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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Section: *Philosophy and Religion*

Applying Habermas's theory to Vision 2030 initiatives to promote national identity: A critical analysis

Shuruq Ismail Alsharif¹ ¹Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University*Correspondence: sialsharif@iau.edu.sa**ABSTRACT**

This study applies the principles of Habermas's theory of communicative action to the initiatives outlined in Saudi Vision 2030, focusing on the role of effective communication in fostering national identity. The research provides a comprehensive review of Vision 2030 documents and policies related to community dialogue and communication, including news archives, public initiatives, programs, and government announcements. Additionally, the study explores the role of e-government platforms in enhancing communication between the government and citizens, contributing to a more transparent and participatory decision-making process. The findings suggest that Habermas's principles, particularly those related to communicative action, can significantly enhance community dialogue, thereby fostering mutual understanding among different cultural groups within Saudi society. This, in turn, contributes to strengthening national identity, as diverse voices and perspectives are integrated into the broader societal discourse. This perspective can be further refined through Brubaker's critique of essentialist understandings of identity, which emphasizes that identity should not be treated as a fixed attribute of bounded groups, but rather as a dynamic and context-dependent process shaped through discourse and social interaction.

Via creating platforms for open communication, Vision 2030's initiatives encourage active engagement and inclusivity key elements in building a cohesive and united nation. The study recommends increasing investments in community communication and interaction programs, with a particular emphasis on training individuals in effective communication skills. Such training will empower citizens to engage in constructive dialogues, thereby promoting mutual understanding and supporting the achievement of Vision 2030's overarching goals. The research also highlights the critical importance of expanding media use to facilitate open discussions on a range of social, cultural, and political issues, reinforcing transparency and fostering a more informed and engaged citizenry.

KEYWORDS: community dialogue, effective communication, e-government platforms, Habermas, national identity, Saudi Vision 2030, teaching quality

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Introduction

Habermas (1984) highlights the pivotal role of communication in modern society, arguing that human interaction and the concept of “communicative action” are fundamental to achieving mutual understanding. According to Habermas (1984), communicative action involves five key forms of validation in communication, emphasizing the importance of shared understanding and individuals’ ability to achieve their goals through dialogue. This process relies on accurately understanding facts, acting in accordance with societal expectations, and clearly expressing one’s motives. As communication evolves, individuals continually adjust their understanding of others’ standards based on personal experiences, with each person interpreting situations differently.

In capitalist societies, communication is being influenced by a growing focus on individualism and self-interest, often transforming interactions into transactional exchanges rather than fostering genuine human connections. Marx critiques this feature of capitalist societies, using it to advocate for socialism. In contrast, Habermas focuses on the potential for new communication methods to promote equality, self-awareness, peace, and environmental consciousness. He argues that changes in communication are a response to the evolving needs of society, where individuals seek to understand others and adjust their actions accordingly.

The current paper applies Habermas’s theory to analyze the role of Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 in promoting community dialogue and leveraging modern media. To guide the analysis, this study addresses the following research question: To what extent do communication initiatives under Saudi Vision 2030 reflect the principles of Habermas’s theory of communicative action in fostering inclusive dialogue and shaping national identity? Through a comprehensive review of Vision 2030 policies, government initiatives, news archives, and public programs, the study explores the extent to which these efforts embody the principles of transparency and participatory decision-making.

This research also assesses how e-government platforms could facilitate communication between the government and citizens, enhancing the overall democratic process (King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue, 2014). This study is based on a qualitative analysis of selected policy and institutional documents related to Vision 2030. The study adopts a theory-informed thematic analysis. Key analytical dimensions are derived from Habermas’s framework, including participation, inclusivity, communicative rationality, and transparency. These dimensions are used as interpretive categories to examine how communication is constructed and represented across the selected materials. The analysis proceeds through three stages. First, relevant documents and initiatives are systematically reviewed and organized based on their relation to communication practices. Second, recurring themes and patterns related to dialogue, participation, and public engagement are identified and grouped under the predefined analytical dimensions. Third, these themes are critically interpreted in light of Habermas’s theory, with particular attention to the extent to which they reflect or diverge from the conditions of ideal communicative action.

The paper interprets these materials through a theory-informed lens, drawing on Habermas’s concept of communicative action to examine how communication is framed within official initiatives. The material examined includes official Vision 2030 documents, government reports, descriptions of digital platforms such as Absher and Tawakkalna, as well as publicly available information on national dialogue programs and cultural initiatives published between 2016 and 2024. The analysis follows an interpretive approach, focusing on how key themes associated with Habermas’s framework, such as participation, public dialogue, and transparency, are reflected in these materials. These concepts are used as guiding points to read and organize the content, rather than as fixed variables to be measured.

Vision 2030 places significant emphasis on fostering rational communication and social interaction, particularly through creating platforms where citizens can engage in meaningful dialogues. One such platform is the annual Saudi National Cultural Festival, which promotes cultural diversity and national unity by showcasing various regions’ arts, performances, traditional crafts, and cuisines. Furthermore, the government has implemented initiatives such as the Cultural Exchange Program, which encourages collaboration between Saudi artists and international creatives, facilitating cross-cultural dialogue and understanding. These programs focus on developing the tourism sector, preserving national heritage, and engaging different segments of Saudi society in cultural and social initiatives (Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage [SCTH], n.d.). From an analytical perspective, such efforts can be interpreted as facilitating interaction across social groups, though their role in enabling inclusive and deliberative forms of communication remains open to examination.

