Discussing Political Issues in a Private Setting:
An Examination of the *Diwaniya* as a Forum
for Political Communication in Kuwait

UCHE ONYEBADI
Texas Christian University, USA

This study examined the role of Kuwait's *diwaniya* as a *public* forum in a *private* setting for political communication and discourse in the country. Its main findings show that political issues dominate the agenda of discussions in the forum. The study also shows that diwaniya attendees use it to communicate, exchange, and gain information and knowledge about political affairs and leadership in their country. Also noteworthy is the finding that a measure of freedom of speech exists in the diwaniya, in spite of the forum being hosted in a political environment where free speech is not encouraged by the monarch, the Amir, and his government. This study relied on the uses and gratification theory in assessing the needs the forum satisfies for its attendees and used the survey method for data collection.

Keywords: Kuwait, diwaniya, political communication, uses and gratification, survey

Modern Kuwait has two contrasting, but not necessarily competing, institutionalized public forums for political discourse. One is the *diwaniya* (also spelled *diwaniyyah)*, a cultural institution in which cohorts of different ages and social status meet to discuss contemporary issues about politics and other aspects of life in Kuwait. The other is the country's National Assembly, a unicameral legislative body whose members are directly elected for a four-year term of office.

The present study is exploratory in nature and deals with the male-only Kuwaiti diwaniya, with specific focus on political communication and discourse within the forum. This discursive assembly takes place in a highly centralized system in which the Amir (king) is the supreme monarch and head of state, and also the head of the Al-Sabah aristocratic dynasty from which Kuwait's kings are chosen. The forum also exists in a country where overt and public discussions on politics and governance are largely a taboo, and freedom of speech is limited.

A number of studies have investigated the diwaniya as an institution in Kuwait. They include Al-Sejari (2018), who discussed information sharing among attendees on issues related to men's health. Segal (2012) examined the diwaniya as an informal forum for some form of political participation, while Al-Ansari and Al-Kandari (2012) conducted an overview of the myriad of issues that pop up for discussion in the

Uche Onyebadi: onyebadi@yahoo.com
Date submitted: 2020-06-27

forum. Unlike these studies, the present inquiry uniquely, simultaneously, and exclusively interrogates issues on political communication discussed in the forum, attempts to ascertain how those issues for discussion are determined and prioritized, and overall explores the participatory benefits of attendance and engagement in diwaniya sessions against the backdrop of the uses and gratification theory. These points of focus are aimed at contributing to the limited, but growing, literature on the diwaniya in Kuwait and to political communication inquiry as a body of knowledge.

In addition, within the purview of this study is an exploration of the relevance of the diwaniya as a traditional institution in modern Kuwait, especially given that Kuwaitis are arguably among the highest users of social media, Twitter in particular, as platforms for interpersonal and group communication in the Arab world (Radcliffe & Abdulmaid, 2020).

Data for this exploratory and largely descriptive study of the Kuwaiti diwaniya were obtained from a convenience sample of Kuwaitis who are resident in their country and who regularly or intermittently attend the forum.

The overarching research focus is to extensively explore and interrogate the instrumentality of the diwaniya as a forum for political communication in Kuwait

Literature and Theory

Diwaniya *as an Institution*

As a deliberative forum, the diwaniya bears some semblance to the *Ekklesia*, or "a meeting of the entire people" (Hansen, 2010, p. 512) in Athens, ancient Greece, where issues about society and its governance were openly debated. Nevertheless, fundamental differences exist. Primary among them is that children and women do not attend the male diwaniya in Kuwait, home to a male-dominated, patriarchal society that is governed by Islamic religious precepts. Second, unlike the Ekklesia and Jürgen Habermas's public sphere, which were conceptualized as open and unrestricted discussion forums, the diwaniya is mainly held behind closed doors, especially at a designated corner in the convener's living room, another room in his house, or a place exclusively hired for the meeting. Attendance is by invitation. Third, because the diwaniya is a pseudo-"public" forum that operates in a monarchical political system in which the Amir is the ultimate and largely unchallenged authority, the prospect of whatever "public opinion" emerging from the diwaniya actually impacting laws and state governance is realistically remote.

