#TogetherToEndMaleGuardianship: Saudi women's social media activism against the

male guardianship system

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Abstract

Using social media for advocacy and activism can be highly empowering for women as they seek to express themselves and strengthen their positions, especially in developing societies. In June 2016, Saudi women initiated a campaign to advocate for the end of the male guardianship system. The Saudi women campaign against the male guardianship laws is a distinctive case that highlights numerous opportunities and lessons for future online advocacy and women's empowerment. This paper assesses how Saudi women used Twitter to facilitate a societal dialogue, to empower Saudi women, and to foster engagement for social change. Findings from Saudi women's campaign demonstrate Saudi women's innovative use of Twitter to inform, advocate, and call for collective action and civic engagement by and for the Saudi Women. Saudi activists used several innovative empowering strategies to foster a participatory and engagement culture in such conservative society.

Keywords: Advocacy, Digital Activism, Women, Saudi Arabia, Empowerment, Social Change, Social Media

Compared to women in other countries, women in Saudi Arabia face distinctive social and political hardships. Saudi Arabia enforces various gender segregation rules to enforce a dress code on women in public, and it was the only country in the world where women were not allowed to drive until the ban was lifted in September 2017. Women in Saudi Arabia were, and are still, facing many hardships and gender discrimination in various forms. According to recent statistics, Saudi women still lag men in all fields of employment, even though they have higher literacy rates than their male counterparts (Koyame-Marsh, 2017). On top of that, all Saudi women, regardless of age, are required to have a male guardian. That is, adult Saudi women must get permission from a male guardian to study abroad, travel, work, receive medical treatment or get married, among other things (Human Rights Watch, 2016). There are several reasons behind such gender inequalities, such as the patriarchal culture and traditions of the Saudi society, discriminatory policies and laws, and misinterpretation of Islamic texts.

In recent years, however, Saudi women have slowly begun to challenge gender inequality and demand social justice. Women have recently gained some rights. For example, in 2013, thirty women were appointed to the *Al-Shura* Council, which is the king's highest consultative and advisory body. Following that, Saudi women gained a more symbolic victory via some political reforms that allowed them to register as voters and to be candidates in the municipal councils' elections for the first time in the history of the country (Human Rights Watch, 2015; "Saudi Arabia's women vote," 2015). In September 2017, Saudi women were finally allowed to drive in a step that was viewed as a historical change in Saudi society. Yet, despite these gains, some Saudi women activists

believe that these reforms remain partial and limited with the existence of the male

guardianship system (Kalin & Bayoumy, 2017).

This paper aims to assess how Saudi women have utilized Twitter to advocate to

end the male guardianship system, to facilitate a societal dialogue, and to foster

engagement for social change. Using social media for advocacy and activism can be

highly empowering for women as they seek to express themselves and strengthen their

positions, especially in developing societies. Previous women empowerment literature

(Akpabio, 2012; Nunez Puente, 2011; Plush, 2013; Radsch & Khamis, 2013; Stavrositu

& Sundar, 2012) suggests that social media tools are particularly powerful for giving a

voice to women who have been isolated, invisible and without a voice for so long.

However, there is a need for more studies on the role of social media in advocacy

and women's empowerment, as Guntarik and Trott (2016) argue, "this literature focuses

predominately on women in the West, while women in developing countries, or Asia

more generally, have been largely excluded from analysis" (p.235). This paper attempts

to contribute to the literature by filling in some of these gaps. It does so by examining

how social media advocacy is used by Saudi women to promote women's empowerment

and to demand societal structural reforms.

Drawing on the theoretical framework of empowerment and digital activism, this

paper examines Saudi women's online social advocacy to demand gender equality and

combat the unfair male guardianship system. Examining this case allows for an

exploration of the potential opportunities and limitations of social media in advocacy,

empowerment, and social change. In addition, this paper aims to present a collection of

practical lessons for social media activists and their future use of social media for social change and gender equality.

Theory and literature

Social Media Advocacy and Digital Activism

Throughout the world, grassroots movements are embracing social media as new advocacy platforms and the opportunities they provide to achieve social change (Ahmad, Bromley, & Cokley, 2013; Berents, 2016; Comunello, Mulargia, & Parisi, 2016; Karamat & Farooq, 2016; Obar, 2014; Pınar Özdemir 2012; Salter, 2011). Social advocacy is the use of Web 2.0 tools, such as social media to reach, inform, and mobilize a group of concerned people around a social issue or cause.

