

# Social Media Manipulation in the Post-Truth Era: The Saudi Twitter Campaign to Boycott Turkish Products

Hakikat Sonrası Dönemde Sosyal Medya Manipülasyonu: Suudi Twitter'ın Türk Ürünlerini Boykot Kampanyası

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## Abstract

Social media platforms such as Twitter (X) and Facebook were extensively used by activists during the Arab Uprisings that began in Tunisia on December 17, 2010, and spread to Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, Libya, and Syria, and were heralded during this period as “liberation technologies”. However, it is now broadly acknowledged that social media has become an effective tool for information control in the hands of authoritarian regimes. In this context, the study examines social media manipulation in the post-truth era by analyzing the Twitter boycott campaign launched by Saudi Arabia against Turkish products between October 3 and 16, 2020. While there is extensive literature on the social media operations of major powers such as the United States, Russia, and China, research on similar activities conducted by Middle Eastern countries remains limited. From this perspective, the study aims to contribute to the literature on social media operations in the Middle East. Furthermore, the boycott campaign provides an empirical example of how social media is strategically used for narrative control and perception management in international relations. The research was conducted using the Opinion Analysis Model that combines Machine Learning (ML) and Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques, and the findings were visualized through Gephi. The results demonstrate that the boycott of Turkish products in Saudi Arabia went beyond being a mere economic reaction and reveal that anti-Turkish political discourse was systematically disseminated to large audiences through nationalist emotional content and misleading information.

**Keywords:** Social Media, Boycott, Machine Learning, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia

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## Öz

Twitter (X) ve Facebook gibi sosyal medya platformları, 17 Aralık 2010'da Tunus'ta başlayıp Mısır, Bahreyn, Yemen, Libya ve Suriye'ye yayılan Arap Halk Ayaklanmaları sırasında aktivistler tarafından yoğun biçimde kullanılmış ve bu dönemde "özgürleştirici teknolojiler" olarak müjdelenmiştir. Ancak günümüzde sosyal medyanın, otoriter rejimler tarafından bilgi kontrolü amacıyla etkili bir araca dönüştüğü yaygın biçimde kabul edilmektedir. Bu bağlamda, bu çalışma post-truth (post-gerçeklik) çağında sosyal medya manipülasyonunu, Suudi Arabistan'ın 3-16 Ekim 2020 tarihleri arasında Türk ürünlerine karşı başlattığı Twitter boykot kampanyası üzerinden incelemektedir. ABD, Rusya ve Çin gibi büyük güçlerin sosyal medya operasyonlarına ilişkin kapsamlı bir literatür bulunmasına rağmen, Ortadoğu ülkelerinin benzer faaliyetlerine dair araştırmalar oldukça sınırlıdır. Bu açıdan çalışma, Ortadoğu'daki sosyal medya operasyonlarına yönelik literatüre katkı sunmayı hedeflemektedir. Ayrıca söz konusu boykot kampanyası, sosyal medyanın uluslararası ilişkilerde algı yönetimi ve anlatı kontrolü amacıyla nasıl stratejik biçimde kullanıldığına dair ampirik bir örnek oluşturmaktadır. Araştırma, Makine Öğrenimi (ML) ve Doğal Dil İşleme (NLP) tekniklerini birleştiren Görüş Analizi Modeli ile yürütülmüş; elde edilen bulgular Gephi ile görselleştirilmiştir. Sonuçlar, Suudi Arabistan'daki Türk ürünlerine yönelik boykotun yalnızca ekonomik bir tepki olmanın ötesine geçtiğini; Türkiye karşıtı politik söylemin, milliyetçi duygulara hitap eden içerikler ve yanıltıcı bilgiler yoluyla geniş kitlelere sistematik biçimde yayıldığını ortaya koymaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Sosyal Medya, Boykot, Makine Öğrenimi, Türkiye, Suudi Arabistan

## Introduction

A decade after being heralded as a "technology of liberation" (Diamond & Plattner, 2012), social media is now increasingly recognized for its transformation into an effective tool for information control by authoritarian regimes, with growing scrutiny of its "dark side". Starting with the Arab Uprisings on December 17, 2010, with the protests in Tunisia, which then spread to several countries, including Egypt, Syria, Libya, and Yemen, leading to the overthrow of leaders, social media platforms such as Twitter (now X) and Facebook were widely used by social movements to coordinate and mobilize protesters. Due to their public-facing conversation spaces, these platforms were particularly threatening to authoritarian regimes during the Arab Uprisings. At the time, social media was regarded as a technological innovation that promoted democratization. However, just five years later, with events such as Brexit, the election of Donald Trump, and the Cambridge Analytica scandal, this optimistic narrative began to shift dramatically. Allegations that malicious actors had taken control of social media to spread targeted propaganda, political disinformation, monitor citizens, and mislead the public became increasingly widespread. (Abrahams & Leber, 2020, p.1174).

During the ongoing discussions regarding the transformation of social media, the Oxford Dictionary (2016) selected "post-truth" as the word of the year in 2016. This term refers to a phenomenon in which objective facts have less influence on shaping public opinion than emotional appeals and personal beliefs. The term was first used by the American playwright Steve Tesich in his 1992 essay *A Government of Lies*. Tesich criticized the American public for passively accepting the falsehoods of the George H.W. Bush administration. Tesich (1992), referring to earlier political scandals such as Watergate, the Iran-Contra affair, and the First Gulf War, argued that society had consciously chosen to live in a world where truth no longer held value.

Within this framework, “post-truth” transcends the narrower concept of “fake news.” While the latter denotes the deliberate fabrication and dissemination of false information via digital or traditional media, post-truth encapsulates a broader epistemic transformation. It expresses a social bias towards affective thinking, in which group biases and emotionally charged narratives become stand-ins for objective fact in shaping public opinion (McDermott, 2019, p. 220). It is sustained by alternative media and algorithmic platforms, whose environments become filled with demagoguery, disinformation, and conspiracism (Benkler et al., 2018, p.289). Social media algorithms then amplify it with a bias towards sensational and divisive information, extending its dissemination, deepening propaganda, and creating echo chambers that amplify bias and destroy reason (Jones, 2019, p.1394). In the post-truth era, the blurring of lines between fact, fiction, and opinion leads to confusion, amplified by mass media and social media, resulting in a public unable to distinguish truth from lies.

The article proceeds as follows: The first section draws on recent academic literature to examine how authoritarian regimes, particularly in the case of Saudi Arabia, utilize social media as a strategic instrument to shape public opinion, suppress dissent, disseminate pro-regime narratives, and advance foreign policy objectives. Following this, the recent historical background of the tensions between Türkiye and Saudi Arabia is examined to offer a contextual foundation for the boycott campaign. This section lays the groundwork for understanding the relationships and developments that shaped the campaign. The third section introduces the theoretical framework, which is based on the principles of social network theory. The methodology section outlines the data collection and analysis processes used in the study. A dataset from Twitter was collected and analyzed using the Opinion Analysis Model, which combines Machine Learning (ML) and Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques. The results were visualized using the Gephi application. In the final section, the findings of the study are discussed.

### **Authoritarian Regimes and the Strategic Use of Social Media**

Recent academic studies on Twitter use in the Middle East suggest that the platform’s emancipatory potential has been increasingly overshadowed by repressive regimes (Abrahams, 2019, pp. 43–46). It is widely acknowledged that many regimes employ both human-operated accounts and bots to engage in online political discourse. These governments utilize in-house social media specialists and hire large numbers of individuals to disseminate pro-regime narratives (Chen, 2015). Marc Owen Jones has documented the presence of centrally coordinated accounts in the Persian Gulf region, systematically promoting authoritarian messaging and stifling human rights discourse (Jones, 2017).