Chay (2015) traced the history of the diwaniya to Kuwait's maritime past, when fishing merchants discussed their business and monitored other activities on the coastline. However, with the diminished economic importance of the fishing industry and the rise of the oil industry in the 1930s, the diwaniya began to metamorphose into a cultural and social space where cohorts of different ages and social standing met to "socialize and converse" (Alabdullah, 2020), especially to discuss important and topical issues of the day in Kuwait (Alotaibi, 2015). This transformation is also acknowledged in other studies on the role of the diwaniya in Kuwait (Al-Ansari & Al-Kandari, 2012; Alhabib, 2009; Alhajeri, 2010; Al-Kandari, 2002, 2011).

Al-Kandari (2002) explained that a diwaniya is convened for multiple reasons. They include making wedding or funeral arrangements, social occasions, discussing political and economic issues, or simply entertainment, such as playing cards and other forms of cultural games. Attendees' demographics cut across age, educational, social, and economic status (Al-Kandari, 2011). As people attend the diwaniya, they also informally update themselves on the big news of the day, and the forum is the main source of news for some of these attendees (Al-Ansari & Al-Kandari, 2012). Nonetheless, these studies lack clarity on how the topics for discussion in the diwaniya are generated or who selects them. In addition, none of the studies exclusively focuses on political communication in the forum, nor are they explicitly situated on some theoretical foundation to further illuminate the function of the diwaniya in Kuwaiti society. The present study addresses these issues while, like the preceding studies, recognizing that the diwaniya as an institution has become so ubiquitous in the country that Kuwaitis consider it a social obligation to attend them (Al-Kandari, 2011; Alqaseer, 2013; Clemens, 2016).

Although Al-Sejari (2018) noted that the "Diwaniyyah is a traditional gathering place for men in the Arab world" (p. 380), men no longer monopolize convening this forum. Alotaibi (2015) observed that changes in the Kuwaiti political system—especially in 2005, when women gained the right to vote and run for legislative office—have enabled women to convene and hold diwaniyas to discuss issues that affect their gender. However, Alotaibi (2015) also explained that while women are traditionally not allowed or expected to attend male diwaniyas, women's diwaniyas are open to both genders. Stephenson (2011) also observed that "the diwaniya is the Kuwaiti man's realm" (p. 183) and noted that when women convene diwaniyas, the forums are pejoratively and "more commonly and easily referred to as a *jalsa* or *jama'a*" (p. 185). Both words mean an inconsequential gathering.

Other countries in the Gulf region also have institutions that conceptually resemble the diwaniya. They are called the *majlis*, where people gather to discuss important matters of the day (Herb, 1999). However, Alotaibi (2015) opined that Kuwaitis enjoy more freedom to discuss fundamental issues of governance in their diwaniya because Kuwait operates a relatively more open and democratic society than the other countries in the region. Stephenson (2011) also supports this contention and asserts that as a result of "the freedoms Kuwaitis have to speak and to gather, this institution (diwaniya) has become completely embedded within Kuwaiti culture in a way that has not been the case elsewhere in the Gulf" (pp. 184–185).

Kuwait: A Brief Political Insight

Located in the northeast of the Arabian Peninsula, Kuwait gained independence in 1961 and is ruled by a monarch, the Amir, whose full executive powers are enshrined in the country's constitution. For instance, the Amir is constitutionally empowered to prorogue parliament, although not for more than one month in a session, and has the legal authority to veto any legislation he does not support (Khedr, 2010). According to the Comparative Constitutions Project (n.d.), Article 54 of Kuwait's 1962 constitution, as reinstated in 1992, states that "The Amir is the Head of the State. His person is safeguarded and inviolable" (para. 2). Rugh (2004) summarized the supreme nature and power of the Amir by noting that Kuwaitis "cannot change their head of state" (p. 89).

Kuwait's constitution does not provide for the formation or operation of political parties. However, various forms of active political associations exist in the country (Alotaibi, 2015). Thus, the absence of both political parties and overt political discussions makes the existence and convening of the diwaniya quite important, arguably even imperative, in Kuwait.

