

Analysing The Role Of Social Media In The Normalisation Agreement Between Uae And Israel

Raida ALjasmī^{*1}, Dr. Suriati Saad², DR Nurzali Bin Ismail³

School of communication, Universiti Sains Malaysia
11800 USM Penang, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Background: The UAE-Israel normalisation agreement, also known as the Abraham Accords, signed in August 2020, marked a historic shift in Middle Eastern diplomatic relations. Social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook were crucial in influencing public discourse and facilitating cross-cultural interactions. The unique nature of social media provided a valuable opportunity to explore its impact on shaping narratives and opinions surrounding this geopolitical event. The key theories underpinning the study included the normalisation and agenda-setting theories.

Aim: The study aims to investigate the role of social media in promoting narratives, influencing public opinion, and fostering diplomatic and cultural relations during the UAE-Israel normalisation agreement. Additionally, the study seeks to identify the challenges of misinformation and algorithm-driven content in shaping these interactions.

Methods: The research uses a qualitative methodology to collect primary and secondary data. The primary data was collected through 15 semi-structured interviews with participants from the UAE and GCC to gain insights into their perceptions of social media content and its influence on their views. A thematic analysis was used to categorise the findings into key themes related to diplomatic relations, public sentiment, and cross-cultural exchange. In addition, secondary data was collected by incorporating content analysis of social media posts across Twitter (X) and Facebook during the Abraham Accords.

Findings: The findings indicate that social media played a significant role in amplifying official government narratives, shaping public opinions and statements, and promoting socio-cultural exchange between the UAE and Israel. Positive engagement was seen in fostering dialogue and encouraging mutual understanding. However, challenges such as the spread of misinformation also emerged, potentially distorting public perceptions and complicating the diplomatic narrative.

Conclusions: Social media has proven to be a powerful tool in facilitating diplomatic relations and cultural understanding during the UAE-Israel normalisation process. While it offers a platform for positive discourse, misinformation and content filtering challenges must be addressed to fully harness its potential in shaping accurate and constructive public dialogue. Future research should further explore the long-term impact of social media on diplomatic initiatives and public perception management.

1. Introduction and Background

The Abraham Accords, signed in 2020 between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Israel, marked a significant milestone in Middle Eastern diplomacy, reshaping the region's geopolitical landscape. This agreement, brokered by the United States, established formal diplomatic relations between the two nations and was widely regarded as a breakthrough in the pursuit of regional peace and stability. Beyond its political and economic implications, the Accords are emblematic of the UAE's broader strategy to position itself as a regional power through soft diplomacy and international partnerships (Dagres, 2021). However, the impact of this normalisation on public opinion and the role of social media in shaping these perceptions have been underexplored, particularly in the context of international diplomacy.

Historically, the relationship between Israel and Arab nations, including the UAE, has been fraught with tension, primarily over the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Ezugwu, 2023). For decades, normalisation between Israel and any Arab nation was seen as contingent on resolving the Palestinian issue. However, with the Abraham Accords, the UAE became the third Arab nation to establish formal ties with Israel, signalling a significant shift in regional dynamics (Baqai & Mehreen, 2021). The UAE leadership framed this move as a strategic decision to prevent further Israeli annexation of the West Bank and strengthen regional security, particularly in countering shared threats from Iran (Sorkin, 2021). The agreement opened up avenues for cooperation in fields such as technology, tourism, and security while also enhancing the UAE's standing on the global stage, particularly in Washington, D.C. (Frisch, 2020).

Despite the high-level diplomatic and economic benefits, the normalisation of ties between the UAE and Israel sparked mixed reactions across the Arab world. Social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook became key venues for public discourse, providing space for both praise and criticism of the agreement. A survey by the Israeli Ministry of Strategic Affairs indicated that 81% of Arab social media users expressed negative sentiments toward the Abraham Accords, viewing the deal as a betrayal of the Palestinian cause (Abubakr, 2020). In contrast, UAE's leadership portrayed the normalisation as a step toward fostering peace and economic prosperity, aligning it with the nation's broader image as a progressive and peaceful actor in the region (MOFAIC, 2017).

Social media's role in shaping public perceptions of international agreements like the Abraham Accords cannot be overstated. As platforms that facilitate both mass communication and mobilisation, social media sites have the potential to influence public opinion, rally support, or propagate disinformation (Gallo & Cho, 2021). Regarding the UAE-Israel normalisation, social media reflected the regional divide and amplified differing narratives regarding the agreement. The rapid dissemination of factual and misleading information across platforms heightened the polarised responses to the normalisation, particularly concerning sensitive issues like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Mulki, 2020). Consequently, the UAE government has actively used social media to promote its narrative, portraying the accords as a pragmatic move that serves both national interests and broader regional stability.

Given these dynamics, this research investigates social media's dual role in supporting and challenging the normalisation of relations between the UAE and Israel. By analysing sentiment across platforms like Twitter and Facebook, this study aims to uncover prevailing trends in public opinion and how these opinions correlate with broader geopolitical developments (Jindal & Aron, 2021). Sentiment analysis—an established method for interpreting emotional tones in digital content—will be used to evaluate whether social media users in the UAE and the broader Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region perceive the Abraham Accords positively, negatively, or neutrally (Jindal & Aron, 2021). Moreover, qualitative interviews with a cross-section of individuals from the UAE and neighbouring Gulf states will offer additional insight into how citizens engage with the normalisation process on social media platforms (Zweiri, 2020).