During the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia, which played a pivotal role in quelling popular uprisings in the Gulf region through a staunchly status quo approach, has significantly expanded its digital operations in recent years to advance its strategic objectives both domestically and internationally. In fact, according to academic research, as early as 2013, the Kingdom was already employing computational propaganda techniques to polish the image of the state and delegitimize its adversaries (Woolley, 2016). Domestically, these influence operations advance sectarian-tinged narratives and bolster the social reform agenda under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s Vision 2030 initiative

(Jones, 2016). These campaigns employ tactics including bot networks, troll account activation, and content automation. Studies have pinpointed the utilization of such automated techniques to further inflame anti-Qatar sentiment during the 2017 Gulf Crisis (Pfeiffer, 2019), although the magnitude of these operations is regarded as fairly marginal (Abrahams & Leber, 2020). Several of these digital accounts were connected to Smaat, a Saudi-Arabia-based social media company that handles the online presence of recognizable Saudi personalities (Grossman, 2020).

Smaat specializes in managing the online reputation of notable figures, organizations, and government institutions in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, designing social media strategies, and producing digital content; In Saudi Arabia, they have a lot of influence over social media, and they are also good at crafting public sentiment and promoting narratives. In 2019, a report emerged accusing multiple social media accounts linked to Smaat of promoting Saudi government policies and improving Saudi Arabia's international reputation. For example, Twitter suspended or limited accounts associated with Smaat, accounts that had been used to attack critics of the Saudi government and promote a positive image (Guardian, 2009). Fake accounts have been identified acting as everything from impersonating opposition activists to flooding the Saudi Twitter space with phony trending hashtags (Al Sharif, 2019). The global impact of Saudi influence campaigns, especially the Khashoggi-assassination related campaign and its subsequent campaigns to influence international opinions in the background of the Qatar Crisis, has been extensively analyzed by international media and academia (DiResta et al., 2019).

To illustrate what Twitter called state-backed "information operations," the company reported about actions against three accounts from Saudi Arabia between September 2019 and April 2020 (Twitter, 2020). The first of these actions was against the Saud al-Qahtani, a former advisor to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and cited to have orchestrated a campaign to tailor the media landscape to the regime's interests (Leber & Abrahams, 2019). Al-Qahtani, who was also tied to the October 2018 murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi and reputed to be a member of a group dubbed "electronic flies" was actively running down critics on the Web. The indictment had been made public, it said, in November 2019 and charged two former Twitter employees of spying for Saudi Arabia by leaking information about the private accounts of dissenters.

According to Leber and Abrahams (2019), tactics such as bot-driven propaganda, digital harassment, and disinformation campaigns are not unique to Saudi Arabia but are commonly used by other authoritarian regimes, including Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, and Venezuela. Ritzen (2019) emphasizes the significant influence such digital manipulation exerts on public opinion. For instance, Forelle et al. (2015) demonstrated the systematic use of political bots in Venezuela to steer online discourse and reinforce pro-regime sentiment. Similarly, Russia's extensive digital interventions have also garnered considerable attention. Greenberg (2019) explores Moscow's influence operations in Libya, underscoring the transnational scope of its social media manipulation. Beyond its notorious involvement in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Russia has interfered in the Brexit debate in the UK and propagated misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly targeting vaccination campaigns. Following its military intervention in Ukraine in 2022, Russian information operations shifted toward producing war-related content (Pierri et al.,

2022). While a temporary decline in propaganda volume was observed during this period, analysts confirmed the continued presence of coordinated Russian disinformation campaigns.

Iran has used social media platforms to increase public sentiment for its foreign policy goals, a strategy it has directed against Saudi Arabia. Iran has run a series of campaigns using Twitter bots and propaganda accounts. However, research indicates that while these activities frequently overlap with significant political events, they rarely have a meaningful impact (Kießling et al., 2020). Iran's agendas are characterized by anti-Saudi narratives and robust activity in the wake of political crises in various countries in the region. Additionally, Iran has been actively using social media to enhance its soft power, particularly in the eyes of Muslim countries' public opinion.

China, by contrast, has a social media strategy that works, particularly on issues about regional disputes in the South China Sea. These operations are generally carried out via state-affiliated media accounts. Nip and Sun (2018) argue that China has implemented a coordinated strategy to shape public perception. Finally, China has built a massive propaganda machine that pushes its narratives through international social media, especially with visual content, and has drawn up a highly coordinated effort. North Korea uses seemingly unimportant but very effective tactics of propaganda and manipulation on social media platforms which allow citizens to engage. Much of its propaganda content extolls the regime and denigrates foreign adversaries. Platforms like Twitter are used by state-sponsored cyber actors to promote messages depicting North Korea's leadership as powerful and robust. Additionally, North Korea's information operations tend to mix threats against the West with anti-South Korea propaganda. These examples demonstrate that social media has moved beyond being merely a communication tool and has become a multidimensional platform for propaganda and disinformation shaped by the domestic and foreign policy objectives of authoritarian regimes.

### **Türkiye-Saudi Arabia Relations: Shifts and Tensions Post-Arab Spring**

The Arab Uprisings have constituted a landmark moment for the geopolitical fault lines in the geopolitically unstable Middle East. The protests began in late 2010 in Tunisia and quickly spread throughout the region, leading to the overthrow of Zain al-Abidin bin Ali's regime in Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak's regime in Egypt, and Muammar Gaddafi's regime in Libya, while also sparking civil wars in Syria and Yemen. The Arab Uprisings fundamentally altered the course of history in the region, recalibrating the dynamics, calculations, and inter-state alliances within the Middle East. During regime changes in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, other countries in the region have revised their political and economic policies (Cengiz, 2020, p. 95). Türkiye and Saudi Arabia, by adopting markedly different approaches to these events, triggered an ideological divide, which set the stage for a prolonged rivalry. From the outset, Türkiye supported these popular uprisings, seeing them as part of a broader democratization wave in the region (Altunışık, 2020). Türkiye's support for the government of the Muslim Brotherhood, headed by Mohamed Morsi in Egypt, served as one illustration of its backing for the transformative demands of the Arab people (Sarı, 2023, p.142). By supporting these movements, Türkiye sought to promote democratic change, gaining popularity in certain parts of the Arab world but also provoking conflict with authoritarian monarchies, including Saudi Arabia, that defended the existing order.

Saudi Arabia adopted a status quo-oriented approach during the Arab Spring, and concentrated its efforts on maintaining regional stability and ensuring the continuity of established powers, fearing protests might inspire similar reform desires within its own borders (Cengiz, 2020, p. 96). Riyadh provided substantial support to Egypt's military leadership under Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, particularly following the removal of Mohamed Morsi from power. A deep ideological rift has developed between Saudi Arabia and Türkiye, resulting in an escalating competition where both nations are competing to increase their areas of influence. This rivalry has manifested itself on several battlefields, such as Egypt, Libya and Syria. However, tensions between Saudi Arabia and Türkiye, characterized as a "cold war", reached their peak in 2016 and 2021 (Jabbour, 2022). These five years, which saw a series of critical events such as the Qatar Crisis and the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, further deepened the rift. During the Qatar Crisis period (2017-2021), Ankara's open support for Doha during the Gulf blockade of Qatar brought it into direct confrontation with Saudi Arabia. The murder of Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul on 2 October 2018 became a new focal point, with Ankara's reaction and the international backlash it elicited revealing the deep mistrust between both powers. The incident became a metaphor for strained relations and cast a long-lasting shadow over diplomacy (İnat & Duran, 2023, p.96).