Furthermore, Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 supports the use of modern media to facilitate dialogue and enhance communication among different cultural communities. The strategic application of digital platforms, including government apps such as "Tawakkalna" and "Najm", encourages public engagement by enabling citizens to provide feedback, access services, and participate in national policy development. Notably, the "Tawakkalna" system was awarded the 2022 United Nations Public Service Award in the category of Institutional Resilience and Innovative Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic (Digital Government Authority, 2022). While such digital platforms demonstrate the state's capacity to coordinate information and services at scale, their role in facilitating meaningful public communication remains open to interpretation when examined through Habermas's framework.

The integration of Habermas's theory into the analysis of Vision 2030 reveals the significant potential of community dialogue in building a cohesive national identity and promoting social cohesion within a rapidly changing social landscape. Vision 2030's emphasis on transparency, participation, and use of modern media reflects an evolving approach to communication that strives to include all segments of society, ensuring that diverse voices are heard. This approach not only strengthens the democratic process but also contributes to the formation of a unified Saudi identity based on shared values and collective understanding.

Many countries have implemented principles similar to those of Habermas. An illustrative example is the approach adopted by certain municipalities in Sweden, which have implemented a model based on citizen participation in local decision-making. This model is grounded in principles akin to those elaborated by Habermas in his theory of the public sphere and communicative rationality. A comparative analysis was conducted between these municipalities and others that rely on traditional administrative methods, wherein decisions are made centrally without direct citizen engagement.

Specifically, the model involved the establishment of a digital public sphere and the organization of regular local forums, thereby providing platforms for citizens to discuss local policies and propose improvements. This approach emphasizes transparency and open dialogue among all stakeholders, including citizens, local officials, and the private sector. In contrast, the traditional system confines decision-making to a closed circle of local officials without regular mechanisms for citizen participation, leading to administrative processes that depend largely on technical analysis and managerial discretion rather than active community involvement.

The experience revealed a significant increase in satisfaction and trust: municipalities that adopted the dialogical model exhibited a marked improvement in citizens' satisfaction and trust, as residents felt that they played an active role in shaping policy. Moreover, collective participation can contribute to a more accurate identification of issues and support the development of solutions that are better aligned with community needs, thereby improving the quality of public services. In addition, participatory forms of governance may enhance coordination among stakeholders and reduce administrative tensions by structuring communication and linking deliberation to decision-making processes (Fung, 2006).

The application of Habermas's communicative theory to the initiatives outlined in Vision 2030 highlights the critical role of dialogue in shaping an inclusive and cohesive society. Through the use of media and digital platforms, the vision provides a framework for fostering rational communication, enhancing transparency, and promoting active citizen participation. These efforts contribute to the development of a national identity that embraces diversity while fostering a sense of unity and belonging, in line with Habermas's vision of communication as a tool for achieving mutual understanding and social progress.

Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action

According to Habermas, communication is not merely subjective. Truth and falsehood are part of human communication, with each actor seeking to correct their perceptions of the world around them and their relationships with others. Additionally, an actor can attempt to change something in the outside world and may or may not be successful in that effort. In both cases, that is, forming assumptions and attempting to change the outside world, communication is focused on an objective reality. Based on this context, Habermas discusses two types of interaction, as follows: that between an actor and the outside world and that between an actor playing a role and their own self. The actions an actor takes toward others or toward themselves are a symbolic expression of their relationship.

Simultaneously, multiple perceptions of an action may be correct, which accounts for the ambiguity in interpretation. Communicative action can occur at various levels of strategic action, with all group members

following guidelines derived from overarching rules. In addressing the objective world, Habermas includes the actors as role-playing subjects. To achieve the goal of mutual understanding, an actor must be willing to act based on the potential for rationality between the objective, social, and subjective worlds, creating intersubjective understanding. The relationship between an actor and the world is shaped by truth and efficacy. Interactions regarding normative rules include relationships between the actor and the objective and social worlds. The relationship between the actor and the totality of their legitimate interpersonal relations as well as their own self as a role-playing subject regulates the interactions among them.

One of Habermas's (1987) most important concepts is the "lifeworld," which critiques deficiencies in the economy and state through communicative action (p. 374). Both communicative and nonverbal actions are important components of speech, contributing to substantive and instructive rationality in the lifeworld through successful communicative exchanges. Habermas sees languages as both key to creating expectations and tools for action. He adds that legitimacy in institutions is important to social order; that is, institutions should respect individuals so long as individuals support the institutions. However, legitimacy may also become "colonized" and navigate away from a community's lifeworld. The use of media in modern society, along with the associated money and power, transforms the lifeworld into an institution by means of positive law. In this way, the lifeworld can become colonized by the systems of the modern world, and powerful people may take actions to distort the lifeworld.

Marcuse (1985) proposes that inner freedom and individual unconsciousness are components of public opinion and suggests that industrial societies possess more ideology than ever before. Habermas (1989) attempts to analyze this issue through the concept of the public sphere, which he considers a structure of communication networking for public opinion within a lifeworld. Problems in the public sphere arise only through political decision-making, as politics strongly influence it. The public sphere is initiated by an "action actor" who forms opinions that reflect an interest in the general public's collective expression. These ideas are based on private life experiences, such as those related to family, and on experiences in public spaces where one can communicate with other people face-to-face, such as religious institutions or coffee shops.