Equally germane to this discussion is that Kuwait is generally regarded as one of the most liberal nation-states in the Gulf region and Arab world in general. According to Salameh and Al-Sharah (2011), "The Kuwaiti political system has proved flexible enough to accommodate the opposition into the political process. This stands far from the methods of repression and exclusion prevailing in the most Arab countries" (p. 59). In addition, and in relation to freedom of speech and the press, Odine (2011) determined that journalists and citizens in the country enjoy "relatively wide margin of press freedom" (p. 181). Nonetheless, a 2021 Human Rights Watch report (n.d.) asserts that "Kuwaiti authorities continue to use provisions in the constitution, the national security law, and the country's cybercrime law to restrict free speech and prosecute dissidents, particularly focusing on comments made on social media" (para. 1). In other words, Kuwait is still under an authoritarian form of government that infringes on peoples' rights and freedoms.

The vast powers of the Amir, restrictions on personal liberties and free speech, and prosecution of dissidents addressed in this section serve to underscore the importance of the diwaniya as a forum for political communication and sharing of information in Kuwait. Because politicians running for seats in the legislative assembly know that they cannot enjoy the support of political parties because they do not legally exist, they strategically have to attend as many diwaniyas as possible, "hoping to make sure they reach a larger voting audience" (Alabdullah, 2020, p. 99) in their quest for success at the polls.

Theoretical Insight: Uses and Gratification

The present study adapted the uses and gratification theory of mass communication to assess, explain, and proffer an understanding of the diwaniya as a forum for political communication in Kuwait. Broadly expressed, the adaptation and use of this theory will provide insights into why people visit the discussion forum, with an emphasis on the benefits they derive therefrom.

As a theory, uses and gratification is a primary response to early communication scholarship that assumed that audiences are directly and immediately impacted by media messages. For instance, Lasswell (1948) opined that the media provided an immediate and profound one-way effect on audiences—hence, the concept of the *magic bullet* effect of media messages. However, Lazarsfeld and Katz (1955) challenged this paradigm, noting that the message effect may not be as immediately impactful on audiences as previously conceptualized. A more profound challenge came later from Katz (1959), who argued that the real question about messages and audiences was not "what the media do to people," but "what do people do with the media" (p. 2). Katz's (1959) main implication is that, unlike the magic bullet model, which essentially regards audiences as passive recipients of media messages, individuals are indeed active seekers of information that will gratify or satisfy their needs. In other words, there is a correlation between need satisfaction and media choice, with the individual at the center of making such determination.

In adapting this theory to the present research, this author used Katz's (1959) major premise to postulate that Kuwaitis who visit the diwaniya are more active than passive seekers of information. They are therefore more targeted in their personal choice to participate in the diwaniya because it represents a forum they can use to gratify or satisfy their needs—such needs, in this case, being political communication and seeking information about the topical issues in their society. In other words, by visiting the diwaniya, the attendees are people whom Eginli and Taş (2018) characterized as "goal-directed and motivated" (p. 87) in their study, which also used the uses and gratification theory. In this case, these attendees are motivated to engage in political communication as they seek information about politics and leadership in their country.

Other studies that used or adapted the uses and gratification theory include Bryant and Miron (2004), who determined that it was among the major theories used in top six journals of mass communication in the 20th century; Alotaibi (2015); Charney and Greenberg (2002); Chen (2011); Chung and Kim (2008); Ruggiero (2000); Tosun (2012); and Wang (2014).

Research Questions

The diwaniya is a discussion and deliberative assembly in an authoritarian and centralized society that is largely unwelcoming of free speech and where formal political parties are constitutionally banned. Thus, the diwaniya offers citizens a semipublic forum to discuss and examine political and other topical issues of importance in their country. As outlined earlier, Al-Ansari and Al-Kandari (2012) determined that information sharing is also a common feature among people who attend the diwaniya. This suggests some level of freedom of speech and the expression of views and ideas, primarily because diwaniya attendance is largely controlled by its convener(s). More specifically, Alhajeri (2010) contends that it also offers space for some measure of political participation.

Considering the literature outlined in this study, brief insights into Kuwait as an authoritarian nation-state where freedom of speech is curtailed and political participation at the level of established political parties is not constitutionally allowed, the present study therefore sought to explore the diwaniya as a cultural institution in a modern setting, also highlighting it as a place where political communication takes place and important issues of the day are discussed. This exploratory inquiry was done against the backdrop of the uses and gratification theory, which is about people using a medium for the realization of their needs.

