
MEDIATING THE MUSLIM PUBLIC SPHERE

VOICE, IDENTITY, AND INCLUSION IN CONTEMPORARY MEDIA ENVIRONMENTS

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DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I, Sultan Ahmed Al-Azri, declare that this thesis entitled “*Mediating the Muslim Public Sphere: Voice, Identity, and Inclusion in Contemporary Media Environments*”, and the work in it are my own, with the exception of a clearly identified section that draws on a jointly authored publication, for which my individual contribution is specified. Further, I confirm that where I have used the work or ideas of others, this has been clearly acknowledged by reference to the source, and no part of this thesis has been submitted in support of another degree or qualification at the University of Leeds or any other institution. I hereby declare that the article on minority radio included in this thesis was jointly authored with Dr Nour Halabi. My contribution (approximately 75–80% of the work) encompassed leading the development of the research design, conducting the majority of the interviews, and carrying out the primary data analysis. I was responsible for the whole analytic process, including coding, thematic development, and the integration of theoretical frameworks. I also took the lead in drafting all sections of the manuscript, coordinating revisions, and preparing the article for journal submission.

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ABSTRACT

This research project adopts a three-article format unified by the theme of media-enabled public sphere formation in non-Western Muslim contexts to explore and understand how Muslim voices are mediated in contemporary media environments, with particular attention to questions of voice, identity, and inclusion across minority and majority settings. While each article addresses a distinct empirical problem utilizing a particular case study and employs its own methodological design, collectively they form a coherent investigation of mediated Muslim participation in the public sphere. The first article, “Minority Radio in the United Kingdom: The Case of a Muslim Radio Station in Yorkshire”, examines how community-based broadcasting functions as a deliberative space for minority voices within a Western context. The second article, “Deliberative Discourses in Digital Spaces: Unpacking the Deliberative Qualities of Online Forums in Oman”, explores how citizens navigate expression, authority, and inclusivity within a semi-authoritarian context. Finally, the third article, “Mediating Religious Authority and Women’s Rights: Self-Identified Religious Omani Female Influencers in the Digital Public Sphere”, focuses on how gendered authority, religiosity, and digital visibility shape deliberative participation in online spaces. Together, the three studies offer a perspective on how diverse actors use their platforms – community radio, online public forums, and social media – to construct space for voice, identity, and authority. Exploring the Muslim public sphere is especially significant given that dominant Western models of the public sphere have tended to marginalize or exclude religious and minority perspectives.

This project adopts an integrated theoretical framework that combines scholarly conceptions of voice and participatory parity with postcolonial perspectives on power and representation that counter Western epistemological dominance. Further, it follows a comparative, multi-sited, and mixed methods approach to investigate how the Muslim public sphere is mediated across different socio-political and media environments.

Examining both Western minority and Middle Eastern majority contexts, this project highlights the diverse ways in which Muslim voice, identity, and inclusion are mediated. It contributes to ongoing scholarly efforts to rethink the media as a mediated public sphere, offering both conceptual innovation and empirical depth to the fields of public sphere theory and political communication. The analysis underscores that communication is not only a vehicle of expression but a site of struggle over legitimacy, authority, and belonging.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CDA: critical discourse analysis

GCC: Gulf Cooperation Council

SROFIs: self-identified religious Omani female influencers

SWANA: Southwest Asia and North Africa

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INTRODUCTION

The overarching aim of this thesis is to explore how Muslim voices are mediated in contemporary media environments, with particular attention to questions of voice, identity, and inclusion across minority and majority contexts. This focus on mediated Muslim participation in the public sphere is especially significant given that dominant Western models of the public sphere have tended to marginalize or exclude religious and minority perspectives. Scholars have highlighted that such frameworks are shaped by intersecting historical, epistemological, and cultural biases privileging bourgeois secularism and Western experience at the expense of marginalizing others (see: Asad, 2003; Calhoun, 1992a; Casanovas, 1994; Couldry, 2010; Fraser, 1990; Mouffe, 2000). Jürgen Habermas, whose work is foundational to public sphere theory, is often cited as emblematic of this Eurocentric bias. Accordingly, his analysis has faced substantial criticism for reflecting assumptions rooted in bourgeois secularism and Western historical experience (Gunaratne, 2006). Such critiques have prompted scholars to argue for alternative models that recognize multiple, overlapping publics. While Fraser (1990) theorizes the existence of subaltern counterpublics in general terms, Gunaratne (2006) extends this argument to Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority contexts, emphasizing the role of religious, communal, and cultural logics of legitimacy. While Fraser (1990) and Gunaratne (2006) provide critical theoretical frameworks for rethinking the public sphere, this study applies their insights empirically by examining mediated public spheres in Muslim contexts, with particular attention to how minority Muslim radio in the UK – alongside other cases – illustrates the ways different groups create alternative public arenas.

On the specific issue of minority representation in the public sphere, two perspectives are particularly relevant to this study as they move beyond the classical Habermasian model by recognizing the role of media as a site of cultural production and the importance of plural, intersecting publics. First, Born (2013) emphasizes the importance of providing access to the means of self-representation and self-expression in media production for minority and disadvantaged groups. Second, Soliman (2017) highlights how Muslim

communities in Europe engage in self-representation and critique, creating alternative public spheres that reflect their experiences and views. Both perspectives foreground agency and voice among marginalized groups, aligning with this study's focus on mediated self-expression and the dynamics of inclusion. Accordingly, this project adopts a broader conceptualization of the public sphere as a mediated space in which diverse social actors, including minority and marginalized communities, can articulate claims, debate issues, and negotiate social and political identities.

Publics and the mediated public sphere are two interrelated concepts. According to Barnett (2008), publics are constituted in part through the mediums in which their representation appear, including the public sphere. Drawing on Don Mitchell, Barnett argues that publicness has something to do with communicating with others. This understanding is consistent with Habermas's conceptualization of the public sphere as a circulatory space of communication and his acknowledgment of it as constituting ongoing discursive processes, a reading articulated and developed by Barnett (2008). Both concepts – publics and the mediated public sphere – are central to understanding inclusion, representation, and social justice in contemporary societies. First, the different publics engaged in these exchanges, along with their distinct compositions and voices, can vary according to context, medium, and access to the mediated public sphere. Second, within the mediated public sphere, the extension of public spaces into media platforms (e.g., social media, minority media) is what allows dialogue, contestation, and representation to occur. These concepts facilitate evaluation of the quality and openness of public debate by guiding the study of how marginalized communities, for instance, minority Muslims in the UK or minorities within Muslim-majority contexts, use media to create alternative spaces for expression and deliberation.

This thesis addresses the overarching research question of how Muslim voices are mediated in contemporary media environments, with particular attention to questions of voice, identity, and inclusion across minority and majority contexts. In addressing this overarching question, this research project adopts a three-article format unified by the theme of media-enabled public sphere

formation in non-Western Muslim contexts. It connects diverse regions, media technologies, and sociopolitical settings through studies that differ in design and context, allowing for comparative and cross-contextual insights to explore how mediated spaces operate under differing cultural and regulatory frameworks. Each study individually addresses a context-specific issue from a distinct angle: exploring cultural identity and communal cohesion via traditional broadcast, evaluating whether digital deliberation platforms enable inclusive and equitable participation, and analysing Instagram as a space for crafting religious authority and framing gendered rights.

For ease of reference throughout this project, these three research articles are cited as individual studies to facilitate cross-referencing and thematic synthesis across the sections. The first, titled “Muslim Minority Radio Broadcasting in the UK: The Case of Fever FM in Yorkshire” (hereafter “*Minority Radio*”), examines how community-based broadcasting functions as a deliberative space for minority voices within a Western context. This article has been accepted for publication in the *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research*. Forthcoming in the *Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, the second article, “Deliberative Discourses in Digital Spaces: Unpacking the Deliberative Qualities of Online Forums in Oman” (hereafter “*Sablat Oman*”), explores how citizens navigate expression, authority, and inclusivity within a semi-authoritarian context. Finally, the third article, “Mediating Religious Authority and Women’s Rights: Self-Identified Religious Omani Female Influencers in the Digital Public Sphere” (hereafter “*Religious Female Influencers*”), focuses on how gendered authority, religiosity, and digital visibility shape deliberative participation in online spaces. A revised version of this article has been resubmitted to the journal *Women’s Studies in Communication*. Taken together, the three studies demonstrate how diverse actors use their platforms – community radio, online public forums, and social media – to construct space for voice, identity, and authority. This thesis extends the wider conceptualisation of the public sphere beyond its Eurocentric and secular contexts. Meanwhile, by situating the analysis of Muslim mediated voices within the broader debates on the public sphere, this project contributes

to rethinking the way visibility, participation, and legitimacy are negotiated in plural and post-secular contexts.

The remainder of this introductory section proceeds as follows. I begin by presenting the key research questions and objectives of this research project, situating the study within broader debates in media and political communication. This is followed by an explanation of the rationale for adopting the three-article thesis format. I then provide an overview of the thesis, presenting the three articles in more detail and outlining the structure of the dissertation as a whole. The discussion subsequently outlines the key concepts utilized in this project and their definitions. Attention then turns to the methodological strategy adopted throughout this study. The section concludes with the research considerations and alignment of analytical sites.

1.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVES

According to Couldry (2010), voice, as the capacity to speak and be heard, helps individuals in the production and expression of social identity. Building on this perspective, inclusion can be understood as the extent to which such voices are recognized as legitimate within the public sphere. Dominant media establishes the terms of audibility and legitimacy; consequently, it specifies which identities are considered authoritative and which remain marginal. In this sense, voice is a relational phenomenon embedded in institutional, cultural, and technological conditions that privilege some speakers while silencing others. In practical terms, this reality means that institutional power plays a significant role in shaping Muslim identities, and thus in determining how Muslims are recognized as legitimate actors within public discourse. Therefore, a nuanced understanding of contemporary Muslim voices is important because it reveals how minority communities negotiate between imposed framings and their own claims to authority, identity, and belonging. This approach highlights both the empirical realities of mediated voice and the normative stakes of inclusion, recognition, and democratic participation, a concern that also resonates with Saeed's (2016) analysis. In her book, *Islamophobia and Securitization: Religion,*

Ethnicity and the Female Voice, Saeed highlights how Muslim minority women in the UK are represented in media and how power, securitization, and institutional forces constrain or shape the “female Muslim voice”.

These tensions between authoritative and marginalized voices underscore the need to investigate how Muslim voices are mediated in today’s media landscapes. Responding to these tensions, this thesis aims to understand how Muslim voices are shaped and articulated through contemporary media, not only as individual expressions but also as forms of participation within the broader public sphere, with a focus on the dynamics of identity, voice, and inclusion across diverse sociopolitical contexts. It is worth noting that the focus on identity, voice, and inclusion reflects the central concern of the public sphere theory with recognition, participation, and legitimacy (Couldry, 2010; Fraser, 1990). This study extends Fraser’s (Fraser, 2006) notion of participatory parity, which refers to social arrangements that permit all members of society to interact with one another as peers in social life by foregrounding the communicative and discursive preconditions through which parity becomes possible in mediated public spheres. Specifically, it conceptualizes identity and voice as prior conditions that shape who is recognized as a legitimate speaker and whose participation is rendered audible within dominant discourse orders. In this sense, voice and identity specify how parity is negotiated, constrained, or enabled at the level of mediated visibility and public communication.

While the existing literature on the Muslim public sphere (see Section 1.2) has provided valuable insights across a wide range of themes, including political participation, religious authority, media regulation, and diasporic identity, it has often remained fragmented across studies on minority media, digital deliberation, and gendered authority (Willemse & Bergh, 2016), which tend to be examined in isolation, with limited engagement across these bodies of work. This project integrates these strands across its three interconnected case studies to enable the capture of patterns, tensions, and complementarities across minority media, digital deliberation, and gendered authority. Furthermore, in addition to capturing the complexity of the Muslim public sphere as multidimensional (minority/majority, online/broadcasting, gender/religious

authority), it facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of Muslim voice, including how identity, authority, and inclusion are negotiated across different platforms and contexts. This integration contributes to a holistic framework that shows how different strands interact to shape Muslim publics. It also moves beyond single-case or single-dimension studies and, consequently, produces a more generalizable and conceptually rich account.

This project's case studies involve three distinct but interconnected contexts (radio, online forums and Instagram influencers) that, as far as the literature indicates, have not been studied together before for the purpose of theorizing voice, identity, and inclusion as central dynamics of mediated Muslim publics. Examining these cases together allows for a comparative understanding of how these dynamics unfold across traditional, semi-digital, and fully digital platforms, thereby revealing continuities and transformations in Muslim self-representation and participation.

The questions arising from the above are then (1) How is the Muslim public sphere mediated across different media environments? and (2) In what ways do these mediations shape voice, identity, and inclusion? The main objective of this thesis is to synthesize findings across the three case studies to develop an integrated understanding of the Muslim public sphere that bridges minority/majority contexts, offline/online platforms, and gendered/religious authority. This objective is fundamental given that Habermasian models of the public sphere (and their critiques) often remain abstract or Western-centric. Such synthesis provides a more situated, empirically grounded understanding that can both refine and challenge existing theories. Furthermore, by synthesizing findings, this project offers a broader conceptualization of the Muslim public sphere by weaving together insights that would otherwise remain siloed. In fact, individual studies in each of the areas investigated – minority radio, online forums and Instagram influencers – can provide valuable insights, but they cannot reveal the broader patterns, interactions, or comparative dynamics across contexts. This synthesis yields original insights by showing that voice, identity, and authority are not merely context-dependent but are reconfigured through recurring relational patterns across cases. Through a

comparison between minority and majority settings, online and broadcast media, and gendered and religious contexts, the study has revealed how similar mechanisms, such as selective visibility, conditional recognition, and negotiated legitimacy, operate differently depending on institutional support, platform architecture, and cultural norms. In fact, individual studies alone do not have the capacity to generate these comparative insights because each case in isolation foregrounds localized dynamics. On the other hand, juxtaposing them makes visible the structural conditions under which voice becomes influential, constrained, and symbolic. Finally, linking the three cases produces a more nuanced and theoretically rich account of the Muslim public sphere, moving beyond localized or context-specific observations.

Importantly, the above objective is not an end in itself, but a necessary foundation for the second objective, namely, to contribute to broader debates in political communication and media studies. The integrated understanding of the Muslim public sphere produced in this project enables a more robust theorization of voice, identity, and inclusion that is central to the dynamics of mediated Muslim publics. Specifically, this synthesis enables the study to theorize voice, identity, and inclusion not as isolated attributes, but as relational and context-dependent processes that are shaped differently across minority and majority settings, digital and broadcast media, and gendered and religious forms of authority. This thesis demonstrates how similar struggles over legitimacy and audibility recur across platforms and sociopolitical locations, albeit through distinct institutional and cultural constraints. The comparative approach demonstrates how power operates through shifting combinations of institutional regulation, algorithmic visibility, community norms, and individual agency, dynamics that tend to be overlooked in single-case or single-platform studies. By advancing a more integrated theoretical account of mediated public spheres, the study shows how inclusion and authority are negotiated through intersecting structures of media power rather than within discrete communicative spaces.

The above discussion outlines the core research objectives that the three articles collectively address through their examination of complementary dimensions

within the Muslim public sphere. First, the *Minority Radio* article focuses on showing how voice and identity are expressed and sustained in broadcasted, community-driven contexts. The *Sablat Oman* article, in turn, investigates political discussions on an Omani online forum, problematising the dynamics of participation, inclusivity, and persuasive power in online deliberation. Finally, the *Religious Female Influencers* article explores the roles of self-identified religious Omani female influencers on Instagram, demonstrating how religious authority and gendered identity intersect with mediated voice. The three case studies examined in these articles and summarized in Table 1 reflect the diversity of communicators and media through which voice, identity, and inclusion are expressed. While this section presents each case study in detail, the cross-contextual synthesis and discussion of the shared dynamics of voice, identity, and inclusion will be developed in Section Five, where the critical analysis will be conducted and the findings compared and integrated to support the theoretical intervention.

Theoretically, this project enhances the understanding of the Muslim public sphere. It demonstrates how voice, identity, and inclusivity operate across minority and majority contexts, offline and online platforms, and gendered and religious authority. It bridges previously fragmented literatures on minority media, digital deliberation, and gendered religious authority, while extending Habermas's concept of the public sphere beyond its traditional Western and secular framing. In short, it advances theoretical discussions of the public sphere by tracing these dynamics across different communicative settings, revealing the interdependence between mediated participation, structural power, and recognition. Furthermore, in addition to clarifying how different actors negotiate legitimacy and participation in mediated publics, this approach provides a foundation for future research on inclusive and context-sensitive understandings of public spheres.

Article / Case Study	Communicating Actors	Medium	Focus	Key Issues Examined	Contribution to Overall Project
UK Minority Radio	Muslim minority community broadcasters	Fever FM Radio (offline, community-based)	Minority radio in the UK	Expression of voice and identity in community-driven contexts	Shows how minority publics create and maintain cultural and political presence through voice and identity
Sablat Oman	Omani citizens	Sablat Oman (online forum)	Political discussions in Oman	Dynamics of participation, inclusivity, and persuasive power in online deliberation	Highlights how digital platforms mediate deliberation and inclusivity in non-Western contexts
Religious Female Influencers	Omani female religious influencers	Instagram (social media platform)	Gendered religious authority online	Intersection of religious authority, gendered identity, and mediated voice	Demonstrates how women negotiate authority and expand inclusion in religious discourse

Table 1: Articles compared across contexts and dimensions

The topic areas covered in the three articles were purposefully chosen to examine different contexts, platforms, and dimensions of the Muslim mediated public sphere, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of the project's scope. Minority radio represents semi-autonomous platforms in which marginalized groups negotiate visibility, counter exclusionary discourses, and claim political participation. Utilization of this platform enables an exploration of how voice and identity are constructed under conditions of marginality within a Western majority society. Additionally, as a publicly funded media, it reflects redistributive arrangements, as state-supported resources condition who can access platforms of visibility and under what terms. This illustrates how redistribution operates indirectly as a structural precondition shaping communicative participation. Meanwhile, *Sablat Oman* offers the chance to explore how citizen deliberation and political expression unfold in a majority-Muslim, non-Western context. Compared to other new media platforms, private, closed platforms, including online forums, involve structural elements, such as the requirement of a specific sign-up and the presence of a gatekeeper. On the one hand, such elements serve to maintain community boundaries (Cyron et al., 2024). Thus, online platforms tend to attract a dedicated core audience, and they are prospected to involve fewer non-citizens, yielding results that are more representative of the target population. However, on the other hand, scholars (eg. Hill & Shaw, 2021; TeBlunthuis et al., 2022) have found that such structural elements can significantly impact inclusion, as they influence who can participate, how participants engage, and the overall inclusivity of the community. The utilization of Sablat Oman allows for the investigation of online forums' affordances and constraints in terms of digital deliberation, showing how publics negotiate inclusion and legitimacy in relation to state power and cultural norms. Finally, the article on self-identified religious Omani female influencers contributes to this exploration by examining how gendered and religious authority are performed and negotiated in digital spaces. It demonstrates how influencers articulate voice, construct identity, and frame rights within their community's sociocultural norms and sheds light on the intersection of religion, gender, and mediated public engagement.

In summary, the analysis presented in this section highlights how the three articles collectively demonstrate the dynamics of voice, identity, and inclusion across different mediated Muslim publics. Together, these findings contribute a partial yet substantive answer to the central research question by demonstrating how these dynamics operate under varying political and institutional constraints. This synthesis sets the stage for Section Five, where these insights are brought into direct dialogue to explicate the overarching theoretical argument of the thesis.

1.2 RATIONALE FOR THE ALTERNATIVE THESIS FORMAT

In order to maximize both theoretical depth and empirical breadth, this dissertation adopts an alternative, article-based format. In line with the University of Leeds Guidelines, this structure consists of three publishable articles and an integrative discussion that synthesizes their collective contribution. Unlike a traditional monograph, the thesis organizes the research into discrete studies, each with its own literature, review, methodology, and analysis, while remaining anchored in a shared conceptual framework. Presenting three interrelated articles alongside a critical integrative analysis allows for the exploration of key interrelated theoretical concepts through distinctive case studies – Muslim minority communities, Omani citizens, and religious female influencers – while working deductively from theory to empirical analysis.

This approach enhances the examination by allowing more in-depth exploration of specific dimensions of the overarching research problem. It enables each study to be presented as a self-contained contribution, allowing for clearer articulation of findings, easier publication in peer-reviewed journals, and a more effective integration of theoretical depth with empirical breadth. Meanwhile, these insights are synthesized into a coherent theoretical contribution within the integrative discussion.

This thesis-by-article format offers four distinct advantages over a traditional thesis format, which is why this author chose it. First, it allows each article to

present its own literature review, methodology, and analysis while maintaining coherence through an overarching theoretical framework. Second, this structure increases clarity for readers by allowing them to follow each study independently without extensive cross-referencing, thus demonstrating both rigour and autonomy. Third, the systematic methodology, transparent data analysis, and critical discussion ensure that each study meets academic standards on its own, enhancing rigour and independence. Fourth, it positions the research within ongoing scholarly debates in political communication, media studies, and the sociology of religion through publication-ready articles, enabling findings to reach the academic community more rapidly. Finally, this format enhances both the practical and academic impact of the dissertation, ensuring that each study stands as an independent, citable contribution while collectively advancing the broader inquiry into voice, identity, and inclusion in mediated contexts.

This approach aids comparative synthesis across contexts. Juxtaposing the findings of the three articles identifies commonalities and differences in how marginalized actors exercise community, persuasive, and normative power. In fact, this approach emphasizes the contribution of this research agenda to rethinking the public sphere in non-Western contexts, offering both empirical and theoretical insights into how alternative arenas of participation are created and sustained across different groups and media environments.

In sum, the adopted format is not solely a pragmatic choice; it also offers a conceptually coherent strategy. It demonstrates how this project has not only produced empirically grounded, publication-ready research but also advances

our theoretical understanding of mediated public spheres, identity negotiation, and inclusive participation.¹

1.3 KEY CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS

This project is situated at the intersection of political communication, media studies, and the sociology of religion, with a specific focus on Muslim publics in non-Western contexts. By examining mediated public spheres in these settings, this thesis investigates how different groups challenge the assumptions and limitations of Western-centric public sphere models by creating alternative spaces and practices of public engagement. The study's framework draws on multiple theoretical perspectives, integrating insights from public sphere theory, identity studies, and participatory approaches to communication, integrating various overarching strands: the mediated public sphere, publics and voice, identity construction and negotiation, and inclusive participation. In the following pages, each of these strands is developed in turn: The mediated public sphere strand outlines how digital and broadcast environments reshape conditions of participation, the public voice strand examines how different actors articulate presence and authority within this environment, and the identity construction and negotiation strand reviews the scholarly debates on identity as a relational, performative, and mediated process. Finally, the inclusive participation strand highlights the criteria through which participation becomes equitable, meaningful, and socially recognized. Together, these strands form the theoretical foundation that guides the empirical analyses presented in the subsequent sections.

¹ Additionally, this format provides professional benefits by producing three journal-submitted articles that demonstrate tangible scholarly output and enhance visibility. Unlike a traditional monograph, it allows timely contributions to ongoing debates, ensuring that findings reach the scholarly community promptly.

1.3.1 MUSLIMS AND MEDIATED PUBLIC SPHERES

Habermas (1991) theorized the public sphere as an intermediate arena situated between private individuals and state authority. This arena facilitates freedom of expression and open debate on issues of common concern, thereby shaping public opinion, which in turn influences state policies and actions. This conceptualization serves as a foundational entry point for this study.

While Habermas' model provides a starting point, critiques surrounding its Eurocentric and exclusionary assumptions, particularly regarding gender, class, and non-Western contexts, cannot be ignored (Eickelman & Anderson, 2003; Fraser, 1990). For example, Susen (2012) argues that Habermas's notion of the public sphere ignores the influence of gender discrimination. This type of normative idealism, which exaggerates the emancipatory potential of the public sphere, contradicts the lived realities of Muslim communities, where gendered participation is shaped by entrenched religious and cultural practices rather than formal ideals of equality. Aligned with this approach, Bekheit (2022) underscores the difficulty of employing the Habermasian model of the public sphere within the Arab context. She claims that some essential foundations of the Arab public sphere remain underdeveloped. These include relying on reason rather than force, fostering a culture of dialogue and debate, and prioritizing democratic principles. Furthermore, a clear separation between the public and private spheres remains difficult in Arab societies and in the virtual sphere of social networks, as private issues frequently spill into the public domain. Additionally, Khamis and Sisler (2010) claim that the Habermasian notion of the public sphere clashes with the role of Islamic religious traditions. This analysis concurs with Bekheit's assessment and acknowledges Khamis and Sisler's claim, although it approaches them as empirical conditions rather than a normative deficiency. However, rather than treating these limitations as evidence of the absence of a public sphere, this study examines how communicative practices, forms of participation, and claims to legitimacy are reconfigured within a structurally constrained environment. Accordingly, this study shifts attention from idealized deliberative standards to actually existing mediated public

spheres in which voice, identity, and inclusion are negotiated under uneven political, cultural, and institutional conditions.

On the other hand, invoking precolonial Morocco as an illustrative example, Eickelman and Salvatore (2002) argue that the idea of the public sphere is not a recent one in the Arab or the Muslim-majority world. They argue that political “belonging” in precolonial Morocco was based on a continuing process of contention and reaffirmation rather than unquestioned belief. Their argument recognizes a type of public sphere that functioned differently, as a set of ongoing negotiations over authority, legitimacy, and belonging, rather than a liberal-rational, secular sphere of debate. Accordingly, Eickelman and Salvatore (2002) challenge scholars who deny the existence of the Muslim public sphere by broadening its definition to account for Muslim contexts, showing that collective debate, contest, and reaffirmation existed in social and political practices, even if they were not visible in parliaments, newspapers, or coffeehouses in the European style.

The above discussion draws our attention to the divergence in perspectives regarding the Muslim public sphere. In fact, those scholars who refute the existence of a distinctive Muslim public sphere, such as Khamis and Sisler (2010), tend to adhere closely to Habermas’s original model, which emphasizes rational discourse. On the other hand, the approach adopted by those who affirm the existence of a Muslim public sphere aligns with less rigid interpretations of the theory, particularly those that criticize Habermas’s overemphasis on deliberative rationality (e.g. Calhoun et al., 2011; Fraser, 1990).

Habermas argues that “mediated political communication in the public sphere can facilitate deliberative legitimation processes in complex societies” (Habermas, 2006b, pp. 411-412), including Muslim and authoritarian contexts. This potential is contingent on the existence of media systems that operate independently of external pressures. Such systems should enable input from anonymous audience members and effectively connect the informed elite with the broader public. When these conditions are met, mediated communication can contribute to fostering a more informed and engaged community. As

Habermas (2006b, p. 412) notes, the internet has reactivated the grassroots of writer and reader publics in authoritarian contexts.

While Habermas (2006b) underscored the internet's potential to expand spaces of deliberation, subsequent scholarship on Muslim contexts highlights both opportunities and tensions generated by digital media. Online platforms have provided Muslim discourse with the space for expression, enabling transnational networking and reshaping how religious authority is negotiated (Eickelman & Anderson, 2003; Mandaville, 2007). Digital media allow Muslims across diverse national and cultural contexts to exchange opinions, debate religious and political issues, and form publics that are no longer confined to local institutional or state-regulated media. This has weakened the monopoly of traditional religious elites and opened their authority to contestation by new preachers and activists who gain visibility through online engagement rather than formal credentials. Meanwhile, such platforms have fragmented interpretive authority and amplified competing voices, processes that are not inherently detrimental from a public sphere perspective but nonetheless reflect a shift from centralized to pluralized forms of religious deliberation. This pluralization has enhanced inclusion and challenged established hierarchies of authority. Moreover, it complicates building consensus and intensifies contestation over religious legitimacy. Consequently, the relationship between digital media and the Muslim public sphere remains contested. This is to say that online communication can both foster new forms of Islamic deliberation and intensify existing divisions, depending on context.

Although authoritarian control over media remains a reality across many Muslim contexts, including in countries across the Middle East and North Africa, researchers argue that digital platforms continue to offer spaces where citizens can circumvent censorship, mobilize, communicate, and contest dominant narratives. Many of them have investigated the relation between media and Habermas' public sphere and public space in less democratic settings. For example, Marshall (2004) recognizes the internet as the driver of a transformative shift in the public sphere in non-Western contexts. His conceptual argument acknowledges the internet's role in reshaping patterns of

interpersonal communication, facilitating the formation of new sociopolitical communities beyond traditional, geographically bounded settings and enabling new types of communities to emerge and thrive. He also argues that new media destabilizes traditional gatekeeping, digital environments reconfigure voice, identity, and visibility, and media cultures enable new forms of participation and self-representation. Drawing on comparative studies of networked social movements and mediated political participation, Iosifidis and Wheeler (2015) emphasize the internet's role as a global medium that enables digital citizens to articulate thoughts, connect across borders, and form diverse virtual communities. They situate these developments within broader debates on network democracy, drawing attention to both their emancipatory potential and their structural limitations. Similarly, Abdulla (2023) explores social media's contribution to the formation of an eventful public sphere in an authoritarian context (Egypt) by combining survey data from participation in the Tahrir Square protests with a process-tracing analysis of 18 years of social media use. The study demonstrates how online networks sustain public discourse and its engagement around collective events, even when conventional spaces in the public sphere are constrained. While these studies provide empirical and analytical evidence, their findings are also shaped by contextual and methodological limitations linked to broader generalizations (c.f. Marshall, 2004) rather than empirical ones, as is the case with Iosifidis and Wheeler's (2015) study, or else they focus on moments of political mobilization rather than everyday public sphere participation. Taken together, these limitations underscore the need for further empirical investigation that systematically examines how digital media shapes public sphere participation across various contexts.

Nevertheless, as Bekheit (2022) points out, Arab and foreign researchers remain divided over the role of social media in fostering a free public sphere grounded in rational debate and communicative dialogue. She warns against overconfidence regarding social media's role in the creation of a public sphere. Although the internet has the capacity to develop people's awareness and expand their political, social, and economic freedom, as Dahlberg (2007) argues, its existence as a space alone is insufficient to establish a democratic public

sphere. He contends that such spaces must meet normative conditions, including but not limited to reasoned and reciprocal deliberation, reflexivity, and relative autonomy from state and economic power. According to Aslan (2022), the digital divide must also be addressed at three levels – internet access, digital skills and patterns of usage, and the tangible outcomes of internet engagement – in order for the internet to function as a mediated public sphere. Additionally, Papacharissi (2002) asserts that the internet offers an additional space for political discussion; however, it remains a firmly controlled space in authoritarian states, constrained by their lack of inclusivity, transparency, and responsiveness to marginalized perspectives. The internet, therefore, provides a public space, but not a fully realized public sphere. As MacKinnon (2011) highlights, practices of self-censorship and state monitoring constrain open participation and critical expression.

Many scholars have studied the public sphere in Muslim-majority contexts, where social, political, and historical factors shape the possibilities of public deliberation. Bekheit (2022), for instance, emphasizes the importance of situating social media within the broader historical, political, and social context of Muslim societies. Other scholars have proposed alternative models for the public sphere in Islamic contexts. For example, Abdulla (2023, p. 11) proposes a model that “highlights the role of social media in carving out an eventful public sphere within a defiant, rather than an autonomous, public space”. He utilizes the term “defiant public space” to capture how social media environments operate in conditions where traditional mechanisms of autonomy, understood as institutional independence from state and elite pressures, are systematically constrained. A defiant public space is not an independent power structure but is constitutively shaped by resistance to them. It enables actors to contest imposed silence, resist hegemonic control, and temporarily disturb dominant communicative orders. These studies illustrate how digital platforms can facilitate public engagement, even in contexts where traditional democratic institutions and deliberative practices may be limited.

Guided by this engagement and critique of Habermas’s concept of the public within the literature, this project understands the Muslim public sphere as a

mediated communicative arena shaped by media and sociopolitical conditions, where individuals and groups articulate voice, negotiate identity, and contest boundaries of inclusion and legitimacy. This understanding of the Muslim public sphere informs my research by providing the conceptual lens through which I analyze how digital media reshapes modes of participation and identity among Muslim communities. By situating my study within these debates, I can evaluate whether online platforms enable forms of deliberation that resemble – or diverge from – Habermas’s model. Furthermore, it demonstrates how this project contributes to ongoing debates about voice, identity, and inclusion in non-Western contexts. It does so by reframing the Muslim public sphere as a multifaceted and contested space where digital and offline practices intersect rather than form a singular or uniform domain, and by bridging minority and majority settings, offline and online spaces, and gendered and religious forms of authority.

1.3.2 PUBLICS AND VOICE

Mapping the Muslim mediated public sphere as a structural space provides the setting but not what actually happens in it. Practices of voice, identity, and inclusion reveal how people operate in these arenas, and who gets heard or silenced. In fact, because these practices reveal power dynamics, they are not evenly distributed. For example, some groups gain legitimacy, while others are marginalized. Thus, it is important to examine the practices of voice, identity, and inclusion within it to expose how authority is negotiated. This examination involves capturing how publics articulate themselves, negotiate identities, and contest boundaries of belonging. Accordingly, this section turns to the dynamics of voice to consider how this mediated sphere operates as a site of competing voices where questions of access, legitimacy, and representation determine which publics emerge and how they are recognized.

This study is anchored in the concept of voice, which Couldry (2010, p. 7) recognizes as “the process of giving an account of one’s life and its conditions”. This is to say that voice is understood as the capacity of individuals or groups to articulate perspectives in ways that are heard, recognized, and capable of

influencing public discourse. In the case of Muslim communities, voice is not merely a matter of expression, but a negotiated practice shaped by religious legitimacy, platform affordances, and cultural expectations. While such factors contribute to shaping such practice, political factors have the capacity to effectively silence or marginalize certain voices, as is the case in authoritarian contexts where political elites may shape whose voices are amplified and whose remain muted. In such cases, media platforms act as arenas where marginalized voices are expressed, and identities are articulated (Couldry, 2010). According to Caspi and Elias (2011), media provide a platform for voices that would otherwise remain unheard, offering minorities the opportunity to produce their own programmes, share their stories, and express their concerns and aspirations. Nick Couldry's theory of voice acknowledges alternative media's potential to challenge exclusionary practices in mainstream media, views voice as a mechanism of power and agency within social structures, and recognizes the importance of diverse voices in media (Couldry, 2010). Additionally, Said's (2003) postcolonial critique of Western epistemological dominance informs this project's framework by highlighting how publics and voice are shaped through unequal regimes of representation. This critique is taken up in greater depth in the subsequent sections, where it is used to examine how communicative spaces generate alternative epistemologies that negotiate, resist or reconfigure dominant knowledge structures. In this sense, the three articles in this thesis examine how communicative spaces generate alternative epistemologies that negotiate, resist, or configure dominant knowledge structures.

In this project, the framework of publics and voice emphasizes three interrelated dimensions. The first is expression and identity: Media platforms serve as platforms for publics to express their identities. Expression here refers to the ways in which people articulate their own identities, narratives, and issues within Islamic discourse through posts, blogs, and video content. In fact, media, such as community radio, contribute to shaping and sustaining the collective identity of audiences (Backhaus, 2020). It provides marginalized groups with the space to express their identities, voice their distinctive struggles and experiences, and share their stories to increase their visibility (Caspi & Elias,

2011; Delgado, 1990). Minority voices expressed through media contribute to the preservation of their culture, identity, and values (Hirschman, 1970).

The second dimension is representation and participation: In her approach to deliberative democracy, Fraser (2000a) affirms that participatory parity necessitates the inclusion of diverse voices in the public sphere. According to the principle of participatory parity, all individuals should have equal opportunities to engage and interact as peers, which requires both the equitable distribution of resources and recognition of diverse identities. Social media offers underrepresented populations the voice to articulate their concerns and narratives that are often overlooked by mainstream media (Couldry & Dreher, 2007) and to engage with the world (Couldry, 2012).