The public sphere helps make problems visible. However, according to Habermas, it is more suited to negotiation than to problem-solving. The public sphere helps articulate issues within civil society; the structure of associations and organizations focused on societal issues influenced by political systems (Habermas, 1989) to create change. It is positioned between political power and cultural institutions and practices. Civil society institutionalizes problem-solving and can reach the public sphere through the media to influence the political sphere, helping citizens become involved in politics and ensuring the political system respects them. Correspondingly, there are two types of actors, as follows: local actors, who try to solve the problems in the public sphere, and external actors, who have political or other power.

Habermas (1996) criticizes the idea of norms and states that the public sphere does not fit into the traditional sociological idea of a "social order," as it is not an institution or organization. The scholar's ideas and philosophical approach also extend to political philosophy. He integrates the philosophy of history with critical theory by addressing the agency–structure issue and analyzing individuals' needs alongside the overall structure of the state, explaining how we can make changes while simultaneously incorporating the economic and material aspects of society.

Critiques

Horkheimer (1972) argues that merely using the public sphere for theoretical practice and then applying those abstract ideas to the real world does not necessarily lead to genuine freedom. He contends that such a process, without a critical understanding of social structures and power dynamics, fails to address the deeper conditions of human oppression and domination. According to the concepts of the public and civil spheres, the public sphere includes only negotiation power, while the civil sphere includes only state power. Therefore, the state is able to change the desires of local actors, meaning they cannot overcome all barriers to human freedom, at least through critical social inquiry. The transformation of capitalism into a "real democracy" has failed in terms of social equality, and decision-making remains ideal because power is linked to money. To create change, local actors can negotiate only in the public sphere, which is not easily related to real-world political institutions, especially in complex societies. Horkheimer's criticism may be used as a starting point to consider the voices of

minorities and individuals from different classes, who are the focus of postmodernity and postcolonial studies. Fraser (1990) critiques Habermas for his focus on a bourgeois model without a public sphere separate from the bourgeois. In other words, Habermas fails to consider class distinctions, social strata, social equality, cultural diversity, and participatory democracy, which are all important to critical theory. As such, the bourgeois still controls the dynamics that lead to unequal empowerment for minorities, such as women. Fraser argues that we should consider more than one public sphere so that all stratified groups can create their own subaltern counterpublic to help make their voices heard.

Furthermore, Fraser (1990) disagrees with Habermas's definition of the public sphere, claiming it has four problems. First, Habermas believes that social equality is not necessary for democracy, which Fraser argues cannot be true. Second, Habermas believes that sociology should analyze only a general public sphere instead of several spheres. This is problematic because it means some participants, such as those from lower classes, will not have their voices heard. The ideas and expectations of the public also vary among different regions and cultures. Furthermore, Habermas refers only to the "common good", or what is best for society as a whole. However, Fraser argues that sociology should sometimes analyze the individual good, such as in the case of abusive situations, which need to be addressed on a case-by-case basis and require that the needs of the individual be placed before those of the group. Third, Fraser points out that Habermas assumes that the government and public will always have different goals, which is not necessarily true. An example of this could be a religious government and a religious society, where societal expectations and government mandates are identical. Fraser takes issue with Habermas's assumption that the public sphere does not have cultural attributes and that the dominant group is the most important one to analyze sociologically.

In analyzing and critiquing Habermas's concept of deliberative democracy, Young (1996) argues that, in a democracy, all participants should have equal opportunities to make their voices heard without any domination from powerful groups, which aligns with the goal of deliberation as a whole rather than decisions based on private preferences. Young (1996) suggests that "communicative democracy" highlights democratic discussion based on interest and identifies what policies and rules incentivize voting among greater numbers of people. In this context, differentiation and the overcoming of differentiation are the main resources in a communicative democracy.

Young (1996) also states that the concept of democracy should be broader than forms and styles of speaking that involve deliberative political discussion, which are not sufficient to achieve the outcomes theorists usually envisage. He argues that these processes should be referred to as "communicative" rather than "deliberative," as deliberation is not equally accessible to all individuals who assert it. Sometimes, this description better fits a specific group of people, and norms of deliberation may not reach vocal or emotional expression. She further argues that what counts as legitimate participation is often shaped by implicit norms that privilege certain forms of expression over others. As a result, communicative practices such as storytelling, emotional expression, and everyday interaction may be overlooked, despite their importance in enabling broader and more inclusive forms of engagement.

Furthermore, Young (1996) considers learning as objective rather than subjective. That is, it involves a process of discovering where we are operating subjectively and learning to separate feelings from the objective facts and accept both (constructing unity). Effective criticism of society requires insight into shared understanding and the use of commonalities within that society. This perspective highlights the need to reconsider how participation is understood in institutional contexts, particularly in settings where communication appears open but may still be structured by predefined expectations about acceptable forms of expression.

Self-destructive rationality is the key feature of Enlightenment rationality, implying that Enlightenment thinking and modern society are not truly rational because they create self-destructive environments based on economic benefit rather than considering long-term consequences. These values further lead to inequality in work and education for women compared with men. Habermas (1972) also discusses the conflict between technology and ethics. Science often assumes "neutrality," or the idea that scientific advancement should take place apart from any favoritism, which is a problematic notion in terms of its moral implications.

