THE IMPACT OF FACEBOOK DURING THE YEMENI UPRISING: A FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

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ABSTRACT

The role and effect of Facebook social networking usage during the uprising in Yemen is investigated. Qualitative data was collected from an activist who participated in the main uprising. Focus group interviews were conducted at various locations in Yemen to obtain sufficient data to explore the usage of Facebook among the protesters. Informants comprising well-experienced activists provided differing information, which was analysed thematically to provide generalised findings based on the study context. The results show that the Yemenis were actively involved in the uprising. The main aim of the Yemenis was to choose a new government committed to the welfare of the people. The government contended and abused the citizens of Yemenis in an attempt to stop street demonstrations and the posting of information and data pertaining to the uprising. Findings revealed that Facebook was mainly used to protest against the government as a way to defend the people's freedom and the support of fair government. The role of Facebook lies in demonstrating the anger of the Yemenis towards their leaders. The attempt to show this dissatisfaction led to increasing hardship and poverty in Yemen.
Key words: Facebook, Yemen, uprising.

INTRODUCTION

The Facebook social network site is widely used for communication; it is versatile and has played a crucial role in every society. In countries where media services are controlled by government, for instance in Yemen, social networking sites are used as an alternative to traditional media systems. The use of Facebook among Yemenis has had a huge impact on the lives of the common people in different parts of the country. In countries where radio, TV, and newspapers are controlled by the government, Internet usage is maximised to meet citizens' needs. Facebook on a mobile phone has been used to oppose government's policies and laws (Riaz, 2011).

During the Arab revolutions, the communication media system was banned, and citizens were not allowed to protest against the government. The reason was that the government did not want anyone to reveal issues regarding corruption and high unemployment in various government settings, including in Yemen (Riaz, 2011). The Arab region's people started to force out the dictatorial regimes to reform government practices.

The Arab region called for transparent, accountable, and participatory governance through action against corruption and the abuse of power. This was a step towards political and economic reform to address the rising challenges of unemployment (Hanafi, 2011). The Yemeni uprising followed the Tunisian and Egyptian uprising. The Yemeni protesters were openly against corruption, unemployment, and deteriorating economic conditions (Nevens, 2011). The uprising crisis throughout the Arab World revealed that social media networking

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sites such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are effective tools for communication. The Yemeni youth carried out a mass social movement that helped them achieve their motive. which was to topple the Saleh regime (McAulay, 2011). Protesters spread information and posted images on Facebook to attract more Yemenis, which in turn attracted the attention of other countries. It thus shows that social media networking sites support the flow of information (Lee and Ma, 2011). Purcell et al. (2010) acknowledge that social media networking sites are a powerful source of news. About 37% of the Internet users share news and stories about governments, friends, and family using social networking sites, as was the case in Yemen.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The uprising was a response by the citizens to the aggressive dictatorship regime led by President Saleh. Yemeni leaders created a form of "hereditary" leadership to keep their family members in government. Because the leaders earlier resisted internal and external forces, attempts in mid-2006 was unsuccessful (Schmitz, 2011). There was a struggle in the early days of the uprising in Yemen because the dictatorial regimes controlled the traditional media, including TV, national newspapers, and radio stations. This has been a recurring strategy used by the government to shut down Yemeni opposition efforts towards a change of government. The government made it very difficult for citizens to communicate in the early stage of the social movement. Social networking sites, especially Facebook, were the only alternative communication platform for Yemenis during the uprising. Facebook was frequently put to use to initiate social movement and mass protests, especially among the students at Sana'a University. The efforts made by the students in various community squares extended to major cities in Sana'a such as Taiz, Aden, Hodeidah, and many others.