The third dimension is rights and visibility: As I see it, voices are shaped by a complex interplay of state policies, cultural traditions, and evolving social norms. Here, I emphasize voice as a community context (cultural norms, religious attitudes, and political climate). Together, these elements interact to shape the visibility, reception, and impact of individuals' and groups' advocacy for their rights. Accordingly, marginalized groups' engagement in active rights-based advocacy, which challenges such biased policies, traditions, and norms, has become a central element of their evolving voice and agency within the public sphere. As Nabil Echchaibi (2013) argues, Arab new media outlets have become an alternative space of resistance that amplifies women's voices and confronts gender-biased interpretations and policies.

1.3.3 IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND NEGOTIATION

This project is grounded in the perspective that identity is not fixed but socially constructed, continuously negotiated in interaction with others, and mediated through communicative practices. In fact, the three articles that constitute the core of this research project treat different media as sociotechnical spaces where identity is publicly performed and mediated by examining (1) how UK Muslim minority communities use community radio to express collective identity and negotiate representational power; (2) how Omani citizens construct their civic voice within platform built-in restrictions in terms of visibility and

moderation; and (3) how religious female influencers present moral and embodied authority through curated, algorithmically amplified content practices. Indeed, media platforms provide spaces where individuals and communities articulate, contest, and affirm their identities before diverse audiences.

Social analysis must recognize the fact that *identity* is a central concept in contemporary politics. However, it is sufficiently ambiguous that Brubaker and Cooper (2000) recommend more precise alternatives, such as identification, self-understanding, and commonality. They argue that identity “tends to mean too much (when understood in a strong sense), too little (when understood in a weak sense), or nothing at all (because of its sheer ambiguity)” (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p. 1). On the other hand, Jenkins (2008, p. 17) argues that identity can only be understood as a process of “being” or “becoming”. He maintains that one’s identity or/and identities remain contested since “who we are is always multi-dimensional, singular and plural”. He defines identity as the systematic establishment of similarities and differences between individuals and groups, emphasizing its social construction. Rather than being a fixed essence, Hall (2011) argues that identity is a “production” that is always in process and is shaped by history and representation. Accordingly, people derive part of their identity from the groups to which they belong through shared history and representational practices. According to him, identity is increasingly fragmented, fractured, and repeatedly constructed across different, often intersecting, and sometimes antagonistic discourses, practices, and positions.

Media play a pivotal role in the construction and negotiation of identity. Traditional media have historically functioned as powerful institutions of representation and contributed to the construction of communities’ identities by fostering shared cultural experiences and reinforcing dominant social values (Anderson, 2016; Scannell, 1996). Additionally, as Karim (2003) affirms, for minority and diasporic groups, community media, such as local radio, have been crucial in maintaining cultural continuity and negotiating hybrid identities. On the other hand, new media environments amplify the identity production process by enabling multiple, overlapping, and sometimes conflicting forms of

self-presentation (Papacharissi, 2011). Social media specifications qualify it to facilitate the development of shared experiences and views, a process that plays a vital role in the construction of group identity, which is a social capital that can be mobilized for activism (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). For example, social media platforms and digital forums allow users to curate narratives of belonging, cultural continuity, and difference, often in ways that challenge dominant discourses (Castells, 2015).

Unlike traditional mass media, which often present one-way narratives of representation, digital platforms provide interactive spaces where individuals and groups actively shape, perform, and contest their identities. With this discussion, I do not intend to underestimate the capacity of traditional mass media to construct and negotiate identities. Rather, I seek to emphasize that social media extends this capacity to individuals, whereas previously it was largely confined to collective actors such as minority media. In other words, while traditional mass media essentially positioned identity formation within the control of institutions, social media shifts this capacity to individual users, affording them greater freedom and autonomy in negotiating how they present themselves and engage with others. Traditional mass media have historically constrained identity formation within institutional boundaries, a dynamic explained by gatekeeping practices (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996) and the institutional layers outlined in the hierarchy of influences model (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014). In contrast, social media and online forums shift this capacity to individual users. However, this is conditioned by platform architectures and algorithmic logics that privilege certain forms of visibility and engagement over others. Such dynamics shape whose voices are amplified, which claims gain traction and how legitimacy is constructed within mediated publics. This project investigates this shift by examining how individuals, rather than only collective actors, articulate cultural and political claims within Muslim mediated spheres. Indeed, the case studies illustrate how individual participation now complements the work of collective minority media. While UK Muslim minorities utilize radio to acquire voice and identity in the first article, in the third article, religious female influencers engage in individual identity claims and cultural preservation.

1.3.4 INCLUSIVE PARTICIPATION

The concept of *inclusive participation* has emerged as a central concern in debates on democracy, deliberation, and mediated communication. According to Young (2002), this term refers to the meaningful involvement of diverse social groups in public life, where differences of gender, class, religion, and cultural identity are acknowledged and accommodated rather than excluded. Accordingly, inclusivity is not limited to the mere presence of marginalized voices but extends to ensuring that such voices not only are heard and valued but are also capable of influencing collective outcomes (Fraser, 1990). In short, inclusivity ensures that all social groups, especially marginalized ones, are recognized and empowered to participate equally in deliberation and decision-making processes.

Access, representation, and power are the main lenses through which inclusive participation has been examined in media and communication studies. As Dahlgren (2009) emphasizes, the democratic potential of media depends on enabling citizens to articulate their perspectives and challenge dominant narratives. Meanwhile, Papacharissi (2010) underscores the importance of digital spaces in opening new windows for marginalized groups to obtain visibility and agency. On the other hand, media systems are, as Couldry (2010) cautions, embedded in power relations that may silence marginalized groups, thereby limiting inclusivity in practice.

Habermas's deliberative democracy theory (Habermas, 1996) provides a normative framework to understand political deliberation as a communicative process grounded in reason-giving, mutual justification, and reflexivity among participants. Inclusivity is central to this model, ensuring that all potential actors can participate as equals, as is rational deliberation, which is understood as the exchange of arguments oriented towards mutual understanding rather than merely a strategic advantage. Reflexivity further requires participants to remain open to revising their positions in light of better arguments, thereby linking the communicative process to democratic legitimacy. This conception of

deliberation has particular importance because inequalities among groups can significantly undermine its quality.

Providing a conceptual foundation, paying attention to media structures, and offering a normative horizon have privileged Habermas's framework as a valuable tool; however, it remains incomplete for this study as its limitations, including its Eurocentrism and overemphasis on rationality, necessitate complementary perspectives to adequately frame the research. I engage his emphasis on various concepts, such as the public sphere (Habermas, 1991), to assess and adapt deliberative practices in non-Western contexts, and I draw on deliberative democracy and inclusivity (Habermas, 1996) to explore how inclusion operates in public deliberation. Additionally, I employ communicative rationality (Habermas, 1984) to frame deliberation as a communicative process rooted in mutual understanding and reflexivity. Meanwhile, I also recognize the need to adapt and expand the theory to capture the realities of deliberation in non-Western contexts. For example, the mere presence of deliberative spaces is not enough to maintain inclusivity. Fraser (1990) has highlighted that some spaces, which are seemingly inclusive because anyone can enter them, often claim that differences can be set aside or "bracketed out" as insignificant. However, in reality, these differences are both real and significant due to the privileging of certain communication styles, existing inequalities, and power relations between groups. Consequently, Habermas's approach is supplemented with Fraser's conception of deliberative democracy to provide a normative framework for deliberation, inclusivity, and rational-critical debate that helps assess online deliberation and frame voice, identity, and inclusion as authoritative in contemporary media. Integrating Fraser's emphasis on recognition and participatory parity with analyses of media power and platform governance in this study conceptualizes voice, identity, and inclusion as relational achievements that depend on visibility, legitimacy, and authority within specific mediated contexts. This approach enables a more realistic assessment of online deliberation, especially in contexts where gendered, religious, and geopolitical asymmetries are encountered.

In summary, the discussion above has outlined four interrelated concepts that are employed analytically to guide this research. First, the concepts of publics and voice provide the foundation for examining how communication practices shape participation and representation within Muslim communities. Second, the Muslim mediated public sphere frames the study's focus on how media, particularly radio and digital platforms, facilitate alternative forms of public engagement beyond Western-centric models. The third concept, identity construction and negotiation, captures the dynamic processes of self-representation and belonging by providing a lens for analysing how individuals and groups articulate belonging and difference through communicative practices. Finally, inclusive participation foregrounds the challenges and possibilities of visibility, legitimacy, and engagement across unequal communicative fields. This concept is used to evaluate the extent to which mediated spaces such as social media platforms enable or constrain the visibility of diverse voices within these communities. Together, these concepts form the conceptual framework through which the three articles collectively explore the dynamics of voice, identity, and inclusion across different media contexts.

1.4 OVERVIEW OF THE THESIS

This section provides an overview of the three articles that comprise this thesis. Each subsection outlines the specific focus, objectives, methods, and key contributions of one article, demonstrating how the three collectively advance the overarching research aims. Together, they illustrate the thematic and methodological coherence of the thesis while highlighting the distinct contributions of each study.

1.4.1 MINORITY RADIO IN THE UNITED KINGDOM: THE CASE OF MUSLIM RADIO STATIONS IN YORKSHIRE

UK Community radio operates within the broader British media system that is often characterised as a liberal, market-oriented model with a strong public services broadcasting tradition anchored by institution such as the BBC. The regulating system, the Communication Act 2003 and the subsequent

Community Radio order 2004 formally recognised community radio as a distinct tier of broadcasting, alongside the BBC and commercial stations with a mandate to serve geographically defined communities or communities of interest (Lewis, 2008; Ofcom, 2017). The South Asian population represents a significant demographic in West Yorkshire where this study is situated. According to the 2021 Census, 7.8% of Leeds are South Asian of whom a substantial portion identify as Muslim (ONS, 2022). Politically, the UK context is a stable parliamentary democracy with high levels of media freedom. The political context is shaped by ongoing debates around multiculturalism, integration and media representation of ethnic and religious minorities (Husband & Alam, 2011). Community radio station such as Fever FM serves as important platform for minority voices, offering participatory media arenas that mainstream media often fail to provide (Budarick & Han, 2015).

The first article included in this doctoral manuscript, “Minority Radio in the United Kingdom: The Case of Muslim Radio Stations in Yorkshire”, explores how diaspora Muslim communities shape a radio-based public sphere to assert voice and identity in the UK. It draws on Nick Couldry’s theory of voice as a theoretical framework. In addition to acknowledging alternative media’s potential to challenge exclusionary practices in mainstream media, the theory of voice views voice as a mechanism of power and agency within social structures. Additionally, it recognizes the importance of diverse voices in media (Couldry, 2010, 2012; Couldry & Dreher, 2007).

Since the medium’s inception, the importance of minority-produced radio for underserved people with shared interests has continued to grow, enabling them to build and maintain communities (Brown, 1998, p. 67) by sharing their views, celebrating distinct cultural forms, circulating vital information and opportunities, and catering to their informational needs (Khan et al., 2017). To ground this discussion, I examine Fever FM, which is an embedded community media station founded by a member of the minority community and situated within the community it serves. Fever FM provides a particularly insightful case through which to explore the intersection of media, minority representation, and community engagement. First, it is the foremost radio station to provide

Islamic programming to Muslim minorities in Leeds and its surroundings (personal communication, June 6, 2024). This status has contributed to maintaining its credibility and reputation within the minority community, making it an ideal subject for understanding the dynamics and impact of radio. Second, Fever FM specifically caters to South Asian Muslim minorities, the focus of the study, ensuring the relevance and applicability of findings. Lastly, the scale of the organization (i.e. the size, structure, and operational scope of the station) is suitable for in-depth analysis, allowing for a comprehensive examination of its operations, impact, and role as an alternative space where community members could potentially address gaps in representation. These features – its local location, minority-led management, and focus on serving the hosting community – made it a particularly relevant and informative case study for this investigation.

Indeed, observations and interviews indicate that Fever FM provides unique avenues for community voices and participation. In fact, the analysis demonstrates that West Yorkshire's Muslim communities utilize radio as a platform for voice and identity in two significant ways. First, the station serves as a platform for expressing minority voices, preserving their identity, and educating new generations. Second, as a community radio station, it provides training platforms that prepare minority members to join mainstream media, enabling them to deliver their voices, express their identity, and share their culture with the majority community. This finding is consistent with the assertion put forth by Echchaibi (2002) that community radio stations play a significant role in redefining and challenging the identity boundaries of their communities. The study also highlights the role of community media in minorities' struggle to escape the restrictions created by the dominant culture. Finally, the study's survey reflects strong public sentiment in support of minority radio.

By conceptualizing the Muslim public sphere as a mediated communicative arena shaped by media and sociopolitical conditions, where individuals and groups articulate voice, negotiate identity, and contest boundaries of inclusion and legitimacy (see Section 1.6.1: Muslim and Mediated Public Sphere) as its

analytical lens, the Fever FM radio case study demonstrates how Muslim communities hosted in democratic Western contexts utilize radio as a public sphere to express their voice and identity and to combat misrepresentation in mainstream media. In fact, Fever FM exemplifies how community-based media provide minorities with a space to voice their concerns and cultural narratives, which are often overlooked by mainstream sources (Couldry & Dreher, 2007), and shapes how individuals and communities understand and engage with the world (Couldry, 2012). Additionally, the findings of this research not only enhance our understanding of how marginalized groups utilize media for empowerment and cultural preservation but also improve our comprehension of how such communities support their radio stations. More importantly, this dynamic demonstrates that minority media production and consumption are not passive practices; they actively widen the horizons of the public sphere by foregrounding questions of inclusion, recognition, and belonging.

1.4.2 DELIBERATIVE DISCOURSES IN DIGITAL SPACES: UNPACKING THE DELIBERATIVE QUALITIES OF ONLINE FORUMS IN OMAN

Oman is a hereditary absolute monarchy governed under the Basic Statute of the State issued by Royal Decree no. 6/2021, which vests executive, legislative, and judicial authority in the Sultan. According to Valeri (2009) and Peterson (1978), this top-down model of governance offers limited avenues for formal political participation because political parties remain prohibited and the elected Shura Council serves a primarily advisory functions. In this thesis, the term ‘semi-authoritarian’ is used to refer to political system that maintains authoritarian control over key domains, particularly media, political expression and civil society, while, at the same time, permitting limited spaces for public discourse and civic engagement, often through controlled channels (Al-Azri, 2013; Ottaway, 2003). This duality is reflected on Oman’s media system where mainstream media, print, radio and television are largely state-owned or closely aligned with government views and the 2024 media law (Royal Decree 58/2024) imposes restrictions on content critical of the Sultan, the government and national unity (Rugh, 2004). However, the advent of digital platforms created a significant opening. Early online forums, like Sablat AlArab and Sablat Oman,

emerged as vital ‘counter-publics’ that bypassed traditional gatekeeping, which enabled citizens to deliberate on socio-political issues previously absent from national press (Worrall, 2012). This digital public sphere has since evolved with the rise of social media platforms such as Instagram, that has become a focal point for identity politics and feminist discourse. However, these alternative spaces remain under the shadow of both, the 2011 Cyber Crime Law and 2024 Media Law whereas the 2011 Law penalizes the content as cybercrime and the 2024 law addresses it as a professional media violation. Consequently, laws complement each other in intensifying the regulatory grip on digital content.

The second investigation, “Deliberative Discourses in Digital Spaces: Unpacking the Deliberative Qualities of Online Forums in Oman”, examines whether Omani online fora function as deliberative public spheres that enable inclusive civic participation beyond elite gatekeeping. In this study, the Sablat Oman online forum is employed as a case study to examine how Omanis engage with one another to express their civic interests. It also explores the role of technology in shaping public political communication in the Omani context.

Recently, scholars (eg. Bondes et al., 2024; Zhang, 2022) have found that technology enhances online deliberation in non-Western contexts by overcoming physical distance, enabling broader political participation, and providing new tools for information sharing and mobilization. This general overview of the recent literature sets the stage for a closer examination of Sablat Oman, chosen as the case study for its role within the landscape of online forums. In fact, Sablat Oman exhibits several defining features relevant to deliberative discussion, and these characteristics inform the choice of this case study. Its diverse user base, actively enforced moderation policies, and established posting norms that guide participant behaviour are among those characteristics. Furthermore, it exhibits complex interaction dynamics, reflecting a range of participant engagement styles and deliberative approaches. Additionally, the forum is an open space for Omani discussants from different cultural/ethnic backgrounds and guarantees accessibility with anonymity. Such aspects, namely structural, functional, and contextual, make it well-suited for

hosting democratic public deliberation and a good case for studying public deliberation.

Contrary to initial expectations, the analysis revealed that the platform did not fulfil its expected deliberative role; instead, discussions were dominated by non-deliberative exchanges. In fact, unexpectedly, rather than encouraging inclusive deliberation, the platform's discussions tended to be dominated by brief, one-sided statements, indicating limited engagement in reasoned debate. The analysis indicates weak deliberation in terms of rationality and validity claims, and the discussions often lacked depth and were dominated by a few users. This research finding aligns with Borge Bravo et al. (2019), who concluded that, among other deliberation qualities within their case study platform, Barcelona's Decidim, rationality decreases as the discussion unfolds. However, in spite of the significant gap between the platform's expected deliberative function and the actual discussions, it would be remiss not to acknowledge that Sablat Oman is characterized by substantial engagement, both qualitative and quantitative. This is to say that, despite the presence of cultural and gendered biases that appear discursively rather than direct exclusion (such as when labelling a male participant as a female is deployed as an insult – including by female users), the forum's substantial participation and vibrant discussions demonstrate its robust engagement and enduring vitality.

This study contributes to the wider literature on the nature and limits of online discourses in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian contexts. Beyond its general implications, this research also contributes to understanding the specific context of Oman. In addition to assessing deliberative quality in the Omani context, this study provides insights that serve to illuminate Omani local political culture online.

1.4.3 MEDIATING RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS: SELF-IDENTIFIED RELIGIOUS OMANI FEMALE INFLUENCERS IN THE DIGITAL PUBLIC SPHERE

"Mediating Religious Authority and Women's Rights: Self-Identified Religious Omani Female Influencers in the Digital Public Sphere" is the third article that constitutes this doctoral study. It investigates how self-identified religious

Omani female influencers (SROFIs) use Instagram to mediate religious authority and foster rights-based discourse within Oman's sociocultural public sphere.

Harry Febrian (2024, p. 1) defines religious influencers as "social media accounts with a high number of followers and micro-celebrity status, which combine their calling for self-cultivation, commercial interests, and socio-political concerns under the umbrella of da'wa, the Arabic term for preaching". This exploration draws our attention to how those influencers pursue change from inside the Muslim community, drawing on its own cultural codes and religious teachings as the basis for their authority. In other words, this new generation of religious influencers, as distinct storytellers skilled in digital media production (Zaid et al., (2022), is challenging the long-established notions and domain of religion and authority. Their engagement is shaped not only by their own motivations but also by how they come to see themselves through the lens of others on the platform (Pan et al., 2017). They operate with an acute awareness of the socio-cultural context in which religion plays a central role in shaping public discourse and online engagement patterns. More specifically, they highlight the alignment between their socio-cultural context, particularly Islamic principles, as Alam (2018) noticed, and the women's rights standards set by the United Nations.

Before turning to the findings, it is important to outline the defining features of SROFIs that shape their relevance and inform the analysis. Their key characteristics include their self-identification with religious values, engagement with religiously relevant content, and active participation in online communities focused on ethical and spiritual topics. Pan et al. (2017) confirm that social self-identification has significantly reshaped social media usage behaviour. Thus, religious influencers utilize the process of self-identification to form and perform their identities; in other words, they align their actions with their identities. Chen and Hsieh (2024) confirm that social media amplifies this performance, particularly in the case of those identifying as religious influencers. Regarding engagement with religiously relevant content, Glas and Alexander (2020) note that drawing on emancipatory religious interpretations can be a more practical approach to advancing gender equality in the Arab region. Consequently, religious influencers are projected to introduce fresh intellectual

momentum to advance feminist objectives within Muslim societies (Badran, (2011).

Analysis of SROFIs' Instagram accounts revealed that, contrary to the expectation that their content would strictly reflect religious deliberation, posts often prioritized personal expression or community affirmation over theological debate. In addition, while the influencers are embedded within religiously conservative networks, findings indicate a selective engagement with religious discourse that balances personal visibility and community norms. Additionally, the study found a discrepancy between the platform's potential as a space for deliberation and the actual patterns of interaction, which often reinforced existing social hierarchies rather than challenged them. The research demonstrates that religious legitimacy is not the only communicative strategy that SROFIs draw on to construct religious authority, negotiate gender roles, and frame women's rights. Cultural alignment and authoritative performance are also utilized to achieve such goals. This is to say, contrary to the expectation that their arguments would be strictly grounded in religious justifications, they often draw on community norms and their public persona, including their professional roles, to construct their arguments.

This study captures how authority is performed, how rights are framed, and how religious women navigate the tensions of Muslim sociocultural expectations and digital visibility. This academic inquiry expands the application of Islamic feminism within digital discourse, illustrating how religious Omani female influencers negotiate authority, identity, and gender roles on Instagram. Furthermore, it contributes to our understanding of the intersection between digital activism, gendered religious narratives, and cultural norms.

1.5 RESEARCH CONSIDERATIONS AND ALIGNMENT OF ANALYTICAL SITES

As highlighted above, this project collectively investigates how Muslim voices, identities, and inclusivity are mediated across media in different contexts. It explores the strategies that Muslim communicators use to engage across various media platforms. The project considers that each communicational

arena possesses specific characteristics that differ from those of others and shape the behaviour of its participants. For example, a platform's information accessibility or how open or closed it is significantly impacts its users' willingness to disclose their opinions and thoughts or participate (Zhang et al., 2018). Accordingly, this section specifies the research considerations and theoretical dimensions of the phenomena, linking them to the respective case study or article.

Returning to the theoretical concerns outlined above regarding voice, legitimacy, and inclusion in mediated public spheres, there remains a critical question of how marginalized groups claim legitimacy in public communication spaces that are often dominated by majority voices and institutional authority (Chowdhury, 2021). Furthermore, as Lefort (2023) underscores, the negotiation concerning collective identity and belonging within minority communities that is sometimes contested by the majority community demands closer attention. There is little doubt that the dynamics of inclusivity remain uneven, with minority voices frequently constrained by both external exclusion and internal hierarchies. These challenges call for an empirical investigation into how communicative practices enable or obstruct participation, recognition, and representation of minority communities in majority Western communities.

To understand voice, identity, and inclusivity in non-Western Muslim contexts, it is essential to address the aforementioned underexplored issues, with particular attention paid to minority communities as a critical component of these contexts. The case of UK Muslim minority radio offers a valuable space to examine these dynamics. Minority radio represents a semi-autonomous platform in which marginalized groups negotiate visibility, counter exclusionary discourses, and claim political rights (*Minority Radio* article, Section 2.6.1). It highlights how Muslim communities in diaspora settings use community broadcasting to assert their voice, negotiate identity, and seek inclusivity within a wider secular-majority society (*Minority Radio* article, Section 2.6.1). Exploring this case contributes directly to addressing the broader research need of theorizing Muslim publics in ways that move beyond Eurocentric or majority-

centric models. It enables an exploration of how voice and identity are constructed under conditions of marginality within a Western majority society.

Understanding voice, identity, and inclusivity in non-Western Muslim contexts requires addressing several interrelated issues. For example, a critical area of investigation is how individuals negotiate legitimacy and recognition in their national settings, where communicational spaces are often shaped by dominant cultural norms and institutional authority (Willemse & Bergh, 2016). Furthermore, inclusion and exclusion both have complex dynamics in which access, visibility, moderation (in some online spaces), and the rules of discourse all shape whose voices are heard and whose are marginalized. According to Lee et al. (2024) and Sultana et al. (2024), access, visibility, moderation policies, and platform regulations collectively structure dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. Investigating Omani online forums, such as Sablat Oman, responds directly to these challenges. These forums serve as public digital arenas where citizens deliberate on social, political, and cultural issues, enabling researchers to analyze how voice is articulated, identities are negotiated, and inclusivity is performed under conditions of both opportunity and constraint.

By focusing on Muslim online forums in their national settings, this project can illuminate the ways in which non-Western publics engage in mediated discourse, navigate social hierarchies, and contest or reinforce norms of legitimacy and participation. The *Sablat Oman* article demonstrates how online deliberation unfolds in a Muslim-majority national context, where political expression and civic identity are shaped through digital dialogue under state oversight (*Sablat Oman* article, Section 3.8). Compared to other new media platforms, private or closed platforms, such as online forums, require a formal sign-up and might have a gatekeeper maintaining community boundaries (Cyron et al., 2024). Thus, it is plausible that Sablat Oman, due to its membership, national regulation, or registration requirements, may include fewer non-citizens than broadly open social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook, yielding more precise results. The *Sablat Oman* article illuminates the affordances and constraints of digital deliberation, showing how publics actively

negotiate inclusion and legitimacy while navigating the intersecting pressures of state power and cultural norms.

One of the earliest and most cited critiques of Habermas's approach to the public sphere is its treatment of religion. For example Calhoun (Calhoun, 1992b) argues that Habermas's secular rational-critical framework marginalizes religious actors and fails to account for the ways in which religious publics contribute to collective discourse. Habermas framing of the bourgeois public sphere as a secular space for rational-critical debate has led to the exclusion of religious institutions and discourses from its ideal model of deliberation (Habermas, 1991, 1996). Scholars like Fraser (1990) and Calhoun (1992b) argue that this secular bias neglects religious groups' contribution in the public debate. Furthermore, beyond spiritual legitimacy, gendered authority is another issue that is being renegotiated in digital environments. In Muslim contexts, tensions surrounding authenticity, visibility, and the boundaries of women's authority in religious discourse are also evident (Baulch & Pramiyanti, 2018; Karakavak & Özbölük, 2022). To address the lack of research on how religious female voices navigate and contest traditional hierarchies, and how digital platforms both enable and constrain inclusive participation, this project investigates the Instagram accounts of self-identified religious Omani female influencers. Alongside minority radio and online forums, the study of Instagram influencers fills a critical gap by capturing how voice, identity, and inclusivity are mediated. Specifically, it demonstrates how self-identified religious female influencers articulate authority (*Religious Female Influencers* article, Section 4.7.1), frame women's rights (*Religious Female Influencers* article, Section 4.7.2), and negotiate visibility within the sociocultural norms of Omani society (*Religious Female Influencers* article, Section 4.7.3). Accordingly, it reveals the shifting dynamics of gendered and religious authority in online minority/majority contexts and across digital platforms.

1.6 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This thesis employs a comparative, multi-sited, and mixed-methods approach to investigate how the Muslim public sphere is mediated across different socio-

political and media environments. Together, the articles in this project offer a comparative horizon to examine Muslim publics in two distinct contexts: a minority Muslim context (in Yorkshire, UK) and a majority Muslim context, in Oman. Furthermore, while the *Minority Radio* article investigates broadcast media, namely a Muslim community radio station, the second and third articles explore online media, specifically a digital forum and Instagram accounts. Thus, this thesis explores both Western minority and Middle Eastern majority contexts, highlighting the diverse ways in which Muslim voices, identities, and inclusion are mediated.

The research views media publics, radio audiences, online forum users, and social media followers as socially produced and discursively negotiated populations. They are not just passive receivers of content; instead, they actively construct meaning through their interactions, discussions, and engagement with media. As such, this thesis adopts a constructivist epistemology orientation that emphasizes, first, the situated nature of voice (minority/majority, online/offline), showing that people's ability to express themselves and to be heard depends on their social position and context: The opportunities, limitations, and strategies for expressing opinions or influencing discourse may differ between those considered as minority versus majority groups or between online users versus offline audiences. This reality highlights how "voice" is not universal – it is context-dependent. Second, from a constructivist perspective, the role of mediations, understood as the processes, platforms, or cultural norms through which communication is filtered and organized, is central to the production of meaning and the attribution of authority. Media doesn't just transmit messages neutrally; rather, it shapes meaning and authority and therefore contributes to influencing how people are heard and how they gain legitimacy in a public space. Finally, the importance of interpretive analysis in understanding communicative practices lies in its ability to elaborate on the way these processes are socially constructed, negotiated, and experienced by different actors within their specific cultural and institutional contexts.

Considering that communication is socially constructed, this study adopts an interpretive research orientation, employing qualitative discourse analysis as

well as semi-structured interviews to examine meanings, practices, and communicative strategies. Qualitative content analysis is used complementarily to identify patterns and distributions in communicative forms, which are subsequently interpreted within their social and cultural contexts. Each article applies these methods in ways suited to its empirical focus and analytical aims. In the *Minority Radio* article, a survey, interviews, and discourse analysis are adopted to interpret how producers and audiences construct narratives of belonging and participation within a minority public sphere. In the *Sablat Oman* article, meanwhile, quantitative content analysis and qualitative discourse analysis are utilized to understand how citizens articulate opinions, navigate authority, and negotiate inclusion. Quantitative content analysis is used to identify recurring themes as well as the patterns and distribution of communicative forms, while qualitative discourse analysis interprets how citizens articulate opinions, navigate authority, and negotiate inclusion within their social, cultural, and political contexts. Finally, the *Religious Female Influencers* article adopts interviews and qualitative content analysis to interpret visual and textual representations of religiosity and gendered authority, exploring how gendered authority, religiosity, and digital visibility shape deliberative participation in online spaces.

Despite its contributions, this project has several limitations. First, the study is limited by its case study scope. Significantly, this scope provides many benefits articulated in earlier sections of the thesis, including enabling in-depth, contextually grounded analyses of how voice, identity, and inclusion are enacted in specific communicative environments (Vohra, 2024; Yin, 2009). However, focusing on only three cases may limit the generalizability of the findings to other Muslim communities or platforms. Furthermore, due to time and practical constraints, the sample size and selection represent a limitation, particularly in terms of interviews and content sampled, which may not capture the full diversity of perspectives. This limitation of potential sampling bias has been mitigated by triangulation between interview data, textual analysis, and contextual observation. Finally, analytically interpretive methods carry the risk of researcher bias, and cross-contextual comparisons could oversimplify complex dynamics. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the analytical

process to minimize the defects associated with the interpretive nature of this research. This includes memoing, transparency in coding decisions, and iterative discussions of the findings with peers and supervisors to reduce individual bias. These practices enabled ongoing critical scrutiny of interpretations, revealed implicit biases, and ensured that analytical claims remained grounded in the data while remaining attentive to contextual complexity.

1.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

This research adopted a mixed qualitative design tailored to each case study, combining semi-structured interviews with qualitative content and discourse analysis. In addition, it drew on ethnographically informed digital observation to contextualize platform-specific practices rather than a full-scale digital ethnography. Fieldwork was conducted in accordance with the University of Leeds ethical guidelines, with full ethical approval obtained before the data collection phase. All participants were informed about the study's aims, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Consent was secured, and all interviewees were assigned pseudonyms, with identifying details removed from transcripts and analysis. However, in the case of the radio practitioners, some individuals, whose professional public roles meant that identification did not present any credible risk of harm, provided explicit consent to be named. For digital materials, only publicly accessible content was used, and platform norms regarding privacy and contribution were strictly followed. Throughout the research stages, particular care was taken to respect the sensitivities inherent in studying religious identities, minority status, and gendered visibility, ensuring that data handling, interpretation, and representation upheld principles of confidentiality, non-harm and cultural respect.

1.8 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Collectively, the three articles comprising this project advance a deeper understanding of how media shape communicative practices through their affordances and constraints, mediate voices by filtering, translating, and

recontextualising them across platforms and power relations, and circulate them across complex sociopolitical contexts. Each article stands as an independent scholarly contribution; however, together they articulate a coherent analytical approach that moves from theoretical framing to empirical exploration and interpretive synthesis. The *Minority Radio* article explores how diaspora Muslim communities shape a radio-based public sphere to assert voice and identity in the UK. It seeks to understand how the Muslim public sphere, as a mediated communicative arena, is shaped by media and sociopolitical conditions through which individuals and groups articulate voice, negotiate identity, and contest boundaries of inclusion and legitimacy. The *Sablat Oman* article examines whether Omani online fora function as deliberative public spheres that enable inclusive civic participation beyond elite gatekeeping. The Sablat Oman online forum is analyzed to explore how Omanis engage in digital spaces to express their civic interests, and to investigate the role of technology in shaping public political communication in the Omani context. Finally, the *Religious Female Influencers* article extends the discussion by interrogating the implications of these mediated interactions to explore broader questions of identity, belonging, and communicative power. It investigates how religious Omani women utilize social media to mediate religious authority and foster rights-based discourse within Oman's sociocultural public sphere. This project, comprising three interrelated articles, examines both Western-minority and Middle Eastern-majority contexts, highlighting the diverse ways in which Muslim voices, identities, and inclusion are mediated. Accordingly, it contributes to ongoing scholarly efforts to reexamine how media function as a mediated public sphere, offering both conceptual innovation and empirical depth to the fields of public sphere theory and political communication.

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ARTICLE ONE: MINORITY RADIO IN THE UNITED KINGDOM: THE CASE OF A MUSLIM RADIO STATION IN YORKSHIRE

ABSTRACT

This study examines how minority radio serves as a medium of expression and a site of identity construction, forming a symbiotic bond between broadcasters and their audience. In order to explore the symbiotic relationship between radio and minorities and to understand the dynamics of media representation and participation among minority communities, we draw on Couldry's (2010) theory of voice as a theoretical framework, given its relevance to the study of radio as a medium and the centrality of audio in this realm. Using the UK community radio station Fever FM as a case study, we demonstrate that community radio thrives on a reciprocal relationship with its listenership and the broader community. To do so, this study adopts a qualitative case study approach, drawing on a mixed-methods approach of data collection. This approach includes semi-structured interviews with radio practitioners as well as minority radio audience members, audience surveys, and the examination of archival data. Our findings reveal a reciprocal end evolving relationship between minority communities and their radio stations. While communities offer human resources, political support, and financial resources, radio stations, in turn, develop tailored programming that addresses the specific needs of their communities. Beyond content production, minority stations function as participatory hubs in which community members learn media skills, comprehend the grammar of public communication, and express shared concerns. In addition to enhancing cultural expression, this process configures who is entitled to speak in the public sphere, transforming community radio from a medium of representation into a medium of recognition and collective agency.

Keywords: Radio, Minorities, Minority radio, Voice, Identity, Community media

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The relationship between radio and minority communities dates back to the first half of the twentieth century. Since the medium's inception, minority-produced radio's importance for underserved people with shared interests has continued to grow, enabling them to build and maintain communities (Brown, 1998, p. 67) by sharing their views, celebrating distinct cultural forms, and circulating vital information and opportunities. Further, radio's ability to cater to the informational needs of its audience members empowers communities and facilitates collective action and community development at the grassroots level (Khan et al., 2017).

In addition to performing an outward-facing role in advocating for the interests of minority groups within a wider public, minority media perform a vital function within underrepresented communities. Additionally, during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, community-produced radio provides listeners with valuable information and companionship (Moylan, 2023). Primarily, they provide a platform for voices that would otherwise remain unheard (Caspi & Elias, 2011), offering minorities the opportunity to produce their own programmes, share their stories, and express their concerns and aspirations.

In order to explore the symbiotic relationship between radio and minorities and to understand the dynamics of media representation and participation among minority communities, we draw on Couldry's (2010) theory of voice as a theoretical framework. This framework is particularly relevant to the study of radio as a medium, given the centrality of audio in this realm. The theory of voice not only acknowledges alternative media's potential for challenging exclusionary practices in mainstream media but also views voice as a mechanism of power and agency within social structures. Additionally, it recognizes the importance of diverse voices in media (Couldry, 2010, 2012; Couldry & Dreher, 2007). Couldry's (2010) concept of voice has particular importance for this study as it studies voice as social phenomenon. Beyond the literal understanding of voice, Couldry's definition expands on the symbolic, representational, relational and conceptual importance of the phenomenon. First, Couldry conceptualizes

voice through its ability to make oneself heard and socially recognized. Second, he emphasizes voice existence within the structures of power, acknowledging that not all voices are equally heard or valued. This allows critical evaluation of the interplay between power and structural constraint, highlighting that minority media create opportunities for expression but does not automatically guarantee social change. Finally, Couldry treats voice as a form of symbolic power. That is, for Muslim community, being able to speak and to be recognized confers legitimacy, making their cultural practices and social concerns visible to the majority community. Accordingly, Couldry's (2010) theory allows us to interpret this as minority radio transforming communicative acts into social recognition, thereby reinforcing identity, solidarity and collective agency.

