



AFTER MODERNISM, DO CONSERVATISM AND WAHHABISM STILL EXIST IN SAUDI ARABIA? CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS ON X USERS' COMMENTS ABOUT RELIGIOUS SENTIMENT ISSUES

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The existence of conservatism and Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia creates a complex discourse in light of the modernism introduced by Saudi Vision 2030. Although much research has been conducted on this topic, none have approached the phenomenon through the lens of social media discourse. To fill the gap in the study, this research examines the existence of Conservatism and Wahhabism as reflected in the comments of internet users concerning the Islamic religious sentiment that emerged on the X platform. This research analyses the contentious event of two non-Muslim women entering the Nabawi Mosque in unsuitable clothing on February 7, 2023, utilising descriptive qualitative methods. The data obtained through internet archive documentation were analysed utilising Theo van Leeuwen's framework. The findings revealed a process of actor exclusion marked by a passivation and actor inclusion utilising differentiation, abstraction, identification, and indeterminacy. The processes and strategies utilized led to a polarisation in the discourse. The emotional discourse observed in the comment section suggests the continued influence of Wahhabism on conservatism within social media discussions. This existence is characterised by Islamic exclusivity, the purification of tauhid, adherence to conservative principles, rejection of modernism, and a literal interpretation of religious texts. The findings of this study indicate that de-conservatisation and de-wahhabisation, integral to the Saudi Vision 2030 program designed to mitigate extremism, do not automatically eliminate this viewpoint from the public sphere. The findings of this study have implications for the advancement of thought studies in the context of modernisation and moderation in Saudi Arabia.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the declaration of the Saudi Vision 2030 by Muhammad bin Salman (MBS), Saudi Arabia has undergone substantial transformations across multiple social, political, and religious dimensions (Kinninmont, 2017; Asadi, 2020; Rafique & Butt, 2022). Through the Saudi Vision 2030, MBS aims to foster a modernization initiative in Saudi Arabia to diminish reliance on oil (Nurunnabi, 2017; Moshashai et al., 2018). The studies by Alhoussein (2020) and Alghannam (2024) indicate that MBS has introduced a new form of moderate Islam to legitimize social reforms and enhance Saudi Arabia's standing in the international arena (Aarts, 2020; Grabowski, 2021; Ismail et al. 2022). Saudi Arabia's modernization, as outlined in the Saudi Vision 2030, promotes liberalisation and seeks to diminish the dominance of Wahhabism by endorsing moderate Islam (Bari, 2019). The adoption of moderate Islam influences the diminishing influence of religious groups on state policy formulation, as it is perceived to obstruct the modernization efforts in Saudi Arabia (Mațoi & Constantin, 2016; Rahman, 2019). Conversely, moderate Islam has emerged as a new authoritarian framework aimed at diminishing the influence of Wahhabism within the Saudi government and reinforcing the authority of Saudi leaders (Asadi 2020; Ożarowski, 2022).

MBS plays a complex role in Saudi Arabia's modernization process by initiating the ambitious Saudi Vision 2030 project (Pashayan, 2019). MBS has transformed numerous facets of Saudi Arabia through Saudi Vision 2030, with the most significant initiative being the futuristic city of Neom (Farag et al. 2018; Mohamed et al., 2022). MBS has effectively employed foreign policy to achieve regional stability and dominance (Koç 2019; Athanasoulia, 2020; Lima 2023). MBS has promoted the integration of moderate Islam within Islamic education. The research conducted by Othman et al. (2021) and Latifah & Solihat (2024) indicates that Saudi Vision 2030 promotes the reform of the Islamic education curriculum to align with moderate Islamic ideology. MBS promotes alterations in national identity that align with Saudi Arabia's socio-political shift towards modernity (Aldossry, 2024). MBS has also empowered women in Saudi Arabia, advancing gender equality (Hvidt, 2018; Alessa et al., 2022).

