Social Media in Perceived Levels of National Security

Subjects: Social Issues

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The increase in the use of social media as a 21st century communication tool is in parallel increasing the threat to national security globally. Security is, according to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory, a fundamental need of human life and the level to which this is experienced by members of a community is reflected in the confidence and security of the respective society. As governance bodies across the world seek to establish sustainable solutions to the provision of national security and disaster management for their communities, they are challenged in addressing the conundrum of managing the influence of social media.

national security   social media   youth   crisis   multiple linear regression   social media influence

1. Introduction

Social Media (SM), its reach, impact, and potential in a globalized world are no longer contested; it has affected people's lives, regarding its use and misuse [1]. The phenomenal rise in the use of the internet with associated simple and multi-layered social media platforms is recognized globally as one of the most significant threats to security at the local, regional, national, and global level. The role of social media as a mechanism for seeking to destabilize intellectual convictions, ideological constants, and moral and social virtues to create an imbalance within society, increasing the threat to national security and crisis, is widely acknowledged in current literature [2][3][4]. The research presented herein seeks to inform on the influence of social media on elements contributing to national security as experienced in the United Arab Emirates. Al-Huwaish [5] suggests security comprises different elements and their priority is different for each individual. These security elements include social, political, economic, criminal, food, water, cultural, environmental, and information security (environmental and information being more recent security additions), all of which are interdependent. Al Huwaish [5] further proffers the interdependence of these elements of security results in disruption across the comprehensive set of security when one of the elements is lost or disrupted.

2. The Influence of Social Media on Perceived Levels of National Security

Herein, the suggestion by Al-Huwaish [5] is that the makeup of national security comprises interdependent elements including social, political, economic, criminal, food, water, cultural, environmental, and information security (environmental and information being more recent security additions). The work of Al-Suwaidi [6] argues that the 21st century communication tool, the internet, and associated media platforms, and its excessive use in society, especially by youths, has had repercussions/impacts on these various social, economic, political, intellectual, ideological, moral, personal, and national security levels within the Arab world. The work of Norri-Sederholm et al. [7] suggests social media is an increasing security threat impacting personal lives and a key channel for dissemination of information for political gain. This influence, Norri-Sederholm et al. [7] suggest, is of particular significance for youth as the internet has become:

…a core part of their everyday reality and not just a peripheral place to visit and share ideas with others. Young people's connections and networks in social media also provide them with the opportunity to engage in different types of political discussions in society.

(p. 231)

Al Zaabi and Tomic [8] in their work researching the influence of the use of social media platforms on recruiting and supporting terrorist activities conclude that there is evidence that social media can be directly linked to terrorism, planning, recruitment, and attacks. The authors suggest the overall outcome of the use of social media platforms has resulted in successful recruitment campaigns, particularly in youths, to join terrorist groups. Similarly, the work of Al-Saggaf and Davies [9] in examining the expression of grievances in the Arabic Twitter sphere identified the willing engagement with these topics on online social media platforms. The implication here is the direct influence of the internet and associated platforms to disseminate influential campaigns to disrupt the security of people's lives and the future of their national security. Vasu et al., [10] in reporting on the influence of fake news and referring to the velocity of information, which is spread within seconds online, suggests this form of media offers those seeking to destabilize a state, to readily, and with impact, spread disinformation and achieve their aims. Al-Enzi [11] explains that social media has become one of the most important tools on which terrorist and criminal groups rely in spreading misleading rumors and destructive ideas. The work of Al Zaabi and Tomic [8] advocates for research that identifies the means for controlling terrorist activities on social media platforms:

…Any future researcher must therefore understand that 90% of terrorist activities have gone dark, meaning that it is high time to research the strategies to control their clandestine activities.

(p. 1)

Similarly, Cardenas et al. [12] support the urgency of research to identify behavior bordering on criminality within the deregulated world of social media as a human security imperative for governments (p. 1). This call for further research is an underpinning premise herein, that is to develop a more in-depth understanding of the influence of social media on the perceived level of national security as seen through an Arabic youth lens. Specifically, the study has been undertaken with Arabic youth in the United Arab Emirates.

