

MODERNIZATION AND MEDIA IN SAUDI ARABIA: A CONCEPTUAL PSYCHOMETRIC FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING RELIGIOUS-CULTURAL IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION UNDER VISION 2030

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Abstract— This paper proposes a conceptual psychometric framework to examine the psychosocial dynamics of modernization in Saudi Arabia under Vision 2030. Moving beyond economic and political interpretations, modernization is conceptualized as a measurable construct reflecting the cognitive and affective processes through which individuals reconcile media-driven change with religious-cultural identity. Drawing from Social Identity Theory, Cultural Tightness–Looseness, and the Uses and Gratifications approach, this proposal introduces the Media-Driven Modernization Attitudes Scale (MDMAS). The framework theorizes that media engagement influences acceptance of modernization through perceived compatibility between religiosity and modernity, moderated by national identity salience and gender. The study integrates psychometric principles—construct validity, measurement equivalence, and factor structure—into a culturally specific context rarely examined in applied psychology. By treating modernization as an operationalizable psychological variable, this conceptual model provides a methodological foundation for future testing, cross-cultural validation, and policy-oriented research. The proposed framework advances applied psychology by linking sociocultural transformation to measurable dimensions of attitude, belief, and identity negotiation.

Keywords— identity, media psychology, modernization, psychometrics, religiosity, Saudi Arabia, Vision 2030.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Background and Rationale.

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 initiative is one of the most striving social projects today. It associates economic diversification with cultural change. The quick opening up of entertainment, the increased visibility of women in public and media spaces, and the government's intense focus on 'moderation' and 'innovation' indicate a momentous change in the country's moral and cultural framework. While these developments have been explored in cultural and political studies, they remain under examined in terms of psychological adaptation: how individuals perceive, internalize, or resist the ideational shift from 'moderation' to 'modernization.'

In applied psychology, modernization has typically been studied as a macro-sociological process, but less as a psychological construct involving measurable attitudes, emotional responses, and identity negotiations. The situation in Saudi Arabia offers a distinct opportunity to observe modernization as a process, i.e. as an evolution in people's thoughts and actions. This transformation is affected by media exposure and is influenced by cultural norms and religious identity.

What emerges from this archetype of state-managed modernization is not only a transformation of social culture but also a reconfiguration of individual consciousness. The dominance of media with visuals of empowerment, freedom and innovation encourages the citizens especially the youth to adopt a new and effective repertoire affiliated with national progress. Yet this invitation also produces contradiction vis-à-vis established tradition, and enthusiasm for participation coexists with unease over the erosion of traditional certainties. The resulting psychological negotiation between aspiration and anxiety, conformity, and authenticity underscores modernization as a close, existed process rather than a purely institutional one. Understanding how Saudis make sense of these competing demands opens a crucial and analytical space for examining modernization as a form of psychological adaptation created by new media exposure and mediated through cultural and religious identity.

Beyond economic diversification, the vision 2030 project operates as a cultural blueprint for redefining Saudi Arabia's identity in the twenty first century. Drawing from modernization theory, particularly the works of Daniel Lerner and Alex Inkeles, Vision 2030 reflects a known concept of social transformation: economic transformation as the enabler for cultural liberalization. However, in the Saudi Arabia context, modernization is not just a predictable outcome of development but a consciously designed performance of national rebranding. The reopening of movie theatres in 2018 after a long 35-year prohibition, the hosting of international concerts such as the MDL Beast music festival, and the rise of Saudi influencers on global platforms like Instagram and YouTube all serve as symbolic gestures of controlled liberalization. Each of these social changes is planned through state-sponsored media campaigns that project a narrative of liveliness, cosmopolitanism, and inclusiveness of all genders. For instance, the General Entertainment Authority's promotional videos, rich in global aesthetics and youthful imagery, present entertainment as a civic duty—an act of national participation in modernization. This arrangement aligns with Antonio Gramsci's notion of **cultural hegemony**, wherein the ruling government obtains public acknowledgement by reshaping cultural models rather than relying purely on force. Vision 2030's cultural reforms thus represent a new kind of hegemonic project: the Saudi government's effort to redefine what constitutes 'Saudi modernity' at the same time, maintaining political control over its expression. By aligning cultural participation through watching global films, attending concerts, and posting on social media—as nationalistic acts, the regime defines a new moral order that blends modernization with national loyalty. Media plays a dual role of the creator and the validator of these new norms of social fabric, balancing between global visibility and local acceptability. The psychological impact on the Saudi youth will have to be understood in this context.