MBS has encountered challenges in realising his reform objectives, leading to various instances of international criticism. The murder of Jamal Khashoggi, which involved Saudi government agents (Gause 2018; Kéchichian, 2019), and Saudi Arabia's participation in the war in Yemen (Ruggiero, 2019; Habibi, 2019) serve as pertinent examples. MBS has also empowered women in Saudi Arabia, enhancing their lives (Hvidt, 2018; Alessa et al., 2022). Nonetheless, the reform agenda encountered significant obstacles due to the enduring structural and ideological frameworks within Saudi Arabian society (Ainurrofiq & Khasanah, 2024). The realization of human rights has faced obstacles not only for women but also due to the enduring ideology of Wahhabism (Almakaty, 2024; Heydarzeda & Bagheri, 2024). A significant obstacle to the implications of Saudi Vision 2030 is the unpreparedness of certain individuals to accept substantial changes in Saudi Arabia (Alkarni, 2018; Czornik, 2020).

The initiation of Saudi Vision 2030 in 2016 prompts inquiries regarding the status and role of Wahhabis and conservatives in the context of modernization. Previous studies indicate that Salafism (Wahhabism) groups have undergone an identity crisis and a shift in ideological direction as a result of the Saudi 2030 vision project (Sinani, 2022; Ismail, 2023). The Saudi Vision 2030 reform imposes restrictions on Wahhabi clerics regarding their ability to critique government policies deemed inconsistent with Wahhabism (Mațoi & Constantin, 2016; Rahman, 2019; Asadi, 2020). The Saudi vision

policy faces challenges stemming from the prevailing conservatism and Wahhabism among the populace of Saudi Arabia (Almakaty, 2024; Heydarzeda & Bagheri, 2024). This occurs as Conservatism and Wahhabism remain partially integrated within Arab political and social frameworks, undergoing a de-Wahabization process to facilitate state reforms (Aarts, 2020; Grabowski, 2021). The Saudi government requires religious legitimacy to maintain the stability of its authority. The concept of “ta’at wali al-amr” in Wahhabism continues to be upheld by Saudi leaders to mitigate both internal and external threats (Sulaib, 2020).

Previous studies have examined the dynamics of Netizen responses across various social media platforms. In the studies by Downing & Dron (2019) and Faisal et al. (2021), Muslim activism articulated its religious identity on Platform X. Anti-Islamic groups express hate speech against the Muslim community in the comments section of Platform X (Darwish et al., 2018; Evolvi, 2019; William et al., 2023). Previous research has examined netizens' criticism of Saudi Arabia's reforms as part of the Saudi Vision 2030 project. Almutarie (2019) and Balalaa et al. (2021) addressed economic issues related to social media in the context of Saudi Vision 2030. Platform X in Saudi Arabia legitimizes religious officials' presence in disseminating their perspectives (Alajlan, 2021). Furthermore, the rejection of the Saudi vision reform was also evident on the X platform. Several Twitter users have expressed criticism regarding the effectiveness of the Saudi Vision 2030 project (Alshaikh, 2019; Alkarni, 2018). The negative reaction of male users on the X platform to the lifting of the driving ban for women in Saudi Arabia is notable (Almuyidi, 2020).

This study analyses the presence of Wahhabism ideology and conservative movements following the initiation of Saudi Vision 2030. The government of Saudi Arabia has formally designated moderate Islam as the state ideology. Wahhabism and conservative ideology persist, adapting to contemporary contexts within the framework of Saudi Arabian reform. In this context, communication strategies via social media, particularly on the X platform, serve as a crucial arena for religious actors to sustain their presence and strategically influence public opinion. This explanation indicates a lack of research addressing the coexistence of Conservatism and Wahhabism via social media. The research question can be summarised as follows: Firstly, how does the actor represented in X users' comments about religious sentiment issues? Secondly, how does the existence of conservatism and Wahhabism reflected in X users' comments about religious sentiment issues? This study employs the critical discourse analysis theory from Van Leeuwen (2008) to address the research questions, focusing on identifying X users' ideology and religious identity through their comment narratives.

METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative methodology, utilising data from user comment X on posts from the SaudiNews50 account concerning the incident involving two non-Muslim women entering the Nabawi mosque on February 7, 2023. The data source can be accessed at <https://x.com/SaudiNews50/status/1623435034496741376>. The recent incident involving two non-Muslim women entering the Nabawi Mosque in inappropriate attire on February 7, 2023, has sparked controversy regarding Saudi Arabia's approach to tourism. The incident generated significant discourse on social media platforms, particularly X. Many negative comments criticised the act. A significant number of negative comments condemned the act as a breach of the sanctity of the Nabawi Mosque and Islamic religious identity. Criticism has been directed at the Saudi

Allah is sufficient for us, and He is the best of managers.

The phrase *تدورون لهم اعذار* 'you are making excuses for them' does not indicate the actor directly, as it does not explicitly mention the subject defending this action. The word *تدورون* could refer to the government of Saudi Arabia, the management of the Nabawi mosque, the security police, supporters of liberalisation policies, or people who agree with these policies, but it remains unclear who they are. This triggers broader public assumptions and is open to various interpretations. The sentence *تدورون لهم اعذار* also allows the reader to interpret the actors of the sentence on their own, thus widening the space for criticism and allowing the comment to polarise 'those who defend' versus 'those who oppose', without further explaining positions or reasons. The passivation strategy of this sentence leads to the assumption that certain forces indirectly contribute to this offence. In addition to excerpt 1 above, the exclusion process with passivation strategies can also be seen in excerpts 2 and 3 below.

Excerpt 2 *تم ادخالهم عمدا وعن قصد كما تم ادخال الصهيوني سابقا قاتلكم واخزاكم
سياستكم التخريبية لم تعد تخفى على أحد*
*They were brought in deliberately and premeditatedly, just as
the Zionists were brought in before them. Kill them and shame
them. Your destructive policies are no longer hidden from
anyone.*

Excerpt 3 *من وراء هذا والمي يبون المسجد الحرام قبر الرسول يكون سياحه وش بقو من
العبادة حسبي الله ونعم الوكيل*
*Who are the masterminds behind all this, and those who want
to make the Grand Mosque (the burial place of the Prophet) a
tourist attraction? What is left of worship? Allah is sufficient for
us and is the best organizer of all affairs.*

Excerpt 2 also shows passivity, as seen from the words *تم ادخالهم عمدا وعن قصد* 'they were brought in deliberately and planned', indicating that there was an actor who deliberately brought the two non-Muslim women into the Nabawi mosque. However, who the actor is is not shown directly. It could refer to the Saudi government or others who support liberalisation policies. The comment makes the criticism more vague but still effective in building the impression of a conspiracy or a particular agenda. Meanwhile, the sentence after also shows strategic passivity as seen from the sentence after *قاتلكم واخزاكم سياستكم التخريبية لم تعد تخفى على أحد* 'kill them and shame them, your destructive policies can no longer be hidden from anyone'. This sentence is clearly aimed at the Arab government or the ruler, considered the target of criticism, because this is part of the innovation of tourism policy in Saudi Arabia. Meanwhile, the discourse in excerpt 3 also does not show the actors directly; rather, the consequences or results of the action are more emphasised. It can be seen from the verb *يبون* 'they made' with pronouns that do not indicate who did or started the event, for example, the government of Saudi Arabia, the authorities, or certain people. In other words, the actors are hidden and directed at the consequences of the policy, namely, the change in the function of places of worship into tourist objects.

Inclusion Process through Differentiation Strategy

The inclusion process with differentiation strategies occurs when users compare the events with other events. This discourse shows the user's strategy to corner the actor by presenting other groups or discourses to strengthen the unfavourable impression. The discourse can be identified in the following excerpt 4.

Excerpt 4 تم ادخالهم عمدا وعن قصد كما تم ادخال الصهيوني سابقا قاتلكم واخزاكم
سياستكم التخريبية لم تعد تخفى على أحد
They were brought in deliberately and premeditatedly, just as the Zionists were brought in before them. Kill them and shame them. Your destructive policies are no longer hidden from anyone.