Several scholars highlight the inherent democratizing and empowering role of social media and the advocacy potential of these modern technologies for social movements and grassroots mobilization (Chalmers & Shotton, 2016). This study relies on the theoretical framework of digital advocacy that was developed over the last few years. Hon (2015, p. 315) developed a theoretical model that identified several features of digital social advocacy, such as 1) Supersizing Effects, which refers to the ability of digital advocacy to expand reach and speed; 2) Affordances, which means that digital advocacy can significantly reduce costs that were often incurred in traditional advocacy, including time, money, or other social costs, such as punishment, job loss, arrest, and sometimes death; 3) Shift Power, which indicates a shift in power from the owners of means of production, (such as governments, formal organizations, centralized leadership, gatekeepers, mainstream media) to the masses.

Previous studies (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Boyd, 2010; Brunner, 2017; Clark, Bland, & Livingston, 2017; Neumayer & Svensson, 2014; Sanderson, Frederick, & Stocz, 2016) have argued that social media tools, with their low or no cost, wide-reaching access, and instantaneous sharing of messages, have altered advocacy and provided great opportunities for networking, mobilization, civic engagement, and collective action. Activists are embracing these new platforms and the opportunities they provide to achieve social change (Chaudhry, 2014; Christensen, & Titley, 2014; Halpern, Rosenberg, & Arraiagada, 2013; Obar, 2014). As Murphy (2015) argues, "the opening of new pathways for dialogue, flows of exchange and the amplification of the average person's voice, in particular, are worthy of our attention, as these developments are transforming human rights and social justice communication" (p. 104).

In contrast to traditional media that are often blamed for the decrease of engagement and social capital (Hao, Wen, & George, 2014), several recent studies offer evidence that social media use is often positively related to civic engagement and an individual's participatory behavior in various societal and political issues (Baruh, 2015; Chan, 2016; Harlow, 2016; Skoric & Poor, 2013; Vromen, Xenos, & Loader, 2015; Warren, Sulaiman, & Jaafar, 2015).

Despite the enormous potential for social media activism to raise awareness, impact attitudes, and enable behavioral change, efforts to use social media in advocacy have resulted in varying degrees of success and failures. While some social media activism efforts were very successful and led to some social changes, others have been ephemeral and ineffective. Previous studies differentiate between online and offline participation (Šerek, & Machackova, 2015), and sometimes the findings indicate that the

use of social networks has no impact on offline civic participation and the influence of these social networks use is limited to online participation (e.g., Zhang & Gearhart, 2015). Such findings provide some evidence for skeptics who question the effectiveness of digital advocacy to induce a real change on the ground and thus present 'slacktivism' as an alternative when cyber-activism limits itself to the convenient online spaces without pairing it to the actual offline space (e.g., McCafferty 2011; Štětka & Mazák, 2014).

Women Empowerment

This study also utilizes the theoretical framework of empowerment and the role new technologies and social media play in empowering women. Currently, several feminist efforts are flourishing around the world, and many are emerging in social media spaces as hashtags with the hope that they will eventually develop into a broader social movement that empowers women and leads to social change. According to Page and Czuba (1999), empowerment is a social process that fosters power in people for use in their own lives, their communities and in their society, by acting on issues they define as important. Empowerment is a process to topple negative beliefs about oneself, and the shift from being passive, lacking self-confidence and not believing in being able to make a difference to self or to society, to a more active self with more attentiveness to one's true human potential (Ahmad, Bromley & Cokley, 2013).

Previous literature on empowerment (Page & Czuba, 1999; Pettit, 2012; Green, 2008; Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012), makes a clear distinction between two important concepts: structure and agency. Agency is used to refer to the actions of individuals and groups in society aiming for change, while structure refers to the broad, institutional and recurrent behaviors, systems, ideologies, and policies within a certain society. The crucial

aim of women's empowerment is to change the gender imbalances and transform patriarchal social relations and structures in society (Green, 2008). "When gender inequality exists, women are not only disadvantaged economically and politically; they may also perceive that who they are and what they do are of little consequence to their significant others – that they do not matter" (Chew, Ilavarasan, & Levy, 2015, p.524).