In this article, we argue that community radio cultivates the skills, experience, and training that communities need in order to accustom themselves to addressing their own members as well as a wider public. Operating in a symbiotic, mutually strengthening relationship with each community it serves, community radio provides minority groups with an outlet to express identity and achieve greater and more authentic representation and voice in the public sphere while the community provides the radio station with the vital human and material resources, support, and audience that it needs to thrive. Such community support includes but is not limited to financial backing and volunteer engagement with various staffing needs, such as administrative tasks, programming, and technical support (Peissl et al., 2022). This interdependence constitutes a reciprocal relationship between communities and their radio stations, which involves technological, social, economic, and political factors, including financial support, content creation, volunteer engagement, listener interaction, and advocacy efforts (Lewil Diedong & Dzisah, 2023; Wang & Waterman, 2011).

Further, community radio's capacity to offer authentic representation emanating from minority communities is particularly relevant to the case of British Muslims, a community that is covered within the British media landscape in ways that are overwhelmingly negative, antagonistic to their core beliefs and overly simplistic with regards to intra-group diversity (Monitoring, 2024). In fact,

dominant narratives continue to marginalize or misrepresent UK Muslim voices, reinforcing negative stereotypes (De Coster et al., 2024). This observation raises important questions about how Muslim communities develop their own communicative infrastructures to assert presence and sustain identity.

This study addresses this gap by examining Muslim community radio in West Yorkshire as a space where cultural and religious identities are articulated, negotiated, and shared. We argue that radio in this context functions not merely as a medium of transmission but as a participatory platform that fosters collective voice, community cohesion, and sociocultural continuity. By exploring how Muslim communities utilize, support, and sustain their radio stations, we attempt to understand how minority groups build resilient communicative ecosystems that resist cultural homogenization and contribute to more pluralistic media environments.

Despite the increasing amount of scholarship that investigates ethnic and community media in multicultural societies, those focusing on Muslim minority radio remain limited and fragmented (Farid & Hakimi, 2025; Haq, 2025). Indeed, much of the existing literature focuses on mainstream representations of Muslims or on digital platforms, leaving the role of local, community-driven radio underexplored. Limited studies have explored how Muslim radio stations operate as spaces of negotiation on cultural preservation, religious identity, and civic participation. Additionally, the mechanism adopted by minority stations to sustain themselves amid structural challenges such as funding constraints, regulatory pressures, and audience fragmentation remains underexplored. Farid and Hakimi (2025) emphasize the need for further investigation into their adaptation strategies. This limitation highlights a clear knowledge gap, the one this study seeks to address by providing deep exploration of Muslim community radio in West Yorkshire as both a site of voice production and a locus of minority resilience.

This study proposes two research questions. First, how do Muslim communities in West Yorkshire, England utilize radio as a platform for expressing their voice, preserving cultural and religious identity, and fostering community cohesion

within their respective societies? Second, in what ways do minority communities support and protect their radio stations as vital sources of communication and cultural representation, and how does this community support contribute to the sustainability and resilience of minority radio stations?

2.2 MINORITY RADIO

Radio is a relatively understudied medium in media research (Dian Wardiana et al., 2024), an oversight that belies not only the medium's importance to the study of race and ethnicity in communication but also its role in building solidarity among minoritized communities since its origins in the previous century (Anderson & Masocha, 2017).

Community radio differs from commercial and state-run media. While commercial radio is driven by profitability and state media often prioritizes national agendas, community radio is rooted in the everyday experiences, languages and cultures of specific ethnic, linguistic or religious groups. Its local orientation and participatory nature make it a distinct platform for marginalized voices. Using relatively cost-effective and easily portable technology, radio provides an accessible space for minority to express their identity and concerns to the larger community. Minority community radio amplifies perspectives that are often neglected in mainstream media, such as those related to migration and the preservation of identity and culture (Downing, 2001). This tendency is consistent with patterns within minority media as a whole, which Cazzamatta argues (2025) create parallel discursive spaces where marginalized minority groups establish counter-discourses, which aligns with Nancy Fraser's (1990) notion of subaltern counterpublics. Indeed, the significance of minority radio is that it has become the vehicle through which minorities' stories are narrated by their voices.

Crucially, community radio contributes to shaping and sustaining the collective identity of audiences while also enhancing the media literacy and skills of community members who serve as individual producers and volunteers (Backhaus, 2020). Radio provides minorities with the space to voice their

distinctive struggles and experiences and present their stories to increase their visibility (Caspi & Elias, 2011; Delgado, 1990). Similarly, Couldry (2010, p. 7) recognizes the concept of *voicing* as “the process of giving an account of one’s life and its conditions”, and Hirschman (1970) describes minority voices transmitted through radio as an attempt to change: Minority individuals respond internally to such media messages by incorporating them into an adopted identity as a way to avoid interpreting majority images as if they had been intended for them.

Time	Show Name
00:00 - 07:00	Back 2 Back
07:00 - 10:00	Good Morning Leeds
10:00 - 12:00	Bollywood Selection
12:00 - 14:00	With Hits of Yester Years
14:00 - 16:00	Rangla Punjab
16:00 - 18:00	TWC & Drivetime Hits
18:00 - 20:00	Bollywood Hits
20:00 - 22:00	Best of the 90s
22:00 - 00:00	Pre-Recorded

Table 2: Typical daily programming as broadcast on Fever FM

2.2.1 MEDIA EMPOWERMENT

Minority radio’s mission is to serve communities through programming tailored by and specifically for minority members to fulfil their cultural and informational needs and interests (Alia & Bull, 2005; Mann, 2019; Siegelman & Waldfogel, 2001). Hence, it has to be a media-by minorities or a media-for minorities rather than a media-about minorities. As Caspi and Elias (2011) emphasize, media-by and media-for models are minority-oriented and remain distinct from media-about models, which primarily target majority audiences and treat minority communities as an object of media coverage. In contrast, media by minorities is the most minority-oriented model; thus, it can perform internal functions that target the minority members, particularly those related to voice and identity,

because minority members themselves are the primary producers and consumers of the media.

Scholars have drawn attention to the importance of self-produced minority media to minority groups around the world. Community participation transforms radio from a one-way channel of communication into a dialogic space that reflects and responds to local needs (Gumucio Dagron, (2001). Rastogi and Suryavanshi (2024) concluded that broadcasting in local dialects is a major advantage that provides a positive impact on the audience. Archival programming data from Fever FM reveals this responsiveness, demonstrating how the station's content reflects and reinforces cultural attachment. As Shahab (personal communication, August 10, 2023a), Fever FM radio presenter, former Business Development Officer, and occasionally an Impact & Evaluation Consultant, explained "Our listenership is overwhelmingly Pakistani, followed by Indians. Even though most of listeners are Pakistani, the programming includes more Indian Bollywood music-because culturally, the whole South Asian region has grown up listening to it". Community radio plays a pivotal role in grassroots empowerment, particularly when community members are actively involved in content creation and agenda-setting. A recent study conducted by Srivastava (2022) highlights the extraordinary effectiveness of community radio in connecting, entertaining and educating community members. In our interviews, community radio hosts at Fever FM emphasized the importance of their platform to speaking to community members on core issues including promoting education and further education, fundraising for community needs and spreading awareness on matters from public health during the COVID-19 pandemic to public announcements. It demonstrates that radio is instrumental in creating awareness and empowering communities as well as promoting collective action.

2.2.2 COMMUNITY SUPPORT FOR RADIO

Minority radio stations owe their existence to sustained community support, and their fate is impacted by the economic and political challenges facing their communities. Hence, achieving sustainability in minority media requires a

holistic community approach that encompasses financial, social, and political dimensions (Peissl et al., 2022). First, while insufficient funding hampers the development of community media, hindering it from achieving its maximum capabilities, participants have voiced a number of concerns about using public funding to support community media, as they see it as a threat to media independence (Peissl et al., 2022).

Second, the social dimension highlights the importance of community involvement in media creation, as minority radio stations collaborate with audiences to produce meaningful content (Lewil Diedong & Dzisah, 2023). While various individuals contribute to a station's smooth operation through tasks related to management and content creation, audiences collectively participate in the station's programming and activities, for example, through fundraising campaigns. Community engagement in media production not only reduces expenses but also enhances inclusivity and diversity, improves representation, and better reflects community perspectives (Carpentier, 2011; Rodríguez, 2001).

From a public sphere perspective, minority groups support their radio stations not merely as cultural outlets but as discursive spaces that represent and advocate for their interests within the broader media landscape (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). This support has two essential avenues. Firstly, grassroots mobilization entails assessing how well the radio station reflects and connects with the community it serves, ensuring that the station addresses its audience's needs (Ananthakrishnan, 1987). Secondly, key community members and politicians representing the minority community actively advocate for the interests and rights of minority radio. These influential figures play a crucial role in garnering political support and ensuring that the station's representation aligns with the broader goals of the minority community (Chen, 2020).

2.3 FEVER FM

Fever FM was established in 1989 in a humble studio as the first Asian radio station in Leeds, airing in English, Urdu/Hindi, and Punjabi (personal

communication, June 6, 2024a). The station's early identity, as documented on its website, was Radio Apni Awaaz ("Our Voice"), with the aim of giving listeners a platform to air their views and concerns while educating, informing, entertaining, and inspiring the members of the community. A decade later, its name changed to Radio Asian Fever, and the station started working towards being legalized by broadcasting on the Restricted Service License. Today, Fever FM airs its programmes in Leeds and the surrounding areas on 107.3FM and online through the Fever FM website - which also hosts the station's programme archive - as well as on the [canstream.co.uk](https://www.listenagain.canstream.co.uk/feverfm/) online platform (<https://www.listenagain.canstream.co.uk/feverfm/>). The station's headquarters lie in Harehills, a heavily minority neighbourhood of the city of Leeds, down the street from a leading halal butcher and several well-frequented Persian, Turkish and Afghan restaurants. Fever FM's recording studios are housed in a building that hosts a community-based charity centre, and RETAS Leeds, whose mission is to support refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants in successful community integration (RETAS, 2022), thus reflecting the intersecting stakeholders of these community spaces. Recording side-by-side with the refugee-support organization, and adjacent to the much-frequented butchers and restaurants known to the minority communities it serves, the studio's location allows it to capture the concerns at the heart of the minority communities of the area. This proximity equally inspires the linguistic and cultural richness of its audience, and the station now broadcasts programmes in English, Urdu/Hindi, Punjabi, and Mirpuri.

Echoing Couldry's theory on voice, Fever FM emphasizes the importance of agency in producing media by and for the minority community they serve. The station's mission, as recorded on its website, is to "combat underrepresentation, misrepresentation, and exclusion of minorities from mainstream media" (Fever FM, 2022). This echoes some of the leading aspects of radio's importance for minoritized communities identified in the extant literature (Chikaipa & Gunde, 2021; Mann, 2019). The station also promotes itself as a springboard for local and new talent and supports its audience by recruiting and training volunteers of all ages in radio presentation skills. It voices its core value as programming "by the community – for the community".

Fever FM is a compelling case study for exploring the intersection of media, minority representation, and community engagement. Firstly, it is the foremost radio station to provide Islamic programming to Muslim minorities in Leeds and its surroundings (personal communication, June 6, 2024b). This status has contributed to maintaining its credibility and reputation within the minority community, making it an ideal subject for understanding the dynamics and impact of radio. Secondly, the scale of the organization (i.e. the size, structure, and operational scope of the station) is suitable for in-depth analysis, allowing for a comprehensive examination of its operations, impact, and role within the community.

2.4 METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

This research adopts a case study approach focused on Fever FM, the oldest and most established radio station that offers programming targeting Muslim audiences in West Yorkshire in the UK. Data collection followed a mixed-methods approach including interviews, audience surveys, and the examination of archival data. First, the research team conducted five in-depth interviews using purposive sampling, with key figures in Fever FM's leadership team (Table 2). We also conducted seven interviews with audience members using a convenience sampling system (Table 3). Most of the interviews were conducted in person, and a few of them were conducted online via Zoom platform, with an average duration of 60–90 minutes for each interview. Discussions followed a semi-structured protocol in which the researchers posed open-ended questions, thus helping the interviewers to examine pertinent topics in detail (Jamshed, 2014). Interview data was analyzed using critical discourse analysis (CDA) to explore the perspectives and experiences of radio professionals, providing in-depth insights into their engagement with radio programming.

	Nickname	Position	Place of interview	Date of interview
	Nickname	Position	Place of interview	Date of interview
1	Jabbar Karim	Fever FM's founder and managing director,	Fever FM Radio Station	Feb 8, 2023
2	RJ Shahab Ud'Deen	radio presenter, a former Business Development Officer, and occasionally an Impact & Evaluation Consultant	Fever FM Radio Station	August 10, 2023
3	Anil Bharath	BBC DJ, Writer and a Former Fever FM broadcaster	online	November 2, 2023
4	Jabbar Karim	Fever FM's founder and managing director,	Fever FM Radio Station	June 6, 2024
5	RJ Shahab Ud'Deen	radio presenter, a former Business Development Officer, and occasionally an Impact & Evaluation Consultant	Fever FM Radio Station	June 6, 2024

Table 3: List of interviewees 1: Media practitioners

	Nickname	Position	Place of interview	Date of interview
1	Interviewee 1	Radio Audience, (college student)	University of Leeds	July 13, 2023
2	Interviewee 2	Radio Audience	University of Leeds	July 15, 2023
3	Interviewee 3	Radio Audience	Leeds	August 10, 2023b
4	Interviewee 4	Radio Audience	Leeds	August 13, 2023
5	Interviewee 5	Radio Audience,	online	November 15, 2024
7	Interviewee 7	Radio Audience	online	Nov 10, 2024

Table 4: List of interviewees 2: media audience

The qualitative research was complemented with an electronic survey of 172 members of the Muslim and/or South Asian British minority communities aged 16 to 74. According to the 2021 Census, Muslims constitute approximately 14.5% of West Yorkshire's population, amounting to around 340,875 individuals. To determine an appropriate sample size, Cochran's formula (Cochran, 1977) was used with a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, assuming

maximum variability ($p = 0.5$). The statistically ideal sample size is approximately 383 participants. However, due to practical limitations and accessibility considerations, 172 participants were successfully recruited through a random sampling approach within the West Yorkshire Muslim community. While smaller than the optimal size, this sample still provides substantial insight into the patterns of media use, voice, and identity construction within the studied population, aligning with qualitative depth rather than statistical generalization.

We designed a 30-question survey distributed via a QR code link. The questionnaire was piloted on five participants to assess clarity, relevance and feasibility of the question rather than for statistical generalization. The pilot aimed to evaluate question wording, appropriateness of response options and potential biases in question sequencing. The questionnaire included some open-ended items to allow the participants to respond in their own words (Bordens & Abbott, 2018), which enabled us to draw inferences about the experiences, beliefs, and attitudes of an audience (Ede, 1984, p. 140).

The QR code linking to the online survey was distributed through multiple channels to maximize research and diversity of respondents. It was shared on the radio station's social media accounts, displayed on printed flyers distributed at community events and circulated via WhatsApp groups. This multi-channel approach aimed to capture both active listeners and those who engage with the station through digital platforms.

Thus, both quantitative (survey-based) and qualitative (interview-based) methods were employed to examine audience engagement with radio content and to explore the role of radio in shaping the community identity of South Asian Muslims in West Yorkshire. Additionally, archival data such as programme timetables and Ofcom reports were analyzed to provide insights into the station's history and operations as well as a broader overview of the UK community radio landscape.

2.5 RESULTS

2.5.1 SURVEY FINDINGS

This section presents the key findings derived from the questionnaire responses, offering insights into Yorkshire Muslim minority engagement with community radio. Before delving into the detailed analysis, it is important to highlight that we considered sub-groups containing 10% or more of the participants as impactful; meanwhile, we neglected sub-groups of less than 10% of the total respondents. Hence, sub-groups with fewer than 17 respondents are not considered representative. Accordingly, both gender sub-groups meet the representativeness criteria. Among ethnic sub-groups, only three – Pakistanis, Arabs, and Indians – are considered representative. Similarly, four age sub-groups (16–24, 25–34, 35–44, and 45–54 years) are deemed representative.

All representative sub-categories show a positive stance regarding listenership, with over 50% of participants reporting a frequency of engagement ranging from “sometimes” to “always”. Our findings show that men tended to have higher engagement rates with radio stations than women. Meanwhile, younger groups have higher rates of engagement, while older groups have higher rates of willingness to participate. This suggests that younger groups have more opportunities to engage with community radio, thereby strengthening its relevance and contributing to the sustainability of the impact of this medium over time. A majority of the surveyed Muslims (60%) expressed a willingness to engage with radio stations and share their experiences as minority members; however, only 25% had the opportunity to do so. Respondents showed a strong belief in radio’s capacity to challenge societal norms and promote social change regarding minority issues. In fact, this attitude is shared between all representative sub-groups, with a minimum percentage of 70% scored by the 35–44-year-old age group. Additionally, approximately 62% of our participants believe that sharing stories that promote empathy and cross-cultural connections is the main way in which radio contributes to bridging the communication gap between minority communities and the larger society, followed by addressing social issues and advocating for inclusivity (39%) and

providing a platform for dialogue and understanding (36.6%). Figure 1 shows how Muslims perceive the power of radio in supporting their identity.

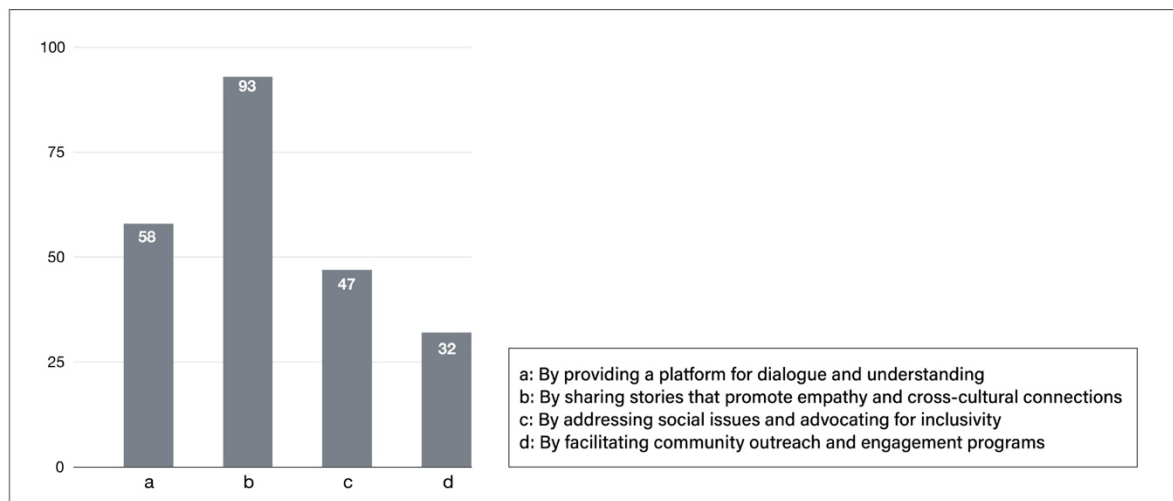


Figure 1: How Muslims perceive the power of radio in supporting their identity

2.5.2 *FEVER FM'S LISTENERSHIP*

Nearly 59% of our participants listen to Fever FM Radio. While the gender sub-groups have very similar listenership figures, age representative sub-groups ranged from about 48% for the 16–24-year-old age group to 63% for 45–54-year-olds.

In terms of ethnic groups, Pakistanis have the largest percentage of listenership (75%), including 67% who identify as frequent listeners. Indians come next, with 52%, almost all of whom are frequent listeners, and finally, 43% of Arabs, with 34% identifying as frequent listeners. According to our survey, 39% of Muslims report listening to Fever FM several times a week, while 17% engage with it once a week or less.

Table 1 presents age group responses to how radio enables minority voice expression. The findings suggest that younger participants prioritize their recognition within the majority community while older generations priorities preserving their own culture.

	16–24 year olds	25–54 year olds
Featuring diverse voices and perspectives	1	4
Addressing issues relevant to minority communities	2	1
Promoting cultural and artistic expressions	3	3
Providing opportunities for community engagement	4	2

Table 5: Perceptions across age groups on how Fever FM Radio serves as a platform for minority expression

While the three representative ethnic sub-groups agree in their opinion on the extent to which radio serves as a platform for giving voice to minorities, they are significantly diverse regarding the ways in which radio provides a platform for minority members to express their voice. Our survey reflects a positive attitude among the three sub-groups regarding the capacity of radio to serve as a platform for amplifying minority voices. Among Pakistanis, 61% of those surveyed prioritize providing opportunities for community engagement, and they believe that talk shows and discussions, along with music and artistic programming (56% and 75%, respectively), are the main types of programming that empower them to express their identity. Among Arabic-speaking respondents, 41% of participants believe addressing issues relevant to minority communities is the main source of empowerment. Moreover, 59% of this ethnic group thinks that talk shows and discussion programmes effectively empower them to express their identity, while news and current affairs coverage was chosen by 57%. Lastly, respondents of Indian origin reported that promoting cultural and artistic expression – the least popular choice among Pakistanis and Arabs – comes first, with 39%, followed by addressing issues relevant to minority communities and providing opportunities for community engagement, with 22% each. They also believe that news and current affairs coverage is the most effective type of radio programming to empower them to express their identity.

All respondents shared an optimistic perspective regarding the capacity of radio to create a sense of belonging between minority community members. Highlighting the achievements and contributions of minority individuals is considered the most important way in which radio contributes to creating a sense of belonging among all representative sub-groups, followed by fostering connections and solidarity among Indian and Arab listeners, and addressing shared concerns and challenges faced by minority communities in the case of Pakistani and Muslim sub-groups.

Overall, a quarter of the respondents reported past participation in activities supporting their community radio stations. However, among Pakistanis, the participation rate was 56%, while the participation rate dropped to 7% among Arabs. Volunteer work, which attracts older members, and participating in interviews, which tends to attract younger generations, are the most frequent activities carried out by respondents to support community radio.

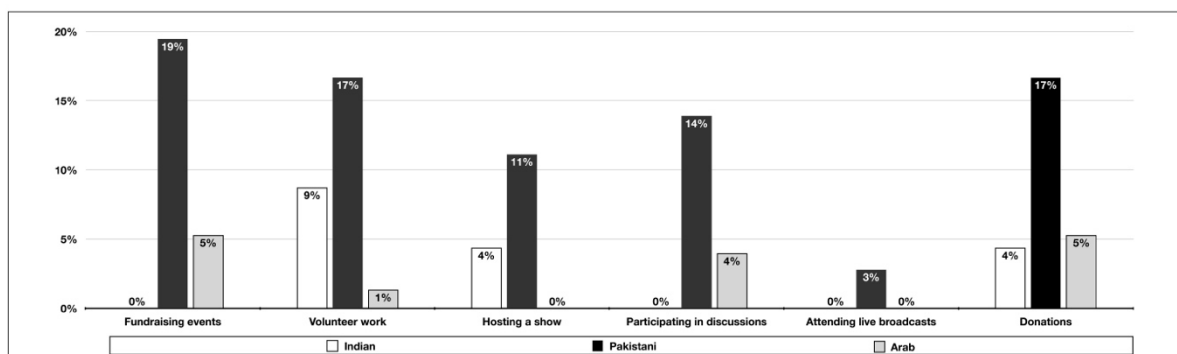


Figure 2: Ethnic minorities' activities in support of their radio

Community members engaged in different activities to support their radio station (Figure 2). Notably, only two respondents reported attending live broadcasts as a practice to support their community radio station. However, 17% of the respondents reported that the opportunities for community involvement encouraged them to support community radio, while 14.5% were encouraged by the radio station's clear mission and goals. Both engaging and diverse programming and high-quality production and content encouraged about 12% of the respondents to support their community radios, while 11.6% of respondents cited local news coverage as a key reason for their support.

Among female respondents, 11% reported supporting their community radio stations through donations, compared to just 1% of male respondents. A personal connection to the station or its mission was the most common motivation for donating, cited by approximately 10% of respondents. Around 6% mentioned that the community impact and benefits influenced their decision to donate. Belief in supporting local media followed with 4%, while 3.5% of respondents indicated that their enjoyment of specific programmes or shows motivated their contributions.

2.6 DISCUSSION

2.6.1 COMMUNITY RADIO'S VITAL ROLE

In this section, we examine the findings in relation to existing literature and theoretical perspectives to further explore the connections between community radio and the minority communities it serves. Both our qualitative interviews and quantitative survey demonstrated that Radio indeed attracts a significant portion of the Yorkshire Muslim community, including younger generations. The high percentage of frequent listeners – about 70% of Muslim Asians and 72% of the broader Asian minority community – underscores the importance of radio as a trusted and accessible medium for Muslim minority voices. In fact, this percentage is significantly higher than that reported by Dynata (2021), which stated that only 45% of the UK Asian minority population listens to the radio, and it is slightly lower than the UK's broader ethnic minorities percentage (77%) reported by the Digital Radio and Audio Review (Department for Digital, 2021). This variation underscores the complexity of media consumption patterns among Asian minorities in different contexts. It is possible that the cultural and identity-based programming offered by community radio in Yorkshire, such as Fever FM, resonates strongly with Asian audiences. Furthermore, comparing Muslim Asians and the broader Asian minority population figures suggests that radio consumption among Muslims is somewhat lower. This disparity may indicate variations in engagement with radio across different Asian minority religious groups, influenced by cultural or demographic factors.

A similar pattern of variation can be seen regarding gender and age. According to the analysis, men and younger audiences tend to interact more effectively, while older audiences demonstrate a stronger willingness to contribute but face barriers to doing so. This echoes previous UK- based research (eg. Bailey et al., 2007; Howley, 2010). We believe that this result can be interpreted beyond merely variation on demographic attributes. It demonstrates that participation in community media is shaped by intersecting factors of access, confidence and digital literacy as well as pressures on time and resources in the context of economic pressures faced by young generations. The stronger engagement of younger groups reflects both what Jenkins (2006) describes as the rise of participatory culture and his emphasis on shifting media habits influenced by digital convergence and participatory culture.

Approximately 71% of the respondents either indicated a preference for community radio or consumed it alongside mainstream radio, suggesting that the tailored content offered by community radio resonates with their specific cultural and social needs. Indeed, in our case study, 41% of the total respondents preferred Fever FM to commercial radio, which further highlights how localized programming can cater to the identities and experiences of minority communities, providing a sense of belonging that mainstream platforms often fail to deliver. In response to the interview question, “Can you describe your radio listening habits?”, a respondent noted, “As a taxi driver, I spend long hours listening to the radio. I prefer minority radio programmes because they speak to and about our community” (personal communication, August 20, 2023). Another interviewee said, “Minority radio offers a ‘rare space’ where our language, music and perspectives are normalized rather than exoticized” (personal communication, November 15, 2024). This echoes Fraser’s (2000a) notion of subaltern counter-publics spaces where marginalized groups develop alternative discourses outside the dominant publics.

Scholars have frequently highlighted issues of marginalization and the need for inclusivity and dialogue among different communities (eg. Ahmed, 2019). Media platforms act as sites where marginalized groups can reclaim their narratives and resist misrepresentations. Another finding of this study, that Muslim

minority participants perceive community radio as a platform for challenge and social transformation. Echoing Fraser's (1990) concept of subaltern counter-publics, this result reflects the medium's role in fostering counter-hegemonic discourse in which marginalized communities construct alternative spaces to contest societal narratives. Additionally, our study demonstrates a belief among Muslim minority members in community radio's capacity to challenge societal norms and promote social change. In numerical terms, this belief is expressed by more than 75% of our respondents. For instance, Jabbar (personal communication, Feb 8, 2023) expressed his belief that Fever FM's programmes are intended to contribute to the development of the South Asian communities of West Yorkshire. One example is the Fever FM programme "Together We Can", which is dedicated to addressing social matters to improve community members' lives. Other programmes, such as "Dil Se", provide South Asians with educational yet entertaining materials, including motivational talks, poetry, topical discussions and interviews.

Fever FM also contributes to community development through awareness programmes and fundraising for community projects. Before the emergence of social media, the station played a significant role as a public information-sharing platform. More recently, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the station participated in public awareness campaigns. Nowadays, some programmes are aimed at the development of community life, including "Together We Can," which covers an array of topics about keeping physically and mentally well. One interviewee, a taxi driver (personal communication, August 20, 2023), identified minority radio as a resource for understanding the political landscape of local communities and the minority individuals vying for electoral positions. This highlights minority radio's role as a civic learning platform that translates politics into accessible, community-relevant discourse. However, while it fosters awareness, its influence may remain interpretive rather than participatory.

Moreover, the station works as a trusted charity platform, where people can be assured that their donations are distributed fairly. For example, in 2011, Fever FM raised £81,330 for flood relief in Pakistan and £25,440 to aid Palestine and Africa. Evidence of its sustained community engagement is visible in the

station's office, where multiple certificates and letters of appreciation recognize its charitable initiatives and financial support to local and international causes.

Our investigation reveals active engagement with radio stations. Two-thirds of the participants saw radio storytelling as a bridge between their minority and wider society, echoing a report by the Open Society Foundations (2011). Similarly, our interviewees recognize the power of storytelling to educate society about the richness and diversity of minority cultures, promoting greater understanding and respect. Indeed, about a quarter of the surveyed Muslims shared their experiences as a minority member, while two-thirds of them stated a willingness to participate if given the chance to do so. This finding resonates with the station's own recognition of its listeners as diverse active contributors rather than passive consumers. Jabar's (personal communication, June 6, 2024a) emphasizes Pakistan and India's internal linguistic and ethnic variety which illustrates the radio administrations' nuanced awareness of diversity within minority communities. This awareness underpins their view of storytelling as a mean of making minority culture and concerns intelligible to wider audience, fostering understanding and respect for minorities. In Couldry's (2010) terms, this reflects the exercise of voice as an act of giving an account of one's world and being recognized as legitimate within the public sphere and repositions minorities from the objects of representation to active subjects within public discourse.

We argue that this engagement with radio turns radio into a by-minority rather than about-minority platform that allows marginalized groups to express their voices and identities (Fraser & Restrepo Estrada, 2001). Sharing stories, addressing social issues, and advocating for inclusivity (39%), as well as providing a platform for dialogue and understanding (36%), are highly valued benefits of community radio. These views reflect the sense that commercial UK radio stations are less likely to cater to ethnic minorities and do not adequately represent them (Dynata, (2021).

We contend that community radio functions as a counter-public sphere in which marginalized groups create alternative spaces of discourse to contest and

“speak back” against dominant negative representation or misrepresentation. Muslim minorities in Yorkshire leverage their community radio to articulate their experiences and resist negative stereotypes perpetuated in mainstream media. As an interviewee remarked, “We don’t just listen; we speak” (personal communication, Nov 10, 2024), while another mentioned how sharing stories contributes to challenging the negative stereotypes that often dominate media sources (personal communication, July 15, 2023). This underscores minority radio as a space of voice and counter-narration, in which participants actively reshape representations rather than passively consumes them. This aligns with Fraser’s (Fraser, 1990) concept of subaltern-publics demonstrating how marginalized groups use media to contest misrecognition and reclaim discursive power within their broader public sphere. This is to say that by sharing their personal stories, minority members resist dominant media framings and construct alternatives of identity and belonging.

Additionally, community radio contributes to meeting the informational needs of minority communities that are otherwise underserved, as was the case with Fever FM’s programming during the COVID-19 pandemic. A college student interviewed for this case study mentioned that his parents, who have limited proficiency in English, relied on Fever FM’s broadcasts to stay informed about the pandemic (personal communication, July 13, 2023). In fact, Fever FM’s founder Jabbar (personal communication, Feb 8, 2023), noted that the station first achieved prominence when it aired news about the death of a community member, underscoring the pivotal role of radio in addressing inward-facing informational needs of minority groups. This incident encouraged Jabbar to transform the station into a voice of the community. Of course, the educational and informative aims of the station are balanced with entertainment, as Shahab points out, (personal communication, August 10, 2023a) asserts, “a key facet of this radio station is to keep people company”.

The connection between Yorkshire Muslim minorities and their community radio is strong, evidenced by the finding that Fever FM, our case study, is listened to by 55% of our survey respondents and preferred by 45% of them. The vast majority (90%) of Fever FM’s surveyed audience expressed satisfaction with

their community radio's reflection of the changing interests and preferences of the younger generation within the Muslim community. But what keeps Muslim community radio stations like Fever FM on the air? In addition to its representative and voice-giving functions, our survey respondents recognize its pivotal role in preserving cultural heritage and strengthening group identity. Cultural recognition through radio is critical for the sustainment and growth of Muslim identities within the multicultural tapestry of British society. Muslims who are citizens or residents of the United Kingdom are referred to as *British Muslim*. While British media often represent Muslims as homogeneous (Peach, 2006), this group encompasses a diverse range of ethnicities. For example, *South Asian Muslims* are those whose ancestry can be traced to several countries, including Pakistan and India. In addition, terms such as *Pakistani Muslim* and *Bangladeshi Muslim* specify distinct Muslim groups based on national origin. Such groups may differ in terms of cultural practices, languages, and traditions. Finally, Muslims from other ethnicities, including Arabs and Africans, who may be identified based on their ethnicity in addition to their religion, also contribute to the diversity of the British Muslim community. Fever FM's ability, and clear track record, of effectively speaking to a minority community with significant internal diversity lends it a strong following among members of the community. This in turn also informs a willingness to participate as we witnessed in our survey, donate to the station, and contribute to fundraising and public engagement campaigns that create a record of service to community needs.

Thus, radio programming that accommodates the varied linguistic needs of this diverse audience is necessary. Fever FM broadcasts multilingually to cater to the different sub-communities within their target audience, for example by dedicating several hours of airtime to Punjabi and Urdu music. Additionally, the station has developed an entire production and distribution process to enable the broadcast of religious programming that satisfies and balances diverse groups' requirements and needs. One example is the move to avoid lyrical music with instruments that are prohibited by some Muslim sects (Berglund, 2008), in a measure that puts the station's commitment to inclusivity and diversity into practice. As recorded on its website, Fever FM describes itself as "the station for

the nation". This slogan encapsulates its ambition to transcend linguistic and cultural boundaries in serving and representing its multicultural society.

Fever FM also encourages greater understanding of cultural and religious practice across the different minority groups it serves. For instance, while the station serves speakers of many languages regardless of religious practice, playing Urdu, Arabic, Hindi, Pashtu music. Yet, the station observes a shift to Muslim music throughout the holy month of Ramadan. During the hours of the fast, the station plays Muslim *nasheeds*, or hit pop songs reprises suited to the occasion. If you tune into Fever FM during Ramadan, you may, for example, hear the popular remake of Ed Sheeran's song "Perfect" that substitutes the word "baby" with "*Habib Rasulallah*" in Khaled Siddiq's version and "Allah" in Waheeb Nasan's version, exploring a more transcendental holy love than the one originally envisaged by the performer. Also, Muad offers a vocal-only cover version "that aligns with Islamic themes and focuses on spiritual devotion". Similarly, the station's offering includes other songs that create, remix, and expand on existing pop music that is familiar to the everyday listener. These practices align with Chikaipa and Gunde (2021), who note that the preference for minority radio is a reflection of the significant role of community radio in promoting cultural diversity and inclusivity. The cultural and linguistic content aired by Fever FM serves to preserve minority identities and traditions. Efforts such as this one to balance community needs and foster understanding among the different ethnic, religious and linguistic groups are a testament to the ability of community radio to foster a public space that includes diverse communities.

Time	Show Name
00:00 - 07:00	Back 2 Back
07:00 - 08:00	Mehfil Purnoor
08:00 - 10:00	British Muslim Show
10:00 - 11:00	Rah-e-Amal
11:00 - 13:00	Jummah Special
13:00 - 14:00	Jummah Kareem
14:00 - 16:00	Jummah Mubarak
16:00 - 19:00	Drive Time
19:00 - 22:00	Bhangra Fever
22:00 - 00:00	Back 2 Back

Table 6: Typical Friday religious programming as broadcast on Fever FM.