The proliferation of social media as a political tool has been evident in recent global movements, such as the Arab Spring and the Black Lives Matter protests, where platforms like Facebook and Twitter played critical roles in mobilising public sentiment and facilitating collective action (Youmans & York, 2012). Similarly, in the context of the UAE-Israel normalisation, social media has functioned as a space for public deliberation, providing a forum

for both supporters and critics to voice their opinions. However, it has also been a platform for disinformation and incitement, raising concerns about the potential destabilising effects of unchecked narratives (Walsh, 2020). The delicate balance between fostering diplomatic progress and managing public dissent underscores the need for a comprehensive understanding of how social media shapes international relations.

Ultimately, this study seeks to fill the gap in the literature concerning the role of social media in bilateral normalisation agreements, specifically between the UAE and Israel. While previous research has explored the political, economic, and security implications of the Abraham Accords, there is limited scholarship addressing how public discourse on social media influences or reflects these diplomatic efforts (Frisch, 2020; Guzansky & Marshall, 2021). By focusing on the digital dimension of diplomacy, this research will contribute to a deeper understanding of the intersection between social media, public opinion, and international relations, particularly in the rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. In addressing this overall aim, the study was guided by the following key research questions:

1. What is the role of social media in the normalisation of the UAE-Israel?
2. How was social media Used during the UAE & Israel normalisation?
3. How do social media sentiments impact the UAE-Israel normalisation?
4. Literature Summary

1.1 Theoretical Background

1.1. Normalisation

Normalization Theory provides a foundational theoretical framework for understanding social media's influence on political discourse. Michel Foucault's notion of normalisation is essential in this context, arguing that societal norms are established to define what is considered 'normal' and marginalise what is deemed abnormal (Foucault, 2007). According to Foucault, normalisation functions as a mechanism of power that delineates acceptable behaviour and suppresses deviations from these norms. This concept is particularly useful in analysing how political discourse is shaped through normalisation processes. Normalisation theory explains how diplomatic shifts are framed as routine or "normal" over time in international relations, particularly regarding UAE-Israel relations. This process involves the gradual reframing of previously contentious relationships through strategic narrative construction (Taylor, 2009). Social media plays a pivotal role in propagating these normalisation narratives. By continuously reinforcing pro-normalisation content, social media platforms shape public perception and align it with new diplomatic realities (Sadeghi & Al-Harbi, 2021).

1.1. Social Media and Political Mobilisation

The transformative impact of social media on political mobilisation is a significant aspect of the theoretical framework. Bennett and Segerberg's "connective action" concept is particularly relevant, highlighting how social media facilitates large-scale mobilisations around shared values by leveraging decentralised networks (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). This concept underscores the shift from traditional hierarchical organisational models to more fluid, networked forms of collective action facilitated by social media (Tufekci, 2017). The phenomena of echo chambers and filter bubbles further elucidate how social media shapes public opinion. Pariser's filter bubble concept describes how algorithms prioritise content that aligns with a user's existing beliefs, reinforcing dominant political narratives and contributing to ideological fragmentation (Pariser, 2011). As a result, social media facilitates mobilisation and perpetuates ideological division by creating environments where users are predominantly exposed to information that confirms their pre-existing views (Sunstein, 2018).

1.1. Media, Diplomatic Relations and Meaning Construction

Social media platforms increasingly mediate the construction of meaning in political events (Jackson et al., 2017). Traditional media gatekeepers, such as journalists and editors, previously held significant control over political discourse (Moreno-Almeida & Banaji, 2019). However, the rise of social media has democratised content

production and dissemination, shifting power dynamics. Today, social media platforms enable a more direct influence on political discourse, allowing individuals and groups to challenge or supplement traditional media narratives. Government accounts and influencers have utilised platforms like Twitter and Facebook to highlight normalisation's economic and technological benefits while downplaying or contesting criticisms (Silke et al., 2023).

1.2 Social Media and Diplomatic Relations

1.2. Role of Social Media in the Normalization Process

Social media has been instrumental in shaping public discourse surrounding the UAE-Israel normalisation agreement. Platforms like Twitter and Facebook have provided a space for disseminating and amplifying pro-normalisation narratives. Government accounts and influencers in the UAE utilised these platforms to promote the economic and technological benefits of the agreement, framing it as a positive development for regional stability and prosperity (Sadeghi & Al-Harbi, 2021). This strategic use of social media highlights its role in advancing diplomatic objectives and shaping public perception. In contrast, other Arab communities, particularly those with strong pro-Palestinian sentiments, viewed the normalisation as a betrayal of the Palestinian cause. The widespread use of hashtags such as #NormalizationBetrayal and #UAEIsrael underscores the polarised nature of public opinion, reflecting both support and opposition to the agreement.

1.2. Misinformation and Disinformation on Social Media

The spread of misinformation and disinformation on social media platforms is a significant concern that impacts public opinion and diplomatic efforts. During the UAE-Israel normalisation process, false narratives and misleading reports about the implications of the agreement for the Palestinian cause were circulated widely (Sunstein, 2018). These false narratives fueled opposition and heightened tensions within parts of the Arab world, demonstrating the potential for social media to undermine diplomatic efforts (Tufekci, 2017). The role of social media algorithms in amplifying polarising content further complicates the situation. Algorithms often prioritise content that generates high engagement, including sensationalist or misleading information (Zerback et al., 2020). This tendency to amplify polarising content poses a challenge to fostering balanced and informed political discourse, as it can distort public perception and exacerbate ideological divisions.