Applying Habermas's Theory to Saudi Vision 2030

Habermas's theory of communicative action offers a valuable lens through which to understand how dialogue

contributes to Vision 2030's realization. Effective communication, transparency, and public participation are key to achieving the vision's ambitious goals. Saudi Arabia can create a more informed, participatory, and cohesive society. Through dialogue, both between citizens and the government and among diverse cultural groups, Vision 2030 may succeed in developing a more sustainable, prosperous future for the kingdom. The theory of communicative action's emphasis on transparency, mutual understanding, and rational interaction is reflected in the practical steps outlined in Vision 2030. As Saudi Arabia continues to implement its strategic objectives, Habermas's insights on communicative action will play a crucial role in guiding the nation toward achieving its goals of economic diversification, enhanced education, and improved quality of life (King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue, 2014).

For analytical clarity, Habermas's framework is approached through three broad dimensions: the extent to which participation is encouraged, the accessibility of communication channels, and the level of transparency in how information and decisions are presented. These dimensions are used to structure the discussion of Vision 2030 initiatives.

Saudi Vision 2030, launched by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 2016, is a strategic blueprint designed to transform the national economy and promote sustainable development. A core component of this vision is the emphasis on dialogue as a key instrument to achieve its ambitious goals. Habermas's theory of communicative action provides a useful framework for understanding how dialogue can foster transparency, trust, and effective cooperation between the government and its citizens, who are essential for the successful implementation of Vision 2030.

Vision 2030 and the Role of Dialogue

The Vision 2030 plan has specific objectives that highlight the importance of dialogue in achieving development.

- 1. Diversifying the economy:** Vision 2030 seeks to reduce dependence on oil by developing non-oil sectors. Achieving this goal requires active communication between the government, the private sector, and civil society to identify opportunities and challenges, enhancing cooperation among these stakeholders (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016).
- 2. Enhancing education and training:** Aligning educational outcomes with labor market needs has become a central priority within Vision 2030, particularly in response to persistent evidence of skill mismatches among graduates. Empirical studies have identified gaps between educational outputs and labor market requirements, highlighting the need for closer coordination between educational institutions and employers to ensure the development of relevant skills (Al Taweel, 2020; Baqadir et al., 2011).
- 3. Improving quality of life:** Vision 2030 is framed as an initiative aimed at improving living conditions through broad-based development strategies that emphasize inclusiveness and alignment with global development goals. Within this context, citizen engagement is presented as part of a wider effort to enhance public services and social development (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], n.d.).
- 4. Implementation through dialogue:** Vision 2030 aims to create platforms for public discourse, allowing citizens to express their opinions and participate in decision-making processes. These forums, events, and initiatives are designed to promote effective communication between different segments of society.

Dialogue is, therefore, an essential component of Vision 2030. It not only serves as a means of fostering transparency and trust between the government and citizens but also underscores the significance of cultural diversity. Dialogue offers an opportunity for diverse groups to contribute to shaping the future of the nation (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016).

Habermas's Theory and Saudi Vision 2030

Habermas's theory of communicative action underscores the importance of rational discourse, transparency, and mutual understanding in fostering cooperation among individuals and groups. According to Habermas (1984), communicative action occurs when individuals engage in dialogue while adhering to principles of rationality, fairness, and respect for others' opinions. In the context of Saudi Vision 2030, Habermas's theory may provide valuable insights into how dialogue can contribute to the achievement of the vision's goals, particularly in the

areas of social integration, national identity, and effective governance.

Strategic Action and Cooperation

Habermas's concept of strategic action refers to coordinated efforts among individuals based on clear goals and rules. This concept is central to the implementation of Vision 2030, which requires effective communication and collaboration among government bodies, the private sector, and civil society. In sectors such as education, healthcare, and economic development, coordination is essential to achieving the objectives of Vision 2030. As Habermas (1984) suggests, rational dialogue among stakeholders promotes the integration of efforts, enhancing the effectiveness of collective action. Ensuring that all parties engage in communication guided by shared principles, Vision 2030 may foster the rational coordination necessary for Saudi Arabia's sustainable development.

The Public Sphere

Another key element of Habermas's theory is the public sphere, a space where individuals and groups come together to discuss societal issues, exchange opinions, and advocate for change. Vision 2030 emphasizes community participation and open dialogue, providing platforms for citizens to engage in discussions with the government about important national issues. This public dialogue, which aligns with Habermas's vision of the public sphere, enables citizens to influence policy decisions and strengthens the social contract between the government and its people. In facilitating open communication, Vision 2030 supports the development of a more inclusive, transparent, and participatory society.

Dialogical Methods and Their Impact

The examples provided illustrate how various forms of dialogue, whether through technology, face-to-face communication, or transparent processes, could play a vital role in fostering effective communication between citizens and the government. These instances reflect the essential themes of transparency, participation, and rational dialogue, which are fundamental in promoting mutual understanding and cooperation within society. The Absher platform, for instance, exemplifies how modern technology can enhance communication between citizens and the government. The platform fosters transparency and encourages active participation. This aligns with Habermas's theory of communicative action, where citizens engage with the state in an open and accessible manner, facilitating trust between both parties. In this sense, technology becomes a crucial tool in bridging the gap between the government and its citizens, reinforcing the importance of communicative action in the process of governance (Habermas, 1984).

