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COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

THE GULF CRISIS AND RISE OF DIGITAL NATIONALISM IN QATAR:
A CASE STUDY OF TWEETS

BY

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ABSTRACT

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The Gulf Crisis started on June 5, 2017 when three member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC); that is Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates, as well as Egypt issued a coordinated statement that subsequently severed the ties with Qatar. The boycott soon escalated into a “Qatar blockade” as a result of the quartet closing their borders; including an air, sea, and land embargo against Qatar. Immediately after the blockade, the legitimacy of the Gulf Crisis was questioned, particularly on the social media. Both the social, and traditional media were actively used in questioning the crisis legitimacy; and the citizens of both Qatar and the quartet countries were actively involved in this discourse by engaging in twitter war, pushing narratives, and counter narratives, and eventually culminating in a new hike in digital nationalism in the region. Drawing on tweets on popular hashtags in the early days of the crisis, this study explores the rise of digital nationalism among Qataris by looking into the underlying features and its implications on the citizenry population. The study found that Qataris engage in virtual world, to fight off misinformation, which is being propagated by the countries that imposed the blockade. The study reports that the twitter war heightened the sense of belonging and solidarity among Qataris, and brought all Qataris to the same platform under the present leadership, and made Qatar even stronger.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my family whom stood next to me in my toughest times; I do not even have the words to thank you enough for your unlimited support and your motivational words. None of this would be possible without all of you.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1: Background

1.1.1: The Gulf Crisis and Virtual War

The Gulf crisis did not lead to direct, traditional warfare in the region, as was stated by the late Amir of the State of Kuwait, His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al Ahmad Al Jaber Al Sabah. However, the crisis instigated a new type of war that was fought virtually on social media platforms between Qataris and the citizens of blockading countries (Pinnell, 2018).

It all started on May 24, 2017, when the website of Qatar's official news agency, Qatar News Agency (QNA), was hacked. This hack involved posting fake news about Qatar's Emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani. The news alleged that Sheikh Tamim had made an astonishing speech in which he was perceived that he had praised Muslim terrorist groups, including Hezbollah, Muslim Brotherhood, and Hamas. The most controversial part of this allegation is the Emir's open support of Iran, which is Saudi Arabia's main rival.

This story soon disappeared from the QNA website, and a statement was issued by Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in denial of the allegation; the act was termed a hack intended to propagate malice. The statement specifically accused the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as the perpetrators. A subsequent report that was published in the Washington Post corroborated the allegation by confirming that indeed the UAE was behind the attack. Immediately after this statement was issued, news agencies associated with the UAE and Saudi Arabia reported that Qatar was, with the intent of destabilizing the Gulf region, involved in financing terrorist groups.

Following the media house engagement in news exchange about Qatar's support of terrorist groups, and subsequent denial, another hack, which seemed to be retaliation for Qatar,

occurred, and it targeted the UAE. The UAE ambassador to the United States had his email hacked. The content, which revealed facets of his private life, was leaked to the international press. This was the final phenomenon before a fallout was experienced between Gulf-region countries and Qatar.

On June 5, 2017, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, Bahrain, and other allies savored their ties with Saudi Arabia. The UAE and Saudi Arabia even expelled Qatar nationals from their countries. Furthermore, they blocked Qatar throughout their territories on air, land, and sea, which significantly interfered with domestic, region, and international trade. Saudi Arabia issued a 13-item demand for Qatar, to which they were supposed to comply within ten days. United States President Donald Trump, through Twitter messages, seemed to support this act by Saudi Arabia. Since then, virtual war has escalated, and social bots have been fundamentally crucial.

Since the alleged cyber-attack and accusation of Qatar's leader, there have been trending hashtags both in support and against the leader. Popular hashtags have included "Qatar Is Not Alone" and "Tamim The Glorious," which appeared on Twitter. On the other hand, anti-Sheik Tamim hashtags were also fronted. A popular hashtag was "Gaddafi of the Gulf." Research was later conducted by BBC Arabic investigation on the use of bots to popularize such hashtags. This research examined the frequency of postings for a single Twitter account. In one of the findings, there was an account, "@sabaqksa," which had a total of 201 tweets in a span of a few seconds, which is humanly impossible. BBC Arabic and Twitter later suspended the account. Similar trends were also revealed on anti-Qatar hashtags (BBC Arabic, 2018).

Some tweets were authored in the period following the onset of the Gulf crisis. Most were authored in response to the online war between Qataris and citizens from Gulf-region countries that participated in the trading blockade.

Here are some examples:

Algeria and Morocco, when they accused each other of supporting terrorism, did not throw the two peoples together, but limited their differences on the political issue. No Moroccan was expelled from Algeria, or vice versa (@Binnahar85, 2017).

This tweet was in response to the decision by the UAE and Saudi Arabia to expel the citizens of Qatar from their country, and also recall their citizens from Qatar. This tweet is an expression of solidarity with the people of Qatar, especially in such adverse conditions.

Another tweet was authored to probe accusations that the Qatari leader supported terrorist groups:

Why was there no statement condemning Qatar from the Cooperation Council, the Arab League, the European Union or even the African Union, which Al-Jubeir went to persuade and did not succeed? (@Majedalansari, 2017).

This tweet was authored around the same time as @Binnahar85's tweet (2017) that is reported above. It indicates the extent to which Qatari nationals were using social media to drive different counter-narratives that would counter the accusations coming from blockading countries.

Qatar's blockade, despite numerous interventions, had since escalated, including from the US. Even after Trump initially seemed to support Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey openly supported Qatar and even offered military support (Jones, 2017). Meanwhile, fake news continues in the Gulf region, and it seems that it will not be ending anytime soon.

1.1.2 Digital Nationalism

Considering the blockade's economic consequences, it is indeed important to examine the use of digital nationalism in the Gulf region's politics. Likewise, this current study focuses on Qatar and other Gulf-region countries.

The concept of digital nationalism has been widely discussed, especially about citizens' protection of their country's sovereignty (Heft et al., 2018). As already mentioned, the Gulf crisis has increasingly escalated the relationship between Qatar and other countries in the Gulf

Corporation Council, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain. Unfortunately, Qatar has been on the receiving end of a blockade from these three countries and Egypt in North Africa.

A unique case about the Gulf crisis is the extent to which digital or social media was used to perpetuate this crisis. Social media in this context also include online news channels. As already described, this crisis was instigated when QNA's website was hacked; videos and images of Qatar's leader supporting terrorist groups were posted. As Milton-Edwards (2020) argues, the expectation was that the alleged support of terrorist groups by Qatar would spark condemnation from many Western countries, but it did not.

1.1.3: Virtual War and Digital Nationalism: Conceptual Issues

Digital nationalism was manifested with regard to how Qatari nationals, both locally and internationally, took to the various social media sites, including Facebook and Twitter, to defend their leader and country against the accusations. Qatari nationals created many hashtags on Twitter to counter hashtags that were created by nationals of other countries, including the UAE and Saudi Arabia, and that all depicted Qatar negatively.

Digital nationalism in the context of Qatar and during the Gulf crisis was particularly important. Qatar is a geographically small country in the Middle East, yet it is seen as one of the most progressive, not only economically but also socially and culturally. Qatar's geographical size and significant oil wealth make it vulnerable to various forms of attack, especially from its neighbors (McSparren et al., 2017). In response to its vulnerability, the country heavily relies on soft power and public diplomacy as a way of protecting itself against potential aggression from its perceived enemies.

Qatar has a stable relationship with countries such as the United States, France, and the United Kingdom, among many other world powers and advanced nations (Dogan, 2017). The United States has a military base in Qatar, which serves the strategic function of US influence in the Middle East. Also, the United States and the United Kingdom (UK) have branches of

their universities in Qatar, most of which serve to strengthen ties between these countries (Dogan, 2017). Qatar is also preparing to host the FIFA 2022 World Cup. As such, the country's public image is crucial; therefore, the accusations that Qatar's leader supports terrorist groups could not have come at a worse time.

With semi controlled democratic space to allow for actions such as demonstrations, social media provides a unique platform on which Qatari nationals can express concerns regarding their national identity. Understandably, branding the country as a supporter or sympathizer of a terrorist group taints both the leader's image and that of its citizens. As such, the Qataris felt it was prudent to defend their country from such a negative image; instead, they sought to promote a positive and resilient one, which has indeed been effective.

To understand digital nationalism, it is imperative to first explore the meaning of nationalism. According to Kecmanovic (2005), there is no universal definition of the nationalism concept. However, there is a distinction between the concepts of nationalism and citizenship. As Berbeloglu (2019) argues, nationalism is about more than a sense of geographic belonging. It is more an expression of sentimental attachment between an individual and the nation to which he or she belongs. Nationalism is more about how an individual feels about his or her nation, and that such feelings do not occur naturally, or inherently as it does with tribalism or clannism. Instead, nationality is a perception that develops at a given time or is inspired by particular events or phenomena. In this context, therefore, nationalism can be examined as the fundamental attachment that Qatari citizens and non-citizens have to their country.

Although many recent studies have explored the concept of digital nationalism, few have focused on this definition's concept. Instead, the definition is largely based on the concept of nationalism. According to Udupa (2019), digital nationalism is the use of digital technology to promote or enhance the sense of nationalism. Generally, many studies on digital nationalism

seem to concur with the relationship between digital technology and nationalism (Vico, 2019). There is, however, contention with regards to the point at which digital nationalism emerges. As written by Gündüz and Kaya-Erdem (2017), there is significant ambiguity regarding the difference or similarity between nationalism before and after the emergence of digital technology. Digital media, particularly social media, has enhanced and made the concept of digital nationalism more popular than before. Udupa (2019) also argues that digital nationalism is more sporadic and less predictable; it is evoked by specific events.