After all, a regular listener of Fever FM will also grow accustomed to all the languages represented during their habitual times, regardless of the languages they personally may speak. As one listener reminded us, British Muslims are not a “single category of person”; they include people from many countries and backgrounds. Because Muslim minority radio provides programming that caters to Muslims of various ethnicities, the presenters and professionals, who come from the community, must possess the linguistic and cultural backgrounds necessary to meet their needs. The station has benefited from recruiting voluntary presenters who are experts in various fields such as medicine, education, and IT. Fever FM website’s “schedule” page presents a weekly programme lineup consisting of more than 42 musical, social, and religious programmes as well as news bulletins in multiple languages. The programme schedule is executed by more than 40 presenters with a diversity of professional backgrounds, further reflecting the symbiotic relationship between the radio station and the minority community.

Notably, the station’s diversity also extends to the representation of different groups in its staffing. Fever FM’s “Meet the Team” page presents a diverse array of presenters in terms of their cultural background, ethnicity and demographic attributes. Shahab (personal communication, June 6, 2024b) states that the station’s diverse crew unites various ethnicities and cultures to create a singular broadcast reflecting the Muslim community’s voice. In discussing the multiplicity within South Asian communities, Jabar (personal communication, June 6, 2024a)

reflected on the Punjabi, Pashtun, Baluche communities, as well as sub-groups within them, noting that despite this internal variation, only a few major languages dominate communication. By representing the diverse groups within the Muslim community as a unified voice, radio not only validates the existence of Muslim culture but also promotes a broader understanding of it among various other groups (Alia & Bull, 2005). This approach helps in building bridges, enhancing mutual respect, and promoting cultural diversity and inclusivity by joining an array of subcultures in one space to listen to each other. Indeed, this highlights organizational and representational diversity as central to the station's mission, demonstrating how staffing composition shapes content and community engagement. Fever FM weaves together ethnicities and cultures into a coherent broadcast. The station exemplifies what Alia and Bull (2005) describe as media fostering cross-cultural understanding and reinforcing collective identity.

Cultural and linguistic content is appreciated by two-thirds of Fever FM listeners, while about one-third valued minority voice representation. Responses to the question, "What aspects of Fever FM radio programmes appeal to you the most?" reveal three dimensions in which Fever FM contributes to voicing the cultural identity of South Asians, especially second-generation immigrants, who are more likely to lose the connection with their ancestral culture. First, it educates community members about their homeland cultures, with programmes such as "Pakistani Classic Tracks", which plays traditional music that younger generations have a low likelihood of being exposed to otherwise. Jabbar (personal communication, Feb 8, 2023), Fever FM's founder and managing director, recalled how Pakistani immigrants used to excitedly crowd into one vehicle to listen to cassette tapes brought back home from visits abroad, eager to tune into the latest popular music in their ancestral homeland. Fever FM now fulfils the need that used to be met by sharing cassette tapes. Jabbar's note illustrates minority radio's role in maintaining cultural continuity and transnational connections for diasporic communities, effectively replacing older forms of media circulation such as shared cassette tapes. This resonates with Appadurai's (1996) notion of mediascapes in which media technologies enable the flow of cultural products across borders, shaping identity and

community belonging. Further, Fraser's concept of subaltern counter-publics can be applied here where community radio creates a dedicated space in which diasporic groups negotiate identity and cultural expression outside the dominant public sphere. Accordingly, minority radio sustains affective and cultural ties reinforcing collective memory and a sense of belonging.

Next, according to one interviewee (personal communication, August 10, 2023b), Muslim communities struggle with the lack of Islamic centres and resources, and moreover, "attending them adds financial burdens as well as pressures our children to sacrifice a weekend day". Thus, the second dimension is that with Fever FM, Islamic teachings and traditions are being passed on to Yorkshire's younger generation of South Asians through radio programmes that address issues related to spiritual matters within the Muslim community and inform listeners about religious traditions and practices. According to Fever FM's timetable, the station broadcasts about eight hours of Islamic-themed programmes every Friday. For example, Friday's Islamic lineup starts with the "British Muslim Show" at 08:00 and concludes with the "Together We Can Show and Naats" at 16:00. Another Naat programme, "Naats Mix", airs at 10:00, followed by Sufi Kalaam, a two-hour programme that conveys lessons from the life of the prophet Mohammed at 11:00, and "Jummah Kareem," a special programme dedicated to the significance of Friday (*Jummah*) in Islam at 13:00.

The third dimension is that programmes aired by Fever FM provide the South Asian community with educational and entertaining materials that maintain social coherence and solidarity. About one-third of the surveyed population listening to Fever FM indicated that music and entertainment tailored to minority audiences were the most appealing content aired by the station. In response to the question, "How do minority radio stations impact your community's culture and identity", one respondent noted the importance of Fever FM's programming in familiarizing younger generations with their religion, citing the example of the nasheed, "Muhammed, he is *Rasulullah* [God's prophet]" aired on the station (personal communication, August 13, 2023).

Another aspect of how Fever FM navigates staying on air to serve its community relates to funding its operations. In the case of Fever FM, funding comes mostly through donations and limited advertising. As well as the volunteering efforts of skilled individuals who offer their time and expertise fill the gaps in the staffing needs of the station. Financial diversification and volunteering efforts both address the aforementioned concerns raised by Peissl et al. (2022) and our interviewees regarding the public authorities' funding of community media. These donations and volunteer efforts have significantly contributed to meeting the needs of Fever FM.

Our survey reflects strong public sentiment in support of minority radio. A clear example of this was the community support for Fever FM radio against a complaint which claimed that the station, licensed as a community radio, should limit its religious programming (personal communication, June 6, 2024a). Community members, including MPs and council members, came together to challenge the complaint. This effort turned the challenge into an opportunity, explicitly guaranteeing the station's right to present religious content, especially during Ramadan. This exemplifies collective agency and public solidarity in defining the legitimacy of minority media. This community's mobilization around Fever FM's right to broadcast religious content reflects Fraser's notion of the formation of subaltern counter-publics as spaces in which marginalized communities assert alternative norms and contest dominant definitions of public communication. This level of support is substantiated by figures from our survey. More than a quarter (26%) of those surveyed have participated at least once in an event or activity to support community radio. The survey reveals a considerable amount of support for minority radio initiatives among respondents, who participate in numerous ways, including financial contributions. Further, it aligns with Couldry's emphasis on the moral and political significance of voice as a form of recognition. This community defence of the station underscores how minority radio becomes a symbolic site of cultural autonomy and participatory democracy.

Even more heartening is the readiness of the respondents to volunteer their time and skills to the station, indicating a strong commitment to sustaining and

empowering minority radio platforms through personal involvement in addition to monetary aid. One-third of the surveyed individuals have actively engaged in volunteer work to support their community radio station. Fever FM management acknowledges the importance of such skills. Shahab values this participation, stating that “all of these things contribute towards the experience overall, it is something that we need” (personal communication, August 10, 2023a). This brings us to a related but distinct issue that this active community participation is central not only to the sustainability but also to the legitimacy of minority radio. The voluntary engagement of listeners indicates what Couldry (2010) defines as communicative agency, the collective enactment of voice through participation and shared responsibility. Further, Fraser’s (2000a) idea of participatory parity is reflected here, demonstrating how this involvement fosters inclusion by reducing structural gaps between producers and audiences.

In return, Fever FM benefits the community by providing an opportunity for a future generation of South Asian media professionals to receive training and experience that can help them pursue careers in mainstream media. Fever FM prides itself on being a springboard for local new talent by recruiting and training volunteers of all ages in radio production skills. As recorded on the station’s website, the organization stated: “We support and encourage our volunteers (through training, mentoring and supervision) to research, produce and present their own radio shows”. In exchange for working as volunteers, would-be disk jockeys receive training in how to engage with audiences and operate radio software and hardware successfully. Fever FM has trained several DJs who have gone on to successful careers in mainstream media as journalists, video producers, writers, and presenters. According to Jabbar (personal communication, Feb 8, 2023), at least four volunteers who started at Fever FM as trainees have joined major mainstream media, including the BBC. This illustrates the capacity of minority radio to provide marginalized voices with pathways to dominant institutions. This not only reflects progress towards participatory parity (Fraser, 2000a) but it also reveals what Couldry (2010) terms the structural filtering of voice in which legitimacy is achieved only through conformity to mainstream media logics.

One DJ we interviewed for this study, Anil Bharath, recounted, “My heart was telling me I want to work with communications and media, but my home situation was telling me something else” (personal communication, November 2, 2023). By chance, he heard that Fever FM provides a viable opportunity for young people to learn broadcasting skills and thought, “This is something I would love to do”. Bharath found his experience at Fever FM to be highly valuable, saying, “I learned how to broadcast and how to produce my own show, and I learned the confidence to speak to audiences”. The experience has allowed him to do successful interviews with big-name personalities. Bharath presented the work he did for Fever FM to the BBC, and they saw his potential. He asserted, “I couldn’t have done that without my training with Fever FM”. Bharath’s story underscores the positive impact that minority media stations can have on their employees and volunteers (Backhaus, 2020).

2.7 CONCLUSION

In this article, we have argued that radio functions as a participatory platform that fosters collective voice, community cohesion, and sociocultural continuity. Evidence from Fever FM in West Yorkshire illustrates that the minority radio functions as a mediating platform that overcomes cultural and linguistic barriers to enable communities to access information otherwise restricted by mainstream media formats. As Shahab (personal communication, August 10, 2023a) observes, “People have got a voice. So, that’s one way where we can give the community a voice”. Both Bharath (personal communication, November 2, 2023) and Shahab (personal communication, August 10, 2023a) highlighted that minority radio provides a medium to inform community members who have cultural obstacles such as language barriers, aligning with Fraser’s (2000a) argument that structural barriers, including language, hinder participatory parity while such dedicated spaces are necessary for equitable participation.

In this sense, minority radio functions both as an inclusionary tool and as a countermeasure against systemic marginalization in media. Providing media platforms in one’s own language is not only about information access but also about empowering individuals to express, interpret and act on issues relevant

to their social and cultural context and this is the core of Couldry's (2010) concept of voice as agency. For West Yorkshire's Muslim communities, radio offers a platform for expressing minority voices, preserving their identity, and educating new generations. This is consistent with the assertion put forth by Echchaibi (2002) that community radio stations play a significant role in redefining and challenging the identity boundaries of their communities.

Moreover, Community radio plays a capacity-building role, offering training platforms that prepare minority members to join and participate in mainstream media, enabling them to deliver their voices, express their identity, and share their culture with the majority community. Fever FM exemplifies how community-based media foster social cohesion and support communities expressing their culture, celebrating their linguistic diversity, and strengthening social solidarity via providing both educational and entertainment content. As Couldry and Dreher (2007) and Couldry (2012) emphasize, community based media enables minority communities to voice their cultural narratives and shape collective understanding in ways the mainstream media often overlook.

Our analysis demonstrates that the establishment and sustainability of minority radio stations are dependent upon community support, reflecting the symbiotic relationship between radio and minority communities. Community ownership of minority radio allows for better interaction between the station and the community. Consistent with Siegelman and Waldfogel's (2001) findings, the extent of minority-targeted programming is positively correlated with the degree of community ownership and participation of radio stations.

Importantly, our findings confirm that community involvement is important to the financial and social sustainability of minority radio. As Peissl et al., (2022) (2022) note, community radio must adopt comprehensive strategies addressing social, economic and political dimensions of participation. Fever FM's management has emphasized community support as key to its sustainability and continued operation. Indeed, beyond reflecting listeners' satisfaction with radio programming, such support is manifested through volunteerism and sponsorship, which help maintain the station's survival and relevance.

Finally, this study underscores how marginalized groups employ community radio for empowerment, cultural preservation and participatory inclusion. Meanwhile, the communities themselves actively sustain these media outlets. Fever FM's example demonstrates how minority radio transforms access into agency and enhances communicative parity within an unequal media landscape. While we brought obstacles that minority radio faces and the collective efforts to overcome them to light, future studies could explore the specific strategies these stations utilize to navigate structural challenges and assess the long-term influence of community participation on their sustainability. Additionally, our findings dramatically outpace the overall rate of radio listenership in the UK. This opens avenues for future research to examine how Muslim communities across the UK utilize radio, identifying broader patterns of engagement, participation and representation.

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ARTICLE TWO: DELIBERATIVE DISCOURSES IN DIGITAL SPACES: UNPACKING THE DELIBERATIVE QUALITIES OF ONLINE FORUMS IN OMAN

ABSTRACT

Digital platforms have emerged as alternative spaces for public deliberation, even in political systems where freedom of expression is limited. This article explores the role of technology in shaping public political communication within the Omani context by examining how Omanis utilize the Sablat Oman platform to express their civic interests. To achieve the research objectives, this study draws on Habermas's deliberative democracy theory (1996) and Fraser's approach to deliberative democracy theory (1990) as a theoretical framework. Assessing the quality of deliberation involved two methodological approaches: content analysis using a coding scheme developed by Graham and Witschge (2003), and textual analysis guided by the normative concept of deliberation from an Omani cultural perspective.

An analysis of a Sablat Oman forum thread with over 130 participants indicates weak deliberation in terms of rationality and validity claims. The discussions often lacked depth and were dominated by a few users. While textual analysis reveals the presence of conflicts, disagreements, and differing political views, the thread still reflects a low level of reciprocity. Future research could track changes in deliberative behaviour over time or in response to political events and explore how online deliberation unfolds across countries in the Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA) region.

Keywords: Deliberative Democracy, Digital Public Sphere, Online Political Communication, Oman, online Forums

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on examining online deliberation in the Omani context and its potential to empower voices traditionally constrained in the public sphere, enabling more inclusive discourse within a culturally rooted framework. It

considers the case of the Sablat Oman online forum, a self-regulated, independent media platform where moderators and users enforce the rules rather than external authorities. The primary objective is to evaluate the extent to which political discussions on Sablat Oman demonstrate key features of deliberative discourse, such as reason-giving, respectful engagement, and openness to diverse viewpoints. Accordingly, the following research questions were formulated: To what extent do the political discussions on the Omani online platform Sablat Oman meet the requirements of the process of deliberation? And to what extent do online forums in Oman promote inclusive and equitable participation in public deliberation?

To answer the research questions, I chose a discussion thread from a critical period, the year 2011, that represents the peak influence of online forums in shaping public opinion in Oman. In fact, Omani online forums had the highest levels of activity during this period, offering rich data on digital discourse. Although the period coincides with the Arab Spring – a politically sensitive time that witnessed the widest popular protests since the end of the Dhofar war – regulatory conditions remained stable, enabling a clear analysis of organic online deliberation (Valeri, 2015). To analyze the chosen thread, I adopted a combined framework to ensure that this exploration of deliberative processes not only investigates rationality but also actively addresses systemic inequalities, fostering genuine participatory parity (Fraser, 2000c) and inclusivity. Thus, it utilizes Habermas's (1989) and Fraser's (1990) approaches, which support the idea that independent digital spaces enable marginalized voices and alternative discourses as a framework.

To assess the deliberation process, I draw on Graham and Whitschage's coding approach (2003), which is grounded in the principles of Habermas' deliberative democracy and was initially applied and tested in their own content analysis research of online forums. This approach delves into individual interactions, assessing how personal participation contributes to the quality of deliberative engagements. It can analyze the dynamics of online political discussions, providing a robust structure to evaluate the deliberation's quality (Friess & Eilders, 2015). It is particularly designed to examine how participants engage

with each other, the arguments they present, and the overall quality of the deliberative process (Friess, 2015; Heinbach, 2022). Additionally, as will be elaborated in a later section, this investigation utilizes textual analysis guided by the normative concept of deliberation and interpreted through the lens of Omani culture.

This contribution responds to a growing scholarly interest in understanding how public deliberation unfolds within non-democratic contexts like the Omani context. It aims at bridging a notable gap in scholarly understanding of how public deliberation works in digital spaces of more conservative or state-influenced societies, where traditional mechanisms of civic discourse are evolving. The value of studies investigating non-democratic deliberation, like the current one, stems from their ability to explore how citizens engage in dialogue, negotiate boundaries, and express dissent or consensus within a framework shaped by cultural norms and political constraints.

This study also contributes to the wider literature on the nature and limits of online discourses in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian contexts. Beyond this universal implication, this research also offers a significant local contribution. In addition to assessing deliberative quality in the Omani context, this study contributes to illuminating Omani local political culture online. It sheds light on how Omani socio-cultural norms (e.g., respect, authority, consensus-seeking, and indirectness) and the particular political environment, which, according to Ghubash (2006), has created a unique democratic model that diverges from Western conventions, shape and are, in turn, shaped by online deliberative practices.

Following this introduction, Section 1 reviews relevant literature on deliberative democracy, the theoretical framework, digital deliberation in the Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA) region, and the Omani context. Section 2 presents the case study, Section 3 outlines the methodology, Section 4 reports the findings, and Section 5 concludes with key insights and suggestions for future research.

3.2 DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

Numerous studies in the realm of online public deliberation have been conducted over the years, primarily focusing on the quality, dynamics, and patterns of communication from a normative stance on online citizen deliberation. Through the description and analysis of online deliberation and mobilization, these inquiries have significantly contributed to our understanding of the utilization of e-platforms as a part of the public sphere, shedding light on how they have been used for explicit political objectives (Ayish, 2018; Khamis & Sisler, 2010). In addition to delineating specific features of political deliberation within particular societies (Borge Bravo et al., 2019), these studies have examined the quality of online deliberation and established standardized and normative criteria for assessing online political deliberation (Del Valle et al., 2020; Mendonça, 2015).

Deliberative democracy theory emphasizes the role of deliberation in creating more informed outcomes and highlights collective decision-making between equal discussants in rational debates (Mercier & Landemore, 2012). Rational deliberation is a key component of any functioning deliberative democracy because it enables unanimous public outcomes without exclusion, even under conditions of pluralism (Lafont, *Philosophy & Social Criticism*/2009). Exploring deliberation under the lens of deliberative democracy encompasses some related notions and concepts. First, Habermas's (Habermas, 1996) deliberative democracy theory attempted to provide a framework to explore political deliberations by emphasizing concepts such as rational discourse and inclusivity. This framework is based on the argument that legitimacy in democracy arises from free, open, and reasoned deliberation (legitimacy through dialogue) among citizens (communicative action) in a free and open space (the public sphere; (Habermas, 1984, 1991). However, scholars have criticized this framework. For example, Calhoun criticizes deliberative democracy's overemphasis on rationality (Hall, 2007). Furthermore, Fraser (1990) critiques Habermas's earlier perspectives on democracy by introducing the concept of a "plurality of public spheres," which challenges his notion of a singular, rational,

and universal public sphere. Such a concept facilitates an understanding of online forums as fragmented and alternative discursive spaces.

Nevertheless, the current examination draws on the Habermasian approach of deliberative democracy, which posits that “mediated political communication in the public sphere can facilitate deliberative legitimation processes in complex societies,” including authoritarian ones, provided that they form media systems that operate independently of external pressures, allow input from anonymous audience members, and effectively connect the elite with the broader public to foster a more informed and engaged community (Habermas, 2006a, pp. 411-412). Additionally, Habermas argues that the internet has reactivated the grassroots writers’ and readers’ public sphere in authoritarian contexts. However, he acknowledges that authoritarian regimes may be concerned about how weakening such censorship may undermine their efforts to control and repress public opinion (Habermas, 2006a).

The above discussion suggests that Habermas’s approach is suitable for examining Sablat Oman as a digital space where citizens have expressed opinions, raised concerns, and deliberated on public matters—even if within certain boundaries. However, this approach does not adequately account for differences between participants. Inequalities among participating groups can significantly affect deliberation and undermine its quality. Nancy Fraser (1990) has pointed out that these spaces, which appear inclusive because anyone can enter them, often claim that differences can be set aside or “bracketed out” as insignificant. However, in reality, the privileging of certain communication styles and existing inequalities and power relations between groups mean that the differences are both real and significant. This analysis effectively demonstrates this dynamic.

Accordingly, I supplemented Habermas’ approach with Fraser’s deliberative democracy approach, which revolves around the concept of participatory parity (Fraser, 2000c) and the inclusion of diverse voices in the public sphere. *Participatory parity* is the principle that all individuals should have equal opportunities to engage and interact as peers; it requires both the equitable

distribution of resources and the recognition of diverse identities. In practice, I identify discursive indicators such as (a) equal opportunity for users to contribute across threads, (b) respectful engagement regardless of social or political affiliation, and (c) the absence of marginalization or silencing (e.g. via mocking, exclusionary language, or dismissals). This diverges from Habermas's ideal of a neutral, rational public sphere by highlighting the role of social power and identity in participation. Meanwhile, it reflects Fraser's acknowledgement of counterpublics and the need to address structural exclusion in deliberative spaces. I used these indicators as coding categories during the content analysis to systematically assess whether and how deliberation on the platform reflected Fraser's theoretical framework.

The precedent of cross-cultural applications of Habermas's deliberative democracy approach alongside Fraser's approach (eg. Erkuş et al., 2024; Lupien, 2022) has motivated me to adopt them and extend their application to a new context, namely the Omani context. Examples include Min (2014), whose paper draws on Habermas's deliberative democracy and provides examples of deliberative practices in various non-Western societies, such as Cameroon and Colombia. Sass and Dryzek (2014) also utilize Habermas's approach to examine political deliberation in Egypt, highlighting how local cultural contexts influence deliberative practices. Another such example is a study by Bardhan (2018), who utilizes Fraser's ideas on public spheres and discourse to explore discursive practices in Arab Islamic contexts. The research utilizes both approaches and contributes to the existing literature by providing a unique regional perspective, given that the Gulf region, despite its distinct cultural and linguistic landscape, is often underrepresented in online deliberation research.

Extensive academic attention has been given to the impact of technology on online deliberation. In her exploration of the impact of technology on politics, Dean (2005) argues that new technologies contribute to post-politics, a condition where real political action is displaced by endless communication. Wilhelm (2000) investigates the nature of democracy and expresses fear of democracy acting "not so much as a formal process of national referenda but as a bastardized version of (manufactured) consent". Another study by Jensen

(2003) on online democratic deliberation found that dialogues featuring informed debates remain limited in reach and active participation.

More recently, researchers (eg. Bondes et al., 2024; Zhang, 2022) have found that technology enhances online deliberation in non-Western contexts by overcoming physical distance, enabling broader political participation, and providing new tools for information sharing and mobilization. Kassem and Hoppe's (2020) study, conducted in the Kuwaiti context, affirms that technology revolutionizes online deliberation by empowering a broader spectrum of individuals to participate and mobilize politically. Meanwhile, it introduces challenges such as digital exclusion, incivility, and the fragmentation of discourse into ideological echo chambers. According to Zhang (2022), such challenges can distort representation and reduce the quality of deliberation.

3.3 SOCIAL MEDIA AND DELIBERATION IN SWANA

Scholars have extensively examined the presence of democratic principles and related concepts such as freedom of speech, the public sphere, and deliberation in non-democratic contexts (eg. Bhagwat, 2015). Janssen and Kies (2005) emphasize the geographical and cultural zones that online deliberations belong to as a relevant variable, justifying differences between zones such as the European or Arabic worlds. Many studies have engaged in analysing the public discourse on the politics of the SWANA states. For example, Khamis and Sisler (2010) claim that the Habermasian notion of the public sphere contradicts the values of Islamic religious traditions. On the other hand, in an investigation of qat chew gatherings in Yemen, Wedeen (2007, p. 80) concludes that, although they do not produce explicitly liberal debates, they "are the occasion for the performance of an explicitly democratic subjectivity—one that relishes deliberation". She notes that the gatherings introduce important distinctions between democratic practices and liberal values. This is to say that democratic practices such as rational deliberation can exist in non-democratic contexts, including in many SWANA countries where liberal values, like freedom of speech, are extremely uncommon. The divergence in perspectives can be explored through Habermas's deliberative democracy theory framework and its

subsequent critiques. Khamis and Sisler (2010) tend to adhere closely to Habermas's original model, which emphasizes rational discourse in the public sphere. Meanwhile, Wadeen's (2007) approach aligns with more lenient interpretations of the theory, particularly those that challenge Habermas's overemphasis on deliberative rationality (eg. Calhoun et al., 2011; Fraser, 1990). The current study adopts the latter view, where scholars account for diverse cultural and religious contexts, especially in Muslim-majority societies, as it provides a more relevant framework that considers the role of religion and alternative forms of communication in public discourse.

Based on the preceding discussion, it can be argued that the concepts of the public sphere and rational deliberation do not contradict the principles of Arab and Muslim societies. According to Ghubash (2006), Arab and Muslim societies have the potential, experience, and incentives for rational deliberation. Although limited, existing scholarship affirms a positive impact of modern media technology on the SWANA political landscape. For example, Nadav Samin (2012) concludes that the use of the Internet and social media can support positive democratic change in the Middle East. Additionally, while the principle of *Shura* (consultation) stipulated in the Holy Qur'an is at the forefront of these incentives, history bears witness to deliberative practices that have had a positive impact on Arab and Islamic history. For example, scholars (eg. Funsch, 2015; Ghubash, 2006) generally agree that Omanis under the Imamah system had the chance to experience wide societal representation in governance, including the election of the Imam, governors, and judges.²

3.4 THE OMANI POLITICAL CONTEXT

In addition to the press and publications law (1983), Oman has numerous other laws regulating media institutions, such as the telecommunications regulations

² Over more than twelve centuries, the Ibadi Imamah elected sixty-one imams, starting with al-Julanda bin Masud (r. 749–741). Ghalib al-Hinai (c.1912– 2009), was the last elected imam (ruler) of the Omani Imamate.

law (2002), the radio and television private establishments law (2004), the penal code (1974), the commercial companies law (1974), the trade law (1990), and the law of declaring a state of emergency (2008). During the deliberation period, there were no comprehensive legal codes that regulated online publishing.³ Instead, different laws and acts were amended to extend state control over cyberspace, including online forums. For instance, Article 61 of the telecommunications regulations law was amended in 2008 to broaden its scope of punishable acts. The amendment now explicitly includes “any natural or legal person owning, managing or supervising a website if he incites or agrees to the publication of the messages stated in item three⁴ of this article through the telecommunications network or assists in it by a positive or a negative act”.

Omanis have utilized online forums to host their deliberations. The establishment of the internet has given rise to the online version of deliberation, which is a key element of the public sphere (Calhoun et al., 1992). It has expanded opportunities for members of society to participate in social and political deliberation, enhancing the visibility of diverse voices and reducing some barriers to engagement. Although opportunities to participate in deliberation are influenced by the digital divide and digital exclusion, the state’s efforts to improve digital infrastructure and promote digital literacy minimize their impact. Initiatives such as the national broadband strategy and digital literacy programmes have increased internet penetration and improved access to digital technologies. Additionally, the growing availability of affordable smartphones and internet plans has made digital technologies more accessible to low-income households. Accordingly, the digital divide and digital exclusion in Oman are gradually narrowing, enabling more Omanis to participate in the

³ The first comprehensive legal code to regulate publishing was enacted in November 2024.

⁴ Item three: Any person who knowingly sends, through telecommunications systems, equipment, or media, a message that is contrary to public order or good morals.

digital economy and access essential services. During the study period, 2011, the internet penetration rate in Oman was approximately 83% (eOman, 2012).

Aside from the legal framework, the Omani political context is also shaped by long-standing traditions and practices. For example, social media use in Islamic contexts is impacted by Islamic religious beliefs and ethical paradigms (Razali et al., 2024). Noh et al (2023) found that using social media from an Islamic perspective involves *da'wah* (propagating Islamic teachings), establishing one's character, *ukhuwwah* (fostering unity and relationships), facilitating knowledge sharing and education, enjoining good and forbidding harm, and maintaining a digital wellbeing. Promoting usage behaviours that align with these objectives fosters an ethical digital ecosystem characterized by positive consumption and interaction (Razali et al., 2024).

3.5 SABLAT OMAN: THE CASE STUDY

Omani citizens have engaged in online deliberation through several online platforms, including Sablat Oman, Sablat Al Arab, and Alharah Al Omania. Sablah or sablat refers to a public meeting hall where people gather to discuss issues of common interest. Sablat Oman (see Figure 3) became the leading online forum in Oman after the termination of Sablat AlArab.⁵ It has about 23 thematic forums, including *al sablat al seyasa wa el eqtisad* (the politics and economics sablah), *al sablah al deneiah* (the religion sablah), and *al sablah al a'mah* (the general sablah). While browsing Sablat Oman, content is open to the public without restrictions, but registration is required to post, initiate a thread, or contact a registered member via the internal messaging system. Some registered users are promoted by the administration as moderators of the forum sections, with the authority to terminate any thread or ban a user. While no approval is needed for new posts and threads to appear online, they can be

⁵ Sablat Al Arab was one of the earliest Omani online forums created in 1997 by Said Al-Rashdi, who closed it down forever after he was arrested in 2006 due to the content authored by the users of his forum.

removed later by a moderator based on an administrative decision. Registration is open for anyone above 18 years old with a device and internet access, regardless of their location. Registration requires providing demographic information such as gender and location.

While the forum's allowance of pseudonymous participation enables discussants to express their opinions on sensitive matters without fear of retribution, their profiles reveal a diverse range of characteristics, including variations in age, geographical location, and gender. This information provides indicators to evaluate the deliberative quality of the forum, assess the fulfillment of Fraser's criteria for participatory parity and inclusivity (Fraser, 2006), and uncover participation patterns. Such criteria will be assessed to evaluate whether all users in the forum can contribute equally, without facing cultural, social, or economic barriers, and whether the forum promotes mutual recognition and ensures fair access to influence, regardless of users' identities or backgrounds.



Figure 3: Screenshot of the homepage of Sablat Oman.

3.6 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Due to its strong potential to attract a diverse range of users in terms of demographic characteristics and experience with online participation, I chose Sablat Oman as a case study. As discussed in the introduction, the analyzed thread dates to 2011, which represents the peak influence of online forums in shaping public opinion in Oman. I purposefully selected this thread because it involves a politically significant topic and contains high engagement with substantial and diverse contributions. Further, selecting a single case thread allows for a focused analysis of Omani culture to produce in-depth insights on political communication. This ensures the study captures contextual nuances and provides a robust and detailed investigation of the interactions, enabling

me to explore subtle aspects of participatory parity, inclusivity, and deliberative quality.

This study employs two methodological approaches to address the research inquiries. First, this article utilizes Graham and Witschge's (2003) coding approach to examine the deliberation quality by looking at the content of the forum through the operationalization of three key dimensions: rational-critical debate, reflexivity, and reciprocity, which will be explained in detail later in this section. For this research, the initial coding practice was modified to account for the study context. First, I translated the instructions and the coding categories into Arabic to ensure clarity and accuracy. Then, I meticulously reviewed the adapted deliberative norms to align with local values and social practices specific to Oman. I found that the deliberative norms aligned well with the context overall; however, I incorporated an additional code that reflected the importance of religion in the Omani context. The "religious" code was added to the "evidence type" category. This was the sole adjustment made to the original coding scheme.

Second, I chose to utilize critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine how discussants use language to construct their arguments and their deliberative spaces due to its strength in focusing on the use of language in a social context. Jørrrgensen and Phillips (2002) affirm that CDA envisages discourse as a type of social practice that both constitutes the social world and is constituted by other social practices. Through these practices, social actors construct objects of knowledge, situations, social roles, and interpersonal relations between social groups (De Cillia et al., 2009). These relations are manifested in language with various levels of transparency, reflecting the dominance, discrimination, and power and control relations that CDA is fundamentally concerned with (Wodak, 2001). Accordingly, this method provides a deeper exploration of the socio-political context and power structures underlying the themes identified through the coding approach.

In practice, I manually scraped the chosen thread into separate Excel sheets based on each post's author's username, content, and quoted posts. Before I

imported the Excel sheets into NVivo,⁶ which I used to analyze the chosen thread, I reviewed the scraped data to avoid duplication, ensure inclusion of all needed data, and coded participants' usernames.

This analysis assesses the deliberative quality and evaluates the contributions of individual participants. Thus, revealing the thread without anonymization would disclose the researcher's view on these contributions, potentially exposing participants to unwarranted scrutiny or judgment. Furthermore, it was not feasible to secure the consent of all the users of the thread to have their specific posts exposed in a research context. Therefore, to maintain ethical integrity, I choose to anonymize the analyzed thread.

The coding process involved five stages, starting with sorting posts into initial rational arguments, responses, or irrelevant comments, as shown in Table 7 and Figures 4. To ensure the consistency and accuracy of the coding process, an intercoder reliability test was conducted. This involved the researcher and a second coder independently coding the same thread. Both coders used the codebook developed by the researcher to ensure consistency in applying the codes. The results were calculated using NVivo's built-in Cohen's kappa scale, which yielded a score of .62. According to Cohen's interpretation, this score is classified as indicating substantial agreement. This level of agreement is generally seen as satisfactory for studies investigating online political deliberations (McHugh, 2012).

⁶ NVivo is a qualitative data analysis (QDA) software produced by Lumivero, designed to help researchers organize, analyze, and visualize qualitative data.

Stage 1	All posts
Initial Rational Argument	Any message, which provides a validity claim accompanied by a reason or justification, which is not a response to another message and that is an initial line of argument.
Irrelevant	Indicates posts that are not relative to the thread subject
Response	Any message, which refers to participant's or participants' message(s) by either a direct or indirect citation.
Stage 2	All posts coded as Response
Non-reasoned/ justified claim	A message that is a response to another message(s) but lacks a reasoned/justified validity claim or critique.
Reasoned/ Justified Claim	A message that is a response to another message(s) and provides a reasoned/justified validity claim or critique but
Stage 3 (A)	All posts coded as Non-Reasoned-Claim
Counterassertion	A message that is a critique of another message(s) but lacks a reason(s) / justification(s) and an alternative claim.
Response-Affirmation	A message that lacks a reasoned/justified validity claim or critique but is a response to another message(s), which seeks to affirm another position, statement and/or opinion.
Response-Informative	A message that lacks a reasoned/justified validity claim or critique but is a response to another message(s), which seeks information and/or asks a question and/or provides information/clarification.
Stage 3 (B)	All posts coded as Reasoned-Response
Counterargument	A message, which critically responds to a Rational-Argument (this may include a Rational-Affirmation as well), which is reasoned/justified and which provides an alternative claim.
Rational-Affirmation	Any message, which affirms another message(s) by providing a reasoned/justified affirmation in support of another author's or authors' claim.
Rebuttal	A message, which is a reasoned/justified response to a Counterargument in defence of the original claim under discussion.
Refute-to- Rebuttal	A message that responds to a Rebuttal, by the original author(s) of the Counterargument (needs to be a continuation of the Counterargument, the alternative claim), which is reasoned/justified.
Stage 4	All posts coded as Reasoned-Response (based on the type of counterevidence they provide)
Supported-by-Analogy/Example	A message, which supports its claim by using analogies and/or analogical examples.
Supported-by-Assertion/Assumption	A message, which supports its claim by asserting a conviction or by assuming certain things to be as such.
Supported-by-Experience	A message, where the author uses a personal or second-hand experience to support a claim.
Supported-by-Factual	A message, which supports its claim by providing factual evidence, which could include citations to outside sources or references to facts.
Supported-by-Religious	A message, where the author uses a religious example, quotation or statement to support a claim
Stage 5	All posts coded as Counterargument, Rebuttal and Refute-to- Rebuttal
Argument-Referencing	A message coded as a Counterargument, Rebuttal, or Refute-to-Rebuttal, which provides a response that addresses the other claim point-to-point.
Argument-Breakdown	A message coded as a Counterargument, Rebuttal, or Refute-to-Rebuttal, which provides a point-to-point breakdown, accompanied by alternative claim and uses counterevidence - Factual, Experience, and Analogy/Example - to support its own claim and to confront the opposing argument under question.

