of its kind.

1.1 The reasons for choosing Twitter as a model for the study

Twitter was chosen as a model for the study for several reasons. Twitter is a large public forum in the Gulf in general and in Saudi Arabia in particular, enabling the public to express their views more freely. Benjamin Ampen, the director of Twitter sales in the Middle East, announced that 500 million tweets are issued from Saudi Arabia every month during 2015. Amben was discussing the future of Twitter in the region in seminars for Saudi Aramco, the Saudi Arabian Oil Company, which were presented under the title "The Future of Social Media". Specialised studies have confirmed that Saudi Arabia is among the top countries for Twitter use and that Twitter attracts more Saudis than other social media sites (Alarabiya, 2015).

As a microblogging platform, Twitter affords its Saudi users the opportunity to start using hashtags that can be widely shared more easily than on other social media platforms such as Facebook. For example, although a long post on a public Facebook page can reach many viewers, it cannot be shared as effectively as a tweet in a hashtag is likely to be shared more widely than a Facebook page or a Facebook post, which surpasses the Facebook page. Moreover, any Twitter user, including those who do not follow the account profile that initially made the post, can view it in its entirety in a single thread using its hashtag. For these reasons, this study focuses on Twitter.

There are six reasons for the popularity of Twitter's use in academic studies (Ahmed, 2015):

1. In terms of the media coverage it gets, Twitter is a popular platform. This encourages its further use in research due to its cultural position.
 2. It is easy to search and track Twitter conversations (i.e. using either its search feature or tracking the tweets that appear in Google search results).
 3. Twitter hashtags make it easy to gather, sort, and extend searches when collecting data.
 4. Because Twitter discussions of global events and news stories appear concentrated under a hashtag, Twitter information is simple to retrieve.
 5. Compared to other social media sites, the Twitter API is more transparent and usable, which makes it easier for developers to produce data collection tools for Twitter. Consequently, this enhances the supply of instruments for researchers.
 6. Many researchers are themselves Twitter users, and due to their favourable personal adventures, they feel much more comfortable with conducting research on a platform that is familiar to them.
- This list is not meant to be exhaustive but to provide insight into why Twitter has surged in popularity.

1.2 Problem Statement

This research aims to contribute to the ongoing debate about the way social media may or may not have changed the religious authorities' hold on power in Saudi Arabia. It also aims to illustrate the different views of Saudi youth, who are the primary consumers of this media, shedding new light on how they use, perceive and participate in this cyber-debate.

1.3 Research Questions

This study addresses the following questions:

1. How does social media influence the direction of Islamic discourse in Saudi Arabia?

To address this question, several support questions were developed:

- a) How do Saudi clerics make use of social media websites such as Twitter to disseminate their religious messages?
- b) How do Saudi youth perceive such messages?
- c) What is the role of social media in general in their religious socialisation compared to the usual role of legacy media?
- d) What are the indications that clerics have accepted their role and that youth understand their Islamic identity on social media?

1.4 Research Objectives

- To investigate the impact of social media on the engagement of youth with religious clerics in Saudi Arabia, revealing the responses of youth to the content expressed by religious clerics. This will expand the current scope of literature, which shows Islamic clerics as willing to use social media for religious purposes, from both an educative and constructive perspective, but fails to accurately depict youth perceptions of the actions of clerics on social media.
- To determine the influence of social media on the direction of Islamic discourse in Saudi Arabia. This includes identifying how Islamic clerics use Twitter to disseminate religious messages, understanding the perceptions of youth towards the religious messages of Islamic clerics, and understanding how social media messages impact religious socialisation.
- To add to the body of knowledge on Arab youth's reliance on social media for religious knowledge.
- To gain a deeper understanding of the meaning and significance of the use of social media sites to build and consolidate the religious hegemony of *ulamā* (clerics) in Saudi Arabia.

1.5 Hypothesis

This research seeks to determine how the use of social media by Saudi preachers has been influential in advancing Islamic discourse among youth.

H1: Use of social media by clerics to spread Islamic discourse has had a considerable positive impact on Islamic youth through educational and spiritual content. Moreover, Arab countries and youth use social media and follow clerics as their role models whose teachings help them uphold Islamic ideologies and virtues. Clerics use Twitter as a social media tool to educate youth on how Islamic religion can consolidate religious hegemony. The hypothesis aims to show that the Western world's perception that clerics' teachings create violence against other religions, races and cultures is not always correct. Therefore, social media plays an important role in educating youth on the values taught by the Holy Quran.

H2: Modern social media is not a causative factor but rather an accelerating factor that has renewed or changed Islamic discourse in Saudi Arabia. The main factor, in my view, is the emergence of a group of Saudi preachers who do not belong to official religious institutions such as the institution of the Council of Senior Scholars and the official media. Therefore, these preachers search for new means of communication in which they express their hopes and perceptions through these means.

1.6 Contributions to Knowledge

Whereas the literature, reviewed below, explores religious discourse; its use of the media, Islam and the Internet; and the nature of social media in Saudi Arabia, some elements remain unaddressed. For instance, previous studies tend to highlight the cemented alliance between the religious and political powers in Saudi Arabia, but, as I argue below, this alliance has shifted since 2011. As detailed in the Discussion chapter, the study contributes to our understanding of the relationship between Saudi political rulers and religious elites; it also adds to our knowledge about the role of authority in Islam as manifested in the authority of traditional clerics. The study argues that social and new media platforms have provided a new avenue for religious scholars to directly address and amass young followers. This, in turn, has affected the types of religious messages that are disseminated on social media, with many young followers being attracted to moderate clerics, defined as those who provide less strict fatwas, are more attuned to the agenda of social justice and humanitarianism in the world and are more tolerant of non-Muslim communities.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

2.1 The nexus of media, religion, and audience

This study focuses on three main concepts: media, religion, and the audience. The word media is conceptualised from three perspectives. The main perspective views the media as an intervening agency, working to create connections between the audience and the transmitter of information (Berger, 2014). The second perspective views the media in the technical sense, where there are clear distinctions between the forms of media as visual, print, or even audio (McQuail, 2015). The commercial use of media offers the third perspective, from which the media are seen as a platform for the expression of commercial purposes, such as advertisements (McQuail, 2015). The convergence of these perceptions has advanced the current definition of the media to where in common discourse, it will often be referred to as mass media. As such, mass media becomes the interaction between mass communication and aspects of society and culture. McQuail (2015) notes the evolution of media theory depends on popular perceptions of the media. In the early twentieth century, the media held a

position of power, more capable of persuasion and injecting ideology into society than any other form of communication (McQuail, 2015). These perceptions, however, have changed over time and with advances in popular forms of media.