Al-Rawi (2017) provides insight into how cyber conflict has led to the disinformation of political alliances, regional rivalries, and sectarian divisions. Misuse of social media may trigger enmity between nations, where each is likely to point fingers at the other. Cyberconflicts, such as those perpetuated by hackers or social media trolls, trigger nationals of the attacked nation to step up in defense of their country. Al-Rawi argues that cyberconflict pioneers digital nationalism as citizens defend the stand of their respective countries.

Mitchell and Allagui (2019) wrote that social media is a crucial tool when it comes to citizens' solidarity. Furthermore, social media connects people who are from different regions and come together to comfort each other. Digital nationalism is, therefore, enhanced by social media platforms since citizens are urged to protect their country's image. Citizens, in the effort to defend one's nation, promote their patriotism.

1.2: Research Questions

This study, to explore reasons for the rise of digital nationalism immediately following the aforementioned blockade and its implications for Qatari society, examines the following research questions:

1. Why did the Qataris and citizens of blockading countries use social media to promote narratives and counter-narratives concerning the Gulf crisis?

2. What are the factors that caused Qataris to engage in a Twitter war with nationals of the quartet (KSA, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt)?
3. How did this Twitter war contribute to heightened digital nationalism in Qatar?

1.3: Significance of the Study

Social media has provided people with a voice to speak against common vices and yet remains vulnerable to manipulation. It is, therefore, important to carry out this current study to explore relevant information regarding social media and nationalism.

Social media's prevalence has grown significantly. Today, even marketers are using social media more than the traditional media channels to market their products and services. Social media, therefore, has become one of the most important communication sources. Communication in media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, for example, has enabled people to engage in national issues that otherwise were left to mainstream media such as radio, TV, and newspaper. Today, social media allows almost every member of the public who has access to digital technology to take part in important discourses.

Despite social media being one of the most commonly used modern-day communication methods, there is limited study regarding its impact on social decision-making. Furthermore, more studies indicate that wide access to social media by the masses has made it vulnerable to adverse or anti-democratic practices. Recently, there have been several incidents of national negligence of the social masses. At the same time, social media is being used to manipulate public opinion regarding issues of national importance. It is, therefore, important to explore studies that could inform public decision-making on national language and heritage, which will include future practices. Locating and cultivating more information about digital nationalism and social media can influence government policy-making decisions, especially in Gulf-region countries where there is limited media freedom.

CHAPTER 2: DIGITAL NATIONALISM: A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1: Introduction

A literature review is always important because it can enable the contextualization of this present study's topic in terms of the existing body of knowledge. This section provides a review of recent studies on social media nationalism.

This chapter examines previous studies about the use of electronic bots in social-political spheres. Since the advent of social networking sites, the use of bots has significantly increased. Social media provides a platform in which information is consumed by the masses. As such, bots have been used significantly for influencing various social discourses.

2.2.1: Social Media and Digital Nationalism: A Global Overview

Almeer (2020) examined Qatari nationalism in the post-blockade era and the role that social media has played in shaping it. That study sought to determine how, through social media, this crisis has shaped both the social and state expression of nationalism in the country. Using a quantitative approach, the study found that the new nationalism has been created around the identity of Qatar's leader, other members of the country's royal family, and other government leaderships. Furthermore, the results indicate that post-crisis leadership has significantly transformed Qataris' nationality. More people identify with the state of Qatar and less with specific social, cultural, or ethical identities. In other words, the crisis has made Qataris, both locally and internationally and despite potential cultural, social, and probably religious differences, endear more to the identity of the country-state as a way of expressing solidarity and unity.

Huijsmans and Lan (2015) explored the enactment of nationalism through the use of digital technology. The study was done with a focus on the Lao-Vietnam borderland, a relatively remote region. This study focused on the youth's use of Viettel, which is the largest

mobile service provider in Vietnam. A qualitative approach in which data was collected through focus group discussions was used. This study found that mobile phone technology helps youths in Lao–Vietnam to construct successful digital capitalism and nationalism. The study reported that digital technology enabled the youths to construct and incorporate nationalism in their daily lives. The results of this study are not necessarily related to the context of the current study; that is, how digital technology was used for political influence in the context of Qatar. However, it indicates the importance of digital technology and how it influences youths toward a nationalization perception. This study is further relevant considering that the majority of smartphone users, and consequently, social media, are people of the younger generations.

Chen, Su, and Chen (2019) explored digital nationalism and social media in China. The selection of China for this study was informed by the extent to which the Chinese leadership is actively involved in setting the national agenda, considering that China is largely a communist state. Communism, in this regard, indicates that much of China’s individual-and national-level decisions are influenced by the state’s economic, social, and political forces. However, social media, provides Chinese nationals with an opportunity to set their agenda, despite the ones that are perceived to be set at the national level. This study, therefore, sought to explore whether digital nationalism in China is constructed through the bottom-up or top-down approach.

For analyzing data, the study used supervised machine learning and semantic network analysis. The results indicated that despite the influence of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in setting the nation’s local and foreign agenda, digital nationalism is constructed by a bottom-up approach. This implies that the process of digital nationalism in China starts from the individual user, then to specific influencers, and finally manifests through organizational accounts like ministries accounts and governmental figures accounts. These results are relevant to the context of Qatar, considering that the country has a monarchy leadership system. The

royal family of Qatar, and that of many other countries in the Gulf region, have a significant influence in setting the national agenda. Consequently, this leadership system has a significant influence over the media. However, there is limited control by the state over digital media. It can, therefore, be argued that the development of Qataris' sense of nationalism, to defend their leader during the beginning of the crisis, was influenced by individuals, or self-identification with the country and consequently to its leader. Social media can, therefore, be perceived as a platform for expressing the collective perception of individual societal members who share a common economic, political, social, and religious identity.

Cheng (2018) explored Chinese digital nationalism. This study focused on how digital technology has fostered the change and transition of Chinese nationalism. Cheng asserts that nationalism has been an issue of fundamental importance to the CCP since the Tiananmen incident. The CCP, to legitimize party rule, has focused on creating a sense of nationality, especially considering that most countries worldwide are governed through democratic means. Digital technology has enabled nationality in China to flourish even further. However, there is inadequate literature on whether the sense of nationalism in China is created independently or whether the state has an influence on this.

Cheng (2018) argues that nationalism involving sentiments of a strong and independent China may be a threat to the state, especially when the state-sponsored agenda does not necessarily concur with its citizens. This author used a discourse analysis qualitative approach to answer the research questions. The results found that there is minimal interference by the China's central-state government in the construction of digital nationalism. However, the study further argues that the embodiment of information and technology in the Chinese education system is a significant and positive mediator of the Chinese construction of digital nationalism. As such, some of China's national symbols and rituals have been relocated from physical space to cyberspace. Additionally, the study found that digital space allows nationalist Chinese to

express themselves and engage in discourses that help further shape the perception of Chinese nationality, especially to the world ‘outside’ of China. Likewise, digital nationalism helps China to dispel some myths and misconceptions that may be held by the ‘outside’ world.

2.2.2: Social Media and National Unity

Oruc (2019) conducted a study that explores the use of social media to express solidarity and unity in Qatar following the imposition of the 2017 blockade. This study used a qualitative research approach. It examined several hashtags and tweets that were published in Qatar’s Twitter trends within the first two weeks of the blockade. A total of 402,962 tweets were analyzed. The results indicated that Qatari nationals used both text and visual displays such as videos and pictures to express strength, loyalty, resilience, and pride during the blockade. Hashtags and tweets were not only created to resist the blockade but also to express support and solidarity with Qatar’s leader, Sheikh Tamim Al-Thani. The hashtags, tweets, retweets, and replies were focused on the Qatari leader’s persona. Additionally, Qataris used the Twitter platform to speak against the cultural and social division that has potentially emerged in the context of transnational, tribal identities.

Mitchell and Allagui (2019) conducted a study that examines how social media has been used to promote solidarity among Qatari citizens. During the Gulf crisis, Qataris affixed patriotic decals to their buildings, vehicles and profiles on social media to show support for their country. They engaged in nationalism-rituals to express their solidarity. Besides, social media, Twitter, in particular, was greatly used for expressing that Qataris were doing great, even after the blockade. Citizens used social media to motivate each other as well as promote a sense of communal belonging.

Leurs (2014) explored how digital technology can influence the sense of togetherness among people who are living amid significant ethnic, social, and religious diversity. The study was informed by the extent to which population diversity has increased, especially in urban

areas. The study cites London as a city where there is significant cultural diversity. According to Leurs, people are more likely to cultivate togetherness as long as they share similar geographical locations. Therefore, the focus of the study was to examine how modern digital technology helps culturally, ethnically, and religiously diverse populations within the same geographic location form a sense of common identity.

The study was conducted among 38 respondents living in Haringey, which is one of London's most diverse areas. Also, the study focused on Facebook as the main source of digital influence. The results reveal that this social media platform, by connecting families and relatives living overseas, helps people maintain their transnational identity. At the same time, social media helps a diverse population group develop a sense of belonging in their shared geographic region. For instance Facebook helped a Scottish resident stay connected to his or her Scottish roots, while also maintaining the Londoners' residential identity. These findings reflect what happened in Qatar in response to the Gulf crisis. Qatar has a high percentage of expatriates from various countries worldwide. Based on the results of the study, it is logical to assume that during the Gulf crisis, those who were living in Qatar during the crisis were likely to use social media to positively influence Qatar's image.