The information about the diwaniya, the political environment where it operates, its attendees and the benefits they derive from their attendance, informed the conceptualization of the following research questions for this study:

RQ1:   What are the most frequently discussed and salient topics in the male-only diwaniya in Kuwait?

RQ2:   Who determines the topics for discussion in the Kuwaiti male-only diwaniya?

RQ3:   To what extent do male-only diwaniya attendees gain knowledge about politics, political affairs, and leadership in Kuwait?

RQ4:   *How do male-only diwaniya attendees rate their chances of engagement in civic and political activities in Kuwait?*

RQ5:   *How do male-only diwaniya attendees rate their free speech experience in the privacy of their forums?*

Method

This is an exploratory study. Data were obtained from a survey of Kuwaiti citizens resident in their country, all of whom affirmed that they attended the diwaniya. All were males, given that the focus of this study is on the male-only diwaniya, which traditionally and expectedly excludes women and children. The usefulness of survey data for research has been articulated in communication research books published over the years, such as Fowler (2014), Poindexter and McCombs (1999), Robinson and Leonard (2019), and Wimmer and Dominick (2010).

The survey data for this study were based a nonprobability and convenience sample of Kuwaiti citizens. This method of data collection has inherent disadvantages, such as the investigator's inability to generalize results to the larger population. However, this author used it for several reasons, including the lack of resources to embark on a nationwide and large-scale systematic sampling of millions of Kuwaitis. Hocking, Stacks, and McDermott (2003) recommended the use of a convenience sample in research, especially when it is difficult to sample an entire population because of resource constraints involving time and money. Hocking et al. (2003) also suggested this sampling method when the study is mainly descriptive and exploratory. The present inquiry fits both recommendations.

The Twitter account of a mass communication professor at the University of Kuwait was used to facilitate the survey in Arabic, the official and most widely spoken language in Kuwait. The use of Twitter as a platform for data collection was also based on this investigator's limited resources already outlined. In addition, Twitter has been recognized as a very powerful tool for communication in Kuwait. According to the Digital Marketing Community (n.d.), a social media platform that monitors social media usage across the globe, Kuwait had 1.68 million active monthly Twitter users in 2019. This figure is quite substantial for a country with a population of 4.2 million. The report identifies Twitter as the third most used social media tool in Kuwait, the first and second being Facebook and Instagram, respectively.

Translations and transcriptions of survey results were handled by the same professor, a Kuwaiti national who is proficient and fluent in both Arabic and English; he studied in Kuwait and the United States, where he obtained his doctoral degree in mass communication.

The questionnaires for the survey were made available and administered on Twitter in two waves of two weeks each, in January and February 2020. This method implicitly recognizes that Twitter is not quite ubiquitously used in the country, hence the imperative to give ample time and opportunity for interested respondents to complete the survey. Furthermore, because the survey was put on the Internet twice across two months, potential respondents were cautioned and advised to complete the questionnaire only once to avoid duplications and corrupting the results.

Two important demographic variables were used in the analysis of data: age and level of education. For age, the author used 18 years as a benchmark. This is also the age at which a typical Kuwaiti is expected to have completed the significant fourth level of general education (i.e., high school). The rationale for this emphasis on both variables centers on showing that the attendees were mature enough, by age and educational attainment, to meaningfully engage in diwaniya discussions and participation and to articulate and share their thoughts about the forum in the survey.

After examining the survey response and weeding out incomplete submissions from some survey participants, a total of 383 responses were found to have been adequately completed. Sixty submissions that were completed by diwaniya attendees who identified themselves as women were eliminated, given that the focus of this study is on male-only diwaniyas. As a result, the nonprobability sample for this study consisted of 323 attendees of male-only diwaniyas. This figure was considered adequate for an exploratory study by this researcher. For comparison, a study by Al-Sejari (2018) on the diwaniya and its impact on men's health relied on a nonprobability and convenience sample of 429 respondents, but its subjects were 16 years old and older, unlike in the present study which has 18 years of age at its baseline.

Results

Demographic results in the all-male survey showed that among the 323 respondents, 219, or 67.8%, were in the 18–30 age range. Seventy-five, or 23.2%, belonged to the 31–40 age group, while 26, or 8%, were 41–50 years old. Only three people, or 0.9%, were 51 years old or older. For level of education, most (155; 48%) had a high school diploma, closely followed by 147 (45.5%) respondents with university-level education. Twenty-one (6.5%) respondents had other forms of education that were not university or high school level.