Additionally, Pettit (2012) argues that power can be gained, improved and transformed, as it is neither an absolute nor static. In addition, "power can be understood as a kind of mutual interaction and interplay of agency (humans) and structure (systems) in any society, and empowerment is the process that requires shifts in both dimensions" (p.4). Women empowerment, in particular, has received considerable attention from scholars (Bawa, 2016; Chew, Ilavarasan, & Levy, 2015; Green, 2008; Todorova, 2017). For example, women in any society are the agency that should take actions to change current formal and informal structures of power within their societies (e.g., laws, norms, traditions, family constraints) that hinder their power.

The changes required for women's empowerment occur on different levels. One empowerment level is the "power-within", which is a sense of personal power on an individual level (self-esteem, self-confidence, self-awareness, etc.). Another empowerment level is the "power with", which is conceptualized in the women empowerment literature as the recognition that more can be achieved by networking with other individuals/groups to act together (macro) rather than alone (micro). This involves the ability to work with others to change society and social institutions and organizing communities with a common purpose to achieve collective and communal goals (Williams, Seed, & Mwau, 1994, cited in Green, 2008, p. 372).

Women Use of Social Media for Empowerment

Social media provided women with virtual spheres that encouraged women to communicate and overcome the barriers that exist in traditional communication channels. In addition to providing female users with greater control over time and pace of conversation, social media tools also allow anonymity, reduce the importance of physical appearance, and put more emphasis on representation and storytelling through text and other multimedia items.

Several studies around the world have explored the numerous opportunities for women empowerment and engagement provided by social media and innovative digital communication tools (Akpabio, 2012; Anderson & Shrum, 2007; Champeau & Shaw, 2002; Guntarik & Trott, 2016; McLean, Maalsen, & Grech, 2016; Mogambi & Ochola, 2015; Plush, 2013; Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012). The main question for such studies was about the uses and effects of the Internet and social media on female users and whether these new tools have the potential to improve the lives of women and empower them to accomplish gender equality.

Successful cases from some developing countries provide an optimistic view of the role social media platforms can play in mobilizing and encouraging women's engagement and empowerment. Professional women in developing countries utilize information communication technologies and new media tools to start a dialogue in their society to change gender codes that govern behaviors and to demand gender equality (Anderson & Shrum, 2007). In Southern Africa, new media is fostering women's participatory communication and assisting greatly in achieving the goals of the gender movement (Akpabio, 2012). In Pakistan, media and various communication efforts are

not only the agents of change, but also agents of re-defining cultural values and the challenging patriarchal mindset of society (Awan, 2012). Stavrositu and Sundar (2012) found that online spaces, such as blogging, are means of self-expression that allow women to provide a voice of their own that is also visible to others, which leads to psychological empowerment of women bloggers and enhances their sense of community. Arab women empowerment has been recently tackled in the context of such emerging new media. For example, Radsch and Khamis (2013) conducted a study based on in-depth, personal interviews with more than twenty young Arab women journalists, bloggers, and activists from Arab countries that faced political unrest during the so-called Arab Spring. They concluded that networked social media gave Arab women new tools to express their identities, participate in the public sphere, and gain more visibility with their own voice. Given that literature, one can argue that social media provide a space where women can contest and challenge unfair cultural norms and values.

Saudi Women's Digital Activism for Social Change

Throughout the years, gendered power relation ideologies attributed to traditions and socioeconomic values gained legal force in Saudi society by being mistakenly associated with Islamic teachings (Hamdan, 2005). Unfortunately, the patriarchal interpretations of Islamic texts are used in isolation and out of their proper context to validate systematic injustices carried out against women, which reinforce female inferiority (Qazi, 2016).

In the last few years, Saudi women have used social media tools to demand social change and reform. Saudi women activists started a campaign in 2011 to demand their right to drive. Saudi women activists have long demanded the ban to be ended, and some of them have been arrested and jailed for defying the ban. Manal Al-Sharif is the

prominent Saudi women activist who launched #Women2Drive in 2011 as a Facebook campaign to urge Saudi women to get into their cars and drive. The campaign started when Al-Sharif posted on her other social media accounts, a video of herself driving. The video went viral and Al-Sharif was detained and jailed by Saudi authorities but later released. Al-Sharif inspired civil disobedience by asking Saudi women to defy the ban and drive their cars (Baker, 2012). As a result, many Saudi women took to the road in defiance as a means of civil disobedience, posting on various social media, photographs or videos of themselves behind the wheel. Saudi Arabia was the only country in the world where women were not allowed to drive. The Saudi government officially lifted the ban on women's driving when Saudi Arabia's King Salman issued a decree in September 2017 announcing that a ban on women driving was going to be lifted on 24 June 2018. Following the ban lift, Al-Sharif, author of the book *Daring to Drive*, said that this government decision is "driving to freedom" and is just the first step in a long road of reform that should be followed by ending the oppressive guardianship system (Al-Sharif, 2017).