2.2.3: Construction of Qatari Nationalism in the Digital Space

While all the above-mentioned studies indicate a positive relationship between social media and digital nationalism, or nationalism itself, Lim's (2017) study differs from these findings. According to Lim, social media channels do not resemble ordinary staunch dualistic forms such as democrats versus republicans, majority versus minority, or even rationalism versus reality. Instead, social media users construct their own perceived nationalism, which favors their personal or individual agenda while silencing dissenting opinions. Lim's study was done in the context of the Indonesian 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial elections, which were highly polarized and largely influenced by social media. Lim reports that digital nationalism created

in social media is not based on equal rights and justice for all, which is the ideal concept of nationalism. Instead, the study found that digital nationalism is mostly created with respect to a specific issue that a country is experiencing, particularly from external parties. Specifically, issues that arouse digital nationalism are often based on a country's sovereignty and independence.

Kudaibergenova (2019) explored digital nationalism in the context of countries where self-expression is rather restricted. This research explored the role of social media in shaping sexual identity and the body. As the main sources of data, this study focused on Kazakhstan and Russia. The results indicate that social media encourage social identities that are more in violation of nationally-held values. This study's findings concur with those reported by Lim (2017).

Kudaibergenova (2019) argues that despite the significant personal and national identity conflicts in social media platforms, users are still more inclined and likely to promote their original identity. As such, Facebook users in Russian or Kazakhstan, for example, are likely to consistently identify themselves with their countries despite the perceived restriction of self-identity, such as gender. These findings are crucial in the context of my current study. It can be argued that despite the negative image or perception that a specific country may be associated with, its citizens are likely to identify with the same on social media. As such, if the country is perceived to be under attack, its citizens on social media are likely to defend their country's reputation.

Ismangil (2019) examined the creation of digital nationalism in China through e-sports and borderless competitive games. Memes are considered an important entertainment source and are used obviously to construct a country's national image. Ismangil's study used field data and interviews with respondents in China. Content analysis was also used to explore the visual and audiovisual elements of e-sports. The results found that China creates digital

nationalism through the bottom-up approach, yet in a subversive way. Again, this confirms the assertions by Kudaibergenova (2019) and Lim (2017) regarding how digital nationalism works. Subversion, as referred to by Ismangil (2019), implies that, at the local and individual levels, nationalism (or personal) is created based on an individual's perception, opinion, attitude, and beliefs as a Chinese national. Memes can be used locally to criticize the government and other national institutions. However, at the national level, or beyond the digital border space, digital nationalism is used to defend or perpetuate the country as being superior to other perceived competitors or enemies.

For instance, China has been significantly criticized regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, which originated in the country. The United States, for instance, led by President Trump, has lambasted China's handling of the virus and let it spread worldwide. It can be assumed that under such international criticism, China has probably used the social media to express solidarity and unity with its leader through hashtags, and other national conversation that expresses solidarity with the leader. Unfortunately, no study has yet been published on this topic. However, the Twitter hashtags developed in 2020 indicate the use of digital nationalism to express solidarity with their country.

An event occurred on April 13, 2020, following a hashtag posted by one of Thailand's celebrities, Weeraya Sukaram, who appeared to have insinuated that the coronavirus pandemic may have originated from a Chinese laboratory; these sentiments are like those previously articulated by United States President Trump. The hashtag sparked a social media war between Thailand and Chinese citizens. On one hand, the Chinese were reacting to the comment as a way of discarding the notion that the virus was manufactured in a lab in their country. On the other hand, the Thailand citizens were reacting in support of Weeraya Sukaram as a representative of Thailand's national identity. An online attack on Sukaram was considered as an attack on Thailand's nationalism. As Aljazeera (2020) reported about how the hashtag

#Nnevvv on the Chinese social media platform, Weibo, attracted 1.4 million posts and 4.6 billion views globally. Interestingly, this social media hype also drew in Hong Kong's pro-democratic citizens who supported Thailand. This is a typical example of the bottom-up construction of digital nationalism. Unlike Hong Kong people, many Chinese citizens may harbor resentment toward the CCP's non-democratic rule, they are not likely to express the same sentiments when their country is under external attack.

The coronavirus pandemic, and it has affected millions worldwide, has indeed involved much controversy regarding its origin. News emerged that the Chinese government had tried to keep the virus a secret when it was first discovered, which is believed to have been critical in fueling the spread of the disease globally. As such, it is normal for even Chinese citizens to feel that their country could have done better to stop the spread. However, when the same country is under attack from external forces, it seems that the individual sentiments become insignificant. Instead, citizens use digital platforms to fight off such accusations.

Although the literature review indicates a digital nationalism concept that is developed out of people's conviction to safeguard their country's image, it is also important to note that, in the social media age, the government has used other means to influence mass opinions. Social bots, in particular, have been commonly used to push propaganda and opinions, some of which may be anti-democratic. A lot of research on social media, democracy, and politics has been published in recent years.

2.2.4: The Other Side – Weaponization of Social Media

Al-Rawi (2017) examined the impacts of cyberconflict, particularly hacking, during the Gulf crisis. This study examined how social media was being used to create conflict between nations as well as to change some political narratives and policies. Al-Rawi points out that hackers are state or self-sponsored to spread misinformation and propaganda. Cyber-operations were used to pressure the Qatari government to adjust its policies.

Jones (2019) examined, in the context of the Gulf blockade, the weaponization of social media through social bots. This study analyzed Twitter account creation dates and hashtag samples to detect social bots from actual accounts of human users. The results indicate that social bots were used significantly to promote the anti-Qatar campaign. Furthermore, news was started based on fake news that Qatar's blockading countries had created. Social bots were even used to create and promote the notion of the Qatari anti-Temim regime. Although Qatar also responded similarly with social bots, this study's results indicate that the social bots by anti-Qatar side were more.

As explained in my study's introduction, the Qatar blockade was instigated by the UAE, together with Saudi Arabia. As such, the blockade is an issue between governments. It is, therefore, logical to argue that the use of social bots in the Gulf crisis is a manipulation of the people's perspective on Qatar. To a large extent, it is an expression of autocracy. That said, through the blockade, Qatar's only land passage through Saudi Arabia was blocked, and its citizens were sent out of Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Saudi Arabia even blocked its airspace from Qatar. The blockade has had a significant economic impact not only on Qatar but also on the entire Gulf region. To date, the issues have remained unresolved.

Al-Borshaid (2019) explored the influence of social bots on the perceptions of Qatari nationals toward the blockade. This study used both quantitative and qualitative research approaches. The results indicate that social media bots have been instrumental in influencing the positive perception of Qatar nationals. During the blockade, social media bots were widely used to promote a positive image of Qatar. This has been critical in influencing the international perspectives of Qatar. It is important to note that Qatar has been exploring soft power strategies as a way of defense against its hostile neighbors. Qatar is a relatively small country that is rich in oil and gas. It won the bid to host the FIFA 2022, which has been widely criticized based on allegations of corruption and manipulation. The World Cup will happen in 2022, and there has

seemingly been almost no concern about attendants' safety, in the case that the gulf crisis is not resolved. This is yet an indication of the significant influence of Qatar's soft power strategy.

Suárez-Serrato et al. (2016) explored the use of social bots during online protests in the case of Mexico. A qualitative research design was used to examine the tweets related to the hashtag "#YaMeCanse," which is reported as the world's most active online protest. This hashtag is a Latin phrase that translates to "I got tired" in English. It is an online protest against the violent crimes in Mexico, which are perpetrated by drug cartels. The violence is highly intense, yet the government has continuously been unable to contain it. In addition to being about violence and insecurity, this protest also focuses on corruption and other ill governmental practices.

Examination of the hashtags revealed that social bots have significantly suppressed the online protest, despite its activity. This is another classic case where social bots are used to infringe on the public's democratic rights. Citizens have the right to protest about things they do not agree with, which is protected by most countries' constitutions. Due to fear of physical confrontation with gangs and government security agencies, protestors opt for a safer option, which is the Internet.

Thus, a review of the literature indicates that social media, digital, or virtual space is the major platform on which digital nationalism is built. For the Gulf crisis, the literature review revealed that Twitter was the most used social media platform for engaging in the promotion of narratives and counter-narratives regarding the crisis. Qatari nationals particularly used Twitter to rally support in defense of their leader. As such, nationalism was built around the leader's persona. The review also indicates that, throughout the blockade period, Qataris used social media to fight misinformation and promote unity and resilience.

Additionally, the literature review indicates that digital nationalism is built by the bottom-up approach that is from individuals citizens perspective to a common and national

focus. Furthermore, digital media allows users significant flexibility to shape their concept of nationalism. Lastly, the literature review indicated that social media can be weaponized to promote propaganda, misinformation, and negative publicity. Even though numerous studies have been done about digital nationalism, few studies have been done that focus on the Gulf crisis; yet, this crisis represents one of the landmark events that has experienced significant use of digital nationalism against foreign non-military aggressions against a sovereign country. Therefore, this study's findings are meant to contribute toward filling this gap.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1: Introduction

A study's results section is critical in research. It provides the basis on which its validity and reliability can be verified. When the details of how a study was conducted are clear, another researcher can follow the same procedure and possibly arrive at the same or different conclusion (Das et al., 2016; Hennink et al., 2020).