Table 7: The coding process with the definitions of each coding category, adapted from Graham and Witschge's (2003)

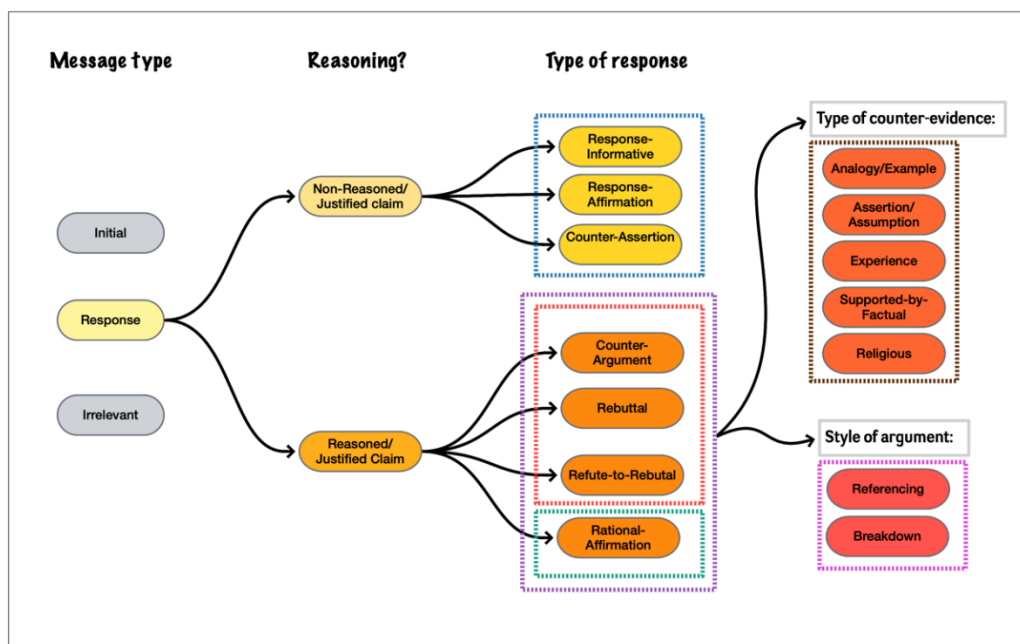


Figure 4: The coding process

After completing the coding work, I utilized the results to analyze the qualities of the debate, as detailed in Table 8. For example, rational debate is evaluated by counting the messages coded as initial rational arguments, rational affirmations, counterarguments, rebuttals, and refutations to rebuttals in the discussion thread. By identifying the number of such coded messages and dividing them by the total number of posted messages, we can determine the percentage of rational messages in the thread.

Meanwhile, reciprocity is reflected in levels. Posts were graphed as a web, where each post is linked to those it interacts with based on the exchange of validity claims, arguments, and critiques among participants. The level of reciprocity is determined by the length of the chains within this web.

In terms of reflexivity, I explored the presence and use of arguments and counterevidence. As shown in Table 8, reflexivity is explored at three progressive levels of analysis. While the first level – alternative claims present – provides the boundaries within which reflexivity can be further assessed, the second level investigates the type of counterevidence, and the third level takes a closer look at how counterevidence is used.

Theoretical Construct	Definition / Theoretical Basis	Indicator	Empirical Indicator	Analysis type
Rational-critical debate	Open, reasoned discussion where individuals engage in reasoned argumentation aimed at reaching consensus through the force of better arguments rather than coercion	Rational debate	Initial rational-argument, counterargument, rebuttal and refute-to-rebuttal	Coding
		Validity claims	Counterargument, rebuttal & refute-to-rebuttal	
		Coherence and continuity	1: One-timers	
			2: Rebuttal and refute-to-rebuttal. 3: The messages stick to the same lines-of-issue	
Reciprocity	The mutual recognition and equal participation of individuals in dialogue, where each has an equal chance to speak, question, and challenge claims	Participants-to-participants,	To what extent the discussion thread under investigation forms a reciprocal web	Coding
		Messages-to-messages.	To what extent the discussion thread under investigation forms a reciprocal web	
Reflexivity	The critical self-examination of one's own assumptions, social context, and communicative practices to enable more rational and emancipatory discourse	Level 1: Alternative claims present	Counterargument, rebuttal and refute-to-rebuttal	Coding
		Level 2: Type of counterevidence	Use of counterevidence / type of counterevidence used	
		Level 3: The way in which counterevidence is used	Argument referencing vs argument breakdowns	
Participatory parity	The condition in which all individuals can interact as peers in social life, having equal opportunity to participate and be heard without structural disadvantage	Discursive indicators: Equal opportunity for users to contribute across threads, respectful engagement regardless of social or political affiliation, absence of marginalization or silencing (e.g. via mocking, exclusionary language, or dismissals)		Textual analysis
Inclusivity	Ensuring all social groups, especially marginalized ones, are recognized and empowered to participate equally in deliberation and decision-making processes	User demographics		Archival
		Content diversity		Textual analysis

Table 8: Evaluation of deliberation qualities, adapted from Graham and Witschge's (2003)

3.7 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In the investigated thread, 132 users posted 283 posts, which is higher than the average thread post count. The thread contains recurring themes, arguments, and patterns commonly discussed in Omani online forums, providing insights into the larger deliberative culture. The total post count of the thread's participants within the forum ranged from 4 posts to 41,599 posts, with an average of 1071 posts and a median of 279 posts. Their posting per day rate ranges from 0–28, with an average rate of 2 and a median of 1. This study does not measure quantitative indicators regarding Omanis' interest in political discussions. Other studies (e.g. AlRushaidi, (2023) have concluded that Omani citizens demonstrate great interest in participating in social media discussions on shared interests.

3.7.1 RATIONAL CRITICAL DEBATE

Graham and Witschge's (2003) coding approach assesses deliberation quality from three perspectives. First, rational-critical debate is evaluated according to three prerequisites. For the first prerequisite, reasoned/justified debate, the level in our case study thread was quite low, with a score of about 28 percent. Out of 283 posts, only 79 messages contained a reasoned/justified argument. This indicates that the thread is not meeting the normative condition of reasoned or rational debate. This finding differs from Alotaibi's (2019) study, which found that online discussion on Twitter about Saudi women's political participation in municipal elections was rational. This incongruence might reflect differing dynamics and characteristics between the Sablat Oman online forums and the X platform. However, this research finding generally aligns with Borge Bravo et al. (2019), who concluded that within their case study platform, Barcelona's Decidim, among other deliberation qualities, rationality decreases as the discussion unfolds. They attribute the limitation of rationality to the absence of common ground, along with the dominance of the discussion by a small number of participants. As the following details reveal, this justification also applies to the current case study.

From the identified rational messages, only 51 posts contained a critical argument of another participant's validity claims or alternative claims. In other words, posts tagged as counterarguments, rebuttals, and refute-to-rebuttals constitute about 13% of the total number of the thread's posts. Accordingly, the thread's score on the second prerequisite of rational-critical debate – validity claims – is significantly low (see Table 9).

Category	Frequency
Initial rational-argument	14
Counterargument	24
Rebuttals	8
Refute-to-rebuttals	5
Rational-affirmation	28
Response -informative	12
Response -affirmation	82
Counter-assertion	15
Irrelevant	105
Messages coded as rational (reasoned response)	79
Messages coded as rational-critical	51

Table 9: Rational-critical debate

Despite the large number of participants and posts involved in this thread, the above analysis reveals significantly weak deliberations. This weakness is not limited to the quantity of rational posts but also covers the quality of the rationality. For example, in terms of the types of evidence provided, only four rational messages are supported by factual evidence, while 14 posts are accompanied by personal assertions.

It is noteworthy that messages that may be considered critical of the Sultan, government, or ministers appear very frequently and are scattered throughout the thread. At the same time, no messages were posted in the thread by the moderation team members. This indicates that the participants are enjoying a high degree of freedom. However, we should keep in mind that moderators have other tools to control the forum's threads, including the internal messaging system and omitting posts. Although the ability to reveal omitted posts is very limited, I managed to identify two omitted posts as they had been quoted in other posts. Both posts contained no sensitive content that may indicate deliberate censorship, and therefore, they might have been removed by their authors rather than the moderators.

Continuing with Graham and Witschge's (2003) approach, the third prerequisite of the rational-critical debate – coherence and continuity – was examined according to three dimensions. First, the “one-timer effect” had a notably high score as 70 percent of users, much more than the amount captured by Graham & Witschge (2003), posted only once. This result indicates scattered discussions and time constraints that can reduce the potential for continuity.

Second, regarding interaction continuity (as reflected in Figure 5), the analyses identified numerous continued conversations, with some threads extending up to nine posts. However, only four relatively short discussion threads reached the refute-to-rebuttal stage. The longest chain of continued rational interaction consisted of six posts, while the second-longest, a five-post chain, was also the only continued rational critical interaction identified between the thread's creator and another participant.

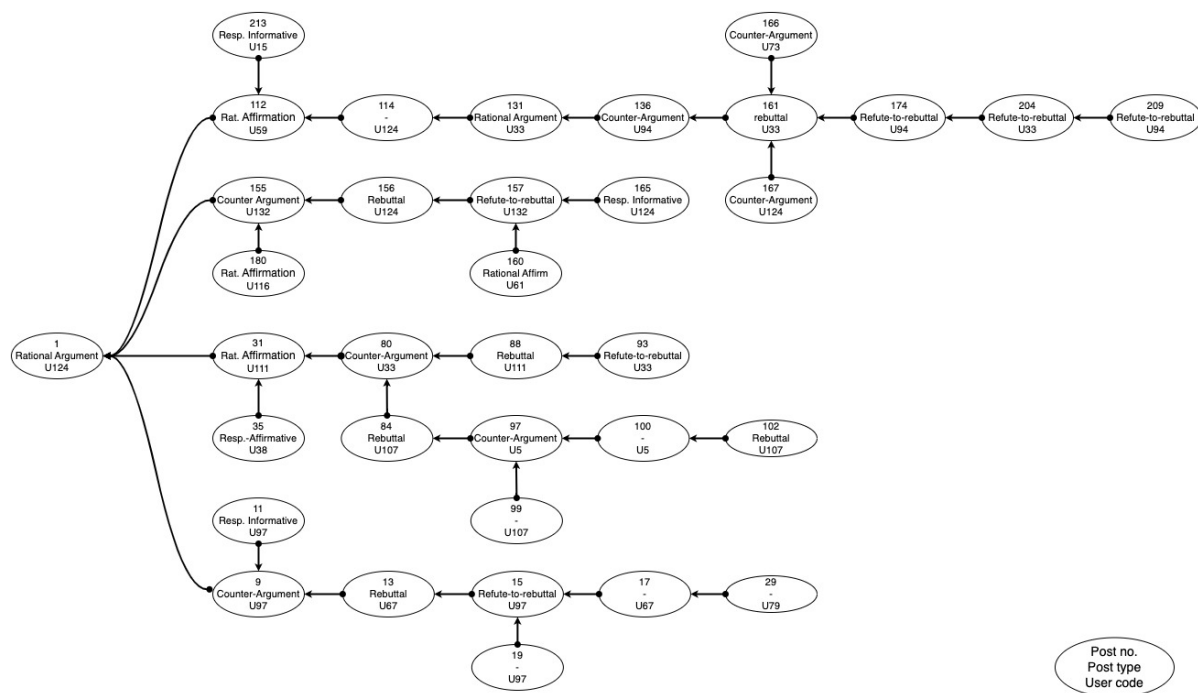


Figure 5: Continuity of discussion flow chart

In terms of coherence and continuity, users tended to address minor or irrelevant issues in the quoted post, which led to the fragmentation of the thread. For example, a new thread emerged from a participant's inquiry to another participant about whether he had been investigated by the state for his participation in the forum. Another thread was created by two users criticizing each other's way of thinking. In fact, 37 percent of the total thread posts, including those affirming following up, were irrelevant. Although there were about 100 responses to the initial post, many of them discussed issues that had already been addressed or asked questions that had already been answered.

Third, consistency in addressing the topics under discussion plays an important role in the process of comprehension, particularly at the more advanced stages of reflexivity and empathy. Such higher levels of understanding naturally take time to develop (Graham & Witschge, 2003). In this thread, we identified six themes (see Figure 6), each of which includes relatively short chains of ongoing rational debates. Meanwhile, only seven thematic chains included more than three posts, four of them belong to one theme (theme 5), which stands out as the longest chain with 10 posts, including the initial post.

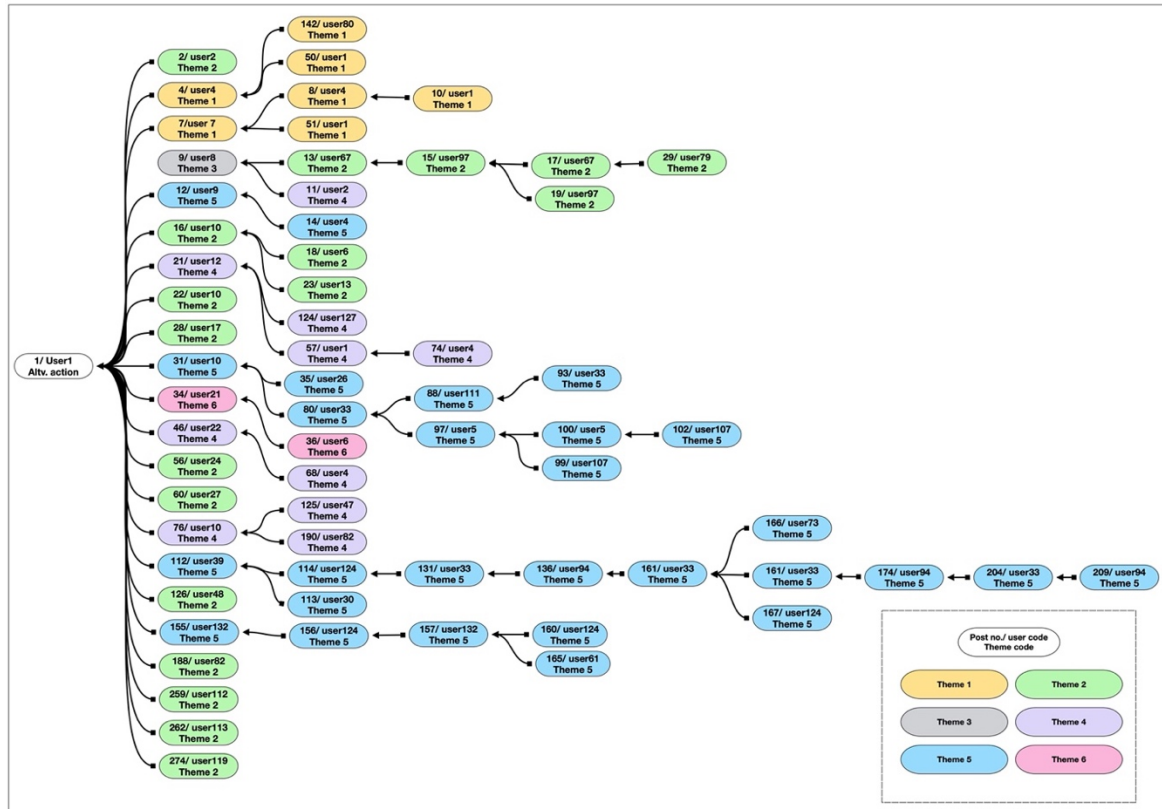


Figure 6: Ongoing rational debates within individual thematic categories

3.7.2 RECIPROCITY

Reciprocity involves “assessing whether participants are reacting and listening to previous comments,” which “will show if there is a real discussion” (Borge Bravo et al., 2019, p. 5675). Visualizing users’ interaction networks is the ideal way to assess participant-to-participant reciprocity. Due to the large number of users and posts involved in this thread, I chose to limit the representation of the visualization to those users who had multiple interactions or were linked to a chain of more than two users. Accordingly, 54 users with only one interaction or response linked to the initial post have been omitted. This number, together with another 32 users who posted non-topic-related posts, indicates a weak state of reciprocity in general. On the other hand, as Figure 7 reveals, the other 42 users’ interactions form a complicated web. This web shows reciprocal interaction between this limited group involving different types of responses dominated by response affirmation messages. The concentration of interaction can be most easily seen in four participants (U124, U111, U107, and U33), each

of whom had a minimum of 10 interactions with a minimum of 3 connected users.

In terms of message-to-message assessment of reciprocity, only one-third of the total posts received responses, including those unrelated to the thread topic. This result further supports the results from our assessment of participant-to-participant reciprocity. Additionally, as indicated in the previous section, the level of extended interactions in the form of rational-affirmations, counterarguments, rebuttals, and refute-to-rebuttals between participants is very low.

Only 42 users were involved in rational, continued debate in which they gave and received feedback at least once along the thread. The rest of the participants posted only once and did not receive any feedback from other participants. In other words, more than 67% of the participants did not engage in an exchange. Moreover, many of them were not trying to participate in the ongoing deliberation; rather, they posted for other purposes, for example, to other users (32 posts) or to maintain their presence by leaving place marker phrases (e.g. “following”), which was used about seven times.

Regarding participants reading each other’s claims, repeatedly addressed questions and issues suggest that users don’t read each other’s posts carefully. In many cases, users refuse to answer each other’s claims, justifying their attitudes by saying that the correspondent does not understand their comments, the correspondent is not willing to accept their point, or they are sceptical about the correspondent’s reason for questioning. Meanwhile, other users refuse to criticize the Sultan, although one of them suggested replacing the Sultan with other entities or bodies, such as ministers or ministries, while justifying their opinion by declaring their love for the Sultan. While the legal landscape suggests that there could be potential interference by the state on posting behaviour, coding and textual analysis indicate deeper issues related to participants’ deliberative capabilities. In many cases, participants drew their own boundaries on their participation by excluding particular issues from the debate. This observation brings attention to how the legal-political context may

be characterized by patterns of self-censorship. For example, one participant commented to another who was criticizing the appointment of some ministers that it is best to limit the conversation to areas within their authority to ensure they remain within their responsibilities.

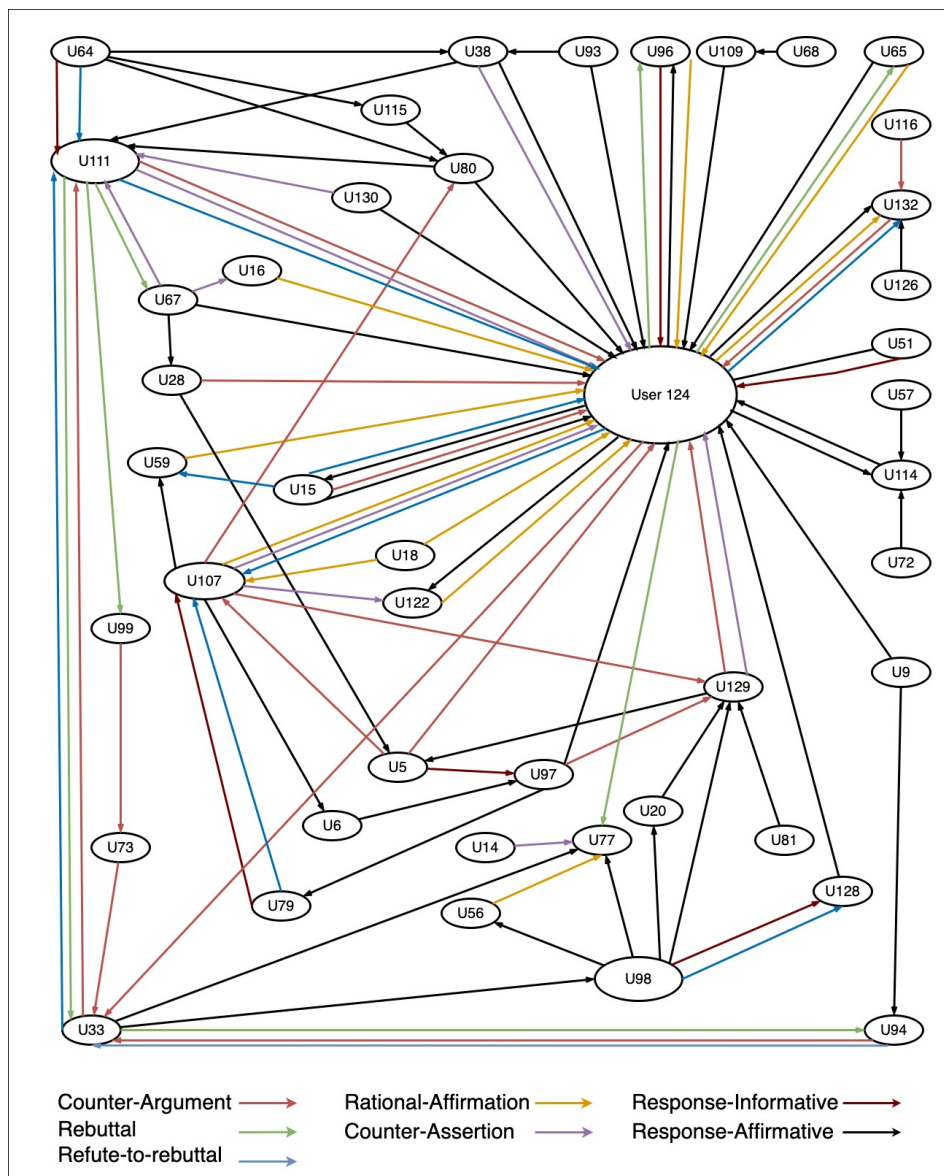


Figure 7: Web of reciprocity

3.7.3 REFLEXIVITY

Finally, the thread shows that there were 42 instances of counterevidence utilized by 31 users to support their arguments. As illustrated in Figure 6, it is evident that there is a greater presence of less rational evidence compared to

more rational evidence. For instance, factual evidence was employed only five times, while assumption-based evidence was used 13 times. Furthermore, only 29 of the 47 instances of counterevidence were utilized to support a counterargument, as Table 3 reflects.

	Analogy (8)	Assumption (13)	Experience (10)	Religious (11)	Factual (5)
Counterargument	1	6	5	3	3
Rebuttal	1	1	0	1	1
Refute-to-Rebuttal	0	1	0	4	0
other	6	5	5	3	1

Table 10: The use of counterevidence

The third level of reflexivity examines posts for the presence of argument referencing and argument breakdowns. Posts that address an opposing claim directly, categorized as counterarguments, rebuttals, or refute-to-rebuttal, and offer point-to-point responses fall into the “argument referencing” category. If any of these posts challenged the opposing argument by using any of the aforementioned types of counterevidence, they were categorized as “argument breakdown”. In this thread, out of the total posts, only 10 posts were coded as argument-referencing, and all of them used at least one type of counterevidence; thus, they were coded as argument-breakdown, as Table 4 and Figure 10 show.

	Argument- Breakdown	Analogy	Experience	Religious	Factual
Argument	2	1	5	3	3
Rebuttal	2	1	0	1	1
Refute-to-Rebuttal	0	0	0	4	0

Table 11: Argument referencing case types

Coding analysis indicates a limited use of counterevidence. Meanwhile, textual analysis of the subsequent use of counterevidence in the thread found that less than 30% of the counterevidence cases were discussed or revisited in the following posts.

There were many cases in which participants acknowledged others' opinions or views; however, textual analysis identified very few cases where this acknowledgement reached a level at which a participant questioned their own beliefs. In fact, only two cases developed from reciprocal interaction and indicate a change of opinion. Both of them were direct indications of a willingness to change one's attitude. In the first, a participant said, "I think I need to revise my views," while the other argued, "I can see your point, but I need more evidence to change my opinion". Participants more commonly acknowledged broader concepts, such as the presence of corruption. However, discussing deeper concepts, such as who exactly is responsible for corruption, prevents the emergence of reciprocal interaction, especially if the Sultan is involved. This hesitation can be attributed to the Sultan's widespread popularity and authority. It appears that one of the obstacles that prevents the development of reciprocity and reflexivity is the clash between general rational reasoning and cultural reasoning. For example, cultural reasoning prevents accountability of the Sultan and allows for direct responsibility of the society regarding issues such as corruption. As one participant argued, "Why blame the government? Look at Omanis; they don't obey the law".

3.7.4 TEXTUAL ANALYSIS: PARTICIPATORY PARITY AND INCLUSIVITY

The selected thread discusses an issue – the performance of Sultan Qaboos's government – in which participants share a common set of experiences. In general, the textual analysis indicates a loss of trust in the government, suggesting public dissatisfaction. The participants' expressions of concern over economic hardships, social inequalities, and governance issues through open deliberation offer valuable insights into the nation's socio-political landscape. For example, one participant criticized the government's lavish spending on National Day celebrations, as he described it, despite widespread poverty

among citizens. Indeed, the analysis confirms the presence of a wide range of perspectives among participants, as the following paragraphs detail.

Exploring the thread's deliberations reveals the extent to which this online forum promotes an equitable deliberative space. However, before diving into the textual analysis, it is useful to address a key aspect of online forums that significantly impacts political deliberations. First, anonymity is crucial in societies where direct criticism of authority may have social or legal repercussions, thus promoting a freer exchange of ideas. This forum allows for a degree of pseudonymity that conceals critical identity markers such as ethnicity and religious affiliation; however, due to certain limitations, gender can often still be inferred. Gender attributions can be determined based on a user's profile, self-identifiers within the content, gendered language use, and culturally recognizable linguistic markers commonly used in Arabic discourse. Second, while the forum is not a fully independent space, it may function as a semi-autonomous arena within the broader public sphere, enabling divergent groups to engage without fear of surveillance or judgment. This partial independence aligns with Fraser's emphasis on differentiated publics and the need to recognize distinct discursive spaces for diverse communities. Finally, rather than erasing differences, anonymity can be framed as the ability of marginalized groups to create a safe space where participants are free from fear of social or legal repercussions. This way, they can express themselves with minimal hierarchical social attributes or societal norms that often suppress marginalized voices.

The textual analysis reveals several specific dimensions of Omani online deliberations, such as diversity, openness, and inclusivity. The analysis also shows substantial engagement, with multiple pages of responses indicating active participation from the forum community. Comments related to the Sultan have the greatest amount of interaction, followed by those concerning the economic situation. This engagement includes diverse perspectives, ranging from support for the author's views to the defence of governmental policies and the Sultan. For example, one participant suggested that misbehaviour often

occurs when individuals are granted authority or appointed to positions, questioning the tendency to attribute such issues to leadership. Another participant expressed the view that criticism of state performance can be an indication of loyalty to one's country. While some participants' claims are well-supported with factual and experiential evidence, others tend to be more sentimental, evoking the relationship between the Sultan and his people or providing analogies about how the Arab Spring, in their opinion, destroyed states like Libya and Egypt.

Unlike other social media platforms, such as Instagram and X, online forums provide participants with plenty of space to express themselves and to deliberate their thoughts since they offer topic-centred communities that allow long-form expression and extended discussions over time. Based on the forums' structure, which promotes pseudonymity and topic-focused dialogue that reduce social hierarchies and barriers to participation, an assumption can be made that online forums provide participants with the opportunity to engage in discussions while experiencing fewer structural inequalities or exclusionary practices. However, this assumption requires further investigation to validate its accuracy because not all discussions can be considered political deliberations, especially when considering how the tendency to engage in post-politics is often associated with technology. Hence, one could question whether the significant engagement and active participation mentioned previously can be deemed political deliberation. While the allowance for lengthy texts in online forums can contribute to minimizing the post-politics tendencies often associated with technology, my analysis shows that participants did not take advantage of this feature. The suggestion from the coding analysis that participants are not properly reacting or listening to previous comments cannot be attributed to word limits. Figure 7 shows that more than two-thirds (about 196) of the posts are less than 25 words long, while only the initial post exceeded the limit of 500 words, and only five posts reached 200 words. Additionally, the textual analysis reveals that participants also tend to focus on trivial or tangential points in their posts. For example, there are three posts longer than 50 words criticizing the author's style of writing. One of them dedicated his contribution of 250 words

to criticizing the literary writing style of the thread initiator. The outcome is fragmented and unrelated discussions that contribute to the depoliticization of the discussion.

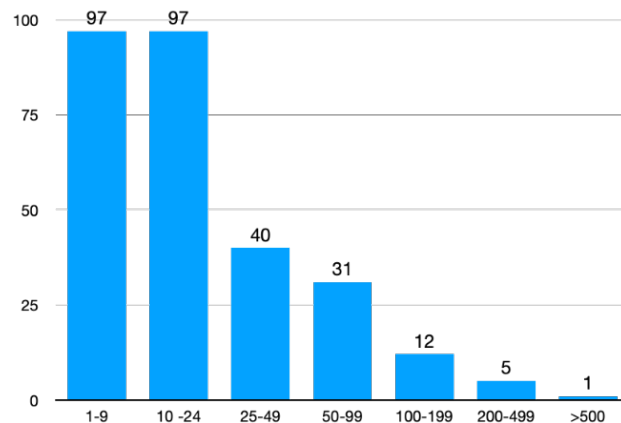


Figure 8: Number of posts by word count

This investigation suggests a shortage of reciprocal interaction. Reciprocity indicates the level of inclusion of all voices in public discourses; however, analysis reveals a lack of gender equality within the language used in discussions in this thread. In many cases, users address other participants using feminine descriptors or terms, intending it as an insult. Interestingly, there was at least one female user who also used this form of address. This highlights a gender-related cultural obstacle that hinders the achievement of participatory parity. This finding appears aligned with a study by Al-Kindi and Al-Rashiedi (2016), which indicates that most Omani male students share their real names and personal photos on social media, while most Omani females do not. This reflects a bias, indicating an underlying preference or attitude that favours one gender over another. As AlRushaidi (2023) observes, societal constraints and the fear of isolation or criticism have collectively formed an obstacle to positive engagement and weakened virtual discussions and dialogues.

In terms of communication behaviours, the analysis reveals distinct communication patterns between men and women within the analyzed thread. Female participants tend to have lengthier posts in which they address their opponent's claims intensively. They provide more examples and justifications to elaborate on their positions. Meanwhile, male participants tend to adopt a more

direct approach, presuming shared knowledge with their audience. For example, while a male participant broadly describes the high cost of living as exceeding the citizens' capacity, one of the female participants proceeds to detail prices, compare them to average salaries, and calculate the cost of living based on the average family size. Additionally, female participants tend to be more emotional in their arguments, repeatedly reminisce about the past, and express disappointment over the perceived lack of appreciation for the Sultan's love for his people. In contrast, male participants tend to focus on rights and make comparisons with other nations. This analysis did not observe gender bias indicators regarding the weight given to individuals and the right to accountability. I captured only six instances where a participant attacked another's right to accountability: four female-to-female, one female-to-male, and one male-to-female.

3.8 CONCLUSION

Integrating macro and micro-level analyses enabled a holistic assessment of the deliberation quality of Sablat Oman. First, textual analysis has shown that this deliberative space features substantial engagement, both qualitative and quantitative, in which participants openly discussed sensitive topics, and cultural and gender biases regarding the weight given to individuals and right to accountability are almost absent. These aspects can partially justify the forum's robust engagement and enduring vitality.

In the selected thread, discussants debated a sensitive political issue related to Sultan Qaboos's government performance. The fact that the discussion often lacked depth and was dominated by a few users corroborates earlier findings (Wilhelm, (2000). It also echoes the work of Janssen and Kies (2005) in demonstrating that online forums do not inherently possess the characteristics of ideal deliberation, including reasoned justification and reciprocity. The findings indicate weak deliberation in terms of rationality and validity claims, which contradicts Al-Rushaidi (2023), who concludes that online deliberation in Omani X platform is rational. In my estimation, the fact that X users are exposed

to content based on algorithms – which also influences their decisions on who to follow – contributes to the creation of echo chambers by prioritizing particular content and limiting exposure to contrasting viewpoints. Consequently, discussions often lack the depth typically generated by a diversity of perspectives and result in emotionally driven expression rather than critical engagement. Despite this lack of rationality, in a context where the main public sphere is significantly restricted, the existence of a more open space where individuals can raise public issues and concerns offers an important democratic benefit.

Religion also has an impact on Omanis' online deliberation in terms of the prevalence of religious evidence and the establishment of deliberation guidelines. This study affirms how Islam plays a significant role in public life across Muslim societies and remains a central component in shaping social and civic interactions (Salvatore, (2016). For example, at least three users across the thread have called for accountability by quoting the Hadith “All of you are guardians and are responsible for your subjects”. The use of the prophet's words goes beyond the semantic core of “accountability” to encompass the religious connotation of accountability in the afterlife, in which humans will be held accountable. In my view, this type of deliberation could result in a lack of action against those who abuse power or, at the very least, undermine efforts to promote public accountability.

The thread exhibits dynamic interactions driven by conflicts and disagreements. Conflict and disagreement serve as catalysts for deliberation, promote more in-depth discussions, and extend their length (eg. Fung, 2003). Furthermore, empirical research indicates that reciprocity is positively impacted by differing political views and disagreements (eg. Aragón et al., 2017). While textual analysis indicates the presence of conflicts, disagreements, and differing political views, the thread still suffers from a low level of reciprocity. This can be attributed to the lack of continuity and coherence, where extensive discussions became fragmented into minor themes, leading to the dilution or loss of the main argument.

The coding analysis further revealed limitations on the deliberation's reflexivity. According to the textual analysis, this thread is characterized by its high competition. In general, competition leads to more dynamic debate. However, in some cases, it results in a dynamic that, according to Borge Bravo and Santamarina Sáez (2016), impairs reflexivity, which appears to be the outcome in this case.

While Omani online forums foster political public discussion, their ability to influence real-world policy or democratization remains limited without enhancing the deliberative quality. In my estimation, only quality deliberations can build collective expectations and possibly pressure institutions to be more transparent and responsive. Meanwhile, unstructured discussions may lead to weak civic engagement, as Habermas (1996) emphasizes, by discouraging meaningful participation and reducing public interest in public issues. Furthermore, low deliberation quality can decrease trust not only in online platforms but also in public democratic dialogue, leading to scepticism towards the possibility of institutional reform.

Based on the study's findings, I propose incorporating discussion cues or structured threads to guide users towards more thoughtful engagement by framing discussions around targeted questions, encouraging reflection on diverse perspectives, and promoting the use of evidence or personal experience. These suggestions reflect Fraser's (1990) call for inclusive and structured counterpublics that empower marginalized voices in public discourse. I also propose several policy recommendations to enhance the quality of online deliberation in Oman. First, the Omani government should support the development of independent digital platforms that encourage reasoned debate and protect user rights. Such platforms have the potential to foster participatory governance. In line with Fraser's (1990) emphasis on linking discourse to institutional processes, insights from online forums could be integrated into policymaking by creating formal channels for digital public input on national issues, enhancing legitimacy and civic trust.

We should exercise caution when applying these conclusions for two key reasons related to the study's limitations. First, because it examined a single medium with participants who possess specific demographic characteristics, the findings are not fully representative of the broader Omani deliberations across different media and user demographics. The demographic homogeneity of participants limited the diversity of perspectives, creating potential challenges for Fraser's ideal of participatory parity. Therefore, its conclusions may not be generalizable to all of the Omani deliberative landscape. However, it can be employed in comparative studies between different means of communication in the Omani scene. Further, I strongly recommend future research to explore how online deliberation unfolds across different countries in the SWANA region. Nationally, research could track changes in deliberative behaviour over time or in response to key political events – such as Shura elections and protests – to understand how digital public spheres evolve in restrictive or transitional political environments. This could be further enriched by incorporating perspectives from forum users and relevant authorities to explore how these actors perceive the role and purpose of such platforms in shaping public discourse.

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ARTICLE THREE: MEDIATING RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY AND WOMEN’S RIGHTS: SELF-IDENTIFIED RELIGIOUS OMANI FEMALE INFLUENCERS IN THE DIGITAL PUBLIC SPHERE

ABSTRACT

This study treats Instagram as a sociotechnical space where identity, rights, and authority are publicly performed and mediated. Specifically, it aims to capture how self-identified religious Omani female influencers (SROFIs) express authority, frame their rights, and navigate sociocultural and digital pressures. Islamic feminism is used as a theoretical framework to guide the research, while a qualitative case study of five SROFI’s Instagram accounts and three semi-structured interviews are employed as the methodological tools. The study explores how SROFIs construct and negotiate their public roles and authority within the sociocultural context of Omani society and how they employ religious discourse to frame women’s rights in their Instagram content. The research demonstrates that SROFIs primarily draw on three communicative strategies to achieve their goals: religious legitimacy, cultural alignment, and authoritative performance. It contributes a culturally specific perspective to broader debates on the interplay of religion, gender norms, and sociopolitical structures.

Keywords: Instagram, Authority, Women’s rights, Identity, Social media, Religious influencers

4.1 INTRODUCTION

[My presence on Instagram is not limited to being a means of connecting with the audience and followers. It represents an intentional practice aimed at establishing a new model of participation in digital spaces, one that encourages Omani women to make their voices heard and assert their presence through social media spaces.] (personal communication, August 24, 2025).

This statement speaks directly to the central concern of this study: how Omani women, particularly religious figures, negotiate visibility, authority, and participation within the digital public sphere. Their advocacy for rights has developed within a multifaceted socio-political landscape, where women's voices have historically been shaped by the interplay of state policies, tribal traditions, and evolving social norms.