The phrase *كما تم ادخال الصهيوني سابقا* 'just as the Zionists were brought in before' shows that the user deliberately added another event to reinforce and imply that the entry of two non-Muslim women into the Nabawi mosque was not just an ordinary incident, but part of a larger pattern involving outsiders who are considered detrimental to Muslims. In addition, the term *الصهيوني* 'zionists' is used to reinforce the differentiation between 'them' (non-Muslims who entered the mosque) and 'us' (Muslims who maintain the sanctity of the mosque). This comment shows an inclusion strategy to link two different cases of two non-Muslim women entering the Nabawi mosque. Before that, there were Zionists who also entered the mosque. By comparing the case of the two non-Muslim women with the Zionists, this comment reinforces the assumption that the entry of the non-Muslims was not just a technical error, but part of a wider pattern of threats to the Muslim community.

The inclusion process with differentiation strategies was also identified in other comments, as shown in excerpts 5 and 6 below.

Excerpt 5 اي موقع ديني بالعالم ما يُدخل له بلباس غير ساتر، عند النصرارى-على سبيل المثال
وليس المقارنة-الفاثيكان على اختلاف وعِظْم قدسية الحرمين تلبس الزائرات غطاء على
الرأس.
No place of worship in the world should be entered in clothes that do not cover the 'awrah. For example, among Christians, not to be compared - the Vatican, despite the greatness and sanctity of both holy mosques, female visitors wear head coverings.

Excerpt 6 ماذا تمنعون البدون المسلمين في الكويت من العمرة والحج من سنولت بينما تدخلون
غير المسلمين لمكة والمدينة وباقي المدن؟
Why did you prohibit Bedouin Muslims in Kuwait from performing Umrah and Hajj for years, while you allowed non-Muslims to enter Mecca and Medina, and other cities?

The discourse in excerpt 5 shows a differentiation strategy with non-Muslims in the Vatican. The user compares and contrasts the dress code in Islamic shrines and the Vatican. The comment highlights that female visitors to the Vatican must cover their

heads as a sign of respect. Through the comment, the user also emphasises that non-Muslims (Christians) apply a stricter dress code in terms of modesty, so this case at the Nabawi mosque is considered more striking and absurd. On the other hand, the phrase *على سبيل المثال وليس المقارنة* 'for example, not to be compared' shows that the user is implicitly building a comparison even though explicitly denying it. Therefore, the narrative unintentionally establishes a differentiation between Islamic rules and the rules of Christian places of worship to show contradictions in Saudi Arabia's policies.

The discourse in excerpt 6 shows two contrasting events that indirectly polarise into two groups: 'us', namely Bedouin Muslims in Kuwait who are prohibited from performing Umrah and Hajj and 'them', non-Muslims who are allowed to enter Mecca and Medina. This comment highlights the injustice in Saudi Arabia's policy that gives more leeway to non-Muslims than to certain Muslims. The differentiation strategy is illustrated through the clauses *لماذا تمنعون* 'why do you prohibit' and *بينما تدخلون* 'while you allow', showing a sharp contrast between the prohibition of certain Muslims and permission for non-Muslims. As a result, the government of Saudi Arabia has been criticised for discriminating against fellow Muslims while being more tolerant towards non-Muslims.

Inclusion Process through Abstraction Strategy

The process of inclusion through the abstraction strategy occurs when users create abstractions. These abstractions result in the identification of a few actors among many. In specific cases, this strategy can influence the shaping of positive and negative opinions about the two non-Muslim women as the represented actors. This inclusion process using the abstraction strategy can be observed in excerpts 7 and 8 below.

Excerpt 7

اصلا بأية وجه حق يدخلون لحد الحرم وهو غير مسلمين
On what basis were they allowed to enter a holy place, even though they are not Muslims?

Excerpt 8

طيب على الاقل احتراماً للمكان المفروض تبتروا حين منعهم العسكري من الدخول
اخرجوا العبايات ولبسوها ليش من الاول ما احترمن أنفسهن وتسترن
Okay, at the very least, they should have covered themselves out of respect for the place. When the soldiers stopped them from entering, they took off their abayas and put them. Why didn't they respect themselves and cover up from the beginning?

The word *يدخلون* 'they enter' in excerpt 7 refers to a pronoun for more than two people, even though the incident only involved two women. This plural form can create the impression that the incident was not a small case involving just two individuals, but rather part of a broader phenomenon. In other words, the user employs the abstraction strategy to expand the actors' scope, as if many non-Muslims were entering the Nabawi mosque, not just two. In this way, the criticism can feel more serious and systemic, rather than merely an individual case.