This section provides details about the study's data sources, how the data were collected, the sample size or the size of the data used, and the data analysis procedures. It also contains information about the research philosophy, approach, strategy, and study design. The methodology part details how the data were collected and analyzed. Ethical considerations are also reported.

3.2: Study Design

3.2.1 Philosophical Foundation of the Study

This study is based on nominalist or relativist ontology and nominalist or emic epistemology. Ontology and epistemology are philosophical concepts that are used to explore beliefs about reality and how to gain knowledge or what are the most valid ways to reach truth (Guyon et al., 2018). People are naturally intrigued by their surroundings, and as such are continuously interested in knowing how things work. Ontology, therefore, provides the reality through which natural and social phenomena can be explored.

According to Vogl et al. (2019), it is important to study ontology because it influences an individual's perception of the truth. The perception of the truth, in turn, influences what can be known or learned as truth (Guyon et al., 2018). Generally, there are two types of ontology: realism and relativism. On one hand, realists believe that there is only one truth regarding a specific phenomenon or the subject of research interest (Guyon et al. 2018). Another major

assumption of realism ontology is that the truth does not change. In addition, realism ontology is based on objective measurement to establish the truth. Lastly, the truth established under the realism ontology is generalizable.

On the other hand, relativism ontology is almost the exact opposite of realism. Relativism ontology holds that the truth about a given phenomenon is varied or multi-faceted. As such, a different person may not agree with a given knowledge, perspective, opinion, or observation because of his or her varied knowledge, rationale, view, or opinion. Relativism ontology also holds that truth, or reality, can be shaped by different contexts; that is, the truth is not constant, as in realism ontology. Additionally, relativism ontology maintains that truth is a finite, subjective experience. Instead, it evolves or changes. Lastly, the truth in relativism ontology is not essentially generalizable, but it can be applied in different contexts (Guyon et al., 2018). Quantitative and qualitative approaches are based on the two ontologies described herein.

Epistemology is a branch of philosophy that studies knowledge. Epistemology explores the specific beliefs or perceptions of knowledge, that is, how knowledge is constructed and the specific attributes that determine or define a body of information or knowledge to be considered true or false (Smith, 2019). The term epistemology is derived from the Greek word “episteme,” which refers to knowledge, and “logos,” which means reason. Nominalist epistemology is founded on the assumptions or reasoning of universality. Several things are considered truth or universal because they share specific attributes. For instance, the term “humanity” is universal. The nominalist philosophy, however, denies the universality of universal concepts. Attributes such as strength, weakness, happiness, and sadness are considered universal. Nominalist philosophers, however, deny such assumptions of universality. Such philosophers argue that unless there are specific physical attributes that define happiness, it can be considered universal.

3.3: Sampling Procedures

In qualitative studies, there is always less restriction with regard to the sample size (Kumar et al., 2017). This is because of variations in the data that often characterize qualitative research. In most research studies, the sample size is determined before the data collection procedure begins. However, the sample size is mostly dependent on the nature of the research.

In my current study, the sample size was not determined before the beginning of the research. This is because of the inductive nature of the study and the types of data sources. Typically, in qualitative research, such as interviews or phenomenological studies, the number of respondents is often low due to the potential of response variation, which could significantly compromise the information quality (Shaheen and Pradhan, 2019). As such, the general rule is to have a relatively low number of respondents, which is, however, guided by the concept of data saturation. According to Faulkner and Trotter (2017), data saturation is the point in data collection at which any additional data or information does not significantly vary from what has already been collected. At this point in qualitative studies, it is always advisable to stop with further data collection.

In this case, however, the nature of the data implied that more sources had to be used to generate the necessary themes. Ordinarily, in qualitative research, the themes or theories are generated from the relatively less varied data that are obtained through interviews or other methods. In this case, however, the themes or theories were generated from a large pool of tweets. Since there were no guiding hypotheses or theories, it was, to generate the necessary themes, prudent to explore large tweet volumes.

3.4: Data Collection Procedure

Virtual Ethnography

Data was collected in this study through the use of virtual ethnography. Self-ethnographic, non-participant, and participant online ethnography were some methods used.

Contextual interviews were conducted using the screen-sharing technique. Furthermore, virtual ethnography was used to focus on different aspects of social media, such as social interactions and self-perception. However, at some point, an overt approach was used where the interviewees were aware that research was being conducted.

Tweets were the main form of data used in the study. Because of the nature of the study, no specific research instrument was used. To obtain the relevant data, trending the hashtags within the first two weeks when the Qatar blockade started; that is June 5, 2017. The popular Twitter accounts within the given hashtags were identified, and more exploration on the same was done. For this study, the tweets were translated from Arabic to English.

Multiple hashtags and tweeter accounts were selected and included for analysis, as described in Chapter 4. Tweets that seemed to have more activity within the first two weeks after the blockade in the various hashtags were given priority in the data collection process. Such tweets were considered to be of primary importance in an otherwise qualitative interview or survey. They were copied and transferred to a Word document, with documentation of the tweet, the author, and the date. To gather more relevant data, retweets to the main tweets were also considered. The authors of relevant retweets were searched for, and their respective tweets and retweets were used to collect more relevant data.

Once the tweets of the initial period following the blockade had been exhausted, the search was expanded. The search strategy involved using Twitter's "Advanced Search" option. Sub-sections were filled with relevant information: "Accounts," under which the "From these Accounts" option was filled with the relevant username, such as "@Binnahar." Further down the search options, the following information was entered: "Tweets, and replies." Lastly, the section, "Dates – 'from' – 'to,'" was entered. To simplify the process of data collection, this procedure was necessary to filter the tweets within a given timeline.

3.5: Data Analysis

Thematic Research and Content Analysis

Data analysis was done using a thematic analysis technique, which is a qualitative data analysis technique that is used for analyzing non-numerical data such as texts, audio, and audiovisuals (Nowell et al., 2017). An inductive approach was integrated, which allowed this study's themes to be generated from the data collected. The thematic analysis process involved familiarization, coding, generating, reviewing, and defining themes. The codes were used to generate relevant themes, as are presented in Chapter 4.

The analysis process began by first reading through all the tweets to gain an overall perception of their potential meaning. Considering the research questions, an overview of the data was established by reading the tweets and taking initial notes to become familiar with the data. After the first reading, a second reading was followed with a classification of the tweets, depending on their perceived similarities in meaning. Second, some words within tweets which appeared similar were classified into different colors and then grouped as codes. Once the tweets were grouped, a third reading was done, with specific emphasis on identifying codes or lines that seemed to have a similar meaning. After the codes had been generated, the possible themes were generated. Multiple codes that seemed similar were combined into a single theme. The themes, which include patriotism, diversity, and misinformation, were sent to the supervisor, who made the necessary input, remarks, and suggestions. Based on the supervisor's feedback, more tweets were gathered, and more themes were generated, as presented in the Results section.

Furthermore, a conceptual and relational analysis was used to analyze the tweets. Based on the research questions, data was examined both qualitatively and quantitatively. Data were narrowed down and grouped based on how they informed the research question. A balance was achieved to ensure that the information was not too extensive and the process was not too arduous.

3.6: Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are often a major issue when the research subjects are human, which is not the case in the current study. Common ethical issues often include the privacy of the information provided by the participants, especially during the interview or through a questionnaire. In this case, secondary data forms the basis for the analysis, and the data are obtained from a public or social media account. Despite the public nature of the data source—Twitter—it is only prudent that the privacy of the authors – tweets are protected. Besides, the authors of the tweets reserve the right to allow their tweets to be used for other purposes. As such, it would be unethical to use their real identities. The following section presents the results of the study and the discussions as well.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1: Introduction

This section presents this study's results. As previously mentioned, the thematic analysis technique was used to analyze the tweets, which were searched according to both hashtags and influential tweets in Qatar during the Gulf crisis. Social media is characterized by rapid mass consumption of information such that within a few days, the news is no longer a priority or a much talked-about issue in the public. As such, most of the analyzed hashtags and tweets were from within the first two weeks and one month after the blockade's imposition. Specifically, the data were collected from June 6, 2017, a day after the embargo was initiated.

For hashtag selection, tweets were randomly chosen. This was important to avoid bias in the study. Most of the tweets were in Arabic. As a result, they had to be translated into English. During the thematic analysis, specific codes were identified by the researcher. Initially, several themes were generated from the tweets. However, through consultation with experts and further refinement, three major themes were developed that are in line with the objectives of the study stated in chapter one.

This study pertains to how Qataris and the citizens of the blockading countries use social media to promote narratives and counter-narratives with regards to the Gulf crisis. According to Tucker et al. (2017), virtual space offers a different platform for citizens' engagement between two or more countries. In the 21st century, military conflict, especially among developed or emerging economies, is highly unlikely. As such, many countries engage in economic warfare as a way of confronting each other. The Gulf crisis and the China-US trade war are examples of such economic warfare. Unfortunately, economic warfare affects every citizen, unlike military confrontation, which only targets a particular country's security forces.

This study points to the factors that caused Qataris to engage in a Twitter war with nationals of the quartet. Similarly, citizens of a particular country feel offended by external aggression the same as when economic or social warfare is launched against them. Given that virtual space involves no physical engagement, it provides a perfect space for citizens of different countries to engage with each other (e.g., Qatar and the quartet countries).

4.2: Results

4.2.1: THEME ONE – SPREAD OF MISINFORMATION AND FAKE NEWS

The Gulf crisis is long-standing; however, the means of confrontation among the involved countries have often been non-aggressive. With the evolution of technology, a different platform for conflict engagement has emerged – the virtual space.