Almost half of the respondents (49.9%) claimed that they visited the diwaniya eight or more times in one month, and most of them (36.8%) spent no less than three hours per visit, although the time spent in the forum was dependent on the number of topical and interesting issues on the agenda for discussion (see Appendix for other results).

With regard to the first research question, on the most prominent and frequently discussed topics in a diwaniya, the survey results in Table 1 show the rank ordered agenda issues in percentages: politics (25.7%), followed by religion and culture (13.3%), sports and recreation (12.4%), family affairs (9%), public infrastructure (8.7%), and international affairs (5.6%). As noted in the literature review, Kuwait does not have formalized political parties, hence, this author created "parliament" as an independent topic in diwaniya discussions. However, this issue attracted only 5.6% attention, just above the economy, with 2.8% of the topics.

Table 1. Prominent Issues on the Diwaniya Agenda.

Topic	Response	Percentage (%)
Politics	83	25.7
Religion & Culture	43	13.3
Sports & Recreation	40	12.4
Family Affairs	29	9.0
Public Infrastructure*	28	8.7
International Affairs	18	5.6
Parliament	18	5.6
Economy	9	2.8
Others	55	17.0
Total	323	100

*Roads, schools, hospitals, housing etc.

The second research question was about who determined the topics on the diwaniya's agenda. Survey results in Table 2 indicate that attendees freely self-generated most of the topical issues for discussion (42.7%), with very minimal input by the host (5.9%). Nevertheless, the topical issues for discussion were also influenced by prominent news items published in the Kuwaiti media (34.7%).

Table 2. Who Determines Issues for Discussion in the Diwaniya.

Agenda Setter	Response	Percentage (%)
Freedom to suggest an issue	138	42.7
Issues published in the media	112	34.7
No preset issues	54	16.7
Diwaniya host	19	5.9
Total	323	100

The third research question assessed the diwaniya as a source of information and education about politics, political affairs, and Kuwait's leadership. Results in Table 3 show that attendees overwhelmingly (71.5%, agree/strongly agree) said that as a forum, the diwaniya is a good source for obtaining information and becoming educated on issues about Kuwaiti politics and leadership. People who could not say how they felt about this issue (15.2%) outnumbered those respondents who expressly disagreed or strongly disagreed (13.2%) that the diwaniya is a good source of information/education on Kuwait's politics and leadership.

Table 3. Diwaniya as a Source of Education/Information About Politics and Leadership in Kuwait.

Agreement	Response	Percentage (%)
Strongly agree	87	26.9
Agree	144	44.6
Can't say	49	15.2
Disagree	32	9.9
Strongly disagree	11	3.4
Total	323	100

The fourth research question asked diwaniya attendees to rate their chances of participating in civic and political activities, especially in the immediate pre-election period. Table 4 shows that respondents whose response was strongly agree/agree (55.4%) far outnumbered those who did not believe that attending a diwaniya would influence their participation in political and civic activities (19.8%, disagree/strongly disagree).

Table 4. Engagement in Political/Civic Activities by Diwaniya Attendees.

Agreement	Response	Percentage (%)
Strongly agree	60	18.6
Agree	119	36.8
Can't say	80	24.8
Disagree	43	13.3
Strongly disagree	21	6.5
Total	323	100

The diwaniya provides a forum for discussions on topical issues of the day in a country with an authoritarian monarchy and where censorship prevails. The fifth research question therefore explored the level of freedom of speech enjoyed by diwaniya attendees inside their forum. Survey results on Table 5 indicate substantially large agreement (85.1%, agree/strongly agree) on freedom of speech in the diwaniya, compared with 5.9% who disagreed/strongly disagreed on the issue.

Table 5. Freedom of Speech in the Diwaniya.

Agreement	Response	Percentage (%)
Strongly agree	139	43.0
Agree	136	42.1
Can't say	29	9
Disagree	13	4
Strongly disagree	6	1.9
Total	323	100

This study began with the recognition that the diwaniya and parliament coexist in modern Kuwait. Survey respondents were therefore asked about their views on the relevance of this traditional discussion forum in modern Kuwait. Results in Table 6 show overwhelming support (70.6%) for the relevance of the institution and its continued existence as a discourse forum in contemporary Kuwait.