Context for *#TogetherToEndMaleGuardianship* Campaign

According to Human Rights Watch (2016), every Saudi woman must have a male guardian, normally a father or husband, but in some cases a brother or even a son, who has the power to make a range of critical decisions on her behalf. Saudi women may be required to provide guardian consent in order to work or access healthcare. Women regularly face difficulty conducting a range of transactions without a male relative, from renting an apartment to filing legal claims.

Women's rights activists in Saudi Arabia have repeatedly called on the government to put an end to this male guardianship system, which the government agreed to do in 2009 and again in 2013. However, the male guardianship system remains largely in place (Human Rights Watch, 2016). In June 2016, Saudi women initiated a campaign to demand change within their community. Women across Saudi Arabia joined the growing Twitter campaign calling for the end of the guardianship system (India, 2016; Khan, 2016; O'Sullivan, 2016). Prominent Saudi women activists started raising awareness and questioned the religious validity of such an unfair system.

The goal of this paper is to examine how Saudi women activists used Twitter to advocate against the Male Guardianship System and to challenge existing societal structures. The paper aims to answer the following research questions:

Q1: What were the major themes created by Saudi women activists that emerged within the Twitter advocacy discourse against the Male Guardianship System?

Q2: What were the major empowering strategies used by Saudi women activists during their guardianship campaign?

Q3: What types of messages (including informational, persuasive, and artistic messages) were used by Saudi women in their online campaign?

Method

This case study uses a qualitative critical textual analysis of tweets posted by Saudi women campaigners against the Male Guardianship System. Tweets that use the campaign's hashtags provide an opportunity to study strategies of digital advocacy and women's empowerment. This case is of a particular significance because, by examining the Saudi women's activism via social media, it adds to the literature on how women in

developing countries are using social media tools to combat social injustice and demand long-denied rights. A total of 46,267 tweets were collected for analysis using DiscoverText Software to search for tweets that included the campaign's relevant hashtags, both in English and Arabic, (English hashtags #TogetherToEndMaleGuardianship, #IAmMyOwnGuardian, #StopEnslavingSaudiWomen and their equivalent Arabic hashtags).

Tweets were selected at two points in time during the campaign: December 29th 2016 to January 7th, 2017, and from March 13th to March 22nd, 2017, encompassing a 20-day period during this when the campaign started to receive massive national recognition and the campaign's hashtags were trending on Twitter for several days. The second point of time (March 13th to March 22nd, 2017) was selected to capture another stage of the campaign when it started to receive significant international attention that coincided with the global annual celebration of the International Women's Day in March.

The search analytics tools and search filters in DiscoverText allowed the researcher to select a purposive sample of 400 tweets. Searching the tweets archive data using the software's metadata filters (such as keyword search, date, influence, use of visuals in the tweet), provided an automated clustering and a high sense of the data landscape. Critical textual analysis of the purposive sample of tweets was used to analyze and synthesize the content of the online textual and visual twitter discourse created and disseminated by Saudi women activists during their activism against the Male Guardianship System. Although the tweets of Saudi women used in this analysis are publicly available online per the Terms of Services of Twitter, the researcher chose to omit the user handles in this report to protect their privacy. The tweets, which were in

English, were kept in their original form (e.g., misspellings, grammar issues), and tweets

that were originally written in Arabic were translated to English by the researcher (who

speaks and reads both languages) to reflect the original meaning as close as possible.

Results

The online discourse that is generated by the Saudi women's campaign provides a rich

terrain to examine a case of advocacy and activism that engaged the Saudi society in a

conversation about long-standing social injustice, gender inequality and empowered

women to take a stand against such sexist laws and policies. The study examined Saudi

women's tweets to determine what Saudi women activists were posting, what information

was shared the most, what themes emerged in the campaign's content, and to discover the

ways in which Twitter enables and/or constrains discourse surrounding Saudi women's

activism and demands for social change. The online campaign discourse demonstrates

Saudi women activists' use of Twitter to inform, express emotion, and to advocate for

collective action by and for the Saudi women. To answer the first research question about

the major themes that emerged on Saudi women's Twitter advocacy discourse, the

following two major overarching themes were identified: 1- Communicating anger and

intolerance and 2- Blaming patriarchal power arrangements.