Facebook was used to transfer information and communicate with students and other citizens. With the massive participation in the uprising by the citizens, the capital city was stirred to protest even at various governorates of Yemen. The mass demonstration was born out of a sense of governmental threat and unfairness. The uprising boiled down to political despotism, poverty, corruption, and discrimination. The ruling party had been in power since the 1960s and dominated until 2011 (Bay, 2011). Yemen declared itself a democracy in 1990 and reunified under the leadership of former President Saleh. The regime deliberately sabotaged party elections and left marginal freedom to other political parties. There was no press freedom and the media were subject to government prescription. This unfairness was practised across Arab countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria (Barry, 2011). Strong policies to control the media systems made it very difficult for citizens to object to government leadership. The opportunity afforded by social networking sites was utilised to strengthen ties to fight corruption in a way that surprised the government. Although changes were achieved across the Arab world, especially in the political arena through mass demonstration, it is unclear how social networking sites contributed to the uprising in Yemen. The leadership circle of Yemenis was strongly against any opposition to their regime (Thomas, 2011). This was seen across Arab countries (Davies, 2014). Thus, the Arab Spring and the Yemeni uprising could be termed a "force of liberation" initiated for the welfare of the people. However, the students' behavioural intention and self-presentation on Facebook affected their daily life, activities, and attitude (Karpinski and Duberstein, 2009; Kirschner and Karpinski, 2010). Studies have found the attitude of people on online social networks affects their daily interaction with others and leads to abuse and addiction (Brenner, 1997; Veil, Buehner and Palenchar, 2011). This study partly tends to explore Facebook usage to proffer recommendations to control its effect on the everyday life of the Yemeni Sana'a University students.

Therefore, a clear understanding of the self-presentation, behaviour, and attitude of the protesters is central to determining how Facebook can be used to improve learning. This is because learning content and other important government information can be transferred using Facebook. Individuals are motivated to use social networking sites because they are cheap and convenient wherever internet facilities are available. Because the user's profile on a social networking site can be manipulated, this makes information posted on Facebook questionable. It is, therefore, important to understand self-consciousness, behaviour, and attitude towards Facebook usage during the uprising. Using focus group discussion data, themes were developed to specifically address the research questions. The thematic analysis generalises the discussion and provides a distinctive insight on the uprising. Quantitative statistics using numerical data were used to measure the research variables.

The technology acceptance model (TAM) postulated by Davis (1989) was used to explain Facebook usage. This is because social networking sites such as Facebook are technologically based. The social judgement theory postulated by Sherif (1965) was used to explain the attitude leading to the acceptance and involvement of Yemenis in the uprising. These theories play a central role in explaining how a persuasive Facebook communication platform influenced the attitude of its users.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How was Facebook used by the Sana'a University students to facilitate communication during the Yemeni uprising?
- What compelled Sana'a University students to accept and get actively involved in the uprising?
- What is the effect of Facebook use, social movement, and social learning via social judgment on Yemeni student involvement in participating and sharing information during the Yemeni uprising?

ANALYSIS OF FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

This study is confined to investigating Facebook usage during the Yemeni uprising, especially among the university students. Facebook allows its users to share media content and interact. The theoretical basis of Facebook as a communication platform describes its specific social state of action, and in-depth discussions and targeted analysis of Facebook further reveals a comprehensive understanding about it usage, addressing the research questions of this study. To achieve this, a purposive sample was assigned for this study, a method that is common among researchers. The sampling method enabled the researcher to select a sample of the research-targeted population with the expectation of getting more information about the study topic, which enabled the researcher to analyse deeply and to understand, describe, and explain the target phenomenon.

The focus group discussion usually uses the target sample; therefore, the researcher delivered three discussions in different regions in the country and hosted groups of people who were interested in the study topic. The data collected was categorised according to themes to address the specific condition of interest and to focus the findings of this research. Based on the focus group in-depth group discussion data, the result used the theme to present a specific answer to a specific research question provided by the interview result. The interview locations from where the data was collected as well as the number of participants in the in-depth group discussion are provided under Table 1.

The table shows the distribution of the participants in the three areas where qualitative data were collected for the analysis presented in this chapter. The specialisation of the

informants comprised Illusion journalists, researchers, academicians, entrepreneurs, and establishment staff (Table 2), spread across the third in-depth group discussion sessions comprising 24 informants. Of the 24 experts who participated in three interview sessions, 20 were men (corresponding to 83.3%), while 4 informants were women (constituting 16.7%).