Advanced theories have indicated that receiving content from the media does not always result in attitude changes. These places the media in an intervening role, arguing against it holding absolute power over culture and society (McQuail, 2015). The use of a medium is expected to have more influence than the nature of the medium (Garrett, et al., 2012). As such, issues like accessibility by the audience, the arrangement of content, and the regularity with which users access it may make a particular media form more effective in one context than another. The emergence of new media in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has increased the probability of the media gaining a position of power (McQuail, 2015). New media is different from social media, as the latter includes social media and all other forms of communication that use modern electronic means (Garrett, et al., 2012). However, this time the position of power is regarded within the context of the cultural, behavioural, and cognitive state of the recipients. Current research also notes the role of social constraints and their mediating role in the effectiveness of communication (Livingstone, 2005).

The most common theory of audience is the uses and gratification theory. The uses and gratification theory explores the reasons people actively seek out and make use of the media, focusing on the audience during the process of understanding communications (Fourie, 2001). This theory implies that engaging in media use is a deliberate action on the part of the audience, arguing against their being reached by media communications by chance (Livingstone, 2005). Audiences actively use media for purposes of escaping reality, personal relations and identity, as well as surveillance (Fourie, 2001).

In this study, I apply the uses and gratification theory regarding using religion in media, as it is the most suitable project to focus on. According to this theory, people use media to fulfil some of their needs, including their cognitive needs, affective needs, integrative personal needs, integrative social needs, and tension reduction needs. Religion, in this sense, is a concept that integrates all such needs under a single name. Of the scarce literature utilising the uses and gratification theory, Nagham and Auter (2014) assert that when used in a broad-spectrum manner, Facebook is usually used for purposes of relaxation. However, according to the researchers, when Facebook and other social media sites are used for religious or culturally specific purposes, the platforms are highly associated with the significance of group membership. This is because users of social media sites find their use to be greatly gratifying for a variety of professional and personal reasons. Based on collective self-esteem, group belonging is the main motive for using social network sites. Group belonging, self-esteem and social well-being are all strongly related reasons many Muslims use social media sites such as Twitter. Additionally, having friends from one's same cultural and religious background gives users a sense of belonging (K., Rosen.D , & Hendrickson B.D, 2011). This, in turn, increases the users' self-esteem. Other individuals also use social sites such as Twitter to promote upcoming club meetings and other events. Finally, the vast majority of individuals use Twitter and Facebook to read the latest news and learn about their friends' experiences. In this way, social media has been used as a way of connecting Muslims from different parts of the world.

2.2 Islam, tradition and modernity

Today, the Islamic world is reckoning with the effects of modernity and postmodernity, globalization, and secularization (Olsson & Kersten, 2016). Muslims are busy inquiring about religious representations and authority. In the process, alternative Islamic discourses, along with the dichotomies of heterodoxy and orthodoxy, state and civil society, and continuity and change, have arisen to challenge binary opposition. As a result, authority dispersal has become rampant and hierarchical structures and gender roles have broken (Olsson & Kersten, 2016). Alternative ideas concerning religion in Saudi Arabia have persisted throughout time, but they are a more significant reality today due to alternative spaces like social media (Moaddel, 2005). In their efforts to respond to critical questions that challenge the Islamic faith, religious disputations and philosophical debates have resulted in different ideologies from pluralist Muslim intellectuals. (Quamar, 2015). Although this has been a considerable issue, traditional Islamic orthodoxy seems far from addressing these concerns, which explains why modernist Islamic discourse is not far from reality; that is, it revolves around of the many modern affairs occurring in the contemporary world (Al Alhareth & Al Dighrir, 2015). This section examines the literature surrounding discussions of Islamic modernity. It largely explains the different perceptions of modernity in an attempt to suggest the extent of modernity's compatibility with Islam.

In many cases, Muslims have admitted to modernity within the context of westernisation, even though their views on its relevance and compatibility with Islam differ slightly. Trends of Islamic modernity range from reform to outright rejection of modernity or rejection of tradition (Masud, 2009). As a result, different reform discourses have emerged, each with differing interpretations of modernity and tradition. Discourses about Islamic modernity not only appear contradictory, but some arguments appear apologetic (Crooke, 2015; Masud, & Salvatore, 2009). For example, although discourses borrow much from Western sciences and technology, they are predominantly critical of the West. However,

Islamic modernity explains this uncertainty by emphasising that modernisation is different from westernisation. By way of an example, changing perceptions of modernity as science, technology, human rights, and nationalism tend to coincide with changing perceptions of Western modernity (Aghababa, 2011). As a result, Muslim scholars have attempted to streamline Islam with European enlightenment, resulting in the rise of Islamic modernity.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

This section explores existing literature on the nature of Islamic discourse and its presence on social media. It first examines religious discourse in the media and provides an overview of Islam and its controversial presence on the internet. The review also includes perspectives on social media use in the Arab world, with a particular focus on Saudi Arabia. These are the three themes the review examines; however, it also touches upon feminist Islamic discourse, Islamic youths' perspectives on social media, and the relationship between social media and Islamic radicalisation.