Similarly, the National Dialogue Forum can serve as a model of Habermas's concept of the public sphere, which provides a space for individuals to engage in free and rational exchanges of ideas. This forum facilitates direct interaction among citizens, enabling them to discuss national issues and cultural differences. Such dialogue is fundamental in promoting social cohesion and inclusivity, particularly in a rapidly changing society.

In the same vein, the potential publication of government budget data demonstrates how transparency in government processes could lead to greater public trust and active participation in decision-making. Allowing citizens to engage with financial data and participate in the monitoring of government activities enhances the legitimacy of the government. This practice aligns with Habermas's principles of communicative action by enabling citizens to contribute to the decision-making process that directly affects their lives. When citizens are empowered to actively participate in such matters, it strengthens the democratic fabric of society and nurtures a sense of shared responsibility and understanding (Habermas, 1996).

These examples collectively underscore the profound potential of dialogue, whether facilitated through technology, public forums, or transparent processes, in shaping a more communicative and inclusive society. Participation and rational discourse in the fabric of governance, these practices support the formation of a cohesive, unified society. They align with Habermas's vision of communication as a tool for achieving mutual understanding, social progress, and democratic participation.

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 seeks to foster social dialogue and engagement across different segments of society, in alignment with Habermas's principles of communicative action and transparency. The kingdom's

strategic use of digital tools enables citizens to express their opinions and actively participate in the policymaking process. One of the key initiatives is the “Absher” e-government platform, which provides citizens with easy access to government services and allows them to offer feedback. Available official indicators suggest high levels of user engagement with government digital platforms such as Absher, reflecting their widespread adoption and perceived accessibility among citizens.

Vision 2030 emphasizes the preservation and celebration of Saudi Arabia’s diverse heritage. These objectives have been supported through a range of nationwide cultural initiatives led by the Ministry of Culture, which organizes public events and festivals across different regions of the Kingdom to engage diverse segments of society. Such initiatives aim to promote cultural awareness, highlight regional diversity, and reinforce a shared sense of national identity through collective participation in cultural activities (Ministry of Culture, n.d.). Additionally, programs like the Saudi Cultural Exploration Program play a significant role in promoting cross-cultural dialogue. This program facilitates collaboration between Saudi artists and international creatives, fostering cultural exchange and mutual understanding. These interactions help break down cultural barriers and encourage acceptance of diversity, which directly aligns with Vision 2030’s goals of strengthening social bonds and promoting an inclusive society (SCTH, 2024).

Through these cultural initiatives, Saudi Arabia is not only fostering national pride but also creating opportunities for continuous interaction among various cultural groups, enhancing the fabric of Saudi society (Saudi Press Agency, 2017). These initiatives can be analytically interpreted as engaging with themes central to Habermas’s theory, particularly in relation to communication and social integration, although their capacity to support fully inclusive and reciprocal dialogue remains subject to further analysis.

Technology and media have become integral to facilitating communication between institutions and citizens, particularly through the expansion of digital government services under Vision 2030. Government applications such as “Tawakkalna” and “Najm” provide structured access to services and information, while also enabling limited forms of user feedback. These platforms enhance efficiency and accessibility in public service delivery; however, their role in enabling open and participatory dialogue remains subject to further examination when considered through Habermas’s concept of communicative action. Vision 2030 places emphasis on social cohesion and the inclusion of different segments of society within broader development processes (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], n.d.). This orientation reflects an institutional interest in promoting communication and engagement at the societal level. However, the extent to which these initiatives translate into meaningful public dialogue remains open to examination. This limitation can be further understood through Fraser’s (1990) critique of the public sphere, which highlights how structural inequalities may restrict equal participation in communicative processes. Fraser argues that formal inclusion does not necessarily ensure equitable voice, as access to discourse is often shaped by underlying social, institutional, and power asymmetries. In this sense, the presence of communication channels alone does not guarantee inclusive dialogue, but rather raises questions about who is able to participate, under what conditions, and with what influence. For instance, digital platforms such as “Absher” provide structured channels for accessing services and interacting with government institutions. While these tools enhance efficiency and accessibility, their role in enabling open and deliberative forms of participation remains limited when considered in light of Habermas’s concept of communicative action. These concerns are further reflected in broader participatory governance literature, which emphasizes that the quality of participation varies significantly depending on the degree of citizen influence and institutional design. Arnstein (1969), for instance, conceptualizes participation as a continuum ranging from symbolic inclusion to genuine citizen power, while later work highlights how participatory mechanisms can enhance accountability and responsiveness when effectively implemented (Fung, 2006; Avritzer, 2002).

Case Study: The King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue

Partnerships, memorandums of understanding, and cooperation agreements form an integral part of the dialogical work of the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue. Recognizing the importance of collaboration, the center has made efforts to engage with ministries, governmental institutions, and both public and private organizations to foster the culture of dialogue and stimulate interactive discussions across all segments of society. As part of this commitment, the center has established around 24 partnerships with various ministries

and organizations, including the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Labor and Social Development, the General Secretariat of the Council of Senior Scholars, the Shura Council, and the General Presidency for the Affairs of the Two Holy Mosques, among others (King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue [KACND], n.d.). The role of the center has also been examined in institutional research, which highlights its contribution to promoting dialogue, broadening participation across social groups, and addressing national issues through structured communication initiatives (King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue, 2014).