Information in the technological world has become an essential political element, especially regarding how it is communicated and channeled through mass media. Unlike in the older days when television, newspaper, and radio were the leading mass media channels, nowadays, social media provides an even broader platform. Even more, social media provides users with the capacity to engage mainstream and alternative news sections through interactive channels (Stier et al., 2018). As such, social media, in a way, has provided a platform for perpetuating democracy through enhanced freedom of speech and other expression. At the same time, social media provides a platform for significant manipulation of information to serve self-interests. As such, false information, propaganda, and negative publicity are standard practices in social media. When misinformation and propaganda occurs between two or more countries, the citizens of the respective nations engage through nationalism in support of their national leaders.

4.2.1.1 Leadership Strategy of the Gulf Region

Leaders of the UAE and Saudi Arabia have seemingly been pursuing a different strategy for consolidating power in the Gulf region than their predecessors. According to Honniball

(2020), since Mohammed bin Salman, the leader of Saudi Arabia, came to power in 2015, he has shown a great deal of desire to consolidate the Gulf region's capacity and extend influence beyond the Gulf region. As a result, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have significantly altered the Gulf region's security architecture compared to the traditional system that mainly revolved on a country's sovereignty. Specifically, the UAE and Saudi Arabia alliance has attempted to change the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) from being defensive to more offensive. To achieve this objective, the Abu Dhabi–Riyadh alliance has increased tension with its opponents and created a significant break-up of ties with existing regional structures.

Qatar has often been perceived as a significant obstacle in these aggressive objectives because of its considerable security relations with the outside world and its ambitious economic growth plan. Brannagan and Giulianotti (2018) argue that the UAE-Saudi Arabia axis has, since 2015 (two years before the blockade occurred), therefore sought to diminish Qatar's influence and economic dependence.

According to Barzilai et al. (2016), Saudi's desire to dominate the Gulf region did not only start in 2015 but traces back to the 1980s. Saudi Arabia has always sought to dominate the area because of factors including it is home to Islam's holiest sites, has the region's largest military, oil reserves, and a large population. Historically, GCC members, including Qatar, Oman, and the UAE, have always vetoed Saudi's plan for the establishment of a regional security council. As such, most Saudi neighbors still perceive it as a significant threat. However, with the security collaboration between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the two countries have intensified their quest to dominate the region, despite Qatar's unwillingness to participate. As such, the two countries have sought strategies for minimizing Qatar's influence. Yet, Qatar host one of the United States' regionally strategic military bases. Furthermore, Qatar has successfully portrayed itself as an Islamic country that is more dynamic and has a diverse sociocultural system.

As Brannagan and Giulianotti (2018) report, Qatar is an example of the successful use of soft power strategy for defense. Several factors determine Qatar's soft power strategy. It is a tiny country with a small population yet is rich in oil and gas. Its security against significant and equally economically empowered countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE is very vulnerable. Therefore, Qatar prefer significant diplomatic relations with countries like the United States, UK, France, and Turkey, most of which are also important allies with the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

Qatar's soft power and public diplomacy are significantly insulated from potential military aggression by the region's more extensive forces. As a result, weakening Qatar economically and diplomatically seemed the most viable option. Digital technology seemed to have offered the UAE and Saudi Arabia the right tool for launching propaganda regarding an excuse to blockade Qatar. Fake news was the only viable option. Furthermore, the propaganda occurred at a time when United States President Donald Trump expressed his disapproval of countries that support or sympathize with terrorists. In 2017, Trump issued a travel ban to and from some Islamic-dominated countries that were purported to support terrorism (Maltz, 2018). As such, smearing Qatar as a supporter of terrorism was probably perceived as a possible way of savoring Qatar and the United States' ties and further weakening the country.

As prior- Mentioned, the crisis started in May 2017, when the QNA website was hacked and articles posted, which implicated Qatar's leader as a supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood, a terrorist organization. Further, the themes portrayed the Qatar leader as a supporter of Iran and Israel, a move that sparked outrage from Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Egypt (Lynch, 2017). Qatar denied this news, and the situation quickly escalated. The following month, on June 5, 2017, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain cut diplomatic ties with Qatar. Saudi Arabia and the UAE imposed a blockade of Qatar on land, water, and air. Qatari nationals in the UAE and Saudi Arabia were ordered to leave, and UAE and Saudi Arabian citizens in Qatar were ordered

to return to their respective countries. An essential aspect of the crisis is that it was mostly fought in virtual space, specifically social media.

Citizen journalism played a fundamental role in confronting accusations. This is essentially about, other than ordinary news agencies or media, the public collecting, analyzing, and disseminating information (Lindner, 2017). It seemed to have been more effectively utilized in Qatar to defend itself against the fake news.

The following section reveals tweets that represent citizen journalism, especially regarding Qatari citizens defending their nation:

Gulf differences are temporary differences because they are not disputes arising from the nature of governments, but rather from the nature of individuals, and individuals will one day change or change their convictions (@Binnahar85, 2017).

This tweet was done as a reference about the Qatar crisis as not a result of specific economic, geographic, and social issues between the four countries and Qatar but rather based on the personal differences of the leaders' respective countries. This tweet was by a Qatar national. It seems neutral, but it insinuates the Qatar's defense. It supports the fact that Qatar's leader's news is fake and was only developed for self-serving reasons.

Algeria and Morocco, when they accused each other of supporting terrorism, did not throw the two peoples together, but limited their differences on the political issue. No Moroccan was expelled from Algeria, or vice versa (@Binnahar85, 2017).

This tweet was authored to support yet it reveals that differences between Qatar and the four countries that imposed the blockade are not political or economic; it is more personal. The author refers to a previous case where the two countries had similar accusations. Nevertheless, the citizens were not drawn into a war-like case with Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia.

Another tweet by this same author is presented below.

Why was there no statement condemning Qatar from the Cooperation Council, the Arab League, the European Union, or even the African Union, which Al-Jubeir went to persuade and did not succeed? (Binnahar85, 2017)

In the above tweet, @Binnahar85 (2019) argues that if Qatar were supporting terrorism

or terrorist activities, as insinuated by the fake news, this would have warranted condemnation of the Gulf Cooperation Council's, the European Union, and the Arab League. Furthermore, the author asserts that Saudi Arabia's Minister of Foreign Affairs—Adel-Aljubeir—attempted to lobby the mentioned bodies to condemn Qatar on the alleged news, but the mission failed. An essential aspect of this tweet is that it draws the readers' attention, who may otherwise be convinced that Qatar is guilty.

Indeed, the European Union is a strong resister of terrorism and terrorist-related activities. As such, if they were convinced that Qatar was supporting a terrorist organization, they would have condemned Qatar, but they did not. In this case, Binnahar85 (2017) provides verifiable facts that can be used to refute the claims of fake news.

Within this same theme, another author tweeted:

After months of continuous Saudi media talk about the “collapse” of the Qatari economy, it suddenly became an example of economic success (@majedalansari, 2018).

According to this tweet, Saudi Arabian news outlets had engaged in propaganda that Qatar's economy was or had collapsed due to the land, air, and water blockade that was placed on Qatar by the four countries. This tweet was done in 2018, months after the crisis had already been ensuing. As this tweet suggests, Qatar's economy has defied its expected collapse and instead became successful. To date, the crisis has persisted and, indeed, Qatar's economy has not suffered. Instead, Qatar has strengthened its alliance with former opponents and even formed new alliances.

In another tweet, (@majedalansari, 2018) wrote:

They said blockade and then boycott and now "diplomatic row" getting down from the tree is more complicated than climbing.

This tweet indicates that the UAE and Saudi Arabia's plot to weaken Qatar seemed to have failed. Qatar refused to give in to blockading countries' demands. The blockade's naming as a "diplomatic crisis" is used to indicate a soft stand and perception that the blockading

countries want to adopt, especially after realizing that their initial strategy did not yield results.

With regards to the theme in question, @majedalansari, (2018) again tweeted:

The main challenges to any solution to the Gulf crisis are 1 – difficulty in providing guarantees not to fabricate upcoming crises. 2- the absence of security and economic confidence in the event of opening borders for people and goods .3 – the absence of pressing circumstance to solve the crisis. 4 – the need of the blockading countries for a way out that does not seem to be a regression, but evidence indicates that solution is close to agreement.

This tweet has several implications. First, it implies that the blockading countries have finally conceded and would like to end the crisis. However, Qatar is skeptical about these countries' intentions. This tweet insinuates that there is no security guarantee that if the borders are opened, the blockading country will not invade Qatar. Furthermore, Qatar is not ready to resolve the crisis if the four countries do not admit that they were wrong and the news was fake. Instead, these countries want to fix the problem in a manner that does not embarrass them.

This author published yet another tweet.

“The length of the crisis and the irreversibility of agitation is clear that they are looking for reconciliation that does not put a shameful position before the world after a blessing that has been invalid for three years. Perhaps Trump’s isolation process and hearings are the main driver for the accelerating reconciliation for purely political reasons and not for social reasons of love in the people of the region and ending the dispute”
Majedalansari (2017)

Again, this tweet confirms that Qatar is unwilling to let the crisis be resolved until the blockading countries admit their wrongdoing. Furthermore, this tweet confirms that the UAE and Saudi Arabia were hoping that Trump would intervene in the accusations and put pressure on Qatar to give in to the demands required for lifting the blockade. With Trump's impeachment and continued isolation from other countries, the UAE-Saudi axis realized that they were losing and wanted to resolve the crisis quickly.