There is a rapidly developing body of literature which collectively indicates that social media has become the communication tool of choice and, either by default or intent (dependent on the user), is influencing peoples' perspectives on personal and national issues [7][9]. Social media has altered the way we become informed and form opinions. The role of online social media for influencing the perception of national security of a nation from an external view is discussed in the 2020 work of Marine-Roig [13], analyzing online travel reviews and the use of electronic word-of-mouth. Marine-Roig's [13] work centered on analyzing the impact of online social media tourism-related platforms following a period of terrorist-related activities and unrest in Catalonia. The work suggests:

…results show that serious events had a minimal impact on the city's image as perceived and shared by reviewers despite the enormous media coverage.

An additional work of Marine-Roig [14] and Marine-Roig and Huertas [15] explores the influence of user-generated content (UGC) suggesting such content shared on social media has the capacity to impact the online image of a country and the ranking as a tourism destination, and by association perceptions of safety and security of visitors and citizens. Similarly, the

work of Tsoy & Tirasawasdichai [16] analyzing the role of social media in shaping public risk perception during the COVID-19 pandemic suggests:

…while traditional media still plays a significant role in shaping risk perception, social media can be considered even more influential.

(p. 39)

Whilst there is now more recent work published in relation to the influence of social media on society, the earlier work of Al Sumadi [17] in exploring the role of social networks/media sites (Facebook and Twitter and WhatsApp and YouTube) signposts the strong potential influence of these communication tools for disrupting the perception of security and, specifically in the Al Sumadi [17] study, intellectual security. Al Sumadi [17] defines intellectual security as:

…means to maintain authentic cultural components to face other foreign cultural currents that may be suspicious.

(p. 633)

According to Al Sumadi [17], a review of work in this field in the period leading up to 2016 was limited, explaining:

…we should point to the rarity of studies that deal directly with the effect of social networks causing Intellectual Deviation.

(p. 636)

The dimension of Intellectual Deviation as explained by Al Sumadi [17] resonates with the current UAE study through the association of culture and religion; however, a similar situation occurs as experienced by Al Sumadi [17] in exploring the social network/media influence on Intellectual Deviation, in that there is no direct comparison in terms of the survey dimensions of the UAE. The UAE study does enable insight into a broader range of dimensions on national security. Al Sumadi [17] concludes that social networking/media does cause intellectual deviation through the potential to use the platforms to spread social, political, and religious ideas. The work of Stanger et al. [18] encompassed a different angle from which to explore the relationship between social networks/media and Arabic culture and religion. In the Stanger et al. [18] work, the survey instrument sought to understand how those with an Arabic cultural and religious background used social media. Although it here does not directly align to the current UAE study, the topic herein, the findings, and the results resonate with the UAE results suggesting limited negative influence of social media experienced on cultural and religious perspectives.

A central tenet herein is the concept of social media as a fertile environment that some exploit to exchange misconceptions among its users to create internal and external national instability, i.e., the systematic distribution of communications via social media to gain support from young people to impact on the national security of the state in many areas (cultural and societal, moral and religious, political, economic, security). A review of the literature associated with the Arab Spring suggests social media played a major role in sabotaging and causing unrest in several Arab countries in the recent period in the so-named 'Arab Spring' protests. Terrorist satellite channels exploited their various social platforms to incite people against their governments whilst others used it to distribute misinformation about the UAE, the aim of which was to destabilize UAE national security and internal stability [19][20][21][22]. The spread of these networks and websites in the UAE society, due to their technological and educational potential, poses a major challenge because of their negative and positive impact on society, and at all political, economic, educational, cultural, social, security, religious, and moral levels.

Globally, there has been an increasing body of literature focused on understanding the impact of social media across multiple domains associated with youth, chief amongst which are mental health wellbeing, for example [23][24][25], and political activism, for example [26][27][28][29]. The literature does not definitively confirm the use of social media by youth as positive or negative, rather there are elements of both and it may be influenced by the lens through which the research is conducted. Importantly, as suggested by Auxier and Anderson in 2021 [30], the youth category is the most frequent user of social networking sites.