Since the late 20th century, the Omani government has introduced a series of reforms expanding women's social, economic, and political rights. These initiatives have resulted in improvements in women's access to education and employment opportunities, greater participation in public discourse, and enhanced political representation, including the right to run for office and to hold ministerial positions. However, such advancements have not fully translated into either public perceptions or lived experiences of gender equality, as cultural norms and gendered biases continue to limit women's visibility and influence in the public sphere. In the current environment, state-led reforms coexist alongside persistent gender bias in the community. In recent decades, the advocacy of rights for Omani women has become a notable feature of contemporary sociopolitical dynamics. Women's growing engagement in active rights-based advocacy, which challenges traditional boundaries of participation, has become a central dimension of their evolving voice and agency within the public sphere. This proactive participation in the intellectual rearticulation of women's rights has positioned women as equal agents rather than passive beneficiaries.

This study investigates how Self-Identified Religious Omani Female Influencers (SROFIs)⁷ leverage social media to position themselves as subjects of change rather than passive recipients of policy in redefining women's rights. It seeks to examine the intersection between digital activism, gendered religious narratives, and cultural norms, highlighting how Omani women navigate norms and traditions while asserting agency in a culturally conservative context. It asks: How do SROFIs construct and negotiate their public roles and authority within the sociocultural context of Omani society? And how do they employ religious discourse to frame women's rights in their social media content while navigating the broader sociocultural norms of Oman?

Numerous studies have explored how women in Gulf countries use social media to negotiate and advocate for their rights. A significant portion of this research focuses on a broad range of female activists who engage with or otherwise draw on religious discourse on social media platforms as a means of supporting such advocacy (eg. Guta & Karolak, 2015). To date, however, no study has specifically examined SROFIs who position themselves within religious discourse to advocate for particular rights for women. Moreover, thus far, no research has directly investigated Omani women's rights activism in this context, where conservative religious traditions intersect with rapid digital transformations. In recent years, the rapid growth in participation in social media in Oman has transformed these platforms into important public spaces where women, including those from religious backgrounds, are increasingly visible and influential. The emerging phenomenon of SROFIs offers a compelling opportunity to explore how women navigate authority, modesty, and public voice within a patriarchal and religiously coded social framework.

⁷ In line with best practices, I coined the SROFIs acronym, which I use throughout this study. It is intended to enhance readability and facilitate comprehension of the article's content (see: Mack, 2012; Panter, 2014).

Many communities in Oman are strongly influenced and guided by Islamic teachings and literature. The interpretation of Islamic texts to guide social and political life varies according to the traditions and influence of religious institutions. Inspired by Masooda Bano (2018), I distinguish between two approaches to engaging with Islamic literature. First, the theological approach tends to be inward-focused and often interprets religious texts literally. This approach to Islamic religious texts has allowed for patriarchal traditions to persist (Kynsilehto, 2008), which can create tensions with Western modernity. Second, the civilizational approach calls for interpreting the Qur'an and Hadith through the creative and dynamic spirit they historically inspired, one that fostered a flourishing Islamic civilization marked by scientific, political, and artistic achievements (Bano, 2018). From a practical perspective, the latter reflects the nature of Islam as more dynamic and provides Muslim women with more space to manoeuvre.

In considering different approaches to interpreting the Qur'an and Islamic sacred literature, Islamic feminism represents a critical lens through which these texts can be revisited to promote gender equity. Its presence has emerged from within Muslim-majority societies, grounding women's rights, voices, and agency in Islamic epistemology (Bakhshizadeh, 2023). According to Glas and Alexander (2020), Islamic feminism has the capacity to position Arab women between global feminist discourses and local Islamic traditions. Additionally, Badran (2011) argues that Islamic feminism has "built upon and extended the Islamic modernist thinking" (pp. 11–12). Contemporary Islamic feminists are introducing fresh intellectual momentum to advance feminist objectives within Muslim societies in an effort to contribute to the realization of a transformed *Umma*, or unified Muslim identity (Badran, 2011, pp. 11-12)

At its core, Islamic feminism seeks to reinterpret religious texts and traditions in ways that advance gender justice. Accordingly, adopting Islamic feminism provides a framework for analyzing how SROFIs navigate modernity, media, and religious discourse without being seen as Westernized. Furthermore, as Glas & Alexander (2020) note, drawing on emancipatory religious interpretations can

be a more pragmatic way to boost gender equality in the Arab region. This study employs González's definition of Islamic feminism, which characterizes it as "a movement that seeks to further a progressive agenda for women's rights within an Islamic framework" (2013, p. 6). Against this backdrop, I utilize Islamic feminism to examine how Omani female influencers engage with an ideological discourse that situates women's rights within an Islamic context.

Within the established framework of Islamic feminism, it is important to highlight a few central considerations guiding this study. First, it should be noted that Islamic feminism is a controversial term. Some scholars argue that "Islamic" and "feminism" are impossible to reconcile with each other because most Islamists view feminism as synonymous with Western colonialism and imperialism. Many Islamists categorically reject the term feminism, viewing it as a Western construct that undermines traditional values and disrupts established social systems (see: Alam, 2018; Karam, 1998). Thus, the "feminist" label is often avoided in the studied context, particularly due to cultural, political, and theological sensitivities, as scholars like Alam (2018) and Karam (2020) affirm. It is therefore plausible to assume that the rejection of the label "Islamic feminist" is not based on the intellectual framework associated with it, but on its affiliation with broader schools of feminist thought. As a case in point, one interviewee in this study asserted that she was fully convinced that feminism, irrespective of the attached modifier, does not align with Muslim communities (personal communication, August 24, 2025). Consequently, I prioritize the participants' self-identification as religious female influencers over the scholarly categorization of Islamic feminists. I believe that this approach avoids imposing an external label while enabling the studied group to be situated within the broader discourse of Islamic feminism, drawing on shared arguments and practices. Importantly, the utilization of this framework is based on the ability of its functional characteristics to serve the research goals and does not necessitate categorizing those influencers as Islamic feminists.

Even in a traditionally conservative society like Oman, women, including those from a religious background, use social media. I argue here that SROFIs reshape

authority through digital visibility and by using religious discourse to reframe sensitive topics (e.g., education, work, family roles), highlighting religiously grounded perspectives that expand women's agency and participation. This approach raises a broader question of how feminist movements in Arab societies navigate between counterpublic positioning and mainstream public engagement. Sometimes, activists avoid presenting themselves as oppositional to public norms; rather, they seek to appeal to a wider audience by situating demands within established cultural and religious narratives. Consistent with this view, Bakhshizadeh (2023) points out that Muslim feminists have fostered intra-religious debates on women's rights by questioning patriarchal interpretations of Shari'a and raising the public's consciousness about gender equality. Such a strategy reveals the pragmatism of such activists in negotiating their legitimacy and effectiveness in contexts where overt oppositionality may limit their reach. Drawing on Qur'anic or Hadith-based language allows them to advocate for change without being seen as oppositional. By exploring this phenomenon, this study enhances current understandings of how religious narratives shape gendered political expressions. Moreover, by grounding the research within the context of Omani society, it adds a culturally specific perspective to broader debates on the interplay of religion, gender norms, and sociopolitical structures.

4.2 RELIGIOUS WOMEN'S ONLINE ACTIVISM IN THE GCC AND BEYOND

A substantial body of literature has examined female influencers' long-standing role in shaping public discourse, including research focusing on how women of faith mobilize digital platforms to advocate for gender justice and women's rights while negotiating religious authority. Numerous studies have explored how religious women in different contexts use social media to convey and advocate for their rights. For example, Sheldon (2025) describes a pattern of how social media adoption reinforces established roles, providing a baseline from which to analyze the distinct practices of religious influencers. Taking this framework a step further, Gaddini (2021) examined American female evangelical microcelebrities who express religious authority in her study, which investigates the impact of these rising microcelebrities on perspectives of

gender and religious authority in the digital sphere. Gaddini contends that social media increases women's visibility, reach, and control and thus provides an enhanced possibility for such women to demonstrate religious authority.

In Islamic contexts, research on digital piety highlights how female preachers contribute to Islamic social movements by engaging new audiences, both female and male. For example, Nielsen (2022) argues that Muslim female preachers circumvent religious norms that prohibit gender mixing by proselytizing online. Karakavak and Özbölük (2022) discuss how social media influencers in Turkey have reshaped the meaning of the hijab while simultaneously promoting hijab fashion. Their findings reveal how Instagram accounts function as digital fashion boutiques, enabling women to integrate more rapidly into contemporary popular culture. Meanwhile, Beta (2019) explores the transformative influence of social-media-based young Muslim women's groups in shaping socio-political discourse in Indonesia. In the same context, Febrian (2024) reveals how Indonesian religious influencers establish visual authority through close-up, friendly, and informal self-presentations that contrast with the distant and rigid style of traditional religious figures.

The internet and social media have provided women in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries—where traditional opportunities for activism may be limited—with a space to negotiate and advocate for their rights. Nowadays, women increasingly turn to social media platforms for expressions of values, networking, and activism. For example, social media has been instrumental for women's rights activists in Saudi Arabia, where gender segregation characterizes public and social life (Al Derham, 2023). This is exemplified by the work of Loujain al-Hathloul, who advocates for Saudi women's rights through social media, and Manahel al-Otaibi, who utilizes online platforms to express her clothing choices and criticize the guardianship system. In Oman, Habiba Al Hinai is a publicly recognized figure who leverages social media platforms to debate a range of human rights issues, including women's rights. She has been advocating for the rights of Omani women married to foreign men to pass on their nationality to their children since online forums and weblogs were nascent.

In GCC countries, social media has become an alternative space of resistance that amplifies women's voices and challenges gender-biased interpretations and policies (Echchaibi, (2013). Further, it connects Muslim women seeking to express a shared Muslim female identity that has been traditionally reinforced through political alignment or geographical proximity (Al-Rawi, 2020). Online communities compensate for the absence of formal venues to collectively express their religious and political opinions. For example, members of the "Muslim Women Against Femen" online community are linked not only by their identity as Muslim women but also by their collective political stance opposing the Femen movement, a prominent feminist group noted for its topless protests and activism (Al-Rawi, 2020, p. 45).

4.3 SELF-IDENTIFIED RELIGIOUS INFLUENCERS

Participation in social media is inherently relational, comprising continual interaction and communication with others. As such, users' engagement is shaped not only by personal motivations but also by how they come to see themselves through the lens of other users (Pan et al., 2017). Individuals internalize self-categorizations to construct a coherent sense of self within digital communities. Stets and Burke (2000) see self-categorization as a process by which an individual takes themselves as an object and organizes, classifies, or labels their identity in relation to other social categories or classifications. Chen and Hsieh (2024) affirm that individuals utilize this process to construct and act out their identities; in other words, they align their actions with their notions of self. They argue that social media amplifies this performance, particularly in the case of those identifying as religious influencers. Meanwhile, Pan et al. (2017) confirm that social self-identity has significant effects on social media usage behaviour.

Febrian (2024, p. 1) defines religious influencers as those who have "social media accounts with a high number of followers and micro-celebrity status, which combine their calling for self-cultivation, commercial interests, and socio-political concerns under the umbrella of da'wa, the Arabic term for preaching". Additionally, self-identified religious influencers strive for authenticity and

credibility by aligning their content with intrinsic religious values rather than commercial or secular motivations. Indeed, this new generation of religious influencers, compelling storytellers skilled in digital media production, is challenging longstanding notions of authority in religious domains (Zaid et al., (2022).

While these influencers publicly identify as Muslim through explicit Islamic markers and content, much of their audience engages not out of institutional religiosity but as part of a broader spiritual consumption trend that favours personal, meaning-driven content over traditional ritual practice. According to Sherwood (2016), social media users increasingly describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious,” reflecting flexible beliefs and a looser commitment to traditional doctrines and religious authority. Accordingly, they are less inclined towards obedience to formal religious institutions and more responsive to personalized spiritual guidance.

4.4 ISLAMIC FEMINISM, ISLAM, AND WOMEN’S RIGHTS

Alam (2018) observed that the new generation of Islamists highlights the alignment between Islamic principles and the women’s rights standards set by the United Nations. For example, they point to Riffa Al-Tahtawi, a 19th-century Egyptian explorer who engaged with the discourse on human rights—particularly women’s issues—within the framework of Islamic heritage, concluding that the concept of Islamic feminism is rooted in the cognitive and religious consciousness of the Arab-Islamic intellectual tradition and is aligned with the evolving demands for women’s rights. Al-Tahtawi reflected on European societies, where he observed the roles and status of women in France and expressed the belief that Islamic teachings, when interpreted with reason and in light of contemporary needs, support the advancement of women’s rights (Tahtawi, 2012). In his reflection, Al-Tahtawi asserts that Islamic teachings do not contradict modern or Western values regarding the roles and status of women.

Finally, it should be emphasized that historically, Islamic foundational texts have been predominantly interpreted by Muslim men, resulting in a gender bias that has shaped religious and social understandings of Muslim women's roles and conditions. Additionally, Krivenko (2009) argues that *ijtihad*, the process of deriving rulings and principles for new legal cases based on sacred Islamic texts, was originally intended as a tool for legal reasoning and contemporary reform but has been misused to exploit patriarchal interpretations. This argument aligns with the findings of Alsinani (2022) who concludes that the reliance on Shari'a in framing rights has, in many cases, transformed it from a safeguard into a constraint. For example, *Qewama*, the Islamic concept of men's responsibility to provide for and protect women—particularly within the family context—has often been misinterpreted as granting authority or control over women. Accordingly, reformist reinterpretations of Islamic teachings may help provide greater congruence between Muslim communities and their religious principles.

Drawing together the key insights of this section, I argue that Islamic feminists exemplify women's capacity to lead and challenge patriarchy within Muslim communities, specifically by advocating for women's empowerment in accordance with Qur'anic teachings (Badran, 2011). Moreover, feminist ideas can be accommodated in the space of Islamic concepts and ideas based on the permission granted to believers to apply reason and practical judgment to aspects related to social transactions, such as marriage.

4.5 CONTEXTUAL OVERVIEW

Oman is a predominantly Muslim society where Islam plays a central role in shaping social norms, legal structures, and public discourse. Under the leadership of Sultan Qaboos (1970–2020) and continuing under Sultan Haitham (2020–present), the country has undergone rapid economic, social, and political modernization. Consequently, Omani women's cultural, economic, and social participation has grown significantly since 1970, as demonstrated by the achievements of Omani women. For example, the Omani female writer and academic, Jokha Alharthi, won the Man Booker International Prize in 2019 for her novel *Celestial Bodies*. In the economic sphere, four Omani women—Lujaina

Darwish, Areej Darwish, Haifa Al Khaifi, and Hind Bahwan—joined the Forbes Middle East’s list of the “50 Most Powerful Businesswomen” in 2022 (Forbes, 2025). Additionally, Omani women have founded and led major professional organizations, NGOs, and community development initiatives. One exemplar is Zahra Al Aufia, who has dedicated herself to eliminating illiteracy among women and children in remote mountain villages. She was recognized with the Literacy Challenge Award by the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Knowledge Foundation in 2020 (Zacharias, 2020).

Oman has witnessed steady progress in women’s rights across the political, economic, and social spheres. According to a report by the Arab Center Washington, DC (Liloia, 2022), over the past five decades, Omani women have gained the right to vote and run for public office, taking up many ministerial positions. Furthermore, Omani legislation has granted women various rights, including access to education and equal pay. Article 17 of the Basic Statute of Oman (the Basic Law), which was ratified in 1996 and serves as Oman’s constitution, explicitly prohibits discrimination based on gender.

However, traditional gender expectations continue to influence the ways women engage with public life, and Omani women are still struggling in terms of redefining gender roles and enforcing legal rights (Liloia, 2022; Valeri, 2007). As one interviewee in this study remarked, “Men do not accept a woman as a reformist” (personal communication, August 24, 2025). She exemplified this view by referring to an interpretation of a Qur’anic verse that is recognized by many scholars but is commonly rejected when expressed by her as a woman. Another influencer pointed to the case of Basma Al Keiumi, an Omani lawyer who ran for the Shura Council election in 2019, as an example of community sexism. She noted that the case of Basma, who faced heavy public criticism for appearing unveiled, not only exemplifies gendered electoral bias but also reveals gendered social control (personal communication, July 24, 2025).

In the face of such gender bias, many female activists continue to mobilize for social reforms aimed at achieving gender equality in aspects ranging from decision-making within families to participation in public and civic life. Valeri

(2015) argues that contemporary Omani women are advocating for their right to contribute to political and economic decision-making. This can be exemplified by the petition submitted to the Sultan during the Arab Spring in February 2011, which included demands such as eliminating gender-based discrimination in access to government land grants and post-retirement entitlements (Worrall, 2012).

4.6 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND CASE STUDIES

This investigation into how SROFIs negotiate their public roles, construct religious authority, and frame women's rights adopts a qualitative case study approach, analyzing the Instagram content of five noted influencers. The qualitative approach taken here supports multiple data sources, including content analyses, interviews, and observational data, providing rich, nuanced insights into how these influencers challenge traditional portrayals of women, assert their authority, and strategically maintain visibility and engagement within their communities. This methodological strength is rooted in the ability of case studies to integrate diverse forms of evidence and construct a holistic understanding of complex phenomena (Yin, 2009). Indeed, as Crowe et al. (2011) note, case study research offers depth by combining interviews, observations, and document analysis. Similarly, Stake (1995) argues that the strength of case studies lies in their capacity to provide "thick description" by weaving together varied sources of evidence to illuminate meaning in context.

The specific selection of SROFIs and social media accounts that provided data for this research was made using the following approach. Based on a pilot study into SROFI social media use, I opted to focus on Instagram accounts instead of either X (Twitter), Snapchat, or Facebook. This decision was primarily driven by the fact that Instagram is the preferred platform for influencers in Oman. I found that all the suggested religious influencers actively use Instagram, whereas fewer than 50% have X or Facebook accounts with a sufficient number of followers for meaningful analysis.

Regarding the selection of research participants, I contacted five influencers, all of whom agreed to take part in this study. These individuals were specifically recruited because they explicitly situate themselves within a religious framework and consistently employ faith-based reasoning in their interactions with followers. I applied three criteria in selecting the accounts. The first criterion is relevance; accordingly, potential case studies included influencers who frequently discuss religious topics. Second, engagement; influencers with higher interaction rates (likes, comments, and shares) were prioritized. Finally, to maintain diversity, I included a mix of influencers from different ideological and ethnic backgrounds to capture varying perspectives. Given that the Omani community is diverse in terms of ideology and ethnicity (Al-Ismaili, 2018), I employed this criterion to minimize ideological, ethnic, and educational biases.

The selected accounts ranged from approximately 50,000 to 300,000 followers. This number can be considered reasonable given that religious influencers usually attract modest follower counts that, according to de Hass (2025), tend to be in the four-to-five-digit range. This figure is significantly lower than that of mainstream influencers; however, according to Connell et al. (2025), source credibility, authenticity, relatability, and parasocial interaction often predict engagement and behavioural influence more effectively than mere size.

Social media content, consisting of collected posts, videos, bios, reels, and comments from the influencers' Instagram accounts, constitutes the primary source of data. The collected data were analyzed using critical discourse analysis (CDA) as the primary approach, which was complemented by thematic analysis to enrich the interpretation of data. According to van Dijk (2000), CDA examines how texts and spoken interactions are systematically structured and strategically organized, paying attention to how they are produced, interpreted, and utilized within specific social contexts. CDA has been widely used to examine how language reflects and reinforces power, ideology, and social positioning (Fairclough, 2010; Lazar, 2018), while thematic analysis allows researchers to identify key themes, including expressions of religious authority and negotiations of modesty and visibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al.,

2017). To facilitate this process, the study utilized NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software program produced by Lumivero.

To complement the content analysis and enrich the findings of this study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with three of the selected influencers with a view to understanding how they negotiate cultural norms, construct religious authority, and engage with their audiences online. The interviews facilitated understanding those influencers' motivations and intentions beyond using social media, as well as how they construct and negotiate their authority in digital spaces. Triangulating the research findings with interviews also strengthened the validity of the research.

As the study explores a sensitive issue in an authoritarian context, all selected accounts have been fully anonymized to protect the privacy and identities of the influencers involved. Additional precautions were also taken as revealing the identities of the studied influencers or their accounts could inadvertently disclose their political views and personal opinions, potentially exposing them to undue scrutiny or judgment. To maintain ethical integrity and to ensure maximum anonymization, all research participants were informed of the anonymization procedures during the consent process, which included using pseudonyms throughout the analysis and removing or altering identifying details such as usernames and specific location tags. Direct quotes from posts have been edited where necessary to prevent traceability via search engines. In addition, the vignette technique was employed, which uses parallel or hypothetical examples to protect participant identities (Aujla, 2020). For example, the story of Khadija mentioned in the analysis is a substitute for a unique case that could potentially identify a participant. I indicate such examples through discourse markers such as "this vignette highlights..."

4.7 FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The following section delineates the principal findings of this investigation and analyzes how SROFIs on Instagram shape religious identity and authority within religious discourse. It begins with general observations about the types of

content used, account statistics, communicative strategies, and overarching goals before addressing the core research questions in depth.

The influencers in the selected sample have posted a variety of multimedia, including text images (text-based images on plain backgrounds), selfie images, AI-generated images, AI-generated videos, and animation videos. As shown in **Error! Reference source not found.**, videos constitute the primary content posted by the five religious influencers on their Instagram accounts. The videos are primarily utilized for religious preaching, self-marketing, and community criticism—dominant themes that cumulatively account for 87% of the identified content. According to one SROFI, video content is preferred because it effectively supports communicative goals, particularly those related to religious education and modelling proper moral or social behaviour, such as a video that demonstrates the correct procedures for prayer or another that illustrates specific behavioural norms (personal communication, July 24, 2025). This influencer notes that video content not only spares her from making lengthy explanations but also presents topics clearly and in a more engaging manner. Additionally, she stated that AI technologies have driven a surge in video content across social media platforms by enabling creators to produce high-quality videos for virtually limitless scenarios at minimal cost, without the need to use their own voices or appearance.

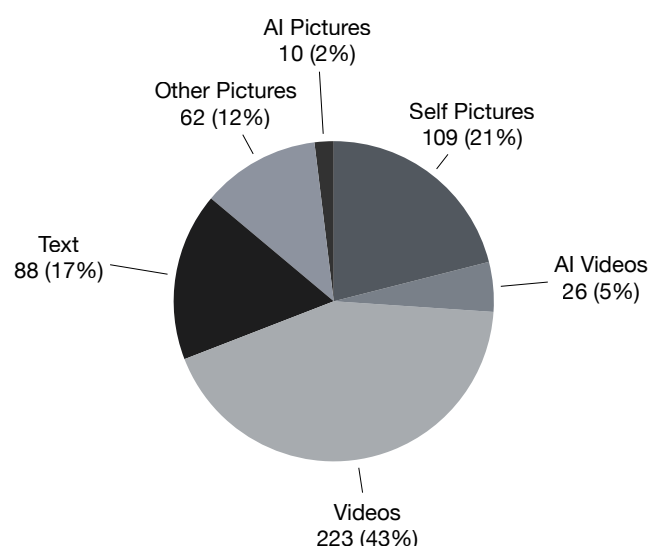


Figure 9: Distribution of themes across Instagram posts (N = 518)

Figure 9 illustrates both the frequency count and corresponding percentage for each thematic category. Surprisingly, AI-generated media accounts for only 7% of the content. This figure reflects a relatively low reliance on emerging tools such as AI platforms—particularly considering that the study period occurs more than two years after the rise of such technologies. One influencer (personal communication, July 2, 2025) whose account is free from AI-generated content emphasized that content quality is her primary concern and that, hence, she avoided using this technology. Another influencer (personal communication, July 6, 2025) attributed her minimal reliance on such tools to a lack of control—especially when working with religious and cultural symbols. Notably, she explained that she has never succeeded in generating AI content that conveys her intended message without introducing extraneous motifs or misleading elements, such as inappropriate character clothing or scenic details.

Self-pictures, the second most prominent content type, consist of all images depicting the influencer either alone or with other people. This category comprises 21% of the sampled posts. Rather than being primarily about self-presentation, SROFIs tend to employ them for pragmatic purposes, such as documenting event participation, presenting the work setting, or featuring professional peers. In terms of portraits that include the self alone (i.e., “selfies”), regardless of whether the picture was taken by others or by the subject (Hung et al., 2021), this study found that religious influencers post selfies for self-presentation far less frequently than their mainstream counterparts. Selfies constitute less than 2% of the total analyzed sample. When I shared this observation with one interviewee, she remarked, “My selfies are solely about encouraging other women to claim visibility and authenticity online rather than drawing attention to my looks. For this reason, I don’t feel the need to post selfies very often” (personal communication, August 24, 2025). One notable example I observed was a selfie accompanied by a caption stating that its purpose was to inspire young girls to appear without makeup.

The third most prominent content type encompasses all textual elements that contribute to the post’s conveyed message, either independently or as a

supplementary element supporting images or video content. One influencer noted that while her textual content tends to employ formal Arabic, the language used in her recorded or streamed videos is often mixed with her local dialect (personal communication, August 20, 2025). The analysis indicates that this pattern aligns with the content of other influencers. Notably, among the three interviewed influencers, none reported using AI-generated text. It is also important to note that not all of the collected posts were analyzable as a considerable number consisted only of brief messages (e.g., greetings, emojis, or non-topical remarks) rather than substantive content.

4.7.1 PERFORMING AUTHORITY

To achieve their communicational goals, SROFIs deployed various strategies to build legitimacy and thereby establish their authority. Religious discourse, cultural alignment, and authoritative performance are the three most used communicative strategies within a total of 518 sampled posts. At least 14% of the posts utilize religious legitimacy to challenge traditional gender norms and conservative values.⁸ For instance, one influencer quoted the verse ﴿وَإِذْ قَالَتِ الْمَلَائِكَةُ يَا مَرْيَمُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ اصْطَفَاكِ وَطَهَّرَكِ﴾ “And [remember] when the angels said, ‘O Mary, indeed Allah has chosen you and purified you,’” (Qur’an, 3:42) to exemplify the status of women in Islam. Another instance is provided by an influencer who references the verse ﴿يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ اتَّقُوا رَبَّكُمُ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ نَفْسٍ وَاحِدَةٍ، وَخَلَقَ مِنْهَا زَوْجَهَا﴾ “O mankind, fear your Lord, who created you from one soul and created from it its mate” (Qur’an, 39:9) to counter patriarchal readings of women as secondary to men.

Further analysis shows that three main types of religious discourse have been employed to this end: citing Qur’anic verses and Hadith, making religious metaphors, and referencing characters or passages from Islamic literature and

⁸ It should be noted that the percentages reported across categories are not cumulative as posts were allowed to be assigned to multiple categories.

historical texts. They all primarily draw on religious authenticity to challenge traditional gender norms and conservative values. First, to maintain authority, all five of the influencers consistently garner religious legitimacy by citing Qur’anic verses and Hadith in their posts. A very common strategy among the analyzed accounts is to open a post with “As Allah taught us...” followed by a verse addressing the topic at hand. For instance, verses such as ﴿وَلَهُنَّ مِثْلُ الَّذِي عَلَيْهِنَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ﴾ “And due to the wives is similar to what is expected of them, according to what is reasonable” (Qur’an, 2:228) and ﴿وَعَاشِرُوهُنَّ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ﴾ “And live with them in kindness” (Qur’an, 4:19) are quoted to emphasize women’s rights.

Religious metaphors are the second type of religious discourse that SROFIs employ to enhance their legitimacy. For example, to encourage her audience to stay focused on their goals, one of the influencers evokes *Qibla*, the fixed direction in prayer, to symbolize focus, direction, or spiritual intention. Finally, SROFIs draw upon characters, incidents, and speech from Islamic literature and history to demonstrate their religious legitimacy. For example, one influencer highlights the word “no” in the common declaration of monotheism, “There is no god but Allah,” as an affirmation of the freedom to reject any form of submission except to God. An analogous example might be the story of Caliph Omar ibn Al-Khattab, who attempted to limit the amount of *mahr*, the material contribution made by a husband-to-be to his wife-to-be. A woman objected, justifying her stance with a verse from the Holy Qur’an, to which the Caliph responded by acknowledging her argument, saying: “The woman is right, and Omar is wrong”. SROFIs often invoke such vignettes from Islamic history to reinforce their views.

In addition to religious legitimacy, the five influencers also strive for political legitimacy in their posts. For instance, the influencers frequently evoke the actions and speech of both Sultan Qaboos and Sultan Haitham to support their arguments. A useful example here is an influencer who referred to the pioneering appointments of Omani women to high-level positions—such as the 2004 selection of Dr Rawya bint Saud al-Busaidi as the Minister of Higher

Education, the second female minister to be appointed in a GCC country—to illustrate Omani women’s capacity to lead. Other examples include two influencers who referred to the First Lady of Oman, Sayyida Ahad bint Abdullah, to exemplify the engagement of Omani women in political life, and a third influencer who championed the accomplishments of the previously mentioned Zahra Al Aufia, an Omani woman well known for her charitable contributions. The Basic Law of Oman and international protocols are other discursive resources that have been utilized by Omani female religious influencers to establish legitimacy within Oman’s sociopolitical landscape. Examples include references to Article 12 of the Basic Law, which acknowledges gender equality, and Oman’s ratification in 1996 of the UN’s Convention on the Rights of the Child, which guarantees every child’s right to education.

Nevertheless, influencers exhibit a selective approach towards referencing protocols—particularly international ones—given their potential clashes with Islamic teachings, which they prioritize in their legal and moral frameworks (personal communication, July 2, 2025). These examples also demonstrate the cultural alignment communication strategy, whereby influencers reference Omani values, customs, or heritage in their content. In many cases, they reference notable Omani female figures, both historical and contemporary, to exemplify the values they promote. This strategy has been employed in about 10% of the analyzed posts.

All but one of the selected influencers represent their claimed authority as a blend of professional intellect and religious or moral values. Specifically, they appropriate their professional knowledge in the service of personalized content creation, which, according to Abidin (2018), functions as a conduit of information to amplify messages. Furthermore, they leverage their public personas and professional roles to construct a form of religious authority, positioning themselves as spiritual mentors and moral exemplars within the digital sphere. These influencers emphasize their professional identities (e.g., as coaches or trainers) in their bios while explicitly framing their work as grounded in or guided by Islamic principles.

Influencers leverage their specialization, public persona, and religious knowledge as a form of authoritative performance, the third communicative strategy, in approximately 27% of the posts investigated. For example, one influencer leans on her knowledge as a life coach to urge girls not to be influenced by others' negative opinions regarding the wearing of the hijab. Another influencer draws on her experience in family support counselling to reframe the notion of guardianship in the Qur'anic verse ﴿الرِّجَالُ قَوَّامُونَ عَلَى النِّسَاءِ﴾ "Men are [*qawwamun*] caretakers/maintainers—over women" (Qur'an, 4:34) as a form of responsibility rather than a denial of agency.

In summary, SROFIs primarily draw on religious legitimacy, cultural alignment, and authoritative performance to challenge traditional gender norms and conservative values. Religious legitimacy is expressed through the use of Islamic texts, religious metaphors, and references to characters and incidents from Islamic history. Cultural alignment is demonstrated by invoking Omani values, customs, and heritage, the words and deeds of both Sultan Qaboos and Sultan Haitham, and national and international laws. Finally, through authoritative performance, most SROFIs project their claimed authority as a synthesis of professional intellect and religious or moral values.

4.7.2 FRAMING WOMEN'S RIGHTS WITHIN ISLAMIC DISCOURSE

As highlighted above, the findings indicate a predominant tendency to frame women's rights as spiritually grounded and socially accepted. This approach, however, is not exclusive, as the five SROFIs also support those rights through broader political and cultural arguments. In terms of political argumentation, one influencer suggested that empowering women strengthens Oman's cultural diplomacy and moral standing in the global arena. Another influencer argues that Omani culture has always valued women's contributions and that nowadays, they can honour tradition while participating in modern society (personal communication, July 24, 2025).

Returning to the religious framing, phrases like "Islam grants women dignity..." appear frequently in the SROFIs' Instagram posts, emphasizing that women's

rights are divinely granted, thereby pre-empting or delegitimizing any attempt to revoke them as religiously or legally invalid. Indeed, influencers' religious argumentation of women's rights extends beyond broad doctrinal claims (e.g., "Islam grants women dignity") to include direct engagement with Islamic sources such as the Qur'an, Ḥadith, and other authoritative texts. As research on Islamic social media (eg. Zaid et al., 2022) shows, influencers strategically support their claims with scriptural references, enhancing authenticity while grounding content in religious tradition. For example, to frame gender equality, one SROFI cited the verse, ﴿مَنْ عَمِلَ صَالِحًا مِنْ ذَكَرٍ أَوْ أَنْثَىٰ وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ فَلَنُحْيِيَنَّهٗ حَيَاةً طَيِّبَةً ۖ وَلَنَجْزِيَنَّهُمْ أَجْرَهُمْ بِأَحْسَنِ مَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ﴾, which states that "Whoever does righteousness, whether male or female, while he is a believer—We will surely grant them a good life..." (Qur'an, 16:97). Another case is the use of a verse affirming women's right to marry a man of their own consent: ﴿فَلَا تَعْضُلُوهُنَّ أَنْ يَنْكَحْنَ أَرْوَاجَهُنَّ إِذَا تَرَاضَوْا بَيْنَهُمْ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ﴾ "Do not hinder them from marrying their husbands if they mutually agree in kindness" (Qur'an, 2:232). Such examples not only reflect the influencers' awareness of Qur'anic articulations of women's rights but also demonstrate how they actively utilize these scriptural references to challenge patriarchal gender interpretations rooted in traditional norms. Another Qur'anic verse that an SROFI has employed to confirm their rights by implication is ﴿قُلْ هَلْ يَسْتَوِي الَّذِينَ يَعْلَمُونَ وَالَّذِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ﴾ "Say, are those who know equal to those who do not know?" (Qur'an, 39:9). Here, the influencer argues that this verse confirms the right to education by implicitly affirming the honour and importance of pursuing knowledge for both men and women (personal communication, July 24, 2025).

Attributing women's rights to Islamic sources goes beyond simply seeking legitimacy. It reflects a strategic effort to present these rights as deeply rooted in Islamic tradition, rather than as modern or external imports. One of the most compelling historical examples used by influencers to illustrate the Qur'an's protection of women's rights is the story of Khawla bint Tha'labah, whose personal grievance against her husband led to the revelation of Surah Al-Mujadila, affirming her dignity, voice, and marital rights. One research participant mentioned this historical anecdote to advocate for women's right to

own property. She refers to Khadija as a successful businesswoman who employed the Prophet Muhammad before his prophethood and continued managing her own wealth during the early Islamic period. This influencer concludes by stating that Arab women enjoyed the right to ownership long before the introduction of modern constitutions.

The discussion presented here highlights how women's rights have been articulated in diverse forms within Islamic discourse. Empowerment, moral superiority, and protection are among those frames. For example, one influencer has argued that education not only enables women to work and contribute to household expenses but also equips them to raise their children in a more informed and effective way. Other SROFIs have reframed their rights not only to contest prevailing national narratives but also to question and counter globally imported interpretations. For example, in one post, the hijab is framed as a sign of modesty rather than repression. This brings us to the second frame, moral superiority, in which influencers portray a particular motif or element, like the hijab, as a virtue esteemed within the Muslim community, rather than as a symbol of subjugation. The research participants emphasized that the hijab is not a simple marker but a proud affirmation of her cultural and religious heritage, presenting it as part of her personality and as a rejection of externally imposed notions of modernity (personal communication, August 20, 2025). Meanwhile, another influencer framed the concept of *mahram*, an unmarried male guardian, as a form of protection rather than a restriction on their mobility.

However, direct examples and verbal elaborations are not the only strategy utilized by the investigated influencers to promote women's rights. For instance, AI tools are occasionally used to create images and videos of veiled women as empowered doctors, teachers, and engineers. Furthermore, many multimedia images intentionally include males in an effort to normalize women's professional presence within mixed-gender environments. Although these multimedia present hypothetical scenarios, they effectively portray male acceptance of women's rights as normative within both religious and social

discourse. This acceptance is also reinforced by the presence of the influencers' male relatives—husbands, brothers, and sons—in the photographic images featured on their accounts. As one interviewee (personal communication, July 6, 2025) said, “The mere presence of my husband in the very few posts provides me with the energy to continue expressing myself and to advocate for my rights on social media”.