In addition, the center has signed memorandums of understanding with prominent universities such as Princess Nourah University, King Saud University, Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud University, and King Abdulaziz University, as well as several other higher education institutions. The center has also formed collaborations with several organizations, including the Saudi Pro League, the Saudi Organization for Technical and Vocational Training, the Economic City of Knowledge, and the Saudi Arabian Scouts Association. These partnerships have helped ensure balanced representation across various social sectors, including scholars, academics, intellectuals, media figures, athletes, as well as youth, students, and learners. Over the years, numerous joint meetings and events have been organized in cooperation with these entities (KACND, n.d.).

On the international front, the center's efforts extend beyond local partnerships to include agreements with internationally renowned institutions that have extensive experience in cultural, intellectual, and dialogical work. These include UNESCO, the Arab Organization for Education, Culture, and Science (ALECSO), and the World Organization of the Muslim Scouts. Additionally, visits by ambassadors from European, Asian, and Arab countries have further elevated the center's profile, with many diplomats praising the center's various programs and dialogical activities that engage diverse segments of society (KACND, n.d.). The center's dialogical approach has received international recognition for its diverse programs that engage different generations and social groups through accessible dialogue formats (KACND, n.d.).

Since its inception in 2003, the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue has undergone significant transformations, spurred by political, social, and cultural shifts. The center began its national dialogues by addressing critical issues such as extremism, national unity, and international treaties, offering a social rejection of violence and extremism. The center's focus has evolved to emphasize community coexistence, supporting national efforts in countering regional and global challenges, and strengthening the sense of national solidarity (KACND, n.d.).

As a key institution, the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue can be linked to Habermas's theory of communication interaction, and the public sphere in the following ways:

- **Enhancement of the public sphere:** The center aims to promote a culture of dialogue and respect for differences of opinion (KACND, n.d.), which is consistent with Habermas's concept of the public sphere as a space for rational debate. It has also established a Youth Programs Administration that provides a platform for youth to participate in public dialogue, thus expanding the circle of participants in the public sphere.
- **Communicative action:** The center seeks to address national issues, including culture, society, education, and the economy, by discussing and presenting them through channels of intellectual dialogue (KACND, n.d.), consistent with Habermas's concept of communicative work aimed at mutual understanding.
- **Communicative rationality:** The establishment of the Dialogue Academy for Training aims to develop dialogue skills, enhancing the communicative rationality emphasized by Habermas.
- **Legitimacy through dialogue:** The launch of the National Dialogue Award encourages consolidation of the values of dialogue and tolerance, which contribute to building legitimacy through communication, as suggested by Habermas.

Through its programs, the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue could achieve several key goals, based on Habermas's theory of interactive interaction. First, it may strengthen public spaces to create spaces for independent dialogue between the various elements of Saudi society, which do not currently align with Habermas's concept of the public sphere as an arena for free discussion among free people. The center also communicates at a distance between different spectra and understands the basis on which its dialogue is based (King Abdulaziz Center, 2024). In this way, it works to enhance communication between different sections of society by encouraging interaction through organizing dialogue and workshops. In this respect, it has organized

“ten intellectual dialogues, in which more than 9,000 citizens from different social and age groups participated” (KACND, n.d.). This aligns with Habermas’s theory, which stresses the importance of effective interaction in building societal consensus.

The King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue (2024) also aims to build rational consensus to reach an understanding of opinion and any person, and to define the values of tolerance and national characteristics. This is consistent with Habermas’s idea of building a consensus among society members through open dialogue. Moreover, the center is further working toward the development of special dialogue skills training programs for young people, focusing on training young people to communicate with the basics of other civilizations and cultures. This initiative supports Habermas’s vision of the importance of communication in the public sphere. The center focuses on influencing the public through monitoring the results of work (KACND, n.d.), reflecting Habermas’s concept of the role of the public sphere and the power of public influence.

Limitations of Habermas’s Theory

While Habermas’s theory provides a powerful framework for understanding the influence of the media, it does not fully consider modern media’s complexities. Media has become not only a means of communication but also a set of commercial platforms influenced by economic and political pressures, which may lead to the marginalization of important voices in public debates. This perspective can be further understood through the critical theory of Horkheimer and Adorno, who argue that modern forms of mass communication may function as instruments of social control, shaping public consciousness in ways that limit critical reflection and reinforce dominant structures (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/1993). Marcuse’s critique of advanced industrial societies offers a complementary perspective, highlighting how dominant communication structures can reproduce prevailing ideologies and limit critical engagement (Marcuse, 1964/1985). Although Habermas’s framework helps explain the role of dialogue in shaping identity, it has been criticized for insufficiently addressing the broader social and power dynamics that influence communicative processes.

Moreover, the analysis presented by the theory lacks consideration of social discrimination, which can cause feelings of minority status among individuals. This can further lead to an inability to engage in constructive dialogue with society, which contradicts the basic premise of the theory that rational communication can contribute to identity formation. To understand this context, Habermas’s ideas must be combined with other concepts, such as multiculturalism, which reflects the complexities of cross-cultural interaction, and social constructionism, which highlights how social contexts shape identity. This integration may provide a more comprehensive vision, helping highlight challenges and opportunities and enhance individuals’ ability to develop an integrated identity in a diverse society.

