

# The changing face of Saudi Arabia – findings from focus groups with Saudi young men and women

(Public Opinion Research Contexts parallel session 13.4.4)

Dr Ghina Aljehani, Karen Kellard and Yousef Alsharari  
National Center for Social Studies, Riyadh, KSA

**WAPOR Asia Conference  
November 2022**

# Contents

- 1. Background and context
- 2. Research design and method
- 3. Findings
  - Research methodology issues
  - Key topics and themes
- 4. Summary



# 1. Background and context

## Background – the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

- KSA is undergoing a rapid economic and social transformation including:
  - Independent travel
  - Entertainment and culture
  - Tourism
  - Employment & education
  - Women's rights
- Ambitious blueprint for change – Vision 2030
  - Focus on a thriving economy, an ambitious nation and a vibrant society



# Context

## Social research to date in KSA

- Predominantly surveys, and analysis of administrative datasets
- Conducted mostly by government centers and universities

## Qualitative (social) research limited

- Focus groups in social research less common than market research
- Tend to be recruited from students or online panels, and rewarded through loyalty points
- Most (non-professionals) unfamiliar with focus groups
- In KSA, events tends to be more formal (eg workshops)

# National Center for Social Studies



Relatively new research center – focused on social issues to inform government policy and practice

Supported by the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development in KSA

Center has limited experience of running social research focus groups in-house

Keen to expand skills and experience of the research team, particularly in qualitative research





## 2. Research design and method



# Research aims

To explore Saudi young people's views on the changes to society in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

To explore how well focus groups work for this cohort, including gender differences and openness on the topics



# Method: focus groups

6 focus groups

2 female, 2 male, 2 mixed

Age 21-35

Located at NCSS offices

Incentive of SR 200 (c.50 USD), plus Certificate of Attendance

Moderated by Saudi researchers, in Arabic

# What were we interested in?

## Practical issues

- What are the best times and days to run the groups?
- How to fit around prayer times, traffic congestion, family/work commitments
- Where's the best place to hold the groups?

## Gender issues

- Will males and females be happy in mixed or single-gender groups?
- How about male/female moderators?
- How will these factors affect discussions?

## Recruitment of participants

- What and how much to incentivize?
- Where to recruit from and how?
- How do we explain focus groups to people – as so unfamiliar
- How to we ensure people attend?

## Discussion topics

- How sensitive are the topics for discussion?
- Will people feel comfortable talking freely?
- What concerns will people have about being audio-recorded?

## 3a. Findings – research methodology issues



# Some observations on the practicalities

## Finding best days and times is challenging

- Only conducted 4 focus groups (1 male, 1 female and 2 mixed)
- Avoided prayer times, school pickup and other peak times
- Consider travel distances and heavy traffic in Riyadh
- Groups were run:
  - ✓ Evening 4.30pm to 6pm, and 7.30pm to 9pm
  - ✓ All late starting, most over-ran

## Location

- Difficult to find suitable focus group venues (away from universities) – limited specialist focus group facilities in Riyadh available
- Hotel facilities very expensive and more suitable for meetings or workshops, not focus groups
- ✓ Held at NCSS offices

## Environment and surroundings important in KSA

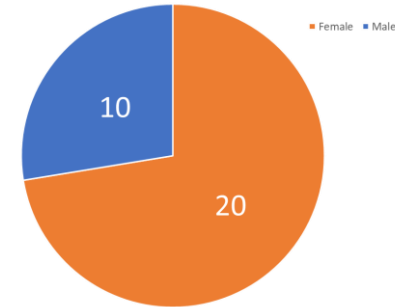
- Organized catering (but notably few ate or drank during discussions)
- Room set up as formal but relaxing
- No one objected to being audio-recorded, or asked any questions about it
- Some participants took photos of the setup and room



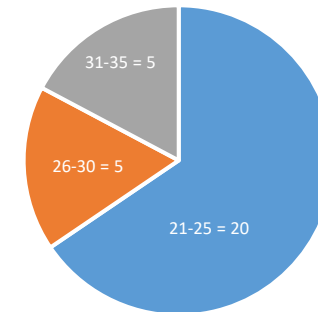


# Participant demographics (n=30)

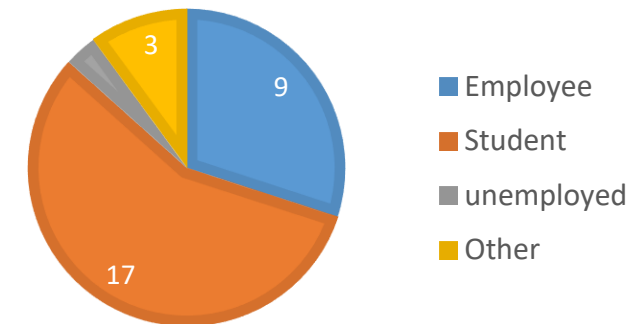
- Around two-thirds female



- Two thirds were age 21-26



- Around half were students



# Recruitment observations

## Recruitment

- Flyer, circulated electronically via contacts and word of mouth 'snowballing'
- QR code to Google forms to register interest (100+ people)

## Recruitment issues

- Recruitment initially very slow
- Recruitment increased after 1<sup>st</sup> group
- Our recruitment flyer was too formal in language

## Attendance

- Attendance was unpredictable, despite reminders
- Some early, some late
- Some brought additional people (friends, parents)
- Some stayed way beyond planned end time