Table 6. Relevance of Diwaniya in Modern Kuwait.

Agreement	Response	Percentage (%)
Yes	228	70.6
No	36	11.1
Maybe	55	17.0
I don't know	4	1.2
Total	323	100

Discussion

Kuwait is arguably an oasis of relative political liberalism and press freedom in the Gulf region. However, the traditional monarch, the Amir, remains an absolute ruler (Amin, 2002; Rugh, 2004), with a latitude of powers that include proroguing parliament, dissolving it outright, or vetoing legislations which he does not approve. This atmosphere of monarchical dictatorship, press censorship, and the absence of political parties that traditionally offer forums for political education, discussion, and the articulation of views and opinions provide the context for understanding and appreciating the place of the traditional and cultural institution of the diwaniya in Kuwait.

This study investigated the instrumentality of the male-only diwaniya as a forum for political communication among male Kuwaiti citizens who live in a circumscribed society under their traditional ruler. Overall, the diwaniya offers them some space to discuss and share ideas on issues of national importance and other concerns within the confines of an enclosed forum. With specific focus on the content of their discussions, this study established the dominance of politics as the most topical and prominent issue talked about in the male-only diwaniya. According to the survey respondents for this study, politics consumes 25.7% of the discussions in the diwaniya (Table 1).

It is arguable that this dominance of political issues on discussions in the diwaniya is the consequence of an amalgamation of factors, including (a) the absence of political parties that would have performed political and civic education, and recruitment functions associated with such organizations in more liberal democracies, and (b) the general atmosphere of the curtailment of freedom of speech and the system's intolerance of public articulation and dissemination of information and opinions that the ruling dynasty may determine to be subversive to its authority and stability.

As a political communication forum, the diwaniya may well be conceptualized as a paradox for governance in Kuwait in the sense that the ruling monarchy, its government, and its security agencies are well aware that the forums exist, but they strategically and intentionally desist from seriously clamping down on them or methodically shutting them down. Leaving the forums to continue to exist in an authoritarian system might provide Kuwaitis with some form of opportunity and space to hold political (and other) discussions in the privacy of the diwaniyas, as well as serve the government's broader public relations interest. The other side of this existential paradox is that diwaniya attendees are fully aware that the authorities know about the existence of the forums that provide them the cultural safety net for political discussions outside of public glare—forums that might have otherwise attracted censure, harassment, assault, and possible incarceration by the government. In this regard, the diwaniyas, which have their origin in Kuwaiti culture, are arguably beneficial to both rulers and the citizens in Kuwait, and pragmatic for the maintenance of some form of equilibrium in the society. Consequently, diwaniyas may serve as a form of palliative for Kuwaitis to feel a sense of agency and autonomy, and that they can share their views on political and other issues in their country; they also offer the ruling dynasty and its government a way to consolidate their grip on power by showcasing an outward appearance that diwaniyas are there for Kuwaitis to enjoy a measure of free speech and assembly.

For the purpose of this study, therefore, the diwaniya is a sort of sanctuary for at least a semblance of free speech and assembly in a country where more overt political communication and discussion of topical and fundamental issues that affect society are not officially encouraged. Not surprisingly, 71.5% of the survey respondents for this study strongly agreed or agreed that the forum is a source of education and information about politics and leadership in their country (Table 3), and 85.1% of them acknowledged enjoying a measure of free speech in their forums (Table 5). Most of them admitted that issues that come up for discussion in the diwaniya are not imposed on them, but are freely and organically generated (42.7%); however, 34.7% of them added the caveat that the topics are also impacted by what they read and learn from the local media in their country (Table 2). In other words, the diwaniya offers an opportunity for topics that appear on the news channels to filter into it for more private and broader exploration and discussion.

It is also imperative to underscore that Kuwaitis are also cautious about the boundaries of their freedom of speech, even within the diwaniya—hence, the selective and restricted invitation to participate in them by their conveners. Therefore, the probability exists that a diwaniya event could largely be made up of people who broadly share similar political outlook and views on a cross-section of issues. As our findings also revealed, 50.7% of the survey respondents said that the diwaniyas they attended were mainly composed of family members and their friends (see Appendix). In other words, the element of free speech in a diwaniya might mainly be occurring among family members, friends, and like-minded people.