B. From Cultural Discourse to Measurable Constructs.

Previous research on Saudi media emphasizes state control, symbolic nation-building, and the strategic alignment of religion and modernity (e.g., Al-Rasheed, 2021; Menoret, 2020). However, from a methodological standpoint, these insights are mostly descriptive. To address this gap, the present conceptual paper redefines modernization as a veiled hypothesis made up of cognitive (belief-based), affective (attitudinal), and behavioral (participatory) components.

The proposed framework, which has its foundation on psychological theory and methods of measurement, seeks to transform this multifaceted cultural shift into a testable psychometric model that could be used by future generation researchers. It thereby aligns with TPM's emphasis on construct development, testing, and methodological innovation in applied contexts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A. Social Identity and Modernization.

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) asserts that individuals derive aspects of their self-concept from their associations with social communities, be it religious, national, or cultural. Vision 2030's focus on 'moderate Islam' and 'global openness' presents a setting in which traditional identity limits are redrawn. For the young generation of Saudi Arabia, media exposure creates dual pressures of recognition on top of legitimate religious beliefs, and to embrace global modernity. This contradiction represents the fundamental psychological tension that the proposed scale seeks to quantify.

This dilemma of dual identification burden does not exist in isolation. It is saturated within the socio-political and cultural framework that actively influences the definition of modern Saudi identity. Government policies and the media narratives assert modernization as a civic and moral essential. The young generation of Saudi Arabia is presented with acceptable rules, behaviour, social engagement, and cultural values. The tension, which is mainly psychological, between religious authenticity conversation and embracing globally accepted modern practices, is reflected in the structural tension of a nation reconciling tradition with progress.

To further understand the self-concept and emotional responses of Saudi youth, it is essential to understand their dynamics of identity negotiations within the Saudi society, which is an extensively mediated and ideological environment, where modernisation functions as both a top-down mandate and a noticeable experience. Saudi Arabia today occupies a unique intersection of religion, media, and modernization. As the birthplace of Islam and home to its two holiest cities, the Kingdom has claimed religious authority for centuries within the Muslim world, which is deeply rooted with Wahhabi orthodoxy. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia is a wealthy state with its economy majorly dependent on oil. The kingdom is deeply entangled with global markets, entertainment economies, and global politics. This dichotomy induces an ongoing tension between claims of religious authenticity and aspirations for global modernity. The tension is not fixed with the Kingdom's Vision 2030; instead, it alters the way everyone perceives it. The characteristics of modernisation are taking the place of moderation increasingly. This change in rhetoric has an impact. During King Abdullah's reign (2005–2015), 'moderation' served as a political bridge between extremism and liberalism, facilitating reform within the confines of Islam. But under Prince Mohammed bin Salman, over a period of time, 'modernisation' has emerged as a moral and developmental necessity that is in line with global standards of progress and productivity.

This change is what Michel Foucault might call a 'discursive transformation of power'. It influences what can be said, seen, and accepted in society. Vision 2030 has changed the way the Saudi government views cultural modernity; it now requires it and, to a large extent, prescribes it to be adopted into the Saudi society. The metaphor

of modernisation becomes central to national identity, serving both as a response to global expectations and as a mechanism of domestic social regulation. Both digital media and all other media, comprising visual formats, play a crucial role in this process of change. Media outlets like Al Arabiya and The Saudi Broadcasting Authority are regime-controlled and promote stories of innovation and youth dynamism. On the other hand, the global streaming platforms like Netflix feature Saudi-produced films and series (e.g., Wadjda, AlKhallat+) that subtly deal with issues of gender, tradition, and reform. These images don't just show social change; they also create it by changing what people think of as the 'new normal' in Saudi life.

Scholars such as Madawi Al-Rasheed and Pascal Menoret have argued that Vision 2030's reforms, while progressive in appearance, often reinforce state power through cultural centralization. This is one of the drawbacks of this top-down modernization that leads to contradictions. Entertainment, cinema, and influencer culture are framed as tools of national unity, yet they remain closely monitored. The digital platforms that enable new voices also exert state narratives of optimism and progress. As Benedict Anderson might suggest, the Kingdom is constructing an imagined community of modern Saudis—young, entrepreneurial, globally connected—whose identity is mediated through shared cultural consumption rather than political or religious-centric participation.

B. Cultural Tightness–Looseness.

Gelfand's (2011) 'Theory of cultural tightness–looseness' posits that societies vary in the strength of social norms and tolerance for deviance. Saudi Arabia, long characterized as a 'tight' culture, is now undergoing a partial loosening process. However, this loosening is regulated—individuals experience both empowerment and surveillance. Modernization thus operates as a negotiated psychological process where conformity and innovation coexist.