1.3 Theoretical Framework

This research integrates agenda-setting theory, social media use (SMU) theory, political participation (PP) theory, and the Social Media Political Participation Model (SMPPM) to explore how social media influences public discourse and political participation in the context of the UAE-Israel normalisation. Agenda-setting theory, developed by McCombs and Shaw (1972), posits that media shape public discourse by emphasising specific issues, influencing what the public considers important (McCombs & Shaw, 2023). Traditionally, this theory focused on news media, but social media has redefined agenda-setting into a "network agenda-setting model" (Guo & McCombs, 2016), allowing users to generate and disseminate content, which affects the agenda. In the context of the UAE-Israel normalisation, social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram have played a pivotal role in setting the public agenda. Through trending topics and viral content, these platforms influence how different aspects of the normalisation process are framed—whether as a diplomatic breakthrough or a controversial geopolitical move. This aligns with "second-level agenda-setting" (Lopez-Escobar et al., 1998), which examines how media shapes the public's perception of an issue's attributes. The agenda-setting theory also incorporates the "need for orientation" concept, suggesting that individuals turn to media, including social media, when faced with complex or unfamiliar situations (McCombs & Shaw, 2023). The UAE-Israel normalisation is complex, making social media a key resource for information and public deliberation.

SMU theory, an extension of the uses and gratifications framework (Katz et al., 1974), focuses on why individuals engage with social media and how they use it for various purposes, including political ones (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010). This theory is particularly relevant for understanding how people interact with political content on social media during the UAE-Israel normalisation process. Valenzuela (2013) found that social media is critical for disseminating political information and mobilising citizens in politically charged contexts. In the UAE-Israel case, social media users, whether deliberately or unintentionally, come across political content that influences

their participation in political discourse.

PP theory examines how individuals engage in the political process, from traditional offline activities to digital participation through social media (Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 1995). Social media has expanded political participation, allowing users to share opinions, organise movements, and engage directly with political leaders. This theory is vital for understanding the role of social media in facilitating political participation during the UAE-Israel normalisation. Tufekci and Wilson (2012) demonstrated that social media mobilised political action during the 2011 Egyptian revolution, highlighting the potential for online platforms to influence political events, even in restrictive environments. This helps explain how social media sentiments shape the normalisation process.

The SMPPM, developed by Knoll, Matthes, and Heiss (2020), integrates elements from SMU and PP theories to provide a comprehensive view of how social media affects political participation. It identifies four key types of political participation in social media: information seeking, expression, news sharing, and political action. In the context of the UAE-Israel normalisation, the SMPPM helps categorise and analyse the diverse ways users engage online, from seeking information to organising political actions. It also considers psychological factors, such as political interest, which mediate the relationship between social media use and political engagement. This model provides a nuanced framework to understand how social media influences political participation and discourse surrounding international relations. This theoretical framework combines agenda-setting theory, SMU, PP, and SMPPM, offering a well-rounded approach to examining the influence of social media on political participation during the UAE-Israel normalisation. Figure 1 illustrates the theoretical framework for the study.

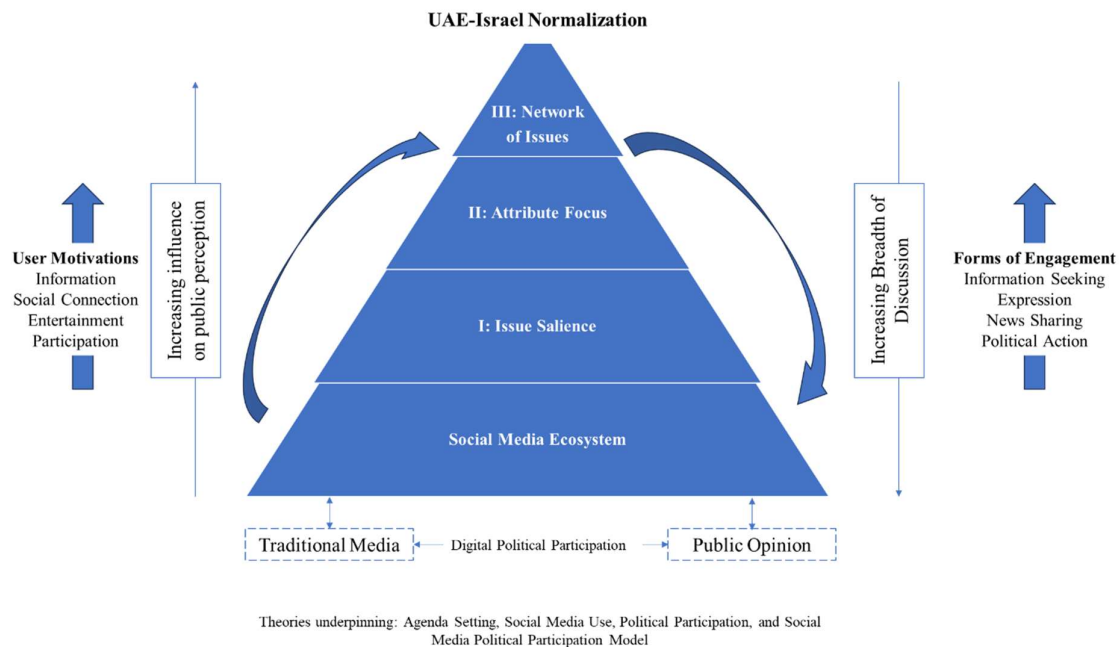


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, using content analysis to examine social media posts and digital interactions related to the UAE-Israel normalisation agreement. Adopting a qualitative research design allowed for reviewing and including the required detailed and in-depth exploration of public discourse, sentiment, and narratives surrounding the UAE-Israel normalisation agreement (Kumar, 2018; Patel and Patel, 2019). The examined issues were content-specific and highly subjective, requiring a design that included diverse opinions, attitudes, and perceptions of the parties involved. Due to the nature of the study, it relied on a combination of secondary and primary data sets.