Table 1: Interview locations and number of participants in the in-depth interview

Interview locations	Number of participants	Percentage (%)
The first in-depth discussion at Sana'a	7	29.2
Second in-depth discussion at Taiz Al-Saeed Foundation	8	33.3
Third in-depth discussion at Taiz sidewalk	9	37.5
Total	24	100%

Table 2 shows that the number of informants in each in-depth discussion session ranged between seven and nine. Out of a total of 30 informants invited to participate in this study, 24 responded, corresponding to 80% of the expected respondents. The informants that participated in this study, especially those from Qaeda Scientific, showed great interest and provided much research. Although the number in each group was encouraging, members of the group reported their individual view and experience in the group's in-depth discussion, which lasted for about two hours. Thus, the reporting of different views increases knowledge about number issues, especially on Facebook usage. Group in-depth discussions have been shown to be an ideal and interactive way to explore data from an individual with a different view about a particular situation. A study has shown that this approach can potentially transform a real-life debate involving 10 or fewer members (Gill et al., 2009, p. 293). Therefore, the difficulty of controlling the larger number of informants was minimised in the in-depth group discussion organised in this study.

Table 2: Category of informant's profession

Category of participant's profession	Number	Percentage (%)
Reporters and journalists	3	12.5
Academics and researchers	7	29.2
Free Acts	3	12.5
Employees	11	45.8
Total	24	100.0

DEVELOPMENT OF THEMES

To ensure higher accuracy of the analysis, themes were carefully developed to ensure that all transcriptions informant to the focus group discussion. The researcher has chosen themes that appropriately indicated all the research questions. All the analysis led to the development of entirely several new themes and was noted as part, in a contribution from embarking on this research. First, the researcher carried out a heuristic inquiry, immersing themselves in the

data to understand the feeling of the informants. This was done by executing mute observation to understand the meaning and motives of information conveyed by the informants. Spoken words were carefully merged by combining all the disconnected information.

Second, the researcher conducted an epoch. This was necessary to justify that all the themes fit well in explaining the data. This theoretical approach supported the analysis process. Initially, an attitudinal shift was used to understand the data from a different point of view compared to previous views. This was used to explain the real situation shifting from earlier assumptions based on personal understanding while making interpretations. This process includes reading, comprehension, theme formation, and comparison of data from a different informant. Third, the researcher utilised reduction to ensure that the analysis reported in this study conformed to the data generated from the focused group discussion. Data reduction focused of the present study data and all details found were transcribed. Fourth, the transcription and coding process was used to screen for error. The process of categorisation and developing theme provided a clearer insight into the uprising situations.

The researcher also acts as the instrument of the research. A latent coding method (also known as semantic analysis) was also used in the research. Deacon in 2007 defined these codes as interpretative devices that enable communication to occur in particular cultures to instruct the combination of cultural and ideological meanings (Deacon, 2007). Audio recording was also used as the means for the storage of data. The discussion data was analysed using thematic analysis, coded using the ATLAS.ti version 7.5 software for qualitative research (also essential for handling a large amount of data). This software helped classify, sort, and arrange the information according to the themes. It later examined the relationships by shaping selected themes.

Thematic analysis helped produce a recurring pattern that cut across the preponderance of the data (Taylor, 1984). Themes are concepts indicated by the data and construction of themes and their application should be subjected to the situational demands of a given study (Constas, 1992). The research at hand employs thematic analysis to evaluate the data collected throughout the research process. Thematic analysis operates on the derivation of themes and sub-themes from the collected data that make up the objectives of the research. Thematic analysis is defined as a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Boyatzis, 1998). It organises and describes the data in rich detail, even if carried out minimally. Ideally, the analytic process involves a progression from description, where the data has simply been organised to show patterns in semantic content and summarised, to interpretation, where there is an attempt to theorise the significance of the patterns and their broader meanings and implications (Patton, 1990). A data collection method via proportionate stratified sampling, narrowed the sample size and enabled the researcher to attain a purposive sampling; thus it provided for the ease of the researcher, as the sample size is selective and does not involve a large number or population group. This research employs purposive sampling based on the strata's priory-division in which the samples are specific targeted informants.

FINDINGS

All the empirical materials gathered during the focus group discussion were coded for identification purposes. The code "R" corresponds to each informant's contribution and explain different views from the informants. The codes were considered very useful in providing clear interpretation leading to meaningful conclusions. The "R" represents an informant and ranges from R1 to R24 constituting the total number of informants that participated in this study.

The research questions of this study were answered using themes categorised to specifically provide detailed insight explaining the events of the uprising (see Table 4).