Saleh [31] suggests social media has added positive dimensions to people's lives, and has promoted social, cultural, scientific, and political changes in their lives, including elements as briefly described as follows. Self-enhancement whereby social media have contributed to the self-enhancement of individuals by giving them the opportunity to create an independent entity in the community in which they express themselves. Social media has expanded communication networks, suggesting social media has contributed to the exchange of common interests, habits, and activities. Hence, individuals could search for friends with common hobbies and qualities around the world. Additional positive aspects suggested by Saleh [31] include social media as a platform for the exchange of ideas and the expression of personality, intellect, culture, and beliefs of the participant. Enabling connection with family and friends across the world and connecting businesses have been identified as further positive attributes of social media.

In balance, Al-Labban [32] identified a set of negative attributes of social media, and although not an exhaustive list, the following offers an insight into the broad areas of negative influence. These areas resonate in the literature exploring the impact of social media more widely, for example: the work of Alexander [33]; Akram & Kumar [34]; Raggad & Shweihat [35]. The areas proffered by Al-Labban [32] include the addictive nature of social media whereby it generates circumstances where the user loses track of time and place and connection within the reality of the lived moment. One of the more dangerous influences from a national security perspective is the opportunity in social media to hide one's true identify, the ability to use pseudonyms. Current literature supports the suggestion by Al-Labban [32] of the negative influence of social media on the perception of national security through dissemination of destructive ideas and the spreading of a negative culture, e.g., violence and terrorism. Research exploring the role of social media in the support of terrorist-related activities is widely published and the work resonates with the suggestions of Al-Labban [32], Hollewell and Longpre [36], KhosraviNik and Amer [37], and Cherney et al. [38]. In the context here, the work of Al-Labban [31] suggests social media supports the loss of Arab culture identity replacing it with a more global identity.

In the context of establishing and sustaining national security, Morsi [39] indicates achievement requires: (a) recognizing the threats and challenges and potential risks; (b) use of soft and military power to defend national security; (c) provide the capacity to defend national security; and (d) utilizing future foresight data to build scenarios to prepare for future threats. The relationship between these requirements and social media usage lies in understanding the impact of social media on (a) and (b). In addition to the negative aspects of social media discussed above, the work of Al-Huwaish [5] highlights the governance challenges associated with social media, suggesting an additional threat to national security is enabled where the platforms/channels of social media are not subject to frameworks or laws that control the content disseminated and circulated through the respective social media platforms.

The study presented here included exploring the relative level of influence of social media on religion and through religion, the perceived level of national security experienced by youth in the UAE. In association with the impact on religion, Abdul-Khalequ [40] suggests social media has enabled groups bearing characteristics of Islam to communicate and campaign ideas that are not reflective of authentic Arab values, for example the actions of ISIS in Iraq and Syria in 2018 in recruitment activities. The work of Al-Smadi, [17] and Acar [41], similarly suggests that the role of social media has provided an opportunity to influence cultural beliefs and ethical standards and actions. As discussed by McElreath [42], and Huda et al. [43], social media has

become a vehicle for extremist organizations to document, broadcast, plan, and carry out their terrorist operations. The social media platforms enable members of terrorist organizations to use them to communicate with each other, to exchange private information, to spread it in remote geographical areas, and to relate them organizationally or intellectually to each other. This perspective is similarly reflected in the work of Akram and Kumar [34] in proffering that social media plays a central and strategic role in influencing the values of citizenship and loyalty, and it is a means of dialogue and marketing the image of the state, its values and its civilization to the world, and psychologically influencing followers, particularly youth.