One of the most tangible expressions of these tensions was the Twitter campaign initiated in Saudi Arabia on October 3, 2020, calling for a boycott of Turkish products. Although no official Saudi statement was made, prominent members of the Saudi Royal Family and the President of the Saudi Chambers of Commerce endorsed the campaign, actively tweeting calls to boycott Türkiye (Rashad, 2020). Initially limited to a handful of tweets, the campaign quickly escalated into a widespread campaign, amassing thousands of tweets under various boycott-related hashtags. By 2021, however, Türkiye and Saudi Arabia found themselves compelled by shifting global and regional dynamics to reconsider their rivalry. Economic and geopolitical factors motivated a shift toward reconciliation and cooperation. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's visit to Jeddah on April 29, 2022, was crucial in accelerating this normalization process (İnat & Duran, 2023, p.96). The visit paved the way for new diplomatic efforts, signaling a mutual willingness to leave the tension behind the era and build a partnership rooted in shared interests. In conclusion, the Arab Spring and the ensuing years brought about deep ideological rifts between Türkiye and Saudi Arabia, leading to a rivalry that manifested through economic, political, and social tensions.

### **Social Network Theory and Social Media**

The "cold war" between Türkiye and Saudi Arabia has manifested not only in the diplomatic sphere but also in the digital world. During this period of media wars, negative publications increased in both countries. A similar situation was observed on social media. Before analyzing the boycott campaign against Turkish products on Saudi Twitter in 2020, we will elaborate on the Social Network Theory (SNT) as the theoretical framework. This will facilitate a better understanding of how active Twitter accounts involved in the boycott campaign constructed a social network, as we will attempt to analyze in the following sections. Social Network Theory provides a framework for analyzing the connection patterns between individuals and groups, illustrating how these interactions shape social dynamics (Wasserman & Faust,

1994). In contrast to conventional approaches that regard individuals as isolated units, SNT asserts that people should be regarded as interconnected components within a larger structure, in which relationships play a crucial role in social dynamics. In contemporary virtual environments, social networks provide a significant domain for the application of social network theory. Relationships in such networks capture SNT principles, taking their use in virtual spaces to a new level. Social networks in social spaces form an opportunity for connecting geographical and cultural gaps between humans, providing a bridge for contacts in seconds with ease and unprecedented velocity. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn form examples of such networks in social spaces, manifesting the notions of connectivity and centrality in virtual spaces and defining relations through virtual networks.

Analysis of social relations in terms of ties (relationships between them) and nodes (individuals or entities) constitutes social network analysis. In such a model, the nucleus of the network consists of nodes, and relations between them represent ties. Ties can vary in terms of form and intensity. In a social network, one can have a topological view of the relations between a specific group of nodes (Çelik, 2019, p. 237). By looking at such networks' structures, one can have a deeper view of individual nodes' role in times of information dissemination, power distribution, and influence propagation (Menguaslan & Çelik, 2023, p. 49). On social networks, entities with a larger following have a larger voice (Henning & Kohl, 2011). That amplified voice places them in a position of leaders with an ability to shape and move social change. Looking at digital centrality helps one understand in detail about key persons in a network becoming a focal point.

The application of social network theory in virtual spaces not only helps in explaining connectivity and influence, but it also presents a model for researching information flow and manipulation techniques in virtual spaces. In today's technological era, it is becoming increasingly difficult to differentiate between correct and incorrect information. Social networks have become powerful tools not only in shaping public opinion but in allowing for propaganda and narrative development (Benkler et al., 2018). One such powerful demonstration happened in 2020 when Saudi Arabia boycotted Turkish products, with social networks being deliberately utilized in an attempt to promote and disperse the boycott message at a high velocity. In the following pages, how this was done will be elaborated in detail.

## **Methodology**

This study utilizes the Opinion Analysis Model that integrates Machine Learning and Natural Language Processing methodologies specifically designed for examining stances in concise text formats like tweets. The model employs a pre-trained, transformer-based classifier that has been refined to comprehend the nuanced contextual implications of language. This allows the model to accurately pinpoint subtle indications of agreement or disagreement within concise statements. Initially, tweets undergo tokenization and encoding, after which they are examined for features that indicate a particular stance, including sentiment polarity, relevant keywords, and contextual phrasing. These characteristics are vital in correctly categorizing tweets as "Pro-Boycott" or "Anti-Boycott". This research selected the Opinion Analysis Model due to its capacity to offer a thorough analysis of sentiment and stance in social

media posts. Given the concise nature, subtle undertones, and dependence on the context of tweets, it is crucial to utilize a model capable of interpreting language within a rich contextual framework to guarantee accurate stance classification. The model's focus on NLP methods that stress contextual understanding and sentiment evaluation closely matches the study's aim: to accurately gauge the scope and magnitude of backing or resistance for the boycott. By categorizing the data into these specific stance categories, the study aims to offer a clear, data-driven understanding of public sentiment, thus shedding light on the social media dynamics surrounding contentious topics.

However, the sheer volume and complexity of information we encounter have made classical textual analysis methods inadequate in the modern digital age. The Opinion Analysis Model is powered by an innovative context-aware approach, which relies on transformer-based NLP models (e.g., BERT). They're able to analyze the meaning of not just individual words but their relationships, enabling them to infer implied meaning, sarcasm, and emotional subtleties. The main purpose of the Opinion Analysis Model is to preprocess (e.g., tokenizing, HTML tag removing, punctuation removing, stemming, lemmatization, etc.) and then to classify the text into positive, negative, and neutral classes using classification algorithms. Under the NLP umbrella, features are separated out and ML algorithms allow learning from labeled datasets. Crucially, this kind of system is about not just looking at individual texts but isolating trends across large communities, generating high-value big data-type insights. The outcomes of this examination were visualized utilizing the Gephi application.

In this context, it should be clearly stated that a similar methodological approach was previously employed in an earlier study co-authored by Hala Mulki, in which the Twitter platform was analyzed during the period of August 13–14, 2020, to monitor, collect, and categorize Arab public reactions to the UAE-Israel normalization agreement (Mulki & Gökhan, 2020). While the current study adopts a comparable methodology, it significantly diverges from the previous work in both its research question and findings. Specifically, this article moves beyond the analysis of ordinary user interactions and instead focuses on detecting manipulations, coordinated campaigns, and artificial engagement activities on the Twitter platform. Therefore, despite methodological similarities, the two studies differ substantially in scope and analytical objectives.

### **Data Collection and Preprocessing**

This study aims to examine how the Arab public perceived and reacted to the boycott campaign against Turkish products that gained momentum in Saudi Arabia during October 2020. The dataset was compiled from Arabic-language tweets posted between 3 and 16 October 2020. Data collection was conducted via the Twitter API, using a set of predefined hashtags and keywords listed in Table 1. The initial dataset consisted of 41,542 raw tweets, which were subjected to a series of preprocessing steps. During this phase, irrelevant content, purely informational (non-opinionated) tweets, and commercial or promotional posts were filtered out. As a result of this cleaning process, a refined dataset of 20,375 subjective (opinion-expressing) tweets was retained for analysis.