First, the secondary data set included social media posts on the topic. In accessing this data, the study used keywords and phrases, including Hashtags such as #UAEIsrael, #AbrahamAccords, and #PeaceInTheMiddleEast, to identify relevant content. These helped establish threads and conversation trends on the topic and allowed for the relevance and accuracy of the analysed findings. The search scope was the same keywords across three main social media platforms: Facebook and Twitter (X). These were selected due to their popularity globally and membership, as well as their frequency or use by most nationals in the UAE and Israel. The search scope focused on three months only, from August 2020, when the announcement was made, to October 2020. The three-month period had the highest online shutter and conversations on the issue. As a result, 500 social media posts were identified and used in the study analysis. The core social media users considered in this category for analysis were government officials, social media influencers, as well as everyday citizens engaging in conversations, respectively. This wide scope and inclusion allowed for opinions and perceptions of diversity on the investigated issue (Flick, 2015).

Secondly, the study included primary qualitative data. Data was collected directly through semi-structured interviews on a sample base of 15 people (3 from UAE and 12 from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The interviews were conducted online via Zoom, Google Meet, or face-to-face, depending on the participants' preferences. The sample base was selected through a purposive sampling technique rolled out through the social media platforms where the inclusion criteria were a minimum age of 20 years, being conversant with the normalisation of relations agreement, an understanding of past and historical relations between the two nations, as well as basic knowledge and experience in using different social media platforms, respectively (Kumar, 2018; Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). The participants included in the study were as indicated in the tale below.

Table 1: Participant Profile

| Participant Code | Nationality | Gender | Age | Occupations |
|------------------|--------------|--------|-----|-----------------------------|
| P1 | UAE | Female | 28 | Social Media Manager |
| P2 | UAE | Male | 35 | Journalism Professor |
| P3 | UAE | Male | 42 | Financial Analyst |
| P4 | Bahrain | Male | 31 | Public Relations Specialist |
| P5 | Bahrain | Male | 39 | Diplomat |
| P6 | Bahrain | Female | 26 | Nurse |
| P7 | Oman | Male | 33 | Social Media Manager |
| P8 | Oman | Female | 45 | Engineer |
| P9 | Saudi Arabia | Female | 45 | Brand Manager |
| P10 | Saudi Arabia | Male | 29 | Media Relations |
| P11 | Saudi Arabia | Male | 50 | Social Media Manager |
| P12 | Kuwait | Female | 41 | Newspaper Editor |
| P13 | Kuwait | Female | 27 | Social Media Specialist |
| P14 | Qatar | Male | 36 | Business Owner |
| P15 | Qatar | Female | 32 | Marketing Manager |

The interview findings were then analysed using the Braun and Clarke (2013) model. This allowed for the critical analysis of the findings, coding of the findings and the determination of emerging themes, respectively. Equally, the secondary data obtained was analysed through a sentiment analysis approach, where the analysis used a manual coding process to determine whether a post reflects a positive, negative, or neutral sentiment. This was achieved by analysing the nature and form of language used in the different posts to demonstrate their position and view on the announced normalisation of the relations agreement.

3. Results

3.1 Role of Social Media During Normalisation

3.1. Social Media Platforms and Role

The study established that most social media platforms were used extensively in the UAE, with X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and WhatsApp being the most popular. Participants highlighted, such as P1, *"One of the most commonly used social media platforms is Twitter and then Facebook. Nowadays, TikTok and other platforms have also become more popular"*. This demonstrated the rising number of newer platforms like TikTok, though traditional platforms like X and Facebook remained dominant, especially for accessing real-time news and engaging in discussions. WhatsApp was identified as the preferred platform for private messaging, while Instagram and Snapchat were mainly used for sharing images. Facebook, though versatile, was seen as a space for more in-depth discussions. In addition, it established the role of government and official accounts in shaping the narrative surrounding the normalisation between the UAE and Israel. Participants in the study pointed out that official government social media accounts, such as WAM and those belonging to key officials, were the primary sources of credible information during this period. For instance, P10 noted, *"They post information online on government website, officials post tweets, and they also give interviews to news channels."* The extensive use of hashtags like #peace and #AbrahamAccords by these official channels helped pass the government's message and maintain a sense of credibility in the eyes of the public. Moreover, the participants emphasised their dependence on these accounts to ensure the legitimacy of the information they consumed.

An additional emerging finding is the role of influencers. In this case, the influencers were critical in shaping perceptions of the UAE-Israel normalisation agreement. Emirati influencers, in particular, embraced the agreement, promoting it as beneficial for the UAE's economic and technological advancement. For instance, P3 argued that this was *"happening for a reason, for the country's benefit"*. As such, participants demonstrated how the influencers promoted and presented the normalisation of relations as a move that aligned with the national interest, helping to connect the agreement with public sentiment. This messaging was instrumental in creating a positive discourse around the process, especially through narratives emphasising economic opportunities. However, there were also concerns about the authenticity of these influencers' endorsements, with some participants expressing a lack of confidence on whether their engagement was driven by genuine belief or external pressures. Additionally, the role and influence of technology, in the form of machine learning and social media algorithms, emerged. In this case, the findings demonstrated that the algorithms used by platforms such as Twitter and Facebook reinforced content aligned with users' previous engagements, creating an opportunity where specific narratives, such as the benefits of normalisation, were emphasised. These algorithms, along with engagement metrics and trending topics, had the potential to limit users' exposure to diverse perspectives, fostering filter bubbles. Consequently, the participants noted that this led to a complex environment where the dissemination of information was not just user-driven but also heavily influenced by platform mechanics, which significantly impacted how people engaged with the normalisation process.