As a cultural and traditional institution that fulfills the discursive needs of Kuwaiti citizens in modern but arguably nondemocratic country, the diwaniya can also be explained by the application of the uses and gratification theory of mass communication. As outlined in the findings, Kuwaitis visit the diwaniya because of what they gain by their attendance (Table 3). Some of them visit various diwaniya forums as many as eight times a month (see Appendix). Paraphrasing and applying Katz (1959), one of the authors of the uses and gratification theory, it is plausible to postulate that Kuwaitis do not necessarily attend the diwaniya because of what the diwaniya does for them, but because of what they do with the discussions and information they gather from the institution. In other words, Kuwaitis attend the diwaniya not as passive members of its audience, but as active participants in the discussions that go on within it—not as listeners to lectures on politics and other matters, but as active discussants on the issues raised in the forum. Furthermore, 55.4% (agree/strongly agree) of the survey respondents acknowledged that, as a result of learning about and discussing issues at the diwaniyas, they could be persuaded to engage in political and civic activities in their country, especially during elections for the country's parliament (Table 4).

Another issue worthy of acknowledgment is that although the diwaniya is a decades-old symbol of Kuwaiti culture, the advent of modern means, gadgets, and platforms for communication does not appear to threaten its continuous relevance in the country. As noted by Kononova and Akbar (2015), the oral form of communication and sharing of information still takes place in Kuwait, and this can be extrapolated to the diwaniya. Given the opportunity to communicate in this traditional fashion, coupled with other benefits of diwaniya attendance and what the forum represents in Kuwait, there is little surprise that a sizeable number of the survey respondents (70.6%) agreed on the relevance of this institution in contemporary Kuwait (Table 6).

Conclusion

Overall, this study attempted to demonstrate that while the diwaniya is a cultural and traditional institution, it is still of strategic importance in modern Kuwait because it offers citizens the opportunity to discuss what they consider the topical issues in their society and generally educate themselves on those issues, especially on politics and leadership. It is also a forum that effectively provides political education, discussion, and other opportunities in a society where the constitution proscribes formal political parties. Attendance and participation in the diwaniya are therefore factors that can persuade attendees to become more actively engaged in civic and political activities in their society.

With political issues ranking at the top of the agenda of topics discussed by diwaniya attendees, it is evident that the diwaniya functions as a political communication forum in Kuwait, thus providing evidential response to our overarching research question. Data in Tables 1–5 provide responses to the five specific research questions investigated in this study.

Admittedly, the nonprobability and convenience sample used in this study limits the generalizability of its findings to the entire Kuwaiti population. Another limitation is the absence of personal interviews to further provide valuable insights into the nature and importance of the diwaniya in the society. Furthermore, although the use of Twitter to reach potential survey respondents is legitimate and appropriate for research, one cannot ignore or gloss over the possibility that using it exclusively may have limited the ability of this author to reach more survey respondents for this inquiry. The limitations in this exploratory study should be addressed by subsequent studies on the diwaniya in Kuwait.

Nonetheless, the diwaniya is demonstrably a very valuable traditional institution in modern Kuwait and offers the opportunity to discuss political and other crucial issues in society and its governance outside official attention. The diwaniya facilitates the discussion of public and political issues in a private setting and thrives in a political environment where the monarch wields enormous constitutional power, and citizens cannot openly criticize him without adverse consequences and repercussions.

This study is also an attempt to further apply, understand, and expand the frontiers of the uses and gratification theory of communication in a society in the Gulf region where the traditional institution of the diwaniya serves as a forum for political discourse and communication. It shows that Kuwaitis use the diwaniya to extensively discuss topical issues that are in the political realm, but they do so in a traditional and private space and derive some gratification doing so.

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Appendix

Other Significant Survey Responses

- Most respondents (46.4%) consider the diwaniya important in their lives.
- Most respondents (49.9%) said they visit the diwaniya eight or more times in one month and spend three or more hours per visit (36.8%).
- A total of 50.7% of respondents said that the diwaniyas they attended were mainly composed of family members and their friends.
- Majority of the respondents (38.7%) said the forum was a place to visit because of the overall insights they gained from discussions within it.
- Most attendees agree/strongly agree (54.5%) that they are active discussants on issues in the diwaniya.