In excerpt 8, the abstraction strategy is also present, where specific individuals or groups are generalized into a broader category. As a result, this incident involving two women can be perceived as involving a group of non-Muslim women. The clause *ما احترمن*

أنفسهن وتسترن *'did not respect themselves and cover themselves from the beginning'* uses the pronoun *hunna* (a plural pronoun for women). The actual case only involves two non-Muslim women entering without an abaya. However, the use of the plural form creates the impression that more non-Muslim women did the same. This sentence effectively transforms an individual case into a collective one. The use of this word choice is actually intended to suggest that the incident poses a threat to the prestige of the Muslim community. This comment also broadens the scope of the actors being criticised. The user is not only criticising the two women, but also the party that allowed this to happen—namely, the Saudi government. The Saudi government's policy of allowing religious tourism for non-Muslims has led to more relaxed access to Islamic holy sites.

Inclusion Process with Identification Strategy

The process of inclusion through the identification strategy can occur when individuals or groups are represented based on specific characteristics attached to them. This strategy is found in commentaries containing judgments about the incident in the data sources. This process and strategy can be observed in excerpt 9 below.

Excerpt 9 المشكلة موبس اللباس وصول غير المسلمين للحرم هو المصيبة حتى لا يلهى العمارة
The problem is not just about their clothing, but the arrival of non-Muslims in the Haram (the holy city) is a calamity, as it may disturb the worshippers.

The excerpt above demonstrates the strategy of identification through the phrase *'the arrival of non-Muslims to the Haram (the holy city) is a calamity'*. This clause shows that non-Muslims are identified as a threat. The comment not only mentions that non-Muslims entered, but immediately categorises their arrival as *المصيبة 'a calamity'*. Additionally, the sentence represents religious-based identification, as seen in the use of *غير المسلمين 'non-Muslims'*, rather than identifying individuals by their specific characteristics. Furthermore, this data seems to reinforce the polarisation between Muslims and non-Muslims. It reflects a perception that Muslims have exclusive access. At the same time, non-Muslims, seen as outsiders, are considered a disruption to the sanctity of the place and are not justified in gaining access. This comment can be understood as an example of how actor representation strategies are used to construct public opinion, portraying the presence of non-Muslims at the Nabawi mosque as a threat to Muslims collectively.

Inclusion Process through Indetermination Strategy

The process of inclusion through the strategy of indetermination occurs when actors are not explicitly mentioned, creating ambiguity or a vague general impression. This process and strategy can be observed in excerpt 10 below.

Excerpt 10 لو كانت هيئة الأمر بالمعروف والنهي المنكر موجودة ما كنت تجد هذه الأنواع من غير المسلمين.
If only the Commission for Welfare Empowerment and Crime Prevention existed, we wouldn't find non-Muslims like this.

This sentence shows two elements of indeterminacy: هذه الأنواع من غير المسلمين *'like this non-Muslims'* and هيئة الأمر بالمعروف والنهي *'the Commission for Welfare Empowerment and Crime Prevention'*. The phrase *like this non-Muslims* does not specify who is meant, nor does it explain who or where these non-Muslims come from, leaving the reader to fill in their own interpretations or stereotypes. By not mentioning the number or specific identity, this sentence broadens the impression that many non-Muslims are entering holy sites, even though the actual case involves only two women. The phrase *the Commission for Welfare Empowerment and Crime Prevention* implies that the Saudi government is at fault for dissolving this institution, though it is not explicitly stated. This sentence suggests that the problem results from this institution's absence. In this way, the sentence creates a sense of collective responsibility without identifying a specific actor. This strategy of indeterminacy allows for criticism to be built without directly naming who should be held accountable in the case of the two non-Muslim women entering the Nabawi mosque. It also broadens the scope of the criticism, potentially targeting the government, society, or even the broader Muslim world.