Two years ago, on this day, June 5, 2019, the chain of courtesy were broken, and the gates of the world opened to us, and we merged in one vision, two years later, Qatar.....a thousand good....and the next one with the help of God Almighty is more significant and better (Jaberalharmi, 2019).

The above tweet serves to dispute that the blockade did not cause a significant economic

impact on Qatar. Instead, this country has emerged better and more robust.

Another author expressed similar sentiments:

“NBC: US officials confirm reports of piracy. Qatar News Agency. The UAE is responsible for hacking the site #Qatar Siege (@Jaberalharmi, (2017).

This tweet was done in July 2017, one month after the blockade was imposed. It confirms that, indeed, the news aimed at tainting the image of Qatar's leader was malicious and induced through hacking of the QNA.

In another tweet, (@Jaberalharmi, (2017) wrote:

Whoever hacked the Qatar News Agency website, what prevents him from recording all the closed meetings held in his home or spying on other meetings.

This tweet was also authored in July 2017. It was written as a way of corroborating the allegations against Qatar's leader. According to the author, if the alleged meetings between Qatar's leader and the said terrorist representatives were true, how come the videos or photos of the suspected sessions were not present? The rationale is that the person who created this news should have backed them with visual evidence.

In yet another tweet, (@Jaberalharmi, (2017) reported:

Qatari charities are members of the United Nations. So what terrorist organizations are you talking about, gentlemen?! Have mercy on the minds of public opinion.

This tweet questions the existence of relations between Qatar and the United Nations, whether if Qatar was supporting or sympathizing with terrorist groups.

Another tweeter reported as follows:

Look at the folly and lies of the blockade countries. America is participating in exercise with a terrorist country. The important thing is to take 480 billion jobs (@Althani_Faisal, 2017).

This tweet is about a collaborative American-Qatar military training exercise, which occurred months after the blockade was imposed. The United States is one of the world's foremost critics of terrorism, considering the consequences this country suffered from 9/11. As such, if the information presented on the QNA website were indeed true, there is no way the

United States would participate or continue to have collaborative activities with Qatar. Therefore, Qatar and the USA's continuing relations are an indication that the news was fake.

In yet another tweet, @Binnahar85 (2017) wrote:

The end of the crisis means only a return to normal diplomatic relations. As for the return of political trust, it is impossible after the political absurdity that we witnessed. Qatar drew its new political path and set off, and it cannot be reversed.

This tweet confirms the extent to which the fake news has damaged Qatar's trust and its neighbors in the GCC. As this tweet indicates, even if the countries continue to have diplomatic relations, their political interests are already compromised.

Can't believe it has been a full year since the blockade on Qatar. Here is a thread of a few million ways we have benefited from this as a nation (@Althani_Faisal, 2017)

This tweet confirms that the economic sabotage intended by the blockading countries did not succeed, and Qatar has emerged better off than before.

4.2.2: Theme Two – Attacks and Counterattacks on Digital Space

Social media has played a significant role in advancing digital nationalism. Social media has also been a substantial source of the subversion of democracy through propaganda and fake news (Qin et al., 2017). In particular, social bots have been used to popularize propaganda, which is easily consumed by the masses. Cultivation Theory posits that if information is repeated in a given media, people, based on the data, are likely to change their opinion (Morgan et al., 2017). The social media platform has billions of users. Therefore, it is the perfect place for exerting specific influence through mass communication. Twitter has mainly been influential as a platform for digital nationalism in Qatar's case. It has been used to challenge and refute the fake news claims by the blockading countries and encourage nationality and unity among the Qatari people.

Digital nationalism can be understood from the concept of nationalism. According to Gündüz and Erdem (2017), nationalism is the consciousness of a sense of belonging to a

specific nation and aspiring or subscribing to the country's security and sovereignty. Digital nationality can therefore be defined as the use of digital space, such as social media and search engines, through electronic devices such as smartphones, tablets, and computers to express nationalism in a specific manner.

According to Udupa (2019), the practice of digital nationalism is more often revealed with regard to the defense of a country from external aggressions of whatever kind. In the Gulf crisis, digital nationalism can be considered as the digital platform used by Qatari citizens to defend their country from the accusations and blockades placed on them by the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Bahrain. It can also be considered in the context of citizens of the four countries using fake news to attack Qatar. In simple terms, digital nationalism can be viewed as using virtual spaces to stand with one's own country in matters of international relations.

Social media provides the platform on which Qataris express their nationalism, which, in this case, is translated to the spirit of solidarity, unity, and togetherness. As previously mentioned, there are significant concerns among scholars of nationalism regarding the points at which nationalism emerges and the triggers. As Berberoglu (1919) argues, specific positive or negative cross-national events are the primary triggers of nationalism's sense and spirit. In this case, digital nationalism in Qatar was used to express solidarity and togetherness during the crisis. As the tweets indicate, even non-Qatari nationals who do not live within the country used Twitter to express solidarity with the government. A majority of the Qatari people expressed their commitment to defend their nation, despite the challenges that it was subjected to. Some related tweets are presented in the section below.

A tweet concerning the theme discussed herein is shown below.

Now, two years of living under the #QatarBlockade, and what I see is that Qatar is a stronger, more unified country. Proud to call it my home (@ANAIKhelaiifi, 2017).

This tweet identifies and unifies the Qatari people with their country. In yet another tweet, the author reports:

We are stronger than ever and keeping our heads up and never looking back but focused on doing the best for Qatar (2017).

Although an individual author tweeted this, it seeks to encourage the spirit of nationality among Qataris in the face of adversities.

Another author, @fatimaalmnai3i (2017), wrote:

Qatar has become stronger and more united.

50 days we're #stronger, and we love our Amir and supports him unconditionally.

Another author, @hananfayadh, (2017), wrote.

In this small area of the world, ...you will see the true meaning of solidarity, cohesion, victory, and love. Let patients know that glory is not measured by size.

@Majedalansari (2017) also tweeted:

Two years ago, on this day, June 5, 2019, the chain of courtesy were broken, and the gates of the world opened to us, and we merged in one vision, two years later, Qatar.....a thousand good....and the next one with the help of God Almighty is more significant and better.

The Gulf crisis revealed that the degraded media in Gulf countries and Egypt is managed from one "bedroom." and drank from one cup.

The above tweets indicate how the blockading countries and their citizens used digital nationalism to attack Qatar.

The Omani people must warm-up and prepare from now, as it appears that the scum of the Gulf has big bodies and minds of children preparing for it after Qatar ad Kuwait (Majedalansari, 2018).

The reference to "Omani" people is a direct call for the country's citizens to prepare to defend their country if the UAE and Saudi Arabia launched a similar attack on Omani, since it is one of the regional countries that did not support the blockade.

After months of continuous Saudi media talk about the collapse of the Qatari economy, it suddenly became an example of economic success (Majedalansari, 2018).

This tweet refers to the Qatari people defending their country against the propaganda that their economy, due to the blockade, has suffered.

Patriotism doesn't have an age limit. #QatarCrisis #IStandWithQatar (Mohammed Al-Jufairi@Halawala, 2017)

This tweet was authored by an older woman (64 years old). She is a Qatari national. The tweet's relevance is that this is a person whose age does not necessarily reflect social media active users, especially those using Twitter. However, as the author indicates, in times of crisis, when patriotism is needed, age becomes irrelevant; everyone must use every means possible to advance the voicing of their problems.

4.2.3: Theme Three – Embracing Diversity

According to the literature review, digital nationalism is constructed from a bottom-to-top approach (Chen et al., 2019). This approach implies that, at the individual level, citizens probably have a varying perception of their country and their self-identity regarding their nation. Besides

Nationals from countries other than Qatar expressed their support for Qataris, which is an indication that people embrace diverse ideas. Some people may not necessarily share the sentiments or perceptions that their leaders may want them to. For instance, Qatar and many other countries in the Middle East region have less democratic leadership systems. In a global world where democracy is perceived as a more effective governance style, some Qatari residents likely feel that their political system is not the best. However, such perceptions are local and only matter as far as the country's internal affairs are concerned. However, on the foundation of sovereignty, when a country is perceived to be enduring the potential for external aggression, as in Qatar's case, citizens seem to reconcile their localized conflict with the government and various influential groups and offer solidarity and support of their nation.

Gündüz and Kaya-Erdem (2017) argue that as individuals within nations grow and interact more with the social, cultural, and economic facets of their governments, they become more inclined to develop an identity that is primarily associated with their country. As such, along the way, it can be argued that people inherently create a sense of nationalism. However,

as Berberoglu (2019) argues, such a sense of nationalism is likely to remain silent until specific events evoke it. It can also be argued that the magnitude of such events and their perceived impact on individual lives has a significant effect on how the spirit of nationalism is evoked.

In the tweets presented in this section, most of which were published one or more years after the blockade, it is apparent that the embargo's prolonged effects have evoked a sense of nationalism among Qatar's people. Digital nationalism, in this case, has enabled Qataris to remain resilient, despite the blockade's potential economic and social ramifications. The blockade's ideal situation was that the Qatari leader would give in to the demands of the quartet countries, including scaling down diplomatic ties with Iran and Turkey, close Turkey's military base that was under construction at the time of the blockade, and sever relations with all labeled terrorist organizations, including the Muslim Brotherhood, which would have essentially been an admission of supporting terrorist organizations.