The distribution of hashtags within the dataset was not uniform; while some tags were heavily represented, others appeared infrequently. This imbalance was taken into account during the sentiment and stance analysis. For the classification of attitudes, a custom machine learning-based model was employed. This model was specifically developed in-house to recognize both Modern Standard Arabic and various regional dialects. It was optimized to accurately detect positive, negative, or neutral sentiments expressed in the tweets.

**Table 1**

*The Tweets Frequency Under Each Hashtag (Oct. 3 and Oct. 16, 2020)*

Hashtags	Hashtag (English)	Count	Percentage
#مقاطعة_المنتجات_التركية	#Boycott of Turkish Products	6770	33
#الحملة_الشعبية_لدعم_تركيا	#The Popular Campaign to Support Turkey	5620	28
#قاطعوا_المنتجات_التركية	#Boycott Turkish products	3973	19
#مقاطعة_البضائع_التركية	#Boycott of Turkish Goods	3516	17
#حظر_المنتجات_التركية	#Ban Turkish Products	496	2

### Temporal Distribution of Tweets

As illustrated in Figure 3, the engagement with the topic under investigation began modestly on October 3, 2020, with 590 tweets, representing approximately 3% of the entire dataset comprising 20,375 tweets. This initial surge in activity coincided with a tweet posted on the same day by Ajlan Al-Ajlan, the Chairman of the Council of Saudi Chambers of Commerce, which appears to have triggered the public discourse around the boycott. Figure 1 shows the tweet by Ajlan Al-Ajlan that sparked the initial surge in engagement.

**Figure 1**

*Ajlan Al-Ajlan's Call for Economic Disengagement*



**Note.** “The boycott of everything Turkish, whether on the level of import, investment or tourism, is the responsibility of every Saudi (trader and consumer) in response to the continued hostility of the Turkish government to our leadership, our country, and our citizens.” (Al Ajlan, 2020). *(Translation by the authors)*

In the following days, and throughout the period (Oct. 4 – Oct. 8, 2020), the interaction decreased remarkably as people were waiting for an official statement from the Saudi Ministry of Commerce about the boycott. Although no official statements were issued by the relevant Ministries regarding the boycott approval, the interaction significantly increased on Oct. 9, 2020, reaching a peak with more than 5,500 tweets (27% of the collected tweets). This increased interaction was recognized right after a tweet posted by a member of the Saudi royal family, Prince Abdulrahman bin Musa'ad, in which he supported the boycott of Türkiye, calling for a popular campaign to boycott all Turkish products. Figure 2 displays Prince Abdulrahman bin Musa'ad's tweet that triggered the surge in interaction.

**Figure 2**

*Boycott Call by Abdulrahman bin Musa'ad*

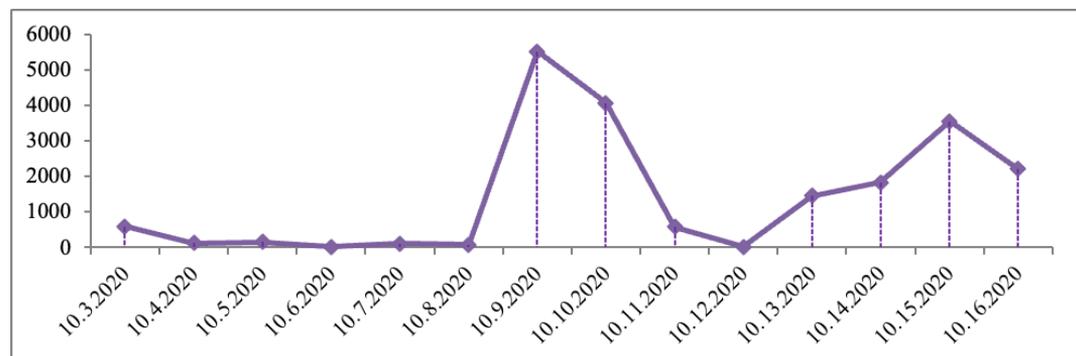


**Note.** “Therefore, I call on everyone to fully boycott Turkish products. This way, we can preserve the stability of Türkiye’s economy and even strengthen it.” (Bin Musa’ad, 2020). *(Translation by the authors)*

While the interaction gradually decreased during Oct. 10 – Oct. 12, 2020, Oct. 13 and Oct. 14 witnessed an increased interaction with a rate of 1,464 and 1,832 tweets, respectively, as the debates raged again among the public on Twitter over the viability of such a boycott. Another climax of the number of tweets could be noticed on Oct. 15, 2020, when the hashtags of the anti-boycott campaign became trending and people kept tweeting under these hashtags till the next day Oct. 16, 2020, such that the tweets posted on these two days were more than 5,766 tweets (28% of the whole dataset). The timeline of tweet volumes between October 3 and October 16, 2020, is depicted in Figure 3.

**Figure 3**

*Tweets Frequency Line Chart (Oct. 3 – Oct. 16, 2020)*

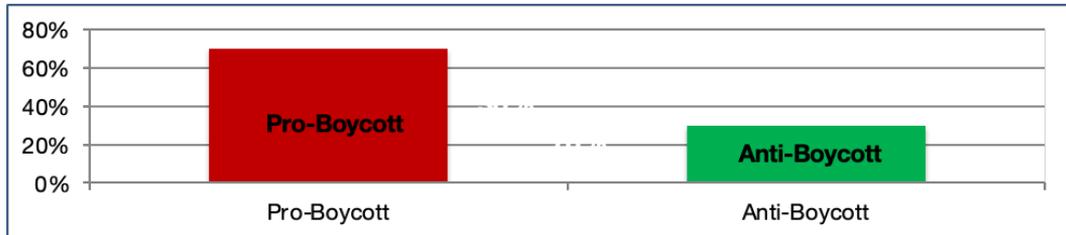


### Classification of Stances in Tweets

Using the applied opinion analysis model, the stances expressed in the analyzed tweets were categorized into two main groups: “Pro-Boycott” and “Anti-Boycott.” Figure (4) presents a detailed distribution of these two categories.

**Figure 4**

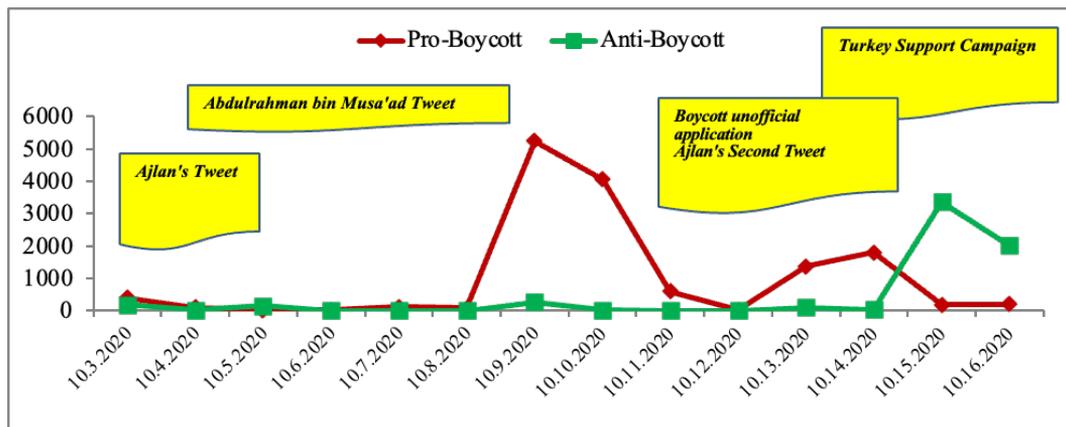
*General Stance on Twitter (Oct. 3 – Oct. 16, 2020)*