Table 4 Categories and Themes for Focus Group Discussions

Category	Themes
1. Usefulness of the Facebook social network	• Organise protest • Socialise with friends • Information and knowledge • Discuss Yemen's issues • Update friends • Post messages and images • Share
2. Acceptance of involvement in the uprising	• Strengthen unity among Yemenis • Oppose corrupt leaders • Defend citizen's rights • Promote freedom of speech • Promote democratic leadership
3. Consequences of Facebook	• Strengthens opposition parties • Creates disunity among parties • Reveals Yemeni anger towards leaders • Destroys Yemeni relationship • Disrupts economic activities

Qualitatively discussed focused group data obtained from one-on-one interaction has been used to address the research questions of this present study. The analysis comprising of different interview location involving 24 participants from different fields provided sufficient data.

In addressing the first research question of this study, thematically analysed data showed that the Facebook social networking site was useful in many during the uprising especially for organising the protest and socialising with online friends to share information and knowledge pertaining to the uprising. Yemeni issues were also discussed via Facebook among the students, and they posted images and messages to their online friends. This indicated their interest in the welfare of Yemenis. Findings based on the thematic analysis have shown that the perspectives of different individuals slightly differ. Based on the analysis reported in the first category (the usefulness of the Facebook social network), the first research question of this study was analysed. The main use of Facebook during the uprising was mainly to inform other Facebook users about the uprising events through sharing of information and posting of images and messages.

Second, the participation in various protests against the ruling government is shown to be a sign of national interest in Yemen's future. Based on the analysis, the collective mass demonstration organised in Yemen during the uprising was designed to strengthen unity among the people in an attempt to oppose the threat from government and the unfairness of corrupt leaders. By doing so, Yemenis tends to defend their citizenry rights and promote freedom of speech and a fair democratic government. To achieve the intention of the

Yemenis, Facebook was the only option to support communication among the people.

Communication and sharing of information about Yemen politically, socially, and economically was successful through Facebook. Concluding based on the findings generated from the qualitative interview result, the second research question on the acceptance to involve in the uprising has been answered. Participation in the uprising was based on individual perspectives and attitudes towards national unity. Findings show that the Yemeni have demonstrated their eagerness to strengthen unity and to promote freedom of speech.

The genuineness of online interaction during the uprising was addressed by answering the third research question. This was demonstrated through the students' Facebook account during the uprising. Analysis showed that Yemenis participated in the uprising genuinely out of interest in the welfare of Yemenis. This was the motivation to post and publicise different threat imposed to the citizens by the ruling party. Differing views from the informants showed that the university students seek to support unity and fairness.

Yemen's political, economic, and social instability was also a concern that stirred up anger among the Yemenis. Primarily, the aims of the Yemenis were to restore the economic, political, and social state of the country by removing corrupt leaders. Therefore, the uprising was a genuine and honest demonstration against the Yemeni government's corrupt leadership. This was the main cause of the uprising; therefore, the protester opted for a government that would listen to the masses and is committed to welfare of the country at large rather than to individual interest. The consequences of Facebook usage were addressed by answering the fourth research question. The thematic analysis for the fourth research question provided a differing view that was categorised using themes. The result showed that, through this attempt to strengthen national unity, the peace of Yemen was affected. Participating in the sharing of information and social demonstration was intended to reveal anger towards the government. However, Facebook destroyed the relationship of the political parties with public in general and disrupted economic activities. With the increased risk of poverty, the uprising period was economically a wasted period when the government was unable to generate income to sustain the nation. Facebook social media has been shown to be an effective tool for communication; however, dialogue can be applied to critical issues relative to the economy of a developing nation like Yemen. This measure can be used to reduce the risk associated with economic instability and the welfare of the citizens. The consequences of Facebook reflect the effect of the uprising on the economy of Yemen and the tension between the parties and various ethnicities. Disunity among the parties could produce lasting political conflict. Facebook has been shown to be an attractive platform for communication, but it can be used to disrupt economic activities and remove government as in the case of President Saleh. The fifth research question was answered by addressing the effect of the uprising on the Yemenis. Analysis has shown that the uprising in Yemen posed a significant threat to the people and the political parties. Social movements during the Yemeni uprising affected the country politically, socially, and economically. The effect of the uprising heightened security risks and exposed political parties to future crises. This is because the ruling party realised that the other parties collectively joined efforts in a mass demonstration against the government. The view of the protesters was for the betterment of the Yemenis, but it is not clear whether the interest of any political group/party was for the Yemenis or for personal reasons, as was seen in the regime of President Saleh.