## Understanding of focus groups

- Low understanding of what a focus group is, even though briefed fully by research team
- Some thought it was a meeting, or a job interview, or a large event, or an individual interview; some just came because they were curious
- Some clearly nervous beforehand and at the start of the focus groups



# Gender observations

Women far easier to recruit than men

Women more likely to show up (that is, not cancel or 'no show') and to be on time

Both genders were happy in mixed gender groups (but spoke more freely in single gender groups)

Males and females sat separately – men on one side, women on the other

In the presence of females, males appeared to seek approval from other males for their point of view in the discussions and were very mindful of their comments

Men stayed longer after the discussion – wanted to carry on chatting

Some females remained fully covered, others did not cover faces

# Other observations

Participants typically started off very formally, but relaxed over time as they understood how the focus group was more informal

Participants would have been happy to continue for more than 1.5 hours, and had little concern for the end time

All enjoyed the experience and the topics (this was sometimes difficult to manage because of enthusiastic and animated conversations)

Participants were very conscious of being polite and respectful, sometimes cautious in giving their views so as not to cause upset or offence to others (particularly in mixed gender groups)

In the mixed groups, some women remained covered with full niqab; for the researchers, this sometimes made it unclear who was speaking and more difficult to read facial expressions

## **3b. Findings – key topics and two main themes**



# Pre-planned discussion topics in our guide

Overall awareness and views of Vision 2030

Changes that have been the most significant or important for society, especially for young people

Culture and entertainment (cinema, concerts, entertainment venues)

Health (emphasis on exercise, sports activities)

Saudization (recent increased emphasis)

Housing (access to affordable houses, urban developments)

Women and society (employment, driving, independent travel)

Green space and the environment (Green Riyadh, environmental sustainability)

Travel and tourism (opening up to overseas tourists)

Focus group findings – ‘top of mind’ most significant change?

*‘what change has had the biggest impact on you/your life and why?’*

**Changes welcomed**, for society and for the country

**Changes for women** – greater than for men (women’s voices louder, greater rights, more choices)

**Freedom in public space** – independent travel, genders mixing together – socially, in the workplace

**Changing employment opportunities** – women in employment rapidly rising, women in senior positions

**Tourism** – visitors now experiencing the ‘real’ Saudi, able to show Saudi generosity, hospitality and friendliness

**Entertainment** – more events (cinema, concerts, more to do, has increased expenditure)

**Tradition vs modernity** – challenges of balancing traditional roles, values and customs with new ways of thinking, living and working

**Access to information** - technology, websites, apps, online learning

**Focus on health**, exercise – particularly for females, more opportunities to exercise and do sports. Disability now is more visible, health care more accessible

*'holding onto our cultural norms, customs and traditions will never stop us from going forward' (FG3, male)*

*'we stayed in one period of time for so long, now we have a vision to finally move on with' (FG2, female)*

*'the Saudi people fully trust and believe that these changes and the vision will place them in the top rankings of the world countries' (FG4, male)*

*'Saudi people were ready for change, when the changes came' (FG2, male)*

*'Saudis are very hospitable people' (FG2, male)*

# Focus Groups

## Spotlight 1:

### Changing society and gender

*‘Sharing family responsibilities between mum and dad delivers positive psychological and social impacts to children’ (FG2, female)*

*‘women shine and show positive results in society when they are given the chance’ (FG3, male)*

Traditional roles in the family changing (combining work and family, earning)

- Women’s roles now extend beyond the family (greater pressure?)
- Delaying marriage, greater involvement and more equity in decisions on both marriage and divorce

Being able to drive, and travel independently

- Life changing, especially in the cities – independence, being able to drive to work, take children to school, take parents out
- Generally encouraged by males, but concerns about road safety and traffic increase (although some said women are more compliant with road rules)

Changing labour market and employment opportunities

- Greater employment opportunities for women; greater competition for men
- Women can access more education options (eg choosing different subjects at school and university for more options for employment sectors)
- More females in senior positions – still some cultural adjustment to this
- Women perceived as more hard-working than men
- More women in work; how does this change family and household dynamics?

Women knowing their rights – being ‘heard’, a greater voice



# Focus group

## Spotlight 2:

### Tourism, culture, arts and entertainment

*'Saudi people will accept any kind of entertainment as long as it's not against our religion' (FG4, male)*

*'Our identity makes great impressions for tourists who come to see our beautiful identity' (FG4, female)*

A real positive step for the Kingdom, but not without challenges

- Cultural adjustment for visitors, for example, culturally appropriate concerts

More opportunities for entertainment

- Freedom to attend concerts, go to the cinema
- Ability to move freely in public spaces
- But, additional expenditure for families

Tourism welcomed

- Opportunity for visitors to see the 'real' Saudi
- Demonstrate Saudis' hospitality, friendliness and openness
- To dispel some myths about the Kingdom, and stereotypes about its people
- Helps to grow the economy and diversify from oil

# Summary

## Very positive experience for participants

- Really enjoyed the opportunity to give their views in a confidential and relaxed research environment, and shared and listened to thoughts and ideas with others
- Word of mouth created further recruitment

Low familiarity with focus group method had an impact on recruitment and – perhaps - attendance

High interest from participants in research topics – could have discussed for much longer

## Further research needed....

- With a larger sample
- With different gender mixes in participants and moderators
- In different parts of the Kingdom (other regional and urban)
- With different age cohorts
- To dig deeper on specific topics (women, marriage, tourism, employment, culture and entertainment)

شكراً

لكم

**Thank You**

[karen@ncss.gov.sa](mailto:karen@ncss.gov.sa)