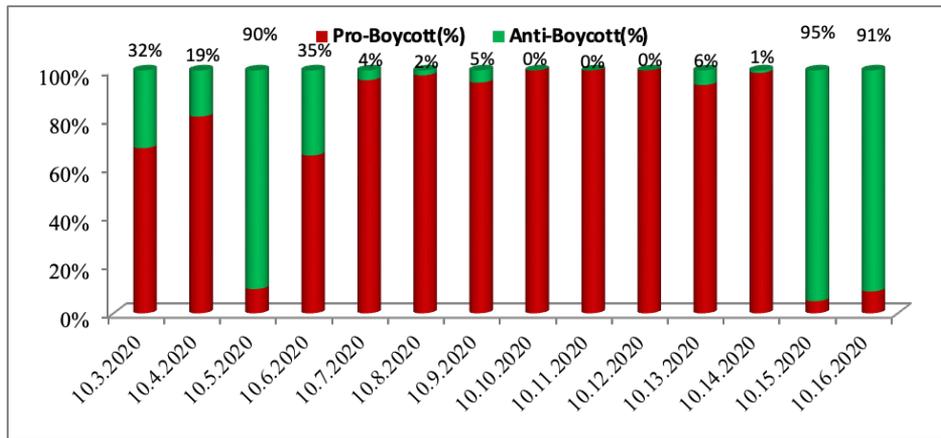


As shown in Figure (4), the Pro-Boycott stance predominated in the collected tweets, accounting for 70% of the total. This suggests that within the Twitter environment, the anti-Türkiye campaign—spearheaded by influential Saudi accounts and supported by coordinated bot networks—exerts significant influence in shaping public opinion towards the targeted stance on Türkiye. This can be understood when exploring the tweets of the Pro-Boycott stance, as most of them underrated the quality of the Turkish products, confirming that better alternatives are available in the Saudi market. Also, they justified this boycott, indicating that it is legal to ban Turkish products as a defensive step towards the continuous hostility practiced by Türkiye against Saudi Arabia. Conversely, Figures 5 and 6 illustrate the distribution of opposing viewpoints throughout the specified timeframe.

**Figure 5**

*Stances Distribution towards Turkish Products Boycott (Oct. 3 – Oct. 16, 2020)*



**Figure 6***Histogram towards Turkish Products Boycott (Oct. 3 – Oct. 16, 2020)*

Figures 5 and 6 reveal that the majority of tweets shared between October 3 and October 16, 2020, reflected a stance favoring the boycott. It should be noted that regardless of the stance recognized in the studied dataset, in both tweet stance categories (Anti-Boycott and Pro-Boycott), the public stressed that replacing the Turkish products with those imported from UAE i.e. (The Jebel Ali Free Zone) was unacceptable due to the low quality and the high prices of the UAE products. The variation in opposing stances can be interpreted in relation to the unfolding of events as follows:

Although there have been several calls for boycotting Türkiye since Sep. 28, 2020, the actual launch of the boycott campaign on Twitter was on Oct. 3, 2020, when Saudi officials in the trade and industry sectors urged citizens to boycott products coming from Türkiye or bearing a mark showing that they were made in Türkiye. Therefore, following the tweet of Ajlan Al-Ajlan, the head of Saudi Arabia's Chambers of Commerce, most of the tweeters showed support for boycotting (68%) Turkish products, indicating that boycotting Türkiye is highly needed to confront its hostile policy against Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, the Anti-Boycott tweets (32%) indicated that it is not advisable to boycott Turkish products since no equivalent alternatives, in terms of quality or price, are available in the Saudi market.

Later, on Oct. 9, 2020, Prince Abdulrahman bin Musa'ad called for a popular boycott of all Turkish products, indicating, sarcastically, that this boycott aims to *strengthen* and *stabilize* the economy of Türkiye. His tweets came after a statement made by the Turkish President Erdogan, on Oct. 8, 2020, for the Qatari newspaper "The Peninsula" in which he clarified that "The Turkish military presence in Qatar supports the stability of the Gulf states". The majority of the tweets (95%) implied a Pro-Boycott stance, with the common idea dominating the tweets stating that weakening the Turkish economy is the best way to confront the unacceptable policies of Türkiye. The weakened state of economics can potentially urge and provoke the anger and dissatisfaction of the people of Türkiye and lead to early presidential elections with the preferred outcome of a new president elected. By Oct. 14, 2020, Ajlan Al-Ajlan posted his second tweet stressing boycotting Türkiye. Figure 7 illustrates this second call for a boycott made by Ajlan Al-Ajlan.

Figure 7

*Ajlan Al-Ajlan's Second Call for Boycott Against Türkiye*



أقولها بكل تأكيد و وضوح:  
 لا استثمار  
 لا استيراد  
 لا سياحة  
 نحن كمواطنين ورجال أعمال لن يكون لنا أي تعامل مع كل ما هو  
 تركي.  
 حتى الشركات التركية العاملة بالمملكة أدعو الى عدم التعامل معها.  
 وهذا أقل رد لنا ضد استمرار العداء والأساءة التركية الى قيادتنا  
 وبلدنا.

**Note.** “I say this with full clarity and certainty: No investment, No imports, No tourism. As citizens and businesspeople, we will not engage in any dealings with anything Turkish. I also call for avoiding interactions with Turkish companies operating in the Kingdom. This is the least response we can give to Türkiye’s ongoing hostility and offenses against our leadership and our country.” (Al-Ajlan, 2020). (*Translation by the authors*)

This was in conjunction with activating the boycott in the Saudi market, as some hypermarkets in Saudi Arabia started to declare their explicit boycott of Turkish products. While some stores shared images of Turkish products being unloaded off the shelves, others put the Turkish products in piles with a badge over them saying “*Turkish items, not for sale*”. This has reflected on the stances expressed through the tweets posted on Oct. 14, 2020 as the Pro-Boycott tweets were dominant, with a value of 99%.

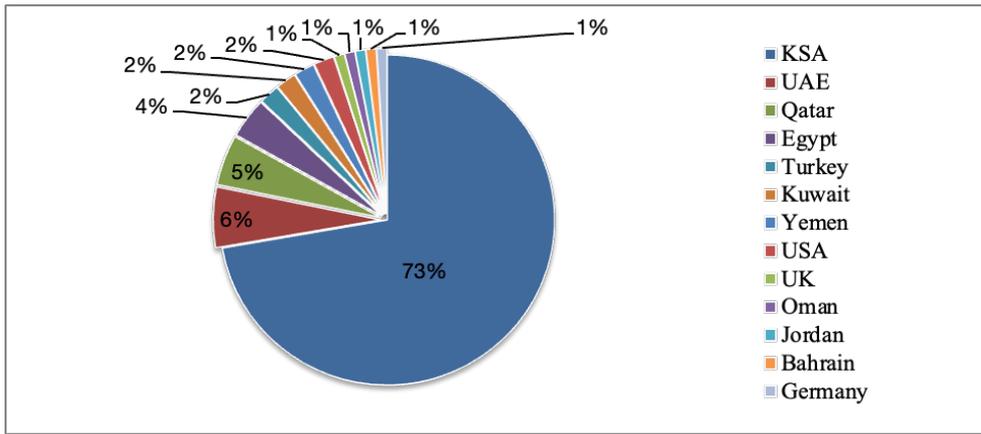
In the following days and throughout the period (Oct. 15 – Oct. 16, 2020), a popular campaign to confront the boycott of Turkish products was initiated on Twitter under the hashtag “#الحملة\_الشعبية\_لدعم\_تركيا”. The hashtag went viral with more than 5,700 tweets, dominated by the Anti-Boycott tweets (+91%). Through the posted tweets, the people expressed their rejection of boycotting the high-quality and low-price Turkish products. On the other hand, some tweets stressed that a bad relationship with a country should not mean boycotting the products of that country, especially if the alternative would be low-quality UAE products. Interestingly, some Anti-Boycott tweets referred to the timing of the boycott campaign as the calls for boycotting Türkiye started after The Jebel Ali Free Zone and Dubai Airport Free Zone Authority both signed memoranda of understanding with the Federation of Israeli Chambers of Commerce in late September. This led tweeters to question whether there was a hidden goal behind the boycott, which was speculated to be to make room for Israeli goods in the Saudi market.