3.1 Islam and the internet

According to Bunt (2003), although Islam does not need the internet, without it, Islamic organisations and some Muslims would be deprived of their tool of propagation and networking. Many would be unable to share their messages to their followers and observers, which would limit their social position in the global scale of the religion (Bunt, 2003). In this respect, it is critical to note the role that online religion has played in granting status to individuals who would otherwise remain unrecognised as religious teachers or people of status in their local contexts. Some of the instigators and participators commended in online Islamic discourse may be treated as pariahs in their local authorities (Bunt, 2003). The internet also provides for the immediate circulation of sermons, coordinating the activities of Muslims globally as if they were in the same geographical region (El-Tahawy, 2008).

The controversial roles that the internet plays in the Islamic context are elaborated in El-Tahawy (2008). Here, the internet is adopted for missionary work, otherwise known as da'wah. The second use is the global provision of forums for like-minded individuals, and these individuals may use the forums for activism (El-Tahawy, 2008). The sites may also support the jihad, while others perpetuate the electronic jihad in Israel (El-Tahawy, 2008). Finally, the proliferation of online fatwas becomes the fifth use to which exclusive Islamic platforms may be implemented religiously (Illar, 2010). Notably, however, this view does not preclude the participation of Muslims in more open forums, especially in their use of social media. Similar functions may be carried out on alternative platforms, but these will often be more susceptible to critics and observers (Al-Jenaibi, 2016). The views expressed in this analysis propagate the perception of most exclusive Islamic sites being formulated and accessed with radical intentions. The study postulates that the emergence of moderate Islamic sites has been slow, with sites formed by the Islamic brotherhood becoming the ideal destinations for Muslims on the internet (El-Tahawy, 2008).

3.2 Saudi Arabia and social media

According to Al-Rasheed (2007), the use of social media in Saudi Arabia extends not only to personal expression, but also to the propagation of religious values. Prior to the twenty-first century, fatwas and tafseer could only be transmitted through audiotapes or national television stations, radio stations (Perlov & Guzansky, 2014). However, these are now posted on social media sites by clerics and often appear in both English and Arabic. Owing to the pivotal role that social media seems to play in the country, there have been deliberate attempts to limit the degree of dissent that occurs on these platforms (Al-Jenaibi, 2016). The people of Saudi Arabia have begun to believe that social media is crucial to their empowerment, and the majority feel that social media makes them more connected to their community. The perception that social media makes it possible for people to learn to accommodate different points of view has also increased (Ghannam, 2011).

A 2014 study released by the Al Mesbar Centre for Studies, Research and Communications revealed increases in internet use in three major regions: Riyadh, Dammam, and Jeddah. Among them, the study notes that Dammam has the highest percentage of internet users (68%), followed by both Riyadh and Jeddah (approximately 55% for both). It is also clear from the results of the study that the majority of Saudi citizens watch religious programs through Saudi channels. It seems that religious programs have a high status in Saudi Arabian society. This explains many things, including the religious culture, the high status of religious affairs in politics and education, and, most importantly, the fact that Saudi society is based on the foundations of Islam, which has been institutionalised in legislation, the courts, and many other executive matters.

An Arabic study, "Religion and Social Media Platforms", released by the Al Mesbar Studies and Research Centre in February 2015, focussed on several related issues of religion online and representations of religious discourse on social media; this is one of the few relevant studies in this area. This study revealed that social media has strongly influenced the nature of religious authority in the Muslim community; and the relationships between the Muslims who are in seek of a fatwa (Islamic edict) and the clerics who compete with each other to provide it. Social media has made it possible to communicate with a variety of clerics regarding any point, allowing them to accept the fatwa, which seems more

appropriate to them. The fatwa is issued by the cleric who most closely imitates their thoughts. Social media has helped the clerics to manage thousands of new followers. Social media usage by clerics has positively contributed to the integration of Islam and modernity, promoting a culture of patience and opposing the obsessive beliefs. Ben Dridi's (2015) study entitled "Speech of the Religious Scholars in the Social Media" indicated that 48% of students believe that scholars and preachers use the language of "reason" on social media sites, while 28% believe they use the language of "feeling", and 24% believe they use the language of intimidation. Religious issues have also emerged among the most prominent topics preachers and scholars discuss on social media, followed by educational, social and political issues. This explains the interrelationship between the content of religious discourse and classical issues, which were addressed in traditional religious discourse, despite the use of modern means of communication (cited in Al Mesbar, 2015).

3.3 Clerics and social media

The passivity or activity of social media users with regards to the Islamic discourse has been a major research topic for scholars. Dwicahyo (2017) identified youthful audiences as the most active demographic on social media when it comes to Islamic preaching's on social media. Most of the older generation have not yet fully embraced Islamic modernity, as seen in their reluctance to fully accept social media platforms as an avenue for sharing the word of Allah. Many believe that social media is evil, and only evil things can be passed through that media. However, this myth has recently been debunked, as most Islamic preachers are now freely available on social media platforms, thereby enhancing the image of social media as a good space for religious activity.

The shift from mass media, such as television programs, to social media platforms like Twitter has not gone well for most preachers. The fact that social media is difficult to regulate is a thorn in the side of most governments. For example, in Saudi Arabia, the government tries to regulate the internet as much as it can. However, it still has little control over what individuals post online. This creates fertile ground for radicalisation, especially of the youths who are most gullible. Radical clerics use this unregulated platform to lure unsuspecting Muslim youths into believing various radical teachings that breed religious extremism. However, despite this danger, preachers' shift to social media platforms has been a blessing to most Muslims, who now have access to the word of Allah at their fingertips (Ibahrine, 2014).

Al-Mezlini (2010) warned of the implications of the growing social standing of television preachers, who he said have become "stars" after combining the symbolic capital provided by their work in the religious field and the financial wealth generated by their work in "religious contracting". He argued that the preacher's conversion into a star, seen as sacred by "his followers" and used as a religious "reference" who solely "possesses the truth", may open the door to believers rejecting different religious views and interpretations, which may then lead them to accuse others of disbelief, for which they may believe opponents should be killed.