The uprising empowered the citizens but led to the loss of valuable property belonging to both individuals and government. The properties involved millions of USD that can be used for other useful purposes in Yemen. The removal of the government was considered a

means of regulating political, social, and economic instability of Yemen, yet the wastages involved were not considered. The economy of Yemen worsened after the uprising as the new government restored the damaged sectors and important facilities supporting government activities, such as telecommunication. Intensified hardship, poverty, and the loss of lives and property were some of the effects of the Yemeni uprising. It was generally accepted that Yemeni participation in the mass demonstration was a sign of rejection of the political ruling party. Upon successful removal of the president Saleh regime, Yemenis believed they had achieved a fundamental step towards the nation's recovery politically, economically and socially.

The findings of this study conclude the uprising to be result of the need or desire of every Yemeni for national transformation. The analysis based on the group discussion presented various views regarding Facebook usage during the Yemeni uprising reflected in the different uses of the Facebook social networking site. This was utilised to mobilise the masses to stand against injustice and unfair leadership. The youth of Yemen, mainly university students, led the demonstration at various places during the uprising that successfully removed the ruling regime led by President Saleh. This was achieved through the communication strengths of the Facebook social networking site. The analysis of qualitative in-depth group discussion conducted at Sana'a, the Taiz Al-Saeed Foundation, and on the Taiz sidewalk has been analysed, focusing on answering the research questions of this study. The specific category was assigned with themes specifically committed to addressing at least one research question. This form of analysis tends to avoid the repetition of the similar idea. Evidence from the in-depth group discussion with experts in the different field has shown that students used Facebook immensely during the uprising to communicate with the protesters. Findings from the interview showed that communities faced significant political challenges as a threat of the division of Yemen states conflicting along sectarian and regional lines. The uprising affected the relationship between the political parties, whether in support of the uprising or against it, and differing views had an impact on the relationship between those parties later. Largely, the acceptance to participate and the involvement of Sana'a University students through Facebook showed the extent of Yemen's economic problems and unemployment issues. The magnitude of the rate of unemployment among young people was among the key issues. Therefore self-consciousness regarding an individual's ability, thoughts, feelings, and behaviour control the university students' beliefs during the uprising. The expectation of the participants were summed up in the three in-depth group discussions and various categorised themes to answer the specific questions. However, the findings of this study were generalised based on the analysis of the research questions. The public was concerned with unfair governance and corruption. This was possible using Facebook because the masses do not have access to media services (for example radio and television) in Yemen; therefore, social isolation in the real world was overcome in Yemen with the help of Facebook.

CONCLUSION

Sana'a University students used Facebook to plan and organise demonstrations, protests, and sit-ins, and to unite other students to participate in the uprising. The involvement of students in the uprising transmitted rejection of government leadership and represented an attempt to oppose the government, which successfully proves to be in their favour when President Ali was overthrown in 2011. The spreading of revolutionary consciousness focused on the awareness of goals demanded by the uprising: an end of "unfair governance, corruption and high unemployment especially among the youth". This was led by the consistent support of the youth to overthrow the Ali regime with the intention of rebuilding a fully sovereign independent civic Yemeni state. This was successfully achieved using Facebook to inform

other interested users of the social networking site to cooperate jointly in the move to oppose the governing leadership. Facebook was essentially used to disseminate news and information and to post videos and images about the events and attacks on the protesters, which were shared with friends. This was possible because of the role of the Sana'a University students in the uprising and their consistent demonstrations in response to the abuse of power. Facebook wall publications among the undergraduate students at Sana'a University were used to inform other people of the truth of what was going on during the Yemeni uprising, while raising awareness and rallying revolutionaries and packing; many of the publications were used to convey the truth to the people. The transfer of bachelor students at Sana'a University events through their accounts on Facebook and the public have expressed their views and feelings. Students' publications reported the true image of the oppression, and they created a community of sympathy endorsed by large segments of the population.

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