The Existence of Conservatism and Wahhabism in X Users' Comments on Religious Sentiment Issue

The analysis is linked to the representation of actors outlined earlier to identify the existence of conservatism and Wahhabism in the user's discourse. The process and strategies of representation implicitly reveal the perspective and values upheld by the user in justifying an event. In the context of the two non-Muslim women entering the Nabawi mosque, this identification is presented in the following subsections.

The Existence of Conservatism and Wahhabism in Exclusion Process through Passivisation Strategy

The process of exclusion through the passivisation strategy contains the ideas of conservatism and Wahhabism, as shown in excerpts 11 and 12 below.

Excerpt 11 المسجد الحرام والمسجد النبوي أماكن عبادة وليست أماكن سياحة قال تعالى وطهر بيتي للطائفين والعاكفين والركع السجود وليس لسياحة غير المسلمين فيه أماكن كثيره مخصصه للسياحة غير قبلة المسلمين ومسجد الرسول صل الله عليه وسلم
The Holy mosque and Nabawi mosque are places of worship, not tourist attractions. Allah SWT says, "Purify My house for those who perform tawaf, those who stay there, and those who bow and prostrate." Neither is a tourist site for non-Muslims. There are many other places designated for tourism aside from the qibla of the Muslim community and the Mosque of the Messenger of Allah

Excerpt 12 راجعوا المنع التام لدخول غير المسلمين للمدينة وريحوا روسكم من هالمشاكل
Return the total ban on non-Muslims from entering the city and save yourselves from this problem.

The discourse in excerpt 11 above shows the use of the passivisation strategy by not directly mentioning the authority responsible for the policy, such as the Saudi government or the mosque administrators. Additionally, the two non-Muslim women are not described personally; they are only categorised generally as *ghairu muslimin* (non-Muslims). This aims to place the blame on the broader group of non-Muslims rather than on specific individuals. This discourse reflects a conservative religious ideology with an extreme Wahhabist tone, emphasising the purity of *Tawhid* (the oneness of God). This is evident in the user's justification, which draws a clear line between the sacred and the profane, as well as the exclusivity of worship spaces for Muslims only. Furthermore, the user legitimises their argument by quoting a verse from the Quran, asserting that the Holy mosque and the Nabawi mosque are places of worship, not tourist sites. This demonstrates a textualist and literalist approach to understanding religious texts, a hallmark of Wahhabi thought.

In excerpt 12, the passivisation strategy is reflected in the imperative word راجعوا, 'return it'. This word is a plural imperative, directed at more than one actor. It addresses the Saudi government, urging them to restore the image of Masjid al-Nabawi as a place of worship, not a tourist site. Additionally, the phrase ربحوا رؤوسكم literally means 'calm your heads', but its connotative meaning is to avoid disturbance. The user uses these two plural imperative words to emphasise their opinion that the old policy (total ban on non-Muslims entering the Nabawi mosque) is better and more calming. Furthermore, the user conceals the role of the Saudi government as the authority behind the policy and shifts the focus from the rulers to non-Muslims as the problem. This comment represents a conservative ideology with Wahhabi characteristics because it views holy cities like Medina as needing to remain sterile from the presence of non-Muslims. The user desires to reinstate the total ban to maintain strict religious and social boundaries. This thinking is rooted in a textualist and literal understanding of religious texts and tends to reject modernization policies that contradict the purity of the faith.

The Existence of Conservatism and Wahhabism in Inclusion Process through Abstraction Strategy

The existence of conservative and Wahhabi ideas in inclusion process through abstraction strategy can be seen in excerpt 13 below.

Excerpt 13 كيف غير مسلمات يدخلون الحرم النبوي المفترض عند البوابه يطلعون جوازتهم
علشان تعرف من اي ديانه هم لان ما يجوز يدخلون تانيا معهم عباها في الشنطه اذا ما
كانوا يعرفون ليش العباها كانت في الشنطه!!؟

*How did the non-Muslim women enter the Nabawi mosque?
They should show their passports at the gate so you can know
their religion, because they are not allowed to enter again with
an abaya in their bag if they don't know why the abaya is in the
bag!*