Mohammed Al-Ghilani (2013) pointed out that preachers use the Quran, the Prophet's biography, and sermons "pragmatically" to attract and impress as many viewers as possible and create competition in the market of media and advertising. He explained that the disclosure of the preachers works on the "religious subconscious" and ideological "sacred" heritage of the recipient is characterised by a dynamic character and continuous emotional charge. It also adopts rhetoric and its arts to persuade and attract the admiration of the viewer, who goes into a state of anaesthesia, and his mind stops "thinking, analysing, or accounting".

3.4 Youth and social media

Al Dabaa's (2009) study, entitled "Teenagers in the Arab world use Facebook and the satisfactions coming to them", aimed to determine the extent to which Arab teenagers read and access Facebook; their use of Facebook, their satisfaction with Facebook, and their motives for using Facebook; and the characteristics and disadvantages of Facebook from the perspective of teenagers. The study found that 80% of survey respondents use Facebook, 51% of whom had been using Facebook for 2-3 years, and 26% of whom had been using it for a year or less. It also found that 75% access Facebook daily, while 15% access it 4-6 days per week, and 0.7% access it once a week. The study confirmed that 29% of respondents access Facebook to follow the news, while 11% access it to meet friends. Regarding respondent's topic preferences, the study confirmed that amusement and entertainment topics came first, with 55%, with scientific topics following with 30% (Dabaa, 2009).

Al Zoman's (2012) study, entitled "Saudi Youth Subjected to Social Media, a Descriptive Observational Field Study on a Sample of Male and Female University Students in Riyadh", aimed to determine the extent of Saudi youths' exposure to social media, the ways Saudi youths use social media, their motives for using social media and the gratification they achieve from it, and the factors affecting the ways Saudi youths use social media. The study found that 89% of youth prefer to use social media at home. It also found that 36% of respondents use a pseudonym, 32% use their first name without their last name, and about a quarter (29%) use their full name. The desire to know additional information and details about events was the top motivation for using social media (67%). This is 63%, there is no statistically significant difference between the average rate of social media use among male students 3.29 and the average rate of social media use among

female students 3.32; that is, gender (male, female students) does not affect the rate of use of social media, indicating equal opportunities among the survey sample (Al-Zouman, 2012).

Al-Badr (2013), in a study entitled "Social Values System and Its Relationship with Saudi Attitudes Toward Social Media (A Survey Study on the Generation of Both Parents and Youths in Riyadh)", aimed to identify the relationship between Saudis' social values system with their attitudes towards social media. This study also used a descriptive research method; the researcher conducted a questionnaire survey with a sample size of 200 people (i.e. 100 parents and 100 youths) and found that the intellectual values system has a powerful influence on parents' attitudes towards social media. At the same time, this effect was only strong on children's attitudes towards those networks. Other values systems (i.e. economic, aesthetic, political, and social) have a strong influence on the attitudes of parents and youths towards social media. The religious values system has a very strong influence on the attitudes of parents and youths towards social media. The trends rejecting the use of social media are the possibility of committing crimes of fraud and internet fraud and the weakness of direct social communication and opening the way for blackmailing women. There are statistically significant differences in parents' and youths' attitudes toward social media (Al-Badr, 2013).

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter reviews relevant literature related to media discourse in Saudi Arabia. The existing studies have provided useful information about the topic at hand, thereby helping advance the ongoing research. Moreover, the literature review has revealed a gap in the research that the current study aims to fill: how does social media influence the direction of Islamic discourse in Saudi Arabia.

Past studies show that the internet has popularised religious discourse. Based on this finding, the current study aims to determine whether this is true by examining the impact of religious discourse, especially on the youth. However, past studies have not examined the interactions between clerics and the youth, indicating a research gap for the current study to examine.

The research gap identified can be discussed from the perspective of one of the themes coming out of the literature review. The strongest theme to emerge is the radical shift from passive social media use to active, participatory social media use. This theme guides the present research in its query into the impact of social media on Islamic discourse in Saudi Arabia. This theme implies a shift from passively seeking religious information on social media, by way of simply watching or perusing through it, to a more thorough approach that seeks to evaluate the accuracy of the information presented. From this, one could prepare a study comparing what is propagated on social media platforms with what is found in holy texts such as the Quran.

Chapter 4: Methodology

Based on the research aim and objectives, this chapter presents the methods and approaches used to investigate the postulated research questions. Bryman (2001) argued that the research approach is the overall inclination of the study process and the claims a researcher makes. Three common research approaches were identified by Creswell (1998): mixed, qualitative, and quantitative. In this study, a mixed methods research approach, featuring both quantitative and qualitative methods, was used. The quantitative method entailed the use of a survey questionnaire, while the qualitative method entailed the use of interview questions. According to Creswell (2002), the process of quantitative research involves data collection, analysis, interpretation, and reporting. In comparison, Creswell (2002) noted that qualitative research involves collecting information, analysing the insights obtained, and reporting findings based on the traditional qualitative inquiry. Figure 4-1 illustrates the explanatory sequential mixed methods design used in this research.