In sum, SROFIs' argumentation of women's rights extends beyond broad religious claims: The influencers also frame women's rights as spiritually grounded and socially accepted. On the one hand, they strategically support their claims with religious scriptural references, enhancing authenticity while grounding content in religious tradition. On the other hand, they have reframed their rights not only to contest prevailing national narratives but also to distance themselves from globally imported interpretations. They strategically present these rights as deeply rooted in the Islamic traditions and collective mores, rather than as modern or external imports.

4.7.3 NEGOTIATING PUBLIC VISIBILITY AND CULTURAL EXPECTATIONS

Having explored how SROFIs are asserting authority and framing their rights, the question arises of how these influencers balance being publicly visible on social media with social norms of modesty, religious piety, and gendered expectations. The data suggests that influencers employ different strategies to meet cultural expectations and negotiate their public image. First, they emphasize religious rather than personal visibility. Here, the term *religious visibility* indicates how influencers intentionally foreground doctrinal authority rather than focusing on personal storytelling or lifestyle content. Religious visibility is also shaped by the strategic navigation of algorithmic systems. According to Cotter (2019), algorithmic ranking determines who and what becomes visible on social media. She argues that algorithms prescribe participatory norms by establishing social media visibility conditions. Meanwhile, this “visibility game” underscores how digital creators actively manage exposure. Indeed, algorithms have the capacity to shift the influencer-audience relationship from friend-like intimacy to a more clerical role (Abidin, 2018).

Essentially, religious influencers position themselves not just as relatable peers but as authoritative interpreters of religious texts by adopting various strategies to enhance their algorithmic visibility. For example, one influencer mentioned that she utilizes trending audio tracks and visually striking religious imagery to ensure algorithmic pickup (personal communication, August 24, 2025). Another influencer confirmed that she carefully reviewed her long experience with Instagram to replan her posting schedule. She emphasized that she leverages religiously significant periods such as Ramadan and evening times to enhance her audience engagement cycles and platform upticks (personal communication, August 20, 2025). Furthermore, many influencers use faith-specific hashtags. Hashtags such as #Ramadan_reflections act as illustrative vignettes, foregrounding the interplay between religious devotion and self-branding practices online. SROFIs also strategically engage with platform vernacular, trending formats, and time-sensitive posting to maintain visibility. Such strategizing is required for enhancing influencers' religious authority through the algorithmic logics of social media platforms (Abidin, 2016, 2018; Taylor & Abidin, 2025).

Additionally, to maintain religious visibility, SROFIs adopt various verbal, visual, behavioural, and emotional strategies. It is common for religious influencers to begin their posts with a *dua*, a traditional supplication commonly recited at the start of religious gatherings. SROFIs also draw heavily on visual imagery to maintain religious visibility. While influencers are often accused of intentionally attracting male attention, displaying conservative religious clothing prevents such accusations, as wearing such clothing significantly reduces perceived attractiveness (Pazhoohi et al., 2017). Furthermore, as Febrian (2024) asserts, visual imagery often shapes how audiences perceive influencer identity and can be strategically crafted as part of a brand persona that may not reflect reality. In addition to their commitment to commonly recognized Islamic clothing, some influencers wear a *niqab* (full veil) and other clothes culturally associated with religious individuals, including gloves and *sawaed* (a piece of cloth that covers the area from the elbow to the hand).

Almost all of the live-streamed posts investigated begin with *salawat* (blessings upon the Prophet Mohammed) and end with traditional dua. Following this religious protocol contributes to the perception of these influencers as spiritual guides rather than celebrity personalities. An influencer mentioned that *salawat* not only brings *baraka* (blessings) but also enhances visibility through the dynamics of algorithms (personal communication, August 20, 2025). The present study captured various types of behavioural strategies employed to sustain a visible religious persona. Indeed, the influence of such behaviours goes beyond affecting a religious persona; it positions SROFIs as role models for observational learning (Ramlan et al., 2006). One influencer, for instance, shows herself reciting, “*Bismillah al-Rahman al-Raheem*,” a ritual invocation seeking Allah’s blessing and mercy before any action, drinking water in three sips, and concluding with “*Alhamdulillah Rabb al-‘Alameen*”, a ritual of praising and thanking Allah as the Lord of all worlds. Another influencer kisses the Holy Qur’an before opening it, while a third recites religious phrases as a way to correct previously misspoken words. Such behaviours appear to be practiced habitually and unintentionally, which makes their impact even stronger.

This study supports the view that religious words and gestures carry inherent discursive meanings that serve specific pragmatic functions in Islamic Arabic culture (Alqahtani, (2024). In response to an influencer’s religious expression, one user employed sarcasm by alluding to a historical figure. While this allusion may represent a form of critique or ridicule, the linkage between the religious expression and the historical figure confirms the capacity of religious expression to perform cultural functions. Hence, religious expressions drawn from Muslim discourse can function as verbal indicators that enhance religious visibility. Phrases such as “*‘ala barakat Allah*” (in the blessing of God) function not only as spiritual invocations but also as identity markers, signalling alignment with a more religious-oriented communicative register. Additionally, quoting phrases from Islamic literature can enhance religious visibility. For example, to encourage followers’ continued participation, SROFIs use popular phrases such as “قليل دائم خير من كثير منقطع” “A little that lasts is better than much that doesn’t

endure,” “يد الله مع الجماعة” “God’s hand is with the group,” and “كثروا سوادنا” “Increase our numbers”.

Apart from their ritualistic and semantic value as expressions of worshipfulness, religious expressions are commonly used in vernacular speech to perform pragmatic functions (al-Rojaie, 2021). While commonly used expressions perform functions related to politeness strategies, as Alqahtani (2024) confirms, less commonly used ones perform deeper pragmatic functions such as maintaining public presence and evoking religious significance. Al-Rojaie (2021, p. 22) has captured various broader discursive functions that religious expressions are pragmatically recontextualized to reflect. These functions include conveying scepticism and ambiguity, expressing respect and honour, and expressing humour and sarcasm, among others.

This analysis identified instances where religious expressions are employed in more complex ways, requiring a deeper understanding of contextual relationships. For example, historical anchoring is an important strategy whereby influencers use phrases that are typically only read or heard in classical Arabic literature and historical TV dramas that penetrate Omani homes during the holy month of Ramadan.

In many cases, SROFIs add audio of religious recitation in the background of their posts to evoke a spiritual effect and project a sense of religious presence. Such emotional strategies are found repeatedly in the analyzed data. Another type of emotional strategy is to evoke religious sentiment through storytelling or emotional appeals. Emotional engagement and storytelling are recognized as important strategies supporting Islamic influencers’ mission to bridge traditional Islamic teachings and modern-life realities (Roslan et al., 2025). For example, an influencer’s reference to the Hadith and anecdote of the repentance of Ka’b ibn Malik represent a deep psychological distress followed by public repentance and emotional reunion and, according to a follower comment, triggers emotional appeal. In several posts, female influencers shared spiritual struggles, moments of doubt, and personal sins that were followed by acts of repentance. Their tone reflects a sense of personal vulnerability and confession. The analysis captured

many cases in which emotional strategies involved both spiritual and personal dimensions. For example, one influencer mentions her fondness for a particular verse not only for its positive tone but also because it reminds her of her late mother, who used to recite it regularly. These posts stir religious feelings mixed with personal touches that not only contribute to maintaining religious visibility but can also be seen as intimate self-sharing, which fosters influencer–fan closeness (M. Kim, & J. Kim, (2020).

These strategies for achieving religious visibility are flexible and often overlap. Nevertheless, they frame how SROFIs construct and maintain their religious personas within the religious discourse of the Omani context.

Generally speaking, modesty is widely expected of religious women. Accordingly, modest clothing that conceals rather than delineates the contours of the human body (Rosenberg, 2019) functions as an effective strategy for demonstrating piety and meeting cultural expectations. According to Bagdogan (2023), Turkish Muslim female vloggers explicitly adhere to sociocultural norms of modesty in their online self-branding activities to maintain social positionality and frame their visibility within culturally acceptable boundaries. Additional strategies for maintaining modesty were also captured within the accounts analyzed in this study. When interacting with both online followers and audiences attending their videotaped events, SROFIs are careful to use modest language. For example, I observed multiple occasions where an influencer used self-referential language when reminding others to fear Allah and do good deeds in order to avoid an attitude of superiority. In addition, such advice is often accompanied by tears or facial expressions that reflect humbleness and piety.

Third, SROFIs practice controlled self-disclosure, which, according to Leite et al. (2024), increases perceptions of influencer credibility. This strategy goes beyond posting stories that highlight fleeting moments, such as adjusting their veil or counting rosary beads after prayers; rather, it involves sharing aspects of their lives selectively and maintaining a curated modesty. Influencers usually construct their identities around selected topics that grant them recognition, knowledge, and authority (Kim & Kim, 2021). The analyzed data show that

influencers strategically present themselves across four identity frames: devoted family member, gendered individual, working professional, and socially engaging community actor. To reflect her role in her family, one influencer shared a video in which she prepared an Omani dish for her family for *iftar* in Ramadan, while another one posted an intimate moment that showed her teaching her son the Holy Qur'an. Another SROFI who is engaged in commercial advertising frequently features her family in videos marketing restaurants and hotels. Arguably, the inclusion of a male family member in such posts can be interpreted as a deliberate sign of his tacit endorsement of the influencer's online visibility and activism, especially within a context where male guardianship carries significant social weight.

Influencers also have emphasized their gendered personality. They share behind-the-scenes content that manifests their femininity within culturally accepted norms. For example, one SROFI made a post showing her followers how she performs an Islamic manicure, which allows water to reach her nails when washing for prayers. Another shared self-care routines to help her followers preserve skin freshness and fight aging. Meanwhile, they reveal their professional side by sharing content captured at their workplace or with their colleagues. For example, one participant shared with her followers a glimpse of her final moments at work before heading off for the Eid holiday, while another posted an image of her team members wearing their company badges.

Finally, Alsalloum and Gainous (2025) argue that Gulf female influencers gain prominence based on their actions and the aspirational lifestyles they present. By framing themselves as socially engaging community actors, they cultivate parasocial relationships. Almost all of the recruited SROFIs have shared posts about their contributions to voluntary social events held at schools, at the Omani Women's Association, or by charity organizations. Furthermore, the analysis identified multiple announcements of online events organized by the influencers themselves, aimed at empowering Omani women. These events ranged from religious education to life skills training, while two cases involved calls for English language learning sessions. Such activism not only frames

influencers as socially engaged community actors but also grants them the significant social capital needed to serve as effective conduits for change. Additionally, this improves the relationship between SROFIs and their followers, which is a critical factor enabling influencers to act as role models in their communities (Duckwitz & Zabel, 2024).

To synthesize the discussion, SROFIs pursue multiple approaches to meet cultural expectations and negotiate their public visibility. First, they draw on the use of algorithmic systems, applying different approaches to enhance the algorithmic visibility of their religious authority, such as linking trending religious multimedia and developing posting schedules. Next, they also navigate their visibility through multiple analogue approaches, including various verbal, visual, behavioural, and emotional strategies. To meet cultural expectations, modest fashion constitutes an important approach, as it is widely expected of religious women in the context under study. Additionally, SROFIs maintain controlled self-disclosure to increase perceptions of influencer credibility. This strategy includes posting stories that highlight fleeting moments and framing themselves as socially engaging community actors.

4.8 CONCLUSION

This study explored how self-identified religious Omani female influencers (SROFIs) construct religious authority, negotiate gender roles, and frame women's rights on Instagram. The findings indicate that these influencers employ different Islamic literature, including the Qur'an and Hadith, to build their religious authority and frame their rights in the online public sphere. They combine the reframing of such literature with cultural heritage imagery to build visual authority, affirming Alqahtani's (2024) assertion of religious verbal expressions' pragmatic functions in Islamic Arabic culture.

The results demonstrate that influencers frame women's rights as spiritually grounded and socially accepted. As asserted by one of the respondents, grounding rights in a religious foundation is very important, but alignment with social norms—which do not always reflect religious teachings, especially those

related to patriarchal issues—is also a key component in framing Omani women’s rights (personal communication, August 20, 2025). SROFIs strategically present these rights as deeply rooted in Islamic traditions and collective mores, rather than as modern or external imports.

Significantly, both the content analysis and interviews demonstrate SROFIs’ awareness of the importance of the algorithms of social media platforms. They leverage the dynamics of algorithms mainly for reach and visibility. They strategically engage with platform vernacular, trending formats, and time-sensitive posting to maintain visibility. Additionally, to maintain religious visibility, they perform visibility labour, the everyday affective work that ordinary users undertake to be noticed by prolific elite users (Abidin, 2016). They also use a range of verbal, visual, behavioural, and emotional strategies to enhance their presence.

This research expands current understandings of Islamic feminism within digital discourse by illustrating how religious Omani female influencers negotiate authority, identity, and gender roles on Instagram. Furthermore, it contributes to our understanding of the intersection between digital activism, gendered religious narratives, and cultural norms. However, the study’s case-based design and sample size limit generalizability across broader GCC contexts. Therefore, caution should be exercised when applying the findings of this study to other cultural or social contexts, as the insights are context-dependent and may not be generalizable beyond similar socio-religious settings. Rather, future research could examine similar influencer practices in other GCC countries to compare how gender and religious framing differ regionally.

While not the primary focus of this research, it is noteworthy that, in line with Febrian (2024), this exploration confirms the effectiveness of visual imagery in shaping how audiences perceive influencer identity. This suggests a potential avenue for future research into how female influencers employ visual imagery to navigate gender norms and assert legitimacy in religious and cultural spaces.

Ultimately, this research adds a culturally specific perspective to broader debates on the interplay of religion, gender norms, and sociopolitical structures. It underscores the evolving nature of religious authority in the digital age and the role of female influencers in reimagining faith-based public discourse.

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CONCLUSION: COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS ON VOICE, IDENTITY, AND INCLUSIVITY

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This section serves as a critical reflection on the insights developed across the three empirical studies as well as the cumulative findings and methodological approach underpinning this thesis. Moving beyond the specific case studies, it interrogates how Muslim voices are shaped through diverse media environments and how questions of authority, inclusion, and recognition play out across different sociopolitical contexts. By synthesizing theoretical and empirical insights, this section highlights the cross-contextual dynamics revealed through the comparative framework, demonstrating how the article-based format enables a more robust theorization of mediated participation and representation. Furthermore, it provides an evaluation of how the three articles advance an interpretive understanding of the Muslim mediated public sphere through distinct-yet-interconnected case studies. Additionally, it brings together these insights to provide an integrated critical analysis of their collective contribution to the central research questions of the thesis. This discussion concludes by outlining the theoretical and methodological implications of the study and identifying potential directions for future research.

The three articles comprising this thesis explore the creation of alternative public spheres in different socio-political contexts utilising different media platforms and involving different types of audiences or users. They examine how the Muslim minority in the United Kingdom utilizes radio to combat underrepresentation in mainstream media, how Omanis employ online forums as alternative spaces for public deliberation, and how Omani religious women have mediated their Instagram platform accounts to negotiate their authority, rights, and gender roles. Each of the articles focuses on a different group engaged in a continuous quest to uphold their visibility and gain recognition in the public sphere. Together, the three articles provide a comparative perspective on voice, religious identity, and the complex dynamics of inclusivity, power, and authority.

As noted in the introduction, this project is anchored on an integrated theoretical framework that combines Couldry's (2010) concept of voice, Fraser's (1990) theory of participatory parity, and Said's (2003) postcolonial perspective on power and representation and his critique of Western epistemological dominance. Together, these approaches provide a coherent foundation for an exploration of how communicative spaces mediate voices and identity and how these processes shape inclusion, recognition, and power in contemporary societies. Beyond the analysis of the three articles, this synthesis enables a layered understanding of marginalized actors' negotiations of visibility and agency within unequal media ecologies while revealing their structural, discursive, and cultural dimensions.

Couldry's (2010) concept of voice highlights the symbolic power and inequality inherent in communication. According to Couldry (2010), voice challenges social orders and privileges some perspectives while silencing others. In the *Minority Radio* article, Couldry's theory demonstrates how the Muslim minority contests exclusion within a media landscape dominated by mainstream British narratives. Within this context, voice helps to understand when the act of voicing generates genuine influence and when it remains symbolic within existing power structures by foregrounding how institutional structures, recognition, and power determine whether expressions are listened to, taken up, and acted upon. In other words, Couldry's approach frames the structural and the communicative dimensions of the study. Moreover, it complements Fraser's (2000b) notion of "participatory parity" by enabling the study to link voice (agency) with inclusion (structure). Participatory parity provides a normative grounding for evaluating the fairness and equity of participation. For example, by applying Fraser's lens, the discussion on Sablat Oman can be understood as an attempt to achieve participation parity; meanwhile, these efforts are constrained by limitations on recognition and access to communicative resources. According to Fraser (2000a), fair participation requires the elimination of structural, cultural, and economic barriers that hinder particular groups from participation on an equal footing. While Fraser's theory contributes to de-Westernizing the notion of the public sphere as a communicative venue,

the postcolonial approach anchors my research within a non-Western epistemology, challenging Eurocentric academic frames. This is to say, postcolonial theory provides the study with a historical and cultural lens to situate issues of voice and participation within legacies of colonial domination, representation, and global inequality. As Edward Said (2003) contends, Western cultural and intellectual traditions have long claimed the authority to define the “other”, shaping what counts as legitimate knowledge and practice. Said’s insight allows non-Western or minority contexts to challenge Western norms of publicity, democracy, and media practice by asserting alternative communicative values and epistemologies. Further, it complements Couldry’s approach as its lens can be applied to discuss the conditions under which minorities can speak – or “speak back” – and how their voices are mediated or constrained. As Spivak (1988) suggests, structures of power and representation often make true, unmediated speech impossible. In other words, acts of speaking by marginalized actors are always shaped, filtered, or constrained by dominant discursive, institutional, and media structures. Hence, what appears as voice may not translate into autonomous self-representation or meaningful influence within existing power relations. The insights from these three approaches guide the analysis of this study, illuminating how UK Muslim communities, users of Omani online forums, and religious female influencers negotiate communicative power and recognition within unequal media landscapes. This combined lens allows the thesis to reframe participation and visibility not as adherence to Western democratic norms, but as context-dependent practice shaped by structural constraints, cultural authority, and alternative epistemologies of voice and recognition.

This study develops an integrated analytical framework to examine how Muslim communities negotiate participation, recognition, and agency across different media environments. It conceptualizes voice, identity, and inclusion as three interdependent dimensions of communicative power. Within this framework, voice is understood as the capacity to express concerns, articulate interests, and participate meaningfully in communication. Identity represents the interpretative dimension through which communities define themselves,

narrate belonging, and negotiate cultural and political meaning. Finally, inclusion refers to the condition enabling participation parity. Together, these three lenses provide a holistic approach to understand how minority actors articulate their presence within unequal media and political landscapes. By integrating these three dimensions, the framework positions communicative practices as simultaneously expressive, interpretive and structural. This integrated approach avoids a piecemeal reading of the cases and instead foregrounds the broader contribution of the thesis; showing how marginalized actors construct communicative agency across diverse platforms while confronting hegemony, misrecognition, and exclusion.

5.2 VOICE

A key theme explored in the three articles is voice, which, drawing on (Couldry, 2010; Couldry & Dreher, 2007; Fraser, 2007), I define as the capacity of individuals and groups to express perspectives, articulate experiences, and be recognized as legitimate participants in public communication. Fraser (2007) and Couldry (2010) understand voice as a socially mediated and politically situated process, shaped by structures of power, inclusion, and representation that determine whose expressions gain visibility and influence in the public sphere. Muslim minority radio stations challenge the under-representation of marginalized voices/communities within the UK media landscape by providing minorities with alternative spaces for self-representation and counter-narratives. In Oman, online forums function as a semi-public space in which Omani citizens deliberate on political and social issues. Yet, in this space, the articulation of voice is shaped by state regulation, cultural hierarchies, and the risk of censorship. Meanwhile, religious discourse is deployed by religious Omani female influencers to carve out a visible and authoritative voice in gendered digital spaces. Such projections of voice challenge traditional silences around women's authority and rights. Taken together, these cases highlight both the enabling role of media platforms in fostering voice and the structural constraints that continue to delimit who can speak, how they can speak, and to whom their voices are heard, a theme examined further in this section through the analysis

of power relations and mediated participation. Importantly, drawing on Edward Said's (2003) critique of Western epistemological dominance, this project does not take Western liberal-democratic assumptions about media, publicity, and participation as the universal default. Rather, it critically examines to what extent such frameworks can be applied to the contexts in question and where alternative communicative values and epistemologies – such as relational notions of authority, faith-inflected moral reasoning, and context-specific norms of legitimacy – emerge to challenge or reconfigure these norms.

Although Couldry's (2010) framework is explicitly applied in the analysis of the *Minority Radio* article, the thesis as a whole continues to engage his concept of voice. The *Sablat Oman* article, for instance, investigates an environment in which state regulations shape online deliberations, and religious and tribal norms influence the framing of what can be publicly expressed, revealing how participants navigate between self-censorship and communal reasoning to sustain their voice. Meanwhile, in the *Religious Female Influencers* article, voice is shaped by the intersection of gendered expectations, platform algorithms, and religious authority through which influencers strategically negotiate visibility and legitimacy while adhering to modest representation and traditional values. Both articles examine the communicative conditions that enable or constrain voice within their respective sociopolitical and cultural contexts. In this sense, while voice as a theoretical construct is most visibly mobilized in one article, its underlying concern, the capacity for individuals and communities to express, be recognized, and participate meaningfully in mediated publics, runs throughout the entire project.

Accordingly, this thesis expands on Couldry's (2010) framework of voice by examining how voice operates across multiple communicative and cultural registers. Its interpretive design, particularly the use of deliberative operational indicators such as inclusivity and responsiveness, has shaped the conceptualization of voice. This analytical choice inevitably privileges certain dimensions of voice that align with deliberative ideals of reason-giving and mutual recognition. While expressions are grounded primarily in affect,

storytelling or symbolic performance may receive less analytical weight, even though such forms can be politically meaningful. Nonetheless, this emphasis is analytically justified given the project's focus on participation, legitimacy, and recognition within mediated public spheres, where claims to influence are often evaluated through deliberative norms. This approach enables a more precise assessment of when voicing practices translate into visibility, responsiveness, or political recognition rather than remaining solely expressive. Couldry's theorization of voice as both a process and a value grounding participation in social life provides an important foundation for this understanding. As a result, this thesis not only draws upon Couldry's framework to analyze how voice operates across multiple communicative and cultural contexts but also advances it by extending the concept from a primarily normative and conceptual formulation to an empirically grounded process for examining voice in mediated public spheres. Building on the discussions presented in the three articles and drawing on Couldry and other theorists, I distinguish three manifestations of voice.

First, "voice" is rooted in a collective and communal dimension. This notion expands Couldry's (2010) idea of voice as a shared social capital by showing how collective articulation fosters belonging and solidarity within minority publics (see: *Minority Radio* article, Section 2.1). It represents the shared expression of the identity, values, and demands of the group, including Muslim citizens in the UK. In this sense, voice is something sustained through collaborative ownership and participation (e.g. radio as a platform shaped and protected by the community), even within publicly funded infrastructures. While community radio is supported by UK government funding frameworks, its editorial practices and participatory governance allow the communities it serves to shape, protect, and circulate their own narratives. This positioning enables community radio to function as a site of epistemic resistance within – rather than outside of – state-supported media systems. Consequently, it becomes a medium through which marginalized groups reclaim the right to define and represent themselves. Drawing on Said's (2003) critique of Western epistemological dominance, such practices challenge the historic tendency of dominant cultures to speak for or

about minorities by asserting a self-defined narrative of voice and belonging instead.

This case demonstrates how voice can be a form of communal capital that belongs to the group and is exercised for cultural continuity and cohesion. While formats such as radio call-in shows or interactive programmes allow for audience participation, the depth of rational-critical deliberation is typically constrained by time, moderation, and structural inequalities in access (Bailey et al., 2007; Howley, 2010). Rather than sustained deliberation, community radio primarily fosters cultural representation, identity affirmation, and social cohesion (Madianou, 2005). According to Martín-Barbero's (1993) perspective, radio serves less as a tool of transmission and more as a mediator of meaning and belonging since "radio in virtually all countries gave the people of the different regions and provinces their first taste of the nation" (Martin-Barbero, 1993, p. 164).

In its second manifestation, as the *Sablat Oman* article demonstrates, voice becomes more deliberative and dialogical. Rather than a mere expression of identity, it turns into active political participation measured by inclusivity, reason-giving, and responsiveness to opposing views. Here, voice should be framed less as a cultural defender and more as participation in decision-oriented debate. Accordingly, it represents the deliberative dimension implicit in Couldry's work, situating voice within practices of contestation and negotiation rather than mere identity defence. *Sablat Oman* users demonstrated the capacity to maintain voice as they articulated their perspectives in ways that are heard, recognized, and capable of influencing public discourse. The question to be asked here, given the centrality of the concept of voice to deliberative theory, is to what extent such expression of voice can be recognized as deliberative. (Habermas, 1996), in democratic discourse, deliberation requires more than equitable opportunities for participants to exercise their voice; it also entails rational-critical debate. Therefore, discussions of *Sablat Oman* cannot be considered deliberative, even though the analysis confirmed the presence of voice, because such voices did not provide rational-critical debate (see: *Sablat*

Oman article, Section 3.7.1). Indeed, a key finding of the *Sablat Oman* article is that the mere presence of voice does not necessarily lead to deliberation. This insight resonates with Said's (2003) critique of Western epistemological dominance by challenging the universalization of Western norms of rational deliberations as the sole markers of communicative legitimacy. Significantly, such challenges do not imply a rejection of deliberative ideals as normative yardsticks. Rather, this analysis utilizes deliberative principles – inclusivity, reason-giving, and responsiveness – as evaluation criteria that must be interpreted in relation to specific cultural, political, and institutional contexts. For example, in the Omani case, communicative practices articulate alternative normative logics of legitimacy based on relational authority, social harmony, and culturally embedded forms of justification. Such practices call for a contextualized normative framework that retains deliberative democracy's criteria ambitions. Meanwhile, they recognize plural epistemologies of communication through which voice, authority, and legitimacy are negotiated.

Finally, the *Religious Female Influencers* article conceptualizes voice as an individualistic and persuasive mediated practice, highlighting how individual influencers exercise agency through self-expression and credibility building. In doing so, it extends Couldry's conception of voice by acknowledging the micro-level dynamics through which voice is practiced, recognized, and rendered authoritative within mediated religious contexts. In this case, it is mediated by self-branding as well as authority construction and framing strategies. Meanwhile, religious discourse and sociocultural constraints play a significant role in shaping this type of voice. Here, voice becomes a personal performance of legitimacy, aimed at persuading, mobilizing, or redefining norms.

Influencers have benefitted from social media's relative absence of traditional gatekeepers, audiences' growing preference for seeing "ordinary" people in the spotlight, and a cultural economy that frames even personal identity in consumerist terms as ways to advance their self-branding, construct authority, and strategically preserve heard voice (Khamis et al., 2017). They carefully choose what is to be shown, what is hidden, and how identities are presented

to maximize resonance with their audience. The result is that voice is not a mere communicative act but constitutes a branding process tied to social capital. Rather than interpreting their self-presentation through a secular-liberal lens of individual emancipation, this study positions their communicative agency within Islamic epistemologies of modesty, moral responsibility, and community care. By taking this approach, it situates these influencers as producers of alternative communicative and ethical frameworks rather than as exceptions to Western feminist ideals. This argument echoes Said's (2003) critique of Western epistemological dominance.

Meanwhile, Couldry (2010, 2025) argues that the world's communicative spaces are socially constituted through media practices that privilege some voices while silencing others. Indeed, structural constraints, including platform algorithms, audience expectations, self-censorship, authoritarian constraints, and market pressures, significantly impact the agency reflected by voice. Such constraints play a significant role in our lives, particularly our digital lives. For example, as Couldry and Mejias (2019) highlight, "data colonialism" controls and commodifies digital life, reshaping the conditions under which voice, participation, and visibility are exercised by appropriating communicative acts for capitalist gain and harming the deliberative potential of digital communication. In more recent work, Mejias and Couldry (2024) emphasize the danger of exploiting users' connections and repackaging their data to control their views, track their movements, record their conversations, and discriminate against them. Thus, while I argue that influencers' voice is individualistic, it is also relational, not only in terms of its requirement of audience recognition and emergence through interaction, but also – and more importantly – its deep entanglement with power relations. In other words, voice always exists within structures that enable or constrain its articulation. Consequently, religious influencers tend to construct their identities around select topics that afford them recognition, knowledge, and authority (see: *Religious Female Influencers* article, Section 4.7.3). In sum, while theorists acknowledge that voice is not merely an act of speaking, I would add that it is neither a simple articulation of one's opinions or beliefs. Instead, it constitutes

a multi-dimensional social interaction through which individuals and groups seek to affect change while being constrained by structural forces.

Taken together, these points suggest that media have the capacity to compensate for the absence of traditional spaces intended to host free deliberations. It provides alternative spheres in which marginalized voices are expressed and amplified. For example, minority members utilize radio to collectively articulate their voices, preserve identity, and foster cohesion (Matsaganis et al., 2011). Social media now extends similar opportunities to specific community groups, including religious female influencers. Therefore, in addition to their function as alternative outlets for minority representation, digital media provides groups, such as women and marginalized groups, with the platforms to negotiate visibility, authority, and cultural legitimacy within their societies (Abidin, 2016; Kavakci & Kraeplin, 2017). From a more individualistic perspective, new media grants citizens, including those in authoritarian contexts, the opportunity to make their voices heard, their views acknowledged, and their perspectives visible to those in positions of authority.

This discussion evokes Said's (2003) critique of Western epistemological dominance to critically examine the selected case studies not as deviations from Western communicative norms, but as representations of alternative communicative values and epistemologies that challenge or reconfigure these norms. This examination includes the prevalence of moral and religious authority alongside secular rationality, the use of narrative, testimony, and effect as legitimate modes of public reasoning, and collective or community-oriented forms of voice that challenge liberal individualist assumptions. Rather than relying on abstract notions of neutrality or procedural rationality, knowledge production in this context is often grounded in lived experience, ethical commitments, and historically situated identities. Further, this study engages with broader debates on mediated voice (Couldry, 2010; Fraser, 2000a) by positioning the articulation of Muslim voices within the structural conditions that shape participation in digital spaces. While existing literature has explored the ways in which inequalities of access and recognition influence whose voice

is heard, this study extends this conversation by investigating how platform governance, religious norms, and sociopolitical constraints intersect to shape the visibility and legitimacy of such voices. This research's argument contributes to understanding voice not as a mere act of speaking but as a demonstration of legitimacy manifested in different forms, such as collective and communal, deliberative and dialogical, and individualistic and persuasive.

5.3 IDENTITY

This research affirms the central role of media in producing common knowledge, which, beyond merely marking membership, enables communities to sustain a collective sense of identity while acknowledging internal differentiation. This identity, as Jenkins (2008) argues, is socially constructed, continuously negotiated in interactions with others, and mediated through communicative practices; it is a collective identity. According to Turner (2011), this collective identity entails a powerful sense of “we” yet remains fragile, contingent, and always vulnerable to subversion. Looking from a different angle, Jenkins (2008, p. 176) argues that identity “is imagined but not imaginary”. In fact, it is not only imagined but enacted. As similarities and differences intersect in a process carried out and reinforced through rituals of identification, they serve to sustain both communal belonging and organizational structure. In this sense, media platforms act as ritualized spaces of identification, where shared practices of listening (as in radio) and participation (as in new media), reaffirm communal bonds while simultaneously negotiating internal differences. As Chwe (2013) asserts, the function of public ritual extends beyond transmitting meaning from a central source to individual audience members; it also ensures that each member becomes aware of what other audience members know. Thus, echoing Turner's view on collective identity and Jenkins's emphasis on identity as imagined yet enacted, media platforms serve as a vital arena where collective belonging is both symbolized and made effective. They provide spaces where individuals and communities articulate, contest, and affirm their identities before diverse audiences.

Media outlets play a significant role in shaping and performing personal and social identities, including religious identity, which introduces additional layers of meaning, obligation, and symbolic practice. Unlike broader cultural identities, religious identity is often anchored in shared beliefs, rituals, and moral frameworks, yet it is still continuously negotiated and performed within social contexts, including mediated spaces (Casanovas, 1994). Indeed, media platforms, including social media, not only reflect religious affiliation but also provide spaces for hosting debates and interactions in which religious norms are interpreted, contested, and reinforced. For instance, many linguistic expressions that function not only as spiritual invocations but also as identity markers signal alignment with a more religious-oriented communicative register (see: *Religious Female Influencers* article, Section 4.7.3). They allow religious influencers to actively construct and communicate their religious selves to diverse audiences within those spaces. Focusing on religious identity, this research allows for a nuanced understanding of how faith, practice, and community intersect with mediated self-representation and participatory engagement.

By drawing on media ethnography, the *Minority Radio* article reveals three dimensions in which Fever FM contributes to voicing identity. First, it educates the community members on their traditional culture. This is evident in some Fever FM programmes, such as “Pakistani Classic Tracks”, which plays traditional music that younger generations would otherwise have little opportunity to encounter (see: *Minority Radio* article, Section 2.6.1). Second, it passes Islamic teachings and traditions on to new generations through the station’s programmes. Finally, programmes aired by Fever FM provide minority members with educative and entertaining materials that maintain social coherence and solidarity. The station’s timetable includes about eight hours of Islamic-themed programmes aired every Friday, including “Sufi Kalaam”, a two-hour programme that conveys lessons from the life of the prophet Mohammed (see: *Minority Radio* article, Section 2.6.1). I argue here that identity in this context is not only collective but also institutionalized, as the actors contributing to its production do so according to their social affiliation rather than merely as individuals. This is to say that different entities, including the radio station itself, its audience,

and those involved in producing radio programmes, function in their capacity as members of a minority community, thereby reinforcing and reproducing a shared sense of minority identity.

A similar logic can be applied to religious identity among UK Muslim minorities; mediation through media functions primarily as a bonding mechanism. As evidenced in the *Minority Radio* article (see: *Minority Radio* article, Section 2.7), the radio station reinforces Muslims in-group solidarity, affirms shared beliefs, and provides a common cultural frame that sustains a sense of belonging. In fact, since the advent of radio technology, radio has represented a vital space for racial, ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities to express their identities, to mark their traditions and holidays, and to sustain their community rituals. Fever FM is no exception; through this radio station, not only are migrants' news and views systematically produced, but minority communities' stories are also narrated by their voices. As Couldry (2010, p. 7) declares, voicing is "the process of giving an account of one's life and its conditions". Minority voices, such as those transmitted through Fever FM radio, should be acknowledged as an attempt to change (Hirschman, 1970). Such change aims at preventing the aforementioned subversion of identity. In other words, minority radio serves as an alternative to dominant media by resisting the consumption of majority-produced images that may misrepresent or marginalize the communities it serves, thereby protecting and affirming its listeners' collective identities.

While religious identity on minority radio is collectively maintained, reinforcing shared values, rituals, and belonging, its impact on Omani online deliberation appears in the use of religious evidence and deliberation guidelines, where individual posts often mix religion with political, tribal, or social arguments (*Sablat Oman* Article, Section 3.8). Methodologically, considering Fraser's (2007) argument that deliberative practices must acknowledge the moral grammars of distinct publics and Salvatore's (2016) view that Islam plays significant role in shaping social and civic life across Muslim societies, I included the "religious" code under the "evidence type" category during the coding process in order to assess participants' reliance on religious justification in deliberation (*Sablat*

Oman Article, Section 3.6). This adjustment highlighted the contextual embeddedness of deliberative practice and revealed the operation of a religious form of reasoning within it, affirming the broader argument that communicative rationality is culturally mediated rather than universal. This dynamic of mixing religion with political, tribal, or social arguments is further complicated by the fact that *Sablat Oman* allows for a degree of pseudonymity that conceals critical identity markers such as ethnicity and religious affiliation. Although religious identity was not overtly highlighted, the analysis demonstrated that it resonated within the deliberative exchanges on the forum. Additionally, it was reflected in underlying assumptions and discursive practices that shaped online deliberation. Both the coding approach and the textual analysis in the *Sablat Oman* Article reveal the influence of religion on Omani online deliberation, particularly in the use of religious evidence and deliberation guidelines (*Sablat Oman* article, Section 3.8). This conclusion not only reflects the contextual embeddedness of deliberative practice but also affirms the broader argument that communicative rationality is culturally mediated rather than universal.