Overall, Habermas’s theory can still contribute to understanding how the media might act as a positive force for dialogue and understanding or how it might pose challenges related to bias and misinformation. Modern societies need to develop strategies to ensure that the media promotes rational communication and positively supports the public sphere. Recent research found that social media engagement is associated with stronger expressions of national belonging among university students (Al-Saify et al., 2024). Similarly, social media use has been shown to contribute positively to the development of cultural identity in Saudi society, while also presenting challenges related to external cultural influences (Alanqari & Al-Dayri, 2025).

Discussion

This study explores the application of Habermas’s theoretical principles in the context of Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030, emphasizing the pivotal role of communication in fostering national identity and social cohesion. Habermas’s framework, which centers around communicative action, highlights the significance of dialogue in building trust and mutual understanding within a society. As Saudi Arabia embarks on its ambitious vision, the country faces a complex social environment marked by diverse cultural backgrounds and varying opinions. Habermas’s concepts of the lifeworld and the public sphere offer valuable insights into navigating this complexity, as they help provide a space wherein individuals can engage in rational discourse and collective decision-making. One of the central elements of Vision 2030 is the promotion of dialogue, which is key to achieving its goals of sustainable development and economic diversification. Effective communication strategies, based on inclusivity and the recognition of diversity, are essential to creating a more integrated society. This inclusivity is reflected in

various initiatives under Vision 2030, such as cultural events and community programs designed to foster open discussion, which provide platforms for diverse groups to express their views, contributing to the enhancement of societal diversity. However, the application of Habermas's principles faces challenges, particularly concerning the influence of power dynamics that may hinder free and equal communication. Social and cultural barriers, such as differences in education, access to resources, and societal norms, must be carefully considered to ensure that communication remains effective and inclusive.

Furthermore, rapid technological developments in media have significantly transformed patterns of communication, positioning digital platforms as central spaces for interaction. While these platforms enable the exchange of ideas and expand opportunities for individuals from different cultural backgrounds to connect, the extent to which they foster meaningful dialogue remains subject to critical examination. In the context of Vision 2030, the increasing reliance on digital communication may be interpreted through a Habermasian lens, particularly in relation to the conditions required for rational and deliberative communication. However, whether such platforms facilitate reciprocal and inclusive discourse, rather than merely expanding access to communication, remains an open question.

To what extent do these platforms reflect a true public sphere in the Habermasian sense?

The concept of the public sphere in Habermas's thought constitutes a foundational element for communicative action, referring to a space in which individuals can engage in open discussion of public issues and influence decision-making through rational-critical debate (Habermas, 1989). In the Saudi context, platforms such as "Absher" and the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue serve as key channels of communication between the state and citizens.

However, the extent to which these platforms reflect a Habermasian public sphere remains subject to critical examination. From this perspective, communicative action requires that participants possess relatively equal opportunities to influence discourse, without structural distortions arising from social or economic inequalities (Habermas, 1996). In a context characterized by cultural diversity and uneven access to resources, some groups may encounter constraints that limit their effective participation, whether due to differences in digital access, social norms, or institutional conditions.

For example, while Vision 2030 emphasizes expanding women's participation in public life, variations in access and representation across different regions may shape the degree to which such participation is realized in practice. These dynamics raise questions regarding the inclusivity of communication processes and the extent to which existing platforms approximate the conditions of an open and participatory public sphere.

However, national surveys indicate high satisfaction among Saudi women with government services, with female labor market participation reaching 36% in 2024 and homeownership rates exceeding 60% (General Authority for Statistics, 2024; Ministry of Housing, 2024). These figures highlight the Kingdom's commitment to women's empowerment across healthcare, education, and housing sectors.

Reconsidering the Adaptation of Habermas's Theory to Non-Western Contexts
This analysis raises a deeper question about the applicability of the communicative action model as proposed by Habermas to non-Western contexts, where cultural and religious factors play a fundamental role in shaping patterns of dialogue and social interaction. Some researchers argue that applying Habermas's theory in societies with different cultural structures requires adjustments that account for the prevailing ethical frameworks and social values. Therefore, the Saudi model for national dialogue could be a unique one that aligns with the principles of rational communication but requires a more contextually adaptive conceptual framework to address the cultural and social particularities of Saudi society.

Enhancing Governance and Transparency through Reporting and Complaints Mechanisms: A Habermasian Approach

Providing official channels for submitting complaints and reporting issues is one of the effective mechanisms for enhancing transparency and accountability, aligning with the requirements of communicative action in Habermas's framework. These mechanisms enable individuals to directly and freely communicate their opinions and demands to the government. In this context, Saudi Arabia, within the framework of Vision 2030, has developed advanced systems for receiving complaints, particularly in governmental institutions such as the

Ministry of Education, thus strengthening effective communication between citizens and official entities.