Communicating Anger and Intolerance

Across the tweets, one strong message and a major theme communicated in the campaign

was anger and intolerance of the Male Guardianship System. Saudi women activists

demanded an end for this discriminating system and used their campaign to communicate

to policymakers and others in Saudi society that this patriarchal system was no longer

acceptable nor tolerated. An angry Saudi woman tweeted: "We will never be silent on

this slavery system, it's our lives, our bodies, and our right to end it!!" Another indignant Saudi woman tweeted: "I can't get that job, I can't marry you, I can't travel for treatment, because he said NO."

Women demanded their right to be recognized in their society as adults and to end such discriminatory laws. Here are a couple of tweets that Saudi women tweeted concerning this:

> - It is so simple; we only want to be recognized as adults, not minors, not lunatics, not handicapped.
>
> - We are facing the worst imaginable forms of gender discrimination.
>
> -She is not a child & she is not inferior to you and she is not your slave by law.

Under this anger and intolerance theme, Saudi women were pointing out injustice practices due to the unfair system and expressed their indignation, resentment, and bitterness in various means.

Blaming Patriarchal Power Arrangements

Across the campaign discourse on Twitter, another major theme that emerged was blaming existing power arrangements in Saudi for the patriarchal system of male guardianship. Saudi reformers challenged the use of religion as a justification for such an unfair system and they attributed responsibility to patriarchal institutions in the Saudi society, such as local customs, and other political, legal, and economic societal structures. Saudi women sent a strong message that the deprivation of their rights under the Male Guardianship System had no origin in the pure teachings of Islam. Saudi women activists, instead, blamed existing power structures and called for providing women with more rights, based on the pure teachings of Islam.

Saudi activists also stressed on the fact that Saudi Arabia was the only Muslim country that restricted women's rights by applying the Male Guardianship System, while women in other Muslim Arab countries (e.g., Egypt, Jordan, United Arab Emirates) enjoyed more political, social, and personal rights, with no comparable enforcement of such guardianship system. Additionally, Saudi women shared distinguished Islamic scholars' opinions that dismissed the false claims that the guardianship system was required in Islam. For example, Saudi women tweeted quotes from Islamic law scholars, such as Khaled Abou El Fadl, stating: "Wahhabism goes and takes elements from the Islamic tradition that are most oppressive of women, and highlights and enlarges them and makes them the whole of Islam. In my view, that a clear corruption of the Islamic tradition."

Saudi women argued that the primary interpreters of Islamic law and policymakers in the modern history of Saudi Arabia were mostly male scholars and their interpretation was partial, biased, and selective. Saudi women activists tweeted:

- The legal guardian system has been imposed in 1982, don't believe those who say it is required by religion. Our mothers and grandmothers did not have guardians and they are still good Muslims and believers.

- We just want our God-given rights & for all women in the country to enjoy these rights.

- I can B my own guardian cuz I'm an adult but the government doesn't trust me!!

- You want me to respect the law? Then make the law respectable!

Saudi activists also used various examples from Islamic history that demonstrated Muslim women's independence and participation in various domains in society. They also called for an end to the use of religion as a justification, and shared ample

explanations of Islamic rules on Guardianship, clarifying that it was only required for minors and for those who are mentally challenged. For example, one Saudi woman tweeted: "In Islam, guardians are only required for minors and those who are mentally ill. Which religion did you rely on when you came up with the male guardianship system in our society?"

To answer the second research question, the following section discusses the major empowering strategies used by Saudi women activists during their guardianship campaign.

Empowering and Fostering Participatory Culture

Saudi women activists encouraged other Saudi women who have been marginalized for years to participate in this campaign actively. Saudi women activists were involved in a collective action to mobilize and empower other Saudi women to break their silence and participate in this campaign. Three broad empowerment strategies were identified in the campaign's discourse: 1- Disseminating information & raising awareness, 2- Mobilization & call for action, and 3- Breaking the silence & collective efforts.

Disseminating information & raising awareness. One of the most frequently used empowerment strategies was disseminating information and keeping the society informed. Saudi women activists used their online campaign to raise awareness, convey information about their cause and share available support resources. They shared lots of informative posts to educate women about their rights as well as facts and statistics to compare the status of women in Saudi Arabia with women in other Muslim societies and the world in general. For example, women activists heavily tweeted and retweeted links to the Human Rights Watch report "Boxed In", a report that included several true stories

shared by Saudi women on the hardships they face under the Male Guardianship System (Human Rights Watch, 2016). Posts represented in this category included tweets that shared news articles, international coverage of their cause, or any other useful resources.