C. Media Psychology and Cognitive Reframing.

The Uses and Gratifications framework (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973) provides a media psychological lens for understanding how individuals use media to satisfy needs for information, identity validation, and social integration. Under Vision 2030, media becomes a vehicle of moral persuasion and identity experimentation. Exposure to media messages about 'empowerment,' 'progress,' and 'openness' fosters new schemas through which individuals interpret modernization as compatible with religious and national values.

Looking back at the history of media culture in Saudi Arabia can help us understand how mediated stories and narratives have changed the way people think and feel. The current use of media as a tool for negotiating individual and community identity, specifically in relation to Vision 2030, is not a new fact but rather the culmination of an evolving development trajectory. When radio and later television came along, these were important turning points in the relationship between religious authority and larger societal change processes. These were crucial in shaping the basic ideas that Saudi people would later use to understand, accept, and respond to stories curated by the government. The way individuals in Saudi Arabia interact with the media has changed over time, which indicates how complicated and evolving the relationship is between the media, authority, and societal values.

In the middle of the twentieth century, when the emergence of radio, later television was serving as crucial medium for transmitting Islamic authority and administrative legitimacy, the early broadcasting focused on religious programming, sermons and Quranic recitation (Boyd, 1982). thereby firmly embedding media as a tool to promote religious nationalism. During the 1960s and 1970s, television emerged as a controversial topic. Initially, religious officials deemed it un-Islamic, but later down the road, they used it to spread ideas related to religion, and on the other hand, the society was divided into sections. A section that was very eager to experience those new mediums which is the majority and they were looking forward to watching national television, tales and anecdotes were woven about that era, including what is said about some women covering themselves in front of the television announcers in some villages and a section that got used to watching television through travelling abroad or from Aramco represented a large percentage of people who were familiar with the nature of television and there was a very small conservative group that rejected television and exaggerated in their reluctance (Al-Shubayli, 2014). The commencement of beaming of television in Saudi Arabia (1965-1967) required a reliance on local production to fulfil program requirements, because the available imported content was insufficient and often restricted by stringent censorship, particularly concerning depictions of women. In the initial months following the establishment of television, representations of women were absent in both locally produced and foreign programs.

II. PROPOSED MODEL AND HYPOTHESES

A. To study the above phenomenon, we propose a Conceptual Model such as follows: The Media-Driven Modernization Model (**MDMM**) (see Figure 1) that posits the following relationships:

- Media Engagement (ME) → influences Modernization Attitudes (MA).
- Religious Commitment (RC), which moderates the effect of ME on MA.
- National Identity Salience (NIS), which mediates between MA and Identity Flexibility (IF).
- Gender and age act as potential moderators in the perception of compatibility between religion and modernization.

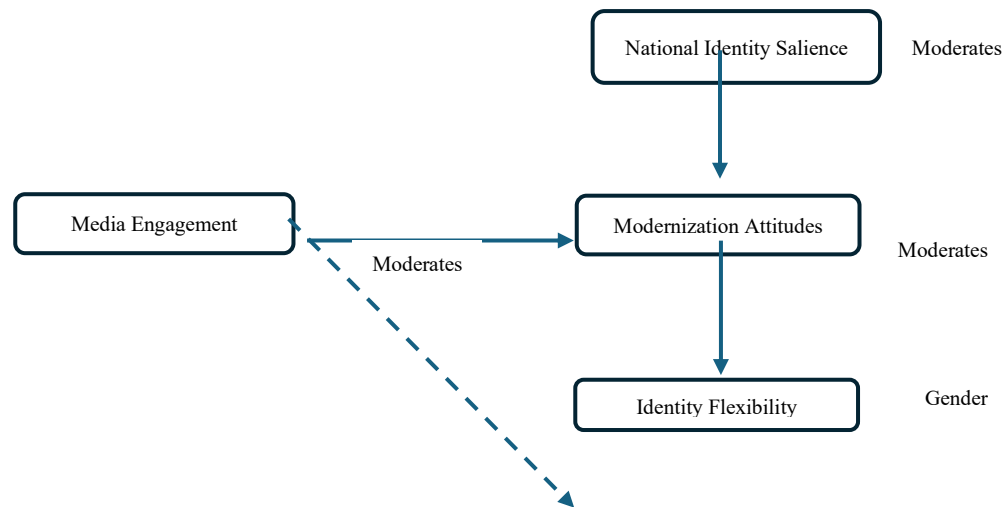


Figure 1. Concepted framework of the Media-Driven Modernization Model (MDMM)

B. Our Hypotheses would be as follows:

- H1: Media engagement positively predicts modernization attitudes.
- H2: Religious commitment negatively moderates the media–modernization relationship.
- H3: National identity salience mediates the effect of modernization attitudes on identity flexibility.
- H4: Gender moderates perceived compatibility between religiosity and modernization, with women showing higher integration scores.