Other demands included shutting down Al Jazeera and all its affiliate stations and aligning Qatar's social, political, economic, and military policies with those of the Gulf and Arab countries (Naheem, 2017). Indeed, these demands are essentially an infringement of Qatar's sovereignty. If Qatar's leader gave in to such requests, it would have essentially been surrendering the independence of the country's people, hence the use of digital nationalism to rally support and solidarity for the leader.

The following tweets indicate support and solidarity by the Qatari and non-Qatari with their country and leader.

Another author, @TheoAbsolon (2020), tweeted:

*I can't believe it over three years since the #Gulfcrisis has still not reached a solution.
#IStandWithQatar*

This is a transnational author who lives in Qatar and expresses solidarity with the country during the crisis.

Another author, - #AleeVoice (June5, 2017), wrote:

*Cutting down diplomatic ties with Qatar by Maldives is not justified n it's unacceptable.
Have we become a cheap puppet to the Dictatorship?*

Again, this is a transnational author who does not even live in Qatar. The author lives in the Maldives but expresses solidarity with Qatar. Notably, this tweet was published during the first week following the blockade.

Another cause of a different nationality uses the social media platform to express solidarity with Qatar during the blockade.

Thousands of videos sent in from all over the world, supporting Qatar. We feel the love #IStandwithQatar (@hamadalamari, 2017).

Again, this is a tweet in which a video was embedded to express solidarity with Qatar. The author of the tweet is from Yemen.

We will not abandon our Qatari brothers, Erdogan tells members of the ruling AK Party (@Bilalr, 2017)

This tweet is from a non-Qatari national who reports Turkey's position in the face of the Gulf crisis. As the tweet indicates, Turkish leader Erdogan promised not to abandon Qatar in the situation. Indeed, to date, Turkey and Iran, throughout the crisis, have been the most outspoken with their solidarity with and support for Qatar.

supporting Qatar at the United Nations Youth Assembly. Remove the blockade on the people of Qatar #IStandwithQatar (Neeshad Shafi@inneshadvs, 2017).

This tweet was published two months after the blockade was imposed. It represents the voice of a young non-Qatari national who was attending in the United Nations Youth Forum and is advocating for the embargo's removal. Although the author is essentially using the United Nations, he goes ahead. He posts his position regarding the blockade, with an image of himself at the UN-level, advocacy for an ending to the crisis.

Saudi Arabia is saying it will give Somalia "whatever it wants" if it cuts relations with Qatar. Somali people say NO! IStandwithQatar (Greater Somalia @, 2017).

This tweet indicates the Somali people's support even though it does not represent the

official position of the Somali government, which is essentially the essence of digital nationalism. Digital nationalism expresses the citizens of a country's citizens, even when the perception is different from those of the government. However, in most cases, they are always expressed in favor of the national or country's position.

More tweets are reported below.

I stand in solidarity with the government and the people of Qatar (Razif @ajib33, 2017).

people of Qatar have shown great unity despite the blockades against their country and stood with their leader (Huraira @Hur1, 2017).

4.3: Discussion

This study's results revealed three major themes: Qatari used digital nationalism to fight against misinformation that was portrayed by the media. Social media can promote digital nationalism, and digital nationalism can be used for uniting a nation's citizens against potential external aggression. The discussions result from this done about what was reported in the literature and additional extant literature relevant to the products.

4.3.1: Defending Qatar's Image

The media serves multiple roles in most democratic and non-democratic societies. The media are the voice between the people and the ruling class. Before further discussing digital nationalism to fight misinformation of the media, it is paramount to understand why the press exists, hence the concept of leadership and the people. Regardless of whether a country is democratic, this governance structure has always been for the people's interest.

Pashukanis (2017) postulated a theory that explains the origin of law. According to this idea, people once lived like animals, without specific leadership structures. Individuals had the liberty to farm, which was the main economic activity at the time, or hunt and gather wild fruits. There was no law; as such, people could easily use other people's property without

necessarily asking for their permission. Therefore, it followed that those who worked hard and accumulated wealth were vulnerable to theft from those who did not have these resources. Thus, it became necessary for society to have an arrangement such that the resources acquired by individuals could not be taken from them without their consent. As Ostrowski (2018) argues, the people, to protect their needs, agreed to exchange their freedom for leadership. On the other hand, John Locke postulates that leadership has always been for the people and by the people (Inoguchi, 2020). In his theory, to explain democracy Locke argues that an ideal democracy is where everyone rules or makes decisions, which is impractical.

The concept of democracy originated in ancient Greece, following the failure of the people's parliament - which included the most influential people in society, to promptly make essential leadership decisions (Inoguchi, 2020). Therefore, it was agreed that these individuals would be selected by the people to form a legislative house, to discuss the issues that affect the common person. The media evolved as a platform through which people could communicate with their leadership and vice versa (Lazzolino & Stremlau, 2017).

In democratic countries, the media is impartial and reports without the government's or the people's favor. However, it is only prudent that the media always focus on representing the people because they are vulnerable to mistreatment by leaders. In non-democratic societies, the media is owned and controlled by the government or the leaders; hence, they dictate what is reported (Peters, 2016).

Sometimes, even when the state does not own the media, authoritative regimes try to gag the press so that they do not factually report the state's wrongdoings. The media, therefore, has a significant influence on a nation state's government and citizens. The government can use the media to influence citizens' perceptions and decision-making. At the same time, people can use the media to influence the government's decisions.

The media's ability to control politicians is based on cultivation theory. According to

Morgan et al. (2016), this theory asserts that when the societal masses are repeatedly exposed to certain information, their perception becomes influenced accordingly, hence the foundation of propaganda and fake news. In other words, people are likely to believe in what is being reported by the media if the same information is repeated over and over again.

Based on cultivation theory, misinformation, propaganda, and fake news regarding Qatar's leader as a supporter of terrorist groups were expected to impact people. Considering the magnitude of the news, it was expected that if it is played repeatedly in both local and international news outlets, the people would eventually start believing it. Indeed, this would have significantly destroyed the leader of Qatar's influence and control, especially through the eyes of the international community, which Qatar relies on for soft power purposes.

Ideally, the fake news would probably have had a significant adverse effect on Qatar's image if not for the social media platform. Qataris would have naturally wanted to defend their leader and their country's image, but doing this would have been quite challenging. According to Stever (2017), people are often biased toward what they want to believe or what the masses believe and care less about alternative opinions. As such, even if the Qatari leader had used traditional media to defend the accusation, he probably would not have been successful in containing the spread of false information. Therefore, digital media offers an alternative platform where misinformation regarding crucial personal, societal, or national issues can be virtually explored and with instant counter-information (Fenton, 2016).

First, the fact that false information was being propagated by countries that have long been perceived as Qatar's enemies evoked the sense of nationality among Qatari citizens almost apparent. Second, one nation's propagation of false information against another is perceived as an infringement upon a country's sovereignty. Therefore, the concept of government becomes relevant. As previously mentioned, the government must not be seen as a separate entity from a country's citizens; they are indeed a part of each other. The government fundamentally exists

because of a country's citizens.

According to Locke's argument, the government is established by citizens to take care of society's interests (Inoguchi, 2016). As such, an attack on a country's leader is a direct attack on the people who are represented by this leader. As such, they are bound to retaliate or respond in defense of their leader. Digital nationalism, therefore, should not be considered a spontaneous occurrence.

As the literature review indicates, digital nationalism is constructed with a bottom-up approach, which was indeed the case with Qatar and its citizens during the Gulf crisis. The bottom-up approach indicates that a citizen or a member of a country has a sovereign right, and is considered as the basic unit of national sovereignty. According to Locke's theory, the individual citizen agrees to exchange their sovereign freedom to the leaders who, in turn, promise to provide basic needs and protect the individual's sovereign rights (Inoguchi, 2020).

For example, in one tweet, the author asked:

If the person who leaked the purported video of Qatari leader in support of the terrorist group, why was he/she unable to take videos and pictures of where and when the Qatar leader and the terrorist group met? (@Jaberalharmi, 2017)

The courthouse can be used as an analogy for further discussing how Qataris used digital nationalism to fight false information. The media outlets in Saudi Arabia and the UAE can be considered prosecutors presenting a case against an accused person. Qatari nationals and transnationals living in the country can be regarded as the defendant's lawyers or advocates. Therefore, the prosecutor presents his or her case with evidence, which is the video and other information that was leaked to QNA's website.

In essence, the Qatari people did not just refute the accusation. They attempted to provide information that would make a neutral person, specifically the international community, corroborate the facts presented by the false information's propagators. In an ordinary court, for instance, the prosecutor or the advocates often rely on the motive for

committing an offense as a significant determinant of a case's direction.

It appears that Saudi Arabia and UAE leaders had personal issues, which many tweets considered less political, religious, or economic. One tweeter questioned why the two countries' citizens had to be sacrificed if the quarrel was purely political or economic. If the conflict were based on these issues, the two countries' citizens would not have been involved. Instead, Saudi Arabia and the UAE expelled Qatari residents and recalled their citizens who were living in Qatar (Pinnell, 2018).

digital platforms (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, etc.) enable netizens to look for information and facts that they can use to defend their positions. Consequently, it is logical to argue that Qatari citizens could effectively use their digital nationalism to protect their country and their leader against a false accusation. As this discussion reveals, citizens did not just defend their leader because they believed he was right. They protected him because an attack on their leader is considered a direct assault on their identity, and it is this identity that the leader represents.