The discourse in excerpt 13 above uses the term غير مسلمات 'non-Muslim women' in the plural form. This refers to the non-Muslim women as a group, presented as a symbol of the "foreign" group within the sacred space of Islam. The user employs the abstraction strategy to broaden the scope of the actors, as if many non-Muslim women are entering Masjid al-Nabawi, not just two women. This comment fosters a negative sentiment towards the group of non-Muslim women, as they are perceived as a problem

or a threat to the sanctity of the mosque. This also suggests an ideological conservative stance in line with the two previous comments. The users strongly reject the new policy introduced by the Saudi government, although they do not directly blame the government. Moreover, this comment shows a Wahhabi way of thinking that emphasises non-Muslims should not enter Muslim spaces. The religious identity is evident in the belief that sacred spaces belong exclusively to Muslims and that outsiders should be identifiable and prevented from entering in the first place. This comment also reflects a rejection of the policy's relaxation, suggesting that violations should be prevented through administrative procedures (passport checks and religious identification).

The Existence of Conservatism and Wahhabism in Inclusion Process through Identification Strategy

The existence of conservative and Wahhabi ideas in inclusion process through abstraction strategy can be seen in excerpt 14 below.

Excerpt 14

ما فيه شي اسمه خطأ هذا تسيب المشاعر المقدسة خط احمر
There is no such thing as a mistake. This is negligence! Sacred places are a red line!

The discourse in excerpt 14 shows the strategy of identification through the phrase *خط احمر* 'red line'. Metaphorically, this term means a strict prohibition or an absolute boundary that must not be crossed. The phrase does not specify who is doing something, but evaluates the object (the sacred place) with a high ideological judgment. The term *red line* serves to reinforce the boundary of religious identity, distinguishing between the sacred and the profane, as well as between Muslims and non-Muslims. It is not about who the actor is, but about the values attached to the object (the sacred place). Through this term, the user seeks to remind the readers of the old rules and position sacred places as the holiest spaces for Muslims. Therefore, this comment reflects a conservative Wahhabi ideology that is strict in maintaining the old rules and harsh in rejecting new ones.

DISCUSSION

The data and analysis presented indicate that conservatism and Wahhabism persist in Saudi Arabia, notwithstanding MBS's initiatives aimed at modernization and reforms that redirect religious thought towards nationalism within the state framework. Conservatism and Wahhabism are inherently linked as religious ideologies and identities, with their roots extending back to the establishment of the kingdom. Consequently, despite the global promotion and dissemination of Saudi Arabia's modernist ideas, conservative and Wahhabi ideologies remain resilient and difficult to eliminate. The exposure to these ideologies has varied between pre-modernism and post-modernism in Saudi Arabia. Based on Theo Van Leeuwen's theory, the analysis results indicate that the representation patterns of positive and negative social media actors effectively illustrate both ideologies within this platform. Actor representations in comment discourses indicate users' alignment with specific religious ideologies and identities.

This study's findings corroborate the research conducted by [Downing & Dron](#)

(2019) and Faisol et al. (2021), demonstrating that society actively employs social media to articulate ideas and opinions. The focus on religious sentiment regarding the two non-Muslim women aligns with the economic motivations for rejecting Saudi Vision 2030 on social media, as noted by Almutarie (2019) and Balalaa et al. (2021). This finding further supports the research conducted by Alshaikh (2019), Alkarni (2018), and Almuayidi (2020), which emphasises the criticism from Twitter users regarding the effectiveness of the ambitious Saudi Vision 2030 projects across various sectors, as well as the lifting of the driving ban for women. The rejectionist ideas are articulated through a conservative ideology that contrasts the contemporary ideology advocated by the Saudi government, specifically moderate Islam (Alhoussein, 2020; Athanasoulia 2020; Winarni 2022). This study concludes that societal will conflicts with governmental aspirations, stemming from ideological and religious identity differences.