Mobilization and call for action. Saudi women and prominent Saudi activists called on political leadership to improve women's rights and encouraged Saudi women to act to end their hardships. For example, a prominent Saudi activist, Hala Al-Dosari wrote an online petition and used the campaign to mobilize women to sign that petition. The petition received a quick turnout, with more than 15,000 Saudi women signing the online petition in a few hours. Additionally, several Saudi clerics signed this petition in a move to show their support and also to deny the claim that the guardianship was derived from Islamic teachings (Sidahmed, 2016). Another prominent Saudi Activist, Aziza Al-Yousef sent the signed petition to the Royal Court and distributed her picture in front of the Saudi Royal Palace as she submitted the petition in person (Al-Dosari, 2016).

In addition, through the campaign's online discourse, Saudi activists were persuading other Saudi women to engage in the ongoing discussion and participate in the campaign's symbolic and peaceful resistance activities. For example, women were asked to post pictures of themselves holding papers where they were asked to write down their reasons for demanding an end to the male guardianship system. Several women posted photos of themselves, often hiding their faces, holding the paper, along with their Saudi passports. One Saudi woman wrote on the paper: "I'm a Saudi woman, I refuse to be treated like a minor, I'm a capable human being and I deserve to have full control over my life. I demand to remove the male guardianship law, I demand freedom!" Another woman

wrote: "Male guardianship in Saudi Arabia normalizes the dehumanization of & control over women by men. But campaigning to end it is the crime."

Breaking the silence and collective efforts. Twitter provided Saudi women activists with numerous opportunities to initiate and be involved in a dialogue to discuss what used to be taboos in traditional communication channels. Twitter offered alternative means for self-expression, where Saudi women shared their own stories and explained their own struggles in numerous ways. The third major empowerment strategy in the campaign's online discourse was breaking the silence. Under this theme, Saudi activists motivated other women to share their stories and the discrimination they went through because of this sexist law.

While several social media activists in Saudi Arabia were using anonymous accounts to hide their true identities and location for fear of harassment, some activists did reveal their identities while tweeting. Mariam Eletibi is a Saudi woman, for example, who revealed her ID photo on Twitter while she was campaigning against the Male Guardianship System. As a result, her brother beat her up to force her to stop campaigning and to remove her photo. When Mariam reported her brother to the police for domestic violence, her father reported her for parental disobedience, which is a crime according to Saudi law. She was arrested and sent to jail. Mariam shared her story on Twitter and it was shared aggressively, with hashtags such as *(#IStandWithMariam and #WeAllAreMariamEletibi)* were created to show solidarity with Mariam and other Saudi women who shared similar discrimination and oppression stories. The case of Mariam and other Saudi women, who were victims of injustice and sexist laws, were shared on Twitter to encourage other women to speak up and act bravely.

Saudi women shared many testimonials from other women who suffered from the unfair guardianship system. For example, one Saudi woman tweeted a link to a video where she posed in front of the camera to share her suffering and struggle with the guardianship system. She shared her story after her husband died and how she found herself incapable of doing anything without a guardian, and how her sick father, who was barely able to get out of his room, became her guardian to give her permission to travel. In the video, she described her feeling and how disappointed and helpless she felt when her father died after two years: "I felt like a handball now, I need a new person to become my guardian because I'm an adult female and I can't do anything alone without a guardian."

In addition, the virtual campaigning space provided Saudi women activists with an opportunity to reach out to other women around the world and seek their support. The discourse of the campaign showed intensive participation from women in other countries, which demonstrates solidarity with the cause of Saudi women.

Innovative, Artistic, and Satirical Rhetorical Messages

Saudi women activists used several innovative and creative ways to communicate their intolerance of the Male Guardianship System during their campaign. They utilized various artistic and symbolic performances in innovative and creative ways to empower Saudi women to raise their voices and defend their human dignity. For example, the prominent Saudi activist who identifies herself as "Ms. Safaa" created "I Am My Own Guardian" artwork series, which was widely considered by Saudi women as the artistic expression for civil disobedience during the campaign (O'Sullivan, 2016). Ms. Safaa's posters, featuring a female face, covered in the traditional Saudi male head-cover and the

hashtag #IAmMyOwnGuardian, became a symbol of the anti-guardianship campaign (Malik, 2016). Her artwork was displayed on Saudi streets, retweeted, and sold online in various forms, such as T-shirts, scarves, and mugs.