3.1. Impact and Challenges

The study findings established that social media platforms have significantly transformed how people access and engage with political information, offering opportunities and challenges. Some participants say these platforms have greatly enhanced access to diverse news sources and political education. For instance, P1 states, *"Social media makes it easy to get knowledge and encourages different kinds of conversation"*. In this regard, they noted how social media platforms make it easy to gather knowledge and foster varied discussions, indicating that they allowed for self-directed learning by providing a wide range of political issues and viewpoints. In addition, they stated that social media use allowed access to numerous news sources worldwide, breaking down traditional barriers imposed by geographic and editorial constraints. This is demonstrated in responses provided by participants P2 and P7, who stated, *"Using social media makes it simple to obtain a greater number of news sources."* This democratisation of information promotes a more informed and politically engaged public, as users can explore different perspectives and stay updated on current events and policy changes. Despite its continued use, some participants raised concerns about the reliability, accuracy, and dependability of social media news and information dissemination. In this case, they noted that the platforms were saturated with misinformation and

disinformation, particularly during the normalisation process, which complicated efforts to maintain news credibility.

In addition, the study established the rising influence and role of algorithms on social media discourse and news acceptance among citizens in the UEA and Israel. They noted that algorithms prioritising content based on engagement metrics altered how narratives are presented and discussed online, potentially leading to echo chambers and filter bubbles. Consequently, these algorithms created echo chambers by focusing on content that aligns with users' existing beliefs, which can reinforce confirmation bias and limit exposure to diverse viewpoints. This was noted by P4, which pointed out that *"the presence of echo chambers can restrict people's exposure to different viewpoints,"* This algorithmic influence underscores the potential for social media to exacerbate ideological fragmentation and oversimplify complex issues.

Despite these challenges, the participants acknowledged the critical role of social media in fostering cross-cultural exchanges and diplomatic interactions. For example, participant 9 explained that through *"virtual gatherings, joint ventures, and collaborative projects,"* people from both countries were *"engrossed in heartfelt conversations"* because social media *"played a crucial role in fostering countless cross-cultural exchanges."* To this end, they noted that social media has facilitated meaningful dialogue between individuals in the UAE and Israel through platforms such as online communities, virtual gatherings and collaborative projects to enhance cross-cultural understanding. This is a factor further propelled by travel bloggers who played a significant role in humanising both Emirati and Israeli cultures through their shared experiences on social media platforms.

3.2 Usage of Social Media in the Normalization Process

The study findings established that social media emerged as a critical support tool in the normalisation process between the UAE and Israel, influencing various levels and forms of communication and public opinion. This is illustrated by the responses offered by P4 and P5, who stated the UAE's social media presence and official channels emphasised the potential for *"cultural exchange, trading and tourism"* (P5) as *"successful avenues"* (P4). In this regard, participants noted social media's critical role in promoting cultural exchange, tourism, and mutual understanding between the two nations. They insisted that social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram were used to demonstrate the cultural similarities and shared interests between the two nations, essentially serving the purpose of dispelling and disconfirming the existing stereotypes between the two nations that have lasted for decades. As such, the content examined in these social media posts focused on common and shared heritage and traditions, thus reinforcing the UAE's values of inclusivity and tolerance. P9's response indicates, *"Content that focused on shared cultural heritage, traditions, and mutual interests proved effective. Videos and posts highlighting the similarities between Emirati and Israeli cultures, food, and lifestyles helped break down stereotypes and promote a sense of unity"* (P9). In addition, the influence of social media on public opinion was also evident. Participants observed that social media platforms amplified positive and negative perspectives through likes, shares, and comments. Government officials and influencers utilised these platforms to shape public discourse, though Emirati influencers generally avoided political controversy. This dynamic demonstrated social media's dual role in shaping narratives and highlighting the necessity for balanced and informed discussions to manage polarised views.

Additionally, using social media allowed for the timely dissemination of success stories and mutual support between the UAE and Israel. The findings noted that media professionals and politicians used these platforms for reporting and gauging public sentiment, though challenges such as echo chambers and polarisation sometimes overshadowed balanced discussions. The need for media literacy and diverse viewpoints was emphasised to enhance productive dialogue. This was in addition to promoting diplomatic relations at the citizens' level, where the citizens started engaging and interacting with each other through social media communities and networks. For instance, participant P1 noted, *"Because social media is very prevalent in the UAE, it did help in the communication between the two countries"*. This provided a footing and basis for both countries' agreement propagation and implementation. The participants noted that the government officials leveraged this to contribute to the discussions to enhance the credibility and relevance of the discussions and offer a perception of official government support for the positive deliberations on the normalisation of the relations agreement.

3.2. Socio-Cultural Impact

The findings established that social media was critical in shaping cultural identity and representation. Participants noted that these platforms increased representation and offered a platform for a voice to underrepresented groups. For instance, P13 said, *"discussing on social media did make people feel more represented because it let people with different opinions be heard."* In this regard, the participants argued that the free nature and availability of the discussions on social media and the freedom to participate and engage helped the citizens feel more represented by allowing diverse opinions to be heard. Moreover, they highlighted social media's broad reach and accessibility, which allowed for a more inclusive expression of cultural identities. To this end, they stated that social media facilitated the amplification of various viewpoints and stories about the normalisation process, including various viewpoints from government officials, influencers, lobby groups, and citizens in both countries. The collective impact of this is fostering connectivity and community building through creating a digital space for continuous communication and engagement. For instance, P12 noted that *"social media created opportunities for everyday Emiratis and Israelis to connect,"* (P12). In addition, the participants highlighted how social media influenced interpersonal communication styles and social interactions in the UAE. They observed that social media provided users a sense of belonging and satisfaction by democratising public discourse and allowing ordinary individuals to engage in conversations previously dominated by gatekeepers and what was viewed as a reserve for senior government officials. Equally, the findings demonstrated the challenges of preserving Emirati culture and heritage in the digital age. In this context, the participants highlighted how social media content emphasising shared cultural traits and values effectively bridged cultural gaps and promoted common cultural heritage through videos and posts. This is stated by P8, who states that *"social media campaigns and use of hashtags did facilitate cross-cultural communication and understanding"* (P8).