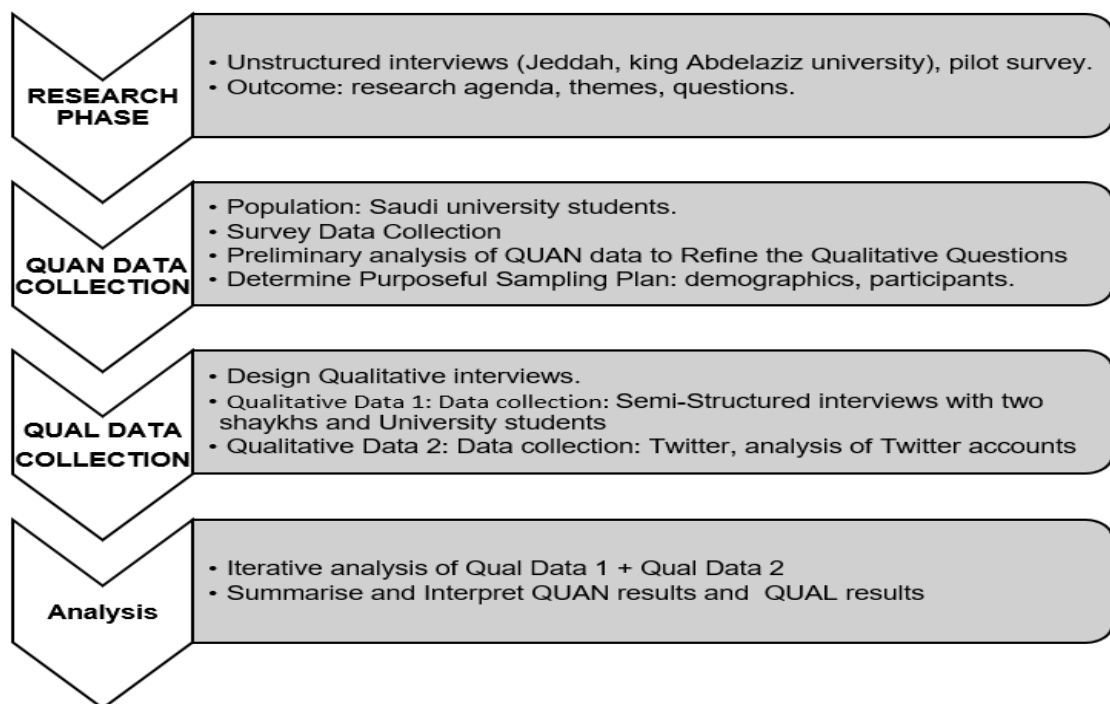


Figure 4-1. Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods Design

The use of a mixed research strategy made it possible to include diverse techniques of information collection to ensure rigour and data saturation, and hence data validity (MacNealy, 1999). It was not only possible to collect empirical data for quantitative analysis, which is crucial for results generalisation, but also to collect personal views on social media's role in advancing Islamic beliefs among youth. Hence, the use of multiple techniques also helped me to evaluate the accuracy of the data collected in terms of the relationship between the use of social media by the Saudi clerics and the effectiveness of such interventions in advancing religious teachings.

4.1 Study participants

The use of quota sampling allowed me to identify several categories within the accessible Saudi population, making it possible to develop a cross-sectional analysis. In this study, quotas were defined as Muslim scholars and clerics who use social media to communicate religious messages to the public and the young Muslim youths who use social media as an alternative platform to access religious teachings and Islamic discussions. Although there was no age limitation on the recruited clerics, there was an age limitation for the youth: between 21 and 28 years.

The study applied the quota sampling strategy to select the most applicable participants to engage in it. Through the sampling process, the researcher was able to identify Muslim clerics and youths to represent the population under review. Although this sampling method leads to bias in the process, it enabled the study to obtain critical data from three universities located in the three major cities in Saudi Arabia. Using audience analysis, the research setting was limited to Saudi Arabia and Saudi university students in the three main cities of Jeddah, Dammam, and Riyadh. Through the sampling process, two quotas were identified to represent the general population. These quotas were Muslim scholars and clerics and Muslim youths. Through this process, the researcher interviewed 27 participants who were engaged to provide critical data for the study. A notable component of the sampling process was the distribution of the study participants across these three main cities. The application of audience analysis ensured the selection of the correct sample based on their locations and participation on Twitter.

Such an approach was deemed essential in ensuring the results of the study could be generalised as representative of the entire population of Saudi Arabia. Figure 4-2 illustrates the areas from which the participants were sampled,



Map of Research Locations

Figure 0-2. Map of Research Locations

I was able to obtain data from 27 participants in total. Among the respondents who provided data were two clerics and 25 students from different universities in Saudi Arabia. All the participants involved in the study volunteered their participation. Those who did not agree with the conditions of the study or who did not respond to the request for an interview, including Shaykh Aidh Al-Qarnee. The two clerics engaged in this study were Shaykh Adel Alkalbani and Shaykh Mohammed Alarefe. Both clerics are male individuals with a significant number of followers on their respective Twitter accounts.

4.2 Data collection instruments

Three main tools were used to collect all the relevant data: survey questionnaires, interview questions, and thematic analysis of the Twitter accounts of the selected clerics. The questionnaire tool and interview questions used in this study are described in the following subsections. Ethics approval was sought from the Research Institute Ethics Committee at the University of Bedfordshire. Once approval was obtained, the interview invitation was sent to potential participants (Shaykh Mohammed Alarefe, Shaykh Aidh Al-Qarnee, and Shaykh Adel Alkalbani). I also contacted a representative of the King Abdulaziz University to request assistance and permission to post the questionnaire on the university's website to attract potential student participants. The fieldwork consisted of two phases. The survey was conducted in the first phase; field research in Jeddah, Riyadh, and Dammam was conducted in the second phase. The first phase also included an initial field visit to Jeddah. This was followed by the design, piloting, and implementation of the survey and subsequent initial analysis.

4.3 Data coding and analysis

Data obtained from 248 survey respondents were empirically analysed using Microsoft Excel. The data analysis process entails perming descriptive statistics on participant responses and examining the frequency and means of statistical distribution. All analyses were completed with SPSS, a quantitative analysis software from IBM. The goal of the quantitative analysis was to attain a general overview of youths' perception regarding the presence of clerics on social media.

The qualitative analysis process began at the research location and continued upon my return to the UK. The analysis of the survey findings, initial interviews, and Twitter accounts laid the foundation for the identification of themes that were further explored through the coding of the interview data. All analyses were completed with NVivo, a qualitative analysis software owned by QSR international, and QDA miner, a qualitative analysis software. Analyses of the interview data followed a three-phase process, as depicted in Figure 4-3.