This manifestation of religious identity in *Sablat Oman* tends to have a more strategic function, reflecting not only the broader context of a predominantly Muslim society that shapes how religious identity is expressed and perceived but also individual and group agency. For example, discussants use religious identity as rhetorical capital when they invoke the Qur'an, hadiths, or basic religious values to legitimize their political positions or discredit opponents. In fact, rather than being framed as a point of divergence within this public space, religious identity functions as a common ground among debating users. At the same time, religious identity is deployed in deliberative spaces in a way that often reflects tensions between state control, social norms, and individual voices. In this sense, religious identity reveals a political sensitivity given the risks of crossing red lines in an authoritarian context, not to mention deeply religious contexts where religious identity should be instrumentalized cautiously.

On the whole, political forums illustrate a paradox: While religious identity may be obscured or downplayed due to the degree of pseudonymity afforded by the

platform, it nevertheless surfaces in individual, strategic, and often contentious ways as a resource for gaining legitimacy and authority in political debate.

Meanwhile, religious identity can be mediated with a more inclusive orientation, as evidenced in the *Religious Female Influencers* Article. In this case, it still affirms the speaker's legitimacy within the religious community, but it is also purposefully shaped to engage, persuade, and translate ideas to a wider, often more diverse public. Religious identity among self-identified religious female Omani influencers (SROFIs) tends to be more performative and visual (*Religious Female Influencers* article, Section 4.7.3). SROFIs curate their religious identities through modest fashion, hijab styles, Quranic calligraphy, and video tutorials (e.g. on prayer or hijab etiquette). In fact, this performativity aligns with Goffman's (1959) notion of self-presentation and Butler's (1988) concept of performative identity: Identity is established through repeated acts, not just held. Additionally, religious discourse is utilized by SROFIs to legitimize themselves as moral guides. However, their authority involves a negotiation between traditional religious roles and their new digital authority gained through followers, likes, and shares. They often anchor their views by blending Qur'anic verses and Hadith with references to their Omani cultural heritage to negotiate their authority. In fact, they frame religious identity strategically to advocate women's rights, reinforce modesty, or even subtly challenge patriarchal readings of Shari'a.

In comparison to the previous two cases, Fever FM and Sablat Oman, religious identity here tends to be individualistic while remaining community-oriented. In other words, unlike collective voices in radio, religious identity on Instagram is individualized and tied to personal branding and followers' engagement. Meanwhile, in Sablat Oman, religious identity reflects a hybrid form where individual expression is still embedded within communal practices and shared narratives. However, it still fosters community belonging, especially for women, by creating safe spaces to discuss modesty, family roles, and Islamic lifestyles. On the other hand, religious identity on Instagram is expressed within limits imposed by state regulation, conservative social norms, and risks of backlash.

Accordingly, SRFOIs carefully balance innovation by engaging with new frameworks, such as Islamic feminism – even though they reject its principles and labelling (see: *Religious Female Influencers*, pp. 5:7) – and by complying with traditional religious teachings and modest representation.

Overall, this discussion underscores the ways in which religious identity is performed and mediated on various media platforms. Religious identity has two significant impacts. First, it supports internal cohesion by strengthening the collective's resilience against marginalization by ensuring continuity of traditions and maintaining a safe communicative space where religious and cultural narratives are protected from external pressures. Second, it affects external outreach by acting as a cultural resource strategically framed to negotiate shared values across audience boundaries, build credibility with multiple publics, and influence discourse beyond the original faith community. To elaborate further, while minorities utilize religious identity as a shield against assimilation into the majority culture, countering stereotypes and offering positive images of Muslim life (Matsaganis et al., 2011), Sablat Oman users strategically utilize their shared religious identity as rhetorical capital. An important reflection emerging from this study is the contextual embeddedness of deliberative practice and its affirmation that communicative rationality is culturally mediated rather than universal. This finding contradicts Habermas's (1984) assumption that rational communication follows universal pragmatic rules and critiques its lack of attention to cultural and contextual factors. Instead, it aligns with Dryzek (2002) and Hammond's (2025) claim that communicative rationality and deliberative practices are culturally grounded and situated.

5.4 INCLUSIVITY

Many scholars have highlighted issues of marginalization and the need for inclusivity and dialogue among different communities (eg. Ahmed, 2019). Inclusivity is often framed as the equitable participation of diverse actors. However, such participation is always mediated by power relations that

determine whose voices are recognized, amplified, or marginalized. According to Fraser (2000a), genuine inclusion requires the elimination of structural barriers that prevent some groups from participating on an equal footing. Such barriers are both economic, involving unequal access to material resources and communicative means, and cultural, involving patterns of misrecognition that delegitimize particular voices or perspectives. From this view, power goes beyond domination; it functions as a source that communicators can mobilize to negotiate visibility, recognition, and influence within communicative spaces. Understanding inclusivity through the lens of power highlights the fact that participation is never neutral; rather, it reflects broader struggles over authority and legitimacy.

Returning to power as a dynamic of inclusivity, this power operates through communication and meaning-making. It is understood as a relational and productive force, not simply an exercise of control that can be observed when actors use media affordance, discursive resources, and symbolic authority to shape participation, recognition, and visibility in the public sphere. I argue that each of the spaces discussed in this research hosts distinct forms of power exercised by communicators to shape discourse, access, legitimacy or participation. Comparing the power dynamics across the three articles, I identify three types of power: *community power*, *persuasive power*, and *normative power*. First, drawing on Lukes (2005), I frame community power as collective agency or structurally entrenched power dynamics that constrain action. Second, I conceptualize persuasive power based on Habermas's (1984) notion of communicative rationality in which power is exercised through argumentation and consensus building. Finally, normative power can be understood as power practised through norms, values, and standards of legitimacy (Manners, (2011).

These forms of power operate at three different levels of the social strata. For example, through radio waves, the UK Muslim minority negotiates its identity and expresses its voice within the dominant UK majority. In this case, community power operates not as domination over others, but as a form of collective

empowerment: Fever FM enables the UK Muslim minority to strengthen internal cohesion and affirm cultural identity within a majority-dominated media landscape. Through multilingual religious discussions and coverage of community events, Fever FM radio functions as a space where local identities are recognized and voiced. In this case, the station represents a communicative resource and a vehicle for participatory parity (Fraser, 2000a), which enables minority members to co-produce representation and assert visibility within the majority community. While effective voice does not depend solely on being heard by the wider majority, community media can facilitate conditions for such listening by making minority perspectives publicly accessible and institutionally legitimate. However, broader media ecologies, power relations, and audience receptivity impact the extent to which these voices are taken up beyond the community. Persuasive power, by contrast, is enacted by individuals within their own communities. As illustrated in the *Sablat Oman* article, Omani citizens turn to the online forum as semi-free space to assert their right to political participation and to make their voices heard. In this sense, power lies in the capacity to influence discourse, shape opinion and challenge the boundaries of allowed speech within their socio-political context. Discussion on *Sablat Oman* reflects how its users employ this type of power through the citation of religious texts, moral justifications, and appeals to community values. Such rhetorical strategies allow them to influence discourse and gain recognition. Importantly, in this situation, persuasion is exercised through recognition and moral validation rather than rational consensus. Lastly, normative power occupies an intermediate position mobilized by different community groups to shape acceptable practices and values. In the *Religious Female Influencers* article, SROFIs make use of social media to contest political exclusion within their community. They exercise normative power through social media by redefining accepted forms of female religious authority and public engagement. They normalize women's presence in online religious spaces and challenge established hierarchies of voice and authority through their moral advice, Quranic interpretations, and community-oriented discourse.

The UK Muslim minority harnesses radio to combat under-representation within mainstream media by training community members in media production and storytelling, thereby enabling them to amplify their marginalized voice that would otherwise remain unheard and to counter exclusionary practices. I argue here that this Muslim minority establishes inclusion through community power that is enhanced by shared identity and facilitated by the collective ownership of a radio station. Viewed this way, community power refers to the capacity of groups or individuals to shape decisions and influence the allocation of public and private resources in ways that address shared community needs and priorities (Saleheen & Barela, 2025). Community power represents the group's ability to mobilize resources, sustain participation, and create safe communicative spaces for culturally specific needs and to determine understandings of community identity. Carpentier (2011) and Rodríguez (2001) assert that radio enhances inclusivity and diversity, improves representation, and more accurately reflects community perspectives, not only through its impact on audiences but also through community engagement in media production.

Community radio has long been recognized as a site where community power is exercised to resist exclusion, articulate identity, and create space for marginalized voices. In minority radio, community power manifests its agency within a majority media landscape. Reflecting on the community's lived experiences, cultural practices, and political concerns contributes to building this agency (Carpentier, 2011; Matsaganis et al., 2011). In this context, community power goes beyond mere access to communication to reshaping representation and participation in collective terms. Accordingly, minority members collectively practice power dynamics in an effort to ensure that representation is not determined solely by dominant groups but includes the contribution of the minorities themselves. In alignment with Fraser's (2000a) concept of participatory parity, community power in this venue gives credence to the idea that genuine inclusion requires both access to material resources and recognition of social identities. Accordingly, community power, in addition to its function as a means of access to communication, reshapes representation and

participation on more collective and equitable terms. The engagement of minority members with radio allows them to exercise communicative agency and work to secure parity of participation. It ensures that they can co-construct representation with majority groups, who traditionally dominate the public sphere. Seen in this light, radio functions as both a communicative resource and a political tool: it enables communities to resist majority-imposed identities, build solidarity, and demand recognition on their own terms.

Within this framework, inclusivity is collective, allowing for the representation of a minority community within a hosting majority. Through community radio, members of minority communities come together to negotiate visibility, contest stereotypes, and claim legitimacy on behalf of their community rather than as individuals. Through its production process, community radio contributes to shaping and sustaining the collective identity of its audiences by enhancing the media literacy and skills of community members as individual producers and volunteers (Backhaus, 2020). On the consumption level, on the other hand, radio's ability to cater to its members' informational needs facilitates collective action and community development at the grassroots level (Khan et al., 2017). A study conducted by Srivastava (2022) demonstrates that, among other functions, radio is instrumental in promoting collective action, which can be seen in its extraordinary ability to connect, entertain and educate community members.

In the *Sablat Oman* article, inclusion within the Sablat Oman forum is shaped by structural, social, and individual factors. Within this setting, the capacity to engage others and sustain dialogue enhances the effectiveness of participation within political and socially sensitive contexts. The capacity of users to persuade others in online deliberation can be conceptualized as persuasive power – a combination of message content, form, and socio-cultural framing that relies on reputation and rhetorical style, including structure, appeals, and tone, to attract attention, affirm argument strength, or direct behaviour (Joyowidarbo et al., 2025; Manzoor et al., 2020; Rahayu et al., 2018).

It can be argued that persuasive power is an advanced component of deliberative discussions. For persuasive power to be enacted, it requires “mutual communication that involves weighing and reflecting on preferences, values, and interests regarding matters of common concern” (Bächtiger et al., 2018, p. 2), which is considered to be the minimal definition of deliberation. They assert that mutual reason-giving and listening are core features of deliberation and, as outlined earlier, all three articles in this study contend that they are also essential requirements for practicing persuasive power. Importantly, this discussion recognizes persuasive power as a significant component of the deliberative process, but it would be inaccurate to claim that persuasive power alone represents deliberation. This is to say that persuasive power reflects participants’ ability to exercise communication skills to improve a reasoned position within an interaction. However, while this persuasion may enable expression and engagement, it does not necessarily fulfil the normative ideal of deliberation, which necessitates that outcomes be shaped by the force of better argument rather than mere strategic or coercive influence (Dryzek, 2002; Habermas, 1984). This distinction offers a useful lens for assessing the quality of public deliberation in mediated spaces. My empirical findings indicate that the discussions on the Sablat Oman platform were largely not deliberative in the strict Habermasian sense.

On the other hand, this conceptualization of persuasive power situates discourse as the medium through which social actors can challenge domination and negotiate legitimacy. In this view, persuasion is considered as mechanism for ensuring that excluded voices can participate in meaning-making on equal terms rather than a mere rhetorical performance. However, persuasive power depends on the ability of individuals to shape discourse and influence opinion, not only through argumentation and credibility but also symbolic authority, thereby opening the door to inequality. Moreover, persuasive power also exposes how unequal access to discursive resources shapes whose perspectives become influential in public deliberation. In the case of Sablat Oman, such asymmetries were clearly visible. Users had the option to decide on how much personal information to reveal. Hence, posts initiated by identified users, or

even those partially identified through indicators like gender or occupation – as a number of posts included in the analyzed thread showed – tended to attract greater engagement and agreement.

Normative power, the third type, stems from the influencer's authority to define what counts as acceptable discourse about women's rights and religious roles. The purpose of normative power is "to change existing structures of power and injustice by opening up the possibilities of different perspectives" (Manners, 2011, p. 233). Normative power refers to the capacity of communicators to shape behaviour, beliefs, and expectations by establishing standards of what is considered appropriate or legitimate within a social or cultural context (Barnett & Duvall, 2005; Risse, 2000). It reflects the role of cultural values, religious principles, and social norms in legitimizing or constraining who is considered a legitimate participant.

In this context, participation is always bounded by cultural, religious, and social norms that define what is deemed acceptable, credible, or legitimate. Also, as the above discussion highlights, inclusive participation requires negotiating, reshaping, or sometimes resisting these norms so that alternative voices can be recognized as valid contributors.

Unlike persuasive power, normative power operates through the articulation of values, moral authority, or socially shared norms. In the *Religious Female Influencers* article, which explores the context of religious female influencers, normative power can be understood as the capacity to establish, enforce, and legitimize behavioural and ethical standards within religious communities, influencing participation and engagement beyond the constraints of formal authority structures. As this article reveals, influencers navigate complex intersections of gender, religion, and digital media, exercising influence by creating norms around acceptable conduct, piety, and community engagement. Their authority is enhanced by personal charisma or expertise, as well as alignment with broader religious and cultural values that confer legitimacy on their guidance. The influencers' establishment of normative frameworks fosters inclusivity by incorporating marginalized voices into the discourse, granting

them access to spiritual knowledge once dominated by men, and enabling participation in communal decision-making.

5.5 CONCLUSION

This research project critically examined three distinct communicative spaces, each occupied by different groups of communicators: a minority community, Omani citizens, and religious female influencers. The above analysis demonstrates how diverse communicators make use of persuasive, normative, and community power to claim visibility, negotiate inclusion, and reshape public discourse. In the first article, a UK Muslim minority group employs community power and shared ownership of media to contest marginalization. Meanwhile, the *Sablat Oman* Article exposes the role of individual communicative agency in shaping public deliberation among Omani citizens. This investigation is extended in the *Religious Female Influencers* Article, which illustrates how normative power is exercised by religious female influencers to enhance inclusivity and challenge gendered boundaries within digital religious spaces.

Collectively, the three articles demonstrate both the possibilities and constraints of communicative participation in contemporary Muslim societies. While voice refers to the capacity to speak and be heard, participation captures the ongoing process through which individuals and groups engage, negotiate recognition, and influence discourse. Thus, rather than treating participation as a static achievement, these studies show it as a continuing process shaped by access, credibility, and the capacity to frame narratives. By situating these analyses within broader theoretical debates on communicative action and power, this project contributes to understanding how marginalized or less audible voices carve spaces of influence within unequal social and political structures. Ultimately, the findings underscore that communication is not only a vehicle for expression but a site of struggle over legitimacy, authority, and belonging.

Drawing on the analysis presented in this project, I argue that voice is a negotiated act rather than a given expression; one that emerges through interactions shaped by structural constraints, audience expectations, and

platform affordances, rather than an autonomous utterance that simply reflects individual intention. This argument is consistent with that of Elmimouni et al. (2024), who similarly observed that voice is contingent on the technological affordances of the platform. This dependency, in addition to other factors that shape whose voices are amplified, silenced, or legitimized, including editorial policies, moderation norms, or platform algorithms, contributes to institutional gatekeeping that can affect such negotiation.

However, the negotiation of voice is also conditioned by broader political and economic structures. For example, in the case of Sablat Oman, the forum and its users are expected to adhere to the state regulations governing media content and licensing requirements. At the same time, market pressures and resource inequalities determine which communicative practices are sustainable or gain visibility. Sablat Oman is not a commercial platform; nevertheless, its sustainability depends on advertising and sponsorships, which might affect the discussions hosted in the forum. Additionally, the active engagement of its users depends on their digital literacy, internet access, and familiarity with online communication norms. Such political and economic constraints often intersect with sociocultural norms, reinforcing hierarchies of legitimacy and credibility.

In this project, sociocultural norms play a significant role in the authority to speak or be heard. For example, dimensions like gender and religiosity contribute to the determination of what kinds of voices are accepted as “authentic” or “credible” within each communicative context. As a result, communicators must continuously negotiate their visibility and legitimacy within unequal power structures in an attempt to balance conformity to dominant expectations with their efforts to assert marginalized perspectives. These findings reinforce Paul et al.’s (2025) finding that the marginalization of indigenous voices in Bangladeshi media necessitates a negotiation of visibility and legitimacy by indigenous communicators, who must navigate media structures that often exclude or misrepresent them. This negotiation occurs between personal agency with individual expression (as in the religious influencers’ case) and community accountability (as in minority radio and online

forums) with collective identity. These voices operate on different platforms with unique dynamics, and each frames negotiation differently. While radio emphasizes communal representation and shared identity, forums encourage argumentation and debate, and social media personalizes voice through visibility and engagement metrics. This investigation confirms that participation is shaped by affect, belonging, and moral legitimacy, not just argumentation.

Identity is not static but is continuously negotiated through communicative practices shaped by media affordances, sociopolitical environments, and audience expectations (Jenkins, 2008; Saleem & Ismail, 2025). Therefore, identity can be either individually or collectively formed. In minority radio, for instance, identity is articulated collectively where community cohesion, cultural preservation, and shared belonging are emphasized. On the other hand, in online forums and Instagram, identity expression is more individualized. In this case, personal experiences and interpretations coexist alongside collective religious or cultural narratives. Also, in digital media, digital visibility transforms identity from being simply expressed to being performed and evaluated by audiences, giving an account of one's life and its conditions as Couldry (2010) confirms. Furthermore, particularly on Instagram, visibility becomes a moral and aesthetic practice that defines belonging and recognition. Identity markers such as religious language and community symbols are utilized to claim legitimacy and solidarity while simultaneously reproducing or contesting exclusions. Accordingly, this study argues that identity functions as both a means and a boundary of inclusion. In line with this finding, Alkhazaleh et al. (2025) observed that young people in Jordan adjust their identity presentation (language, appearance, etc.) to fit algorithmic norms; thus, some identities become more visible while others are marginalized. To combat exclusion, they strategically craft their identities to balance between expression and safety, showing adaptive agency within structural constraints.

According to this investigation, inclusion in Muslim mediated publics is not static but contingent on access mechanisms, including gatekeeping, moderation, and visibility. Furthermore, it varies across media platforms and depends on the

adopted medium's technical and structural affordances that shape who can speak and be heard. While radio relies on participatory production, forums depend on registration and moderation, and Instagram on algorithmic visibility. Cultural and institutional norms play a significant role in media inclusion as they define the limits of appropriate participation. Similarly, Rifat et al. (2024) demonstrated that minority communities may refrain from expressing opinions or participating fully due to constraints shaped by sociopolitical environment such as fear, stigma, and moderation practices. In conservative Muslim contexts in particular, inclusion is mediated through religious, cultural, and gendered expectations. Furthermore, algorithmic mediation strongly shapes inclusion and visibility, as algorithmic biases privilege certain tones or identities, thereby structuring inclusion in ways that ultimately exclude particular voices. In fact, the landscape of deliberative spaces, in terms of inclusion, reflects ongoing struggles over legitimacy, representation, and belonging within Muslim publics.

Building on the collective findings of the three articles, this project identifies several future avenues of investigation aimed at extending the study of voice, identity, and inclusion in mediated Muslim public spheres. The observation of the tensions between voice and visibility, as well as participation and recognition across minority radio and online spaces raise a number of questions. For example, the finding that online deliberation in Oman is shaped by religious norms and guided by the use of religious evidence raises the question of whether digital spaces can foster sustainable, religiously informed forms of grassroots participation in broader sociopolitical debates. Similarly, the dynamics of digital interactions among Muslims in non-democratic contexts call for longitudinal and ethnographically informed research to trace how online engagement translates, if at all, into offline civic or political participation over time.

Finally, the limitations encountered when applying Habermasian ideals to contexts shaped by Islamic ethics, community-based authority, and alternative notions of publicity reflect the need to integrate a non-Western conceptualization of the public sphere. Future research should therefore build

on this study's initial engagement with non-Western contexts by more fully applying non-Western conceptualizations of the public sphere to further enrich and expand a Habermas-centred framework. While this study examines Muslim media practices and demonstrates how voice and publicity are negotiated within specific mediated religious contexts, it does not attempt to systematically compare ethnographic analyses of non-Western public sphere models as such. Addressing this gap would require the comparative analysis of Muslim media institutions across contexts, in-depth ethnographic studies of community media participation, or theoretical work that situates Islamic notions of moral responsibility and collective welfare within debates on publicity and voice. Additionally, future scholarship may explore how Muslim community media ecosystems create alternative communicative rationalities that challenge universalized Western norms of publicity and voice. I believe that addressing these questions would contribute to a deeper understanding of mediated Muslim publics and the public sphere, providing a more comprehensive framework for theorizing voice, identity, and inclusion in contemporary media landscapes.

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APPENDIX A: *MINORITY RADIO* ARTICLE'S INTERVIEWEES' LIST

	Name	Position	Interview location	Interview date
Media Practitioners				
1	Jabbar Karim	Fever FM's founder and managing director,	Fever FM Radio Station	Feb 8, 2023
2	RJ Shahab Ud'Deen	Radio presenter, former business development officer, and occasional impact & evaluation consultant	Fever FM Radio Station	August 10, 2023a
3	Anil Bharath	BBC DJ, writer and a former Fever FM broadcaster	online	November 2, 2023
4	Jabbar Karim	Fever FM's founder and managing director,	Fever FM Radio Station	June 6, 2024a
5	RJ Shahab Ud'Deen	Radio presenter, former business development officer, and occasional impact & evaluation consultant	Fever FM Radio Station	June 6, 2024b
Radio Audience				
6	Interviewee 1	Audience member, (college student)	University of Leeds	July 13, 2023
7	Interviewee 2	Audience member	University of Leeds	July 15, 2023
8	Interviewee 3	Audience member	Leeds	August 10, 2023b
9	Interviewee 4	Audience member	Leeds	August 13, 2023
10	Interviewee 5	Audience member, (taxi driver)	Leeds	August 20, 2023
11	Interviewee 6	Audience member (Academic staff)	online	November 15, 2024
12	Interviewee 7	Audience member	online	Nov 10, 2024

APPENDIX B: MINORITY RADIO ARTICLE'S SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

A. Minority Radio Professionals:

- Questions for Fever FM's founder and professionals:
 - Could you describe the circumstances surrounding the establishment of the Fever FM radio station, including its initial location and the idea or motivation that informed its funding?
 - Can you describe Fever FM's mission in supporting trainees or volunteers to develop the skills and experience needed to progress into the mainstream media?
 - What institutional, regulatory or resource constraints affect how the station operates and the kind of content it can produce?
 - How would you describe Fever FM's core listenership in terms of ethnicity, age, or other demographics?
 - Given that your audience includes multiple South Asian communities, how do you balance content that reflect Pakistani culture versus Indian or broader South Asian influences?
 - What role does community support play in sustaining the station financially and socially?
 - How does Fever FM contribute to the media skills, training, or career development of Muslim minority members?
- Questions for a professional who was trained at Fever FM radio station:
 - How did you first get involved with Fever FM station, and can you describe your experience training there as a community member?
 - Looking back, how do you assess the role of minority radio in shaping your professional identity and career trajectory?
 - In your experience, how does community radio enable minority voices to be heard differently than mainstream radio?

B. Minority Radio Audiences:

- Can you describe your radio listening habits?
- What motivates you to listen to community radio station rather than mainstream radio stations?

- Do you participate actively in your community radio (e.g. Sending messages, calling, or attending events) or mostly listen passively?
- How does minority radio station meet your needs?
- Do you feel the station represents your cultural, religious, or social identity accurately?
- Have you ever participated in supporting your community radio station?
- Is there anything else about the station's role in your life or community that you'd like to share?

APPENDIX C: MINORITY RADIO ARTICLE'S QUESTIONNAIRE

Note: This questionnaire was administered electronically via an online survey platform, accessed by participants through a QR code link. The content has been reproduced here in a print-friendly format for the purpose of thesis documentation. No modifications have been made to the questions or response options.

Section 1: Demographic Information

1. Gender:

- a) Male
- b) Female
- c) Prefer not to say

2. Age Group:

- a) under 16
- b) 16-24
- c) 25-34
- d) 35-44
- e) 45-54
- f) 55-64
- g) 65-74
- h) >74

3. Ethnic Group:

- a) Bangladeshi
- b) Indian
- c) Pakistani
- d) Chinese
- e) Other Asian
- f) Arab
- g) Black African
- h) White
- i) Other Asians
- j) Other

4. Religion:

- a) Christianity
- b) Islam
- c) Hinduism
- d) Sikhism
- e) Buddhism
- f) Judaism
- g) No religion
- h) Other
- i) Prefer not to say

5. Residential City:

- a) Batley
- b) Bradford
- c) Brighouse
- d) Castleford
- e) Dewsbury
- f) Halifax
- g) Huddersfield
- h) Keighley
- i) Leeds
- j) Wakefield
- k) Other

Section 2: Survey Questions

Q1. How often do you listen to radio?

- a) Always
- b) Very often
- c) Sometimes
- d) Rarely
- e) I don't listen to radio

Q2. What radio stations do you listen to?

- a) mainstream radio
- b) community radio
- c) Mainstream and community radio

Q3. What community radio station(s) do you listen to? (Select all that apply)

- a) Akash Radio Leeds
- b) Bradford Asian Radio
- c) Fever FM
- d) Link FM
- e) Marefa Radio
- f) Panjab Radio
- g) Radio Apni Awaz
- h) Radio MAC Radio
- i) Sunrise Radio
- j) Sangam Sunrise Radio

Q4. Have you ever engaged with radio stations and shared your experiences as a minority member?

- a) Yes, frequently
- b) Occasionally, when I feel strongly about a topic
- c) No, I haven't had the chance to participate
- d) Not interested in participating

Q5. In your opinion, does radio have the power to challenge societal norms and promote social change regarding minority issues?

- a) Yes, radio can be a catalyst for social change
- b) It can have some influence, but other factors are also important
- c) No, radio has limited impact on societal norms
- d) Not sure, I haven't seen significant examples of social change through radio

Q6. In your opinion, how can radio contribute to bridging the communication gap between minority communities and the larger society? (Select all that apply)

- a) By providing a platform for dialogue and understanding
- b) By sharing stories that promote empathy and cross-cultural connections
- c) By addressing social issues and advocating for inclusivity
- d) By facilitating community outreach and engagement programs

Q7. Do you listen to Fever FM Radio?

- a) Yes
- b) No

Q8. How frequently do you listen to Fever FM radio programs?

- a) Daily
- b) Several times a week
- c) Once a week
- d) Occasionally
- e) Rarely or never

Q9. How do you typically access Fever FM radio? (Select all that apply)

- a) Traditional FM/AM radio
- b) The online streaming platform
- c) Mobile apps
- d) Other (please specify)

Q10. What aspects of Fever FM radio programs appeal to you the most? (Select all that apply)

- a) Representation of minority voices and perspectives
- b) Cultural and linguistic content relevant to the minority communities
- c) News and information specific to the minority communities
- d) Music and entertainment tailored to minority audiences
- e) Other (please specify)

Q11. Do you feel that Fever FM radio programs adequately reflects the changing interests and preferences of the younger generation within the minority community?

- a) To a Great Extent
- b) Somewhat
- c) Very Little
- d) Not at All sure

Q12. To what extent does Fever FM cover subjects that interest you?

- a) To a Great Extent
- b) Somewhat
- c) Not really
- d) Not at all

Q13. Are there any specific topics or issues that you would like to see addressed more in Fever FM radio programming? Please describe.

Q14. What improvements or additions would you like to see in Fever FM radio programming?

Q15. To what extent can radio serve as a platform for giving voice to minorities?

- a) To a Great Extent
- b) Somewhat
- c) Very Little
- d) Not at All

Q16. In what ways has radio provided a platform for minority members to express their voice? (Select all that apply)

- a) By featuring diverse voices and perspectives
- b) By addressing issues relevant to minority communities
- c) By promoting cultural and artistic expressions
- d) By providing opportunities for community engagement
- e) Other (please specify)

Q17. To what extent minority radio successfully represented minority's identity?

- a) To a Great Extent
- b) Somewhat
- c) Very Little
- d) Not at All

Q18. Which aspect(s) of radio programming empower expressing identity of minorities? (Select all that apply)

- a) Talk shows and discussions
- b) Music and artistic programming
- c) News and current affairs coverage
- d) Community-focused programs and initiatives
- e) Other (please specify)

Q19. To what extent does radio contribute in creating a sense of belonging between the members of the minority community??

- a) To a Great Extent
- b) Somewhat
- c) Very Little
- d) Not at All

Q20. How has radio contributed in creating a sense of belonging and community among minority members? (Select all that apply)

- a) By fostering connections and solidarity among listeners
- b) Highlighting the achievements and contributions of minority individuals
- c) Addressing shared concerns and challenges faced by minority communities
- d) Other (please specify)

Q21. Have you ever participated in any event or activity to support your community radio station?

- a) Yes
- b) No

Q22. What type of event or activity have you participated in supporting your community radio. (Select all that apply)

- a) Fundraising events
- b) Volunteer work
- c) Hosting a show or segment
- d) Participating in discussions/interviews
- e) Attending live broadcasts or performances
- f) Donations
- g) Other (please specify)

Q23. What would encourage you to support a community radio station? (Select all that apply)

- a) Engaging and diverse programming
- b) Local news coverage
- c) Opportunities for community involvement
- d) Clear mission and goals
- e) High-quality production and content
- f) Other (please specify)

Q24. what motivated you to make a donation? (Select all that apply)

- a) Belief in supporting local media
- b) Enjoyment of specific programs/shows
- c) Community impact and benefit
- d) Personal connection to the station or its mission
- e) Other (please specify)

Q25. Do you have any additional thoughts or ideas you would like to share with the researcher?

APPENDIX D: RELIGIOUS FEMALE INFLUENCERS ARTICLE'S SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- Can you tell me about your experience as a religious influencer, especially your start and what motivated you to create content?
- How do you navigate Omani cultural and social expectations while sharing content online? And what role does your faith or religious identity play in shaping your content and your presence online?
- What role, if any, has your family played in shaping, supporting, or hindering your decision to become an influencer?
- Do you feel your content challenges stereotypes about religious women in the Omani community? How?
- How do you incorporate religious teachings into your content, and what guides your interpretations?
- How do you decide whether or not to post selfies, and what considerations guide how you present yourself in them?
- What impact do you hope your content has on your followers and the broader Omani society?
- How do you see the relationship between religious teachings and the ideas often associated with feminism?

Information Sheet

Minority Radio in the United Kingdom: The case of Muslim radio Stations in West Yorkshire

You are being invited to take part in a research project, led by Dr. Sultan Al-Azri (a PhD. researcher in Media and Communication at the University of Leeds). Before you decide whether to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the purpose of the project?

The study aims to analyze how local media producers, creators, professionals of South Asian Muslim community descent try to cater to the needs of their community and try to combat their lack of visibility in mainstream media. It also seeks to hear from community members and audiences about the role such stations play in fostering a sense of community belonging.

Why have I been chosen?

We invite you to take part in this research study because of your position as a media professional in a local media station that plays a role in fostering a sense of community belonging and combat the lack of visibility in mainstream media.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to

sign a consent form) and you can still withdraw at any time. You do not have to give a reason.

What do I have to do?/ What will happen to me if I take part?

We expect that your participation in the interview will last approximately 60-90 minutes. We will schedule a time for an interview which will be held in place and time that works with your schedule. If the physical interview is not attainable for any reason, the interview will be held online via zoom or a similar secure platform. You will be interviewed by the researchers, Mr. Sultan Al-Azri and Dr. Nour Halabi. Our conversation will be audio recorded and subsequently transcribed for accuracy.

The interview will be about your role in the radio station, how do you cater to the needs of your community and your attempt to combat your community lack of visibility in mainstream media. We would like you to speak about these topics in some detail but within the bounds of time constrictions. We will have a list of question, but the conversation might lead us in different directions, depending on your answers.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

I believe there are no known risks associated with this research study; however, it is impossible to rule out some discomfort in the interview. However, if there is any issue of any kind of sensitivities, all needed considerations will be taken to protect you against vulnerability during the interview, and after the interviews have been completed. This includes taking any steps necessary to avoid: the threat of exploiting you, making you vulnerable and leave you open to any embarrassment or loss of reputation. Therefore, data management and curation process during and beyond the end of the project will follow rigorous measures to ensure confidentiality, privacy and data protection. This includes but not limited to anonymization of your identity, strictly limiting access to the collected data to the researcher and the project supervisors and omitting any collected data that can reveal your stands in opposition to the authoritarian regime or it may cause negative consequences on you.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that the conversation will be intellectually stimulating and will provide an opportunity to step back from the day-to-day routines and reflect on one's own experience and participation as a media professional belongs to a minority community.

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

The interview will be audio recorded and will be used for transcription only. Only transcripts will be used for analysis and for illustration in publications, conference presentations and lectures. This includes this project as well as relevant future research conducted by the researcher. No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one outside the project team (myself and my supervisors) will be allowed access to the original recordings.

Use, dissemination and storage of research data

Your personal information (e.g. contact information), audio recordings and interview transcript will be stored on secure servers, which are approved by the investigator's university, University of Leeds. Research data will be destroyed one year after the research is published.

What will happen to my personal information?

All the contact information that we collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential and will be stored separately from the research data. I will take steps wherever possible to anonymise the research data so that you will not be identified in any reports or publications.

What will happen to the results of the research project?

The results of this research may be published in research papers, conference presentation and lectures. Publishing academic work takes time (it will be several months after the interview) but when it appears we can send you a copy if you wish. Aside from publications emerging directly from this study, we may use the data in subsequent research.

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

The study will seek information about your experiences and perspectives related to minority radio, including media practices, participation, and representation. This information is collected to help understand how minority radio functions as a platform for voice, inclusion, and community engagement within the broader media landscape.

The study specifically analyzes how local media producers, creators, professionals of South Asian descent try to cater to the needs of their community and try to combat their lack of visibility in mainstream media. You were chosen for participation because of your role in a local media station as media professional.

Who is organising/ funding the research?

This research is organized by the researchers, and no funding bodies are involved.

Contact for further information

For further questions please contact:

Sultan Al-Azri

Email: mesaaa@leeds.ac.uk

Phone (Mobile): 0044 7745074431

*** You will be given a copy of the information sheet and a signed consent form to keep. Thank you for taking the time to read this information.**

APPENDIX F: CONSENT FORM SAMPLE

Consent to take part in:

**Mediating Religious Authority and Women's Rights: Self-Identified
Religious Omani Female Influencers in the Digital Public Sphere**

	Add your initials next to the statements you agree with
I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated 01/02/2024 explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.	
I agree for the data collected from me to be stored and used in relevant future research.	
I agree to take part in the above research project and will inform the lead researcher should my contact details change during the project and, if necessary, afterwards.	

Name of participant	
Participant's signature *	
Date*	
Name of researcher	Sultan Al-Azri
Signature	
Date	

*To be signed and dated in the presence of the participant.