3.2. Educational and Informational Exchange

The findings established the significant role that digital literacy plays in managing the flow of information and addressing misinformation in the context of the normalisation of relations between the UAE and Israel. Participants highlighted the crucial need for digital literacy to navigate online environments' complexities and discern credible information from misleading content. For instance, P9 emphasised the challenges associated with handling divergent opinions and misinformation, pointing to the important role of critical assessment skills in maintaining a positive online atmosphere and noted that managing *"divergent opinions"* and *"dealing with misinformation"* presents *"challenges"* in the process of *"maintaining a positive online environment."* Similarly, the participants observed that misinformation tends to spread rapidly from unofficial sources, making it imperative for users to have the capability to evaluate information before it is fact-checked critically. Therefore, the findings brought to the fore the role and importance of fact-checking and collaborative reporting in quickly addressing misinformation, which requires users to be adept at assessing the reliability of information sources. In addition to digital literacy, the study established the role and value of social media as a platform for informal learning and knowledge sharing during the UAE-Israel normalisation process. For instance, P6 stated that *"conversations about political aspects of the normalisation process provided an opportunity for individuals to engage with the political landscape, allowing for alternative sources of information."* As such, the participants noted that social media provides a forum for exchanging diverse viewpoints and enhancing political understanding. They further stated that social media platforms facilitated sharing opinions and personal stories, which can transform political consciousness by exposing users to new perspectives.

Moreover, the study highlighted the challenges associated with information accessibility and equity. The participants pointed out that disparities in access to information can exacerbate existing inequalities. For instance, they mentioned and raised their concern about the lack of rigorous polling data, which limits access to reliable information and exacerbates the digital divide. Consequently, they emphasised the need for equitable access to accurate information to counteract misconceptions.

3.3 Social Media Sentiments and Their Impact

The study undertook an extensive sentiment analysis of social media discussions related to the normalisation process between the UAE and Israel, collecting a substantial dataset encompassing over 10,000 tweets and over

500 Facebook posts. The focus was on understanding the public sentiment and discourse surrounding this significant diplomatic event. A series of data cleaning and preparation procedures were implemented to ensure the dataset's accuracy and relevance. This included removing duplicate entries to avoid redundancy and ensure that each data point represented a unique opinion or perspective. The dataset was refined to include only posts from the UAE, aligning with the study's objective to capture the local context. Posts in languages other than English were also excluded, as the analysis was specifically aimed at English-language discussions. After these filtering and cleaning processes, the dataset was condensed to a manageable size, comprising 541 tweets and 117 Facebook posts, which served as the basis for the sentiment analysis using NVivo, a sophisticated qualitative data analysis software. The sentiment analysis results indicated a predominantly positive sentiment towards the normalisation process. This sentiment is illustrated in the figure below.

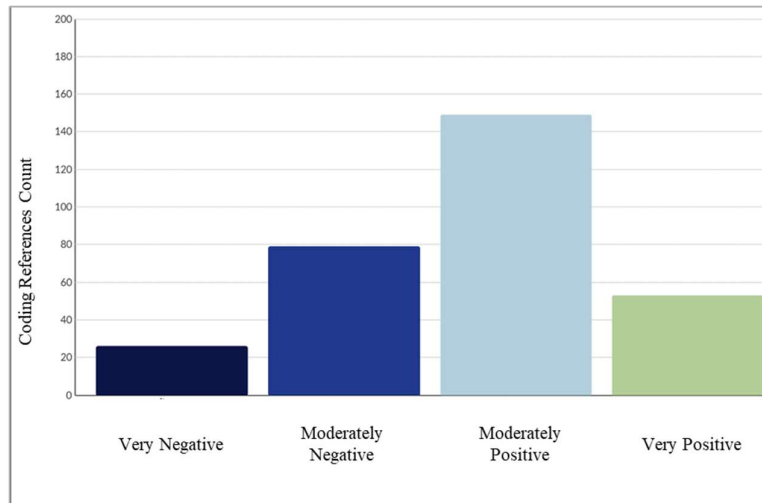


Figure 2: Sentiment Analysis Results

Various figures visually represented this, including word clouds and frequency analyses. For example, the word cloud illustrating negative sentiments highlighted terms related to Palestine, Israel, and the UAE, capturing the intensity and polarisation of the discourse. Words such as "salvation," "hate," and "blackmailing" emerged, reflecting the deep-seated emotions and historical grievances associated with the normalisation process. The frequency analysis of these negative sentiments revealed that terms like "arab," "israel," and "palestinian" were frequently mentioned, emphasising the contentious aspects of the discussion and the underlying tensions related to the diplomatic event.

Equally, the study established several moderately negative sentiments that featured different terms related to the Abraham Accords and regional dynamics. The word cloud for moderately negative sentiments (indicated below) included terms such as "abrahamaccords," "peace," "uae," and "israel," along with references to regional leaders and ongoing challenges like conflicts and the pandemic.



Figure 3: Word Cloud - Moderately Negative

This visualisation highlighted the complex and sometimes critical perspectives on the normalisation process. The frequency analysis further supported this view, with terms like "uae" and "israel" being prominently mentioned, indicating that discussions frequently centred on these core issues and their implications for regional stability and relations. Nevertheless, the analysis of moderately positive sentiments presented a more optimistic perspective on the normalisation process. The word cloud for this sentiment included terms such as "region," "peace," "cooperation," and "prosperity," reflecting a favourable view of the Abraham Accords and their potential benefits for regional cooperation and stability. The frequency analysis reinforced this positive sentiment, which showed that terms like "peace" and "uae" were frequently mentioned, underscoring the supportive and hopeful attitude towards the normalisation process and its impact on regional relations.