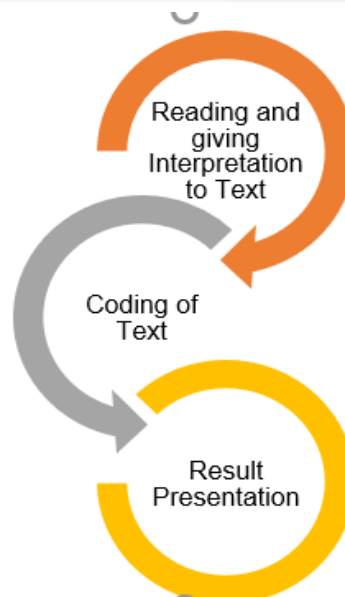


Figure 4-3. Analysis Phase Diagram

Phase 1: Reading and interpretation of the text

This phase involves the careful reading of the text to develop a complete overview of the collected data. With the aid of NVivo, a word cloud image was used to illustrate the most frequently occurring words in the given data. The word cloud reveals shaykhs, religious, people, social, political follow, and others as the most frequently occurring words in the data. The words found to occur most frequently are related to this study's research subject, indicating that the collected data are in coherence with the research subject.

Phase 2: Coding of text

This phase involves ascribing meaning to the given data (codes); this was done after a thorough reading of the data text, and coding was done with NVivo. The initial coding of the items revealed more than 100 codes in total.

Phase 3: Result presentation

This phase involves the presentation of the analysis concerning the research questions. Each research question was treated individually.

Chapter 5: Case study Twitter page contents of Saudi clerics

The Islamic discourse on social media has changed since King Salman and Prince Muhammad implemented Saudi Vision 2030. The Islamic discourse before the reforms was characterised by extremist messages exposed by the people who were opposed to the country's success. The tweets focussed more on the revolutions occurring in other parts of the Muslim world, such as Egypt and Syria. Such messages were not only informative, but they also aimed to incite people, especially youths, to start a revolution in Saudi Arabia. The Twitter accounts of many clerics were promoting the idea of a jihadi, and most of their messages were ones of hatred, especially directed toward the Saudi government. The Quran was misinterpreted by the terrorist organisations to justify their acts and condemn moderate Muslims for not living their faith. The tweets posted during that period condemned the Shiites, claiming that they are not real Muslims since some of their practices and beliefs do not fall in line with the teachings of mainstream Islam.

However, the Islamic discourse on social media changed after the implementation of Saudi Vision 2030, and some clerics closed their social media accounts for some time. The government declared that sharing extremist information was illegal and social media content would be closely scrutinised. The new government ruling significantly reduced the number of extremist clerics on social media, and some changed the type of messages they shared. The clerics started telling Saudi citizens to respect government authorities because the Prophet Mohamed (PBUH) declared that whoever respects authorities respects him. They also began promoting patriotism in the name of Allah. Tweets about revolutions in other Islamic countries decreased because the new government structure discourages such content, believing that it incites rebellion against the government of the day. The theory of Islamic modernity can explain the changes in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Vision 2030 promotes modernity and encourages tolerance of other people, ideologies, and faiths. Since modernity cannot coexist with extremism, the government began curbing extremism.

The Muslim clerics would want credit for changing the tone of Islamic discourse on social media, and the change could indeed reflect their efforts to simply toe the line of the new regime's attempts to reform and deradicalize Islam

(Lacroix, 2019). The new Saudi Vision 2030 calls for radical reform across the whole kingdom, modernising the country and calling for more liberal approaches to religion. For example, for the kingdom to free itself from its dependence on oil exports, other sectors of the economy need to increase production. One of these sectors is tourism. Although the kingdom has enjoyed religious tourism from the Arab world, its tough stances on Islamic practice had previously discouraged non-Islamic tourists from visiting. The kingdom's efforts to attract such tourists included softening some of its radical Islamist views, such as removing and loosening the driving ban and other restrictions, respectively, on women. Because these restrictions were based on religious views, whether through coercion or free will, Saudi Vision 2030 has influenced the country's Muslim clerics to align themselves with the vision and allow reforms to the practice of Islam.

Chapter 6: Survey Involving Saudi Youths on Perception About Cleric Use of Social Media

This chapter focused on the analysis of questionnaire results related to Saudi youths' perceptions of clerics' use of social media. The chapter aimed to prove the study's objective and hypothesis concerning the impact of social media on Saudi Arabian youth. Thus, it analysed the questionnaire responses to determine how young people are involved in the discourse and how they perceive the clerics who use social media to communicate a message.

Since the study hypothesises that Islamic discourse on social media has a positive impact, this was tested by asking and analysing questions about how the youth perceive religious content, the most-used media platform, frequency of usage, usage motive, clerics' followership, and competition amongst clerics. Based on the results, the majority of youths (40%) have a positive perception of clerics, which indicates that the messages they receive are good or appealing to them. This supports the hypothesis (H1) which argues that the use of social media by clerics to spread reformist discourse has had a considerable positive impact on Islamic youths through its educational and spiritual content. This is enhanced by the finding that the majority (54.4%) of the participants believe clerics use social media to direct society on the right path.

As 94.4% of the respondents use social media more than other media, this increases the impact of the clerics' messages on them. In addition, a majority of participants stated that they mostly use social media to educate or inform themselves, thus showing that they benefit from social media. These findings support H1 by showing that Islamic discourse on social media impacts young people positively instead of negatively (i.e. through radicalisation and anti-Western messages).

These results are also in line with the findings about modernity and Islam. According to this study, Islam (even as a conservative religion) has been forced to adopt modern practises like the use of the internet. The findings in this chapter show that clerics have, to a large extent, embraced the use of the internet and attracted high numbers of followers based on their respective discourse. Amongst such prominent Islamic religious leaders are Shaykh Mohammed Alarefe, who is the most-followed cleric on Twitter, followed by shaykhs Aidh Al-Qarnee, Saleh Almagamsi, and Adel Alkalbani. This proves that the Islamic world is embracing modern practises, although it had previously refused to do so. However, this raises the question of whether or not Islamic discourse has changed.