4.3.2 Promoting Unity and Solidarity

Social media is different from traditional media. One of the fundamental differences and unique features of social media is that it is interactive. As such, users can engage with each other in real-time, and there is often no time limit for the engagement (Arli, 2017). With traditional media, if the viewers are to be engaged, there is a limitation of time that they can be on-air. For instance, radio stations often have specific shows, and listeners can call and engage in discussion. The time is limited to the show's air time, which may be two to three hours per session. In-between sessions, the presenter, and probably a guest, engage in conversation, music is being played, and commercial advertisements are aired (especially if the show is popular). Therefore, it becomes difficult for listeners to fully express their perceptions and opinions about an issue of paramount importance. Thus, assuming that the Qatari people relied on traditional media to express their nationalism and solidarity with their leader, it probably

would have taken a long time and would have had minimal effect, especially on the international community.

Social media, as previously mentioned, has no time limit. People can engage in a trending topic for as long as the masses are still consuming the news or before another hot topic appears (Morgan et al., 2016). Twitter, for instance, has become a top-rated social media platform because of its microblogging features. Twitter allows users to make several tweets regarding a topic, which is usually represented in a hashtag (Balakrishnan et al., 2020). In Qatar, for instance, one of the popular hashtags was *#IstandwithQatar* and *#Gulfcrisis*. These hashtags generated millions of tweets from Qatari nationals and other users worldwide.

An important feature of Twitter is that it has character limitations. As such, one cannot tweet an extensive comment on a hashtag. People are, therefore, forced to make several tweets to express their opinions. The more tweets that are generated for a particular hashtag, the more it trends. Twitter has a feature that automatically places trending topics according to the number of tweets and retweets generated at a specific time (Balakrishnan et al., 2020).

Facebook is also a significant social medium that is commonly used for political influence. A notable feature of Facebook that makes it different from most common social networking sites is its user interface, which makes it friendly to many people. According to Elaheebocus et al. (2018), it is much easier to navigate Facebook than Twitter and Instagram. Also, Facebook has no character limitation about a specific post. A Facebook user can create a long-read post, although such are often less effective since social media users are not necessarily on the platform to read but interact and have fun. However, among all the world's social media platforms, Facebook has the most users. As such, it can bring attention to current global issues.

Social media's interactive forums make it possible and more comfortable for users to create content that can effectively influence the thoughts and perceptions of other users or

viewers. When Qatar's blockade was announced, the Trump administration, specifically the president, seemed to have expressed support but quickly retracted. The lack of comments from the European Union, the Gulf Cooperation Council, and many other world organizations had significant implications for Qatar. To a large extent, this indicated uncertainty about the authenticity of the accusations that were leveled against Qatar's leader. Such information and its relevance may not have necessarily been known to the public, especially among young people who are less likely to consume the mainstream media. However, through social media, especially Twitter, users quickly brought up such facts to neutralize the accusations.

For instance, one user questioned why in the middle of the crisis, approximately two months after the blockade had been imposed, the United States military had joint training with Qatar's military. Yet, the USA is one of the leading countries in the fight against terrorism. Another tweeter questioned why the United Nations Security Council, which is also concerned about world terrorism activities, had not condemned Qatar for supporting terrorism. The fact that these bodies are advocates of world security from terrorists, it is only prudent to assume that they would have hold Qatar responsible for supporting terrorist groups.

Therefore, it is logical to conclude that social media enables or promotes digital nationalism because of embedded features such as an interactive forum where users can engage. Another essential element of social media is its ability to reach many viewers at the same time. As previously mentioned, Facebook has the largest number of active users. As such, any event happening at a particular place around the world can quickly be communicated to other countries worldwide. Social media also has features that allow users to attach more information, such as videos, texts, and audio, all of which can have a fundamental influence on users' perceptions, through Cultivation Theory.

4.3.3 Qatar First

In the current Gulf crisis, digital nationality has, more than before, been used to unite

the Qatari people in the national sphere. The literature review indicates that the concept of race may sometimes differ significantly at the local level. For instance, not every Qatari is satisfied with the country's less democratic governmental system. Qatar's leadership and most of its laws are based on Islamic religious principles, which, to no small extent, are discriminative among women. However, significant progress is happening in Qatar (Berger, 2019). Qatari's current leadership has less separation of power, which means that the royal family and the selected leaders have more power than citizens. These may not be issues that Qataris agree with. However, through digital nationalism, the Qataris seemed to have created their identity around their leader.

In the literature review, Oruc (2019) also reported that digital nationalism mostly occurs through the persona of the country's leadership. However, it is also important to argue that such an architecture of nationalism is only popular among monarch and communist leadership systems where a single party or family rules. In democratic states, digital nationalism is likely to be created around the principles of democracy, culture, and shared values (Rao, 2016). Democrats in the United States, for instance, are less likely to form digital nationalism around the persona of a president who is a Republican, and vice versa. However, digital nationalism in the United States is expected to be created around the foundations of democracy, the culture of freedom and liberty, and respect for human rights.

It is logical to conclude that digital nationalism is used to create unity among a country's citizens, regardless of the potential economic, political, social, cultural, and religious differences that may exist among them. Additionally, it also allows non-citizens living in the same country or outside to develop and express their solidarity with and support of the government whose sovereignty may be under attack from external aggression.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The Gulf crisis started lasted in June 5, 2017, despite numerous efforts to end this crisis. A unique feature of the crisis that made the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain create the Qatar blockade has been the influence of both mainstream and social media. This crisis began following a hack into the Qatar News Agency (QNA), which is the country's broadcasting house. Its network was hacked, and videos that indicated the Qatari leader purportedly supports terrorist groups were posted, which sparked outrage between leaders and citizens of the involved countries. Qataris used social media in particular to show their solidarity in and support of their leader and country, a concept which is referred to as digital nationalism. The current study was, therefore, developed to explore how digital nationalism was used in Qatar during the Gulf crisis.

A qualitative study was used, in which data were mainly collected from Twitter as the preferred social media platform. The results indicate that Qataris used digital nationalism to counteract misinformation, fake news, and propaganda. Also, the results indicate that Qatar used digital nationalism to create unity and solidarity around the persona of its leader. Social networking sites were found to be fundamental in the promotion of digital nationalism.

As previously mentioned, the Gulf crisis is a recent event; it has been ensuing for over three decades. However, events since 2017 have been more visible due to their nature and modern mass communication systems. Conflicts and strained diplomatic relations used to be less visible because of localized mass communication systems. Even when strained relations were visible, they rarely involved citizens. In most cases, government representatives would be leading reconciliation efforts. In cases of military aggression, defense forces would engage with external aggressors. As such, civilians were, in most cases, always left out of cross-boundary issues. This, however, does not imply that their sentiments or perceptions have

always been missing. Contrarily, the means of communication has always been the limiting factor for social expression.

Despite the perceived positive impact of digital media, it is a potential source of propagating misinformation. In the case of Qatar, the digital space is the source of conflict. The UAE, and probably Saudi Arabia, wanted to taint Qatar's image, not only within the GCC but also internationally. Given the significance of how terrorism is treated by developed nations, which are Qatar's major allies, it was expected that such information would damage Qatar's image. As such, targeting the QNA by hacking was purposefully done to spark a widespread discussion of allegations. With citizens of the quartet countries taking sides with their governments' onslaught toward Qatar, Qataris had to counterattack the allegation to discredit the misinformation, which was largely successful.

As this crisis continues, Qataris are likely to put their interests first, which has indeed been a major stalemate for peace talks that have frequently collapsed (Al-Horr et al., 2019). Qatar seems to have weathered the storm and would probably not back down by accepting any of the original demands by the quartet countries, especially if they are perceived to be an infringement of Qatar's sovereignty. With the crisis transpiring and more strained relations within the Gulf Corporation council still eminent in the future, Qataris' digital nationalism can only grow stronger and more resilient.

The blockade of Qatar resulted in rituals of solidarity, and the rise of national identity encouraged resistance to the blockade, both online and offline. The increase of social reaction to this blockade has been a major unifier among Qatar's residents and neighboring nationalities. Digital media platforms have proven to be the main form of expressing national solidarity and nationalism. This study shows that national solidarity and nationalism were mobilized through social media platforms during times of resistance to uphold blockade. The hashtag statements were included to portray national unity and amplify the national slogans. Most tweets

investigated in this study reveal that users focused on displaying dignity, bravery, strength, and pride toward their nation.

Qatar is likely to remain an enemy of the major GCC countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, considering that the anticipated consequences after the blockade have arguably failed. Qatar's diplomatic ties with Iran and Turkey have remained. Developed nations such as the United States and France continue to be allied with Qatar. The US particularly has a strategic military base in Qatar, and this is important for sustaining US influence in the Middle East, especially with the perceived challenge of its global dominance by China (Wallin, 2018).

The FIFA World Cup 2022, which will be hosted in Qatar, can also further enhance Qatar's international image. Furthermore, Qatar, with regards to the Shura Council elections, is slowly advancing toward some form of democratic governance. It is evident, therefore, that Qatar's economic, social, and political policies can only deviate further from those of the GCC and Arab countries, which is yet a potential cause of sustained conflict. As such, the spirit of nationalism among Qataris will surely be tested again in the future. With continuing advancements in social media technology, only digital nationalism would be appropriate to serve functions like those done during the current Gulf crisis.

This study is aimed at cautioning citizens from engaging in unnecessary wars due to fake news. People using social media should be wise to not be misinformed. Also, social media should promote positive digital nationalism by enhancing patriotism and solidarity.

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