The study's use of the word cloud for very positive sentiments highlighted key concepts such as "abraham accords," "peace," "technology," and "opportunities," reflecting the celebratory and optimistic tone surrounding the diplomatic agreements and analysed it as below.

| Word | Length | Count | Weighted Percentage (%) |
|-----------------|--------|-------|-------------------------|
| israel | 6 | 15 | 2.61 |
| peace | 5 | 11 | 1.92 |
| uae | 3 | 8 | 1.39 |
| israeli | 7 | 7 | 1.22 |
| #abrahamaccords | 15 | 6 | 1.05 |
| east | 4 | 6 | 1.05 |
| feel | 4 | 6 | 1.05 |
| tech | 4 | 6 | 1.05 |
| agreement | 9 | 5 | 0.87 |
| good | 4 | 5 | 0.87 |
| middle | 6 | 5 | 0.87 |
| proud | 5 | 5 | 0.87 |

Figure 4: Analysis of frequency - Very Positive

This visualisation depicted a sense of enthusiasm and positive outlook associated with the normalisation process. The frequency analysis revealed that terms like "israel," "peace," and "uae" had high weighted percentages, indicating their central role in the positive discourse. Words like "proud," "honored," "love," and "joyous" highlighted the celebratory and hopeful sentiments expressed by social media users regarding the normalisation process and its broader implications for regional cooperation and progress.

4. Discussion & Conclusion

4.1 The role of social media in the UAE–Israel normalisation

This study explored the critical role of social media in the normalisation of diplomatic relations between the UAE and Israel, focusing on how digital platforms facilitated communication, shaped public opinion, and influenced political discourse. Key platforms such as WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook were employed for specific functions, from private messaging to real-time news dissemination. These findings align with theories of platform-specific affordances, where the functionality of each social media site directly impacts user behaviour and information consumption, as posited by Ronzhyn et al. (2022) and Boulianne (2015).

Political leaders and influencers played a significant role in using social media to shape public discourse, acting as agenda-setters during normalisation. Government officials strategically employed social media to disseminate official narratives, while influencers shaped public opinion by portraying the normalisation as beneficial to the UAE's economic and technological future. This is consistent with agenda-setting theory, which posits that media can define the public agenda by highlighting specific issues and shaping how they are perceived (McCombs & Shaw, 2023). The findings also support the second level of agenda-setting theory, or attribute agenda-setting, where influencers and officials directed public opinion toward viewing normalisation as a positive, strategic move.

Moreover, the study illustrates the applicability of intermedia agenda-setting and agenda-melding theories, demonstrating how social media algorithms amplify certain viewpoints. These algorithms foster echo chambers and filter bubbles, limiting users' exposure to diverse perspectives. Reinforcing pre-existing opinions through algorithmic biases, consistent with the work of Ruiz & Nilsson (2023), complicates efforts to foster an informed and balanced public discourse. The role of algorithms underscores the need for critical media literacy, particularly as social media users increasingly rely on these platforms for news and political education. Social media's influence extended to cross-cultural communication between the UAE and Israel, illustrating its role in diplomatic engagement. Influencers and political actors shaped narratives to promote social cohesion, yet the spread of misinformation and hate speech highlighted the darker aspects of digital platforms. This is aligned with research emphasising the dual role of social media in facilitating both intercultural exchange and extremist ideologies (Williams & Tzani, 2022).

The study also revealed that users' engagement levels varied, with some being passive consumers of information while others actively contributing to the discourse. This dynamic reflects theories like social media use theory (SMU) and political participation theory (PP), which argue that platform-specific affordances and user engagement shape political behaviour and influence (Boulianne, 2020; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). The findings also suggest that social media allows for the direct interaction between political leaders and the public, a crucial component of digital diplomacy.

In conclusion, this study highlights the transformative role of social media in shaping political discourse, public opinion, and diplomatic engagement during the UAE-Israel normalisation. By integrating agenda-setting, SMU, and PP theories, the research underscores the importance of social media in shaping narratives, influencing public sentiment, and promoting political dialogue. However, it raises concerns about algorithmic biases and misinformation, pointing to the need for media literacy and critical thinking in the digital age.

4.2 The use of social media during the UAE & Israel normalisation

The normalisation of diplomatic relations between the UAE and Israel marked a pivotal shift in Middle Eastern geopolitics, with implications for economic growth, cultural exchange, and regional stability. This study investigates the role of social media in shaping public discourse and promoting normalisation between the two countries. It reveals how social media, especially through government communication strategies, contributed to cultivating cultural understanding and framing the narrative surrounding normalisation.

The UAE's use of social media emphasised economic opportunities, cultural ties, and mutual understanding, portraying normalisation as aligned with the country's broader principles of inclusivity and tolerance. These official narratives were advanced through digital platforms, underscoring shared cultural heritage and economic

benefits, which helped foster public acceptance. The study's findings are consistent with agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 2023), where media platforms play a central role in shaping what the public perceives as important. The UAE's use of social media effectively influenced public discourse by emphasising select aspects of normalisation, including trade and tourism, while sidestepping contentious issues. This aligns with McCombs' second level of agenda-setting, which tells people what to think about and how to think about it (McCombs et al., 2018). The strategy allowed social media to become a tool for promoting unity, dispelling stereotypes, and advancing the normalisation agenda.