Chapter 7: Results of the Interviews

This chapter analysed the results of the interviews on clerics to relate the findings to the research objectives and questions. It also intended to prove the second hypothesis (H2) that modern social media is not a specific factor but rather an accelerating factor in renewing or changing Islamic discourse in Saudi Arabia.

The emergence of a group of Saudi preachers who do not belong to official religious or scholarly institutions, such as muftis or the official media, but are still strictly guided by the sharia doctrine and Mohammed's teachings have resulted in a search for new means of communication to express their religious perceptions. Social media is seen as a significant platform for these clerics who are not in formal religious institutions but have a calling to talk to audiences of diverse backgrounds. This medium, used by millions, gives them the potential to reach many people.

When asked if they were more interested in popularity than the message, respondents indicated that the message is more important. This indicates that although the media might change, Islamic discourse is intact. However, the majority agreed that social media improves Islamic discourse because it promotes the messages instead of limiting them as in a mosque (where the message may not include issues like politics or the economy, amongst others). Thus, these findings also prove that H2 is true.

These findings also revealed how clerics perceive the internet as an aspect of modernity. Islam as a religion has been opposed to modernity mainly because it was viewed as contrary to the Muslim doctrine. However, Islam has adopted modern approaches to avoid irrelevancy as the rest of the world embraced modernity. Muslim clerics also realised that they could adopt modern practises by preaching via the internet whilst preserving their doctrines and the message of Allah. The same was found to be true by the interviewees as the majority of clerics agreed to retain the Islam doctrine without compromise. However, this might change based on views of Vision 2030 and Islamic discourse and modernity. Indeed, according to the clerics' responses, Islamic discourse might change for the worse as social media becomes more central in spreading messages. This is due to the power of social media to change ways of thinking, especially among young people.

This chapter also analysed young people's perceptions to determine whether they appreciate or disregard the views of clerics on social media. A significant portion agreed that in addition to preaching, clerics have the responsibility of contributing to social development. The responses highlighted that most clerics adhere to this responsibility through community achievements, especially during Islamic events like Ramadan. Moreover, the findings show that social media platforms have enhanced how clerics perform this duty to engage in humanitarian aid by enabling them to preach humanitarian messages without the restriction of time or place.

However, several responses indicated that some clerics concentrate on obtaining the largest numbers of followers not only to spread their messages but to outshine their competitors. Whilst this might alter their messages, due to the strict Islamic sharia, many feel that clerics must devise more creative ways to attract people to their Twitter platforms without religious manipulation or engaging in extremism. Nevertheless, government regulation restricts such actions. Thus, the Islamic discourse remains largely intact regardless of changes in the media and the emergence of new clerics, as evidenced by the fact that many young people continue to follow clerics, trusting their motivations and their messages.

Chapter 8: Conclusions

This study researched Islamic discourse on Twitter, especially from the perception of young people. The main research question (how does social media influence the direction of Islamic discourse in Saudi Arabia?) was further divided into three sub-questions, the first of which was: how do Saudi clerics make use of social media websites such as Twitter in disseminating their religious messages?

The answer, obtained through analysis of interview findings, is that some clerics in Saudi Arabia have more than 15 million followers on Twitter, and more than half of clerics are active Twitter users. This study has shown that most people, especially the younger generation, prefer getting information on social media because there is two-way communication, unlike with legacy media, where information is unidirectional. The clerics manage their social media accounts and can share religious information with digital platform users at any time. They are also willing to debate with users on a particular issue which affects the Muslim world, such as the view of Islam held by Western countries. Thus, social media users prefer Islamic discourse shared online because the platforms are not limited by space, time, or subject.

The second sub-question (how do Saudi youths perceive such messages, and what is the role of social media in general in their religious socialisation compared to that of legacy media?) answered in this study involved young people's various perceptions, which only a small number of clerics are aware of. For example, the youths have a positive impression of the humanitarian messages presented by clerics on social media. However, most of the respondent's dislike religion which focusses more on faith and ignores the problems which people are facing in society. Thus, messages which encourage people to have faith and help the underprivileged are better received by the youths in Saudi Arabia.

In contrast, young people are divided about political messages delivered by clerics. Some feel that religious leaders should limit themselves to sharing messages about faith, encouraging people, and protecting the Islamic faith from corruption. On the other hand, there are those whose perspective is that politics promote the influence of the Islamic religion, and hence the two cannot be separated. They also believe that clerics should be free to express political opinions just like other people.

Finally, most of the young people in Saudi Arabia have a negative perception of advertising by clerics because the teaching of Islam does not allow them to use religion for financial gain. Many users believe that by advertising on social media, clerics will shift their attention from sharing Islamic discourse to conducting business. However, Vision 2030 has been perceived positively by youths in Saudi Arabia since the government is regulating social media to curb the dissemination of extremist or misleading content.

The main reasons young people use social media, apart from receiving Islamic teaching, are to socialise with other users and debate topics amongst themselves. Unlike legacy media, where the opinions of the audience are limited, social media encourages comments, and other users may appreciate these views.

The third sub-question addressed in this study (what are the indications that clerics have accepted their role and that the youths understand their Islamic identity on social media?) indicates that clerics have accepted the role of sharing the Islamic faith via social media. The clerics interviewed have millions of followers, and the number is increasing daily; hence, they have a vast multitude awaiting their messages for spiritual nourishment. For this reason, the clerics spend a significant amount of time on social media sharing Islamic discourse, encouraging young people, and answering questions. In turn, the fact that they have so many followers on social media is an indication that most people have accepted the new clerical role, or they would not be consulting them.

Moreover, through their willingness to answer followers' questions, clerics have embraced social media as a communication channel and tool for sharing Islamic discourse. They also believe that as most Muslims in Saudi Arabia are social media users, there is no reason they should not seek religious advice or guidance online. Indeed, most clerics believe that young people benefit more from using social media platforms than attending mosques services. Even Islamic authorities do not restrict clerics from sharing Islamic discourse on social media as long as the doctrine remains pure.