### **Geolocation Analysis of Tweets**

This section aims to examine the geographic distribution of tweets and associate the identified stances with their locations. Out of the total 20,375 tweets, 9,579 contained location data. Among these, 8,599 tweets included actual country or city names provided by users, while the remainder featured fictitious location names. The proportion of tweets per country is presented in Figure (8), displaying only locations with more than 50 tweets.

**Figure 8**

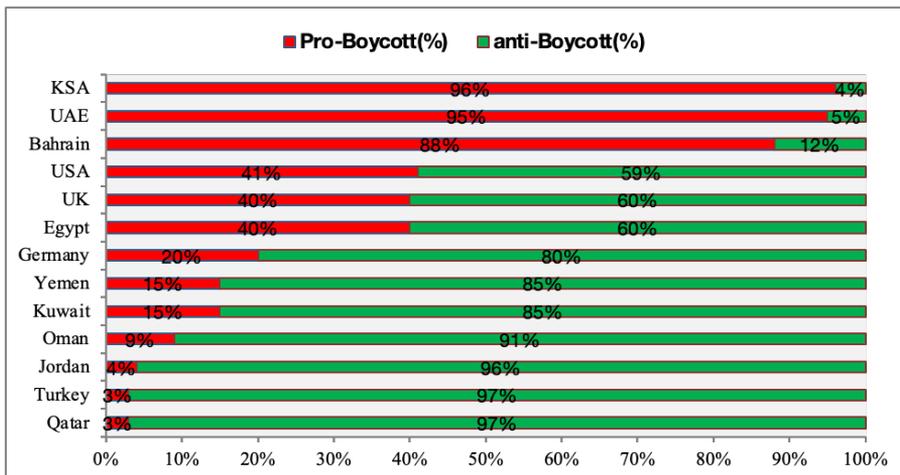
*Tweets pie Chart by Country (%) (Oct. 3 – Oct. 16, 2020)*



Considering Figure (8), the majority of the collected tweets (73%) were associated with the location of Saudi Arabia. Being an ally of Saudi Arabia, the UAE ranked 2<sup>nd</sup>. On the other hand, the tweets from Qatar formed 5% of the studied tweets, followed by Egypt with a percentage value of 4%. It should be noted that although the studied incident is related to Türkiye, the tweets written from Türkiye have barely formed 2% of the adopted dataset. The reason for this is the proliferation of tweets sent by nationals of Saudi Arabia and its allies (UAE and Egypt) under any hashtag related to Türkiye, aiming to spread disinformation, and to portray Türkiye according to their own narratives under a specific agenda. To associate the expressed positions with geographic origins, we analyzed the international distribution of attitudes toward the boycott of Turkish products, as illustrated in Figure (9).

**Figure 9**

*Pro-Boycott/Anti-Boycott Percentage Values by Country (Oct. 3 – Oct. 16, 2020)*



In Figure (9), we noticed that the tweets associated with Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Bahrain were dominated by the Pro-Boycott stance, with percentage values of 96%, 95%, and 88% respectively. This is expected as the boycott campaign that started in Saudi Arabia was instantly supported by trolls from the UAE and Bahrain. On the other hand, besides Türkiye which hosts a considerable number of Arab expats, we spotted significant support for the Turkish products in the tweets posted from Qatar, Jordan, Oman, Kuwait, and Yemen. This indicates that regardless of the foreign policy of Türkiye towards these countries, Turkish products have a very good reputation in their markets, and they are favored over the products coming from Jebel Ali in the UAE. In this context, most of the tweets implied that Arab consumers in Qatar, Jordan, Oman, Kuwait, and Yemen are very satisfied with the quality and prices of Turkish products. Furthermore, some tweets even praised the tourism services in Türkiye.

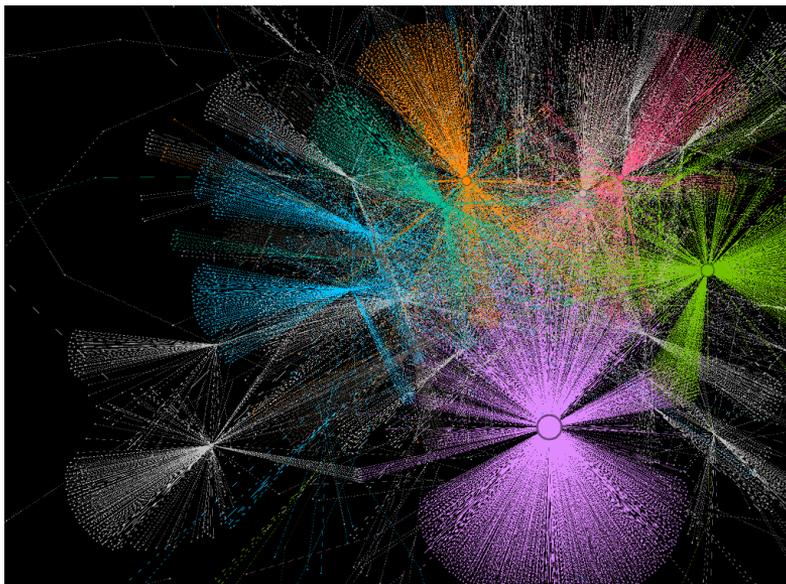
### *Analysis of User Interactions on Twitter*

To examine interaction patterns within the collected tweets, we analyzed retweet activity among users for both supportive and opposing tweets, aiming to identify the most influential accounts based on the frequency of retweets within each stance category.

**Engagement Analysis of Tweets Supporting the Boycott.** To build the retweet interaction network, we extracted the user handles of both the original tweet authors and those who retweeted them. Using a tailored script, we created the network graph, applied normalization through graph algorithms, and visualized the results with the Gephi software. Figure (10) presents the retweet network for the Pro-Boycott tweets, consisting of 7,429 nodes and 12,214 edges.