In addition, Saudi activists also used satire as an effective rhetorical device in this campaign. According to Test (1991), satire is "a legitimate aesthetic expression of basic human emotions - anger, shame, indignation, disgust, contempt - emotions that are aroused by universal human behaviors - stupidity, greed, injustice, selfishness…" (p. 5). Satire allows opportunities for social and artistic expressions that satisfy people's need for humor and play. One Saudi woman satirically tweeted: "In Saudi Arabia, women are minors forever!!"

Saudi activists widely distributed satirical cartoons throughout this campaign. One example of these satirical cartoons shows a stark contrast between Saudi women inside and outside of Saudi Arabia. Outside of Saudi Arabia, a woman is shown walking in front of a young boy who is labeled "minor," while that same woman, inside Saudi Arabia, is shown walking behind the same young boy, and she is the one who is labeled minor this time. Another example of the use of satire is a cartoon that shows a Saudi woman filing a complaint against her abuser brother, with the law enforcement officer asking her "so, he is your abuser, where is your male guardian?" The woman in the cartoon is pointing to her brother, who is sitting in front of the law enforcement officer and the label reads as "her brother; her male guardian; her abuser."

Another satirical message that utilized creative performance to empower Saudi women to speak about their own struggles in the society was a video that depicted Saudi women playing, dancing, skating, etc. (Alesa, 2017). The video clip was heavily tweeted

and went viral during the campaign. The video showed Saudi women performing, along with satirical Arabic lyrics that translate to: "May all men disappear from the earth, they give us psychological illnesses. Damn, none of them is sane".

Pro-Guardianship: A Counter Campaign

The strong campaigning discourse created by Saudi women to combat the Male Guardianship System was countered by another online campaign that was led by conservative Saudi men and women and supported by conservative religious clerics. The hashtag #SaudiWomenProudofGuardianship is an example of this counter-campaign narrative, but also the original campaign's hashtags were used to articulate their different views and express their disapproval of the demands of Saudi women activists to end the guardianship system. Two main themes emerged in this pro-guardianship narrative.

The first theme was *conspiracy,* where pro-guardianship narratives tied the Saudi women campaign against guardianship to conspirators who aimed to dismantle Saudi society and Islamic laws. For example, a prominent Saudi female academic tweeted: "The injustice of some guardians should be dealt with through legal solutions, not
 by dropping Islamic laws."

The second major theme in the pro-guardianship campaign narrative was *guardianship as a woman's privilege*. Opponents to the Saudi women's campaign argued that Saudi women are protected under such a guardianship system and considered such laws as a privilege that protects Saudi women from an array of financial and familial burdens, since males are responsible for these financial obligations under this guardianship system.

Saudi women activists used humor and satirical messages to rhetorically disrupt the "Pro Guardianship" narrative and show their incongruity with such justifications. For example, Saudi women heavily tweeted a cartoon of a Saudi woman wearing a crown with the text stating: "I'm not a queen, I'm a human being. I can be my own guardian."

Conclusion and Discussion

The campaign of Saudi women against the Male Guardianship System is a distinctive case that highlights numerous opportunities and lessons for future virtual advocacy and women empowerment. In this campaign, Saudi women engaged in an ongoing activism battle to foster social change in Saudi Arabia's patriarchal society. They were empowered by communication and networking outlets provided by social media spaces, where long muted and suppressed women's voices could be heard.

Consistent with previous women empowerment literature, Saudi women activists used Twitter to mobilize other Saudi women to become active participants in their society rather than remain powerless subjects. Activists demanded that women preserve their sense of empowerment and continue fighting for more women rights and gender equality. In line with the previous findings on the role of social media in empowerment, this paper argues that social media has enabled Saudi women to discover their hidden potential; increase their power-within; boost their ability to act together, empower other women to bring attention to their plight, and find solutions for their serious social problems.

Investigating the role of social media in advocacy provides guidelines for advocates who seek to raise awareness and demand social change and justice. Twitter has been used by Saudi women as an alternative virtual public sphere for tackling social

injustice issues that remained untouched and considered taboos in other Saudi conventional media platforms.

Findings from this Saudi women's campaign demonstrate Saudi women's innovative use of Twitter to inform, advocate, foster collective action and civic engagement by and for Saudi Women. Along with the digital advocacy model developed by Hon (2015), Twitter enabled Saudi women to expand the reach and speed of their campaign and provided an affordable networking opportunity that helped them bring attention and demand changes to their hardships.