According to the theory of communicative action, ensuring the existence of an effective public sphere requires transparent communication channels that allow citizens to express their concerns and interact with governmental institutions in a rational and objective manner (Habermas, 1996). In this regard, the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia has developed specialized systems for receiving complaints and suggestions through accessible electronic platforms, such as the Tawasul Platform, which allows citizens to submit complaints and feedback directly regarding educational services (National Saudi Platform, 2022). In addition, there is the Unified Phone Number (Ministry of Education, 2021) and the Electronic Reporting System, which allows reporting administrative and educational violations, thereby enhancing the governance of the educational sector and giving citizens a supervisory role in educational performance.

The Habermasian Application of These Mechanisms in Vision 2030

It is clear that these channels are not just administrative tools but also represent a practical application of the theory of communicative action, as they promote transparency, participation, and accountability. According to Habermas, individuals must be able to freely communicate their ideas and participate in decisions that affect their daily lives (Habermas, 1989). Thus, empowering citizens to easily submit complaints contributes to creating a dynamic public sphere that allows for the exchange of issues and finding solutions collaboratively between the state and society, thereby narrowing the gap between the government and citizens and enhancing trust in public institutions.

To effectively promote dialogue and support networks, several key recommendations can be drawn from this study, as follows:

1. **Creating digital and intellectual dialogue platforms:** Platforms that allow citizens to express their opinions and engage in discussions on pressing issues should be developed. These platforms, whether digital or intellectual, can serve as public spaces where diverse perspectives are shared, ultimately enhancing societal engagement and encouraging constructive dialogue.
2. **Organizing dialogue workshops:** Workshops and discussion groups focusing on cultural identity, diversity, and societal integration should be organized at schools and universities and in local communities to foster mutual understanding and promote respect for differences, laying the foundation for a more inclusive society.
3. **Political guidance for inclusivity:** Policies should be designed to encourage diversity and inclusion, ensuring that the voices of marginalized and diverse groups are heard. By creating a political framework that prioritizes cultural and social inclusion, Saudi Arabia can strengthen social ties and promote unity across different communities.
4. **Supporting local initiatives:** Local community initiatives, including cultural and artistic events, should be actively supported, as they create opportunities for cultural exchange and provide a platform for diverse groups to engage in dialogue, thereby deepening mutual understanding and promoting cultural appreciation.
5. **Establishing support groups for mixed families:** Mixed families, often caught between different cultural norms and expectations, would greatly benefit from support groups. These groups could offer emotional and social support, creating a space to share experiences and build stronger ties within the community.
6. **Encouraging volunteerism for cultural understanding:** Young people should be encouraged to participate in volunteer programs aimed at promoting cultural understanding and communication between different social groups. Such initiatives can help break down barriers and build bridges between diverse communities, reinforcing the shared goals of Vision 2030.

In focusing on education, media, and community engagement, the implementation of these recommendations may contribute to the development of a more inclusive and cohesive society. This, in turn, will support the successful realization of Vision 2030's goals, which heavily rely on active participation, open dialogue, and mutual respect among Saudi citizens. The strategic inclusion of these principles, rooted in Habermas's theories, will foster the development of a well-informed, participatory public sphere that can effectively address the challenges of a diverse and rapidly changing society.

Conclusion

This study has underscored the pivotal role of effective communication, grounded in Habermas's principles, in the context of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 initiatives. The findings highlight that communication is not only a mechanism for fostering mutual understanding but also a fundamental tool for strengthening national identity and creating a cohesive, integrated society.

This research emphasizes the necessity of enhancing community dialogue programs, recommending increased investments in initiatives that prioritize training individuals in effective communication skills. These programs should be inclusive, ensuring that all segments of society are equipped to express their opinions and engage in meaningful discussions. Raising awareness about the media's role as a platform for dialogue is also crucial, as it may provide significant opportunities for intercultural interaction and idea exchange.

Ultimately, this study affirms that Habermas's principles of communicative action could significantly contribute to realizing the social objectives of Vision 2030. In fostering a society that values cooperation, mutual understanding, and cultural diversity, these principles offer a framework for building a more unified nation. Through continuous dialogue and interaction, national identity may evolve and strengthen, enabling Saudi Arabia to effectively address future challenges and progress toward its ambitious goals. Effective communication, underpinned by Habermas's theories, thus emerges as the cornerstone for achieving the transformative vision of Vision 2030.

The development of official mechanisms for receiving and addressing citizen complaints, as exemplified by the Ministry of Education, is a key step toward the effective application of the theory of communicative action within the framework of Vision 2030. These mechanisms not only contribute to improving the quality of government services but also reinforce the principles of transparency and participation, creating a more just and effective communicative environment. Therefore, enhancing the use of these platforms and expanding their scope to include other sectors could represent an advanced model for integrating communicative action principles into modern governance, overcoming some of the criticisms related to the limitations of traditional public spheres, and contributing to building a more open and communicative society.

Declarations

1. Ethical Approval:

Not applicable. This study does not involve human participants, animals, or sensitive data requiring ethical approval.

2. Consent to Participate:

Not applicable. The study did not involve human participants requiring consent.

3. Consent to Publish:

Not applicable. No personal or sensitive data requiring consent for publication is included in this study.

4. Authors Contributions:

S. I. Alsharif: Conceptualization, theoretical analysis, literature review, and manuscript writing.

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6. Competing Interests:

The author declares no competing interests.

7. Availability of Data and Materials:

Not applicable. This study is based on publicly available literature and does not include primary data.

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