Developing an understanding of the perspective Arabic youth have on the influence of social media on cultural, economic, political, religious, and security domains is unique. The point of difference is rather than isolate the individual elements, the research has sought to build knowledge of the perception of influence on the combination of aspects and the relationship between each element. A further point of difference to previous research is here it to explore the potential for the perception of influence of social media to predict the level of national security perceived by youth in the UAE. **Figure 1** offers a conceptual diagram of the relationship between the five elements and the aims of the research.
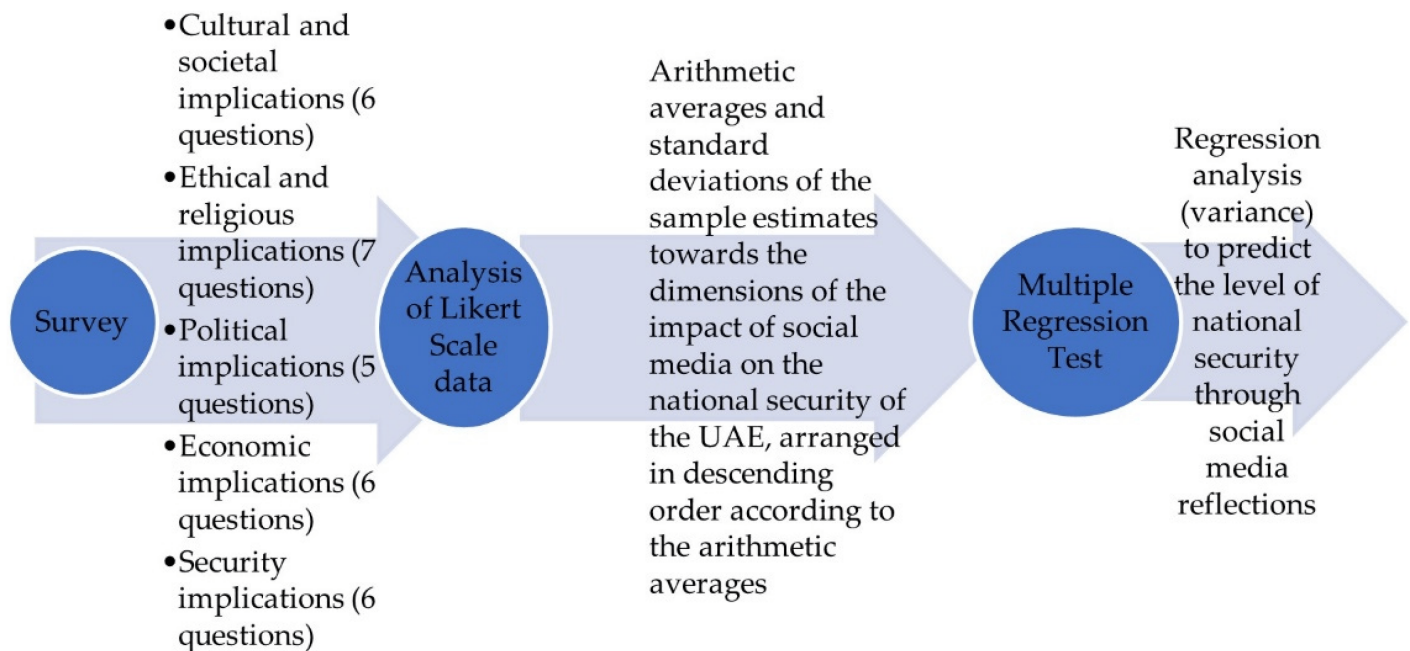

Figure 1. Conceptual diagram of the relationship between the five elements (survey) data and the aims herein.

A significant challenge with the current UAE study is the limited available literature reporting similarly comparable studies. This situation is due in part to the orientation of studies associated with the influence of social media in society. As indicated in **Table 1**, whilst by no means an exhaustive list of studies, in the domain of social media and influence in society, the examples are indicative of the variation in the focus of studies on the influence of social media. One of the noteworthy aspects of the UAE study, is what it is not; it does not attempt at this stage to explore the nuances within the dimensions, in particular, as there is a wealth of knowledge in this area, and it does not delve into social media influence on radicalization and terrorism.

Table 1. Comparative literature.

Author/s	Reference Title	Content Focus	Current Study Comparison/Contribution
Norri-Sederholm, T., Norvanto, E., Talvitie-Lamberg,	Social Media as the Pulse of National Security	A four-year study not yet complete, the study approaches the subject from	Findings not yet available from the Finnish study, the current UAE study will offer a valuable comparison; however, there may