**Figure 10**

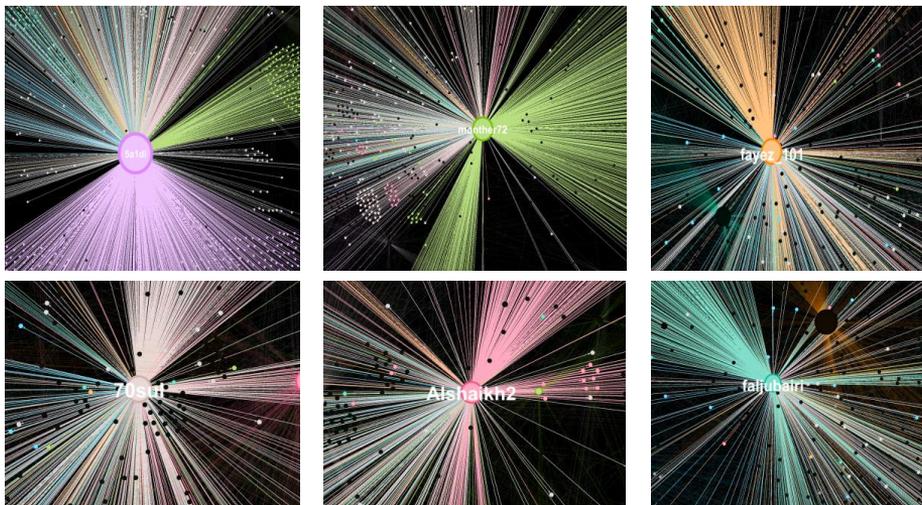
*Retweet Network Analysis of Boycott-Supporting Tweets*



As depicted in Figure 10, each node in the network corresponds to a Twitter account participating in the tweet or retweet activity, while the edges denote the retweet connections between users (where one user retweeted another's tweet). The colored clusters indicate distinct user communities, with each cluster centered around a key node representing the most influential user, whose tweets receive the highest retweet counts from the surrounding nodes within that community. To determine the most influential accounts, we measured the out-degree weights of nodes and visually emphasized nodes with greater out-degree values by enlarging their size. Within this retweet network, the ten most impactful users were identified, as illustrated in Figure 11 and detailed in Table 2.

**Figure 11**

*Sample of Most Influential Users in Pro-Boycott Retweet Interaction Network*



**Table 2**

*Top 10 Key Influencers in the Pro-Boycott Retweet Network*

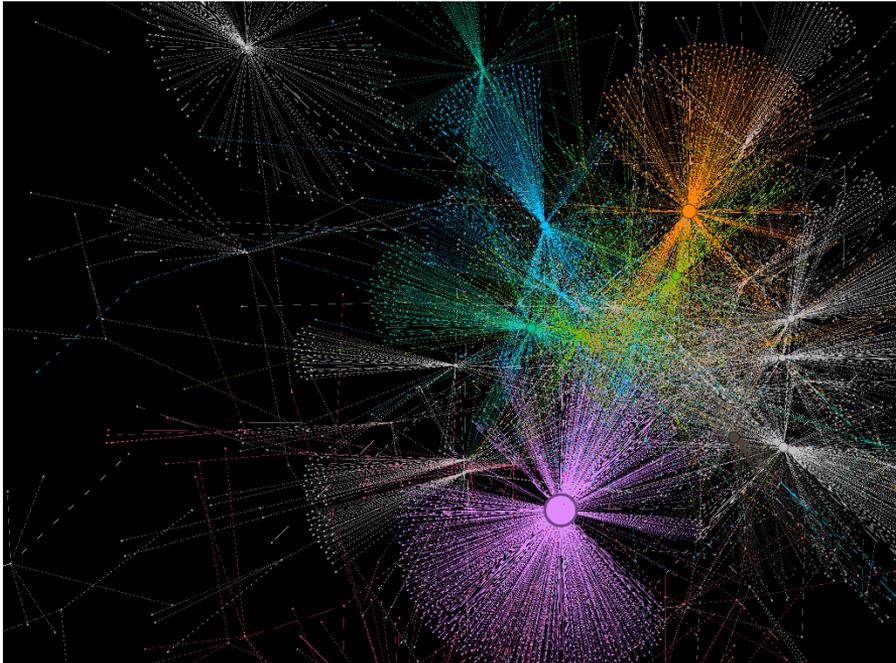
Influencer users	User Name	Followers	#Retweets	Location
@5a1di	بن هباس	200.000	2,711	-
@monther72	منذر آل الشيخ مبارك	447.000	1,360	-
@fayez_101	فايزوف .MBS	110.000	923	في البيت
@70sul	إبراهيم السلیمان	131.000	766	الرياض دار العز
@AlshaiKh2	عبد اللطيف بن عبدالله آل الشيخ	496.000	655	Riyadh, KSA
@faljubairi	فهد الجبيري	28.500	639	-
@PatriotKSA88	سلمان بن حثلين	6.721	311	-
@mktassf	المكتشف	14.400	303	-

@krrsa_	كریم صالح	19.100	302	المملكة العربية السعودية
@M6no5_21	#مطنوخ MBS	12.700	298	Jeddah, KSA
@salahalghaydan	صلاح الغيدان	1.000.000	282	-

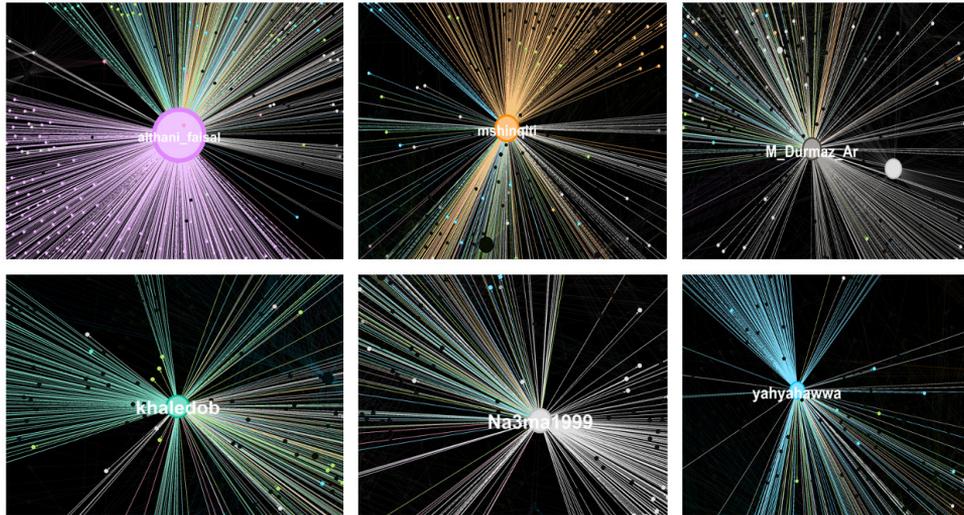
**Analysis of User Interactions within Anti-Boycott.** Similarly, we developed the retweet interaction network for opposing tweets, comprising 3,790 nodes and 6,052 edges, as depicted in Figure (12). In this network, nodes represent user accounts participating in the tweet and retweet activities, while edges denote retweet connections between users (indicating one user has retweeted another’s tweet). The colored clusters correspond to distinct user communities, each centered around a key node that signifies the most influential user in that community, whose tweets are retweeted most frequently by surrounding nodes. This structure is visualized in Figure 12.

**Figure 12**

*Retweet Network Analysis of Tweets Opposing the Boycott*



To identify the key influencers, we measured the out-degree centrality of nodes within the network, assigning larger sizes to those with higher out-degree values. Based on this analysis, the previous retweet network revealed the top 10 most influential users, which are displayed in Figure (13) and detailed in Table (3).