III. PSYCHOMETRIC DEVELOPMENT

A. Construct Dimensions.

The proposed Media-Driven Modernization Attitudes Scale (MDMAS) would measure modernization as a multidimensional latent construct comprising:

1. Media Orientation (MO): engagement, trust, and emotional response to modernization content in traditional and digital media.
2. Cultural Integration (CI): cognitive acceptance of modernization as compatible with cultural and religious values.
3. Identity Negotiation (IN): degree of flexibility in reconciling religious beliefs with modern roles, such as gender equality or consumer culture.

B. Item Development and Validation.

Item generation could proceed through:

- Qualitative interviews with Saudi youth (ages 18–35) to extract modernization-relevant phrases.
- Translation–back translation procedures for linguistic validity (Arabic–English).
- Expert panel review for content validity (media, religion, psychology specialists).
- Pilot testing ($n \approx 100$) to assess reliability and dimensionality.
- Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to validate structure.

C. Proposed Measurement Indicators.

Internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.70$), convergent validity (AVE < 0.50), and discriminant validity (square root AVE $>$ correlations) would be used as psychometric benchmarks here:

Construct	Example Items (Likert 1–5)	Expected Direction
Media Orientation	“Media helps me understand the new Saudi identity.”	+
Cultural Integration	“Modernization can coexist with Islamic values.”	+
Identity Negotiation	“I feel conflicted when modern values contradict tradition.” (reverse)	-

IV. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

A. Design.

Although this paper is conceptual, it proposes a mixed-method, sequential exploratory design for future research:

1. Phase 1: Qualitative exploration: focus groups/interviews to define modernization's psychological dimensions.

2. Phase 2: Quantitative validation: survey-based psychometric testing across gender and regional strata.
3. Phase 3: Model testing: structural equation modelling (SEM) to assess interrelations among constructs.

B. Sampling Strategy.

A stratified random sample of Saudi nationals aged 18–45 across major regions (Riyadh, Jeddah, Eastern Province) would ensure representation of diverse modernization exposures. Minimum sample size for CFA (≈ 300 –400) would ensure model stability.

C. Analytical Approach.

- EFA with oblimin rotation for initial factor discovery.
- CFA using AMOS/SmartPLS for model validation.
- SEM to test hypothesized relationships.
- Measurement invariance across gender and religiosity levels to establish cross-group validity.

V. EXPECTED FINDINGS

The model anticipates that media exposure functions as a cognitive priming mechanism, enhancing openness to modernization through repeated positive framing. However, religious commitment moderates this process, with highly devout individuals demonstrating selective acceptance of modernization framed as ‘Islamic.’

It is expected that:

- The MDMAS will yield a three-factor solution (MO, CI, IN) explaining $> 60\%$ variance.
- Media orientation will have the strongest direct effect on modernization attitudes.
- National identity salience will mediate identity flexibility, showing how modernization is internalized as patriotic compliance rather than ideological transformation.

VI. DISCUSSION AND APPLIED IMPLICATIONS

This conceptual framework extends psychometric research into non-Western modernization contexts, offering a model for operationalizing social transformation as a measurable psychological process.

Applied implications include:

- Informing media literacy interventions that promote critical engagement rather than passive assimilation of modernization messages.
- Assisting policy communication in designing culturally resonant modernization campaigns.
- Providing methodological guidance for cross-cultural psychometric adaptation, especially in Muslim-majority contexts.

The MDMAS can serve as a **diagnostic tool** to measure modernization readiness, identity tension, or adaptive coping among populations experiencing rapid sociocultural change.

VII. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As a conceptual proposal, the framework awaits empirical validation. Key limitations include:

- reliance on theoretical constructs pending field testing;
- potential social desirability bias in self-report measures;
- and difficulty isolating modernization effects from globalization or economic factors.

Future research should test the model longitudinally and cross-nationally (e.g., in Qatar or UAE) to examine the generalizability of modernization as a measurable psychological construct.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This paper repositions modernization as a psychological phenomenon—a process of cognitive negotiation and emotional adaptation mediated by media narratives and religious belief. By proposing a psychometric instrument (MDMAS) and a conceptual framework (MDMM), it advances methodological rigor in examining cultural transformation.

In doing so, it bridges the gap between cultural theory and applied psychometrics, offering a new lens for understanding how individuals internalize modernization within tightly structured cultural systems. Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 thus becomes not merely a policy roadmap but a living laboratory for studying psychological adaptation to modernity.

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