Finally, their interaction with these clerics on social media has caused the younger generation to learn more about their faith, become proud of it, and understand their Islamic identity. They are better able to differentiate the true doctrine of Islam from extremist theology, and it is becoming more difficult to recruit young Saudis into terrorist organisations. Thus, their socialisation on social media has further developed the Islamic identity of young Muslims.

8.1 Limitations

This research was limited in various ways, including the sample population, quality of data, and method of data collection. The sample population was comprised of students from institutions of higher learning. Thus, it is not appropriate to generalise the results to make it seem that the behaviour of university students reflects that of all youths in Saudi Arabia, especially as university students' ways of thinking may differ from those of employed youths or those who never studied at universities. For this reason, this study cannot be used to judge the behaviour or opinions of a large population of young people in Saudi Arabia, and it may have been better to also involve youths who are not students. The sample population was also limited because the total number of interview participants was 32 (two clerics and 30 university students), which is quite small considering the changes occurring in Saudi Arabia. A small sample population provides limited information and applying the results of the data to the whole population is a false generalisation. Moreover, interviewing just two clerics leads to a minimal understanding of other clerics with different ideas.

The method of data collection was also limited since, with the online survey, target participants in remote areas could not be reached because of network problems. This, the participants were from urban areas, and the study was limited to presenting the opinions of urban youths rather than the entire population. Another challenge with the online survey method was that the researcher could not clarify a response given by participants if it was vague or hard to understand. In such cases, the researcher either interpreted what the participant was trying to say or completely discarded the response.

In addition, the structural change in Saudi Arabia's government has made people more cautious about what they say. It is thus possible that some clerics did not state opinions which reflect their beliefs due to the fear that they may be classified as extremists. Despite the explanation that the data was being collected for an academic study, some participants may not have believed this and gave inaccurate information. The time allocated to collect the data was also limited, so this could have further affected the quality of data.

Finally, the study was delimited to Twitter, youths, and Saudi Arabia. The influence of clerics on the adult population was not considered, nor was their impact on youths in other nations. Despite many social media platforms, the study focussed only on the interaction of clerics and Saudi youths on Twitter alone.

8.2 Future Research

Due to the study's limitations, further recommendations can be made for future research. For instance, the current study focussed on clerics' influence on younger generations. Future research can conduct this study on the entire population to determine if clerics have the same influence on adults as they do on young people. It is also recommended to research several social media platforms used by different clerics to broaden the scope of the survey.

It is also recommended that future scholars perform a similar study using a larger sample population to give more reliable results. The sample population should be a mix of university students, employed youths, and those who did not attend university to represent the youth population more accurately in Saudi Arabia. Methods of data collection other than an online survey (such as a hard-copy questionnaire) could also be employed to reach potential participants in rural areas with poor internet connectivity.

Similarly, future research could focus on neighbouring countries or several countries simultaneously since social media restrictions in Saudi Arabia might have caused some participants to provide unreliable data. For this reason, a study of Islamic countries with fewer restrictions on social media content could further determine the influence of clerics on social media users.

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ملخص:

تسعى هذه الأطروحة إلى الإضافة إلى الجدل المعاصر حول كيفية استخدام رجال الدين لوسائل التواصل الاجتماعي للتأثير على الشباب وعلى تصورهم الديني لخطاب العقيدة الإسلامية على الإنترنت. ويحدد العناصر المهمة التي أعاققت تبني الإنترنت ووسائل التواصل الاجتماعي، وينظر في التحالف المتغير للنخب السياسية والدينية المؤثرة منذ 2011 ويشرح كيف أثرت وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي على اتجاه الخطاب الإسلامي في المملكة العربية السعودية. يستخدم البحث نهجًا مختلطًا، باستخدام كل من الطريقة الكمية (المطبقة على إجابات الاستبيان لـ 248 مشاركًا) والطريقة النوعية (مع مقابلات من اثنين من رجال الدين و25 طالبًا جامعيًا تم توضيغهم من خلال أخذ عينات الحصة). بالإضافة إلى ذلك، يسلط تحليل الخطاب لحسابات ثلاثة رجال دين على تويتر الضوء على كيفية احتضان رجال الدين للإنترنت، من خلال مشاركة منشورات مثيرة للجدل ومناقشتها مع أتباعهم، لكسب جمهور هائل من الشباب. في حين أن بعض الشباب لديهم تصور سلبي لرجال الدين الذين يسعون للانخراط في جدل عبر الإنترنت، يتمتع الشباب الآخرون بمعرفة أكبر وإحساس بالألفة ينشأ من خلال التواصل ثنائي الاتجاه على وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي. توضح حقيقة أن العديد من الشباب يختارون الانخراط في دروس رجال الدين والردود عليهم في الوقت الفعلي، يوضح كيف أصبحت وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي المقبولة على نطاق واسع أداة تعليمية لمشاركة التعاليم الدينية مع توفير منصة جديدة لرجال الدين، وخاصة غير الرسميين. لحشد المتابعين. يقتصر البحث على حجمه (بعد أن استند إلى عينة صغيرة مأخوذة من مجتمع الجامعة ومقابلات مع رجلين دين فقط)، ونهج جمع البيانات (الذي لا يمكن أن يمتد إلى الأفراد في المواقع النائية) والطريقة التي تسيطر بها الحكومة من وسائل الإعلام تؤثر على آراء المستجيبين. يجب أن يشمل البحث المستقبلي عددًا أكبر من السكان وأن يبحث في نطاق أوسع من منصات وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي. المعنى الضمني هو أن رجال الدين المعتدلين يمكنهم الآن الحصول على رؤية أفضل لكيفية نشر التعاليم الدينية التي تقيس ردود فعل الشباب وتقليل ارتباط الإسلام النمطي بالإرهاب.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تويتر، مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي، الخطاب الإسلامي، السلطة الإسلامية، رجال الدين، الجمهور