Additionally, the study demonstrates that influencers played a key role in shaping public opinion, consistent with intermedia agenda-setting theory. Influencers and opinion leaders utilised their platforms to echo the UAE government's positive framing, amplifying messages focused on cultural and economic benefits while mitigating the negative narratives. This aligns with theories on political engagement and media (Vonbun et al., 2016), where influential figures shape broader public discussions.

However, the study also highlights challenges, particularly the role of social media in spreading misinformation and hate speech, which can undermine efforts to promote tolerance. This duality reflects broader scholarly concerns about social media's potential to foster positive and negative discourse (El Kurd, 2022; Al-Mughrabi et al., 2023). As demonstrated in the study, while platforms facilitated dialogue, they were also vulnerable to misuse, necessitating moderation and fact-checking initiatives. These findings emphasise the critical importance of digital literacy programs in enabling users to navigate the information landscape and engage constructively.

The results are also tied to political participation (PP) and social media use (SMU) theories, showing how digital platforms have transformed political engagement in the Middle East. The UAE government leveraged social media to promote narratives focused on cultural understanding and economic potential, aligning with the nation's broader goals of inclusivity. However, consistent with SMU theory, the platforms also risked amplifying misinformation and polarisation, illustrating the need for robust digital literacy and content moderation (Skoric et al., 2016). In conclusion, the research underscores the significant role social media played in shaping the narrative of UAE-Israel normalisation, balancing opportunities for dialogue with the challenges of misinformation. This case study highlights the evolving influence of digital platforms in political processes, where their capacity to engage, inform, and mobilise must be met with careful management to mitigate their risks.

4.3 How social media impacts the UAE–Israel normalisation

The findings from the sentiment analysis regarding the UAE-Israel normalisation process are consistent with existing research on the influence of social media on public discourse and opinion. Scholarly literature highlights the growing role of social media in fueling violence, mobilising large crowds, and disseminating misinformation, especially by far-right organisations (Reisach, 2021; Deibert, 2019; Papakyriakopoulos, Serrano & Hegelich, 2020). This perspective underscores the dual nature of social media as both a catalyst for mobilisation and a potential source of misinformation. In the context of the UAE-Israel normalisation, sentiment analysis of social media users in the UAE revealed a predominantly positive sentiment. This finding aligns with studies suggesting that social media often reflects and amplifies dominant societal emotions (Reisach, 2021; Deibert, 2019). Positive sentiment can be attributed to normalisation's perceived benefits and diplomatic progress. However, the analysis also uncovered negative sentiments, particularly concerning the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and apprehensions about the broader implications of the normalisation agreement. This is consistent with previous research demonstrating that social media is a platform for discussing contentious geopolitical issues, providing a space for diverse and often conflicting viewpoints (Ribeiro et al., 2019; Shugars & Beauchamp, 2019).

Moreover, the sentiment analysis highlighted frequent mentions of terms related to the Abraham Accords, regional dynamics, and peace efforts. This prevalence reflects the importance of these topics in digital dialogues, mirroring scholarly findings that emphasise social media's role in shaping public opinions about peace initiatives and diplomatic agreements (Kavada, 2015; Zerback et al., 2021). The wide range of sentiment intensity observed, from highly positive to negative, corroborates research indicating that social media platforms accommodate a broad spectrum of emotions. This range underscores the complexity of public opinion, capturing both fervent support and intense criticism (Doğan et al., 2024; Shugars & Beauchamp, 2019; Spears & Postmes, 2015). Overall,

the sentiment analysis aligns with the broader literature on the role of social media in shaping public opinion and discourse (Rita et al., 2023; Ruiz & Nilsson, 2022), particularly in relation to significant geopolitical events such as the UAE-Israel normalisation process. The agenda-setting theory serves as a valuable lens to analyse the interplay between public opinion and social media discourse in the context of UAE-Israel normalisation. This theory posits that media outlets critically highlight issues that the public considers significant (Harris, 2022). The agenda-setting framework elucidates the dynamics at play in the normalisation dialogue by examining how digital platforms affect public discourse and emphasise particular aspects of diplomatic processes (McCombs & Shaw, 2023).

In this context, social media's ability to disseminate information rapidly and facilitate real-time discussions becomes particularly evident. This phenomenon, termed "network agenda-setting," highlights the interconnectedness of topics within public discourse, revealing a complex web of sentiments surrounding the normalisation process (McCombs et al., 2018). The predominance of positive sentiments identified in the analysis can be attributed to social media's agenda-setting power, reinforcing pre-existing attitudes (Grossman, 2022). This suggests that the normalisation initiative aligns well with prevailing public perceptions and governmental narratives.

4.4 Contribution

Theoretically, the study findings integrate theories of diplomatic relations to provide a nuanced understanding of digital platforms' role in shaping diplomatic changes. The research highlights both levels of agenda-setting theory, demonstrating how social media amplifies specific issues and shapes public attitudes toward them. This theoretical exploration contributes to understanding digital diplomacy and informs strategies for managing public opinion and digital discourse in international relations. Moreover, practically, the study provides practical insights for government organisations, policymakers, and communication specialists on effectively utilising social media platforms for diplomatic and national branding purposes. It provides recommendations for creating tailored content strategies and engaging with the public to foster cultural understanding and influence public opinion positively.

4.5 Limitations and Future Research Recommendations

The research acknowledges limitations such as the need for a more diverse sample and broader citizen inclusion to capture global perspectives on social media's role in diplomatic relations. It highlights potential biases in participant responses and acknowledges the evolving nature of social media platforms, suggesting longitudinal studies and cross-cultural analyses for deeper insights. Future research opportunities include investigating the effectiveness of digital literacy programs, exploring policy implications, and examining the ethical dimensions of using social media in diplomatic relations communication and awareness creation.

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