**Figure 13***Examples of Key Influential Accounts in the Anti-Boycott Retweet Network***Table 3***Top 10 Key Influencers in the Anti-Boycott Retweet Network*

Influencer Users	User Name	Followers	#Retweets	Location
@althani_faisal	فيصل بن جاسم ال ثاني	421.600	1,148	-
@mshinqiti	محمد المختار الشنقيطي	608.300	480	-
@M_Durmaz_Ar	محمد دورماز	20.700	348	-
@khaledob	د. خالد عبيد العتيبي	22.400	305	وطني الكويت سلمت للمجد
@Na3ma1999	نعيمة الأندلسي	28.100	300	أرض المسلمين وطني
@yahyahawwa	يحيى حوى	178.000	256	Canada
@alziyab52	Alziyab52	46	255	-
@TurkiShalhoub	تركي الشلهوب	575.200	220	المملكة العربية السعودية
@TinHina30579149	Tin Hinan	2.025	206	-

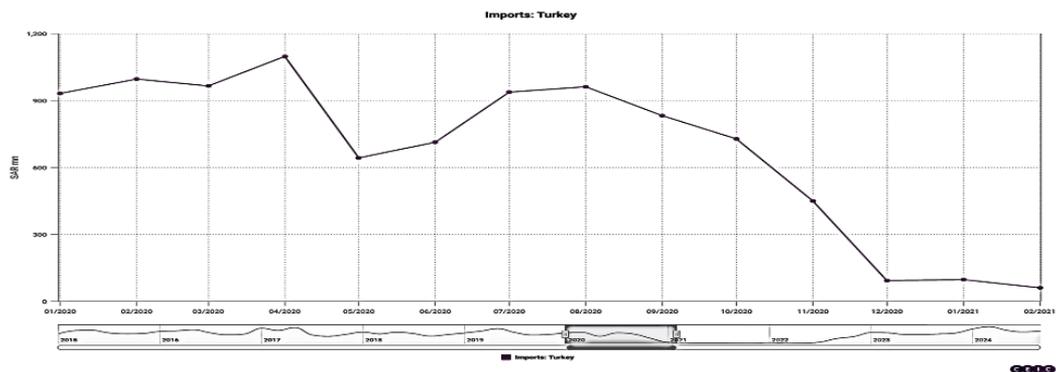
## Discussion of Findings

Our analysis identifies that the campaign was fueled most predominantly by Saudi, UAE, and Bahrain government supporter tweeps and Saudi, UAE, and Bahrainian bot tweeps. Most striking, high-profile tweeps most closely linked with government and ruling elites actively took part in driving the campaign, supporting studies regarding social media use for propaganda and disinformation in regimes (Abrahams & Leber, 2020; Pan & Siegel, 2020). Content analysis revealed that about 70% of tweets endorsed the boycott, and thus, pro-government accounts and bot tweets have successfully

constructed the Twitter discourse. Tweets in favor of a boycott supported discursive narratives about poor quality in Turkish goods, superiority in alternative goods, and hostile policies towards Saudi Arabia by Türkiye. All such discursive narratives utilize the “othering” discursive practice, a propaganda tool that creates an “us” and “them” divide (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018). Quantitative data aside, examination of tweets qualitatively reveals emotive language and nationalistic rhetoric in an attempt to mobilize in support of boycotts. Such practice is in agreement with theory in terms of digital nationali, that social media platforms become spaces for political expression and shared identity (Skey & Antonsich, 2017). Widespread use of such a narrative reveals a coordinated attempt at creating a solidarity narrative in reaction to a perceived external enemy, which in this case would be Türkiye. Figure 14 shows a sharp decline in Turkish imports starting in October 2020, in harmony with the boycott of Turkish goods.

**Figure 14**

*Saudi Arabia Imports from Türkiye*



There is a direct causality between poor diplomacy and a fall in imports from Türkiye, according to information in the figure displayed. Imports had fallen steadily in the past but experienced a sharp fall following the boycott and continued to have a low level in subsequent months. The sharp fall shows the financial impacts of diplomatic strains. A deeper analysis of the geographical distribution of tweets shows the localized impact of boycotts and a variation in perception depending on the country. According to the information presented, 73% of tweets have been produced in Saudi Arabia, with a high amount of support from the UAE and Bahrain, in agreement with the boycotts. It is an expression of political coordination and an expression of diplomacy among the nations in a region, a demonstration of social behavior in social networks. On a contrasting note, nations such as Qatar, Jordan, Oman, Kuwait, and Yemen were most likely to express satisfaction with Turkish goods. It is a reflection of positive political and financial relations with Türkiye in general that impacts the positive perception of Turkish goods in these countries. For instance, a strategic agreement with Türkiye most likely influenced Qatari citizens’ rejection of the boycott (Jamal et al., 2015).

## Conclusion

Twitter has become one of the most influential platforms for information operations and propaganda activities in the current digital age. Its capacity to reach large audiences significantly enhances the ability of both individuals and states to strategically influence media content, public opinion, and the flow of information. This study examines Saudi Arabia's 2020 boycott campaign against Turkish products as a case study to analyze the dynamics of digital manipulation via social media. The research findings indicate that the campaign was not a spontaneous grassroots movement, but rather a digital operation organized through state-sponsored accounts, automated bot networks, and influential individuals with close ties to political elites. Throughout the campaign, emotional rhetoric, nationalist discourse, and exclusionary strategies were systematically used to shape public perception. In this context, social media emerges as an important platform, going beyond traditional diplomatic tools and creating a new geopolitical space in international relations.

The study also revealed that algorithmic manipulation, fake engagement, and disinformation campaigns have become structural components of contemporary political conflicts. The examined case demonstrates that digital platforms can transform economic tools—particularly consumer boycotts—into politically driven instruments with tangible economic consequences. The findings indicate that digital manipulation can directly impact international economic relations, and diplomatic tensions can lead to widespread public mobilization and large-scale boycotts through digital platforms. In this context, it is necessary to emphasize once again the increasing strategic importance of digital diplomacy in international relations. Therefore, future studies using long-term datasets and multi-platform analyses may contribute to more effective detection and monitoring of social media interactions.

This research underscores the need to enhance digital literacy, strengthen transparency mechanisms on social media platforms, and implement global ethical regulations, as highlighted in similar studies. In this regard, not only states and international organizations but also the academic community has the responsibility to objectively define the scope of digital manipulation and develop effective counterstrategies. As a result, social media is increasingly surpassing its idealized role as a space for free communication, transforming into a multi-layered arena where political discourses are shaped, and power struggles occur; it has become a powerful tool that effectively shapes the power dynamics in international relations through the use of digital manipulation and propaganda strategies.

## Author Declaration

**Peer Review Statement:** This article was reviewed through a double-blind peer review process.

**Plagiarism Check:** The manuscript was screened using both iThenticate software and was found to be in compliance with the journal's plagiarism policy.

**Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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**Ethics Committee Approval:** Ethical approval was not required for this study.

**Use of Artificial Intelligence Tools:** Artificial intelligence tools based on transformer-based natural language processing (NLP) models and machine learning-based classification techniques were used during the data processing stage. All analytical decisions and interpretations were made solely by the authors.

**CRedit Author Contribution Statement:** İ. S.: Conceptualization (lead); Theoretical Framework (lead); Writing – Original Draft (lead); Writing – Review & Editing (lead); Supervision (lead). H. M.: Methodology (lead); Data Curation (lead); Formal Analysis (lead); Visualization (lead); Writing – Review & Editing (supporting).

**Data Availability Statement:** The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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