The ideology and religious identity reflected in X's comments about the case of the two women entering Masjid Nabawi reveal differences from prior studies, alongside the aforementioned similarities in findings. Research indicates that users of platform X frequently employ it to disseminate hate speech, particularly motivated by Islamophobic ideologies targeting the Muslim community (Darwish et al., 2018; Evolvi, 2019; Hamer, 2023; William et al., 2023). The increase in negative sentiments from X users has motivated Muslim activists to articulate their perspectives on Islam within the platform (Downing & Dron 2019; Faisol, et al. 2021). Nonetheless, no study has yet elucidated the specific reasons for societal rejection of Saudi Vision 2030, particularly among X users, attributed to the influence of religious ideology and identity. This study identifies ideological and identity-driven factors as significant reasons for rejecting Saudi Vision 2030 and modernism, which are viewed as excessively liberal. A segment of society in Saudi Arabia remains aligned with conservative and Wahhabi perspectives, resisting the shift towards modernism.

The argument relies on historical data indicating that Saudi Arabia has maintained a robust relationship with the Wahhabi Islamic group since the establishment of the Al-Saud kingdom (Verleyen, 2020). Saudi policies, especially in the religious domain, are regulated by Wahhabi scholars. This group identifies as Salafism rather than Wahhabism (Hamdi, 2019). The linguistic representation in the comments on X naturally reflects conservative ideological values and religious identity, indicative of Wahhabism. The data indicates that most comments on X do not explicitly convey dissatisfaction with the Saudi Vision 2030 policies, particularly regarding social reforms. The comments obscure the social actors deemed responsible for the current social chaos in Saudi Arabia, specifically the Saudi government.

The hesitance of Saudi society to express criticism openly is attributed to the principle of ta'ah li uli al-amr (obedience to those in authority). This concept is integral to Saudi culture and stifles government criticism by asserting that dissent against the ruler is synonymous with dissent against Islamic teachings (Izaqi, 2016; Sulaib, 2020). Consequently, it is reasonable for users on X to refrain from directly accusing the Saudi government. This study must also critique the misalignment between Saudi Arabia's ambition to become a moderate Islamic state and societal conditions and readiness (Czornik, 2020; Athanasoulia, 2020; Ismail, 2023). Saudi Arabia continues to violate human rights, exemplified by the recent arrest of several Wahhabi clerics who were perceived as obstructing the state's vision and hindering the progress of the Saudi Vision 2030 project (Wafi, 2018). This appears to be an attempt to reduce conservative Islam's influence on Saudi Arabia's liberalization. Saudi Arabia is adopting this step to strengthen its political power and reduce religious academics' influence. Saudi Arabia

can enact measures that violate Islamic beliefs using this method (Grabowski, 2021).

This study observes that Saudi society appears to maintain a negative perception of non-Muslim women. The data indicates that Saudi society perceives its clothing as unsuitable for visits to the holy land. The public appears to be imposing its ideology on the two non-Muslim women, compelling them to conform. The attire of the two non-Muslim women is regarded as typical and relatively modest according to non-Muslim standards. The policy mandating non-Muslim women to wear the abaya was abolished in 2019 (Andika & Idris, 2024). This notion suggests that non-Muslim and Islamic views of modest clothes are shaped by their respective beliefs. Islam promotes modesty and women's dignity by covering their bodies with 'awrah'. The non-Muslim perspective emphasizes personal freedom. When visiting important sites, Saudi culture expects the two non-Muslim ladies to be tolerant and follow Islamic dress requirements.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that conservatism and Wahhabism religious identity still exist in Saudi Arabia, despite the modernization and moderation initiatives introduced by MBS. In a progressively restricted environment, conservatism and Wahhabism are not openly articulated in Saudi Arabia and are likely challenging to identify. Social media platforms like X offer a more effective and efficient environment for users who subscribe to these ideologies, enabling them to articulate their perspectives on relevant issues. This study enhances the existing research on religious thought in Saudi Arabia, particularly in the country's ongoing modernization efforts. The analysis is constrained by the limited volume of data examined. Future research may explore a more extensive comments dataset on X to better understand public opinion. Future research should investigate additional policies under Saudi Vision 2030, particularly those about social changes in Saudi Arabia, as this area is essential for comprehending the mental preparedness of Saudi society for substantial transformations.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The first author was responsible for designing and organizing the analysis, carrying out the research, and writing the text. The second author was also responsible for collecting data, enriching contextual analysis, and proofreading the work.

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