Author/s	Reference Title	Content Focus	Current Study Comparison/Contribution
K., Aki-Mauri Huhtinen, A. [7]	Threats: A Framework for Studying How Social Media Influences Young People's Safety and Security Situation	the perspective of society's comprehensive security and investigates whether activities in social media influence attitudes towards personal and national security, and young people's safety and security situation.	be a difference in the dimensions investigated in the two studies.
Al Zaabi, K., Tomic, D. [8]	New security paradigm—the use of social networks as a form of threat to the national security state	This qualitative study examined the role of social media in influencing indoctrination.	The study design is not directly comparable to the UAE study; the Al Zaabi and Tomic study suggests social media is a tool for influencing national security—the UAE study indicates there is limited impact.
Al-Enezi, N. N. [11]	Employment of social networking sites in response to rumors	Study exclusively explored the role of social media managing Facebook so as to mitigate false information.	The study confirmed the wide use of social media by youth and the potential of its influence. The UAE study resonates the findings.
Marine-Roig, E. [13]	Content analysis of online travel reviews	Study explores online travel reviews—specifically related to perspective on image of areas with recent terrorist activity.	The study aligns with the UAE findings that social media activity had limited impact on the perspective of security in specific locations.
Tsoy, D., Tirasawasdichai, T., & Kurpayanidi, K. I. [16]	Role of social media in shaping public risk perception during COVID-19 pandemic:	This study did not contain data, it was a review of literature, the theme of which indicates social media exposes people to more information and the potential to heighten risk perception, calling for attention to crisis communication management and the use of social media to examine public opinion.	There is no comparable data, the study is valuable in confirming the strength of social media and its potential to heighten risk perception and by default perception of security.
Akram, W., Kumar, R. [34]	A study on positive and negative effects of social media on society	A presentation of positive and negative effects of social media on society—no data available—a general review of commonly used social media sites and the positive and negative effects on education, business, society generally, teens, and children.	The study does not offer any data with which to establish a comparison, the study does support the potential of social media to have positive and negative effects on these dimensions in society.The UAE study offers an extension to this study through provision of data and analysis of youth use of social media.
Raggad, A., & Shweihat, S. [35]	The degree of positive and negative effects of social media networks from the point of view of the	The study includes a questionnaire of 55 paragraphs and analyses the most attractive topics on social media from the perspective of a sample of German-Jordanian University	The approach in the Raggad and Shweihat is similar to this current UAE study, the focus of the questions is different in that the UAE study is exploring specifically the connection between the influence of social media on perspectives of national security, the Raggad and Shweihat study explores

Author/s	Reference Title	Content Focus	Current Study Comparison/Contribution
	German-Jordanian University students	students. The current study aimed to know the reality of the use of social networks by students of the German-Jordanian University in terms of the topics they follow and the sites that are most attractive to them, analyzing the social and cultural effects (negative and positive).	which topics on social media are of most interest and the students' perspectives of the positive and negative influences of social media related to those topics.
Hollewell, G.F., Longpre, N. [36]	Radicalization in the social media era: Understanding the relationship between self-radicalization and the internet	This study focused on the role of social media in self-radicalization. Results showed that individuals holding a university degree—especially young men—were more at risk of endorsing positive attitudes toward political violence and terrorism, and, therefore, more at risk of being radicalized.	The Hollewell and Longpre study questions focused on understanding the emotional intelligence, psychological involvement on social media, attitudes toward terrorism, and political violence, and loneliness. These dimensions did not directly align with the focus of the UAE survey dimensions.
Al Smadi, H. [17]	The Effect of Social Networking Sites In Causing Intellectual Deviation From Qassim University Students' Perspective	The study focusses on investigating the effect of social networks in causing intellectual deviation (distortion of Islam and noble values) by KSA university students.	The study utilized a questionnaire and analyzed the results in a similar process to the UAE study—means & standard deviation; Pearson correlation to treat variables, Manova analysis. The results suggest a potential for a strong influence by social media on intellectual deviation (culture/religion/values of Islam). The study does not consider national security. The difference here with the UAE study results suggest the core dimensions are interdependent with security least impacted.
Stanger, N., Alnaghaimshi, N., Pearson, E. [18]	How do Saudi youth engage with social media	The study utilizes Hofstede's cultural dimensions to assess how cultural and religious factors are shaping the use of social media (Instragram, facebook, snapchat). The research sample used was KSA students studying in New Zealand.	Surveys and interviews were conducted, the results indicating the sample were very conscious of behaving ethically and culturally and religiously appropriately on social media. These were not the dimensions of the UAE study; however, the results do resonate with the UAE results suggesting limited negative influence of social media experienced on cultural and religious perspectives.

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