Resilience and creativity were reflected in Saudi women's campaigning against the sexist guardianship laws. Their social media campaign engaged society members in a conversation about women's rights and discrimination. Saudi activists used several innovative strategies to approach Saudi society and foster a participatory and engaging culture in such a conservative society. Activists used Twitter to inspire ideas and call for collective efforts to support Saudi women's demands that have been ignored or silenced for too long.

However, this activism case also raises questions about the limits of digital advocacy. Saudi women's digital activism via this Twitter campaign demonstrates the ways in which social media can be used artfully as a supplement to—but not a replacement for—traditional forms of mobilization and advocacy. It is this combination of online activity and offline participation in activism (petitions, art work, etc.) that makes social media a fascinating element in the development of social movements and social change. This case illustrates how strategic social media activism, situated within the hybrid digital/physical spaces, can produce innovative and effective instances of civic

engagement and participation. Saudi women were able to extend their virtual advocacy efforts to offline spaces and bridged online and offline activism spaces. The online campaigning space against the guardianship system was often used as the starting point of many other advocacy efforts in Saudi's streets and public spaces. Several offline advocacy efforts were first initiated as ideas, discussed, and coordinated within these online spaces before they were moved to the real world.

Another issue this case illustrates is questioning whether Twitter and other social media platforms are safe and free platforms of expression, where the marginalized and the oppressed can fearlessly and confidently speak and share their stories. It is important to note that until now, digital activism efforts cannot avoid many of the restraints that authoritarian governments have successfully placed on traditional social activism in the past. Although most Saudi woman were tweeting anonymously, lots of Saudi women reported being exposed to abuse from their families or even online harassment as a response to their campaigning and activism efforts.

This study has several limitations. First, the study relied exclusively on a qualitative analysis of the ample online campaign discourse available to the researcher on Twitter. Future research can use quantitative content analysis method to reveal other evidence about the campaign dynamics. Another limitation was relying only on the digital footprint of the campaign on Twitter. It might be helpful if future research could also gather self-reports from Saudi women activists, using surveys or in-depth interviews to capture their firsthand experience and narratives on challenges and lessons learned during their digital activism. In addition, this study used one specific campaign, which is Saudi women's advocacy to end the guardianship system. To further refine and develop

findings and lessons from this digital advocacy case, future research would necessarily need to assess other cases of women's use of social media in advocacy across different contexts and cultures. There is a growing need for future research to examine how digital social advocacy is used to raise awareness, break the silence, create collective solidarity and empower women around the world (e.g., the recent international #MeToo movement against sexual harassment).

Traditional media, in some cultures, diminished women's perspectives on certain issues for years, while social media offer an additional pathway to women's empowerment and helps them improve themselves to force social changes in their communities. Social media offers alternative means for self-expression, where muted voices can now share their own stories and explain their own struggles. Social media provides women with numerous opportunities to initiate and participate in dialogues about some of their issues that used to be taboo in traditional communication channels.

Grassroots campaigns have been redefined in the modern world through the use of social media. Social media have transformed advocacy and activism and provided endless opportunities for mobilization, civic engagement, and social change. Saudi women's online activism against the male guardianship system is a compelling example that illustrates how women around the globe are using social media tools to demand social change and raise women's voices that were once eliminated or muted. These online spaces allowed Saudi women to speak out in ways they would not have been able to without social media. Social media spaces offer an alternative public sphere that empowers women to speak and demand social change in their communities. Saudi activists are using social media not only to define and participate in ongoing debates, but

also to ask for social justice by expressing their frustrations from prevailing social norms, bias policies, and sexist laws. As Robbins and Jamal, 2016, explain, "at its core, social justice means creating a just or equal society by ensuring all members of society are treated the same, human rights are respected, and there is no discrimination based on membership in a group or other forms of Identity" (p.127).

Whether it is through innovative digital activism using social media or offline advocacy, the future long-term impact and social change that Saudi women will achieve via their digital advocacy remain to be determined. However, Saudi women's voices are being heard and will continue to be heard all the way through their battle for social justice. Even if the guardianship system is still in effect, Saudi women's social media activism should still be regarded as a noteworthy case of activism for social justice. Saudi women, empowered by social media, are enforcing a shift in their conservative societal structures, breaking the patriarchal attitudes, and starting the difficult work of activism to resist social injustice.

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